

The Gorgon's Head

By Miss Gertrude Bacon

“They that go down to the sea in ships” see strange things, but what they tell is oft-times stranger still. A faculty for romancing is imparted by a seafaring life as readily and surely as a rolling gait and a weather-beaten countenance. A fine imagination is one of the gifts of the ocean—witness the surprising and unlimited power of expression and epithet possessed by the sailor. And a fine imagination will frequently manifest itself in other ways besides swear words.

Captain Brander is one of the most gifted men in this way in the whole merchant service. His officers say of him with pride that he possesses the largest vocabulary in the great steamship company of which he is one of the oldest and most respected skippers, and his yarns are only equalled in their utter impossibility by the genius he displays in furnishing them with minute detail and all the outward circumstance of truth.

I first learned this fact from the second engineer the evening of the sixth day of our voyage, as we leant across the bulwarks and watched the sunset. The second engineer was a bit of a liar—or I should say romancer—himself. The day he took me down into the engine-room he told me, as personal experiences, tales of mutinous Lascar firemen, unpopular officers who disappeared suddenly into the fiery maw of blazing furnaces, and so forth, which, whatever foundation of fact they may have possessed, certainly did not lose in the telling. As a humble aspirant in the same branch of art he naturally was quick to recognise the genius of that past master, the captain, and his admiration for his chief was as boundless as it was sincere.

“I say, Miss Baker,” he said, *à propos* of nothing, “have you had the skipper ‘on’ yet?”

“Not that I am aware of;” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Why, has he been spinning you any yarns yet? There isn’t a man in the service can touch him for stories. I don’t deny that he has seen some service, and been in some tight places, but for a real out-and-out lie, commend me to old Monkey Brand!” (It was by this sobriquet, I regret to say, suggested partly by his name, and mostly by his undoubted resemblance to a well-known advertisement, that the worthy captain was known in the unregenerate engine-room.)

“Oh, I should just love to hear him,” I cried. “There is nothing I should like better. Do tell me how I can manage to draw him.”

“Well, he doesn’t want much drawing as a rule,” said the engineer. “He likes to give vent to his imagination. Let me see,” he continued; “tomorrow afternoon we shall be about passing the Grecian Islands. Ask him about them, and try and get him on the subject of Gorgons.”

“Gorgons!” I said. “What a strange topic! Why, since I’ve left school I have almost forgotten what they were. Weren’t they mythological creatures who turned people into stone when they looked at them?”

“That’s about it, I believe,” said the engineer, “and a fellow called Perseus cut off their heads, or something of that kind. It’s a lie anyhow, but you ask the skipper.”

It was the custom of Captain Brander every afternoon to make a kind of royal progress among his passengers. Going the entire circuit of the ship; passing slowly from group to group, with a joke here and a chat there, and bestowing his favours in lordly and impartial fashion—especially among the ladies. I have watched him often coming the whole length of the promenade deck, making some outrageous compliment to one girl, patting another on the shoulder, even chucking a third under the chin; a sense of supreme self-satisfaction animating his red cheeks, curling his

grey hair, and suffusing his whole short, portly person. Eccentric he was; indifferent to his personal appearance—his battered old cap had seen almost as much service as he had—but a more popular man or an abler officer never walked the bridge. On this particular occasion I was at the end of the deck, and had so arranged that an inviting deck chair stood vacant beside me. Wearied by his progress by the time he reached me, he fell at once into my little trap, and sat down on the empty chair, leant back, and spread his legs. He and I were fast friends, and had been since the day when I tried to photograph him, and he had frustrated my design by unscrewing the front lens of my camera and keeping it in his pocket for the rest of the morning.

“Captain,” I said, pointing to a cloudy grey outline faintly visible against the eastern horizon, “what land is that?”

“My dear young lady,” said he, “I am quite sick of answering that question! If I have been asked it once I have been asked it twenty times in the last half-hour. That old Mrs. Matherson in the red shawl buttonholed me on the subject to such an extent that I thought I should never get away again. Wonderful thirst for information that old party has! And she appears to think that because I’m captain I must have a complete knowledge of geography, geology, history, etymology, mythology, *and* navigation. Well, for the twenty-first time, then, we are passing the isles off the coast of Greece, and that one straight ahead is Zante.”

“So that is Greece, is it?” I mused aloud. “Well, from here at least it looks old enough and romantic enough to be the home of all those ancient heroes we read about—Alexander and Hercules and—and—Gorgons and those sort of things.” I felt I had introduced the subject somewhat lamely, after all, and the captain looked me full in the face as if suspecting a plot. But if I am not very adroit in conversation, I can at least look innocent upon occasions, and he merely said, “And what do you know about Gorgons, pray?”

“Oh, as much as most people, I expect!” I answered. “They are only a sort of fairy tale, you know.”

“I am not so sure of that,” said Captain Brander. “Those fairy tales, as you call them, have often truth at the bottom of them. And as to Gorgons, why, I could tell you a little incident that happened to me once—but it’s rather a long story.”

Then I urged my best persuasions—not that he needed much pressing—and pushing his old cap off his bald forehead, and speaking slowly and with that almost American accent peculiar to him, he unfolded his tale of wonder as follows:

“It’s nearly thirty years ago, Miss Baker—that’s long before *you* were ever born or thought of—that I was fourth officer of the *Haslar*, 2,000-ton vessel of this same company I serve to this day. How times have altered, to be sure! The *Haslar* was reckoned a fine ship in those days, and if you had told me that I should presently command an 8,000-tonner, such as I do this day, with 11,000 horsepower engines, and more men for the crew alone than the *Haslar* could hold when she was packed her tightest, I very probably wouldn’t have believed you. However, that is neither here nor there. But thirty years ago in the spring time—now I come to think of it, it was in the month of April—we were cruising in this very neighbourhood, and one thick foggy night our skipper lost his bearings a bit, got too near the coast, and ran us ashore off the south point of Zante.

“Of course there was a great fuss, and everybody came up on deck with lifebelts, and all the girls screamed, and all the young fellows swore to save them or die in the attempt; and the skipper turned as white as paper—not that he was afraid, for he was no coward—none of our officers are that—but because he knew his prospects were ruined, and he would be turned out of the company and perhaps lose his certificate, and he’d got a wife and a big family, poor chap! Of

course that consideration didn't affect *me*, for I was in my bunk and asleep at the time, but it was certainly unfortunate for him.

"Well, it was very soon discovered that the ship wasn't going down in a hurry, and nobody got into the boats, though they were lowered ready. And when daylight came we saw we were fast on the rocks, with half the stern under water, and the saloon and a lot of the cabins flooded. But more than that the *Haslar* couldn't sink, and at low water you might almost walk dryshod on to the shore. There was no getting her off, however, and so all the passengers were landed and sent home as best they could across country, and a rough time they had of it, for Zante is not an over-hospitable sort of a C place; while we officers had to stick to the ship till we could get help, and then till she was repaired sufficiently to work her into dock somewhere.

"It was a tedious job, for help was slow in coming; and then all her boilers had to be taken out before she would float, and we fellows got jolly sick of it, I can tell you, for we were hard worked, and Zante is a wretched hole to spend more than half an hour in. Our one amusement, when we were off duty, was to go ashore on foot or row round the island in a boat, shooting wild fowl and exploring the country. There was precious little to see and not much to shoot, and it was slow fun altogether till, one day, the second officer came back from a tramp ashore and told us he had found his way to some very remote village on the eastern coast, where there was a cave among the hills which the villagers warned him not to enter. He could not gather for what reason, because he didn't understand enough of their outlandish tongue, but as it was then growing late he was obliged to return to the ship without further investigation.

"I was always one for adventure when I was a lad, and directly the second officer told his tale I made up my mind to go and explore that cave before any of the rest had a chance. It so happened that next day was my turn for going ashore, and I went and looked up one of the assistant engineers and persuaded him to come with me. I wanted him because he was a chum of mine, and also he was the only one of us who could talk the language a bit. He had been in those parts before, and generally acted as interpreter in our dealings with the natives. His name was Travers, a queer little dark chap, with black eyes and a hot temper, but a pleasant fellow enough if you did not rub him up the wrong way, and game for anything under the sun. He readily agreed to come with me, and we started as soon as we could get away, telling no one of our destination, for we had no wish to be forestalled.

"It was a long tramp, right across the island, to the village which Jenkins, the second officer, had indicated. But at last after climbing a weary hill, we looked down on some clustering huts standing amid vineyards in the valley beneath, while another and much sheerer cliff rose on the opposite side, whose rugged scarp was all rent and riven as by an earthquake, and intersected by a deep ravine. Here and there among the rocks were dark shadows and black patches which might be the entrances to caverns in the crag. 'This must be the place,' I said, 'and one of those is the forbidden cave. How are we to find out which?'

"As if in answer to my question, at this moment there came along the hill-top towards us a burly countryman with a sunburned face and tattered garments. He regarded us with astonishment, as well he might, for they get few strangers in those parts, and he made some remark to us in his queer language, which, of course, I didn't understand, but Travers did and replied to it. Finding he was understood, the countryman stopped and talked.

" 'Ah!' he said, or so Travers interpreted. 'So you have reached the valley of the Haunted Cavern! It is far to seek and hard to find, but it lies spread beneath you.'

" 'But which is the Haunted Cavern, and why is it so called?' asked Travers.

“ ‘It lies in yonder cleft of the hills,’ answered the man, pointing to the opposite ravine, ‘and it is called the Haunted Cavern because none who venture there return alive. Nay, they return not either alive or dead. They are seen no more!’

“ ‘Tell that to the Marines!’ said Travers, only he translated it into Greek, of course, or what the Zante people think is Greek. ‘You don’t expect me to believe such a yarn as that! Why, what is there up in that place?’

“ ‘That is what none can tell,’ replied the peasant; ‘for none come back to say. And, indeed, it is the truth I speak. Many men have attempted to find the secret. In bygone days, I have heard, a whole party of soldiers were sent there to search for brigands supposed to be in hiding, but not one was seen again. The cavern has an evil name, and now is shunned by one and all, but every now and again there arises a youth venturesome beyond the rest; and he heeds not the warnings of the old, but hopes to break the spell and find the treasure that some say is hidden there, and he starts in high hope and courage, but never again do we behold his face!’

“ ‘But what is the reason?’ persisted Travers, the incredulous.

“ ‘Nay, that we cannot say,’ reiterated the man. ‘A short distance can one go up the ravine that leads to the cavern. I have been there myself; and truly there is nothing that can be seen except a barren valley, scattered all over with big black stones. Nothing more, and farther than the entrance none must venture.’

“ ‘Oh, I say!’ exclaimed Travers, in delight, ‘did you ever hear such an old liar? This beats anything I could have believed possible in the nineteenth century. Come on, Brander! We are in luck this time!’ and the impetuous fellow dashed off down the hill, I at his heels, leaving the countryman dumb with amazement behind us.

“At the foot of the hill we entered the little village. An old, white— haired man of rather superior appearance was crossing the road before us. Travers accosted him and asked him the way to the Haunted Cavern. The old man turned quite pale with astonishment and apprehension.

“ ‘The Haunted Cavern, my son!’ he said, in quavering tones; ‘surely you are not going thither?’

“ ‘Yes, we are, though,’ said Travers, his eyes dancing with excitement. It is wonderful what enterprise that boy—he was little more—had in him. ‘And if you won’t tell us, we’ll find the way out for ourselves!’ and he pushed past the old man, who held out his skinny hands as if to detain him.

“Before we had got clear of the hamlet the news had somehow got circulated that we were about to explore the ravine, and the whole of the inhabitants turned out in the wildest excitement. Some were for staying us forcibly, till Travers began to get quite nasty, drew his revolver, and talked of firing. Many reiterated and emphasised alarming warnings and assurances that we should never return. All watched us with the most intense interest, and followed close on our footsteps until we began to near the fatal spot, when they fell off singly or in parties, till finally at the very entrance of the ravine we had left even the boldest spirits behind us.

“In truth, it was a strange spot to which we had penetrated. The narrow path had led us suddenly round the spur of the mountain, and now, look which way we might, the giant rocks towered up sheer above us, hundreds of feet high, in inaccessible grey walls. The sinking sun was now too low to shine within this well-like space, which his rays could only reach at midday, and the very air struck damp and chill. We were in an open valley, thus shut in by the cliffs, of considerable extent, but not to be reached by any path except that we had traversed. The ground was firm and smooth, but littered all over with the strangest black stones of all sorts of shapes, and in all positions, though of a fairly uniform size, and alike in material. There was something

uncanny and weird about these queer black boulders, which strewed the valley the thicker the farther we advanced, till at the far end of the space, where a huge black hole yawned ominous in the cliff, they almost entirely blocked the way.

“The dark cavern looked terribly grim and forbidding in the fading light. A little stream issued from its mouth and trickled among the stones. It did not gurgle and glisten as most mountain streams, but flowed noiselessly, sluggish, and dull, and gathered in stagnant pools on its rocky bed. No birds sang in that dismal nook; no sound from without penetrated to its recesses. All was silent, dim, and chill as the tomb itself.

“Despite my utmost efforts, I felt the spell of the weird, wild spot stealing over me, and a cold shudder crept down my backbone. There was but room for one at a time in the ever-narrowing track, and I was at first leading. My steps became slower and slower, and finally I paused altogether and turned to look back on Travers to see if he too was feeling the oppressive sense of evil that seemed to hang heavy in the very air. But in his face was only visible an ecstasy almost of eagerness and delight. His dark eyes sparkled again, his cheeks were flushed, his breath came quick, and his whole body was quivering with excitement.

“ ‘Go on, Brander!’ he cried. ‘What are you stopping for, man? This is grand! This is luck, indeed! Did you ever see such a place? Come on, I want to get to that cave!’

“I felt utterly ashamed to confess my weakness, but it was that cave that I had begun to dread more and more. Whatever else I may be, Miss Baker, it is not boasting to say I am no coward. I have seen danger, aye, and courted it all my life, and until that moment I doubt if I had known what fear was. But I knew then: the blind, unreasoning fear that saps the strength of mind and limb and melts the heart and paralyses all thought save that one overpowering instinct to fly—somewhere. Yet, in face of Travers’s eagerness, I could not bear to show the white feather. I turned my back therefore on the dark cavern, now just ahead of us, and endeavoured to temporise.

“ ‘Travers,’ I said, ‘did you ever see such queer stones? How do you suppose they have got here? They are quite a different nature from these cliffs, so they could not have fallen from the sides.’

“ ‘Oh, bother the stones!’ said Travers. ‘I can’t look at them now, I want to get into the cave. Quick, before it gets dark!’ and as I still hesitated, he pushed past me into a more open space beyond, almost at the cavern’s mouth. I did not dare to leave him, and was scrambling after him as best I might, when I suddenly heard him cry out in a voice such as I had never heard before, and hope never to again. A shrill, high—pitched cry in which there were surprise, wonder, disgust, alarm, and awful horror all combined in one: a cry of astonishment, a shriek of agony, a shout of dismay. ‘Look, Brander! look! look!’

“I could have sworn that when he spoke my companion was in full view, close beside me, touching me almost, though at the exact moment my eyes were looking from him; but when I turned my head in answer to his cry he was gone.

“For one second only had my gaze been averted, but in that time he had utterly vanished from sight, disappeared in a flash, gone—whither? A large black stone stood close beside me, similar to the rest in that ghostly valley; yet it struck me somehow that I had not noticed it there before. I placed my hand upon it as I peered round behind to see if Travers were there and a shudder I could not explain ran up my arm, for the stone felt warm to the touch. I had not time then to analyse my unreasonable horror at this trivial circumstance I was too eager to find my friend. I rushed madly among the stones, I yelled his name again and again, but the weird echoes of my cry, returned in countless reflections from cliff and cavern, alone answered me.

“In a frenzy of despair I continued my search, for certain was I that by no natural means could Travers have disappeared so utterly in so brief a space. Blind panic seized me, and I knew not what I did, till my eye suddenly fell on a shallow pool of water collected in a rocky hollow at my very feet. It was not more than a couple of inches deep, and scarce a yard across, but on its placid face were reflected the overhanging rock and opening of the cavern just behind it, and also something else that glued my eyes to it in horror and rooted my flying feet to the ground.

“Just above the cavern’s mouth was a narrow ledge of rock, running horizontally, and of a few inches in width. On this natural shelf; reflected in the water, I saw, hanging downwards, a decayed fragment of goat-skin, rotten with age, but which might have been bound round something, long years before. Upon this, as if escaped from its folds, rested a Head.

“It was a human head, severed at the neck, but fresh and unfaded as if but newly dead. It bore the features of a woman—of a woman of more perfect loveliness than was ever told of in tale, or sculptured in marble, or painted on canvas. Every feature, every line was of the truest beauty, cast in the noblest mould—the face of a goddess. But upon that perfect countenance was the mark of eternal pain, of deathless agony and suffering past words. The forehead was lined and knit, the death-white lips were tightly pressed in speechless torment; in the wide eyes seemed yet to lurk the flame of an unquenchable fire; while around the fair brows, in place of hair, curled and coiled the stark bodies of venomous serpents, stiff in death, but their loathsome forms still erect, their evil heads yet thrust forward as if to strike.

“My heart ceased beating, and the chill of death crept over my limbs, as with eyes starting from their sockets I stared at that awful head, reflected in the pool. For hours it seemed to me I gazed fascinated, as the bird by the eye of the snake that has charmed it. I was as incapable of thought as movement, till suddenly forgotten school-room learning began to cross my brain, and I knew that I looked at the reflection of Medusa, the Gorgon, fairest and foulest of living things, the unclean creature, half woman, half eagle, slain by the hero Perseus, and one glimpse of whose tortured face turned the luckless beholder into stone with the horror of it.

“If I once raised my eyes from the reflection to the actual head above I knew that I too should freeze in a moment into another black block, even as poor Travers, and every other who had entered the accursed valley had done before. And as this thought occurred to me, the longing to lift my eyes and look upon the real object become so overpowering that, in sheer self-preservation, I inclined my face closer and closer to the water till I seemed almost to touch it, when my senses fled and I knew no more.

“When I woke at last it was far on in the night, and a bright moon, riding high, shone full down upon the valley, revealing the ragged rocks and scattered stones with a cold brilliance that almost equalled the day. I was lying chilled and stiff beside the pool, and I started up in amazement, unable to recall to my mind, for a moment, where I was or what I was doing there. I had my back to the cavern, fortunately, and as I gazed over the ghostly and deserted scene the events of the day suddenly returned to my mind in a single flash of terror.

“To escape from this ghastly place was now my only thought, and in order to do this I resolved to look no more at the pool at my feet in case the terrible fascination should again take possession of me. What it cost me to adhere to this resolution I cannot tell you, but with the courage of despair I pressed blindly forward to the mouth of the ravine, only pausing a second to lay my hand upon the now ice-cold stone that once was Travers.

“Poor Travers! gay, light-hearted fellow! Ever in the forefront of mischief; of danger, of adventure. How eager he had been to solve the secret of the haunted valley, which now must be his tomb for ever. How full of health and spirits he had scrambled a few hours before among

those very boulders, one of which now, standing stiffly erect among its forest of brethren, was at once the monument and sole relic of a fearless lad, a cheery friend, and a gallant seaman. Dear old Travers! Brave, foolish boy! My heart was heavy, indeed, for his awful fate, as I reverently touched the stone and murmured to the night breeze, stealing around the rocks, 'Good—bye, old fellow; sleep sound!'

"It seemed to me, in my loneliness and terror, that my fearsome journey would never be ended: that, lost in a labyrinth, I should tread that valley for ever. But at last, after endless ages, I reached the mouth of the ravine, and once on open ground I stretched my cramped limbs and ran, without ceasing, till I once more reached the ship."

Here the captain paused, more from want of breath than anything else, I think.

"Go on, Captain Brander," I cried. "You haven't half finished yet. What did they say when you returned, and how did you explain about poor Travers?"

"Young lady," said Captain Brander, "don't ask any more questions. I think I have told you enough for one afternoon," and here, an officer coming up and summoning him, he left me.