

## **‘Ellen Maxwell’**

‘I say, Jem, do you see that queer light to windward?’ asked the boatswain’s mate of the Thunderer of a brother seaman.

‘Yes, I spied it out a minute ago; I can’t make it out; t’ain’t the Flying Dutchman, is it, d’ye think?’

‘It’s just as like the Flying Dutchman as them yon fore halyards is to that capstan bar, I’ve a notion.’

‘Jem Harris, lend a hand to cut these ropes,’ sung out the officer of the watch.

‘Ay, ay,’ and away went Jem.

The night had closed in, calm, quiet, and cool; the young moon was shining brightly, and the vessel was gliding smoothly through the waters. Close up to the side stood Jack Bennet, looking at the strange light which appeared to windward. Just as he turned to seek some officer, and tell him of the appearance, the look-out man sang out ‘Ship on fire to windward!’

The words echoed through and through the vessel; up from his cabin came the captain, followed by his officers, and in an instant every glass was pointed in the direction of the light.

‘I don’t think it’s a ship,’ said Captain Leslie; ‘here, Morton, take my glass and run up to the mast-head and see what it is.’

Fast up the ropes went the young seaman.

‘It *is* a ship sir;’ – and as he spoke, the boom of a gun came faintly to their ears.

‘Answer the signal! All hands to set sails! Quick, quick, my lads!’

The Thunderer, although a merchant ship, was a fast sailer, and in an incredibly short time she was rushing through the waves on her errand of mercy; still, rapid as was her course, it was not swift enough for her crew’s wishes; guns came quicker and quicker from the blazing vessel, and they longed to be with her.

‘Shorten sail now, and lower the boats. Mr Howard, take the command of the long boat, and let Morton go with you; he’ll be of service if there is anything to do.’

‘Thank your honour,’ said Morton, touching his hat.

‘Now lads, bear a hand,’ and following the officer, the men jumped into the boat.

‘Give way, give way, my men,’ shouted Howard, who stood a-head; almost flat to their oars laid the men, and the boat seemed to fly, but as the shrieks and guns came to their ears, the men pulled like furies; a groan, but not of pain, from one of the rowers immediately behind him startled Howard; he turned – it was from Morton.

‘Gently, gently, Morton; you’ll do yourself a mischief.’

‘No, no, sir; but those screams! Shall we ever reach them? The boat seems to stand still! There! there, again!’ and as the wild shrieks passed them, he bent lower to the oar.

‘Lord have mercy upon us! look at the flames! – look, Morton, look!’ said the man next him.

‘I dare not; is the sea lead, that we make no way?’

They were nearing the vessel fast, and the sea was red with the intense glow.

‘Shout, shout, my lads, that they may know we are coming.’

The men gave a loud huzza that shook the boat, and it was answered with a cheer from the burning ship.

‘One more pull, and all together.’

Morton dashed past his officer, climbed up the fore-chains and in an instant was upon the quarter-deck; the sight was awful: sailors killed by the fall of the burning masts lay everywhere around; embers, ashes, blazing wood mingled with the senseless forms that covered the deck. The boats were quickly filled with those whom wounds, smoke, and terror had not bereft of their senses, and with their living freight the boats put off. When they returned the flames burnt, if possible, more intensely, and the heat was suffocating. Morton, like one gifted with supernatural power, was everywhere. At least the officer called out, ‘Quick, my men, to the boats: we must stay no longer; the vessel will blow up directly, we have saved all those who are sensible.’

‘Morton – where’s Morton?’ shouted one of the boat’s crew, as they put off.

‘Morton, Morton, Morton!’ – the calls were unanswered.

‘He must have fallen overboard.’

The crackling timber warned the officer of impending danger.

‘Heavens forbid! Give way, my lads, or we shall not get out of the way before she blows up!’

Harry Morton had forced and crept his way through the burning masts and fragments of rigging down again to the cabin. All were deserted, and he was returning, when a sound of low sighs

stopped him; they evidently came from one of the ladies' cabins. He darted to the spot, forced open the door, and entered. On the bed lay an elderly female, dead, and kneeling by her was a young lady whose hair was hanging dishevelled; her dress was burnt and torn; and her tearless eyes were fixed upon the body with an agonizing expression. Morton went gently up to her.

'Come with me – pray come,' he said, in a subdued voice.

'Will you take her too?' she murmured. 'I know she is dead, but I will not leave her!'

'I cannot; but I will save you!'

'No, no, I cannot leave her; dear, dear aunt!' and she rose, and wept passionately upon the corpse. Morton let her do so as long as he dared, and then whispered, 'Your aunt is dead – you cannot recall her by staying here. If she were alive her first wish would be that you should save yourself –'

'You are right,' she sobbed, raising herself; 'I will go!' She went half way to the door, then turned and flung herself upon the body, crying 'I cannot leave – go, go, save yourself! I will stay here. God bless you, sir, go, go!'

'And leave you here? *Never!* If you remain so will I!'

'Are you so firm?' she asked, as she slowly rose and gazed upon his face. 'Then I will not be a murderess! come, come;' – and she caught his hand, saying 'Take me now, *now!*'

He wound his arm around her, and crawled and crept through the smoke and timber back to the deck. He laid her against the capstan and rushed to the side to see if the boats were gone – they met not his eyes! His heart stood still – he turned to look at the fainting girl, and shuddered for her fate; not a thought was wasted upon himself.

'What's to be done?' he involuntarily exclaimed.

'What more has happened?' she asked.

'Nothing, nothing – do not be frightened.'

'I see – I am not frightened – the boats are gone. Well, all chance is over!' and she smiled and laid her hand upon his arm.

'No, no – I can swim; come, dear lady, come!'

'Brave, generous man, no; singly, you may save your life; I have periled it enough already.'

He seized her hand.

‘Dare you hold this rope steady for me to slide down by?’ said he, pointing to one which he had fastened to the capstan and thrown over the bow of the ship.

‘Yes, yes, make haste!’ and she bent to it.

‘Forgive me!’ and he caught her round the waist, and holding her tightly, grasped the rope and slid down. Once in the water, he bore her up with one arm and swam with the other. ‘Hold fast for your life,’ he said as he struggled through the waves.

‘I will, I will; but it is vain; you cannot support my weight much longer, and you will die too!’

‘Don’t be so down-hearted, my lass – ma’am – I beg your pardon – I meant no offence –’

‘I have taken none; you are brave, – I am helpless; you saved me, and we are more than equal.’

‘God bless you!’ said Morton fervently; and as the words had left his lips, a crash, an explosion, that seemed to rend the very sky and sea, told that the devoted ship had blown up – huge fragments of timber swept through the air, and clove the waters to a fearful depth. Morton grasped the shrinking girl closer, as if that could save her, and she wound her arm round him, and tried to pray.

Splash, splash all around came pieces of the wreck; and in spite of his gallant heart, Morton cowered as they fell before and behind him. At a distance he saw his own dear ship and the guiding lights that were hung out as beacons to any who might have been roused from stupor by the concussion, and thrown upon the ocean.

‘Cheerly, cheerly,’ cried Morton, as the destructive shower ceased; ‘the worst is over.’

She did not reply: she was stupefied with fear; and her long, full dress, now thoroughly wetted, clung a dead weight to him, and terribly impeded his action. They had been now upwards of a quarter of an hour in the water; the arm that bore her up was perfectly benumbed; they were still at a tremendous distance from the ship, and he was already wearied and exhausted.

‘You are sinking, fainting, and I am the cause of it! For God’s sake let me go; you cannot save me – it is impossible!’

‘Never while I have life! God will not desert so innocent a being as you are; you will be my protector, not my hindrance;’ and again the gallant fellow struggled with the wave; the wind had freshened – the sea, though it did not run high, yet weakened and retarded poor Morton still more.

His nerveless arm fell slower and slower, and she who hitherto required consolation, now strove to give it.

‘How very far you have brought me; we shall be saved; see how much nearer we are; do not despair.’

‘I do not,’ he gasped; ‘but I can swim no more;’ and he vainly tried.

‘My brave, kind, kind, friend ! and I have killed you !’

‘No, no,’ he exclaimed with a desperate effort, ‘you have not, dear lady. The ship ! the ship – comrades ! – forgive me. I can’t go on;’ in another moment his senseless body floated on the ocean.

The middle watch had just begun; and the sea, far and wide, looked as still and quiet as if unconscious of the fearful gulf it had been to many a wretched being; but the moon no longer shone as brightly as before: thick white fleecy clouds scudded faster and faster across her disc; and the wind had become cold.

‘What a bad job this has been to-night ! Hows’ever, it’s a blessed marcy as there’s so many of the poor things saved. My dear eyes, what a sight the blowing up of that `ere ship was ! I never seed anything so terrible life, in all my life.’

‘Ay, it was a tarnation fire, to be sure, and they might all ha’ gone to Davy Jones’s locker if it hadn’t ha’ been for poor Harry Morton. How he did pull at them oars ! T’warn’t like a man’s grip, poor fellow. I’d no fancy it was his last tug.’

‘He was the boldest hand, and merriest, in this here craft, though he was so larned-spoken sometimes. What a rare favourite he was with the officers, surely ! Hark ! What’s that ?’

Both the men bent eagerly over the vessel’s side, and, every now and then, a faint struggling cry seemed to rise from the waters close by, but the moon’s light was so dim and irregular that they could see nothing.

‘What’s the matter, my men ?’ asked the officer of the watch.

‘Something like a signal of distress overboard, your honour; but I can’t see.’

‘There ! there ! don’t you hear it ?’ cried the other as the wail was repeated.

‘Ay, ay, lights out directly; lower a boat. somebody from the wreck,’ sang out Mr Forrest.

As is always the case in a well-disciplined ship, the orders were scarcely give than executed, and, with lanterns fixed to poles, the boat was out and searching all around; but the cry was still and the men had no guide.

‘It must have been fancy,’ said Mr Howard, as the boat swept round for the fourth time. Just then, a shout from the ship reached their ears; a sailor standing after had heard something grate by the ship’s side; he looked down; it was an immense piece of timber and something white clinging to it.

‘Body alongside !’

In a moment three men jumped overboard, and lights were let down to assist them; as they disengaged the body, a cry burst simultaneously from all –

‘It’s Morton and a woman !’

‘Alive ?’ asked Captain Leslie, anxiously.

‘Can’t say ! – gently, lift him gently !’ and Morton and the lady were hauled on deck as tenderly as if the rough hands were women’s. His arm was round her still and it was difficult to release it.

As Morton was raised to be carried below, the surgeon exclaimed ‘Good heavens, he’s wounded; and terribly; look here !’ and he pointed to his back.

The jacket and shirt were completely cut through, and the flesh beneath frightfully opened from shoulder to waist, and jagged pieces of wood were sticking in the wound. It appeared that when he jumped from the wreck with the lady, that a piece of the mast, splintered lengthwise, caught him below the arm, and tearing upwards, left this dreadful wound. The agony was intense; but the brave heart never gave a groan to tell it, but struggled and buffeted on, though every movement of the arm, for it was the one he swam with, gave a pang of suffering so excessive, that as the waves dashed, though gently, on his back, the splinters swayed to and fro in the gash, till he fainted with the pain, but not before, with a last effort, he had caught hold of a rope hanging in a monstrous piece of wood that floated by, and twining it round his body and that of the lady, trusted to Providence to guide it to his ship. After two hours incessant exertion he was recovered: his first words were ‘Where is the lady ?’

‘Safe below.’

‘God be thanked, and thank you all.’

In a week he was allowed to come upon deck for a short time, and every officer from the captain to the middies vied with each other in paying him attention. He was a singularly handsome young man, with sun-burnt cheeks and splendid hazel eyes. His appearance was that of extreme muscular power, but there was blended with it more than a common grace and elegance, and even the dark ringlets, that sailor-fashion hung at the side of his face, were beautiful. Not a stranger crossed the white decks of the Thunderer without gazing long and earnestly at Harry Morton. His was the quickest hand to reef the sails, the nimblest foot to mount the rigging, the

boldest heart and dauntless spirit at the guns, the cheeriest voice to echo orders in the storm, the gentlest touch to tend the sick, and the best disciplined seaman to his officer. Twice at his life's hazard he had saved his captain's, and when he made his first appearance on deck, Leslie went forward and greeted him with a father's welcome.

'I ought to have been the first, Captain Leslie,' said a young lady coming forward: 'my brave preserver!' she would have taken his hand, but his glazed hat was off; and as she met the full glance of those magnificent eyes, her extended arm fell nervelessly by her side, and a deep quick blush rushed to her face.

'It was one of the proudest days of my life, madam, and not the first time I have thanked God he made me a sailor.'

She looked up. There was something in the words and manner beyond a common seaman; yet there he was, clad in the checked shirt and coarse blue jacket of the crew. Could there be a mystery? No, for he gloried in his calling; and Captain Leslie had told her that Harry had been with him from boyhood, and always the same bold, frank, creature; he was then superior in words and deeds to all around him.

In two months the Thunderer arrived at Madras; and Ellen Maxwell (who had been proceeding thither to join her father, who was the commander of the British forces there) was set ashore.

Ellen Maxwell had not seen either her parents or her brother since she was six years old; she had been left in England under the charge of her maternal aunts, who thought the shy, beautiful child was not like to find much care and attention from her haughty parents, who lavished all the little feeling pride and fashion had left upon their heir. The eldest of these aunts was dead; and Sir Robert and Lady Maxwell, having heard much from English arrivals of the beauty and grace of their half-forgotten child, wrote to beg she might come to them, accompanied by her protectress. With a heavy heart, Lady Mowbray consented to leave her country; but she was a widow; had no ties, save local ones, to keep her there; and she had dreaded to send her beautiful Ellen undefended to her heartless family. She accordingly determined to accept their formal invitation and accompany her niece. Her fate was awful; alarm had killed her before the ship blew up, but her body found its grave in the blue ocean.

Once before the Thunderer left Madras, Ellen saw young Morton. Many and earnest had been the entreaties she had made to see her brave preserver, and after a long time her haughty father consented.

Morton came, accompanied by Captain Leslie. Ellen was alone when they were announced, and both thought as she advanced to meet them, that her exquisite beauty had never been equalled.

‘I am so glad to see you,’ she said. ‘Captain Leslie, this is very kind of you;’ and she shook the veteran’s hand. After some time she said ‘I shall not be able to see you sail: may I’ – and she turned to Morton – ‘venture to ask you to take charge of this packet of letters for me, to be put in the post when you reach dear, dear, happy England ? they are to old friends, and I dare not – I mean – I –’

She stopped. Leslie looked at her; he knew enough by report of Sir Robert Maxwell’s stern pride to guess that the gentle girl was wretched; and he was right. She dared not write openly to her childhood’s friends; she had been forbidden to hold intercourse with them.

‘Thank you for the trust; depend on their being safely delivered, Miss Maxwell; and if you can think of any other thing I can do, pray, pray give me your commands.’

‘Thank you – thank you a thousand times; but I have nothing else to do, except this;’ and she brought a parcel from an inner room: ‘it is a present to the crew of your noble vessel; it is the English flag. I have worked at it day and night to finish it, and now I beg you to present it to them with my gratitude and respect. Tell them I have not forgotten their kindness and gentleness to me when I was ill, and a burthen on their provisions and accommodation; bid them remember Ellen Maxwell, and if ever money or her aid can serve them, let them command her utmost power. To you, Morton, I dare offer no reward: you saved my life in frightful peril, and no offering that I can tender can pay the debt; – I only ask one thing. When your ship sails, may these colours be flying over her stern; and let all know that your hand has placed them there.’

They parted; and back to his ship in moody silence went Harry Morton. Two days after, as Lady Maxwell and Ellen, with a large party, were on the shore, they saw the Thunderer setting sail and getting under way. All hands were busy on board.

‘What a splendid ship !’ said one of the party.

As he spoke, the vessel moved majestically from her moorings.

‘Good heavens !’ cried another; ‘look at that man ! what has he got ?’

Ellen looked, and saw Harry Morton climbing up the mizzen shrouds, with her flag in his hand; he fastened it to its place, and waved his hat. The whole ship’s crew and officers were on deck; and as he gave the signal, there distinct cheers came upon the air, and the name of Ellen Maxwell echoed in each.

‘How is this, miss ?’ asked her ladyship; ‘how dare these low wretches presume to name you ?’

‘I gave them that flag, madam; and it is hoisted today for the first time. Their parting cheer I did not expect or deserve; but I am very grateful to them for it. There is not a man on board that

gallant vessel to whom I am not indebted; and most of all to him who has placed those colours in their proud elevation.’

Ellen spoke firmly, and enraged as Lady Maxwell was, she was too politic to produce a scene.

Sir Robert and Lady Maxwell had two idols which they devoutly worshipped – rank and wealth; and to the possessor of these advantages, though a man of brutal mind and displeasing person, they wished to sacrifice their child. Lord Marshcroft was five-and-forty, loose in principle, and excessively proud. He was the colonel of a cavalry regiment, and his harsh, relentless nature found ample scope in torturing and oppressing the wretched natives. Such was the man poor Ellen was to wed. To the end she held out, but she had no friends near her, no support, and at the last she consented, but not without a desperate hope that something might occur to save her.

Ellen had now been three years in India, and her affianced husband became more fervent than ever for their marriage. At last the day was fixed. They were to be married at Lord Marshcroft’s splendid bungalow, where Ellen, her parents and friends, arrived two days previous to the one appointed.

Ellen was frightened at the sullen looks and significant smiles of all around. That there was some project in agitation she was convinced; and that the household servants were concerned in the plot she was also certain. Even Sir Robert, stern and proud as he was, noticed it to his lordship.

‘Oh,’ he cried, ‘if they mean mischief, I’ll hang up a few of them on hooks, for the mosquitos to play with.’

‘Great God!’ said poor Ellen, as she rushed from the room: is this monster to be my husband? oh, never, never!’

Shrieks and screams the next day proclaimed that his threat had been executed. Ellen hid her head in the cushions of the sofa, and tried, with convulsive efforts, to shut out the horrid cries. Still with demon force they pierced the cushion, and she heard them more piteously. At last she started up, and was rushing out of the room, when a slave entered with a letter just arrived by express from Madras. She had not half perused it when in rushed a poor aged woman and her daughter, ‘Save us – save us!’ they cried, as they threw themselves on their knees and clung wildly round her.

‘I will – I will!’ said Ellen. ‘What is the matter? Do not fear.’

‘Oh, save us – save me!’ they shrieked again, clinging closer to her as the door opened, and two slave-drivers entered.

‘I will,’ said Ellen, advancing with dignity to the men. ‘What is your business here?’

We want those two natives who have escaped; but by heaven, they shall smart for this !’ – and coming forward to seize them they flourished their whips, while the poor wretches crouched on the ground.

‘Back, ruffians !’ exclaimed Ellen: ‘these are my apartments ! These women have taken refuge here, and they are safe. Touch them at your peril ! If your master has authorized this presumption, tell him from me it will not be suffered; if he has not, you shall bitterly repent it ! No reply – but instantly quit the room !’

Confused and alarmed, the men withdrew.

‘Thank God !’ exclaimed Ellen, ‘Now, my poor people, what can I do for you ?’

Long was the conference between them, and when it was over Ellen wrote a long letter, and sent it off by express to Madras; then, leaving the women locked up in her room, she went to her father, who was with Lord Marshcroft.

‘My lord,’ she said, ‘since I have been here I have been made wretched by the misery all around me. My very apartments have not been sacred from your brutal followers. I have been maddened by the screams of agony, frightened by your own language, and insulted by your own ferocity. You have been twice refused by me, and only now accepted to free myself from cruel persecution. Hear me, my lord ! If these tortured slaves are not instantly released, I will suffer death before my hand takes yours at God’s altar. I have already taken means effectually to protect the wretched natives you so recklessly murder, by apprizing the English Government of the savage rule you hold. I am a weak woman, my lord, but a *firm* one;’ – and, bowing with lofty dignity she quitted the astonished pair.

The chapel was brilliantly lighted; the clergyman was there, and he waited for Lord Marshcroft and Ellen. At last, they came. Ellen cast an almost frenzied look around as the ceremony went on, and once she murmured, ‘They will not come !’ just as Lord Marshcroft was about to place the ring on her finger, the slaves without the building gave a loud shout, and rushing in with gleaming knives, fell upon the bridegroom.

‘Oh, do not kill him, for mercy’s sake – for my sake !’ shrieked Ellen, as she threw herself in her pity before him; and they fell back.

As she knelt there, in her spotless bridal robes, before the dark and ferocious man, she looked like a pleading angel.

‘Hurrah, hurrah !’ shouted a multitude of voices. Ellen’s head turned giddily round. ‘Hurrah, hurrah !’ And, with these words, in rushed a body of English seamen, and Ellen saw but one. She rose and staggered, and faintly said ‘Morton.’

‘Miss Maxwell ! Ellen – my Ellen !’ and she fell into his arms.

Sir Robert came angrily forward, and aimed a blow at Harry Morton. Ellen caught it.

‘Shame –shame, my father ! would you strike your daughter’s preserver ?’

‘Base, low-born wretch !’ he exclaimed.

‘Father, no; Sir Robert Maxwell, hear me ! When a child, you left me to the care of others, neglected and forgotten. After long, long years of absence, during which you never even wrote to know whether I were alive or dead, you called me home. I came. You forbade all intercourse with those who loved and cherished your deserted child; and against my will – my prayers – you tried to force me into marriage with a ruffian. Only that my life is stubborn, you had long since deprived me of it my misery. You have neither loved, nor reared, nor protected me. What duty do I owe you ? None. I am free – I am of age. Thus I use my liberty. Morton, then, there is my hand; we have loved each other long.

I am not portionless – I shall be no burden to you – for I have ample means.’

‘Hold, or my curse –’

‘Give it – it will not injure me !’ returned Ellen, calmly.

‘Vile girl !’ ejaculated Sir Robert.

‘Proudly I confess I am no child of yours. I learned yesterday, for the first time, that I am an orphan. Your child has long been dead, and I am the only child of Lady Mowbray’s deceased husband. Ah, dear, dear aunt, I little knew she was my mother-in-law ! Sir Robert Maxwell, your rule over me is past. If you doubt my assertion, I have papers that will amply satisfy you that I am the heiress of a prouder estate and fortune than yours.’

‘And will you bestow this peerless land on me ? Dearest Ellen, I am far beneath you, though now the captain of the ship in which I was but lately a common sailor.’

‘But a brave one.’

‘Our ship sails tomorrow, dearest Ellen. Shall she bear you back to England ?’

Ellen glanced around, and placed her hand in that of Harry Morton. He pressed it passionately to his lips, and led her up to the altar; then while his comrades circled around them, she knelt, and in a few minutes rose the bride of the sea captain.