

Father Ahab

Louis Arthur Cunningham

Illustrated by

E. J. Dinsmore

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That," said Herbie Spiller, the winchman, looking up from a copy of the *Fundy Fisherman*, "was a narrow escape them lobstermen from Deer Island had—marooned two days an' nights on Shirtail Ledge."

"Hmph!" said Captain Hallan.

"Might've starved to death," persisted Herbie Spiller, "or died of thirst ___"

"Or been et by sea-dogs," said Captain Hallan with an open sneer. "Remember, Mr. Spiller, ye're talkin' to a man as has been wrecked on a desert island an' had the narrerest escape of his life."

"From what, cap'n—death by hunger and thirst—cannibals?"

"Matrimony," said Captain Hallan. "Matrimony with a widda."



This widda (continued Cap'n Hallan, giving the crowd in the Pilot Rooms an ancient mariner's glare) was the relict of Henry Bloggs, who used to be bos'n aboard the *Linnet* as was lost at sea with all hands. An' with all due respect fer the departed, he was a swab an' deserved his fate. Not dyin', I don't mean, but bein' married to Mabel an' havin' her pitcher tattooed on his buzzum. He allus hated me, did Henry Bloggs, an' richly merited his crool end.

Mabel grieved fer him as decently long as widdas do; then she began to cast an eye about fer a new mate. A large an' determined woman, she were, with a fine figger an' nice blue eyes. But she had a way with 'er that caused us young seamen to sheer off well afore there was danger o' goin' aground. If ye went to call on 'er, she'd have your shoes offen you an' a pair of Henry Bloggs' slippers on ye an' have ye settin' in Henry's chair in front o' the fire an' drinkin' tea afore ye rightly knew whether ye wanted all them things done to ye or not. An' ye kind o' figgered that if she could get yer shoes off and have ye in a rockin' chair guzzlin' tea—well, it mightn't take much to get ye there for keeps. An' all of us knew the life Henry Bloggs had led with Mabel. Why, rather than put up with Mabel, even between v'yages, Henry—

But I'm gettin' on ahead. What I want to say is, there were two of us men what found special favor in Mabel Bloggs's eyes—me an' Bert Wickson, who was my mate aboard the *Jezebel Phillmore*, a eight-hunderd-ton barque built at Meteghan an' owned by Jeremiah Whitcomb's sons here in town.

Me and Bert Wickson wasn't safe from Mabel; no, sir, not one minute of all the time we spent on shore, which weren't so long in them days, with cargoes plentiful an' charters fetchin' a high price. Mabel would come right down to the Market Wharf or York P'int or wherever we was lyin', an' yank either me or Bert right offen the *Jezebel Phillmore*, take us up to her place in Drury Lane, put Henry Bloggs' slippers on us, set us in Henry's chair, fill us full o' tea an' say how lonely is the lot of a poor widda woman, defenseless an' with no strong man to pectect her; also, how nice it would be fer a sailorman when he came home to have a nice snug little parlor to settle into.

"Jonas," says Bert Wickson to me the night we was sailin' for Melbourne, Australia, "Jonas"—he wiped the sweat offen his brow—"s' help me, if I stayed in port with that 'ere woman just one hour longer. I'd be a lost man, I would."

"Bert," says I, "if you wouldn't be, then I would. She's got me hipmetized that's what. She puts matrimony right into your head an' ye can't get it out."

"If I'm spared to come back to this port," says Bert, "an' that woman's here and unmarried, why, I'm goin' to stay in quarantine. I'm goin' to paint myself yellor an' pertend to have the fever so's she can't come a-near me."

"An' there'll be two of us in sick-bay," says I. "For if she gets me alone again, I'm undone. Thank the Lord, Bert, in half-a-hour we'll be away from here an' away from her for months an' months an' months. No more rockin'-chairs, no more slippers, no more tea, no—"

"Jonas!" Bert's voice sounds like somethin' outen the tomb, an' his hand, touchin' mine on the taftrail, feels cold an' clammy. "It ain't—"

"Bert," says I. "stand by!"

Up the gangplank, along o' several boxes an' carpet bags, escorted by Seth Whitcomb hissself, dressed in a plaid shawl an' lilac bonnet, walks Mabel Bloggs.

"She's come," I whispers, "to say good-by."

“Not with all that ’ere dunnage, she ain’t,” says Bert. “I feel somethin’ awful comin’ on, Jonas.”

Bein’ master o’ that vessel, it’s up to me to welcome passengers. We have several ladies an’ gents on board already, but we never dream o’ this happenin’ to us.

“This is a pleasure. Mrs. Bloggs,” I says, advancin’ an’ raisin’ my hat. “Ye’ve come to say good-by to us poor sailormen venturin’ far across the brimy sea.”

“I’m goin’ along, Cap’n Hallan,” says Mabel, lookin’ me in the eye, “for my health. I see the doctor today an’ he says I need a long sea v’yage. Why, howdedo, Mr. Wickson, ain’t you well?”

“Oh, yes, mum,” says Bert, lookin’ pale as a ghost. “Do I understand, Mrs. Bloggs, mum, that we’re a-goin’ to have the soo-preme pleasure an’—?”

“Indeed ’n you are,” says Mabel. “Now show me to my cabin, please. It’s nice to think I’ll be right handy to you boys for months an’ months an’ months.”

“Yes,” says we, kind of weak like a hail from a ship a mile away.

“To pour yer tea an’ see to your comfort.”

“We got a steward, mum,” says Bert desperate-like.

“A man! What’s he know about lookin’ arter other men’s comforts. Why, as poor dear Henry used t’ say—him as had my pitcher tattooed right on his buzzum, he loved me so—I never know what bein’ on the sea means to a man, Mabel, till I get home with you.”

“Probably he didn’t,” says I. “Anyways, he’s dead now.”

“An’ at rest,” says Bert.

“Amen,” says Mabel.

A nightmare, that’s what that v’yage was; a nightmare. Mabel chased me an’ Bert Wickson fore an aft, alow and aloft. We hung together for pertection an’ even then it appeared she would be marryin’ the both of us. If there’d been a preacher aboard the *Jezebel Phillmore* one or other of us’d have been a goner. As it was, bein’ skipper, I couldn’t perform my own weddin’ an’ I swore a solemn oath to Bert that I’d never perform his. Just

the same, we were only human and Mabel was the wearin'est woman as ever caused a man to yield in sheer desperation, and I knew by the time we reached Melbourne that she'd have one of us all ready to be spliced.

"If she don't get us in Melbourne," says Bert, "she'll get us on the way back. I can't hold out much longer, cap'n. She'll own me, body an' soul, in another week."

We had long since rounded The Horn, after a fair easting, an' we were sailin' along in Southern waters, warm an' starry an' filled with a dangerous seductiveness. That's the word I wanted—seductiveness. If it had been cold an' snowin' an' blowin' a gale of wind, a seaman might have been able to resist Mabel, but here the moon an' the water an' the stars an' the breeze was all agin us.

"Cap'n," says Bert, one still, smooth night. "I guess I'm a goner. I can't hold out no longer. If she gets me tonight—"

"I'm the same way, mister," I tells him. "What's the use of resistin' your inevitable doom. It's you or me, one or the other. If she gits me first tonight or if she's got her mind set on me . . ."

We fell silent, an' we're so occupied with our dismal musin's that the typhoon sneaks up on us almost afore we're aware of it. First comes a awful puff o' wind—whoosh!—like that, an' the sails begins to fill an' crack like cannons; then whoosh! again, and then hell pops loose, the chicken-coop blows away, the sails is torn to ribbons an' we're diggin our nose into seas that look like the Rocky Mountains gone marine. Bert grabs me around the neck an yells:

"We're saved. Jonas! It's a dispersion o' Providence."

Maybe it was at that. Just the same, Providence was doin' things with a lavish hand. The rain fell in sheets, the seas swept us fore an' aft, hatch-coamin's were busted an' we began to fill with water. It was all up with the *Jezebel Phillmore*. The foremast snapped off early in the storm, an' afore we could cut it clear down came the main an we didn't wait for the mizzen.

The seas were still runnin' high, but it was "out boats an' away." Chaos, that's what it was chaos. The wind howlin' an' men shoutin' an' women screamin'. We saw to it that Mabel got in the first boat along with the others, an' we felt better. But when we tried to launch our boat a big sea caught her an' bashed her against the barque's side, an' presently I was in the water clingin' grim death to a spar. Someone was alongside me, an' I yells to him an' it's Bert Wickson.



All night we cling to that spar, an' dawn finds us washed up on a clean, white, sandy beach with green wavin' palms all around us an' blue water an' a clear blue sky above.

"Safe!" says Bert. "We're clear of her, Jonas."

"Yes," says I, feelin' happy about that. "An' maybe the others got clear. They'd find somethin' to cling to an' the typhoon soon blew itself out. Anyways, we're clear o' Mabel."

Just then, gents, Mabel comes sailin' in on a hatch-cover.

Side by side, in this dark hour, me and Bert stood, silent in our agony. There we stood till a big wave brought her in and dumped her in the surf at our feet. Not until she yells at us do either of us think to give her a hand.

"Have ye forgotten I'm a lady!" yells Mabel. "Do you want me to perish!"

"No," says we and we gave her a hand. But our smiles and words o' welcome is only a hollow mockery. Bad enough to be on shore with this woman, worse to have her on shipboard, but to be marooned on a desert island . . .

"This is a nice situation," she says as soon as she's got her breath. "A pretty situation. Here I am alone with two men on this island. What will

people say?”

“They got to find us first,” says Bert.

“And if they do,” says she, “can I hold up my head, can I go back home and—and—after—?” She starts to weep then, an’ me an’ Bert get up from the sand where we been sittin’ an’ stroll away up to the beach to gather cocoanuts and fetch water from a spring. When we get back, Mabel has dried her tears and the sun has dried her clothes an’ the clothes shrunk. Still, she’s feelin’ better an’ consents to eat a cocoanut or two.

“Romantic, ain’t it?” says she. “Bein’ wrecked on a desert island with two big handsome men. Just like in the story-books. I do hope you boys won’t get to fightin’ a duel over me.”

“Not us,” mutters Bert, but he choked over it, ’count o’ me hittin’ him in the ribs with my elbow to preserve peace an’ Mabel doesn’t hear him. We git to work then an’ build a couple of huts, one for Mabel an’ one for us.

“It won’t be long now,” I tells Bert as we go to sleep that night, after lightin’ a big bonfire to attract any vessels as might pass. “Some one of us has got to marry her now.”

“Maybe we’ll all die,” whispers Bert. “I hope I die first.”

None of us looked like dyin’, however. Days passed. We found lots of fruit an’ caught fish, and lived pretty well. Me an’ Bert never left each other, knowin’ that the one as she got alone was a gone man. We talked about buildin’ a raft an’ sneakin’ away on her, but she kept an eye on us an’ we knew there wasn’t no escape for us—not without Mabel.

We’re sittin’ on the beach one day, close by where we first landed—sittin’ there in the sun an’ not sayin’ much at all. Mabel is weavin’ herself a suit out of palm leaves or somethin’, an’ Bert leans over to me an’ whispers very hoarse. “Her trousseau,” and shudders. Then suddenlike he turns his head, jumps up an’ dashes into the jungle. I think maybe he’s gone mad, but just the same I’m not goin’ to be left there with Mabel. So up I get an’ runs after him.

I hear a great crashing an’ noise like elephants ahead of me, and then I come upon Bert and he’s got hold of the queerest lookin’ thing I ever see. It’s got a long beard an long hair an’ is dressed in old faded shirt an’ pants.

“Robertson Crusoe,” says Bert. “I just happened to see him peerin’ from the bushes.”

“Who are you?” says I.

“I’m called Father Ahab,” the stranger answers in a deep, deep voice like a man who isn’t used to talkin’ much. “I’m a hermit.”

“You—you ain’t a preacher?” says Bert fearful-like.

“I preach sometimes,” says he, “to the poor heathen on these islands.”

“Do ships ever come here?” I ask him, switchin’ the talk.

“Often,” says he. “Probably be one along today.”

“Come an’ see Mabel,” invites Bert.

“I don’t like wimmen,” protests the hermit. “That is why I’m here.”

“Neither do we,” says Bert, “but we can’t all find desert islands, unfort’nately. Come on now.”

We go back to the beach an’ find Mabel lookin’ pretty fierce, thinkin’ maybe we’ve run away on her. She looks very curiouslike at Father Ahab, an’ her mouth is open when she hears about him.

“How romantic!” she says. “An’ he’s a woman hater an’ a sort of missionary. Could you perform a marriage, sir?”

“Why, yes,” says Father Ahab. “I could do that. I have a book here I use to pray with. Which of these two is it?”

Bert an’ me began to lick our lips. Mabel looks from one to the other. Just then, around a green point o’ the island comes a ship.

“Saved!” cries Bert. “We’re saved.”

“One of you,” says Mabel in a low voice, “has got to be my husband afore we board that boat. Here I been on this island with you two men an’—now which is it to be?”

The hermit speaks up.

“I’ll bury two shells,” says he, “in the sand an’ mark each with a twig. One will be white, the other blue. You gents draw in alphabetical order an’ him who draws the blue one is the lucky man.”

“Meanin’ he don’t have to marry her?” says Bert.

“Meanin’ he does,” says Father Ahab.

He goes away after we say it’s fair enough, an’ buries his shells.

“Now,” he says, comin’ back to us, “who draws first?”

“My name bein’ Hallan,” says I, “and his, Wickson, it would seem as I do.”

So I go to the two little mounds, pick the left one an’ draw the blue shell.

“Mr. Hallan wins,” says the hermit an’ I look at him pretty sharp-like, not carin’ for the way he says it. But Mabel takes me by the hand and says:

“I’m glad it’s you, Jonas. You’re a good man.”

“Now,” says Father Ahab, “if you’ll jine hands . . .”

We jined hands there on the sunny, white sand beach of Mimko Island, with the blue sea afore us, the green jungle behind us an’ the blue sky above us. The rescue ship has hove to, let down her anchor and sent a boat off. We jined hands and the hermit read from his book those magic an’ fateful words:

“Whom God hath jined together let no man put asunder.”

And me an’ Mabel Bloggs is man an’ wife.

The rescue boat grounds on the shingle an’ seamen come up to us. Bert explains what’s happened. This ship, it appears, is the *Rio Tambo*. She’s picked up the rest of our outfit an’ been cruisin’ around lookin’ for us.

“And we find a happy married couple,” says the mate, a Mr. Arkwright, beamin’ on me an’ Mabel.

No one says a word. The hermit makes a funny noise in his beard. He’s sittin’ on a bunch of grass or somethin’. No one pays much attention to him. We all go for the boat, Mabel hangin’ to my arm. Suddenly, the hermit lets a yell out o’ him. We turn an’ see what’s happened—a snake has bit him—a big green snake. He lays it low with a stick, but it stung him first.

We all rush back to help him. He’s lyin’ down, an’ his face, as much as you could see of it, is pretty pale.

“It bit him on the chest,” says Mabel. “Poor, dear man! Open your shirt till we see.”

“No!” He sits up an’ yells at her. “No! Let me die.”

I reaches down an’ rips open the shirt an’ there on Father Ahab’s bosom is Mabel Bloggs’ pitcher.

“Viper!” screams Mabel.

“It were a grass snake,” says Bert.

I walk over to that other twig hidin' the shell an', knowing Henry Bloggs an' how much he likes me, I kick the sand away an' find that both them shells was blue. An' I say that a man who'd foist a woman like Mabel off on another man deserved just what he got.

So," said Herbie Spiller, the winchman, "your marriage didn't take, cap'n."

"No more than did Henry Bloggs' snake-bite. Mabel took him home. He were the sole survivor o' the wreck he'd been in, but he never after was heard to congratulate hisself on it."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Father Ahab* by Louis Arthur Cunningham]