

# HOMeward BOUND.

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HE old *Shamraken*, sailing-ship, had been many days upon the water. She was old—older than her masters, and that was saying a great deal. She seemed in no hurry as she lifted her bulging old wooden

sides through the seas. What need for hurry? She would arrive some time, in some fashion, as had been her habit heretofore.

Two matters were especially noticeable among her crew, who were also her masters—the first, the agedness of each and every one; the second, the *family* sense which appeared to bind them, so that the ship seemed manned by a crew all of whom were related one to the other. Yet it was not so.

A strange company they were, each man bearded, aged, and grizzled, yet there was nothing of the inhumanity of old age about them, save it might be in their freedom from grumbling, and the calm content which comes only to those in whom the more violent passions have died.

Had anything to be done, there was nothing of the growling inseparable from the average run of sailor-men. They went aloft to the "job"—whatever it might be—with the wise submission which is brought only by age and experience. Their work was gone through with a certain slow pertinacity—a sort of tired steadfastness born of the knowledge that such work *had* to be done. Moreover, their hands possessed the ripe skill which comes only from exceeding practice, and which went far to make amends for the feebleness of age. Above all, their movements, slow as they might be, were remorseless in their lack of faltering. They had so often performed the same kind of work, that they had arrived, by the selection of utility, at the shortest and most simple methods of doing it.

They had, as I have said, been many days upon the water, though I am not sure that any man in her knew to a nicety the number

of those days. The skipper, Abe Tombs—addressed usually as Skipper Abe—may have had some notion, for he might be seen at times gravely adjusting a prodigious quadrant, which suggests that he kept some sort of record of time and place.

Of the crew of the *Shamraken*, some half dozen were seated, working placidly at such matters of seamanship as were necessary. Besides these, there were others about the decks—a couple who paced the lee side of the main deck, smoking and exchanging an occasional word; one who sat by the side of a worker, and made odd remarks between draws at his pipe; another out upon the jibboom, who fished, with a line, hook, and white rag, for bonito. This last was Nuzzie, the ship's boy. He was grey-bearded, and his years numbered five-and-fifty. A boy of fifteen he had been when he joined the *Shamraken*, and "boy" he was still, though forty years had passed into eternity since the day of his "signing on," for the men of the *Shamraken* lived in the past, and knew him only as the "boy" of that past.

It was Nuzzie's watch below—his time for sleeping. This might have been said also of the other three men who talked and smoked; but for themselves they had scarce a thought of sleep. Healthy age sleeps little, and they were in health, though so ancient.

Presently one of those who walked the lee side of the main deck, chancing to cast a glance forrad, observed Nuzzie still to be out upon the jibboom, jerking his line so as to delude some foolish bonito into the belief that the white rag was a flying fish.

The smoker nudged his companion.

"Time that b'y 'ad 'is sleep."

"Aye, aye, mate," returned the other, withdrawing his pipe and giving a steadfast look at the figure seated out upon the jibboom.

For the half of a minute they stood there, very effigies of Age's implacable determination to rule rash Youth. Their pipes were held in their hands, and the smoke rose up in little eddies from the smouldering contents of the bowls.

"Thar's no tamin' of that b'y," said the first man, looking very stern and determined.

Then he remembered his pipe, and took a draw.

"B'ys is tur'ble queer critters," remarked the second man, and remembered his pipe in turn.

"Fishin' w'en 'e orter be sleepin'!" snorted the first man.

"B'ys needs a tur'ble lot er sleep," said the second man. "I 'member w'en I wor a b'y. I reckon it's ther growin'."

And all the time poor Nuzzie fished on.

"Guess I'll jest step up an' tell 'im ter come in outer that," exclaimed the first man, and commenced to walk towards the steps leading up on to the fo'c'sle head.

"B'y!" he shouted, as soon as his head was above the level of the fo'c'sle deck. "B'y!"

Nuzzie looked round at the second call.

"Eh?" he sung out.

"Yew come in outer that!" shouted the older man, in the somewhat shrill tone which age had brought to his voice. "Reckon we'll be 'avin' yer sleepin' at ther wheel ter-night."

"Aye," joined in the second man, who had followed his companion up on to the fo'c'sle head. "Come in, b'y, an' get ter yer bunk."

"Right!" called Nuzzie, and commenced to coil up his line. It was evident that he had no thought of disobeying. He came in off the spar and went past them without a word, on the way to turn in.

They, on their part, went down slowly off the fo'c'sle head, and resumed their walk fore and aft along the lee side of the main deck.

## II.

"I RECKON, Zeph," said the man who sat upon the hatch and smoked—"I reckon as Skipper Abe's 'bout right. We've made a trifle o' money outer the ole 'ooker, an' we don't get no younger."

"Aye, that's so, right 'nuff," returned the man who sat beside him, working at the stropping of a block.

"An' it's 'bout time we got inter the use o' bein' ashore," went on the first man, who was named Job.

Zeph gripped the block between his knees, and fumbled in his hip pocket for a plug. He bit off a chew and replaced the plug.

"Seems cur'ous this is ther last trip, w'en yer comes ter think uv it," he remarked, chewing steadily, his chin resting on his hand.

Job took two or three deep draws at his pipe before he spoke.

"Reckon it had ter come sumtime," he said at length. "I've a purty leetle place in me mind w're I'm goin' ter lie up. 'Ave yer thought erbout it, Zeph?"

The man who held the block between his knees shook his head and stared away moodily over the sea.

"Dunno, Job, as I know what I'll do w'en ther old 'ooker's sold," he muttered. "Sence M'ria went, I don't seem nohow ter care 'bout bein' 'shore."

"I never 'ad no wife," said Job, pressing down the burning tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. "I reckon seafarin' men don't ought ter have no wives."

"That's right 'nuff, Job, fer yew. Each man ter 'is taste. I wer' tur'ble fond uv M'ria—" He broke off short and continued to stare out over the sea.

"I've allus thought I'd like ter settle down on er farm 'o me own. I guess the money I've arned'll do the trick," said Job.

Zeph made no reply, and for a time they sat there, neither speaking. Presently, from the door of the fo'c'sle on the starboard side, two figures emerged. They were also of the "watch below." If anything, they seemed older than the rest of those about the decks—their beards, white save for the stain of tobacco juice, came nearly to their waists. For the rest, they had been big, vigorous men, but were now sorely bent by the burden of their years. They came aft, walking slowly. As they came opposite to the main hatch, Job looked up and spoke.

"Say, Nehemiah, that's Zeph here's been thinkin' 'bout M'ria, an' I ain't been able ter peek 'im up nohow."

The smaller of the two new-comers shook his head slowly.

"We hev oor troubles," he said—"we hev oor troubles. I hed mine w'en I lost my datter's gel. I wor powerful took wi' that gel, she wor that winsome; but it wor like ter be—it wor like to be—an' Zeph's hed his trouble sence then."

"M'ria wer' a good wife ter me, she wer'," said Zeph, speaking slowly; "an' now th' old 'ooker's goin', I'm feared as I'll find it mighty lonesome ashore yon." And he waved his hand as though suggesting vaguely that the land lay anywhere beyond the starboard rail.

"Aye," remarked the second of the new-comers. "It's er weary thing tu me as th' old packet's goin'. Six-and-sixty year hev I sailed in her—six-and-sixty year!" He nodded his head mournfully and struck a match with shaky hands.

"It's like ter be," said the smaller man — "it's like ter be."

And, with that, he and his companion moved over to the spar that lay along under the starboard bulwarks, and there seated themselves to smoke and meditate.

### III.

SKIPPER ABE and Josh Matthews, the first mate, were standing together beside the rail which ran across the break of the poop. As with the rest of the men of the *Shamraken*, their age had come upon them, and the snows of eternity rested upon their beards and hair.

Skipper Abe was speaking.

"It's harder'n I'd thought," he said, and looked away from the mate, staring hard along the worn, white-scoured decks.

"Dunno w'at I'll du, Abe, w'en she's gone," returned the old mate. "She's been a 'ome fer us these sixty years an' more." He knocked out the old tobacco from his pipe as he spoke, and began to cut a bowlful of fresh.

"It's them durned freights!" exclaimed the skipper. "We're jest losin' money every trip. It's them steam-packets as hes knocked us out."

He sighed wearily and bit tenderly at his plug.

"She's been a mighty comfortable ship," muttered Josh, in soliloquy. "An' sence thet b'y o' mine went, I sumhow thinks less o' goin' ashore'n I used ter. I ain't no folk left on all thar arth."

He came to an end, and began with his old, trembling fingers to fill his pipe.

Skipper Abe said nothing—he appeared to be occupied with his own thoughts. He was leaning over the rail across the break of the poop, and chewing steadily. Presently he straightened himself up and walked over to leeward. He expectorated, after which he stood there for a few moments, taking a short look round—the result of half a century of habit. Abruptly he sung out to the mate.

"W'at d'yer make outer it?" he queried, after they had stood a while peering.

"Dunno, Abe, less'n it's some sort o' mist riz up by ther 'eat."

Skipper Abe shook his head, but, having nothing better to suggest, held his peace for a while.

Presently Josh spoke again—

"Mighty cur'us, Abe. These are strange parts."

Skipper Abe nodded his assent, and

continued to stare at that which had come into sight upon the lee bow. To them, as they looked, it seemed that a great wall of rose-coloured mist was rising towards the zenith. It showed nearly ahead, and at first had seemed no more than a bright cloud upon the horizon, but already had reached a great way into the air, and the upper edge had taken on wondrous flame-tints.

"It's powerful nice-lookin'," said Josh. "I've allus 'eard as things was diff'rent out'n these parts."

Presently, as the *Shamraken* drew near to the mist, it appeared to those aboard that it filled all the sky ahead of them, being spread out now far on their bow. And so in a while they entered into it, and at once the aspect of all things was changed, the mist, in great rosy wreaths, floating all about them, seeming to soften and beautify every rope and spar, so that the old ship had become, as it were, a fairy craft in an unknown world.

"Never seen nothin' like it, Abe—nothin'," said Josh. "Aye, but it's fine—it's fine! Like's ef we'd run inter ther sunset."

"I'm mazed—just mazed!" exclaimed Skipper Abe, "but I'm 'gree'ble as it's purty, mighty purty."

For a further while the two old fellows stood without speech, just gazing and gazing. With their entering into the mist, they had come into a greater quietness than had been theirs out upon the open sea. It was as though the mist muffled and toned down the creak, creak of the spars and gear, and the big, foamless seas that swept past them seemed to have lost something of their harsh whispering roar of greeting.

"Sort o' unarthly, Abe," said Josh later, and speaking but little above a whisper. "Like as ef yew was in church."

"Aye," replied Skipper Abe. "It don't seem nat'ral."

"Shouldn't think as 'eaven was all thet diff'rent," whispered Josh. And Skipper Abe said nothing in contradiction.

### IV.

SOME time later the wind began to fail, and it was decided that, when eight bells was struck, all hands should set the main t'-gallant. Presently, Nuzzie having been called—for he was the only one aboard who had turned in—eight bells went, and all hands put aside their pipes and prepared to tail on to the halyards; yet no one of them made to go up to loose the sail. That was the "b'y's" job, and Nuzzie was a little late in coming

out on deck. When, in a minute, he appeared, Skipper Abe spoke sternly to him.

"Up, now, b'y, an' loose thet sail. D'y think to let er grown man dew such-like work? Shame on yew!"

And Nuzzie, the grey-bearded "b'y" of five-and-fifty years, went aloft humbly, as he was bidden.

Five minutes later he sung out that all was ready for hoisting, and the string of ancient ones took a strain on the halyards. Then Nehemiah, being the chaunty man, struck up in his shrill quaver—

"Thar wor an ole farmer up Yorkshire way."

And the shrill piping of the ancient throats took up the refrain—

"Wi' me aye, aye, blow thar lan' down!"

Nehemiah caught up the story—

"'E 'ad'n ole wife, 'n' 'e wished 'er away."

Then—

"Give us some time ter blow thar lan' down!"

came the quavering chorus of old voices.

"Oh, thar Divvel come to 'im one day at thar plough," continued old Nehemiah, and the crowd of ancients followed up with the refrain—

"Wi' me aye, aye, blow thar lan' down!"

Then—

"I've comed fer th' old woman, I mun 'ave 'er now," sang Nehemiah, and again the refrain—

"Give us some time ter blow thar lan' down!"

shrilled out.

And so on to the last couple of stanzas. And all about them, as they chanted, was that extraordinary rose-tinted mist, while above, blent into a marvellous radiance of flame colour, as though just a little higher than their mast-heads, the sky was one red ocean of silent fire.

"Thar wor three leetle divvels chained up ter the wall," sang Nehemiah shrilly.

"Wi' me aye, aye, blow thar lan' down!"

came the piping chorus.

"She tuk off 'er clog, 'n' she walloped 'em all," chanted old Nehemiah, and again followed the wheezy, age-old refrain.

"These three leetle divvels fer marcy did bawl," quavered Nehemiah, cocking one eye upward to see whether the yard were nearly mast-headed.

"Wi' me aye, aye, blow thar lan' down!"

came the chorus.

"Chuck out this ole hag, or she'll mur—"

"Belay!" sung out Josh, cutting across the old sea-song with the sharp command.

The chaunty had ceased with the first note of the mate's voice, and a couple of minutes later the ropes were coiled up, and the old fellows back to their occupations.

It is true that eight bells had gone, and that the watch was supposed to be changed, and changed it was so far as the wheel and look-out were concerned, but otherwise little enough difference did it make to those sleep-proof ancients. The only change visible in those about the deck was that those who had previously only smoked, now smoked and worked, while those who had hitherto worked and smoked, now only smoked. Thus matters went on in all amity, while the old *Shamraken* passed onward like a rose-tinted shadow through the shining mist, and only the great, silent, lazy seas that came at her out from the enshrouding redness seemed aware that she was anything more than the shadow she appeared.

Presently Zeph sung out to Nuzzie to get their tea from the galley, and so, in a little, the watch below were making their evening meal. They ate it as they sat upon the hatch or spar, as the chance might be, and, as they ate, they talked with their mates of the watch on deck upon the matter of the shining mist into which they had plunged. It was obvious, from their talk, that the extraordinary phenomenon had impressed them vastly, and all the superstition in them seemed to have been waked to fuller life. Zeph, indeed, made no bones of declaring his belief that they were nigh to something more than earthly. He said that he had a feeling that M'ria was somewhere near to him.

"Meanin' to say as we've come purty near ter 'eaven?" said Nehemiah, who was busy thrumming a paunch mat for chafing gear.

"Dunno," replied Zeph; "but"—making a gesture towards the hidden sky—"yew'll 'low as it's mighty wonnerful, 'n' I guess of 'tis 'eaven, thar's some uv us as is growin' powerful wearied uv arth. I guess I'm feelin' pecky fer a sight uv M'ria."

Nehemiah nodded his head slowly, and the nod seemed to run round the group of white-haired ancients.

"Reckon my datter's gel 'll be thar," he said, after a space of pondering. "Be s'prisin' ef she 'n' M'ria 'd made et up ter know one another."

"M'ria wer' great on makin' friends," remarked Zeph meditatively, "an' gels was awful friendly wi' 'er. Seemed es she hed er power thet way."

"I never 'ad no wife," said Job at this



"The rest of the old men followed his example."

point, somewhat irrelevantly. It was a fact of which he was proud, and he made a frequent boast of it.

"'Thet's naught ter cocker thysel' on, lad," exclaimed one of the white-beards who, until this time, had been silent. "Thou'lt find less folk in heaven t' greet thee."

"'Thet's trewth, sure 'nuff, Jock," assented Nehemiah, and fixed a stern look on Job; whereat Job retired into 'silence.

Presently, at three bells, Josh came along and told them to put away their work for the day.

## V.

THE second dog-watch came, and Nehemiah and the rest of his side made their tea out upon the main hatch along with their mates. When this was finished, as though by common agreement, they went every one and sat themselves upon the pinrail running along under the t'-gallant bulwarks; there, with their elbows upon the rail, they faced outward to gaze their full at the mystery of colour which had wrapped them about. From time to time a pipe would be removed and some slowly-evolved thought given an utterance.

Eight bells came and went; but, save for the changing of the wheel and look-out, none moved from his place.

Nine o'clock, and the night came down upon the sea; but to those within the mist the only result was a deepening of the rose colour into an intense red which seemed to shine with a light of its own creating. Above them the sky seemed to be one vast blaze of blood-tinted flame.

"Piller uv cloud by day, 'n' er pillar uv fire by night," muttered Zeph to Nehemiah, who crouched near.

"I reckon 's them's Bible words," said Nehemiah.

"Dunno," replied Zeph; "but them's thar very words as I heerd Passon Myles a-sayin' w'en thar timber wor afire down our way. 'Twer' mostly smoke 'n daylight, but et t'arned ter 'n eternal fire w'en thar night comed."

At four bells the wheel and look-out were relieved, and a little later Josh and Skipper Abe came down on to the main deck.

"Tur'ble queer," said Skipper Abe, with an affectation of indifference.

"Aye, 'tes, sure," said Nehemiah.

And after that the two old men sat among the others and watched.

At five bells—half-past ten—there was a murmur from those who sat nearest to the

bows, and a cry from the man on the look-out. At that the attention of all was turned to a point nearly right ahead. At that particular spot the mist seemed to be glowing with a curious, unearthly red brilliance, and a minute later there burst upon their vision a vast arch formed of blazing red clouds. At the sight, each and every one cried out their amazement, and immediately began to run towards the fo'c'sle head. Here they congregated in a clump, the skipper and the mate among them. The arch appeared now to extend its arc far beyond either bow, so that the ship was heading to pass right beneath it.

"'Tis 'eaven, fer sure!" murmured Josh to himself. But Zeph heard him.

"Reckon 's them's ther gates uv glory thet M'ria was allus talkin' 'bout," he replied.

"Guess I'll see thet b'y er mine in er little," muttered Josh; and he craned forward, his eyes very bright and eager.

All about the ship was a great quietness. The wind was no more now than a light, steady breath upon the port quarter; but from right ahead, as though issuing from the mouth of the radiant arch, the long-backed, foamless seas rolled up black and oily.

Suddenly, amid the silence, there came a low musical note, rising and falling like the moan of a distant æolian harp. The sound appeared to come from the direction of the arch, and the surrounding mist seemed to catch it up and send it sobbing and sobbing in low echoes away into the redness far beyond sight.

"They'm singin'!" cried Zeph. "M'ria wer' allus tur'ble fond uv singin'. Hark ter——"

"'Sh!" interrupted Josh. "'Thet's my b'y!" His shrill old voice had risen almost to a scream.

"It's wunnerful, wunnerful—just mazin'!" exclaimed Skipper Abe.

Zeph had gone a little forrad of the crowd. He was shading his eyes with his hands, and staring intently, his expression denoting the most intense excitement.

"B'lieve I see 'er—b'lieve I see 'er!" he was muttering to himself over and over again.

Behind him two of the old men were steadying Nehemiah, who felt, as he put it, "a bit mazy at thar thought o' seein' thet gel."

Away aft, Nuzzio, the "b'y," was at the wheel. He had heard the moaning, but,

being no more than a boy, it must be supposed that he knew nothing of the *nearness* of the next world, which was so evident to the men, his masters.

A matter of some minutes passed, and Job, who had in mind that farm upon which he had set his heart, ventured to suggest that heaven was less near than his mates supposed; but no one seemed to hear him, and he subsided into silence.

It was the better part of an hour later, and near to midnight, when a murmur among the watchers announced that a fresh matter had come to sight. They were yet a great way off from the arch, but still the thing showed clearly—a prodigious umbel of a deep, burning red; but the crest of it was black, save for the very apex, which shone with an angry red glitter.

“Thar throne uv God!” cried out Zeph in a loud voice, and went down upon his knees. The rest of the old men followed his example, and even old Nehemiah made a great effort to get to that position.

“Simly we’m a’most ‘n ‘caven,” he muttered huskily.

Skipper Abe got to his feet with an abrupt movement. He had never heard of that extraordinary electrical phenomenon, seen

once, perhaps, in a hundred years, the “fiery tempest,” which precedes certain great cyclonic storms; but his experienced eye had suddenly discovered that the red-shining umbel was truly a low, whirling water-hill reflecting the red light. He had no theoretical knowledge to tell him that the thing was produced by an enormous air-vortex, but he had often seen a water-spout form. Yet he was still undecided. It was all so beyond him, though certainly that monstrous gyrating hill of water, sending out a reflected glitter of burning red, appealed to him as having no place in his ideas of heaven. And then, even as he hesitated, for the last time came the æolian-harp-like note of the coming cyclone. As the sound thrilled strangely upon their ears, the old men looked at one another with bewildered eyes.

“Reck’n thet’s sure the harps playin’,” whispered Zeph. “Guess we’re on’y mis’rable sinners.”

The harp-note rose abruptly into the bellow of the approaching storm.

The next instant the breath of the cyclone was in their throats, and the *Shamraken*, homeward-bounder, passed in through the everlasting portals.