

THE DRIFT OF DEATH

An Old Mariner Recounts a Struggle for Life in a Storm at Sea. After a Whale Had Smashed a Boat and Left Him and His Comrades Clinging to the Wreckage for Many Hours

CAPTAIN HORACE SHERMAN, a whaler of forty years' experience, is now in Sailors' Snug Harbor, Staten Island. Many experiences have been his, and he has met danger in many forms, but, as he says, the thing which for him holds terror unspeakable is solitude. After what he endured in the North Pacific on his first whaling trip, this is not at all to be wondered at.

FOR forty years my life was on the sea. I have met danger in most of the forms in which it is encountered by seamen, and I have been in tight places on shore. Often I have known fear when the peril has seemed insurmountable and lives besides my own have hung in the balance, but there is one terror, overwhelming, nameless, which has never relinquished its grip upon my mind. It is the terror of loneliness, the horror of being left desolate, alone an infinitesimal speck in a great roaring universe.

How it came to me is a long story. I was but a lad when I shipped for my first cruise aboard the whaling schooner Gideon Rowland, out of New York. The sea had always called me. I used to dream of tall, spirelike masts, describing circles against starry skies, and when my father told of strange cruises in stranger waters I would close my eyes and hear the splash of the waves against the side and feel the comfortable motion of the ship.

It was settled from the first, as far back as I can remember, that I was to be a sailor, and it was but the consummation of all my dreams, all my longings, when the Gideon Rowland, close hauled and sailing into the wind, tacked out of the harbor and the great light at Sandy Hook slipped down and down behind the horizon.

Followed weeks and weeks of a life that was new and strange and enchanting to me, and the weeks grew into months before at last we were clipping through the blue, cool water of the North Pacific. Whales had been plentiful, and by the middle of May we wanted only one more of the great sea mammals to complete a thousand barrels of sperm oil, which would entitle the crew to a barrel of flour to make doughnuts. That was incentive enough to put every man of us on his mettle.

Early in the morning of May 17 we sighted two whales from the cross trees. Two boats put off from the ship. I was in the boat with Mr. Fairfield, our mate, and we succeeded in fastening to the cow.

The other boat was not successful, and the male kept plunging along in front of the whale we had harpooned. It was my first whale and there were minutes of tense excitement for me. I was busy at my oar while the mate was throwing the harpoon and did not see him in the act, but when he had fastened there was

nothing to do but to keep the boat trimmed and handle the great long spades in an effort to kill the animal.

Those who held the rope were experienced hands and it required all their skill to handle the situation. With the first bite of the harpoon into her fleshy, fat side, the whale sank. How far down she went I do not know, but it seemed to me that the rope, whirring off the reel, was enough to sound the utmost depths of the sea.

Down, down she went, and the coil of rope grew smaller and smaller until it seemed that the tremendous force would soon pull us under, boat and all; but gradually the line began to cut forward through the water and then with a jerking, unsteady motion the boat shot ahead.

The sea was like oil. Not a ripple stirred the surface, and the boat, finally started, cleft through the water at an alarming rate for so small a craft. Sometimes it was jerked to the side and shipped water, which kept us busy bailing, and sometimes when our whale

weapons were plunged into her back and sides where cords and blood vessels were near the surface.

The great tail slapped viciously and a shower of spray covered us before the whale disappeared again and the rope tore off the reel faster than before. Out and out it ran until we were almost as far from the animal as we had been at first, then the same thing was repeated. All the time we were dragging nearer to the whale the boat was racing through the water. Looking back I saw the ship low on the horizon. The other boat had probably put back, for it was not in sight.

Then the excitement of the chase claimed my attention. Again and again we drew our little craft close to our prey and the dripping spades were plunged into muscles and arteries. If the pace slackened it was not noticeable. We ploughed and cavorted through the water like mad, and each time the monster was spaded down she went, deeper and deeper. When at last she went more slowly the ship was out of sight. How far we

seemed to be towering above our heads, and then it fell.

Where there had been a boat there were splinters and fragments of wreckage. One of the men had been struck full by the great tail and sank like lead. Three of us had jumped into the icy water. The other three had been knocked there and though injured were not incapacitated.

Suddenly as she had struck the whale sank again, and the male, apparently realizing that all was over, disappeared. All about us were bits of oars and planks. We could all swim, but it was uncertain

if we would be in the water, and strength was precious. There was wood enough to float all six of us, but no piece sufficiently large for two men.

A few moments after we had been dashed into the water the great body of the whale floated to the surface and drifted about in the swells. She was dead and we had nothing to fear from her. Still not a breath of air stirred the calm surface of the ocean, and we lay there shivering, clinging to our boards. Later I learned that boats had been sent from the ship to search for us, but the whale must have dragged us in a curved or zigzag course, for they were unable to locate us.

From the height of the sun we judged it mid afternoon and were anxious about returning to the ship, but we could only shiver there and long for help. We knew not in which direction to swim, and besides wanted to conserve every ounce of strength that was in us. Three hours we endured so, and then I noticed a blunt, black head of cloud jutting slowly above the western horizon. I shivered so that I could hardly enunciate, but I called the attention of my mates to the cloud. Two of them immediately began to despair, but the rest of us laughed as best we could and made merry jests about how we feared we might be shipwrecked or, about how fortunate we were not to be aboard ship with the storm approaching.

Rawlins, one of the seamen, recalled that he had a flask of brandy in a rear pocket of his baggy trousers. Kicking my legs and clinging to the board, I made my way to him and managed to twist the flask from his pocket. It was hard work, drinking there in the water, and our hands

and darkness was gathering fast. We prayed for some little breeze which would fill the great canvass wings of the Gideon Rowland and bring us salvation. At last it came in gentle, breathlike puffs, that sent chills through the small portions of our bodies which were not covered by water. With the coming of the breeze for which we had longed, our hearts sank within us and we feared that now our end was at hand. All the time darkness gathered.

In puffs and eddies the breeze came and we could see the ruffled patches sweeping across the water in little squalls. Perhaps the ship was feeling it and perhaps she was not. As darkness thickened we paddled closer to one another and kept up a conversation, not at all cheerful. It helped, though, even to talk of things terrible.

"We had best kick off our clothes," I said, "we may have to swim for it yet." "Boo-hoo," shivered Rawlins, a man with whom I was particularly friendly. "I couldn't think of it. It's cold enough as it is."

At that we all laughed. It was a cackling, hoarse laugh with little of mirth in it. Once started I felt like laughing on until the end should come, but Rawlins, who was nearest me, jabbed an elbow into my ribs and said angrily:—"Here, stop that! You stop, I say!" I took offence and was ready to reply, but in a second it flashed over me that I had been becoming hysterical and I thanked him.

Gripped by the Cold. The cold was maddening and my fingers were incapable of gripping the board to which I had been holding. I slipped my arm over it and hugged it tightly under my shoulder. After freezing ourselves

from our shirts and trousers we swam around a bit and the blood tingled once more through veins and arteries until we were limber and comparatively warm, though that was small comfort.

I was tempted time and again to let the board slip from under my arm and sink, not struggling, below the surface of the cruel water. Once I believe I should have done so, but Rawlins turned to me and fixed his great bright eyes on mine.

"Hang on there, confound you!" he said; "if you don't I'll brain you!" The threat was idle and I do not know how he suspected my purpose, but it had its result and I clung to the board. In a vague fashion I feared Rawlins, and yet I was grateful to him.

Darkness had us at last, and we strained for the twinkle of a light that might denote the ship. In the east the stars shone and one after one we hid those low on the horizon as the beams of our vessel, but one after one we knew them for stars, and as the cold of our bodies increased the chill in our hearts grew and grew.

In the west, like a curtain or the hand of some monster of death, the black in the sky crept onward and upward, obscuring the stars and casting a heavy shadow over our hopes.

At times one of us cried out, instinctively hoping that somewhere man might hear us and bring succor.

As we had planned, we worked only enough to keep together. How long we had floated about in the darkness before the wind began to blow steadily and more violently I do not know. When it did there was no doubt that the storm was coming.

Waves began to lap over us and, breaking, filled out nostrils with the stinging, choking spray. Two of the men, Carroll and Smith, did not endure long. Carroll went first. A great wave had just splashed over him.

"Goodby," he called. "I'm done with this," and letting go his board he sank without a struggle.

The example maddened Smith. "He's right," he said. "Why stand this longer? I hate to—"

He never finished the sentence. The waves gulped him down and he made never an outcry.

That sobered the remaining four of us if it were possible to sober us further. We did not speak after that. The wind was strong and the waves ran high. Soon it was impossible to keep our positions and we drifted apart, calling loudly from time to time, feeling the comfort of company even though it were only a voice and though we considered ourselves as good as dead. Even then the fury of the storm was not full upon us and we imagined with horror what it would be when the waves were highest.

We fell into the habit of calling loudly our own names, so that each would know where the other was. I remember after some minutes missing the name of Hopkins. I was the first to yell:—"Where are you, Hopkins?"

There was no answer, and others called. "O Hopkins! Hopkins! Where are you?"

Then I could hear Rawlins saying, "Hopkins is gone."

Three, that left. None of us spoke of the loss of the others, but the effect on us was appalling. It took the very strength out of my muscles and I looked upon drowning as but a pleasant relief from suffering. For a time Rawlins and I clung to each other for company but it sapped our strength and the waves battered us about until from very exhaustion we were obliged to drift about. To call to each other required all the strength and all the breath of our bodies.

Fainter and fainter to my ears grew the sound of Fairfield's voice and I thought that he was weakening, but Rawlins called to me that the mate was drifting away to the other side of him. When I could no longer hear his cries Rawlins told me each time he heard him. It was comfort even to know that he had not yet given up.

A freak of the waters brought Rawlins and me together again and for a moment we could both hear Fairfield calling in the darkness, but his cries dwindled and divided in volume until at last, strain our ears as we might, there was no hearing him.

Whether he had gone down or whether he had merely drifted away we did not know. It mattered very little in the end, we thought.

Rawlins Lost.

Suddenly, with a shock as though I had been struck, I realized that Rawlins was not calling to me. Probably there had been no unusual interval of time since the last cry, but I had no sense of how long it was. A minute would have been the same to us.

Fear that was already infinite multiplied in my heart and I yelled frantically. There was no answer but the roar of the storm. Devastating loneliness such as I cannot describe took hold of me. In all that great sea I was alone—alone. I had never known what the word meant. Somehow, now that I had no company, I did not want to die. Before it had seemed a welcome termination to suffer-



"Where There Had Been a Boat There Were Splinters and Fragments of Wreckage."

plunged the bow dipped and seemed as if we were headed straight for the bottom.

The men in the other boat rowed frantically, but they could not keep pace with us. Bit by bit they lagged, and when we were really under way they saw it was of no use. Breathlessly I waited for the monster to rear out of the sea again. As the line straightened ahead, men pulled in on it, bringing us all the time nearer and nearer to the whale. There were fathoms and fathoms of rope and it was a tedious task taking it in by inches.

At last there was a surging of the water, far ahead, and the animal rose to the surface. Just in front of her the male rose and plunged through the water, leading the race. Faster now, the rope was wound around the reel and we drew gradually nearer and nearer to our prize. The wicked sharp spades were made ready. They were poles more than fifty feet long and men in the bow wielded them as though they were toys. For miles and miles we raced through the water before it was safe to go within reach of the monster. When she tired somewhat we drew within reach and the

had gone none knew, but the mate thought it was twenty-five miles.

Battle with the Whale.

There was light left in the whale. We had just spaded her and instead of sinking she thrashed and struggled about in the water, almost upsetting us. Line was paid out and we rowed away from her as she was through running and seemed to be in her death struggles. Suddenly she sank, but the line instead of running out slackened and we could not take it in fast enough.

All was confusion. We were in a dangerous place; the whale might rise directly beneath us, and row as we would, the line remained slack. There was no way of telling which way she had turned. "Pull, boys," yelled Mr. Fairfield. "The Gideon's twenty-five miles off, and it's Davy Jones' for us if this critter comes up beneath us."

There was a rippling and gurgling of the water. Suddenly as lightning strikes, a great blackish object reared straight out of the water just to starboard. One of the men with a spade made to stab it, but missed. Like a great bowlder it

how long we would be in the water, and strength was precious. There was wood enough to float all six of us, but no piece sufficiently large for two men.

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