

## Through Straddle Rock Cove

By GEORGE E. WALSH

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BOGGLES came aboard at Halifax—a stranded, battered derelict of the sea—eager to sail to the north coast. He was suffering from a plethora of hard luck, but to Mr. Pierce he had the appearance of one recovering from a period of dissipation. Annette saw only the picturesque side of Boggles, and he was tentatively engaged on the spot.

"I know the Newfoundland coast better'n I know the chart of me own face," confessed the pilot in a soft, pleading voice. "Seeing that I was born in Straddle Rock Cove an' lived there until I was old enough to run away, I ought to."

Annette was romantic, and she anticipated his thoughts.

"And you want to visit your old home again?" she asked sympathetically.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm dying to do that; been trying to get back in the old



"OH, BOGGLES! WHY DID THIS HAPPEN?"

home port for well nigh twenty years, but what with hard luck an' other things I've always missed it. Once at St. John's, I says to myself, now I'll see Straddle Rock ag'in before I die. I was so sartin of it that I had to break a leg celebrating the event. Of course no one wanted a sailor with a game leg, an' I had to stay in port until the season was too far advanced to go north. Then I shipped to the States ag'in to keep from starving."

Boggles lumped a trifle yet from his broken leg, and one eye seemed to squint with diabolic cunning when you looked him square in the face, but Annette saw none of the ugly sides of the subjects she liked, and Boggles charmed her.

Mr. Pierce grumbled at the bargain, but finally submitted. Pilots familiar with the north coast were scarce in Halifax, and the season was late anyway. "Well, it's for Annette's sake I'm up here," he confessed, "and I suppose I shouldn't object if Annette approves."

"He looks honest, but a bit hardened on the surface by too much contact with the world," ventured Dr. Langdon, with a smile. "I think his story of being born and nurtured in Straddle Rock Cove is a myth, however. I doubt if there is such a place."

"We must visit Straddle Rock Cove," said Annette positively one day. "Mr. Boggles"—she always dignified the old pilot with Mr.—"can guide us there. It's an immensely dangerous harbor, and no one can enter it in a storm except Mr. Boggles."

"Boggles may be all right," drawled the doctor, "but I draw the line at going into Straddle Rock Cove with him in a storm."

Annette ignored the interruption. Mr. Pierce was bored with the whole trip, and he was willing to yield anything for peace.

"You will visit the cove, papa, where Boggles was born?" Annette continued. "You will make him happy again. He's been dreaming of this trip for twenty years."

"If you will be satisfied to return home then we may run in the harbor," craftily replied Mr. Pierce, anxious to shorten the trip by striking any sort of a bargain.

"Yes," reluctantly, "after we stay there a few days."

Straddle Rock grew daily in importance thereafter. It was the first definite point of entry for the yacht. Captain Reed looked the place up on the charts. There was a group of small rocks off a dangerous point of the coast, locally known by the fishermen as Straddle rocks. They were marked "Dangerous" and "No Safe Harbor For Ships or Yachts." He carried his information to the owner and grumbled with malicious intent.

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least, captain," retorted Mr. Pierce, annoyed by the new interference. "Annette is persistent, and you must oblige her. Really, it's none of my affair."

"But, sir, this man Boggles may wreck us."

Mr. Pierce waved his hand entreatingly. "Talk to Annette," he murmured.

Annette checked the incipient mutiny by closing herself in the chart room with the captain for two whole hours. When they emerged both were smiling. No orders were given to change the course of the yacht.

The waters of the north coast met them a week later. They were cold and icy, with the breath of floating bergs hovering over them. Boggles was consulted by the captain, and his meek, submissive air sloughed off to make place for the official bearing of "Mr. Boggles, the north coast pilot."

Boggles was to report for duty the following morning. As his last unofficial act he helped the mate to repair the small acetylene gas generator in the forward part of the yacht. This was used in emergencies for the forward searchlight.

"We've got to keep a sharp lookout for icebergs now," Captain Reed had warned, "and that forward searchlight must be fixed up."

Boggles didn't know much about acetylene gas. Neither did the first mate. They tampered with the plant for two hours, and then a muffled explosion forward alarmed every member of the crew. It was the first mate who exclaimed incoherently:

"The thing—the tank exploded right in our faces. It was so sudden that I could not say how."

Boggles couldn't explain, for he was blinded and his body was blazing like a human torch covered with pitch. The captain and Dr. Langdon squelched the flames, so the yacht was safe, and Annette, with two sailors, rescued Boggles from incineration.

Mr. Pierce was angry and bored to the point of saying:

"How annoying! Any one hurt?"

"Boggles is pretty well done up," the doctor replied, scraping the charred skin from the blackened face. "He's blind as a bat for one thing, and—"

Boggles groaned and stammered in a hoarse whisper:

"I knew I'd never see Straddle Rock Cove ag'in. I might have known something would happen. Oh, why didn't I stay away?"

Captain Reed called another meeting to consider the question of changing the yacht's course. "Mr. Boggles is now incapacitated," he exclaimed, "and of course no one else is familiar with this coast."

"That's so," retorted Mr. Pierce, with sudden enlightenment. "Then we must return—at once."

A malevolent light of joy illumined his features.

"Exactly," replied the captain. "I shall order the course changed."

"Not today, captain," interrupted Annette sweetly. "It seems like—like sacrilege to turn around and run home so soon after Mr. Boggles is laid up. I—I think we should keep on a day or two. There is some hope, Dr. Langdon, isn't there?"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Annette, but there's none. Boggles is blind—totally blind. He may in six months or a year recover some of his sight, but it is a forlorn hope."

Annette's face darkened. Mr. Pierce thought she was about to cry, and he hastily said:

"We might keep on the same course for a day or two, captain, out of respect for Boggles, and—"

"Yes, yes, certainly."

Annette gave them both a grateful smile, and the conference was ended. Boggles absorbed more attention now than before the accident. Every one paid him deference, but that was partly because all, from the humblest to the highest, knew that the trip was to be abandoned in a day or two. But Boggles didn't know, and he kept moaning:

"I'll never see the Straddle rocks ag'in! If I could see 'em I'd die in peace! Ah, there they are! Are you here, ma'am? Look at 'em! See the sun on 'em! There's where I was born—twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ago, ma'am!"

"Oh, Boggles!" moaned Annette in return. "Why did this happen?"

Now, the meeting of the cold breath from the north coast and the warm wind of the southern summer plays havoc with the sea at many points between Newfoundland and Labrador. Pierce elemental struggles of the atmosphere shake the sea and earth, and for days and nights no ship is safe in those far regions.

The Grayling was a staunch yacht, but rather undersized for a cruise so far from port. When the wind struck her she danced lightly in the choppy seas, but as the storm developed she grew troubled and frightened.

Boggles had recovered from his feverish delirium and was rational. He heard the storm and found an atom of consolation in it. It relieved his mind of the weight pressing upon it.

For a night and day the yacht drifted. Then in the blackness of the second night the vortex of the frightful storm was reached, with the craft ill prepared to meet it.

The forward watch reported breakers ahead, and the jagged outlines of rocks were seen in the distant background. The Grayling was drifting steadily toward them. It was a matter of an hour before she would strike.

Annette heard the summons to prepare for the worst. The two boats which were left would hold the crew and passengers, and there was no alternative but to trust their lives to the tender mercies of the breakers.

"Boggles, you must rise and go with me," Annette said. "I'll lead you. We're drifting on the rocks."

"What rocks—Straddle rocks?"

"I don't know," laughed Annette hysterically. "It would be funny if they were."

"No, ma'am, it wouldn't, for they're dangerous—very dangerous in a storm like this."

"Oh, if you could only see, Mr. Boggles, you would save us!"

"Yes, I'd save you. I know the coast."

He pressed a hand to his throbbing head.

"What rocks did you say they were?" he queried again. "How do they look—tall, ragged an' straddling, as if they wanted to block up the entrance to the cove? That's them. Yes, I know them."

"I didn't say, Mr. Boggles, what they looked like."

"Yes, I know that sound," interrupted the man suddenly. "That's off the Saddle's hump. It's three miles to the west of the entrance. I know my reckoning now. I'll take the yacht."

"Mr. Boggles, it is!" Annette started to interpose, but the old pilot was at the door of his stateroom.

"There, take those things away!" he said impatiently, stripping the bandages from his forehead. "I can't see with them on!"

Annette mechanically picked up the discarded strips of fine linen and followed her erstwhile patient through the door. Boggles was on deck before her. All was confusion and blackness there, but the pilot wended his way through the obstructions to the pilot house.

"I'll take her, captain, now," he announced gently. "I've got my bearings. That's the Saddle's hump, an' over there's the Straddle rocks. It's nasty weather in here."

Captain Reed stared at the vision, but it was too dark to see clearly. His own nerves were considerably rattled by the recent series of events, and he stepped back in something like superstition.

"Let her go ahead full speed, captain," Boggles continued. "The tide runs like blazes through these channels."

The sailors halted in their work and left the boats swinging half down the davits. Mr. Pierce shouted angrily:

"What's he doing—wrecking us on his blamed rocks?"

"Wait a moment, Mr. Pierce," Dr. Langdon said, the intuition of a vision possessing him. "He can't make matters worse."

"Isn't he blind?" snorted the owner.

"Yes, we're all blind," answered the doctor meekly.

The crash of the breakers on their right drowned all further conversation. The wind veered and shrieked a new tune, and the Grayling cleared the line of rocks by a scant yard.

"That was as close as we could run to the hump without going on," exclaimed Boggles, with both hands on the wheel.

"Now," with a sigh, "for the Straddle rocks. They're worse, much worse in this weather."

"Good God! Then we're lost," groaned Mr. Pierce. "We can't live in anything worse than that."

"Hush, papa," whispered Annette. "I think Boggles may know."

The yacht yawed and swung wide of the next line of breakers, then faced the black towering rocks. Boggles held her steadily toward them. There was no opening. The sea dashed mountain high against their precipitous face. The white foam splattered the bow of the boat. Mr. Pierce could stand it no longer. He broke loose and shouted in a frenzy:

"We're crazy! That madman will wreck us! Take the wheel, Captain Reed! I command you! Take it!"

But the captain fumbled in speech and movements. Then he was arrested by a most violent lurch of the yacht. There was a grinding and grating of steel against an unyielding substance. Some one shrieked awfully. It seemed an eternity for the bewildered spectators, but Boggles sighed and said:

"There, we're through the Straddle now! We're safe, captain!"

The towering wall of rocks had miraculously opened, and the Grayling shot through a channel so narrow that her sides scraped the outer edges of the strange formation of granite. The current swept the craft forward with accelerated speed.

Then the sea lost its turbulence and the wind its power for evil. Protected on all sides by abutments of rocks, the sheltered cove was like a mill pond compared to the raging sea.

"We'll anchor here, captain," Boggles was saying. "The tide is not so swift inside the rocks, an' the bottom is sandy. I'll take a rest now. I'm tired, an' it's getting dark, very dark. I never knew the cove to be so dark before. I can hardly see the rocks. I think—I'm falling."

It was Annette's arm he clutched, and Annette and the doctor led him below to his room.

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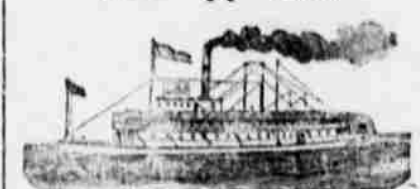
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