

Literature, &c.

From 'Harry Cavendish,' in Graham's Magazine

THE DOOM OF THE DART.

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

The day had been close and sultry, but as sunset drew on, a light breeze sprung up, which diffused a delicious coolness throughout the ship, imparting new vigor to the pining and almost exhausted men. Invigorated by the welcome wind, a group of us gathered on the weather quarter to behold the sun go down; and those who have never seen such a spectacle at sea can have no idea of the vastness with which it fills the mind. Slowly the broad disc wheeled down toward the west, seeming to dilate as it approached the horizon, and, as its lower edge touched the distant seaboard, trailing a long line of golden light across the undulating surface of the deep. At this instant the scene was magnificent. Pile on pile of clouds, assuming every fantastic shape, and varying from red to purple, and from purple to gold, lay heaped around the setting god. For a few moments the billows could be seen rising and falling against the broad disc of the descending luminary, while, with a slow and scarcely perceptible motion, he gradually slid beneath the horizon. Insensibly the brilliant hues of the clouds died away, changing from gorgeous crimson, through almost every graduation of color, until at length a faint apple green invested the whole western sky, slowly fading into a deep azure, as it approached the zenith.

'Beautiful!' exclaimed the skipper, 'one might almost become poetical in gazing on such a scene.'

The sun had now been hid for some minutes, and the apple green of the sky was rapidly becoming colder and more indistinct, though the edge of a solitary dark cloud hanging a few degrees above the horizon, was yet tipped with a faint crimson. Meantime the stars began to appear in the opposite firmament, one after another twinkling into sight, as if by magic, until the whole eastern heaven was gemmed with them. I looked around the horizon. Never before had its immensity so forcibly impressed me. The vast concave swelling high up above me and gradually rounding away toward the distant seaboard, seemed almost of illimitable extent, and when, over all the mighty space of ocean included within its circuit, my eye rested on not a solitary sail, I experienced a sense of loneliness which no pen can describe. And when the breeze again died away, leaving the sails idly flapping to and fro, as the schooner rocked on the swell, my imagination suggested that perhaps it might be our doom, as it had been that of others, to lie for days, nay weeks, and months, powerless in the midst of that desert latitude, shut out from the world, enclosed within the blue walls of that gigantic prison; and I shuddered, as well as I might at the very idea of such a fate.

It was now a dead calm. No perceptible agitation could be discovered on the surface of the deep, except the long undulating swell which never subsides, and which can be compared to nothing but the heavy breathing of some gigantic monster when lulled to repose. Now and then, however, a tiny ripple, occasioned by the gambols of some equally tiny inhabitant of the deep, would twinkle sharp in the starlight; while, close under the shadow of our hull, a keen eye might detect hundreds of the fairy fire-flies of the ocean, their phosphoric lanterns glittering gaily to and fro. Absorbed in the contemplation of the spectacle, I suffered more than a half hour to pass unheeded; and it was not until the sea began to be sensibly agitated, and the wind to freshen, that I looked up. The change which had come over the firmament astonished me, and requires a passing description.

When I had last looked at the heavens, the whole eastern sky was thick set with stars, though no moon had as yet appeared. Along the western seaboard still stretched the long line of pale apple green which the sun had painted in that quarter. The firmament overhead was without a cloud, its dark azure surface spangled with stars. Between the zenith and the eastern horizon hung the dark cloud which I have already mentioned, a black opaque mass of vapor apparently not larger than a capstan head. But every thing now presented a different aspect. The first thing that met my eye was the upper portion of the disc of the moon, peeping above the eastern

seaboard, the dark fiery red of its face betraying the existence of a thin mist in that direction. Fascinated by the sight I remained gazing for more than a minute on the rising luminary, as she emerged gracefully and majestically from her watery bed. At length, and apparently with an accelerated motion, she slid suddenly above the line of the horizon, pouring a line of silver light along the crests of the undulating swell, while instantaneously, as if putting on all her glory, she emerged from the mist that had surrounded her, and rolled on in pearly brightness, calm and undimmed, the stars fading before her approach. One planet alone remained visible—it was the evening star, walking in almost equal beauty, a little to the right of her sister luminary. Never before had these fine lines of Milton, in which he pictures her as leading on the choral hosts of heaven, rose so vividly before my imagination.

When I turned my gaze westward, how different the spectacle that met my eye! The little cloud which I have described, had grown to a gigantic size, and now obscured the whole larboard firmament, extending its dark and jagged front a third of the way around the horizon, and piling its gloomy masses high up toward the zenith. Here and there, where a thinner edge than usual was disclosed to the light, it caught the rays of the rising luminary which it reflected back, so that the cloud seemed lined with silver. The sea, immediately under this gloomy bank of vapor, was of the color of ink, and reminded me of the fabled waters of Acheron. The whole spectacle was calculated to fill the mind with dark and ominous forebodings; and I confess my own feelings partook of this uneasy character.

The wind was rapidly freshening; but instead of setting in steadily from any quarter, it blew in fitful gusts chopping all round the horizon. Yet it brought a delicious coolness with it, which was peculiarly refreshing after the heat of the day. The sea now began to rise, and as the dark billows heaved up in the spectral light, they wore an aspect so ghastly that I almost shuddered to look on them—an aspect, however, that was partially relieved when the unquiet puffs of air crisped their edges into silver, or rolled a sheet of crackling light along their surface. With the freshening of the wind the schooner began slowly to move ahead, but ever and anon, as the breeze died away, or struck her from a new quarter, she would settle like a log on the water, moaning as if in pain. At such times the dying cadence of the wind, wailing through the rigging, smote on the ear with strange, weird power.

'A threatening prospect,' said the skipper, approaching me, and breaking the profound silence which had reigned for several minutes, 'we shall have a tempest before long, and I fear it will be no child's play.'

'I never saw such ominous signs before. The very air seems oppressed and sick, as if it trembled at approaching ruin. Mark the faces even of our oldest veterans—they betray a vague sentiment of fear, such as I never saw on their countenances before.'

'Aye!' replied the skipper, abstractedly, for he was gazing anxiously astern, 'the cloud comes up like a race-horse. How it whirls over and over, rolling its dark masses along; it reminds me of the mountains which the old Titans, we read in school, heaved against Jove. But here am I thinking of classic fables when I ought to be taking in sail. Ho!' he exclaimed, lifting his voice, as a sharp gust, premonitory of the coming hurricane, whistled across the hamper, 'in sail—every rag!'

No time was to be lost. During the short space we had been conversing, the dark clouds astern had increased their velocity threefold, and even as the skipper spoke, the most advanced of them had overshadowed us with its sepulchral pall. As the momentary puff of air accompanying it died away, a few large heavy rain drops pattered on the deck, and then all was still again. The men sprang to their stations, at the voice of their superior, and incited to double activity by these signs of approaching danger, soon reduced our canvass until the schooner lay, with bare poles, rocking on the swell. Scarcely had this task been completed, when the gale burst on us in all its fury, roaring hissing, and howling through the rigging, and drenching us with the clouds of spray that it tore from the bosom of the deep, and bore onward to its fierce embraces. For a few minutes we could scarcely stand before the blast. The schooner groaned, and starting forward

at the first touch of the hurricane, like a steed when he feels the spur, went careering along, her tall masts curving over in the gale, and her hull shrouded in the flying spray which drove onward with even greater velocity than ourselves. In this desperate encounter with the elements, every rope and stick strained and cracked almost to breaking. All at once this hurricane died out, and then an awful stillness fell on the scene. Not a voice spoke, not a footfall was heard, scarcely a breath broke the appalling silence. The schooner rose and fell ominously on the agitated swell. Suddenly a flash of lightning played far off on the dark edges of the cloud behind us, and then followed a low hoarse growl of distant thunder. Scarcely a minute elapsed before a large rain drop fell on my face, and instantaneously, as if the heavens were opened before us, a deluge of rain rushed downwards, hissing and seething along the decks, and almost pinning us to our places; while the wind, bursting out afresh, swept wildly across the sea, and driving the spray and rain madly before it, produced a scene of confusion and tumult almost indescribable. For some minutes I could see nothing in the thick darkness which now surrounded us—could hear nothing but the roar of the hurricane and the splash of the waters. But suddenly a blinding flash shot from a cloud almost directly overhead, lighting up the deck, spars and guns, for an instant, with a supernatural glare, and striking the ocean a few fathoms distant, ploughed up the waters, which it flung in volutes of spray in every direction. Before a clock could tick, the report followed, stunning us with its deafening roar, and rattling and crackling fearfully as it echoed down the sky. Never shall I forget the ghastly looks of the men, as I beheld them in that unearthly glare. And minutes after darkness had resumed its sway, and the roar of the thunder had died in the distance, my eyes still ached with that intense light, and the crackling of the bolt rang in my ears.

Meantime the rain descended in torrents, not, however, falling vertically, but flying whistling before the hurricane. The uproar of the elements now became terrific. The thunder rattled incessantly—the wind shrieked through the hamper—every timber and spar groaned in the strife, and the deep boom of the angry surges, pursuing in our wake, sounded like the howlings of beasts of prey.

The darkness was intense, only relieved by the glare of the lightning which streamed incessantly over the scene. Whither we were going it was impossible to tell, for all control of the schooner had been given up, and we were scudding before the tempest with breathless velocity. A quarter of an hour had thus passed, when I found myself standing by the skipper, who was watching the course of the ship.

'East, by east—sou'-east,' he said, 'and driving like death. God of heaven, what a storm!'

The words had scarcely left his mouth before another peal of thunder, even more awful than the preceding one, I have described, burst overhead, and, stunning us for an instant with its terrific explosion rattled down the sky, crackling and re-crackling in its retreat, as if the firmament were crashing to its centre; it was accompanied rather than preceded by a flash, such as I had never seen before, blinding me instantaneously with its glare, and making every object swim dizzily before the brain. On the moment I felt a stunning shock, and was prostrated on the deck, while a strong smell of sulphur pervaded the atmosphere. The deluge of rain revived me, and I looked up in alarm. Good God! the foremast was in flames. We had been struck with lightning!

Quick as thought the whole horrors of our situation rose before me. We were on a pathless sea amid a raging storm. That there was little hope of extinguishing the flames was evident, for, even while these thoughts flashed through my mind, a volume of smoke puffed up through the fore-castle, and a cry ran through the decks that the whole forward part of the schooner was on fire. There was no time, however, to be lost, if we would make any effort to save ourselves, and, faint as was the hope of success, it was determined to attempt to smother the flames, by fastening down the hatches and excluding the air. But the fierce heat that filled the decks told us that the endeavor would be in vain; nor was it long before the fore-hatch was blown up with a loud explosion, while a stream of fire shot high up into the air; and, the next minute, the forked tongues had caught hold of the rigging, wrapping shrouds, ropes and yards in a sheet

of lurid flame. The rapidity with which all this occurred was incredible. It seemed as if but a minute had elapsed since that terrific bolt had burst above us, and now the whole forward part of the schooner was a mass of fire, that streamed out before the tempest like a blood red banner; showers of sparks, and even burning fragments of the wreck, flying far away ahead on the gale. There are periods, however, even of long duration, which appear to be but momentary, and so it was now. So wholly had every energy been devoted to the preservation of the ship, that the time had passed almost unnoticed, though a full half hour had elapsed since we had been struck with lightning. The storm, however, still raged as furiously as ever; for though the rain was less violent, the wind blew a hurricane, threatening to settle down into a long sustained gale. Had the torrents of water, which first drenched us, continued falling, there might have been some hope of extinguishing the flames; but the subsidence of the rain, and the unaltered violence of the wind, rendered the situation of the schooner hopeless.

'We can do nothing more, I fear,' at length said the skipper, drawing me aside, 'the fire is on the increase, and even the elements have turned against us. We must leave the little Dart to her fate, unless you can think of something else to do?' and he looked inquiringly at me.

'Alas!' I replied, with a mournful shake of my head, 'we have done every thing that mortal man can do; but in vain. We must now think of saving ourselves. Had we not better order out the boats?'

The skipper did not, for a moment, reply to my question, but stood, with his arms folded on his breast, and a face of the deepest dejection, gazing on the burning fore-castle. At length he spoke.

'Many a long day we have sailed together, in many a bold fray have we fought for each other, and now to leave you, my gallant craft, ah! little did I think this would be your doom. But God's will be done. We must all perish sooner or later, and better go down here than rot, a forgotten hulk, on some muddy shore—better consume to ashes than fall a prey to some huge cormorant of an enemy. And yet,' he continued, his eye lightening up, 'and yet I should have wished to die with you under the guns of one of those gigantic monsters—aye! die battling for the possession of your deck inch by inch.' At this instant one of the forward guns, which had become heated almost to redness in the conflagration, exploded. The sound seemed to recall him to himself. He started as if roused from a reverie, and, noticing me beside him, recollected my question. Immediately resuming his usual energy, he proceeded to order out the boats, and provide provisions and a few hasty instruments, with a calmness which was in striking contrast to the raging sea around, and the lurid fire raging on our bows.

The high discipline of the men enabled us to complete our preparations in a space of time less than one half that which would have been consumed by an ordinary crew under like circumstances; and indeed, in many cases, all subordination would have been lost, and perhaps the ruin of the whole been the consequence. The alacrity of the men and the forecast of the officers were indeed needed; for our preparations had scarcely been completed when the heat on the deck became intolerable. The fire had now reached the after hatch, and notwithstanding the violence of the gale, was extending aft with great rapidity, and had already enveloped the mainmast in its embraces. For some time before we left the schooner the heat, even at the taffel, almost scorched the skin from our faces; nor did we descend into the boats a minute too soon. This was a feat also by no means easily accomplished, so great was the agitation of the sea. As I looked on the frail boats which were to receive us, and thought of the perils which environed us, of our distance from land, and the slight quantity of provisions we had been enabled to save, I felt that, in all human probability, we should never again set foot on shore, even if we survived until morning. To my own fate I was comparatively indifferent, for life had now lost all charms to me; but when I reflected on the brave men who were to be consigned to the same destiny, and of the ties by which many of them were bound to earth—of the wives who would become widows, of aged parents who would be left childless, of children for whom the orphan's lot was preparing—the big tears gushed into my eyes, and coursed down my cheek, though unob-