

HER LAST SAIL.

A YACHTING STORY.

BY W. E. A.



It was old Joshua (Goff's) cottage as used to stan' by the water's side a mile or so from Gosford, Kincaumber way. That was the white patch with the green behind it as all of us chaps knew when we were lads; an' you could see it from most places round Brisbane Water.

I remember as old Josh had it built after his missis died, when he gev up goin' to sea to look after his little gal. He found it a hard job to quit his old ketch that he'd sailed so long, and when Sam Doubleday took charge and wanted to buy the vessel off him old Josh spoke up right sharp as he'd never sell that ketch as long as he lived. 'There ain't a smarter craft on the coast,' he said. 'She's made me a livin', and she'll make a livin' for my Maggie when I'm gone; so there's an end on it. Let me here no more about buyin' and sellin'. She's carried me in good weather and in bad—me an' mine. Why, when her as is dead an' gone was a thin slip of a gal, an' we was first married, that vessel was our first home, an' I kep' her like a yacht; an' you, Sam Doubleday, if you want to keep charge o' her, you must keep her like a yacht, too. I know the kind o' seaman you are, for I larned ye myself, or I'd never let ye stan' at the tiller. I'd rather lay her up on the beach in front of the house, an' let her go to pieces in the sun, than see her driftin' about, with them sails onny half set, and the riggin' full of Irish pennants, like most of the vessels as sails this coast. So jest you see to it, Sam Doubleday, and say no more about buyin'.'



'SHE'S CARRIED ME IN GOOD WEATHER AND IN BAD, ME AND MINK.'

I was a rough lout of a lad when Josh first came ashore. He went in for timber contractin' then, and afore the down on my chin was long enough to turn round your first finger, he began to get on a bit. You see he was a reliable sort o' chap and was pretty well known, an' he never sent no poor stuff away from his sawpits.

The first thing as he did when he found as he got along ashore was to whitewash the cottage outside and paper it inside; for Maggie, tho' she was only a bit of a gal then, liked to see things nice. Afterwards he made her a flower garden in front, an', my word, she kep' it neat. That was all right, but Mag wanted fruit trees, so Josh planted a bit of an orchard, an' what with improvements inside and outside the place got a pretty nice sort of a home.

It was built of slabs, howsoever, and by-and-bye the white ant got into it and at it away, an' that is why the old place, as everybody knowed when I was a lad, ain't there now. It's a good while ago, an' I'm turnin' 76, but lor, bless yer, that's nothin' in these parts where men lives to be 100 an' over sometimes. Yes, an' old Josh's ketch, the Dairy Maid, gone too, an' I'm a-goin' to tell you how she was lost. She might a bin afloat to this day, so strong an' sound was she if it hadn't a bin for that damned villain Lionel Lonsdale—God forgive him.

Well, Maggie she grew up a fine gal, an', my word, I don't know whether the old man was proudest or fondest of her. She was straight and shapely as a spar, she had black hair an' lots of it, an' a forehead white and smooth as mother o' pearl. Her cheeks was rich an' brown, with the red showin' through, an' all round her lips an' nostrils an' about her ears there allus seemed to me to be a kind o' tawny under the skin, makin' it a shade darker, just like you see the dark points on a good beifer. It's a sign o' good stuff in most animals, I notice, to see dark points, an' I think it's just the same in wimmen.

Anyhow, the young chaps about the district—sawyers, sailors, fishermen an' setch—was fair mad about her. But

she would ha' none o' them. Not as she was proud or any-thing o' that sort, becuz when Jim Oaks got capized in a 'buster', in the Broadwater an' was brought ashore more dead than alive, didn't she have him carried up to the house and nurse him and look after him until he got over it? Poor Jim had better a bin drowned after all. You never see a man so cut up as he was afterwards when she wouldn't have him.

Old Joshua was a bit of a cure, too. He used to slap his thigh, an' swear as no man should have Maggie but he as was fit to sail the Dairy Maid.

'When that man comes,' says Josh, 'Mag and the ketch 'll go together, each bein' the best o' her kind. Me an' the missus begun life that way, an' there ain't no better way. With care the Maid 'll last 'em long enough, and if no better luck serves 'em they can build a house with the stuff as in her, by-and-bye, when it's time for 'em to come ashore to live.'

It was downright amusin' to see the young chaps ketchin' to the water like ducks, hopin' to catch the old man's eye. It was that struttin' fal-de-lal Lonsdale as used to come up here a fishin', and a shootin', and sich like, as first caught the gal's eye. He was a gentleman born and educated, more shame to him; an' though some folks considered him a bit 'looney,' or have-brained, or somethin', he allus know'd enough, drunk or sober, to hold his tongue about himself.

It might a bin as a kind o' offset to Lonsdale that old Josh first took up with young Hal Stephens. Hal was a likely lad, smart, handy, and spirited. He came from Bathurst way not a month before, and ha'n't never seen the sea. The chaps thought to chaff him a bit at first, but they soon found out as he was one too many for 'em, and after a while there wasn't a more popular chap in all Brisbane Water than Hal. I'm blowed if he didn't learn to row inside of a fortnight, and lick the head off 'o' Mackerel, as they used to call Joe Sadler, the fastest man in the district. That got Hal's name up, I can tell you.

But Hal was clean gone the minnit he clapt eyes on Maggie. I see it myself. This is how it was: I was a sittin' on the wharf mindin' my nets one day when Hal fust come. Him and me was havin' a bit of a yarn. He wanted a job, an' I was tellin' him how I made a livin' a' catchin' an' dryin' and smokin' fish an' sellin' 'em—some to the Government, some to the deep sea ships, and some to the men-o'-war. While we was talkin' Maggie and little Clara, the obbing gal as lived with 'em, come rowin' past in a light skiff. They often used to go out together when the work was done up at home. Yes, and sail too. My word, I recollect it as well as anything. Mag was pullin', an' as she swayed backwards and forwards as graceful as could be, she looked up at the wharf an' give me a nod an' a smile. I see Hal looked at her pretty hard, and he went to the edge of the wharf an' kep' his eyes on her until they was out of sight.

'Who's that?' he says after a while, when he came slowly back with his hands in his pockets.

'Maggie Goff,' says I, 'the prettiest gal an' the best gal in all the district.'

'My word, you're right,' he says, 'an' you might just as well ha' said in the whole colony. I never see such a face and figger before. I see her yesterday in the town.'

Then he arst about her an' old Josh, an' I told him all, an' as how the chap as wanted her 'ud have to satisfy the old man as he was fit to sail the Dairy Maid, which happened to be lyin' off the wharf at the time. He didn't say nothin' for some minutes, but kep' his hands in his pockets, and his head down, thinkin'. I could see right enough what was in his mind. After a bit I says—

'That's the Dairy Maid lyin' over there—not the black one, but the grey one with the black bulwarks an' taut riggin'.' Aint she a beauty? I reckon as the chap as gets her, and Mag, too, 'll be in it. Now, I s'poe you think a smart chap might easily learn to sail her?'

'Well,' he says slowly, 'men has learned more'n that.'

'Right you are,' I says; 'but how long do you think as it'd take you now?'

'Couldn't say. May be a year or so if a fellow give his mind to it.'

I burst out larfin' in his face.

'What're you larfin' at?' he says quite hot.

'At you,' I says; 'it's easy seen as you come from the country, an' I larned again.'

'Knock it off now, knock it off,' he says, for he didn't like bein' larfed at. 'I'd like to see you amongst the cattle on Bathurst Plains, an' see if you'd be so mighty knowin' then.'

'Well,' I says, 'every man to his trade, but don't you come for to think as you can learn to sail that craft so as to satisfy old Joshua Goff in a year, or anythin' like it. You might learn to steer a bit an' set sails an' handle cargo, but that ain't seamanship. That ain't about the bar, an' the tide, an' the winds, an' the sandbanks, an' the 'southerly busters,' an' the coast-line, an' the wear an' tear, an' the paintin' an' 'copperin', an' the pointin' o' toin, an' the dockin' an' repairin', an' seawin', an' splicin', an' riggin'.' That ain't about handlin' her when she's flyin' light, an' when she's over deep loaded. That ain't about leadin' marks, an' hauldin' in gales o' wind. That ain't about caulkin' an' kedgin' an' warpin', an' moorin' in an' cester. To say nothin' on luffin', an' shootin', an' sterna boards, an' doctorin' sails, an' a hundred more things. No, I says, 'It takes some of the best years o' your life to larn it all, so it's like second natur. You're a likely enough lookin' chap,' I says, lookin' hard at him, 'but you ain't agoin' to win her that way, mind me.'

'Well,' says he, 'you're a strain for 'ard spoken chap, an' so am I, an' I don't mind tellin' you as I'm agoin' to try my luck. Yes,' he says, 'if it takes years, as you say, it'd be worth it to win a gal like that. It only happens once in a

lifetime, an' its all the difference between a happy life an' a wretched one. I don't care if you blab it about, becuz it's bound to come out afterwards. Anyhow the sooner the better, so's we all understand one another. I got a good eye for a woman, an' I can see as the man as wins Maggie Goff 'll have the greatest blessing a man can get in this world. Now, you're a old hand about the sea, for your years that is, can't you tell us how to make a start?'

I looked at him smilin' a bit an' I says, 'The devil! How do you know I ain't got a eye that way myself?'

He turned round sharp, an' looked me hard in the face, an' thin he larfed a bit an' said: 'Not you, old boy; you wouldn't have no show.'

'The devil!' I says, pretty wrothy. But I was over it agen in a minit, for I couldn't be wrothy with him, somehow; there was somethin' so nateral an' manly an' open about him. 'You're right,' I says, 'I got no show, so I give it up long ago. But look here,' I says, 'you ain't got much more of a show, I can tell you that now. If you take my advice you'll clear out, an' git over it as soon as you can.'

'No, I'll not go,' he says; 'you didn't clear out, did you?'

'No,' I says, 'I didn't.'

'No, you didn't,' says he. 'Nammore'll I.'

'Well, but you ain't got no show, I can tell you that. I see her listenin' to that Lonsdale,' I says.

'No matter,' says he; 'tell me how to start, an' that'll do for me.'

I never seen such a straight ahead chap, an' such a one to get round the soft side o' you. So I jest told him all I could, an' advised him to go an' see old Joshua an' arst for a job at the sawpits, as it was no good his goin' to sea.

I'll be blowed if he didn't walk right off there an' then, an' arst for a job on the ketch; but as there was no openin' aboard of her at present, he took a job at the sawpits, an' after workin' there hard all day he'd go for a four mile pull as hard as he could lick, jest as if sawin' all day was nothin'.

After he'd licked 'Mackerel,' as I told about afore, old Josh begun to take notice of him, and to think as he was a pretty likely sort of a chap.



"HAL"

Well, this 'ere Lonsdale, to give the devil his due, wasn't bad lookin', and was wonderful insinuat' with gals. I could see as Mag was a bit took with his fine manners, and neat clothes, and such at first, an' the best of gals is up to a bit o' fun or flirtin' sometimes, you know; but she soon found him out for what he was, and wouldn't have nothin' more to do with him. He seemed to ha' gone clean crazy after her. You never see a chap so stirred up. He ran after her at all times of the day, beggin' an' prayin' an' threatenin' like a loonatic. He worried the life out of the gal, an' she couldn't go a step, or for a pull, but he'd turn up and drive her back into the house. Old Josh didn't know what the devil to do, an' at last he arst Hal to the house, thinkin' perhaps it was some protection to have a young chap like him about the place sometimes.

Hal soon got to know how things was, an' when he told us we held a meetin' one night, I mean a few of us young chaps as had sisters, as Mister Lonsdale'd made rather too free with, an' we settled to nab Mister Lonsdale an' tar and feather him. An' I don't think we did more'n he deserved, nor the half of what he deserved for that matter, becuz he was a real bad lot. An' when we set him on an old horse facin' the tail and started him off on the Peat's Ferry-road we all thought as we'd seen the last of him. Such a site as he looked, for mind you we all knew how to tar a vessel's bottom, an' we give him a good coat an' lots of feathers.

Lord, how old Josh did laugh and clap his thigh when he heard on it; an' he sent for young Hal an' gave him charge of the sawpits there an' then.

It must a bin nigh a couple of months after that when Sam Doubleday come up from Sydney one mornin' with the Dairy Maid, all taut and trim as usual. I happened 'be on the wharf, an' was talkin' to old Josh, when Sam come ashore in the boat.

'Sam,' I says, 'what craft is that down Blackwall way lyin' at anchor with the mainsail set? You must a passed her.'

'Well, I'm blowed,' says he; 'you've got eyes like a hawk. What do you think she is?'

'Bless if I know,' says I; 'I never seen her up here before, but it looks like one o' them big Sydney yachts.'