

THE STRANGE SAIL.

By JAMES MURPHY

In the "Irish News," Belfast.

"It is very strange."
"Do you see it again?"
"Yes, it is in the offing—due south."

"I cannot see it."
"It is plainly there," said he, applying his telescope again to his eye, "a large three-masted vessel, with a white mark on the water-line. It appears this hour every evening, and disappears before morning—every evening for the past week. It is very strange," continued he, wiping his forehead in a state of extreme perplexity, and surprise. "I cannot understand it at all."

I had searched the horizon with my field-glass, which was a very powerful one, but failed to see any indication of the vessel.

"Let me have your telescope," said I. "Perhaps it is more powerful than mine. At present there is no vessel visible on the waters—not to me, at least."

"It is there nevertheless," said he, as with trembling hands he once more lifted the glass to his eyes, and took a steady survey of the ocean. "And much plainer than it has appeared yet. Making for the mouth of the harbour with all sails set, and flying a signal of distress. My God! what does it mean?"

He was in a state of extreme agitation and distress.

Taking the telescope from his hand, after a long and silent stare in the one fixed direction, I adjusted the glass to my sight and looked anxiously to the direction pointed out by him.

But though I concentrated all my strength of sight in the effort to behold the vessel, I failed, so far as my power of seeing went, no sail stood within the limit of our horizon.

"There is no vessel there," I said, handing him the glass. He took it from my hands with a gesture half of impatience and contempt.

"It is even plainer now," said he, once more bending the glass in the former direction. "I see all the sails filled with the wind; she is careening over almost with the strength of the gale."

"There is not a breath of wind out," said I, beginning by this time to doubt his sanity.

"Is there not?" said he, looking up with a strange look of horror depicted on his countenance. "I had not noticed that before." As indeed he had, for his mind was so completely occupied with the strange sail that his attention failed to catch the immediate surroundings. "Still there she is, every inch of canvas set, making straight for the Lough. How she tosses with the force of the waves. I can see her topmast bending with the force of the gale. It is strange—it is very strange!"

He closed up the telescope with a look of doubt and anguish on his face that was pitiful to see.

We were standing together on the rocks beneath the lighthouse tower, on one of the rockiest points of the eastern Antrim coast. It was in the darkening eve of a December day, and what with the sunless sky above, the darkening air around, the leaden face of the waters, our horizon was anything at all but an extensive one.

To our left lay the rocky coast washed by the opening waters of the North Channel, to our right the shoaling waters of the open bay, which had been, and is still, misnamed harbor. Before us, to our front the Irish Sea, and to the far north the wild Atlantic whose waves came in unbroken succession from the shores of America, as they thundered upon the rocky headlands of North Antrim, or rolled with prodigious strength and fury apast the open mouth of the shelterless Carrickfergus Bay.

"What does it mean?" he repeated. "Every evening this week it is there struggling with the storm. I come down at midnight expecting to see it driving on the rocks or breaking to pieces on the shoals of the bay, but I cannot see it. I come down in the first light of the morning, and it has disappeared. But, there it is each evening—there, just as I see it now!"

"It can hardly be in distress now, at any rate," said I, motioning as if to go upwards towards the lighthouse in order to induce him to come too, and so abandon the scene of his delusion; "for there is scarcely a ripple on the waters, and there is not a breath stirring."

My motion upwards induced a corresponding motion (half unconsciously) on his part; but after climbing up a few steps he turned round and

gain to take another view of the strange sail that so tormented him.

"It is gone now," said he, with the same sense of indescribable anxiety in his voice. "I cannot see it."
"It is but a strange reflection of the clouds on the water," I said, glad to fix upon any explanation for the moment to change the tenor of his deranged thought. "It is only your imagination that is at work."
"No; it is not that," replied he. "I could see the waves breaking over her side. That is no reflection. I could see her masts, at one time upright; at another, when she careened over, lying almost parallel with the water. No reflection could do that. Besides the same reflection could not constantly occur. I have seen it every evening for the past week."

There was so much force in these words and in his manner of saying them; there was, moreover, such palpable distress manifest in his face and eyes, that I could not help sympathizing with him in his mental misery.

He seemed to me to have in his expression that strange look that we are told exhibits itself in the features—in the eyes, especially—of haunted men.

"I cannot tell what it means; but there it is now. There it has been every evening for the past week. How long will it be there?—God knows."
"Probably never again," said I encouragingly; "but we had better be turning homewards. The night is falling fast"—it was already beginning to grow dark—"and it is ugly work climbing up those rocks without light; at least it is to me, and we shall see what news Norrie has for us."

I had struck on the right chord this time.

The bare mention of the name almost at once banished the brooding fancies that filled his mind. His brain cleared; and with a much bricker and brighter step than I expected, he—two together—climbed the high rocks that towered above; and, gaining the level summit, struck out for home.

I should have mentioned that he had been expecting his son, Hubert, home from Derry that day after a long sea voyage from Vera Cruz. His ship was to touch at Derry, and he would come home by land. Possibly he might by sea if a ship suited, but that was highly unlikely, and the chances were the mail car would bear him home on Christmas Eve. We were all in great heart, Norrie especially; and indeed it was one of the reasons that brought me here this eve. The long-absent wanderer would be so welcome.

Our home was the lone Hollywood Cottage—dignified by the name of a coast guard station.

For there was no one there in the capacity of a coast guard but himself, and his business mainly was to inform Lloyd's agent of any wreck material that might be washed on shore.

He had been there some years, living a lonely and isolated life. Scarcely anyone, except, perhaps, those at Lloyd's, knew anything of his previous history. He was not a native of the locality, and he was naturally, if not morose; uncommunicative.

I had met with him in the office into which in Belfast he once or twice a week came to make his reports. He had asked me out from Belfast—it is many long years ago now—to spend Christmas Day with him, to meet his home-coming son, and to have some seal fishing.

I was very glad to get rid of the city air, and equally glad to witness the stormy sea when in mid-winter it burst upon the rock-bound coast of Island Magee, and to enjoy some sport.

And, perhaps, there was another reason—apart from the wish to welcome his son.

The Hollywood Cottage was some distance—a few fields—away from the shore, and sheltered therefrom by a grove of trees.

And a very necessary protection this latter was, for the storm of winter burst with great fierceness at times over this exposed coast; and often the white foam of the sea was carried far inland, and lay in white shrouds over the branches of the trees and on the hedges.

Thither we proceeded by the well known path along the hedge. We had just crossed a stile that led from one field to the other, when he suddenly placed his hand on my shoulder. We had been going in Indian file—I proceeded. I turned round.

"Sidney," said he.

"Yes," said I, half fearing a recurrence of his delusions.

"This is Christmas Eve."
"Yes, of course," I said. "We have mentioned that a dozen times before to-day."
"Yes, I know," said he; "but it is only now I really thought of it. I had not thought of it in the same light before. At least," said he, passing as if to further explain some idea that was running through his head, "it is bound up with things that I did not remember before to-day; no, not for years."

"What might they be then?" said I, without a particle of interest in my question, but more immediately concerned in the getting home as soon as possible.

"It is close on forty years since it happened, and it is many since it came into my head before. Isn't it strange how it comes to-night? I see it as clear before my eyes as I did when it happened."

"What was it?" said I, with some show of curiosity, which I certainly did not feel.

"'Twas of a Christmas Eve, too," said he, more as a reflection of his own than in reply to my query—how I doubt if he heard. "Strange how it should turn up now, and not for years before."

"What was it?" queried I again, with some faint interest growing upon me.

"It was that ship, Sidney, depend upon it, that was there this evening. I had not thought of that before; it was no other."

"You forget you haven't mentioned any ship at all to me yet," said I. "What ship?"

"The line of battleship, the Blenheim."

"This is the first time you mentioned that name to me," said I, as I took his arm and walked slowly beside him. "What of her?"

"She was lost, Sidney, lost with all hands on board."

"How was she lost?" said I, impatiently. "You are perplexing me. What was she?"

"She was lost on the Antrim coast—not far from here."

"Who lost her?"

"I."

"You!" said I, with some astonishment. "You! How did you come to command her?"

"I did not command her."

"Then how did you lose her? My goodness that is a curious thing you are saying. How could you lose her? Tell me about it."

"I'll tell you how it was, Sidney," said he, glancing around as if expecting to see the tall masts of the vessel lifting themselves above the frowning rocks we had left behind.

"This is the story—and a strange one it is. I had been sent down from the Admiralty Office in Dublin—I was clerk there then—to take charge of the coast guard station for a few weeks during the war with the French. About 1815 it was. The officer was ill that had been in charge; hands were scarce, and I was deputed to take command. It was of a Christmas Eve that I reached."

"The station was a very lonely one, built high up on the rocks, it was something further up on the coast, and commanding a fine view of the North Channel and the Irish Sea. It was a very stormy day, this Christmas Eve, when I arrived. It had been blowing strongly all the week previously, and the storm culminated on this day. The sea was black and leaden, with the dull color of the sky. At times, however, it ran white, when, the strength of the wind being spent for a time, the surface of the water rose up into mountainous waves crested with foam. When the wind was at its height the surface of the sea was a dead calm with the great pressure of the storm. But always and ever the sea burst with great force against the rocks with a booming noise that never ceased, throwing up great clouds of spray around the station."

"After dinner I lit my pipe, and, in company with one of the men, strolled out on the high banks to watch the effect of the gale—I might with truth call it a hurricane."

"We had scarcely gone a quarter of a mile when all at once my eyes rested on the tall masts of a vessel, standing out, curiously enough, in the teeth of the storm with all sails set."

"The coastguard that accompanied me clutched me by the arm."

"See!" said he, pointing in her direction.

"I see her," I shouted in answer, for with the violence of the gale it

was almost impossible to hear.

"That vessel is British rigged," said he, "but she is a foreigner for all that."
"How do you know?" said I.
"She is trying to tack out in the face of the storm," said he. "She does not know this coast. If she were an English vessel she would run under bare poles and make for a harbor. She is not. She has come too near Carrickfergus and is trying for the open sea. And I know it further by her build."

That she was trying to tack out was plain enough. With every inch of canvas stretched she was beating about trying to get to sea in defiance of the hurricane. Half a dozen shifts of the helm, and the constant reefing and letting fly of the sails, indicated as much.

"She is on dangerous ground this moment," said he, as he watched her attentively, "but they are making a gallant effort to get off; almost a mad effort, I think."

"They don't appear to be gaining ground, at any rate," said I, after watching her for some time.

"They are not losing it," said he. "But it is a pity they do not make for Dublin. They will have to do it sooner or later if they do not choose to come on the rocks. They never can get north in the teeth of that gale. They must be utter strangers to the coast or they would not try it even."

For an hour more we watched the struggles of the vessel.

Right bravely she struggled against the fury of the waves, and right manfully her crew worked—as we could well know by her various tackings—to get her out to sea.

"She's a French vessel," said the coastguard at last; "she is afraid to run for Carrickfergus or Belfast Lough. A man-of-war too; I can now see her line of portholes. She must be though French man-of-war the Languedoc, that's reported cruising about off the Northern Coast; she has run down the channel; has got caught in the gale; and is trying to make for the broad Atlantic. Yes, she is surely French."

He had raised a small glass which he had just found in his outside pocket, and watched her closely.

"If it were a little brighter, I could tell more about her," said he; "but it is darkening very fast."

It was darkening very fast. The line of our horizon became rapidly more limited.

In consequence of the high wind the day had been clearer than usual; but when night began to fall it fell very rapidly.

A creaking noise to our right attracted my attention.

Looking in the direction, I could see two huge wooden arms like the arms of an immensely tall cross waving in the air.

"They are making signals," said my companion, in response to my look of interrogation.

"Who are?" said I.

"The Naval Barracks at Carrickfergus," said he. "That is the Semaphore."

I looked with some curiosity at the huge machine as its awkward arms moved creakingly in the wind.

I had never seen one before, and, though for some few years in the Dublin Admiralty Office, had but a faint knowledge of their use.

"I must go back," said he, after watching its motion until it ceased working, "and see by the Code what these signals mean."

He did so, and after a short stay at the station, came running back.

"Well?" said I.

"It is very odd," said he; "but they signal to light the beacon fires after dusk on the tower, over at Island Magee."

"What is that for?" said I.

"I don't know," said he, "what it is for; but I know well what it will do."

"What?" said I, with great curiosity.

"You will probably learn time enough—if you don't know already," said he, looking at me with a rather curious expression in his eyes.

"I suppose we had better do it," said I, "when we are ordered."

"I should think so," replied he, "and as it will take as some time to reach there, we had better make haste."

The night had fallen partly by this time, and before we reached the tower we were completely enveloped in darkness.

Through the dusky atmosphere, however, we could see the flashes of spray, and at times the long, white

crests of the gleaming surf flung upwards by the furious waves.

It was with much difficulty we reached the tower.

The storm at times was sufficient to blow us off our legs, and, to get breathing time, we had occasionally to sit down.

But gain it we did finally; and, ascending, we applied a match to the beacon. In a few seconds the blaze ascended high and wide.

It was a curious scene to see this brilliant light on the lone solitudes of the Antrim coast, its glare flashing and reflecting on the furious waters below.

Having done our work, we crept cautiously in the dark along the precipitous bank homewards.

It required all our care and my companion's knowledge of the paths, to get safe, for the beacon shed such a treacherous and insufficient light that it made every step one of infinite danger.

But get home we did, and after a tumbler of brandy, smoking hot, I tumbled into bed, for I was weary after my journey, and slept soundly.

Towards daybreak on Christmas morning I was awake by the coast-guard coming into my room.

"Up, Captain! for heaven's sake, and come out!" I was not a captain, but all the officers were called captains. "Come at once, and don't wait."

I was up and dressing in a twinkling.

"What's amiss? What's the matter?" I asked.

But he was too excited to make answer or to explain.

"Come quick! For God's sake come quick!"

As soon as I was partly dressed he ran out and I followed him.

For about twenty minutes he led me a race along the high banks, until we came to a narrow path that wound round a bay or opening in the rocks; and there I stopped, suddenly, still!

My heart almost ceased to beat; my head reeled round for a moment; and I thought I should have fallen.

Below me in the ravine lay the wrecked and broken hulk of the vessel we had seen fighting with the storm yesterday morning. Beaten and twisted out of all shape and form, she lay on her side, underneath the treacherous tower; masts and torn sails and cordage; broken planks, and twisted iron; cannon balls, cannon, and muskets strewed the beach in one tangled and promiscuous heap; and around and among all here and there and everywhere, wrapped up in the cordage, jammed in between huge fragments of masts, stretched high and dry on the rocks, or washing about on the surf, were dead bodies thicker together than trees in yonder grove; and all English—soldiers and sailors—all English!

"All English?" I repeated, in astonishment.

"Yes; the beacon fire, which I with my own hands lit, had done it all. It was not the Languedoc at all; it was our own man-of-war the Blenheim. She had been a prize, taken long before from the French. She had only just returned from the Mediterranean and was coming to be stationed at Moville to guard Derry and Lough Foyle. She had been with Jarvis amid the smoke and battle of St. Vincent; with Nelson. She was standing out to sea now in all the storm to watch for the French invading fleet with which we were threatened that were to come up the Irish Sea and make for Derry or Belfast. But my hand—the fire I lit sent her to her doom."

"God bless us," said I in astonishment and horror, "why did they send such an order?"

"There was the mistake," said he. They did not send that order. The order was: "Don't light the beacon fire."

But my coastguard read the signal wrongly.

My duty it should have been (I knew how) to read it; and under the influence of that fatal error, my hand had lured eight hundred Englishmen to their deaths in the middle of one of the fiercest storms that ever swept the Antrim coasts."

I could not help feeling awfully startled over this strange story of

my unfortunate friend the coast-guard. The end was so singular and unexpected!

Then I asked—"Were they all drowned?"

"They were all drowned," said he, relapsing again into his former state of anxiety and despondency, from which the narration of his story had partly roused him—"all except one."

"Except one!"

"And that, strange to say, was a young lady."

"A young lady!"

"Yes, she was the daughter of the Captain of the Blenheim. And she was Norrie's and Hubert's mother."

We were standing during the latter portion of the narrative, and he now bent his head on his breast and walked moodily on. I followed him, full of surprise and horror at his story.

I now felt the clue to his depression and hallucinations.

The event so long banished from his mind had now returned with redoubled force and had partly turned his brain. This was the explanation of his strange derangement. It became clear to me that the sooner his mind was taken off this unfortunate event the better.

Still I could not help asking him before we reached the station—

"Good gracious! That was very unfortunate. What was the result? How did you fare afterwards?"

"I was tried by court-martial, but I could not be held responsible. I did not know how to read the message, and did not understand it. I was acquitted. But I could not acquit myself. I should not have undertaken duties I could not fulfil; and I was never afterwards promoted."

By this time we had reached the coastguard cottage, from which the light streamed pleasantly. And from a prettier cottage no light in all Belfast or Antrim streamed that Christmas Eve. For within it beamed two eyes bright enough to light up the gloomiest cavern that ever watching gnome lurked in; and a face handsome enough to brighten Paradise, enshrined those eyes. At least I thought so.

"Well, Norrie," said the old man, with a fair approach to cheerfulness, as we entered—"I should like to see one who could be otherwise than pleasant in her presence!"

"Well, father?" said Norrie brightly.

"Any news yet, Norrie?"

"No, father; but we'll have it before morning, never fear. Hubert is not the fellow to let the grass grow under his feet once he reaches Derry."

"I am afraid the night will be stormy for him," said the coastguard. "The wind is likely to rise."

"Not a bit, father. What does Hubert care about the storm?"

"I think I will sit up till he comes," said the father. "Have you a fire in the parlor, Norrie?"

"Yes, father," said she, leading the way for us, "and a right good one."

There was a good one, a right good one as Norrie merrily phrased it; and what was more, a steaming kettle and tumblers.

A cosier three never sat together at a Christmas Eve before I do verily believe.

As for the old man—under the genial influence of the surroundings—the late delusion vanished altogether, and, as for myself, the only discomfort I experienced was when I glanced at Norrie's beaming eyes, for, afterwards, I could only see the surroundings as one does when he looks from the light of a lamp into the gloom of the night.

I don't know whether Baron Rothschild, the Baroness Burdett Coutts, or Prince Esterhazy play cards of a Christmas Eve. If they do, I fancy they must play for higher stakes than we did, for we played for the modest sum of one halfpenny each. But I am inclined to imagine that no voice ever rang with such musical laughter in their drawing-rooms (ad-ways they do at all laugh) as broke from Norrie's rosy lips when she won which she frequently did.

We started suddenly—very suddenly—once when Norrie called out, evidently repeating the voice she heard outside—

"Father, help! Help, father! Help, Norrie! Do you hear it, father? That's Hubert outside; he wants us

to help him off with t. Hurry, he wants us quick. And in a twinkling we sit first, were standing door—But no human being round or in sight! The white clouds were cross the face of the sky, obscuring the moon, just sufficient light at times complete barrenness of the

ings. "Who calls? Who spoils Norris, but no answer could there?"

"I declare," cried she, retracing our footsteps the words as plainly as spoken outside the door, strange—isn't it?"

A chill—a strange sort came creeping over my face as I braced myself to conquer cheerfully—

"It was your anxiety you think so; it was the wind through the trees. 'May be so,' she responded (reassured, I was think, by my words), and turned to our places and the game again."

I did not think it could quite midnight when Norrie the door to listen for Hubert, declared it was day. I did think the night had its character until the wind through the trees, ment the door was opened that a gale was going

"I don't think he'll morning after all," said the lady. "It's blowing gale outside. I doubt if come by the sea road; and the inner country road here sooner than noon."

"Not here by a vessel."

"Not he! I think he'll inner road," said her father. "We'll wait for an hour or so. He may be easily delayed. Night has been so wild."

"Then we had better sit of the Rosary, don't you say Norrie. 'Poor mother ways read one of a Christmas Eve.'"

had even half of it finished lightful a thing it is to cede of the Rosary recited sweet musical voice. When ended the prayer, I didn't have even half of it finished

At other times I used, say, consider a decade if little too long; but with ing it, it did not seem long enough. Just as I ing what a pity it was to decade or two had not been to it, Norrie hastily closed book and jumped up.

"That's Hubert!" cried her voice. Don't you crying—'Help, father! Help! Help!' He is calling and I hear steps coming door."

So there were! But no set of steps, but a multitude came running to the door or I got there. She said: "It is not Hubert, father, she from the door. 'But something amiss on the people are all running in. Come here!—quick!'

We did not want much go there; we were beside, she had ceased speaking.

"What's amiss?" I shouted the gate to one man who wing very hard.

"I don't know," he sheeply, without stopping his think it's a house that's 'A house on fire.'"

"It must be Cyril let us go and see."

We ran forward; but, a man and active, I was vance of him when we turned of the grove.

I looked in the direction farmhouse, but there cert no fire in that direction.

I looked over the sea, my beating heart sudden still!

Tossing, tumbling, hea on the roaring waters, torn and flapping, or other sheet iron with the h gale; with topmasts, suspended by the ropes w in the wind, with her ru and