

# THE PIRATICAL LOVER OF TOW NUMBER TWO

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FOR a third time since he had poised himself on the dizzily swinging cable-block a streak of fire flashed through the inky blackness of the sky, and showed the wheelman of Tow Number One the growing sea beneath him. For three lightning flashes Joshua Phipps had stood there, half naked, undecided, with something between a prayer and a curse upon his lips, and fear in his heart. Thrice he had nerved himself to spring into the seething water, and thrice his nerve had failed him.

A fourth lightning flash lit up the huge steel freighter ahead, puffing steadily down Lake Huron with a million feet of lumber dragging on behind. The man on the cable-block looked over his shoulder at it, and as the light burned out of the sky he turned his eyes again to where the red and green lights of Tow Number Two twinkled, a hundred fathoms back of Tow Number One. They seemed to taunt him with his cowardice, to urge him back over the bit of sea to a little deck-cabin half buried under the cedar piles.

In that cabin was the only being Joshua Phipps had ever loved in his life, and now he pictured her there, his sweetheart still, red-eyed as he had left her that morning. Then he was mate of the ship, with a captain's berth somewhere in the future and a vision always before him of a certain little white-walled cottage down by the lake, "with honeysuckle 'n' jasmine a creepin' over it," and with an orchard just at its back. That was the cottage and the orchard that Joshua Phipps would take his little sailor wife to, and they would give up the hard life of the inland seas together. Of these plans the mate had been talking, the day before, for the twentieth time,

with Nell's head very close to his shoulder, when the captain, who was supposed to be taking a nap, had come over the top of the lumber and witnessed. The next morning—that morning—the big freighter ahead had wasted a ton of coal by pausing for a few minutes in mid-lake. Then Joshua Phipps had been sent to the tow ahead, the tow that was to be carried on to Buffalo, while the other was to be dropped at Algonac, three hundred miles behind. That same day the captain of Tow Number Two sprained a leg, but the deposed mate was not recalled. These were the events that put the pirate into the heart of Joshua Phipps.

Once more he leaned out, wanting still the last charge of nerve to launch himself down into the blackness of the sea. The rope that passed from his body to a hoop on the tow-line—the rope that meant life or death in the swift journey over the cable—he gripped in both hands. And still before him those little bobbing red and green eyes at the head of Tow Number Two seemed to beckon more vehemently now as the first edge of wind came with the approaching storm.

In the distance two sonorous echoes cried that a ship was coming up, and the whistle on the big freighter ahead answered the greeting with two screaming blasts. It was the night-language of ships passing on the unsalted seas, and the deposed mate stared again at the little eyes on Tow Number Two and half mumbled, half thought, the barge-man's "lines of safety":

Green t' green,  
An' red t' red,  
Blow two w'istles  
An' go ahead!

Joshua Phipps emphasized the last three words—"an' go ahead!" That

meant *him*. The voice of the ship shrieked at him; the bobbing, blinking eyes of Tow Number Two invited him through the dash of spray; and something in himself said "go!"

Another lightning flash revealed the cable-block empty, and down into the chop of the sea that was coming with the first breath of the storm shot a human form, doubled like a jack-knife, and swallowed in an instant where the cable end of Tow Number One dipped in a swirl of water on its way to Tow Number Two.

## II

WHEN one plunges into the sea with a rope about his waist, and the other end of that rope is fastened to a steel hoop on a tow-line, it takes only the small part of a minute to drag through a hundred fathoms of water. For one long breath Joshua Phipps was whipped about like a great spider; then the upward slant of the cable running to the nose of Tow Number Two caught him and he slipped up it on his hoop until, half drowned but breathing free again, he reached out and hugged close to where the tow-line cut into the cable-block of his old ship.

For a few moments he hung there, like a great half-drowned water-rat. Somewhere behind the lumber he heard the shout of a man and then the stumble of heavy feet near him. Huge and grotesque in the dim glow of a deck lantern, the deposed mate's head and shoulders rose above the ship's bulwark. An arm reached over, and at the end of that arm was something that glittered menacingly as it pointed at a shadow swinging with the movement of the barge.

"Ho, Bill—Bill-ee-ee!" called the mate.

The shadow seemed to slip back into the blackness of the lumber piles, but Phipps still pointed to where it had disappeared.

"Billy, is that you?" he cried again. "Don't be afraid, man! This is Josh—Josh Phipps, an' I need help!" He pulled himself over the bulwark as he spoke and followed where he thought the shadow had gone.

"I tell 'e you needn't be afraid, Billy! I fell overboard and caught on the cable

by luck. Can't you give a man a little help?"

He had put his pistol hand behind him and reached out to grope with the other. Close up against the ragged edges of the lumber he found a man crouching.

"Billy, I ain't a ghost, I tell you! What you afraid of?" The mate hauled at the invisible form, and a round, fat face, white with fear, came out into the lantern light.

"If it's you, Josh, an' I needn't be afraid, what the devil's that y' been pointing at me!"

"This, Billy!"

From behind him the mate poked the muzzle of a revolver close up into the other's face. Then he shoved it into one of his wet pockets and drew the shivering cook of Tow Number Two back into the dense shadow of the lumber.

"But I ain't going to use it on you, Billy—not if y' play me fair!" The mate shouted the last words as a fresh gust of wind screamed over the lumber. "Billy, can y' say the Lord's Prayer?"

"I think I kin, Josh!"

"An' do you remember the marriage service?"

"I kin *think* it out, Josh."

"See here, Billy—you wasn't lyin' when you said you was a preacher once?"

"No—no—I was a preacher, s'elp me God, I was!"

The mate caught the cook's wrists in his hands, and bound them with a piece of the rope from about his waist.

"I ain't going to gag you, Billy!" he shouted, for the wind came in a sudden roar as he spoke. "But if you don't think out the service by the time I get back, or if you open your yap, I'll shoot—"

Phipps's voice was drowned in a thunderous clatter of lumber above, and he finished his warning with a cold touch of the revolver. Then he swung out into the smothering sheets of spray that were drowning the bow-lights and clambered up the edge of the cedar piles to the top. Amidships the blackness was like that in the sky above. He crawled through it on all fours until the cabin lamps and the lanterns under the wheel showed him the stern of Tow Number Two running black with the drench of

the sea. He leaped down, almost shouting with the new joy that burned in his heart, and against a blast that beat back his breath he struggled to the stream of light that shot across the slippery tow from the captain's cabin. A few steps more and his naked shoulders pressed against a door, his hand groped for a latch, and, dripping and exhausted, he came into the presence of the captain of Tow Number Two.

### III

"Good evenin', Cap'n Wiggs—"

Joshua Phipps meant to round off his words with an oath. He had planned to curse the captain before doing other things; but through the water-mist in his eyes he saw a form kneeling beside the skipper's berth and a face, white and terrified, stared up at him.

"Nell!" he cried. "Nell—"

A thundering blow of the sea against the ship's side sent him reeling. As he caught at the wall the girl sprang from the bunk, but the powerful fingers of Captain Wiggs imprisoned her arm and she sank to her knees again, while Joshua Phipps, his eyes burning with the fever that had come to him in Tow Number One, advanced slowly upon the skipper of Tow Number Two. His hands were clenched, the muscles in his bare arms stood out like cords, and the wounded captain drew back in his berth and caught a sheath-knife from his pillow. The threatening eyes of the deposed mate seemed not to notice that the other was armed. He caught the berth-railing with a grip that made it creak. Then he leaned over and tried to smile—but it was an ugly grin, even for the homely face of Joshua Phipps.

"I said good evenin', Cap'n Wiggs!"

The captain swallowed as if a lump in his throat had suddenly become loosened.

"What the devil you doing here?" he cried. He pulled himself to a sitting posture, pain and rage distorting his face.

Joshua Phipps came a step nearer, and reverentially placed one of his big bony hands upon the dark head of the girl at his feet. His hand trembled as it touched the silken tresses, but the eyes that looked into those of Captain Wiggs were unflinching.

"I've come back for Nell, cap'n!"

Another hand, warm and loving, came up to the bronzed one on the head of the captain's daughter. The girl was silent still, between father and lover, but the touch gave Joshua Phipps all the strength that he required.

"I've come back for Nell, cap'n," said the young man in a softer voice. "This is goin' t' be our weddin' night, and you're going to bless us—here in this cabin!"

The lash of the wind and sea, and the shrill whistling of the gale in the lumber seemed to concentrate, not to drown, the captain's voice.

"This is mutiny, Josh Phipps—damned mutiny!" he almost shrieked. "Ho, Nell, girl, call the men aft!"

"It's worse 'n mutiny—it's piracy, Cap'n Wiggs!" cried the mate. He whipped the revolver from his pocket and flourished it above his head. "The ship's mine! There isn't a man out there to take care of the lumber in this blow. The wheel's tied, an' not a soul aboard to help you but me 'n Nell. You're going t' marry us, or I swear we'll all go down together!"

As if to emphasize his words, there came a jar that set the ship shuddering under their feet. Through his thick tan the captain's face went a shade whiter, and with a terrible cry Nell staggered to her feet and threw her arms over Joshua's naked shoulders.

"Oh, my God! Joshua, do you know what you're doing?"

The mate's arms tightened about the girl's slight form.

"Are you afraid to die with me, Nelly?"

The gale outside came again in a screaming blast. The captain lost his voice in it, and waited, while Joshua pressed his lips down upon the head of the girl he held. Again there came a shock that seemed to split the ship.

The captain gave a shout. He made an attempt to rise from his berth, but fell back with a cry of pain.

"Nell! Nell!"

The girl was at his side in an instant, her arms about his neck.

"I won't leave you, dad!" she sobbed.

The look in Captain Wiggs's eyes would have sent a chill to the heart of

any other than the half-mad lover of his girl.

"Josh Phipps," he shouted, "we was bound for a Michigan port, where piracy is life imprisonment; but now I'll hang to th' tow ahead for N' York, where it's death! D'y hear, damn you, it's death—death!"

"Listen!" interrupted the mate. "Hear that sea, Cap'n Wiggs? It's poundin' away your lumber, because there's no man a guiding the ship. But it's going to be worse in a minit, cap'n! I'll give you one more chance—it's Nell or th' cable!"

"It's death t' you!" shouted the captain. Between the two the girl knelt, her eyes big and dark with agony.

"One more chance—Nell or th' cable!" cried Joshua Phipps a second time.

"I tell you it's death!" replied the captain. "We'll keep to th' tow."

In a moment Joshua Phipps was at the cabin door and had disappeared into the blackness of the night. With his going came a thunder of storm and sea through the open door that drowned the cry of the girl behind him. With almost a shriek of pain Captain Wiggs drew himself to a sitting posture on the edge of his bunk. In that instant his face went ashy gray in the ghostly glow of the binnacle lamp over his head, and he gave one hoarse shout for the return of Joshua Phipps.

"Great God, Nell, he's gone to cut the tow! Ho, Bill-ee!—Jack!—Henderson!"

#### IV

THE captain's daughter bowed her head against the rush of wind, and fought her way to the door. Her brain seemed to burn with a single thought. If Joshua Phipps was mad she was the person he needed most at that moment. Out into the blackness of the slippery after-deck she stumbled, a prayer in her heart and her lover's name coming in a smothered cry from her lips. The stern was roaring like a cataract, and in the drench of the sea she fell upon her hands and knees and crept across the pitching deck to the face of the lumber. Foot by foot she clambered up the great pile, the wind tearing at her hair and clothes and

threatening to hurl her over into the black smother under the sides of the tow. At intervals her voice would rise, piteously weak, in a long wind-strangled cry of "Joshua—Joshua—Joshua!" Once she fancied she heard an answering shout, and listened; but only the shrieking of the wind through the spars and the lashing of the sea filled her ears. She had almost reached the top of the lumber when an ominous rumble rose above the storm, and she released her hold and fell to the deck as a half of the great pile above her slipped off into the sea. With her breath almost gone, she clung to the jagged ends of the cedar, then drew herself up again until she looked out over the break of Tow Number Two, and saw, like pitching, flooded stars, the two little dancing lights ahead on Tow Number One. As she looked, the girl fancied those lights were dissolving into the blackness ahead, and her heart seemed to stop beating with the knowledge that her lover had cut the tow. Then they appeared again, to disappear as quickly as before; and as she strained her eyes in their direction a human shape came crawling over the lumber, followed by a shadow just behind.

"Joshua!" cried the girl.

Her last cry was smothered in the strong arms of the mate. With the drenched form clasped tightly to him, Joshua Phipps lowered himself over the broken cedar pile, and with a shout to the shadow behind, staggered with his sweetheart through the open door of the captain's cabin.

"Cap'n, 'ere's Nell! It's a rough night for her outside, sir!" he said. Through the door there came another dripping figure, round, fat, and with a face like chalk. Phipps pointed his revolver at it.

"Come in, Billy, an' take a seat by the cap'n. Cap'n Wiggs, this is the preacher I've brought to marry Nell 'n' me!"

For the moment the captain's voice failed him. He still sat on the edge of his bunk, his face twitching with pain at every jar of the ship. His girl knelt beside him again, the water from her hair and clothes wetting him to the skin. But he seemed not to notice this.

"Josh, have you cut the cable?" he

asked. There had come a great change in his voice, and the hand that rested on Nell's head trembled a bit.

"Ask Billy, Cap'n Wiggs!" replied the mate.

"Billy—is th' cable gone?"

There came the ominous click of the hammer on Joshua Phipps's revolver. Billy started.

"Tell th' honest truth, Billy!"

"S'elp me God——"

The revolver fell carelessly on a line with Billy's head.

"Th' cable's gone, Cap'n Wiggs, th' lumber's washin' overboard, an'—an'——"

"Tell it all, Billy!" said the mate.

"An' we'll be on the rocks o' Thunder Bay inside of an hour, Cap'n Wiggs, s'elp me God, we will!"

"And there's nary a hand aboard to help us, cap'n," added the mate. "Listen to the sea beatin' death to 'er ribs! We're awash—driftin' like a cask——"

The revolver rested in the hollow of Joshua's arm on a dead level with Billy's eyes. It suggested death to Billy.

"Cap'n, f'r the sake o' God give Josh Phipps his wish or we're all dead men—an'—an'——" Fear choked back the cook's words, but with a trembling hand he pointed at the captain's girl.

"It's for Nell, cap'n," said the mate. Almost unconsciously he knelt beside the girl and put his arms about her. His revolver lay on the floor a foot behind him, and a devilish, frightened gleam came into Billy's eyes as he sneaked toward it. "It's all for Nell, cap'n," repeated the mate, almost pleadingly.

Billy's hand stole down. His fat fingers twined themselves about the cold metal of the gun, and his white face went whiter as he thought of what he would do the next instant. The captain watched him over Joshua's shoulder.

"Put it down, Billy!" he said. "Put it down and take a seat, as Josh told you!" Then he leaned over until his powerful hands could have clutched the mate's throat. From outside there came the grinding wash of another avalanche of cedar pitching over the side, and the captain grimaced. "And what if I promise, Josh?" he asked.

"It ain't a promise I want, cap'n, it's a wife," said the mate. His head was

bowed until he could see only the feet of the other; but one of Nell's arms was about his neck, and he knew that he was safe.

"An' if I give y' that?"

Joshua straightened himself. "If you give me that I'll—I'll run th' ship to port an' work for you 'n' Nell till th' crack o' doom!"

"Billy—hev y' a Bible?"

The captain shouted the words in a voice of thunder. With a cry that rose piercing above the tumult of the storm, the sailor's sweetheart threw her arms about her father's neck, and Joshua Phipps rose to his feet, dazed, and stretched both of his great, brawny arms out toward the two.

"Hev y' a Bible?"

It was the captain's old voice again, the voice that had strung itself to the song of gales for forty years, and, with it thundering through the cabin, a great joy filled the heart of Joshua Phipps, and he, too, turned and roared at the little fat man who stood shivering at the door, the revolver shaking in his hand.

"Your Bible, Billy!"

As the cook slipped out into the roaring night two great hands met in a crushing clasp, and two tender, loving arms were raised, one around the neck of each.

"Josh, 'adn't you better put off th' weddin' until the hands have straightened the ship?" asked the captain, after that first, silent moment.

"The ship's all right, Cap'n Wiggs!" said the mate. "Billy was the one as told you the tow was cut; I didn't!"

"An' the tow——"

"Ain't cut at all, sir!"

"But th' wheel—th' men——"

"Henderson's at the wheel, sir, an' Jack's for'rd, neither of 'em knowing what's been happening!"

For a full minute the captain was speechless. Then he let out an oath which seemed to come from the bottom of his soul.

"Josh, you're—you're devilish clever!" he said.

Again two great hands met in a crushing clasp, and this time two warm lips kissed first the mate and then the captain, while a wildly beating little heart prayed that Billy would hurry—with the Bible.