

Arabella Hardy

By Charles Lamb

I was born in the East Indies. I lost my father and mother young. At the age of five, my relations thought it proper that I should be sent to England for my education. I was to be intrusted to the care of a young woman who had a character for great humanity and discretion; but just as I had taken leave of my friends, and we were about to take our passage, the young woman suddenly fell sick, and could not go on board. In this unpleasant emergency no one knew how to act. The ship was at the very point of sailing, and it was the last which was to sail for the season. At length the captain, who was known to my friends, prevailed upon my relation, who had come with us to see us embark, to leave the young woman on shore, and to let me embark separately. There was no possibility of getting any other female attendant for me in the short time allotted for our preparation; and the opportunity of going by that ship was thought too valuable to be lost. No other ladies happened to be going; and so I was consigned to the care of the captain and his crew—rough and unaccustomed attendants for a young creature, delicately brought up as I had been: but indeed they did their best to make me not feel the difference. The unpolished sailors were my nursery-maids and my waiting-women. Everything was done by the captain and the men to accommodate me and make me easy. I had a little room made out of the cabin, which was to be considered as my room, and nobody might enter into it. The first mate had a great character for bravery and all sailor-like accomplishments; but with all this he had a gentleness of manners, and a pale, feminine cast of face, from ill health and a weakly constitution, which subjected him to some ridicule from the officers, and caused him to be named Betsy. He did not much like the appellation; but he submitted to it the better, saying that those who gave him a woman's name well knew that he had a man's heart, and that, in the face of danger, he would go as far as any man. To this young man, whose real name was Charles Atkinson, by a lucky thought of the captain, the care of me was especially intrusted. Betsy was proud of his charge; and, to do him justice, acquitted himself with great diligence and adroitness through the whole of the voyage. From the beginning I had somehow looked upon Betsy as a woman, hearing him so spoken of; and this reconciled me in some measure to the want of a maid, which I had been used to. But I was a manageable girl at all times, and gave nobody much trouble.

I have not knowledge enough to give an account of my voyage, or remember the names of the seas we passed through, or the lands to which we touched upon, in our course. The chief thing I can remember (for I do not recollect the events of the voyage in any order) was Atkinson taking me upon deck to see the great whales playing about in the sea. There was one great whale came bounding up out of the sea, and then he would dive into it again, and then he would come up at a distance where nobody expected him; and another whale was following after him. Atkinson said they were at play, and that the lesser whale loved that bigger whale, and kept it company all through the wide seas: but I thought it strange play, and a frightful kind of love; for I every minute expected they would come up to our ship and toss it. But Atkinson said a whale was a gentle creature, and it was a sort of sea elephant: and that the most powerful creatures in nature are always the least hurtful. And he told me how men went out to take these whales, and stuck long pointed darts into them; and how the sea was discoloured with the blood of these poor whales for many miles' distance: and I admired the courage of the men; but I was sorry for the inoffensive whale. Many other pretty sights he used to show me, when he was not on watch, or

doing some duty for the ship. No one was more attentive to his duty than he: but at such times as he had leisure he would show me all pretty sea sights—the dolphins and porpoises that came before a storm; and all the colours which the sea changed to—how sometimes it was a deep blue, and then a deep green, and sometimes it would seem all on fire. All these various appearances he would show me, and attempt to explain the reason of them to me as well as my young capacity would admit of. There was a lion and a tiger on board, going to England as a present to the king; and it was a great diversion to Atkinson and me, after I had got rid of my first terrors, to see the ways of these beasts in their dens, and how venturous the sailors were in putting their hands through the grates, and patting their rough coats. Some of the men had monkeys, which ran loose about; and the sport was for the men to lose them, and find them again. The monkeys would run up the shrouds, and pass from rope to rope, with ten times greater alacrity than the most experienced sailor could follow them: and sometimes they would hide themselves in the most unthought-of places; and when they were found they would grin, and make mouths, as if they had sense. Atkinson described to me the ways of these little animals in their native woods; for he had seen them. Oh, how many ways he thought of to amuse me in that long voyage!

Sometimes he would describe to me the odd shapes and varieties of fishes that were in the sea, and tell me tales of the sea-monsters that lay hid at the bottom, and were seldom seen by men, and what a glorious sight it would be if our eyes could be sharpened to behold all the inhabitants of the sea at once, swimming in the great deeps, as plain as we see the gold and silver fish in a bowl of glass. With such notions he enlarged my infant capacity to take in many things.

When in foul weather I have been terrified at the motion of the vessel as it rocked backwards and forwards, he would still my fears, and tell me that I used to be rocked so once in a cradle, and that the sea was God's bed and the ship our cradle, and we were as safe in that greater motion as when we felt that lesser one in our little wooden sleeping-places.

When the wind was up, and sang through the sails, and disturbed me with its violent clamours, he would call it music, and bid me hark to the sea-organ; and with that name he quieted my tender apprehensions. When I have looked around with a mournful face at seeing all men about me, he would enter into my thoughts, and tell me pretty stories of his mother and his sisters, and a female cousin that he loved better than his sisters, whom he called Jenny; and say that when we got to England I should go and see them; and how fond Jenny would be of his little daughter, as he called me. And with these images of women and females which he raised in my fancy, he quieted me for a while. One time, and never but once, he told me that Jenny had promised to be his wife, if ever he came to England; but that he had his doubts whether he should live to get home, for he was very sickly. This made me cry bitterly.

That I dwell so long upon the attention of this Atkinson, is only because his death, which happened just before we got to England, affected me so much, that he alone of all the ship's crew has engrossed my mind ever since; though, indeed, the captain and all were singularly kind to me, and strove to make up for my uneasy and unnatural situation. The boatswain would pipe for my diversion, and the sailor-boy would climb the dangerous mast for my sport. The rough fore-mast-man would never willingly appear before me till he had combed his long black hair smooth and sleek, not to terrify me. The officers got up a sort of play for my amusement; and Atkinson, or as they called him, Betsy, acted the heroine of the piece. All ways that could be contrived were thought upon to reconcile me to my lot. I was the universal favourite; I do not know how deservedly; but I suppose it was because I was alone, and there was no female in the ship besides me. Had I come over with female relations or attendants, I should have excited no particular curiosity: I should have required no uncommon attentions. I was one little woman among a crew

of men; and I believe the homage which I have read that men universally pay to women was in this case directed to me, in the absence of all other womankind. I do not know how that might be; but I was a little princess among them, and I was not six years old.

I remember, the first drawback which happened to my comfort was Atkinson's not appearing the whole of one day. The captain tried to reconcile me to it by saying that Mr. Atkinson was confined to his cabin; that he was not quite well, but a day or two would restore him. I begged to be taken in to see him; but this was not granted. A day, and then another, came, and another, and no Atkinson was visible; and I saw apparent solicitude on the faces of all the officers, who nevertheless strove to put on their best countenances before me, and to be more than usually kind to me. At length, by the desire of Atkinson himself, as I have since learned, I was permitted to go into his cabin, and see him. He was sitting up, apparently in a state of great exhaustion; but his face lighted up when he saw me; and he kissed me, and told me that he was going a great voyage, far longer than that which we had passed together, and he should never come back. And though I was so young, I understood well enough that he meant this of his death; and I cried sadly: but he comforted me, and told me that I must be his little executrix, and perform his last will, and bear his last words to his mother and his sisters, and to his cousin Jenny, whom I should see in a short time; and he gave me his blessing, as a father would bless his child; and he sent a last kiss by me to all his female relations; and he made me promise that I would go and see them when I got to England. And soon after this he died; but I was in another part of the ship when he died; and I was not told it till we got to shore, which was a few days after; but they kept telling me that he was better and better, and that I should soon see him, but that it disturbed him to talk with any one. Oh, what a grief it was when I learned that I had lost an old shipmate, that had made an irksome situation so bearable by his kind assiduities! and to think that he was gone, and that I could never repay him for his kindness!

When I had been a year and a half in England, the captain, who had made another voyage to India and back, thinking that time had alleviated a little the sorrow of Atkinson's relations, prevailed upon my friends, who had the care of me in England, to let him introduce me to Atkinson's mother and sisters. Jenny was no more. She had died in the interval, and I never saw her. Grief for his death had brought on a consumption, of which she lingered about a twelvemonth, and then expired. But in the mother and the sisters of this excellent young man I have found the most valuable friends I possess on this side the great ocean. They received me from the captain as the little protégée of Atkinson: and from them I have learned passages of his former life; and this in particular—that the illness of which he died was brought on by a wound, of which he never quite recovered, which he got in a desperate attempt, when he was quite a boy, to defend his captain against a superior force of the enemy which had boarded him, and which, by his premature valour inspiring the men, they finally succeeded in repulsing. This was that Atkinson, who, from his pale and feminine appearance, was called Betsy: this was he whose womanly care of me got him the name of a woman; who, with more than female attention, condescended to play the handmaid to a little unaccompanied orphan, that fortune had cast upon the care of a rough sea-captain and his rougher crew.