

Otis James

A Runaway Brig: or, An Accidental Cruise



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CHAPTER I. THE SALLY WALKER

"I'm going down to the beach to find Jim Libby. If you'll come along we'll have a prime sail; and most likely this is the last chance we shall have to go out with him, for his vessel leaves in the morning."

"How can I go when I've got to mind this young one all the forenoon just 'cause the nurse must go an' have a sick headache? I don't believe she feels half as bad as I do!" And Walter Morse looked mournfully out over the blue waters with but little care for his baby sister, who was already toddling dangerously near the long flight of steps leading from the veranda of the large summer hotel.

"Can't you coax off for a couple of hours?" the first speaker, Harry Vandyne, asked.

"It's no use. Mother has gone to ride, and said I was to stay here until she came back."

Harry started toward the beach, determined not to lose a single hour of pleasure because of his friend's engagements; but before he had taken half a dozen steps a sudden, and what seemed like a very happy thought, occurred to him.

"I'll tell you how it can be fixed. Hire one of the other nurses to take care of your sister till we get back. Any of them will do it for a quarter, an' we'll be home before your mother comes."

The boys were spending the summer at the Isle of Shoals, off the New England coast. Harry's father was Robert Vandyne, the well-known ship-owner of New York, and Walter's was equally prominent in the wholesale dry-goods business on Broadway. During their stay at this summer resort they had made the acquaintance of Jim Libby, "cook's assistant and everybody's mate" on the fishing-schooner Mary Walker, a craft which visited the Shoals once each week to supply the hotels with fresh fish.

Jim was at liberty to follow the dictates of his own fancy several hours each day while in port, and the boys found him ever ready to take them out sailing in the square-bowed, leaky tender belonging to the schooner. As Harry had said, this was Jim's last day on the island until the end of another cruise, and Walter was so eager to blister his hands and wet his feet once more by rowing the Sally Walker – the tender was dignified with a name – around the shore that he really did not stop to consider all Harry's advice implied.

He wanted to go on the water; Bessie would have even better care from one of the nurses than he could give her; and it was not difficult to convince himself that, under all the circumstances, he would be warranted in disobeying the positive commands of his mother.

"She didn't know Jim was going away in the morning, or I'm sure she'd 'a' fixed it so's I could take one more trip in the Sally."

"Of course she won't care," Harry said in such a decided tone that Walter, who was more than willing to be convinced by the most flimsy argument, made his decision at once.

"Come on; there's Mrs. Harvey's maid, and we'll ask her."

The bribe of twenty-five cents was sufficient to enlist the good-natured girl's sympathies, and five minutes later the two boys were running at full speed toward the shore, while Bessie, apparently well content with the change of nurses, looked so happy that Walter really began to believe he had done the child such a very great favor that his mother could not but be pleased.

The unwieldy-looking Sally Walker was drawn up in a little cove which, owing to a line of rocks just outside, made a most convenient landing-place, and on the bow sat Master Jim, his face

striped with dirt but beaming with good-nature, and his clothes as ragged as they were redolent of fish.

"I'd jes' begun to think you couldn't come, an' was goin' back," he cried as his neatly-dressed acquaintances came into view. "If we want'er do any sailin' it's time to be off, 'cause this wind's dyin' out mighty fast."

"It's better late than never, Jim," Harry cried cheerily as he commenced to push at the bow of the boat. "Let's get the old craft afloat, and do our talking afterward."

To launch the Sally into deep water was quite a hard task owing to her breadth of beam; but after that had been done the labor was ended for a time, save such as might be necessary with the bailing-dish.

Jim stepped the short mast with its well-worn leg-of-mutton sail, got one of the oars aft as a rudder, and the full-bowed clipper began to move through the water slowly, but with a splashing and a wake sufficient for a craft ten times her size.

"We can't run along the coast very well 'cause the wind's blowin' straight out to sea, an' she don't stand up to it like a narrower boat would," the skipper said as he settled himself back comfortably in the stern-sheets while he pulled the fragment of a straw hat down over his eyes.

"Let's sail before the wind two or three miles and then row back," Walter suggested. "I'd like to get to the hotel before mother comes."

"It'll be a tough pull," Jim replied as he glanced at the clumsy oars. "I'd rather row the Sally one mile than two."

"Harry and I will do that part of the work."

"Then let her go," and as Jim eased off on the sheet the old craft came around slowly, for she was by no means prompt in answering the helm.

"See that ship over there? How far away is she?" Harry asked as he pointed seaward, when the Sally was well under way.

"That ain't a ship," Jim replied with a slight tone of contempt because his companions were so ignorant. "She's a brigantine, an' hard on to three miles from here."

"Let's run over to where she is. We can row back by dinner-time easily enough."

Since his crew were to do all the work on the return trip Jim would have been perfectly willing had the distance been twice as far, and he gave assent by nodding his head in what he intended should be a truly nautical manner.

The brig, which was now the objective point of the trip, appeared to be a craft of about three hundred tons, and moving through the water slowly, under the influence of the rapidly-decreasing wind, on a course at right-angles with the one the Sally was pursuing. She was running with yards square, under her upper and lower topsails, foresail, jib and foretop-mast stay-sail, and the head-sheets were flowing.

"She ain't goin' so fast but what we can come up with her before the breeze dies away, I reckon, an' if she's becalmed they won't say anything agin our goin' aboard," Jim said after a few moments of silence, during which all hands gazed intently at the stranger.

The idea of visiting a vessel at sea was very enticing to the city boys, and they were now as eager for a calm as they had previously been to have the wind freshen. The Sally took in so much water between her half-calked seams that it was necessary to keep the bailing-dish in constant use, consequently there was little time for speculation as to where the brig was bound until, when they had sailed not more than a mile and a half, Jim said in a tone of mild disappointment:

"It's no use, fellers, we can't get there. It's dead calm, an' we ain't makin' a foot an hour."

"What's to prevent our rowing?" Harry asked. "You take down the sail and keep the bailing dish going while Walter and I show you how to make the Sally walk."

"I'm willin' if you are," and Jim unshipped the stumpy mast. "My vessel won't get under way before mornin', an' it makes no difference if I ain't back till sunrise."

To make the Sally "walk" required a great deal of hard work; but since it was under the guise of play Harry and Walter went at it with a will, while Jim wondered what sport boys could find in pulling a heavy boat, for this was the one portion of a fisherman's life at which he rebelled.

Slowly but surely the little craft gained upon the larger one, which swung to and fro on the lazy swell, and when they were about a quarter of a mile apart Jim said, in a tone of disapprobation:

"The crew on that brig are worse'n fishermen. Every one of 'em must be below, for I haven't seen so much as a feller's nose yet. Perhaps some of the crew have gone ashore – the gangway's unshipped."

Unacquainted with nautical matters as the city boys were, they did not think there was anything strange in such a condition of affairs, but kept steadily at work with the oars until Jim scrambled into the bow to fend off, the journey having been finished.

"I'll make fast here while you go aboard," he said as he seized the ladder of rope and wood which hung over the rail as an invitation to visitors.

"We'd better find out first whether they're willing to have us," Harry suggested.

"That'll be all right," and Jim spoke very confidently. "If you're afraid I'll go first; but it seems kinder strange that somebody don't hail us."

Having made the Sally's painter fast, Jim clambered over the side closely followed by his companions; but not a person could be seen on deck. The fore hatch was lying bottom upward, and the appearance of the ropes indicated decided carelessness on the part of the crew, yet no sound was heard save the creaking of the booms as they swung lazily to and fro.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked in a whisper as he noted the look of fear which came over Jim's face.

"I'm sure I don't know. Let's see if we can raise anybody;" and then Jim shouted, "Ahoy below! ahoy!"

No reply came. Again and again was the cry repeated, until Walter asked, impatiently:

"Are you afraid to go into the cabin and stir them up?"

Jim would have braved many dangers rather than be thought a coward, and without answering the question he leaped down from the rail, running first into the forecabin and then the cabin, after which he returned to his companions with a very pale face as he said, in a tremulous whisper:

"Boys, there ain't a single soul on this 'ere brig but ourselves, an' there's a sword on the cabin floor! Do you s'pose pirates are anywhere around?"

CHAPTER II. THE BONITA

Harry and Walter remained motionless and speechless on the rail staring at Jim for several moments after this startling announcement had been made, and there was a decided look of fear on the faces of all three. The mere suggestion of pirates was enough to send the cold chills down their spinal columns, while the mystery connected with the abandonment of an apparently sound craft caused them to feel very uncomfortable in mind.

Walter glanced apprehensively over his shoulder as if expecting to see some terrible sight seaward, and the slightest ominous sound would have sent the visitors into the Sally as the only place of refuge.

It was fully five minutes before Harry succeeded in gaining the mastery over his fears, and then he said, with an evident attempt to make his voice sound firm as he leaped from the rail:

"Say, boys, we're making fools of ourselves by getting frightened at an empty ship! Suppose the pirates *have* been on board; there are none here now, and I don't see any reason why we shouldn't go below."

"I'm with you," Jim replied; but by taking up his position at Harry's side he showed very plainly that it was not his intention to lead the exploring party.

"I'll go, too, rather than stay on deck alone; but, according to my way of thinking, we'd better start for the Isle of Shoals instead of staying on a vessel like this." And once more Walter looked over the rail at the Sally, which was taking in water quite rapidly now that the bailing-dish was idle.

Harry and Jim had started toward the cabin before Walter ceased speaking, therefore he had no choice save to follow them, and with an undefined feeling of awe the three went down the stairs into a comfortably but not expensively furnished saloon, from each side of which led the eight state-rooms.

To judge by the general appearance of affairs one would have said that the officers had but just gone on deck. On the long, stationary table were sewing materials and a woman's work-basket; in one of the chairs an open book, and on a locker was the log-slate with the reckoning partially worked out.

The only suspicious object to be seen was a sword, which had been withdrawn from its scabbard and thrown on the cabin floor. The blade was covered with spots which might have been blood-stains or nothing but rust, and the visitors gathered around the sinister-looking weapon without offering to touch it.

"The sword doesn't prove that pirates have been here," Harry said, after a long silence. "There couldn't have been much of a fight or we should see more signs of it. Perhaps somebody is in one of the state-rooms."

"It won't take long to find out." And Jim boldly opened the nearest door, a goodly portion of his courage having returned since the search thus far had failed to reveal any very horrible sight.

In rapid succession the searchers went from one room to another, stopping at each only long enough to make sure no person was concealed therein, and to take a general but hasty survey of its contents.

Every tiny apartment showed signs of recent occupancy. A sea-chest, clothes hanging on the walls, and such belongings as a sailor would deem necessary for a long voyage, could be seen. In one state-room was a set of gold studs and sleeve-buttons and a new quadrant. In another, which Jim confidently asserted was the captain's, a watch hung at the head of the berth, while a small writing-desk was littered with papers.

"All hands have gone somewhere, that's certain," Jim said when the search was concluded; "an' before we go ashore it won't do any harm to have dinner. If the pantry has been left like the cabin, we stand a good chance of finding plenty of grub."

"I'm hungry enough to eat almost anything," Harry replied with a laugh. "So if you know where the food is kept we'll have lunch before beginning the long pull home."

Jim was thoroughly well acquainted with the general arrangement of vessels of this size, and without hesitation he led the way to the pantry, where was found a large assortment of delicacies for the cabin table.

In this room were many boxes and packages which had not been broken, and as each bore the mark "Brig Bonita," the name of the craft was known as well as if the boys had seen the gilt letters under the stern.

Just at this time, however, the visitors gave but little heed to anything connected with the abandoned craft save the provisions, and these they sampled generously, beginning with nuts and ending with jam; each one eating until it was an absolute impossibility to swallow another mouthful.

During the varied but hearty meal they failed to notice that the brig had heeled over slightly, or that there was considerable more motion than when they first came aboard. The feast drove all thoughts of the general condition of affairs from their minds until it was finished, and then Jim said:

"Now, what's to be done? It seems a pity to leave this craft and all these things; but I don't s'pose we could tow her in to the Shoals."

Even though Harry and Walter knew nothing about seamanship, they understood how ridiculous it would be to make any attempt at towing a three-hundred-ton brig with a crazy little boat like the Sally, and their merriment was so great when Jim made this remark that he thought it necessary to defend himself by saying:

"I've seen folks tow bigger vessels than this; an' I was only thinkin' how fine it would be to take her in, for since there's nobody aboard we'd own everything."

"Well, so long as it can't be done we'd better go back," Walter said as he suddenly remembered his neglect of duty and the very grave reason why he should be at the hotel before his mother returned.

Neither Harry nor Jim believed there was any necessity for making a hurried departure, and fully half an hour more elapsed before they were ready to go on deck. Even then they would have delayed still further had not a violent motion of the vessel caused Jim to cry, as he sprang toward the companion-way:

"The wind has freshened, and if we want to get back to-night it's time we were off!"

Then, as he gained the deck, fear and surprise took the place of his suddenly aroused anxiety. The wind had sprung up and must have done so a long while before, for now there was no sign of land in either direction, unless, indeed, a dark smudge far down to windward might be the island which had been so close aboard a few hours previous, and the Bonita was working on a zigzag course seaward. Owing to the fact that the head-sheets were flowing, each time she fell off sufficiently to get the wind abaft the beam she would fill her topsails and gather way, then come to, stop, and again fall off; making, as a sailor would say, "boards and half-boards."

Harry and Walter were so thoroughly amazed and alarmed by this sudden disappearance of the land, as it were, that they gave no heed to anything around them, but stood by the port rail amidships, searching in vain with their eyes for the island.

Jim's knowledge of seamanship was decidedly limited; but he understood fully why the Isle of Shoals was no longer in sight, and his one thought was how they could leave the vessel, which was literally running away with them. Springing to the main chains where the Sally had been made fast, a single glance was sufficient to show of what little service she would be to them just then. Leaking as she did, and towed now and then at a rapid rate, the little craft was filled with water, nothing save a very small portion of the bow upheld by the painter being visible.

Hardly knowing what he did, the young fisherman ran fore and aft in a distracted way until Harry, aroused from his stupefaction by Jim's apparently aimless movements, asked in a sharp tone of nervous irritation:

"What are you doing? Are we to stay here without trying to get back?"

"I wish you would tell me what we can do;" and Jim stopped short as he plunged his hands deeply in his pockets, looking Harry squarely in the face. "The Isle of Shoals must be a dozen miles away by this time; the Sally is swamped, an' there's nothin' in the shape of a boat on board."

"But we *can't* stay here and be carried out to sea!" Walter cried in a shrill tone of fear.

"If you think it's possible to swim back we won't stay; but I don't know of any other way to get there!"

For an instant Walter acted as if he intended to make the attempt; and then, as Harry seized his arm to prevent him from leaping overboard, the poor boy gave way to the most passionate grief, he began to realize the full consequences of his disobedience, and could he have been transported to the land just at that moment, Bessie would have opened her eyes wide in surprise at the great display of brotherly affection.

It seemed as if Walter's tears served to restore to Jim at least a portion of his senses, for he immediately assumed a business-like tone as he said:

"Now see here, fellers, we're in a scrape of course; but it won't do any good to give up like this, 'cause if we try to help ourselves things may turn out all right."

"If we can't get back in the Sally I don't see how we're going to help ourselves very much," and Harry made every effort to appear brave that Walter might be cheered.

"Some vessel will surely heave in sight before long, an' we can signal to her. The first thing is to find a flag an' set it half-mast, union-down. Any craft would try to find out what the matter was after seein' a thing like that, an' jes' as likely as not we'll be picked up before dark. Then we must get some of this canvas off of her so she can't sail so fast, an' when that's done matters won't be so very bad, for we can keep goin' straight ahead till we come out somewhere."

Jim spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone that the courage of his companions was revived at once. They had not thought of the possibility that a vessel might be sighted; but now it seemed very probable, and the two boys set about the proposed task with hopeful hearts.

The wind continued to freshen, and in her limping way the Bonita worked slowly but surely seaward with a wide expanse of ocean before her, while the force on board was hardly sufficient to keep the helm steady in heavy weather.

CHAPTER III. A SMALL CREW

As they searched for the flag-locker Jim did his best to keep hope alive in the hearts of his companions by talking as if it was impossible they could run many hours longer without meeting some craft from which assistance could be procured; but even as he spoke he knew it would not be strange if a week, or even more, elapsed before anything larger than a sea-bird's wing came within their range of vision. He had been in the Mary Walker on the fishing banks when it was known there were many vessels in the vicinity, and yet not a sail was seen for ten days. While the wind held in the same direction the Bonita would be too far north to sight any of the coastwise traders, and Jim was well aware that it might be a long while before they could summon aid.

The flag-locker was found after a short search, and when the stars and stripes were hoisted as a signal of distress the bright colors appeared to afford Harry and Walter no slight amount of relief.

"If a vessel comes within sight that must attract attention," Harry said hopefully. "I don't suppose any captain would pass us by without at least asking what was the matter."

"It would be a pretty mean sailor who wouldn't try to help us," Jim replied; and then, as the thought came that it might be many days before the flag would be seen by any one save themselves, he added in a voice which was far from steady, "Now let's try to hoist the Sally inboard. She'll be knocked to pieces if we tow her, an' there's no knowin' how soon she may be needed."

"Tell us what to do and we'll obey orders," Harry said cheerily. "I'm not sure but we can run this craft as well as a full crew could, so long as you know enough to be captain."

Jim was thoroughly well aware of his own ignorance; but no good could be gained by admitting such a fact, and he began to give commands in a very loud tone, as if the noise would drive away his dismal forebodings.

There was no lack of blocks which could be used, and by fastening a whip to the Sally's bow she was soon hauled in over the rail minus her cargo of water.

"If we stay here long enough we must calk the seams," Jim said as he wiped the perspiration from his face. "It won't be a hard job, an' we may need her pretty bad."

"Why not do it now?" Walter asked.

"Because we ought to got some of this canvas in before it blows any harder; but it would puzzle a better sailor than I am to know how it's to be done unless we leave everything loose."

Neither Harry nor Walter could give any advice, and Jim was forced to > work out the problem unaided.

"I'll tell you what it is," he said, after studying the matter in silence several moments. "It won't do to strip her entirely, for then we couldn't keep steerage-way on. The jib, foretopsail, and mainsail won't be more'n enough to steady her, and if the wind don't come any stronger, I reckon we can take care of the helm."

"Do you mean that we're to pull down them big pieces of canvas?" Walter asked in dismay.

"If I did mean that, it couldn't be done. By carrying the halyards to one of the winches, though, we can clew them up after awhile; but it'll be kinder hard work."

Then Jim set about the task which at first sight appeared to be impossible, and, incredible though it may seem, had before dark stripped the brig of all the canvas save what he proposed to keep her under while the weather remained fair. His slight knowledge of seamanship was sufficient to show him how work should be performed, and with the winch as a very material aid the huge squares of canvas were clewed up after rather a clumsy fashion.

When this had been done Jim went to the helm, which he lashed in one position when the task of shortening sail was first begun, and soon the Bonita was sailing properly dead before the wind, but in a lazy manner, as if sulking because deprived of so many of her white wings.

"That's a good job well over," he said with a long-drawn sigh of relief. > "Now, if it blows very hard, we can soon get rid of the mainsail and jib."

"Where are we heading for?" Harry asked, the severe labor having in a certain measure dulled the grief in his heart.

"I don't know – straight across the ocean I reckon," Jim replied; and then observing that his companions had noted the look of anxiety on his face, he added in a lighter tone, "It seems kinder funny that we three boys should be sailin' this craft like as if she was our own – don't it?"

"I wish we'd never seen her nor the Sally Walker," Walter cried passionately. "Nobody knows when we can get back, and our parents will think we meant to run away!"

"Now, don't get to feelin' bad ag'in," Jim said soothingly. "It won't do any good, an' you'll be jes' so much the worse off. We've got to have supper, an' who'll be cook?"

"I'll do what I can toward it; but I don't believe I'd know how to make even so much as a cup of tea," and Harry rose to his feet.

"Jes' bring up a lot of grub from the pantry; that'll be enough. To-morrow I'll show you how to steer, an' take a turn in the galley myself."

Harry beckoned Walter to follow him; for, if the truth must be told, he felt rather nervous about going into the cabin alone. Now that they were on the open ocean, at the mercy of wind and wave, the deserted saloon seemed peopled with things none the less horrible because unseen. Every inanimate object had suddenly taken on a most sinister appearance; and the rusty sword on the floor seemed to bear witness of the tragedy which had caused a sound, well-found vessel to be abandoned in such haste.

Neither of the boys cared to look around the saloon in which the shadows of night were gathering. They walked swiftly through into the pantry, selected such articles of food as were nearest at hand, and then went on deck very quickly.

Jim had lashed the helm again and was in the maintop looking seaward in the vain hope of seeing a sail, and his apparent calmness, together with the warm breeze, the water sparkling under the rays of the setting sun, and the regular movement of the brig as she rose and fell on the swell, served to banish the fears caused by that desolate-looking cabin.

When twilight came, that time when homesickness always appears with redoubled violence, the three involuntary voyagers were eating a meal composed chiefly of delicacies, and Jim understood that his companions must be prevented from dwelling upon their own condition; therefore, as a means of cheering all hands, himself included, he proposed to spin a yarn in true sailor fashion.

From the number of so-called ghost stories which the crew of the Mary Walker were wont to relate during their leisure moments he chose the most horrible, and some time before it was concluded he understood that he had succeeded in banishing homesickness at the expense of an invitation to fear. Even he himself began to be afraid because of his own "yarn," when it was told on the deck of a vessel so mysteriously abandoned as had been the Bonita, and the sighing of the night-wind through the rigging sounded very "ghostly" in his ears.

The three boys huddled close together, neither speaking above a whisper until after the moon rose, and then matters began to seem more cheerful. Jim changed the unpleasant current of thought by speculating upon the strange sights they might see if it was possible for them to keep the brig on the same course until they made land, and by ten o'clock all hands had so far gained the mastery over fear that the young captain proposed an arrangement for the night.

"We can't stay awake all the time," he said sagely, "so s'posin' you fellers go below an' turn in. If the wind dies out much more I'll lash the wheel an' join you; but if it don't one of you will have to spell me 'long toward mornin'."

"I don't care about going below," Walter replied in a half-whisper. "Why can't we sleep out here on deck?"

"There's nothin' to prevent it; but you'll be cold before mornin' if you don't get some blankets from the cabin."

Even Harry was timid about venturing into the saloon since that particularly horrible ghost story had been told; and very likely Jim understood this fact, for he said, after a brief pause:

"If you'll hold the wheel, Walter, an' Harry will come with me, I'll get the bedclothes."

This proposition was accepted, and a few moments later a mattress and half a dozen blankets were spread out on the deck aft, the whole forming such a bed as even less tired boys would not have despised.

There was yet sufficient food remaining from the supply brought for supper to serve as a lunch in case any of the party grew hungry before daylight; therefore, as Jim said, "they were pretty well fixed for the night." The wind was decreasing each moment, and, regardless of the possibility that it might spring up again from a different quarter, the helm was lashed amidships that all hands might sleep.

"I reckon some of us will wake up if it blows hard, an' considering that we don't know where we're goin', it can't make much difference whether anybody is at the wheel or not."

The young fisherman laid down as he ceased speaking, and his companions, in blissful ignorance of the possible danger to be incurred by this unseamanlike proceeding, seeing nothing rash or strange in thus leaving the brig to care for herself, followed the example of their commander.

The bed was hardly as soft as Harry and Walter had been accustomed to sleeping on, perhaps; but it was not uncomfortable, and in a few moments all three were in dreamland.

CHAPTER IV. A VOICE FROM THE SEA

The small crew of the Bonita were weary almost to the verge of exhaustion. Excitement and grief had fatigued them even more than the long pull in the Sally; therefore all three slept as soundly as if they had been snugly tucked-up in bed at home, and when the sun came from his bath in the sea they were yet unconscious that another day had dawned.

When Jim, who was the first to awaken, opened his eyes, he rose suddenly to a sitting posture with a misty idea that his slumbers had been disturbed by the sound of a human voice.

It was several seconds before he fully realized where he was; but the deserted deck of the brig and the Sally upturned on the main hatch soon brought back to his mind all the strange occurrences of the previous day, after which he began to speculate whether it was in a dream that he heard a low, feeble hail of "Brig ahoy!"

Harry and Walter were both asleep, consequently neither of them had spoken. Rising to his feet he gazed eagerly over the placid ocean, but without seeing the ardently-longed-for sail.

"I reckon I was dreaming," he said to himself, and then the thought of their lonely position drove everything else from his mind. "We must be out of the track of vessels or one would be in sight by this time; and when the next storm comes up it'll be good-by all hands, for we can't manage a craft like this in a gale. I ain't sure, but – "

"Brig ahoy! ahoy!"

This time there was no mistake. It was a hail hardly more than a whisper, but yet so distinct as to prevent any possibility that it was a trick of the imagination. One would have said it came from the sea directly beneath the brig's stern, and Jim's face grew pale with fear as he looked quickly around without seeing so much as a floating timber.

"There's something wrong about this craft," he muttered, "Sailors don't run away from a sound vessel without a pretty good reason, an' I reckon she's haunted!"

"Brig ahoy! Help a dying man! Ahoy on board!"

The words were spoken more feebly than before, and Jim, thoroughly convinced he had heard something supernatural, awakened his companions by shaking them nervously.

"Get up quick!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "This brig has been hailed three times, an' there isn't even a fly in sight!"

Harry and Walter were on their feet in an instant gazing around in bewilderment; but seeing nothing, and after Jim had told his story, he asked in a voice trembling with fear:

"What shall we do? I'd rather take my chances on the Sally, even if we are out of sight of land, than stay here another minute. This brig has got ghosts aboard!"

"I don't hear anything," Harry said, the bright sun and sparkling water investing the vessel with a sense of life and animation directly at variance with any supposed supernatural visitations. "You're mistaken, Jim, that's all."

"Wait a little while," Jim replied, shaking his head gravely as if the subject was too serious to admit of any discussion.

The boys were destined to be skeptical but a few seconds longer. Before another moment had passed a low groan was heard as if coming from beneath their feet, and all three instinctively ran across the deck to the starboard rail, to put the greatest possible distance between themselves and the unearthly sound.

This short flight was the one thing needed to reveal the seeming mystery; for as Jim leaped into the main rigging with the intention of going aloft, if the ghostly voice was heard again, he involuntarily glanced downward.

"Look! Look there!" he cried excitedly, pointing toward the water; and, following with their eyes the direction indicated by his trembling hand, the boys saw a Whitehall-built boat about twenty feet long made fast to the main-chains. An oar lashed to one of the thwarts served as a mast, and fastened to this was a small piece of canvas.

All these details were not at first remarked, for in the bottom, lying face downward as if dead, was a man. His outstretched hands looked like claws, so tightly was the skin drawn over the bones, and even though covered with clothing it could be seen that his body was wasted almost to a skeleton.

Unaccustomed though Harry and Walter were to such sights, it was not necessary for Jim to explain that the occupant of the boat was a shipwrecked sailor in the last stages of starvation. The night had been calm, and he probably propelled his craft with oars after the wind died away, making her fast to the main-chains as he uttered the cry which awakened Jim, and ceasing his appeal for help only when consciousness deserted him.

It was several moments that the boys stood gazing at these mute evidences of agony without making any effort to relieve the sufferer, and then Harry asked:

"Can't we do something to help him? Perhaps instead of being dead he has only fainted."

"I ought to be kicked for standin' here like a fool!" Jim exclaimed as he clambered over the side, and an instant later he was lifting the man to a sitting posture, crying, meanwhile: "Bring some water quick!"

Walter ran into the cabin, all fear of the place having been banished by the desire to aid the sufferer, and in a few seconds passed a pitcher of water into the boat.

Jim was an awkward nurse; but his patient had more vitality than was apparent at the first glance, and before the boy could bathe his face thoroughly he had revived sufficiently to grasp the pitcher with both hands, drinking most greedily.

"Don't let him have all he wants!" Harry cried. "I've heard that people who have been almost starved shouldn't have too much at a time."

Jim tried to wrest the pitcher from the man's desperate clutch, but he swallowed the liquid more eagerly, and the boy was forced to exert all his strength in order to accomplish his purpose.

"Wait a bit," he said as he held the vessel behind him. "You can drink till you bu'st, after a spell, but I reckon Harry's right about takin' too much just now."

The man looked fiercely at Jim for an instant as if about to spring upon him and thus obtain that which would quench his burning thirst, and then, controlling himself with an effort, he asked in a whisper:

"Where are the crew?"

"There ain't any on board. Us three boys are alone. Have you got strength enough to climb over the rail?"

Instead of answering the question the man attempted to rise to his feet, but his limbs refused to obey the will, and he sank back on the thwart as if about to relapse into unconsciousness again.

"Here, drink some more water," Jim cried quickly; and when the sufferer had swallowed half a dozen mouthfuls eagerly, he shouted to the others: "Lean over the rail and try to get hold of him!"

At the same moment he lifted the emaciated form – he had often raised heavier burdens – until those above could seize him under the arms, after which the remainder of the task was easy of accomplishment.

Harry and Walter carried the sailor to the mattress on the port side, lying him upon it tenderly; and while they were thus occupied, Jim climbed on deck once more, running directly to the pantry.

A case of canned soup was among the stores, and without waiting to select any particular kind he seized one of the tins and carried it to the galley.

To build so much of a fire as would be sufficient to heat the soup was but the work of a few moments, and then he carried a bowl full of the nourishing food aft, saying, as he handed it to the starving man:

"I don't reckon it'll do you any harm to eat this. I'll get a spoon, an' one of us fellers will feed you."

There was no necessity for any such preparation. The sailor still had strength enough to raise the bowl to his lips, and in the shortest possible space of time it had been drained of its contents.

"I s'pose you could pump two or three gallons into him before he'd know there was anything inside," Jim said in a low tone to Harry as the sufferer laid back on the pillows with closed eyes. "What'll we do? Give him some more?"

"Hold on a few minutes and see if he asks for it. I think he's going to sleep."

Jim went forward again, where he could be alone while thinking over this addition to their number, and instead of finding relief in the coming of the stranger it seemed to him as if the matter had grown more complicated.

"It was tough enough for us before," he said as he went into the galley; "but what we're goin' to do with a sick man on our hands beats me."

He was not in so much despair as to forget that as yet they had not breakfasted, however, and he at once set about preparing a reasonably elaborate meal.

The wind was not sufficient to lift the narrow thread of blue which hung from the mast-head. The brig rose and fell on the lazy swell, swinging her bow from one point of the compass to another under the influence of ocean currents or eddies, and there was nothing to claim Jim's attention save the culinary duties he had thus voluntarily assumed.

Before breakfast was ready Harry came into the galley for more soup, explaining that the stranger had awakened and asked for food; and by the time the invalid was fed again Jim called his companions to partake of the result of his labors.

The boys talked of little else, while they were eating, save regarding the man who slumbered on the mattress aft. His coming had temporarily driven from their minds the sorrow caused by the enforced absence from home, and in this respect, at least, it was productive of good.

"There's one thing about it," Jim said, when the conversation was ended with the meal, and they had failed to realize that the shipwrecked man might be of great assistance in the future, "his boat is a long ways ahead of the Sally, an' I wouldn't be afraid to sail anywhere in her. She ought to be hoisted inboard, an' if he's asleep now we'd better try to hook her on the davit-falls."

The man was asleep, and before washing the breakfast dishes Jim made preparations for securing the boat, which he rightly believed would be so valuable when the time came to abandon the Bonita.

This work was by no means easy of accomplishment, even though there was neither sea nor wind to interfere with the laborers; but it was finally finished successfully, and the young captain had no slight satisfaction in the thought that he and his crew were now well prepared for the worst.

It was two hours past noon before the rescued man awakened again, and Jim had more soup heated, this time allowing his patient to eat and drink all he wished.

"Go ahead," he said as he served the food aft, placing a number of dishes on the house, "for there's plenty aboard to fill up a man twice your size. Call on us for what you want an' I reckon we can find it."

The sailor was greatly refreshed by this third meal, and when it was concluded the ghastly look on his face had given place to what appeared very much like evidence of returning strength.

"Tell me how you boys happen to be on board here alone?" he asked; and Jim began at once to relate their misadventures, which commenced with the cruise in the Sally.

"We don't feel very much like stayin' on this vessel, for of course there's something wrong about her or the crew wouldn't 'a' left everything behind!" he said in conclusion; "but we couldn't

start away in the Sally, 'cause she leaks so bad. Now that we've got your boat, we can say good-bye to the brig as soon as you're well."

"What's the use of abandonin' a good craft like this?"

"'Cause we can't manage her, an' – an' – Well, to tell the truth, I'm kinder afraid."

The stranger smiled as if he thought Jim's fears very foolish; but at the same time he could give no reasonable guess as to why the Bonita had been abandoned.

CHAPTER V. BOB BRACE'S STORY

As a matter of course the boys were eager to hear the sailor's story; but no one asked any questions, believing he would relate the particulars of what was evidently a disaster when he had recovered his strength sufficiently to spin a lengthy yarn.

And in this they were not mistaken.

Before sunset he was able to sit up, and greatly to the satisfaction of his companions he volunteered the information they were so impatient to gain.

"Most likely you're wantin' to know how Bob Brace, able seaman, got pulled down to a reg'lar bag of bones like this?" he said toward the close of the afternoon while the boys were gathered around him.

"I reckon you've been wrecked," Jim replied, "an' we'd like to know about it, but don't want you to talk till you're feelin' all right."

"A sailorman picks up mighty quick after he's where he can get hold of a well-filled mess-kid, an' when its cabin grub that's poured inter him the rarity of the thing helps out amazin'. I reckon I'm the only one of the Trade Wind's crew that's alive. We sailed from New York for Cardiff five weeks ago, an' had the best kind of weather for twenty days when a reg'lar nor'-easter struck us the afternoon of Thursday, nine days past as near as I can figger. There was time to get in the royals an' to gallant sails before night; but the gale kept growin' worse so the spanker was downed, the main course hauled up an' furled, an' she was put fair before the wind, which had been workin' around to the east'ard. By the next mornin' we was snugged down with nothin' but the main-topsail, foresail an' fore-stays'l showin', an' the old hooker duffin' into it mighty hard.

"It looked as if she'd weather it all right till eight bells on Friday mornin', when every thread of canvas was blown off the spars, leavin' us wallowin' in a chop sea that stove the bulwarks an' swept the decks clean before we could heave her to on the port tack by settin' the lower main-tops'l. By this time the fo'castle was drowned out, an' all hands bunked in the cabin till Saturday, when there was no more watches below, for she was takin' water so fast that everybody up to the captain had to stand by the pump. We managed to keep the old barkey afloat till Sunday, when the long-boat an' yawl – the gig had been stove – were launched.

"There ain't much use to tell the rest, for it's like what you must 'a' heard many times. We in the yawl had six gallons of water, an' them in the long-boat had a bag of bread. Before we could divide the stores the bark went down, one of her spars striking the long-boat, an' we never saw a soul of 'em ag'in. I reckon pretty nigh every one was killed by the ruffle. The yawl held six, all told, an' I'm the last. The lack of food wasn't so bad till the water give out, an' then the weakest went first. Yesterday I threw the last body overboard, an' this mornin' after it fell calm your craft hove in sight.

"I didn't believe I could lift an oar; but it was life or death for sure, an' I managed to do it, losin' my head entirely after makin' fast to the main-chains an' not gettin' any answer to the hail. That's the whole of the story. It ain't very much in the tellin'; but, lads, the livin' of it was somethin' a man don't like to think about very long at a time. The question to be settled now is, where are we, an' what's the course to the nearest port? Did you find anything below that looked like a log-book?"

"We didn't hunt round in the cabin very much, but if it'll do any good we'll overhaul things now," Jim replied, the sense of companionship which had come when Bob Brace revived sufficiently to tell his story causing him to lose a certain portion of his fear at going below.

"The log-book would tell us where the brig was when the crew abandoned her, an' from that we might shape some kind of a course. Help me over to the wheel, an' I can manage to hold her steady while you boys are rummagin'."

The knowledge that immediate action was necessary to save their lives, as well as what might prove to be a valuable cargo, had a beneficial effect on Brace, and Harry fancied he could see him growing stronger each moment. With but little aid he seated himself near the wheel, after which the boys went below to make a thorough search of the saloon and state-rooms.

The approach of night had already filled the cabin with gloom, and to dispel this Jim lighted the swinging lamps, thus giving to the interior a less sinister appearance. The sword still remained on the floor, however, and all felt that this reminder of what had possibly been a deadly encounter must be removed before the place could be divested of its horrors.

"It ain't anything but a piece of steel, no matter what's been done with it," Jim said by way of reassuring himself; and then, lifting the weapon very gingerly, he threw it under the berth in one of the state-rooms, closing and locking the door quickly, as if fearing that by some supernatural agency it might spring upon him.

This horror of an inanimate object may sound foolish when read in print with nothing in one's surroundings to inspire terror; but if the situation of these three boys be taken into consideration, together with the mystery attending the abandonment of the brig, very many excuses can be found for their superstitious fears.

The search was made thoroughly, but no log could be found. The slate, on which the brig's position had been partially worked out, was the only article which might have thrown any light on the matter, and this Bob Brace could not understand.

"You see I ain't much of a navigator at the best, an' this bit of figgerin' beats me," he said when the boys returned with the fruit of their labor. "If we can't get any idee of our true position we'll have to make a guess at it. How far do you reckon this 'ere brig has sailed since you come aboard?"

Jim frankly confessed that he was ignorant on that point. He described the position of the canvas when they found the Bonita, and the probable time she had been under shortened sail; but this was not very valuable information. The statement was hardly concluded when Bob interrupted him by asking angrily, as his gaze fell upon some object forward:

"Wasn't you in trouble enough when the brig carried you off but that it must be made worse by turnin' that hatch over?"

"We didn't do it," Harry replied quickly. "It was in that position when we came aboard."

"Then it's no wonder the crew took to the boats," and Bob wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his coat, apparently as much disturbed by this trifling matter as the boys had been at the sight of the sword.

"Why?" Jim asked, disturbed in no slight degree by the look of fear on the old sailor's face. "How can a little thing like that do any harm?"

"If you'd seen as much as I have you wouldn't call it a little thing," Bob replied in a solemn tone. "I had a messmate in the old Sea Queen what shipped on a English bark, an' the second day out one of the green hands turned the main hatch bottom up. What happened? Why, in less'n a month the bark turned turtle on 'em, an' all but four went to Davy Jones' Locker. It's a bad sign, lads, an' one that I never knew to fail!"

"What is it a sign of?" Harry asked impatiently.

"Didn't I jes' tell you? It's a sign that this 'ere craft will turn bottom up afore reachin' port, an' we're in big luck to have the Trade Wind's yawl hangin' at the davits."

"Well, we'll fix that mighty sudden!" And Jim ran forward as he spoke; but the heavy hatch was more than he could lift unaided.

"It won't do any good to turn it now, for the mischief has been done," Bob said in a lugubrious tone; "but you boys had better go for'ard an' help him set it ship-shape."

Harry and Walter did as was suggested; but they did not move with alacrity, for the old sailor's superstitious fears had plunged them again into deepest despair.

"Don't act as if you'd lost your best friend," Jim said in a whisper when the two came forward. "It's only a mess of sailor's nonsense."

"But he says the sign always comes true!" Walter replied mournfully.

"That don't make it so. If every fore-hatch what got turned upside down sunk a ship there wouldn't be many vessels afloat. He's all in a heap through bein' starved so long, an' most likely doesn't know more'n half of what he's talkin' about."

The boys refused to be comforted. It was but natural that they should believe the eldest member of the party, and he an old sailor, rather than the youngest, more especially as the ominous prediction seemed to be in keeping with all that had happened since they boarded the brig.

It was a mournful-looking group which clustered around the wheel when the sun descended behind the waste of waters, for even Jim could not appear cheerful while his companions were so gloomy; and as the darkness settled down over brig and sea Bob repeated the story of his sufferings in the open boat, until the sighing of the light wind through the rigging sounded in their ears like the moaning of some unearthly visitant.

"What are you goin' to do about standin' watch?" Jim asked, in order to change the dismal current of thought.

"You and I'll have to take the most of it," replied Bob. "I don't know as we can do any better than keep her steady as she goes till some kind of a course is figgered out, for we ain't makin' much headway with this wind. I'll take Harry in my watch an' give you Walter; then if we should have luck enough to sight a craft, a flare can be started without the helmsman's leavin' the wheel. Hunt in the pantry for alcohol – you'll find some there; get a basin out the galley, an' a bunch of oakum from the fo'castle. We'll have everything ready to signal, an' if a ship does heave in sight there won't be any time lost."

Jim didn't fancy searching through the deserted fore-castle and cabin in the night; but it was necessary some one should set an example of courage to Harry and Walter, and he went below without a show of hesitation, returning a short time later with the materials Bob desired.

When the flare was arranged to the old sailor's satisfaction, he proposed that Jim should stand the first watch, and with a few words of advice relative to the method of using the signal, in case it should become necessary, he and Harry went below, leaving the other two sole occupants of the deck.

CHAPTER VI. A CHANGE OF WEATHER

Walter could be of but little assistance on deck, owing to his ignorance of nautical matters; yet in Jim's estimation he formed, as companion to himself, a very important portion of the watch. Brave though the young fisherman tried to appear, nothing short of actually saving his own life would have tempted him to remain on the Bonita's quarter-deck alone in the night; and even with an assistant it seemed necessary for him to whistle very loud during several minutes after Bob and Harry disappeared in the cabin before he had sufficient control over his voice to hide the fear which came upon him.

Then he said in what was intended to be a cheery tone:

"Well, Walt, I reckon this is the last night we'll run dead before the wind, unless it blows in our favor. By mornin' Bob oughter be strong enough, if he keeps on eatin' same as he has to-day, to help work ship, an' then the brig'll be headed toward home."

Walter sighed deeply. Just at that moment he was thinking of the loved ones whom he knew must be mourning his absence, and the word "home" caused such an uncomfortably big lump to rise in his throat that it was impossible to make any reply.

Perhaps the same syllable sent Jim's thoughts straying in a similar direction, for he began to whistle once more, and continued to do so until a voice from the companion-way asked, in a querulous tone:

"What's the matter? Short-handed as we are, do you think it's goin' to help out by havin' more wind!"

"It ain't blowin' any harder than it was when you went below," Jim replied in surprise, understanding by the tone of the voice that it was Bob Brace who had spoken.

"That's jes' why you wanter tie up the whistle. It'll bring a gale if you keep on much longer!"

Then the sound of footsteps told that the speaker had returned to the cabin, and Jim said, in a low tone, to Walter:

"Them old sailors are as full of whims as a dog is of fleas. Some of them on the Mary Walker had signs for everything a feller did; but I never saw any come true. Tom Downey, the mate, allers fussed when birds flew 'round the schooner, 'cause he said they'd bring on a gale, an' in a dead calm he'd either whistle or wish he had a cat to throw overboard."

"What for?"

"So's to bring a wind. He says it'll allers come when you do that; but of course its foolishness. Then again, if I happened to whistle, no matter how calm it was, I'd get a rope's endin' 'cause they think a boy mustn't so much as squeak. If I'd believed Bob could hear me I'd know'd enough to hold my tongue."

"Did you get whipped very often on the Mary?" Walter asked, with a mild curiosity.

"More times than I've got fingers an' toes. Whenever any of 'em, from the captain down to the cook, wanted something to do they'd stir me up, an' it makes a feller dance when he gets a good stout heavin'-line across his back; but I'd be willin' to take a pretty big dose of it if I could be on board the old schooner just now."

There was no necessity for Walter to repeat this last sentiment. A severe punishment from his father at that moment would have been a positive pleasure. The lightest word in reference to home caused him to realize more keenly each hour the distance between those whom he loved and himself, and Jim's words seemed but the echo of his own thoughts.

During fully half an hour the two remained in silence at the wheel, steering the brig through the darkness on a course indicated only by the wind, and then the young fisherman was suddenly recalled from memories of the Mary Walker to the Bonita.

The breeze was increasing perceptibly, and the moisture in the atmosphere told that rain might be expected very soon. While the boys had given themselves up to reverie the clouds were gathering, until now it seemed as if they actually enveloped the brig as with an impenetrable vapor, and the waters dashed against the bow with that peculiar sullen sighing which betokens a storm. The Bonita no longer sailed freely, but tossed and plunged like some living thing harassed by obstacles in its path until wearied with the constant strife.

Jim knew the meaning of this change in wind and wave, and he roused himself suddenly as does one who is rudely awakened.

"I reckon it would be better if we 'tended to our business instead of whinin' about what can't be helped," he said grimly, clutching yet more tightly the spokes of the wheel. "You'll have to go below an' tell Bob that a storm is comin' on, so's we can get in some more of this canvas, if he thinks we're carryin' too much."

Walter noted the change in his companion's voice rather than in the elements; but that was sufficient to cause him to move very quickly.

It became necessary to look in several of the tiny apartments before finding the two who were enjoying their watch below, after which it was an affair of only a few seconds to arouse them. Bob sprung to his feet before Walter had repeated Jim's words, and he awakened Harry by saying, as he pulled him from the bunk:

"Come on deck, lad; for we shall need the whole workin' force unless our fisherman has made a mistake!"

To have seen Bob ascend the companion-way ladder one would hardly have supposed he had been so near death a few hours previous. The necessity for action seemed to call back all his strength, and on reaching the deck there was no evidence of weakness in his movements.

"Well, the wind you was callin' for has got here," he said to Jim, looking out into the darkness. "I never knew much good to come of boys whistlin' at sea, an' I don't reckon any one else ever did."

Jim had nothing to say. He didn't believe he was responsible for this sudden change in the weather; but long and sad experience had taught him how useless it would be to deny the imputation, and he asked meekly:

"Do you think we're goin' to have much of a storm?"

"It looks like it; but if we had half a crew aboard there wouldn't be any reason for touchin' a rope. The way we're fixed now makes things different, an' we'd better get her snugged down. I'll take the two boys for'ard, an' you ease her up a bit so we can furl the jib. Come on, lads; there ain't much time to waste."

Harry and Walter followed Bob without the slightest idea of what was required. They could carry out his instructions when he set the example, however, and in half an hour the Bonita was plunging heavily into the rapidly-rising sea with nothing save the foretopsail drawing. She had no more canvas than might have been shown in the most furious gale; but, under the circumstances, it seemed to be all that was consistent with safety, for no one could say how much wind lurked behind the inky clouds.

"Now light the binnacle lamp, Jim, so's we'll have some idea of where we're headin', an' then try your hand at makin' tea. I reckon this will be an all-night job for me, an' as I don't feel so very chipper yet, somethin' warm won't do any harm."

Bob took the wheel as he spoke, and Jim obeyed orders, the other boys following him closely, for the stuffy galley was preferable to the deck, where the huge waves, roaring astern, appeared ever on the point of engulfing the brig.

By the time a pot of tea had been steeped the storm was full upon them, causing the Bonita to pitch and toss in what Harry and Walter thought a most dangerous manner. Jim did not feel disturbed by it, however, for in his mind was the knowledge of that greater peril concerning which his companions were ignorant. The brig was dashing on literally at the mercy of the gale, and at any moment might strike a reef or the mainland, to the destruction of all on board as well as her own stout timbers, for the helmsman had no idea of what lay before them.

When Jim carried a pannikin of tea aft, leaving the other boys in the galley awaiting his return, Bob said in a low tone, as if fearing his words would be overheard:

"You must take the wheel awhile, lad, so I can hunt for the charts. It won't do to storm along like this without a little smatterin' of what's ahead, an' we'll make some kind of a guess as to where the brig was when you picked me up."

Jim grasped the spokes firmly, as much for the purpose of steadying himself against the vessel's furious plunging as to hold her before the wind, and after draining the pan of its bitter contents Bob Brace went into the cabin.

Owing to the violent motion of the brig the boys in the galley made no effort to join the young fisherman at the helm, and he was left alone during half an hour, when Bob returned.

"Did you find the charts?" Jim asked eagerly.

"Yes; an' I reckon there's no call to worry ourselves very much. We're runnin' pretty nigh south, an' if the brig was a hundred miles off the coast when I came aboard there's nothin' between us an' the Bahamas. We've got thirteen or fourteen hundred miles of clear water, an' this breeze will blow itself out before –"

"Look! Look there!" Jim cried excitedly, heaving the wheel down to port as rapidly as he could handle the spokes.

Bob turned quickly, and but one brief glance was sufficient to cause him to spring to the helmsman's aid.

There was good reason why the two were alarmed. Directly in the Bonita's course, less than half a cable's length away, a huge fabric of canvas and cordage came out of the gloom like a phantom, as if bent on running down the brig.

The stranger had all lowersails set, and a collision would have been fatal to the smaller craft because her headway was so much less than that of the other.

"Up with the helm, lad, to meet her as she comes around!" Bob screamed, when the wheel had been jammed hard down for a second, and the Bonita heeled over while responding to the rudder's sudden swing. "We shall clear her, but it'll be a rub."

The stranger had also changed her course by this time, and as the two vessels swept past each other on a heaving, screaming sea of foam, hardly twenty feet apart, Jim sprang toward the flare.

"You can't bring her to now, lad," Bob shouted as the boy ran into the galley with the basin of alcohol-saturated oakum. "Even if they were willin', we couldn't wear ship."

Jim's excitement was so great that he did not hear the old sailor's words. When he emerged from the galley the spirit was sending up a blue flame which illumined the entire after-part of the brig; but the stranger had vanished in the gloom to starboard, and strain his eyes as he might it was impossible to see any answering signal.

"You needn't spend much time lookin' for that craft, lad. We've been nearer to her than we shall ever be again, an' you'd better chuck the basin overboard before your fingers get burned."

CHAPTER VII. AN UNEXPECTED DANGER

During the remainder of that night Bob Brace stood at the wheel, save now and then when Jim took his place that he might go into the galley to light his pipe or solace himself with a pannikin of tea.

When the young fisherman lighted the flare both Harry and Walter firmly believed that the ship which had almost run them down would heave to and offer assistance; therefore, as the Bonita plunged on through the dense gloom and over the howling waters without receiving any answer to the mute appeal for aid, their despair was intense. To have been so near those who might have given help seemed to make their position even more desolate than it was before, and after watching in vain for some show of a light from the stranger the boys gave way to grief.

"Now see here, fellers," Jim said gravely as he entered the galley and found them weeping, "feelin' bad won't help matters, an' it'll only make 'em worse. Bob says there wasn't a chance for them on the ship to lend us a hand, even if they wanted to, an' we must keep a stiff upper lip till the weather clears a bit. By this time to-morrow there may be a full crew on board, an' the brig standin' up for the coast; so don't take on so hard. It won't be any use to stay on deck 'cause neither Bob nor me can turn in, so you'd better go below. I'll sing out if there's need for help."

Neither of the boys protested against following this advice. Both were perfectly willing to go where they could not witness the conflict of the elements, and when Jim went aft again they sought refuge in the cabin with but little heed to what a few hours previous had been a place peopled with phantoms of the imagination.

They were yet below when another day dawned, and Jim prepared an appetizing breakfast before awakening them.

The gale still continued in all its fury. With the single piece of canvas the Bonita plunged and rolled on her way southward, for the wind's direction had not changed by so much as half a point, and the watch on deck looked haggard and worn from the long vigil.

During the early hours of the morning, while the sun, through its cloudy veil, was trying to dispel the gloom of night, Jim asked if it was not possible to stand nearer the land in the hope of making some port, and Bob replied very decidedly in the negative.

"It can't be done, lad. The boys below wouldn't be of any account in makin' sail, an', besides, we'd stand a good show of plumpin' on the coast where there wouldn't be the ghost of a chance to get ashore. We'll keep her as she goes till this wind blows itself out, an' then take to the boat if there's no craft in sight. This brig never'll reach port, 'cordin' to my way of thinkin', and I'll be the first to say 'leave her' when the time comes."

On this day there was but little change in the condition of affairs. The gale held strong from the north, but no sail appeared within the anxious watchers' range of vision. Harry and Walter were eager to be of some assistance; but beyond taking a few lessons in steering there was nothing they could do, and their time was passed in comparative idleness.

Bob and Jim alternately stood watch and slept until, when night came again, they were in fair bodily condition for the work before them, and once more Harry and Walter retired to the cabin, knowing they ought to do a full share of the labor, but too ignorant to give any save the most trifling aid.

Before midnight the wind fined down to a light breeze, still holding from the north, however; and Bob said, with a sigh, as Jim made ready to stand his trick at the wheel:

"Ah, lad, if we only had a couple of good men aboard how quick the old hooker's head would be turned toward the coast."

"In case we don't sight a vessel why can't you put her about, anyhow?"

"We'll make a try to get the lower canvas on in the mornin'. You an' I must have a good bit of help from the watch below, an' they'd be worse than wooden boys in the night."

This was not the only reason why Bob made no attempt to get sail on at once. He was yet feeble from the exposure and privations of the nine days in the Trade Wind's yawl, and although there was but little labor involved in such watches as had been kept since coming on board the Bonita, the anxiety prevented an immediate return of strength.

"I've heard of vessels comin' in mighty short-handed," Jim said thoughtfully, as if trying to bring forward some argument which might induce the old sailor to take greater risks. "There was a fishin' schooner from Newburyport what lost all her boats in a fog, an' the captain brought her home with nobody but the cook to help."

"I ain't a questionin' that, lad. The packet-ship Three Brothers, in the Chinese trade, anchored inside of Sandy Hook ten years ago, an' nobody aboard able to lift a hand but two men and the captain's wife – all the rest down with fever. I could spin yarns from now till daylight 'bout jes' sich cases; we're fixed different. None of us knows navigation, an' its got to be all dead reckonin', which is a pretty shaky way of runnin' even a fishin' schooner. Then, again, Harry an' Walter ain't strong enough to handle the wheel in any kind of a decent breeze, an' it's only you an' me. We must lay by till somethin' more'n a good fair chance comes, else we'll find ourselves in a bad scrape."

"Of course you're the one that knows what we ought to do, an' I ain't sayin' a word if we run way down to South America; but it's kinder tough on the boys. I can see 'em, when they think I ain't lookin', wipin' their eyes an' actin' like as if it wouldn't take much to make both yell right out. If they didn't have no more of a home than I've got neither would bother 'bout how long the cruise is likely to last."

"I s'pose it does seem rough," Bob said reflectively; "but what's to be done? I reckon they'd rather loaf 'round here a good many days than take chances on a raft. Sailorizin' is a mighty risky thing for green hands, an' while I can hold my own among the best of 'em in the fo'castle, I'd make a poor fist of navigation. They'll have to grin an' bear it same's many a good man has done before 'em."

Jim had no reply to make. Even before the conversation was begun he realized the difficulty of reaching port unless under the most favorable circumstances; and now since Bob had spoken so freely he resolved to be patient, no matter how long they might remain at sea.

The old sailor, instead of going below, where there would be some trouble to awaken him in the event of a sudden emergency, laid down on the deck to leeward of the house, and a few seconds later his loud breathing told of unconsciousness.

To remain at the wheel, the only one of this small crew awake, and in a certain degree responsible for the safety of all, was a task from which even a more experienced sailor than Jim might be excused for shrinking; but it was a matter which could not well be bettered, and the boy stood up to it bravely. Now and then the white crest of a wave in the distance caused him to start with joy, only to be correspondingly depressed a few seconds later as the true nature of the object was discovered; and thus amid alternate hope and despondency the two long hours of his watch were passed.

Then Bob took his trick at the wheel, Jim camping down on the deck in the place so lately vacated by the old sailor; and when his eyes were closed in slumber he did not open them again until the sun began to send long shafts of golden light across the leaping waters.

"What made you let me sleep so long?" he asked, with just a shade of irritation in his tone. "I was better able to stand watch than you, an' a couple of hours' sleep would a'-fixed me up all right."

"Well, lad, somehow the thinkin' of what might be the end o' this 'ere queer cruise kept me awake, an' when I wasn't sleepy there could be no reason for pullin' you out. We'll square it before

dark, though. Now s'posen we get a little grub, call the watch below so's they can take a few lessons in steerin', an' be ready for settin' the canvas."

Jim, feeling that he was in a certain degree responsible for having thus unconsciously shirked his duty, carried out these instructions with the greatest alacrity. When Harry and Walter were awakened they went aft to their teacher in seamanship, while the amateur cook prepared a hearty breakfast, which was served on the top of the house in order that all might eat at the same time.

Then Bob went below for what he called a "double dose of snoozin'." Walter set things to rights in the galley, and Harry steered while Jim stood beside him to make sure the Bonita was kept on the course, exercising as much care as if it was the only one which could be pursued with safety.

Although Bob had fully determined to turn the brig toward the coast on this day, there was no change in her course at noon, and for a very good reason. Before daylight the breeze had died away entirely, and at nine o'clock the Bonita was rising and falling on the glassy ocean with not air enough stirring to lift the narrow thread of blue bunting at the main-truck.

The involuntary crew had spread the yawl's sail from the house to the starboard rail as an awning, for the heat in the cabin was too great to admit of their remaining below, and under this all sought shelter from the sun's fervent rays.

Bob found a reasonably large stock of tobacco among the Bonita's stores, and with this and a short black pipe he occupied himself during the hours of enforced idleness, while the boys thought of home and the loved ones whom they might never see again. The seconds came and went until the sun was directly overhead, and the old sailor had but just settled down for a noonday nap when all four sprang to their feet in alarm, as the deafening crush of an explosion was heard.

The brig quivered from stem to stern as if from the effects of a torpedo beneath her keel, and the fore hatch was flung high in the air while a dense cloud of what appeared to be smoke arose from the hold.

Astonishment and fear rendered the younger members of the crew incapable either of speech or movement, and they might have remained staring stupidly forward an indefinite length of time if Bob had not shouted, excitedly:

"It's a case of fire, lads! Jump to it for what provisions an' water can be got out in a hurry! There's no time to be lost if we want to leave, for most likely the hold is one mass of flame."

These hurriedly-spoken commands aroused the boys from their stupefaction, and in an instant all three leaped toward the pantry. Each took what was nearest at hand, and in a very few moments there was a reasonably large but varied collection of canned provisions in the yawl. No water had been put on board for the very good reason that they could not find a breaker; and Jim shouted, after they had searched several moments in vain:

"We shall have to leave without anything to drink, for we can't get one of the scuttle-butts on the boat."

"I'll stand a pretty good scorchin' afore startin' like that," Bob said decidedly, "'cause you see I know what it is to be thirsty. Fill half a dozen of the fire-buckets while I hunt after bottles."

During all this time the smoke had been pouring from the fore hatchway in dense clouds, apparently giving evidence of some mighty conflagration below; but before a supply of water could be put on the yawl it had fined down to a thin curl of vapor, and to this Jim called Bob's attention just as they were preparing to lower the boat.

"It looks as if somethin' had put the fire out," he said; and Bob replied, as he let go the davit-falls:

"Make fast there, lads, an' I'll take a look below. We don't want to abandon the brig while there's a chance of standin' by her."

The old sailor went forward, the boys remaining aft ready to lower away at a moment's notice, and in a few seconds, to the surprise of all, he was seen going below.

"Now, that's what I call queer!" Jim said after five minutes had passed and Bob did not make his appearance. "He couldn't stay down there very long if the fire amounted to much."

"Perhaps he's been suffocated and can't get back," Harry suggested in a low, tremulous tone.

This idea was sufficient to alarm the other boys, and stopping only long enough to make the falls fast they rushed forward, reaching the fore hatchway just as Bob began to ascend.

"Is the fire very big?" Jim asked; and the reply astonished them quite as much as had the explosion.

"There ain't even a spark!"

"Then what caused the smoke?"

"The brig is loaded with alcohol in casks made of red-oak. That kind of wood is porous, an' the fumes escapin' have formed a gas that looked like smoke, but which had force enough to blow off a hatch that wasn't battened down." Then, as Bob seated himself on the combing and wiped the perspiration from his face, he added: "Now we can have a pretty good idee as to why this craft was abandoned. There was an explosion same as happened a few minutes ago, an' all hands thought what we did – that the brig was on fire. They hove her to an' got the boats over, most likely meanin' to lay at a safe distance until it was possible to find out what would happen. The mainsail was stowed, so she had no after-canvas to hold her steady. Then she got stern-way-on an' backed off till the wind filled her topsails, when she started like a rocket, leavin' the crew behind. Of course she would run a couple of miles, then come to, an' before the men could catch her she'd be off once more. The chances are that them maneuvers were kept up till night set in, when she was lost entirely."

The three boys listened with the utmost attention to this very plausible explanation of what had previously been such a deep mystery, and when Bob concluded there was a look of most intense relief on their faces. Up to this moment the brig herself terrified them because of what had possibly happened on board; but now all seemed changed, and she was suddenly transformed from something supernatural to the most innocent and peaceful of traders.

"Then there's no reason for abandoning her?" Harry said half-interrogatively.

"Not a bit of it, lad. We'll leave the hatch open to let the gas out, an' run her in on the coast if we don't speak a craft that can lend us two or three hands."

"S'posin' you could get some more sailors, then how would you fix it?" Jim asked, remembering what the old man had said regarding his ignorance of navigation.

"Take the chances of keepin' off the shore till we sighted a New York pilot-boat, an' then lay claim for a fat salvage."

"And we should be landed at home!" Walter exclaimed in delight. "We might stop in front of Harry's father's store, which is close by the wharves; and I guess there'd be a big time when Mr. Vandyne found out who had brought in the Bonita!"

"Don't count too much on anything like that, Walt," Harry added gravely. "Bob said he would try to make that port if he could find some sailors to help him; but according to the looks of things now it'll be a long while before such good luck comes."

"We can believe it will be here any moment, and then the nights won't seem so lonely, nor the days so long."

"That's right, lad; don't trouble trouble till trouble troubles you. Keep a stiff upper lip whatever happens, an' you'll stand a better show of pullin' through!" Bob cried in a cheery tone. "I was shipmate once with a chap what was allers worryin' 'bout findin' hisself on a haunted vessel. He never'd put his mark to the articles till after he'd asked all about the craft, an' whether there was any ghosts aboard. Now, you let a man go nosin' 'round expectin' to see things, an' it happens that what he's huntin' for most allers comes, or else he conjures 'em up. Well, so it was with Tom – Tom Byard, he called hisself. He got drunk one night, an' the next mornin' awoke on a ship bound 'round the Horn with a cargo of railroad iron."

"It wasn't long before he commenced to hunt after ghosts, 'an this time he didn't have to look very far. I reckon the liquor – he'd been on a four days' spree – had considerable to do with his eyes; an' that very night, while they was within sight of Sandy Hook, he saw, or thought he did, the biggest kind of a ghost makin' right for him with a bloody knife. Tom was on the maint'gallant-yard with another chap when the thing come. He give a big yell, singing out that he knowed it would be there some time, an' over he went. Nobody ever saw hide or hair of him afterward, an' the captain put in the log-book as how it was delirium tre – tre – tremenjus, or somethin' like that, what killed him."

The point that Bob sought to make was forgotten owing to the length of the story, and even he himself appeared to have lost sight of any moral; therefore, what had been intended as a strong argument why people should not seek out trouble passed for nothing better than a very improbable yarn.

The boys were eager to see the cargo which had given them so much alarm, and had also possibly been the cause of the brig's abandonment by her original crew; therefore they went below on a tour of investigation, which was not very satisfactory because there was nothing but a quantity of casks to be seen.

Ten minutes in the hot hold was sufficient to gratify their curiosity, and then the amateur cook sat about preparing the noonday meal.

CHAPTER VIII. ANOTHER SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

Now that the boys had lost all fear of the Bonita, half their troubles seemed suddenly to have vanished. As a matter of course, Harry and Walter grieved because of the sorrow their unexplainable absence must have caused at home; but their distress of mind was lessened very materially by the belief that they would soon be in a condition to return.

Even Bob appeared to be relieved by what was evidently the solution of the mystery, and it was quite a jolly party which gathered in the saloon to partake of the dinner prepared by Jim.

"Now that things seem to be straightened up a bit, an' all hands are feelin' kinder nat'ral-like, I reckon we'll get some sail on the old hooker this afternoon," Bob said when the meal was finished and he had begun to make ready for the after-dinner smoke.

"There ain't wind enough to lift a pocket-handkerchief," Jim suggested, "so why do you want more canvas?"

"I don't reckon it'll hold calm a great while, an' we must be ready when the breeze does come. There's time now to give Harry an' Walter a lesson in workin' ship, an' they need it."

The boys had no objection to make, for a certain amount of labor was necessary if they ever hoped to reach home again, and they signified their willingness to begin at once; but the old sailor insisted on finishing his smoke before doing anything else.

"There's plenty of time," he said lazily, "an' we'll lay under the awnin' till the sun gets a little nearer the water."

Then he arose from the table, and as the boys followed on deck they were electrified by hearing him shout, as he shaded his eyes from the glare and gazed southward:

"There's a steamer, lads! Now all we've got to do is hook on an' be towed into port. Set the flag so's they'll know we're in distress, an' we'll overhaul the hawsers to save time."

Before he ceased speaking the boys had made out that which caused Bob so much excitement. It was a small craft coming toward them under steam, as could be told from the thread of smoke which floated on the still air, and after one glance at her Jim hoisted the signal of distress while the others gathered in the bows to watch the welcome approach.

"It ain't a very big steamer," the young fisherman said as he rejoined his companions.

"Most likely she's a tug what's got blown out to sea," Bob replied as he went into the cabin for a glass; and when he came on deck again the boys waited impatiently to learn what could be seen.

During fully ten minutes the old sailor held the glass to his eyes, while a mystified expression came over his face as he said to Jim:

"Here, take this an' see what you can make out. It puzzles me, for a fact."

"She looks like a tug," the boy said, after gazing at the approaching craft several seconds; "but there's something queer on her bow."

"What about her spars?" Bob asked impatiently.

"She's got two short masts, and – Why, what's that? She's flying a signal of distress!"

"That's about the size of it," Bob exclaimed as he brought his hand down on the rail with a vigorous slap as if to give emphasis to his words.

"I thought my eyes must be playin' me a trick, so that's why I asked you to look. Her bow has been stove, an' she's workin' up this way for help."

"Well," and Jim lowered the glass with a gesture of disappointment, "she's comin' to a pretty poor place, for we've got our hands full tryin' to help ourselves."

During the next half hour hardly a word was spoken, so occupied were all hands with watching the stranger, which approached very slowly, and at the end of that time she was almost within hailing distance.

It was a small tug with a flag run half-way up the stumpy mainmast, and her bow stove from the cut-water nearly to the pilot-house. A stream of water coming from the starboard side told that the steam-pump was necessary to keep her afloat; but no person save a boy about eighteen years of age, who was at the wheel, could be seen.

"She must be pretty nigh as short-handed as we are," Bob said; and then came a hail.

"Brig ahoy!"

"Ahoy on the tug!"

"Can you send me some men? The steamer is sinking, and I am the only one on board."

"Who's running the engine?" Bob shouted.

"I am, and trying to steer at the same time."

"There's only one man an' three boys here. Can't you manage to come alongside?"

The helmsman waved his hand as if in reply and disappeared, when the steamer's speed was checked. Then he entered the pilot-house again, going below once more to stop the machinery entirely when within fifty yards of the brig.

By this means the tug was brought so near that a heaving-line could be thrown aboard, and ten minutes later she was lying alongside the Bonita as a tired, hungry-looking boy stepped over the brig's rail.

"I reckon you've been havin' a decently tough time," Bob said by way of starting the conversation.

"Since yesterday morning I've been trying to keep her afloat. If some craft hadn't hove in sight to-day I should have given up, and probably gone to the bottom with her."

"How did you get in such a mess?"

"An ocean steamer ran into us at sunrise yesterday. Before she could clear herself every one of the tug's crew, except myself, climbed on board over the bow. I was the engineer, and had an assistant. He was on duty at the time, and I asleep in the after cabin. The shock of the collision threw me out of the bunk and stunned me, I reckon, for when I came on deck there was no craft in sight. Since then I've kept steam on so the pump would work, and run in the hope of sighting some craft."

"Where do you hail from?"

"Philadelphia. The Sea Bird is a new boat, and we were taking her to Cuba."

"How long have you been out?"

"Five days from the Capes."

"Then we've made more of a southin' than I reckoned on," Bob said half to himself, and seeing a look of inquiry on the stranger's face he gave a brief account of the Bonita from the time the boys came aboard; saying, in conclusion: "We're better off than you, for the brig is sound; so you'd best bring your traps over the rail an' let the steamer sink when she gets ready. I reckon with your help we can crawl in toward the mainland an' make a tidy bit of salvage at the same time. What's your name?"

"Joseph Taylor. The only work I have ever done on ship-board has been in the engine-room, and I'm afraid I sha'n't make much of a sailor."

"You've got strength an' pluck," Bob said approvingly, "an' that's enough."

"But I don't like to give up trying to save the Sea Bird. She isn't stove below the water-line, is new, and is worth fifteen thousand dollars."

"I'm afraid, lad, that we haven't got force enough to do very much in the way of ship-building," and Bob shook his head gravely as if to say he thought it a hopeless case. "Howsomever, while there's no wind we sha'n't be wastin' time, so it won't do any harm to have a look at her."

Joe Taylor led the way over the rail, and the three boys, eager to see the little steamer, followed directly behind Bob, Jim whispering to his friends:

"If this cruise don't end pretty soon we shall have a reg'lar cripples' crew aboard. Here's me, who come from the Mary Walker; you, that never belonged to any craft; the old Bonita, with nobody to work her; Bob, as a remnant of the Trade Wind, an' now another feller with a sinkin' tug. It's a nice crowd to talk about salvage when they can't help theirselves!"

"Just let us get ashore once more, an' I'll be satisfied to have somebody else make money by taking these crafts into port!" and Walter leaped on to the deck of the tug in a discontented way, as if he fancied the shuttered steamer had brought fresh trouble and complications upon them.

The litter of splintered timbers, loose ropes and general wreckage on the forward deck of the Sea Bird gave her the appearance of having suffered more injury than really was the case. Instead of a sharp, narrow bow, as is usual on crafts of her kind, the hull flared very decidedly from the water-line to the deck, thus giving her greater carrying capacity; and it was this upper portion which had been cut into, leaving the lower part in fair condition.

All this Bob saw at a glance after going on board, and he at once began a careful examination with a view to ascertaining how badly her seams had been strained.

"What amount of coal have you got?" he asked, coming on deck after spending fully half an hour in the hold.

"Enough to run three or four days."

"That wouldn't carry her to the Capes, if your reckonin' is right as to the time she's been out; but we might manage to make some nearer port," he said half to himself; and then added, in a louder tone: "I calculate the hole might be patched up with spare canvas an' plenty of tar; but we'd need fair weather till the job was done."

"If you could manage that part of it I can tow the brig, providing one of your party steers," said the engineer eagerly. "Why not tackle the job? If the weather should change it would be only the loss of a few hours' time."

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