

The Legend Of The Bell Rock.

Captain Marryat

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Chapter L.

There was a grand procession through the streets of the two towns of Perth and Dundee. The holy abbots, in their robes, walked under gilded canopies, the monks chanted, the censers were thrown, flags and banners were carried by seamen, lighted tapers by penitents; St. Antonio, the patron of those who trust to the stormy ocean, was carried in all pomp through the streets; and, as the procession passed, coins of various value were thrown down by those who watched it from the windows, and, as fast as thrown were collected by little boys dressed as angels, and holding silver vessels to receive the largesses. During the whole day did the procession continue, and large was the treasure collected in the two towns. Every one gave freely, for there were few, indeed none, who, if not in their own circle, at least among their acquaintances, had to deplore the loss of some one dear to them, or to those they visited, from the dangerous rock which lay in the very track of all the vessels entering the Firth of Tay.

These processions had been arranged, that a sufficient sum of money might be collected to enable them to put in execution a plan proposed by an adventurous and bold young seaman, in a council held for the purpose, of fixing a bell on the rock, which could be so arranged that the slightest breath of wind would cause the hammer of it to sound, and thus, by its tolling, warn the mariner of his danger; and the sums given were more than sufficient. A meeting was then held, and it was unanimously agreed that Andrew M'Clise should be charged with the commission to go over to Amsterdam, and purchase the bell of a merchant residing there, whom Andrew stated to have one in his possession, which, from its fine tone and size, was exactly calculated for the purport to which it was to be appropriated.

Andrew M'Clise embarked with the money, and made a prosperous voyage. He had often been at Amsterdam, and had lived with the merchant, whose name was Vandermaclin; and the attention to his affairs, the dexterity and the rapidity of the movements of Andrew M'Clise, had often elicited the warmest encomiums of Mynheer Vandermaclin; and many evenings had Andrew M'Clise passed with him, drinking in moderation their favourite scheedam, and indulging in the meditative merschaum. Vandermaclin had often wished that he had a son like Andrew M'Clise, to whom he could leave his property, with the full assurance that the heap would not be scattered, but greatly added to.

Vandermaclin was a widower. He had but one daughter, who was now just arrived at an age to return from the pension to her father's house, and take upon herself the domestic duties. M'Clise had never yet seen the beautiful Katerina.

"And so, Mynheer M'Clise," said Vandermaclin, who was sitting in the warehouse on the ground-floor of his tenement, "you come to purchase the famous bell of Utrecht; with the intention of fixing it upon that rock, the danger of which we have so often talked over after the work of the day has been done? I, too, have suffered from that same rock, as you well know; but still I have been fortunate. The price will be heavy; and so it ought to be, for the bell itself is of no small weight."

"We are prepared to pay it, Mynheer Vandermaclin."

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"Nevertheless, in so good a cause, and for so good a purport, you shall not be overcharged. I will say nothing of the beauty of the workmanship, or even of the mere manufacture. You shall pay but its value in metal; the same price which the Jew Isaacs offered me for it but four months ago. I will not ask what a Jew would ask, but what a Jew would give, which makes no small difference. Have you ten thousand guilders?"

"I have, and more."

"That is my price, Mynheer M'Clise, and I wish for no more; for I, too, will contribute my share to the good work. Are you content, and is it a bargain?"

"It is; and the holy abbots will thank you on vellum, Mynheer Vandermaclin, for your generosity."

"I prefer the thanks of the bold seamen to those of the idle churchmen; but, never mind, it is a bargain. Now, we will go in; it is time to close the doors. We will take our pipes, and you shall make the acquaintance of my fair daughter, Katerina."

At the time we are speaking of, M'Clise was about six-and-twenty years of age; he was above the middle size, elegant in person, and with a frankness and almost nobility in his countenance, which won all who saw him.

His manners were like those of most seamen, bold, but not offensively so. His eye was piercing as an eagle's; and it seemed as if his very soul spoke from it. At the very first meeting between him and the daughter of Vandermaclin, it appeared to both as if their destinies were to unite them.

They loved not as others love, but with an intensity which it would be impossible to portray; but they hardly exchanged a word. Again and again they met; their eyes spoke, but nothing more. The bell was put on board the vessel, the money had been paid down, and M'Clise could no longer delay. He felt as if his heart-strings were severed as he tore himself away from the land where all remained that he coveted upon earth. And Katerina, she too felt as if her existence was a blank; and as the vessel sailed from the port, she breathed short; and when not even her white and lofty topgallant sail could be discovered as a speck, she threw herself on her couch and wept. And M'Clise as he sailed away, remained for hours leaning his cheek on his hand, thinking of, over and over again, every lineament and feature of the peerless Katerina.

Two months passed away, during which M'Clise was busied every ebb of the tide in superintending the work on the rock. At last, all was ready; and once more was to be beheld a gay procession; but this time it was on the water. It was on a calm and lovely summer's morn, that the abbots and the monks, attended by a large company of the authorities, and others, who were so much interested in the work in hand, started from the shore of Aberbrothwick in a long line of boats, decorated with sacred and with other various banners and devices. The music floated along the water, and the solemn chants of the monks were for once heard where never yet they had been heard before, or ever will again. M'Clise was at the rock, in a small vessel purposely constructed to carry the bell, and with sheers to hang it on the supports imbedded in the solid rock. The bell was in its place, and the abbot blessed the bell; and holy water was sprinkled on the metal, which was for the future to be lashed by the waves of the salt sea. And the music and the chants were renewed; and as they continued, the wind gradually rose, and with the rising of the wind the bell tolled loud and deep. The tolling of the bell was the signal for return, for it was a warning that the weather was about to change, and the procession pulled back to Aberbrothwick, and landed in good time; for in one hour more, and the rocky coast was again lashed by the waves, and the bell tolled loud and quick, although there were none there but the sea-gull, who screamed with fright as he wheeled in the air at this unusual noise upon the rock, which, at the ebb he had so often made his resting-place.

M'Clise had done his work; the bell was fixed; and once more he hastened with his vessel to Amsterdam.

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Once more was he an inmate of Vandermaclin's house; once more in the presence of the idol of his soul. This time they spoke; this time their vows were exchanged for life and death. But Vandermaclin saw not the state of their hearts. He looked upon the young seamen as too low, too poor, to be a match for his daughter; and as such an idea never entered his head, so did he never imagine that he would have dared to love. But he was soon undeceived; for M'Clise frankly stated his attachment, and demanded the hand of Katerina; and, at the demand, Vandermaclin's face was flushed with anger.

"Mynheer M'Clise," said he, after a pause, as if to control his feelings; "when a man marries, he is bound to show that he has wherewithal to support his wife; to support her in that rank, and to afford her those luxuries to which she has been accustomed in her father's house. Show me that you can do so, and I will not refuse you the hand of Katerina."

"As yet, I have not," replied M'Clise; "but I am young and can work; I have money, and will gain more. Tell me what sum do you think that I should possess to warrant my demanding the hand of your daughter?"

"Produce twelve thousand guilders, and she is yours," replied the merchant.

"I have but three thousand," replied M'Clise.

"Then, think no more of Katerina. It is a foolish passion, and you must forget it. And, Mynheer M'Clise, I must not have my daughter's affections tampered with. She must forget you; and that can only be effected by your not meeting again. I wish you well, Mynheer M'Clise, but I must request your absence."

M'Clise departed from the presence of the merchant, bowed down with grief and disappointment. He contrived that a letter, containing the result of his application, should be put in the hands of Katerina. But Vandermaclin was informed of this breach of observance, and Katerina was sent to a convent, there to remain until the departure of her lover; and Vandermaclin wrote to his correspondent at Dundee, requesting that the goods forwarded to him might not be sent by the vessel commanded by M'Clise.

Of this our young captain received information. All hope was nearly gone; still he lingered, and delayed his departure. He was no longer the active, energetic seaman; he neglected all, even his attire.

M'Clise knew in which convent his fair Katerina had been immured; and often would he walk round its precincts, with the hope of seeing her, if it were but for a moment, but in vain. His vessel was now laden, and he could delay no longer. He was to sail the next morning; and once more did the unhappy young man take his usual walk to look at those walls which contained all that was dear to him on earth. His reverie was broken by a stone falling down to his feet; he took it up; there was a small piece of paper attached to it with a silken thread. He opened it; it was the handwriting of Katerina, and contained but two words "*The Bell.*"

The bell! M'Clise started; for he immediately comprehended what was meant. The whole plan came like electricity through his brain. Yes; then there was a promise of happiness. The bell was worth ten thousand guilders; that sum had been offered, and would now be given by Isaacs the Jew. He would be happy with his Katerina; and he blessed her ingenuity for devising the means. For a minute or two he was transported; but the re-action soon took place. What was he about to attempt? sacrilege cruelty. The bell had been blessed by the holy church; it had been purchased by holy and devout alms. It had been placed on the rock to save the lives of his brother seamen; and were he to remove it, would he not be responsible for all the lives lost? Would not the wail of the widow, and the tears of the orphan, be crying out to Heaven against him? No, no! never! The crime was too horrible; and M'Clise stamped upon the paper, thinking he was tempted by Satan in the shape of woman; but when woman tempts, man is lost. He recalled the charms of Katerina; all his repugnance was overcome; and he resolved that the deed should be accomplished, and that Katerina should be gained, even if he lost his soul.

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Andrew M'Clise sailed away from Amsterdam, and Katerina recovered her liberty. Vandermaclin was anxious that she should marry: and many were the suitors for her hand, but in vain. She reminded her father, that he had pledged himself, if M'Clise counted down twelve thousand guilders, that she should be his wife; and to that pledge she insisted that he was bound fast. And Vandermaclin after reasoning with her, and pointing out to her that twelve thousand guilders was a sum so large, that M'Clise might not procure until his old age, even if he were fortunate, acknowledged that such was his promise, and that he would, like an honest man, abide by it, provided that M'Clise should fulfil his part of the agreement in the space of two years; after which he should delay her settlement no longer. And Katerina raised her eyes to heaven, and whispered, as she clasped her hands, "The Bell." Alas! that we should invoke Heaven when we would wish to do wrong: but mortals are blind, and none so blind as those who are impelled by passion.

It was in the summer of that year that M'Clise had made his arrangements: having procured the assistance of some lawless hands, he had taken the advantage of a smooth and glassy sea and a high tide to remove the bell on board his own vessel; a work of little difficulty to him, as he had placed it there, and knew well the fastenings. He sailed away for Amsterdam, and was permitted by Heaven to arrive safe with his sacrilegious freight. He did not, as before, enter the canal opposite to the house of Vandermaclin, but one that ran behind the habitation of the Jew Isaacs. At night, he went into the house, and reported to the Jew what he had for sale; and the keen grey eyes of the bent-double little Israelite sparkled with delight, for he knew that his profit would be great. At midnight the bell was made fast to the crane, and safely deposited in the warehouse of the Jew, who counted out the ten thousand guilders to the enraptured M'Clise, whose thoughts were wholly upon the possession of his Katerina, and not upon the crime he had committed.

But, alas! to conceal one crime, we are too often obliged to be guilty of even deeper; and thus it was with Andrew M'Clise. The people who had assisted, upon the promise of a thousand guilders being divided among them, now murmured at their share, and insisted upon an equal division of the spoils, or threatened with an immediate confession of the black deed.

M'Clise raved, and cursed, and tore his hair; promised to give them the money as soon as he had wedded Katerina; but they would not consent. Again the devil came to his assistance, and whispered how he was to act: he consented. The next night the division was to be made. They met in his cabin; he gave them wine, and they drank plentifully; but the wine was poisoned, and they all died before the morning. M'Clise tied weights to their bodies, and sunk them in the deep canal; broke open his hatches, to make it appear that his vessel had been plundered; and then went to the authorities denouncing his crew as having plundered him, and escaped. Immediate search was made, but they were not to be found; and it was supposed that they had escaped in a boat.

Once more M'Clise, whose conscience was seared, went to the house of Vandermaclin, counted down his twelve thousand guilders, and claimed his bride; and Vandermaclin, who felt that his daughter's happiness was at stake, now gave his consent. As M'Clise stated that he was anxious to return to England, and arrange with the merchants whose goods had been plundered, in a few days the marriage took place; and Katerina clasped the murderer in her arms. All was apparent joy and revelry; but there was anguish in the heart of M'Clise, who, now that he had gained his object, felt that it had cost him much too dear, for his peace of mind was gone for ever. But Katerina cared not; every spark of feeling was absorbed in her passion, and the very guilt of M'Clise but rendered him more dear; for was it not for her that he had done all this? M'Clise received her portion, and hasted to sail away; for the bodies were still in the canal, and he trembled every hour lest his crime should be discovered. And Vandermaclin bade farewell to his daughter: and, he knew not why, but there was a feeling he could not suppress, that they never should meet again.

"Down down below, Katerina! this is no place for you," cried M'Clise, as he stood at the helm of the vessel. "Down, dearest, down, or you will be washed overboard. Every sea threatens to pour into our decks; already have we lost two men. Down, Katerina! down, I tell you."

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"I fear not; let me remain with you."

"I tell you, down!" cried M'Clise, in wrath; and Katerina cast upon him a reproachful look, and obeyed.

The storm was at its height; the sun had set, black and monstrous billows chased each other, and the dismayed vessel was hurried on towards the land. The wind howled, and whistled sharply at each chink in the bulwarks of the vessel. For three days had they fought the gale, but in vain. Now, if it continued, all chance was over; for the shore was on their lee, distant not many miles. Nothing could save them, but gaining the mouth of the Firth of Tay, and then they could bear up for Dundee. And there was a boiling surge, and a dark night, and roaring seas, and their masts were floating far away; and M'Clise stood at the helm, keeping her broadside to the sea: his heart was full of bitterness, and his guilty conscience bore him down, and he looked for death, and he dreaded it; for was he not a sacrilegious murderer, and was there not an avenging God above?

Once more Katerina appeared on deck, clinging for support to Andrew.

"I cannot stay below. Tell me, will it soon be over?"

"Yes," replied M'Clise, gloomily; "it will soon be over with all of us."

"How mean you? you told me there was no danger."

"I told you falsely; there is death soon, and damnation afterwards; for you I have lost my soul!"

"Oh! say not so."

"I say it. Leave me, leave me, woman, or I curse thee."

"Curse me, Andrew? Oh, no! Kiss me, Andrew; and if we are to perish, let us expire in each other's arms."

"'Tis as well; you have dragged me to perdition. Leave me, I say, for you have my bitter curse."

Thus was his guilty love turned to hate, now that death was staring him in the face.

Katerina made no reply. She threw herself on the deck, and abandoned herself to her feeling of bitter anguish. And as she lay there, and M'Clise stood at the helm, the wind abated; the vessel was no longer borne down as before, although the waves were still mountains high. The seamen on board rallied; some fragments of sail were set on the remnants of the masts, and there was a chance of safety. M'Clise spoke not, but watched the helm. The wind shifted in their favour; and hope rose in every heart. The Firth of Tay was now open, and they were saved! Light was the heart of M'Clise when he kept away the vessel, and gave the helm up to the mate. He hastened to Katerina, who still remained on the deck, raised her up, whispered comfort and returning love; but she heard not she could not forget and she wept bitterly.

"We are saved, dear Katerina!"

"Better that we had been lost!" replied she, mournfully.

"No, no! say not so, with your own Andrew pressing you to his bosom."

"Your bitter curse!"

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"'Twas madness nothing I knew not what I said." But the iron had entered into her soul. Her heart was broken.

"You had better give orders for them to look out for the Bell Rock," observed the man at the helm to M'Clise.

The Bell Rock! M'Clise shuddered, and made no reply. Onward went the vessel, impelled by the sea and wind: one moment raised aloft, and towering over the surge; at another, deep in the hollow trough, and walled in by the convulsed element. M'Clise still held his Katerina in his arms, who responded not to his endearments, when a sudden shock threw them on the deck. The crashing of the timbers, the pouring of the waves over the stern, the heeling and settling of the vessel, were but the work of a few seconds. One more furious shock, she separates, falls on her beam ends, and the raging seas sweep over her.

M'Clise threw from him her whom he had so madly loved, and plunged into the wave. Katerina shrieked, as she dashed after him, and all was over.

When the storm rises, and the screaming sea-gull seeks the land, and the fisherman hasten his bark towards the beach, there is to be seen, descending from the dark clouds with the rapidity of lightning, the form of Andrew M'Clise, the heavy bell to which he is attached by the neck, bearing him down to his doom.

And when all is smooth and calm, when at the ebbing tide, the wave but gently kisses the rock, then by the light of the silver moon, the occupants of the vessels which sail from the Firth of Tay, have often beheld the form of the beautiful Katerina, waving her white scarf as a signal that they should approach, and take her off from the rock on which she is seated. At times, she offers a letter for her father, Vandermaclin; and she mourns and weeps as the wary mariners, with their eyes fixed on her, and with folded arms, pursue their course in silence and in dread.