

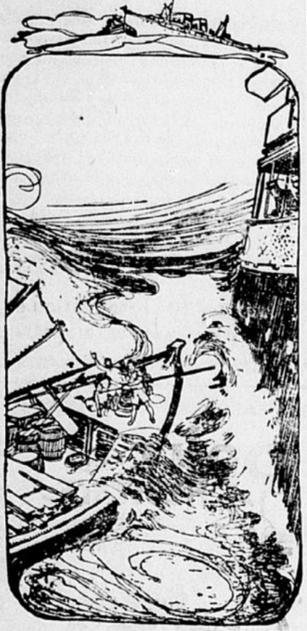
ings of morning

TRACY

Edward J. Clode

drifted on through chaos. The typhoon had broken the lance.

But brave men, skillfully directed, wrought hard to avert further disaster.



They looked down into the wrecked craft.

After the first moment of stupor gallant British sailors risked life and limb to bring the vessel under control.

By their calm courage they shamed the paralyzed Lascars into activity. A sail was rigged on the foremast and a sea anchor hastily constructed as soon as it was discovered that the helm was useless. Rockets flared up into the sky at regular intervals in the faint hope that should they attract the attention of another vessel she would follow the disabled Sirdar and render help when the weather moderated.

When the captain ascertained that no water was being shipped, the damage being wholly external, the collision doors were opened and the passengers admitted to the saloon, a brilliant palace, superbly indifferent to the wreck and ruin without.

Captain Ross himself came down and addressed a few comforting words to the quiet men and pallid women gathered there. He told them exactly what had happened.

The hours passed in tedious misery after Captain Ross's visit. Every one was eager to get a glimpse of the unknown terrors without from the deck. This was out of the question, so people sat around the tables to listen eagerly to Experience and his wise saws on drifting ships and their prospects.

Some cautious persons visited their cabins to secure valuables in case of further disaster. A few hardy spirits returned to bed.

Meanwhile in the chart house the captain and chief officer were gravely pondering over an open chart and discussing a fresh risk that loomed ominously before them. The ship was a long way out of her usual course when the accident happened. She was drifting now, they estimated, eleven knots an hour, with wind, sea and current all forcing her in the same direction, drifting into one of the most dangerous places in the known world, the south China sea, with its numberless reefs, shoals and isolated rocks and the great island of Borneo stretching right across the path of the cyclone.

Still there was nothing to be done save to make a few unobtrusive preparations and trust to idle chance. To attempt to anchor and ride out the gale in their present position was out of the question.

Two, 3, 4 o'clock came and went. Another half hour would witness the dawn and a further clearing of the weather. The barometer was rapidly rising. The center of the cyclone had swept far ahead. There was only left the aftermath of heavy seas and furious but steadier wind.

Captain Ross entered the chart house for the twentieth time.

He had aged many years in appearance. The smiling, confident, debonaire officer was changed into a stricken, mournful man. He had altered with his ship. The Sirdar and her master could hardly be recognized, so cruel were the blows they had received.

"It is impossible to see a yard ahead," he confided to his second in command. "I have never been so anxious before in my life. Thank God, the night is drawing to a close. Perhaps when day breaks?"

His last words contained a prayer and a hope. Even as he spoke the ship seemed to lift herself bodily with an unusual effort for a vessel moving before the wind.

The next instant there was a horrible grinding crash forward. Each person who did not chance to be holding fast to an upright was thrown violently down. The deck was tilted to a dangerous angle and remained there, while the heavy buffeting of the sea, now raging afresh at this unlooked for resistance, drowned the despairing yells raised by the Lascars on duty.

The Sirdar had completed her last voyage. She was now a battered wreck on a barrier reef. She hung thus for one heartbreaking second. Then another wave, riding triumphantly through its fellows, caught the great steamer in its tremendous grasp, carried her onward for half her length and smashed her down on the rocks. Her back was broken. She parted in two halves. Both sections turned completely over in the utter wantonness of destruction, and everything—masts, funnels, boats, hull, with every living soul on board—was at once engulfed in a maelstrom of rushing water and far flung spray.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN the Sirdar parted amidships the floor of the saloon heaved up in the center with a mighty crash of rending woodwork and iron. Men and women, too stupefied to sob out a prayer, were pitched headlong into chaos. Iris, torn from the terrified grasp of her maid, fell through a corridor and would have gone down with the ship had not a sailor, clinging to a companion ladder, caught her as she whirled along the steep slope of the deck.

He did not know what had happened. With the instinct of self preservation he seized the nearest support when the vessel struck. It was the mere impulse of ready helpfulness that caused him to stretch out his left arm and clasp the girl's waist as she fluttered past. By idle chance they were on the port side, and the ship, after pausing for one awful second, fell over to starboard.

The man was not prepared for this second gyration. Even as the stairway canted he lost his balance; they were both thrown violently through the open hatchway and swept off into the boiling surf. Under such conditions thought itself was impossible. A series of impressions, a number of fantastic pictures, were received by the benumbed faculties and afterward painfully sorted out by the memory. Fear, anguish, amazement—none of these could exist. All he knew was that the lifeless form of a woman—for Iris had happily fainted—must be held until death itself wrenched her from him. Then there came the headlong plunge into the swirling sea, followed by an indefinite period of gasping oblivion. Something that felt like a moving rock rose up beneath his feet. He was driven clear out of the water and seemed to recognize a familiar object rising rigid and bright close at hand. It was the pinnacle pillar, screwed to a portion of the deck which came away from the chart house, and was rent from the upper framework by contact with the reef. He seized this unlooked for support with his disengaged hand.

A uniformed figure—he thought it was the captain—stretched out an unavailing arm to clasp the queer raft which supported the sailor and the girl, but a jealous wave rose under the platform with devilish energy and turned it completely over, hurling the man with his inanimate burden into the depths. He rose, fighting madly for his life. Now surely he was doomed. But again, as if human existence depended on naught more serious than the spinning of a coin, his knees rested on the same few stanch timbers, now the ceiling of the music room, and he was given a brief respite. His greatest difficulty was to get his breath, so dense was the spray through which he was driven. Even in that terrible moment he kept his senses. The girl, utterly unconscious, showed by the convulsive heaving of her breast that she was choking. With a wild effort he swung her head round to shield her from the flying scud with his own form.

The tiny air space thus provided gave her some relief, and in that instant the sailor seemed to recognize her. He was not remotely capable of a definite idea. Just as he vaguely realized the identity of the woman in his arms the unsteady support on which he rested toppled over. Again he renewed the unequal contest. A strong, resolute man and a typhoon sea wrestled for supremacy.

This time his feet plunged against something gratefully solid. He was dashed forward, still battling with the raging turmoil of water, and a second time he felt the same firm yet smooth surface. His dormant faculties awoke. It was sand. With frenzied desperation, buoyed now by the inspiring hope of safety, he fought his way onward like a maniac.

Often he fell. Three times did the backwash try to drag him to the swirling death behind, but he staggered blindly on, until even the tearing gale ceased to be laden with the suffocating foam, and his faltering feet sank in deep soft white sand.

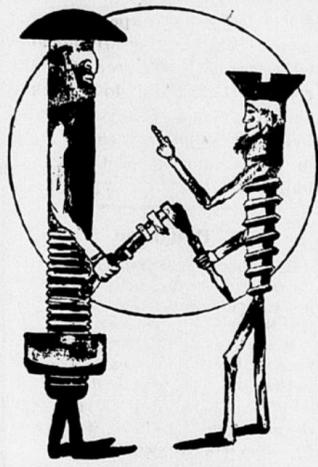
Then he fell, not to rise again. With a last weak flicker of exhausted strength he drew the girl closely to him, and the two lay clasped tightly together, heedless now of all things.

How long the man remained prostrate he could only guess subsequently. The Sirdar struck soon after day-break, and the sailor awoke to a hazy consciousness of his surroundings to find a shaft of sunshine flickering through the clouds banked up in the east. The gale was already passing away. Although the wind still whistled with shrill violence, it was more blustering than threatening. The sea, too, though running very high, had retreated many yards from the spot where he had finally dropped, and its surface was no longer scourged with venomous spray.

Slowly and painfully he raised himself to a sitting posture, for he was bruised and stiff. With his first movement he became violently ill. He had swallowed much salt water, and it was not until the spasm of sickness had passed that he thought of the girl. "She cannot be dead," he hoarsely murmured, feebly trying to lift her. "Surely Providence would not desert her after such an escape. What a weak beggar I must be to give in at the last moment! I am sure she was living when we got ashore. What on earth can I do to revive her?"

Forgetful of his own aching limbs in this newborn anxiety, he sank on one knee and gently pillowed Iris' head and shoulders on the other. Her eyes were closed, her lips and teeth firmly set—a fact to which she undoubtedly owed her life, else she would have been skin-faceted—and the pallor of her skin seemed to be that terrible bloodless hue which indicates death. The stern lines in the man's face relaxed, and something blurred his vision. He was weak from exhaustion and want of

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food. For the moment his emotions were easily aroused.

"Oh, it is pitiful!" he almost whimpered. "It cannot be!"

With a gesture of despair he drew the sleeve of his thick jersey across his eyes to clear them from the gathering



He staggered blindly on.

mist. Then he tremblingly endeavored to open the neck of her dress. He was startled to find the girl's eyes wide open and surveying him with shadowy alarm. She was quite conscious.

"Thank God!" he cried hoarsely. "You are alive."

Her color came back with remarkable rapidity. She tried to assume a sitting posture, and instinctively her hands traveled to her disarranged costume.

"How ridiculous!" she said, with a little note of annoyance in her voice, which sounded curiously hollow. But her brave spirit could not yet command her enfeebled frame. She was perforce compelled to sink back to the support of his knee and arm.

"Do you think you could lie quiet until I try to find some water?" he gasped anxiously.

She nodded a childlike acquiescence, and her eyelids fell. It was only that her eyes smarted dreadfully from the salt water, but the sailor was sure that this was a premonition of a lapse to unconsciousness.

"Please try not to faint again," he said. "Don't you think I had better loosen these things? You can breathe more easily."

A ghost of a smile flickered on her lips. "No—no," she murmured. "My eyes hurt me—that is all. Is there any—water?"

(To be continued.)

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