

**HEART OF OAK, A
THREE-STRANDED
YARN**

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Heart of oak, a three-stranded yarn by W. Clark Russell

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W. CLARK RUSSELL

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YARN**

HEART OF OAK

A THREE-STRANDED YARN

BY

W. CLARK RUSSELL

AUTHOR OF

'THE WRECK OF THE GROSVENOR' 'THE PHANTOM DEATH'

'THE CONVICT SHIP' ETC.



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CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. MISS OTWAY OPENS THE STORY	1
II. MARIE'S SWEETHEART	6
III. THE 'LADY EMMA'	12
IV. MARIE BEGINS HER VOYAGE	22
V. THE HIDDEN LIFE OF THE SHIP	32
VI. A STRANGE MAN ON BOARD	43
VII. A RACE AND A ROLLER	52
VIII. A HURRICANE	61
IX. DISMASTED	73
X. THE JURY-MAST	81
XI. THE CREW LEAVE	92
XII. MR. SELBY TAKES UP THE STORY	107
XIII. THE HULL	118
XIV. STILL ADRIFT	127
XV. THE ICE IN THE SOUTH	137
XVI. THE AURORA AUSTRALIS	146
XVII. THE THICK OF IT	156
XVIII. IMPRISONED	165
XIX. MR. MOORE CONTINUES THE STORY	176
XX. STARTLING NEWS	184
XXI. MR. MOORE SAILS	194
XXII. THE PHOTOGRAPHS	203
XXIII. THE SHIP SEEN ON THE ICE	213
XXIV. THE BRIG 'ALBATROSS'	222
XXV. AT SEA AGAIN	233
XXVI. THE ICE	245
XXVII. CORONATION ISLAND	255
XXVIII. MR. MOORE ENDS HIS STORY	267

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HEART OF OAK

CHAPTER I

MISS OTWAY OPENS THE STORY

I DATE the opening of this narrative, February 24, 1860.

I was in the drawing-room of my father's house on the afternoon of that day, awaiting the arrival of Captain Burke, of the ship 'Lady Emma,' and his wife, Mary Burke, who had nursed me and brought me up, and indeed been as a mother to me after my own mother's death in 1854; but she had left us to marry Captain Edward Burke, and had already made two voyages round the world with him, and was presently going a third.

My father sat beside the fire reading a newspaper. His name was Sir Mortimer Otway: he was fourth baronet and a colonel; had seen service in India, though he had long left the army to settle down upon his little seaside estate. He was a man of small fortune. Having said this, I need not trouble you with more of his family history.

I was his only surviving child, and my name is Marie; I have no other Christian name than that; it was my mother's. My age was twenty and my health delicate, so much so that Captain and Mrs. Burke were coming from London expressly to talk over a scheme of my going round the world in their ship for the benefit of my appetite and spirits and voice, and perhaps for my lungs, though to be sure *they* were still sound at that date.

Ours was a fine house, about a hundred years old; it stood within a stone's throw of the brink of the cliff; walls and hedges encompassed some seventy or eighty acres of land, pleasantly wooded in places, and there was a charming scene of garden on either hand the carriage drive. I stood at the

window with my eyes fastened upon the sea, which went in a slope of grey steel to the dark sky of the horizon, where here and there some roaming mass of vapour was hoary with snow. It was blowing a fresh breeze, and the throb of the ocean was cold with the ice-like glances of the whipped foam. Presently it thickened overhead, and snow fell in a squall of wind that darkened the early afternoon into evening with smoking lines of flying flakes. The sea faded as the reflection of a star in troubled water. My father put down his newspaper and came to the window. He was a tall man, bald, high-coloured; his eyes were large and black, soft in expression, and steady in gaze; his beard and mustache were of an iron grey, he was sixty years old, yet still preserved the soldier's trick of carrying his figure to the full height of his stature.

'At what hour do you say they're to be here?'

'At three.'

He glanced at his watch, then out of the window.

'That doesn't look like a scene where a delicate girl's going to get strong!'

'No,' I answered with a shiver.

'But a crown piece on a chart will often cover the area of worse weather than this, and for leagues beyond all shall be glorious sunshine and blue water.'

'It's hard to realise,' said I, straining my eyes through the snow for a sight of the sea.

'Well,' he exclaimed, turning his back upon the window, 'Bradshaw is an able man; his instances of people whom a sea voyage has cured are remarkable, and weigh with me. Living by the seaside is not like going a voyage. It's the hundred climates which make the medicine. Then the sights and sounds of the ocean are tonical. Are sailors ever ill at sea? Yes, because they carry their sickness on board with them, or they decay by bad usage, or perish by poisonous cargoes. The sea kills no man—save by drowning.'

He took a turn about the room, and I stared through the window at the flying blankness.

'Steam is more certain,' he went on, thinking aloud. 'You can time yourself by steam. But then for health it doesn't give you all you want. At least we can't make it fit in your case. It would be otherwise if I had the means or was able to accompany you, or if I could put you in charge of some sober, trustworthy old hand. Steam must signify several changes to give you the time at sea that Bradshaw prescribes.'

It's out of the question. No; Mrs. Burke's scheme is the practicable one, and I shall feel easy when I think of you as watched over by your old nurse. But I have several questions to ask. When are they coming? Have they missed their train?'

About five minutes after this they were shown in.

Mrs. Burke, my old nurse, was a homely, plain, soft-hearted woman, a little less than forty years of age at this time. She was stout, and pale, though she was now a traveller, with large, short-sighted blue eyes, a flat face, and a number of chins. She was dressed as you would wish a homely skipper's wife to be: in a neat bonnet with a heavy Shetland veil wrapped around it; a stout mantle, and a gown of thick warm stuff. She sank a little curtsy to my father, who eagerly stepped forward and cordially greeted his old servant; in an instant I had my arms round her neck. You will believe I loved her when I tell you she had come to my mother's service when I was a month old, and had been my nurse and maid, and looked after me as a second mother down to the time when she left us to be married.

Her husband stood smiling behind her. He was short, an Irishman: he looked the completest sailor you can imagine—that is, a merchant sailor. He was richly coloured by the sun, and his small, sharp, merry, liquid blue eyes gleamed and trembled and sparkled in their sockets like a pair of stars in some reflected hectic of sunset in the eastern sky. Everything about him told of heartiness and good humour: there was something arch in the very curl of his little slip of whiskers. A set of fine white teeth lighted up his face like a smile of kindness whenever he parted his lips. He was dressed in the blue cloth coat and velvet collar, the figured waistcoat and bell-shaped trousers, of the merchant service in those days, and over all he wore a great pilot-cloth coat, whose tails fell nearly to his heels; inside of which, as inside a sentry box, he stood up on slightly curved, easily yielding legs, a model of a clean, wholesome, hearty British skipper.

Of course I had met him before. I had attended his marriage, and was never so dull but that the recollection of his face on that occasion would make me smile, and often laugh aloud. He had also with his wife spent a day with us after the return of his ship from the first voyage they had made together. My father shook him cordially by the hand. He then led him into the library, whilst I took Mrs. Burke upstairs.