

CHRISTIAN HEROES: THEN & NOW

HUDSON TAYLOR

Deep in the
Heart of China

JANET & GEOFF BENGE

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Dangerous Light

Captain Morris gripped the wheel of the *Dumfries*, a 470-ton wooden sailing ship, as he barked orders at his twenty-three man crew. In his cabin below deck, the ship's only passenger, Hudson Taylor, sat writing in his journal. The short, young Englishman with blond hair and blue eyes was on his way to be a missionary in China. Busy writing, he didn't know that the ship was headed into a storm, though he did notice that the lantern in his cabin was beginning to swing more than it had been.

On deck, the barometric pressure was dropping steadily. Low pressure meant high winds, and high winds meant rough sea. Waves were beginning to break across the bow of the ship. With each one, the

Dumfries rolled from side to side, shuddering and creaking. The stronger the wind grew, the more worried Captain Morris became. Despite all his efforts, his ship was at the mercy of the current and the howling wind. And worse, they were just four days out of Liverpool and not yet in the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean. They were still in the Irish Sea, close to the jagged, rocky outcrops of the Welsh coastline. Now, tossed to and fro by the wind and the ocean current, those rocks were perilously close.

By late afternoon, the waves were mountainous, and the *Dumfries* creaked as it lurched. Hudson Taylor made his way cautiously up on deck. The color of the sky matched the bruises he'd gotten while being tossed around in his cabin. Ocean spray stung like tiny shards of glass as it whipped at his face.

Captain Morris clung to the ship's large wooden wheel, turning it first one way and then the other, trying to get the *Dumfries* to respond. He glanced at Hudson, not once slackening his grip.

"Unless God helps us, there is no hope," he yelled.

"How far are we from the Welsh Coast?" Hudson shouted back.

"Fifteen or sixteen miles, and we're drifting fast."

As Captain Morris spoke, a huge wave hurled itself against the ship. Frothing foam driven by the wind filled the air, and water surged across the deck,

tossing barrels and pieces of lumber around as though they weighed nothing. Hudson decided he would be safer down in his cabin. As he left the deck, he surveyed the scene before heading below. *Unless God works miraculously on our behalf, a few broken timbers will be all that's left of us and our ship by morning*, he thought, unsure of what lay ahead.

In the darkness below deck, many of the *Dumfries'* crew huddled together in the mess room. The ship was pitching and rolling so heavily—now falling forward, now rocking from side to side, now falling *and* rocking—that Hudson had to crawl on his hands and knees down the passage to his cabin in the ship's stern. The cabin door swung wildly on its hinges, but he managed to secure it behind him as he collapsed inside. He rolled onto his bunk, alone in the dark, hearing only the smash of the waves against the ship's side and the ship's shuddering reply. Each swell nearly threw him from his bunk.

He tried to sleep, but it was no use. The fury of the storm only grew, until the ship was being tossed so wildly that Hudson could not remain in his bunk. He made his way back up on deck. Captain Morris still stood resolutely at the wheel. But Hudson noticed something different this time. He could see a lighthouse close to the leeward side of the ship.

"The Holyhead Lighthouse," Captain Morris yelled to Hudson. "We're heading straight for it."

"How long do we have?" Hudson bellowed back over the howl of the wind.

"Two hours at the most," was the captain's grim reply.

Hudson could think of nothing else to say. It was over. Captain Morris had done everything he could to save his ship, but nothing had worked. It was only a matter of time before the *Dumfries* would smash into the rocks. Tears joined the salty trail of sea spray that streaked down Hudson's cheeks.

Thoughts of family flooded Hudson's mind as he made his way back below deck. He could see the faces of his mother and father and his sisters Amelia and Louisa. How would they cope with his death? It was not supposed to end this way. Had God saved him from malignant fever and certain death only to let him drown in the Irish Sea? He thought about his body. Would it sink to the bottom or wash up on shore? Just in case it washed up, he took out his pocketbook and, despite the fierce, unpredictable movements of the *Dumfries*, managed to write his name and address in large letters inside the cover. He slipped the book inside his undershirt. Now, if his body washed up, his family would know he'd been identified and properly buried.

Next he began looking for something that would float, something he could cling to when the *Dumfries* sank. As he looked, he realized that floating was less of a problem than avoiding being smashed against the rocks by the raging sea. But there was nothing he could do about that; he would just have to take his chances. Finally he settled on a

cane hamper as a life preserver. It would surely float, and it was easy to cling to. Inside the hamper he put a little food, a change of clothes, some rope, and his surgical tools. With this unlikely lifesaving kit tucked under his arm, he once again made his way to the deck. A hatchway door had been ripped from its hinges, and water was now pouring in below deck through the hatch. Several crew members were scrambling to cover the gaping hole with a piece of torn sail and some lumber.

On deck, Captain Morris was still standing at the *Dumfries'* wheel, where he had been standing for the past twenty-four hours. Frothing water swirled around his legs as wave after wave washed violently over the ship's railing.

Hudson gripped the railing and pulled himself towards the captain. Above him, the halyards whipped against the mast. Captain Morris was trying to get the *Dumfries* to tack, zigzagging the ship first one way and then the other, to get away from the rocks. But it was no use. The wind was just too strong, and the ship still would not respond. Yard by yard they were being pushed toward Holyhead Lighthouse and the ship-smashing rocks of the Welsh coast.

The lighthouse beam passed rhythmically, eerily, over the *Dumfries'* bow. It was the kind of light no sailor ever wanted to see this close.

Knowing he was about to lose his ship, Captain Morris checked his instruments one last time. The barometer revealed that the pressure was beginning

to rise, but not fast enough to be of any use to them. Then he checked the wind gauge. Suddenly, he shouted. "The wind has shifted," he cried. "Only two points mind you, but enough that we might be able to clear the rocks."

He barked orders to his crew, who scurried up from below deck to carry them out. They pulled at the halyards with all their might to set the sails to take advantage of the wind shift. Captain Morris skillfully adjusted the *Dumfries'* wheel, and this time the ship began to respond. Instead of being swept closer to the rocks, it began to inch away from them. Inches turned to feet, and feet into yards, and soon the *Dumfries* was headed back out into the Irish Sea. Everyone on board let out a loud cry. They were safe!

None was more surprised or happy than Hudson Taylor. He was not going to drown after all. He was going to make it to China. He smiled to himself. Four days out of England and he'd already had his first sea adventure. If the junior clerks at the Barnsley Bank could see him now!