

A Sailor's Wife

(Continued From Page Two.)

By Frank H. Shaw

was fringed with steel colored, ragged clouds. The sun set in a bewilderment of crimson and gold and violet, and the afterglow held a menacing yellowish light. The barometer continued to fall with merciless steadiness, and the summit of the column of mercury grew concave.

Brentwood, against his better judgment, informed Maisie of the missing odds. "Hold on to life as tightly as you can, dear girl," he said thick throatedly. Maisie rubbed her white lips with a hand that had lost its steadiness and, when the color came, smiled.

"I've not felt so well for a week," she lied bravely. "And if the pain is bad sometimes, it's not more than I can bear. Look, I'm laughing." The Wanama dove slowly into the trough of a swell, and the jar of the racing propeller shook the woman where she lay. Brentwood went on deck to make such arrangements as were in his power for the easement of the ship; and his wife had recovered from her faint before he returned. Being an experienced seaman, one very wise in weather lore, the skipper of the Wanama refused to blind himself to the possibilities. The indications showed that the steamer was in for a grueling, possibly as bad a bout of weather as she had experienced since first she left the launching way with the spilled wine still wet on her bow. He turned his face towards a sky from which hope had been wiped as by a sponge, and cursed himself in that he had ever known sufficient folly to bring his wife into such danger as now threatened her. He blamed himself for all the happening; but for his selfish desire to share Maisie's company she had been snugly ashore; within reach of skilled attention—slim fingered surgeons could have ministered to her, instead of a many thumbed blunderer who had nothing but deep love and willingness as an equipment. There was so little he could do—so little, except to drive the ship heading towards the port of salvation. This he vowed to do—no matter what happened in the result.

Meantime, he racked his brains to devise means for his wife's easement. The ship's store of drugs was pitifully limited; he used the pain killers to the best of his ability. Occasionally he opened the instrument case and fingered the shining tools therein, wondering how any human being could possess courage and skill sufficient to employ them, in their rightful work; wondering whether the time would ever come when he would be forced to essay a task, the mere thought of which turned his blood to ice.

That night, studying his wife's sleeping face by the indifferent light of a shaded candle, he told himself that death's shadow rested there; and he spent the hours of darkness between the bridge and the engine room, uttering appeals to all men he met to do their damndest—their damndest, because on them rested the life of the suffering woman. By dawn the Wanama was pitching evilly into a boiling head sea; and there was a moaning cadence in the growing breeze that told a certain tale of the unleashed forces beyond the green blue rim of the lifting sea.

The second engineer and the carpenter between them devised a cunning cot that should so absorb the shuddering vibrations of the racing propeller as to permit Maisie to lie in something approaching ease; and the easement of her pain caused her face to brighten and a tone of hope to come into her voice. Brentwood promised incoherent rewards as the two inventors flushed and looked ashamed. The chief engineer, displeased with the youth of the fourth, insisted on keeping that youngster's engine room watch in person, so that the throttle might be properly tended and the terrible racing—that meant a certain loss of speed—be reduced to a minimum.

But the weather worsened steadily; the gale was now growing monstrous; its scream was as the scream of laughing furies. Steady processions of white combed waves galloped over the Wanama's plunging fore-castle head, and clean swept her decks. White water swirled through the chinking wash-ports; bitter spindrift rattled against the bridge dodgers; the sky veiled itself in livid, ragged masses of cloud; from beneath which the ferocious squalls came roaring, to lay irresistible hands on the laboring fabric and thrust her back whence she came. Presently it became necessary, lest irreparable accident should arise to lessen the impetuous beat of the engine and slow down—the Wanama was doing herself more harm than good by thrusting into this crashing smother.

Brentwood studied the last day's run with gloomy eyes. On the average the ship had made a bare 10 knots per hour, and every succeeding hour meant a further diminution. He turned from his calcu-

lations to the barometer—there he found not even the thinnest thread of hope. If anything, the weather would grow worse—they were in for a gale that might become historical.

With this knowledge in his soul he went below and talked cheerfully to the woman who was growing dearer to him as hope receded. He was at the best a poor liar; but he kept his face in shadow and averted as he spoke a wonderful tale of speed; of improving weather. All that was really necessary was that Maisie should keep in good heart and have faith in her husband and his ship. She must not let her spirits droop; he was convinced that she had a better color and that her eyes were brighter. He rested his hand on the side of the cot when he made this statement; and when he left the cabin Maisie laid her lips on the spot where the damp of his fingers still remained.

Worn, salt soaked, haggard, Brentwood discarded his useless oilskins after an unbroken thirty-six hours on the bridge, what time he had toiled like a maniac to bring the Wanama from the gulping throat of death to the sweeter openness of life; and, slipping off his sea boots, tiptoed into the presence of his dying wife. She was dying, he knew, when he saw her face. The hours of his absence had brought an affrighting change; though she was now asleep it was, indeed, a sleep that was own brother to death. He gulped sickly. But there might still be a chance. The weather was still as bad as it had been at its worst; but there were hopeful signs of improvement on the morrow. Given a spell of smooth water and light winds he would drive the Wanama in such a fashion as should astound seafaring humanity.

He would permit nothing to stand in the way of a successful issue to his agony. Only one thing mattered—this truth hammered into his numbing brain with merciless strokes that shook him where he stood—that Maisie should be given her chance. He had spent racked hours on the bridge remembering the golden days of her health; muttering incoherent thanks to God for the happiness that had been his, and—yes, Maisie's.

In his own fashion he thought to appease his Creator's wrath by this sacrifice. He had made vows, reckless vows—offering to sacrifice everything if only Maisie might be saved. And he'd do it, too, by God! Let him have a chance and he'd show what a man could do with a ship—the age of miracles was not yet passed. He repeated his vows, but broke off short in the repetition as the bridge whistle sounded. Maisie stirred uneasily; cursing. Brentwood snatched the whistle from the tube.

"Quiet, you fool!" he hissed. "Come up, sir, please," said the second mate, and there was a fresh note in his voice to tell of some great excitement. Brentwood would have questioned further but for the stirring of his wife; and this was her first sound sleep for many hours. Muttering anathemas on the head of the inconsiderate officer he passed into the outer cabin, donned his clammy oilskins and seat boots; dashed his sou'wester earflaps under his chin, and left the comparative calm of the deck.

Solid water surged past his legs as he closed the door behind him; a sharp edge of wind hurled spray clipped him painfully in the eyes and teeth. The darkness was baffling; until a sharp his-zag of lightning ran down the shrieking sky, to show him his bearings. He clawed at the hand rails of the bridge and hauled himself up.

Going, he thought in a detached way that the second mate would get his walking ticket at the end of the trip. He was a weak nerved young idiot who thought the weather was growing a bit worse and hadn't the pluck to see it out alone. That was it—the terrible loneliness of the storm had frightened him. He was a steam trained sailor; not one of your old stick and string kind, who'd rather die than admit to ordinary human weaknesses.

"Right enough, it is blowing a bit," gulped Brentwood. He found it necessary to drop on hands and knees and crawl across the bridge to the weather corner; to stand upright against the yelling ferocity of the wind was beyond even his iron strength. Then he hauled himself upright behind the dodger, clawing at a human arm to aid himself; he bawled into a remote ear: "What's wrong? Getting seasick?"

"There!" bawled back the watch officer. There was a suggestion of an outflung pointing arm. Beyond showed an infinitely thin and unreal wisp of yellowish light that was climbing—climbing, with a mysterious wilderness of ragged cloud in its immediate vicinity. Then the wisp disappeared. Greater darkness fell, to be relieved by a falling trail of vividly colored stars.

Hardly had the last star burst and died than a trail of ragged

light, almost blinding in its intensity, shattered the gloom. The terrible lightning appeared to hang suspended between sea and sky; for appreciable seconds the horrible pall of night was parted. A ghostly sheen ran along the boiling tumble of wave crests, and the blackness on either side appeared even more intense by contrast. It was, Brentwood thought dully, as if the gates of the pit itself had suddenly opened to reveal the horrors beyond. He was raising his dripping hands to rub his dazzled eyes when the watch officer tugged at his arm.

"There, sir—there!" he yelled. The ship was plain to behold, staggering there in the hissing, howling hell broth. A sailing ship, evident to the seared sight; for even after the monstrous brilliancy of the lightning had vanished, the picture itself was photographed on the watchers' retinas. Their brains had been sensitive plates, recording realities for future guidance. A sailing ship in sorry case, with main and mizzen masts gone by the board, helpless on her beam ends, with huge watery avalanches streaming and thundering over her; she stood for all an embodiment of all the tragedies the devouring sea had ever consummated. Forlorn she was, piteously helpless. Case hardened as he was to the rigors of deep water, troubled to the depths of his soul by his own private agonies, Brentwood knew a wave of pity shiver through him; he gulped.

"Poor devil! My God! Then the darkness fell like a solid thing; it was as though the Wanama plowed her tortured way through solid indigo. There was now no single glimmer in all the ravaging gloom, save for the sudden sparkle of spindrift as it came flying into the glow of the swinging masthead light. Until a pallid blue flicker showed ahead, died down, gathered strength, blazed out, illuminating the upleaping wave tops and adding to their monstrous menace.

"Blue light!" said the second mate. "She's seen us, sir. Shall I—shall I answer?" He was answering the instinct of the sea, that bids a man strive to the uttermost to succor his fellows on whom the greater trouble has fallen; the blessed spirit which laughs at danger and difficulty and forgets to doubt human ability. There are no human limitations recognized by the real sailor when precious lives are at stake.

He commenced to warp himself towards the wheelhouse where the signal rockets were stowed, but Brentwood's hand closed vice-like on his stiffened arm.

"Wait!" Almost before he understood his own action, less than half conscious of what he was doing, the skipper moved to the switch box and extinguished mast head and side lights. The lurid danger of the strugglers out there beyond had not sufficiently impressed itself on his conscious brain to bind the subconscious mentality of the root idea of many days. He was working to gain time—he was racing against death; every minute counted.

"Mustn't raise false hopes—impossible—can't do anything!" he heard himself shouting against a covered ear. Speaking, he understood that he was justifying his action to himself more than to his subordinate. If it hadn't been for Maisie—but there was Maisie!

"Can't you see?" he roared. "Impossible! In this seaway—boat could not live—it couldn't live. Night time." He spat the acid salt from his lips with an oath.

"We could try." There was indignant reproach in the junior's tones, unnaturally raised as they were. This was entirely against the law of the sea as he had learned it through the strenuous days of his youth. He was not long since out of sail himself, spite of Brentwood's belief that he was merely a steam trained man. He could picture and understand the agonies that were being suffered out in the void of night. Another blue light blazed out; by its flare intimate details of the wreck could be observed.

During the existence of the unnatural sheen the watchers saw the single remaining mast crash over-side and saw high, white water leap up triumphantly to smother the sheer hull.

"She's going—too late?" gasped Brentwood, wondering dully why the sensation of relief in his heart should be so pronounced. But after a lapse of moments the green blue light showed again; the windjammer was still alive, still battling furiously against the appalling odds.

"Aren't you going to try?" the second mate asked indignantly.

"We can't do anything—you're young—don't understand. Insuperable difficulty—risking other lives foolishly—" Brentwood did not know what he was saying, except that it was necessary to convince this skeptic of the entire unreason of his mad brained suggestions. To stop the Wanama, to spend precious hours in an utterly futile attempt at a rescue that no human being could

effect, while his wife was hanging on to dear life minute by minute—he must convince the youngster.

He yelled explanations. He even explained why he had extinguished the steaming lights and failed to reply to the distress signals. "No use arousing false hopes," he said again and again. "The thing's out of the question—clean out of the question. A madman wouldn't try—he daren't."

"I dare," the youngster said defiantly. "At least, we can stop and answer—stand by till daylight. Leaving them like this—it's hellish—hellish!" In fancy the lad saw himself dragging the perishing men from death, ere the closing jaws locked together in their final snap. The romantic element in him was alive and mingling with the desire to succor; personal danger was lost sight of completely. He wanted to do something; this harsh indifference to the needs of fellow seamen stirred hot wrath in his soul.

"We can't—and there's my wife. You've forgotten her." The youngster ceased his protests suddenly, understanding glimmering at last. He had forgotten dying Maisie and her need. But that smoldering resentment against circumstance did not cease to tear him.

"It's hard, sir—it's hard."

"All life's hard, my son. If there'd been a single chance we might—" Brentwood decided not to carry on with that line of argument because he was uneasily aware that there was a fighting chance. He had, in youth, engaged in rescue work no less difficult than this; he had taken part and lot in performing some of those ocean miracles of which the placid, earthbound world knows so little. Nothing was impossible at sea, when the cool daring of seamen of the right sort—such men as manned the Wanama—was taken into account. Another blue light flared out and remained unanswered; as though those on the wreck had given up hope of immediate assistance, a rocket soared afresh into the lowering clouds. Fearful lest a further lightning flash should sizzle across the night and reveal the full plight of the sailing ship, afraid lest his iron resolution should waver, Captain Brentwood issued curt instructions to his junior to proceed on his course, and went below wearily to his cabin.

With the screaming outer clamor deadened by closed doors, his greater thought turned immediately to his wife. He had done right. "Whom God hath joined—" It was laid down in Holy Writ that nothing must come between man and the wife of his bosom. Those sufferers were strangers, men he would have passed unnoticed in the streets, but Maisie—she was Maisie, the most precious possession he had ever known. Yes; he was quite right, he decided, as he rid himself of the oil skins and sea boots and tiptoed into the inner cabin. Very quietly, holding his breath, he moved to the side of the cot where she lay. She was awake; her eyes fixed themselves on his face. She reached up a thin hand and touched his sleeve.

"My man!" she whispered, and, speaking, her lips twisted with the pain wakefulness had brought. He clutched that restless hand as though he would crush the bones; his chest heaved spasmodically.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

He licked his salted lips and stared hard at a picture on a distant bulkhead, whilst his heart slogged furiously in his breast.

"Nothing," he said. "Bad weather makes a man anxious. You, too—I'd hoped you would sleep on, right through the night. Cheer up—we're doing a little better now—hurrying, eh? We'll have you home and in safe hands before you know—"

He was thinking that he had done right. It mattered more that this one woman should be saved—he was sure that she would be saved—than that all those unknown men out in the night's wildness should be dragged from death's teeth. Windjammer men they were—men who hardly mattered in the great scheme of things. If their lives were saved they'd simply get drunk—

Argument after argument presented itself to his brain. And it was impossible that any one should know of the Wanama's action in the matter. No one could tell that it was the Wanama that had passed shadowlike through the night. There need be no entry in the ship's log—he would see to it. Looking at it from that point of view, the thing was safe as houses. And the weather was certainly too atrocious to permit of an attempt at rescue. By dawn that weather might abate, and then he could shove the Wanama through it for all she was worth; make up lost timing—get home in time. He'd done right—any other man in his position would assuredly have done the same.

"What is it?" The thin hand tightened on his sleeve. "Look at

me. There's something wrong—"

"It's nothing. How's a woman going to understand? It's nothing." Under the tan and the sea grime his face flushed, embarrassment showed in his manner. Not for nothing had he said that Maisie could read him like an open book, and the agony of her body appeared to give her soul a greater detachment still. "You see, with this bad weather, sweetheart—fear of being too late—" He stammered, tried to release his cuff from the detaining fingers, cursing his telltale face.

"What's the real truth?" With cold sweat beads mingling with the undried brine on his forehead, he told the truth, against his better judgement. In the telling—and he was curtness itself as he spoke—he endeavored to make light of the tragedy. "There'll be another ship coming along—we're right in the track. Besides, that ship isn't as bad as she thinks she is. They've lost their heads." His voice faltered to carry conviction. He repeated his words, with even less conviction, because of the accusation in Maisie's eyes.

"It means losing you," he concluded gaspingly.

"Now, tell me the real truth. If I wasn't here what would you do?" "Try my damndest!" he said, speaking on impulse. And there was a note in his voice that caused Maisie to smile quietly.

"So you've been—been—lying?" "It isn't lying. I've you to think of. You mightn't understand all you mean to me—and it's pretty nearly impossible."

"It is altogether impossible. Look at me. Wait." She raised herself on an elbow and drew her face closer to his face, her eyes searching his unsteady eyes. After a moment Brentwood looked away.

"Go and try," said Maisie, sinking back on the pillows. "You've got to try."

"I won't—I can't. I won't do it. Your life means more to me than everything else. Things up on deck are worse than I told you. And every minute counts for you. Think I'm going to lose you so long as there's a living chance? I won't—"

"You're going to let me stand in the way of your duty! Shame on you! What would men think of you? I'm only one woman—we've no children. Go and do your best."

"You don't know what you're saying. It might take hours—days. Days! We're running against time as it is—every hour tells. We can't try anything before daylight, and that's six hours away. We're going on."

But his voice was wavering, and Maisie laughed a little.

"You're going to rescue those men, husband mine," she said, quietly triumphant. "Do you think it would help me to know that my life had been bought at the price of theirs? Could you look people in the face afterward, knowing that you'd left men to drown?"

"If I had you safe, yes," he said stoutly.

"That's all you know. I know you better than you know yourself. Go and try." And, after many arguments, Brentwood went and tried.

The rocket that shot upwards from the Wanama's bridge was answered by another rocket from the wreck. Fresh blue lights flared, a car barrel was ignited.

"Morse him—there'll be somebody aboard able to read it—that we'll stand by and try rescue at first opportunity," said the skipper into the second mate's ear. The tiny lamp dotted and dashed in obedience to the hand on the key. After an eternity of waiting there came a reply that would have been grotesque under other circumstances. Unfitted with signaling gear, compelled to improvise with a wavering oil lamp and a scrap of sail cloth, the sailing ship said:

"Don't hurry, but we're drowning."

Brentwood, forgetting his own personal anguish now in the clean seaman's desire to save life, determined, once embarked on the venture, to conquer the destroying sea, took the Wanama closely to windward of the wreck, that she might benefit by the shelter of his lee. Followed a period of galling inaction, until that inaction became unbearable. By now all hands of the Wanama were clustered on or under the bridge, drawn out of their bunks by the adventure that promised.

"Looks to me as if the sea isn't quite as bad as it was," the chief mate ventured after a while.

Actually that sea was boiling madly, impossible to describe in written words drawn from a dictionary compiled by men who have never witnessed the ultimate wrath of ocean.

"With a drop of oil—" said Brentwood; all the sailor now. "Think you could manage it?"

"I'm willing to try. Give me a lee as much as you can, and then—" They spoke spasmodically, the