

Half-Way to Tomorrow

By George Coffin

The sun poured blinding molten brass on the flat water's edge, and the sea, on fire, glared along a harsh broad path from the half-sun on the straight horizon to the ship. From the fore-castle rail the prow seemed to carve great billow-crested furrows in the cool jade waters ahead. The always breaking, turning, falling, churning of the ship-cut sea roared in his ears and filled his head with great cleansing swirls of nothingness. His world was a disc with radius only as far as the black seawater-mark that cut the darkening sky from darker water far ahead. Somewhere, drawn on paper, drawn from the mirror angle on the sextant's scale and from the ticking chronometer's cold faced dial, there was another world. Now there was only the ship-and-sea world of eighty-seven men and a heavy wooden hull twenty-four hours from yesterday's water and twenty-four hours from the water to break on the prow at this moment in this hour tomorrow.

He thought of the sea beneath, and the terror of the waterline ahead which always crept a little further out into the sky beyond. The world of the ship faded from view, and he became a point above the foam, flecked with phosphorescent sparks, a point beneath the black cupped sky. There was no world. There was only the point and sea and sky and wind and peace.

A force upon his shoulder pressed him down again against the fore-castle deck, fastened him to the ship, joined him to the eighty-seven men. He turned, and in the light from the flame within the bos'n's hand he saw the old man's thin white hair stirring in the wind. He caught the glint of quick blue eyes set far back beneath his tangled brows. The old man leaned against the rail in silence, the glow of his pipe growing and waning with the pulse of the prow.

"All right, lad?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"I saw you from the bridge while I was on the wheel. I thought you might be lonely. Even after twenty years, the sea's lonely when it's dark and calm. They say you'll ship-off when we hit port this time. The homeward voyage is always long. It's a clean life, but not a good life, lad. The sea can never be a home, a wife, a mother. They're always somewhere fore' or aft' and out of sight. And all the bravery they shout about—it's all a myth told by old salts to green young seamen, told to hide emptiness. Valor's ashore.

It's on the land with men of the land. There's no use fighting against the sea; the wave will break, the gale will blow, and ships are driven off their course whatever we do out here. But on the land, among the men, there you can shape your life as you will. Ship-off, lad. Get away before you've learned the sea and can't do anything else."

He didn't answer. The old man knocked the ashes from his pipe and wandered off along the rail and into the dark. The night closed in, and he became a spot above the sea. He could see the line on the chart again, the straight black line creeping toward the mark on the paper land. He could see the subway in Boston just as it had been when he left it; the irritated drab evening crowd was pouring into the too-full cars that lurched forward when the doors slammed shut. He thought of the lonely grey room and the harsh white light and the screech of music in a cheap spotted hash-house.

On the farms outside the dirty city-heap, men fought against the wind and rain and sun, and they told young men to leave before they became ensnared with the life. They cursed the rain, and they cursed the sun, and they regretted their lost youth and what they might have had. Somewhere there was a reason, though. Somewhere in the point above the sea and under the sky there was an answer. It was here and in Boston and on the farm. He could stay, grasp the point above the waves, leave the ship-world forever, and rest here half-way between yesterday and tomorrow. The answer would have little use that way. If he stayed with the ship he might never know, and if he left he might know too late.

After many sea-wave breaks against the prow he followed the rail through the darkness and entered the lighted cabin. Before he climbed into his bunk below, he packed the few remaining clothes and made a good stout knot in the cord.

The ship sailed on along the line into tomorrow.

