

The Lost Ship

By W. W. Jacobs

On a fine spring morning in the early part of the present century, Tetby, a small port on the east coast, was keeping high holiday. Tradesmen left their shops, and labourers their work, and flocked down to join the maritime element collected on the quay.

In the usual way Tetby was a quiet, dull little place, clustering in a tiny heap on one side of the river, and perching in scattered red-tiled cottages on the cliffs of the other.

Now, however, people were grouped upon the stone quay, with its litter of fish-baskets and coils of rope, waiting expectantly, for today the largest ship ever built in Tetby, by Tetby hands, was to start upon her first voyage.

As they waited, discussing past Tetby ships, their builders, their voyages, and their fate, a small piece of white sail showed on the noble barque from her moorings up the river. The groups on the quay grew animated as more sail was set, and in a slow and stately fashion the new ship drew near. As the light breeze took her sails she came faster, sitting the water like a duck, her lofty masts tapering away to the sky as they broke through the white clouds of canvas. She passed within ten fathoms of the quay, and the men cheered and the women held their children up to wave farewell, for she was manned from captain to cabin boy by Tetby men, and bound for the distant southern seas.

Outside the harbour she altered her course somewhat and bent, like a thing of life, to the wind blowing outside. The crew sprang into the rigging and waved their caps, and kissed their grimy hands to receding Tetby. They were answered by rousing cheers from the shore, hoarse and masculine, to drown the lachrymose attempts of the women.

They watched her until their eyes were dim, and she was a mere white triangular speck on the horizon. Then, like a melting snowflake, she vanished into air, and the Tetby folk, some envying the bold mariners, and others thankful that their lives were cast upon the safe and pleasant shore, slowly dispersed to their homes.

Months passed, and the quiet routine of Tetby went on undisturbed. Other craft came into port and, discharging and loading in an easy, comfortable fashion, sailed again. The keel of another ship was being laid in the shipyard, and slowly the time came round when the return of *Tetby's Pride*, for so she was named, might be reasonably looked for.

It was feared that she might arrive in the night—the cold and cheerless night, when wife and child were abed, and even if roused to go down on to the quay would see no more of her than her sidelights staining the water, and her dark form stealing cautiously up the river, They would have her come by day. To see her first on that horizon, into which she had dipped and vanished. To see her come closer and closer, the good stout ship seasoned by southern seas and southern suns, with the crew crowding the sides to gaze at Tetby, and see how the children had grown.

But she came not. Day after day the watchers waited for her in vain. It was whispered at length that she was overdue, and later on, but only by those who had neither kith nor kin aboard of her, that she was missing.

Long after all hope had gone wives and mothers, after the manner of their kind, watched and waited on the cheerless quay. One by one they stayed away, and forgot the dead to attend to the living. Babes grew into sturdy, ruddy-faced boys and girls, boys and girls into young men and women, but no news of the missing ship, no word from the missing men. Slowly year succeeded

year, and the lost ship became a legend. The man who had built her was old and grey, and time had smoothed away the sorrows of the bereaved.

It was on a dark, blustering September night that an old woman sat by her fire knitting. The fire was low, for it was more for the sake of company than warmth, and it formed an agreeable contrast to the wind which whistled round the house, bearing on its wings the sound of the waves as they came crashing ashore.

“God help those at sea to-night,” said the old woman devoutly, as a stronger gust than usual shook the house.

She put her knitting in her lap and clasped her hands, and at that moment the cottage door opened. The lamp flared and smoked up the chimney with the draught, and then went out. As the old woman rose from her seat the door closed.

“Who’s there?” she cried nervously.

Her eyes were dim and the darkness sudden, but she fancied she saw something standing by the door, and snatching a spill from the mantelpiece she thrust it into the fire, and relit the lamp.

A man stood on the threshold, a man of middle age, with white drawn face and scrubby beard. His clothes were in rags, his hair unkempt, and his light grey eyes sunken and tired.

The old woman looked at him, and waited for him to speak. When he did so he took a step towards her, and said:

“Mother!”

With a great cry she threw herself upon his neck and strained him to her withered bosom, and kissed him. She could not believe her eyes, her senses, but clasped him convulsively, and bade him speak again, and wept, and thanked God, and laughed all in a breath.

Then she remembered herself; and led him tottering to the old Windsor chair, thrust him in it, and quivering with excitement took food and drink from the cupboard and placed before him. He ate hungrily, the old woman watching him, and standing by his side to keep his glass filled with the home-brewed beer. At times he would have spoken, but she motioned him to silence and bade him eat, the tears coursing down her aged checks as she looked at his white famished face.

At length he laid down his knife and fork, and drinking off the ale, intimated that he had finished.

“My boy, my boy,” said the old woman in a broken voice, “I thought you had gone down with *Tetby’s Pride* long years ago.

He shook his head heavily.

“The captain and crew, and the good ship,” asked his mother. “Where are they?”

“Captain—and—crew,” said the son, in a strange hesitating fashion; “it is a long story—the ale has made me heavy. They are—”

He left off abruptly and closed his eyes.

“Where are they?” asked his mother. “What happened?”

He opened his eyes slowly.

“I—am—tired—dead tired. I have not slept. I’ll tell—you—morning.”

He nodded again, and the old woman shook him gently.

“Go to bed then. Your old bed, Jem. It’s as you left it, and it’s made and the sheets aired. It’s been ready for you ever since.”

He rose to his feet, and stood swaying to and fro. His mother opened a door in the wall, and taking the lamp lighted him up the steep wooden staircase to the room he knew so well. Then he took her in his arms in a feeble hug, and kissing her on the forehead sat down wearily on the bed.

The old woman returned to her kitchen, and falling upon her knees remained for some time in a state of grateful, pious ecstasy. When she arose she thought of those other women, and, snatching a shawl from its peg behind the door, ran up the deserted street with her tidings.

In a very short time the town was astir. Like a breath of hope the whisper flew from house to house. Doors closed for the night were thrown open, and wondering children questioned their weeping mothers. Blurred images of husbands and fathers long since given over for dead stood out clear and distinct, smiling with bright faces upon their dear ones.

At the cottage door two or three people had already collected, and others were coming up the street in an unwonted bustle.

They found their way barred by an old woman—a resolute old woman, her face still working with the great joy which had come into her old life, but who refused them admittance until her son had slept. Their thirst for news was uncontrollable, but with a swelling in her throat she realized that her share in *Tetby's Pride* was safe.

Women who had waited, and got patient at last after years of waiting, could not endure these additional few hours. Despair was endurable, but suspense! “Ah, God! Was their man alive? What did he look like? Had he aged much?”

“He was so fatigued he could scarce speak,” said she.

She had questioned him, but he was unable to reply. Give him but till the dawn, and they should know all.

So they waited, for to go home and sleep was impossible. Occasionally they moved a little way up the street, but never very far, and gathering in small knots excitedly discussed the great event. It came to be understood that the rest of the crew had been cast away on an uninhabited island, it could be nothing else, and would doubtlessly soon be with them; all except one or two perhaps, who were old men when the ship sailed, and had probably died in the meantime. One said this in the hearing of an old woman whose husband, if alive, would be in extreme old age, but she smiled peacefully, albeit her lip trembled, and said she only expected to hear of him, that was all.

The suspense became almost unendurable, “Would this man never awake? Would it never be dawn?” The children were chilled with the wind, but their elders would scarcely have felt an Arctic frost. With growing impatience they waited, glancing at times at two women who held themselves somewhat aloof from the others; two women who had married again, and whose second husbands waited, awkwardly enough, with them.

Slowly the weary windy night wore away, the old woman, deaf to their appeals, still keeping her door fast, The dawn was not yet, though the oft-consulted watches announced it near at hand, It was very close now, and the watchers collected by the door, It was undeniable that things were seen a little more distinctly. One could see better the grey, eager faces of his neighbours.

They knocked upon the door, and the old woman's eyes filled as she opened it and saw those faces. Unasked and unchid they invaded the cottage and crowded round the door.

“I will go up and fetch him,” said the old woman.

If each could have heard the beating of the others' hearts, the noise would have been deafening, but as it was there was complete silence, except for some overwrought woman's sob.

The old woman opened the door leading to the room above, and with the slow, deliberate steps of age ascended the stairs, and those below heard her calling softly to her son.

Two or three minutes passed and she was heard descending the stairs again alone. The smile, the pity, had left her face, and she seemed dazed and strange.

“I cannot wake him,” she said piteously. “He sleeps so sound. He is fatigued. I have shaken him, but he still sleeps.”

As she stopped, and looked appealingly round, the other old woman took her hand, and pressing it led her to a chair. Two of the men sprang quickly up the stairs. They were absent but a short while, and then they came down like men bewildered and distraught. No need to speak. A low wail of utter misery rose from the women, and was caught up and repeated by the crowd outside, for the only man who could have set their hearts at rest had escaped the perils of the deep, and died quietly in his bed.