A CHAPTER OF ADVENTURES

BY G. A. HENTY.

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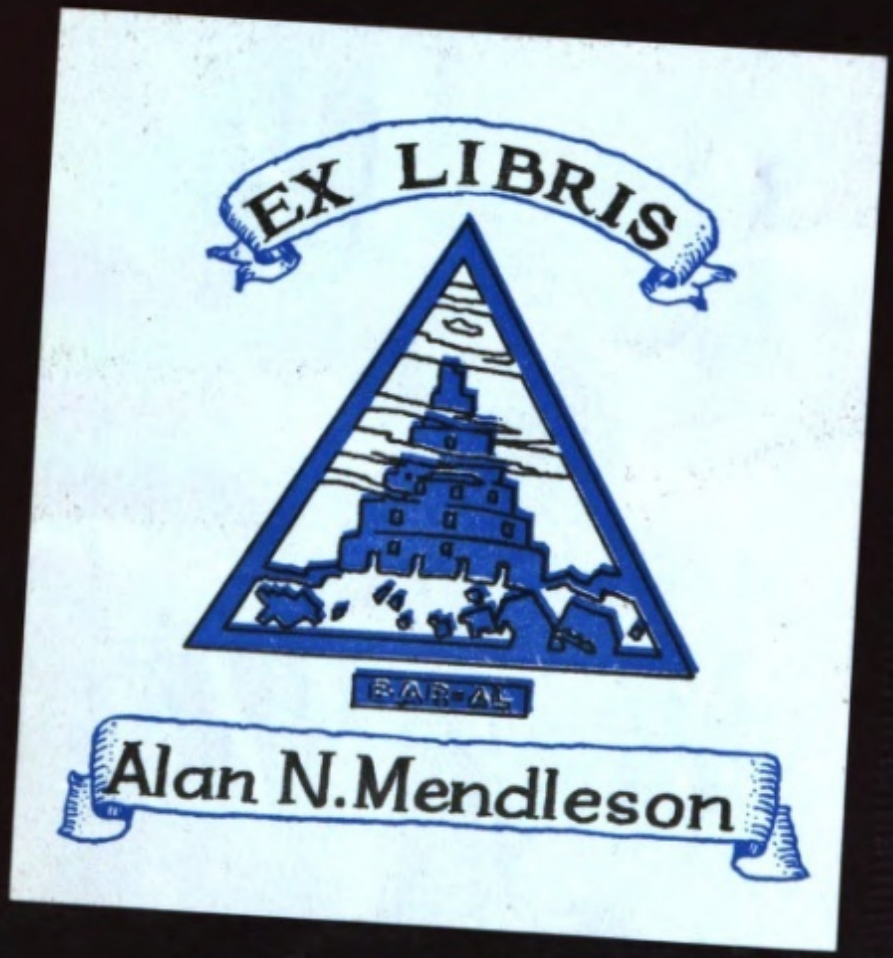

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A CHAPTER OF ADVENTURES:

OR,

THROUGH THE BOMBARDMENT OF ALEXANDRIA.

BY

G. A. HENTY,

Author of "By Pike and Dyke;" "The Lion of St. Mark;" "The Cat of Bubastes;" "Bonnie Prince Charlie;" "By England's Aid;" &c.

WITH SIX FULL-PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. H. OVEREND.

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A CHAPTER OF ADVENTURES.

CHAPTER I.

A FISHING VILLAGE.

OF the tens of thousands of excursionists who every summer travel down by rail to Southend, there are few indeed who ever stop at Leigh, or who, once at Southend, take the trouble to walk three miles along the shore to the fishing village. It may be doubted, indeed, whether along the whole stretch of coast-line from Plymouth to Yarmouth there is a village that has been so completely overlooked by the world. Other places, without a tithe of its beauty of position, or the attraction afforded by its unrivalled view over the Thames, from Gravesend to Warden Point, ever alive with ships passing up and down, have grown from fishing hamlets to fashionable watering-places; while Leigh remains, or at any

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rate remained at the time this story opens, ten years ago, as unchanged and unaltered as if, instead of being but an hour's run from London, it lay far north in Scotland.

Its hill rises steeply behind it; there is room only for the street between the railway and the wharves, and for a single row of houses between the line and the foot of the hill. To get into Leigh from the country round it is necessary to descend by a steep road that winds down from the church at the top of the hill; to get out again you must go by the same way. The population is composed solely of fishermen, their families, and the shopkeepers who supply their necessities. The men who stand in groups in the street and on the wharf are all clad in blue guernseys or duck smocks and trousers of pilot cloth or canvas. Broad-built sturdy men are they, for in point of physique there are few fishermen round the coast who can compare with those of Leigh.

A stranger in the place would think that the male population had nothing to do but to stand in the street and talk, but night is for the most part their time for work; although many of the bawleys go out on the day-tide also, for at Leigh the tide is all-important. For five hours in the

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day it washes the foot of the wharves, for seven a wide expanse of mud stretches away to Canvey Island in front, and Southend Pier to the east.

At the wells—for Leigh still depends for water on its wells—are, during the hours at which water is permitted to be drawn, lines of twenty women and girls with pails, each patiently waiting her turn. There are not many boys about, for boys require more sleep than men, and a considerable portion of their time on shore is spent in bed.

It is ten o'clock in the day; the bawleys have returned from the fishing grounds, and scores of them have anchored in the Ray—a deep stretch of water lying between the spit of sand that extends from the end of Canvey Island close up to Southend Pier, and the mud-flats of Leigh. The flats are still uncovered, but the tide is rising fast in the winding channel leading up to the village. In a few minutes there will be water enough for the boats, and already these can be seen leaving the bawleys and making for the mouth of the channel. The wind is fair, and each boat hoists its sail, white or yellow or brown, and with the crew sitting up to windward comes flying along the shallow channel, making, as they always do, a race of it home.

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The boats are large and roomy, and are, as they need to be, good sea-boats; for they have at times to live in rough water that would swamp lighter craft like cockle-shells. Each boat carries two men and a boy, that being the regular crew of a bawley; although, perhaps, for rough winter work, they may sometimes take an extra hand. In the bow of the first boat that comes tearing along up to the wharf sits a good-looking lad, about fourteen years old. His face is bronzed with the sun and wind, his clothes are as rough and patched as those of the other fisher lads; but although as strong and sinewy as any of his companions of the same age, he is somewhat slighter in his build, more active in his movements, and has a more springy and elastic walk in spite of the heavy boots that he wears.

He helps the others to land several baskets of shrimps, and carry them to the railway-station hard by. They are already boiled, for the bawleys carry coppers, into which the shrimps are baled straight from the nets, so that they are in readiness to send off to town as soon as they are landed. When the baskets are all piled on the platform he crosses the line, follows it along for some fifty yards, and then enters a neat cottage facing it.

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"Back again all safe, Jack?"

"All right, mother! It's been a fine night, with just enough wind, and not too much. I ought to have been in half an hour ago, but tide is late this morning."

"Lily brought word, just as she was starting for school, that the boats were coming up the creek, so your breakfast is all ready."

"And so am I, mother; though I had a piece of bread and cheese when we dropped anchor. I will just wash my hands, and be ready in a jiffey."

Mrs. Robson was a native of Leigh. Her father had been a fisherman, who had owned his own bawley; indeed, most of the boats at Leigh are the property of one of the men who work them.

Bessy Tripper—not that her real name was Tripper, but Snow; but her father for some unknown reason got the nickname of Tripper, and his sons and daughters were also called by it, and would hardly have answered if addressed as Snow—was one of the prettiest girls in Leigh; so thought William Robson, a young artist, who came down to Leigh to spend the summer there, sketching the picturesque boats as they came in and out, or lay, with their heads pointing all round the compass, on the soft mud.

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He had taken lodgings at Tripper's house, and when not at work with his brush spent much of his time on board the *Enterprise*, Bessy Tripper was a conspicuous figure in the foreground of many of his sketches, and occupied as prominent a place in his thoughts. She was as sweet-tempered as she was pretty, and at last Will Robson made up his mind to marry her if she would take him. He was himself an orphan, and had no friends who had any right to object to his marrying according to his fancy, and he could therefore do as he pleased without question or comment. Bessy Tripper was quite ready to take him when he asked her, and they were married at the church at the top of the hill, and went to live at a little cottage near Dulwich.

William Robson was no genius; he had the knack of painting pretty marine sketches in water-colours. These sold readily, but at low prices; and although he was always talking of doing a great picture in oils that was to make his fortune, the picture never was painted. He was always too busy at what he called pot-boilers, which had to be sold to dealers for a trifle, in order to enable him to meet the butcher and baker's bills. He never repented his marriage; Bessy was an

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admirable housewife, and made a shilling go as far as many women would a half-crown. In the summer they generally went down for a couple of moñths to Leigh, for her to see her friends, for him to gather a fresh stock of new subjects.

He died suddenly from the effects of a chill, and when his affairs were wound up Bessy found herself mistress of the five hundred pounds for which he had insured his life, and the furniture of the cottage. It was natural that she should return to Leigh. She had no friends elsewhere; and she knew that money went much further there than in most other places. Two hundred pounds were spent in purchasing the cottage in which she now lived, and another two hundred in buying a bawley. At Leigh, as at most other fishing places, the men work on shares—the boat takes a share, and each of the men a share—the owner of a boat supplying nets as well as the boat itself. The bawley, therefore, brought Mrs. Robson in a sum equal to that earned by a fisherman, with deductions, however, for damages to nets and spars.

In good seasons the receipts sufficed to keep her and her boy and girl comfortably; in bad seasons they had to live very closely, and she was obliged in specially bad times to dip a little into

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her reserve of a hundred pounds. Upon the other hand, there was occasionally a windfall when the smack rendered assistance to a vessel on the sands, or helped to get up anchors or discharge cargoes.

At the time of her husband's death Jack was ten years old and Lily eight. For two years the former attended the school on the hill, and then went as a boy on board a bawley belonging to one of his uncles.

The lad's own predilections were entirely for the sea; his happiest times had been spent at Leigh, and his father's work had kept the longing alive at other times. He would have preferred going to sea in one of the ships of which there was always such a line passing up and down the river, but he was too young for that when he first began his work on board the bawley; and as the time went on, and he became accustomed to the life of a fisherman, his longings for a wider experience gradually faded away, for it is seldom indeed that a Leigh boy goes to sea—the Leigh men being as a race devoted to their homes, and regarding with grave disapproval any who strike out from the regular groove.

"We did well this morning, mother," Jack said

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as he came downstairs in a clean guernsey and pilot trousers. "We had a fine haul off the lower Blyth, and not a bad one higher up. I fancy most of the boats did well. The *Hope* was close to us, and I expect she must have done as well as we did."

"That's good news, Jack. The catches have not been heavy lately, but now they have once begun I hope that we shall have a better time of it."

The breakfast was fish, for fish is the chief article of diet at Leigh.

"Are you going to bed, Jack?"

"No, mother; I did not start until half-past one, and so I got a good six hours before I turned out. I am going to help Uncle Ben put a fresh coat of pitch on our boat. He is going to bring her in as soon as there is water enough. Tom stopped on board with him, but they let me come ashore in Atkins' boat; and of course I lent them a hand to get their fish up. We shall land our lot when the bawley comes up."

"Then you won't go out again to-night, Jack?"

"Oh, yes, we shall, mother. We shall go out with the tide as usual. We shall only do up to the water-line, and the pitch will be plenty dry

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enough by night. We are going to fish over by Warden Point, I think."

"I am glad to hear it," his mother said. "I always feel more comfortable when you are on that ground, as you are out of the track of steamers there."

"Uncle is talking of going down to Harwich next week."

Mrs. Robson's face fell. She had expected the news, for every year a considerable number of the Leigh bawleys go down to Harwich and fish off that port for two or three months. The absence of Jack was always a great trial to her. When he was with her she felt that he was safe, for it is an almost unheard-of thing for a bawley to meet with an accident when fishing in the mouth of the Thames; but off Harwich the seas are heavy, and although even there accidents are rare—for the boats are safe and staunch and the fishermen handle them splendidly—still the risk is greater than when working at home.

The Leigh men themselves attribute their freedom from accident in no slight degree to the fact that their boats never go out on Sunday. They are God-fearing men these fishermen, and however bad the times, and however hard the pinch, it is

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seldom indeed that a bawley puts out from Leigh on Sunday, save to the assistance of a vessel in distress.

The excursionists who go down in summer weather to Margate and Ramsgate scarcely think that ships could be cast away and broken up upon the hidden sands beneath the sparkling waters. They know not that scarce one of these sands but at low water is dotted with low, black timbers, and that there are few more dangerous pieces of navigation in the world than the passage up the mouth of the Thames on a wild night when a fierce gale is blowing and the snow and sleet driving before it, obscuring the guiding lights that mark the channels between the sands.

The *Bessy*—for so Ben Tripper had named his bawley, after his favourite sister—was lying on the mud just above Leigh. A fishy smell pervaded the air, for close by were the boiling-sheds, with their vast heaps of white cockle-shells. These were dug by the cocklers either from the sand at the end of the Canvey Island or on the Maplin Sands somewhere off Shoebury.

The large boats often return deeply laden with them. On reaching Leigh the cockles are thrown out in great heaps by the side of the creek, where they

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are covered at each tide. Here they are left to clean themselves, and to get rid of the sand they have taken in when burrowing. Two or three days later they are carried up to the boiling-houses and thrown into great coppers of boiling water. They open at once, and the fish drop from the shells. The contents of the coppers are passed through large meshed sieves, to allow the fish to pass through and retain the shells, which go to add to the heaps outside. These heaps would in time rival in size the cinder tips of the Midlands were it not that there is a use for the shells. They make splendid lime, and are sometimes taken away in barge-loads and carried to town, where they are used instead of gravel in the parks, making, when crushed, the whitest and tidiest of paths.

Before starting Jack had put on a canvas jumper, leggings and high boots, and was soon at work with his uncle, ankle-deep in the mud. The bawleys are boats almost peculiar to Leigh, although a few hail from Gravesend and the Medway. They are from thirty to forty-five feet long, and are divided into three classes of from six to fifteen tons burden. They are very broad in comparison to their length, some of them having a beam of fifteen feet, and they carry their width almost to the

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stern, which is square. This gives the boats a dumpy appearance, as they look as if they had been cut short. They are half-decked, with a roomy fo'castle and a well, where the fish are kept alive. They carry one mast.

The peculiarity of their rig is that they have no boom to their mainsail, which in shape somewhat resembles a barge-sail, and, like it, can in a moment be brailed completely up. They carry a lofty topmast and large topsails, and these they seldom lower, even when obliged to have two reefs in the mainsail. They are capital sea-boats, fast, and very handy; and it requires a good yacht to beat a bawley with a brisk wind blowing. The men are keen sailors, and when the trawls are taken up and their heads turned homewards it is always a race to be first back.

Ten years ago all the bawleys were clinker-built—that is, with the streaks overlapping each other, as in boats; but the new bawleys are now all carvel-built, the planks being placed edge to edge, so as to give a smooth surface, as in yachts and large vessels. They now for the most part carry spinnakers, boomed out when running before the wind, and balloon foresails, thereby greatly adding to their speed in light winds. One peculi-

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arity of the bawleys is that, when at anchor, the mainsail, instead of being stowed with its spars parallel to the deck, is made up on its gaff, which is then hoisted with the throat seven or eight feet up the mast, while the peak rests on the stern.

This is done to give more room on deck, and enable the men to get more easily in and out of the fo'castle. It has, however, a curious appearance, and a fleet of bawleys at anchor resembles nothing so much as a flock of broken-backed ducks.

Ben Tripper and his mate, Tom Hoskins, finished tarring the boat under her water-line soon after four o'clock in the afternoon, Jack's share of the work consisting in keeping the fire blazing under the pitch kettle.

"What time shall we go out, uncle?"

"Not going out at all, Jack. We will finish tarring her the first thing in the morning, and there are two or three odd jobs want doing."

"Will you want me, uncle? because, if not, I shall go out early with Bill Corbett cockling. His father has hurt his leg, and is laid up, so he asked me to lend him a hand. I told him I didn't know whether you were going out again to-night or

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whether you could spare me in the morning, but that if you didn't want me I would go with him."

"You can go, Jack; besides, you will be in early anyhow. We will do the tarring without you."

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CHAPTER II.

CAUGHT BY THE TIDE.

JACK ran home.

"I thought you would have been in by two o'clock, Jack," his mother said reproachfully, "so as to see Lily before she went off to school again."

"So I should have done, mother, but I had to stick at the work until we had finished up to the water-line. Uncle Ben thought it was not worth while knocking off."

Jack's meal of bread and bacon was soon finished, then he waited a little until Lily had returned from school.

"Come on, Lil," he said; "I have been waiting to take you out with me."

"Be in by six," Mrs. Robson said.

"All right, mother! We are only just going down to the shore."

Near the little coast-guard station they came upon Bill Corbett.

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"Can you come to-morrow, Jack?"

"Yes; uncle has agreed to do without me. What time are you going to start?"

"We will go out as late as we can, Jack. We can get down the creek till three anyhow, so at three o'clock you be ready down here."

"Joe is going, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, he does to carry the cockles to the boat while we scrape them out. That is a nice bawley, that new one there; she only came in this tide. That is the boat Tom Parker has had built at Brightlingsea. He expects she is going to beat the fleet. She will want to be a rare good one if she does, and I don't think Tom is the man to get the most out of her anyhow."

"I don't reckon he is," Jack agreed. "He would never have bought that boat out of his own earnings, that is certain. It is lucky for him his uncle in town died and left him four hundred pounds. He is one of the lazy ones, he is. Half the times he never goes out at all. It is either too rough, or there ain't wind enough, or he don't think it is a likely day for fish. His mother will do a sight better now that he has got a boat of his own, and she will get someone else to work hers. I should not like to work on shares

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with him though he has got a new boat and gear."

"Well, I must be going," Bill said. "Shall I knock at your door as I pass in the morning?"

"You will find me there as the clock strikes three, Bill; but if I ain't, you knock."

Bill Corbett, who was a lad some two years older than Jack, strolled away. Jack and Lily sat down on the sloping stage from which the coast-guardsmen launched their boats, and began to chat to the man standing with a telescope under his arm at the door of the boat-shed. Jack was very fond of talking to the coast-guardsmen. They had not, like the fishermen, spent all their lives between Gravesend and Harwich, but had sailed with big ships and been to foreign parts. One of them had been in the China War, another had fought in India with Peel's Naval Brigade, had helped batter down the palace fortresses of Lucknow, and when in the humour they had plenty of tales of stirring incident to relate.

Jack was a favourite with the coast-guardsmen, for he possessed the virtue rare in boys of being able to sit still; and as his favourite place was the slip in front of the boat-house, and he would sit there cutting out toy boats by the hour, he gene-

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rally came in for a good deal of talk with the men who happened to be on duty. This afternoon, however, the men were busy burnishing up their arms and getting everything into apple-pie order, as the inspecting officer was to come on his rounds the next morning; so Jack after a time strolled along the path between the railway and the track, Lily prattling by his side and stopping to gather wild convolvulus and grasses. The sea was out now, and the mud stretched away, glistening red and brown in the sunlight. Beyond in the Ray lay a long line of bawleys, while a score or more nearer at hand lay heeled over on the mud as they had been left by the receding tide.

To a stranger the black hulks would have looked exactly like each other; but the Leigh men could tell every boat afloat or ashore, even without looking at the number painted on her bulwarks, just as a shepherd can pick out one sheep from a flock.

"It is time to go back, Lily," Jack said at last. "Mother said we were to be in at six, and it cannot be far off that now. There is the Yarmouth steamer going up. It is about her time."

"How do you know it is the Yarmouth steamer, Jack?"

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"Oh, I don't know. I know her by her look. I know pretty near all of them—the Yarmouth, the Scotch, and the Dutch boats."

"They all look to me alike."

"Ah! that is because they are a long way off, Lily. There is a lot of difference between them when you are close. We know them all, and which whistles if we are in the way, and which will give way for us, and which will come right on without minding whether they run us down or not. The colliers are the worst for that, they just go straight on, and expect you to get out of the way, and don't mind a rap about the rule of the road or anything else. I should like to see half a dozen of those captains hanged."

"I do not think it is right to say that, Jack."

"Well, I should like to see them get five dozen lashes anyhow," Jack said, "well laid on by some of our fishermen. They would give it 'em heartily, and it would do them a world of good, and save many a life afterwards. It is too bad the way those fellows go on; they don't care a bit about running down a small craft in the dark. In the first place, they know very well that they are not likely to be recognized, and so steam straight on, and leave men to drown; and in the

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next, if they are recognized, they are ready to swear that black is white all round, and will take their oaths you hadn't got your side-lights burning, or that you changed your course, and that they did all in their power to prevent a collision. I wish some of the people of the Board of Trade would come down the river sometimes in sailing-boats and see the way these coasters set the law at defiance, and fine them smartly. What is the use of making rules if they are never observed? Well, here we are home, and the church is just striking six, so we have hit off the time nicely."

By eight o'clock Jack was in bed, and having acquired the fisherman's habit of waking at any hour he chose, he was at the door when Bill Corbett and his brother Joe came along. The day was already breaking faintly in the east, for the month was May.

"Going to be fine, Bill?" Jack asked.

"Dunno. Wind is blowing strong from the north, though we don't feel it here."

The water was off the flats and had sunk some distance in the creek.

"It is lower than I expected," Bill said. "Come on; come on."

"Where is she, Bill?"

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"Close to the foot of the steps."

The boat had already taken ground; but Bill, getting into the water with his high boots, shoved her off. The mast was stepped and sail hoisted, and she was soon running fast down the creek.

"The boats were off an hour ago, I suppose?" Jack remarked.

"Ay, more than that. Some of them turned out at half-past one. But those whose boats were down the channel didn't go for half an hour later. Father told me. I saw him before I started. He couldn't sleep with the pain in his leg."

Twenty minutes' sailing took them down to the mouth of the creek and into the wider channel. They now turned the boat's head directly off shore, and jibed the sail, and bore off for the sands stretching away from the end of Canvey Island.

"No other boats here this morning?" Jack asked as the boat ran ashore.

"No; three or four of them went down to Shoebury last night. They say there is more cockles down there than there is here now. But father said we had best come here. I suppose he thought that Joe, you, and me, made but a poor cocklers' crew. Of course, with the wind

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blowing off shore, it is all right anyhow; but men never think us boys can do anything. Why, I would not mind a bit starting, us three, for Harwich. I reckon these boats are just as safe as the bawleys?"

"I think so too; but they want more handling. However, I expect we could manage it."

They had now got out their implements, consisting of a shovel, a large rake, and a couple of baskets, on shore, and fastening the boat with a grapnel, went to the place where experience had taught them it was best to dig, and were soon at work. The cockles were for the most part buried some five or six inches in the sand, and were found in great numbers; the two elder boys digging and raking while Joe picked them up, and threw them into the baskets. As these were filled Bill carried them down on his shoulder to the boat, put the baskets into the water, gave them a heave or two to wash some of the sand off the cockles, and then emptied them into the boat.

It was a broad-beamed craft, of over twenty feet long, and would carry more than a ton of cockles if filled up.

The sun had long been up, the clouds were flying fast across the sky, and the wind was work-

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ing round to the east, knocking up a short choppy sea as it met the ebb, and covering the river with white horses.

The boys worked away sturdily, ceasing occasionally from their labours to go down and shove the boat further off as the tide fell. At six it was dead low. They had each brought with them a bag with some bread and cheese, and a tin of cold tea, and now sat down on the gunwale of the boat for breakfast. Having finished that meal, they continued their work till nine o'clock, by which time they had got several bushels on board.

"Look there!" Joe exclaimed suddenly; "there is a big steamer has run on to the Middle Ground."

The boys had just thrown down their spade and rake, and had agreed to knock off, and they now ran across to the outside of the strip of sand, which had by this time narrowed very considerably.

"She will get off easy enough as the tide rises," Joe said; "but they won't be able to back her off now."

"No; she does not move in the least," Jack agreed. "Her screw is working hard astern now. Look how high her head is. She has run a long way up with wind and tide and steam. She must have gone on it hard."

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"She had best get a couple of anchors out astern," Bill said, "before she gets broadside on."

This was evidently also the view of the captain, as two boats were lowered and anchors got into them. But it is no easy matter to row a boat with a heavy weight in it against wind and tide; and before they had got fairly away from the vessel she had already swung round a considerable distance, and was heeling over a good deal from the force of the wind and tide. It was nearly half an hour before the boats were far enough off to get the anchors over with any effect.

"They won't dare to haul on them now," Joe said. "They would only come home. Those anchors ain't heavy enough to work her stern round. I expect when a tug comes along they will get them to help, else she will keep on driving higher and higher."

"Hallo!" The exclamation came from Jack, who now happened to look round towards the boat. They had accidentally taken their stand on the highest point of the sand-bank, and in watching the steamer had forgotten all about the tide, which, under the influence of a north-east wind, had risen with great rapidity. The patch of dry

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sand was scarcely fifteen yards wide, and would be entirely covered in a very few minutes.

"Look, Bill, the boat has gone!"

It was true. The grapnel, a very light one, with a short length of rope, had been thrown carelessly down on the sand when they last hauled the boat up, and as the full strength of the tide had caught the boat, it had dragged a considerable distance, and was drifting away up the Ray.

"What is to be done?" Joe exclaimed.

"Do you think we could wade along to the island, Bill?" Jack asked.

Bill shook his head. "No; there are deep channels where it would be over our heads. I can't swim a stroke, no more can Joe."

"Shall I swim to the boat, Bill, and try and get her back?"

Joe shook his head. "She is in deep water now, Jack, and the grapnel ain't holding her a bit; she will drift as fast as you can swim. But of course you can try if you like, it don't make any difference to us, for you could never beat back against this wind and tide. What fools we have been, to be sure!"

"The boats will soon be coming back now,"

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Jack said hopefully. "There are some of them this side of the Chapman now."

Bill shook his head. "It will take them three quarters of an hour to beat up, Jack."

Jack turned and looked the other way. "Here are three of them coming in from the Nore, Bill. They will not be very long before they are up."

"They will be here before the others, Jack; but I doubt they will be in time. Water will be breast-high before they get up, and they may drop anchor down at the mouth of the Ray and not see us. Our best chance is the shore."

He shaded his eyes and looked steadily across at Leigh. "There is a man running from the coast-guard station," he said. "There! there are two or three others running to meet him. Now they are going back together."

The boys stood looking fixedly at the station.

"Hooray!" Jack said after a minute; "there comes the boat out of the house. Do you see they are getting her down the slip; now she is in the water." Another minute passed, and then a white sail appeared. "She is heading straight off to us, Bill. With this wind she will be here in a quarter of an hour."

But the tide was already half-way up to their

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knees, and the waves beginning to splash against them.

"Will they be here in time, do you think, Bill?" Joe asked.

"I hope so, Joe," Bill said cheerily. "They would be in plenty of time if it were not for the force of the tide. Still, I think it is all right."

The minutes passed rapidly; higher and higher rose the water, and the waves increased fast in size. It was as much as the boys could do to stand against the sweep of the stream.

"Bill, you had better take Joe on your shoulders," Jack said. "I have read that one man can carry another across a stream that he couldn't get over alone."

"Jump up, young un," Bill said; "and you, Jack, get off your sea-boots. You stand just behind me and hold on, I feel much steadier now that I have got Joe on my shoulders. If you feel that you are going, leave go of me, you will only pull me backward holding on; and as you can swim you are all right. You have only got to keep yourself afloat, the tide will drift you up to the island in no time."

"I don't mean to go if I can help it," Jack said. "Of course I could not swim with you two, but

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if you would lie on your back quiet I might manage to keep you up for a bit anyhow."

The boat, heeling far over to the breeze, was dashing along at a great pace towards them. It was a question of minutes. Jack found it extremely difficult to keep his feet, the sand seemed to be scooped out from under them by the force of the tide. The wind, which was blowing in violent gusts, added to the difficulty of withstanding the force of the current and waves.

"Don't pull, Jack," Bill said, "or you will have us over."

"I can't hold on without, Bill. Which shall I do? Swim off alone, or hold on by you till we all go together?"

"Go off by yourself, Jack; the boat will be here in five minutes now. I think I can hold on until then; anyhow, it is the best chance."

They were now waist-deep; for, little by little, as the sand gave way under their feet, they had been driven backwards towards deeper water.

"There is one other thing, Bill. Do you think you can shift Joe so as to sit on one shoulder? If I get on your other it will add to your weight."

"I will try it," Bill said; "I was nearly off my feet then. Get on to my left shoulder, Joe.

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Now, Jack, you climb up. Yes, I think that is better. I should be all right if the sand would not slide away so much from under my feet."

Several times Jack felt Bill totter and sway; he was fast being swept back into the deeper water.

"If you do go, Bill, do you and Joe throw yourselves on your backs, and I will try and hold you up. The boat will be here in no time now."

She was indeed less than a hundred yards away when Bill exclaimed, "I am going!"

"Keep on your back, Bill!" Jack shouted as he went backwards under water.

The three came up close together. Jack seized the others by the hair, and throwing himself on his back, and striking out with his legs, tried to keep them in a similar position with their faces above water. Bill lay quietly enough; but Joe struggled to raise his head, and turning, grasped Jack round the body, and in a moment the three were under water.

Jack kept his presence of mind; he knew that the boat was close at hand, and strove, not to loosen the grasp of his companions, which was impossible, but to come to the surface occasionally for an instant.

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Two or three times he managed this, and obtained a breath of air before he went under again. The last time, he saw the boat close at hand, and a rope fell across his face; but he could not free his hands to grasp it, and went under immediately. His senses were leaving him, when he felt something grasp him, and then knew no more till he opened his eyes, and found himself in the bottom of the boat with his two companions.

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CHAPTER III.

A RUN FROM HARWICH.

ONE of the sailors, dripping wet, knelt beside him. "That is all right, lad; you will be yourself again directly."

Jack was already sufficiently recovered to sit up some time before either Bill or Joe showed signs of life; for, unable to swim or to take advantage of their momentary intervals of coming to the surface, they had become insensible some time before he had done so himself. The sailors rubbed their chests and hands, and at last both showed signs of returning animation.

"That was a close shave, Jack," the coast-guardsman who was at the helm said. "It was lucky I made you out with my glass when I did. It was touch and go; I saw you trying to get them on their backs. If they had kept quiet you would have managed it; but drowning people never will keep quiet."

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They were now running up the Ray in pursuit of the boat, which had drifted into shallower water near the end of the island, and here the grapnel had brought it up. When they got up to it, the grapnel was raised and brought into the stern of the boat, and the coast-guard boat laid her course close-hauled for Leigh, towing the other behind her.

Before they arrived at the slip the other two boys were both able to sit up. They would have taken their boat up beyond the village, but one of the fishermen said, "You go home and change; you have done quite enough for to-day. Tom and I will take the boat up for you."

"That has been a lesson to me I shall not forget," Bill said as they walked along. "You saved our lives, Jack, there is not much doubt about that."

"Oh, I expect we should all have been fished out anyhow!" Jack replied.

"No, we should not, Jack. Anyhow, not alive. I thought just at first you were going to keep us up pretty easy, and then young Joe twisted round and got hold of you, and we all went down together. But I could feel then that somehow you were keeping us up, and I tried not to catch hold of your legs."

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"You did not, Bill. I was able to use them just at first, and then, somehow, Joe got hold of them. However, we all kept together, that was a good thing. If we had separated, I don't suppose they would have got us all."

Fortunately the news of the danger Jack had run had not reached his mother, for she had been engaged in the back-room washing, and Lily had gone up to school.

At the first alarm many people had run down to the shore; the officer of the coast-guard with his glass had reported what was going on, and up to the last moment it had been believed that the boat would get to them in time, and there had been a gasp of dismay as he suddenly exclaimed, "They are down! The boat is only a few lengths away," he went on; "I expect they will get them. One of the men is standing up in the bow ready to jump."

A half-minute later he exclaimed, "There he goes! There, they are hoisting them into the boat!"

"Have they got them all, sir?"

"That I can't see; but I expect they have, for you see they have lowered the sail. Yes! they must have got them all, for none of them are

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standing up looking about, as they would be if one was missing."

Five minutes later the sail was hoisted again. The officer watched for a minute or two, and then closed his glass.

"They are going up the Ray," he said. "I expect they are going to tow the boat in here; she is under the island. They would not trouble about that unless those they have picked up were all right, but would be making straight back again to see what could be done for them."

The little crowd, now feeling that nothing worse than a ducking had happened to those on the sand, broke up and scattered to their houses. No one had known at first what boat it was whose occupants had got into trouble, and it was not till it was half-way back that it was made out to be Corbett's.

"Why, I thought he was ill in bed?" one said.

"So he is, but I expect his boys went out with it. It was not likely there was a man on board. No one but boys would be fools enough to get caught like that, and I should have thought Bill Corbett had too much sense."

"Why, Jack, what has happened?" Mrs. Robson asked as her son entered the house.

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"Nothing much, mother; but we have had a ducking. There was a steamer aground on the Middle Ground, and watching her we forgot all about the tide, and the boat drifted away and we got caught. Of course I could swim, so there was no danger for me; but it would have gone hard with the two Corbetts if the sailor at the coast-guard station had not made us out, and their boat put off and picked us up."

"Well, go and change your clothes at once, Jack; it has taken all the colour out of your face. I will get a cup of hot tea ready for you by the time you come down."

It was not until some of her neighbours came in, and talked to her about the narrow escape her son had had, that Mrs. Robson realized that Jack's life had been in considerable danger, and it was well that she had him before her enjoying his tea before she learnt the truth.

"It is no use getting into a fuss about it, mother," Jack said cheerfully; "it is not going to happen again, you know. It has been a good lesson to me to keep my eyes open; and when I go cockling again I won't lose sight of the boat, not if there were twenty vessels ashore."

A few days later Jack started with his uncle

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in the *Bessy* for Harwich. For himself he liked the life there better than at Leigh. At home men could not be said to live on board their boats. They went only for short trips, taking a meal before starting, and another on their return; but doing no cooking on board. Here they were out for longer hours, and the boat was always their home. They were more independent of the tide; and unless it and the wind were both dead against them, could at all times run out to their fishing ground, ten miles away, near the Cork light-ship.

The fishing was various. Soles, whiting, and haddock were the principal fish brought up in the trawls; but there was occasionally a big skate or two in the net, and these had to be handled with considerable circumspection, as they could take off a finger or two with the greatest ease with their powerful jaws and sharp teeth. These fish were always hung up in the air for a day or two before eating, as the flesh improves by keeping; the eatable portions were then cut out, and the rest was thrown overboard. These fish were for the most part eaten by the crew; the small soles, dabs, and flounders were hawked in the town, and the rest of the take sent up to London.

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There was an excitement, too, in the fishing itself, apart from that connected with hauling up the trawl and examining its contents, for the sands off this coast are dangerous, and the wrecks, that have at one time or another taken place there, innumerable. Occasionally a net would catch in one of the timbers that had perhaps been lying there a hundred years or more, and then it either came up torn into fragments, or if it obtained a really firm hold, there was nothing for it but to cut the trawl-rope and lose it altogether. In fine weather, however, this step would not be taken except as a last resource. After trying in vain to get the net and trawl up the rope would be buoyed, and the next day another attempt would be made to raise the net, the boat being assisted by three or four others. The loss of a net was a serious one, as it took ten pounds or more to replace it and the trawl-beam and its belongings.

Sometimes a storm would blow up suddenly, and then the nets had to be got on board with all speed, and the topsails lowered and mainsails reefed, and the fleet of perhaps a hundred vessels would go racing back into Harwich, there to anchor just above the Guard, or under shelter of

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the Shotley Spit, or a short way up the Orwell, according to the direction of the wind.

The hardest part of a Leigh fisherman's life Jack had not yet encountered, for boys are seldom taken stow-boating. Stow-boating is really sprat catching, and no one can exactly explain the meaning of the term. It is carried on in winter at the edge of the sands, far down at the mouth of the river. Boats are out for many days together, frequently in terrible seas, when the boat is more under than above the water. The work of getting up the net is heavy and exhausting, and for all this hardship and labour the reward is often exceedingly slight. Sometimes the sprats are abundant, and good pay is made; sometimes, when the winter accounts are balanced up, the crew find that their share will barely suffice to pay for their keep on board, and not a farthing is left for the support of their wives and children.

Londoners who purchase sprats at an almost nominal price know but little of the hard struggle those who have caught them have to make ends meet.

After fishing for a month, Ben Tripper said one Friday evening, "We will run up to Leigh to-morrow and spend Sunday at home. I don't

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think we shall lose much, for the weather looks bad, and I don't think there will be any fishing to-morrow."

"I am pretty sure there won't, Ben," his mate said. "I think that it is going to blow really hard, and that we shall get wet jackets as we go up."

"We are accustomed to that," Tripper said carelessly. "Anyhow, if it comes to blow too hard for us we can make for shelter into the Crouch or Black Water."

"Oh, we are all right as to that, Ben! It is not a question of wet jackets or sea that I am thinking of, only whether we are likely to drop anchor in the Ray to-morrow night. If I were sure of that I should not mind a dusting; but I would rather lie here quiet than have a regular day's heavy knocking about, and then have to run in to Burnham after all."

"So would I," Ben assented. "If the wind comes from anywhere to the west of south it is no use thinking about it. It has been chopping and changing about to-day, and there is no saying which way it will come when it fairly makes up its mind about it; but I think from the look of the sky this evening that it is as likely to

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come from the north-east as not, and in that case I allow we shall make a good passage of it."

"Ay, that is right enough," Tom Hoskins assented. "They say the run from Harwich Pier to Leigh has never been done yet by a Leigh bawley under six hours, though it has been pretty close several times. We have got the springs on now, and with the wind from the north-east we should run the six hours very close, if we didn't beat it. There are two or three of them can go faster than the *Bessy* close-hauled, but running free I doubt if there is one can touch her."

"We will make a start at seven," Ben said. "We shall take the last of the ebb down to Walton, and then catch the flood and have it at its full strength by the time we are opposite Clacton."

Jack was delighted at the thought of spending a Sunday at home with his mother; but though it was not for him to give an opinion, he agreed with Tom Hoskins that they were likely to have a dusting on the way up. The sun had gone down angry and threatening; the stars could be only seen occasionally through driving masses of cloud, and even at her snug anchorage the *Bessy* was rolling heavily.

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Jack was out soon after dawn. There was a haze over sea and sky, and the wind was blowing strongly; it was from the north-west now, but Jack thought that it was likely to draw round to the quarter his uncle had predicted. "There must be a heavy sea on now all the way from the Swin Middle to the Nore with the wind meeting a lee tide," he said to himself; "but of course when the ebb is done it will smooth down a bit, and will be all right if the weather does not come on too thick. A fog is bad enough and a gale is bad enough, but when you get the two together I would rather be at home and in bed by a long way than on board the *Bessy*."

"Well, Jack, what do you make out of the weather?" Ben Tripper asked, as he came out from the fo'castle.

"It looks rather wild, uncle; but I think the wind is working round to the north of east, just as you thought it would last night."

"Yes; I think it is," Ben said, surveying the sky. "Well, get the fire alight at once, Jack, and get breakfast ready; we will have our meal before we start. We shall have enough to do when we are once under way. I will run down to the Naze anyhow, and then we shall see what

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it is like outside. If we don't like its looks we can pop back anyhow; and shall have lost nothing, for there is no shooting nets to-day, that is quite certain."

The topmast was lowered, small jib and foresail got up, and two reefs put in the mainsail; then they began to get up the anchor.

"What! are you going up home, Tripper?" shouted a man from the next boat.

"Ay, ay, lad!"

"You will get your decks washed before you get to the Mouse!"

"Do them good and save us trouble!" Tripper shouted back.

"Tell the missis if you see her she may expect to see me next Saturday if the wind is right." Tripper threw up his arm to show he understood, and then lent his aid in getting up the anchor.

"Put up the helm, Jack; the anchor is free. That is enough. Keep her jib just full and no more till we have stowed all away here." When the chain was stowed below, and the anchor securely fastened, Tripper went aft and hauled in the main-sheet. "Up with the foresail, Tom. That is it. You keep the tiller, Jack." The two men now proceeded to coil down all the ropes,

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and get everything ship-shape and tidy. By the time they had finished, Harwich was fairly behind them, and they were lying their course a point or two outside the Naze, throwing the spray high each time the boat plunged into the short choppy sea.

"Nice place this, Jack," his uncle said. "There is always a sea on the shallows if the wind is anywhere against tide. No wonder they call it the Rolling Ground. There, I will take the helm now. You had best get the compass up; I can't make out the point sometimes through the mist."

An hour and a quarter from the time of getting up the anchor the *Bessy* was off the point. As soon as the ugly ledge of rocks running far out under water was weathered, Tripper put down the helm.

"Haul in the sheet, Tom. That is right; now the sail is over. Slack out—slack out all it will go; the wind is nearly dead aft. Ease off the jib-sheet, Jack. That is it. Now she is walking along."

The motion was smooth and easy now. The waves were much higher than in the shelter of the bay, but they were running easily and regularly, in nearly the same line the boat was

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following. Coming up threateningly behind her, they lifted the stern high into the air, passing gently under her, hurrying her along as she was on the crest, and then passing on ahead and dropping her gently down into the hollow.

"I think she would stand a reef shaken out, uncle," Jack said.

"She has got quite enough on her, Jack, and is walking along at a grand pace. Always leave well alone, lad. The squalls come up very strong sometimes, and I would not carry as much sail as we have got if she were a cutter with a heavy boom. As it is, we can brail it up at any moment if need be. We sha'n't be long getting down off Clacton. Then you must keep a sharp look-out for the Spitway Buoy. It comes on very thick at times, and it is difficult to judge how far we are out. However, I think I know pretty well the direction it lies in, and can hit it to within a cable's length or so. I have found it many a time on a dark night, and am not likely to miss it now. It will take us an hour and a half or so from the time we pass Walton till we are up to the buoy.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE WRECK.

"I CAN see the buoy, uncle, over there on the weather-bow."

"That is right, Jack. I am always glad when we get that buoy; it is the hardest to find of any of them. We shall have to jibe going round it. You stand by to brail the sail up when I give the word; we might carry away the gaff at the jaws if we let the sail go over all standing now." As soon as they neared the buoy Tom Hoskins got in the oar with which the mainsail was boomed out. "Now, Jack, brail up the sail as she comes round. Haul in the sheet as fast as you can, Tom, and pay it out again handsomely as it comes over. That is the way. Now fasten the sheet and throw off the main-tack and trice the sail up pretty near to the throat.

"That will do. Slack the brail off, Jack. Now haul in the sheet a bit. You had better let the fore-

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sail down, Tom; the wind is heavy, and there is too much sea on here to drive her through it too fast."

The sea would have been far heavier than it now was in another two hours' time, but the water was still very shallow on the sands, and this broke the force of the waves. The boat was now running along the narrow channel of deep water leading between the Spitway Buoy and the Bell Buoy, and almost at right angles to the course they had before been following. The wind was almost on their beam, and even under the reduced canvas the *Bessy* was lying far over, the water covering three planks of her deck on the starboard side. They could see the buoy, and presently could hear its deep tolling as the hammers struck the bell with every motion of the buoy.

"Ah! here is another heavy rain squall coming down. I am glad we are round the Bell Buoy before it came up. Jack, you may as well put the tea-kettle on. A cup of tea will be a comfort."

All three were wrapped up in oil-skins; but in spite of this they had a general sensation of dampness, for it had been raining more or less ever since they started. Jack was below, when he heard a far louder roar of the wind than before,

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and heard his uncle shout, "Brail up the main as far as you can, Tom—the jib is about all we want now!"

Jack looked out from the fo'castle. The wind was blowing tremendously, sweeping the heads off the waves and driving them into sheets of spray; then great drops of rain struck the deck almost with the force of bullets, and a minute later it came down almost in bucketfuls.

"Do you want me, uncle?" he shouted. His voice did not reach Ben's ears, but he guessed what he had said and waved his hand to him to remain in the fo'castle. Jack took off his sou'-wester and shook the water from his oil-skin, and then opening the locker where the coke was kept replenished the fire. It settled down so dark when the squall struck the boat that he could scarce see across the little cabin. Regardless of the howling of the wind and the motion of the vessel, he sat on the floor putting in stick after stick to hasten up the fire. As soon as the kettle boiled he put in a handful of tea and some sugar and took the kettle off the fire, then he got a couple of large mugs and half-filled them with tea, and sat balancing them until the fluid was sufficiently cool to be drunk. Then tying on his sou'-

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wester again he made his way out and gave a mug to each of the others.

"Go down below again, Jack!" his uncle shouted at the top of his voice, and although Jack was within two or three feet of him, he scarcely heard him. "There is nothing to be done at present here, and it is no use looking out for the Swin Middle at present."

Jack took a look round before he went below. Away at some distance on either hand were white masses of foam where the sea was breaking on the sands. He went up to the bow and looked ahead through the darkness, then he went back to his uncle. "I caught sight of a light right over the bowsprit."

"Ah! they have lit up then," Tripper said. "I thought they would, for it is almost as dark as night. You had best get the side-lights ready and the flare-up. I don't suppose we shall want them, for if we see a steamer coming down we will give her a clear berth. They won't be able to look far ahead in the face of this wind and rain." Jack went forward again and lay down on the lockers. He thought little of the storm. It was a severe one, no doubt; but with the wind nearly due aft, and a weather tide, it was nothing

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to the *Bessy*, whose great beam in comparison to her length enabled her to run easily before the wind, when a long narrow craft would have been burying herself.

Presently he thought he heard his uncle shout, and getting up looked aft. Tom Hoskins was now at the helm. Tripper was standing beside him, and pointing at something broad away on the beam. Jack at once made his way aft.

"What is it, uncle?"

"I saw the flash of a gun. Ah! there it is again. There is a ship ashore on the Middle Sunk." Jack gazed in the direction in which his uncle was pointing. In a minute there was another flash.

"It is all over with her," Ben Tripper said solemnly. "The strongest ship that ever was built could not hold together long on that sand with such a sea on as there will be there now."

"Cannot we do something?"

"Tripper was silent for half a minute. "What do you think, Tom? We might get there through the swashway. There is plenty of water for us, and we could lay our course there. It is a risky business, you know, and we may not be able to get near her when we get there; but that we

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cannot tell till we see how she is fixed. Still, if we could get there before she goes to pieces we might perhaps save some of them."

"I don't mind, Ben, if you don't," the other said. "I have neither wife nor child, and if you like to take the risk, I am ready."

Ben Tripper looked at Jack. "I would not mind if it wasn't for the boy," he said.

"Don't mind me, uncle," Jack burst out. "I would not have you hang back because of me, not for anything in the world. Do try it, uncle. It would be awful to think of afterwards, when we hear of her being lost with all hands, that we might have saved some of them perhaps if we had tried."

Ben still hesitated, when another bright flash was seen. It was an appeal for aid he could not resist. "Put down the helm, Tom," he said. "Now, Jack, help me to rouse in the sheet. That will do. Now then for a pull on the jib-sheet. Now we will put the last reef in the foresail and hoist it, slack the brail and haul down the maintack a bit. We must keep good way on her crossing the tide." Now that they were nearly close-hauled instead of running before the wind, Jack recognized much more strongly than before how

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heavy was the sea and how great the force of the wind. Lively as the boat was, great masses of water poured over her bow and swept aft as each wave struck her. Her lee bulwarks were completely buried.

"Give me the helm, Tom," Tripper said; "and get those hatchways up and cover the well, and lash the tarpaulin over it. It is bad enough here, it will be worse when we get into broken water near the wreck." Most of the bawleys are provided with hatches for closing the long narrow place known as the 'well,' but it is only under quite exceptional circumstances that they are ever used. Jack and the man got them up and managed to fit them in their places, but getting the tarpaulin over them was beyond their power.

"I will throw her up into the wind," Ben said. "Haul on the weather fore-sheet as I do, and belay it with the foot of the sail just to windward of the mast. Now rouse in the main-sheet. That is right."

Quitting the tiller as the boat lay-to to the wind, Ben lent his aid to the other two, and in three or four minutes the tarpaulin was securely lashed over the hatches, and the boat completely battened down.

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"Now, Jack, you had best lash yourself to something or you will be swept overboard; we shall have it a lot worse than this presently. Now, Tom, before we get well away again get the last reef in the mainsail, then we can haul the tack down taut again; the sail will stand much better so, and we shall want to keep her all to windward if she is to go through the swashway."

When all was ready the fore weather-sheet was let go, and the lee-sheet hauled taut. The main-sheet was slacked off a little and the *Bessy* proceeded on her way. It was a terrible half-hour; fortunately the dense heavy clouds had broken a little, and it was lighter than it had been, but this only rendered the danger more distinct. Once in the swashway, which is the name given to a narrow channel between the sands, the waves were less high. But on either hand they were breaking wildly, for there were still but four or five feet of water over the sands. The sea was nearly abeam now, and several times Jack almost held his breath as the waves lifted the *Bessy* bodily to leeward and threatened to cast her into the breaking waters but a few fathoms away. But the skipper knew his boat well and humoured her through the waves, taking advantage of every squall to eat up

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a little to windward, but always keeping her sails full and plenty of way on her. At last they were through the swashway; and though the sea was again heavier, and the waves frequently swept over the decks, Jack gave a sigh of relief. They could make out the hull of the vessel now looming up black over the white surf that surrounded it. She had ceased firing, either from the powder being wetted or her guns disabled.

"Which way had we better get at her, Tom?" Ben Tripper asked. "She is pretty near on the top of the sand."

"The only way we have a chance of helping her is by laying-to, or anchoring on the edge of the sand to leeward of her. They may be able to drift a line down to us. I do not see any other way. Our anchors wouldn't hold to windward of her."

"No; I suppose that is the best way, Tom. We must make the best allowance we can for the wind and the set of tide, otherwise they will never drift a line down to us. She won't hold together long. Her stern is gone as far as the mizzen, so we must be quick about it."

The wreck was evidently a sailing vessel. Her masts were all gone, her bulwarks carried away, and she lay far heeled over. A group of people

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could be seen huddled up in the bow as they neared her. Tom Hoskins and Jack had for the last ten minutes been busy getting the spare anchor up on deck and fastening to it the warp of the trawl-net, which was by far the strongest rope they had on board.

"What water is there on the sand, Ben?"

"Six or seven feet on the edge, but less further on. We do not draw over five feet, so we will keep on till we touch. The moment we do so let the two anchors go. Wind and tide will take her off again quick enough. Pay out ten or twelve fathoms of chain, and directly she holds up drop the lead-line overboard to see if she drags; if she does, give her some more rope and chain."

The anchors were both got overboard and in readiness to let go at a moment's notice, the instant the *Bessy* took ground.

The foresail was lowered and the mainsail partly brailed up, so that she had only way on her sufficient to stem the tide. As they entered the broken water Jack was obliged to take a step back and hold on to the mast. Her motion had before been violent, but to a certain extent regular; now she was tossed in all directions so sharply and violently that he expected every moment that the

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mast would go. Tom looked round at Ben. The latter pointed to the sail and waved his hand. Tom understood him, and going to the mast loosened the brail a little to give her more sail, for the waves completely knocked the way out of her. When she forged ahead again, Tom returned to his post.

Jack held his breath every time the boat pitched, but she kept on without touching until within some eighty yards of the wreck; then as she pitched forward down a wave there was a shock that nearly threw Jack off his feet, prepared for it though he was. In a moment he steadied himself, and crept forward and cut the lashing of the hawser just as Tom severed that of the chain. The latter rattled out for a moment. There was another shock, but less violent than the first, and then the renewed rattle of the chain showed that she was drifting astern. Ben now left the tiller and sprang forward. The jib was run in by the traveller and got down, the foresail had been cast off and had run down the forestay the moment she struck, and the three now set to work to lower the mainsail.

"She is dragging," Tom said, examining the lead-line, "but not fast."

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"Give her another five or six fathoms of chain," Ben said, himself attending to the veering out of the hawser.

This done they again watched the lead-line. It hung straight down by the side of the vessel.

"They have got her," Ben said. "Now then for the ship."

For the first time since they entered the broken water they had leisure to look about them. Those on board the ship had lost no time, and had already launched a light spar with a line tied to it into the water.

"It will miss us," Ben said, after watching the spar for a minute. "You see, I allowed for wind and tide, and the wind does not affect the spar, and the tide will sweep it down thirty or forty yards on our port bow."

It turned out so. Those on board payed out the line until the spar floated abreast of the smack, but at a distance of some thirty yards away.

"What is to be done?" Ben asked. "If we were to try to get up sail again we should drift away so far to leeward we should never be able to beat back."

"Look here," Jack said; "if you signal to them to veer out some more rope I could soon do it.

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I could not swim across the tide now, but if it were twenty fathom further astern I could manage it."

"You could never swim in that sea, Jack."

"Well, I could try, uncle. Of course you would fasten a line round me, and if I cannot get there you will haul me in again. There cannot be any danger about that."

So saying Jack at once proceeded to throw off his oil-skins and sea-boots, while Ben went to the bow of the boat and waved to those on the wreck to slack out more line. They soon understood him, and the spar was presently floating twenty yards further astern. Jack had by this time stripped. A strong line was now fastened round his body under his arms, and going up to the bow of the boat, so as to give himself as long a distance as possible to drift, he prepared for the swim.

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CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE.

JACK was a good swimmer, but he had never swum in a sea like this.

"If I raise my arms, uncle, pull in at once. If I see I cannot reach the spar I sha'n't exhaust myself by going on, but shall come back and take a fresh start. Let me have plenty of rope."

"All right, Jack! we won't check you."

Jack took a header, and swimming hard under water came up some distance from the boat.

"He will do it," Tom shouted in Ben's ear. "He is nigh half-way between this and the rope already."

It was, however, a more difficult task than it looked. Had the water been smooth it would have been easy for Jack to swim across the tide to the spar before he was swept below it, but he found at once that it was impossible to swim fast, so buffeted and tossed was he by the sea, while he was almost smothered by the spray carried by the

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wind to the top of the waves. He trod water for a moment with his back to the wind, took a deep breath, and then dived again. When he came up he was delighted to see that he was as near as possible in the line of the spar, which was towing but a few yards from him. He ceased swimming, and a moment later the tide swept him down upon it.

He had before starting fastened a piece of lashing three feet long to the loop round his chest, and the moment he reached the spar he lashed this firmly round the rope, and passing one arm round the spar lifted the other above his head. In a moment he felt the strain of the rope round his chest, and this soon tightened above the water. But Jack felt that the strain of pulling not only him but the spar through the water might be too much for it, and rather than run the risk he again waved his hand, and as soon as the line slacked he fastened it to the rope from the wreck, loosened the hitches round the spar and allowed the latter to float away. He was half drowned by the time he reached the side of the bawley, for he had been dragged in the teeth of the wind and tide, and each wave had swept clean over his head.

At first those on board pulled but slowly, in

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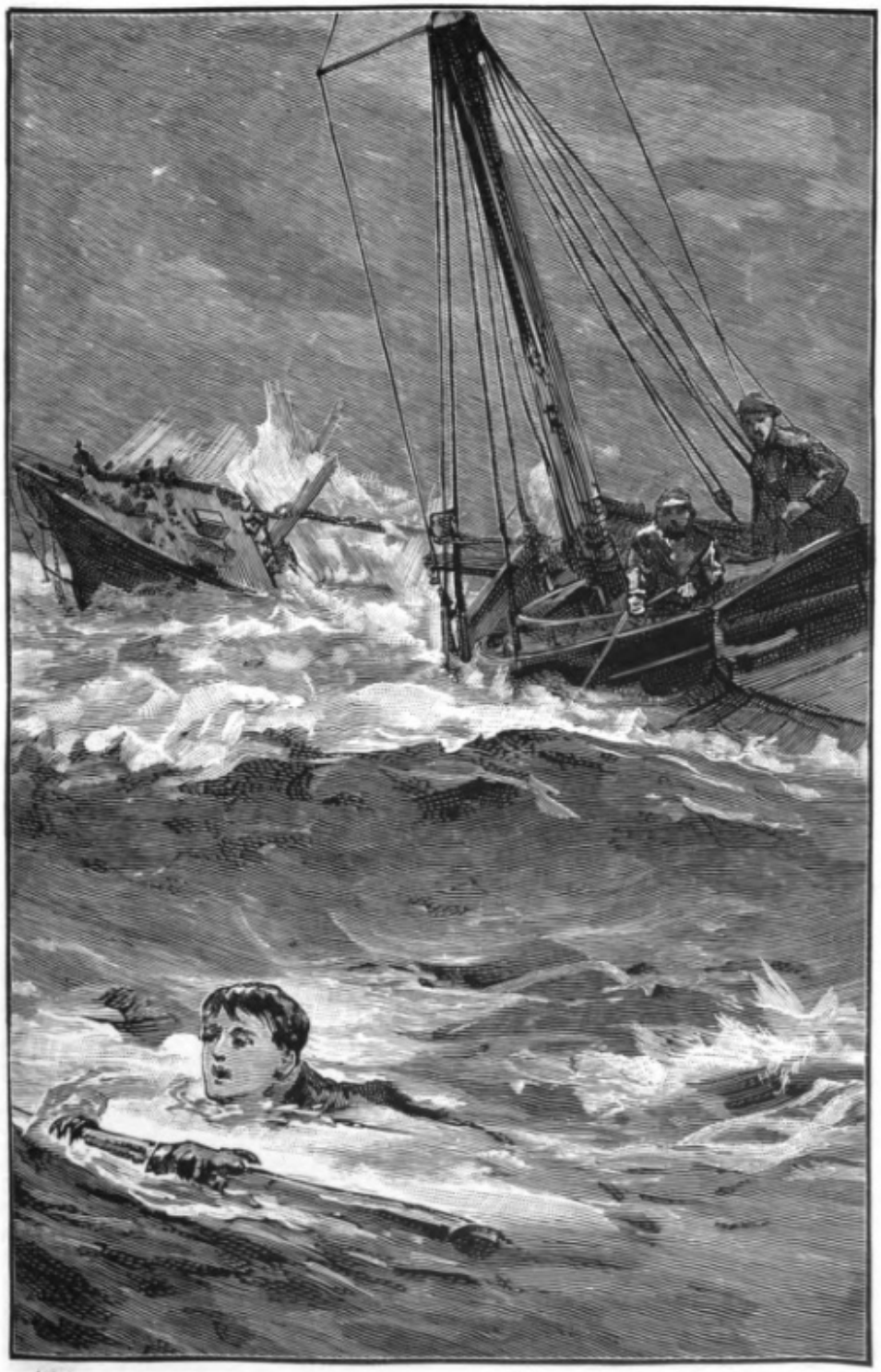

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JACK REACHES THE SPAR.

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order to enable him to swim over the top of the waves. But the force of the spray in his face was so great that he could not breathe, and he waved to them that they must draw him in at once. As soon as they understood him they pulled in the rope with a will, and more under than above the water he was brought to the side of the smack and lifted on board, the wind bringing down the sound of a cheer from those on board the wreck as he was got out of the water. Ben undid the line round his body, carried him downstairs, wrapped a couple of blankets round him and laid him down on the lockers, and then ran upstairs to assist Tom, who had carried the line forward and was already hauling it in.

"That is right, Tom. They have got a good strong hawser on it, I see, and there is a light line coming with it to carry the slings."

As soon as the end of the hawser came on board it was fastened to the mast. The line by which it had been hauled in was unfastened and tied to that looped round the hawser, and payed out as those on the deck hauled on it. A minute later two sailors got over the bulwarks, and a woman was lifted over to them and placed in the strong sling beneath the hawser. A lashing was put round her,

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and then they waved their hands and the fishermen hauled on the line. In two minutes the woman was on the deck of the smack; the lashing was unfastened and knotted on to the sling ready for the next passenger, then at Ben's signal that all was ready those on board the wreck hauled the sling back again.

Jack remained between the blankets for a minute or two. He had not lost consciousness; and as soon as his breath came he jumped up, gave himself a rub with the blanket, slipped into some dry clothes, and was on deck just as the woman arrived. She was all but insensible, and directly the sling had started on its return journey Ben carried her on into the fo'castle.

"Jack! set to work and make a lot of cocoa. There are no spirits on board; but cocoa is better, after all. Put the other kettle on and chuck plenty of wood upon the fire, and as soon as the one that is boiling now is empty, fill that up again. I should say there are twenty or thirty of them, and a pint apiece will not be too much. Take a drink yourself, lad, as soon as you have made it. You want it as much as they do."

Fast the shipwrecked people came along the line. There was not a moment to lose, for the

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wreck was breaking up fast, and every sea brought floating timbers past the bawley.

"It is a good job now, Tom, that we anchored where we did, instead of in the direct line of the tide, for one of those timbers would stave a hole in her bow as if she were a bandbox."

"Aye, that it would, Ben. I thought we had made rather a mess of it at first; but it is well that, as you say, we ain't in the line of the drift."

Nineteen persons were brought on board—the captain being the last to come along the line. The first four were women, or rather, the first two were women; the third a girl of ten years old, and the fourth a woman. Then came a middle-aged man, evidently a passenger. Then came ten sailors, a steward, two mates, and the captain.

"Is that all?" Ben asked, as the captain stepped from the slings.

"I am the last," the captain said. "Thank God all are saved who were left on board when you came in sight. We all owe our lives to you and your men. I had little hope that one of us would live to see the night when we made you out coming towards us. But there is no time to talk. The ship cannot hold together many minutes

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longer, and when she breaks up in earnest some of the timbers will be sure to come this way."

"I have got the buoy with a length of rope on the chain ready to slip," Ben said, "and a spar lashed to the hawser. Now, Tom, let the chain out; I will jump below and knock out the shackle. Now, captain, if one or two of your men will lend us a hand to get up some canvas, we shall be out of it all the sooner. And please get them all except the women out of the cabin, and put them aft. We want her head well up for running before this sea."

"Now, lads, tumble out and lend a hand," the captain said. "I see you have got some cocoa here. Well, all who have had a mug come out at once, and let the others get aft as soon as they have had their share. The ladies are all right, I hope?"

"Quite right, captain," one of the men answered, "and begin to feel warm already; which is natural enough, for this cabin is like an oven after the deck of the *Petrel*."

"Now, skipper, do you give the orders," the captain said as Ben took the tiller.

"Run up the foresail and haul in the starboard-sheet. That will bring her head round."

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"Now let go the cable and hawser." There was a sharp rattle of chains, and the cry "All free!"

"Slack off that weather-sheet and haul down on the lee-sheet," was Tripper's next order. "Not too much. Have you got the jib hooked on to the traveller? Out with it, then. Now, up with her. Now man the throat and peak halliards. Up with her. Slack out the main-sheet well, and boom the sail out with an oar. Trice the main-tack up as far as it will go."

The *Bessy* was now running almost before the wind. Every moment the great waves loomed up high behind her stern, and looked as if they would dash down upon her deck, but she slipped easily away. The clouds had broken up much now, but the wind had in no way abated. A gleam or two of sunlight made its way through the rifts of the clouds, and threw light green patches upon the gray and angry sea.

"She is a splendid sea-boat this of yours," the captain said. "I would hardly have believed such a small craft would have made such good weather in such a sea."

"There are few boats will beat a bawley," Ben said. "Well handled, they will live through pretty near anything."

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"I can quite believe that. Which of you was it who sprang overboard to get our line?"

"It was not either of us," Ben said. "Neither Tom nor I can swim a stroke. It was my nephew Jack—that lad who has just come out of the fo'castle."

"It was a gallant action," the captain said. "I should have thought it well-nigh impossible to swim in such broken water. I was astonished when I saw him leap overboard."

"He saw that the spar had drifted with the tide to windward of you and there was no other way of getting at it."

"I was in hopes of seeing you throw the lead-line over our line. You might have hauled it in that way."

"So we might," Ben agreed, "if we had thought of it, though I doubt whether we could have cast it so far. Still we ought to have tried. That was a stupid trick, to be sure. I allow I should have thought of it any other time; but we had had such a dusting in getting up to you that our brains must have gone wool-gathering."

"One cannot think of everything," the captain said. "You had your hands full as it was. Is there anything else I can do at present? If not,

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I will just go below for a minute and see how my wife and the passengers are getting on, and have a cup of that cocoa, if there is any left."

They were now in the Knob Channel, and the sea, although still heavy, was more regular. As they passed the Mouse Light-ship there were several large steamers at anchor there, but it was now a straight run down to the Nore and they held on.

Ben Tripper had already asked the captain where he would like to be landed. "I can put you either into Sheerness, Southend, or Leigh," he said. "Tide is high now, and you can land at any of them without difficulty. But you would get more quickly up to town from Southend or Leigh; and I should recommend our side, because tide will be running out from the Medway pretty strong before we get there, and when that is the case there is a nasty sea at the mouth."

"I think we cannot do better than Leigh," the captain said. "Of course I am anxious to get on shore as soon as I can to get the women into dry clothes."

"It will not make more than twenty minutes' difference whether you land at Leigh or Southend; and it is much handier for landing at Leigh, and

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no distance to the inn, where they can get between blankets while their things are being dried."

"Then Leigh let it be. A few minutes will make no difference one way or the other, and if they have not caught cold already they will not do so in that warm cabin."

The wind was blowing far too strongly to admit of conversation, except in shouted sentences. Fortunately there was a good supply of tobacco on board, and the rescued sailors, who had almost all a pipe in their pockets, had, after the smack was once clear of the broken water, enjoyed the consolation of a smoke.

Accustomed to look down on the water from the high deck of a large ship, they had at first felt some doubt as to the ability of the low bawley to struggle safely through the towering waves; but as soon as they saw how well she behaved, and how little water she took over the sides, they felt that all danger was over, and became disposed to look at things more cheerfully.

The steward had, as soon as he came on board, relieved Jack of his duties at the galley, and had kept the kettles going; he now served out a second supply of cocoa all round, and hung up as

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many of the ladies' things as they could dispense with round the fire to dry.

The passenger had remained below with the ladies. He was suffering from a broken leg, having been knocked down and swept along by the sea soon after the vessel struck. Six of the sailors and two of the mates had either been washed overboard or crushed to death when the masts went over the side.

As they passed the Nore a perfect fleet of steamers and sailing-vessels were at anchor there. Tide had turned strongly now, and there was a nasty heavy choppy sea until the *Bessy* passed the end of Southend Pier, when she entered comparatively smooth water. In less than half an hour the sails were lowered, and she anchored some fifty yards from the coast-guard station.

The look-out there had already observed the number of people on her deck, and had guessed at once that she had taken the crew off a wreck of some kind, and as soon as the anchor was dropped their boat came alongside.

The captain had as they neared the shore asked Tripper about inns, and at once sent the crew ashore in charge of the mate, with orders to go to

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the "Bell;" and to see that they had everything they required, saying that he would himself, as soon as the ladies were on shore, go to one of the shops and order a supply of clothes to be sent up for them.

The ladies were next taken ashore, and then the injured man carried up and placed in a boat, a stretcher being sent off for him to be laid on. A messenger had been already sent up to the doctor on the top of the hill to come down to the Ship Inn, where the party now went. The ladies had become so thoroughly warmed by the heat in the little cabin that they declined to go to bed, and having been supplied with dry garments by the landlady, they were soon comfortable.

The surgeon on his arrival pronounced the fracture of the passenger's leg, which was a few inches above the ankle, to be a simple one, and not likely to be attended with any serious consequences whatever. After setting it he bandaged it in splints, and said that although he should recommend a few days' perfect quiet, there was no actual reason why the patient should not be taken up to London if he particularly wished it.

Ben Tripper had gone with the captain, and a pile of flannel shirts, stockings, guernseys, trou-

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sers, and shoes had at once been sent up to the "Bell." Furious as was the gale, it was possible to speak so as to be heard in the street of Leigh, and Ben now learned for the first time some particulars about the wreck.

"The *Petrel* was a seven hundred ton ship," the captain said, "and on her way home from Australia. She belongs to James Godstone & Son. There is no James Godstone now. The son is the passenger you saved; he is the owner of a dozen vessels all about the same size as the *Petrel*. His wife and daughter are two of the ladies saved. They went out with us to Australia. The girl was not strong, and had been recommended a sea voyage.

"I had been married when I was at home last time, and was taking my wife out with me; so Mr. Godstone arranged that his wife and daughter should go with me. We carried no other passengers; the other woman saved is the stewardess. Mr. Godstone himself did not go out with us, but went across by Suez and joined us there for the homeward voyage. We made a fine run home; and took our pilot on board off Deal. The gale was blowing up then; but as it looked as if it was coming from the north-east we did not care about

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