

# The Touch o' the Sea

By Roland Thomas

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JOHN GRIERSON boarded the old schooner in Hankow, lying to her anchor in the bay, with pleasant anticipations of the novelty of being aboard without a watch to stand. For two years he had been first officer of an inter-island transport, kept at full responsibility stretch day and night by the responsibility of the passengers, through the reef-strewn waterways of the Philippines, and picking up anchorages in uncharted bights and treacherous tide-swept roadsteads, and handling boats with men and cargo in the surf on coral beaches, and the superfluous duties which fall to an executive who is navigator and watch officer, too. He had wearied of the life till it seemed to him he had wearied of the sea as well, and when the opportunity came to go home in a liner, he decided that he need not know a textant from a signal hallow, he had seized on it.

And for a while he was not disappointed. It was indeed pleasant to see the China coast at last as a traveler sees it, lying tranquilly in the passenger chair while the ship was maneuvered through the tortuous entrance of Hong Kong, and the long turn which leads to the anchorage behind the green peninsula of Amoy—where the houses glisten so very white among the trees and sharing in the adventurous excitement of his fellow passengers as they explored new cities in the lazy voyage up the coast.

But when the skipper's stubby bow-sprit was once painted fairly eastward and pale rosy Fujiyama had faded into the blankness of the sky aster, and the last wandering fishing junk had been dropped below the horizon, Grierson began to learn that an unattached sailor aboard ship is the most miserable creature imaginable. The Hankow's officers, friendly as they were, were too busy with their duties—duties which all at once began to strike the exile as rather desirable things—to spare much time to him. And the passengers, he discovered, belonged to a world which he had almost forgotten, with interests quite different from his. They expected from him, so far as they expected anything, only marvelous yarns, and when Grierson, being a man of a certain turn, failed to meet this demand, they dropped him unceremoniously. He seemed likely to pass many hours in solitude—until little Miss Minturn discovered him, and, uninvited and unencouraged, made of it a social deus.

She was soon occupying the larger share of Grierson's waking moments, being present in his thoughts even when she was absent in the flesh. Her ready friendliness puzzled rather than flattered him. In the eight years of his life since he had left the schoolship he had seen little of women, and like most sailors he was wary of what he did not understand. Why Miss Minturn, who was both pretty and popular, should take the trouble to seek him out in the lonely nooks he haunted and spend hours questioning him on the greater and lesser mysteries of seamanship, he could not make out, for there seemed little in common between her life, past or future, and the petty, petty problems she brought him for solution. She was a slender girl in the early twenties, apparently, and until this journey round the world—which had come to her through the rather obtrusive generosity of a rich uncle and aunt who accompanied her, Grierson learned as one learns things aboard ship—she had been a consistent landswoman, with a nautical experience confined to the coast waters of New England coast. John wondered, somewhat suspiciously, what interest a girl like that could have in the stowage, say, of a mixed cargo of railroad iron and grain in bulk.

The logical explanation, that she asked out of pure eagerness to be informed, did not strike him as logical, for the information could be of no possible use to her. And yet he was at a loss for any other motive which seemed adequate. So he held himself watchful almost inevitably, and with the tidal ebb and flow of his own mind, with the same simple eloquence of deep enthusiasm and love, of his own people, and through his eyes Helen Minturn saw the sleepy town on the shore of Cape Cod bay, with the tidal creek bubbling in the marshes and the old square white house on the hill above them from which so many generations of Griersons have gone down to the sea—and where so many Grierson women and children have waited, with the patient patience of sea-born folk, for the return of a ship, or for the news which makes a blank of life at first.

And so at last, one afternoon, Miss Minturn heard how something had called John Grierson from the easy path of college and profession which had been marked out for him, and had made a sailor of him, too. Somehow or other, John said, he thought of the memory of all those Griersons who had been waters on the sea which had summoned him.

His tongue was stumbling enough when he required it to speak of such unspeakable things as his own emotions, and in the midst of his self-analysis he broke off short. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this," he said.

"Because I'd rather hear it than anything else any one could say," said the girl gently. "You just had to go, didn't you?"

"Yes," John answered simply. "I had to go."

"You're so lucky!" she cried, half-enthusiastically. "So many of us can't puzzle out our place in life at all, and you found yours without a struggle."

"Except for my mother," John corrected. "She had lost her father and her brother and my father at sea already."

"I know," said the girl, and was silent for a little. "Do you know," she said at last, "I think in spite of that she'd rather you'd be where you belong. And you, you don't regret it, do you?"

"No," John muttered. "That is, only sometimes," he added honestly. His eyes caught hers, and hung there, and there was a longing in them which brought the blood to the girl's cheek. "Sometimes," he said earnestly, as if the words came from him without his will, "when I think that I can never hope for the things other men take as a matter of course, home, and—and—" John glanced sideways at his companion's glowing face, realized that he was talking his heart out to this inhabitant of another world, and became speechless once more. Partly for shame's sake, partly for something else. All at once he knew how sorry he was that this girl with the pretty commanding ways did belong to a world so far from his. And Miss Minturn, infected by his awkwardness perhaps, was silent too.

"That night—it was the sixth out from Yokohama, and the Hankow was laboring in the trough of a heavy swell which makes down from the northward along there—John sat in the smoking room after all the other men had dropped away to bed, deep in his own uneasy thoughts. At last he knew what a scurvy trick fate had played him in that week which he was to remember regretfully all his life. If only he had not been a sailor, or if the girl had come of seafaring folk—John, in his modesty felt that he had nothing to offer which could tempt her, and in his honesty he knew that nothing one could offer would make it right for a man to let a tenderly nurtured woman share



"Our ship will get to our Valparaiso . . . Vale of Paradise."

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Then was the time for a watchful aunt to have looked to windward and have put a dragon uncle on sentry-go, for the step to more personal things was easy, almost inevitable, and with the tidal ebb and flow of his own mind, with the same simple eloquence of deep enthusiasm and love, of his own people, and through his eyes Helen Minturn saw the sleepy town on the shore of Cape Cod bay, with the tidal creek bubbling in the marshes and the old square white house on the hill above them from which so many generations of Griersons have gone down to the sea—and where so many Grierson women and children have waited, with the patient patience of sea-born folk, for the return of a ship, or for the news which makes a blank of life at first.

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And he had no sooner agreed than, after the manner of men on the brink of love, he lost sight of the ethical aspects of his case in a sudden, overwhelming vision of what might have been. With astounding vividness he saw Helen Minturn, Helen Grierson now, turning away up the gravel path that leads through banks of tiger lilies to the side door of the old white house, and a gasp, whose sadness was not fit all faintful. Just vividly he experienced the rapturous completeness of each return from sea, when Helen Grierson would be waiting for him under the old gnarled trees of the orchard. And at each successive picture rose before him he became less and less the Puritan clasping thorny duty with unflinching hands, and more and more the rebellious boy complaining at his fate and half-inclined to try a fall with it.

A sudden stillness called him from all that. On a long fair-weather voyage one becomes tuned to the ever-recurring movements and thousand muffled voices of a ship and they pass unnoticed, except when they stop. It took John a moment to realize that the Hankow's engines were shut off and that only her momentum was carrying her forward with a gentle whisper of water along-side, quite different from the sharp hissing and bubbling of the waves parted by a vessel under way. At the same time the watch officer on the bridge sang out in a mellow roar, "Bark ahoy! What bark is that?"

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But the officers and the Chinese boat-swain were busy with preparations for a visitor. A boatline was rigged over the starboard side, a boarding ladder, that if he had a right to marry at all, it was only with a woman of his own class, inured to the tragedies of the sea. It was already decided for him, of hand, that he could not fall in love with Miss Minturn. It was a hard decision to agree with, but he managed it.

And he had no sooner agreed than, after the manner of men on the brink of love, he lost sight of the ethical aspects of his case in a sudden, overwhelming vision of what might have been. With astounding vividness he saw Helen Minturn, Helen Grierson now, turning away up the gravel path that leads through banks of tiger lilies to the side door of the old white house, and a gasp, whose sadness was not fit all faintful. Just vividly he experienced the rapturous completeness of each return from sea, when Helen Grierson would be waiting for him under the old gnarled trees of the orchard. And at each successive picture rose before him he became less and less the Puritan clasping thorny duty with unflinching hands, and more and more the rebellious boy complaining at his fate and half-inclined to try a fall with it.

A sudden stillness called him from all that. On a long fair-weather voyage one becomes tuned to the ever-recurring movements and thousand muffled voices of a ship and they pass unnoticed, except when they stop. It took John a moment to realize that the Hankow's engines were shut off and that only her momentum was carrying her forward with a gentle whisper of water along-side, quite different from the sharp hissing and bubbling of the waves parted by a vessel under way. At the same time the watch officer on the bridge sang out in a mellow roar, "Bark ahoy! What bark is that?"

It was hard to bring to any one who has not experienced it a realization of the hugeness and emptiness of the Pacific, or of the monotony of a voyage across its thousands of leagues of slowly heaving blue. Even those who have crossed the Atlantic often have little conception of the desert waste of old ocean really is, for the thronging commerce between Europe and America moves in a very few narrow and crowded lanes, where it is as natural to meet a fellow wayfarer as on a country road. But in the vast expanse of the mid-Pacific, where the Hankow was then, even on established routes of passage, the glint of a sail or the smudge of a smoke plume on the dim horizon line is an event. Once off these little frequented paths a disabled ship might drift for months undiscovered, now that the ubiquitous whalers are gone. To speak another ship there is a rare event, and the hail of the second mate brought John to his feet.

He flung open the door of the port gangway and saw, close aboard to leeward, as the Hankow swept slowly on a magnificent sailing vessel. Only a breath of air was stirring, there on the northern edge of the Trades, and she had all sail set to catch it. It was bright moonlight, though the sky was flecked with the outposts of the trade-wind clouds, and every taut rope and tapering spar of her was clean-cut as a shadow, while the swells of silver canvas glinted like sheets of silver.

She was a sight to make one's breath catch, appearing there so unexpectedly, out of the night, in what had seemed an empty sea.

"Bark ahoy!" the watch officer hailed again, and from the stranger, now falling rapidly astern in her drift to leeward, a thin and eerie voice returned an incomprehensible answer. Then suddenly, with a rattle of brace-blocks, the bark's main-yard swung aback, and John heard the soft thudding of wind-beaten canvas as her light sails were let go and clewed up. From her spanker-gaff a line of red lanterns

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"Talk French, Mr. Grierson," he asked. "Come up, and try her. Those topsails set Frenchy."

So, braced on the overhanging end of the bridge, while the Hankow wallowed inertly in the swells which lapped her sides, John hurled fragments of speech, hither and thither, out into the night. And gradually fragments of information struggled back up the wind. The stranger was the bark Duchesse de something, of Marseilles, some number of days out from Hong Kong, bound to Valparaiso.

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