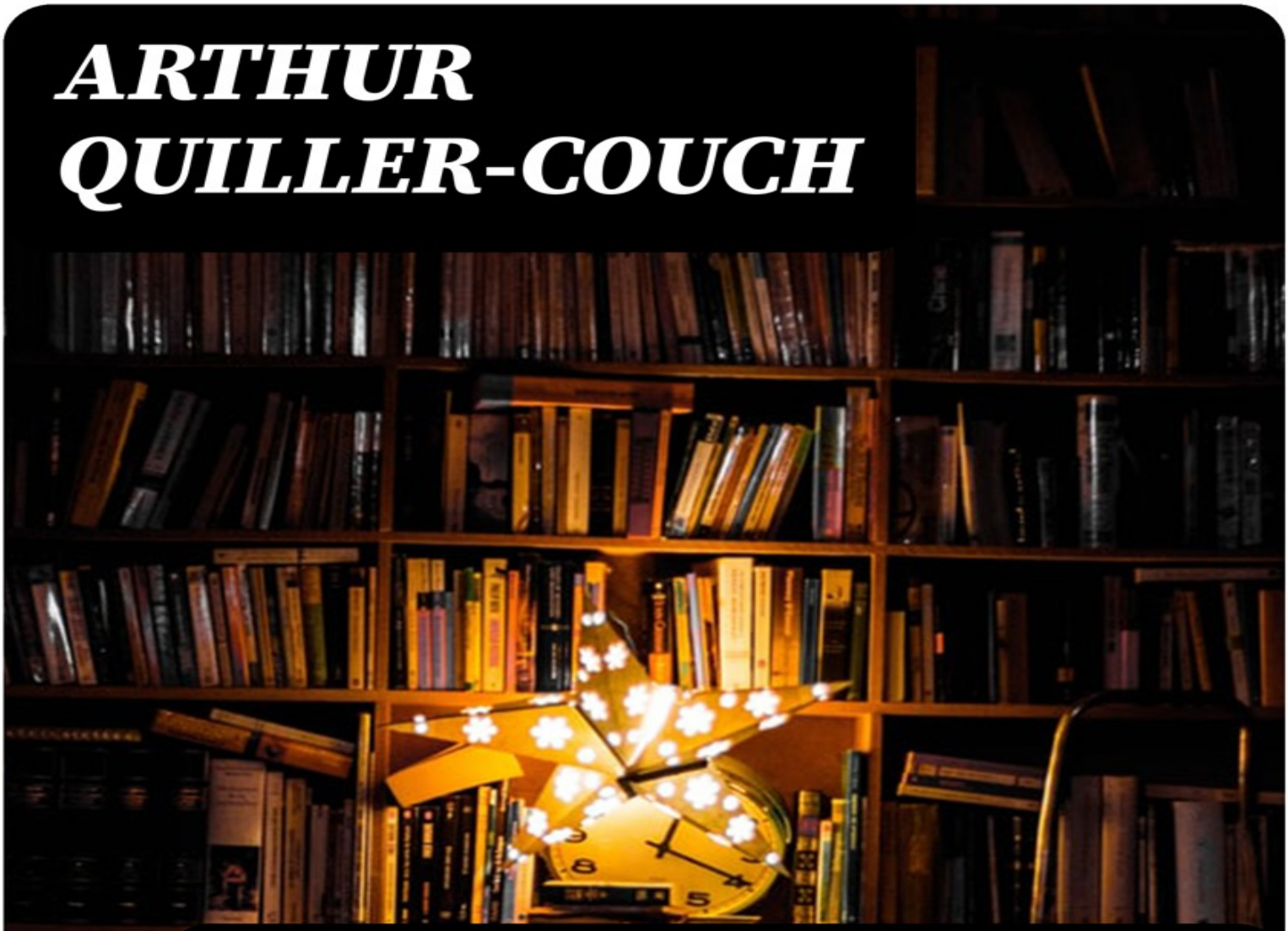
ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH



I SAW THREE SHIPS AND OTHER WINTER TALES

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CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST SHIP.

In those west-country parishes where but a few years back the feast of Christmas Eve was usually prolonged with cake and cider, "crowding," and "geese dancing," till the ancient carols ushered in the day, a certain languor not seldom pervaded the services of the Church a few hours later. Red eyes and heavy, young limbs hardly rested from the *Dashing White Sergeant* and *Sir Roger*, throats husky from a plurality of causes—all these were recognised as proper to the season, and, in fact, of a piece with the holly on the communion rails.

On a dark and stormy Christmas morning as far back as the first decade of the century, this languor was neither more nor less apparent than usual inside the small parish church of Ruan Lanihale, although Christmas fell that year on a Sunday, and dancing should, by rights, have ceased at midnight. The building stands high above a bleak peninsula on the South Coast, and the congregation had struggled up with heads slanted sou'-west against the weather that drove up the Channel in a black fog. Now, having gained shelter,

they quickly lost the glow of endeavour, and mixed in pleasing stupor the humming of the storm in the tower above, its intermittent onslaughts on the leadwork of the southern windows, and the voice of Parson Babbage lifted now and again from the chancel as if to correct the shambling pace of the choir in the west gallery.

"Mark me," whispered Old Zeb Minards, crowder and leader of the musicians, sitting back at the end of the Psalms, and eyeing his fiddle dubiously; "If Sternhold be sober this morning, Hopkins be drunk as a fly, or 'tis t'other way round."

"'Twas middlin' wambly," assented Calvin Oke, the second fiddle—a screw-faced man tightly wound about the throat with a yellow kerchief.

"An' 'tis a delicate matter to cuss the singers when the musicianers be twice as bad."

"I'd a very present sense of being a bar or more behind the fair—that I can honestly vow," put in Elias Sweetland, bending across from the left. Now Elias was a bachelor, and had blown the serpent from his youth up. He was a bald, thin man, with a high leathern stock, and shoulders that sloped remarkably.

"Well, 'taint a suent engine at the best, Elias—that o' yourn," said his affable leader, "nor to be lightly trusted among the proper psa'ms, 'specially since Chris'mas three year, when we sat in the forefront of the gallery, an' you dropped all but the mouthpiece overboard on to Aunt Belovely's bonnet at 'I was glad when they said unto me.'"

"Aye, poor soul. It shook her. Never the same woman from that hour, I do b'lieve. Though I'd as lief you didn't

mention it, friends, if I may say so; for 'twas a bitter portion."

Elias patted his instrument sadly, and the three men looked up for a moment, as a scud of rain splashed on the window, drowning a sentence of the First Lesson.

"Well, well," resumed Old Zeb, "we all have our random intervals, and a drop o' cider in the mouthpieces is no less than Pa'son looks for, Chris'mas mornin's."

"Trew, trew as proverbs."

"Howsever, 'twas cruel bad, that last psa'm, I won't gainsay. As for that long-legged boy o' mine, I keep silence, yea, even from hard words, considerin' what's to come. But 'tis given to flutes to make a noticeable sound, whether tunable or false."

"Terrible shy he looks, poor chap!"

The three men turned and contemplated Young Zeb Minards, who sat on their left and fidgeted, crossing and uncrossing his legs.

"How be feelin', my son?"

"Very whitely, father; very whitely, an' yet very redly."

Elias Sweetland, moved by sympathy, handed across a peppermint drop.

"Hee-hee!" now broke in an octogenarian treble, that seemed to come from high up in the head of Uncle Issy, the bass-viol player; "But cast your eyes, good friends, 'pon a little slip o' heart's delight down in the nave, and mark the flowers 'pon the bonnet nid-nodding like bees in a bell, with unspeakable thoughts."

"'Tis the world's way wi' females."

"I'll wager, though, she wouldn't miss the importance of it—yea, not for much fine gold."

"Well said, Uncle," commented the crowder, a trifle more loudly as the wind rose to a howl outside: "Lord, how this round world do spin! Simme 'twas last week I sat as may be in the corner yonder (I sang bass then), an' Pa'son Babbage by the desk statin' forth my own banns, an' me with my clean shirt collar limp as a flounder. As for your mother, Zeb, nuthin 'ud do but she must dream o' runnin' water that Saturday night, an' want to cry off at the church porch because 'twas unlucky. 'Nothin' shall injuce me, Zeb,' says she, and inside the half hour there she was glintin' fifty ways under her bonnet, to see how the rest o' the maidens was takin' it."

"Hey," murmured Elias, the bachelor; "but it must daunt a man to hear his name loudly coupled wi' a woman's before a congregation o' folks."

"'Tis very intimate," assented Old Zeb. But here the First Lesson ended. There was a scraping of feet, then a clearing of throats, and the musicians plunged into "*O, all ye works of the Lord*."

Young Zeb, amid the moaning of the storm outside the building and the scraping and zooming of the instruments, string and reed, around him, felt his head spin; but whether from the lozenge (that had suffered from the companionship of a twist of tobacco in Elias Sweetland's pocket), or the dancing last night, or the turbulence of his present emotions, he could not determine. Year in and year out, grey morning or white, a gloom rested always on the singers' gallery, cast by the tower upon the south side, that stood

apart from the main building, connected only by the porch roof, as by an isthmus. And upon eyes used to this comparative obscurity the nave produced the effect of a bright parterre of flowers, especially in those days when all the women wore scarlet cloaks, to scare the French if they should invade. Zeb's gaze, amid the turmoil of sound, hovered around one such cloak, rested on a slim back resolutely turned to him, and a jealous bonnet, wandered to the bald scalp of Farmer Tresidder beside it, returned to Calvin Qke's sawing elbow and the long neck of Elias Sweetland bulging with the *fortissimo* of "O ye winds of God," then fluttered back to the red cloak.

These vagaries were arrested by three words from the mouth of Old Zeb, screwed sideways over his fiddle.

"Time—ye sawny!"

Young Zeb started, puffed out his cheeks, and blew a shriller note. During the rest of the canticle his eyes were glued to the score, and seemed on the point of leaving their sockets with the vigour of the performance.

"Sooner thee'st married the better for us, my son," commented his father at the close; "else farewell to psa'mody!"

But Young Zeb did not reply. In fact, what remained of the peppermint lozenge had somehow jolted into his windpipe, and kept him occupied with the earlier symptoms of strangulation.

His facial contortions, though of the liveliest, were unaccompanied by sound, and, therefore, unheeded. The crowder, with his eyes contemplatively fastened on the

capital of a distant pillar, was pursuing a train of reflection upon Church music; and the others regarded the crowder.

"Now supposin', friends, as I'd a-fashioned the wondrous words o' the ditty we've just polished off; an' supposin' a friend o' mine, same as Uncle Issy might he, had a-dropped in, in passin', an' heard me read the same. 'Hullo!' he'd 'a said, 'You've a-put the same words twice over.' 'How's that?' 'How's that? Why, here's *O ye Whales* (pointin' wi' his finger), an' lo! again, *O ye Wells*.' ''T'aint the same,' I'd ha' said. 'Well,' says Uncle Issy, ''tis *spoke* so, anyways'—"

"Crowder, you puff me up," murmured Uncle Issy, charmed with this imaginative and wholly flattering sketch. "No—really now! Though, indeed, strange words have gone abroad before now, touching my wisdom; but I blow no trumpet."

"Such be your very words," the crowder insisted. "Now mark my answer. 'Uncle Issy,' says I, quick as thought, 'you dunderheaded old antic,— leave that to the musicianers. At the word 'whales,' let the music go snorty; an' for wells, gliddery; an' likewise in a moving dulcet manner for the holy an' humble Men o' heart.' Why, 'od rabbet us!—what's wrong wi' that boy?"

All turned to Young Zeb, from whose throat uncomfortable sounds were issuing. His eyes rolled piteously, and great tears ran down his cheeks.

"Slap en 'pon the back, Calvin: he's chuckin'."

"Ay—an' the pa'son at' here endeth!'"

"Slap en, Calvin, quick! For 'tis clunk or stuffle, an' no time to lose."

Down in the nave a light rustle of expectancy was already running from pew to pew as Calvin Oke brought down his open palm with a *whack!* knocking the sufferer out of his seat, and driving his nose smartly against the back-rail in front.

Then the voice of Parson Babbage was lifted: "I publish the Banns of marriage between Zebedee Minards, bachelor, and Ruby Tresidder, spinster, both of this parish. If any of you know cause, or just impediment, why these two persons —"

At this instant the church-door flew open, as if driven in by the wind that tore up the aisle in an icy current. All heads were turned. Parson Babbage broke off his sentence and looked also, keeping his forefinger on the fluttering page. On the threshold stood an excited, red-faced man, his long sandy beard blown straight out like a pennon, and his arms moving windmill fashion as he bawled—

"A wreck! a wreck!"

The men in the congregation leaped up. The women uttered muffled cries, groped for their husbands' hats, and stood up also. The choir in the gallery craned forward, for the church-door was right beneath them. Parson Babbage held up his hand, and screamed out over the hubbub—

"Where's she *to?*"

"Under Bradden Point, an' comin' full tilt for the Raney!"

"Then God forgive all poor sinners aboard!" spoke up a woman's voice, in the moment's silence that followed.

"Is that all you know, Gauger Hocken?"

"Iss, iss: can't stop no longer—must be off to warn the Methodeys!

'Stablished Church first, but fair play's a jewel, say I."

He rushed off inland towards High Lanes, where the meeting-house stood. Parson Babbage closed the book without finishing his sentence, and his audience scrambled out over the graves and forth upon the headland. The wind here came howling across the short grass, blowing the women's skirts wide and straining their bonnet-strings, pressing the men's trousers tight against their shins as they bent against it in the attitude of butting rams and scanned the coast-line to the sou'-west. Ruby Tresidder, on gaining the porch, saw Young Zeb tumble out of the stairway leading from the gallery and run by, stowing the pieces of his flute in his pocket as he went, without a glance at her. Like all the rest, he had clean forgotten the banns.

Now, Ruby was but nineteen, and had seen plenty of wrecks, whereas these banns were to her an event of singular interest, for weeks anticipated with small thrills. Therefore, as the people passed her by, she felt suddenly out of tune with them, especially with Zeb, who, at least, might have understood her better. Some angry tears gathered in her eyes at the callous indifference of her father, who just now was revolving in the porch like a weathercock, and shouting orders east, west, north, and south for axes, hammers, ladders, cart-ropes, in case the vessel struck within reach.

"You, Jim Lewarne, run to the mowhay, hot-foot, an' lend a hand wi' the datchin' ladder, an'—hi! stop!—fetch along my second-best glass, under the Dook o' Cumberland's picter i' the parlour, 'longside o' last year's neck; an'-hi! cuss

the chap—he's gone like a Torpointer! Ruby, my dear, step along an' show en—Why, hello!—"

Ruby, with head down, and scarlet cloak blown out horizontally, was already fighting her way out along the headland to a point where Zeb stood, a little apart from the rest, with both palms shielding his eyes.

"Zeb!"

She had to stand on tip-toe and bawl this into his ear. He faced round with a start, nodded as if pleased, and bent his gaze on the Channel again.

Ruby looked too. Just below, under veils of driving spray, the seas were thundering past the headland into Ruan Cove. She could not see them break, only their backs swelling and sinking, and the puffs of foam that shot up like white smoke at her feet and drenched her gown. Beyond, the sea, the sky, and the irregular coast with its fringe of surf melted into one uniform grey, with just the summit of Bradden Point, two miles away, standing out above the wrack. Of the vessel there was, as yet, no sign.

In Ruby's present mood the bitter blast was chiefly blameworthy for gnawing at her face, and the spray for spoiling her bonnet and taking her hair out of curl. She stamped her foot and screamed again—

"Zeb!"

"What is't, my dear?" he bawled back in her ear, kissing her wet cheek in a preoccupied manner.

She was about to ask him what this wreck amounted to, that she should for the moment sink to nothing in comparison with it. But, at this instant, a small group of men and women joined them, and, catching sight of the faces of

Sarah Ann Nanjulian and Modesty Prowse, her friends, she tried another tack—

"Well, Zeb, no doubt 'twas disappointing for you; but don't 'ee take on so. Think how much harder 'tis for the poor souls i' that ship."

This astute sentence, however, missed fire completely. Zeb answered it with a point-blank stare of bewilderment. The others took no notice of it whatever.

"Hav'ee seen her, Zeb?" called out his father.

"No."

"Nor I nuther. 'Reckon 'tis all over a'ready. I've a-heard afore now," he went on, turning his back to the wind the better to wink at the company, "that 'tis lucky for some folks Gauger Hocken hain't extra spry 'pon his pins. But 'tis a gift that cuts both ways. Be any gone round by Cove Head to look out?"

"Iss, a dozen or more. I saw 'em 'pon the road, a minute back, like emmets runnin'."

"'Twas very nice feelin', I must own—very nice indeed—of Gauger Hocken to warn the church-folk first; and him a man of no faith, as you may say. Hey? What's that? Dost see her, Zeb?"

For Zeb, with his right hand pressing down his cap, now suddenly flung his left out in the direction of Bradden Point. Men and women craned forward.

Below the distant promontory, a darker speck had started out of the medley of grey tones. In a moment it had doubled its size—had become a blur—then a shape. And at length, out of the leaden wrack, there emerged a small

schooner, with tall, raking masts, flying straight towards them.

"Dear God!" muttered some one, while Ruby dug her finger-tips into Zeb's arm.

The schooner raced under bare poles, though a strip or two of canvas streamed out from her fore-yards. Yet she came with a rush like a greyhound's, heeling over the whitened water, close under the cliffs, and closer with every instant. A man, standing on any one of the points she cleared so narrowly, might have tossed a pebble on to her deck.

"Hey, friends, but she'll not weather Gaffer's Rock. By crum! if she does, they may drive her in 'pon the beach, yet!"

"What's the use, i' this sea? Besides, her steerin' gear's broke," answered Zeb, without moving his eyes.

This Gaffer's Rock was the extreme point of the opposite arm of the cove—a sharp tooth rising ten feet or more above high-water mark. As the little schooner came tearing abreast of it, a huge sea caught her broadside, and lifted as if to fling her high and dry. The men and women on the headland held their breath while she hung on its apex. Then she toppled and plunged across the mouth of the cove, quivering. She must have shaved the point by a foot.

"The Raney! the Raney!" shouted young Zeb, shaking off Ruby's clutch.

"The Raney, or else—"

He did not finish his sentence, for the stress of the flying seconds choked down his words. Two possibilities they held, and each big with doom. Either the schooner must dash

upon the Raney—a reef, barely covered at high water, barring entrance to the cove—or avoiding this, must be shattered on the black wall of rock under their very feet. The end of the little vessel was written—all but one word: and that must be added within a short half-minute.

Ruby saw this: it was plain for a child to read. She saw the curded tide, now at half-flood, boiling around the Raney; she saw the little craft swoop down on it, half buried in the seas through which she was being impelled; she saw distinctly one form, and one only, on the deck beside the helm—a form that flung up its hands as it shot by the smooth edge of the reef, a hand's-breadth off destruction. The hands were still lifted as it passed under the ledge where she stood.

It seemed, as she stood there shivering, covering her eyes, an age before the crash came, and the cry of those human souls in their extremity.

When at length she took her hands from her face the others were twenty yards away, and running fast.

CHAPTER II.

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THE SECOND SHIP.

Fate, which had freakishly hurled a ship's crew out of the void upon this particular bit of coast, as freakishly preserved them.

The very excess of its fury worked this wonder. For the craft came in on a tall billow that flung her, as a sling might, clean against the cliff's face, crumpling the bowsprit like paper, sending the foremast over with a crash, and driving a jagged tooth of rock five feet into her ribs beside the breastbone. So, for a moment it left her, securely gripped and bumping her stern-post on the ledge beneath. As the next sea deluged her, and the next, the folk above saw her crew fight their way forward up the slippery deck, under sheets of foam. With the fifth or six wave her mizen-mast went; she split open amidships, pouring out her cargo. The stern slipped off the ledge and plunged twenty fathoms down out of sight. And now the fore-part alone remained—a piece of deck, the stump of the foremast, and five men clinging in a tangle of cordage, struggling up and toppling back as each successive sea soused over them.

Three men had detached themselves from the group above the cliff, and were sidling down its face cautiously, for the hurricane now flattened them back against the rock, now tried to wrench them from it; and all the way it was a tough battle for breath. The foremost was Jim Lewarne, Farmer Tresidder's hind, with a coil of the farmer's rope slung round him. Young Zeb followed, and Elias Sweetland, both similarly laden.

Less than half-way down the rock plunged abruptly, cutting off farther descent.

Jim Lewarne, in a cloud of foam, stood up, slipped the coil over his head, and unwound it, glancing to right and left. Now Jim amid ordinary events was an acknowledged fool, and had a wife to remind him of it; but perch him out of

female criticism, on a dizzy foothold such as this, and set him a desperate job, and you clarified his wits at once. This eccentricity was so notorious that the two men above halted in silence, and waited.

Jim glanced to right and left, spied a small pinnacle of rock about three yards away, fit for his purpose, sidled towards it, and, grasping, made sure that it was firm. Next, reeving one end of the rope into a running noose, he flung it over the pinnacle, and with a tug had it taut. This done, he tilted his body out, his toes on the ledge, his weight on the rope, and his body inclined forward over the sea at an angle of some twenty degrees from the cliff.

Having by this device found the position of the wreck, and judging that his single rope would reach, he swung back, gained hold of the cliff with his left hand, and with his right caught and flung the leaded end far out. It fell true as a bullet, across the wreck. As it dropped, a sea almost swept it clear; but the lead hitched in a tangle of cordage by the port cathead; within twenty seconds the rope was caught and made fast below.

All was now easy. At a nod from Jim young Zeb passed down a second line, which was lowered along the first by a noose. One by one the whole crew—four men and a cabin-boy—were hauled up out of death, borne off to the vicarage, and so pass out of our story.

Their fate does not concern us, for this reason—men with a narrow horizon and no wings must accept all apparent disproportions between cause and effect. A railway collision has other results besides wrecking an ant-hill, but the wise ants do not pursue these in the Insurance Reports. So it only

concerns us that the destruction of the schooner led in time to a lovers' difference between Ruby and young Zeb—two young people of no eminence outside of these pages. And, as a matter of fact, her crew had less to do with this than her cargo.

She had been expressly built by Messrs. Taggs & Co., a London firm, in reality as a privateer (which explains her raking masts), but ostensibly for the Portugal trade; and was homeward bound from Lisbon to the Thames, with a cargo of red wine and chestnuts. At Falmouth, where she had run in for a couple of days, on account of a damaged rudder, the captain paid off his extra hands, foreseeing no difficulty in the voyage up Channel. She had not, however, left Falmouth harbour three hours before she met with a gale that started her steering-gear afresh. To put back in the teeth of such weather was hopeless; and the attempt to run before it ended as we know.

When Ruby looked up, after the crash, and saw her friends running along the headland to catch a glimpse of the wreck, her anger returned. She stood for twenty minutes at least, watching them; then, pulling her cloak closely round her, walked homewards at a snail's pace. By the church gate she met the belated Methodists hurrying up, and passed a word or two of information that sent them panting on. A little beyond, at the point where the peninsula joins the mainland, she faced round to the wind again for a last glance. Three men were following her slowly down the ridge with a burden between them. It was the first of the rescued crew—a lifeless figure wrapped in oil-skins, with one arm