

ON A SHIPWRECK

By Owen Oliver

THERE was a space of still water round the *Uralian*. One reef sheltered her as she lay upon another, straining and groaning, like a beast in pain. Her bows had climbed over the hidden rock, pointing scornfully upwards till they had bent with their own weight and sagged downward again. Now the fore-castle was half submerged, and the water poured in and out through great rents. The vessel was twisted amidships, the deck-planking had opened in places, and part of the music saloon had fallen in; but the stern was uninjured and lay in deep water. They carried aft the boats that were available and launched them there.

Beyond the oasis of calm, a heavy sea swept shorewards in towering green waves, until it reached a comb of jagged rocks, and poured through the openings in sheets of foam to a long, sandy beach. Three tossing boats were approaching the rocks as slowly as the current would suffer, looking for a passage through. The fourth—the last remaining—was just leaving the ship. The men who had lowered it, with no appliances but bare ropes, rubbed their chafed hands on their trousers and mopped their foreheads, and gathered together silently—except a tall gentleman of about forty. He left the rest and went toward a lady, who stood back a little, watching them. The rest of the women, and all the children, were in the boats.

She turned when he reached her, and they walked forward together. He patted her shoulder approvingly, and she smiled faintly at him. She was about five-and-thirty; could scarcely be called good-looking, but very likable when she smiled.

"That's why she wouldn't go in the boat!" one of the gathering observed.

"Aye!" said an old sailor. "She's the right sort."

Then they were silent again. The man and the woman were silent too. When they reached the end of the saloon promenade, beside the wrecked music-saloon, they stopped and rested their arms on the rail and gazed at the shore a mile away; not as if they wished to look at the shore, but as if they feared to look at each other. The chief officer came swiftly down the narrow ladder from the navigation deck, with two life-belts on his arm.

"Best put them on," he advised, "but I don't think they'll be much use." He nodded toward the breakers.

"She'll go in ten minutes."

The man laid one belt on the deck, while he put the other round the woman. She held up her arms and smiled at him all the time. When he finished his task, and picked up the other belt, she took it from him.

"Let me do it for you," she offered. "I should like to if I may."

His grave face lit up for a moment.

"I shall like you to," he told her. "You are a brave woman."

"Braver than I thought," she assented. "I used to think that I was just—ordinary; that we all were. Now I think it was life that was ordinary, not we. What shall we do with the rest of it—the ten minutes?"

"Let us open our hearts," the man proposed. "We may venture now. Dear lady, I have admired you and liked you all the voyage. We shall go as friends together, I think?"

"I wish no better company," she told him.

"Is there no one who has a better right?" he asked.

"No one. And you?"

"No one."

"And that," she said, "is why we thought life ordinary, I suppose."

He nodded and they rested their arms on the rail again and gazed at the boats approaching the shore. There were only two now—no, three. One lay upturned on the beach. Specks of humanity crawled out of the foam. Some rushed back, at the risk of their lives, and pulled out others.

"Yes," he said. "We are braver than we thought. Do you see the boulder man, as we called him?" He pointed to the group at the stern. "One might have expected him to fight for a place in the boats. When I saw him carry the first child down, I thought it was an excuse to get a place for himself; but he carried half a dozen more down and came back cheerfully every time. He managed to cheer them, too; wiped their eyes and joked at their fears in his boorish way; got some packets of sweets from the bar and threw them down to the boat, and kissed his hand to them. Now he's lighting a cigarette. Yes, we're braver than we thought. You, dear lady, are the bravest and the best. You gave up your life when you gave up your place in the boat. Why?"

"The children have no mother," she explained; "and he is such a good father to them. They need him; and I have no one."

He took her hand.

"You have a friend," he assured her.

"Yes," she said, simply. "That was the other reason why I remained."

"Me?" He looked at her quickly.

"You. I wonder—it doesn't matter what we say now, does it?—I wonder if we really cared for each other!"

"Ah!" said the man. "I wondered too, but I thought women always knew?"

She shook her head.

"I liked you, certainly; but I have liked other men. I never liked any of them enough. You see, I am not a marrying woman. I have—I had aims in life. Marriage meant sacrificing so much. It is a sacrifice for an independent woman—to give up your individuality; to be Mrs. Something-Else; not even your own name left! And for what? To be a toy and a plaything for a year. Perhaps not a year—don't call it selfishness. I'd have given up everything if I had thought that love would last! My dear friend, it doesn't last. You and I are not children. We have seen life. We know! But the woman's lasts longest. I was afraid of that!"

"I know," the man nodded. "I liked you, too; liked you more than was comfortable! I thought it out many a time. It was more than liking, Marian. I quickened at your coming; warmed at your beautiful smile."

"Dear friend," she protested, "we can be candid now. You know that I am not beautiful."

"Indeed," he declared, "I thought you were. It was

yourself that I liked; but I liked your woman's graces, too. You are smiling very beautifully now."

"If it pleases you," she said, "I will smile to the end. I am glad that my looks please you. Will it make this—this moment of your life happier to know that I admire you? I do."

He nodded.

"Thank you, dear woman. I was very tempted sometimes to ask you to give me yourself; but—you see, I, also, have liked others; and not enough. I, too, was not sure if I liked you enough; but I liked you more than any of the rest—much more. Sometimes I pictured you at my breakfast-table, in a cool morning-gown, your white fingers busy with the cups. But I was forty and more; and you were forty and less. The married breakfast-table is not always harmonious; and we were a little old to adjust ourselves to double harness; and so—well, I didn't think so much of the risk of quarrels. We might have had a few hot words, now and then—but they don't matter. It was the cold words that I feared. To love you—and I knew that I should love you very

He drew her gently to him. She laid her face on his shoulder for a moment, then lifted it to his.

"Oh, my dear!" she cried, "the risk was not that we should not love; only that we should lose sight of it, in the commonplace of life. Now, if we are spared, we shall know—"

"We shall know, darling. There is no hope, I think. May we both be saved, or neither!"

"Yes—yes—hold me very tightly when—then! Oh! I love you so!"

He took up a piece of cord that lay upon the deck and made a fastening between the life-belts.

"If my arms can no longer hold you," he said, "we will still be together. It shall be both, or neither. I think it will be 'neither.' I love you very much, Marian."

He kissed her many times, and she smiled the beautiful smile.

"Close your eyes, then," she told him. "Think of me like this; as you like to see me. Think that afterwards you will find me so. Dear, I was not always sure that I believed in afterwards; but now that you love me I am

"Good sports!" he said, smiling at their locked fingers.

An hour ago they would have thought him a vulgar intruder. Now they shook his hand warmly.

Presently the chief officer appeared, almost dragging the old captain with him. The latter seemed to have no eyes for anything but the doomed ship. It was like a child to him, and he had no other. Ah! we all have dear ships that go down!

The vessel shivered again, and heeled over slightly. They looked anxiously at one another, thinking that she would sink before the powder exploded, and then, suddenly, there was a great crash. Boards, bales, the whole music-saloon, flew into the air. The bows seemed to dissolve, and the stern took a great lurch into the water. The waves swept over it for a few moments, but when they passed it floated upright, and its human freight was left, clinging to the rails—except the captain. The chief officer rubbed his drenched sleeve across his wet face.

"He'd have wished to go with her," he said, huskily.

"Yes," said the boulder man. "Yes. I can under-

the green sea and the seething foam that raced to the shore.

"They're awkward!" the mate admitted. "Confoundedly awkward. If we could get through them I'd bet ten to one on the lot of us reaching the shore alive. You can't drown in half a minute. Well, some of us will get through. It's the only chance. Take a long breath before you start."

"Can't you get a rope ashore?" was asked, "the way they do at wrecks—so that we could go down it?"

"Ye-es," said the chief officer. "I might get a rope ashore, but you couldn't hold on. I've no cradle to run up and down it. No. You'll have to jump."

"That is the only thing left to do. Who'll go first?"

The man and the woman looked at each other.

"We will," he said, and she nodded approval.

"You'd better go singly," an old sailor advised.

"There'll be more chance of slipping between the snags, you see. If you're tied together and one gets caught you'll both be done for."

The boulder man slapped him on the shoulder.

"And suppose that's what they wish?" he said. "Eh, my old sport?"

"Ah-h!" said the old sailor. "Ah-h! That makes it all the more pity." He looked at the cord which fastened them together, and suddenly he laughed excitedly and turned to the chief officer.

"The very idea, sir!" he said. "If you got a cable ashore, we'd sling 'em over it in pairs—let the rope between 'em slide down it, don't you see? They could hold on to each other, and keep it from slipping off."

The chief officer and several of the men rushed away and came back with twine and ropes. They fastened some balls of twine together and bound one end round a plank. Then they threw the plank overboard, and the current carried it swiftly toward the rocks. It struck one of the snags, and leapt violently into the air. Then it went on the beach, and one of the sailors secured it, and waved his arm.

"Ah!" said the old sailor, "that's Bill. He understands. He was a life-boat man once, Bill was. Look! He's telling the rest."

He waved his arm in reply, and fastened on a thin rope and the men dragged it ashore by the twine, and then, by the line, they pulled in a stout hawser—several hawsers joined, really. All ashore, even the women and children, assisted to haul, standing in a long row. Then the men held the end, and the women and children held the line attached to it.

Those aboard secured their end firmly to the ship, carrying it up to the stanchions of the platform round the captain's cabin to give it as much elevation as possible; and then their comrades ashore pulled it as taut as they could—tugging so hard that the poop of the ship moved yards nearer the breakers. The sailors substituted a stouter rope for the cord between the man and the woman, tied a loop in the end of the rope and greased it to make it run more easily. They put it over the hawser first, so that one would hang at each side, and told them to hold each other firmly. Then two or three men held them over the side ready to start.

"Now," asked the chief officer, "are you ready?"

"Wish each other luck," said the boulder man. "Don't mind us!"

The woman smiled at him, bravely.

"God bless you all," she said. "There are more good people in the world than I thought. Good-by."

She lifted her face to the man, and they kissed each other.

"God bless you!" he said.

"Go!" cried the chief officer, giving them a mighty push, and they slid swiftly down the sagging hawser, through the drenching foam that sprang up from the rocks and nearly took their breath away, holding each other more and more tightly, and rocking swiftly from side to side.

At first they went very fast; but as the rope sagged their motion was slower and slower; and though the rope between them passed over the joins in the hawsers, the obstacles checked their speed. Then their feet dragged in the foam and they moved very, very slowly, till at last the current began dragging at their feet, and the oldest sailor ashore yelled out sharply:

"Lower 'em! Lower 'em! The current 'll fetch 'em!"

And suddenly they splashed in the water and the foam flew all over them; and a sailor, waist-deep in the water and holding to others in a chain, seized them and dragged them on to the beach. And, without waiting to be untied, they joined the rest in hauling at the rope for the passage of the next pair, who were already at the ship's side; but as they pulled they kept smiling at each other.

"Oh!" she whispered once. "And we thought life ordinary!"

All their friends were ashore at last. The chief officer and the "boulder man" were the final pair, and arrived a couple of minutes before the remains of the old ship broke up and disappeared. They were heavy men and swung their legs and landed unaided with a run; and then a sailor cut the couples adrift. When he severed the only lady from her companion he grinned.

"The next time you're tied up," he prophesied, "it'll be a knot that can't be cut—a parson's knot."

And the boulder man beamed on them benevolently—he felt as though he would like to lend some one a dollar, he said.

"I'll go and see it done," he asserted, "whether I'm asked or not."

Three weeks later, when a passing steamer had carried them off to England, he was asked, and went: He gave the bride a wonderful gold ornament fashioned like a fragment of rope tied in a sailor-like way.

"The parson's knot," he informed them, and the chief officer, who was also asked to the wedding, took it up and smiled.

"We don't call it that," he said. "We call it a 'true-lover's knot.'"

"That," said the boulder man, with a beaming smile, "is what it will be!"



AND GAZED AT THE SHORE AS IF THEY FEARED TO LOOK AT EACH OTHER.

much—and then to slip back! To be loved by you—if you could—and then to be loved by you no longer! To turn into the ordinary married pair; to live our separate lives—and a chain between!"

"My dear! My dear! It is so hard!"

"No, no! We have found each other; and perhaps if we had lived the ordinary life—we never should have. This is best."

They clung to each other tightly. They did not stir even when the ship gave a long shiver and another. Then the chief officer hurried forward.

"Get aft," he cried. "Get aft! There's a lot of powder in the hold. The captain's going to fire it and try to blow her up. It will break her in two; but he thinks that the stern will float off; and if the watertight compartments hold, we shall reach the breakers before we ground. He laughed in the careless way of sailorsmen. "I'll come to your wedding yet," he said. "God bless you!"

She clasped her hands over his arm.

"Oh!" she cried, "if this is the end, it was worth living for! Life is better than I thought, and braver. They have all been so brave. I will never despise any one again! Not even a boulder man!"

The boulder man held out his hand to them when they reached him.

sure. "Love holds the keys of Heaven." I wrote that once in a book—a book! Now you have written it on my life. This is the time that I have lived, these few minutes!"

"My dear! My dear! It is so hard!"

"No, no! We have found each other; and perhaps if we had lived the ordinary life—we never should have. This is best."

They clung to each other tightly. They did not stir even when the ship gave a long shiver and another. Then the chief officer hurried forward.

"Get aft," he cried. "Get aft! There's a lot of powder in the hold. The captain's going to fire it and try to blow her up. It will break her in two; but he thinks that the stern will float off; and if the watertight compartments hold, we shall reach the breakers before we ground. He laughed in the careless way of sailorsmen. "I'll come to your wedding yet," he said. "God bless you!"

She clasped her hands over his arm.

"Oh!" she cried, "if this is the end, it was worth living for! Life is better than I thought, and braver. They have all been so brave. I will never despise any one again! Not even a boulder man!"

The boulder man held out his hand to them when they reached him.

They stared at the black masses jutting up between