THE ALAMANCE GLEANER,

VOL 5. GRAHAM, N. C. WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 24 1879 NO.42

THE GLEANER

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY

E. S. PARKER

GRAHAM, N. C.

Rates of Subscription. Postaye Paid :

One Year	$1.50
Six Months	.75
Three Months	.50

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THE DESERTED SHIP.

A Strange Story of the Sea.

BY APPLETON OAKES.

There are days in the existence of all of us whose lives are spent upon the ocean, which circumstances impress upon our hearts as with a brand—periods that write themselves upon our memories in ciotions whose very intensity renders them ever after ineffaceable. Such to me was the nineteenth of December eighteen hundred and—

I at this time commanded the ship, Ariadne, and was bound from New York to Pernambuco. The day was a stormy one and the wind, which for two days previous had been from the north-west and blowing a fine, had backed round to the south-south-west, bringing with it thick and rainy weather. Six bells of the forenoon watch found me lying to under a close-reefed main topsail, and at noon my dead reckoning placed me in 34 deg north and 57 deg. west. For eight and forty hours previous, I had been scudding, and, as the Ariadne was sometimes disposed to be wicked when overdriven, I did not feel much like leaving the deck; but after everything was snug, I descended, and with feelings much relieved by a consciousness that I had done my best, waited for better weather.

Four bells had gone of the afternoon watch, and I was anxiously consulting my barometer to see if it indicated any change, when the mate entered the cabin and announced that there was a dismasted vessel to leeward. I went on deck, and there indistinctly to be seen through the driving mist and rain, was a dismantled hulk, now lifted into view on the summit of some wave, and then lost sight, as she plunged and rolled in the trough of the sea.

My first impulse was to bear for her, but prudence bade me wait till the storm was over.

We watched her with peculiar interest all of that afternoon, and were convinced from the drift of the two vessels, that our relative positions would not alter much through the night. As soon as it was dark, lanterns were hung in the rigging, so that any one on board of her might see that we had discovered her, and was waiting to render assistance should it be needed. But vainly I strained my eyes in the direction I had last seen her to discover, if possible, some answering signal: all was dark, and I walked the deck full of anxious fears. 'What if she were to founder?' I asked myself, 'with those lights of mine still in sight, telling those on board that help is near; yet powerless to save? What if curses at my tardiness and fear should mingle with the cry of those men? Would they not haunt me for evermore? Might there not even then be some turned toward the spot where I was standing that would soon be closed forever? And I treading the deck of my good ship in safety—could not even raise a hand to save!'

I know not what it was that had impressed it on my mind that this ship was foundering, but so fully convinced was I that such was the case, that before morning dawned I had a boat ready for lowering, should she be still in sight.

As the night wore away the gale abated, and at four o'clock in the morning I took the reefs out of the topsails and set the courses, and under this sail made short tacks to windward till daylight, knowing that we should naturally drift more to leeward than she.

The wind had been again hauling slowly round to the westward, and as the first streaks of day light up the eastern sky, we were standing on the starboard tack to the southward. Suddenly, we descried the wreck, about a mile ahead, slowly rising and falling, as the night before, on the heavy swell. We stood on for her, and it was broad daylight before we were within speaking distance. We had been examining her attentively with our glasses, but could see no signs of any living thing on board.

I had my trumpet in my hand, and was standing in the weather waist to speak her as we ranged up under her lee quarter; but she looked such a picture of desolation—so much like a tomb upon the ocean—that I said never a word, and put my trumpet away, determined to board her without previous questioning. We backed our maintopsail and lowered a boat, into which I got and pulled for the wreck. Some of her ports were washed out, and once or twice I thought I saw something like a head cautiously watching us from one of them; but I soon felt convinced that such could not be the case as she had evidently been in her present condition for a long time. Still, before I boarded her, I hailed; but not even an echo came back.

Innumerable shell-fish clung to her sides, and a long, green, silky grass floated from her bends out upon the water, contrasting beautifully with the golden gulf weed which had gathered about her. Her bulwarks were all gone on her port side, and her decks had evidently been swept several times, as not a thing was to be seen on them.

We climbed on board by the main chains, and ordered the boat to pull off on the starboard side, as I could see plainly that the vessel was pitching and might be expected to fall on us at any moment. Some half dozen other open scuttles were opened, and we walked aft and opened the companion way leading to the cabin. As little as I expected to find any living thing on board, I felt a strange thrill of horror at my heart as I stepped down into the cabin, and found myself in the presence of a human being, who, at the sound of our footsteps, had risen from a crouching position in the very centre of the topmost step, slowly raised his head and fixed on us his eyes full upon us. My first impulse was to crush him, and my foot was raised with that intention, but the wild, never stirred, and never once removed his eyes from mine—a sort of fear, at first, of course, we looked and acted so venomous, rather turning his head with the way he moved, and with something like a defiant look in his eye. I wished him away from there, but did not dare to touch him. Finally, in much the same manner that one passes a place where a bull dog is chained, I got by him and descended to the cabin. He turned round to watch me, and still continued to watch me, looking down from the same place.

The water was knee deep in the cabin and slowly growing deeper. When we had got a little accustomed to the light which stole dimly through a bull's eye in the deck, I saw a sight which I shall never forget. In the centre of the cabin stood a table, which was bolted to the deck, and on that table cleats were nailed to answer the same use as the racks which we have now to keep dishes from rolling off. At the head of this table, a large mahogany arm-chair was bolted in the transom, and sitting in this chair, with one arm outstretched and braced against the table in such a way as to keep it stationary, was a human skeleton.

I have a faint recollection of the horror I felt at first sight of it. I remember how long I stood there watching it, and conjuring up all the probable incidents of its fate, with the certain that I was bewildered, and sought vainly many times for the cabin door, but always came back to contemplate that ghastly object. A voice seemed to call me back every time I turned to go, and without being exactly aware of what I did, I took a little bottle of closely written pages and a letter from the table, and placed them in the breast pocket of my coat. The water was now rising fast, and had nearly submerged the table.

I had turned with my sense once more about me, and was on the point of leaving the cabin, when it recollected that I had seen something like a golden chain lying upon that fleshless breast; I went back, and gently unclasping it, found it held a miniature. It had once been pressed to a beating heart, but now, alas! that heart was gone, and this alone remained to show to whom its last pulse stirred.

I hurried to the deck, the rat still occupying the same place, and watching me gloomily as before. I gave him a wide birth in passing, and, going to the gangway hailed my boat. I was just getting into her as she came alongside, when casting my eyes aft, I saw that rat emerge from the companion way, and slowly approach me along the deck. 'Shove off, men!' I cried, and the last thing that I saw was the rat looking at me, as I thought, sadly from one of the port sills.

I gained my vessel, the boat was hoisted up, and we all stood watching the sinking ship. Presently a heavy wave came rolling towards us, and lifted her trembling in the air, and then with a wild plunge, she disappeared and we saw her no more.

I made sail on my vessel and hastened to leave the spot. The first leisure moments that I had devoted to reading the following strange document, which I found on the table of the foundered ship:

To the finder and shall first enter this Cabin.

STRANGER! For I pray to God that none other may never enter here—listen to the words of a dying man, as sure as you expect your last earthly prayer to be heard, see that you fail not to do the little that I ask of you.

'With this letter you will find upon this table a little written book—I am myself, to-day, but shall not be so long—that book will tell you all. I would send it to her, but I fear there are some things there which it were better she should not see. Go to her at once, you will find her address at the bottom of this page.

'It is all true on the honor of a dying man. I am dead, all dead but my soul, and that—that will go to-day. I think it has gone once. In fact, I know it did, but it came back—so—that my bloodless hands should trace these lines.

'Tell her I have seen her often—often upon the shore—I saw her once when she read the paper which said that I was lost. I see her now; but something is wrong. Why do they tell her that I am coming? She knows that I am here! She was with me last night—she gave me water!

'She said that she would come to-day—but, I—I am going—going—not to her. And yet—she sees me—and she smiles—no! seems. But she will come! and if I am not here—will she follow me to where I am going? Where—where is that? Where.

The above was without date or subscription, and was exactly word for word, as it is here written. The little book to which the letter refers I give as follows precisely as I found it:

SHIP MARGARET, AT SEA,
Sept. 20, 1831.

'MY SWEET ELLEN—This is the Sabbath, and the anniversary of the happiest day of my life. I commence these lines particularly for that day, in order that, should you ever see them, you may know that it is remembered as fondly as ever.

'You know I could never write much, unless it was of or to you, but I never dreamed that I should ever have to recount to you so fearful a story as that which you will find written in these pages.

'Let me commence my task, for my hopes are growing fainter, and only thoughts of you keep them up. When even from such memories a cloud darkens over me, and I ask myself bitterly, 'Why was I spared?' It is not the death that I fear at all, sweet Ellen—only the leaving you! But let me be brief and tell you what has brought me to my strait, that then I can talk to you, sweet Ellen, of other things.

'On the 21st of August last, being in the latitude of 50 deg. north, and longitude 36 deg. west, my ship was struck by a hurricane, which took every mast out of her, and almost at the same instant she was boarded by a heavy sea which swept her decks completely, carrying overboard every soul but myself. All hands were on deck at the time, and I had only ascended to the deck to do my share, and should share their fate.

'My God, Ellen, you would have pitied me, could you have seen me, when I came on deck, and first became aware of their fearful fate. It was in vain that I called to the dear parts of the ship—no voice replied. I could not realize that all *all* were gone. I searched in different places—the forecastle, the steerage, even the cabin! Alone all alone! I could not believe it. But the night came, and then it began to dawn upon me.

'I knew that ships were continually passing, and all day long I watched, but in vain. I had no fears of hunger for there was an abundance of provisions on board; one part of the ship sinking, for she was new and strong, and I had tried the pumps often, and found that she made no water; neither did I fear of suffering from thirst for there were two casks of water in the run, out of one of which I have never since been using.

'Every thing, including water-casks, boats and galleys, had been swept from the decks and the only water on board was in the two casks.

'Day after day went by, and still as long as there was a ray of light in the sky, I watched and watched, and hoped, and prayed. Sometimes I would imagine that I saw a sail in the distance, and then I would strain my eyes till hope became almost a certainty, and then I would become blinded with tears of thankfulness and joy. Too soon, however, I would learn that it was only a fleeting cloud on which I had built my hopes.

'I soon learned that it was a hopeless thing to ever think of getting anywhere with the ship. If by any chance the winds drive me a little to the westward I am sure to have a current that will set me back to the eastward again and *vice versa*. I only hope now to fall in with some ship which will take me off.

'A month has gone by since this fearful dispensation, and I have striven, Ellen dear, not to repine at my own fate. I have your miniature continually before my eyes, and I pray to God that his comforting angel may visit me in your form. I nightly beseech him that you may appear to me in my dreams, so that my waking hours may be comforted by my visions of the night. And Ellen, Ellen, you do come; I feel that you are with me always.

'It is a beautiful Sabbath, and I am writing this on the companion way, so that I may watch at the same time.

'A sail! Ellen, a sail! I have been looking at her through my glass. She is a ship standing to the southward, and must come in sight of me. I can see all three of her topgallant-sails. Pray Ellen, pray for me!—pray that she may not go by without seeing me. My God! my God! do not desert me!

'I have got an oar, Ellen—it is the longest thing like a spar on board—I have set the ensign on it, and have lashed it up as high as I can get it to the stump of the mizenmast. They cannot help but see this.

'It is four o'clock now, dearest, of the afternoon; the breeze is light—very light, but the stranger ship, thank God! is drawing nearer and nearer. I can see the heads of her topsails now. They could see me easily from aloft on board of her, and perhaps they do, as she seems to be standing directly for me. I have been looking carefully with my glass to see if I could make out any one aloft on board of her but cannot. I fear my eyo sight is impaired from too much use of late.

'It is five o'clock, Ellen, love, and calm. The stranger ship is still distant, but I can see the second reefs of her topsails. Pray, Ellen—pray for a little breeze to bring her a short distance more, so that they may see my flag.

'It is six o'clock, my poor Ellen, and darkness is coming on. I can scarcely see the stranger ship, although she is still in the same place, and it is still calm. Would to God that it might continue, so till to-morrow! If a breeze should spring up in the night, the ship would pass without seeing me. Pray, Ellen, pray for poor dear Ellen for a calm.

'I have hauled my ensign down, and have set a lantern in its place. I feel light airs from the north-west, and fear a breeze.

'It is twelve o'clock, Ellen dear, and blowing freshly from the north-west. As soon as the breeze set in, I commenced firing muskets and bursting powder, but as yet have seen nothing of the ship. My God! my God! do not let her pass me.

'It is half-past one o'clock now, love, and the breeze has died away to a gale. I am sailed to the companionway, as almost every wave makes a complete breach over my poor ship. Hope is growing fainter, and I long for, and yet almost fear to see, the breaking day.

'The daylight has come, my poor dear darling, of the 21st of September. I have not looked yet—I dare not look. God strengthen me!

'I have looked. Ellen, she is gone. The stranger ship has gone on her way, and left me to my fate. Now pray, Ellen, for my hopes are all crushed down. I did not dare to avow even to myself that they were so high and fervent, never for a moment did I suffer myself to think that that ship would not go by. But she is gone, Ellen and I have nothing left but thoughts of you.

'*Monday, September 26.*—I have been ill, dear Ellen, for nearly a week, and hardly expect to recover. Yesterday I felt so much better that I thought I felt it coming on, so I got a pitcher of water and some biscuit, and placed them beside my berth, and well for me I did so, as my strength has not yet returned so as to enable me to get out. I believe my senses, too, all left me.

'I dare not write it as a reality, but think on the day when I was the week that I was boarded by a boat. I know it was then, or some other time, for I heard the stroke of the oars as she came along side; I heard the tread of feet upon the deck, and strange voices sounded in my ears, as of people conversing near me. And another strange circumstance for which I cannot account, the ship's log book was lying upon the table when I was first taken sick, and is now nowhere to be found.

'Can people have been in the cabin, while I was lying between life and death without knowing that I was there?

'Ellen, I know not what I have done to require so fearful a retribution! Were it not for you, I feel that I could not—that I should not last. For thirty eight days I have dwelt alone; and you know how fearful solitude always was to me. If you recollect when we first moved to our new house on the Vineyard, the Summer that I remained at home, if you chanced to be absent for a day you would always come back and find me sad. Companionship was ever one of the most urgent needs of my existence, and now from this I am completely debarred.

'I have some books on board, but I cannot read; my mind refuses to withdraw itself from the burning thoughts that are fast destroying its once calm balance. I could not write were it not to you! I have kept a record of the time, through sickness and everything else, up to to-day; and now it has become so much a matter of habit with me, that I believe if I should go mad—which God forefend!—I should still mechanically, each morning mark the day in the almanac.

'I have two or three times, my poor Ellen, made up my mind to say nothing of what I am about to relate, lest that you should think that my mind had given way at length to childish idiocy. But I beg of you, my dear love, to weigh every word of what I now write, and ask yourself if a disorganized mind could tell so strange thing in so clear and coherent a manner.

'As I said before, when I felt my sickness approaching, I placed some bread and water within my reach upon the transom; but the fever parched my mouth so, that when I really needed it I could not eat the bread, and nothing passed my lips for nearly the whole time but a little water. The rats would gather upon the transom, and sometimes approach and look into my berth, wholly undisturbed by my presence. And several times, as if aware of my situation, when seeking some of their lurking places, they would cross deliberately over me. Some stories which I had read of their attacking human beings worked upon my mind, and two or three times when I thought they appeared menacing, I nerved myself for a desperate encounter, and prayed to God not to let me die so fearful a death. Even then, when I wished to die, the thought of dying so was horrible.

'I think it was on the third day of my sickness; I was perfectly conscious, and was watching the rats as they chased one another about the transom. Suddenly, I observed a kind of panic among them, and they all fled and huddled themselves up in a corner, squirming and each endeavoring to get under the other. It was not the fear that has inspired among them by the approach of a human being, nor yet of a cat. They acted as I had never seen them before, and I half raised myself on my elbow to observe the cause.

'I heard a sound as of something descending the companion way, and instantly after an enormous rat, larger by three fold than any one of them, slowly entered the cabin, and stood looking about him. Presently with the same deliberate movement he jumped upon the table and leaped to the transom, and approached the frightened crowd who were cowering in the corner. They seemed to be powerless from fear, and he deliberately seized some fifteen or six of them in his teeth and took them lifeless upon the floor before the rest fled. Having accomplished this feat he crept near the edge of the transom by my berth, and stretching himself out like a dog, with his head between his fore paws, lay there watching me. I detected an joyful and saucy gleam in his eye, half fearing that he would resent my fear, he did not, and on the contrary in a grave sort of way, seemed pleased at the attention, since then, he has never left me but once, and I judged on this occasion, from the sound, he was in different parts of the vessel that he was engaged in a fresh massacre of his kind.

'Ellen, love, I know not how long this has since broken upon me, but I have been coming to the conclusion that we are the only things living on the vessel. Ellen, love, I have been on deck many times to-day, looking for a sail, but nothing, nothing have I seen. Good night, my sweet dear, Ellen! good night!

October——I have lost the day, dear Ellen, but I think it is about two weeks since I wrote the last. On the day after, I think it was, a strong breeze sprang up from the northeast, and I thought, for the time, that I had drifted into the north east trades. I went to work and got up a spare top gallant sail, and by lashing oars together, succeed in getting it set forward. I then took the wheel and kept her away west-south-west, going about two knots, and hoping to reach some of the West India Islands or fall in with some homeward bound vessel from South America.

I do not know how many suns I saw while I stood at that wheel, but they were four or five, and at last I do not think I knew which was in the heavens, the moon which was at its full or the sun. The weather was warm in the day time and at night I had a blanket which I threw over my shoulders. Uncle Roland took up his quarters on the binnacle, and never left me—watching me all day in a kindly compassionate way.

At length nature could endure it no longer; and I sank exhausted to the deck.

I know not how long I remained where I had fallen, whether hours only, or days had been numbered while I slept, I only know that I awoke as one from a long sleep.

I found myself covered with the blanket; no one but Uncle Roland could have done this. I jumped to my feet, and found my limbs so paralyzed that I could hardly stand. I grasped the binnacle for support, and Uncle Roland came and rubbed his wet head against my hand. I looked about me; the rain was falling in torrents, and my clothes were completely saturated.

A sou'wester had set in while I slept and swept my poor jury mast, sail and all, away, and the ship was now drifting rapidly away to the northeast, thus losing to me all that I had suffered so much to gain.

Sick at heart and feeble, I crept away to the cabin, Uncle Roland following me slowly down the stairs. A dizziness comes over me, dear Ellen, and I can write no more.

Another day.—I think I was writing to you about a storm, my love! It is all

Continued on fourth page.