## LIII. The Sea-Dog

W. Somerset Maugham

Ships’ captains for the most part are very dull men. Their conversation is of freights and cargoes. They have seen little more in the ports they visit than their agent’s office, the bar which their kind frequents, and the bawdy houses. They owe the glamour of romance which their connection with the sea has cast over them to the imagination of the landsman. To them the sea is a means of livelihood and they know it, as an engine-driver knows his engine, from a standpoint which is aridly practical. They are men, working men, of a narrow outlook, with small education for the most part and little culture; they are all of a piece, and they have neither subtlety nor imagination. Straightforward, courageous, honest, and reliable, they stand four-square on the immutability of the obvious; and they are definite: they are placed in their surroundings like the objects in a stereoscopic photograph so that you seem to see all round them. They offer themselves to you with salient traits.

But no one could have adhered less to type than Captain Boots. He was the master of a little  Chinese steamer on the Upper Yangtze and because I was his only passenger we spent a good deal of time in one another’s company. But though he was fluent of speech, garrulous even, I see him shadowly; and he remains in my mind indistinctly. I suppose it is on account of his elusiveness that he engages my imagination. There was certainly nothing elusive in his appearance. He was a big man, six foot two, powerfully built, with large features and a red, friendly face. When he laughed he showed a row of handsome gold teeth. He was very bald, and clean-shaven; but he had the most bushy, abundant, and aggressive eyebrows that I have ever seen, and under them mild blue eyes. He was a Dutchman and though he had left Holland when he was eight, he still spoke with an accent. He could not pronounce th, but always made it d. His father, a fisherman who sailed his own schooner on the Zuyder Zee, hearing that fishing was good in Newfoundland, had set out with his wife and his two sons across the broad Atlantic. After some years there and in Hudson’s Bay—all this was hard on half a century ago—they had sailed round the Horn for the Behring Straits. They hunted seal until the law stepped in to save the beasts they were exterminating, and then Boots, a man now and a brave one, God knows, sailed here and there, as third, then as second mate, on sailing vessels. He had been almost all his life in sail and now on a steamer could not make himself at home.

“It’s only in a sailing boat you get comfort,” he said. “Dere’s no comfort anywhere when you got steam.”

He had been all along the coast of South America after nitrates, then to the west coast of Africa, then again, fishing cod off the coast of Maine, to America; and after that with cargoes of salt fish to Spain and Portugal. A tavern acquaintance in Manila suggested that he should try the Chinese Customs. He went to Hong-Kong, where he was taken on as a tide-waiter, and presently was put in command of a steam launch. He spent three years, chasing the opium smugglers, and then, having saved a little money, built himself a forty-five ton schooner with which he determined to go to the Behring Straits and try his luck again with the seal fishery.

“But I guess my crew got scared,” he said. “When I got to Shanghai they deserted and I couldn’t get no oder, so I had to sell de boat and I shipped on a vessel what was going to Vancouver.”

It was then he first left the sea. He met a man who was pushing a patent hay-fork and this he agreed to take round the States. It was a queer occupation for a sailor-man, and it was not a successful one, for at Salt Lake City, the firm that employed him having gone bankrupt, he found himself stranded. Somehow or other he got back to Vancouver, but he was taken with the idea of life ashore, and he found work with an estate-agent. It was his duty to take the purchasers of  land to their plots and if they were not satisfied persuade them that they need not regret their bargain.

“We sold one fellow a farm on de side of a mountain,” he said, his blue eyes twinkling at the recollection, “an’ it was so steep dat de chickens had one leg longer dan de oder.”

After five years he had the idea that he would like to go back to China. He had no difficulty in getting a job as mate of a ship sailing west and soon he was at the old life once more. Since then he had been on most of the China runs, from Vladivostok to Shanghai, from Amoy to Manila, and on all the big rivers; on steamers now, rising from second to first mate, and at last, on Chinese owned ships, to master. He talked willingly of his plans for the future. He had been in China long enough, and he hankered after a farm on the Fraser River. He would build himself a boat and do a bit of fishing, salmon and halibut.

“It’s time I settled down,” he said. “Fifty-dree years I’ve been to sea. An’ I shouldn’t wonder but what I did a bit of boat building too. I’m not one to stick to one ding.”

There he was right and this restlessness of his translated itself into a curious indecision of character. There was something fluid about him so that you did not know where to take hold of him. He reminded you of a scene of mist and rain in a Japanese print where the design, barely suggested, almost escapes you. He had a peculiar gentleness  which was somewhat unexpected in the rough old salt.

“I don’t want to offend anyone,” he said. “Treat ’em kindly, dat’s what I try to do. If people won’t do what you want talk to ’em nicely, persuade ’em. Dere’s no need to be nasty. Try what coaxing’ll do.”

It was a principle which it was unusual to find used with the Chinese, and I do not know that it answered very well, for after some difficulty he would come into the cabin, wave his hands, and say:

“I can do noding wid dem. Dey won’t listen to reason.”

And then his moderation looked very like weakness. But he was no fool. He had a sense of humour. At one place we were drawing over seven feet and since the river at its shallowest was barely that and the course was dangerous the harbour authorities would not give us our papers till part of the cargo was unloaded. It was the ship’s last trip and she was carrying the pay of regiments stationed several days down stream. The military governor refused to let the ship start unless the bullion was taken.

“I guess I got to do what you tell me,” said Captain Boots to the harbour master.

“You don’t get your papers till I see the five foot mark above the water,” answered the harbour master.

“I’ll tell the compradore to take out some of dat silver.”

He took the harbour master up to the Customs’ Club and stood him drinks while this was being done. He drank with him for four hours, and when he returned he walked as steadily as when he went. But the harbour-master was drunk.

“Ah, I see dey’ve got it down two foot,” said Captain Boots. “Dat’s all right den.”

The harbour-master looked at the numbers on the ship’s side and sure enough the five foot mark was at the water’s edge.

“That’s good,” he said. “And now you can go.”

“I’ll be off right away,” said the captain.

Not a pound of cargo had been removed, but an astute Chinaman had neatly repainted the numbers.

And later when mutinous regiments with an eye on the silver we carried sought to prevent us from leaving one of the riverside cities he showed an agreeable firmness. His equable temper was tried and he said:

“No one’s going to make me stay where I don’t want to. I’m de master of dis ship and I’m de man what gives de orders. I’m going.”

The agitated compradore said the military would fire if we attempted to move. An officer uttered a command and the soldiers, going down on one knee, levelled their rifles. Captain Boots looked at them.

“Put down de bullet proof screen,” he said. “I tell you I’m going and de Chinese army can go to hell.”

He gave his orders to raise the anchor and at the same time the officer gave the order to fire. Captain Boots stood on his bridge, a somewhat grotesque figure, for in his old blue jersey, with his red face and burly frame, he looked the very image of those ancient fishermen that you see lounging about Grimsby docks, and he rang his bell. We steamed out slowly to the spatter of rifle shots.