

hurricane that tore our remaining canvas to ribbons. Edwards and I took turns at the wheel—for none of the Coolies could be trusted—and it was fatiguing work steering the light, ballasted vessel under bare poles. She was tossed about like an egg shell as the huge combers crept up astern, passed us and went on; but though we yawed two points each side of our course, fortunately we shipped no water, and as it was a dry, winter storm, there was no rain. Then we made a landfall.

It was at midday. I had been wrenching my muscles all the forenoon at the wheel while Edwards slept, and when he came up after dinner I called his attention to the thin line of blue on the horizon ahead.

"It's the coast of Honshu," I said, "but I don't know what part. I suggest that we round to under a tarpaulin and ride it out until this goes down, and we can ask of some fishermen."

"Or until we drift ashore and go to pieces," he answered, taking the spokes. "Go down and enter up your log book. Enter that land we see, and make sure of the date. This is the fourteenth of November. There's only one day left on the insurance."

"This is the fifteenth, according to the log," I said. "We jumped a day in crossing the hundredth and eightieth meridian. The insurance expired this noon."

"It's the fourteenth," he rejoined, angrily. "I've got a calendar. I can count days if I can't navigate. Rig your tarpaulin and I'll bring her up. Then get your dinner and get what sleep you can. We may have to depend on the anchors."

It was his first departure from the customary cool civility, and I did not care to correct his mistake. In crossing that meridian from the east to the west we had jumped a day to get into the time east from Greenwich, but I could not have made him understand. It was his vessel, his risk, and his foolishness in insisting on the monthly, instead of the thirty day, clause in the policy which would have given him the day that he counted on. However, I obeyed him; I rigged the tarpaulin—a square patch of canvas—in the port main rigging, and when he had put the wheel down the pressure of wind upon it not only steadied the craft, but kept her nose slightly up to the seas, so that she bobbed up and down, merely drifting sidewise about three miles an hour. This accomplished I went down, entered up the log—being careful of the date, as instructed—and before sitting down to the wretched dinner waiting for me, took a generous swig of his grog. When I had finished and opened my door to turn in, Tom, who had been lying in my berth, sprang out of the room and into Edwards's, no doubt to escape the chill draught from the open deadlight—now on the weather side. This angered me the more. I closed the deadlight, and before wedging my door partly open for ventilation, recklessly took another drink of the rum, then turned in.

It was the last drink I have ever taken.

I wakened—or rather came to a half-consciousness—with the crashing of riven timbers in my ears, the waning light of the afternoon streaming through the closed deadlight, and the pungent, poisonous smell of gas in my nostrils. I was not breathing, but, with the exercise of all my strength, managed to roll out of my berth to the floor. There the air was a trifle sweeter, and after a half inhalation, I crawled to the door. It was closed and locked from the outside. I turned to the gas jet over my small desk, noticing, even in this extremity, that the log book was gone. Then I saw that the thumb cock of the gas fixture was gone, too. It had been secured in place with a screw, which had been removed while I slept. With a last effort of strength I staggered to open the deadlight over

my berth, but I did not reach it. Tom was in the berth, stretched at full length, and feebly moved as my hand fell upon him in lurching over the berth.

I wakened again, breathing fresh, sweet air, but with my whole body saturated with agony that centered in my face, neck and hands. My hair was gone, my skin blistered, but my eyes were not injured. Through my puffed lids I could see, as I rose from the floor, a thin pencil of flame extending above and below the hole in the gas fixture. And by this illumination—for it was dark without—I saw that the rotten door had been blown outward, and that the cat, its upper side denuded of fur, lay dead in the berth. Why I was not killed myself by that explosion of gas in a closed room I can only explain by the fact that my body received the pressure on all sides at once, and why my eyes were not burned from my head, by the wonderful involuntary quickness with which eyelids will close. As a boy I had shut my eyes against an explosion of powder six inches before my face.

First extinguishing a few smouldering sparks on the edges of my bedding, I went on deck, where the cold wind cut me like a million red-hot knives. It was black darkness, but I could see that the boat was gone, and that green seas were washing across the deserted deck. But the crashing of timbers had ended, and satisfied that the old hulk would not break up immediately, I went back and swathed my face, neck and hands with cloths drenched in paint oil. Then I gave poor Tom a sea burial, and put in the rest of the night thinking—for sleep was impossible.

Whether or not Edwards had planned an insurance job at the beginning I could not determine, but he must have squared away for the beach soon after I had turned in; for the vessel could not have drifted so far before dark. And whether or not he had purposely encouraged my drinking to my own destruction was beyond me; yet he certainly had taken advantage of my condition to remove my gas cock and lock me in to die of asphyxiation, trusting that the wreck would break up in that terrific sea before the locked door or the tinkered gas burner could be discovered. He had possibly placed the cat in with me to die as well, and his previous kindness to the animal, his civility to me, and his laxity about drinking were part of the general plan. I could only guess at these things; but what I knew for a fact was that, if he had reached the beach and saved his own life, he was impoverished. For he had lost his schooner and the insurance had expired. Yet what I could not even guess at was what had caused the explosion. Edwards could not have set it off from without, and I had struck no matches.

It was in the hospital at Yokohama, where I was taken by fishermen who rescued me next day, that this last puzzle was solved. The American Consul, a white-bearded, well-preserved and well-spoken man, visited me for my deposition. And as he talked, and as I looked at him through my swollen eyelids, fleeting memories—half formed and intangible—came to me. I had heard his voice, somewhere. I had seen that face, and that beard.

"We've got him in jail," he was saying, as I grappled with these elusive pictures of the mind, "and he is putting up a great protest about a drunk mate and a falsified log book. But Lloyd's will prosecute him for attempted barratry, and I'll help—not so much on your account, for there's no doubt you were drunk, but on account of that cat. It's the meanness of it. A man who will ill-treat a dumb animal is simply mean—mean enough to steal the cross off a donkey's back. That cat saved your life. I've puzzled it out. You must have struck a spark from its back."



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