

Choice Literature.

AN UNSUNG HERO.

A PHYSICIAN'S STORY.

ADAPTED FROM THE GERMAN.

Night on the ocean; a gentle breeze swelled the white sails of the *Sea Gull* as she ploughed her way steadily southward over the restless bosom of the Atlantic. I lay stretched lazily upon a bale of sailcloth, my eyes fixed far overhead upon the delicate tangle of ropes and yards etched against the starry sky.

The waves, parted by the good ship's prow, dashed in measured beats against her sides; from the rigging arose at intervals a deep musical murmur, as from the strings of a gigantic wind-harp.

Beautiful and revivifying, after the fierce glow of day, is the summer night on tropic seas, and I was enjoying it to the full. We were bound for Rio, and the voyage was two-thirds over.

I was thinking, as I lay there under the stars, of many things—of the home I had left in search of health and distraction from painful thoughts, and perhaps in the hope of restoring my shattered confidence in human nature; for things had gone wrong with me, and I was indulging at the time in that sort of spurious cynicism which besets some men when life first presents itself stripped of shams and illusions.

All at once my reverie was disturbed by the wail of a child from the cabin below; I knew the sound. Among the passengers was a young woman in widow's weeds, accompanied only by a boy of four or five years. Nothing was known of her beyond the self-evident facts that she was young and beautiful, and that by the advice of physicians she was taking the boy—her only child—on this voyage, in the hope of restoring his strength, wasted by a long illness. A forlorn hope, indeed. It was plain to the most indifferent eye that the boy had been failing from the day we left New York, as it seemed, from sheer lack of vitality and consequent wasting of his tissues.

It was a sight to move the hardest heart—this fair young mother, worn to a shadow with long watching, her whole being absorbed by the passionate mother love that refused in the very face of despair to relinquish hope.

Lured on by sympathy for her sad and solitary state, I, like other passengers, had offered such services as suggested themselves; like the others I had been gently but firmly repulsed. To no one would the mother for a moment delegate the charge that was sapping her own life.

Shrinking from notice and avoiding all other companionship, she brooded over the fragile being who was slipping surely and all too rapidly from her clinging grasp.

The cry came up from the cabin again and again, shattering my reverie and filling me with uncomfortable forebodings. It was evident that the end was near, and, physician as I was, and cynic as I tried to believe myself, the thought of the young mother's despair disturbed and pained me.

With a selfish, yet perhaps natural, prayer that the child might live at least until land was reached, I rose on my elbow and by way of diverting my thoughts, addressed myself to the sailor who was on watch at that hour. He leaned against the foremast near me, a stalwart fellow, with handsome bronzed features, and a pair of blue eyes as frank and clear as a child's. By the light of the lantern swinging above his head, I saw that his face was overspread with a look of melancholy quite out of keeping with the rôle of jolly Jack Tar that belonged to him, and it was not the first time I had noticed this expression on honest Tom's countenance. It may have been that, coupled with other unusual characteristics, that from the first day had attracted me to the fellow; whatever it was, I had found pleasure in studying this sturdy type of man, and had enjoyed many a quiet chat with him during the long voyage, without however having made any attempt to pluck out the heart of his mystery, if such existed.

"A fine night, Tom," I began, by way of opening conversation.

"Ay, sir, a fine night!" answered Tom in his deep tones, saluting me respectfully.

"It isn't often that you make a better trip than this, is it, Tom?"

"Well, no, sir. But we ain't there yet," he answered significantly, giving himself the sailor's peculiar hitch.

"You are familiar with these waters, I presume?"

Tom gave himself another hitch and cleared his throat before answering.

"Wall, sir, to'able familiar. This makes my eleventh trip from New York to Rio."

"Indeed!" I responded. "You must have a special liking for these parts."

"As to that," said Tom, slowly, "it's pretty much the same to me where I go, so't I'm goin'. I'm restless an' oneasy on shore, sir; all sailors is that, but 'pears to me I'm a little more restless an' oneasy than most of 'em. Mebbe," he went on, his gruff voice softening a little—"mebbe it's along o' my not havin' any folks on shore belongin' to me. The ship is all the home I've had this many a year, sir. There was a time when it might a-been different, if so be."

At that moment some one hastily ascended the stairs leading from the cabin, and called my name.

"It's the doctor, sir: Dr. Claas," said Tom, touching his cap, and turning away.

Dr. Claas, the ship's physician, hurriedly approached the place where I was lying.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, extending his hand as I arose to meet him, and giving mine a hearty pressure, "but I believe you are a practising physician?"

As the doctor, a singularly grave and reticent man, had until now shown no desire to extend our acquaintance, I was unprepared for the cordiality of his greeting, but I answered at once in the affirmative.

"Then you are the only medical man besides myself on board, and I beg of you to consult with me in a most interesting case. I am not mistaken—you will do me this favour?"

As a young and comparatively inexperienced practitioner I could not but feel flattered by the doctor's manner, and answered without hesitation:

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure."

"Then come, I beg," he earnestly said. "There is no time to lose."

As I passed Tom to follow Dr. Claas I noticed that he was leaning forward, as if listening to what we had been saying, and I fancied that I heard him mutter some indistinct words as he resumed his position.

A moment later I stood with my colleague at the side of the sick child. He no longer moaned, but lay motionless, and almost pulseless, upon his pillow. The mother sat by him, her dark hair falling loosely, her small hands lying listless in her lap, her face pale and tense with unutterable grief and pain. Physician though I was, and already inured to the sight of human suffering, I could not meet the look that was turned upon us as we entered. On examination of the little sufferer I agreed perfectly with Dr. Claas in his diagnosis of the case; the child, though under the influence of no organic disease, was perishing from inanition. His life's small taper was flickering faintly; in a few days at most it would go out in darkness unless—a sudden thought flashed across my mind, sending the blood bounding through my veins. I looked quickly up into my colleague's face and met his eyes full upon me; a glance of quick intelligence passed from one to the other, and at the same instant the same word passed our lips. That word was—transfusion! The thought had been simultaneous. To restore the child's almost extinguished vitality, the famishing frame, deprived of nutriment by the incapacity of the organs of digestion and assimilation to do their work, must be supplied with fresh life material already prepared for assimilation. In other words, the warm, ruddy stream of life must be led direct from the arteries of a living, healthy being into the child's own depleted veins.

Only a physician can comprehend the glow of enthusiastic joy that pervaded our whole beings as this theory, then comparatively new and untried, presented itself before us with all its glorious possibilities.

The grave face of Dr. Claas fairly shone for a moment, then darkened again, and he shook his head gravely.

"A magnificent opportunity!" he said, in a tone of regret—"magnificent! But unfortunately impracticable. Being so near the end of our voyage we have not a living animal on board!"

A sharp cry interrupted my answer. In our professional zeal we had forgotten that the mother's ears were drinking in every word that was uttered. In an instant a slender arm bared to the elbow was extended towards us.

"I know what you mean," the little woman hurriedly said, her face flushing and paling again, "I have read much about it. I remember that it need not be an animal—a human being will do as well—even better!"

Even Dr. Claas was not proof against this. I saw his eyes grow moist as he took the extended hand gently in both his own. "It cannot be, madam," he said, as if speaking to a little child. "Compose yourself. We will retire and consider other means. Something may yet suggest itself."

It was very hard to convince her that not from her fragile, exhausted frame might flow the invigorating stream that should give new life to her dying child. But we left her at last, sitting in listless despair by the little couch, as before, and returned to the deck, where Dr. Claas joined me in a long discussion of the subject that had just been under consideration.

Tom, the sailor, was still on duty, pacing the deck at times, or leaning against the foremast, taking no apparent notice of our presence. At a late hour I bade Dr. Claas good-night, and retired to my berth, but not to sleep. The piteous face of that mother as we left her, having given the death-blow to her last hope, was constantly before me; her plaintive voice mingled with the monotonous plashing of the waves.

For what seemed hours I lay listening to every sound, longing for daylight, though it was not yet midnight, but finally eight bells sounded, and steps and voices overhead showed that Tom was being relieved from duty.

A moment later there was a knock at the door of my room, and in response to my astonished "Come in," it was opened and Tom himself, looking very awkward, and uncertain, stood on the threshold.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said in a husky whisper, fingering his cap like a bashful boy—"beg pardon, but I made sure you wasn't asleep, an' there was somethin' I wanted to ask ye right away, sir, if I may make so bold."

So far from being angry with Tom for his intrusion, I was glad of any interruption to my painful thoughts, and bade him enter and close the door.

"And now what is it, Tom?" I said, when he had done so.

"I wouldn't have ye to think, sir, that I meant to listen to your conversation with the doctor," he began, after much preliminary shuffling and hitching and clearing of his voice, "but bein' where I was, some words come to my hearin', sir, an' after that I couldn't but lis'n, feelin' an int'rest in the little sick chap myself. An' from what I heard I gathered as how there was somethin' that 'ould save his life, sir, if it could be had; an' because it couldn't be had, sir, the poor little chap must die."

Tom made a little halt here and then continued:

"I—I couldn't rightly make out what it was as was wanted, bein' a seafarin' man an' knowin' little of things as ain't in my line, sir, but feelin' sorry for the poor little chap—an' his mother, sir—she seems to hev sot her heart on him to that extent—why, sir, I made so bold as to come and ask ye what it was that was wanted, and can't be had."

Tom's gruff voice trembled a good deal as he stumbled through his clumsy speech, and he shifted himself from one foot to the other a good many times.

It was impossible for me to feel either amusement or vexation at what might have seemed to some very like presumption. I did not hesitate to explain to Tom as simply and as clearly as possible the theory of transfusion, the obstacles in the way of its application in the present case, and the regret of Dr. Claas and myself at the loss of so fine an opportunity.

Tom listened breathlessly, leaning forward, his eyes fixed upon me, his lips moving in unconscious imitation of my own. When I had finished he straightened himself, putting one hand to his curly head with a perplexed air:

"Ay, ay!" he slowly said, "that was it: I wasn't sure as I got it right eend up, sir, but that was it: Ye see it has a powerful strange sound to a man like me; but jest let me once git my hearin', sir, so't I don't run agin no sunken rocks nor sand-bars, an' I'm all right, sir. Ye say that the blood of a livin', breathin', healthy animal, beast or human, pumped, so to speak, into the veins of a sick an' ailin' creatur', beast or human, will save life, sir?"

"May, Tom; no man can say, will."

"May, then;" repeated Tom. "Wall, sir," and drawing himself up, he bared for my inspection one magnificent muscular arm, freshly tattooed with all a sailor's taste and ingenuity. "Wall, sir, here am I, eight-and-twenty year of age, tough as oak, and though I say it as shouldn't, mebbe, as sober a man as ever trod deck, an' the little chap yonder is welcome to the last drop o' blood in my veins, so ne it mought save him to the poor little woman that is breakin' her heart over him as any man can see."

I sprang from my berth and seized Tom's hard brown hand.

"My brave fellow," I cried, "you will do this for the sake of a child who is nothing to you, and a woman you never saw before and never will see again?"

A strange smile came over Tom's face, and his eyes sought the floor.

"I will, sir," he answered, hoarsely; "for the sake of that same woman—as I shall never see again, mos' likely."

"But Tom," I said, "it is my duty to tell you that there a risk involved, a risk to yourself."

Again Tom smiled, giving himself a careless hitch or two.

"That's all right, sir. That's all right."

In an incredibly short space of time I stood again with Dr. Claas at the door of the state-room we had left a few hours before in so different a mood. It was opened by the child's mother, who had been prepared for our coming, and welcomed us with eagerness. Already reviving she had given some brightness and colour to her face.

"You have found some one who is willing to render this service?" she began, excitedly. "A sailor, you say? Oh, where is he? Let me see him and speak with him. I must thank him for his noble kindness."

Meantime Tom had remained in shadow, but as she came forward looking eagerly about her, he stepped out into the light and stood awaiting her, cap in hand. She sprang toward him with extended hands. "Oh, you good, brave fellow, God bless you!" she began, fervently. "God must and will bless you for your kindness to a poor despairing mother!"

She stopped abruptly, as if suddenly turned to marble. The full light of the lamp fell over the sailor's athletic figure, and pale, agitated face. His eyes were fixed upon her with an inscrutable expression. For some time the two stood gazing at each other in silence, then with a loud cry the woman started forward, wavered, and would have fallen but for Tom, who seized her in his mighty arms and laid her on the nearest sofa.

For a moment he stood bending over her, his form perceptibly shaken, his face hidden; then at a summons from Dr. Claas with whom the necessity for prompt action superseded all other emotions, he left the unconscious woman in charge of the stewardess, and followed us into the state-room.

A half-hour later the operation had been successfully accomplished.

We found the mother still lying on the sofa where we had left her, but at the sound of our steps she started up wildly expectant.

"Be calm, madam," said Dr. Claas, his very voice and mien expressing the satisfaction he felt; "all has passed off well. Your child is sleeping peacefully, and we have every reason to hope for the best."

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!" said the happy mother, with streaming eyes. "But the man—the sailor—where is he? I must see him, there is something to be explained," she continued, in deeply agitated tones.

But Tom had slipped silently away and was not to be found.

"It is better so," said the doctor, returning to the saloon. "You have had enough excitement for to-night."

Then, after administering a sedative, we left the now hopeful woman to return to her child, while we sought such rest as the brief summer night might have yet in store for us.

In the course of the next morning, having made an early call with my colleague upon our little patient with the most gratifying results, I found myself on deck.

The sun had been beating down for some hours upon the great awning stretched overhead for the protection of the passengers, many of whom were sitting about trying to divert their minds from physical discomfort in various ways. The heat was simply terrific. Scarcely a breath of wind was stirring. The sails hung slack against the masts, and the sea was like glass.

A vivacious old French lady, to whom in a moment of weakness I had divulged the fact of my acquaintance with her mother tongue, had inveigled me into a game of chess for which I was not at all in the mood; but from very lack of resistive power I yielded to her wishes, and tried to get up an interest in the game.

My partner had heard something of the remarkable events of the preceding night, and was burning with curiosity to know all the details. Tom, who, though no longer in sight, had been on duty as usual that morning, had been pointed out to her as the hero of the hour, and with the shrewdness of her race and sex in matters of sentiment, the old lady scented a romance.

I told her, in response to her persistent questionings, all that I considered proper, not mentioning the little scene between Tom and the young widow, which, I confess, had aroused my own curiosity to a lively degree.

"*Tiens!*" cried the old lady, melodramatically (not forgetting a skilful manoeuvre with her bishop)—"*C'est certainement l'amour, Monsieur! C'est certainement l'amour!* There is always love at the bottom of these affairs. Either the handsome sailor has discovered an old flame in the pretty little widow, or he has fallen in love with her during the voyage! *Pourquoi pas?*" with a shrug and a smile that illuminated her wrinkles like a ray from the past—" *Pourquoi pas?* A sailor—is he not a man like other men? And this one—*ma foi!* He is a sailor such as one finds in books!"

And with remarkable presence of mind the old lady took possession of my castle.

I left her little romance undisturbed. Perhaps she was right. Who could tell?

For some time we continued the game. Never was chess so tiresome to me, never did I play so badly. What with my partner's incessant chatter, and the increasing heat, which seemed only to excite her tongue to greater activity, I grew more and more restless and *distrait*.

One by one the passengers on deck went below in search of coolness, one by one those below came up for the same purpose.

(To be continued.)