ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

THE LIVELY POLL: A TALE OF THE NORTH SEA

Robert Michael Ballantyne

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Содержание

Chapter One 5
Chapter Two 9
Chapter Three 13
Chapter Four 17
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 18

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Chapter One
The Fleet

Manx Bradley was an admiral—"admiral of the fleet"—though it must be admitted that his personal appearance did not suggest a position so exalted.

With rough pilot coat and sou'-wester, scarred and tarred hands, easy, rolling gait, and boots from heel to hip, with inch-thick soles, like those of a dramatic buccaneer, he bore as little resemblance to the popular idea of a lace-coated, brass-buttoned, cock-hatted admiral as a sea-urchin bears to a cockle-shell. Nevertheless Manx was a real admiral—as real as Nelson, and much harder worked.

His fleet of nearly two hundred fishing-smacks lay bobbing about one fine autumn evening on the North Sea. The vessels cruised round each other, out and in, hither and thither, in all positions, now on this tack, now on that, bowsprits pointing north, south, east, and west, as if without purpose, or engaged in a nautical game of "touch." Nevertheless all eyes were bent earnestly on the admiral's vessel, for it was literally the "flagship," being distinguishable only by a small flag attached to its fore stay.

The fleet was hovering, awaiting orders from the admiral. A fine smart "fishing breeze" was blowing. The setting sun sparkled on the wave-crests; thin fleecy clouds streaked the sky; everything gave promise of a satisfactory night, and a good haul of fish in the morning.

With the quiet air of an amiable despot Manx nodded his venerable head. Up went the signal, and in a few minutes the fleet was reduced to order. Every smack swept round into position, and, bending over on the same tack, they all rushed like a shoal of startled minnows, away in the same direction—the direction signalled by the admiral. Another signal from our venerable despot sent between one and two hundred trawl-nets down to the bottom of the sea, nets that were strong enough to haul up tons of fish, and rocks, and wreckage, and rubbish, with fifty-feet beams, like young masts, with iron enough in bands and chains to sink them, and so arranged that the beams were raised a few feet off the ground, thus keeping the mouths of the great nets open, while cables many fathoms in length held the gears to their respective vessels.

So the North Sea Fishermen began the night's work—the *Nancy*, the *Coquette*, the *Rattler*, the *Truant*, the *Faith*, the *Playfellow*, the *Cherub*, and all the rest of them. Of course, although the breeze was fresh, they went along slowly, because of the ponderous tails that they had to draw.

Do you ask, reader, why all this order? why this despotic admiral, and all this unity of action? why not "every man for himself"? Let me reply by asking you to think for a moment.

Wind blowing in one direction, perhaps you are aware, does not necessarily imply vessels sailing in the same direction. With variation of courses possible, nearly two hundred tails out astern, and no unity of action, there would arise the certainty of varied and striking incident. The *Nancy* would go crashing into the bows of the *Coquette*, the bowsprit of the *Rallier* would stir up the cabin of the *Truant*, the tail of the *Faith* would get entangled with that of the *Cherub*, and both might hook on to the tail of the *Playfellow*; in short, the awful result would be wreck and wretchedness on the North Sea, howling despair in the markets of Columbia and Billingsgate, and no fish for breakfast in the great metropolis. There is reason for most things—specially good reason for the laws that regulate the fisheries of the North Sea, the fleets of which are over twelve in number, and the floating population over twelve thousand men and boys.

For several hours this shoal of vessels, with full sails and twinkling lights, like a moving city on the deep, continued to tug and plunge along over the "banks" of the German ocean, to the satisfaction of the fishermen, and the surprise no doubt of the fish. About midnight the admiral again signalled, by rocket and flares, "Haul up," and immediately, with capstan, bar, and steam, the obedient crews began to coil in their tails.

It is not our intention to trouble the reader with a minute account of this process or the grand result, but, turning to a particular smack, we solicit attention to that. She is much like the others in size and rig. Her name is the *Lively Poll*. Stephen Lockley is her skipper, as fine a young fisherman as one could wish to see—tall, handsome, free, hearty, and powerful. But indeed all deep-sea fishermen possess the last quality. They would be useless if not physically strong. Many a Samson and Hercules is to be found in the North Sea fleets. "No better nursery or training-school in time of war," they say. That may be true, but it is pleasanter to think of them as a training-school for times of peace.

The night was very dark. Black clouds overspread the sky, so that no light save the dim rays of a lantern cheered the men as they went tramp, tramp, round the capstan, slowly coiling in the trawl-warp. Sheets of spray sometimes burst over the side and drenched them, but they cared nothing for that, being pretty well protected by oilskins, sou'-westers, and sea-boots. Straining and striving, sometimes gaining an inch or two, sometimes a yard or so, while the smack plunged and kicked, the contest seemed like a doubtful one between *vis inertiae* and the human will. Two hours and a half it lasted, until the great trawl-beam came to the surface, and was got up on the vessel's side, after which these indomitable men proceeded to claw up the huge net with their fingers, straining and heaving with might and main.

"Yo, ho!" cried the skipper, "heave her in, boys!"

"Hoy!" growled Peter Jay, the mate, giving a tug that should have torn the net to pieces—but didn't!

"Looks like as if we'd got hold of a lump o' wreck," gasped Bob Lumsden, the smack's boy, who was also the smack's cook.

"No, no, Lumpy," remarked David Duffy, who was no respecter of names or persons, "it ain't a wreck, it's a mermaid. I've bin told they weigh over six ton when young. Look out when she comes aboard—she'll bite."

"I do believe it's old Neptune himself," said Jim Freeman, another of the "hands." "There's his head; an' something like his pitchfork."

"It does feel heavier than I ever knowed it afore," remarked Fred Martin.

"That's all along of your bein' ill, Fred," said the mate.

"It may be so," returned Martin, "for I do feel queer, an' a'most as weak as a baby. Come heave away!"

It was indeed a huge mass of wreck entangled with sea-weed which had rendered the net so heavy on that occasion, but there was also a satisfactory mass of fish in the "cod-end," or bag, at the extremity of the net, for, when, by the aid of the winch, this cod-end was finally got inboard, and the cord fastening the bottom of it was untied, fish of all kinds gushed over the wet decks in a living cataract.

There were a few expressions of satisfaction from the men, but not much conversation, for heavy work had still to be done—done, too, in the dark. Turbot, sole, cod, skate, and all the other treasures of the deep, had to be then and there gutted, cleaned, and packed in square boxes called "trunks," so as to be ready for the steam-carrier next morning. The net also had to be cleared and let down for another catch before daybreak.

Now it is just possible that it may never have occurred to the reader to consider how difficult, not to say dangerous, must be the operation of gutting, cleaning, and packing fish on a dark night with a smack dancing a North Sea hornpipe under one's feet. Among the dangers are two which merit notice. The one is the fisherman's liability, while working among the "ruck," to run a sharp fish-bone into his hand, the other to gash himself with his knife while attempting to operate on the tail of a skate. Either accident may be slight or it may be severe.

A sudden exclamation from one of the men while employed in this cleaning and packing work told that something had happened.

"There goes Martin," growled Joe Stubley; "you can always tell when it's him, 'cause he don't curse an' swear."

Stubley—or Stubby, as his mates called him—did not intend this for a compliment by any means, though it may sound like one. Being an irreligious as well as a stupid man, he held that all who professed religion were hypocritical and silly. Manliness, in poor Jo's mind, consisted of swagger, quiet insolence, cool cursing, and general godlessness. With the exception of Fred Martin, the rest of the crew of the *Lively Poll* resembled him in his irreligion, but they were very different in character,—Lockley, the skipper being genial; Peter Jay, the mate, very appreciative of humour, though quiet and sedate; Duffy, jovial and funny; Freeman, kindly, though reckless; and Bob, the boy-cook, easy-going both as to mind and morals. They all liked Martin, however, in spite of his religion, for he practised much and preached little.

"What's wrong?" asked Lockley, who stood at the tiller looking out for lights ahead.

"Only a bone into my left hand," replied Martin, going on with his somewhat dirty labours.

"Well that it's no worse, boy," observed Freeman, "for we've got no medicine-chest to fly to like that lucky Short-Blue fleet."

"That's true, Jim," responded Martin; "I wish we had a Gospel smack with our fleet, for our souls need repairing as well as our bodies."

"There you go," growled Stubley, flinging down a just finished fish with a flap of indignation. "A feller can't mention the name o' them mission craft without rousin' you up to some o' your hypocritical chaff. For my part, if it wasn't for the medicine-chest and the mittens, I think we'd be better by a long way without Gospel ships, as ye call 'em. Why, what good 'ave they done the Short-Blues? I'm sure *we* doesn't want churches, or prayin', or psalm-singin' or book—"

"Speak for yourself, Jo," interrupted Puffy.

"Although your head may be as thick as a three-inch plank, through which nothin' a'most can pass either from books or anything else, you mustn't think we've bin all built on the same lines. I likes a good book myself, an', though I don't care about prayin' or psalm-singin', seein' I don't understand 'em, I say 'good luck' to the mission smacks, if it was for nothin' else than the books, an' doctor stuff, an' mitts what the shoregoin' ladies—bless their hearts!—is so fond o' sendin' to us."

"Ay, an the cheap baccy, too, that they say they're a-goin' to send to us," added Freeman.

"P'r'aps they'll send us cheap grog at last," said Puffy, with a laugh.

"They'll hardly do that," remarked Martin; "for it's to try an' keep us from goin' for our baccy to the *copers* that they've started this new plan."

"I wish 'em success," said Lockley, in a serious tone. And there was good ground for that wish, for our genial and handsome skipper was peculiarly weak on the point of strong drink, that being to him a powerful, almost irresistible, temptation.

When the fish-cleaning and packing were completed, the men went below to snatch a few hours' repose. Wet, weary, and sleepy, but with a large stock of reserve strength in them, they retired to the little cabin, in which they could scarcely stand up without bumping their heads, and could hardly turn round without hitting their elbows on something or other. Kicking off their long boots, and throwing aside oilskin coats and sou'-westers, they tumbled into their narrow "bunks" and fell asleep almost without winking.

There was one among them, however, who did not sleep long that night. Fred Martin was soon awakened by the pain of his wound, which had begun to inflame, and by a feeling of giddiness and intense uneasiness with which he had been troubled for several days past.

Turning out at last, he sat down in front of the little iron stove that served to cook food as well as to warm the cabin, and, gazing into the embers, began to meditate on his strangely uncomfortable sensations.

"Hallo, Martin, anything wrong?" asked the mate, who descended at that moment to relight his pipe.

"I believe there is, mate. I never felt like this afore. I've fowt against it till I can hardly stand. I feel as if I was goin' to knock under altogether. This hand, too, seems gittin' bad. I do think my blood must be poisoned, or somethin' o' that sort. You know I don't easily give in, but when a feller feels as if little red-hot wires was twistin' about inside of him, an' sees things goin' round as if he was drunk, why—"

"Why, it's time to think of goin' home," interrupted Jay, with a laugh. "But let's have a look at you, Fred. Well, there does seem to be some o' your riggin' slack. Have you ever had the measles?"

"Not as I knows of."

"Looks like it," said the mate, lighting his pipe. "P'r'aps it'll be as well to send you into dock to refit. You'd better turn in again, anyhow, for a snooze would do you good."

Fred Martin acted on this advice, while Jay returned to the deck; but it was evident that the snooze was not to be had, for he continued to turn and toss uneasily, and to wonder what was wrong with him, as strong healthy men are rather apt to do when suddenly seized with sickness.

At grey dawn the admiral signalled again. The order was to haul up the nets, which had been scraping the bottom of the sea since midnight, and the whole fleet set to work without delay.

Martin turned out with the rest, and tried to defy sickness for a time, but it would not do. The strong man was obliged to succumb to a stronger than he—not, however, until he had assisted as best as he could in hauling up the trawl.

This second haul of the gear of the *Lively Poll* illustrated one of those mishaps to which all deep-sea trawlers are liable, and which are of frequent occurrence. A piece of wreck or a lost anchor, or something, had caught the net, and torn it badly, so that when it reached the surface all the fish had escaped.

"A night's work for nothing!" exclaimed Stephen Lockley, with an oath.

"*Might* have been worse," suggested Martin.

By that time it was broad daylight, and as they had no fish to pack, the crew busied themselves in removing the torn net from the beam, and fitting on a new one. At the same time the crews of the other smacks secured their various and varied hauls, cleaned, packed, and got ready for delivery.

The smoke of the steam-carrier was seen on the horizon early in the forenoon, and all the vessels of the fleet made for her, as chickens make for their mother in times of danger.

We may not pause here to describe the picturesque confusion that ensued—the arriving, congregating, tacking, crossing, and re-crossing of smacks; the launching of little boats, and loading them with "trunks;" the concentration of these round the steamer like minnows round a whale; the shipping of the cargo, and the tremendous hurry and energy displayed in the desire to do it quickly, and get the fish fresh to market. Suffice it to say that in less than four hours the steamer was loaded, and Fred Martin, fever-stricken and with a highly inflamed hand and arm, started on a thirty-six hours' voyage to London.

Then the fleet sheered off and fell into order, the admiral issued his instructions, and away they all went again to continue the hard, unvarying round of hauling and toiling and moiling, in heat and cold, wet and dry, with nothing to lighten the life or cheer the heart save a game at "crib" or "all fives," or a visit to the *coper*, that terrible curse of the North Sea.

Chapter Two
Accidents Afloat and Incidents Ashore

Now, although it is an undoubted fact that the skippers of the North Sea trawling smacks are first-rate seamen, it is an equally certain fact that strong drink can render them unfit for duty. One of the skippers was, if we may say so, unmanned by drink at the time the fleet sheered off from the steam-carrier, as stated in the last chapter. He was named Georgie Fox—better known in the fleet as Groggy Fox.

Unfortunately for himself as well as others, Skipper Fox had paid a visit to one of the *copers* the day before for the purpose of laying in a stock of tobacco, which was sold by the skipper of the floating grog-shop at 1 shilling 6 pence a pound. Of course Fox had been treated to a glass of fiery spirits, and had thereafter been induced to purchase a quantity of the same. He had continued to tipple until night, when he retired in a fuddled state to rest. On rising he tippled again, and went on tippling till his fish were put on board the steamer. Then he took the helm of his vessel, and stood with legs very wide apart, an owlish gaze in his eyes, and a look of amazing solemnity on his visage.

When a fleet sheers off from a steam-carrier after delivery of cargo, the sea around is usually very much crowded with vessels, and as these cross and re-cross or run past or alongside of each other before finally settling into the appointed course, there is a good deal of hearty recognition—shouting, questioning, tossing up of arms, and expressions of goodwill—among friends. Several men hailed and saluted Fox as his smack, the *Cormorant*, went by, but he took no notice except with an idiotic wink of both eyes.

“He’s bin to the *coper*,” remarked Puffy, as the *Cormorant* crossed the bow of the *Lively Poll*. “I say, Lumpy, come here,” he added, as Bob Lumsden came on deck. “Have ’ee got any o’ that coffee left?”

“No, not a drop. I gave the last o’t to Fred Martin just as he was goin’ away.”

“Poor Fred!” said Puffy. “He’s in for suthin’ stiff, I doubt, measles or mulligrumps, if not wuss.”

“A great pity,” remarked Peter Jay, who stood at the helm, “that Martin couldn’t hold out a week longer when our turn comes round to run for Yarmouth.”

“It’s well we got him shipped off to-day,” said Lockley. “That hand of his would have made him useless before another day was out. It’s a long time for a man in his state to be without help, that run up to Lun’on. Port your helm a bit, Jay. Is it the *Cormorant* that’s yawin’ about there in that fashion?”

“Ay, it’s the *Cormorant*,” replied Jay. “I seed her just now a’most run foul o’ the *Butterfly*.”

“She’ll be foul of us. Hi! Look out!” cried Lockley, becoming excited, as he saw the *Cormorant* change her course suddenly, without apparent reason, and bear straight down upon his vessel.

There was, indeed, no reason for the strange movements of the smack in question, except that there was at the helm a man who had rendered his reason incapable of action. With dull, fishy eyes, that stared idiotically at nothing, his hand on the tiller, and his mind asleep, Georgie Fox stood on the deck of the *Cormorant* steering.

“Starboard a bit, Jay,” said Lockley, with an anxious look, “she’ll barely clear us.”

As he spoke, Fox moved his helm slightly. It changed the course of his vessel only a little, but that little sufficed to send the cutwater of the *Cormorant* straight into the port bows of the *Lively Poll* with a tremendous crash, for a smart breeze was blowing at the time. The bulwarks were cut down to the deck, and, as the *Cormorant* recoiled and again surged ahead, the bowsprit was carried away, and part of the topmast brought down.

Deep and fierce was the growl that burst from Lockley’s lips at this disaster, but that did not mend matters. The result was that the *Lively Poll* had to quit the fleet a week before her time of eight weeks afloat was up, and run to Yarmouth for repairs. Next day, however, it fell calm, and several days elapsed before she finally made her port.

Meanwhile Fred Martin reached London, with his feverish complaint greatly aggravated, and his undressed wound much worse. In London he was detained some hours by his employers, and then sent on to Yarmouth, which he reached late in the afternoon, and ultimately in a state of great suffering and exhaustion, made his way to Gorleston, where his mother lived.

With his mind in a species of wild whirl, and acute pains darting through his wounded hand and arm, he wended his way slowly along the road that led to his mother's house. Perhaps we should style it her attic, for she could claim only part of the house in which she dwelt. From a quaint gable window of this abode she had a view of the sea over the houses in front.

Part of Fred's route lay along the banks of the Yare, not far from its mouth. At a spot where there were many old anchors and cables, old and new trawl-beams, and sundry other seafaring rusty and tarry objects, the young fisherman met a pretty young girl, who stopped suddenly, and, with her large blue eyes expressing unspeakable surprise, exclaimed, "Fred!"

The youth sprang forward, seized the girl with his uninjured hand, and exclaimed, "Isa!" as he drew her towards him.

"Fred—not here. Behave!" said Isa, holding up a warning finger.

Fred consented to behave—with a promise, however, that he would make up for it at a more fitting time and place.

"But what is the matter!" asked Isa, with an anxious look, laying her pretty little hands on the youth's arm.

Yes, you need not smile, reader; it is not a perquisite of ladies to have pretty little hands. Isa's hands were brown, no doubt, like her cheeks, owing to exposure and sunshine, and they were somewhat roughened by honest toil; but they were small and well-shaped, with taper fingers, and their touch was very tender as she clasped them on her lover's arm.

"Nothing serious," replied the youth lightly; "only an accident with a fish-bone, but it has got to be pretty bad for want of attention; an' besides I'm out o' sorts somehow. No physic, you see, or doctors in our fleet, like the lucky dogs of the Short-Blue. I've been knocked up more or less for some weeks past, so they sent me home to be looked after. But I won't need either physic or doctor now."

"No? why not?" asked the girl, with a simple look.

"Cause the sight o' your sweet face does away with the need of either."

"Don't talk nonsense, Fred."

"If that's nonsense," returned the fisherman, "you'll never hear me talk sense again as long as I live. But how about mother, Isa? Is she well!"

"Quite well. I have just left her puzzling herself over a letter from abroad that's so ill-written that it would bother a schoolmaster to read it. I tried to read it, but couldn't. You're a good scholar, Fred, so you have come just in time to help her. But won't she be surprised to see you!"

Thus conversing, and walking rather slowly, the pair made their way to the attic of Mrs Martin, where the unexpected sight of her son threw the patient woman into a great flutter of surprise and pleasure. We use the word "patient" advisedly, for Mrs Martin was one of those wholesome-minded creatures who, having to battle vigorously for the bare necessaries of life in the face of many adverse circumstances, carry on the war with a degree of hearty, sweet-tempered resolution which might put to shame many who are better off in every way. Mrs Martin was a widow and a washerwoman, and had a ne'er-do-well brother, a fisherman, who frequently "sponged" upon her. She also had a mother to support and attend upon, as well as a "bad leg" to endure. True, the attendance on her mother was to the good woman a source of great joy. It constituted one of the few sunbeams of her existence, but it was not on that account the less costly, for the old woman could do nothing whatever to increase the income of the widow's household—she could not, indeed, move a step without assistance. Her sole occupation was to sit in the attic window and gaze over the sands upon the sea, smiling hopefully, yet with a touch of sadness in the smile; mouthing her toothless gums, and muttering now and then as if to herself, "He'll come soon now." Her usual attitude was that of one who listens expectantly.

Thirty years before Granny Martin had stood at the same attic window, an elderly woman even then, looking out upon the raging sea, and muttering anxiously the same words, "He'll come soon now." But her husband never came. He was lost at sea. As years flew by, and time as well as grief weakened her mind, the old woman seemed to forget the flight of time, and spent the greater part of every day in the attic window, evidently on the look-out for some one who was to come "soon." When at last she was unable to walk alone, and had to be half carried to her seat in the attic window by her strong and loving daughter, the sadness seemed to pass away, and her cheery spirit revived under the impression, apparently, that the coming could not be delayed much longer. To every one Granny was condescendingly kind, especially to her grandchild Fred, of whom she was very fond.

Only at intervals was the old woman's cheerfulness disturbed, and that was during the occasional visits of her ne'er-do-well son Dick, for he was generally drunk or "half-seas-over" when he came. Granny never mentioned his name when he was absent, and for a long time Mrs Martin supposed that she tried to forget him, but her opinion changed on this point one night when she overheard her mother praying with intense earnestness and in affectionate terms that her dear Dick might yet be saved. Still, however much or frequently Granny's thoughts might at any time be distracted from their main channel, they invariably returned thereto with the cheerful assurance that "*he* would soon come now."

"You're ill, my boy," said Mrs Martin, after the first greetings were over.

"Right you are, mother," said the worn-out man, sitting down with a weary sigh. "I've done my best to fight it down, but it won't do."

"You must have the doctor, Fred."

"I've had the doctor already, mother. I parted with Isa Wentworth at the bottom o' the stair, an' she will do me more good than dozens o' doctors or gallons o' physic."

But Fred was wrong.

Not long afterwards the *Lively Poll* arrived in port, and Stephen Lockley hastened to announce his arrival to his wife.

Now it was the experience of Martha Lockley that if, on his regular return to land for his eight days' holiday, after his eight weeks' spell afloat, her handsome and genial husband went straight home, she was wont to have a happy meeting; but if by any chance Stephen first paid a visit to the Blue Boar public-house, she was pretty sure to have a miserable meeting, and a more or less wretched time of it thereafter. A conversation that Stephen had recently had with Fred Martin having made an impression on him—deeper than he chose to admit even to himself—he had made up his mind to go straight home this time.

"I'll be down by daybreak to see about them repairs," he said to Peter Jay, as they left the *Lively Poll* together, "and I'll go round by your old friend, Widow Mooney's, and tell her to expect you some time to-night."

Now Peter Jay was a single man, and lodged with Widow Mooney when on shore. It was not, however, pure consideration for his mate or the widow that influenced Lockley, but his love for the widow's little invalid child, Eve, for whose benefit that North Sea skipper had, in the kindness of his heart, made a special collection of deep-sea shells, with some shreds of bright bunting.

Little Eve Mooney, thin, wasted, and sad, sat propped up with dirty pillows, in a dirty bed, in a dirtier room, close to a broken and paper-patched window that opened upon a coal-yard with a prospect rubbish-heap beyond.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad it's you!" cried Eve, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, as the fisherman entered.

"Yes, Eve, my pretty. I'm back sooner than I expected—and look what I've brought you. I haven't forgot you."

Joy beamed in the lustrous eyes and on every feature of the thin face as the sick child surveyed the treasures of the deep that Lockley spread on her ragged counterpane.

"How good—how kind of you, Stephen!" exclaimed Eve.

"Kind!" repeated the skipper; "nothing of the sort, Eve. To please you pleases me, so it's only selfishness. But where's your mother?"

"Drunk," said the child simply, and without the most remote intention of injuring her parent's character. Indeed, that was past injury. "She's in there."

The child pointed to a closet, in which Stephen found on the floor a heap of unwomanly rags. He was unable to arouse the poor creature, who slumbered heavily beneath them. Eve said she had been there for many hours.

"She forgot to give me my breakfast before she went in, and I'm too weak to rise and get it for myself," whimpered Eve, "and I'm *so* hungry! And I got such a fright, too, for a man came in this morning about daylight and broke open the chest where mother keeps her money and took something away. I suppose he thought I was asleep, for I was too frightened to move, but I could see him all the time. Please will you hand me the loaf before you go? It's in that cupboard."

We need scarcely add that Lockley did all that the sick child asked him to do—and more. Then, after watching her till the meal was finished, he rose.

"I'll go now, my pretty," he said, "and don't you be afeared. I'll soon send some one to look after you. Good-bye."

Stephen Lockley was unusually thoughtful as he left Widow Mooney's hut that day, and he took particular care to give the Blue Boar a wide berth on his way home.

Chapter Three
The Skipper Ashore

Right glad was Mrs Lockley to find that her husband had passed the Blue Boar without going in on his way home, and although she did not say so, she could not feel sorry for the accident to the *Lively Poll*, which had sent him ashore a week before his proper time.

Martha Lockley was a pretty young woman, and the proud mother of a magnificent baby, which was bordering on that age when a child begins to have some sort of regard for its own father, and to claim much of his attention.

"Matty," said Stephen to his wife, as he jolted his daughter into a state of wild delight on his knee, "Tottie is becoming very like you. She's got the same pretty little turned-up nose, an' the same huge grey eyes with the wicked twinkle in 'em about the corners."

"Don't talk nonsense, Stephen, but tell me about this robbery."

"I know nothin' about it more than I've told ye, Matty. Eve didn't know the man, and her description of him is confused—she was frightened, poor thing! But I promised to send some one to look after her at once, for her drunken mother isn't fit to take care of herself, let alone the sick child. Who can I send, think 'ee?"

Mrs Lockley pursed her little mouth, knitted her brows, and gazed thoughtfully at the baby, who, taking the look as personal, made a face at her. Finally she suggested Isabella Wentworth.

"And where is she to be found?" asked the skipper.

"At the Martins', no doubt," replied Mrs Lockley, with a meaning look. "She's been there pretty much ever since poor Fred Martin came home, looking after old granny, for Mrs Martin's time is taken up wi' nursing her son. They say he's pretty bad."

"Then I'll go an' see about it at once," said Stephen, rising, and setting Tottie down.

He found Isa quite willing to go to Eve, though Mrs Mooney had stormed at her and shut the door in her face on the occasion of her last visit.

"But you mustn't try to see Fred," she added. "The doctor says he must be kep' quiet and see no one."

"All right," returned the skipper; "I'll wait till he's out o' quarantine. Good day; I'll go and tell Eve that you're coming."

On his way to Mrs Mooney's hut Stephen Lockley had again to pass the Blue Boar. This time he did not give it "a wide berth." There were two roads to the hut, and the shorter was that which passed the public-house. Trusting to the strength of his own resolution, he chose that road. When close to the blue monster, whose creaking sign drew so many to the verge of destruction, and plunged so many over into the gulf, he was met by Skipper Ned Bryce, a sociable, reckless sort of man, of whom he was rather fond. Bryce was skipper of the *Fairy*, an iron smack, which was known in the fleet as the Ironclad.

"Hullo! Stephen. *You* here?"

"Ay, a week before my time, Ned. That lubber Groggy Fox ran into me, cut down my bulwarks, and carried away my bowsprit an' some o' my top-hamper."

"Come along—have a glass, an' let's hear all about it," said Bryce, seizing his friend's arm; but Lockley held back.

"No, Ned," he said; "I'm on another tack just now."

"What! not hoisted the blue ribbon, eh!"

"No," returned Lockley, with a laugh. "I've no need to do that."

"You haven't lost faith in your own power o' self-denial surely?"

"No, nor that either, but—but—"

"Come now, none o' your 'buts.' Come along; my mate Dick Martin is in here, an' he's the best o' company."

"Dick Martin in there!" repeated Lockley, on whom a sudden thought flashed. "Is he one o' your hands?"

"In course he is. Left the Grimsby fleet a-purpose to j'ine me. Rather surly he is at times, no doubt, but a good fellow at bottom, and great company. You should hear him sing. Come."

"Oh, I know him well enough by hearsay, but never met him yet."

Whether it was the urgency of his friend, or a desire to meet with Dick Martin, that shook our skipper's wavering resolution we cannot tell, but he went into the Blue Boar, and took a glass for good-fellowship. Being a man of strong passions and excitable nerves, this glass produced in him a desire for a second, and that for a third, until he forgot his intended visit to Eve, his promises to his wife, and his stern resolves not to submit any longer to the tyranny of drink. Still, the memory of Mrs Mooney's conduct, and of the advice of his friend Fred Martin, had the effect of restraining him to some extent, so that he was only what his comrades would have called a little screwed when they had become rather drunk.

There are many stages of drunkenness. One of them is the confidential stage. When Dick Martin had reached this stage he turned with a superhumanly solemn countenance to Bryce and winked.

"If—if you th–think," said Bryce thickly, "th–that winkin' suits you, you're mistaken."

"Look 'ere," said Dick, drawing a letter from his pocket with a maudlin leer, and holding it up before his comrade, who frowned at it, and then shook his head—as well he might, for, besides being very illegibly written, the letter was presented to him upside down.

After holding it before him in silence long enough to impress him with the importance of the document, Dick Martin explained that it was a letter which he had stolen from his sister's house, because it contained "something to his advantage."

"See here," he said, holding the letter close to his own eyes, still upside down, and evidently reading from memory: "'If Mr Frederick Martin will c–call at this office any day next week between 10 an' 12, h–he will 'ear suthin' to his ad–advantage. Bounce and Brag, s'licitors.' There!"

"But *you* ain't Fred Martin," said Bryce, with a look of supreme contempt, for he had arrived at the quarrelsome stage of drunkenness.

"Right you are," said Martin; "but I'm his uncle. Same name c–'cause his mother m–married her c–cousin; and there ain't much difference 'tween Dick and Fred—four letters, both of 'em—so if I goes wi' the letter, an' says, 'I'm Fred Martin,' w'y, they'll hand over the blunt, or the jewels, or wotiver it is, to me—d'ee see?"

"No, I don't see," returned Bryce so irritatingly that his comrade left the confidential stage astern, and requested to know, with an affable air, when Bryce lost his eyesight.

"When I first saw *you*, and thought you worth your salt," shouted Bryce, as he brought his fist heavily down on the table.

Both men were passionate. They sprang up, grappled each other by the throat, and fell on the floor. In doing so they let the letter fall. It fluttered to the ground, and Lockley, quietly picking it up, put it in his pocket.

"You'd better look after them," said Lockley to the landlord, as he paid his reckoning, and went out.

In a few minutes he stood in Widow Mooney's hut, and found Isa Wentworth already there.

"I'm glad you sent me here," said the girl, "for Mrs Mooney has gone out—"

She stopped and looked earnestly in Lockley's face. "You've been to the Blue Boar," she said in a serious tone.

"Yes, lass, I have," admitted the skipper, but without a touch of resentment. "I did not mean to go, but it's as well that I did, for I've rescued a letter from Dick Martin which seems to be of some importance, an' he says he stole it from his sister's house."

He handed the letter to the girl, who at once recognised it as the epistle over which she and Mrs Martin had puzzled so much, and which had finally been deciphered for them by Dick Martin.

"He must have made up his mind to pretend that he is Fred," said Isa, "and so get anything that was intended for him."

"You're a sharp girl, Isa; you've hit the nail fair on the head, for I heard him in his drunken swagger boast of his intention to do that very thing. Now, will you take in hand, lass, to give the letter back to Mrs Martin, and explain how you came by it?"

Of course Isa agreed to do so, and Lockley, turning to Eve, said he would tell her a story before going home.

The handsome young skipper was in the habit of entertaining the sick child with marvellous tales of the sea during his frequent visits, for he was exceedingly fond of her, and never failed to call during his periodical returns to land. His love was well bestowed, for poor Eve, besides being of an affectionate nature, was an extremely imaginative child, and delighted in everything marvellous or romantic. On this occasion, however, he was interrupted at the commencement of his tale by the entrance of his own ship's cook, the boy Bob Lumsden, *alias* Lumpy.

"Hullo, Lumpy, what brings you here?" asked the skipper.

But the boy made no answer. He was evidently taken aback at the unexpected sight of the sick child, and the skipper had to repeat his question in a sterner tone. Even then Lumpy did not look at his commander, but, addressing the child, said—

"Beg parding, miss; I wouldn't have come in if I'd knowed you was in bed, but—"

"Oh, never mind," interrupted Eve, with a little smile, on seeing that he hesitated; "my friends never see me except in bed. Indeed I live in bed; but you must not think I'm lazy. It's only that my back's bad. Come in and sit down."

"Well, boy," demanded the skipper again, "were you sent here to find *me*?"

"Yes, sir," said Lumpy, with his eyes still fixed on the earnest little face of Eve. "Mister Jay sent me to say he wants to speak to you about the heel o' the noo bowsprit."

"Tell him I'll be aboard in half an hour."

"I didn't know before," said Eve, "that bowsprits have heels."

At this Lumpy opened his large mouth, nearly shut his small eyes, and was on the point of giving vent to a rousing laugh, when his commander half rose and seized hold of a wooden stool. The boy shut his mouth instantly, and fled into the street, where he let go the laugh which had been thus suddenly checked.

"Well, she *is* a rum 'un!" he said to himself, as he rolled in a nautical fashion down to the wharf where the *Lively Poll* was undergoing repairs.

"I think he's a funny boy, that," said Eve, as the skipper stooped to kiss her.

"Yes, he *is* a funny dog. Good-bye, my pretty one."

"Stay," said Eve solemnly, as she laid her delicate little hand on the huge brown fist of the fisherman; "you've often told me stories, Stephen; I want to tell one to you to-night. You need not sit down; it's a very, very short one."

But the skipper did sit down, and listened with a look of interest and expectation as the child began—

"There was once a great, strong, brave man, who was very kind to everybody, most of all to little children. One day he was walking near a river, when a great, fearful, ugly beast, came out of the wood, and seized the man with its terrible teeth. It was far stronger than the dear, good man, and it threw him down, and held him down, till—till it killed him."

She stopped, and tears filled her soft eyes at the scene she had conjured up.

"Do you know," she asked in a deeper tone, "what sort of awful beast it was?"

"No; what was it?"

"A Blue Boar," said the child, pressing the strong hand which she detained.

Lockley's eyes fell for a moment before Eve's earnest gaze, and a flush deepened the colour of his bronzed countenance. Then he sprang suddenly up and kissed Eve's forehead.

"Thank you, my pretty one, for your story, but it an't just correct, for the man is not quite killed *yet* and, please God, he'll escape."

As he spoke the door of the hut received a severe blow, as if some heavy body had fallen against it. When Isa opened it, a dirty bundle of rags and humanity rolled upon the floor. It was Eve's mother!

Lifting her up in his strong arms, Lockley carried her into the closet which opened off the outer room, and laid her tenderly on a mattress which lay on the floor. Then, without a word, he left the hut and went home.

It is scarcely necessary to add that he took the longer road on that occasion, and gave a very wide berth indeed to the Blue Boar.

Chapter Four
Hardships on the Sea

Fly with us now, good reader, once more out among the breeze-ruffled billows of the North Sea.

It was blowing a fine, fresh, frosty fishing breeze from the nor'-west on a certain afternoon in December. The Admiral—Manx Bradley—was guiding his fleet over that part of the German Ocean which is described on the deep-sea fisherman's chart as the Swarte, or Black Bank. The trawls were down, and the men were taking it easy—at least, as easy as was compatible with slush-covered decks, a bitter blast, and a rolling sea. If we had the power of extending and intensifying your vision, reader, so as to enable you to take the whole fleet in at one stupendous glance, and penetrate planks as if they were plate glass, we might, perhaps, convince you that in this multitude of deep-sea homes there was carried on that night a wonderful amount of vigorous action, good and bad—largely, if not chiefly bad—under very peculiar circumstances, and that there was room for improvement everywhere.

Strong and bulky and wiry men were gambling and drinking, and singing and swearing; story-telling and fighting, and skylarking and sleeping. The last may be classed appropriately under the head of action, if we take into account the sonorous doings of throats and noses. As if to render the round of human procedure complete, there was at least one man—perhaps more—praying.

Yes, Manx Bradley, the admiral, was praying. And his prayer was remarkably brief, as well as earnest. Its request was that God would send help to the souls of the men whose home was the North Sea. For upwards of thirty years Manx and a few like-minded men had persistently put up that petition. During the last few years of that time they had mingled thanksgiving with the prayer, for a gracious answer was being given. God had put it into the heart of the present Director of the Mission to Deep-Sea Fishermen to inaugurate a system of evangelisation among the heretofore neglected thousands of men and boys who toil upon the North Sea from January to December. Mission or Gospel smacks were purchased, manned by Christian skippers and crews, and sent out to the various fleets, to fish with them during the week, and supply them with medicine for body and soul, with lending libraries of wholesome Christian literature, and with other elevating influences, not least among which was a floating church or meeting-house on Sundays.

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