

# The Admiral

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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After I finished painting the hatch-combing, I walked back aft to the well deck where Tony and Dick were standing by the rail looking down into the Whangpoo. The sampan was there again, and the younger woman was sculling it in closer to the ship's side. When she stopped, the old woman fastened a net on the end of a long stick and held it up to the rail, and Tony put some bread and meat into it.

Every day they came alongside at about the same time, and we were always glad to see them, for we were lonely men. The young woman was standing in the stern as always, and when she smiled, there was something pleasant and agreeable about it that made us feel better. The old woman gave the kids some of the bread and meat, and we stood watching them.

Probably they didn't get meat very often, and bread must have been strange to them, but they ate it very seriously. They were our family, and they seemed to have adopted us just as we adopted them when they first came alongside at Wayside Pier. They had come to ask for „bamboo“, which seemed to mean any

kind of lumber or wood, and for „chowchow“, which was food, of course. The greatest prize was „soapo“, but although most of the Chinese who live like that sell the soap or trade it, our family evidently used it—or some of it.

That was one reason we liked them, one reason they had become our family, because they were clean. They wore the faded blue that all the Chinese of that period seemed to wear, but theirs was always newly washed. We had thrown sticks of dunnage to them or other scrap lumber and some that wasn't scrap, but then the mate came by and made us stop.

There were five of them, the two women and three young ones, living in a sampan. Tony had never seen the like, nor had I, but it was old stuff to Dick, who had been out to the Far East before.

He told us lots of the Chinese lived that way, and some never got ashore from birth to death. There is no room for them on China's crowded soil, so in the seemingly ramshackle boats they grow up, rear families, and die without knowing any other home. There will be a fishnet on the roof of the shelter of matting, and on poles beyond the roof the family wash waves in the wind. Sometimes the younger children have buoys fastened to their backs so they will float if they fall over the side.

Two of the children in our family were girls. I have no idea how old they were. Youngsters, anyway. We never saw them any closer than from our rail to the sampan. They were queer little people, images of their mother and the old woman but more serious. Sometimes we'd watch them play by the hour when not working, and they would never smile or laugh. But it was the Admiral who was our favorite. We just called him that because we didn't know his name. He was very short and very serious. Probably he was five years old, but he might have been older or younger. He was a round-faced little tyke, and he regarded us very seriously and maybe a little wistfully, for we were big men, and our ship was high above the water.

We used to give them things. I remember when Tony came back from a spree and brought some chocolate with him. When he was painting over the side on a staging, he dropped it to the Admiral, who was very puzzled. Finally he tasted it and seemed satisfied. After that he tasted everything we dropped to him.

Tony had a red silk handkerchief he thought the world of, but one day he gave it to the Admiral. After that, whenever we saw the Admiral, he was wearing it around his head. But he was still very serious and maybe a little prouder.

Sometimes it used to scare me when I thought of them out there on the Whangpoo in the midst of all that shipping. Partly it was because the Chinese had a bad habit: they would wait till a ship was close by and then cut across her bows real sharp. Dick said they believed they could cut off evil spirits that were following them.

There were wooden eyes painted white with black pupils on either side of the bow of each sampan or junk. They were supposed to watch for rocks or evil spirits. Those eyes used to give me the willies, always staring that way, seeming to bulge in some kind of dumb wonder. I'd wake up at night remembering those eyes and wondering where the Admiral was.

But it got Tony more than me. Tony was a hard guy. He was said to have killed a cop in Baltimore and shipped out to get away. I always thought the old man

knew, but he never said anything, and neither did the rest of us. It just wasn't any of our business, and we knew none of the circumstances. Something to do with payoffs, we understood.

Tony took to our family as if they were his own flesh and blood. I never saw a guy get so warmed up over anything. He was a tough wop, and he'd always been a hard case and probably never had anybody he could do for. That's what a guy misses when he's rambling around—not somebody to do something for him but somebody to think of, to work for.

One day when we were working over the side on a staging, the sampan came under us, and Tony turned to wave at the Admiral. „Lookit, Duke,“ he says to me, „ain't he the cute little devil? That red silk handkerchief sure sets him off.“

It was funny, you know? Tony'd been a hard drinker, but after our family showed up, he began to leave it alone. After he gave that red silk handkerchief to the Admiral, he just quit drinking entirely, and when the rest of us went ashore, he'd stay aboard, lying in his bunk, making something for the Admiral.

Tony could carve. You'd have to see it to believe how good he was. Of course, in the old days of sail, men aboard ship carved or created all sorts of things, working from wood, ivory, or whatever came to hand. Tony began to carve out a model of our own ship, a tramp freighter from Wilmington. That was the night we left for Hong Kong and just a few hours after the accident.

We had been painting under the stern, hanging there on a plank staging, and it was a shaky business. The stern is always the worst place to paint because the stage is swinging loose underneath, and there isn't a thing to lay hold of but the ropes at either end.

Worse still, a fellow can't see where the ropes are made fast to the rail on the poop deck, and those coolies are the worst guys in the world for untying every rope they see knotted. One time at Taku Bar I got dropped into the harbor that way. But this time it was no trouble like that. It was worse.

We were painting almost overhead when we heard somebody scream. Both of us turned so quickly we had to grab the ropes at either end to keep from falling, and when we got straightened around, we saw the Admiral in the water.

Our family had been coming toward our ship when somehow the Admiral had slipped and fallen over the side, and now there he was, buoyed up by the bladder fastened to his shoulders, the red handkerchief still on his head. Probably that had happened a dozen times before, but this time a big Dollar liner was coming upstream, and she was right abeam of us when the Admiral fell. And in a minute more he'd be sucked down into those whirling propeller blades.

Then the plank jerked from under my feet, and I fastened to that rope with both hands, and I felt my heart jump with sudden fear. For a minute or so I had no idea what had happened, and by the time I could pull myself up and get my feet on the staging again, Tony was halfway to the Admiral and swimming like I'd seen nobody swim before.

It was nip and tuck, and you can believe it when I say I didn't draw a breath until Tony grabbed the Admiral just as the big liner's stern hove up, the water churning furiously as she was riding high in the water. Tony's head went down, and both he and the Admiral disappeared in the swirl of water that swept out in a wake behind the big liner.

There was a moment there when they were lost in the swirl of water behind the steamer, and then we saw them, and Tony was swimming toward the sampan towing the Admiral, who had both hands on Tony's shoulder.

That night when we slipped down the Whangpoo for Hong Kong, Tony started work on his boat. For we were coming back. We had discharged our cargo and were heading south to pick up more, and by the time we returned, there would be cargo in Shanghai for us.

You'd never guess how much that boat meant to us. All the time we were gone, we thought about our family, and each of us picked up some little thing in Hong Kong or Kowloon to take back to them. But it was the carving of the boat that occupied most of our time. Not that we helped because we didn't. It was Tony's job, and he guarded it jealously, and none of us could have done it half so well.

We watched him carve the amidships house and shape the ventilators, and we craned our necks and watched when he fastened a piece of wire in place as the forestay. When one of us would go on watch, the mate would ask how the boat was coming. Everybody on the ship from the old man to the black cook from Georgia knew about the ship Tony was carving, and everyone was interested.

Once the chief mate stopped by the fo'c'sle to examine it and offer a suggestion, and the second mate got to telling me about the time his little boy ran his red fire engine into the preacher's foot. Time went by so fast it seemed no time at all till we were steaming back up the Whangpoo again to anchor at Wayside Pier. We were watching for our family long before they could have seen us.

The next morning the boat was finished, and Chips took it down to the paint locker and gave it a coat of paint and varnish, exactly like our own ship; the colors were the same and everything. There wasn't much of a hold, but we had stuffed it with candy. Then we watched for the sampan.

Dick was up on the crosstree of the mainmast when he saw it, and he came down so fast it was a crying wonder he didn't break a leg. When he hit the deck, he sprinted for the rail. In a few minutes we were all standing there, only nobody was saying anything.

It was the sampan. Only it was bottom up now and all stove in. There wasn't any mistaking it, for we'd have known that particular sampan anywhere even if it hadn't been for the red silk handkerchief. It was there now, a little flag, fluttering gallantly from the wreckage.

