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THE SLAVERS - AN ACTUAL INCIDENT OF THE SLAVE TRADE

by

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The Slavers

An Actual Incident of the Slave Trade

By Maurice H. Hirst

ALL at last was ready. Between decks the last of the slaves had been packed into the noisome den which they were to occupy for many weeks. It was a good cargo, and well stowed. In that narrow space, less than three feet high, the long rows of ebon humanity lay breast to back, shackled to each other and the chain which ran through the lower deck ring-bolts. Mothers, though spared the weight of irons, lay with their babes in the same foetid air. Their fetishes had failed them. They were to be carried they knew not whither, nor to what strange destiny. Here came no cool wind such as stirred at night the tangled growths of their humid forests. The brawny man and the stripling, the mother and the maid, all those black specks of vitalised dust, trembled with fear, as a trapped and driven herd trembles; were acquiescent in despair, or sullen with anger. Their quivering animal senses had been tortured by sights and sounds of which they knew not the import; the reek of their hot flesh, massed in compound and cells, had ascended to skies as merciless as their captors. Now for them the middle passage awaited; the tropic seas, the breathless calms, the sudden squall. Lest their condition fail too rapidly, the whips of their masters would encourage them to dance and sing on those rare occasions when, from the darkness of their prison, they crept out to sunlight. A picture for a Doré, that dance. But of that they knew nothing; supine and terrified, friend and foe were united in their chains; powerless to escape whip, or memories, stalking fever, ophthalmia. . . .

The anchor came up to the bows, the jibs were set, the main- and fore-sails filled; the *via dolorosa* had begun. Soon the Guinea coast lost its definition of outline, became a dark rim on the horizon, softened to a filmy haze, and

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was gone. Free at last from the steaming heats and stifling airs of tropical rivers, their mud, the sullen flood of their discoloured waters, the slaver lifted quick bows to freshening waves and wind.

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Nearly all that day, as for many days past, the schooner had floated, a thing inert and lifeless, upon the brazen disc of the equatorial sea. Upon her lay the oppression of absolute stillness. The sun had climbed its wide arc, flamed down upon her, descended to the hard rim of the burnished ocean; the inscrutable constellations had marched by night across the sky: day after day and night after night the same majestic and impersonal sequence, the same gleaming immobility, the same cold certitudes. The stillness imposed an illusion of annihilation. It was as though everything—vessel and shadow, the sea, the sky—were fixed for ever; as though all movement, save that of the recurring and monotonous mechanism of nature, were impossible. Once or twice in that long trance a breeze had obscured the sheen of the smoothed waters; the canvas had fluttered for a while, a slack chain sheet had jingled, a boom had creaked as it swung idly. Then it had died away; the sails, enfeebled, as it seemed, by their effort for freedom, had fallen again on stillness, the little trivial hissings alongside had ceased. Motionless once more, the schooner resumed her air of detachment from the things of this world. She seemed like some bird poised for flight, with wings outspread, but snared by a malignant fate. The pitch bubbled in the seams, the woodwork blistered. Yet she chilled the heart. There was about her a sinister exhalation, an oppression of brooding and stealthy horror that appalled the finer perceptions of the spirit. The men about her decks moved slowly, shuffling with uncertain steps, or sprawled about in the scanty shade. Their breath came with laboured respiration; every now and then one would stagger to the brackish and tepid water, drink, and return to his place exhausted, moving clumsily. Each might have been despair personified. None moved on those occasions when the schooner stirred to a faint life under the wavering influence of a breeze. All through that day scarcely a word was spoken. Only the helmsman spun at times, and as it were from habit, the useless wheel.

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He had stood there for hours, sheltered by a strip of awning, peering ahead through narrowed eyelids. To that trapped and melancholy vessel he gave, at least, an air of something human. In his endurance there seemed purpose, perhaps hope. Yet the complete loneliness of that indifferent sea was broken only by another schooner, becalmed and helpless as his own. Shadow and ship appeared interchangeable; the unaltering reflection to mock the bare poles that pointed accusingly to the callous skies.

But as the sun slipped down the polished dome of the heavens, a brisker breeze than had been theirs for many days filled out the sails. The men on deck raised heads as the canvas slatted, but only the helmsman, in his tenses poise, gave evidence of real interest. Though his posture did not change, nor his puckered eyelids cease from undeviating gaze upon their companion on that lonely sea, it was as though his hope took definition at the touch of the wind upon his form. And though he never looked aloft upon the bellying canvas, nor at the wake that made a darker blur upon the ruffled water, yet it must be that their sounds, and the noise of the hissing bubbles that swept from the bows, impinged upon a consciousness so expectant. He alone, of all the crew, appeared to live; to be superior to the exhaustion and despair that weighed them down. He seemed the link that still united them to a humanity they had resigned; his nervous and accustomed hands, clutching the wheel, to combat and control not only the onward-forging vessel, but some dark, mysterious fate as well. . . . The schooner, on the last fitful wafting of the breeze, crept slowly to within easy hailing distance of the stranger, and ranged up on her starboard. Then at last the voice of the helmsman shattered the long silence, and at the sound the sprawling men stumbled to their feet and shambled with what haste they could to either bulwark of their vessel.

“For God’s sake, you on that schooner, send some men aboard us who can see. We’re all blind here, all but me, and I’m nearly gone,” cried the helmsman in a voice feeble and cracked from exhaustion, the very ghost of a sea-hail. But terror and fear beyond words were in it. For a second’s space, wherein men heard the loud pulsation of

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their hearts, silence fell; and then a murmur rose and swelled which had in it a hint of mockery and cackling mad laughter, impotent rebellion, and a deep diapason of despair. And, as it wavered away again to verge on silence, there came an answering voice, "We're all blind aboard here." . . .

* * * * *

On those two ships that floated motionless upon the sea, the tumult of men appalled at the horror of their trapping died away. For a space they were exhausted. To what purpose their blasphemies, or their whimperings? A torpor had succeeded rebellion; a consciousness of their irremediable servitude to dreadful circumstance had stricken them dumb. So the sane lay prostrate, and the mad chuckled and muttered unregarded. And in the pest-house whence the doom had come, their cargo died in torment. None had given them food or water all that long calm; none had dared make entry there. In their chains they rotted, poisoning the air. . . . But to the sufferings of those who still lived a term had been set. The sun dipped, a blood-red disc, to the horizon, though no eye saw it; but to the eastward a sombre cloud swiftly began to climb the sky. The fleeting twilight passed, and once again the stars appeared in their appointed stations, flickering in the quivering and oppressive atmosphere. The cloud grew vaster, more sinister. Its opaque mass advanced upon the night sky with incredible yet stealthy speed. In swift and stifling vibrations the air was thrust moaningly before it; the sea heaved in glossy undulations. The last stars soon were blotted out, and utter blackness lay like a pall upon the schooners.

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