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MID-ATLANTIC

"TAFFRAIL"

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MID-ATLANTIC

by
TAFFRAIL
(Captain Taprell Dorling, D.S.O., F.R.Hist.S.,
Royal Navy)

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TO

CAPTAIN THOMAS CHARLES ENOS

who for 58 years roamed the Seven
Seas in Sailing Ships and in Steam
Tramps—to his seafaring ancestors
and son, I dedicate this book

The 'Moorhaven' of this story is an entirely mythical ship belonging to an entirely imaginary Company. None of the characters in the tale has relation to any living person.

I should add that every chapter has been read through, and corrected where necessary, by an Officer who has spent most of his life in tramp steamers.

TAFFRAIL, 1936

CONTENTS

Voyage No. 93.

S.S. *MOORHAVEN*

CREW LIST

NAME	RATING.	ADVANCE.	ALLOTMENT.
Leonard George Gamblin	Master		
Nicholas Jasper Cudworth	1st Mate		
Thomas Moulding	2nd Mate		
Samuel Francis Dunn	Boatswain		
John Patrick	Carpenter &		

Over	A.B.		
Francis Omdurman Higgs	A.B.		
Edward Walter Swale	,,		
Frank Horden	”		
Timothy Todd	”		
Francis Robert Horniblow	1st Engineer		
Robert McNeile	2nd ”		
Harold Dibb	3rd ”		
Arthur Ledbury	Donkeyman		
Robert Henry Gedney	Fireman and Trimmer		
Howell Norton	”		
Michael James Marish	,,		
James H. Cooley	”		
Frederick Sergeant	,,		
Vincent Hawkins	”		
Sidney P. Farish	”		
Harold John Tubbs	Steward		
Hayward Montague Fox	Cook		

William James Lutter	Messroom Boy		
Robert Albert Timmins	Apprentice		
Nigel Farnsworth	”		
Percy John Denholm	W/T Operator		

MORNING WATCH

1

AT three minutes past four in the morning of the *Moorhaven's* tenth day out from Swansea, when the yawning Nicholas Cudworth, her first mate, stepped for a moment into the chartroom to verify the position before ascending to the bridge to relieve Tommy Moulding for the morning watch, the chart showed that the ship was roughly in mid-Atlantic.

One says "roughly" advisedly. For all that Nick, Tommy or Captain Leonard George Gamblin, Master Mariner, the *Moorhaven's* skipper, were aware, the estimated midnight position pricked off on that informative sheet of the North Atlantic might be ten, twenty, thirty, even fifty miles in error.

For the past five days the sky had been heavily overcast without a peep of the sun or stars, so that the ship had been running on dead reckoning. The wind was in her teeth. A considerable sea on the port bow had caused her to pitch and to yaw vilely, so that steering within half or three-quarters of a point was a feat of sheer physical impossibility. The surface set was a matter of conjecture. Add to these factors a patent log whose vagaries and aberrations seemed to be inspired by the Evil One, and you will understand why the *Moorhaven's* precise location in that waste of dark, tumbling, windswept water was largely a matter of guesswork.

Not that it really signified. They were bound for Boston, Massachusetts. Unless it were another ship, they would sight nothing until they made Cape Cod nine or ten days later. Meanwhile, by the usual law of averages, the sky and the horizon would have cleared to allow the chance of a sight.

Figures of latitude and longitude convey little to the imagination. Looking at the chart, however, and using your dividers, you, like Nick Cudworth, might have realised that the ship had covered about fifteen hundred miles of the Great Circle track at a good deal less than her usual seagoing waddle of about eight knots.

Working it out, this meant nineteen or twenty days for the passage. The *Queen Mary* and some of the other flyers did it in something over four. The thought was depressing.

However, the weather had been against the *Moorhaven* practically all the way, and the engines and boilers were as old as the ship. They all dated from the year before the war, 1913, and that, as any seaman will tell you, is aged as ships run nowadays. Indeed, it approaches senility.

According to Mr. Francis Horniblow, the chief engineer, who damned his wig and whiskers, and anathematised his machinery and boilers, the "ruddy muck they call coal" he was expected to burn, the old-fashioned rod-and-chain steering gear which was always giving trouble, and the owners with impartial and blasphemous fervour, the *Moorhaven* should long since have died a decent death.

"A fair chance!" he would snort explosively, when someone tried to excuse the ship's failings. "Stiffen the Dutch! Who'd give a chance to a thing like this? She ought to have been torpedoed in the war by those U-boats. And what's she now? A blinkin' relic. The poor old witch is only fit for the knackers!"

But for all Mr. Horniblow's strictures, and they were sometimes very vituperant indeed, he had an affection for the ship and was even rather proud of her frailties. He had been in her longer than anyone else on board—eleven mortal years

with a break of three months when she had been laid up for repairs after some fool on the bridge had run her ashore in a thick fog near the Lizard, and two periods each of six weeks when she had undergone her surveys.

Whistling tunelessly through his teeth, and cursing the day he had ever made her acquaintance, he nursed and cosseted her like a mother her child. He had coaxed and driven her all over the world, heaven help him! Men came and men went; but he apparently, would go on for ever.

He couldn't very well help it. He was the only man who *could* do the job, he congratulated himself. Nobody else could ever hope to learn the *Moorhaven's* idiosyncrasies, or to fulfil her many demands.

He was indispensable. Come to that, he *was* the *Moorhaven* —the man who took her here, there and everywhere.

Those red-faced skippers and mates on the bridge, who came and went with appalling regularity and had the brazen impertinence to look down upon the engineers, were merely the conductors, though they did think themselves the salt of creation. He, Francis Horniblow, was the man who really mattered. The ship could go nowhere without him.

The *Moorhaven*, let it be understood, was a wall-sided tramp of the "three island" type, one of those ships that the irreverent averred were built at so much the yard and sold at so much the fathom—a perambulating steel box with a slightly sharpened bow and rounded stern, and engines that had originally driven her at nine knots when she had done her trials as a new ship away back before the war.

With her thin, vertical black funnel, her stumpy twin masts and the samson-posts amidships and at the fore end of her short poop, she was anything but beautiful to look at.

Unpainted and rusty, as she usually was, she reminded one of a bedraggled beldame who had long since ceased to care about her personal appearance.

Nobody on board worried much about the *Moorhaven's* looks. For one thing, the owners stinted the paint. For another, the officers and men were far too busy in keeping the ship running. Her deck complement totalled eleven all told—the master and two mates; the boatswain; the carpenter, who was also rated as A.B.; four other able seamen, and a couple of apprentices. What with watchkeeping and the normal work about the decks, nobody had any time for fancy paintwork or tittivation in a ship whose gross register tonnage was 3,214; net register, 2,116; deadweight, 5,907.

Strictly speaking, by the usual law of averages, the *Moorhaven* should long since have been broken up for scrap. Only Messrs. Moore and Moore Brothers, Limited, the Managing Directors of the Haven Steam Shipping Company, thought otherwise. So long as she passed the periodical Lloyd's surveys she was worth keeping.

But Messrs. Moore and Moore were also the owners, ship managers, agents and brokers, the articles of association covering them for every method of making money out of shipping. The Haven Steam Shipping Company was charged all the brokerage, address commissions, agency fees, chartering commissions and the like, which were paid to Messrs. Moore and Moore. They also ran a ship chandlery business which made a fair profit, and received as managing directors the management fees, about five per cent. of their ships' gross earnings.

So while the shareholders received no dividends whatever, the Company's officers and men were ill-paid and vilely fed,

and the ships were grudged stores, equipment and fuel, Messrs. Moore and Moore prospered through their various perquisites so long as the *Moorhaven* and her four sisters were kept running.

Speed didn't really much matter. An average eight knots was considered good for a long passage. But in bad weather, with strong head winds and high seas, the speed often dropped as low as four-and-a-half.

Mr. Horniblow had something to do with that. Since the resistance of wind and sea were unknown quantities to those on the bridge, the chief engineer often shut down the steam a little more than was really necessary. This saved two or three tons of coal on the normal daily consumption of twenty-four tons or so. By this means Mr. Horniblow acquired merit with the owners for the economical consumption of fuel, and, it was rumoured, augmented a bonus received annually at Christmas.

2

At five minutes past four on that cold, stormy morning in November, when Messrs. Moore and Moore were snugly abed ashore in Glamorganshire under their silken eiderdowns, and Mr. Francis Horniblow, in thick flannel pyjamas and four grimy blankets, was snoring in his bunk in the superstructure built round the base of the funnel on the after end of the bridge deck, Nick Cudworth, wearing oilskins over most of the mufflers and woollen garments he possessed, climbed the bridge ladder to relieve the second mate.

The glass, as he had already observed, had fallen considerably. The wind, too, had freshened since he had gone below at midnight. He could tell that from the sound of it, and

the fierce squall mingled with driving rain which beat shrilly upon the ship simultaneously with his arrival on the bridge.

The sea had risen. It still ran from the same direction on the port bow; but was steeper and more confused. Even at her leisurely crawl the old ship plunged like a frightened thing, shuddering and shaking herself as she lifted.

It was impossible to see much in the rain and the darkness. When the bows fell, however, Nick was vouchsafed an impression of sheer walls of black water, topped with ghostly grey, rearing themselves up ahead in no ordered rhythm or sequence. A few seconds' respite, and a sea would come leaping over the forecastle head in a yeasty mass of solid water and spray glimmering with bluish-white phosphorescence. It reminded him of waves beating confusedly against a breakwater—except that a breakwater was immovable, which the *Moorhaven* was not. The yellowish gleam of the steaming-light, high above the table on the foremast, was reflected mistily back from the curtain of flying rain and spindrift.

Laden with nearly 5,000 tons of anthracite, the ship had less than six feet of freeboard. Every time she plunged, a wave crashed over the port bulwarks in a liquid avalanche. As she rose again and rolled over, a torrent of broken water, feet deep, surged madly to and fro, backwards and forwards, round about the two hatches and the cluster of winches at the foot of the foremast. Part of the flood poured overboard in a cascade over the starboard bulwarks as the ship lurched over. Part went out through the freeing ports. But the deck was never really clear of water. It was constantly reinforced as the *Moorhaven* took another dive and butted her bluff bows into an oncoming comber the size of a house.

Watching the tumult, realising the weight of water on board and the strength behind its blows, Nick Cudworth felt mildly anxious about the hatch-covers. He was not unduly apprehensive. He had known it as bad as this on many occasions, sometimes worse. All the same, it would be advisable to make certain that none of the wedges were working loose.

It always struck Nick as peculiar that whereas a ship of the *Moorhaven's* type might have four transverse watertight bulkheads below, the vulnerable hatches on deck were protected by nothing better than three or four inches of wood and canvas.

Hatch covers, as most people who have travelled by sea will be aware, consist of rectangular sections of thick plank fitting between the inside edge of the hatch coaming and the movable fore-and-aft and athwartship beams crossing the hatch opening. Watertightness, such as it is, is given by two or three layers of thick canvas dipped in patent preparation stretched tightly overall, and kept down to the outside of the hatch coaming by long steel battens passing through vertical brackets. The canvas is finally nipped by wooden wedges hammered home between the strips and the outer portions of the brackets.

In this, the fourth decade of the twentieth century, with ocean liners steaming thirty knots, and motor-cars and aeroplanes travelling at seven or eight times that speed, the use of wood, canvas and wedges seemed an amateurish sort of way of preventing water from finding its way below into the cargo spaces, thereby ruining contents and possibly flooding the largest compartments in the ship.

The method certainly had cheapness and simplicity to recommend it, and Nick, for one, could think of nothing better. But while the scheme was safe enough in liners and large freighters, where the deck level was twenty-five feet and more above the ordinary surface of the sea, the ordinary hatching coverings brought grey hairs to the head of many a worried tramp officer when his ship, with a freeboard of perhaps less than the height of an average man, ran into bad weather.

At such times the fore and after well-decks might be swept by heavy seas, so that the hatches themselves would resemble half-tide rocks. It only wanted a wedge or two to work loose with the straining of the ship, or a tear to start in the canvas covers, for the water to begin to find its way below. The first trickle might develop into a torrent if the damage weren't spotted in time and immediate steps taken to prevent any portion of the wooden covering from becoming displaced by the battering effect of the seas.

Quite apart from any damage to the cargo, the safety of the hatches meant the safety of the ship in anything like a gale of wind. On occasions, all the hands might find themselves fighting tooth and nail to re-cover a hatch and make all secure with every alternate sea bursting feet high over the well-deck. It was a case of one hand for oneself and one for the ship; but in such emergencies men were sometimes swept clean overboard with no possible hope of rescue, or cruelly mangled against the steel bulwarks or deck fittings.

Nick had experienced that sort of thing. One ship in which he had served as second mate had nearly been lost through the bursting in and flooding of number two hold. In another, disaster had all but occurred through the shifting of a cargo in a strong North Atlantic gale. In his twenty-two years at sea,

he had seen more than a score of men drowned or frightfully battered, with no surgeon within reach—nothing but the ship's medicine chest, and the rough and ready hands of the master and officers to do what could be done in the way of temporary alleviation with morphia tablets, swabs, bandages, and splints.

People ashore, or those who voyaged in comfort in large liners, had no conception of the amazing elemental strength which lay behind the wind and sea in their anger. At times they seemed to rip the very bottom out of creation. The cataclysmic fury of the sea, in particular, was annihilating, so that it seemed useless to struggle against it. But they struggled, nevertheless, pitting their puny strength and cunning against an invincible enemy.

In the years he had lived at close quarters with the sea, Nick Cudworth had learnt that it was always ready to take advantage of the least laxity on the part of those who served it. It never forgave a lapse. Moreover, it could never really be conquered, merely outmanœuvred by due skill and watchfulness. Therefore, at the risk of being considered an "old woman", it was wise to take every possible precaution. This, after all, was the essence of good seamanship.

So when Tommy Moulding, the second mate, saw the dark figure of his relief and came half-sliding, half-staggering towards him across the narrow bridge, Nick's first question had reference to the safety of the forward hatches. He had to shout. Ordinary conversation would have been drowned by the demoniacal shrieking of the wind and the crash and thunder of breaking seas.

"Oh, they're okay," Tommy bellowed. "The spare hand went round an hour ago."

"Right," the other returned, satisfied. In any case the second mate would go round the hatches and report to the bridge before turning in. It was the normal routine. "There's some thick stuff comin' over forward," Cudworth added. "It's much worse than at midnight, and the glass is down.—Old man been up?"

"No, thank God!"

"Did you report?"

"Bet your life. Young Timmins went down."

"When?"

"About an hour ago."

"What happened?"

The second mate laughed.

"Usual thing," he answered. "Friend Timmins was told to go to hell and play a harp, or something. Old man's to be called at daylight, or if it gets worse."

"Huh!" Cudworth grunted. "Has it?"

"No. Squalls are a bit more frequent, that's all."

The two mates—Cudworth, aged thirty-eight, and Moulding, three years younger—were as thick as thieves, invariably addressing each other as "Nick" and "Tommy" when out of official hearing. But it must not be imagined that the pair were in any way in league against Captain Gamblin. On the contrary. They liked and admired the "old man," who, incidentally, had just turned forty-one.

If the skipper was peevish when roused by a bull of an apprentice charging into his room and switching on the light in the small hours, he was a darned good fellow, one of the best. Having been through the mill, he made a friend of his officers and fought their battles whenever he could. Certainly

he understood their many difficulties, and did his best to lighten them.

"Anything in sight?" Cudworth asked.

"Not a damned thing," the second mate told him.

"Steerin' the same course?"

"Yes. South eighty-three west."

"How's she steerin'?"

"Kicking hellishly to starboard. Wants watching."

"Who's relieved the wheel, Tommy?"

"Friend Higgs."

"Young Farnsworth put in an appearance?"

"Yep. I sent him below to scrounge you some tea."

"Good! Then bung off, Tommy boy, an' get what sleep you can. If this gets worse I'll probably be hookin' you out of bed at daylight.—So long, boy. Happy dreams, an' don't forget to enter up the log."

"Nighty night, Nick. Don't forget about calling the old man at daylight."

"Right, son. Off you go."

The second mate waited until the ship was comparatively steady, crossed the bridge and disappeared down the steep ladder.

Cudworth went amidships, to peer over the shoulder of the helmsman into the dimly-lit compass bowl. The card was oscillating wildly across the black lubber's line painted on the inside of the bowl to represent the fore-and-aft line of the ship. The seaman's knuckles shone whitely as he gripped the spokes of the wheel, moving it abruptly as the bows plunged and the ship showed a vicious tendency to slew to starboard.

Steering in weather like this was a task that required fierce concentration. The man was breathing heavily.

"South eighty-three west?" the mate queried after a pause.

"Yes, sir. That's what I'm tryin' to keep her on. She's pullin' to starboard. The rudder don't seem to be holdin' 'er as it 'oughter."

"Try lettin' her yaw both sides of the course," Nick advised. "Don't use too much helm. The rudder's half out of water when the stern lifts."

"Aye aye, sir," the man replied, intent on his job. "It does take a bit o' doin' on a night like this. Is it goin' to last, sir, d'yer think?"

"It'll be worse before it gets better," said Nick cryptically. "It's breezin' up every minute, from the feel of it. Well, we must grin and bear it. Watch that steerin', Higgs."

"I'll do me best, sir."

Nick left him, and opened the door of the wireless-room on the tail of the bridge abaft the wheel. Denholm, the wireless operator, had kept the last period of watch at his instruments from midnight until one o'clock, and would not be up again until six. However, he might have obtained a late weather report and have left it on the file on his desk. Switching on the light, Cudworth hunted, to find nothing more interesting than a ribald limerick scrawled on a signal pad. Even that had its last line missing.

But it didn't need the promptings of a meteorologist transmitted through space to inform him they were in for a snorter. It was blowing half-a-gale already, and a full gale would inevitably follow. The sea was pyramidal and confused, possibly, thought Nick, because they were somewhere near the edge of the Gulf Stream. Every alternate

wave seemed to be leaping on board and sweeping across the fore well-deck in a cataract feet deep, the spray of its impact pattering against the wooden bridge-screens and driving high overhead. The air was full of flying moisture, though the horizon, or what he could see of it when the ship lifted, looked tolerably clear.

The ship occasionally developed a sort of gyratory corkscrew motion, neither pitch, nor roll; but a combination of both. It was an unpleasant movement—almost disconcerting when, in the midst of it, the bows descended with a swoop into a buttress of advancing water which seemed to bring her up all standing with every plate and frame quivering in protest.

Nick felt glad they had rigged the lifelines along the well-decks overnight. Otherwise, if it got much worse, the men mightn't be able to leave the forecastle to get aft.

Lord! They must be having a rotten time, poor devils, lying in their bunks right in the eyes of the ship with the sea pounding and hammering for admittance outside and overhead. Nick often wondered how the men stuck it. They had little enough comfort in fine weather. In a gale of wind it was sheer torment.

And the highest paid man among them, the carpenter, who ranked as a petty officer, drew no more than £10 16s. 6d. a month. The A.B.s and firemen were paid £8 6s. 6d. and £8 16s. 6d. respectively, while all hands were fed by the Company. But the food, such as it was, couldn't cost more than ten shillings or twelve and sixpence a head a week, which meant that practically all of the men drew less than the lucky fellows who drove the Corporation dustcarts in Balham or Houndsditch, added to which they got no tips at Christmas.

Come to think of it, however, Nick Cudworth's pay of £19 8s. 6d. a month, or about £237 a year, wasn't precisely munificent for a man of thirty-eight with a master's ticket, a wife and one child. What with occasional spells of unemployment, when he received no pay at all, he had difficulty in making ends meet. Nevertheless, he was better off than many who had lost their jobs when the depression came and had no possible hope of ever being re-employed at sea. There weren't many jobs ashore into which an unemployed sailorman would fit. Several officers that Nick knew were literally down and out, poor devils.

However, with luck, and provided nobody took a dislike to him, he ought to be in command in a year or two. He was first on the Company's list, and all things being equal he should get the *Greenhaven* when old Captain Baxter retired.

The wind shrieked and boomed in mighty gusts which all but drowned the roaring of the sea. Inky-looking masses of low scud, torn and fretted by the gale into a myriad tattered wisps and streamers, trailed dizzily across the dark concave of the heavens. There was no break in the sombre mantle which shrouded the background of sky, no twinkle of a friendly star.

3

Young Nigel Farnsworth, the seventeen-year-old apprentice doing his second voyage, staggered on to the bridge hugging a jug to the bosom of his oilskin.

"I brought you cocoa, sir," he said apologetically, doing a balancing act against the rolling of the ship, while clutching the jug in one hand and conjuring a tin mug from his oilskin pocket with the other. "I couldn't manage tea."

He didn't add that the galley fire was down, and that the old curmudgeon of a cook, Mr. Fox, dozing on his locker, had

threatened him with evisceration when he dared to ask for boiling water for the mate's tea. Farnsworth had made the cocoa on his own spirit lamp in the room he shared with Mr. Robert Timmins, his fellow apprentice, a piratical young man of over twenty, who was nearly out of his time and treated his younger shipmate with condescension mingled with contempt.

"Thanks, Farnsworth," said Nick kindly, relieving him of the jug. "I prefer cocoa. Had any yourself?"

"No, sir," the boy replied. "I don't think I really want it."

"Seasick?" the mate asked, trying to see his face, a feat that was impossible in the darkness.

"N—no, sir. Not really. Here's the mug, sir, and some biscuits from the tin in your room." He handed over a small package wrapped in a handkerchief.

"Stout lad," said Cudworth approvingly. "You look after me well, don't you?"

"Well, sir. I ... I know you like something when you come on watch."

The mate was pouring out his cocoa.

"Of course. Couldn't get on without it. Look here, Farnsworth."

"Sir?"

"There's nothing you can do up here—Oh! Half a minute, though. Are the bos'un or Chips anywhere about?"

"I saw the bos'un outside the galley five minutes ago, sir."

"Right. Tell him I want him.—An' when you've done that, you'd better stick handy below. I shan't want you till daylight. It's no good your kickin' your heels up here with nothin' to do. Go on," he added, as the boy began to expostulate. "No

argument. Buzz off, boy, an' be thankful for small mercies. Be up here at half-past six, an' don't forget to tell the bos'un."

Farnsworth thanked him, and went.

The mate had a soft spot in his heart for the younger of the two apprentices, a far softer spot than he had for the bullet-headed Timmins, who was inclined to be argumentative and to throw his weight about.

Through working on deck with the men, Timmins had absorbed a good deal of the able seaman's complex. He could knot and splice and steer and paint and scrape and do the usual odd jobs of a ship with tolerable proficiency, though he was apt to be something of a skrimshanker when nobody's eye was upon him.

When it came to such things as the elementary navigation and chartwork which Captain Gamblin and the two mates tried to teach him in their spare moments, however, the youth showed no interest at all. It seemed as though he prided himself on his practical seamanship, and didn't want to learn the theoretical side of the business. Cudworth had given him up as a bad job. Timmins would never get his second mate's ticket unless he put in a few months' intensive study at some navigation school ashore. Even then it was doubtful.

Nigel Farnsworth was a different type altogether, a willing worker, quick and intelligent, desperately anxious to learn and to get on. He was the only child of a clergyman's widow who had literally starved herself to send the boy to a good preparatory school. Determined to go to sea and to become an officer, young Nigel was of the type that might have passed into the Navy through Dartmouth, or have joined one of the large liner companies after a course at the Nautical College at Pangbourne, or in the *Worcester* or *Conway*. But these

establishments cost money, and Mrs. Farnsworth had none to spare. Instead, her son apprenticed himself to Messrs. Moore and Moore, who charged a premium of no more than £10 when their "young gentlemen" signed their indentures for four years. During this period they received free food and accommodation, were supposed to be taught the rudiments of their profession, and were paid £5, £10, £15 and £20 in the four successive years of their apprenticeship.

Messrs. Moore and Moore's prospectus was written to beguile. Nigel had certainly joined the ship in all the glory of a brass buttoned uniform suit, and a cap with the Company's badge and house flag; but he hadn't worn them since. Instruction of a sort was given by the already overworked officers at odd and infrequent intervals. However, any ideas he may have had of walking about the snowy white decks dressed as an officer and carrying a shining telescope, were very soon proved to be wrong. Wearing dungarees or any old clothes they possessed, the apprentices were worked, and fed, exactly as were the seamen.

There seemed to be a catch in the scheme, a catch that was all on the side of the owners. Apprentices over eighteen years of age and of two years' service counted as "efficient deck hands" within the meaning of the Act. The ship was bound by the Board of Trade regulations to carry eight seamen. At least one of the apprentices in each of the Company's five ships was reckoned as an efficient deck hand. But whereas an ordinary A.B. drew £8 6s. 6d., or roughly £100 a year, an apprentice, after deducting his premium, received an average of £10. Messrs. Moore and Moore therefore complied with the strict letter of the law and saved £450 a year, which paid the salaries of three members of the office staff including the haughty, scarlet-lipped, rosy-nailed, ashen blonde with the

permanent wave who was Mr. Nathaniel Parker Simon Moore's personal and private secretary and seemed to regard all ships' officers as her social inferiors.

Nigel was soon disillusioned. He was full of pluck and did his best; but Cudworth speedily realised he wasn't the type who would ever make good as a tramp officer. He had been too delicately brought up ever to fit into the rough and tumble discomfort of life in a tramp, altogether too gentle, diffident and reserved.

Timmins, who imitated what he was pleased to call Nigel's "Oxford accent," and considered him a "Sissy" because he chose to be personally clean, sensed these deficiencies at once and took advantage of them. Farnsworth was told off for the dirty jobs, and all the fetching and carrying of the food from the galley. Farnsworth scrubbed out the apprentices' berth, what time Timmins lay in his bunk smoking a foul pipe and regaling his rather horrified shipmate with bawdy stories and lurid tales of his conquests with women. Nigel was young, and very innocent.

The mate, who disliked Timmins, happened one day to overhear an unnecessarily disgusting remark addressed to Nigel. Nick was no prude or plaster saint; but he detested anatomical obscenities. Seeing red, he booted Timmins' stern.

"Any more o' that," he growled fiercely, "and I'll lambaste the hide off you, you foul-mouthed young perisher!"

That incident hadn't improved matters between Nigel and his tormentor.

4

Samuel Francis Dunn, the bos'un, fortyish, thickset, hairy and almost as broad as he was tall—clambered gruntingly up to the bridge and reported himself to Cudworth.

"You sent fur me, sir?"

"Yes, 'bose. What about the hatches?"

"I wus round less than an hour ago, an' Mr. Moulding's havin' a look now," Mr. Dunn replied dourly. "All the wedges is tightened up an' extry lashin's passed."

"Nothin' more to be done, then? It's goin' to blow like the wrath of God before it's finished."

"Everything's secure, sir. I 'bin round meself. We can't do no more."

"Are the heads of the derricks lashed?"

"Haven't bin unlashed since we sailed," said the bos'un.

"How's it in the fo'c'sle?"

"Haven't bin there since two o'clock. Then it was no worse'n usual, sir. Wet an' ruddy miserable."

"Leakin'?"

"No more'n usual. There's a dozen foot o' water in the fore-peak, from the sound of it. But that isn't nothin', not in this here ship. That's the leakin' plate we've reported the last three voyages that hasn't bin properly seen to. It didn't oughter be allowed."

Cudworth didn't pursue the subject. The leaking plate forward below the waterline had been a constant source of trouble. It had been repaired, and three to four hundred rivets put in, on the last occasion the ship had been docked. The compartment had been tested and found tight. But no sooner did the *Moorhaven* run into bad weather with a head sea, than her heavy plunging and vibration caused the rivets to slacken and to weep, so that the fore-peak gradually filled up.

It was a source of danger; but apart from pumping it out once daily, there was nothing that could be done at sea. The

real fact of the matter, as the bos'un had hinted, was that the damage had been made good in the cheapest possible way. The *Moorhaven* was an old ship, no fit subject for parsimony after wandering round the world for over twenty years.

"Anchors hove right up?" Cudworth asked.

"Yes, sir. The slips were screwed up bar taut 'afore she started shippin' heavy water."

"They're not chatterin' as she dives?"

"Not a move, sir."

"All right, bose. Keep handy in case I want you."

"I'll stick about amidships, sir, when I'm not lookin' around. I'll hear your whistle if you blows it hard enough.—Will it last long d'ye think?" he asked halting at the top of the ladder.

Cudworth gave him an equivocal answer. In these latitudes, and at this time of year, it might blow for days on end. Dunn must not be depressed more than was necessary.

He was a good man, was the bos'un—a prime seaman who managed to get the best out of the crew. Moreover, it was no real part of his duty to be out of his bunk at this time of the morning. He had "stuck about" on deck because he thought he might be needed.

The mate was left on the bridge with the helmsman.

Lord! The old ship was kicking about like a bucking bronco—plunging, rolling, corkscrewing.

Clutching the teak rail under the inadequate protection of the ballooning canvas dodger at the starboard end of the bridge, Cudworth felt himself lifted high in the air at one moment, and the next carried downwards in a sickening,

slanting swoop that was the inevitable forerunner of a shower of heavy spray.

Then she lurched bodily over to starboard, until, jammed in the corner of the bridge and looking outboard, he found himself overhanging a hillock of groaning, hissing water palely lit up in the virescent gleam of the starboard bow-light. The ship seemed to hang for several seconds before righting herself with an effort. Then, passing the vertical, she reeled over to port and all but pitched him from his handhold.

To a novice it would have been terrifying. To Cudworth it was just part of the *Moorhaven's* normal behaviour in bad weather. She was a regular beast at sea, and a wizard for rolling.

It seemed to be blowing harder than ever. It was strange, the mate thought to himself, how one judged the strength of the wind more by the noise it made than by its pressure. It was rowdy enough now, in all conscience—a natural orchestra gone mad, with every instrument screeching, howling, throbbing and booming in wild unison. Another flurry of heavy rain came tearing down from windward. It was icily cold. It might turn into sleet or snow before daylight.

Cudworth found his mind wandering away from his immediate surroundings. It was surprising what small things altered the whole course of one's life. If he hadn't become a sea scout as a boy, if he hadn't been keen on learning morse and semaphore, if there hadn't been a war—not that the war was a small thing—the chances were he wouldn't have been on the bridge of the *Moorhaven* on this particularly filthy night. He probably wouldn't have been a seaman at all. No. It was much more likely he would have been something or other

in Uncle Ted's fish-curing business at Great Yarmouth, and be earning five or six times the money he was getting now.

Both his parents had died when he was a child. Uncle Ted, his mother's brother, had brought him up and treated him as one of his own sons. A good fellow, was Ted Rogers—a bit of a rough diamond, perhaps; but one of the whitest men who had ever lived. Anyway, Nick had never ceased to be grateful to him.

It had always been understood that Nick, when he had done with school, should be absorbed into the business. But the war had come instead, and everything had been turned upside down.

Yarmouth and Lowestoft became filled with trawlers brought thither from every fishing port in Britain. Still manned by their fishing crews, they flew the White Ensign. They had been chartered in scores by the Admiralty for minesweeping and patrol work, some of them being provided with guns and wireless. Their crews were fitted up in naval uniforms and enrolled in the trawler section of the Royal Naval Reserve. It was strange to see the rugged old fishing skippers togged up in brass-buttoned jackets and uniform caps, saluting each other and trying to comport themselves as naval officers. They were a robustious crowd of men, utterly fearless and independent.

Nick and some of his scout friends had been employed as messengers down at the docks. But there was a shortage of signalmen for service afloat in trawlers, and the cry went up for volunteers. Nick, as a well-grown lad of sixteen, sent in his name, considerably to Uncle Ted's annoyance. However, said Uncle Ted, there wasn't a dog's chance of the youngster

being taken. Kitchener's Army wouldn't look at recruits before they were eighteen.

The Navy, however, had different ideas. After waiting on tenterhooks for ten days, Nick was summoned to an interview with a fierce, tired-looking officer with gold stripes on his sleeves who fired questions to him as to age, family history and qualifications.

Did he know anything of morse and semaphore?

He did.

Had he good eyesight?

Yes.

Had he obtained the consent of his parents?

Nick replied that he was an orphan.

Then who was his guardian, the officer demanded.

Uncle Ted—Mr. Rogers.

Then Nick had better run away and get a letter from Mr. Rogers saying there was no objection to his nephew's enrolment.

Uncle Ted was difficult to persuade. His two sons had already volunteered for the Army, and now his nephew wanted to go to sea! What was the sense of it? It was the brazen limit, stew him if it wasn't? What about his age? Did the bloomin' Navy want children to fight its battles?

His age didn't matter, Nick pointed out. In any case he was anxious to serve. So after a good deal of argument Uncle Ted was prevailed upon to write a formal letter of consent. After another interview with a gold-striped officer, a doctor who sounded him and tested his heart and lungs, Nick signed on the dotted line and was entered as some sort of a signalman.

Within seven days, kitted up as a bluejacket boy and immensely proud of himself, he was actually at sea on the bridge of a trawler commanded by the ex-second mate of a collier tramp rigged up as a temporary sub-lieutenant in the R.N.R.

It was a strenuous and sickmaking existence for the first month or two. They were kept on the job sweeping for mines in every sort of weather.

Nick had nearly four years of minesweeping and patrol work, right up to the time of the Armistice. Blown up twice, once narrowly escaping with his life, he had finished as a qualified signalman.

Then came demobilisation and the post-war task of finding a job at the age of twenty. With thousands of returning warriors waiting to be re-absorbed into every branch and department of trade, commerce and industry, there was nothing doing ashore. Moreover, Uncle Ted's business had fallen upon evil times, so Nick had turned to the Merchant Navy, where his previous sea service counted.

It wasn't difficult to pass for second mate after some further time at sea as a deckhand and a few weeks' intensive study at a school of navigation at Hull. Also, there was a boom in shipping, so by the middle of 1919 he was the junior officer of a coasting steamer running on the east coast between the Tyne and London. Two years later he signed on as second mate of a foreign-going tramp, and in tramps of one sort or another he had remained ever since. He had seen a good deal of the world—as much of it, that is, as ever can be seen by a man who has visited many countries, but has neither the leisure nor the money to penetrate beyond the seaports. Nick's more intimate knowledge was confined to details of

loading and unloading cargo, and the wiles and idiosyncrasies of stevedores, shipping agents, harbour-masters and customs and port officials. The smaller and less important the country visited, he usually found, the more gorgeously-attired and fussy were its minor nautical nabobs.

Tramping wasn't much of a life, particularly for a man who had married and acquired a son. The pay was bad, and Milly hated his long absences. During the last ten years he had seen her on the average for less than one month in every twelve. He denied himself practically everything so that she could keep their little home going; but eking out a lonely existence with a young child wasn't anything of a life for a young and attractive woman who had been used to a good deal of attention before she married. It was unfair on her, and the wonder was how she managed on what he could afford to give her.

Sailors might fall in love like ordinary people. Indeed, they were popularly supposed to be more susceptible than most. It was a mystery why girls married sailors, however, particularly girls like Milly who had had other chances. Also, as she was the daughter of a shipmaster, she must have known what to expect.

But she didn't complain more than usual, and was only burningly anxious that Nick should get some sort of a job ashore—anything that would permit them to lead a normal married life. The money didn't very much matter provided they had enough to scratch along with.

But there wasn't a chance of any job ashore. Nick had no capital, no business experience. Uncle Ted was an old man. His fish-curing concern had passed into the hands of his eldest son, and had never recovered its pre-war prosperity. It

could offer no hope of employment to Nick at a wage that would make it worth his while to leave the sea.

Then came the trade depression, when ships were laid up in scores, and hundreds of officers and merchant seamen were cast ashore to fend for themselves with nothing but their meagre savings to fall back upon. Most of the unemployed officers that Nick knew were ineligible for the dole, and many were virtually destitute. One master mariner with whom he had served was selling matches in the streets for a living. Another was hawking fruit, firewood and vegetables.

Nick didn't wonder at the bitterness of such men in accusing the country of rank ingratitude in its utter forgetfulness of what they had done during the War. Merchant seamen who had braved the submarine campaign, and had saved the country from starvation and defeat in the face of the gravest peril it had ever known, were heroes then. Nothing was too good for them. But within eleven years of the Armistice, soul-searing idleness, poverty, destitution and starvation stared many of them in the face.

It seemed hideously unfair in a country which depended upon the sea, its seamen and its ships for its very existence. Yet nobody seemed really to care a damn, and most shipowners, judging from the sums they left when they died, continued to make fortunes. Anyhow, the least of them lived in comfort.

Nick, he supposed, was lucky to have retained his job, albeit with a reduction in his already exiguous pay. But even he was embittered, and would have jumped at the chance of a job ashore if one had come his way. There were so many discomforts and vexations of life in a tramp. For instance, take the matter of this everlasting four hours on and four

hours off at sea, day and night, in addition to the normal work of the ship.

Captain Gamblin had fought tooth and nail with the owners for a third mate to be appointed to the *Moorhaven* in accordance with the recommendations of the National Maritime Board.

Mr. Nathaniel Parker Simon Moore, however, the senior of the two managing Directors, had pointed out that the Board of Trade regulations were complied with. A ship the size of the *Moorhaven* need carry only two certificated officers apart from the master. Everyone knew, he added with a grin, that the National Maritime Board was only advisory so far as officers were concerned.

The Company couldn't afford to appoint a third mate to its ships. If Captain Gamblin didn't like it, he could lump it, or relieve his officers by keeping a watch himself.

Captain Gamblin pointed out that he *did* take an occasional watch; but that he had plenty to do otherwise. Mr. N. P. S. Moore thereupon retorted that there were many other men waiting to step into the shoes of Captain Gamblin and his officers if they felt dissatisfied.

The "old man," who was usually very reticent, had told Nick the whole story immediately after his return to the ship. He was bristling with indignation.

"No third mates for us, mister!" he exclaimed with a snort, tilting the bowler hat off his forehead with a gesture of impatience, and proceeding to mop the imaginary sweat from his brow with a florid bandanna handkerchief. "What the blazes do we want with a third mate when things are running at a loss, hey? The Company can't afford third mates. If we don't like it, we know what to do."

"Give notice, sir, I suppose," Nick put in.

"Aye, mister. That's it.—Give notice, with no chance of another job, and blinking well starve."

"I don't think I'm prepared to do that, sir."

"Huh!" the skipper retorted. "You'd be a brazen fool if you did. Anything's better than nothing in these days. All the same, I'd ...," he hesitated.

"What were you goin' to say, sir?" Nick enquired after a pause.

Captain Gamblin glared at him for a moment, and then seemed to make up his mind.

"I shouldn't get talking scandal," he said. "But that painted-up, tow-haired witch of a secretary of his costs him a sight more than a *couple* of third mates. When I asked for his Lordship she looked at me as though I'd been a bit o' something the cat had found in the neighbour's dustbin!—Secretary my foot!" he continued with rising vehemence. "See her ogling him when she thinks you're not looking. Smell her scent, and see the way she walks, waggling her stern like a ship doing a full-power trial! See the flowers on his table! I'm wondering if his missus knows the ins and outs of it."

Nick hoped that the Captain wasn't cogitating blackmail.

"Flowers!" the "old man" went on. "They don't send us flowers when we're going to sea, nor yet boxes o' chocolates on our birthdays."

"Chocolates!" Nick exclaimed.

"Yes. That's what he gives her, mister, though you needn't ask who told me. He doesn't even offer *me* a lift back to the ship in that chromium-plated car I saw standing outside the

office along with his snipe of a chauffeur. It was raining fit to drown you; but tuppenny tram-rides and shanks' mare are good enough for hard-boiled master mariners who earn him his money! We'd dirty his cushions, I suppose. Tcha!"

It wasn't often that Captain Gamblin let himself go. Still less did he confide his grievances to his juniors. However, he had known Nick for three years, and they were much of an age.

There was no doubt about it that the "old man" was right. Some shipowners treated their personnel with consideration. Others, on the other hand, particularly the tramp owners, seemed to think that anything was good enough for the poor devils who actually went to sea, provided that they, the employers, kept within the strict letter of the law.

Noble gentlemen, speaking in the House of Lords, congratulated themselves there was no discontent in the Merchant Navy because they heard no complaints. It was as much as an officer's job was worth to voice a complaint with twenty others waiting to step into his shoes.

What were the principal grievances?

First and foremost, Nick always thought, came the awful feeling of insecurity—the feeling that every officer, including the master, was merely signed on for the voyage as a glorified casual labourer, and might be put ashore at the end of it with no hope of another job. Then there was the bad pay, and the fact that the officers of the American, Danish, Dutch, Scandinavian and French merchant services all received more than their British comrades. Incidentally, foreign ships were also better manned.

And touching the matter of pay, various unscrupulous shipowners paid their officers less than the scale laid down by

the National Maritime Board. The N.M.B. could only *recommend*. Its decisions were not binding so far as officers were concerned. And if the officers objected to these so-called "secret cuts", there were plenty of others to supersede them.

Then there was no regular scale or system of leave, though the N.M.B. "recommended" they should be granted fourteen days leave a year on full pay. It wasn't as if they didn't earn it, and why in the name of heaven should seamen, who saw little of their homes and lived in conditions of pretty severe discomfort, be treated differently to clerks or other employees ashore?

Regular pension schemes were a rarity, while officers were sometimes signed on in the dual capacity of officer and deck-hand. This meant that the shipowners complied with the manning rules, on paper; but saved one man's pay.

Moreover, officers, and in some cases masters, found they had to do manual work about the decks to meet the owners' requirements as to upkeep. In other words, ships must be kept running and in tolerable order with a minimum of shore labour. Nick knew of vessels where, during daylight in clear weather, the man at the wheel was the only occupant of the bridge, while the officer of the watch was painting or chipping, or doing one of a hundred and one other odd jobs, on deck. If the officer was wanted on the bridge because something was sighted, the helmsman blew a whistle to summon him. Again, to protest against this unseamanlike practice was to invite dismissal.

Even in the *Moorhaven* Captain Gamblin looked sideways at his officers if he found them unemployed during their watches on the bridge.

“Now then, mister,” he would say. “Staring at the horizon’s doing no one any good. What about that boat’s cover that wants repairing?”

Nick and the second mate had scraped and painted every inch of the bridge several times over while in charge of the ship as officer of the watch. They had sewn yards of canvas for one purpose or another, and had spliced whips, strops and cargo slings.

5

The morning watch crawled on, its minutes lengthening into quarters, and the quarters into hours.

Soon after half-past six, by which time the helmsman had been relieved, a gaunt, yellowish pallor creeping up over the dark mistiness astern of the ship showed that it would soon be daylight. But there was no gleam of brilliance from any invisible sun. Whichever way one looked, there was no break in the heavens. The great arch of the sky was still heavily overcast—a funereal pall streaked with the sooty bunches of scudding nimbus.

The wind blew with unchained fury—roaring, shrieking, tearing at the ship in mighty gusts as though to beat her backwards. The bridge was enveloped in a constant deluge of spray—heavy, almost solid, as she plunged and buried her bows in the heart of oncoming surges to fling their parted crests halfway up the gaunt funnel; lighter, like rain, as she was borne skywards again and the water on the fore well-deck was whisked upwards and aft by the violence of the storm.

Daylight came slowly, to show a horizon blotted out in sheets of spindrift driving over the surface of the sea. But as far as the eye could see to windward, perhaps a mile and a half, the great ridges of toppling grey water came rolling

remorselessly towards the ship. Crowned with their breaking crests, their steep slopes patterned with lacy spume like the soapsuds in a washtub, the waves looked prodigious. It seemed wonderful how anything built by man could withstand their mighty impact. Looking up at their curling summits as the *Moorhaven* fell into a hollow and started sluggishly to rise up the succeeding hummock reminded Nick of being in a railway carriage at the bottom of a deep cutting. But these great billows were moving with unimaginable strength, and the solid land did not.

Young Farnsworth, the apprentice, white-faced and gasping, with the skirts of his tied oilskin streaming out behind him, pulled himself laboriously up the bridge ladder. The boy looked vaguely alarmed as he peered over the bridge rail and had his first real sight of the raging welter ahead.

"Well," said the mate, shouting to make himself heard. "What d'you think of it?"

"Pretty bad, sir," Farnsworth replied, ducking as the fag-end of a wave smote the wooden bridge-screen and hurtled overhead.

He wasn't going to admit that it was the worst sea he had ever seen. To have done so might have branded him as pusillanimous in the eyes of a man for whom he had a profound admiration.

"Is it likely to last long, sir?" he went on to ask.

"God knows," Nick roared back, as the ship started another of her downward plunges. "But it can't get much worse, that's certain. It's been like this for four hours. Sea always looks worse by daylight."

He knew from the occasional shuddering vibration that the propeller was racing. That meant the poor devil of an engineer

on watch below was standing by his throttle trying to shut off the steam each time the stern lifted. That he wasn't altogether succeeding was no fault of his.

But if the screw was sometimes revolving in air, most of the rudder was also out of the water at the same moment. A vicious cross-sea driving in under the counter might strike it a heavy blow. This would throw a sudden and unfair strain on the steering quadrant on the rudder-head on the poop, and the stress would be transmitted to that long length of rod and chain passing from the poop, down along the after well-deck, and so to the steering-engine in the engine-room.

Those rods were made in varying lengths, connected by bolts and nuts, and had sometimes to be unshipped for working cargo. Chain was used on the poop, and where the gear passed over the heavy, revolving sheaves mounted at the bends.

The whole old-fashioned arrangement was frightfully vulnerable. If a rod became bent, if a bolt sheared or a link of chain snapped through some sudden jerk, the steering gear was useless and the ship became unmanageable.

They might, at a pinch, be able to use the hand steering-wheel on the poop, and so keep the ship more or less head to sea while repairs were made. Making good the damage, however, would mean working on the after well-deck with the seas breaking over them. Meanwhile, the chances were about fifty-fifty that the ship would fall off broadside on to the wind and sea—into the trough.

If that happened in weather like this ... well, Nick hardly dared to think of it.

The ship, heavily laden and lying deep in the water, would be overwhelmed by those steep, curling monsters. She would

be battered to pieces. The wooden hatch-covers would be smashed in one after the other. The holds would fill up.....

Everything depended on the steering-gear. They had nursed it, and tended it and oiled it until they knew every bolt and rod and link in the whole length of it. All the same, the darned contraption often gave trouble. It was the bane of their existence. They were always tinkering with it.

The whole system was archaic. It shouldn't be allowed in anything but a river ferry-boat. The only advantage was its simplicity and cheapness.

Cheapness, yes—for the people who profited by the ships in which it was fitted. What about the poor fools of sailors who had to use it at sea, whose lives might depend upon it in bad weather?

Nick Cudworth boiled with inward rage when he allowed his mind to dwell on the wickedness of the cheeseparing parsimony that was sometimes applied to ships. How the devil *could* they be even moderately safe when they were allowed to be sent to sea undermanned, thick with rust, with rotten gear, and the necessary repairs done in the cheapest possible manner?

But there was nothing more that Nick could do now. He had taken every seamanlike precaution he could think of, and his conscience was clear. If the steering-gear went, it went, and that was all about it. Pray God it wouldn't.

"Go and call the cap'en," he shouted to young Farnsworth. "Tell him it's daylight, and we're on the same course. It's blowing as hard as ever, and the sea's heavy and a bit on the port bow. Tell him we're racin' a bit."

"Yes, sir."

“An’ when you’ve done that, Farnsworth, go to my room, look in the second long drawer under the head of my bunk, an’ find me a bath towel. This damned muffler round my neck’s more like a dish-clout.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Wait,” said the mate, as the boy turned to go. “Get hold of the steward, or the boy, and tell ’em I want a mug of tea an’ some biscuits. Get some for yourself, too.—All right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Buzz off, then. Call the cap’en first.”

Farnsworth negotiated the bridge ladder with caution.

He was wondering how to approach the steward, Mr. Harold John Tubbs, who was quite as irascible as the cook. The mate would get his tea, no doubt; but if he Farnsworth, dared to suggest some for himself, he would be given the usual angry answer.

“I don’t want no thievin’ apprentices cadgin’ food around ’ere,” Mr. Tubbs would say, snorting with indignation. “You gets your whack accordin’ to the rules, an’ early mornin’ tea ain’t included in the menoo.—’Op orf an’ out of it, me son, before I puts it acrost you. Tea for apprentices! Biscuits! Go to hell an’ kiss spiders!”

Rumour said that Mr. Tubbs was unhappily married, and that he came to sea to escape his wife. Nobody ever having seen the lady, however, it was impossible to vouch for the truth of the story.

It was true, however, that Robert Timmins, Farnsworth’s fellow apprentice, was a born scrounger, blessed, or burdened, with a voracious appetite. He was as cunning as a hatful of monkeys so far as food was concerned, and lost no chance of raiding the galley and saloon pantry. He had even been known

to consume a whole bottle of pickled onions and two tins of Captain Gamblin's precious and private sardines during one middle watch.

All the same, the apprentices were vilely fed, and Mr. Tubbs was a miserly old beast.

Timmins had even composed a ribald song about him. Sung to the tune of "Annie Laurie," what time the steward forgathered with the cook in the galley, or took his afternoon nap on the bunk in his own room, it reduced Mr. Tubbs to a state of babbling, breathless incoherence.

It was quite a good song in its way, and Timmins, rather proud of himself, had confided the words to Denholm, the wireless operator, who played the ukulele. Denholm had sung them to the second mate, who transmitted them to Nick Cudworth as something too joyous to be missed in a grim and sordid life. Even Captain Gamblin had laughed immoderately when he heard young Timmins' classic, and had said to Mr. Tubbs on the next occasion of meeting him—"What's this I hear about you, steward?"

And the crew sang it also, with embellishments peculiarly their own, for Mr. Tubbs was not at all popular.

Neither was he pleased. Mr. Tubbs had a position to keep up. Above all things, ridicule from the seamen and firemen touched him on the raw. Who were they that they should laugh at him?

Frizzle and fry them young limbs of Satan in the apprentices' berth, he muttered to himself. They were the cause of his discomfiture. He'd teach 'em which side their bread was buttered, curse their confounded imperence!

But it was a bit hard that the steward's vituperant retaliation should be vented also on Nigel Farnsworth, who had not

offended and was anxious only to please.

6

Captain Gamblin, attired in a pair of mauve and green striped pyjamas very much too small for him, dragged himself ponderously out of his bunk and cautiously lowered his bulk to the heaving floor of his room.

Seeing him ashore, you might have thought him a licensed victualler, anything but a seaman. He didn't look the typical sailor—a man whose great-grandfather, grandfather and father had all been at sea in command, and whose own son would presently follow in his footsteps. In the Merchant Service the sea tradition runs in families just as often as it does in the Royal Navy.

In bed, anchored by his great weight, with his stern pressed hard against the bulkhead and his doubled knees braced against the bunk-board, he felt tolerably safe, and rather prided himself he could sleep through anything short of the ship being flung over on her beam ends.

Once on his feet, however, the *Moorhaven* seemed to take charge of him. Breathing heavily, he hung on to the side of the bunk while the ship made one of her wild plunges and lurched heavily over to port.

"Damn the old harridan!" he muttered angrily, waiting until she steadied herself for a moment. She was chucking herself about more than he had realised while lying prone.

Captain Gamblin hated exercise and was a hearty eater. Rather bald, red-faced, with three pendulous chins, he looked much older than his age, which was forty-one. Also, he was very massive, with a great bulbous paunch and limbs like a young oak tree. Fifteen stone doesn't willingly take liberties

with a madly reeling ship. That last roll to port was fully thirty degrees.

Ah! She was righting herself.—Waiting till the deck was comparatively level, he clawed his way to one of the portholes in the foremost bulkhead overlooking the fore well-deck, clutched the butterfly nuts with which the glass was screwed home, and looked out.

He couldn't see much. Until he wiped it with the sleeve of his jacket, the glass was fogged on the inside with the heat of the cabin. Outside, it had just received a deluge of heavy spray. But he did catch a glimpse of the fore well-deck, with the two square hatches, the winches, mast and forecastle head standing out of a foaming maelstrom. They rather reminded him of half-submerged boulders in the bed of a mountain torrent.

And just clear of the bows was a moving hillock of greyish water crowned with yeasty white. Hanging on as the ship lurched over to starboard, he watched it curl and break over the port edge of the forecastle, to come pouring down on to the fore well-deck in a mighty waterfall to meet another flood which had erupted a full fathom deep over the port rail.

Then Captain Gamblin's vision became blotted out by a mass of water that was heavier than spray. It was the tail-end of a sea. He felt the thud of it as it beat against the bulkhead.

Staggering across the cabin to reach the clothes which had slithered from the settee to the deck, he suddenly felt anxious because the crew—or those of the crew that weren't on watch in the centre portion of the ship—lived in that forecastle. Lifelines or no lifelines, no man in his senses would willingly run the gauntlet of that well-deck with every alternate wave

breaking over it. Something must be done about it, and meanwhile he wasn't dressed.

A heavy roll to starboard nearly flung him off his feet. He felt the ship shaking, and every loose fitting in the room rattling in unison. Minutes seemed to pass before he found himself wedged in a corner of the settee pulling on a pair of trousers that seemed much too tight.

Trousers—sea-boot stockings knitted by his wife—rubber sea-boots reaching well up his thick thighs, and the deuce of a struggle to get into. A cardigan over his pyjama jacket, then his thick grey sweater and woollen muffler, with his oldest coat over all.

Next another perilous journey across the room for the oilskin and sou'wester hanging on their hook by the door in the after bulkhead. He had got halfway there in a series of short, tipsy-looking zig-zags, when the door suddenly flew open.

Mr. Tubbs, swaying to the roll, stood framed in the opening, juggling with a mug balanced on a battered tin tray.

The sight of the man brought a spasm of fury into Captain Gamblin's usually placid heart.

"I brought yer tea, sir," the steward said, baring his prominent yellow fangs in a grin.

The Captain, anchored for the moment with one hairy fist clutching the edge of his bunk, eyed the man with disfavour.

"Huh!" he grunted.

With his lank, tousled hair, pale unshaven face, little dark eyes rather like a pig's, and a greasy shirt from which protruded a scraggy neck like that of a plucked turkey, Mr. Tubbs was not a refreshing sight at this hour of a wild and stormy morning. Moreover, he brought with him a strong

whiff of oiliness. Something was cooking in the galley, no doubt; but the odour was strangely reminiscent of a fried fish shop in the backwaters of Swansea.

"Your tea, sir," Mr. Tubbs repeated, holding out the tray.

"And ruddy near time, too," growled the "old man," edging cautiously forward to seize the mug as the ship momentarily steadied herself.

"It's a most unpleasant mornin', sir," the steward continued.

"Eh?" gurgled the captain, glaring at him over the edge of the mug.

"A most unpleasant mornin', sir. Blowin' great guns an' a mighty great sea."

Captain Gamblin, feeling anything but charitable, gulped down the rest of the warm liquid.

"I wonder you don't say the sun's shining and the sea's glassy smooth," he snorted, hastily passing back the mug.

"Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to offend."

"Offend!—Think I've got no ears or eyes, you brazen fool? Think I want *you* to come telling me about the weather? Get out!"

The ship lurched again.

Mr. Tubbs retired precipitately. The door slammed to behind him.

The captain, anathematising the whole breed of tramp stewards in general, and Mr. Tubbs in particular, staggered towards his oilskin.

"Subservient apes!" he muttered angrily.

The *Moorhaven* had been built before wireless became more or less universal in ships of her class. Her installation was an afterthought, and had been placed in a small room built on the after end of the bridge abaft the steering position. Percy Denholm, the twenty-five-year-old operator, lived below in a spare cabin.

"Our Perce," as Nick Cudworth and the second mate called him, was rather an exquisite young man, altogether too neat and too natty for an aged tramp. When he went ashore, he affected a florid style in neckties, fancy shirts, floppy trousers, and coats cut in to his waist. And on board the ship he usually wore gloves, which excited the ribaldry of his shipmates.

Did he want to keep the dirt out of his finger-nails, the mate enquired.

Not necessarily, Percy told him. It was because his hands were important to him as were a ballet dancer's legs to the lady who owned them. Wireless operators were born, not made. Tapping a wireless key, apparently, was just as delicate an operation as playing a piano really well. Operators, he said, could tell each other by their distinctive touch. Some had supple fingers and some hadn't. Cudworth laughed at that.

However, Denholm and his ukulele were popular, and there was no doubt about it he was good at his job. There was little that he missed, and his shipmates rather regretted that in the ordinary course of events he was unlikely to remain in the *Moorhaven* for longer than a year. He was merely learning the job before moving on to a better and larger ship—one that gave more scope to his ability.

Emerging from his wireless room, where he had been on watch since before six o'clock, he found the mate standing

beside the helmsman, who was having difficulty in keeping the ship on her course.

"Anythin' doin', Sparks?" Cudworth enquired.

Denholm pulled down the cap over his curly fair hair to prevent it from being blown overboard.

"Nothing interesting," he replied. "Dozens of 'em are reporting filthy weather, that's all."

"Filthy isn't the word for it," Cudworth remarked. "I call it ruddy awful."

"And I'm wonderin' if my blinkin' aerial's going to stick it," said Sparks with a frown, looking aloft at the single wire strung between the tops of the two stumpy masts. Blown to leeward in a hard curve, it seemed to be alternately tightening and slackening as the ship plunged. "If the damned thing goes, I don't fancy rigging another in this howling tempest."

"You'll have to, my bonny boy," Cudworth replied. "The old man won't be without his wireless."

The operator laughed.

"The old man'll have to put up with the best I can do," he returned. "I can't do miracles, and the ... Hullo!" he broke off. "Here he is."

Captain Gamblin was coming up the starboard bridge ladder. There was deliberation in his movements. For a man of his weight, caution was necessary. He paused every now and then as the gale tore at his oilskins and the wild lurching of the ship threatened to dislodge him. He wasn't risking a tumble.

Denholm retreated hurriedly into his wireless room. The mate went forward to meet the skipper as he pulled himself up the last few steps to the bridge.

"Everything all right, mister?"

"Everything bar the weather, sir."

"Seen to the hatches?"

"The bos'un and the carpenter have been round, sir."

"Huh!" grunted the "old man," looking out ahead. "Mighty big sea." He clutched the bridge rail as the ship slid over to starboard.

"Blessed barograph in my room's all over the shop," he went on to say. "From what I can see of it the glass has gone down like a deep sea lead."

Captain Gamblin loved his barograph. It was a presentation piece, awarded to him for saving part of the crew of a ship torpedoed in the war.

"How's she steering?" he went on to ask.

"She's yawin' a lot, sir," Cudworth told him.

"Aye," said the skipper. "She would in this little lot. She's racing, too.—Wish we'd had a sight or two to get on with. Only consolation is there's no land for close on fifteen hundred miles."

"That's always somethin', sir."

"Anything on the wireless?"

"No, sir. Only other ships reportin' bad weather."

"Right, mister.—You go down below for a bit. Lord!" as a huge sea crashed over the forecastle's head and came cascading aft. "Reckon we'll have to heave her to if it gets much worse. Can't risk those hatches—go on, mister. Take a spell. I'll look out."

The "old man" was always considerate about sending the officer of the watch below when he came up. Cudworth

thanked him, and turned to leave the bridge. His progress was arrested by the carpenter.

"Sir," he exclaimed. "Mister Cudworth, sir."

The mate thought from the man's manner that something serious had happened to the ship.

"Well, Over. What is it?"

"There's a fireman bin 'urt below, sir. That chap called Fred Sergeant. 'Im that joined at Swansea." Over spoke breathlessly.

"Hurt?" growled the captain, who had overheard. "How, for God's sake?"

"Scalded or burnt, sir. I don't rightly know. I met the second engineer an' another bloke takin' 'im along to the engineers' messroom. The second engineer asks me to tell the mate, sir."

"Serious?" the captain demanded.

"Looks it, sir. 'E wus groanin' somethin' crool."

"Hell!" the captain muttered, with some show of testiness.

"You'd best stay up here, mister," he added to Cudworth. "I'll go along and see to the poor devil." He made his way towards the bridge ladder.

Captain Gamblin might well be annoyed. If Sergeant were seriously hurt, it meant one fireman the less, and the *Moorhaven* had none to spare.

Moreover, he, the captain, had charge of the ship's medicine chest, and was *ex-officio* doctor.

He could prescribe Number Nine pills with the best of them. He could lance an abscess and dress a wound after cleaning it and drenching it with peroxide of hydrogen. He had put splints on a broken leg, and had amputated a mangled

finger with a sharpened penknife after dosing the patient with morphia tabloids and brandy.

But burns or scalds were more complicated. They sometimes led to blood poisoning. He didn't relish the job of tending this fireman with the ship tumbling about in the father and mother of a gale.

Curse this sea! Why the devil weren't all ships over a certain size compelled to carry doctors?

He'd have to read up the book of the words before starting operations. Meanwhile, the key of the medicine chest was in the top right-hand drawer of the desk in his cabin.

He descended the ladder with more haste than usual. Poor Sergeant, according to Over's account, was in agony. Captain Gamblin was a kind-hearted man.

FORENOON WATCH

1

TEN minutes past nine.

Helped by Mr. Horniblow, Cudworth—when he came off watch at eight o'clock, young Farnsworth, and the steward, Captain Gamblin had done all he could for his patient. With his legs and middle portion of his body swathed in bandages, Sergeant had been put in the bunk in a spare room which would have been occupied by the fourth engineer if the *Moorhaven* had carried such a person.

The poor wretch was semi-conscious, moaning and babbling to himself. His face, ashen under its grimy covering of coal dust, was beaded with perspiration. The fingers of his huge, calloused hands worked convulsively. He was horribly burnt.

Working in the stokehold in nothing but a cotton singlet and a pair of trousers, he had apparently slipped or been thrown off his feet while firing one of the boilers. The furnace door being open, the pitching of the ship had cascaded a shower of red-hot coals over his legs and one side of his body.

The "old man" had seen some pretty gruesome sights in his time, and congratulated himself that he was fairly hardened. Nevertheless, Sergeant's burns made him feel sick. Young Farnsworth had actually to retire for a time.

Areas of charred flesh alternated with large, hideous, puffy-looking blisters. In many places portions of burnt clothing had stuck to the wounds, and couldn't be removed. Sergeant had already been drenched in carron oil. The skipper, breathing heavily, proceeded to cut away what clothing he could with a

pair of blunt scissors. He went to work carefully, stopping whenever the ship gave a heavier lurch than usual.

The engines had been eased down to slow, just sufficient to give steerage way and to keep the ship head to sea. The second mate, on the bridge, was doing his utmost to lessen the motion. But the sea had become heavier and more confused. No power on earth could prevent those awful lurches to port and to starboard, and the *Moorhaven's* persistent and violent plunging.

Sergeant had been given morphia, and, morsel by morsel, his clothing was cut away. Then they had applied picric dressings, and gauze smeared with carbolised vaseline and more carron oil.

Captain Gamblin had done all that he humanly could. The rest depended on the invalid's power of resistance.

The skipper, however, had fears of blood-poisoning, or septicæmia, as the book preferred to call it, for the patient didn't appear to have been thoroughly clean since leaving England. His skin was grimed and filthy, and washing him was more than they could manage. If blood-poisoning did supervene, there was nobody on board who could cope with it.

A doctor was necessary, and that as soon as possible. But they might as well whistle for the moon. Even if the weather moderated, the *Moorhaven* couldn't reach her destination for another nine or ten days.

There was something about a shore wireless medical service mentioned in the official 'Instructions to Wireless Operators', which prescribed by wireless in cases of serious injury or illness. However, though Denholm could hear shore

stations, the ship was too far away for him to transmit to them direct, though his signal might be relayed.

As an alternative, some passenger ship carrying a medical officer might be in wireless range, however, and might come to the *Moorhaven's* assistance if it didn't take her too far out of her way. But even if a ship did appear, no doctor or anyone else could be ferried across to the *Moorhaven* in a sea like this.

If only this pestilential gale would stop blowing, Sergeant might have a chance. Morphia or no morphia, it must be agony for the poor devil stretched out on his side in a violently heaving bunk with hardly a sound part of his body to lie upon.

It was a very harassed shipmaster that left the cabin after giving orders that his own electric radiator was to be installed to keep the place tolerably warm, and that the patient was to be watched and fed on beef-tea laced with brandy if he came to and felt inclined for food.

What else he could do, Captain Gamblin honestly didn't know.

He went forward to the bridge, where the second mate was on watch.

"How's the invalid, sir?" Moulding asked.

"Looks to me as though he'd peg out," the captain told him. "Poor chap's horribly burnt. I've told the bos'un to get busy and make some sort of cot out of canvas. If we sling it, it'll prevent him being rolled about in a bunk. Think this motion's any easier, mister?"

The second mate shook his head.

"It doesn't seem to make any difference what course we steer, sir, or at what speed. The sea's all over the shop."

“Then bring her back to the old course,” the captain ordered. “Tell ’em in the engine-room to go on again. We can’t afford to waste time.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Moulding gave an order to the helmsman, and moved the lever of the engine-room telegraph. A reply gong clanged. The ship swung slowly to starboard, bringing the wind slightly on the port bow.

It was blowing as hard as ever, and from the same quarter. But the sea was more confused, as though some strong surface current were running against or across the wind.

The waves no longer advanced in their regular ridges, each crest separated from its neighbour by a trough several hundreds of yards wide. Subsidiary hillocks, pyramidal and menacing, seemed to be piling themselves up in all directions, and for no apparent reason.

Unable to accustom herself to the confused welter, the *Moorhaven’s* wild motion had become jerky and constrained. No sooner had she recovered from one sea surging down from ahead, than another seemed to leap at her from one side or the other. There was no avoiding them. They raised their curling summits close alongside, collapsed, and toppled inboard with a mighty shock and a sound like roaring thunder. The fore well-deck was swept every few seconds.

Captain Gamblin didn’t like the look of things.

Those hatch-covers....

Some of the seas seemed to be beating down straight on top of them. The weight of the blows must be prodigious.

However, with Sergeant still on his mind, the skipper staggered to the wireless room on the tail of the bridge. He

flung open the door, saw Denholm sitting at the desk with a pair of earphones over his head, and squeezed himself inside.

"Anything doing, mister?" he roared, shutting the door behind him. "In touch with anyone?"

"Only ships reporting bad weather, sir."

"Is there any passenger ship inside hailing distance?" he asked, going on to explain that he wanted to communicate with some vessel carrying a doctor.

"Not a hope, sir. The *Balearic* and the *Andalusian* are somewhere within about a hundred miles, and a Frenchman of sorts a bit further. I've been listening to them swapping signals. But I've no hope of getting 'em—not with this set, that is. It's antediluvian."

"Hell! Nothing inside a hundred miles? Any good calling up on spec?"

Denholm shook his head.

"No, sir. There's no ship really close."

"Let me know if you do hear one, Mister Denholm. This chap's life may depend on it."

"Yes, sir. I'll keep listening."

So that was that.

Frederick Sergeant, aged thirty-three, a native of Liverpool, must take his chance, like many another man before him.

According to Mr. Horniblow, he had a wife and three children in Swansea.

2

Nick Cudworth and the bos'un, watching their chances, had managed to dodge the heaviest seas and had been round all the four hatches. They were as tight as human forethought and effort could make them.

Satisfied, Nick had retired to his room, to shed his drenched clothing. It wasn't worth trying to shave, he decided. Instead, staggering about the floor as the ship rolled and pitched, he sponged his naked body with the three inches of water splashing to and fro in the bottom of his tip-up basin. It was merely lukewarm; but it refreshed him. Hating cigarettes, he had a draw or two at a pipe while pulling on dry clothes.

Lord; but he was tired! Who wouldn't be after eight hours on the bridge out of the last fourteen, precious little sleep during his watch below, and this Sergeant business on top of it?

He felt exhausted, as though he could have flopped on to his bunk and slept for a full twelve hours by the clock if the damned ship would only permit it. Towards ten o'clock, however, attended on by Lutter, the steward's boy, he was wolfing a belated breakfast in the officers' messroom.

It wasn't anything of a breakfast. Most shoregoing people would have turned up their noses at three thick slabs of greasy bacon, with two fried eggs tasting of straw and as tough as shoe-leather, stuck to a discoloured plate. The fiddles were on the table, and the boy Lutter, white-faced and seasick, swayed to and fro in the background with a battered tin coffee-pot hugged to his bosom. He was a dismal sight, poor lad.

Nick, however, was a hungry man. He had had no regular meal since 'tea' at five o'clock the evening before. He ate the food that was put before him, with stale bread and butter and marmalade to follow, the whole washed down by two cups of the steward's unspeakable coffee stained a deep putty-colour with condensed milk.

“You’re not liking it, Lutter,” he said, finishing his meal and wedging himself firmly in a corner of the settee as he filled his pipe for the first real smoke of the day.

“Not too much, sir,” said the boy with a deprecatory grin, as he began to clear away. “She’s knocking about a lot sir. Isn’t she?”

“Yes, pretty badly, Lutter. But I’ve known it much worse than this, much worse,” Nick told him, ramming down the tobacco in his pipe-bowl. “Anyhow, there’s nothing to worry about,” he added with a cheerfulness he didn’t feel. “We ought to be clear of this lot in a day or two.”

“I’ll be thankful for that, sir.”

“Seasick?” the mate enquired, lighting his pipe.

“A little, sir. Not too bad, though.”

Cudworth blew out a cloud of smoke and hoisted his long, sea-booted legs on to the settee.

“Are you sorry you signed on?” he asked. “This is your first voyage, isn’t it?”

“My first voyage in this ship, sir. I did ten months in a coasting steamer.”

“Quite an ancient sea-dog. How old are you?”

“Just turned eighteen, sir.”

“And you came here to better yourself, what?”

“Yes, sir. That, and to see something of the world. I always wanted to go to sea.”

“Lord!” said Nick. “As keen as all that—Why?”

“I’d read books about the sea ever since I can remember, sir. I felt sort of fired, like. My father was a sailor.”

“Who’s your father, then?” the mate asked, only to regret his question as the boy’s face became suffused with sudden scarlet. Dropping his eyes he looked supremely awkward.

“My father was drowned in the war, sir,” he explained lamely. “But he was a sailor, all right. My mother says so.”

Nick realised he had blundered upon an unhappy subject. In point of fact, Lutter had been born out of lawful wedlock, and was aware of it. The mate, however, knew nothing of that. Struck by Lutter’s general look of misery, he was merely trying to be kind, to draw him out a little.

The lad had a pretty thin time under the tutelage of the detestable Mr. Tubbs, and the equally churlish Fox, the ship’s cook. He was their slave and bottle-washer, and they saw to it that he earned his three pounds a month, plus what food he could scrounge after everyone else had finished.

Lutter, who inhabited a room with the cook, did most of the dirty work. He peeled the potatoes, scrubbed out and cleaned the saloon, officers’ messroom, galley and pantry, besides looking after the officers’ rooms. He washed up the crockery and table utensils, and in his brief intervals of leisure was put on to any odd jobs that the steward or cook could find. If anything went wrong, it was always the fault of ‘that blurry boy’.

“What’s your ambition?” the mate asked.

“I want to be a steward, sir.”

“What, of a ship like this?”

Lutter smiled wanly.

“Oh no, sir. I want to be chief steward of a passenger boat, sir—one of the big Cunard White Star ships. I don’t intend to stay here after I’m nineteen.”

“Good for you!” Cudworth laughed. “Set your mind on a thing, and you’ll get it one day.”

“Yes, sir.”

All the same, the mate couldn’t quite imagine young Lutter as chief steward of a Transatlantic liner, one of those resplendent beings who made more in tips in a quarter than the chief officer was paid in a year. He’d heard of one who was met on arrival at Liverpool by his own private motor-car, while the captain hired a taxi or footed it.

It would have been interesting to find out how Lutter proposed to get a footing in one of the big passenger companies; but further conversation was interrupted by the entry of the steward.

He glowered at the boy, and turned an oleaginous smirk on Cudworth.

“Breakfast to your likin’, sir?”

“No worse than usual, steward.”

“Cookin’s none too easy in this weather wi’ the pots an’ pans flyin’ all over the galley, sir. As I wus sayin’ to Mister Fox....”

The mate grunted and stretched himself.

“It’s not altogether the cookin’ I complain about,” he interrupted, not the least anxious to hear what the steward had said to the cook. “It’s this filthy tainted butter you give us.”

“I can’t ’elp it, sir. You know the Company don’t allow fresh butter after the first sea stock’s gone. Wot can I do about it?—’Ere, you!” Mr. Tubbs continued sharply, observing that young Lutter was listening avidly. “You ’op it an’ get busy peelin’ them spuds for dinner. Don’t stand loafin’ here, you young skrimshanker. Get a move on, can’t yer.”

Lutter disappeared into the pantry.

“Well, sir,” the steward went on. “ ’Ow can I give you fresh butter on wot I’m allowed? If I ’ad me way, I’d do yer proud —tripe an’ onions fur breakfast an’ ’Amburg steak fur tea....”

Cudworth groaned.

If he had said what he was really thinking, he would have accused the steward and cook of feathering their own nests at the expense of the officers and crew. He felt certain in his mind that the whole of the victualling allowance wasn’t being spent, and that Messrs. Tubbs and Fox were susceptible to bribes from the contractors who supplied the food. Unfortunately, there was no proof. If there had been, the iniquitous pair might have been fired long ago. The skipper had tried to get rid of them, only to be rebuffed by the owners.

“I know the officers in the *Greenhaven* do much better than we do, steward,” Nick said. “I was talkin’ to her mate at Swansea the other day.”

Tubbs looked angry. So the officers were discussing the food outside the ship!

“I don’t know ’ow they manages in the *Green’aven*,” he blustered. “An’ wot they does is none o’ my business. I does the best I can ’ere, Mister Cudworth, an’ you ’aven’t no right to go sayin’ things be’ind my back.”

“Behind your back!” the mate broke in, nettled at the man’s tone. “Damn it, steward! I’m tellin’ you to your face. Your food’s rotten, ruddy awful. It’s been worse this voyage than ever before. If you don’t want it talked about you’d better try to do better, that’s all.”

“Better!” the steward snorted. “ ’Oo are you tellin’ to do better? I bin with the company fur fifteen year....”

“I’m sick of hearin’ that, steward. D’you want the crew complainin’ again?”

“Ah! That won’t wash,” said Tubbs, with an air of triumph. “Wot ’appened when they did complain? Why, the owners says there wasn’t no cause for complaint. They was gettin’ their proper whack. Their complaints was frivolous, the ungrateful ’ounds.”

“Frivolous,” Nick retorted. “I like that. If you pulled the wool over the owners’ eyes, you didn’t over mine. Their complaints were entirely justified. You know that as well as I do.”

“Meanin’ wot?” the steward demanded, his voice truculent.

“Meanin’ precisely what I say, steward. Neither more nor less.”

“You’ll repeat that before witnesses,” Tubbs threatened. “I ’ain’t goin’ to ’ave my character blackened by no one, not even if ’e is the mate! Mates ain’t everyone, as you’ll find one o’ these fine days.”

“Get out!” said Nick quietly, putting his pipe in his pocket and sliding his feet to the deck.

“I’ll complain to the cap’en,” said Tubbs, backing towards the door.

“Complain and be damned to you!” Cudworth flung back. “You’ll get no change there.”

“ ’Ow d’you mean I’ll get no change?” the steward exclaimed, beside himself with anger. “I’ve got me rights! You’ve took me character away!”

“Damn your character!” said the mate, his temper rising.

“I’ll ’ave the law on you!” Tubbs shouted. “You’re insinuatin’ I pinches the crew’s grub!”

"I told you to get out, steward. Or do you want me to heave you out?"

He hoisted himself to his feet, steadying himself with a hand against the bulkhead.

Tubbs wasn't waiting for any more. Assisted by a heavy roll to starboard, he dived through the doorway leading into the pantry, mouthing imprecations he daren't utter.

"The ruddy reptile!" Nick murmured, curbing an insane desire to follow the man into his lair and to knock his yellow teeth down his throat.

But that wouldn't do. It was undignified enough to bandy words with the fellow, let alone to man-handle him.

Instead, he left the messroom by the other door on his way to his room.

Within five minutes he was stretched out on his bunk, asleep, in spite of the motion.

3

The forecastle of the *Moorhaven* was a dark, triangular cavern perhaps thirty-five feet long from base to apex and on the same level as the fore well-deck. At least twelve feet, right in the eyes of the ship, were taken up by the fore-peak store, filled with its odds and ends of rope, canvas, unopened drums of paint, red-lead, oil and the usual hugger-mugger of bos'un's and carpenter's stores. The rest of the space, divided into four living-compartments—if we exclude the paint-room, lamp-room and a couple of lavatories which had doors opening on to the well-deck—provided accommodation for fourteen men, who lived like troglodytes.

Stepping over a high sill from the fore well-deck one found oneself in an open alleyway stretching forward as far as the

bulkhead and door giving access to the fore-peak store, immediately abaft which, in the deck, was the watertight hatch which gave admittance to the fore-peak below.

By the entrance, to starboard, Dunn, the bos'un, and Over, the carpenter, lived in a small, square apartment, about the size of an ordinary ship's cabin. It had two bunks, one over the other, two lockers serving as seats, and a table which filled practically the whole of the floor space. Two grimy portholes opened out on to the fore well-deck; but whenever the dynamo was running, the electric light was always on, day or night. When steam was down, they made shift with a paraffin lamp. In a similar room, lived Arthur Ledbury, the donkeyman.

The seamen's forecastle, on the starboard side further forward, had accommodation for eight men in four double-tiered bunks. Only four lived there now, as the *Moorhaven's* deck complement had been reduced. The seven firemen and trimmers lived in a similar compartment on the other side of the alleyway. It was uncomfortably crowded; but at sea two of its residents were always on watch.

The men's quarters never saw real daylight, merely the subfusc apology for daylight which filtered in through the tiny portholes set in the ship's side over the upper tier of bunks. In really fine weather the ports might be opened. In anything approaching bad, they were shut and screwed home. Several of them leaked badly, emitting a trickle of water every time the ship plunged her bows into a sea.

There was no artificial air supply—merely a mushroom ventilator or two in the deck above which had to be screwed tightly down when seas or heavy spray came washing over the forecastle head. Except in really hot weather, however,

artificial ventilation wasn't needed. A gale of wind seemed always to be eddying up and down the bleak alleyway outside. One merely opened the door of the seamen's or firemen's quarters to receive a piercing draught which became a freezing blast in cold weather. There were coal bogeys in the forecastles for heating; but the moment the ship took water over the forecastle-head the stove funnels had to be unshipped and the artificial heating became non-existent.

Even in harbour the men's quarters reminded one of dug-outs. They were nauseating and unsavoury, the sort of places in which no decent person ashore would have harboured an animal.

It was idle to suggest, as did some shipowners, that the men came from a low walk of life, that they were naturally accustomed to squalor, discomfort and living in a herd; that they made their own surroundings at sea, and would have converted the roomiest, airiest and most luxurious forecastle into a pigsty in the course of a few days or weeks.

Those statements simply weren't true. There were rough elements among them, particularly among the firemen, whose work was particularly hard and uncomfortable. Collectively, however, they were no better or no worse than the average run of working men ashore. They liked their small comforts and amenities. One had only to see the attempts at making their quarters more comfortable and homely to realise that.

No. The fact was they had to accustom themselves to the foulness and discomforts of their accommodation in order that they might earn their livings, not because they liked it. They growled, as all seamen will growl, in season and out of season; but *any* sort of a job afloat was better than being permanently on the dole ashore.

No power on earth could have made the *Moorhaven's* forecastle habitable to the veriest slum-dweller. In the slums, people could at least get out and walk about for a change of scene and environment. In a ship at sea, they couldn't, and in the *Moorhaven* in bad weather there was nowhere to walk unless one chose to risk being drenched to the waist.

At about half-past ten in the morning of the ship's tenth day out from Swansea, three firemen of the two watches below were in their quarters in the forecastle.

Two who had kept the middle watch, Robert Gedney and Howell Norton, lay smoking in their bunks. The third, Michael Marish, sat at the table with the remains of a meal in front of him. He was crooning to himself, varying it by picking his teeth with a match stick. Wearing no more than a dirty singlet and trousers over his grimy skin, he occasionally shot out a black hand to prevent his mug and plate and battered teapot from sliding to the deck as the vessel rolled.

Two leaking portholes, more unidentified leaks overhead, and the water which sometimes dribbled in over the sill of the closed door from the alleyway outside, had caused a noisome flood on the floor. It was fully two inches deep, and went washing to and fro, backwards and forwards, as the ship threw herself about. A pair of stokehold clogs, someone's sock, a solitary plimsoll shoe, and the inevitable collection of spent matches, torn paper, slowly disintegrating cigarette ends and morsels of broken food, went with it. It was impossible to keep the place even tolerably clean in bad weather.

The air was thick with the smell of unwashed humanity and general unairedness; of food, and wet clothing, and musty straw mattresses and stale blankets; of strong tobacco smoke mingled with the usual ship odours, of rusty iron, paint,

canvas and tar. The stench was increased by the smoky reek of an oil lamp swinging overhead. It was only in the nature of things that the electric light in the forecastle should give out at such a time. The fault wasn't in the switch box, and nobody was going to bother about tracing and testing circuits during a gale of wind.

The forecastle was at one end of a see-saw over three hundred feet long. It plunged up and down incessantly—now steadily, now jerkily in a series of sickening heaves. It swayed from side to side like some infernal slow-motion car travelling endlessly along a road banked up at angles of between thirty and forty-five degrees in either direction. The seas thundered overhead, and even through the closed door could be heard cascading off the edge of the forecastle on to the fore well-deck. More seas crashed and thundered against the wall side of the ship with a succession of shocks that set her whole fabric trembling.

And somewhere below, water could be heard swishing to and fro in the Stygian recesses of the fore-peak. It shouldn't have been there—wouldn't have been there but for the leaking seams and faulty rivets which had never been properly rectified.

Gedney, the oldest man in the ship and the doyen of the forecastle—he owned to forty-one and was actually fifty-three—swung his short legs over the side of his bunk and sat up, swaying to the rolling.

His square face was a motley of greyish-black and white. There were pale streaks, where trickles of perspiration, long since dry, had carved out their little runnels. A whitish circle round his lips showed where he had wiped his mouth. The flickering lamplight fell on the tolerable cleanliness of his

bald head, and the rigid line of demarcation across his forehead. He invariably wore a greasy shoregoing cap when labouring in the stokehold.

He had rinsed himself perfunctorily in a bucket of water, drawn off the condenser in the engine-room, before leaving the stokehold at 4 a.m. But it had been more a matter of custom than anything else. Cleanliness didn't really interest him in foul weather, added to which some double-distilled blighter had stolen the soap from its usual hiding place. Real, all-over washing was usually reserved for Sundays—if Sundays happened to be fine. Coal dust was clean dirt, anyhow. It had no obnoxious flavour—merely dried up one's mouth until even cookie's coffee was welcome as a lubricant.

But Gedney had gone through his usual ritual of shedding his working garments and donning his cold weather slumber-wear, which consisted of woollen socks and thick woollen underpants topped off with a furry black and brown striped jersey.

He possessed a huge torso, short bowed legs and unnaturally long arms, bulging with muscle. His eyes looked fierce and bloodshot. He hadn't shaved for ten days. Sitting there on the upper bunk, swaying to and fro and crouching to prevent his head coming into violent contact with the deck above, he looked like a semi-human gorilla.

"It's no ruddy use!" he growled, glaring at the innocent Marish at the table. "Not a blinkin', blasted bit o' use."

He removed the short pipe from his lips to spit expertly to the deck.

"What's no use?" the younger man asked.

"This blinkin' ship! Can't get no muckin' sleep! Can't get nothin'."

"Wot's hitting you now, King Kong? Rheumatics again?"

Gedney glowered.

"Rheumatics be blistered!" he retorted fiercely. "An' that's enough o' yer King Kong, young feller."

Marish grinned uncomfortably. Gedney was one of the strongest men on board, and one of the most quarrelsome. Marish had seen him clear a pub, barman, potman and self-appointed chuckers-out and all, in something less than two minutes, though that was after half-a-dozen pints or so laced with brandy.

"Sorry mate," he apologised. "I thought you took King Kong as a compliment."

"Not when I'm feeling like I does now, I don't. I'm Mister Gedney to you, or Bob when you keeps a civil tongue in yer 'ead—'Strewth!" he added, wiping the back of his hand across his lips. "I gotta mouth like a blazin' monkey 'ouse!"

"Want a drop o' water?"

"Water!" sniffed Gedney. "Wot the 'ell's the good o' water? —If it rots the soles of yer boots, wot the blazes does it do to yer blazin' inside?"

"I'm dure I dunno," said Marish.

"You wouldn't," Gedney flung back. "Wot's in that there pot o' yours?"

"It *was* tea," said Marish.

"Tea.—Huh!"

"But it's all gone. Pot wasn't no more'n half full, anyhow. —Sorry, Bob."

"Scoffed the muckin' lot, 'ave yer?" Mr. Gedney grumbled, scratching his bald pate with the stem of his pipe. "You young

muggers don't look arter yer betters in the way I wus brought up ter. 'Ow old are yer?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

" 'Ow old are yer?" Gedney reiterated, rolling his eyes.

"Twenty-five," Marish told him.

"Twenty-bloomin'-five!—Sufferin' Susan! An' I wus at sea shovellin' blazin' coal 'afore you was ruddy well pupped!"

Marish bridled.

"Look here, Bob," he exclaimed, looking up at Gedney with an angry glitter in his eyes. "That's no word to use!"

Gedney waved his pipe.

"Born then, if yer wishes ter be perlite," he amended ungraciously. "It don't make no difference wot yer calls it.—But when I fust went to sea firemen *wus* firemen, not these 'ere noo-fangled sissies 'as don't know a slice from a ruddy shovel, an' can't 'andle neither; nor yet these young gents wiv 'igh-school eddications as runs these blurry oil-burners an' goes below in fancy shirts an' kiss-me white trousis ter switch on a sprayer or two when they feels like it. Huh!" and he expectorated again. "I dunno wot the muckin' sea's comin' to in these days. When I wus in the *Carpathian* way back in nought eight...."

The other man stretched out on his bunk, Howell Norton, usually known as 'Hookie,' had begun to take an interest in the proceedings.

"Put a sock in it, Bob," he grunted, raising himself on one elbow to wink at Marish. "Mick, old son, don't you pay any attention to the old codger."

"I won't," said Marish.

" 'Wot's that?" Gedney demanded sharply.

“Shut it, Bob,” Hookie continued. “We’ve heard o’ your ruddy *Carpathian* till we’re fed up with it—what you says to the chief engineer, and the chief engineer says to you.—You’d be a blinkin’ chief engineer yourself if you had your deserts, no doubt.”

“I would, would I?”

“Just as much chance as I have of being Bishop of Bath and Wells,” said Hookie, grinning affably. “And that’s no chance at all.—How’s old Freddie?” he went on, addressing Marish. “You haven’t told us since you came for’ard.”

“Much the same when I saw him twenty minutes ago,” Marish replied. “They’re doing what they can aft there. I give ’em full credit for that.”

“Is he bad?”

“Doesn’t look too good, Hookie. He was sort of mumblin’ to himself, poor bloke. Reckon they’d doped him a bit to make things easier.”

“I reckon ’e’ll peg out,” Gedney put in.

“Give the poor chap a chance, Bob,” Hookie remonstrated.

“It wouldn’t ’ave ’appened but in this muckin’ ship,” Gedney persisted. “She’s rotten, stuck together wi’ rust, leakin’ like a ruddy sieve.—’Ark at that water in the blinkin’ fore-peak,” he went on, raising his voice as he pointed at the floor. “That didn’t oughter to be there, ought it?”

“Aw! Shut it, you old croaker! Why try giving us all the creeps? You’ll say she’ll be sinking on us next.”

“An’ I shouldn’t blinkin’ well wonder at that,” said Gedney, wagging his head.

“For Gawd’s sake, cheese it!” Hookie exclaimed. “Look on the bright side, can’t you?”

“There ain’t no blazin’ bright side,” said Gedney lugubriously. “It’s time we said our prayers.”

“Crikey! Hark at the old stiff!—Give us a song, Bob, for the love o’ Mike.”

“I can’t sing, Hookie. Don’t feel like it.”

“Well I do,” said the other. “Someone’s got to sing, to scare away the jeebies. What’ll it be, Mick—‘She was poor, but she was honest,’ hey?—Must cheer ourselves up somehow, seeing we haven’t a couple o’ pints or more to drown our sorrow in drink.—Well, I trust you two to join in the chorus.”

He raised his voice and began, his voice and the inane words sounding strangely uncouth amid the crashing and thudding of the seas as the ship plunged and wallowed. The whole scene was grotesque in that swaying forecastle, with the fitful lamplight playing dimly on the grimy faces of the three men, and showing up the whites of their eyes and their white teeth. They looked like caricatures of nigger minstrels, except that they didn’t smile.

“She was poor; but she was honest,”

sang Hookie, in his unmusical baritone.

“Victim of a rich man’s whim,
For one day she met the Squi-er,
An’ she lost ’er name to ’im.”

“Now, gents, all together please”—

Gedney’s growling bass mingled with the other two voices as they sang the chorus.

"It's the same the 'ole world over.
It's the pore wot gets the blame.
While the rich gets all the pleasure.
Ain't it all a blinkin' shame."

Then Hookie's solo, the others joining in the chorus at the end of each verse.

"So she 'astened up to London,
For to 'ide her grief an' pain,
There she met an army capting
An' she lost 'er name again.

See 'im ridin' in 'is carriage
Past the gutter where she stands.
'E 'as made a stylish marriage,
While she wrings 'er ringless 'ands.

See 'im in the 'Ouse of Commons
Passin' laws to put down crime,
While the girl that 'e 'as ruined
Creeps away to 'ide 'er shaime.

Way back in the old-world village.
Where 'er aged parents live,
Tho' they drink champagne she sends 'em
Yet they never can forgive——"

"Now, last time, gents, if you please"—

"It's the same the 'ole world over.
It's the pore wot gets the blame.
While the rich gets all the pleasure.
Ain't it all a blinkin' shame."

Their three voices drowned even the noises of the storm. Hardly had the last chorus been shouted, however, than the door of the forecastle was rudely banged open.

An oilskinned figure stood in the opening—that of one of the A.B.'s who lived opposite.

"Can't you ruddy perishers stop your blinkin' concert and let us blokes who wants it get a bit o' shut-eye?" he demanded angrily.

"What's bitin' you, Ted Swale?" Hookie asked with an air of innocence.

"Bitin' me? 'Strewth! I like that, blimey if I don't! Is this a foc'sle, or is it a purple parrot house?"

"You don't like our moosic?" Bob Gedney enquired.

"Music!" snorted Swale. "My blinkin' oath!—I'd sooner listen to a pneumatic riveter than to your voice, you bleary-eyed, bandy-legged, black-faced old baboon!"

Gedney's face contorted with rage. He prepared to scramble down from his bunk to do battle. These insults were more than he could bear. Baboon, indeed!

For the moment, however, his intention was frustrated by the ship rolling heavily to port and pinning him in his bunk. By the time she swung back and allowed him to descend, the door had been slammed and Swale had disappeared.

"Don't trouble about him, Bob," Hookie advised.

Gedney, who had forgotten he was wearing socks, had suddenly discovered that the floor was flooded with several inches of dirty water.

"Trouble!" he snorted, hopping on one foot as he tried to scramble on to the table, a task that was made doubly difficult by the *Moorhaven's* motion. "I'll trouble 'im, the perisher! I'll reach me' 'and down 'is purple throat, catch 'old of 'is scarlet gizzard an' pull 'im ruddy well inside out! I'll have 'is liver

for breakfast, the splay-footed, swab-tailed buzzard!—An' now me blinkin' feet are wet, blast it!"

He was very angry indeed.

"An' don't yer let me see yer larfin' at yer elders an' betters, young Marish!" he went on, as the ghost of a smile flickered over Mick's face. " 'Tisn't nothin' to larf about."

"That's right," said Hookie from his bunk. " 'Tisn't no laughin' matter."

"Wot?" snapped Gedney, detecting a tone of irony in the younger man's voice. "Wot d'yer say?"

"You heard. I said it wasn't no laughin' matter. No. It's more like a blinkin' tragedy."

Gedney frowned. The argument was getting beyond him.

"Wot's a tragedy, you ugly son o' sin?" he demanded roughly.

Hookie smiled affably. He knew he had a face like the front of an omnibus. It didn't worry him in the least.

"Wot's a tragedy?" Gedney reiterated.

"Being in the same foc'sle as you, you cross-grained old alligator."

Gedney, clenching his fists and glowering in Hookie's direction, appeared to be swallowing something that hurt him.

"Alligator!" he spluttered, smiting himself on the chest. "Me?"

"You've said it, Bob," came the quiet answer. "You're always snappin' chaps heads off for nothing."

"Ain't I the oldest purple fireman in this 'ere ship? Ain't I no right ter tell you young blokes 'ow to be'ave?" Gedney demanded.

Norton made the unseemly noise with his lips that is sometimes known as a "raspberry". If looks could have killed he was a dead man; but Gedney did no more.

He daren't.

Hookie Norton was no great pugilist; but he happened to know a thing or two about ju-jitsu.

4

The galley was one of the warmest places in the ship, and while some mild bickering was going on in the forecastle, and Nick Cudworth was asleep in his bunk, Mr. Harold John Tubbs, the steward, was airing his grievances to Mr. Hayward Montague Fox, the cook, who was his friend and ally.

Balancing himself to the motion of the ship, the battered-looking Mr. Fox was stirring the contents of a huge saucepan lashed to the top of the galley stove. It contained part of the midday meal for officers and men, or what Fox himself referred to as "Irish stoo".

No decent housewife would have called his concoction anything at all. It was a horrible mess of odds and ends of meat and vegetables, reinforced with the contents of a couple of large tins of corned beef, and "doughboys" almost as hard as cricket balls. Hungry men *might* eat it, if they failed to discover that some of the meat was slightly tainted. Fox had cut off the worst portions, and had heavily peppered the remainder.

He was nothing of a cook. Indeed, he had only become a cook at the age of thirty-eight, just two years before. Previous to that he had done eight years as a fireman, and before that had been in the army, in which he had also served in the war.

Being a man of little imagination, he cooked, so to speak, "by numbers", in the same sort of way as he would have

sloped arms as a private in a line regiment, or have stoked a furnace as a fireman. He had only aspired to the culinary art when advancing years made a fireman's life too onerous. Being a cook had its advantages. It meant more pay, and the pick of the food. Also, Fox had the bulge on the steward, and shared in various perquisites that are better not mentioned.

Cookie was a wily old bird, and certainly knew which side his bread was buttered. He must be imagined as a grizzled-headed, hardened ruffian of forty who looked considerably older—a man who had knocked about the world, knew his rights and was prepared to fight for them. Some would have called him a highly irascible sea-lawyer.

He had a fine taste in beer and women, though on this particular morning he wouldn't have appealed to a female Hottentot. He hadn't shaved for many days. His shirt and apron were filthy. So were his hands and his bare arms, the latter so hairy that one could hardly see the zoological collection tattooed between wrist and elbow.

"Mate!" the steward snorted, balancing himself on the locker with the fag-end of a cigarette hanging from his lower lip. " 'Oo the 'ell's the mate, anyway?"

"Aye," Fox nodded, pausing in his stirring to wipe his face with the greasy cloth he kept tucked into his belt. " 'Oo is 'e? Gives hisself airs, all right."

"Befriendin' the ruddy boy!" Mr. Tubbs grumbled on. "Complainin' of the scoff we gives 'im! Sendin' the blinkin' apprentices down for cocoa an' biscuits! Askin' fur fresh butter. An' then when I tells 'im there isn't no blasted fresh butter, 'e insinuates that I gets a rake-orf o' the crew's grub!"

Fox grinned. If it came to that, neither the steward nor himself did so badly in the direction indicated. However, he

wasn't saying anything about it with the prospect of being overheard, or having to change the conversation if someone suddenly poked his head in through the galley door.

"Mates is as thick as peas," he said. "Fallin' over theirselves. So's skippers."

Tubbs agreed.

"An' the old man 'ad a lap at me when I took up 'is tea this mornin'," he said.

"So you tells me," the cook nodded. " 'E don't like you, 'Arold. That's at the back of it."

" 'Oo wants to be liked?" the other demanded. "A good stooard's worth fifty mates, any blinkin' day."

"Eh! An' where does cooks come in?"

"Stooards *an'* cooks," said Tubbs magnanimously. "They works 'and in glove, don't they?"

"Aye," said Fox with a sly wink. "That's right, 'Arold. They does—sometimes."

"We *'ave* to work together," the steward went on. " 'Cos why?"

"Search me, chum."

" 'Cos we're the chaps wot feeds the blokes wot makes the wheels go round to drive the blinkin' ship along. That's why."

Cookie stared at him in amazement.

"Bin readin' poetry, 'Arold?" he enquired, with some show of concern.

"Poetry!" Tubbs exclaimed, clearing his throat. "Wot the blazin' 'ell?"

"Sounds like it, 'Arold."

“Go chase yourself,” came the reply. “Wot I means is if it wasn’t fur us, everyone in this ship ’ud be in Queer Street, an’ so would the blinkin’ owners. Good stooards an’ cooks isn’t ’atched out under every gooseberry bush like skippers and mates. Supposin’ there wasn’t none of us. ’Ow’d that be?”

“I should tell that to the ole man,” said Fox. “ ’E’d be interested to ’ear it. Likewise, I’d be interested to see ’is face when you said it.”

“Come off it. You knows what I mean. Supposin’ there wasn’t no stooards or cooks. Wot then?”

The possibility of such an eventuality had never entered Fox’s mind.

“Search me,” he said.

To tell the truth, he was beginning to lose interest in Tubb’s argument. He couldn’t see what the fool was driving at.

But the steward hadn’t finished.

“All the thanks we gets for slavin’ our guts out is strings of complaints,” he rambled on. “This ain’t right, an’ that ain’t right. As I says to the ole man that time the men sees ’im about the grub.—‘Sir,’ says I, dignified like. ‘I’m ’ere to keep ’em alive, not to feed ’em.’—Then the ole man looked at me something fierce, like I was a ruddy loo-natic.—‘Wot the ’ell d’you mean, Mister Tubbs?’ ’e shouts.—‘Mean, sir,’ says I, calm as usual. ‘I means that I does the best I can, like the rest of us. If I don’t give satisfaction,’ I says, ‘maybe you’ll inform the owners.’—Then ’e ups an’ lets go somethin’ crool, fair snorty, ’e was. But I don’t see nothing strange in wot I says, d’you, cookie boy?”

“You’ve gone bats,” said Fox. “I can’t make head nor tail o’ what you’re sayin’ now. If you don’t like the blinkin’ job, why not chuck it?”

“Talk sense!” Mr. Tubbs retorted. “ ’Ow should I find another?”

“Aye, that’s it, ’Arold. ’Ow would you find another?—You wouldn’t, ole son. Not a blurry chance nowhere.”

The steward threw away the end of his cigarette.

“I thought you was sympathetic,” he observed testily.

The cook grinned and continued his stirring.

“I’ve me own show to look arter,” he replied. “Meanwhile, ’Arold, didn’t the ole man say as that there Sergeant was to ’ave special diet if ’e fancied it?”

“Special diet!” sniffed Tubbs. “It’s *you* who’ve gone bats now. Is this a ship or is it a blazin’ ’orspital?”

“You’d best take notice o’ the ole man’s orders, chum,” Fox warned him. “ ’E’ll skin you alive, else.”

“Wot the ’ell do them gory firemen want to go getting theirselves burnt for?” the steward wanted to know. “Special diet!—Ain’t we got enough blinkin’ trouble without them?”

Mr. Fox bridled.

“Look ’ere,” he said truculently, shaking his ladle. “You seem to misremember I was a fireman meself afore I was a cook. I don’t stand for no insults, see?”

Mr. Tubbs did see, and had the grace to apologise. Whatever happened he must stay in with Mr. Fox. Mr. Fox knew too much. As an enemy, he might start saying things about Mr. Tubbs—nasty things, that might get Mr. Tubbs into trouble.

What about this special diet for Sergeant? the steward went on to ask. What did Mr. Fox suggest as suitable?

The cook, assuming an aspect of deep thought, scratched himself behind the ear with the business end of his ladle. All

he could think of was a nice little drop o' soup with some biscuits crushed up in it.

"Soup," said the steward, "what soup, for the love of Mike?"

"Some of the liquor from the stoo bubbling on the stove," Fox suggested. "It would be tasty and nutritious, fritter him if it wouldn't."

Too tasty, thought Mr. Tubbs, aware of the ingredients.

"No," he said aloud. What he'd better do was to go along and get a bottle of beef extract from the medicine chest, though he'd have to beard old frosty face for the key, besides accounting for every spoonful of the blamed stuff.

"Beef extract!" the cook snorted, skimming his vile brew. "Cow's 'eads, 'orses 'ooves an' glue, you mark my words.—Much better 'ave a drop o' this 'ere."

Mr. Tubbs thought otherwise. Leaving the locker, he staggered from the galley.

The ship seemed to be throwing herself about worse than ever.

"Coo!" he said in an awed voice, clutching the hand-rail on the bulkhead as she slid over to starboard, and he found himself gazing down at the foaming summit of a huge, grey-green comber. The crest of it slopped in through the lee rail and went swishing aft as the ship dipped to meet it.

He might well exclaim.

It was blowing with hurricane strength. The sea was the heaviest he had ever seen—terrific.

Mr. Tubbs felt a vague anxiety clawing at his vitals. He was never a brave man, except after half-a-pint or so of whisky.

Then he felt like pulling down houses with his bare hands, or assaulting all the police in Glamorgan.

5

Mr. Horniblow, the chief engineer, making frequent pauses as the ship plunged, crawled his way on to the bridge in search of the captain.

It was not the sort of excursion he cared for. Down below in the engine-room, in spite of the wild motion, the sea was out of sight, the wind was merely heard, and the moving machinery gave one a feeling of confidence.

On deck, however, one had literally to fight one's way against the raging blast by pulling oneself from one handhold to the next. It boomed and shrieked and whistled, seeming to beat the very breath from one's body.

Clouds of heavy spray enveloped the *Moorhaven* from end to end as she butted her bluff bows into the liquid hills surging remorselessly towards her.

And the sea....

Nature seemed to be knocking the bottom out of creation with all the strength at her disposal. Those huge walls of curling water reared themselves up and tumbled in all directions, as though agitated by some mighty elemental force far beneath the surface. They seemed bent on annihilation. Even the racing clouds seemed to have become tinged with a ghastly unnatural yellow.

One felt naked and afraid, utterly helpless.

Mr. Horniblow was no craven, and had endured his full share of bad weather. This, however, was something quite different to anything he had ever experienced. It seemed the sort of cataclysm that might herald the end of the world.

The old ship—could she stick it?

He could imagine any one of a dozen things that might bring about disaster.

He dragged himself breathlessly up to the top bridge, to see the burly, oilskinned figure of Captain Gamblin with his feet far apart, seeking what shelter he could from the spray under the torn remains of the starboard dodger. He fought his way towards him, touched him on the shoulder.

The captain, wiping his streaming eyes with his hand, turned an anxious face on Mr. Horniblow.

"Hullo!" he roared. "What's brought you up here?"

Several things, the chief engineer shouted back, his mouth close to the skipper's ear.

To start with, he'd had to ease down a bit, not merely on account of the racing; but because a feed pump in the engine-room had started its old games and was giving trouble. One of the bearings was running hot, he went on to explain, in the intervals of dodging the heaviest bursts of spray.

Captain Gamblin didn't like it, and said so. He'd noticed the reduction in speed; but hoped to heaven they wouldn't have to ease any more. They were barely moving through the water as it was, practically hove to. If they lost steerage way, God help 'em! The ship would fall off into the trough, and then—what?

Mr. Horniblow could see for himself. They were doing their level best, he said. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary to go any slower. They were on the job for all they were worth; but for the time being that dratted pump was out of action.

How long would it be, he was asked.

Half-an-hour, perhaps three-quarters.—But there was other trouble. He'd tried to pump out the fore-peak, which was a matter of normal routine during the morning. The pump had sucked for about ten minutes, and then had chucked its hand in. The suction had choked.

"This b—— ship!" Captain Gamblin bellowed with all the emphasis at his command.

Mr. Horniblow agreed. The *Moorhaven* was worse than sanguinary. She was accursed—a damned leaking old canister all stuck together with paint and rust. He daren't even think of the state of the bottom under the boilers.

Meanwhile, they'd traced that suction pipe as far as they could. The stoppage was somewhere forward, probably in the fore-peak itself. It couldn't be got at in weather like this with the blessed compartment full up. It would be a longish job when they did get the chance.

Captain Gamblin said nothing; but thought a great deal. The fore-peak being full of water—tons of it—meant that the ship was down by the bows.

What about lifting the bows a bit by flooding some of the after tanks and bilges, he asked Mr. Horniblow.

They talked it over, discussing the pros and cons.

Flooding more tanks would reduce the freeboard and buoyancy, which was a disadvantage. On the other hand, increasing the draught aft would tend to diminish the racing by keeping the propeller more fully submerged.

Not that it would be by very much. In ordinary loading it took about thirty-seven tons of cargo to increase the *Moorhaven's* draught by one modest inch. They eventually decided on the usual fifty-fifty compromise.

But the chief engineer lingered. There was something on his mind.

“What now?” roared the captain.

“That fella Sergeant,” shouted Mr. Horniblow.

“What of him?” Captain Gamblin howled back.

“Don’t like the look of him, Cap’en. Won’t eat—won’t do anything but groan. Sort o’ half-dazed by the look of him.”

The captain looked concerned.

“I’ve done my best, poor devil,” he said. “I’ll go along and see him.”

“Yes,” the other nodded. “I think it’s advisable. They may want to know—later.”

“They?” the skipper demanded, noticing the peculiar expression on the other’s face. “What the ... Lord!” he broke off, realising what the chief engineer was driving at. “You—you don’t think he’s going to peg out?”

“That’s precisely what I do mean,” said Mr. Horniblow. “I’ve never seen a chap look more like a corpse.”

“My God!” the skipper exclaimed, starting to claw his way towards the bridge ladder.

6

Apart from seeing to the hatch-covers in the intervals of dodging the heavier seas on the fore and after well-decks, and passing extra lashings round the four lifeboats, there was not much work to be done on deck that forenoon.

Anyhow, Timmins, the senior apprentice, managed to escape early, and at eleven-thirty, oilskinned, sou’westered and sea-booted, made his usual boisterous entry into the apprentices’ room on the after end of the bridge deck.

Farnsworth, half-seasick, half-dozing, lay stretched out on his bunk, where he had every right to be.

The apprentices' berth was a bare and comfortless apartment—an oblong steel box with a white-painted wooden lining on the bulkheads, the bare roof overhead dripping with condensation, and linoleum that had once been brown underfoot.

There were four bunks in pairs to starboard and to port; but only the lower ones were now utilised. There was a hard cushioned settee running along the foremost bulkhead, with a couple of bookshelves, racks for crockery, and some food lockers overhead. A deal table bolted to the deck and covered in dirty linoleum occupied most of the floor space. There were two clothes cupboards, and lockers under the settee and the lower bunks. The rest of the furnishings included a chest of drawers, and a battered tip-up wash-basin with a rack for bottles and glasses.

The hooks by the door on the after bulkhead were filled with oilskins, coats, mufflers and dirty dungaree overalls, which swayed sickeningly to and fro with the movement of the ship. Most of the occupants' other personal belongings, including Timmins' gramophone, seemed to have been thrown anyhow on to the upper bunks. But bunks, drawers and lockers had discharged a fair proportion of their contents to the deck, where books, boots, shoes, a tin teapot, mugs, knives, forks, spoons and a half-empty tin of butter played a merry game of touch-last.

Except for the torn and faded door curtain, an almanac, a picture of a female film star cut out of an illustrated paper and pinned to the bulkhead, and some lurid postcards over Timmins' bunk, there was no attempt at decoration. The place

simply wasn't worth it. No power on earth could have made it beautiful.

For the rest, it had the usual ship smell of oilskins, damp bedding and general stuffiness, mingled with the aroma of Timmins' private store of cheese and apples. A bottle of Worcester sauce had also been smashed in one of the lockers. However, the berth was pleasantly warm—and was unbearably so in hot weather. It lay over the engine-room.

"My blazin' oath!" shouted Timmins, allowing the door to slam behind him, and holding on to the table as the ship bucked. "Ruddy well asleep, are we?"

Nigel did not reply.

"Look at the filthy mess on the deck!" the robustious one continued, casting his baleful eyes on his shipmate. "Too proud to clear it up, I suppose, or too mucking well seasick!—And where's the blasted dinner, damn my guts? You're peggy, aren't you?"

Nigel was always "peggy", otherwise, general scullion, dish-washer and performer of every job that came along. Timmins never took his turn.

After all, Timmins argued to himself, what was the good of being senior apprentice if one derived no benefit? And if the junior apprentice were smaller than oneself, and fool enough to be bounced into doing all the dirty work, why not let him get on with it?

If young Farnsworth had been prepared to fight, things might have been different. However, he wasn't the fighting sort. He didn't believe in that sort of thing. He hadn't the guts of a louse. He even read his Bible.

"It isn't dinner time," said Nigel wearily.

“Dinner time’s when I want my dinner,” Timmins retorted, removing his dripping sou’wester and shaking it over Nigel’s face. “Just you scramble out of that ruddy bunk, and go and shake up that perishin’ cook,” he continued aggressively. “There’ll be Hail Columbia if I’m not feedin’ in five minutes.”

Nigel swung his legs over the edge of the bunk and sat up.

“What’s that you said?” he enquired.

“I told you to get my scoff, damn you!”

“Oh,” said Nigel yawning. He felt mightily tired, and rather seasick.

To Timmins, that yawn looked very like open defiance.

“Are you lookin’ for trouble?” he demanded.

“Not a bit.”

“Then get a move on!”

“I said *I* didn’t want trouble,” the younger boy returned. “It’s you who’s making it.”

Timmins stared at him, breathing a little faster.

“My God!” he exclaimed, glowering. “What the hell d’you mean, blast you?”

“If you want your dinner, go and fetch it,” Nigel told him. “I shan’t.”

Timmins’ pale green eyes seemed to start out of his head. He leant forward, glaring into Nigel’s face. Nigel could see the reddish bristles on his chin, and the little beads of moisture on his bushy eyebrows.

“Are you ruddy well mad?” the elder boy asked fiercely, wondering whether this sudden change in young Farnsworth’s attitude was sheer bluff, or whether he was at last standing up for his rights.

Nigel shook his head.

"I'm as sane as you are," he replied calmly. "And I'm *not* going to fetch and carry for you."

"My blazin' oath!" Timmins exploded. "So you're refusin' to do what I tell you, hey? It's mutiny, what?—D'you want me to put it across you, you damned young squirt, or shall I...." he paused.

"Shall you what?" Nigel prompted him.

"Report you to the mate for disobeying orders. Aren't I senior to you, dammit!"

"I wish you *would* report me to the mate," Nigel put in. "I could tell him a few things."

"Meaning what?" Timmins roared.

"That you don't do your fair share of the jobs," the other retorted, his usually placid temper starting to rise. "I know you're senior to me! I'm sick of hearing it; but it's no reason why I should fetch and carry for you always.—Report me to the mate!" he added breathlessly, surprised at his own temerity. "Report me, and see what he says!"

"Everyone knows you're the mate's blue-eyed boy!" Timmins hurled back. "You do everything to keep in his good books, don't you? You suck up to him, you rotten, toadying, psalm-singing, little parasite!—'Yes, sir'—'No, sir'—'Oh, *thank you*, sir'. D'you think I haven't heard the way you talk to him, you mealy-mouthed reptile! I'll give you one more chance," he blustered on. "Either you get my dinner, or...."

"I *won't* get your dinner," said Nigel firmly, diving his hand under the pillow, and standing up with a short length of three inch rope in his right hand. It had a heavy knot at one end of it. Properly used, would make a tolerably effective weapon.

Timmins fell back, licking his lips. The worm had turned. He hadn't bargained for that.

"Put that damned thing down!" he ordered.

"I won't," said Nigel.

"So you're threatenin' me, are you?"

"Only if you go for me."

"Huh! I could knock the guts out of you with one hand," Timmins sneered, his eyes on Nigel's.

"Perhaps," said Nigel, facing him. "But not before you get a crack with this."

He also was watching his adversary's every movement, waiting to strike if he made any sign of attacking. But Timmins wasn't attacking. He preferred to bluster.

"Put that silly toy down, and we'll fight fair," he retorted, swaying to the motion of the ship.

"No. You've just said you could lick me with one hand. Probably you could. So it's fairer if I have this."

Nigel spoke with an assurance he didn't feel. He was not happy. For one thing, he felt all limp with seasickness. For another, if it came to a scuffle, he knew very well he hadn't a dog's chance, weapon or no weapon. Timmins was a husky sort of fellow, and as tough as leather. However, Nigel hadn't started the row. It had been forced upon him.

The sensible thing would have been to patch up the quarrel, and make friends. Fighting was a mug's game at the best of times. Fighting in the apprentices' room, with a gale of wind roaring outside, and the ship tumbling about all over the shop, was sillier still.

But Timmins wasn't the sort of person with whom one could ever be friends, unless one chose to applaud his bawdy

stories, and emulate his foul language. Moreover, he had been violently aggressive ever since Nigel had joined the ship, and had never forgotten the occasion when the mate had threatened to lambaste the hide off him.

There must be a particle of decency somewhere in Timmins, Nigel supposed, though he had never found it. He couldn't remember a single remark addressed to him that hadn't been interlarded with abuse or bad language. He had always been bullied and unfairly used, and now that he had summoned up the pluck to rebel, he was damned—yes, damned—if he was going to hold out the olive branch of friendship.

"Put that thing down!" Timmins ordered once more.

"No."

"Then I'm going to half kill you!" the other growled fiercely, starting to take off his oilskin. "Just you wait, my bonny boy."

Breathing a little faster, Nigel paused for a moment, until Timmins had wrenched his left arm from the garment, and was struggling to free the other. It was not easy. He had to hold on with one hand as the *Moorhaven* rolled and plunged.

Then the younger boy raised his weapon to strike. It might be cowardly; but he felt desperate.

However, the blow never fell.

Seeing Nigel's intention, Timmins let go of the table with his left hand. The ship did the rest by lurching suddenly over to port. The senior apprentice staggered backwards, tripped over something on the littered floor, and fell headlong.

Simultaneously, the door flew open with a crash. The burly, oilskinned figure of Dunn, the bos'un, crowned by a furious

face—sou'westered, unshaven and dripping with wet—appeared in the opening.

"Timmins here?" he demanded angrily. "Hullo!" he added, catching sight of Nigel's home-made truncheon, and the figure of the senior apprentice sprawling on the deck. "Wot's goin' on here?"

"Nothing, bos'un," Nigel said.

"Nothin'!" Mr. Dunn exclaimed. "Looks like it, don't it?—Fightin', wot? Laid him out, have yer?"

"No, bos'un. He just fell over."

Mr. Dunn sniffed.

"Fell over, did he?" he growled, eyeing Timmins with disfavour. "It's a damn pity someone don't put it acrost him. —Get up, yer skrimshankin', good-fur-nothin' young devil!" he continued angrily. "Are yer goin' to sleep down there, or wot?"

Timmins, with a furious glance at Nigel, pulled himself to his feet, and started to wriggle back into his oilskin. He looked mighty sheepish.

"Did I, or did I not tell yer to help puttin' them extry lashin's on number four lifeboat?" the bos'un enquired with mock politeness.

"Yes, bos'un."

"Then may I be so bold as to enquire why yer high-an-mightiness hasn't done it?" Mr. Dunn wanted to know, leaning forward into the room with a huge hand on either doorpost. "Maybe you wus seasick, or feelin' a bit under the weather, somehow?"

"There were plenty of others about on the job," Timmins said. "I wasn't really necessary."

“Oh!” the bos’un snorted, blowing out his red, hairy cheeks with righteous indignation. “So yer wasn’t bloomin’ well necessary, wus yer?—I’m bos’un o’ this here ship, an’ I tells you orf fur a job o’ work. The moment me back’s turned, you’re up, orf an’ out of it like a tomcat on the razzle.”

Timmins, very red in the face, tried to excuse himself. Dunn cut him short.

“You wants pullin’ up with a round turn, Timmins, lettin’ others do your job!”

“It was nearly dinner time, bos’un. I hadn’t forgotten the job, really. Then I was pretty wet, and....”

“Excuses don’t cut no ice with me,” the bos’un broke in. “ ’Tisn’t eight bells now, an’ well yer knows it. Dinner time! —Are yer comin’ on deck now, or will I have to fetch yer?”

Timmins started to button his oilskin.

“Oh, I’ll come, bos’un,” he replied. “You needn’t wait.”

“Sez you,” Dunn retorted. “I stops here till you *are* on deck, me bucko. I don’t trust yer, see?”

Timmins, looking supremely foolish, cast another angry glance in Nigel’s direction. It was a bit thick, he thought, that he should be slanged like a pickpocket in front of the junior apprentice, particularly after what had happened a few minutes before.

However, there was no suspicion of a smile on Nigel’s face. He was pretending not to notice. Indeed, he felt awkward and *de trop*, not a bit triumphant.

Wrapping a dirty towel round his neck, Timmins crammed the sou’wester on his red head, and left the room.

Dunn drew aside to let him pass out through the doorway. Then the bos’un leant into the room again, and turned his

fiery eyes on Nigel.

"Farnsworth?"

"Yes, bos'un."

"Wot you was doin' when I happened along, I doesn't just know. I don't want to know, neither. But if you *wus* half murderin' that young skunk, then I reckons he deserves it."

"But I wasn't," Nigel protested. "We merely had an argument."

"Argument," said Mr. Dunn, permitting himself to grin. "Funny sort o' argument with him flat on th' deck, an' yer standin' there with a rope's end in yer hand.—Ho, yus!"

"I hadn't touched him, bos'un."

The bos'un's grin became wider.

"Then maybe yer wus abart to touch him," he said. "Maybe yer wus stickin' up fur yer rights. Then, says I, carry on with th' good work. That chap wants a kick in the pants, the dirty, double-dodgin' blighter. Don't yer be put upon by the likes o' him, Farnsworth. Take my tip."

Nigel was astounded.

That the bos'un should take his side, that he was even aware of the relations between Timmins and himself, passed his comprehension.

He didn't realise that the *Moorhaven's* world was a very small one, and what the "old man" said to the mate at meal times; what the chief engineer remarked to the donkeyman; what the carpenter thought of the messroom boy, and the wireless operator of the cook, soon became common property. Even a new patch in the seat of the bos'un's dungaree trousers, or the fact that Tommy Moulding, the second mate,

had taken to Eno's Fruit Salts, provided topics for conversation.

The bos'un, however, was no sentimentalist.

"Get yer dinner, Farnsworth," he said abruptly. "I'll be wantin' yer afore long."

He disappeared, slamming the door behind him.

For a moment Nigel stood looking at the doorway where he had stood. Henceforward, he determined, he would take the bos'un's advice. He would stick up for his rights, and damn the consequences.

Rolling, plunging, creaking and groaning, the *Moorhaven* wallowed on.

The sea made sport with her.

7

It was impossible for hot food to be taken forward to the forecastle. Men laden with tin dishes or pannikins could never have faced the passage along the fore well-deck.

It was dangerous enough unencumbered.

Waiting until the bows lifted, and some of the water had cascaded overboard, men took their chance. Hanging like grim death to the sagging lifelines, they fought their way across the slippery steel plating oscillating wildly underfoot. As often as not, they waded knee-deep through a flood of broken water surging violently to and fro, forward and aft, as the ship wallowed.

Heaven help them if they lost their footing, or were filched from their foothold.

Every alternate sea broke high over the port bulwarks, while an occasional foaming monster crashed in from

starboard. Tons of water swished aft in a series of subsidiary waves to break madly against the bridge-deck bulkhead.

Where the *Moorhaven* really surpassed herself, however, was when she took one of her sickening dives straight into the heart of a steep, curling sea the size of a three-storied warehouse.

Viewed from the top bridge, the breaking crests of these monsters appeared to be level with a point halfway between the truck[2] and the table[3] on the foremast. Seen from the deck, they seemed to shut out all sight of the sky. They were prodigious.

And when they broke on board, crashing madly over the forecastle head, surging fathoms deep over the bulwark, the ship seemed to be brought up as though she had struck a concrete jetty bows on. Those mighty blows caused her to shake and tremble all over. Every plate, each frame, every rivet, seemed to raise their voices in protest at the unfair strain that was being placed upon them.

It was a mighty strain. Squat and solid though she might be, the *Moorhaven* must be hogging and sagging as the seas supported her deadweight of nearly six thousand tons amidships, or at bow or stern. The stresses were never the same for two consecutive seconds. The ship must be bending lengthwise like an elastic steel girder, twisting from side to side.

The sight of the heaviest seas breaking on board was almost terrifying. The whole bows of the ship, from the forecastle head almost to the break of the bridge-deck, disappeared in water, until only the foremast was visible. Winches, hatches and derricks were constantly buried.

At times, peering over the bridge dodger as she dived under, with the spray whipping into his face, Tommy Moulding, who was keeping the forenoon watch, could have sworn that she would never lift again. The mighty blows which shook the solid structure upon which he stood seemed irresistible, as though they would tear apart the stoutest structure devised by man.

But lift she inevitably did, shuddering and shaking as the bows hoisted themselves skywards with the water pouring overboard in cataracts. Up and up she went, until the forecastle head became visible above the flood, then the derricks, finally the hatches, winches and portions of the streaming deck.

In spite of that leak in the forepeak, the *Moorhaven* was still buoyant, thank God!

She wasn't such a bad old witch after all, Tommy thought to himself. Anyhow, the weather was just about as wicked as the Almighty could make it, and the old harridan was certainly putting up a good fight.

But why didn't the "old man" heave to? the second mate wondered. If he'd been in command, he'd have done it long ago. As it was, the engines were probably going the revolutions for seven knots, and they were making good no more than two or one-and-a-half.

But Captain Gamblin was a fine seaman. He was probably chary about easing down in case the ship lost steerage way. Steering was difficult enough as it was. The ship was all over the place.

Food in the forecastle being impossible, the seamen and firemen off watch ate their middle-day meal standing up on deck under the lee of the galley, or on the upper gratings of

the engine-room fiddley, where at least there was a little warmth.

They were a depressed, sorry-looking crew, dirty, unshaven and tired; the seamen in their oilskins, and the firemen in their working clothes ready to go below for the afternoon watch.

Each man had his hunk of bread, and a bowl or pannikin of the cook's stew. Two had spoons, the rest manipulated the more solid portions with their fingers.

There wasn't much conversation.

" 'Ow's old Fred Sergeant?" one of the seamen asked the cook.

Mr. Fox shook his head lugubriously.

"Not too fine," he said. "Reckon 'e won't last out the night."

"Pore blighter," the seaman said. "Crool 'ard luck to get copped like that."

"Aye, mate," Mr. Fox agreed. "Crool 'ard luck.—Still, we all comes an' goes some time. Reckon it's all wrote down somewhere when we've gotter go. We can't help it.—Any more for a whack o' stoo?" he broke off. "Better fill up while you can, lads. There isn't no duff to-day."

"There wouldn't be, you blamed old water-spoiler," someone grumbled.

Mr. Fox was indignant.

"Be blazin' well thankful for wot you *'ave* got," he retorted with vigour. "There isn't one cook in ten thousand as 'ud make you a stoo like that in this 'ere weather."

"You've said it, cookie," another man put in, with a wry expression. "Nor in an other weather neither."

“Meanin’ wot?” Mr. Fox enquired sharply, his ladle poised over the mess bubbling on the stove.

“Meanin’ it’s just food, cookie. Just enough to keep you alive; but ruddy awful muck to eat, an’ no blinkin’ duff to keep it down.”

The cook raised his implement. The light of battle was in his eyes.

“Ongrateful swab!” he roared. “An’ arter all I done fur you! —Take your blurry ’ead outa’ my galley!”

AFTERNOON WATCH

1

SITTING in his little cubby-hutch of a wireless-room on the after end of the bridge, Percy Denholm had spent most of the forenoon eavesdropping.

He had heard one weather forecast, and many ships reporting a strong gale and heavy seas, coupled with the information that they had had to reduce speed, and might be late in arriving. He had listened to a private message being passed in Morse from the *Normandie*, outward bound, to someone in the *Manhattan*, on her way to Europe. Then the *Westernland* had something to say; the *Alaunia* wished to make certain that somebody would meet one of her passengers in New York, and a Federal cargo-liner bound for New Zealand reported her noon position to her owners in Leadenhall Street.

The air was never quite clear of the inaudible sounds which resolved themselves into dots and dashes in his earphones—now harsh and distinct, which showed that the ships were within eighty or ninety miles; now barely audible, like the faint gnawing of a mouse in the wainscot. Ships chattered without ceasing. There were dozens of them. It rather reminded him of one of his mother's tea-parties.

But there was nothing very interesting, unless it was the fact that a baby weighing seven and three-quarters pounds had been born rather unexpectedly in some ship or another to the southward. The father seemed proud enough in informing his wife's relations in England; but Denholm didn't envy the mother in weather like this. Come to that, the happy event had probably been accelerated because of it.

Denholm was an enthusiast, and had varied the monotony by listening on his own private set to programmes broadcast from England and America. By manipulating knobs, he had even heard a lady called ‘Violette’ jabbering French through the *Normandie’s* radio-telephone to some other woman in New York. From what he could gather, it had something to do with a consignment of new dress models from Paris.

Women and their clothes!

Such things were of importance even during the father and mother of a gale in the Atlantic. However, it showed that ‘Violette’ was a seasoned traveller, or else that the 79,000 ton, thirty-knot *Normandie* was crashing along at her usual speed with nothing more incommoding than an occasional whiff of spray over her tall bows.

What sort of a woman was ‘Violette’, Denholm found himself wondering. She had a pleasant voice; but was she blonde or brunette, young or oldish, fat, or slim like one of the dear young things one saw in the pages of *La Vie Parisenne*? Whatever she was, she’d have curled hair, a wonderful complexion, carmined lips, and finger-nails which looked as if they’d been dipped in blood.

All the same, wireless was *the* invention of the age, and some day Denholm fully intended to be chief wireless operator of a ship like the *Normandie*. Then he might meet these delectable houris at close quarters. Meanwhile, the *Moorhaven*....

Several times during the forenoon Tommy Moulding, oilskinned, windblown and streaming with water, stuck his head in through the lee door to pass the time of day.

“You’re as snug as a bug in here, Percy,” he said on his last appearance, just after noon, casting envious eyes on

Denholm's electric radiator.

"I might be if you'd shut that perishing door," Sparks grumbled. "Old man gone below?"

"Yeah."

"Then come inside, for heaven's sake. I can't hear a damned thing with the row of the wind and sea."

Moulding took his advice.

"How's it outside, Tommy?"

"Blowin' like the wrath o' God, Percy. Sea ruddy awful, and all over the shop."

"Any worse?" the wireless operator asked, adding to the already pungent frowst of his den with the acrid smoke of his cigarette. He hadn't been long at sea; but was one of those lucky people whom the wildest motion never seemed to disturb.

"It couldn't be worse," the second mate replied, holding on to the table as the ship lurched. "Can't you feel the old sow?"

"It doesn't worry me," Sparks said, safely seated in a chair that was clamped to the deck. "All I'm hoping is that my blasted aerial'll hold out. Have a bullseye," he went on, pulling open a drawer and producing a tin. "They'll warm you up."

"Thanks, Percy," the second mate said, helping himself. "Any news?"

Forgetting that anything intercepted by wireless was supposed to be confidential, Denholm told his friend of the seven and three-quarter pound baby.

"Poor little blighter!" Tommy commiserated. "Anything else?"

Sparks mentioned the unknown ‘Violette’. “I’m wondering what she looks like,” he went on to say.

“You and your women!” Moulding guffawed. “Can’t you even steer clear of ’em at sea, Percy boy? I thought you were engaged.”

“Sort of,” said Sparks airily. “However, I’m not quite certain. I’ve taken damn good care not to get tied up in writing, anyhow. I just send her postcards with pictures of the town-hall—noncommittal sort o’ stuff.”

“Huh! You would.—Nothing else to tell me?”

“Not a darn thing, except that ships are reporting foul weather everywhere.—What’s for dinner?”

“Gawd knows! We’ll be lucky if we get corned beef sandwiches and a cup o’ coffee in this little lop. What I want is a couple of hours shut-eye in my bunk. Food doesn’t interest me much when I’m weary.”

“It does me,” said Sparks. “Surely you’re not seasick?”

“Seasick be damned! But what’s the use of hoping for decent scran with that cook and steward of ours, blast their livers!—The galley’s probably been washed out by now, and cookie with it, by the same token. We’ve had the fag-end of a sea or two over the bridge deck.—By the way, the old man said I was to remind you that he wants to know if any ships are fairly close.”

“The hell he does! What’s the big idea?”

“Better ask him,” said Moulding. “I’m no blinkin’ thought-reader.”

“Does he want to ask someone’s advice about treating Sergeant?” Denholm queried.

"Search me, Percy. But I do know that Sergeant's mighty bad. I hear the poor bloke may conk out. It's the sort o' thing that would happen in a blow like this. It doesn't give a chap a fair chance.—Well, s'long, boy. Old Nick'll be up here before long, praise be."

"Buzz off," said Denholm suddenly, sitting up. "And see that door clicks behind you. It'll fly open, else."

Listening intently, he leant forward in his chair, to put over a switch and twiddle a knob or two. A faint crackling sound in his earphones showed that a new ship had started to talk. He hadn't heard her before. Her note was different to the others—louder, more musical.

The second mate retired hastily.

Young Percy, he considered, was a lucky man, the only person on board apart from the skipper who was *really* in touch with the outside world.

The broadcast news that came through on Tommy's own wireless set, when it functioned, seemed to consist mainly of political crises in Europe, trouble in North China, the prices of hoggets and shearlings, and the results of football matches. They interested him just about as much as talks on gardening, or dance music with no one to dance with.

2

Able Seaman Francis Omdurman Higgs, who was probably the best seaman in the ship apart from Sammy Dunn, the boatswain, had the first two hours of the afternoon watch at the wheel.

Looking at him, one would have said at once that he was the typical sailor. His face, or what one could see of it through the reddish stubble that covered his cheeks and chin, and the layer of grey that represented grime and dried salt, was the

colour of dry, unvarnished mahogany, all creased and wrinkled like an old apple. He had bushy eyebrows, a roguish blue eye, bad teeth and a pleasant expression. He looked the sort of man that one could trust, and was. Those who knew he had been a quartermaster in the P. and O. wondered how he had ever descended to the *Moorhaven*. That, however, was too long and complicated a story to be entered into here. A woman came into it.

He was a short, sturdy lump of a man with a deep chest, slightly bowed legs, and a rolling walk. In tropical attire, which consisted of nothing but a pair of trousers when working about the ship, one would have noticed his enormous chest and body muscles, and powerful arms. Also, that he was very hairy, and strangely and wonderfully tattooed.

There was a blue ring, done by himself with Indian ink and a needle, round the third finger of his left hand, the back of which was adorned with a beetle which originated at Port Said. A snake, as thick as an ordinary man's wrist, crawled round and round his left arm from wrist to elbow. It was a fearsome, multi-coloured reptile unknown to zoology that had cost him twenty-five dollars and considerable pain at the hands of a hissing Japanese tattooist at Hong-Kong, just after the War.

There was a full-rigged ship on his chest, a coat of arms on his back, and a blue ring round his right ankle. His right arm afforded space for a bird, a dragon and two butterflies, while, on the inside of the forearm, appeared a pair of clasped hands beneath a true lovers' knot. A crossed Union Flag and a Red Ensign were depicted beneath the clasped hands. Looking at them closely, one would have observed that their outlines were slightly blurred. There was a reason for this. They covered an inscription 'To Molly', which, with the hands and

the lovers' knot, had been done by a shipmate when Higgs was twenty-four. Molly, the slut, had proved faithless, hence her obliteration.

"Lor' luv' us!" exclaimed the bos'un, stopping in amazement as he saw Higgs' bared torso for the first time, when Higgs was washing himself under the break of the forecastle the morning after joining the ship. "Wot 'ave we 'ere?" he went on, walking round the object of his admiration to have a better look. "Ships, snakes, flags—the whole boilin' outfit. Anythin' on yer legs, son?"

Higgs laughed and shook his head.

"Then don't you never get in the 'ands o' the police," Sammy Dunn advised. "Them things is worse'n finger-prints if they once sees yer naked. Reckon if you ever wants to commit bloody murder, you'll 'ave to skin yerself first."

Higgs, who was popular, was 'Omdey' to most of his shipmates. He was rather proud of his second Christian name, having been born on September 4, 1898, two days after Lord Kitchener's victory at Omdurman. It was said that his father had taken part in the famous charge of the 21st Lancers, and had been recommended for the V.C., a rumour which Higgs never troubled to deny.

In point of sober fact, however, Higgs senior had never been out of England in his life, and could not have pointed out the Sudan on a map. He was nothing more romantic than a railway porter at Reading.

It was Mrs. Higgs who had these strange fancies in naming her children. Francis Omdurman had a younger brother called 'Mafeking Roberts', and a married sister named 'Pretoria Victoria'. But Pretoria wasn't so bad for a female. It could be shortened to 'Pretty', which indeed Miss Higgs had been as a

young woman, and was still, for that matter. Anyhow, it was better than ‘Angel’, which had been the name of one of Higgs’ cousins. She, poor creature, had a face like a codfish.

Omdey, the oldest of the family, had gone to sea as a boy in the Merchant Service soon after the outbreak of the War. Like the rest of the crowd in the *Moorhaven*, he had knocked about the world a bit, and had had his fair share of ups and downs. The *Moorhaven* wasn’t the sort of ship he would have chosen; but nowadays any job at sea was better than none at all. He hoped one day to get back to mail-steamers, though the chances were against it.

One o’clock in the afternoon found Higgs at the wheel on the top bridge, chewing a quid of tobacco as was his habit, and his large hairy hands gripping the spokes as he did his utmost to keep the ship more or less on a steady course.

His smarting eyes were glued to the gyrating compass card. The darned thing never kept still. Nor did the heaving ship. She yawed wildly as she climbed sluggishly up those everlasting slopes of frothing water, and fell again into the succeeding hollows. It was impossible to hold her.

They had rigged up a canvas screen on two stanchions before the steering compass to provide some sort of shelter for the helmsman. It hung slack as the ship descended into the valleys—bellied out again, with sounds like pistol shots, as she rose to the next crest and the gale re-asserted itself.

But nothing short of a solid bulkhead could have kept off the heavy spray that swept the bridge. It streamed over the top of the screen in a constant deluge; whisked round its sides as the fierce eddies played fast and loose with the water that was everywhere. Its saltiness stung the eyeballs, and made it

difficult to see. Every few seconds Higgs had to raise a gnarled hand to clear his blurred vision.

His hands, he noticed, had become sodden and puffy, as though he had worked for hours at a washtub. The frayed leather binding on the cuffs of his oilskin jacket rasped his bare skin, and a sea-boil was forming on the inside of his right wrist. In a day or two he would have a crop of them.

It isn't easy for a layman to comprehend the physical and nervous energy required for steering a lively ship in a seaway. Great concentration is needed to keep her somewhere near her course; to anticipate her probable yawing; and to estimate the time-lag between the movements of the helm and the movements of the rudder. The wheel, let it be observed, merely actuates the steering-engine that moves the rudder.

Then there is the difficulty of maintaining one's equilibrium during the wilder lurches, which seems to tire every bone and muscle in the body. Hours of instinctive swaying to even the gentlest roll is apt to produce an aching in the hip joints, while there is considerable strain to the eyes in trying to keep a mark on the swaying compass card touching the black vertical of the lubber's line painted on the inside of the oscillating compass-bowl.

Except for an occasional odd second, the degree which indicates the course, and the lubber's line, never seem to be in juxtaposition. It is like playing with one of those exasperating automatic machines at a Fun City, where one places a penny in the slot, and tries to increase one's stake by stopping a pointer twirling one way, in line with a certain figure on a disc revolving the other. The quickness of the eye and the dexterity of the hand are beaten, ninety-nine times out of every hundred, by the purposeful vagaries of the mechanism.

In the open, swept by spray and wind, accurate steering is more difficult still, and Higgs, experienced helmsman though he was, had begun to feel the strain.

He grunted involuntarily as he hung on to the wheel during the deeper rolls and endeavoured to circumvent the *Moorhaven's* wilder eccentricities. However, she usually managed to win, by never doing quite the same thing twice running. A shudder and a sudden heave, and she was a full point off her course before he could check her.

In spite of the bitter cold, he was sweating profusely under his oilskins. His hands were numb, and the incipient boil on his wrist was beginning to be painful. An icy trickle from the soaked muffler round his neck was finding its way down the small of his back. His temper was frayed, and he felt thoroughly out of sorts. He was hungry, gnawingly hungry. Having had little real sleep during the past four days, he had used up most of his reserve of energy, and was dog-weary as well.

"South eighty-three west, Higgs?" Nick Cudworth shouted, coming to his side to peer into the binnacle.

"South eighty-three as near as I can make it, sir."

"How's she goin'?"

The seaman shifted his quid before replying.

"Rotten, sir," he said disgustedly. "She's worse'n I've ever known 'er—caperin' all over the shop."

"It's this confused sea," the mate told him. "Stick it, Higgs. You can't do more than your best."

The man grunted an unintelligible answer, moving the wheel to check a sudden swerve to port as the *Moorhaven* started to slide down a long valley.

Cudworth left him. Higgs could be trusted. He might resent being watched over and told what to do.

It was perhaps seven or eight minutes later, after rising to a sea, that the ship yawed heavily to starboard, a thing she had done a thousand times before. Higgs, as usual, moved the wheel over to port to check the swing.

Nothing happened. The ship continued to fall off to starboard ... ten degrees, fifteen, twenty.

He automatically gave her more helm, his eyes on the compass card.

The swerve increased ... twenty-five degrees, thirty, forty-five degrees to starboard of the course. The wheel was hard over in the opposite direction.

"Gawd!" he muttered, staring at the compass card in horrified amazement, as the lubber's line moved to north fifty-five degrees west, north fifty west.....

The ship seemed to have taken charge. There was no holding her.

"Mister Cudworth, sir!" Higgs shouted. "Mister Cudworth!"

God! The wind was nearly abeam. The *Moorhaven* lurched over to port, a mighty roll that nearly flung him off his feet.

Out of the tail of his eye, he caught sight of a mountain of grey, wind-lashed water with a great foaming crest rearing itself up practically alongside the ship.

The *Moorhaven* slid over to meet it ... thirty degrees ... thirty-five. It felt as though she would never stop.

Up and up rose the wall of water, obliterating the sky—curling, hissing, roaring. The gale whipped little streamers of

smoky spray from its arching summit. It was advancing with horrible rapidity.

Higgs blasphemed helplessly as his feet slithered from beneath him. He held on to the spokes of the useless wheel with all his strength, trying to pull himself upright.

He couldn't. The slope of the deck was steeper than the roof of a house.

"Mister Cudworth!" he gasped. "Mister Cudworth! Fur Gawd's sake!"

He wasn't thinking of himself. His own danger did not occur to him. The ship was uppermost in his mind. The wheel was useless, and the *Moorhaven* was out of control. Whatever happened, she must be brought back to her course, though how, he couldn't think.

The next instant the liquid avalanche fell with a shock which seemed as though it must tear the ship asunder.

Higgs cannot have caught the full brunt of it. Hanging on to the wheel for his life, he felt no more than a mighty buffet on his side and back as the deluge poured over him. The breath was all but knocked out of his body. There was a roaring in his ears, and everything went black. Drenched by the icy flood, he managed somehow to hold on.

Then, as the *Moorhaven* started to lift again towards the vertical, the water drained away.

Gasping and spluttering, Higgs spat out the quid of tobacco that threatened to choke him, and managed to pull himself upright. The wheel was still hard over to port.

Next, as the ship continued to right herself, Cudworth, bareheaded, and bleeding from a gash on the forehead, clawed his way aft.

"What the hell's happened?" he bellowed in a fury, the water running off him. "You're points off your course! You've wrecked the ship!"

"B—— helm's not working!" Higgs roared back, stung to retaliation. "She isn't steerin'!"

The mate took in the situation at a glance; saw that the wheel was hard over, and that the *Moorhaven* was still swerving to starboard. The wind and sea were abaft the port beam.

"God!" he muttered. "Steerin' gear's gone!"

As the *Moorhaven* steadied herself for a moment before lurching over to starboard, he dashed to the engine-room telegraph, and wrenched the lever over to 'Stop'.

At much the same moment the bulky figure of Captain Gamblin appeared on the starboard bridge ladder. He was moving with surprising agility. He wore no hat, and Higgs, who had recovered his breath, was almost tempted to laugh as he saw the 'old man's' hair lifted off his scalp, and the look of furious amazement on his red face.

Reaching the top of the ladder, the skipper hung on for a moment. Then he launched himself across the bridge, and after a drunken-looking zig-zag fetched up at Cudworth's side, nearly to be pitched away as the ship reeled over to starboard. The mate, securely anchored, just caught him in time and introduced him to a handhold.

What the blazing hell had happened? the skipper wanted to know.

The steering gear had gone west, Cudworth shouted. The ship was out of control. He had done the only thing that could be done in the sudden emergency. He had rung down—'Stop'.

“Get all hands!” the captain roared. “Go aft, mister! Get the hand wheel connected! Let me know what’s doing! We’ll be smashed to hell if we lie in the trough!”

The mate clawed his way to the bridge ladder, and disappeared.

The *Moorhaven* had suffered already. That one great sea, bursting high over the side of the ship as she reeled into it, had carried away the stanchions, and lifted the port wing of the top bridge with a blow like that of a steam hammer. When the water receded, the end of the bridge had dropped, until twenty feet or so of its outboard extremity was no more than a tangle of splintered planking mixed up with the twisted steel framework.

A boat, covered, lashed and turned inboard on its chocks on the port side of the lower bridge, had disappeared entirely except for a small portion of the bow hanging from the lower block of the fall of the foremost davit, which itself was badly bent.

Two of the large ventilators near the funnel had been beaten in and knocked awry, while a third had vanished. The heavy lifeboat on the port side of the after superstructure had been converted into material for firewood.

Most of the officers’ and engineers’ accommodation had been flooded, while water had poured below into the engine-room and stokehold, through the smashed skylight and ventilator openings.

Mr. Horniblow, awakened from his afternoon nap by the terrific shock, instinctively made his way below. Crawling down the slippery steel ladders, he found his blaspheming underlings wading almost knee-deep through an oily flood washing from side to side over the slippery floor-plates.

“Get those ruddy bilge pumps running, Mr. Dibb!” he shouted angrily at the third engineer. “Don’t stand there lookin’ at the blamed stuff!”

“It’s already done, chief!” roared Mr. Dibb.

That, apart from the uselessness of the steering-gear, was all the injury that was readily apparent.

However, it was more than enough, and Captain Gamblin, standing straddle-legged on the bridge holding on to the rail, was painfully aware that there might be more damage than he knew.

Those hatch-covers, for instance.

If that sea had come clean over the bridge deck, it must have crashed fathoms deep over the well-decks. The hatch-covers might have stood the strain. On the other hand, when they had the time and chance to examine them, one or more might be found to be burst in and leaking.

It was a sorely perplexed and worried shipmaster who stood staring to windward from the *Moorhaven’s* splintered bridge.

The sea looked worse than ever, heavier, steeper and more confused. The ship, having lost her way through the water, was lying practically in the trough of it, rolling horribly, with practically every wave breaking over the fore well-deck.

She was still buoyant, thank heaven, and seemed to be suiting her movement to the length of the sea and its general direction. But if another great breaking comber caught her when she was heeling in the wrong direction, anything might happen.

There was no rift in the dark clouds racing overhead, no signs of the wind abating. It was blowing a hurricane—11 or 12 on the Beaufort Scale—eighty or ninety miles an hour.

“God!” the ‘old man’ murmured to himself, realising what it meant.

Everything depended on the steering gear. If they couldn’t get the hand-steering to function, if the rudder itself was damaged, if they couldn’t repair the steam steering-gear, or rig some sort of an auxiliary, it seemed only a matter of hours before the *Moorhaven* went under.

Waiting until the ship was momentarily steady, Captain Gamblin staggered across the bridge.

Higgs, for want of other orders, was still standing by the useless wheel.

“Nip down aft, an’ let me know what’s happenin’,” the captain ordered gruffly.

The seaman left the bridge.

Captain Gamblin passed on into the wireless room.

3

The *Moorhaven’s* steering gear has already been described. The movements of the wheel on the bridge were transmitted to the steering-engine in the engine-room by means of rods, with bevel wheel connections at the bends, passing along the top bridge; lower bridge, bridge deck and so below.

The rudder was actuated by two long lengths of rod and chain, passing from the steering-engine in the engine-room, out on to the after well-deck, along the well-deck, and finally up to the poop, where the chain passed through heavy quarter blocks to the quadrant on the rudder post.

There had been trouble before with flattened links where the chains passed over the heavy sheaves at the bends, and barely three weeks before, Cudworth had watched the repairing firm’s blacksmith welding a link into the chain

where it came down from the port side of the poop. That link was not tested, and the mate duly protested to Captain Gamblin, who had raised the point with the owners' marine superintendent.

The latter, not having to go to sea in the ship, and not wishing to incur the odium of spending more money on repairs than was absolutely needful, had replied that *he* considered the steering-gear was in sufficiently good repair to carry on for another voyage.

Cudworth had a tolerably shrewd idea of where the damage might have occurred. His first anxiety, however, was to get the ship under control by connecting up the hand steering-gear on the poop.

The ship lay in the trough, with the wind on her beam. They were using oil-bags over the port side; but practically every sea that came roared feet high over the port bulwarks, and swept across the after well-deck in a surging flood of solid water. Men could do nothing there in the way of repairs until the ship was steaming ahead again with the wind on her bow. Indeed, they would run a frightful risk of being swept overboard.

Bob McNeile, the second engineer, arrived on the after end of the bridge deck with Ledbury, the donkey-man, and some tools and spare links. It wasn't really his job; but knowing the difficulty, he volunteered.

Over, the carpenter, came along with his outfit, together with mauls and wooden wedges. Dunn, the bos'un, was there with Swale, one of the A.B.'s, carrying wire and rope for lashings. The party was made up by Horden, Todd and the two apprentices.

“Bob,” said the mate, taking the second engineer aside. “Don’t let anyone on the well-deck until I give you the word. It’s suicide now.”

“What are you going to do then?” McNeile enquired, the wind blowing his long fair hair in streamers.

“I’m goin’ aft to connect up the hand steerin’.”

“Then for God’s sake watch out, man! We don’t want to lose you.”

“Don’t get windy,” Cudworth returned. “Someone’s got to do the job.—Chips?”

“Sir?” said the carpenter.

“Bose?”

“Sir?”

“I want you two, and—er—” he paused, running his eye over the others. “Yes, and you, Todd—to come aft with me. We’ll watch our chance, go aft along the starboard side of the well-deck, and straight on to the poop to get the hand-wheel rigged.”

“Very good, sir,” said the bos’un, as though he were accepting an invitation to tea. “I’m all set.”

“And you, Chips? Got everythin’ you’re likely to want?”

Over sucked his teeth.

“I’m okay, sir,” he nodded. “Fine ruddy weather fur bathin’, I must say,” he added, as a larger sea than usual came surging across the well-deck. “There’s abart two ’undred million ton o’ water in that there one. Wot say, sir,” he went on. “Shouldn’t we take cookie with us?”

“The cook!” said Cudworth. “What the hell for?”

“Give the ole perisher ’is yearly dip,” Over replied. “It’s overdoo.”

The mate scowled at the pleasantry. He liked the carpenter's spirit; but this was no time to be funny.

"And you, Todd?" he queried. "D'you understand?"

"Wot, sir?"

"I want you aft with the rest of us."

Timothy looked faintly surprised.

"It's all the same by me, sir," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Lend us yer spare towel an' bathin' soot, bos'un dear."

Dunn glared at him.

"Enough o' that," he growled. "Just you fist that coil o' wire Ted Swale's carryin', an' keep a civil tongue in yer mouth, unless yer wants yer block knocked off."

"Sir," said Swale. "What d'you want us to do?"

"Yessir, an' me," put in the other man, called Horden.

"And there's us, sir," said Timmins, the apprentice.

The mate shook his head.

"No," he told them. "I don't want more than four to start with. There'll be plenty enough for you others to do later.—But keep your eyes skinned, and if you see one of us wave from the poop, come aft and find out what's wanted. That's all.—You four ready?"

"All ready, sir," the bos'un said.

"Then watch your chance, and follow me one by one. Don't rush it. Take it easy, and for God's sake don't go overboard," Nick cautioned them.

He went two-thirds of the way down the ladder, waited until the ship was more or less steady after a deep roll to starboard, and, with one eye cocked to windward, started to

walk aft, clutching the life-line stretched between the bridge-deck and poop. He was lucky, and reached the poop ladder with no more inconvenience than some more water slopping in over the tops of his sea-boots as a flood of it swished forward.

The bos'un followed, next the carpenter, and finally Todd.

Todd was unfortunate. Feeling the ship beginning a lurch to port, he looked over his right shoulder, saw the curling, smoking crest of a sea bearing down on the ship from the opposite side, and started to run for it, hindered though he was with a small coil of two-and-a-half-inch wire over his left shoulder.

"Steady, you rabbit!" the bos'un howled, watching from half-way up the poop ladder. "Go slow!"

His words floated uselessly away on the gale.

Todd was making fair progress, with his right hand running along the life-line. But the ship moved faster, and the sea more rapidly still. He had just reached the space between numbers three and four hatches, where there was the mainmast and the four cargo winches, when he tripped over the casing of the steam-pipes, staggered, and fell headlong.

The bos'un's remark, as he shot down the ladder to the rescue, was both unsympathetic and profane. He didn't mind if Todd got a wetting; but most strenuously objected to his precious coil of wire being lost overboard. The next moment, when the *Moorhaven* was at the bottom of her roll to port, the sea struck.

As waves go, it was not a very big one. Nevertheless, it seemed to reach the sky, the crest of it even overtopping the poop.

Curling overhead, it fell on deck with a concussion that shook the ship to her keelson. The crashing roar sounded like the end of the world.

Todd, floundering about on his hands and knees among the winches, thought it was the end of the world so far as he was concerned. Beaten flat by the sheer weight of water descending from above, a torrent proceeded to surge over him, knocking him sideways against some projection which cruelly hurt his left knee. He was unable to breathe, and for a time disappeared beneath the flood.

The bos'un, by some miracle of strength, managed to hang on to the sagging lifeline, with his legs and most of his body trailing in the water. Some of the flood cascaded overboard over the weather bulwarks. The weather side of the ship lifted a little, and the bos'un managed to regain a precarious foothold. Pulling himself hand-over-hand along the lifeline, he found Todd jammed up alongside one of the winches. The coil of wire, he noticed, lay beside him.

"Come out o' that!" Dunn growled, pulling the seaman to his feet by the neck of his oilskin. "D'ye want to lose me ruddy wire, an' blinkin' well drown yerself?"

Todd, recovering his breath, spat out sea water and profanity. His knee was darned nearly broken, curse it! He was as wet as a soused herring.

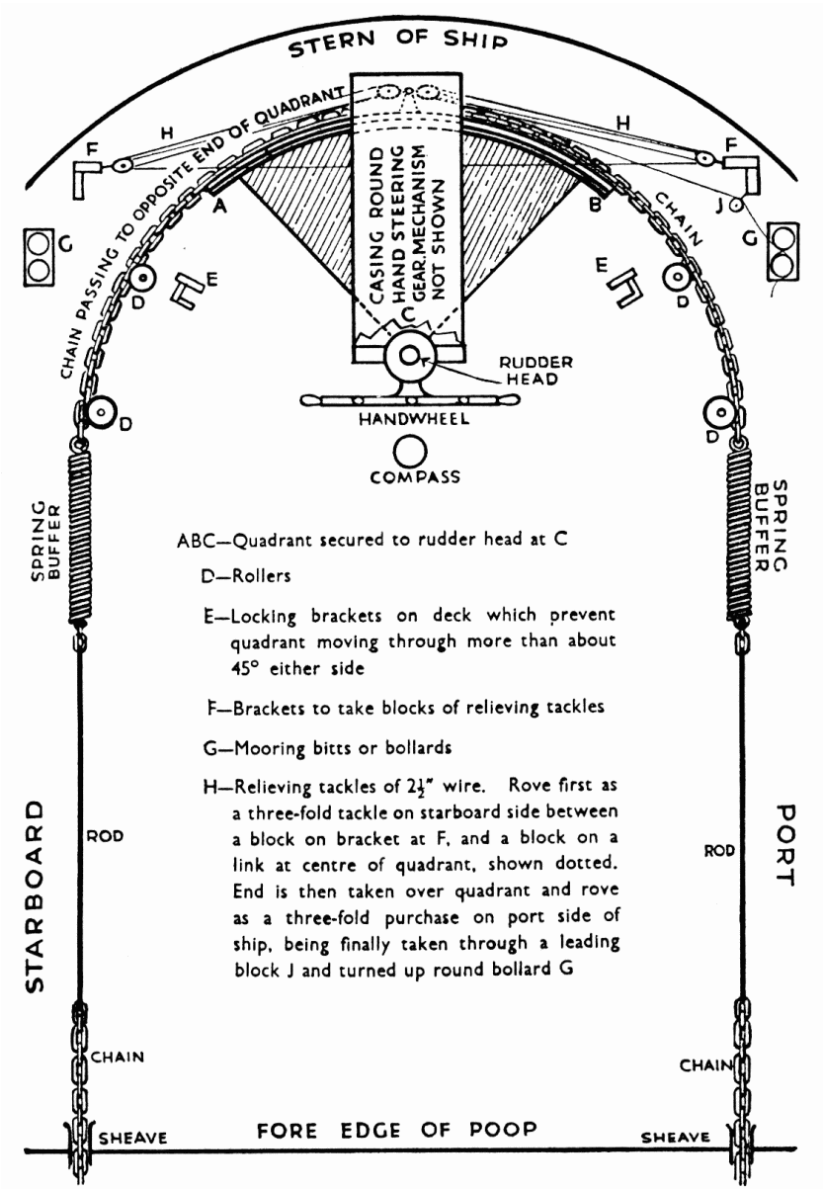
Stiffen the Dutch, quoth the bos'un. Who'd ever heard of an A.B. making a fuss about a drop o' water? To blazes with his knee. Was he a seaman, or a rosy-cheeked, bobbed-haired schoolgirl?

"Come on, lad," he continued more kindly, picking up his precious coil of wire and slinging it over his shoulder. "If we

stick around 'ere yarnin', we'll be over the blinkin' side when the next sea comes."

The pair of them staggered aft, Todd in front. He was limping, and in obvious pain. Climbing the ladder, they reached the poop in safety.

Cudworth had found the damage without having to look for it. A link had parted in the port steering chain, where it passed under the heavy sheave on the well deck after coming down from the poop. The relieving tackles, of 2½ inch wire, designed to take some of the strain on the steering gear, had been rove ever since the gale began, and at the end of each watch, as a matter of ordinary ship's routine, men had been sent aft to take up the slack. But one of the steel blocks had jammed or broken, and the tackle had parted. This had freed the heavy steel quadrant on the poop. The apex of the quadrant, as to speak, was secured to the rudder-head, and both rudder and



Rough diagram of section of Poop showing layout of Steering Gear.

Poop Hatch and Winch not shown.

quadrant had banged from side to side with the heavy rolling of the ship, scrapping the starboard steering chain also.

The mate couldn't account for the ship's sudden swerve to starboard which had brought her into the trough of the sea. However, the reason was unimportant. What was important, was that the hand steering wheel should be connected up as speedily as possible and the *Moorhaven* brought under control. Nothing could be done towards repairing the chains until that had been accomplished.

Meanwhile, as the ship lurched from starboard to port, and back again, the quadrant thrashed from side to side like a great flail. It was weighty, a quarter-circle of steel plating with a radius of about eight feet with its point bolted to the rudder-head. Its after, curved edge, where the steering chains passed through grooves to the opposite ends of the quadrant, looked like a segment of railway line bent into the form of a bow about twelve feet long. A man caught within its orbit would have been pulped to a jelly.

Moreover, its movement was irregular, as it didn't entirely depend upon the rolling. When the stern of the ship lifted, a sea smashing in under the counter caught the rudder a mighty blow, and sent it flying *against* the roll. The quadrant went with it.

There was no anticipating its sudden oscillations. Carrying a tangle of wire and chain with it, the great thing thudded and banged from side to side, fetching up against its stops with a succession of shocks that felt as though the whole stern of the ship might be wrenched off at any moment.

There was a patent friction brake for securing the quadrant in such circumstances, and Cudworth, the bos'un and the carpenter set about applying it.

The ship, meanwhile, was rolling anything up to forty degrees. Heavy spray swept over them, while occasional seas bursting over the exposed poop threatened to hurl them overboard. Worse still, a slip or a tumble might have meant a broken limb or death through the agency of that swinging quadrant, or the bights of chain and wire which followed its movement.

"Can't ye give us a hand?" the bos'un roared at Todd, who was doing little or nothing to assist.

"Me blinkin' leg's near broken, bos'un."

"Get for'ard, then, an' send someone else along!" Dunn retorted. "There's nothin' but ruddy cripples in this 'ere ship!"

"Easy, bose," Cudworth put in. "The chap's hurt himself.—Todd!"

"Sir."

"Send all hands aft, every soul! Tell Mr. Moulding we've got hell's own job up here. Everything's carried away.—Go on. Get a move on!"

"Yessir."

"Hurt hisself!" the bos'un growled, as Todd limped towards the poop ladder. "Singin' out 'cos he's biffed his leg.—Are they all Sissies in this ruddy ship, or seamen?"

After what seemed an eternity, they managed to get the brake put on. The quadrant ceased its wild movement, and the terrifying thudding stopped.

"Thank God for that!" Cudworth muttered, his sou'wester gone, and his hair flying in the gale. "Now the hand-wheel, Chips," he went on to shout. "Smart's the word. That brake won't hold for ever."

It was an unsatisfactory brake at the best of times. A heavy sea hitting the rudder would probably wrench it free, and the quadrant would again start its wild motion.

Todd, apparently, had made his way forward in safety, for the seaman called Swale appeared on the poop in his stead.

"The cap'en's wantin' to know wot's 'appenin', sir," he shouted in the mate's ear.

Cudworth informed him in as few words as possible—told him to go forward to deliver the message, and to return to the poop with more men. "Have you seen anything of the second mate?" he went on to ask.

"Yessir. The cap'en sent 'im with 'Iggs an' the apprentices to do wot they could with number two 'atch. It's stove in, from the look of it."

The mate cursed under his breath. From the terrific pounding the ship had already sustained, he had half-expected something of the sort. And so far, he hadn't had time to look at numbers three and four hatches. For all he knew, their covers also might be damaged and leaking, if not smashed in by the sea.

Over, the carpenter, guessed what was in his mind.

"Don't let's get worrying about 'atches till we've got 'er under way an' 'ead to sea, sir," he advised gruffly. "We can't do fifty things at once."

The mate agreed. "No," he said. "You carry on and connect up, Chips."

The carpenter reached down inside the wooden casing of the hand-wheel, and started fiddling inside. "Bose!" came his muffled voice.

"Hullo?"

“Shove the wheel over to port a bit. Just keep ’er movin’, no more.”

The brake being on, the rudder and quadrant were temporarily secured to the structure of the ship. But the rudder wasn’t exactly amidships, which meant that the quadrant also wasn’t central. To connect up the hand steering-wheel, the carpenter had to manipulate two heavy steel rods each about four feet long. The ends of the rods, which were U-shaped and had holes at top and bottom, had to be pinned through to corresponding holes which had exactly to synchronise. The task was confoundedly difficult.

Cudworth, meanwhile, was bursting with impatience. Once the connection was made, the *Moorhaven* would be more or less under control, and could be brought back to her course. Her hand steering-gear, however, was of the usual old-fashioned sort. The mate was painfully aware that in this weather it would take three, if not four, men at the hand wheel, even with the relieving tackles rove. The latter, meanwhile, would have to be re-rove with new wire, while independent tackles must be passed from the quadrant, to the bitts on either side of the poop. They would have to be manned the whole time and brought to the steam winch on the poop. Without them, no power on earth could steer the ship with the hand wheel.

Counting the bos’un, the carpenter, and the two apprentices, he had a total deck complement of eight—seven if Todd were really hurt, and had to retire to the sick list. Knowing the man, he had no reason to suspect he was malingering.

For the thousandth time, the mate realised how sinfully undermanned the *Moorhaven* really was, how utterly

incapable they were of dealing effectively with any sudden emergency.

The letter of the regulations on the subject was complied with by the owners, no doubt; but it was sheer cheeseparing wickedness on their part, sheer lack of understanding on the part of those who framed the rules and regulations for the safety of ships at sea, that such things should ever be allowed. The Americans, the Scandinavians, the Dutch, the Germans, and the French didn't allow their ships to be undermanned to the point of danger, so why in heaven's name should the British? And Britain, after all, was supposed to be the leading maritime country.

Bent almost double, with his head inside the casing, and his stern up-ended to the sky, the carpenter struggled with his job. In this uncomfortable attitude, with the ship rolling frenziedly, the spray sweeping over him, and water running down into his eyes, his task was exasperatingly difficult.

"Easy!" he shouted, as the bos'un turned the wheel, and a sudden lurch nearly sent him flying. "Stop 'er!—Now back a shade!—Too much, dammit!—Other way a bit, slow now!—Stop! Now just shake 'er to an' fro, bose."

Over's voice sounded hoarse and unnatural. With his head down, and the edge of the wooden casing pressing hard against his stomach, he found difficulty in breathing.

He was on the verge of success, when the stern of the ship lifted. A heavier sea than usual ran in under the counter, to strike the rudder blade a mighty blow. The inevitable happened. The friction brake on the quadrant gave, and in a moment the great thing was free and swinging.

"Stand clear!" the bos'un yelled, pulling the carpenter away.

Cudworth staggered aside just in time.

The carpenter stood swaying with the water dripping off his hairy, empurpled face. His language was past redemption.

The quadrant crashed heavily against its stop as the ship reached the end of her roll. The stern shook to the impact, shook again as she rolled the other way, and the quadrant swept across the deck.

All their work had gone for nothing.

Cudworth could have wept. Having had little sleep during the past three days, he was nearly dropping with fatigue. He felt utterly played out and disheartened, as though it would have been a relief to wave his arms, and blaspheme at the clouds flying overhead, at the raging sea—at everything.

Why should he, and these other underpaid poor fools, sweat their hearts out, and risk their lives, so that ill-found, undermanned old crocks like the *Moorhaven* could struggle to and fro across the ocean, earning money for people who lived in decent houses, slept in soft beds, and could afford to buy large motor-cars and fine clothes for their pampered women?

It was all so rottenly unfair. Why....

The bos'un broke in on his thoughts.

"Well, sir," he asked. "Wot now?"

Cudworth shrugged his shoulders.

"We'll have to shove that brake on again," he replied, watching the swinging quadrant. "It won't hold, I know."

"Wot then sir?"

"Planks, fenders from the after store here under the poop," said Cudworth. "Extra tackles on the quadrant.—We'll have to wedge the bloody thing somehow."

"Aye aye, sir."

“Well, take Swale and Horden,” the mate continued, indicating the two seamen who had arrived on the poop just before the brake had given way. “Get the gear up through the starboard door.—It’s an all hands job. I’ll collect who else I can.”

“Yessir,” the bos’un nodded, aware that the store would be flooded within a few minutes by the seas breaking over the after well-deck. He spoke almost casually, as though he had been told to get the men on to swabbing down the bridge-deck on a fine summer’s morning.

Nick gave him an appreciative look. Dunn was a stout fellow. No matter what happened, he never seemed to turn a hair.

It took them over ninety minutes of agonising work, during which two men were nearly washed overboard, before the quadrant was wedged and secured and the hand wheel finally connected.

Then, with three men at the wheel, the relieving tackles re-rove, and more men manning the additional tackles taken to the poop winch, the *Moorhaven* was gradually brought back to her course.

Captain Gamblin was taking no more risks than were necessary. Once she was heading in the right direction, with the wind slightly on the port bow, he kept her moving with just sufficient speed to give her steerage way, no more. Sacks, loosely stuffed with oakum soaked in oil, had then been put in the men’s lavatories in the forecastle. The oil dribbling out through the waste-pipes spread over the water, and had some effect in preventing the seas from breaking over the after well-deck.

But nothing could stop the motion—those sickening swoops and plunges, and that wild rolling from side to side. Nor could the oil prevent occasional green seas coming on board, and washing waist-deep over the well-decks.

It was the case of all hands, even the cook, the steward and the messroom boy being called upon to assist. Cudworth, Moulding, and what men they could muster, laboured at securing the coverings, battens, and wedges of numbers two, three and four hatches, all of which had suffered.

Bob McNeile, the second engineer, with two of his own men, the carpenter, and some others, were doing their best to repair the two fractured chains of the steam steering gear. They intended to use split links for joining the broken ends, though before that could be done, sections of rod and chain had to be unshackled and eased up to get the ends to meet.

With the heavy movement of the ship, and occasional seas washing them and their tools from their work, wrestling with refractory nuts, bolts and pins, many of which were rusted in and painted over, the job was one of the most difficult and exasperating that McNeile and Over had ever handled. At times, when a breaking sea undid the laborious work of twenty minutes, it seemed impossible.

Meanwhile, the *Moorhaven* had made much water. There was a sluggishness in her movements, and she seemed to be further down by the bows. Knowing that the forepeak was full of water, and aware that number two hold was partially flooded, Captain Gamblin had fears for number one hold also, and the watertight bulkhead that separated it from the forepeak.

If that went, God help them all!

Mr. Horniblow, too, had discovered there was water in the ’thwartship bunker. It might have come in through the bridge space overhead, or through the bulkhead separating the bunker from number two hold. None too confident about the watertightness of the bulkhead at the fore end of the next compartment aft, which accommodated the boilers and engines, all his pumps were working at full pressure.

The water showed no signs of diminishing. On the contrary, it seemed to increase, though the heavy motion made it impossible to be certain. Three times had the chief engineer started up the ladder from the engine-room, to inform the captain what was in his mind. Three times had he thought better of it.

After all, what was the sense of worrying the “old man” with things that were beyond anyone’s control? He already had more than enough to think about. Why add to his anxiety with a further tale of woe from the engine-room?

If he were consulted, he could only tell them to carry on pumping for all they were worth, which they were doing already.

It was this unholy relic of a ship that seemed gradually to be opening out under the terrific strain. Bad weather always discovered her defects. It was the old tale of scamped work and false economy—of rusty plates and frames, of weeping rivets, of leaking joints and pipes.

The old witch was leaking like a colander, and on top of it all came the damnable affliction of steering gear they could never really trust.

If those chains broke again; if one or other of the bulkheads went west; if the weather didn’t moderate....

Mr. Horniblow tried to buoy up his spirits with the thought that the weather *must* moderate before long. It had been blowing for days and days. It couldn't go on for ever.

The chief engineer was not unduly nervous or imaginative. In his inner consciousness, however, he was beginning to feel really alarmed.

Only once in his life had he been really frightened, and that was in April, 1917, when looking over the side of the ship in which he was then serving as second engineer, he had suddenly seen the white slick of an U-boat's torpedo lengthening out across a calm, blue sea. It was coming straight for the engine-room, and, running deep, had passed clean under the ship before he realised it was gone.

The sudden sight of those tell-tale bubbles had been terrifying, almost paralysing. It had induced the sort of fear that seemed suddenly to grip one by the heart, and make one weak and helpless.

This anxiety about the *Moorhaven* was different. It was more prolonged and difficult to bear—a sort of gnawing suspense that never gave one any rest.

All the same, Mr. Horniblow was the last man in the world to display the real state of his feelings to subordinates. He bustled about with his customary energy. Only his language was more sulphuric than usual.

He certainly astonished the stokehold.

"Wot's come over 'Indenburg?" enquired a labouring fireman, named Cooley, completely unabashed at being roundly cursed for not using his slice on a furnace. "I thought 'e wus strong an' silent; sort o' 'oly-like, an' didn't know the use o' them naughty, wicked swear words."

" 'E's a Plymouth Brother," said his friend with the shovel.

"Garn!" Cooley snorted derisively.

"Sure thing, chum. Cookie told me."

"Cookie! Wot the 'ell's the ruddy cook know abart it?"

"The stooard tells cookie, chum. That lop-eared Tubbs knows everythin'. 'E over'ears the orficers at meals."

"Huh!" Cooley grunted. "All I can say is, they teaches 'em some funny things dahn at the Plymouth brother'ood. Thank Gawd I comes from Lime'ouse."

He glanced at a pressure gauge overhead, and threw open a furnace door, to peer at the blazing mass within. The fire needed replenishment. After giving it a preparatory rake with his long slice, he put down the unwieldy implement, and flung in eight shovelsful of damp coal.

Cooley was an experienced fireman. To one unaccustomed to the work, it would have been a pleasure to watch him. The red glow of the fire shone on his face, and his huge arms and heavy chest muscles bulging through his dirty singlet. In spite of the deep rolling of the ship, his every movement was perfectly timed and accurate. Every ounce of that coal fell exactly where he wanted it to go—from end to end of the furnace, so that the fire should be of equal thickness throughout. He didn't want trouble with an uneven fire, and a great mass of clinker which wouldn't fall through the fire bars into the ashpit beneath, and would have to be broken up piecemeal.

Slamming the furnace door to with the tip of his shovel, he attended to two other fires. Then, wiping his streaming face with his bare arms, he helped himself to a drink of grey-looking oatmeal and water mingled with coal dust, spat twice, and considered himself at liberty to continue the conversation.

"Wot wus we sayin'?" he queried.

“ ’Indenburg,” said Farish, his companion. “Didn’t yer know ’e visits them seamen’s missions an’ gets ’ob-nobbin’ with the ’Oly Joes? I’ve see’d ’im meself, singin’ hymns an’ playin’ the ’armonium, lookin’ like butter wouldn’t melt in ’is mouth.”

“Dark ’orse, d’yer mean?”

“Maybe. Orl the same, I can’t ’elp likin’ the ole bloke. ’E’s square.”

“ ’Ooever said *I* didn’t like ’im?” Cooley returned. “I does like ’im—kiss ’im if yer like. Wot’s more, I likes ’earin’ ’im break ’art a bit. It makes things more ’omelike when he ain’t too perlite.”

“ ’Omelike, fur the love o’ Mike!” Farish exclaimed, mystified. “ ’Ow?”

“Reminds me o’ me ole dad,” Cooley returned. “Time I wus a kid, an’ dad comes ’ome from sea.”

What was the connection between Cooley’s male parent and Mr. Horniblow, Farish couldn’t imagine.

“Wot abart yer ole dad?” he asked.

“ ’E wus a fireman, like me, chum. First night ashore ’e ’as ’is skinful, like anyone else. Then when the pub closes, if ’e ain’t broke it up before’and, ’e comes ’ome an’ starts smashin’ up the ’ouse just to show ’ow ’appy ’e is at bein’ ashore agen. No one could ’old ’im once ’e got goin’; but ma, knowin’ wot’s in the wind, locks up the best china before things starts to ’appen.” He paused.

“Wot did ’appen?” his companion queried. This was the sort of reminiscence he enjoyed. It savoured of the “good old times” when people were a law unto themselves.

“ ’Appen!” Cooley snorted. “Wot didn’t blazin’ well ’appen!—Wot wi’ ma screechin’, the blinkin’ furniture flyin’, the second-best crockery smashin’, orl us kids yowlin’, an’ the neighbours yellin’ murder an’ perlice outa their winders, we makes a fair night o’ it when me ole dad comes ’ome from sea. There wasn’t much Y.M.C.A. abart ’im.—’Owever, it wus only ’is bit o’ fun....”

“Sounds like it, chum.”

“Well, ’cept fur ma’s black eye, an’ the scratches down dad’s face where she’d sloshed ’im with a teapot, we wus orl friends agen next day.—’E wus good to us kids when ’e ’ad the money, an’ ’e an’ ma understood each other. There weren’t no ill-will nor back-bitin’ abart it. Fergive an’ ferget wus the motter.”

A sudden lurch, wilder than usual, sent the narrator staggering over the slippery floorplates, across which surged several inches of filthy water.

He could hear the booming roar of the wind overhead, and the hollow, thudding reverberation as seas impacted against the *Moorhaven’s* side and broke on board. She shook and vibrated as her stern lifted and the propeller left the water. It was like being inside a great resonant drum.

“They’ll drop the bloody screw off her if they don’t stop that racin’,” Cooley remarked. “Feels like she’s bein’ turned inside out when she pitches.—I wonder how poor old Freddie Sergeant’s stickin’ it, lashed up there like a blinkin’ mummy?”

“ ’E’s poorly,” Farish answered. “Burnt somethink crool, I ’eard say.”

“ ’E would be, poor bloke.—This ruddy ship!”

“Wot’s up, chum?” asked his mate, struck by his friend’s sudden change of voice.

“Wot ain’t,” Cooley replied, nodding at the flood swishing round his feet. “I’ve never known ’er make water like this afore.—Is it deeper than it wus an hour ago, or isn’t it?”

“Search me. Orl them pumps are ’eavin’.”

“Aye. I knows that. But pumps ’eavin’, an’ pumps suckin’, ain’t the same thing. That there forrard suction’s choked already, ’cos I ’eard ’Indenburg say so. Supposin’ they’re all chokin’ up gradual-like with that there anthracite we’re carryin’?”

“Meanin’ wot?”

“That the blinkin’ water ain’t gettin’ no less,” said Cooley. “ ’Tisn’t me ’oo’s imaginin’ it.”

Farish stared at him.

“Lawd!” he exclaimed, his eyes goggling. “D’yer reely mean it?”

Cooley snorted with impatience.

“Shouldn’t waste time sayin’ so if I didn’t,” he retorted. “Yus. The water’s gainin’ ’cos the ruddy ship’s leakin’, that’s why.—An’ ’ow long’s it goin’ to take fur the blinkin’ water to reach them perishin’ fires?”

“I dunno, chum.”

“Yer wouldn’t,” said Cooley solemnly. “ ’Cos yer can’t. No one can.—But wot ’appens when the water does reach them furnaces? Maybe yer can think o’ that.”

“Gawd!” the junior fireman exclaimed, suddenly alarmed.

He realised what Cooley was driving at.

If the water showed signs of reaching the furnaces, the fires would have to be drawn to avoid the risk of explosion. If the

fires were drawn, the *Moorhaven* couldn't steam.

That might be right in decent weather, if it gave them a chance of doing something about the pump suctions. But in weather like this....

4.

Captain Gamblin, standing straddle-legged in the chart-room with the chart of the North Atlantic spread out in front of him, was wrestling with the problem of the ship's position.

He imagined her to be somewhere in about Latitude 46° 15′ North, Longitude 35° 30′ West. But sights had been impossible for more than five days. They had been running on dead reckoning, and the wind and sea, combined with the set of the current, might have had any sort of an effect on the course and distance made good. The readings of the patent log, until it had finally been carried away during the forenoon watch, told him little.

With no land or shoal water for nearly fifteen hundred miles, the position would have mattered little in ordinary circumstances. Now, however, it had become a matter of first importance.

The *Moorhaven* was in a bad way, and night was coming on. At almost any moment, the skipper might have to send off a distress signal asking another ship to stand by—if another ship happened to be in wireless touch. But there wasn't much use in a distress signal if the position it gave were twenty, thirty or forty miles wrong.

When darkness came, lights might be seen at two miles, certainly no more. Rockets or flares might be visible at five or six. If a ship were summoned, she might spend the whole of the night and all next day searching for the *Moorhaven* with never a chance of success.

The chances of *sighting* another vessel were fully a thousand to one against. Captain Gamblin had often crossed the Atlantic with never a glimpse of anything from shore to shore. The so-called traffic lanes weren't like Piccadilly. The ships were few and far between, and those bound east kept a good distance to the southward.

There was a chance, just a remote one, that a wireless signal made by the *Moorhaven* might be overheard by a modern ship fitted with direction-finding apparatus which would give her the *Moorhaven's* line of bearing. On the other hand, only passenger ships of over 5,000 tons had to be fitted with "D.F. gear". It was expensive, rather in the nature of a luxury.

Poring over his chart, turning over the pages of the log, and making calculations, Captain Gamblin made up his mind. Forty-six, fifteen, north—thirty-five, thirty, west, was about the best approximation he could think of for four o'clock. Thereafter, the ship would be making good about one knot on the course south eighty-three west magnetic.

He went to a voice-pipe, and whistled up the wireless-room. Denholm answered.

"Are you hearing any other ships?" the captain asked.

"Nothing close to, sir," Percy told him.

"How d'you mean close to?" Captain Gamblin enquired testily. "What distance?"

"Nothing inside a hundred miles, sir."

"And what's she?"

"She may be a man-o'-war, sir. She's been sending in code. I've heard her off and on for the last three hours."

"Closer or further away."

"It's difficult to say, sir."

"You've no idea of her direction?"

"No, sir."

"Any other ships?" the captain demanded.

"Several more very faint, sir. I should put 'em all at over a hundred and fifty miles."

Captain Gamblin sighed.

"Well, keep listening, mister," he said, bitterly disappointed.

"I will, sir," Denholm replied, his voice as cheery as ever.

Dammit, thought the captain, didn't anything ever disturb the lad? Surely he must realise something of the gravity of the situation?

"Is your set all right?" the "old man" went on to ask.

"Nothing wrong with it that I know, sir," the operator returned, the faint note of surprise in his voice seeming to enquire how anyone could ask such a futile question. *Of course* his set was in order. Why should it be otherwise?

"Right, mister. Then stick up there. I may want you to send something before long."

"Very good, sir."

"How about your grub?" the captain asked.

"My *what*, sir?"

"Grub," the skipper repeated. "Scoff, food—whatever it is you call it."

"Oh, that's all right, sir," Denholm laughed. He was amused at the captain's anxiety for his welfare. Had the old boy gone gaga that he should suddenly develop these maternal instincts?

“Don’t be a fool!” the skipper growled. “You must eat. I’ll see you get something.”

“Thank you, sir. Anything’ll do me.”

The captain jammed the whistle in the end of the voice-pipe, and replaced the latter in its clip on the bulkhead.

He felt vaguely jealous. Here was he, a hard-boiled master mariner with years of experience, suffering the torments of responsibility in a crazy, unseaworthy ship, while young Denholm seemed completely unruffled. Either the boy was full of guts, or else he suffered from a complete lack of imagination.

Anyway, he was a good lad. It just showed how wrong it was to base one’s opinion on first impressions. He had rather disliked Denholm because of his foppishness. Evidently a la-di-da manner, the use of scented hair-oil, and rather an extravagant mode of dressing, didn’t necessarily imply that a fellow was effeminate or useless.

The chartroom door flew open.

Tommy Moulding, the second mate, burst in with a gust of wind that sent the captain’s notes flying, and the chart skidding across the table.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he apologised breathlessly, slamming the door behind him. The water streamed off his oilskins on to the floor.

Captain Gamblin relapsed on to the settee, wedging himself into a corner.

“What is it?” he enquired.

“The mate sent me to say we’ve done our best with number two, three and four hatches, sir.”

“What damage was there?”

“Two wooden covers smashed in number two, sir, and the tarpaulins torn,” the second mate said. “We’ve done what we can to repair ’em,” he added, going on to say that all the spare tarpaulins had been used, and the spare canvas for the bunker hatches.

No water was now finding its way below through the hatches, though there was no knowing how long the repairs would last if bad weather continued. The job hadn’t been easy with the ship rolling, and the seas washing them all over the place.

Captain Gamblin seemed satisfied. He was aware of the difficulties. Moreover, he trusted his officers to do the best they could.

“What about the steam steering-gear?” he asked. “Any hopes?”

Twenty minutes or half-an-hour should see the job done, the second mate explained. They’d had to unshackle and unbolt various lengths of rod and chain to get the broken ends to meet. They were still at it. The mate and his party were helping.

“Are they making a job of it?” the skipper queried.

Moulding looked doubtful.

“It depends what you call a job, sir,” he said. “They’re having to use split-links. That’s all they *can* do.”

The skipper grunted.

Split-links, he realised, were unsatisfactory at the best of times. They might do the trick, or they mightn’t. If they carried away, and the steam steering-gear broke down again, they’d have to carry on as best they could with the hand wheel and tackles. That meant watch on and stop on for most of the deck hands.

Another three or four men would have made all the difference. Sitting there listening to the muted roaring of the wind, and the wash and thunder of the seas, Captain Gamblin cursed the parsimony which made it possible for ships to go to sea with only eight men on deck. Eight. Good God! Eighteen wouldn't have been any too many in weather like this.

But he wasn't telling Moulding what was in his mind.

"Right," he said wearily. "Now just you have a look at the chart and the log, mister. See what you make our position at four o'clock. I want a check."

Moulding set to work.

The captain stood up and reached for the engine-room voice-pipe. Removing the whistle, he blew down it, to be answered by the reedy voice of Mr. Dibb, the third engineer.

"Cap'en here," said Gamblin gruffly. "Is the chief engineer below?"

Mr. Horniblow was sent for. For perhaps thirty seconds the skipper listened to the rhythmic thud and wheeze of moving machinery, the clack of pumps. It sounded almost peaceful after the hurly-burly of wind and water on deck. Then the voice of the chief engineer.

"Cap'en here," Gamblin repeated. "How's things with you?"

"As well as you'd expect," Horniblow returned, after the least hesitation.

"What d'you mean, chief?"

But Mr. Horniblow wasn't airing his opinions for his underlings to overhear.

"I'll come up and see you," he said evasively.

The captain clicked his tongue.

"No need for that," he replied with impatience. "Let's have it now."

"No," the muffled voice returned. "I'll come up and see you."

Gamblin shrugged his shoulders.

"Right," he said. "I'm in the chart-room."

He heard the sound which indicated that the whistle had been plugged home at the other end of the voice-pipe. He saw through old Horniblow's little manœuvre. Things weren't too happy below. Something was amiss.

Damn it! What could be wrong?

Engines, boilers, pumps ... he could imagine a score of things, apart from the steering-gear, that might be giving trouble in this perambulating wreck of a ship. His anxiety returned, intensified.

"Well, mister," he asked gruffly, lurching to Moulding's side. "Where d'you put her?"

"Just a moment, sir," said the second mate, who hadn't quite finished.

The skipper watched him as he did an addition sum on a slip of paper, and proceeded to lay off the estimated course with the parallel rulers. Then he measured a distance on the latitude scale at the side of the chart.

"I think we're just about here, sir," Moulding said, indicating a spot with the point of his dividers. "Within a mile or two of this pencil mark."

"You've made an allowance for wind and sea?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you just about tally with me," Captain Gamblin told him. "That's good enough."

"It's mostly guesswork, sir."

"Huh! How could it be otherwise with this stinking weather.—No sights for over five days, damn it!"

"No, sir," Moulding agreed, measuring off. "Your mark's forty-six, fifteen, north. Thirty-five, thirty, west."

"Right. Make a note of it."

The second mate did so.

"And now go down aft and find out how long they'll be with that dratted steering-gear.—Tell the mate not to shift over from the hand-wheel till I tell him. I'll be aft myself in a few minutes to have a look."

"Aye aye, sir," said Moulding, leaving on his errand.

The chief engineer's tale was as bad as it possibly could be. The pumps were heaving for all they were worth; but some of the suctions were choked and couldn't be cleared—dust from the anthracite cargo, probably.

The *Moorhaven* was leaking in twenty places, from the look of things. There was water in number two hold, the bridge space, and the 'thwartship bunker. Water was washing over the floor-plates in the stokehold, and was still creeping up. The firemen were getting the wind up. So, for that matter, was Mr. Horniblow.

"Nothing more you can do?" Captain Gamblin asked, a sick feeling in his heart.

"I've tried everything I know. We can't do more than go on pumping till we can't pump no more."

"Till the water puts the fires out, you mean?"

The chief engineer nodded.

"That's about it," he agreed dolefully.

"How long will that be, chief?"

"Can't say with this motion on her. It's impossible to judge how fast it's coming in.—Maybe ten hours, maybe fifteen, perhaps twenty-four. I shouldn't care to bet on it."

"But she'll float long after that."

Of course, said Mr. Horniblow. The question was, how long would she float?

The captain knew what was in the chief engineer's mind.

If the *Moorhaven* couldn't steam, neither could she steer. Unmanageable, she would fall off broadside on to the wind and sea, to drift helplessly in the trough. With this gigantic, toppling sea running, a few hours of that would see the end of her. She would be overwhelmed.

"No chance of the weather easin' up?" Horniblow asked. "Lord knows it's blown long enough."

Captain Gamblin shook his head.

He couldn't see the least prospect of the weather moderating. The last forecasts they had picked up by wireless had been uniformly bad. Ships were reporting heavy stuff all over the North Atlantic. The glass was down as low as it could be, and seemed likely to remain so. The look of the sky gave no hope of salvation. No. It might go on blowing for days.

The chief engineer groaned.

"God knows I've done me best," he said sadly.

"No one could have done more," the captain consoled him. "We've *all* done our best. We can't do the impossible—steering gear going phut, ship leaking, an' all that.—Hell!"

For a moment the two men stood looking at each other, while the wind howled outside, and the *Moorhaven* went through her usual antics. The captain and chief engineer were very old friends.

"She's cursed!" Horniblow suddenly burst out, overcome by his feelings. "She didn't ought to be at sea at all in this state, riskin' decent men's lives. Where's the fairness of it? Haven't we told 'em time an' time again what wanted doin'. Where's the.... Ah!" he broke off, with an angry shrug of his shoulders. "What the hell's the good o' talkin'? We're up against it. I can't see any way out."

The skipper patted him on the shoulder.

"Cheer up," he said unconvincingly. "We're not dead yet."

"No. But we bloody soon will be unless there's a miracle."

Captain Gamblin did not reply.

"Well," said the chief engineer. "I suppose it's got to come some time. It's no good howlin'. 'Tisn't meself I'm thinkin' about."

"Aye," the skipper agreed sadly, thinking of his wife and children. "I know."

Seven minutes later the *Moorhaven's* wireless was crackling....

S.O.S.—S.O.S.—S.O.S.

FIRST DOG WATCH

1

AT ten minutes past four in the afternoon of her fourth day out from Halifax, Nova Scotia, His Majesty's Ship *Juno* was about 570 miles East—True—of Cape Race.

She was on her way home to recommission at Plymouth after serving for over two years on the America and West Indies Station—a long, lean, single-funnelled cruiser of 7,000 tons, with a length that was ten times her beam. With a complement of just over 550 officers and men, she was a thirty-two and a half knotter. A horse-power of 72,000 was crammed into that slender hull, horse-power that was 25,000 in excess of that of a battleship about five times the size of the *Juno*.

The weather had been dirty ever since sailing, and had become worse on drawing away from the land. It was now blowing something more than a full gale from the westward, and the lieutenant going off watch at four o'clock had logged the wind "10-12. Furious and frequent squalls."

It was no exaggeration. In the heavier gusts the wind seemed to cut the toppling seas in half, to send their ruin driving to leeward in sheets of solid water. And what seas they were—great, leaden-coloured moving monsters streaked with white, with foaming crests that obliterated the horizon.

The *Juno* was as lively as a cork. The wind and sea were slightly on her starboard quarter. Each time her stern lifted to a liquid mountain, until rudder and screws were half out of water, she seemed to shoot down the next deep valley like a toboggan down a slope. Overtaking her, the wave crest usually broke over her low quarter-deck and waist, running

forward in a flood several feet deep to pour overboard again in a series of cataracts.

At times, when the stern was in a hollow, and the bows started to rise, the whole fore-part of the ship, as far as the foremost 6-inch gun turret, was buried deep in solid water. Shuddering, she dragged herself free. The sharp bow lifted, and a roaring, whitened flood came tumbling aft against the fore superstructure, finally to fall back into the sea with a sound like thunder.

She pitched heavily, rolling dizzily and fast,—as only a long, lean ship can roll. Sometimes, when a particularly heavy sea took her under the quarter, she yawed wildly off her course, so that the helmsman had difficulty in holding her. They had tried her at various speeds to suit the sea and to lessen the motion—thirteen knots, twelve, ten. A fraction over nine seemed to be better than anything.

Except for the watchkeepers, the regular routine had long since gone by the board. The ship was battened down fore and aft, and it was unsafe to be on the upper deck or raised forecastle. The watch on deck, oilskinned and sou'westered, sought what shelter they could on the flying-deck between the bridge structure and squat funnel. Below, the wardroom, gunroom, cabins and crowded mess-decks were peopled with suffering humanity. Some of the hardiest had still managed to enjoy their meals, while more made a pretence of eating. The greater number did not really care whether it was Christmas or Easter.

Life was altogether abominable, for in spite of all the modern improvements in accommodation and air-conditioning, a lively, quick-rolling ship in a seaway is still the most uncomfortable thing in the world. Moreover, in a

man-o'-war, man cannot suffer in solitude and dignified silence. He has to endure the indescribable smell of crowded living-spaces, mingled with the odour of cooking—which no system of ventilation ever seems wholly to eradicate,—together with the sight, and sound, of scores of woebegone shipmates, each one more miserable than the last.

On such occasions, the cheery gentleman with the red face, the loud voice and the cast-iron stomach, the 'Life and Soul of the Mess', is fit only to be forcibly invested with a pair of leaden-shod diver's boots, and cast over the side.

The Admiralty looks after its seamen like a benevolent Mother in Israel. It feeds them and clothes them—even supplies them with artificial dentures if the natural ones should fail. But not all the Sea Lords in Whitehall, nor all the Medical Directors General of the Navy, have ever invented a cure for seasickness.

Thank heaven that Nelson was seasick!

The commander of the *Juno*, Roger Wedderburn, tall, slim and rather lackadaisical in his manner, but in nothing else, climbed to the bridge in search of his commanding officer. Captain Kilburn wasn't in his sea cabin, or in the charthouse. Wedderburn found him wedged in a corner of the upper bridge, gazing out to windward over the starboard quarter, observing the behaviour of his ship. Short, dark and thickset, almost as broad as he was tall, the skipper was still smoking his inevitable pipe.

The sight was certainly worth watching—ridge after ridge of smoking, grey-white water rolling relentlessly down from windward, to pick the ship up and hurl her forward like a bolt from a crossbow.

The darkening sky, streaked with tattered banners of slate-coloured cloud fringed with white, had assumed a sickly yellowish tinge to the westward. The bilious colouring was unnatural, almost ghastly, as though some evil genius were brewing his fiendish broth far below the rim of the visible horizon.

The air was full of the crash and thunder of breaking seas. Heavy spray, whipped off the water on the upper deck by the overtaking wind, came flying forward over the bridge, to travel on in a whitened cloud. The sound of the wind was never the same for two consecutive seconds. Sometimes it boomed like distant gunfire. Sometimes it rose to a piercing shriek, only to die away to a plaintive whine as the ship subsided into a trough, and became momentarily sheltered from the blast by a comber towering astern.

Kilburn looked over his shoulder.

Somewhere in the early forties, he was a cheerful, kindly soul, the sort of skipper who could be very dignified and ‘on service’ when the necessity arose; but made friends of his officers, and spent a good deal of time in the wardroom. He detested the loneliness of his own cabin.

His bronzed face, the commander noticed, was redder than usual, whipped by wind and spray. The shaggy eyebrows under the peak of his sou’-wester dripped moisture; but the brown eyes beneath twinkled with bonhomie.

Curse it, Wedderburn thought to himself, the ‘owner’ seemed positively to be enjoying himself! Wedderburn wasn’t.

“Well, commander. How goes it?”

“I came up to report I haven’t been able to go to evening quarters, sir,” the commander bawled, making a hurried salute

and then clutching the rail as the ship gave a mighty lurch. “I’ve been round the mess-decks, and have sent the hands to tea.”

The captain grinned and nodded.

“How are the gallant troops?” he asked. “Flaked out?”

“Pretty awful, sir. One can’t stand up below.—The mess-deck’s like a mortuary. Corpses rolling about all over the shop. A few of ’em are just alive enough to groan. You never saw....”

“Right,” the skipper interrupted. “You needn’t describe it. I’m having my tea in a few minutes.—Had your own?”

Wedderburn made a wry face, and shook his head.

“I’m giving tea a miss, sir.—How long’s this blow going to last?”

The captain smiled. So the commander also was feeling it.

“The pilot[4] says we’ll have it most of the way across,” he replied. “He’s worked it out, curse him!”

“He *would*,” the commander returned, with deep feeling. “He’s a wizard on his lines of equal barometric pressure, and isobars and what-nots.—Roll on England, say I. To blazes with the sea when it’s like this.” He gazed mournfully at the welter outside the ship.

“Then thank your lucky stars we’re not butting into it,” the captain said. “That ’ud be hell with the lid off.—Behaving pretty well, isn’t she? A bit lively, that’s all.”

“I suppose she *might* be worse, sir,” the commander admitted grudgingly. “But if this does go on, it grieves my heart to think what she’ll look like when we steam up the Hamoaze. Chatty[5] won’t be the word for it. All my paintwork’s gone west already.”

"Don't worry, commander. They won't stop your promotion because we've had a gale in the Atlantic.—Lord! I'll be glad to be home again. There's that new infant of mine I haven't seen—getting on for two years old."

"Yes, sir. I remember drinking his health when he arrived. St. Kitts, that was. It seems the deuce of a time ago."

"Yes," said Kilburn. "*And* the christening mug you all gave me, strictly against the regulations."

"No, sir. Strictly within the regulations," the commander corrected. "We gave it to young George, if you remember."

"Yes, so you did. All the same, as young George's proud father, I took it as a compliment.—You know, commander, it's...." he paused.

"What, sir?"

"It's about time you got married. There *are* compensations. Don't tell me you're wedded to the Service, and all that guff."

Wedderburn snorted. He had listened to this sort of talk before.

"I'm too fond of my personal liberty, sir," he explained. "Besides, *I* can't afford a wife. Wives are...."

"What about that young thing you used to skid about with at Bermuda—the one rather rolling in boodle that you used to take to dances and bathing picnics?"

The commander pretended to look mystified.

"Which one, sir?" he enquired. "There were several I sort of had a look at; but not one of 'em came up to what I—er —— Anyhow, heaven protect me from a wife with boodle. I don't fancy having to go to any female to ask for a guinea to buy a new hat."

Captain Kilburn laughed.

"It's to be presumed you'd buy your own hats, commander. What do they pay you for?"

"For looking after this ship, sir. Not to go buzzing and doing the poodle-faking stunt with a gang of women—Lord! I had nearly three years of it in Malta. A fair sickener that was, having to mind your P's and Q's in case you said the wrong thing to some Admiral's daughter, who might let on to papa that you weren't the sort of bloke who ought ever to be promoted."

"Admiral's daughters aren't so *very* different to other young women," the captain objected. "Damn it all, commander, I married one myself."

"Yes, sir. But Mrs. Kilburn's different, if I may say so. She's one of the exceptions that proves the rule."

"Nicely put. But what's the matter with the others?"

"Well, sir. They know too much. Having been born and bred in the Service, they're sort of perambulating Navy Lists, with an intimate knowledge of the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions chucked in."

"I see," the skipper said, rather amused. "You're scared of 'em. All the same, and in spite of—er—your cohort of fairies at Bermuda, I believe you're really a misogynist at heart."

"No, sir," the commander protested. "I don't dislike women. I merely don't want to marry one just yet. I'm like the old Earl of St. Vincent, who didn't get spliced until he was forty-eight. He wrote a letter to one of his officers whom he thought had been married—'Sir, You having thought fit to take to yourself a wife, are to look for no further attentions from your humble servant, John Jervis.'—He was a tough old nut, sir, if you remember. He hanged mutineers on Sunday, and all that."

Captain Kilburn laughed.

"So you're ruthless and remorseless, commander, what? Well, don't get hanging anyone here till I'm safely out of the ship. Someone might kick up a dust in the newspapers. Anyhow, take my tip and...."

"Well, Jenkins," he broke off, as the chief yeoman of signals came staggering across the bridge with a signal pad. "What is it?"

"Wireless message, sir. A distress signal," the man replied, handing over the pad.

The captain ran his eye over it, and whistled.

"Sounds like a job for us, commander," he exclaimed, his manner excited. "Listen to this.—*Moorhaven* to all ships in vicinity. In distress. Ship making water. Hatches stove in but temporarily repaired. Two boats washed overboard. Steering gear unreliable. Please stand by. Am hove to. Latitude forty-six, fifteen north. Longitude thirty-five, thirty west!—Poor devils! What the hell's the *Moorhaven*, I wonder?—Chief yeoman!"

"Sir."

"Tell 'em to acknowledge. Here," he said, tearing off the written sheet and handing back the pad. "Write down."

Jenkins produced his pencil.

"*Juno* to *Moorhaven*," Kilburn dictated. "Am coming to your assistance as fast as weather permits. Verify your position.—That's all for the present. Tell 'em to get it off quick."

"Aye aye, sir."

"And send someone down for the navigating officer!"

"Yes, sir."

The chief yeoman left on his errand. The captain, followed by Wedderburn, made his zig-zag way to the chart house.

"That position's somewhere to the east'ard, sir," said the commander, as they got inside.

"Thank God for that!" returned Kilburn, pulling open a long drawer to find the chart in use. "We'll have to crack on all we can, and it's going to be frightful—not quite so bad as if we were steaming against it."

"We couldn't go more than six knots against it," Wedderburn volunteered.

"Aye, and the Lord only knows what we can do with this sea abaft the beam. It was pretty ghastly when we tried her at twelve this morning. It hasn't gone down any.—Ah! What have we here."

He produced a chart of the North Atlantic bearing the ship's course, and the noon position.

"Where the blazes does the pilot keep his instruments?"

"Try that small drawer to the left, sir," the commander suggested.

"Look up the *Moorhaven* in Lloyd's Register," the skipper grunted, pulling open the drawer indicated, to find no dividers or parallel rulers within. "Where's the pilot tucked away his things, damn it?"

"I know he hides 'em, sir. I've heard him grumbling at the midshipmen for pinching his double B pencils," said the commander, reaching down a squat, black book with red edges from the shelf overhead, and relapsing to the settee to flick over its pages.

The lee door of the chart house was flung open, and the Lieutenant Commander (N), Seymour, entered.

"Sorry if I'm a bit late, sir," he apologised. "I was below, trying to wash. Then, when that S.O.S. came, I hopped along to the distributing office to verify that position.—I'll plot it off, sir. She's some way to the east and south, from the look of it."

He opened another drawer, produced his instruments, and set to work.

"The *Moorhaven*, sir," Wedderburn read aloud, running his finger across the page. "Built in nineteen-thirteen."

"Flaming fish!" Kilburn exclaimed. "Well over twenty years old. Pre-war vintage.—What else?"

"She's changed hands four times, sir, and is now owned by the Haven Steam Shipping Company, of Swansea. Single screw—a tramp, from the look of it."

"What size?"

"Just over three thousand gross register, sir."

"Smallish," said the captain. "Probably one of those ancient, slab-sided, ill-found crocks they allow to go to sea with about six men and a boy. It beats me why fellows ever go to sea in 'em, poor devils! They're death-traps, nothing else. —Well, pilot?"

"If her position's correct, I make her just over a hundred and twenty miles to the east-south-east'ard, sir," Seymour replied. "I'll work out the exact course."

"And suppose her position's not correct?" Kilburn queried. "He mayn't have had sights for days."

"We can D.F. him, sir."

"Yes. I know that, pilot. We can get his bearing within about five degrees at say, seventy miles, and more accurately

as we get nearer. I suppose we ought to find him all right by daylight if there's any visibility at all; but what about night?"

"Tell him to burn flares and fire rockets," the commander put in.

"And suppose he's too far gone to do even that," Kilburn observed. "I'm not liking this job."

He glanced at the clock on the bulkhead, and did some rapid thinking.

One hundred and twenty miles, and say the *Juno* managed to do a steady twelve knots in this following sea? That would mean reaching the *Moorhaven*, *if* they found her without much difficulty, soon after 2.30 a.m. If they could do fifteen knots without damaging the ship, the time would be shortened by about two hours.

What about twenty knots? Could the *Juno* stand it?

Realising his responsibility, the captain thought of the welter outside with apprehension. The sea was really frightful, quite one of the largest he had ever seen.

Would Their Lordships in Whitehall ever forgive him if they were faced with a heavy repair bill because he had forced his ship in bad weather?

This was a life-saving job, certainly. It was his duty as a seaman to do everything in his power to help these poor souls in distress. The honour of the Royal Navy was at stake, and there was the brotherhood of the sea, and all that sort of thing.

Nevertheless, he had the safety of his own ship and ship's company to consider—five hundred and fifty of them. The *Moorhaven*, he imagined, would carry about thirty hands all told.

Was she in imminent danger of sinking, or wasn't she? Her signal hadn't been very explicit. She had merely said—'In distress. Making water,' and had asked other ships to stand by.

Kilburn was wondering if he could reach her in time if he went on at twelve or thirteen knots. If he couldn't, he must risk things and go on faster. In any case, he'd better ask her for more precise details.

"I make the course one oh nine,[6] sir," said the navigator.

The captain thought for a moment. A course of 109° would bring the sea broader on the starboard quarter. The motion would be no worse; but the ship would yaw horribly.

"Right, pilot," he said. "You might tell the officer of the watch to bring her round. And go on to ten knots to see how she takes it.—You realise we may have to increase still more to get there in time?"

"Yes, sir. What are your intentions?"

"To shove on as fast as I can with safety. This fellow may be all in for all we know. We'll increase a knot at a time."

"Aye aye, sir," said the navigator, opening the door and disappearing on to the bridge.

Thank heaven for turbines and oil-fuel, thought Captain Kilbum. Those below in the engine-room and stokehold could increase speed by a good many knots merely by turning on a few more oil-sprayers. It wasn't like shovelling coal into furnaces by hand.

Commander Wedderburn, for his part, was beginning to wonder what they would be able to do when they *did* reach the *Moorhaven*. How could her men be rescued, if rescue became necessary?

Unless the weather moderated greatly within the next few hours, it would be sheer, homicidal mania to try lowering a boat. No ship's boat could live in the steep, curling sea that was running, even if they got her into the water in safety.

Like his commanding officer, he began to think out schemes of laying oil to windward of the wreck; of firing lines over her with Coston guns, and getting a grass hawser between the ships; of launching Carley floats and allowing them to drift to leeward, with hawsers made fast to them, so that they might be grappled from the *Moorhaven*.

However, no matter what scheme was eventually adopted, it would be difficult and hideously dangerous. Both ships would be drifting to leeward; but the *Juno*, light and buoyant, would drift faster than the waterlogged *Moorhaven*. And the cruiser, rocking and pitching violently, would have to steam dead slow past the wreck, and to windward of her, to get a line across. She might even have to stop engines.

Then, when the ships were connected by means of the line-throwing gun, it seemed doubtful if those on board the steamer could haul in the heavier hawser made fast to the end of the line. There might be no steam on the *Moorhaven's* winches. The *Juno* couldn't remain stopped for very long. The line might carry away when she was forced to go ahead to avoid collision.

The commander had every confidence in his captain, who was an excellent seaman, and an adept at handling his ship. But it needed something more than a superman to do a job like this. For the life of him he couldn't see how the rescue was to be accomplished, particularly at night.

Meanwhile, the *Juno's* wireless was crackling.

'*To Moorhaven*', she said. '*Am coming to your assistance as fast as possible. Have about 120 miles to steam. Please indicate your present condition. Are you in immediate danger?*'

Steaming now at twelve knots on the new course, the cruiser was shipping heavier water over her starboard beam and quarter. Yawing wildly to starboard as her stern lifted, she dived her sharp bows deeper into the seas as they raced ahead into the night.

Darkness had fallen, with a sky as black as ink. The raging sea had taken on a faint, bluish radiance, in which the nearer wave-crests stood out as tumbling pyramids of ghostly white. The mingled sounds of the sea and wind were deafening—a continuous booming roar that was like the noise of an artillery barrage. It was almost stupefying.

But Kilburn, watching the behaviour of his ship, felt satisfied. She was shuddering throughout her length as the seas struck home. Even the bridge structure quivered to the blows. She was reeling, pitching and yawing worse than before, with her upper deck like a half-tide rock; but there was no actual danger—merely increased discomfort. Provided the sea were kept well abaft the beam, the speed might even be increased a little more.

Presently a reply came back from the *Moorhaven*:

'*Steering gear repaired. Ship temporarily under command. Pumps choked. Water increasing. Fear it may extinguish fires before many hours. My position ... Gamblin. Master.*'

"That settles it," said Captain Kilburn, reading the message in the charthouse. "We'll go on another knot. See to it, pilot,

will you."

Seymour was inclined to protest.

"She'll be awful for steering, sir," he ventured. "She's yawing all over the place now. Supposing she runs off into the trough?"

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

"She *mustn't* run off into the trough," he replied. "Get your best quartermasters at the helm. Put 'em on half-hour tricks if need be.—Damn it, we can't leave these poor devils to drown! We've over a hundred miles to go. Even a knot may make all the difference."

"Aye aye, sir," said Seymour, going out on to the bridge.

A quarter of an hour passed.

From thirteen knots the *Juno* increased to fourteen. More than that she couldn't go without positive danger. Even so, watching her behaviour from the bridge, Kilburn's heart was sometimes in his mouth as the ship dived more steeply than usual, swerved in her course, and a veritable hill of water surged across the forecastle in a roaring, thundering avalanche.

Another wireless message flashed off into space:

> '*Juno' to 'Moorhaven'.—Expect to reach your estimated position at 1330. Fire rockets or burn flares every quarter-hour from 0045. 'Juno' will show searchlight vertically same times. Inform me if seen and give bearing. Hope locate you by D.F. Coming fourteen knots. Stick it. Good luck. Acknowledge.*'

"She's sticking it," said Captain Kilburn, peering out ahead through an opened window of the bridge as the cruiser drove

on into the night.

"Better than I hoped, sir," the navigator returned.

"Better than I hoped, too," the skipper rejoined. "She's not too bad, considering."

Seymour permitted himself to smile. It was dark on the bridge, and his face couldn't be seen. To his mind, however, the captain was rather asking for trouble—rushing through this sea like a madman, with the helmsman doing all he knew to keep the ship anywhere near her course. If she did take a heavier sheer than usual, and brought the sea nearly abeam ... well, anything might happen.

However, it was Kilburn's own responsibility—Seymour's job to obey orders. Blast the people who ever permitted these ill-conditioned, unseaworthy tramps to go to sea, to disturb the peace of mind of His Majesty's Navy and every other ship in their vicinity!

"Midshipman of the watch!" the skipper suddenly shouted.

"Sir?" answered a rather seasick young officer in oilskins, appearing from nowhere.

"Ring up the wireless office. Tell 'em I've been waiting ten minutes for those intercepted signals—I want to know what other ships, if any, have answered that S.O.S. If they've given their positions, I want 'em quickly. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

"And how often have I told you not to say 'very good'?" the captain growled. "You're a seaman, boy, not a commissionaire of the Hotel Splendide."

"Yes, sir. Aye aye, sir."

"That's better. Now get a move on, and find out what I want. Go below and chase 'em, if necessary."

"Aye aye, sir."

The lieutenant who was officer of the watch, peering ahead in the intervals of staring at an oscillating compass card to see if the quartermaster in the steering position below was doing *his* job, sniggered under his breath. The skipper was a fair corker in his insistence on the use of the proper Service phraseology—regular 'Old Navy' in some of his ideas.

But then, of course, having gone to sea in 1909, the captain *was* 'Old Navy'. He could almost remember the days of masts and yards, and had been a midshipman when such things as motor-boats and aeroplanes were still stared at as novelties. He was a darned good chap, of course, human and understanding, the sort of skipper who stood by his officers through thick and thin, and was liked by every man on board. All the same, he was incredibly old, almost in the sere and yellow.

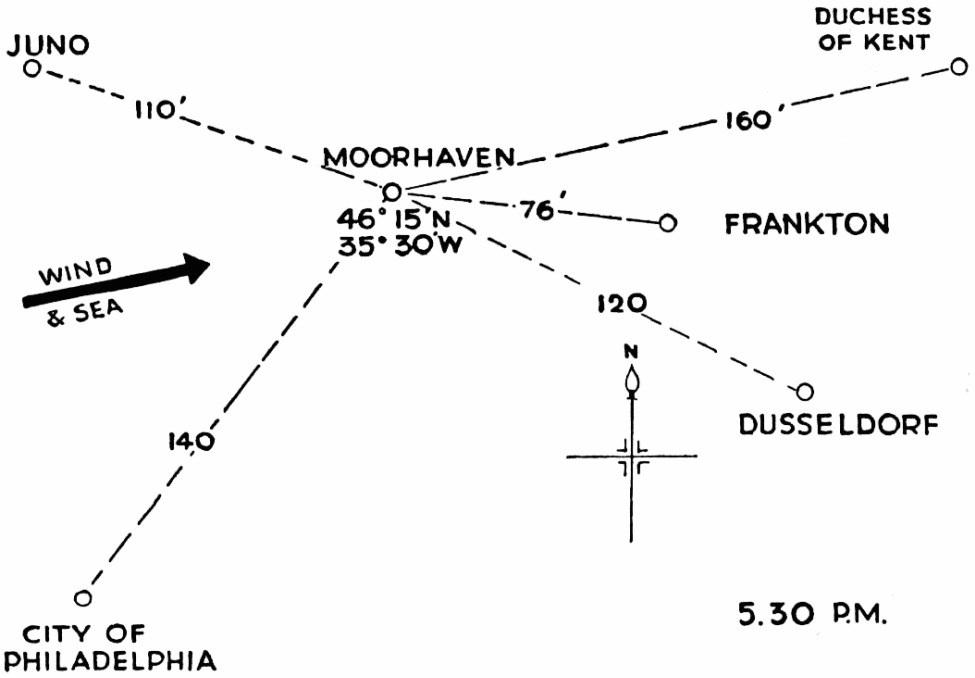
The officer of the watch, who was twenty-four, wondered what *he* would feel like at the age of forty-three.

2

By half-past five, the position had more or less sorted itself out so far as the *Juno* was concerned.

The cruiser herself had wirelessed the Admiralty that she was proceeding to the *Moorhaven's* rescue, while seven vessels had answered the S.O.S. Of these, four, apart from the *Juno*, were converging at varying speeds upon the *Moorhaven's* position as broadcast.

Plotting their respective positions on his chart, gave Seymour the diagram reproduced below:



The captain regarded it with attention.

"Have any of 'em given their expected time of arrival?"

"No, sir. Not precisely," the *Juno's* navigator answered. "But the *Duchess of Kent* says she can't steam more than twelve knots against it. The *Dusseldorf's* doing about eleven and a half. The sea's terrific, they say, or words to that effect."

"And don't we know it, pilot. Thank God we're not to the east'ard, and battling against it!—The *Duchess* is a twenty thousand tonner, I see," he went on, flicking over the pages of Lloyds Register. "The *Dusseldorf* ... er—yes, sixteen thousand."

"If they find the *Moorhaven* slap off, and they ought to, as they're both passenger ships and'll be fitted with D.F., the *Duchess* ought to reach the spot in just over thirteen hours

from now, call it half-past six in the morning. The *Dusseldorf* 'll be earlier, just before four, if she keeps it up."

"Yes. And the *Frankton's* out of the running.—According to this book, she's a tramp, or something like it. Two eight five six tons, gross register. Single screw. Built in nineteen fifteen."

"She merely gives her position, and says she's going as fast as she can against the sea. That won't be more than four or five knots, at the very outside."

"And seventy-six miles to go. That's over fifteen hours. She can't be there before 9 a.m., and won't be much use when she does.—Think we'd better tell her not to bust herself? We don't want another casualty."

The navigator shook his head.

"I shouldn't, sir," he answered. "She's doing her best. Pity to discourage her."

"Yes. That's true, and her cap'en might resent my butting in and trying to do the heavy father—Oh!" he added, his eyes on the chart. "I'd forgotten this fellow to the south'ard."

"The *City of Philadelphia*, sir.—I forgot. She *did* give her time of arrival. Four-thirty in the morning, which gives her about thirteen knots."

"Three hours after us," said Kilburn. "So the *Moorhaven's* our bird, what?"

"Looks like it, sir, unless something happens to delay us."

The captain knocked out his pipe on the heel of his sea-boot, and proceeded to refill it. The ship was rolling dizzily. He could feel the muffled shocks as the racing seas struck her. Here, inside the charthouse, however, the sounds of wind and sea were muted to a gentle drumming.

"What time's daylight?" he asked, putting a match to his pipe.

Between half-past six and seven, the navigator told him.

"By which time there'll be two British ships, one American, and one German on the scene. It's a regular League of Nations. Come to think of it, pilot, there's something rather dramatic about this poor devil flinging off her S.O.S., and all of us converging on her from different points of the compass."

Seymour didn't reply. He couldn't see anything dramatic about it at all. The whole incident was a confounded nuisance, one of those things which ought never to be allowed to happen. He realised, too, the frightful difficulty of doing anything for the *Moorhaven* when they *did* reach her. The weather showed no signs of moderating. The glass was as low as it could be.

"It'll be a nice tit-bit for the B.B.C.'s news bulletins at six and nine-thirty," he observed morosely.

"What?"

"You reported to the Admiralty, sir. It'll be passed on, if all these signals haven't been intercepted already. Can't you hear the announcer saying—'Wild weather and mountainous seas are reported in the Atlantic. The British steamer *Moorhaven* is in distress in latitude so-and-so, longitude so-and-so. The cruiser *Juno*, homeward bound, is racing to her assistance. Four other ships are rushing to the rescue.' It'll be all over England to-night, and in every paper to-morrow morning."

"Lord!" Captain Kilburn grunted, rather perturbed. "I'd forgotten it would be broadcast. It's a bit hard, pilot."

"How, sir?"

"On the wives and relations of the people in the *Moorhaven*. What would you feel like if your wife...."

"*I'm* not married, sir," Seymour protested.

"You're too literally minded, pilot.—If you *did* happen to be married, what would you feel if you heard over the wireless in the evening that your wife might be drowned in a rotten old ship, and you had to spend the night thinking about it?"

"I shouldn't like it, sir."

"No. Nor should I. And unless she sinks before midnight, or so, there won't be any later news in the morning papers. Think of their anxiety.—Pretty awful, I imagine. It's worse than the War in a way, for then they got used to it. This'll come like a thunderclap.—Well, there's one thing I've made up my mind about."

"What's that, sir?"

"Unless she's actually sinking, I shan't do anything until daylight. It's no good risking things when one can't see. We'll stand by her during the night, and then...." he paused.

"And then, sir, what?"

The skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't honestly know," he had to admit. "Oil on the water first, anyway. Then boats, firing a line over her, or floating a grass line to loo'ard?—Who knows! So much depends on what we find when we get there; the weather, how she's lying, and so forth. We don't even know yet that they want to abandon the ship. She's merely said the water's gaining, and that it *may* put out the fires before many hours. If that happens, she's helpless, and 'll probably drive to loo'ard in the trough of the sea. Let's hope for the best, anyhow. Perhaps

friend Gamblin's painting a blacker picture than he really need."

"I hope to heaven he is, sir," Seymour agreed. "It'll be a tough job, otherwise."

"Toughish," said Captain Kilburn. "I've known worse."

He was thinking of the War—in particular, of an incident concerning a destroyer seriously damaged by collision during a thick fog in the Heligoland Bight. The Zeppelins could be heard chattering overhead on their wireless. They had been answered by German cruisers—very close. It had been touch-and-go; but the fog had held. It was one of the few occasions when he had been really thankful for thick weather.

The *Juno* drove on into the night.

SECOND DOG WATCH[7]

1

SIX o'clock in the evening found the *Moorhaven* practically hove to—her engines moving at just sufficient speed to give her steerage way, head to sea. The night was intensely dark, and the weather showed no signs of moderating.

The ship still rolled and pitched heavily, flinging herself through almost impossible angles. In spite of the fact that she was making little or no headway, the larger seas still crashed over the forecastle and poured fathoms deep over the fore well-deck. There was no avoiding them.

To those on the bridge who had the opportunity of noticing, it was obvious that she had lost considerable buoyancy within the last few hours. Her bows butted deeper into the advancing combers. She felt sluggish and lifeless, and no longer tried to suit her movements to the rise and fall of the seas. They seemed constantly to catch her at the wrong moments. It was almost as though she were giving up the struggle as hopeless.

The steam steering-gear and relieving tackles were again in operation; but Captain Gamblin placed no faith in them.

Nor did his officers, or anyone else. Every man on board who had anything to do with it, was aware that the use of split links for repairing the broken chains was an unsatisfactory makeshift, though the only possible one in the circumstances. They might suffice for a time, provided no sudden strain was placed upon the rudder. Otherwise, they merely served to weaken a whole steering system that was already dangerously feeble.

At almost any moment the chains might part afresh, leaving them with no alternative but the hand steering-gear on the

poop. Connecting it up, as the carpenter observed to the bo'sun, would be a gory job. It was difficult enough in broad daylight, with the quadrant charging from side to side like a battering ram. In blinding darkness, it would be simple hell with the lid off.

Oh yes, said Over to his friend, sucking at his pipe outside the door of the galley, where they were more or less sheltered. He knew that every man jack of the crew would do his damnedest in an emergency; but no man could do the impossible. Suppose they couldn't connect up the hand steering—what then?

Dunn, the bo'sun, clasping a mug of the cook's execrable coffee in both hands, shrugged his shoulders and made no reply.

There *was* no reply, or, if there were, Chips already knew it. The *Moorhaven*, helpless and unmanageable, would fall off into the trough of the sea. It would be the beginning of the end.

Besides, they could never steer the ship with the hand-wheel alone. That was humanly impossible. They *must* also have those auxiliary tackles led from the quadrant to the bollards on each side of the poop, and thence to the poop winch.

Meanwhile, according to the latest advice from the engine-room, the water was creeping up. Sooner or later it would reach the furnaces. That meant no steam in the boilers—no steam for the winch on the poop.

A feeling of utter despondency seemed to have settled upon everyone on board. They were wet and cold, and had been in this condition for days. Most of them were weary almost to the point of physical exhaustion.

The only ray of comfort lay in the fact that other ships were steaming to their assistance. But there wasn't a man who didn't know that the water was gaining, and that the pumps, or suctions, serving the forepart of the ship were choked and useless.

How long would it be until the inexorable water put out the fires, they wondered. When would those ships who had answered the S.O.S. arrive? What could they do when they did appear? It was obvious enough to everyone that no boat in existence could live in the sea that was running.

Both the seamen's and firemen's forecastles had had to be evacuated. Those of their occupants who weren't on duty, found what shelter they could outside the galley, in the engine-room fiddley, and the alleyways outside it.

Two men, realising the calls that might be made upon them during the night, were stretched out asleep. Some of the remainder, having eaten the food served out from the galley, had lit their pipes or cigarettes, and seemed to be accepting the situation with stoical calmness—probably because they were too tired to worry.

Two of the firemen, however, Cooley and Hawkins, with their eyes flashing in their black faces, were conversing in excited whispers.

The steward, at the captain's orders, had served out a tot of spirits to all hands with the evening meal. This had merely whetted the desire for more on the part of those two.

Tired of cursing the ship, the owners, and anything else that came to mind, they were planning a raid on the engineers' rooms. McNeile, the second engineer, was below. He habitually kept a bottle of whisky in his locker. So did Mr. Horniblow. It shouldn't be too difficult.

It was astoundingly easy.

The cabins they designed to pillage opened off the port alleyway, and passing out of the fiddley the plotters reconnoitred. They had some plausible excuse if seen and questioned. But the alleyway was empty. So were the rooms.

Less than a minute sufficed to abstract the precious bottles, and to retire with them concealed beneath their grimy shirts. A minute more, and they were on deck, as though nothing untoward had happened. Not a soul was in sight. It was quite dark.

Those bottles were about a half and two-thirds full. Without waiting to argue about sharing alike, they tore out the corks and gulped breathlessly, Hawkins, the younger man, nearly choking as the liquor descended down his gullet. He wasn't used to spirits, particularly neat spirits.

Cooley, the chief conspirator, belched, sighed with deep satisfaction, smacked his lips with gusto, and observed that a little drop like that wouldn't do a board school child any harm. Then he hurled his empty bottle far into the night. A second curved after it.

Lurching back to their old places in the fiddley, the pair seated themselves, grinning and winking at each other in congratulation.

" 'S'easy," Hawkins soon muttered, as a warm exhilarating glow of well-being began to course through his body. "Strike me pink! Pinchin' th' ole mucker's booze! Why didn't we never...."

"Ssh!" his friend hissed.

But Hawkins wasn't in the mood to remain silent for anyone. He was feeling strong and self-satisfied, a fine,

valiant fellow ready to bash anyone on the nose as soon as look at him.

He felt an irresistible desire to laugh and sing. Everything seemed damn funny all of a sudden. Pinching old Hindenburg's whisky was as easy as kiss me.

"Hoo, hoo!" he chuckled inanely.

"Shurrup!" growled Cooley, who was a man of greater alcoholic capacity.

" 'Oo sez shurrup?" Hawkins demanded, hiccuping happily and excusing himself in a sudden access of politeness. "Shurrup? For why?... I don't care ... don't bleedin' well care if we drowns. 'Oo cares, hey?... I feels like I could take on Carnera, or Battlin' Murphy. Slosh 'em, knock their blinkin' 'eads together! Hoo, hoo!—Damn funny, ain't it?"

"Don't get shoutin', yer blazin' fool!" Cooley expostulated, suddenly anxious as Hawkins raised his voice. "You'll give the 'ole show away, you lop-eared bustard! Carn't you 'old a little drop like that without makin' a song abart it an' gettin' us pinched?"

"I'm a blinkin' tank," the younger man announced hoarsely. "Full up to th' ruddy ... hic ... bung 'ole. Hoo, hoo! 'Oo ... c-cares wot 'appens, hey?—Pinched you sez? I'd like ter see the bloke as'll pinch me."

The elder man began to feel alarmed. Hawkins was becoming noisy and obstreperous. Much more of his silly talk, and there would be trouble. As for himself, he wasn't feeling a bit drunk—only pleasantly warm and affable.

"Look 'ere, chum," he whispered. "If you be'aves yourself, we'll find another drop afore the night's out."

The younger man stared at him, evidently trying to understand.

“More bloody booze?” he asked thickly.

“Aye.”

“Then find it now,” Hawkins laughed, trying to scramble to his feet. “L’let’s go ... hic ... find it now. Yus, that’s th’ talk, chum.”

Cooley pulled him down.

“Sit quiet, you fool!”

“Well, ’ow does ... does we get another swallow?”

“You ’olds the stooard in conversation, while I does the trick.”

Hawkins blinked.

“Me ... hic! Me!” tapping himself on the chest. “*Me* ’old conversationsh?—Splendid ideash.—Tell you wash. You go find ole skipper, c-chief engineer, stooard, orl the blazin’ lot. I ’old conversationsh orl right.—Make ’em speech, tell ’em orl wot I....”

“Can’t you stop it?” Cooley exclaimed, his temper rising.

“You go find ... s’stooard, chum. Bring th’ ole beanpole ’ere.—An’ wash’ll I shay to ’im? Won’t shay nuthin’, ’cept don’t like ’is face. Then dot ’im one on ... on shnozzle.”

“Put a sock in it!” the other man growled angrily. “You’ll get us ’ung! You’re drunk, that’s wot you are.”

“Hoo!” came the reply. “You’re drunk, am I?... ’Oo cares? ’Oo bleedin’ well cares? I wants to sing.—Orl merry an’ bright! ’Oo sed cows ... c-clouds, I meansh, ’adn’t got no silver linin’s? ’Oo sed....” he paused for breath. “Wot wus I sayin’, ole chum?”

“You keep quiet!” Cooley hissed, almost in despair. “Stop shoutin’! D’you want ’em comin’ up from the engine-room to see wot the row’s about?”

Let 'em all come, young Hawkins declared. He didn't care. He'd fight the blazin' lot, single-handed—knock 'em base over apex down their ladders. He was brave, he was. Not all the chief engineers in creation could intimidate him. No, sir!

"If you don't keep quiet *I'll* give you a clip alongside the ear'ole, 'Awkins!" Cooley broke in, realising that things were becoming desperate.

Hawkins, swaying to the movement of the ship and his own intoxication, appeared to consider the matter.

"Clip 'longside ear'ole," he observed. "Hoo! that's ... that's.... Kiss me, Gertie!" he went on. "I'm feelin' drunker an' drunker, tighter'n Paddy's ole sow. You knows 'ow tight that wus, Cooley boy, 'cos ... 'cos you're tight yerself, tighter'n.... I can't think 'ow hintoxicuted.—'Oo sez I'm drunk?" he asked. "Bring the bleeder 'ere, an' lemme ... lemme knock 'is ruddy block orf!"

"Keep quiet, damn you!" said Cooley, shaking him.

"Quiet, when ... when I wants to shing?—No, shir. Not this 'ere nigger. We're orl jolly good pals together, th' cheef ... cheef engineer an' orl the bonny boys. Good chapsh, wunnerful good chapsh! Shell their blazin' shirts fur a tot o' whisky, the drunken ole swabs." He paused for breath.

"Ever seen me shing, chum?" Hawkins enquired. "You 'aven't ... hic ... pardon.—Drunk lars' night," he carolled raucously. "Drunk th' night before. Drunk agen to-morrer. Never get drunk no more.—Not 'arf. Shign th' pledge. Wear blue r-ribbon, next me 'eart an' in me button'ole, same as I promised me ole gran'mother, blesh 'er!"

"Stop it, I tells you!" the elder man said furiously, shaking the offender by the arm.

“Wot shay? Don’t like my shingin’? Cooley boy.... Well, ain’t that a shame, you ole Turk.”

“Ain’t everythin’ a blinkin’ shame,” he rambled on. “But you needn’t look sho ugly. Can’t shee you proper, ’cos everything’s ’eavin’ round and round.—But you look sho ugly, always wush. You’re no pal o’ mine, you ole ... ’Strewth!” he broke off with an air of great surprise, staggering to his feet before Cooley could prevent him. “I’m goin’ to be shick!”

Helped by a heavy roll of the ship, he shot out into the alleyway, and disappeared.

“Fur Gawd’s sake!” muttered Cooley in alarm, jumping to his feet, and going after him.

In his present condition, that young fool Hawkins would probably go over the side.

Damn the silly fellow for not being able to hold his liquor without making a nuisance of himself!

2

In the *Moorhaven’s* chartroom, Captain Gamblin was poring over a little diagram like a miniature spider’s web, drawn upon his chart.

It was practically the same as that which appeared on the *Juno’s* chart, over a hundred miles away. It showed the *Moorhaven’s* position in the centre, with the *Duchess of Kent*, *Frankton*, *Dusseldorf*, *City of Philadelphia* and *Juno* hurrying to her assistance from the different points of the compass.

A wonderful invention was wireless, Gamblin thought to himself, busy with his dividers.

Twenty-five or thirty years ago, his ship would have been utterly alone in that wild waste of heaving water, with no

means of summoning help except by firing rockets or burning flares which wouldn't be seen at more than four or five miles. Now, thanks to a few longs and shorts flashed off into space by the simple tapping of a Morse key, he had not only informed ships within 160 miles or so that the *Moorhaven* was in distress, but had told them of his condition.

Moreover, the signals received in reply were encouraging, —with the *Juno* arriving at 1.30 a.m., and most of the others before daylight. By daylight, indeed, the *Moorhaven* would be the centre of a small fleet. She couldn't very well sink before then, old Horniblow said, unless, of course, a bulkhead burst, or the hatches gave way.

However, there was little chance that she wouldn't be located. The cruiser was using her direction-finding apparatus, and though neither the *Duchess of Kent* nor the *Dusseldorf* had mentioned it in their messages, they would be fitted with D.F. as well.

Things looked rosier. There was a chance yet, a damn good chance—particularly since the Navy had taken a hand.

Not that Captain Gamblin had more than a sneaking admiration for the Navy, heretical though it sounds to say so.

Like many of his comrades, he regarded R.N. officers rather as aristocratic, moneyed, polo-playing snobs who looked down on their Merchant Naval brethren rather as pariahs. True, they made speeches at big dinners about the splendid comradeship of the sea, the magnificent work of the merchantmen in the War, and the interdependence of the two Sea Services. But that, he thought, was mostly popular flapdoodle. The naval johnnies weren't *really* sincere about the brotherhood business, and merely tolerated the Royal Naval Reserve because they had to. Even R.N.R. officers

were derisively referred to as “Cargo Bill”, or so Gamblin believed. He’d read it in some book or another.

Naval officers, and the men too, he considered, were pampered darlings who lived on the fat of the land, drew good pay and pensions, and were fêted everywhere they went. Nobody ever made a fuss of the Merchant Navy except in war, or unless they did something outstandingly gallant and courageous during peace. Then they might have their photos in the newspapers, and be given medals, or silver-plated binoculars, suitably inscribed.

The captains of a few of the crack passenger liners might also achieve knighthoods or other distinctions in the ordinary run of business; but these gentlemen were the high-and-mighties of their profession who were always in the public eye. The bulk of the Merchant Navy was made up of those who manned the humble cargo-carriers. Their work was carried on out of sight. They never became illuminated in the glare of publicity unless something untoward happened.

Not that any decent sailorman wanted publicity. He usually preferred to do his job to the best of his ability, and to leave it at that.

As for seamanship, what did the Navy know about seamanship, Gamblin wondered. How could their knowledge compare with that of those who spent year in and year out on their bridges?

Men-of-war, he’d heard, spent much of their time in harbour. And Navy people had long spells in offices ashore, or in instructional establishments where they learnt all about the guns, torpedoes and other scientific and mechanical gadgets with which their ships were crammed. Even the R.N.R. officers and men on first joining were dressed up in

gaiters, to spend hours marching round a parade ground with rifles, learning how to fix bayonets, present arms, and form fours.

Was that sailorizing?

Bet your life, no—Gamblin would have answered.

Any old how, these scientific, gold-laced gents of naval officers couldn't *really* be seamen when it came to a job of hard work which involved something of the lost art of sailing ships.

The captain of the *Moorhaven*, however, worthy fellow though he was, suffered from an inferiority complex. He *thought* that the Navy looked down upon him and his fraternity, whereas the Navy harboured no such conceit. If Captain Gamblin had had occasion to visit one of His Majesty's ships-of-war, he, like any other guest would have been treated like a long-lost uncle, and offered pink gin or sherry.

But he had never been on board a man-of-war, while most of what he believed about the navy he had picked up by hearsay from men who had served in it during the War, and for one reason or another, had harboured a grievance. More than likely, they had been irked by the discipline.

Moreover, never having been in the R.N.R., Gamblin's personal experience of the other Sea Service was very limited. All the contacts he had made had been with transport, convoy and routeing officers during the War—rather peppery old "dug outs", all togged up in gold lace and the ribbons of previous little wars and Jubilees, who were brusque and dictatorial in their manner.

As a master mariner in command of his own ship, Captain Gamblin had resented sometimes being kept waiting for his

sailing orders, and then being glared at and barked at as though he were some dog'sbody of an apprentice asking for an advance of five shillings. Also, he didn't like being talked to as though he didn't know the meaning of latitude and longitude, or how to take a sight or shape a course.

On the other hand, he forgot that these irascible, beribboned gentlemen had a thousand and one things to deal with besides Captain Leonard George Gamblin—skippers who would not *obey* instructions as to safe routes and courses if there was anything to be gained by disobedience; submarine sinkings; newly-laid minefields; the collection of convoys, and the provision of escorts which never existed in sufficient numbers when the convoy system was in full swing.

What with telephone messages and wireless signals pouring in morning, noon and night, orders and counter-orders, the people who had the job of organising the whole complicated business were worried to distraction. It wasn't really fair to judge the whole Navy by them. Come to that, Captain Gamblin wouldn't have cared to be judged by his own biting remarks to all and sundry on one of his worst mornings when things were going wrong.

But the fact that a man-of-war was steaming to the *Moorhaven's* rescue as fast as she could manage it, was distinctly comforting.

The *Juno's* captain, too, seemed a man of some imagination and a good fellow. By breaking away from the usual terse official phraseology and tacking the words "*Stick it. Good luck*" to the end of his wireless message, he had shown a sort of personal interest in the *Moorhaven's* plight. Anyway, Captain Gamblin appreciated the underlying purport of those four simple words. They had caused him to revise some of his

preconceived notions as to the aloofness and superiority of the Royal Navy.

The cruiser was out to help. Thank God for that!

The door of the chartroom burst open, to admit a screeching blast of wind, and the tumultuous roar of breaking water. Cudworth, his oilskins streaming with water, staggered inside with a rectangular canister of bright tin. Shutting the door behind him, he put his burden on the settee.

"Flares, eh?" the captain grunted, eyeing him.

"Yes, sir."

The mate's appearance was ghastly. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot. His sou'wester had gone, and beneath his plastered hair a deep gash over his left eye looked raw and angry in the bright glare of the electric light. The injury had had no attention. Blood, trickling down the side of his face, had matted his eyebrow and congealed with the grime and coarse stubble on his cheek and chin. The side of his face looked like a large sore.

"That's an ugly lookin' cut you've got there," Captain Gamblin observed, peering at the wound. "Done anythin' for it?"

Cudworth shook his head.

"No time, sir. Somethin' caught me early on this afternoon when that sea hit the bridge."

"Hurt you?"

"A bit sore when I touch it, sir. That's all."

"You must have a skull like an elephant, Mister. There's a bit o' skin all hangin' loose. Cut to the bone, by the looks of it."

“It’s all right, sir,” Cudworth answered him, vaguely irritated at the Old Man’s fussiness.

“Best let me shove on a bit o’ lint and plaster,” the skipper insisted. “Maybe it’ll want a stitch or two, and a bandage.”

“I’m all right, sir. I can’t go worryin’ about bandages an’ plaster now. Don’t worry, sir.”

The captain shrugged his shoulders.

“All right, Mister. Suit yourself.—Got those rockets handy?”

“They’re ready in the saloon, sir. Out of the wet.”

“Aye.—How’s things outside?”

“No change, sir,” said Cudworth shortly, moving towards the door. “Sea an’ wind are as bad as ever.”

He wondered why the skipper troubled to ask such a damn silly question. The old boy hadn’t been off the bridge more than ten minutes, and even in the chartroom any fool could hear the roaring of the storm, and feel the *Moorhaven’s* frightful motion.

Change! Why should there be any change? Perhaps the captain wanted company. Perhaps he liked having someone to talk to. Anyhow, with twenty different things on his mind, and the helmsman alone on the bridge, the mate was in no mood for meaningless conversation.

“It won’t take off yet awhile,” Captain Gamblin said mournfully. “Lucky these chaps are coming. You saw their signals.”

“Yes, sir,” Cudworth answered, longing to be off.

“I’ve figured it out on the chart there,” the skipper continued, pointing to his diagram. “You’ll see the situation.”

Cudworth glanced at the captain's handiwork with perfunctory interest. He was far too tired and preoccupied with other matters to be really concerned with diagrams. All that *really* mattered was that ships were coming to the rescue. Until then, the *Moorhaven* had to be kept afloat.

He made some remark about the *Juno*, to which Gamblin replied. The conversation dawdled on. They were still talking, when the chartroom door burst open again, to disclose the pale face and, then, drenched figure of Mr. Harold Dibb, the third engineer.

"Come in, man. Come in!" the captain growled, as a fierce gust of wind sent the chart slithering across the table. "Don't stand haverin' there!"

The engineer came in and shut the door. His expression showed he was the bearer of bad news.

Did it mean that a bulkhead had burst, Cudworth asked himself. Had there been a mishap in the engine-room? Perhaps the encroaching water had reached the furnaces!

"Well," the skipper demanded, as Dibb stood silent, swaying to the motion. "Let's have it?"

"The chief engineer sent me up, sir," the little man stammered, his manner half-furtive, half-frightened.

"Aye. I guessed that," the captain snorted, heavily facetious.

"It's that fireman, sir. Sergeant."

The captain grunted. He felt guilty of neglect. In the horrible anxiety of the last few hours, with the safety of the ship and every man on board absorbing all his thoughts and energy, Frederick Sergeant had passed completely out of his mind.

But he wasn't the only one. Cudworth also had forgotten the injured man.

"What of him?" Gamblin asked. "Has the poor devil taken a turn for the worse?"

"N-no, sir," the engineer replied, sniffing.

"What then?"

"Mr. Horniblow said I was to tell you...." the speaker paused.

"Get it out, Mr. Dibb," the captain said with impatience. "No good mumblin' an' beatin' about the bush."

The engineer gulped.

"Sergeant," he replied. "He's ... he's passed out, sir."

"Dead!" Captain Gamblin repeated, staring at his informant as though he didn't believe it. "You really mean ... dead?"

Mr. Dibb nodded, too overcome to speak.

The news came as a profound shock to the captain also. He had imagined Sergeant's death as a remote possibility; but not suddenly, like this.

It seemed an evil augury—a portent of worse things to come.

3

Young Nigel Farnsworth, still wearing his oilskins over the sodden clothes beneath, sat on his swaying bunk in the apprentices' berth wolfing his evening meal.

It wasn't much of a meal—corned beef sandwiches made of the stalest of bread. Nevertheless, his seasickness forgotten, he ate with relish.

Since early in the afternoon, like everyone else in the ship, he had been hard at it—helping to secure the hatches, to reeve

the extra tackles for the hand steering gear, to do some of the pully-hauly work while Cudworth, McNeile and the carpenter wrestled with the broken steering chains.

What with the motion, and those steep, terrifying seas piling up to windward and breaking on board in floods which threatened to hurl men from their handholds, it had been his worst experience since coming to sea.

He realised that one of those great waves might wash him overboard, or dash him against the lee bulwarks with sufficient force to break every bone in his body. Yet, somehow, he had never felt really frightened—probably because there was so much to be done.

Cudworth had certainly shown a wonderful example, and so had McNeile, Chips and the bos'un. Their language had been blistering—not at anyone in particular; but at the sea, the ship, and things in general. However, they hadn't seemed to mind the danger. There was a job to be done, and that was all about it.

Once, when the mate shouted his warning "Hang on, all!" as a sea crashed over the port bulwarks, Nigel missed his handhold, slipped, fell to the deck and was nearly a 'goner.'

It was Dunn, the bos'un, who saved him by gripping the neck of his oilskin, and holding on with all his great strength as the sea washed over the pair of them.

"Thank you, bose," Nigel had said gratefully on regaining his breath.

To his surprise Dunn was furious.

"Yer bloody young fool!" he growled, shaking the boy in his anger. "Are ye out fur sooicide? Haven't we enough to do without lookin' arter the likes o' you?—How often have I told yer? One hand fur yerself, one fur th' blasted ship!"

All the same, Nigel congratulated himself he had been of some use.

"Thanks, Farnsworth," Cudworth had nodded, when the job was finished. "Good work.—You too, Timmins," he went on to tell the senior apprentice. "Damn good. Both of you."

And now, at seven o'clock in the evening, wet to the skin and cold, too tired even to hunt out any dry clothing there might be in his locker, Nigel was eating his evening meal.

Like everyone else in the *Moorhaven*, he knew that the ship was in danger, that an S.O.S. had been broadcast, and that ships were speeding to their assistance. But he couldn't somehow visualise the *Moorhaven* sinking. Moreover, he had supreme faith in the captain and officers, particularly in Cudworth, as well as in the bos'un and carpenter. He felt quite certain that everything would turn out all right in the end. There might be more discomfort, perhaps; but he was used to that. Anyway, when it was all over, it would be rather a wonderful adventure upon which to look back.

Thus thought Nigel Farnsworth, who was young and inexperienced, and hadn't been long at sea. Meanwhile, he was hungry and weary, and assuredly he would be required on deck again before long. At almost any moment old Dunn or one of the mates might come hammering on the door to rout him out for some job or another.

Then the door did open, to admit Timmins with a plate of food from the galley. Allowing the door to slam behind him with the roll of the ship, the senior apprentice staggered to the lower bunk opposite Nigel's, sat himself down in his oilskins, and began to eat with his fingers.

"Heard the news, young Farnsworth?" he asked. His voice, for a change, was affable.

“No,” said Nigel, ready to let bygones be bygones. “What is it?”

“Sergeant’s conked,” Timmins replied, tearing some shreds of meat off a small mutton bone held in his fingers, and dropping it to the deck.

“Dead?” Nigel exclaimed.

“Um,” Timmins nodded, his mouth full again. “They’ve been holding a council of war. They think he died of shock, poor devil.” He masticated noisily.

“Why? What’s up, young Farnsworth?” He went on, looking up to notice Nigel’s horrified expression. “Never been shipmates with a deader before?”

Nigel shook his head.

“Well, don’t let it worry you,” Timmins returned, continuing his meal. “I’ve seen one man washed overboard, and another fall from aloft. He had to be scraped up in a shovel, or pretty nearly. Beastly sight, that was. Blood and stuff all over the place.”

Nigel shuddered.

Timmins’ talk made him feel sick. He seemed utterly cold-blooded, so callous to death or suffering,—ready even to mention the most ghastly things while busily stuffing himself with food.

Conversation languished until the senior apprentice had eaten through his heaped-up plate. He cleaned it with a piece of bread, and ate that; then proceeded to lick his fingers. He was an ugly feeder at the best of times. Nigel often wondered how he lived at home, and what sort of a home he came from.

“Have you anything that’ll do as a bandage?” Timmins suddenly asked, examining the fingers of his left hand.

“Only a bit of shirt, or clean handkerchief,” said Nigel. “Why?”

“I’ve chawed up my middle fingers. Got ’em nipped in one of those steel blocks on the poop when we were reevin’ those wires. Lucky I didn’t lose the top joints.”

Nigel came over to examine the injury, and drew in his breath with a hiss of sympathy when he saw it. It must be abominably painful.

The tops of the three middle fingers of the left hand were squashed and pulpy, a hideous mess of bruised, lacerated flesh and congealed blood. One nail, torn out by the roots, seemed to be hanging by a shred of skin.

“Gosh!” he exclaimed. “Doesn’t it hurt frightfully?”

“A bit sore,” Timmins had to admit. “I’ve had to use my hand, of course. Dirt and salt water’s got into it. That didn’t improve matters.”

His hands, like Nigel’s, were indescribably filthy.

“D’you think the bones are broken?” Nigel asked.

“Don’t think so,” the other replied, waggling his fingers. “Only a bit mangled.”

Nigel suggested he should go to Mr. Cudworth and have it properly seen to. There were lint and bandages in the medical chest, and the wounds ought to be disinfected. Also, that hanging nail should come off.

But Timmins pooh-poohed the idea.

“Bah!” he exclaimed. “I don’t want to make a damned fuss.”

“But it’ll go septic,” Nigel protested.

Timmins guffawed.

“I can’t help that,” he answered. “However it’s tied up, the bandages ’ll drop off when I have to do a job of work.”

“You shouldn’t use your hand.”

“Use it?—You silly cuckoo! How can I help using it? Who’s goin’ to worry because I’ve got a cut finger or two?”

“It’s more than a cut finger, Timmins. It looks beastly. It might be serious if you don’t look after it.”

The elder boy snorted.

“Look after it!” he retorted. “How the hell can I look after it? No one’s goin’ to put me on the sick-list with the ship as she is, and no hands to spare. We’ll all be wanted for jobs before the night’s out. You don’t seem to realise. It may be a case of sink or swim, for all we know.”

“Is it as bad as all that?” Nigel asked, suddenly alarmed.

“All I know is that we’re making water fast, and most of the pumps are bunged up. You wouldn’t get the Old Man buzzing off S.O.S.’s if he didn’t think it was pretty serious.”

“N-no. I suppose not.”

“Anyhow, if I go yowlin’ to the mate, or anyone else, they’ll only curse me for a ruddy fool for gettin’ messed up. It wasn’t my fault, really, though they’ll say it was, sure as eggs. —D’you mind doin’ what you can, Farnsworth?”

“Of course. But it’ll hurt you, Timmins.”

“Hell! Who cares? Go ahead. If you don’t mind, that is. I shan’t howl.”

Nigel did his amateurish best—cleaning the wounds as best he could with water in the tin basin, bandaging all three fingers with strips torn from the tail of a clean cotton shirt. He had no disinfectant, and didn’t dare to operate on the damaged

nail with his only available instrument, a pair of blunt nail-scissors.

Timmins ground his teeth once or twice during the process; but uttered no sound until Nigel had finished.

"Thanks," he said. "That's better."

"You're an ass if you don't get it properly seen to," Nigel told him.

"I will, if I get a chance," Timmins promised. "But I'll wait till things are quieter. What with Sergeant dyin', and the ship leakin', they're all of a doodah just at present. I'm the last thing they'd want to worry about.—Meanwhile," he went on awkwardly, looking Nigel full in the eyes, "I'd like to say thank you, young Farnsworth.—I've been a bit of a swine to you in the past, haven't I? That row this morning, and all that."

It was Nigel's turn to feel sheepish. Timmins was trying to apologise. Nigel hated it and wished he wouldn't.

"Oh, I dunno," he said lamely, looking the other way. "It's all right, anyhow."

"No, it isn't all right," the senior apprentice insisted. "I've been thinking things over. I've given you rather a hell of a time, one way and another. I just want to say that if we come out of this all right, things'll be better in future.—Anyhow, you're a damned good fellow for doing my fingers. I shan't forget it."

It must have cost Timmins a good deal of pride to make that little speech, and Nigel flushed with pleasure. All the same, he felt mighty awkward.

"That's all right, Timmins," he said smiling. "I understand. Don't let's say any more about it."

They were the first words of approval or friendliness he'd ever received from his messmate. From now on, it seemed, he and Timmins were to be blood brothers.

It was rather late for a reconciliation if the *Moorhaven's* hours were already numbered. All the same, better late than never.

"She's seems to be rollin' a bit less," Timmins observed. "That'll be the water in her, poor old witch. It makes her sluggish. She isn't lifting as she ought to."

Rather a discouraging sort of remark, Nigel thought to himself, watching the other pull open the drawer beneath his clothes cupboard, and hunt inside it.

"Blast!" came his exclamation. "I've smoked all my ruddy cigarettes."

"Then you'd better have some of mine," Nigel said. "I've plenty.—If what you say is correct," he added, with a feeble attempt at humour, "I shan't have much chance to smoke many more."

"What d'you mean?"

"If the ship sinks."

"Aw, forget it," Timmins returned. "It'll be time enough to think about that when we have to take to the boats, or swim for it.—Meanwhile, thanks for offering the gaspers, young Farnsworth. Good for you."

Nigel rummaged, and produced his tin of "yellow perils". They both lit up.

"I wonder what we'll be doing this time to-morrow, Timmins?"

"Doin'?" the other replied, flopping on to his bunk, sea-boots, oilskins and all. "Gawd knows!—Who cares,

anyhow?" he continued, yawning and stretching himself. "Lord! I feel all but done in.—Ugh! I wish it wasn't so damn cold."

Both boys were wet to the skin, and neither possessed much in the way of dry clothing. Nigel had tried to dry certain of his wet garments in the galley, only to be rebuffed by the cook. To try drying them in the engine-room fiddley was to ask for their disappearance.

Both the unused upper bunks were filled with sodden dungarees, socks, sweaters and undergarments. If they did change, it meant shifting into clothing only a little less wet. Besides, what was the sense of changing? At any moment they might be called out on deck, with the prospect of being wet through again in a few minutes.

The apprentices' berth was a most inhospitable apartment. It was close to the engine-room, and either unbearably hot, or freezingly cold and draughty, as it was now. It seemed to depend upon the wind, and its direction.

True, there was a little coal stove in the corner. But that archaic contraption, which had been there since the ship was built, was an invention of the Evil One. When it could be persuaded to burn, it gave no heat worth mentioning, and filled the berth with clouds of acrid grey smoke. Therefore, it remained unlit.

Nigel's teeth were chattering as he lay down on his bunk and pulled a blanket over his shivering body. He was wearing woollen stockings underneath his rubber sea-boots; but they were soaked. His feet felt like lumps of ice.

He heard Timmins' grunting snore in the bunk opposite.

Lucky devil! He was asleep.

FIRST WATCH

1

PERCY DENHOLM, the wireless operator, was having the busiest and most responsible experience of the whole of his young life.

He already knew every inch of his small domain as a mother knows her infant. The knots, smears and cracks on the once white wooden walls; a dent in the brass door-handle; the nicks and gashes in the mahogany desk—these, and the peculiar little rattling, creaking and groaning sounds as the ship moved, were all as familiar to him as the small brown mole on his right cheek which he sliced regularly once a week when he used a new blade in his safety razor.

But he knew the wireless-room a good deal better now, and was fed to the teeth with it. The time was 8.30 p.m. or thereabouts. He had spent most of the morning in his cubbyhole, and all the afternoon and evening. Indeed, since noon he had only left the place for a brief ten minutes before dark to replenish his supply of cigarettes and sweets, and to persuade Cudworth to lend him a man to rig an auxiliary aerial between the bridge and funnel. This was in case the main aerial strung between the mastheads was blown away during the night. It was a wonder it hadn't gone already.

Also, knowing his job, Denholm had seen to the topping-up of his batteries for use when the dynamo failed, as it must do when the incoming water reached the furnaces. That had meant a series of verbal messages and notes to the chief engineer, who apparently regarded his blessed machine as something to be swathed in cotton-wool. Using the dynamo for Percy's batteries, apparently, meant switching off half the

lights in the confounded ship. Like many other fittings about her, the *Moorhaven's* dynamo was a museum piece.

What with the frowst in his swaying den, the omission of his morning dose of Veno's, too many cigarettes, frequent voice-pipe conversations with the skipper, and the two mates popping in their heads every now and then to ask for the latest news, Percy was no longer the bright, nicely-spoken young gentleman of the party. He was a tired, exasperated young man without a civil word for anyone.

He knew his work from A to Z, and wanted to get on with it. He had enough to do in listening to the sounds of buzzing and scratching in his receivers, and transcribing those noises into plain English. Five ships fairly close to the *Moorhaven* and coming to her assistance, were chattering at intervals. Their conversation was being taken up by more ships further afield. Keeping pace with it all was like trying to read a newspaper while listening simultaneously to a gramophone record and a talk from the B.B.C. As if that weren't enough, various silly people distracted his attention with a bombardment of damn fool questions.

The usually polite and unruffled Denholm had been downright rude and snappy. He had even been short with the Old Man, who had retaliated for the *lèse-majesté* by exploding incoherently up the voice-pipe from the chartroom, and calling him a damned young something or other which Percy didn't catch.

It was something very rude, indubitably, and Percy was not without guile. Instead of replacing the whistle in his end of the flexible tube, he plugged it temporarily with a tight wad of paper.

“There, you silly old blighter!” he murmured mutinously, when the operation was safely accomplished. “Blow that out, blast you!—And I hope you die of apoplexy.”

Sitting up in his lair, detached from the humdrum work of the ship and the measures taken for her safety, the wireless operator felt strangely aloof. It was almost as though he had nothing to do with the *Moorhaven*, and were suspended aloft in a balloon or an aeroplane watching other vessels speeding to her rescue.

He was fully aware of the *Moorhaven's* condition, and knew in his heart that he incurred the same danger as his shipmates. With them, he might have to take to the boats, or even be forced to leap overboard and swim for it. By the same token, he wasn't much of a swimmer, and his lifebelt was in his room below.

Next to the captain, he would probably be the last man to leave the ship. It was the tradition that wireless operators should stick to their posts, tapping out their distress signals until the sea flooded their wireless-rooms and drowned their instruments for ever. Then, and not before, they were at liberty to save their lives—unless it were already too late.

Percy Denholm was neither heroic nor timid. He was just an ordinary young man with ordinary instincts and the usual desire for self-preservation. Yet he felt it was a great and honourable privilege that so much should depend upon him. If the worst did come to the worst, he wouldn't disgrace his calling.

Come to think of it, *everything* depended upon him. He was even more important than the fat, blustering old skipper. If the skipper were washed over the side, for instance,—not that Percy wished it to happen—Cudworth could carry on with

perfect competence. If the mate became *hors-de-combat*, Tommy Moulding would take over the command.

But not a single, solitary soul on board could run a wireless set, and tap out Morse as easily as though he were talking through a telephone. And if the wireless ceased to function, how could these other ships find them?

Young Percy suddenly realised his huge responsibility. For the time being, he was the big shot in this little outfit—the big noise, the king pin, whatever you cared to call it. If the *Moorhaven* were doomed to sink, and her people were saved, the lives of the skipper, the mates, old Horniblow, that slimy toad of a steward—and all the rest of the crowd, would have depended upon him and his competence. If he failed in his job....

It was rather awful to think about, this realisation that they all depended upon him, and trusted him to do the right thing.

"Gosh!" he muttered, helping himself to a bull's-eye. "I'm *it*!"

He stiffened and leant forward to twiddle a knob or two, as a harsh, intermittent crackling began to sound in his earphones. The noise assumed a deeper, more musical note as he made his adjustments. Snatching at a pencil, his hand began to stray over the pad in front of him.

It was a coded message—something the *Juno* was sending on power to a station in England.

Lucky fellows, these Navy chaps, Percy thought to himself. They were provided with the best of everything, and didn't have to wrestle with wireless installations which looked as if they had been made of a job-lot of secondhand fittings bought by a drunken man off a coster's barrow in the Caledonian Market.

The *Juno* was a good deal closer than when he had heard her last. From the strength of her signals Denholm put her at a distance of between seventy and eighty miles.

2

Tommy Moulding had the first watch, which promised to be the dirtiest watch in the whole of his experience at sea. With him on the battered bridge were the man at the wheel, and Farnsworth, the junior apprentice, who was keeping the lookout.

Captain Gamblin had retired to his cabin to snatch what rest he could before an ordeal that he now regarded as inevitable. So far as he could see, everything that could be done for the safety of the ship, had been done, and it was no good worrying further.

But he couldn't sleep, or even doze. Among other things, Sergeant's death was on his mind. It was ghastly to think of the poor fellow lying stark and cold in that spare cabin aft.

If the ship lasted until the morning, they'd have to give Sergeant some sort of a funeral—the canvas-shrouded body with a weight at its feet covered with a tattered Red Ensign, and the crew standing sheepishly by as the skipper read the Burial Service.

"We therefore commit his body to the deep, to be turned into corruption, looking for the resurrection of the body (when the sea shall give up her dead) and the life of the world to come....."

Then the long bundle would be launched over the side, and the men would disperse.

If the *Moorhaven* sank she would serve as Sergeant's coffin. Moreover, he would probably have company away down in those unfathomable depths. For the life of him,

Captain Gamblin couldn't see how twenty-five men could be saved from a sinking ship without casualty in weather like this. It was too much to expect.

Cudworth, fully dressed in oilskins and sea-boots, lay stretched on the settee in his room with a rug drawn over him. He was exhausted in mind and body, and it was a relief to be able to relax. But the heating had been turned off. His room felt bitterly cold, as damp and as clammy as a tomb. Even if it had been decently warm, sleep would have been impossible in his existing frame of mind. His thoughts went racing back through the events and incidents of the afternoon as he probed his memory for anything that might have been left undone. Those extra tackles and relieving tackles on the quadrant, the steering chains,—the hatch covers, had every possible precaution been taken?

Then his thoughts switched to what was likely to happen within the next few hours. The flares and rockets were handy for immediate use. Coir hawsers, a hemp hawser and heaving lines were amidships. They had arranged for oily waste in bags for calming the water if it came to lowering the boats. The two boats that remained had their flares, compasses, sea anchors, water and the quantities of biscuit, condensed milk and so forth laid down by the Board of Trade regulations. They were uncovered; but necessarily remained turned in on their chocks with extra lashings passed. No—Cudworth could think of nothing that had been forgotten.

For a time he tried to divert his mind by reading a silly story in a month-old magazine, only to find that he couldn't concentrate on the doings and sayings of a lot of stupid people of the useless sort who lived in night clubs, aeroplanes and high-powered motor-cars. They weren't the folk who really

mattered in the world. The majority of them seemed never to have done an honest day's work in their lives.

So, gaunt and haggard, mortally tired and shivering with cold, he lay awake on his heaving settee, watching the giddy oscillations of a spare oilskin and a pair of binoculars in their case, hung on a hook by the doorway, as they swung to and fro, and out into the room, with the wild movement of the ship.

The little steel compartment in which he lay jarred and trembled as the *Moorhaven* hurled herself from side to side, up and down. It acted like a sound-box. There were a score of different noises from inside the cabin—the groaning and creaking of bulkheads and furniture; the intermittent rattling of drawer handles, and something on the floor of his clothes cupboard; the rolling to and fro of a bottle of ink in the drawer of his writing table; the irritating clink-clank of the water bottle and tumbler in the rack over the washstand. He was far too tired to worry about them. Besides, chasing and stopping little noises in a ship was just as unsatisfactory as trying to prevent the cheeping sounds in the chassis of an old motor-car. For every one located and silenced, two others promptly gave tongue.

These interior sounds seemed to provide a sort of treble accompaniment to the furious bass of the storm outside. With his left ear close to the outer bulkhead, Cudworth could hear the muffled splash and thunder of breaking seas, and the drumming patter as heavy spray burst over the ship. The sound of the wind was never the same for two consecutive seconds. It boomed like distant gunfire, roared, growled, shrieked, howled and sobbed in maddening alternation.

Once or twice, as the ship took a steeper dive than usual, and there was an almighty shock which felt as though she were in collision, he slid a foot to the deck with the intention of going up to the bridge. Then, as the bows rose again, he thought better of it.

Old Tommy Moulding was on watch, and Tommy was one of the most competent, careful officers with whom Cudworth had ever sailed, a real seaman. If Tommy had his due, he would long ago have had the command to which his age and service entitled him. He was thirty-five, and had held a master's ticket for over eight years. There was nothing whatever against him. It was merely the depression, and the general scramble for jobs, that condemned him to serving as second mate in a God-forsaken, decrepit abortion of a ship like the *Moorhaven* at something under £14 a month.

Lord! How the old witch rolled and wallowed.

Well, let her make the most of it while she could. Unless some sort of miracle caused the weather to moderate, or old Horniblow and his blaspheming braves got their pump suctions to work, twenty-four hours might see the end of the *Moorhaven's* career. And a damn good riddance, provided nobody was drowned during her effacement.

Then a horrible thought flashed into Cudworth's mind. The extinction of the *Moorhaven* wasn't so good. It was a calamity. He suddenly remembered that when a ship came to grief, her officers and men automatically went off pay from the moment of her loss.

Moreover, there would be the usual Board of Trade enquiry, at which the survivors would be turned inside out by a gang of shoregoing gentlemen of the legal profession who

knew the art of cross-examination, and could make poor, simple sailors swear that black was white.

The owners would produce bills to show the amounts that had been spent on the ship during the last few years, while their legal representatives would do their utmost to prove negligence on the part of the ship's officers. The fat old marine superintendent to the Haven Shipping Company would dilate on the *Moorhaven's* excellent qualities, seaworthiness, habitability and upkeep. The captain, officers and crew ... well, they would be in the usual horrible predicament of not knowing what to say.

If they told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the ship, the owners might, certainly they should —be held to blame, and be ordered to pay substantial costs. That meant that nobody would get another job with Messrs. Moore and Moore Brothers, Limited, while other companies with dozens of men on their waiting lists, would inevitably fight shy of applicants who had given damaging evidence at a B.O.T. enquiry.

If, on the other hand, the *Moorhaven's* crowd glossed over the truth, and said nothing about the unseaworthy condition of the ship, and the cheeseparing parsimony with which she was run, they would be perjuring themselves in their own eyes, and in the eyes of every decent seaman who could read between the lines of the evidence and visualise what had happened.

Cudworth went hot and cold when he thought of it. The enquiry would be even worse an ordeal than the shipwreck—if it came.

Meanwhile, there was Milly, his wife, and little Tony, his son. Their photographs hung over his bunk—Milly, with that

peculiar half-smile on her lips and something fluffy round her shoulders; the boy, with his thatch of flaxen hair, clutching a teddy bear and staring straight into the camera with that enquiring, ‘who the devil may you be?’ sort of look on his chubby face.

Whatever happened, Milly and Tony mustn’t suffer. They were far too precious.

But his small savings wouldn’t last for more than a month or two. There had been Milly’s illness, and the boy’s infantile complaints. He had had to pay out a good deal in doctor’s bills. Then the little house was still being bought at so much a month, though the furniture, thank heaven, was paid for.

Lord! It was pretty ghastly.

What *would* happen to Milly and Tony if he got the sack from Moore and Moore? He could see himself condemned to tramping from one shipowner’s office to another, asking, hat in hand,—beseeching, finally,—for a job as second mate, then as third mate, and eventually as an A.B. Suppose nobody would take him on?

They would have to part with the house and sell most of the furniture, while he looked for work ashore. But shore jobs didn’t fall into the laps of inexperienced, hungry sailormen—no jobs really worth having, that was. There were too many competitors, too much unemployment.

Cudworth’s thoughts were very black indeed.

3

Tommy Moulding, chilled through to the marrow and uncomfortably wet, had long since decided that life was altogether abominable.

The roar of the wind; the shock and crash of breaking seas; the sheets of icy spray flying over the bridge; above all, the sickening lurching, sliding, rolling and wallowing of the ship, made it almost impossible to think. The tumult of the storm seemed to have a numbing effect on the senses. One felt weak and puny—as helpless as a blind man in traffic.

The skipper and Cudworth, he supposed, were enjoying some sort of sleep in the comparative comfort of their rooms. At midnight Nick would come up to relieve him for the middle watch. But the time was barely a quarter-past nine—another two hours and three-quarters, one hundred and sixty-five interminable minutes, nine thousand, nine hundred seconds. Roll on midnight!

Peering out ahead from the starboard wing of the swaying bridge in the intervals of the blinding spray showers, there was little to be seen at any distance outside the ship—merely the low canopy of inky, driving cloud, and the dim black ridges of racing seas topped with the pale greyness of their frothing crests.

But nearer at hand, immediately ahead of the ship, the seas assumed definite shape, and their summits an unusual whiteness. There was an eerie, greenish-white luminance about them as they burst over the forecastle and bulwarks, and surged in floods over the fore well-deck, occasionally to bathe the whole fore-part of the ship in lambent, coruscating phosphorescence that was almost dazzling in its brilliance. In happier circumstances, in a well-found ship, it would have been wonderful to look at—a natural firework display which sparkled with the liquid blue of sapphires, and the shimmering green and white of emeralds and diamonds.

Tommy Moulding had heard people say there was no phosphorescence in the Atlantic; but there was plenty here. Probably it meant that the ship was in the Gulf Stream, and that the light in the sea had been brought all the way from the tropical waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Anyhow, the Gulf Stream would account for the confusedness of the sea.

However, he had no eye for beauty on a night like this. The *Moorhaven* was making no headway. She was just holding her own, and each time she dived her bows into a heavier sea than usual to take the crest of it clear over the forecastle, Tommy's heart went into his mouth.

He was thinking of the safety of numbers one and two hatches. They had done their best to make them watertight after the damage caused early in the afternoon, when the steering-gear failed and the ship had fallen off into the trough of the sea, to be swept fore and aft. There were no spare tarpaulins left. Every one had been used.

Was more water finding its way below? The ship had clearly lost buoyancy forward. She felt sluggish and hesitant, rising unwillingly to the seas, and often too late. There was no doubt that she was being swept deeper, and more frequently.

But Tommy was powerless. Men could do nothing to secure the hatch-covers in the face of those awful seas, which covered the well-deck with floods of leaping, swirling water six or eight feet deep every time the *Moorhaven* plunged her blunt bows under.

To send men forward into that turmoil was to condemn them to death, though Tommy himself would have led them if there were anything that could be done. But there wasn't. Moreover, it was useless to suggest a reduction in speed to the

‘Old Man’. As it was, the ship was only just carrying steerage way.

If only those confounded pump-suctions hadn’t choked up, or there were some proper means of clearing them? If they hadn’t been carrying anthracite, or the forepeak weren’t full of water? If the steering-gear were reliable, or....

But it was no good considering the many ‘if’s’ and ‘might have beens’. No mortal men could have striven more for the safety of their ship than had the *Moorhaven’s*. The ship herself was at fault, the cursed old wreck! She must take her chance.

But so must those on board her. There lay the rub, and all through the criminal parsimony of those responsible for sending her to sea in such a condition.

Tommy would have given half a month’s pay to have had the owners, and their pompous, pot-bellied, sycophantic marine superintendent, keeping the first watch with him on the *Moorhaven’s* reeling bridge. He would cheerfully have sent *them* to see to the safety of the forward hatches!

Timothy Todd, the man who had hurt his leg during the afternoon, had the first two hours of the watch at the helm. With his great hands gripping the wheel, he swayed to and fro to the roll of the ship, his head and shoulders feebly illuminated in the faint glow from the binnacle. His eyes were cast down as he gazed into the swinging compass bowl. There was a look of fierce concentration on his pale, unshaven face, and with the black sou’wester pulled well down over his brow, he looked strangely like a monk going through some mystic ritual.

Feeling a sudden desire for companionship, the second mate staggered amidships for the ostensible reason of looking at the compass.

“All right, Todd?” he howled.

“Not so bad, sir,” the man shouted back, without looking up. “I’m managin’ all right. She’s wanderin’ a bit at times.”

“How’s the knee?” Tommy yelled.

With the clamour of wind and breaking sea, conversation was very difficult.

“Not so bad, sir. I got ’im lashed up.”

“Does it hurt?”

Todd permitted himself to smile.

“Depends wot you call ’urtin, sir,” he replied loudly. “It’s all right provided I stands mostly on one leg.”

“One leg!” Tommy returned. “You’re a marvel if you can do that in this.”

“I means it’s okay if I doesn’t put too much weight on ’im, sir. ’E’s puffed up a bit.—I couldn’t ’ardly run a mile,” he went on to explain. “But I’m not makin’ a song an’ dance, sir. I’ll do me job all right.”

“What have you done for it?” Tommy wanted to know.

He had a suspicion that Todd was making light of his injury, which was the literal truth. The man’s knee was paining him abominably. By rights he should be on the sick list.

“Done for it, sir?” he queried. “ ’Ow?”

“Has anyone seen it?”

“The bos’un, sir. ’E lashed a bandage round ’im. There wasn’t time to do no more, wot with jobs that wanted doin’, an’ that there Sergeant turnin’ ’is toes up.—Bit of ’ard luck, that wus, poor bloke! Decent sort o’ shipmate. Not like some firemen I’ve sailed with.”

Tommy changed the subject. He wasn't in the mood for talking about Sergeant's death, though no doubt Todd would have revelled in all the more gruesome details.

"Weather's pretty poisonous?" he remarked.

The seaman snorted.

"Poisonous?" he returned. "I calls it bloody, sir.—Wot time's the ship doo to sink, sir?" he went on to ask.

Tommy started. The question was put in all seriousness; though with as much unconcern as though Todd was asking what time he should eat his supper.

"Sink?" the second mate replied. "Put that out of your mind."

"But everyone knows it, sir. They can't 'elp knowin' it."

"Damn lot o' croakers," Moulding said. "Anyhow, if we do go under, there are plenty of ships coming to our rescue."

The seaman sucked his teeth, and looked up.

"Rescoo!" he exclaimed, nodding his head to windward. "We'll need rescooin' all right, I don't think. 'Ow are they goin' to set abart it in this 'ere lot, Mr. Moulding, sir?"

The conversation was becoming difficult. Tommy certainly didn't propose to discuss the situation with an able seaman. Anything he said would inevitably be passed on to others when Todd went off watch, while, if he told the truth, it couldn't fail to be discouraging.

"If we *do* go," he replied. "They'll think of something. There's a cruiser coming, among others."

But Todd still seemed incredulous, as was Tommy himself.

"Cruisers is all right, and the Navy's all right," the man said. "But not all the blinkin' cruisers in the world can work miracles, sir."

“Oh, don’t worry,” Tommy shouted back. “We’ll be all right in the end.”

“I’m not out to complain, sir,” Todd rejoined. “I’m one o’ those blokes as takes the rough with the smooth.”

What, precisely, Todd meant by that, Tommy did not trouble to enquire. But the second mate didn’t wish to prolong an awkward conversation. Waiting for the ship to steady herself, he left the man to his job of steering and went to the fore side of the bridge, where the junior apprentice was keeping his watch.

“Breezy night, Farnsworth,” he shouted, as the ship plunged, and a cloud of spray, almost solid, came hurtling towards them, and their heads came together as they ducked under the lee of the canvas dodger.

The boy made some reply that was inaudible.

The heavy drops of wind-flung water rattled against the wooden bridge-screen like a volley of small shot. The deluge passed overhead. Their heads came up again.

“Farnsworth!” Tommy shouted, as the wind reasserted itself.

“Sir?”

“Go down and find the spare hand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Find him!” Moulding continued, cupping his hand and speaking into the apprentice’s ear. “Tell him—go aft to the galley! Tell cook I want something hot. Tea, coffee—anything! Enough for all of us. If Todd’s as frozen as I am, he can do with something.—Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Farnsworth made his way to the starboard ladder and disappeared.

But that tea or coffee, or whatever else Fox might have thought fit to provide, never reached the bridge.

The weather seemed to have become clearer, with a visibility of perhaps three or four miles, when the *Moorhaven* lifted on the back of a sea. And barely a minute after Farnsworth had left the bridge, when Moulding, holding on to the bridge rail, was still peering out ahead, he saw what looked like a rift of pallor in the sky dead in the wind's eye and over the bows of the ship. He took it at first for a clearing in the clouds above the horizon, and was almost cheerful.

But as he gazed at it, the pale streak seemed to be altering in shape.

He felt a sudden qualm, then certainty.

The lightness was no clear patch in the clouds; but the frothing crest of a gigantic sea, the father and mother of all the seas, the most tremendous wave he had ever seen.

The great mountain of water was two to three hundred yards ahead of the ship. It towered high into the sky, steep and menacing as it rolled remorselessly towards her.

"My God!" Tommy gasped, almost sick with apprehension, as the *Moorhaven* poised herself on a crest.

There was nothing to be done. Nothing could have been done. It was beyond the wit of man to circumvent that sea. No alteration of course or speed could result in its avoidance.

The ship cocked her tail into the air as she breasted the next wave. Her bows descended with the usual sickening swoop as she slid into a yawning valley. The wind died away to a fierce whistling.

In the comparative silence, Tommy found his voice.

"Todd!"

"Sir!" came the helmsman's faint answer.

"Hang on for your life!—Hang on!"

Tommy heard no reply; but saw Todd look ahead. With the light from the binnacle in his face, and his eyes unaccustomed to the darkness, he probably saw little of the menace ahead.

The great hummock of water was a bare hundred yards away now, curling, spouting and foaming. The *Moorhaven's* bows were falling into the abyss before it.

The frothing white crest of the oncoming monster seemed to hover overhead, poising itself, gathering strength and impetus for its descent. To Moulding, it looked like the escarpment of some beetling grey cliff, its ragged, snow-fringed summit cutting the dark sky twelve or fifteen feet above the *Moorhaven's* fore truck.[8]

There was no escape. Gripping the wooden rail of the bridge with all his strength, Tommy heard himself muttering —"Merciful God! Merciful God!....

His heart seemed to have stopped.

The *Moorhaven's* bows started to rise; but too late. It is doubtful if any ship of her size could have lifted to that colossal sea. She lurched drunkenly over to starboard. The next instant the towering bridge of water tottered, curled over, and collapsed upon her.

The roaring crash of its descent filled the air. The ship quaked as though she were hit by a thunderbolt and split asunder. Tommy saw a wall of boiling white water leaping aft towards him, its crown half-way up the slanting black line of the foremast. He had a fleeting impression of a derrick torn

from its fastenings and hurled bodily across the ship. Then, like an avalanche, the giant wave burst over the top bridge.

Tommy felt its mighty concussion. The shattering roar of it was in his ears as his handhold collapsed, and he was swept away like a morsel of paper. He was flung headlong, whirled head over heels. A flood of water poured over him, beating the breath out of his body.

He felt himself strike something cruelly hard and unyielding—tried to clutch it; but failed.

Next came the sensation of falling from a height, the dreadful inability to breathe. Then another frightful impact....

He knew no more.

4

Æons of time seemed to pass before Captain Gamblin succeeded in fighting his way out of his wrecked cabin.

Wide awake in his bunk, he had felt the shock as that gigantic sea struck the ship. He swung his legs over the bunk-board and tried to wriggle to the floor, only to find himself incapable of movement—pinned, hopelessly, with his head down, as the *Moorhaven* continued her dive and slid over to starboard.

The whole weight of his great body was on his head and neck. Blaspheming, gasping for breath, he felt as helpless as a fly stuck upside down in a jar of treacle. He was a powerful man; but could find no handhold to pull himself free.

The next moment about twenty things seemed to happen at once.

Something hit the fore bulkhead of his room with a blow like that of a battering ram. The steel wall, and portion of the roof, seemed to be driven inwards. Still lying in his bunk, he

felt himself suddenly drenched with water. The electric light went out. He heard a sound like thunder as the wave poured over the lower bridge overhead, and across the bridge deck outside.

Still listing heavily to starboard, the *Moorhaven's* bows seemed to lift a little as he struggled to leave his bunk. Another wave struck the ship, an even mightier one than the last from the feel of it. There came a second concussion as it erupted against the steel wall close to his head, a second torrent of water, more awesome sounds as it passed overhead.

"Good God!" he thought to himself. "The ship's sinking. She's being broken up piecemeal, and I'm bloody well helpless!"

The *Moorhaven* righted a little. By a superhuman effort Gamblin managed to raise his body, slid to the floor of his room, where he realised there was fully two feet of water.

The little apartment was in pitch darkness as he tried to find his way to the door in the after bulkhead leading to the alleyway. He heard the sound of wind, and felt a piercing blast, which made him realise that the walls and roof had probably been burst inwards or upwards. Anyhow, his room was open to the elements, and a third sea might complete its ruin.

The door—where the hell was the blasted door? Confound this Stygian darkness!

The ship rolled again, flinging him off his feet, and against the settee running along the starboard side under the portholes. He recovered himself, gasping—clawed his way towards the door, found it, felt his fingers on the handle. He turned it, and nothing happened. The door wouldn't open. He concluded it was wedged by the partial collapse of the roof.

In desperation, he tugged at the solid brass handle. It came away in his fist, to send him flying backwards. At the same instant the *Moorhaven* plunged, and completed his downfall.

He would be drowned like a rat in a trap, he found himself thinking—drowned in his own room! What a fate for a shipmaster while his vessel was being swept fore and aft!

There came another concussion from forward, and a third great wave burst over the bows. The ship vibrated horribly, as though she had charged a dock wall.

This was the end of her, Gamblin decided, sitting on his cabin floor, with the water washing around him. Numbers one and two hatches must already be burst in, and the holds full, or rapidly filling. The bridge space would be flooded next, then the 'thwartship bunker, and the engine and boiler room.

Meanwhile, what was happening on the bridge? The second mate was keeping the first watch. Was the ship still under command? Were the engines ...?

There was no time to think of more. For the third time he felt the quivering shock as a wall of water impacted against the midship superstructure, heard the flood of water roaring, swishing and pounding overhead. It sounded like the knell of doom.

Having fallen in a sitting posture, he was drenched to the skin by now, and breathless with exertion. After a tussle, however, he once more succeeded in scrambling to his feet. He felt his way to the after bulkhead, and found the door.

But this time, nerved by something akin to fear, he didn't waste time. Wearing heavy leather sea-boots, he kicked out at the door with the strength of desperation. Above the noise of wind and sea he heard the stout panels splintering.

Then he suddenly realised the utter uselessness of what he was doing. He would never be able to force his massive body through the oblong rectangle of a single broken panel. He must think of some other method.

It didn't take long. Measuring his distance, he waited until the ship was momentarily steady, and charged with all his strength. The door gave with a sound of cracking. But, normally opening inwards, it still remained fast.

He charged it again, with a longer run this time, and an increased momentum caused by a slight lifting of the *Moorhaven's* bows. The cross-piece splintered under his onslaught. He repeated the process, completing the work of destruction with his hands and heavily-shod feet. With the crash of riven woodwork, he forced his way through a ragged opening into the flooded alleyway.

The starboard door leading to the bridge deck was open and swinging on its hinges. He staggered outside, holding on as the ship tumbled. The ladder leading to the lower bridge was still in place, for he could see it silhouetted against the whitened sea beyond. He made his way towards it, gained it and started pantingly to climb. Minutes seemed to pass before he reached the deck above, and stood there, gripping the stanchions as the ship rolled.

The chartroom, he could see, was still intact; but the boat on the starboard side of the bridge-deck was missing. So was the ladder leading to the top bridge. The top bridge itself appeared to have been swept bodily overboard.

What of the steering-wheel and compass on the little island over the chartroom, he wondered, sick at heart. Were they still intact, and was the ship still steaming under command?

What of the flimsy wireless-room, built over the after end of the chartroom?

"Mister Moulding!" the captain shouted, finding his breath. "Mister Moulding!"

His great voice was drowned in the tumult of sea and wind. Nobody could have heard him. There was no reply.

Another sea thundered over the forecastle head, and came sweeping aft over the fore well-deck. But it was a puny thing compared with the monsters that had gone before. Standing there at the head of the ladder, wondering what to do next, Captain Gamblin felt no more than the thresh of the wind-flung spray beating in his face.

"Mister Moulding!" he roared uselessly. "Mr. Moulding! Where are you?"

There was no answer.

Amid the stupendous roar of the elements, the loneliness began to prey on his nerves.

Where the devil were the two mates, and all the others? Was everybody drowned?

Making up his mind, the captain moved towards the chartroom, pulling himself from one handhold to the next as the ship lurched. There, at any rate, he could whistle up the engine-room, and communicate with the wireless-room overhead—if Denholm and the wireless-room still existed.

The *Moorhaven* seemed to be off her course and out of control. The savage wind and sea were broad on her port bow, instead of almost immediately ahead.

Also, she appeared to have developed a permanent list to starboard, for she no longer rolled to port. She lay over, wallowing like a stricken thing.

That meant that the cargo of loose anthracite had shifted.

"God!" he muttered hopelessly.

The ship seemed to be doomed. This was the end of everything. No mortal man could save her now.

How long might she be expected to survive? When would the *Juno* and the other rescuing ships arrive?

Those were the vital questions.

And if the wireless were demolished ... what then?

The situation was the worst that Captain Gamblin had experienced in his long career at sea.

5

The terrific shock of the first of those gigantic seas impacting against the midship structure, followed by the sudden extinction of the electric light, had brought Cudworth hurriedly out of his room.

His natural instinct was to make for the bridge. Realising, however, that that first wave might be the forerunner of several others which might also sweep the ship, he had not gone on deck by the quickest route—through the door leading out from the alleyway to the port side of the bridge deck. Instead, he had passed into the darkened saloon, and out by way of the officers' messroom, the door of which faced aft. Here, at anyrate, he had something of a lee.

Close by, iron rungs in the steel bulkheads led up to the after side of the lower bridge. He started to climb, pausing halfway up as he felt the ship plunge violently.

Above the roar of the wind he heard the smashing thud of a great sea bursting over the bows—then a sound of rushing water as it drove aft. Next there came another heavy shock. The *Moorhaven*, he noticed, was lurching bodily over to

starboard. The rungs were set close to the vertical steel wall. With most of his weight on the toes of his sea-booted feet, he had difficulty in retaining a foothold.

The next instant, a flood of water poured across the lower bridge, and shot over its after edge in a cataract which nearly completed his downfall. More water surged deeply over the deck beneath him. Drenched, even through his oilskins, he clung grimly on, waiting for the worst of the flood to subside.

The ship was in pitch darkness; but reaching the lower bridge he made his way to starboard under the lee of the chartroom. It was possible to see against the whiteness and phosphorescence of the breaking seas, and the first thing he noticed was that the boat on the starboard side of the bridge deck had vanished.

So had the ladder leading up to the top bridge, the starboard side of which looked strangely unfamiliar. Indeed, when his eyes became fully accustomed to the semi-obscurity, he saw that the wooden bridge-screens had disappeared, and that the top bridge itself was smashed and splintered out of recognition.

He wouldn't have thought it possible for solid water to have reached to such a height, unless the ship lay broadside on. Yet, one or two mountainous waves, coming from ahead, had completed the work of destruction begun earlier in the day, when the steering-gear broke down and the *Moorhaven* had fallen off into the trough. From the look of it, the top bridge was now no more than a tangle of shattered woodwork.

Fear clawed at Cudworth's heart as he began to climb up a further set of rungs let into the starboard side of the chartroom. Both ladders having gone, and the bridge itself being demolished, they afforded his only means of access to

the little platform overhead—really the chartroom roof—where stood the wheel, the compass and the wireless-room.

Another sea erupted over the bows and came thundering aft as he pulled himself up the last few feet. But it was not so monstrous a one as its predecessors. He felt no more than the lashing of heavy spray in his face as it drove past in a shower.

The short ascent was not easy. The ship leant dizzily over to starboard, at an angle that seemed like forty degrees, or more. He climbed with his feet away from his body—like going over the futtock shrouds, or a fly on a sloping ceiling.

Dragging himself on to the platform with the wind tearing at his oilskin, he crouched for a moment to recover his breath, then pulled himself to his feet.

The damage was even worse than he had thought. Both wings of the top bridge had been demolished, and only its midship portion remained intact. The binnacle had vanished, though the pedestal and wheel of the steam steering-gear still remained. The wireless-room abaft it seemed also to be undamaged.

But of the two people who should have been up there, Tommy Moulding and the helmsman, there was no sign.

Sick with anxiety, Cudworth staggered from one handhold to the next, peering and feeling in every likely spot, cursing himself for having forgotten his electric torch. He shouted Moulding's name, expecting at any moment to come upon his recumbent body.

"Tommy!" he called. "Moulding!"

His cries floated uselessly away in the roar of the storm. He might as well save his breath. Except for the wheel, engine-room telegraph and wireless-room, the bridge had been swept clean. No human being remained there.

Then he bethought himself of the wireless-room, with young Denholm inside it. Perhaps Tommy and the helmsman were sheltering there, though it seemed very unlikely.

Going aft, he opened the door without difficulty, and passed inside.

Young Percy was safe, anyway. He sat in his chair with the earphones over his head, his little apartment feebly illuminated in the light of the portable electric battery lamp he always kept as a stand-by.

"What on earth's happened to the lights?" he demanded angrily, as the mate entered. "I thought the end of the world had come when those last two seas came over—Damned nearly unshipped this blasted place! The door...."

"Have you seen anything of Moulding or the helmsman?" Cudworth interrupted.

"Tommy shoved his head in about an hour ago," Denholm replied grumpily. "There's nowhere for 'em to hide here, anyway. Why d'you ask?"

"The bridge has been swept clear—smashed to hell."

"It felt like it," the wireless operator returned. "A deuce of a smack it was, two of 'em. Then something else caught this place a biff, damn nearly came through, by the sound of it.—But.... Good God!" he continued, as the thought suddenly struck him. "You ... you don't mean you can't find 'em?"

"Not a sign of 'em, Sparks."

"Lord!—Gone overboard?"

"Either that, or smashed up on deck," Cudworth nodded. "I must find out.—Is your gear still working?"

"Yes, for the time being. The dynamo's still heaving round, anyway.—God!" he went on. "Poor old Tommy. How damned

awful!—Surely you'll find him? You *must*! He's much too good a chap to lose."

He certainly was; but Cudworth's heart was as heavy as lead as he left the wireless room, crawled down the two ladders, and went along the bridge deck to where he knew the rest of the crew would be sheltering under the after superstructure.

Then another awful thought flashed into his mind. Farnsworth, the junior apprentice, had been keeping part of the first watch as the lookout on the bridge! Where was he, and where was the spare hand?

He found Dunn, the bos'un, with the carpenter and two seamen, outside the galley. The cook and steward were within. The electric lights, he noticed, were still burning in the after part of the ship.

"Has anyone seen Mr. Moulding?" came Cudworth's first question.

"On the bridge, sir," the bos'un replied. "He's keepin' the watch. I wus up there not a quarter of an hour ago."

"The top bridge has been knocked endways," the mate told him. "It's smashed to blazes. Mr. Moulding's missin'."

He heard the gasps of horrified surprise from the little group around him.

"Missin', sir?" Dunn asked. "Overboard, d'ye mean?"

"I fear so. Who was at the helm?"

"Todd, sir."

"Then he's gone, too," Cudworth said.

"Gawd!" the carpenter ejaculated. "When them two seas...."

"What about Farnsworth and the spare hand?" the mate interrupted.

"They wus here not long ago, sir," Dunn told him. "Second mate sent 'em aft fur somethin' hot to drink. There wus nothin' doin' here...."

"The fire's out, sir," the cook put in, always ready to excuse himself. "We got washed out by a sea."

"Then get your ruddy fire lit again!" Cudworth snapped. "You've got wood and coal, haven't you? Don't stand gapin' at the damned thing! We'll all want something hot before the night's out.—Where are Farnsworth and the spare hand?" he went on to ask.

"Farnsworth said somethin' about brewin' cocoa in the apprentices' berth," the steward volunteered.

Cudworth turned on him in anger.

"Well, you go forward and brew something on that spirit stove in the pantry!" he ordered testily. "And get a wriggle on."

Tubbs seemed inclined to protest. He was more comfortable where he was, and didn't fancy going forward, particularly since the bridge had gone. However, he contented himself by scowling fiercely, and, after a moment's hesitation, staggered out through the galley door and disappeared.

The engines, Cudworth realised, were still moving. He could feel the throb of them, and the racing of the screw as the stern lifted. But the *Moorhaven*, with nobody at the helm, was out of control. Indeed, she seemed to be yawing to starboard, bringing the wind and sea broad on the port bow.

The mate's first action was to send the bos'un and one man to the wheel, with orders to bring the ship head to sea if the steering-gear was still in working order. He warned them that

they must make their way up the vertical steel ladders. He would join them in a few minutes.

Next, he ordered the carpenter and one seaman to examine the steering connections; but on no account to venture on the after well-deck unless it were possible without risking their lives.

As for himself, he went aft to the apprentices' berth, and flung open the door. Timmins and Farnsworth were trying to boil a small tin kettle over an inadequate spirit lamp, which one of them had to hold to prevent it sliding off the table. The spare hand of the watch, Swale, looked on. Incidentally, it was strictly against orders that an A.B. should be in the berth at all, but Cudworth ignored that.

He told them briefly what had happened to the bridge, and that the second mate and Todd had disappeared.

A look of horror came over the junior apprentice's face. His eyes opened wide.

"But, sir," he stammered in an awed voice. "I was up there less than ten minutes ago."

"Then you can thank your lucky stars that Mr. Moulding sent you down to make cocoa," Cudworth told him. "It probably saved your life."

It had.

The four of them examined every inch of the bridge deck, without finding any trace of the missing men. Cudworth, risking the seas which broke over it, even explored the after well-deck with a borrowed electric torch, hoping he might find a huddled body washed into some corner, or in among the winches between the hatches.

But there wasn't a sign of anyone. Moulding and Todd had gone for ever, there was no doubt about that.

Hurled off the battered bridge by the same great sea, they had either been swept straight and mercifully overboard, or thrown to the lower bridge, and thence to the bridge deck, before disappearing through or over the rails.

The mate shuddered as he thought of that. It meant two successive drops of eight or ten feet, with various obstructions on the way—broken bones, mangled bodies.

Whatever had happened, pray God it was quick and painless!

Poor Sergeant lay dead in the spare cabin. Now Tommy Moulding had gone—Tommy, one of the finest shipmates he had ever met; and Todd, a good, stolid seaman. That was a death-roll of three out of a total complement of twenty-six.

The casualty list might be considerably augmented before morning, Cudworth reflected bitterly.

It was with a feeling of utter misery and dejection that he made his way forward to seek out Captain Gamblin. How would the Old Man take the news, he wondered. The skipper was usually so phlegmatic and unmoved.

But Cudworth himself felt almost like weeping. Tommy Moulding—one of the best and most lovable of fellows, the sort of man who would tear up his last shirt, or share his final shilling, for the sake of a needy shipmate.

The mate couldn't banish Tommy from his mind. His sudden loss seemed such pitiful, agonising waste of a good life, so utterly cruel and unnecessary. And Todd and Sergeant, too—they were good men, though of course they weren't his intimate friends.

Cudworth realised, however, that he must thrust his private feelings into the background of his mind. At such a time as this, it would never do to be faint-hearted and squeamish, to

give anyone cause to think that he was overcome by calamity, or that he was afraid.

The safety of the twenty-three men who remained was all-important. It might be impossible to save them, if, as he suspected, the *Moorhaven* were already out of control, and slowly sinking by the bows, with a cargo that had shifted.

But he'd have a damn good try. He was the skipper's right-hand man, and it was up to him to see that the crew didn't hang back. He must set an example of fortitude. Provided there was anything useful to be done, the men must be worked until they dropped in their tracks, whether they liked it or not. There must be no shrinking or timidity. He must encourage them—if necessary, drive them, curse them—kick them to their feet if they showed signs of throwing up the sponge.

There were such things as the tradition of the Merchant Navy, and the honour of British seamen.

The dead must not be repined. Perhaps they were happier than the living at such a time as this.

It was with a new courage and resolution that Nick staggered forward in search of the captain.

So much, so very much, depended upon him in this time of grave and awful emergency. Whatever happened, he must not fail.

The ship, he noticed, had righted herself a little, though she still lay heavily over to starboard. The feeling of inanimation about her, however, had increased to an alarming extent. She plunged horribly, with the wind and sea in the same direction; but her movements were heavy and sluggish, as though she were in the throes of death.

The seas broke high over the forecastle and fore well-deck. Sheets of wind-flung spray drove over the gaunt funnel, dimly outlined as a slanting, smoking black pillar against the dark void of the sky.

Cudworth was glad to see the smoke. It meant that the water hadn't yet reached the furnaces.

The paralyzing strength of the wind was unbelievable. It seemed to strangle one—to throttle the very breath from one's body as one fought against it.

6

The *Moorhaven's* engines were still moving, though more water had poured below through damaged skylights and ventilator openings.

And the leaks forward seemed to have increased, probably due to the straining of the bridge-deck bulkhead. Water must be finding its way into the bridge space, and through a hatch into the 'thwartship bunkers.

In the stokehold, the water in the bilges had started to lift the floorplates as the vessel lurched. But she had developed a more or less permanent list to starboard, so that an inky flood swished sullenly in and out of the open door of the starboard side bunker.

The two labouring firemen had difficulty in maintaining their foothold as they plied their long slices, and swung their shovels to feed the glowing furnaces. They worked like automata, seldom speaking; pausing now and then to wipe their grimed, sweating faces; peering overhead at the needles in the dingy, circular faces of the pressure gauges.

They were losing heart. Their work seemed useless. The water was creeping up and up. In a few hours, more or less,

fires would have to be drawn unless they ran the risk of an explosion. And after that ... what?

Mr. Horniblow was in the engine-room, with McNeile, the second engineer, and Ledbury, the donkey-man.

There was little he could do, except to watch his subordinate shutting off the steam as the stern of the ship lifted, and the propeller started to race. She was racing with greater frequency now, he noticed—probably because she was down by the bows.

Poor old ship! He had nursed her through many tribulations; but this was apparently the end. Numbers one and two hatches must have gone, from the rate the water was finding its way aft.

If only those damned pumps....

Above the noises outside, and the thud and wheeze of moving machinery, there came a clanging rattle. The pointer on the expressionless face of the bridge telegraph moved over to “Stop”.

Looking up, McNeile automatically shut off steam.

“What now?” old Horniblow muttered apprehensively, half to himself. “He’s ruddy well mad to stop in this. We’ll fall off into the trough.”

It may have been imagination; but the movement of the ship certainly seemed to alter, though she still lay perilously over to starboard.

“That bloody anthracite’s shifted!” the chief engineer grumbled. “Damn the blasted stuff, chokin’ up the pumps an’ all! We’d a’ kept her goin’ if it hadn’t been for that, an’ now....” He shrugged his shoulders, with a look of fierce disgust on his homely face.

“We took two mighty great ones over not so long ago,” McNeile put in. “It felt like hittin’ an iceberg, or a dock wall.”

“No seas ’ud harm her if the pumps were goin’,” Horniblow retorted. “An’ what chance have the pumps had, I ask ye? None at all, an’ it’s the ruddy cargo what’s done it. Dust in the blasted bilges, curse the muck!”

There came a muffled whistle from the voice-pipe labelled “Chartroom”.

McNeile moved over to it, took out the plug, and put the flexible end of the tube to his mouth.

“Hullo?” he said, shifting it to his ear and listening. “Yes, sir,” after another movement. “I’ll tell him, sir. Just a second —old man wants you, Chief.”

Mr. Horniblow grunted and came to his subordinate’s side. He picked up the tube.

“Chief engineer here,” he roared, as though he were hailing another ship.

It wasn’t like using a telephone. One couldn’t speak and listen at the same time, and for some minutes McNeile saw Horniblow flicking the mouthpiece from his ear to his lips and back again.

“All right here for the present,” he said after a pause. “No, I can’t say how long.—Maybe; but it’s creepin’ up all the time, if ye understand me.—Yes, of course.—Yes.—No.—No.—Right. I’ve got that.—Certainly. I’ll acquaint ye.”

“What?” he gasped after a longer pause, his expression changing. “Poor chaps! What a thing to happen!—Yes. Terrible. *Such* a nice lad, too.”

McNeile pricked up his ears. What awful thing had happened to evoke these utterances on the part of the stolid

Mr. Horniblow? It was something unexpected and horrible, evidently.

"Very well, sir," the chief engineer concluded. "I'll see to it."

He replaced the whistle-plug in the mouthpiece, and the end of the pipe in its clip. His hand shook in agitation.

"Lord!" he muttered in a voice filled with emotion. "To think o' that. Poor, poor chaps!"

"What's up?" McNeile anxiously queried.

"Up?—The bloody bridge has been smashed to perdition. That nice young fella' Moulding, an' one seaman, have gone."

"Gone?" the second engineer gasped. "Overboard?"

Mr. Horniblow nodded.

"Aye," he replied sadly. "Three gone now, countin' Sergeant. Well," shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe more of us 'll join 'em before the night's out."

McNeile murmured something that the older man failed to catch.

"We're stoppin' indefinitely," the chief engineer went on, his voice returning to the normal. "The steerin' gear's gone agen."

"Those split links, Chief," the second engineer returned, with an air of apology. "I knew all along they wouldn't hold her. I told the mate so when we put 'em in."

"Nothin' 'll hold her when once the chains carry away," Horniblow dolefully agreed. "It's nobody's fault aboard here. It's those...."

He thought better of what he was going to say, and abruptly changed the subject.

“We’re lyin’ with the sea on the port bow. The cap’en says she’ll lie there without the engines.—And for why? ’Cos numbers one and two hatches have gone to hell, an’ the holds are fillin’ up. She’s down by the bows. That’s holdin’ her.”

“God!”

“We’re to keep the dynamo runnin’ until it’ll run no more, mister—for the wireless.”

McNeile cast an anxious glance at the clock.

“How long ’ll it be before we have to draw fires?” he asked doubtfully. “Won’t do to go risking explosions.”

“No chance o’ that yet,” Mr. Horniblow told him. “Not unless a bulkhead goes, that is.”

McNeile grunted. He wasn’t exactly frightened, merely anxious.

“How long ’ll she last?” he queried.

“How the blazes should I know, mister?”

“Then what time’s that cruiser due, Chief?”

“One-thirty in the mornin’, someone told me.”

“One-thirty!” McNeile muttered. “Whew! Over four mortal hours!”

By his way of thinking, they would have had to abandon ship long before that.

The time by the engine-room clock was seventeen minutes past nine.

7

Considering the other damage that the *Moorhaven* had received, it was surprising that the wireless-room, which was a flimsy erection built on the tail of the bridge as an afterthought, still remained *in situ*. It was a miracle that the

aerial, which had been thrashing about in a fierce wind for over five days, and in a virtual hurricane for twenty-four hours, still remained stretched between the two mastheads.

And towards nine-thirty, Denholm, at the captain's orders, was tapping out a message:—

> *Moorhaven to all ships in vicinity—Ship swept by heavy seas. Bridge carried away. Second mate one seaman lost overboard. Cargo shifted. Heavy list to starboard. Two derricks adrift forward. Numbers one and two hatches stove in and holds flooding. Impossible repair damage. Ship down by bows. Require immediate assistance. Hove to. Position....*
>
> *Gamblin. Master.*

The rescuers were gradually drawing in, for between nine forty-five and ten-twenty Denholm had received answers from four ships:—

> *Juno to Moorhaven. Have your approximate bearing by directional. Make you roughly fifty miles away 2130. Increasing speed. Amended time arrival 0030. Fire rockets show flares from midnight. Hold on. Doing our best.*

Stirred by the obvious urgency of the *Moorhaven's* signal, indeed, Kilburn, the *Juno's* captain, was taking risks. The sea had not moderated; but a simple calculation showed that he was driving his ship through the night at a speed of about eighteen knots.

The *Duchess of Kent*, too, away to the eastward, reported no improvement in the weather; but said she also was able to

increase speed. Instead of six-thirty in the morning, she expected to arrive upon the scene at five thirty-five.

That, Captain Gamblin realised, would probably be too late.

The *Dusseldorf* was speeding up. She, her captain hoped, would reach the *Moorhaven* soon after three o'clock, while away to the south-west the *City of Philadelphia* sent a message of encouragement which amply proclaimed her nationality.

> *Stick it buddy boy. Dig your toes in. Old Glory's coming. The wheel of the wagon ain't broken. Four o'clock sir. Before the milk.*

Percy Denholm, transcribing that message, wondered who had composed it. From its flippancy, he suspected a young and rather pert junior operator.

But he liked the idea of the fat old skipper being addressed as "buddy boy", and being told to dig his toes in. If they came through this wretched business alive, he must treasure that signal for future use—write it in the notebook wherein he kept the clues to all his best and most amusing stories.

Buddy boy, indeed!

The messages from the various vessels brought some degree of comfort. The *Moorhaven* was not alone, and somewhere within seventy or eighty miles, four stout ships, manned by nearly two thousand seamen, were striving by every effort to reach her.

Help was coming, but would it be too late?

If the ship sank before one of the rescuers arrived, there was little hope of salvation. Looking at the great hummocks of angry water leaping and tumbling pyramidally in all

directions, there wasn't a soul on board who didn't realise that no ordinary boat could live in such a turmoil. And the *Moorhaven* had but one boat left to her—for twenty-three men!

No. The thing was impossible. The survivors, if there were any, would have to trust themselves to floating wreckage, in which case there was little chance of rescue. Fighting for their lives, half-suffocated by the breaking waves, numbed by the icy cold of the water, they would be washed away from their pitiful flotsam—to merciful oblivion.

The condition of the ship was rapidly deteriorating. Just before eleven Denholm was ordered to broadcast another message:—

> *Urgent. List increasing. Every sea sweeping fore-deck. Water fast increasing engine-room. Must draw fires. Pumps dynamo stopping. Shall transmit on batteries.*

Then, at eleven thirty-eight, very feebly:—

> *Condition desperate. Ship lying over on side. Cannot last long.*

Fifteen miles away, that message was read out to Captain Kilburn on the reeling bridge of the *Juno*. The ship was lurching wildly, burying herself in the foaming monsters that rolled ceaselessly up out of the night.

"The wireless office reports her signals as very weak, sir," the oilskinned messenger shouted into his ear.

The captain thought for a moment.

Should he risk it, or shouldn't he? The cruiser was making heavy weather of it now—the worst he had ever seen. But

even a knot or two might make a difference.

He made up his mind—shouted to the officer of the watch.

"Sir?"

"Put her on at twenty."

"Aye aye, sir."

Seymour, the navigator, who was standing by his commanding officer's side, gasped with dismay.

Eighteen knots was bad enough, in all conscience. Twenty seemed sheer insanity. Had the owner taken final leave of his senses?

But he didn't dare to protest.

The revolution telegraph rattled, and the answering clang came back from the engine-room.

"Officer of the watch?"

"Sir?"

"Have that searchlight switched on. Tell 'em to train it vertical, and let it move with the ship."

"Aye aye, sir."

"It may put heart into the poor devils if they *see* us coming," the captain roared at his navigator.

"Yes, sir," Seymour shouted back. "Quite."

All the same, he thought Kilburn was qualifying for Bedlam, or a court martial, he wasn't quite certain which. The ship would be smashed up and strained—as sure as eggs she would. She might even be strained already.

Gosh, he thought to himself, the fur would fly all right when they reached Plymouth. Reasons in writing would be the first step, then a Court of Enquiry, finally a Court Martial at which he would figure as one of the chief witnesses.

He could almost hear himself being asked the questions: “In your judgment, taking the state of the weather into account, did you, or did you not, consider the speed excessive?”—“As the navigating officer of the ship, did you make any remark, or utter any protest, when the speed was increased?”

Seymour was a loyal soul, and was sincerely fond of his captain. He wouldn’t willingly do him down. But if his loyalty clashed with his conscience, what then?

Hell! Curse these broken-down tramps!

The pale, bluish-white ray of a searchlight flickered on, and shot heavenwards. It swayed, like a questing finger, across the dark sky, reproducing every pitch and roll of the ship that bore it—casting its pool of milky radiance on the underside of the low cloud canopy overhead.

The *Juno* drove on, many pairs of eyes on her bridge probing the darkness ahead.

MIDDLE WATCH

1

THE *Moorhaven's* fires had been drawn, and her dynamo had stopped. Nothing more could be done below. By the captain's orders, all the men had been withdrawn from the engine-room and stokehold.

Both hands of the clock in the chartroom, dimly lit by an oil lamp smoking on the bulkhead, pointed to XII. Captain Gamblin, supporting himself by the doorposts, half-in and half-out of the door, had his eyes upon it.

"All right, mister," he shouted. "Let her go."

Cudworth, standing on the lower bridge within a few feet of him, pulled a line.

There came a slight report, followed by a hiss and a trail of sparks in the darkness, as a rocket left the deck. Its fiery track rose obliquely as the fierce wind carried it far to leeward.

The resultant explosion was inaudible above the roar of the wind and sea. For a moment or two, the dark clouds overhead became spangled with golden stars, and the foaming crests of the racing seas leapt into ochreous light. Then darkness again.

Captain Gamblin felt disappointed. It wasn't much of a display.

"What d'you make the visibility?" he roared.

Cudworth peered round the visible horizon.

"Not more than three or four miles, sir," he replied. "But the spray flyin' about the surface makes it difficult to see. It may be clearer overhead under the clouds."

"Aye," the skipper agreed. "But they're low enough.—Let's have one o' those flares, mister."

The mate, standing in the partial lee of the chartroom, fumbled in the pocket of his oilskin. He hit something on the rail. In a moment, the ship and the sea nearby became bathed in a glow of the colour of rubies. The bustling wave-tops and flying spray were dyed with patches of brilliant redness, and the wet funnel shone like a pillar of molten metal. With the dark shapes and shadows cast by the rolling ship, and the plume of purplish smoke streaming horizontally from Cudworth's firework, the effect was strikingly beautiful.

But nobody noticed its beauty. The flare was a signal of dire distress.

"Hm," the captain grunted to himself. "That's more like it."

The light dwindled, and died away.

Both men stepped out to the starboard side of the lower bridge. Anxiously, their eyes gradually accustoming themselves to the darkness, they looked to windward for anything in the nature of a reply,—the twinkle of a bursting rocket, perhaps, or the flicker of a searchlight over the horizon.

For several minutes they gazed without speaking. There was nothing to be seen—nothing except the white-capped hummocks of the tumbling seas, and their phosphorescence as they broke over the forepart of the ship.

The *Moorhaven* was sensibly deeper by the bows. Almost every wave surged over the starboard bulwarks, to pour down the slope of the well-deck like a weir in mid-river. Her list had increased. The starboard bulwarks was practically submerged.

"Not a sign," the captain groaned, the anxiety sounding in his voice.

"Perhaps it's a bit early yet," the mate suggested hopefully, though he also felt utterly despondent.

Captain Gamblin made no reply.

Not being an expert, he was wondering if the *Juno's* directional wireless was as accurate as such apparatus was reported to be. Could it be implicitly relied upon to give the *Moorhaven's* real bearing? The tramp's reported position was a mere approximation. If the cruiser were relying upon that, the stricken ship might *never* be found. She was sinking slowly. There was no doubt whatever about that.

He went to the chartroom, with a heart that was very troubled, and took down the voice-pipe communicating with the wireless-room above. He blew up it, to be answered by Denholm's tired voice.

"Anything new, mister?"

"Nothing, sir," said the operator, who was sharing the captain's anxiety. "Her last message said she was coming as fast as she could."

Captain Gamblin grunted.

"Those directional gadgets," he queried. "Is it possible for 'em to go wrong?"

"Of course, sir," Denholm answered, wondering what new bee was in the old geezer's bonnet.

"But not likely to go wrong in a man-o'-war, hey, mister?"

"Well, sir. They generally have the best of everything, and plenty of men to work it."

"And from fifteen or twenty miles she should get our line o' bearing plumb, hey?"

"Yes, sir. Within a degree or so."

"As near as dammit, what?"

"Yes, sir," said Denholm, somewhat impatiently. "Of course."

The “Old Man’s” questions irritated him. If anything went wrong, it wouldn’t be the wireless. Why the blazes should the old blighter start casting doubts upon the efficiency of the *Juno’s* telegraphists, or their apparatus?

“Keep listenin’,” Gamblin grunted, replacing the voice-pipe.

“God!” he muttered, relapsing to the settee, and leaning wearily forward to rub his fingers across his eyes. The strain was beginning to tell. He felt very old, and very tired.

The clock on the bulkhead ticked on.

Aloft in his wireless-room Denholm fulminated under his breath.

Keep listening, indeed!

As though he weren’t listening—as though he hadn’t been sitting for hours with the perishing earphones clamped over his head, and his nerves all of a dither!

These elderly shipmasters seemed to imagine that because a chap was young and innocent-looking, he must also be a B.Y.F. who didn’t know his job.

A faint scratching in his receivers deviated his thoughts into another channel.

He put out a hand, and made an adjustment.

It was nothing of any importance. A ship some hundreds of miles away was reporting herself to a shore station.

2

Seven minutes past midnight—thirteen minutes past.

Another rocket went up from the *Moorhaven*, another red flare was burnt.

Again the captain and the mate gazed anxiously to windward. They were beginning to lose hope.

Timmins, the senior apprentice, who had been sent up to act as a messenger, was perched on top of the chartroom outside the wireless room.

"D'ye see anything, boy?" the skipper roared from below.

"No sir, nothing."

"Where the hell's she got to?" the "Old Man" went on to exclaim. "She ought to be in sight by now, if she's picked us up."

"It's not so clear as it was, sir," Cudworth volunteered.

"Looks no different to me, mister."

Cudworth was about to reply, when someone came forward and joined them.

"Who's that?" the captain demanded.

"It's me, sir. McNeile," said the second engineer. "The chief engineer sent me up."

"An' what's up now, Mr. McNeile?"

It was sufficiently serious.

Water, from number two hold and the bridge space, was finding its way into the 'thwartship bunker in increasing quantity. The watertight bulkhead between the 'thwartship bunker and the engine and boiler-room was threatening to collapse under the strain.

Mr. Horniblow wished to report that he had collected all the available hands, and was doing his utmost to shore it up.

It was a pretty hopeless sort of job, according to McNeile. They were working at the back of the still hot boilers, using what planks were available. Except for a slush lamp or two, the place was in Stygian darkness. Meanwhile, the water was well over the floodplates in the engine-room and stokehold.

Due to the excessive list of the ship, it was six or seven feet on the starboard side, and still increasing.

The news was alarming.

Captain Gamblin gasped. Cudworth felt physically sick.

Numbers three and four holds, they hoped, were still clear of water, or tolerably so. But if that bulkhead did crumple and collapse under the pressure, and the engine and boiler-room filled up, the ship couldn't remain afloat.

"Have that starboard after boat turned out, an' ready for lowerin'," the skipper ordered the mate. "Seems we're finished.—Watch out she isn't rushed, or lowered till I give orders."

Cudworth went off, after telling the captain there were further flares in the chartroom drawer if required. McNeile, before he left the lower bridge, was asked to see to the renewal of the oil-bags along the port side of the bridge deck.

The bags were doing some good. Still pitching heavily, the ship was drifting with a broad slick of floating oil stretching up to the windward. It couldn't prevent the seas from breaking over the fore well-deck, which was all but submerged; but it did something to curb their violence.

"Oil, and more oil," the captain said. "It doesn't matter a damn how much we use now. We shan't be needin' it much longer. See to it, mister."

McNeile had hardly left the bridge when Timmins, from his position overhead, shouted something unintelligible. He went on shouting.

Looking up, the skipper saw the boy's dark figure spring into sudden silhouette as a broad beam of silver light waved madly across the sky behind him.

“God!” the captain murmured, his heart nearly bursting with relief.

With an agility that was surprising for one of his bulk, he pulled himself uphill to the port side of the lower bridge.

And there, broad on the port beam, between a mile and a half and two miles away, was the ship from which that searchlight emanated—the *Juno*, and none other. The captain could see the white pin-points of her two white steaming lights, and the red flash of her port bow light as she lifted to a sea.

She had emerged from what looked like a squall or a bank of mist, and was steaming fast, with the sea and wind under her tail, in a direction which could take her well clear of the *Moorhaven*.

Captain Gamblin realised that his own darkened ship couldn’t have been seen. Returning to the chartroom with all possible haste, he tore open the drawer and came out again with a flare.

Thirty seconds later, his fingers were being wickedly scorched as he held the flaming torch aloft. Once more, the battered *Moorhaven* became bathed in rufous brilliance.

A thin trail of fire climbed aloft from a spot near the searchlight. It curved high in the air, to burst overhead like a flung handful of gold and silver.

Throwing away the remains of his flare, the skipper muttered a few words of thankfulness. Help was at hand. The sudden feeling of comfort was overwhelming.

As he watched, the searchlight was extinguished. But the two tiny white steaming lights remained. They swung into line, and a little later he had a glimpse of the red and green of

the port and starboard bow lights. The cruiser had altered course. She was steaming directly towards the *Moorhaven*.

The captain didn't hear the ragged cheer that broke out from the little group of men whom Cudworth had collected to turn out the starboard after boat, the only one that remained. The sound of their voices was carried away by the wind; but they shouted from the very bottom of their hearts. Salvation was at hand. Life was again worth living.

In a minute or two, young Farnsworth arrived breathless on the lower bridge, to ask the skipper if the mate should carry on turning out the boat.

"Tell him to have everything ready; but not to turn out till further orders," the reply went back. "And, boy."

"Sir?"

"Tell the chief engineer to send up all hands from the engine-room."

"Yes, sir."

They were by no means out of the wood yet, Captain Gamblin recognised. There remained the difficult, if not impossible, task of saving the crew.

But if that bulkhead below collapsed with a sudden rush, the men below might be trapped and drowned outright. Now that another ship had arrived, it were better they should have a chance on deck if the *Moorhaven* went to the bottom.

Was it his imagination, Gamblin wondered, or had the sea *really* moderated a little? He could have sworn that the waves weren't breaking so furiously as they had been an hour before, and that the wind, also, had lulled. Its roaring seemed to have diminished. One could hear oneself speak.

The *Juno* approached.

Denholm thumped on the inside of his door for Timmins to take a message—put out his head and shouted angrily into the night when the apprentice, who was more interested in watching the oncoming cruiser, did not immediately appear.

"Hi! Timmins, blast you!" Percy roared. "Come here!"

The apprentice heard him, and approached.

"Ask the cap'en to stick by the voice-pipe in the chartroom," the wireless operator said. "The *Juno's* going to wireless what she's goin' to do.—Got that?"

"Yes."

"Well, jump to it.—And next time you don't answer when I bang on the door," Percy continued angrily, "I'll come out and boot that fat stern of yours!"

"I'd like to see you try it," Timmins retorted as Denholm's head disappeared, and the door slammed to behind it.

The *Juno*, rolling dizzily with the sea nearly abeam, came on until she was within about six hundred yards of the wreck. Then she swung herself head on to the sea, until those on board the *Moorhaven* could see the whole long, lean length of her silhouetted against the dark sky beyond.

Rising and falling, she was steaming dead slow, the lines of lighted dots from her scuttles dropping occasionally out of sight as the wave-tops intervened.

Two searchlights flashed out, to sweep the *Moorhaven* from stem to stern.

Meanwhile, Captain Kilburn knew better than to try communicating with a tramp steamer by means of a flashing lamp. He relied on his wireless, and the interchange of messages that ensued was like a slow conversation, with every letter of each word spelt out in Morse.

Presume—from—your—last—message—you—cannot—last—till—daylight? the *Juno* asked.

Cannot—last—much—longer, the *Moorhaven* replied. *Bulkhead—below—likely—collapse—any—moment.*

Proceeding—to—lay—oil—all—round—you, the cruiser returned. *Then—intend—coming—close—windward—firing—line—across—you—Stop—Haul—in—line—coir—hawser—on—end—Stop—Boat—on—end—coir—hawser—Stop—Request—you—haul—in—slow—as—boat—approaches—allowing—her—pass—under—your—stern—to—lee—side—Stop—As—going—alongside—impossible—officer—boat—instructed—your —men—must—jump—one—at—time—wearing—lifebelts—Stop—Use—oil—Stop—Is—message—understood?*

Message—understood, the *Moorhaven* wirelessed back, as the cruiser moved slowly round in a circle pumping out oil on the angry water.

How—many—men? the *Juno* asked.

Twenty—three—and—one—dead, the *Moorhaven* answered.

Regret—inadvisable—embark—dead, came back. *Imperative—others—jump—Stop—See—no—chance—otherwise—Stop—Am—switching—off—searchlight—temporarily.—Stop—Show—a—light.*

Watched by every soul on board the stricken tramp, the *Juno*, pitching and rolling horribly, passed about two hundred yards to leeward. Moving slowly on, she swung to starboard and again approached, steaming towards the *Moorhaven's* port side.

Shall—stop—to—windward, she said by wireless. *Look—out—for—line—as—I—pass.—Stop.—Burn—flare—when—*

you—have—it.

Her searchlight flashed on once more, bathing the *Moorhaven* in its uncanny brilliance.

Cudworth was taking the precaution of distributing his men throughout the length of the ship. There was no knowing where the *Juno's* line might fall. The bos'un and another man even ventured on to the fore well-deck, which was still being washed by every sea that came toppling down from windward, to run up the *Moorhaven's* port side.

Her list to starboard had increased. The water was lapping the foredeck about halfway between the bulwarks and hatch coamings.

The wind certainly had lulled, though the ship was still bombarded with bursts of heavy spray. And the sea also had moderated, for the moving hummocks had lost much of their confusedness. They were still big; but ran smoothly and evenly, more like a heavy swell. In the area where the *Juno's* oil was slowly spreading over the surface, there was hardly a breaking crest to be seen.

She was using oil-fuel, and the reek of it was strong in the air. Standing on the port side of his sloping lower bridge, watching the dark shape of the cruiser coming slowly ahead into position, with her searchlight blazing, and the lights on her upper deck alternately sliding into view and disappearing behind the intervening wave crests, Captain Gamblin sniffed appreciatively.

To him, at this moment, the smell of that oil-fuel was strangely comforting—more delightful than all the sweetest perfumes that ever came out of Arabia.

The *Moorhaven* lay with the wind and sea roughly two points on the port bow. The *Juno* approached at an angle, steering practically straight for the tramp's bows, upon which a second searchlight was now directed.

For the next few minutes, watching a piece of superbly good ship-handling and seamanship with breathless interest, Captain Gamblin almost forgot about the imminent danger to his ship and all those on board her.

Behind the glare of the searchlights, he saw the dark hull of the cruiser come slowly on, her two steaming lights swaying madly as she rolled in the still lumpy sea. She approached to within what looked like two hundred and fifty yards abreast of where he was standing, until he could have sworn that a collision was inevitable.

But Kilburn had his ship under perfect control.

The *Juno* was already turning to port against the wind and sea. Gamblin saw a huge wave break over his forecastle as she did so, and a mass of breaking water go tumbling aft as her bows lifted. The cloud of spray driving high over her bridge and funnel shone like silver in the ray of her searchlight.

There came the report of a Schermuly line-throwing gun, followed by a thin trail of golden sparks. The rocket shot into the air, and came travelling in a curve in a direction well ahead of the *Moorhaven's* bows.

Holding his breath, Captain Gamblin watched its flight.

It seemed to be aimed perfectly. The wind would probably carry it over the ship, and its line on board.

But then, for some unaccountable reason, the missile was suddenly deflected to the left, into the wind's eye. It swished

round through an angle of nearly ninety degrees, to vanish into the night—wasted.

"God!" the skipper muttered, his heart heavy within him.

Things never go wrong singly. At that very moment, Dibb, the third engineer, appeared on the lower bridge, with another message from Mr. Horniblow. The engine-room, he said, was filling up fast.

"How long's she likely to last?" the skipper demanded.

"I can't say, sir. The chief engineer thinks the bulkhead has gone."

"Thinks!" Gamblin snorted angrily. "Go down and find out!—Will it be ten minutes, or an hour?"

Mr. Dibb retired hastily. He was a nervous little man at the best of times. Mr. Horniblow bullied him. As for shipmasters, he regarded them as man-eaters who lived on the flesh and blood of third engineers, nothing less.

Captain Kilburn, of the *Juno*, was prepared for emergencies. His ship, apparently, possessed a second Schermuly gun, or else his people were very quick in reloading the first.

The third engineer was hardly off the bridge when Gamblin heard another faint bang, and saw a second fiery trail. He watched it, praying hard—saw it coming straight for the *Moorhaven's* bows, travelling like a comet.

The wind took it slightly, bringing it aft, and towards him. It started to curve downwards, until he heard the 'wooo-o-o-sh' of it driving through the air. It passed overhead.

Gamblin remembered the wireless aerial strung between the masts. If the rocket fell foul of that, they couldn't reach the line without letting go the aerial halliards.

However, he had reckoned without the wind, which blew the bight of the line over the starboard side of the bridge deck, where Cudworth and two men were standing ready.

In the glare of the searchlights, it was almost as bright as daylight. The mate saw the line, snatched at it, and took a turn.

More men joined him, and they started to haul in. The captain heard them shouting. Their spirits had revived, poor devils.

"Shall I light the flare, sir?" Timmins shouted in the Old Man's ear.

"Flare?—What flare?"

"To tell 'em we've got the line, sir!" the apprentice howled. "She told us to."

"Hell!" Gamblin muttered. In the stress and excitement, he had forgotten the *Juno's* last wireless message. "Yes, boy. Go ahead.—Thanks for remindin' me."

The bluish-white brilliance enveloping the *Moorhaven* changed to a beautiful rosy pink as Timmins held his blazing flare at arm's length.

Three hundred yards away, on the cruiser's bridge, Captain Kilburn saw it, and was thankful.

"Keep the helm on her, pilot!" he called to his navigator. "I want the wind and sea fine on the port bow to give the boat something of a lee."

"Ship's head still moving to port, sir. Another thirty degrees yet."

"Starboard screw still going slow ahead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Keep her going for the moment."

Below, and slightly abaft the bridge, on the after end of the *Juno's* long forecastle, Commander Wedderburn and a group of men were standing by to lower the twelve-oared cutter, which served as the sea-boat. Her oil-skinned crew, wearing their lifebelts, were sitting on their thwarts.

The ship was still rolling heavily, and the summits of the larger swells reached practically to the level of the upper deck. But the seas no longer broke. The *Juno* was in the midst of an ever-widening patch of oil.

Oil, or no oil, however, lowering the boat in safety would be a risky job. Wedderburn realised that. So did the captain on the bridge above, the lieutenant in charge of the boat, and every man jack of his crew.

Reaching the *Moorhaven* might not be too difficult, since she lay almost dead to leeward, and the seas no longer carried their foaming crests. The chief hazards would come in getting close enough to the wreck to pick up her men, and, when once they were rescued, in getting them on board the *Juno*. Moreover, the cutter would be crowded—twenty-three men from the wreck, over and above the boat's crew of fourteen.

Pray heaven, Kilburn was thinking, that the *Moorhaven's* people realised what they were required to do with the coir hawser, the first end of which was now going over the side as the tramp's crew hauled away on the rocket-line. If they made a botch of it, the whole manœuvre must be started afresh. Pray heaven, too, that neither the rocket-line nor the coir hawser carried away. Coir rope had only one-quarter of the strength of hemp of the same size. But it was one-third lighter, and floated on the surface. Hence the reason for using it.

However, the lieutenant in the boat had his instructions, and could be trusted to do all that was humanly possible. There

was no sense in confusing him with last minute orders or advice shouted through a megaphone.

The *Moorhaven*, still lit up in the glare of two searchlights, was broad on the *Juno's* starboard quarter at a distance of between three and four hundred yards.

Standing on a little platform on the after side of his bridge, Kilburn watched the tail of the first hawser pass over the side. A second was knotted to the end of it, and a third to the end of the second.

With the sea on her port bow, the cruiser, nearly stopped, had developed an uneasy corkscrew motion—half-pitch, half-roll. The captain had his night-glasses on the little group of labouring men in the *Moorhaven*.

"Hell!" he muttered to himself, watching them, "They ought to have the end of it by now!—Put your backs into it, you blighters!"

Minutes seemed to pass before he saw the end of the coir hawser emerge from the sea, to be dragged up the tramp's side.

They had it, thank God!

He breathed again. The rocket-line, which looked even less stout than a domestic clothes line bought at Woolworth's, had done its job.

"How are we heading?" he shouted to the navigator.

"Another fifteen degrees to get head to wind, sir," yelled Seymour, watching the compass.

The captain looked over the side, measuring the height of the sea with his eye. The *Juno's* motion was easier now. She was pitching, more than rolling.

“All ready, commander?” he shouted through his megaphone.

“All ready, sir!” Wedderburn howled back. “Maturin?” he added to the officer in the boat.

“Sir?”

“Keep those lifelines crossed till you’re in the water. They’ll help to steady her.—Put your backs into it, men. Good luck.”

“Stop both engines,” the captain ordered. “All right, commander!” he shouted. “Carry on!”

Wedderburn raised his hand in acknowledgment.

“Slip the gripes!” he ordered.

The men standing by the davits, struck with their little metal hammers. The slips flew free. The gripes holding the boat to the horizontal griping spar fell away, dangling from the davit-heads towards the water.

“Start the falls!” the commander ordered. “Lower away!”

Fenders had been lowered to prevent the boat from being dashed in against the ship’s side. The men sitting on her port thwarts had their stretchers ready for bearing off.

“Ta ta, Bella,” called a facetious seaman in the cutter, waving his free hand as he started to descend. “Slip us a postcard, dearie! See you next week-end.”

“Silence in the boat!” roared the lieutenant in the stern.

“Undisciplined rascals!” the commander chuckled to himself. “Do they think it’s a ruddy picnic, or what?”

He loved his West Country ship’s company. They were a damned good crowd, irrepressibly cheerful, and very much all there when it came to a real job of work. But there was no denying they loved the sound of their own voices.

“Handsomely, that foremost fall!” he yelled suddenly, observing that the boat was slightly down by the bows. “Roundly, the after fall!—Together, now!”

The boat was below him. He leant over the rails, watching her in the glare of the electric clusters. He felt a little sick, for as the falls lengthened out she had started to sway forward and aft, out and in, like a flying boat on a whirligig at a fair. The crew, doing their utmost to steady her with the lifelines, sent a medley of strange curses floating up to the heavens.

Down went the cutter, foot by foot, as the inboard ends of the falls were slowly paid out over the brass stag-horns.

“ ’Vast lowering!” Wedderburn roared. “Hold on!—All right, Maturin?”

“All right, sir!”

“Out pins!” the commander ordered.

“Foremost pin out, sir!—After pin out!”

“Both pins out, sir!” the coxswain reported, “All ready for slipping!”

The boat swung more dizzily now—a violent figure-of-eight motion that was almost terrifying to watch. Time after time she swished past the ship’s side, missing it by a few inches.

“Stand by!” the commander bawled, watching a hump of oily water come swishing aft along the ship’s side.

“Slip!”

He had judged it to a nicety. The cutter, swinging out like a plummet on the end of a string, was suddenly released, to fall with a splash from a height of three or four feet on to the crest of the wave.

Mingled objurgations drifted upwards as the boat was carried bodily aft with her stern up-ended, her bows apparently under water in the trough, and the crew struggling with their heavy ash oars.

"Ruddy wars!" Wedderburn muttered, watching her with his heart in his mouth. He could have sworn that she was about to be flung broadside on and capsized, or dashed into the ship's side and her crew spilled overboard.

But no such thing happened. Luck was on their side. The cutter went clear. Her crew somehow managed to get their oars to work—how, exactly, the commander never realised.

"Thank God!" he said fervently to the chief bos'un's mate standing by his side. "Miracles sometimes happen, Coggins." His feeling of relief was tremendous.

"Aye, sir," the chief 'buffer nodded. "But it gave me the staggers to watch 'em."

He was by no means the only one.

Captain Kilburn, with half-a-dozen others on the bridge had had 'the staggers' also. At one time, indeed, it had been on the tip of the captain's tongue to countermand the lowering of the boat, and to think out some other method of rescuing the *Moorhaven's* crew.

4

In the glare of the swaying searchlight, Cudworth and the bos'un watched the end of the *Juno's* grass hawser come dripping out of the water as the men hauled in on the rocket-line. The carpenter was there, with Farnsworth, two seamen, the cook, steward and messroom boy, the three engineers and four firemen.

Knowing that their lives depended upon getting that line from ship to ship, they had tailed on and pulled with a will.

"Easy!" Cudworth kept shouting, in a ferment of anxiety lest the line should carry away, and leave them worse off than ever. "Don't bust the bloody thing! Take in the slack, that's all!"

Dunn, realising that deeds were better than words, had stationed himself nearest the ship's side, and used his great strength to pull in the opposite direction. His language was blistering.

But the end of the hawser was in sight now, dripping, and turning over and over as it rose out of the sea.

"Pull easy, for God's sake!" the mate howled, the wind whipping at his oilskins.

Foot by foot the coir came towards the rails, and in a moment Cudworth and the bos'un were helping the end of it on board. There was considerable strain upon it. They were hauling a great bight of floating rope across three or four hundred yards of heaving water.

"Okay, sir," the bos'un muttered between his clenched teeth, holding on like grim death, and managing to snatch a turn round a stanchion. "I got 'im.—Come on here, you mother's darlin's!" he went on to roar. "Come an' fist this; you sons o' misery!"

In a minute they had it, and were hauling in, staggering about the sloping deck as the *Moorhaven* wallowed.

Again Cudworth had to caution them not to put too much beef into it.

The *Juno* lay well to windward, practically head on to the wind and sea. The mate saw lights and movement on the after end of her forecastle, and realised that a boat was being

lowered. A minute or two later, as the cruiser rolled and one of her searchlights dipped towards the dark water, he caught sight of the boat herself, perched on the smooth crest of a sea. With her oars working, she looked like some huge water-beetle.

His heart thrilled as the searchlight lifted, and the cutter either sank into a trough, or was blotted out in the darkness. If all went well, that boat meant salvation for every soul on board.

"Boat's comin', lads!" he shouted. "Keep your hearts up!"

The little group of men raised a faltering cheer. Their spirits revived. The mate could hear their excited remarks.

As for Cudworth himself, his feeling of happiness was spoilt by the thought of three men who could never be saved. Tommy Moulding, his best friend in the world except for his wife, was one of them.

Fathom after fathom of coir hawser was hauled on board, to be coiled down in a heap. When he judged he had sufficient length, Cudworth, remembering the gist of the *Juno's* signal, sent the bos'un and two hands to pass the end of it round the stern and well forward the starboard side of the ship. The boat, when she arrived, would have to lie off somewhere abreast the *Moorhaven's* funnel to effect the rescue.

The ship was deeply down by the bows, with the forecastle head dipping under water to every advancing sea. The oil was having its effect, for the seas hardly broke. Nevertheless, they swished and gurgled over the fore well-deck. The list to starboard seemed to have increased, and the rolling had ceased. But the violent plunging persisted.

The boat could never come close alongside. They would have to jump or swim for it. By Cudworth's orders, all hands

were already wearing their lifebelts.

Timmins, the senior apprentice, was still at his station outside the wireless room, while Denholm was within.

Captain Gamblin, standing straddle-legged on the port side of the lower bridge, with one hand clutching a stanchion, and the other holding an attaché case containing the ship's papers, some money, and the few other documents and letters he had been able to collect from his room on the spur of the moment, was watching the *Juno*. He, also, had seen her boat.

"Bo-o-o-y!" he hailed, turning his head.

"Sir?" Timmins replied from above.

"Tell the wireless operator to pack up, and to come down here. You, too.—Get your lifebelts on, and join the others."

"Yes, sir."

The apprentice was pleased. To him, it seemed likely that the *Moorhaven* might take it into her head to sink at very short notice. She was losing more and more of the slight buoyancy that remained. And Robert Albert Timmins wasn't out to do any Casabianca stunt, for no real reason that he could see. Let them who wanted to be heroes, carry on with it.

But when he put his head inside the dark wireless room, with the remark—"The skipper says you're to pack up, and put on your lifebelt," Denholm was furious.

"Tell the Old Man to take a running jump at himself!" he retorted mutinously, the earphones still over his head. "I'm listening."

"Anything urgent, Sparks?"

"Mind your own business!" Percy snarled. "Don't come worrying me with your damfool questions!"

“Don’t be a fool,” Timmins said. “If it’s not anything important you’d better come. She’ll go under pretty soon.”

“I know when it’s time to quit, blast you!”

“We’ll all be quitting soon,” the apprentice told him. “The boat’s halfway here.—Anyhow, I’ve given you the skipper’s message. I’ll tell him what you say.”

“Oh, all right,” said Percy grudgingly. “I’ll come.—You buzz off, anyhow. Your voice gets on my nerves.”

Timmins, unable to think of a suitable rejoinder, slammed the door, and retired in dudgeon.

Denholm took the earphones from his head, and threw them to the desk. Nothing important was coming through, anyhow—merely some vague chatterings which had excited his curiosity.

He shone the torch round his little domain, recognising and taking leave of all its familiar features. The *Moorhaven* was his first ship as wireless operator. In his peculiar sort of way he was rather proud of her—at any rate of her wireless, antiquated though it might be.

Never again would he sit in this chair with its familiar creak as the ship rolled, and stretch out his hand to play with those knobs and switches. Never again would he....

Oh, hell! It was rather awful, now it came to the point of leaving her.

He pulled open a drawer, and stuffed a bundle of letters, and the photographs of two different young women, into the inside pocket of his jacket. A third photograph he gazed at with pursed lips, finally to tear it into small pieces, which he dropped to the deck. She, the best looking of the lot, had been faithless, and could go down with the ship.

He rose to his feet, staggering a little as the *Moorhaven* pitched. She lay over to starboard at an appalling angle, he noticed. He had difficulty in standing upright without holding on.

Well, perhaps it really *was* time to leave her.

Lord! He felt mighty tired.

He put a packet of cigarettes, a box of matches, and the remains of a tin of bullseyes into his side pockets—flashed the torch all round the room in case there was anything he had forgotten.

Then, with the wireless log under his arm, and the lifebelt slung over his shoulder, he opened the door, and stepped out on deck.

He felt mighty sad, almost as though he might burst into tears.

The wind still howled, though the seas no longer broke over the ship. No spray reached the bridge.

Captain Gamblin must have seen Denholm's figure outlined against the sky, for there came an angry roar from the lower bridge.

"Come on, Mister! Have I got to wait all night for you?"

"Coming, sir," Percy shouted back.

"Got your wireless log, Mister?" the captain went on to demand.

Denholm replied in the affirmative.

What a damn stupid question!

As though any wireless operator worth a stiver would be likely to forget that most important record of every message that had come through!

Silly old blighter!

The *Juno's* cutter lay close to the *Moorhaven's* midship structure, tethered under the lee of the wreck with one of the tramp's hemp hawsers, in addition to the cruiser's coir.

The swell was heavy. Pitching wildly, the boat was carried high into the air at one moment, and the next slid dizzily down into a deep hollow. Provided she wasn't carried in on top of the ship, to be bilged or capsized against the steel side, her position was tolerably safe from the point of view of the weather.

So great was the *Moorhaven's* list, that the seas were lapping over the starboard edge of her boat deck. Men had difficulty in holding on.

It was almost as bright as daylight, for the *Juno*, lying to leeward, had two searchlights focussed on the wreck. Their rays showed up the tramp's tall funnel, and the stout samson-post of the derrick immediately in front of it. They leant over at an impossible angle, describing the giddiest arcs as the ship plunged. Overhead, too, was the after superstructure on the bridge-deck, surmounted by a lifeboat in its davits, and those ventilators that remained.

Maturin, balancing himself in the cutter's stern, had an idea that the ship might capsize on top of the boat, to crush her beneath the water, and fling the whole of his crew, and himself, into the water. The funnel also seemed to be swaying with a motion all of its own. If its stays carried away, and it came crashing down, the Admiralty might equally well have cause to send telegrams of condolence to their relatives.

However, it was no good worrying about the direful possibilities. This sort of life-saving job couldn't be undertaken without risk. The boat's crew didn't seem

troubled, anyhow. As usual, they were noisy, blasphemously so.

Meanwhile, only four of the tramp's people had been rescued, and in what seemed like ten or twelve minutes, though it was probably less in actuality.

Heaving lines were being thrown from ship to boat, and from boat to ship, whenever they were sufficiently close. The tramp's skipper, or some other officer with a voice like the bull of Basan, seemed to be directing operations on board. But there was a lot of unnecessary shouting and apparent wrangling before they decided who should go next. Some of the men didn't seem to like the idea of committing themselves to the sea, even with lifebelts.

Farnsworth, as the youngest person on board, had been the first to tie a line round his middle, and to slide into the sea, to feel himself dragged through fifteen or twenty feet of icy water which tasted vilely of oil fuel.

Hitting the side of the plunging boat with an almighty thud, he felt one pair of hands under his armpits, and another gripping the back of his belt. With a gruff 'up with 'im', he was half-lifted, half-dragged on board.

"Snuggle down between the thwarts, mate," a friendly voice with a strong West Country burr shouted in his ear. "You're all right, son."

Farnsworth felt anything but all right. Drenched to the skin with water somewhere near freezing point, he was practically numb with cold, besides feeling desperately frightened and very sick.

Lutter, the messroom boy, was the next arrival. Then came Timmins, followed by Denholm—much to Denholm's disgust.

Curse it all, the wireless operator thought to himself, officers should be the last to leave the ship. Yet the captain and Cudworth had forcibly knotted a line round his waist, and had practically thrown him into the sea. Wasn't a wireless operator an officer, damn it?

Officer or no officer, however, he was treated like his predecessors—man-handled like a wet sack full of potatoes, toppled head-over-heels through the air, to be deposited with a cruel thump on his stern in the bottom of the boat on something that was very hard and unyielding.

Gasping for breath, he spat out what seemed like pints of salt water heavily impregnated with oil. Then he was very sick.

"That's right, cully," someone said, hearing his unmistakable sounds of agony above the roaring of the wind. "Let 'er go. Ye'll feel better then."

Denholm groaned. He would *never* feel better, never, never. He couldn't.

Maturin, meanwhile, fumed with impatience.

The *Moorhaven* seemed likely to capsize at any moment. Before long, too, the oil on the water might have drifted to leeward, and the still heavy sea would start breaking over the wreck.

Couldn't those fellows realise that their lives, and the lives of the boat's crew, depended on haste?

"For God's sake get a move on!" he roared, exasperated at the delay. "Don't wait!"

Three men came across in fairly rapid succession, then two more, and another by himself. That made ten rescued up to date—thirteen left on board the wreck.

Then came a further maddening delay. Two heaving lines seemed to have become knotted up or tangled with a third.

"For God's sake talk to 'em!" the lieutenant told his coxswain. "I'm not equal to it. Give it 'em good and hearty."

The petty officer complied. His language would have blistered a marble statue. There were murmurs of envious approval from the boat's crew.

Four more men floundered across, one of them without waiting to invest himself with a heaving line.

Nine remained now ... seven ... six ... four.

Over, the carpenter, was dragged breathless into the boat with some sort of a canvas-covered parcel tied round his neck.

"Wot the 'ell?" demanded one of his rescuers. "Tryin' to drown yer ruddy self, or wot?"

"Ship's papers," Over spluttered. "Wireless log."

"Coo!" grunted a labouring bluejacket. "Mean to say we've come 'ere to rescue the muckin' literature?—Heave it over the side, Shiner."

"Don't you do no such thing!" the carpenter growled, slowly recovering his breath, and clutching his precious parcel as though preparing to defend it with his life. "Cap'en says them's wanted for the enquiry."

One of the *Juno's* men guffawed derisively.

S'trewth, he demanded, who the hell was worrying about enquiries? There wouldn't be time for any blazing enquiry if someone didn't get a move on. If these swab-tailed, perishing sons of witches in the something wreck didn't something shake their ruddy legs and get a move on, the whole purple lot of them, boat's crew and all, would be mixed up together in the confounded drink.[9]

Mr. Horniblow made the passage in safety, though not in comfort. He arrived dripping, wearing his lifebelt over a singlet streaked with oil fuel.

"Oo the 'ell are you?" a bluejacket wanted to know.

"I'm the chief engineer," Mr. Horniblow coughed.

"Orficers aft in the sternsheets," the sailor answered gruffly. "You'll have to stow tight, sir."

Mr. Horniblow didn't care how tight he stowed, provided he was tolerably safe. Meanwhile, he was shivering with cold, and his artificial dentures were on their way down towards the bottom of the Atlantic.

Three men were left on the *Moorhaven*. Another three or four minutes, Maturin decided, should see the rescue completed.

"Oars ready, men," he ordered. "All ready for slipping forward?"

"All ready, sir."

The lieutenant glanced over his shoulder, to see that the *Juno* was lying about two hundred yards away, dead to leeward. Unless the laden boat were swamped on the way by a sea curling over her stern, there shouldn't be much difficulty in reaching the cruiser. They would be blown there willy-nilly. The most ticklish part of the business would be getting rescued and rescuers out of the boat when once she was alongside under the lee. The sea was still big. The breaking crests were becoming more numerous as the oil gradually became dissipated.

What was the delay now? he wondered, looking back at the wreck. Why didn't those three remaining men ...?

There was no time for further thought. Loud above the noise of the wind, Maturin heard a muffled crash, followed by a hollow rumbling sound as though shingle were being poured into some huge metal container.

Almost simultaneously, the *Moorhaven* swayed over towards him—then hesitated, and flung herself abruptly to port until she was almost on an even keel. Her stern seemed to be rising out of the water....

God! She was going!

"Slip forward!" he roared, aware of the imminent danger to the boat. "Oars out!"

Out of the tail of his eye, he caught sight of a dark figure leaping over the ship's side.

"Haul in that man!" he yelled.

"I got him here, sir," the coxwain said, feeling a sudden weight on his heaving line, and starting to pull in, hand-over-hand.

"Give us a hand here, you sons o' misery!" he went furiously on, addressing the *Moorhaven's* survivors in the sternsheets.

Maturin, scrambling over men's closely-packed bodies, dashed for the tiller.

Then several things seemed to happen at once.

"All gone forward, sir!" a voice shouted.

The cutter's bows, rising to a sea, were driven off to starboard. A burst of heavy spray swished furiously over her.

"Give way together!" the lieutenant bellowed, putting his tiller over to keep the boat as nearly head to sea as possible.

Almost simultaneously, a man wearing a lifebelt was hauled dripping over the port quarter, to collapse in the

sternsheets.

Of his two companions, there were no signs.

Caught by the wind and sea on her port bow, the cutter was driving rapidly to leeward. The crew had managed to swing out their oars. They had started to pull; but their efforts were useless.

No power on earth could have driven the boat to windward. Climbing alternately up the rolling hummocks, sliding into the intervening valleys, she had developed a violent switchback motion that was wholly disconcerting. When she was poised on the summits, the oars were all but blown out of the men's hands. The gale still blew furiously. It was a mercy that the oil was still doing its work. The waves were steep; but they weren't breaking badly.

With thankfulness in his heart, Maturin saw that one of the *Juno's* searchlights was being kept on his boat. A second shone on the *Moorhaven*. She was twenty or thirty yards away, and fast receding as the cutter drifted away.

Meanwhile, what of those two missing men?

He yelled a question to the last man who had been saved, which was passed on by the coxswain. The poor fellow, however, gasping and choking in the bottom of the boat, could make no intelligible reply.

But even if the other two had jumped overboard in their lifebelts, there was no chance of saving them now. The boat could never reach the spot where they might be expected to be. Even if they tried to swim after the cutter, they could never overtake her. She was driving to leeward faster than any man could swim.

It was hopeless to try rescuing those two, who, for all Maturin knew, might still be in the wreck. Nobody had seen

them throw themselves overboard.

Moreover, he had a crowded boat. There were twenty-one rescued people on board in addition to the crew of fourteen.

The *Moorhaven*, more or less on an even keel, with her stern well out of water, was about fifty yards away, still brilliantly illuminated in the blaze of a searchlight.

Watching her, Maturin saw a great mound of water tumble aft over her submerged fore-deck. It broke heavily over her bridge deck, completely obliterating it.

At the same instant, the sunken bows dipped, and the stern of the ship lifted. More and more of her brick-red bottom appeared, then her rudder and screw—finally a long section of her keel.

For an instant or two, the stern hung in the air at an angle of about forty-five degrees, with the black curve of the counter, bearing the ship's name and port of registry, conspicuous against the background of sky.

Her funnel had gone; but the solitary stick of the mainmast still slanted skywards. The water broke furiously halfway along her midship structure. There were little splutters of spray, forced up by the rush of escaping air. Tiny whiffs of what looked like steam were fast dissipated by the wind.

She sank lower and lower as he watched, expecting to hear the crashing rumble of displaced boilers, or shifting cargo. But no other sounds were audible above the deep roar of the wind and sea.

Then, twisting a little, the *Moorhaven's* stern reared itself nearly vertically out of the water. It hung there while one could count five—then disappeared in a swift, sliding rush.

A few more spurts of white spray, and that was all.

From the loftier bridge of the heavily-pitching *Juno*, one hundred and fifty yards away, they could see a circular patch of unnaturally whitened water, littered with floating wreckage.

Captain Kilburn sighed. It was always painful to watch the death of a ship.

"Tell 'em to stand by for the boat, the starboard side," he said. "I'm going ahead to give her a lee."

His heart was in his mouth.

The cutter seemed to be broadside on to the sea, with heavy spray breaking all over her. It looked as though she might be swamped or rolled over at any moment.

Kilburn felt his responsibility.

Had he risked too much?

6

Ten pages might be written describing the transfer of the *Moorhaven's* survivors from the cutter to the *Juno*; but the briefest summary must suffice.

Once under the lee of the cruiser, the boat, with much water in her, was able to come tolerably close alongside. Boat-ropes were passed into her, and bowlines were lowered. One by one the *Moorhaven's* men were pulled up into safety. All but Maturin, the coxswain, and four of the boat's crew, were dragged up after them.

The ship was rolling and pitching in the still heaving sea. The cutter plunged violently as they hauled her forward under the davits, and the falls were hooked on.

But something went wrong.

The foremost fall became unhooked. Before Maturin or anyone else realised what had happened, the ship rolled

heavily over to port, and the stern of the boat was pulled with a mighty crash into the ship's side.

A sea, racing aft, poured in over the cutter's bows. In a moment she was full to the gunwale, with Maturin and his men hanging on by their eyelids. There was every danger of their being washed away.

Kilburn, watching from his bridge, felt physically sick.

"Get 'em out!" he roared to the commander through his megaphone. "Never mind the boat!"

Wedderburn was already doing his best.

Three of the seamen managed to slip their arms through the bowlines lowered down to them, and were yanked breathlessly up to the deck, banging against the ship's side as they ascended.

A fourth actually went overboard; but was dragged back just in time by the lieutenant and the coxswain.

"Ye bloody fool!" growled the petty officer.

"What d'ye want to go doin' that fur, ye silly cuckoo?—Go on! Shove this round ye."

Completely unaware of why he had been so roundly abused, since the mishap had been no fault of his, the fourth bluejacket regained his ship. He proceeded to inform all and sundry, in a loud voice, why middle-watch picnics in a gale o' wind sufficient to blow the chitterlings out of a brazen idol were not to the liking of any respectable sailor. Nobody listened.

"After you, sir," said the coxswain in the waterlogged boat, trying to put a bowline over Maturin's head.

"Be damned to you!" the lieutenant grunted. "Officers last, Casey."

So Petty Officer Casey also did his aerial act.

Maturin was the last to leave, and just in time.

The boat-rope parted. As the after fall had been unhooked, the cutter was carried aft as the next sea poured over her.

"Good work, Jimmy," the commander said, as the lieutenant, wet to the skin, clambered over the rails. "I congratulate you."

"Damn bad work," Maturin answered breathlessly. "I had to leave two of 'em behind when she sank. I must tell the captain.—They may be floating for all I know, poor devils."

The commander was doubtful, and said so.

"I'll send up and let the captain know," he added. "You bung off and get dry, Jimmy."

"What's happened to the others?"

"I've sent 'em down to the wardroom. The P.M.O.'s all ready with hot whisky and stuff."

"How are they?"

"Damp, and ruddy miserable.—Go on. Bung off."

Maturin went—to the bridge.

Now he came to think of it, it *had* been a bit of a job.

7

Using her searchlights, the cruiser steamed slowly to and fro, quartering the spot where the *Moorhaven* had disappeared.

She sighted a certain amount of floating wreckage—a smashed and waterlogged lifeboat, a few spars and planks, some lifebuoys and lifebelts, mattresses, and other unnameable flotsam. But of men, alive or dead, there was no sign. Those two men had gone, and for ever.

Meanwhile, her wireless had been busy:—

> *'Juno' to all ships in the vicinity.*
> *—'Moorhaven' sunk. Twenty-one survivors rescued. Am now searching for two missing. Consider it unnecessary delay you further. Most grateful your proffered assistance.*

Messages came back from the *Dusseldorf*, the *Duchess of Kent*, the *City of Philadelphia* and the *Frankton*.

Nothing more could be done. They were all resuming their voyages, and at about four o'clock the large German liner, a veritable blaze of lights, hove in sight to the south-east. She altered course a little to pass closer to the *Juno*—flashed a signal as she approached:

> *'Dusseldorf' to 'Juno'. Captain to Captain.—Our best congratulations on your rescue. Sorry to have been too late to help.*

The *Juno* made a suitable reply.

Towards daylight, the wind subsided and the sea was definitely going down. The sky was clearing, and shortly before seven the sun sailed into view over the eastern horizon in a flush of rose-pink and pale orange.

The clouds overhead were losing their ragged appearance. They still sailed rapidly to the east on some upper air-current; but were becoming more rounded and compact, almost like summer cumulus. The patches of blue sky were definitely enlarging.

Until nine o'clock the *Juno* remained on the spot where the *Moorhaven* had foundered. More wreckage was sighted, with occasional patches of oil.

Captain Kilburn, red-eyed, unshaven and very weary, turned to his navigator.

"No use doing any more, pilot," he said. "They've gone, poor chaps. Bring her back to the proper course."

The helm went over. The swell was brought astern. Speed was increased.

"Yeoman?" said the captain.

"Sir?"

"Did they get off that signal to the Admiralty about the survivors, and so on?"

"Yes, sir. It went about two hours ago."

"Well, take down another.—*Have searched area. No further result. Am resuming voyage.*"

"Aye aye, sir."

The surgeon lieutenant-commander, spruce, well-fed and freshly shaven, appeared on the bridge, and went up to the captain.

"How are the invalids, P.M.O.?"

"I'm keeping two of them in bed, sir, suffering from exposure. There's nothing much the matter with any of the others, judging from the breakfasts they've eaten."

"That's good.—What about Maturin, and our own braves?"

The P.M.O. smiled.

"There's nothing much wrong there, sir. Merely a few scrapes and bruises."

"That's lucky," the captain said. "I thought at one time we'd lost the lot."

The *Juno's* course was set to the eastward—for England, and Plymouth Sound.

“I suppose we’ll get it in the neck for losing that cutter,” Kilburn said to the commander later in the day.

Wedderburn gave his characteristic little snort.

“Huh!—It was lucky it was only the cutter, sir.”

The captain smiled.

“You can bet your life someone ’ll tell us what we *ought* to have done,” he observed.

The swell had gone down a lot. The motion was far easier.

The cruiser’s speed had been increased to fifteen knots. Lost time had to be made up.

EPILOGUE

THE following extracts have been taken from various newspaper summaries of the Report of the Formal Investigation held at the Institution of Civil Engineers, Great George Street, Westminster, on the 20th, 21st, 22nd, and 23rd days of March, 19—, before the Rt. Hon. George Hervey, Lord Maybury, sitting on Wreck Commissions, assisted by Captain Arthur B. Plunkett, C.B., D.S.O., Captain Charles F. G. Hartley, Mr. F. H. Burley, M.I.N.A., and Mr. Edward C. W. Keate M.I.N.A., into the circumstances attending the loss at sea of the S.S. *Moorhaven* on the—of November, 19—.

. . . . . .

"To the questions whether the *Moorhaven* was sufficiently manned for the voyage, and whether she carried a sufficient complement of deck hands, the Court assumed that the question of sufficiency was governed by the regulations made under the Merchant Shipping Acts, and embodied in Board of Trade Circular 1463, whereby foreign-going steamships should carry, independently of the master and two mates, not less than eight efficient deck-hands. It appears that the *Moorhaven* was not fully manned in accordance with the law, one of her apprentices, Farnsworth, being under eighteen years of age, and having spent less than two years at sea.....

"Under the agreement with the National Maritime Board, owners of vessels who are members of the Shipping Federation—as are the owners of the *Moorhaven*—undertake that ships of her class shall carry three certificated officers in addition to the master. This undertaking, which, however, is not law, was ignored. It was the unanimous opinion of the

Assessors, in which his Lordship concurred, that if the safety of life and well-being had been regarded as dominant considerations, the *Moorhaven* would have had, besides her master, three mates. During the bad weather, and the subsequent trouble with the steering gear, the necessary watches placed too great a strain on the master and two mates. The design and equipment of the ship, particularly in regard to the steering-gear, and her state of repair, involved constant attention to small tasks, all of which increased the duties of the master and two mates. There was ample evidence which proved that the two mates were normally expected by the owners to be constantly at work on deck during the hours of daylight.....

"The Court observed that whether or not steering gear of the type fitted to the *Moorhaven* should remain the accepted type of gear for ocean-going vessels, seemed upon the evidence to call for full consideration with all possible help from expert witnesses. There was little doubt that the steering gear was not fully efficient when the ship sailed, and that links welded into a fractured steering chain had not properly been tested. Moreover, the evidence proved that the failure of the steering gear in the early afternoon was one of the contributory causes to the subsequent loss of the ship. The gear was of a kind which involved special risks, a fact that was recognised by the ship's officers; but appears to have been disregarded by the owners.....

"The evidence of officers and men of long experience and unquestionable character showed that the *Moorhaven* was liable to plunge very heavily, and that her forepeak was in a very bad condition due to the loosening of the rivets. The forepeak was constantly full of water, and other leaks were caused by faulty flanges to the hawse pipes, by cracked

plates, and leaking port-holes in the forecastle. The general condition of the ship was the subject of conflicting evidence. The expenditure on repairs was certainly kept down to a minimum, and on her voyages the efficient deck hands of the crew were kept at day work in a manner that was exceptional.....

"The evidence showed that the ship carried a full cargo of anthracite dust, which was stowed in a safe and proper manner. There was much conflict of opinion among the witnesses as to the covering and security of the hatchways, and the condition of the covers, and their fittings and coamings. The tarpaulins were of diverse quality and their quantity was sufficient for normal purposes. It was open to question, however, whether there were sufficient tarpaulins for a winter voyage in the North Atlantic. This had been represented to the owners; but no steps had been taken to provide more.....

"The prime cause of the ship's foundering was the inadequacy of her pumping arrangements. Evidence showed that the pumps were faulty, and that sufficient suction could not be obtained to pump out the tanks and bilges. The chief engineer, and others of his department, stated that some of the pipes were perforated with age, and that many of the suction boxes were inaccessible and liable to become choked when carrying an anthracite cargo. The *Moorhaven* was an old ship, steel built, no doubt well repaired from time to time. But her last extensive overhaul was carried out three years before her loss, and there is evidence of rusted areas, and plating reduced in thickness by reason of age. The Court observed that it was open to question whether the rules and procedure in force provided for sufficient surveys, and whether the age of ships

should be taken into account so that the risks of loss by perils of the sea may be more fully guarded against.....

"It was emphasized that the master, Leonard George Gamblin, and his officers and men, did everything they could to repair damage, and to save life. The casualties numbered five, though one of these, a fireman, succumbed before the loss of the ship through burns sustained in the stokehold. Everything possible was done to save his life. The second mate, Thomas Moulding, and an able seaman, Timothy Todd, were washed off the bridge and drowned by a succession of particularly heavy seas that swept over the ship during the first watch. The master and the boatswain, Samuel Francis Dunn, were last seen on board the ship just before she sank. They perished with her.....

"The Court added that it would not be proper in a case of this kind if they failed to record their opinion that from first to last the behaviour of the ship's company—officers and men—in circumstances of deadly peril, was in the highest degree praiseworthy. The state of affairs had been described in evidence by the mate, Nicholas Cudworth, the wireless operator, the apprentices and others. When the survivors were finally rescued, long continued labour without food and without sleep, had brought most of them to a state of physical exhaustion. They did all that was possible to the end.....

"The survivors were rescued by a boat from the cruiser *Juno*, which had hurried to the scene on hearing the *Moorhaven's* signals of distress. The risks taken by Captain Kilburn in lowering a boat in such weather appeared to the Court to have been fully justified. His fine seamanship and coolness were responsible for the saving of twenty-one officers and men who otherwise must have been drowned. The greatest praise was also due to Lieutenant Maturin, in

charge of the cruiser's boat, and her crew, for their gallantry in effecting the rescue of those officers and men in circumstances of great risk and danger. They stood by the wreck until she foundered. Nicholas Cudworth, the mate, who was still on board with the master and boatswain, saved his life by jumping overboard at the last moment. His companions failed to do so, for reasons that cannot be conjectured. Their loss was regrettable; but no vestige of blame was attributable to anyone. The boat, blown to leeward, could make no headway against wind and sea, and eventually reached her ship in a waterlogged condition. She had to be abandoned after the survivors and crew had been removed. Until two hours after daylight, the *Juno* remained on the spot searching for the two missing men. Wreckage was seen; but nothing else. In the opinion of the Court, the saving of the *Moorhaven's* survivors was a fine example of the fellowship of the sea, and the bond that links the two Sea Services upon which the Country and the Empire depend.....

"The Court gave its opinion that the existing provisions for securing the safety of seagoing ships and their crews fell short of what was necessary. For instance, loadline surveys should have due regard to the general condition of the ship; the Instructions to Surveyors that were in existence should be made practically effective; steering gear and hatches should be practically and carefully examined. Default of a surveyor in such matters, it was considered, should entail direst and prohibitive consequences. Evasion by shipowners of the manning regulations should be provided against by due penalties. Wilful false statements in logs and other official papers should be so dealt with that the reliability of such documents will not readily be tampered with....

"In the matters of the *Moorhaven's* manning, the condition of her steering-gear, her general state of seaworthiness, her pumping arrangements, and the extent and cost of her various repairs, the evidence of the Company's marine superintendent was often in conflict with that of the owners and the ship's officers. The evidence proved that the advice and requests of the ship's officers in regard to seaworthiness were habitually disregarded on the score of unnecessary expense. The Court was unanimously of the opinion that there was laxity on the part of the owners and their shore staff in regard to these important matters....

"The owners, the Haven Steam Shipping Company, were ordered to pay on account of the expenses of the investigation the sum of three hundred pounds to the Solicitor to the Board of Trade; two hundred pounds to the Solicitors representing the National Union of Seamen and the Transport and General Workers Union, and two hundred pounds to the Solicitors representing the relatives of officers on board the S.S. *Moorhaven* and the various Officers Protection Societies."

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

[1] What is known as the "Second Dog Watch" in certain sections of the Merchant Navy is usually called the "Last Dog Watch" in His Majesty's Service.

[2] The truck. The wooden disc at the masthead, usually fitted with sheaves for signal halliards.

[3] The table. The transverse steel cross-trees, generally halfway up the mast, to which the ends of the derrick topping-lifts are shackled.

[4] 'The pilot,' i.e., the navigating officer.

'Chatty' = Dirty.

[5] [6] .e. 109°. Gyro compass courses are reckoned clockwise from True North, which is 000°. East is 090°; South, 180° and West, 270°.

[7] The 6-8 p.m. watch is usually known as the ‘Last Dog Watch’ in the Royal Navy.

[8] This is no exaggeration. A tramp steamer of about the same size as the *Moorhaven*, carrying a crew of twenty-six officers and men, was lost in the Atlantic on December 14, 1934. At about 10 p.m. the night before “a succession of waves swept the ship; two of a very great height and force appeared to affect the vessel’s course.” A third “was judged by the master to come on at 14 or 15 feet above the truck on the foremast.” The quotations are taken from the report of the investigation into the loss held in London on May 20-23, 1935. It should be added that in the case referred to, the owners were exonerated from any blame.

[9] Drink = sea.

[The end of *Mid-Atlantic* by Henry Taprell Dorling (as "Taffrail")]