

TALES of the CHINA SEAS

No. 1

The COMMANDER of the ALETTA

By Foxcroft Davis

The Yangtze, Yellow river, four hundred miles from Hankow, not the pleasant winter cruising grounds in the world, and, so said, in unmistakable language, Chief Quartermaster Stubbs of the American gunboat Alletta.

Stubbs was reckoned a pious man on shore and a frequenter of the Seamen's Bethel, and a naval adjunct of the Salvation Army. The minute, however, he left the spokes of the wheel in his brawny hands, a steady stream of profanity trickled forth unintermittently from between his clenched teeth. In the performance of his professional duties Stubbs was the enemy of all mankind, especially the Chinese. A nation which habitually sneers at lights on big junks and gigantic rafts in the fairway of ships is likely to incur the ill will of quartermasters. Besides the rules of the road at sea fixed by international agreement Stubbs had added another, which read as follows, in large printed characters:

RULE XI. TAKE IT FOR GRANTED THAT EVERY VESSEL YOU MEET IS COMMANDED BY A DAMNED JACKASS, AND GIVE HIM A WIDE BERTH.

Beneath it was inscribed in Stubbs' own handwriting, homely but clear, like himself:

And you won't never have no collisions.

The chief quartermaster, for some occult reason, preferred to use the word "collision" where the dictionary called for "collision." The idiosyncrasy was by no means objected to by the Alletta's temporary commanding officer, a smooth-faced pink and white twenty-six-year-old lieutenant, Allyn by name, who thanked God from the bottom of his heart that in the present emergency he had Stubbs at the wheel—a sort of maritime Casey at the bat.

A slight nervousness on Allyn's part was natural; the Alletta's captain was laid up at Shanghai with pneumonia, while Richardson, the executive officer, was nursing a broken leg in the Chinese hospital at Hankow, and the command of the Alletta had devolved upon Allyn. Instead of being comfortably housed in at Hankow or Shanghai, and the officers going to European halls twice a week, the Alletta was tossed about the overworked region of the Yangtze, in the month of November, when the water was freezing, and not even the native pilots knew all about the ever-changing bottom.

Ostensibly the gunboat was looking for Chinese pirates, but the presence of the third class German cruiser Cecilia, apparently on the same errand, told Allyn that there was something else in the wind besides junk loads of Chinese freebooters. It looked more like an uprising, with murder in the air. And then, the Alletta having crept cautiously in the river, the British torpedo boat destroyer Viper, with a couple of torpedo boats, casually appeared one day. Some days after a French baby gunboat, L'Hirondelle, much smaller than the Alletta, having come up from Shanghai, the British second class cruiser Drake, without any apparent reason, also appeared.

Looking for Pirates.

Allyn knew this little peculiarity of the British navy; that whenever a few war ships were gathered together in foreign waters there was certain to appear at least twice as strong as all the other ships combined.

In the present instance it was given out that the Drake, which flew a flag officer's pennant, had come up from Hankow in obedience to a freak of Admiral Harbord's concerning torpedo boat practice. The admiral, a large, vindictive man, explained this, in language as soft as a lady's magazine, to the commanding officers of the other vessels. This pretty tale was believed by all except the people on the Alletta.

For the admiral had said and it was of great consequence to Allyn and also to Tournau, who commanded the French gunboat by seniority, and not by accident.

For were there not two beautiful Harbord girls, of whom it was openly known in Hankow, Shanghai and Peking, that they were the daughters of the admiral, who was also known to Admiral Harbord as the father of the young American non-French officers, and regarded with great bitterness having allowed his daughters to come to China at all.

The Alletta lay hove to around in the great river, which had become a vast and turbid sea, and in this particular afternoon was returning to her station in the vicinity of the other ships, where there was good anchorage.

The chief quartermaster's relief having reported, Stubbs, obeying the order of the bridge, went up and engaged in cheerful conversation with Allyn.

It was about 5 o'clock on a dull afternoon and the Alletta plied her way across the muddy waters, with her swirling tides and unknown sets and mysterious currents. Aft off was the low line of hills, upon which the people clustered during the overflows, and strung out in a semi-circle, down the river, were the British torpedo boats, the Drake cruiser holding the middle of the line. At one end lay the German gunboat, while at the other the little French gunboat loomed restlessly at anchor.

Stubbs in his heart yearned like a mother toward Allyn. A gunboat with a main battery of 6-inch rapid fire guns and a secondary battery of 4-inch guns was a big command for a man whose commission was only five years old, and who had a British admiral and a French and German commander looking on. Stubbs would have considered it rank insubordination to instruct his commanding officer, nevertheless he managed to convey a good deal of information to Allyn, the twenty-six-year-old.

"I've been in the service twenty-seven years, four months and seventeen days," remarked Stubbs, "and I ain't never been in a foreign port nor seen no ship there, with so much as a 6-inch gun on her, that in a day or so there wasn't a couple of British torpedoes alongside and a very polite young lieutenant coming aboard with the captain's compliments and the usual remarks."

Allyn encouraged Stubbs by a nod and a muttered word or two to continue.

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Allyn was in the mood then to be critical of the British navy, and who would not in his shoes? He recalled with joy in his heart that the Alletta was the only ship of the fleet at Shanghai and could be very comfortably at a seventeen-knot gait. Like a man he had a supply of extra good food, and her crew could not be seen more than five miles away.

The Drake, however, had experienced extraordinary bad luck concerning coal, and at that very moment was burning a mixture of dirt and slag, and out of

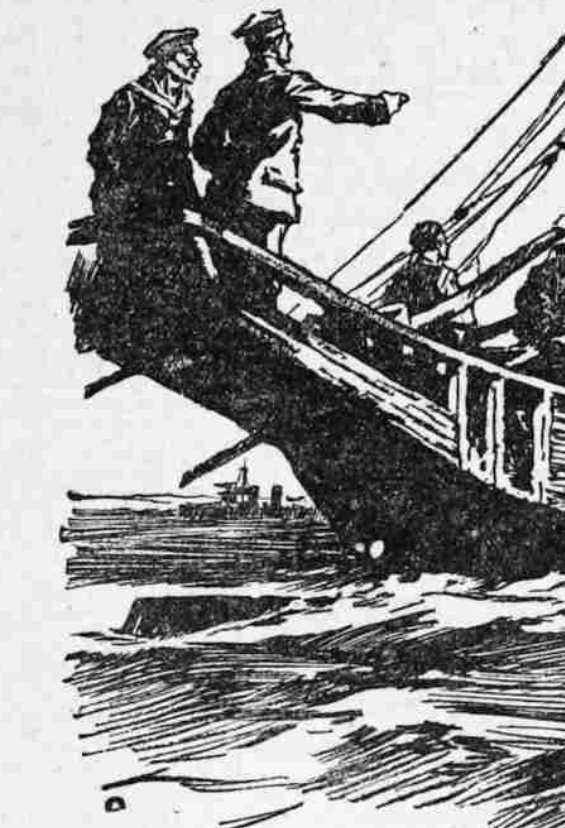
her funnels was pouring a black smoke, warranted to be seen at least thirty miles away.

With the conviction that the admiral's eye would be upon the Alletta when she came down the river, Allyn felt a burning desire to have Stubbs at the wheel, but was a little bashful about mentioning it; temporary commanders are proverbially bashful as well as nervous.

"I think, Stubbs," said Allyn, clearing his throat, "that we want to take up a good berth at the end of the line, and to do so in style. It might be just as well for you to have an eye on the man at the wheel when we get close enough."

"I'll do it, sir," promptly responded Stubbs. "I'll keep an eye on the man at the wheel, sir, even as a hen gathered with her chickens under her wing. It ain't worth while to take no account of native junks as may be prowlin' about. The chances is ten to nothin' they are pirates, and if, by the blessings of Providence, we run down a few of 'em it would be a great gain."

"The Chinese have a way of protectin' themselves against pirates. They rub themselves all over from head to heel with garlic, but I never heard as it kep'



ACROSS THE TURBID WATERS WHERE THE DRAKE LAY, GRIM AND WATCHFUL.

any pirates away. When a pirate gets brilliantly successful, sir, and smites his enemy big and thigh the victory of the province writes him a mighty pretty letter, all full of compliments and such, and invites him to become a big Taitao, presiding over a court of justice. This is a great compliment, sir, they never pay to any except ex-royal pirates."

Allyn had heard this story before and laughed at it.

"Curiously enough," he said, "I hear that these pirates make excellent judges, and foreigners stand a better chance before them than any other sort of Chinese judge."

"Goin' to sea long enough, sir," replied Stubbs solemnly, "qualifies a man for most anything except the kingdom of heaven. If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll take a extry turn at the wheel."

This Stubbs proceeded to do, swearing softly to himself as the Alletta went rushing along at a sharp trot and made several very pretty turns in the whirl and treacherous water before pulling up sharp at her anchorage, which was next L'Hirondelle.

The daylight lasted until the Alletta had dropped her anchor, and then a brown fog, like a world ghost, slipped up the wide reaches of the great river and wrapped the earth and waters and ships in its cold embrace. The fog horns from all the ships began their frightened wailings, like children crying in the night.

Allyn, dining in solitary magnificence in the captain's cabin, meditated deeply upon Chinese pirates, British admirals and their daughters, and the sailing directions for the Yangtze, which say: "Easterly winds bring gloomy weather; southerly winds heavy fogs." His Japanese boy had just given him his soup when a hail was heard under the Alletta's quarter.

Allyn, jumping up, ran out on deck. A shadowy launch crept out from the unknown and a voice replied in French-English to the chief quartermaster's hail:

"This is the launch of L'Hirondelle, with her commanding officer, Lieutenant Tournau. We were caught in the fog trying to make our ship."

"Come aboard, Tournau," called out Allyn, who knew how Tournau stood with Clarrice Harbord, just as Tournau knew how Allyn stood with Mary Harbord. "You can't make your ship until this infernal fog lifts."

"All right," responded a voice.

The next moment Tournau was clambering over the side, while the boat was being hoisted up—it does not do to leave boats out at night in Chinese waters.

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"My friend," said Tournau, in a burst of confidence, "let us be frank. I am at this moment in a state of the greatest nervousness concerning my ship. I see you are the same. Let us encourage each other."

There is great comfort when a man is uneasy in finding another man in the same circumstances equally uneasy. The two plunged into confidences while the fog held, and even reached the point that Tournau inquired anxiously of Allyn, who had left Hankow after him, concerning Clarrice Harbord.

"For I dare not ask the admiral," he plaintively remarked. "English fathers are very peculiar."

Allyn's answer to this was:

"Clarrice has been sent up the Liangkiang river with a party of ladies visiting the convent at Howchin Kwang."

Chinaman, who alone made no protest when ordered out of the boat from the Alletta's deck.

Allyn went back to the cabin and finished the champagne with Tournau. Then he returned to the dark and slippery deck. The junk had been hoisted aft and secured in order to save the sacred white paint on the Alletta's sides. The faint twinkle of a lantern might be seen in the junk, as a dark figure, which was Stubbs, searched it. Presently he coiled on the rope and brought the junk near enough for him to climb in at a lower deck port. In a minute more he was on the deck and standing by Allyn's side in the wet and darkness.

"It's a regular arsenal, sir," whispered Stubbs. "There's a kind of a store bottom in the junk, and in it is thirteen rifles and eight pistols, with the mark

of the British admiralty on 'em. Likewise a whole outfit of sailors' slops, and—"

Here Stubbs stopped and chuckled softly to himself.

"An admiral's full dress uniform, cap and all, marked 'A. G. H.' That is to say, sir, Alfred Greatrex Harbord. No doubt stole from the Drake, all except the rifles. Taint no easy job to steal rifles from a British ship, and it won't be no merry jest to the Drake's armor when it's found out."

Stubbs's sympathies were plainly with the petty officer, but Allyn's heart was with the Drake's captain, when the loss of the rifles should become known.

Ten minutes afterward the plunder was brought in and piled upon the cabin table. There were, as the chief quartermaster had said, thirteen rifles and eight pistols, all bearing the mark of the British admiralty; also a dozen suits of blue-jackets' clothing and a handsome admiral's uniform and cap, in which Allyn's prophetic eye could see the tall and commanding figure of Admiral Harbord. Allyn gazed with rapture at the cap marked 'A. G. H.' and Tournau, blowing a kiss to the uniform and cap, said:

"Blessings upon you, beloved father-in-law."

The Giant Chinese.

As the chief quartermaster said, the loss of the clothes, and even the pistols, could be easily accounted for, but the loss of the rifles was something of which the British admiralty would take cognizance. Allyn's soul was filled with rapture when he realized what Admiral Harbord's feelings would be when the loss and recovery of the rifles were reported to him. Then Allyn asked the chief quartermaster:

"You know something of the Chinese language, quartermaster. Could you get anything out of these people?"

"Yes, sir," replied Stubbs coolly. "If you will make out a watch bill for a summary execution to-morrow morning at 6 o'clock, sir, I think I can get the truth from that strapping big Chinese Ah Fong who is at this blessed moment stuffing himself in the forward galley on pea soup and bacon as is the property of the United States government. I have been interviewed by that gent and he is a layvin' on as he don't know a word of English. So you can supply the details of the hangin' in his presence and he won't know nothin' about it."

Stubbs was incapable of winking at the commanding officer but there was a gleam in his eye which not only Allyn but Tournau perfectly understood.

"Tell the master at arms to bring me the Chinaman Ah Fong," Allyn directed the orderly, and then said to Stubbs: "You will remain here, quartermaster."

In a little while the master at arms appeared, escorting a big Chinaman, with a face like hammered brass and voice like a peacock with catarrh. He stood stolidly, his arms folded and his eyes on the floor. Allyn proceeded to interrogate him, but at every question he merely shook his head and declared in Chinese he did not understand.

Allyn, with a cigar in his mouth, conducted the investigation. Tournau, at the other end of the table, was politely absorbed in a book.

"Ask him," demanded Allyn of the chief quartermaster, "how he came by these arms."

Stubbs put the question in Chinese. At the sound of his own language the Chinaman started, and his folded arms dropped to his side. He answered, however, in a loud chatter, the chief quartermaster's question.

"He says, sir," repeated Stubbs, "that the clothes were bought in a pawn shop in Shanghai, and so were the arms."

"Tell him he lies," responded Allyn.

Stubbs conveyed this remark with considerable force. The Chinaman, however, only shook his head, and a contortion of the mouth, meant for a smile, revealed a set of jagged and wolfish teeth.

"I perceive," continued Allyn, "that this man will not tell the truth. These things found in the junk are conclusive that, instead of being a trade boat, it is a pirate junk. Master-at-arms, here are your orders: All up and aft at 6 o'clock in the morning to witness the hanging of pirates at the yard-arm."

Stubbs repeated this to the Chinaman. He merely shook his head with the same wolfish grin.

Allyn had resorted to the champagne in his moments of exaltation, so now he was forced to do the same thing to raise his drooping spirits consequent upon Tournau's news.

Just as Allyn finished the bottle he heard a sound that brought him to his feet—a door scraping against the Alletta's side. The door opened and an orderly appeared with a report from the officer of the deck that a Chinese junk, lost in the fog, had bumped against the Alletta's side. Allyn ran out and in the gangway butted into the chief quartermaster.

"A Chinese junk full of pirates, sir," whispered Stubbs. "They don't want to come aboard, sir—aboard we'll search their junk."

Allyn, taking the hint, remarked to Tommy Jones, who had the deck:

"Have all those Chinese brought aboard, and the chief quartermaster will examine the boat."

Allyn went forward, and leaning over the side watched a dozen chattering Chinamen crawl in the port. The last man to come aboard was a big

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Allyn went back to the cabin and finished the champagne with Tournau. Then he returned to the dark and slippery deck. The junk had been hoisted aft and secured in order to save the sacred white paint on the Alletta's sides. The faint twinkle of a lantern might be seen in the junk, as a dark figure, which was Stubbs, searched it. Presently he coiled on the rope and brought the junk near enough for him to climb in at a lower deck port. In a minute more he was on the deck and standing by Allyn's side in the wet and darkness.

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"And keep them in double irons until they are up for execution," added Allyn. "Master-at-arms, take your prisoner away."

Here the master-at-arms laid a heavy hand on the Chinaman and marched him away. It was now 9 o'clock at night and the long-drawn howling of the string of ships still penetrated the fog. The master-at-arms came back and reported:

"Handcuffs and legions on twelve Chinamen, sir, all down in the brig."

Just then there was a sudden cessation of the wailing foghorns; the fog was lifting and flying off seaward, like a disturbed ghost.

Tournau jumped to his feet.

"How I wish I could see the denouement of this, my friend! But you will let me know as soon as possible!"

To this Allyn replied significantly:

"I shall go aboard the Drake at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning to turn over these things and the people and the junk to Admiral Harbord."

To this the two young commanders grinned sympathetically.

Allyn had not got much sleep since the command of the Alletta devolved upon him, and he hardly closed his eyes for joy that night. On Allyn's last visit to the deck Stubbs confided to him the belief that Ah Fong would not be likely to weaken before half-past five in the morning, the execution being ordered at 6. It was therefore an agreeable surprise, when about 4 o'clock, earth and sky and water seemed black as night, the chief quartermaster's stubbly bearded face was poked into Allyn's sleeping cabin.

"I put the Chinese into the sweat box, sir," remarked Stubbs, with an accent of suppressed triumph. "He broke down so quick I don't believe they'll ever promote him to be a judge. It's all straight enough about gettin' the clothes and the admiral's cap at a pawn shop at Hankow. Taint so awful hard to steal a few revolvers, them being easy hid, but how they got the rifles puzzled me. It turns out, sir, that all came from the coxswain of one of the Drake's boats not a-headin' the Alletta, another being ordered at 6. It was therefore an agreeable surprise, when about 4 o'clock, earth and sky and water seemed black as night, the chief quartermaster's stubbly bearded face was poked into Allyn's sleeping cabin."

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