

LITERATURE, &c.

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FIRE AT SEA.

My first Cruise.—Scenes from the Life of Edward Lascelles, gent.

At Cowes, on the 27th July, 18— we finally weighed anchor and left the white cliffs of Old England, for the dark waters of the Atlantic. With a pleasant breeze we dropped down the channel, and soon lost sight of land. The 'world of waters was now our home,' and at first, I must confess, I found it a very cheerless and solitary residence. Away we bore, sometimes in tempest, sometimes in calm; touching at the lovely shores of Teneriffe, and steering for the lone isle of St. Helena, where we were to receive instructions as to our ultimate destination. It was on a lovely autumn evening, in nine degrees south latitude and three east longitude, that we were going steadily along, at the rate of six or seven knots—a moderate breeze upon our larboard quarter. All around, the usual indications of continued fine weather were observable—the soft undulated surface of the water was slightly curled—the sky overhead was clear and cloudless—the sinking rays of the evening sun diffused over the western horizon a broad flood of ruddy light. The sentinel had struck two bells of the second dog watch—groups of the men were assembled on the forecabin, to enjoy the genial serenity of the evening—Strangway and Sands paced the quarter-deck, side by side, and I leant listlessly over the bulwark, watching the ripple of the water, as it was reflected from the stately sides of the vessel. The burning heat of a tropic sun had induced an apathy which caused all the idlers of the time to encourage an unusual degree of listless languor. The partly Mr. Parsons stood, with folded arms leaning against a gun on the fore-cabin, and gazing on vacancy—even the tuneful voice of the jolly purser was mute; and save the occasional creaking of the spars, the sighing of the breeze among the shrouds, and the slight murmur incidental to the usual routine of duty, there was nothing to interrupt the sleepy stillness.

It was customary for Captain Morley, especially on such evenings as the present, when the steadiness of the weather relieved him, in some degree, from the anxiety consequent on his situation, to assemble the midshipmen in his cabin, where he would kindly explain to them some difficulty in the ship's reckoning or cause them to read aloud to him; by turns, such books of instruction or entertainment as he thought proper to put into their hands, their diligence and good elocution were frequently rewarded on such occasions with supper and a glass of grog at his own table, or sometimes even with a hand at whist. To some rigid disciplinarians, perhaps, such a practice may appear highly derogatory to the dignity of a Commander. But Captain Morley was one of those who conceived that good discipline was not incompatible with kindness, or even with considerate indulgence; and while the mildness of his deportment gained for him the devoted attachment both of his officers and men, the respect due to his situation was never for a moment forgotten; and his requests were invariably attended to with that amiable alacrity which is only observable when the sense of duty is mingled with a sentiment of esteem.

Accordingly, I had not long continued to watch the rippling waters, when I was summoned below. I found the captain in the after cabin, sitting in a careless attitude in the corner of the sofa. One hand held a book, and was resting on the ledge; the other, on which his head was listlessly reclined, was partly hidden among the dark tresses of his hair. The rich mellow rays of the setting sun streamed gorgeously through the stern windows, tipping with their ruby light the bullion of his epaulettes, and throwing what painters term a broad light and shadow over his face and figure. Two of my brother midshipmen, who had been summoned for the same purpose as myself, were just taking their seats as I entered.

After some general conversation, on subjects more immediately connected with the business of the ship, Captain Morley opened the book he held in his hand, and presenting it to me, requested that I would read some passages from it aloud. It was a copy of "Coleridge's Poems," and I found it open at that beautiful creation "Christabel." In the perusal of this book I knew the captain took great delight, and I commenced to read in my very best style of intonation. I had already got as far as the entrancing description of the mysterious lady, "in the touch of whose bosom there dwelt a spell," and had just given out the concluding lines—

"I guess 'twas frightful there to see

A lady richly clad as she—

Beautiful exceedingly!"

When Captain Morley suddenly started from his reclining posture, and leant forward, with an expression of extreme anxiety in his face, watching apparently the repetition of some sound that had alarmed him. I paused, and for a moment there was a death-like silence; but at length the extreme and anxious tension of his features gradually relaxed, he sunk back into his former attitude and without remark on either side, I continued my reading. I had not, however, proceeded far, when I was again interrupted by his springing suddenly to his feet. For one instant he remained stationary, in an attitude of extreme attention—his hand a little raised, as if to command silence—his brows knit, his eyes fixed, and his lips slightly separated; then snuffing the air, with eager impatience he rushed out of the cabin.

I knew Captain Morley to be a man of the very firmest nerve, and greatest promptitude in cases of emergency. Never taken unawares, always prepared for whatever might happen, he was wont to behold the approach of tempest or battle, how unconnected soever, with the same calm serenity of countenance with which he paced the quarter deck in sunshine and

safety. His conduct on the present occasion, therefore, struck me as the more remarkable. There was a wild expression about his face and a hurried trepidation in his movements, which I had never before witnessed—a mixture of alarm and anxiety for which I was totally at a loss to account.

I did not, however, remain long to consider the probable causes of his sudden disappearance, but dashing down my book, followed him hastily out of the cabin.

On reaching the main deck, the first thing that caught my bewildered sight was the Captain's coat lying in the lee scuppers! the very coat he had worn two minutes before in the cabin. I snatched it up, and stood for a moment lost in a maze of wild conjectures.

What could have happened? the uniform coat in such a situation, notwithstanding Captain Morley's known punctiliousness in all matters of etiquette! was it possible that that raised look and apparently causeless trepidation could have arisen from any mental —; the very thought of such an event was dreadful. I looked anxiously around in all directions, in search of some source of explanation; nor was I kept long in suspense. First I heard a distinct murmur rising forward from the lower deck—then an articulate sound—and at last spoken by twenty voices at once, the awful announcement—*Fire!*

At sea, and for the first time, who that has heard that cry can ever forget it! It is still ringing like a death knell in my ears; and though many summers have since passed over my head, the events of that night are still as fresh in my memory as if they were the occurrences of yesterday. Many leagues from the nearest point of land; our boats insufficient to carry one fifth of the crew, and at best, totally unfit to live for a day in those seas, if the weather became at all unpropitious, we had nothing to look for but death in one or other of his most appalling forms! It was a fearful alternative!

My first impulse, I know not why, was to rush on deck. I found it almost entirely deserted. On the first alarm, men and officers had pressed eagerly forward to ascertain the extent of the evil; and saving the man at the helm, and Mr. Sands, the purser, who was pacing up and down the quarter deck with a look of determined resignation, not an individual was to be seen.

"For God's sake, Mr. Sands, where's the fire, Sir?"

"In the boatswain's store room, Sir. Another hour, and there will not be a man left to tell the tale."

"The boatswain's store room!" I repeated, as the thought flashed across my mind that nothing but a thin bulk head divided this room from the powder magazine. "The boatswain's store-room! Then no earthly exertion can save us!"

"Of course not, Sir," replied Sands; and pointing forward, he directed my attention to a thin column of white smoke that now began to issue from the fore hatchway. Uncertain what to do, or which way to turn, I stood and gazed upon this harbinger of our destruction, as it rose slowly up behind the shelter of the booms, and then, caught by the breeze, was carried away in eddies, and dissipated on the face of the waters. The sound of the drum beating to quarters was the first thing that roused me, and in obedience to the summons, I hurried instantly to my station below.

The scene here soon became one of extreme activity. The firemen of the foremost guns handed in water from the main deck ports, while those of the after guns cleared the magazine and got the gunpowder on deck, where it was stowed abaft the mizen mast, ready to be thrown aboard, in case the fire should obtain the mastery. At the fore hatchway, where he commanded a full view of the main and a partial one of the lower deck, stood our gallant commander, without coat or hat, issuing orders and giving directions. Strangway took charge of the men beneath, and directed the play of the engines. The fire now raged with fury, and at every fresh discharge of water, sent up thick suffocating gusts of vapouring smoke. The stores in the room—ropes, canvases, tarpaulings, and so forth—being of a very combustible nature, gave additional impetus to the flames, and it became a matter of the utmost importance that as many of them as possible should be removed. With a rope fastened round his waist, and hatchet in his hand, our gallant boatswain made repeated descents on this perilous mission, and was often dragged out in a state of total exhaustion and insensibility. I shall never forget the scene that presented itself to me, as I stepped forward to the top of the hatch to deliver an order from the captain. Within the burning store-room, his figure enveloped in dense smoke, but at the same time clearly relieved against the red glare of the flame stood the gallant Parsons, breaking open the lockers with his hatchet, and tearing down stores of all kinds from the shelves. The heavy stroke of the axe, and the crashing of the breaking boards, mixed strangely with the crackling sound of the fire, and the hissing of the water. Vigorously, for a few minutes did the noble little fellow wield his uplifted hatchet and tear asunder the boards of the lockers. Gradually, however, his stroke became feebler and more feeble, until at length, completely overcome by the scorching heat and suffocating smoke, he reeled, fell and was dragged insensible on deck.

For two hours did we labour incessantly, but in vain. The fire was gaining so rapidly, that the stream of water from the engine very soon lost almost entirely its effect. As a last resource, therefore, the lower deck was scuttled, and water was brought in buckets, and poured through the openings, down upon the raging element. At first this appeared to produce a good effect, as the strength of the flame was evidently subdued; and, in the hope of extinguishing it entirely by one large volume of water, Strangway ordered the men to fill all the buckets, and pour their contents at the same moment through the deck. This was accordingly done; but, to the astonishment of every one, a fresh flash of fire, accompanied by a dense volume of smoke, followed the discharge. The men, for an instant, stood aghast,—the empty buckets in their hands.

Strangway seemed uncertain how he was next to proceed, and the captain bent over the hatchway in considerable agitation. A slight murmur among the men succeeded his momentary pause. It seemed to refer to getting the boats in readiness; and the practised ear of the captain instantly caught its purport. He started as if struck by lightning.

"Send the carpenter here!" he exclaimed, in a voice almost amounting to a scream, and immediately the carpenter was at his side.

"Go on deck, Sir,—render every boat unfit for sea!—and now, men, we shall sink or swim together!"

A single round of hearty cheers followed this declaration; and in a minute all were busily occupied.

Scarcely, however, had the axe been laid to the first boat on the booms, when Strangway called up the hatchway to announce that the fire was nearly extinguished. The last flash of flame, and cloud of dense smoke had been the expiring struggle of the devouring element as the great volume of water fell on some vital part—By a little active exertion the firemen in a few minutes succeeded in getting it entirely under, and very soon nothing remained of the conflagration but the vapoury smoke that arose from the smouldering embers.

Such of the stores as were not consumed, were now got up on deck, where they were spread out and examined, in case that any latent spark might still be lurking among them. All, however, being reported safe, the retreat was beat, the starboard watch set, and an universal silence speedily prevailed, which contrasted strangely with the previous bustle. I well remember, it was my middle watch; and shall I be ashamed to acknowledge that while I paced the deck during those few solitary hours, I breathed forth more than one thanksgiving to the mighty ruler of all things, who had thus so mercifully interfered in our behalf.

Next morning, when I left my hammock and went on deck, I found every thing in its usual order. The gunpowder and other stores had been removed below, the decks and hatches were newly washed, and, saving that a strong smell of burning still lingered about the main and lower decks, no one could have imagined that so shortly before, the ship was on the eve of perishing by fire. I stepped forward on to the gangway, and found Darby Mullins, the carpenter's mate, busy repairing the boat he had disabled the previous evening.

"Good mornin' to your honor," said he, touching the little bit of tarpaulin hat, as I passed; "I'm glad to see you well and alive, after last night's work.—Troth, they would ha' found it indifferent sailing, that trusted themselves to this gig, any how."

"Why, Darby, I suppose if you had a few minutes longer, you would have scuttled every boat upon the booms."

"Fait! and wid all my heart and soul, your honor. Och, it was like a rare gentleman in the captain, to tell us all to sink or swim thegider!—Japers! he's none of your big-wigs, who are afraid of being seen in honest folk's company!—But who does your honor think 'll be served out for the doing of it—bad cess to him for that same?"

"I can't tell Darby, it's no business of mine, nor your's either, I trust."

"Throo for you, throo for you, your honor; only I could'nt help axing about it, for Mr. Parsons has been saying that the captain's been after making vestigashins, and we'el hear more about it yet."

"Darby Mullins," said I, "mind you your mallet and your chizzel, and leave the captain to take care of his own matters."

"Throo for you again, your honor; so I'll just be after patching up this big hole myself was so handy in making; and he again set to plying his hammer with redoubled assiduity."

Whatever investigation the captain had instituted, with regard to the individual with whom the fire had originated, the result was totally unknown, except to the parties concerned. That due inquiry had been made, however, we all felt quite assured; for the crime was one of a very serious nature, and not like to be overlooked by so strict a disciplinarian as Captain Morley. Nay, when the systematic arrangement of everything on board, and the correct information the captain usually had of whatever passed in the ship, was considered, it seemed extremely probable that the guilty person had been detected. It was not, therefore, matter of astonishment to myself or any one else, when at six bells in the forenoon, all hands were turned up to witness the punishment. In the fore-part of the quarter deck stood captain Morley, dressed in full uniform, holding a folded paper in his hand, apparently the articles of war. Near him were the different Officers, in cock'd hats and side arms; and a little further removed, the men. All was now anxiety as to the culprit; and there was a general murmur of regret and surprise, when Richard Elkins, the boatswain's yeoman, was called forward and committed to the custody of the master-at-arms. If there was one man on board the *Hesperus* a greater and more general favourite than another, it was Elkins. Civil and obliging to his superiors, kind and friendly to his equals, an excellent seaman, and always ready at the call of duty, he was respected and beloved both by officers and men. During the war he had been in the hottest of the fray, and bore many honourable wounds in testimony of his gallantry. Repeatedly had he led the van of his comrades in boarding the enemy, twice had he by his prowess, and at great personal risk, saved the life of an officer; and on one occasion he swam to the Admiral with despatches, when the iron shower of balls and grape, fell so thick that no boat could be trusted on the water.

The captain, having read before an uncovered audience the clause in the articles of war which related to the crime, folded up the paper, and with a tone of deep emotion, addressed the unhappy man nearly in these words:—

"Richard Elkins! through your carelessness yesterday, the ship was nearly destroyed by fire; and your shipmates have only been saved from the most dreadful of deaths, by the merciful intercession of that Being before whose awful throne you had