



Jack Tier

or, the Florida Reef



Part 2: Chapter 8

Man hath a weary pilgrimage,
As through the world he wends;
On every stage, from youth to age,
Still discontent attends;
With heaviness he casts his eye,
Upon the road before,
And still remembers with a sigh
The days that are no more.

—Southey.

It has now become necessary to advance the time three entire days, and to change the scene to Key West. As this latter place may not be known to the world at large, it may be well to explain that it is a small seaport, situate on one of the largest of the many low islands that dot the Florida Reef, that has risen into notice, or indeed into existence as a town, since the acquisition of the Floridas by the American Republic. For many years it was the resort of few besides wreckers, and those who live by the business dependent on the rescuing and repairing of stranded vessels, not forgetting the salvages. When it is remembered that the greater portion of the vessels that enter the Gulf of Mexico stand close along this reef, before the trades, for a distance varying from one to two hundred miles, and that nearly everything which quits it, is obliged to beat down its rocky coast in the Gulf Stream for the same distance, one is not to be surprised that the wrecks, which so constantly occur, can supply the wants of a considerable population. To live at Key West is the next thing to being at sea. The place has sea air, no other water than such as is preserved in cisterns, and no soil, or so



little as to render even a head of lettuce a rarity. Turtle is abundant, and the business of “turtling” forms an occupation additional to that of wrecking. As might be expected, in such circumstances, a potato is a far more precious thing than a turtle’s egg, and a sack of the tubers would probably be deemed a sufficient remuneration for enough of the materials of callipash and callipee to feed all the aldermen extant.

Of late years, the government of the United States has turned its attention to the capabilities of the Florida Reef, as an advanced naval station; a sort of Downs, or St. Helen’s Roads, for the West Indian seas. As yet little has been done beyond making the preliminary surveys, but the day is not probably very distant when fleets will lie at anchor among the islets described in our earlier chapters, or garnish the fine waters of Key West. For a long time it was thought that even frigates would have a difficulty in entering and quitting the port of the latter, but it is said that recent explorations have discovered channels capable of admitting anything that floats. Still Key West is a town yet in its chrysalis state, possessing the promise rather than the fruition of the prosperous days which are in reserve. It may be well to add, that it lies a very little north of the 24th degree of latitude, and in a longitude quite five degrees west from Washington. Until the recent conquests in Mexico it was the most southern possession of the American government, on the eastern side of the continent; Cape St. Lucas, at the extremity of Lower California, however, being two degrees farther south.

It will give the foreign reader a more accurate notion of the character of Key West, if we mention a fact of quite recent occurrence. A very few weeks after the closing scenes of this tale, the town in question was, in a great measure, washed away! A hurricane brought in the sea upon all these islands and reefs, water running in swift currents over places that within the memory of man were never before submerged. The lower part of Key West was converted into a raging sea, and everything in that quarter of the place disappeared. The foundation being of rock, however, when the ocean retired the island came into view again, and industry and enterprise set to work to repair the injuries.

The government has established a small hospital for seamen at Key West. Into one of the rooms of the building thus appropriated our narrative must now conduct the reader. It contained but a single patient, and that was Spike. He was on his narrow bed, which was to be but the precursor of a still narrower tenement, the grave. In the room with the dying man were two females, in one of whom our readers will at once recognize the person of Rose Budd, dressed in deep mourning for her aunt. At first sight, it is probable that a casual spectator would mistake the second female for one of



the ordinary nurses of the place. Her attire was well enough, though worn awkwardly, and as if its owner were not exactly at ease in it. She had the air of one in her best attire, who was unaccustomed to be dressed above the most common mode. What added to the singularity of her appearance, was the fact, that while she wore no cap, her hair had been cut into short, gray bristles, instead of being long, and turned up, as is usual with females. To give a sort of climax to this uncouth appearance, this strange-looking creature chewed tobacco.

The woman in question, equivocal as might be her exterior, was employed in one of the commonest avocations of her sex—that of sewing. She held in her hand a coarse garment, one of Spike’s, in fact, which she seemed to be intently busy in mending; although the work was of a quality that invited the use of the palm and sail-needle, rather than that of the thimble and the smaller implement known to seamstresses, the woman appeared awkward in her business, as if her coarse-looking and dark hands refused to lend themselves to an occupation so feminine. Nevertheless, there were touches of a purely womanly character about this extraordinary person, and touches that particularly attracted the attention, and awakened the sympathy of the gentle Rose, her companion. Tears occasionally struggled out from beneath her eyelids, crossed her dark, sun-burnt cheek, and fell on the coarse canvas garment that lay in her lap. It was after one of these sudden and strong exhibitions of feeling that Rose approached her, laid her own little, fair hand, in a friendly way, though unheeded, on the other’s shoulder, and spoke to her in her kindest and softest tones.

“I do really think he is reviving, Jack,” said Rose, “and that you may yet hope to have an intelligent conversation with him.”

“They all agree he must die,” answered Jack Tier—for it was he, appearing in the garb of his proper sex, after a disguise that had now lasted fully twenty years—“and he will never know who I am, and that I forgive him. He must think of me in another world, though he isn’t able to do it in this; but it would be a great relief to his soul to know that I forgive him.”

“To be sure, a man must like to take a kind leave of his own wife before he closes his eyes for ever; and I dare say it would be a great relief to you to tell him that you have forgotten his desertion of you, and all the hardships it has brought upon you in searching for him, and in earning your own livelihood as a common sailor.”

“I shall not tell him I’ve forgotten it, Miss Rose; that would be untrue—and there shall be no more deception between us; but I shall tell him that I forgive him, as I hope God will one day forgive me all my sins.”



“It is, certainly, not a light offence to desert a wife in a foreign land, and then to seek to deceive another woman,” quietly observed Rose.

“He’s a willian!” muttered the wife—“but—but—”

“You forgive him, Jack—yes, I’m sure you do. You are too good a Christian to refuse to forgive him.”

“I’m a woman a’ter all, Miss Rose; and that, I believe, is the truth of it. I suppose I ought to do as you say, for the reason you mention; but I’m his wife—and once he loved me, though that has long been over. When I first knew Stephen, I’d the sort of feelin’s you speak of, and was a very different creatur’ from what you see me to-day. Change comes over us all with years and sufferin’.”

Rose did not answer, but she stood looking intently at the speaker more than a minute. Change had, indeed, come over her, if she had ever possessed the power to please the fancy of any living man. Her features had always seemed diminutive and mean for her assumed sex, as her voice was small and cracked; but, making every allowance for the probabilities, Rose found it difficult to imagine that Jack Tier had ever possessed, even under the high advantages of youth and innocence, the attractions so common to her sex. Her skin had acquired the tanning of the sea; the expression of her face had become hard and worldly; and her habits contributed to render those natural consequences of exposure and toil even more than usually marked and decided. By saying “habits,” however, we do not mean that Jack had ever drunk to excess, as happens with so many seamen, for this would have been doing her injustice, but she smoked and chewed—practices that intoxicate in another form, and lead nearly as many to the grave as excess in drinking. Thus all the accessories about this singular being, partook of the character of her recent life and duties. Her walk was between a waddle and a seaman’s roll, her hands were discoloured with tar, and had got to be full of knuckles, and even her feet had degenerated into that flat, broad-toed form that, perhaps, sooner distinguishes caste, in connection with outward appearances, than any one other physical peculiarity. Yet this being had once been young—had once been even fair; and had once possessed that feminine air and lightness of form, that as often belongs to the youthful American of her sex, perhaps, as to the girl of any other nation on earth. Rose continued to gaze at her companion for some time, when she walked musingly to a window that looked out upon the port.

“I am not certain whether it would do him good or not to see this sight,” she said, addressing the wife kindly, doubtful of the effect of her words even on the latter. “But here are the sloop-of-war, and several other vessels.”



“Ay, she is there; but never will his foot be put on board the *Swash* ag’in. When he bought that brig I was still young, and agreeable to him; and he gave her my maiden name, which was Mary, or *Molly Swash*. But that is all changed; I wonder he did not change the name with his change of feelin’s.”

“Then you did really sail in the brig in former times, and knew the seaman whose name you assumed?”

“Many years. Tier, with whose name I made free, on account of his size, and some resemblance to me in form, died under my care; and his protection fell into my hands, which first put the notion into my head of hailing as his representative. Yes, I knew Tier in the brig, and we were left ashore at the same time; I, intentionally, I make no question; he, because Stephen Spike was in a hurry, and did not choose to wait for a man. The poor fellow caught the yellow fever the very next day, and did not live eight-and-forty hours. So the world goes; them that wish to live, die; and them that wants to die, live!”

“You have had a hard time for one of your sex, poor Jack—quite twenty years a sailor, did you not tell me?”

“Every day of it, Miss Rose—and bitter years have they been; for the whole of that time have I been in chase of my husband, keeping my own secret, and slaving like a horse for a livelihood.”

“You could not have been old when he left—that is—when you parted.”

“Call it by its true name, and say at once, when he deserted me. I was under thirty by two or three years, and was still like my own sex to look at. All that is changed since; but I was comely then.”

“Why did Captain Spike abandon you, Jack; you have never told me that.”

“Because he fancied another. And ever since that time he has been fancying others, instead of remembering me. Had he got you, Miss Rose, I think he would have been content for the rest of his days.”

“Be certain, Jack, I should never have consented to marry Captain Spike.”

“You’re well out of his hands,” answered Jack, sighing heavily, which was the most feminine thing she had done during the whole conversation, “well out of his hands—and God be praised it is so. He should have died, before I would let him carry you off the island—husband or no husband.”

“It might have exceeded your power to prevent it under other circumstances, Jack.”

Rose now continued looking out of the window in silence. Her thoughts reverted to her aunt and Bidy, and tears rolled down her cheeks as she remembered the love of one,



and the fidelity of the other. Their horrible fate had given her a shock that, at first, menaced her with a severe fit of illness; but her strong, good sense, and excellent constitution, both sustained by her piety and Harry's manly tenderness, had brought her through the danger, and left her, as the reader now sees her, struggling with her own griefs, in order to be of use to the still more unhappy woman who had so singularly become her friend and companion.

The reader will readily have anticipated that Jack Tier had early made the females on board the *Swash* her confidants. Rose had known the outlines of her history from the first few days they were at sea together, which is the explanation of the visible intimacy that had caused Mulford so much surprise. Jack's motive in making his revelations might possibly have been tinged with jealousy, but a desire to save one as young and innocent as Rose was at its bottom. Few persons but a wife would have supposed our heroine could have been in any danger from a lover like Spike; but Jack saw him with the eyes of her own youth, and of past recollections, rather than with those of truth. A movement of the wounded man first drew Rose from the window. Drying her eyes hastily, she turned toward him, fancying she might prove the better nurse of the two, notwithstanding Jack's greater interest in the patient.

"What place is this—and why am I here?" demanded Spike, with more strength of voice than could have been expected, after all that had passed. "This is not a cabin—not the *Swash*—it looks like a hospital."

"It is a hospital, Captain Spike," said Rose, gently drawing near the bed; "you have been hurt, and have been brought to Key West, and placed in the hospital. I hope you feel better, and that you suffer no pain."

"My head isn't right—I don't know—everything seems turned round with me—perhaps it will all come out as it should. I begin to remember—where is my brig?"

"She is lost on the rocks. The seas have broken her into fragments."

"That's melancholy news, at any rate. Ah! Miss Rose! God bless you—I've had terrible dreams. Well, it's pleasant to be among friends—what creature is that—where does she come from?"

"That is Jack Tier," answered Rose, steadily. "She turns out to be a woman, and has put on her proper dress, in order to attend on you during your illness. Jack has never left your bedside since we have been here."

A long silence succeeded this revelation. Jack's eyes twinkled, and she hitched her body half aside, as if to conceal her features, where emotions that were unusual were at work with the muscles. Rose thought it might be well to leave the man and wife alone—and she managed to get out of the room unobserved.



Spike continued to gaze at the strange-looking female, who was now his sole companion. Gradually his recollection returned, and with it the full consciousness of his situation. He might not have been fully aware of the absolute certainty of his approaching death, but he must have known that his wound was of a very grave character, and that the result might early prove fatal. Still that strange and unknown figure haunted him; a figure that was so different from any he had ever seen before, and which, in spite of its present dress, seemed to belong quite as much to one sex as to the other. As for Jack, we call *Molly*, or *Mary Swash* by her masculine appellation, not only because it is more familiar, but because the other name seems really out of place, as applied to such a person—as for Jack, then, she sat with her face half averted, thumbing the canvas, and endeavouring to ply the needle, but perfectly mute. She was conscious that Spike’s eyes were on her; and a lingering feeling of her sex told her how much time, exposure, and circumstances, had changed her person—and she would gladly have hidden the defects in her appearance.

Mary Swash was the daughter as well as the wife of a ship-master. In her youth, as has been said before, she had even been pretty, and down to the day when her husband deserted her, she would have been thought a female of a comely appearance rather than the reverse. Her hair in particular, though slightly coarse, perhaps, had been rich and abundant; and the change from the long, dark, shining, flowing locks which she still possessed in her thirtieth year, to the short, grey bristles that now stood exposed without a cap, or covering of any sort, was one very likely to destroy all identity of appearance. Then Jack had passed from what might be called youth to the verge of old age, in the interval that she had been separated from her husband. Her shape had changed entirely; her complexion was utterly gone; and her features, always unmeaning, though feminine, and suitable to her sex, had become hard and slightly coarse. Still there was something of her former self about Jack that bewildered Spike; and his eyes continued fastened on her for quite a quarter of an hour in profound silence.

“Give me some water,” said the wounded man, “I wish some water to drink.”

Jack arose, filled a tumbler and brought it to the side of the bed. Spike took the glass and drank, but the whole time his eyes were riveted on the strange nurse. When his thirst was appeased, he asked—

“Who are you? How came you here?”

“I am your nurse. It is common to place nurses at the bedsides of the sick.”

“Are you man or woman?”



“That is a question I hardly know how to answer. Sometimes I think myself each; sometimes neither.”

“Did I ever see you before?”

“Often, and quite lately. I sailed with you in your last voyage.”

“You! That cannot be. If so, what is your name?”

“Jack Tier.”

A long pause succeeded this announcement, which induced Spike to muse as intently as his condition would allow, though the truth did not yet flash on his understanding. At length the bewildered man again spoke.

“Are you Jack Tier?” he said slowly, like one who doubted. “Yes—I now see the resemblance, and it was that which puzzled me. Are they so rigid in this hospital that you have been obliged to put on woman’s clothes in order to lend me a helping hand?”

“I am dressed as you see, and for good reasons.”

“But Jack Tier run, like that rascal Mulford—ay, I remember now; you were in the boat when I overhauled you all on the reef.”

“Very true; I was in the boat. But I never run, Stephen Spike. It was you who abandoned me, on the islet in the Gulf, and that makes the second time in your life that you left me ashore, when it was your duty to carry me to sea.”

“The first time I was in a hurry, and could not wait for you; this last time you took sides with the women. But for your interference, I should have got Rose, and married her, and all would now have been well with me.”

This was an awkward announcement for a man to make to his legal wife. But after all Jack had endured, and all Jack had seen during the late voyage, she was not to be overcome by this avowal. Her self-command extended so far as to prevent any open manifestation of emotion, however much her feelings were excited.

“I took sides with the women, because I am a woman myself,” she answered, speaking at length with decision, as if determined to bring matters to a head at once. “It is natural for us all to take sides with our kind.”

“You a woman, Jack! That is very remarkable. Since when have you hailed for a woman? You have shipped with me twice, and each time as a man—though I’ve never thought you able to do seaman’s duty.”

“Nevertheless, I am what you see; a woman born and educated; one that never had on man’s dress until I knew you. You supposed me to be a man, when I came off to you in the skiff to the eastward of Riker’s Island, but I was then what you now see.”



“I begin to understand matters,” rejoined the invalid, musingly. “Ay, ay, it opens on me; and I now see how it was you made such fair weather with Madam Budd and pretty, pretty Rose. Rose is pretty, Jack; you must admit that, though you be a woman.”

“Rose is pretty—I do admit it; and what is better, Rose is good.” It required a heavy draft on Jack’s justice and magnanimity, however, to make this concession.

“And you told Rose and Madam Budd about your sex; and that was the reason they took to you so on the v’y’ge?”

“I told them who I was, and why I went abroad as a man. They know my whole story.”

“Did Rose approve of your sailing under false colours, Jack?”

“You must ask that of Rose herself. My story made her my friend; but she never said anything for or against my disguise.”

“It was no great disguise a’ter all, Jack. Now you’re fitted out in your own clothes, you’ve a sort of half-rigged look; one would be as likely to set you down for a man under jury-canvas, as for a woman.”

Jack made no answer to this, but she sighed very heavily. As for Spike himself, he was silent for some little time, not only from exhaustion, but because he suffered pain from his wound. The needle was diligently but awkwardly plied in this pause.

Spike’s ideas were still a little confused; but a silence and rest of a quarter of an hour cleared them materially. At the end of that time he again asked for water. When he had drunk, and Jack was once more seated, with his side-face toward him, at work with the needle, the captain gazed long and intently at this strange woman. It happened that the profile of Jack preserved more of the resemblance to her former self, than the full face; and it was this resemblance that now attracted Spike’s attention, though not the smallest suspicion of the truth yet gleamed upon him. He saw something that was familiar, though he could not even tell what that something was, much less to what or whom it bore any resemblance. At length he spoke.

“I was told that Jack Tier was dead,” he said; “that he took the fever, and was in his grave within eight-and-forty hours after we sailed. That was what they told me of him.”

“And what did they tell you of your own wife, Stephen Spike. She that you left ashore at the time Jack was left?”

“They said she did not die for three years later. I heard of her death at New Orleans, three years later.”

“And how could you leave her ashore—she, your true and lawful wife?”



“It was a bad thing,” answered Spike, who, like all other mortals, regarded his own past career, now that he stood on the edge of the grave, very differently from what he had regarded it in the hour of his health and strength. “Yes, it was a very bad thing; and I wish it was undone. But it is too late now. She died of the fever, too—that’s some comfort; had she died of a broken heart, I could not have forgiven myself. *Molly* was not without her faults—great faults, I considered them; but, on the whole, *Molly* was a good creatur’.”

“You liked her, then, Stephen Spike?”

“I can truly say that when I married *Molly*, and old Captain *Swash* put his da’ghter’s hand into mine, that the woman wasn’t living who was better in my judgment, or handsomer in my eyes.”

“Ay, ay—when you married her; but how was it a’terwards?—when you was tired of her, and saw another that was fairer in your eyes?”

“I deserted her; and God has punished me for the sin! Do you know, Jack, that luck has never been with me since that day. Often and often have I bethought me of it; and sartin as you sit there, no great luck has ever been with me, or my craft, since I went off, leaving my wife ashore. What was made in one v’y’ge, was lost in the next. Up and down, up and down the whole time, for so many, many long years, that grey hairs set in, and old age was beginning to get close aboard—and I as poor as ever. It has been rub and go with me ever since; and I have had as much as I could do to keep the brig in motion, as the only means that was left to make the two ends meet.”

“And did not all this make you think of your poor wife—she whom you had so wronged?”

“I thought of little else, until I heard of her death at New Orleans—and then I gave it up as useless. Could I have fallen in with *Molly* at any time a’ter the first six months of my desertion, she and I would have come together again, and everything would have been forgotten. I knowed her very nature, which was all forgiveness to me at the bottom, though seemingly so spiteful and hard.”

“Yet you wanted to have this Rose Budd, who is only too young, and handsome, and good for you.”

“I was tired of being a widower, Jack; and Rose is wonderful pretty. She has money, too, and might make the evening of my days comfortable. The brig was old, as you must know, and has long been off of all the Insurance Offices’ books; and she couldn’t hold together much longer. But for this sloop-of-war, I should have put her off on the Mexicans; and they would have lost her to our people in a month.”



“And was it an honest thing to sell an old and worn-out craft to any one, Stephen Spike?”

Spike had a conscience that had become hard as iron by means of trade. He who traffics much, most especially if his dealings be on so small a scale as to render constant investigations of the minor qualities of things necessary, must be a very fortunate man, if he preserve his conscience in any better condition. When Jack made this allusion, therefore, the dying man—for death was much nearer to Spike than even he supposed, though he no longer hoped for his own recovery—when Jack made this allusion, then, the dying man was a good deal at a loss to comprehend it. He saw no particular harm in making the best bargain he could; nor was it easy for him to understand why he might not dispose of anything he possessed for the highest price that was to be had. Still he answered in an apologetic sort of way.

“The brig was old, I acknowledge,” he said, “but she was strong, and might have run a long time. I only spoke of her capture as a thing likely to take place soon, if the Mexicans got her; so that her qualities were of no great account, unless it might be her speed—and that you know was excellent, Jack.”

“And you regret that brig, Stephen Spike, lying as you do on your death-bed, more than anything else.”

“Not as much as I do pretty Rose Budd, Jack; Rosy is so delightful to look at!”

The muscles of Jack’s face twitched a little, and she looked deeply mortified; for, to own the truth, she hoped that the conversation had so far turned her delinquent husband’s thoughts to the past, as to have revived in him some of his former interest in herself. It is true, he still believed her dead; but this was a circumstance Jack overlooked—so hard is it to hear the praises of a rival, and be just. She felt the necessity of being more explicit, and determined at once to come to the point.

“Stephen Spike,” she said, steadily, drawing near to the bed-side, “you should be told the truth, when you are heard thus extolling the good looks of Rose Budd, with less than eight-and-forty hours of life remaining. Mary *Swash* did not die, as you have supposed, three years a’ter you deserted her, but is living at this moment. Had you read the letter I gave you in the boat, just before you made me jump into the sea, that would have told you where she is to be found.”

Spike stared at the speaker intently; and when her cracked voice ceased, his look was that of a man who was terrified as well as bewildered. This did not arise still from any gleamings of the real state of the case, but from the soreness with which his conscience pricked him, when he heard that his much-wronged wife was alive. He



fancied, with a vivid and rapid glance at the probabilities, all that a woman abandoned would be likely to endure in the course of so many long and suffering years.

“Are you sure of what you say, Jack? You wouldn’t take advantage of my situation to tell me an untruth?”

“As certain of it as of my own existence. I have seen her quite lately—talked with her of you—in short, she is now at Key West, knows your state, and has a wife’s feelin’s to come to your bed-side.”

Notwithstanding all this, and the many gleamings he had had of the facts during their late intercourse on board the brig, Spike did not guess at the truth. He appeared astounded, and his terror seemed to increase.

“I have another thing to tell you,” continued Jack, pausing but a moment to collect her own thoughts. “Jack Tier—the real Jack Tier—he who sailed with you of old, and whom you left ashore at the same time you deserted your wife, did die of the fever, as you was told, in eight-and-forty hours a’ter the brig went to sea.”

“Then who, in the name of Heaven, are you? How came you to hail by another’s name as well as by another sex?”

“What could a woman do, whose husband had deserted her in a strange land?”

“That is remarkable! So you’ve been married? I should not have thought that possible; and your husband deserted you, too. Well, such things do happen.”

Jack now felt a severe pang. She could not but see that her ungainly—we had almost said her unearthly appearance—prevented the captain from even yet suspecting the truth; and the meaning of his language was not easily to be mistaken. That any one should have married her, seemed to her husband as improbable as it was probable he would run away from her as soon as it was in his power after the ceremony.

“Stephen Spike,” resumed Jack, solemnly, “I am Mary *Swash*—I am your wife!”

Spike started in his bed; then he buried his face in the coverlet—and he actually groaned. In bitterness of spirit the woman turned away and wept. Her feelings had been blunted by misfortune and the collisions of a selfish world; but enough of former self remained to make this the hardest of all the blows she had ever received. Her husband, dying as he was, as he must and did know himself to be, shrunk from one of her appearance, unsexed as she had become by habits, and changed by years and suffering.

