

THE STORM

He had been alone at sea for three days. In the beginning there had been calms and long oily swells that rolled in from the South. The man had been seasick, and cursed quietly at the time he had spent ashore losing his sealégs. Now the process had to begin again, and he spent the first days checking the chafe on the sheets and sails, the locking nuts of the rigging screws, and the gears of his self-steering vane.

On the third morning he made his landfall on the South-Eastern coast, and with it, there came the excitement that always came as a cloud lifted, and a hill or mountain took shape on the horizon, where he had hoped it would. This time it had been part of the east coast Alps, and the man was pleased because his navigation had been correct. It was then that he had heard the first of the storm warnings.

He had finished charting a compass fix, and after checking his watch, flicked the switch of the small transceiver. The voice was impartial.

".... a depression of 28.4 inches centred moving" The man listened as the voice monotonously sounded its warnings.

"Winds of 70 knots within 100 miles of its centre, decreasing to 40 knots" A quick check confirmed that he would be well within 100 miles of the centre as the depression swept eastwards. As the warnings finished the man gently tapped the barometer mounted on the bulkhead beside him. It fell several points.

Emerging from the cabin, he stood in the cockpit, bracing himself against the motion of the boat. Ahead he could now clearly see the mountains and coastline taking shape. The sky was cloudy, and in spite of an indirect sun, it was still warm. To the south he could just discern the darkening tops of the cumulo nimbus clouds, the storm clouds, that lay heavily merged with the horizon.

If the forecast was correct, then he had several hours before the winds would strengthen, and in that time it would be important that he get as far away as possible from the land. Releasing the tiller lashings, the man swung the yacht about, retrimmed his sails, and headed diagonally out from the coast on a nor'easterly course. Now was the time to firmly stow all loose gear, and as the yacht pranced across the swells, its tiller firmly held by the wind vane, the man went forward to check the lashings which held the dinghy. Satisfied that all was well, he moved back, his lean brown body compensating for the yacht's movements. In the cabin he wedged his navigation volumes into their shelves, checked that the food cupboards were secured, then prepared a cup of coffee and heated a tinned stew. It would be important that he eat now, for there would be no telling what conditions would arise later.

When he had finished the food, and come out from the cabin, he noticed that the wind had strengthened slightly, and was blowing from the south east. Behind, the land was now only a smudge on the horizon, blending and merg-

ing with the lower-lying clouds. In the south, and now extending further across the horizon, he could plainly see the storm clouds, heaped up in rough whites and greys. Where they met the sea in the distance, the man could see a greyish green light which caught the vivid whites of the small wavelets that had now formed atop of the swells.

By now the yacht was leaping and racing forward. Its lee gunwale was held firmly at water level, and as it thrust through the waves, water would race down the tilted deck, striking the cleats and winch mountings, throwing up small jets, which fell on the cabin roof, or into the cockpit. The time had come to reduce sail.

The motion was quite violent until the man headed the yacht around and close onto the wind. Quickly leaping from the cockpit to the mast; he released the mainsail and brought it to the deck. It lay flapping in the wind, and he swore as it flogged against his face as he lay over the boom and tried to release its slides from the mast and bundle it into the blue canvas sailbag which he had brought from below. With the sail the yacht sat upright and joggled up and down with the small jib up forward tightly filled. The man reset his course and went below.

If he was to be free of the fear of being blown onto the coast, then he knew that every sea mile made good now would be insurance for the time when it would be impossible to sail. Reaching for the small bag that held his storm sails, he again crawled onto the deck and attached the heavy canvas cloth to the metal tracks of the mast and boom. It flapped violently at his ear like some imprisoned beast, until he hauled it into position, when the wind filled it, heeled the yacht and pushed it forward violently into the white caps which now beat around it.

An hour later it was necessary to again change sail. This time the tiny storm jib was set. As he looked astern he could no longer see the land. Instead the sea and clouds were now fusing in a rich grey. The sun had been overpowered and was now completely hidden behind the huge masses of cloud that dominated three-quarters of the sky. An eerie, almost unreal light, seemed to come from all directions, and the vividness of the white caps on top of the swells was even more marked than earlier. For a moment the man stood watching, drawn by some horrid fascination at the preface to his ordeal. He had never seen such heavy clouds, nor had he seen such a sudden preamble. As he turned his back to it, to study the yacht's behaviour, he tried to draw comfort from the hope that such a sudden build up could only foretell a short sudden storm. But deep inside he wasn't sure, and a strange uneasiness had come upon him. For the moment there was nothing he could do, but sit with the cold dryness in his mouth, and the tightness in his stomach.

As evening came he was shocked to see how steep the seas had become. In endless processions they swept from the south, some breaking and leaping around the yacht with a low hissing sound. Others would lift the yacht, and after a moment's brief hover, pass through it and onwards leaving the man to look at their broken backs as they raced forwards. At other times the yacht would surge forward, down the wave face diagonally across from the white flecked top.

Just before darkness he reefed the mainsail. With a small area exposed to the unceasing wind, the yacht's speed slowed noticeably, and the man returned to the chart table, to attempt to plot a dead reckoning course. As he peered from the cabin hatchway, the last light faded, and he could see that the tops of the small wavelets were being plucked off by the wind, and blown like dust and refuse across the sea. Above him, he could hear a low moan from the rigging, and it was obvious that the wind vane was having trouble steering the yacht.

Clutching a torch he struggled forward to the mast and lowered the mainsail. With a long length of cord he lashed it to the mast. For a moment he wrapped his arms around the wood and peered into the darkness. He could see very little and was really only aware of the odd white cap, the hissing, and the wind which pressed against his clothing, clutching at his hair and booming in the shrouds.

He thought that it had increased in the short time that he had been at the mast. When he again got below to the shelter of the cabin he was horrified to see that the barometer was still falling.

The yacht was now reaching across the wind and seas, with only one sail set. The self steering gear was not built for such wind strengths and the man had shipped it. The tiller was lashed. He lay below in the darkness, trying to gauge the yacht's behaviour. In spite of his activities he was not yet tired. As he lay on the bunk wedged by cushions against the boat's motion, he was surprised at the clarity with which he was thinking. He tried to account for each creak, every hiss and slap. It surprised him how much he and the yacht had merged, and a short time later he knew that to continue with even one sail set was foolish. In the blackness on the deck he was greeted by a scene of utter confusion. Around him he was aware of terrible, almost primordial movements as huge black shapes hissed past the boat. He could hear them in the distance and as the hissing increased he held tight. They roared like approaching trains, but at the last moment would break a little away or behind the boat. He was thankful that it was night, and he couldn't see them. Above him the wind was now shrieking in the rigging. It was unlike anything that he had ever heard. As he lay pressed to the deck and inching forward he wondered at the velocity which could set up such a wail. He supposed the gusts might be force 10, and for a moment the odd phrases of description from the Almanac came to him, "very high waves, long overhanging crests, tumbling seas, dense white streaks".

As he knelt on the foredeck, clawing at the flogging sail above him, he felt the bow sink below him and instinctively clutched for a handhold. A moment later the first wave broke across the deck, washing up to his armpits. In a frenzy, he dragged the jib to the deck, and tied it to the metal stanchions supporting the life rails. Trembling with cold, he crabbed his way, hand over hand, back to the cockpit. For a moment he sat, dazed by the movement around him.

Even without a stitch of sail, the yacht was travelling fast, and occasionally a steeper wave would thrust it forward, flowing down the wave face in a

smother of foam, the rudder post vibrating with the speed. In his dazed state the man realised that such speed could lead to a broach. Reaching into the lockers at his feet he dragged out two tyres that served as fenders, and, after lashing them together, paid them out astern, on the end of a 100 foot line. The effect was almost immediate, for as the drag came on, the yacht's forward motion slowed considerably, and it no longer plunged down the wave faces. It was also his last defensive measure, and after checking the lashed tiller, he retired below, knowing that he had done everything that he could to save himself and the yacht. If conditions worsened then he would be powerless. Yet strangely he felt almost elated, and as the adrenalin coursed through his trembling body he lowered himself onto the cabin floor, and still in his wet clothes and oilskins, lay huddled below the chart table. Quite suddenly a great lethargy fell over him. He looked at his watch; it was midnight. The storm was three hours old.

In the darkness that followed the man lay braced across the cabin floor. Despite his tiredness, sleep refused to come, and he found himself wondering as to the strength of his rigging, the rudder post, and even the hull itself. For the first time now, the boat was being forcibly struck by broken waves. As he lay with his ear to the floor he could hear the terrible hiss, then a flash of white at the cabin windows, and a terrible jarring which seemed to reverberate the length of the hull. The yacht would shudder momentarily, then flatten itself before the vast wall of windswept water that thundered against its side, throwing up high pillars of foam. A moment later it would right itself, cabin top and decks awash. Even with no sail set it now lay pressed at the heel of 40 degrees, and the interval between the breaking waves was becoming dangerously short.

With his head cradled on his arms he lay listening. He felt utterly powerless, and almost hoped that something might happen to give him something to do. Then he took his sleeping bag, and wrapping it around his head, attempted to obliterate the terrible noises from outside. For a while he was aware only of the sharp pitching and rearing of the boat around him. He thought about praying, but couldn't. It somehow seemed inappropriate. Then, in one moment of clarity it suddenly came to him what the term "founder" meant. It had two senses, and now, in the wet darkness he had come across the seaman's sense of the word. He supposed that if he never made it back to the coast, then somewhere they would say that he had "foundered" - it almost amused him.

He might even have laughed. But at that moment he was aware of a more terrible movement, and a noise that came to him through the sleeping bag which he had pressed to his ears. As he sat up, he sensed rather than saw, the angle on which the yacht lay. It was a jerking movement and it thrust him against the side of the hull. Its full enormity hit him when he realised that the floor on which he had been lying was for a moment vertical beside him. The yacht had been knocked down.

In a welter of noise and falling objects, the man clutched for a handhold. The yacht lay still, and then slowly, almost in a slow motion, shook itself free, and with white water cascading from its deck, began to right itself. It

was then that the second wave hit it. From inside the cabin the man knew that something serious had happened, for the tremble which ran through the hull came from the keel. An instant later water shot into the cabin, and from outside came a tearing sound, harsh, above the roar of the wind. It was the dinghy. Torn from its lashings above the cabin, it had been swept overboard. The forward part of the cabin and two portholes were breached. The smaller wave which followed and those after it, slowly began to fill the yacht.

It took the man a moment to stumble over the debris and locate the damage. By the time he did so, water was above the floor boards, pitching against the hull as the yacht reared sickeningly in the seas. With the added weight, its motion was slightly sluggish, and the man realised that if it rose a matter of inches, then he would lose any reserve buoyancy, and with it, his life.

Clutching a bundle of soaked blankets, bunk cushions and his sleeping bag he jammed them into the broken gaping holes of the cabin walls. Even with them in place, water still ran along the undersides of the deck, into the hull. But he needed time, and to stem the flow, even if only momentarily, could be enough.

Slumping aft, he cleared the squat handle of the bilge pump, and began to move it. The motion was a short sharp push and pull, and as the man began to feel the water press on the pump diaphragm, he braced himself against the pitching hull by holding onto the galley bench. Surging around his feet in the water was a vile slop of softened fruit, newspapers, charts, clothing and broken packets.

A short time later he changed hands, but the water still washed around him. As his arm tired, he changed again, and as he did so, the pace of the pumping slowed, and the length between changes shortened. Still the water washed at his feet, and the terrible roar outside continued. For an instant he tried to visualize what state the sea was in. He did it only to forget the aching in his arms, and he supposed that by now the tops of the waves would be scooped off by the wind, and everywhere white foam would lie scattered like snow. He knew that in these conditions some waves almost came to resemble waterfalls.

He was oblivious to the yacht's momentum. As he pumped he tried different positions, but always one arm, then the other. He tried not to look at the water level, hoping that when he did it might noticeably have dropped. He counted the strokes, then took turn and turn about, one hundred for each arm. As the time passed, he lowered it, sixty for each arm. Then he tried a spell with both arms together.

By now the noise from outside had become a dull roar. The man could hear another noise, which welded with the laboured, heavy, panting of his breath, and this noise came from within his head. He watched his hands, and tried to divorce them from his body. He willed them to continue. He promised them a break if they could do fifteen more strokes, then another fifteen, and then another fifteen.

Vague flashes of light passed before his eyes, whites and reds. His breath felt like fire. Exhaustedly he paused. From deep inside came a terrific wave. He lifted his head and vomited onto the floor then a wave engulfed him, and he fell. As his head lay on the floor boards, he was aware of a wet wood smell. But no water washed his face. It was below the floor boards.

When he awoke it was light, and the wind had gone. Around him mountainous seas of grey reared and pitched. They were terrible, but without the spur of the wind, they would in time fall. As he stared at the boat from the cockpit, its cabin partly broken, the frayed ends of the dinghy lashings hanging limply across the deck, the torn and shredded jib still tied to the stanchion, he began to laugh. It was over, and he was still alive. From deep inside, with a hungered stomach, he laughed that he was still alive.

Two days later he lay tied to the pier of a coastal town. From the cabin he could hear two men talking above him.

"Wonder where he was the other night," one said to the other.

"Yeah", came the reply, "it looks like he's taken a beating. Still, it wouldn't be a bad life, would it?"

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