

Jelland's Voyage

Arthur Conan Doyle

“Well,” said our Anglo-Jap as we all drew up our chairs round the smoking-room fire, “it’s an old tale out yonder, and may have spilt over into print for all I know. I don’t want to turn this club-room into a chestnut stall, but it is a long way to the Yellow Sea, and it is just as likely that none of you have ever heard of the yawl *Matilda*, and of what happened to Henry Jelland and Willy McEvoy aboard of her.

“The middle of the sixties was a stirring time out in Japan. That was just after the Simonosaki bombardment, and before the Daimio affair. There was a Tory party and there was a Liberal party among the natives, and the question that they were wrangling over was whether the throats of the foreigners should be cut or not. I tell you all, politics have been tame to me since then. If you lived in a treaty port, you were bound to wake up and take an interest in them. And to make it better, the outsider had no way of knowing how the game was going. If the opposition won it would not be a newspaper paragraph that would tell him of it, but a good old Tory in a suit of chain mail, with a sword in each hand, would drop in and let him know all about it in a single upper cut.

“Of course it makes men reckless when they are living on the edge of a volcano like that. Just at first they are very jumpy, and then there comes a time when they learn to enjoy life while they have it. I tell you, there’s nothing makes life so beautiful as when the shadow of death begins to fall across it. Time is too precious to be dawdled away then, and a man lives every minute of it. That was the way with us in Yokohama. There were many European places of business which had to go on running, and the men who worked them made the place lively for seven nights in the week.

“One of the heads of the European colony was Randolph Moore, the big export merchant. His offices were in Yokohama, but he spent a good deal of his time at his house up in Jeddo, which had only just been opened to the trade. In his absence he used to leave his affairs in the hands of his head clerk, Jelland, whom he knew to be a man of great energy and resolution. But energy and resolution are two-edged things, you know, and when they are used against you you don’t appreciate them so much.

“It was gambling that set Jelland wrong. He was a little dark-eyed fellow with black curly hair—more than three-quarters Celt, I should imagine. Every night in the week you would see him in the same place, on the left-hand side of the croupier at Matheson’s *rouge et noir* table. For a long time he won, and lived in better style than his employer. And then came a turn of luck, and he began to lose so that at the end of a single week his partner and he were stone broke, without a dollar to their names.

“This partner was a clerk in the employ of the same firm—a tall, straw-haired young Englishman called McEvoy. He was a good boy enough at the start, but he was clay in the hands of Jelland, who fashioned him into a kind of weak model of himself. They were forever on the prowl together, but it was Jelland who led and McEvoy who followed. Lynch and I and one or two others tried to show the youngster that he could come to no good along that line, and when we were talking to him we could win him round easily enough, but five minutes of Jelland would swing him back again. It may have been animal magnetism or what you like, but the little man could pull the big one along like a sixty-foot tug in front of a full-rigged ship. Even when they had lost all their money they would still take their places at the table and look on with shining eyes when any one else was raking in the stamps.

“But one evening they could keep out of it no longer. Red had turned up sixteen times running, and it was more than Jelland could bear. He whispered to McEvoy, and then said a word to the croupier.

“‘Certainly, Mr. Jelland; your cheque is as good as notes,’ said he.

“Jelland scribbled a cheque and threw it on the black. The card was the king of hearts, and the croupier raked in the little bit of paper. Jelland grew angry, and McEvoy white. Another and a heavier cheque was written and thrown on the table. The card was the nine of diamonds. McEvoy leaned his head upon his hands and looked as if he would faint. ‘By God!’ growled Jelland, ‘I won’t be beat,’ and he threw on a cheque that covered the other two. The card was the deuce of hearts. A few minutes later they were walking down the Bund, with the cool night-air playing upon their fevered faces.

“‘Of course you know what this means,’ said Jelland, lighting a cheroot; ‘we’ll have to transfer some of the office money to our current account. There’s no occasion to make a fuss over it. Old Moore won’t look over the books before Easter. If we have any luck, we can easily replace it before then.’

“‘But if we have no luck?’ faltered McEvoy.

“‘Tut, man, we must take things as they come. You stick to me, and I’ll stick to you, and we’ll pull through together. You shall sign the cheques to-morrow night, and we shall see if your luck is better than mine.’

“But if anything it was worse. When the pair rose from the table on the following evening, they had spent over £5,000 of their employer’s money. But the resolute Jelland was as sanguine as ever.

“‘We have a good nine weeks before us before the books will be examined,’ said he. ‘We

must play the game out, and it will all come straight.'

"McEvoy returned to his rooms that night in an agony of shame and remorse. When he was with Jelland he borrowed strength from him; but alone he recognized the full danger of his position, and the vision of his old white-capped mother in England, who had been so proud when he had received his appointment, rose up before him to fill him with loathing and madness. He was still tossing upon his sleepless couch when his Japanese servant entered the bedroom. For an instant McEvoy thought that the long-expected outbreak had come, and plunged for his revolver. Then, with his heart in his mouth, he listened to the message which the servant had brought.

"Jelland was downstairs, and wanted to see him.

"What on earth could he want at that hour of night? McEvoy dressed hurriedly and rushed downstairs. His companion, with a set smile upon his lips, which was belied by the ghastly pallor of his face, was sitting in the dim light of a solitary candle, with a slip of paper in his hands.

"'Sorry to knock you up, Willy,' said he. 'No eavesdroppers, I suppose?'

"McEvoy shook his head. He could not trust himself to speak.

"'Well, then, our little game is played out. This note was waiting for me at home. It is from Moore, and says that he will be down on Monday morning for an examination of the books. It leaves us in a tight place.'

"'Monday!' gasped McEvoy; 'to-day is Friday.'

"'Saturday, my son, and 3 a.m. We have not much time to turn round in.'

"'We are lost!' screamed McEvoy.

"'We soon will be, if you make such an infernal row,' said Jelland harshly. 'Now do what I tell you, Willy, and we'll pull through yet.'

"'I will do anything—anything.'

"'That's better. Where's your whisky? It's a beastly time of the day to have to get your back stiff, but there must be no softness with us, or we are gone. First of all, I think there is something due to our relations, don't you?'

"McEvoy stared.

“We must stand or fall together, you know. Now I, for one, don’t intend to set my foot inside a felon’s dock under any circumstances. D’ye see? I’m ready to swear to that. Are you?’

“What d’you mean?’ asked McEvoy, shrinking back.

“Why, man, we all have to die, and it’s only the pressing of a trigger. I swear that I shall never be taken alive. Will you? If you don’t, I leave you to your fate.’

“All right. I’ll do whatever you think best.’

“You swear it?’

“Yes.’

“Well, mind, you must be as good as your word. Now we have two clear days to get off in. The yawl *Matilda* is on sale, and she has all her fixings and plenty of tinned stuff aboard. We’ll buy the lot to-morrow morning, and whatever we want, and get away in her. But, first, we’ll clear all that is left in the office. There are 5,000 sovereigns in the safe. After dark we’ll get them aboard the yawl, and take our chance of reaching California. There’s no use hesitating, my son, for we have no ghost of a look-in in any other direction. It’s that or nothing.’

“I’ll do what you advise.’

“All right; and mind you get a bright face on you to-morrow, for if Moore gets the tip and comes before Monday, then——’ He tapped the side-pocket of his coat and looked across at his partner with eyes that were full of a sinister meaning.

“All went well with their plans next day. The *Matilda* was bought without difficulty; and, though she was a tiny craft for so long a voyage, had she been larger two men could not have hoped to manage her. She was stocked with water during the day, and after dark the two clerks brought down the money from the office and stowed it in the hold. Before midnight they had collected all their own possessions without exciting suspicion, and at two in the morning they left their moorings and stole quietly out from among the shipping. They were seen, of course, and were set down as keen yachtsmen who were on for a good long Sunday cruise; but there was no one who dreamed that that cruise would only end either on the American coast or at the bottom of the North Pacific Ocean. Straining and hauling, they got their mainsail up and set their foresail and jib. There was a slight breeze from the south-east, and the little craft went dipping along upon her way. Seven miles from land, however, the wind fell away and they lay becalmed, rising and falling on the long swell of a glassy sea.

All Sunday they did not make a mile, and in the evening Yokohama still lay along the horizon.

“On Monday morning down came Randolph Moore from Jeddo, and made straight for the offices. He had had the tip from some one that his clerks had been spreading themselves a bit, and that had made him come down out of his usual routine; but when he reached his place and found the three juniors waiting in the street with their hands in their pockets he knew that the matter was serious.

“What’s this?’ he asked. He was a man of action, and a nasty chap to deal with when he had his topmasts lowered.

“‘We can’t get in,’ said the clerks.

“‘Where is Mr. Jelland?’

“‘He has not come to-day.’

“‘And Mr. McEvoy?’

“‘He has not come either.’

“Randolph Moore looked serious. ‘We must have the door down,’ said he.

“They don’t build houses very solid in that land of earthquakes, and in a brace of shakes they were all in the office. Of course the thing told its own story. The safe was open, the money gone, and the clerks fled. Their employer lost no time in talk.

“‘Where were they seen last?’

“‘On Saturday they bought the *Matilda* and started for a cruise.’

“Saturday! The matter seemed hopeless if they had got two days’ start. But there was still the shadow of a chance. He rushed to the beach and swept the ocean with his glasses.

“‘My God!’ he cried. ‘There’s the *Matilda* out yonder. I know her by the rake of her mast. I have my hand upon the villains after all!’

“But there was a hitch even then. No boat had steam up, and the eager merchant had not patience to wait. Clouds were banking up along the haunch of the hills, and there was every sign of an approaching change of weather. A police boat was ready with ten armed men in her, and Randolph Moore himself took the tiller as she shot out in pursuit of the becalmed

yawl.

“Jelland and McEvoy, waiting wearily for the breeze which never came, saw the dark speck which sprang out from the shadow of the land and grew larger with every swish of the oars. As she drew nearer, they could see also that she was packed with men, and the gleam of weapons told what manner of men they were. Jelland stood leaning against the tiller, and he looked at the threatening sky, the limp sails, and the approaching boat.

“‘It’s a case with us, Willy,’ said he. ‘By the Lord, we are two most unlucky devils, for there’s wind in that sky, and another hour would have brought it to us.’

“McEvoy groaned.

“‘There’s no good softening over it, my lad,’ said Jelland. ‘It’s the police boat right enough, and there’s old Moore driving them to row like hell. It’ll be a ten-dollar job for every man of them.’

“Willy McEvoy crouched against the side with his knees on the deck. ‘My mother! my poor old mother!’ he sobbed.

“‘She’ll never hear that you have been in the dock anyway,’ said Jelland. ‘My people never did much for me, but I will do that much for them. It’s no good, Mac. We can chuck our hands. God bless you, old man! Here’s the pistol!’

“He cocked the revolver, and held the butt towards the youngster. But the other shrunk away from it with little gasps and cries. Jelland glanced at the approaching boat. It was not more than a few hundred yards away.

“‘There’s no time for nonsense,’ said he. ‘Damn it! man, what’s the use of flinching? You swore it!’

“‘No, no, Jelland!’

“‘Well, anyhow, I swore that neither of us should be taken. Will you do it?’

“‘I can’t! I can’t!’

“‘Then I will for you.’

“The rowers in the boat saw him lean forwards, they heard two pistol shots, they saw him double himself across the tiller, and then, before the smoke had lifted, they found that they had something else to think of.

“For at that instant the storm broke—one of those short sudden squalls which are common in these seas. The *Matilda* heeled over, her sails bellied out, she plunged her lee-rail into a wave, and was off like a frightened deer. Jelland’s body had jammed the helm, and she kept a course right before the wind, and fluttered away over the rising sea like a blown piece of paper. The rowers worked frantically, but the yawl still drew ahead, and in five minutes it had plunged into the storm wrack never to be seen again by mortal eye. The boat put back, and reached Yokohama with the water washing half-way up to the thwarts.

“And that was how it came that the yawl *Matilda*, with a cargo of five thousand pounds and a crew of two dead young men, set sail across the Pacific Ocean. What the end of Jelland’s voyage may have been no man knows. He may have foundered in that gale, or he may have been picked up by some canny merchantman, who stuck to the bullion and kept his mouth shut, or he may still be cruising in that vast waste of waters, blown north to the Behring Sea, or south to the Malay Islands. It’s better to leave it unfinished than to spoil a true story by inventing a tag to it.”

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