

SHORT STORY AMERICA

THE CAPTAIN OF THE SUSAN DREW

JACK LONDON

I

A SUNSET of gilt and blue and rose palpitated on the horizon. A tap-estry of misty rain, draping downward from indefinite clouds, obscured the eastern line of sea and sky. Midway between, slightly nearer to the rain, a painted rainbow reached almost to the zenith. So lofty was its arch that the ends seemed to curve inward to the ocean in a vain attempt to complete the perfect circle. Into this triumphal arch, toward the blue twilight beyond, sailed an open boat.

Nor did ever more strangely freighted boat float on the Pacific. In the sternsheets, on the weather side, a stupid-looking Norwegian sailor, in uniform of a quartermaster, steered with one hand while with the other he held the sheet of the spritsail. From a holster, belted about his waist, peeped the butt of a business-like revolver. His cap lay on his knees, removed for the sake of coolness; and his short flaxen hair was prodigiously ridged over a bruise of recent origin. Beside the sailor sat two women. The nearer one was comfortably stout and matronly, with large, dark eyes, full, direct, human. Her shoulders were protected against sunburn by a man's light overcoat. Because of the heat, this was open and unbuttoned, revealing the décolleté and rich materials of dinner dress. Jewels glinted in the hair, at the neck, and on the fingers. Beside her was a young woman of two- or three-and-twenty, likewise décolleté, sun-shielded by a strip of stained oilskin. Her eyes, as well as the straight, fine nose and the line of the red curve of the not too passionate mouth, advertised the closest relationship with the first woman. In the opposite sternsheet and on the first cross-seat, lolled three men in black trousers and dinner jackets. Their heads were protected by small squares of stained oilskin similar to that which lay across the young woman's shoulders. One, a young-ster of

eighteen, wore an expression of desperate yearning; the second, half as old again, talked with the daughter; the third, middle-aged and complacent, devoted himself to the mother.

Amidships, on the bottom alongside the centerboard case, sat two dark-eyed women, as evidently maids as their nationality was respectively the one Spanish and the other Italian. On the other side of the centerboard, very straight-backed and erect, was an unmistakable English valet, with gaze always set on the middle-aged gentleman to anticipate any want or order.

For'ard of the centerboard and just aft the mast-step, crouched two hard-featured Chinese, both with broken heads swathed in bloody sweat-cloths, both clad in dungaree garments grimed and blackened with oil and coal dust.

When it is considered that hundreds of weary sea-leagues intervened between the open boat and the nearest land, the inappropriateness of costume of half of its occupants may be appreciated.

"Well, brother Willie, what would you rather have or go swim-ming!" teased the young woman.

"A cigarette, if Harrison were n't such a pincher," the youth answered bitterly.

"I 've only four left," Harrison said. "You 've smoked the whole case. I've had only two."

Temple Harrison was a joker. He winked privily at Patty Gifford, drew a curved silver case from his hip pocket, and carefully counted the four cigarettes. Willie Gifford watched with so ferocious infatuation that his sister cried out:

"B-r-r! Stop it! You make me shiver. You look positively cannibal-istic."

"That's all right for you," was the brother's retort. "You don't know what tobacco means, or you 'd look cannibalistic yourself. You will, anyway," he concluded ominously, "after a couple of days more. I noticed you weren't a bit shy of taking a bigger cup of water than the rest when Harrison passed it around. I was n't asleep."

Patty flushed guiltily.

"It was only a sip," she pleaded.

Harrison took out one cigarette, handed it over, and snapped the case shut.

"Blackmailer!" he hissed.

But Willie Gifford was oblivious. Already, with trembling fingers, he had lighted a match and was drawing the first inhalation deep into his lungs. On his face was a vacuous ecstasy.

"Everything will come out all right," Mrs. Gifford was saying to Sedley Brown, who sat opposite her in the sternsheets.

"Certainly; after the miracle of last night, being saved by some passing ship is the merest bagatelle," he agreed. "It was a miracle. I cannot understand now how our party remained intact and got away in the one boat. And if it had n't been for the purser, Peyton would n't have been saved, nor your maids."

"Nor would we, if it hadn't been for dear brave Captain Ashley," Mrs. Gifford took up. "It was he, and the first officer."

"They were heroes," Sedley Brown praised warmly. "But still, there could have been so few saved, I don't see. . . ."

"I don't see why you don't see, with you and mother the heaviest stockholders in the line," Willie Gifford dashed in. "Why shouldn't they have made a special effort? It was up to them."

Temple Harrison smiled to himself. Between them, Mrs. Gifford and Sedley Brown owned the majority of the stock of the Asiatic Mail—the flourishing steamship line which old Silas Gifford had built for the purpose of feeding his railroad with through freight from China and Japan. Mrs. Gifford had married his son, Seth, and the stock at the same time.

"I am sure, Willie, we were given no unfair consideration," Mrs. Gifford reproved. "Of course shipwrecks are attended by confusion and disorder, and strong measures are necessary to stay a panic. We were very fortunate, that is all."

"I was n't asleep," Willie replied. "And all I 've got to say is it's up to you to make the board of directors promote Captain Ashley to be Commodore—that is, if he ain't dead and gone, which I guess he is."

"As I was saying," Mrs. Gifford addressed Sedley Brown, "the worst is past. It is scarcely a matter of hardship ere we shall be rescued. The weather is delightful, and the nights are not the slightest bit chilly. Depend upon it, Willie, Captain Ashley shall not be forgotten, nor the first officer and purser, nor—" here she turned with a smile to the quartermaster—"nor shall Gronwold go unrewarded."

"A penny for your thoughts," Patty challenged Harrison several minutes later. He startled and looked at her, shook off his absentmindedness with a laugh and declined the offer.

"For he had been revisioning the horrors of less than twenty-four hours before. It had happened at dinner. The crash of collision had come just as coffee was serving. Yes, there had been confusion and disorder, if so could be termed the madness of a thousand souls in the face of imminent death. He saw again the silk-gowned Chinese table stewards join in the jam at the foot of the stairway, where blows were already being struck and women and children trampled. He remembered, as his own party, led by Captain Ashley, worked its devious way up from deck to deck, seeing the white officers, engineers, and quartermasters buckling on their revolvers as they ran to their positions. Nor would he ever forget the eruption from the bowels of the great ship of the hundreds of Chinese stokers and trimmers, nor the half a thousand ter-rified steerage

passengers—Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans, coolies and land-creatures all stark mad and frantic in desire to live.

Not all the deaths would be due to drowning, he thought grimly, as he recollected the crack of revolvers and sharp barking of automatic pistols, the thuds of clubs and boat-stretchers on heads, and the grunts of men going down under the silent thrusts of sheath-knives.

Mrs. Gifford might believe what she wished to believe, but he, for one, was deeply grateful to his lucky star which made him a member of the only party of passengers that was shown any consideration. Consideration! He could still see the protesting English duke flung neck and crop from the boat deck to the raging steerage fighting up the ladders. And there was number four boat, launched by inexperienced hands, spilling its passengers into the sea and hanging perpendicularly in the davits. The white sailors who belonged to it and should have launched it had been impressed by Captain Ashley. Then there was the American Consul-General to Siam—that was just before the electric lights went out—with wife, nurses, and children, shouting his official importance in Captain Ashley's face and being directed to number four boat hanging on end.

Yes, Captain Ashley surely deserved the commodoreship of the Asiatic Mail—if he lived. But that he survived, Temple Harrison could not believe. He remembered the outburst of battle—advertisement that the boat deck had been carried—which came just as their boat was lowering away. Of its crew, only Gronwold, with a broken head, was in it. The rest did not slide down the falls, as was intended. Doubtlessly they had gone down before the rush of Asiatics, and so had Captain Ashley, though first he had cut the falls and shouted down to them to shove clear for their lives.

And they had, with a will, shoved clear. Harrison recalled how had pressed the end of an oar against the steel side of the Mingalia and afterward rowed insanely to the accompaniment of leaping bodies falling into the sea astern. And when well clear, he remembered how Gronwold had suddenly stood up and laid about with the heavy tiller overside, until Patty made him desist. Mutely taking the rain of blows on their heads and clinging steadfastly to the gunwale, were the two Chinese stokers who now crouched forward by the mast. No; Willie Gifford had not been asleep. He, too, had

pressed an oar-blade against the Mingalia's side and rowed blisters into his soft hands. But Mrs. Gifford was right. There were several things it would be well to forget.