

A Sea Tangle.

"Women are like ships," said Sim Mole, "they want a strong man to take the best that is in them out."

"Mebbe, but often a man needs a good strong ship to make him an able seaman", said Red McLeod as he went on splitting No sound but the r-rip, r-rip of the flat knife through the soft white flesh of the fish, and the splash as they fell from the table into the tub of brine.

A hot sun beat down unmercifully on the waste of sand, and the heat fairly sizzled from the dried shingled roofs of the low lying shacks along the line of beach. The men sweated as they worked, and now and then stopped to bathe their wrists in the cool sea water.

Margot Care now—"began Sim," she needs—"

"Margot Care needs no strong man to steady her," broke in Red, "but she would brace a man and make him a kind home," and the quick eyes fired under their shelter of red-bushy brows, and the breath of the little man came fast—for that was truly a gallant speech and an effort for Red, who was blessed with a big heart, but to whom words came slowly.

Sim Mole cut strong black tobacco from a plug and ground it between his great hardened palms before answering.

A hard keen fisherman was Mole and not of an unkindly heart, but for his twenty odd years in the little fishing settlement the love or hate of a woman had never entered his life, and he disdained everything effeminate. So that this sudden sentiment in his old mate was confusing, and he puzzled for a minute, fighting an old suspicion, with the fear that he might wrong old Red in thinking that he had a liking for the little widow.

"Dang it now, he's riled," he said to himself, and aloud, "there

be those as says that Skipper Rudd would make a good man for Margot.

There's many a one that would make a good man for Margot she lives alone, and need often lives with her," replied Red.

Sim puffed great clouds of blue smoke volubly and by way of diversion from a topic better left alone, said.

"There be Rudd now", as a green punt slowly nosed around the end of the break-water and began to beat up the channel in the light off-shore wind.

"He looks low to the water," said Red," must a struck fish outside. And far up on the gray sands Margot Care sat mending nets, and her children played through the tall sparse grasses nearby. The sun slipping westward flashed in her yet black hair, and her brown arms moved deftly back and forth untiringly. Nets in the summer, and great socks and mitts in the winter, and plenty of fish, for there was not a man in Luck Harbor who would not share his last quintal with Margot. So had she lived since the ill-fated Santa Barbara,—Master, John Care—Master John Care,—had gone down off the South American coast with all on board, and for five years life had been narrow and pinching for her, and on Sundays she still wore the sober black that marked her first mourning for John Care. And she encouraged no man, yet there were countless willing hands to carry her water-pails, and cut her wood,—and none more willing than Red McLeod.

But as the years passed, loneliness crept into her heart, and nights when the Great North Wind drove down from the wind-swept Atlantic on the little harbor, and the sea thundered along the shoreline, she remembered the companionship of John Care, tall and dark, fearless driver of ships and men, yet withal gentle and loving to the mother of his children, and she longed to stand on the cliffs with the other women, their eyes straining seaward, on the gray days of mist and storm, or the dark nights when the swift fog often caught the belated fleet straggling homeward.

And then John Rudd came,—Skipper Rudd they called him—came sailing into the quiet of the bay one evening, with an

estate of a dunnage bag and two tubs of set-lines. He found small welcome at first amongst them, but when they saw him handle a boat in a sea, and deftly splice an oar to a broken boom, and then beat home single handed in the teeth of a nasty southerly, he won their admiration at least.

Came a night when Red McLeod's boat broached and filled on the bar, when Rudd put out alone in a dory and picked him off, he had at last established one firm friendship.

Gentle in manner and clean-spoken, yet schooled in the lore of fish and fishermen, he soon found those who were glad to listen to him, and often at night in the little garret above the fish-stage strange tales were told in a simple convincing way in the lamp-light—, that folks wondered at this man who had come into their lives.

Here in the quieter hours and alone, within sound of the ceaseless wash of the sea, and the great eye of the lighthouse blinking down on him at night, John Rudd with some unknown grief locked away in his heart, found solace in the wind, the stars and the sky,—in the Great Silent Peace of this seaward waste; put out with the fleet over the sea-trail of many a red sunrise, and buffeted home in the twilight against contrary wind and tide.

So the days passed and he learned the lure of the fish, and the sound of the off-shore bottom, catching and curing with the best of them, and they hailed him for a hardy man.

And like Margot, a loneliness had crept into his life,— a loneliness for the smoothing hand of a woman in his affairs, and evening often found him sitting at the door of her cottage listening to her as she lilted old-time tunes for her children, bits of old chanteys and quaint sea-songs, as the drift-wood fire died in wondrous coloring on the stone hearth.

Now Margot often spoke of John Care, who had sailed on his new ship never to return, and Rudd told of the very coast where the Barbara perished, and the dangers of the tropical seas which he seemed to know well.

The long northern twilight slowly dying above the ocean,

lamps began to shine in the little hamlet, and Rudd walking home under the deep, black star-pointed sky in the face of the cool night wind must have held a thought of the little widow in his heart. So the days grew into a year, and skipper Rudd had a name that was honored by the people, and the door of his gift-house was always open to the needy and poor, that he never held but little for himself. His word was law and his friendship golden.

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A brassy sunset glared above the line of red sand-hills, and the wind swinging into the north-east began to drive scuds of low gray clouds across the sky. Wind surely, for the loons had been calling all day, and faint whirl-winds of sand began to eddy along the sweep of open beach. Up this waste Sim Mole and Red McLeod lumbered in their heavy sea-togs chancing to meet Margot Care and her water-pails.

"I'll carry ye the water," said Red relieving Margot of the pails, "Sim will make the fire in our shack," and he brusquely walked off.

"Such a man" said Margot, and when Red returned she had the table laid for him with hot bannock and buttermilk.

"It's rare bannock ye make," said Red "m' and it's for a man ye should be baking."

"And are ye not a man," said Margot.

"I am that," said Red.

"Well, ye're eatin my bannock"—this quickly from Margot, and Red almost choking in confusion, his heart hammering wildly, could say no further of what was foremost in his mind, and simply remarked as he hastened to get out in the open.

"It'll blow hard afore morning, Margot, ye'll let me know if ye need anything."

And blow hard it did. Seldom was there a wilder night along the coast. The wind came in strongly, piling a terrible sea before it, breaking and thundering across the shoals. Squalls of rain and hail rattled over the roofs and against the windows, and the very

houses rocked in the gale, that carried the whippings of salt spray far inland. But snug in his bed under the low rafters Red McLeod vowed to speak to Margot before many days should pass of his uneasily in his sleep with the breaking of the storm and suddenly waking he watched from his window the light in Margot Care's cottage where she still watched with her children.

For two days it blew so that the fishermen worked ceaselessly with no more than time for eating, in securing their fish and boats from the ravages of the storm. On the third morning the sun broke through and the wind dying out, the top fell off the sea somewhat, and noon found anxious men putting out in search of gear, and from the crest of the Red Hill, the women watched them go in their rocking boats. Skipper Rudd was the last and his dark terra cotta colored sail swung giddily as he headed off shore. Far and wide they were spread along the out-side ground, as they cruised about in search of trawls and nets, and a long day found the sun hidden again and a fog bank hanging in the east. Though scarce an air of wind, a slow swell began to heave in, and the more cautious of the fleet turned homeward. An out-setting tide raised a nasty chop in the channel entrance and already it was beginning to break in the Herring Gully. Dark found Red and old Sim feeling their way carefully in the now thickening mist, through the bad running sea in the channel. Shipping some water outside they were running logey, so that another bad one might fill them, and it was with great relief that Red felt the little boat slipping into the quieter waters of the harbor. Lanterns shone yellow in the dusk on the beach, and anxious men and women crowded around them when they landed.

"Had they seen Rudd? Was he not in? No. Then he must have been caught in the fog, and the heart of Red sank, for he did not want to think of what the night might bring. Watching men straining and listening beat up and down the wild stretch of shore, and great fires of brush were kindled on the Hill.

Above the roar of the breakers the clang of the bell-buoy

sounded afar off through the dense gloom, and not a breath of wind stirred in the stillness of the sky.

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The gray mist walled in thicker and thicker, and skipper Rudd intent on the mending of a broken backline which he had been lucky enough to catch, failed to notice the slow-rising sea and the quick shutting in of the fog. Standing erect to straighten his tired back he saw that the sea was capping up somewhat, and that the plunging of his little craft was shorter and dizzier. This was menacing, and at once he hoisted his mainsail, and stopped a moment to locate his situation before casting off.

The land was completely lost to view, and there was not a mark to be seen. Yet he knew his course, and that the tide was setting westward, so by keeping the sea which was surely working landwards, well after him, and steering a little east of south, he should make a good run for the Hole in the Sand.

He cast off the backline now tight as a fiddle string and it fell zipping down with a twang into the green depths of water. Rudd stared ahead and swung his stern into the run of the sea. There was not a breath of wind. The big spread of sail hung loosely, noisily slatting from side to side with the yawing of the creaking boom. The heavy mist pearly into a cold dew, dripping, dripping, constantly from every bit of rigging, and clinging with a dank chill to Rudd's jacket. No sound in all this stillness but the slosh of the boat as it lurched from sea to sea and the straining of the timbers as she fell into the trough of it. Far ahead Rudd thought he could hear the deadened boom of breakers, and he prayed for wind. The sound of a hail through the fog would have cheered him, even the crying of a gull, but no voice reached him, no companion boat loomed up in the shadows to hail, and he knew now that he must be the last of the fleet.

A faint cat's-paw of wind rustled behind him, and he saw with a thrill of joy, the big mainsail fill with the heft of it.

Here was wind and he hoped for more of it, that it would

blow every dreg of fog from the water and give a man a fighting chance. Wind and sea-room were nothing to John Rudd, but fog and sea he feared with a great dread.

For an hour he had been slipping and slipping harborwards and his hands had become chilled in their wet woolen mittens, and he vigorously swung them, turn about against the washboard.

Suddenly he felt, rather than saw, that the sea had grown shorter and choppier, and that there must be shoaler water ahead, for the long outside roll was surely flattening out. In the now early dark he peered into the monotony of gloom for a bit of land to take shape. A huge sea capped up and broke dangerously near, and there was a frothing and yeasting of water all around him. The Herring Gully he thought, and knew that it must be worse on the bar.

At once he felt for the thole-pins, putting them securely in place and freed the long spruce oars for immediate use, for the wind might die any time, and almost as quickly as the thought, the main-sail jibed with the sudden fall of a sea, spilling the last breath from it, and hung loose and slatting to the spar.

The wind had died and with it much of Rudd's hope. Quickly he fastened a stout rope to the after thwart and tied it firmly to his wrist, and as he worked feverishly, the welcome clang off the bell-buoy sounded somewhere near.

"I am a little east," thought Rudd, and listened again, and again the seeming distant clang sounded out.

"No, that is more ahead this time," and he steadied the boat to the sea a little more. He rowed with one hand now, and he had to watch on all sides, for it was beginning to break everywhere. If he could but find the entrance to the channel or once glimpse the fairway buoy he would chance the rest, but there was nothing, nothing, but the gray denseness of the night that seemed to strangle with its very depression. The bell sounded nearer and nearer, yet that might be so, and still the reefs between.

At once he felt a light breath on his cheek, a mere promise of wind.

"Wind, wind, for the love of God wind," prayed Rudd, but

it was no more to the sail than the kiss of it to his cheek.

And Rudd feared at last, feared with the seldom fear in his life, and countless pictures flashed on the screen of his mind. He knew that not so far now, eager and anxious men and women too, watched for him but could give him no aid, and a great love welled up in his heart at the thought of the kind folk who had taken him into their life. Thought too, of Margot Care waiting in her little cottage under the hill, and the children he had grown to love.

There was a mad growl of a boiling sea behind, and Rudd watching over his shoulder saw it break not far astern. This was followed by another, and another, in quick succession, and the arms of the lone man ached as he steadied the boat. He could hear the clanging of the bell now distinctly, and knew that he had just missed the reef by a hair, for he could see the churn of yellow breakers as he passed. He rowed fiercely, watching and steering at the same time. Water sheeted over him and slapped him wickedly in the face. His eyes burned with the salt spray that at times he could scarcely see. He felt the lift and the pound of the boat in the short chop with anxiety. Black night and not a gleam of light.

He heard the ringing of the bell almost in his ear, and a swaying form of trestle loomed alongside for a minute and was as quickly swallowed up in gloom. Suddenly Rudd felt a warning lift, and as soon a mighty mass of white crested water towered up behind him.

"Love of God!" said Rudd, and it caught the little craft fairly astern, Rudd swung his entire weight against the tiller, but there was no response, and the boat swung, catapulted for a second, broached, and the long boom swinging wildly caught Skipper Rudd heavily on the head. A mountain of green seething water smashed over the broad shoulders of the man and into the little craft, and she slowly settled on her side, rising and falling with the sea washing ever shoreward, and the limp body of John

Rudd still hung to the tiller by the rope which had so securely fastened.

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Red McLeod untiringly watching through the long hours thought that at last he saw something blacker than the shadow of night floating in the quiet waters of the harbor. With a secret fear in his heart he spoke apart to Old Sim, and they shoved off a dory. Sim rowed slowly channelwards, and the lantern blanketed, the keen eyes of Red directed to where a shapeless mass of wreckage bobbed up and down with the afterswell of the harbor sea.

"God! It's Rudd," said Red as he grappled onto the upset boat. Slowly he worked, turning about and under the sail with his gaff. Suddenly he struck something soft that sent a chill through his veins, and pulling heavily on the dead weight, he saw the white face of John Rudd turn in the lantern light, and the hands of old Sim trembled on the oars. There were no words on either of their lips, for there was in their hearts more than words could say, as they towed the cumbersome wreckage ashore. And the few who had waited until this late hour knew too well what the wreckers brought.

Silently they worked until the cold water-sodden body was freed, and bearing the heavy lifeless form up the sands they reverently laid it on the stand in front of his shack. Stars had broken through the fog and in the east there was the faint tinge of dawn. They covered him with a tarpaulin, and lumbered on up the sand for cups of hot tea to revive them before they prepared the body for burial.

Red McLeod was the last to leave the lonely form and his heart was sad as he walked. There was a light still burning in Margot Care's cottage for little Jen had been sick, and Red turned that way to bear her the bad news. Perhaps Rudd had loved Margot; he never said, and Red felt in his heart that it would not be disrespectful to the memory of his dead friend to think that he had the next best right to speak for the little widow. He knocked

gently on the door and Margot opened it with a peculiar look on her face.

"We found Rudd," he began "tied to the tiller of his boat. Must a been—"

Red did not get on with the explanation, the light from the big lamp had dazzled him somewhat at first, but as he talked his eyes quickly adjusted themselves to the glare from the inside of the cottage. And then it was that Red stopped speaking. Sitting in the old familiar armchair in the chimney corner sat a man, bearded and swarthy, calmly smoking, and looking at Red.

"God a Heaven!" said Red "Is that you John Care, or yer ghost."

And the man in the chimney corner rising to his tall height, said, "Ay it's me John Care, Red, five years dead in the wilds of South America and come to life."

"Ay, it's him like enough," said Margot, "and it's right glad that me heart is to see him."

"John Care!" said Red again "God a Heaven!" and stumbled out into the night, out and on over the sands to where Old Sim Mole sat in their lone cottage brewing strong tea.

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And far down the drear beach the glazed eyes of Skipper Rudd were turned to the stars, and the first gulls crying in the morning and the wash of the sea did not sound in his ears.

A soft wind land-perfumed, rustled out of the rose-tinted dawn over the hills, belated wind which he had prayed to God for so earnestly, and stirred the wet hair on his brow, and caressing his pallid face, but he felt it not for his great heart was stilled forever.

F. J. MacDonald.