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The Old Smoker.

Lost And Found At Sea

(By Oswald Wildridge, in New York Post.)

He was a skipper of the old school, was Cap'n William Rundle of the Mersey tugboat Triton somewhat skimped in the build, but hard as nails, with a face tanned to mahogany by sea and sun, and a beard of color, rusty as the hull of a neglected ship. On Liverpool River it was said that he could do anything with a tugboat short of making her speak, and it was an open secret that in his own opinion the strongest compliment he ever received was from the port admiral of a certain dockyard town who denounced one of his manoeuvres as "folly for which brought to be court-martialed," and in the same breath extolled it as a "miracle."

It was an unfortunate thing that the Triton should have required a new mate just when she was ordered across the Atlantic to bring the Netherton home, and when Capt. Rundle heard of the choice that had been made, he gave his resentment to free run with words that bit deep and were hurtful. As strongly as discipline would allow, he protested to his chief, and afterwards he addressed himself with greater frankness to Enoch Carron of the Tuskar, and Ned Morrison of the Trojan, who hailed him as he hustled along the dock-side.

"Haven't time t' stay," he declared. "Just got orders t' fit out for the Falklands t' bring a lame hooker home. It's the Netherton, one of Fawcett's ships. She got nearly blown t' bits trying t' work around the Horn, and now her own crew at her fetching back t' reef. Well, I've got t' take a good mate with me. His name is Mister John Ellwood. Shouldn't be surprised if you've heard of his highness."

"We have," Capt. Carron assented. "What have you got against him?"

"I've got everything against him," Capt. Rundle snapped. "He's a fine prize-packet for anybody t' ship. It's not more'n a week since he was a skipper himself, and now he's put back t' mate simply because he didn't know what t' do when he was in a tight place, and also because he hadn't the nerve t' hang on. When I've a big thing on hand I can't stand passengers; workers is all I've any use for. It means that I'll never be able t' take my watch below with any comfort, and if we get any weather I'll just have t' live on deck. A mate what you can't trust is a nuisance. And Mister John Ellwood is no good t' me."

To his crew the skipper of the Triton had, of course, nothing to say about the disappointing quality of his new mate, but their eyes were sharp and their ears open. On the third night out, with the

boat reaching away into the Atlantic, Barney Simpson favored his comrades of the fo'c'sle with certain of his discoveries and deductions.

"He's done what he shouldn't have done," said Barney. "He's done what he shouldn't have done, and that a thing what no sailor can afford. There's only one room for him on the bridge of a boat if he doesn't burgle. A few days after he was made skipper of the Tasso Mister Ellwood got ordered out for a job that some of the men who'd been docking ships all their lives wouldn't have said thank ye for. It was a bad sort o' day for docking, with desperate squalls blowing up out of the west, and when it was decided t' dock the Arrogant the Tasso was told off t' act as extra boat, being stationed on the port tow. Right at the start Cap'n Ellwood got badly rattled up, for the men on the liner didn't quite tumble t' the extra boat business, and didn't pass him their heaving-line as soon as they should have done; and then he'd no sooner got hold of her than a thick squall swept down on the n, and away the Arrogant went t' seaward, bearing dead on the water wall. Course, it was all on the tugs t' hold her, but she'd got a lot of way on her, and what with the liner going strong t' the east and himself going full speed t' the west, Cap'n Ellwood soon had his tug scooping up the water with her lee rail, and it looked as if nothing could save her from being dragged under. And it was then that the young skipper's nerve gave out. He slipped his tow-line."

"And what about the Arrogant?"

"Oh, she met with a bit of luck, and the stern' end managed t' get the way off her, and so she scraped through. It was Ellwood what suffered, for the sea's fearful unreasonab'le and unforgiving, and he'll be a lucky chap if he ever gets another command."

According to her log, the Triton's voyage to the Falkland Islands ranked as one of the most uneventful of her deep-sea wanderings, but to every man aboard it was one of gross discomfort. All the way, from her call at the Azores for the replenishment of her bunkers until they made their landfall in the stormy south, Capt. Rundle's treatment of the mate ranged about from cutting contempt to truculent hostility, and down in the fo'c'sle it was a matter of nightly wonder "how the youngster stood it." Happily for himself Ellwood had been well trained, and he had acquired in full measure that deeply grafted respect for the law of the sea which is so wonderfully the real keeper of the peace. It

was only the occasional flushing of the cheek and the clenching of the fingers in the palm that showed how he felt the sting of the skipper's conduct.

In the same spirit of silent warfare they began their return, and it was thus they came upon that memorable seventh day out on the homeward passage, when the Triton lumbered stolidly over a drowsy sea while the Netherton sagged and snapped at the end of the towing-hawser. She was an unlovely creature. This barque that the tug was taking back to her own home to be restored to the lofty rank of a living ship. Her masts, torn out by the winds, were now replaced by a stumpy jury-jig, along the line of her rail glaring patches demonstrated the destroying might of the waves, all her glory of paint was departed, and her sides were cracked and seared by the acrid bite of brine and scorched by the consuming fires of a tropical sun. She was riding light, also, loftily poised upon the waters, but she carried herself uneasily and even though the sea was a dead calm, she plucked viciously at her leash as though she pined for the freedom which had led to her overthrow.

Since the first hour of the fiery dawn, the tug and the barque seemed to have sailed into the zone of a stagnant world. From its rim to its crown the sky flamed angrily in glowing tones of copper and of bronze and the colors of the heavens was also the color of the sea. With the passing of the hours the sky tones deepened, the copper of the arc at its fringe blended away into purple. Out of the far-off silence a muffled boom weidly swept, spent itself in subdued mutterings, then burst again and yet again. And still Capt. Rundle paced the bridge, and beside him the mate made gentle play with the spokes of the wheel. Of a sudden the skipper halted by the rail and his voice bit sharply into an other volley of that nerve-racking boom. It fell upon the men as a shock, and brought them into attention at the first note.

"Below there!" he cried. "I want a word with you lads. There's a bit o' weather coming on, and I'll expect you all t' stand by. If every man does his best we'll pull through comfortably."

want you be here on the bridge, Barney Simpson, t' bear a hand with the wheel if you should happen t' be needed. And you, Mat Carlin, I want t' stand by the tow-hook with the tripper handy. We're going t' hang onto that hooker, with a nod over the stern towards the Netherton, "and if it's possible for me t' pull her through we'll do it. But, if it isn't possible—if it's a toss-up between our lives and theirs—well you know what we'll have t' do. But, mind you, Mat Carlin, that tripper's not to be used till you get the word from me. The rest of you had better look alive and see that all the hatches are closed and while you're about it you might get some lines rigged up and clear away anything loose what's lying about."

With two men standing by the wheel and Mat Carlin by the hook ready to strike the trigger and release the tow-line should that act of extremity be forced upon them, the skipper turned again to watch the advance of the enemy. By now the rim of the pall was black as ebony, with streamers shooting up through the purple into the copper dome. Across the leagues of sea that muffled boom still rolled. The atmosphere had grown clammy, and hot as furnace fires. Rigidly the skipper leaned upon the rail, marking every changemissing nothing, and then suddenly his sailor's eye caught a far-off swirl of white, and in that same instant a harsh call bellowed from his lips.

"Hold on below there! Get them hatches closed! Its on us now!"

A brief spell of breathless waiting and then the tempest. Its first blow was terrific, paralyzing. With fearsome speed the bore spread itself across their track, and as it grew in length it grew also in height; swiftly, it swept upon them and fell upon them, and in the space of seconds the tug that had labored stolidly upon a sullen sea was buried under tons of maddened water. For seconds that hung like hours she wallowed under it, but sluggishly at last she rose, and the men upon her deck looked about them in wonder, for again there was no fierceness in the sea, and it seemed as though the first attack was destined also to be the last.

It was a false hope. Without warning the light went out; the groped in a thick darkness that hung about them like a garment. Out of the void a spear of incandescent flames shot savagely criss-cross rods of lightning flickered and danced blindly; with deafening crash and crackle like the mingling of giant artillery and the spattering fire of small arms, the thunder broke, the winds were loosed from their bonds, and again the sea rose up to slay them.

After this not a man aboard had any conception of the passage of time, not one indeed ever thought of it. Time had become a trifle. Minutes were eternity. Bravely through it all, however the tug went on with her appointed work; though her deck was ever rull of raging water and the winds refused to let her rise, she bore steadily into the teeth of the hurricane and held the battered barque upon her course. John Ellwood waged a desperate battle, hanging on to the wheel through a tornado of stinging, blinding, choking sea. As for Capt. Rundle, he also gave an occasional look to the steering, but mostly he watched the frantic dance of the Netherton's lights as the barque rolled and pitched astern, lights that were like wandering stars, now high on the ridge of a mighty wave, now low on the crown of the following sea, mere glancing specks, of infinitesimal trifles in a chaotic world, but to William Rundle they were everything. As long as he had them in sight, he was content.

Thus they dragged through the night. It was only wanting an hour of dawn when Mat Carlin made a perilous passage from the deck to the bridge and loudly bawled his message in the old man's ear:

"We've broke—adrift! Half the rope's—just come aboard."

A single glance stern confirmed the news. The tell-tale lights had vanished. The skipper laid hold of the speaking tube and hailed the engine-room:

"Ease her down a bit, Mark—just a bit—-we've broke adrift—and—I don't want to lose the ship."

After this a new instruction to Ellwood, and then that famous drift of which the men of Liverpool river talked with pride for many months. Lured by those will-o'-the-wisp lights that the storm had carried beyond his ken, Rundle embarked upon his desperate pursuit; his orders to the mate were that

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he must keep the Triton's head to the sea, and for the rest he ruled that the tug must carry away to leeward. Of the Netherton's lights not a flicker showed; the mark of the tempest had wiped them out. But the dawn was at hand, and when its grayness gave form and substance to the sea and anything that might lie thereon, it also revealed the harassed barque driving heavily less than a league away.

Through all that day the Netherton drifted over a ragged sea, which raved and clamored, and was itself whipped and beaten by the wind, and all the time the tug followed hard on her track, simply, as Barney Simpson afterwards told in Liverpool, "because Cap'n Rundle had made up his mind, and when the skipper makes up his mind the thing's as good as done. Sometimes he let her drive and sometimes he coaxed her along, and when he spied his chance he smashed her chock into it until the sea covered her from the knight-head to the aft-grating. And of course Cap'n Rundle's audaciousness paid. A couple of hours of sundown he'd got the barque near enough to hail her."

Then John Ellwood gripped the skipper by the shoulder.

"Can't something be done, sir?" he said. "We'll lost her again in the dark."

Rundle wrenched himself away and sidled down to the lee rail and there, for full five minutes, he stood staring darkly through the wrack at the tormented ship. Then he worked his way ack again.

"I'm going t' try and get hold of her," he declared. "It's her only chance—and the sea's going down a bit—a good bit. So stand by t' look alive, and, whatever I do, mind you don't lose your nerve."

Ellwood shrank as from a blow, but his reply was prompt and emphatic.

"It can't be done," he protested. "You'll only smash the tug. Besides, there isn't a man born who can throw a heaving-line far enough in this."

Hotly the skipper turned upon him.

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it. You've got t' stand by, and do what you're told. That's all. I tell you I've never lost a tow yet, and I'd sooner go t' the bottom than report I'd let the Netherton go."

For a moment Ellwood hesitated, and then he blurted out the thought that had come to him.

"I've a better way than yours, skipper."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I mean that this is a one man job—and I'm a powerful good swimmer."

"What!" Captain Rundle's big, round eyes grew rounder and wider than ever. He edged up to the mate and peered closely into his face. "Are you joking?"

"This isn't the time for jokes, cap'n. Unless you get hold of that hooker be-

(Con inued on page 3.)

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