

A Sailor's Wife

By Frank H. Shaw

Should the Men on the Sinking Ship Be Rescued and the Sick Wife Be Allowed to Die? Should She Live and the Others Perish?

It was altogether against the company's regulations, as the marine superintendent took pains to state, but on account of Capt. Brentwood's good service the request should be granted.

"Only, it mustn't establish a precedent," he was informed.

"Don't intend it should," Brentwood made answer. "But I had to ask. Being married yourself you'll understand my feelings, sir. I'm all against carrying women at sea at the best of times—it's no place for 'em. I served my time with a skipper whose wife accompanied him every last, blessed trip he made—he couldn't call his soul his own. Old Squeaker Wilnot couldn't. She found fault with everything; ran the ship. Didn't like the color of the mate's hair, and got him fired at Frisco. O, yes, there isn't room for women aboard an ordinary ship. With liners it's different, because they make arrangements; but in a freighter—"

"If you'd told me your views before," the superintendent said, smothering a grin, "I might have refused permission. We men have to stick by one another whatever comes, in these days, else where'd we be? But it isn't too late—"

"It is too late, sir. Permission's been granted. You know my wife, sir; but you don't know her as well as I do. I could no more go to her now and say she wasn't to make this coming voyage with me than I could commit barratry. I'm a bit addicted to blushing, for one thing; she'd smell a rat at once. No; she will have to go. I suppose in a way I'm glad."

"There's such a thing as an official letter from the company, you know, Brentwood. Canceling earlier promises, eh—so forth? It could be worked. Mrs. Brentwood would not be able to find fault with that."

Couldn't she? That shows how little you know her. There are remarkably few things Mrs. Brentwood cannot find fault with when she is in the mood, let me say. Not that she does it nastily. He coughed, as though aware that he had conveyed a wrong impression of a woman with whom, in spite of many years' married life, he was still much in love. But he was, like many men, somewhat prone to speak with affected cynicism of his real deeper feelings.

"Mind you, we're making an unusual exception in your favor, Brentwood." The superintendent believed strongly in keeping the line's employes constantly aware of the debt of obligation they owed the firm. "And your having your wife aboard mustn't interfere in the least with the ship's work. There'll be trouble if anything of the sort happens."

"There'll be nothing of the sort happen. I've never allowed anything to stand in the way of Buntline & Spinnaker's interests, as you know."

"It's remembering that that caused us to give the permission. But, speaking as a friend, if you'd really rather not—well, I'll be happy to do all I can." But Capt. Brentwood sternly refused the proffered mediation, and by the way of clinching the matter proceeded to remove certain wall decorations from the bulkheads of his cabin. There was nothing whatever wrong with the pictures he took down, but his wife had her own ideas concerning adornments, and he wished to please her.

Then he went home and announced the news. Seeing the growing light of happiness in Mrs. Brentwood's eyes, he felt extraordinarily glad that he had not availed himself of the superintendent's offered assistance. Although, on principle, and by reason of youthful experience—the experience that clings to the male mind through many years—he was opposed generally to the idea of women aboard ship, with his wife it was entirely different. Maisie Brentwood was different from the few other women with whom he had come in contact during his almost monastic life at sea. She was clinging, soft souled, and it was her faith in him that made Brentwood refuse to treat her as nine men out of 10 of his acquaintance would have done. Maisie had established for her abiding comfort an ideal man, worthy of all the confidence and worship of her trusting soul; and that man was the Brentwood of her fancy. Since ordinary male humanity endeavors to live up to the ideals of those with whom he is thrown in contact, Brentwood invariably thought of what might meet with Maisie's approval before committing himself to definite action. Morally and professionally he suffered nothing at all from this course of conduct;

and the pair of them remained sweethearts.

"I'm mighty glad I managed to bring it off," he said. They were sitting in one chair before the fire as he spoke, although they had been man and wife for a goodly number of years. "It must be pretty lonely for you when I'm away at sea. I expect it's the loneliness that's made you look so pale and peaked." She smiled bravely at him, determined to speak no word of the curious little gnawing pain that occasionally troubled her.

"Six months' running about the seas will bring the color back and do you all the good in the world," he went on. "We'll make a sort of honeymoon of it, eh? Come to think of it, we never had a real honeymoon."

"A honeymoon with a middle-aged wife!" she scoffed. "Am I looking so sick as you say?"

He kissed fleeting roses into her cheeks. Their conversation fell to whispers; Maisie laughed once or twice. She spoke of the joy of being in constant companionship with this man, whose wife she had been for fifteen years, and who was yet, in many respects, a stranger to her; for the seaman's mate must perforce be widow for 11 months out of every dozen. Listening, Brentwood felt a touch of indignation against the marine superintendent trouble him. What right had Massey to make suggestions in the way he had done? It didn't follow that because his own wife was a bit of a brimstone, other men's wives were tarred with the same brush! Yes, Capt. Brentwood was glad he had held out—insisted on carrying his wife. Maisie wasn't the sort to interfere with the customary discipline of the Wanama. She would adapt herself to sea conditions and prove a real help. He was conscious of warm and soothing glows running through him as he pictured dark, black nights of fog and rain and driving spindrift, when he could steal an hour from the bridge to slip below to his cabin, where Maisie would await him, with bright eyes and understanding smiles.

He spent more money than he could well afford in the days that intervened before the Wanama sailed, in buying such cabin adornments as he fancied might please his wife. He laid in extra table delicacies with a lavish hand, and bought the cook an entirely new and up-to-date cookery book. He took the cabin steward to task, and said that the old custom of waiting at table in unclean shirt sleeves must cease forthwith. He set the carpenter to work to paint out saloon and cabin, and hinted that extra luxurious deck chairs might be considered. His officers noticed that a new humanity was growing in their skipper; he took a personal interest in their affairs, and was generous in the way of leave ashore.

But Brentwood believed that the Wanama was not nearly well enough equipped when that stout steamer passed through the pier heads and entered the open roadstead.

"I think she's perfect," Maisie Brentwood said. She had recently stowed away certain glaring atrocities of cushions and curtains that offended her taste, but it may be that there were spots of moisture on the discarded adornments, too; because she realized the genuine affection that had dictated their purchase. "I'm going to be happier than ever I've been in all my life."

She laid a hand to her side, where the pain was fretting, and smiled bravely. She made no mention of the roughness of the fare that was served to her for her first meal aboard; but when Brentwood went back to the bridge, she engaged herself in lengthy conversation with the steward, and, under his sympathetic guidance, ventured into the holiest of all holes on shipboard—the cook's galley. Here she found the brightly bound cookery book chocking off a soup kettle that was too small for the stove and the "doctor" himself wiping lather from his razor blade on one of its leaves—the leaf that dealt exhaustively with squeezed duck. When the next meal was served, not only Captain Brentwood, but the mate and second mates opened their eyes widely prior to winking their satisfaction.

"The cook seems to have been getting lessons," the mate remarked.

"Ah, that's the new cookery book I got him—these hash spollers only need a bit of teaching," said Brentwood, and Mr. Brentwood said nothing concerning the blisters on her slim fingers.

Now, a large and not uninteresting book could be written dealing with Maisie Brentwood's sojourn

aboard the Wanama; but it would treat chiefly of minor, uninteresting episodes. No one wishes to be told of the new feet that were knitted into the second mate's shocking socks, nor of Mr. Meekins, the mate, writing a letter of apology and contrition to the girl he had quarreled with. It was not until a month had passed that the boatswain showed the conventional photograph of his wife and family to Maisie; but before a fortnight had elapsed the chief engineer was her devoted slave and expressed the opinion, down there in the engineers' mess room—yes, slugging his work stained fist on the oilcloth covered table, that Mrs. Brentwood must certainly have good Scots blood in her veins, because of her worthiness. The fourth engineer, a cockney Irishman, named her for one of Belfast breeding, and was promptly sent down to perform an entirely unnecessary bit of work, for his pains.

She did not seek favor; indeed, it was almost impossible to realize that she was actually aboard the ship. But, as day followed satisfactory day, Brentwood found himself wondering how it was he had contrived to endure previous loneliness without losing his reason. Life was indeed worth the living now; forgotten youthfulness pleased his soul.

At Santos he took advantage of a yellow fever scare to carry Maisie away into the bracing hills, and found her a companion unbelievable. She was untiring; always ready to fall in with his wishes in the matter of strenuous tramps about the coffee plantations, although on infrequent occasions she admitted that the rough roads and the excessive heat tried her somewhat. But, seeing that she named for a shadow of discontent on Brentwood's face, she bravely made light of her troubles.

"I didn't know it was possible to be as happy as all this," the captain of the Wanama said. "Tell you what, old girl: I'm falling in love with you all over again. You are getting prettier, too. You always were that, but what I mean to say is, that you're sort of—sort of getting even prettier." There is nothing a woman past her prime so much delights in as a sincere compliment from the man who means all the world to her, and Mrs. Brentwood managed to laugh quite naturally—and musically before her lips writhed with the pain that was troubling her.

"These are the days that a man's never going to forget," Brentwood opined, staring away at the violet and saffron wonderment of the surrounding hills, and consequently falling in to notice her sudden pallor.

"O, I hope you'll remember them—always," she said with an energy somewhat unusual to her.

"I'll have to slip down to Santos tomorrow," Brentwood said after a while, what time their fingers had been interlocked. "Ship's business, you know—urgent. But there's no call for you to come—you're better up here; though if you'd like—"

Maisie had no desire that way; and after seeing her husband off on the wide open, curtained cars, she did not immediately return to the inconspicuous hotel they patronized. Instead she walked along a palm bordered, pleasant street, where mule bells tinkled invitingly, and where almost nude children played and chuckled unashamed. After much waiting she was admitted to the saloon presence of the Brazilian doctor.

"I'm not afraid—not altogether afraid to hear the truth," she said, after the examination was over, and the doctor commenced to stammer. "Is it bad?"

"Yes, eet oes bad, senhora. Not, perhaps, very bad. Ah; it is of a thousand pities that I have not the good English. An operation, eh? You unnerstan? By a skillful man, no? In all Brazil there is not one of sufficient skill; but in England or New York—you savvy? Entreat your good husband to lose no time in taking you away. Please unnerstan—it is not exactly of the utmost urgency, but every day that is gained gives you an increased chance of perfect recovery. On the contrary, every day lost is to our disadvantage—is that the word?"

"I can't interfere with the ship's business," said Maisie Brentwood stoutly. "It was a favor to the captain that I was allowed to make this voyage, doctor."

"It might have been better had you remained at home in your own land, senhora. Here we have all the will, but perhaps not the experience, and the climate is against us. Whereas your so wonderful surgeons fear nothing and they work the miracles. I have the great admiration for the skilled surgeons of America and England. Meantime, we shall do what we can." He wrote a prescription; and, that pre-

scription crinkled against her bosom when she met Brentwood as he alighted from the cars.

"We're being tied up," he informed her. "Ship can't get away for days and days yet—there's some trouble up country, and they can't get the stuff down."

She linked her hand—it was growing daily thinner and more transparent—in his arm, and smiled happily upon him.

"Never mind; we're very happy here," she said. "And we must make the best of the good times we're having."

The pain was more frequent and of a greater poignancy when the Wanama ultimately cast off her shore lines, and moved slowly out into the river, with a full cargo aboard. Maisie made no mention of it. She had laid in a good stock of the medicine prescribed by the doctor, and prayed for the best as she gulped down the nauseating doses. Several times she had tried to tell Brentwood all about the doctor's diagnosis, but something within her invariably prompted her to silence. Brentwood was stalwart monument of health with scant tolerance for ordinary human weaknesses; he had enormous faith in the open sea as a healer, and as he daily congratulated—quite sincerely—his wife on her improved good looks, and rejoiced in her companionship, it was not for Maisie to dash the cup of happiness from his lips. Women are constituted that way; swallowing discomforts and actual agonies without a quiver of lip or eyelid to bespeak their suffering, so that the man they love shall continue to admire and believe.

True, in open water, away from the sweltering Brazilian heat, she did taste an improvement in her health. The pain, though acute at times, was more intermittent; and there were long spells with no actual pain at all, indeed, during which intervals she fondly hoped against her own belief, that the trouble was finished and done with. She had her reward in Brentwood's maintained happiness and satisfaction. The Wanama's captain found time to study intricate tomes dealing with the higher navigation; his ambition was rekindled; he determined to seek the greatest honors attainable in his arduous profession.

"I'll go in for liners," he told Maisie boastfully. "This sort of being together grows on a man, makes him feel a fool for wasting the earlier years in this tramping job. Have you realized how thoroughly you and I have got to know each other during these months?" Maisie patted his arm and stared outboard at the shimmering sea, in order that he should not see the convulsive working of her throat. "It has been good," she admitted, after a lengthy pause. "Sometimes it seems—it seems as though it was too good to last. I've never been so happy in my life." She laughed on the word, and Brentwood heard no false note.

"It's going to last," he said. "It's got to. You wait a bit—I'll get a fat job on the Atlantic ferry—home every three weeks for a clear week at a time, and you'll hardly have realized that I'm away before I'm back." He planned with the impulsive eagerness of a boy about to depart on holiday; and Maisie aided and abetted him. Detail by detail they furnished the new house that would receive them; once, in a curiously husky voice, Brentwood mentioned a possible nursery. Until now—so little had they known each other in the years of separation—he had never dared to give utterance to his main ambition; to father a strong, blue-eyed son, who should in his time fare forth upon the riotous waters as his forebears before him. Knowing what she knew and fearing what she feared, Mrs. Brentwood played the gay game of self-deception through the golden tropical days, what time the Wanama hissed and splashed and thrashed her way towards the north.

Came then a morning when Brentwood, returning for his early visit to the bridge, found her white, gasping and tortured.

"What is it?" he demanded, with a quiver in his voice that none of his subordinates had ever heard there. When it was possible, Maisie told him; full confession wrung from her unwilling lips by reason of her agony.

"But that chap was only a Dago!" Brentwood protested. All the Anglo-Saxon's scorn of the Latin vibrated in his words. "It's hardly likely he would know. You tell me your symptoms, old girl—there's a book in the medicine chest that tells you all about anything."

"No, he was right," Maisie said in her womanly wisdom, which is inevitably greater than blundering man's. She detailed symptoms, and later, thumbing the pages of the wise tome, Brentwood realized the

truth of her diagnosis. After a first staggering shock he refused to lose heart. An operation was necessary, was it? Very well; that operation should be performed. All that was necessary was that the Wanama should reach port at the earliest possible moment—and he was the man to see to that. He had never had an opportunity to prove what the ship could really do at a pinch, but now that the chance had come he was prepared to make records for the line. He took the surly chief engineer into his confidence.

"They'll raise Cain about the coal we'll use, Mac," he stated; "but we're going to do it."

"Aye, I've a few oddments o' cash put by in a pairfeetly sound bank, Capt. Brentwood," stated the presiding deity of the pulsating engine room. "Gin Buntline & Spinnaker raise the hell they're capable o' raisin', ye can draw on me for the limit o' our resources. Ye'll get speed." There was really no need to urge the ship's people to their utmost endeavors. As soon as the word was passed a new spirit seemed to animate them from chief mate downwards. In their own unostentatious way these hard bitten men had learned a great affection and reverence for Maisie Brentwood. They compared notes, and found that all had in some greater or lesser degree profited by her presence aboard. In consequence the Wanama picked up her heels and fled gallantly towards the northern latitudes where hope beckoned. Somewhere beyond the clean cut rim of the horizon science and almost superhuman skill were waiting—if only they could be secured in time. That was what it amounted to, when all the trimmings were discarded; the Wanama was embarked on a headlong race against time. The pity of it was there was so little that the majority of them could do. They were palpitating with eagerness to serve, but beyond performing the ordinary routine tasks, nothing of a sacrificial nature came their way. They had all the disposition to martyr themselves for the cause of Maisie's life but none of the martyr's opportunity came to them. With the stokehold and engine room staff it was different; they toiled like furies in their sweltering workrooms; and with a wide open throttle the Wanama raced where before she had lagged. The steward and cook put their heads together, recovered the despised cookery book from its limbo in the gallery coal locker, and devised fearful and wonderful sickroom dainties.

Brentwood himself read every volume the ship carried—yes, even down to the weird works on necromancy proffered him by the donkeyman, who was darkly reported to be writing a book on black magic; he applied remedy after remedy, and remembered forgotten prayers which he hurled vigorously in the direction of a "benign Creator who had apparently remembered some forgotten sin of early youth and visited judgment on his head after much patient waiting."

Maisie conscientiously did her best to recover, and there was not a soul aboard who knew of her pain-riddled, sleepless nights, when she lay staring through burning eyes at the beams overhead and clenched her hands until the nails scored her palms to restrain the cries that drove to her parched lips. Every morning she averred she was a little better; and Brentwood, possessing a pain quickened sight, understood that she lied.

"But we'll make it—yes, we'll make it in time," he told the chief.

"We will—if engines can do it. Give us this smooth water clear along an' ye'll be surprised what we will do. Gin you o' the deck will only watch yer steerin' o' her—look at that wake astern there—as crooked as a giddy corkscrew!—we'll hove her home in time. For the mercy o' God, Captain Brentwood, put the fear o' death into they headless quartermaster." And Brentwood did—so that the hastening steamer's wake lay like a ruled line across the sea floors. If the weather continued fine—

But the barometer had something to say about that. It was falling steady; too steadily for the time of year. One morning the glassy sea floors were troubled by a purposeful swell that ran with weight from the west of north, as indication of the troubles brewing beyond the skyline.

"Right in our teeth when it does come," said Brentwood bitterly. "But, we must make the best of the fine weather whilst it lasts, Mac."

During the next 24 hours the Wanama exceeded her previous best day's run by 32 miles; but the sea was already crisping, white caps were running in a threatening procession towards the sturdily trudging bow, and the northern horizon

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