



The Open Boat



ONE OF THEM KNEW THE COLOR OF THE SKY.

Their eyes glanced level, and remained upon the waves that swept toward them. These waves were gray, except for the tops, which were white, and all the men knew the colors of the sea. The line between sky and water narrowed and widened, and fell and rose.

A man likes to take a bath in a bigger area than this boat could provide. These waves were frightfully rapid and tall; and each boiling, white top was a problem in the small boat.

The cook sat in the bottom, and looked with both eyes at the six inches of boat which separated him from the ocean. He had bared his fat arms as he worked to empty the water from the boat. Often he said, "God! That was a bad one." As he remarked it, he always looked toward the east over the rough sea.

The **oiler**, guiding with one of the two **oars** in the boat, sometimes raised himself suddenly to keep away from the water that poured in. It was a thin little oar, and it often seemed ready to break.

The **correspondent**, pulling at the other oar, watched the waves and wondered why he was there.

The hurt captain, lying in the front, was feeling defeat and despair. It was despair that comes, for a time at least, to even the bravest and most enduring when the business fails, the army loses, the ship goes down. The mind of the master of a vessel is rooted deep in her wood, whether he commands for a day or many. And this captain had in his thoughts the firm impression of a scene in the grays of dawn, with seven faces turned down in the sea. And later the remains of the ship, washed by waves, going low and lower and down. Thereafter there was something strange in his voice. Although steady, it was deep with grief, and of a quality beyond speech or tears.

“Keep her a little more south, Billie,” said he.

“A little more south, sir,” said the oiler in the back.

A seat in this boat was not unlike a seat upon a jumpy horse, and a horse is not much smaller. The boat was much like an animal. As each wave came, and she rose for it, she seemed like a horse leaping over a high fence. The manner of her ride over these walls of water is a thing of mystery. Each wave required a new leap, and a leap from the air. Then jumping and slipping and racing and dropping down, she steadied for the next threat.

A particular danger of the sea is the fact that after successfully getting through one wave, you discover that there is another behind it. The next wave is just as nervously anxious and purposeful to overturn boats. In a ten-foot boat one can get a good idea of the great force of the sea. As each gray wall of water approached, it shut all else from the view of the men in the boat. It was not difficult to imagine that this particular wave was the final outburst of the ocean, the last effort of the determined water.

The sun climbed steadily up the sky. The men knew it was broad day because the color of the sea changed from gray to green and the

white tops were like falling snow. From their low boat they could not see the sun rise. Only the color of the waves that rolled toward them told them that day was breaking.

The oiler and the correspondent rowed the tiny boat. And they rowed. They sat together in the same seat, and each rowed an oar. Then the oiler took both oars; then the correspondent took both oars; then the oiler; then the correspondent. They rowed and they rowed.

The captain, hesitating in the front, after the boat had climbed a great wave, said that he had seen the light at Mosquito Inlet. After a while, the cook remarked that he had seen it. The correspondent was at the oars then and he, too, wished to look at the lighthouse. But his back was toward the far shore. The waves were important, and for some time he could not seize an opportunity to turn his head. But at last there came a wave more gentle than the others. When at the top of it, he hurriedly searched the western water with his eyes.

“See it?” asked the captain.

“No,” said the correspondent slowly, “I didn’t see anything.”

“Look again,” said the captain. He pointed. “It’s exactly in that direction.”

At the top of another wave the correspondent did as he was told. This time his eyes found a small, still thing on the edge of the moving ocean. It was exactly like the point of a pin. It took an anxious eye to find a lighthouse so tiny.

“Think we’ll reach it, Captain?”

“If this wind stays steady and the boat doesn’t sink, we can’t do much else,” said the captain hopefully. Then he added, “Empty her, cook.”

“All right, Captain,” said the cheerful cook.

It would be difficult to describe the secure bond between men that was here established on the seas. No one said that it was so. No one mentioned it. But it was on the boat, and each man felt it warm him. They were a captain, an oiler, a cook, and a correspondent, and they were friends—friends in a more strangely iron-bound strength than

may be ordinary.

The hurt captain, lying against the water jar in the front, spoke always in a low voice and calmly. But he could never command a more ready-to-obey ship's company than the other three in the boat. It was more than a mere recognition of what was best for their safety. There was surely in it a quality that was personal and heartfelt. And after this devotion to the commander of the boat, there was this oneness. The correspondent, who had been taught to be a hard judge of men, knew even at the time that it was the best experience of his life. But no one said it was so. No one mentioned it.

"I wish we had a sail," remarked the captain. "We might try my coat on the end of an oar. It would give you two boys a chance to rest." So the cook and the correspondent held the oar and spread wide the coat. Sometimes the oiler had to turn sharply to keep the sea from breaking into the boat. But, otherwise, sailing was a success.

The lighthouse had been growing slowly larger. It now almost had color and appeared like a little gray shadow on the sky. The men holding high the oar could not be prevented from turning their heads quite often to glance at this little gray shadow.

At last, from the top of each wave, the men in the rolling boat could see land. As the lighthouse was a shadow on the sky, this land seemed only a long black shadow on the sea. It certainly was thinner than paper.

The wind slowly died away. The cook and the correspondent did not now have to labor to hold high the oar. But the waves continued pushing and turning and washing the boat.

Slowly the land rose from the sea. From a black line it became a line of black and white—trees and sand. Finally the captain said he could see a house on the shore. "They'll see us before long and come out after us," said the cook.

The distant lighthouse rose high. "The keeper ought to be able to see us now," said the captain.

"None of those other boats could have reached shore to give word of our ship," said the oiler, in a low voice, "or the lifeboat would be out

hunting for us.”

Slowly and beautifully the land came out of the sea. The wind came again. Finally a new sound struck the ears of the men in the boat. It was the low thunder of waves beating the shore. “We’ll never be able to reach the lighthouse now,” said the captain. “Swing her a little more north, Billie.”

“A little more north, sir,” said the oiler.

So the little boat turned her nose once more down the wind. All except the oarsman watched the shore grow. Doubt and fear were leaving the minds of the men. The management of the boat still took most of their attention, but it could not prevent a quiet cheerfulness. In an hour, perhaps, they would be on shore. The nearness of success shone in their eyes. Everybody took a drink of water.

“Cook,” remarked the captain, “there doesn’t seem to be any sign of life about the house.”

“No,” replied the cook. “Strange they don’t see us.”

Tide, wind and waves were swinging the boat north. “Strange they don’t see us,” said the men.

The sea’s roar was here dulled, but its tone was nevertheless thundering and huge. As the boat swam over the great waves, the men sat listening to this roar. “We’ll overturn,” said everybody.

It is fair to say here that there was not a lifesaving station within twenty miles in either direction. But the men did not know this fact, and so they made bitter remarks concerning the eyesight of the nation’s lifesavers. Four unhappy men sat in the boat and murmured, “Strange they don’t see us.”

The earlier lightheartedness had completely disappeared. To their sharpened minds it was easy to imagine all kinds of idleness and blindness, and indeed, lack of courage. There was the shore of the land, and it was bitter and bitter to them that from it came no sign.

The captain said at last, “I suppose we’ll have to make a try for ourselves. If we stay out here too long, none of us will have strength to swim after the boat goes under.”

And so the oiler, who was at the oars, turned the boat straight for the shore. There was a sudden tightening of muscles. There was some thinking.

“If we don’t all get to shore,” said the captain, “—if we don’t all get to shore, I suppose you fellows know where to send news of my finish?”

Then they briefly exchanged some addresses and instructions. As for the thoughts of the men, there was a great deal of anger in them. They might be summed up this way: “If I am going to lose my life to the sea—if I am going to lose my life to the sea—why was I allowed to come this far to see sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to taste the holy food of life?”

“It is crazy. If this old fool woman, Fate, cannot do better than this, she should be forced from the management of men’s fortunes. She is an old chicken who knows not her purposes. If she has decided to kill me, why did she not do it in the beginning and save me all this trouble? The whole affair is mad—but no; she cannot mean to kill me. She dare not. She cannot. Not after all this work.” And then each man might have had the urge to shout at the clouds. “Just kill me now, and then hear what I call you!”

The waves that came at this time were more fierce. They seemed always to break and roll over the little boat in a mass of boiling white and gray. The shore was still far away. The oiler was a wise seaman. “Boys,” he cried out, “she won’t live three minutes more, and we’re too far out to swim. Shall I take her to sea again, Captain?”

“Yes, go ahead!” said the captain.

The oiler, by a series of quick movements, great skill, and fast and steady work with the oars, turned the boat in the middle of the tide and took her to sea again.

There was a long silence as the boat rose and dropped over the rough sea to deeper water. Then somebody slowly spoke: “Well, they must have seen us from shore by now.”

“What do you think of those lifesaving people?”

“Strange they haven’t seen us.”

“Maybe they think we are out here for sport! Maybe they think

we're fishing. Maybe they think we are fools."

It was a long afternoon. A changed tide tried to force them south, but wind and wave said north. Far ahead, where coastline, sea and sky met, there were little dots which seemed to indicate a city on the shore.

"St. Augustine?"

The captain shook his head. "Too near Mosquito Inlet."

And the oiler rowed, and the correspondent rowed. It was a tiring business.

"Did you ever like to row, Billie?" asked the correspondent.

"No," said the oiler, "I hate it!"

When one exchanged the rowing seat for a place in the bottom of the boat, he suffered a bodily experience that caused him to be careless of everything except an obligation to move one finger. There was cold sea water washing back and forth in the boat, and he lay in it. His head was pillowed on wood within an inch of the waves along the side. Sometimes the sea came in and bathed him once more. But this did not trouble him. It is almost certain that if the boat had sunk he would have fallen comfortably out upon the ocean as if it were a great soft bed.

"Look! There's a man on the shore!"

"Where?"

"There! See him? See him?"

"Yes, sure! He's walking along."

"Now he's stopped. Look! He's facing us!"

"He's waving at us!"

"So he is! By thunder!"

"Now we're all right! Now we're all right! There'll be a boat out here for us in half an hour."

"He's going on. He's running. He's going up to that house there."

The distant beach seemed lower than the sea, and required a searching glance to see the little black figure! The captain saw a floating stick, and they rowed to it. A white cloth was by some strange chance in the boat. Tying this on the stick, the captain waved it. The man at the oars did not dare turn his head, so he was obliged to ask questions.

"What's he doing now?"

“He’s standing still again. He’s looking, I think. There he goes again—toward the house. Now he’s stopping again.”

“Is he waving at us?”

“No, not now; he was, though.”

“Look! There comes another man!”

“He’s running.”

“Look at him go!”

“Look! There’s a fellow waving a little black flag. I’ve never seen anyone wave so hard! There come those other two fellows. Now they are talking together. Look at the fellow with the flag. I’ve never seen anyone wave so hard!”

“That isn’t a flag, is it? That’s his coat. Certainly, that’s his coat.”

“So it is; it’s his coat! He’s taken it off and is waving around his head. But would you look at him swing it!”

“What does that fool with the coat mean? What’s he signaling anyhow?”

“It looks as if he were trying to tell us to go north. There must be a lifesaving station up there.”

“No, he thinks we’re fishing. Just giving us a merry hand. See? There, Billie.”

“I wish I could understand those signals. What do you suppose he means?”

“He doesn’t mean anything; he’s just playing.”

“Well, if he’d just signal us to try again; or to go to sea and wait; or go north, or go south, or go to hell, there would be some reason in it. But look at him! He stands there and keeps his coat turning around like a wheel. The fool!”

“There come some more people.”

“Now there’s quite a mob. Look! Isn’t that a boat?”

“Where? Oh, I see where you mean. No, that’s no boat.”

“That fellow is still waving his coat.”

“He must think we like to see him do that. Why doesn’t he stop it? It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I don’t know. I think he is trying to make us go north. There

must be a lifesaving station there somewhere.”

“He isn’t tired yet. Look at him wave!”

“I wonder how long he can do that. He’s been swinging his coat around ever since he caught sight of us. He’s crazy. Why aren’t they getting men to bring a boat out? A fishing boat could come out here all right. Why won’t he do something?”

“Oh, it’s all right now.”

“They’ll have a boat out here for us soon, now that they have seen us.”

A faint yellow color came into the sky over the low land. The shadows on the sea slowly deepened. The wind brought coldness with it, and the men felt it.

“My God!” said one, allowing his voice to express his feeling. “If we have to wait around out here! If we’ve got to stay out here all night!”

“Oh, we’ll never have to stay here all night! Don’t worry! They’ve seen us now, and they’ll come out after us soon.”

The shore grew dark. The man waving the coat and the group of people gradually became part of this darkness.

“I’d like to catch the one who waved the coat. I feel like hitting him hard, just for luck.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“Oh, nothing, but he seemed so—cheerful!”

And so the oiler rowed, and then the correspondent rowed, and then the oiler rowed. Gray-faced and bent forward steadily, turn by turn, they lifted the heavy oars. The form of the lighthouse was gone from their view, but finally a pale star appeared, just lifting from the sea.

“If I am going to lose my life to the sea—if I am going to lose my life to the sea—why was I allowed to come this far and see sand and trees? Was I brought here merely to have my nose dragged away as I was about to taste the holy food of life?”

The patient captain, leaning against the water jar, was sometimes obliged to speak to the oarsman.

“Keep her head up! Keep her head up!”

“Keep her head up, sir.” The voices were tired and low.

This was surely a quiet evening. All except the oarsman lay heavily motionless in the boat's bottom.

A night on the sea in an open boat is a long night. As darkness fell, the shine of the light, lifting from the sea in the south, changed to full gold. In the north, a new light appeared—a small blue glow on the edge of the waters. These two lights were the furniture of the world. Otherwise there was nothing but waves.

The plan of the oiler and the correspondent was for one to row until he was no longer able. Then he would wake the other from his dead sleep in the bottom of the boat.

The oiler worked the oars until his head dropped forward and the overpowering sleep blinded him; and he rowed some more. Then he touched a man in the bottom of the boat, and called his name, "Will you row for a little while?" he asked softly.

"Sure, Billie," said the correspondent, slowly dragging himself to a sitting position. They exchanged places carefully. And the oiler, slipping down in the sea water at the cook's side, seemed to go to sleep instantly. Though the huge size of the waves had lessened, they still rolled the boat high. The man at the oars tried to keep her pointing into the waves so she would not turn over. The black waves were silent and hard to see in the darkness. Often one was almost upon the boat before the oarsman knew it.

In a low voice the correspondent spoke to the captain. He was not sure that the captain was awake, although this iron man seemed to be always awake. "Captain, shall I keep her going toward that light north, sir!"

The same steady voice answered him. "Yes. Keep the light a little to the left."

The correspondent, as he rowed, looked down at the two men sleeping underfoot. The cook's arm was around the oiler's shoulders, and with their scarce clothing and tired faces, they were the babies of the sea—a strange picture of two old babies.

After a time it seemed that even the captain slept, and the cor-

respondent thought that he was the only man afloat on all the ocean. The wind had a voice as it came over the waves, and it was sadder than death.

“If I am going to lose my life to the sea—if I am going to lose my life to the sea—why was I allowed to come this far and see sand and trees?”

During the long night, a man might decide that it was really the purpose of the seven mad gods to kill him in spite of the awful cruelty of it. But it was certainly not justice to kill a man who had worked so hard, so hard. The man felt it would be a crime. Other people had died at sea since the beginning of ships, but still—

Later the correspondent spoke into the bottom of the boat. “Billie!” There was a slow and gradual movement. “Billie, would you row for a while?”

“Sure,” said the oiler.

As soon as the correspondent touched the cold, comfortable sea water in the bottom of the boat and had pressed close to the cook’s side, he was deep in sleep in spite of the cold. This sleep was so good to him that it was but a moment before he heard a voice call his name in a tone that showed great weakness. “Will you row now?”

“Sure, Billie.”

The light in the north had strangely disappeared, but the wide-awake captain told the correspondent how to go.

Later in the night, they took the boat farther out to sea. The captain told the cook to take one oar at the rear and keep the boat facing the seas. This plan enabled the oiler and correspondent to rest together. “We’ll give those boys a chance to gather some strength,” said the captain.

They curled down and slept once more the dead sleep.

When the correspondent again opened his eyes, the sea and the sky were each of the gray color of dawn. Later, pink and gold light shone upon the waters. The morning appeared finally, in its splendid form—a sky of pure blue, and the sunlight flamed on the tips of the waves.

On the distant sands were many little black houses, and a tall,

white windmill rose above them. No man nor dog appeared on the beach. It might have been a deserted village.

The voyagers searched the shore with their eyes. They considered their position. The captain said, "If no help is coming, we might better try to reach land right away. If we stay out here much longer we will be too weak to do anything for ourselves at all." The others silently agreed to this reasoning.

The boat was going toward the beach. The correspondent wondered if anyone ever climbed the tall wind tower, and if, then, he ever looked at the sea. This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the danger of small creatures. It represented to the correspondent the calm of Nature against the struggles of the individual—Nature in the wind, and Nature in the sight of men. Nature did not seem cruel to him then, nor kind, nor dangerous, nor wise. But she was not interested, completely not interested.

It is, perhaps, probable that a man in this situation, impressed with the lack of concern of the world, should see the many faults in his own life. They may rest badly in his mind, and he may wish for another chance. The difference between right and wrong seems all too clear to him then. And he understands that if he were given another opportunity, he would improve his conduct and his words.

"Now, boys," said the captain, "she is going to go under. All we can do is take her in as far as possible, and then when she sinks, jump out and go toward the beach. Keep cool now, and don't jump until she goes under."

The oiler took the oars. "Captain," he said, "I think I'd better keep her head to the seas and back her in."

"All right, Billie," said the captain. "Back her in." The oiler turned the boat then and, seated in the rear, the cook and the correspondent had to look over their shoulders to see the lonely and distant shore.

The huge waves lifted the boat high. "We won't get in very close," said the captain. Each time a man could turn his attention from the sea, he glanced toward the shore, and in the expression of the eyes there was a remarkable quality. The correspondent, observing the others, knew

that they were not afraid, but the full meaning of their glances was hidden.

As for himself, he was too tired to fully understand the fact. He tried to force his mind into thinking of it, but the mind was slave now to the muscles. And the muscles said they did not care. He merely thought that if he should die it would be a shame.

There were no hurried words, no apparent fears. The men simply looked at the shore. "Now remember to get well away from the boat when you jump," said the captain.

A wave suddenly fell with a thundering roar, and the water came rushing down upon the boat.

"Steady, now," said the captain. The men were silent. They turned their eyes from the shore and waited. Then the next wave broke upon them. Rolling floods of white water caught the boat and whipped it around. Water came in from all sides.

The little boat, dying under this weight of water, sank deeper into the sea.

"Empty her out, cook! Empty her out!" said the captain.

"All right, Captain," said the cook.

"Now, boys, the next one will finish us," said the oiler. "Remember to jump free of the boat."

The third wave moved forward—huge, angry, merciless. It seemed to drink the tiny boat and, at the same time, threw the men into the sea.

The January water was icy. The correspondent thought immediately that it was colder than he had expected to find it off the coast of Florida. This appeared to his dulled mind as a matter important enough to be noted at the time. The coldness of the water was sad; it was very sad. This fact was somehow mixed with opinion of his own situation, so that it seemed almost a proper reason for tears. The water was cold.

When he came to the surface, he knew of little but the noisy water. Afterward he saw his companions in the sea. The oiler was ahead in the race. He was swimming strongly and rapidly. Off to the correspondent's left, cook's great back appeared out of the water. Behind him the captain was hanging with his one unhurt hand to the overturned boat.

There is a certain motionless quality to a shore, and the correspondent wondered that it could exist so near the awful sea. It seemed very desirable. But the correspondent knew that it was a long journey, and he swam slowly.

But finally he arrived at a place in the sea where travel was difficult. He did not stop swimming to consider what kind of current had caught him, but there his progress ceased. The shore was before him, and he looked at it and understood with his eyes each detail of it.

As the cook passed, much farther to the left, the captain was calling to him, "Turn over on your back, cook! Turn over on your back and use the oar."

"All right, sir." The cook turned on his back and, using the oar, went ahead as if he were a boat himself.

The boat also passed, with the captain holding on with one hand.

They passed nearer to shore—the oiler, the cook, the captain—and following them went the water jar, sailing merrily over the sea.

The correspondent remained in the grasp of this strange new enemy—a current. The shore, with its white sand and green trees, was spread like a picture before him.

He thought: "I'm going to die. Can it be possible? Can it be possible? Can it be possible?" Perhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final act of Nature.

But later a wave pushed him out of this small, deadly current, and he found suddenly that he could again make progress toward the shore. Later still he knew that the captain had his face turned toward him and was calling his name. "Come to the boat! Come to the boat!"

In his struggle to reach the captain and the boat, he realized that when one gets tired beyond limit, death must be comfortable—an end of fighting accompanied by a large sense of relief.

After a while he saw a man running along the shore. He was removing his clothes with most remarkable speed. Coat, trousers, shirt, everything came off him like magic.

"Come to the boat!" called the captain.

"All right, Captain." As the correspondent swam, he saw the cap-

tain stand on the floor of the ocean and leave the boat. Then the correspondent performed his one bit of magic of the voyage. A large wave caught him and threw him with ease and speed completely over the boat and far beyond it. He was amazed by his own performance and by that of the marvelous sea.

The correspondent arrived in water that reached only to his chest, but his condition did not enable him to stand for more than a moment. Each wave pushed him down again.

Then he saw the running man come leaping into the water. He dragged ashore the cook; and then went toward the captain; but the captain motioned him away and sent him to the correspondent. The man gave a strong pull, a long drag, and a big push. The correspondent said, "Thanks, old man." But suddenly the man cried, "What's that?" He pointed a quick finger. The correspondent said, "Go."

In the low water, face down, lay the oiler. His forehead touched sand that was sometimes, between each wave, above the sea.

The correspondent did not know all that happened afterward. When he reached safe ground he fell, striking the sand with each part of his body. It was as if he had dropped from a roof.

It seemed that instantly the beach was crowded with men bringing blankets and clothes, and with women carrying coffee. The welcome of the land to the sea was warm and generous. But a quiet and wet shape was carried up the beach. And the land's welcome for it could only be the different and silent one of the grave.

When night came, the white waves rolled back and forth in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the great sea's voice to the men on the shore. And they felt that they could then understand.