

What Road Goeth He?

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A smoky lantern, suspended from the roof by a piece of spun-yarn, described intricate curves in the obscurity of the forecastle. Black chasms gaped on every side. Oil-skins and sodden clothing slapped against the walls. The air was impure, saturated with moisture, and vibrant with the muffled roar of the storm outside. A thin sheet of water washed over the floor as the ship rolled.

A sea-chest broke from its lashings, and carried away to leeward. The deck rose, and the chest slipped aft, amid a raffle of wet boots and sou'westers; it sank, and the heavy chest shot forward across the slippery floor, to fetch up sharply against one of the bunks. Again the ship rolled, and the chest glided to leeward. Mutterings came from the chasms, and pale faces, distorted with yawns, appeared above the bunk boards. The owner of the chest awoke and crept stiffly from his bunk; the ship rolled, the water splashed about his feet, and the chest swooped toward him. He made it fast and climbed into his bunk again without drying his

feet. The faces had disappeared. The ship rose and fell, the lantern swung, the hanging clothes bulged and flattened and bulged again; gloomy shadows wavered and seemed ever threatening to advance from the walls. The sound of the storm outside was dull and persistent.

Boom! A solemn stroke of the bell on the fore-castle-head woke one of the sleepers. He sat up, expectant, for a moment, and then sank back. As he did so the door slid open, the storm bellowed as a man stepped through, and was deadened again as he forced the door to behind him. He vanished into the starboard fore-castle, and reappeared with a short pipe that gurgled as he smoked. He seated himself on a chest, and the man who had awakened looked down on him.

„What time is it?” he asked.

The smoker looked up. „That you, Bill? It’s gone six bells.“

The other grumbled. „I heard one bell from the fo’c’s’le-head.”

„She rolled bad just now. Tolloed the bell herself.“

„Humph!” said the man in the bunk thoughtfully.

„Shut up!” called a voice. „I want to sleep.”

Bill lowered his voice. „How’s the weather?” he inquired, looking down anxiously at the smoker’s glistening oilskins.

„Heavy. The Old Man hain’t left the deck for a minute.”

After that the man in the bunk could not sleep again. He heard the other leave the fore-castle, and swear as the flying spray struck his face; he heard a great body of water come over the bows and wash aft; he heard the heavy breathing about him. He lay in his clothing (it was wet and his blankets were wet—„Warm wet, anyhow,” he thought), and shivered at the sound of the water washing about in the darkness below him, and at the thought of the weather outside. He counted the minutes grudgingly, and lay dreading the sound of the opening door. Wide-eyed, he watched the lantern swinging in the gloom, the pendulous clothing on the wall, the starting shadows, until some one beat frantically on the door, and, staggering into the fore-castle, turned up the light and called the watch.

„A-a-all hands! Eight bells there! D’ye hear the news, you port watch? Eight bells there!”

Men stirred and yawned. Tired men kicked off blankets and sat up, swearing. Cramped men eased themselves from their bunks, and pulled on sodden boots. They stumbled about the heaving deck, cursing their cold oilskins, cursing the ship, cursing the sea.

„Come, shake a leg, bullies!” continued the inexorable voice. „Weather bad an’ goin’ to be worse! Get a move on you, or the mate’ll be for’ard with a belayin’-pin!”

„Anything up?” inquired one.

„Heard the Old Man tell the mate to take in the fore-lower tops’l.”

Thereupon they fell anew to cursing the captain, his seamanship, and, above all, his want of knowledge of the weather.

The watch went out into the tumult of the night, out into a chaos of smashing seas and howling wind, out into a furious abyss of darkness and uproar.

They collided blindly with other men; they called out angrily. Great seas crashed over the bulwarks and smothered them; invisible torrents poured off the fore-castle-head and washed aft, beating them down, stunning them. From

somewhere out of the darkness came the voice of the mate, bawling orders. They felt for the clewlines, making the most of the intervals between the boarding seas. High above them they knew a man was making his way aloft in the darkness to ease up the chain sheets. They hauled and swore, arching their backs against the seas that tore at their gripping fingers and washed their feet from under them. And always the mate's voice sounded, cheerful, threatening, dauntless. Then up into the black night, ratline by ratline, panting, clutching, and climbing; out upon the invisible yard, along invisible foot-ropes, grasping invisible jack-stays; swaying in the darkness, spat upon by the storm, beating the stiff canvas with bleeding hands; unheeding the tumult of the sea, the pounding wind, the lurching yard; with no thought save for the mate's voice below, and the lashing canvas under their hands. From the foretop, as they descended, they looked far down on the narrow hull, rolling, pitching, and shivering, beneath them. Out from the darkness pale seas rushed, roaring, toward the ship; and, roaring, passed to leeward. Seething masses of water rose over the bows, smashed down on the deck, and surged aft, forward, and over the side. Hissing foam creamed about the lee chains; vicious rain-squalls drove across the flooded decks; the cold was penetrating.

In the empty forecabin the lantern swung, the shadows rose and crouched, the voice of the storm sounded deep and steady. Ends of blankets dangled from the deserted bunks and flicked at the murmuring water on the floor. The deck soared and swooped, soared and swooped, minute after minute, hour after hour, and still the lantern swung, and the shadows moved and waited.

The door slid back, the storm bellowed, and three men staggered into the forecabin, bearing another. They laid him awkwardly in one of the lower bunks, and stood for a moment looking down at him. The ship rolled, and the shadows on the wall started as if they, too, would gather around that gloomy berth. Again the deck dropped, the shadows retreated, and the three men turned and left the forecabin.

The man in the bunk lay inert, as they had left him. His body sagged lumpishly to the roll of the ship. A dark stain appeared and spread slowly on the thin pillow.

A little later another man entered. He came to the edge of the bunk and gazed for a few minutes, then deliberately removed his dripping oilskin coat and sou'wester. The man in the bunk began to moan, and the other leaned over him. The moans continued, and the watcher sat down on a chest beside the bunk. Soon the sufferer's eyes opened and he spoke.

„What time is it?“ he asked.

„Lie quiet, Bill,“ the other cautioned. „It's gone six bells.“

„My head hurts,“ complained Bill. He tried to raise it, and moaned a little.

The elder man placed a hand gently on his shoulder. „Don't you worry,“ he said. „You got hurted a little when the spar carried away. That's all.“

„Spar!“ repeated Bill, and pondered. „What watch is it?“

„Middle watch.“

„I thought I been on deck,“ said Bill. „It was blowin'.“ His hands were groping about. „Who bandaged my head?“

„The steward. They carried ye down into the cabin, first. Want a drink, Bill?“

Bill assented, and the other, bracing himself against the chest, lifted the injured man's head slightly and he drank.

„I may as well go to sleep,” he said, and closed his eyes. Instantly he reopened them. „Why ain’t you on deck, Jansen?” he asked.

„The Old Man sent me in to sit by you.” Jansen fingered his long gray beard, and the bright eyes under the shaggy brows blinked uneasily. „You see, it's this way, Bill. You was hurt, an’ the Old Man thought mebbe you’d want something.” He looked at the swinging lantern as if seeking inspiration. „Anything I can do for ye, Bill?” he asked at last.

The other stirred. „I can’t move me legs,” he complained.

„Mebbe the spar hurt your back a little,” suggested Jansen timidly. „You remember, don’t ye, Bill?”

Again the injured man pondered. „Me back’s broke?” he said finally, and Jansen nodded.

„Me back’s broke, an’ me head’s broke,” Bill went on, „an’ there’s a pain in me side like Dago knives.”

„D’ye want another drink?” asked Jansen.

„It’s eight bells, an’ my watch below for me,” said Bill; and again Jansen nodded.

Silence fell. The muffled roar of the storm, the plunging fore-castle, the waiting man on the chest, the dim light, the swinging lantern, the pendulous clothing, and the shadows, all seemed accessory to the great event about to take place.

„The pain in me side is awful!” groaned Bill; and Jansen shivered.

„The Old Man said he’d come for’ard as soon as he could leave the poop,” he said, as if hoping there might be comfort in the thought.

„I don’t need him,” gasped the sufferer. „I’m goin’, I think.”

Old Jansen folded his hands, and repeated the Lord’s Prayer. Then he leaned forward. „Is—is there anybody ashore you’d want me to write to?” he asked.

„No,” answered Bill between his moans. „Me mother’s dead, an’ there’s nobody else that matters. I never was no good to any of ’em.”

After a time the moans ceased. A great sea boomed on the deck outside, and washed aft. The lantern swung violently, and the ship’s bell tolled. Jansen looked into the bunk; Bill’s eyes were fixed on him.

„I want to ask you, Jansen,” he said in a low voice. „D’ye think there is any chance for me?”

The other hesitated. „I—I’m afraid not,” he stammered.

„I don’t mean a chance to live,” explained Bill. „I mean, d’ye think I’ve got to go to hell?”

Jansen’s tone grew positive. „No,” he said, „I don’t.”

„I wisht there was a parson here,” muttered the man in the bunk. „There used to be a old chap that come regular to the Sailors’ Home—gray whiskers, he had, an’ a long coat—I wisht he was here. He’d tell me.”

The man on the chest listened, his elbows on his knees, his head on his hands.

„I shook hands with him many a time,” continued Bill. „He’d tell me—“

Jansen started, and looked up. His bright, deep-set eyes had taken on a look intent, glowing.

„Shall I read to ye a bit?” he asked. „I’ve got a book—it might strike ye—now.”

„All right,” said Bill indifferently.

The old man crossed the fore-castle, opened his chest, and, delving deep into its contents, brought forth a small, thin book.

It had seen much usage; the binding was broken, the leaves were stained and torn. The old man handled it tenderly. He held it high before him that the light from the swinging lantern might fall upon the text, and read stumblingly, pausing when the light swung too far from him, and making grotesque blunders over some of the long words.

„What is that book?“ asked Bill after a time. „It ain't the Bible?“

„No,“ said Jansen. „It ain't the Bible.“

„Then who is it says them things?“ demanded Bill. „He talks like he was Everything.“

Jansen lowered the book. „I don't exactly understand what they call him,“ he answered, „they give him so many names. But I reckon nobody but God talks like that, whatever they call him.“

„Where did you get it? the book, I mean,“ persisted Bill.

„I was cleanin' out a passenger's cabin, two voyages back, an' I found it under the bunk. I've been readin' it ever since. It's all full o' strange, forrin names, worse'n the ones in the Bible.“

„Well, neither of 'em stands to help me much,“ commented Bill. „I ain't never been good. I've been a sailor-man. That book“—he broke off to groan as the ship rolled heavily, but resumed—„that book says same as the Bible, that a man's got to be pious an' do good an' have faith, an' all that, else he don't have no show at all.“

„Listen!“ said Jansen. He turned the pages, and read a few lines as impressively as he could.

„That sounds easy,“ said Bill. „But I ought to ha' knowed about that before. It's no good desirin' anything now. It's too late. He'd know I was doin' it just to save my own skin—my soul, I mean.“

„Bill,“ said Jansen. „I'm goin' to ask you something.“ He closed the little book over one finger, and leaned toward the bunk. „Do you remember how you come to be hurted this way?“

„The spare spar that was lashed to starboard fetched loose, an' I tried to stop it,“ answered Bill readily. „I see it comin'.“

„Why did you try to stop it?“

„Well, a big sea had just washed the Old Man down in the lee scuppers, an' if the spar had struck him it would ha' killed him.“

„It's killed you, Bill,“ said Jansen. „Didn't you think o' that?“

„Me!“ exclaimed Bill scornfully. „Who's me?“

„But why did you want to save his life?“ insisted Jansen.

„The ship 'ud stand a likely chance in a blow like this without a skipper, wouldn't she?“

„Then you thought—“

„Thought nothin'! There was no time to think. I see the spar comin' an' I says, *Blazes! That'll kill the skipper!* an' I tried to stop it.“

„You ain't sorry you did it?“

„Sorry nothin. What's done's done.“

„See here, Bill,“ said old Jansen earnestly. „I'll tell you what you did. You did your duty! An' you laid down your life for another. You saved the captain's life, an'

mebbe the ship, an' all our lives through him. An' you did it without thought o' reward. Don't you s'pose you'll get a little credit for that?"

„I'm thinkin'," said Bill. He lay silent for a minute. „Read that again," he requested.

Old Jansen did so, and after a pause he added, „Now, if I was you I wouldn't worry no more about hell. Just make your mind as easy as you can. That's a better way to go."

„I've got that," said Bill. „It's all right. Go on; read to me some more."

Jansen lifted the book and resumed his reading. He turned the pages frequently, choosing passages with which he was familiar. The other moaned at intervals. With every roll of the ship, water plashed faintly underneath the bunks. The lantern swung unwearied, and sodden clothing slapped against the walls. Dark shadows rose and stooped and rose again as if longing and afraid to peer into the narrow berth. The sound of the storm outside was grave and insistent.

The reader came to the end of a passage, and laid the book on his knee. Suddenly he realized that the moans had ceased. He leaned over and looked at the man in the bunk. He was dead.

Old Jansen sat motionless, deep in thought. At length he reopened the little book, and read once more the lines which he had already repeated at the dying man's request:

He is not lost, thou son of Prithâ! No!
Nor earth, nor heaven is forfeit, even for him,
Because no heart that holds one right desire
Treadeth the road of loss!

He closed the book and again meditated. Later, he rose, replaced the book in his chest, drew the dead man's blanket over his face, and went out on deck.

