

* * The Story Page * *

Jack Stovold, Mariner, or a Hero from the Ranks.

BY BURNETT FALLOW.

Looking back over a lapse of years, I can better understand how Jack Stovold viewed his declining years with a philosophical calm that had a peculiar charm for those who interested him. Boy and man for seventy long years, he had traversed the waterways of the deep. He had seen life as none but a sailor views it, although he had but little profited by the collings and pitchings of his barque over many seas. He attached no value to money. Typical of his class, he worked hard and for the present. He was accustomed to say the harvest of the sea was always ripe, and could be garnered at will. So the years of his life drifted away, more or less aimlessly, the end neither fore-shadowed nor foreseen. With age he had become more or less taciturn. It was told of him that the loss of his wife and child, when they had just begun to brighten his life, had made him a prematurely aged man. He held intercourse with but few of his fellow-fishermen. Seldom, however, was he sullen or ill-tempered, or at variance with his mates. His hands were always ready to perform a service, and his tongue to give sound moral advice. And for little inobtrusive acts of kindness his name was a household one throughout the village.

On a certain June afternoon Jack Stovold might have been seen sitting on the wharf mending the net of a fish-trawl. He appeared in deep thought, as was his usual custom. His pipe was between his lips, but the blue smoke spirals had ceased to rise. In spite of the busy way in which he plied his netting needle, from the set expression of his face, it was easy to see his reverie was a deep one. It was suddenly broken in upon by a loud scream of fright, a splash as of some body striking the water, and then silence.

Jack Stovold had immediately grasped the situation. He sprang to his feet, caught up a boat-hook, and ran to the edge of the wharf. A few moments of 'fishing' with the boat-hook, and then he hauled out a small and half-drowned boy—myself! That was my first connection with Jack Stovold, and we became shipmates from that hour.

My mother, a great invalid, had been ordered to the seaside—and as I was a sickly little chap it had been arranged for me to accompany her. A town boy, I had never seen the sea. You can imagine the delight with which I ran on the shore of the harbor—among the boats—and with the fisher-lads, who took kindly to me, and if they were a bit rough in their ways, they were not unkind to the 'little landlubber who didn't know nuthin'!

At my best, I was but a puny boy. Our family doctor had ordered that I was to run wild the whole summer through. This I was like to do, for it was seldom my afflicted mother could accompany me. So long as I was well and happy she considered she was literally fulfilling the doctor's instructions. And she saw with pride how well the life suited me—how the roses came to my cheeks—and how my shoulders broadened, and my narrow chest expanded.

The day after Jack Stovold fished me out from what would most certainly have been a watery grave, he gave me a small model yacht and told me I could sail her, at low tide, on his oyster-bed.

I was soon in difficulties. Somehow, she would not sail on a straight course. Her tacks were aimless, like a rudderless barque. Often I had to wait a long time before she came ashore, when I made a feeble attempt to readjust her sails.

The old man at last left his net, and came out to me, as to the shingle.

"In difficulties—eh, shipmate?" inquired he.

"She will not sail as I see the other big boats," replied I.

"Partly, shipmate, 'cause you're not aboard, but mostly 'cause you don't understand. So you must learn to trim the sails properly, and some day (if you stay among us) you'll be able to cap'n a real big yacht of your own. Now, let's see if we can rig her a bit ship-shape."

His deft fingers soon set up mainsail and rudder.

Now try her on the port tack, said he. And for half an hour he and I sailed my little yacht backward and forward across the pond. Then he went back to his net, and I continued to sail my yacht until the rising tide caused me to suspend operations for that afternoon. So I went and entered into conversation with my new shipmate; for I had one or two weighty things on my mind that he alone could remove.

"Mother does not understand why you refused the reward she offered you for saving my life," I said. "I want to know why you call me shipmate?"

The old man gazed long and reflectively at me—sadly, perhaps, would be more correct.

"Well," he at last said slowly, "first 'cause I value a human life above money, second 'cause you're like my little boy as I lost."

Then he told me a lot about his little Jack which greatly

interested me, but which I must pass over. Suffice it that Jack Stovold and I became shipmates in every sense of the word. On all favorable occasions he took me with him down the harbor, and I began to gain confidence in steering a boat. And then all too soon came those tragic events which yet live as fresh in my mind as they impressed themselves upon my brain on the fateful day they were enacted.

A number of weeks passed by, and Jack Stovold's interest in me remained unabated. When weather and circumstances permitted he never failed to take me with him on his fishing excursions. His yarns of the harbor and of his voyages to distant lands were always full of exciting interest. Then I gained some practical knowledge in the management of a boat and the intricacies of a lug-sail. My health continued to improve and the old man, after some flattering remark, would often sit and survey me with complacency. Ah it was a happy life, and I revelled in it to the full while it lasted.

The kind of fishing I most enjoyed was 'hooking.' There was plenty of excitement in hauling in a big fish at the end of my line, and in particular when the fish was too strong for me, and I had to summon my shipmate to my assistance. Pull an' haul ye ho! Jack would say, and flop! a big bass cod or sea trout would lie gasping in the bottom of the boat.

At last came the eventful day, the tragic incidents of which indelible on my mind have induced me to pen this story.

We had planned a hooking expedition to a well-known fishing ground far away down the harbor. We set out provisioned for some hours, as we wished to fish two tides. I had a well filled lunch basket—provisions for us both. A keg of nice fresh water was always kept in a fore compartment of the boat.

We set out half an hour before ebb tide, and an hour past midday. The sky was cloudless, and the water as clear as crystal; so much so, in fact, that white shells imbedded in mud could be seen lying at a considerable depth. At the outset Jack expressed the opinion that ill-luck would repay our efforts.

There was not a breath of air to fill the sail if it had been hoisted, so Jack out oars, gave me the tiller lines, and pulled with lusty strokes. In this way, an hour later, we reached the fishing ground.

I had my own lines, and my place was forward. Jack fished from the stern and used four lines. The weight attached enabled us to throw our line far out. We then drew in the slack until we could feel the weight. The lines were then fastened to 'tellers.' They were composed of flexible twigs, and were stuck in holes made for the purpose in the gunwale of the boat. When a fish got on the vibrations of the 'teller' notified the fact. Our bait was composed of, lug-worms, mussel, shrimps, and soft crabs.

Having baited our hooks and cast our lines we sat down to watch the 'tellers.' Not a single bite came and we found it slow work. Then we were subjected to no end of annoyance from whelks and 'kinger' crabs, which continually sucked the baits from the hooks. At last Jack left me to do as I pleased as he wanted a 'snoodle.' I was to keep a sharp lookout and to rouse him if anything out of the common happened.

The afternoon waned, and the sun dipped low upon the horizon. With the approach of night a cold breeze swept across the harbor from the land. The tide had begun to flow and the boat had veered round upon her anchorage, entangled the lines with the painter, and I was forced to rouse Jack to help me get things shipshape again. He grumbled a little over the disentanglement of the lines, and told me I ought to have roused him sooner. Then he moored the boat in another position, and gave it as his opinion that the fish ought to bite. But vain were all our efforts to lure them!

Darkness (it is seldom quite dark on the water) settled around us. The wind gathered in force, and the waves began to rise. Great clouds rolled up from the south west and there was a sudden shift of the wind's direction. Jack Stovold, with knowledge born of years, foresaw danger.

"It's up lines an' home, shipmate!" cried he. Then we forthwith stowed our tackle, up sail and anchor, and, having made one long tack, stood up harbor before the wind for our moorings.

Suddenly and without warning of any kind a boat coming down harbor was upon us. She took us in the bows, sheered off, and shot astern, almost immediately passing for view.

"One of the boats from the next village, an' on the poach as usual!" cried Jack. "I do believe the lubber has stove us." Here, take the tiller, shipmate while I overhaul our bows."

I soon found she was too lively for me to handle, and she almost immediately paid off.

"Keep her full!" cried Jack. "What! You can't? Then you must bale for your life, for we're making water fast!"

I gave up the rudder-lines to Jack, and set to baling with all my strength. I soon found the water was gaining on me.

"Keep her clear! shipmate—you must keep her clear!" Jack cried. There was a tremor in his voice that I did not at that time rightly understand. You see, I did not fully realize our danger.

"Oh, Jack—I can't—I can't," I half sobbed.

"Have one more try, shipmate; our—it's our only chance. I know now that which I did not at the time understand—that it was our lives at stake."

I redoubled my efforts, but all to no purpose.

"Have another try at the helm, shipmate," said Jack; huskiness in his voice. We effected the change. Almost immediately he continued: "It's of no use, shipmate; my weight for a only sinks her bows. If I down-sail we'll make no way, and soon fill. There's but one thing to do—run her on the mud!"

Again he took the rudder lines, slackened sail a bit, and ran us into an indentation in the mud, which afforded us a temporary shelter from the wind and violence of the waves.

Jack stepped out upon the mud, and again examined the boat. I heard him utter a long-drawn sigh—of sadness, regret and abandoned hope. Ah, how well I understand it all as I write these lines, long years after the tragedy was enacted.

"You'll have to sail her into port yourself, shipmate." The huskiness of his voice had deepened. "It's your only chance. She'll ride higher in the water with me out of her."

"Oh, Jack!" cried I. "What will you do?"

"I'll put on my mud-pattens, an' walk to shore. Maybe I'll not arrive home quite so soon as you—maybe sooner. It's a straight course into harbor; you can see the lights from here. I'll close-reef your sail; and then, shipmate, you'll be in God's keeping."

I was much moved by the solemnity of the old man's utterance; and I am not ashamed to own I wept bitterly. I did not fully understand the risk Jack would run, but I had some vague idea he was making a great sacrifice to save me.

"Don't leave me!" I wildly cried, and added sundry other appeals.

"You just listen to me, shipmate! And now the old man spoke with sternness. "If you reach the village, just tell the lads how an' where you left me. Tell 'em at once—don't waste a minute. They'll understand—ay! they'll know what to do."

"Let me come with you, Jack!" I cried, but in vain.

"You couldn't cross the mud, an' you'd sink me if I carried you; just as I'd sink the boat if I came aboard. No—no, shipmate, we've got to part. Put—we're wasting time, an' the tide's flowing fast. 'Twill be over the mud 'fore I get ashore unless I hurry. There! I've reefed the sail; an' don't keep her too full. Sail her on the starboard tack, an' that'll keep the stoven bow higher. Again—an' for the last time—tell the lads how you left me. I'll be all right, for God'll be with me an' his angels'll guide my steps over the bar. An' now—good-bye, shipmate. Kiss me lad! I love thee, for thou art so like my own bonny boy." He caught me in his arms, and kissed me passionately, and one great tear fell upon my cheek. I would have replied, but I could not. His last words were spoken in a low, constrained voice: "God bless you, shipmate, watch over you, and let his hand steer you safe to port; for mine can do so no longer. Good-bye—good-bye!"

One great shove he gave the boat which sent her clear of the mud. Almost immediately darkness came between us, and I saw my old shipmate no more—until the next day!

The boat, freed from the man's weight, now rode higher, and shipped but little water. She was less lively under the reefed sail, and I found I could steer her on the course Jack had set.

The lights of the village grew more and more distinct and some moving ones showed that watchers were on the wharf. Half an hour later I beached the boat on a stretch of shingle westward of the quay. Then I shouted for assistance. Eventually, and in an exhausted condition, I was landed on the wharf.

The fishermen quickly noticed the fact of my having returned alone.

"Where have you left Jack Stovold?" was the cry.

"He is going to walk home," I replied.

"What!" It was old Ben Fisher who spoke. "Where'd ye leave him, lad?"

"On Seagull Flat. Our boat got stove. He went on the mud to lighten her. I was to tell you without delay. He said you'd all understand."

"I should think we do! Here! Abe, Steve, Mark! Come with me in my big boat. We may be in time—I fear we'll be too late."

I heard them run out the boat, and then I fainted. . . . But I was subsequently told all that occurred.

"Pull, lads, pull!" cried Ben Fisher. "There's a life depending on every stroke."

And from time to time he used other cheering expressions.

In spite of the strenuous efforts they made, the boat seemed to crawl through the water. Would they be in