

BOYS AND GIRLS

At the Summons.

(By Frank E. Channon.)

'The lifeboat! The lifeboat!'
The cry rang out, loud and hoarse, above the roaring of the gale and the thunder of the surf.

Far out in the inky darkness of the storm a blue light flared up for an instant; then all was blackness again. A cry of terror—a long drawn out wail, as from those who stand in the fear of death, was caught up by the hurrying wind for a moment, and then stifled into silence by the roar of the elements.

The little knot of weather-beaten men, who stood clustered on the wave-swept beach, and the crowd of hangers-on behind them shivering in the bite of the storm, stood irresolute for a brief second, then the cry rang out again:

'The lifeboat! The lifeboat!'
Instantly there was a shuffling of many feet and the watchers began to run towards the little, low-roofed shed, in which was stored the lifeboat.

'Can we launch her, think you, Bill?' came the anxious inquiry from a tall, gaunt man, as he looked towards a weather-beaten old salt.

'We can get her out all right, but it's after I'm thinking of. Can't Jasper in no way leave? Is his missus sure dying.'

'She is that, too,' broke in another old sailor. 'The doctor says as she can't no ways live till the morn, and what we'll do for a cap'n is more than I know; there's no un here can handle the steerin' oar—say, mates, don't you think he'd come, if we went up and put it to him straight?'

'What! and take him away from his old woman as is a-dying! Not me!'

'But we can't get out clear o' the "Wolf's Tooth" without he, and fer another thing, I ain't a-going to try—"No, Sir," not on a night like this, without old Jasper's got the lines under his arms—that's sure,' and the speaker came to a sudden stop, and slapped his thigh decisively.

The group came to a halt and some of the men voiced their approval of the speaker's words, saying:

'That's what I says.'
'Tain't no good a-racin' into death's jaws.'

The first speaker faced them angrily and asked:

'What are ye a-going to do, then; let 'em go under?'

The speech hit them, and hit them all hard.

'In nowise so; we'll go up to Jasper's cottage and get him to take the lines,' was the response.

Without waiting for more words, a half-dozen of the men started on a run towards their captain's home. It was a little bit of a cottage, nestling just behind the bluff. A light burned feebly in the front room. The men knocked softly, and then, without waiting for permission, entered.

A touching sight met their gaze.

On an old wooden bed lay a woman. Her eyes were closed, and her breath came and went in short little gasps. She was apparently dying. By her side, with bowed head, knelt an old storm-stained sailor. Tears were trickling down his seamed face, on which was plainly depicted an agony of grief. The village doctor sat in a wooden chair on the other side of the bed. He had done his best; it had failed. He realized that the woman was past all earthly help, and leaned back in the chair, watching with grave face the shortening gasps of the patient.

Both men looked up as the lifeboat crew stole into the room.

'What is it, boys?' asked the old salt, well knowing the answer to his question.

'There's a barque fast on "The Wolf"; she's signalled twice, and is going to pieces. Can't ye come?' ventured one of the men.

The husband pointed dumbly to the bed, and the doctor shook his head.

'She may go any moment,' he whispered, 'leave him with her.'

The captain looked up again into the faces of the men.

'No, mates,' he said, 'I can't come to-night. It's the first time I ever refused, but I can't leave her now; I must stand by her to the end.'

The sinking woman slowly opened her eyes, and fixed them on her husband, imploringly.

'Go, Jasper,' she breathed. 'Go, and God's will be done.'

'I'll come, mates,' said the husband, huskily. 'Up there perhaps I'll meet her again.'

He leaned over and impressed a kiss upon the tired face.

Her eyes opened, and again her lips formed the word: 'Go.'

The captain brushed away the tears from his eyes, and reached for his oilskins, then, with a parting kiss, he hurried from the room.

The fury of the gale struck them as they left the cottage. With bent heads they struggled on and reached the beach. The boat was already run out on her carriage, and half the crew had climbed into her. The captain was all action now. He assumed command as one well used to it. His orders came loud and clear above the roaring of the gale.

'Tumble in, boys! Lead her out, there!'

The four strong horses were urged into the seething waters, and next moment the crew were pulling for dear life, while out in the blackness flared another light, and another despairing wail was borne to them upon the storm-driven wind.

Not a word was spoken. Every man pulled with all his might, and the captain wrestled with the tiller. Huge waves broke incessantly over the gallant lifeboat and her crew. They struggled along; now up to their waists in water, as a great wave deluged them; now high and dry on the crest of some giant billow. Then down, down, down into its depths again, while the oncoming mountain of water towered above them and burst again, almost but never quite swamping them; and all the while, the calm, cool hand of the skilled captain grasped the tiller, and he peered out into the darkness, waiting and watching for the next. There would be a warning cry of: 'Here she comes, boys.' A thunderer of rushing waters; the boat would shiver and shake like a thing of life; then push her nose gallantly out from the maelstrom of rushing waters; the boat would shiver in torrents from her scuppers, up, up, high and dry, then down again to the next depth. And so they fought their way out on their errand of mercy, with never a thought of quitting; their only goal, the sinking ship, that now loomed out big and black before them.

She was stuck hard and fast on the dreaded 'Wolf'; the seas dashing over her and threatening every moment to break her up. Her crew and half a dozen passengers were gathered under the lee of a deck-house of her fore-castle, waiting, waiting.

They hailed, with frenzied shouts, their deliverers, as the lifeboat was skilfully brought around under the leeward side of the foundered vessel.

'Throw us a line,' bellowed the lifeboat captain, as he carefully gauged the distance between the two craft.

A rope circles through the air. It falls short. Again and again they try; at last the bow-man in the lifeboat holds to it and makes fast. Now comes some delicate work. In spite of the high-running sea; in spite of the blinding sleet and roaring wind, the rescue boat must be brought up to the wrecked ship. Look out! or she will be smashed to splinters against the tall sides. Watch out, there, or she will be stove in and her gallant crew shelled out like peas from the pod. A cool head and brawny arms are at work, though, until at last they bring her up a foot or so from the wreck in the comparatively smooth water of the shelter of the big ship.

'How many of you?' shouts the lifeboat captain.

The skipper of the ship is hanging to the lee rail.

'Eleven—two women,' he bellows back. 'We can stow you all one trip; can they—'

A monster greyback carries the boat out of earshot for a moment, but she comes in on the next one, aye, comes in too hard, for her gunwales crunch and grind against the sides of the big ship, and she springs apart, like a wounded animal, with a big hole in her top-lines.

'Ship your oar and shift your rowlock!' comes the sharp command from the lifeboat captain.

Too late! The oar is split to match-wood, but a spare one takes its place, and in the brief second that the boat ground against the sides, a dark bundle has been pitched into her. It is a woman, half fainting. She is hastily placed in the sternsheets, and lies there sobbing and hysterical. Again the boat lurches in, and again a human bundle is thrown into her. The two women are safe on her. Now for the men.

Three leap into her as she lay alongside for a second on the next run in. Then two more try; one jumps too far, and the waters close over him; a man at number five grabs him and he is hauled out, his head bleeding from a cut, and crying like a child. He lies sobbing in the shelter of the sternsheets, with the two women, and praying to his God; perhaps the first time he has prayed for years, for all men implore God when the wings of death hover near them.

Now comes the rest of the crew, and last the captain. Like a good, true man, he has stuck to his ship until the last. He has done all he can; there is nothing to be gained by staying, so now, for the first time, he thinks of himself. He swings free and drops into the waiting boat.

'Give 'way!' shouts the lifeboat captain.

The line is cut; the boat runs out from under the shelter of the wreck and is in the grasp of the furious gale again.

But now it roars behind her; the waves leap after her, as if anxious that their prey shall not escape; it is easy work, compared to what it was fighting their way out. The crowd on the beach is waiting for them. Many willing men dash into the surf and drag the gallant boat and its crew of heroes high and dry up on the shingles. The rescued are hustled off to the warmth and shelter of near-by cottages, and the captain is hurrying off to his little cottage again, dreading to find the Angel of Death has already spread his wings over it. One of the rescued men, refusing the proffered offer of shelter, has hastened after him. His hand falls upon the shoulder of the lifeboat captain, who wheels around, and they face each other. There is an exclamation of surprise; a joyous shout rends the air, and they fall on each other's shoulders.

'Father!'

'Son!'

Rescuer and rescued; they have met. After an absence of many years, the wayward son has returned, and has been flung by the sea into the arms of his father, who has mourned for him as dead. The prodigal son has returned; the dead has come to life!

'Come!' says the father, 'you may yet be in time!'

They hurry on, and enter the little cottage.

The doctor is still at his post. The mother still breathes.

The son leans over and gazes at those closed eyes that have looked and looked in vain for his return so long, and as he gazes at them, they open. His arms steal around the wasted form:

'Mother,' he whispers.

'My boy,' comes back the faint answer.

The shock of her boy's return restored the mother to health, as nothing else could have done. Back, from the very gates of Death; back to health and happiness, nursed by the tender love of husband and son, stronger and stronger every