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A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA

By Charles Dickens.

CHAPTER I.—THE VILLAGE.

"And a mighty singular and pretty place it is, as ever I saw in all the days of my life!" said Captain Jorgan, looking up at it.

Captain Jorgan did not look at it, for the village was built there on the face of a steep cliff in a cleft. There was no road in it, there was no level yard in it. From the sea-beach to the church tower, two miles off, rows of white houses, with a patch of garden here and there, and a little church-yard here and there, and a little patch of corn here and there, climbed and climbed, and climbed and climbed, as if they would climb right into the sky. The houses were of all sizes and shapes, and seemed to have been put there, some of them, by the hand of a child playing with his father's tools. There was no regularity in them, except that they faced the south. Some of them had their doors in the middle, some had their doors at the side, some had their doors at the end, some had no doors that anybody could see. Some had windows, some had eyes, some had neither windows nor eyes. Some had chimneys like castles, some had chimneys like mere pipes, some had no chimneys at all. Some had their roofs of slate, some of tile, some of thatch, some of a mixture of all three. The roofs themselves were of all ages, from the roof of the church, which was a Saxon relic, to the roof of the last house, which was a Dutch gable. The village had been built by the fishermen, and was still inhabited by fishermen; but, here and there, a cottage had been built by a smuggler, and was still inhabited by smugglers. The place was very old, very picturesque, very poor, very dirty, very healthy, very ignorant, very superstitious, very honest, very drowsy, very slow, very sly, very quaint, very secluded, very unchanged, very little visited by strangers, very little known to the world, very self-contented, and very well worth seeing.

Captain Jorgan had not been through the village, but had come down to the pier by a winding sheep-path, to have a preliminary look at it from the level of his own natural element. He had seen many boats and pieces of boats, and had smelled them all away in a shrewd, intelligent, and a vigorous manner. He was an American, and was Captain Jorgan—a New Englander—but he was a citizen of the world, and a combination of most of the best qualities of most of the best countries.

For Captain Jorgan to sit anywhere in his long-skirted blue coat and little trowsers, without holding converse with everybody within speaking distance, was an impossibility. So the captain had to talk to the fishermen, and to asking them questions about the fishery, and the fish, and the currents, and the race of water off that point yonder, and what you knew, and what you didn't know, and what else was in your way to know, and what else was in your way not to know, and other nautical questions. Among the men who exchanged yarns with the captain was a young fellow who was a fisherman—a young fisherman of the village, a young fisherman of the village, a young fisherman of the village, with a brown face, dark curling hair, and modest eyes under his broad shaggy hat, and with a frank but simple and manly bearing, which the captain found very taking. "I'd bet a thousand dollars," said the captain to himself, "that your father was an honest man!"

"Might you be married now?" asked the captain, when he had had some talk with this new acquaintance.

"Not yet."

"Going to be?" said the captain.

"I hope so."

The captain's keen glance followed the slightest possible turn of the young fellow's head, the slightest possible turn of the young fellow's eyes, the slightest possible turn of the young fellow's mouth. The captain then shapely lips, and said to himself,

"Never know such a good thing in all my life! There's his sweet heart leaning over the wall!"

There was a pretty girl looking over the wall, from a little plantation of cottage vines and fuchsia; and she, or a shrewd thief, took as the presence of the young fisherman in the landscape made it, she the beauty and he the foil for her.

Captain Jorgan, having modified himself up to laugh with that hearty giant nature which is quite overcome by the innocent happiness of other people, had doubled himself up, and was giving a new subject, when, there appeared coming down the lower ladders of stones, a man whom he hailed as "Tom Pettifer, Ho!" Tom Pettifer, Ho! responded with alacrity, and in speedy course descended on the pier.

"A raid of a sunshiny day in England in November, Tom, that you or your tropical rat, strongly paid out of sole and pepper-box inside, here?" said the captain, eyeing it.

"It's well to be in the sunshine, sir," replied Tom.

"Sail, ahoy!" repeated the captain, laughing. "Yonder, gaping and staring for all the world like that old hat in an ice-pitch. What have you on the other side of the water?"

"It's the Post-office, sir."

"What's the Post-office?" inquired the captain.

"The name, sir. The name of the Post-office."

"A coincidence," said the captain. "A lucky thing, I show my mind to be. Good-by, shipmate, for the present! I shall come and have another look at you, after I leave, this afternoon."

This was addressed to all there, but especially the young fisherman, so all there acknowledged it, but especially the young fisherman. "He's a sailor," said one to another, as they looked after the captain moving away. That he was, and so unlike any other sailor in him, that, although his dress had nothing nautical about it, with the sole exception of its color, but was a suit of a shape and form, too long in the sleeves and too short in the legs, and too unaccommodating everywhere, terminating earthward in a pair of Wellington boots, and surmounted by a tall, stiff hat, which no mortal could have worn at sea in any wind under heaven, nevertheless a glimpse of his sunshiny, weather-beaten face, and his strong brown hand, would have established the captain's calling. Whereas, Mr. Pettifer—a man of a certain plump neatness, with a early whisker, and elaborately nautical in a jacket and shoes, and all things correspondent—looked no more like a seaman, beside the captain Jorgan, than he looked like a sea-serpent.

The two climbed high up the village—which had the most arbitrary ways and twists in it, so that the cobbler's house on one dead across the ladder, and to have had a reasonable course, you must have gone through his house, and through his work-shop, and out at his work-shop window, two little windows, and over one more, and down the other side of the mountain, to the place of the telescope—the two climbed high up the village, and at last a quaint little house on which was painted, "Mrs. Raybrock, Dealer in Shells, Post Office," and in smaller letters underneath, "Sea-water, and Sea-side lodgings to let," was passed by a little plank bridge.

"Here's the name," said Captain Jorgan, "sure enough. You can come in if you like, Tom."

The Captain opened the door, and passed into an odd little shop, about six feet high, with a great variety of beasts and bumps in the ceiling, and, besides the principal window giving on the ladder of stones, a purblind little window of a single pane of glass; peeping out of an abutting corner at the sun-lighted ocean, and winking at its brightness.

"How do you do, ma'am?" said the captain. "I am very glad to see you. I have come a long way to see you."

"Have you, sir? Then I am sure I am very glad to see you, though I don't know you from Adam."

This was a lonely elderly woman, short of stature, stump of form, sparkling and dark of eye, who, perfectly clean and neat herself, stood in the midst of her perfectly clean and neat arrangements, and surveyed Captain Jorgan with smiling curiosity. "And, not you as a sailor, sir," she added, almost immediately, and with a slight movement of her hands, that was not very unlike wringing them; "think you are heartily welcome."

"Thankee ma'am," said the captain. "I don't know what it is I am sure, that brings out the sail in me, but everybody seems to see it as the crown of my hat and the collar of my coat. Yes, ma'am, I am that way of life."

"And the other gentleman, too," said Mrs. Raybrock.

"Well now, ma'am," said the captain, glancing sideways at the other gentleman, "you are the first to hit that as goes to sea—if that means anything in a sailor. This is my mate, ma'am, I am sorry to say. For both of us, all the time you could bear to have him about his life—and I'll be bound he has left all his chairs and tables, clear, I'm sure, that he may see no other than my sea-chest, and my name and rank and station, and I am a skipper, and I call my own and my partner's ships, and have come to take five-and-twenty years, according to custom. I am called Captain Jorgan, and I am so much a captain, I believe, in my heart! Do you live?"

"Perhaps you'll come my parlor, sir, and take a chair?" said Mrs. Raybrock.

"Exactly what I was going to propose myself, ma'am. After you."

Thus replying and enjoining Tom to give an eye to the ship, Captain Jorgan followed Mrs. Raybrock into the little low back-room—decorated with cockle-shells, pots, tea-trays, old china teapots, and punch bowls—which was at once the private sitting-room of the Raybrock family and the inner cabinet of the proceedings of the village of Seaways.

"Now, ma'am," said the captain, "it don't signify a cent to me where I was born, except——"

But here the arrival of some one entering left the sentence in mid-air, and he broke off to come to himself up a smooth his legs, and signal to "Never know such a thing in all my life! Here I go, and——How are you?"

This words referred to the young fellow who had so taken Captain Jorgan's fancy down at the pier. The man to it quite complete he came in accompanied by the sweetheart whom he had seen leaning over the wall. A prettier sweetheart the sun could not have shone upon this sunny day. As she stood before the captain, with her rosy lips just parted in surprise, her eyes a little wider open than was usual from the same cause, and her breathing a little quicker, the captain (and possibly by some mysterious hurry and flurry at the other door, in which the captain had seen her face to be for a moment strongly occupied by the Sea-water and) was so sure she was charming, that the captain felt himself under a moral obligation to slap both his knees again. She was very simply dressed, with no other ornament than an autumn flower in her bosom. She wore neither bonnet nor hat, but merely a scarf or kerchief, loosely spread over her head, to keep the wind off—according to a fashion that may prevail in London in the more central parts of England as well as of Italy, and which is probably the first of all the dresses that came into the world when grasses and leaves went out.

"Is my country," said the captain, rising to give her the chair, "Devonshire, or near it, close to another corner on which the young fisherman must inevitably establish himself—to my country we should call Devonshire beauty, present?"

Whatever a frank manner is offensive, it is because it is assumed or feigned; for there may be quite as much interpretable affection in plain truth as in a lie. Accordingly, the captain was not at all surprised to find that he was honestly according to his nature, and that his heart was open at instance and good humor, therefore, when he paid the little compliment, and expressed with a sparkle or two at her knowing eyes, that, with a little more time to study her, he might be sure of her confidence in his sincerity.

"I was saying to your worthy mother," said the young fisherman, "when you came in, that we had not yet had the pleasure of an introduction, ma'am, but I felt as if I were—I don't know—as if I were your oldest friend, and that I ought to be able to tell you, without your asking, that I was raised on a farm, inland, and that I have sailed on the sea only a few years, and that I am a fisherman, and that I live with my father, who is a fisherman, and that we live in a village called Seaways, and that we live in a house with a green door, and that our house is the last house but one on the village street, and that our house is the last house but one on the village street, and that our house is the last house but one on the village street