

*A Strange Passenger*

BY EDWARD HEINS

WHEN my packet-ship, the *Hermione*, was preparing to sail from Liverpool for New York, I was warned to take precautions against receiving as passenger a certain Mary Youngson, who, while nursing her sick husband—a man considerably her senior—had poisoned him to death, laid hold of all the money and valuables she could get, and then had made off. It was thought that she would try to leave England on some outward-bound ship—most likely for America, where she had friends—and therefore I sharply scrutinized the passengers, eight in number, who were brought off to my vessel in a tender. As they stepped aboard I was relieved to perceive that none of them tallied with the description I had obtained of Miss Youngson, who, I was told, was a beautiful woman, over thirty-five years of age, about five feet six inches in height, and very slender, with brown hair, dark eyes, and a clear complexion. She had been born and educated abroad, but her father had been an Englishman, and an amateur actor, from whom she had inherited a remarkable capacity for deceiving people as to her character.

Two of the female passengers who now came aboard were married ladies, and of dark complexion; there were also two young women of about twenty-one: one, a Miss Lorton, plain and stout; the other, Miss Merwin, slender and tall, apparently not less than five feet nine inches, with the most childish, innocent-looking face, for one of her age, that I ever saw. She had brown hair and eyes, small, baby-like features, and smooth, glowing cheeks, which were constantly dimpled with smiles. As she slightly lifted her long skirt, we saw that instead of shoes or boots she wore ornamented buskins of some kind of soft leather, which made no noise when she walked. Afterwards we heard that she wore them because she had lately sprained her feet, and could not yet bear harder leather.

From the first I could see that my son Tom, a young man of twenty-five, and chief officer, was greatly impressed by this girl.

He had always liked tall women, and anything “babyish” in their looks or manners particularly pleased him. Still, I was surprised at the end of one short week after we sailed to learn that he had actually proposed to her and been accepted.

“She is so artless, so ingenuous, so free from guile of any kind,” said he, “that you can read her heart at once! We are to be married on coming back to Liverpool, at the house of her aunt, who is expecting her. With her usual childish frankness she informed me that, although having a small fortune in Three per cents., left to her by her father, who was a merchant, she is at present short of cash, which would hinder her from purchasing, on landing, certain little articles she desired towards a wedding outfit. I was so touched by her shy infantile way, blended with timid distress at having to tell me this, that I at once went to my room and procured the five-thousand-dollar United States bond, which you know I lately bought with my savings, and gave it to her, telling her where she could get it cashed, and bade her then take out of it whatever she needed.”

“Why, Tom, you don’t say so?” I cried, rather startled.

“Of course,” he answered. “Why not? We are engaged, and it ought to be the same about money matters as if we were married.”

He went below, and I sat long in the clear moonlight, thinking it over as a hasty, foolish piece of business, when suddenly I was startled by the cry of the look-out forward.

“Sail, ho! right ahead!”

The stranger—a large ship—put her helm a-port, so I had no doubt she would pass us safely enough; but, as she was going by, her helmsman raising his wheel too soon, her bow swung off, and her jibboom caught under my spanker sheet, lifting the spar and snapping it off with a crash.

There was noise and confusion as we worked briskly to keep the two vessels apart and prevent further damage, in the midst of which several of the passengers came running up, somewhat frightened, to find out what was the matter.

“It is nothing; we are all right now!” I cried, to reassure them, as the other ship swung clear of us.

Miss Merwin had emerged from the companion way after the others; and as I looked towards her form, distinctly revealed by the moonlight and one of the lanterns, I stood stock-still in the utmost astonishment, for, as true as I am a living man, her stature now seemed at least three inches shorter than I had hitherto seen it!

I was the only one who noticed her at that time, and on meeting my gaze she drew back as quick as a flash, and vanished in the cabin.

The strange phenomenon I had witnessed for a moment almost took away my breath. My whole mind was fixed upon this one thing, and when my son came up, a few hours later, to take the deck, I described the singular change I had noticed in Miss Merwin’s stature. He stared at me at first as if he thought me mad; then broke out into an incredulous laugh, saying that my eyes or the imperfect light must have deceived me.

I knew better, however; but, finding I could not convince him, I told him to wait until the young lady should appear at breakfast in the morning, when he might see for himself. Two hours later the second mate came up to relieve Tom, who then went below. The officer, seeing me seated in a reverie on the quarter-deck, walked amidships, where he stood looking carelessly forward.

All at once, judge of my surprise, when, on raising my head, I beheld, leaning against the rail near me, a person I had never seen before—a slender, middle-aged man, of rather low stature, with hair covering nearly every part of the face excepting the eyes, which glittered like fire-balls in the moonlight!

“Why, halloa! Who are you? Where did you come from?” I cried.

“Pray don’t excite yourself,” he coolly answered. “I am a detective, and got aboard in the harbour through the connivance of one of your crew—I am not going to tell you which one—who also supplies me with food. I have been all along in the state-room next to Miss Merwin’s, with my carpet-bag. Had you looked in the room you would have seen me, but you probably missed the key, or thought it was lost.”

“That is true; but—”

“Here is my warrant,” he interrupted, handing me a paper, which, on reading it by the lantern’s light, I perceived was a signed document, apparently from the proper authorities, instructing John Clews, the bearer, a detective, to conceal himself aboard the *Hermione*, and act as he might see fit in his endeavour to detect the murderess, Mrs. Youngson, who it was suspected was a passenger in disguise aboard that vessel.

“She is here,” was his confident reply, when I remarked that there must be some mistake. “I have not watched through the hole I bored in the partition for nothing.”

“Why, man!” I cried, aghast, “she cannot be the guilty one. She is innocence itself—as artless as a child. Besides, she is very tall and young; whereas I have been told that the murderess was much shorter, and nearly twice as old.”

He laughed in a way which to me was indescribably disagreeable.

“It is not Miss Merwin I allude to,” he said “You will remember that the state-room of Miss Lorton is also next to mine.”

“What!” I exclaimed, almost as much surprised as before, “you suspect that stout young lady who?”

“I don’t suspect,” he interrupted; “I *know* her to be the criminal!”

“But she is young, plain, and stout; the accused woman was slender—”

“Bah!” he again interrupted. “Disguise! That will explain all. It is easy for a woman of that kind to make herself look younger and stouter than she really is. Should we fall in with a good Liverpool-bound ship, I shall arrest this woman, and take her on board of it with me. I will go back to my room now. You may or may not see me again before we sight a home-bound craft.”

With that he glided like a shadow into the cabin.

Now, then, I had something to keep me awake—to drive all thoughts of turning-in from my mind. So, after all, that woman—that terrible murderess—was aboard my ship! I commenced to walk the deck in no pleasant frame of mind, and the morning light stole around me before I was aware that the hour was so late.

When breakfast was ready in the cabin, Miss Merwin was absent from her accustomed place at the table. During the progress of the meal, I looked more than once at Miss Lorton—the stout young lady who the detective had positively asserted was Mary Youngson, the poisoner.

The quiet dignity and composure of her manner, the frank, honest expression of her face, and its undeniable plainness, seemed to me so natural, so real, that I marvelled how the detective contrived to penetrate through so perfect a disguise.

Feeling tired-out after breakfast, I slept until near noon.

When I went on deck, Tom was superintending the repairing of the spanker-boom.

“It is very strange,” he said to me, uneasily, “Miss Merwin has not yet shown herself.” The day wore on without our seeing her. Even at supper-time she did not make her appearance.

Tom looked pale and concerned. Finally he went and knocked at her door, calling her name. There was no response.

“I do not know what to make of it,” he said to me on deck. “Oh, father!” he added, wildly, “is it possible she can have suddenly died?”

“I don’t think so,” I answered—“she seemed to be in good health”; and then thought to myself, “Were it not that we are *where* we are, and she a different sort of person, I might suspect that she had absconded with your money.”

As night approached, her non-appearance excited general comment, and I was advised to break open the door, which was locked. I did so, and we found her room empty. Her trunk was still there, but she was gone.

My son looked at me as pale as death.

“My God! what can have become of her?” he groaned.

In fact, it certainly was a very singular case; and, coupled with my previous observation of the strange shortening of the young woman’s stature, it seemed to me to partake almost of the supernatural.

“May she not have gone on deck last night and fallen overboard?” inquired one of the passengers.

“Impossible!” I answered. “It was clear moonlight. I was on deck all night; and, besides, I had good look-outs posted about the ship. The thing could not have happened unknown to us.”

We looked to see if we might not find a note or something explanatory, but in vain. Then I ordered a thorough search to be made throughout the ship. This was done; but no, she was not to be found, though every nook and corner was looked into.

Then it occurred to me to speak to the detective about it; and, as soon as I could do so unobserved, I knocked at his door. He cautiously opened it, but on seeing who was there he invited me in.

I told him what had happened, not even omitting to mention the sudden change I had previously noticed in the young lady's height. As I proceeded, I observed that his keen eyes seemed to grow larger, while the thick beard that covered the face of this singular man kept twitching, as if every hair was instinct with life.

"Give me time," he said, solemnly, when I had finished, "and I will solve this mystery. In a few days I may be able to do it—perhaps not for a week."

I left him and went on deck. Tom was there, looking so downcast and forlorn that I resolved to acquaint him with the presence of the detective, and tell him what he had said, and so, perhaps, brighten him up a little.

I did so, but my words had an effect I had not expected. Reflecting a moment, he cried out, "Father, I believe that man is a humbug! But whether he be a detective or not, I now suspect that he is a thief and a murderer; that he knew of Miss Merwin's having that 5,000-dollar bond, and that, in order to possess himself of it, he has *killed her and thrown her body overboard!*"

I stared at him in amazement, and told him I feared that his grief had disturbed his reason. How was it possible, I asked him, that the man could have got the body overboard without our knowing it?

"He could have choked her to death, carried her to one of the open cabin windows, and dropped her through that," he replied.

"Impossible," I answered, "without the splash being overheard by the man at the wheel, or by someone on deck. Besides, I doubt if he could have squeezed the body through either of our cabin windows, which, you know, are very small."

Tom, however, seemed to think it could have been done, owing to Miss Merwin being so slender, and, in spite of all my efforts, I could not entirely rid his mind of that horrible idea.

Days passed, for we had head-winds which kept us off our course, but as yet the detective had nothing to tell me, though he said he soon might be able to explain the whole affair. A strange affair enough. Never before had I had such an experience, or anything approaching it, in any craft I commanded. The passengers were equally puzzled; it was

the talk of all aboard the ship. As for Tom, he grew paler, thinner, wilder every day. At last, one afternoon, when we had entered St. George's Channel, he came up to me, and said, in a husky voice: "*It is as I thought!* Quick! I have something to show you! Make no noise!"

I followed him. We both wore light slippers, and without noise entered the room Miss Merwin had occupied. He pointed to a crevice, which he had evidently made in the partition, and looking through it, I saw the detective, in the next apartment, kneeling by his open carpet-bag, from which now protruded the *identical buskins*—I could not mistake them—*which Miss Merwin had worn*. Spread out before him, he held a 5,000-dollar bond—evidently the one which my son had given to the young lady!

"You see!" he whispered. "Was I not right? He has murdered and robbed her!"

Low as the whisper was, the man evidently heard it, for he pushed the buskins, and after them the bond, hastily down into the bag, which he then closed.

Before I could hinder him, Tom rushed out and threw himself against the detective's door with a force which broke the lock and admitted him into the room. He flew at the man, clutched him and shook him, when the fellow drew a dirk, but in his futile struggles to use it—for I held his wrist and soon disarmed him—*his beard fell off*, showing it was a false one, and at the same time his shirt-bosom was torn away about the throat. Then both Tom and I uttered a simultaneous cry of surprise on perceiving that this pretended detective was *a woman over thirty-five years of age*—or, in other words, it was Miss Merwin herself, deprived of the cosmetics and other appliances which had, while in the natural attire of her sex, made her look so much younger than she was.

The whole truth broke upon me at once. This woman, I suspected, was in reality Mary Youngson, the murderess, for her face and height now answered to the description I had of her; and we found, while looking for my son's bond in her carpet-bag, some articles bearing her name, and others marked with that of her victim. In fact, afterwards, while ill, she confessed to being Mary Youngson. Her motive in disguising herself was apparent. She had feared, after I discovered the strange shortening of her stature, that I might suspect who she really was; and, besides, the *ruse* would, she thought, enable her the better to escape from Tom and get off with his five thousand dollars. The mystery of her having, as Miss Merwin, looked so much taller than she was, we found explained by her buskins, which proved, like those sometimes worn by actors on the stage, to be provided with very thick cork soles, to give an appearance of elevation to the stature.

On the night she so astonished me by the difference in her height she had, in her hurry and alarm, come up in her slippers, having forgotten to put on her buskins.

It is hardly necessary to say that the detective's warrant she had shown me was forged, written by herself; nor scarcely need it be mentioned that Tom was now disgusted with this woman, and entirely cured of his infatuation.

Subsequently she died of a malignant fever while being conveyed a prisoner back to England—thus escaping the punishment she so richly merited for her odious crime, although there were not wanting those who stoutly maintained that the charge had by no means been conclusively brought home to her. However, after occupying the public mind for more than the proverbial nine days, the “Youngson Case,” as it was called, gave place to a fresher sensation.

*The Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1891

*Littrell's Living Age*, May 16, 1891

*The Wichita Daily Eagle*, May 17, 1891