

The Li'le Shaver.

(M. B. Manwell in 'Sunday at Home.')

'Each hour comes with some little faggot of God's will fastened upon its back.'—Faber.

It was a rough bit of the coastline, none rougher for miles upshore or downshore.

'Happen I might ha' done wiser not to stick like a limpet to the old place!' sometimes Nat Bray musingly told himself aloud, when the sullen, roaring seas broke over the beach, and the overbearing waves, with a grand disdain for puny man, rolled in their tons of water right up to and beyond his cottage, then with a like slow sweep of contempt rolled back to sea again.

'Tis home though, Nat, my dear, and

But Lyddy suited Nat, and he turned over the kernel in her last words respectfully enough, considering he was her lord and master.

'I take it that you mean there's some'ut special like in our being set down hereabouts,' he took out his pipe to say after slowly ruminating. 'Can't say as I see it, my lass. 'Tis a matter o' nigh fifteen year sin' you and me buckled to and settled in Shorehaven, and what's come o't, I ask you?'

'You forget the li'le shaver, Nat!' softly said Lyddy, and her steel knitting-needles flew round the woollen heel she was shaping, a heel much too small for any foot of stalwart Nat Bray's.

A pause. Then the fisherman's large, far-reaching laugh rang out over the waters in

shrill wind had been rising steadily for the last half-hour. A persistent greyness was crawling over all-things, blotting out the flaming purples of the sunset. And as he watched, Nat's brows drew together.

'Some'ut's coming over!' Lyddy looked up presently to observe.

'Ay! There's dirty weather out beyond there.'

"When the wind's in the south
The rain's in its mouth."

Hilloa! my lad! Nat broke off to shout, and his sea-blue eyes dilated under his bushy black eyebrows.

There was an answering whoop from the shore; a noisy rush over the crackling shingle; a mixed confusion of wind-milling legs and arms; a scramble to the feet of Nat and Lyddy, all of which resolved itself into a boy, as what else in nature could it be?

'Goin' out to-night, dad?' was the breathless question.

'Not so sure as I am, Barney. 'Tis promis'in' to be a dirty night.' Nat's eyes were back on the sea again, piercing the grey veil looming close now to shore. 'If so be as the wind shifts to the south-west, we shall catch a whole gale, if not a hurricane. There, didn' I say so.'

A sharp yell, almost human, slithering and sighing down into a wail ending in a low sobbing, came out of the grey pall.

Nat sprang to his feet, and bent eagerly forward as if to tackle with the new-born tempest, and an angry spray, fiercely driven inland, splashed on his brown cheekbone.

'So! A dirty night 'twill be!'

'God help anything out there!' said Lyddy, under her breath; then she sighed with a sudden relief. The storm had come in a flash as it were, but her man, her Nat, was on shore safe at her side.

Well might Lyddy Bray commend to God's mercy anything—human or otherwise—out in the grey wall of mist, for under the tumbling, boiling waters lay cruel, treacherous rocks—a long reef—on which had ridden to its death many a doomed craft.

It was there that the foreign steamer went down, thirteen years ago, when the half-drowned babe, lashed to a plank by a woman's long embroidered, silk scarf, was washed on the beach exactly below Nat's cottage. The babe was now Barney—a veritable 'son of consolation' to the childless mother—Barney, the agile lad capering before her, whose name might as well have been Mercury, such a restless pickle was he.

'Dad!' he was saying, 'the boats are all going out; they're going round the Head to fish on the lee side. I've been helping!'

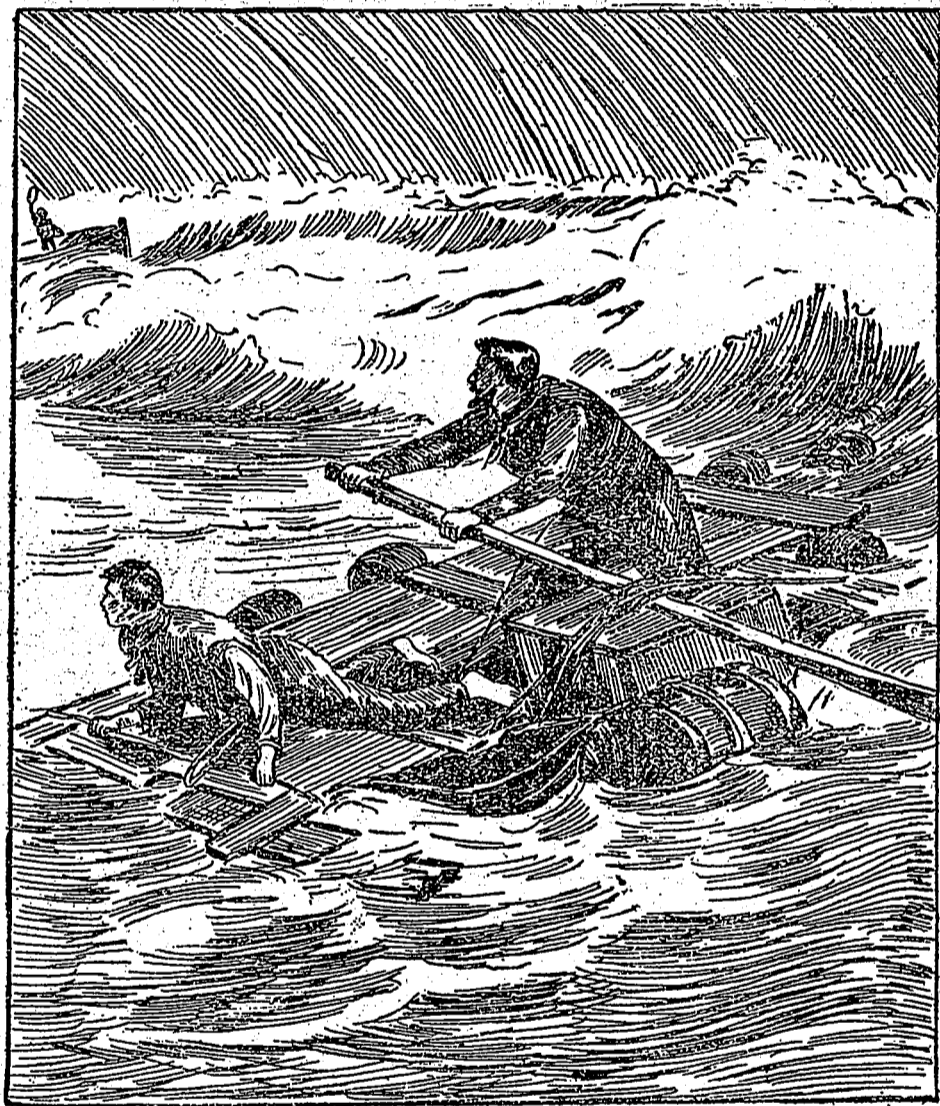
'Be they?' said Nat, slowly. 'Well, I dunno' that I'll go wi' them. Some'uts pulling me not to!'

'Then, don't 'ee!' hastily put in Lyddy. 'Them silent voices and them twitchings back they've a meaning that we don't heed as we had ought to. Seems to me that 'stead o' looking for the finger o' God to p'int the way, we're that keerful to look aside; we don't want to see it, 'cos we've got so every day like, driving 'ahead on our own road, not his. Nat, ye'll bide at home to-night?' she finished earnestly.

'I mean to, my lass!' briefly said Nat, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on the low sea-wall between the cottage and the beach. Then he silently watched the handful of fishing-boats setting forth, in spite of the grim outlook.

'Tis but a squall. 'Twill go as it comed!' the fishermen told each other hopefully as they fought their way round the Head.

But they were wrong. As the night deep-



THE LAST ON THE RAFT.

when ye think deep 'tis not we, for sure, that picks and chooses the spots, here, there, and elsewhere, on this earth where we take root. There's bound to be a mean'in' in wheresoever we find ourselves set down to live our lives.'

Lyddy Bray, Nat's wife, was a thoughtful woman. She was no great favourite with the other women of the fishing hamlet of Shorehaven—a sparse collection of thatched cottages huddled close together for company on the sea-board. Lyddy was too silent to please the loquacious wives who aired themselves, coney-wise, in the sun at their hut doors, scuttling back into the grim, dark interiors at the sight of the first distant brown sail on the horizon, in a mad hurry to rec'd up the house-place before the men beached their boats. That was not Lyddy's way; and to stand out conspicuously from your human surroundings is not the surest means of winning popularity.

front of the cottage door where husband and wife sat for a brief spell of rest at sundown.

'So I did! So I did, Lyddy! God never gave you and me a li'le child of our own, but the winds and the waves sent us one, thanks be!' he ended reverently. 'Whatever'd life been to we, lass, wi'out the li'le shaver—bless him!'

Lyddy smiled.

'An' s'pose we hadn't ha' settled down in Shorehaven?' she said quietly.

'I see,' said Nat briefly. 'And that's why ye called the li'le shaver "Barnabas"?''

'Yes; that's why. Barnabas, "the son o' consolation."'

A long silence followed, and the knitting-needles flew round the heel in flashes.

Out on the tumbling waters, the face of the deep, which Nat watched ever unflinchingly in his waking hours, and dreamed of in his sleep, was changing rapidly. A