

The Captain of the Christopher Duggan.

BY J. OLIVIER CURWOOD.

"FATHER is dead!"

Above the cracking and snapping of the ice-bound timber outside and the thunder of the sea as it packed the little ice-devils closer about the sinking vessel, the voice of the girl rose firm, almost triumphant, in the ears of the haggard, white-faced men who stood gripping their axes and ice-hooks under the glow of the swinging cabin light. Their watery eyes caught the indistinct white of the sheet under which the captain lay. Beside it stood Duggan's girl. Her fallen hair glistened in frozen strands. Her face was death-like, with a red spot on one cheek where a chunk of ice had bitten it. But her eyes were big, beautiful, fearless, as she scanned the faces of the men.

Instinctively old Ramsay put a half frozen hand to his gray head, and pulled off his stiffened cap. Even in this last moment he cherished the old custom of the Lakes.

"I'm glad, Jean girl," he said. "It's easier for a dead man to go down than a live un!"

Outside there was a terrific crash, as another dozen tons of ice-bound cedar loosened its hold of the Christopher Duggan. One by one the members of the crew bared their heads with Ramsay, until only the youngest of them, the boy from Duluth, who had never shipped before in his life, stood there with his head covered, staring straight into the eyes of the girl. Big tears rolled down his cheeks, his purple lips seemed to form a word; then he dropped his head with the others.

"Father's gone!" cried Duggan's girl, her voice half drowned in the thundering rush of water and ice outside. "But he didn't know he was going down, an' he said for me to take the ship, me 'n' Ramsay. There's nothing to keep us from the boats now, if the cedars don't hold."

"If they do hold, Jean, all the devils from 'ere to the Soo can't pull us down! But they won't, girl—ear that?" shouted Ramsay.

A rumbling shudder passed through the Christopher Duggan, and a roar as of distant thunder came to the ears of the men as another avalanche of cedar posts pitched over her side.

"Keep them as long as you can, and me 'n' Jed 'll fix the boats!" commanded the girl.

The men who were daring one last trip across Superior at double pay gripped their axes. As they hurled themselves out into the blackness of the bitter storm, with gray-headed Ramsay leading them, the boy from Duluth caught one of Jean's slim hands for a moment between both his own big bony ones.

"You dassen't do it—I mean you mustn't, Jean!" he said. "You stay here. I'll fix the boats, an' then—then I'll come back for you!"

"Jed, you do as I tell you!" retorted the girl, high above the tumult of the crunching ice and tumbling cedar. "I'm cap'n now, an' you're too much afraid to do it alone. I ain't forgot you was a coward yesterday!"

"I warn't a coward, Jean—"

The boy's expostulation died away in a sudden furious gust that sent the cabin door crashing inward. The girl steadied herself against the gale, her long hair whipping back for an instant into the young man's face. Then she forged ahead into the darkness, out of which came the stentorian voice of Ramsay, who saw her figure swaying onward between him and the light in the cabin.

"One of the boats is gone, Jean—other's clear!" he shouted.

"Then keep to the ice!" returned the girl.

The barge rode smoothly now. She seemed to cut the waves like an iron wedge, and the way she hung in the seas, a dead weight without a tremor, put a thrill of hope into the heart of the green boy from Duluth. But Duggan's girl knew what that steadiness meant.

Ordinarily a dying man is quiet in his last moments. A schooner always is when the little ice-devils have almost got it down. For sixteen hours they had been freezing to the sides of the Christopher Duggan. They hung in solid tons from her deck-houses and rudder. They had crept up her sides until they smothered her outlines of wood, and when now and then a part of the cedar cargo pitched over into the sea, it was like a mass of broken ice that went. Everywhere the ice-devils had got their hold, and the Duggan continued to settle inch

also Faulkner

by inch. Above the regular swish of the waves came the sounds of hacking axes, like the beats of a death-watch at one's bed-head.

The girl joined the men. One of them slipped and fell at her feet, but it was too late to turn Samaritan now. The frozen sailor struggled to his feet again and gripped his ax, but his blows were weak and ineffectual. In the glimmer of the lanterns tied to the deck Jean saw Ramsay fall helplessly down from the cedars, a coil of rope tangled about his arm. His gray head was bare, his beard and hair frozen stiff, and his face was filled with an awful agony. His fingers refused to respond as he tried to grip the girl's arm.

"I can't tie 'em any more!" he cried. "We ain't goin' to hold the cedars much longer!"

"How long?"

The girl dropped her ax. Her voice was almost metallic in its firmness.

"Ten minutes; mebbey less," said Ramsay.

"Then hustle the men into the cabin, and thaw 'em out. We've drifted close in to the Michigan shore, an' we'll make it in the boat!"

Duggan's girl came in last. Never had the lad from Duluth seen her eyes so big and dark; never had he seen her face so white. Somehow he did not feel afraid at all when near Jean. If the boat went down, and he knew that it would go soon, he had determined to do a desperate thing. Duggan's girl should go down in his arms. It would be better lying down there in one of the deep pits of Superior's bottom if such a thing as Jean were near him.

He found himself wondering in that moment if all the women of the Lakes were as splendid as she; and then his dream was interrupted by that same cold, passionless voice telling Ramsay that it was time to go to the boat. At that moment it was a disappointment. He would rather have met his end there, with Jean, than out in the cold and alone. Looking straight at Duggan's girl, he said so.

"I'd rather stay here, Jean!"

"Are you afraid to go, or is it because you ain't afraid to stay?"

There was something in Jean's voice that sounded queer. Just a flash of softness came into her eyes, and quickly disappeared again. Then she pushed old Ramsay through the door, and followed. Two of the sailors had axes, and the girl brought another.

Under the broad stern of the barge the waves beat mercilessly against the ice-hung rudder. Now and then there was a lull; and in one of these the boat swung down, and two sailors were in it before another of the heavier waves came to beat its ribs against the ice. Then Ramsay seized Jean's arm, this time firmly.

"You next, Jean girl!"

"Not now, Ramsay!" she cried, jerking her arm free. "Have you forgot that father's in there? Ain't it my right to be the last to leave the boat?"

"You'd better go, Jean," urged the boy from Duluth, close up to her ear. "I'll be the last!"

"You won't!" shrieked the girl. "Jed, git into that boat, and you, too, Ramsay. Ain't this my boat now, and ain't it my right to leave father last?"

Without a word old Ramsay clambered over the side, and the boy followed.

"You ready?" called down the girl.

"Only a second, Jean. There—

now—"

In the light of the lanterns Jean's ax flashed above her head. Once, twice, it rose and fell, and the crew of the Christopher Duggan disappeared in the blackness of the sea.

"Jean! Jean!" came a despairing cry.

"I'm goin' to stay with father!" shouted the girl through the trumpet of her hands. "Good-by—good-by!"

The crash of another mass of cedar as it slipped off the barge drowned the voices from the small boat. Fearing that the end was very near, Duggan's girl hurried back and sat down beside the white-sheeted cot in the cabin. Her eyes were softer now, and with her chin in her hands she listened unfeelingly for that last gurgling swish of waters which would tell her that the nose of the Christopher Duggan was going under.

The water dripped from her long, beautiful hair, and once or twice a phantom smile seemed to soften her lips, as she thought of the clumsy deck-hand from Duluth. The seconds passed—they seemed like minutes to the waiting girl—and only the recurring sounds of slipping cedar posts came where there should have been that last triumphant gurgle of the little ice-devils. Then there came another sound, a great, human cry of "Jean, Jean!"

The door burst open, and in it stood the boy from Duluth, dripping with ice and water, and with a face that was as white as death could make it.

"Jean, Jean!" he cried again. "I've come back!"

With a wild cry the girl sprang to her feet and held out her arms blindly.

"Jed, you went out in the boat—"

"An' I jumped back, Jean!"

Through the open door there came an awful sound. It was a soothing, rustling sound, like that made by the swish of crunched ice against the sides of a copper vessel, only long-continued. The girl stood as if transfixed, and unconsciously she lifted her eyes upward.

"Jean, is it coming?" asked the boy in a low, thrilling voice. The girl nodded. "Then listen, Jean! I come back to die with you; for I'd rather die with you here than live out there! But I want you to go down in my arms, Jean—will you?"

The soft light came again into Jean's beautiful eyes as she put her arms around the boy's shoulders.

"I couldn't die in braver ones, Jed," said she.

The boy from Duluth held her closely. He could feel her heart beating against his own, and a little fearfully he brought his rough cheek down until it pressed against the girl's. Somehow he forgot to listen to the ominous sound outside, and kissed her, very gently.

One, two, three minutes passed, and the girl lifted her head. There was a pink glow in either cheek now, as she gently pushed the boy back.

"Jed, I guess I was wrong. The time ain't come yet!"

As if to argue for the young lover, there came a tremendous shock that seemed to rend the barge from end to end. For a minute the Christopher Duggan tossed in the seas as if a charge of dynamite had lifted her out of the water. Her stern shot up with a suddenness that pitched Jean and her companion violently against the wall of the cabin. Then she settled again, and the vessel rolled violently, as if caught in another and fiercer gale.

"Jed, Jed!" shrieked the girl. "The ice has broke!"

The landsman caught the meaning of the words. In a flash he was out at the door and on the deck. The wind blew fiercely over his head. He could hear the cedars slipping, but it was only a thin spray of the wave-crests that dashed into his face now. He found difficulty in keeping his feet, and out of his throat came a yell of joy. With the cabin lantern in her hand, Jean stumbled out to him, and together they held it over

the ice-smothered rail of the barge. The Christopher Duggan was up four feet out of the water.

No word came from the lips of the girl. She seemed limp and helpless now, and caught hold of her companion for support. In turn, the lad from Duluth put an arm about her, and half carried her back into the cabin. Then he took the arm away, and Duggan's girl fell upon her knees beside the dead man under the sheet.

After that Jed went out and chopped and chopped, and tied the cedars down, and hung lights as high up the slippery masts as he could climb. When he came back, a sickly gray was climbing into the sky, and by straining his eyes he could make out the white crests of the waves a few fathoms out. The girl still knelt beside the cot—asleep, the boy thought—so he went out again, and watched the coming of the day from the sheltered side of the cedars. His vision grew wider and wider, until half a mile away, deep down, and pounding steadily toward the Soo, he caught the outlines of a huge steel freighter.

When Jean awoke, the landsman was seated near her, calmly smoking a pipe. There was a good fire in the stove, and the room was warm and exceedingly comfortable. Moreover, the Christopher Duggan seemed to be riding squarely in the sea. As the girl jumped to her feet, and brushed the thick hair back from her face, the boy dropped his pipe to the floor and caught her gently by the arm.

"Come here, Jean!" He led her to the door, and opened it. A hundred fathoms ahead the steel freighter was hurrying on her last trip to the Soo. "We're in tow," he explained.

The wind caught Jean's hair and whipped it about his face. The boy from Duluth half put his hands up to it, then hesitated, and caught Duggan's girl in his arms.

"Jean, Jean!" he cried passionately. "You didn't go down in my arms, an' we'll be at the Soo to-night! I love you so I almost wish we'd died together—if you're going to send me away. What are you going to do, Jean?"

For answer the girl turned about and drew her arms tightly around the boy.

Ahead, the whistle of the big steel freighter blew three screeching blasts to something that looked like a ship in the mist of the morning.

"Look out—I'm coming with a tow—I'm coming with a tow—I'm coming with a tow!" they said.