

## UNDEFEATED

Late night, and the racket of the sundowner crowd had run its course. The riot lost its rowdy spirit and one by one the young revellers made for the door. The “Blue Atlantic” was a sailor’s bar, an institution for mariners passing through this mid-Atlantic island. Faded pictures of famous yachts fought each other for elbow room on the smoke-stained walls. Flags and pennants flying the colors of yacht clubs of the four corners of the globe hung from the rafters. The deeply burnished bar, made from massive pieces of the island’s famous mahogany, had witnessed the passage of an immeasurable amount of “Dark n’ Stormys”, the local drink of legend. It was a place of memories, where on any given night mates with intertwining pasts could bump into each other after years of separation. It was an ageless place, seemingly stuck in time, unchanged for decades. Even the barmen were timeless, remembering names and faces from years past as if they had only been seen yesterday.

Amongst the handful of patrons scattered along the bar was a group of four. Weathered and casually unkempt, each man effused the common attribute of professional self-assurance. The wake of untold sea miles reflected from their knowing eyes. “So, what’s in gonna be boys,” queried the Australian, tipping back the last of his drink, ice cubes rattling. “We calling it quits, or manning up?”

The others shot knowing looks along the bar. “I say we grab a bottle and decamp to a table,” suggested Hollis, the local sailmaker. “Who knows when we’ll be crossing tacks again.”

The other two shrugged and pushed back their barstools. “I say Eddie...a bottle of your finest with all the fixings, if you would be so kind,” signalled Morrison, the tall Englishman, in a faux Cambridge accent. “I think we’ll be hove-to for the next little while.”

The four sailors pulled up seats at a near-by table and settled themselves in. A few minutes later the barman passed a bottle of Black Seal, a pitcher of ginger beer, a bowl of ice, and slices of lime across the bar. “You are a damned good man, Eduardo. I think we might be here ‘til stumps, mate,” remarked Digby the Aussie as he retrieved the goods from the bar. “You just give us the boot when you’ve had enough.”

Eddie simply answered with a nod and his flashing smile. “It’s all good,” the smile seemed to say.

Drinks were poured and each of the four men contemplated the quiet, content in the knowing conversation wasn't necessary simply for the sake of it. Finally, Bill the 'Down Easter' turned to the Englishman next to him. "So, what's the latest from down south, amigo? Anything to report?"

"I guess you all heard about our friend Arthur, the mad South African? You all knew him, I presume?"

"Sure...I did a heap of sail repair for the crazy bastard a few years back. Imagine, sailing south from the Vineyard in late December on that big schooner of his, with only a couple of green college kids and his wife for crew."

"I once saw him scrape down a pair of spars on a big ketch," said Digby. "The owner didn't even have time to belay the bosun chair halyard. This is the dinky-die truth, he was coming down the mast with two scrapers, one in each hand! The varnish was flying, I tell you!"

"Dinky what?" laughed Bill.

"Dinky-die, mate...the real thing. You never heard that?"

"First time. Australians, heh? Sorry, Morrison. Where were we?"

"Yes, Arthur Thebaud. The man of iron. I'm sure we've all heard the stories. Building his huge steel schooner in South Africa virtually on his own, and then sailing it to the West Indies with only his wife as crew. A singular man indeed. Didn't have much time for socialising, or petty conversation. He was the sort ready to take head-on what the world threw at him; whether it be gale or calm. I've never known a man who was as confident as he to master any complication. Hand building a fifty-foot stick for his schooner was as easily dealt with as rebuilding a six-cylinder diesel. Nothing could defeat the fellow.

"He had his work cut out for him, though, once he entered the Caribbean charter trade. Dealing with demanding charter guests was not his forte. Having to carry hired crew wasn't easy for him, either. Nor would it have been fun working for him. No one could live up to his high standards. I would regard him as a man who was born in the wrong century. A man who was far more suited to driving a windjammer around the horn or taking on a mob of head-hunting cannibals in the South Seas than mixing gin and tonics for millionaire Americans."

“I could see that,” remarked Bill, refilling his glass. “A hard driving skipper bound ‘round the Horn from Valparaiso with a load of nitrate. His bully mate beating the bejesus out of the crew. ‘Ahoy Cap’n! Man overboard! Ferguson just fell from the to’ gallant yard!’ I could see the man simply glance over his shoulder and give the order to press on. ‘Call up the larboard watch, Mr Pease,’ is about all he’d say. “I believe we could carry the stuns’ls.”

The group all chuckled at the vision.

“Perhaps a bit harsh, my friend,” remarked the Englishman. “It is a fact the man was stubborn and determined. But beyond all of that Arthur was well liked amongst the fraternity. He had a sneaky sense of humour, was well read, and contrary to the image you have just painted, I knew him to always be willing to help out a mate in distress. And I suppose that willingness to help was what led to his downfall in the end.”

“Yes...he somehow damaged his arm in a hurricane, didn’t he?” asked the Australian. “What was the story behind that? I never really heard what happened.”

“It was Hurricane Irma which hit Saint Martin a few years back. I’m sure you blokes all remember it. That was one of those category five Cape Verde bastards that seem to be getting more frequent these days. Arthur had his *Southern Star* snugly anchored up in the lagoon. We all know what kind of a mess Irma made in that so-called safe hurricane hole. In the height of the storm a distress call came out over the radio. A big steel barge had dragged down on a young woman who for some reason had been left alone with her young daughter on their cruising yacht. Her husband had flown to the States on business...something like that. At any rate Arthur mustered up some help from a couple of other boats and battled the elements in his launch and made it aboard...a feat in itself. The barge was tearing hell out of the woman’s yacht. You can imagine! ‘Grab your passports and anything else of importance and get ready to abandon ship,’ he yelled to her. ‘You can come back with us. Our only choice is to cut your boat loose and let her drift into the mangroves. Otherwise, she’ll sink right here!’ The woman objected but what else could they do? Arthur and his mates went forward. It was a tricky situation. The barge was chomping down on the foredeck. Somehow, they had to set the boat adrift and still get into their dinghy. Arthur ordered everyone into his launch and told them to let go. Once

they were clear away, he would cut the yacht's moorings and then jump overboard himself and swim to the launch. You can picture the chaos! One hundred mile an hour winds, rain, waves breaking, the boat pitching and yawing, and this rusty steel monster smashing hell out of the yacht. The crew all did what they were told, and drifted off safely, but somehow in the melee as he tried to let her free the barge took a turn and smashed down on his hand, crushing it instantly. The man still had the strength to finish the job. Once free the yacht instantly blew away to leeward and in excruciating pain, he managed to get himself overboard and make it to the launch. The yacht was lucky; miraculously it came out more or less in one piece. But Arthur Thebaud was maimed for life."

"I could imagine the hospital facilities on the island after something like that," Bill said.

"The airport was shut for days. Apparently, it took him weeks before he could fly to the States to have it looked at. In the end there was little that could be done. His left hand became not much more than a claw. From that point onward he had to have crew to help him sail his ship. It took him a while to find a couple of lads who he could live with, and vice versa. All of which leads us to the events of a few weeks ago. Another top up, gentlemen?"

The glasses were recharged. Morrison continued.

"The end of April and the charter season was finished. You all know the drill. The big boats take some time to do some maintenance before leaving the Caribbean for the hurricane season. Europe, the East Coast, south to Trinidad or Venezuela...somewhere safe. Arthur had stopped to do some work in the Virgins before sailing north, and had hired some dayworkers to tackle the varnish work. We've all been there. Unless you know the fellows from before, it is a bit hit and miss with who you get. There is a definite pecking order amongst the locals, and not a little bit of intimidation goes on. There was one particular fellow who was pushing hard for a job. His name was Ansel, and he was bad news. The man was notorious. I even had a run in with him a few years ago. 'Hey skip, gimme a job,' that kind of thing. Arthur didn't like him and refused. The fellow kept hassling him. Then one morning two of his workers didn't turn up. Desperate to finish the job he gave in and hired the bloke. Needless to say, it didn't work out. Ansel was as lazy as a Sunday afternoon. Arthur gave him until lunchtime, paid him for his day's work, and fired him. It didn't go over well. A big argument ensued and Arthur

had to practically manhandle him from his vessel. The next day the other workers returned, but had little to say about the situation.”

“That’s the problem...you never really know what’s going through their heads,” Digby said.

“That is so true. I think all of us tend to forget that in the islands you are in the midst of another man’s culture. What is happening on the surface is not necessarily the full story. They play by different rules than yours. Unfortunately, Arthur paid the price. The varnish work finished, he paid off his workers at weeks end, and on Saturday he and his wife Gina caught a local bus from the marina into town to provision for the trip north. Walking through the crowded markets they were doing what normal shoppers do, chatting and joking with the local ladies and so on, when out of the crowd flashed Ansel, and before Arthur had time to react the man had shoved a knife straight into his heart. He didn’t have a chance. He was dead before he hit the ground.”

There was silence around the table. The Aussie spoke first. “What about this Ansel bloke? Did they catch him?”

“Oh yes, he was arrested. He was out on bail soon after. Word is he’ll probably get off with a slap on the wrist once all the excitement has blown over.”

“That’s how things go in the islands, I guess.”

“Local justice they call it.”

“So that’s what happened. I hadn’t heard the full story. Amazing, isn’t it...a man like that. Going down so quick and easy.”

“Yes,” replied Morrison, the storyteller. “One way or another, life gets through your defences. We all have to sleep sometime. And we all have to get old. Eventually we all pay the price at one time or another. No one goes through undefeated, no matter how strong.”

Hollis refilled the glasses. “Vale Arthur Thebaud,” he offered, and they all touched glasses. “To another fallen hero.”

“Another fallen hero,” the other three countered. They drank deep.

The bottle was now empty.

