

## THE REPUTATION OF THE "BELLA B."

BY

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"A SHIP'S reputation is like a woman's," said the skipper. "When there's a whisper against it, it's as good as gone."

"Yes, sir," said the second mate, touching his cap.

Etiquette is exacting at sea, and a freight-boat flatters herself that she knows what is fitting as well as a man-of-war. The captain had shipped as cabin-boy when he was fourteen, and had worked his way up to his present lofty eminence, yet even with his officers he hedged himself about with an impenetrable superiority. He ate his meals in solitary state. He sometimes came into the mess-room and watched the progress of a card-game, but he never took a hand. To express an opinion contrary to that of the captain was not considered good form on the *Bella B.*, and so the second mate touched his cap and said, "Yes, sir."

Down in his heart he was wishing that the *Bella B.* was not so ready to shift the responsibility of protecting her reputation. She was a tramp steamer, and perhaps it was her roving life that had unsettled her standards. She had fought her way through a tornado on the Bay of Bengal, and had rounded the Horn in a tempest. In both instances, badly crippled, she had crawled into the nearest port for repairs. Her deck had been stained with the blood of a mutiny. She had been a floating pest-house on one or two occasions, lying tranquilly at anchor while the plague decimated her crew. She had a trick of leaving port just when the signals foretold dirty weather. She had a penchant for meeting icebergs in the most unheard-of places, and she had been the chief sufferer from several collisions. But of all her escapades her latest was the most serious.

Strictly speaking, this could not be laid at the door of the *Bella B.* When the captain had called the attention of the owners to the fact that the asbestos lining of one of the coal-

bunkers was distinctly the worse for wear, these practical men had shrugged their shoulders. After one more voyage it would be necessary to have the *Bella B.* thoroughly overhauled, for the annual inspection. To make repairs before that time would be a waste of good money. The owners took the risk with the composure of business men who know how slight a margin there often is between making a fortune and losing one. The captain accepted their decision with the serenity of a man whose life has been one long hazard. And so the *Bella B.* sailed out jauntily, bound for Montreal.

They were five days from port when the fire was discovered. The defective asbestos lining had failed to protect the coal in one of the bunkers from the heat of the adjacent furnaces. The fuel had ignited. The *Bella B.* was not an ocean greyhound. With fair weather the captain hoped to make Montreal in fourteen days from Glasgow. Storms might delay him another week. At the best the fire might easily become unmanageable before they reached land.

A ship at sea with a fire smoldering in her hold is like nothing so much as a human being with a cancer gnawing at his vitals. Outwardly life is much as usual. One goes about his work, laughs at a good story, makes money, makes love, and all the time that deadly, inexorable thing is gaining little by little. Each morning sees the inevitable a day nearer. Nothing out of the ordinary was observable on the *Bella B.* Perhaps the captain's eyes had a sunken look, as if he had slept poorly, and once, in the middle of a game of poker, the chief engineer dropped his hand and sprang to his feet. "I—I thought I heard something," he said, and then he sat down again and picked up his cards with a shaking hand. But the crew sang and told stories as usual, and even made rough jests regarding the slow-growing horror in the hold beneath them. And the *Bella B.* plowed her tranquil way across the

gray-green water, the blue heavens over her, and a bit of red hell within.

What the tension had been none of them realized till land was sighted. Then a sudden hilarity possessed them all. With unexampled condensation the captain cracked a joke with the second mate, and that youth flushed with gratified pride as he touched his cap. He was very young to have received his papers, this second mate, but he had had two incentives. The one was a gentle old mother, who always wore a kerchief on Sundays, and had a way of ignoring the letter *h* that convinced the hearer that this particular letter had no business in the alphabet. The other incentive had brown curls and a trick of turning rose-color at the slightest provocation, to say nothing of the most tantalizingly long lashes that ever veiled a pair of gray eyes when a man wanted to look into their depths. No wonder that the second mate had been more ambitious and industrious than most young fellows of his age.

"We'll be in port soon," said the captain. "And, Mr. Davis, I'm thinking you and I will look after that little business in the coal-bunker."

"Yes, sir," said the second mate, but he lingered in bewilderment.

The captain saw the wonder in his face, and, though he was under no obligation to do so, he explained.

"It would be an easy thing to get the fire department down here," said the captain. "But if we did, we couldn't keep it secret. Shippers don't like to hear of such things. It plays the very devil with the underwriters." Then he added oracularly, "A ship's reputation is like a woman's. When there's a whisper against it, it's as good as gone."

The second mate's sense of resentment against the *Bella B.* for her seeming indifference to her own reputation had been but momentary. When the time came, he followed the captain down into the hold, his thoughts chiefly occupied with the honor conferred on him. When there was dangerous work to be done, the captain never held back, and his choice of the youth had gone to show that he recognized him as one of his own sort. "When I'm a skipper," thought the boy, "I won't send any man where I'm afraid to go myself." There was an elation in his face that made those he passed glance at him curiously.

For days the men had been drawing what they could of the coal from the bunker, and they were near the fire. From the sullen heaps against the wall adjacent to the furnace the smell of gas arose, and the heat was men-

acing. Each holding a hose, the two advanced upon the pile. The streams of water turned to steam as they struck, and the hissing white cloud drove the men back. Again they advanced, hose in hand, and again retreated.

"We're right on the fire," said the captain, drawing his hand across his eyes, blinded by perspiration. "It would have been a shame to have troubled the department for a little thing like this."

Even as he spoke there was a roar. Then the second mate found himself huddled against the wall and alone. The captain had disappeared. The opening before which he had been standing, and through which they had entered, was choked with coal. The second mate was entombed in a furnace. The peril he had been attacking had cut off his retreat. For an instant he was a madman, clawing at the coal with his bare hands, nor knowing that they blistered at the touch. The face of a little woman with a white kerchief crossed beneath her chin flashed suddenly before him, and that of a pink-cheeked girl pouting and lowering her lashes. She had promised to wear his ring after he returned from this voyage. He wondered vaguely if any one would think to give her that ring, now that he was never to come back.

The men outside were working furiously at the coal, thrown into a barricade by the force of the explosion. Some one made an opening and thrust a hose through. The water that drenched him came just in time to save his reason and his life. He waited, choking in the noxious gases, watching the little opening growing larger as strong arms shoveled back the coal. Then, knowing he could endure no more, he sprang forward. Darkness came, and with strange tranquillity he told himself that this was death.

When he opened his eyes he was on deck. A few feet away lay a blackened, begrimed figure he did not recognize. The steward was trying to force some liquor down his throat, and he swallowed it, and began to realize the pain of his blistered hands.

"Who is that?" he said to the steward, looking toward the silent figure over which the first officer was bending.

"That's the skipper. He was standing so that the explosion of the gas blew him right out of the bunker. But he hasn't moved since, though his heart is beating."

Just then the blackened figure opened its eyes and sat up. It looked toward the prostrate second mate, and for a moment there was silence.

"A ship and a woman are alike," said the

skipper thoughtfully. "When you're doing your best to protect the reputation of either, the chances are that you'll get blown up. Mr. Saunders, as Mr. Davis is not fit for further duty, I will ask you to go down with me to put out the fire."

Then the second mate staggered to his feet, touched his singed hair with his blistered hand, and cried, "If you please, sir, I'm as fit as ever. Don't leave me out!"

That afternoon the *Bella B.*, lying at the dock, looked the picture of respectability. Not even the spick-and-span excursion steamers, carrying pleasure-seekers to near-by resorts, knew of aught to her discredit. The fire was extinguished. In the morning the repairs would begin. The second mate stood on the deck with his hands bandaged and

counted up the days before they would be home again.

The captain, looking pale, yet very trim in his uniform, came up to him. "Are your burns any less painful?" he questioned. "They'll begin to ease up by to-morrow, perhaps." He hesitated a moment, then waived discipline sufficiently to say: "Some people would call it foolish. But the reputation of a woman or of a ship cannot be guarded too carefully. Some day you'll have a wife and you'll understand."

The boy looked eastward, and across three thousand miles of water saw a pretty, piquant face, the color coming and going, and the drooping lashes shading the telltale eyes. "Yes, sir," he said, raising his bandaged hand to his cap, "I understand."

