

## A HOVELLING JOB.



STRONG wind, amounting to a moderate gale, was blowing, and the seas were rolling steadily in long dark green lines, the froth of the summits being swept like falls of snow into the hollows. The sharp, white light of the winter sun came and went with the regularity of a beating pulse as the flying clouds streamed athwart it, and the ocean was a surface of flashing waters and swiftly-moving violet-coloured shadows. It was about half-past ten in the morning, when I stood, in company with a score of boatmen, looking seawards. Away on the horizon there were four or five ships at anchor, their yards braced sharp up to the wind, and their bows breaking the waves into clouds of spray as they pitched their stems as high as the hawse-pipes into it. The attention of the boatmen appeared to be fixed on the aftermost of these vessels, a large, light, full-rigged ship, for every little spy-glass among them was levelled at her.

"What's to be seen?" I inquired of an elderly seaman who stood alongside of me, cased in an immense pair of blanket trousers and a yellow sou'wester.

"Seen," he answered, very slowly, turning to look at me, but in such a manner that he appeared to revolve in his enormous trousers without causing them to alter their position. "Seen? why, nothen."

"Then what are you all looking at?" said I. I imagined by his turning my way again that he meant to answer me; instead of which he expectorated, and, burying his chin upon his arms, which were folded upon the parapet he overhung, resumed his narrow inspection of the horizon.

Suddenly a hoarse voice rattled out, "She's got her wift up!" and in an instant there was a rush of men. It was like brushing your fingers over a piece of meat covered with flies. All hands flung themselves over the pier-side: those who were nearest the ladders took them, but the others went down over the solid masonry, clinging with their finger-nails and holding on as sailors do, by their eyebrows. Every boat whose painter was within reach, was dragged alongside, and there was a frantic scramble for two large luggers which lay a few fathoms away at their moorings. A rare hovelling job was on, and it was to be a race for the prize. Times were bad, the winter was long, and money was scarce. Here was a chance of earning a few pounds, but never did human greed induce a wilder struggle than was to be witnessed in the efforts of these boatmen to gain the luggers. Every wherry that could be come at contained a freight of struggling sou'westers and complicated blanket trousers. Determined not to lose an opportunity, I made for the steps and jumped into a boat that was just shoving off. In a few moments we were alongside one of the luggers, and scrambling over her gunwale. I plumped into the midst of fourteen or fifteen wildly excited men, all engaged in casting off the warps and making sail.

The other lugger lay just ahead, and she, too, was by this time full of men, while in less than a minute she had hoisted her reefed foresail, and was gliding along towards the open sea. Her luck was rather exasperating, for the truth was we were aground, though the flood was making fast, and we all knew we should be afloat very shortly. Still, the rival lugger was away first, and

the cheers of her men came along in a roar as they starboarded their helm, hauled their sheet aft, and spun round to meet the first of the strong seas. The men in our boat, however, remained tolerably quiet; they knew that their lugger could sail two feet to the other's one, and with such odds in our favour, a five, or even ten, minutes' start was not going to tell much against us. I got well aft, and was turning up my coat collar, and in other ways preparing for the wet, when somebody called out that we were afloat; and before I could have counted ten we were out among the seas, leaning down until the seething foam to leeward was within two inches of the top of the gunwale, and rushing up and swooping down over the tall, regular waves, with the glorious, buoyant, flying motion, that is one of the fascinations of open-lugger sailing.

There was an old boatman at the helm, with a face that looked as though it had been carved out of mahogany, the forehead a perfect network of wrinkles, each cheek indented as if blown in by successive gales of wind, and searching yet lustreless eyes, deeply fixed under a pair of shaggy white eyebrows. A short clay pipe, the bowl of which was inverted, stuck out at the corner of his mouth, and the fore-thatch of his sou'wester being turned up, left exposed a number of white curls, which blew about his forehead like short coils of foam upon brown sand. He might have passed for the father of the crew, though I noticed two or three old fellows with sour faces among the men who were sitting about in the large, roomy boat, many of them smoking, with their arms folded, or their hands buried in their pockets, and looking for the most part towards the lugger after which we were racing. She was not more than three-quarters of a mile ahead of us, but she showed one reef more than we did; and the angle of her mast, with the way she jumped the seas, making a run for the tall ones like a boy for a stile,

and flinging her heels out of the water with every leap, as well as the smoking spray that soared in a cloud from under her weather bow as she flung herself into the hollows, gave me the notion that she was sailing like a comet, and that we were not going to overhaul her very easily. But our own pace was splendid. It kept the heart beating like a jockey's in a race, to watch the rush of the foam of the bow wave to leeward; the long, dark-green rising and falling strings of sea-weed swept astern like an object seen from the window of a railway carriage. And how can I express the exhilaration of the morning—the keen light blue of the sky, the squadrons of pearl-coloured clouds, with here and there a rainbow in their skirts, shooting under the sparkling sun, breaking its rays into lines of light, like cascades of silver, which gloriously illuminated the water here and there, kindling the foam into a brilliance that furnished a marvellous contrast to the sullen cloud-shadows driving across the deep?

"I'm enjoying this, Samuel," said I to the old chap who was steering; "more particularly as no wet comes aft. I hope the men don't mind me making one of them."

"Not they," he answered, in a rumbling, deep sea note; "leastways as you'll not count in the shares."

"What on earth makes you take so many men?" I asked. "If you divide your earnings into shares, one would suppose the fewer the crew the more money they'd get per man."

"Who axes 'em to come?" he answered. "Not I, mate. In these here hovelling jobs there's always a roosh. I've known eight-and-twenty men to get into this here lugger, and even when we was under weigh there was six or seven boats scullin' like mad bulls to come up with us."

"I imagine hovelling is no longer the paying business it used to be?"

"Why, it's pretty nigh all steam now-

a-days, and the lifeboats take most o' the jobs that are going. Still, hovelling ain't done yet, master. No, it ain't played out yet, governor," said the old man, balancing his back against the tiller to steady it whilst he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and filled the bowl afresh.

"Mind your luff, Sam; mind your luff, old man," shouted a fellow standing forward in oilskins, which streamed with the wet that flew over the short fore-castle deck of the lugger. "Ye'll be to loo'ard of her, Sam."

The old fellow made no answer for some moments, and then, looking up and knitting his white eyebrows, he roared out, "You 'tend to yourself, Bill. Jus' you keep quiet, matey. If this here voyage is to teach me to suck heggs, I'm blowed if you shall be the grandmother to larn me." A general burst of laughter made this retort decisive, and the old boatman, with his brows still knitted, fixed his eyes on me.

"There'd be more money to airn at hovelling if there was no branch pilots," said a quiet, middle-aged man seated at my side.

"That's true," exclaimed old Sam; "but it ain't uniuersally beknown."

"What part do the branch pilots take in hovelling?" said I. But the old fellow must light his pipe before he would answer, and two minutes were expended whilst he sucked slowly and deliberately at a lighted lucifer-match held in the hollow of his sou'wester; and a fine head he showed when, having removed its covering, he stood with his silver hair blowing upon the wind. "Branch pilots," said he, "aren't supposed to share with us hovellers. But they does. Leastways some of them, and some means many, master. We has to allow 'em a share, and we sends it 'em privately. A branch pilot has a lot of power when he's aboard a ship. Supposin' he thinks proper to slip. Well, he can make the skipper slip, and if the skipper refuses, he can take it on his own shoulders.

Some queer stories are told, governor. Suppose a hovelling job is worth £400. If there ain't too many of us in the boat the pilot's share may come to £15 or £20. It's a understood thing among hovellers to give the pilot a share—I don't say all pilots; some of 'em has got consciences—and so long as pilots share with hovellers so long will more anchors and chains be lost than's good for owners, not to speak of other things which shipping agents knows more on than me." Here he winked. "It's a temptation to do wrong. If a pilot knows that by advising a captain to slip his cable he'll be getting £10 or £20 out o' the earnings of the hovellers who come off from the shore with another anchor and cable, won't he do it? Well, then, many of 'em *does*. It's a pilot's way o' finding hovellers work, and our giving him a share is our way of rewarding him for his po-liteness."

"And if you don't pay him?"

"He'd take care never to employ us again, if he twigged our countenances."

"Do captains ever deal in work of this kind?" The old fellow looked at me with a broad grin, and then closed one eye. I should have liked to ask him a few more questions, but we were fast overhauling the lugger ahead, and from the wooden expression that came into Samuel's face I suspected that for the present any further inquiries would be addressed to deaf ears.

There was much to attract my eye, for there were several vessels under square yards bowling through the water, besides the ships plunging at their anchors ahead of us, and astern and on our port quarter were the low grey cliffs with the line of surf showing very clearly at their base, and the town we had quitted defined by the shadow-like haze of the smoke from the chimneys upon the pale distant blue. The immediate object of interest, however, was the lugger ahead. We had got well within the broad and foaming wake that was

rushing from under her counter like a mill-race, and the faces of the men were quite distinct as they sat ducking now and again to the spray which flew over the broad-beamed boat with the force of a thunder-shower, all looking our way. We were bound to pass her, and our helm was slightly shifted that we might run under her lee. But the moment our boat's head fell off they put their helm up, and as regularly as we tried them on this side or that, so regularly did their boat fall off or come to, keeping her stern steadily at our nose, and bothering us exceedingly by refusing to get out of the way.

"If you don't make room we'll sink ye!" bawled one of our men, angrily shaking his fist at the stubborn crew in advance.

"We'll find ye a course, mates! so gi' us hold o' your tow rope!" was shouted back.

This was too much for old Sam: with a sudden shift of the tiller our boat was shot under the stern of the lugger, there was a sharp noise of splintering wood, and in a moment we had not only carried away our rival's outrigger, but had slewed her nose round into the wind's eye, and were foaming along straight as an arrow for the ship, leaving behind a long wake, at the extremity of which lay the lugger, tumbling heavily under her naked mast, as the men dipped the foresail in order to fetch the harbour again on the starboard tack. It was a bit of real excitement; and the derisive laughter of our crew, who stood up and waved their hands to the discomfited boatmen astern, seemed to put a true ocean-note into the rushing sound of the wind and the heavy splashing noise raised by our little vessel as she sprang over the seas.

From the shore the vessels at anchor had looked pretty close together; but they opened surprisingly as we approached, and I found that the vessel for which we were making lay at least a

mile away from the others. She was apparently in ballast, and showed a great deal of metal sheathing out of water. She had painted ports and a large gilt figure-head that flashed in the sun like a revolving light as it sank or soared with her heavy pitching. She had sent her fore and mizzen topgallant-masts down, and the dark, short coil of the flogging waft, or "wift" as the boatmen called it, at her peak must have given her a woe-begone look in a landsman's eye, though, as far as her hull and spars were concerned, there was nothing wrong with her. We had long before made out that she had lost her port cable and was riding to a single anchor, and a limb of sand that trended athwart the wind's path some distance astern of her gave her signal a strong significance. A number of men were looking at us from her forecabin, and three or four others—presumably her officers—stood near the wheel waiting for us to approach within hail. We were soon close to her; our huge fenders were thrown over the side, the reefed lug was let go, and there we were, close against the vessel's quarter, with the little mizzen rattling over the lugger's stern like a flag.

"Ship ahoy!" shouted Samuel, from the tiller.

"Hillo!"

"What have you got your wift up for?" A short, thick-set man, in top boots and a hair cap, came down to the poop rail, and, leaning over it, bawled back, "Our port cable parted this morning, and we're dragging. Come aboard, some of ye."

This was enough for our men, and immediately all hands were in commotion. A shred of foresail was hoisted, and presently our great cork fenders were grinding against the ship's side. Gazing up that vessel was really like looking up the wall of a house. She had no channels, her plates were yards out of reach, and the ascent was made

doubly perilous by the heaving of the lugger that went scraping up against the smooth wooden surface one moment until her gunwale was almost flush with the painted ports, and then sank down the next into the foaming hollow until the ship's copper appeared to reach half-way up our mast, while the whole hull came leaning and groaning heavily down towards us, overshadowing our boat like the brow of a great hill. A couple of ropes' ends were flung over, and two of our men, watching their chance, made a spring. The younger one of the two went up hand over hand like a monkey, but the other, not being so alert, was overtaken by the swing of the boat, and got such a hoist that, if he had not let the slack of the bight run through his fingers, he would have dropped with a force that must have shaken him off into the boat again, and perhaps broken his back. As it was, nothing but the lugger's fenders saved him from being mashed into a jelly, for his legs were between the ship and the boat when the heave of the latter caught him. He reached the rail safely and was dragged over it by a couple of seamen; but this bit of climbing made me see where one of the chief dangers of hovelling lies, and what real daring is wanted to board wall-sided ships out of a little hoveller, such as a galley-punt for instance, when a heavy sea is running.

When the two men were aboard, we dropped astern and lay hove-to within hail, waiting for what next might come. Though the sea was pretty brisk hereabouts, one would have thought it too small for a thirteen-hundred-ton ship to make a fuss over; yet I might have imagined myself in the middle of the Atlantic in a gale of wind in watching the ship ahead, for such rolling and plunging was unworthy of anything but a tempest in an open ocean. She had a square stern and a very deep counter, and when this part of her chopped down

it threw out two small mountains of foam which the wind and tide carried towards us, where they met and resembled a paddle-steamer's wake. Taut as her braces were, I could see the dislocating jerks of the yards upon the lee rigging, and whenever she dropped her head her main royal mast buckled like a badly-stayed flag-pole in a squall.

"If she's dragging," I sang out to Samuel, "it's no wonder. It would take a rock to hold such a wagon as that."

"Don't say nothen agin her draggin', sir," he answered. "If she be'n worth ten pound a man, I'll swallow my sou'wester."

"Sam," exclaimed the quiet boatman who had been seated near me, and to whom I have referred, "when ye told the gen'l'man that you'd know'd eight-an'-twenty men to jump into a lugger, ye didn't say that it wasn't onusual for half of them to be ordered to stow themselves away in the peak out o' sight."

"No, mate, I didn't, and shall I tell you why?—because I never thought of it," replied Sam. Then addressing me: "If such a boat-load o' men as that was to put off, and all hands was to remain visible, we'd never get a pilot to engage us, because he'd say to himself, there's too many shares there to make it worth my while. So when we're o'er full we usually orders half the men to get into the peak, where the pilot can't see 'em. There's a good deal o' dodging wanted in this here business."

"And what do owners say to it all?"

"What can they do, sir? Every story told by a pilot or skipper reads natural as life; and there's never no fear of shipping agents neglecting of their duty—to theirselves," said the old fellow, making a dry pause between the words, and leaving me to suppose that he could tell me a story or two of shipping agents if there was leisure and I was disposed to listen. In this, however, I was mistaken; for when I asked him what he knew about the tricks of shipping agents

he grew suddenly deaf, and I rather think I traced the infirmity to the stern looks which certain of his mates directed at him.

We lay for some time tossing upon the seas, the men talking among themselves and waiting for a hail from the ship. The land was a long way off, and only a grey line upon the horizon, but there were a number of vessels making a fair wind of the fresh gale, and at this particular moment the whole stretch of water was a beautiful and lively scene, for there were nearly a dozen craft of various rigs buzzing along and gracefully curtseying upon the waves which ran under them, their white sails shining and fading as the cloud-shadows passed over them, and then left them broad in the brilliant noontide light, whilst the heaped-up foam sparkled at their bows, and their streaming sides flashed back the white light as they were lifted out of the dark green surges, until their bright copper looked like gold against the milky setting of the froth. Presently one of the two men we had put aboard the ship signalled with his hand to us to come alongside; so, hoisting the foresail, we made a short board, and rounded to under the vessel's stern.

"Here's the letter for the shore," shouted the man in the hair-cap, whom I took to be the skipper. "Jump up, one of you, and bear a hand, men, when you get it." An active young boatman quickly scrambled up the ship's side, seized the letter, and brought it down.

The moment he was in the boat we got away from the ship, leaving our two men in her, and letting a reef out of the great lug, mastheaded the canvas, and with the wind about two points free, the buoyant lugger shattered the first sea that struck her into foam, and went away for the land like a race-horse for the winning-post.

For awhile I kept my eye fixed on the ship, however, for she had hoisted her foretopmast staysail, and I wanted to see what they meant to do. I had not long to wait. In a minute I heard the hoarse chorus of seamen singing out at the windlass, and the clank, clank of the pawls, and before we had gone a mile and a-half, they had got the ship's head round, pointing for the open water beyond the sand, rolling solemnly and heavily as she went, with her staysail standing out like the side of a balloon, and her crew sheeting home the lower main topsail. She would heave-to presently when clear of the sand, and wait for our lugger to return with an anchor and chain.

I did not make the return journey to the vessel, simply because the anchor and chain filled the bottom of the boat and no room could be found for me. But I had enjoyed a fine sail, and got a new experience; and little more was to be learned by following the anchor and chain to their home aboard the ship, and watching the simple but tedious process by which some hundredweights of iron were hoisted out of the hoveller.

