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The History of Life.

I saw an infant in its mother's arms, And left it sleeping. Years passed—I saw a girl with woman's charms, In sorrow weeping. Years passed—I saw a mother with her child, And 'er it languish. Years brought me back—yet through her tears she smiled, In deeper anguish. I left her—years had vanished—I returned, And stood before her; A lamp beside the childless widow burned, Grief's mantle o'er her. In tears I found her whom I left in tears, On God relying; And I returned in after years, And found her dying. An infant first, and then a maiden fair— A wife, a mother— And then a childless widow in despair— Thus met a brother. And thus we met on earth, and thus we part, To meet, oh, never! Till death beholds the spirit leave the heart, To live forever.

TOM BOLLIVAR'S WIFE.

Somebody knocked at the door. And such a night as it was!—the snow and the wind making it dreadful to think of while you sat beside a roaring fire, let alone being out on the dismal flat where the little house braved the fury of the elemental war. It was quiet inside, the loudest sound being the moan of the wind and the hiss of the feathery snowflakes falling down the wide mounded chimney to the faring logs below. A woman was sitting by those flaring logs, mending a little child's frock. The six lit le shoes, in various worn stages, placed before the fire, told a story that oftentimes louder noises than the moan of the wind and the hiss of lost snowflakes on the fire disturbed the room. Sitting there sewing, and with a woman's mind far away from what she was busy at, and yet tied all the stronger here by reason of her wandering thoughts, the woman started—somebody knocked at the door. She arose hurriedly, suppressing a cry, and unlocked and flung the door open. A man's voice in the snowy darkness said, harshly: "Where do Tom Bollivar's wife live at—here?" "Yes," she answered, her hand upon her heart, her eyes peering out in the night; "I am Tom Bollivar's wife. What do you want of me?" "Lass, will you ask me in? I've news of Tom." "You have! Come in, sailor, and tell me what you know." Into the light and warmth stepped a rough, brawny fellow, dressed in the slipshod manner of a sailor upon shore. He shook the snow from his shaggy coat and his beard. Slapping his slouch hat upon his knee, and looking fiercely down into the little woman's face all the time, as though to intimidate her. She returned the look with an odd expression—not frightened, but startled, bewildered—the look that had come to her face when she opened the door and peered out at the man; then from the bewildered look another came, one of understanding, comprehension, and she said to him, calmly: "Sit by the fire; you must be chilled through this gruesome night." The startled look seemed to have flown from her face to his, but he said, more harshly: "I am chilled through, Tom Bollivar's wife, and that ain't no lie, 'cordin' to Scripper. Are ye all alone here, woman?" and glanced about him. "No," she said, pointing to the six worn little shoes. The man looked at them, and then turned his face away from her for an instant. "Now, sailor," she said, "what's this great news of yours?" "Ain't ye afraid o' me, ye a lone woman?" "Bosh! Tell me the news!" "Tom Bollivar's wife, ye frustrate me! But it's right, ye ain't afraid o' me—why should ye be? I—I kinder thought ye might be, though. But—I'm a rough sailor, and—" "Oh, pshaw! hurry up with the news." "I—I don't know how to commence the yarn, wif ye a settin' there so unskereed." "Oh, it is a yarn, eh? Well, wai sailor, till I put some wood on the fire—then fire away." She put the wood on, sat down on the stool in the red light of the blaze and took up the little frock again. "Now," she said, "I'm ready." The man had his mouth open. Despite his bronzed skin and the fire from the logs, something else sent that flush over his face that now suffused it. "Don't ye a little nervous, anyways?" he asked. "Oh, my, no; not at all! I'm steady enough to count the threads while I sit; this band of our Susy's frock. Nervous! Me? Oh, dear!" "Tom Bollivar's wife, I've that to te as'll not make ye brag o' bein' steady. Tom Bollivar's been gone three years and over, eh?" "If you know it, sailor, what do you ask me for? Don't you suppose I can count the months that make three years?"

"When did ye hear from Tom last? He gulped, and his eyes were wrathy. "Six months ago," she said, easily, "he was sailing for Madagascar, and hadn't time to say much." "Tom Bollivar's wife," said the man, solemnly, and suppressing his strange anger, "ye'll not be likely to hear from him agin' in a hurry; he wout writ' soon." "I expect not. There ain't much o' him writing, anyway, seeing I ca.'d answer, not knowing if I'd send my letters to sea that they'd find him." "Lass, he'll never write again no more. Tom won't. There now!" "That's a pity for Tom," she said, biting off her thread, "for he always likes to write a bit about the children. Oh, dear!" The man looked at her in blank amazement. Tom Bollivar's wife, I think I'll commence that yarn I promised." "Lor, sailor; you don't mean to say you ain't been yet? What a tedious one you can be, to be sure! Bless my heart!"

Again the man gulped and gritted his teeth. He went on, madly: "Ye know, six months ago, Tom he sailed around Madagascar, don't ye? Well, I was along wif Tom, I was. Me an' him we was chums; whatsomever he done, that there done I; wheresomever he went, theresomever went I; whensomever he wrote to ye, I seen that there letter, true as gospel. When he was a-thinkin' o' ye, I knowed it. But there's storms at sea, lass—oh, such storms! Why, this here storm outside is a baby squall compared wif them there at sea, wif creakin', an' groanin', an' cussin', an' orderin', an'—theres's storms makes ye think o' home an' your wife an' babbies, an' to look up in the face o' the angry sky an' try to peer out the pity'n' face o' Jesus Christ as walked on the water an' told them waves to be still; storms as makes ye look up at that there sky that seems to be fightin' wif the mad sea that rises up to chinch wif it, an' falls back all shattered an' broke; there's storms as makes a sailor's heart cry for the help o' God for them as he loves, even if the help don't save his own life. Who knowed more about storms nor me an' Tom Bollivar? We'd follered the sea nigh on to twenty year, an' never separated. I can't tell ye, for ye'll feel that bad."

"No, I won't, sailor; upon my word I won't. I like it—I like to hear you talk; it sounds old-fashioned." "Old-fashioned?" "Yes; Tom used to sit where you sit and I sitting in this blessed identical spot, sewing as I do now, and he'd tell his awful yarns and try to make me believe them. You see, I don't swallow all I hear." "Ye don't think I'm a-deceivin' yet do ye?" "I don't think much about it, so you needn't have that in your noddle. Go on, do; for mercy's sake, what ails the man?" Such a look as he gave her! "Well, there comes a storm one day, an' the skipper he comes to us an' says, says he, 'It's all up wif us, as ye see. Try to save yourselves.' The ship had sprung a leak, the whole side was stove in on a rock, an' the pumps was no use, an' we was a goin' down, an'—oh, Tom Bollivar's wife, how kin I say it?—you husband he woudn't desert that there ship as he knowed, man and boy, since him an' the ship was both young."

"That's right in him," she said, shaking her head and settling herself on the stool, a light in her eyes, "that's right in him. I wouldn't own Tom Bollivar if he'd torsook his work because it got troublesome." "Yes—but, lass, Tom he was aboard till the last two timbers hung together. He woudn't go. He got the others off an' helped wif the cargo; but there he staid; a lookin' out in the direction of his home, and a-thinkin' o' ye an' the babbies."

"True for you, sailor," she said, her voice tremulous and almost glad, "and good for Tom Bollivar." "But why don't ye get frustrated! Didn't ye keer nothin' 'bout Tom? Why don't ye get into a real lar terror?" "Oh, I'll get all that way after a bit." Again that dreadful look at her. "Then ye didn't keer nothin' for Tom?" "Now look here, sailor," she said, "you knew Tom powerful well, you say. Didn't Tom ever know of the time and time again when I sat here all alone through the night, after I've tucked the children up in bed, and staid at the window looking out at the raving storm, thinking of my husband? Didn't he ever know at such times that my heart went away over the cruel sea hunting for him—went further than the sea, up to heaven to Him that holds the sea and the storm in the hollow of his hand? Did he ever know how I treasured up every hope, every dream of him, every word he'd ever said—that I searched the children's faces day after day, seeing his likeness there, so that I'd never forget his looks and should know him always, no matter when or how I met him? And didn't he know how, when I was timidder for more than usual, and wanted him more than usual, I'd go to the children and cry: 'Babies, babies, wake with mammy and pray for daddy on the wild, wild seas?'—and how I'd fix their hands, and how we four woud kneel down and say 'Our Father,' and feel sure that the Lord knew what we were asking for and would answer our prayer! Didn't Tom ever know how I must have counted days, then weeks, then months, and at last years, waiting him, waiting, watching for him, ever true in word and thought? Couldn't he tell you that he guessed I loved all sailors for his sake, and that I pitied lonely ones that came to port here and who made friends with me? For I've gone to them and I've said: 'Cheer up, my lads! I'm Tom Bollivar's wife, and he's on the briny deep. Let me help you all I can; if you're sick or lonesome or want little jobs of woman's work done for you, why, come to me. I'm Tom Bollivar's wife and he's on the briny deep! And how often and often has this room been crowded with sailor men! And how they've kissed the children, in case they'd pass Tom's ship, they said, and would seem to take the kisses to him; or they'd kiss 'em because they had little ones of their own far away who must be looking out to see and thinking of their daddies. And I've helped 'em all I could—indeed, indeed I have; and me and the children, why, we've gone down to see their ships off, and I've made the children wave their hands and say 'Good-bye!' right loud, and the men have called, 'Three cheers and a tiger for Tom Bollivar's wife!' and 'God care for the babies!' And I've done all this for love o' Tom. And you don't say that he ever thought of that, only that I didn't care for him if he didn't know me without words, then he didn't love me as I always thought he did."

And she wiped her eyes on the frock she was mending. The man looked at her for a minute, seemed to hold back something he was about to say, but his hands nervously in his pockets and went on: "Well, lass, ye he knowed it. He thought he knowed it for a truth, but—now come the all-frested awful part o' this here gospel-truth yarn."

"Yes, sailor. "Well—now don't ye cry out, an' don't ye flop down—but Tom Bollivar he won't never, never come home no more." She smiled up in his face. "Why?" she simply asked. "Because—he'd drowned dead," he replied. "I don't believe it, sailor." "But I was wif him all the time, I orter know."

"Then why wasn't you drowned, too? If you thought so much of him as you say, why didn't you drown trying to save him, if nothing else?" "I—I well, I was washed ashore. But poor Tom!—oh, lor! poor Tom, he's went."