



"WHITE SMOKE WAS STREAMING THROUGH THE VENTILATED PANELS."

(See page 610.)

THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

Vol. xix.

JUNE, 1900.

No. 114.

The Saloon Passenger.

BY E. W. HORNING.



AS the cable was hauled in, and the usual cheering passed between tug and ship, Skrimshire unclenched his teeth and gave tongue with a gusto as cynical as it was sincere. It had just come home to him that this was the last link with land, and he beheld it broken with ineffable relief. Tuskar Rock was already a little thing astern; the Australian coast lay the width of the world away; the captain did not expect even to sight any other, and had assured Skrimshire that the average passage was not less than ninety days. So, whatever was to happen in the end, he had three months more of life, and of such liberty as a sailing-ship affords.

He descended to his cabin, locked himself in, and lay down to read what the newspapers had to say about the murder. It seemed strange to Skrimshire that this was the first opportunity he had had of reading up his own crime; but the peculiar circumstances of his departure had forbidden him many a last pleasure ashore, and he was only too glad to have the papers to read now and a state-room to himself in which to read them. There was a heavy sea running, and Skrimshire was no sailor; but he would not have been without the motion, or even its effects upon himself. Both were an incessant reminder that his cabin was not a prison cell, and could not turn into one for three months at all events. Besides, he was not the man to surrender to a malady which is largely nervous. So he lay occupied in his berth; medium-sized, dark-skinned, neither young nor middle-aged; only respectably dressed, and with salient jaw unshaven since the thing of which he read without a flicker of the heavy eyelids or a tremor of the hairy hands.

He had five papers of that morning's date; the crime was worthily reported in

them all; one or two had leaders on its peculiar atrocity. Skrimshire sighed when he came to the end: it was hard that he could see no more papers for three months. The egotism of the criminal was excited within him. It was lucky he was no longer on land: he would have run any risk for the evening papers. His very anonymity as author of the tragedy—the thing to which he owed his temporary security—was a certain irritation to him. He was not ashamed of what he had done. It read wonderfully, and was already admitted to have shown that diabolical cleverness and audacity for which Skrimshire alone deserved the credit; yet it looked as though he would never get it. Thus far, at least, it was plain that there was not a shred of evidence against him, or against any person upon earth. He sighed again; smiled at himself for sighing; and, closing his eyes for the first time since the murder, slept like a baby for several hours.

Skrimshire was the only passenger in the saloon, of which he presently became the life and soul. At the first meal he yielded to the temptation of a casual allusion to the murder on the Caledonian Railway; but though they had heard of it, neither captain nor officers showed much interest in the subject, which Skrimshire dropped with a show of equal indifference. And this was his last weakness of the kind. He threw his newspapers overboard, and conquered the morbid vanity they had inspired by a superb effort of the will. Remorse he had none, and for three months certain he was absolutely safe. So he determined to enjoy himself meanwhile; and, in doing so, being a dominant personality, he managed to diffuse considerable enjoyment throughout the ship.

This man was not a gentleman in either the widest or the narrowest sense of that invidious term. He wore cheap jewellery,

cheap tweeds as yellow as his boots, paper collars, and shirts of a brilliant blue. He spoke with a Cockney intonation which, in a Scottish vessel, grated more or less upon every ear. But he had funds of information and of anecdote as inexhaustible as his energy, and as entertaining as his rough good-humour. He took a lively interest in every incident of the voyage, and was as ready to go aloft in a gale of wind as to make up a

liner was passing them, also outward-bound, and some three or four miles to port. There was nothing alarming in that. Yet Skrimshire went straight on deck in his pyjamas; and, on the top rung of the poop-ladder, paused an instant, his now bearded jaw more salient than it had been for weeks.

Four little flags fluttered one above the other from the peak halliards, and at the weather-rail stood the captain, a powerful



"SKRIMSHIRE WENT STRAIGHT ON DECK."

rubber in any part of the ship. Within a month he was equally popular in the fore-castle, the steerage, and the captain's cabin. Then one morning Skrimshire awoke with a sense that something unusual was happening, followed by an instantaneous premonition of impending peril to himself.

There were too many boots and voices over his head; the ship was bowling sedately before the north-east trades, and otherwise as still as a ship could be. Skrimshire sat up and looked through his port-hole. A

figure of a man, with his long legs planted well apart, and a marine binocular glued to his eyes. Near him was the second mate, a simple young fellow, who greeted Skrimshire with a nod.

"What's up, McKendrick? What is she?"

"A Castle liner; one o' Donal' Currie's Cape boats."

"Why did you signal her?" whispered Skrimshire.

"'Twas she signalled us."

"Do you know what it's all about?"

"No, but the captain does."

The captain turned round as they were speaking, and Skrimshire read his secret at a glance. It was his own, discovered since his flight and flashed across the sea by the liner's pennons. Meanwhile the captain was looking him up and down, his hitherto friendly face convulsed with hatred and horror; and Skrimshire realized the instant necessity of appearing absolutely unsuspecting of suspicion.

"Mornin', captain," said he, with all the cheerful familiarity which already existed between them; "and what's all this bloomin' signallin' about?"

"Want to know?" thundered the captain, now looking him through and through.

"You bet I do."

And Skrimshire held his breath upon an insinuating grin, parrying plain abhorrence with seeming unconcern, until the other merely stared.

"Then you can mind your own business," roared the captain, at last, "and get off my poop—and speak to my officer of the watch again at your peril!"

"Well—I'm—hanged!" drawled Skrimshire, and turned on his heel with the raised eyebrows of bewildered innocence; but the drops stood thick upon his forehead when he saw himself next minute in his state-room mirror.

So he was found out; and the captain had been informed he had a murderer aboard; and detectives would meet the ship in Hobson's Bay, and the murderer would be escorted back through the Suez Canal and duly hanged after nothing better than a run round the world for his money! The thing had happened before: it had been the fate of the first train murderer; but he had taken the wrong hat in his panic. What on earth had Skrimshire left behind him that was going to hang him after all?

He could not think, nor was that the thing to think about. The immediate necessity he had seen at once, with extraordinary quickness of perception, and he had already acted upon it with a nerve more extraordinary still. He must preserve such a front as should betray not the shadow of a dream that he could by any possibility be suspected, by any soul on board; absolute ease must be his watchword, absolute security his pose; then they might like to save themselves the inconvenience of keeping him in irons, knowing that detectives would be waiting to do all the dirty work at the other end. And in two

months' thinking a man should hit upon something, or he deserved to swing.

The opening day was not the worst. The captain's rudeness was enough to account for a change in any man's manner; and Skrimshire did both well and naturally to sulk for the remainder of that day. His unusual silence gave him unusual opportunities for secret observation, and he was thankful indeed that for the time being there was no necessity to live up to his popular reputation. The scene of the morning was all over the ship; yet, so far as the saloon passenger could see, the captain had not told anybody as yet. The chief mate invited him into his cabin for a smoke, spread the usual newspaper for a spittoon, and spun the inevitable yarns; but then the chief was a hard-bitten old dog with nerves of iron and a face of brass; he might know everything, or nothing at all; it was for Skrimshire to adapt his manner to the first hypothesis, and to impress the mate with the exuberance of his spirits and the utter lightness of his heart. Later in the morning he had some conversation with the second officer. It was but a word, and yet it confirmed the culprit in his conviction about the signals.

"What have I done," he asked McKendrick, "to make the old man jump down my throat like that?"

"It wasna you," replied the second; "it was the signals. But ye might have known not to bother him wi' questions just then."

"But what the deuce were the signals about?"

"That's more than I ken, Bennett."

This was Skrimshire's *alias* on board.

"Can't you find out?"

"Mebbee I might—after a bit."

"Why not now?"

"The old man's got the book in his cabin—the deectionary-book about the signalling, ye ken. It's my place to keep yon, but the old man's carried it off, and there's no' another in the ship."

"Aha!"

"Ou, ay, it was somethin' for hissel', nae doot; but none of us kens what; an' noo we never wull, for he's as close as tar, is the old man."

The "old man" was in point of fact no older than Skrimshire, but he had worked his way aft from ship's boy, and a cruel boyhood followed by an early command had aged and hardened him. A fine seaman, and a firm, though fiery, commander, Captain Neilson had also as kind a heart as one



"HE SULKED IN HIS DECK-CHAIR ON THE POOP."

could wish to win, and a mind as simple as it was fair. It was on these qualities that Skrimshire determined to play, as he sulked in his deck-chair on the poop of the four-masted barque *Lochwinnoch*, while the captain thumped up and down in his rubber soles, his face black with thought, and a baleful eye upon the picture of offended oblivion behind the novel in the chair.

It was an interesting contest that was beginning between this pair, both of whom were strong, determined, wilful men; but one was as cunning as the other was kind, and he not only read his better like a book, but supplied in his turn a very legible and entirely plausible reading of himself. He never dreamt of impressing the captain as an innocent man; that would entail an alteration of pose inconsistent with the attitude of one who entertained no tittle of suspicion that the morning's signalling had been about

himself. On the contrary, what he had really been, and what he must now doubly appear, was the guilty man who had very little fear of ever being detected, and not the fleeting shadow of a notion that such detection had already taken place.

This was the obvious and the only rôle; he had played it instinctively thus far, and need only go on as he had begun. The reward was at best precarious. It depended entirely upon the character and temperament of Captain Neilson. Skrimshire credited him with sufficient strength and sufficient humanity to do nothing and to tell nobody until the Australian detectives came aboard. But that remained to be proved. Neilson might leave him a free man all the voyage, and yet put him in irons before the very end; it would be kinder to do so at once. However, he should not do so at all if Skrimshire could help it; and he was not long in letting fall an oblique

and delicate, though an excessively audacious, hint upon the responsibility of such a course in his own particular case.

It was at the midday meal, while the smoke of the accursed liner was still a dirty cloud on the horizon. Neilson remained morose and silent, while the offended passenger would not give him word or look, but, on the other hand, talked more than ever, and with invidious gaiety, to the first and second officers. The captain glowered at his plate, searching his transparent soul for the ideal course, and catching very little of the conversation; how the topic of suicide arose he never knew.

"An' I call it th' act of a coward," young McKendrick was declaring; "you can say what you like, but a man's no' a man that does the like o' that."

"Well, you think about it next time you're havin' a shave, old man," retorted Skrimshire,

pleasantly. "Think o' buryin' a razor in your neck, and the pain, and the blood comin' over your fingers like as though you'd turned on the hot tap ; and if you think long enough you'll know whether it's the act of a coward or whether it ain't."

"I'd blow my blessed head in," said the chief officer. "It'd be quicker."

"Oh, if it comes to that," said Skrimshire, "I'd take prussic acid, for choice. It would take a lot to make me, I admit ; but I'd do it like a shot to escape a worse death. I've often thought, for instance, what a rum thing it is, in these days, that a man of any sense or education whatever should let himself live to be hung !"

The captain looked up at this ; so far he had merely listened. But Skrimshire was addressing himself to the chief mate at the other end of the table ; neither look nor tone were intended to include Captain Neilson, the one being averted, and the other lowered, to a nice degree of insolent disregard. On the other hand, the manner of this theoretical suicide was all audacity and nonchalance, combined with a certain underlying sincerity which gave it a peculiar value in the mind of one listener. In a word, it was the manner of a man so convinced of his own security as to afford the luxury of telling the truth about himself in jest.

"They don't give you a chance," said the mate. "They watch you night and day. You'd be a good man, once you'd got to dance the hornpipe on nothing, if you went out any other way."

"Nevertheless, I'd do it," said Skrimshire, with cheery confidence. "I'd back myself to do it, and before their eyes."

"Poison ?"

"Yes."

"In a ring, eh ?"

"A ring ! Do you suppose they'd leave you your rings ? No ; it might be in a hollow tooth, and it might not. All I say is that I'd back myself to cheat the hangman." Skrimshire said it through his black moustache. "And I'd do it, too," he added, after a pause.

Then, at last, the captain put in his word. "You would do well," said he, quietly. "I once saw a

man swing, and I never want to see another. Ugh !"

His eyes met Skrimshire's, which fell deliberately ; and the talkative tongue wagged no more that meal.

Thereafter Neilson was civility itself, only observant civility. He had made up his mind in the knotty matter of the suspected murderer, and the latter read his determination as he had read the difficulty which it solved, if only for the present.

"So he means to let me go loose, only keeping an eye on me ; so far, so good. But how long—how long ? If I thought he was going to put me in irons as soon as he sights the land——"

He looked over the side, and a slight shudder shook even his frame. It was very blue water now, the depth unfathomable. A shark had been seen that morning. And, sharks or no sharks, Skrimshire could not swim ! But he had two months of steady thought before him.



"HE LOOKED OVER THE SIDE."

Meanwhile the captain showed some cunning in his turn. He evidently wished to convince himself that Skrimshire had not suspected the signalling. One day, at any rate, the passenger was invited into the captain's cabin, in quite the old friendly fashion, for a pipe and a chat; in the middle of which Neilson left him for five minutes to speak to the officer of the watch. As the north-east trades blew as strong and true as ever, as the yards had not been touched for days, and as no sail was in sight, Skrimshire scented a trap, and presently beheld one set under his nose in the shape of the signalling-book. Skrimshire smiled. The captain found him buried in a magazine, and his little trap untouched. And the obvious deduction was also final to the sailor's mind.

Six weeks produced no change in the outward situation; but brought the voyage so near its end that every soul but one waxed merry with the thought of shore—and that one seemed the merriest of them all. They had come from the longitude of the Cape to that of Kangaroo Island in twenty days, and in all probability would enter Port Phillip Heads in two days more. In one week the *Lochwinnoch* had logged close upon two thousand miles; boy and man, her commander had never made such an "east-ing" in his seagoing life. His pleasure and his pride were alike enormous, and Skrimshire conceived that his general goodwill towards men could scarcely have suffered by the experience. He determined, at all events, to feel his way to such compassion as an honest man could be expected to extend towards an unhung murderer; and he felt it with that mixture of cautious craft and sheer impudence which made him the formidable criminal he was.

It was the night that might prove the last of the voyage, and the last night of freedom for the unhappy Skrimshire. Unhappy he undoubtedly was, for the strain of continuing as he had begun, "the life and soul of the ship," had told upon even his nerves in the end, though to the end it had been splendidly borne. To-night, however, as he paced the poop by the captain's side, he exhibited, for the first time, a despondency which exactly fitted in with Neilson's conception of his case.

"I shall never forget this voyage," said Skrimshire, sighing. "You may not believe me, captain, but I'm sorry it's over. I am, indeed; no doubt I'm the only man in the ship who is."

"And why are you?" asked Neilson,

eyeing his passenger for once with the curiosity which had so long consumed him, as also with the sympathy which had grown upon him, despite, or on account of, those sinister signals from the Castle liner.

Skrimshire shrugged.

"Oh, that's a long story. I've had a rum life of it, and not what you would call the life of a saint. This voyage will stand out as one of its happiest chapters, that's all; and it may be one of the last."

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, one can never tell."

"But what did you think of doing out there?"

"God knows!"

Neilson was miserable. There was a ring in the hoarse voice that went straight to his heart. He longed to tell this man what was in store for him—what he himself knew—but he conquered the longing as he had conquered it before. Time enough when the detectives came on board; dirty work and all responsibility would very well keep for them.

So the good captain thought to himself, as the pair took turns in silence; so the dominant brain at his side willed and intended that he should think.

"Whatever you hear of me," resumed Skrimshire, at last, "and however great a beast I may some day turn out, remember that I wasn't one aboard your ship. Will you, captain? Remember the best of me and I'll be grateful, wherever I am, and whatever happens."

"I will," said Neilson, hoarse in his turn; and he grasped the guilty hand. Skrimshire had some ado to keep from smiling, but there was another point upon which he required an assurance, and he sought it after a decent pause.

"So you expect to pass the Otway some time to-morrow?"

"By dinner-time, if we're lucky."

"And there you signal?"

"Yes, they should hear of us in Melbourne early to-morrow afternoon."

"And what about the pilot?"

"Oh, he'll come aboard later—certainly not before evening. It's easy as mid-ocean till you come to the Heads, and we can't be there before nightfall, even if the wind holds fair."

"Well, let's hope it may. So long, captain, and a thousand thanks for all your kindness. Dark night, by the way?"

"Yes; let's hope to-morrow won't be like it."

But the next night was darker still ; there was neither moon nor star, and Skrimshire was thankful to have had speech with the captain while he could, for now he would speak to nobody, and to-morrow—

There was no to-morrow in Skrimshire's mind, there was only to-night. There was the hour he had been living for these six long weeks. There was the plan that had come to him with the south-east trades, and rolled in his mind through the Southern Ocean, only to reach perfection within the last few hours. But it was perfect now. And all beyond lay dark.

"Isn't that their boat, sir?"

It was the chief steward who wanted to know ; he was dallying on the poop in the excitement of the occasion. The captain stood farther aft : an anxious face, a red cigar-end, and a blue Tam-o'-Shanter were all of him that showed in the intense darkness. The main-yard had just been backed, and the chief officer was now on the quarter-deck, seeing the rope-ladder over the side. It was through his glasses that Skrimshire was watching the pilot's cutter, or rather her lights, and as well as he could, by their meagre rays, the little boat that now bobbed against the cutter's side.

"It is the boat, ain't it, sir?" persisted the steward.

"Yes, I think so," said Skrimshire. "How many men come with the pilot, as a rule?"

"Only himself and a chap to row him."

"Ah! You might give these to the chief officer, steward. I'm going to my cabin for a minute. Don't forget to thank the mate for lending me his glasses : they've been exceedingly useful to me."

And Skrimshire disappeared down the ladder ; his tone had been strange, but the steward only remembered this afterwards ; at the time he was too excited himself, and too glad of a glass to level at the boat, to note any such nicety as a mere tone.

Vol. xix.—77.

"Four of them, by Jingo," mused the steward. "I wonder what that's for?"

But he did not wonder long : in a very few minutes the four were on board, and ascending the same ladder by which Skrimshire had gone below, the pilot at their head. Neilson received them at the break of the poop.

"I congratulate you, captain," was the pilot's greeting ; "we didn't expect you before next week. Now, first allow me," and he lowered his voice, "to introduce Inspector Robins, of the Melbourne police ; this gentleman is an officer he has brought with him ; and my man has come aboard for a message for the shore. Mr. Robins would like a word with you before we let him go. There is no hurry,



"NEILSON RECEIVED THEM AT THE BREAK OF THE POOP."

for I'm very much afraid I can't take you in till daylight."

Neilson took the inspector to the weather-rail.

"I know what's coming," he said. "The *Garth Castle* signalled——"

"I know, I know. Have you got him? Have you got him?" rapped out Robins.

"Safe and sound," whispered the captain; "and thinks himself as right as the bank, poor devil!"

"Then you didn't put him in irons?"

"No; I thought it better not to. He'd have committed suicide. I spotted that; sounded him without his knowing," said the crafty captain. "I happened to read the signals myself, and I never let on to a soul in the ship."

The good fellow looked delighted with himself behind his red cigar, but the acute face of the detective scarcely reflected his satisfaction.

"Well, that's all right if *he's* all right," said Robins. "If you don't mind, captain, I'd like to be introduced to him. One or both of us will spend the night with him, by your leave."

"As you like," said Neilson; "but I can't help feeling sorry for him. He's no more idea of this than the man in the moon. That you, steward? Where's Mr. Bennett? He was here a minute ago."

"Yes, sir; only just gone below, sir."

"Well, go and ask him to come up and drink with the pilot. I'll introduce him to the pilot, and you can do what you like," continued the captain, only wishing he could shirk a detestable duty altogether. "But I give you fair warning, this is a desperate man, or I'm much mistaken in him."

"Desperate!" chuckled the inspector; "don't we know it? It seems to have been as bad a murder as you've had in the old country for a long time. In a train. All planned. Victim in one carriage, our friend in the next; got along footboard in tunnel, shot him dead through window, and got back. Case of revenge, and other fellow no beauty, but this one's got to swing. On his way to join your ship, too; passage booked beforehand. The most cold-blooded plant——"

It was the chief steward, breathless and panic-stricken.

"His door's locked——"

"He always does lock it," exclaimed the captain, as Robins darted to the ladder with an oath.

"But now he won't answer!" cried the steward.

And even with his words the answer came, in the terrific report of a revolver fired in a confined space. Next instant the inspector had hurled himself into the little saloon, the others at his heels, and half the ship's company at theirs. There was no need to point out the culprit's cabin. White smoke was streaming through the ventilated panels; all stood watching it, but for a time none spoke. Then Robins turned upon the captain.

"We have you to thank for this, Captain Neilson," said he. "It is you who will have to answer for it."

Neilson turned white, but it was white heat with him.

"And so I will," he thundered, "but not to you! I don't answer to any confounded Colonial policemen, and I don't take cheek from one, either. By Heaven, sir, I'm master of this ship, and for two pins I'll have you over the side again, detective or no detective. Do your business and break in that door, and you leave me to mind mine at the proper time and in the proper place."

He was furious with the fury of a masterful mariner, whose word is law aboard his own vessel, and yet beneath this virile passion there lurked a certain secret satisfaction in the thought that the companion of so many weeks was at all events not to hang. But the tragedy which had occurred was the greater unpleasantness for himself; indeed it might well lead to something more, and Neilson stood in the grip of grim considerations; in his own doorway, while Robins sent for the carpenter without addressing another syllable to the captain.

The saloon had been invaded by steerage passengers, and even by members of the crew, but discipline was for once a secondary matter in the eyes of Captain Neilson, and their fire was all for the insolent intruder who had dared to blame him aboard his own ship. The carpenter had to fight his way through a small, but exceedingly dense, crowd, beginning on the quarter-deck outside, and at its thickest in the narrow passage terminating in the saloon. On his arrival, however, the lock was soon forced, and the door swung inwards in a sudden silence, broken as suddenly by the detective's voice.

"Empty, by Heaven!" he shrieked. "Hunt him—he's given us the slip!"

And the saloon emptied only less rapidly than it had filled, till Neilson had it to himself; he stepped over to the passenger's cabin, half expecting to find him hiding in

some corner after all. There he was wrong; nor did he at once grasp the full significance of what he did find.

A revolver was dangling from a peg on one side of the cabin—dangling by a yard of twine secured to the trigger. A few more inches of the twine, tied to the butt, had been severed by burning, as had another yard dangling from another peg at the opposite side of the cabin. An inch of candle lay upon the floor. The twine had been passed through it: there was its mark in the wax. The whole had been strung across the cabin and the candle lighted before Skrimshire left; the revolver, hung by the trigger as a man is hanged by the neck, had been given a three-foot drop, and gone off duly as the flame burnt down to the string. Such was the plan which an ingenious (if perverted) mind had taken several weeks to perfect.

Neilson rushed on deck, to find all hands at the rail, and a fresh sensation in the air. The pilot met him on the poop.

"My boat's gone!" he cried. "And the night like pitch!"

Neilson stood thunder-struck.

"Did you leave a man aboard?"

"No; he came up for a telegram for the police in town."

"Then you can't blame me there."

And the captain leapt upon the rail at the break of the poop.

"Silence!" he roared. "Silence—every

man of you! If we can't see we must listen . . . that's it . . . not a whisper . . . now . . ."

At first there was nothing to be heard but the quick-drawn breath from half-a-hundred throats; then, out of the impenetrable dark-



"A REVOLVER WAS DANGLING FROM A PEG."

ness, came the thud, thud, thud of an oar in a rowlock, already some distance away; but in which direction it was impossible to tell on such a night.