

The Storm

by

*Martha
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THE STORM

By **MARTHA OSTENSO**

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Above the literary horizon a new star has appeared—Martha Ostenso, the Winnipeg girl, who recently won, with her first novel, a \$13,500 prize. Some of the qualities of that work are evident in this short story of simple folk.

The Storm

YOUNG OLE sat in the doorway of his father's shop. He watched the motes of sunlight dancing on the pile of raw pine boards and saw that the beads of resin were as bright as wild honey, and sweet-looking. Then he glanced toward his father, who was planing a cedar board. The shavings that fell away from the plane were faintly pink. The sound of his father's occupation was smooth and pleasant to the ear.

Young Ole was the eldest son of Ole Seim. He had watched practically from babyhood his father's industry, had come to know that oak, strong and hard, went into the shaping of the keel, and that the long, curved sides were best made of cedar. He learned soon to point out an undesirable knot or split in a cedar board. His father would smile and nod his head at Sigri, his wife, who agreed with him that Young Ole would one day be a master boat-builder. So he was given little tasks to do that would instil in him a love for boat-building, to perpetuate the name that the elder Ole had made for himself in the settlement and beyond it.

"Always remember that you are building against the lake, boy," said the elder Ole, who knew the lake as no one else knew it.

The day came when Young Ole launched the first boat that he had made entirely by his own hand. His father stood back and plucked at his beard to hide his smile of pride, as the boy waded knee deep behind the skiff that balanced on the water as evenly as a gull.

"You serve God well when you make a good boat," the old man said, in his solemn manner, as the two walked back to the shop.

Young Ole was in a mood of almost rash independence as a result of the joy he had felt in seeing his own craft take the water.

"That's all bosh!" he blurted out.

Then he glanced quickly sideways at his father, and saw that his brows had drawn sternly down over his eyes, but that otherwise his expression had not changed.

Once in the shop, the old man turned upon Young Ole.

“What was that you called ‘bosh’?” he demanded huskily.

Young Ole saw the white, set lines of outraged piety in the face of his father. But there was no retracing his statement. He would sooner have died.

“Religion—it’s all bosh, I tell you!” he cried.

“You’ll not say that! No son of mine shall say that!” the old man broke out in fury.

Young Ole threw out an arm to shield himself from the blow. Afterwards the boy sat on the bench of the boat house, unmoved, save for a strange pity for his father.

The days followed leadenly. Young Ole worked with the elder Ole as usual on the skiffs, but the common pleasure had gone out of their building. There was no longer anything stimulating in the penetrating smell of turpentine and the blending of raw odors from lake water and sawdust.

Finally, the philosophy of age soothed the elder Ole’s disappointment in his son. Pointing with his rough finger at the skeletons of the boats stretched out on their slips, he said, in the language, “I’m giving you half of this. From now on, it’s yours to do with what you will. If you can’t be a good Christian, be a good boat-maker.”

Young Ole was deeply touched and immeasurably pleased. He had not hoped that this would come so soon. At the end of the day, he hurried with the news to Anna Klebo, the daughter of a poor fisherman who lived up beyond the little supply store. Anna walked with Ole across the blackened rocks that shouldered into the lake. Rough lichen and hair-like grass and June-berry twigs sprang up here and there in the clefts between the boulders. Below them, the grey-green water swung in lacey curves against the rocks. They sat down in the shelter of a huge stone and looked out upon the water that lay like a sea toward the horizon. There Young Ole told her of his good fortune, and of his great hope. And Anna promised to marry him.

Young Ole’s father helped him build a small frame house back in the timber, within easy reach of the boat shop. There Anna, young as she was, learned to be a model wife. A boy baby, and later, a girl baby, were born to her, and Young Ole found that he had something worth while to work for.

He loved his craft, and he pursued it with the skill inherited from a race of boat-builders across the sea. He worked with his father within sound of the great lake that beat with a cold, constant rhythm against the shore, and with him launched each completed boat for the ultimate test.

Those were days of proud industry and proud fulfillment. Not once did Ole Seim refer to his son's denial of his religion. Young Ole had become a master boat-builder.

ANNA'S womanhood blossomed as fragrantly and richly as the sturdy wild-apple tree that half veiled the cottage Ole had built. Young Ole dreamt of a time when his trade should expand, and he would be able to build a fine house for Anna and send the children out to school, to get from life the thing in books which he knew, somehow, that he had missed. Not that Young Ole grieved much on the last score. He was too happy with Anna and the children and his absorbing and gratifying work.

Then one day, as he stood in the doorway of the shop, he saw a great grey automobile draw up before the supply store. He had never seen the like of it before. He walked slowly up the path to the store. Around the automobile a handful of men and children had gathered in curious awe. He glanced briefly at the machine, and went on into Tobe Martin's store.

A heavy man with a neck that swelled above his collar leaned forward over the counter, in close conversation with Tobe, whose face bore a look of informative importance.

"Here he is now," said Tobe, looking past the stranger toward Young Ole. "My boy, this man wants to talk to you and your dad. Up from the Falls, he is." He waved his hand toward the newcomer with a large air of familiarity. Young Ole smiled to himself and offered his hard hand to the man, whose little half-buried eyes bored through him.

"Better come down to the shore with me then," said Young Ole.

He led the man, whose name, it appeared, was Joseph Reade, down the sand to the boat-shop.

"I've got hold of a couple of your dad's boats, one way or other, and I've come up to do business with him," Joseph Reade said, puffily.

"That's good," Young Ole replied. "He'll be glad to see you."

Joseph Reade flicked a clam shell out of his path with his massive cane. It seemed a gesture of contempt.

"Yes—yes. You've probably heard of the factories I've opened in the southern ports. A fine chance for your father—a fine chance. He's wasting his time fooling around with hand tools and such."

Then, with something of a start, Young Ole understood. He pushed the door of the shop open and bade Joseph Reade enter.

After he had heard his name, the old man looked for some moments at the manufacturer, took in the smooth shape of his hands and the bluish puffs under his eyes. He noted also what his son had noted, that his walking stick was made of polished ebony intricately carved about the head. Ole did not rise from the bench where he had been at work, but simply indicated a stool for Joseph Reade to seat himself. Young Ole stood by, his arms folded across his breast to give an appearance of ease.

A strange excitement had taken hold of him. Somewhere in a book he had read something about a tide in the affairs of men . . . his father would stem that tide . . .

THE elder Ole's eyes, while Joseph Reade talked, were soft and absent, and dwelt upon the flowering thorn-apple trees above the rocks that showed like a grey painting through the door. But Young Ole knew that he was listening deliberately to every word of the stranger.

"With the sawmill so close at hand, and available water power such as you have, we could produce twenty boats in a month where you now turn out only two. And we'll finance you. We've already established three factories on the south shore and all of them running to capacity. What do you say, Mr. Seim? With your reputation and our capital, under the firm name of Reade and Seim, the business would make you a rich man over night."

Ole Seim smiled and took his corncob pipe from the corner of his mouth. "I'm not through makin' good boats yet, Mr. Reade," he replied. "When I am through, I take your offer." With an air of finality, he bent over the wood before him.

Joseph Reade, with an angry shrug, left the shop.

Young Ole, glancing at his father, followed him.

He walked up the sand with him again, and again the manufacturer flicked away a clam shell with sand dried hard in the hollow of it, but Young Ole did not observe the act. His mind was working rapidly, pulling his heart in two ways.

"When will you be going back, Mr. Reade?" he asked, hurriedly.

"Oh, at once—at once," said Joseph Reade. "Have to fill up with gas first."

"I'll be going down this way. Good-by, Mr. Reade."

Joseph Reade nodded to him shortly and went on up to Tobe Martin's store.

Young Ole walked rapidly down the beach to a sheltered nook behind a large rock from which he could look out and see the great car stationed before Tobe's store. Here he seated himself. He picked up two pebbles and struck them together again and again. The tide in the affairs of men . . . a man couldn't keep on being only the offspring of his father forever. He must listen for a farther call. . . . He would be called a traitor and would be branded with avarice. And the old man's heart would probably break, in its

own way. But it would never come again, this chance—it would never come again to Seim Harbor. He rubbed the two pebbles, one against the other. There it was—the purr of the automobile up at Tobe’s store! He scrambled to his feet and ran up the beach.

“Mr. Reade! Oh, Mr. Reade!” he called, as he saw the manufacturer getting into his car.

The man paused, and Young Ole came up to him, panting and abashed.

“I was thinking—I might go into business with you in place of my father,” he said. As he uttered them, the words seemed monstrous in his mouth. But they were out now.

Joseph Reade looked at him shrewdly. This was the young man Tobe Martin had told him of—the logical successor to his father as a boat-maker in these parts. Joseph Reade walked back into the store with Young Ole.

THE elder Ole broke physically, like a dry reed in the wind. But he did not leave the bench in his shop, although the work he did there was for days but the whittling of a chip of cedar. His son, who had grown to be a master boat-builder, despite his heresy, had now deserted the only thing that could have saved him his soul. He was neither a good Christian nor a good boat-builder. He was no longer his son.

For many months, then, Young Ole strove to put into the factory-made boats the integrity of workmanship and the fine durability that had set their seal upon every boat of his father's that had been launched into the lake of storms. The sound of the factory now became the dominant chord that rang against the rocks above the shore, where before had been the reverberant echo of the inland tide. The village boasted of the "Company" to the infrequent transients, and news of it was carried to other ports, so that by the time the thorn-apple trees were spreading like a scarlet mantilla across the grey quarry, a half dozen new families had moved into Seim Harbor.

When the haws became heavily sweet and blue-black as a crow's wing, the Company met. Young Ole to his consternation was shown where he had caused heavy losses after Joseph Reade's manner of calculating. The output had not been commensurate with the investment. Young Ole knew now what being a member of the Company would mean. The gleam on the prow of a new boat would no longer be a symbol of achievement. It would be impossible to manufacture a good boat, as he had learned to know a good boat, with half the means he had hitherto employed. As Joseph Reade had said, their profits would be great. That was Joseph Reade's chief concern.

There was, of course, an alternative. He need not remain in the Company. But to establish his own business, with winter coming on, and the children and Anna looking to him for better things now . . . and the village expecting them . . . it would be difficult, indeed. There could be no returning to the shop down on the beach. He had something of the elder Ole in him, too.

So the new boats were built, and the wood in them was a little thinner, the keel a little less staunch, the laps a little less tightly caulked because of the haste in which they were made to fill the orders that came from the south. Young Ole struck the upturned bottom of the first that was completed, and his conscience misgave him at the hollow response under his hand. But

Joseph Reade wrote him that he was much pleased with the new output, and the weeks passed.

THERE was a little island off shore overgrown with dwarf crab-apple trees. They bore tiny fruit like painted pebbles, round and hard, but intensely sweet. Anna Seim always gathered them in late September, one of the elder Martin boys rowing her over.

It was on a morning of Indian summer haze, with only a white cloud like a faint ribbed feather motionless at the zenith, that Anna and the children and Josh Martin pushed away from the shore, their lunch baskets hidden in the prow of one of the new boats.

“Be home before sundown,” Young Ole called to them, and Anna laughed back at him for his solicitude. He stood on the shore and watched the boat dip and rise, the water parting before it like blown glass, with only the merest ruching of white on its crest.

Little John and Ester were laughing delightedly, and the sound came as clear as a tinkling of bells across the water. And Anna—how silkily her hair blew back in the breeze—how delicate was the curve of her breast. A mood of almost solemn thanksgiving came upon Young Ole. His eyes became misty as they followed the boat until it grew small against the sheen of the lake.

The storm that swept down from the northern reaches of the lake that afternoon was to be remembered and spoken of with many a shake of the head for years afterward.

It came with no more warning than a rustling in the dry yellow leaves that still hung by a brittle thread to the limbs of the elms. Within a half hour the sky to the northwest was a churning scud, and the lake livid as sheet iron and mottled with shadow. The whinney of the wind through the clefts in the stone quarry became shriller and shriller, until it came to the ears of the villagers like the whine of a trapped animal. It was the signal for the beginning of the season of storms, given fully a fortnight before it was expected.

April 15, 1925

Young Ole, in the factory, threw a brake to silence the purring of one of the big wheels, so that he might listen again for what he thought had been the sound of thunder. As he did so, a shadow fell across the light of the

window, and the rain struck the glass in great ragged splotches of silver. Young Ole hurried out of the building and looked toward the lake. He saw what was coming. Every steamer on the lake would be making for the nearest port, or would heave to and be tossed about like a peanut shell. He ran back to the factory and got his binoculars.

On the shore of the island there was no sign of Anna or the children or Josh Martin, or of the boat they had used. Young Ole was a man of quick decision in an emergency, but now he stood on the beach trembling like a woman. Half running, he turned back to the factory, and before it met Tobe Martin.

“Ain’t Josh back yet?” Tobe demanded, almost accusingly.

“How can he be—the rest aren’t,” Young Ole retorted, and brushed past him.

“Get out one of the biggest boats,” he ordered the men who were at work inside. “And wheel it down to the beach.”

Then he returned outside to Tobe Martin. “We’ve got to go after ’em, Tobe,” he said, shortly. “They’ll never make it.”

Tobe snorted. “Do you think *you’ll* make it—in one of your paper tubs? Not much, you won’t! There ain’t a man here would tackle it with you, either. My God! The boy’s lost. There ain’t shelter on that island for a rabbit!”

The wind lifted the old man’s grey hair like the comb of an aged cockatoo. His wraith trailed off empty in the roar from the beach.

“All right—I’ll go alone,” said Young Ole.

“You fool—you damn young fool—” but Tobe couldn’t have told why he was cursing.

The entire village flocked to the shore to see Young Ole put off, alone, in one of his own new boats. Many remonstrated with him, to no avail. There was shouting and calling among the men, and near-hysteria among the women. From a window in her own home, Young Ole’s mother stood and wrung her hands.

The elder Ole bolted the door of his shop and walked up from the beach to his house. From the tail of his eye he saw his son launching the new boat farther down the shore. But he did not turn his face toward the throng that was watching the process and half cowering under the storm.

WHEN YOUNG OLE, alone, had put his hands to the huge oars of the skiff, the villagers on the beach were beaten back by the wind. The rain struck the waves as if it was weighted with lead, and the water opened before the boat in great black rifts.

Young Ole could no longer make out the island, and the scream of the wind was the only audible sound. Even by throwing his entire weight on the oars, he made scarcely any perceptible headway after he had covered half the distance between the mainland and the island. When he paused for a moment, his whole body became cold with sweat, his muscles twitched. The gigantic waves washed over the gunwales, and souged against the sides when they receded. Several times the boat rode so high that Ole could not see the trough of the wave, and the oars were clear of the water.

It was when the boat had settled after one of these tremendous upheavals, that Young Ole caught what he thought was a cry down the gale. He stood upright in the skiff and stared in the direction from which the sound had come. Within hailing distance he made out a wavering blot shaped like a boat.

He made a cup of his hands and shouted, but the wind seemed to tear the very sound out of his throat. Then the ghost of a craft had vanished, and Ole sat down again and seized the oars like a madman.

In his fury to recover the boat that had drifted past him, he paid no attention to the condition of his own skiff. The water reached half way to his knees where he sat, but he made no effort to bale it out. He knew that he was nearing the island, and that it was just possible that the other boat had been swept back.

Suddenly there was a tearing noise behind him, and Ole's boat, striking a saw-tooth of rock, split in two.

Young Ole swam, fighting with all the strength that was in him. Now he saw the island. There seemed to be a lift of light for a moment, and coming up on the crest of a wave he beheld the other boat, tossing like a chip in the breakers. In the next instant, a wave that rose almost perpendicularly had thrown the boat completely out of the water and hurled it onto the rocks of the shore, where it smashed to splinters like a soap box. Then darkness crushed Young Ole's consciousness.

Because the wind was in the wrong direction, he had not heard the cries behind him, beseeching him to turn about. Now he did not feel the strong hands that dragged him out of the water onto the firm deck of the fishing smack that had weathered many storms as violent as to-day's, nor did he see Anna bending over him with tears of gratitude in her eyes.

It was during the wild journey back to the mainland that young Josh Martin received his first lesson on how to handle a boat in rough weather. Old Ole, his great knotted hands upon the oars, instructed him. The youth never tired telling of the manner in which the old boat-maker brought the skiff safely into harbor, nor of how he had rescued them all from the boat that would in another moment have been dashed to pieces on the rocks of the island.

The storm lasted, as usual, for days. Young Ole stood with his father at twilight of the third day, looking out from the pierhead upon the massed waters beneath them, that seemed to run out like a herd of living things from the moving mist.

“It nearly got me—nearly got everything.” Young Ole observed thoughtfully. “Just because I forgot to build against it. I guess I needed reminding. Reade'll be needing another man.”

His father spat vigorously down into the spume below the pierhead.

“They war purty good boats you made first, though,” he remarked in his broken English. “I have idee to buy Joseph Reade out. Maybe he'll sell cheap now, on payments.”

Young Ole was startled.

“What do you know about those boats?” he asked.

Old Ole chuckled. “The first von you ship in the summer to Joseph Reade—that von I bought myself. It vass a good boat—almost so good as mine—almost.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for the eBook.

[The end of *The Storm* by Martha Ostenso]