

## **To The Bitter End**

*By Richard Matthews Hallet*

From The Saturday Evening Post

The feud between Hat Tyler and Mrs. Elmer Higgins sprang out of a chance laugh of Elmer's when he was making his first trip as cadet. Hat Tyler was a sea captain, and of a formidable type. She was master of the *Susie P. Oliver*, and her husband, Tyler, was mate. They were bound for New York with a load of paving stones when they collided with the coasting steamer *Alfred de Vigny*, in which Elmer was serving his apprenticeship as a cadet officer.

The old cadet had just come up on the bridge from taking a sounding--he even had a specimen of the bottom in his hand, he said later, sand with black specks and broken shell--when something queer attracted his attention half a point on the starboard bow. It was a thick foggy night, ships bellowing all round, and a weird-looking tow coming up astern with a string of lights one over another like a lot of Chinese lanterns. It was probably these lights that had drawn the mate's attention away from the ship's bows.

At all events he was standing with a megaphone to his ear hearkening for noises on the port hand when Elmer took him by the elbow and called out: "What in the name of Sam Hill would you call that great contraption mouching across our bows? My sorrows, Fred, it's a schooner!"

The mate went cold along his spine, and the vertebræ distributed there jostled together like knucklebones on the back of a girl's hand, and he yelled "Port helm!"

"I told Fred," Elmer said in discussing this circumstance later with his cronies of the Tall Stove Club--he had got back safe and sound to

Winter Harbor by that time--"I says to him, 'Fred, we're going to bump into that ship jest as sure as taxes!' There he stood, swearing a blue streak. I never knew a man to be so downright profane over the little things of life as he was. And I was right when it come to that too. There was that long Spanish ghost of a schooner dead in our path, with her port light shining out there as red as an apple. They wanted me to say later--I know the skipper come to me personally and says, 'Elmer, now you know you didn't see no light.' 'Captain Tin,' I says to him, 'I have got the greatest respect for you as a man, and I would favor you in all ways possible if 'twas so 'st I could; but if I was to testify the way you want me to I would go against conscience. I wouldn't feel that I could go on paying my pew tax. These people here want to know the truth and I am going to give it to them.' Yes, sir, I saw the light as plain as plain, and I pointed it out to Fred, but the devil and Tom Walker couldn't have prevented them ships from walking right up and into each other, situated as they was then.

"My conscience, warn't there works when those two come together! 'Fred,' I says--I was down on my knees; throwed there, you understand--'we're hit!' 'Tell me something I don't know, will you?' he says. He always was comical, jest as comical as he could be. 'Get down there and look at her snout,' he said to me. 'Find out which of us is going to sink.' That was Fred all over--one of these fellows, all bluster, where it's a bucket of wind against a thimbleful of go-ahead."

"I know him," interposed another member of the Tall Stove Club. "I knew the whole family. He never amounted to nothing till he got to going to sea."

"Well, I down off the bridge," went on Elmer, "and I up on the fo'c'stle head, and there I see the schooner leaning over sort of faintish, jest the way a man will when he's sick to his stomach, and I says to myself, 'That ship's going the way of the wicked.' I sung out to Fred to keep the Alfred going slow ahead, so as to give the crew a chance to come aboard, and it warn't no time before they was

swarming up into our chains like so many ants out of a hill that has been knocked galley-west. I see we was all wrinkled up forward ourselves--the Alfred was a tin ship--and it warn't to be wondered at when you come to consider that the Susie Oliver was jest as full as she could hold of paving stones.

"And the next thing I knew there was Jed Tyler, right out of the blue sky, standing side of me in his shirt sleeves, and looking down, mournful enough. 'Where's Hat?' I sung out to him. 'Drowned,' he says. 'Drowned, am I?' Hat sung out. 'I guess that's just another case of the thought being father to the wish, that's what I guess!'

"So I leaned down, and my stars, there was Hat Tyler! She'd come up jest as she was--there she was sitting on the fluke of the starboard anchor. And warn't she immense! I down over the ship's side with a rope, and s' I, 'Heave and away, my girl!' and I got a grip of her, and away she come over the rail, mad as a wet hen, and jest as wet, too, with her hair stringing down, and her dander up, if ever I see a woman with her dander up."

"I hear she leads Tyler a life," said a member.

"Well, I laughed; I couldn't help it," continued Elmer, moving his ears at the recollection of it.

"'Hat,' I says, 'you never was caught out this way before in all your born days,' I says. She was fit to be tied. 'Laugh!' she says. 'You great booby!' 'Hat,' I says, 'I shall give up, I know I shall.' 'It's jest your ignorance,' she says. 'I know it,' I says, 'but I couldn't help it no more than if you had slid a knife into me.' And I out with another. 'Come down into my cabin,' I says, 'and I will give you a little something in a glass.' And down she come, past all them sailors, in the face and eyes of everybody."

"She didn't lose nothing by what I hear," said Zinie Shadd. "They tell me the underwriters had just as good as told her that they wouldn't let the schooner go to sea again."

And now by your leave a word from Hat herself. There are two sides to every story. She told her tale just across the street from the ship chandler's, where the Tall Stove Club held its meetings. In Mrs. Kidder's bake-shop were gathered the henchmen of Hat Tyler.

"Well, I never see your equal for falling on your feet," Lena Kidder said admiringly. "If I've told my husband once I've told him twenty times I'd rather have Hat Tyler's luck than a license to steal."

"Everybody has got a right to their own opinion on that point," said Hat Tyler heavily, sinking her jaws toward the mug of milk which Mrs. Kidder had set before her.

Hat Tyler was certainly a handful. Her shoulders were wide, as she often said herself, her cheeks were brick-red, her voice was as deep as the fattest gold pipe on the church organ, and the palm of her hand rasped when she took hold of a body. There wasn't a hornier-handed woman in the county. She wore tarred rope round her girth for a belt, knotted at the ends with star knots. She was what Margaret Fuller had in mind when she said to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Let them be sea captains if they will."

"Where was you when she hit, Hat?" asked Mrs. Kidder.

"Asleep," said Mrs. Tyler. "I come up out of my bunk all standing, and went out on deck just as I was. And lo and behold, I had just time to get a grip on that anchor when the Oliver give a lurch and over she went. She didn't shilly-shally, I can tell you, with that load of paving stones in her belly. Let me have another quart of milk, Lena. Talking's thirsty business. Well, I thought I'd get my never-get-over, waiting for those men to get a rig ready for me. And then who should I see but

that fool Elmer Higgins looking down at me. 'Hang on, Hat,' he said, 'while I think what to do,' 'Think what to do!' I says. 'If you're any part of a man you'll fling me a rope.' 'Jest half a second,' he says. 'Rome wasn't built in a day.' 'It was burned up in a night, though,' I says quick as a flash, and I guess that floored him. 'Can't you lift me up, man?' 'Much as ever I can,' he says. 'And you call yourself an able seaman,' I said to him. 'I would sell out if I was you.'"

"He's going round with a different version, Hat," said Lena Kidder. "Didn't he laugh as he says he did?"

"Laugh? I would like to see the man that would laugh," said Hat in her great hardy voice. Her fist closed round the mug of milk. "I'll have him laughing on the wrong side of his face."

"He says he give a bellow fit to wake the dead."

"That man? He stood there like a brazen image, and I had to say to him: 'Are you going to let me stand here in this perishing cold without so much as lifting a hand? Just you stir your stumps and hotfoot a slug of square-faced gin into me if you know what's for your own best good.'

"That man? Why, I taught him all he knows. I was sailing my own ships when he was a deckhand."

The truth was--and Pearl Higgins, his wife, could never quite forget it or forgive it--Elmer had once shipped before the mast on Hat Tyler's ships; and Hat was not likely to forget it either. Rumor had it that Hat and Elmer had been as thick as thieves at one time, and that it was You-tickle-me-and-I'll-kiss-you between them then. But if such was the case they had later had a falling out, and Elmer had gone one way and Hat another.

"As a matter of fact I was more glad than sorry at what took place," Hat now continued. "That cargo of paving stones up and shifted and started her in a new place. She was leaking like a sieve. That little rat of an underwriter said to me: 'If I were you, as soon as I got out of sight of land I would turn round and kick the stern off her with a tap of my foot.' 'Maybe I will, for all you know,' I said. I'd like to see them bamboozle me!"

"Trust you, Hat!" said Lena Kidder in a voice of admiration.

"And so Elmer Higgins has the cast-iron nerve to say that he laughed at me to my face, does he?" continued Mrs. Tyler. "Well, he lies when he says it."

So the lie was passed, and hostilities began; for before night word came to Pearl Higgins that Hat Tyler was back in town running down her husband for his part in the rescue. Elmer's wife, a dark thin-featured woman, had felt all along that Elmer had never been able to shake off vestiges of that time when he and Hat had been so kind of hand-in-glove; and she had privately determined to put the woman at a safe distance once and for all.

"The long and short of it is," she said grimly when Elmer had come home and spread his navigation books on the kitchen table "she's round town calling you a liar; and now I suppose you'll be just meek enough to put up with it."

Elmer took off his spectacles and rubbed his brow thoughtfully.

"I shouldn't wonder if it was a case of necessity, mamma," he said musingly. "If I know one thing better than another it is that I would want to go in training for a spell before crossing that woman. I know when I was before the mast with her--"

Pearl Higgins burst into tears promptly. "I think you might spare me an account of that," she sobbed. "I'm sure I don't want to hear about your goings-on with anyone so ignorant as Hat Tyler. Yes, she is; she's ignorant, and comes of ignorant people. What does she amount to, I'd like to know? There's nothing to her at all. And now," she blazed forth in fierier tones, "you're half in sympathy with the woman this blessed minute! I suppose you think just because you rescued her from a watery grave you're in duty bound to side in with her and take her part against your own wife. I don't know how it is, but everything seems to fall out in that woman's favor."

"Well, ain't it so!" said Elmer, not as a question but as if the full force of the proposition had just struck him. "Now you mention it, I don't know that I ever knew Hat Tyler to come off second best in a transaction. I was talking to a party only the other day, and he said the same thing himself. He says, 'Hat's a smart woman, Elmer.'"

"Why didn't you have her then, when you might have had her?"

"Always said I wouldn't marry a woman that had the heft of me," said Elmer sagely with a fond twinkle at his Pearl. "I know that night when I saw her arm on the fluke of that anchor I said to myself, 'I done just right to steer clear of you, my lady.' There 't was, bare to the shoulder, freckled all the way up, and jest that pretty size!"

"It's as big as a stovepipe!" shrieked Pearl.

"'T was smooth as a smelt," Elmer averred dreamily, "and jest of a bigness to work, and work well, in a pinch. A woman like that would be some protection to a man, Pearl. I wish you could have seen how she clim up into those anchor chains. But I said to myself, 'That woman has got too much iron in her blood to go with my constitution!'"

"But she's smart; Hat is smart. All is, a man never knows how to take her. But she's smart as a steel trap."

"Well, I wish she'd shut it then," said Pearl Higgins grimly.

Silence reigned; and in that silence could be heard the steeple clock ticking on the mantel and the sound of waves lapping under the house. They were living in Pearl's father's house. Pearl's father had been a seaman and wharf owner, and in his declining years had established a sea grill on one of his wharves, and lived up over it. To get to the Higgins home you ascended an outside staircase.

The subject of Hat Tyler had a fatal fascination for Pearl Higgins.

"Do you know what I heard downtown this morning?" she resumed. "They say Jim Rackby's going to make her skipper of the new schooner. After she's just lost one by not keeping her eyes open too! The luck of some women! I don't pretend to know how she does it. A great coarse thing like her----"

"Still there's a different kind of a send-off to her, I was going to say," said Elmer. "Hat's a seaman, I'll say that for her."

"I guess there ain't much you won't say for her," Pearl retorted.

"Then again, when the Alfred run her down she had the right of way."

"I guess her weight give her that," countered his wife.

Elmer got up and stared across the harbor at the new schooner which Hat was to command. The Minnie Williams sat on the ways resplendent, her masts of yellow Oregon pine tapering into a blue sky. A mellow clack of calking hammers rang across the water.



"Those ways are pitched pretty steep, it seems to me," he said. "When she goes she'll go with a flourish."

Among those who swore by Elmer for a man of wisdom was Jim Rackby, the owner of the schooner. Next day the two men met in her shadow. The ship had just been pumped full of water, and now the calking gang were going round staring up with open mouths to see where the water came out. Taking advantage of their absorption Jim Rackby asked Elmer in low tones whether he considered Hat Tyler a fit person to be intrusted with a ship.

"I don't know a better," Elmer answered in the same low tone.

"How about her losing this last ship?"

"I wouldn't say this to my wife, it would only aggravate her," said Elmer, grinding up a piece off his plug, "but the loss of that ship is only another example of what that woman can do in the way of pure calculation when she sets out to. There she had that good-for-nothing schooner on her hands. Why, she had to come in here on these very flats and squat and squirt mud up into her seams, trip after trip, as I've seen with my own eyes, to keep the cargo from falling out as much as anything, let alone water coming in; and as soon as the mud had washed out it was all hands on the pumps, boys, for dear life.

"Well, as I say, she took that ship out there in a fog, like a cat in a bag you might say, and filled up with paving stones to boot, and she planted her right there where the Alfred could come slap up against her and give the owners a chance to say 'Good morning' to the underwriters. And she owner of a good fourth at the time. Why, she's got dollars laid away now where you and I have got buttons. And, mind you, the underwriters had as good as told her that that would be her last trip. The insurance was going to fall in as soon as she made port. Now ain't that what you would call a smart woman, laying all

joking aside? But I wouldn't want my wife to hear this, Jim. There's a little jealousy mixed in there, between you and me and the bedpost."

"Well," said Rackby, satisfied, "I had always understood that she was one of these kind that if they was let out they would always find their way home somehow."

"Yes, sir!" said Elmer heartily. "Why, I was over here the day they was stepping the mainmast, and Hat was going to slip a five-dollar gold piece under the mast for luck, the way the last man did, but she thought better of it. I see her change her mind at the last minute and reach in and take out a bright penny and creep that under quick, thinking the Lord would never notice the difference. I never knew a woman that was more downright fore-handed. Yes, sir, she's a dabster!"

How true it is that we never know our friends in this world so largely made up of conjecture! Could Hat have known how powerfully Elmer had pleaded her cause, and at a time when it was half lost, would she have moved heaven and earth, as she was moving them, to bring him into disrepute? Would she have looked at him when they met with a dagger in either eye and one between her teeth? Would she have tugged that rope girdle tighter about her hips and passed him, as she did, with only a resolute quiver of her person?

Elmer was in hopes that she would come round in time. "She's not much of a hand to hold a thing up against a body, Hat isn't," he tried to tell himself. And yet a vague presentiment, something like trouble in the wind, oppressed him.

Affairs were in this posture when launching day dawned fair. The Minnie Williams stood ready on the ways, dressed in her international code flags, which flew from all trucks. Sails of stiff new duck were bent to the booms, anchor chains had been roused up and laid on the

windlass wildcat, a fire was kindled in the galley and a collation laid in the saloon. The owner was aboard.

Hat Tyler was very much in evidence, fore and aft, giving orders to the crew as to what was to be done as soon as the ship left the ways.

"I want that starboard hook dropped the minute we get the red buoy abeam. Understand? Jake Hawkins, you stand by the windlass. Take care when you snub her not to break that friction band. And stand by to let go the other hook in case we need it. This harbor ain't much bigger than a ten-quart can, when all is said."

Hat was dressed in a splendid traveling suit of heavy brocaded stuff. She wore an enormous green-and-purple hat and carried a green bottle with red, white and blue streamers tied round its neck. Being skipper and a lady at one and the same time, she had chosen to christen the ship herself.

"What's in the bottle, Hat?" sang out one of her admirers.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Hat retorted wittily. She was in high spirits.

"Ain't it a waste of good stuff!" shouted another. "I guess it ain't everybody that can be trusted to christen a ship these hard times."

"It ain't the last drink she will get either," a more remote voice floated up to her. "I hear she's taking rum to France from Porto Rico."

Hat Tyler took a firmer grip of the bottle under its streamers, for this was the voice of Pearl Higgins.

Time pressed. Already the shore gang were splitting out the keel blocks. The whole town stood at gaze. The children had been let out of school. A group of the larger ones were gathered on the after deck,

ready to sing America when the ship took the water. It was a gala day. Hat felt that all eyes were centered on her, and her commands rolled along the decks like so many red-hot solid shot.

The strokes of the men under her keel rang faster and faster yet. When the last block was split out from under that oaken keel it was expected that the ship would settle on the ways, that two smooth tallowed surfaces would come together, that the ship and all her five hundred tons would move the fraction of an inch, would slip, would slide, would speed stern foremost into what is called her native element. But ships are notional, and these expectations are sometimes dashed.

And now Elmer and his wife, who were stationed ankle deep in that yellow sea of chips under her prow, could see the brows of the shore gang beaded with sweat, and a look of desperate hurry in the eyes of the youngster coming with the paint pot and painting the bottom of the keel as the blocks fell one by one. Well he might hurry; for sometimes the ship trips the last dozen blocks or so, and thus stepped on with all that tonnage they snap and crackle, and splinters fly in every direction.

Nothing now held the ship but a single iron dog which bound the two tallowed surfaces together. One stroke of the maul knocked this away. Still the ship hung fire.

"Run back and forth thwartships, you there; all you good people!" cried Hat hoarsely. "See if we can't start her that way."

So the ship's launching company ran back and forth, and fore and aft, until their tongues were hanging out. Elmer nudged his wife and asked her if she remembered that night when they had danced up and down themselves at a moonlight launching. Pearl replied with a trace of acid that she had good cause to remember it. It was then that Elmer had screwed his courage to the speaking point.

In vain, all in vain Hat Tyler roared her orders. The Minnie Williams budged not, nor felt a thrill of life along her keel. The crowd beside the ways scarcely drew breath; the suspense was racking.

At length the ship's company stopped for lack of breath; and in a moment of hush a voice cried: "You better get out of that traveling suit, Hat Tyler. You won't travel to-day."

It was Pearl Higgins. She followed up her witty saying by a peal of jeering laughter, which punctured the tense mood of that great throng of friends and neighbors; and such a roar of laughter went up at Hat's expense that the Minnie Williams--and Hat no less--quivered from stem to stern.

The sea captain burst frankly into tears.

"No, sir," Elmer said to a member of the Tall Stove Club who had missed the launching, "I never see Hat go all to pieces the way she did then. She was all broken up over it. Well, she might have mistrusted that Pearl had a bone to pick with her. Pearl had been between a sweat and a shiver to get in a word, and she see her chance and let her have it slap. 'T was just what the doctor ordered. It come in so kind of comical too. There was Hat, all twittered up in that great poison-green hat of hers with the little heap of crab apples over one eye--and she stood there and couldn't say ay, yes or no. And then it was boo-hoo, you know, same as women will when a thing ain't jest according to their liking. Hat's a smart woman, all right enough, but she don't show to her best advantage when she blubbers. I stood there looking at her and I couldn't think of nothing but that old adage that runs: 'Hell is nothing to put alongside of a woman that has been laughed at.' 'Pearl,' I says, 'you've done it now. You can't tell me you haven't made an enemy of that woman.' And Pearl says to me, 'That great baby! I guess she'll survive.' 'Well,' I says, 'the fat's in the fire.' And Pearl says to me, 'T won't hurt her if she does lose a little flesh over it.' I don't

know why it is these women can't live together in peace without kicking up such a touse all the time over trifles."

Elmer was not free on the occasion itself to spend himself in narrative, however. His wife kept him close by her after her triumph. In grim silence she preceded him up the outside staircase, threw open the door to the house of Higgins and marched in. She commanded him to fetch a hod of coal. She rattled her irons, touched her finger to the bottom of a hot one--tszt--and brought it down on the ironing board with a masterful jounce. And then she glared out of the window at the massive stern of the Minnie Williams.

"I guess she'll know better another time," she said grimly.

"Ain't you two women been at swords' points long enough?" pleaded Elmer.

"If she thinks she can walk all over me she'll find she's mightily mistaken."

"All is, I mistrust she won't leave a stone unturned," Elmer said, scratching his ear. He was deep in the study of navigation again. "Hat's contrary; yes, she is; she's mulish when she's crossed. And I don't know when I've seen her get her back up the way she did to-day."

He spoke as briefly as possible on the subject, however. Good navigation began at home; and there were shallows there that would put to shame the terrors of Pollock Rip Slue. As he was going to bed near the hour of midnight he did just say that he would rather not have Hat Tyler for an enemy.

"There's no telling when she may bob up and put a spoke in your wheel," he said, taking off his necktie.

"You see to it that you put on a clean collar in the morning," said Pearl Higgins from the bed. "The one you've got on's filthy dirty."

"I wish you could see it in a little different light Pearl," said her spouse. "It ain't as if Hat Tyler was the fiend incarnate. But she'll naturally hanker to get back at you; and with me away and all----"

"I can take care of myself, thank you," said Pearl.

"Still and all, I don't like to leave you with things this way."

"A precious lot you care how you leave things--going off at your age and getting into this awful war when there ain't a particle of need of it."

"Ain't we had that all out once?"

"And then you stand up there and defend that woman."

"Now, Pearl----"

"Yes, you are! You're defending her, and I shouldn't wonder if you didn't think as much of her as ever you did in your heart of hearts. Oh, if you only knew how it wrings me to think of you and she together!"

"There, there! Why, in those days I hadn't so much as--I didn't so much as know you were on earth."

"We can't ever forget our first loves," said Pearl. "It's no use your standing up there and letting on. I know what I know. Put out the light and get into bed. Your feet are getting cold standing there that way."

Her mouth turned into the pillow, she went on: "I remember just as well as if it was yesterday when her father lay dying--you know how much he thought of that horse of his, and how it always had red

tassels hung on its ears the first day of spring, and the brass on the harness was enough to put your eyes out, he worked over it so. He thought the world of that horse, and when he see he was going to go, he got up and said, 'Hat, shoot the horse. I won't be quiet in my grave for thinking what kind of treatment it may be getting.' And what does she do but out into the barn and shoot the gun into the air, and come back and let on like the horse is gone. And her poor father lying there at his last gasp."

"Still and all," said Elmer, "wouldn't it have been kind of too bad to put a young horse like that out of its misery? It warn't a day over ten years old."

"And now what?" continued Pearl. "I heard only to-day that she's been to the first selectman about having our place here condemned on the ground that it's unsafe. And the next thing I know I'll be turned out of house and home and won't know which way to turn nor where to lay my head. After I've slaved like a dog all my life and worse--and what thanks do I get for it? Why, my husband--walks away--and leaves me--in the lurch. That's how much he--thinks of me. Ain't you never coming to bed?"

Elmer, who had stood listening, now in fact had his lips ready puffed to blow out the light.

But he did not blow.

Instead he said, "My soul and body, what was that?"

A fearful sound smote upon their ears. Something had shouldered the house. The stovepipe in the kitchen fell down, there followed the sound as of some scaly creature dragging its body across the linoleum. Then there came a fall of plaster, and the kitchen stove itself appeared stealthily through the bedroom wall.



"My conscience!" said Elmer Higgins at the height of his mystification.

But we anticipate. It will be well at this point to look in on the affairs of Hat Tyler for a moment. When it became apparent that the Minnie Williams would not leave the ways until softer weather had loosened up the launching grease the crowd drifted away from her. The cook banked his fires and the crew went ashore for a carouse.

Then it was that Hat had it out with Tyler. Jed said himself afterward that it was a regular old-fashioned session, but further than that he would not commit himself, beyond saying that of course Hat was sensitive--awful sensitive--and just as thin-skinned as she could be, and it was only natural she should get up on her high horse when once she had him alone. It was not till near midnight that, red of eye and with her hair stringing down any old how, she put her head out of the companionway and looked vengefully at the Higgins place across the way.

"If looks could kill," Tyler said, thrusting his jaw out with hers, "there wouldn't be a grease spot left of that shack, would there, Hat?"

Hat made no answer. She had felt an indefinable sensation at the soles of her feet.

"We're away, Tyler, we're away!" she gasped.

It was even so. Swift as a swallow on the wing and noiseless as a thief in the night the Minnie Williams left the smoking ways, with that deep and graceful bow always so thrilling to beholders when there are beholders; the first and most beautiful motion of the ship.

"You christian her, Hat!" cried Tyler. "I'll drop the hook."

Hat broke the bottle over her stern works at the very moment that a roar of chain going out at the hawse pipe forward set the sleeping gulls flapping seaward. The Minnie Williams floated there lightly as a feather drifted from the wings of sleep, soundless save for the chain rattling out of her lockers. She had chosen that whimsical hour of the night to take her first bath, and who should say the lady nay?

Now by insensible degrees the near shore receded and the far shore drew near. Still slack chain rattled out of the hawse pipe.

Hat strode forward.

"For the Lord's sake, ain't you going to snub this ship!" she cried in a voice hoarse with fury.

Jed Tyler thrust a ghastly dewy face out of the windlass room.

"I can't do it, Hat!" he gasped.

"You can't! Don't tell me you can't! Everything's been done that's been tried. You drop that hook or I'll know the reason why!"

"The friction band's broke square in two."

"Oh, damn it all, if I must say so--there!" said Hat bitterly, for she was not captain in name only. "If there's any such thing as break it's break at a time like this. Let go that port anchor."

"Both wildcats will turn idle the way things are here."

"You do as I say! The weight of the chain may check her in some."

Tyler dropped his other hook.

"How much chain have we got on that starboard anchor? Do you know?"

"About one hundred and seventy-five fathoms."

Hat went aft again and gave a calculating glance. When the chain had been paid out to the bitter end the ship would bring up perforce if the anchor had caught on, for the bitter end had a round turn taken about the foot of the foremast, and was shackled to the keelson with a monster shackle. But--what was the width of the harbor at this point?

"Give her port helm, you ninny," said Hat, wrapping herself in her arms. She shivered, partly because the night was chill and partly from nervous excitement. There was no time to be lost.

"Can't. The rudder's bolted in the amidships position," said Jed in shaking accents.

This had been done to make sure that that giant tail-piece should meet the water squarely, as otherwise the thrust of the ship might snap the rudder post like a pipe-stem.

"Well, I guess the horse is out of the stable, then, that's what I guess," Hat said hoarsely. "She's launched herself now with a vengeance."

They fell silent. With the indifference to danger of a sleepwalker the Minnie Williams marched across the starlit harbor.

Presently Hat brought down a heavy hand on her spouse's lean shoulder.

"You see what she's going to do, don't you?" she cried. "She's going to mix it with the Higgins place, that's what she's going to do! Give them a blue light. They're awake. I see a light burning in that south window."

Tyler fetched a blue light; but his matches were wet with the sweat of his efforts in the windlass room. He could not strike fire.

"What are you doing? What are you doing, man?" shrieked Hat.  
"Come, if you can't strike a light give them a shot out of that shotgun. The whole place is coming down round their ears in a minute."

"I give away the last cartridges I had yisterday to a boy that come asking for them."

"I suppose you'd give 'em the shirt off your back if they come asking for it," cried Hat. "I never saw such a man. Get up the patent fog horn."

"I ain't got the key to the box," said Jed in the sulky tones of a man who can't begin to comply with the demands upon him.

"Ain't got the key! This is a pretty time to come telling me that. Run forward and see if you can't kink up the chain in the hawse pipe somehow."

Jed Tyler affected not to hear this. There was a glorious crash coming, and for his part he meant to be an eyewitness. Followed a marvelous silence, during which with fateful celerity the Minnie Williams stalked the unsuspecting Higgins house. The seaward end of the wharf on which it stood had rotted away and fallen in, and nothing now remained but the line of spiles, which rose out of the water like a row of bad teeth from which the gums had fallen away. And on top of each spile roosted a huge sea gull of marvelous whiteness, fatted with the spoils of the harbor.

So quietly had the Minnie Williams stolen upon them that the spiles on which they slept stirred and swayed out before they took note of

the invasion. At the touch they rose shrieking on the night air with a vast flapping of wings.

The ship passed between the long rows of spiling with nice judgment. Certainly in the circumstance she was doing the best she could by herself and her owners. At the left of her lay a little steamer tied up for the winter, the top of her stack swathed like a sore thumb; and only twenty feet to the right, under water, lurked, as Hat well knew, a cruel weed-grown stone abutment. To the fine angular stern of the Minnie Williams the Higgins place would be like nothing so much as a pillow stuffed with eiderdown.

That fated residence stood forlorn in the starshine. It was old, it was gray, it suffered from some sort of shingle mange, and blue and yellow tin tobacco signs were tacked on here and there. The crazy outside staircase was like an aspiration that had come to nothing.

No knight of old ever couched lance against the shield of his enemy with surer aim than that which distinguished the Minnie Williams when she set her main boom against the house of Higgins to overthrow it. And it availed it nothing that it was founded upon a rock.

"My God, Tyler, can't you see what's taking place?" yelled Hat Tyler.

Tyler unquestionably could. He had set a cold corn-cob pipe between his teeth; he answered nothing, but his fascinated saucer eyes were fixed on the precise spot where as it seemed the boom was destined to be planted. This was at a place about six feet below the square of soapstone with a hole in it, through which the stovepipe passed. He was not disappointed. The boom in fact exerted its whole pressure against the body of the stove itself, with the result which we have seen. The stove made its way across the kitchen and appeared in the bedroom at the moment when Elmer had made up his lips to blow the flame.

Nor was this all. The inexorable stern of the Minnie Williams followed after, raising the roof of the Higgins place with the skillful care of an epicure taking the cover off his favorite dish. The roof yielded with only a gentle rippling motion, and the ship's lifeboat, which hung from davits aft, scraped the remains of supper off the supper table with her keel.

Zinie Shadd, returning late from a lodge meeting which had wound up with a little supper in the banquet hall, felt a queer stir through his members to see the Higgins place alter its usually placid countenance, falter, turn half round, and get down on its knees with an apparently disastrous collapse of its four walls and of everything within them. The short wide windows narrowed and lengthened with an effect of bodily agony as the ribs of the place were snapped off short all round the eaves.

"God help them poor creatures inside!" he was moved to utter out of the goodness of his heart. "She went in jest as easy," he recounted later to one of his cronies. "It warn't no more exertion for her than 't would be to you to stick your finger through a cream puff."

"How come it they 'scaped with a whole skin?"

"I don't see for the life of me. Elmer says himself it's just another case of where it's for a man to live, and if it ain't for him to he won't, and if it's for him to be will, and that's about all there is to it."

Elmer's exact phrase has been that he guessed nothing coming from the sea side would ever cheat the gallows.

Pearl Higgins told a friend of hers that the one thing that came into her mind as she lay there was that the place had been torpedoed.

"I knew what it was just as well as I wanted to," she said. She had known all along that if any place would get it it would be the Higgins place, on account of its exposed position, right in line with anything that showed up at the mouth of the harbor. Of course if she had stopped to think she would have known that a torpedo didn't come through a house at the snail's pace the stove was moving at when it looked through at her.

"But my land, at a time like that what is a body to think?" she inquired. Of course as soon as she could get her wits together she could see that it was her own stove, and nothing to be afraid of in itself if only she knew what was animating it.

There was the rub. The truth is, the performance of the stove, at that hour of the night, too, was so wholly out of the ordinary that she and Elmer had not so much as stirred out of their tracks for the fraction of a second it took the thing to come clear into the room. Pearl said later that she thought she was seeing things.

"Scared? I was petrified! I couldn't stir hand or foot," she told her friend. "You talk about your flabbergasted women! I never had such a feeling come over me before."

Of course neither of them had the faintest notion of what was at the back of it, and that made it all the worse. Pearl lay there under the clothes as limp as a rag, and the main boom of the Minnie Williams, which as we know was the thing behind it all, urged the stove forward until it was in square contact with the foot of the bed.

Now if there was one thing on which Pearl Higgins prided herself it was her bed. It was a mountainous, whale-backed, feather-bedded four-poster, built in the days of San Domingo mahogany, and quite capable of supporting the weight of a baby elephant without a quiver. Equipped with the legs of a colossus it had a frame to match. Tradition had it that a governor of the state had once lain in it. If there

was one thing sure, therefore, it was that the bed would not collapse. But then again the Minnie Williams was a lady not to be denied. She must come on; she could not help it for her heart, for the bitter end of the chain cable was not yet, and she still had way on her.

The bed, the stove and the boom met, they fitted together as if they had been made for one another from the beginning, they engaged each other like vertebra in a spine, they stiffened. There came a fearful rending of laths; the mopboard buckled; two vases of alabaster fell from the parlor mantel, and almost at the same moment the red plush clock with the stone cuckoo-bird over the dial and the music box "where its gizzard should have been," as Elmer always said, fell likewise. Pearl said afterward she knew that had gone because it started playing there on the floor at a great rate. And the next thing she knew she was in the parlor herself; and such a mess! She didn't know as she ever wanted to lay eyes on it again after that night's works.

Elmer, uncertain what part to play, walked along with the bed, still carrying the hand lamp in his hand, to light the Minnie Williams along, and dodging falling walls and plaster. He said when questioned by Zinie Shadd that he hadn't felt any particular alarm, on account of the deliberate way she had come poking in there, with a kind of a root-hog-or-die look about her; and he said he never for a minute doubted his ability and Pearl's to make good their escape if the worst came to the worst.

It really wasn't until the parlor went, as he explained to the Tall Stove Club, that he took it into his head to look over his shoulder; and it was then that he saw the lifeboat sweeping on victoriously across the kitchen, or what had been the kitchen. And on top of that he saw Hat Tyler looking down as cool as a cucumber, and her husband standing beside her.



"She had come on deck jest as she was," he stated at that time with a quiet chuckle, "and I never see anything like so much interest showing in a human countenance before."

Hat Tyler might well show interest; for after the house came the land--and the land, well she knew it, was made of sterner stuff. A shriek from Pearl told Elmer that his wife had found her tongue, as he phrased it. The fact is she had caught sight of Hat Tyler standing over her like an avenging fury.

But precisely at this moment the chain cable, which had all this time lain lethargic on the floor of the harbor, roused itself link by link, tautened, took a grip on the hook and snubbed the ship. None too soon, it had run out to the bitter end.

Pearl Higgins' bed halted, the stove halted, and Elmer set down his lamp. The boom receded. With the same swanlike ease she had used in effecting an entrance, the Minnie Williams floated out into the stream again.

And in the very instant of that heaven-sent reversal Hat Tyler cried in trumpet tones, "Travel yourself, and see how you like it!"

A shriek of demoniac laughter came on the heels of that. There were none present to laugh with Hat, but that laugh of hers rang in Pearl Higgins' ears like the last trump. She got herself over the side of the bed in short order. Too late, alas! Hat Tyler's had been a Parthian shot. The ship was out of the house altogether by then, and the roof had settled back over its joists at a rakish angle. The whole after part of the house was mashed into a neat concavity which would have made a perfect mold for the Minnie Williams' stern, and the Minnie Williams was in the stream again, with not a scratch about her.

"Ain't that something?" Elmer Higgins said, standing at the edge of this declivity. "Ain't that something huge?"

"Stand there and gawk! I would if I was you!" cried his wife. "Oh, will I ever get that laugh out of my ears if I live to be a hundred? Did ever you hear anything so hateful? I think you're a pretty small part of a man myself! The least you could have done was to have lit into her when you had the chance.

"But no, not you! What do you do but stand there and never so much as open your mouth!"

"I was so kind of took aback," Elmer advanced, "what with one thing and another, I couldn't seem to lay my hands on jest the words I wanted. And she standing there jest as she was too. Ain't she immense? Where you going to look to for a solider woman than Hat?"

"It's just like her for all the world, pushing herself in where she's not wanted," sobbed Pearl miserably. "The gall of her! And she just itching to get this house out of the way too! I suppose you'll be just contrary-minded enough now to say that she didn't do it on purpose?"

"No," said Elmer, solemn as a judge. "She forelaid for it all right, all right. I been saying right along she warn't a woman to sit quiet under a blow, and I told you as much at the time, mamma, if you'll recollect. I said, 'When Hat hits back I look out from under.'"

He picked a lump of plaster out of his ear and lifted high the lamp.

"But my grief, my grief, when all is said and done, ain't she a dabster!" he whispered with a tinge of admiration. "And warn't it-- warn't it nice calculation?"