

# The Bloomfield Times.

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BY

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## JOHN'S CHEST,

AND

## Why it was Locked.

AMONG the heterogeneous crowd who were to be my shipmates in the Amphion, I was particularly attracted to a slender youth from one of the back counties of New York State, who signed his name on the papers as John Merrill. He was nearly my own age, I judged; and there was an air of quiet refinement about him, strikingly in contrast with the rude, boisterous character of the majority of our associates. These last were about an average of such raw material as is received every day of the week at the metropolis, and shipped off to the whaling ports to be manufactured into seamen.

John was, from the first, retired and uncommunicative, though less so in his intercourse with me than with any one else. He never referred to his antecedents, though I had given him my whole autobiography before we had been a fortnight at sea. And as I found him a sympathizing listener whenever I wanted to let my tongue run on, I don't think I ever thought of esteeming him the less for his reticence as to his past life. I merely thought that he must have some good reason for wishing to conceal his true history, and was too conscientious to invent a false one.

One of John's eccentricities—I knew not what else to call it—was that he always kept his sea-chest locked. This is unusual in a whaler's fore-cabin, and always subjects the man doing it to unpleasant remarks as implying a want of confidence in the honesty of his shipmates. It is common to say of the man who does it, that "he is either a thief himself, or else thinks the rest of us are thieves." But John Merrill only blushed, without making any audible reply, when such cutting insinuations were thrown out, as they occasionally were, in his hearing. They had no effect whatever in producing any change in his habits.—Even I myself could never get a peep at his inventory. He was generous, even to a fault, in respect of giving or lending little matters; but he always kept his chest in the darkest corner of our little dark, triangular quarters, and when he took out or put in anything, was careful never to leave it unlocked.

As concerned his duty, he did not appear to be the stuff of which crack sailors are made. But he won upon the good opinion of the officers, even of gruff Mr. Baldwin, our executive, tarry old Triton, whom current report declared to be web-footed.

"I can't haze that boy," he would say. "We must ease him in, till he has eaten a few barrels of salt-horse to harden his sinews."

I could not tell why, but I don't think I was envious of my comrade because the mate favored him in this way, while he drove me up to my utmost capacity. Both of us were respectful and willing and tried hard to do our duty, and a she expressed it, "make men of ourselves." And I think I felt rather elated to know that Mr. Baldwin discovered that there was tougher material in me than in John Merrill, and worked us accordingly. It was an honor to be selected to pull the mate's tub-oar, while he was enrolled in the rear-rank of the "shipkeepers." And I never complained, even when in reefing topsails, the old salt would say, kindly, "Stop, down, John Merrill, I want you to help me;" while at the next moment, he roared at me on the

yard, in a voice of thunder, "Lay out there, you Bill, and take up that dog's ear. What are you garing at, in the bunt?"

I think I may have assumed a patronizing air in my intercourse with John, in consequence of all this. Feeling a professional superiority, I could not avoid letting it appear sometimes. But if so, he never seemed to notice it. If there was a sudden call, in our watch, for one of the boys to jump aloft and reeve studding-sail-halyards or a loose royal, John would start sometimes, but I would gently push him back and jump in ahead of him. I was proud of my ability to take the lead, and there was gratitude, instead of indignation or shame, in his clear, blue eye on such occasions. Some of the men standing near would perhaps intimate that he was wanting in pluck, to let me do this. But I don't think I ever thought so, though, of course, I felt flattered by such remarks, as any boy would.

But John Merrill made sure, though slow, progress in his duties, and his sinews hardened up, as Mr. Baldwin had prophesied.—Though delicate in frame, his health seemed perfect, and in some respects we had no better man among us. He was always ready to take an extra trick on the lookout, for he seemed to like being alone where he could commune with his own thoughts.—And he was soon acknowledged to be the best helmsman on board. Did the sturdy old Amphion show a determination to carry her wheel an extra spoke to windward at "full-and-by," or to make wayward sheers and yaws when off before it, no one could manage her like this quiet timid youth.

He was always ready to take my turn at the helm for me; indeed, would have taken them all if I would have let him. He could have done me no greater favor than this; for no duty, however, laborious or dangerous, was so irksome to me as steering the ship. To do it well, required an abstraction of the mind for two hours from all other matters, with a touch, and a foresight, or rather forefeeling, in which John Merrill excelled, but which few rough and tumble sailors possess.

Mr. Baldwin used to declare that "he never knew a right-down smart fellow who could steer more than a fair, decent trick; and that he never knew an A 1 extra helmsman who was good for much else." And, after an observation of many years, I think his statement was not far from the truth.

We made our first port at Talcahuano after doubling Cape Horn, and here John and I, being in the same watch, were much together on shore. But he would never stay after dark, and appeared utterly insensible to the fascinations of the Chilian brunettes. He would drink no liquor, and his example, in this respect, had a good effect upon myself.

We sailed for a cruise on the coast of Peru, after a short stay in port. Among the men shipped to fill vacancies, was one known as "California Tom," a fellow of unbounded assurance and infinite 'gas,' to whom John and I both took an instinctive aversion at first acquaintance. But he found some congenial spirits on board the Amphion, as such fellows will in any ship where they may cast their fortunes.

We had not been long at sea before it appeared that we had some one in our circle who disdained the nice little distinctions of *meum* and *teum*. Several articles had been mysteriously missed by different parties, and complaints were loud and clamorous.

A ship's fore-cabin is as unfit a place for a thief as he can well find his way into. As much uneasiness is caused by his presence, as by the knowledge that a powder magazine is located somewhere under the deck without knowing exactly where. Woe to him if he is caught; for though Jack's standard of morality is, in many respects, no higher than it ought to be, he has no mercy for a pilfering shipmate. He has, it may be said, one code of morals to regulate his dealings with his own comrades,

and another much more elastic, for the great barbarian world outside.

We became a very unhappy family after this discovery, for, of course, all mutual confidence was lost, until it should appear who the offender was. No one was exempt from suspicion; though the weight of it was equally divided between California Tom and my demure friend John Merrill. Each had his friends, who believed the other guilty, but while the boy modestly refrained from saying anything about it, Tom did not scruple to head his own party.

"It's easy enough to see who the thief is," I heard him say one night, as he occupied the centre of a little knot of his cronies. "It's that sleek-faced little hypocrite that is at the wheel now."

"Of course 'tis," said Derby, one of the 'congenials.' "Its enough to condemn any fellow to know that he keeps his denkey always locked."

"What business has one man to be allowed to lock his donkey, anyhow?" demanded Tom, loud enough now for all to hear. "I say, let's go and kick the lid open and see what's in it."

"Sit right down!" said Frank Wightman, from our side of the house; for Tom had risen as if to carry his suggestion into effect. "Don't undertake anything of the kind. John Merrill isn't here to speak for himself, and no man shall break his chest open while I'm by to prevent it."

"Don't you want to find out who the thief is?" asked Derby.

"Of course I do; and I don't think I should have to go far to do that. If there's to be a general search of chests and bunks, I'm ready to agree to it at any time; and perhaps the boy would be willing to open his, in such a case. But I say it shan't be kicked open in his absence."

"It's plain enough that he's the guilty one," said Tom, "when his chest is the only one locked, and—"

"I don't know about that!" retorted Frank, with a significant look. "A thief may find other places for his plunder besides in his chest. Indeed, if he's an old hand at it, he would be likely to."

This home-thrust put an end to the discussion for the moment; for Tom as well as Derby and the rest of his gang, were afraid of Wightman, who alone was a match for any two of them. But when John was relieved from the wheel, we told him what had occurred, and how suspicion was thickening upon him. Frank asked him, if he were willing to open his chest and let us all have a look at its contents.

"No," said he, quietly, "I am not willing."

"But why not, if you are innocent?"

"I cannot say why not, but I can assure you that I know nothing about the stolen things. You must either take my word for it, or, if a general search is determined upon, open my chest by force, for I shall not consent to have it done."

"I believe what you say, John," said Frank, and so does Bill, here, that you are entirely innocent. But there are many who don't, and there will be still more, if you don't satisfy them. Perhaps if you would let me, alone, overhaul it, or Bill, if that would suit you better, eh?"

"No," I cannot show the contents of it, even to Bill. If the matter is pressed hard I shall appeal to the old man for protection—though I don't know as that would do any good."

"None at all," said Wightman and I, both at once.

"What would he do, do you think?"

"Exercise his authority, and demand the key at once, or open it by force. He has heard about the thefts, as you know; and I heard him tell Mr. Baldwin that, if another case was reported, he should make a general search, and flog the thief, if he could be found." The boy rested his face upon his hands in thought, but made no answer.

"Never mind, John," said Wightman; "don't fret about it. No harm shall come to you anyhow. I'm satisfied of your truth,

and if you still decline to show your things you shan't be forced to, at least by anybody in this end of the ship. But think this matter over, and perhaps to-morrow you'll feel differently about it. I've no idle curiosity, myself, to want to know your secret; but I would like to satisfy others, who haven't the same trust in your integrity that I have."

That night in the middle watch, I was awakened by a slight clicking noise, and saw California Tom, by the dim light of the hanging lamp, stealthily opening John's chest with a key. John, himself, as well as all the rest of my watch, was sleeping soundly; but I knew that he never left his key where it could be found. It was always about his person, night and day.—Tom must have found a duplicate key to fit the chest.

I was about to speak and give the alarm to Wightman and others; but on second thought, determined to wait a moment and see the result. Tom had a bundle in one hand, which appeared to be a new flannel shirt, and as the lock flew open at last, he lost no time in looking into the chest, but pushed in the bundle, relocked it and went on deck.

I considered the matter, and determined to tell Frank Wightman; which I did as soon as our watch turned out.

"Don't tell John," were his words; "I hope he won't open his chest and discover it; for I want to see what kind of a plot is hatching."

John Merrill had the morning mast-head, and went up to his post at daylight, without having had occasion to look into his chest. Tom was up and stirring soon afterwards—an unusual proceeding for him in a morning watch off duty—and headed off Captain Soule as soon as he made his appearance above deck.

Presently the order was given to call all hands, and muster them up. One of the mates was sent into the fore-cabin to see that no one lingered, and to have all the men's wits and effects roused up to the light of day. The captain was evidently in a towering rage, for he had passed lightly over several previous reports of theft, hoping the matter would be adjusted without his interference. But Tom had lost a new shirt during the night, and Captain Soule had lost—his patience.

"I'll find it if it's inside the ship!" said he; "and I'll flog the man that stole it."

Several chests and bags had been emptied of their contents in the presence of us all; for John had been called down from aloft, and stood, thoughtful and agitated, at my side. When the captain came to the locked chest.

"Whose is this?" he demanded.

"Mine, sir," spoke up the lad.

"Gif me your key?"

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I would like to speak a word with you, by ourselves, sir, if you please."

But the captain was not in a humor to listen to any remonstrance at that moment. "Let me get through with this cursed business before I talk with anybody! It doesn't look well, anyhow, that you keep your chest locked up!"

He swung back his heavy boot as he spoke, and with a single kick under the projecting edge of the lid it flew open.

"There's my shirt!" exclaimed Tom, seizing the bundle that lay on top. He shook it open, showed his marks, and it was at once identified beyond all dispute.

"Enough said! We're on the right track, now," said Captain Soule. "Take up this chest and carry it aft!" And he closed the lid with a bang.

"Mr. Baldwin," he continued, "strip John Merrill's back, and seize him up! It's a new thing for me to flog one of my men—a thing I never did—but I've sworn it in this case, and I'll keep my word."

The poor boy, overwhelmed with confusion, could hardly find a word to protest his innocence, as the mate led him aft. But Frank Wightman at this moment neared the captain respectfully, and touched him gently on the shoulder. A word was spoken; the captain relaxed his angry brows to listen to it, for Wightman was the best man in the fore-cabin. The two walked aft together, conversing earnestly. I kept my eye on them, till Frank made a signal, which I understood, when I followed.

"Mr. Derrick," said the captain to the second mate, "keep everything as it stands, with the chests forward. Don't allow a man to touch a thing, till further orders." He beckoned Wightman and myself to come below. But as he did not countermand the orders he had given about seizing John up, the mate, it seems, proceeded to obey them. He prepared the seizings, but when he ordered the boy to remove his shirt, he met with unexpected resistance. While I was relating to Captain Soule, in the forward cabin, what I had seen during the middle watch, there was a scuffle over our heads, and John Merrill, in frenzy of excitement, rushed down the stairs and into the after cabin. "Hold on, Mr. Bald-

win! Never mind what I told you, for the present." And the captain followed the boy into the sanctum, while we awaited the result. In a minute afterwards he put his head out at the door, with the strangest look on his face that I had ever seen mortal man wear.

"Wightman! you and Bill, pass John Merrill's chest down the stairs, right into this room."

We obeyed the order, and set our burden down at his feet. But the lad was not to be seen as we looked about us.

"That'll do. You can go on deck, now; I'll talk with you again, soon." And the door was closed between us and the mystery.

It was half an hour before Captain Soule came up, and ordered the search continued. When he came to Tom's chest, he overhauled it very carefully; but it was, apparently, emptied to the bottom, without finding any stolen property. But, still unsatisfied, he stood it up on end, thumped it heavily, and threw it bottom up. A false bottom was dislodged and fell out, followed by various missing articles.

A general cry of indignation, was raised, and a strong disposition was manifested to lynch California Tom. But Mr. Baldwin took upon himself the office of executioner, this time with a good will.

"I always felt it in my bones that John Merrill was innocent," said he to Captain Soule; "and when it came to stripping his shirt, I hadn't, somehow, any heart to do it."

"I'm glad you didn't succeed in doing it," was the reply. "I couldn't have flogged him if he had been guilty; nor could you either."

"How so, sir?"

"Do you think you could lay the cat on the back of a woman?"

That comical look of the captain's was reflected, nay multiplied, tenfold, in the rough face of the old mate.

"A woman?" he gasped out, "John Merrill?"

"Ay, a woman, Mr. Baldwin. Annie Carroll is her name, now."

"But what are you going to do with him, sir?"

"Do with him? With her, you mean; put him or put her, or it, ashore, of course, as soon as I make a port. We must give her a state-room, in the cabin, and have her to wear such a dress as belongs to her sex."

"Well—well—" said Mr. Baldwin, reflectively; "I never had anything to bring me up with a round-turn like that." Then a bright idea seemed to have struck him, and he demanded triumphantly, "Where's your clothes to dress her in?"

"She's got all her dry goods in her chest ready to wear."

"What? In John Merrill's chest, do you mean?"

"Of course. Whose else should I mean? That's why he—she, I mean—always kept it locked; and was so secret about it."

I shan't spend time to tell how we talked the matter over in the fore-cabin that night, and compared notes, and went back to every little incident of the outward passage, that might be supposed to have any bearing upon this astounding discovery. Of course, there were those ready to say they had guessed the truth months ago; but I venture to say, that not a man on board the Amphion had the slightest suspicion of the truth, until it was revealed to Captain Soule, as I have related. And how much longer we might have been in the dark, but for the attempt to flog her, it is difficult to say.

John Merrill stood no more watches on board the Amphion, nor went to the mast-head. But Annie Carroll, a beautiful young lady, save that she wore her hair rather too much *au garcon*, sometimes steered a trick at the wheel when she felt in the humor, until our arrival at Callao, where she became, when her story was known, the heroine, the lioness of the hour. A passage home was secured for her; and she took leave of us all, with no desire, as she confessed, to follow any further the profession of a sailor.

It was the old, old story. An orphan, a harsh, guardian, and on attempt to force her into a marriage with one she disliked. A madcap scheme, in which she had embarked on a wayward impulse, and persisted in because she hardly knew how or when to retreat. And we were forced to admit, when we reviewed all the circumstances, that she had nobly sustained the double character, and had preserved all the finer attributes of her sex, while she laid aside its apparel.

And will it be wondered that she lost her heart while on board the Amphion? Not to me; for of course, I was but a boy in her eyes. But when I last saw John Merrill, he was Mrs. Captain Wightman, and still claimed to be, if not the boldest seaman, the best helmsman, at least, of the family circle.