



TOILERS OF THE COLUMBIA



By Paul De Laney

Author of "Lord of the Desert," "Oregon Sketches," and other Pacific Coast Stories



CHAPTER I. The Storm.

"Down she went!"
"All aboard were lost."
"She made a gallant fight!"
"See! She comes to the surface again!"

The foregoing exclamations came from a group of fishermen who stood upon the shores of Baker's bay and watched a ship battling with the waves on the Columbia bar.

The rain fell in long, slanting, twisting sheets. It appeared as if the heavens were a vast waterfall swayed and tossed by all of the gods of fury. The wind howled and moaned like a powerful monster, making the earth and everything upon it tremble while it pursued its way as steady as a tide from the deep.

Trees bended their boughs to the ground and writhed and quivered to the end of their tiniest roots. Houses rocked and swayed like a weather vane upon their foundations. The more timid of the men and the women and children, though accustomed to storms, crouched and trembled with awed expression upon their faces as they listened to the deafening din which was sweeping the earth.

The waters at the broad mouth of the Columbia river arose like wild steeds as they met the storm-driven waves of the Pacific and battled with them for supremacy. The combatting elements formed like a mountain range along the bar, showing, with the rapidity of a kaleidoscopic view, peaks, gulches and canyons as the waters rose and clinched and then fell and divided for another attack.

Nature gave her picture additional grandeur by the coloring. The approach of night through such a storm, while there was still enough shaded light to cast a lurid haze over the scene, the mingling of the blood-red waters of the river with the green and white of ocean streaked the whole with a hue emblematic of contest and death.

The tides from the deep seemed to be angered by the battle above their heads and rose higher and higher, with a power that made the rock-bound shores shake, to crush out the wild contest between river and waves. The spray dashed up even to the timber belt above the beach, creating a fog on the windows of the high-perched light-house that made the newly lighted lamp appear dim, and the whole mountain range along the coast to the north quivered to its foundation while staying the mighty rush of the waters from the ocean.

A group of fishermen stood at a point on the shores of the bay. They were drenched to the skin, but they did not mind this. They were more intent upon watching an object battling for its life on the bar of the river. It was these who had made the exclamations given at the introduction of this chapter.

It was the severest storm for many years. They had been partially drawn, practically thrown ashore in their crude fishing boats by the receding waters from the conflict between ocean and river. While anxious eyes watched them from the windows of the fishing village in the rear, which was wrapped in the landstorm, they looked more anxiously out to sea. Having been handled so mercilessly by the waters which had spent their fury and were retreating from the battle at the bar, they trembled at the fate of an object which they discovered in the center of the raging conflict.

It tossed and leaped and rose and fell like a wounded and bewildered animal pierced by a bullet from some hunter's rifle. Now on a peak, which shot up like a rocket from the depths below; now on the brink of a deep canyon, formed in the twinkling of an eye; now on a narrow ledge pending over a deep abyss, and then in the depths of a gulch, whose watery walls were crashing down upon it—then it disappeared from view!

"Down she went!" said one fisherman.

"All aboard were lost," said another.

"She made a gallant fight," remarked a third.

"See! She comes to the surface again!" exclaimed the man who had first spoken.

The ship had instantly appeared again. But it writhed in the roaring surf like a stricken serpent. It had been a fine rigged sailing vessel, but now it was a mere hull with part of a deck and a few stumps of masts left. It had been the pride of a country and, like a brave soldier wounded and disarmed, it was fighting the enemy even in its dying gasps.

It lunged this way and that. One moment it careened on its side; another it stood on its beam; then it reared up like an animal in desperation, and with the agility of a cat regained its position

on a wild wave and rode it with a gallantry that charmed the fishermen. Then lost for a moment it appeared again as if it had been discharged from one of Neptune's greatest guns stationed on a moor of the deep.

"Bravo!" shouted a fisherman.

"She deserves to live," said another.

"But look!" shrieked a third.

The shattered vessel had crossed the bar and was heading straight for Sand island. Caught on the receding waters she was dragged mercilessly toward her doom.

The storm grew stronger in its fury. As if angry at the prolonged life of the dismantled ship, it gathered over the spot where it was making its last feeble fight to live. The sheets of rain grew thicker, the steady wind grew stronger, the waves dashed together behind her and reared high up into the air. Then they broke apart and those receding sent the vessel on more rapidly. The spray from the ocean and the sheets of rain from the heavens formed a veil which obscured all for a brief time.

The fishermen stood like statues for a few moments. Night was closing in. But for one brief instant there was a glimmer from the departing day and the men ashore saw the stranded vessel standing with nose in the sand while the victorious waves were pounding her at a rate that must soon break her to pieces.

But to render aid to those aboard the sinking ship was impossible. No earthly craft could live in such a sea. Slowly and sadly the toilers of the Columbia wended their way to their homes in the village where they told the story of the wreck.

CHAPTER II.

Age and Infancy Drift Ashore.

With the closing in of darkness the storm abated. As if rebuked by the deep shades of night it skulked away like a subdued trespasser. Only its rumbling, disappearing footsteps could be heard in the distance.

But for the booming of old ocean's mad waves, who seemed to feel that she had conquered all within her grasp and was reaching out her arms for the sky and rocks to catch all above and about her, a stillness would have prevailed such as only exists in a calm after a great storm.

The fishermen began to emerge from their homes. The news of the terrible fate of the ship and her crew had spread about the village. While there was none of those hardy fellows who would dare the white-capped waves, yet they could not sleep while succor might be rendered in some manner.

Beacon lights were kindled upon the hills along the shore and above the safe landing places so that if any craft should have survived the storm it might steer for the place where landing did not mean certain death, though the best was hazardous.

"More wood!" they shouted, as the fires began to die down and in every direction spectre-like forms were seen moving about like shadows among the big trees that lined the hills near the shore.

Others lined up near the water's edge with ropes in hand, and strained their eyes and ears for a glimpse or a sound that would direct them to a place where humanity's most charitable act could be bestowed.

But it was a night of work and vigilance without reward. No object was seen, not a sound heard save that of the receding waters as they returned to the deep from which they came.

The sun shot above the horizon the following morning with a flash. The sky was as clear as a crystal. The waters were as smooth on the bay as a lawn. Only out on the bar did an occasional whitecap show its head.

The beach was soon lined with men, women and children. The smoldering fires on the hillside sent swirling streams of white smoke straight toward the heavens. The great trees above the beach had straightened their boughs and no evidence remained of the battle with the storm save the broken limbs and the high piles of driftwood that littered the shore.

On the approach of a newcomer a first glance was cast out over the bay. It was followed by a cloud of disappointment on his or her face. Sand island had claimed many victims and another disaster was to be added to her record.

Buried deep into her sands was the hull of another vessel. Only a few stumps of masts remained above the wreck. Strain their eyes as they would under the shadow of their lands or through their strongest glasses, not a living thing could be discovered on or about the remains of the vessel which had made such a gallant fight the previous day.

Suddenly a boat shot out from the shore to the east. An involuntary hiss

escaped through the lips of the other fishermen. It was old Seadog and his boys. They had slept through the night while others kept the beacon fires burning. They were not now on a mission of charity bent. They had gone for plunder before.

But old Seadog had other motives in view. His keen eyes had pierced deeper into the storm the previous day. He had also been reading the marine news, besides letters and newspapers from a foreign land. He thought he recognized the vessel's country, by the vessel itself and had a motive for being first aboard should his surmise be true.

On they dashed, propelled by the skilled oarsmen, growing less and less until like young jackals they lifted their boat on the sands and climbed over into the hull of the stranded vessel.

The people began to break away in small groups. They were silent but old Seadog and his boys were condemned in the minds of many. Still they did not know the real motive that prompted the land pirates.

The men scattered up and down the beach that they might find whether any evidence of the vessel or her crew had drifted ashore. This had always been their custom and small boats and dead bodies had often been found even so soon after great catastrophes.

In a few hours the searchers began to return to the village empty-handed. As they came each reported in turn that nothing had been found. It had been a severe storm, however, and everything had probably been dashed to pieces against the rocks about Cape Disappointment, and the bodies of the crew, they thought had been sent to the bottom of the sea or were lashed to the remnants of the vessel where all must be dead.

The forward party which followed the beach toward the ocean, and had proceeded about a mile was startled by a noise while climbing among the driftwood in a little cove.

"A wharf rat!" exclaimed one.

"No, a weasel," said another.

"It is the voice of a human being, as sure as you live!" shouted a third, who was nearer the sound than the others.

"On then," replied the man who had first spoken.

The members of the party all rushed to the place from which the sound emanated.

"Didn't I tell you?" said the man who had proclaimed it a human voice, when he reached the place.

"Well, I told you that it was a small human being, and it is," replied the man who had pronounced the cry as coming from a wharf rat.

"It's mate is old enough for you," remarked one of the fishermen.

"Yes, but he is of little use now, he is dead," was the reply.

"Not much, see, he opens his eyes!" shouted one of them joyfully.

A sad picture, yet one that gave pleasure to the fishermen, presented itself. A short, stout old man, with gray hair and whiskers, lay lashed to a broken spar of a ship. He was probably three score and ten. The spar lay upon his right leg and he could not move. Had this not been the case he could never have released himself from the timber, for he was numb and dazed, more dead than living and the chords had drawn deep into his body. But in the aged man's clasp, like that of the dead, he held close to his heart a crying infant.

CHAPTER III.

Old Seadog Rejoices.

Long before the old man and the child were found, other fishermen had launched their boats and had pulled out on the bay.

Some went to the fishtraps and others made straight across to the wreck. But old Seadog had prepared to go aboard the stranded vessel and to hold it against all comers until he should carry out his plans. Firearms had been secreted in his small boat before leaving shore and these were transferred to the wreck.

One of the boys was left on guard while the old man leading the others went on a searching tour of the ship.

They soon found that the vessel possessed but little that was of value for it had discharged its cargo at San Francisco, and had come to the Columbia for a return consignment.

But it was not wealth of the kind that the world considers valuable that old Seadog was looking for; it was that which would remove all cloud from the title to his own wealth.

It was while thus engaged in ransacking the unfortunate vessel that the advance guard of the fishermen arrived in their small boats. Old Seadog was always first appealed to by his sons before action was taken and the one on guard called to his father and informed him of the approach of their neighbors.

The old man rushed upon deck and seizing a gun, he presented it and said: "Upon your lives, come no closer, men! Stop where you are and return to your boats or I will shoot!"

"What right have you to the craft?" asked the bolder of the party.

"The right of salvage men, the right of salvage! We were first to board her after she went aground," replied the old man.

"Well, we will report you to the law," shouted one of the fishermen as they left the place, some returning to the village and others palling for their traps further up the bay.

(To be continued.)



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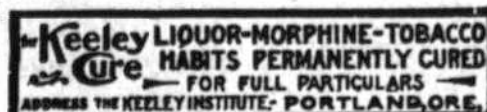
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Taking Him at His Word.

"I didn't do it, your honor."
"But two witnesses here say they saw you pick his pocket."

"I'll tell you how it was, judge. We were on the car coming home from the races. I remarked that I wondered where I was going to get the price of a night's lodging and this gentleman replied: 'You can search me.' Well, I searched him. Nothing wrong in taking a man at his word, is there?"—Kansas City Journal.



Old Joke True.

The old jokes about the antiquity of the ballet girl have gone out of fashion, and it is not likely that they will be revived now that the ballet has become so much less important than it used to be. The show girls who figure in contemporaneous musical pieces are, as a rule, too good-looking to admit of any jokes on that subject. So the reality of the situations existing in some of the comic opera choruses is for that reason more interesting.

A fair member of one organization is the daughter of another. Mother naturally occupies a somewhat inconspicuous position in the line. Daughter, on the other hand, is right down in front in the beauty row. She is only 19, so her relative in the company is not so old as the relation suggests.

In another company the mother of one of the principals is in the chorus, in a theatrical troupe that played here last winter the wife of the leading man used to be the principal lady super.

Muscular Faith.

Mrs. Meeker—I don't take any stock in these faith cures brought about by the laying on of hands.

Mrs. Strongun—Well, I do. I cured my little boy of the cigarette habit in that way.

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Cause and Effect.

"Now, that is what I like to see," observed the rural merchant to the proprietor of the great department store. "All your clerks are full of vim and energy."

"Yes," replied the proprietor with a sarcastic smile. "We close at noon today and they are getting ready to go out."

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So Convenient.

Mrs. Urban—How vent you enjoy living in the country. I suppose you can get all the fresh fruit and vegetables you want.

Mrs. Annex—Oh, yes. Such a nice peddler comes out from the city three times a week.—Brooklyn Life.