

A Sailor's Confession

By DWIGHT NORWOOD

There is a record of the ship Julia Sturdevant having been burned at sea with all on board except five of the crew, who were picked up in a lifeboat while the vessel was burning off the coast of Korea. This happened many years ago when I was a young man. I am now a ninety year old hulk, laid up at the Sailors' snug harbor, ready for the junkheap. The Julia Sturdevant was set afire, and I applied the torch that burned her. Before sailing on my eternal voyage I have to confess this fact and tell how I came to do it. There is no sin on my conscience in that burning, but there are others that are a hundred times worse than burning a ship.

When I stepped on the Julia Sturdevant I was twenty-two years old. We sailed from Boston to Japan, taking out a cargo such as the little yellow men needed then, but don't need now, for that wasn't long after Commodore Perry sailed in among them and began their civilizing. The Sturdevant was one of the early steamers, having paddle wheels and sails, and her engine was a primitive one. Any well rigged ship in a stiff breeze could outsail her.

We were plowing along through the China sea against a stiff nor'easter, when before the wind came a Chinese junk. Before she reached us she hoisted the skull and bones and fired a shot at us as an order to stop. We hadn't so much as a salute cannon aboard and few small arms. There were ports for four guns on each side of the junk, and her decks swarmed with men. We saw it was all up with us, and our captain surrendered with a condition that all our lives be spared.

As soon as the pirates came aboard they began to look the vessel over and concluded to divide their force, running her as well as their own ship. Without regarding the condition they had made, they forced all the crew except five of us to walk the plank. What they kept us five for was to direct the working of the ship, since they knew nothing about the use of steam. Two of us were the engineer and his assistant. The other three they kept to post and help them in working the ship's sails that were entirely unlike

those on the junk.

Fifteen of them stayed on the captured ship, taking aboard two guns and plenty of small arms, while the others sailed away on the junk. We white men were obliged to obey their orders or walk the plank like the others. And that's the crime I have to confess. For weeks, when they were overpowering unarmed vessels, looting and murdering, we were doing our part of the work. What else could we do? We could have refused and given up our lives, and it's been troubling me for more than half a century that I didn't choose the better part.

I'm not going to name all the crimes we committed because we had to. I'm simply going to tell how we finally made our escape. After awhile we agreed that we would pretend that we were contented with our lot, ask for our share of the plunder and do everything else we could to put the yellow devils off their guard. One thing we were afraid of. There was one ship that we tried to capture and failed. We boarded her and were fighting hand to hand with her crew when they saw us white men fighting with the yellow ones. We were about to join our own color when, fired with hatred against us for being part of a Chinese pirate crew, they made a desperate dash and drove us back on to our own ship. After that we knew that if we escaped the pirates and were recognized by any of the men on that ship we would dangle at a yardarm.

The next ship taken had a lot of liquor aboard, and every pirate got drunk. We watched our opportunity, pretending to drink and be drunk like the others, till they were all laid out. When eight of them were either asleep or stupid with liquor below and the rest being in the same condition on deck, we clapped down the hatches on those below. What we did to those on deck I don't mention, except that they didn't trouble us any more.

We hadn't more than fixed them all when looking ahead we saw a ship coming and made out the stars and stripes at her peak, for in those days our flag was often seen on the ocean. Some of us thought that if she overhauled us and we told our story we would be believed. Others didn't think we would. Some day some of us might meet some of the crew of the ship we had boarded. I made up my mind what to do and without saying anything got a lot of tow and oakum together and set fire to it. The wind was high, and in fifteen minutes the whole ship was ablaze. We lowered one of the boats, got into her and pulled for the Yankee ship.

When we reached her we reported that we had been afire for three days and if we hadn't met the Yankee in time we would have been lost. And that's how the ship Julia Sturdevant came to be reported burned at sea with five of the crew saved. It was never made clear what became of the rest of the crew. I managed that story by saying that when the fire finally got ahead of us the others were cut off from the boats. Some were burned below and some were drowned. True enough the pirates below were burned.

I met one of the crew of the ship we had boarded long afterward in Hong-kong. He didn't remember me, but you'd better believe I remembered him and got out of his way as quickly as possible.

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