

A Shifted Cargo.

A TRUE SEA STORY.

By ALAN OSCAR.



IN THE STRAND MAGAZINE for last November appeared an exceedingly clever imaginary story, so well told that it carried conviction, of a man who, to gain a million pounds, kept awake for seven days, during which time he carried eight tons of sovereigns, two pounds at a time, from one end to the other of a room forty-five feet long.

As I had had an actual experience of the kind, I suggested to the Editor that a history of it might interest his readers. This history is given here, and the two stories, the imaginary and the real, can now be compared.

We, who went through the experience I am about to relate, were not working for money, but for life—though we saved at the same time a valuable new steamer and her cargo. We were not moving weights of two

above mentioned. You who read must judge.

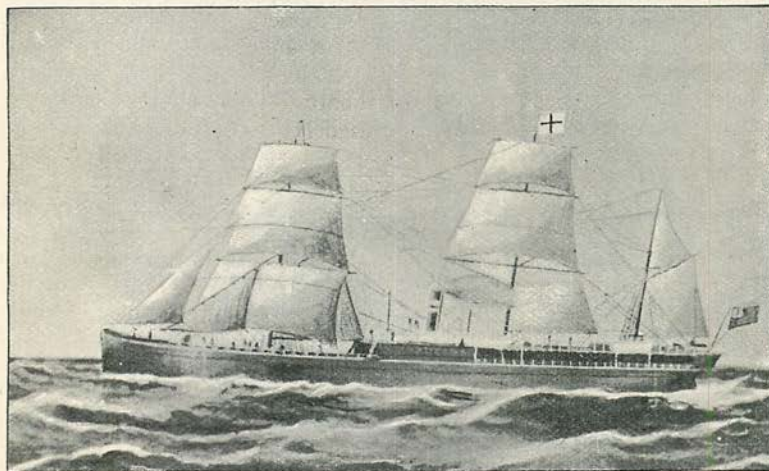
I will now tell the story just as it happened. First, as to the ship. Here are her particulars from Lloyd's Register:—

"*Gresham*. Iron screw steamer, 1,690 tons, 140h.-p.; built at North Shields in 1872; length, 260ft.; breadth, 34ft. 3in.; depth, 23ft. 4in."

She had a midship bridge-house containing officers' cabins; and aft, in place of a poop, a long deck-house containing passenger accommodation. Her dimensions were bad for "stability," that is, she was of a dangerous shape for carrying grain or coal. With such cargoes she was not easily kept upright.

We loaded grain at Montreal, for London. The previous season several grain-laden steamers had left the Saint Lawrence, and had never been heard of again. In consequence, the port authorities were stirring,

and we had a Government Inspector to tell us what we were to do; and under his supervision the lower holds were well stowed—luckily for us. But she would not go down the river fully laden, and we had to finish at Quebec. The cargo we took in there was in "bags"—small sacks. This was stowed in the "between-deck," or upper platform of the hold—like the



From a Drawing]

"THE GRESHAM."

(by the Author.

pounds, but were shovelling coal and carrying sacks of grain. We were not working on a level surface, but on the decks of a ship which sloped like the roof of a house. Our surroundings were not pleasant, as in the story—we were working below deck by dim lamp-light. Our food was not choice, but tinned meat and sea-biscuit. The time which we passed without sleep was four days and a half—109 hours; towards the end of that time we were falling asleep at our work. Taking everything into consideration, I think our endurance was as wonderful as that of the man in the story

top floor of a warehouse. The ship could not carry this space full—she would have been too heavily laden—so that these bags were stowed level until we had enough on board. There then remained an empty space above the bags of about three feet; and there was no middle partition dividing the cargo into two sides. The want of this division was the cause of all our trouble.

Before leaving Montreal we had a sailor's warning; for, curiously enough, though we were loading grain, the rats all left us. You could see them after dark scurrying ashore along our mooring-ropes. The fourth

engineer *did* get scared, and swore he would leave the ship, but was persuaded to remain. I can see no reason for their departure. But "rats leave a sinking ship," so old sailors aver.

We were all strange to a grain cargo except the mate, who did not like this method of stowing the bags, and prophesied disaster. But his warnings were unheeded, and we sailed.

Quiet weather followed us down the Gulf, past Cape Breton, and over the Grand Banks. We were making sure of a quick passage, and all thoughts of the cargo beneath us had gone from our minds, when one afternoon the glass began to fall, and during the night the wind increased to a gale, with thick, drizzling weather. Here is a bare extract from my Abstract Log:—

"Sept. 26th. Increasing gale; a.m. cargo and coals shifted and ship went over on beam-ends, lee coamings of hatches in the water, lee-rail out of sight. Washed away all boats, flooded saloon and bridge quarters; engine-room and bunkers flooded through bunker-hatches, putting out all but one weather fire. Bilge-pumps choked. All hands shifting cargo and coal from this date to 5 p.m. of 30th, without stopping. Righted ship and started again."

So far the log. What this bare extract really meant to us I am now about to tell.

The wind increased fast, and we reduced sail to trysails and close-reefed topsails. Far better had we taken in all sail. The vessel lurched heavily to leeward and seemed to be lying over altogether too much. I was just thinking of turning in when the mate, whose berth was opposite mine, said:—

"Mister, it's my belief that some of our cargo has gone over."

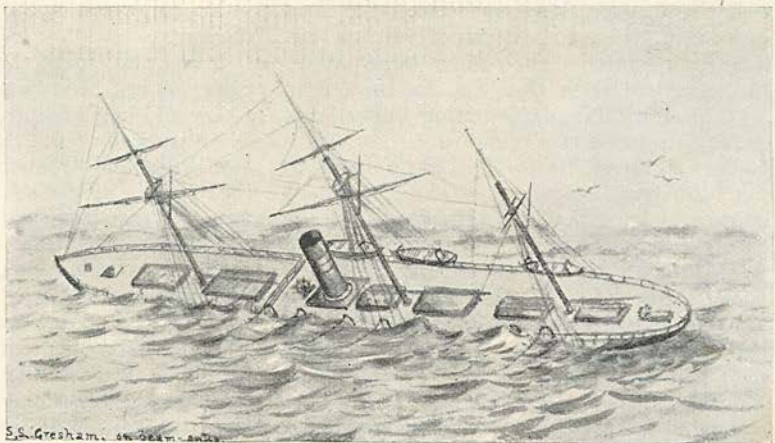
With that he went aft to speak to the captain. As I stood there alone, a heavier sea than usual came along, and as she gave to it she put her lee-rails under. This brought the skipper out in a hurry.

"Take the canvas off her," was the first order.

But it was too late! Before we got the sails in,

the third engineer came clawing along the deck, which was already at a sharp angle, to report that the coal in the fore bunker had begun to run over and had nearly buried one of the trimmers.

The helm was put down with the intention of bringing her head to sea. As she came to, we could tell by the sudden increase in the shriek of the gale that it was blowing hard. Up she came! She took a heavy sea on board abaft the bridge, the spray dashing clear over her funnel. She was just beam on when a heavy mountainous sea came rolling along. We felt her take a rapid lurch to leeward in the hollow of the sea, the great, watery mountains towering up on either hand and shutting out the misty distance. Again she rolled; a fearful sea struck her, smashing the starboard lifeboat, and now over, over, she went. Would she never stop? Down, down, till the lee-rails disappeared in the foam, and the water came creeping up her deck, which was now angled like a house-roof. No word was spoken. I heard one fellow give a choking sort of cry. We all stood silent, staring, and holding on like grim death. We thought she was done for. She stopped, and again lurched to windward with a dull, lifeless motion, but did not come upright again, and there lay with the top of the side-rails just appearing now and again. Thus she remained. It was a sufficiently terrifying picture—the howling gale, the misty rain shutting out the distance, the wicked-looking seas, that came roaring up to windward and dashing against the side, not now breaking on board, but sending their spray hissing over us in blinding showers. So she lay, helpless! Already the lee boats were smashed to atoms. We



S.S. Gresham. on beam-ends.
From a Drawing]

THE "GRESHAM" ON HER BEAMS.

[by the Author.

could not leave the ship even if we would. Sounds of angry exclamations and curses rose up from the stoke-hole. Looking down, I saw the chief engineer coming up the iron ladder. Beneath was a wild scene of confusion: an enormous mass of water washed about to leeward, and terrified men were climbing out of its way.

The engineer gained the deck; his face was white, his voice stammered.

"The water, sir!" he said.

"What?" said the captain.

"It's coming below in tons. The stoke-hole plates are all washed up already."

"Where's it coming from?"

"I don't know," answered the engineer, half crying. "The men are all at their prayers and won't work!"

The skipper's answer was more forcible than polite.

"Come on, you fellows!" he shouted to us, and began clambering down the stoke-hole ladder.

We followed him below.

The state of things appeared appalling—the coal-black water rushing up the sides and then back across the stoke-hole; two wretched-looking firemen hanging on to the weather bunker door; another, who had somehow wedged himself up to windward, on his knees praying. The swashing water was a good five feet deep. Already it had washed out the leemost boiler fires.

We found that it was coming through the coal-bunkers, and a further search showed that it was pouring in through a deck bunker-hatch which was completely under water. After some trouble we managed to secure it with a couple of mattresses wedged up from the deck below with wooden props; but, do what we might, the water still found its way below, and before long washed all the fires out, having risen to a depth of 10ft. to 12ft. The engineers tried their steam bilge-pumps, before it had risen thus far, but these were soon useless, the pipes getting choked up, *solid*, with grease and coal-dust.

We clambered up to the bridge again, to find the weather worse. The scene was enough to scare the bravest—the roar of the gale, the flying spray, the rush and swirl of the foaming water to leeward, and a helpless vessel under foot! Bad enough! But Anglo-Saxons are not easily daunted. As it happened, nearly all our seamen were Canadian lake sailors, but they were of our own blood.

Again we went below, and, having sawed a hole in a bulkhead, got into the cargo space.

We found that the whole of the grain bags had gone over to leeward. I went up and reported to the captain.

"Start at once!" he said—"all hands, mind! Cook, steward, and all, and work the bags up to windward. Tell the engineer to set all *his* crowd on to the coal to get that over."

We set to work.

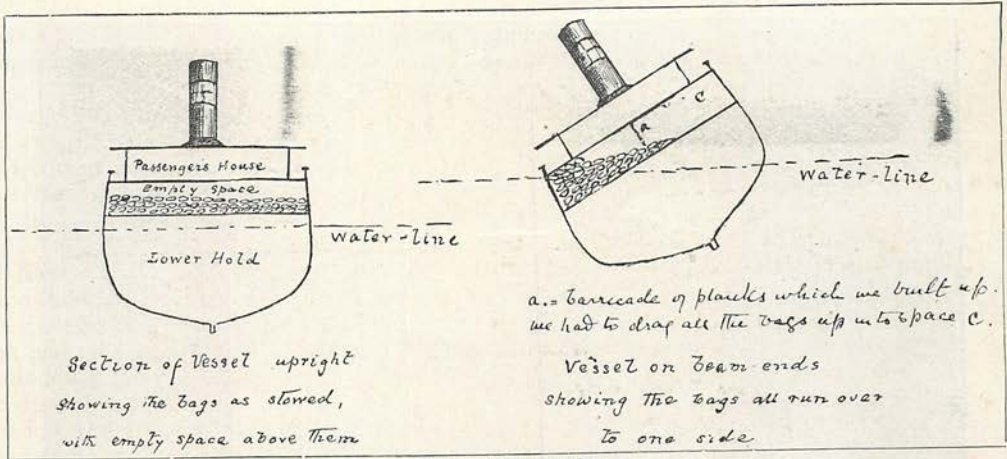
It was just then that I met with an accident, which very nearly put an end to my career. I had gone to the carpenter's berth for an axe, when a huge sea came along and washed me overboard. As I was swept along under water, I felt a rope running through my hands, and, grabbing it, hauled myself back. Then I found that I had split my nose open against a coaling-hatch. I crawled to the saloon and dabbed some friar's-balsam on it, then a lump of lint and some plaster; and here I sat for a bit, in company with the stewardess, for it had been a severe blow, and for the time I was dazed. It had knocked the pluck out of me, too. I got round again presently, but the wound was so painful that I was told off to the job of keeping watch through that first night, giving the captain a chance of going below. For night was now coming on.

I am not likely to forget those solitary twelve hours, alone on the deck of a disabled vessel, in the midst of a howling gale. The fear of death was added to my experiences; for what with the blow I had received, and the long, solitary hours of darkness, I don't mind confessing that I had given up hope. There I sat, the stinging rain and spray drenching me, looking down into the engine-room, and hearing the fierce wash of the water as at every plunge it rushed up into the bilges. Hour after hour, like old Paul in his shipwreck upon Malta, "I wished for the day."

I was supremely thankful when morning came at last, and was glad enough to go below and help at shifting the cargo.

The procedure was this. We lashed planks along the middle stanchions which support the beams. Then we dragged the bags up and over this barricade—for without it they would have slid back as fast as we hauled them up to windward. The firemen proceeded the same way with the coals, only working with shovels instead of hands.

We worked on steadily, knowing it was for life or death. But it was terrible labour. We found it absolutely necessary to take short spells for resting, but none of us thought of sleep, or of regular meals. We



From a Sketch by the Author.

broke off work one by one to snatch hurried lunches of tinned meat and biscuit. There was no thought of cookery—the galley-fire was washed out; and, besides, the place was dangerous of access.

On—ever on! Day and night were the same to us; below there with no light, except the dim globe lamps. I could not have believed it possible that men could have worked so long at such heavy labour. But there was no skulking—no hanging back.

After the first twenty-four hours we were cheered a bit by the gale decreasing, but we knew that if another storm arose—a thing to be looked for at that time of year—we should certainly be lost.

On we worked. Forty-eight hours had passed; and yet the ship gave no sign of righting herself.

How we longed for a sail to heave in sight! Could we have but signalled another vessel we should instantly have abandoned our ship. But none appeared. There was nothing for it but to work on.

It was well that we had not a crew of "Dutchmen." They would have given in long ago; even as it was, when

day followed day, when we imagined it impossible that we could work much longer—and when the ship gave no sign of righting—our men began to show signs of despair, and to think more than was good for them of that death which was staring us in the face. I consulted the third mate, a good chum of my own. We thought it best to conceal what liquor there was aboard, for fear the fellows should remember it, and drink themselves senseless. So we sneaked off on the quiet, and having made the steward hand it over, stowed it all away, beneath some bags of grain in the after "tween decks."

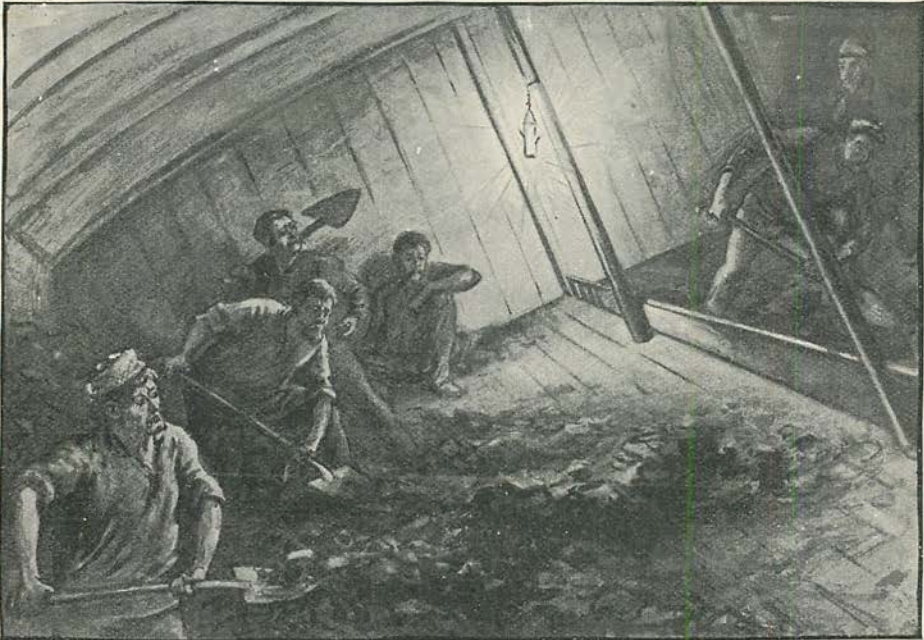
It was now ninety-six hours since our ship had gone on her beam-ends. All this time we had been working continuously at this tremendous task. A dock labourer who



From a Drawing]

SHIFTING THE GRAIN-BAGS.

[by the Author.



From a Drawing]

FIREMEN SHOVELLING THE COAL OVER.

[by the Author.

works for nine hours at handling sacks, with a dinner-hour between, considers he has done a good day's work and earned his night's rest. We had already done ten times as much without a wink of sleep. We were at the end of our endurance. Here and there a man stooping to grab at a sack would fall upon it—fast asleep. In addition to this, our hands were now so sore that we could scarcely bear to lift the bags.

Just at this awful crisis the vessel began to move!

What the present fear of death had been unable to do, hope made possible to us. We worked on, though still now and again stumbling and dozing off; till by five in the evening—so rapid had been the change for the better—our ship was on her legs again.

The captain called every one up from below and ordered them to turn in, he remaining on deck to keep watch. I can remember tumbling into my bunk, as I stood, boots, coat, and all. I was asleep—dead—before my head reached the pillow.

Four hours only were given us for sleep, it seemed like half a minute; for, though we were now safe, much remained to be done. It was a long job to get the engine-room ready for work again. First, the suction-pipes of the pumps had to be brought up on deck, and the solid coal and grease with which they were clogged rammed out with iron rods. Then, after the water had been pumped out, the

coal and rubbish of all kinds which had been washed everywhere had to be cleared away.

At last the fires were lighted again, and presently the engines began to move once more. Then we found time to look round us. One life had been lost. When the chief engineer was once more able to get to his cabin—which had been under water—he found his canary dead, whether starved or drowned it was impossible to say.

During the whole of those first four days we never saw a ship. Had we done so, we should, as I have said, immediately have left the *Gresham* to founder. An hour or two before we finished our work, a barque passed close to us, but we were not going to leave our ship then.

"Arrah! you lazy toad!" I heard one fellow mutter. "Why didn't ye come along sooner?"

I am glad, now, that no vessel did come along, for it is interesting to go through an experience like this; the interest comes in after it is over. As it was, we had no choice, and I doubt whether any other body of men ever worked for so long at such hard labour. We were 109 hours in all without sleep. As soon as we reached London I left the ship. She sailed for many years afterwards, and then was lost—by stranding, if I rightly remember.

I felt no after-effects, and my only *souvenir* of the occurrence is a black mark which adorns my nose, and which I shall carry to my grave. Say, now! Was not our experience as wonderful as his who moved the million of gold?