

Bluebook

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A Short Story By Robert Sheckley

LONE SURVIVOR

The problem the two men went out in the sailboat to talk over was simple: one was in love with the other man's wife. The solution they reached was also simple—but which one came back?

ON August 5, the Coast Guard cutter Seabright put to sea at 1330 hours, in response to information concerning the auxiliary sloop Hope, and its crew consisting of the owner and one guest. After steaming for three hours through heavy seas and gale-velocity winds, the Hope was encountered at a point four miles east of the Port Everglades offshore buoy. The sailboat was found derelict, and an attempt was made to take it in tow. There was only a single survivor, one man having been washed overboard in an attempt to aid the other . . .

The Hope was running fast, her long, flat, overhanging bow pounding slightly in the Gulf Stream chop. Her owner, Theodore Debner, held the tiller lightly, watching for sudden gusts, edging the sloop up to meet them. George Matthews, his guest, braced himself against the coaming and looked west, trying to make out the low white coast line of Florida. Neither man had spoken since leaving Port Everglades.

"It's quite a sensation," Matthews said at last.

"What is?" Debner asked sharply.

"This sailboating, of course."

"Oh," Debner said, smiling faintly. "I thought you were referring to something else. Some of your recent activities have been sensation-filled, haven't they?"

Matthews stirred uncomfortably. "There's no sense starting that way. We came out here to talk about it. It's a damned uncomfortable situation."

"I'm going to tack," Debner said. "Handle the jib sheet, would you?"

"Jib sheet?"

"That line," Debner said, pointing. "Free it when we're in the wind, but don't let it get away from you. . . . You really don't know much about sailboats, do you?"

"My first time on one," Matthews said. "Mountain climbing's more my sport." He found the correct line and waited. Slowly the boat rounded into the wind, her sails flapping wildly.

"Now," Debner said.

Matthews took a double turn around his hand, set his shoulders and unfastened the line from its cleat. Suddenly the big jib filled with a crack.

"Make fast!" Debner shouted, leaning savagely into the tiller. Matthews didn't have a chance. He was dragged the length of the cockpit, the line jammed around his hand. It seemed impossible that a triangle of canvas could exert such a pull. He managed to wrench his hand free before the billowing sail could yank him over the cabin top.

The sloop completed its tack, and Debner set up the lee jib sheet one-handed, before the sail could fill.

"I warned you I wouldn't be much help," Matthews said, a little shakily, rubbing his shoulder.

"I know. You're the expert at other things."

The water was getting rougher, and the wind, which had been moderate when they left Port Everglades, was now singing wildly in the shrouds. Overhead, the sky was slate-gray, with wispy black clouds racing over it.

The long, slim racing sailboat leaned heavily into the mounting seas. She was a faithful image of her owner; neat and taut, beautifully groomed, a little too quick in her movements, a little contemptuous of the sea she subdued over.

"I guess we'd better talk about it," Matthews said.

Debner nodded. "That's what we came out for," he said. "The peace and solitude of the ocean, and a chance to discuss our mutual problem. Go ahead. Tell me the technique you used. Maybe I can try it on someone else's wife."

"It's been nothing like that," Matthews said. "Jannie and I—"

"So you call her Jannie," Debner mused.

"I've called her Jannie since college. I didn't even know she was in this town. We met last month at that water-color exhibit."

"Small-town art is such a fine excuse for mischief," Debner said.

. . . Continued on page 93

JOHN
FLOHERTY
JR



Lone Survivor

Continued from page 24

"If you're finished with your amusing comments . . ."

"I am a betrayed husband," Debner said, smiling. "My emotions get the better of me."

Matthews felt baffled, and a little unsure of himself. He had dated Janice—she was Janice Layton then—in college. It was casual, at least for him—lunches squeezed between Vector Analysis and Stress and Strain; movies, when he wasn't too busy studying for an examination in Heat, Part II. But there had been a growing undertone of seriousness that the war interrupted.

In the Philippines, Matthews tried to analyze that undertone. It bothered him to find that a straightforward application of engineering principles gave him no coherent answer. And then one day, as the result of no analysis at all, he knew he was in love.

By the time he came home, it was too late. Janice was married. Matthews had firm ideas about marriage, and he didn't like to think of himself as a home-wrecker.

But the home had been wrecked long before he ran into her again. Not that Debner was particularly cruel to his wife; that would have implied some interest in her. He simply ignored her, ignored everything except the handsome monthly receipts from the Layton wool mills.

"Let's get it over with," Matthews said directly. "You've given her a pretty rotten time. Do you love her, Debner?"

The question caught Debner by surprise. He glanced at the swell of his mainsail, then said, "Love is an adolescent's word, Mr. Matthews."

Matthews turned quite red, and asked, "Why did you marry her?"

"Janice is a very pleasant woman," Debner said. "As I'm sure you know. And there were other considerations."

"Such as money?"

"Well—why not?"

"All right," Matthews said heavily. "I never thought you'd admit it."

"Why shouldn't I?" Debner asked. "It's just between ourselves. The question is, what now? Ease out on the jib, please."

Cautiously this time, keeping the strain on the sheet winch, Matthews let the jib out. Debner uncleated the mainsheet and swung the boat before the wind, her boom at right angles to her beam, and dipping into the tops of the crests. He had to steer with his whole body, for the following sea was lifting the

sailboat's long flat counter, swinging her sideways, trying to make her broach. The sky had grown darker, and ominous wind-puffs tore white streaks in the waves.

"The thing I hate," Debner said, "is the sheer messiness of it all. I suppose you and Janice have been defaming me all over town. Huddling in dark little bars holding hands in the last row of the movies."

Matthews square face stiffened. "No. And we haven't discussed this with anyone."

"I can hardly believe that," Debner said.

"It's true, not that it matters. Will you give her a divorce?"

Debner shrugged his shoulders. "I'll think about it. We're starting back now. See if you can spot the whistle buoy."

Matthews took the binoculars from their case, adjusted them and stood up, bracing himself against the coaming. There was nothing visible but the white-capped waves racing. When the sailboat dipped into the trough he could see nothing but a crazily tilted sheet of white-veined water. Spray was clouding the glasses, and he shielded them with one hand. There was something in the distance, but he wasn't sure if it was the buoy or another boat. If he could hold the glasses steady for another moment . . .

Debner screamed, "Get down!" Matthews looked around and saw, dreamlike in its clarity, the boom bearing down on him like a blunt-edged guillotine, lashed to express-train speed by the force of the wind behind the sail.

At the last moment he dropped to the deck, feeling the boom brush the top of his head.

"Hang on!" Debner shouted. The boom whipped to the end of its arc, narrowly missing the backstay, and was brought up short by the cleated mainsheet. The impact ripped the cleat out of the coaming. The mast bent like a green sapling, but held. The sailboat heeled over, putting her deck under water, then slowly answered the helm.

"Wind shifted," Debner called. "Lucky we didn't lose the mast in that jibe. It's going to be a little tricky getting back now."

MATTHEWS was still dazed. If the boom had hit him, he would have been dead.

The wind was shrieking a gale now, whipping the tops of the waves in sheets of spindrift. Green water poured over the bow and down the spillways each time the sailboat dipped her bow. But Debner was keeping the boat on its feet and moving. He had drawn the jib taut and let the main go free. When the wind puffed, he swung the sloop to meet it, then quickly let the sails draw before the boat's way was stopped.

"Will you give her a divorce?" Matthews asked again.

"What a one-track mind you have!" Debner laughed. "Doesn't all this impress you?" He waved a hand at the sea.

"It scares me, if you want to know. But I suppose you can get us back."

"I suppose I can," Debner said, "if it doesn't get much worse. That handle over there is the bilge pump. Would you?"

Matthews pumped the bilge dry. When he looked up, the wind seemed to have increased in force. He took another look through the binoculars, this time keeping his head low. There was no sign of the Port Everglades offshore buoy, but he could make out the distant hull of a boat.

Debner started the engine and slid the boat into gear. Even at full throttle he was barely able to maintain steerage way in the steep, breaking seas.

"I'll give her a divorce," Debner said abruptly.

"You will?"

"Yes, why not? I've been bored for some time.

And the Layton Mills income isn't the fortune you might imagine. But there's a condition attached to my acquiescence."

"What's that?" Matthews asked.

"I want custody of the sailboat," Debner said, grinning.

Matthews had to laugh in spite of himself. "I'm sure Jannie doesn't want it."

"Right," Debner said. "I'm glad we talked this out in an intelligent manner. Sometimes marriages just don't work out. When it happens, there's no sense getting dramatic about it. Now let me concentrate on getting us back."

DEBNER looked toward the northwest, where thick black clouds were piling up. He said, "I'm afraid the worst is yet to come. Here, hold her in the wind. I'm going to drop the main."

Before Matthews could answer, the tiller was thrust into his hands. It was like gripping a live thing. The sailboat quivered and groaned as, under full power, he thrust her bow into the wind.

Clutching the grab rail on the cabin top, Debner fought his way to the mast. Matthews could see him gripping the mast with one hand, working at the lines with the other. In a moment he returned and took the tiller.

"The main halyard's jammed," he said.

"What does that mean?" Matthews asked.

"What's a halyard?"

Very quietly Debner told him. "The halyard is a rope that hauls a sail up the mast. The main halyard passes over a wheel that's set into the top of the mast. Our jibe apparently jarred it out. Now I can't get the main down."

"Can't we continue with it up?"

Debner shook his head. "We should be double-reefed by now, and there's more coming. She isn't built for this kind of driving." He located a big screwdriver and stood up. "Take over."

"What are you going to do?"

"Well, we can't live much longer with full main-sail, and we're almost as bad off with no sail at all. There's only one thing I can do. Climb the mast and pry the halyard back on."

"You're crazy!" Matthews said, looking at the

wildly swaying mast. "You wouldn't last a minute up there!"

"You exaggerate the difficulty," Debner said. "Just about every ocean wanderer has done this at one time or another. The old square-rigger men did it every day of their lives, in worse weather than this."

"Will the mast hold your weight?"

"It'll hold a lot more than that. Now take the tiller and listen closely. Keep her as close to the wind as you can, and still maintain steerage way. Don't let her fall off, or you'll be chancing a knockdown. But above all, don't get her in irons. She'll shake herself to pieces and you'll never bring her out. Got that?"

"No," Matthews said. "I can't handle this boat. Give me the screwdriver."

"What? Oh, no, my friend. You don't look like a mast-climbing type: to me."

IF your damned mast will hold me, I can get up it," Matthews said grimly. "But I know I can't sail this boat. Give me the screwdriver."

"All right," Debner said. "No fancy stuff. I don't want to go in after you. Slip the halyard and get down as quickly as you can."

"I'm not planning on eating lunch up there," Matthews said. He tucked the screwdriver into his belt and fought his way to the mast.

It wasn't as hard as he had imagined; certainly not as hard as climbing a rock chimney. He stayed to windward of the sail, and the gale pressed him firmly against it, steadying him. He was able to grip the mast with one leg and use both hands on the halyard for climbing. When he reached the lower spreaders he stopped to catch his breath. Down below, Debner was hunched over the tiller. In the distance, Matthews could see the gray hull of a power boat, laboring toward them through the seas.

The next part was harder. He could feel the mast sway and buckle under his weight. The sail narrowed, giving him nothing to lean against, and the wind was trying its best to tear him loose. The deck looked alarmingly small beneath him.

He clamped his jaws together and pulled himself to the jumper stays. The top of the mast was still 10 feet overhead.

The wind was stronger up there, screaming wildly in his ears. Matthews reached the top and took a firm grip on the halyard. One-handed, he eased the screwdriver out of his belt and started to slip it under the halyard.

And stopped. The halyard was firmly seated in the deep-grooved wheel. There was nothing wrong.

He felt the boat heel as fresh gusts reached it. Could the line have sprung back into place? Or had Debner been mistaken? The wind pressure might have held the sail up.

And then it occurred to him that Debner was trying to kill him.

This was no thought to have, 40 feet above the deck. But it was inescapable. Accidents came easily to a small boat in a gale. He had read that sort of

thing in the newspapers: Man lost from fishing boat in heavy seas off Montauk, or Cape Charles—or Port Everglades.

The boat began to heel, swinging him inexorably outward. Matthews tried to grip the mast with his legs, but couldn't get them around the jumper stays. He dropped the screwdriver, hanging on to the halyard with both hands, swinging pendulumlike over the water.

It couldn't be true, Matthews thought desperately, wondering why Debner didn't straighten the boat. Debner had been perfectly agreeable about the divorce. Or had that been part of the plan? Like pretending he was going to climb the mast. He'd known that Matthews couldn't handle the boat, had known he wouldn't even try.

His hands were slipping on the halyard. He saw Debner leave the cockpit and crawl toward the mast.

Debner had even asked him if anyone knew about him and Jan, Matthews thought. If he were lost from the sailboat there would be no reason to suspect foul play, no apparent motive.

Debner was at the foot of the mast now, looking up at him. Something bright glinted in his hand. A knife? What would he be doing with a knife?

The boat heeled still farther, her rail went under, water coursed along the cabin sides.

There was an explosion. Matthews felt himself flying through the air.

THE Coast Guard cutter *Seabright* had been driving for three hours, and her crew was wet and disgruntled. It never failed. With storm warnings flying from Cape Hatteras to Key West, someone had to take a pleasure trip.

When they found the sailboat, she was a wreck. The gale had wrenched her open, ripped her sails to shreds, flooded her engine. She was lying beam-to the wind, drifting slowly seaward. A man was bailing steadily and mechanically, not looking up even when the *Seabright* made a lee above him and put a man aboard.

"Your wife reported you were out here," the man said. "We better get you off. Where's your passenger?"

"What?"

"Your passenger. Where is he?"

From the bridge of the cutter, a man shouted. "Hurry it up! Get them off there!"

"Where is he?"

"Washed overboard. There was nothing I could do. The sails were gone, and her engine's dead."

"OK. You can make a full report inside, Mr. Debner."

"My name's Matthews. Debner was washed overboard. He was trying to help me. I was up the mast. We were heeled so far over I couldn't get down. Debner would have been safe if he'd stayed in the cockpit. But he came forward and slit the sail to let the boat straighten. Then he couldn't hang on."

"It was a brave thing to do," the man said. "Come on, let's get off here."

They took the sailboat in tow, but her seams had opened too far. Soon her cabin top was awash, and the *Seabright* had to cut her loose. Matthews watched her sink. He remembered that Debner had wanted custody of the *Hope*. Well, he had it.

They took him below and gave him a steaming cup of coffee. He told them again what had happened, keeping it short. There was no sense in going through the whole story, and no satisfaction in maligning the dead. It was finished.

But he wondered if Janice would guess the truth.

He knew that he would always remember the sound of the overburdened mainsail exploding, the green water sweeping everything, the shock of seeing an empty deck where a moment before Debner had stood, knife in hand, stark hatred in his eyes.

And Matthews would remember that halyard he had climbed down, to find two of its strands cut neatly through, and the third strand notched and unraveling.

—BY ROBERT SHECKLEY