

Captain Simpson of the Machigone

Young Tom Smith's walking stick was new and an affectation. He fancied it made him seem older. Another thought occurred to him. Properly handled, a cane was a formidable tool for self-defense. For those reasons, he carried it as he covered the waterfront for The Morning Astorian.

He was not yet 20 and learning his trade in the 1890s at the mouth of the Columbia. He reported the ships that arrived and those that were overdue. He reported about vessels that didn't make the passage from ocean to river and were pounded apart by water and sand. Cargo or an unlucky soul occasionally washed ashore, presenting a story to track down. The sea was a capricious business partner. It was a good place to be a young newsman.

Evenings, Tom went to Jeff's Chop House for dinner and to listen. "The Great Republic was a mighty and fancy steamship, but Sand Island gobbled it up like it was a row boat," a seaman said. "Full of rich passengers. When it broke up, their horses swam for shore, and their piano bobbed out to sea."

"I wish I had one-tenth of Captain Flavel's money," a young sailor moaned. "You would if you had one-tenth his brains and guts," an old salt replied.

Ship masters described in nautical and personal terms near sinkings. "My first mate saved us. He went over the bow and passed a line through the hawser ring," a captain said. "My first mate, a fine stalwart young man."

Tom wondered whether he would be stalwart in swelling seas.

One winter night, Tom left the Chop House, faced a stiff wind and headed home. He saw ahead a glowing pipe and a massive shadow. Tom smelled tobacco and decaying flesh. Rotting fish, he thought. Tom neared the shadow and tipped his cap, "Evening." The shadow tipped his cap. "Good evening, Mr. Tom," he said.

Tom stopped and looked closely and tried to recognize the man in the dark. "Hello," he said cheerily to mask his bewilderment. "How are you?"

The stranger laughed and clapped his hands on his thighs. Tom's eyes were adjusting. He saw that each finger was as large as a sailor's cudgel. "Mr. Tom, we've never met, but I know about you. You write about the sea."

“Write about the sea? That’s too grand. I report on what’s happening on the docks.”

The stranger laughed again. “Mr. Tom, I know you. You write about the sea, and tonight I need your help.”

The stranger was becoming clearer — smashed nose, swollen lips, sunken eyes. It was more a collection of features than a face. His hair was long and gray and tangled. He was the largest man Tom had ever seen. Tom thought, “Shanghai!” He looked around to see if the stranger had accomplices. He gripped his cane and felt like he was holding a toothpick and facing a grizzly bear.

The stranger laughed for a third time. “It’s not like that, Mr. Tom. My name’s Simpson, captain of the Machigone. We must cross the bar tonight to help a man on the other side.”

“I’m not a sailor.”

“I don’t need a sailor. We’re taking a doctor, and he needs a trusty man to assist him. We leave in five minutes. By daylight, Mr. Tom, you’ll have something to write about.”

A story? Trusty man? Tom couldn’t resist. He followed Captain Simpson a short distance to the Machigone. It was a windjammer built to carry heavy cargo. The big ship was rocking in the waves. Tom saw a man holding a medical satchel waiting. The three went aboard. Tom and the doctor sat on a bench as Captain Simpson moved quickly in the dark. Tom couldn’t see any other crew members, but the Machigone was soon sailing into the fast-moving channel.

Tom tried to speak to the doctor. “I wonder why I didn’t see this ship tied up today.” The wind carried the sound away. The doctor saw Tom’s lips move and shook his hand.

The wind howled and water showered Tom and the doctor. Tom followed the glow of Simpson’s pipe. The light moved quickly and stayed lit when a wave struck the captain. Tom smelled tobacco and decaying flesh. The odor of rotting fish must cling to the captain’s old coat, Tom thought.

The Machigone angled into the channel, and Tom saw in the dark a white strip where river and ocean clashed. Tom took out his notebook. He wanted to get the

description right, but the paper was too wet. He thought hard. Was the boat rolling? Pitching? Yawing? All of them?

The white strip was getting closer. Tom felt like reaching into the foam and shoving to get away from it. The doctor held his satchel. Above the roaring wind, Tom heard him say, "We may not get across."

The bow plunged and Tom and the doctor tumbled onto the deck and slid forward. They paused and slid backward as the bow rose and the stern dove. Waves crashed aboard. Tom saw the doctor struggling in water and holding the satchel. Another wave threw Tom headlong toward the side. He held the cane above his head, and the iron rail gouged the stick. Tom kept moving — pushed by gravity and water — and went overboard. "At least the stick will float," he thought.

Water filled his mouth and nose. It was too cold to breathe anyway. He sank and pointed the cane toward the surface, hoping it would somehow make him buoyant. He saw below him a giant squid and a woman. "So this is going to Davy Jones' Locker," he thought. "You lose your mind, and won't let go of a stupid stick."

Tom then felt as though he were rising upward. "More madness," he thought.

He broke the surface and saw Captain Simpson's huge hand gripping the cane and pulling him up. He still couldn't breathe. He was dizzy and nauseous and passing out. The last thing he sensed was the smell of tobacco and decaying flesh.

Tom woke at daylight. He was on a dock and heard a fisherman. "What's this, Tom? Too many lagers at the Germania last night?"

Tom sat up. "Did the Machigone make it back?"

"The Machigone, you say?"

"Captain Simpson took it out last night to help a man, but we ran into the storm."

"You had something stronger than San Francisco beer last night," the fisherman said. "Calm night, last night. I heard of the Machigone, though. Left here and disappeared."

The fisherman laughed. "You've been soaking up the old sea stories, all right, but that's not all you've been soaking up. Stick to lagers and not too many, my boy."

Tom picked up his cane and walked to the newspaper officer and told the editor he was quitting. Mr. Ireland was sorry to hear it, but not surprised. "All you young men leave eventually," he said. "Where are you going?"

Tom fingered the gouge in his walking stick. He lifted the cane and pointed east. "Far, far inland."