

## Stormy Weather A Nautical Yarn

By Dan Boylan

The old man sat in his stuffed armchair, gazing through the bay window at the river, far below. A late autumn squall was blowing up the estuary and a variety of sailboats, fishing smacks and coasters were making upstream for a safe mooring. He watched with interest as they vied for a berth, tied up and dropped and furled their sails.

It was warm in the front room, logs crackled merrily in the grate and Emily had laid a woollen blanket across his legs. He glanced again at the barometer, as he had every few minutes all afternoon. 990 milli-bars and still falling; he grimaced.

He could hear Emily softly humming in the kitchen and could smell the delicious aroma of fresh baked bread. What could she know of sailors out at sea in a force eight? What could she know of reefing the mains and gathering the tops'ls as the ship tossed from side to side, buffeted by powerful waves, pitched up and down on a sea of white water? What could anyone, who had never sailed the vast oceans, know of such perils?

He glanced around the room again. A sailor's room, the walls festooned with pictures of sailing ships, marine charts, barometers, time-pieces, brass oil lamps and in the bay window, a huge brass telescope mounted on a hardwood tripod. Above the mantelpiece hung a large painting of The 'Princess Marie rounding the Cape of Good Hope'; her top gallants ripped loose and flying wild as she ran before a force eight...perhaps the Captain's most exciting and most memorable day's sailing.

The floor was polished hardwood; the furnishings were high quality teak and mahogany from the Orient, the decorative rugs from Arabia. It was the home of a wealthy, self-made man and lovingly maintained by a wife who had stayed at home during his numerous voyages.

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A schooner hove into view, tall and elegant. He could tell from the way she sat upright and deep in the water that her hold was full of cargo. The crew scurried across her yards taking in her sails; she dropped anchor mid-channel and began to batten down the hatches. He brought the telescope to his eye and tried to read her name and home port but she lay beam on to him.

He gazed across the river in the failing light and watched the stream of seamen, in small knots as they trudged up the stone steps towards The Mermaid. Oil lamps flickered in the tavern windows and he noticed the curl of smoke spiralling from the chimney before it was whipped away by the wind. He grinned inwardly as he imagined the sailor's delight at an unexpected chance to warm their bones, slake their thirst and eat a hot meal on solid ground. Later, he fancied there would be shanties and songs of girls left in distant ports drifting across the water. After dark as the ale flowed, there would be peals of laughter as they staggered back to their moorings. The memories of a thousand such adventures in a hundred ports across the world brought a rare smile to his lips.

He shuffled into a more comfortable position and pulled the blanket up to his chest. His condition had deteriorated rapidly after he turned fifty, from the pain and stiffening in his hands to a crippling, debilitating arthritis, and his knees and hips were now gone. For a man who could scale that tallest masts and nimbly tie off knots and hitches, to an invalid unable to tie his own boot laces in a few short years.

'A common enough ailment among seamen, Captain' the Doctor had said, 'no doubt the result of years of cold and wet conditions, poor diet and plain hard work. Most of your shipmates don't make old bones and those who live beyond forty are usually destined for the poor-house. You're comfortably off with a sea-chest full of Spanish doubloons, I'll wager. You've a good wife to care for you. Eat well, fresh vegetables and lots of fresh fruit. Take a grain of laudanum when the pain is bad. Enjoy your retirement, you've earned it!'

Words that would return time after time to haunt him.....

....suddenly, there came a frantic hammering at the door and a raised voice edged with

panic. Then a cold draught as the door was flung wide and the opening filled with the unmistakable frame Coxswain George Jackson, clad in oilskins and sou'wester, dripping with rainwater.

“Skipper, Skipper, we need help, there’s a small collier out on the reef....her cargo has shifted and she’s badly listing to starboard. I’ve got a crew together but we need a skilled helmsman who can get us through the surf and onto the reef. I reckon you’re the only man for the job, I know you’re not in good shape but we’ll carry you down to the cutter if we have to....”

He rose with some difficulty, “I’ll get my oilskins....”

Then Emily appeared at the kitchen door and asked, “What all this fuss about?”

“We need a good helmsman, Mistress, there’s a ship in trouble out on the reef and the Captain’s the best there is.” The coxswain replied.

“Now you just wait one minute Coxswain, my husband’s a sick man, he can’t....”

But she was too late. The Coxswain had hoisted the Captain onto his shoulder and set off down the hill and into the raging storm.

“Cast away!” The Captain called but his words were caught on the wind and went unheard. He signalled with his left hand and the oarsmen dipped their oars and heaved. He steered her into the leeward channel and they made good progress into the churning maelstrom.

“Pull hard me boys, pull hard!” He roared.

They cleared the headland and a mighty wave broke over the bows as another ploughed into her starboard beam. As they crested the next breaker, the Captain caught a brief glimpse of the collier and brought the tiller round a degree or two.

“Half a league, me boys, half a league.” He bellowed above the raging wind and driving rain.

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Into the trough, ‘heave’, up, up the roller, onto the crest and down again. Expertly, foot

# Writing Raw

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by foot, he coaxed the cutter towards the listing collier. The coxswain managed to get a line to her and for a difficult half-hour, they pulled the desperate seamen one by one onboard.

The oarsmen pushed the overloaded cutter off and the captain swung her around towards the lighthouse. He navigated her through the foaming, windswept water and expertly edged her through the harbour entrance. The crew and rescued mariners, all now exhausted managed a cheer, 'three cheers for the helmsman', someone called.

It was almost dusk when Emily strolled into the front room carrying a small tray with a cup of coffee and a piece of cake, "Ah, you're awake again, dearest, are you feeling better after your little nap!"

The End

**Dan Boylan bio:** Dan Boylan is an ageing Yorkshireman, a well-traveled army veteran and ex prison guard. He has been writing articles and travel features for a series of magazines and publications for some 25 years. His favourite genre is short fiction, usually liberally sprinkled with intrigue, humour and a twist in the tale/tail. He has been a member of Fareham Writers for over seven years which has produced over sixty short stories, dramas and rattling good yarns.