

# A Tragedy of the Sea.

BY GERALD HALFORD.

[From Photographs by Charles Clarke, Aldeburgh.]

**T**HE wind is blowing dead on the shore of Aldeburgh from the east, and the white crests of the long waves as they chase each other to their death on the steep, shingly beach make lines almost exactly parallel with the coast-line. Battalions of dark clouds scud swiftly across the dull-grey sky. On the parade and the beach there is little life. The sea is too rough for fishing, and the weather is not inviting for aimless strolling. A few sailors are gathered at each of the two look-outs, and an occasional fisherman may be seen standing by his boat. The date is Dec. 7, '99.

Suddenly a change comes over the scene. From their station near the southern look-out two men of the coastguard come out and send up a rocket. The report of the charge that sends the rocket on its journey is followed by the louder report of the rocket as it bursts in the air. A second rocket is sent up immediately afterwards.

This is the well-known signal that calls out the lifeboat men. At the sound the little town wakes to life, much as the palace of the sleeping princess in Tennyson's poem wakes to life at the kiss of the prince. All is at once bustle and excitement. Along the parade there is a wild race of sailors from all directions to the lifeboat shed, where the belts—the cork life-belts that the crew wear—are kept. For the lifeboat has no regular crew, but is manned by volunteers, and whenever she goes out there is what is euphemistically termed by the local Press a "competition" for the belts—that is, a race and a scramble to secure one. This is, perhaps, not an ideal system, but it is difficult to see how it could be improved upon without creating jealousy and ill-feeling, and it must be said that, however bad the weather may be, there are always more volunteers than are needed. The coxswain, it should be mentioned, has the right to take away the belt of any man he

considers unfit to go, and transfer it to a more eligible candidate—obviously a necessary regulation. Of course, no man may go without a belt.

Others besides the sailors gather on the beach round the lifeboat. The whole population of the town—men, women, and children, all who can possibly spare the time from business or work—come hurrying from all directions, eager to assist in the launch, or at least to witness it.

There is some delay in getting off the lifeboat. The regular coxswain, a man whose name is deservedly famous all over England, has been confined to his bed by sickness. But the sound of the lifeboat signal has been too much for him, and he is here, earnestly trying to persuade his medical adviser that he is fit to go with the boat. But the man of medicine is firm, and resolutely withholds his sanction, and as the deputy-coxswain is also incapacitated by illness, the command of the boat is entrusted to the bowman. Then there seems to be some doubt as to whether it is necessary for the boat to go at all. Telegrams are sent and received, and consultations are held. In the meantime the sailors who have been successful in securing belts stand complacently on the deck of the lifeboat chatting with their friends, and evidently much pleased with themselves. They little think that their success has meant in many cases their death-warrant.



THE ALDEBURGH LIFEBOAT CREW OUT FOR PRACTICE.



THE LIFEBOAT LEAVING THE SHORE IN THE HEAVY SURF.

After a time the boat is got off. There is here no convenient harbour from which the boat can put off quietly into smooth water, or, if the wind is adverse, be towed out by a tug. She has to be dragged laboriously down the beach and pushed and hauled right into the breakers. And close to the shore there are two shoals—the inner and the outer shoal—which add greatly to the difficulty and danger of launching a boat in rough weather.

However, these difficulties and dangers have often before been overcome by the lifeboat men, and no special anxiety is felt on this occasion. The sea is certainly very rough, but the lifeboat has before now been out in even worse weather. It is true that the regular coxswain is not on board, but his substitute, the acting coxswain, is known to be a thoroughly competent and experienced man, with nerves of iron.

At last the boat is afloat with only her mizzen-sail set. The fact that the wind is blowing dead on to the land and the tide flowing strongly makes it difficult to head her out to sea, and for a time she drifts southward in the line of the breakers, perilously near the shore. Time after time does a great wave break against her bows, drenching the crew to the skin, and turning the boat's head to leeward, and time after time does the coxswain bring her back to her course, pointing as near to the wind as the boat will go. After a time the

foresail also is hoisted, and at last the boat seems to be about to get clear of the breakers. She is crossing the inner shoal, pointing well out to sea, and many of the watchers turn away thinking that the worst of the danger is over. But their attention is

quickly recalled by a terrible cry of horror and dismay from those who have remained. A great wave has struck the boat on her quarter. Before she has time to recover herself another, even larger, wave has caught her broadside on, breaking right on to her sail. In a moment the boat is capsized and disappears from view.

Then a dozen dark, indistinguishable figures are seen struggling in the breakers. They are tossed about like corks by the waves, for to such a sea the strongest man is but a plaything. They are rolled over and over by the billows; as if in mockery, flung ashore, and dragged back.

For a moment the spectators stand horror-struck and appalled. Then there is a frantic rush for the spot where the men are being thrown ashore. Every able-bodied man joins in it. There is no distinction of class or occupation. Seamen and landsmen, rich and poor, tradesmen, professional men, and working men, even women and boys—all assist. The boat has drifted some distance from her starting-point, and only those who



THE LIFEBOAT CROSSING THE SHOAL.



THE LIFEBOAT JUST BEFORE THE DISASTER.

have been following her along the shore have much chance of helping. But they are enough, and each body that is thrown ashore is promptly seized by eager hands before it can be dragged back by the back-wash, and hauled up the beach out of danger. And this is no light task, for the weight of an insensible man with heavy clothes saturated with water is something amazing.

A dozen men are rescued, and no more are to be seen in the water. The men are in a piteous plight, as may well be imagined. There are nearly all utterly exhausted—their faces cut and bruised by the shingle—some of them insensible. Medical aid is at hand, and the sufferers, carefully tended by willing helpers, all eventually recover, though some of them cause their friends an anxious half-hour. The acting coxswain is among the first to come ashore, and quickly recovers himself. He has shown the most striking courage and coolness throughout, and it is afterwards reported that when in the water he called out to the man nearest to him, "Don't muddle yourself! We shall get to shore all right." He now rises and runs down to the water to help to rescue the rest of the crew. He is so exhausted that he can hardly stand, and he falls down on the way, but he picks himself up again and rushes into the water. Such conduct is beyond all praise. No words could do justice to it.

Twelve men are ashore and alive; six remain to be accounted for. Where are they? The lifeboat has by this time come ashore, and is lying, keel uppermost, on the edge of the breakers. The dreadful truth is clear. The missing men are *under the lifeboat!*

At this point the tragedy may be said to reach its climax. The scene is one that it is

absolutely impossible to describe. The men are known to be there, under the boat, within a few feet of a crowd of men eager to take any trouble or risk to save them, and yet nobody seems to know what to do. And, as a matter of fact, there is nothing to be done. The lifeboat weighs

thirteen tons, and to lever her side up or to turn her over is for the present equally impossible. To dig away the shingle from under her is quite useless while the tide is still flowing and the waves are breaking almost on to her. In the meantime the men under her, if not dead, must be rapidly dying, and the spectators grow desperate. Women and girls—mothers, sisters, and daughters of the victims, or merely sympathetic friends—are weeping and sobbing in the most heart-rending fashion. Some go into hysterics and have to be taken away; others faint outright. Even strong men are seen to go apart from the crowd and turn their heads away.

At this time occurs perhaps the most dramatic incident of the day. Before the lifeboat finally settles down a wave slightly lifts the side nearest to the sea, and in the back-wash a body floats out. It is that of a quite young fellow, married little more than a year ago, and the father of a three-months-old baby. It is at once secured and the treatment for the restoration of the apparently drowned applied. There is a report that the man is still alive, the spectators being probably misled by the muscular movements caused by the artificial respiration. It is soon evident that life has gone for ever, and a sad little procession takes the corpse home.

Meanwhile desperate attempts are made to rescue the five men remaining under the boat. The regular coxswain is by this time on the scene, and, though he ought to be in bed, is in the water, directing operations. The acting coxswain and the local secretary to the Lifeboat Institution are with him, and there is no lack of eager volunteer helpers. Attempts are made to drag the boat up the beach; failing that, to lift her side up with



MILLER WARD.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son, Aldeburgh.*



TOM MORRIS.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



HERRERT DOWNING.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



CHARLES CRISP.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



WALTER WARD.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



JOHN BUTCHER.  
(Drowned.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



ALLEN EASTER.  
(Rescued from the sea, but  
died of his injuries.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



CHARLES WARD.  
(Acting-Coxswain of the lifeboat at  
the time of the disaster—Saved.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*



JAMES CABLE.  
(The usual Coxswain, absent  
through illness.)

*From a Photo. by Clarke & Son.*

THE CREW OF THE WRECKED LIFEBOAT.



THE WRECK OF THE LIFEBOAT, WITH FIVE MEN BENEATH IT. THE CROWD ATTEMPTING TO RAISE THE BOAT WITH LEVERS.

levers ; but they are useless. Efforts are made to find out whether the men under her are still alive. A few men bravely go into the water, and seizing hurried opportunities between the incursions of the waves, look under that side of her which is toward the sea, and under which the back-wash of the waves has scoured out a slight opening. They report that they can see the men, and some even imagine that they can hear them. The coxswain mounts on the boat, and, putting his mouth to the tube through which the water escapes when the boat is afloat, shouts "Are you there?"

There is a breathless silence, but no answer comes.

As a last resort it is resolved to break through the side of the lifeboat. This is no easy task, for a lifeboat is naturally built for solidity more than anything else, and to cut through her stout timbers is a matter of time and toil. But with axes and saws energetically wielded it is at last accomplished, and a great gap yawns in the side of the boat.

And then it is found to be quite useless. The bodies cannot be reached. The deck of the boat under which the men are lying—in a space that cannot be more than 2ft. high—intervenes.

Then the original plan is reverted to. Huge pieces of timber are brought and used as levers, and as the tide goes down it is at last found possible to lift the edge of the boat sufficiently to enable the bodies to be extricated, though this is not till after darkness has set in. None of the five is missing, and the scene as

each body is taken out and identified is truly pitiful. The two last to be brought out are the two oldest men in the crew, found lying together with their heads badly injured, no doubt—and there is some comfort in this thought—killed instantaneously when the boat was capsized, or when she came ashore. In fact, it seems fairly certain that none of the six was alive, or at least conscious, after the lifeboat was thrown upon the beach.

Sadly and solemnly, "by the struggling moonbeams' misty light and the lantern dimly burning," the bodies are taken home.

It is a terrible tragedy. Immense pity is felt in the town for all concerned—for the dead men, for their families, for the lifeboat officials and crew. There is deep gloom, but—let us record it with thankfulness—there is no anger, no bitterness. It is recognised that no one is to blame. The officials were undoubtedly justified in letting the boat go out, and no act of carelessness or incompetence can be imputed to the acting coxswain or the crew. And, after the accident, everything possible was done by everybody concerned—and everybody not concerned—to rescue the crew. As the crowd disperse they can only say gloomily to each other: "A sad day for the town." But it is a day of which the town has no need to be ashamed!



THE END OF THE LIFEBOAT