

Tom's Yarn.

A TALE OF ENTERPRISING YOUNG CANADA.

By SPRIGGINS.

To the enthusiastic yachtsman there are few feelings so utterly hopeless as those engendered during the monotony of a dead calm. The even roll of the vessel, the limp, dejected flag, the slack sail, each contributes its small quota in the vast accumulation of misfortunes that so vexes his eager soul. With our small party it was particularly noticeable; they were, with one sad exception, deep in rueful regrets—sweet vain longings for the unattainable. Most fond were the pictures recalled of distant homes and domestic circles, of friends and parents. The solitary exception was one who, on account of his being a landlubber and unused to go down to the sea in ships, had been written on the articles as General Utility Man, to wit: your humble scribe and servant! He was prostrate on a bunk in the cabin. The steady, ceaseless roll of the yacht had brought him to a state of most abject misery. He prayed vaguely for death—anything to end the horrible sufferings he experienced. Forgive him, gentle reader, for he was so reduced as to be but the shade of his normal self. Virtue, pride, manhood, all had gone out of him, and but the outer crust, the empty shell, of his former grand and wholly brave individuality remained.

The cook had brought a mattress and cushion out of the cabin, in defiance of orders, and lay thereon, puffing moodily at a disreputable corn-cob pipe. The able-bodied seaman reclined forward on a rug, his face upturned and his hands clasped behind the back of his head, staring vacantly at the sky in a state of shameless collapse.

The skipper alone bore up bravely through it all. He sat exposed to the hot sun, holding the tiller more, as he had to confess, for the sake of example than because he had any hope of making the vessel answer her helm. Though he perspired freely, like a true sailor he stuck manfully to his duty.

There, you have the four who comprised the complement of souls on board the yacht *Spray*. Three stalwart Canadians, hale and hearty, and one ditto citizen of the Great Union, temporarily indisposed.

The three Canadians underwent all the tortures of blighted hopes and plans disarranged on account of the dead calm. The citizen of the Great Union also suffered, but he did not care a continental about their plans disarranged, etc.

Discipline was at an end. The skipper was not only regarded without due deference, he was openly reviled and threatened with vague but dire vengeance by the exasperated crew. He it was who had proposed the expedition, and inveigled us into joining it by anticipating, in glowing language, the pleasure and excitement in prospect if we consented to accompany him on board his yacht. Alas! we listened to his insinuating address, believed his sweet-spoken promise, and, in an evil hour, consented to come.

From the small village of Pointe-au-Pic, on the Lower St. Lawrence, we set sail one bright August day. There was a good westerly wind blowing, and the *Spray* moved out from her moorings near the wharf amid the plaudits of an admiring crowd, assembled there to witness the arrival of the Quebec steamer. Presently we responded to their salutations as we sped bravely off before the wind.

We proposed to reach Tadoussac during the night, spend the following day there, then cross to the south shore to visit Cacouna and Kamouraska before returning. How true is the saying, "Man proposes, but God disposes!"

In about two hours' time the wind died out, and the broad sheet of water quickly became perfectly smooth, save for a horrible undulating swell, which continued throughout, causing the little craft to roll with a sickening motion, much resembling that of the pendulum of a clock in its unchanging, ceaseless regularity.

The skipper was naturally rather discouraged; he felt the responsibility of his position. His eloquence had long since been exhausted, and so had his resources. The wind positively refused to be wooed. The cook darkly hinted at the possibility of a Jonah being on board, and suggested that the inoffensive and suffering scribe be subjected to a strict examination, but the libellous insinuation was not followed up.

But, and may Allah reward him for it, a bright idea occurred to the skipper.

"I say, Tom," he called out, "what was that story I heard about a queer experience you had on the Montreal boat? Give it us now, like a good fellow, to while away the time."

Tom, the cook before alluded to, was a youth of pronounced depths of dissimulation. His melancholy countenance and quaint querulous speech masked as gay, reckless and pleasure-loving a nature as was to be found amongst the many untamed young students of McGill University, Montreal. But withal he had an undercurrent of good in him struggling untiringly to assert itself, though seldom succeeding, alas!

He puffed on at his pipe meditatively a moment before replying. Then, in a sad, plaintive tone he said: "Captain, that is unfair; it is even ungentlemanly? You seduce me into joining what promises to become an indefinitely prolonged cruise in this miserable little tub of yours, whence there is no escape. You have already degraded me by conferring on me a menial title which will involve me by setting to at hard, uncongenial manual labour. And now you would amuse yourself, forsooth, by having me reveal a cherished secret, and at the same time relate mine

own misfortune. I refuse sir," and he settled his head more comfortably on the cushion with an air of determination.

But the able-bodied seaman, roused to animation at the prospect of a yarn, basely forsook his fellow-rebel. Tom's stories were famous amongst his friends. He had a peculiar propensity for fitting in the most awkward situations, which was only equalled by the droll exaggerated account he gave of the same when he could be induced to gratify his friends.

The A. B. and the captain waxed persuasive, they begged and they threatened, all in vain! Despite their eloquence, Tom remained obdurate. Finally they resorted to force. His mattress was pulled from under him, the skipper threw himself upon his prostrate form and, unmindful of struggles and protestations, held his arms, whilst the able-bodied seaman laboured him with the cushion. This stern treatment soon brought him to reason. Then a bottle of claret was procured and three glasses filled, one of which was offered as a bribe. Tom regarded the refreshment with a longing eye. He held out his hand, which was released for the purpose by his captor, but the glass was withdrawn. "Promise to give us the yarn, or not a drop do you get," declared the A. B. sternly.

"And this is friendship," quoth the unhappy prisoner, waving his hand skyward; but it was again seized by the skipper and pinioned down to the deck. "Well, I will tell you the story. Give me the claret first, though."

The invalid had been attracted to the deck when the scuffle begun. At least his pale, woe-begone face was visible peering at them above the companion-way, and, after a short palaver, he was prevailed upon to venture further, though not without misgivings. A strong dose of brandy was next administered, and the bulky son of Neptune stood over him with such a threatening crest that, recalling the treatment of the unfortunate cook, he rallied and declared quickly that he felt quite well.

Thereupon all prepared for Tom's yarn. I cannot hope to do it justice writing, as I do, from memory alone. His style was inimitable, and, of course, it is impossible to set down his manner and the whimsical seriousness of his expression, which at times grew so absurdly puzzling that, for the life of you, you could not say "here he jests, or here he is really moved to earnestness." Probably he could not have told himself. Tom is, in truth, just the man to be the hero of an adventure; he has the rare gift of telling a story well. His own words move him as he speaks, and he is carried away to such an extent that he enters into the spirit of them, casting from him all other thoughts, except that of telling and acting the part he has taken upon himself for the time. We quite forgot our disappointments and ills as the story proceeded. As he, in his clear, flexible voice, with his grotesquely impressive face, expressed himself moved, even so were we moved. For the time we were the servants of his will, and the servitude was by no means one at which the soul rebelled. Finally, at the conclusion, when we had recovered from the laughter into which we were thrown by the ridiculous *dénouement*, a vote of thanks was tendered him with hearty unanimity. Truly a great art is that of the accomplished yarn spinner! And, O Thomas, my friend, thou wilt do great deeds some day, the world will certainly hear more of thee. When time has toned down that youthful frivolity, and the stern purpose of the man directs those keen wits of thine, will not that clear sounding voice be heard again, and yet again, and will not men listen unto it spellbound, even as we three did on board the *Spray*? I trow it will, I trow they will.

Tom sipped his claret a moment, regarding with mock reproach his grinning and expectant audience, then he began

HIS STORY.

"I was returning home from a trip up the river. Jack May, another McGill man, and myself had been off together spending part of the vacation among the great lakes. We saw that stupendous marvel of Nature's grandeur—the Niagara Falls. We lingered amongst the Thousand Islands, saw and admired, as others have done and will continue to do. And in our own peculiar way, according to our lights, we were happy and highly satisfied with our trip. But ere we reached the protecting shelter of our homes a misfortune befell us. We were obliged to wait over a day in Montreal, and there encountered some college men, who insisted upon helping us to put in the time. Their intentions were doubtless good intentions, and did credit alike to their hospitality and their regard for us as fellow-students on vacation. But they over-reached themselves; they entertained us too well. Indeed, I dare surmise that had it not been for their flattering attentions I should not now be relating this tale of woe. However, *verbum sap.*"

In the evening we were escorted down to the Quebec boat, by which our passage was booked, and sent off in a most inspiring manner. I forget exactly what became of Jack. I know he was by my side on the after deck waving his hat in response to the farewell shouts of our late companions as the boat moved off; but after that he disappeared. Probably he retired, like a wise youth, to his stateroom.

I was, however, in a more wakeful and enterprising humour. Turning to observe my fellow-passengers, I was attracted by a pair of bright laughing eyes. The owner, a young girl, was seated opposite me. She made a beautiful picture, with the sinking sun for a background—an artistic setting of glorious light outlining her graceful little figure. There was a faint soft breeze blowing, which moved some loose tresses of hair about her temples. And

the gleam from the sunset, as it glanced from her small shapely head, seemed to form a halo of golden light behind it. I can see her now! Indeed I often see her, both in my dreams and when I am awake. But, ah! she will never, to my eyes at least, appear so irresistibly attractive as she was at that first meeting. Had I been an artist I would have longed to sketch her! Had I been a poet I would immediately have strung my impassioned lay to the fitful rustling of those tresses of soft brown hair at her temples! Being neither artist nor poet, I struck an attitude. I tilted my hat the least bit over one eye, leaned against the deck railing, fingered my watch-chain with my right hand, caressed the down on my upper lip with my left, and smiled at her. The attitude was not exactly unstudied; but, as it had answered admirably on former occasions, I had great confidence in it. And apparently it was deserving of my good opinion, for she returned my smile. She beamed upon me, this bright goddess of the midsummer sunset!

It is useless to linger over that scene; it was indescribable. I don't think I am more impressionable than the ordinary run, but her glance did thrill me unspeakably. I gazed enthralled! Her face had a queer fascination for me, and it seemed, somehow, that I had known it before. Have you ever, in the dreary silence of a sleepless night, shut your eyes to hide the oppressive gloom which appals your nervous senses with its dread impenetrable blackness, and then seen a loving and lovely face, familiar yet unknown? You stare at it enraptured, start up with wide extended arms and eyes glowing with responsive love, and behold it is gone. Have you, perchance, gazed upon some beautiful painting of a female face, and as you, admiring, shift your position to get it in a better light, you catch a glimpse of something that stirs you, you cannot tell what? A brief vague impression that has vanished before its presence is realized. In vain you seek for it again, it is gone. Have you experienced these conceptions? No. Well, neither have I. But, if I had, they would have affected me exactly as the girl's face did.

Judge then as to the feeling with which I gazed upon her. Were they, I ask, deserving of vulgar contempt? Alas! it shows how gross are the minds of men when that state of high wrought, sublime ecstasy but served to amuse such of the passengers as observed it.

One man in particular I noticed, at length, was regarding me with intense interest. He was laughing and, it appeared, making vile brutal jokes at my expense. It was a great, fat, overdressed youth, and he was simply convulsed. His bloated cheeks were purple with suppressed mirth. I happened to meet his eye and, even to my entranced senses, the cause of his merriment was manifest. Down I came to earth with surprising rapidity; my head swam with the sudden shock of my descent, and my blood boiled with ire. I assumed instantly my most imposing air and frowned truculently. Would I not punish this insolent churl that dared to thrust his vulgar jibes in between me and one who was as far superior to me as I flattered myself I was to him? Most assuredly. No brave knight in the days of chivalry burned more ardently for the fray than I did for the oily gore of that stout scoffer. For a space his fate hung in the balance, then my cooler judgment, with a regard for the fitness of things, triumphed over the honest indignation of a brave heart outraged. I contented myself with scowling my sentiments; and indeed the effect of that was enough. The fat youth became suddenly intensely grave and looked rather sheepish. He shifted uneasily under my eye. At length I released him from its magnetism and stalked off with a triumphant theatrical stride to a remote corner, where, seating myself on a chair, I leaned my elbows on the railing and stared moodily over it into the waters.

How unsympathetic people are! Oh, the world, the horrible, vulgar world! I yearned for the grand old days of belted knights, rearing war horses and distressed princesses. The progressive roar of the nineteenth century, with its steam engines, its factories, its electric marvels, and all the thousand and one other signs of advancement were, for the moment, to me as naught compared to those free, unfettered days of yore. Then, if a man offended you, you straightway cut him down with your own good sword, and there was an end to it. This train of thought led me on to speculate as to how I should deal with the object of my present wrath under such circumstances. In fancy, I had placed his generous figure on a vicious prancing steed, put a lance in his hand, and girt his fat proportions with a suit of armour. With the most bloodthirsty intent I pictured myself opposing him, also mounted, mail-clad, with lance in rest. I had just unhorsed him, and was proceeding with the utmost *sangfroid* to deprive the craven wretch of his unworthy life when a hand was placed softly on my shoulder, and a sweet voice murmured something, I know not what—sweet entreating, perhaps, to stay my avenging arm. I turned, and— Yes, it was she, the vision of benign beauty; the cause of my present combat! I arose all dazed, trying to collect my wandering wits.

"So happy," I mumbled; "mercy is the province of the fair—that is, I mean, er—er—," and my voice died away in an inarticulate murmur as I realized that this was the nineteenth century, and that no foeman lay ignominiously humbled beneath my conquering blade. This revealed the state of affairs to me in another and equally dramatic light.

The young lady regarded me strangely a moment, came forward a step impulsively, then stopped short laughing as I retreated.

(To be continued.)