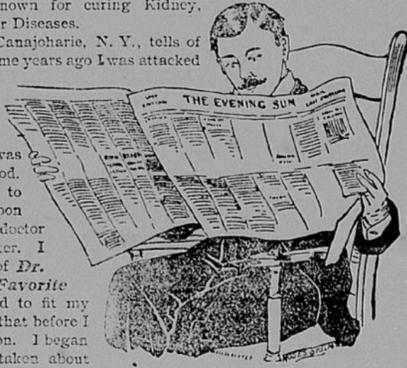


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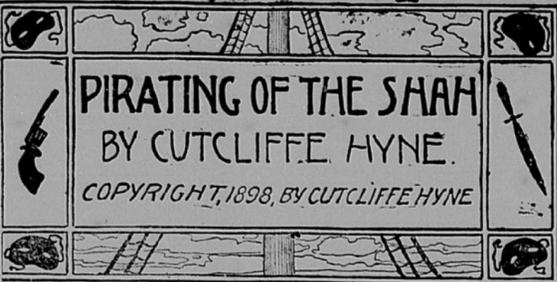
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CHAPTER I

Now, I'll not deny I guessed there was something fishy about the Shah from the very first minute her skipper talked to me, but I was not in a position to pick and choose. In fact, I was that pushed it was a choice between taking the berth I was offered or going to sea as ordinary fireman at \$4 a month.

It was my weakness that had got the better of me, as usual. I had come into New Orleans on one of the West Indian Pacific boats, and the berth was good. I was third on her, and, though I ought to have been second, the berth as third was distinctly good. We engineers had a messroom, with a steward all to ourselves, and bread was baked on board fresh three times a week. There was no stint of anything. Even pickles were to be had for sticking out your fork, and any one but a fool would have staid on that ship and read up textbooks and won promotion. I was a fool.

He was a very nice, quiet, gentlemanly fellow, the one who got me to go ashore with him, and he could play hymn tunes on the accordion like an organ in a chapel. I did see him laughing and joking with some of the others, but then, as he explained to me, a boarding house master had to suit himself to his guests. He admitted he wasn't Scotch himself, but his mother had come from Kilmarnock as a girl, and he'd a strong liking for the north country in consequence. He wasn't wanting me to go and stay in his house, he explained to me, but only to come and have a cup of tea just for the sake of the place I came from. It was not to cost me a single sixpence. It seemed he was a member of the free kirk of Scotland himself, and that explained it. My father had once been minister to that sect at Ballinrocheater.

We had a bit of a social after tea, and there was hymn singing to the accompaniment, and I sang too. They seemed to like it, and they drank my health. I just had a tot to drink their back. There was corn whisky in a demijohn on the table, and you could help yourself, with nothing to pay. It would have looked unfriendly not to taste.

Well, I'll admit that night was a bit thick when it got to the finish, and where I slept the guide Lord may know, but I don't. I'd a thirst on me like Welsh coal ashes next morning, and the whisky was still there, and by mid-day I was full up to the eyes again and inclined to talk. I went back to the ship, found the old man on the levee cursing some nigger roustabouts and forthwith told him what I thought of his conduct. I wasn't content with telling him quietly either. I must needs mount on a cotton bale and preach aloud to all the niggers and loafers who would hear that any skipper who would use language like that was no sort of company for God fearing men like us, and finally while I was advising them to duck him in the Mississippi a policeman came and lugged me off to the calaboose. There was no foolery about that policeman. He drove me before him with the small end of a revolver, and I had to go. Policemen are valuable in New Orleans, and drunks are not. They don't allow their police to go scrapping with madmen in the public streets, and if a drunk won't come when he's told he's shot, and there's good riddance of him.

Well, of course I was sacked from the West Indian Pacific after that. The British consul wouldn't look at me, and after the boarding house master had mopped up my pay and what he lent me my chest he showed me the door too. He wouldn't keep me on in hopes of getting his dollars out of my next advance. He said straight he didn't think I'd get another ship. He said my tongue when I got it oiled was enough to frighten Grover Cleveland.

I'd \$2 left when I got shown the door there, and with \$2 a man doesn't starve all at once in New Orleans. There are free lunch counters everywhere, and with a 10 cent glass of beer you can have a very tolerable fill out of fish pie, dry hash, cheese, and so on, but it doesn't do to go to the same place too often or the nigger behind the bar will forget to fill your plate when you pass it on. But \$2 won't last long, and when I'd got down to my last 25 cents and this berth on the Shah turned up I'd just got to take it and hold my tongue.

It was her skipper himself that lured me into it. He was a smallish chap called Blake, American-Irish, I think, and the biggest thief in the two Atlantics. He'd a face on him like a saint in a stained glass window and a reputation that would have spoiled a gallow, but he could talk polite fit to make an actor of.

So far no jail had ever claimed him, because he had always kept to windward of the law or hadn't been caught, but he was considered a baddish tough, even in New Orleans, and good-nature knows, they're not particular down there. He came across me sitting on a cotton bale on the levee at the foot of Canal street. He had just come down river in a big "stern wheeler," and I was the first person he spoke to after he walked down her gangplank.

"You're Mr. Sandy McTodd, ain't you?"

"Neil Angus McTodd."

"Same thing. Still out of a berth, 'sunny?"

"I haven't decided yet which to take."

"Then take mine or I reckon you'll starve."

"Is that stern wheeler yours, captain?"

"No, sirree, I'm Captain Blake of the Shah. She's down river at anchor by the quarantine station, waiting orders, and I want a new second engineer. My last skipper, if you think you'd like the berth, come and liquor."

"Right-O," said I, and I walked with him down Canal street, and we turned off and went into a "saloon." It was on the French side, and I'd seen more respectable places. We went into an up stairs room, and a nigger brought us two schooners of beer, and when he had gone we were alone, excepting for the flies, which wouldn't repeat what they heard.

"Now," said the captain, "let's get to business. Item the first—you're stone broke."

"I'm no Jay Gould just for the minute," I said.

"And you'd like to earn trouble wages even with hard work?"

"I'm with you there all the way."

"And could be content to ask no questions?"

"About what, captain?"

"Carraho! There you are, beginning already. You've got to ask no questions whatever, my son, if you come aboard of me, and you're to see nothing you're not intended to see. I can get the ordinary type of inquisitive idiot cheap anywhere. My last second engineer was that brand, and I had no use for him, so I just fired him out. You can bet I'm not offering big pay for nothing. No, sirree, I want a man who can keep his head shut."

"I'm that way, captain, if the pay's big enough."

"Sufficient silver will make you concentrate your thoughts on that and not see anything else? I quite see your idea. Well, Mr. McTodd, there's \$12 a month for you so long as you're second engineer and \$30 when you're chief."

"Me, chief?"

"That's what I said."

"Will you tell me if there's any chance of that happening?"

"Every chance. With decent luck you ought to be chief engineer of the Shah by this day week."

"But how?"

He cut me short with a laugh. "I'm not going to talk," he said. "Here's the offer ready, packed up, and waiting for you. Take it or don't."

"I'm coming with you, captain."

"Very well. We'll go right now and get you signed on, and then we'll be off to the ship. There's a tender running down to the quarantine station half an hour from this. You don't want any advance or you might be tempted to go on the spree again. You can fill up your kit from the slop chest when we get aboard. The Shah's got a fine slop chest."

"How do you know I've no kit, captain?"

He laughed pleasantly. "Never your mind how, but you can take it from me I do know. I know all about you—yes, sirree, every blooming thing, or the pair of us wouldn't be talking now here. And I say also you'll find me a good shipmate. Finish up your beer, Mac, and let's be going. Here's good luck to you!"

We got down to the Shah that afternoon, and I must say she was a vessel that pleased the eye. She was a fine



I must needs mount a cotton bale and preach.

new ship, built and engined on the Clyde and owned by a Liverpool firm. She was some 1,500 tons burden. Her last skipper had died of yellow jack in Pensacola, Fla. Mr. Knowles, the mate, had brought her across to New Orleans, and Captain Blake had been engaged by cable from England. He had to sail in two days from getting the billet, and he certainly made good use of his time, for in those two days he not only planned how to run away with the Shah as she stood, but had also got together the men who were necessary to help him. But about that of course I did not know till later.

Steam was ordered for daybreak, and so I was pretty full up till then finding my way about and getting the hang of the machines. The chief was a nervous man, and he seemed to have a small opinion of my capabilities. I wondered

much what he would think if he got to know I was to step into his shoes. Of course, though, I said nothing about that, but just followed him about and listened with a pucker'd face while he gave me tips about hisenemies. While they were getting up steam he even thought good to blow off a test can full of water and show me how to use litmus paper on it.

At daybreak punctually we got under way, with a Port Eads pilot on the bridge to take us out through the south-east pass. I was free after the watch was set and went out on deck for a whiff of air. The river was smeared with a three foot layer of white mist. You could hardly see the yellow water as it scrubbed along the steamer's side, and the trees on the shore were cut off clean by the whiteness half way up their trunks. There was a smell to the mist like new turned earth. It was just the smell you get up the Kongo and the west African rivers, and it as good as said to me, "My lad, you take precautions, or you'll have a dose of fever coming back to you." So I went below to roust up the cabin steward to get a dose of quinine out of the medicine chest, when who should come in there but the old man himself.

"Quinine?" said he. "Certainly, Mac, my lad. Wade in and help yourself. Say, you'd better take a couple of Cody's pills to ram it home."

"Cody's?" said I. "They're new to me."

"Best pill that was ever rolled," said he. "Your English pills make me tired. I guess a man might as well swallow shot corns for all the good they do. Now, Cody's are regular twisters. It doesn't matter what a man has the matter with him, Cody's get right there and let him know they're attending to business. Are you interested in drugs, Mac?"

"No man more so. I've been in the west coast trade, captain, and drugs just keep me alive. I fairly lived on them and no expense spared."

"Sit down right here," said he, "and put that cigar in your face. We must have more talk about this. I need a great deal of drugs myself, and what I don't know about them isn't worth knowing. Bear a hand, and we'll pull out the medicine chest and go through it right now."

Well, I have got to tell a good deal against Captain Blake later on, but I will say he was a man who was splendidly informed with regard to medicine. I never met his equal. It seems he always read carefully all the papers which his bottles and pill boxes were wrapped in, and that's a thing many people omit, and besides he'd a book on doctoring that he sknew better by heart than he did his Norie's epitome. He showed himself quite a gentleman, too, in the way he left the Shah's medicine chest to my discretion. "Wade in," he said, "and help yourself, Mac. I'd not give that leave to everybody, but you're a man that knows what he's about, equal to a doctor in a hospital ashore."

It was while we were having this talk that the propeller stopped. He gave me a curious look, and "I reckon," said he, "that means we're on the ground." But he didn't offer to move from his seat.

"Well, I thought I," the old man's making fast, and if we don't get off quick here we'll stay for another tide." But as it was not my place to say anything I held my tongue.

"Dangerous things, these Mississippi bars," said he. "Very likely to get some plates started over this game."

"Oh, no," said I, "there's no danger. It's all soft mud underneath. Why, we never felt her going on. There was no shock whatever."

He leaned across and whispered in my ear. "But I say there is danger, Mr. McTodd. I tell you that this ship's bottom has very likely received such damage here that it is quite on the cards she may sink when she gets into the sleep with news that the ship is settling under him, he has enough to think of in the present without bothering his head about things of that kind, and I just slipped on a pair of boots and ran to the engine room in pyjamas, just as I was."

The chief and the third were hard at work at the broken bilge pump, but it wasn't easy work, because every time she rolled down that side a good ten foot of water soused over their cars. The water was gaining, there was no mistake about that; you could feel the steamer grow more sodden with every roll, and it was clear enough that with the one steam pump we had working we could not keep her afloat another two hours. The stokehold was full of steam from the ashes falling into the water, and presently the splashing began to hit the bottom of the fire bars and the steam grew worse. Then the fires started to die, and the gauges fell so that you could not see them. We did not stop the engines. They slowed by degrees and brought up of themselves. And then, like drowned rats, we went out on deck. The chief and I were the last to go. There was nothing else to be done.

There was a snoring breeze, with a stillish sea running. It wasn't cold, because we were in the thick of the gulf stream, but the night was as black as coal with driving rain and not a bit inviting for a boat cruise. However, there was no help for it. Knowles and the two other mates and the carpenter had got the two lifeboats swung out, the stewards and the cook were vaktaling them, and the hands were bidden to tumble in without any more delay. A tailor could have seen that the old Shah had not got very much longer to float.

I wasn't going to lose the things I had bought out of the slop chest, so I had it in my mind to go below and put them together. I had got to the head of the companion to do this when Captain Blake came out of the chart-house with the light from inside shining full on his face. He was as cool as a fish and smiling.

"Ah, Mac," he said, "glad to see you are keeping your head. I'll remember this in your favor afterward. Say,

his hanging lamp. "The carpenter has tried his hand," said he, "and made no sort of a job of it at all, and I guess my room stinks of kerosene like a Pittsburgh tool shop. But you're a man of ideas, McTodd, and you'll see what's wrong at a glance."

"I can smell no oil just now, captain," said I when we got inside the chart-house, "but if you'll just let me handle the lamp a minute or so—"

"Shucks," he says, "let the lamp alone. That was only a blind, because I didn't care to say below what I wanted you for, in case somebody was listening. Sit down on the sofa, Mac, and fill your pipe. What do you think of the chief engineer?"

"It's no for me to speak evil of my superiors, but—I'd call him a very careful officer."

"He's an old woman, a nervous old woman, that's what the chief is. And he's no then which side of his bread's margerined. Now, I guess you have, Mac. There are no flies on you—and I believe you could keep your head shut if a secret were told you?"

"That depends."

"Oh," said the old man, "if you can't give me a promise, I can hold my tongue."

"Well," I said, "I'm pinning myself to nothing, you'll understand, but I'll not repeat any matter you choose to speak of."

"That's good enough for me," says the skipper, and he started in to reel out a tale which made the hair tickle on the top of my scalp. He was not very long about it. He told me his scheme in 40 words, and then he asked my opinion upon it.

"Mac," I said, "it's a piracy; no less. 'Oh,' he says, 'it's that.'"

"You are going to take the ship and her cargo at one steal?"

"At one steal, Mac. No use taking four fits at a perissimmon."

"But if you're caught?"

"To begin with, we shan't be. There's no chance of it. And supposing we were, we'd get it no hotter for taking the whole ship than we should for annexing one of her boats. Now, are you going to be sensible and bear a hand?"

"Captain Blake," I said, "you're talking to the wrong man. My father was a minister in the free kirk of Scotland, and if I'd gone strait I might be living in his manse even today. I've a failing and a taste for the sea, which has brought me down to what I am now, and I'm fond of a good wage, but neither the one nor the other can induce me to do what you ask. Man, it's most immoral, besides it's not as safe as you seem to think."

"Well, Mac," he said, "if we don't trade we don't, and there's an end to it. Only remember I hold your promise not to repeat what's been spoken."

"I'm not likely to forget," I said and took my cap and left the chart-house.

CHAPTER II.

Now, although he had told me he intended to steal the Shah, Captain Blake said nothing about his method, and when he got to work that very night I had no idea that what was happening came from his hand and was the outcome of his knavish ingenuity.

I had gone off watch at midnight, had turned in and had been sleeping some hour and a half when the fireman came to rouse me.

He said: "She's half full of water, sir, and one of the bilge pumps is broken down. It's two foot deep over our footplates already and coming in like a mill race. I'll reach the fire directly, sir, and then it'll be a case of golden shore for all hands if we don't look out. She must have started a plate as you said, sir, when she took the ground in the pass yonder."

Of course the yarn about the plate being started when she struck on the bar ought to have given me a hint, but it did not. When a man is woke out of sleep with news that the ship is settling under him, he has enough to think of in the present without bothering his head about things of that kind, and I just slipped on a pair of boots and ran to the engine room in pyjamas, just as I was.

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