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The Sinking of the Abergavenny

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FROM SCREENPLAY: "Immortal Sea"
BY Richard Matlak

"THE SINKING OF *THE ABERGAVENNY*, *East Indiaman*,
FEB 5, 1805"

Ext. DECK OF THE *ABERGAVENNY* - 4:00 PM

A PILOT of Portsmouth Harbor is climbing the rope ladder from his row boat up to the deck. The rain is heavy and the wind is wild. About half way up, the pilot bangs his head against the hull, but finally makes it to the deck. He appears to be disoriented when he reports to John and to John's first mate, Mr. GILPIN, on the poop deck.

PILOT

Pilot Coughlin reporting, sir.

JOHN

Mr. Coughlin, it's taken you long enough to get to us. Are we the last? Get us safely into anchorage. And keep us off them Shambles! Take charge of the Pilot, Mr. Gilpin.

John passes the pilot on to the first mate, who leaves with him. John paces the deck nervously. The first mate returns.

JOHN

Is the Pilot squared away, Mr. Gilpin?

GILPIN

Sir, he banged his head, but,
Sir, he is drunk.

At the very moment, the hull of the vessel strikes a reef and the sound of wood splitting and creaking in the lower hull is unmistakable. The ship is stuck. John shouts out to the night.

JOHN

Oh Pilot! You have ruined me!

The ship is rocking, but not moving, despite the intense wind. The pilot runs up to John.

PILOT
I'll send for help, Cap'n. It's
a misfortune!

The pilot runs off.

EXT. ALONGSIDE *THE ABERGAVENNY* - MOMENTS LATER

The pilot is climbing down the rope ladder. Half way down, with the wind blowing him about, he falls off into the raging sea. His rower throws out a line, but the pilot misses it and goes under.

EXT. ON DECK OF *THE ABERGAVENNY* - MOMENTS LATER

Passengers, soldiers, and sailors are beginning to gather to learn what has happened to the vessel. John is standing on the bridge with his officers.

JOHN
Mr. Gilpin. Go down below to see how
badly we are cracked.

Gilpin departs. The others look about worriedly.

INT. CUT TO THE PUMP ROOM - MOMENTS LATER
The water is flowing in through the broken planks of the hull.

INT. CUT TO JOHN'S CABIN - MOMENTS LATER

John, Cornet BURGOYNE, who is the commanding officer of the soldiers on board, and his subordinate officers are conferring about actions to be taken. There is a knocking on the door.

JOHN
Enter!

Gilpin enters breathless.

GILPIN
Sir, it is bad. We will need some young
arms to pump her out!

JOHN

Cornet Burgoyne! Will you place your men under the command of Mr. Gilpin?

BURGOYNE
Whatever is required, sir.

JOHN
Mr. Gilpin, take charge below deck!

GILPIN
Sir, yes sir!

Gilpin and Cornet Burgoyne leave the cabin together.

EXT. ON DECK - 7:00 PM

John is standing next to his gunners on the port side of the vessel, which faces the shore line two miles off.

JOHN
Fire the guns! Fire them!

The gunner flounders a bit, but finally gets off a volley. The rain and storm relentlessly batter John and the gunner.

JOHN (con't)
Fire the guns again, quickly!
The other vessels must hear us!

Again the guns go off. John looks through his eyeglass into the distance. He speaks to himself.

JOHN (con't)
My comrades, for the love of God, help us!

Gilpin rushes to John on deck.

GILPIN
Sir, the hull is GONE. The soldiers are pumping mightily, but we have little time, sir.

JOHN
Mr. Gilpin, direct the crew to work the sails. Rock her out of these Shambles. Rock her, Mr. Gilpin! Rock her to the

shore. Safety is two miles away! Rock her!

GILPIN

Yes, sir. We will give it all we have. We do or we die!

JOHN

Gunner, another volley!

The guns fire again and again.

INT. THE PUMP ROOM OF THE ABERGAVENNY - 8:00 PM

The lower hull is getting increasingly deluged, despite the efforts of the young soldiers. The soldiers are dispirited. Cornet Burgoyne begins a chorus of one of the military's morale-raising ditties, "God Save the King."

BURGOYNE

"God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King,
God save the King!"

Come on, boys, join in!
We can beat this! We are almost
free of the shambles. Keep us
afloat!

The soldiers give another surge of effort.

BURGOYNE (con't)

"Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God Save the King."

The cannons of distress fire again on deck and the singing stops. The soldiers are waist deep in sea water.

EXT. ON DECK - 10:00 PM

Panic is taking hold. John is standing on the rear deck watching the agitated crew and passengers cry and pray. Men are coming up from the pump room. The deck is filled with over 300 crew, soldiers, and passengers. Burgoyne approaches John excitedly but still respectfully.

BURGOYNE

Cap'n Wordsworth. Can we not release the ship's longboat? There is still time for it to save some of the passengers and the young soldiers. The First Mate says we're only two miles off shore.

John looks at him blankly.

BURGOYNE (con't)

For God's sakes, at least fire the cannons again. Where are your fellow captains? Where are your mates? Why haven't they sent rescue boats?

JOHN

We've fired enough cannon to win a war. No one is coming. A longboat operation to shore will be chaos. The longboat will be used when we sink.

BURGOYNE

What do you mean, man? We're going to give up and die?

JOHN

The vessel cannot move.

Members of the crew are starting to climb the masts in preparation for the sinking.

EXT. MIDSHIP - 10:30 PM

The lowest ranking SAILORS are rushing to break open the spirit room, but a MIDSHIPMAN stands in the way with a pair of pistols:

MIDSHIPMAN

You won't get into this room! You will not die drunk! You will attempt to save yourselves.

SAILOR

Sir, for Chris' sake sir, we're going to die. Let us at the gin!

MIDSHIPMAN

If we are to die, let us die like men!

EXT. REARDECK - 10:45 PM

A few passengers are imploring John to do something, others are running about the deck frantically crying, some are on their knees praying. The hencoop falls and breaks open and the chickens, ducks, and geese, which were to be meals at the captain's table, are loose. They get underfoot squawking and running about wildly, flying and hopping. It is a surreal scene of men and women and animals crying, cursing, screaming, and squawking in panic. John is standing motionless amidst the chaos. Gilpin rushes up to John.

GILPIN

Sir, she will sink at any moment!

John looks at him pitifully.

JOHN

Let her go. God's will be done.

The ship now slowly begins to sink. A WOMAN passenger runs up to Mr. Gilpin, who is staring in bewilderment at John.

WOMAN

Mr. Gilpin, please Mr. Gilpin, can't we use the boat hanging above us? Look, the crew is climbing into it. Tell them to save me some room! How will I get into it?

The ship sinks deeper and creaks.

GILPIN

Madam, I can do nothing! Our captain says it is God's will!

The ship sinks further down. The pleading woman runs to John and falls on her knees.

WOMAN

Captain, please sir, I don't want to die!

John stands stoically. The woman grabs for his legs as she begins sliding off the slippery deck. The ship is sinking quickly. Gilpin rushes to the mast and the ropes. The woman slips overboard as the ship lurches.

GILPIN

Cap'n Wordsworth, grab on to the lines.
Grab on, sir. She's going down!

John remains still. He is holding Mary's yellow scarf looking out into the night sky of dramatic lightning and thunder. Screaming and panic on board are universal. The vessel sinks, and goes straight down without rolling over. The long boat is cut free by the sailors, who expertly climb into the boat just as the vessel sinks. John is washed away.

EXT. IN THE RAGING SEA - 11:00 PM

John is wildly treading water. The longboat is near him. John yells out:

JOHN

Wait for me!

Cornet Burgoyne, who has made it to the longboat, shouts bitterly to John's sinking body,

BURGOYNE

Lucifer is waiting for you, you
miserable bastard! My men could have
been saved!

John disappears with one last line on his lips:

JOHN

Wait for me! Mary!

Other bodies are screaming and sinking. The *Abergavenny* is standing upright, with twenty or more sailors hanging on to the masts above water watching the carnage.

EXT. THE LONG BOAT FROM *THE ABERGAVENNY* -

Standing in the long boat, Gilpin marvels at the *Abergavenny* not rolling over.

GILPIN

The Captain, he had her stowed well.
It's like she's upright, waiting for
him to return.