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A Terrible Channel Experience

by Cutcliffe Hyne

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"Hullo! there's Calvert, of all people!" I heard a brisk voice say behind me. "Now, he's the very man. I'll introduce you to him this minute, and then we'll go below and see your room, and backsheesh the steward into civility."

I turned my head and saw Vanvennan elbowing his way amongst the

crowd which swarmed on the steamer's bridge-deck between the gangway and the head of the first-class companion. He had a couple of dressing-bags in his fists, a bundle of rugs under his arm, and a pair of ladies in his train. To these last he introduced me:

"Mrs. Codrington, and my sister Mabel. They're going across to New York to stay with some friends, and then, when the warm weather comes, they're off with a party to see the Yosemite valley. They'll be met on the wharf at the other side, but up to there they'll be two lone, lorn females, and I want you to give them the benefit of your countenance, and do the genial watch-dog business. By the way, you're taking matters pretty coolly: you look either as if you had been settled here for a week, or else had no connection with the steamer whatever. I suppose you are crossing by her?"

I laughed. "Oh, yes," I said; "I came on board her sixteen minutes ago; saw the purser, and found 1 knew him; made him give me the best room in the ship instead of the one I'd got; carted my things in there one-time, and locked the door; and then cleared out here, and didn't worry any more."

"You're an old, bold hand," said Vanvennan, "and many years of wandering have made you perfect in the art of looking after yourself. What do you think of the boat?"

"Oh, she's a fine steamer, and she'll do a quick passage. Moreover, because she is a foreigner, they'll feed us extremely well, which is a great thing for this time of year."

"Then do you think we shall have a very bad crossing?" Mrs. Codrington asked, anxiously.

"We may have a breeze, or we mayn't; the Western Ocean is always delightfully uncertain about that. But I was thinking about the cold.

There'll be precious little going out on deck; meals will be the most interesting item of the day; and therefore a good table is a distinct pleasure to look forward to."

"Do you think there is any danger?" said Mrs. Codrington.

I smiled. "Remarkably little. Considerably less, for instance, than you would be exposed to if you travelled by train for a week backwards and forwards between London and Glasgow. In fact, if you care to give me the sum of one penny apiece, I'll insure you each for £1,000 against fatal accident all the way across, like the weekly papers do ashore. Come, now, will you let me do that stroke of business?"

"Save your coppers," said Vanvennan, laughing. "Calvert is too grasping. Come along down below and get settled in your quarters, and then bid me an affectionate good-bye. I shall have to clear if I don't want to be taken on. Ta-ta, Calvert, old chap. So awfully good of you to take these damsels under your charge. Hope you'll all have a good time on the other side, and not get frozen on the road. Goodbye."

We hove up at dusk that afternoon, because the Channel outside was white with an ugly, choppy sea, there were fiddles on the table at dinner and extraordinarily few diners. I sent down dry champagne and biscuits to Mrs. Codrington's room, and then, seating myself next to the purser, made a gorgeous meal.

"We do ourselves well here in the grub line, don't we?" said the purser. "Better than the English boats. We're dragging all the passenger trade away from them now. Come along down to my room for your coffee, and we'll have a quiet smoke before I get to work squaring up my papers. Lord! I wouldn't care to be the Old Man tonight! He'll be perched there freezing on the upper bridge till we're bang clear of the Channel, and very likely for the next twenty-four

hours after that if the weather's at all thick. He's got just over a thousand human lives on this ship, and I guess they give him all the responsibility he's any use for. Steward, bring me down a bottle of liqueur cognac to my room. Now, Mr. Calvert, if you're ready."

The purser and I talked Western Ocean shop during the burning of two Cuban cigars, and then he turned to at work, and I slipped off to the smoke-room and read the illustrated papers. It was eleven o'clock before the smoke-room steward hinted that the hour of closing had come.

I went out into the night, a black misty night full of rain and spindrift driving down from the nor'-nor'-west. I cocked my eye and saw the skipper and two mates patrolling the upper bridge; on the beak of the deck ahead of me were three men in glistening oilskins; in the crow's-nest forward were two others; and I shivered luxuriously, and thanked the fates that I was a mere passenger who could travel in absolute safety and have no watch to keep. And then I went below, made fast my portmanteaux, and turned in. Sleep humoured me at once. I woke to the tune of colliding ships and the full orchestra of Death.

To say that my senses came to me with-out flurry and at once would be too great a claim. By some violent shock from beneath I was banged up against the iron roof of the cabin. I pitched back on the floor, and for a minute or so lay there stunned.

Something serious was going on. I became dully conscious of this, and with an effort roused myself and stared curiously at the curtain-rod of the bunk, which lay doubled up and twisted between my hands. Then it began to be borne in upon me that the ship was awake with screaming and the trampling of frightened feet, and then the interpretation of these things came to me in a flash. We were in collision.

A man snatched open my door, stammered out, "We're going down: Oh! what shall I do?" and ran away shouting. The ship was full of noise and darkness and hammering. The propeller had stopped; no light came when I turned the electric switch; and we had so heavy a list to starboard (my side) that already the ports were covered most of the time. It was precisely clear that the steamer was in a bad way, and one's first and most natural instinct was to bolt for the upper decks.

I'm ashamed to say that I had already rushed outside the door with this idea before I got my wits in hand again. But then I pulled myself up, and went back and dragged on some heavy serge clothes over my pyjamas, and added boots and a whisky-flask; after which I pounded off along the alley-ways to the room .which Mrs. Codrington shared with the Vanvennan girl. The door of it was slamming noisily with the roll of the ship. I looked inside. The place was empty, and from out of the darkness came a swirl of water which ran coldly about my knees. I guessed they had gone to the upper deck, and ran there myself with the best of pace. There was a feel about the steamer that I knew. She lay down sodden and numb in the sea, and rose to the waves no more. I had felt that sluggish sullen roll before on another ship. We had found her drifting, and boarded her in mid-ocean, and had just time to leave her decks before she sank down to the ocean floor. The mail steamer was going to repeat that dive--and she was carrying a thousand human lives.

The bridge-deck lay atilt like the roof of a house, and it was carpeted with humanity. From the upper bridge, rockets climbed up high into the night in one never-ending stream of yellow flame. Orders, prayers, shrieks, and threats were being hurled about in every tongue that Europe knows. The stoke-hold crews, mad with fear, were raging like devils unchained round the grips and chocks of the lifeboats. Naked

emigrants were with them. Sick men, who could hardly crawl, tore at the boat-awnings with their teeth. The ship's officers and the few deck-hands were swept aside like straws.

Then a bellow from the steam siren drowned all the clamour, and at that instant the moon slid out and burnt like a great white lamp through a gap in the racing clouds. A shout could not be heard above that din, and the shouts died away whilst the trembling fingers fumbled on at boat-grips, and rived at the stops on the falls. Then the captain on the upper bridge let go the lanyard of the siren, and gave his orders before the silence could be broken.

"Keep your heads, and all will be saved," he cried in German. "Women stand by the starboard boats, and men away to port. Boat crews to their stations. I will shoot the first swine that disobeys me." Then he repeated the words in English and French and Norsk, till his cry was lost once more in the raging clamour.

Now, for myself I had seen the uselessness of thinking about my own hide till matters were somewhat further advanced, and I remembered (with grim amusement) how I had offered to heavily insure two ladies' lives for the trifling premium of two copper coins. So from the moment of coming out on deck I had been employed in hunting for these charges amongst the mob, and had not been sparing vigour in the process. There were nine hundred people wedged into one group, and it was not a possible thing to go through these singly. So I had gone round outside the bulwark rail, occasionally climbing up by a stanchion or a stay, and had gazed down on the huddle of faces from above; and when I found the two that were wanted I fought my way to them with elbow or shut fist as required. Mrs. Codrington wore a flannel dressing-gown; and as the other girl had turned out in a singularly becoming garment of cotton, I gave her my own pilot-jacket, and stole also for her (by brute force) a spotted carriage-rug from a

Polish Jew.

"Now," I said, "there's string in the pocket of that jacket, and this thing will make you an elegant skirt. You'd much better stop being frightened, and then we can get along more comfortably. You aren't going to get drowned, or anything like it. I've insured you for a thousand apiece to Vanvennan, and I can't afford to let you come to grief at that price. When these fools have stopped struggling and squealing, you shall go off in a big boat and join another steamer. We shall have ten round us in half an hour. Look at those rockets."

Mrs. Codrington gripped my arm. "Then you think we have a chance of--" she began, and "B'm-m-m·m" said the great steam horn from above.

When we could hear ourselves speak again, and whilst the captain was giving his orders from the upper bridge, the purser came to my elbow.

"Here, Calvert," he said in my ear, "you're a man. Those port boats won't lower anyway: she's listed too much over. I don't know whether we can get the star-board boats in the water without swamping with this sea running, but we've got to try; and if anyone goes off in them except the boat crews, it's got to be the women and kids. Same old yarn, y'know. So you've got to peg out anyway, and you may as well do it in a way that'll make you respect yourself. Ah, would you?" He knocked down a frantic German who was battling his way towards one of the starboard boats with a revolver outstretched. He wrenched away the weapon, and gave it me. "Here's a gun, old man. Just you wire in and murder the swine if they try to swamp you. They'll soon see those port boats won't lower, and they'll be back here in a minute."

Now a peculiar feeling had come over me. I had made up my mind

that I had got to die, and didn't waste time by being sorry for myself over it. All my brain was turned on two objects. First, I had got to keep my ticket clean by seeing that the two girls I was looking after were sent away clear of the mess. And second, I wanted to leave a very red mark on the cowards who were wasting other people's lives because they could not save their own. That last wish amounted to a mania. I was ashamed of being a man whilst some of those brutes lived and could call themselves men also.

One of the starboard boats had been lowered already, packed with people. But before she was in the water the after fall had jammed in the block, and because the other took charge, she tilted bow-downwards, and spilt her wretched freight into the charging seas. Another boat was swung out, and lay beating against the rail as the steamer rolled. I would have bustled my two charges into her, but she was crowded in an instant and lowered away. She took the water safely, shoved off, and with oars straddling out on either side, crawled away over the inky water like some uncouth insect.

Then came the rush. The list had grown till the port boats hung inboard against their davits, and the waiting crowds beside them saw that that road of escape was cut off for good. In half the tongues of Pentecost they screamed into the windy night that the ship was sinking, sinking--and each brute amongst them thought that his own life was worth more than all the honour and the wealth the world combined. They poured down the slope of the decks in a raving horde--Polish and Russian Jews, Hungarian peasants fleeing from the conscription, Italian thieves, Belgian stokers--a foul gush from the dregs of Europe; and with them came men who ought to have known better, but who had gone mad also, smitten by this same infection of terror.

I had slung the two women on to the floor grating of No. 3 lifeboat,

and stood with my back against the gunwale. One of the mates, a gigantic Swede, rose up beside me, his teeth gritting with fury, and a belaying pin gripped in his hand.

Three deck hands were sweating and swearing at the falls, getting the boat lifted right off her chocks and swung outboard.

The other women on the decks were knocked down and stamped on, and the mob of men leaped at the boat. It was no time for words. The mate and I hit out at every face we could reach with savage fury, but none turned to hit again. They scrabbled at the boat's gunwales with their hands, and those behind tore the leaders back. I could have beat in their faces in my hate; but--I could not bring myself to shoot: there was nothing there worthy of a bullet

The boat was lifted from its bed, and swung outboard. The steamer had ceased to roll, and the seas were coming green on her bridge-deck rail. The boat was floated almost before the falls were let go, and a wave came up and swayed her clear. The crowd shrieked and drew back up the slanting decks.

I leaned up against a davit, my breath returning to me in laboured pants. But the Swedish mate left me, and if ever murder showed in a man's eye, I saw it gleaming from his then; and shrieks coming through the darkness told what his fury was doing. He at any rate, I told myself, would die warm.

But the lust for maiming had left me. The last of the boats had gone, and the women and children who were left had got to die with us men, and with those who were infinitely less than men. The rockets were still spouting up in unwearied series from the upper bridge, and once I saw the purser pass me, jaunty as of yore, with a lit cigar in his fingers, and an assurance between his teeth that all would be well. But I heeded him little. The chill of Death was nipping me with its

agues, and the hopeless minutes were dragging out intolerably. With a life-belt I might . . . but no: there were women left, and I had got to stay.

Then of a sudden there burst out a roar, and a clang of iron, and a gush of scalding steam; and the decks ripped and splintered, and the steam rushed down in grey, peeling clouds. No, not that death. I vaulted the rail, and sank.

The instinct of the swimmer is curious. I had gone over the side quite satisfied that escape was hopeless, and intending to drown with one long plunge. But no sooner did the icy water thunder in my ears than the old instinct made me strike out for the surface. But I could not reach it. I swam on for what seemed to be minutes, hours, years, thousands of years; my arms aching, the veins like to burst through my skin; and then it came upon me that the steamer had sunk, and I was being dragged in her swirl down, down, down, to the dark sea floor; down, down, where it was too cold--down--down.

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I opened my eyes and blinked; blinked again, and saw dimly the rough sea living-room of fishers. It was wainscoted with bunks round to the rudder case, and on the forward bulkhead was a fireplace resplendent with brass. I imagined I was in one of the bunks, but was not very certain about it, and so coughed inquiringly. Somebody came to my side. I pondered awhile, and then remarked, "I seem, somehow, to know that coat."

"It's yours," said the someone. "Don't you remember? I'm Mabel Vanvennan."

This was more satisfactory. I woke further, and inquired; "Where's the other--Mrs.--er--I forget?"

"Codrington," said a voice from one of the bunks. "Here."

I was getting on. "I'm afraid you must have lost all your clothes?" was the next thing that occurred to me.

"Yes," said the voice, "and such a lovely diamond star!"

Then came a torrent of sobbing, and, between sobs, "Oh! how could I be so horrid as to think of such a thing now? There are only sixty picked up, they say. And all those other poor people lost! Isn't it awful to think about?"

"Very probably," I said. "But we've saved our own skins, and I don't think we've anything to be ashamed of. It wasn't my fault that someone gathered me up, though."

Then a man came in and stared at me thoughtfully--a fisherman, in clumsy sea boots and brown-patched oilskin.

"Closish squeak you've had, mister," said he, slowly. "We just passed that other boat what run you down. She'd about seven foot of her how gone, and looked pretty sick, I tell you. We hailed her to know if she wanted anything; but she said, 'No.' Got her steering gear fixed up again, and was going to put into Portsmouth. She's a Welsh collier bound there. Rum go this has been. Where was your steamer hit?"

"Haven't a notion."

"Well, what were her watertight bulkheads doing?"

"Very sorry, but I can't tell you."

"H'm!" said the man. "Then what do you know about it?"

"Nothing," said I, "except that I'm here now, and that just now I imagined I was drowned."

"Well," said the man, "you won't do much towards dirtying any poor beast of a sailor's ticket at the inquiry, that's one blessing. I'll send you in a can of tea, and then you'd better sleep. We're standing in for Penzance to bring the news, because there ought to be a reward kicking about, and by the time you wake we should be there. So long! "
