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THE MAN ON THE MAST.

A THRILLING TALE OF THE SEA.

The little fishing village of — is placed on a flat neck of land, which unites a small rocky promontory with the sandy district of Fingal, and forms the point of junction of two sweeping bays that take a long curve inwards at both sides, leaving it standing far into the sea, so as to present from the distant heights the appearance of being built upon, or rather in the water. On this rocky promontory a small ruined chapel stands, bleak and unsheltered, to buffet as it may the force of the waves, which are occasionally swept, in long white lines of spray, completely over the roofless walls into the streets of the hamlet behind it. On the northern shore of the promontory a small and rude pier has been constructed, and forms a narrow and imperfect shelter for the few wherries, by the assistance of which the village contrives to exist, and pay the landlord for the use of the patch of barren land on which it stands.

One autumn afternoon, in the year —, three figures were observed standing in front of one of these habitations, against which two of them leaned, whilst the third stood a little in advance, and, with his hand over his eyes, seemed to be intently gazing in the direction of the sea-ward horizon. To a person less skilled in the prognostics of change of wind or weather, than the hardy race of deep-sea fishermen on the coast of Ireland, it would have been difficult to account for the evident marks of anxiety which could be discerned on the countenances of all three, imparting a thoughtful cast to those of the two elder and more retired of the party, and exhibiting itself in the most lively manner in the attitude and expression of the third, as he alternately swept the distant sea line with his eye, and threw it up for an instant, nearly closed, to the sky.

'They'll be late, some of them, I'm afraid, after all,' said the youngest of the party, turning to his companions, after a long and intent gaze to the eastward. 'As for that cockle-shell, the Kittywake, with the young gentlemen in her, it's well she's so near in shore, or she'd have but a bad look-out of it. Three of us have here in sight, and are making for home; but the rest had better keep their offing, and seek to weather it out as they are for to-night.'

'Ay, Jack, if they let the daylight go, they have no business in shore. It will be a dark night as well as a breezy one; and should they miss the harbor, and the ebb set in, it's all over with them, I'm afraid.'

'Two more of them yonder to the north-east I see crowding up,' said the third of the party, 'and one of them's Bucker Bryan's boat, I'll warrant. I think I can tell the schooner rig even with my old eyes. He's sure to run for it if he doubts the weather.'

'But I say, Rooney, what's she just loomed out from behind the island yonder, northward of the Coffin Rocks? Picking for the water dogs, I suspect, from the cut of her job. She's right to keep to windward now, any how, and let them have a sleep; she might land more than her cargo before morning if she were half a league closer in. I've some doubts of her, too, even where she is; she's deep in the water, and, now I look again, she's running a point or two too much to the westward, to have any one on board who knows much about the Chapel Head.'

The signs of coming tempest were now too apparent to be mistaken. The wind, which had been blowing at first lightly from the westward, and then had lulled altogether, had within the last hour chopped about to the north-east, and continued every moment to gain in force, as was evidenced by the small, white foam with which every wave was tipped as it rolled shoreward, and the deeper swing and strain of the boats riding in the little harbor. The day had been cloudless; but as the sun approached the west, the eastern quarter of the heavens had become heavy with a lurid haze, which rose like an exhalation out of the waters, and stretched itself gradually onwards towards the land, tinging the sea with a dull brown, and leaving only one narrow rim of light running along the line of its distance, in which, as if touched by a pale gleam of sunshine, were discernible the far off sails of some of the fishing boats, whose return was so anxiously looked for by the three mariners on shore.

At last, something seemed to flit past so lightly and rapidly, that it might have been taken for a sea-bird's wing in the gathering gloom. In another instant, a gig of the lightest and most fragile build, had shot to the westward of all the other boats, under a small lug-sail, which was lowered in an instant, and was already aground on the foamy swell of the back-water at the bottom of the harbor. The next moment four persons—her whole crew—had jumped out of her into the water, and taking her under the thwart, had run the frail bark high and dry upon

the sand. A merry cheer announced the landing accomplished, and the figures began slowly to ascend the beach toward the sailors.

The youngest of the three fishermen descended to the beach at a signal from one of the party, and took charge of the boat. The amateurs were dressed in loose white shirts and trousers, with a small black handkerchief hanging round their necks. Their whole air was that of joyous excitement, and as the gale swept the long hair from their brows, and heightened the color on their sunburnt cheeks, it was hard to say whether the recollection or the expectation of pleasure was predominant in the expression of their countenances. They had invigorated their bodies with manly exercise—got through difficulty and danger with success, and were now within reach of a hospitable house, where good cheer and smiling faces awaited them, and where the exertions of the day would serve only to give a topic for conversation, and a zest to the banquet. Alas! how different the lot of many a hardy youth who surmounted the same peril, with the same relish for enjoyment.

We will follow the party which had just landed to the neighboring hall, where they had been anxiously looked for by sundry portly-looking personages, with rubicund faces, and snow-white wigs; coats spread over the torrid zone of their stomachs. Dinner had been detained till the youths should arrive, and dinner was the object which always engrossed these worthy gentlemen's thoughts about this hour, to the exclusion of everything else.

While engaged in the festivities of the dining-hall, one of the party, a young physician, was called suddenly away, and, following him, we arrived at a very different scene.

The night was fearfully tempestuous, and pitchy dark; the rain swept down in torrents, and our poor Esculapius drew a hard breath between his teeth, and shuddered at his toes, and wrapped in a muffler and dreadnought coat, he found himself in the open air, hurrying forward, led by a strange man, and totally unable to see anything but the false glare of light which remained at the back of his eyes after his long gaze at the dining-hall fire. It was not until he had ascertained that all his rappings were adjusted, and his coat-collar brought as near his hat as was consistent with leaving any of his face out, that he thought of asking the particulars relative to the nature of the call upon him beyond the 'Where is it?' of the first moment. The answer to this query was gruff enough.

'Only some bodies cast ashore; we don't know from what ship, and one of them, the officer says, has a bit of life in it yet. A decent-looking woman, too, and young enough to be worth saving.'

The doctor hurried on stumbling and splashing at every step. Their way lay at first through the avenue of the demesne; but, on passing the gate, the guide, who was a fisherman of the neighborhood, and in his capacity a smuggler—a profession very commonly found united to the former—knew the by-ways at least as well as the high-ways, struck into the fields; and, as the disciple of Galen began to regain his sight, he could just distinguish that his course was directed towards that side of the promontory of the Chapel head which lay farthest from the village of —.

At length, arrived upon the shore, the doctor was ushered into the midst of a party of the coast-guard, commanded by an officer.

'Ab, doctor! a little too late, I fear. I knew those young fellows would have you up at — house, so I got a hand to go for you—with some difficulty, I assure you. My own men I could not send off duty, and the rest, you see, expect to come in for a share of what's going; and, I believe, they'd suffer their grandmother to drown by inches, ere they'd allow a bale of goods thrown up by one wave to be swallowed by the next, without a scramble for it. They've landed their cargo from some vessel sooner than they expected, poor devils; and here we are collected to take charge of it, without their leave. All drowned, I fear, doctor. A body or two already ashore. One woman is up there at the limekiln, and you shall have a look at her, for I think there's a spark left.'

So saying, he gave his load into the hands of his men, and strode on before the physician, towards the building which the latter had seen, and which proved to be another of the deserted limekilns so frequent in the neighborhood, and which was not more than a score of yards off the spot he had reached.

'Come, my lads,' exclaimed the officer, as he entered among them, 'make room for the doctor. He's in for the inquest at all events.—Make way, and fetch over a light.'

In an instant the physician was on his knees beside a sort of litter made of coats; while a man held over his head a brand taken up from the fire, and which, as it flickered and flashed, showed the apparently lifeless form of a woman.

Some of her dripping clothes had been removed; coats, &c., had been wrapped round her; she had been chafed, and a drop or two of spirits applied to her lips, but hitherto with no effect.

'She must be removed at once to a house,' said the physician, after examining her attentively for a few moments. 'Nothing can be done till that is accomplished;' and he rose from his knees.

'We cannot leave our duty, sir,' they replied; 'and there is no one else here but this fisherman. The folks below have something else to think of, and the nearest cabin is half a mile off, at the least.'

'Well! this man and I can take her there between us. It is the only chance for her life.'

He set at once about devising as convenient a way of removing her as possible. The promise of a reward out of his own pocket bought the services of the greedy peasant; and they were, in a short time, once again travelling in company, though with a cumbersome addition to their party. Hard they worked that night, the volunteer and the mercenary, bearing their senseless burden through the swampy fields and over the slippery fences in the storm; and late it was when their loud knocking at the door roused the peasant and his family from their labor-rocked slumbers.

It is needless to detail the alarm at first; the surprise, and then the ardent compassion of these poor cottagers. By those who know the superstitious timidity, and the boundless hospitality of the lower classes of the Irish, the succession of these feelings is understood at once; to those who do not, a description sufficiently concise for the present purpose would scarcely be satisfactory.

The body, as it may be called, was deposited on the only bed, warm from the occupation of the family; the few turf ashes were blown up, and replenished with fresh fuel, and all the additional bedding of the house (scanty enough, to be sure) collected and heated to envelop the limbs of the stranger. The poor woman herself, with that peculiar alertness and shrewdness of management commonly met with amongst the peasantry of that secluded and primitive district set herself to strip the clinging habiliments from the cold and senseless form on the bed, and chafe and dry it ere she re-involved it in the coarse but well-aired garments she had collected for the purpose. Life not being extinct, these efforts, under the judicious superintendance of the physician, produced at last their effect, and it was with real pleasure he saw the lids unclose from the eyes of an interesting looking female, apparently under the middle age, and in appearance somewhat above the common class. By the use of proper remedies, this unfortunate being continued gradually to recover strength and consciousness.

In the morning, meantime, a considerable assemblage of persons had been collected on the shore, consisting (besides the coast-guard) principally of the country people, although two or three of the nearer gentry, to whose ears tidings of the wreck had already reached, were of the number. The morning was clear and bright; the sun was fast ascending towards the horizon; but the weight of the north-easter was still rushing in, might and main, marking the surface of the water with white foam, and throwing the breakers upon the shore with tremendous fury.

Farther still, and just beyond the curl of the shoaling water, it was evident a vessel had sunk in the night, for there were two masts, by this time perfectly discernible, standing up almost perpendicularly, immersed about as far as the tops, as they are technically termed; that is, the broad framework which affords footing at the juncture of the mast and top-mast. Of these, the foretops, being lower than the other, were rather below the level of the sea, but the main-tops were above it, and on these the outlines of four human figures could be seen with tolerable distinctness by a spectator on the beach, standing out against the moving stay, although so little raised above the water as to be partially immersed by every wave as it swept past.

As soon as ever this had been ascertained by those on land, there had been a cry for a boat. The three sailors already mentioned were the first to volunteer their services; and it was with a view to completing their crew that two of them had gone to Lynch's cabin, while the third went northward across a neck of land to the little pier of —, close to which the yawl lay high and dry. The greater part of the gazers from the top of the cliff had followed in the direction of the projected launch; but the officer of the coast-guard, an experienced seaman, remained with his men at their original station, occasionally raising his glass to his eye, and taking a narrow survey of the mast and those clinging to it; but when spoken to about the boat, and the chance of getting them off, he only shook his head, and looking up sagaciously to windward, without saying a word.

He had just shut up his glass, and slung it

once more in its leathern case behind him, when the unbappy creature he had assisted to save the night before came running wildly up, her hair floating behind her, her face ashy pale, and all the intenses of fearful inquiry in its expression. Breathless and agitated, she could not at first say a word, but looked frenziedly back and forward along the horizon, the rapidity of her gaze preventing her from catching the object she was in search of. At last she gained utterance, and cried, 'Oh, sir! where are they?—where are they? Show me them, for God's sake!—Oh, show me them!' and she clasped her hands before him.

'Look over that black rock there, about a quarter of a mile off shore, and you'll see the masts. I doubt whether you can make out what's on them, though.'

She shaded her eyes with her hand, and ran her glance more slowly in the direction pointed out, and at length screamed, 'Yes, yes, that's our ship—there she is, and people on the mast! Oh, who are they? For God's sake, tell me, sir, is he there?'

'Don't know, ma'am, indeed. Can't well see yet who's there. Besides, I don't know the person you speak of, that I'm aware of. Not likely he and I should be acquainted.'

'Oh, look, look, sir! take the glass, or give it to me. He's tall, sunburnt, with blue jacket. Oh, you can't mistake him!'

'Here, my lads,' said the officer to his men, 'unstrap this spyglass and hand it to me.'

They unbuckled it from the back of their superior, where it had been slung; and when he had received it at their hands, he commenced leisurely to place it at its focus, while the poor woman continued to watch him with agonized impatience.

'Oh, look! for the love of heaven, sir, look, and tell me what you see!'

'Why, ma'am, as well as I can see, there are four men holding on, and a boy, I think, beside, on the other mast; but of that I can't be altogether certain, for the sea washes over him, and it's only now and then I catch a glimpse of him. By George, there's one of the men off! Ha! he continued, looking through his glass, 'I caught him that moment on the top of a wave. He is close to the other mast. No doubt he will make for it, if he has strength, now that he has been swept off the mainmast; but he will hardly have so good a berth there, I expect, as the tops are below water. He's at it, by Jove—no, gone again; and the boy's off, too. My God, they'll not hold out much longer, any of them!'

'Oh, don't say so!' cried the woman. 'What are the men on the mast like? Look, sir, look, and tell me, I beseech of you! What color is their dress?'

'They're not down yet, though,' continued the officer, without heeding her, and still looking.—'There they were both together on a wave that time—a strong fellow that, to stand against such a sea—by Jove, he has hold of the boy; and, as I am a living man, it was to save him he quitted the mainmast; and there he is now swimming back to it! Now that there's more light, I can see that he's a stout young fellow, and the biggest of them all.'

'That's he, that's he, I knew it!' she exclaimed, bursting into tears; 'my generous, noble Henry; who is there to save him? who will go out to him? Oh, sir, is there no boat here? I'll go out myself with any one!' and the distracted woman caught the arms of the officer.

'Why, ma'am, they're gone off already to launch one for trying the thing; but I've my doubts if they'll get through surf—however, they'll try.'

[One of the fishermen's boats was launched, and manned by four intrepid men, but on approaching the bar off the promontory, it was capsized by a dreadful wave and dashed in pieces, the men barely escaping with their lives.]

This event, discouraging in itself, was fraught with fearful consequences to others. Five human beings there were—alone in the midst of the winds and waves, and unconscious of what had been attempted—whose only earthly chance of deliverance seemed cut off for ever by that accident.

At the lime-kiln, the chief officer of the coast-guard was joined in the meantime by several individuals, whose curiosity had got the better of their chilliness.

As the tide rose, each hour saw the mast lightened of its human burden. One soul more was swept into eternity—body after body was washed ashore, and the wretched creature, who had returned to the cliff and now watched them drifted successively in, was still satisfied that each, though well known, was not that of her beloved. The day, as it advanced, enabled her to see him distinctly—to mark his effort to preserve himself and his companions—his lashing the boy to the mast by a piece of loose rope, suspended to which, however, he expired early—his apparent sufferings from cold—his anxious and imploring look towards the shore, and more

than once the tokens of his supplications in the lifting of his hands to heaven. Much of this she could see herself from the station she had resumed at the lime-kiln, and much of it she gained by report from the officer, whose glass seemed the interpreter of her destinies.

She had not long been placed thus, when a dog, of the French boodle breed, was seen struggling up the steep cliff, occasionally stopping to slake the water from its long curly hair; and as soon as it had reached the top, it ran directly to where the woman was sitting, and began to jump upon her with the most extravagant marks of delight. She sprang up, seized the little animal in her arms, and covered it with caresses, and at length burst into an agony of tears. It had evidently called her mistress, and had probably floated ashore on some piece of the wreck without being observed by the persons on shore, and now rejoiced one of its owners with its safety.—But the force of instinct told the animal that in its rejoicing it had a duty to perform; and no sooner did its mistress put it down from her arms than it began to jump round her, to pull at her dress, to run to the brink of the cliff and look out to sea, and then run back with a greater show of eagerness, and go through the same energetic dumb-show again.

She had watched the struggles and agony of the shipwrecked man himself, and retained some possession of herself in the midst of her despair; but this was too much for her. She rushed frantically towards the precipitous pathway which led to the beach, and would in all probability have hurried down, and plunged into the breakers in her frenzy, had she not been laid hold of by the bystanders and forced back to her old place, and the dog secured in the hands of one of the coast-guard.

Before mid-day but one human being remained on the mast; and that was he to whom her existence clung. He appeared nearly worn out, the rising tide immersing him still more frequently and fearfully beneath the waves, and it was plain to see that he could not hold out much longer.

The young gentlemen from — house unknown to their friends, now pushed off in their small boat from the pier, in the direction of the mast.

A shout, lengthened and renewed, showed that the common people were ready to do justice to the generous heroism of their superiors. Who, indeed, could withhold at such a moment his tribute of heartfelt admiration at the conduct of those noble young spirits, who, when the stoutest heart quailed, and the strongest boat was deemed insufficient, had manned their slight and fragile craft, and braved in her the fate which the more experienced fishermen had so nearly met in the morning. They had succeeded, moreover, for the great danger was passed, the bar having been surmounted before they came into view, and they had now only the long swell of the deep sea to encounter. There they were, the four slender forms straining steadily and gracefully over their oars, their white shirts bright in the sun, while the youngest of the three sailors of the preceding evening, although one of those who had so narrowly escaped in the morning, sat in her stern. They had drawn off from the crowd, it was supposed, according to a preconcerted arrangement, as soon as ever the officer's opinion had been pronounced, and had hastened unperceived away to launch their boat out of reach of the officious interference of the multitude.

The only question now was, whether the solitary being on the mast had strength to hold out till they should arrive there; and it was a fearful interest that was now experienced by the whole assembly of spectators, as they saw the straining of the crew in the distance, and observed the same time that the poor man was growing weaker and weaker, and, besides, did not see the succour that was so near him.

The distance of the Kitty-wake from the spectators was at first too great to allow of much more being distinguished than that it was she, and that she was manned in the manner described. The steersman showed his judgment by keeping well out to sea, and as close as possible to the mind, so that they might not only ride drier and easier, but be able to drop down along side of the mast, rather than have to strain up to it. In this way they would find it easier to render assistance to the man upon it, and be themselves less exhausted in any exertion they would have to make in doing so. The object of their endeavours was every moment in a more critical situation. The gradual rising of the tide, and, as was supposed, the settling down of the vessel, had brought the sea up so as to cover the secure footing in the tops entirely, and he was now forced to depend for his whole support upon the rope which still adhered to the top-mast, and even so, every wave which happened to rise above the rest, swept over his head, and he subsided, the eyes of the people on shore gazing intently looked, to see the mast relieved from the