

THE DRAGON

by
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It wasn't supposed to turn out this way.

This isn't how things should have been, but as he stood at the aft of his new ship, breathing in the rich salty air and watching the dark shapes of the Azores recede into the hazy horizon, Gilman knew he wouldn't be complaining. Far from it, in fact. Fate's fortuitous intervention in Andrew Gilman's life had not only seen him appointed Second Mate aboard this ship -- the Mary Celeste -- but had also seen he alone among his former shipmates escape criminal charges back in their home port of New York. It was pure luck that while dodging the constabulary, he stumbled upon a meeting of the Mary Celeste's owners, including the ship's Captain, Arthur Spradling, and discovered her second mate had taken ill and would be unable to participate in its cargo run that would commence the following day.

And so, here he found himself, in the winter of 1872, surrounded by the rolling blue-black ocean, right where he'd always wanted to be... albeit on a different vessel and under less than ideal circumstances.

When he had left his home in Denmark at the age of seventeen, he was already an experienced seaman and quickly found work with various New York-based ships. He'd crewed just about every type of vessel imaginable, even briefly lending his skills to a short-handed whaler three years prior and it was his wealth of experience that led to the average-height, average-build Dane's promotion to second mate aboard his last ship, the Stonecutter, and helped convince the owners of the Mary Celeste that he could

handle the same job aboard their vessel. In theory, he was the ideal choice for the job -- young, capable and easy for the other seamen to get along with, but it was these same traits that the captain and first mate had come to resent over the course of their voyage. Gilman was, at twenty-five, younger than both men, just as skilled if not more so and the rest of the crew -- with the exception of Aksel Gundersen, who didn't like anyone -- had come to like and respect him a great deal.

"Mister Gilman?"

He immediately tensed slightly, imperceptibly, at the voice. Light, feminine, with a faint British accent.

It was one of many problems Gilman had faced while on board the Mary Celeste -- the captain's wife. While he very much enjoyed the woman's company and she his, it was clear that Captain Spradling had taken notice of their increasing familiarity and had gone to great pains to keep Gilman busy with any task he could dream up.

"Mrs. Spradling," he said, forcing a smile and a slight bow. "You're up and about rather early."

"When one sails the high seas, one must keep sailor's hours," she said with a light chuckle.

Though she was almost thirty-three, Sarah Spradling was still a very striking woman. Not exactly beautiful in the classical sense and possessing the look of a woman who has worked very hard for what she had, Gilman nevertheless couldn't help but be attracted to her. He tried repeatedly to convince himself it was just because she was the only woman on board.

Sarah brushed a coal-black ringlet out of her eyes, but the warm breeze promptly blew it back.

"You know as well as anyone, Mr. Gilman, that the early morning and late evening hours are my only moments of peace. A mother's work is seldom done."

"Mothers and sailors," he said. "are the only people on Earth whose work takes up all their waking hours."

There was an awkward silence that followed, the kind that hung in the air like a thick wet blanket hung out to dry, refusing to yield to the breeze. These silences were frequent when Gilman and Sarah spoke -- it often seemed as though they said more to each other when they said nothing at all -- and it had partly become a defence mechanism of sorts, for on a boat of under a hundred and ten feet, there were few places where even the quietest voices didn't carry to the ears of at least one of the seven crewmen. And it was just as well, as far as Gilman was concerned. He knew just as well as he figured she did that they were already

treading on dangerous ground and the constant presence of the crew was keeping them from straying too far into territory where they had no business venturing.

Not that it would be at all bad, he thought.

No, by Christ, he had to stop thinking like that. The captain already disliked him, and Gilman knew that no one would ask any questions if the Mary Celeste arrived in port minus one second mate. God knows it had happened before and God knows it would happen again, he reminded himself, but it was not going to happen to him. Andrew Gilman was planning on commanding a ship of his own within the next few years. He'd already picked out a name, if he was given the opportunity to name her -- he'd call her Lucky Bastard, after himself.

He hadn't realized the name had brought a smirk to his face until Sarah questioned him about it.

"Oh," he said, trying to think of a plausible excuse without telling the whole truth. The last thing he needed now was for Sarah to let slip to the captain that his second mate was after his job. "Just enjoying being at sea."

He knew she didn't buy the excuse, but she said nothing and any further conversation was cut short with the appearance of Jochen Butenschon, one of the ship's long-standing seamen.

"Mornin' Gilly, ma'am," said Butenschon in his thickly-accented English. Though he and his brother -- also a crew member -- spoke fluent English, they both had very thick accents that were part German as their heritage would suggest, but having been at sea for many years, they had also picked up dialect quirks of just about every nationality they encountered. Jochen often insisted that he didn't speak English or German or any other specific language, but that he spoke fluent sailor.

Sarah bid him good morning, then politely excused herself, saying that she needed to check on her daughter Elisabeth.

After watching her go, Butenschon stepped up the gunwale, dropped his pants and began urinating over the side. He broke wind with a loud sigh.

"Ain't nothin likes a good piss `n fart in the mornin, eh Gilly?," he asked with a hearty laugh.

Of the crew, Butenschon was the only one Gilman would truly call a friend. He was a big burly fellow, his head shaved to stave off lice and long since having lost most of his teeth to scurvy, but Butenschon's sense of humour remained as sharp as ever, and his weatherbeaten face was

always split by a wide grin.

Gilman stepped up to the gunwale and joined him in relieving himself.

"Gonna be a storm comin soon," said Butenschon, punctuating his statement with another loud fart.

Looking out at the sky, all Gilman could see was an endless stretch of cloudless blue. There was no sign of any ill weather, no bitter breeze, no choppy whitecaps, but any sailor worth his weight in cow dung knew that the only thing you could ever expect from the ocean was the unexpected. It might be the clearest day you'd ever seen now, but in five minutes you could find yourself in the middle of the worst storm you'd ever seen.

"There's always a storm coming," he said. "Always a storm coming."

"Got that right. My goddamn knees pop and creak more'n our bloody riggin when `ere's a storm in the air."

Gilman pulled up his pants and left Butenschon -- whom he decided must have the bladder of an ox -- and crossed the poop deck to the quarter deck where the captain had just appeared.

"Sir."

"Yes, Gilman?"

The captain was a stocky man who looked far older than his thirty-seven years. His hair was nearly white, and his face deeply lined -- some of the crew said it was because he spent so much time frowning. That didn't surprise Gilman in the least.

"Butenschon says there's a storm coming, Sir. Says he can feel it in his knees."

"I see," said Captain Spradling with a grunt. "How scientific of him."

He tilted his head into the light breeze and sniffed several times.

"There is a storm in the air," he said, nodding.

How the captain's method of storm detection was any more scientific than Butenschon's was beyond Gilman, but whether by knee or by nose, it was clear there would be a storm at some point today. Or tomorrow. Or the next day. Or all three. That was the beauty of an open-sea storm, thought Gilman -- they could blow over in an hour or they could pound the wrath of Poseidon into your ship for days, as had happened shortly after the Stonecutter had left port those many, many months ago. They had nearly been dashed on coastal shoals more times than he cared to remember, but the Mary Celeste was a larger ship and thus the brigantine was not as bound to the mercy of the winds as the small

Stonecutter. Whereas she had been built for speed alone, the Mary Celeste had been built broad and sturdy, born for the long haul, designed to withstand the rigors of trans-Atlantic shipping with her precious cargo intact.

Of course, the Stonecutter's lighter build had seen her captain stick close to shore for fear of losing masts to the brutal oceanic winds and it was this strategy that had exposed the ship to the dangers of shoals, rocks and reefs. The Mary Celeste was in the open sea and while that posed dangers all its own, the risk of cracking her ribs and splitting her open on rocks was slim. It was a small consolation, but a consolation nonetheless.

The morning was quite uneventful -- one of the crew swore he had seen the tail of a mermaid, but it had turned out to be the tail of a sperm whale calf and the ship had been diverted slightly to the south to avoid a large pod of the creatures, but there had been no heavy winds, no rain, no storm. In fact, were it not for the minor course change, there would have been little to occupy the crew. Most of the crew. Spradling and Doody had beckoned Gilman onto the quarter deck shortly after the morning meal, such as it was, and had ordered him to personally inspect every one of the seventeen hundred barrels of raw alcohol they had been hired to transport to Italy. Apparently the captain, who had probably never had a drink in his entire life, had caught a faint whiff of the stuff and was worried one or more casks were leaking.

That was where Gilman found himself -- in the hold, inspecting barrel number nine-hundred and four with the reluctant assistance of the ship's steward and cook, Simon Hobson -- when the first sign of inclement weather made itself known. The ship lurched slightly beneath their feet, causing Hobson, the less experienced seamen of the two, to steady himself on one of the barrels.

"What the bloody hell?"

While the shift was hardly the jarring jolt of a collision, it was enough for any half-wit sailor to know that there were problems developing.

"Shift in the wind is all," said Gilman, leaving out the fact that he knew it was a major shift in the wind and one that no doubt heralded the coming of a major storm.

"Just a shift in the wind."

"Jesus bloody Christ it is! We hit something!"

Gilman ignored the wild-eyed man. He knew from experience that the jar they felt was not a collision, but he also knew that Hobson was the type who could not be calmed by such a fact -- he would continue to believe the

worst until you held the truth up in front of his eyes and forced him to look at it.

Pushing his way past the nervous steward, Gilman quickly ordered the man to stay where he was and finish checking the barrels, then made his way onto the poop deck. Immediately, the wind lashed out at him, his pant legs making sharp snapping noises and he had to steady himself for an instant while his body adjusted to the new circumstance.

The sky had changed. No longer was it a wide open welcoming blue, but a foreboding slate grey, filled with jagged black clouds. The warmth of the morning sun had completely vanished, replaced by a chill, biting wind that howled through the Mary Celeste's rigging, pulling the lines taut as the seamen struggled to pull down sails. The rain had not yet begun, but the air was heavy and there were flashes of lighting in the distance the rain would come and come soon. □

"Gilman!," the captain yelled. He could barely be heard over the roaring wind, but he didn't need to be -- following the captain's pointing finger, Gilman knew exactly what the man wanted -- the chest where they kept spare lengths of rope on deck had not been lashed down and was sliding all around the deck and the ocean swells began tipping the ship at odd angles. As Gilman grabbed it and shoved it back into place, using one of the ropes from within to fasten it tightly to the deck, he felt another jolt. Unlike the last, this jolt was not the whole ship shifting or tossing, but a great thump that could be felt through the deck timbers.

This time, they had hit something.

"What in the bloody blue blazes was that?," demanded the lanky, horse-faced first mate, Albert Doody, his big droopy moustache making him look something like an emaciated walrus.

"Mister Gundersen!," bellowed the captain, but Gundersen didn't hear well at the best of times, so Gilman answered the call himself.

"Captain," he said. "That was an impact."

"I realize that, Mister Gilman, but the question is what in God's name did we hit in the open ocean?"

"A fish?," suggested Doody. "The natives of the Azores say there are fish in these waters big enough to swallow a small vessel."

Spradling snorted at his mate's faith in folklore.

"When was the last time a bloody native knew anything about anything? Bloody fools, the lot of them. Gilman,"

he said. "Go and see if whatever it is, is still nearby. Don't want to ram my ship into it twice, see."

Gilman nodded and ran to the fore, clambering out onto the bowsprit without hesitation and squinting against the salt spray while examining the deep in front and below. Nothing. There wasn't a giant fish in sight, nor anything else but miles upon miles of water, everywhere but above. On the bow of the ship, however, there was a deep scrape -- a fresh scrape, exposing clean, whitish wood.

"Hell."

"What is it?," asked Doody. Gilman hadn't realized the man had followed him, but he wasn't surprised -- Doody often felt the need to check up on the young Dane, even on the most mundane of assignments.

Gilman slid back onto the deck and wiped the sea out of his stinging eyes.

"Don't know, sir. Whatever it was, it was big -- gave ol' Mary a bugger of a scar," he said, walking the length of the deck, peering over the side, looking for some sign of whatever it was they had struck. Doody followed closely.

"How bad? Will we take on water?"

"No, God willing," he beckoned to Holger Butenschon, younger brother of Jochen who always wore a red woollen cap and was better known as 'Kid' though he was only two years younger than Gilman. "Kid, check the forward hold for water--"

The rest of his order was drowned out by the shouts of several men, including Jochen Butenschon, who was perched high in the rigging, pointing aft with a mixture of both excitement and fear.

"Jesus bloody wept!," Jochen yelled hoarsely.

Less than a quarter mile behind the Mary Celeste, the waters of the sea were churning and roiling as if they were in a stew pot and preparing to boil out all over the stove. It was all white foam and spray, and then it stopped. Then there was nothing again but the howl of the wind in the rigging, for no man on deck moved.

"It weren't bigger 'n us," said Jochen, suddenly standing beside the dumbstruck Gilman and Doody. "Not the ship. But it were twice the size of a man, easy."

"What was it?," asked Doody. Though he and Gilman had been standing at the aft rail, Butenschon's higher vantage point gave him the best view of the disturbance.

"Ain't nothin I seen afore," he said, shaking his head as a light rain began to come down. "Not in the water, least ways. Like a snake, almost, but not really."

"Starboard!," someone screamed, and the entire crew, save for the wheelman named Schüler, flocked to the starboard in time to see huge ripples in the ocean swells.

"Those ripples go against the swells," sad Doody.

"What does that mean?"

None of the men had noticed Sarah come onto the deck during the excitement, and now tried to cover their uneasiness so as not to alarm her.

"Just unusual, ma'am," Doody said dismissively. "You should stay below, ma'am, what with the storm and... I should say the storm is worsening."

She frowned and looked into Doody's eyes, but he looked away. He had never been a good liar and Sarah knew he was lying to her now -- the storm may well be worsening, but there was more to those ripples than he had admitted.

"We should get you below," said Gilman, taking her elbow and leading her towards the stairway.

"What's going on, Andrew?," she asked, putting her hand on his.

"We hit something. We don't know what, but it was big and it was alive and it may still be. Keep walking," he said firmly when Sarah stopped. "And stay below decks."

When she started down the steps, he closed the door behind her and rejoined Doody and Jochen.

"A whale, perhaps?," Doody was asking.

"I know what a whale looks like, sir and it weren't no whale."

"You said it was bigger than a man," said Gilman. "How much bigger?"

"Maybe twice," said Jochen. "Twice as big, twelve foot. `Course I dunno if I seen the whole thing."

Twelve feet. And how much more below the surface?

Gilman stared down at the choppy surface, the water even darker than the angry sky above, and couldn't help but feel a deep sense of foreboding. What if Jochen had been right and he had not seen the entire length of the creature? The impact and the scrape on the bow would seem to indicate an extremely large creature, far larger than the twelve foot estimate, and with the sea as it was, their visibility would extend a matter of a mere few feet below the surface.

"God willing, we never will see the whole thing," he said.

Doody frowned and appeared about to say something, but he quickly clammed up when the captain approached, one hand clamped on top of his hat against the winds.

"Gentlemen, I'll thank you to get back to work," said

Spradling. "A brigantine doesn't sail itself, you know."

"But Sir, what about the... thing."

"It was a whale, Mister Doody, a whale, that's all. I'm afraid we have more pressing matters to deal with than some fish that doesn't know enough to stay out of the way of a ship," he said, waving his free hand at the ever-darkening sky.

He looked at the faces surrounding him, looking for someone to protest, but none were willing. He grunted his satisfaction.

"Where's Hobson?"

"Below, Sir," said Gilman.

"Get him up here, we may need the extra hands."

The rain was coming down heavier now, fat droplets splattering on the deck and on the crew, and the wind had become even more biting and bitter.

"Bloody weather reminds me of England," muttered Spradling. He hadn't been to Britain for years -- certainly not since Elisabeth was born -- but every time he had put into port there it was cold and wet and grey. He promised Sarah they could go back to visit her family in London once this trip was over, but God how he was dreading that voyage. "Gilman."

The second mate had just returned from the hold with Hobson reluctantly in tow. The steward had made a hot-headed protest about not being a sailor and that it wasn't his job to haul sail, but Gilman quickly convinced him otherwise as evidenced by the darkening bruise on the younger man's left cheekbone.

"Sir?"

Spradling ignored the response for a moment, frowning at the mark on Hobson's face.

"What happened?"

"Slipped, Sir," Hobson said nervously. "Slipped when we were hit, Sir, banged m'self on one of the barrels, Sir."

The captain nodded sympathetically and instructed the man to go to Doody for orders. Hobson quickly complied and Spradling, left alone with Gilman, smiled humourlessly.

"Lazy bastard, isn't he?"

"No, Sir. He was very eager to get on deck and help," said Gilman with a straight face. "Barely got your orders out, Sir, and he was halfway up."

"Of course. Next time, Mister Gilman, make sure his eagerness doesn't leave such a visible mark."

"That's entirely in his hands, Captain."

"Sticking up for fellow crew members is an admirable

thing to do, Gilman," said Spradling, through clenched teeth. "But lying to your captain is not. You're already walking a very fine line, Mister Gilman -- be careful not to stumble. You may find yourself falling overboard."

"You should know, Sir, that the men are far more loyal to me than they are to you," he said with an even, diplomatic, even sympathetic tone. As soon as the sentence was out of his mouth, he knew he shouldn't have said it, but he had already decided that when the Mary Celeste docked in Italy, Andrew Gilman would slip away in the night and the ship would be one man short for the voyage home.

Spradling could feel the anger rising in his throat, the wash of blood creeping up his neck and into his cheeks, and he wanted to grab Gilman by the throat right here. He wanted to strangle the Dane and throw his corpse overboard to feed whatever it was that had swam into his bloody ship. He wanted the second mate off his ship, out of his life and most importantly, away from Sarah. He had heard the rumours about his wife's relationship with Gilman, rumours about a romantic relationship and even about sexual encounters in the darkness of night. He did not believe that, of course, for his wife slept next to him every night, but the rumours alone made him furious and even he could see the ease with which Sarah and Gilman conversed and the ease with which he could make her smile. And for that, he hated Gilman.

"You have crossed the wrong man, Mister Gilman," said Spradling, his rage barely contained. "I'll see to it that-."

He could not finish the sentence.

With a great crash and the creak and groan of stressed timbers, the ship shook and lurched, sending both men -- all the men -- to the deck with heavy thuds. The captain's hat was snatched from his head by the winds and taken overboard before he could get over the shock.

The crew picked themselves up slowly and Gilman offered Spradling a hand but was cursed at instead as the captain struggled to his feet alone. Feeling a warmth on his forehead, Gilman touched it only to find a large gash had opened there where his head had struck the rough wooden planks of the poop deck.

"Is everyone all right?," he called out.

One by one, the crew yelled out that they were fine, but Hobson had broken his wrist.

"Bloody Hobson," swore Spradling.

"Captain," said Doody as he hurried over to Spradling, holding his right elbow. He waved off the concern and

explained that he'd hit the arm on the deck when he fell, but it was just sore -- nothing serious. "Captain, I saw it this time. It was the same beast. It rammed us! I tried to order a turn but it was too fast."

The captain looked out to sea, unsure of what to do.

"Gilman," continued Doody. "Go stitch yourself up -- you're no good to us if you bleed to death."

"Yessir."

Stepping below decks, Gilman saw that the second collision between the Mary Celeste and the beast caused even more havoc here than it had above -- just about everything that hadn't been nailed down was now scattered on the floor. His boots crunched on a shattered piece of ceramic that may once have been a dinner plate but was now only so many useless shards and he saw a battered old rag doll lying limply in the corner and wondered if the captain's daughter had been hurt in what he could only think of now as a deliberate attack.

He looked around at the mess and began shuffling through it, looking for something, anything, to stitch up the gash in his head. Finding an old scrap of material, he pressed it to the wound to staunch the flow of blood until he found a needle and thread.

"Andrew," said Sarah as she stepped into the room. "You're hurt."

"Just a scratch. Are you and Elisabeth all right?"

"Yes, a little shaken is all."

She forced him to sit down and let her look at his injury and she blanched as the blood seeped in a scarlet line from the deep cut, tracing a path down his face, following the contour of his jaw. As he again pressed the now-blood-soaked scrap to his head, Sarah disappeared into the other room and rummaged through her sewing chest until she found a thin needle and a spool of the fine white thread she often used to reattach the brass buttons her husband had a habit of losing from his best shirts. She threaded the needle, lit a lantern for light and stood over Gilman. Swallowing heavily, she tried her best to convince herself stitching up a head wound would be as easy as mending torn pants, but as the tip of the needle slid into the flesh and through the other side, dragging the thread behind it with a sort of squishing sound, she had to stop.

"You can do it," Gilman said. "Just stop thinking about it."

"Easy to say," she said, forcing a smile.

Taking a deep breath, she quickly -- but clumsily, thanks to the rolling waves beneath the ship -- finished

stitching him up and tied off the thread. She was still pale and her hands shaking while she used the hem of her skirt to wipe away the excess blood from Gilman's face.

"What's going on, Andrew?," she asked, her voice shaking. He couldn't tell if it was fear of the unknown or the effect of playing nurse that caused it.

"It rammed us."

He began to walk away, but she grabbed his hand and held it as he turned to face her.

"Andrew, I..."

"Just take care of Elisabeth, Sarah. We'll take care of the ship," he said with a confidence he did not feel.

There was more he wanted to say -- comfort her, reassure her -- but he knew that everything he wanted to say would have been an act. He couldn't reassure himself, let alone the nervous wife of his captain, so he forced himself to turn away and step back onto the weather-beaten deck.

"Man overboard!," was the first sound that reached Gilman's ears as he stepped back into the screaming winds and icy rains. He rushed to the side where a number of the crew had gathered, one with a long stave and one with a rope, but there was no one in the water. All that floated there beside the Mary Celeste was a red woollen cap, slowly soaking up water until it became too heavy and began to sink out of view.

Gilman put a hand on the shoulder of Jochen Butenschon, a gesture that seemed pathetic in the wake of the man losing his young brother, and saw tears in the older man's eyes.

"Jochen, I'm sorry," he said. "What happened?"

"He was on the bowsprit," said Doody when Butenschon didn't answer. "A wave came up, plucked him right off."

Losing men to the sea or to disease was common on long hauls like the one the Mary Celeste was engaged in, but losing a shipmate, a friend, combined with the fear generated by the sudden appearance of a belligerent beast from the depths left the crew on edge. Reluctantly, they abandoned their vigil for the body of Holger Butenschon and silently returned to their tasks, all but Jochen and Doody and Gilman, whose minds were reeling to make sense of everything.

Gilman had once helped rescue the surviving crew members of a fishing boat that had broken on a reef in the Carribean, pulling bloodied men from that red-tinged water even as the sharks circled and snapped at victim and rescuer alike. He had been seventeen, but he had never

forgotten the sight of those gaping mouths full of teeth -- the sharks had been small ones and he hadn't feared them, but a death like the ones suffered on that day was a sailor's worst nightmare.

"Raise the main sail!," ordered Spradling. While Gilman was having his injuries tended to, the captain and first mate had decided that their best course of action was to put into port, any port, as quickly as possible and were willing to risk damaging their sails in the storm to do so.

As the men scrambled to rig the sail, their work made perilous and difficult by the winds tearing at their bodies and the cold rain battering their already freezing hands, the ship was tossed on a large wave. The ocean was now dotted with whitecaps where there had once only been dark mounded swells and as Gilman stared down into the depths that had become a shipmate's grave, he froze, his eyes wide.

A shadow had appeared. Then it was more. A long, smooth object, half as wide as the Mary Celeste herself. It was no more than two feet below the churning surface and Gilman followed its length with his eyes, seeing a short sail-like fringe along the length of the dull green creature, two long fins -- at least, two that he could see, though he assumed there were more -- and the head. Just below the surface, the head looked massive, fringed and with what looked like seaweed growing in tufts along the snout and a chill ran down Gilman's spine that had nothing to do with the weather -- the beast's huge black eyes were staring at him. They were like the eyes of a shark, he thought, somewhat amused that he could think so clearly, though a shark's eyes were almost lifeless while these eyes seemed to burn with life. They were nothing but black orbs, yet the intensity of the beast's gaze forced Gilman to turn away.

He wanted to call out to the crew, warn them of the danger lying so quietly beside them, but he kept silent -- the creature was large enough to swamp the Mary Celeste and he did not want to startle the beast into a sudden thrashing. His eyes searched the deck desperately as he tried to think of something, anything, he could do. His eyes caught Doody, who began to approach.

"Gilman!," yelled the first mate. "Stop standing around like a bloody-."

He trailed off, his eyes wide as dinner plates. The water churned, its crashing thunderous, drowning out all other sounds and Gilman turned to witness the beast rearing up, its size far more immense than he had first thought.

Its head and a good portion of its body rising out of the water, the beast proved why it had no apparent fear of the ship. With its tail visibly thrashing on the other side of the ship, near the stern, and its head almost as high as the mast, the beast was nearly twice the length of the one hundred and three foot brigantine. A wave caused by the creature's sudden rising sloshed over the deck and the icy water rushing past his ankles brought Gilman out of his trance and he staggered backward and fell heavily as his heel squished down on a sodden length of rope left lie on the deck by the nervous crew.

"Dragon!," screamed Doody, his voice almost entirely snatched away by the wind.

As if in reply, the beast opened its great maw and thrusting its head forward, roared at the ship. Or, more accurately, screamed. It's call was strangely shrill and musical for such a massive creature, starting off very soft and delicate, but reaching an ear splitting crescendo in a matter of seconds. And as Gilman watched in horror, the beast pulled back sharply, water cascading in sheets off its smooth, glistening skin, and thrust its head forward, ramming the side of the Mary Celeste with a thunderous crack. The crew members cried out as each of them was thrown to the deck and Gilman heard a sickening thud and crunch behind him -- Aksel Gundersen, the grumpy old-timer of the crew, had been halfway up the mast and was sent crashing to the deck, and to his death, by the dragon's charge. His head lay limply at a near-ninety degree angle to his shoulders, his neck broken.

Gilman scrambled to his feet and seeing the creature pull back again, he bellowed for the crew to hold on to something solid, but there was no second charge. Instead, the creature seemed to weave its head back and forth, blinking its intense black eyes repeatedly.

Ramming the hard timbers of the Mary Celeste's ribs had stunned the animal.

"Captain!," yelled Gilman. "Orders?"

Spradling was in a daze all his own. A second yell from Gilman went unanswered, and the young second mate had to weave his way up to where the captain stood and shake the man by the shoulders before his presence was even acknowledged.

"I...," the captain trailed off, gaping in awe at the immense creature a matter of metres from his ship. Gilman glanced back to make sure the beast was still dazed and it was... but so too was Captain Spradling.

"Captain!," said Gilman. "What are your orders? We

need to do something!"

Stunned silence.

"Damn it. All right, men," Gilman yelled, loud enough to be heard over the wind. "Raise all sails! We're making a break for it!"

It wouldn't matter, he thought. It wouldn't matter if they had as many sails as a Man-O-War -- the ship just wasn't fast enough to get them away from the dragon, as Doody had called it. It would matter to the crew, though. It would give the remaining men something to do, something to concentrate on, some sense of normalcy in a decidedly abnormal situation that would force them to calm down and let their sailors' instincts take over. There had to be something he could do, something to avert the disaster they all knew was coming and coming quickly.

Gilman didn't have time to finish his thought. The creature stretched its neck high and screamed its high-pitched call, but did not charge. This time, the ship was rocked from the other side as the beast's tail arced up over the deck and crashed down, sending splinters -- some as much as four feet in length -- spraying across the ship. All the sails in the world weren't going to help them survive this encounter, Gilman thought as he glanced up to see Doody kneeling over yet another fallen shipmate. Approaching the pair, Gilman was shocked to see that the man was mortally wounded, a three-foot length of splintered wood impaling him just below the rib cage, a wet red spot spreading rapidly across his expensive white shirt. It was Captain Spradling.

"Captain!," Doody was saying, desperately trying to keep him conscious. Not that keeping Spradling conscious would help, thought Gilman. Maybe if they were within reach of a hospital or even a ship's surgeon, but out here, in the middle of a storm, the captain was already dead and he told Doody so.

"Damn it, Gilman!," he said. "The man is hurt!"

"The man is dead, Doody! Are you a bloody surgeon? We're in the middle of the Atlantic -- no land in sight, no surgeon aboard and some kind of sea serpent trying to swamp our ship -- our first priority is to save this vessel."

Doody bowed his head and stood, not because Gilman's words had convinced him, but because the captain had breathed his last shuddering breath, the blood bubbling audibly in his lungs.

"What do we do now?"

"We? I tell Sarah about her husband, you check on the cargo. And to see if we're taking on water."

He followed Gilman below decks and while Doody continued on to the hold, Gilman sat Sarah down and quietly told her what had happened. After allowing her to cry for a few moments, Gilman took her firmly by the shoulders and forced her to focus.

"Listen to me," he said. "You have to get Elisabeth. Bring her here, to this room and stay here."

"Andrew..."

"Later. We'll talk later, but right now, I have a crew to save. Understand?"

Sarah nodded slowly, doing her best to hold in her tears. She couldn't believe what she was hearing -- her husband, the father of her children, the man who had supported her was dead. Dead. Killed in an attack by some kind of damned sea serpent that was threatening to sink their ship, and Gilman wanted her to be calm? She would never be calm again until she and her daughter were off this bloody vessel with their feet planted firmly on the ground. Maybe with Gilman beside them?

No, for God's sake, Arthur had just died, how could she even think about something like that? She should never have agreed to take part in this trip.

"Gilman," said Doody as he climbed out of the hold, his pants soaked, a puddle of sea water forming at his feet. "We're taking on water. Badly. Up to my knees already."

Gilman cursed loudly, then quickly apologized for doing so in front of Sarah.

"Abandon ship," he said to Doody. "Go above, get Butenschon and the two of you prepare the boat."

Doody quickly nodded and headed out onto the deck. Gilman turned back to Sarah.

"Get Elisabeth. Pack whatever you can from the stores -- food, water, whatever you can carry," he said before leaving her and joining Butenschon and Doody as they removed the small boat from its fixings near the main hatch. Their work was made increasingly difficult by the tossing of the ship on the waves and as the trio lifted the boat free, Gilman glanced over his shoulder and saw the beast give one final shake of its head, then rear back again.

"Quick, boys, quick!," he yelled, and the men braced themselves just in time as the crown of the dragon's skull came crashing through the rail and cracked the jib at a near ninety degree angle. The remaining crewmen -- Schüler and the injured Hobson -- helped the best they could and the life boat was pushed into the water on the side opposite of the beast. Butenschon, the strongest of the

survivors, scurried down the rope ladder they had tossed out and did his best to hold the boat steady for the rest of the crew.

Sarah was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn it," said Gilman. "Doody, get everyone down to the boat! Hurry!"

He raced down through the main hatch, banging his shoulder loudly in his haste, and found Sarah still packing things -- clothes and toys in one bag, food in another. Elisabeth sat on the floor, too scared to move.

"Sarah, that's enough, we have to go."

"Just a few more things!"

"No more things!"

He grabbed the bag of food and slung it over one shoulder, then scooped up Elisabeth in his arms and nudged Sarah toward the door.

"Go, damn it!"

"But those shirts! They're silk!"

Gilman had the urge to laugh, until the ship was rocked yet again. Instead, he pushed Sarah ahead of him up onto the deck and over to where the boat and the crew waited in relative safety. The seas were rough and the escape boat small, but it was a far better option than staying aboard the Mary Celeste. While preparing the small boat, Doody had assured everyone that the beast would focus on the large ship as its enemy and ignore the rowboat -- after all, it was the Mary Celeste that struck the creature in the first place, and it was toward the brigantine that the beast had thus far directed all of its energies. There was logic in it, Gilman had to admit, but some days cold, hard logic was useless. He hoped today would not be one of those days.

Butenschon climbed back up the swaying ladder and took Elisabeth over his shoulder, carrying her safely down to the boat and Gilman dropped each of the packs down for the crew to catch. He took Sarah by the hand and showed her how to climb down the rope ladder, doing his best to hold it steady as she did so, Doody helping her the last few feet until she was seated at the front of the boat, Elisabeth wrapped tightly in her arms.

Taking one last look at the dragon -- the beast that had destroyed his ship, killed his crew; the beast that had turned his entire world upside down -- Gilman swore colourfully. He spat on the deck and quickly hopped over the side scrambled down the rope ladder, dropping the last four feet into the boat. With Butenschon's help, Gilman heaved against the side of the Mary Celeste, giving them

some breathing room, and the crewmen began to row with all their might, eager to put as much distance as possible between them and their sea dragon.

He glanced at the sullen faces around him, saw the tentative flicker of hope in their eyes as the space between their small craft and their sea dragon grew ever wider.

Gilman reached over the side and splashed some of the cold seawater on his face. And his blood ran cold.

A large, intense black eye stared back at him.

Historical Note:

The story presented here is based (loosely) on two true stories. The first story is that of the Nantucket whaling ship, the Essex, which was attacked and sunk by a large bull sperm whale roughly two hundred miles off the Pacific coast of South America in 1802. As you may know, the story of the Essex also became the foundation for a story that I readily admit is a far better tale than I have told here -- it's a novel by Herman Melville, called Moby Dick. The second of the true stories from which I drew inspiration is that of the Mary Celeste, a brigantine built in Nova Scotia whose name I left intact for my story. The Mary Celeste, whose original name was "Amazon" until being bought by a New York-based ownership group, was indeed sailing from New York to Genoa, Italy, with a shipment of alcohol. Somewhere East of the Azores, something went wrong for the crew of the Mary Celeste, but no one is quite certain what that was -- she was found on December 5, 1872, halfway between the Azores and Portugal, listing badly and with no crew on board. All eight crewmen and two passengers were gone and no sign of them has ever been found.

Those who have heard the story of the Mary Celeste will no doubt have heard that she was found in perfect condition and that many items left behind by the crew indicated a very sudden departure -- toys, half-eaten breakfasts, still-steaming mugs of tea -- however these reports, while very intriguing, are false. As stated above, when found the Mary Celeste was listing badly and was far from being in pristine condition. Statements made by the crew who discovered the ill-fated brig tell us that not only was the ship in complete disarray, but she had taken on a great deal of water between decks. Aside from these details, the damage sustained to the ship in my story was all caused by an overactive imagination.

All the characters presented here are fictional, though they did have real-world counterparts. The Mary Celeste was captained by Benjamin Briggs who did indeed bring his wife Sarah and young daughter Sophia along for the voyage. Andrew Gilling, a native of Denmark, served as second mate. I should point out that while some elements of the characters are taken from historical accounts (mainly their ranks and nationalities), they are still quite fictionalized -- while it was not uncommon for men who ran afoul of the law to escape by crewing ships, there is nothing to suggest that Andrew Gilling, Gilman's real-world counterpart, did so, just as there is nothing to suggest a relationship

between him and Sarah Briggs or that he intended to abandon the vessel upon docking in Genoa. Similarly, by all accounts Captain Briggs was a very capable commanding officer who had captained three ships previously and had a very good rapport with his crew -- quite unlike our Captain Spradling.

The Mary Celeste did sail again many times after the events fictionalized here, until her last owner intentionally wrecked her in the Carribean in order to collect the insurance money. Her wreck, lost for almost a century, was discovered in the year 2000.

- *JRH*