

The After House

By

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The After House

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I Plan A Voyage

By the bequest of an elder brother, I was left enough money to see me through a small college in Ohio, and to secure me four years in a medical school in the East. Why I chose medicine I hardly know. Possibly the career of a surgeon attracted the adventurous element in me. Perhaps, coming of a family of doctors, I merely followed the line of least resistance. It may be, indirectly but inevitably, that I might be on the yacht Ella on that terrible night of August 12, more than a year ago.

I got through somehow. I played quarterback on the football team, and made some money coaching. In summer I did whatever came to hand, from chartering a sail-boat at a summer resort and taking passengers, at so much a head, to checking up cucumbers in Indiana for a Western pickle house.

I was practically alone. Commencement left me with a diploma, a new dress-suit, an out-of-date medical library, a box of surgical instruments of the same date as the books, and an incipient case of typhoid fever.

I was twenty-four, six feet tall, and forty inches around the chest. Also, I had lived clean, and worked and played hard. I got over the fever finally, pretty much all bone and appetite; but - alive. Thanks to the college, my hospital care had cost nothing. It was a good thing: I had just seven dollars in the world.

The yacht Ella lay in the river not far from my hospital windows. She was not a yacht when I first saw her, nor at any time, technically, unless I use the word in the broad sense of a pleasure-boat. She was a two-master, and, when I saw her first, as dirty and disreputable as are most coasting-vessels. Her rejuvenation was the history of my convalescence. On the day she stood forth in her first coat of white paint, I exchanged my dressing-gown for clothing that, however loosely it hung, was still clothing. Her new sails marked my promotion to beefsteak, her brass rails and awnings my first independent excursion up and down the corridor outside my door, and, incidentally, my return to a collar and tie.

The river shipping appealed to me, to my imagination, clean washed by my illness and ready as a child's for new impressions: liners gliding down to the bay and the open sea; shrewish, scolding tugs; dirty but picturesque tramps. My enthusiasm amused the nurses, whose ideas of adventure consisted of little jaunts of exploration into the abdominal cavity, and whose aseptic minds revolted at the sight of dirty sails.

One day I pointed out to one of them an old schooner, red and brown, with patched canvas spread, moving swiftly down the river before a stiff breeze.

"Look at her!" I exclaimed. "There goes adventure, mystery, romance! I should like to be sailing on her."

"You would have to boil the drinking-water," she replied dryly. "And the ship is probably swarming with rats."

"Rats," I affirmed, "add to the local color. Ships are their native habitat. Only sinking ships don't have them."

But her answer was to retort that rats carried bubonic plague, and to exit, carrying the sugar-bowl. I was ravenous, as are all convalescent typhoids, and one of the ways in which I eked out my still slender diet was by robbing the sugar-bowl at meals.

That day, I think it was, the deck furniture was put out on the Ella - numbers of white wicker chairs and tables, with bright cushions to match the awnings. I had a pair of ancient opera-glasses, as obsolete as my amputating knives, and, like them, a part of my heritage. By that time I felt a proprietary interest in the Ella, and through my glasses, carefully focused with a pair of scissors, watched the arrangement of the deck furnishings. A girl was directing the men. I judged, from the poise with which she carried herself, that she was attractive - and knew it. How beautiful she was, and how well she knew it, I was to find out before long. McWhirter to the contrary, she had nothing to do with my decision to sign as a sailor on the Ella.

One of the bright spots of that long hot summer was McWhirter. We had graduated together in June, and in October he was to enter a hospital in Buffalo as a resident. But he was as indigent as I, and from June to October is four months.

"Four months," he said to me. "Even at two meals a day, boy, that's something over two hundred and forty. And I can eat four times a day, without a struggle! Wouldn't you think one of these overworked-for-the-good-of-humanity dubs would take a vacation and give me a chance to hold down his practice?"

Nothing of the sort developing, McWhirter went into a drug-store, and managed to pull through the summer with unimpaired cheerfulness, confiding to me that he secured his luncheons free at the soda counter. He came frequently to see me, bringing always a pocketful of chewing gum, which he assured me was excellent to allay the gnawings of hunger, and later, as my condition warranted it, small bags of gum-drops and other pharmacy confections.

McWhirter it was who got me my berth on the Ella. It must have been about the 20th of July, for the Ella sailed on the 28th. I was strong enough to leave the hospital, but not yet physically able for any prolonged exertion. McWhirter, who was short and stout, had been alternately flirting with the nurse, as she moved in and out preparing my room for the night, and sizing me up through narrowed eyes.

"No," he said, evidently following a private line of thought; "you don't belong behind a counter, Leslie. I'm darned if I think you belong in the medical profession, either. The British army'd suit you."

"The - what?"

"You know - Kipling idea - riding horseback, head of a column - undress uniform - colonel's wife making eyes at you - leading last hopes and all that."

"The British army with Kipling trimmings being out of the question, the original issue is still before us. I'll have to work, Mac, and work like the devil, if I'm to feed myself."

There being no answer to this, McWhirter contented himself with eyeing me.

"I'm thinking," I said, "of going to Europe. The sea is calling me, Mac."

"So was the grave a month ago, but it didn't get you. Don't be an ass, boy. How are you going to sea?"

"Before the mast." This apparently conveying no meaning to McWhirter, I supplemented - "as a common sailor."

He was indignant at first, offering me his room and a part of his small salary until I got my strength; then he became dubious; and finally, so well did I paint my picture of long, idle days on the ocean, of sweet, cool nights under the stars, with breezes that purred through the sails, rocking the ship to slumber - finally he waxed enthusiastic, and was even for giving up the pharmacy at once and sailing with me.

He had been fitting out the storeroom of a sailing-yacht with drugs, he informed me, and doing it under the personal direction of the owner's wife.

"I've made a hit with her," he confided. "Since she's learned I'm a graduate M.D., she's letting me do the whole thing. I've made up some lotions to prevent sunburn, and that seasick prescription of old Larimer's, and she thinks I'm the whole cheese. I'll suggest you as ships doctor."

"How many men in the crew?"

"Eight, I think, or ten. It's a small boat, and carries a small crew."

"Then they don't want a ship's doctor. If I go, I'll go as a sailor," I said firmly. "And I want your word, Mac, not a word about me, except that I am honest."

"You'll have to wash decks, probably."

"I am filled with a wild longing to wash decks," I asserted, smiling at his disturbed face. "I should probably also have to polish brass. There's a great deal of brass on the boat."

"How do you know that?"

When I told him, he was much excited, and, although it was dark and the Ella consisted of three lights, he insisted on the opera-glasses, and was persuaded he saw her. Finally he put down the glasses and came over, to me.

"Perhaps you are right, Leslie," he said soberly. "You don't want charity, any more than they want a ship's doctor. Wherever you go and whatever you do, whether you're swabbing decks in your bare feet or polishing brass railings with an old sock, you're a man."

He was more moved than I had ever seen him, and ate a gum-drop to cover his embarrassment. Soon after that he took his departure, and the following day he telephoned to say that, if the sea was still calling me, he could get a note to the captain recommending me. I asked him to get the note.

Good old Mac! The sea was calling me, true enough, but only dire necessity was driving me to ship before the mast - necessity and perhaps what, for want of a better name, we call destiny. For what is fate but inevitable law, inevitable consequence.

The stirring of my blood, generations removed from a seafaring ancestor; my illness, not a cause, but a result; McWhirter, filling prescriptions behind the glass screen of a pharmacy, and fitting out, in porcelain jars, the medicine-closet of the Ella; Turner and his wife, Schwartz, the mulatto Tom, Singleton, and Elsa Lee; all thrown together, a hodge-podge of characters, motives, passions, and hereditary tendencies, through an inevitable law working together toward that terrible night of August 22, when hell seemed loose on a painted sea.

1. The Painted Ship

The Ella had been a coasting-vessel, carrying dressed lumber to South America, and on her return trip bringing a miscellaneous cargo - hides and wool, sugar from Pernambuco, whatever offered. The firm of Turner and Sons owned the line of which the Ella was one of the smallest vessels.

The gradual elimination of sailing ships and the substitution of steamers in the coasting trade, left the Ella, with others, out of commission. She was still seaworthy, rather fast, as such vessels go, and steady. Marshall Turner, the oldest son of old Elias Turner, the founder of the business, bought it in at a nominal sum, with the intention of using it as a private yacht. And, since it was a superstition of the house never to change the name of one of its vessels, the schooner Ella, odorous of fresh lumber or raw rubber, as the case might be, dingy gray in color, with slovenly decks on which lines of seamen's clothing were generally hanging to dry, remained, in her metamorphosis, still the Ella.

Marshall Turner was a wealthy man, but he equipped his new pleasure-boat very modestly. As few changes as were possible were made. He increased the size of the forward house, adding quarters for the captain and the two mates, and thus kept the after house for himself and his friends. He fumigated the hold and the fore-castle - a precaution that kept all the crew coughing for two days, and drove them out of the odor of formaldehyde to the deck to sleep. He installed an electric lighting and refrigerating plant, put a bath in the fore-castle, to the bewilderment of the men, who were inclined to think it a reflection on their habits, and almost entirely rebuilt, inside, the old officers' quarters in the after house.

The wheel, replaced by a new one, white and gilt, remained in its old position behind the after house, the steersman standing on a raised iron grating above the wash of the deck. Thus from the chart-room, which had become a sort of lounge and card-room, through a small barred window it was possible to see the man at the wheel, who, in his turn, commanded a view of part of the chartroom, but not of the floor.

The craft was schooner-rigged, carried three lifeboats and a collapsible raft, and was navigated by a captain, first and second mates, and a crew of six able-bodied sailors and one gaunt youth whose sole knowledge of navigation had been gained on an Atlantic City catboat. Her destination was vague - Panama perhaps, possibly a South American port, depending on the weather and the whim of the owner.

I do not recall that I performed the nautical rite of signing articles. Armed with the note McWhirter had secured for me, and with what I fondly hoped was the rolling gait of the seafaring man, I approached the captain - a bearded and florid individual. I had dressed the part - old trousers, a cap, and a sweater from which I had removed my college letter, McWhirter, who had supervised my preparations, and who had accompanied me to the wharf, had suggested that I omit my morning shave. The result was, as I look back, a lean and cadaverous six-foot youth, with the hospital pallor still on him, his chin covered with a day's beard, his hair cropped short, and a cannibalistic gleam in his eyes. I remember that my wrists, thin and bony, annoyed me, and that the girl I had seen through the opera-glasses came on board, and stood off, detached and indifferent, but with her eyes on me, while the captain read my letter.

When he finished, he held it out to me.

"I've got my crew," he said curtly.

"There is n't - I suppose there's no chance of your needing another hand?"

"No." He turned away, then glanced back at the letter I was still holding, rather dazed. "You can leave your name and address with the mate over there. If anything turns up he'll let you know."

My address! The hospital?

I folded the useless letter and thrust it into my pocket. The captain had gone forward, and the girl with the cool eyes was leaning against the rail, watching me.

"You are the man Mr. McWhirter has been looking after, are n't you?"

"Yes." I pulled off my cap, and, recollecting myself - "Yes, miss."

"You are not a sailor?"

"I have had some experience - and I am willing."

"You have been ill, have n't you?"

"Yes - miss."

"Could you polish brass, and things like that?"

"I could try. My arms are strong enough. It is only when I walk -"

But she did not let me finish. She left the rail abruptly, and disappeared down the companionway into the after house. I waited uncertainly. The captain saw me still loitering, and scowled. A procession of men with trunks jostled me; a colored man, evidently a butler, ordered me out of his way while he carried down into the cabin, with almost reverent care, a basket of wine.

When the girl returned, she came to me, and stood for a moment, looking me over with cool, appraising eyes. I had been right about her appearance: she was charming - or no, hardly charming. She was too aloof for that. But she was beautiful, an Irish type, with blue-gray eyes and almost black hair. The tilt of her head was haughty. Later I came to know that her hauteur was indifference: but at first I was frankly afraid of her, afraid of her cool, mocking eyes and the upward thrust of her chin.

"My brother-in-law is not here," she said after a moment, "but my sister is below in the cabin. She will speak to the captain about you. Where are your things?"

I glanced toward the hospital, where my few worldly possessions, including my dress clothes, my amputating set, and such of my books as I had not been able to sell, were awaiting disposition. "Very near, miss," I said.

"Better bring them at once; we are sailing in the morning." She turned away as if to avoid my thanks, but stopped and came back.

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