

Excerpt from *The Lifeboat* by Charlotte Rogan

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We passed jagged splinters of wood and half-submerged barrels and snakelike lengths of twisted rope. I recognized a deck chair and a straw hat and what looked like a child's doll floating together, bleak reminders of the pretty weather we had experienced only that morning and of the holiday mood that had pervaded the ship. When we came upon three smaller casks bobbing in a group, Mr. Hardie shouted "Aha!" and directed the men to take two of them on board, then stored them underneath the triangular seat formed by the pointed aft end of the boat. He assured us they contained fresh water and that once we had been saved from the vortex created by the foundering ship, we might need to be saved from thirst and starvation; but I could not think that far ahead. To my mind, the railing of our little vessel was already perilously close to the surface of the water, and I could only believe that to stop for anything at all would decrease our chances of reaching that critical distance from the sinking ship.

There were bodies floating in the water, too, and living people clung to the wreckage—I saw another mother and child, the white-faced child holding out its hands toward me and screaming. As we came closer, we could see that the mother was dead, her body draped lifelessly over a wooden plank and her blond hair fanned out around her in the green water. The boy wore a miniature bow tie and suspenders, and it seemed to me ridiculous for the mother to dress him in such an unsuitable way, even though I had always been one to admire fine and proper dress and even though I myself was weighted down by a corset and petticoats and soft calfskin boots, not long ago purchased in London. One of the men yelled, "A little more this way and we can get to the child!" But Hardie replied, "Fine, and which one o' ye wants to trade places with 'im?"

Mr. Hardie had a rough seaman's voice. I could not always understand the things he said, but this served only to increase my faith in him. He knew about this world of water, he spoke its language, and the less I understood him, the greater the possibility that he was understood by the sea. No one had an answer for him, and we passed the howling child by. A slight man sitting near me grumbled, "Certainly we can trade those casks for the poor creature!" but this would now have involved turning the boat around, and our passions on behalf of the child, which had flared briefly, were already part of our sinking past, so we held our silence. Only the slight man spoke, but his thin voice was barely audible above the rhythmic groaning of the oarlocks, the roar of the inferno, and the cacophony of human voices issuing instructions or screams of distress: "It's only a young boy. How much could such a small fellow weigh?" I later learned that the speaker

was an Anglican deacon, but at the time I did not know the names or callings of my fellow passengers. No one answered him. Instead, the rowers bent to their tasks and the rest of us bent with them, for it seemed the only thing we could do.

Not long afterwards, we encountered three swimmers making their way toward us with strong strokes. One by one they grabbed on to the lifeline that was fitted around the perimeter of our boat, putting enough weight on it that curls of water began to spill in over the edge. One of the men caught my eye. His face was clean-shaven and livid with cold, but there was no mistaking the clear light of relief that shone out from his ice-blue eyes. On Hardie's orders, the oarsman sitting nearest him beat one set of hands away before beginning on the hands of the blue-eyed man. I heard the crack of wood against bone. Then Hardie raised his heavy boot and shoved it into the man's face, eliciting a cry of anguished surprise. It was impossible to look away, and never have I had more feeling for a human being than I had for that unnamed man.

If I describe what was happening on the starboard side of Lifeboat 14, I of necessity give the impression that one thousand other dramas were not taking place in the turbulent waters to port and astern. Somewhere out there was my husband Henry, either sitting in a boat beating away people as we were doing or trying to swim to safety and being beaten away himself. It helped to remember that Henry had been forceful in securing me a seat in the boat, and I was sure he would have been just as forceful on his own behalf; but could Henry have acted as Hardie did if his life depended on it? Could I? The idea of Mr. Hardie's cruelty was something to which my thoughts continue to return—certainly it was horrendous, certainly none of the rest of us would have had the strength to make the horrific and instantaneous decisions required of a leader at that point, and certainly it is this that saved us. I question whether it can even be called cruelty when any other action would have meant our certain death.

There was no wind, but even in the flat sea, water occasionally splashed in over the side of the overburdened boat. A few days ago, the lawyers conducted an experiment proving that one more adult of average weight in a boat of that size and type would have put us in immediate jeopardy. We could not save everybody and save ourselves. Mr. Hardie knew this and had the courage to act on the knowledge, and it was his actions in those first minutes and hours that spelled the difference between continued existence and a watery grave. His actions were also what turned Mrs. Grant, who was the strongest and most vocal of the women, against him. Mrs. Grant said, "Brute! Go back and save the child, at least," but it must have been clear to her that we could not go back and escape with our lives. With those words, however, Mrs. Grant was branded a humanitarian and Hardie a fiend.