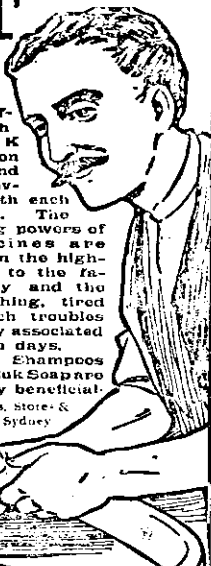
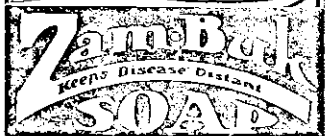


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THE WRECKER

ON the edge of the Great Bahama, near the turn of the Caicos bank, the hull of the Stella Polare lay high on the coral reef. She was a Spanish steamship, built in Italy, and had made the run many times between Havana and the Mediterranean ports. She had run with an easy company, and many passengers had changed their countries in her; for she had been a crack packet in her day; and her day had passed, joining the vast host of limitless time.

From a distance the black hull loomed large and sinister, a long iron mass standing out clearly in the surrounding whiteness of coral and foam. Closer observation showed the rusty plates, the paintless cabin houses, and the weather-worn woodwork that still remained. Her two rakish funnels stood slantwise holding their places by the aid of rusty guys, the chains and all valuable metal work having long ago been stripped from her. And so she lay as the Buccaueer, a wrecking schooner from Nassau, came slowly across the bank.

The rays of the setting sun shone strongly upon the iron hull, and the crew of the schooner gazed at her from various positions of ease and lassitude; for the day had been hot and sultry, and the air filled with a brassy coloured humidity that was as thick as a heavy haze on the horizon. The master of the wrecker was a Spaniard. He was a good looking fellow, bronzed and fine featured, and his black hair was streaked with gray. Heavy lines in his face suggested suffering rather than exposure, although his vocation was rigorous enough.

The master had gazed for fully a quarter of an hour at the wreck as the vessel fanned along before the light breeze, when his mate addressed him.

"Shall we get the gear ready, sir? I got a box of Atlas powder and twenty fathom of fuse with explosives."

"Yes, get what you need in the small boat," said the master absently. "You can haul down the jib and let go when you're ready. Give her not more than four fathoms; for we won't stay here long—looks like it's coming on bad, and the glass is falling. The bank isn't safe this time of year. We ought to get into some pocket and tie up." The master spoke absently, still gazing at the wreck, and the mate noticed it.

"She doesn't look much like what she did when you had her, sir," said he.

"What, the Stella Polare?"

"Yes, sir, and it wasn't so long ago either. Seems like yesterday when you ran her into Havana Harbour for her last voyage under the old charter."

"When you're ready with the small boat I'll go with you," said the Captain, still gazing at the black hull.

Anchoring with the fore and main-sails still up, the small boat went slowly into the bay. There was little or no surf on the lee of the bank, and the party landed without difficulty. Then they began carting their outfit to the wreck. They would break her up, stripping the plates from her sides for old iron and tearing apart the most valuable portion of her engines to sell at Key West. It was a job that the men who had been there before them had declined as unprofitable, for it required considerable work to strip the plates, and the engines were well rusted in the hull submerged hull. At high water there was little of value uncovered in her hold; but the wrecking crew had not been successful that season, and it was a case of getting what they could. Wrecks had been few, and the sponging industry, which all wreckers of the bank usually follow during the summer and hurricane season, had paid small returns. Dynamite was expensive to use; but it was just as well to explode a part of it as to have it spoil on their hands. They could still keep enough for a few loads of fish, for the law of the reef and bank was never enforced in re-

gard to high explosives, and they were far away from any prying eyes.

The crew carried sledges and hydraulic jacks, with a spare tackle or two, and the mate carried the explosive. They reached the high side where the dry sand had banked against it, and one by one mounted to the deck, the captain going aft, still gazing at the old hulk in an absent manner. She was a long ship, and he walked the entire length of her deck until he reached the taffrail. Then he turned and looked at the cabin house. His mind was far away from the work he intended. He saw that deck as it had been in the days gone by, the days of his youth, and as he looked, a strange feeling of loneliness came upon him.

The deck was there, before him, and upon it he saw the faces of the people who had walked or sat upon it. Even a blistered bit of paint on the deck house recalled a certain day in the lime gone when he sat there with the one woman he had lived for, the wife of his youth. A soft voice called to him and spoke the words he remembered so well. He almost started, and a choking feeling came in his throat. Yes, he had sat near that particular spot many times and listened to that voice; now still, but which seemed to call again. There were the stitches in the canvas deck covering she used to rub with her foot while talking, sitting there as they used to do in the old days when the company allowed him to take his wife with him on the run across. The deck seemed to slant away and roll from side to side, and he balanced himself to meet the roll of the ship. The stillness about him was unbroken save by the distant murmur of the sea and the low voices of the men waiting forward for the work to begin; but he heard nothing save the voice of the past.

He went into the deck house. There was the old settee, now without the red upholstered cushions. He remembered how many times he had sat there in the evenings after the voyage was run, and how for years they had chatted under the light of the saloon lamp when the passengers had all gone ashore and the ship was deserted by all save the crew. About him were the signs of wreck and ruin, and he stood for some minutes gazing about the cabin. A woman's shoe lay mouldy and green upon the floor near a state room door, and it brought a dull pain in his heart as he noted it. The owner was dead, long dead, probably lost in the hurricane when the vessel went into her last resting place. Far away in Nassau was a mound, grass grown and storm swept, the resting place of the one who had made life worth living for him. Soon the sand would bank up and cover the old hull, and the long beach grass would grow over it, blotting out all.

He looked into a deserted room. The door was broken and hung slantwise upon its one rusty hinge. Then he stepped softly back into the middle of the saloon and listened. A thousand little things brought back memories, and he raised his head. "Oh, God! the loneliness of it all!" he cried.

In the stillness he thought he heard the laughter of a woman's voice. No, it was the sobbing, and he started. A land crab scuttled across the floor of the cabin, making a disagreeable rattling as it went. In the ghastly stillness of the lost ship a thousand sounds seemed to fall upon his listening ears. He saw the table set and the people sitting about it, the stewards getting the dinner, and the old questions asked him of the day's run; but foremost and always was the form of one woman whose bright smile welcomed him from the table end. He stole forward and went into his room, the Captain's room of the liner. The wreck and confusion here were

even greater than aft; but he saw nothing now save the time when they used to sit there, she sewing upon some piece of woman's work and he poring over the chart which held his course.

His heart seemed bursting. The ghastly wreck was awful—it was the wreck of his hopes—and he bowed his head and covered his face with his hands as he sat upon the edge of the bunk. The light was fading, but he failed to note it. Fifteen, twenty, thirty minutes he sat there, and the mate, who had returned with the rest of the gear left in the boat, was searching for him. The sun sank below the sea before that officer broke into the room and saw him sitting there.

"It's getting too late to do anything more this evening, sir," said he with a peevish tone of complaint.

"All right; go aboard. I'll stay here awhile," said the Captain.

There was something in the seaman's face as he looked up that caused the mate to forget his temper at the delay. "The men must get their supper, sir," he said quietly. "Do you want a boat sent in for you later?"

"Good Lord! let me alone!" he cried. "Go! leave a boat for me. I'll row out aboard myself when I'm ready."

The mate went forward, and the men followed him in the small boat. They went aboard the schooner for the evening meal, and afterward turned in for the night. A small boat was towed in by a man in the craft they had used, and it was left upon the sand.

Comment was made forward, at the Captain's absence. No one understood. Even the mate, who had an idea, did not think it of enough real importance to dwell upon it; and so the tropic night fell over the reef, the haze deepened and the darkness grew intense.

In the dull, heated quiet of the early night the Captain sat upon the ship's rail. He could not stand the oppressive stillness of the blackness in the cabin. The outline of the surf upon the sea-side of the wreck shone in a line of phosphorus, but the dull glare failed to outline the vast bulk of the hull. The wind had all died away and the warmth of the air was felt, being heavy with a moisture and saltness that bespoke of a falling glass. But he sat and wandered through the memories of a past life which was all the more bitter because of the happiness that would never return.

"She will never come back—never!" he whispered into the void about him. "I'm so tired—tired of it all!" and he groaned aloud in his anguish. He would not break up the ship. In the morning he would find some excuse to tell the mate and crew. He could not tell them the real one. They would not understand. How could they—poor devils! What had they known of life, life as he had known it? No, he would weigh his anchor and sail away over the tropic seas to live out his existence as Fate had demanded of him. He might kill himself; but there were others dependent upon him for a living, and he would not do a cowardly thing, would not cause them suffering to alleviate his own. He must live on—just on and on to help the few who trusted in his strength to provide for them. It was no pleasure to save to ease their burden. It would be to-morrow—and to-morrow—and to-morrow—a broken life of unending work and hardship.

"God grant I'll not have to make it too long! Let me go to a big—a long, and unending rest! I want to sleep, to sleep forever; for I'm tired out!"

His voice was deep and vibrant; but it fell upon the empty air, and he more than ever noted the silence. He gazed to the southward. There was nothing upon the dark sea. To the eastward it seemed a little blacker; but over the desolate ocean there came no sound of even a breaking wave-top. For several