

Literature, &c.

From 'Harry Cavendish,' in Graham's Magazine.

THE OPEN BOAT.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'CRUISING IN THE LAST WAR.'

How shall I describe the horrors of that seemingly endless night. Borne onward at the mercy of the waves—possessing just sufficient control over the boat to keep her head in the proper direction—now losing sight altogether of our consort, and now hanging on the top of the wave while she lay directly under us, we passed the moments in a succession of hopes and fears which no human pen can adequately describe. As the night advanced our sufferings increased. The men were kept at their oars only by the consciousness that even a moment's respite might be our destruction. With difficulty we maintained even the slightest communication with our fellow sufferers in the other boat, and as the hours wore away, communication became almost impossible. It was only at intervals that we caught sight of our companions through the gloom, or heard their loud huzzas in answer to our shouts. And no one, except he who has been in a like situation, can tell how our sense of loneliness was relieved, when we saw these glimpses of our consort, or caught the welcome sounds of their voices than our own across that fathomless abyss.

At length a gigantic wave rolled up between us and the launch, and, when we rose from the trough of the sea, I fancied I heard beneath us a wild, prolonged cry of human agony. At the sound, my blood curdled in my veins, and I strove to pierce the obscurity ahead, hoping almost against hope that our companions yet survived, and that I might catch a glimpse of the launch; but my straining eyes scanned the prospect in vain, for the thick darkness shut out every thing from my vision, except when the ghastly foam whitened along the waves beside me. For an instant I tried to believe that what I heard had sprung from a disordered fancy, but the eager, yet horror-struck faces of my shipmates beside me, soon convinced me that I was not the only one who had heard that cry. We looked at each other for a moment, as men may be supposed to look who have seen a visitant from the tomb, and then, with one common impulse, we joined in a halloo that rose wildly to windward, swept down on us, rose again, and finally died away to leeward in melancholy notes. No answering cry met our ears. Again and again we united in a shout—again and again the roar of the wind and wash of the waves was our only reply. Suddenly a flash of lightning blazed around us, and, taking advantage of the momentary light thus shed on the prospect, I gazed once more across the waste of waters. We hung, at the moment, on the topmost height of a mountain wave, while beneath yawned a black abyss, along whose sides the foam was rolling in volumes, while the ghastly crests of the mimic billow, and the pitchy darkness of the depths below, were lit up with the awful glare of the lightning, presenting to the imagination a scene that reminded me of the lake of fire into which Milton's apostate spirits fell. Just at the lowest point of the vortex a boat was seen, bottom upwards, while, in close proximity to it, one or two human forms were struggling in the sea; but all in vain; for at every despairing stroke they were borne further and further from the few frail planks which now were to them their world. Oh! never will that sight fade from my memory. A cry of horror broke simultaneously from all who beheld the scene, and long after it had vanished from our eyes, we heard the first despairing shriek of our drowning messmates, we saw the last look of agony ere they sank for ever. To save them was beyond our power. As we were whirled down into the abyss we leaned over the gunwale to catch, if possible, a sign of the vicinity of any of the sufferers, but our efforts were in vain, and, after watching and listening for more than an hour, we desisted in despair. As the storm gradually passed away, and the stars broke out on high, diffusing a shadowy light around us, we gazed again across the waste for some token of our lost messmates, but our scrutiny was in vain. The tale of their death, save as it is rehearsed in these hurried pages, will never be told until the judgment day.

Morning at length dawned. Insensibly the first cold streaks of day crept along the eastern horizon, gradually diffusing a gray twilight over the vast solitude of waters around, and filling

the mind with a sensation of utter loneliness, which, though I had experienced it partially before, never affected me with such indescribable power as now. As far as the eye could stretch there was nothing to break the vast monotony of the horizon. The first glance across the deep destroyed the hope which many had secretly entertained, that morning would discover some sail in sight, and though no unmanly lamentations were uttered, the dejected look with which each shipmate turned to his fellow was more eloquent than words. All knew that we were out of the usual route of ships crossing the Atlantic, and that our chances of rescue were consequently lessened. We were, moreover, nearly a thousand miles from land, with but scanty provisions, and those damaged. Our boat was frail, and one far stronger had already been submerged—what then, would probably, nay! must be our fate. It was easy to see that these thoughts were passing through the minds of all, and that a feeling akin to despair was gathering around every heart.

'Cheer up my hearties!' at length said Bill Seaton, a favorite topman, looking round on his companions, 'it's always darkest just before day, and if we don't meet a sail now we must look all the sharper for one to-morrow. Never say die while you see the wind overhead, or see the waves frolicking around you. Twenty years have I sailed, in one craft or another, and often been in as bad scrapes as this—so it's hard to make me think we're going to Davy Jones's locker this time. Cheer up, cheer up, braves, and I'll give you 'Bold Hawthorne,' and with the words he broke out into a song, whose words acted like an inspiration on the crew, and in a moment the air rung with the ballad, chorused forth by a dozen stentorian voices. And thus alternating between hope and despair, we spent the day. But, unlike the others, my situation forbade me to betray my real sentiments, and I was forced to maintain an appearance of elation which illly agreed with my feelings.

Meanwhile the day wore on, and as the sun mounted towards the zenith, his vertical rays pouring down on our unprotected heads, became almost insupportable. The gale had long since sunk into a light breeze, and the mountainous waves were rapidly subsiding into that long and measured swell which characterizes the deep when not unusually agitated. Over the wide surface of the dark azure sea, however, might be seen ten thousand crests of foam, one minute cissing into existence, and the next disappearing on the declining surge; and, as the hour approached high noon, each of these momentary sheets of spray glistened in the sunbeams like frosted silver. Overhead the dark, deep sky glowed as in a furnace, while around us the sea was as molten brass. Parched for thirst, yet not daring to exceed the allowance of water on which we had determined—burning in the intense heat, without the possibility of obtaining shelter—worn out in body and depressed in spirits, it required all my exertions, backed by one or two of the most sanguine of the crew, to keep the men from utter despair, nor was it until evening again drew on, and the intolerable heat of the tropical day had given way to the comparative coolness of twilight, that the general despondency gave way. Then again the hopes of the men revived, only, however, to be once more cast down when darkness closed over the scene, with the certainty we should obtain no relief until the ensuing day.

Why need I recount the sufferings of that second night, which was only less dreadful than the preceding one because the stars afforded us some comparative light, sufficing only, however, to keep us on the watch for a strange sail, without allowing us to hope for success in our search, unless almost by a miracle? Why should I narrate the alternation of hope and fear on the ensuing day, which did not differ from this one, save in the fiercer heat of noon day, and the more utter exhaustion of the men? What boots it to recount the six long days and nights, each one like its predecessor only that each one grew more intolerable, until at length, parched and worn out, like the Israelites of old, we cried out, 'Would God it were morning,' and in the morning, 'Would God it were evening.' And thus week after week passed, until our provisions were exhausted, and yet no relief arrived, but day after day we floated helplessly on that boiling ocean, or were chilled by the icy and unwholesome dews of night. Hunger and thirst, and heat—fever and despair contended together for the mastery, and we were the victims. Often before had I read of men who

were thus exposed coming at length to such a pitch of madness and despair that they groveled in the bottom of the boat, and cried out for death: but never had I thought such things could be credible. Now how fearfully were my doubts removed! I saw lion-hearted men weeping like infants—I beheld those whose strength was as that of a giant, subdued and powerless—I heard men, who in other circumstances, would have clung tenaciously to life, now sullenly awaiting their fate, or crying out, in their agony, for death to put a period to their sufferings. No pen, however graphic—no imagination, however vivid, can do justice to the fearful horrors of our situation. Every morning dawned with the same hope of a sail in sight, and every night gathered around us with the same despairing consciousness that our hope was in vain.

There was one of my crew, a pale, delicate lad, whom I shall never forget. He was the only son of a widow, and had entered the navy, though against her will; to earn an honorable subsistence for her. Though he had been among us but a short time, he had already distinguished himself by his address and bravery, while his frank demeanor had made him a universal favorite. Since the loss of the Dart he had borne up against our privations with a heroism that had astonished me. When the rest were sad he was cheerful; and no suffering, however great, could wring from him a complaint. But on the twentieth day—after having tasted no food for forty-eight hours—the mortal tenement proved too weak for his nobler soul. He was already dreadfully emaciated, and for some days I had been surprised at his powers of endurance. But now he could hold out no longer, and was forced to confess that he was ill. I felt his pulse—he was in a high fever. Delirium soon seized him, and throughout all that day and night he was deprived of reason. His ravings would have melted the heart of Nero. He seemed conscious of his approaching end, and dwelt constantly, in terms of the most heart-rending agony, on his widowed mother—so soon to be deprived of her only solace and support. Oh! the terrible eloquence of his words. Now he alluded in the most touching accents to his father's death—now he recounted the struggles in his mother's heart when he proposed going to sea—and how he dwelt on her grief when she should hear of his untimely end, or watch month after month, and year after year, in the vain hope of again pressing him to her bosom. There were stern men there listening to his plaintive lamentations, who had perhaps never shed a tear before, but the fountains of whose souls were now loosened, and who wept as only a man can weep. There were sufferers beside him, whose own anguish almost racked their hearts to pieces, yet who turned aside from it to sorrow over him. And as hour after hour passed away, and he waxed weaker and weaker, one feeble shipmate after another volunteered to hold his aching head, for all thought of the lone widow, far, far away, who was even now perhaps making some little present for the boy whom she would never see again.

It was the evening of the day after his attack, and he lay with his head on my lap, when the sufferer, after an unusually deep sleep of more than an hour, woke up, and faintly opening his eyes, lifted them to me. It was a moment before he could recognize me, but then a grateful smile stole over his wan face. I saw at a glance that the fever had passed away, and I knew enough of the dying hour to know that this return of reason foreboded a speedy dissolution. He made an attempt to raise his hand to his face, but weakness prevented him. Knowing his wishes, I took my handkerchief and wiped the dampness from his brow. Again that sweet smile played on the face of the boy, and it seemed as if thenceforth the expression of his countenance had in it something not of earth. The hardy seamen saw it too, and leaned forward to look at him.

'Thank you, Mr. Cavendish, thank you,' he said faintly, 'I hope I have not troubled you—I feel better now—almost well enough to sit up.'

'No—no, my poor boy,' I said, though my emotion almost choked me, 'lie still—I can easily hold you. You have slept well?'

'Oh! I have had such a sweet sleep, and it was full of happy dreams, though before that it seemed as if I was standing at my father's dying bed, or saw my mother weeping as she wept the night I came away. And then, a melancholy shadow passed across his face as he spoke, 'I thought that she cried more bitterly than ever, as if her

very heart were breaking for one who was dead—and it appears, too; as if I was that one,' he said, with child-like simplicity. Then for a moment he mused sadly, but suddenly said—'Do you think I am dying, sir?'

The suddenness of the question startled me, and when I saw these large, clear eyes fixed on me, I was more embarrassed than ever.

'I hope not,' I said brokenly. He shook his head, and again that melancholy shadow passed across his face, and he answered in a tone of grief that bro't the tears into more eyes than mine.

'I feel I am. Oh! my poor mother—my poor, poor widowed mother, who will care for you when I am gone?'

'I will,' I said with emotion; 'if God spares me to reach the land, I will seek her out, and tell her all about you—what a noble fellow you were—'

'And—and,' and here a blush shot over his pale face, 'will you see that she never wants—will you?' he continued eagerly.

'I will,' said I, 'rest easy on that point, my dear, noble boy.'

'Aye! and while there's a shot in the locker for Bill Seaton she shall never want,' said the topman, pressing in his own horny hand the more delicate one of the boy.

'God bless you!' murmured the lad faintly, and he closed his eyes. For a moment there was silence, the hot tears falling on his face as I leaned over him. At length he looked up; a smile of joy was on his countenance, and his lips moved. I put my ear to them and listened.

'Mother—father—I die happy, for we shall meet in heaven,' were the words that fell in broken murmurs from his lips, and then he sunk back on my lap and was dead. The sun, at this instant, was just sinking behind the distant sea-board. Ah! little did his mother, as she gazed on the declining luminary from her humble cottage window, think that that sun beheld the dying hour of her boy. Little did she think, as she knelt that night in prayer for him, that she was praying for one whose silent corpse rocked far away on the fathomless sea. Let us hope that when, in her sleep, she dreamed of hearing his loved voice once more, his spirit was hovering over her, whispering comfort in her ear. Thank God that we believe the dead thus revisit earth, and become ministering angels to the sorrowing who are left behind.

Another sun went and came, and even the stoutest hearts began to give way. For twenty three days we had drifted on the pathless deep, and in all that time not a sail had appeared—nothing had met our sight but the brazen sky above and the unbroken deep below. During the greater portion of that period we had lain motionless on the glittering sea, for a succession of calms had prevailed, keeping us idly rocking on the long, monotonous swell. When the sun of the twenty fourth day rose, vast and red, there was not one of us whose strength was more than that of an infant; and though, at the first intimation of dawn, we gazed around the horizon as we were wont, there was little hope in our dim and glazing eyes. Suddenly, however, the topman's look became animated, and the color went and came into his face, betokening his agitation. Following the direction of his eyes, I saw a small, white speck far off on the horizon. I felt the blood rushing to the ends of my fingers, while a dizziness came over my sight. I controlled my emotion however, with an effort. At the same instant the doubts of the topman appeared to give way, and waving his hand around his head, he shouted—

'A sail!—a sail!'

'Whereaway?' eagerly asked a dozen feeble voices, while others of the crew who were too far gone to speak, turned their eyes in the direction in which all were now looking.

'Just under yonder fleecy cloud.'

'I can't see it,' said one, 'surely there is a mistake.'

'No—we are in the trough of the sea—wait till we rise—there!'

'Face it—I see it—huzza!' shouted several.

A sudden animation seemed to pervade all. Some rose to their feet and clasping each other in their arms, wept deliriously—some cast themselves on their knees and returned thanks to God—while some gazed vacantly from one face to another, every now and then breaking into hysterical laughter. For a time it seemed as if all had forgotten that the strange sail was still far away, and that she might never approach near enough to be hailed. But these thoughts finally found their way into the hearts of the most sanguine, and gradually the exhilaration of sudden hope gave way to despair, of