

## **Loch Ard Lullaby**

**Kate Lance (2004)**

They said she was over-rigged, but so were her sisters: press of sail did not take her to those island cliffs. She was fast and handsome and brave, from the moment we boarded her to the end. It was not her fault. It was mine.

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At home in Dublin, Papa would tell us stories of fierce natives and giant kangaroos until we would shriek with terror and delight. Most of all, he said, as snow fell around our great draughty house, we would be warm and he would get better then in that hot, dry country.

The voyage was easy, the southern ocean unusually kind: even the storms were more thrilling than fearsome. The Captain taught my young sister Raby and myself how to shoot the sun each day with the sextant, to find our place on that featureless waste. By the time we had rounded the Cape our readings were almost as true as those of the officers, and Papa and the Captain would smile indulgently at our pleasure.

Captain George Gibb had a noble brow and a nautical beard. He told me his wife was also named Eva and, unusually, he preferred to converse with me rather than pretty Raby. I knew much about ships—when Evory was ill my mother had me sit with him and build tiny vessels with matchstick spars, shrouds of twine and handkerchief sails—and Captain Gibb loved nothing better than to tell me of his great clipper, her iron masts, her wire rigging, her acres of creamy canvas. He was as fine and as tall as his ship.

Tom Pearce was sometimes there at the wheel. One day we caught each other's eye as an apprentice was being loudly chastised for a small foolishness and we smiled. He said, Miss Carmichael, would you care to take the helm for a few moments? My father had done this several days before and was still very pleased with himself, and he frowned and said perhaps I was not strong enough.

Captain Gibb—George—assured him the vessel was in such fine trim and the wind so steady there was no possible harm. I stepped onto the platform and Tom beside me released his grip.

I could hardly turn the wheel but truly, did not need to do so. The ship was steering smoothly, the wind fresh to starboard, the sails full and by. I could feel her rise with a small swoop over the waves and then fall just as gently, flexing and easing, her passage a rhythm under my hands. I whispered, astonished, she is *breathing*, she is alive, and Tom said, yes miss, that she is.

He was shorter than me but sturdy, and his hands were large and brown when he took the wheel once more. I knew he sometimes gazed at Raby but I did not mind. Every night as I fell asleep I would think of hands and strong arms. They were not of course Tom's arms. But my dreams took hold of me, or I of them, and I would lean on the warm wooden railing and watch the seafoam and yearn.

My mother would tease me that my strong will was most improper in a young lady, but she had no idea—and nor did I—of what a very fierce will it could be.

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We held a small celebration the night before we were due to reach port on our pretty ship. We went late to our berths: my mother, father and two small sisters nearby, my two young brothers forward, and Raby and me in our snug cabin.

In the early hours we were awoken by shouts. Was land in sight? I hurried to the deck and peered out. Land was indeed in sight, but it was hardly the land we had hoped for.

Men were running and climbing and bracing the sails, we were coming around, around: but the canvas shivered and we fell away. The anchors were let go, clanking and shrieking on the windlass. They did not hold.

I ran down to my family. We donned life-belts but the strings broke apart. My hands were shaking as I climbed back to the deck and found George, entirely in command. He kissed me and said to tell his wife he had died like a sailor, but I did not believe he would die.

The anchors were slowing us, the sails were catching the wind and blossomed one by one, men were roaring and hauling at the ropes and oh, they almost saved her, that dear, lively ship.

But the waves forced her back and her iron hull crumpled and opened on the rocks, and her iron yards ground against the cliffs and showered sparks upon me like lightning, and a great wave took me into a cold so intense I could scarcely breathe.

I could not swim, yet I swam to a spar and clung to it with two other poor souls. They grew quiet, finally, and drifted away into the cold, cold dark. Slowly there was faint light, and breakers and cliffs all around, and a man far away on the shore. I cried out, *George*, and he swam to me.

It was not George.

I do not know how we lived through that surf, but he got me ashore and we limped to a cave. He made me a bed of dry grass and found brandy to revive us amongst the flotsam. We drank and his arms held me and his brown hands rubbed spirits through my wet nightgown to heat up my blood, and when I was warm we drank again.

He told them all later he had moved to another place of shelter to sleep, but what shelter could have been more welcoming than my sweet grass bed? (Once a woman drew her skirts away from me and whispered *harlot*, and I did not let her see my smile.)

Afterwards he told me he had always yearned to be a hero, to rescue a maiden, and I said I too had dreamt of a romantic salvation. He did not have to explain it was not me he had wished for, nor I that I had hoped for someone taller.

As I slept, brave Tom climbed the cliff and sought help. When I awoke I followed his footsteps but then could not climb after him. I was tired and afraid of natives and kangaroos in this country that was not at all hot and dry. I scooped out a hollow, hid myself with leaves and fell insensible.

It was dark when I was awoken by Tom and the men with blankets and soup and fire. They took us to a homestead to recover, alert to any sign of warmth between us, but we were reserved. In truth the losses, day after following day, were sobering enough. In a quiet moment by the piano Tom proposed to me, because he had compromised me he said, but I refused.

I liked him very much, but I would never marry a man who was so fond of that cold dark sea.

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They gave him a medal and he went back to a ship. She was lost too, but he lived and set sail on another. We did not meet again but we always wrote to each other, more often than anyone knew.

He married the sister of an apprentice, a plain lad from our ship, and I hope he was happy with her. Poor Tom, his life was hard. Thirty years after our voyage together his son died in a wreck in the same waters and, bereft, Tom followed soon after.

At my request the return to Dublin was by steamer, not sail. They had been puzzled at the homestead, I think, by the ease with which I spoke of my family, but perhaps I was bemused by my own salvation. Certainly I did not begin to comprehend the totality of my loss until I stood at the door of our empty house.

It took some years to recover, but again my will prevailed. I married a man of substance who disliked the sea, and my sons grew up and joined the army (I would not countenance discussion of the navy). We lived for a time on the Irish coast but I took no joy from the rush and flurry of the breakers.

Yet for the rest of my life I could not sleep at night without returning to *Loch Ard*. My mother and father and small sisters are nearby, my young brothers forward, and in the cabin, curled in our berths, Tom lies with his Raby and I with my George.

That kind, clever ship is alive, breathing and sailing on a voyage with no homecoming. I hope one day she forgives me for wishing her broken so that I might be rescued.