

Survival

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Tex Worden shoved his way through the crowd in the Slave Market and pushed his book under the wicket.

The clerk looked up, taking in his blistered face and swollen hands. „What'll you have, buddy? You want to register?“

„Naw, I'm here to play a piano solo, what d'you think?“

„Wise guy, eh?“

Tex's eyes were cold. „Sure, and what about it?“

„You guys all get too smart when you get ashore. I'm used to you guys, but one of these days I'm going to come out from behind here and kick hell out of one of you!“

„Why not now?“ Worden said mildly. „You don't see me out there running down the street, do you? You just come out from behind that counter, and I'll lay you in the scuppers.“

At a signal from the man behind the wicket a big man pushed his way through the crowd and tapped Tex Worden on the shoulder. „All right, buddy, take it easy. You take it easy, or you get the boot.“

„Yeah?“

„Yeah!“

Tex grinned insultingly and turned his back, waiting for the return of his book. The clerk opened it grudgingly, then looked up, startled.

„You were on the RARATONGA!“

„So what?“

„We heard only one of the crew was saved!“

„Who the hell do you think I am? Napoleon? And that saved business, that's the bunk. That's pure malarkey. I saved myself. Now come on, get that book fixed. I want to get out of here.“

The plainclothes man was interested. „No kiddin', are you Tex Worden?“

„I am.“

„Hell, man, that must have been some wreck. The papers say that if it wasn't for you none of them would have gotten back. Dorgan was on that boat, too!“

„Dorgan?“ Tex turned to face him. „You know Dorgan?“

„Knew him? I should say I did! A tough man, too. One of the toughest.“

Worden just looked at him. „How tough a man is often depends on where he is and what he's doing.“ He was looking past the plainclothes man, searching for a familiar face. In all this gathering of merchant seamen hunting work, he saw no one.

Times were hard. There were over seven hundred seamen on the beach, and San Pedro had become a hungry town. Jobs were scarce, and a man had to wait his turn. And he didn't have eating money. Everything he had had gone down with the RARATONGA. He had money coming to him, but how long it would be before he saw any of it was a question.

Near the door he glimpsed a slight, bucktoothed seaman in a blue pea jacket whose face looked familiar. He edged through the crowd to him. „Hi, Jack, how's about staking a guy to some chow?“

„Hey? Don't I know you? Tex, isn't it?“

„That's right. Tex Worden. You were on the WEST IVIS when I was.“

„Come on, there's a greasy spoon right down the street.“ When they were outside, he said, „I don't want to get far from the shipping office. My number's due to come up soon.“

„How long's it been?“

„Three months. Well, almost that. Times are rough, Tex.“ He looked at Worden. „What happened to you?“

„I was on the RARATONGA.“

The sailor shook his head in awe. „Jee-sus! You were the only one who came back!“

„Some passengers made it. Not many, but some.“

„How's it feel to be a hero? And with Hazel Ryan yet. And Price! The actress and the millionaire! You brought them back alive.“

„Me an' Frank Buck. If this is how it feels to be a hero, you can have it. I'm broke. There's a hearing today, and maybe I can hit up the commissioner for a few bucks.“

The other seaman thrust out a hand. „I'm Conrad, Shorty Conrad. Paid off a ship from the east coast of South America, and I lied to you. It didn't take me three months because I've got a pal back there. I'll say a word for you, and maybe you can get a quick ship-out.“

They ordered coffee and hamburger steaks. „This is a tough town, man. No way to get out of this dump unless you can take a pierhead jump or get lucky. If you know a ship's officer who'll ask for you, you got a better chance.“

„I don't know nobody out here. I been shipping off the East Coast.“

A burly Greek came along behind the counter. He stared hard at them. „You boys got money? I hate to ask, but we get stiffed a lot.“

„I got it.“ Shorty showed him a handful of silver dollars. „Anyway, this is Tex Worden. He was on the RARATONGA.“

„You got to be kiddin'.“

The Greek eyed him with respect. „That where you got blistered?“ he motioned toward Worden's hands. „What happened to them?“

„Knittin'“, Tex said. „Them needles get awful heavy after a while.“

He was tired, very, very tired. The reaction was beginning to set in now. He was so tired he felt he'd fall off the stool if he wasn't careful, and he didn't even have the price of a bed. If he hit the sack now, he'd probably pass out for a week. His shoulders ached, and his hands were sore. They hurt when he used them, and they hurt just as much when he didn't.

„It was a nasty blow, Shorty. You never saw wind like that.“

„She went down quick, eh? I heard it was like fifteen minutes.“

„Maybe. It was real quick. Starb'rd half door give way, and the water poured in; then a bulkhead give way, and the rush of water put the fires out. No power, no pumps—it was a madhouse.“

They were silent, sipping their coffee and eating the greasy steaks. Finally Shorty asked, „How long were you out there?“

„Fifteen days, just a few miles off the equator. It rained once—just in time.“

Faces of men he knew drifted by the door. He knew some of them but could not recall their names. They were faces he'd seen from Hong Kong to Hoboken, from Limehouse to Malay Street in Singapore or Grant Road in Bombay, Gomar Street in Suez, or the old American Bar on Lime Street in Liverpool. He'd started life as a cowboy but now he'd been at sea for fifteen years.

It was a rough crowd out there on Beacon Street, but if he did not know them all, he knew their kind. There were pimps and prostitutes, seamen, fishermen, longshoremen, and bums, but they were all people, and they were all alive, and they were all walking on solid ground.

There were gobs there from the battle wagons off Long Beach and girls who followed the fleet. There was an occasional drunk looking for a live wire who might spring for another bottle, and he liked it.

„Maybe I'll save my money,“ he said aloud, „buy myself a chicken ranch. I'd like to own a chicken ranch near Modesto.“

„Where's Modesto?“

„I don't know. Somewhere north of here. I just like the sound of it.“

Tex Worden looked down at his hands. Under the bandages they were swollen with angry red cracks where the blisters had been and some almost raw flesh that had just begun to heal. In the mirror he saw a face like a horror mask, for tough as his hide was, the sun had baked it to an angry red that he could not touch to shave. He looked frightening and felt worse. If only he could get some sleep!

He did not want to think of those bitter, brutal days when he rowed the boat, hour after hour, day after day, rowing with a sullen resignation, all sense of time forgotten, even all sense of motion. There had been no wind for days, just a dead calm, the only movement being the ripples in the wake of the lifeboat.

He got up suddenly. „I almost forgot. I got to stop by the commissioner's office. They want to ask me some questions. Sort of a preliminary inquiry, I guess.“

Shorty stole a quick look at him. „Tex—you be careful. Be real careful. These aren't seamen. They don't know what it's like out there. They can't even imagine.“

„I'll be all right.“

„Be careful, I tell you. I read something about it in the papers. If you ain't careful they'll crucify you.“

There were several men in business suits in the office when they entered. They all looked at Tex, but the commissioner was the only one who spoke. „Thank you, son. That was a good job you did out there.“

„It was my job,“ Tex said. „I done what I was paid for.“

The commissioner dropped into a swivel chair behind his desk. „Now, Worden, I expect you're tired. We will not keep you any longer than we must, but naturally we must arrive at some conclusions as to what took place out there and what caused the disaster. If there is anything you can tell us, we'd be glad to hear it.“

Shorty stole a glance at the big man with the red face. A company man, here to protect their interests. He knew the type.

„There's not much to tell, sir. I had come off watch about a half hour before it all happened, and when I went below, everything seemed neat and shipshape. When the ship struck, I was sitting on my bunk in the fo'c'sle taking off my shoes.“

„The jolt threw me off the bench, an' Stu fell off his bunk on top of me. He jumped up an' said, ›What the hell happened?‹ and I said I didn't know, but it felt like we hit something. He said, ›It's clear enough outside, and we're way out to sea. Must be a derelict!‹ I was pulling on my shoes, and so was he, an' we ran up on deck.“

„There was a lot of running around, and we started forward, looking for the mate. Before we'd made no more than a half-dozen steps, the signal came for boat stations, and I went up on the boat deck. Last I saw of Stu he was trying to break open a jammed door, and I could hear people behind it.“

„We must have hit pretty hard because she was starting to settle fast, going down by the head with a heavy list to starb'rd. I was mighty scared because I remembered that starb'rd half door, and—“

„What about the half door, Worden? What was wrong with it?“

„Nothing at all, commissioner,“ the company man interrupted. „The company inspector—“

„Just a minute, Mr. Winstead.“ The commissioner spoke sharply. „Who is conducting this inquiry?“

„Well, I—“

„Proceed with your story, Worden.“

„The half door was badly sprung, sir. Somebody said the ship had been bumped a while back, and I guess they paid no mind to repairs. Anyway, it wasn't no bother unless they was loaded too heavy, and—“

„What do you mean, Worden? Was the ship overloaded?“

Winstead scowled at Worden, his lips drawing to a thin, angry line.

„Well, sir, I guess I ain't got no call to speak, but—“

„You just tell what happened at the time of the wreck, Worden. That will be sufficient!“ Winstead said, interrupting.

„Mr. Winstead! I will thank you not to interrupt this man's story again. I am conducting this inquiry, and regardless of the worth of what Worden may have to say, he is the sole remaining member of the crew. As a seafaring man of many years' experience, he understands ships, and he was there when it happened. I intend to hear *all*—let me repeat, *all*—he has to say. We certainly are not going to arrive at any conclusions by concealing anything. If your vessel was in proper condition, you have nothing to worry about, but I must say your attitude gives rise to suspicion.“ He paused, glancing up at the reporters who were writing hurriedly.

„Now, Worden, if you please. Continue your story.“

„Well, sir, I was standing by number three hatch waiting for the last loads to swing aboard so's I could batten down the hatch, an' I heard Mr. Jorgenson—he was the mate—say to Mr. Winstead here that he didn't like it at all. He said loading so heavy with that bad door was asking for trouble, and he went on to mention that bad bulkhead amidships.

„I don't know much about it, sir, except what he said and the talk in the fo'c'sle about the bulkhead between hatches three and four. One of the men who'd been chipping rust down there said you didn't dare chip very hard or you'd drive your hammer right through, it was that thin. When I was ashore clearing the gangway, I saw she was loaded down below the Plimsoll marks.“

„Weren't you worried, Worden? I should think that knowing the conditions you would have been.“

„No, sir. Generally speaking, men working aboard ship don't worry too much. I've been going to sea quite a while now, and it's always the other ships that sink, never the one a fellow's on. At least that's the way it is until something happens. We don't think about it much, and if she sinks, then she sinks, and that's all there is to it.“

„I see.“

„Yes, sir. There was trouble with that half door before we were three days out. Me an' a couple of others were called to help Chips caulk that half door. You know—it's a door in the ship's side through which cargo is loaded. Not all ships have 'em. That door had been rammed some time or another, and it didn't fit right. In good weather or when she carried a normal load it was all right.

„But three days out we had a spot of bad weather; some of that cargo shifted a mite, and she began to make water, so we had to recaulk that door.

„To get back to that night, sir. When I got to my boat station, I saw one of the officers down on the deck with his head all stove in. I don't know whether he got hit with something or whether it was done by the bunch of passengers who were fighting over the boat. Ever'body was yellin' an' clawin', so I waded in an' socked a few of them and got them straightened out.

„I told them they'd damn well better do what they were told because I was the only one who knew how to get that lifeboat into the water. After that they quieted down some. A couple of them ran off aft, hunting another boat, but I got busy with the lifeboat cover.

„All of a sudden it was still, so quiet it scared you. The wind still blowing and big waves all around but ghostly still. You could hear a body speak just like I'm speakin' now. It was like everything quieted down to let us die in peace. I could tell by the feel of her that we hadn't long. She was settlin' down, and she had an ugly, heavy feel to her.

„Mister, that was a tryin' time. All those people who'd been yellin' an' fightin' stood there lookin' at me, and one little fellow in a gray suit—he had a tie on, an' everything. He was Jewish, I think. He asked me what he could do, and I told him to get to the other end of the boat, to loose the falls and lower away when I did.

„I got the boat cover off, and we got the boat into the water, and the ship was down so far and canted over—a bad list to her—that it was no problem gettin' those few folks into the lifeboat.

„I took a quick look around. The boat 'longside was already in the water, and there were two A.B.s with it, Fulton an' Jaworski, it was. They had maybe thirty people in that boat, and I saw one of the stewards there, too. There was nobody else in sight, but I could hear some yelling forward.

„Just then she gave a sort of shudder, and I jumped into the boat and told the Jew to cast off. He had trouble because she was rising and falling on the water, but a woman helped him. I didn't know who she was then, but later I found out it was that actress, Hazel Ryan.

„We shoved off, and I got oars into the water, and we started looking for others. When we got out a ways, I could see Sparks—one of them, anyway, in the radio shack.

„Then the ship gave a kind of lunge and went down by the head. She just dipped down and then slid right away, going into the water on her beam ends with all the port-side boats just danglin' there, useless, as they couldn't be got into the water. At the last minute, as she went under, I saw a man with an ax running from boat to boat cutting the falls. He was hoping they'd come up floating, and two or three of them did.

„All of a sudden I see a man in the water. He was a pleasant-looking man with gray hair, and he was swimming. He looked so calm I almost laughed. 'Cold, isn't it?' he says, and then he just turns and swims away, cool as you please. You'd have thought the beach wasn't fifty feet away.

„It's things like that fairly take your wind, sir, and there I was, trying to pull the lifeboat away from the ship and hopin' for the best.

„I turned my head once and looked back. Mostly I was trying to guide the boat through wreckage that was already afloat. When I looked back—this was just before she went under—I glimpsed somebody standin' on the bridge, one arm

through the pilot-house window to hang on, and he was lighting his pipe with his free hand.

„It just didn't seem like it could be happening. There I was just minutes before, a-comin' off watch, all set for a little shuteye, and now here I was in a lifeboat, and the ship was goin' down.

„There must have been nearly a hundred people in the water and not a whisper out of any of them. Like they was all in shock or somethin' of the kind. Once a guy did yell to somebody else. Then something exploded under water—maybe the boilers busted. I wouldn't know. Anyway, when it was over, a lot of those folks who'd been in the water were gone. I fetched the bow of my boat around and rowed toward something white floating in the water. It was a woman, and I got her into the boat.“

„Was that Hazel Ryan?“ a reporter asked.

„No, it was Lila, a stewardess. Then I held the boat steady whilst another man climbed in. He pointed out three people clingin' to a barrel. I started for them.

„The sea was rough, and folks would disappear behind a wave, and sometimes when you looked, they weren't there anymore. Those people were havin' a time of it, tryin' to hang to that barrel, so I got to them first, and folks helped them aboard. The Ryan woman was one of them.

„I'll give her this. First moment she could speak, she asked if there was anything she could do, and I said just to set quiet and try to get warm. If I needed help, I'd ask for it.

„It was funny how black everything was, yet you could see pretty well for all of that. You'd see a white face against the black water, and by the time you got there, it was gone.

„One time I just saw an arm. Woman's, I think it was. She was right alongside the boat, and I let go an oar an' grabbed for her, but her arm slipped right through my fingers, and she was gone.

„Some of those we'd picked up were in panic and some in shock. That little Jewish fellow with the necktie and all, he didn't know a thing about the sea, but he was cool enough. We moved people around, got the boat trimmed, and I got her bow turned to meet the sea and started to try to ride her out.“

„What about the radio?“

„We didn't think about that for long. At least I didn't. There hadn't been much time, and the chances were slim that any message got off. It all happened too fast.

„Sparks was in there, and he was sending. I am sure of that, but he hadn't any orders, and most shipmasters don't want any Mayday or SOS goin' out unless they say. If he sent it, he sent it on his own because the old man never made the bridge.“

„The man you saw lighting his pipe?“

„Jorgenson, I think. He was watch officer, but they were changing watch, so I don't know. He wasn't heavy enough for the old man.

„Anyway, I'd no time to think of them. The sea was making up, and I was havin' the devil's own time with that boat. She'd have handled a lot easier if we'd had a few more people aboard.

„Lila, she was hurting. Seemed like she was all stove up inside, and the shock was wearing off. She was feeling pain, turning and twisting like, and the Ryan

woman was trying to help. She and that little Jew, they worked over her, covering her with coats, trying to tuck them under so she'd ride easier. The rest just sat and stared."

"No other boats got off?"

"I don't know—except that boat with Fulton and Jaworski. They were good men, and they'd do what could be done. The ship had taken a bad list, so I don't think many of the boats on the topside could be launched at all."

"How was the weather?"

"Gettin' worse, sir. There was nobody to spell me on the oars because nobody knew anything about handling a boat in a heavy sea. I shipped the oars and got hold of the tiller, which made it a mite easier."

"Lila had passed out; spray was whipping over the boat. I was hanging to that tiller, scared ever' time a big one came over that it would be the last of us. There was no way to play. You just had to live from one sea to the next."

"How long did the storm last?"

"About two days. I don't rightly remember because I was so tired everything was hazy. When the sea calmed down enough, I let Schwartz have the tiller. I'd been gripping it so hard and so long I could hardly let go."

"You were at the tiller forty-eight hours without relief?"

"Yes, sir. Maybe a bit more. But after that she began to settle down, and the sun came out."

"The boat was provisioned according to regulations?"

"Yes, sir. We'd some trouble about water later but not much."

"How about the crew and the officers? Were they efficient in your opinion?"

"Sure. Yes, they were okay. I've been going to sea quite a spell, and I never have seen any seaman or officer shirk his job. It ain't bravery nor lack of it, just that he knows his job and has been trained for it."

"Sometimes you hear about the crew rushing the boats or being inefficient. I don't believe it ever happens. They're trained for the job, and it is familiar to them. They know what they are to do, and they do it."

"Passengers are different. All of a sudden everything is different. There's turmoil an' confusion; there's folks runnin' back and forth, and the passengers don't know what's going on."

"Sometimes one of them will grab a crewman and yell something at him, and the crewman will pull loose and go about his business. The passenger gets mad and thinks they've been deserted by the crew when chances are that seaman had something to do. Maybe his boat station was elsewhere. Maybe he'd been sent with a message for the engineer on watch below."

"Maybe those crewmen you hear about rushing the boats are just getting there to get the boat cover off and clear the falls. This wasn't my first wreck, and I've yet to see a crewman who didn't stand by."

"How long before she sank?"

"Fifteen minutes, give or take a few. It surely wasn't more, though. It might have been no more than five. We'd made quite a bit of water before the cargo shifted and she heeled over. With that half door underwater—well, I figure that door gave way and she just filled up and sank."

„Mr. Commissioner?“ Winstead asked. „I’d like permission to ask this man a few questions. There are a few matters I’d like to clear up.“

„Go ahead.“

„Now, my man, if you’d be so kind. How many were in the boat when you got away from the scene of the wreck?“

„Eight.“

„Yet when you were picked up by the MALOAHA there were but three?“

„Yes.“

„How do you account for that?“

„Lila—she was the stewardess—she died. Like I said, she’d been hurt inside. She was a mighty good woman, and I hated to see her go. Clarkson—he went kind of screwy. Maybe he didn’t have all his buttons to start with. Anyway, he got kind of wild and kept staring at a big shark who was following us. One night he grabbed up a boat hook and tried to get that shark. It was silly. That shark was just swimmin’ along in hopes. No use to bother him. Well, he took a stab at that shark and fell over the side.

„Handel, he just sat an’ stared. Never made no word for anybody, just stared. He must’ve sat that way for eight or nine days. We all sort of lost track of time, but he wouldn’t take water, wouldn’t eat a biscuit. He just sat there, hands hanging down between his knees.

„I’d rigged a sort of mast from a drifting stick and part of a boat cover. The mast this boat should have carried was missing. Anyway, the little sail I rigged gave us some rest, and it helped. Late one day we were moving along at a pretty fair rate for us when I saw a squall coming. She swept down on us so quick that I gave the tiller to Schwartz and stumbled forward to get that sail down before we swamped. With the wind a-screaming and big seas rolling up, I’d almost reached the sail when this Handel went completely off his course. He jumped up and grabbed me, laughing and singing, trying to dance with me or something.

„Struggling to get free, I fell full length in the boat, scrambled up and pulled that sail down, and when I looked around, Handel was gone.“

„Gone?“ Winstead said.

„You mean—over the side?“ the commissioner asked.

„That’s right. Nearest thing I could figure out was that when I fell, he fell, too. Only when I fell into the bottom, he toppled over the side.

„Rain and blown spray was whipping the sea, and we couldn’t see him. No chance to turn her about. We’d have gone under had we tried.

„For the next ten hours we went through hell, just one squall after another, and all of us had to bail like crazy just to keep us afloat.“

„So,“ Winstead said, „you killed a passenger?“

„I never said that. I don’t know what happened. Whatever it was, it was pure accident. I’d nothing against the man. He was daffy, but until that moment he’d been harmless. I figure he didn’t mean no harm then, only I had to get free of him to save the boat.“

„At least, that is your story?“

„Mister, with a ragin’ squall down on us there was no time to coddle nobody. I didn’t have a straitjacket nor any way to get him into one. It was save the boat or we’d all drown.“

„Yet even with your small sail up, you might have lasted, might you not?“

Worden considered the matter, then he shrugged. „No way to tell. I was the only seaman aboard, and it was my judgment the sail come down. I'd taken it down.“

„All right. We will let that rest for the moment. That accounts for three. Now what became of the other two?“

„The Jew—Schwartz, he come to me in the night a few days later. We were lyin' in a dead calm, and most of our water was gone. Sky was clear, not a cloud in sight, and we'd a blazin' hot day ahead. He told me he was goin' over the side, and he wanted me to know because he didn't want me to think he was a quitter.

„Hell, that little kike had more guts than the whole outfit. I told him nothing doing. Told him I needed him, which was no lie. It was a comfort just to have him there because what he didn't know he could understand when I told him. He wouldn't accept the fact that I needed him.

„It even came to the point where I suggested I toss a coin with him to see who went over. He wouldn't listen to that, and we both knew I was talkin' nonsense. I was the only seaman. The only one who could handle a boat. It was my job to bring that boat back with as many people as possible. I ain't goin' for any of that hero stuff. That's all baloney. Sure, I wanted to live as much as any man, but I had a job to do. It was what I signed on to do. At least when I signed on, it was to do a seaman's job. I ain't done nothing I wouldn't do again.“

„I see. And what became of the other man?“

„He was a big guy, and he was tough. He tried to take charge of the boat. There's a lot happens in an open boat like that when everybody is close to shovin' off for the last time. People just ain't thinkin' the way they should. This big guy, he had more stamina than the rest of them. Most of them tried to take a hand in rowin' the boat.

„We'd no wind, you see, and I was hopin' we could get out of the calm into the wind again, but he wouldn't do anything. He just sat. He said I was crazy, that I was goin' the wrong way. He said I drank water at night when they were all asleep. Twice when I passed water forward for somebody else, he drank it.

„Then one night I woke up with him pourin' the last of our water down his damn throat. The Ryan woman, she was tuggin' at his arm to try to stop him, but hell, it was too late.

„It was her callin' to me that woke me up, and I went at him. He emptied the cask and threw it over the side. I tried to stop him, and we had it out, right there. He was some bigger than me and strong, but there was no guts to him. I smashed him up some and put him between the oars. I told him to row, that he'd live as long as he rowed. First we had to circle around and pick up the cask.“

„An empty cask?“ Winstead asked incredulously. „What in God's world did you do that for?“

„Mister, it's only in the movies where some guy on the desert an' dyin' of thirst throws away a canteen because it's empty. Shows how little some of those screenwriters know. Supposin' he finds water next day? How's he goin' to carry it?

„You throw away an empty canteen in the desert an' you're committin' suicide. Same thing out there. We might get a rain squall, and if we did, we'd need something to hold water. So we circled and picked up that cask.“

„And what happened to Dorgan?“

Tex Worden's face was bleak. „He quit rowin' twenty-four hours before we got picked up.“

Winstead turned to the commissioner. „Sir, this man has admitted to killing one passenger; perhaps he killed two or three. As to his motives—I think they will appear somewhat different under cross-examination.

„I have evidence as to this man's character. He is known along the waterfronts as a tough. He frequents houses of ill fame. He gets into drunken brawls. He has been arrested several times for fighting. His statements here today have cast blame upon the company. I intend to produce evidence that this man is not only a scoundrel but an admitted murderer!“

Tex sat up slowly.

„Yes, I've been arrested for fighting. Sometimes when I come ashore after a long cruise I have a few too many, and sometimes I fight, but it's always with my own kind. After a trip on one of those louse-bound scows of yours, a man has to get drunk. But I'm a seaman. I do my job. There's never a man I've worked with will deny that. I'm sorry you weren't in that boat with us so you could have seen how it was.

„You learn a lot about people in a lifeboat. Me, I never claimed to be any psalm singer. Maybe the way I live isn't your way, but when the time comes for the men to step out, I'll be there. I'll be doin' my job.

„It's easy to sit around on your fat behinds and say what you'd have done or what should have been done. You weren't there.

„Nobody knows what he'd do until he's in the spot. I was the only guy in that boat knew a tiller from a thwart. It was me bring that boat through or nobody. I'd rather lose two than lose them all. I wasn't doin' it because it was swell of me or because they'd call me a hero. I was bringin' them in because it was my job.

„Handel now. He wasn't responsible. Somethin' happened to him that he never expected. He could have lived his life through a nice, respected man, but all of a sudden it isn't the same anymore. There's nobody to tell to do something or to even ask. He's caught in a place he can't see his way out of. He'd never had just to endure, and there was nothing in him to rise to the surface and make him stand up. It sort of affected his mind.

„Hazel Ryan? She has moxie. When I told her it was her turn to row, she never hesitated, and I had to make her quit. She wasn't all that strong, but she was game. A boatload like her an' I could have slept halfway back.

„Dorgan was a bad apple. The whole boat was on edge because of him. He'd been used to authority and was a born bully. He was used to takin' what he wanted an' lettin' others cry about it. I told him what he had to do, and he did it after we had our little set-to.“

„Who did you think you were, Worden? God? With the power of life and death?“

„Listen, mister“—Worden leaned forward—„when I'm the only seaman in the boat, when we have damn' little water, an' we're miles off the steamer lanes, when there's heat, stillness, thirst, an' we're sittin' in the middle of a livin' hell, you can just bet I'm Mister God as far as that boat's concerned.

„The company wasn't there to help. You weren't there to help, nor was the commissioner. Sure, the little fat guy prayed, an' Clarkson prayed. Me, I rowed the boat.“

He lifted his hands, still swollen and terribly lacerated where the blisters had broken to cracks in the raw flesh. „Forty hours,“ he said, „there at the end I rowed for forty hours, tryin‘ to get back where we might be picked up. We made it.

„We made it,“ he repeated, „but there was a lot who didn‘t.“

The commissioner rose, and Winstead gathered his papers, his features set and hard. He threw one quick, measuring glance at Worden.

„That will be all, gentlemen,“ the commissioner said. „Worden, you will remain in port until this is straightened out. You are still at the same address?“

„Yes, sir. At the Seaman’s Institute.“

Shorty glanced nervously out the window, then at Winstead. Tex turned away from the desk, a tall, loose figure in a suit that no longer fit. Winstead left, saying nothing, but as Worden joined Shorty, the commissioner joined them.

„Worden?“

„Yes, sir?“

„As man to man, and I was once a seaman myself, Mr. Winstead has a lot of influence. He will have the best attorney money can hire, and to a jury off the shore things do not look the same as in a drifting lifeboat.

„The LICHENFIELD docked a few minutes ago, and she will sail after refueling. I happen to know they want two A.B.s. This is unofficial, of course. The master of the vessel happens to be a friend of mine.“

They shook hands briefly.

There was a faint mist falling when they got outside. Tex turned up his coat collar. Shorty glanced toward Terminal Island. „You got an outfit? Some dungarees an‘ stuff?“

„I‘d left a sea bag at the Institute.“ He touched the blue shirt. „This was in it. I can draw some gear from the slop chest.“

„They got your tail in a crack, Tex. What’s next, the LICHENFIELD?“

„Well,“ he said shortly, „I don‘t make my living in no courtroom.“

