

The Fear of It.

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. S. BOYD.

THE sea was done with him. He had struggled manfully for his life, but exhaustion came at last, and, realising the futility of further fighting, he gave up the battle. The tallest wave, the king of that roaring tumultuous procession racing from the wreck to the shore, took him in its relentless grasp, held him towering for a moment against the sky, whirled his heels in the air, dashed him senseless on the sand, and, finally, rolled him over and over, a helpless bundle, high up upon the sandy beach.

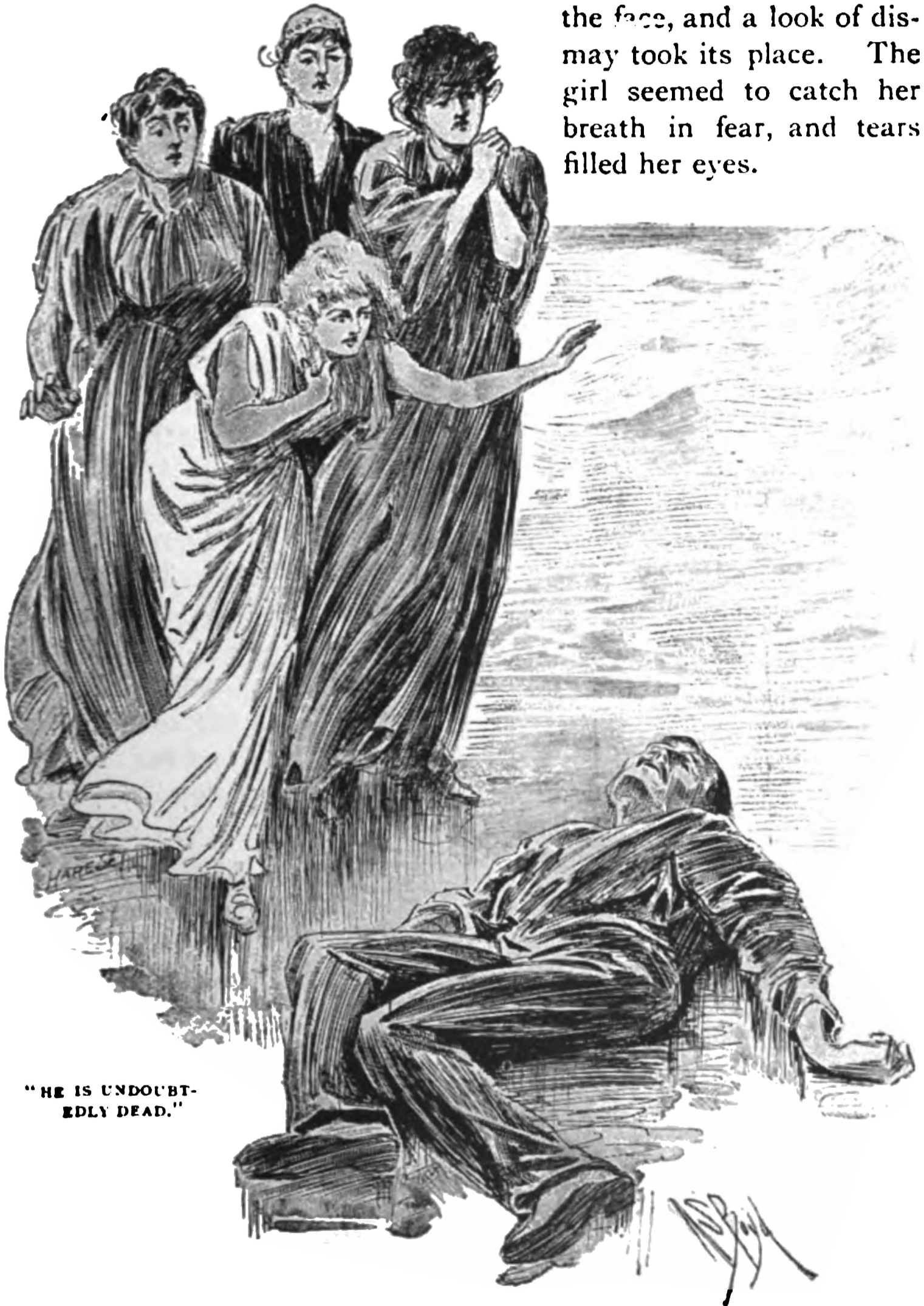
Human life seems of little account when we think of the trifles that make towards the extinction or the extension of it. If the wave that bore Stanford had been a little less tall, he would have been drawn back into the sea by one that followed. If, as a helpless bundle, he had been turned over one time more or one less, his mouth would have pressed into the sand, and he would have died. As it was, he lay on his back with arms outstretched on either side, and a handful of dissolving sand in one clinched fist. Succeeding waves sometimes touched him, but he lay there unmolested by the sea with his white face turned to the sky.

Oblivion has no calendar. A moment or an eternity are the same to it. When consciousness slowly returned, he neither knew nor cared how time had fled. He was not quite sure that he was alive, but weakness rather than fear kept him from opening his eyes to find out whether the world they would look upon was the world they had last gazed at. His interest, however, was speedily stimulated by the sound of the English tongue. He was still too much dazed to wonder at it, and to remember that he was cast away on some unknown island in the Southern Seas. But the purport of the words startled him.

“Let us be thankful. He is undoubtedly dead.” This was said in a tone of infinite satisfaction.

There seemed to be a murmur of pleasure at the announcement from those who were with the speaker. Stanford slowly opened his eyes, wondering what these savages were who rejoiced in the death of an inoffensive stranger cast upon their shores. He saw a group standing around him, but his attention speedily became concentrated on one face. The owner of it, he

judged, was not more than nineteen years of age, and the face—at least so it seemed to Stanford at the time — was the most beautiful he had ever beheld. There was an expression of sweet gladness upon it until her eyes met his, then the joy faded from the face, and a look of dismay took its place. The girl seemed to catch her breath in fear, and tears filled her eyes.



"HE IS UNDOUBT-
EDLY DEAD."

"Oh," she cried, "he is going to live."
She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed.

Stanford closed his eyes wearily. "I am evidently insane," he said to himself. Then, losing faith in the reality of things, he lost consciousness as well, and when his senses came to him again he found himself lying on a bed in a clean but scantily furnished room. Through an open window came the roar of the sea, and the thunderous boom of the falling waves brought to his mind the experiences through which he had passed. The wreck and the struggle with the waves he knew to be real, but the episode on the beach he now believed to have been but a vision resulting from his condition.



"A PLACID-FACED NURSE STOOD BY HIS BED."

A door opened noiselessly, and, before he knew of anyone's entrance, a placid-faced nurse stood by his bed and asked him how he was.

"I don't know. I am at least alive."

The nurse sighed, and cast down her eyes. Her lips moved,

but she said nothing. Stanford looked at her curiously. A fear crept over him that perhaps he was hopelessly crippled for life, and that death was considered preferable to a maimed existence. He felt wearied, though not in pain, but he knew that sometimes the more desperate the hurt, the less the victim feels it at first.

"Are—are any of my—my bones broken, do you know?" he asked.

"No. You are bruised, but not badly hurt. You will soon recover."

"Ah!" said Stanford, with a sigh of relief. "By the way," he added, with sudden interest, "who was that girl who stood near me as I lay on the beach?"

"There were several."

"No, there was but one. I mean the girl with the beautiful eyes and a halo of hair like a glorified golden crown on her head."

"We speak not of our women in words like those," said the nurse, severely; "you mean Ruth, perhaps, whose hair is plentiful and yellow."

Stanford smiled. "Words matter little," he said.

"We must be temperate in speech," replied the nurse.

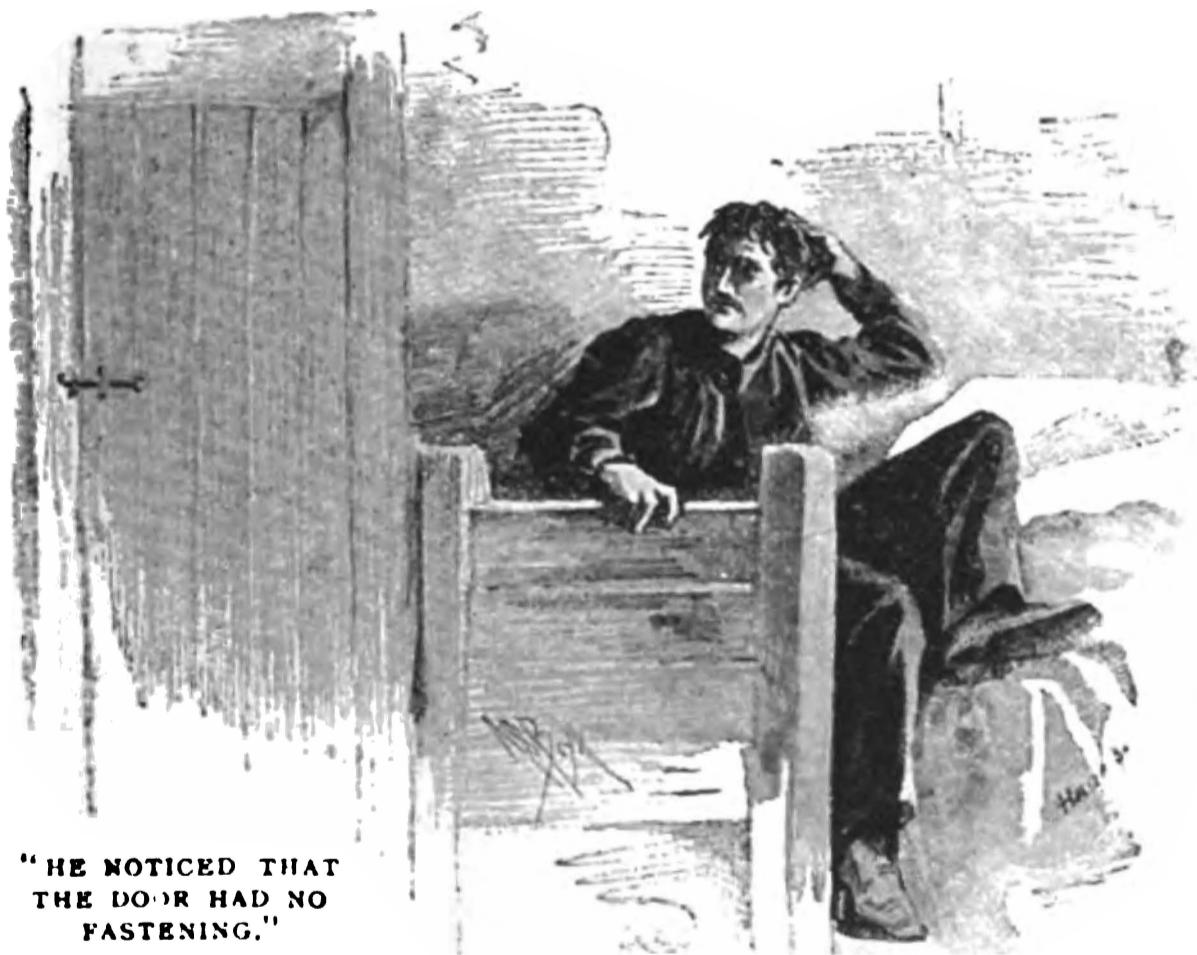
"We may be temperate without being teetotal. Plentiful and yellow, indeed! I have had a bad dream concerning those who found me. I thought that they—but it does not matter. She at least is not a myth. Do you happen to know if any others were saved?"

"I am thankful to be able to say that every one was drowned."

Stanford started up with horror in his eyes. The demure nurse, with sympathetic tones, bade him not excite himself. He sank back on his pillow.

"Leave the room," he cried, feebly. "Leave me—leave me." He turned his face toward the wall, while the woman left as silently as she had entered.

When she was gone Stanford slid from the bed, intending to make his way to the door and fasten it. He feared



"HE NOTICED THAT THE DOOR HAD NO FASTENING."

that these savages, who wished him dead, would take measures to kill him when they saw that he was going to recover. As he leaned against the bed, he noticed that the door had no fastening. There was a rude latch, but neither lock nor bolt. The furniture of the room was of the most meagre description, clumsily made. He staggered to the open window, and looked out. The remnants of the disastrous gale blew in upon him and gave him new life, as it had formerly threatened him with death. He saw that he was

in a village of small houses, each cottage standing in its own plot of ground. It was apparently a village of one street, and over the roofs of the houses opposite he saw in the distance the white waves of the sea. What astonished him most was a church with its tapering spire at the end of the street—a wooden church such as he had seen in remote American settlements. The street was deserted, and there were no signs of life in the houses.

“I must have fallen in upon some colony of lunatics,” he said to himself. “I wonder to what country these people belong—either to England or the United States, I imagine—yet in all my travels I never heard of such a colony.”

There was no mirror in the room, and it was impossible for him to know how he looked. His clothes were dry and powdered with salt. He arranged them as well as he could, and slipped out of the house unnoticed. When he reached the outskirts of the village he saw that the inhabitants, both men and women, were working in the fields some distance away. Coming towards the village was a girl with a water-can in either hand. She was singing as blithely as a lark until she saw Stanford, whereupon she paused both in her walk and in her song. Stanford, never a backward man, advanced, and was about to greet her when she forestalled him by saying:

“I am grieved, indeed, to see that you have recovered.”

The young man's speech was frozen on his lip, and a frown settled on his brow. Seeing that he was annoyed, though why she could not guess, Ruth hastened to amend matters by adding:

“Believe me, what I say is true. I am indeed sorry.”

“Sorry that I live?”

“Most heartily am I.”

“It is hard to credit such a statement from one so—from you.”

“Do not say so. Miriam has already charged me with being glad that you were not drowned. It would pain me deeply if you also believed as she does.”

The girl looked at him with swimming eyes, and the young man knew not what to answer. Finally he said:

“There is some horrible mistake. I cannot make it out. Perhaps our words, though apparently the same, have a different meaning. Sit down, Ruth, I want to ask you some questions.”

Ruth cast a timorous glance towards the workers, and murmured something about not having much time to spare, but she placed the water-cans on the ground and sank down on the grass,

Stanford throwing himself on the sward at her feet, but, seeing that she shrank back, he drew himself further from her, resting where he might gaze upon her face.

Ruth's eyes were downcast, which was necessary, for she occupied herself in pulling blade after blade of grass, sometimes weaving them together. Stanford had said he wished to question her, but he apparently forgot his intention, for he seemed wholly satisfied with merely looking at her. After the silence had lasted for some time, she lifted her eyes for one brief moment, and then asked the first question herself.

"From what land do you come?"

"From England."

"Ah! that also is an island, is it not?"

He laughed at the "also," and remembered that he had some questions to ask.

"Yes, it is an island—also. The sea dashes wrecks on all four sides of it, but there is no village on its shores so heathenish that if a man is cast upon the beach the inhabitants do not rejoice because he has escaped death."



"SHE LIFTED HER EYES FOR ONE BRIEF MOMENT."

Ruth looked at him with amazement in her eyes.

"Is there, then, no religion in England?"

"Religion? England is the most religious country on the face of the earth. There are more cathedrals, more churches, more places of worship in England than in any other State that I know of. We send missionaries to all heathenish lands. The Government, itself, supports the Church."

"I fear, then, I mistook your meaning. I thought from what you said that the people of England feared death, and did not welcome it or rejoice when one of their number died."

“ They do fear death, and they do not rejoice when it comes. Far from it. From the peer to the beggar, everyone fights death as long as he can ; the oldest cling to life as eagerly as the youngest. Not a man but will spend his last gold piece to ward off the inevitable even for an hour.”

“ Gold piece—what is that ? ”

Stanford plunged his hand into his pocket.

“ Ah ! ” he said, “ there are some coins left. Here is a gold piece.”

The girl took it, and looked at it with keen interest.

“ Isn't it pretty ? ” she said, holding the yellow coin on her pink palm, and glancing up at him.

“ That is the general opinion. To accumulate coins like that, men will lie, and cheat, and steal—yes, and work. Although they will give their last sovereign to prolong their lives, yet will they risk life itself to accumulate gold. Every business in England is formed merely for the gathering together of bits of metal like that in your hand ; huge companies of men are formed so that it may be piled up in greater quantities. The man who has most gold has most power, and is generally the most respected ; the company which makes most money is the one people are most anxious to belong to.”

Ruth listened to him with wonder and dismay in her eyes. As he talked she shuddered, and allowed the yellow coin to slip from her hand to the ground.

“ No wonder such a people fears death.”

“ Do you not fear death ? ”

“ How can we, when we believe in heaven ? ”

“ But would you not be sorry if someone died whom you loved ? ”

“ How could we be so selfish ? Would you be sorry if your brother, or someone you loved, became possessed of whatever you value in England—a large quantity of this gold, for instance ? ”

“ Certainly not. But then you see—well, it isn't exactly the same thing. If one you care for dies you are separated from him, and——”

“ But only for a short time, and that gives but another reason for welcoming death. It seems impossible that Christian people should fear to enter Heaven. Now I begin to understand why our forefathers left England, and why our teachers will never tell us anything about the people there. I wonder why missionaries are not sent to England to teach them the truth, and try to civilise the people ? ”

“That would, indeed, be coals to Newcastle. But here comes one of the workers.”

“It is my father,” cried the girl, rising. “I fear I have been loitering. I never did such a thing before.”

The man who approached was stern of countenance.

“Ruth,” he said, “the workers are athirst.”

The girl, without reply, picked up her pails and departed.

“I have been receiving,” said the young man, colouring slightly, “some instruction regarding your belief. I had been puzzled by several remarks I heard, and wished to make inquiries regarding them.”

“It is more fitting,” said the man, coldly, “that you should receive instruction from me or from some of the elders than from one of the youngest in the community. When you are so far recovered as to be able to listen to an exposition of our views, I hope to be able to put forth such arguments as will con-



‘RUTH AT THE WELL.’

vince you that they are the true views. If it should so happen that my arguments are not convincing, then I must request that you will hold no communication with our younger members. They must not be contaminated by the heresies of the outside world.”

Stanford looked at Ruth standing beside the village well.

“Sir,” he said, “you underrate the argumentative powers of the younger members. There is a text bearing upon the subject which I need not recall to you. I am already convinced.”