

**"THE RIBS OF DEATH."**

Three months before I was born my father's boat went down in a sudden squall, within sight of home and of my mother, who, with the rest of the fishermen's wives, awaited the landing of the little fleet. Perhaps this was the reason I had such an instinctive horror and dread of the sea, even while it fascinated and drew me to it in its stormiest moods. It was a queer feeling that possessed me. When away from the sight and sound of the breakers I was restless and unquiet, near them I was awed and melancholy, but some craving of my nature was satisfied, and I was comparatively calm. I believe many of our people, who are intensely superstitious, looked upon me as doomed in consequence of this. "The sea always swallows what it gets a hold of," they said amongst themselves with sorrowful fatalism. We can hardly help being superstitious and gloomy—who are born and reared in Callernouth. Nature is so stern in her moods, and so cruel in her way of expressing them.

Callernouth is only a cluster of cottages around a little harbor, with a pier and life-boat house below. About a mile to the north is the ugly sharp ridge of rocks which bears the significant name of the "Ribs o' Death." Many a fine vessel has struck, and ground her timbers to matchwood, many a poor clinging life has been washed off those fatal ribs. They do say that in the old times many a ship was lured there to its destruction too; but I can scarce believe the grandfathers of our brave fellows, who lived by and on the waters just as now, could be inhuman enough to trade upon the danger and the deaths of fellow-mariners. Only I must say that even yet, while any one of our men would risk his life without thinking twice about it to save another, he wouldn't have any very definite ideas on the laws of salvage.

Spite of my want of beauty, I had two lads came courting me, and Willie Lisle was the one I favored. Edam (Adam) Carr was too much of my own temper for me, too gloomy; I was afraid of him, had the same sort of mistrust of him that I had of the sea, and perhaps a little of the same idea of his possible power over me.

But Willie, with his bonnie yellow curls and his blue eyes, and his sunny smile, what girl could have resisted him? He brought his brightness into my life, and it seemed to go out like the sun beneath a cloud on the day he sailed in the "Rowena," bound for China and the East Indies, from the Tyne.

All our most energetic and enterprising young men become sailors, if they do not feel satisfied to be fishermen as their fathers before them. It never seems to enter into any of their heads that there are other means of livelihood than these two callings. They cannot tear themselves away from the sea altogether, however they may abuse it. They inhale its salt breeze with their earliest breaths, its foam and spray beat on them, until it becomes part of them as it were, and they are as much creatures of the waves as the fishes that swim beneath or the gulls that float above. So it was that when Willie grew discontented with his earnings as a fisherman, he went to sea to make more money, in the hope of wedding me the sooner.

"I was not strong enough for a fisherman's wife," he said, "and he hoped to be able to keep me like a lady!" Just as if I cared!

One afternoon I was wandering rather disconsolately on the beach, feeling low and hopeless, wishing for Willie and better days, when Edam, who was busy in his boat, called to me as I past by.

"Elsie, come here and tell me what you think o' my boat?" he cried in a more cheery voice than usual, and glad to be good-natured when I could, I stopped and admired the fine new boat he had just bought with the money an uncle had left him.

"But you've got no name for her," I said at last; "what are you going to call her?"

"That depends on you," he replied, looking up quickly; "if ye don't object, I would name her 'The Bonnie Elsie.'"

That would never do, I thought in a minute, it would be all over the place at once that Edam Carr had called his boat after Elsie Wilson, and that she was "off with the old love and on with the new."

"You mustn't do that," I demurred as gently as I could; "there's prettier names and lasses too, for that matter, in the place!"

His face changed for the worse in a moment, and an angry light blazed in his eyes.

"I'm not to hev yer name then, forbye yerself!"

"It wouldn't do, Edam; folks would talk, and—willie might be vexed," I went on hesitatingly. What a coward I was to be sure! It was with the greatest difficulty in the world I managed to bring out my real objection. And yet I was so proud of being Willie's sweetheart.

"He's not yer man yet that he should mind," Edam replied sulkily; and then under his breath, "Maybe he never will beither."

I heard the end of the sentence, low as it was muttered.

"An' what's to hinder, if we're both of one mind about it?" I said sharply, losing my temper a bit at his obstinacy.

"Who knows? He might get a wife where he's gone, and he might never come back at all—"

"D'ye want to quarrel wi' me, Edam?" "No, no, Elsie, we winna quarrel," he said at once. "I'm a bit queer in the temper, but I wouldn't like to vex you. I'm goin' to try th' new boat, will ye venture out wi' me, lassie?" he went on quietly after a moment.

"I did not know what to say. It would not be wise to offend him more than I had been unlucky enough to do already. There was no harm in sailing out a mile or so, providing he would promise to bring me back then. But, could I trust him? His mother, old Nanny Carr, had come up while we were speaking, and she took part with him.

"It's not much to ask ye, Elsie, and it'll please him ever so! He's gey queer to do wi' just now, lassie," she said aside to me; "if ye can humor him a bit, ye might for ma sake."

She was a kind neighbor, and after the bairns got a dinner from her when I was away, so I did not care to refuse her if she saw no harm in it, who else would dare to talk?

Still I hesitated.

"D'ye think it's safe? The sea has been callin' off and on all the day. Listen!" And in the hush which so often precedes a gale we could distinctly hear that strange moaning, about which we always say "The sea is calling."

Edam threw a quick glance along the horizon.

"It'll blow hard afore the morn, but there's time enough to be out and ir again for all that."

There was something in the tone which made me doubtful; so before long we were out on the open sea, tacking and turning to catch the breeze. There was more of that farther out than on shore, but still not enough to send us along merrily, although the new boat was as light, and swift, and easy to manage as any boat could well be, and skimmed the waves like a bird.

"She's a bonnie one to go, Edam," I said after a little; but I got no reply. Edam sat with his eyes fixed upon the distant sky, and I could see he was thinking something over very deeply. I followed the direction of his eyes, and did not like the prospect. A gleam of sickly yellow light lay low down to the water, but above that were piled masses of heavy gray clouds, without a break save in one place, where it was as though a mighty hand had pushed them aside to make a space for the tempest to break through. All around this space was hurry and confusion, while the rest of the sky was sullen and quiet. Far out the sickly gleam on the horizon was repeated on a gray green sea; nearer, the dark waves were beginning to show tops of white.

I did not like the prospect, nor did I like the notion of being out there on the angry-looking waste of waters at the mercy of Edam Carr and his caprices.

"Don't you think we should go back now, Edam?" I asked timidly; "it doesn't look over well out yonder," and I pointed to the far sea.

"Leave that to me, Elsie, ma darlin'!" He had no right to call me his darling, but I was beginning to be very much afraid, and so I said nothing about that.

But all at once a rush, a whirl, and a roar caused me to scream out, as a squall struck our little craft and made it heel over, wetting me to the skin at the same time. As a matter of fact, we fisher lasses are not at all brave upon the sea, though it may be almost our native element. There are very few Grace Darlings amongst us. Indeed, we hardly ever venture into a boat at all. So it is not to be wondered at that my courage should fail utterly when we began to slip heavy seas.

"Oh, take me home, Edam, or I know we'll never win back at all!"

But he took no notice, more than to put things right and tight in a skillful way I could not but admire, however angry I began to feel towards him.

"Are you never going to turn, Edam Carr?" I broke out at last.

A suspicion which I had often heard breathed in the village came back to me then, and I trembled for our lives. They said "Edam Carr was gettin' the same queer look as his feythor had afore he went out of his heid and drowned his self;" and remembering this and the few words his mother had whispered, I inclined to think he was mad at times. When I spoke he laughed out loud. It was the first time I had ever heard him laugh, and it gave me an odd feeling.

"So you're afraid, ma bonnie Elsie! It's a long time since you and I were as much alone together as we are now, nothing but the boat that holds us two on all that world o' water! Eh, but it's fine to have you all to mysel' like this!"

"Are you mad?" I exclaimed, my thought taking words all unconsciously.

Edam laughed again, that horrible, cruel laugh which had no mirth in it.

"Maybe. Sometimes I think I am myself, but if I am, it's for love o' you." His eyes were so bright and so wild I could not bear to look at them, and his hand, as he took hold of mine, burned with fever.

"For mercy's sake, Edam, take care! If ye don't mind we'll be both in the water."

"An' what o' that? At any rate we'll drown together, and ye'll never belong to another man."

I clasped my hands in an agony of terror. Oh, what a fool I had been not to have guessed what might happen! I thought of the poor bairns at home waiting for me now to give them their suppers, and hear their prayers, and tucked them up in their beds, and the tears rolled down my cheeks at the thought of how long they might have to wait.

"Oh, Edam, I didn't think you could be so cruel!" I said between my sobs. But even the tears failed to move him.

"You have been cruel enough to me—it's my turn now!" he answered sullenly, as he altered the sail.

By this time the lurid gleam had almost died out from the sky, and all was dark around us. The wind was blowing strongly, and hurrying the masses of clouds across the heavens at headlong speed, and tearing at the water until the air and the waves mingled in one wild fray. How our little boat lived at all in such a storm is more than I can understand. In the hands of a less experienced boatman we should have been lost in no time.

"Do have pity on me and the poor little ones that have only me to look to, Edam—dear Edam!"

"Ay, it is dear Edam now you're in my power, but how long would it last if I let you win safe to land? Elsie, if you'll say you'll be ma wife I'll make for shore this minute—if not—"

"What then?" I faltered.

"I'll run us straight on to the 'Ribs o' Death,' and there'll be an end on't!"

"What was I to do? I tried to be false to Willie for the sake of dear life; but it was no use; I couldn't get out the words which would make me so! If I

must die I must, and there was no help for it, but, oh! it was hard, while the young blood flowed quick and warm in my veins, to be plunged headlong into eternity.

I gave one loud despairing cry.

"Oh, Willie, Willie! can you not hear me, my sweetheart, my darling! If you were only by I know you could save me. It's for your sake I die, Willie; but I love you so, I love you so!"

"Then die, Elsie, for ye shall never be his wife!"

I sank down in the bottom of the boat and closed my eyes. I could not look at my death, though I knew now it must come. A dull stupor crept over me, and the agony of fear which held me before was gone. Was it my disordered imagination which made me think something had happened which sounds perfectly incredible?

It was getting too dark to distinguish plainly, but, surely, that was Edam Carr's big form I saw at the other end of the boat stooping over a coil of rope!

Then, who was the man busied with the sail in the center of it?

We were shut off from all human help there in the midst of a howling tempest, and yet some one had managed to come on board, and evidently to give us assistance. No other vessel could possibly have approached us while my eyes were shut, certainly not without my hearing it. Where then had this stranger come from?

All these thoughts flashed through my mind, but at the time I was too stupefied to wonder much. My faculties seemed dulled, and I could neither suffer nor fear any more. I simply waited for the end. I could see dimly the sharp ridge of rocks we were nearing, and from which nothing short of a miracle now could keep us.

But this miracle did take place. All at once our course changed and the boat turned from its dangerous way. Then, and not till then, did Edam seem to awaken to the knowledge that he was no longer managing affairs. With a sudden oath he started up and crept forward.

When he got to the figure standing with its back toward him, I saw him raise his arm to thrust it aside. Then slowly, slowly it turned and looked him straight in the face.

He cried out wildly, "God help me, for I'm mad now, anyway!" and, throwing up his arms, he leapt overboard into the seething waves.

I watched him strike out when he rose, but I was too paralyzed to scream even. He had not a chance in that terrible sea, but was thrown like a bit of floating weed upon the very rocks he had been steering for, clung there a moment, only to be swept back by a return of the waves. I saw this in the last lurid streak of light which flashed across the water, before the night came, and in it were shown at last the features of my strange companion. Was it all a dream? I did not know even then, nor did I feel afraid, but as those eyes met mine a thrill ran through me, and I sank into unconsciousness. Late that night, when some of the men went down to see that their boats were secure, they found Adam Carr's new boat safely drawn up on the beach, and me lying in it in a dead faint.

After that came a time of dull, stupid misery to me. I could never answer questions, nor give any account of that dreadful evening, save that Adam Carr had gone mad and jumped overboard, and had been dashed against the "Ribs of Death," and that I fainted when this happened and knew no more. But then, how had the boat been brought into port, they asked? My story was proved true by poor Adam's body being washed ashore two days after. For long the people looked at me strangely. Their superstition made them regard me as "uncanny," and shun me as something they could not account for. Besides; instead of the sea claiming its victim, as they expected it to do, I had been miraculously saved from it!

I often wonder I did not go mad myself during that dreary time.

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