

# Northern Messenger

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## The Skipper's Story.

There was a gathering of masters of different craft. The conversation took an interesting turn. Many experiences were told in that convincing style so full of point which is peculiarly common among sailors.

The master of one of the smartest sea barges sailing out of London river told of 'cracking on' in the Channel, going ahead of several of his kind, till a squall blew his topsail to ribbons, and brought down his topmast, and there he was in such a mess that a tug was the only thing his heart desired. He was a smart little man, sturdy and fit, with muscles like iron, and a weather-beaten, alert face; vivid in description, and thoroughly enthusiastic and proud of his profession.

Others followed, and the atmosphere, heavy with smoke, yet seemed to reek of the salt sea and the roar of the wind. There was a master whose story of the sea was presently drawn from him by the others—a big fellow, with hair and beard almost white, and whose cheeks were peculiarly marked, which was explained later in the course of his narrative. His story was listened to by the others with more than the usual attention.

'It was when I had the "Clan William" brigantine,' he began. 'We left Newhaven for the Tyne. It was blowing hard all the way up the Channel, but it was after we left Orfordness that it came on a full gale from the North-east'ard. I thought I'd try and make Lowestoft, and run in for shelter. You may remember that gale,' he said, naming the year, and some of the skippers nodded their heads in a manner that conveyed so much.

'The fore stopm'st stays'l and fore stays'l were blown clean away. There was an ugly sea running. Every now and then she would put her head into it, and the hands had to hang on where they could for their lives. One big sea rolled aboard, carried away part of the weather sail, and smashed the boat on the main hatch.

We held on all night, and the next morning we were close on to the sand. By then all the bulwarks were crumpled up and swept away. The hands were working the braces from aft. No one dared go forra'd, where the seas made a clean sweep of us. Another twenty minutes and we should have weathered the sand bank. It was a close thing, but the end came quite suddenly, and without any warning. She must have touched the ground. I found myself in the water swimming for life. I got hold of a piece of wreckage, managed to lash myself, and then drifted. Not a sign of another soul did I see. All hands were lost, as I afterwards learnt.

It was rough work enough being flung about by the seas; being lashed to the wreckage saved me. Then a strange thing happened. There was a puffing and snorting close to me. It was my old dog Punch; he must have followed me ever since the "Clan William" foundered. I managed to get hold of him, and drew him on to my shoulders. I have the marks of his paws now on me, deep on both sides of my chest.

The long hours passed slowly enough. From the top of a wave nothing was to be seen but the heave of the sea, the breaking of foam, and



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a leaden sky above. Then we fell down to the depths between the waves with the roar and swirl of storm waters in our ears. Darkness settled down, and night came. Often I lost consciousness, and when I came to felt Punch licking my face. A deal of the time I was unconscious.

'And so that awful night dragged slowly by. Dawn came at last—a dawn I never expected to see. The wind lulled. The sea got smoother. From the top of a wave I could see the coast away along the horizon. Punch was limp and quiet. I was only half-conscious. It was like a horrible dream, and always there was the swirl and splashing of water about us. Seaweed clung to us, and at times the foam almost smothered us.

Then suddenly I woke up; Punch was barking. With difficulty I glanced over my shoulder. There was a brigantine not far away bearing straight for us, the faint sound of voices, of the oars in the rowlocks; it was music. They soon dragged us aboard, and there was old Tom bending over me with a strange expression on his face—a sort of wonder and almost fear, like one who sees a ghost.

Old Tom got me into his cabin. He gave me a nice piece of steak. After seventeen hours in the water I felt hungry enough, you may be sure; but it was the worst thing I could have touched. I knew that afterwards. Weak enough I felt. I had a sort of wash, and when I pulled the seaweed away from my face the skin came with it.

In a few hours I landed. Someone went on and told the wife. When I got home she had

gone to break the news to the people. All the hands belonged to Lowestoft. As I stood in the sitting-room I caught sight of myself in the glass. No wonder old Tom stared. I was another man. During that seventeen hours in the water my hair had gone as grey as you see it now, and before I hadn't a grey hair. How many years of his life can a man live in seventeen long hours?

'Well, I had four months of it in bed, but I've never been the same man since. Somehow, it knocked the pluck out of me. I've been at sea ever since, but I'm only half a man since that time.'

There was a long silence in the room. Every man knew that a similar story might be his own some day. Those who 'go down to the sea in ships' carry their lives in their hands, and who knows at what moment it may be wrested away, in spite of pluck or knowledge. But the eternal sea rolls on. Yearly it takes its toll of human lives; yearly it inflicts suffering upon human creatures—those in its cruel clutches and those who wait watching ashore.

And for ever its weird beauty calls to the heart of man, and the sound and the heave of the sea, whether in the glow of summer time or the fierce grandeur of the gale, exercise on him a strange and compelling fascination.—S. W. Hunter, in 'Friendly Greetings.'

Don't peril the happiness of a life-time by a pique. Pride's chickens have many feathers, but they are an expensive brood to rear—they eat up everything, and are always lean when they are brought to market.—Alexander Smith.