. . . THE . . .

Ocean Graveyard.

A Mystery of the Atlantic.

By DAVID WECHSLER.

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On reaching the bottom I stood for a minute or two looking around me. Which direction should I take? I struck out to the right and made a wide circle, but there was nothing unusual to be seen. The bed was hard, rising and dipping here and there with loose rock lying about, and hardly any weeds. I paused again. I tried to remember in what direction the yacht lay, and moved, as I thought, away from her. I walked on and on, until it was time to ascend, and on getting to the surface I found I had wandered east of the vessel.

"Try further south this afternoon," said Capt. George, when I made my report. "By the way, what did those loose rocks look like?"

"Most of them were rough and ragged," I replied. "In some places they were thrown together in heaps, and in others only two or three were to be seen."

"Ah, I thought so! Don't despair, Lawrenceson, you're not far from the mark."

At three o'clock I made a second descent, a good deal further to the south. Soon after I touched the bottom, I found something that aroused my interest. It was an iron stanchion, evidently torn from a vessel which must have foundered close at hand. I went on, and then stood still.

What was it made me pause? I scarcely knew at first, but I had a sort of instinctive feeling that I was near some unseen danger. I moved on very cautiously, and halted a second time. With a strange sense of awe stealing over me, I became aware of a singular circumstance for which I could not account. There was a slight but peculiar tremor in the water around me, much like the vibration in the air after a distant peal of thunder. Once or twice, too, I fancied I felt a faint heaving in the ground under my feet.

I Held Up My Lamp And Read.

It was some little time before I could bring myself to proceed. I walked first ahead, then to the left, then to the right, and back again towards the point from which I had started. I made no further discovery. Sometimes the tremulous motion in the water seemed to grow more distant; frequently it died away until it was hardly perceptible. I was puzzled. I thought it better to go up, and see whether Capt. George could give any explanation of this singular occurrence.

"You were within reach of the rock," he said, when he had heard what I had to tell. "The next time you go down try and ascertain from what point that tremor proceeds. Follow in this direction; it will lead to your goal."

The next morning I set out again. I was now thoroughly bent upon pushing on with the search, no matter what risks might lie in the way. I had placed a buoy over the spot where I had descended the previous day, and told the men to keep rowing slowly to the south while I was under water, for that was the direction I was determined to take.

I still noticed that strange tremor I have described, but I soon grew accustomed to it, and walked boldly ahead. As I proceeded, the disturbance increased; the ground seemed to sway under me; it was as if waves of motion were passing beneath my feet. Once or twice I felt half inclined to turn back; I was just a little bit—well, I remembered I had a wife and family depending upon me, and it looked like tempting Providence to proceed further. But I set my teeth hard and pressed on.

Presently, the ground began to shelve downwards. The commotion around me was now so great that at times I had some difficulty in keeping my feet. I was nearing the awful spot, then! I grew reckless. I cast aside every fear. If I succeeded in locating this rock, what an inestimable service I would render to mankind.

As I descended into a kind of hollow, I became aware of something like a dark wall rising before me. At first I thought it was the rock; but no; it was long, low, and regular in outline. I approached it; then I gave a sort of gasp inside my helmet. Good heavens! It was a ship!

A big steamer, too! What a sight she presented as she lay there on her side, rising and falling with the undulating motion of the ground! Her masts and funnels were gone, her decks torn up, and her bows battered in, almost down to the foremast. Around her, the place was littered with wreckage, cargo of every description, and the bones of her gallant crew. What was her name? I groped my way to the stern, held up my lamp, and read: "Ontario, Liverpool."

Scarcely had I left her, and moved further along the hollow, than another hull appeared in sight. A sailing ship this time! After that, almost every step I took brought me in view of a sunken vessel. They lay scattered around in all directions, and in all positions; some mere shells, others just beginning to break up, and a few which showed they had been afloat within the last year or two. The battered bows of each told the same terrible story. Ships of every size—and of almost every nation, I suppose—were huddled together in this awful valley of death. Here stood the remains of an old three-decker, and by her side lay the skeleton of a small vessel, not much bigger than a schooner. I turned away. I had seen enough!

At the opposite side from which I had approached, I noticed there was an upward tendency in the ground. I determined to proceed in that direction. After walking for a few minutes the ascent grew steeper. I made slow progress, and was nearly hurled back into the hollow more than once. I went down, and tore an iron bar from one of the vessels. Armed with this I renewed the attempt, and found it afforded me great assistance in the climb.

Steadying myself with the bar, and taking advantage of every piece of projecting rock which might aid my ascent, I crept up the steep slope. On I went, panting, and half stifled, not daring to pause lest I should be swept away by the strong current which seemed to beat down upon me from above. At last I reached a sort of narrow platform, and stood there, with my bar thrust into a crevice. I looked up. Above me rose a great, towering, irregular mass of solid rock!

I scarcely remember how I got back to the boat, for I was feeling terribly exhausted, and my head was dizzy. When I reached the deck of the yacht, it was only to drop into the nearest seat. I must have looked seared and white, for Captain George hurried to my side.

"Whatever is the matter, Lawrenceson?" he said. "You look as if you had just escaped from the jaws of some sea monster."

"I have escaped from the jaws of death itself!" I replied.

"You found the rock?"

"I did."

He turned hastily, and gave an order to one of his men, who darted away toward the saloon. Presently the man came running up with a glass and a bottle of brandy.

"Here, swallow off this," said Captain George, handing me a pretty stiff dram. "I can well imagine the sight was enough to give any man a bit of a shock."

After dinner he made me go through the whole story of my adventure that morning. He listened attentively, never interrupting me once.

"Just as I thought," he said, when I had finished.

He rose from his seat, and walked up and down in silence, as if pondering deeply over what he had just heard.

"Do you know, Lawrenceson," he said, suddenly halting before me, "I would like to go down and have a look at the place myself."

"Don't do it, Captain George," I replied hastily.

"Why not? It is not often a man gets a chance of witnessing a sight like that. The risk, if there is any, does not deter me; I shall ask for the loan of your diving dress this afternoon, and make the attempt."

I knew he was not the sort of man to be lightly turned from his purpose, so I had to give in. I told him he would have little difficulty in finding the spot, as the boatmen had stationed a buoy over it. I did not accompany him, for I was feeling a bit out of sorts, and laid down on a couch in the saloon. I was soon fast asleep.

An hour or two later I was aroused by a step on the cabin stairs. I looked up, and saw Captain George entering the saloon. He went straight into his own cabin, without even glancing in my direction.

When he had changed the diving dress for his ordinary yachting suit, he came out into the saloon, and sat down.

"Well, Captain George, what did you think of it?" I asked.

"It might well be called 'The Graveyard of the Ocean,'" he replied, solemnly.

There was silence for a minute or two; then he said:

"That three-decker must be the old Redoubtable, I fancy. She left Bermuda in the autumn of '63, and has long been returned as 'missing' at the admiralty."

After another pause I ventured to say:

"Now that we have found the rock, what's to be done next?"

"Blow it up," he answered, gravely.

I looked at him in amazement.

"I have brought out a quantity of tonite for this very purpose," he went on. "It is a rather powerful explosive, four times the strength of ordinary, blasting powder, and equal to No. 1 dynamite. As the rock appears to be fissured, it will save us the trouble of boring. The cartridges must be encased in waterproof packing or india rubber bags. When you have laid the charges, we can retire to a distance, and explode them by means of an electric cable and battery. If we even succeed in splitting the rock, it would answer our purpose."

I entered heartily into the scheme, for my whole thoughts were bent upon getting rid of the danger. Though I might have to encounter some risk in placing the charges, it was a small matter compared to the advantages that would follow if we were successful. For several days I was busily engaged in inserting the powerful cartridges, and, as I had some experience of this kind of work, I laid the charges so as to give the explosion the greatest effect possible.

I Turned Away I Had Seen Enough.

At last the work was completed, the cable laid, and all in readiness for the final moment. It was a bright, sunny afternoon, I remember, not much like the general run of October days. I looked around the wide expanse of ocean. Not a sail was in sight.

The Wanderer had weighed anchor that morning, and had full steam up, ready to depart for home. Captain George stood on deck, with the battery before him. He was about to attach the ends of the cable.

"Now," he said, when it was done, "prepare to see the last of this mysterious rock!"

I kept my eyes on the spot where the buoy still marked the position of the rock. Suddenly a column of water rose into the air, and we heard a dull report as of distant thunder. But we were little prepared for the full result. Almost instantly with the first report—so quickly, in fact, as to appear part of it—came the roar of a mighty detonation that shook the yacht from stem to stern. A vast body of water was flung to a height of several hundred feet, and carried with it huge masses of rock, some of which fell thirty or forty yards away. It was a grand, but an appalling sight! Never before had I witnessed such a mighty upheaval. The foundations of the sea seemed to have been torn up.

The commotion on the surrounding surface was so great that the Wanderer was lifted on an immense ridge of water, and carried away at such tremendous speed we had to hold on to the woodwork to keep ourselves from being dashed across the deck. When all was still again Captain George turned to me, and said:

"We didn't count on the pent-up forces which lay beneath that rock. The explosion of the tonite must have given them vent, and they finished the work more completely than we ever could have done. I expect there is little left either of the rock itself or the vessels that lay around it. Well," he continued, gazing back toward the spot from which the Wanderer was fast gliding away under full steam, "I owe little to mankind, and, as yet, mankind has owed little to me. From henceforth, however, those who traverse this sea in future, will, without knowing it, be debtors to me for their safety."

(The End.)

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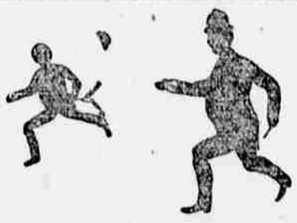

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