

Murder Will Out

BY TRUANT

“Eight bells. Call the watch.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” answered the boatswain’s mate, who executed the order in a short space of time, for he and the watch on deck were worn out, having been busy handling and trimming sail.

This occurred on board a United States sloop-of-war, which we will call the *Nantilus*, one stormy night in December of 1863, as she stood off and on in the neighborhood of Frying-pan Shoals, waiting for daylight, to run up to the flagship and report her arrival. She had just been put in commission and ordered to report for duty to the Admiral of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. From her main-truck to the keelbolts she was new, and consequently her crew were worked harder to handle her than they otherwise would be.

She was officered with the intent of performing off-shore duty, and was afterward known as a first-class ship for paper-collar sailors to emigrate from. Commander Shufeldt, our captain, had seen some eighteen years’ service, and lately had acted as Professor of Mathematics at Annapolis. Lieutenant Commander Jones, our executive officer, was but a few years behind the captain in service, and was known to the Department at Washington as just the man to break in the new ship and her crew; while our sailing master enjoyed the reputation of being *par excellence* in his line of duties. The remainder of the watch officers were all acting volunteers, among whom was the writer, in the capacity of ensign.

Nothing of importance had occurred during our passage until this morning watch, when at two bells I found it necessary to “go in stays,” or in other words, to bring the ship to the wind and stand off shore. I gave some cautionary commands to the captains of the tops, and then turned my attention to the wheel. While the vessel was swinging, and before I could give the necessary commands in such a case, I was startled by the cry of “Man overboard!” I instantly ordered the helm up, the head sheets to the windward, and directed the quarter-master to drop one of the patent fire buoys attached to the stern. By its light we could just see the head and arms of the lost sailor in an attitude of supplication for help, but so distant that it precluded the possibility of his keeping afloat until the boat reached him. Captain Schufeldt now came on deck, and directed the engineer to spread his fires (they were “banked,” in obedience to a general order from the department), and make steam, and I was to stand in the direction of our boat, fire an occasional blue light, and to see the propeller gear all in readiness to put the ship under steam power. (Our ship was rigged with a propeller-wheel by which we could raise the propeller out of water, and thus, when under sail alone, make better headway.) The engineer reported steam, and I that everything was in readiness to put the ship under steam power. (Our ship was rigged with a propeller-wheel by which we could raise the propeller out of water, and thus, when under sail alone, make better headway.) The engineer reported steam, and I that everything was in readiness. The captain now took the bridge and pulled the bell—one, to go ahead slow. The engine had made but two or three revolutions, when the next blue light showed us our cutter right under the bows. The bell was pulled to stop, and back instantly, but the engine refused to revolve, and we struck our boat fair with our stern, and literally run her under.

Everything now was confusion worse confounded, until the captain yelling through his trumpet and with a drawn revolver, threatened death to the first man who should break silence. This had the desired effect, and in the lull all boats were called away. Two only out of eleven of the cutter's crew were rescued, and others having gone down where she struck. One of those who were saved, the coxswain, was a dark, swarthy fellow, plainly enough a Spaniard, yet he claimed to be an Englishman. He held the position of captain of the top and coxswain of the cutter. As he was being handed over the side, I noticed a deep gash in his hand, near the thumb, and that it bled profusely. When asked about it, he said it was from a fragment of the boat, and was readily believed. We now had time to inquire who the unfortunate was that had fallen overboard, and to my astonishment and horror I learned that it was Willie Dean, an ordinary seaman in the top watch. Sanchich, the coxswain, told how the gasket had got loose and he directed Willie to "lay out" and make it up; that he missed his foothold, lost his balance and fell, some ten feet clear of the ship's side.

After the watch had been sent below and the excitement somewhat allayed, I bethought me of a quarrel between Sanchich and Willie, when hard language passed between them, and but for the interference of the sentry would have come to blows. They were both brought to the mast and cautioned against fighting, on pain of confinement in irons. Sanchich went away muttering threats against Willie, and looking the very demon of passion. As is frequently the case, I jumped to the conclusion that all was not right, and walked forward to hail the top and examine others of the watch. When close under the slings of the yard and against the fife wall, my foot slipped from under me with the roll of the ship, and I fell. In getting on my feet I put my hand into something which I knew could not be water, and which, on examination, proved to be blood. As Sanchich had gone down the after hatch to the doctor's room, and as he claimed to have received his cut while overboard, I could account for the blood in no other way than that Willie had been stabbed and thrown from the yard in an encounter with Sanchich, and that he had made one cut in return.

The more I thought the matter over, the deeper became my conviction that Sanchich had murdered poor Willie Dean and thrown him overboard to hide the crime. I bethought me of Willie's mother and sisters, whom I knew well, and of their great bereavement, for he was their mainstay and had been forced into the service by the drafting process; and I mentally vowed that I would ferret out the murderer, and had no doubt but that Sanchich was the man.

My watch was now up, and when relieved, I went aloft to the yard-arm from which Willie fell or was pushed, and found the yard, jack-stay, foot-rope, and, in fact, the entire head of the sail covered with blood. In feeling in the dark for the extent of the fight, my hand struck something sticking between the head of the sail and the yard. It was a sheath knife, and on inspection it proved to be Willie Dean's, as his name was carved on the handle. I made inquiries from the men who were in the tops, and all but one knew nothing of the matter. He had heard some words between the men, but could not say what, and did not see the fall. I could not sleep, and while waiting for daylight and the executive officer to appear, I resolved the while matter over in my mind, and became firmly convinced that I was on the right track. I went forward to the berth-deck, and calling the ship's corporal told him to take Sanchich's clothes out of his hammock without disturbing him; I searched them but found no knife. I laid my case before the executive

officer, and he appeared to joke at the idea; but I found out afterward that he had the same ideas and opinions I had, but remained silent, knowing that he could prove nothing.

In consultation with the captain, we agreed to say nothing of the matter until after we had reported. We were now in signaling distance of the fleet, and were ordered to “come within hailing distance,” which we could not do, so we asked for a tug and were towed in, and anchored close by the flagship. Our mishaps of the night were reported to the admiral, and also to the staff who were present, the Captain giving his opinions as to the murder, when the fleet engineer broke in with the query: “Captain, to what cause do you attribute the stopping of your engine?” The Captain answered that the Chief was now overhauling the machinery to see.

After some further conversation, the admiral called for his barge, and, with the fleet engineer and the captain, come on board our ship. Sanchich was sent for, and when confronting the stern old Dahlgren, quailed and cowered like a thief detected. He told contradictory stories, interlarded with protestations of innocence, until he was shown Willie Dean’s knife, and asked to explain how it came to be stuck in the yard, when he assumed an impudent and defiant attitude, and said they could not make a murderer of him, etc.

Just as he was giving vent to these remarks, and while the admiral was studying his villainous countenance, a cry of horror arose from aft, where the crew had just hauled up the propeller from the water at the wish of the chief engineer, and there, jammed and torn into an almost unrecognizable mass, was the body of Willie Dean, with Sanchich’s knife sunk deep in the breast and through the heart. Portions of his clothing had filled the slot and jammed the shaft, as the vessel backed over and caught the body with her propeller.

I now lost my temper, and all sense of respect for my superiors, and catching Sanchich by the throat, I forced him aft to look upon his horrible work. I pulled the knife from the ghastly wound and held it under his eyes, charging him with the murder.

One long hellish look in silence he gave the corpse, but with the rapidity of lightning, he snatched the knife from my hand and sunk it to the handle in his own breast, instantly falling dead at my feet.

Never shall I forget the countenance of this murderer, as he lay in the cold, dull rays of a December sun, stiff and dead, within ten feet of his victim, whom he had fondly imagined down deep in the sea; but it was willed otherwise, for murder will out.

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