



The
LIFEBOAT

CHARLOTTE ROGAN



virago





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For Kevin
And for Olivia, Stephanie, and Nick
With love







I shall sing of the flood to all people. Listen!

The Myth of Atrahasis, last lines







PROLOGUE

Today I shocked the lawyers, and it surprised me, the effect I could have on them. A thunderstorm arose as we were leaving the court for lunch. They dashed for cover under the awning of a nearby shop to save their suits from getting wet, while I stood in the street and opened my mouth to it, transported back and seeing again that other rain as it came at us in gray sheets. I had lived through that downpour, but the moment in the street was my first notion that I could live it again, that I could be immersed in it, that it could again be the tenth day in the lifeboat, when it began to rain.

The rain had been cold, but we welcomed it. At first it had been no more than a teasing mist, but as the day progressed, it began to come down in earnest. We held our faces up to it, mouths open, drenching our swollen tongues. Mary Ann could not or would not part her lips, either to drink or to speak. She was a woman of my age. Hannah, who was only a little older, slapped her hard and said, ‘Open your mouth, or I’ll open it for



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you!' Then she grabbed Mary Ann and pinched her nostrils until she was forced to gasp for air. The two of them sat for a long time in a sort of violent embrace while Hannah held Mary Ann's jaws open, allowing the gray and saving rain to enter her, drop by drop.

'Come, come!' said Mr Reichmann, who is the head of the little band of lawyers hired by my mother-in-law, not because she cares one jot about what happens to me, but because she thinks it will reflect badly on the family if I am convicted. Mr Reichmann and his associates were calling to me from the sidewalk, but I pretended not to hear them. It made them very angry not to be heard or, rather, not to be heeded, which is a different and far more insulting thing, I imagine, to those used to speaking from podiums, to those who regularly have the attention of judges and juries and people sworn to truth or silence and whose freedom hangs on the particular truths they choose to tell. When I finally wrenched myself away and joined them, shivering and drenched to the bone but smiling to myself, glad to have rediscovered the small freedom of my imagination, they asked, 'What kind of trick was that? Whatever were you doing, Grace? Have you gone mad?'

Mr Glover, who is the nicest of the three, put his coat around my dripping shoulders, but soon the fine silk lining was soaked through and probably ruined, and while I was touched Mr Glover had offered his coat, I would much rather it had been the coat of the handsome, heavy-set William Reichmann that had been ruined in the rain.

'I was thirsty,' I said, and I was thirsty still.

'But the restaurant is just there. It's less than a block away. You can have any sort of drink you like in a minute or two,' said



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Mr Glover while the others pointed and made encouraging noises. But I was thirsty for rain and salt water, for the whole boundless ocean of it.

‘That’s very funny,’ I said, laughing to think that I was free to choose my drink, when a drink of any sort wasn’t something I wanted. I had spent the previous two weeks in prison, and I was only free pending the outcome of a proceeding that was now in progress. Unable to restrain my laughter, which kept lapping at my insides and bursting out of me like gigantic waves, I was not allowed to accompany the lawyers into the dining room, but had to have my meal brought to me in the cloakroom, where a wary clerk perched vigilantly on a stool in the corner as I pecked at my sandwich. We sat there like two birds, and I giggled to myself until my sides ached and I thought I might be sick.

‘Well,’ said Mr Reichmann when the lawyers rejoined me after the meal, ‘we’ve been discussing this thing, and an insanity defense doesn’t seem so far-fetched after all.’ The idea that I had a mental disorder filled them with happy optimism. Where before lunch they had been nervous and pessimistic, now they lit cigarettes and congratulated one another on cases I knew nothing about. They had apparently put their heads together, considered my mental state and found it lacking on some score, and, now that the initial shock of my behavior had worn off and they had discovered that it could perhaps be explained scientifically and might even be exploited in the conduct of our case, they took turns patting me on the arm and saying, ‘Don’t you worry, my dear girl. After all, you’ve been through quite enough. Leave it to us, we’ve done this sort of thing a thousand times before.’ They talked about a Dr Cole



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and said, 'I'm sure you will find him very sympathetic,' then rattled off a list of credentials that meant less than nothing to me.

I don't know who had the idea, whether it was Glover or Reichmann or even that mousy Ligget, that I should try to recreate the events of those twenty-one days and that the resulting 'diary' might be entered as some kind of exonerating exhibit.

'In that case, we'd better present her as sane, or the whole thing will be discounted,' said Mr Ligget tentatively, as if he were speaking out of turn.

'I suppose you're right,' agreed Mr Reichmann, stroking his long chin. 'Let's see what she comes up with before we decide.' They laughed and poked the air with their cigarettes and talked about me as if I weren't there as we walked back to the courthouse where, along with two other women named Hannah West and Ursula Grant, I was to stand trial for my life. I was twenty-two years old. I had been married for ten weeks and a widow for over six.



PART I





DAY ONE

The first day in the lifeboat we were mostly silent, either taking in or refusing to take in the drama playing itself out in the seething waters around us. John Hardie, an able-bodied seaman and the only crew member on board Lifeboat 14, took immediate charge. He assigned seats based on weight distribution, and because the lifeboat was riding low in the water, he forbade anyone to stand up or move without permission. Then he wrested a rudder from where it was stored underneath the seats, fixed it into place at the back of the boat, and commanded anyone who knew how to row a boat to take up one of four long oars, which were quickly appropriated by three of the men and a sturdy woman named Mrs Grant. Hardie gave them orders to gain as much distance from the foundering craft as possible, saying, ‘Row yer bloody hearts out, unless ye want to be sucked under to yer doom!’

Mr Hardie stood with his feet planted and his eyes alert, guiding us deftly around anything that blocked our way, while

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the four rowed in silence, their muscles straining and their knuckles white. Some of the others grabbed on to the ends of the long oars to help with the effort, but they were unpracticed, and the blades were as apt to skip over or slice through the water as they were to push against it broadside, the way they were designed to do. I pressed my feet against the floor of the boat in sympathy, and with every stroke I tensed my shoulders as if this would magically further our cause. Occasionally Mr Hardie would break the shocked silence by saying things like ‘Two hundred meters farther out and we’ll be safe,’ or ‘Ten minutes ’til she goes under, twelve at most,’ or ‘Ninety percent of the women and children have been saved.’ I found comfort in his words, even though I had just seen a mother toss her little girl into the water, then jump in after her and disappear. Whether Mr Hardie had witnessed this or not, I did not know, but I suspected he had, for the black eyes darting about beneath his heavy brows seemed to absorb every detail of our situation. In any case, I did not correct him or even consider him to be guilty of a lie. Instead, I saw him as a leader trying to inspire confidence in his troops.

Because ours had been one of the last lifeboats to be launched, the water before us was congested. I saw two boats collide as they tried to avoid a mass of floating debris, and a calm center of my mind was able to understand that Mr Hardie was aiming for a patch of clear water away from the rest. He had lost his cap, and with his wild-looking hair and fiery eyes, he seemed as suited to disaster as we were terrified by it. ‘Put yer backs into it, mates!’ he shouted, ‘show me what yer made of!’ and the people with the oars redoubled their efforts. At the same time, there was a series of explosions behind us, and the



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cries and screams of the people still on board the *Empress Alexandra* or in the water near it sounded as hell must sound, if it exists. I glanced back and saw the large hulk of the ocean liner shudder and roll, and for the first time I noticed orange flames licking at the cabin windows.

We passed jagged splinters of wood and half-submerged barrels and snake-like lengths of twisted rope. I recognized a deck chair and a straw hat and what looked like a child's doll floating together, bleak reminders of the pretty weather we had experienced only that morning and of the holiday mood that had pervaded the ship. When we came upon three smaller casks bobbing in a group, Mr Hardie shouted 'Aha!' and directed the men to take two of them on board, then stored them underneath the triangular seat formed by the pointed aft end of the boat. He assured us they contained fresh water and that once we had been saved from the vortex created by the foundering ship, we might need to be saved from thirst and starvation; but I could not think that far ahead. To my mind, the railing of our little vessel was already perilously close to the surface of the water, and I could only believe that to stop for anything at all would decrease our chances of reaching that critical distance from the sinking ship.

There were bodies floating in the water, too, and living people clung to the wreckage – I saw another mother and child, the white-faced child holding out its hands toward me and screaming. As we came closer, we could see that the mother was dead, her body draped lifelessly over a wooden plank and her blonde hair fanned out around her in the green water. The boy wore a miniature bow tie and suspenders, and it seemed to me ridiculous for the mother to dress him in such an unsuitable



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way, even though I had always been one to admire fine and proper dress and even though I myself was weighted down by a corset and petticoats and soft calfskin boots, not long ago purchased in London. One of the men yelled, 'A little more this way and we can get to the child!' But Hardie replied, 'Fine, and which one o' ye wants to trade places with 'im?'

Mr Hardie had a rough seaman's voice. I could not always understand the things he said, but this served only to increase my faith in him. He knew about this world of water, he spoke its language, and the less I understood him, the greater the possibility that he was understood by the sea. No one had an answer for him, and we passed the howling child by. A slight man sitting near me grumbled, 'Certainly we can trade those casks for the poor creature!' but this would now have involved turning the boat around, and our passions on behalf of the child, which had flared briefly, were already part of our sinking past, so we held our silence. Only the slight man spoke, but his thin voice was barely audible above the rhythmic groaning of the oarlocks, the roar of the inferno, and the cacophony of human voices issuing instructions or screams of distress: 'It's only a young boy. How much could such a small fellow weigh?' I later learned that the speaker was an Anglican deacon, but at the time I did not know the names or callings of my fellow passengers. No one answered him. Instead, the rowers bent to their tasks and the rest of us bent with them, for it seemed the only thing we could do.

Not long afterwards, we encountered three swimmers making their way toward us with strong strokes. One by one they grabbed on to the lifeline that was fitted around the perimeter of our boat, putting enough weight on it that curls of



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water began to spill in over the edge. One of the men caught my eye. His face was clean-shaven and livid with cold, but there was no mistaking the clear light of relief that shone out from his ice-blue eyes. On Hardie's orders, the oarsman sitting nearest him beat one set of hands away before beginning on the hands of the blue-eyed man. I heard the crack of wood against bone. Then Hardie raised his heavy boot and shoved it into the man's face, eliciting a cry of anguished surprise. It was impossible to look away, and never have I had more feeling for a human being than I had for that unnamed man.

If I describe what was happening on the starboard side of Lifeboat 14, I of necessity give the impression that one thousand other dramas were not taking place in the turbulent waters to port and astern. Somewhere out there was my husband Henry, either sitting in a boat beating away people as we were doing, or trying to swim to safety and being beaten away himself. It helped to remember that Henry had been forceful in securing me a seat in the boat, and I was sure he would have been just as forceful on his own behalf; but could Henry have acted as Hardie did if his life depended on it? Could I? The idea of Mr Hardie's cruelty was something to which my thoughts continue to return – certainly it was horrendous, certainly none of the rest of us would have had the strength to make the horrific and instantaneous decisions required of a leader at that point, and certainly it is this that saved us. I question whether it can even be called cruelty when any other action would have meant our certain death.

There was no wind, but even in the flat sea, water occasionally splashed in over the side of the overburdened boat. A few days ago, the lawyers conducted an experiment proving



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that one more adult of average weight in a boat of that size and type would have put us in immediate jeopardy. We could not save everybody and save ourselves. Mr Hardie knew this and had the courage to act on the knowledge, and it was his actions in those first minutes and hours that spelled the difference between continued existence and a watery grave. His actions were also what turned Mrs Grant, who was the strongest and most vocal of the women, against him. Mrs Grant said, 'Brute! Go back and save the child, at least,' but it must have been clear to her that we could not go back and escape with our lives. With those words, however, Mrs Grant was branded a humanitarian and Hardie a fiend.

There were examples of nobility as well. The stronger women tended to the weaker ones, and it is a testament to the oarsmen that we so quickly distanced ourselves from the foundering ship. Mr Hardie, for his part, was staunchly determined to save us, and he immediately distinguished those of us consigned to his care from those outside of it. It took the rest of us longer to make that distinction. For several days, I tended to identify less with Lifeboat 14 than I did with my fellow first-class travelers from the *Empress Alexandra*, and who wouldn't? Despite the difficulties of recent years, I was used to luxury. Henry had paid over five hundred dollars for our first-class passage, and I still saw myself arriving triumphantly in the city of my birth, not as the bedraggled survivor of a shipwreck and not as the daughter of a failed businessman, but as a guest at some welcoming dinner, clothed in dresses and jewelry that were now resting in the weedy murk at the bottom of the sea. I imagined Henry at long last introducing me to his mother, whose resistance to



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my charms evaporated now that our marriage was a fait accompli. And I imagined the men who had swindled my father elbowing their way through the crowd only to be publicly rebuffed by everyone they met. Hardie, to his credit or damnation, adjusted to our new circumstances immediately, an ability I attribute to his seaman's soul and the fact that he had long ago lost his finer sensibilities, if he had ever had them. He had strapped a knife around his waist and replaced his lost cap with a rag of unknown origin, which made a stark contrast to the gold buttons of his jacket; but these changes to his uniform seemed evidence of his readiness and adaptability and only served to heighten the trust I placed in him. When I finally thought to look around for other lifeboats, they had become distant specks, which seemed to me a good sign, for the open sea was a place of relative safety after the chaos and turbulence surrounding the wreck.

Mr Hardie gave the weakest of the women the choicest seats and called us 'ma'am'. He asked after our well-being as though there were something he could do about it; and at first the women returned the favor and lied that they were fine, even though anyone could see that Mrs Fleming's wrist hung at an odd angle and that a Spanish governess named Maria was badly suffering from shock. It was Mrs Grant who fashioned a sling for Mrs Fleming's arm, and it was Mrs Grant who first wondered aloud how Hardie came to be in our boat. We found out later that while emergency protocols called for a trained seaman in each lifeboat, Captain Sutter and most of the crew had remained with the ship, helping others into the lifeboats and trying to maintain order after panic had set in. We had seen for ourselves across the slowly increasing distance that the



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frantic haste with which crew and passengers alike tried to dispatch the lifeboats was counterproductive, for the foundering vessel was tilting dramatically, a condition made worse as her contents crashed and shifted within her, so that by the time our lifeboat was being lowered, it was no longer a straight line down from the deck to the water. Not only was the smaller craft in constant danger of hitting the steep incline of the ship's side or catching against it and tipping, but the men working the pulleys had to struggle mightily to lower the fore and aft ends at the same rate. A boat that was launched immediately after ours turned completely upside down and dumped its entire load of women and children into the sea. We saw them screaming and flailing about in the water, but we did nothing to help them, and without Hardie to direct us, it stood to reason that we would have suffered a similar fate. After all that has happened, I can answer my own question in the affirmative: if Mr Hardie hadn't beaten people away from the side of our boat, I would have had to do it myself.