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DEEDS OF “DERRING DO”

By DR. WILFRED T. GRENFELL

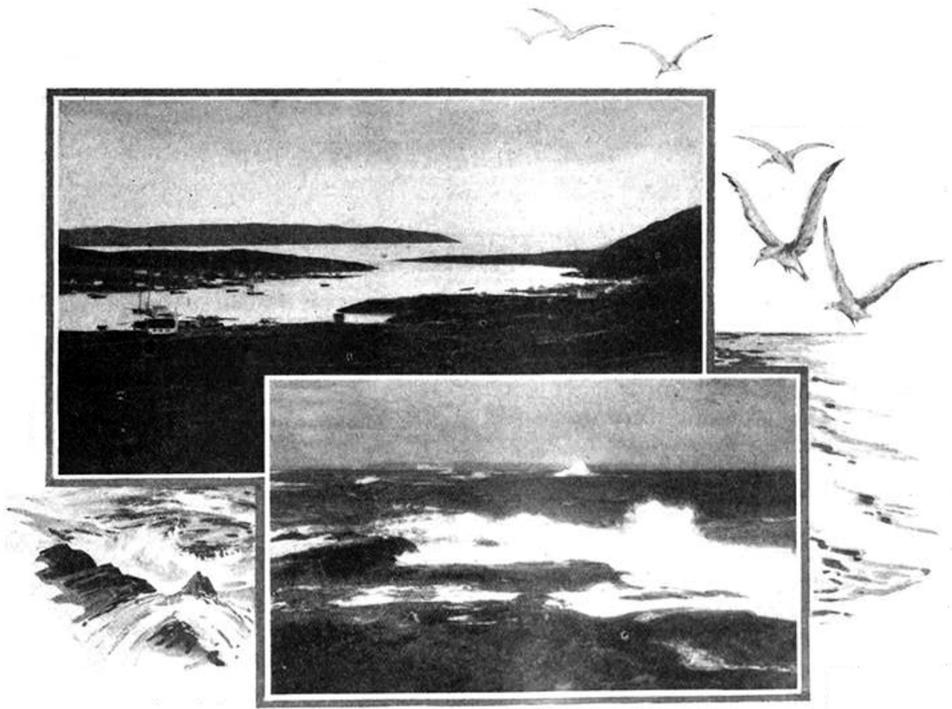


he schooner *Silver Queen*, Skipper Ambrose Loveday, was in serious trouble. Leading the van as usual of a great Labrador fleet of nearly a hundred vessels bound north for the summer fishery, she had been the first in thick fog to run up against the heavy arctic ice field, which a sudden change to a strong north-easterly wind was driving rapidly in upon the coast. Real heavy ice it was, too; the huge pans, some nearly half a mile long, had sides like precipices, and were of that steely blue ice that cuts the soft planking of our northern vessels

like a knife.

The man at the masthead who was conning the schooner reported “Ice everywhere; ne’er a drop of water to be seen.” The floe was running in before the wind at a good knot an hour, which, when once its inner edge brings up against the cliffs that flank our eastern shore, meant pressure that would crush a vessel’s ribs as a hydraulic press would those of a mosquito.

Nor was there the faintest chance to put about and run back, for the big fleet lay too far inside the bay, and the skipper could make out that the feet of the mighty cliffs of Cape St. Peter, away on the horizon, were battling already with the southern edge of the great ice field. Their only safety lay in getting anchorage, before it was too late, under the lee of a group of islands. The *Silver Queen* came about incontinently, and the fleet, warned by her movements, tacked also, heading right in for the land. Having a better offing from the ice than the *Silver Queen*, all the others safely reached the open water in the wake of the islands.



St. Rode's Harbor lay right ahead. The powerful light . . . warned the skipper that soon he would pass the protecting shelter of the land, and be facing the full force of the gale in the open.

The poor *Silver Queen* was caught in the treacherous embrace of two large pans of ice, a big spur pierced her side below the water line, and then as quickly slacking off again, left her in a sinking condition. Working at the pumps as only men in such dire need can work, the crew succeeded in keeping her afloat until she rounded the point of the land, where, with her decks already awash, they ran her on the rocks to prevent her sinking.

A host of comrades in a swarm of motor boats were soon around the crippled ship, like bees 'round honey. Quickly and efficiently, a big sail was sunk alongside and hauled under her keel, and wrapped around her to cover the hole. Extra pumps, brought aboard, worked so fast that the water, attempting to rush in, drove the sail into the breach, and gain was slowly made. After some patching and lightening of the hull, the schooner was freed enough of water to be towed up into a shallow arm of the roadstead where, on the top of high water, she was safely beached.

Alas, the salt, eight hundred dollars' worth and absolutely essential for the voyage, had melted out, and much of her provisions were ruined. Only a

spontaneous collection of salt, taken up by all the other vessels, enabled the skipper to proceed with the voyage at all, and even then prospects for a Christmas dinner when he returned from the long cruise were anything but rosy.

“Jeannie,” he wrote to his wife. “It’s you that will have to come to St. John’s to do t’ spending vfall, even if us do use our new salt. Else there’ll be nothing but dru diet for us t’ winter. I’m vlowing.”

Skipper Ambrose thought a great deal of his home “up South,” where three children now detained the young wife, who at first had always shared his voyages, cheering and inspiring him in his troubles.

As good luck would have it, after an anxious three weeks in which the plucky little schooner cruised many hundreds of miles in the vain search for “a voyage,” she ran right into the great body of cod fish that every year come browsing along out of the Gulf into the Atlantic, through the Straits of Belle Isle, as soon as those waters get too warm to suit the bait fish on which they feed. Skipper Ambrose managed to send news of his better fortune home by a vessel that got her load early, and which he had been lucky enough to intercept on her voyage south.

“There’ll be enough yet, Jeannie, please God, if you does the laying out of it; and maybe old Santa won’t have to pass St. Rode’s after all,” was his message.

The masts of the *Silver Queen* had hardly topped the horizon of St. Rode’s Harbor on her return early in October, before the whole Loveday household were somehow aware of the fact; and so quickly did Jeannie have the three “all spruced up,” that she was alongside with them in the boat before the anchor chain had stopped running through the schooner’s hawse pipe.

“Yes, us have used our salt, lass,” said the skipper proudly. “And us would have used twice as much if us had had it. But the old ship got a nasty squeeze in t’ ice, and in spite of the patch us put on her, she wasted a power of it again whiles us was beating about after t’ fish. Guess you’s e’ll have to come along, Jeannie, if t’ money’s to reach to Christmas tings—Can’t leave the kiddies? Oh, the neighbors will keep an eye on they. Us won’t be long anyhow. Johnny needs tending? Well, you’s e can bring Johnny along if you’s e feared to leave him home.”

Jeannie’s protests were all in vain, and in spite of her better judgment she yielded at last to her husband’s importunity. Thus it happened that when the fish had been dried, and marketed in St. John’s, and all the money spent, the *Silver Queen* left one fine morning, again northward bound, with more than the usual modest quantity of bunting at her masthead, to signify that the skipper’s wife and lad were aboard with him, and that with a well stocked

vessel and happy hearts they were off to spend a merry Christmas in their little home on the northern coast.

Everything was stowed away snugly, every hatch was closely battened down, and by dark the *Silver Queen* was speeding along north in smooth water under the land, before a spanking westerly wind. With the advent of night the wind freshened, veering slightly against them, so that sail was shortened, sheets hauled down, and the passengers early tucked away securely in their bunks. Towards midnight the breeze freshened to a north-westerly gale and double-reefed both fore and aft, the little schooner was clinging on to the land to hold the shelter of the cliffs as long as possible.

The powerful light of Bonavista Cape was now abeam and, flashing down from its lofty perch on the hill tops, warned the skipper that soon he would pass the protecting shelter of the land, and be facing the full force of the gale in the open.

St. Rode's Harbor lay right ahead. It was only thirty miles across to the land that spelled home and safety. The ship was stout. Close-hauled, she could lay across on the wind. The skipper had made this journey so often before that to hesitate at crossing never entered his mind. Some men would have put about and hugged the land, at least until daylight, but not so Skipper Ambrose. A few minutes later, he and his little ship were facing the full fury of the gale as serenely as most of us would face our breakfast at home.



Real typhoons, tornadoes and cyclones are not known in the North. Whether now a rare specimen had escaped from its path, or whether this was merely the accumulation of force from the pent-up fury of the wind buffeting around the mighty cliffs of the headland, it is impossible to say. But suddenly the good ship began to turn over. At first she just lay down as every good boat will do in heavy wind. But alas, this time she was failing to recover herself. It seemed for all the world as if some great invisible hand were pressing her slowly down. She shivered and struggled like some small wild animal under the paw of a mighty lion all to no purpose. Steadily, inch by inch, down she went. She had already gone altogether too far for recovery when a sea, sweeping over her, broke right into her main-sail, snapped off her mainmast at the gammon, and slowly the half-drowned little craft righted herself once more.

One moment's hesitation, while, half full of water, she lay rolling in the trough of the sea, her broadside exposed to the great combers that came sweeping by, must have sealed her fate forever then and there. But the helm

was up, the fore-sheet out to the knot, and the battened hull running straight before the seas out into the open Atlantic while a landsman would have been recovering his feet—or before he could have guessed what had happened.

Down below decks, everything seemed quiet and secure again now, and the Skipper's shout down the companion to his wife to keep right on sleeping was, he thought, all that was needed to restore her confidence.

Though the winter boxes and barrels had been so well stowed, and were so tightly jammed from the ballast deck to the beams, that very little of the ballast itself had stirred when the vessel "hove down," things were far from cheerful, the pumps scarcely gaining on the water in the well.

The wreckage was successfully cut away without piercing her hull, and the following seas so far made no breach over her. But she was only a small schooner; she had been badly crushed in the ice in the spring; she had only one mast left; and it was already winter "North of the roaring forties." The only possible way to keep her afloat was to run her right on before the wind into the open ocean, and even then there was no hope unless they were seen and taken off by some passing steamer.

Daylight brought little comfort to the stricken ship. Gallantly she ran on before mountains of water which towered away above her stern, and which every now and again broke fiercely just under her counter. The skipper had lashed himself firmly to the helm, where he was soaked to the skin by the tail ends of many of the seas that lurched over the taffrail in the darkness. Not for one second had he allowed even the mate to relieve him, knowing that at any moment the lives of all on board might hang on a single turn of the wheel.

The second mate and deck hand, almost played out, were still working at the pumps when at last, after daylight, the captain went forward for a moment. "Go below, lads," he said, "and get some dry clothes. She's riding all right, but I want you both forward again as soon as you're ready. Her decks are badly strained, and she's making a lot of water forward."

"All right, skipper." And the two weary men, glad of an excuse to forget their troubles for a moment, fell over one another in their haste to get first to the fo'castle.

The tough old mainmast, before breaking off, had so strained the deck that great gaps were left through which the water was pouring and accounted for the constantly rising water in the well. Temporary relief was secured by clamping heavy canvas over the seams, and everyone's heart rose when once more the eternal swash in the bilges was silenced for the time being—for it is a dirge which is enough to discourage the stoutest of hearts in time.

Though there was no abating of the storm as the day wore on, there was no time for anxiety. Not only had the pumps to be worked incessantly, and the decks to be caulked, but the foremast, on which even their temporary safety depended, had been so badly strained when the mainmast went by the board, that its rigging had to be reinforced, and its preventer stays rigged to hold even the bare pole standing. Tangled rags of the sails, flapping dismally against the shrouds, were the sole remnants of the ship's canvas. Every ounce of help being necessary to save the ship, no one even thought of food. Meanwhile, rough as it was, they were able to keep her running directly before the seas, and so smother the movement of the vessel sufficiently to make the skipper, who found only a rare moment to shout a word of cheer down the hatchway, fully believe that he was keeping his wife in ignorance of the real state of things on deck. With that end in view he had even spared the cook for a few minutes to carry her food as usual.

That through the second awful night his wife should still be staying quietly below was an infinite comfort to the brave heart on deck. Little was he aware "what every woman knows." Yet the realization that his vessel was sailing to certain destruction in mid-Atlantic, and that he was himself responsible for carrying her to seemingly sure death, was almost more than he could bear. The loss of the salt, the outfit, anything and everything that had gone in the spring misadventure, and which had meant terrible losses to him, he had taken like every true seaman takes adversity—only as a stimulus to more effective action. But as with most sailors, under a moment that his whole mind was not absorbed in the fight with the seas the thought that it was partly his own selfishness that was responsible for his wife and child being aboard the doomed schooner tortured him like a fresh knife stab.

So the second night wore interminably away. Years of experience had made it second nature to Skipper Ambrose to handle the *Silver Queen*. Since the time when, with his father and brothers, he had built and launched her at the head of Birch Inlet he had sailed her himself every season. It was she that had enabled him to obtain a home, to find his partner in life, and to support his children as they came along. She would obey no one as she would him, and in these terrible hours he would let no one try. The sullenly smooth sea was, he knew, only waiting relief from the wind pressure to surge once more into mountains that would dangerously menace the ship. So again at night he lashed himself to the helm—a very vigil of prayer that it is the lot of few men to know.

The craft was now far out in the Atlantic, and the terror of the steep seas on the shallow waters of the great Banks to a vessel in her condition was every moment looming up like some dread spectre that would suddenly

overpower them all. Yet he dared not alter the ship's course one iota to avoid them. Hour after hour the insensate hurricane swept everything before it. By morning there was no longer any possible hope of clearing the Banks, so they must incur the terrible extra risk of opening the hatches in order to jettison cargo, and so lighten the ship.

The first streak of dawn was just lighting up the face of the watery waste, and the skipper after repeated warnings and instructions had just handed the helm to his second hand, and was forward with the mate, helping to open and close the main hatch as each barrel and box was hauled on deck and flung over the side. For the hundredth time he had turned round to keep his eye on the helmsman, when suddenly he became aware of a woman's figure emerging from the after companion, and approaching the man at the wheel. She was carrying something in her hand. It was a cup with a steaming liquid in it. Surely that woman could not be Jeannie! She must be sleeping at that hour! His mind must be going. He dropped the hatch and stood staring before him into the semi-darkness as if turned into a pillar of stone. A moment passed and he had not moved a finger.

"What's the matter, skipper?" broke in the frightened mate. "Whatever are you seeing?"

All the skipper's reply was a mechanical walk aft as a man might do in a dream. "Jeannie," he found words at last, when he had actually touched her arm. "Jeannie, is it you? What are you doing on deck this weather? It's no place for you, darling—bad enough for us men," and he put out his hand as if to lead her below again.

Yet he felt somehow as though there were no need for it now. She seemed in some way different to the gentle little woman of his home. He could not tell quite what it was that was strange, but there was a light in her eyes, and even a joy, that he felt he had never noticed there before. Instead of trying to direct her, therefore, he was satisfied just to touch her arm again, as if to be quite sure it was herself.

Then his eye fell on the steaming mug of coffee, and he remembered that they had eaten nothing for two days, had not even thought of it, and instantly there came to his mind the picture of a man standing on a wreck he had read of, and reminding the crew "it is now fourteen days, and you have eaten nothing." Jeannie had not spoken yet, but somehow he felt that he knew exactly what she would say, and that he ought to wait for her to speak. He could almost hear that man on the wreck, now nearly two thousand years ago, going on with almost the words in which she was now beginning to say:

"Last night as I lay in my bunk, though I thought I was awake, I seemed to be going into the door of our own house in St. Rode's. There was no one

'round so I went upstairs. It was early morning, but the children were awake, and cried out with joy at seeing me. Then they dressed and came downstairs, and there was a big rattling at the door, and you came stumbling in, carrying a huge pack on your back. At first I couldn't make out what you were doing, but when you put down the pack and looked up the children began to shout. For your face had become round and red and your whiskers long and white, and you were growing fatter and fatter. Suddenly I knew that we were at home on Christmas Day; and somehow we had a power of things for Christmas. Then just as I said 'Thank God' it all vanished away. But it was so real I'm certain it'll be exactly as I've said. We must all take courage. None of us'll be drowned."

A minute or two passed, the skipper standing with bowed head and making a fine picture in his shining oilskins. It seemed like the close of a simple religious service. As his wife stopped speaking the two went silently below. "I pray you to take some meat, for this is for your health," he could hear the brave old man of his memory saying. Jeannie made no further comment—and without at all realizing what he was doing he found himself stirring the fire in the cabin stove.

The uneasy motion of the vessel warned him that the water was shoaling and the Banks getting near. But he had forgotten to worry and soon had the kettle refilled and boiling, and a fresh pot of steaming coffee brewed. Calling all hands except the helmsman, the skipper said grace in his simple way, and as in the vision of his memory "then were they all of good cheer, and they also took some meat."

How deliverance was to come no one could possibly guess. Already the scudding ship had passed far to the south of the track of steamers. All day and yet another night went by—the worst night of all in many ways. For the steep seas of the Banks curled over more than once on to the schooner's taffrail and the strained hull, working more and more under the stress and drag of the seas, had allowed the ever increasing quantity of water in the hold to gain dangerously on the pumps. It had become obvious to all that if help was to come, it must be soon.



When the evening of that third night settled down it was only Jeannie's optimism that saved the ship. Beset with their never-ending tasks the worn-out crew had not even noticed that the skipper's wife had assumed the rôle of cook. Nor had the exuberance of good things that were constantly being passed up to them struck them as strange. Never in all her life had the *Silver Queen* seen such days. Sugar and milk accompanied the mugs of tea that were on draught at all hours of the day and night. Alcohol there was none—but the frills of Christmas were “flowing” all day on the deck of that sinking vessel. For the new cook had access to the stock that St. Nicholas had destined for St. Rode's Harbor, and she was cheating Father Neptune of them in the only way possible.

Just before daylight on the fourth morning the watch, dashing aft, yelled to the skipper: “Steamer's light on the port bow! Not more than a mile away!” There wasn't a moment to lose, or they would be just as “ships passing in the night,” for all hands realized that the chances of the steamer's watch seeing the water-logged fishing boat with only one bare stick standing, in the half darkness, were very small indeed.

But a Newfoundland fisherman, like the native weasel, is not be caught napping. In less time than it takes to tell, flares were alight from end to end of the doomed vessel, and the old sealing gun of Skipper Ambrose was barking out its hoarse appeal as fast as it could be reloaded. Realizing that it was the last cast of the die, with the skill of his craft he also began edging the old hull to windward, which had the double advantage of slowing down her pace and bringing her more across the steamer's path. An answering flare from the stranger's deck soon set their minds at rest that they had been seen. The problem of doing anything to help them, however, seemed utterly insoluble: only the God-given genius of the sea, and the indomitable pluck of British sailors in the face of danger could even now possibly save them.

Dawn found the small and buffeted ocean tramp bravely standing by—and the impossible was actually being attempted. Six men in a small boat were preparing to be lowered over the great rolling iron wall into the cauldron of that storm-driven sea. No one who has not seen it tried can begin to appreciate the difficulty. To get the boat safely into the water and away from the ship's side is almost an impossibility. It is the one great problem in shipwreck. Untold lives have been lost through failure in the attempt to launch the boats. Who would have blamed these men, who themselves had loved ones dependent on them at home, had they decided that the risk was unjustifiable? There was neither glory nor money if they succeeded, and a terrible death "for nothing" if they failed. Why do men of the sea do these deeds? Shall such be judged hereafter by their creeds?

This time the launching was successful in spite of an awful crash as the boat, hanging at full length of the falls, was driven before an irresistible mountain of water into the ship's side; but the straining eyes from the wreck saw her sheer off, and start drifting down towards them. On she came, now visible high in the air, topping the crest of a huge comber, and then again there was a horrible dread that she would never reappear, as the moments went by and she was lost from sight amidst the steep watery valleys. Suddenly there she was again, towering now right above the water-logged wreck that lay deep in a great chasm below her. Surely she must crack like a nutshell if they touched. Yet if she was swept by, with her would go the last chance for life. Again these "common seamen" snatched victory from the impossible. Two of the steamer's crew had actually leaped aboard, and making fast, were literally carrying in their arms across that raging gulf a woman and a helpless child. The schooner, left without a helmsman, had immediately broached to, and the seas were already making clean sweeps over her.

The skipper, who held on till the last, was, however, not kept long waiting. The men, leaping into space one after the other, and being dragged aboard by the rough, deft hands of the boat's crew, even when safely in the boat, knew that the difficulty of scaling the lofty side of the steamer as she lay rolling to and fro in the troughs and crests of the great sea was almost insurmountable. The child was lashed up in one of the men's coats, and somehow hauled on deck by a rope. The woman, like the men, actually climbed over the rocking side of that towering craft by a long, dangling, rope ladder.

A few days later they were all landed in Sydney Harbor, but long before they arrived there their story had become common property aboard their rescuer, and the sympathies of these men of rough exterior had been deeply touched. Skipper Ambrose, with his wife, child, and crew were soon shipped

home as wrecked sailors. All their hard won outfit had been lost; even their scanty stock of personal clothing had gone. Needless to say, there was nothing left for Christmas Day, and the little stockings, that were hung up as usual in St. Rode's, were all empty that morning.

But it so happened that about two o'clock Christmas afternoon, the last mail boat for the season butted in to the standing ice at the harbor mouth. To his intense surprise Skipper Ambrose, who had gone off to land the mails with his team of dogs, found a large crate plainly labelled with his own name. He hauled the mysterious package home, and it was promptly pried open in the presence of all the family. There were packages for all the family—not one had been forgotten. A wonderful jacket and warm gloves were labelled "Mrs. Jean Loveday." A spanking new woollen sweater bore the brief legend "Skipper Ambrose;" while on no less than four parcels they discovered the name of "Johnnie Loveday." Somehow, even little Phyllis and Mary found boxes containing wonderful dolls and a real Teddy bear with their names pencilled on them. There were boxes of candies, bags of fruit, a tin of cocoa, some sugar and heaven knows what—and the strange thing was that every package bore somebody's name.

It was perfectly marvellous, for in that Christmas box was just exactly what every single one in the family wanted most on earth. The minister himself could not have persuaded the little Lovedays that it wasn't St. Nicholas who had come in by sea instead of on his reindeer—and I'm not sure they weren't right.

All the same Jeannie has her suspicions that some rough sailor men from the crew of a certain ocean tramp could have thrown some light on the subject had they wished.

Transcriber's Notes

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[The end of *Deeds of "Derring Do"* by Wilfred T. Grenfell]