

CHAPTER VII.

YOU certainly know the fable of the Flying Dutchman. It is the story of an enchanted ship which can never arrive in port, and which since time immemorial has been sailing about at sea. When it meets a vessel, some of the unearthly sailors come in a boat and beg the others to take a packet of letters home for them. These letters must be nailed to the mast, else some misfortune will happen to the ship—above all if no Bible be on board, and no horse-shoe nailed to the foremast. The letters are always addressed to people whom no one knows, and who have long been dead, so that some late descendant gets a letter addressed to a faraway great-

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great-grandmother, who has slept for centuries in her grave. That timber spectre, that grim grey ship, is so called from the captain, a Hollander, who once swore by all the devils that he would get round a certain mountain, whose name has escaped me,[22] in spite of a fearful storm, though he should sail till the Day of Judgement. The devil took him at his word, therefore he must sail forever, until set free by a woman's truth. The devil in his stupidity has no faith in female truth, and allowed the enchanted captain to land once in seven years and get married, and so find opportunities to save his soul. Poor Dutchman! He is often only too glad to be saved from his marriage and his wife-

saviour, and get again on board.

The play which I saw in Amsterdam was based on this legend. Another seven years have passed; the poor Hollander is more weary than ever of his endless wandering; he lands, becomes intimate with a Scottish nobleman, to whom he sells diamonds for a mere song, and when he hears that his customer has a beautiful daughter, he asks that he may wed her. This bargain also is agreed to. Next we see the Scottish home; the maiden with anxious heart awaits the bridegroom. She often looks with strange sorrow at a great, time-worn picture which hangs in the

hall, and represents a handsome man in the Netherlandish-Spanish garb. It is an old heirloom, and according to a

legend of her grandmother, is a true portrait of the Flying Dutchman as he was seen in Scotland a hundred years before, in the time of William of Orange. And with this has

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come down a warning that the women of the family must beware of the original. This has naturally enough had the result of deeply impressing the features of the picture on the heart of the romantic girl. Therefore, when the man himself makes his appearance, she is startled, but not with fear. He too is moved at beholding the portrait. But when he is informed whose likeness it is, he with tact and easy

conversation turns aside all suspicion, jests at the legend, laughs at the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew of the Ocean, and yet, as if moved by the thought, passed into a pathetic mood, depicting how terrible the life must be of one condemned to endure unheard-of tortures on a wild waste of waters—how his body itself is his living coffin, wherein his soul is terribly imprisoned—how life and death alike reject him, like an empty cask scornfully thrown by the sea on the shore, and as contemptuously repulsed again into the sea—how his agony is as deep as the sea on which he sails—his ship without anchor, and his heart without hope.

I believe that these were nearly the words with which, the bridegroom ends. The bride regards him with deep earnestness, casting glances meanwhile at his portrait. It seems as if she had penetrated his secret; and when he afterwards asks, "Katherine, wilt thou be true to me?" she answers, "True to death."

I remember that just then I heard a laugh, and that it came not from the pit but from the gallery of the gods above. As I

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glanced up I saw a wondrous lovely Eve in Paradise, who looked seductively at me, with great blue eyes. Her arm hung over the gallery, and in her hand she held an apple, or rather an orange.[23] But instead of symbolically dividing it with me, she only metaphorically cast the peel on my head. Was it done intentionally or by accident? That I would

know! But when I entered the Paradise to cultivate the acquaintance, I was not a little startled to find a white soft creature, a wonderfully womanly tender being, not

languishing, yet delicately clear as crystal, a form of home-like propriety[24]and fascinating amiability. Only that there

was something on the left upper lip which curved or twined like the tail of a slippery gliding lizard. It was a mysterious trait, something such as is not found in pure angels, and just as little in mere devils. This expression comes not from evil, but from the knowledge of good and evil—it is a smile which has been poisoned or flavoured by tasting the Apple of Eden. When I see this expression on soft, full, rosy, ladies' lips, then I feel in my own a cramp-like twitching—a convulsive yearning—to kiss those lips: it is our Affinity.

[25]

I whispered into the ear of the beauty:—

"Yuffrou,

[26] I will kiss thy mouth."

"Bei Gott, Mynheer! that is a good idea," was the hasty answer, which rang with bewitching sound from her heart.

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But—no. I will here draw a veil over, and end the story or picture of which the Flying Dutchman was the frame.

Thereby will I revenge myself on the prurient prudes who devour such narratives with delight, and are enraptured with them to their heart of hearts, et plus ultra, and then abuse the narrator, and turn up their noses at him in society, and decry him as immoral. It is a nice story, too, delicious as preserved pine-apple or fresh caviare or truffles in Burgundy, and would be pleasant reading after prayers; but out of spite, and to punish old offences, I will suppress it. Here I make a long dash Which may be supposed to be a black sofa on which we sat as I wooed. But the innocent must suffer with the guilty, and I dare say that many a good soul looks bitterly and reproachfully at me. However, unto these of the better kind I will admit that I was never so wildly kissed as by this Dutch blonde, and that she most triumphantly destroyed the prejudice which I had hitherto held against blue eyes and fair hair. Now I understand why an English poet has compared such women to frozen champagne. In the icy crust lies hidden the strongest extract. There is nothing more piquant than the contrast between external cold and the inner fire which, Bacchante-like, flames up and irresistibly intoxicates the happy carouser. Ay, far more than in brunettes does the fire of passion burn in many a sham-calm holy image with golden-glory hair, and blue angel's eyes, and pious lily hands. I knew a blonde of one of the best families in Holland who at times left her beautiful chateau on the Zuyder-Zee and went incognito to Amsterdam, and there in

the theatre threw orange-peel on the head of any one who pleased her, and gave herself up to the wildest debauchery, like a Dutch Messalina! . . .

When I re-entered the theatre, I came in time to see the last scene of the play, where the wife of the Flying Dutchman on a high cliff wrings her hands in despair, while her unhappy husband is seen on the deck of his unearthly ship, tossing on the waves. He loves her, and will leave her lest she be lost with him, and he tells her all his dreadful destiny, and the cruel curse which hangs above his head. But she cries aloud, "I was ever true to thee, and I know how to be ever true unto death!"

Saying this she throws herself into the waves, and then the enchantment is ended. The Flying Dutchman is saved, and we see the ghostly ship slowly sink into the abyss of the sea.

The moral of the play is that women should never marry a Flying Dutchman, while we men may learn from it that one can through women go down and perish—under favourable circumstances!