



Run to Earth: A Novel

Mary Elizabeth Braddon

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Seven-and-twenty years ago, and a bleak evening in March. There are gas-lamps flaring down in Ratcliff Highway, and the sound of squeaking fiddles and trampling feet in many public-houses tell of festivity provided for Jack-along-shore. The emporiums of slop-sellers are illuminated for the better display of tarpaulin coats and hats, so stiff of build that they look like so many sea-faring suicides, pendent from the low ceilings. These emporiums are here and there enlivened by festoons of many-coloured bandana handkerchief's; and on every pane of glass in shop or tavern window is painted the glowing representation of Britannia's pride, the immortal Union Jack. Two men sat drinking and smoking in a little parlour at the back of an old public-house in Shadwell. The room was about as large as a good-sized cupboard, and was illuminated in the day-time by a window commanding a pleasant prospect of coal-shed and dead wall. The paper on the walls was dark and greasy with age; and every bit of clumsy, bulging deal furniture in the room had been transformed into a kind of ebony by the action of time and dirt, the greasy backs and elbows of idle loungers, the tobacco-smoke and beer-stains of half a century. It was evident that the two men smoking and drinking in this darksome little den belonged to the seafaring community. In this they resembled each other; but in nothing else. One was tall and stalwart; the other was small, and wizen, and misshapen. One had a dark, bronzed face, with a frank, fearless expression; the other was pale and freckled, and had small, light-gray eyes, that shifted and blinked perpetually, and shifted and blinked most when he was talking with most animation. The first had a sonorous bass voice and a resonant laugh; the second spoke in suppressed tones, and had a trick of dropping his voice to a whisper whenever he was most energetic. The first was captain and half-owner of the brigantine 'Pizarro', trading between the port of London, and the coast of Mexico. The second was his clerk, factotum, and confidant; half-sailor, half-landsman; able to take the helm in dangerous weather, if need were; and able to afford his employer counsel in the most intricate questions of trading and speculation. The name of the captain was Valentine Jernam, that of his factotum Joyce Harker. The captain had found him in an American hospital, had taken compassion upon him, and had offered him a free passage home. On the homeward voyage, Joyce Harker had shown himself so handy a personage, that Captain Jernam had declined to part with him at the end of the cruise: and from that time, the wizen little hunchback had been the stalwart seaman's friend and companion. For fifteen years, during which Valentine Jernam and his younger brother, George, had been traders on the high seas, things had gone well with these two brothers; but never had fortune so liberally favoured their trading as during the four years in which Joyce Harker had prompted every commercial adventure, and guided every speculation.

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