

THE TALE

BY

JOSEPH CONRAD

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OUTSIDE the large single window the crepuscular light was dying out slowly in a great square gleam without colour, framed rigidly in the gathering shades of the room.

It was a long room. The irresistible tide of the night ran into the most distant part of it, where the whispering of a man's voice, passionately interrupted and passionately renewed, seemed to plead against the answering murmurs of infinite sadness.

At last no answering murmur came. His movement when he rose slowly from his knees by the side of the deep, shadowy couch holding the shadowy suggestion of a reclining woman revealed him tall under the low ceiling, and sombre all over except for the crude discord of the white collar under the shape of his head and the faint, minute spark of a brass button here and there on his uniform.

He stood over her a moment, masculine and mysterious in his immobility, before he sat down on a chair near by. He could see only the faint oval of her upturned face and, extended on her black dress, her pale hands, a moment before abandoned to his kisses and now as if too weary to move.

He dared not make a sound, shrinking as a man would do from the prosaic necessities of existence. As usual, it was the woman who had the courage. Her voice was heard first—almost conventional while her being vibrated yet with conflicting emotions.

“Tell me something,” she said.

The darkness hid his surprise and then his smile. Had he not just said to her everything worth saying in the world—and that not for the first time!

“What am I to tell you?” he asked, in a voice creditably steady. He was beginning to feel grateful to her for that something final in her tone which had eased the strain.

“Why not tell me a tale?”

“A tale!” He was really amazed.

“Yes. Why not?”

These words came with a slight petulance, the hint of a loved woman's capricious will, which is capricious only because it feels itself to be a law, embarrassing sometimes and always difficult to elude.

“Why not?” he repeated, with a slightly mocking accent, as though he had been asked to give her the moon. But now he was feeling a little angry with her for that feminine mobility that slips out of an emotion as easily as out of a splendid gown.

He heard her say, a little unsteadily with a sort of fluttering intonation which made him think suddenly of a butterfly's flight:

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“You used to tell—your—your simple and—and professional—tales very well at one time. Or well enough to interest me. You had a—a sort of art—in the days—the days before the war.”

“Really?” he said, with involuntary gloom. “But now, you see, the war is going on,” he continued in such a dead, equable tone that she felt a slight chill fall over her shoulders. And yet she persisted. For there’s nothing more unswerving in the world than a woman’s caprice.

“It could be a tale not of this world,” she explained.

“You want a tale of the other, the better world?” he asked, with a matter-of-fact surprise. “You must evoke for that task those who have already gone there.”

“No. I don’t mean that. I mean another—some other—world. In the universe—not in heaven.”

“I am relieved. But you forget that I have only five days’ leave.”

“Yes. And I’ve also taken a five days’ leave from—from my duties.”

“I like that word.”

“What word?”

“Duty.”

“It is horrible—sometimes.”

“Oh, that’s because you think it’s narrow. But it isn’t. It contains infinities, and—and so—”

“What is this jargon?”

He disregarded the interjected scorn. “An infinity of absolution, for instance,” he continued. “But as to this ‘another world’—who’s going to look for it and for the tale that is in it?”

“You,” she said, with a strange, almost rough, sweetness of assertion.

He made a shadowy movement of assent in his chair, the irony of which not even the gathered darkness could render mysterious.

“As you will. In that world, then, there was once upon a time a Commanding Officer and a Northman. Put in the capitals, please, because they had no other names. It was a world of seas and continents and islands—”

“Like the earth,” she murmured, bitterly.

“Yes. What else could you expect from sending a man made of our common, tormented clay on a voyage of discovery? What else could he find? What else could you understand or care for, or feel the existence of even? There was comedy in it, and slaughter.”

“Always like the earth,” she murmured. “Always. And since I could find in the universe only what was deeply rooted in the fibres of my being there was love in it, too. But we won’t talk of that.”

“No. We won’t,” she said, in a neutral tone which concealed perfectly her relief—or her disappointment. Then after a pause she added: “It’s going to be a comic story.”

“Well—” he paused, too. “Yes. In a way. In a very grim way. It will be human, and, as you know, comedy is but a matter of the visual

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angle. And it won't be a noisy story. All the long guns in it will be dumb—as dumb as so many telescopes.”

“Ah, there are guns in it, then! And may I ask—where?”

“Afloat. You remember that the world of which we speak had its seas. A war was going on in it. It was a funny work! and terribly in earnest. Its war was being carried on over the land, over the water, under the water, up in the air, and even under the ground. And many young men in it, mostly in wardrooms and mess-rooms, used to say to each other—pardon the unparliamentary word—they used to say, ‘It’s a damned bad war, but it’s better than no war at all.’ Sounds flip-pant, doesn’t it.”

He heard a nervous, impatient sigh in the depths of the couch while he went on without a pause.

“And yet there is more in it than meets the eye. I mean more wisdom. Flippancy, like comedy, is but a matter of visual first impression. That world was not very wise. But there was in it a certain amount of common working sagacity. That, however, was mostly worked by the neutrals in diverse ways, public and private, which had to be watched; watched by acute minds and also by actual sharp eyes. They had to be very sharp indeed, too, I assure you.”

“I can imagine,” she murmured, appreciatively.

“What is there that you can’t imagine?” he pronounced, soberly. “You have the world in you. But let us go back to our commanding officer, who, of course, commanded a ship of a sort. My tales if often professional (as you remarked just now) have never been technical. So I’ll just tell you that the ship was of a very ornamental sort once, with lots of grace and elegance and luxury about her. Yes, once! She was like a pretty woman who had suddenly put on a suit of sackcloth and stuck revolvers in her belt. But she floated lightly, she moved nimbly, she was quite good enough.”

“That was the opinion of the commanding officer?” said the voice from the couch.

“It was. He used to be sent out with her along certain coasts to see—what he could see. Just that. And sometimes he had some preliminary information to help him, and sometimes he had not. And it was all one, really. It was about as useful as information trying to convey the locality and intentions of a cloud, of a phantom taking shape here and there and impossible to seize, would have been.

“It was in the early days of the war. What at first used to amaze the commanding officer was the unchanged face of the waters, with its familiar expression, neither more friendly nor more hostile. On fine days the sun strikes sparks upon the blue; here and there a peaceful smudge of smoke hangs in the distance, and it is impossible to believe that the familiar clear horizon traces the limit of one great circular ambush.

“Yes, it is impossible to believe, till some day you see a ship not your own ship (that isn’t so impressive), but some ship in company,

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blow up all of a sudden and plop under almost before you know what has happened to her. Then you begin to believe. Henceforth you go out for the work to see—what you can see, and you keep on at it with the conviction that some day you will die from something you have not seen. One envies the soldiers at the end of the day, wiping the sweat and blood from their faces, counting the dead fallen to their hands, looking at the devastated fields, the torn earth that seems to suffer and bleed with them. One does, really. The final brutality of it—the taste of primitive passion—the ferocious frankness of the blow struck with one’s hand—the direct call and the straight response. Well, the sea gave you nothing of that, and seemed to pretend that there was nothing the matter with the world.”

She interrupted, stirring a little.

“Oh, yes. Sincerity—frankness—passion—three words of your gospel. Don’t I know them!”

“Think! Isn’t it ours—believed in common?” he asked, anxiously, yet without expecting an answer, and went on at once: “Such were the feelings of the commanding officer. When the night came trailing over the sea, hiding what looked like the hypocrisy of an old friend, it was a relief. The night blinds you frankly—and there are circumstances when the sunlight may grow as odious to one as falsehood itself. Night is all right.

“At night the commanding officer could let his thoughts get away—I won’t tell you where. Somewhere where there was no choice but between truth and death. But thick weather, though it blinded one, brought no such relief. Mist is deceitful, the dead luminosity of the fog is irritating. It seems that you ought to see.

“One gloomy, nasty day the ship was steaming along her beat in sight of a rocky, dangerous coast that stood out intensely black like an India-ink drawing on gray paper. Presently the second in command spoke to his chief. He thought he saw something on the water, to seaward. Small wreckage, perhaps.

“‘But there shouldn’t be any wreckage here, sir,’ he remarked.

“‘No,’ said the commanding officer. ‘The last reported submarined ships were sunk a long way to the westward. But one never knows. There may have been others since then not reported nor seen. Gone with all hands.’

“That was how it began. The ship’s course was altered to pass the object close; for it was necessary to have a good look at what one could see. Close, but without touching; for it was not advisable to come in contact with objects of any form whatever floating casually about. Close, but without stopping or even diminishing speed; for in those times it was not prudent to linger on any particular spot, even for a moment. I may tell you at once that the object was not dangerous in itself. No use in describing it. It may have been nothing more remarkable than, say, a barrel of a certain shape and colour. But it was significant.

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“The smooth bow-wave hove it up as if for a closer inspection, and then the ship, brought again to her course, turned her back on it with indifference, while twenty pairs of eyes on her deck stared in all directions trying to see—what they could see.

“The commanding officer and his second in command discussed the object with understanding. It appeared to them to be not so much a proof of the sagacity as of the activity of certain neutrals. This activity had in many cases taken the form of replenishing the stores of certain submarines at sea. This was generally believed, if not absolutely known. But the very nature of things in those early days pointed that way. The object, looked at closely and turned away from with apparent indifference, put it beyond doubt that something of the sort had been done somewhere in the neighbourhood.

“The object in itself was more than suspect. But the fact of its being left in evidence roused other suspicions. Was it the result of some deep and devilish purpose? As to that all speculation soon appeared to be a vain thing. Finally the two officers came to the conclusion that it was left there most likely by accident, complicated possibly by some unforeseen necessity; such, perhaps, as the sudden need to get away quickly from the spot, or something of that kind.

“Their discussion had been carried on in curt, weighty phrases, separated by long, thoughtful silences. And all the time their eyes roamed about the horizon in an everlasting, almost mechanical effort of vigilance. The younger man summed up grimly:

“‘Well, it’s evidence. That’s what this is. Evidence of what we were pretty certain of before. And plain, too.’

“‘And much good it will do to us,’ retorted the commanding officer. ‘The parties are miles away; the submarine, devil only knows where, ready to kill; and the noble neutral slipping away to the eastward, ready to lie!’

“The second in command laughed a little at the tone. But he guessed that the neutral wouldn’t even have to lie very much. Fellows like that, unless caught in the very act, felt themselves pretty safe. They could afford to chuckle. That fellow was probably chuckling to himself. It’s very possible he had been before at the game and didn’t care a rap for the bit of evidence left behind. It was a game in which practice made one bold and successful, too.

“And again he laughed faintly. But his commanding officer was in revolt against the murderous stealthiness of methods and the atrocious callousness of complicities that seemed to taint the very source of men’s deep emotions and noblest activities; to corrupt their imagination which builds up the final conceptions of life and death. He suffered—”

The voice from the sofa interrupted the narrator.

“How well I can understand that in him!”

He bent forward slightly.

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“Yes. I, too. Everything should be open in love and war. Open as the day, since both are the call of an ideal which it is so easy, so terribly easy, to degrade in the name of Victory.”

He paused; then went on: “I don’t know that the commanding officer delved so deep as that into his feelings. But he did suffer from them—a sort of disenchanting sadness. It is possible, even, that he suspected himself of folly. Man is various. But he had no time for much introspection, because from the southwest a wall of fog had advanced upon his ship. Great convolutions of vapours flew over, swirling about masts and funnel, which looked as if they were beginning to melt. Then they vanished.

“The ship was stopped, all sounds ceased, and the very fog became motionless, growing denser and as if solid in its amazing dumb immobility. The men at their stations lost sight of each other. Footsteps sounded stealthily; rare voices, impersonal and remote, died out without resonance. A blind white stillness took possession of the world.

“It looked, too, as if it would last for days. I don’t mean to say that the fog did not vary a little in its density. Now and then it would thin out mysteriously, revealing to the men a more or less ghostly presentment of their ship. Several times the shadow of the coast itself swam darkly before their eyes through the fluctuating opaque brightness of the great white cloud clinging to the water.

“Taking advantage of these moments, the ship had been moved cautiously nearer the shore. It was useless to remain out in such thick weather. Her officers knew every nook and cranny of the coast along their beat. They thought that she would be much better in a certain cove. It wasn’t a large place, just ample room for a ship to swing at her anchor. She would have an easier time of it till the fog lifted up.

“Slowly, with infinite caution and patience, they crept closer and closer, seeing no more of the cliffs than an evanescent dark loom with a narrow border of angry foam at its foot. At the moment of anchoring the fog was so thick that for all they could see they might have been a thousand miles out in the open sea. Yet the shelter of the land could be felt. There was a peculiar quality in the stillness of the air. Very faint, very elusive, the wash of the ripple against the encircling land reached their ears, with mysterious sudden pauses.

“The anchor dropped, the leads were laid in. The commanding officer went below into his cabin. But he had not been there very long when a voice outside his door requested his presence on deck. He thought to himself: ‘What is it now?’ He felt some impatience at being called out again to face the wearisome fog.

“He found that it had thinned again a little and had taken on a gloomy hue from the dark cliffs which had no form, no outline, but asserted themselves as a curtain of shadows all round the ship, except in one bright spot, which was the entrance from the open sea. Several

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officers were looking that way from the bridge. The second in command met him with the breathlessly whispered information that there was another ship in the cove.

“She had been made out by several pairs of eyes only a couple of minutes before. She was lying at anchor very near the entrance—a mere vague blot on the fog’s brightness. And the commanding officer by staring in the direction pointed out to him by eager hands ended by distinguishing it at last himself. Indubitably a vessel of some sort.

“‘It’s a wonder we didn’t run slap into her when coming in,’ observed the second in command.

“‘Send a boat on board before she vanishes,’ said the commanding officer. He surmised that this was a coaster. It could hardly be anything else. But another thought came into his head suddenly. ‘It is a wonder,’ he said to his second in command, who had rejoined him after sending the boat away.

“By that time both of them had been struck by the fact that the ship so suddenly discovered had not manifested her presence by ringing her bell.

“‘We came in very quietly, that’s true,’ concluded the younger officer. ‘But they must have heard our leadsmen at least. We couldn’t have passed her more than fifty yards off. The closest shave! They may even have made us out, since they were aware of something coming in. And the strange thing is that we never heard a sound from her. The fellows on board must have been holding their breath.’

“‘Aye,’ said the commanding officer, thoughtfully.

“In due course the boarding-boat returned, appearing suddenly alongside, as though she had burrowed her way under the fog. The officer in charge came up to make his report, but the commanding officer didn’t give him time to begin. He cried from a distance:

“‘Coaster, isn’t she?’

“‘No, sir. A stranger—a neutral,’ was the answer.

“‘No. Really! Well, tell us all about it. What is she doing here?’

“The young man stated then that he had been told a long and complicated story of engine troubles. But it was plausible enough from a strictly professional point of view and it had the usual features: disablement, dangerous drifting along the shore, weather more or less thick for days, fear of a gale, ultimately a resolve to go in and anchor anywhere on the coast, and so on. Fairly plausible.

“‘Engines still disabled?’ inquired the commanding officer.

“‘No, sir. She has steam on them.’

“The commanding officer took his second aside. ‘By Jove!’ he said, ‘you were right! They were holding their breaths as we passed them. They were.’

“But the second in command had his doubts now.

“‘A fog like this does muffle small sounds, sir,’ he remarked. ‘And what could his object be, after all?’

“‘To sneak out unnoticed,’ answered the commanding officer.

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“Then why didn’t he? He might have done it, you know. Not exactly unnoticed, perhaps. I don’t suppose he could have slipped his cable without making some noise. Still, in a minute or so he would have been lost to view—clean gone before we had made him out fairly. Yet he didn’t.”

“They looked at each other. The commanding officer shook his head. Such suspicions as the one which had entered his head are not defended easily. He did not even state it openly. The boarding officer finished his report. The cargo of the ship was of a harmless and useful character. She was bound to an English port. Papers and everything in perfect order. Nothing suspicious to be detected anywhere.

“Then passing to the men, he reported the crew on deck as the usual lot. Engineers of the well-known type, and very full of their achievement in repairing the engines. The mate surly. The master rather a fine specimen of a Northman, civil enough, but appeared to have been drinking. Seemed to be recovering from a regular bout of it.

“I told him I couldn’t give him permission to proceed. He said he wouldn’t dare to move his ship her own length out in such weather as this, permission or no permission. I left a man on board, though.”

“Quite right.”

“The commanding officer, after communing with his suspicions for a time, called his second aside.

“What if she were the very ship which had been feeding some infernal submarine or other?” he said in an undertone.

“The other started. Then, with conviction:

“She would get off scot-free. You couldn’t prove it, sir.”

“I want to look into it myself.”

“From the report we’ve heard I am afraid you couldn’t even make a case for reasonable suspicion, sir.”

“I’ll go on board all the same.”

“He had made up his mind. Curiosity is the great motive power of hatred and love. What did he expect to find? He could not have told anybody—not even himself.

“What he really expected to find there was the atmosphere, the atmosphere of gratuitous treachery, which in his view nothing could excuse; for he thought that even a passion of unrighteousness for its own sake could not excuse that. But could he detect it? Sniff it? Taste it? Receive some mysterious communication which would turn his invincible suspicions into a certitude strong enough to provoke action with all its risks.

“The master met him on the after-deck, looming up in the fog amongst the blurred shapes of the usual ship’s fittings. He was a robust Northman, bearded, and in the force of his age. A round leather cap fitted his head closely. His hands were rammed deep into the pockets of his short leather jacket. He kept them there while he explained that at sea he lived in the chart-room, and led the way there,

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striding carelessly. Just before reaching the door under the bridge he staggered a little, recovered himself, flung it open, and stood aside, leaning his shoulder as if involuntarily against the side of the house, and staring vaguely into the fog-filled space. But he followed the commanding officer at once, flung the door to, snapped on the electric light, and hastened to thrust his hands back into his pockets, as though afraid of being seized by them either in friendship or in hostility.

“The place was stuffy and hot. The usual chart-rack overhead was full, and the chart on the table was kept unrolled by an empty cup standing on a saucer half-full of some spilt dark liquid.

A slightly nibbled biscuit reposed on the chronometer-case. There were two settees, and one of them had been made up into a bed with a pillow and some blankets, which were now very much tumbled. The Northman let himself fall on it, his hands still in his pockets.

“‘Well, here I am,’ he said, with a curious air of being surprised at the sound of his own voice.

“The commanding officer from the other settee observed the handsome, flushed face. Drops of fog hung on the yellow beard and moustaches of the Northman. The much darker eyebrows ran together in a puzzled frown, and suddenly he jumped up.

“‘What I mean is that I don’t know where I am. I really don’t,’ he burst out, with extreme earnestness. ‘Hang it all! I got turned around somehow. The fog has been after me for a week. More than a week. And then my engines broke down. I will tell you how it was.’

“He burst out into loquacity. It was not hurried, but it was insistent. It was not continuous for all that. It was broken by the most queer, thoughtful pauses. Each of these pauses lasted no more than a couple of seconds, and each had the profundity of an endless meditation. When he began again nothing betrayed in him the slightest consciousness of these intervals. There was the same fixed glance, the same unchanged earnestness of tone. He didn’t know. Indeed, more than one of these pauses occurred in the middle of a sentence.

“The commanding officer listened to the tale. It struck him as more plausible than simple truth is in the habit of being. But that, perhaps, was prejudice. All the time the Northman was speaking the commanding officer had been aware of an inward voice, a grave murmur in the depth of his very own self, telling another tale, as if on purpose to keep alive in him his indignation and his anger with that baseness of greed or of mere outlook which lies often at the root of simple ideas.

“It was the story that had been already told to the boarding officer an hour or so before. The commanding officer nodded slightly at the Northman from time to time. The latter came to an end and turned his eyes away. He added, as an afterthought:

“‘Wasn’t it enough to drive a man out of his mind with worry? And it’s my first voyage to this part, too. And the ship’s my own. Your

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officer has seen the papers. She isn't much, as you can see for yourself. Just an old cargo-boat. Bare living for my family.'

"He raised a big arm to point at a row of photographs plastering the bulkhead. The movement was ponderous, as if the arm had been made of lead. The commanding officer said, carelessly:

"You will be making a fortune yet for your family with this old ship.'

"Yes, if I don't lose her,' said the Northman, gloomily.

"I mean—out of this war,' added the commanding officer.

"The Northman stared at him in a curiously unseeing and at the same time interested manner, as only eyes of a particular blue shade can stare.

"And you wouldn't be angry at it,' he said, 'would you? You are too much of a gentleman. We didn't bring this on you. And suppose we sat down and cried. What good would that be? Let those cry who made the trouble,' he concluded, with energy. 'Time's money, you say. Well—this time is money. Oh! isn't it!'

"The commanding officer tried to keep under the feeling of immense disgust. He said to himself that it was unreasonable. Men were like that—moral cannibals feeding on each other's misfortunes. He said aloud:

"You have made it perfectly plain how it is that you are here. Your log-book confirms you very minutely. Of course, a log-book may be cooked. Nothing easier.'

"The Northman never moved a muscle. He was gazing at the floor; he seemed not to have heard. He raised his head after a while.

"But you can't suspect me of anything,' he muttered, negligently.

"The commanding officer thought: 'Why should he say this?'

"Immediately afterwards the man before him added: 'My cargo is for an English port.'

"His voice had turned husky for the moment. The commanding officer reflected: 'That's true. There can be nothing. I can't suspect him. Yet why was he lying with steam up in this fog—and then, hearing us come in, why didn't he give some sign of life? Why? Could it be anything else but a guilty conscience? He could tell by the leadsmen that this was a man-of-war.'

"Yes—why? The commanding officer went on thinking: 'Suppose I ask him and then watch his face. He will betray himself in some way. It's perfectly plain that the fellow has been drinking. Yes, he has been drinking; but he will have a lie ready all the same.' The commanding officer was one of those men who are made morally and almost physically uncomfortable by the mere thought of having to beat down a lie. He shrank from the act in scorn and disgust, which were invincible because more temperamental than moral.

"So he went out on deck instead and had the crew mustered formally for his inspection. He found them very much what the report

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of the boarding officer had led him to expect. And from their answers to his questions he could discover no flaw in the log-book story.

“He dismissed them. His impression of them was—a picked lot; have been promised a fistful of money each if this came off; all slightly anxious, but not frightened. Not a single one of them likely to give the show away. They don’t feel in danger of their life. They know England and English ways too well!

“He felt alarmed at catching himself thinking as if his vaguest suspicions were turning into a certitude. For, indeed, there was no shadow of reason for his inferences. There was nothing to give away.

“He returned to the chart-room. The Northman had lingered behind there; and something subtly different in his bearing, more bold in his blue, glassy stare, induced the commanding officer to conclude that the fellow had snatched at the opportunity to take another swig at the bottle he must have had concealed somewhere.

“He noticed, too, that the Northman on meeting his eyes put on an elaborately surprised expression. At least, it seemed elaborated. Nothing could be trusted. And the Englishman felt himself with astonishing conviction faced by an enormous lie, solid like a wall, with no way round to get at the truth, whose ugly murderous face he seemed to see peeping over at him with a cynical grin.

“‘I dare say,’ he began, suddenly, ‘you are wondering at my proceedings, though I am not detaining you, am I? You wouldn’t dare to move in this fog?’

“‘I don’t know where I am,’ the Northman ejaculated, earnestly. ‘I really don’t.’

“He looked around as if the very chart-room fittings were strange to him. The commanding officer asked him whether he had not seen any unusual objects floating about while he was at sea.

“‘Objects! What objects? We were groping blind in the fog for days.’

“‘We had a few clear intervals’ said the commanding officer. ‘And I’ll tell you what we have seen and the conclusion I’ve come to about it.’

“He told him in a few words. He heard the sound of a sharp breath indrawn through closed teeth. The Northman with his hand on the table stood absolutely motionless and dumb. He stood as if thunderstruck. Then he produced a fatuous smile.

“Or at least so it appeared to the commanding officer. Was this significant, or of no meaning whatever? He didn’t know, he couldn’t tell. All the truth had departed out of the world as if drawn in, absorbed in this monstrous villainy this man was—or was not—guilty of.

“‘Shooting’s too good for people that conceive neutrality in this pretty way,’ remarked the commanding officer, after a silence.

“‘Yes, yes, yes,’ the Northman assented, hurriedly—then added an unexpected and dreamy-voiced ‘Perhaps.’

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“Was he pretending to be drunk, or only trying to appear sober? His glance was straight, but it was somewhat glazed. His lips outlined themselves firmly under his yellow moustache. But they twitched. Did they twitch? And why was he drooping like this in his attitude?”

“There’s no perhaps about it,’ pronounced the commanding officer sternly.

“The Northman had straightened himself. And unexpectedly he looked stern, too.

“No. But what about the tempters? Better kill that lot off. There’s about four, five, six million of them,’ he said, grimly; but in a moment changed into a whining key. ‘But I had better hold my tongue. You have some suspicions.’

“No, I’ve no suspicions,’ declared the commanding officer.

“He never faltered. At that moment he had the certitude. The air of the chart-room was thick with guilt and falsehood braving the discovery, defying simple right, common decency, all humanity of feeling, every scruple of conduct.

“The Northman drew a long breath. ‘Well, we know that you English are gentlemen. But let us speak the truth. Why should we love you so very much? You haven’t done anything to be loved. We don’t love the other people, of course. They haven’t done anything for that either. A fellow comes along with a bag of gold. . . I haven’t been in Rotterdam my last voyage for nothing.’

“You may be able to tell something interesting, then, to our people when you come into port,’ interjected the officer.

“I might. But you keep some people in your pay at Rotterdam. Let them report. I am a neutral—am I not?. . . Have you ever seen a poor man on one side and a bag of gold on the other? Of course, I couldn’t be tempted. I haven’t the nerve for it. Really I haven’t. It’s nothing to me. I am just talking openly for once.’

“Yes. And I am listening to you,’ said the commanding officer, quietly.

“The Northman leaned forward over the table. ‘Now that I know you have no suspicions, I talk. You don’t know what a poor man is. I do. I am poor myself. This old ship, she isn’t much, and she is mortgaged, too. Bare living, no more. Of course, I wouldn’t have the nerve. But a man who has nerve! See. The stuff he takes aboard looks like any other cargo—packages, barrels, tins, copper tubes—what not. He doesn’t see it work. It isn’t real to him. But he sees the gold. That’s real. Of course, nothing could induce me. I suffer from an internal disease. I would either go crazy from anxiety—or—or—take to drink or something. The risk is too great. Why—ruin!’

“It should be death.’ The commanding officer got up, after this curt declaration, which the other received with a hard stare oddly combined with an uncertain smile. The officer’s gorge rose at the atmosphere of murderous complicity which surrounded him, denser, more impenetrable, more acrid than the fog outside.

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“It’s nothing to me,’ murmured the Northman, swaying visibly.

“Of course not,’ assented the commanding officer, with a great effort to keep his voice calm and low. The certitude was strong within him. ‘But I am going to clear all you fellows off this coast at once. And I will begin with you. You must leave in half an hour.’

“By that time the officer was walking along the deck with the Northman at his elbow.

“‘What! In this fog?’ the latter cried out, huskily.

“‘Yes, you will have to go in this fog.’

“‘But I don’t know where I am. I really don’t.’

“The commanding officer turned round. A sort of fury possessed him. The eyes of the two men met. Those of the Northman expressed a profound amazement.

“‘Oh, you don’t know how to get out.’ The commanding officer spoke with composure, but his heart was beating with anger and dread. ‘I will give you your course. Steer south-by-east-half-east for about four miles and then you will be clear to haul to the eastward for your port. The weather will clear up before very long.’

“‘Must I? What could induce me? I haven’t the nerve.’

“‘And yet you must go. Unless you want to—’

“‘I don’t want to,’ panted the Northman. ‘I’ve enough of it.’

“The commanding officer got over the side. The Northman remained still as if rooted to the deck. Before his boat reached his ship the commanding officer heard the steamer beginning to pick up her anchor. Then, shadowy in the fog, she steamed out on the given course.

“‘Yes,’ he said to his officers, ‘I let him go.’”

The narrator bent forward towards the couch, where no movement betrayed the presence of a living person.

“Listen,” he said, forcibly. “That course would lead the Northman straight on a deadly ledge of rock. And the commanding officer gave it to him. He steamed out—ran on it—and went down. So he had spoken the truth. He did not know where he was. But it proves nothing. Nothing either way. It may have been the only truth in all his story. And yet. . . He seems to have been driven out by a menacing stare—nothing more.”

He abandoned all pretence.

“Yes, I gave that course to him. It seemed to me a supreme test. I believe—no, I don’t believe. I don’t know. At the time I was certain. They all went down; and I don’t know whether I have done stern retribution—or murder; whether I have added to the corpses that litter the bed of the unreadable sea the bodies of men completely innocent or basely guilty. I don’t know. I shall never know.”

He rose. The woman on the couch got up and threw her arms round his neck. Her eyes put two gleams in the deep shadow of the room. She knew his passion for truth, his horror of deceit, his humanity.

THE TALE

“Oh, my poor, poor—”

“I shall never know,” he repeated, sternly, disengaged himself, pressed her hands to his lips, and went out.