

The Last Survivor

A True Story of the Sea.

(By William Root Bliss in Christian Union.)

In the month of November the mail steamer was making the voyage from San Francisco to Honolulu, when, on a bright morning, "the sail" was sighted, which proved to be the remains of a brig. Her foremast was standing, her foretopmast and jib were partly set, the foremast was hanging in the rigging, the mainmast had been cut away, and the bulwarks were gone. Slimy green grass was growing on her sides. Her deck, all awash, was bent up in an arch by the swelling of water lumber in her hold. Over the forecastle was spread a loose sail, which flapped up and down and was wetted by the sea. On the foretop was a shelter made by a strip of sail passing around it and lashed to the rigging. Evidently these places had been occupied by shipwrecked people; but there was no living thing to be seen, nor did there appear to be a spot on the wreck where any life could exist.

The steamer sent off a boat to examine the wreck. On reaching it two of the boat's crew ran aloft into the foretop. There was nothing in it. The officer in charge of the boat who was standing up as it lay alongside the brig, shouted to his men in the top to search in the canvas for a paper, a log-book, or something that would tell the story of the wreck. He had hardly finished these orders when the emaciated figure of a half-drowned, wretched-looking man rose up from under the sail on the forecastle right in front of him! The man's eyes were glassy and lifeless; he held one hand over his heart as if to suppress excitement, and lifting up the other, he muttered a voiceless prayer, and fell back into the heap of wet canvas. The two men hurried down from aloft, and, lifting up the man, said: "Where are the rest of you?"

"All gone! All gone!" he replied.

He could only mutter the words in faint tones. Then he said, "Water! water!" and became incoherent.

They tore away the sail from the forecastle, which was the only part of the vessel that was above the sea-level, and searched for his shipmates. Nobody there! It was true—they were "all gone!"

There was too much swell on the sea to allow the men to lift the incoherent survivor gently into the boat; so they took him up, and, standing on the half submerged bow of the brig, they waited an opportunity, as she rose and fell, to drop him into the arms of two men who stood in the boat to catch him. And so they received this living skeleton and brought him aboard the steamer.

He was put to bed and nourished with brandy and water. His legs were numb; he had lost the sense of taste and smell; his sense of sight was feeble; he weighed not more than 100 pounds.

Two days later he showed signs of recovery. He could speak. The next day he began to tell the story of the wreck, the substance of which I embody in this narrative. He was Captain Hopken, master of the brig, which sailed from San Francisco for Callao, having a company of ten hands and two young men as passengers. Two weeks after leaving port the brig encountered a hurricane and became waterlogged. Then she drifted for 110 days at the mercy of the winds, and no help reached her in all that time! During the hurricane all the provisions were flooded; the sea got into the fresh-water casks, and with the exception of a box of starch, some salted tongues and salmon washed up from below, the men on the wreck had nothing to eat, nor had they anything to drink. Four of them died from exposure. The eight who remained retreated to the foretop, around which they arranged the canvas shelter. The foretop was a semi-circular platform at the head of the foremast, about 25 feet from the deck, and about the size of half the circular top of a small table. They went down daily to catch fish for sustenance; their hooks were made of wire taken from the edge of a tin can; their lines were strands of rigging; their bait was rags. With these equipments they caught skinkfish and albacore, and enough of them to lay away, some to be dried. They chewed the raw fish, for they had no fire to cook them. By and by their throats became so parched that they could not swallow what they chewed. Every night they climbed up into the foretop to sleep. As they could not lie down in this small area, they slept leaning against the mast and against each other as best they could. When it rained they caught water in a pan to drink. As there was but little of it for so many, they took the sheepskins that had been used on the rigging for chaffing-gear, and allotted a piece to each man, they spread the pieces on the edge of the foretop to absorb dew that fell in the night. In the morning each man sucked dry his piece of wool to alleviate his thirst, and so they existed for 65 days. Then, having gone down from the foretop as usual to fish on the 66th day, they found themselves to be weak to climb the rigging any more. That night they spread a sail on the forecastle and lay down under it in the wet, hoping for the day to come speedily when they should be rescued.

There were two Italians in the crew, who now demanded that lots should be drawn for the death of the eight to furnish food for the others. The captain would not consent to this. He said that each man must take his chance for life and all be saved or lost together. The others agreed with him indifferently. But the Italians were so intent on their plan that the captain, with the two passengers, agreed to watch them, and if they attempted murder to kill them at once. The captain had a loaded pistol in his pocket.

Now hunger, thirst and weakness increased every day. Still the captain encouraged his miserable fellows with the hope of a rescue. He said he had dreamed about it. This hope was so much in his day-thoughts that he often fancied he heard the welcome cry, "Brig ahoy!" and, hearing it, as he supposed, he got up and peered out of the sail that covered them. But he never saw anything save the expanse of ocean and the expanse of sky. His comrades also scanned the horizon daily in search of a ship coming to their rescue. At different times they thought they saw three ships sailing on courses far away from them.

They had existed in the condition about 95 days, when, one morning, a full sail came near the wreck and was hoisted to advantage. It was there, in plain sight and motionless; her topsails were a-bark, her foretopmast a-wreck, and her mainmast a-bark. The men got up eagerly and waved what they had that would attract attention. The Italians waded through the water on deck, got upon the stump of the mainmast, and waved their hats. All hands tried to shout together; their voices were feeble and husky; they could not make much of an outcry.

The stranger bark was so near that the men could have thrown a stone aboard of her had they had their usual strength. They saw that her hull was painted black, with a gilt band running around it. They saw the letters of her name on her stern

and trail-boards, but their eyes were too dim to read them. They saw that she had a new sparker set; they noticed it was new because it had not been stained by the weather. They saw three men go aft and speak with a man standing on the quarter-deck who wore a cap and appeared to be the master; then they saw this man look at the wreck and turn and talk with a woman who sat near him in a willow armchair, and who was wearing a black and red plaid shawl. The shipwrecked men saw all these things, as they thought, and waited to be taken off. But, to their great astonishment, the bark filled her topsails and sailed away.

Was this a phantom? Its effect on the shipwrecked men was that of a reality. On the afternoon of that day the two Italians became delirious and jumped overboard, and despair began to extinguish what life there was in the other sufferers. The next day three of them died, and the captain rallied their bodies into the ocean. Then the youngest of the passengers died. He was not much more than a boy; but he had been resolute and had tried hard to live. He said he had left a good mother at home that he loved her and wanted to see her once more.

The events on the wreck were written with a pencil, as they occurred, on the margins of a nautical almanac, by the captain or by the elder passenger. These two, being now the only survivors of the twelve who had sailed in the brig, laid themselves out to wait for death or for salvation. On the 107th day, according to the notes on the margin of the almanac it blew a gale. Green smoke broke over the forecastle, drenching the two men under the canvas. It is a wonder they were not washed off. At night it rained. The passenger crept out of the sail, caught a cupful of water, and drank the whole of it. In the morning he was missing. The captain then resolved that if help did not come with the next day he would drink a mixture of blue-stone and ink, which he had prepared, and so end his tormenting misery by poison. On that day our ship found and saved this last survivor.

He was landed at Honolulu; and as soon as his account of the wreck became known, inquiries were made in every direction to learn the name of the bark which came alongside the bark and then abandoned it. No information of such a vessel was obtained; no bark answering to the description given by Captain Hopken was known at that time. It was therefore concluded that she was a creature of the diseased imaginations of the shipwrecked men; that their desire for salvation brought before their weary eyes an apparition of what they were earnestly longing for.

In regard to this story the author writes us: "The story of 'The Last Survivor' is substantially true. I had the name of the brig and of the captain, both of which were German; I may have them now among my papers. She was such a vessel as described, and a Frenchman, who for Callao as stated, and was loaded with lumber. She drifted as a wreck the number of days mentioned, and had on board the same number of hands; the story on the wreck and manner and sequence of their deaths are true. The remarkable separation of the bark hove-to alongside the wreck (if it was an apparition) was told by the captain. He was carried to Honolulu, whether I was in Honolulu it was the subject of discussion, and the conclusion generally was that this bark was a creature of the diseased imagination of the shipwrecked men. I think that fact makes the story interesting, as it shows how their earnest desire for salvation created in their imaginations the material by which they could be saved."

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