

THE LAST MAN.

BY A SEAFARER.

A small iron, full-rigged ship was in latitude 10 degrees north of the equator, outward bound for a New Zealand port. The sun would be setting in an hour; already his disk was rayless and of a dark and angry gold, and his reflection lay in a broad and waving dazzle upon the western swell. A pleasant draught of air, blowing softly over the port quarter, had kept the lighter canvas sleeping all the afternoon, but the lower sails hung up and down, and, as the ship leaned upon the gentle undulations, the tender swinging of their folds wafted cool currents over the fevered decks, as though some gigantic punkah-wallah, perched aloft, were fanning the ship. The deep blue of the sea, scarcely wrinkled by the breeze, stretched around, and the water-line was like an azure cincture clasped, where the glory of the sun hung, by a plate of gold; but over the side the water was of an exquisite transparent green, in which you could see the metal hull of the vessel wavering till a bend hid it, and it was enough to possess a man, half-blinded with the heat that came off the brassy glare under the sun, with a calenture to look into the glass-like emerald profound, and to think of the coolness and sweetness to be got by a lazy floating in the serene surface of that fathomless depth. All the afternoon it had been blowing a soft air, with now and again a stronger fold that came out of the northeast with a parching taste in it that might have made it pass for the expiring breath of a rush of atmospheric heat from some blast-furnace hidden behind the sea; but one felt that the draughts could not long outlast the sinking of the sun, whose ardency was slowly sucking out all life from the air. Already in the south the water-line ruled the deep violet of the sky with a burnished surface, betwixt which and the heavens there was a trembling of heat in which the blue swam to a height of four or five degrees. Just where that tremulous appearance was you saw a shining speck, the topmast sails of a ship disconnected by refractions from the rest of the fabric; they looked through the glass like kites flying in the air; and if there was anything in this world to emphasize the vast expanse of the ocean it was those tiny points of canvas when one came to think how small a handful of miles was needful to sink the big vessel out of sight, to render invisible a hull full of people perhaps, and loaded with cargo of a value sufficient to render a thousand poor families happy and independent for life ashore. Still the breeze continued blowing softly as the sun sank. There were wrinkles round the stem of the little iron clipper, and the surface of the green clearness over the side was strewn with bubbles that gleamed like emeralds and diamonds and rubies between the shadow of the ship and the light off the sea as they veered slowly astern into the languid, iridescent wake. It was a pretty sight to peer from under the short awning to up aloft, and mark the stunsails spreading further and further as they descended, till the reflection of the great white square of cloths stretched by the swinging-boom shone like a sheet of silver under the black spar; and whenever the ship lifted to the swell there would come from aloft a sound of pattering reef-points and the quiet beating of butlines and the low clatter of rope against rope, which, with the aid of the brook-like murmur of the rippling water at the bows, might have passed for a stirring of fallen leaves disturbed in their shady place by a sudden passage of wind betwixt the dark trunks of trees and over the cool turf.

It was the second dog-watch. No work was doing, and the heat was too great for any kind of diversion. One saw a number of open-breasted, mossy-bosomed sea-

men overhanging the fore-castle rail, pipe in mouth, with drowsy eyes sleepily looking away into the blue distance, whilst a low throaty murmur of voices floated aft from forward, where the black cook, standing in the galley door, was arguing with a Dutch sailor. There was a farm-yard noise, too, of muttering hens, mixed with the routing and grubbing grunt of a pig or two, and a strange eastern bird, secured by the leg, was clawing with beak and talons up and down a fathom or two of forestay, whilst in a hoarse sea-note he'd sing out now and again: "Sail ho! bless my eyes! bear a hand! sail ho!" right aft on the quarter deck, visible from the weather side of the fore-castle under the lifted clew of the mainsail, stood the helmsman gripping the wheel, and gnawing upon a quid in his cheek, with many a roll of his gleaming eyes aloft and then into the compass-bowl and then upon the sea; the brightness came off the water in a scarlet tremble upon his figure, and often he would tip his Scotch cap on the back of his head to pass the length of his arm from the wrist to the elbow over his streaming brow. The captain, a red-faced man in a straw hat, and with a Manilla cheroot in his mouth, paced the deck from the mizzen rigging to the taff-rail; the chief mate, who had charge of the watch, walked in the gangway, and the second mate, seated on the main hatch, was emptying his third and last sooty pipe. Slowly the sun sank, brightening out the heavens to far beyond the zenith into an amazing glory of scarlet and red and orange, melting into a sulphurous tinge that died out into a delicate green sky, which in its turn deepened into blue and violet and indigo where the ocean met it in the east, with a star or two glistening where the lovely hue was deepest. A tropical evening, indeed; and you saw the silver speck of the hidden ship's sails trembling above the horizon and catching the farwell ray of the setting luminary whose light went slipping level to it from the brow of one swell to another until it was like a drop of blood in color and hung like the red lamp of a distant lighthouse, though the ashen eastern shadow closed down upon it swiftly, and melted it into thin, gray air, while the loftiest of our own clipper's sails were still on fire with the rich hectic of the west, and the ropes, like gold wire, and the greased topgallant and royal masts, and whatever else showed a polished surface up aloft, twinkling with ruby stars. Darkness swiftly follows the descent of the sun in these parallels; there was no twilight, and the night lay in a dusky spangled fold in the east ere the sun had fairly trailed the skirts of his golden robe off the low-down western sky. The moon would not rise for another two hours; but the darkness and the coolness were wonderfully sweet after the long spell of roasting daylight. The dew fell till the stars made pearly flakes of it upon the rails and skylights; and the gentle breeze still blew, though with an ever-waning breath. The ripples now ran in lines of fire from the ship's bow, and strange green shadows, like the vapor rising from melted tin, brightened and dimmed in cloudy puffs in the slants of the inky swells, and you saw tendrils and stalks and leaves of phosphoric radiance eddying in the holes of the ship's wake, and glimmering along the lines which marked the breadth of the ebony path she was sailing along. Then in armies the stars overran the velvet-black heavens, with planets shining in blues and greens, and dropping points of quicksilver into the dark waters, whilst above them the glittering dust of countless worlds lay thick as sand, and often a narrow space of the vast dome would flash out in radiance to the bursting of a meteor, whose momentary bright shining would seem to find an echo, so to speak, in a dim violet glare of lightning down in the southeast.

Two bells—9 o'clock—were struck; one heard the ringing chimes hollowly thrown downward out of the sails. A dead calm

had fallen, the ship lay in a deep slumber upon the gently breathing bosom of the ocean, and nothing seemed awake but the throbbing stars. Not above four miles had been measured since the darkness came down, and now that the night was breathless, with a threat of cat's-paws—on no account to be neglected—on either bow and all around, the captain gave instructions for the sternsails to be taken in and stowed away out of the road of such boxhauling of the yards as might be necessary. This made the ship lively for awhile with the running about and the racing aloft of naked-footed mariners; but presently all was silence again, the captain below taking a glass of grog, the second mate quietly pacing the deck aft, the watch coiled up anywhere for a snooze, a single figure erect on the fore-castle, and the sea like a mirror full of starlight, yet so dark that it was like looking through a haze at the luminaries over the water-line. Three bells were struck, and scarcely had the last vibration died when the second mate hailed the fore-castle: "Forward there! is there anybody singing below?" "Nobody singing here, sir," came back the answer promptly. "Nonsense, man! There's someone singing somewhere below forward, I tell you. Put your head into the scuttle and listen." There was a pause, and presently back came the reply: "All's still in the fore-castle, sir. There's no singing in this part of the ship." The second mate walked up to the fellow at the wheel: "Did you hear a man's voice singing just now, before the bell was struck?" "Yes, sir." "Didn't the sound come from forward?" "It seemed like it," answered the helmsman. "Hush! there it is again," cried the second mate, raising his hand and stretching his head forward, with his ear bent toward the fore-castle. The sound was distinct enough—it was that of a husky voice singing—but at a distance that made the notes as thin and vibratory as the twanging of a jew's-harp heard from afar. It ceased, and was followed by a faint, unearthly laugh, that died out at the moment, when a sudden shivering flap of the canvas up in the darkness seemed like a shudder passing through the ship. "There's someone singing and laughing away out ahead here, sir!" shouted the man on the fore-castle, in a voice that made one suspect he felt his loneliness at that moment. "What the dickens can it be, and where does it come from?" exclaimed the second mate, stepping to the rail and looking over. He peered and peered, but the night lay dark upon the water, spite of the starlight, and no deeper shadow stood anywhere upon the glooming surface to indicate the presence of a vessel in the neighborhood. "Forward there!" he shouted; "do you see anything?" "Nothing, sir." The watch on deck, aroused by this hailing, and gathering its import, clambered on the bulwarks to look around, and the captain, hearing the second mate's voice, came up from the cabin. "What's the matter?" he asked. "There's been a sound of singing and a kind of laughing following—coming from somewhere ahead, sir," responded the second mate. The captain went to the side and took a long look. "Pooh! pooh!" he exclaimed, "it must have been your fancy, sir. Singing and laughing? Why, were any vessel near enough for us to hear such noise, we should be bound to see her." He was walking over to the compass. "There, sir, you have it now!" cried the second mate. Once again the same thin, wailing, singing, borrowing a supernatural character from the darkness, came faint but clear to the ship, followed as before, by the same reedy, croaking laugh. "By heaven, Mr. Burton, it's no fancy!" exclaimed the captain, wheeling swiftly around. "But is it a human voice, think you? If so, where in mercy's name can it come from? I say, my lads," calling to the men staring over the bulwarks, "I've seen anything?" "Nothing at all, sir, though the sound's plain

enough," was the answer, delivered in a tone full of awe. Suddenly a dim, luminous, gray haze floated up into the eastern sky; it brightened into yellow and then into a kind of a sullen faded red; and in a few moments the upper limb of the moon jutted up, a pale crimson, with a light that made an indigo line of the horizon under her, and as she soared one saw the wake she left trembling in dull gold along the withering ebony of the swell, till, shooting clear of the deep, with a broadening of delicate lustre around her that quenched the stars there, she shot her level crimson beam at the ship, whose sails took the tinge of feverish radiance, and stood out in phantasmal spaces of mystical light against the darkness and the stars. But speedily transmuting her copper into silver, the luminary threw out a fairy radiance that, flowing to the westernmost sea-line, showed the circle dark and clear all round, and scarcely was her bland and beautiful illumination fairly kindled when a dozen voices shouted: "There's a boat out there on the starboard bow!" "Hush!" cried the captain; and amid the silence there stole down yet again to the awed and astonished listeners the wild, mysterious singing of a man's voice, followed by a peal of laughter. "Well, whatever it may prove, it must be overhauled," said the captain. "Mr. Burton, called some hands aft to lower away one of the quarter-boats, and go you and see who it is that's singing and laughing away out here in the middle of the ocean." In a few minutes the boat was pulling away for the dark object to the left of the moon's reflection.

The watch below had turned out and a crowd of seamen awaited with burning curiosity the issue of this singular encounter. "It'll be no man's voice as raised that there chantey," said one of the oldest, and presumably one of the most ignorant among them, as they overhung the rail. "If I'd been in the old man's place ye might ha' turned to and boiled me afore yon'd ha' got me to send a boat to it." "Why, what d'ye think it is Bill?" inquired another. "Think! I don't think at all. 'Taint my business to think. But d'ye s'pose," replied the old man, "that any mortal being with intellects inside him, such as you and me's got, 'ud turn to and sing songs—and I desay comic songs, for what should set him larfin'?"—in a hopen boat at this here hour of the night, two or three thousand miles away from land? You bet old Bill knows what he's a talkin' about when he says that if what's come across in that there boat turns out mortal he'll swaller the biggest pair o' sea-boots that's knock-in' about the fore-castle." Awed by the old sailor's prophetic croaking, to which years of rum and hard weather had communicated a forbidding, sepulchral note, the others fell into deep silence, straining their eyes in the direction of the boats. A half-hour passed before they approached the ship, during which the seamen had been startled by many hoarse and dreadful cries proceeding from the advancing boats, intermixed with shrill and savage laughter, and wild shouts delivered in accents the mariners could not make head nor tail of. "Well," cried the captain, when the boats were within hail, "what is it you have come across, Mr. Burton?" "A raving lunatic, sir," answered the mate. "He's a Spaniard, I think. There's a dead boy in the bottom of his boat that I reckon to be his son. He's been shipwrecked apparently, and there's nothing to eat or drink along with him that we can find. It was now seen that two of the crew were on the madman's boat holding him. As they drew alongside the wretched maniac began to rave fearfully, sometimes breaking off to sing some weird, tuneless song, then bursting into accents full of heart-breaking entreaty, and afterward wrestling furiously with two men who had hold of him making, the boat sway her gunwales, and uttering shriek after shriek. It was as terrible a scene as ever the moon shone down upon,