

A TALE OF THE SEA.

BY R.J.B.



FOR a whole month the south-west wind had clouded the sky and lashed with frequent rain squalls the slate-coloured waters of the Bristol Channel. Then came a day's calm, and after that a brisk north-easter swept the skies and made the waves sparkle merrily in the bright sunshine. Near five hundred sail of merchantmen had been lying wind-bound in Swansea Bay, Penarth Roads, and elsewhere, and soon after the welcome change set in their snowy sails were flecking the green waters as like a flock of sea fowls, they raced down channel before the favouring breeze. A noble clipper, staggering along under a cloud of canvas, led the van, and by evening she had so far headed the fleet that even the headmost of the score of steamboats that had begun to draw clear of the ruck of sailing craft, made her out only as a black speck against the crimson light in the west. The slowest of all the steamers was a large collier called the Clontarf, bound out through the Gut to Barcelona. She was of the oblong tank type, and pretended to no lines that interfered with the carriage of the greatest amount of cargo within a given length, breadth, and depth, at eight knots. As she slowly panted past one of the headmost sailing ships, a hand aboard of her, with an attempt at nautical honour, held out a rope's end to two or three of the barque's crew who had clustered near the fore rigging to watch the passing steamer.

"Oh, my boy," said the barque's captain, when he saw the offered line, "I have seen the day when you would have had to move a bit faster than you are doing now before you would have had the chance to offer the old Robin Hood a tow."

"Yes," he continued, turning to the mate who stood beside him, "if old Veale hadn't cut it so precious fine this trip and loved us no canvas for a set of stuns'ls, the Black Adder herself wouldn't have dropped us quite so easily."

"Well, sir, even them steamboat owners has got to cut it pretty fine nowadays, judgin' by the way they load their vessels down," said the mate, shutting one eye and scowling grimly at the Clontarf with the other. "It seems to me she wouldn't show much of Plimsoll's mark if she was in smooth water."

"Not the top rim of it," replied the skipper. "It was awash before she hauled out into the basin, and had that fifty foot steam launch landed on her deck; and after that she took in fifty ton of gunpowder from the lighters out in the stream."

"We're deep enough, Lord knows!" said the mate, spitting thoughtfully over the side, "but I don't envy them if we get bad weather in the Bay."

"Likely enough, too," added Captain Sturmev. "The glass ain't risen yet, and we are not going to hold this wind long if it doesn't rise."

Before noon the next day the fleet was clear of the Scillies, but the wind had died down, and by two o'clock the ships were rolling nearly yardarm under in a dead calm. Soon heavy masses of cloud were heaped up in the North-West, and in another hour the vessels were swinging away, close hauled, under top gallantsails. And long before night closed in even the Black Adder was reduced to three close-reefed topsails, for a strong nor-wester came roaring down upon them as the sun went sullenly down behind the rolling clouds.

The Robin Hood stowed her fore-topsail early in the first watch, though she still carried a reefed mainsail. The sail was brand new, and made of the stoutest canvas. The hail and sleet that began to rush down upon the ship in squalls of growing fierceness and frequency had soaked and stiffened the stout cloths till they became like thin boards. The watch made several attempts to stow the sail, but in vain, and at last, at midnight, all hands were called "to shorten sail." The men struggled slowly up the tautened rigging into that upper darkness where the fierce spirit of the storm itself, howling, shrieking, whistling, moaning, seemed playing a wild accompaniment to its own mad passion upon straining shroud and stiffened rope. The great sail lashed in the rushing blast, with thundering slats, belying, out and swelling over the yard, thrashing and threatening each moment to hurl some poor fellow into the black abyss: it tugged and strained at its fastenings like a thing possessed, skaking yard and mast as though it would tear them from the ship. The vessel rolled till the lee rigging hung slack in wide bights, streaming in the wind; then righting herself with a sudden jerk, she would lurch to windward, tautening each rope and chain and shroud till they became as bars of steel. She would plunge down the long slope on the back of a sea, heading into the hollow at the very foot of the onrushing mountain of water, and then roll over in a sickening sort of helplessness—over—over, till it seemed as though the yardarm were to be launched, and on, into the heart of the troubled deep. The squalls thundered down upon her, cowing for a moment with their fierce rush the wild sea, thrusting her down into the seething brine, while the foam boiled from under her lee bow, and every timber in her trembled and groaned with the strain. For hours the men toiled on amid this mad tumult, with nothing but black horror about them, and below them the faint gleam of the breaking seas; the labouring hull, dimly visible when it rose on the seas, and shook itself clear of the driving spray; and the glitter of the biplane light upon the brass-work of the wheel, and the wet oil-kins of the two men who gripped the spokes. And when at last the sail was snugged, and the poor fellows drenched to the skin, weary, sore, and stiff, two of them with their nails torn from their finger ends, clambered down from aloft, it was nearly four o'clock.

Yet their dangerous work was only half done. The seas had swept the main deck of the heavily-laden craft, bursting out the bulwarks; and upon the unprotected deck, and waist high in the rushing swirling water, the men knew they must now stand and work the pumps for a two or three hour's spell.

Captain Sturmev stood aft, under the shelter of a small tarpaulin that had been lashed in the weather-mizzen rigging, conning his labouring ship, listening to the dreary, monotonous clank of the pumps, and watching for the belated morn. It crept slowly over the storm-vexed sea at last. The gale blew as fiercely as ever, but the squalls had taken off a little. The captain looked anxiously over his vessel. The main deck had been clean swept of everything by the fearful seas. A row of forlorn-looking stanchions was all that remained of the weather bulwark. The green sea poured in between them, and rushed foaming and swirling over the deck to leeward, where as the labouring hull lifted, the tops of the stanchions showed black above the foam, like the teeth of a great kraken.

Suddenly Captain Sturmev's arm was clutched, and turning round he found the mate, who had left the pumps for a moment, standing beside him and pointing to leeward. As the ship rose on the sea the hull of a large steamer came into view. No smoke issued from the funnels, and she appeared to be hove to under storm trysails. She was not more than a mile away, and making bad weather of it. The mate made a dash for the companion way and brought back the skipper's glass and handed it to him. The captain steadied himself with one arm round a shroud, and took a long look at the disabled steamer as she appeared to be. He handed the glass back to his companion, who looked through it at the steamer for a minute, and then turning round and looking into the captain's face, yelled "The Clontarf!"

The skipper nodded. "Clean swept!" the mate added after another look, and again Captain Sturmev nodded.

Two or three of the crew had now gathered into the shelter of the weather cloth, where they watched the long black hull of the steamer wallowing unceasingly, broadside on the sea, which made a clean breach over her. The mate continued to observe her through the glass, and then once more he turned to the captain and shouted, "She's flying a signal of distress, sir."

Those aboard the disabled steamer had made out the barque to windward, and had hoisted the British ensign Jack downwards in the main rigging as a call for help.

Captain Sturmev looked along his own vessel's swept decks, to windward, at the heaving mountainous seas, coming onwards, ridge behind ridge, at the haggard faces of his wearied men, and then shook his head.

"Can't help her," he said. To go about in such a sea, and in their condition, seemed like rushing into the jaws of certain death. Another squall came shrieking down upon them, pressing the vessel over on her beam ends. For the next few minutes each man's only thought was to prevent himself from being harled across the deck into the boil to leeward. The squall passed over, the ship righted a little, and as the smother swept slowly off to leeward, all eyes were turned to where the steamer had last been seen.

"My God, Tom, she's gone!" gasped one of the men. Doubt for a minute or two longer divided their minds, but as wave after wave swept by, lifting the Robin Hood to its crest, and then foaming and roaring, slid from under her, and still no one caught sight of the steamer's hull, the dismal conviction forced itself upon them that she must have foundered. The captain gazed steadfastly out over the waste of raging seas; the men looked in each other's faces, but only to see there the reflection of their own sad forebodings.

Presently the mate almost screamed, "Two boats, sir. I can see them!"

Captain Sturmev looked irresolutely at his men, and for answer saw them start as by a common impulse and work themselves slowly along to the main braces; two stationed themselves by the relieving tackles of the wheel. The skipper stood out from behind the weather cloth and watched for a lull. Providentially it soon came, and he made a sign to the hands at the wheel. At the same time the mate checked the main-yard a little. The Robin Hood hung to the wind for a while, and then her bows began to describe great sweeping curves towards the dread-way hollows, and then as the waves rushed by sweeping half-way back again, as though she feared to trust herself in the trough of such a tremendous sea, she was to remain for a few minutes only meant destruction. A mountainous slope of green water, streaked with driving fumes, hove up to windward. The Robin Hood rolled, dipping her sad arms; the maintop-sail flapped in the calms of the great hollow. Some of the men then ran half-way up the mizzen rigger to be safe from the expected deluge. For one merciful half-minute the great wave held its crest unbroken, and then hurled it thundering, roaring, and hissing under the vessel's keel.

Meanwhile the barque had got the wind abaft the beam, and as she slid down the sloping back of the wave she gathered way rapidly, and when the next hollow reached her she was already driving across it and away from its following slope.

Two boats were tossing helplessly in the tremendous sea, while four men in each boat laboured hard to keep its head to sea. The one chance to rescue was to run down as near as possible to the boats, and bring the ship to again to leeward of them. They could not do this, for the wind, this was done, and the Robin Hood shot by them like the wind, the mate standing on the rail and motioning to the men to follow the ship. She had shot more than a mile away before she could be safely brought to the wind once more. Then came a quarter of an hour of anxious waiting, before the boats showed up against the sky, in the crest of a coming wave. Two men stood ready with ropes to heave into them as they passed under the ship's stern. It was cleverly done, and one of the boats was hauled alongside to leeward. Three men clambered aboard at once; the fourth remained behind to haul up a few bundles of things they had managed to save. The Robin Hood rolled heavily over as

another great sea caught her, nearly bearing the boat down under her.

"Jump, man!" yelled the mate. The ship shot her fore-foot twenty feet out of water as she reached the wave's crest, and then lunged down the slope. The rope holding the boat tautened with a jerk, and then snapped like a carrot, and before the poor fellow could stir the boat was twenty feet from the ship driving fast away. The second boat, which also contained four men, was close under the quarter at the time. As the Robin Hood was again lifting her bows out of water, her stern came down upon the great steel life-boat, crushing it like a walnut shell. One man clung desperately to the mizzen chains, and was hauled aboard in safety, but his three companions never rose again. For one instant they caught sight of the other poor fellow as the drifting boat topped the crest of the next wave. He was sitting on the aftermost thwart, his face hidden in his hands, and his head bowed upon his knees. Then another squall swept down upon them, and for ten minutes everything fifty yards from the ship was hidden in the driving smother. When it passed nothing was to be seen of the boat, even if rescue had been possible.

Out of a crew of fifty-six four had been rescued, and then only at awful risk to another ship's company. The Clontarf had wallowed all night in the trough of the sea, making dreadful weather of it. Then the lashings that secured the great launch she was carrying to Cadiz gave way. Before it rolled clear of her decks her engine-room sky-lights had been smashed and the deck stove in. Sea after sea rushed upon the devoted steamer, pouring down into her engine-room and stoke holes. The fires were put out, and she was left as helpless as a great iron tank. It could not last long. Two steel life-boats were all that remained of her boats. The Clontarf went down under foot as they were being launched.

In due course, among other disasters of that terrible December gale, the newspapers chronicled 'the foundering of the steam collier Clontarf in the chops of the Channel, with the loss of all hands but four, who had been rescued by a barque, outward bound, which had transferred them to a homeward-bound Swedish ship.'

That was the only notice taken of a brave act done by a brave company of 'those who go down to the sea in ships,'—and alas! that such things should be— that was all the notice taken of the act of a man who pocketed the generous insurance money of his foundered vessel, together with the freight for the carriage of the very launch that had been the chief cause of the disaster, and against carrying which across the Bay of Biscay in the middle of winter the master of his ship had vainly protested.

That is fifteen years ago, and the owner of the ill-fated Clontarf has prospered exceedingly since. He is notoriously charitable, and he has built a handsome Gothic church all out of his own gains. Every Sunday he takes his seat on the crimson plush cushions of the front pew there, and right in front of a splendid chapel, wherein are to rest his own saintly remains when 'it shall please God'—and here he always raises his eyes heavenwards when telling you— to take him to his Eternal home!

LOVER'S GREEN.

PRITHEE! draw the curtains closer,
For I would not see the snow;
It would chill me as I wander
In that summer long ago,
When I crowned myself with roses,
And I trailed the silken sheen
Of my purple robe behind me
O'er the dew of Lover's Green.

Near at hand a thrush was trilling
In his sober suit of brown,
And afar I saw the windows
Gleaming silver in the town.
Sweet and salt the wind was blowing
From the bay that flashed between,
When we met that golden morning
On the dew of Lover's Green.

It was there my soldier lover,
In his coat of army blue,
Knelt to tie the sash ribbon
That was trailing from my shoe.
He was overlong about it,
And I bent to look, I ween,
So I kissed him ere I knew it
'Mid the dew of Lover's Green.

Oh! he caught me to his bosom,
With the ribbon left untied,
And the birds began to carol
From the boughs on every side;
And the sun a little nearer
In his glory seemed to lean,
Till he turned to flaming jewels
All the dew of Lover's Green.

Though a hundred years, in passing,
Strew my head with ashes grey,
They can never steal the sweetness
Of that single hour away.
E'en the mist came down the mountains
And the shadow rose between,
And we parted, pale with anger,
In the dew of Lover's Green.

Still above that place enchanted
Blue and tender bend the skies,
Still the mountains, richly wooded,
In their grandeur round it rise;
But the roses now are paler,
And the winds are cold and keen,
And a woman's tears are ebbing
With the dew of Lover's Green!

M. R.

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