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Chapter 11 - Emil's Thanksgiving

The Brenda was scudding along with all sail set to catch the rising wind, and everyone on board was rejoicing, for the long voyage was drawing towards an end.

'Four weeks more, Mrs Hardy, and we'll give you a cup of tea such as you never had before,' said second mate Hoffmann, as he paused beside two ladies sitting in a sheltered corner of the deck.

'I shall be glad to get it, and still gladder to put my feet on solid ground,' answered the elder lady, smiling; for our friend Emil was a favourite, as well he might be, since he devoted himself to the captain's wife and daughter, who were the only passengers on board.

'So shall I, even if I have to wear a pair of shoes like Chinese junks. I've tramped up and down the deck so much, I shall be barefooted if we don't arrive soon,' laughed Mary, the daughter, showing two shabby little boots as she glanced up at the companion of these tramps, remembering gratefully how pleasant he had made them.

'Don't think there are any small enough in China,' answered Emil, with a sailor's ready gallantry, privately resolving to hunt up the handsomest shoes he could find the moment he landed.

'I don't know what you would have done for exercise, dear, if Mr Hoffmann had not made you walk every day. This lazy life is bad for young people, though it suits an old body like me well enough in calm weather. Is this likely to be a gale, think ye?' added Mrs Hardy, with an anxious glance at the west, where the sun was setting redly.

'Only a capful of wind, ma'am, just enough to send us along lively,' answered Emil, with a comprehensive glance aloft and alow.

'Please sing, Mr Hoffmann, it's so pleasant to have music at this time. We shall miss it very much when we get ashore,' said Mary, in a persuasive tone which would have won a melody from a shark, if such a thing were possible.

Emil had often blessed his one accomplishment during these months, for it cheered the long days, and made the twilight hour his happiest time, wind and weather permitting. So now he gladly tuned his pipe, and leaning on the taffrail near the girl, watched the brown locks blowing in the wind as he sang her favourite song:

'Give me freshening breeze, my boys,
A white and swelling sail,
A ship that cuts the dashing waves,
And weathers every gale.
What life is like a sailor's life,
So free, so bold, so brave?
His home the ocean's wide expanse,
A coral bed his grave.'

Just as the last notes of the clear, strong voice died away, Mrs Hardy suddenly exclaimed: 'What's that?' Emil's quick eye saw at once the little puff of smoke coming up a hatchway where no smoke should be, and his heart seemed to stand still for an instant as the dread word 'Fire!' flashed through his mind. Then he was quite steady, and strolled away saying quietly:

'Smoking not allowed there, I'll go and stop it.' But the instant he was out of sight his face changed, and he leaped down the hatchway, thinking, with a queer smile on his lips: 'If we are afire, shouldn't wonder if I did make a coral bed my grave!'

He was gone a few minutes, and when he came up, half stifled with smoke, he was as white as a very brown man could be, but calm and cool as he went to report to the captain.

'Fire in the hold, sir.'

'Don't frighten the women,' was Captain Hardy's first order; then both he stirred themselves to discover how strong the treacherous enemy was, and to rout it if possible.

The Brenda's cargo was a very combustible one, and in spite of the streams of water poured into the hold it was soon evident that the ship was doomed. Smoke began to ooze up between the planks everywhere, and the rising gale soon fanned the smouldering fire to flames that began to break out here and there, telling the dreadful truth too plainly for anyone to hide. Mrs Hardy and Mary bore the shock bravely when told to be ready to quit the ship at a minute's notice; the boats were hastily prepared, and the men worked with a will to batten down every loophole whence the fire might escape. Soon the poor Brenda was a floating furnace, and the order to 'Take to the boats!' came for all. The women first, of course, and it was fortunate that, being a merchantman, there were no more passengers on board, so there was no panic, and one after the other the boats pushed off. That in which the women were lingered near, for the brave captain would be the last to leave his ship.

Emil stayed by him till ordered away, and reluctantly obeyed; but it was well for him he went, for just as he had regained the boat, rocking far below, half hidden by a cloud of smoke, a mast, undermined by the fire now raging in the bowels of the ship, fell with a crash, knocking Captain Hardy overboard. The boat soon reached him as he floated out from the wreck, and Emil sprung into the sea to rescue him, for he was wounded and senseless. This accident made it necessary for the young man to take command, and he at once ordered the men to pull for their lives, as an explosion might occur at any moment.

The other boats were out of danger and all lingered to watch the splendid yet awesome spectacle of the burning ship alone on the wide sea, reddening the night and casting a lurid glare upon the water, where floated the frail boats filled with pale faces, all turned for a last look at the fated Brenda, slowly settling to her watery grave. No one saw the end, however, for the gale soon swept the watchers far away and separated them, some never to meet again till the sea gives up its dead.

The boat whose fortunes we must follow was alone when dawn came up, showing these survivors all the dangers of their situation. Food and water had been put in, and such provision for comfort and safety as time allowed; but it was evident that with a badly wounded man, two women, and seven sailors, their supply would not last long.

and help were needed; they only hoped for a meeting of a ship, although the gale, which had raged all night, had blown them out of their course. To this hope all clung, and wiled away the weary hours, watching the horizon and cheering one another with prophecies of speedy rescue.

Second mate Hoffmann was very brave and helpful, though his unexpected responsibility weighed heavily on his shoulders; for the captain's state seemed desperate, the poor wife's grief wrung his heart, and the blind confidence of the young girl in his power to save them made him feel that no sign of doubt or fear must lessen it. The men did their part readily now, but Emil knew that if starvation and despair made brutes of them, his task might be a terrible one. So he clutched his courage with both hands, kept up a manly front, and spoke so cheerily of their good chances, that all instinctively turned to him for guidance and support.

The first day and night passed in comparative comfort, but when the third came, things looked dark and hope began to fail. The wounded man was delirious, the wife worn out with anxiety and suspense, the girl weak for want of food, having put away half her biscuit for her mother, and given her share of water to wet her father's feverish lips. The sailors ceased rowing and sat grimly waiting, openly reproaching their leader for not following their advice, others demanding more food, all waxing dangerous as privation and pain brought out the animal instincts lurking in them. Emil did his best, but mortal man was helpless there, and he could only turn his haggard face from the pitiless sky, that dropped no rain for their thirst, to the boundless sea where no sail appeared to gladden their longing eyes. All day he tried to cheer and comfort them, while hunger gnawed, thirst parched, and growing fear lay heavy at his heart. He told stories to the men, implored them to bear up for the helpless women's sake, and promised rewards if they would pull while they had strength to regain the lost route, as nearly as he could make it out, and increase their chance of rescue. He rigged an awning of sailcloth over the suffering man and tended him like a son, comforted the wife, and tried to make the pale girl forget herself, by singing every song he knew or recounting his adventures by land and sea, till she smiled and took heart; for all ended well.

The fourth day came and the supply of food and water was nearly gone. Emil proposed to keep it for the sick man and the women, but two of the men rebelled, demanding their share. Emil gave up his as an example, and several of the good fellows followed it, with the quiet heroism which so often crops up in rough but manly natures. This shamed the others, and for another day an ominous peace reigned in that little world of suffering and suspense. But during the night, while Emil, worn out with fatigue, left the watch to the most trustworthy sailor, that he might snatch an hour's rest, these two men got at the stores and stole the last of the bread and water, and the one bottle of brandy, which was carefully hoarded to keep up their strength and make the brackish water drinkable. Half mad with thirst, they drank greedily and by morning one was in a stupor, from which he never woke; the other so crazed by the strong stimulant, that when Emil tried to control him, he leaped overboard and was lost. Horror-stricken by this terrible scene, the other men were submissive henceforth, and the boat floated on and on with its sad freight of suffering souls and bodies.

Another trial came to them that left all more despairing than before. A sail appeared, and for a time a frenzy of joy prevailed, to be turned to bitterest disappointment when it passed by, too far away to see the signals waved to them or hear the frantic cries for help that rang across the sea. Emil's heart sank then, for the captain seemed dying, and the women could not hold out much longer. He kept up till night came; then in the darkness, broken only by the feeble murmuring of the sick man, the whispered prayers of the poor wife, the ceaseless swash of waves, Emil hid his face, and had an hour of silent agony that aged him more than years of happy life could have done. It was not the physical hardship that daunted him, though want and weakness tortured him; it was his dreadful powerlessness to conquer the cruel fate that seemed hanging over them. The men he cared little for, since these perils were but a part of the life they chose; but the master he loved, the good woman who had been so kind to him, the sweet girl whose winsome presence had made the long voyage so pleasant for them all - if he could only save these dear and innocent creatures from a cruel death, he felt that he could willingly give his life for them.

As he sat there with his head in his hands, bowed down by the first great trial of his young life, the starless sky overhead, the restless sea beneath, and all around him suffering, for which he had no help, a soft sound broke the silence, and he listened like one in a dream. It was Mary singing to her mother, who lay sobbing in her arms, spent with this long anguish. A very faint and broken voice it was, for the poor girl's lips were parched with thirst; but the loving heart turned instinctively to the great Helper in this hour of despair, and he heard her feeble cry. It was a sweet old hymn often sung at Plumfield; and as he listened, all the happy past came back so clearly that Emil forgot the bitter present, and was at home again. His talk on the housetop with Aunt Jo seemed but yesterday, and, with a pang of self-reproach, he thought:

'The scarlet strand! I must remember it, and do my duty to the end. Steer straight, old boy; and if you can't come into port, go down with all sail set.'

Then, as the soft voice crooned on to lull the weary woman to a fitful sleep, Emil for a little while forgot his burden in a dream of Plumfield. He saw them all, heard the familiar voices, felt the grip of welcoming hands, and seemed to say to himself: 'Well, they shall not be ashamed of me if I never see them any more.'

A sudden shout startled him from that brief rest, and a drop on his forehead told him that the blessed rain had come at last, bringing salvation with it; for thirst is harder to bear than hunger, heat, or cold. Welcomed by cries of joy, all lifted up their parched lips, held out their hands, and spread their garments to catch the great drops that soon came pouring down to cool the sick man's fever, quench the agony of thirst, and bring refreshment to every weary body in the boat. All night it fell, all night the castaways revelled in the saving shower, and took heart again, like dying plants revived by heaven's dew. The clouds broke away at dawn, and Emil sprung up, wonderfully braced and cheered by those hours of silent gratitude for this answer to their cry for help. But this was not all; as his eye swept the horizon, clear against the rosy sky shone the white sails of a ship, so near that they could see the pennon at her mast-head and black figures moving on the deck.

One cry broke from all those eager throats, and rang across the sea, as every man waved hat or handkerchief and the women stretched imploring hands towards this great white angel of deliverance coming down upon them as if the fresh wind filled every sail to help her on.

No disappointment now; answering signals assured them of help; and in the rapture of that moment the happy women fell on Emil's neck, giving him his reward in tears and blessings as their grateful hearts overflowed. He always said that was the proudest moment of his life, as he stood there holding Mary in his arms; for the brave girl, who had kept up so long, broke down then, and clung to him half fainting; while her mother busied herself about the invalid, who seemed to feel the joyful stir, and gave an order, as if again on the deck of his lost ship.

It was soon over; and then all were safely aboard the good *Urania*, homeward bound. Emil saw his friends in tender hands, his men among their mates, and told the story of the wreck before he thought of himself. The savoury odour of the soup, carried by to the cabin for the ladies, reminded him that he was starving, and a sudden stagger betrayed his weakness. He was instantly borne away, to be half killed by kindness, and being fed, clothed, and comforted, was left to rest. Just as the surgeon left the state-room, he asked in his broken voice: 'What day is this? My head is so confused, I've lost my reckoning.'

'Thanksgiving Day, man! And we'll give you a regular New England dinner, if you'll eat it,' answered the surgeon heartily.

But Emil was too spent to do anything, except lie still and give thanks, more fervently and gratefully than ever before, for the blessed gift of life, which was the sweeter for a sense of duty faithfully performed.