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THE

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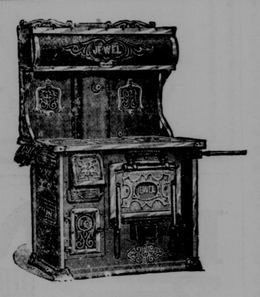

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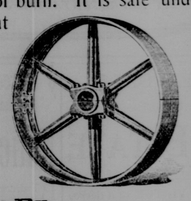

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When the Betsy Came Into Port

By GEORGE ETHELBERT WALSH

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"HERE are the orders, captain. Sail soon's the cargo's aboard. Old Peck wants the pine coffins in Boston by the 10th. Guess you'll have to get a move on the old Betsy to fetch up there in time. Storm's brewing on the coast too."

Lester, happy go lucky cigarette fiend and incidentally shipping clerk for Peck & Son, New York shipowners, flipped the bill of lading across the greasy table and appropriated Captain Ezra's best chair for a foot rest.

"I understand the Betsy's going out of commission," continued Lester. "She doesn't pay the old man, and he's going to sell her. Had a man down yesterday to look at her and he was to come again today."

The pipe went back to the trembling mouth and the teeth closed on it with a click.

"You'll get a chance at shore duty, captain—dock watchman, timekeeper or something. Peck senior says you're getting too old and timid to sail his ships, and the Betsy's like you. You don't take risks enough to suit Peck & Son. The old man said the other day he believed you were afraid of a ghost of a zephyr. Another captain would put the Betsy through a storm and not dodge from port to port to wait for fair weather."

"Humph!" snorted Captain Ezra. "An' lose the Betsy an' everything on board."

"Never mind, captain. There are worse positions than dock watchman or timekeeper."

After his exit from the smoke stained cabin Captain Ezra puffed away in silence, his eyes roaming around the dingy but sacred walls of his home until they blinked with watery tenderness. Somehow the Betsy had become a part of him. She was wife, home, children. They had grown old together in the coasting trade. Her patched sails and spliced rigging, strained timbers and bulging deck seams were all visible signs of the strenuous life she had lived on the rough Atlantic.

When Captain Ezra finally walked on deck there was little animation in his movements. The news that had been so flippantly conveyed to him had aged him so that his steps lagged as though his limbs were weighted with lead.

Unprofitable seasons in the coasting trade had forced him year by year to increase his indebtedness to Peck & Son. Hoping for the best, he had neglected to pay interest on the mortgages, and the last one was overdue

"YE CAN LOOK HER OVER."

now nearly a year. The Betsy was his in name only. The law entitled its rightful owners to sell the schooner over his head.

"Ain't risky enough ter suit 'em?" Captain Ezra mumbled to his pipe. "Too timid ter navergate a rowboat? Afeard of a ghost of a wind? Humph! I guess they'd think diff'rent ef they went through some of 'em storms with me when the Betsy was young and stanch. But she ain't what she used ter be, an' neither am I. No, we're getting' old an' rheumatic. But we ain't afeard of storm or anything else what any other boat can stand up in."

When the schooner dropped down the bay the storm signals were flying from the top of the Maritime Exchange and outside a stiff breeze was ruffling up the Atlantic. Captain Ezra, loaded light with his pine coffins, sought shelter inside of the Horseshoe until the wind could blow itself out. Half a dozen coasting steamers and sailing craft kept him company, all riding at anchor behind the sheltering spit of sand as safely as though moored at their dock up the bay.

Late in the afternoon a small tug fussed and fumed through the sea of foam, making direct for the Betsy. Captain Ezra stood on the after deck watching the saucy craft approaching. Suddenly his bent form stiffened, and he stood at attention.

"Hello, captain! We want to come aboard! Give us a line!"

The speaker was a short, thickset man standing in the bow of the tug. Captain Ezra instantly recognized the face and figure. Just at that moment it brought no sense of pleasure to the skipper of the Betsy.

"We want to look over the Betsy before you sail," panted the man as he scrambled aboard. "This friend of mine is thinking of buying her. Fine craft, captain, ain't she? Just the sort to run before a stiff breeze like this. Wonder we caught you down here."

"All right, Mr. Peck, ye can look her over," replied Captain Ezra, turning his back on the two men and walking forward.

He was employed to sail the Betsy, and not to exhibit her good points to prospective buyers. The senior member of Peck & Son stared hard at him a moment and then turned away.

"Captain's a little gruffy today," he muttered. "These coasting skippers always are when you board their schooners after they've left port. Think they own everything, and they try to lord it over you. But I'll settle that with him later."

There was every opportunity to inspect the Betsy under most favorable circumstances. The tug was dismissed, to call later, and after two hours of close examination Peck senior took possession of Captain Ezra's cabin to talk over the deal under the quieting influence of something peculiarly good, which the company furnished for just such occasions.

"Yes, she's one of the best schooners in the trade," the shrewd owner said as he poured out the third glass of port. "Captain Ezra's sailed her for more'n twenty years without an accident. Why, she could weather this gale with ease." Conversation continued, accompanied by the clinking of glasses, until suddenly a lurch of the schooner precipitated the contents of the glass in Owner Peck's lap.

"The storm must be increasing," he added. "I never knew it so rough here in the Horseshoe before. Now, as I was saying"—

And so on through half an hour of laudatory talk of the Betsy. As they talked the wine seemed to go to their heads, for certainly the floor of the cabin lurched and tipped until they retained their upright positions with difficulty. Finally Jonathan Peck started to his feet.

"I—I think I'll go on deck," he said. "I need a little fresh air. This cabin is hot and stuffy; everything seems to be reeling."

Once on deck he stood a moment in blank dismay, fully convinced that the wine had befuddled his mind. Instead of quietly riding at anchor inside of the Hook the Betsy was plowing her way through seas so boisterous that every one seemed to break over her deck, sweeping her from stem to stern.

"Captain—er—what has happened?" he stammered, wiping his perspiring forehead and staring at the calm features of the skipper.

"Nothin', Mr. Peck," was the quiet reply. "We're sailin' before a pretty stiff breeze an' the sea's a little rough."

"Sailing! Where to?" gasped the head of the shipping firm.

"Boston, sir. Them pine coffins must be delivered thar by the 10th, an' the Betsy's got ter move lively ter get thar in time."

"Good God, captain, are you crazy?" suddenly shrieked the now alarmed man. "Turn her back! Turn her back at once!"

"Can't do it, sir. My orders was to sail soon's the cargo was aboard, an' I got ter reach Boston by the 10th."

The calm, imperturbable face of the grizzled old sea captain increased the anger of the frightened owner.

"Turn her around and go back to New York, I say!" shouted the man. "I order you—I command you!"

"Don't make much diff'rence ef ye do, Mr. Peck. I'm captain of the Betsy, an' I got my orders before I left port."

"You—you—refuse to obey me?" gasped the owner.

"I'm obeyin' orders—that's all."

"I'll discharge you—arrest you for this! I discharge you now! I'll make the first mate captain. Here, Billings, I"—

A heavy hand was suddenly laid on his arm and a voice growled menacingly in his ear:

"Stop that, now, or I'll put ye in irons! Get back in the cabin an' stay thar until I tell ye ter come on deck again. Ef ye don't obey I'll iron ye. Yes, by jimmy! I'll do it anyway ef ye don't shut up. Ye ain't on land, Mr. Peck, where ye can order an' kick yer men around. Ye're on the high seas, an' I'm captain of the Betsy. It may be the last time I'll sail her"—

"Yes, the last time!" snorted Jonathan Peck.

"An' I'm goin' ter have one good old time with her, sich as we used ter have together when we was both young an' fresh. The Betsy ain't too old ter struggle through this storm, an' we ain't afeard—no, neither one of us. But, by gum, we're goin' ter let ye see what we can do. We're jest goin' ter have a tearin' old time on this trip, an' we'll convince ye that we ain't afeard of anything that blows on the high seas."

"You're crazy, captain—crazy as a loon," stammered Peck in dismay. "You will drown us all, and—and"—

"Mebbe I will," was the unsatisfactory answer. "I ain't answerin' fur the safe delivery of any of ye into Boston, but I want ye ter find out fur yerself that I ain't afeard of any of yer storms an' winds an' that the Betsy is a stanch craft. Yes, sir," turning to the prospective buyer, "a stanch craft! She'll weather any gale that any other coaster can, an' she's worth buyin'. But thar ain't no captain that knows how ter sail her better'n me. I've been with her night an' day fur nigh on to forty years, an' she's never had a wreck. Mebbe it was because I was too careful with her, Mr. Peck—too timid an' not risky enough ter suit ye."

The evident contempt in the words and voice stung the old merchant, who turned upon the skipper and apologized.

"I never said you didn't take good care of her, Captain Ezra. You were always trustworthy, and"—

"Afeard of the ghost of a zephyr."

"Sometimes you were a little too cautious, and"—

"Too timid ter navergate a rowboat!"

"Er—er—captain, you don't understand me," addad the stout owner in surprise.

"Ain't good fur much now except ter watch the docks an' keep time on the workmen," continued the irate captain.

"I—I—what do you mean?"

"That I ain't goin' ter take no shore position from ye, an' that the Betsy an' me are goin' ter show ye we ain't so old an' rheumatic as ye think. We're goin' ter take risks this trip, Mr. Peck. Yes, great risks. I hope the Betsy's cargo is well insured."

For three hours the Betsy staggered before the wind like a blindfolded victim hurled forward by some invisible power from behind. From each shock she recoiled as if shattered beyond repair. The timbers creaked and groaned under the strain, the rigging whipped and whistled in the wind, but the good ship managed to stand up bravely and take her punishment.

Jonathan Peck succumbed to fear and terror. The wild scene made him plead where before he threatened, but Captain Ezra was obdurate.

"IT MAY BE ALL THAT, BUT WE'LL TRY IT."

The night passed somehow, a wild carnival of storm and nasty weather. The Betsy, under the careful handling of the old skipper, held her own, but in the dawn of a new day she appeared bedraggled and exhausted. The wind and waves had subsided somewhat and the fog had lifted considerably when Jonathan Peck, pale and weak kneed, stumbled on deck. A gleam of hope entered the bloodshot eyes when he saw the subsiding storm.

"How near shore are we, captain?" he asked abruptly.

"Don't know," was the bluff reply. "We ain't headed that way. There's a ship in distress—a derelict, I guess—an' we're p'inted toward her."

"What for?" stammered the owner in surprise. "She's deserted, and you can't save her!"

"We can get salvage money on her ef we tow her ter port. She's a mighty good ship, I reckon. Jest look fur yerself, Mr. Peck."

Mr. Peck looked and saw a big three masted schooner that had not fared so well as the Betsy. She appeared twice the size of the plucky little coaster.

"You can't tow her to port in this storm, Captain Ezra," exclaimed Jonathan Peck, a new terror bulging out his eyes. "It's suicide, it's madness, downright idiocy!"

"It may be all that," calmly answered Captain Ezra, "but we'll try it. I need the salvage money, Mr. Peck, an' I'll get it. I said the Betsy an' me would have a frisky time an' we'd show ye what we was made of. We ain't too old fur work yet."

In vain the irate owner stormed, threatened and pleaded. Captain Ezra kept the Betsy pointed toward the drifting derelict.

"Captain," said the now thoroughly cowed man of business. "Captain"—and the voice was husky—"how much salvage money do you expect to get out of this?"

Captain Ezra continued to stare at the schooner drifting toward them. Without turning his head he said:

"Seein' she's sich a big one, an' pretty new at that, an' not much damaged, I reckon my share would 'bout cover them mortgages on the Betsy, with interest ter date."

Jonathan Peck squirmed. He looked from the captain to the derelict. He knew the value of the prize if once towed to port, but he valued life above money and ships. After a moment of hard breathing he said:

"I'll do it, captain."

Captain Ezra wheeled around sharply and asked:

"Do what?"

"Cancel the mortgages if you'll sail direct to the nearest port and land me."

"I ain't asked ye ter do that," snapped the skipper. "Them mortgages was given by me in good faith, an' I ain't askin' no man to call 'em back. I can't pay 'em, but ye've got the Betsy, an' she's wurth 'em, every dollar."

"Then what do you want?" stammered the perplexed man.

Captain Ezra took his time to answer. It was light now on the sea, and his face was illumined by a queer smile. He looked quietly at the man before him and said:

"I jest want ter sail the Betsy as long as she'll hang tergether an' then die with her."

There was a solemnity in the words, simply uttered, that made their import strangely effective. Jonathan Peck was silent a moment. Then he stepped nearer.

"Captain, I've misjudged and misunderstood you," he had the honesty to say, "and I apologize for my past words. I promise you that the Betsy shall stay in commission as long as she can sail and that no other captain shall command her."

Captain Ezra looked suspicious. "Ye mean it?" he said slowly.

"I'll promise you before the crew and put it in writing."

"'Tain't necessary, Mr. Peck. I'll take yer word fur it. We'll go back now to port. Ye want ter reach New York, I reckon, soon 's ye can?"

"Yes, but put me into the nearest harbor."

"That ain't far off, Mr. Peck—not so far as ye think," was the quiet rejoinder. "It's gettin' lighter now. The fog's about gone, an' ye can see the shore."

The dim outline of land was visible on the port side. Captain Ezra pointed to it and added: "There's the Sandy Hook light. We'll reach it in a couple of hours."

Jonathan Peck started and looked incredulous. The outlines of the shore seemed to grow familiar. A smile played on his lips.

"How far out of the harbor have we been, Captain Ezra?" he asked in a voice of humility.

"'Bout five miles, Mr. Peck."

Modern Card Playing.

The gambling of today is a mild affair compared with the extant records of English society. We shall never again see the days when General Scott won a fortune of £200,000 at whist, chiefly by dint of keeping sober. And high play, it must never be forgotten, is a relative term. When Lord Stavordale gained £11,000 by a single coup at hazard, his only comment was that if he had been playing "deep" he might have won millions. When the dimensions of modern wealth are taken into account the wildest excesses ever witnessed at the card table would have a timid and parsimonious aspect to the bucks of the regency.—Times of India, Bombay.

On the Safe Side.

An old woman who persisted in bowing during church service whenever the name of Satan was mentioned was reprimanded by the minister for so unseemly a habit. The reproof had, however, no effect, and the minister asked her finally in exasperation why she thought it necessary to bow.

"Well," she replied, "civility costs nothing, and you never know what will happen."—Harper's Weekly.

Refining It.

Jenkins—Mr. Golding of your city is quite wealthy, I'm told. Did he make all his money himself? Miss Backbay (of Boston)—Oh, no! Most of it was a—er—limbacy from his father.—Exchange.

ALTERING A PICTURE.

Why the Change Did Not Please the Original Artist.

An artist was talking about the noted German painter Adolf von Menzel.

"Von Menzel," he said, "painted the clearest and most distinct of pictures. Everything with him was worked out to the last hair. Nothing was ever suggested. With suggested, sketchy, impressionistic pictures he had no sympathy. He was called the Meissonier of Germany.

"In a discussion of a certain impressionist's vague, unintelligible work I once heard Von Menzel say:

"'This man Markheim sold to the Countess X. two years ago one of his landscapes. The countess after she had had the landscape a few weeks tired of it, and to another artist who dined with her one night she said:

"'"I think the new picture that Herr Markheim sold me lacks animation. It needs life in it. Would you be willing to paint for me a man or woman on that road that runs through the middle?"

"'"Why, surely, madam," said the second painter. And he took the picture home with him, made the addition and returned it the next morning.

"'Later, meeting Markheim, he said:

"'"I had the audacity to alter a landscape of yours the other day. It was the landscape you sold the Countess X. She wanted a figure in it, and to oblige her I painted an old peasant walking down the road."

"'Markheim frowned.

"'"The road?" he said. "The road? I don't remember any road in that picture."

"'"Oh, yes, there is a road," said the other.

"'"I can't recall it," said Markheim.

"'Finally, to settle the matter, they went to the house of the countess and stood before the picture.

"'"There," said Markheim's brother artist—"there is your road, and there is my old peasant walking down it."

"'"Fool," Markheim cried, "what have you done? That is not a road in the center of my work. It is a river."'"—San Francisco News-Letter.

THE GROUND CUCKOO.

Remarkable Cunning It Displays In Catching Rattlers.

One of the most interesting zoological oddities is the California ground cuckoo. He usually is from twenty to twenty-five inches long, including his tail, which measures one-half of his whole length. On account of his small wings he is a poor flier, but what he lacks in aerial dexterity he makes up in pedestrian velocity. With his four yard jumps he can outrun the swiftest race horse. His geographical range is confined to southern California, Mexico and some parts of Texas. As a bird of prey the ground cuckoo outwits his most avidious fellow creatures. Snails and large worms constitute his principal food, which he is busy all day in digging out of the ground. But he does not hesitate to attack larger animals. It is no trouble for him to get the better of small snakes, and when domesticated he beats any cat or dog in the extermination of mice and small house pests.

Most curiously interesting is the strategic sagacity he displays in the capture of large rattlesnakes. These he dare not meet in fair and open combat. As soon as he espies a rattlesnake sleeping in the sun near a cactus hedge he surrounds his victim with a heap of the prickly leaves until he is well hemmed in. He then pricks at the reptile a few times with his sharp bill, which causes a sudden commotion in the cactus heap. In his attempt to disentangle himself from the leaves he wounds his tender flesh, and it takes but an hour or two for the average rattler to die of sheer exhaustion and furnish a much coveted tidbit for the sly cuckoo. His method with his prey resembles that of the cat with the mouse.

THE OLD SAILING SHIPS.

Why the Wooden Ones Were Better Than Those Built of Iron.

The sailing ship when I knew her in the days of her perfection was a sensible creature. When I say her days of perfection I mean perfection of build, gear, seaworthy qualities and ease of handling, not the perfection of speed. That quality reached its highest excellence in the discovery of hollow lines and departed with the change of building material.

None of the iron ships of yesterday ever attained the marvels of speed which the seamanship of men famous in their time had obtained from their wooden, copper sheeted predecessors. Everything had been done to make the iron ship perfect, but no wit of man had managed to devise an efficient coating composition to keep her bottom clean with the smooth cleanness of yellow metal sheeting. After a spell of a few weeks at sea an iron ship begins to lag as if she had grown tired too soon. It is only her bottom that is getting foul.

A very little affects the speed of a ship that is not driven on by an untiring propeller. Often it is impossible to tell what inconsiderate trifle puts her off her stride. A certain mysteriousness hangs around the quality of speed as it was displayed by the old sailing ships commanded by competent seamen. In those days the speed was still a matter for the seaman's care. Therefore, apart from the laws, rules and regulations for the good preservation of his cargo, he was careful of his loading, of what is technically called the trim of his ship. Some ships sailed best on an even keel, others had to be trimmed quite one foot by the stern, and I have heard of a ship that gave her best speed on a wind when so loaded as to float a couple of inches by the head.—Joseph Conrad in Harper's Weekly.

Didn't Dare.

"Mr. Meekton says he never spoke a harsh word to his wife."

"Yes," answered Miss Cayenne, "but I'm not sure whether that is due to kindness or caution."—Washington Star.

No man was ever scolded out of his sins.—Cowper.