

CHAPTER 1

My father's trim little merchantman, *Seamew*, a three-master, rode at anchor in New York harbor, I, a babe of ten days, lay in a cot in a New York hospital, my dear mother, because of me, lay in a grave in a pretty little cemetery on the outskirts of the city. A week later my maiden aunt, Libby Doane, took me to her home in the suburbs and my father, Henry Dunmore, of excellent English connection, returned to England aboard his well-loaded ship. Thus it will be seen that I am of two worlds, born in America, but of pure English parentage. I lived there with my Aunt Libby eight years while my father was largely on the high seas. At last my aunt and I sailed for England where we lived in a pretty cottage some fifty miles inland from Liverpool. I lived there to the age of twelve, carefully schooled and tutored, taught thrift and industry, learned to do many practical things, and how to take care of myself, to earn money. My aunt called me Michael, but the children around us dubbed me "Mickey" because I look a bit Irish, and had obvious freckles, and some sly humor. With my twelfth birthday this story begins, thanks to the diary my aunt gave me for a birthday present.

One day in March, Aunt and I had just finished three o'clock tea when a loud pounding on our front door sent me scurrying through the cottage. Timidly, I opened the door.

"A-hoy, Mickey," a man said, his weathered face brimming with cheer. "Danny Merlin is come with a message from Captain Dunmore to his son, Mickey, giving him, as a birthday present, one first-class passage to the West Indies and return aboard the good ship *Seamew*."

He entered the room as my aunt appeared at the passage.

"Safe in port again, Danny?" she said, offering her hand. "And the Captain, hail and hearty?" He removed his felt visor cap and rubbed his weather-scarred face.

"Aye, aye," he said, handing my aunt a letter. He picked me up, holding me at arms' length. "You for the sea, m'lad, weather-eyeing the

offin', furlin' topsails and messin' with the crew." I stared, wide-eyed. His face beamed as he pressed me against his warm, blue reefer.

"Does the Captain mean it, Danny?" Lifting her eyes from the letter, "Mean to take this lad on a voyage? The semi-tropic sea is none too calm at this season." She looked her fears at me, beckoned Danny to a seat.

Danny laughed scorn at her reference to danger. "The wish and the order, Miss Doane. The Captain blew it to me last night—a sudden idea of his, remembering the lad's birthday, the cargo having been stored and things made shipshape. We've been in port ten days, the Captain's too busy to come here. We sail Monday, and the Captain would have you come Sunday with Mickey, with you to spend the day aboard."

"That's the Captain, Danny, that's Henry, always too busy for his family and his social duties; and now he would take the boy to sea and leave me here alone. Yes, that's Henry."

All that Friday afternoon we gathered my clothing and packed my trunk. What I lacked in warm woolens we made haste to buy. Danny had his yarns (my aunt called him the "Yarn Shop"), and the last of these I well remember, heathenish as it was, as being one of a number of things Danny told me before I entered into the silent world. Danny was forty, beefy, with strong Anglo-Saxon features. He began:

"There was a fellow named Cook, a baker, down in Australia, who got out a new kind of biscuit. They were popular, and packed in handy tins, were carried by travelers. One of Cook's friends was a minister, a missionary. When he told Cook he was bound for the United States, Cook gave him some biscuits to take along. The missionary was very fond of them and carried a few in his pockets. Well, Mickey, his ship stopped at a cannibal island for water. The good man went ashore and the blacks spotted him. The sailors, sensing the situation, gave warning, and all ran for the boat. The luckless fellow was caught—"

"Did they eat him?" I asked, excitedly.

"Michael—shame!" My aunt shook her finger reprovingly. She was very religious. Danny's eyes twinkled.

"No, they didn't," returned Danny, quickly. "He got away, and there's my story."

"How?" I asked, wondering. He broke into a laugh.

"By giving them a taste of those marvelous biscuits, Mickey. The blacks went clean daft over them and forgot the holy beef." I saw my aunt glare, lips compressed, at the grinning Danny. "The witty fellow darted for the boat, waded out and got in as the sailors let go a volley, driving the savages back."

"Danny Merlin," my aunt cried, horrified, "if you value your bunk aboard my brother's ship, never again tell the boy such a sacrilegious story—never!" She stood up and shook a thin finger at Danny. I laughed.

And that was the last story I ever heard with my ears.

We went out Monday morning with the tide, our cargo being, as usual on the westward voyage, tea, cutlery, laces, and linen. The return trips would generally find our bottom laden with tobacco, sugar, spices, bananas, and Jamaican rum. I remember listening to the screaming sea fowl as we drove along, the booming of the waves against our sides as we went farther and farther, the waves growing larger, and the booming louder. Everything about the ship interested me. The day was filled with thrills and things glorious in a boy's eyes, and when night came and I was snug in my bunk in my father's cabin, I lay awake dreaming dreams only a boy can dream, startled now and anon by a louder booming of the waves, when I would clutch the rail of my bunk and bury my head in the blankets.

There was a cabin boy aboard, Ole, they called him. He had occupied my bunk until I came, but henceforth he was to sleep next to Danny, where also were the bunks of Dirk and Joe, trusted sailors, men on whom my father could depend in any kind of danger. Ole and I became good friends. We had our tasks, for there was no such thing as idleness for any one aboard the *Seamew*. I helped in the mess room, and I cared for our cabin; I was put through a drill daily, learning the ropes and the sails, and nautical terms without end. They made me half a sailor in a week.

The voyage was uneventful until we got well within the semi-tropics, and I recalled my aunt's warnings, when even Danny didn't laugh when he saw how pale I was. There had been a storm somewhere, and the sea had grown rougher day by day. Then one morning I arose to find

the heavens black to the southward, the wind rising, and the sails coming in here, and shortening there, as the agile sailors deftly worked in the rigging. The storm came down, and by noon was raging in all its fury. Ole and I were sent to my cabin and ordered to remain in. My father was at the wheel, and Danny was giving orders. The *Seamew*, which had seemed so grand and staunch the day I boarded her, now seemed to have shrunk into insignificance, a frail toy tossed and lifted about like a cork by a sea whose power was God, whose fury was that of the mad. She shook and trembled from stem to stern. She rose, and dropped, and plunged. Every instant I expected her to sink. The storm lasted well into the night, when the lightning and the thunder added to the terror, but toward dawn I was conscious of less tossing and plunging. I heard loud shouts, and I could see the men gliding about in slickers, holding to lifelines stretched about the deck. Blanch-faced, the shivering Ole and I peered through the ports, as light dawned, and we saw the havoc, the stove-in bulwarks, the smashed lifeboat, the shreds that had been sails. I heard a steady sound as of an engine throbbing, and I knew it was the pumps, and then Ole pointed to some men at work around a lifeboat, Joe and Dirk.

“We’re wrecked, and they’re going to launch a boat.”

“I hear the water rushing in, Mickey, O God, I’m afraid.”

“I’m going to find my father,” I cried, opening the door. The rise of the vessel and the wind swung the door back violently. I was hurled against Ole, and we sprawled on the floor.

Regaining our feet, we rushed out towards the men at the boat. The ship rose and rolled. I grasped madly at a rope as a wave swept over the deck, and when the sea had passed and I again opened my eyes Ole was gone. I heard a loud shout of warning and darted for the cabin door, falling violently against my bunk, striking my head. The next thing I knew I was in a lifeboat with Danny and Dirk and Joe. Father was not with us. The sea had fallen.

“You were knocked daffy, Mickey, and you’ve been sleepin’.”

It was Joe, who had been holding my bruised head.

“But my father—and the ship?” I asked, rubbing my eyes.

“The *Seamew* got wet and was drowned,” drawled Dirk. A sudden peril to the boat threw all three men to the oars, and we rose without

mishap on the crest of a great swell. I felt the tears filling my eyes, and a vague sense of the awful truth dawning. I looked tearfully at Danny, but said no more.

The air grew mild and balmy, and by the third day the sea was calm. No ship had been seen, and while we were well stocked with food and water, fear was in every breast, and dread. By noon the sun grew very hot, and Dirk and Joe stripped and dived. It was such good sport that I, too, flung off my clothes and plunged into the sea. I swam about close to the boat, but Dirk and Joe, strong swimmers, started a race, when to our horror a shark's fin cut the surface, headed toward the men. Danny gave a shout, and thrusting an oar towards me, drew me in. The men turned, and seeing their peril, struck madly for the boat. We gazed, horror-stricken, for the monsters were upon them like a flash. I closed my eyes, and in the moment of darkness I heard Danny utter a terrible oath, and when I opened my eyes again I saw blood, but no Dirk, no Joe, and I sank, sick and pale, in the bottom of the boat.

"My God, my God; why did I let them go in?" Danny kept muttering. He sat down, staring at me, at the sea, at the streaks of blood, uttering oaths and clenching his fists. I drew on my clothes, saying not a word, and sat again in the stern sheets.

Then came a night of gloom, followed by a day of darkness—darkness of the spirit. Neither Danny nor I spoke, save with our blood-shot eyes. My courage was ebbing fast, for the loneliness of our plight and the terrors and strain we had been through were now tolling. Hours passed, when at last Danny said something about eating, and opening a can of tack and drawing some wine from a cask, he offered them to me. I poured some water in the wine and drank it, and began to nibble the biscuit. Danny drank and ate, growing more talkative and cheerful. Then the night drew on, and a great, beautiful new moon rose over the dark sea. The calm beauty of the scene revived me, and Danny talked in a way to buoy up our spirits. I was filled with renewed courage and a sense of deep spirituality. Such a scene was not meant to die in, rather, to live in, and for, and to dream of. "O God," I would pray, inwardly, "take care of Danny and me." Danny, too, must have felt the spell. He grew still more cheerful and talkative and optimistic. I joined in the

talk, and as a light breeze sprang up it seemed to waft away our fears and to give us a feeling of safety and eventual rescue. I buttoned my reefer. The boat rose and fell gently, rocking the worn-out sailor into a state of drowsiness. He ceased talking, and his head would sink upon his breast, to rise with a start, his eyes opening and closing as if through his weary brain there flitted the dreadful ordeal we had met and weathered. Then it sank again, heavily. The sailor slept.

It was my watch, and all that ghostly-still night I kept awake, watching, watching for a sail, or for smoke.

About ten o'clock the next morning Danny brought forth from under the bow seat an iron box, and opening it, drew forth some papers that were in a thick, yellow envelope. "Read this, Mickey, it is from your dear father, who is no more." Tears welled up as I thought of Father.

Trembling I opened the envelope and learned that all my father had possessed was bequeathed to me—the *Seamew*, and the insurance on her and the cargo.

"There's a mortgage on the ship, Mickey, about one hundred thousand dollars, or twenty thousand pounds, and when all is paid and things cleared up, you'll still have a neat fortune to draw interest while in trust. He carefully replaced the document and snapped the lock.

"I'm going to see that you get some of this, Danny," I said, earnestly.

"No, my lad; I can take care of myself, I'm Danny Merlin, big and strong." Then he stood up and scanned the horizon. He shaded his eyes and looked sharply. "Look, Mickey, look!" He pointed south, squinting. "That's not a cloud—it's smoke, a ship! A ship!" I sprang to my feet.

Danny seized an oar and tied a big, red cloth to it, a signal flag he had always kept stowed in the boat. He waved it with long sweeps. I sat down, eager, excited, filled with joy. Full five minutes Danny waved the flag, then he sat down and opened the chest again, drawing forth a marine glass. He looked, then shook his head and replaced the glass. I understood. A cloud. "Let's eat a bite, Mickey, we're going to be detained, but keep up your courage, this part of the sea is full of ships." We fell to with wine and biscuits, and as we ate dark clouds were coming up from the south, and coming fast. Then we felt a breeze, and this was

good because of the intense heat, but when the waters began to ripple, the breeze increased, and the clouds drew to and over us, I was seized with fear. Danny pulled a tarpaulin over the stern half of the boat and we crawled under as the rain started pelting us with big drops. Then it came down in a mad deluge for five minutes, passing with the clouds as they hurried onward. Then all was clear and bright again—and hot. Five days of this—frequent squalls and rain, and always the sickening heat. I grew feverish and sick, then delirious.

On the sixth day chills set in, and then my old catarrhal trouble returned, with coughing and spitting of phlegm. Chills and fever, consciousness and unconsciousness. Two days more, then a terribly dark, still, hot night, and then—a light—lights—far off! I screamed for joy. Danny made a torch of paper and rags and tied it with wire to an oar, smearing it with oil and tar. Lighted it and held it high. Waited. A flare shot up and the ship's siren sent a blast over the sea that to Danny and me was as a trumpet blast from heaven.

A worn and weary Danny and a very sick boy were picked up half an hour later, and given heavenly comfort aboard that ship, two days out of Kingston bound for New York. The ship's doctor and the nurse took charge of me. When we reached New York I was taken to a hospital, Danny accompanying me, giving the hospital the information it wanted, and telling reporters our story. Danny was kept at the hospital another day, questioned by the doctors and nurses. He placed my papers in the office where they were put in the safe. Reporters raised a hundred dollars for Danny, and offered me as much, but I assured them that I would not need it.

The next evening Danny left me, left me alone, sick, in a great, strange place. His goal was to find a ship, promising to return to me before sailing, and arrange for my future on leaving the hospital. But it was years before I again saw him. He had found a ship that was to go out that night with the ebb tide, and he could not return to me, nor get me word. I remained in that hospital six weeks, during which time the world began fading away from me, or that part of the world composed of sound. I was losing my hearing, I was entering into that new and strange world—the world of silence.