



# THE SON OF A HERO

By J. OLIVIER CURWOOD

ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM CLARKE

DOWN near the edge of the big lake a small boy was wading ankle-deep in a pool. Very near him, sitting on the shattered rib of a ship, was a woman, smiling, with a proud, glad look in her eyes.

"This is papa's ship!" cried the child, jerking a little boat tied at the end of a string.

The mother laughed with him. "Yes, it's papa's ship," she said. "Papa's ship—coming home!"

The boy turned his rosy face to the woman on the wreckage and opened his eyes wide in simulated fear.

"But there's going to be a storm—a big storm!" he exclaimed. He kicked his bare feet in the pool until the tiny boat bobbed up and down and came near upsetting. The mother puckered her pretty mouth and cried "Oh-h-h!" in a way that made the boy run up to her and kiss her.

"But I won't let any harm come to papa," he cried, consolingly. "See how the ship is tossing!" He kicked in the pool again, and his boat jumped and dipped until it was wet and heavy. "Hurray, they're going to take to the boats."

The mother leaned over the edge of the water. "And now what does papa do?" she asked proudly.

The child screamed with delight. "He's seen all the boats over but one," he replied. "Now they're going to that, an'—it's got a big hole in it!"

The mother tried to look alarmed. "And what in the world will they do?" she questioned.

"They're getting into the other boats, mamma. They're all in but two, and one of them is papa. 'Oh-h-h-h!' cried the mother again. "Are you

self on his knees and one arm, while the other arm was raised, like a cat's ready to scratch at the yellow, hair-hung visage of the man he defied.

After a moment the sailor settled back on his haunches with a cackling laugh and glanced furtively at a stick just out of reach. There was something terribly suggestive in the leering look of the man as he nodded toward the pine-bough shelter.

"Are y' honest, Cap'n?"

"Honest as God!" declared the little man.

He went back and sat down in front of the pine-bough shelter. For a few minutes the half-stripped sailor lay in the sand, burying his arms and shivering. Then he crawled up and huddled close to the fire. The other suffered in grim silence, staring out fixedly against the wilderness of lifeless sand dunes. As the captain looked his reason slipped beyond his clutch and the righted heaps seemed to take a thousand fantastic shapes and fill the air until they walled him in. After a time they settled again and were peopled with a score of romping children, among whom was a rosy-cheeked boy with a tiny ship trailing at the end of a string. Behind them all was a woman, who smiled over their heads and down at him. The man was filled with joy, and he crooned and beckoned to the woman and the child until something pulled at his arm, and the sailor crept between him and his vision.

"My Gawd, Cap'n, wake up!" The captain dragged himself back to consciousness with a start. His first instinct was to

He pulled himself to his feet and stood away, like a drunken man. With an effort the captain stood up. He pried a few more sticks on the fire, and then the two men staggered through the dunes. The little man's weakness was overpowering. In a moment of delirium he fell upon the sand and hunted for tracks. They were here—they were here—he moaned monotonously. "They were here—they were here—" He dug his way up the side of a dune that crumbled away under him as he kicked and clutched in it with his hands and feet. Again and again he rolled back exhausted, his eyes and mouth filled with sand. Fighting his way weakly, inch by inch, he crawled at last to the top of the dune, and with an unheard cry flung his arms above his head and turned his gaunt face up to the cold, gray vastness of the sky. Then he pitched forward and like a dead thing rolled down the other side of the dune. With a powerful effort he concentrated what was left of his mind, and at times stumbling along on his feet, at others creeping upon his hands and knees, toiled through the drifting sand until he came to the edge of the lake along which the searching sailor was winding like a snake.

He failed to notice that he had made less than a hundred fathoms. On bleeding hands and knees he still crept along, resting now and then, sometimes even in the freezing wash of the sea. The glow burned out of the sky, and now up through the gloom of the twisting sand dunes came the sailor.

"Nothing—nothing," he groaned wearily.

hands he clutched a tiny mussel to his breast. When he came to his knees he held the precious shell out for the sailor to see. The eyes of the latter burned with a mad, mad fire. He approached like a thing half human and fell upon his companion, tearing and scratching with the viciousness of a cat.

"Oh—my—my—my—my!" he cried.

The two rolled over and over in sickening combat. The great hands of the staving sailor caught at the other's throat and held there until the man's face went black and the captain opened his mouth like a strangling fish. By chance he freed himself, and using the clam for a weapon dug its sharp edge deep into the sailor's bare chest. Inside the captain's shirt was treasured a pistol. In their smothering embrace he reached for it, but his arm was pinioned. At that moment the sailor's hand came in contact with a small stone and with it he rained blows upon blow upon the little man's head. Under them the captain sank like a dead man and lay crushed beneath the body of his enemy. He was conscious of a flow of warm blood puffing over his face and he knew that he must be terribly wounded. His hand touched the revolver butt and with a supreme effort he twisted the muzzle upward and exhausted all of his dying strength in a pull upon the trigger. There followed a smothered explosion, and the sailor lurched back and pressed his hands to his stomach. A moment more and he toppled over upon the sand, kicking and sobbing in the agonies of death, while the victor lay very quiet, with blood soaking his hair and beard and forming in a pool under his face.

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"They're getting into the other boats, mamma. They're all in but two, and one of them is papa." "Oh-h-h-h!" cried the mother again. "Are you going to let papa stay there and drown?"

"There's room for just one more," said the boy, partly puzzled. "I guess somebody's got to drown."

"And what does papa do, dear?" There was a pretty expectancy in the mother's face.

The child, thoroughly puzzled, stopped kicking in the water and looked from the woman to the little boat tumbling in the wavelets of the pool. He was very sober now.

"Papa—gets—in—the—boat," he said, finally. "The other man stays. I ain't going to let papa get drowned!"

The mother reached out her arms and the child came into them for a moment.

"No—no—no," dearie, papa would never do that!"

"Then we won't have any more storm, mamma, and papa's ship is still coming home."

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"My Gawd, Cap'n, wake up!" The captain dragged himself back to consciousness with a start. His first instinct was to crouch back in an attitude of preparedness, his second to glance hastily in the shelter where the coat-wrapped bundle still lay where he had placed it. In a vague sort of way he felt that he had something to fear, and he turned his cavernous eyes in a sudden, suspicious look at his companion.

"I've got a plan," said the sailor. With a trembling forefinger he drew a circle in the sand. "We'll both start here—at the end of th' island. You go one way, me th' other. Mebby we'll find a clam."

He pulled himself to his feet and stood away like a drunken man. With an effort the captain stood up. He pried a few more sticks on the fire, and then the two men staggered through the dunes. The little man's weakness was overpowering. In a moment of delirium he fell upon the sand and hunted for tracks. "They were here—they were here—" he moaned monotonously. "They were here—they were here—" He dug his way up the side of a dune that crumbled away under him as he kicked and clutched in it with his hands and feet. Again and again he rolled back exhausted, his eyes and mouth filled with sand. Fighting his way weakly, inch by inch, he crawled at last to the top of the dune, and with an unheard cry flung his arms above his head and turned his gaunt face up to the cold, gray vastness of the sky. Then he pitched forward and like a dead thing rolled down the other side of the dune. With a powerful effort he concentrated what was left of his mind, and at times stumbling along on his feet, at others creeping upon his hands and knees, toiled through the drifting sand until he came to the edge of the lake along which his searching sailor was winding like a snail.

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"Nothing—nothing," he groaned wearily. "Nothing—nothing—nothing."

The little man stood up beside him and together the two gazed out upon the gray waste of water that was dissolving itself in the gathering darkness of night. After a moment the captain's chin fell upon his chest, and his eyes searched the sand at his feet. Suddenly he gave a cry and fell upon his face, sobbing, laughing, and raving in his madness until the other drew back in horror. For a few moments he lay very quiet and during those moments the captain fought to re-establish his reason, while with both

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"Gif me it—gif me it!" he cried. The two rolled over and over in sickening combat. The great hands of the starving sailor caught at the other's throat and held there until the wash face went black and the captain opened his mouth like a strangling fish. By chance he freed himself, and using the clam for a weapon dug its sharp edge deep into the sailor's breast chest. Inside the captain's shirt was treasured a pistol. In their smothering embrace he reached for it, but his arm was plucked. An instant later the sailor's hand came in contact with a small stone and with it he rained blow after blow upon the little man's head. Under them the captain sank like a dead man and lay crushed beneath the body of his enemy. He was conscious of a flow of warm blood pouring over his face and he knew that he must be terribly wounded. His hand touched the revolver butt and with a supreme effort he twisted the muzzle upward and exhausted all of his dying strength in a pull upon the trigger. There followed a smothered explosion, and the sailor lurched back and pressed his hands to his stomach. A moment more and he toppled over upon the sand, kicking and sobbing in the agonies of death, while the victor lay very quiet, with blood soaking his hair and beard and forming in a pool under his face.

Darkness had fallen thick and cold over the sea when the captain raised his head. He seemed to be awakened from his death-sleep by the crying of a child. Groaning he struggled to rise and falling in this he dragged himself foot by foot toward the dead pine from which fluted the signal of distress. That pine had been in his mind for a day and a night. He had figured that his last duty would be to the sculling up of a pillar of flame that might call a ship to the little girl he would leave when he died. They had burned a tree such night. This would be the last. On his stomach he wormed his way toward it, and again and again he attempted to raise his voice in response to the wails of the child coming from among the dunes. After a little it seemed to the wounded man that the sounds were nearer. Each minute now he marked the eyes of the baby girl until he knew that she had toddled almost to the beach. Frantically he strove to reach the pine. The light of it would bring to him the only living thing he had saved from his ship, and he prayed and sobbed in his weakness as he came nearer and nearer to it. He was bleeding profusely again and knew that he had only a few minutes more before him. His last progress was made by inches. At the base of the pine he had only strength enough left to strike a match and light the pile of cones. Then he rolled upon his face nose to the ground.

Away up on the wilderness edge of the big northern sea, where Superior is always shivering cold and the Michigan forests are bleak and leafless, a ship had beaten herself to pieces. A few of her timbers were scattered along the waste damp, frozen beach. The rest of her had

