AFFLICTED WITH A JONAH

THE SEA CAPTAIN'S FEAR OF PARSONS' SONS.

HOW HE PROVED THAT ONE BROUGHT MISFORTUNE TO HIM BY A CHAPTER FROM HIS OWN EXPERIENCE.

"You may laugh at me as hard as you like, but I still stick to it that there are such things as Jonahs even in these days," said a white-haired old sea Captain one afternoon recently to a few friends who were helping him to surround a stove in the office of a South-street chandler's shop. The Captain's statement led to satirical remarks on the part of some of the others. But the old man's superstition was proof against ridicule, and he said quite earnestly: "Now, if you chaps will only listen to me for a few minutes, I will guarantee to convince every one of you that, although the original Jonah may be dead as a herring, his spirit still lives, and every now and then gets into some unlucky landsman who insists on going to sea and brings misfortune to every ship he sets his foot on." The Captain's listeners admitted that they were open to conviction, and were ready to listen to any evidence as to the existence of Jonahs which might be laid before them.

"Although I was never really what you could call superstitious," began the Captain, "I had the idea, even while I was a mate, that if when I got to be a Captain I should ship a parson's son in my crew it would bring me bad luck. You know parsons' sons are full of spirits and all that, and sometimes get in trouble. Then their friends think it would do them a world of good to make a voyage or two before the mast. Well, after I got to be Captain I refused several times to ship a parson's son just on account of that idea of mine. About 10 years ago I was put in command of a trim little bark just off the stocks that was loading in this port for Cape Haytien, in the West Indies. Just as I was about to sail my steward came to me and asked me if I wouldn't take a boy. He promised to look after the boy, and have him in his own stateroom. From the way he talked, I thought the boy was some relation of his. I liked the steward, and he had sailed with me for several years. So, to oblige him, I said I would take the boy. In the hurry of getting off I thought no more of the boy until we got off Sandy Hook. Then I asked the steward if he had brought the boy. He says 'Oh, yes, Sir, but he's seasick, and I think it would be better for him to keep his berth until he's all right again.' So I left it to the steward to bring him on deck when he saw fit. You see, although the boy had signed articles, and all that, I hadn't clapped eyes on him once. The next morning, when I was on deck, up came the steward with the boy. I started back when I saw the youngster. He was a fat, clumsy lad of about 18. I shuddered when I looked at him. It seemed to me as if I saw ill-luck in his face. I wouldn't have been any more set back if I had seen the word 'Jonah' written on his forehead. I looked reproachfully at the steward, and then I called the mate and told him to set the boy at work. Then I asked the steward if he thought it was doing the fair thing by me to go and smuggle a Jonah on board my bark. The steward got kind of indignant. 'Why,' said he, 'that boy ain't a Jonah. He's a good boy, only one of his chums went and got into a scrape and laid the blame all on him. So his people had to send him to sea. His father is a very nice man. My sister is seamstress in his family.' Then I asked the steward who the boy's father was. It turned out that he was a parson. That was all I cared to hear. I knew I was in for it now. There was no doubt now but that I had got a genuine Jonah on board.

"I thought at first of putting about and landing my Jonah, but the wind was fair, so I kept on. But on the third day out came a head wind. That was followed by a hurricane, in which my new bark began to leak. Then came a calm with a fog. We were going along easily when all of a sudden we felt a terrific shock. The bark had run into a waterlogged wreck, but we soon cleared her. Fortunately, we were going very slowly or the accident would have made a hole in our bows. But the bark made a good deal more water after the collision, although she seemed all right otherwise. A few days afterward a white squall struck us and carried away two of the upper yards and split a whole set of sails. I used to sit on deck and watch my Jonah as he waddled clumsily about, and I began to wonder if, after all, I wouldn't be justified in quietly pitching him overboard, for I felt sure that he was the cause of all our ill-luck. When we were within about a day's sail of Cape Haytien I noticed that we had got into a strange current, but I managed to get out just soon enough to avoid running onto the reefs of the Caycos, which you know is the most dangerous neighborhood in that part of the West Indies. You never saw a more thankful Captain than I was when finally I dropped anchor in the harbor of Cape Haytien, although my bark was leaking very badly for so new a vessel.

"While the bark was unloading and taking on a fresh cargo I was trying to hit on some plan for getting rid of my Jonah. He had shipped for the round trip, and I was afraid that the Consul would not consent to my discharging the boy. But at last I hit on a plan. I hated to have to be tricky, but I did not dare to risk going back with Jonah on board, for I felt sure that he would bring some terrible disaster on the bark if she left port with him again. The boy had not gone ashore once up to the time that the cargo was on board, and the bark was ready to sail. I sent the steward ashore for some fresh provisions, and about an hour afterward I sent for Jonah. I pointed out the town and the country around it and I asked him if he didn't want to take a run ashore. Says I, 'Why, the bark won't sail these three days because I am going to take a large consignment of gold, and that hasn't got here yet.' The boy seemed pleased, and I gave him money enough to cover his wages for the time he had been with me and a couple of months' more. 'Now,' said I, 'just you go ashore and have a good time.' I called a shore boat and Jonah got into it. I can assure you that I saw him going away with a great deal of pleasure. Soon afterward the steward came off with the fresh provisions. Everything was ready for sailing, and just then the pilot came on board. I ordered the crew to heave up the anchor at once. The steward missed Johah, of course, and was wild about him. Says I, 'If the young scapegrace has gone and run away how can we help it?' He didn't seem satisfied, but it was too late for him to do anything, for by that time we were getting under way. The voyage back was the luckiest I have ever had. The wind was right behind us all the way up to this port. The sea was a little rough and there seemed to be hurricanes all around us, but somehow they never touched us. Although the bark had been leaking considerably even in port, she tightened up again the moment we got out to sea. We were lucky in every way. I laid my good luck to our having got rid of Jonah, which, of course, was the reason.

"The voyage proved such a profitable one to the owners of my bark that they sent me right back to Cape Haytien. The voyage back to that port was a quick and a prosperous one in every way. But as we got near Cape Haytien I began to feel a little uneasy about Jonah. I thought that perhaps I hadn't done right in sending the lad ashore in that way. But what I feared most was that the Consul had the boy in charge and would insist on sending the boy home with me. The steward hadn't said a word about the boy during the whole voyage. I didn't know whether it would be best to ask about him or not when we got into port, but I concluded not to do so, because I was afraid that if I did I would appear to acknowledge that I was in some way responsible for him. So when I went ashore I said nothing about Jonah and I heard nothing about him, although I was in constant dread of his turning up somehow or other. I found that business was very dull at Cave Haytien, and that many of the merchants had met with losses since I had been there last, and that the town had become unusually unhealthy. This, of course, I laid at Jonah's door, and it made me fear that the unlucky lad was still around and would turn up before I could get out of port. At last the return cargo was all on board, and we were ready to leave port. The day before we sailed I noticed that the steward was acting a little strangely. He seemed uneasy, and was always looking at me kind of suspiciously. But I paid no particular attention to this behavior, as I had other things to attend to.

"Next morning the pilot came on board and we set sail. After we had passed out of the harbor and had dropped the pilot, I felt uneasy somehow. I thought it strange, because I had got away without Jonah turning up, and it seemed to me that I ought to feel light-hearted. Things passed off about as usual during the day, except that I noticed that the steward was always looking at me kind of strangely. The wind was fair but somewhat light. The feeling of uneasiness grew on me early in the evening. I went on deck and took soundings, but they didn't agree at all with the depth of water marked on the chart for the spot where I supposed I was. Then it flashed over me that I must have got into a strange current. I listened for some minutes carefully, and I could make out the distant roar of breakers. There could be no doubt that we were being carried toward the reefs of the Caycos. There was no getting out of the current. Although I made every attempt to stem the current, it carried me rapidly toward the reefs. An hour later the bark struck on one of the reefs. The sea was smooth and our lives were in no danger, but I saw plainly that there was no getting off the reef. The bark was a hopeless wreck. Next morning I saw several small coasting sloops near by. I told my men that we would have to abandon the bark. We lowered our largest boat and the men put their chests in this and got in themselves. I decided to row to one of the coasters which lay to near by. All my men were in the boat except the steward. I called out to him to hurry up. He pointed to a small boat that was coming up from another coaster, and said that he would rather go off in her. My boat then pushed off. When we got about 100 fathoms from the wreck I looked back, and then I understood why the steward had acted so strangely for two days past, and had finally preferred to abandon the bark in another boat. There by the steward's side stood my Jonah with a wicked grin on his fat face. The steward had found the youngster at Cape Haytien, and fearing that I would refuse to take him home he had stowed the fellow away in his stateroom. And that was how it came about that my bark got into the current that stranded her among the Caycos reefs."

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