The Good Ship Decorum

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Abstract

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THE GOOD SHIP, the USS Decorum, had blown up its boiler and gone down like a rock. Bits of things were bobbing on the water, and the fortunate were paddling away in a life boat, leaving the unfortunate to fend for themselves. At least one of the unfortunates had fended, for she had arrived safely, if somewhat damply, on a little island. Her mode of transportation was unknown; from her appearance, she might have been blown there in the blast. She was planted on a stone, staring out to sea. That was by no means her normal occupation, but those were not normal times, and poor Mrs. Steele felt it keenly.

Her thoughts, as much, were centered upon a raft drifting ever so gently toward shore. On it was a vision that should have gladdened her heart. It was Mrs. Adams, one of her fellow travelers. Mrs. Adams' countenance, in spite of the ravaging effects of salt water, was the epitome of serenity and repose. She rested gracefully, gazing thoughtfully across the water as she waited for the raft to land. When it touched shore, she composed her belongings and stepped off onto the dry sand.

"What a pleasant surprise!" she remarked. "I really didn't suppose I would find anyone I knew here."

Mrs. Steele sighed bravely. "No. Those people in the boat just wouldn't wait for me, so I had to come alone."

Mrs. Adams set down her things and smoothed her dress. "It was so fortunate I discovered my raft. I would certainly hate to have the water ruin my dress, too." She fanned herself casually with her handkerchief, and inspected her feet. "I am afraid my shoes got wet."

Mrs. Steele appeared upset again. She pursed her lips and looked away. A figure in the water caught her attention and seemed to cheer her.

"Look. There is Mrs. Thompson."

And indeed it was. Mrs. Thompson came wading out of the surf like a Venus rising out of the sea. She picked her way
carefully on her toes, lifting her feet high before poking them gingerly back into the water. She held her skirts (already sodden) up away from the waves. A lock of hair fell across her glasses, and she dropped her skirt to push at it. The hem fell into the water and she frantically clutched it up again. Suddenly she noticed Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Steele. She flapped her hand — and dropped her skirt. She was quite out of breath.

"My goodness!" she panted, struggling up the beach. "I've never been so wet in all my life!" She brushed at her dripping sleeves and dabbed at her hair. A drop of water fell on Mrs. Adams' skirt. Mrs. Adams smiled graciously and mopped it up.

Mrs. Thompson was appalled at their plight. Her eyes grew round and anxious. "Why, whatever are we going to do?" she asked, looking from Mrs. Adams to Mrs. Steele and smiling uncertainly. Mrs. Adams rose admirably to the occasion.

"I think it would be best to wait. Someone will send a ship soon. They certainly should." Mrs. Steele said nothing.

So they waited. They had barely settled themselves, and Mrs. Thompson was still pouring the water out of her shoes when a great splashing aroused them. Some athletic soul was deftly side-stroking in to shore. As they watched, the figure stood up and splashed up the beach. It was another contemporary — Mrs. Reed.

Mrs. Reed strode up, draining water out of her ears and shaking out her hair.

"Well well well well well!" she cried brightly. "Look what's here! Bet the college'll wonder what happened to us. They never lost four housemothers at once before." She busied herself unfastening an ax that in some whimsey she had strapped to her back. "Picked this thing up when the ship sank and thought it might come in handy. I tied it on my back so it wouldn't bother my stroke," and she waved her arms vigorously. Water spattered on Mrs. Steele and she was reduced to a silent fury.

Mrs. Adams sighed thankfully. "Fortunately, I was able to save my silver tea service. I would feel so badly if anything happened to that. It was my grandmother's you know."

Mrs. Thompson caught the spirit. "I brought all my
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keys," she announced. "I had all my things locked up tight and I just thought I'd better get all my keys. That was so nobody else can get at them."

Mrs. Reed was amused. "Why, all your things went down with the ship, silly."

Mrs. Thompson was stunned. "My goodness! I never thought of that!"

For the first time in a considerable while, Mrs. Steele spoke. "All I brought was this," and she picked up a booklet from beside her. It was so water-soaked that the words, "State University Dormitory Regulations," were barely legible.

Mrs. Reed snorted. "Should've brought something that'd do some good. Like my ax. Come on; let's go get some fire-wood."

Mrs. Steele opened her mouth in protest to such unfairness, then clamped it shut again. From the intense activity of her eyebrows, it was obvious that her feelings were grievously wounded. Mrs. Reed sailed off with the hem of her dress tucked into her waistband, intent on procuring firewood. Mrs. Adams waited expectantly for a moment, then observed.

"Perhaps someone should help her. I myself could never chop wood, but — "

There was a long silence. Then Mrs. Thompson stood up and brushed the sand from her dress. "I could go if you really think someone should." She looked uncertainly at Mrs. Adams. Mrs. Adams smiled sweetly.

"I think that would be very nice."

Time passed and darkness was falling when they returned. Mrs. Thompson was exhausted and even Mrs. Reed was not her usual effervescent self.

"Some island you picked to end up on," she groused, throwing down an armload of wood. "Nothing but vines." She picked up two sticks and began rubbing them savagely together. Nothing happened. Finally, enunciating most clearly, Mrs. Steele said,

"They're green."

Mrs. Reed favored her with a pitying glance and went on rubbing. This time she obtained results; the bark began to fray.

More time passed and more darkness fell. Mrs. Reed had
given up trying to light a fire and was down by the water scanning the sea for fish. She had equipped herself with a pointed stick and was poised for action. Mrs. Thompson had gathered some grass and was braiding it into several six-inch ropes. Mrs. Adams was wrapping her scarf about her tea service, possibly putting it to bed, and Mrs. Steele had just quit memorizing dormitory regulations.

Suddenly, Mrs. Reed broke the calm with something that sounded suspiciously like a Rebel yell.

"A light! A light! Hey, there's a light out there!" She dashed out into the water and began waving her arms and shouting.

It was a ship.

"How nice of them to send one now. I was beginning to feel tired."

"My goodness, I'm just so excited I don't know what to do!"

"I suppose there will only be room for three."

A small boat went over the side and they could see dim figures rowing toward shore. Mrs. Reed met them half way and they hauled her aboard. When they pulled up onto the beach, she leaped out and bounded back to the others.

"Hurry up! It's a ship bound for Australia and they've got room for all of us. Hurry up!"

She hustled them as fast as possible over to the boat. Mrs. Adams was about to step in when one of the sailors doing the rowing noticed the bundle she carried so carefully.

"What'cha got in the sack, lady?"

"I hardly consider it an affair of yours, but it is my grandmother's silver tea service. It is very old."

"Better leave it behind, lady. There ain't much room for a silver tea service in a cattleboat."

Mrs. Adams drew herself up very straight.

"A cattleboat?" Her voice suggested hoof-and-mouth disease. "I couldn't think of riding in a cattleboat. I'll stay here until my friends come."

"You can't stay here alone, stupid. Hurry and get in," Mrs. Reed snapped.

"I suppose if you stay, you'll want me to stay with you," Mrs. Steele sighed.
Mrs. Reed pushed Mrs. Thompson into the boat and jumped in herself.

"But we can't just go off and leave them all alone!" Mrs. Thompson wailed. "Oh my! We are going off and leaving them! Oh what will they ever do? Stop, somebody. Oh dear! They won't stop! Don't worry, Mrs. Adams! Don't worry. We'll send somebody for you. Oh dear!"

"Sit down!" said Mrs. Reed. "You'll tip us over."

And the boat, in the manner of all good boats, sailed away into the sunset, and Mrs. Adams and Mrs. Steele went back to their rocks and sat down.

—Janet Stoner

A Child Came Home

A child came home,
Over a scalding plain of
bent knuckles and polished steel barrels
on a map of unsorted pebbles
thrown down into the noon.

A child came home
To give up at the mother's feet
and crawl into the dark place between
the arm and the breast
and smell in the softness there.

And all the night could not move him
from where he rested,
nor all the circumstances of days and days
defy his eternal burrow,

The dark, warm strength of his home.

—Elinor Holmberg