

BEN BLOWER'S STORY;

OR HOW TO RELISH A JULEP.

BY C. F. HOFFMAN.

"ARE you sure that's THE FLAME over by the shore?"

"Certing, manny! I could tell her pipes acrost the Mazoura."*

"And you will overhaul her?"

"Won't we though! I tell ye, Strannger, so sure as my name 's Ben Blower, that that last tar bar'l I hove in the furnace has put jist the smart chance of go-ahead into us to cut off The Flame from yonder pint, or send our boat to kingdom come."

"The devil!" exclaimed a bystander who, intensely interested in the race, was leaning the while against the partitions of the boiler-room, I've chosen a nice place to see the fun near this infernal powder barrel!"

"Not so bad as if you were in it!" coolly observed Ben, as the other walked rapidly away."

"As if he were in it! in what? in the boiler?"

"Certing! Do n't folks sometimes go into bilers, manny?"

"I should think there 'd be other parts of the boat more comfortable."

"That 's right; poking fun at me at once't; but wait till we get through this brush with the old Flame and I'll tell ye of a regular fixin scrape that a man may get into. It's true, too, every word of it—as sure as my name 's Ben Blower."

"You have seen the Flame then afore, Stranger? Six year ago, when new upon the river, she was a raal out and outer, I tell ye. I was at that time a hand aboard of her. Yes, I belonged to her at the time of her great race with the 'Go-liar.' You've heern, mayhap, of the blow-up by which we lost it? They made a great fuss about it; but it was nothing but a mere fiz of hot water after all. Only the springing of a few rivets, which loosened a biler plate or two, and let out a thin spirting upon some niggers that had n't sense enough to get out of the way. Well, the 'Go-liar' took off our passengers, and we ran into Smasher's Landing to repair damages, and bury the poor fools that were killed. Here we laid for a matter of thirty hours or so, and got things to rights on board for a bran new start. There was some carpenter's work yet to be done, but the captain said that that might be fixed off jist as well when we were under way—we had worked hard—the weather was sour, and we need n't do any thing more jist now—

* The name "Missouri" is thus generally pronounced upon the western waters.

we might take that afternoon to ourselves, but the next morning he'd get up steam bright and airy, and we'd all come out *new*. There was no temperance society at Smasher's Landing, and I went ashore upon a lark with some of the hands."

I omit the worthy Benjamin's adventures upon land, and, despairing of fully conveying his language in its original Doric force, will not hesitate to give the rest of his singular narrative in my own words, save where, in a few instances, I can recall his precise phraseology, which the reader will easily recognize.

"The night was raw and sleety when I regained the deck of our boat. The officers, instead of leaving a watch above, had closed up every thing, and shut themselves in the cabin. The fire-room only was open. The boards dashed from the outside by the explosion had not yet been replaced. The floor of the room was wet and there was scarcely a corner which afforded a shelter from the driving storm. I was about leaving the room, resigned to sleep in the open air, and now bent only upon getting under the lee of some bulkhead that would protect me against the wind. In passing out I kept my arms stretched forward to feel my way in the dark, but my feet came in contact with a heavy iron lid; I stumbled, and, as I fell, struck one of my hands into the 'manhole,' (I think this was the name he gave to the oval-shaped opening in the head of the boiler,) through which the smith had entered to make his repairs. I fell with my arm thrust so far into the aperture that I received a pretty smart blow in the face as it came in contact with the head of the boiler, and I did not hesitate to drag my body after it, the moment I recovered from this stunning effect and ascertained my whereabouts. In a word, I crept into the boiler resolved to pass the rest of the night there. The place was dry and sheltered. Had my bed been softer, I would have had all that man could desire; as it was, I slept and slept soundly.

"I should mention though, that, before closing my eyes, I several times shifted my position. I had gone first to the farther end of the boiler, then again I had crawled back to the manhole, to put my hand out and feel that it was really still open. The warmest place was at the farther end, where I finally established myself, and that I knew from the first. It was foolish in me to think that the opening through which I had just entered could be closed without my hearing it, and that, too, when no one was astir but myself; but the blow on the side of my face made me a little nervous perhaps; besides, I never could

bear to be shut up in any place—it always gives a wild-like feeling about the head. You may laugh, Stranger, but I believe I should suffocate in an empty church, if I once felt that I was so shut up in it that I could not get out. I have met men afore now just like me, or worse rather—much worse. Men that it made sort of furious to be tied down to anything, yet so soft-like and contradictory in their natures that you might lead them anywhere so long as they didn't feel the string. Stranger, it takes all sorts of people to make a world! and we may have a good many of the worst kind of white-men here out west. But I have seen folks upon this river—quiet looking chaps, too, as ever you see—who were so teetotally *caranlteranlterous* that they'd shoot the doctor who'd tell them they couldn't live when ailing, and make a die of it, just out of spite, when told they *must* get well. Yes, fellows as fond of the good things of earth as you or I, yet who'd rush like mad right over the gang-plank of life, if once brought to believe that they had to stay in this world whether they wanted to leave it or not. Thunder and bees! if such a fellow as that had heard the cocks crow as I did—awakened to find darkness about him—darkness so thick you might cut it with a knife—heard other sounds, too, to tell that it was morning, and scrambling to fumble for that manhole, found it, too, black—closed—black and even as the rest of the iron coffin around him, closed, with not a rivet-hole to let God's light and air in—why—why—he'd 'a *swooned* right down on the spot, as I did, and I ain't ashamed to own it to no white-man."

The big drops actually stood upon the poor fellow's brow, as he now paused for a moment in the recital of his terrible story. He passed his hand over his rough features, and resumed it with less agitation of manner.

"How long I may have remained there senseless I don't know. The doctors have since told me it must have been a sort of fit—more like an apoplexy than a swoon, for the attack finally passed off in sleep—Yes I slept, I know *that*, for I dreamed—dreamed a heap o' things afore I awoke—there is but one dream, however, that I have ever been able to recall distinctly, and that must have come on shortly before I recovered my consciousness. My resting place through the night had been, as I have told you, at the far end of the boiler. Well, I now dreamed that the manhole was still open—and, what seems curious, rather than laughable, if you take it in connection with other things, I fancied that my legs had been so stretched in the long walk I had taken the evening before, that they now reached the whole length of the boiler and extended through the opening.

"At first, (in my dreaming reflections) it was a comfortable thought that no one could now shut up the manhole without awakening me. But soon it seemed as if my feet, which were on the outside, were becoming drenched in the storm which had originally driven me to seek this shelter. I felt the chilling rain upon my extremities. They grew colder and colder, and their numbness gradually extended upward to other parts of my body. It seemed, how-

ever, that it was only the under side of my person that was thus strangely visited. I laid upon my back, and it must have been a species of nightmare that afflicted me, for I knew at last that I was dreaming, yet felt it impossible to rouse myself. A violent fit of coughing restored, at last, my powers of volition. The water, which had been slowly rising around me, had rushed into my mouth; I awoke to hear the rapid strokes of the pump which was driving it into the boiler!

"My whole condition—no—not all of it—not yet—my *present* condition flashed with new horror upon me. But I did not again swoon. The choking sensation which had made me faint, when I first discovered how I was entombed, gave way to a livelier, though less overpowering, emotion. I shrieked even as I started from my slumber. The previous discovery of the closed aperture, with the instant oblivion that followed, seemed only a part of my dream, and I threw my arms about and looked eagerly for the opening by which I had entered the horrid place—yes, looked for it, and felt for it, though it was the terrible conviction that it was closed—a second time brought home to me—which prompted my frenzied cry. Every sense seemed to have tenfold acuteness, yet not one to act in unison with another. I shrieked again and again—imploringly—desperately—savagely. I filled the hollow chamber with my cries till its iron walls seemed to tingle around me. The dull strokes of the accursed pump seemed only to mock at while they deadened my screams.

"At last I gave myself up. It is the struggle against our fate which frenzies the mind. We cease to fear when we cease to hope. I gave myself up and then I grew calm!

"I was resigned to die—resigned even to my mode of death. It was not, I thought, so very new after all as to awaken unwonted horror in a man. Thousands have been sunk to the bottom of the ocean shut up in the holds of vessels—beating themselves against the battened hatches—dragged down from the upper world shrieking, not for life but for death only beneath the eye and amid the breath of heaven. Thousands have endured that appalling kind of suffocation. I would die only as many a better man had died before me. I *could* meet such a death. I said so—I thought so—I felt so—felt so, I mean, for a minute—or more; ten minutes it may have been—or but an instant of time. I know not—nor does it matter if I could compute it. There *was* a time then when I was resigned to my fate. But, good God! was I resigned to it in the shape in which next it came to appal? Stranger, I felt that water growing hot about my limbs, though it was yet mid-leg deep. I felt it, and, in the same moment, heard the roar of the furnace that was to turn it into steam before it could get deep enough to drown one!

"You shudder—It *was* hideous. But did I shrink and shrivel, and crumble down upon that iron floor, and lose my senses in that horrid agony of fear?—No!—though my brain swam and the life-blood that curdled at my heart seemed about to stagnate there forever, still *I knew!* I was too hoarse—too hope-

less, from my previous efforts, to cry out more. But I struck—feebly at first, and then strongly—frantically with my clenched fist against the sides of the boiler. There were people moving near who *must* hear my blows! Could not I hear the grating of chains, the shuffling of feet, the very rustle of a rope, hear them all, within a few inches of me? I did—but the gurgling water that was growing hotter and hotter around my extremities, made more noise within the steaming caldron than did my frenzied blows against its sides.

“Latterly I had hardly changed my position, but now the growing heat of the water made me plash to and fro; lifting myself wholly out of it was impossible, but I could not remain quiet. I stumbled upon something—it was a mallet!—a chance tool the smith had left there by accident. With what wild joy did I seize it—with what eager confidence did I now deal my first blows with it against the walls of my prison! But scarce had I intermitted them for a moment when I heard the clang of the iron door as the fireman flung it wide to feed the flames that were to torture me. My knocking was unheard, though I could hear him toss the sticks into the furnace beneath me, and drive to the door when his infernal oven was fully crammed.

“Had I yet a hope? I had, but it rose in my mind side by side with the fear that I might now become the agent of preparing myself a more frightful death—Yes! when I thought of that furnace with its fresh-fed flames curling beneath the iron upon which I stood—a more frightful death even than that of being boiled alive! Had I discovered that mallet but a short time sooner—but no matter, I would by its aid resort to the only expedient now left.

“It was this—I remembered having a marline-spike

in my pocket, and in less time than I have taken in hinting at the consequences of thus using it, I had made an impression upon the sides of the boiler, and soon succeeded in driving it through. The water gushed through the aperture—would they see it?—No, the jet could only play against a wooden partition which must hide the stream from view—it must trickle down upon the decks before the leakage would be discovered. Should I drive another hole to make that leakage greater? Why, the water within seemed already to be sensibly diminished—so hot had become that which remained—should more escape, would I not hear it bubble and hiss upon the fiery plates of iron that were already scorching the soles of my feet?

“Ah! there is a movement—voices—I hear them calling for a crowbar—The bulkhead cracks as they pry off the planking. They have seen the leak—they are trying to get at it!—Good God! why do they not first dampen the fire?—Why do they call for the—the—

“Stranger, look at that finger! it can never regain its natural size—but it has already done all the service that man could expect from so humble a member—*Sir, that hole would have been plugged up on the instant, unless I had jammed my finger through!*

“I heard the cry of horror as they saw it without—the shout to drown the fire—the first stroke of the cold water pump. They say, too, that I was conscious when they took me out—but I—I remember nothing more till they brought a julep to my bed-side arterwards, *AND that julep!*—”

“Cooling! was it?”

“STRANGER!!!”

Ben turned away his head and wept—He could no more.