

The Wreck of the Sirdar

by Louis Tracy



The cumbersome Chinese vessel struck the Sirdar a terrible blow. The junk was burst asunder by the collision.

wide belt of brick red. She had never seen such a beginning of a gale. Iris shivered and aroused herself with a startled laugh.

A nice boat in a sheltered corner, and perhaps forty winks until ten-time—surely a much more sensible proceeding than to stand there, idly conjuring up phantoms of afterthought.

The lively fanfare of the dinner trumpet failed to fill the saloon. By this time the Sirdar was fighting resolutely against a stiff gale.

But the stress of actual combat was better than the eerie sensation of impending danger during the earlier hours. The strong, hearty pulsations of the engines, the regular thrashing of the screw, the steadfast onward plunging of the good ship through racing seas and flying spray, were cheery, confident and inspiring.

Miss Deane justified her boast that she was an excellent sailor. She smiled delightedly at the ship's surgeon when he caught her eye through the many gaps in the tables. She was alone, so he joined her.

"You are a credit to the company—quite a sea-kink's daughter," he said. "Doctor, do you talk to all your lady passengers in that way?"

"Not at all. Too often I can only be truthful when I am dumb."

Iris laughed. "If I remain long on this ship I will certainly have my head turned," she cried. "I received nothing but compliments from the captain down to—"

"The doctor?"

"No. You come a good second on the list."

In very truth she was thinking of the ice-carrying steamer and his queer start of surprise at the announcement of her rumored engagement. The man interested her. He looked like a broken-down gentleman. Her quick eyes traveled around the saloon to discover his whereabouts.

She could not see him. The chief steward stood near, balancing himself in apparent defiance of the laws of gravitation, for the ship was now pitching and rolling with a mad zeal. For an instant she meant to inquire what had become of the transgressor, but she dismissed the thought at its inception. The matter was too trivial.

With a wild sweep the plates, glasses and cutlery on the saloon tables crashed to starboard. Were it not for the restraint of the fiddlers everything must have been swept to the door. There were one or two minor accidents. A steward, taken unaware, was thrown headlong on top of his laden tray. Others were compelled to clutch the backs of chairs and cling to pillars. One man involuntarily seized the hulk of a lady who devoted an hour before each meal to her coiffure. The Sirdar with a frenzied bound tried to turn a somersault.

"A change of course," observed the doctor. "They generally try to avoid it when people are in the saloon, but a typhoon admits of no labored politeness. As its center is now right ahead we are going on the starboard tack to get behind it."

"I must hurry up and get on deck," said Miss Deane.

"You will not be able to go on deck until the morning."

She turned on him impetuously. "Indeed I will. Captain Ross promised me—that is, I asked him—"

The doctor smiled. She was so charmingly confident. "It is simply impossible," he said. "The companion doors are bolted. The promenade deck is swept by heavy seas every minute. A boat has been carried away and several chandeliers snapped off like carrots. For the first time in your life, Miss Deane, you are battered down."

"The girl's face must have paled somewhat," he added hastily. "There is no danger, you know, but these precautions are necessary. You would not like to see several tons of water rushing down the saloon stairs now would you?"

"Decidedly not." Then after a pause, "It is not pleasant to be fastened up in a great box, doctor. It reminds me of a huge coffin."

"Not a bit. The Sirdar is the safest ship afloat. Your father has always preferred a splendid whorly in that respect. London and Hongkong Company may not possess fast vessels, but they are seaworthy and well found in every respect."

"Are there many accidents at sea?"

"No, just the usual number of boarded livers. We had a nasty accident just before dinner."

"Good gracious. What happened?"

"Some luscars were caught by a sea forward. One man had his leg broken."

"Anything else?"

The doctor hesitated. He became interested in the color of some Burgundy. "I hardly know the exact details yet," he replied. "Tomorrow after breakfast I will tell you all about it."

An English quartermaster and four lascars had been licked off the forecastle by the greedy tongue of a huge wave. The succeeding surge hung round the Sirdar against the quarter. One of the black sailors was pitched aboard, with a fractured leg and other injuries. The others were swept against the iron hull and disappeared.

The captain fought his way to the chart-house. He wiped the salt water from his eyes and looked anxiously at the barometer.

"Still falling!" he muttered. "I will keep on until 7 o'clock and then bear down. The lightning is coming. By midnight we should be behind it."

He struggled back into the outside fury. By comparison, the sturdy citadel he entered was paradise on the edge of an inferno.

Down in the saloon the harder passengers were striving to subdue the enmity of the interval before they sought their cabins. Some talked. One hardened reprobate strummed the piano. Others played cards, chess, draughts, anything that would divert attention from the storm.

The stately apartment offered strange contrast to the warring elements without. Bright lights, costly upholstery, soft carpets, covered the hold and girders. The staterooms were filled with the furniture of a palace.

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difficult task. Her eyes wandered from the printed page to mark the about articles of her garments swinging on their hooks. At times the ship rolled so far that she felt sure it must topple over. She was not afraid, but sublimely astonished, placidly prepared for vague eventualities.

After the course was changed and the Sirdar bore away toward the southwest, the commander consulted the barometer each half-hour. The tell-tale mercury had sunk over two inches in twelve hours. The abnormally low pressure quickly created dense clouds which enhanced the melancholy darkness of the gale.

For many minutes together the bows of the ship were not visible. Masthead and side-lights were obscured by the pelting sea. The engines thrust the vessel forward like a lance into the vitals of the storm. Wind and wave gushed out of the vortex with impotent fury.

At last, soon after midnight, the barometer showed a slight upward movement. At 1:10 a. m. the change became pronounced; simultaneously the wind swung round a point to the westward.

Then Captain Ross smiled wearily. His face brightened. He opened his coat, glanced at the compass and nodded approval.

"That's right," he shouted to the quartermaster at the steam-wheel. "Keep her steady there, south 15 west."

"South 15 west it is, sir," yelled the sailor, impassively watching the moving dial. For the wind alteration necessitated a little less help from the rudder to keep the ship's head true to her course.

Captain Ross ate some sandwiches and washed them down with cold tea. He was more hungry than he imagined, having spent 11 hours without food. The tea was insipid. He called through a speaking-tube for a further supply of sandwiches and some coffee.

Then he turned to consult a chart. He was joined by the chief officer. Both men examined the chart in silence.

Captain Ross finally took a pencil. He stabbed its point on the paper in the neighborhood of 14 degrees north and 112 degrees east.

"We are about there, I think."

The chief agreed. "That was the locality I had in my mind." He bent closer over the chart.

"Nothing in the way tonight, sir," he added.

"Nothing whatever. It is a bit of good luck to meet such weather here. We can keep as far south as we like until daylight, and by that time—"

"How did it look when you came out?"

"A trifle better, I think."

"I have sent for some refreshments. Let us have another look before we tackle the activity."

The two officers passed out into the hurricane. Instantly the wind endeavored to tear the charthouse from the deck. They looked at each other in dismay, caught the great steamship in its tremendous grasp. It was useless to attempt to speak. The weather was perceptibly clearer.

The junk vanished into the wilderness. They stood, pressing against the wind, seeking to penetrate the murkiness in front. Suddenly they were galvanized into strenuous activity.

A wild howl came from the lookout forward. The eyes of the three men glared at a huge dismantled Chinese junk, wallowing helplessly in the trough of the sea, dead under the bows.

The captain sprang to the charthouse and signaled in force pantomime that the wheel should be put hard over.

The officer in charge of the bridge pressed the telegraph lever to "stop" and "full speed" and then, with his hand on the wheel, he pulled hard at the strain cord, and a raucous warning sent stewards flying through the ship to close collision bulkhead.

The chief officer dashed to the port rail. He was shouting orders to the crew for the Sirdar's instant response to the helm seemed to clear her nose from the junk as if by magic.

It happened so quickly that while the hoarse signal was still vibrating through the ship, the junk swept past her quarter. The chief officer, joined now by the commander, looked on in amazement.

They could see her crew lashed in a bunch around the captain on her elevated poop. She was laden with timber. All told, she was a monstrous sight.

A great wave sucked her away from the steamship and then hurled her back with a tremendous force. The Sirdar was completing her turning movement, and she heeled over, yielding to the mighty power of the gale. For an appreciable instant her stern struck the side of the junk, and she swayed the junk like a cork lifted the great ship high by the stern. The propeller began to revolve in air—for the third officer had corrected the signal to "full speed ahead" again, and the cumbersome Chinese vessel struck the Sirdar a terrible blow in the counter, smashing off the screw close to the propeller, and wrenching the rudder from its bearings.

There was an awful race by the engines before the engineers could shut off steam. The Sirdar was now on a collision course with the junk. The Sirdar was now on a collision course with the junk.

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this downright exposition of the facts. Mr. John shook his head; he carried the dust of caution no further.

The hours passed in tedious misery after Captain Ross's visit. Every one was eager to get a glimpse of the unknown terrors without from the deck. This was out of the question, so people sat around the tables to listen eagerly to the tales of his wild saws on drifting ships and their prospects.

Some cautious persons visited the cabin to secure valuables in case of further disaster. A few hardy spirits returned to bed.

Meanwhile, in the charthouse, the captain and chief officer were gravely pondering over an open chart, and discussing a fresh risk that loomed ominously before them. The ship was a long way out of her usual course when the accident happened.

She was drifting now, they estimated, 11 knots an hour, with wind, sea, and current all forcing her in the same direction, driving into one of the most dangerous places in the known world, the south China sea, with its numberless reefs, shoals and isolated rocks, and the great island of Borneo stretching right across the path of the cyclone.

Still, there was nothing to be done save to make a few unobtrusive preparations and trust to idle chance. To attempt to anchor and ride out the gale in their present position was out of the question.

Two, three, four o'clock came, and went. Another half-hour would witness the dawn and a further clearing of the weather. The barometer was rapidly rising. The center of the cyclone had swept far ahead. There was only left the aftermath of heavy seas and furious but staid wind.

Captain Ross entered the charthouse for the twentieth time.

He had aged many years in appearance. The smiling, confident, debonair man he had altered with his ship. The Sirdar and her master could hardly be recognized, so cruel were the blows they had received.

"It is impossible to see a yard ahead," he confided to his second in command. "I have never been so anxious before in my life. Thank God the night is drawing to a close. Perhaps when day breaks—"

His last words contained a prayer and a hope. Even as he spoke the ship seemed to lift herself bodily with an unusual effort for a vessel moving before the wind.

The next instant there was a horrible grinding crash forward. Each person who did not chance to be holding fast to an upright was thrown violently down. The deck was tilted to a dangerous angle and remained there, while the heavy buffeting of the sea, now raging afresh at this unlooked-for resistance, drowned the despairing yells raised by the lascars on duty.

The Sirdar had completely lost her last voyage. She was now a battered wreck on a barrier reef. She hung thus for one heart-breaking second. Then another wave, riding triumphantly through its fellows, caught the great steamship in its tremendous grasp, carried her onward for half her length and smashed her down on the rocks. Her back was broken. She parted in two halves. Both sections turned completely over in the utter wantonness of destruction, and everything—masts, funnels, boats, hull, with every living soul on board—was at once engulfed in a maelstrom of rushing water and far-flung spray.

CHAPTER II
The Survivors

WHEN the Sirdar parted amidships, the door of the saloon heaved up in the center with a mighty crash of rending wood-work and iron. Men and women, too stupefied to sob out a prayer, were pitched headlong into chaos. Iris, torn from the terrified grasp of her maid, fell through a corridor and would have tumbled down with the ship had not a sailor, clinging to companion ladder, caught her as she whirled along the steep slope of the deck.

He did not know what had happened. With the instinct of self-preservation he seized the nearest support when the vessel struck. It was the mere impulse of ready helplessness that caused him to stretch out his left arm and clasp the girl's waist as she fluttered past. By idle chance they were on the port side and the ship, after pausing for one awful second, fell over to starboard.

The man was not prepared for this second gyrations. Even as he caught her, he lost his balance; they were both thrown violently through the open hatchway and swept off into the boiling surf. Under such conditions thought itself was impossible. A series of impressions, a number of fantastic pictures, were received by the benumbed faculties, and afterward painfully sorted out by the agonizing brain.

Anguish, amazement—none of these could exist. All he knew was that the lifeless form of a woman—for Iris had happily fainted—must be held in his arms. He wrenched her from him. Then there came the headlong plunge into the swirling sea, followed by an indefinite period of gasping oblivion. Something that felt like a moving rock rose up beneath his feet. He was driven clear out of the water and seemed to recognize a familiar object rising rigid and upright before him. It was the binnacle pillar, screwed to a portion of the deck which came away from the charthouse and was rent from the upper framework by contact with the reef.

He seized this unlooked-for support with his disengaged hand. For one fleet instant he had a confused vision of the destruction of the ship. Both the fore and aft portions were burst asunder by the force of compressed air. Wreckage and human forms were tossed about foolishly. The sea, pounded upon the opposing rocks by the noise of 10,000 mighty steam hammers.

A uniformed figure—he thought it was the captain—stretched out an unavailing arm to clasp the quivering girl which supported the sailor and the girl. But a jealous wave rose under the platform with devilish energy and turned it completely over, hurling the man with his inhuman burden into the depths. He rose, fighting madly for his life. Now surely he was doomed. But again, as if human aid was one dependent on nature's more potent, the spinning of a coin, his knees rested on the same few stanch timbers, now the ceiling of the main deck, and he was given a brief respite. His great difficulty was to get his breath, so dense was the spray through which he was driven. Even in that terrible hour he kept his senses. The girl, utterly unconscious, showed by the convulsive heaving of her breast that she was choking. With a wild effort he swung her head back, and shielded her from the flying scud with his own form.

The tiny air space thus provided gave her some relief, and Iris, who had been so long unconscious, began to stir. She was not remotely capable of a definite idea. Just as he vaguely recalled the identity of the woman in his arms, the sea lifted her. The girl's head tumbled up. Again he renewed the unequal contest. A strong, resolute man and a typhoon sea wrestled for supremacy.

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