

like the desert here--or my hand--or my heart. Empty, Sahib--all empty!

"THEIR LAWFUL OCCASIONS"

THE WET LITANY

When the water's countenance
Blurrs 'twixt glance and second glance;
When the tattered smokes forerun
Ashen 'neath a silvered sun;
When the curtain of the haze
Shuts upon our helpless ways--
Hear the Channel Fleet at sea;
Libera nos domine!

When the engines' bated pulse
Scarcely thrills the nosing hulls;
When the wash along the side
Sounds, a sudden, magnified
When the intolerable blast
Marks each blindfold minute passed.

When the fog-buoy's squattering flight
Guides us through the haggard night;
When the warning bugle blows;

When the lettered doorways close;
When our brittle townships press,
Impotent, on emptiness.

When the unseen leadsmen lean
Questioning a deep unseen;
When their lessened count they tell
To a bridge invisible;
When the hid and perilous
Cliffs return our cry to us.

When the treble thickness spread
Swallows up our next-ahead;
When her siren's frightened whine
Shows her sheering out of line;
When, her passage undiscerned,
We must turn where she has turned--
Hear the Channel Fleet at sea;
Libera nos Domine!

"THEIR LAWFUL OCCASIONS"

PART I

... "And a security for such as pass on the seas upon
their lawful occasions."--Navy Prayer.

Disregarding the inventions of the Marine Captain, whose other name is Gubbins, let a plain statement suffice.

H.M.S. Caryatid went to Portland to join Blue Fleet for manoeuvres. I travelled overland from London by way of Portsmouth, where I fell among friends. When I reached Portland, H.M.S. Caryatid, whose guest I was to have been, had, with Blue Fleet, already sailed for some secret rendezvous off the west coast of Ireland, and Portland breakwater was filled with Red Fleet, my official enemies and joyous acquaintances, who received me with unstinted hospitality. For example, Lieutenant-Commander A.L. Hignett, in charge of three destroyers, Wraith, Stiletto, and Kobbold, due to depart at 6 P.M. that evening, offered me a berth on his thirty-knot flagship, but I preferred my comforts, and so accepted sleeping-room in H.M.S. Pedantic (15,000 tons), leader of the second line. After dining aboard her I took boat to Weymouth to get my kit aboard, as the battleships would go to war at midnight. In transferring my allegiance from Blue to Red Fleet, whatever the Marine Captain may say, I did no wrong. I truly intended to return to the Pedantic and help to fight Blue Fleet. All I needed was a new toothbrush, which I bought from a chemist in a side street at 9:15 P. M. As I turned to go, one entered seeking alleviation of a gum-boil. He was dressed in a checked ulster, a black silk hat three sizes too small, cord-breeches, boots, and pure brass spurs. These he managed painfully, stepping like a prisoner fresh from leg-irons. As he adjusted the pepper-plaster to the gum the light fell on his face, and I recognised Mr. Emanuel Pyecroft, late second-class petty officer of H.M.S. Archimandrite, an unforgettable man, met a year before under Tom Wessel's roof in Plymouth. It occurred to me that when a petty

officer takes to spurs he may conceivably meditate desertion. For that reason I, though a taxpayer, made no sign. Indeed, it was Mr. Pyecroft, following me out of the shop, who said hollowly: "What might you be doing here?"

"I'm going on manoeuvres in the Pedantic," I replied.

"Ho!" said Mr. Pyecroft. "An' what manner o' manoeuvres d'you expect to see in a blighted cathedral like the Pedantic? I know 'er. I knew her in Malta, when the Vulcan was her permanent tender. Manoeuvres! You won't see more than 'Man an' arm watertight doors!' in your little woollen undervest."

"I'm sorry for that."

"Why?" He lurched heavily as his spurs caught and twanged like tuning-forks. "War's declared at midnight. Pedantics be sugared! Buy an 'am an' see life!"

For the moment I fancied Mr. Pyecroft, a fugitive from justice, purposed that we two should embrace a Robin Hood career in the uplands of Dorset. The spurs troubled me, and I made bold to say as much. "Them!" he said, coming to an intricate halt. "They're part of the prima facie evidence. But as for me--let me carry your bag--I'm second in command, leadin'-hand, cook, steward, an' lavatory man, with a few incidentals for sixpence a day extra, on No. 267 torpedo-boat."

"They wear spurs there?"

"Well," said Mr. Peycroft, "seein' that Two Six Seven belongs to Blue Fleet, which left the day before yesterday, disguises are imperative. It transpired thus. The Right Honourable Lord Gawd Almighty Admiral Master Frankie Frobisher, K.C.B., commandin' Blue Fleet, can't be bothered with one tin-torpedo-boat more or less; and what with lyin' in the Reserve four years, an' what with the new kind o' tiffy which cleans dynamos with brick-dust and oil (Blast these spurs! They won't render!), Two Six Seven's steam-gadgets was paralytic. Our Mr. Moorshed done his painstakin' best--it's his first command of a war-canoe, matoor age nineteen (down that alleyway, please!) but be that as it may, His Holiness Frankie is aware of us crabbin' ourselves round the breakwater at five knots, an' steerin' pari passu, as the French say. (Up this alley-way, please!) If he'd given Mr. Hinchcliffe, our chief engineer, a little time, it would never have transpired, for what Hinch can't drive he can coax; but the new port bein' a trifle cloudy, an' 'is joints tinglin' after a post-captain dinner, Frankie come on the upper bridge seekin' for a sacrifice. We, offerin' a broadside target, got it. He told us what 'is grandmamma, 'oo was a lady an' went to sea in stick-and string-batteaus, had told him about steam. He throwed in his own prayers for the 'ealth an' safety of all steam-packets an' their officers. Then he give us several distinct orders. The first few--I kept tally--was all about going to Hell; the next many was about not evolutin' in his company, when there; an' the last all was simply repeatin' the motions in quick time. Knowin' Frankie's groovin' to be badly eroded by age and lack of attention, I didn't much panic; but our Mr. Moorshed, 'e took it a little to heart. Me an' Mr. Hinchcliffe

consoled 'im as well as service conditions permits of, an' we had a résumé-supper at the back o' the Camber--secluded an' lugubrious! Then one thing leadin' up to another, an' our orders, except about anchorin' where he's booked for, leavin' us a clear 'orizon, Number Two Six Seven is now--mind the edge of the wharf--here!"

By mysterious doublings he had brought me out on to the edge of a narrow strip of water crowded with coastwise shipping that runs far up into Weymouth town. A large foreign timber-brig lay at my feet, and under the round of her stern cowered, close to the wharf-edge, a slate-coloured, unkempt, two-funnelled craft of a type--but I am no expert--between the first-class torpedo-boat and the full-blooded destroyer. From her archaic torpedo-tubes at the stern, and quick-firers forward and amidship, she must have dated from the early nineties. Hammerings and clinkings, with spurts of steam and fumes of hot oil, arose from her inside, and a figure in a striped jersey squatted on the engine-room gratings.

"She ain't much of a war-canoe, but you'll see more life in 'er than on an whole squadron of bleedin' Pedantics."

"But she's laid up here--and Blue Fleet have gone," I protested.

"Precisely. Only, in his comprehensive orders Frankie didn't put us out of action. Thus we're a non-neglectable fightin' factor which you mightn't think from this elevation; an' m'rover, Red Fleet don't know we're 'ere. Most of us"--he glanced proudly at his boots--"didn't run to spurs, but we're disguised pretty devious, as you might say. Morgan, our signaliser, when last seen, was a Dawlish bathing-machine proprietor. Hinchcliffe was

naturally a German waiter, and me you behold as a squire of low degree; while yonder Levantine dragoman on the hatch is our Mr. Moorshed. He was the second cutter's snotty--my snotty--on the Archimandrite--two years--Cape Station. Likewise on the West Coast, mangrove swampin', an' gettin' the cutter stove in on small an' unlikely bars, an' manufacturin' lies to correspond. What I don't know about Mr. Moorshed is precisely the same gauge as what Mr. Moorshed don't know about me--half a millimetre, as you might say. He comes into awful opulence of his own when 'e's of age; an' judgin' from what passed between us when Frankie cursed 'im, I don't think 'e cares whether he's broke to-morrow or--the day after. Are you beginnin' to follow our tatties? They'll be worth followin'. Or are you goin' back to your nice little cabin on the Pedantic--which I lay they've just dismantled the third engineer out of--to eat four fat meals per diem, an' smoke in the casement?"

The figure in the jersey lifted its head and mumbled.

"Yes, Sir," was Mr. Pyecroft's answer. "I 'ave ascertained that Stiletto, Wraith, and Kobbold left at 6 P. M. with the first division o' Red Fleet's cruisers except Devulotion and Cryptic, which are delayed by engine-room defects." Then to me: "Won't you go aboard? Mr. Moorshed 'ud like some one to talk to. You buy an 'am an see life."

At this he vanished; and the Demon of Pure Irresponsibility bade me lower myself from the edge of the wharf to the tea-tray plates of No. 267.

"What d'you want?" said the striped jersey.

"I want to join Blue Fleet if I can," I replied. "I've been left behind by--an accident.

"Well?"

"Mr. Pyecroft told me to buy a ham and see life. About how big a ham do you need?"

"I don't want any ham, thank you. That's the way up the wharf. Good-night."

"Good-night!" I retraced my steps, wandered in the dark till I found a shop, and there purchased, of sardines, canned tongue, lobster, and salmon, not less than half a hundredweight. A belated sausage-shop supplied me with a partially cut ham of pantomime tonnage. These things I, sweating, bore out to the edge of the wharf and set down in the shadow of a crane. It was a clear, dark summer night, and from time to time I laughed happily to myself. The adventure was preordained on the face of it. Pyecroft alone, spurred or barefoot, would have drawn me very far from the paths of circumspection. His advice to buy a ham and see life clinched it. Presently Mr. Pyecroft--I heard spurs clink--passed me. Then the jersey voice said: "What the mischief's that?"

"Asn't the visitor come aboard, Sir? 'E told me he'd purposely abandoned the Pedantic for the pleasure of the trip with us. Told me he was official correspondent for the Times; an' I know he's littery by the way

'e tries to talk Navy-talk. Haven't you seen 'im, Sir?"

Slowly and dispassionately the answer drawled long on the night; "Pye, you are without exception the biggest liar in the Service!"

"Then what am I to do with the bag, Sir? It's marked with his name." There was a pause till Mr. Moorshed said "Oh!" in a tone which the listener might construe precisely as he pleased.

"He was the maniac who wanted to buy a ham and see life--was he? If he goes back to the Pedantic--"

"Pre-cisely, Sir. Gives us all away, Sir."

"Then what possessed you to give it away to him, you owl?"

"I've got his bag. If 'e gives anything away, he'll have to go naked."

At this point I thought it best to rattle my tins and step out of the shadow of the crane.

"I've bought the ham," I called sweetly. "Have you still any objection to my seeing life, Mr. Moorshed?"

"All right, if you're insured. Won't you come down?"

I descended; Pyecroft, by a silent flank movement, possessing himself of

all the provisions, which he bore to some hole forward.

"Have you known Mr. Pyecroft long?" said my host.

"Met him once, a year ago, at Devonport. What do you think of him?"

"What do you think of him?"

"I've left the Pedantic--her boat will be waiting for me at ten o'clock, too--simply because I happened to meet him," I replied.

"That's all right. If you'll come down below, we may get some grub."

We descended a naked steel ladder to a steel-beamed tunnel, perhaps twelve feet long by six high. Leather-topped lockers ran along either side; a swinging table, with tray and lamp above, occupied the centre. Other furniture there was none.

"You can't shave here, of course. We don't wash, and, as a rule, we eat with our fingers when we're at sea. D'you mind?"

Mr. Moorshed, black-haired, black-browed, sallow-complexioned, looked me over from head to foot and grinned. He was not handsome in any way, but his smile drew the heart. "You didn't happen to hear what Frankie told me from the flagship, did you? His last instructions, and I've logged them here in shorthand, were"--he opened a neat pocket-book--"Get out of this and conduct your own damned manoeuvres in your own damned tinker fashion!"

You're a disgrace to the Service, and your boat's offal."

"Awful?" I said.

"No--offal--tripes--swipes--ullage." Mr. Pyecroft entered, in the costume of his calling, with the ham and an assortment of tin dishes, which he dealt out like cards.

"I shall take these as my orders," said Mr. Moorshed. "I'm chucking the Service at the end of the year, so it doesn't matter."

We cut into the ham under the ill-trimmed lamp, washed it down with whisky, and then smoked. From the foreside of the bulkhead came an uninterrupted hammering and clinking, and now and then a hiss of steam.

"That's Mr. Hinchcliffe," said Pyecroft. "He's what is called a first-class engine-room artificer. If you hand 'im a drum of oil an' leave 'im alone, he can coax a stolen bicycle to do typewritin'."

Very leisurely, at the end of his first pipe, Mr. Moorshed drew out a folded map, cut from a newspaper, of the area of manoeuvres, with the rules that regulate these wonderful things, below.

"Well, I suppose I know as much as an average stick-and-string admiral," he said, yawning. "Is our petticoat ready yet, Mr. Pyecroft?"

As a preparation for naval manoeuvres these councils seemed inadequate. I

followed up the ladder into the gloom cast by the wharf edge and the big lumber-ship's side. As my eyes stretched to the darkness I saw that No. 267 had miraculously sprouted an extra pair of funnels--soft, for they gave as I touched them.

"More prima facie evidence. You runs a rope fore an' aft, an' you erects perpendick-u-arly two canvas tubes, which you distends with cane hoops, thus 'avin' as many funnels as a destroyer. At the word o' command, up they go like a pair of concertinas, an' consequently collapses equally 'andy when requisite. Comin' aft we shall doubtless overtake the Dawlish bathin'-machine proprietor fittin' on her bustle."

Mr. Pyecroft whispered this in my ear as Moorshed moved toward a group at the stern.

"None of us who ain't built that way can be destroyers, but we can look as near it as we can. Let me explain to you, Sir, that the stern of a Thorneycroft boat, which we are not, comes out in a pretty bulge, totally different from the Yarrow mark, which again we are not. But, on the other 'and, Dirk, Stiletto, Goblin, Ghoul, Djinn, and A-frite--Red Fleet dee-stroyers, with 'oom we hope to consort later on terms o' perfect equality--are Thorneycrofts, an' carry that Grecian bend which we are now adjustin' to our arriere-pensée--as the French would put it--by means of painted canvas an' iron rods bent as requisite. Between you an' me an' Frankie, we are the Gnome, now in the Fleet Reserve at Pompey--Portsmouth, I should say."

"The first sea will carry it all away," said Moorshed, leaning gloomily outboard, "but it will do for the present."

"We've a lot of prima facie evidence about us," Mr. Pyecroft went on. "A first-class torpedo boat sits lower in the water than a destroyer. Hence we artificially raise our sides with a black canvas wash-streak to represent extra freeboard; at the same time paddin' out the cover of the forward three-pounder like as if it was a twelve-pounder, an' variously fakin' up the bows of 'er. As you might say, we've took thought an' added a cubic to our stature. It's our len'th that sugars us. A 'undred an' forty feet, which is our len'th into two 'undred and ten, which is about the Gnome's, leaves seventy feet over, which we haven't got."

"Is this all your own notion, Mr. Pyecroft?" I asked.

"In spots, you might say--yes; though we all contributed to make up deficiencies. But Mr. Moorshed, not much carin' for further Navy after what Frankie said, certainly threw himself into the part with avidity."

"What the dickens are we going to do?"

"Speaking as a seaman gunner, I should say we'd wait till the sights came on, an' then fire. Speakin' as a torpedo-coxswain, L.T.O., T.I., M.D., etc., I presume we fall in--Number One in rear of the tube, etc., secure tube to ball or diaphragm, clear away securin'-bar, release safety-pin from lockin-levers, an' pray Heaven to look down on us. As second in command o' 267, I say wait an' see!"

"What's happened? We're off," I said. The timber ship had slid away from us.

"We are. Stern first, an' broadside on! If we don't hit anything too hard, we'll do."

"Come on the bridge," said Mr. Moorshed. I saw no bridge, but fell over some sort of conning-tower forward, near which was a wheel. For the next few minutes I was more occupied with cursing my own folly than with the science of navigation. Therefore I cannot say how we got out of Weymouth Harbour, nor why it was necessary to turn sharp to the left and wallow in what appeared to be surf.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Pyecroft behind us, "I don't mind rammin' a bathin'-machine; but if only one of them week-end Weymouth blighters has thrown his empty baccy-tin into the sea here, we'll rip our plates open on it; 267 isn't the Archimandrite's old cutter."

"I am hugging the shore," was the answer.

"There's no actual 'arm in huggin', but it can come expensive if pursued."

"Right-O!" said Moorshed, putting down the wheel, and as we left those scant waters I felt 267 move more freely.

A thin cough ran up the speaking-tube.

"Well, what is it, Mr. Hinchcliffe?" said Moorshed.

"I merely wished to report that she is still continuin' to go, Sir."

"Right-O! Can we whack her up to fifteen, d'you think?"

"I'll try, Sir; but we'd prefer to have the engine-room hatch open--at first, Sir."

Whacked up then she was, and for half an hour was careered largely through the night, turning at last with a suddenness that slung us across the narrow deck.

"This," said Mr. Pyecroft, who received me on his chest as a large rock receives a shadow, "represents the Gnome arrivin' cautious from the direction o' Portsmouth, with Admiralty orders."

He pointed through the darkness ahead, and after much staring my eyes opened to a dozen destroyers, in two lines, some few hundred yards away.

"Those are the Red Fleet destroyer flotilla, which is too frail to panic about among the full-blooded cruisers inside Portland breakwater, and several millimetres too excited over the approachin' war to keep a look-out inshore. Hence our tattics!"

We wailed through our siren--a long, malignant, hyena-like howl--and a voice hailed us as we went astern tumultuously.

"The Gnome--Carteret-Jones--from Portsmouth, with orders--mm--mm--Stiletto," Moorshed answered through the megaphone in a high, whining voice, rather like a chaplain's.

"Who?" was the answer.

"Carter--et--Jones."

"Oh, Lord!"

There was a pause; a voice cried to some friend, "It's Podgie, adrift on the high seas in charge of a whole dee-destroyer!"

Another voice echoed, "Podgie!" and from its note I gathered that Mr. Carteret-Jones had a reputation, but not for independent command.

"Who's your sub?" said the first speaker, a shadow on the bridge of the Dirk.

"A gunner, at present, Sir. The Stiletto--broken down--turns over to us."

"When did the Stiletto break down?"

"Off the Start, Sir; two hours after--after she left here this evening, I believe. My orders are to report to you for the manoeuvre signal-codes, and join Commander Hignett's flotilla, which is in attendance on Stiletto."

A smothered chuckle greeted this last. Moorshed's voice was high and uneasy. Said Pyecroft, with a sigh: "The amount o' trouble me an' my bright spurs 'ad fishin' out that information from torpedo coxswains and similar blighters in pubs all this afternoon, you would never believe."

"But has the Stiletto broken down?" I asked weakly.

"How else are we to get Red Fleet's private signal-code? Any way, if she 'asn't now, she will before manoeuvres are ended. It's only executin' in anticipation."

"Go astern and send your coxswain aboard for orders, Mr. Jones." Water carries sound well, but I do not know whether we were intended to hear the next sentence: "They must have given him one intelligent keeper."

"That's me," said Mr. Pyecroft, as a black and coal-stained dinghy--I did not foresee how well I should come to know her--was flung overside by three men.

"Havin' bought an 'am, we will now see life." He stepped into the boat and was away.

"I say, Podgie!"--the speaker was in the last of the line of destroyers,
as we thumped astern--"aren't you lonely out there?"

"Oh, don't rag me!" said Moorshed. "Do you suppose I'll have to manoeuvre
with your flo-tilla?"

"No, Podgie! I'm pretty sure our commander will see you sifting cinders in
Tophet before you come with our flo-tilla."

"Thank you! She steers rather wild at high speeds."

Two men laughed together.

"By the way, who is Mr. Carteret-Jones when he's at home?" I whispered.

"I was with him in the Britannia. I didn't like him much, but I'm
grateful to him now. I must tell him so some day."

"They seemed to know him hereabouts."

"He rammed the Caryatid twice with her own steam-pinnace."

Presently, moved by long strokes, Mr. Pyecroft returned, skimming across
the dark. The dinghy swung up behind him, even as his heel spurned it.

"Commander Fasset's compliments to Mr. L. Carteret-Jones, and the sooner
he digs out in pursuance of Admiralty orders as received at Portsmouth,

the better pleased Commander Fasset will be. But there's a lot more----"

"Whack her up, Mr. Hinchcliffe! Come on to the bridge. We can settle it as we go. Well?"

Mr. Pyecroft drew an important breath, and slid off his cap.

"Day an' night private signals of Red Fleet complete, Sir!" He handed a little paper to Moorshed. "You see, Sir, the trouble was, that Mr. Carteret-Jones bein', so to say, a little new to his duties, 'ad forgot to give 'is gunner his Admiralty orders in writin', but, as I told Commander Fasset, Mr. Jones had been repeatin' 'em to me, nervous-like, most of the way from Portsmouth, so I knew 'em by heart--an' better. The Commander, recognisin' in me a man of agility, cautioned me to be a father an' mother to Mr. Carteret-Jones."

"Didn't he know you?" I asked, thinking for the moment that there could be no duplicates of Emanuel Pyecroft in the Navy.

"What's a torpedo-gunner more or less to a full lootenant commanding six thirty-knot destroyers for the first time? 'E seemed to cherish the 'ope that 'e might use the Gnome for 'is own 'orrible purposes; but what I told him about Mr. Jones's sad lack o' nerve comin' from Pompey, an' going dead slow on account of the dark, short-circuited that connection.

'M'rover,' I says to him, 'our orders is explicit; Stiletto's reported broke down somewhere off the Start, an' we've been tryin' to coil down a new stiff wire hawser all the evenin', so it looks like towin' 'er back,

don't it?' I says. That more than ever jams his turrets, an' makes him keen to get rid of us. 'E even hinted that Mr. Carteret-Jones passin' hawsers an' assistin' the impotent in a sea-way might come pretty expensive on the tax-payer. I agreed in a disciplined way. I ain't proud. Gawd knows I ain't proud! But when I'm really diggin' out in the fancy line, I sometimes think that me in a copper punt, single-'anded, 'ud beat a cutter-full of De Rougemongs in a row round the fleet."

At this point I reclined without shame on Mr. Pyecroft's bosom, supported by his quivering arm.

"Well?" said Moorshed, scowling into the darkness, as 267's bows snapped at the shore seas of the broader Channel, and we swayed together.

"'You'd better go on,' says Commander Fassett, 'an' do what you're told to do. I don't envy Hignett if he has to dry-nurse the Gnome's commander. But what d'you want with signals?' 'e says. 'It's criminal lunacy to trust Mr. Jones with anything that steams.'

"'May I make an observation, Sir?' I says. 'Suppose,' I says, 'you was torpedo-gunner on the Gnome, an' Mr. Carteret-Jones was your commandin' officer, an' you had your reputation as a second in command for the first time,' I says, well knowin' it was his first command of a flotilla, 'what 'ud you do, Sir?' That gouged 'is unprotected ends open--clear back to the citadel."

"What did he say?" Moorshed jerked over is shoulder.

"If you were Mr. Carteret-Jones, it might be disrespect for me to repeat it, Sir."

"Go ahead," I heard the boy chuckle.

"'Do?' 'e says. 'I'd rub the young blighter's nose into it till I made a perishin' man of him, or a perspirin' pillow-case,' 'e says, 'which,' he adds, 'is forty per cent, more than he is at present.'

"Whilst he's gettin' the private signals--they're rather particular ones-- I went forrard to see the Dirk's gunner about borrowin' a holdin'-down bolt for our twelve-pounder. My open ears, while I was rovin' over his packet, got the followin' authentic particulars." I heard his voice change, and his feet shifted. "There's been a last council o' war of destroyer-captains at the flagship, an' a lot of things 'as come out. To begin with Cryptic and Devolution, Captain Panke and Captain Malan--"

"Cryptic and Devolution, first-class cruisers," said Mr. Moorshed dreamily. "Go on, Pyecroft."

"--bein' delayed by minor defects in engine-room, did not, as we know, accompany Red Fleet's first division of scouting cruisers, whose rendezvous is unknown, but presumed to be somewhere off the Lizard. Cryptic an' Devolution left at 9:30 P.M. still reportin' copious minor defects in engine-room. Admiral's final instructions was they was to put into Torbay, an' mend themselves there. If they can do it in twenty-four

hours, they're to come on and join the battle squadron at the first rendezvous, down Channel somewhere. (I couldn't get that, Sir.) If they can't, he'll think about sendin' them some destroyers for escort. But his present intention is to go 'ammer and tongs down Channel, usin' 'is destroyers for all they're worth, an' thus keepin' Blue Fleet too busy off the Irish coast to sniff into any eshtuaries."

"But if those cruisers are crocks, why does the Admiral let 'em out of Weymouth at all?" I asked.

"The tax-payer," said Mr. Moorshed.

"An' newspapers," added Mr. Pyecroft. "In Torbay they'll look as they was muckin' about for strategical purposes--hanamerin' like blazes in the engine room all the weary day, an' the skipper droppin' questions down the engine-room hatch every two or three minutes. I've been there. Now, Sir?" I saw the white of his eye turn broad on Mr. Moorshed.

The boy dropped his chin over the speaking-tube.

"Mr. Hinchcliffe, what's her extreme economical radius?"

"Three hundred and forty knots, down to swept bunkers."

"Can do," said Moorshed. "By the way, have her revolutions any bearing on her speed, Mr. Hinchcliffe?"

"None that I can make out yet, Sir."

"Then slow to eight knots. We'll jog down to forty-nine, forty-five, or four about, and three east. That puts us say forty miles from Torbay by nine o'clock to-morrow morning. We'll have to muck about till dusk before we run in and try our luck with the cruisers."

"Yes, Sir. Their picket boats will be panickin' round them all night. It's considered good for the young gentlemen."

"Hallo! War's declared! They're off!" said Moorshed.

He swung 267's head round to get a better view. A few miles to our right the low horizon was spangled with small balls of fire, while nearer ran a procession of tiny cigar ends.

"Red hot! Set 'em alight," said Mr. Pyecroft. "That's the second destroyer flotilla diggin' out for Commander Fassett's reputation."

The smaller lights disappeared; the glare of the destroyers' funnels dwindled even as we watched.

"They're going down Channel with lights out, thus showin' their zeal an' drivin' all watch-officers crazy. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll get you your pyjamas, an' you'll turn in," said Pyecroft.

He piloted me to the steel tunnel, where the ham still swung majestically

over the swaying table, and dragged out trousers and a coat with a monk's hood, all hewn from one hairy inch-thick board.

"If you fall over in these you'll be drowned. They're lammies. I'll chock you off with a pillow; but sleepin' in a torpedo-boat's what you might call an acquired habit."

I coiled down on an iron-hard horse-hair pillow next the quivering steel wall to acquire that habit. The sea, sliding over 267's skin, worried me with importunate, half-caught confidences. It drummed tackily to gather my attention, coughed, spat, cleared its throat, and, on the eve of that portentous communication, retired up stage as a multitude whispering. Anon, I caught the tramp of armies afoot, the hum of crowded cities awaiting the event, the single sob of a woman, and dry roaring of wild beasts. A dropped shovel clanging on the stokehold floor was, naturally enough, the unbarring of arena gates; our sucking uplift across the crest of some little swell, nothing less than the haling forth of new worlds; our half-turning descent into the hollow of its mate, the abysmal plunge of God-forgotten planets. Through all these phenomena and more--though I ran with wild horses over illimitable plains of rustling grass; though I crouched belly-flat under appalling fires of musketry; though I was Livingstone, painless, and incurious in the grip of his lion--my shut eyes saw the lamp swinging in its gimbals, the irregularly gliding patch of light on the steel ladder, and every elastic shadow in the corners of the frail angle-irons; while my body strove to accommodate itself to the infernal vibration of the machine. At the last I rolled limply on the floor, and woke to real life with a bruised nose and a great call to go on

deck at once.

"It's all right," said a voice in my booming ears. "Morgan and Laughton are worse than you!"

I was gripping a rail. Mr. Pyecroft pointed with his foot to two bundles beside a torpedo-tube, which at Weymouth had been a signaller and a most able seaman. "She'd do better in a bigger sea," said Mr. Pyecroft. "This lop is what fetches it up."

The sky behind us whitened as I laboured, and the first dawn drove down the Channel, tipping the wave-tops with a chill glare. To me that round wind which runs before the true day has ever been fortunate and of good omen. It cleared the trouble from my body, and set my soul dancing to 267's heel and toe across the northerly set of the waves--such waves as I had often watched contemptuously from the deck of a ten-thousand-ton liner. They shouldered our little hull sideways and passed, scalloped, and splayed out, toward the coast, carrying our white wake in loops along their hollow backs. In succession we looked down a lead-grey cutting of water for half a clear mile, were flung up on its ridge, beheld the Channel traffic--full-sailed to that fair breeze--all about us, and swung slantwise, light as a bladder, elastic as a basket, into the next furrow. Then the sun found us, struck the wet gray bows to living, leaping opal, the colourless deep to hard sapphire, the many sails to pearl, and the little steam-plume of our escape to an inconstant rainbow.

"A fair day and a fair wind for all, thank God!" said Emanuel Pyecroft,

throwing back the cowl-like hood of his blanket coat. His face was pitted with coal-dust and grime, pallid for lack of sleep; but his eyes shone like a gull's.

"I told you you'd see life. Think o' the Pedantic now. Think o' her Number One chasin' the mobilised gobbies round the lower deck flats. Think o' the pore little snotties now bein' washed, fed, and taught, an' the yeoman o' signals with a pink eye wakin' bright 'an brisk to another perishin' day of five-flag hoists. Whereas we shall caulk an' smoke cigarettes, same as the Spanish destroyers did for three weeks after war was declared." He dropped into the wardroom singing:--

If you're going to marry me, marry me, Bill, It's no use muckin' about!

The man at the wheel, uniformed in what had once been a Tam-o'-shanter, a pair of very worn R.M.L.I. trousers rolled up to the knee, and a black sweater, was smoking a cigarette. Moorshed, in a gray Balaclava and a brown mackintosh with a flapping cape, hauled at our supplementary funnel guys, and a thing like a waiter from a Soho restaurant sat at the head of the engine-room ladder exhorting the unseen below. The following wind beat down our smoke and covered all things with an inch-thick layer of stokers, so that eyelids, teeth, and feet gritted in their motions. I began to see that my previous experiences among battleships and cruisers had been altogether beside the mark.

PART II

The wind went down with the sunset--
The fog came up with the tide,
When the Witch of the North took an Egg-shell (bis)
With a little Blue Devil inside.
"Sink," she said, "or swim," she said,
"It's all you will get from me.
And that is the finish of him!" she said,
And the Egg-shell went to sea.

The wind got up with the morning,
And the fog blew off with the rain,
When the Witch of the North saw the Egg-shell
And the little Blue Devil again.
"Did you swim?" she said. "Did you sink?" she said,
And the little Blue Devil replied:
"For myself I swam, but I think," he said,
"There's somebody sinking outside."

But for the small detail that I was a passenger and a civilian, and might not alter her course, torpedo-boat No. 267 was mine to me all that priceless day. Moorshed, after breakfast--frizzled ham and a devil that Pyecroft made out of sardines, anchovies, and French mustard smashed together with a spanner--showed me his few and simple navigating tools, and took an observation. Morgan, the signaller, let me hold the chamois leathers while he cleaned the searchlight (we seemed to be better equipped with electricity than most of our class), that lived under a bulbous

umbrella-cover amidship. Then Pyecroft and Morgan, standing easy, talked together of the King's Service as reformers and revolutionists, so notably, that were I not engaged on this tale I would, for its conclusion, substitute theirs.

I would speak of Hinchcliffe--Henry Salt Hinchcliffe, first-class engine-room artificer, and genius in his line, who was prouder of having taken part in the Hat Crusade in his youth than of all his daring, his skill, and his nickel-steel nerve. I consorted with him for an hour in the packed and dancing engine-room, when Moorshed suggested "whacking her up" to eighteen knots, to see if she would stand it. The floor was ankle-deep in a creamy batter of oil and water; each moving part flicking more oil in zoetrope-circles, and the gauges invisible for their dizzy chattering on the chattering steel bulkhead. Leading stoker Grant, said to be a bigamist, an ox-eyed man smothered in hair, took me to the stokehold and planted me between a searing white furnace and some hell-hot iron plate for fifteen minutes, while I listened to the drone of fans and the worry of the sea without, striving to wrench all that palpitating firepot wide open.

Then I came on deck and watched Moorshed--revolving in his orbit from the canvas bustle and torpedo-tubes aft, by way of engine-room, conning-tower, and wheel, to the doll's house of a foc'sle--learned in experience withheld from me, moved by laws beyond my knowledge, authoritative, entirely adequate, and yet, in heart, a child at his play. I could not take ten steps along the crowded deck but I collided with some body or thing; but he and his satellites swung, passed, and returned on their

vocations with the freedom and spaciousness of the well-poised stars.

Even now I can at will recall every tone and gesture, with each dissolving picture inboard or overside--Hinchcliffe's white arm buried to the shoulder in a hornet's nest of spinning machinery; Moorshed's halt and jerk to windward as he looked across the water; Pycroft's back bent over the Berthon collapsible boat, while he drilled three men in expanding it swiftly; the outflung white water at the foot of a homeward-bound Chinaman not a hundred yards away, and her shadow-slashed, rope-purpled sails bulging sideways like insolent cheeks; the ribbed and pitted coal-dust on our decks, all iridescent under the sun; the first filmy haze that paled the shadows of our funnels about lunch time; the gradual die-down and dulling over of the short, cheery seas; the sea that changed to a swell: the swell that crumbled up and ran allwhither oilily: the triumphant, almost audible roll inward of wandering fog-walls that had been stalking us for two hours, and--welt upon welt, chill as the grave--the drive of the interminable main fog of the Atlantic. We slowed to little more than steerage-way and lay listening. Presently a hand-bellows foghorn jarred like a corncrake, and there rattled out of the mist a big ship literally above us. We could count the rivets in her plates as we scooped by, and the little drops of dew gathered below them.

"Wonder why they're always barks--always steel--always four-masted--an' never less than two thousand tons. But they are," said Pycroft. He was out on the turtle-backed bows of her; Moorshed was at the wheel, and another man worked the whistle.

"This fog is the best thing could ha' happened to us," said Moorshed. "It gives us our chance to run in on the quiet.... Hal-lo!"

A cracked bell rang. Clean and sharp (beautifully grained, too), a bowsprit surged over our starboard bow, the bobstay confidentially hooking itself into our forward rail.

I saw Pycroft's arm fly up; heard at the same moment the severing of the tense rope, the working of the wheel, Moorshed's voice down the tube saying, "Astern a little, please, Mr. Hinchcliffe!" and Pycroft's cry, "Trawler with her gear down! Look out for our propeller, Sir, or we'll be wrapped up in the rope."

267 surged quickly under my feet, as the pressure of the downward-bearing bobstay was removed. Half-a-dozen men of the foc'sle had already thrown out fenders, and stood by to bear off a just visible bulwark.

Still going astern, we touched slowly, broadside on, to a suggestive crunching of fenders, and I looked into the deck of a Brixham trawler, her crew struck dumb.

"Any luck?" said Moorshed politely.

"Not till we met yeou," was the answer. "The Lard he saved us from they big ships to be spitted by the little wan. Where be'e gwine tu with our fine new bobstay?"

"Yah! You've had time to splice it by now," said Pyecroft with contempt.

"Aie; but we'm all crushed to port like aigs. You was runnin' twenty-seven knots, us reckoned it. Didn't us, Albert?"

"Liker twenty-nine, an' niver no whistle."

"Yes, we always do that. Do you want a tow to Brixham?" said Moorshed.

A great silence fell upon those wet men of the sea.

We lifted a little toward their side, but our silent, quick-breathing crew, braced and strained outboard, bore us off as though we had been a mere picket-boat.

"What for?" said a puzzled voice.

"For love; for nothing. You'll be abed in Brixham by midnight."

"Yiss; but trawl's down."

"No hurry. I'll pass you a line and go ahead. Sing out when you're ready."

A rope smacked on their deck with the word; they made it fast; we slid forward, and in ten seconds saw nothing save a few feet of the wire rope running into fog over our stern; but we heard the noise of debate.

"Catch a Brixham trawler letting go of a free tow in a fog," said Moorshed

listening.

"But what in the world do you want him for?" I asked.

"Oh, he'll come in handy later."

"Was that your first collision?"

"Yes." I shook hands with him in silence, and our tow hailed us.

"Aie! yeou little man-o'-war!" The voice rose muffled and wailing. "After us've upped trawl, us'll be glad of a tow. Leave line just slack abaout as 'tis now, and kip a good fine look-out be'ind 'ee."

"There's an accommodatin' blighter for you!" said Pycroft. "Where does he expect we'll be, with these currents evolutin' like sailormen at the Agricultural Hall?"

I left the bridge to watch the wire-rope at the stern as it drew out and smacked down upon the water. By what instinct or guidance 267 kept it from fouling her languidly flapping propeller, I cannot tell. The fog now thickened and thinned in streaks that bothered the eyes like the glare of intermittent flash-lamps; by turns granting us the vision of a sick sun that leered and fled, or burying all a thousand fathom deep in gulfs of vapours. At no time could we see the trawler though we heard the click of her windlass, the jar of her trawl-beam, and the very flap of the fish on her deck. Forward was Pycroft with the lead; on the bridge Moorshed pawed

a Channel chart; aft sat I, listening to the whole of the British Mercantile Marine (never a keel less) returning to England, and watching the fog-dew run round the bight of the tow back to its mother-fog.

"Aie! yeou little man-o'-war! We'm done with trawl. You can take us home if you know the road."

"Right O!" said Moorshed. "We'll give the fishmonger a run for his money. Whack her up, Mr. Hinchcliffe."

The next few hours completed my education. I saw that I ought to be afraid, but more clearly (this was when a liner hooted down the back of my neck) that any fear which would begin to do justice to the situation would, if yielded to, incapacitate me for the rest of my days. A shadow of spread sails, deeper than the darkening twilight, brooding over us like the wings of Azrael (Pycroft said she was a Swede), and, miraculously withdrawn, persuaded me that there was a working chance that I should reach the beach--any beach--alive, if not dry; and (this was when an economical tramp laved our port-rail with her condenser water) were I so spared, I vowed I would tell my tale worthily.

Thus we floated in space as souls drift through raw time. Night added herself to the fog, and I laid hold on my limbs jealously, lest they, too, should melt in the general dissolution.

"Where's that prevaricatin' fishmonger?" said Pycroft, turning a lantern on a scant yard of the gleaming wire-rope that pointed like a stick to my

left. "He's doin' some fancy steerin' on his own. No wonder Mr. Hincheliffe is blasphemious. The tow's sheered off to starboard, Sir. He'll fair pull the stern out of us."

Moorshed, invisible, cursed through the megaphone into invisibility.

"Aie! yeou little man-o'-war!" The voice butted through the fog with the monotonous insistence of a strayed sheep's. "We don't all like the road you'm takin'. 'Tis no road to Brixham. You'll be buckled up under Prawle Point by'mbye."

"Do you pretend to know where you are?" the megaphone roared.

"Iss, I reckon; but there's no pretence to me!"

"O Peter!" said Pyecroft. "Let's hang him at 'is own gaff."

I could not see what followed, but Moorshed said: "Take another man with you. If you lose the tow, you're done. I'll slow her down."

I heard the dinghy splash overboard ere I could cry "Murder!" Heard the rasp of a boat-hook along the wire-rope, and then, as it had been in my ear, Pyecroft's enormous and jubilant bellow astern: "Why, he's here! Right atop of us! The blighter 'as pouched half the tow, like a shark!" A long pause filled with soft Devonian bleatings. Then Pyecroft, solo arpeggie: "Rum? Rum? Rum? Is that all? Come an' try it, uncle."

I lifted my face to where once God's sky had been, and besought The Trues
I might not die inarticulate, amid these half-worked miracles, but live at
least till my fellow-mortals could be made one-millionth as happy as I was
happy. I prayed and I waited, and we went slow--slow as the processes of
evolution--till the boat-hook rasped again.

"He's not what you might call a scientific navigator," said Pyecroft,
still in the dinghy, but rising like a fairy from a pantomime trap. "The
lead's what 'e goes by mostly; rum is what he's come for; an' Brixham is
'is 'ome. Lay on, Mucduff!"

A white whiskered man in a frock-coat--as I live by bread, a frock-coat!--
sea-boots, and a comforter crawled over the torpedo-tube into Moorshed's
grip and vanished forward.

"E'll probably 'old three gallon (look sharp with that dinghy!); but 'is
nephew, left in charge of the Agatha, wants two bottles command-
allowance. You're a tax-payer, Sir. Do you think that excessive?"

"Lead there! Lead!" rang out from forward.

"Didn't I say 'e wouldn't understand compass deviations? Watch him close.
It'll be worth it!"

As I neared the bridge I heard the stranger say: "Let me zpell un!" and to
his nose was the lead presented by a trained man of the King's Navy.

"I'll tell 'ee where to goo, if yeou'll tell your donkey-man what to du. I'm no hand wi' steam." On these lines we proceeded miraculously, and, under Moorshed's orders--I was the fisherman's Ganymede, even as "M. de C." had served the captain--I found both rum and curaçoa in a locker, and mixed them equal bulk in an enamelled iron cup.

"Now we'm just abeam o' where we should be," he said at last, "an' here we'll lay till she lifts. I'd take 'e in for another bottle--and wan for my nevy; but I reckon yeou'm shart-allowanced for rum. That's niver no Navy rum yeou'm give me. Knowed 'ee by the smack tu un. Anchor now!"

I was between Pyecroft and Moorshed on the bridge, and heard them spring to vibrating attention at my side. A man with a lead a few feet to port caught the panic through my body, and checked like a wild boar at gaze, for not far away an unmistakable ship's bell was ringing. It ceased, and another began.

"Them!" said Pyecroft. "Anchored!"

"More!" said our pilot, passing me the cup, and I filled it. The trawler astern clattered vehemently on her bell. Pyecroft with a jerk of his arm threw loose the forward three-pounder. The bar of the back-sight was heavily blobbed with dew; the foresight was invisible.

"No--they wouldn't have their picket-boats out in this weather, though they ought to." He returned the barrel to its crotch slowly.

"Be yeou gwine to anchor?" said Macduff, smacking his lips, "or be yeou gwine straight on to Livermead Beach?"

"Tell him what we're driving at. Get it into his head somehow," said Moorshed; and Pyecroft, snatching the cup from me, enfolded the old man with an arm and a mist of wonderful words.

"And if you pull it off," said Moorshed at the last, "I'll give you a fiver."

"Lard! What's fivers to me, young man? My nevvvy, he likes 'em; but I do cherish more on fine drink than filthy lucre any day o' God's good weeks. Leave goo my arm, yeou common sailorman! I tall 'ee, gentlemen, I hain't the ram-faced, ruddle-nosed old fule yeou reckon I be. Before the mast I've fared in my time; fisherman I've been since I seed the unsense of sea-dangerin'. Baccy and spirits--yiss, an' cigars too, I've run a plenty. I'm no blind harse or boy to be coaxed with your forty-mile free towin' and rum atop of all. There's none more sober to Brix'am this tide, I don't care who 'tis--than me. I know--I know. Yander'm two great King's ships. Yeou'm wishful to sink, burn, and destroy they while us kips 'em busy sellin' fish. No need tall me so twanty taim over. Us'll find they ships! Us'll find 'em, if us has to break our fine new bowsprit so close as Crump's bull's horn!"

"Good egg!" quoth Moorshed, and brought his hand down on the wide shoulders with the smack of a beaver's tail.

"Us'll go look for they by hand. Us'll give they something to play upon; an' do 'ee deal with them faithfully, an' may the Lard have mercy on your sowls! Amen. Put I in dinghy again."

The fog was as dense as ever--we moved in the very womb of night--but I cannot recall that I took the faintest note of it as the dinghy, guided by the tow-rope, disappeared toward the Agatha, Pyecroft rowing. The bell began again on the starboard bow.

"We're pretty near," said Moorshed, slowing down. "Out with the Berthon. (We'll sell 'em fish, too.) And if any one rows Navy-stroke, I'll break his jaw with the tiller. Mr. Hinchcliffe (this down the tube), "you'll stay here in charge with Gregory and Shergold and the engine-room staff. Morgan stays, too, for signalling purposes." A deep groan broke from Morgan's chest, but he said nothing. "If the fog thins and you're seen by any one, keep'em quiet with the signals. I can't think of the precise lie just now, but you can, Morgan."

"Yes, Sir."

"Suppose their torpedo-nets are down?" I whispered, shivering with excitement.

"If they've been repairing minor defects all day, they won't have any one to spare from the engine-room, and 'Out nets!' is a job for the whole ship's company. I expect they've trusted to the fog--like us. Well, Pyecroft?"

That great soul had blown up on to the bridge like a feather. "Ad to see the first o' the rum into the Agathites, Sir. They was a bit jealous o' their commandin' officer comin' 'ome so richly lacquered, and at first the conversazione languished, as you might say. But they sprang to attention ere I left. Six sharp strokes on the bells, if any of 'em are sober enough to keep tally, will be the signal that our consort 'as cast off her tow an' is manœuvrin' on 'er own."

"Right O! Take Laughton with you in the dinghy. Put that Berthon over quietly there! Are you all right, Mr. Hinchcliffe?"

I stood back to avoid the rush of half-a-dozen shadows dropping into the Berthon boat. A hand caught me by the slack of my garments, moved me in generous arcs through the night, and I rested on the bottom of the dinghy.

"I want you for prima facie evidence, in case the vaccination don't take," said Pyecroft in my ear. "Push off, Alf!"

The last bell-ringing was high overhead. It was followed by six little tinkles from the Agatha, the roar of her falling anchor, the clash of pans, and loose shouting.

"Where be gwine tu? Port your 'ellum. Aie! you mud-dredger in the fairway, goo astern! Out boats! She'll sink us!"

A clear-cut Navy voice drawled from the clouds: "Quiet! you gardeners

there. This is the Cryptic at anchor."

"Thank you for the range," said Pyecroft, and paddled gingerly. "Feel well out in front of you, Alf. Remember your fat fist is our only Marconi installation." The voices resumed:

"Bournemouth steamer he says she be."

"Then where be Brixham Harbor?"

"Damme, I'm a tax-payer tu. They've no right to cruise about this way. I'll have the laa on 'ee if anything carries away."

Then the man-of-war:

"Short on your anchor! Heave short, you howling maniacs! You'll get yourselves smashed in a minute if you drift."

The air was full of these and other voices as the dinghy, checking, swung. I passed one hand down Laughton's stretched arm and felt an iron gooseneck and a foot or two of a backward-sloping torpedo-net boom. The other hand I laid on broad, cold iron--even the flanks of H.M.S. Cryptic, which is twelve thousand tons.

I heard a scrubby, raspy sound, as though Pyecroft had chosen that hour to shave, and I smelled paint. "Drop aft a bit, Alf; we'll put a stencil under the stern six-inch casements."

Boom by boom Laughlin slid the dinghy along the towering curved wall.
Once, twice, and again we stopped, and the keen scrubbing sound was renewed.

"Umpires are 'ard-'earted blighters, but this ought to convince 'em....
Captain Panke's stern-walk is now above our defenceless 'eads. Repeat the evolution up the starboard side, Alf."

I was only conscious that we moved around an iron world palpitating with life. Though my knowledge was all by touch--as, for example, when Pyecroft led my surrendered hand to the base of some bulging sponson, or when my palm closed on the knife-edge of the stem and patted it timidly--yet I felt lonely and unprotected as the enormous, helpless ship was withdrawn, and we drifted away into the void where voices sang:

Tom Pearce, Tom Pearce, lend me thy gray mare,
All along, out along, down along lea!
I want for to go to Widdicombe Fair
With Bill Brewer, Sam Sewer, Peter Gurney, Harry Hawke,
Old Uncle Tom Cobley an' all!

"That's old Sinbad an' 'is little lot from the Agatha! Give way, Alf!
You might sing somethin', too."

"I'm no burnin' Patti. Ain't there noise enough for you, Pye?"

"Yes, but it's only amateurs. Give me the tones of 'earth and 'ome. Ha! List to the blighter on the 'orizon sayin' his prayers, Navy-fashion. 'Eaven 'elp me argue that way when I'm a warrant-officer!"

We headed with little lapping strokes toward what seemed to be a fair-sized riot.

"An' I've 'eard the Devolution called a happy ship, too," said Pyecroft. "Just shows 'ow a man's misled by prejudice. She's peevisish--that's what she is--nasty-peevisish. Prob'ly all because the Agathites are scratching 'er paint. Well, rub along, Alf. I've got the lymph!"

A voice, which Mr. Pyecroft assured me belonged to a chief carpenter, was speaking through an aperture (starboard bow twelve-pounder on the lower deck). He did not wish to purchase any fish, even at grossly reduced rates. Nobody wished to buy any fish. This ship was the Devolution at anchor, and desired no communication with shore boats.

"Mark how the Navy 'olds it's own. He's sober. The Agathites are not, as you might say, an' yet they can't live with 'im. It's the discipline that does it. 'Ark to the bald an' unconvincin' watch-officer chimin' in. I wonder where Mr. Moorshed has got to?"

We drifted down the Devolution's side, as we had drifted down her sister's; and we dealt with her in that dense gloom as we had dealt with her sister.

"Whai! 'Tis a man-o'-war, after all! I can see the captain's whisker all gilt at the edges! We took 'ee for the Bournemouth steamer. Three cheers for the real man-o'-war!"

That cry came from under the Devolution's stern. Pyecroft held something in his teeth, for I heard him mumble, "Our Mister Moorshed!"

Said a boy's voice above us, just as we dodged a jet of hot water from some valve: "I don't half like that cheer. If I'd been the old man I'd ha' turned loose the quick-firers at the first go-off. Aren't they rowing Navy-stroke, yonder?"

"True," said Pyecroft, listening to retreating oars. "It's time to go 'ome when snotties begin to think. The fog's thinnin', too."

I felt a chill breath on my forehead, and saw a few feet of the steel stand out darker than the darkness, disappear--it was then the dinghy shot away from it--and emerge once more.

"Hallo! what boat's that?" said the voice suspiciously.

"Why, I do believe it's a real man-o'-war, after all," said Pyecroft, and kicked Laughton.

"What's that for?" Laughton was no dramatist.

"Answer in character, you blighter! Say somethin' opposite."

"What boat's thatt?" The hail was repeated.

"What do yee say-ay?" Pyecroft bellowed, and, under his breath to me:

"Give us a hand."

"It's called the Marietta--F. J. Stokes--Torquay," I began, quaveringly.

"At least, that's the name on the name-board. I've been dining--on a yacht."

"I see." The voice shook a little, and my way opened before me with disgraceful ease.

"Yesh. Dining private yacht. Eshmesheralda. I belong to Torquay Yacht Club. Are you member Torquay Yacht Club?"

"You'd better go to bed, Sir. Good-night." We slid into the rapidly thinning fog.

"Dig out, Alf. Put your nix mangiare back into it. The fog's peelin' off like a petticoat. Where's Two Six Seven?"

"I can't see her," I replied, "but there's a light low down ahead."

"The Agatha!" They rowed desperately through the uneasy dispersal of the fog for ten minutes and ducked round the trawler's bow.

"Well, Emanuel means 'God with us'--so far." Pyecroft wiped his brow, laid a hand on the low rail, and as he boosted me up to the trawler, I saw Moorshed's face, white as pearl in the thinning dark.

"Was it all right?" said he, over the bulwarks.

"Vaccination ain't in it. She's took beautiful. But where's 267, Sir?" Pyecroft replied.

"Gone. We came here as the fog lifted. I gave the Devolution four. Was that you behind us?"

"Yes, sir; but I only got in three on the Devolution. I gave the Cryptic nine, though. They're what you might call more or less vaccinated."

He lifted me inboard, where Moorshed and six pirates lay round the Agatha's hatch. There was a hint of daylight in the cool air.

"Where is the old man?" I asked.

"Still selling 'em fish, I suppose. He's a darling! But I wish I could get this filthy paint off my hands. Hallo! What the deuce is the Cryptic signalling?"

A pale masthead light winked through the last of the fog. It was answered

by a white pencil to the southward.

"Destroyer signalling with searchlight." Pyecroft leaped on the stern-rail. "The first part is private signals. Ah! now she's Morsing against the fog. 'P-O-S-T'--yes, 'postpone'--'D-E-P-' (go on)! 'departure--till--further--orders--which--will--be com" (he's dropped the other m) "unicated--verbally. End,.'" He swung round. "Cryptic is now answering: 'Ready--proceed--immediately. What--news--promised--destroyer--flotilla?'"

"Hallo!" said Moorshed. "Well, never mind, They'll come too late."

"Whew! That's some 'igh-born suckling on the destroyer. Destroyer signals: 'Care not. All will be known later.' What merry beehive's broken loose now?"

"What odds! We've done our little job."

"Why--why--it's Two Six Seven!"

Here Pyecroft dropped from the rail among the fishy nets and shook the Agatha with heavings. Moorshed cast aside his cigarette, looked over the stern, and fell into his subordinate's arms. I heard the guggle of engines, the rattle of a little anchor going over not a hundred yards away, a cough, and Morgan's subdued hail. ... So far as I remember, it was Laughton whom I hugged; but the men who hugged me most were Pyecroft and Moorshed, adrift among the fishy nets.

There was no semblance of discipline in our flight over the Agatha's side, nor, indeed, were ordinary precautions taken for the common safety, because (I was in the Berthon) they held that patent boat open by hand for the most part. We regained our own craft, cackling like wild geese, and crowded round Moorshed and Hinchcliffe. Behind us the Agatha's boat, returning from her fish-selling cruise, yelled: "Have 'ee done the trick? Have 'ee done the trick?" and we could only shout hoarsely over the stern, guaranteeing them rum by the hold-full.

"Fog got patchy here at 12:27," said Henry Salt Hinchcliffe, growing clearer every instant in the dawn. "Went down to Brixham Harbour to keep out of the road. Heard whistles to the south and went to look. I had her up to sixteen good. Morgan kept on shedding private Red Fleet signals out of the signal-book, as the fog cleared, till we was answered by three destroyers. Morgan signalled 'em by searchlight: 'Alter course to South Seventeen East, so as not to lose time,' They came round quick. We kept well away--on their port beam--and Morgan gave 'em their orders." He looked at Morgan and coughed.

"The signalman, acting as second in command," said Morgan, swelling, "then informed destroyer flotilla that Cryptic and Devolution had made good defects, and, in obedience to Admiral's supplementary orders (I was afraid they might suspect that, but they didn't), had proceeded at seven knots at 11:23 p. M. to rendezvous near Channel Islands, seven miles N.N.W. the Casquet light. (I've rendezvoused there myself, Sir.) Destroyer flotilla would therefore follow cruisers and catch up with them on their course.

Destroyer flotilla then dug out on course indicated, all funnels sparking briskly."

"Who were the destroyers?"

"Wraith, Kobbold, Stiletto, Lieutenant-Commander A. L. Hignett, acting under Admiral's orders to escort cruisers received off the Dodman at 7 P. M. They'd come slow on account of fog."

"Then who were you?"

"We were the Afrite, port-engine broke down, put in to Torbay, and there instructed by Cryptic, previous to her departure with Devolution) to inform Commander Hignett of change of plans. Lieutenant-Commander Hignett signalled that our meeting was quite providential. After this we returned to pick up our commanding officer, and being interrogated by Cryptic, marked time signalling as requisite, which you may have seen. The Agatha representing the last known rallying-point--or, as I should say, pivot-ship of the evolution--it was decided to repair to the Agatha at conclusion of manoeuvre."

"Is there such a thing as one fine big drink aboard this one fine big battleship?" "Can do, sir," said Pyecroft, and got it. Beginning with Mr. Moorshed and ending with myself, junior to the third first-class stoker, we drank, and it was as water of the brook, that two and a half inches of stiff, treacly, Navy rum. And we looked each in the other's face, and we nodded, bright-eyed, burning with bliss.

Moorshed walked aft to the torpedo-tubes and paced back and forth, a captain victorious on his own quarterdeck; and the triumphant day broke over the green-bedded villas of Torquay to show us the magnitude of our victory. There lay the cruisers (I have reason to believe that they had made good their defects). They were each four hundred and forty feet long and sixty-six wide; they held close upon eight hundred men apiece, and they had cost, say, a million and a half the pair. And they were ours, and they did not know it. Indeed, the Cryptic, senior ship, was signalling vehement remarks to our address, which we did not notice.

"If you take these glasses, you'll get the general run o' last night's vaccination," said Pyecroft. "Each one represents a torpedo got 'ome, as you might say."

I saw on the Cryptic's port side, as she lay half a mile away across the glassy water, four neat white squares in outline, a white blur in the centre.

"There are five more to starboard. 'Ere's the original!" He handed me a paint-dappled copper stencil-plate, two feet square, bearing in the centre the six-inch initials, "G.M."

"Ten minutes ago I'd ha' eulogised about that little trick of ours, but Morgan's performance has short-circuited me. Are you happy, Morgan?"

"Bustin'," said the signalman briefly.

"You may be. Gawd forgive you, Morgan, for as Queen 'Enrietta said to the 'ousemaid, I never will. I'd ha' given a year's pay for ten minutes o' your signallin' work this mornin'."

"I wouldn't 'ave took it up," was the answer. "Perishin' 'Eavens above! Look at the Devolution's semaphore!" Two black wooden arms waved from the junior ship's upper bridge. "They've seen it."

"The mote on their neighbour's beam, of course," said Pyecroft, and read syllable by syllable: "'Captain Malan to Captain Panke. Is--sten--cilled frieze your starboard side new Admiralty regulation, or your Number One's private expense?' Now Cryptic is saying, 'Not understood.' Poor old Crippy, the Devolute's raggin' 'er sore. 'Who is G.M.?' she says. That's fetched the Cryptic. She's answerin': 'You ought to know. Examine own paintwork.' Oh, Lord! they're both on to it now. This is balm. This is beginning to be balm. I forgive you, Morgan!"

Two frantic pipes twittered. From either cruiser a whaler dropped into the water and madly rowed round the ship: as a gay-coloured hoist rose to the Cryptic's yardarm: "Destroyer will close at once. Wish to speak by semaphore." Then on the bridge semaphore itself: "Have been trying to attract your attention last half hour. Send commanding officer aboard at once."

"Our attention? After all the attention we've given 'er, too," said Pyecroft. "What a greedy old woman!" To Moorshed: "Signal from the

Cryptic, Sir."

"Never mind that!" said the boy, peering through his glasses. "Our dinghy quick, or they'll paint our marks out. Come along!"

By this time I was long past even hysteria. I remember Pyecroft's bending back, the surge of the driven dinghy, a knot of amazed faces as we skimmed the Cryptic's ram, and the dropped jaw of the midshipman in her whaler when we barged fairly into him.

"Mind my paint!" he yelled.

"You mind mine, snotty," said Moorshed. "I was all night putting these little ear-marks on you for the umpires to sit on. Leave 'em alone."

We splashed past him to the Devolution's boat, where sat no one less than her first lieutenant, a singularly unhandy-looking officer.

"What the deuce is the meaning of this?" he roared, with an accusing forefinger.

"You're sunk, that's all. You've been dead half a tide."

"Dead, am I? I'll show you whether I'm dead or not, Sir!"

"Well, you may be a survivor," said Moorshed ingratiatingly, "though it isn't at all likely."

The officer choked for a minute. The midshipman crouched up in stern said, half aloud: "Then I was right--last night."

"Yesh," I gasped from the dinghy's coal-dust. "Are you member Torquay Yacht Club?"

"Hell!" said the first lieutenant, and fled away. The Cryptic's boat was already at that cruiser's side, and semaphores flicked zealously from ship to ship. We floated, a minute speck, between the two hulls, while the pipes went for the captain's galley on the Devolution.

"That's all right," said Moorshed. "Wait till the gangway's down and then board her decently. We oughtn't to be expected to climb up a ship we've sunk."

Pyecroft lay on his disreputable oars till Captain Malan, full-uniformed, descended the Devolution's side. With due compliments--not acknowledged, I grieve to say--we fell in behind his sumptuous galley, and at last, upon pressing invitation, climbed, black as sweeps all, the lowered gangway of the Cryptic. At the top stood as fine a constellation of marine stars as ever sang together of a morning on a King's ship. Every one who could get within earshot found that his work took him aft. I counted eleven able seamen polishing the breechblock of the stern nine-point-two, four marines zealously relieving each other at the life-buoy, six call-boys, nine midshipmen of the watch, exclusive of naval cadets, and the higher ranks past all census.

"If I die o' joy," said Pyecroft behind his hand, "remember I died forgivin' Morgan from the bottom of my 'eart, because, like Martha, we 'ave scoffed the better part. You'd better try to come to attention, Sir."

Moorshed ran his eye voluptuously over the upper deck battery, the huge beam, and the immaculate perspective of power. Captain Panke and Captain Malan stood on the well-browned flash-plates by the dazzling hatch. Precisely over the flagstaff I saw Two Six Seven astern, her black petticoat half hitched up, meekly floating on the still sea. She looked like the pious Abigail who has just spoken her mind, and, with folded hands, sits thanking Heaven among the pieces. I could almost have sworn that she wore black worsted gloves and had a little dry cough. But it was Captain Panke that coughed so austerely. He favoured us with a lecture on uniform, deportment, and the urgent necessity of answering signals from a senior ship. He told us that he disapproved of masquerading, that he loved discipline, and would be obliged by an explanation. And while he delivered himself deeper and more deeply into our hands, I saw Captain Malan wince. He was watching Moorshed's eye.

"I belong to Blue Fleet, Sir. I command Number Two Six Seven," said Moorshed, and Captain Planke was dumb. "Have you such a thing as a frame-plan of the Cryptic aboard?" He spoke with winning politeness as he opened a small and neatly folded paper.

"I have, sir." The little man's face was working with passion.

"Ah! Then I shall be able to show you precisely where you were torpedoed last night in"--he consulted the paper with one finely arched eyebrow--"in nine places. And since the Devolution is, I understand, a sister ship"--he bowed slightly toward Captain Malan--"the same plan----"

I had followed the clear precision of each word with a dumb amazement which seemed to leave my mind abnormally clear. I saw Captain Malan's eye turn from Moorshed and seek that of the Cryptic's commander. And he telegraphed as clearly as Moorshed was speaking: "My dear friend and brother officer, I know Panke; you know Panke; we know Panke--good little Panke! In less than three Greenwich chronometer seconds Panke will make an enormous ass of himself, and I shall have to put things straight, unless you who are a man of tact and discernment----"

"Carry on." The Commander's order supplied the unspoken word. The cruiser boiled about her business around us; watch and watch officers together, up to the limit of noise permissible. I saw Captain Malan turn to his senior.

"Come to my cabin!" said Panke gratingly, and led the way. Pyecroft and I stayed still.

"It's all right," said Pyecroft. "They daren't leave us loose aboard for one revolution," and I knew that he had seen what I had seen.

"You, too!" said Captain Malan, returning suddenly. We passed the sentry between white enamelled walls of speckless small arms, and since that Royal Marine Light infantryman was visibly suffocating from curiosity, I

winked at him. We entered the chintz-adorned, photo-speckled, brass-fendered, tile-stoved main cabin. Moorshed, with a ruler, was demonstrating before the frame-plan of H.M.S. Cryptic.

"--making nine stencils in all of my initials G.M.," I heard him say.

"Further, you will find attached to your rudder, and you, too, Sir"--he bowed to Captain Malan yet again--"one fourteen-inch Mark IV practice torpedo, as issued to first-class torpedo-boats, properly buoyed. I have sent full particulars by telegraph to the umpires, and have requested them to judge on the facts as they--appear." He nodded through the large window to the stencilled Devolution awink with brass work in the morning sun, and ceased.

Captain Panke faced us. I remembered that this was only play, and caught myself wondering with what keener agony comes the real defeat.

"Good God, Johnny!" he said, dropping his lower lip like a child, "this young pup says he has put us both out of action. Inconceivable--eh? My first command of one of the class. Eh? What shall we do with him? What shall we do with him--eh?"

"As far as I can see, there's no getting over the stencils," his companion answered.

"Why didn't I have the nets down? Why didn't I have the nets down?" The cry tore itself from Captain Panke's chest as he twisted his hands.

"I suppose we'd better wait and find out what the umpires will say. The Admiral won't be exactly pleased." Captain Malan spoke very soothingly. Moorshed looked out through the stern door at Two Six Seven. Pyecroft and I, at attention, studied the paintwork opposite. Captain Panke had dropped into his desk chair, and scribbled nervously at a blotting-pad.

Just before the tension became unendurable, he looked at his junior for a lead. "What--what are you going to do about it, Johnny--eh?"

"Well, if you don't want him, I'm going to ask this young gentleman to breakfast, and then we'll make and mend clothes till the umpires have decided."

Captain Panke flung out a hand swiftly.

"Come with me," said Captain Malan. "Your men had better go back in the dinghy to--their--own--ship."

"Yes, I think so," said Moorshed, and passed out behind the captain. We followed at a respectful interval, waiting till they had ascended the ladder.

Said the sentry, rigid as the naked barometer behind him: "For Gawd's sake! 'Ere, come 'ere! For Gawd's sake! What's 'appened? Oh! come 'ere an' tell."

"Tell? You?" said Pyecroft. Neither man's lips moved, and the words were

whispers: "Your ultimate illegitimate grandchildren might begin to understand, not you--nor ever will."

"Captain Malan's galley away, Sir," cried a voice above; and one replied: "Then get those two greasers into their dinghy and hoist the blue peter. We're out of action."

"Can you do it, Sir?" said Pycroft at the foot of the ladder. "Do you think it is in the English language, or do you not?"

"I don't think I can, but I'll try. If it takes me two years, I'll try."

* * * * *

There are witnesses who can testify that I have used no artifice. I have, on the contrary, cut away priceless slabs of opus alexandrinum. My gold I have lacquered down to dull bronze, my purples overlaid with sepia of the sea, and for hell-hearted ruby and blinding diamond I have substituted pale amethyst and mere jargon. Because I would say again "Disregarding the inventions of the Marine Captain whose other name is Gubbins, let a plain statement suffice."

THE COMPREHENSION OF PRIVATE COPPER