

MISSING AT EIGHT BELLS.

"I shan't trouble yer long, Williams, replied Christiansen, shaking his head wearily. "I shan't trouble yer long." Then, turning to Jimmy, he murmured, "Thank ye, young man—and may God bless you, and send ye a friend at the end. I'm a dying man—a dying man—and ugh! it's terrible to think of death in this place."

Jimmy's eyes involuntarily followed those of the sick man around the squalid, ill-ventilated den in which they lived, and he shuddered. The word "death" seemed to have a sudden and new significance for him.

The next day Christiansen was very much worse, and it became evident that he could not possibly recover. His condition was reported to the captain, who saw the sick man and gravely pronounced his complaint to be "played out"—a modern disease, which, though not specifically recognized by the medical faculty, is the cause of death in thousands of cases in this age of restless activity. The majority of men do not pass through life nowadays; they wear it out.

The captain administered some strengthening medicine to his patient and ordered the second steward to attend to his necessities and give him nourishing diet and such delicacies as the ship's *cuisine* could afford. The steward, when he had received these orders, and instructed the "doctor" accordingly, confided his opinion to that worthy, that Christiansen would never rise from his bed alive. "I know," he said, "when it's Davy Jones's locker. The 'old man' never wastes luxuries upon a man that's got a chance of recovery. 'It's only when it's all up with a man that he likes to make the end comfortable like, and send him away with a full stomach. It lightens his conscience."

Jimmy voluntarily took the care of Christiansen, and often gave up his much-needed rest to cheer the sufferer with a little conversation and encouragement. He also occasionally read a chapter of the Bible aloud to him, carefully selecting such passages as were particularly full of the divine love and the inspiration of grace and atonement. He did not stop here; he was very practical in his ideas of extending human sympathy, and he suggested to the bos'un that he might perform Christiansen's duties aloft, hoping thereby to lessen the ill will which was perceptibly growing against the poor, helpless old man. The bos'un spoke to the mate on the subject, and, to Jimmy's great joy, the request was acceded to, and he was put in the "starboard" watch. He was very muscular and agile, and in a few weeks succeeded in becoming a fairly good "top-man."

During this time Christiansen lingered on. He seldom murmured, but he was in a very despondent frame of mind, and could not arouse himself. He was very grateful to Jimmy for his kind attention and words of hope and comfort, and when he heard his step on the ladder his eyes brightened, and the grip around his heart seemed to loosen, but he felt that his end was fast approaching, and a dull void in his soul imbued him with a horrible fear of it. It monopolized his thoughts, and a settled gloom fell upon him. When Jimmy was away on deck he would lie and moan. "Death, death, death!" and then turn his face upon the pillow, only to hear the word still ringing in his ear like a knell. Like that of most of his class, his life had been anything but irreproachable, and he dreaded the inevitable accounting to which in our turn we all have to submit.

Jimmy had not read Scripture for his own edification since he left his mother's knee, but as he progressed in his reading for his unfortunate companion, he became deeply interested personally, and he began to dimly perceive that even for him, miserable, nameless outcast that he was, there was a possibility of redemption. He had been a godless, selfish, foolish scamp all his life—a ne'er-do-well—but as he read the glorious gospel of hope, preached in old Palestine eighteen hundred years before, he became conscious of a change in his heart. His brain was crowded with new aspirations and grand resolutions to make the world better for his having lived in it, and often the text would swim before his eyes, and he would clasp the sick man's outstretched palm in a grasp which spoke worlds for both and seemed to clear away for a moment the clouds fast gathering around the dying man's path.

One day in the "dog-watch" Jimmy slipped down in the fore-castle to see if his patient needed anything, and found it vacated, except by Christiansen and Williams, who was in his bunk apparently fast asleep. Christiansen appeared to have rallied somewhat the previous evening, and Jimmy was therefore considerably shocked when he looked towards the berth and saw the sick man's face with the hue of death overspreading it. The cheery greeting froze upon his lips, and something very like a moan of anguish escaped them. Within the past few weeks he had bestowed the human sympathies, so long pent up in his heart, upon this unfortunate old man, and although he had expected the inevitable, now that he actually stood, as it were, in the very presence of death, his heart sank within him. It seemed as if all that bound him to his new-born better self were leaving him with the sufferer's last painful gasps for life.

The silence was unbroken save by the occasional foot-falls on the deck above and the ceaseless plash, plash of the water against the sides of the vessel, as it rolled almost on a level with the open ports.

Jimmy laid his hand upon the damp brow, and bending his mouth down to the pillow, he whispered:

"Christiansen! Christiansen! for God's sake speak to me—speak to me." He broke down, and a great sob that almost choked him in his efforts to repress it, burst from his lips.

Christiansen opened his eyes and, smiling with an evident effort, said: "Is that you, Jimmy?" Then, with terrible earnestness, "Thank God! you've come. I thought I should die alone—alone." The listener gave his hand a slight pressure in gentle contradiction. He could not trust himself to speak.

"No, don't trouble to fetch the skipper," continued Christiansen, reading the unspoken question in Jimmy's eyes and feebly retaining him as he half rose. "He can do no good. It's come—I can't shirk it—God help me!"

Then after a pause: "Listen, I have something to tell you before I die. I may not have time to tell it. Can you listen and pray for me at the same time! I've tried to pray but I can't."

Another pause for breath.

"I was supposed to be asleep last night while your watch was on deck and I heard 'em talking together. I listened and—"

"Yes?"

"Sh! speak under your breath. He—" looking in the direction of the sleeper, "he's one of the ringleaders. There is going to be a mutiny aboard this ship the first dark night that comes."

"Are you certain of this?"

"Quite. They are all in it 'cept the bos'un and yourself. The second steward is in the swim, too. Beware of him. If they ever get to the stores and rum, God help this ship. I've told ye. I've done my duty for the last time. Oh, my God! the last time."

A long silence intervened, during which the dying man lay with closed eyes, blanched face and trembling, colourless lips, in that state of semi-quietude which is the precursor of the eternal stillness.

Suddenly he started up in his bunk with the energy which often comes at the last moment, on the brink, as it were, of the soul's plunge into eternity.

"Jimmy,"—his voice was hardly articulate, and his eyes all at once assumed a glossy appearance—"Jimmy—where are you? It is dark—dark. Keep near me now, Jimmy." His grasp loosened upon the other man's wrist, and he fell back.

A few moments of suspense, that were a century of intense mental anguish to the silent watcher, and then Christiansen was dead.

The captain took possession of Christiansen's kit next day in order to prevent the crew from stealing the few trifling articles it contained. His body was sewn up in a hammock, weighted with iron, and consigned to the deep in the afternoon. When the skipper, who read the burial service over the remains, uttered the words "Commit his body to the deep," and the hammock slid slowly from the board into the sea with a heavy splash, Jimmy bent his head upon the rail, and sobbed for a moment. It was his only exhibition of grief. But the past few weeks had completely changed him. His spirit was chastened and strengthened, and that last parting with his poor friend was written in his brain in undying love and pity.

III.

According to the popular superstition still prevailing among seamen, now that the sharks were appeased with the body of their late comrade there should have been a spell of fine weather. Such, however was not the case. The weather still continued to be nasty, and the conspirators had not long to wait for an opportunity to accomplish their design, or make the attempt.

On the night of the second day following Christiansen's burial, there was not a vestige of a moon. It was, however, comparatively fine, a heavy gale of wind having been experienced all the fore and afternoon, and was a splendid opportunity for the discontents to overpower the officer on watch and seize the ship before the captain and the rest of officers realized the situation.

Jimmy guessed that it was probably their intention to strike at once, and, creeping stealthily up the poop ladder, he approached Mr. Gates, who was in charge.

"Who's that?"

"Sh! It's me, sir, Jimmy. I want to have a word with you, but for Heaven's sake speak low." He got quite close to the mate's ear, and in a few hurried words acquainted him of the danger he feared.

"Are you sure about this?" enquired the mate.

"Christiansen told me on his death-bed. He would not lie."

"Then, by —, they shall have a mutiny," muttered Mr. Gates with concentrated hate in his voice. "Step down quietly to the captain's berth and inform him of this. Tell him and the other officers to slip up here unobserved. I cannot leave the poop."

Captain Bowslaugh's berth was at the end of the saloon. Jimmy noticed a dark form outside, and as he pulled the saloon door open, the light from within streamed out in the darkness with a dim uncertainty, sufficiently strong, however, to reveal the second steward lounging against the rails of the pantry window.

"Wal?" said the steward interrogatively, as if demanding by what right a man from before the mast entered his own particular domain.

"Wal?" repeated Jimmy in a tone of quiet aggressiveness, and he passed in, without another word.

The steward was about to follow when he heard the voice of the mate just over the break of the poop saying, "Here, Ikey, I want you a moment," and, inwardly furious, Ikey was obliged to obey the summons. In another moment he lay on the deck, gagged and pinioned. He was taken by surprise and was secured without the least alarm being given to his comrades.

When "eight bells" struck, the port watch came up to relieve the starboard watch, and the whole crew mustered under the break of the poop, as customary, to answer to the roll-call. This is a duty generally left to the officer of the last watch, and often the officer of the watch coming on duty does not appear until it is over. The men stood about in groups, and there was a good deal of significant whispering among them. This was evidently the moment chosen for the revolt.

After Mr. Gates had called the roll the men did not disperse. It is usual for the members of the watch below, as they answer their names, to go right off to bed, but the men seemed to linger like school-boys wishing to prefer some request, but afraid to open the question. At length Captain Bowslaugh, who was thought to be asleep in his berth, leaned over the break of the poop and said, with clever dissimulation, "Now, boys, lively there for'ard. Starboard watch below."

It was rather a shock to the men to discover that the skipper was on deck, but a man named Dennis, who had been appointed to act as spokesman, replied in what he considered terms of wily diplomacy:

"Well, cap'n, I've been made speaker of this 'ere informal meeting, and would like a talk with you. What we want is less hazing, more grub and—"

"Really. Is that all?" interrupted the captain with a mocking laugh. "Go for'ard and wait until you hear from me upon the subject. For'ard, do you hear?"

"For'ard!" with an oath. "It's aft we're going. Come on, boys!" and the man leapt up the poop ladder. The crew followed their leader, some with drawn knives, others with marlin spikes and old belaying pins.

To his surprise half a dozen strong pairs of hands grasped him by the collar and dragged him up the stairs before he had time to assist himself, and Dennis found himself lying on his back with the cold muzzle of a revolver pressed against his temples.

Captain Bowslaugh, Mr. Gates the bos'un and half a dozen apprentices sprang to the top of the ladder and discharged a perfect fusillade of revolver shots into the air. The effect was electrical. There is no argument in the world so convincing as the sharp click of a pistol. The men fell back terrified, and in another minute not a single form was to be seen on the deck abaft the main-mast.

Ikey and Dennis were put in irons, and accommodated in a retired part of the hold. The rest of the crew were called aft next morning, and the captain after giving them admonitory warning, embellished with selections from his most forcible vocabulary, dismissed them.

After the abortive attempt at mutiny, the ill-feeling against Jimmy Ducks was greatly increased, and he was subjected to every petty annoyance that his enemies could devise. This he bore for a long time in uncomplaining silence, but one day Williams gave utterance to an insulting remark that included a reference to his mother. Jimmy's hot blood boiled in his swollen veins, and his face became scarlet with passion. This was an insult he could not brook, and in an instant the offender lay sprawling on the deck. When he regained his feet a *mêlée* ensued, in the course of which Jimmy's long arms and quick movements proved very effective, and somewhat startled his messmates. Williams was badly beaten and sullenly accepted his defeat, but in his heart he vowed vengeance.

The following week was one long, dreary repetition of terrific squalls. Just before eight bells, one very dark night, it came on to blow a hurricane so unexpectedly that we were almost in danger of losing our masts by the board. It had been quite calm a few hours before, and we were sailing under rather full canvas. The order to reef top-sails was hurriedly sent for'ard, and Jimmy, who was standing by the stays, at once leaped into the rigging. In his haste and the excitement of the moment, he forgot that the first man aloft has always to go to the end of the yard, and that this is a very perilous duty, requiring the steady nerves of an old salt. Upon reaching the yard, however, he braced himself up for the effort, and crept out into the blackness, hovering, as it seemed, between the conflicting elements like a twig upon the side of a precipice.

An instant later the air was rent by a terrible clap of thunder, which appeared momentarily to lull the seething, roaring waters and howling wind into comparative stillness. A vivid flash of lightning followed almost immediately, succeeded by another low, long rumble of thunder, culminating in a crash like the crack of a whip. In the glare of the lightning Jimmy saw the dark vindictive features of his mortal enemy, Williams, who lay out on the yard within a couple of feet of him. The recognition was instantaneous and mutual.

Scarcely knowing why, Jimmy was seized with a sudden pain about his heart that he could not repress. He was not a coward, but he felt that that thunder clap was his requiem. His forebodings were only too well founded. A fiendish idea took possession of the soul of Williams as he comprehended the opportunity afforded him by Jimmy's dangerous position to take a complete revenge. The second steward had managed to communicate with him, and had told him that he suspected it was Jimmy who warned the captain of the plot to take the ship, so that Williams had two scores to balance. There could not possibly be any suspicion of foul play on such a night as this. Men are blown from yards and lost by hundreds in such weather.

He crept closer to his victim, who could not see him in the darkness, but who instinctively felt his approach. There was no possibility of escape, however, and as the ship rolled to leeward, Williams raised himself by the lift