



The BURDEN PATERNAL *by* Captain Dingle

Author of "The Liar," "The Avenging Sea," etc.

SOMEHOW old Captain Basil always struck me as foreordained to carry an overburden of this world's cares. I had sailed as a boy with him in the *Murmurous* bark, had found in the old chap a lot of the fatherly interest I had lacked after my own parents left me a child orphan, and had successively passed second and first mate's examinations with his kindly help. In time I fell into the second mate's berth, and lacked only the vacancy for mate, filled, so far, by his own son Dick.

Dick was a limb of the devil. One of those slim, dark lads, looking almost effeminate with his pretty face yet as strong as a steel rod; opportunity played a big part in molding his behavior while ashore. At sea he was a decent sailorman, his thorough grasp of his profession marred at times only by outbursts of black temper which, however, he managed to control generally; but in port, at home or in the tempting little Eastern places to which we mostly traded, he let go all and flew a high kite.

Perhaps he did not actually take so much liquor as we thought; but he certainly acquired all the effects of a lot, and many a police blotter lacked his name only on account of the old man's record; many a dark-skinned lover sought him with gritted teeth because of some brazen meddling with a black-eyed girl who was not as unattached as Dick chose to believe.

It was pitiful sometimes to see the old gentleman's face on sailing day, after he had for the twentieth time rescued Dick from detention ashore which would have surely meant leaving him behind; and I knew very well that down in his heart he longed to see his boy go into other employ, or another ship anyhow, so that he might rise to

command, but feared to let him go out of his sight for the evil that lived in him.

"Billy," he said to me one dog-watch just outside the Molucca Passage. He called me Mr. Cleaver in the common run of ship's duty, but this was one of his gloomier moments. "Billy, my lad, I'm afraid for Dick. He ought to have a ship of his own by now. You ought to have been mate, too, before this. Why don't you ask for another ship, Billy?"

He turned away and stumped the deck a while, his handsome old face drawn and wan, then rejoined me, muttering:

"I daren't let Dick go, Billy. He's wild, and a danger to himself, and—and he's worrying his mother to death."

That proved a long, trying voyage home, for apart from the weather, which was mostly windless and sultry throughout the Indian Ocean, and perverse with headwinds and lumpy seas right up to the northern tropic in the Atlantic, there was an indescribable air of brooding about the after part of the ship which made a chap jumpy in his watch on deck and uneasy in his watch below.

I can't say whether the old man hauled Dick over the coals about his conduct or not, but a restraint certainly had grown up between father and son, and Dick passed his watches whistling through smiling lips and clenched teeth, smooth as silk in his speech to the men, yet carrying a glitter in his dark eyes which I, who knew him so well, cared little to see. It was all to be explained a little later.

The day we docked in London, Dick went ashore the minute he had given the crew the word. "That'll do, men!" and I saw no more of him, except through a binocular, from that day to this. I

thought I caught sight of him once, the day we paid off, but can't be sure.

I was ferreting around St. George's, looking for Jamrach the animal importer, to whom I hoped to sell a couple of blue-faced monkeys and a tangle of baby pythons from Borneo, when I spotted a natty sailorman dodging into the grimy office of a notorious shyster lawyer whose name had more than once been linked with that of some defaulting or barratrying skipper needing a defender. The chap looked like Dick; but as I say, I can't be sure, and far be it from me to plaster an acquaintance of that kidney on a shipmate without certainty to back me.

However, to fill away again with the yarn, Captain Basil met me at the gangway on my return on board with a look on his brave old face only to be described as high hope struggling with black misgiving.

"Mr. Cleaver," he said with a shake in his voice, "you will shift your dunnage over to the mate's room. I congratulate ye, Billy."

His hard, honest fist gripped mine. He made the bald announcement of my promotion in official style; that done, it was the man, kindly, fatherly, glad, who added the friendly grip.

"Has Dick—?" I stuttered, too surprised to thank him for my own bit of fortune. He interrupted me with a grave smile.

"Dick is master of a steamer, Billy. Went to sea this tide, bound for Huelva. Let's hope for everything that's good for him, lad. Anyhow, you got your own boost sooner than ye expected to, hey?"

"I'm glad it came through Dick's own promotion, sir," I said warmly, and the old man's eyes lighted gratefully as if sensing the alternative which I had in mind.

The new second mate plays a negligible part in this tale, and I'll simply mention that he seemed to know his work and his place, which pair of qualifications will always ensure a second greaser a comfortable berth if the ship affords such for anybody.

Our Eastern cargo was out and the holds swept, ready for the full cargo of machinery and building material we were to carry out to Adelaide, when the skipper came aboard one afternoon along with the principal owner.

"It's a pity your son hadn't a little more patience, Captain Basil," the owner was saying. "This new departure we're making will be a big

thing for our captains and mates. Dick would have got his ship in a few months, in any case, under the superannuation plan alone, for we propose to retire you, after giving you one voyage in one of the new steamers to bring your wages up to a better level."

And later in the evening, when we stood alone at the dimly-lighted gangway, the old man told me with a little shake in his voice:

"'Twould have been splendid, Billy! Dick would have had the old *Murmurous*, with you getting your promotion just the same, only a voyage later. Then ye'd both have gotten fine steamers very soon, for the old bark is to be the last of the fleet to go, after she's carried out all the gear for the establishment of the branch offices and docks and sheds out there.

"Fine big steamers they're building, Billy; none of your cheap secondhand tramps, lad, but Clyde-built ships that'll carry a lumping big cargo at a level fourteen knots, and have plenty of room and comfort for a score or so of passengers."

He paused, gazing out across the dark basin of the East India dock, at a tall, black maze of rigging which, with the *Murmurous* herself, alone represented the vanishing romance of sail in all that mass of hulls and funnels and derrick-masts which crammed the basin to the gates.

"I suppose the owners are right, Billy lad," he muttered presently, laying a hand on my shoulder. "I don't believe I'd be very happy in one o' them steamers. It's best for me to retire. It's a very decent thing they're doing, too; very decent. Starting a pension scheme they are, for masters who have served them for twenty years or more, and they're going to retire me at half-pay.

"You heard what he said, Billy? Giving me command of the first new steamer just so's my wages will be nearly double when I'm retired. Jove, Billy! That's a firm to work for! And Dick's lost his chance; the young fool. But you stick to 'em, Billy Cleaver, and you're made. Stick to owners like that. Run your ship to orders, keep your record clean, and when ye've got passengers aboard remember they're but woolly lambs in your tender care and bear with their whims and their grouches and their sometimes durn foolishment as you would toward children.

"But above everything else, Billy, keep clean hands and a clean record. That's about the only thing the owners are flint-hard about. They never give a man another chance who turns a bad trick on

‘em. If I lost this ship, and the court decided against me, goodbye to me, that’s all. If the decision said ‘t wasn’t my fault, my job would be waiting for me whatever the world said about the case. Oh, they’re the men to tie to, Billy!”

The old man had waxed quite enthusiastic in his warmth, and for once in a long time I saw him go to his late train with a lighter step and a smoother face. Every night he went to his suburban home, where his fine old domestic partner awaited him all through his long voyages, hoping for that day to come when she need no more scan the maritime news for reports of his movements.

The imminent realization of that high hope would help wonderfully to offset the sorrow she had suffered through Dick. Oh, no doubt the old man carried home that night a heart full of cheer.

NEXT morning I stepped outside the dock gates to buy my morning paper before breakfast, and the news was burned into my brain even as I took the damp sheet. Headlines, they were; big, black, appalling to me who was interested more than a little.

STEAMER’S LIFEBOAT PICKED UP IN BAY OF BISCAY. CAPTAIN AND FOUR MEN SAVED. VESSEL, THE S.S. *Hispaniola*, STRUCK ON ROCK IN THE NIGHT.

“*Hispaniola!*” I muttered unbelievably. “Dick’s new ship? Can’t be!”

I hurried aboard and propped the paper against the stanchion of the table while I ate. The details were meager; just the names of the survivors and the very scanty report made by the skipper himself to the man who picked him up. But right there beneath the main item of interest was another bit which started my thoughts whirling and kept them whirling all day.

AEROPLANE FLYING FROM CADIZ TO BREST WITNESSES WRECK OF STEAMER. AVIATOR MAKES STARTLING REPORT.

Only to give the casting away of the *Hispaniola* its due importance in the story, it suffices to say that Dick Basil’s step into foul business, proved disastrous. When he became foolish, taking silly offense at his father’s reprovings, and joined in with a crooked gang of ship-murderers he overlooked the fact that the air has been conquered.

The old man fought hard to save him at the inquiry, engaging counsel without regard to cost; but that aviator’s evidence damned the lad in the eyes of the grim old seamen who sat in judgment. They could not see any reason why a steamer, under control, due west of the Chaussée de Sein and bound from Huelva for the Channel, should be steering a few degrees south of east, even allowing for the seventeen degrees of variation in that region and any possible deviation the ship herself might have.

“Ticket suspended for one year,” the old man told me when all was over.

His eyes glistened suspiciously.

“And I heard ‘em saying, Billy, when they didn’t think I could hear, that he’d have been broke for good only they felt sorry for me! D’ye hear that, Billy Cleaver? Sorry for me, so they let him down easy! They think they can make me feel it less, the disgrace of it!”

We loaded and sailed for Australia, and only once, just after dropping the pilot off Dungeness, did the skipper mention Dick to me. It appeared that, besides his other follies, Dick had become entangled in an affair with a barmaid in London and faced a paternity case.

I heard very little about it, except that it had, coming a-top of the casting away of his ship, almost killed his mother. The only saving circumstance in the whole messy business seemed to be that when Dick started for Australia, passage paid by the old man, to seek a fresh start, the lad had stood by the girl, married her honestly and insisted upon taking her with him.

For the rest, the old *Murmurous* slogged her way around the world again, discharged her cargo, loaded up with wool and cases of tinned rabbit and slogged home again, taking fifteen months over the voyage as if she sulked at the prospect of losing her revered old master.

We tied her up, unloaded her, left her in charge of the second mate to await her new skipper, and Captain Basil and I proceeded to the builder’s yard to supervise the finishing touches on the new steamer.

The S.S. *Solander* was a beauty; even we two hard-bitten windjammer sailors saw something in her to praise; and that is all that need be said to prove her merits. In the novelty of his new command, the feverish activity of his days and the planning for the morrow of his evenings, the

skipper found plenty to take and keep his mind off his troubles.

But I knew from the little he let fall that Mrs. Basil was failing, that he wanted nothing so much as to throw up the whole shipping business and go home to her; but she insisted that he remain and complete his services desired by the owners. And I knew, or had a shrewd notion, that his defense of Dick, his staking him to a fresh start, and the illness of the old lady had sucked him almost dry financially. There was every reason for his staying on until he could haul down his flag for good and all.

Sometimes a bright streak shone through the gray, and he would tell me with something like his old smile that he had heard from Dick.

"Doing very well, Billy, very well," he would say. "Took on as mate in a little tub of a steamer when he landed out there, and made good. Seems as if he'll get command of one of the smaller ships now that his suspension's up. Hope so, by gracious!"

Everything looked fine when at last our steamer passed out of the river to steam her trials. If she satisfied the owners we would take her around to the Thames right away to load for Adelaide—first ship of the new line. And she satisfied all right; exceeded her required speed, behaved like a sweet ship and merited all the popping corks in the saloon which saluted her return trip.

That night Captain Basil was ashore at a big banquet given the owner by the builder, and did not get a letter which had come aboard for him until after midnight. He woke me up—it must have been but a few minutes after he came on board—and as he turned on my electric light I saw his face. It was gray, gray, the gray of skeleton dust, and a full score years aged since morning.

"She's dead, Billy," he said slowly, as if striving to let me thoroughly understand what he was telling me. "She's gone, my old woman, Billy, and Dick killed her, by—!"

He quit my cabin as abruptly as he had entered, and I resumed my broken sleep. There seemed nothing else I could do until morning. Then I turned the hands to and stood by for events.

About mid-forenoon the owner sent down a clerk to say Captain Basil had gone to London by train and that I was to take the ship around myself. The Clyde pilot came on board, and when we dropped him well outside, it, was simple coastwise

steaming until we picked up the mud-pilot off the shipwash for the run upriver to the docks.

IT WAS a changed Captain Basil who took command after his wife's funeral and carried the new steamer to sea. As for me, I found so much strange and interesting about my first steamship that I had small time to bother my head about the moods of my skipper. But Captain Basil, being what he was, my oldest friend and shipmate, it was inevitable that his troubles and sorrows should in a measure reflect themselves in me.

He spoke seldom, and when he did it was in curt, almost snappish monosyllables which speedily discouraged our few passengers from trying further to dig beneath his reserve. To me he was ever kindly, yet even to me he showed a distaste for conversation other than simple orders and remarks concerning ship's business.

We had coaled and left St. Vincent before he touched on any intimate matter, and then, gazing ahead into the dusky blue of the creeping night, he suddenly exclaimed to me:

"By gracious, Billy! That boy's got a heavy load on his conscience. Killed his mother, he did. Just as sure as if he'd beaten her to death with a club. I hope his days may be dark and his nights—"

The old man broke off suddenly, and as he raised his eyes to the skies I saw a look of awe, almost fear, cross his haggard face. Then he turned to me and seized my hand, careless of the curious grin on the quartermaster's face within the wheelhouse.

"Billy," he said quietly and shakily, "Billy, lad, 't ain't for us to judge the boy. I told you he was doing right well, didn't I, Billy?"

Thereafter the ship plowed her stately way to Table Bay, down on the Great Circle past the Crozets and Kerguelen, and along the blustering, long-sweeping "Forties" toward Australia, without the skipper's ever once returning to the subject of his family affairs.

About the forty-seventh day out we began to haul up for the land, aiming to make landfall about Kangaroo Island, and our radio man started picking up scraps of news from ships and shore-stations.

It was all amazingly new to the skipper and me, whose windjammer days had been spent without the luxuries of wireless or electric light even; and each item of news that came to hand from those unseen sources away over the skyline found in us

an eager audience which must have been amusing to the second and third mates, both steamer men from boyhood.

“Dark horse possible United States President,” read the old man from a sheaf of radio forms. I peeped over his shoulder as he went through them. “Great fires in Gippsland”—then, as a passenger knocked on the chartroom door to ask him for a moment of his time, Captain Basil crammed the last radio form into my fist and growled out:

“There! Read that—confound their dinner parties and cruises! Why can’t a man be left to carry his ship to port without interference?”

“That” turned out to be a message from the colonial representative of the firm saying that they were coming to meet the steamer—a party of twelve—at Adelaide, and would go around to Melbourne in her. Captain Basil was instructed to order his steward to prepare in a manner worthy of the great occasion.

An off-lying pilot picked us up soon afterward, and apparently had been so confident of getting the new ship that he had brought us some letters. My own correspondence was negligible; but the old man got a letter which seemed to banish the grumpiness he had assumed on learning of the forthcoming joy-cruise. As he almost invariably had done since losing his life-partner, he came over to me with his news.

“I said so, Billy, d’ye remember? Listen to this. It’s from an old shipmate o’ mine; he’s kept an eye on Dick for me.”

He read from the letter:

“The lad seems to have come back to himself, old friend. The girl he married has turned out trumps, and he never made a better investment than buying her a plain gold ring. There’s a papoose, too, a young rip with limbs like stanchions and lungs like Boreas. Dick’s got command of a steamer, too; she’s the *Flamingo*, an apple-bottomed, flake-plated old ballyhoo plying the coast; not such a much, says you, but he’ll get a better one if he sticks by the long-necked bird until her engines tumble through her double-bottoms, which won’t be long, God willing.

“I’m sending this out by Tranter, the pilot. He’s sure to get your steamer. Look out for the boy as you come up. You’ll know his ship, for her red funnel’s long and thin and uncertain, just like a flamingo’s neck.”

I could see that the letter had brightened up the

old man a lot. The news of Dick pleased me more than a little, too, for after all, he had long been a shipmate of mine; but any news of him or his fortune, since he had made that one bad break, was important only in so far as it rendered his dad less melancholy or sad. So my own vision was the keener as I peered ahead for the land, because of the possibility of detecting the wisp of smoke from a lean, unstable funnel, which should gladden the heart of old Captain Basil when he saw it.

But no decrepit *Flamingo* hove in sight. At the semaphore our directors came on board earlier than we expected them and joined in the farewell feed in the saloon along with the passengers. Of the dozen, nine were the sort a sailor likes well to serve: well-groomed, prosperous-looking, keen though kindly of eye, and using speech that carried conviction without any barking or blustering.

Two of the others were not so agreeable at first sight; but that may have been due to the fact that they could be heard criticizing things while they were actually drinking the old man’s cocktails in his own room. But the last of the dozen properly soured the good impression made by the first nine, for he was a rat-faced, mean-appearing little man with a cro’jack eye and nervous fingers, which were ever tweaking at his long nose as if for want of another man’s snout to haul at. I noticed the old man scanning him pretty closely, as if seeking to place him, but he seemed to be in doubt; so I asked the pilot—

“Who’s the little, queer fellow, pilot?”

The pilot smirked a bit, then spat out with emphasis:

“A bad woman’s baby, by gosh! Worst shippin’ man in th’ Colonies!”

“An old-timer?” I grinned. “One of the last of the—?”

“No, sir! Australia don’t breed that strain, though we raise some smudgy devils, too. Ain’t been out here more’n a year or so, but he’s into everything, and some not so clean, either. I heard tell of some bother he was in home; lost a ship, or had one lost or something. I think he nearly got his toes in the trap, too. But you’ll know him well enough before you leave Melbourne. He’s one o’ your owners, ain’t he?”

The pilot’s grin was so utterly knowing, so slyly insinuating, that I could only grin responsively and leave him for the other end of the bridge. In a few minutes the old man came up, having excused

himself as soon as he could escape from the vapory atmosphere of a saloon full of gaseous passengers, bent on patting him on the back with verbal wallops at the end of a fair passage.

I had heard the cheers and shouts through the skylight dome, and I could hear the voices of some of the passengers as they laid the old man aboard and bombarded him with fine compliments and sugared speeches. But you know the sort of thing.

The spokesman hoists himself on his hind legs and spills a mess of words about the perfect trip, the splendid loyalty of the crew, the amazing perfection of the grub—after all hands have spent three-quarters of the voyage grousing at the stewards—and gets it all down to the old man's eternal credit.

The principal stockholder in our ship got up, took a hold of the table, and chipped in with a lot of slumgullion about no steamship firm ever enjoying the services of a better commander than Captain Basil, gentlemen! The health of Captain Basil, ladies and gentlemen, standing!

So it went, and so it ever goes—until the day after, when they haul the old man across the coals because he couldn't get his bunkers in Table Bay in less than two days, and had to pay one day's harbor-dues too much.

It's all very funny to listen to, and we've all got to go through it sooner or later if we quit sail to go into steam—passenger steam, that is. However—

The directors stayed on board while we discharged the Adelaide portion of our cargo, apparently bent on making a yachting trip out of it. Captain Basil worried me a bit, for once he had completed his ship's business it seemed to me that he should have been on board a good deal more, especially with all those keen-eyed directors aboard, and that ratty-faced one in particular. I felt certain Rat-face was marking time on the old man.

But nothing was said, and Captain Basil came on board in good time on sailing day, stepping more briskly, looking less drawn about the eyes than I had seen him since that gray day when he had told me of his wife's death. I had seen something similar in the case of sailors often before; but in this case I could see nothing to indicate a bursting out into liquor, so tried to rest easy as I took my station on the forecastle in pulling out.

LUNCHTIME came just as I reached the bridge after seeing everything clear forward, and I went down for a quick meal before relieving the second mate for his. We were carrying the pilot around with us, he being licensed for Melbourne as well as for Adelaide, and having asked for a passage; so I tried to get him to talk some more about Mr. Rat-face. But he seemed slow to respond, and before I got a peep out of him the skipper and his guests appeared.

First of all the rat-faced one appeared, and even through the greasy glow of good feeding and plenty of red wine his mean face seemed to be a proper ticket for him. The old man followed him on to the bridge, trying to appear happy but evidently making heavy weather of it, and I sidled over to leeward, leaving them to the weather end. But as I passed them I heard Rat-face snap at the skipper:

"No, sir! Once the spasm's worn off this first-steamer business, you'll look for no such darn nonsense from owners as you're seeing now. There's too much soft stuff and hullabaloo, as if no steamer ever arrived out here before. That comes of having old sailing-ship fogies for directors. But I'm here to see that none of the come-day-go-day-God-send-pay-day, go-as-you-please methods of ship-running take root out this side of the world. There's enough of that in London. What I'm telling you goes, too, in your own case, captain. You spent too much time altogether ashore in Adelaide. It'll pass this time, but—"

He stopped, permitting the old man to tack his own conclusion on, and I noticed the skipper gave him just one short, sharp look and muttered something in reply. I couldn't catch the words, nor did I wish to eavesdrop once I had passed them; but I did see Rat-face start, snarl like a mean dog, and leave the place where he was standing in rather a hurry. He came over to me, but I started first and crossed over as he came, keeping my duty-face fixed ahead. There was something about the man that made me shiver, like rubbing the hide of a shark from aft to for'ard with the bare hand.

A covert glance showed me the old man's face grim and hard, but his eyes seemed to twinkle. It may have been glitter, though, which is different. I crossed over again, keeping a steady stride, and Rat-face looked as if he had lost his peeve, for he passed me and rejoined the skipper.

Then, next breath, I got a shock. Rat-face said something I failed to catch again, but I caught the

skipper's reply all right.

"Get off the bridge, sir!" he roared, and shook his fist in the other's face. "D'ye hear me? Owner or no owner, I'm master here, and by the living Kafoozelum if you're not off the bridge in thirty seconds I'll heave you off myself!"

Rat-face stared in stupefaction; then, backing before the menacing figure of the angry old chap, I saw his mean little face snarl up like a monkey-face knot with each strand spun of sheer malice.

"All right, Captain Basil," he grinned, backing down the ladder faster; "make the most of your chance while you are master. But don't count too much on that pension, my friend. You haven't completed this voyage without fault yet!"

He slipped around the social-hall doorway and vanished just as three or four of the more pleasant directors walked up from aft, and for my part I saw no more of him until we picked up Cape Otway some forty hours later. Then he came on deck again, and from that moment until the steamer was in the Rip inside Port Philip, he remained like a figurehead at the rail immediately beneath the bridge. And from there he kept up a running fire of evil mutterings which went to the old man's ears, as they were intended to.

Before the pilot took charge I could hear Captain Basil trying to pump him regarding some hints he had let fall. And I had a bit of curiosity myself about what the ratty one had meant by telling the old man not to make too sure of his pension. The pilot seemed suddenly struck with discretion, but he said with a hesitating laugh:

"There's a yarn going around that Rat-face, as you call him, had to come out here to escape the consequences of losing a steamer in a shady way. His skipper did the job all right, it seems, but some nosey flying-machine spotted the business and blabbed."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the skipper impatiently. "I heard all that at home. But what about the other matter you hinted at? I want to get that without any mistake. If it's true—"

I glanced over the rail at the rat-faced one standing below; he had his head on one side, listening with his lugs wide open, but the pilot lowered his voice and fooled him.

"That's true, too, so far as anybody knows. I don't know what the young chap's name is, but I hear he's the same skipper who lost that steamer back home, and this was the only job he could get.

She's a wild steamer, is the *Flamingo*, and has a name for such. She manages to pass inspection, somehow, God knows how; but she's a shocking old brute, and she'll lose her master his ticket before long. That seems to be the idea. The owner bought her, knowing her record; gave this youngster the mate's berth until his suspension was up, then let him have her. He'll lose her sooner or later; can't help it; then, with his past record—"

"The lad'll be condemned without a hearing!" the old man vehemently broke in. "Perhaps they won't take his ticket from him, but owners won't look at him except cross-eyed!"

"You've hit it," rejoined the pilot, earnestly. "And what's more, by keeping the *Flamingo* on this Melbourne run where she must make this bad entrance twice a voyage, she's as surely fixed for trouble as if dynamite had been laid under her boilers."

"Why, how do you mean?"

"It's like this, captain."

The pilot peered over the rail, watched Rat-face for a moment and drew back, bringing the old man beside the telegraph where I stood.

"This way, skipper; she's fitted with that single rod and bevel steering-gear. You know it, of course. Mighty good, too, in a new ship, or where it's been looked after. But in the *Flamingo* it's worn out. While she lies at a dock or at anchor, it passes all right; the inspectors try it, and it controls perfectly; but when the ship's underway and working like such an old ballyhoo does even in a calm, that gear slips a cog as often as not, and that's no joke if she has to maneuver in the tail of the Rip."

The old man's face was grim and drawn. He was silent for perhaps five minutes; then, with Points Nepean and Lonsdale opening ahead, he relinquished command to the pilot and stationed himself at the port side weather cloth with his binoculars.

WE HAD no passengers other than the shareholders, and they clustered at the fore rail of the bridge-deck as we raised the land. I could hear them chatting; and pretty soon it was made obvious that Rat-face was scarcely of the crowd though with them. He, too, had binoculars, and I believe he stood actually in one spot without moving his feet from that moment until Mud Island was so close he might have jumped on to it.

But once within the Heads there was little time for stargazing. I kept my end of the lookout with every faculty alert, scarcely noticing the old man until I heard him swear gruffly under his breath. Then I followed the direction of his gaze and saw enough to keep me awake properly.

To starboard, apparently coming out through Pinnacle Channel, a red, long-necked smokestack swayed above a wall-sided, rust-marked hull which squattered along without regard for the directness of a straight line, seemingly bent upon laying her old bones upon the flats.

So amazingly erratic were her antics that I could not believe them due to faulty steering-gear. They looked more like deliberate intention to me; and the same thought struck the old man, for I heard him swear again, damning Dick for a dark-souled fool.

Then I stole a glance at Rat-face beneath us, and in doing so came against the skipper on the same errand. We both surprised Rat-face looking upward, and he immediately turned his head toward the *Flamingo* again. There was no doubt as to the identity of that sway-backed, wry-necked old ruin hurrying across our course as we steamed fair for the Symonds Channel ourselves.

Nor was there any doubt about the thoughts running through Rat-face's mean little soul. The *Flamingo* swerved badly even as he met our glances, and as she barely drew clear, with swirling waters tearing at her stern as she got farther into the tidal sweep, triumphant expectancy sat upon Mr. Rat-face like a new hat.

"By Cripes, she'll never make it this trip!" exclaimed the pilot excitedly. "It's a darn shame to send her out!"

"Has she a pilot, think?" The question came in such cold, level tones that I could scarcely realize it was the old man who uttered it. The *Flamingo* was about two hundred fathoms away now, broad on our starboard beam and crossing us. Ours was the duty to give her room, by passing across her stern if necessary; hers the right of way; she had but to hold her course, and—

"Get caught once more, and she's done!" cried Captain Basil, taking the words out of my mouth as if he knew what I was thinking. The men on the deck below were chattering excitedly, glancing up as if to see what we were going to do. Rat-face so far forgot himself as to yell up something about having a care, but somebody beside him told him to keep quiet, and I heard the old man repeat his

question.

"No, captain," the pilot replied absently. "She carries no pilot. Skipper has a piloting license. But look at her!"

No need to tell us. We saw the *Flamingo* yaw abruptly, as if to ram us with malice aforethought, and as she fought to straighten out against the deadly suction of the racing waters, her stern seemed to touch the ground slightly. Slowly, so slowly that it seemed flying straight into the face of destruction, her head came toward us. She was not holding her course, as the law demands; but by her erratic movements put us in peril too if we obeyed the law and held our course.

"One of us is going to strike!" I muttered. Then the skipper did the amazing thing.

"Pilot, I'll take charge. You are relieved," he said.

For ten seconds there was silence; then, as the pilot repeated the order doubtfully, a clamor arose from beneath us, and Rat-face made the greater part of it. The skipper called down the tube for all the steam available, paused but a breath to shove Rat-face back, down the ladder which he had mounted in fury, then took the wheel himself as if utterly to absolve everybody else from blame.

The *Solander* throbbed as she gathered greater speed, and to a hard-over helm circled around close to the *Flamingo's* laboring stern. Then she straightened out and started to overhaul the cripple.

Slowly we drew up until our stem was nosing the *Flamingo's* quarter. Our own propeller was churning up the mud of the flats, and on the *Flamingo's* bridge a harassed officer waved us off excitedly. But our old man carried on as if bent upon steaming clean through the other fellow's bridge. Then we came together with a smash; I heard something go—I think it was our forward boat, which we carried swung out—and as the splinters began to fly the skipper shouted to me to get aft and range out a stern anchor and wire in case of need.

As I hung over the after hatch, directing the work, davits and boats, ventilators and rails, port glasses and wind-chutes began to carry away with one long tearing smash. Furious voices rang out on our decks; others as mad sang out from the *Flamingo* demanding where in some place we green-truck farmers were coming; but I noticed that we held a hard starboard helm, and while the debris rained about our ears we were shoving that long-

necked old ballyhoo out into the fairway, clear of the Rip.

“Keep her going! You’re all right now!” bawled Captain Basil, ignoring a capering figure which shook a heavy fist at him. The long, crazy red funnel, the *Flamingo’s* neck, tottered as two guys parted, and smoke poured out from the torn plates near the fiddle. But the other guys held, the steamer was clear and in deep water, and something seemed to tell her skipper that he had been hauled out of a bad mess by design and not by accident.

I had got the small kedge up and the wire was coming over the hatch-coaming when we struck ourselves, right on the tail of the bank, and listed over until anchor and men fetched away to leeward. The *Flamingo* started to turn clumsily, as if to stand by, but our old man bawled to them to carry on, that we were all right, then had the engines reversed, shifted his helm and waited for results.

For some moments it was doubtful whether we had struck badly or only just clipped the edge of the flats; but as it happened, and I think the old man counted on it, our draft was too deep for us to catch on the real ledge, and we simply grazed the outer overfall of the soft mud. The *Flamingo*, with ten feet less draft, must have slipped right up on to the flats themselves but for the skipper’s amazing exploit.

However, there we were. We slipped off in no time, and the carpenter reported the hull tight as a bottle. But our upperworks and topsides were a sight. Another sight was that group of directors standing under the bridge, surrounding the deposed pilot and bombarding him with questions and assertions. And loudest of all was the acid voice of Rat-face, charging deliberate intention to cast away the *Solander* and threatening all sorts of dire penalties.

The pilot interjected short, snappy scraps of speech which seemed at first to be merely his ineffectual effort to get into the noisy confab; but soon a new note was discernible in the loud denunciations of Rat-face. He swung around and raved at the pilot, who stood his ground stubbornly, blazing out at the angry little man; and presently the other directors demanded that the pilot repeat some charge he had just made. He did so, in spite of Rat-face’s furious interruption; and one of the directors left the group, saying tersely:

“We’ll soon find out! I’ll send a wireless ashore

and have an inquiry cabled. We’ll get a reply long before we hit the dock, gentlemen.”

He went to the radio room, and soon the spark began to crackle overhead. When he rejoined his party Rat-face was standing apart from the rest, who were apparently deep in some story the pilot was spinning them. One glance I took at Rat-face and decided that something the pilot had said or was saying hadn’t agreed with his stomach, and vaguely, for no reason that I knew, I felt that what was bad for Rat-face could not be other than good for Captain Basil. The mere thought was comforting. I turned to business and resumed my neglected lookout from the bridge-end.

I glanced to port, where the *Flamingo* squelched drunkenly to seaward, all her damage failing to add to her general air of decrepitude. On her bridge I saw a figure which my glasses told me was Dick Basil, and as I looked he semaphored with his arms a final question as to our situation. Then the old man ran out to the end of our bridge and semaphored back, roaring vocally as he waved his arms, as if to leave no doubt as to his meaning—

“Keep your head pointing seaward, you young fool, and have that — old booby-trap condemned soon as you get alongside again!”

THEN I watched the skipper as he piloted his steamer up the bay. I had seen gray faces; I saw his own handsome old face look ashy gray twice: when Dick got into trouble and when his old wife pegged out, but I never believed a face could wear the gray pallor that I saw there now.

I could almost read his mind. I could imagine him chewing it all over. Here he was, all but penniless, an old man, too old to start again, casting everything broadcast to the sea for the sake of a boy who had not made any great records as a son.

For there could be no doubt he would lose his ship, his pension, and at least have his certificate suspended for what must have seemed to the owners a mad action. I wanted to speak to him, but his grim expression warned me not to. He would carry his own load and weather his own storm or go under without complaint; that I knew.

I turned away and spotted one of the pleasantest of the directors coming out of the radio room. Even his usually pleasant face wore a grim and forbidding frown, and any hope I had nursed for the old skipper was frozen to death right there.

Beneath the bridge the voices were still

vociferous. The pilot's voice rose at times above the rest, and he seemed angry. That was natural. Any pilot would feel angry at being turned off the bridge only to see a mess such as Captain Basil had made. At least, that's how it struck me.

"Oh well, that's the way it goes," I muttered to myself. "It's the way of the sea. Never a man can tell whether old Ocean will hand him a slap on the back or a slam in the eye!"

In good time we tied up snugly to the railway pier with our wounded side to the gaping crowd ashore. Our passengers stepped down the gangway and stood away off, inspecting us, nodding and shaking heads sagely as they toted up the damage. There was a train at the pier station, and I could see a hot argument afoot between Rat-face and some of the rest; and soon he screamed something hot, shook his fist at the others, and bolted off to catch the train.

Some of them moved after him, but came back when the train started, and at last they all came aboard again and one of them, the one I saw coming from the radio room, knocked on the skipper's door. The old man was dressing to go uptown.

"Who's there?" snapped the old man sharply.

"I want to speak to you, captain," said the director in a voice that seemed to me more pleasant than unpleasant.

"Oh, it's you, eh? Well, come on in and let's get the dirty business over, mister!"

The door was flung wide and I saw the skipper inside, half-dressed, his face set with a sort of dogged obstinacy as if he had resolved to defend his course against all creation.

"I want personally to congratulate you on a piece of fine, daring seamanship, captain," said the man, standing in the doorway. I could see amazement come over the skipper, as anybody looking on might have seen it in me. My ears stuck out like bat-wings for the rest.

"I may say, with one exception, that all of us admired, personally, of course, your splendid act;

and all the more so since I received a reply to a radio message ashore which made clear some things we did not know concerning one of the directors and your son Richard.

"Of course, as directors of the company we shall be forced to take action in this matter different to our actions as individuals. The steamer is rather badly damaged, captain, and it would be unfair to our shareholders to pass it. But I am sent to inform you that one of our members, who need not be named, will be very closely examined concerning his connection with that steamer *Flamingo*, and will certainly find himself *persona non grata* at future board meetings of this firm.

"Also, although we can't say anything at present regarding any action the Board of Inquiry will take about you or your certificate, I may say that your past record will not be lost sight of, and unless you feel you must return to England, you need not worry about finding employment, for we can use a man of your sort out here on the shore-end—a man able to decide quickly and with guts enough to act on the decision. Will you come up to the office with us now?"

I felt as if I'd swallowed a wad of dry oakum, but my feet didn't want to stay on the deck. I sneaked a look down at the open door and twigged the director, standing off a bit with a big cigar, waiting for the skipper to finish dressing; and from time to time, as he potted about in a half-daze, I caught a slant at Captain Basil's face, and it was the face of a mighty proud man, I tell you.

Then, when the pilot, no other, stumped along and stuck a great hairy fist inside the door and speechlessly gripped the old man's hand and wrung it, I seemed to feel a sort of presentiment that a sacrifice had not been made in vain, and that perhaps, after a rat-faced shipping man had answered a few questions yet to be put, there might be brighter days even for Dick Basil and the girl who stood by him when he started out to prove himself a man.