

and never moved from the weather rigging——stay! once, and once only, he shot a glance at the Marmion’s poop, from under the dripping edge of his sou’-wester; and that, when Winifred Styles caressed the salt-encrusted rail—it was a piercing look at the small, white hand; his eyes seemed purposely withheld from hers—he never, even looked at Styles.

As the Marmion dropped rapidly astern, the gap in our excitement at Matson’s daring act was filled by his suddenly awakening from apathy—either assumed or real—he called the mate from his shelter, in quick, incisive tones; and while the latter was panting to windward, hurled these commands at him, like shot from a gatling gun:

“All hands on deck—shorten her right down to top-sails—see all top-sail halliards and sheets clear for letting go—hustle those Johns round Mr. Bootle!”

I took a quick glance at the sky, and found: the evil looking clouds had, at last, burst from the thralldom of the imprisoning gale and spread over the zenith like an overhanging pall, casting off from the arched edge smoke-like fragments. Astern, daylight was almost blotted out by anger-riven clouds, some stationary, some scurrying across the sky and colliding in their headlong career, emitting from the lurid impact steplike streaks of forked lightning—as yet, to us, voiceless lightning, unaccompanied by thunder; but it made more vivid and ghastly the storm-vaulted heavens—a vault paved with raging seas, rolling from under the canopy in mountains of green water, crested with foam.

We carried a good crowd that voyage; not runners, picked up in Newcastle, but honest, deep-water sailormen. They must have known we were racing another and more deadly foe; for they stripped that ship as if she had been making the home port, instead of fighting for safety in mid-ocean. But, for all that, it was a dead heat—the hurricane fell upon us just as the last sail was put under the gaskets.

There was a sudden dropping of the gale, which had carried us on the storm-front—a squaring of yards, in the midst of a turmoil of waters, that pitched and

tossed the Whitkirk as if she had been mere froth on the surface of the ocean. I remember, the after yards were squared, but the fore, still braced up—the men were struggling to get to the fore braces—when Matson sprung into the rigging, simultaneously yelling:

“Look out!!”

Intuitively, I ducked my head, and clung to the wheel with all my strength. Next moment, I felt the Whitkirk’s stern rise to a mountainous sea, and stagger in the rising; then, all was blank, save for a partial sense of suffocation and a rending, tearing force at my arm. When I recovered my wits, Matson was pulling me from under the wheel-box, where the sea had wedged me, hard and fast. I saw, that he kept one hand on the wheel, and I looked in a dazed way for the Swede, but his place was vacant; the sea had swept the ship from end to end and carried him to a viking’s death, only a shred of oilskin, fluttering on the jigger rigging, disclosed the way of his passing.

“Get to the weather wheel,” hissed Matson in my ear, at the same time almost lifting me round to the other side.

As I raised my arms and clasped the spokes, only the fol’sl head and poop deck were visible; all between, was a turmoil of angry waters; in which, wreckage from galley, boats, and deck mixed indiscriminately with my shipmates in their endeavour to reach comparative safety in the rigging. Matson pulled the mate over the break of the poop, against which the backwash had flung him. Then he came aft to me and said:

“Keep her dead before the sea, Wilson!”

I answered: “Aye! Aye! Sir,” and knew I had passed from boyhood to the threshold of manhood—five minutes before, he would have called me ‘boy!’.

The wind suddenly died down and, for a moment, ceased to blow; then, just as suddenly, it jumped back with re-doubled fury to the old quarter, filling our fore top-sails, striking the after sails flat aback. I looked at Matson, for I felt she was losing steering way, but he had gripped the rigging again and was look-