

BOYS AND GIRLS

A North Sea Peril.

(“Toilers of the Deep.”)

We were well out on the northernmost banks—farther than it is usual to sail in the winter months, but the fish had become scarce nearer home, so after it we had to go—or else starve! Three hundred miles from the Spurn we dropped on a fine run of ‘prime,’ but it ought to fetch its weight in gold, considering the weather we went through. Strong winds had followed us out, and while we cruised on and off, our lonely boat seemed the only object in these solitary waters on which they could hurl their power. Yet after all we thought we might laugh at their spite, for our ship was new and well-fastened. Still, it was cruel work, the constant shift of sail; now hauling down the balance reef, then letting out again, and what with shifting jibs we never had a dry rag to our backs since we left home, and glad enough we were to hear the skipper say we should make a last ‘haul’ that night, and then away for home, with the leading wind that blew.

The short winter’s day of these parts was about done, and we were making ready the gear for a last shoot as the smack threshed to windward, under a one-reef breeze that sang in icy coldness out of the nor’west, and put a frosted deadness on the weather side of the blue-black seas swinging with tinted caps of foam, as they rose to the level of the light; and as we stormed along, with the deep-red sun dead over the bows and level with the seas, it seemed as though the touch of our stem churned the dark-colored water into a rain of blood, as the wind flung the spray and drift in a constant stream across the sun-glow.

Tea was over, and the hands below were donning mufflers and extra guernseys in readiness for the bitter deck; and in the engine-room—we carried a small donkey engine for heaving the gear with—the boy was trimming the lamps by the light of the boiler fire. We had laid down the law to him: no lamp trimming until we had finished tea, for, after all, even a smacksman has an objection to paraffin as a flavoring to his ‘grub,’ for our lad seemed to bathe in it—waste rags he scorned, or at least preferred his hair to do duty for them.

Our paraffin distributor had just answered the skipper’s ‘Hurry up with the lamps!’ when we heard the smashing of glass as the smack gave an extra lurch, and in a moment the cabin was lit up with a bright glare issuing from the engine-room, and the lad ran shouting up the ladder. We sprang to the doorway, to find the place a mass of flames from the burning oil swilling on the floor. We were trapped! To gain the deck we must rush through the flames to the ladder; there was no door to shut out the fire from the cabin, and the dense smoke poured chokingly on us; every moment’s hesitation made our situation more desperate. We tore the berth doors open, and seized the rugs and blankets to envelop our heads, before making the awful rush, but the skipper on deck had realized our terrible position, and was smashing off the binnacle hatch at the further end of the cabin.

The heat and smoke were stifling, as we huddled at the cabin stern to keep out of reach of the flames, but each time the ship’s stern swung up the downward eddy of air drove them on to us, scorching our hands and faces. The deck-hand wrapped his oil-skin coat round his head, ready to make a rush for the ladder, when down on our

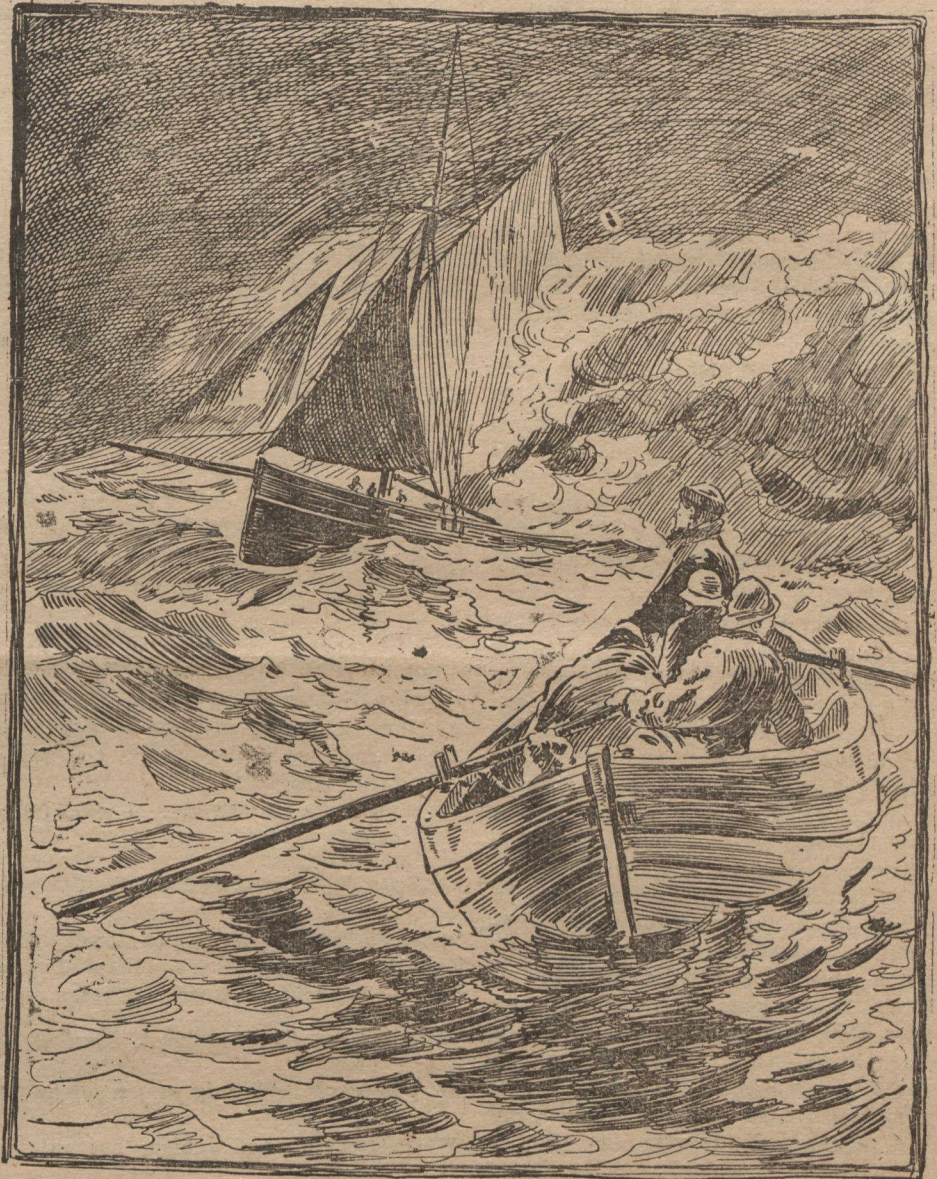
heads fell the compass and broken wood-work of the hatch, and above us were the dark heavens, with the stars gleaming down. Even then there was a generous struggle as to who should be the last to leave, but the open hatch sucked the flames, and one by one we struggled through the narrow opening.

A few moments only we drank in the life-giving breeze, then flew to the hold for buckets, or anything that would hold water, and as fast as we could fill them we flung the water down on the flames. We were but wasting our time, for the lad in his fright of the burning lamp, had overturned a four-gallon tin of oil, and the vessel was no sod-

The sight of him standing stupified was too much for us, so again we manned the buckets, but we might as well have emptied them overboard for the good they did, and the awful roar of the steam escaping from the boiler warned us that any instant we might be blown up.

All our clothing and food were in the burning cabin, and the horror of passing a night in the open boat loomed vividly before us. Our only chance lay in some vessel sighting the glare and running down to our assistance, but such chance was very small, as we were out of the usual track.

We had abandoned the buckets now, and held on forward, a silent little group, help-



WATCHING THE LOSS OF THEIR ALL.

den old hulk, but made of new and dry timber, and the oil had run into every accessible hole and cranny.

The flames spouted up into the night, lighting up every rope and sail, and we were bathed with perspiration, despite the intense cold; while the roar of the steam blowing off, as the flames played on the boiler, drowned even the rush of the seas. By this time the fire was bursting through the broken binnacle hatch. We dragged spare sails from the forepeak, and battened them over the hatches to try to smother the fire, but they were no sooner on than they were burnt through, and fiercer than ever the flames poured out.

We could do no more; it only remained for us to get the boat out. The skipper stood looking bitterly at his ruin, for all his hard life’s savings had been ventured in the ship—and to come to this!

lessly watching the fire getting stronger each minute; the wind, as the stern swung up, driving the flames in sheets across the lee quarter, and any instant we knew the tiller lashings might be burned through. We were ‘laid to.’ The mizenmast and sail were all on fire now, and little jets of flames ran flickering up the newly-tarred ropes, firing the smack aloft.

There was no hope now, and sorrowfully we rigged the tackle on the boat and hove her out.

‘Get into her, boys, before the tiller lashings part,’ mournfully said the skipper. One by one we watched our chance, and sprang into the boat dancing alongside, stowing the lad in the bows, half stunned at the extent of the mischief he had made, and fearfully eyeing the skipper as he held on against the rail watching the completion of his ruin.