

The Star of the "Grasmere."

By E. W. HORNUNG.

MY acquaintance with Jim Clunie began and ended on the high seas. It began when the good ship *Grasmere*, of the well-known Mere line of Liverpool clippers, was nine days out from that port, bound for Melbourne with a hardware cargo and some sixty passengers. There were but seven of us, however, in the saloon, and Clunie was not of this number. He was a steerage passenger. When, therefore, on the tenth day of the voyage I had occasion to seek the open air in the middle of dinner, I was not a little surprised to find Clunie practically in possession of the poop. As a steerage passenger he had no business to be there at all, much less with the revolver which I instantly noticed in his right hand.

"It's all right, my lord," he shouted to me hesitating on the top of the ladder. "I'm only taking a pot at the sea-gulls!" And he discharged his weapon over the rail, needless to say without effect, for we were close-hauled to a hard head wind, and pitching violently.

I looked at the man at the wheel, and the man at the wheel nodded to me.

"The third mate'll be back in a minute, sir. He's only gone for'a'd to speak to Chips."

"A minute's all I want," cried Clunie, firing twice in quick succession. "What does your lordship say? Too sick to say anything, eh?"

I need hardly say that I have no title, and just then I could not even claim to be a lord of creation, as I hung and clung like a wet towel to the rail. But such manhood as I had left was still sensitive to an impertinence, and I turned and stared as resentfully as possible at this insolent fellow. He was young enough, but I was younger, and I am sure we hated each other on the spot. At my look, at all events, his offensive grin changed to a sinister scowl, while I recollect making an envious note of his biceps, which filled out the sleeves of the striped football jersey that he wore instead of a coat. Perhaps at the same moment he was looking at my wrists, which are many sizes too small, for the next liberty the brute took was to pat me on the back with his left hand while he brandished the smoking revolver in his right.

"Cheer up," said he. "You'll be as good a man as any of us when we get the trades. Try sardines whole! When you can keep a whole sardine you'll be able to keep anything."

"The third mate'll be up directly," said the man at the wheel.

"He will so!" said I, starting off to fetch him; but as I reached the break of the poop, up came the captain himself, who had heard the shots, and in a very few seconds Mr. Clunie found himself in his proper place upon the main deck. He took his discomfiture very coolly, however, just nodding and laughing when the captain threatened to take away his revolver altogether. And I saw no more of the man for some days, because I was so cold on deck that I soon retired to the saloon settee, and so miserable on the saloon settee that I finally retreated to my own berth, where most of my time was spent.

For the voyage had begun very badly indeed. We were actually three weeks in beating clear of the Bay of Biscay, during which time we were constantly close-hauled, but never on the same tack for more than



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"HE BRANDISHED THE SMOKING REVOLVER."

four consecutive hours. It was a miserable state of things for those of us who were bad sailors. For four hours one's berth was at such an angle that one could hardly climb out of it, and then for four more the angle was reversed, and one lay in continual peril of being shot to the other side of the cabin like clay from a spade. Then the curtains, the candle-stick, and one's clothes on the pegs described arcs in the air that made one sick to look at them; and yet there was nothing else to look at except the port-hole, which was washed repeatedly by great green seas that darkened the cabin and shook the ship. The firm feet and hearty voices of the sailors overhead, when all hands put the ship about at eight bells, grieved me only less than the sound and smell of the cuddy meals that reached and tortured me three times a day. I think my only joy during those three weeks was one particularly foul morning on the skirts of the Bay, when I heard that all the ham and eggs for the cuddy breakfast had been washed through the lee scuppers. Ham and eggs in a sea like that!

Most days, it is true, I did manage to crawl on deck, but I could never stand it for long. I had not found my sea-legs, my knees were weak, and I went sliding about the wet poop like butter on a hot plate. The captain's hearty humour made me sad. The patronizing airs of a couple of consumptives, who were too ill to be sick, filled my heart with impotent ire. What I minded most, however, was the insolent demeanour of Jim Clunie. He was as good a sailor as our most confirmed invalid, and was ever the first person I beheld as I emerged from below with groping steps and grasping fingers. He seemed to spend all his time on the after-hatch, always in his blue and black football jersey and a Tam o'Shanter, and generally with a melodeon and some appreciative comrade, whom he would openly nudge as I appeared. I can see him now, with his strong, unshaven, weather-reddened face, and his short, thick-set, athletic frame; and I can hear his accursed melodeon. Once he struck up "The Conquering Hero" as I struggled up the starboard ladder; and once——

But that was not yet.

Those three weeks wore to an end. A fair wind came at last, and it came to stay. We took the north-east trades in 33° N., and thenceforward we bowled along in splendid style, eight or nine knots an hour, with a slight permanent list to port, but practically no motion. The heavy canvas was

taken down, the ship put on her summer suit of thin white sails, and every stitch bagged out with steadfast wind. There was now no need to meddle with the yards, and the crew were armed with scrapers and paint-pots to give them something to do. Awnings were spread, as every day the sun grew hotter and the sea more blue, and under them the passengers shot up like flowers in a forcing-house. There was an end to our miseries, and the pendulum swung to the other extreme. I never saw so many souls in spirits so high or in health so blooming. We got to know each other. We told stories. We sang songs. We organized sweepstakes on the day's run. We played quoits, and cards, and draughts, and chess. We ventured aloft, were duly pursued and mulcted in the usual fine. We got up a concert. We even started a weekly magazine.

Clunie took a conspicuous part in almost everything. He was the only man of us who was too quick for the sailors up aloft. When his pursuer had all but reached him, Clunie swung himself on to one of the stays and slid from the cross-trees to the deck in the most daring manner, thus exempting himself from further penalty. He afterwards visited all three mastheads in one forenoon, and wrote his name on the truck of each. We had our first concert the same evening, and if one man contributed to its success more than another, that man was undoubtedly Jim Clunie. He not only played admirably upon his melodeon, but he recited "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and Poe's "Raven" with unsuspected force and cleverness. People began to speak of him as the life and soul of the ship, and yet in the saloon we were getting to like him less and less. For though plucky and talented, he was also pushing, overbearing, and ready to make himself objectionable on or without the very slightest provocation.

He had sent in a contribution for the *Grasmere Chronicle*, which happened to be edited by the doctor and myself. We were prepared for a good thing, for the general aggressiveness of the man had by no means blinded us to his merits, but we soon discovered that these did not include any sort of literary faculty. His effusion was too silly even for a ship's magazine. It was also illiterate, so it really did fall short of our modest standard. We therefore rejected it, and that night I encountered Clunie in the waist of the ship.

"You call yourself the editor of the *Gras-*



THE LIFE AND SOUL OF THE SHIP."

personal a matter as a rejected offering to our magazine. His face it was too dark to see, but I went straight to the doctor and reported my suspicions.

"If you don't prescribe that man a straw hat," said I, "you may order a sheet and a shot for this one; for I'll swear he means to murder me."

The doctor laughed.

"My dear fellow, it isn't that," he said. "It's much more likely to be whisky. He was as right as rain when he was with me an hour or two ago. He came to tell me what he was going to do for us to-morrow night at the concert. He means to bring the ship down this time, and I believe he'll do it. He's our star, my boy, and we mustn't take him too seriously. It'll never do to go and have a row with Jim Clunie!"

The doctor thought differently a day or two later. Meantime, he took the chair at our second concert, which was held the

mere *Chronicle*, don't you?" he began, stopping me, and speaking with the northern burr that gave some little distinction to his speech. I had noticed that this burr accentuated itself under the influence of emotion, and it was certainly accentuated now. So I looked at him inquiringly, and he rolled out his words afresh and rather louder.

"I am one of the editors," said I.

"Yes; the one that rejected my verses!" cried he, with a great many "r's" in the last word.

"No," said I; "I'm afraid we did that between us."

"That's a lie," said he through his teeth, "and you know it's a lie. You're the man! You're the man! And see here, Davidson, I'll be even with you before we get to—the port we're bound for. Do you know what that is?"

"Melbourne," said I.

"Kingdom Come!" said he; "and I'll pay you out before we get there."

The sun had been very hot. I felt sure that it had struck through Clunie's most unsuitable Tam o' Shanter and affected his brain. Nothing else could explain the absurd ferocity of his tone about so trivial and im-

night before we crossed the line, and in his opening speech he paid Clunie what I considered a rather unnecessary compliment, which, however, the "star" certainly justified before our entertainment was over. He gave us a capital selection on his melodeon, then he sang to it, and finally he danced a breakdown to it in response to a double encore. But his great success was scored in the second part of the programme, when he recited "The Dream of Eugene Aram" with a tragic intensity which has not since been surpassed in my hearing. Perhaps the tragedy was a little overdone. Perhaps the reciter ranted in the stanzas descriptive of the murder, but I confess I did not think so at the time. To me there was murder in the lowered voice, and murder in the protruding chin (on which the beard was still growing), and murder in the rolling eye that gleamed into mine more times than I liked in the course of the recitation. The latter was the most realistic performance I had ever heard, and also the most disagreeable. Nor can I have been alone in thinking so, for, when it was over, a deep sigh preceded the applause. This was deafening, but Clunie was too good an artist to risk an anti-climax by accepting

his encore. He was content, possibly, to have pulled the cork out of the rest of the entertainment, which fell very flat indeed. Then, in a second speech, our infatuated doctor paid a second compliment to "the star of the *Grasmere*." And by midnight he had the star on his hands: sun-struck, it was suspected, but in reality as mad as a man could be.

Some details of his madness I learned afterwards, but more I witnessed on the spot.

At six bells in the first watch he appeared half-dressed on the poop and requested the captain to make it convenient to marry him next morning. Our astonished skipper had lifted his pipe from his teeth, but had not answered, when Clunie broke away with the remark that he had not yet asked the girl. He was back, however, in a minute or two, laughing bitterly, snapping his fingers, and announcing in the same breath how his heart was broken, and what he did not care. It appeared that, with a most unlooked-for proposal of marriage, he had been frightening the wits out of some poor girl in the steerage, whither he now returned, as he said, to sleep it down. The mate was sent after him, to borrow his pistols. He lent them on condition the mate should shoot *me* with them, and heave my body overboard, and never let Clunie set eyes on me again. And in the mate's wake went our dear old doctor, who treated the maniac for sun-stroke, and pronounced him a perfect cure in the morning.

Nevertheless, he was seen at mid-day perched upon the extreme weather-end of the fore-t'-gallant yard-arm, holding on to nothing, but playing his melodeon to his heart's content. The whole ship's company turned out to watch him, while the chief officer himself went aloft to coax him down. To him Clunie declared that he could see Liverpool as plain as a pikestaff on the port bow, that he could read the time by the town-hall clock, and that he wasn't coming down till he could step right off at the docks. Our ingenious chief was, however, once more equal to the occasion, and he at last induced Clunie to return to the deck in order to head a mutiny and take command of the ship. When he did reach the deck, he rushed straight for me, the mate tripped him up, and in another minute he was wailing and cursing, and foaming at the mouth, with the irons on his wrists and a dozen hands holding him down. It appears that the two of them arranged, up aloft, to burn me alive as an offering to Neptune on crossing the line; to behold the captain

and all the male passengers; and to make all females over the age of twenty-five walk the plank that afternoon. The last idea must have emanated from our wicked old chief himself.

They put him first in the second mate's cabin, which opened off the passage leading to the saloon. His language, however, was an unsavoury accompaniment to our meals, and it was generally felt that this arrangement could not be permanent. Though shackled hand and foot, and guarded day and night by an apprentice, he managed to escape, in a false nose and very little else, on the second afternoon. A number of us effected his capture on the main deck, but I was the only one whose action in the matter he appeared to resent. He spent the rest of the day in hoarsely cursing me from the second mate's berth. The next, we lost the trade-winds which had carried us across the line. All day we wallowed in a steam of rain upon an oily sea. But the damp of the doldrums seemed to suit the poor fellow in the second mate's cabin; at all events, his behaviour improved; and by the day after that (when we were fortunate enough to drift into the south-east trades) the carpenter's berth, in the for'a'd deck-house, was ready for his reception, with a sheet of iron over the door, stout bars across the port-hole, and the carpenter's locker securely screwed up.

It took Clunie exactly twenty-four hours to break into that locker. He then stationed himself at his port-hole with a small broad-side of gouges and chisels, which he poised between the bars and proceeded to fire at all comers. The officers were fetched to overpower him, but he managed to break the third mate's head in the fray. Then, because they could not throw him overboard, they fixed a ringbolt in the floor of the berth, and handcuffed him down to that whenever he became violent. As we sailed into cooler latitudes, however, he became better and better every day. He gave up railing at every man, woman, or child who passed his port-hole; he even ceased to revile me when we met on deck, where he was now allowed to take the air with his right wrist handcuffed to the left of the strongest seaman in the fore-castle. At this stage I fear he was the amusement of many who had latterly gone in terror of him, for he was very strong on mesmerism, which he fancied he achieved by rattling his manacles in our ears, while he was always ready to talk the most outrageous nonsense to all who cared



W. X. Symons
"ALLOWED TO TAKE THE AIR."

to listen to him. His favourite delusion was a piece of profanity very common indeed in such cases; and his chief desire was to be allowed to row himself back to Liverpool in one of the boats.

"Give me the dinghy and a box of mixed biscuits," he used to say, "and I won't trouble you any more."

It was all very sad, but the violent phase had been the worst. His only violence now was directed against his own outfit, which he tore up suit after suit, swathing his feet with the rags. The striped football jersey alone survived, and this he wore in a way of his own. He put his legs through the sleeves because he had torn up all his trousers. And as his costume was completed by a strait-waistcoat, constructed by the sailmaker, it was impossible not to smile at the ludicrous figure now cut by this poor, irresponsible soul. He was no longer dangerous. The homicidal tendency had disappeared, and with it the particular abhorrence with which I of all people had been unfortunate enough to inspire him when he was still comparatively sane. We were now quite friendly. He called me Brother John, after a character

in a comic song with which I had made rather a hit at our first concert, but the familiarity was employed without offence.

We had it very cold in our easting. We all but touched the fiftieth parallel. But we were rewarded with excellent winds, and we bade fair to make a quick passage in spite of our sluggish start. One wild, wet evening, I was standing on the weather side of the quarter-deck, when Clunie came up to me with his strange apparel dripping wet, his swathed feet dragging behind him like squeegees, and the salt spray glistening in his beard.

"Well, governor," said he, "do you remember refusing my verses?"

"I do," said I, smiling.

"So do I," said he, thrusting his face close to mine. "So do I, Brother John!" And he turned on his swaddled heel without another word.

Straight I went to the doctor.

"Doctor," said I, "you oughtn't to let that fellow go loose. I fear him, doctor; I fear him—horribly."

"Why?" cried he. "You don't mean to tell me he's getting worse again?"

"No," I said, "he's getting better every day; and that's exactly where my fear comes in."

The wind blew strong and fair until we were within a day's sail of Port Phillip Heads. Then it veered, still blowing strong, and we were close-hauled once more, the first time for eight weeks. Then it shifted right round, and finally it fell. So we rolled all night on a peaceful, starlit sea, with the wind dead aft and the mizzen-mast doing all the work, but that was very little. Three knots an hour was the outside reckoning, and our captain was an altered man. But we passengers gave a farewell concert, and spent the night in making up the various little differences of the voyage, and not one of us turned in till morning. Even then I could not sleep. I was on the brink of a new life. The thought filled me with joy and fear. We had seen no land for eighty-six days. We expected to sight the coast at daybreak. I desired to miss none of it. I wanted to think. I wanted air. I wanted to realize the situation. So I flung back my blankets at two bells, and I slipped into my flannels. In another minute I was running up the foremast ratlines, with a pillar of idle canvas, and a sheaf of sharp, black cordage a-swing and a-sway between me and the Australian stars.

I had not "paid my footing" at the beginning of the voyage for nothing. I had acquired a sure foot, a ready hand, and, above all, a steady head. I climbed to the cross-trees without halt or pause, and then I must needs go higher. My idea was to sit on the royal yard, and wait there for Australia and the rising sun. It is the best spar for seeing from, because there are no sails to get in your way—you are on the top of all. But it is also the slightest, the unsteadyest, and the furthest from the deck.

I sat close to the mast, with my arm, as it were, round its waist, and it is extraordinary how much one sees from the fore-royal yard. There was no moon that night, the sea seemed as vast as the sky and almost as concave. Indeed, they were as two skies, joined like the hollows of two hands: the one spattered with a million moon-stones; the other all smeared with phosphorus; both inky, both infinite; and perched between the two an eighteen-year-old atom, with fluttering heart and with straining eyes, on the edge of a wide new world.

It had been a pleasant voyage.

I was sorry it was over. Captain, officers, passengers and crew, it was probably my last night among them, and my heart turned heavy at the thought. They had been good friends to me. Should I make as good over yonder? It was too much to expect; these dear fellows had been so kind. Among them all I had made but one enemy, and he, poor soul, was not accountable. My thoughts stayed a little with Clunie, who had not spoken to me since the wet, wild night when he brought up that silly, forgotten matter of his rejected contribution. My thoughts had not left him

when his very voice hailed me from a few feet below.

"Sit tight, Brother John," he cried, softly. "I'll be with you in two twos."

I nearly fell from the yard. He was within reach of my hand. His melodeon was slung across his shoulders, and he had a gleaming something between his teeth. It looked like a steel moustache. There would have been time to snatch it from him, to use it if necessary in my own defence. As I thought of it, however, his feet were on the foot-rope, and he himself had plucked the knife from his

mouth. It was a carving-knife, and I could see that his mouth was bleeding.

"Move on a bit," he said; and when I hesitated he pricked me in the thigh. Next moment he was between the mast and me.

He thrust his left arm through my right; his own right was round the mast, and the knife was in his right hand, which he could hardly have used in that position. For an instant my heart beat high; then I remembered having seen him throw quoits with his left hand, and I heard the look-out man give a cough down below.

"We hear him," observed Clunie, "but he won't hear us unless you sing out. And when you do that you're a gone coon. Fine night, isn't it? If we sit here long enough we shall see Australia before morning. So that surprises you, Brother John? Thought I'd say Liverpool, now, didn't you? Not me, you fool, not me. I'm as sane as you are to-night."

He chuckled and I felt my forehead; it was cold and messy. But say something I must; so I laughed out:—

"Were you ever anything else?"

"Ever anything else? I was as mad as



"SIT TIGHT, BROTHER JOHN."

mad, and you know it, too. You're trying to humour me; but I know that game too well, so look out!"

"You mistake me, Clunie, you do——"

"You fool!" said he; "take that, and get out further along the yard."

And he gave my leg another little stab, that brought the blood through my flannels like spilled ink. I obeyed him in order to put myself beyond his reach. This, however, was not his meaning at all. He edged after me as coolly as though we were dangling our legs over the side of a berth.

"I've got a crow to pluck with you," he went on, "and you know well enough what it is."

"Those verses?" said I, holding on with all ten fingers, for we were rolling as much as ever; and now the black sea rose under us on one side, and now on the other; but Clunie had straddled the spar, and he rode it like a rocking-horse, without holding on at all.

"Those verses," he repeated. "At least, that's one of them. I should have said there was a brace of crows."

"Well, as to the verses," said I, "you were hardly a loser. Our magazine, as you may know, died a natural death the very next week."

"Of course it did," said Clunie, with an air of satisfaction which I found encouraging. "You refused my poem, so, of course, the thing fizzled out. What else could you expect? But I tell you I have a second bone to pick with you. And you'll find it the worst of the two—for you!"

"I wonder what that is," said I, in a mystified tone, thinking to humour him still more.

"I'll tell you," said he. "Just shunt a bit further along the yard."

"I shall be over in a minute," I cried, as he forced me and followed me with the naked carver.

"I know you will," he replied, "but not till I've done with you. To come to that second bone. You had a concert to-night, and you didn't ask me to do anything!"

My teeth chattered. We had never thought of him. I protested, and truly, that the fault was not mine alone; but he cut me short.

"How many concerts have you had without asking me to perform—me, the only man of you worth listening to—me, the star of the ship? Tell me that, Brother John!"

"I hardly know."

"Count, then!"

"I think about six."

"Curse your thinking! Make sure."

I counted with my clutching fingers.

"Seven," I said at length.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Then take that—and that—and that—and that!" And he pricked me in seven places with his infernal knife, holding it to my throat between the stabs in case I should sing out.

"Now," he said, "I'm going to give you a concert all to yourself. You're going to hear the star of the *Grasmere* free of charge. But get along to the point of the spar first; then you'll be all ready. What, you won't? Ah, I thought that'd make you!"

I had obeyed him. He had followed me. And now the knife was back in his mouth—the blood had caked upon his beard—and the melodeon was between his hands. He played me the "Dead March." I should not have known it, for I was past listening, only the horrid grin in his mad eyes showed me that he was doing something clever, and then I discovered what. I was now past every-



"THE DEAD MARCH."

thing but holding on and watching my man, which, as I have since thought, was better than looking down. He was wearing his beloved jersey, and he had it the right way on. Upon his legs were a pair of thick worsted drawers; but his feet were naked, and his head was bare. It was his head I watched. His hair had been cropped very close. And the stars swam round and round it as we rose and fell.

I heard four bells struck away down below, and repeated still more faintly from the break of the poop. It was two o'clock in the morning. As we dipped to port, Clunie suddenly lifted his melodeon in both hands, and heaved it clean over my head.

"Hear the splash?" he hissed. "Well,

there'll be a bigger one in a minute, and you'll hear that. You're going to make it!"

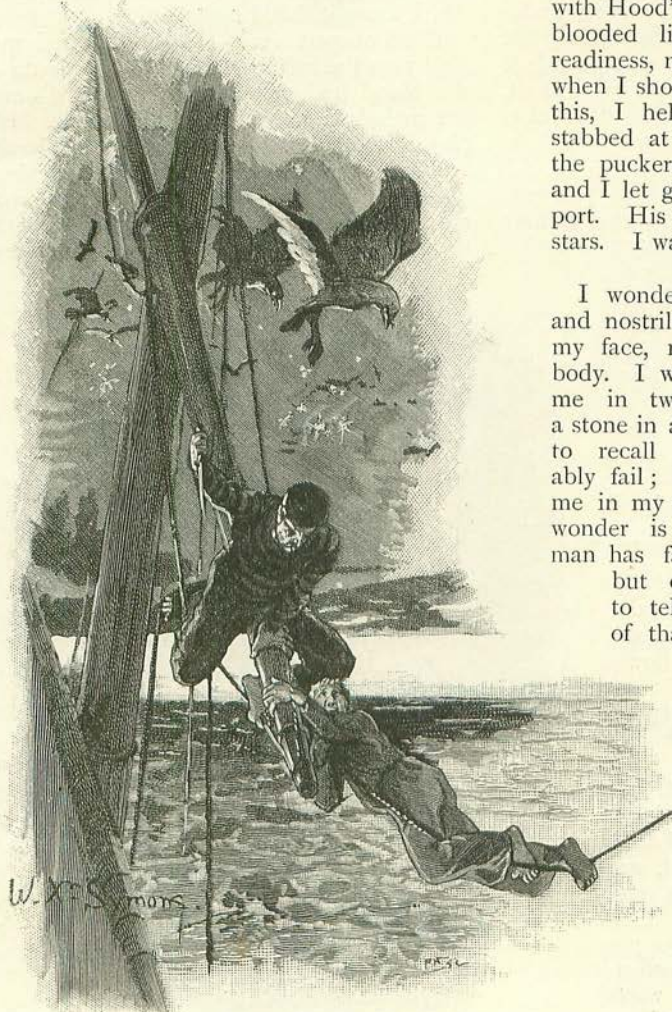
His words fell harmlessly upon my ears. I had heard no splash. I was wishing that I had; the abyss below us would have seemed less terrible, then.

The next thing I noted was the monotonous and altered sound of his voice. He was reciting "The Dream of Eugene Aram," and making the ghastliest faces close to mine as he did so. But I, too, was now astride of the spar. My legs were groping in mid-air for the brace. They found it. They clung to it. I flung myself from the spar, but the lithe, thin ropes gave with my weight, and I could not—no, I dare not let go.

And yet I was not stabbed to the heart; for there was Clunie leaning over me, with Hood's stanzas still flowing from his blooded lips, and the carver held in readiness, not for me, but for the brace when I should trust myself to it. Seeing this, I held fast to the spar. But he stabbed at the back of my hand—I see the puckered white scar as I write—and I let go as we were heeling over to port. His knife flashed up among the stars. I was gone!

I wonder the rush of air in mouth and nostrils did not tear the nose from my face, nay, the very head from my body. I wonder the sea did not split me in two as I went into it like a stone in a pond. When I endeavour to recall those sensations, I invariably fail; but at times they come to me in my sleep, and when I wake the wonder is ever fresh. Yet many a man has fallen from aloft, and if he but cleared the deck, has lived to tell the tale. And I am one of that lucky number. When I

came to the surface, there was the ship waggling and staggering like a wounded albatross, as they hove her to. Then they saved me in the pinnace, because I was still alive enough to keep myself afloat. But some may say that Clunie was as lucky as myself; for he had fallen a few seconds after me, and his mad brains splashed the deck.



"I HELD FAST TO THE SPAR."