

When he reached the deck he found about half-a-dozen men, one of them being the third engineer, then off duty. Afterwards he remembered precisely what men these were.

The second officer did not reach Collinson just then, for the incident of the voyage took place while he was yet three yards off. Suddenly and urgently tinkled out the engine-room bell, clear above the churning of the engines. At the same instant there was a hoarse shout from the bridge.

The bell had rung out 'Shut off steam!' but in an instant tinkled again, 'Full steam astern.' After a long and fearful pause there was a sudden silence as the machinery halted in its motion; but the Northgate surged helplessly on through the white seas. Another instant and she seemed to be struggling with herself as her huge bulk answered to the engines.

A second afterwards the mate gave a cry. Out of the white wall before him loomed an almost formless mass, a vast black body pricked out in fog and snow. Another breathing-space, and they were on it, the Northgate's bows striking with a shock that threw the men off their feet. The bow-plates crashed in, and there was a sickening noise of rending woodwork. The great ship stood still and shivered as if she had received a fatal blow; but a moment more her bows were clear, and the hulking death in her course was drifting away into the mist from which it had emerged. When the first man from below came tumbling on deck there was nothing in sight to explain the disaster which had taken place.

For a few seconds there were signs of panic, but it did not spread. The engines were still, and the Northgate rode shivering in the grey and silent sea. Then the captain's orders rang out from the bridge in straight, plain terms that gave no suggestion of danger, and immediately everything was done in the best order. All hands were on deck in three minutes as a matter of course, and it took no more than five to prove that the ship had suffered little damage. Several plates had been started, but there was no injury that threatened her safety. Just in time the captain had given his saving signal. Otherwise—

'Otherwise,' said Mr. Gibbs, under his breath, 'it would have been a hole in our bows big enough to build a house in, and about an hour to take to the boats. Captain Pritchard, I'll drink your health. You're the finest man in the North Atlantic to-day.'

'A derelict, I guess,' said the third engineer, blankly.

'A Canadian timber-ship,' answered Mr. Gibbs, 'waterlogged. Been drifting in these seas since the days of the Flying Dutchman, waiting for you and me. And we came.'

Then he turned to stare out into the blank wall of fog which had swallowed up the enemy. 'But it beats me,' he said slowly—'it beats me how the old man could have seen her!'

He put the question aside for more pressing matters

during the next half hour, but it was to come up again in a most bewildering form. That was when things had been made good as far as possible, and the first officer reported the Northgate ready to resume her voyage. It was then that Captain Pritchard laid bare the secret of his action in a somewhat astonishing declaration.

'Confound it, Mr. Bruce,' he cried angrily, 'do you think I'm going to steam away and leave that poor fellow to his fate? What do you take me for?'

The first officer's bewilderment was extreme.

'We're going to stand by,' declared the captain, 'till the weather clears a bit. That won't be more than an hour or two; but if it was a week it would be all the same. That man saved my ship, and I'm going to pick him off before I stir a yard.'

The first officer was a long-headed, cold-humored Scot, who never lost his temper or his reason. While all the others stared at one another, convinced that Captain Pritchard's brain had been turned by the recent shock, he began to make inquiries.

'I beg your pardon, sir,' he said calmly; 'what man do you mean?'

'Why, the man on the derelict,' answered Captain Pritchard. 'The one who gave us warning of its whereabouts by striking the bell.'

Again the clustered members of the crew glanced at each other for light. The first officer simply looked thoughtful, and preserved a discreet silence; but the captain, who knew these signs, waxed impatient.

'You were below, of course,' he said; 'but every one on deck can tell you all about it. If it hadn't been for that bell, sir, you'd be in command of the lifeboat by this time, with the Northgate settling by the head. That's all.'

But that was not all. A dead silence followed the speech, instead of the chorus of assurance and declaration which might have been expected from the watch on deck. It lasted so long that the captain was struck by its significance.

'What in thunder is the matter with you all?' he rasped angrily. 'Where's the second officer?—Mr. Gibbs, you were on deck; you heard the bell?'

'Very sorry, sir,' said the second officer, 'I don't remember it. I didn't hear a sound. I only saw the hulk crowding over our bows.'

There was a pause. Every one began now to realise that there was a sensation afoot. Captain Pritchard turned to the third engineer.

'You heard it, Mr. Knight?' he asked.

'I heard your bell ring in the engine room, sir,' answered Knight. 'That was the first and only bell for me.'

The captain stared from face to face. Not one of the other few men of the watch came to his aid, and he realised what this meant.

'Very well,' he said grimly; 'but it was a good thing for all of us that I heard it, anyway. And we'll just stand by, Mr. Bruce!'

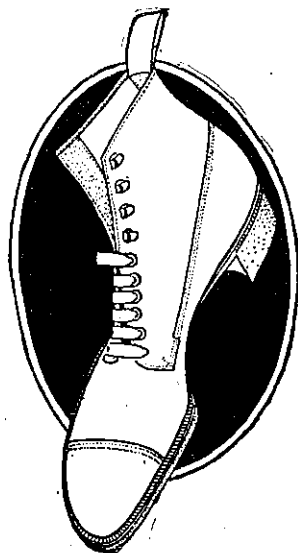
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