

The Wreck

H.M. Tomlinson

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WE turned our heads as the door creaked and opened, admitting another man to the tavern, and giving a brief peep of ships in a morning harbour. This stranger in the village curtly acknowledged our company, which appeared to know him.

"Floated her yet?" he was asked gently, as he stood at the bar. The question caused some faint laughter. The stranger did not smile, nor look at us. He answered at leisure. "Expect us always to save ships you farmers chuck about like haycocks?" he inquired genially.

He was a meagre fellow, with the lean face of a jockey who still had the saturnine visage for a hard race, but was past the age for riding. He did not look like a seaman; but then a seaman seldom does, unless other seamen doubt him. He might have been a pedlar, yet his demeanour was without the proper suavity. He could have been a tout, perhaps a bookmaker's, and that was why he was confident; he had found it easy to gain a fair share of the profits which come of quick traffic with human foolishness. His business might have been anything in which wit had a chance to devise good luck out of the slowness of respectable citizens. More likely he was a longshoreman. His clothes were neutral in the dinginess and tobacco mist of that inn of a west country harbour.

The stranger drank his beer, while meditating reproachfully a shabby gull in a glass case. He was asked how long he reckoned the job would take. He merely shifted his cap in ironic thoughtfulness. His cloth cap was an old and subdued subject, but it took on life as soon as he briskly pushed it back while considering a question, and then gave it a jaunty pull over his eyes. He looked up from under its peak in pained wonder at your innocence.

That cap had a chief part in his conversation. He was a cockney as soon as he spoke. His comments on life and affairs were summary and sardonic, but his countenance was rigid. Only his thin lips and his cap moved. His eyes expressed fortitude for folly and misfortune but no surprise. There was some talk of the ships in harbour; several steps led down from the tavern entrance to the sanded floor, so we could see the masts and yards outside soaring unnaturally high in an upper light. Our eyes were drawn to topmasts in the bright morning above the lower curtains of the windows. The stranger did not look that way. He had his back turned to the light. He knew ships, as tokens of a hard life, and so, I suppose, he turned his back on them. Ships never came his way, he explained, except when they were no good.

His cap, in its artful inconsequence, helped him then with his allusions to large maritime enterprises, which he indicated briefly in grotesque outlines. They were burlesque adventures on the deep, the ironic fancies of a humorist who took that way of mocking the pretences of the sailors in that saloon bar. The sailors laughed, and did not deny him. His banter was too dry and townish. His seascapes were parodies of heroic weather, caricatures of the mighty deep, and raised a startled interest in an enormity at which one laughed. He knocked at the porch of Davy Jones in an absent-minded way. He entertained us with hints of desolate ships that had no rudders one had no bottom ships of a buoyancy which gave men hanging to them about five minutes more. Ships of malignant caprice, in league with cunning seas, prolonging the misery of crews who knew they were fools to be there. He assumed an attitude of patient resignation. The work of this little grey man was, in fact, salvage. He was there then on just such a job.

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He was amusing, but that did not make it easy to see him directing the release of a ship, a sad victim, from the elemental powers which held her. I stood with him in the bow window of the tavern. The tide was flowing. We could see most of the broad water of the harbour. The sun was high. "There she is," he said. "That's mine."

That was his ship. His index finger was casually indifferent to her qualities. It was deprecative. I murmured warm approval of her usefulness. Tugs are indispensable vessels. She was a large tug. We talked of the handiness of tugs, and their remarkable power. The little skipper of the one in the harbour looked at his tug in friendly annoyance. "I shall be going out early this afternoon," he said. "Got nothing else to do? Come and see it."

He did not mean his ship. He meant this wrecked steamer which had caused furtive but jeering comment. That relic of tragedy was not to be seen from the village. The headland screened her. But she interested the village more than the news from London, and she would have been of more interest still had we known why she steered into such a corner on a clear night. Moved by the scandalous gossip, I thought I would like to see this Spaniard. That was why, and for no better reason, I was aboard the tug *Hawk*, listening to a cockney on her bridge, whose conversation had no more respect for romance or reality than is usual with a whimsical man who has lived long enough to greet another frustration with but a grimace.

His ship herself was a little whimsical. The gear and lumber on her deck were adventitious to seafaring, but by a cautious survey of it one could climb and lower oneself the length of the *Hawk*, and with few abrasions, for her length was not great. One could reach the other end of her in time, and with care; and there was plenty of time. The harbour was still, and the skipper's allusive converse, while we waited, gave his ship the unconvincing aspect of his cloth cap, which was so much a part of his dry speech. I could not be sure we were going anywhere to do anything. That did not matter. It was a shining and spacious harbour, and the day was warm. An hour of waiting in the midst of that historic water, where the subdued muttering from mallets in the shipyards, and the song of the tide, the sounds of the life of our day, were only like slumberous echoes from past centuries, made me feel that our tug had no more to do with the next job than is usual with the show of things when it happens to be pleasant in leisured and sunny retrospection.

Presently, however, I found I was forgotten. The past was mine, if I found it so pleasant. As for the skipper, he was addressing in a harsh foreign voice a group of men idling forward. He had suddenly lost his humour. We were under way, and our quick passage from the still harbour to the ground-swell of the bay suggested how brief may be the transit, at times, from the bright and peaceful look of the day to the truth about it. The waters outside were moving largely. There was now no difficulty about getting to the other end of the *Hawk*; a careless passenger might be precipitated thither, in one movement.

We rounded the buoy which marks the beginning of the fairway to shelter, though we were not running for shelter, but otherwise. I was then at the first step of a journey from the stern companion-hatch to the wheel-house, when the tug, in my view of it, stood upright on her propeller. At least, it was necessary to wait a moment. Then there seemed to come an opportunity for a short run to a better handhold, but my intention was detected, and ten pounds of beef suspended in the rigging caught me with its bone-end. The movements of this ship were novel. Yet, though the fun of a lunatic does not win laughter, it must be respected. The ways of our tug with the seas were without order and precedent. She gave a hint of a lurch to port, and this passenger took it in time, only to learn that the hint was but an error which she corrected immediately, for she really wanted to roll to starboard. That became impossible, for the waters rose swiftly under her counter, and her funnel leaned over to look at the bow-wash, and so did her men. A little Atlantic voyage in a salvage steamer, with no stiffening but her pumps and dynamite, when a traveller begins to regret the steady home he has just left, offers him but one chance of peace; the giant powder may decide to get out of it.

In the north-west, over the waters of the bay which opens to all the western ocean, we could see a low buff cloud, which was really an island. The gyrations of the *Hawk* made this landmark inconstant. We were lifted up, quivering in the wind, to see it far away, and then swashed into a cold hollow with a near view of a glassy wall

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falling past us. Down those fainting shadowy declivities we went, and then up again for another short glance round a distant horizon.

I sought the little man on the bridge. His cap was pulled down over his eyes, which had lost their irony. He shook away the salt drops that had struck his face. "We shall be out all night," he said.

All night? Then the only consolation in sight was the slender stalk of the harbour light, and that was diminishing astern. A strange coast was growing large over the port bow, high and repellent, for the sun was descending behind it; and I thought it remarkable that the huge boulders projecting from the steep black silhouette of the promontory did not overbalance and fall, in that wind and exposure. We were making for that cape. The spray mounted noisy and sparkling at our bows, and fell over us. The day was going, but the drenching helped the level evening rays to make our ship lustrous, though bleak. We approached the land, and the headland afforded us some shelter, because now it stood over us almost to the zenith. We anchored; and we rolled.

The sun foundered in a bare waste, and the sea-fowl complained on the high dim shelves over us. The world grew vague, though it was pouring heavily past, and presently the moon, a full globe, came to sit on the black jags above. That was all there was to see, so I went below to sleep on a hollow bench in which the dynamite was stowed. The tug leapt and reared all night. To sleep on uneasy dynamite has its dreams, and at length it appeared to be better to go on deck and wait for morning. There I found the skipper, pacing his bridge in a greatcoat. "Don't want two wrecks here," he explained. "Must watch my cables."

His cables complained at their task. The moon had gone. A flurry of sparks, all I knew of the skipper's face, flew from his pipe. I heard him tap his pipe. An unseen comber of greater weight thundered on the invisible shore. The little man was but a shadow without shape on the rail of the weather dodger. The shadow rose, and came close to me. "I wish I knew," it grumbled. Our ship mounted with a panic of cables, and subsided again.

There was nothing for me to do but wait for the next word. Was a question of the tide in his mind a possibility of approaching that wrecked steamer we had not sighted yet? Or the cables? The skipper was evidently considering again whatever doubt he had, because he was silent for a spell. "Well, there it is," he added. "There's no telling. Not," he remarked, "but what I sometimes think but what's the good; you can think anything you like on a night like this . . . d'ye hear that bird up there? Happy voice he's got, hasn't he?"

It was a call which accorded with the sounds of waters at night. Such cries are never answered. And what had a seamew to do with salvage work?

"I don't mind keeping a watch like this," the skipper mumbled, "because it gives me some time to myself. You can take your bearings on the quiet, if you can manage to pick 'em up. Think it over a bit. There's nothing else to do." He paused. "There's been heavy weather outside, to send this swell whoa, you brute! Sometimes watch it, there's another coming! sometimes I wonder whether it wouldn't be better to let the wreckage go. What's the bottom of the sea for? Let it all go. But you can't do it. Can't do it. You've got to let her have daylight while the pumps work. Eh? What do you think? That's right, isn't it? Keep her afloat, if it's no more good than whistling for a dead dog. Hold on to it. That's what I say. What do you say, mister?"

I held on when she listed, but said nothing. That seabird called again. "Nice cheerful songster that," said the skipper. He remained reflecting for a minute or two. Then he explained. "You see, what I always wanted was to give my boy a good start don't begin at the bottom unless you're there, that's sense, isn't it? Give him a good start. He was quicker with a crayon than his father with a blasting charge. He was a dab at pictures, though I don't know how he picked it up. But here we are. That boy talks now like that bird up there; same sort of noise. But what would you expect? He was never the same after he got that bit of shrapnel in his head. What's the hope that he ever will be? If I could only see the gist of it . . ." He paused, idled over to a speaking tube, listened, and then bellowed to the bottom of the tug.

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"All right?" he cried. "Right. We're going to move."

Day was coming. Night was leaving the dark headland behind. The surges could be seen moving under its walls. We rounded that promontory, and met the full strength of the west again. The first of the dawn showed the leaning masts, for they were white, of the wrecked steamer, the ship which somehow had mistaken the sea lamps one night, and had tried to cut off three miles of slate and schist. In that wan light, in that welter of jags and cataracts, with her deck at a woeful angle, she affected a surprised witness as though she were human and luckless. I turned to our skipper, and saw his profile clearly for the first time that morning. It was grey, stern, and worn.

What did I think? But I had not answered him. I was still trying to pick up the bearings. The skipper was unaware that I had looked at him intently. He stood up, and struck the rail with his hand. "Look at that," he cried. "What's she doing there? That's a nice place for a visit."

I did not enjoy the look of it. Those cliffs, towards which the waters seemed to be flinging us, grew lighter. Their threat was serious. Less than that would have been enough. The wreck became plain under a descent of contorted strata, from which ribs and bosses protruded like the black bones of a dead earth. The master himself took the wheel, for our tug had begun to prance where the noises of the exploding waters was a daunting uproar. "We'll see if we can work in between the wreck and the shore," shouted the skipper. "What do you think?"

But in that, at least, he did not echo my mind, because not far from the *Hawk* I saw rocks threaten us with their bare teeth through the surf. Yet we closed the wreck. We rounded her stern, and got under her lee. The seas were rocking her hull. They vaulted over her beam. We could hear her body groaning. The triumphant waters shouted over her, and occupied her with every breaker, then left her for a minute, with her deck a deep clear amethystine bath, through which her white paint glimmered till the instant when another wall of water from the ocean burst over all but her upper-works.

"Here we are," said the skipper, alert and purposeful. "It's all right. We don't bump. We can start work."