

VENGEANCE  
IN HER BONES

Malcolm Jameson

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# *Vengeance in Her Bones*

*by Malcolm Jameson*

*The late Malcolm Jameson was a naval officer who turned to writing after he had retired from service. Your editor has always preferred those stories of his that dealt with deep water over those that dealt with deep space. There is a verisimilitude about sea stories that all the phony parallels about space-going navies can never attain. The feeling all seafarers get about their ships—the animism with which they regard them—is a real thing. And a strange tale of the sea is far more likely to arouse genuine reader emotion than the most slickly bandied but irrevocably synthetic story of a moon-flying navy.*

The messenger from the recruiting office found old Captain Tolliver in his backyard. The crabby, sour-visaged

housekeeper took him as far as the hedge back of the house and pointed the retired mariner out to him. Captain Tolliver was reclining in a ragged canvas deckchair taking the sun. He had on faded dungarees, soft and pliant as linen from hundreds of scrubblings, and the stump of his handleless left arm rested carelessly on his lap. The peg-leg that matched it lay in alignment with the one good leg. The captain had his eyes closed, comfortably drinking in the sun's good heat, when he heard the crunch of the messenger's step on the gravel walk that separated the vegetable from the flower beds. The old skipper's hearing was still alert, though, and at the sound he raised his lids and looked inquiringly at the newcomer.

"Commander Jason's compliments, sir," said the bluejacket, "and would you please step down to the office. He has a ship for you."

Captain Tolliver smiled feebly, then he closed his eyes against the glare. His eyes were not overstrong these days—the doctors had said something about incipient cataracts.

"Commander Jason is confusing me with my son. He already has a ship, working out of West Coast ports. My sea-going days are over. Forever."

To emphasize his point he waved the stump of his left arm, and lifted the pegleg slightly.

"No, sir. It's you he wants. He was very clear about that. He has a ship that only you can command. She's a rogue. They say she will obey no other skipper. He says they have

waived your physical defects and will give you all the help you need. But they've got to have you."

The captain shook his head.

"He's wrong, I say. There is no such a ship. There was one once, but she rotted her life away in the back channel. They sold her finally to a wrecking company and broke her up for scrap. All I have to say to that is whoever bought that scrap had better have a care as to how they use it. For she was a vindictive wench. The *Sadie Saxon* bore grudges and would have her way no matter what you did...."

"Yes, sir," said the messenger, eagerly, "that's the ship—the *Sadie Saxon*—a cargo type vessel! They've put her back in commission but she won't leave port. They need ships now that America is at war. Every ship. That's why they need you. The commander says please come. If you want, he'll send an ambulance."

"The *Sadie Saxon*," whispered the old captain, suddenly rapt with nostalgia for World War days when he and she were in their prime.

Then aloud, "He needn't bother about the ambulance. I can get there under my own power, son. Give me a hand so I can get up and go dress. The old uniform still fits, thank God."

Captain Tolliver's senility seemed to drop from him as a cloak the moment the well-worn blue garments were back on his lean frame. He looked a little ruefully at the tarnished gold lace on the sleeves and at the cap device the years had

tinted with green mold, but nevertheless he brushed the uniform carefully, squared his shoulders, and marched down the steps without availing himself of the sailor's proffered arm.

"So they didn't break her up after all?" said the captain, as they waited at the curb in the hope a cruising taxi would come by. "How come? I know she was sold."

"Too expensive. She was part of a contract for scrap to be sent to the Japs some months ago, but they only worked three days on her. She killed nine men the first day they brought their cutting torches aboard, all of them in different ways. One of her booms crashed down the second day and smashed five others. On the third day seven suffocated in a hold, and two slipped and fell overboard. The men said she was jinxed and threatened to call a strike. So they put a tug alongside and hauled her back to her old berth."

Captain Tolliver chuckled.

"For the Japs, huh? She knew it even before they attacked Pearl Harbor, but I might have told 'em. But what's this about her *refusing* to leave port. Doesn't that sound a little silly to you?"

His faded old eyes twinkled when he asked the question. It was one that did sound silly, when a person came to think about it. Yet he knew it was not silly and one an experienced sailorman would answer as seriously as he could.

"There's no other word for it, sir," replied the bluejacket, soberly. "She was refitted at Newport News, given a crew and loaded with cargo. They look her out to make a voyage to Spanish Morocco, loaded with grain and automobile tires. But she wouldn't pass the Thimble. Her rudder jammed and she piled up hard, and at high tide, too. It took four days to pull her off. They took her back to the yard and looked her steering gear over. It was okay. So they started her out again. That time she sheered out to the other side and grounded near Willoughby Spit. The third time they tried to take her out, she piled up in the dredged channel and blocked all shipping for hours. The yard still insisted there was nothing wrong with her steering gear and suspected sabotage—

"I know," said the captain. "They didn't find any evidence of it."

"That's right. They gave her crew a clean bill of health and ordered to sea once more. She won't budge. She had steam up and stood a good dock trial, but once she was out in the stream her propellers quit turning over—"

"With full throttle, of course," remarked Captain Tolliver calmly.

"Yes, sir. With full pressure in the boilers and throttle wide open. All she would do was drift until she banged into a dock.

"The tugs got hold of her and tied her up again. The engineers swear her engines are all right and there is no reason why she won't run. She just won't—that's all."



A taxi rounded the corner and caught the sailor's hail. As it slid to a stop before them the captain made one final remark.

"I see. They looked up her record and found she was always that way. Except when I had command of her. Well, I know what is on that little tub's mind and what to do about. It won't be orthodox, but if they want her in service it is the only way."

"What's that, sir."

"Give her her head," said the old man cryptically, then stiffly climbed into the cab.

It was a week later that Captain Tolliver arrived at Norfolk Navy Yard. An aide of the admiral in charge of transport took him to the dock where she lay. She looked spick and span and new and a painter's stage swung under her near bow, and was to play her part in keeping supplies going Eastward in spite of havoc to the West. Tolliver climbed up onto it with some difficulty and patted one of the shiny plates of her nose.

"Up to your old tricks, eh, Sadie?" the astonished aide heard him say. "Well, everything's going to be all right now. We'll go hunting together."

Was it the wash of a passing tug that caused her to bob suddenly up and down that way? The aide shrugged his shoulders and was glad he was in the regular outfit. He would hate to have to go to sea through the war zone on a

rogue ship under the command of a decrepit and senile madman of a skipper.

"I am ready to take over," announced Tolliver when he was back on the dock, "whenever those three men whose names I gave you have been replaced by others more acceptable."

"Acceptable to whom, sir? I repeat that they are loyal American citizens despite their German ancestry. They have been investigated fully."

"Acceptable to me as representative of the ship," answered the captain with all his old dignity. "When they are off we sail. Not before. Perhaps it is prejudice—Sadie's funny that way—perhaps your investigation was not as comprehensive as you think. That's your problem."

The aide laughed. The old lunatic, he thought, but I'm stuck I guess. They said give him anything he asked for.

"Very well, sir," was what he said out loud.

Captain Tolliver waited patiently beside the bow until the last of the three scowling men had come down it laden with their bags and dunnage. Then he mounted to the deck and went straightway to the bridge. His hand reached for the whistle pull. A long, triumphant scream of a blast split the air.

"Stand by your lines," bellowed the old man through a megaphone, "and tell the tug never mind. We won't need her."

Two hours later the *Sadie Saxon* swept through the dredged channel, picked up and passed the entrance buoy to the bay. Throbbing with the vibration of her churning screws and rising and falling to the heavy swell outside, she shook herself joyfully at the smell and feel of the open sea. Cape Henry and Cape Charles Lights soon faded behind. The Captain set a course for Bermuda, for the ship's orders had been changed. After the long delay in setting out the situation was different. She was to rendezvous with a Gibraltar bound convoy at the island.

Mate Parker came up to take the watch. It was a cloudy, dark night and the ship was running without lights.

"Keep a sharp lookout," warned the captain, "and handle things yourself. I don't want to be called unless something extraordinary occurs."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged the mate surlily. By rights he should be the skipper of this cranky tub—not this doddering old fool.

The captain got down the ladder the best way he could and groped along the darkened decks until he came to the door of his room. He did not undress at all but lay down in his bunk as he was. The *Sadie Saxon* could be counted on to do the unexpected at any time. He closed his eyes wearily, for the excitement of the day had taxed his strength to the utmost. In a moment he was fast asleep.

It must have been well after midnight when he was roused from his deep slumber. Mr. Parker was standing over him

with a look of concern on his face.

"She's gone crazy again, sir," he reported, "and we can't do a thing with her—"

"Don't try," directed the captain. "What's she doing?"

"Turned sharp to the left about fifteen minutes ago and is turning up about twelve revolutions more than her proper speed. The helmsman can't do anything about it. Neither can the engineer. She won't obey her wheel or throttle. What do we do—fold up and call it a day?"

Captain Tolliver sat up in his bunk.

"Oh, no. By no means. You'll be awfully busy shortly. Turn out all hands at once. Man your lifeboats and have them ready for lowering. Shut all watertight doors below and see that there is plenty of shoring handy in case the peak gets stove in. Have the collision mat ready. That's all."

"But the steering?"

"Just let the wheel go. She'll steer herself. She knows where she wants to go. I don't."

The mate left and the old man dragged himself to his mismated feet and began the laborious journey to the bridge. Once he was up there he made sure that the searchlight was ready to turn on in case he needed it. After that he could only wait.

The wait was not long. Fifteen minutes later there was a shock, a grinding, bumping of something under the fore-foot and along the keel. The ship's engines stopped abruptly, then began backing. Captain Tolliver reached for the engine room telegraph and rang it to "Stop."

The ship stopped.

"Collision forward!" shouted the lookout in the bow. "We just ran down a small ship of some sort."

Tolliver could hear the boatswain and his gang dropping into the fore hold to see whether the damage was serious. Then he spoke quietly to the mate who was on the bridge beside him.

"You may put your boats in the water now, Mister. I have a hunch we just ran down a Nazi sub. I'll put on the light as soon as you are lowered."

The mate left on the run, more mystified than ever. A man came up from forward and reported the peak was full up to the waterline but the bulkhead abaft it was holding and the ship seemed to be in no danger.

"Turn on that searchlight," ordered Captain Tolliver, "and sweep aft."

There was a chorus of gasps as the light stabbed out into the murk and almost instantly lit on a large black object rearing up above the waves. It was the bow of a submarine, and even as they sighted it it slid backwards into the deep. But in that brief glimpse they saw several men plunge

overboard, and as the light swept to right and left the bobbing heads of a dozen or more men could be seen in the water.

"Pick up those men and be smart about it," yelled Tolliver through his megaphones to the boats. Then he watched as they dragged the survivors into the boats and rowed back to the ship. He watched as they hoisted the boats in and housed them at their davits.

"Put those men under guard," he directed, "and get back on your course. Things will be all right now." And with that he went below to pick up his night's sleep where he had left off.

The arrival of the *Sadie Saxon* at Bermuda caused quite a stir. Many were the congratulations upon the ship's luck in blundering across a U-boat and ramming it in the dark. The two officers and eleven men rescued from the crash were most welcome to the British Intelligence officers. Hasty arrangements were made for quick repairs to the ship's damaged bow. She had missed the convoy for which she was intended, but there would be other convoys and the little delay was well paid for by the bag of the under-sea wolf. Captain Tolliver took his praise modestly.

"It's not all luck," he said. "It is a habit of the *Sadie Saxon*. If you will look up her record in the last war you will see she has done that sort of thing before."

By the time the ship was ready for sea again the hubbub had died down. Captain Tolliver took the position assigned

him with entire calm and confidence. It was a big convoy and made up of three columns of ships. The *Sadie Saxon* was given the post of danger and honor as the lead ship of the right-hand column. But destroyers frolicked about ahead and on the flanks. It would be costly for any submarine to tackle that well-guarded flotilla.

For three nights they went eastward, steaming without lights and in formation. There was no alarm other than the appearance overhead one day of a trio of scout bombers marked with the black and white crosses of Germany. The anti-aircraft guns of the escorting warships kept them at too great a height to do any damage, and so drove them away. But after their appearance old Captain Tolliver knew anything might happen. The *Sadie Saxon* had behaved most peculiarly all the while they were in sight, vibrating almost as if she had dropped a screw.

"Steady, old girl," whispered the skipper into the binnacle, "you'll have to get used to those. They're an innovation."

It was the night after that that the big attack occurred. The long triple column of ships was plowing along through a dark and misty night and thirty officers on as many bridges were staring anxiously into the murk striving not to lose sight of the tiny blue stern light of the ship ahead. Under the circumstances mutual collision was much more likely than a hostile attack. The orders were strict—maintain radio silence at all costs, never show a light under any circumstances, and above all, keep station.

But the *Sadie Saxon* cared next to nothing about commodore's orders. At ten minutes past four in the morning she balked, her engines churning violently at full speed astern, to the consternation of the black gang who had had no bells to that effect and were caught off guard. Captain Tolliver was on the bridge when it happened and called sharply to the forward lookouts:

"Look sharply close aboard! What do you see?"

The ship was turning rapidly to starboard, her rudder jammed hard over, while the helmsman strove wildly to bring the wheel back the other way.

"The wakes of two torpedoes, sir—no, four—five—nine! Coming from starboard, sir."

The streaks of phosphorescent light were visible now from the bridge. The *Sadie Saxon* was turning straight into them; she would pass safely between a pair of them.

The aged skipper acted with an alacrity that surprised even him. He yelled for the searchlight and with his own hand pulled the whistle into a strident blast of warning. The searchlight came on and threw its beam straight ahead. There, in a line, were three gray conning towers—three submarines on the surface and in fairly close formation. The nearest destroyer saw them too and at once plunged toward them with its guns blazing. Geysers of white water shot up about the nearest one. A couple of seconds later a bright flash told of a six-inch hit squarely at the base of a conning tower. The other two subs were diving hard, but the one that



was hit did not dive. Or did not dive the regular way. It rolled slowly over toward the *Sadie Saxon*, spilling frantic men from its torn superstructure, then settled to its grave.

The leading freighter of the middle column suddenly blew up with a bang, lighting up the sea like day. A moment later the second ship of the left-hand column burst into flames. At least two of the nine torpedoes fired had found a mark. But the subs that fired them had no opportunity to fire more. They had been ambushed in their own ambush, and already three destroyers were racing back and forth over the spots where they had last been seen and dropping depth-charges by the score. Similar activities were going on on the other side. Apparently there had been other subs waiting there as well.

The *Sadie Saxon* lay still where she was until the survivors of the two ships destroyed had been brought on board. Then she unaccountably turned due south and ran for an hour at full speed. There she stopped and refused to budge another yard. It was well past the dawn then and a destroyer could be seen on the horizon behind still searching for vestiges of their attackers.

"Signal that destroyer," the captain said, "and tell him to come over here. We've got one spotted."

The destroyer came up within hail, and its captain delivered a blistering message through what must have been an asbestos-lined megaphone.

"Will the second on that ship kindly relieve that blithering idiot in command and put him under arrest? The—"

"The sub's right under me," Tolliver yelled back, "playing possum a hundred feet or so down." The ship started moving ahead. "Come in and drop your eggs. Then lock me up if you want."

He turned to Parker who was in a quandary as to what to do. The performances of the ship had shaken his nerve. He had begun to wonder whether *he* was the crazy man. Tolliver ignored him. Instead he walked out to the wing of the bridge and watched the destroyer do its work.

Huge seething hummocks of water rose as the ash-cans exploded under the surface. Four of them had gone off and the destroyer was coming back for a second run across the same spot. But there was no need. A half mile away a black nose appeared for a moment on the surface, stuck its beak up into the air, then with a loud hissing of escaping air fell back weakly into the water. Where it had been were three bobbing heads. There *had* been a sub under there!

"Thanks," flashed the destroyer, "well done. Rejoin convoy."

They went past Gib without stopping and made the hazardous trip to Alexandria without incident other than a few sporadic and ineffectual raids by enemy aircraft. At Alexandria Captain Tolliver found this message waiting for him; it was from ONI.

*"You are a better guesser than some of our experts. The three men you tipped us off to are in jail. They planned to*

*seize the ship and divert it to a Norwegian port.  
Congratulations."*

The skipper gave a brief snort and then crammed the message into a pocket with his one good hand. Then he learned that on the voyage home he was to carry the convoy's commodore. The "commodore," a retired Navy captain, came aboard and looked around.

He did not say much until they were out of the Mediterranean and well to the west of Portugal. By then they had been joined by many other ships and were steaming in a formation much like the one before, with the difference that this time, being flagship, they were more nearly in the middle of the flotilla.

"You seem to have a remarkable ability to spot submarines, Captain," he remarked. "What is your secret?"

"Me?" said the skipper indignantly. "Hell, I can't see a submarine in the dark or under water any farther than the next man. All the credit is due to Sadie. She *smells* 'em. She hates 'em, too."

"Yes. I know. She rammed several in the last war, didn't she? And didn't they make her into a Q-ship?"

"She did. She was. If you'll look down there on the pedestal of the binnacle stand you'll see some file marks. There are fourteen of 'em now. Each one stands for a U-boat. Or raider. I tell you, she don't like Germans. She was a

German herself, you know, but they didn't treat her right. She has a grievance."

"Now, Captain," laughed the commodore, "don't you think you are carrying your little joke too far? After all..."

"Do you know the story of this ship?" asked Tolliver fiercely, "well, listen."

It was close to midnight then and a bright moon was shining. The silhouettes of the ships about were distinct as black masses against the glittering white-kissed sea. The two officers went on talking, but their eyes were steadfastly kept ahead. This was a night when anything might happen.

"In 1911 this ship was spanking new. She was the *Koenigen von Sachsen* or something of the sort, freshly turned out of the Vulcan Works at Stettin. The outbreak of the war caught her at Hoboken and they tied her up for the duration. But when we joined the war in '17 and took her over, her innards were something pitiful to see. Her crew had dry-fired her boilers and they were a mass of sagging tubes. The vandals cracked her cylinders with sledges, threw the valve gear and cylinder heads overboard, and messed up all the auxiliaries. They fixed the wiring so it would short the moment juice was put on it, and they took down steam leads and inserted steel blanks between the flanged joints. In other places they drove out rivets and replaced them with ones of putty. I tell you she was dynamite, even after they fixed up the boilers and main machinery.

"Naturally, having a thing like that done to you would make you sore—especially if you were young and proud and the toast of the Imperial German merchant marine. But that was not all. On her first trip across—I was mate then—a sub slammed a torp into her off the north of Ireland and it took her stern away. Luckily she didn't sink and another ship put a hawser on us and worried us into Grennock where they fixed her up. That would have been bad enough, but on the trip home she smacks into a submarine-laid mine off the Delaware Capes and blows in her bow. We had to beach her near Cape May.

"They rebuilt her again and we set out. But her hard-luck—or mistreatment rather—wasn't at an end. In those days our Secret Service wasn't as good as it is now and a saboteur got aboard. He gummed up things pretty bad. So bad that we caught afire and almost sank in mid-ocean. It took some doggoned hard work to save that ship, but help came and we stayed afloat. Well, that was the end of her patience. She went hog-wild. After that, no matter whether she was in convoy or not, whenever, anything that was German was around—sub, torpedo, raider or what not—she went after it, and never mind engine room bells or rudder. Her whimsies cost me a hand and a leg before we were through, but I didn't mind. I figured I could take it if she could.

"She broke the hearts of three captains. A lot of captains, you ought to know, object to having the ship take charge. They said she was unmanageable and chucked their jobs. That left me in command, though at the time I didn't rate the job. Knowing something of her history, I knew better than to

interfere. Her hunches are the best thing I know. No matter what she does..."

"Hey!" yelled the commodore, thoroughly alarmed, "watch what you're doing."

The *Sadie Saxon* had sheered sharply from her course and was heading directly across the bows of a ship in the column to one side of them. It was too late then, even if the *Sadie* had been tractable, to do anything about it. A collision was inevitable. The commodore reached for the whistle pull, but Tolliver grabbed his arm and held it.

"Wait," he urged, "this means something. I know her."

An angry, guttural shout came from the bridge of the ship whose path they were about to cross. Then came the rending crash as steel bit into steel—thousands of tons of it at twelve knots speed. The other ship had rammed the *Sadie Saxon* just abreast the mainmast and she heeled over sharply, spilling deck gear over the off rail. At once pandemonium reigned in the convoy as ships behind sheered out to avoid compounding the already serious collision.

At once fresh confusion succeeded. The ship that was the victim of the *Sadie's* caprice suddenly dropped her false bulwarks and the moonlight glinted off the barrels of big guns both fore and aft. Harsh orders sounded in German and the guns began spitting fire. Shells began bursting against ships on all sides as the raider that had insinuated itself into the midst of the convoy began its work. Escort ships began dashing toward the scene, worming their way through the

scattering freighters so as to get to a spot where they could open fire.

"I told you," said Captain Tolliver, serenely. "You can always trust her."

But she was sinking, and the crew were lowering what boats they could. The commodore was one of the first to leave, since he was in charge of the entire expedition and must transfer his flag to a surviving ship. Tolliver stayed behind. There was not room enough in the boats for one thing, and his faith in the durability of the *Sadie Saxon* was unlimited. He had seen her in worse plight many times before.

The raider had succeeded in backing away, but it, too, was in a perilous condition. Her bows were torn wide open and she was fast going down by the head. She continued to fire viciously at everything within reach, paying especial attention to the crippled *Sadie Saxon*. A shell struck her funnel and threw fragments and splinters onto the bridge. One fragment struck Captain Tolliver in the right thigh and he went down with a brief curse. Another pair of projectiles burst aft among the rest of the crew who were engaged in freeing a life raft from the mainmast shrouds. It must have killed them all, for when shortly afterward a destroyer ranged alongside and hailed, there was no answering cry.

Tolliver hauled himself to the wing of the bridge and managed to cut an opening in the weather screen. He looked out just in time to see the flaming remnants of the raider sink under the moon-tipped waves. The freighters had all gone

and the destroyers were charging off in a new direction. Apparently submarines, working in conjunction with the camouflaged raider, had made their appearance. Tolliver watched a moment, then was aware of a growing faintness. His leg must be bleeding more than he thought. In a moment everything turned black.

It was broad daylight when he came to again. Another peep showed him an empty ocean. The convoy must have gone on, as it was proper and correct it should. And then he heard the burr and roar of airplanes overhead. They swooped low, machine-gunning the decks systematically on the assumption men were still aboard. One, more daring than the rest, swooped in between the masts. *Sadie Saxon* was trembling in every plate and rivet.

"Steady, girl," murmured the now delirious captain, laying his cheek against the bridge deck and patting it gently with his one hand, "you can't handle those, I know. But we've done enough, you and I. We can't keep afloat forever."

Her answer was typical. He had no way of knowing how deep she was in the water, or what her trim, but she heeled violently to port—hung there a moment, then turned quietly over on her side. The instant she chose to do it was just as the daring raider plane was diving beneath her radio antennae, ready to drop its final bomb. Captain Tolliver heard its wings snap off and its body crash as the whipping, heeling mast struck it. There was a final burst of flame, and the rest was cool, green water. The old sea-dog felt the waves close over him, but he was smiling and content.



"Bless her old heart," was his last thought, "she even got one of *those*."

[The end of *Vengeance in her Bones* by Malcolm Jameson]