Captain from Milbridge

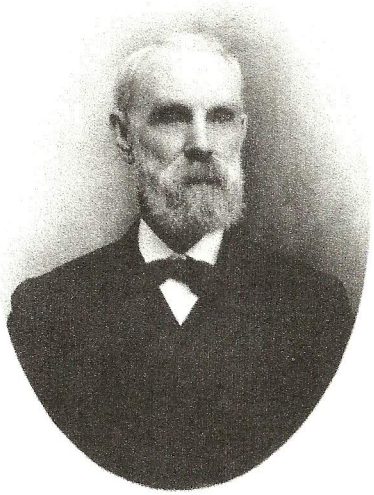
by John Paul Heffernan

Matters would come to a head this morning, the captain knew, and it was a pity he might have to be a little rough, what with a fine passage behind him and landfall and Hong Kong less than twenty-four hours ahead. Safety of his ship was always the master's prime consideration, so if there was a mutiny brewing that morning he would be as tough as the situation demanded.

The ship's bell sounded three sharp double strokes and the captain looked carefully at his large silver watch. Six bells. Seven o'clock, as landlocked folks would put it. Ever considerate of the ship's company, he had not ordered a muster of the crew until eight bells when the watch would be changing. The first mate had the key to the arms locker, but nothing would be issued to the officers and loyal members of the crew unless the master saw an immediate need. He preferred to handle the matter himself.

Meanwhile, in his own calm way, he would enjoy a fine morning at sea, around him and part of him all the sights and sounds he had known since boyhood. The wind was dead astern, and there was no thumping of canvas overhead as there would have been had not the wind been steady, like a great, strong hand pushing firmly against the sails while the morning sun tinted the tall pyramids of canvas with crimson and gold. And the only sounds were the hundred voices of the ship's stout timbers, the hum of rigging and the hiss of the sea curling away from the forefoot. Up forward the vessel's dolphin striker dipped rhythmically into the meeting swells, scattering rainbows along her bows.

Astern were the trackless miles of the East China Sea, and unseen to port lay Formosa as the ship drove steadily through the Taiwan Strait toward Hong Kong and a few days' layover while she unloaded and then went up to Canton to load tea, porcelain, silks, teak, and camphorwood. Better than six feet tall, with dark brown hair and eyes that had the blue of deep water in them, the captain smiled slightly behind his curly beard when he heard a light step behind him. Without turning his head he said: "Good morning, Edgar."



Captain Lemuel G. Means.

"Good morning, Father."

Then the captain turned and looked at his son. They were very much alike, he thought, and there was pride in the father's glance and probably a touch of sadness. The lad was growing up and before long he'd have to go back to Maine and get some formal schooling.

The captain's hand rested lightly on the boy's shoulder and they stood silently awhile watching the changing colors of morning and listening to the voices of the ship and the hiss of the sea running along her flanks.

Duly checked with the captain's watch, the ship's bell sounded again. Half past seven. "Another voyage or so and we'll have to be putting you ashore, Edgar," the captain said.

"Do I *have* to go, father?"

The captain nodded. "I'm afraid so. It's the way of things. The sea can teach a man a number of things, but there's a deal a man can learn from books, too. You'll go to Bowdoin, where I wanted to go but never had time."

The boy said firmly, "I won't like it."

His father chuckled. "Boys always say that, but you'll meet lads your own age and you'll never regret a minute of it." He looked at his watch again. "Were the ladies and the girls stirring when you came aloft?"

"No, sir."

"Good. I think you better go down and bring up my pistols now. Hold on!" he said as the boy spun around. "I don't want you boiling up here like a Malay pirate. Put the weapons under your jacket and don't make any show of it. I don't want the females getting upset. Tell them you and I will be down for breakfast directly after the watch is changed."

Young Edgar nodded quick understanding. Women and children below while he and his father handled this. And if he stuck his chest out a little, what boy wouldn't? Thirty-five years after his father's death, landlocked in Nebraska with his own family and attendant responsibilities, the Maine boy would remember: ". . . Until I was sixteen years old, about the only life I knew was at sea . . . My father and I were inseparable pals . . ."

The ship was the full-rigged "Down Easter" *Zouave*. Twelve hundred and three tons, 182 feet in length, she was built in Richmond, Maine, in 1862 and wore the house flag of Vernon H. Brown & Co. of New York, a shipping interest that also served as American agent for Britain's Cunard Line.

The *Zouave's* master was Captain Lemuel G. Means, sometime of Milbridge and Jonesport. Captain Means was born in Milbridge in 1822 and, in the tradition of a host of Maine men who had been born with the smell of salt water in their nostrils, had been going to sea since he was twelve. Although he eventually rose to the command of barks and full-rigged ships, Means often told his family in later years that the proudest moment of his life had been when at the age of nineteen he brought the brig *George Washington* in to Jonesport as her master.

As he matured, married, and undertook family responsibilities, Means, like many another Maine captain blessed with a good wife, had contrived to make his ships a little bit of Maine away from Maine.

In the *Zouave* and other ships under his command, Means and his little family had seen the world a number of times, and the rolling miles and roving years had not been without their perils and privations.

Mrs. Means.

In home waters the days of privateers and pirates had long gone, but in the Orient a shipmaster had to keep his eyes open. There had been a time in Hong Kong, with the *Zouave*'s ample holds swallowing a valuable cargo, when the captain's sharp eyes had noted undue interest on the part of a huddle of Chinese and Malays on the docks. Helpful British and American warships on the China Station could not be everywhere at once. Piracy was still a common thing along the China coast and it behooved a shipmaster to be prepared.

It was then the practice for pirates to spot the ships loading valuable

cargoes and lie in wait for them after they put to sea. It was not unheard of for a vessel and her crew to disappear completely after less than twenty-four hours out of port and in calm seas. Later, items of her cargo would appear in such ports as Macao where men were interested not in their origin, but in their prices.

"They'll be waiting for us off the coast," Captain Means said to his mates, and the men nodded grimly.

A peaceful trading vessel, the *Zouave* mounted no guns but carried enough rifles and cutlasses to arm every man. The big junks and sampans used by the sea wolves usually carried no ordnance beyond an occasional ancient swivel gun or two, capable of hurling scrap metal and broken glass short distances. The favorite pirate tactic was to take a ship by boarding, thus ensuring that there would be no survivors to bear witness to authorities ashore.

The *Zouave* made sail and left Hong Kong on a flood tide colored with the violet of dawn, but the wind fell off while they were still well in sight of the coast; it was then that three strange craft were seen tracking the ship.

"Just as I thought," said Captain Means, and rapped out orders to the mates to arm the crew. Meanwhile Mrs. Means had thought of another method for repelling boarders. The captain's wife was a great reader and she recalled from one of Sir Walter Scott's books that defenders of castles often drove off attackers by pouring boiling oil or water on their heads as they attempted to scale the walls. The *Zouave* carried only enough oil for her lamps, but there was no shortage of water in the East China Sea. "They'll be a pack of scalded heathens," said the resolute lady, "before ever they board this ship!" So she set the ship's cook to boiling huge copper cauldrons of sea water.

This did not set well with Ah Wong, the Chinese cook, who thought it a pretty poor time to start boiling water. Ah Wong had been shipmate with the Means family for years and was a very outspoken man. In a mixture of Cantonese and pidgin English he protested that it was his duty to join the crew in defending the ship. Under any other conditions, short of a Cape Horn gale, he would boil all the water in the sea for "Missee Cap'n," but not when the ship's safety was at stake. He fondled a big, shiny cleaver. It would slice the pirates' heads like soft melons, he pointed out. But Mrs. Means was firm and the grumbling cook returned to his water boiling.

The wind had fallen off to fluky puffs, barely giving the *Zouave* steerage way. The pursuing craft had unshipped their long sweeps and were bending their backs to the oars when the wind suddenly came up

again, strong and steady, and the *Zouave*, her bottom newly cleaned, soon left a horde of sea vultures behind.

"Give them a volley to let them know what they're missing," the captain said. They were out of range by then, but it would help relieve the tension, so the crew fired a round, cheered, the watch off duty went below, and the watch on deck yarned about it for the rest of the day.

Ah Wong, the Chinese cook, was always good for a fond, reminiscent chuckle among the Means family and their descendants. Once, after a long voyage from New York to the Russian port of Sebastopol, the *Zouave* became ice-locked in that harbor while at anchor and awaiting wharfage to unload an ungainly cargo of locomotives. It had been a long, hazardous voyage. While waiting in the ice, everybody aboard dreamed of something fresh to eat, so Ah Wong was sent ashore across the ice in search of chickens.

Several hours later the grinning cook trudged back with a large sack on his back. Considering that the sanctity of the quarterdeck did not apply to him, he mounted the ladder and emptied the contents of the bag on the deck at the captain's feet. "We eat," he said, beaming proudly. Captain Means allowed as how they probably would, as he gazed in considerable wonderment at a dozen of the plumpest hens he had seen since leaving Maine.

Ah Wong bobbed his head happily and went for'ard to the galley where he was due to prepare the noon meal. Soon a businesslike mushroom of smoke blossomed from the galley stove pipe, the "Charley Noble," and there was a rattle of pots and pans. None of this made the crew's mouths water. When a vessel had been long at sea, nothing surprising came from the galley. Dried beans or peas brought to sodden life in boiling water. Some version of "salthorse" pork or beef. Ship's biscuit, too often a snug haven for happy weevils. A man could pour black molasses over the whole lot and call it food, providing he held his nose and had a well-oiled imagination. To top off the Lucullan repast, there was always plenty of coffee strong enough to float a ringbolt. But the anchor watch had seen Ah Wong trudging back to the ship lugging a big sack and with a contented look on his normally expressionless Oriental countenance. The word got around. There was a hope.

Then at about seven bells, half past three in the afternoon, there was a howl of anguish and rage from the galley and such a commotion as the oldest salts aboard later swore they had never heard the like of in all their years at sea. Normally the captain held himself aloof from minor hassles, leaving discipline to the

mates, but he had nothing to do at the moment and made his way for'ard to see what it was all about. By the time Means reached the galley, three of his sturdiest seamen were having a hard time holding down Ah Wong. Later Means would recall that the mens' hearts weren't really in their work because they were laughing so hard. Ah Wong was anything but Celestial, mouthing curses in his native tongue and calling on strange gods. Whatever he had to say impressed veteran Maine sailors and made them weak with laughter.

"What's going on?" the captain asked.

By that time, the men had deprived Ah Wong of his wicked cleaver and had pinned the hissing Celestial to the deck. Between gusts of laughter a sailor answered: "The Chink's been took by a Roosian, cap'n. His fat chickens is all shrunk up like persimmons."

"Land o' mercy!" Mrs. Means said later to her husband, "What was all that noise about?"

Safe in the privacy of his cabin, Captain Means now could afford to laugh, too. "Ah Wong was taken in by a sharp Russian ashore," he said. The cook had placed his bag of plump hens on a table near the galley stove to thaw out while he prepared the noonday meal. And thaw out they had indeed. The chickens had been stuffed with snow to fatten them up; when Ah Wong opened his burlap sack later in the afternoon he found considerable water and a dozen carcasses that, by a stretch of the imagination, might have resembled the remains of twelve underfed pigeons. "They looked like balloons with the air let out," said Captain Means, swabbing his eyes with a bandanna.

Mrs. Means allowed it was fairly amusing. "But it looks as if we'll have the same old tiresome diet for dinner tonight. And," she added, "you'd better see that Ah Wong doesn't get ashore. I'd hate to think what he'd do to that Russian if he ever gets loose with his cleaver."

All those years at sea were good to look back on, and the pictures passed through Means' mind as Edgar returned with his pistols and they stood together waiting for eight bells to strike.

"How is Siada this morning?" the captain asked his son.

"Sulking," Edgar said. "She still misses that silly hat Jennie accidentally knocked off her head yesterday. It wasn't Jennie's fault it blew overboard." Jennie was Edgar's younger sister. "When is that girl going to grow up, Father?"

"Girls grow up pretty fast when they set their minds to it," Means said, "and it doesn't matter whether a girl is as white as you and Jennie are or as coal black as Siada—they all set a great deal of store by fripperies and I don't doubt she thought that hat was fit for a queen, even if it did look something like a sewing basket with a bunch of weeds and dead fruit in it."

Siada Means, as she would call herself until she died in her early thirties, was as black as the tar that bubbled out of the deck seams when the ship lay becalmed at sea in the tropics. Several years before, while the *Zouave* was loading cargo at Iloilo in the Philippines, Means had been approached by a fellow shipmaster with a desperate problem. "It's the young girl I got, Lem," he said. "Now my wife's gone, I just don't know what to do with her. A ship's no place for a young girl with no other female aboard, but I can't just set the child adrift."

He explained that for ten dollars he had bought the child from an Arab slave trader to be a companion to his now dead wife. "The Arab said she's a Zulu, but you know how Arabs are. If one of 'em told me the sun rises in the east I'd expect it to come up due west every morning. Dunno how old she is. The Arab swore she was eight but, aside from him being a natural born liar, who knows how old a young female is? You can't look at her teeth and tell, like you do with a hoss."

The upshot was that Siada was adopted by the Means family. When Captain Means retired from the sea and came back to Maine to live in Portland, Siada accompanied the family. She was an intelligent, willing worker, devoted to her adopted people, but was never really happy in Maine where she was not accepted by either the whites or the small black population. Subsequently, Siada moved to Ipswich, Massachusetts, where she found employment in a stocking mill. She owned and lived on a small farm outside town and "took up" with a white man known today to Means descendants only as "an Irishman named John." When asked once why she did not marry "John Conroy," her answer was: "Because if I married him he wouldn't do what I told him." When she was dying, still a young woman, her last request was that she be buried in the Means family plot in Milbridge, Maine. She lies there today with the kindly seafaring people who gave her a home and an identity.

But that was all in the far future as the *Zouave*'s bell struck eight musical notes and the bawling voice of the ship's bos'n called all hands aft to hear what the ship's master had to say. In the Maine manner, he never wasted words. "I hear you have a grievance," he said, "and if you have appointed spokesmen let them step forward and speak."

Four men came forward and mounted unbidden to the sacred quarterdeck. They were exactly the four he had figured might make

trouble among a normally decent, hardworking crew. "Well?" said Captain Means.

"Ye're a blamed Yankee skinflint," said the burliest of the quartet. "While you an' yer family an' the officers was eatin' high on the hog last night the rest of us was eatin' dog stew! And we ain't standin' fer it." He added a few other words which are best left unprinted. That was a little more than the captain could take, mild man though he was. He leveled a pistol at the four men. "Put them in irons," he ordered the mate, and when that was accomplished he said to Edgar: "Trot forward like a good lad and fetch Ah Wong."

Yes, the cook admitted, he had fed the crew dog stew. Not without some anguish, he was voluble in pointing out. Everybody knew that the three pet dogs he had been allowed to keep were getting old and mangy. What better way for an old seagoing dog to die than in providing nourishment for his hungry shipmates? "Dog stew very good."

"All right, Ah Wong," said the captain, "you may go. And now," he told the crew when the cook had disappeared, "I'll let all of you in on a secret if you'll swear not to talk about it within my wife's and my family's hearing. We had dog stew last night, too, but we didn't know it!"

Laughter rolled through the waist of the *Zouave*, and the captain pocketed his pistol. He had never cared for weapons anyway.

In the cabin, he and Edgar joined the ladies for breakfast, Mrs. Means, Miss Nan Joy, the dedicated Maine governess who had steered the children through the shoal waters of the alphabet, little Jennie, and dark Siada. The head of the family took his place at table and all bowed their heads while he said a brief prayer.

"What was all that noise on deck?" Mrs. Means wanted to know. "Not trouble, I hope?"

"No, my dear," said the captain, peering suspiciously at the plate Ah Wong placed before him. "Nothing that Edgar and I couldn't handle."

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