

"Take Over Bos'n"

- Oscar Schisgall

Hour after hour I kept the gun pointed at the other nine men. From the lifeboat's stern, where I'd sat most of the twenty days of our drifting, I could keep them all covered. If I *had* to shoot at close quarters, I wouldn't miss. They realized that. Nobody jumped at me. But in the way they all glared at me I could see how they'd come to hate my guts.

Especially Barrett, who'd been bos'n's mate; Barrett said in his harsh, cracked voice, "You're a dope, Snyder. Y-you can't hold out forever! You're half asleep now!"

I didn't answer. He was right. How long can a man stay awake? I hadn't dared shut my eyes in maybe seventy-two hours. Very soon now I'd doze off, and the instant that happened they'd pounce on the little water that was left. The last canteen was under my legs. There wasn't much in it after twenty days. Maybe a pint. Enough to give each of them a few drops. Yet I could see in their bloodshot eyes that they'd gladly kill me for those few drops. As a man I didn't count anymore. I was no longer third officer of the wrecked *Montala*. I was just a gun that kept them away from the water they craved. And with their tongues swollen and their cheeks sunken, they were half crazy...

The way I judged it, we must be some two hundred miles east of Ascension. Now that the storms were over, the Atlantic swells were long and easy, and the morning sun was hot -- so hot it scorched your skin. My tongue was thick enough to clog my throat. I'd have given the rest of my life for a single gulp of water.

But I was the man with the gun -- the only authority in the boat -- and I knew this: once the water was gone we'd have nothing to look forward to but death. As long as we could look forward to getting a drink later, there was something to live for. We had to make it last as long as possible. If I'd given in to the curses and growls, if I hadn't brandished the gun, we'd have emptied the last canteen days ago. By now we'd all be dead.

The men weren't pulling on the oars. They'd stopped that long ago, too weak to go on. The nine of them facing me were a pack of bearded, ragged, half-naked animals, and I probably looked as bad as the rest. Some sprawled over the gunwales, dozing. The rest watched me as Barrett did, ready to spring the instant I relaxed.

When they weren't looking at my face, they looked at the canteen under my legs. Jeff Barrett was the nearest one. A constant threat. The bosn's mate was a heavy man, bald, with a scarred and brutal face. He'd been in a hundred fights, and they'd left their marks on him. Barrett had been able to sleet -- in fact, he'd slept through most of the night - - and I envied him that. *His* eyes wouldn't close. They kept watching me, narrow and dangerous.

Every now and then he taunted me in that hoarse, broken voice:

"Why don't you quit? You can't hold out!"

"Tonight," I said. "We'll ration the rest of the water tonight."

"By tonight some of us'll be dead! We want it now!"

"Tonight," I said.

Couldn't he understand that if we waited until night the few drops wouldn't be sweated out of us so fast? But Barrett was beyond all reasoning. His mind had already cracked with thirst, I saw him beginning to rise, a calculating look in his eyes. I aimed the gun at his chest -- and he sat down again.

I'd grabbed the Luger on instinct, twenty days ago, just before running for the lifeboat. Nothing else would have kept Barrett and the rest away from the water.

These fools -- couldn't they see I wanted a drink as badly as any of them? But I was in command here -- that was the difference. I was the man with the gun, the man who had to think. Each of the others could afford to think only of himself; I had to think of them all.

Barrett's eyes kept watching me, waiting. I hated him. I hated him all the more because he'd slept. He had that advantage. He wouldn't keel over.

And long before noon I knew I couldn't fight any more. My eyelids were too heavy to lift. As the boat rose and fell on the long swells, I could feel sleep creeping over me like paralysis. It bent my head. It filled my brain like a cloud. I was going, going...

Barrett stood over me, and I couldn't even lift the gun. In a vague way I could guess what would happen. He'd grab the water first and take his gulp. By that time the others would be screaming and tearing at him, and he'd have to yield the canteen. Well, there was nothing more I could do about it.

I whispered, "Take over, bos'n."

Then I fell face down in the bottom of the boat. I was asleep before I stopped moving...

When a hand shook my shoulder, I could hardly raise my head. Jeff Barrett's hoarse voice said, "Here! Take your share o' the water!"

Somehow I propped myself up on my arms, dizzy and weak. I looked at the men, and I thought my eyes were going. Their figures were dim, shadowy; but then I realized it wasn't because of my eyes. It was night. The sea was black; there were stars overhead. I'd slept the day away.

So we were in our twenty-first night adrift -- the night in which the tramp *Groton* finally picked us up -- but now, as I turned my head to Barrett, there was no sign of any ship. He knelt beside me, holding out the canteen, his other hand with the gun steady on the man.

I stared at the canteen as if it were a mirage. Hadn't they finished that pint of water this morning? When I looked up at Barrett's ugly face, it was grim. He must have guessed my thoughts.

"You said, 'Take over bos'n,' didn't you?" he growled. "I been holdin' off these apes all day." He hefted the Luger in his hand. "When you're the boss-man," he added, "in command and responsible for the rest -- you -- you sure get to see things different, don't you?"

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Writing Assignment

Write the missing part of the story. Tell what happens between Snyder's collapse and the moment he wakes up. You may write another part of the story (e.g. before or after, if you choose).

Name:

Creativity - Imaginative and interesting

Fit with rest of story - Insightful and well expressed

Writing Style - Original and effective. Communicates in a pleasing way.

Spelling and grammar - Proofread, no errors

Creativity	1	2	3	4
Fit with rest of story	1	2	3	4
Writing Style	1	2	3	4
Spelling and grammar	1	2	3	4

Grade _____

Comments: