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Flappers and Philosophers

The Offshore Pirate

1

THIS UNLIKELY STORY BEGINS on a sea that was a blue dream, as colourful as blue silk stockings, and beneath a sky as blue as the irises of children's eyes. From the western half of the sky the sun was shying little golden discs at the sea – if you gazed intently enough you could see them skip from wave tip to wave tip until they joined a broad collar of golden coin that was collecting half a mile out and would eventually be a dazzling sunset. About halfway between the Florida shore and the golden collar a white steam yacht, very young and graceful, was riding at anchor and under a blue-and-white awning aft a yellow-haired girl reclined in a wicker settee reading *The Revolt of the Angels*, by Anatole France.*

She was about nineteen, slender and supple, with a spoilt, alluring mouth and quick grey eyes full of a radiant curiosity. Her feet, stockingless and adorned rather than clad in blue satin slippers, which swung nonchalantly from her toes, were perched on the arm of a settee adjoining the one she occupied. And as she read she intermittently regaled herself by a faint application to her tongue of a half-lemon that she held in her hand. The other half, sucked dry, lay on the deck at her feet and rocked very gently to and fro at the almost imperceptible motion of the tide.

The second half-lemon was well-nigh pulpless and the golden collar had grown astonishing in width, when suddenly the drowsy silence which enveloped the yacht was broken by the sound of heavy footsteps and an elderly man topped with orderly grey hair and clad in a white flannel suit appeared at the head of the companionway. There

he paused for a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the sun, and then seeing the girl under the awning he uttered a long even grunt of disapproval.

If he had intended thereby to obtain a rise of any sort, he was doomed to disappointment. The girl calmly turned over two pages, turned back one, raised the lemon mechanically to tasting distance, and then very faintly but quite unmistakably yawned.

“Ardita!” said the grey-haired man sternly.

Ardita uttered a small sound indicating nothing.

“Ardita!” he repeated. “Ardita!”

Ardita raised the lemon languidly, allowing three words to slip out before it reached her tongue.

“Oh, shut up.”

“Ardita!”

“What?”

“Will you listen to me – or will I have to get a servant to hold you while I talk to you?”

The lemon descended slowly and scornfully.

“Put it in writing.”

“Will you have the decency to close that abominable book and discard that damn lemon for two minutes?”

“Oh, can’t you lemme alone for a second?”

“Ardita, I have just received a telephone message from the shore—”

“Telephone?” She showed for the first time a faint interest.

“Yes, it was—”

“Do you mean to say,” she interrupted wonderingly, “at they let you run a wire out here?”

“Yes, and just now—”

“Won’t other boats bump into it?”

“No. It’s run along the bottom. Five min—”

“Well, I’ll be darned! Gosh! Science is golden or something – isn’t it?”

“Will you let me say what I started to?”

“Shoot!”

“Well, it seems... well, I am up here...” He paused and swallowed several times distractedly. “Oh, yes. Young woman, Colonel Moreland has called up again to ask me to be sure to bring you in to dinner. His son Toby has come all the way from New York to meet you and he’s invited several other young people. For the last time, will you—”

“No,” said Ardita shortly, “I won’t. I came along on this darn cruise with the one idea of going to Palm Beach, and you knew it, and I absolutely refuse to meet any darn old colonel or any darn young Tobey or any darn old young people or to set foot in any other darn old town in this crazy state. So you either take me to Palm Beach or else shut up and go away.”

“Very well. This is the last straw. In your infatuation for this man – a man who is notorious for his excesses, a man your father would not have allowed to so much as mention your name – you have reflected the demi-monde rather than the circles in which you have presumably grown up. From now on—”

“I know,” interrupted Ardita ironically, “from now on you go your way and I go mine. I’ve heard that story before. You know I’d like nothing better.”

“From now on,” he announced grandiloquently, “you are no niece of mine. I—”

“O-o-o-oh!” The cry was wrung from Ardita with the agony of a lost soul. “Will you stop boring me! Will you go ’way! Will you jump overboard and drown! Do you want me to throw this book at you!”

“If you dare do any—”

Smack! *The Revolt of the Angels* sailed through the air, missed its target by the length of a short nose and bumped cheerfully down the companionway.

The grey-haired man made an instinctive step backward and then two cautious steps forward. Ardita jumped to her five feet four and stared at him defiantly, her grey eyes blazing.

“Keep off!”

“How dare you!” he cried.

“Because I darn please!”

“You’ve grown unbearable! Your disposition—”

“You’ve made me that way! No child ever has a bad disposition unless it’s her family’s fault! Whatever I am, you did it.”

Muttering something under his breath, her uncle turned and, walking forward, called in a loud voice for the launch. Then he returned to the awning, where Ardita had again seated herself and resumed her attention to the lemon.

“I am going ashore,” he said slowly. “I will be out again at nine o’clock tonight. When I return, we will start back to New York, where I shall turn you over to your aunt for the rest of your natural, or rather unnatural, life.”

He paused and looked at her, and then all at once something in the utter childishness of her beauty seemed to puncture his anger like an inflated tyre and render him helpless, uncertain, utterly fatuous.

“Ardita,” he said not unkindly, “I’m no fool. I’ve been round. I know men. And, child, confirmed libertines don’t reform until they’re tired – and then they’re not themselves – they’re husks of themselves.” He looked at her as if expecting agreement, but receiving no sight or sound of it he continued. “Perhaps the man loves you – that’s possible. He’s loved many women and he’ll love many more. Less than a month ago, one month, Ardita, he was involved in a notorious affair with that red-haired woman, Mimi Merrill; promised to give her the diamond bracelet that the Tsar of Russia gave his mother. You know – you read the papers.”

“Thrilling scandals by an anxious uncle,” yawned Ardita. “Have it filmed. Wicked clubman making eyes at virtuous flapper. Virtuous flapper conclusively vamped by his lurid past. Plans to meet him at Palm Beach. Foiled by anxious uncle.”

“Will you tell me why the devil you want to marry him?”

“I’m sure I couldn’t say,” said Ardita shortly. “Maybe because he’s the only man I know, good or bad, who has an imagination and the courage of his convictions. Maybe it’s to get away from the young fools

that spend their vacuous hours pursuing me around the country. But as for the famous Russian bracelet, you can set your mind at rest on that score. He's going to give it to me at Palm Beach – if you'll show a little intelligence."

"How about the... red-haired woman?"

"He hasn't seen her for six months," she said angrily. "Don't you suppose I have enough pride to see to that? Don't you know by this time that I can do any darn thing with any darn man I want to?"

She put her chin in the air like the statue of France Aroused,* and then spoiled the pose somewhat by raising the lemon for action.

"Is it the Russian bracelet that fascinates you?"

"No, I'm merely trying to give you the sort of argument that would appeal to your intelligence. And I wish you'd go 'way," she said, her temper rising again. "You know I never change my mind. You've been boring me for three days until I'm about to go crazy. I won't go ashore! Won't! Do you hear? Won't!"

"Very well," he said, "and you won't go to Palm Beach either. Of all the selfish, spoilt, uncontrolled, disagreeable, impossible girls I have—"

Splash! The half-lemon caught him in the neck. Simultaneously came a hail from over the side.

"The launch is ready, Mr Farnam."

Too full of words and rage to speak, Mr Farnam cast one utterly condemning glance at his niece and, turning, ran swiftly down the ladder.

2

FIVE O'CLOCK ROLLED DOWN from the sun and plumped soundlessly into the sea. The golden collar widened into a glittering island, and a faint breeze that had been playing with the edges of the awning and swaying one of the dangling blue slippers became suddenly freighted with song. It was a chorus of men in close harmony and in perfect rhythm to an accompanying sound of oars cleaving the blue waters. Ardita lifted her head and listened.

“Carrots and peas,
Beans on their knees,
Pigs in the seas,
Lucky fellows!
Blow us a breeze,
Blow us a breeze,
Blow us a breeze,
With your bellows.”

Ardita’s brow wrinkled in astonishment. Sitting very still, she listened eagerly as the chorus took up a second verse.

“Onions and beans,
Marshalls and Deans,
Goldbergs and Greens
And Costellos.
Blow us a breeze,
Blow us a breeze,
Blow us a breeze,
With your bellows.”

With an exclamation she tossed her book to the desk, where it sprawled at a straddle, and hurried to the rail. Fifty feet away a large rowboat was approaching containing seven men, six of them rowing and one standing up in the stern keeping time to their song with an orchestra leader’s baton.

“Oysters and rocks,
Sawdust and socks,
Who could make clocks
Out of cellos?...”

The leader’s eyes suddenly rested on Ardita, who was leaning over the rail spellbound with curiosity. He made a quick movement with his

baton and the singing instantly ceased. She saw that he was the only white man in the boat – the six rowers were Negroes.

“Narcissus ahoy!” he called politely.

“What’s the idea of all the discord?” demanded Ardita cheerfully. “Is this the varsity crew from the county nut farm?”

By this time the boat was scraping the side of the yacht and a great hulking Negro in the bow turned round and grasped the ladder. Thereupon the leader left his position in the stern and, before Ardita had realized his intention, he ran up the ladder and stood breathless before her on the deck.

“The women and children will be spared!” he said briskly. “All crying babies will be immediately drowned and all males put in double irons!”

Digging her hands excitedly down into the pockets of her dress, Ardita stared at him, speechless with astonishment.

He was a young man with a scornful mouth and the bright-blue eyes of a healthy baby set in a dark sensitive face. His hair was pitch black, damp and curly – the hair of a Grecian statue gone brunette. He was trimly built, trimly dressed and graceful as an agile quarterback.

“Well, I’ll be a son of a gun!” she said dazedly.

They eyed each other coolly.

“Do you surrender the ship?”

“Is this an outburst of wit?” demanded Ardita. “Are you an idiot – or just being initiated to some fraternity?”

“I asked you if you surrendered the ship.”

“I thought the country was dry,” said Ardita disdainfully. “Have you been drinking fingernail enamel? You better get off this yacht!”

“What?” The young man’s voice expressed incredulity.

“Get off the yacht! You heard me!”

He looked at her for a moment as if considering what she had said.

“No,” said his scornful mouth slowly, “no, I won’t get off the yacht. You can get off if you wish.”

Going to the rail, he gave a curt command, and immediately the crew of the rowboat scrambled up the ladder and ranged themselves in line before him, a coal-black and burly darky at one end and a miniature mulatto of four feet nine at the other. They seemed to be uniformly dressed in some sort of blue costume ornamented with dust, mud and tatters; over the shoulder of each was slung a small, heavy-looking white sack, and under their arms they carried large black cases apparently containing musical instruments.

“Ten-*shun!*” commanded the young man, snapping his own heels together crisply. “Right *driss!* Front! Step out here, Babe!”

The smallest Negro took a quick step forward and saluted.

“Yas-suh!”

“Take command, go down below, catch the crew and tie ’em up – all except the engineer. Bring him up to me. Oh, and pile those bags by the rail there.”

“Yas-suh!”

Babe saluted again and, wheeling about, motioned for the five others to gather about him. Then after a short whispered consultation they all filed noiselessly down the companionway.

“Now,” said the young man cheerfully to Ardita, who had witnessed this last scene in withering silence, “if you will swear on your honour as a flapper – which probably isn’t worth much – that you’ll keep that spoilt little mouth of yours tight shut for forty-eight hours, you can row yourself ashore in our rowboat.”

“Otherwise what?”

“Otherwise you’re going to sea in a ship.”

With a little sigh as for a crisis well passed, the young man sank into the settee Ardita had lately vacated and stretched his arms lazily. The corners of his mouth relaxed appreciatively as he looked round at the rich striped awning, the polished brass and the luxurious fittings of the deck. His eye fell on the book, and then on the exhausted lemon.

“Hm,” he said, “Stonewall Jackson claimed that lemon juice cleared his head.* Your head feel pretty clear?”

Ardita disdained to answer.

"Because inside of five minutes you'll have to make a clear decision whether it's go or stay."

He picked up the book and opened it curiously.

"*The Revolt of the Angels*. Sounds pretty good. French, eh?" He stared at her with new interest. "You French?"

"No."

"What's your name?"

"Farnam."

"Farnam what?"

"Ardita Farnam."

"Well, Ardita, no use standing up there and chewing out the insides of your mouth. You ought to break those nervous habits while you're young. Come over here and sit down."

Ardita took a carved jade case from her pocket, extracted a cigarette and lit it with a conscious coolness, though she knew her hand was trembling a little; then she crossed over with her supple, swinging walk and, sitting down in the other settee, blew a mouthful of smoke at the awning.

"You can't get me off this yacht," she said steadily, "and you haven't got very much sense if you think you'll get far with it. My uncle'll have wirelesses zigzagging all over this ocean by half-past six."

"Hm."

She looked quickly at his face, caught anxiety stamped there plainly in the faintest depression of the mouth's corners.

"It's all the same to me," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "'Tisn't my yacht. I don't mind going for a coupla hours' cruise. I'll even lend you that book so you'll have something to read on the revenue boat that takes you up to Sing Sing."

He laughed scornfully.

"If that's advice, you needn't bother. This is part of a plan arranged before I ever knew this yacht existed. If it hadn't been this one it'd have been the next one we passed anchored along the coast."

"Who are you?" demanded Ardita suddenly. "And what are you?"

“You’ve decided not to go ashore?”

“I never even faintly considered it.”

“We’re generally known,” he said, “all seven of us, as Curtis Carlyle and his Six Black Buddies, late of the Winter Garden and the Midnight Frolic.”

“You’re singers?”

“We were until today. At present, due to those white bags you see there, we’re fugitives from justice, and if the reward offered for our capture hasn’t by this time reached twenty thousand dollars I miss my guess.”

“What’s in the bags?” asked Ardita curiously.

“Well,” he said, “for the present we’ll call it... mud – Florida mud.”

3

WITHIN TEN MINUTES after Curtis Carlyle’s interview with a very frightened engineer, the yacht *Narcissus* was under way, steaming south through a balmy tropical twilight. The little mulatto, Babe, who seemed to have Carlyle’s implicit confidence, took full command of the situation. Mr Farnam’s valet and the chef, the only members of the crew on board except the engineer, having shown fight, were now reconsidering, strapped securely to their bunks below. Trombone Mose, the biggest Negro, was set busy with a can of paint obliterating the name *Narcissus* from the bow, and substituting the name *Hula Hula*, and the others congregated aft and became intently involved in a game of craps.

Having given orders for a meal to be prepared and served on deck at seven thirty, Carlyle rejoined Ardita and, sinking back into his settee, half-closed his eyes and fell into a state of profound abstraction.

Ardita scrutinized him carefully – and classed him immediately as a romantic figure. He gave the effect of towering self-confidence erected on a slight foundation – just under the surface of each of his decisions she discerned a hesitancy that was in decided contrast to the arrogant curl of his lips.

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