

The Shamraken Homeward-Bounder

By William Hope Hodgson

The old *Shamraken*, sailing-ship, had been many days upon the waters. She was old-older than her masters, and that was saying a good deal. She seemed in no hurry, as she lifted her bulging, old, wooden sides through the seas. What need for hurry! She would arrive some time, in some fashion, as had been her habit heretofore.

Two matters were especially noticeable among her crew—who were also her masters—; the first the agedness of each and everyone; the second the *family* sense which appeared to bind them, so that the ship seemed manned by a crew, all of whom were related one to the other; yet it was not so.

A strange company were they, each man bearded, aged and grizzled; yet there was nothing of the inhumanity of old age about them, save it might be in their freedom from grumbling, and the calm content which comes only to those in whom the more violent passions have died.

Had anything to be done, there was nothing of the growling, inseparable from the average run of sailor men. They went aloft to the “job”—whatever it might be—with the wise submission which is brought only by age and experience. Their work was gone through with a certain slow pertinacity—a sort of tired steadfastness, born of the knowledge that such work *had* to be done. Moreover, their hands possessed the ripe skill which comes only from exceeding practice, and which went far to make amends for the feebleness of age. Above all, their movements, slow as they might be, were remorseless in their lack of faltering. They had so often performed the same kind of work, that they had arrived, by the selection of utility, at the shortest and most simple methods of doing it.

They had, as I have said, been many days upon the water, though I am not sure that any man in her knew to a nicety the number of those days. Though Skipper Abe Tombes—addressed usually as Skipper Abe—may have had some notion; for he might be seen at times gravely adjusting a prodigious quadrant, which suggests that he kept some sort of record of time and place.

Of the crew of the *Shamraken*, some half dozen were seated, working placidly at such matters of seamanship as were necessary. Besides these, there were others about the decks. A couple who paced the lee side of the main deck, smoking, and exchanging an occasional word. One who sat by the side of a worker, and made odd remarks between draws at his pipe. Another, out upon the jibboom, who fished, with a line, hook and white rag, for bonito. This last was Nuzzie, the ship’s boy. He was grey-bearded, and his years numbered five and fifty. A boy of fifteen he had been, when he joined the *Shamraken*, and “boy” he was still, though forty years had’ passed into eternity, since the day of his “ signing on”; for the men of the *Shamraken* lived in the past, and thought of him only as the “boy” of that past.

It was Nuzzie’s watch below—his time for sleeping. This might have been said also of the other three men who talked and smoked; but for themselves they had scarce a thought of sleep. Healthy age sleeps little, and they were in health, though so ancient.

Presently, one of those who walked the lee side of the main deck, chancing to cast a glance forrard, observed Nuzzie still to be out upon the jibboom, jerking his line so as to delude some foolish bonito into the belief that the white rag was a flying-fish.

The smoker nudged his companion.

“Time thet b’y ’ad ’is sleep.”

“i, i, mate,” returned the other; withdrawing his pipe, and giving a steadfast look at the figure seated out upon the jibboom.

For the half of a minute they stood there, very effigies of Age’s implacable determination to rule rash Youth. Their pipes were held in their hands, and the smoke rose up in little eddies from the smouldering contents of the bowls.

“Thar’s no tamin’ of thet b’y!” said the first man, looking very stern and determined. Then he remembered his pipe, and took a draw.

“B’ys is tur’ble queer critters,” remarked the second man, and remembered his pipe in turn.

“Fishin’ w’en e orter be sleepin’,” snorted the first man.

“B’ys needs a tur’ble lot er sleep,” said the second man. “I ’member w’en I wor a b’y. I reckon it’s ther growin’.”

And all the time poor Nuzzie fished on.

“Guess I’ll jest step up an’ tell ’im ter come in outer thef,” exclaimed the first man, and commenced to walk towards the steps leading up on to the fo’cas’le head.

“B’y!” he shouted, as soon as his head was above the level of the fo’cas’le deck. “B’y!

Nuzzle looked round, at the second call.

“Eh?” he sung out.

“Yew come in outer thet,” shouted the older man, in the somewhat shrill tone which age had brought to his voice. “Reckon we’ll be ’avin’ yer sleepin’ at the wheel ter night.”

“i,” joined in the second man, who had followed his companion up on to the fo’cas’le head. “Come in, b’y, an’ get ter yer bunk.”

“Right,” called Nuzzie, and commenced to coil up his line. It was evident that he had no thought of disobeying. . . He came in off the spar, and went past them without a word, on the way to turn in.

They, on their part, went down slowly off the fo’cas’le head, and resumed their walk fore and aft along the lee side of the main deck.

2

“I reckon, Zeph,” said the man who sat upon the hatch and smoked, “I reckon as Skipper Abe’s ’bout right. We’ve made a trifle o’ dollars outer the old ’ooker, an’ we don’t get no younger.”

“Ay, thet’s so, right ’nuff,” returned the man who sat beside him, working at the stropping of a block.

“An’ it’s ’bout time’s we got inter the use o’ bein’ ashore,” went on the first man, who was named Job.

Zeph gripped the block between his knees, and fumbled in his hip pocket for a plug. He bit off a’ chew and replaced the plug.

“Seems cur’ous this is ther last trip, w’en yer comes ter think uv it,” he remarked, chewing steadily, his chin resting on his hand.

Job took two or three deep draws at his pipe before he spoke.

“Reckon it had ter come sumtime,” he said, at length. “I’ve a purty leetle place in me mind w’er’ I’m goin’ ter tie up. ’Ave yer thought erbout it, Zeph?”

The man who held the block between his knees, shook his head, and stared away moodily over the sea.

“Dunno, Job, as I know what I’ll do w’en ther old ’ooker’s sold,” he muttered. “Sence M’ria went, I don’t seem nohow ter care ’bout bein’ ’shore.”

“I never ’ad no wife,” said Job, pressing down the burning tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. “I reckon seafarin’ men don’t ought ter have no truck with wives.”

“Thet’s right ’null, Job, fer yew. Each man ter ’is taste. I wer’ tur’ble fond uv M’ria—” he broke off short, and continued to stare out over the sea.

“I’ve allus thought I’d like ter settle down on er farm o’ me own. I guess the dollars I’ve arned ’ll do the trick,” said Job.

Zeph made no reply, and, for a time, they sat there, neither speaking:

Presently, from the door of the fo’cas’le, on the starboard side, two figures emerged. They were also of the “watch below.” If anything, they seemed older than the rest of those about the decks; their beards, white, save for the stain of tobacco juice, came nearly to their waists. For the rest, they had been big vigorous men; but were now sorely bent by the burden of their years. They came aft, walking slowly. As they came opposite to the main hatch, Job looked up and spoke—

“Say, Nehemiah, thar’s Zeph here’s been thinkin’ ’bout M’ria, an’ I ain’t bin able ter peek ’im up nohow.”

The smaller of the two newcomers shook his head slowly.

“We hev oor trubbles,” he said. “We hev oor trubbles. I bed mine w’en I lost my datter’s gell. I wor powerful took wi’ thet gell, she wor that winsome; but it wor like ter be—it wor like ter be, an’ Zeph’s hed his trubble sence then.”

“M’ria wer’ a good wife ter me, she wer’,” said Zeph, speaking slowly. “An’ now th’ old ’ooker’s goin’, I’m feared as I’ll find it mighty lonesome ashore yon,” and he waved his hand, as though suggesting vaguely that the shore lay anywhere beyond the starboard rail.

“Ay,” remarked the second of the newcomers. “It’s er weary thing tu me as th’ old packet’s goin’. Six and sixty year hey I sailed in her. Six and sixty year!” He nodded his head, mournfully, and struck a match with shaky hands.

“It’s like ter be,” said the smaller man. “It’s like ter be.”

And, with that, he and his companion moved over to the spar that lay along under the starboard bulwarks, and there seated themselves, to smoke and meditate.

3

Skipper Abe, and Josh Matthews, the First Mate, were standing together beside the rail whicWran across the break of the poop. Like the rest of the men of the *Shamraken*, their age had come upon them, and the frost of eternity had touched their beards and hair.

Skipper Abe was speaking:—

“It’s harder ’n I’d thought,” he said, and looked away from the Mate; staring hard along the worn, white-scoured decks.

“Dunno w’at I’ll du, Abe, w’en she’s gone,” returned the old Mate. “She’s been a ’ome for sixty years an more.” He knocked out the old tobacco from his pipe, as he spoke, and began to cut a bowl-full of fresh.

“It’s them durned freights!” exclaimed the Skipper. “We’re jest losin’ dollars every trip. It’s them steam packets as hes knocked us out.”

He sighed wearily, and bit tenderly at his plug.

“She’s been a mighty comfertable ship,” muttered Josh, in soliloquy. “An’ sence thet b’y o’ mine went, I sumhow thinks less o’ goin’ ashore ’n I used ter. I ain’t no folk left on all thar’arth.’

He came to an end, and began with his old trembling fingers to fill his pipe.

Skipper Abe said nothing. He appeared to be occupied with his own thoughts. He was leaning over the rail across the break of the poop, and chewing steadily. Presently, he straightened himself up and walked over to leeward. He expectorated, after which he stood there for a few moments, taking a short look round—the result of half a century of habit. Abruptly, he sung out to the Mate. .

“W’at d’yer make outer it?” he queried, after they had stood awhile, peering.

“Dunno, Abe, less’n it’s some sort o’ mist, riz up by ther’eat.”

Skipper Abe shook his head; but having nothing better to suggest, held his peace for awhile.

Presently, Josh spoke again

“Mighty cur’us, Abe. These are strange parts.”

Skipper Abe nodded his assent, and continued to stare at that which had come into sight upon the lee bow. To them, as they looked, it seemed that a vast wall of rose-coloured mist was rising towards the zenith. It showed nearly ahead, and at first had seemed no more than a bright cloud upon the horizon; but already had reached a great way into the air, and the upper edge had taken on wondrous flame-tints.

“It’s powerful nice-lookin’,” said Josh. “I’ve allus ’eard as things was diff’reent out ’n these parts.”

Presently, as the *Shamraken* drew near to the mist, it appeared to those aboard that it filled all the sky ahead of them, being spread out now far on either bow. And so in a while they entered into it, and, at once, the aspect of all things was changed.

The mist, in great rosy wreaths, floated all about them, seeming to soften and beautify every rope and spar, so that the old ship had become, as it were, a fairy craft in an unknown world.

“Never seen nothin’ like it, Abe—nothin’!” said Josh. “Ey! but it’s fine! It’s fine! Like ’s ef we’d run inter ther sunset.”

“I’m mazed, just mazed!” exclaimed Skipper Abe, “but I’m ’gree’ble as it’s purty, mighty purty.”

For a further while, the two old fellows stood without speech, just gazing and gazing. With their entering into the mist, they had come into a greater quietness than had been theirs out upon the open sea. It was as though the mist muffled and toned down the creak, creak, of the spars and gear; and the big, foamless seas that rolled past them, seemed to have lost something of their harsh whispering roar of greeting.

“Sort o’ unarthly, Abe,” said Josh, later, and speaking but little above a whisper. “Like as ef yew was in church.”

“Ay,” replied Skipper Abe. “It don’t seem nat’rel.”

“Shouldn’t think as ’eaven was all thet diff’reent,” whispered Josh. And Skipper Abe said nothing in contradiction.

Sometime later, the wind began to fail, and it was decided that, when eight-bells was struck, all hands should set the main t’gallant. Presently, Nuzzle having been called (for he was the only one aboard who had turned in) eight bells went, and all hands put aside their pipes, and prepared

to tail on to the ha'lyards; yet no one of them made to go up to loose the sail. That was the b'y's job, and Nuzzle was a little late in coming out on deck. When, in a minute, he appeared, Skipper Abe spoke sternly to him.

"Up now, b'y, an' loose thet sail. D'y think to let er grown man dew suchlike work! Shame on yew!

And Nuzzle, the grey-bearded "b'y" of five and fifty years, went aloft humbly, as he was bidden.

Five minutes later, he sung out that all was ready for hoisting, and the string of ancient Ones took a strain on the ha'lyards. Then Nehemiah, being the chaunty man, struck up in his shrill quaver:—

"Thar wor an ole farmer in Yorkshire did dwell."

And the shrill piping of the ancient throats took up the refrain

"Wi' me ay, ay, blow thar lan' down."

Nehemiah caught up the story:—

"'e 'ad 'n ole wife, 'n 'e wished 'er in 'ell."

"Give us some time ter blow thar lan' down," came the quavering chorus of old voices.

"O, thar divvel come to 'im one day at thar plough," continued old Nehemiah; and the crowd of ancients followed up with the refrain:—"Wi' me ay, ay, blow thar lan' down."

"I've comed fer th' ole woman, I mun 'ave 'er now," sang Nehemiah. And again the refrain:—

"Give us some' time ter blow thar lan' down," shrilled out.

And so on to the last couple of stanzas. And all about them, as they chaunteyed, was that extraordinary, rose-tinted mist; which, above, blent into a marvellous radiance of flame-colour, as though, just a little higher than their mastheads, the sky was one red ocean of silent fire.

"Thar wor three leetle divvels chained up ter thar wall," sang Nehemiah, shrilly.

"Wi' me ay, ay, blow thar lan' down," came the piping chorus.

"She tuk off 'er clog, 'n shd walloped 'em all," chaunted oldi Nehemiah, and again followed the wheezy, age-old refrain.

"These three leetle divvels fer marcy did bawl," quavered Nehemiah, cocking one eye upward to see whether the yard was nearly mast-headed.

"Wi' me ay, ay, blow thar lan' down," came the chorus.

"Chuck out this ole bag, or she'll mur—"

"Belay," sung out Josh, cutting across the old sea song, with the sharp command. The chaunty had ceased with the first note of the Mate's voice, and a couple of minutes later, the ropes were coiled up, and the old fellows back to their occupations.

It is true that eight bells had gone, and that the watch was supposed to be changed; and changed it was, so far as the wheel and look-out were concerned; but otherwise little enough difference did it make to those sleep-proof ancients. The only change visible in the men about the deck, was that those who had previously only smoked, now smoked and worked; while those who had hitherto worked and smoked, now only smoked. Thus matters went on in all amity; while the old *Shamraken* passed onward like a rose-tinted shadow through the shining mist, and only the great, silent, lazy seas that came at her, out from the enshrouding redness, seemed aware that she was anything more than the shadow she appeared.

Presently, Zeph sung out to Nuzzie to get their tea from the galley, and so, in a little, the watch below were making their evening meal. They ate it as they sat upon the hatch or spar, as the chance might be; and, as they ate, they talked with their mates, of the watch on deck, upon the matter of the shining mist into which they had plunged. It was obvious, from their talk, that the

extraordinary phenomenon had impressed them, vastly, and all the superstition in them seemed to have been waked to fuller life. Zeph, indeed, made no bones of declaring his belief that they were nigh to something more than earthly:

He said that he had a feeling that "M'ria" was somewhere near to him.

"Meanin' ter say as we've come purty near ter 'eaven?" said Nehemiah, who was busy thrumming a paunch mat, for chafing gear.

"Dunno," replied Zeph; "but—"making a gesture towards the hidden sky—"yew'll 'low as it's mighty wonderful, 'n I guess ef 'tis 'eaven, thar's some uv us as is growin' powerful wearied uv 'arth. I guess I'm feelin' peeky fer a sight uv M'ria."

Nehemiah nodded his head slowly, and the nod seemed to run round the group of white-haired ancients.

"Reckon my datter's gell 'll be thar," he said, after a space of pondering. "Be s'prisin' ef she 'n M'ria 'd made et up ter know one anuther."

"M'ria wer' great on makin' friends," remarked Zeph, meditatively, "an ' gells wus awful friendly wi' 'er. Seemed as she bed er power thet way."

"I never 'ad no wife," said Job, at this point, somewhat irrelevantly. It was a fact of which he was proud, and he made a frequent boast of it.

"Thet's naught ter cocker thysel on, lad," exclaimed one of the white-beards, who, until this time, had' been silent. "Thou'lt find less folk in heaven t' greet thee."

"Thet's trewth, sure 'null, Jock," assented Nehemiah, and fixed a stern look on Job; whereat Job retired into silence.

Presently, at three bells, Josh came along and told them to put away their work for the day.

5

The second dog watch came, and Nehemiah and the rest of his side, made their tea out upon the main hatch, along with their mates. When this was finished, as though by common agreement, they went every one and sat themselves upon the pinrail running along under the t'gallant bulwarks; there, with their elbows upon the rail, they faced outward to gaze their full at the mystery of colour which had wrapped them about. From time to time, a pipe would be removed, and some slowly evolved thought given an utterance.

Eight bells came and went; but, save for the changing of the wheel and look-out, none moved from his place.

Nine o'clock, and the night came down upon the sea; but to those within the mist, the only result was a deepening of the rose colour into an intense red, which seemed to shine with a light of its own creating. Above them, the unseen sky seemed to be one vast blaze of silent, blood-tinted flame.

"Piller uv cloud by day, 'n er piller uv fire by night," muttered Zeph to Nehemiah, who crouched near.

"I reckon's them's Bible words," said Nehemiah.

"Dunno," replied Zeph; "but them's thar very words as I heerd passon Myles a sayin' w'en thar timber wor afire down our way. 'Twer' mostly smoke 'n daylight; but et tamed ter 'n eternal fire w'en thar night corned."

At four bells, the wheel and look-out were relieved, and a little later, Josh and Skipper Abe came down on to the main deck.

"Tur'ble queer," said Skipper Abe, with an affectation of indifference.

“Aye, ’tes, sure,” said Nehemiah.

And after that, the two old men sat among the others, and watched.

At five bells, half-past ten, there was a murmur from those who sat nearest to the bows, and a cry from the man on the look-out. At that, the attention of all was turned to a point nearly right ahead. At this particular spot, the mist seemed to be glowing with a curious, unearthly red brilliance; and, a minute later, there burst upon their vision a vast arch, formed of blazing red clouds.

At the sight, each and every one cried out their amazement, and immediately began to run towards the fo’cas’le head. Here they congregated in a clump, the Skipper and the Mate among them. The arch appeared now to extend its arc far beyond either bow, so that the ship was heading to pass right beneath it.

“’Tis ’eaven fer sure,” murmured Josh to himself; but Zeph heard him.

“Reckon ’s them’s ther Gates uv Glory thet M’ria wus allus talkin’ ’bout,” he replied.

“Guess I’ll see thet b’y er mine in er little,” muttered Josh, and he craned forward, his eyes very bright and eager.

All about the ship was a great quietness. The wind was no more now than a light steady breath upon the port quarter; but from right ahead, as though issuing from the mouth of the radiant arch, the long-backed, foamless seas rolled up, black and oily.

Suddenly, amid the silence, there came a low musical note, rising and falling like the moan of a distant æolian harp. The sound appeared to come from the direction of the arch, and the surrounding mist seemed to catch it up and send it sobbing and sobbing in low echoes away into the redness far beyond sight.

“They’m singin’,” cried Zeph. “M’ria wer’ allus tur’ble fond uv singin’. Hark ter——”

“’Sh!” interrupted Josh. “Thet’s my b’y! His shrill old voice had risen almost to a scream.

“It’s wunnerful—wunnerful; just mazin’!” exclaimed Skipper Abe.

Zeph had gone a little forrard of the crowd. He was shading his eyes with his hands, and staring intently, his expression denoting the most intense excitement.

“B’lieve I see ’er. B’lieve I see ’er,” he was muttering to himself, over and over again.

Behind him, two of the old men were steadyng Nehemiah, who felt, as he put it, “a bit mazy at thar thought o’ seem’ thet, gell.”

Away aft, Nuzzle, the “b’y,” was at the wheel. He had heard the moaning; but, being no ‘more than a boy, it must be supposed that he knew nothing of the *nearness* of the next world, which was so evident to the men, his masters.

A matter of some minutes passed, and Job, who had in mind that farm upon which he had set his heart, ventured to suggest that heaven was less near than his mates supposed; but no one seemed to hear him, and he subsided into silence.

It was the better part of an hour later, and near to midnight, when a murmur among the watchers announced that a fresh matter had come to sight. They were yet a great way off from the arch; but still the thing showed clearly—a prodigious umbel, of a deep, burning red; but the crest of it was black, save for the very apex which shone with an angry red glitter.

“Thar Throne uv God!” cried out Zeph, in a loud voice, and went down upon his knees. The rest of the old men followed his example, and even old Nehemiah made a great effort to get to that position.

“Simly we’m a’most ’n ’eaven,” he muttered huskily.

Skipper Abe got to his feet, with an abrupt movement. He had never heard of that extraordinary electrical phenomenon, seen once perhaps in a hundred years—the “Fiery

Tempest” which precedes certain great Cyclonic Storms; but his experienced eye had suddenly discovered that the red-shining umbel was truly a low, whirling water-hill, reflecting the red light. He had no theoretical knowledge to tell him that the thing was produced by an enormous air-vortice; but he had often seen a water-spout form.

Yet, he was still undecided. It was all so beyond him; though, certainly, that monstrous gyrating hill of water, sending out a reflected glitter of burning red, appealed to him as having no place in his ideas of Heaven. And then, even as he hesitated, came the first, wild-beast bellow of the coming Cyclone. As the sound smote upon their ears, the old men looked at one another with bewildered, frightened eyes.

“Reck’n thet’s God speakin’,” whispered Zeph. “Guess we’re on’y mis’rable sinners.”

The next instant, the breath of the Cyclone was in their throats, and the *Shamraken*, homeward-bounder, passed in through the everlasting portals.