



CHAPTER 1

I hardly know where to begin. If I had not visited my friend who lives near Sausalito for the weekend, Monday morning would not have found me on the ferry crossing San Francisco Bay.

I was on the *Martinez*, a new ferry-steamer, making her fifth trip between Sausalito and San Francisco. Heavy fog blanketed the bay, but as a landsman, I was not worried. In fact, I remember how excited I was as I took up my position near the pilothouse and allowed the mystery of the fog to take over my imagination. A fresh breeze was blowing, and I was alone in the moist obscurity—yet not alone, for I was conscious of the captain, close by at the wheel.

I remember thinking how comfortable it was, this division of labor that made it unnecessary for me to study fogs, winds, tides, and navigation in order to visit Sausalito. It was good that men were specialists, I mused. The knowledge of the captain was enough for people who knew no more of the sea and navigation than I knew. On the other hand, instead of having to devote my energy to learning

a multitude of things, I concentrated on only a few particular things, such as the analysis of Edgar Allen Poe's place in American literature—an essay of mine, by the way, was in the current *Atlantic* magazine.

A red-faced man, slamming the cabin door behind him and stumping out on the deck, interrupted my reflections. The man shot a glance at the pilothouse, gazed into the fog, stumped across the deck and back (he evidently had an artificial leg), and stood by my side, legs wide apart. I guessed that his days had been spent on the sea.

“It's nasty weather like this here that turns heads gray before their time,” he said, with a nod toward the pilothouse.

“I didn't think there was much to worry about,” I answered. “It seems as simple as A, B, C. They know the direction by compass, the distance, and the speed. I would call it a mathematical certainty.”

“Worry!” he snorted. “Simple as A, B, C! Mathematical certainty!”

He seemed to brace himself up as he stared at me. “How about this here tide that's rushin' out through the Golden Gate?” he bellowed. “How fast is it movin'? What's the drift, eh? Listen to that, will you? A bell-buoy, and we're on top of it! See 'em alterin' the course!”

From out of the fog came the mournful tolling of a bell, and I could see the captain turning the wheel. The bell, which had seemed straight ahead, was now sounding from the side. Our own whistle was blowing loudly, and from time to time, the sound of other whistles came to us from out of the fog.

“That’s a ferryboat of some sort,” the man said, indicating a whistle off to the right. “And there! D’ye hear that? Some schooner, most likely. Better watch out, Mr. Schooner-man. Now hell’s a poppin’ for somebody!”

The unseen ferryboat was blowing blast after blast, and the other horn was tooting in a terror-stricken fashion.

“And now they’re payin’ their respects to each other and tryin’ to get clear,” the red-faced man went on, as the whistling ceased.

His face was shining, his eyes flashing with excitement as he translated into articulate language the speech of the horns and whistles. “That’s a steam-siren a-goin’ over there to the left. And you hear that fellow with a frog in his throat—a steam schooner as near as I can judge, crawlin’ in from the north against the tide.”

A shrill little whistle, piping as if gone mad, came from directly ahead. Gongs sounded on the *Martinez*. Our paddle-wheels stopped, their pulsing beat died away, and then they started again. The shrill little whistle, like the chirping of a cricket amid the cries of great beasts, shot through the fog and swiftly grew faint. I looked to my companion for enlightenment.

“One of them little speed boats,” he said. “I almost wish we’d sunk him! They’re the cause of a lot of trouble. And what good are they? Any jackass gets aboard one, runs it too fast, blowin’ his whistle to beat the band, and tellin’ the rest of the world to look out for him, because he’s comin’ and can’t look

out for himself! Right of way! Common decency! They don't know the meanin' of it!"

I felt amused at his anger, and while he stumped indignantly up and down I went back to dwelling on the romance of the fog. And romantic it certainly was—the fog, like the gray shadow of infinite mystery, brooding over the whirling speck of earth, while men groped their way blindly along, clamoring and clanging, while their hearts are heavy with uncertainty and fear.

The voice of my companion brought me back to myself. I, too, had been groping and floundering while I rode through the mystery.

"Heads up! Somebody's comin' our way," he was saying. "And d'ye hear that? He's comin' fast. Guess he don't hear us yet. Wind's in wrong direction."

I could hear the whistle plainly, off to one side and a little ahead, and asked, "Ferryboat?"

He nodded, then added with a short chuckle, "He's gettin' nervous over there."

I glanced up. The captain's head and shoulders were out of the pilothouse, and he was staring into the fog as though by force of will he could penetrate it. His face was anxious, as was the face of my companion, who had stumped over to the rail and was gazing in the direction of the invisible danger.

Then everything happened unbelievably quickly. The fog seemed to break away as though split by a wedge, and the bow of a steamboat emerged, trailing wisps of fog on either side. I could see its pilothouse and a white-bearded man leaning partly

out. I remember noting how trim and quiet he was. His quietness, under the circumstances, was terrible. He accepted destiny, marched hand in hand with it, and coolly accepted it. As he stood there, he ran a calm and speculative eye over us, as though to determine the precise point of the collision, and took no notice whatever when our captain, white with rage, shouted, "Now you've done it!"

"Grab hold of something and hang on!" the red-faced man barked. All his bluster was gone. "And listen to the women scream," he said grimly, as though he had been through this before.

The vessels came together before I could follow his advice. We must have been struck squarely amidships, for I saw nothing, the strange steamboat having passed beyond my line of vision. The *Martinez* heeled over sharply and I was thrown flat on the deck. Before I could scramble to my feet, I heard the screams of the women. This was the most indescribable sound, and it threw me into a panic. What happened in the next few minutes I do not recollect, though I remember pulling out life preservers while the red-faced man fastened them onto hysterical women.

It was the women's screaming that tried my nerves the most. It must have affected the nerves of the red-faced man, too, for I saw something that will never fade from my mind. A tangled mass of women, with white faces and open mouths, shrieking like a chorus of lost souls; and the red-faced man, his face now purplish with wrath, shouting, "Shut up! Oh, shut up!"

The horror of it drove me out on deck. I was feeling sick and sat down on a bench. In a hazy way, I saw and heard men rushing and shouting as they tried to lower the lifeboats. It was just as I had read in books. The tackles jammed. Nothing worked. One boat was lowered away with the drain plugs out. It was crammed with women and children but soon filled with water and capsized. Another boat had been lowered by one end and still hung in the tackle by the other end, where it had been abandoned. I could see nothing of the steamboat that caused the disaster.

I went down to the lower deck, looked over the side, and saw that the *Martinez* was sinking fast. Several of the passengers were leaping overboard. Others, in the water, were trying to get back aboard again, but no one seemed to notice. I was seized by panic and went over the side in a surge of bodies. How I went over I do not know, though I did know, and instantly, why those in the water were so desperate to get back on the steamer. The water was cold—so cold that it was painful. The pang, as I plunged into it, was as quick and sharp as that of fire. It bit to the marrow. It was like the grip of death. I gasped with the shock, filling my lungs with water before the life preserver popped me to the surface. The taste of the salt was strong in my mouth, and I was strangling with the water in my throat.

But it was the cold that was the worst. I felt like I could survive only a few minutes. People were struggling in the water all around me. I could hear them crying out to one another. As time went by, I

was amazed that I was still alive. I had no sensation whatever in my lower limbs, while a chilling numbness was wrapping around my heart. Small waves, with spiteful foaming crests, continually broke over me and into my mouth, sending me off into more strangling convulsions.

The noises grew faint, though I heard a final chorus of screams in the distance, and knew that the *Martinez* had gone down. Later—how much later I have no knowledge—I came to myself with a start of fear. I was alone. I could hear nothing—only the sound of the waves. Was I being carried out to sea? And would my life preserver fall to pieces at any moment? I had heard that the things were made of paper that quickly became saturated and lost all buoyancy. And I could not swim a stroke. And I was alone, floating in the midst of a gray vastness. I began to shriek like the women had shrieked.

I don't know how long this lasted—but when I regained my senses I saw the bow of a vessel emerging from the fog directly in front of me. Where the bow cut the water there was foaming and gurgling, and I was directly in its path. I tried to cry out but was too exhausted. The bow plunged down, just missing me and sending a wave of water clear over my head. Then the long, black side of the vessel began slipping past, so near that I could have touched it with my hands. I tried to reach it, but my arms were heavy and lifeless. Again I tried to call, but I could make no sound.

The stern of the vessel shot by, and I caught a glimpse of a man standing at the wheel and of

another man smoking a cigar. I saw the smoke from his lips as he slowly turned and glanced out in my direction.

Life and death were in that glance. I could see the vessel being swallowed up in the fog; I saw the back of the man at the wheel, and the head of the other man turning, slowly turning, as his gaze casually made its way towards me. His face wore an absent expression, and I was afraid that if his eyes did light upon me he would not see me. But his eyes did light upon me and looked squarely into mine; and he did see me, for he sprang to the wheel, pushing the other man aside, and whirled it around, hand over hand, at the same time shouting orders of some sort. The vessel disappeared into the fog.

I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness, and tried with all the power of my will to stay awake. A little later, I heard the stroke of oars growing nearer and nearer, and a man calling out across the water. When he was very near, I heard him yelling, "Why in hell don't you sing out?" This meant me, I thought, and then the darkness came . . .