

# SHORT STORY AMERICA

## THE HANDSOME CABIN BOY

JACK LONDON

"AND the dapper young fellow was—"

"None other than the veiled woman, of course."

"O, pshaw!" I cried. "That's well enough for a Sunday newspaper, but in real life people are not so easily misled."

"Look at the authentic instances—women serving as soldiers, sailors, scouts—"

"Bosh!"

"Why, there's my little brother Bob, as clever an impersonator—"

"Bosh!"

"People are fooled every day and—"

"Stuff and nonsense," I said. "Any one but a ninny should penetrate such a make-up at a glance. I don't think much of a fellow who can't tell a man from a woman. Catch me napping that way."

"I'll catch you," cried Jack.

"I like that," was my reply.

"I'll wager I fool you within six months."

"Done! For how much?"

"The loser to foot a supper; the setting, ordering, and inviting of the same to be at the winner's discretion."

"Done!"

We shook hands, and the fellows crowded round with all sorts of advice and persiflage. Thus was the seed sown, out of which was to spring the never-to-be-forgotten romance of "The Handsome Cabin Boy."

The succeeding fortnight found me in solitary grandeur aboard my schooner yacht *Falcon*, bound for a short cruise to Honolulu. We had hardly sunk the Farralone Light, when my suspicions were aroused. From the cook to the sailing-master complaints began to pour in about the new cabin boy. They held he was willing enough, but worthless. At the last moment, Billy, the old boy, had left us in the lurch, and my agent, to whom all such matters were entrusted, had hastily procured the present incumbent.

As they said, he was willing enough, but—in short, he was ignorant of his duties and totally unfit for such a position. Yet he tried so hard that everybody was drawn toward him. And he was such a handsome lad. Dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked, with a delicate olive complexion and an exquisite oval—small wonder that he recalled to my mind the bet with Jack Haliday. And then, for the slender lad of fifteen or sixteen that he appeared, there was a vague, insinuating fullness about the figure, which did not fail to corroborate my suspicions.

But I held my hush and awaited confirmation. This came sooner than I expected. The sailing-master and myself were on the poop, one noon, with our sextants, bent on shooting the sun. The lad came up the companionway with a pan of soot and ashes; he had just cleaned the cabin stove. Instead of going to the lee, he stepped to the weather rail and let fly the refuse. And fly it did—backwards, of course, and all over us.

Digging a handful out of his eyes, the sailing-master grabbed the young rascal by the arm. Now Nelson was a rough son of the sea, and had a mellifluous command of the vernacular which serves for emphasis to those who sail the same. He shook him up and down and cursed him with as virile a combination of English and Scandinavian oaths as was ever my luck to hear.

The boy lost his wits and began to cry. Picking up the pan, he started for the cabin, but just opposite me, reeled and toppled over. I caught him before he could fall, and—well, my arm had strayed in forbidden pastures too often to be mistaken now.

"Why, you're a girl!" I cried.

The man at the wheel began to snicker, so I hurried her below to save her from confusion before the men. There she cried, and sobbed, and carried on, till I was almost as distracted myself, in my efforts to soothe her. At last she calmed down.

"O, sir," she began, "I hope you won't be angry with me. I—he—Mr.—"

"It's Jack Haliday's doing, isn't it?" I interrupted.

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know all about the bet, and you'll have to testify that I discovered your—er—identity."

"Yes, sir, and he'll be angry because I lost. Boo—hoo—oo—"

"O, you did very well." I thought she needed a little cheering. "The cook would never have discovered—say! how the deuce—you'll have to change your—"

It was indeed embarrassing for both of us. And that blundering cook had never tumbled! I called him into the cabin.

"Tell off that German deck boy to help you," I ordered. "And go to your room and pack up Miss—er—"

"E—E—Eastman," sobbed the disconsolate bundle on the floor.

"And pack up Miss Eastman's belongings. Take them to the spare state-room, and make everything comfortable. I'll see you get extra pay for this trip. Go! Don't stand there all day!" I could not help laughing at his round-eyed wonder.

"I don't know what to do in the way of suitable clothes," I said, as she entered her new berth in the wake of a trim little sea-chest.

"That's all right, sir," she replied, between her sobs. "I b—brought some dresses along."

"Strike me blind!" cried the cook, as the door shut. "O, I beg your pardon, sir; but do you mean to tell me, sir, that he's a—a she? Think of it!—and me a married man! What'll my wife say?"

Though I tried to explain that there was no necessity of his wife knowing, he wandered away to the galley, more woe-begone, if anything, than the poor creature who had caused his distress. Still, I could sympathize with him, realizing as I did, my own false position, and knowing how the sailors must be haw-hawing among themselves.

Dinner was sent into her, and it was not till next morning that she showed herself. And then it was a demure little maid, for all her short brown locks. It seemed a pity they had been clipped for the sake of a paltry bet.

"What will your people say?" I asked, in the course of explanations. "Do they know?"

"My brother does. I came with his consent."

"Your brother's a scoundrel and ought to be horse-whipped. It's disgraceful, to say the least."

"How?"

This was a poser. How? I began to comprehend the mess Jack Haliday had got me into. How? What innocence!

"You must have been brought up in a convent," I said bluntly.

"Yes, sir; I went to the Sacred Heart until a year ago."

Worse and worse—it was no light responsibility thus thrust upon me. I finally wormed her story from her. She had lost her mother during her childhood, and her father, a small tradesman, had educated her at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. Things had gone from bad to worse with him, and when he died, she and her brother were left penniless. To curtail the story: they had become protégés of Haliday's. She had shown an aptitude for the stage, and Haliday encouraged her, prophesying that some day the metropolitan vaudeville would open its arms to a soubrette of no mean ability.

"And when he asked this favor of me," she concluded, "what could I do? Refuse, after all he had done for me?"

Well, the yacht took on new life. Strange how this chit of a child, this girl of sixteen, brightened things up! She became the idol of all hands and even Nelson apologized—first time the stubborn dog ever did such a thing, I'll wager. She could play the piano fairly well, and though her voice was not strong and had no register, her singing was sweet indeed.

When we arrived at Honolulu, I was for making arrangements to send her back by steamer; but the guileless creature would not hear of it, and looked so miserable when I insisted, that I gave in. Besides, nobody knew us. And she—why, she had no conception of evil, and to undeceive her was a task beyond my power. I supplied her with funds, and she soon had a stunning array of gowns and other female fripperies. Then we took in the concerts of the Hawaiian Band, made long drives into the country, and visited many places of interest and recreation. We had a delightful time; but the

best of good things must end, and a month later found us off the Golden Gate. To-morrow we should be in San-Francisco.

To-morrow—I half sighed as I lighted a cigar, and glanced at her state-room door. What were her dreams, I wondered. Then I thought of my long, lonely cruises. How bright this one had been! Life took on new possibilities, as I began to realize some of its hitherto unknown charms—charms which my benedict friends never ceased to dwell upon. How she had changed things! A neatly turned ankle on the cabin stairs, a twinkling slipper along the deck, a girl's light laughter, a song at twilight, a—in short, the ineffable something of a woman's presence. I was startled at the thought. Let me see: sixteen—twenty-six; nineteen—twenty-nine; no, that would be too long to wait, eighteen—twenty-eight—that's it. And not such a disparity after all. Two years! What would not two years do? Development, the rounding of that mind—aye, and that form, already so rich of promise. Two years, and then—

"Eight bells!"

The clamor of changing watch had destroyed the fairy pictures; so I tossed away my cigar and went to bed.

Jack Haliday and the whole crowd were at the club-house pier to meet us. Evidently, the lookout of the Merchants' Exchange had telegraphed our arrival off the Heads the previous night. They trooped aboard in a body, and I trembled for Miss Eastman. However, Clara, as I had come to call her, faced the ordeal bravely. The subdued expectancy and smothered giggles angered me. Jack Haliday opened the ball at once.

"I say, you know, about that supper—"

"What about it?" I asked sharply.

"Well, I've made all the plans, but I thought it better to submit them to you. You might make a few suggestions, you know."

"You've made all the plans!" I shouted. "I have an idea that the ordering of this supper

belongs to me."

"Ha! ha! ha!" Everybody began to laugh.

"Hope you had a pleasant trip, Miss Eastman," he said, turning to her.

"O, I did," she assured him, though I could see her lips were trembling.

"How did you discover it?" he asked, addressing me.

"Why she fainted in my arms, and—"

"ho! ho! He! he! he!" the crowd fairly roared, and I beamed triumphantly on my discomfited opponent.

"Was he angry?" continued the imperturbable Haliday.

"No," Clara replied, "he was real nice. And when we got to Honolulu he wanted to send me home on the steamer, but I wouldn't let him. Then we had a gorgeous time—bought me candy and gloves, took me buggy riding, and—"

With this the crowd went mad. They slapped Jack on the shoulder, poked him in the ribs, and hugged each other in ecstasies of glee.

"Why, you ninny!" Jack cried. "That's my brother Bob."

"Impossible," I rejoined. "Why, when she fainted in my arms, I—"

At this juncture speech failed me, for the modest Miss Eastman turned a couple of back-flips, came up smiling, thrust a hand into her maidenly bosom and drew forth—heavens!—a couple of pneumatic cushions, the kind used by football players.

It were needless for me to tell how I led the stampede to the club-house; how the supper came off, with Bob Haliday at the head of the table; or how, to this day, the

mere mention of "The Handsome Cabin Boy" arouses a certain choler which I can never hope to overcome.