THE WRECKER'S REWARD

Heroism of a Big Black Mate

By T. JENKINS HAINS

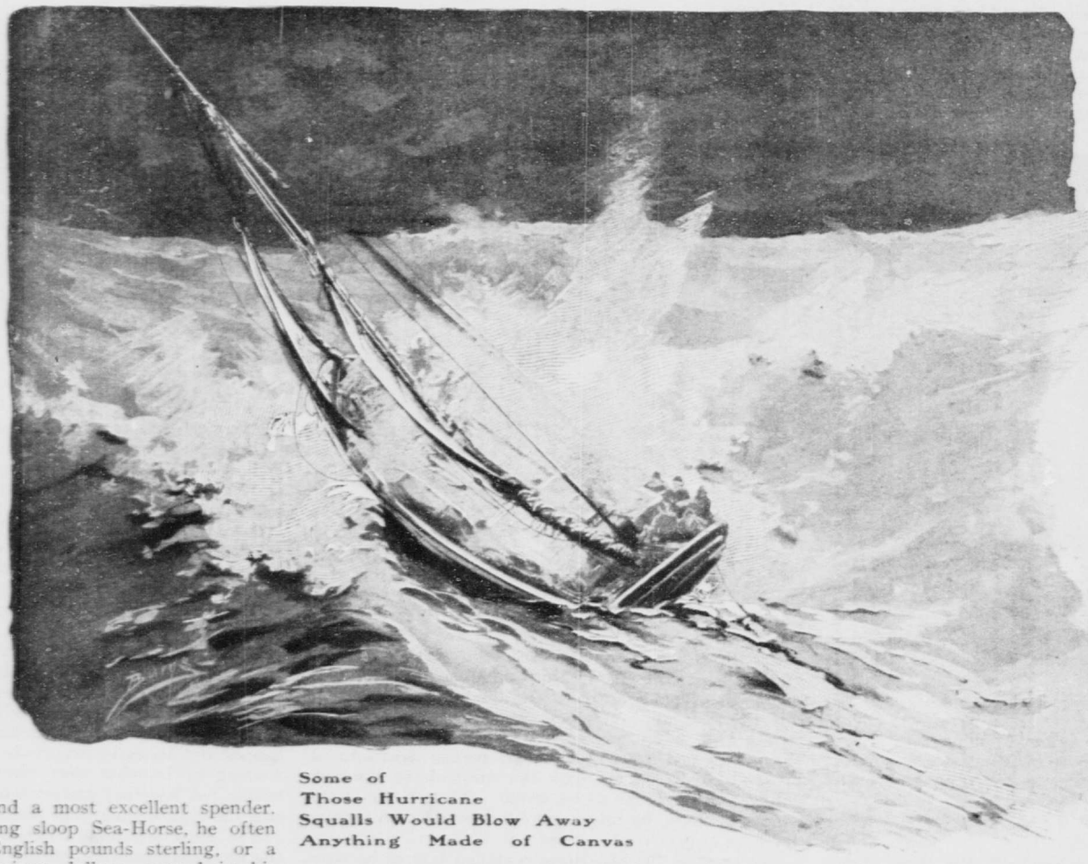
"EF I wassent er lady, I'd knock yo' blamed haid off, yo' black rascal!" cried Julia. The big mate smiled at her softly, and made another pass to seize her; but she struggled free, for he would not hold her fast enough. "Don't yo' come 'round heah no mo'; I don't want no dealin's wif no sailor men."

"What' the good o' gettin' mad over a little squeeze, Sugar-plum?" grinned the black giant. "I ain't done yo' no harm—an' wouldn't fo' nothin', Jule. Yo' knows I ain't got no gal but yo'self."

"Youse a rascal, dat yo' is, 'n' ef I wassent a lady, I'd knock yo' cocoanut off'n yo' ugly haid!" said the indignant Julia, whose dignity had been ruffled by the sailor's amorous but powerful wooing. "I knows yo', comin' around dis house an' tryin' to fool a pore gal like me."

"No, Jule, I means everythin' I says, an' a lot mo' besides. I wants yo' to marry me, sho' 'nuff," said the big sailor earnestly.

Julia rapidly was soothing herself. There was something so strong and pleading in the man's voice that she almost forgot the liberties he had taken, and looked at him keenly. "Aw, gwine away, yo' black man; whar yo' got money to marry a gal like me?" She was now smiling at him; but edging away into the doorway of the little cabin which stood by the coral roadway in Key West. She really did not dislike the sailor; for Bahama Bill had a reputation for being a good money-getter and a most excellent spender. As mate of the wrecking sloop Sea-Horse, he often came in with a few English pounds sterling, or a pocketful of good American dollars, earned in his business along the Great Bahama Bank. Three days, however, always was the limit of his prosperity.



Some of Those Hurricane Squalls Would Blow Away Anything Made of Canvas

Now he had been ashore for a week, and consequently was the possessor of nothing more than a clasp-knife, a dirty pair of trousers and jumper, and an old clay pipe. Shoes he had left at some friend's house for a trivial debt for a handful of cigars, and head-gear he did not need. He was more or less contented, and was entirely willing to enter into the married state, feeling with the utmost confidence that money was a plentiful article and easy for a man of parts to procure. His wild excesses seemed vain in the sober light of the tropic sunshine, and it manifestly was the time for him to settle down to a state of quiet bliss with Julia.

"I kin get plenty o' money, Jule," said he softly.

"When yo' shows me, den yo' cain talk wif me, an' not befo'," said Julia. "I ain't doin' no washin' 'n' ironin' for no one. I'se near eighteen now, an' I ain't married no one yet."

"But, Jule, I kin get money easy enough. Come here now an' let me tell yo' how I kin."

"No, sah, no monkeyin'," said Julia, edging farther into the doorway. "Yo' get de money fust, 'n'—'n'—den—well, yo' knows—'bout—'bout—dat."

Then she softly but firmly shut the door. He caught a glimpse of her through the kitchen window, and she smiled and waved her hand so that he almost was tempted to force an entrance; but he remembered that the Cuban who owned the house would likely hear him and perhaps fill him with bird-shot. He gave one longing look, and strode toward the harbor. The wrecking sloop was to sail that day, sponging to the northward along the Keys.

The first few days were hard on him. He was solemn and lonesome in spite of himself, and his quiet behavior was noticed by his shipmates. They made the remarks usual among rough men of the forecastle, but Bill took no notice.

"Here's a chance for a feller to make good," cried a Conch to a stout German sailor called Heldron: "Reward fer old man Sanches' boy who run off to sea in one o' them fruit-ships," and he read from an old paper as he lay in his bunk during the watch, below.

"I know dot poy: he pad poy; but him fader big sight worse," said the German. "He make de worst seegar in Key West."

"Well, if I was a mate o' a ship I might make good on that, hey?" said Sam.

"Blamed sight easier'n spongin', to catch a little boy," said another; "but I hear the old man is going to the eastward—heard of something down Fortune Island way."

And the conversation turned to business, while the mate smoked on in silence. That night they were speeding across the Florida Channel in spite of the threatening weather and heavy sea. By morning they were many miles off shore, and gradually had been forced to slow down. The wind, while now slacking up and becoming heavy with moisture and warmth, had been strong enough during the night to make the Sea-Horse shorten down to keep from forcing too heavily into the high, rolling sea.

It was dirty weather in the Gulf Stream. The flying scud streamed away to the northwest in little, whirling bits of vapor. They tore along with the speed of an express train in a direction which seemed at a sharp angle to the heavy, steel-blue bank which swept in a mighty and majestic semicircle across the southern sky. High overhead the sky had a distant appearance, something peculiar and weird, for the storm center was advancing northward and gathering all straying moisture in its grasp. It made dark streaks in the heavens at a distance above the sea, and rays of the morning sun shone upon them with a brassy glare, as though the whole universe was incased in a colossal dome which darkened near the horizon. It seemed to absorb the failing light less and less as the line of vision rose toward the zenith.

With a line of reef-points tied in from the second hoop on the mainsail to the cringle on the leach, which raised only a couple of fathoms in the air, the Sea-Horse lay upon the starboard tack. A bit of staysail forward hauled to the mast held it steady as it breasted the sea, staggering to leeward with the heave that, increasing, told of a mighty power behind it. The combing crests rolled white with a dull, rattling snore, and the beautiful, blue color of the warm stream was paling into a dark lead.

The sloop would throw its forefoot high in the air as the rolling crests would strike and sweep from under the now almost loggy hulk. The brown of the copper-painted under-body showed in strong contrast to the dirty white above. Then it would drop with a sidewise, twisting motion, a little bow-foremost into the trough and back its snub nose away from the onrushing hill before it, which sometimes would burst and smother it out of sight to the mast in a storm of flying water. Then it would drop again, sidewise and forward down the incline, the rush of foam on the decks sweeping through the side ports in the bulwarks, spurting and pouring over everything, and finally overboard, until the action was repeated.

Two men in their yellow oilskins were upon the quarter-deck; one lying prone abaft the rise of the cabin, gazed sullenly at the menacing sky. The other sat and held on the wheel, which was fast in a becket, with relieving tackles on the gear heaving it hard down, and he tried to get puffs of smoke from a pipe. The wind was getting too strong for smoking, and he went into the companion-way and called the mate to relieve him. Bahama Bill came up, and the Captain went below.

The big mate sat there watching the weather, and his face bore a good-humored expression. The conditions suited his frame of mind. Away from the temptations of the beach, he was a different man from the fracas-loving ruffian when full of cheap grog. Captain Bull Sanders turned in for a short rest, knowing that the vessel was in good hands.

Below in the bunks of the cuddy five men lay in all possible positions to keep from being flung out. One read, or tried to read, the paper which told of the running away to sea of the rich cigar-maker's son and of the reward offered for his safe delivery into the bosom of his family. Others lay and talked. Another slept, grasping even in his slumbers at the bunk-boards, and mechanically bracing his knee to hold himself during the wild plunges. The creaking and racking of the straining sloop blended with the droning roar overhead, punctuated now and then by a smashing crash as a sea would fall on deck; but the resting men paid little attention to either the noise or motion, until the Captain had finished his pipe.

He suddenly threw down the magazine he had been trying to read for some minutes, and glanced at the barometer on the bulkhead. "Goin' down all the time. I reckon we'll catch it," he said.

"Hurricane season began nigh a month ago," said a man significantly.

"It don't got here alretty yet, maybe," said Heldron.

"Must be," said a Swede.

There was a general movement. All hands reached