MALAY WATERS

Also by

H. M. TOMLINSON

THE SEA AND THE JUNGLE
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GALLIONS REACH
ALL OUR YESTERDAYS
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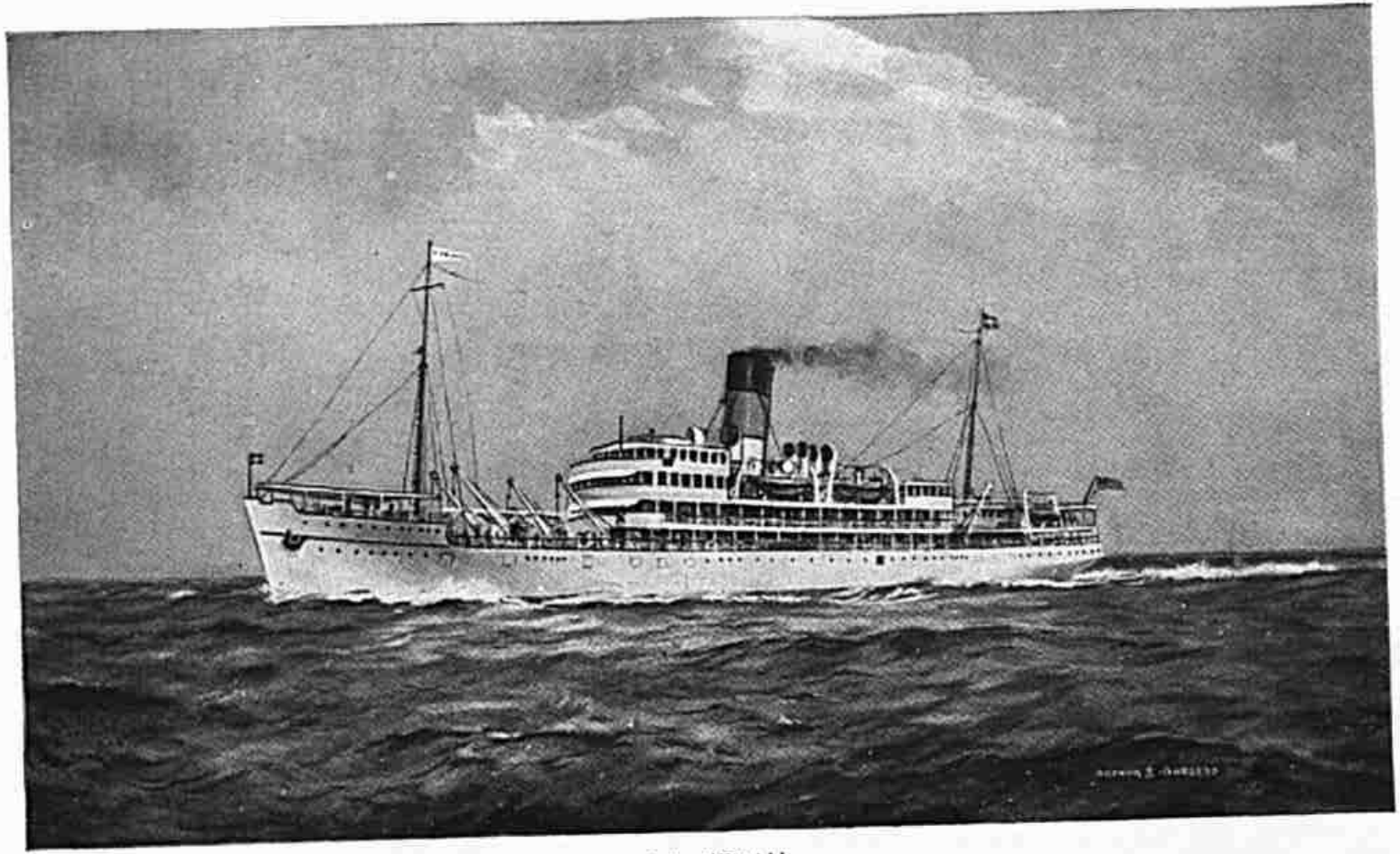
MORNING LIGHT



S.S. KEDAH

MALAY WATERS

The story of little ships coasting out
of Singapore and Penang in
peace and war

by

H. M. TOMLINSON

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TO

HARRY TOMS

Representative of the Officers and Men of the Straits Steamship Company, at his post when the Japanese entered Singapore, and who returned to it after his trials as a prisoner of war with the labour gangs constructing the Bangkok–Burma railway, on which a multitude of prisoners perished.

CONTENTS

Setting a Course

A TELLER OF TALES, GOING OVER THE RECORD OF BUT one house-flag of our merchant ships in peace and war, should be constrained by the purport of it all. That simple emblem, which is cryptic to most of us, represents in its individual style the Red Ensign. It is a reminder of those thousand years the battle and the breeze. To compass so much of past and present cannot be done, but with good luck glimpses of the men at their historic task may show between the lines.

Then again, when relating the adventures and inherencies of that flag, if the story-teller's acquaintance with ships and the sea is not professional, an explanation seems called for. By what right? I can claim nothing, except that I have known ships and shipmen all my life. For that simple reason I feel mortified when public congratulation, following a national sense of relief, betrays surprise as well as pride because in war our seamen do well. What else did we expect? They have always shown valiancy with cheerfulness, as well as a rather ribald distaste for heroics. It surprises them to find we are surprised. We have been assured, perhaps too often, that war brings out the best in men. No doubt it does. But which men? It is incredible that the value of our seamen was not worth earnest attention until the magic of gunfire was applied to it.

How shall we put it? It is possible that, as the benefits

war brings to pass are barely comparable with beatitudes, to say the best of it, we feel we must have heroes. The common virtues are inadequate. Heroes are compensatory. Their mettle is undeniably of our pasture, quite human, so this superiority of theirs to havoc and the foul, which also are quite human, is a solace. It keeps us in countenance. Heroes make it certain that in people whose look is ordinary and whose work by other conventional standards would attract no attention, a value may reside which is incorruptible. They are caught in evil circumstances, and strangely become unearthly bright. They make it seem likely that finally we are not subject to ugliness, violence, and the brutish. They afford relief to resentful grief, which today is universal. They lighten the horror of unreason and the obscene, suppressed by many good people as they regard the way of the world, and lessen our despair over mankind. They provide fair presumptive evidence for immortality. Death itself cannot put out their light, which, though they themselves have gone, remains sufficiently clear to keep us on our way.

Now and then it has happened I have shared the hazards of life afloat with these men, and in the years of gunfire. Though not of them, I have been with them. They were never strangers, to take me by surprise. I find pleasure in writing this footnote to history because I have voyaged in the little ships whose house-flag of the Straits Steamship Company is my subject. I have messed with their men. Their officers are from the home country, with Malays on deck and Chinese in the engine-room. I should like to say

that a European who fancies his superiority to a seasoned Malay sailor, or a Chinese craftsman, has yet to learn his place in life. I found it a select and cheerful community, the crew of a little ship, in which a man's only worth was his fitness for his task. A Chinese in the engine-room knew where he was, and could be left to it, whatever happened; and the bearing of a Malay quartermaster gave not the slightest impression that he thought you the better man. One could face adversity at sea in the company of those fellows.

That means, of course, that there is a deal of personal reminiscence in this history, so I doubt it will pass muster with sticklers for what is called true history. Yet what is that? Is it like pure art, and inhuman? I shall have to be reminiscent, or else a reader who does not know the Far East would find these peculiar ships in their tropical setting no more related to verifiable life than abstract poetry, and my purpose would fail.

The ships of this company are rarely seen in home waters after launching and departure. I suppose even a Thames pilot would fail to recognize their house-flag offhand. Though I have been familiar since boyhood with the distinguishing marks of British merchant ships, I had never heard of this shipping company till the morning, a few years after the First World War ended, when I landed at Singapore. Its ships are as British as London Bridge, but they are based far away out East. They voyage regularly to ports, havens, and anchorages, with names unfamiliar before the Japanese compelled us to consult an atlas; and now

possibly the names are forgotten again. They trade in waters deep ships cannot enter, gathering for the home market from obscure towns and outposts the produce that helps to form cargoes for the greater ships, and there they deliver what is wanted of European manufacture; and, in general, keep life circulating where otherwise it would stagnate.

The greater merchant ships, on hearing that at last the war fleet of Japan was out, departed; the little ships remained. Our Admiralty wanted them. Whatever happened to them, while they could float they were indispensable. In 1939, at the beginning of hostilities, they mounted what weapons were handy, and for a time combined commerce with gunnery, in the Elizabethan manner. While it was possible, men and merchandise must continue to move about, and a watch had to be kept on the coasts. On the first day of the war a number of them ran up the White Ensign. They were present when Singapore was abandoned, and did most to carry away the people who could go.

When I landed at Singapore for the first time, I had no reason that an accountant would pass for being there. Nothing better than an old dream was having its way with me. It was Alfred Russel Wallace and his *Malay Archipelago* that had drawn me out, which is a long way from common sense. It but serves to prove what a dream can manage in the long run; for I was a boy when first I read that book. There I was, on my way to the fabulous Moluccas at last. So in this story of the Malayan coasting ships, remembering

fondly the smells, the light, and the colours, I have attempted to picture the background to their voyaging. I doubt I shall see those shores again; yet, to quote the well-known hymn, "I have been there, and still would go". I have, in fact, been dreaming the dream again—the nearest I could get to reality, as things are. It is evident, therefore, that a word of warning to a reader would be judicious. There is a page in which I venture to recommend a visit to the unfrequented mountainous country of the Malay peninsula where the boundaries of Kelantan, Perak, and Pahang meet. That visit had better be postponed. The journey had its risks when I made it. In those forests today there is an additional peril, rather worse than what is autochthonous. A passionate faith is about. Still, the face of aboriginal Malaya will be there, much as I saw it, when the various faiths that now perplex the world are with yesterday's seven thousand years. And the little ships must continue their voyaging, if out there all sorts and conditions of men would continue to live on.

H. M. T.

London
July 1949.

Chapter One

Invocation

THE WAR FOLLOWING THE WAR TO END WAR WAS OVER; or so we were told. Certainly there was the sensation that an abominable thing, black and vast, overwhelming reason and shattering it, had just thundered past. It had gone. The plain and open summer it left behind was vacant, and its quiet unnatural. The newspapers fell as empty as the daylight, almost. There appeared to be a difficulty in finding news that would support the customary headlines of amazement. It was a nice day. Then a decent chance came in August 1946. "Crew Faced Death as Ship Dragged Anchors." A ship had won what is called "news-value", as in the days of innocence long ago, now forgotten, when no more than a vegetable marrow could swell into a public wonder in a cloudless and newsless summer.

True, she was only a little thing, as ships go. Still, she was something, and so lucky a storm and story was gladly maintained in print for several days. Unseasonable Atlantic weather was off Cornwall, and this helpless steamer continued to drift. Would she strike the rocks? Seamen who had been through what they called "five years of it", and were not quite over their surprise that they were still about, must have been attracted by the fact that a ship dragging her anchors, while lifeboats stood by, was important enough for a serial yarn.

Not that they said anything about it. They seldom do. It's not much use—or so one of them told me—trying to explain things to a nation of seafarers. I could not see whether he was smiling, as we were on the bridge after dark. That officer was given to dry fun, though now and then, when serious, his humour was unconscious.

She did not strike the rocks. The "ambulance and rescue teams on the cliff-top" were not wanted. A lifeboat took off the crew, the ship was boarded by a salvage party, and then towed to Falmouth. Her name had a pleasant ring; it was reminiscent of the Golden Chersonese. It was *Kedah*. Was she one of the little white ships, funnels blue and white with black tops, that used to be a feature of the waters off the Malayan mangroves, and of anchorages where the palms above coral beaches made a feathery frieze along a violet wall of far mountains, in the China Sea?

Some readers of the London Press who had seen, and perhaps had smelt for a prolonged period, Penang, Singapore, Belawan, and Borneo—the Indian Ocean, the Malacca Straits, and the China Sea—began to give the matter more interested attention. Half-forgotten things were revived. The mention of her name, as if by incantation, brought up from the past the grace of moments that had been lost; of mornings and sunsets, dream-like, their light and calm not quite earthly; all gone since 1939, we had supposed; we won't say gone for good, but gone for ever. A ship's name brought them back again by chance. Then her picture was published, for she reached Falmouth safely; and she proved

to be one of the yacht-like craft of the Straits Steamship Company.

So what had she been doing off Perranporth, dragging her anchors? That wasn't quite the style of her house-flag; and how far was she from home! Anyhow, whatever put her in the wrong place it was a miracle, no less, she was afloat, after those brief and shocking messages from the sea to which we had been accustomed, in the years when we kept ourselves braced for a worse thing.

Without knowledge of particulars it was known well enough to readers who once on a time found in *Lloyd's List* a fidelity to facts, and a breadth of outlook, so much better than popular romance, that very many ships of the Red Ensign in Far Eastern waters must have disappeared abruptly from the Register after the Pearl Harbour disaster, after December 1941. How they went? It is little use asking. We have had full narratives, and in variety, of the great land battles, and of fleet actions. We have been given more than a few broad hints of the tribulations of Atlantic, Arctic, and Mediterranean convoys, though not broad enough to convey what the log of a freighter in but one of those convoys has to say about it. The men themselves are not heard speaking. This I happen to know, having been allowed peeps into the logs of a few shipmasters, which were enough to tighten the scalp.

Are we ever likely to have an official account of the general contribution of the Merchant Service to our welfare, though without it the defence of our country would have utterly failed? Experience warns us that we are not.

Whitehall historians will not feel constrained to record the doings of those ships and men whose voyages and fidelity fed us all the time, and kept going workshops and factories with the material for war; that conveyed the armed forces to all parts of the world, and brought home the inflammable stuff without which our planes would have stayed on the ground. We shall not have that history.

There is a reason for it. The work of the merchant ships was without the drama of battle. It was no more, as a rule, than chance helpless burning and foundering anywhere and everywhere in deep waters. We should not expect ships with names that are of particular importance only to Lloyd's Register in Fenchurch Street, and in modest homes, to become memorable in tragic history, in the way of *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*.

We may, of course, if our business takes us to odd corners of our sea-ports, hear confidential talk in cabins to make us thoughtful—stories of war we had not heard before, and could not have imagined, casual yarns having the queer veracity of fable in their extravagance—but those fragments of unrecorded knowledge, though lightened with grim fun, never get beyond the portholes. There is no design in them; they have not the unity required by art. They elude the deliberated pattern from which martial valour and skill lift into victory, or sink to a national dirge. They either reach port, those ships, and deliver the goods, or they do not. There is no prelude premeditated, no onset, no crisis, no last act of achievement, as when the *Graf Spee* and the *Bismarck* were sunk, as in the sea-battle of Mata-

pan, or the landings on the coast of Normandy. It is not easy to make history of the numberless improvisations in calamity of stout hearts and cool heads, and of some anonymous suffering, when all has vanished in a night that is past, that has merged into the soundless void where the Nobodies are.

Chapter Two

The Straits of Malacca

THE "KEDAH" MUST HAVE SEEN MUCH SINCE SINGAPORE fell? She had met trouble before this difficulty with a lee shore, and her need for Cornish lifeboats?

I have been told she had. It was a wonder she was still afloat. I asked a friend, who knew her well, for it had been his duty to direct the fleet to which she belonged, what he meant by it, allowing a sound ship to be boarded by a salvage party? What had he been about, to get property worth—so the newspapers said—a quarter of a million sterling, off her course by half the globe and letting anchors drag where his ship had no right to be? I could be familiar with him, because I met Mr. Charles E. Wurtzburg in Singapore long ago, when he gave the help and advice needed for travel in seas where one may get lost; very few people know their whereabouts when beyond the Rhio Islands.

He was amused. "The poor old thing," he said. "We were not her owners at the time. She was not her original self. She had been knocked about a bit. If it interests you, look at those papers."

There they are, before me now, those papers—accounts, charts, reports, and so on, in a formidable pile—and I half wish they were not. I am supposed to do something with them; and though their interest is insistent, their tangle is

the deuce. The interest is felt, but agents, shipmasters, and engineers, when reporting to owners after a task is done, never waste words. They say only what they must to explain what happened; they leave themselves out of it as much as possible. It is a fact, and they know it, that they are of less importance than the ships. After all, too, most of them were under the orders of the Admiralty; they were under the White Ensign temporarily instead of the Red.

That makes a further difficulty. When Whitehall is begged for particulars of events that have more precision than the imperfect memories of seamen should be expected to retain after a lapse of years, the answer is: "I am commanded by My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty to acquaint you that it is contrary to the practice of the Admiralty to grant access to official records, they regret that the facilities desired cannot be afforded." So, as the saying is, "We've had it." But we won't let the old *Kedah* go just yet. We'll see what more the pleasant sound of her name will recall from the bygone. It may have some bearing on things as they are this day.

It is possible that the touch of magic in her name may evoke nothing to fix the curiosity, or not securely, of the majority of that nation of seafarers to which an officer of the watch referred one night with reproach in his voice; yet the voyages of the *Kedah* and those of a host of small ships like her, long before the guns went off, were of vital consequence, and are so again. Their work did affect the way we lived in London and elsewhere, though the truth of it passed as unnoticed as what comes of sun and rain to the

just and the unjust. Good service was continuous on our behalf far away and out of sight, and did not wait on cognizance. We regard our merchant ships much as we do the saving and gratuitous presence of sea and sky.

Yet it would be absurd to expect all British taxpayers to know that the spread of tropical islands and coasts east of Achin Head, Sumatra, is so extensive that only an ocean the size of the Atlantic could accommodate it. Very few of us, relatively, have watched the forested heights of Sumatra lift on the skyline ahead, and so must be unaware that beyond the Indian Ocean, and north-east by the China Sea, wherever in those waters one happens to be, certain house-flags of our Merchant Service are never out of sight for long, and as tokens of faithfulness are better respected out there than are the national emblems of some great Powers.

After a run east from Ceylon of about three days, for Singapore, comes landfall: Pulo Weh. An ordinary map of that region marks this island as a speck barely discernible amid immensities, but the imagination of the traveller is stirred by it, for his steamer is quite a while passing under the green mountain of this dot. It is the first of the famous Malay Archipelago of Alfred Russel Wallace. With Pulo Weh astern, your ship has Sumatra on the starboard beam. You have to assume—you take your navigator's word for it—that you are looking at only another island, because clouds, mountains, and distance make a muddle of it that is interminable. All you are quite sure about is that the breathless heat, the sea a mirror reversing the meridian light, the spectral coast, and the portentous gathering of thunder-

clouds at sunset, silent and still, as if waiting a supernal signal, make the appropriate prelude to Singapore, the gate to the Far East; to Java, Bali, Borneo, Celebes, Cambodia, Formosa, China, Korea, Japan, the Moluccas, and New Guinea.

The next night again there Singapore is with its enchanting lights, though the steady radiance of a great city is perplexed by processions of feeble Chinese lanterns swaying about and wandering all haphazard on poles. There are spasmodic and unaccountable noises. There are smells so violently esoteric that they must exhale from the corruption of what is very rich and fecund. A new-comer has a suspicion that he has wandered off the beaten track; he has slipped unaware into another dimension. He is being jostled by the goings-on in an entertainment of the Arabian Nights, and it is one of the more dubious sort. He is in for something new. And, if over Singapore Roads and the outer islands to the south that night, there is an electric storm, an equatorial speciality, expanding incessantly and silently about the sooty volumes of tempest vapours that look more substantial than the ships and coasts revealed intermittently below, then it is natural in him to acknowledge the majesty and mystery of earth, and the virtue of man's honest endeavour where elemental powers seem arrayed against him.

This is the beginning of Malaya. On a map of the globe the Malay Peninsula makes a poor show; so do the British Isles, for that matter. Singapore before the war had been for most of us simply the origin of fiction better

than truth; and very realistic, as the saying is, some of it was. Then the Japanese, fully aware of what that great good man, Sir Stamford Raffles, divined as long ago as 1819, when he founded the city on the site of a few fishers' huts and the mangroves, drew general attention to its part in our welfare. What it meant was suddenly and painfully clear. Singapore was the entrance to a vast region, a sunny world populous with our friends, and rich with benefits sorely needed at home; a gate that was abruptly slammed and barred against us. We were shut out from what had been so idly accepted as our natural freedom that its value had been unreckoned till it was lost. When across the Malacca Straits that barrier fell, Australia was in peril; and so was the rest of the Pacific as far as the Panama Canal. The one road left into China was by air over the Himalayas. War seems to be the only way to teach us where and how we live.

Chapter Three

Morning in Singapore

SHALL WE PRETEND ALL THAT HAS NOT HAPPENED YET? Let us say Singapore is still unaware of its fate. We may as well remain in the past, for a spell of ease. The affairs of lost mornings are all right if we slip back into them for no more than quiet reverie. And day-dreaming is good. We don't get enough of it in the everlasting rush, so never have a chance to learn where we are going; and what day-dreaming we do get is slop-made for us now in the picture-palaces. Reverie, and not that celluloid substitute for it exported in bulk by Hollywood factories to soften innocent brains, used to be the origin of the world's right and good original work; and even the wisest of us could use a quiet spell apart to discover where he is and why in the name of mercy he happens to be there. It is so very easy to forget that our present fortune did not come of a stroke of ill-luck, but is the natural consequence of what was engendered, and that the future likewise is bound to give away brutally the quality of our present day-dreaming.

Singapore, as it was before the enemy arrived, startled a visitor from the bleak north with mankind's rich diversity and its consequential inherency of touch-and-go. Until the day when you were lost in the place on your lonesome you never knew there was all this coloured variety about. Did it threaten? That thought came. The torrents of brown

and yellow humanity pouring along every street suggested that human life was in flood and was over the barriers. If you had a settled philosophy, the back streets of Singapore could make a mess of it, unless it was settled on a good base. The mob anywhere always alarms us with the idea that man in the lump is a fearsome beast. If the body of the beast were ever impelled by panic, or some idiot desire, and galloped blind . . . but we prefer not to think of such things. In Singapore the sense of that danger was more acute because the mob was not one's own sort of mob. Nothing like it. It was not only of warmer colour and smell, but seemed to be compounded of all Asia; and Asia is unpredictable.

That was felt even before I landed from my ship. The pilot's launch slipped swiftly alongside and stopped with accuracy; but it was not the pilot, a Scot at a guess, who was of most interest. Peering overside, my glance fell on the upturned eyes of the Malay helmsman below, and was held. It seemed to me, as we eyed each other, that if our cargo-liner of the Blue Funnel had miraculously disappeared in that moment, the stern expression on that man's face would not have changed. He would only have noted that we had gone; another swirl in the waters! Not worth thinking about!

Ashore, the confusion in the heat and glare along the water-front had few clues for a northerner. Chinese in variety, Indians of several kinds, Malays, Bugis of Celebes, and other men of the islands, and some Japanese, were chromatic in a traffic of glassy motor-cars, rickshas, and

bullock-carts. There was an extraordinary spread of ships off-shore, diminishing away into the subduing heat, liners and freighters of Europe and America, with junks and craft of the islands unknown at Lloyd's. All this faced a newcomer in the first hour with some questions. Here was one of the busiest and strangest places on earth. Who sorted it out? What held it together? Was it organic?

The commercial buildings were of concrete and steel, of course, as they are at Casablanca, Hull, and San Francisco. We are a long way from the primeval trees and the fisherman. I fancy Raffles would have been astonished by it; I dare not say gratified. Into one block of offices I went, and found settled coolness and calm. It was called Ocean Building, and you could begin to believe in the possibility of the rule of intelligence. A principal director of its affairs met me, a young Briton who knew Cambridge as well as the Old Front Line. His office table was by a wide window commanding the anchorage, and it might have been in Liverpool except that its paper-weights were massive and opalescent sea-shells, and he was in white linen so neat that I was conscious of the defects in my own new raiment. Beside his chair a telescope on three legs was directed towards the outer glare and the ships. I assumed from his nonchalance that he knew all there was to know about those many craft out there, yes, all of them, his own and his rivals, and had no need to watch them. He gave me the impression that, like my first Malay, no event would astonish him, or make him raise his voice. It struck me that not the most artistic and experienced poker-player

handling cards could do it with a countenance more convincing of absence of mind. Since I had been consigned to that office for his advice and assistance, I abandoned personal responsibility, and left it to him.

It is necessary to meet in distant lands these representatives of the British, mostly young, sundered from their traditional supports, doing what they can to create wealth, and to keep traffic between communities sweet and lawful, if one is to correct a few false notions. These notions derive from ignorance and some favourite reading, and they are not unimportant. We assume, chiefly because of our reading, that white people go soft under exposure to a tropical sun, and through loneliness in overlooked corners of the earth. Behaviour, not bad enough at home to annoy, degenerates quickly on warm and moist earth, though fortified by a public school and the Church. It will decay so picturesquely that it serves for drama, to illustrate what naturally we suspect, that all men are flawed, and fall to pieces at a jolt. This loosened character rarely becomes criminal, and not often rascally. It was never tough enough for that. All it descends to is meanness, the faithlessness of cowards, indolence, squalor; the deplorable. In the business of life we avoid the carious and musty; but as stuff to work upon, when the aim is to display ironically the natural depravity of one's own folk, what could better serve the purpose of literature? In a book, or on the stage, it is the present pleasure to see the worst in us. A dark glass is preferred. Folly, ugliness, and distortion serve art better than uprightness, which has nothing crooked about

it, is more difficult to portray, and, worse than all, provides no cynical amusement. It is beneath notice. But it would be fair at this juncture in the world's business to note that administrators, doctors, geologists, botanists, engineers, mariners, planters, teachers, journalists, and directors of ships and commerce, all of them anonymous, and without a word of cheer for their simplicity and devotion, must have done pretty well, in general, for our Commonwealth to have held together the way it did when the world blew up in anarchy. I merely mention this. I know it cannot alter in the least the charm of those yarns which show how beggarly we are, when circumstance is not to our comfort, or when opportunity comes along for exercising a weakness in need of an airing; but it is worth a thought.

No, I did not realize this in the hour that I began to talk to a young official in a Singapore shipping office. There is no swift magic about insight. One needs time for it, and a measure of sympathy, unless one is like Shakespeare and knows the truth simply because it exists. My newly found friend heard me out, as if tired. Then he indicated, largely, the sort of world I had entered in innocence, and what had better be done. He brought out pleasing large-scale charts of coasts rarely visited by travellers. They had ports of call with fascinating names, yet it was doubtful whether means existed for getting there. I noted scattered about one coast Kuala Pahang, Kuantan, Trengganu, Bangnera, Patani, Singgora. On the other side of the Malay Peninsula Malacca, Penang, Tongkah, and through the Mergui Islands to Moulmein; or over to Sumatra and Belawan; or

to Borneo, to Kuching, Miri, Brunei, Labuan, and Sandakan; or right across eastward, if one choose, to the Sulu Sea and Zamboanga of the Philippines. Those Mergui Islands, now; tales about them had drifted as far as London. The Sea Gypsies, and all that! Could they be found?

Easily enough. All one had to do was to go to Johnson's Pier, and put out to a coasting steamer at the appointed hour. However rum those place-names might be, and hundreds more, they were in the official programme of departure and arrival. Except the Acts of God and the King's Enemies —see any bill of lading—if you were not aboard at the hour then you must wait for the next ship. Euston was never more explicit and prompt. The signs began to appear that this romantic port of Singapore was not only organic but strictly lawful. I was examining for the first time, with close attention, the sailing list of the Straits Steamship Company. Which way to go? Choose which steamer? If one could only live long enough to see all, visit every place named in so attractive a business document!

Chapter Four

Malay Magic

THE "KEDAH" WAS NOT VOYAGING THE MALAY COAST WHEN I was. My first ship of the Company was the *Krian*, 856 tons; launched in 1911. She was bound from Singapore in and out the havens and anchorages towards Bangkok. I should like to dwell upon that little voyage, but it would be irrelevant. It was a novel excursion, to go with a large company of native deck-passengers, and with so few white men that one could have done with less if the captain and engineer remained. When at sea, the men I like to be in charge should have such names as Jones, Hammond, Daly, and Ferguson; a trifle of prejudice because of a lurking distrust of the sea. The chintz curtains of my white cabin, though their pattern of rosebuds did little to moderate the heat, at least would have persuaded me East Anglia was abeam; but it was the country of Sir Hugh Clifford's *In Court and Kampong*, which then was preferable.

The ship's master knew that sea rather better, I suppose, than Conrad's Secret Sharer, and perhaps as well as the Malay pirates who infested it before the coming of steam. In his quiet way, for he was a Christian of an exacting sect, he related strange stories to accord with the heavy night, the sounds of unseen waters, and native voices murmuring in the shadows of the after-deck. Money cannot buy such an interlude, nor artful persuasion procure it. The master

was a little man, and his candid regard of me was as if he sought the truth diligently in a difficult world but had little hope of finding it in a fellow mortal; and the truth should be brief, precise, and hard, to match his clipped and grizzled moustache. Above his desk hung a text, "The Lord will hold thine hand and keep thee." He must have known this was right, for he had sailed with a ruffian called Bully Ringbolt, who is said to have taken the pump-handles to his cabin because his crew complained of the constant pumping. They should see how they enjoyed it if she foundered.

The captain had studied for his certificate in Poplar, he told me, but thought it unlikely he would see England again. No more the Blackwall bus to the Bank! The ships of his line never visit the homeland. And at home we are seldom aware, unacquainted as we are with the necessity for the *Eastern Archipelago Pilot* (printed for the Hydrographic Office, Admiralty), that there are men, once our neighbours, dreeing their weird far away, who must keep beside them that unusual book, in several volumes. My shipmaster's earthly care was simply to maintain his Company's house-flag in the best light. If he never failed in that, that was his reward. His conscience and his certificate would be clean. What more could a seaman have? Seamen ought not to expect to die at home.

Or so I gathered, in general. In particular, I learned that his Company's flag had been in Malay waters for nearly sixty years. "It takes a long time," he explained sadly, "to learn what Orientals want, and the way they want it. Even

on this short run the trade is very specialized, what with the Chinese to deal with, the Malays and the Siamese, not to mention the mixtures. . . . I wish that fellow aft would stop strumming that mandoline, or whatever it is. It's monotonous, on a still night. Only three notes. They run in one's head with the tune of the engines; don't they with you? No, he won't stop it, he won't stop it."

The Captain paused, as if compelled to listen. He broke the spell with the comment that you can't get away from it. Yet, he thought, the country had its attractions, if your lot was gladly accepted. "The ships," he explained, "have to be like us. They must adapt themselves. My Company designs its own ships. Experience, you see. They must be of shallow draft; river-mouths and bars, you understand. The parcels of goods are valuable, and the depth of water won't always let us go close in. Cargo has to be brought out to us in some places. And there's the heat, what you feel now. . . . Your cabin is to your liking? Comfortable? We do our best. It's an easy night to-night, but in the north-east monsoon, look out. A ship should be able to face it. Mine is a good little thing. . . . Are you looking at my books in the cupboard? Do you read? Take what you want. I must leave you now, unless you care to come up to the bridge. It's cooler there sometimes, though to-night there is only the air upset by the ship's speed. Come up, when you feel like it."

They were devotional books, hardly suited to me. Down in my own berth I soon felt the bridge was where I would rather be. Sleep in the tropics is but fitful half-perception.

But for that chance resolve I might not be attempting this footnote to history after so many years. The profile of the Malay helmsman, as I arrived, is still distinct in the glow of a binnacle lamp now extinguished; I should know that man again. The sparing voice was heard of the master at the dodger, as he peered ahead. Nothing was to be seen ahead but lightning exploding without sound in filmy clouds, quivering through diaphanous veils, yet the thin diffusion of a quarter-moon was constant. The shadow of an island was to port. "No," said the master, answering a question, "that island is said to have nobody on it, but I've seen lights there before tonight."

Shadows also now, that ship and her men. Yet I must respect the ghosts. I have long suspected they may be the more abiding part of reality. What sort of a world would it be without them? I don't know why we make so great a difficulty over resurrection. It is always happening. I remember the shadow at the dodger remarked that we should be off Tumpat in the morning. I had no idea then what that word implied, but I know now. I landed there, capriciously, for Kota Bharu, and so it came about that I got to learn a little of aboriginal Malaya, far away in the mountains, and met some unusual men, brown and white.

For though in the year I was there a tiger occasionally wandered over from Johore to Singapore island, to be met one morning in a paragraph of the local press—strange confrontation, very pleasing to a guest newly arrived in one of the city's grand hotels—yet a stay in Singapore is more likely to give a visitor wrong ideas of Malaya than to reveal

it. The first day out of Kota Bharu, Kelantan, trudging towards the interior, told me that. Singapore stands at the extreme point of the long and narrow peninsula stretching from the mass of the Asian continent, from Burma and Siam, down close to the equator. It is apart and peculiar. It is to be relished or not for itself alone. Perhaps any impressionable writer could expand on that city, for it has its excitements, within a day or so of landing; but if aboriginal Malaya does not warn a ready pen on its first long journey into the interior that it intrudes into another world, where all is to learn, then it should find cause to go home.

Malaya casts a spell over the susceptible, and may never let them go, but I cannot believe hurried inquisitiveness ever learns what is there. A traveller, to retard him, ought to acquire a decent Oriental sense of time. Delays have merit. Let him rest, he hardly knows why, and has no conscience to invent reasons, where a few bamboo dwellings with shaggy roofs of palm leaves stand on stilts by an upper reach of a quick river. The central hills are around. He will get used in the heat to the smell of durian shards—he will want extra time for that—and other smells of a small community unaware of its own unusual exhalations, so that afterwards, when beset in a cold and hurried northland, the desire for another whiff of it all will bring him to a stand, staring at nothing, absent-minded. If he stay long enough to find native dress comfortable at the end of the day, he may see that the leisured and courteous Malays who entertain him have a way of living as rich and varied as that where the semi-detached villas make half-a-mile of a Lon-

don suburb daunting. No alarm clock holds the Malay in thrall. A buffalo or two will seek shelter at night in the space between the earth and the raised flooring of his house, which is of rough boughs. He unrolls his sleeping-mat on the floor. When a beast below eases its pose, he must respond, for his mat does. The smell of buffalo, while mosquitoes sing in the dark to keep him awake, is a smell he will not forget. The forest is close. It is next to him. He cannot hear or see the trees, and that is why their midnight presence is the more impressive.

The Malays never go into that forest except in company. He learns why when wandering in it alone, following the tracks. It was there before man, and appears to know it. Man is there on sufferance, and must be equal to its chances. If he does not enjoy one of its accidents, that is his affair. But if your curiosity within its twilight silence is a little wary, because the origin of an eerie cry in the deep of it is beyond a guess—certainly some creatures haunting that fastness are formidable and are better avoided—and though only an artist in the macabre would feel quite at home with the buttressed and contorted trunks, the exposed roots coiled like serpents in wait, the ropes hanging from aloft out of the dark, and the damnable leeches that would suck one dry if they had time for it, yet majesty is there; and loveliness too, where an opening by running water is flooded by the sun. One understands, in Malaya, why the Victorian naturalists chose to live in such a land for years. What more could a man and a student want, unless he prefers politics and economics in another wilderness?

Still, the village beasts gather close to the huts at night for reasons they know. They crawl under your couch. They prefer human society then, and no wonder. The forest and its possibilities close in after dark. Sunset is the time when it is better to keep together. That little Malay community has a folk-lore, much of it conceived within the deeper shadows of the trees, and its yarns make Grimm's tales obviously more suitable for children.

Glimpses of that land will surprise a traveller at a train window, or downward looking from an aeroplane. He will exclaim, and wish for more of it. It is not easy to experience more than is seen in a fleeting glance, or in an excursion from one of the towns. Even the Malays seldom view more than there is between one village and the next, nor do they desire to. A voyager on a coasting steamer sees as much of that land, in general, as its native fishermen ever do. Many islands are abeam, the inviting phantoms of old tales; and the sandy beaches and casuarina trees on the China Sea side of the peninsula, and the creeks and mangroves of the Malacca Straits; and, wherever you are, the constant clouds, remote and magnificent, changing colours with mountain range and forest as the hours pass. Those forests, botanists tell us, have a greater variety of trees than all India and Burma, and those mountains rise here and there to about 7000 feet, and most of them jungle to the summit. They are precipitously tumbled, lifting from ravines which, if not frightful with cataracts below, are likely to be that and worse at any moment. Tempests are sudden, and then darkness and wind and a violence of rain

lit by ghastly flashes will make precipice and fantastic foliage a picture not even Gustave Doré would have wished to improve. It is soon over—or we will hope so—and then silence falls, except for the secretive dripping of water from high strata of trees in a burst of sunlight, and the clatter of an abrupt flight of hornbills.

If you take a large-scale map you will see that considerable areas of the mountainous country of the interior are without place-names. The chance which with good luck in travel may take a traveller to a prospect over Central Malaya from a high summit, say where Kelantan, Perak, and Pahang meet, and nobody about but the Semang, the aboriginal negritos—they will not be met, except through the intervention of Providence—is an experience worth several world tours, and incomparably cheaper. It needs little more than good health, a few Malay carriers, the will to go on, and less time than a traveller usually gives to a few well-known and favoured places of the world. That is the proper way to learn why Swettenham, Cuthbert Harrison, Clifford, Maxwell, Winstedt, Ashley Gibson, and others have written of Malaya as though they knew nothing better, not even when remembering Mediterranean lands.

Of course, that is extreme counsel. For it should be said that when night comes, and it closes in swiftly, and the sleeping-mat is unrolled, the brooding hours till sunrise can be worse than long. There is the moment as the sun goes, and, as to a conductor's baton, while the last of day is only touching the tops of the highest trees, the cicadas strike up. The silent forest becomes vocal instantly with,

let us say, praise of life, to the orchestration of a gale in telegraph wires, and locomotives reducing pressure of steam, and steel harsh on whirling grindstones. It is an immense and threatening pæan. When it is over—and it does not last—the rare distant sounds can be of any cause in Malay lore, and they are in harmony with midnight in a wild place. One is apt to be wakeful, listening for those calls, waiting for morning; and it can be cold at night, too, in the highlands.

When dawn breaks, that is the hour worth the longest journey. A Malay morning is again the first morning of all. It is the announcement of earth and its life. Nothing has happened yet. The sparkle of the rapids about the granite boulders in the river comes of the touch of an originating sun. The chant of the gibbons—do not call them monkeys—swinging their way deeper into the woods across the river, is so free and confident that a hearer feels, though tuneful, he could not do better. There is no lark on the wing. There is the call of an Argus pheasant. The snail on the thorn—more thorns are about than are required by a glorious morning—is nothing like a sign of the Home Counties. God in the heaven of the wilderness has but this hour seen that it is good. All's right with the world.

The prahu is loaded and pushed out into the headlong rapids, and against them. We are not going down to the sea. The right thing to do is to find what is round the corner of that reach, where the high peaks, just appearing above the morning mist, are shining about a sombre ravine.

Chapter Five

Aurea Chersonesus

IT SHOULD BE ADDED, TO SAVE WALKING AND TRANSPORT, that for so unusual a light one need not go beyond a Penang or Singapore garden. It is even there at the same hour, with the Strait's robin—really a thrush—a black-and-white bird, but with the robin's wistful and faint soliloquy. A Malay garden then, the new day burnishing the crowns of the palms, their boles and the colours below still in shadow and unawakened, and the scent of a warm and stirring earth heavy with dew, is the assurance that chance has favours, and there you are.

We are back on the coast again, for it is undeniable that ships, little ships included, cannot be kept going on the glory of morning light in the wilderness, though romantic stories of the sea would suggest that the imponderable gleam is exactly what does it. When a ship is a grand figure in a story to name her cargo would be coarse. But if tin and rubber, and much else, say a load of durians or of matured eggs, each having the smell of protracted undoing —if cargoes of many things were not in a local ship's manifest, bringing her down to her mark, she could not be there by schedule, handsome and pleasant a mile off-shore.

Produce implies that people are about. Desolation cannot do it. Central Malaya, that unfrequented region where the *seladang*, the Malay bison that weighs a ton and is as

shapely and nimble as a cat, the tiger and the leopard, and other inland peculiarities that inspirit the scene with a faint apprehension, was indicated only that the background to the lively scenes at the ports should not be overlooked. It was to hint that those distant visionary peaks with their coeval clouds, constant as the lunar battlements of an inaccessible kingdom, have substance and attractions that can fade the memory of Main Street and its shop windows.

A visitor might never know it with little more to go upon than a rush by car, for example, from Port Swettenham to Kuala Lumpur. He sees no forest. He sees nothing as he travels fast except miles and miles of regimented *Hevea braziliensis*. All the way! Rubber-trees all the way. Each tree is the image of its next evenly-spaced neighbour, and the sameness fleeting past without end is soporific. Such an experience is unlike that of the diverse country where a stamping ground of wild elephants in a morass adds to the fatigue of attainment and is hideous with leeches. I have my preference, and it is clear and firm, but in this short history has no place. Tropical cultivation, meaning sugar, tapioca, coconuts, oil-palm, nutmegs and cloves, manila hemp, pineapples, rubber, pepper, and rice, has its adventurous side, and a word with any planter will emphasize that, especially when markets are falling; and yet the truth remains that plantations, to the eye and spirit, are not always quite so enlivening as where the primitive earth invites no commendation. Mrs. Isabella Bird should be read on this in her gossip of the *Golden Chersonese*, of the year 1874, and a very pleasant book of travel it is.

This means little more, of course, than that in travel the best things are as prizes in a lottery. Good fortune should never be in the itinerary; wait till you get it. There is, however, a fair likelihood of reward if you turn out early when your ship expects to take her Penang pilot aboard before the sun is up. The introduction to Penang, in the north-east monsoon, will last as long as memory. When the sea of the tropical east is calm, and a high coast is near, the beginning and end of the day confirm that our own planet is one of the celestial luminaries. It is helpful to be made aware of this before reading the radioed news in the ship's bulletin of what energetic men everywhere were doing yesterday. One is fortified.

Penang Island is a little smaller than the Wight, and rises to 2000 feet, wooded to its peak. It is separated from the mainland by the Kra Channel, two miles wide at its narrowest, and is a port of call on one of the principal sea-routes of the world. When a voyager is entering that channel just ahead of day's first hour he may wonder whether he is on earth at all. Did something happen in the night? Is this his first news of it? For he sees a shining tranquillity that looks, to the earth-born, everlasting. Such an appearance is supernatural; it belongs to legend, and is the fond hope of dreamers. It is plain that if this place is a reality with exact bearings safe for the pilot of a deep ship, then Malaya must be an extravagant and prodigal land, with felicity as the designed order of existence. A lone witness on deck is promised enlargement. He fancies release is coming to him from the bonds of all heavy and hoary ideas.

I have been looking through an old log-book, and have found an entry which says: "On deck this morning as we approached Penang. It was the best hour of the voyage. The sun was not yet there, but the lofty and serrated horizon of the mainland was dark under old rose and liquid gold. The island faced that glow, dimly tinted, with one white and blue house conspicuous. That house was all that gave tangibility to Penang's ghostliness. The island otherwise was too filmy to support the works of man. A junk and a cluster of fishing-boats were in mid-air. No sea was under them; they were without support, high in a solving of night. The silence smelt of spice. But was it only spice? Pepper was in it, and so, I thought, was warm moist loam, and flowers; and stranded sea-wrack also was in it, to give a thought of ancient days in decay, as if antiquity still haunted the scene till day arrived. I could snuff up what Marco Polo smelt."

In the letters Mrs. Bird wrote home in the '70's from the Golden Chersonese, while Malays could be met who were as resentful and quick with their weapons as d'Albuquerque found them at Malacca—and that Portuguese asked for it—she rejoices over most of her journey, but seems to have been not entirely pleased with Georgetown, Penang. "This is truly a brilliant place under a brilliant sky, but oh, how I weary for the wilds." Yet she says that the sight of the Asiatics in the town is a "wonderful one"; those Chinese, Burmese, Javanese, Arabs, Malays, Sikhs, Madrassees, Klings, Chuliahs, and Parsees, each keeping to his own costume, customs, and religion, and very orderly.

What more did she want? Though I'm quite at ease with sand dunes, marsh, and the untilled, and prefer unprofitable country, destitute of valuable minerals, and that refuses to grow potatoes, to the best of orderly estates subject to scientific discipline, and in fact find a prospect much better when given over to the elements, yet I'm not prejudiced. Are not our fellow men part of Nature, and wild enough? But we have learned to understand what Thomas Hardy meant when he said that, weary for restoration, our favour of late years has turned from the gracious gardens and parklands of civility to solitude in the waste. There is sufficient reason. In our cities we are "saturated with faces", as Charles Lamb put it. We are also governed too much, and see no help for it. The compulsions and ordinances of the community, and the uniformity of the roads and trends followed by the multitude, can be joyless. A man is known by a number now when he asks for no more than bread. His person has disappeared in a viewless State necessity. He has put his soul into a common pool, like a ha'penny, where it is lost in a nation's statistics. We crave at last for a word with self, to make sure it hasn't lost its voice. Town and country planners are as necessary, certainly, in this unifying age of the machines, as are neuropathists and nursing homes; so let us pray that some regions of earth may never be civilized too much, may never have concrete car-parks and loud speakers everywhere; may never know the full benefits that energy and enterprise bestow, but will be left to the end something like they were in the beginning. Some remembrance of Genesis should be kept.

Now that is said it should be qualified with a good word for vulgar market-places. In the Far East especially, markets may be more pleasing than the choice clubs. I remember that an old and experienced ship's surgeon advised me once, before I embarked, on no account to miss the fish market at Tanjong Priok. A market can be as sensational as what came of Open Sesame. Think of Mrs. Bird's Asiatics in Penang's market; there they must assemble, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, all in different costumes, moving in sunlight round the stalls to buy household things which, for a visiting European, have no names. A visitor learns in a few minutes that human life is as heterogeneous and enigmatic as the primeval woods, and that ought to make him suitably humble; humility is the proper but perhaps impossible starting point in all international relationships. Something is gained in that market that was not for sale. He may find, if he tries, that a Chinese who had a piratical smile, and the chance to swindle him, has been strictly honest. Kindliness and good manners are also strangely there, he learns; that market stall has yielded something not so enigmatic, after all. If so busy and brilliant a scene, with its colours and fragrance (we will call it that, and keep polite, like the crowd), does not pleasantly startle a visitor with a glimpse into the depth of his ignorance, then he should have stayed at home with his radio set.

Penang has other merits. It is, for one, a point of departure. The little ships go from it to many havens in Lower Siam and Lower Burma, Tankah, Renong, and Mergui up

to Moulmein in the Gulf of Martaban. They pass through the enchanting Mergui group of islands. The passage across the Malacca Straits to Pangkalan Brandan, Langkat, Belawan for Medan, Pagurawan, and other doors to Sumatra's mountains and lakes, is brief. There is, a little south, old Malacca itself. In no other tropical waters is there so rich a variety of native life on inviting coasts, and all to be easily seen, as those around the Malaya Peninsula. I know a man whose knowledge of geography did not include Borneo, except as a subject for music-hall mirth; and yet in a dispensation of fortune he arrived there. He only had to buy a ticket at Singapore. In the same small craft he voyaged so far up an uncivilized river that when at last she moored among the trees, and he went ashore, he came face to face with an orang-utan in the first half-hour in the woods. He assured me it was no put-up job, and that he disdained my difficult acceptance of his story.

But the sea itself, out there, under the land, if it is peered into long enough, is persuasive of myth and fable. Alfred Russel Wallace could forget to collect and verify facts, for the use of zoologists, when he paused in his eager pursuit and gazed into its crystal. He says: "Here and there little bays presented beaches of dazzling whiteness. The water was transparent as crystal, and tinged the rock-strewn slope which plunged steeply into its unfathomable depths with colours varying from emerald to lapis-lazuli. The sea was calm as a lake, and the glorious sun of the tropics threw a flood of golden light over all. The scene to me was inexpressibly delightful. I was in a new world. . . ."

Chapter Six

Past and Present

WE HAVE ENOUGH TO DO PUZZLING OUT THE LONG story of our own islands, curious for its drift and meaning, to have sufficient life and patience left over for enigmas at the far ends of the earth. It saves time to see Malaya emerge into a sort of reasonable existence, its intrigues, treacheries, and murders of the customary sort a western mind does not find it difficult to understand, with the advent of European navigators, missionaries, and traders. The Portuguese reached Malacca in 1509. That, of course, was not the beginning, not by several millennia; it is only a convenient starting point.

Sugar, spices, cotton, silk, and other attractive novelties came to the more general notice of Europeans through the Crusades. These good things came west from Cathay and the Spice Islands by several land routes, since there was no sea-route to the Far East till Bartholomew de Diaz—that very gallant seaman—found in 1486 that the mass of Africa rounded to an end in the far south. Vasco da Gama soon afterwards sailed round Africa on his way to India, and reached Calicut. The establishment of trading-stations in India by the Portuguese was opposed by the Arabs, who would not let go their monopoly without making trouble. The second Viceroy out there was Alfonso d'Albuquerque; he dreamed of empire, and built forts to protect

his country's gains. When the Portuguese ship that had touched at Malacca in 1509 reported back to headquarters at Goa with a story of ill-treatment, d'Albuquerque sent a fleet and an army to teach Malacca a lesson; the Portuguese stayed in Malacca for 130 years.

The Dutch reached Java in 1597, and presently founded their East India Company. Portuguese energy was failing in the next century, and the Dutch took over Malacca in 1641. For a century they remained the paramount European Power in Malaya, and they extended their dominion east as far as New Guinea. They were then, as they are now, prime seamen and clever traders, and made the most of their ships and men. Drake, however, homeward bound, was in those waters in 1579; and his arrival at Plymouth with the news of a world encompassed, and the goods to prove it, was a further stimulus to an island race awake and rejoicing to an intimation of destiny; even their language had to be enlarged and enriched to express their new sense of the glory of life, and they had the men to do it. It was incidental to them, an elementary fact as obvious as daylight, that the sea was the giver and support of their way of life. Their Queen, poets, adventurers, and seamen, were in simple agreement. James Lancaster, quickly following Drake, was at Penang as second in command of four ships from Plymouth; and when the East India Company was founded he commanded its first fleet, which anchored off Acheen, Sumatra, in 1600. John Davis, the greatest of Elizabethan navigators, was with him. The rivalry between the Dutch and English had begun. Francis Light

should be remembered. He was the English officer and seaman who first saw the value of Penang as a base for British ships in competition with the Hollanders, and in 1786 secured it in negotiations with the ruler of the kingdom of Kedah. History of our own sort is well under way.

Still, it is salutary to recall that more than a thousand years before the English were in Penang, a Chinese pilgrim, I-Tsing, a Buddhist, visited Palembang, a port at the south end of Sumatra, and reports a kingdom with its Maharaja. The East has been experimenting with the art of living much longer than the West. Sir Richard Winstedt, in his *Malaya*, says that "the earliest known specimen of the Malay language, or some closely cognate dialect, an inscription in the Venggi script of Southern India, dated A.D. 686, and found in Kota Kapor in Banka, records an attack on Java by the forces of Sri Vijaya, a kingdom that in A.D. 778 built the fine Buddhist temple of Kalasan in Central Java." It appears to have been a very considerable kingdom, and in the thirteenth century claimed suzerainty over much of the Malay Peninsula and Ceylon.

Singapura—its ancient name—was a settlement colonized under Indian influence, and destroyed just before A.D. 1365 by the Javanese empire of Majapahit; but its position between the China coast and India suggests that before Oriental annals began it may have been peopled by emigrants from the north. In 1552, though destroyed, it was still a port of call; St. Francis Xavier was there. But Sir Richard Winstedt is inclined to believe that from the fourteenth century, when the Javanese razed it, down to its re-

founding by Raffles, who hoisted the Union Jack there on the 29th January 1819, it was little more than a fishing village. Singapore Island, about the size of the Isle of Wight, was then jungle and swamp; but Raffles' prescience saw a city that could be most profitable "independently of our commerce with the tribes of the Archipelago . . . the principal entrepôt to which the native traders of Siam, Cambodia, Champa, Cochin China, and China, will annually resort. . . . One free port in these seas must eventually destroy the spell of Dutch monopoly, and what Malta is to the West that may Singapore be to the East."

That is now what it is. Prescience is the mark of a superior mind, though it never looks like good sense to Authority. Raffles, a man hard to balk, had his way over Singapore, though he had to fight for it. John Company did not reward him for his devotion to its interest, yet it was not unmindful of its great servant, for when he was home again, broken by long labour in the tropics, it loaded him with a huge debt, so it is not surprising that he died suddenly of apoplexy. Give us time, however, and we can show our gratitude to a noble fellow citizen. Raffles today has a statue in Singapore, as well as a bust in the lion-house at Regent's Park, for he founded the Zoological Society of London. One must remark that he was indeed far ahead of his day. Not till steam took the place of canvas did all that Raffles had foreseen come to pass. In the busy days of sail our ships to and from China did not enter the Straits of Malacca, but passed through Sunda Strait, between Java and Sumatra. The prevailing winds decided that. Singa-

pore remained of local importance till it was on the steamship highway to the distant east, after the opening of the Suez Canal. Moreover, in Raffles' day Japan was still in the middle ages. The rise of the Japanese to power came in the age when machinery was of more importance than good will in human destiny. It would be fairly easy to show that industrial civilization, east and west, with all its benefits and what not, was spread about the world by the iron ship powered with steam and the reciprocating engine. The development of the high-pressure marine boiler had more to do with it than any evangel.

When the last war was only a promise no worse than Mussolini's eloquent claim to all the Mediterranean and punctual trains, Singapore was the seventh port of the seas, with a population of almost three-quarters of a million, the greater part of it Chinese. It was not the place to look for the Malays at home; they preferred the mainland, with its agriculture and fisheries. Singapore is commerce; and is a coaling station, and perhaps the greatest of oil depots. The amount of tonnage entering and leaving it is fabulous. It is a free port. This does not promise that the approach to it, early in the morning, is one of the sun's most spectacular efforts, but that is the simple truth. Magnificent is the right word. From a ship's prow then, a traveller, his mind empty of care, can agree that this world is in accord with its Creator's first satisfaction over it.

The scene was altogether so attractive that, after a spell of idleness, I continued east as far as Gilolo, an island of the Malay Archipelago. Gilolo is as remote from Singa-

pore as that city is from Piccadilly. And, wherever I went, was I never to escape those stories told by Hollanders, as well as by the British, of the perfidy of the Japanese? That continued whisper blemished converse. The subject was never absent for long. You were begged to consider those Japanese shops opening in Malaya wherever there was nobody to buy enough to pay postage to Tokyo. And look at the crafty agents everywhere, from Singapore up to Siam, pretending to be barbers or anything else that put them where gossip was thickest! And those Japanese fishing-craft sneaking around just off-shore of the most unlikely coasts, when much better fishing was nearer home! I heard so much of it that I grew incredulous. It was clearly a prevalent morbidity. All the same, there was a word by way of relief. I heard that Singapore was soon to be a great naval base; and then, said everybody out there, we shall not be so frightfully exposed.

Is there anything better than an elaborate military establishment for encouraging a false sense of security and well-being, except perhaps the bottle? I myself, though not a devoted acolyte to Mars, could have sworn the light and substance of Singapore was as lasting as most things human. Were not my own people busy there, though in small numbers? Their activity confirmed the permanence of the prodigious city, even if I did feel weak misgiving when out of sight of the moral support of its wharves and dockyards, and the continual arrival and departure of its shipping, and its imposing façade of concrete and steel.

The sea-front of Singapore, though so near the equator,

in fact was the bold actuality of the dreams of boreal economists and technologists. To question such a manifestation of progress is the newest sort of atheism. It is most improper to question the latest and best proof, so far, of divine creative purpose on earth, and I am not the man to do it, not aloud, and among true believers. I will say instead, like an honest publicity agent, that engineering science and city planning could not have built better than they had at Singapore. Science had even succeeded in keeping malaria and other tropical havoc down to a minimum, and nobody knows what that means who has not been a victim, and has not lived where the vitality of a population has been drained by blood parasites. There is, I am well aware, a deal to be said for understanding what you are doing, and for hard work, just administration, proper sanitation, a good and abundant water supply, and law and order. The doubt that has always disturbed me when admiring the dominance of a capital city is that, after all, one sees in it but evidence of human will; yet how if the viewless faith from which it arose weakened, or were challenged? If opinion and desire veered? If the wind of doctrine set in from another quarter? There are but a few years of difference, as recorded time shows, between masonry and a house of cards.

We who were in London remember well the May of 1940. It was lovely weather, but in our suburban gardens, which never looked better, we could hear the muttering of distant guns. The battles had reached the Channel coast; they were as near as that to our Sunday tea-tables. In all

our history there never was a month of May like it. We listened to the outer defences of our established order tumbling down. Out in Malaya, one learns, our relatives the exiles heard at their radio boxes the news of Dunkirk. What did that compelled exodus portend? Presently they were appalled by the bombing of London. When the day's news had ceased they looked out, shocked but exempt, to the stillness of extravagant plantations, with the wall of the impassive jungle beyond.

This outlook was not in the least confirmatory of evil. Those exiles, in the year that followed, read thankfully in their local news of secret jungle aerodromes, and were assured that for the enemy to over-run Malaya was impossible. Common sense told them it was. They had the natural protection of precipitous mountain and forest; and a few of them had experienced the extreme difficulty of a traverse of that land. Should the foe attempt those forested ravines he would be in a trap. In those days of a shining local peace, untroubled except by the radio box, and even that worrying thing faithful with Big Ben striking nine o'clock—all right so far!—they waited for what would happen next. Some of them, who journeyed south, reported the *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales* at anchor down there; which seemed enough. Singapore was confident.

The quiet and the assurance began to go in a day. There came word that the Japanese had landed at Kota Bharu in Kelantan. Well, that was on the east side, and a long way from Penang, with the worst of the mountains and forest in between; and much farther from Singapore. Singapore

was bombed. Then a dreadful rumour spread that our great warships had been sunk.

A flight from the north of the Peninsula began. In her *Malayan Landscape* of those days, Mrs. Katherine Sim tells us something of that flight, with its muddle and inconsequence, as though it were an inexplicable dream. When she reached Singapore, "rarely", she says, "had Malaya looked so beautiful. In the cold white light there were dense black shadows and silvered leaves." As an artist she noticed those trifling irrelevances. But also, outside an office, a long queue waited, of people of many nations, of varied professions, and all wanted to get away at once. Every now and then a door of the office opened and a tired voice remarked, "Colombo on the right, United Kingdom on the left."

Chapter Seven

Origins

WHEN THE PROMISE TO ATTEMPT THIS CHRONICLE WAS lightly made, it was explained, as condolence for difficulties I should encounter, that the records of the Straits S.S. Company used to be in the offices of the Blue Funnel Line in Liverpool; but there they were blitzed. "In Singapore, of course, the Japs destroyed everything we had. Everything. They didn't leave us a book—not a blessed sheet of paper. You will have to do what we did. When we started operations again we hadn't even a list of our ships. Not that a list would have helped much. We didn't know whether we had any ships worth more than scrap metal. As to the names of their masters, nobody dared ask. Were they alive or dead? We had to be like Micawber—wait for something to turn up. The surviving ships appeared afterwards in all sorts of unlikely ports, where we had nobody to watch our interests. You see how it is?"

It is plain. If the ghosts do not show up out of the dark backward, though faintly, to prompt me, I shall make trouble; I am sure to make it while trying to get at the truth in history, if indeed that has ever been accomplished. There ought to be warning gestures in the thin air, frantic if dim, to keep me aware of pitfalls. A relation of the past must be made out of fragments of charred paper, and men brought to light again from no more than

allusive words in fugitive correspondence. News of the ships, their management explained, must be left to more patience. One, it was known, was at the bottom of Batavia harbour, not worth salving; others certainly had vanished through enemy action. One ship was on her side in the river at Belawan. Another was ashore at Seletar. Ruin increased with more regular mails. When at last there was a full tally of surviving ships it made seven. Thirty of the fleet had gone. What to do with seven cripples?

The recollections of servants of the Company were invited, and their notes and memoirs began to drift in from places as far apart as Edinburgh, Mombasa, Australia, and Devon. Yet as the story of the Company's flag begins in 1890, and men who were going about their business in that year may not all have vanished, like the records the Japanese hated, yet today they could not form a large and vivacious party. In 1880 there was no Port Swettenham. Penang was without a wharf, and had no north and south passage for a large ship between the island and the mainland that a pilot dared attempt. The coastal run up to Moulmein was not charted; not in a way that would keep a ship afloat when among the islands, or threading the mudbanks and mangroves about the mouths of the havens. A navigator had to learn for himself the guiding marks—a group of palms, a dead tree, a rocky islet, a mosque. The strandings of other masters were lessons in navigation for him. Captain Blain, a Penang pilot, in his amusing reminiscences *Home is the Sailor*, gives this picture of tribulation in getting in and out of Klang, eighteen miles up the Klang river of

Selangor, and not many years ago the port of Kuala Lumpur. "In my time", he says, "you rushed your ship up the stream on top of the flood tide, with parrots screaming among the rigging, and the crocodiles lying like a guard of honour on either shore. The river was too narrow for a ship to turn. The manœuvre, if that is not too neat a word, necessary to bring the ship's head round for the return journey, was to charge the mud bank, then, with the bow fixed, let the tide sweep the stern round, and back out. When the water was high the bow went far into the jungle amid the protesting monkeys and parrots, and the look-out men skipped and squealed as hornets' nests, dislodged from the trees, fell on the deck."

That means pioneering, yet the year was not so long ago. It was at the beginning of this century. Great wealth, despite monkeys and crocodiles, was inherent in Klang, though we are told its sole visible industry at the time was gambling, a signal failing of pioneers. The Chinese tin-miners from the interior descended on it periodically for festival, and to unload desperate earnings on fan-tan and poli. Scotch agents and engineers were also on the coast, considering, for one thing, dredging the river. They had the idea that its mud was full of money for tin, if a way to raise the mud and change it into dollars could be invented. There ought to be other ways, too, they surmised, as eager and hopeful men, to persuade the jungle to do better than orchids. When we admire the convenience of any seaport, accepting as natural its many devices for preventing trouble, the men who brought to pass the easy facilities,

gambling with life and time, as did the Chinese tin-workers with all they had, are never thanked, because they have gone; and there are no records, except the reminiscences of a few surviving elders. It was when the likelihood of plenitude in Malaya and the surrounding seas, seen by faith, was just showing through the hazards of experiment, that the Straits Steamship Company began to move ships about the scene, to help growing affairs along.

In that year, we should remember, the era of sails had not passed, not by long sea miles. Many of the prejudices of a thousand years of traditional naval architecture, and of conventional routine in the management of ships and commerce, were still to be overcome in the minds of men who had to consider what to do next to the profit of the Red Ensign. It is the way of men whose business is on the waters to regard innovation with unsympathetic eyes; modern science notwithstanding, ships and the routine of life afloat still bear the impress of archaisms persisting from long-lost years. Lloyd's Register, as late as 1880, is mainly of sailing craft. The steamers it names retained bowsprits and other Tudor relics. We learn from it that of the P. & O. fleet of forty-eight steamers but ten were above 2000 tons, and the greatest was the *Kaiser-i-Hind*—a ship I remember seeing in the Royal Albert Dock—and she was 2560 tons. In those days only originality and courage could discern traffic ahead, and the best site for wharves, where venturing seamen were annoyed by hornets and screaming parrots while getting a ship round.

My cordial and learned correspondent the late Basil Lubbock, in his valuable researches into *The Last of the Wind-*

jammers, 1929, regrets the loss of seamanship, hardihood, and resourcefulness in emergency, in the passing of his beloved sailing-ships. That is still a frequent complaint. An admiral here and there will repeat it to this day. Conrad adds his authority; he has given in support his experience as master of the barque *Otago*, and with the eloquence of a poet.

We know what he means. Some of us can recall, with the fondness of oldsters for the days of youth, the appearance, the stateliness, of a number of Lubbock's beauties, for beauties they were, when they were back home again. It is possible, in reverie, to see also the bearing of their masters, once familiar figures in the docks of London, by Clyde and Mersey, and in the offices of Fenchurch and Leadenhall; and with all that dear remembrance remain not fully persuaded, not even by Conrad's noble periods. It is astonishing, and it is pleasing, when thought is given to it—and it is also very lucky for us—that the change over to steam from the beauties whose lost white canvas is regretted was begun in the shipyards of this country. It was our own conservative and reluctant craftsmen who did it. There were great shipowners who changed over with a wrench they did not enjoy. They could not prove this change was the proper thing for fellow shareholders. They had but imagined a warning call from a time not come, which is elusive of proof. This prophetical apprehension we may as well call native genius; the instinctive right use of ships for islanders when times are hard and the winds of doctrine are boxing the compass. They took the risk boldly. In truth the change was brought about by the very virtues which

appeared, to our salvation and the great surprise of the world, at Dunkirk. Would any one deny seamanship, hardihood, resourcefulness, and much else in the way of instinctive talent, afloat and ashore, in that dread early summer of 1940? That occasion, out of which was saved our name and fortune as by a miracle, was seen by outsiders who were exempt, and thus were able to look on with fair equanimity, as the going down in flames of an ancient house; a great name was perishing heroically; the curtain was falling on the last act.

Dunkirk was not finale; it was the prelude. Renaissance was to come. And it was no miracle. It was the instant uprising and convergence in crisis of gifts forgotten. Knowledge as old as the way of the tides on the coasts of home, that had been in easy use alongshore since soon after the coracles, though so constitutional it had lapsed from the mind, that did it. Something beyond prediction had to be done forthwith, and it seemed impossible of achievement to onlookers only because they were unaware of what resided in the hearts of the islanders; who, after all, were themselves but dimly aware of their power to do just that. Inherent in Dunkirk—for let us claim a little that is due to us—was much else. We have been charged from many quarters since then with grave faults and hesitancies; but hidden within our salvation at Dunkirk was a future triumph at Stalingrad, and foredoom also was there for yet another enemy not unmasked till the affair at Pearl Harbour. The little ships and boats did well, though not so well as they knew; the full inherency of their desperate adventure was unknown to all the world in that early summer.

Chapter Eight

The Straits Steamship Company

DUNKIRK IS NOW ONLY ANOTHER MARK IN A CHRONICLE fading back into an early age where London itself is so very dim that it is disputable. Dunkirk surprised everybody in its year, yet before it, and not so very long before, there was that other crisis over ships, though in no way dramatic. It was not even observable except by a few citizens aware that the sea is life-giver to people who have the deep waters all about them; and those few men, looking to windward, thought they saw challenge in the air. They began, as shipowners, to fear for their holdings should affairs break loose; and they made ready. Coal and iron were beginning to dispute the supremacy of oak and hemp, and our more adventurous shipping folk turned to the engineers and shipwrights of the Thames, Clyde, Wear and Tyne, and Belfast, to meet the change, and improve it profitably without disturbance, and with no fanfare.

The change came, so to say, while the rest of the world slept, between sunset and sunrise. There it was. To me, as a youth, the docks of London were full, as naturally as a forest with trees, of tall ships cross-hatching the sky with spars and rigging; and before I could turn away from it only funnels, and steel hulls the length of city thoroughfares, were moored to modern quays conjured up to furnish a new order with its appropriate machinery. An era of ships as long as the recorded story of mankind, going back to the

Nile, had come to an end, and another had begun, before men still living could leave the docks and go home to retirement. I should like to quote in support of this another mariner, Scotch of course, and out East when Conrad was there, for he began his life at sea in a small barque in the year 1888. "Not all nations", he remarked of this revolution, "had this resiliency, nor the quick appreciation of the continually shifting aspects of the economics of sea transport."

That sailor was navigating Malayan waters when the flag of the Straits Steamship Company first appeared. From river mouths where the tropical forest could get entangled in the fore-rigging of a small steamer making for the sea, mercantile prudence rightly should have turned away. The need for a programme of regular sailings was not even a dream. There was not enough rubber in the whole land to make more than a postal packet, and no convincing promise of it. To cruise for freights was gambling, like all forerunning. But stray Britons lived there touched by the attractions of Malaya, and while damning the cruelty of exile were ready to sacrifice life and fortune to a romantic attachment; requital would reward them when their devotion was recognized. Nor shall we ever understand ships unless it is axiomatic that money is not their prime motive. They could not go far on that alone. There is something about ships so enchanting but nebulous that it is never accounted in official balance-sheets; its value is not common currency. In the strict reckoning of auditors it is naught, yet without it no advantage could be reckoned.

There was, to hoist the new flag of the Company, only

Mr. T. C. Bogaardt, senior partner of W. Manfield & Co., Singapore, agents for the Blue Funnel Line, Liverpool. In 1890 that line had subsidiary services to Bangkok, Borneo, and the east coast of Sumatra. Mr. Bogaardt began the new service of the Straits Steamship Company to the west side of the Peninsula, Malacca, Port Dickson, Klang, Teluk Anson, and Sumatra, and directed it from Robinson Quay. If you care for the names of ships here is his fleet: *Sappho*, 328 tons; *Will-of-the-Wisp*, 166 tons; *Malacca*, 405 tons; *Billiton*, 195 tons; *Hye Leong*, 296 tons,

As a fleet it would seem freakish today; and what a far call it was from the creeks and anchorages of its voyages to the docks of London, which it hoped to replenish! Rubber, the current staple of Malaya, was not there. The Amazon supplied all the world wanted of that stuff. The first director of coastal runs about the Peninsula must have been a sanguine man, for in his day most of that country was considered to be merely Clifford's *Further Side of Silence*. I cannot learn much about him, but it can be said he forwarded the enterprise begun out there centuries before him by John Company. Rarely now do we hear that Company mentioned, unless in a happy reference to one of its clerks, by chance a poet, for Elia once exclaimed plaintively, "Who first invented Work, and ground the Holy-day loving spirit down?" He meant work in Leadenhall Street. Still, he continued dutifully at John Company's indents and manifests until pensioned, and there is no doubt his eye was as shrewd for flaws in commercial documents as it was for the bogus in letters proper.

Elia mourned the "dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood", but his grief brings old India House of Leadenhall Street to life, for those who tread that street's present hard stones. By that token we are all in it, from Clive, Warren Hastings, Raffles, Lamb, and Bogaardt, to those who are still bent over the desk's dead wood, or working the ships; the old tradition has its will with its unconscious agents, and there is no help for it but to improve, if a way can be found, on what was taken up when our elders departed.

One catches a fleeting glance or two of contemporary shipmasters on the coast, and would like to learn more of a Captain Macdonald, on the Bangkok run. He was notable, it seems, for his bulk, blue eyes, and a long beard hanging from rosy cheeks, was invariably cheerful, and was killed when trying to pacify a Malay seaman running amok. Only an unusually strong, kindly, and courageous man would have resorted to pacification in an amok. That shipmaster's blue eyes and other befriending characteristics are remembered only because he came to a strange and untimely end.

By 1896 the Company's fleet had grown to a tonnage calling for a manager from Europe, and Mr. C. N. Laird of the famous shipbuilders of Liverpool was appointed; and then, instead of reconditioned ships, two new vessels were bought direct from the slipways, *Juno* and *Clio*, one carrying 900, and the other 1200 tons dead weight. Ships straight from their yards and of real tonnage are more eloquent of success than explanations. They themselves are the representative images. Mr. Bogaardt retired in 1899.

We hear next of the Somerville brothers. It is said of

them, and by those who knew them—we are much closer to the present—that they "made" the Company. Mr. D. K. Somerville arrived in the Straits in 1900. Mr. H. E. Somerville early in 1903. Two years after his arrival the first Somerville was in charge. It was he who looked wryly at ships that chanced to be for sale when he thought more tonnage was advisable. He saw that ships for service in shallow tropical waters, to be of comfort to passengers as well as capacious for cargo, would have to be designed and built; and yet that a fleet conditioned by local circumstance without a sound financial plan in support would be a manager's nightmare. To Mr. Somerville dreams came all in his waking moments and were of his choosing. His contemporaries wondered whether he ever rested. It was hard to keep up with him. Without warning, in the midst of a festal gathering, when his fellows had cast to the night all indents, freight accounts, and lists of essential repairs, their principal would become rigid and abstracted, having caught sight of an issue others could not see. Then he would disappear. He had ships on the brain. In his adventurous quests he had the loyal support, which never faltered when the going was hard, of some Chinese directors. We have their names: Tan Jiak Kim, Lee Chang Yan, Lim Ho Pua, and Tan Keong Saik. They were prudent gentlemen of substance, with sons in British schools; they were realists in commerce, fastidious in the usages of Cathay, philanthropists with the Oriental sense of largess, and as loyal to the mythology of Pall Mall as the oldest members of the Athenæum.

It is no easier in our day to make out what those merchants had to do to save their bacon than it was for Elia to get daylight on the Sunderbunds with candles in Leadenhall Street. All we know is—from *Whitaker's Almanac*—that in 1939 the Federated Malay States exported 175,952 tons of rubber; freight enough there for quite a convoy of big ships. Not a parcel of that mountainous bulk came the way of the Somervilles. They knew nothing of it. In their day rubber was from Brazil, out of the wilderness, collected by serfs from trees widely scattered about the Amazon's interminable ramifications. Malaya's remarkable tonnage of the latex resided at that time in ambiguous seeds carried about in the pocket of an enthusiastic Singapore botanist named Ridley; and he could persuade few, eloquent as he was, to discern plantations and dividends in his handful, even faintly.

It is impossible for careless sight, the ordinary eyes, to observe the unity in disparate things, say the relationship between trees and engines. It is, unluckily, rare even in the seeing eye to make out the full awful implication of that unity. The internal or infernal combustion engine could not be more unlike a sylvan glade, yet it sought its complement there. That invention was only beginning business when this century opened. It had only begun to convert the lonely and delightful byways of England into the continuous peril we know. Progress, as change is often hurriedly named, turns on odd chances. The hidden ambitions of scientific experimenters, engineers and botanists, working apart and unknown to each other, will prove

mutually attractive in the right atmosphere. They will unite to create a public passion for speed, and thus transform beyond recognition an immemorial landscape, and provide cargoes for ships, and presently take to wings. In their progress they will leave the earth, invade the empyrean, bring about a revolution in naval and military tactics and strategy, and at last flabbergast us dumb with a fear of doom hanging over all our dear cities.

The late Mr. Ashley Gibson, in his *Malay Peninsula and Archipelago*, reminds owners of ships trading to the Far East, and owners of cars everywhere, that their gratitude is due first to Sir Henry Wickham, whom he once met in Ceylon, and after him to Mr. H. N. Ridley, F.R.S. It was Sir Henry who in 1876 spirited seeds of *Hevea braziliensis* out of Brazil. To be plain about it, he smuggled them out; their export was prohibited. The turn of Ridley came later, when in charge of the Botanic Gardens, Singapore. Mr. Gibson tells us: "In 1876 twenty-two saplings just germinated from the Wickham consignment were received from Kew at the Singapore Botanic Gardens by Mr. Murton, the then Director. Some were established there, while nine were planted at Kuala Kangsar, Teluk Anson, and Matang. . . . On his arrival in the Peninsula in 1888, Mr. Ridley immediately interested himself in the rubber block in the Singapore Economic Gardens. The various tapping methods were experimented with, and their results interested him intensely."

The botanist became a missioner with rubber seeds in his pocket as a new gospel with a larger hope. His converts, in

the early days, were few. Planters saw no hope in his seeds. Their faith was in coffee berries. In his wanderings with his new evangel he was known as Mad Ridley, or Rubber Ridley. It is said that his earliest convert was a Chinese, Tan Chay Yan of Malacca, and the exhibit of this original practical planter at an exhibition in that city in 1898 began a general demand for seeds in the Peninsula; yet as late as 1905 the weight of plantation rubber produced was no more than 200 tons. Twenty years later the tons had risen to 250,000; the devotion of two or three botanists to one kind of tree made a remarkable change in the appearance of tropical landscapes, and to the wheels of vehicles, and the soles of shoes, and the holds of ships and much else; so it must also have affected naval architects, in addition to provoking geologists into the discovery of more oil-bearing strata. The poet who imagined that to pluck a flower would trouble a star was not daft; unfortunately he was but warning us of a dreadful fact. We have arrived, however, at another stage. The day of synthetic rubber is at hand. It begins to appear that Malaya has much more pioneering to do.

Mr. D. K. Somerville, guiding his steamship company, must have been gifted to sense immediacy in "the sundry and manifold changes in the world". That appears to have been all he had to explain a plan to build new ships, designed for local conditions. As this called for more money, in 1908 the Company's Articles of Association were revised, and the authorized capital of the Company increased from 500,000 dollars to twice that figure. His faith and

energy were complementary to Mr. Ridley's preparing for events that were not so much as a cloud the size of a man's hand. His bright new ships, however, attracted attention. Their house-flag was marked. Travellers who preferred comfort to endurance noted them with relief; and it is more than likely that the good word of contented voyagers, traders themselves, will induce freights where conventional printed matter will fail to attract. Successful commerce, like poetry, comes of divination into the obscure springs in the hearts and minds of our fellow creatures; not everything in economics is learned in schools of economics.

The new ships, or most of them, *Selangor*, *Perak*, *Kinta*, *Ipoh*, and *Klang*, were familiar shapes about the Peninsula at the outbreak of the last war; and that was a second war for them; they were requisitioned for service in 1914, plying as far afield as the Persian Gulf. After the First World War, the *Kamuning*, *Kepong*, and *Kajang* were built. The *Kelantan* followed in 1921. Architects, naval and otherwise, are nearly always anonymous contributors to good, yet it should be said that Mr. James Maxton, of Belfast, has for many years designed ships for the Company that were as near perfect for their several duties as things human ought to be, but rarely are. Next year, to prove the gravity of superior mass, the Company acquired the Eastern Shipping Company of Penang. Many small ports near that important calling place on a main highway of the ocean had been neglected, but now visits were regular. Success also incurs liabilities, and the Company bought a small shipbuilding yard at Sungei Nyok on the Prai River; and there,

adding wharves and machine shops, it built small craft to serve the greater ships.

In 1923 Mansfield & Co. were appointed general managers of the Company; it returned for its overseership to the house from which it received its original impetus. In thirty-six years the fleet increased to forty-eight ships with a total of 39,300 gross tons, and this does not include numerous launches. It served fifty-three ports in British Malaya, Siam, Burma, the East Coast of Sumatra, Borneo, and the Philippine Islands. The *Kedah*, 2000 tons, arrived last, an 18-knot twin-screw turbine passenger vessel that could do the run from Singapore to Penang in a day; a local marvel. We at home first heard of her off Cornwall, in trouble, after the last war. This additional fact should be recorded. When the Japanese nightmare was ending, and morning was at hand, and a British war-fleet came again to Singapore, it was the *Kedah* that led the van, wearing the White Ensign.

Chapter Nine

War Comes to the Tropics

WHILE OCCUPIED WITH EVENTS IN THE LAST GREAT WAR, A historian's zeal may be taken aback by an abrupt suspicion. What, he asks himself, has become of all the books about the First Holocaust, so named by Sir Osbert Sitwell? Are they not forgotten?

This is an awkward question. And if they are forgotten, does it matter? Perhaps the slain, whose memory, we are often told, "will live for ever more", might like an assurance, if they could ask for it. Lonely battlegrounds, with nothing to speak for them but strands of rusty wire, and some other memorials half-obliterated and awry in a spacious quiet, affect the chance wayfarer no more and are as soon behind him as the brickbats in a desert of an ancient city whose name and renown he does not know and does not seek. As for the gallant ships deep below the fathoms, sunrise and sunset will never make a difference.

That is how glory affects us a week or so after the smoke clears. I fear most people are as weary of war and of stories of it, and especially of what comes of it, as I am. As I am, off and on. One severe difficulty for a remembrancer is the fact that the men who fought at our Thermopylæ do not inspire heroic periods. A fellow who was there will say little of the famous and fatal pass, except elliptically in a corner over a beer with a pal who also was there, but didn't

care for the glorious day, or not very much. We get no rhythmic clashing of metal to defiant cries in the right good classical measure. No audience is waiting expectantly for a song about it, anyhow, and there is a reason for its indifference. Everyone else in that public-house was in the show, somewhere or other. Thermopylæ was no more of a terrible crisis than London under fire, when a girl had to drive her ambulance through smoke and tumbling streets. The view of war has shortened to a close-up for you and me. When Flanders Fields take in the Marylebone Road flats, a romantic vista is lost. When the battle-ground includes all nurseries and infirmaries there comes not exaltation but a grue. The privilege of sudden death is for the infant as well as the paladin; and lifeboats and battleships share the same glory. Wonder goes out of war when it is on the doorstep and everywhere, when all seas, all back streets and coral strands, all tropical forests and London suburban gardens, have commonplace investments in "old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago".

This cheapens fame and splendour. A civil engineer recently surprised me with the remark that he was parachuted into the Malay jungle; and that is an unclassified way to arrive. The Japs were about him as well as fever and thorns, but he survived in rags, he didn't know how, except through luck and cunning, knowledge of the lingo, and some artful help from the natives; and it seems he was able, on good days, to make a delightful mess of the enemy's arrangements. As I listened to his casual recital—it had to be prompted—my scepticism changed to astonishment at

the veracity of a story which diminished the extravagance of pagan legends; and the most remarkable fact in it was that the story-teller went as far as to admit that it wasn't all cake.

There it is. We have become burdened by the marvellous. Knowledge and experience have made us indifferent not only to the things of the spirit but to the adventures of the body. Our machines are treasured and oiled with devotion, but life in general has lost its joyous worth.

Yet in loneliness we brood over a mystery. We turn to it in the quiet. What does it all mean? Nothing? We won't admit that, for there was very certainly a magnanimous spending of the spirit. How can one be as cold as a chartered accountant over that expenditure? In an instant, at the challenge, a man had to decide; and when he decided that his continued existence was less important than what he believed of life's purpose, we dare not say there was nothing in it; unless, of course, we are materialists, and think this world incomprehensible except as an imposing imbecility in which we must either eat or be eaten; and such a conclusion is contrary to the traditions of civilized men, traditions so ancient and august that it would be ridiculous to measure against them a drab and cynical view of our present discontents.

For, like my friend's task when he was dropped alone among the Malay mountains, this present venture of mine can be justified only by faith. Faith in what? I'm not sure. But you may say it is in what was expressed in the farewell wink and gesture of a youngster who went up the com-

panion ladder of his ship one sullen evening, bound for Heaven knew where and what. I won't say that junior had acquired the mystical certainty that whoso would save his life shall lose it, and therefore meant to hand it over, in acknowledgment of the unnamed good. We know that young men are not given, as a rule, to contemplation of absolute values. Still, as elderly philosophers sometimes admit, it is possible for an innocent and generous soul to come to a right judgment, to know what he ought to do, and to act, without losing time threading a difficult dialectic. Magnanimity in the service of others has no excuse to make.

As Hitler's tanks drove into Poland, the little ships here being recorded were scattered about between Burma and the Philippines. It is a wide stretch of the waters, remote from Whitehall and those important doors to historic council chambers which keep the secret of British destiny. When your ship is anchored out beyond, and a whisper comes at the end of a day—you have all a coast to yourself where British destiny is of less interest than tomorrow's fish and rice—when news comes then that London Bridge far away in the old town is falling down at last, no support for the mind can be found in palm trees, however black and beautiful they may be in the splendour of an alien sunset. No evening papers are handy to give all the facts, and more, of a disastrous collision between European ideas of government. Only the cicadas are heard singing their usual evening song that is older than Nineveh. The radio, if it is working, may worry the lonely cabin still more with a half-

heard utterance of last things. What in the world is happening now to blot out the ways of decent life? Anchored far from fellowship, in comes your engineer, to help sort out as much of the evidence as the two of you can pool. He also wants to know the right thing to do tomorrow, since he can see nothing in universal lunacy to give him direction. How, you both wonder, are the people at home taking it? O for five minutes by Charing Cross!

Something, however, can be said for certain of one opinion held by the men of so insignificant a ship. It was a conviction beyond calm argument by British seamen. After Prague was entered and gutted by the Nazis within a few months of their pledge that peace and satisfaction were attained, there was never a doubt in simple minds as to what must happen in the hour that Hitler made another move like it; we should be at war. Now his tanks had broken his bond and were careering into Poland. That he fancied it was safe to break faith because he had made a deal with Russia could not alter our fate, though it blackened the frightful outlook. We were in for it, doom or not. It was understood in every British ship, wherever she happened to be when the message came that Poland was attacked, that people at home were already watching the sky for what must come of challenging wrong that had gone too far.

And what would Japan do? Act at once, or wait to surprise a day? Nobody knew, though it was natural for men east of Colombo to be as worried by the thought of Japan as it was for others to scan the sky for incoming German bombers. But a Company's ship in a Bornean river, or

wherever she was that day, was aware of its destiny up to a point when news of war arrived. Probably few shipowners employ astrologers, yet they must divine what may be in the future, and score more hits in the years than is usual with statesmen. If they could not do that they would cease to be owners. Tonnage is dispersed and vulnerable property, and jealous hereditary experience is better for its safeguarding than the timid conservation of yesterday's gains and hoping for the best.

The Company had had a war plan since about 1930. Every vessel in the fleet knew its place and duty should guns interrupt traffic. In September 1939, seventeen vessels of the fleet of thirty-seven were taken over by the Admiralty for service as minesweepers, patrol, and supply ships. From time to time other ships of the fleet went under the White Ensign. Japan still made no move, and it was seen that more tonnage taken from coastal shipping would presently halt the circulation of essential commodities. The ships, therefore, combined naval duties with commerce. They acted the part of the ships of the merchant adventurers of Elizabeth's day, varying trade with gunnery.

On Saturday evening, 6th December, 1941, the motor ship *Raub*, Captain Law, was at Kuantan in Pahang, on the China Sea side of Malaya. As dinner was being served a British Army officer boarded her and entered the saloon. He was dirty and tired, and said, "A Japanese convoy is coming south towards Malaya. It passed Camranh Bay this morning."

The *Raub* left her wharf and anchored on the seaward

side of the bar. Next morning she made for Singapore. Her Third Engineer, during the middle watch, 8th December, had the odd fancy that he could hear many aeroplanes passing high over the ship. She arrived at Singapore that morning, to meet the news that the city had been bombed. About 150 people had been killed. The street lamps were alight at the time; the raid came just before dawn, for nobody knew Japan was out to kill. Later in the day came word of Pearl Harbour. The ship remained in port, awaiting orders, as H.M.S. *Raub*.

Chapter Ten

A Report from the Footplates

"I'M NOT KNOWING," SAID THE ENGINEER—HE USED TO be Chief of the *Raub*—"how one like you would be regarding unreason. Maybe 'tis all very well for a writer chappie. I can't say. But it fair boggles me. Our ship was at Singapore. We were awaiting orders, and when they came they'd be outside the guess of any man's experience. Ye ken the anchorage? Then ye'll ken it was a grand one and a bonny. War was round the point, or behind yon cloud, but you'd not know it, saving that people talked absent-like, the way they do with a corp in the house. That's what war does. You must e'en plan to spoil and bury, not to make and grow. It throws a' the faculties into reverse, war does. Forbye, when you know the proper move to make it's likely to be the daft one, contrary to correct estimate, that's unfair on the gearing.

"Anyway, that's how I see it. Now Diesels I understand. And so I ought. I can tell ye why things happen in the whole clamjamfry of internal combustion theory and practice, though I'll admit to being sentimental. I'm gey fond of the old reciprocators. If ever I loved anything it was my first triple-expansion merry-go-round. But unreason is a dream. And a sad dream at that. There's no controls in a dream. It dodders on. Whiles, there was nothing to instruct a man, no, nor an engineer

either, how he and his job would behave themselves when the whole bag o' tricks took its place in a Tam O' Shanter midnight, if a Londoner like you knows what I mean. Nothing to tell him. . . . Och, well, I'm no thinking of a' thae speculations about what would be happening next in war. You'd hear that at tiffin, and with gin, and everywhere. You'd begin to suspect, while listening, that two and two make five, or maybe it would be three. And that's no so easy on the judgment. And how will engines act, think you, to such chancy computation?

"When I was a young lad and in the shipyard I took a course in philosophy and metaphysics. . . . What's that? No, sir, I was not seeking how to pack ultimates into neat formulas. I'm not precisely an idiot. I was only wanting to learn how best to heckle grand nonsense, for my old dad was a great hand at that Plato, and Plotinus, and the other celestial balloonists. I was thinking, being young, it was all fair demented.

"Eigh, I'm not that sure, now. No, I'm not. I would catch myself, that December, when Japan began her cantraps, eyeing the job below askance. I was doubting the engines themselves were not what the diagrams and textbooks had always ratiocinated; and how different? And yon's a terrible thought, that science may be fleerit wi' facts that can't be measured like. For one thing now, down on the footplates it was out o' the specification to bear in mind that the old ship had a four-inch gun on the fo'castle deck and a Lewis mounted on the permanent awning of the poop. And belike, if your maiden aunt took to carry-

ing an automatic stuck conspicuously until her silk bodice, you'd not get used to it at one tea-party? I'll say he was a nice bold lad, our gunnery officer, yon Mr. Stein. He was fair set on letting fly with his beauties. He wanted the Japs to have a go at us. He said he wanted medals to send home to his people. I'm wondering what became of him. Ay, what? I never heard.

"Ah, now we're coming to it. When they did let fly at you . . .

"Wait till I tell you. They came in their own time. Old Hornie does, so I'm told. There's no word to a man beforehand to warn him to get inside a clean shirt. It was on 12th December that we had orders to proceed to a 'rendezvous'. Just that, and no more. That's the best I ever heard of its bearings. It would be south of Penang. Three other ships went with us. It was dark when we left, and we were at that unnamed place by the morn. The Japs, though so far we hadna seen any of them, were landing troops behind our lines in craft they'd captured up coast. We'd be there to stop their game, I conjecture. Yet even then I was thinking it would be more leery to land troops behind *their* lines. But I'm only a marine engineer. Our Old Man, Law, was a grand Scot, and a cheerful seaman, but he was as close with what he knew as a lawyer in the Parliament House at Edinburgh. You'd have liked him fine. He escaped with his life, but he died of it after he got to India, so I've been told.

"There we hung about then, and nothing in sight for an explication. The next afternoon we put into Port Swetten-

ham, and loaded 400 tons of Diesel oil at the wharf. Four hundred tons. It would have lasted us four months. It gave us a cruising stretch of 26,000 miles, or near it, at three tons oil a day and 200 miles a day. A tanker wanted to come alongside the wharf, so we sheered off early, at daybreak. The tanker entered as we moved out to Klang Straits and anchored. Then up went the curtain. Action stations sounded. Planes came flying in fra the sea towart the land. We got out of it. We held a course, but only the Old Man knew for where. I took a keek at the poop compass that night; it was west we were heading. We'll be for Belawan, Sumatra, says I.

"That's all I knew. Anyway, we had clean missed that first lot of planes. But yon tanker didn't. Her engineers rushed on the wharf to cast off, but the bombs were quicker, and they died, most of them. As for us, we began a long spell of patrolling the Belawan coast at night, with other ships of the Company. There was the *Kelantan* and *Vyner Brooke* and *Lipis*, and *Larut*. At daybreak we would anchor onobtrusively. Off and on, H.M.S. *Scout* would call to see how we were faring. We were doing that for more than a month, and you'd have said we were nicely the far side of war. Of course, Action Stations sounded several times a day, but that was only to keep us in tune. We had the coast of Sumatra to look at. It was meant for picture-books. But no for long.

"I'm thinking it would be 20th January. We were at anchor, and at breakfast. I heard Action Stations sound and thought no more of it as I raxed across for the toast,

but never got that toast. My spine seemed to crack as the ship left the water. That was an explosion at the back o' me. More upheavals played shuttlecock with her centre of gravity, and on the companion ladder I had to hang on the rail because my feet were flung off the steps. But nobody counted the rest of them crashes, we were that busy getting under way. Still, yon was only by way of being a visiting card. The Japs came back in a large party to lunch.

"They were flying high in the blue, in numbers to stop the heart if you stood to count, but we did not. We had the *Raub* away as easy as a wee bit launch. There was an electric motor for the windlass, we'd the switch always on, and I'm telling you our anchor was home in a hurry. We had the knots on her before they could let go at us. All the same, the ship was drenched with spray from the bursts. I couldn't say what happened subsequent. I was below, and heard only the noise of it, which was loud and long. An engine-room is a sounding-box, and if by the way of it you can't see anything, there's plenty to be heard. Music of battle, you might call it. But what went on topside was not my pidgin. She had to run while there was power, and it's as well to have no curiosity when she stands on end and her beams shoot out rivets wi' vibrating. If she still speeds along that's enough. Law was handling her, and if he couldn't misdirect the shots at us no man could. Even my Chinese below had that faith. They attended to duty with an even gait, while the footplates allowed foothold, which was off and on like. All I ken is that the enemy made four runs over us, leaving me free to count the seconds left to

mortality each time I heard the bombs coming down. When Law rang off the engines it was a grievous jolt to hear the clang, for I wasna thinking it was over. You don't often see Chinese smiling happily, but I did then.

"We were riddled. If she rolled five degrees she took in the sea through holes along her water-line. We were for repairs, which would make a breather, but repairs took only three days. Captain Law and I took a turn up the road to the hospital after lunch one day to get word of our sick, for we were off again that night, and we wanted some men. We were cracking with the doctor, whose dog was resting at his feet, and you'd fancy the quiet was a sort of negative evidence of continuity, until the dog sat up and growled. It was the air-raid warning. Our ship was at moorings. Off the two of us went at the double. There was most of a mile to go, but the enemy was over us before we had done the half of it. We checked our haste, which wasna equal to planes, and then stopped. Clouds began springing up to take great roaring jumps at us, leaping off the road ahead, so we went aside out of their way. As soon as we could we hurried on, anxious for our *Raub*. And there she was, my friend, still alongside what was left of the wharf, but on her ribs, and her funnel was a pipe for the tide, which was flowing into it.

"She was not exactly dead, but dying. She gulped the air out of her inside once or twice, and shook. I'll not be sure today what reality may be, back of our phantasmagoria, but it's a sorrowful sight is your ship, when she's done. We stood looking at her, Law and I, but there was no

word between us. I couldna meet the Old Man's eye. She was past repair, and if she wasn't, no help was left in the port of Belawan to tinker with so much as a bucket. It was a shambles. What wasn't on fire was tumbled and strewn. The cranes were twisted to figures of eight, and a Dutch ship ahead of the *Raub* was blazing. Other wrecks were part showing in the stream. A Dutchman came running up through the reek of it and advised us to clear out. That burning ship was loaded with ammunition. We cleared out. We were bare to the wide.

"It's no easy to say what came after that. I mind that we were joined by survivors of the *Larut*. She had been sunk off Sabang. Of all that was happening out yonder we heard many lies, and some sad truth, but we had no slide rule for the measurement, so both were of equal value. When a man is cut off in a corner of Bedlam, and can't get out, he'll not know whether he is more fey than the rest or not, but I did get a telegram from Singapore telling me my wife and daughter had left for Australia, and that contented me with fate; you see, if Belawan was like this, what like would be Singapore?

"In the second week of February we were told to go to Palembang, to seek a ship for Singapore. Ay, I said Singapore. Look at the map! The British Consul found two Ford cars for us. Palembang was five-hundred miles to the south-east, just about that. And do ye ken Sumatra? It's mostly variegated mountain, morass, and forest, and when I say forest I mean it. It hasna changed much since time began. They do say, that when a party of its heathen is

travelling on a road there, a tiger will choose his meat and be off with it before the poor bodies know what's come and gone.

"I stowed into one car with Captain Law and Mr. Lossie Smith of the *Larut*, and we were away for a hurl through the orang-utangs. There is a place in the mountains called Toba. It's a great lake just under the sky, and a nice cooler it is after the sweltering coast. It's just one of those grand places you tell yourself you maun return to some day, and with long leisure, so we had but one short sleep there and off again. Duty, of course. Duty sees to it no time is wasted when looking for trouble.

"After that, I'd be thankful to get enough sense into that journey for you to be following it with fair understanding. I've never understood it myself. Our driver sweated over his wheel as if Nannie the Witch was at our tail, barely missing her grabs at the number plate astern of us. Never a let-up or we'd be caught. The weird mountain land was the worse because it swept past in a swoon. Your eyes were trying to be sure yon queer shape ahead was real, and it was past. We were birling away towards what no man knew, for 'twas certain sure that all would have changed before we got there. Shipwrecked seamen we were, and a maniac helmsman whirling us along with jungle high in the sky to port, and our starboard wheels crumbling the edge of sheer vacancy. The speed of it! Hell's gates close early maybe, and we were late.

"I bethought me that unless we shot over the edge into the void, night must stop him, night and rain, for rain

began, and the mirk presently did meet us in a kind o' silent collision with a black thunderstorm; yet into the dark we plunged, with pale trees charging at our headlights but missing us, and the lightning flickering deep into the offside bottomless. I didn't like it.

"Law speired at the driver, who said he was lost. Lost! If he was only lost, perhaps he was human after all, and there was a chance for us; but he drove on as fast as before in the hope of finding himself somewhere. Law said he reckoned at this rate of knots the Indian Ocean would stop the lunatic by sun-up, unless we died first. Then I imagined I saw a light ahead, but didn't mention to anybody so trifling a hallucination. But there was a light, if only a wee one, and we stopped. We followed a path and came to a porch, and we called out.

"What was a house doing there? It was dim inside, and if something we hated the sight of had appeared to take a keek at us I think I'd have cheered at the natural fun of it. You'd expect a bogle, but only a Dutchman showed up in his slippers, and he was fleyed enough. He eyed us as if we'd come with the gallows!

"I tell you, it's fear itself is more to be feared than all that makes a man afraid. The worst thing of war, worse than the dead and the sunk ships, is the fear it lets loose to sicken confidence in life. Mark that, for it lasts, and it lasts long. Now that Dutchman was shaking. He had heard us coming and thought the Japs were upon him. He went back to calm his wife, and when we met the poor body she was in need of support. I was glad to see the British naval

uniform could have the same effect as the wings of unexpected angels. It soothed the pair of them. Our Dutchman was the local district officer, and knew nothing but bad news, and had been warned to expect worse, but his best food and drinks and his best linen and beds were for us. And what a good man was Law! How he made us laugh that night! I've often wondered since whether that poor lonely couple came through together, but 'twould be unlikely.

"One day, not fully believing it, we came to the Palembang River. We happened on it, I'm thinking, because we were still lost. And the size of it! By the town of Palembang, and that is a hundred miles upstream, yon river is as wide as the Thames at Greenwich. And don't you forget there are East Indian islands as big as some countries that are over-full of their own importance, and much more interesting. And Palembang was full of interest that day, and likely fuller than it ever was before. The hotel was incommoded by the military. Singapore was in its last days. By what I could see of it, the white people of Sumatra, and the semi-whites and the not-so-darks—and very becoming were some of the intermediate ladies—were all gravitating to the south end of the island, there to be emptied for safety into next-door Java.

"Of course, nobody kenned that Java, not Sumatra, was next on the Japanese tally of lands and islands. How was anybody to ken anything, anyway? But we were shortly to be better informed. I went to find the Navy man in charge, and that, let me tell you, is generally a sound move

when you suspect the ingredients of a woeful general mess, and he straightway appointed me and my Third Engineer Hansen to the *St. Just*. She was the Singapore Naval Base tugboat. There was a convoy of ships being formed for Batavia, the *Klias*, *Hua Tong*, both our Company's, and another little thing of 75 tons, with a queer name—what was it now? Yes, the *Jerantut*—also of our flag, and he warned us time was scarce. It was. You could both hear and smell it. While we were taking in water at the wharf the Japs were bombing and machine-gunning the town. There's nothing like funk and panic for it, whether it's war or peace—scatter their wits, and they're yours.

"The four ships made off downstream the early afternoon of 13th February. Captain Brown of the Company was in charge of the convoy, and we steamed well on after dark. The idea was to hide among the islands when daylight came. Have you ever tried to hide a full-powered ship? We were for continuing all night, but three hours before midnight our Dutch pilot anchored us, and he had a wooden face for our indignation. There's no argy-bargy with a pilot, for you daren't move without him when sandbars and mud-flats change places in a fairway just to maintain local interest. At dawn, there our four ships were in line ahead, and no pilot. He had gone; but there we were, and most notable. A better target for a bombing run never yet sat waiting to be sunk.

"Our conspicuosity in the clear light disinclined me for breakfast. I stayed topside watching, for I knew it must happen, and it did. There they came till the sky was black

with planes, black I tell you, and time dragged on and on as the horror roared over us. Somebody who'll surely have a taste for a note-book on Doomsday told me he counted up to a hundred and forty and then lost count through looking round for a life-belt. But they did not disturb us. On they went carrying paratroops to capture the Palembang airfield. It is very certain the Japanese had had all the Indies taped for many years, and they moved to schedule as the bell rang.

"It was reasonable to suppose that at least one of the great host had spotted us, so we got out the boats, and we cut branches and palm-fronds to give our ships the look of islands. As you'll surmise, a ship is a large, proud, refractory creature if you'd try to make her seem what she is not, especially in a hurry. The convoy, anyway, thought it better to move off when more planes appeared. As the bombardment began the *St. Just* already had steerage way, so the explosions were but injudiciously close, when a black column of smoke sprang up high astern of us, and that was the *Hua Tong*. We went about and picked up some survivors. We lifted aboard Mr. Horn, the Chief of the sunk ship, who had a foot crushed by a stoke-hold plate, and also the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Tongue, badly hurt by his gun blown over him. And if that was not enough, a Dutch pilot boarded us from among the wreckage and bodies drifting downstream, and told us a Japanese fleet was off the mouth of the Palembang River, and we must away back to the town.

"That same night we steamed back; we took the way of

the enemy paratroops. A ship must go either up or down stream, and we could not go down, since big cruisers had shut the way out to the sea. It occurred to me we'd as well put ashore and continue lost, except that both shores were tidal swamps, nipa palms, and crocodiles, which are not improved by midnight.

"While weighing the worth of several prospects, the *St. Just* arrived back alongside the Palembang wharf. I noted, because there was a good bright light for it, that whatever would be happening next would be happening soon. The shapes of the night clouds were plain, being all red hot and glowing with the spasmodic flames under them of oil refineries burning. There were sounds of the iron lids of hell's manholes being opened and slammed, and the appropriate howling. We were trapped. I saw, alongside our ship, our Captain in converse with the British Naval Officer in charge, and learned in five minutes that the Japanese were not only downstream; they were around the town. What we had to do was to take the *St. Just* to midstream and sink her. After that we must move on instinct, because reason was bankrupt.

"You didn't have to be a major prophet to foresee so much. In fact, during the run upstream, we engineers had eased back the nuts of the main condenser doors in case scuttling was to be ordered. So across stream we went and anchored. A boat was lowered, and a line made fast ashore. It was easier, in the swift current, to haul the boat to and fro than row the distance. We landed our crew and passengers and their kit. All this time the enemy was dive-

bombing anything to his sight and fancy up and down river, but both the Captain of the *St. Just* and his Chief Officer had been through the Plymouth blitz. They were not to be upset thinking the next minute was full tally. At length all was done. We opened her to the water, put a big hammer through the pumps, and left the poor thing. We went ashore, and there we stood with other survivors in a land we didn't know, without a ship, and e'en without a conjecture among the host of us worth sixpence. The *Klias* had been scuttled. The injured men had gone to hospital, but whether better off with wounds or without, when in Japanese hands, it was no help to consider. The Dutch demolition squads were swarming at it while we stood. I noticed bags of flour being dumped into the river. The wharves, cranes, and buildings were going up in brilliant bangs the while, and it was advisable to slacken the nerves to reduce the impacts, and the smoke of it stank of elemental cremation. Did I tell you this was my second world war?

"There was but one road to choose, so we took it, ragtag and bobtail. It brought us to a railway track, and nobody knew where that went. In a few minutes a goods train came puffing along from the town, and we hailed it. It stopped. As well as a thankful man dare say, that train was directed to us in the only possible moment by the Inspector-General of the grand planetary orbits. No local stationmaster could have calculated it. I clambered to the footboard of a corrugated iron truck. We did not ask where we were going. That driver would be a lost child.

He would drive on, to be sure, till he was balked. It turned out to be the Sunda Straits which brought us up; and how grand the open sea can look! We found a ship which was crossing to Java without waiting for late consignments; she cast off when there was not another minute left for even a board of directors. On the Java side I hit on a chance for Australia, and did not look for a better. It was the Company's *Darvel*, and I knew her. Or I thought I did till I got to Tanjong Priok, where she was lying.

"She was full of holes. There wasn't a compartment from the engine-room to the master's cabin that wasn't perforated by bullets and bomb splinters and she could not join the convoy as a colander. Hansen and I forsook all else to help steik up the holes and keep out the daylight along her waterline. The convoy was due to depart. We plugged her with wood and canvas and we did not stop to eat. Work! We worked in a race against the enemy's tirl at the door which did not come. The *Darvel* took her place in the convoy.

"We left at night, and we were limited to a crawl of five knots—there were two other ships, and one, you see, was towing a cripple, His Majesty's Australian destroyer *Vendetta*. Joggling along at that rate and unarmed we had Java in awful sight for a week, and only the Japs can tell you why we were not seen and scuppered. For us, we waited for it to happen from hour to hour for seven days, but the sky remained clear and we were all alone at sea. I don't know why, but we were allowed to crawl over the horizon. It was the end of February when the *Darvel* sighted Fremantle."

Chapter Eleven

Penang Interlude

THE SPEED OF THE JAPANESE ATTACK, AFTER THE LANDINGS in Kelantan, kept well ahead of the meditations of those who were directing reaction to it. The enemy arrived at Penang from the hither side of the peninsula while the island still believed its loveliness unfading and its defacement only a pessimistic fancy. There the enemy was, his strength far too much, before it was decided what must be done should he bang on the door.

The island had no anti-aircraft defences. Only a few outclassed Brewster Buffalo fighters rose to meet the enemy's host of modern war-planes, and their gallant pilots, while our disconsolate ships below looked on, made a bonny fight of it without a chance. The island went to the wrong side of the battle-line so quickly that one of the Company's ships, of course under the White Ensign, putting into Singapore after the fall of Penang, was refused oil and water because she was based on Penang, and should return thither for replenishment. This disclosure of what Headquarters knew about it deprived a shipmaster, just escaped, of all appropriate words. He went silently out of the office, for a brief while, to renew his strength.

Though we should not forget—what the world has forgotten—that when the Japanese broke out, our country had had the hate of Germany and Italy to itself for a year, keep-

ing both of them off with weapons scattered over many seas, as well as guns and aircraft could be thinned out; the Battle of Britain continued while our few troops were breaking up in Africa the immoderately superior armies of Italians. For that matter, as we have learned since, if the Germans had landed in the homeland, there was not much more than shot-guns and billhooks in reserve behind an army not yet equipped after Dunkirk. To hold the Germans off the Channel beaches with one hand, and to reach out over the Italian and French fleets to the Far East with the other to stop the Japanese, could not be called a simple exercise. Still, it was, in a way, encouraging; it betrayed the inherent imbecility of militarists that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour and Malaya at the same time. With the courage of stupidity they settled the fate of the Germans as well as their own; though it remains a mystery to us that those whom the gods would destroy because their insolent pride offends Olympus, are never allowed to notice they have been touched to madness till all the harm is done.

The waters around Penang island were patrolled and swept by the *Hua Tong, Jeram, Trang, Jerantut, Kuala,* and *Kampar*. Strange names, unknown in the ports of home! Those ships had been of the Company's Malayan fleet, but were then His Majesty's, some of them fitted for magnetic and acoustic minesweeping, and were the most of Penang's protective flotilla. Their officers, engineers, and crews had gone over from private to public service, and with guns instead of merchandise were back in Tudor times, except that the trouble they liked least was apt to drop from the clouds.

The *Kampar* was anchored a mile off the land in Penang Roads, at nine in the morning, 11th December, when about forty-five bombers appeared, flying low, and dropped their consignment along Bishop Street. Its shops and offices were just beginning the day's business, thinking evil was at a distance. Viewed from offshore, the town went. The planes circled out of range of the ships, and made their next attack safely from a little above the roofs, with anti-personnel bombs and machine guns. When the wind cleared away the worst of the smoke the whole water-front was in flames. That night it was possible to read messages two miles offshore, Penang was so bright.

The violence and weight of the attacks meant, if this continued, that the island must be abandoned. Lieutenant Preston, Chief Engineer of the *Kampar*, landed by the town after the visit when the streets were swept at close range, and was distressed by the number of the dead and wounded. The ambitions of the enemy, which had been thought prodigious and beyond the measure of his little figure, were seen to be well-calculated and compassable. That he intended to have the sea on the western side of the peninsula for his exclusive use was already clear; he was using local boats to land his men down the coast behind the backs of the defence troops, who accepted each landing as a sign for further retirement. All ships at Penang, except those protecting its approaches, were ordered south to Port Swettenham and Singapore, and it was well they went, for the ordeal to come was to be worse.

The minesweepers and patrol craft, and the ferries be-

tween Penang and Butterworth on the mainland, began to suffer continuous assault. One ship, H.M.S. *Sui Ho*, was damaged and abandoned. The *Kuala* became a favoured target, but her Commander, Lieutenant Caithness, handled her cleverly and dodged the strokes, while her gunners brought down one dive-bomber and damaged another. The *Kampar* and *Ban Hong Leong* were closely pursued. One series of bursts was so near the *Kampar* that her bottom-plates were started.

And the armament of these craft that had to meet the bombing flights? The *Kampar* had a low-angle four-inch gun, a Lewis mounted on an improvisation of gas-piping, five rifles, and four revolvers; even the revolvers came into action in the wild hope of hitting a pilot, who at times was so near the funnel that "the chap could have been picked out, if met in the street". This near and persistent interest, as if the enemy had identified her and knew her purpose, caused nervousness in the *Kampar*; her load of depth-charges aft was very heavy. She was saved—or so her men supposed when they had a minute to spare for wiping their brows—by her full speed of seven knots. She could do no more. The Japanese pilots were convinced she was a liar, and their scepticism directed their shots nicely ahead instead of next to her horrible depth-charges.

In one attack the explosions were close enough to burn the paint off her sides, and a plate dropped out of the ship's bottom, under the port boiler. Her Third Engineer submerged himself to measure the damage, but the inrush of the sea sent him up quickly to report that "the hole must

be on the big side". All the pumps were put on, and the master, Lieutenant Hamer, headed her for the harbour, twenty-five miles away; but more of the bottom was shaken out and as her Chief Engineer put it, "the fun started". A large sheet of quarter-inch rubber was found, and a man at each corner kept it in place under the boiler. The ship was doing all she could to reach water in which she could sit up instead of founder. The flood pouring in was therefore heavy, and the four men were roped lest they were carried through the hole. The Chief cut a sheet of iron, and worked it under the feet of the four till they were standing on it; the iron and its stuffing were then shored to the base of the boiler. It was intended to make her provisionally secure with a patch of cement, but when the harbour was reached another ship was at the berth. To keep her above water the *Kampar* was stranded on a mud-bank in the centre of the harbour.

The Chief put off with the Mate, Lieutenant McLeod, in a motor-boat for Butterworth on the mainland. Their mission was to find a craft to transport people and valuables from the island, and there might be only a minute's difference between the possible and the unattainable. But across the water they found, says the Engineer, nothing more useful than an abandoned ferry-boat without fuel and water.

"There was only that hulk, and how raise her from the dead? With the help of an officer of Naval Base—he was about our own junior rank, as you're sure to tell me—so away went chits and regulations while we plundered oil and water, and applied them. But I didn't know ferry-boats,

except as a passenger. They're not shapely. Their bowels are misplaced. She was long in responding to our doctoring. It was hardly natural when steam did come, and she breathed. Her inside worked, in a way. We pushed off, and she moved. No speed, you know. She never had much, and she gave us less. Her oil system was a convoluted problem I hadn't solved, and the raiders they raided, but we managed to make several runs across to the island and back with passengers, while the Japs tried to sink us. A ferry is clumsy at dodging bombs. It is better to risk no acrobatics. Leave it to luck and go straight on. We were not sunk. Only my cap was slit by a splinter.

"She had to do better than that sidelong amble. Many people had to leave Penang. I got busy one day, when she was kept at the island wharf during an attack, and examined her innards more precisely. It was raining bullets. Nobody would come with me to hold a spanner. I was getting on fine and had cleared some choked pipes when the Japs dropped a packet alongside. The shock coated me, hair and all, with black thick oil. It was calamity. I lost my last white suit. But my ferry wasn't hurt much. She could still chug along.

"That raid settled our *Kampar* on the mudflat. She had several bombs to herself, and up she went, quite handsome and dangerous to everybody with bursting shells. After that display our ferry made for Butterworth again, crowded with people. There was a routine when making fast on the other side. As soon as she had crashed the wharf twice, the one and only engineer rushed up from below, grabbed a rope,

jumped ashore and tied up before her rebound had taken her out of reach. That day another ferry, the railway one, caught it. She also had been overcrowded. We rescued the only man alive in her. I don't know who cleared that awful mess of dead bodies tangled up with iron and timber."

It was, in fact, the ferry-boats that took off from Penang those who had to go while there was time for it; and the ferries were manned by Penang pilots, by members of Penang's Harbour Board, and by the officers and engineers of the *Kampar*. The ferries had been abandoned by their native crews; and though that is no wonder, it is odd that it was they who received official recognition for rescue work in desperation when to uninstructed opinion it appeared that it was no good trying to do anything.

Chapter Twelve

Keeping the Watch

THE LONGEST BATTLE OF THE WAR WAS FOUGHT AT SEA. It was five years long. It was fought on our side with cunning, informality, and cheerful resolve by men who had for support in the dark of it only the traditional thousand years the battle and the breeze. Somehow, the tradition held. There was continuity. Still, we ashore knew of this prolonged engagement only as a story as shadowy as Troy's. A shadow, I suppose, it must remain, and by this year attenuated almost to nothing. Nor can much be done to put substance there. Perhaps it is impossible for a chronicler to give this story proportioned and gracious body. It is beyond the discipline of art, boundless and chaotic. It might as well be an abstraction, as remote from significant form as immortality or eternity. But it can be simply stated. It was the effort of our merchant ships in all seas to preserve amid universal confusion and tumult, and through all the hazards of enemies and the elements, life-lines with home. There was in it no order of battle, as when armour and guns engage; no approach, crisis, and conclusion. There was, in all the oceans, but unity of spirit in diverse duties; with that a lonely ship faced destiny. There was no dramatic and triumphant end. One day at sea a vessel picked up the message that at sunset she could light up once more; that was all. The war was over, so they lit her

lamps and she held her course as before. When next she berthed at home she was unnoticed; her men were asked no questions, and they had nothing to say.

Looking about on ruin in the home port, what could they say? They saw that everybody had been through the fire. What they had witnessed off Madagascar and Lagos, off Penang and Java Head, and numerous other islands and capes, from the beginning of the tragedy, was already below the horizon. It was lost in space and time. But ought we not to recover a trifle of it, here and there, for remembrance? There can be no just dealing between men unless each knows something of what the other fellow felt while his mind was being shocked into its bias; for a man may keep an experience of war as a dark secret, or anyhow as a wonder not so easily expressed and brought to light, yet potent enough to alter his bearing towards his neighbours, they won't know why. The experience may have left no outward sign because it is only a rankling in the mind.

The logs of the masters have gone. The Admiralty has its own preoccupation. Only chance evidence remains in letters home, and in brief reports written long after the events. A word in a casual letter, or in a short comment, sometimes is like that peep the sun gives into a vast and dim expanse; for an instant, brought out in dramatic distinction, is a feature one is surprised to note is part of reality. It dies at once, and is sunk again into the universal.

An officer writes of his little craft, the *Jerantut*, new to the White Ensign, and proud of it—this was September 1939—and war had only just come—that she was approached

from astern by a heavy Italian cruiser on its way home, and from ahead by a smart French cruiser bound for Indo-China. The little craft could only salute with a whistle; and, as obviously the junior figure in a naval tableau, it was her duty to be instant in good manners. The three ships met at a point, and the junior was shaken between the saluting guns of the nobility; the whistle was swamped. What was worse, as the august warships passed, the crew of no significance was lounging idly at the rail, interested in a fine show, the war being young, and not at correct attention. The officer adds in extenuation that he also was new to royal gold lace, and that his Malays were sportsmen, though they did not look it.

It was a new game to them, and they enjoyed it, so far, though unaware that day of the correct social conventions of warships. By the time casualties had to be logged they followed the ritual, and knew something of the way it was related to the brave new flag. That young officer says it amazed him that they began to argue points of British naval routine in the mess decks. The canvas, decking, and rope-work were spotlessly kept, and a man who could not read or understand English would pick up a copy of *Knots and Splices* and produce the most complicated combinations of knots merely by looking at the illustrations. It was taken as a personal affront when a sweeping wire parted. The Malays have a sense of fun. If a senior ship failed in precision over a trifle there were catcalls across the waves. The Chinamen were like priests before the engines and boilers. Something like a religion took hold of this ship's company. There is a

postscript, too, to this. The Italian cruiser went home to be sunk in action in the Mediterranean, and the Frenchman was reduced to a senseless hulk by Hitler and Vichy.

It would include too much of the atlas to chronicle the war service of this one house-flag of our British merchantmen. In the mass the story would have the bewildering aspect of surrealism without a clue. A reader would be baffled. A visit to the Cocos Islands—islands that figure in many hunts for Indian treasure since Darwin was there in 1836—ought to help a teller of tales along, but not when a small ship goes there with relief and stores for a garrison, and soon afterwards finds herself held blistering in the Red Sea, a store ship for her livelier sisters. It isn't every reader who would know what is implied when a small ship, built for tropical coasting, dares monsoon weather and cyclones in the Indian Ocean because the Andaman and Nicobar Islands call for wireless apparatus. These numerous domestic tasks of the handmaid, though in unfamiliar scenes, do not lift war to its romantic periods, though Mars could not act his part unless they were performed.

The *Matang* happened to be at Rangoon in time to be filled, not with merchandise, but with refugees. She took them safely to Vizagapatam. She went from India to Durban; and while rounding Africa, not being shaped for the seas of the Southern Ocean, she rolled 55 degrees with racing engines; and while accepting her master's observation of the measure of her roll, she must surely be the only ship that ever rolled so far without submerging her funnel. Whatever the degrees of her distress, she made the Gulf of

Guinea. There she conveyed native troops up the Gambier River, trespassing after that along a tributary of the river far into French Territory to snatch out Vichy prisoners-of-war, allied airmen and naval officers and master mariners who had been kept languishing too long in the wrong place; and a bad place, whether in peace or war.

The over-running of the southern end of the Malay peninsula left villages here and there on the coast exposed to fire from both sides. The little ships went to carry the natives out of it, threading difficult estuaries within view of Japanese gunners, but remaining till every hut was cleared. Duty would take them to Colombo, Christmas Island, Trincomalee, the Maldive Islands, Seychelles, Cochin, Akyab, Madagascar, the west coast of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean, but their masters evidently had a greater distaste for the seas and weather their ships were not built to meet than for encounters with the enemy.

They were busy nearly as often in the work of rescue as in moving about troops and munitions. The *Hua Tong* and the *Klias*, on a sweep early one morning, sighted a tanker well within a minefield, nearly a mile astray from the swept channel. They could not reach her, and all the signals they made did not arouse her interest. They fired a shot across her bows, and that brought her engines to a stand, but too late. She struck a mine, and when the screen of water fell she was blazing fore and aft. With way still on she surged ahead, pouring burning oil into the sea till her wake for half-a-mile was also blazing. Her own flames rose above her masts, and little figures of her men could be seen cling-

ing to the bows, which jutted clear of the furnace. The *Hua Tong* and *Klias* went full speed in the channel till abreast of the burning ship, and lowered boats. The petrol burning on the sea began to give out as the boats approached, but the heat of the burning ship kept the boats at a distance. In open patches of water surrounded by fire struggling men could be seen. A few were picked up.

Chapter Thirteen

Palembang River

WITH THE "HUA TONG" IT HAPPENS THAT MR. HORN, HER Chief Engineer, has recorded more than the minutes in which her mission was wrecked. He seems to have watched the general scene and its unrest reflectively and in wonder, lest his log should have to account for the unbelievable. Thus we hear that within an hour of sunset, which comes soon after six all the year round at Singapore, on Sunday, 7th February, the Company's *Rahman, Klias, Changteh,* and *Hua Tong* heaved in their cables for the last time there, and headed westward towards Raffles Lighthouse. They were for Palembang. In another week all those ships were on the sea floor, and their companies scattered, and the fate of most unknown for years.

Rahman was leading. When passing the lighthouse *Klias* fell away, and the other ships dropped speed to five knots. *Rahman,* reducing her speed still more, ordered *Hua Tong* to take her place and lead the way through the minefields. Visibility was bad. Misty showers were setting in to make heavier the smoke drifting across from Singapore's burning. Speed was slowed further to allow the *Klias* to creep up in a dangerous place, for she was in trouble. Darkness fell. And whereabouts was the channel swept through the minefield? Was that also a snare? But the field must be entered, and a dim blue light was placed astern in the leader

to guide the ships following. Speed at last was no more than a feeble three knots, and the likelihood increased of strong currents sweeping a vessel among the mines. The Commander of the *Hua Tong*, Lieutenant Brown, and Gunnery Officer Lieutenant J. C. Tongue, were kept anxiously busy taking and checking bearings, and it was with relief that they pulled through. Orders had been to proceed by night and hide during the day. Minefields are at their worst by night. They anchored in the estuary of the River Indragiri early next morning.

At sunset they left the river for Singkep Island to hide under it at daybreak. They were making the crossing at three knots, and that speed was growing less when the *Klias* signalled for assistance. Her boat came alongside, and Mr. Horn got into it to board the other ship and to learn what the trouble was. He found her Chief in the engine-room, and in tears. Spreading his hands, for this engineer was a Free Frenchman, he explained to Mr. Horn that steam engines were the devil's own, and he did not know them.

"Me, I am a Diesel man, and thees sheep and engeens is a beetch." He cursed the day when he did not decide to join the British Navy, in which engines were reasonable.

All his engine-room crew were Navy men, and they had worked themselves into tired and hopeless misery. They knew only oil-burners. Furnaces that were fired with coal were foreign and abhorrent to them, as sensible fellows. And in fact Mr. Horn found the furnaces of the *Klias* were black and solid with unburnt coal, logic having told these

who helped Mr. Horn to some wreckage, for the swift current was sweeping the men away, and who then swam off to help other men in difficulties. A Dutch launch came along and picked up all hands. Though the ship was under water five minutes after she was holed even the wounded were saved.

Mr. Horn remembers next an earnest discussion on the right move to be made, but is not clear about its conclusion. His leg was beginning to make itself known, and the stokehold plate had bumped the back of his head. He knew only that he was in Sumatra, had lost his ship, and was very wet. His vague hope was that one of the other ships, which he supposed would still be floating, would get him to Batavia.

He was, however, put into a fast craft with Lieutenant Tongue and other wounded men, and taken back to Palembang, presumably for hospital. He considered this move as well as wandering thoughts would allow, because another complication, added to an inability to walk, was that gossip also whispered that the enemy was coming up river. What was more, Japanese paratroops, by all accounts, might arrive first at the hospital to which they were bound.

He dismissed the tangle as the easiest thing to do with it. Logic could not help him now. He was in a mess. Squalls of rain delayed them, blotting out the river. It was four in the morning when they reached the town. Tongue was taken ashore first. His was a serious case. Mr. Horn, who was dimly aware of circumstance, came round sufficiently to have a vivid impression of darkness with an

infernal illumination in a strange place. On the other side of the river the oil-wells and the refinery were burning. In those spasmodic glarings, while being put into an ambulance, he saw his engine-room crew waving farewell to him. He knew by then, anyway, that the ship that had brought them there was then to join the *Klias* and the *Rahman*, and all were to be sunk. What was left? When one cannot move one must take anything that comes.

It was a journey of twenty minutes to the hospital, and when he entered the place he noticed that everybody else was bustling out of it, though it was not yet day. Tongue and two sailors were given immediate attention, and were then put in the line for the general hurried evacuation of the building. Poor Tongue was delirious as he disappeared. Mr. Horn's leg was given temporary attention, and a Dutch Sister of Mercy, whom he recalls as looking insensitive to tumult, brought him a cup of hot coffee, and it was a nice, very large cup. He was left alone in the room, after she had told him that nearly all the casualties had gone to another place, or to the railway station. He must wait, things were so very difficult. He fell asleep.

He was awakened by the alarm siren, and for quite a long while listened dully to bombs exploding. They blew up near, but he judged did not, on the whole, burst any nearer. At half-past ten that morning he was taken across the river once more and to the railway station. There he found Tongue, still delirious, other wounded men known to him, and several hundreds more who were not. They were all ranged in long lines of stretchers down the plat-

form. They were waiting for a train. They continued to wait till it was discovered there would be no more trains. The Indonesian railway staff had deserted. There was drifting smoke, the smell of burning, and the usual signs of everything adrift and without direction.

The Dutch seemed to be tackling the matter as well as they could. They declared they would find some road transport. A little transport was quickly found, and Tongue, the sailors, and a few airmen, the worst cases, were taken away. It was then mid-day. They had not long departed when all movement was halted by an air-raid. This raid evidently was addressed to the station. A wounded man, we learn, because he is on his back, is best able to note the considerable expanse of a railway station as a target a bomb ought not to miss. The raid lasted for an hour, but the shaking terminus received only the dust and smoke of misses. Mr. Horn thereupon began to feel satisfied with Dutch efficiency, for the sky was no sooner clear of aircraft than more road transport came up, and he and six other stretcher cases were placed in a motor truck. A crowd of mixed Dutch and British soldiers scrambled aboard it, and off all went. Mr. Horn noticed the direction was south, though destiny was an enigma he did not feel able to question. With a broken leg, the continuous bumping in a wild career into the unknown, which could stretch to any distance, occupied his mind.

The road now and then during a frantic journey was attacked by low-flying aircraft. When the planes were sighted the truck would come to a stand abruptly, and

whoever was not on a stretcher leaped off and flung himself into a ditch. A truck allows stretcher-cases in it to watch planes in flight, especially their near approach, and to note how short is the range when the guns let fly. Near the end of daylight Mr. Horn's truck arrived at an airfield's casualty station, which gave a near view of Dutch and British planes incessantly arriving and departing. That small emergency hospital was spending beyond its means; supplies were running out, and the wounded were pouring in. A light fast ambulance was leaving with two injured airmen whose bomber had just crashed on its return from a raid, and Mr. Horn was given a remaining place in it. It was to go south.

Its driver could drive very fast indeed, but his sense of direction was imperfect. He would admit, when pressed, that he had taken the wrong turning. Once he found a wrong turning and kept it so long that a Dutch patrol halted him, and said he was driving straight into the Japanese lines. In fact, he was driving north. Near midnight, however, the ambulance happened on the coast near Cape Lamut, and with that certain bearing soon found the hospital. The beds were spotless, empty, and very inviting. The Dutch Sisters went to prepare food for them. The wounded settled down to rest, and to wait refreshment.

Yet not for long. In fifteen minutes news came that the Japanese had made a landing near the hospital. Again the rushing about began, and food was a foolish thought. Midnight saw them on the run once more. Two of the convoy pitched into ditches and were overturned, and their groan-

ing occupants were crowded into other vehicles. There were detours when warnings were given of the Japanese close at hand. After eighteen hours on the road—a length of time Mr. Horn remembers very foggily—they reached Oesthaven in the south, and were taken aboard a Dutch ship at a wharf.

She moved off to allow another ship to come alongside. The civilians gave up their cabins to the wounded, and the Dutch women aboard, also in flight of course, saw to it that Holland should keep its reputation for kindness and hospitality. The steamer was not a hospital ship, but very like it. Mr. Horn shared a cabin on the port side with a wounded airman, and through the porthole he saw, to reassure him, the pleasant form of the *Kedah* in the sun, among other familiar ships. He was on the water again. Yet a suspicion possessed him too deeply ingrained to be eradicated. The Japanese, he had learned, were anywhere at will. One little minute in a peaceful haven could make a frightful difference. He trusted, since his strength was almost gone, that now the running would be smooth. There had been too much excitement for too long.

An army officer intervened at that moment, poking in his head at the cabin door. He called out to two helpless men, and to a Dutch nurse who was there, that though a Japanese attack was momentarily expected, they were not to be alarmed. It would be all right. Should the ship sink, all the wounded would be put into life-jackets and lowered overboard.

Mr. Horn, while thinking how hard it was to be told this

in a loud voice after he had been a day without food, and had had enough of it anyhow, was startled to hear in that instant a Bofors gun go into action with a crash above his cabin. The Dutch girl fled. The airman tried to follow her, but failed. Mr. Horn confesses that on this occasion his own nerves were not what they had been, but he could only endure the concussions while waiting. The officer's head reappeared at the cabin door, with the shout, "Boys, it's only practice."

Mr. Horn reached Java, and in the end with over 4000 men of the forces, and 500 civilians, mostly women and children, boarded the *Orcades* at Tanjong Priok, and reached Colombo on the 27th February. It is right to add that on recovery he served as a senior engineer, and at last as Flotilla Engineer Officer, H.M.A.S. *Kanimbla*, a unit of the American Seventh Amphibious Forces, in every major operation from Arawe to the retaking of New Guinea, the Philippines, and Borneo.

Chapter Fourteen

A Shipping Clerk Looks On

THE ENEMY HAD LANDED ON SINGAPORE ISLAND, AND WAS closing in. Nobody knew how near the city he was. Mr. Alec Pyner, once of Leyton, Essex, thought it was worse than a Zeppelin night—if I remembered what a Zeppelin night used to be like—to be caught between increasing gun-fire and the sea; it was much worse. But his wife and child had got away, and that was a comfort. At the same time, hanging about, waiting to see what would happen next, was a worry. The gun-fire was certainly getting closer. From his discreet allusions, half humorous in the Cockney way, for he didn't want to make too much of the unhappy occasion, and his shy glance at times to learn whether I understood it wasn't all quite so funny as fools might suppose, I gathered that the proximity of the enemy was often only the measure of the jumpy nerves of the next chap who had something to report of approaching doom. It was monstrous, yet undeniable; Japanese troops were actually on the blessed island and coming towards them.

He had been there five years, and he would have preferred any ugly brute to the Japanese. The devil of it was, everybody he knew had always disliked the Japs, to say the least. Yes, to say the least. Mr. Pyner's own opinion of them was better suited to his club, where it would not have been thought improper. This made their possible advent

the more distressing; waiting for what would happen next had nasty implications. To make things worse, the city had no public shelters; it had no defence at all against bombing except ground fire. And you could not trust the sirens. They were hysterical. He had heard the All Clear while jumping out of the way of a wall coming down. One good thing was that although the Jap bombers made their circuit of the city at leisure, they did it to schedule; nevertheless, it was very painful that a favourite target was a wharf and the crowd on it waiting to escape. It didn't look hopeful, either, to see groups of soldiers wandering about, tired out, hunting for food. Other soldiers had orders to shoot looters, and were doing it. Of course, there were no public services except ambulances. It appears that when you heard another whispered story it might be only an idiot's dream, or the latest fact in the position. Who could tell? Mr. Pyner could not. His linen was getting foul. But what could he do?

So he had written to his London superiors that there was "an air of depression about Singapore". He wanted to prepare them, but not to trouble them unduly. It was true, too. There was such an air, and it was kept confined to the streets by the heat of both the sun and the fires, and by an almost unbroken roof of smoke. The smell was bad, and tasted of a smouldering rubbish dump. It was sickening. His very pipe tasted of it, so he was unable to smoke. His pipe also had turned against him.

He would have liked to get out of it, but how do that? The little ships belonging to the port, those which knew

their artful way about the islands, they had gone. He had seen them depart, nobody knew for where, all crowded with refugees. Then why, I asked, had he not gone in one?

Mr. Pyner hesitated, examining his hand for a sign, and it seemed that a vague sense of duty had something to do with it. Yet when he had admitted this it afforded him some amusement. He realized that he had been too high-minded over this matter of duty. He abated his lapse into virtue, his dutifulness, with the remark that, after all, there wasn't much of a chance to sell stuff to a shipmaster who didn't know whether his ship wouldn't be downstairs next day.

Only one thing was he sure about. Help had better be in Singapore pretty quick, or those nasty little yellow beasts would be swarming into Raffles Place. To Mr. Pyner, with the large and elaborate establishments about him of a settled life old and good—the ships and those new bank buildings and commercial offices—that the unmentionable Japs should ever violate the sanctuary was as incredible, when he thought about it, as a riot over the sacred pitch of the County Ground, when Essex, all in white, were fielding against Kent on a lovely June afternoon. Such things are unnatural; they cannot happen.

Besides, we all know the eleventh hour is the hour when the British invariably save themselves; never before. Mr. Pyner kept this in mind at the time, while waiting, and he judged that the clock must be about to strike its signal of rescue if the uproar, dust, smoke, and stinks were anything to go by. You might say, looking at it that way, the signs

were good. As a chandler for ships, nearly all British, he kept a native faith in miracles for the flag. What is the sea for, if not for us?

In this faith he returned to his home in the suburbs, with two men he knew. They didn't enjoy the look of things, but they rejected the idea of escape. His friends, that day, had seen their wives embark. It was a jolly relief that their wives were out of it. That gave husbands the leisure to watch more of the enemy's bombers heading for the Straits; then they were free to hope the ship with the women in it would be a lucky ship. Some ships stood a chance to be lucky out of the large number? That was only reasonable. They cheered themselves with whisky, and then Mr. Pyner had an idea; he began to empty the rest of the bottled stuff into the drain. It was awful to hear good whisky, to be recognised as such by the most particular of shipmasters, guggling down the sink, but his friends knew he wasn't mad. They had heard what had happened at Hong Kong, when the Jap soldiers found the booze; it turned into a very messy business.

The three of them went to rest; that is, they waited for daylight while listening to the heaviest bombardment they had heard. When machine-guns began chattering in a near road they sat up, attentive. Had the enemy broken through? Mr. Pyner pointed out that it was no good going out to see. Too dark! They would learn as soon as they wanted to if they stayed where they were.

Mr. Pyner crept into his garden at sunrise, and was surprised to find his favourite cannas as dewy and delightful as

though nothing had happened, as if change could never be, full of colour and quite calm. But a bungalow screened by a near clump of palms was blazing, and smoke elsewhere was drifting over the shrubberies. He could feel, without investigation, that all his suburb was abandoned, despite the easy song of one bird. The three of them considered it, and thought a stout building by the water-front was preferable, even if that area was a favourite target for the bombers. They had found that machine-gun fire at night, if close, keeps sleep away. They therefore packed a few necessities to take with them, but only a few, as they did not expect to be absent very long. They had not yet accepted the frightful doubt that their own day, with its cannas in the garden, with its large bank premises to be reached in a few minutes, was mortal, was even near its end. When all apparently was lost salvation would come. If nobody could explain from where, what did that matter? Sufferers well trained by national habit and custom are immune. Downfall in finality cannot be true. You wait patiently for your luck to turn.

A high building of stout concrete on the water-front allowed them shelter. Nobody was in it, but many bundles were strewn on the floor down below, which they took to be people asleep. They did not examine the bundles. From its roof they watched the bombing; one large flight of planes let go along the whole length of the breakwater. Some ships were still in the Roads, but their masts and funnels disappeared in stupendous volumes of spray. When the smoke and water had gone, there the

ships were, still all right. The three friends rejoiced. How very like the Japanese! Hadn't they always said so? One of the party went out scouting for news, and returned with a report, a very circumstantial story, that American troops had retaken Penang, and had landed at Port Swettenham. Singapore still had a chance? Well, but in the meantime, should the Japanese break through, how painfully embarrassing it would be! One's pride must be allowed for.

Mr. Pyner, weary of watching distant fires and explosions which had no resemblance to American aid, descended from the roof and wandered away. He felt restless. He had no other object than to keep his mind off things by moving about. He didn't want to think. If you move about you cannot do much thinking. His irresolute journey gave him the fancy that he was on his way to the end of time, and would soon be there. By the look of it, in the populous city which had been the source of his wealth and content, he was now the last man alive. The warehouses were deserted. A motor-car was wrecked and fuming, and near it was a dead coolie on his back, an old Chinese who was sneering at the bluebottles buzzing over his mouth. A prowler now and then slouched round a corner, or else he imagined movements out of the corner of his eye. Yes, it was only his fancy. There were bursts of rifle fire, and he supposed that was from soldiers in ambush, dealing with looters. The roads seemed longer, and were hotter and more of a blinding white now there was no traffic.

He found above him presently the high prow of a Blue Funneller, the very one that had brought him out to Singa-

pore in the happy days. Her name was like home. He noticed bomb damage on her fore-deck. His affection was roused. Surely she was not abandoned? The companion ladder was still in place. He thought he would board her. Only his back felt cold, he said, as he went up the gangway. He went up slowly and with dignity, to give any rifle levelled at him the hesitation that this visit of his was not for loot but lawful. He arrived safely behind her bulwarks in a silence.

That poor ship troubled him, I could see, more than any other aspect of the city's ruin. She was desolate. A good ship like that! He was alone with her. He paused in his recital as if to wonder whether another man could understand what it was to be alone in a big ship, one you had promenaded with your friends when the year was kind. There was no doubt that her exposure and helplessness shocked the ship-chandler more than if a bullet had missed his head on the gangway. This show of feeling did not surprise me. A ship abandoned is the most woeful expression of change in the will of man. "You know," exclaimed Mr. Pyner, "it does you no good to see how damned bloody some men can be. You'd not believe it," he said, "but they had gutted her. I tell you her panelling had been axed." Any hearer of his story would have sympathized with Mr. Pyner. The proof was absolute that good manners had gone from Singapore, clean gone, for even a handsome ship got no more respect than you'd give to an old shed.

As late as 13th February, he told me, he met fellows who

were still able to say that all would be well. He was glad to hear this opinion, if now it was harder to take it. Not another word had come of those Americans who were said to have landed on the west coast. For his part, he could never see how they could have got there.

The view from the roof, it struck him that day, was certainly worse than it had been. The dense reek of oil-stores and ammunition dumps rising was the picture of many solid black columns supporting a low ceiling of smoke. The bombing had badly increased, he supposed, or else there had been many more unlucky hits.

Though might it be true, as he had heard, that the defenders were blowing up their dumps and firing their own oil tanks? This looked rather like it, and if it were so, what did it mean?

Blowing up their own stuff? What was their reason for getting rid of what they wanted? Mr. Pyner preferred not to make a shot at this riddle, posed by himself. He stood there while avoiding the conclusion to the logic of it, all in a dream, till he awoke to the fact that down below a lot of women and children were still embarking, with nurses and sisters from the hospital. Quite a crowd was alongside that ship, but the progress of the procession inwards was slow, far too slow. Altogether too slow. He was alarmed.

He got the wind up as he watched. He wanted to urge them on. Another raid must be due. That ship ought to be away. That crowd ought to disperse. And there the devils came. It was a silly thing to do, but he bawled out. He couldn't help shouting. How could they hear him up

there? Then a burst beside the ship blotted everything out.

The smoke had not gone, he was still looking down at the spot, not wanting to see it, but paralysed, when he was flung on his back. He hadn't heard another bump, but the building was rocking under him. He must have passed out for a moment, because the next thing was the building had changed its mind. It was standing up steady again, but he was flat and smothered with dust.

The wallops were getting rather close. He went down out of it and his knees were shaky. A roof was not the right place, and on the ground floor he met old Jock Irvine, who had just come from his post in the Auxiliary Fire Service. Mr. Pyner was now in a mood to believe the worst, if it was about, and he heard it. Singapore was likely to capitulate that day, perhaps at noon.

Mr. Pyner confessed he must have gone crackers for a minute, because Jock told him that he didn't say anything, but began walking fast in a circle looking intently at his watch, till he fell smack over the kerb. Jock asked, when he got up, "What's the matter? It isn't twelve yet, is it?"

"No," said Mr. Pyner, "but we're done. We're cooked."

He was told to pull his shirt straight. If the game was up, it was up. All they could do now was every man for himself in case there was a return match. Moreover, Jock, as an artful Scot, became confidential with a chance, if it was a chance. But it was all they'd got. Lewis Jones, who wasn't always sarcastically ambiguous, had gone out to

fetch it. Jones said he knew of a little launch tucked away. It was there still, Jones said, if it hadn't been pinched. If he found it they had to meet him at the far end of the breakwater. Nowhere nearer than that, and don't keep Jones waiting, or he won't stop, because if a crowd pushed aboard the little thing in a hurry they were all sunk. It was some way to go to the end of the breakwater, and they'd better be off. Take up that parcel of food, Mr. Pyner was advised, and shove along, but not too fast. Don't hurry. Don't attract attention. Easy does it. Jones would take a bit to get her going. Yes, that was all they were taking with them, food; not a tooth-brush, not a razor, only grub. Nobody had ever supposed there would be a general shemozzle, so don't forget a launch isn't a ship with one-berth cabins.

Of course there was a raid on—you'd expect that—and a raid is noticed the more when you are exposed far out on the breakwater. But they could not see a launch. Nothing was in sight but the raid, and four idiots gaping seawards hoping to pull off the impossible. They could not have been more plain and bare out there, and the devils were flying low that day. They did spot a launch just as the planes came down close, but it was a long way off. It might be any old launch.

Then it disappeared. It was smothered. Enormous fountains from a stick of bombs rose where it had been; but perhaps it didn't matter to them, it was no boat for them. When the smother cleared, there she was still, heaving about in broken water, and seemed to be trying to come their way. Was she making for the breakwater?

There were dead fish afloat, and a yellow-and-black rag was at Mr. Pyner's feet on the stones, and when he stepped on it it slithered off. It was a sea snake. A ship was on fire in the Roads. "It's him, all right," said someone.

So it was. It was Jones in that launch. He was soaked, and pretty white, which didn't improve the cast in his eye as he came alongside. He only half-looked at them, as if he hated them, but didn't want to let them see it, so looked partly another way.

They beat it. They pushed off. Not one of the five men in the party knew the beginnings of navigation, and only Jones knew where they were going, if they were ever going to get anywhere. He had an office map, with a route marked on it by a fellow supposed to know the best thing to do. They had plain bearings so far, Jones said, and nodded at the islands to the south. They couldn't miss them. The islands were on fire. They had been oil reservoirs. So far, the route couldn't be lost. All went well for an hour. Then the launch struck coral, and spilled them.

Out they all got, naked, into three feet of water, and heaved, but it was no go. She was fast aground. They were stuck. There was only one thing good about it, they were screened from Jap bombers by the drift of smoke from the islands. They could do nothing but stand up to their middle in water, and watch Singapore going up. They did that for six hours. They watched their city going up and the wreckage drifting past. Nobody said a word all the time but Jones, who said, "Over there's where my boots are, and this coral is making bloody hash of my feet."

It seems that, from where they stood on a coral reef, that black smoke they were watching had been the home of Mr. and Mrs. Pyner for five happy years. He had expected to do well enough there to feel safe in life, and that was why he had nothing to say. He could only shift about a bit, easing his feet while holding the gunnel. All had gone, all of it. The city, the whole island, was a foul sooty cloud with flames in it.

It was dark when the launch floated off. They were afraid of holing her. Navigation, when you know nothing about it, is worse after dark, so they had trouble in finding a safe anchorage. Coral reefs are confusing when you don't know where they are. The depth was either too great or else shallow enough for another grounding. It was cold. Without a blanket, and no room to lie down, and nothing to eat but a mouthful of bully beef, they lay shivering till daybreak.

Chapter Fifteen

Adventures of the *Jarak*

THE INVASION OF MALAYA BEGAN AT A DISTANCE, BY THE Siamese border. For a brief while, for as long as it took to believe the threat was grave, younger officers found patrolling Malay waters and sweeping for mines, with a daily return to harbour, an adventurous change from the routine of mercantile seafaring. Duty could take the inquisitive to unfrequented mangrove creeks, coral reefs never seen before except on charts, and to islands said to be uninhabited but found to be only shy of traffic.

Dangerous novelty, after the disaster to the battleships, became less of a frolic. The spectre was seen. The certainty that the Japanese could tackle the best we had, and sink it to short order, tested character. Young seamen experienced the shattering of an inherited faith. Had these Orientals some particular magic? Anyhow, history had taken an unexpected turn. Pride was sunk, as well as superior weight of metal and science. Immemorial usage was dead. The little transformed merchant ships now had the war at sea largely to themselves. They must find their own moral support. Patrols were no longer brief; they could extend to a week and more, and were exposed and lonely. A Japanese fleet lurked in the rear of its destroying aircraft, free to choose its movements at leisure.

The *Jarak*, commanded by Lieutenant E. A. Hooper, felt

this increased tension in watch and ward when east of the Horsburgh Lighthouse. This light marks the passage between the south-eastern point of the peninsula and Bintang island of the Rhio archipelago, east and south of Singapore. A week away from base, with a crew of about forty, Malays on deck and Chinese below, no fresh provisions, and the last authentic scrap of news promising worse matters soon—because all these men, from the Commander down, had their homes and families in Singapore—sharpened apprehension. The ship had no protection, except a line of deep mines laid across the eastern approach to the city. But the low, dense clouds of monsoon weather were their chief concern. To know that traditional big-gunned ocean monarchs in heavy armour could be overthrown by darts shot at them from overhead shocked the verities of seamen; and a little ship has not the ribs of a battle monster.

The *Jarak* has been out for a week. Occasionally stunned fish came to the surface, following submarine explosions that had no obvious cause, and were seen thankfully as fresh food was absent, but malevolent currents too often swept the provender away towards the minefields. And those mines were, in a sense, a needless added peril where coral in the channels between the many islands was so thickly strewn that twenty fathoms shallowed to the ship's draught in a few revolutions. The open sea itself is marked in the charts, of course, with but ascertained shoals. The *Jarak* put in to Tanjong Uban for oil and water.

This Tanjong, or cape, is in the Rhio Strait; yet that fact means little even to dwellers in Singapore. The strait

runs roughly north and south between Bintang island, high and forested and twice the size of Singapore island, and its big western neighbour Batam of the Rhio group. A little south of the maze of the Rhio islands is the Lingga archipelago, with its chief item more than twice the size of the Wight. South still is the mountainous mass of Banka, an island the size of Yorkshire, separated by a narrow strait from Sumatra and the delta of the Palembang river. It has a neighbour with high peaks due east, Billiton, and the famous Gaspar Strait separates the pair of them and is almost choked with coral patches; Gaspar was famous, that is, in the days when the China clippers were racing home from Canton River, heading for the Indian Ocean by the sally-port of the Sunda Strait, the opening between Java and Sumatra.

Krakatoa, the volcanic island which blew up in 1883, sending dust into the sky that changed England's sunsets, is in mid-channel of the Sunda Strait, within a short sail of Java Head. Readers of travel and exploration, as well as of fiction, will have heard of Java Head. Conrad in the dream-like conclusion to *Youth*—a personal experience he told me—must have had that renowned seamark in mind; and he leaves us sure of an enchantment of that region of earth needing not the additional spell of war. Melville, in pursuit of *Moby Dick*, salutes Java Head as he passes it, bound north.

All that seclusion of the South China Sea has little mention in English; not even Wallace names the Rhio and Lingga groups, Banka or Billiton. Those islands and the sea

in which they are set receive particular care only in the volumes of the *Eastern Archipelago Pilot*, published at the Admiralty. Within that seclusion are the bright islands of Pompong, Singkep, and Saya; but only one familiar with Admiralty Chart 1789 will know where to look for them. In the flight from Singapore, February 1942, those tropical islands witnessed horrors that, like much else of late years, could serve to show that the majority of mankind is contemptuous of reason. Its faith is that lies and violence will better serve its purpose.

The *Jarak* took in oil and water in the Rhio Strait, and resumed her sweep. Those dark monsoon clouds were over her, and out of them a formation of planes dived to bomb the wharves she had just left. Most of the explosions were in the sea, sending up a variety of fish, the gorgeous *ikan merah* conspicuously red. The enemy was then forgotten by her crew. Buckets, nets, and hats scooped fish aboard. Prolonged duty in war at least teaches men that regular food comes of a rational life; otherwise anything fit to eat is lucky chance, and danger ought to be jumped to grab it.

The *Jarak's* odd jobs for Authority came to her as did fresh food after a bombing raid. She never knew when back at Singapore what she was in for next. On her way home early one morning, after a spell, flotsam was reported abeam to starboard. In a bad light it was puzzling stuff, and the telescope hinted human bodies. A signal was made to *Tapah*, an accompanying ship, and together they were in time to rescue sixty-nine of the company of the ss. *Tai Sang*, a Jardine ship that had struck a mine. The rest of the

passage was taken up with artificial respiration and dressing wounds, though stay was made at an island where a wrecked Hurricane was sighted on the beach. This was towards the end of January 1942, when the Japanese army was close to Singapore.

She delivered her load of the rescued, and was told that parties of British troops were stranded on the west side of the peninsula behind the enemy. One large body, 1000 men, was at Batu Pahat, half-way to Malacca up the coast. With the gunboats *Dragonfly* and *Scorpion*, and other small ships, the *Jarak* must get the troops away. She left after dark, towing six sampans for ferrying the men over the shallows of a river mouth. The return could be made only before daylight; the enemy was attacking all movements in the Malacca Straits. Next, when Selatar, the naval base with its floating dock, was abandoned, and the enemy was on the Johore side, the *Jarak* had to go there by night to retrieve some special equipment, if she could. She found the stuff amid the flames. It was more than three tons in weight, but it was manhandled to the water, and towed back through oil so thick that the ship was slowed by it while she was being machine-gunned from the coast.

The Commander, returning after sunset from patrol in the Rhio Strait on 1st February, had seen the liner pass him that had his wife and family aboard. Her destination was unknown to him; and after the *Jarak* had reported her night adventure at the naval base he went home for the last time, and mentions that he had expected the silence of a place that is desolate, but he had not thought to find his chil-

dren's toys on the floor. Authority, uninterested in this, having its own thoughts, advised him to keep his ship "topped-up" with oil. Things were happening; general evacuation was at hand. The Service Specialists had to be got out of it, and thirty-four of them were allotted to the *Jarak*. His native crew were dismissed, and he was given instead insufficient ratings who had survived the sinking of the battleships. He was to proceed immediately to a position in the Durian Strait, and mark there for other ships, as they arrived, the entrance to the channel swept of mines. If he received no orders by daylight he was to return to port.

The *Jarak* was anchored in position at dusk, and when night fell—and it closes down swiftly on the line—it was the darkest night the ship's company had ever known. The thick reek of the oil installations burning in the north was added to cloudy weather, and all light was shut out, and considerable hope. It was also a busy night, what with challenging, and answering signals and questions from numerous craft escaping south. Towards morning a signal was flashed from a patrol vessel for *Jarak*, with the Rear Admiral's order to proceed to Batavia, steaming by night and taking cover by day. How find cover? For almost everywhere a ship would have to anchor well off shore, and exposed.

2

When morning came there was no sun. Clouds lowered by the weight of smoke gave a gloomy departure. The Durian

Strait is a corridor between the islands south of Singapore on the Sumatra side, and the *Jarak* entered the very narrow channel between Great and Little Durian. Its lofty wooded cliffs afforded shelter while her conspicuous superstructure was daubed with paint and black oil; there is much more of open sea than of islands before Java is sighted. While hidden between the islands successive formations of enemy bombers passed over, going south, hunting such as the *Jarak*; and they would certainly find some of the ships, packed with refugees, that had gone that way the night before. At sundown the *Jarak* herself steamed away, and made for the Dempo Strait, to pass to the westward of the Linggas.

By daylight she was well down the great island of Lingga itself, and there was no sign of the enemy in all great space. About midday she arrived off the last point of the group, and Lieutenant Hooper decided to continue towards the Banka Straits for Palembang, due south from there about 150 miles. She had to be exposed under the sun for some time now, whatever course she made.

For two hours, with Lingga fading astern, they steamed in a silence broken only by the run of the wash. They were alone on the silky waters, as a ship there nearly always is. After the continuous tumult they had left in the north, the *Jarak's* company were suspicious of this bright serenity in which their ship was solitary. But they were not alone for much longer. A plane appeared ahead, circled them at a safe distance, and returned south.

The *Jarak's* company went to action stations, and waited

for the next thing. A reconnaissance plane had found them. Wisps of smoke rose on the horizon ahead, and an anxious telescope made out three cruisers and a destroyer in line abreast. Far more than enough! Course was made directly away, but the ships of war also changed course at a right angle, bringing them to line ahead with broadsides bearing on the *Jarak*.

The broadsides all sparkled together. It seems a long time to stand on an unsheltered deck, after the opposing guns have flashed, while counting the seconds before the shells burst. The little ship was enveloped with columns of water. There was nothing she could do but wait for the next salvo. Her slight armament could not reach the enemy. Her men found that the continuous jolting of the body by shell-bursts interrupted the proper flow of thought, but Lieutenant Hooper did estimate that in twenty minutes, which gave the impression of time without end, the enemy expended ammunition beyond the original value of his ship, without doing her vital harm. The whistling of shells coming down for their heads was the hardest thing to bear. The narrow confinement of a ship when life is at stake was never more acutely felt.

A plane and a destroyer stood out from the enemy fleet and made for the *Jarak*. The big ships ceased fire. It was a visit to see whether the *Jarak* was dead. She was not. The plane arrived first, caught it, and departed, crippled. The destroyer was more serious. With greater fire-power she lay off, and could hardly miss her shots. The *Jarak* was soon in a mess. One shell blew away the port wing of the bridge,

wounding her Commander and two other men. But she was still in going order. The destroyer unaccountably kept her distance, as if fearing something; perhaps she suspected a minefield. Anyhow, she kept away. Lieutenant Hooper wondered whether, if his ship were abandoned, the destroyer would suppose its task was done and depart. While the shells were still crashing about them two boats were lowered. One of the wounded men—for the *Jarak* was undermanned—helped to get the boats afloat, and then went below for medicine, dressings, and supplies. They pulled away. The Commander was attempting to stop the blood jetting from his leg, but looked up at a shout. Another plane was coming at them, and the rowers resigned themselves to a dose of the machine-guns, but the plane roared over, and turned again for the disappearing cruisers. Then the destroyer also put about.

Isolated Saya island, about thirty miles south of Lingga, was in sight invitingly. The men were lighthearted at their surprising release as they pulled for it, and sang as they rowed; though a wounded petty officer who had the tiller troubled his companions with his blackened eyes and the bloody bandages about his head. He protested that he was all right. Even with the sail to help the rowers progress was slow, for the current was adverse. It was dark when the island was reached, and Saya is small and lofty. The two boats separated in their search for a good landing. One went to the southern end, but returned to report it was sheer cliff. Together they pulled along the precipitous east side, and at last found a rocky shelf under the cliffs at a less

extravagant angle than the rest, and landed for the night. The shelf was hard and cold, and edged like rows of knives, but a change was possible from the knives to a smooth and slippery patch that led to the surf if a man dozed. A watch was kept on the boats, which were banging about and likely to be stove; and the only amusement for the men trying to sleep was to hear the language of the watch when fed-up with the antics of the boats.

2

At dawn a boat put out to explore for a better lodgment, though the islet appeared to deny all visitors; but it was soon back for the rest of the company. The right place was found. What had disappointed them as a bare and unscaleable monument three miles round, was hollow, and only a small opening betrayed the fact; the first sight of a tropical island is often misleading. The Commander thought he must have hit on the original of a Stevenson story. What they saw was not in the world of immediate savage reality, but as luminous and benign as a masterpiece that is lost and forgotten while the mind is disturbed and beauty is a phantom dissolved. They had chanced into another existence. Rounding a wall of black volcanic rock the boats entered a lagoon of a crystal never flawed till their prows intruded. The lagoon was clear beryl to its sandy floor, and deep enough to float a ship. A coral beach was around it radiant with imprisoned light, for green walls of forest kept it. Fantastic fronds hung low and metallic over the white coral. At the head of the

bay a sparkle of fresh water fell through the trees to brim a pool and overflow to the beach. The party found coconut palms, papayas, bananas, and yams. It was easy to climb to the hilltop, and look-out men went up. They reported nothing in sight but their *Jarak*, which had drifted close enough to be well within reach.

A party went out to her to raise steam without making smoke. While they were away, an army lieutenant spent most of the day cleaning and dressing wounds. He gave two hours to the Commander's back and legs, extracting an assortment of wood, brass, and copper splinters. The ship's party was away all night, of course, for smoke would surely be made, but before daylight the *Jarak* was brought in and anchored in the bay. But they had lost their boat. The one other boat thereupon left the enclosure with a signalling officer to listen for news. News was picked up from a Japanese station, with enough of truth in it, when sorted out, to tell them that Palembang was probably not the port to make for; many British ships, the Japanese boasted, had been sunk between the Linggas and Banka Straits.

Round the cliff at the entrance to the bay they watched a native prahu enter laden with fruit. Two sturdy Malays manned it. They had come, they said, from Singkep, a large island thirty-five miles to the north-west. They explained that they visited Saya every year to collect fruit. They were ashore there when the Tuan's ship was fought. They saw it all from the hilltop. But because they were so high above the water they knew more than the men of the *Jarak*. Beyond the three cruisers, and farther south, were six

very large ships and ten ships like the cruisers, besides many smaller ships. They were simple and honest men. Their news disposed of remaining hesitancy over Palembang. What was left to them now was the Indragiri river, about eighty miles west and north, as the one place to make for in Sumatra. A Japanese fleet was between them and Batavia and Palembang.

The *Jarak* had not long been secured when a messenger came down the hill in haste to report a cruiser approaching the island. "Or it might be a battleship." All took to the trees and crouched behind rocks. They remained hidden some time before another message told them that the warship had stopped, and a plane had left her. By then the plane was not news; its drone was heard, and at once it was over them. It circled and dived to machine-gun the *Jarak*. It pulled upwards roaring while the walls threw the noises about, and dived again. It did this four times, though the echoes made it forty. Then it tore off for its ship. The warship steamed away.

The engineers boarded the *Jarak* to give a lift to the steam, and noted that the gunning had added only dints to the general damage. It was fair to assume the Japanese pilot had been taken in. He thought the ship was a wreck. She looked all of a wreck to her own men as she rested dishevelled in a small and rocky bay, and showed no sign of life. She had every feature of a ship abandoned.

Her men hurried the stores aboard her, secured the boat, and after sunset made an attempt to get her out of it; but the anchor had fouled a rock, and, what was worse, she was

aground. She had shifted a little, to encourage them, in the abrupt attempts to clear and weigh anchor, and by backing and filling she was wriggled free. She slid off into deeper water before the tide receded still more. The cable was slipped, and out she went into the night.

Course was set for Tanjong Buku, the south point of Singkep. The compass was lighted only by a hand-torch covered with a piece of blue bunting, and that dim glim kept the navigator's tired eyes right down on the binnacle. It was possible to keep awake if a companion was handy with a nudge now and then. When the loom of Singkep was sighted on the starboard bow this torturing pose over the binnacle was straightened, and the navigator was free to relax. He could hear then that the engines were singing quite the wrong tune. It was unmelodious. There were highly irregular clanks and groans. Before he could question this the Chief was beside him on the bridge, to admit frankly it was a riot below. The engineer was breathless with exertion and the perspiration dripped from him. He said he had held her up so far, but her bones had been shaken apart. She wouldn't go much longer. He returned to his footplates to ease the patient, and she continued to crawl along in an anxiety of painful cries. All that was possible was to take her as near the coast as she would go—there is deep water close in—and afterwards send her to the bottom.

The Chief persuaded the engines to keep turning over till a reasonable beach was sighted. All hands and stores were put ashore, and only a scuttling party of six remained

aboard. She was nursed back again to seventeen fathoms, all movable and buoyant objects were secured, and the order was given for the burial of the *Jarak*. She settled till her deck was level with the sea, and her men left her. They pulled away, and stood off in the silence watching while her shape lessened in the dark; but it was hard to say just when the last of her shadow had gone.

At sun-up the company shifted into the cover of the jungle. They considered together. It was clear one boat could not take all of them the voyage to the Indragiri. They were in the dilemma that faced many a group of destitute people in the war; not all of them could use the only means at hand for problematical salvation. Nor did one of them know a word about the people of this big island, or if it had more than a few settlers. They had a sign when a Malay was seen distantly walking on the beach, and they knew then the emotion of the castaway when he met man Friday. Yes, the man told them, there was a town on the island, It was Dabo, twelve miles away. Boats were there to take them all. He explained there were many people at Dabo. "Truly, there are now many, and white people, out of ships sunk." The boat put out at once for Dabo.

When it returned, bringing with it two native craft and their crews, it brought also more news; too much of it to be manageable. Dabo indeed was more than full of people. Hundreds of survivors of ships bombed and sunk were there, and a large number were seriously wounded. There was a hospital, but it had no medical stores. It was a frightful affair, and it was without a full remedy. The *Jarak's*

men knew well the ships that had gone, and three belonged to the Company: *Dragonfly*, *Grasshopper*, *Tienkwang*, *Shu Kwang*, *Kuala*, *Changteh*, and *Trang*.

Two sailing prahus with the *Jarak's* party left Dabo on 21st February for Sumatra, and with a fresh breeze made fair headway. After dark the Commander's craft lost sight of the other, and never saw it again. The coast of Sumatra was hit at a branch of the delta of the Indragiri called Kuala Euok, in the morning of 23rd February; and a day later was at a centre, the village of Tembilhan, where an organization was arranging to get survivors across the great island to Padang, the port on Sumatra's Indian Ocean coast. There were already about 500 people in flight halted in the place, and they continued to arrive in yachts and launches, native fishing-boats, and canoes. The best effort was that of a Chinese junk, which arrived with 100 passengers. The junk had been found abandoned in Singapore Straits by a captain of the Royal Artillery; and he had navigated the awkward derelict, picking up unfortunates from rafts and sampans, and clinging to lifebelts, all the way south. The gunner who could manage a junk, and sail it to safety in those waters, rescuing the perishing while handling a puzzling rig, deserves more than a brief mention, but he passes out of the story without a name, for he did not leave one.

Padang was the port of salvation. There a ship ought to be, unless the Japanese arrived first; and it was known that

strong forces of the enemy were closing in on it from both north and south of the island. There were long delays while the despairing were fast in retreat for Padang. Launches, lorries, and trains broke down, or were absent when most wanted, till no choice seemed left between captivity, which in barbarous tropical conditions was a repugnant prospect, and the mountainous jungles in which only aboriginals could keep alive. British officers and seamen, in desperation, offered to serve with the Dutch forces. They were rejected, doubtless because the Dutch preferred not to increase the number of victims, knowing the game was up.

When Padang was reached no ship was there, nor was one likely to put in. The last ship had gone. Too late! There were no native craft. Padang was waiting dumbly to be taken. A party of ten decided to go on to Sasak, a coastal village 100 miles north. By good fortune, Lieutenant Hooper and a depleted party left the main road for the track leading to Sasak just before the Japanese forces were at the crossing; and arrived at Sasak, to see two good sailing prahus at anchor. One was purchased next morning. She was ballasted with four tons of sand, and provisioned and watered. Two sacks of rice, some biscuits, and canned meat and fish were stowed, and four hundred-weight of wood for the primitive bricked fire-place. There was also a primus stove and a little oil for it. The water was stored in oil-drums and kerosine tins. Two hundred young coconuts were put aboard to supplement the water supply.

Colombo, 1400 miles away, was the port to be made for. They had sail needles, but could get no fresh canvas, and

the sails were in a bad condition for a long voyage; but a bale of cheap cotton and a quantity of palm-leaf sleeping-mats were obtained, and might serve in an emergency. On the morning of 16th March, with a fresh off-shore wind, the anchor was weighed and that native boat, the *Setia Berganti*, departed from Sasak bound towards Ceylon. For navigation they had a small-scale chart of the Indian Ocean, a school map of the islands lying off Sumatra, an ancient volume of Dutch Sailing Directions, a book of Nautical Tables, and the *Jarak's* boat compass.

They were well clear of the land at dawn on the second day. As day grew the force of the wind fell away till it was dead calm. For seven hours of idleness she wallowed, the sails flapping, in a smooth but heavy swell, wrenching her poor gear; and the fear of delay while being pursued came over her men again with the customary symptoms of irritability and explosiveness. The type of weather to be expected then in that latitude was equatorial squalls with torrents of rain, and calms. It was thought best to run with the squalls when they came, though the sails were fit only for light winds. Once a Japanese plane was in sight, making what was probably a routine sweep of the coast; they were certainly seen, but the watch on deck were disguised in Malay dress.

On the third night out, on a north-westerly course to pass Pina Island, a squall struck them, and the mainsail was ripped from head to foot. She was anchored off the island, and on its beach the damage was repaired and two new sails made from the bale of cotton. From Pina they made

another island, Tello, and thence began the long hop to Ceylon.

They reached the half-way mark without another incident; they had "only 500 miles to go" they were reminding each other. The next day they were watching the blue-black curtain ahead of a rain squall advancing, always an anxiety, and through it emerged a Japanese fleet. All hands went below while their ship passed the enemy on a parallel course; Japanese watchkeepers would have seen only what appeared to be a Malay at the tiller of a ship of the islands. The fleet was of three fast fleet oilers in line ahead, and armed. Would they investigate, or fire without a question? Would they bother at all about a native craft? They steamed past, and made no sign.

It was when the fleet was, very thankfully, three miles astern, that one of its ships put about. She approached, and fired a shell across the bows of the *Setia Berganti*. She closed the prahu and ordered her to come alongside. The refugees had to board the *Sinkoko Maru*; and its captain, a venerable man, in good English, told them how sorry he was they had failed. It was his duty to make them prisoners of war. In another minute they were on their way back to Singapore.

Chapter Sixteen

Change and Chance

THE COMPANY'S LATEST AND SPEEDIEST SHIP, THE "KEDAH" and the most comely of the fleet, was taken early in the war from her regular run, the round of Singapore, Penang, and Belawan, and transformed into an auxiliary destroyer with two four-inch quick-firers, a three-inch high-angle gun, and two four-barrelled pom-poms. She then went to cruise the coast of North Borneo, west from Kuching round to Sandakan on the east side, and was warned to keep a sharp eye on Miri. Oilfields are at the back of Miri. There were islands off the Bornean coast used by the Japanese as "fishing stations", and the *Kedah* made friendly visits to be sure this fishing remained identifiable.

When, with their first bombs on Singapore, the Japanese announced that they were on their way, the *Kedah* was being overhauled at the Naval Base. Her engines were down, and machinery parts were scattered in workshops ashore and over the engine-room flooring. The raiding was constant, and precise correction and adjustment of delicate and complicated gearing went on while the bombs dropped. She was as helpless as the wharf to which she was moored. In the rain of missiles one must surely find her.

It is a fancy of seamen, and we should not laugh at it, that there are ships, while being built, that are infected in the dark of the moon by the blight of woe, or by something

of that nature, and it is as obscure as our own hereditary determinants. The days seldom run altogether right for those ships on their after-voyaging. Yet other ships are born innocent of the black touch, and are blithe. We should not laugh at this fancy unless we know everything. In the days of sail, when the genius of shipwright and rigger worked in oak and hemp, and so more easily intruded into a ship's plans a temperament that might be happy or might be unblessed, it sometimes happened that an owner found it difficult to provide one of his ships with a crew after a few voyages that hinted an unfortunate influence in her engendering. It was also certain then, as it is now, that a ship will give her best to one master, and refuse it to another. Let it be overlooked in a seaman that he is superstitious, never to be fully comforted by the latest appliances which are supposed to make seamanship and navigation easy to fools.

The *Kedah*, however, was a ship whose keel-plates were laid under well-disposed stars. Her engineers and fitters, all the same, could not feel quite positive of this benefit at their Naval Base in Johore Kuala, when the wail of the siren was heard again. Pausing with tools in hand, they must have wondered whether their dedication to the perfect thousandth of a millimetre in the midst of chaos was rational. Would the next minute find the job where then they saw it? She was so very conspicuous an object at a Naval wharf, and a natural mark for the enemy's hate; and she did in fact get her first battle-scars while moored there, but only little ones in her funnel.

The raids were by day and night. The Naval Base must expect first and best attention, and received it; but the *Kedah* remained untouched, except for those minor perforations. She was ready to go one morning. She tuned-up, and moved off to an oil-tanker for fuel. While on her way the sirens began their dolours, and on this occasion a full-bodied effort developed for the abolition of the British base; and it did indeed destroy the wharf which the *Kedah* had left but a few minutes before and the workshops about it. She took her fuel without losing any. About this time, too, Commander J. L. Sinclair was appointed to her; and if she had been launched in a lucky conjunction of the elements, she was now in the care of a master whose knowledge of those seas and sympathetic understanding of a ship and its character were an assurance that her original promise of prosperity would hold, except for that fortuitous stroke which is not meant to harm, but does. No ship can avoid that bolt.

She left the Naval Base for Keppel Harbour—it was the end of January 1942—and had as passengers, for this brief run, several hundred ratings saved from the lost battleships. These men were all on deck as the *Kedah* moved slowly through the harbour to her berth. Out of a mass of heavy clouds a flight of planes appeared and dived at her. The wharfinger, who was watching, thought her visit could be cancelled. She no longer appeared to be there. Those aboard her felt her lift from the water, and more than once; but the ratings, warned by their recent experience, had gone flat under cover at the first shout. There was not a casualty.

She tied up, and her passengers disembarked as the planes departed. Her company were then prepared to swear by her. She was exempt.

It was not useful for even a lucky ship to remain at wharves just then, and that night she left for Palembang, taking along 600 men of the R.A.F. Instead of heading for the Durian Straits, after working through the minefields she hugged the islands towards the Rhio Straits to the east, and anchored; there was an engine defect, and she wanted to hide. Two Japanese planes passed over her, but her cherub must have distracted their attention. The defect was put right, and she made for the Durian Straits. All went well till that afternoon, when a tube burst in a boiler. A new tube was fitted, the boiler coupled up, and she made Palembang under a sky still clear of ugliness. She then returned to Singapore, took aboard a large company of the R.A.F. for Batavia, and reached Java without seeing more of war than a few mines adrift.

The Hollanders in the Indies by then were resigned to their fate. They knew their beautiful Indonesia would be invaded by the people they had always disliked and feared. Ships, in consequence, were moving away for safety south to the Indian Ocean. The *Kedah* was fitted with Asdic, and for a spell she screened vessels passing through the Sunda Straits, in case a submarine was lurking at that narrow gate between the seas. While on this duty she was at Tanjong Priok, the port for Batavia, when an urgent message came to return to Singapore, "with the utmost despatch".

She departed forthwith, full speed for home, in company

with H.M.S. *Durban*. It was 11th February. All on board were aware they were running into it now; no obliging magic could avert the hazard before them. The enemy was encountered in the Banka Straits next morning. The *Kedah* was attacked by nine planes, but there was judgment at her wheel, and the bombs went wide. The planes circled and made for the *Durban*. The regular ship-of-war was too proud to zig-zag, but sped at her thirty knots, and the bridge of the *Kedah* had a full view of showers of projectiles flashing in brilliant sunlight dead into the wake of the ship ahead, increasing the foam.

"That evening", the record merely relates, "we buried our casualties at sea." Every man was at his post through the night till, within a little of midnight, the *Kedah* was nearing Singapore. Her Commander called his Chief Engineer, Lieutenant R. Lowe, up to the bridge, "to look at what you will never see again".

The Engineer tells us but briefly what this was. Yet what more could he say? He noticed, in his climb from below to the bridge, that the faces about him were grave, yet that nobody spoke, except in a small voice. It was supposed, from what they saw before them, that little life now was left in the city they knew. Distant clouds and smoke were dreadful with the glow of the whole island burning, and they could hear it erupting. Towards that spectacle the ship began to worm her way through the minefields. Small islands abeam were alight. She passed slowly through the harbour's western entrance to the flashing of near batteries. A large warehouse was a furnace by her wharf. It was two in the

morning, but they had plenty of light. What was worse than all the big guns in action were the bursts of machine-gun fire, loud and violent, telling them cruelly the city was near its hour. The ship, when at her berth, was surrounded by flames and inexplicable lights and sounds. Shells from the defending forts sped over her, and were distinct from the descending whine of the enemy's.

Men of the R.A.F. and a number of civilians began to stream aboard as soon as the gangway was lowered, and that was as soon as she was fast. Only sixty tons of oil could be obtained, but no water, and in less than two hours she was away again. Visibility was bad because of the smoke, and the light marking the extremity of the minefield could not be picked up. She was compelled to idle around till daylight. When that came she made for the Durian Straits, convoying, with the *Durban*, the ships *Gorgon* and *Empire Star*. The procession of ships was getting into position when, just before nine o'clock, a large formation of bombers was sighted.

The *Empire Star* was the next ship astern, and three bombs struck her. The *Kedah* closed the stricken ship to draw the enemy's fire. The attack lasted nearly three hours and was concentrated on the *Kedah*. It must be supposed a touch of the uncanny was in her handling, since in all that time, while wave after wave of the enemy descended to make sure of her—her obstinacy seems to have annoyed them—not a direct hit was made. Yet the bursts were close. Her Chief, whose only cheer below throughout the engagement was the fury of his ship's guns breaking out afresh in full

power whenever the sound of another dose was heard on its way down, nevertheless was anxious while he put her through her paces to the incessant ringing of the telegraph. Machinery was not built for that raging vibration. The blasts were next to the engine and boiler rooms and her plates were shuddering. Steam-pipes burst. Oil-pipes on the turbines cracked and a generator was knocked out. The place was filled with dense steam, and he admits that at its worst the outlook was unenjoyable. He says, in fact, he will bear that day—it was 12th February—in mind while he lives.

It was doubted whether, in her shaken condition, her luck could suffice to save her should she get more of this pummelling in the Banka Straits, but Tanjong Priok was reached without further distress, except the news that three tankers in the north were suffering and had no aid. The *Durban* was already in the harbour, and her men formed up to cheer the *Kedah*; after their last view of their companion ship, beset and battling alone, it was natural to rejoice while watching her come along as if bombers were incidental to life afloat.

She was ordered to Tjilatjap, the only port on the south coast of Java, on a secret mission. There she embarked the Allied Headquarter's Staff, among them Field Marshal Earl Wavell (then Sir Archibald Wavell) and 400 refugees for Colombo, and sailed in convoy on 26th February. Many ships of the convoy were sunk. There were further attempts to sink her, but her speed and its management again saved her. Still, she had been badly shaken. She left

the convoy. Neither Commander nor Engineer have more to say of this voyage than that it was "a nightmare". There were such little things as the jamming of the port fan damper in the shut position. You must then crawl through hot-air ducts, while in the Indian Ocean, to release it. One crawl in a hot-air duct is insufficient; it must be done several times. Boiler tubes burst, one after another. They were replaced, but more fractured tubes gave out. Then so many of them failed in company that steam failed; and the water in the tanks was nearly exhausted. She was at the end of her strength. Her signal of distress was picked up by a light cruiser, H.M.S. *Dragon*, and the *Kedah* was towed into Colombo on 9th March.

Chapter Seventeen

One St. Valentine's Day

A DAY CAME IN MALAYA—IT CAME A LITTLE BEFORE Singapore was renamed Queen City of the South by the Japanese—which will be rarely mentioned out there again, and then but allusively, as it came in a week that left a permanent scar.

Freya's day, which is Friday, was always thought by sailors to be unpropitious for departure, and should it fall on the 13th of a month the conjuncture would be black. Friday, 13th February 1942, in Singapore was without light. General flight, if not decreed, was allowed, because there was nothing to stop it except the sea. No permit or booked passage was necessary if you could go. You joined the crowd on a wharf to watch for an opportunity, and if it came squeezed aboard. Exodus had been deferred till very late, or till too late, and was hastened by continuous collapse and increasing fires. While waiting to escape people died on the wharves. There was no panic, but there was haste; the enemy's troops were nearing the water-front.

It has been said that the ships taking away women and children ought not to have left wearing the White Ensign; but they had been under that ensign through most of the war. Probably nobody gave a thought that day to the flag a ship was flying. It was a relief if she got away before she was knocked out. It has been also complained that the

rescue ships should not have been ordered by the Admiral to go the way they did. Yet in that week was there one course safer than another? No choice was left. The intent of the enemy was to prevent escape, and he could do it. His eye took in all surrounding coasts and waters, and was likely to mark a ship whatever her ensign—her flag, anyhow, was no matter—and on whatever track.

That their city was lost, and they must go, emptied life of the verities. The familiar had turned spectral and menacing. Singapore was an establishment of civility so old, and was so modern a city in elevation, with all the marks of prosperity and increase natural to its place at the entrance to the Orient, that its foundations had never been questioned. That may have been the reason why the necessity to surrender it appeared to its Government to be as unacceptable as the approach of death.

In a day the establishment was gone. The lofty signs of its wealth and continuance had become as sorry as the record of triumph in perpetuity on a Babylonian fragment. Its innocents, with nothing under them but a threatened deck, were between the devil and the deep. Only the little ships, that were as unremarkable as Raffles Place itself because they pertained to the city and were thus of no note beside the one-time daily procession of visiting liners, only they were left for help, the last opportunity.

The Company lost a fair proportion of its fleet in that February. After all, as Singapore was also the home of the small ships, on their final departure they should carry away what of its people they could from the home that was burn-

ing. There may have been more than thirteen of the Company's ships sunk or scuttled that month, but that seems to have been the number. Nor should a detailed report by a ship's officer be looked for, though necessary for historical accuracy, when a bomb struck the navigation bridge early in an encounter, especially when she was overloaded by many hundreds with civilians seeking refuge, who in minutes were left with a few drifting planks for support. The little ships did all that was possible, but that would not go far in cataclysm.

Most of us would never have heard of the *Kuala* or of the *Vyner Brooke* but for the Japanese. The *Kuala* was only of 954 tons gross. The Navy took her over for various duties in the first December of the war. Once when on patrol off Penang she narrowly escaped in a bombing attack; she had acted as a troopship, and was an anti-submarine craft off Singapore during the battle for the island, but was brought in and made ready for sea. On 13th February she lay in the harbour, with other ships, taking aboard passengers all day as boats and launches came alongside.

The enemy's aircraft about their business were more numerous and much faster than the rescuing boats and launches. The crowds at the waterside waiting to be taken off had to be patient, though aware of that fatal difference in activity, patience enforced by the smoke and smell of the city, which held them where they stood, and by the uproar of battle, reminding everybody that a change of mind was inadvisable. They must keep watch for a boat with room in it, trusting that boat would arrive not just too late.

Collapse was behind them, and they faced a harbour that intermittently erupted. While still waiting they could see the ship vanish that was their last chance of getting out of it, and then slowly reappear through dissolving vapours. They saw the *Kuala* disappear, but show again when the curtain of water and smoke thinned away. They did not know those bursts had killed four of a boatload that had boarded her and wounded many others. Another launch put off for her with the women of a hospital, sisters and nurses, European, Eurasian, and Chinese; most of them were girls, hysterical through the scattering of custom and habit, praying and weeping, for they had already learned that even the promise of escape could be ambiguous, and very likely only another frightful trap.

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The *Kuala* left at sunset. The display in the sky as that day ended was afterwards remembered. As sunset so often is in those seas, the sky, as the ship put out, to the thoughtful and apprehensive, was less the casual farewell of another day of the week than the majestic requiem at the passing of an era. Singapore receded astern. Above their city a black canopy quivered incessantly with the reflected rage of fires in its streets. Quick and nervous with alarm through night and the enemy at hand together, the searchlights of its garrison shot ghastly diagonals across the waters. To the south, deep in the dark, the islands of Bukum, Sambo, and Sabaroa, that had been oil magazines, were three

volcanoes in action. Towards those flames course was set. Departure, and the fading in the sky of a light that, to those in flight from downfall, and who did not know where they were going, was like the last light they would see on things known, was as if voyages now must be towards a reality yet unrevealed.

It was north-east monsoon weather in the China Sea, when the wind can be strong, and at night it is cold. The ship was so crowded that there could be no settling down for her company, and no ease, for the wind, though not strong, was chilly. The ship was unlighted. But there was compensation in the dark, despite the cold and the impossibility of ease; they were leaving the blasts and gunfire behind them. After a time the ship's engines stopped. It was seen that she was close to the loom of land. The whisper went round that their ship was only waiting for morning to get closer to an island.

While it was dark nobody on the *Kuala* outside the chart-room knew where they were; and what the chart-room had in mind at the time will never be known. The name of the shadow abeam was heard next morning. It was Pompong. It is an island at the northern tip of the Lingga group and very likely before the war had never been named in an English book. It is only a few minutes north of the equator, which cuts across the Linggas, and even on the special chart for mariners in that area is little more than a dot. It is an uninhabited lump covered with jungle from surf to summit. It rises steeply from deep water to about 300 feet, and most of its shore is barbed with ridges of

volcanic rock, though on the eastern side is a small sandy beach.

When day was near the *Kuala's* people could see they were not alone. Another ship was close, but nearer the shore, and was recognized. She was the *Tien Kwang*, and was near them in Singapore the day before. More distant was another steamer and much larger, and she was down by the stern. At daylight a launch came alongside the *Kuala* with the news that the more distant ship was the *Kung Wo*, that she had been bombed, and was abandoned and sinking; and would the *Kuala* take the survivors aboard, with those of another ship, the *Shu Kwang*, which had sunk? This the captain of the *Kuala* promised to do, after dark.

Aboard the *Kuala* were officers of the Malayan Public Works Department, and they formed parties to disguise the ship. Boats put off to gather foliage, but it was regretfully noticed that this draping of greenery left her much what she was, a steamer lying off shore. Morning was very soon at that latitude's great heat, but water was scarce. She had about 500 people aboard, more than half of them women and children. It was known well before noon that a reconnaissance plane had been sighted, and so back came the old waiting dread, with its eyes on the sky.

What they did not want to see was soon there. A large fleet of Japanese aircraft was heading for them. The sinking *Kung Wo*—she was of 4636 tons, and belonged to the Indo-China Steam Navigation Co.—was the first to catch it, and was quickly under water. The enemy swarmed over to the *Kuala*, and a bomb struck her bridge. She broke into

flames, with steam droning from fractured pipes, the crackling of fire, the cries of the wounded, and the screams of the terrified. She had been carrying a number of casualties, and now many more were scattered about on deck and below. Her boats and rafts could do little, but discipline was kept, and they were got away. As to swimming, though the shore was not really far, it was too far, as it chanced, for the strength of some, though wearing lifebelts. The tides and currents run swiftly and erratically about those numerous islands. A swimmer may labour close enough to hope he will soon feel the ground, and then be carried away to the open sea. There are sharks.

Nor had the enemy done with them, though the ship was doomed, and its people who could were dropping overside. The victims were in desperation, but the foe could be leisurely; he had plenty of time to clear those waters of unwanted ships. More bombs meant for the *Kuala* continued to burst in a sea dotted with struggling people. There was so great a rain of splinters that swimmers who were well away from the ship thought they were being machine-gunned. While in anxious advice with a neighbour a swimmer labouring for the shore would have his words cut short. If the rocks were reached, bombs fell there. While those who could were clambering up the steep slopes, finding difficult handholds on boulders and spinous vines, the explosions followed them. The top was not always reached. The silent evidence of what happened on that island, and some neighbouring islands, will still be there. When darkness came, those who had survived,

naked, or nearly so, men and women, wet and exhausted, without food or water, after stress of mind and the exertions in a great heat, had to suffer night's continuous cold wind on bare flesh. The more delicate shuddered out their lives.

Some who were making for it did not reach Pompong. The companies of a fleet of perhaps twelve ships were adrift; and what became of many who lived through the bombing is no good asking now. What happened may be surmised from the story of the lone survivor of one raft. At first it had twenty-six either on it or clinging to it. They dropped off one by one during the day. To endure the glare of the sun on those waters, when one is merely hanging on, is past the strength of most of us. There is a book, *Singapore to Freedom*, by Mr. Oswald W. Gilmour, who swam to Pompong from the *Kuala*, which has a notable passage in a description of the affair. It has been quoted before, but we had better have it again, for it is a sound reminder of what can happen to a community when common bonds are broken, and trust and reason have gone.

"As St. Valentine's Day 1942 was nearing its close, a state of affairs which defies description prevailed in this section of the Malay Archipelago. Perhaps never before in the long period of recorded history was there anything to compare with it. Men, women, and children in ones and twos, in dozens, in scores and in hundreds were cast upon these tropical islands within an area of say four hundred square miles. Men and women of many races, of all professions, engineers, doctors, lawyers, business men, sisters,

nurses, housewives, soldiers, sailors and airmen, all shipwrecked. Between the islands on the phosphorescent sea floated boats and rafts laden with people; and here and there, upheld by his lifebelt, the lone swimmer was trying to make land. All around the rafts and swimmers were dismembered limbs, dead fish, and wreckage drifting with the currents; below, in all probability, were sharks; and above, at intervals, the winged machines of death. Among those who had escaped death from bombs or the sea, there was not one who did not suffer from mutilations, wounds, sickness, hunger, cold, dirt, fear or loss, and none knew what the morrow would bring forth."

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The *Kuala*, we have seen, was but one of many ships lost not far from Singapore in that February; and the Company owned much of the tonnage that went to the bottom. But if one turns from the general prospect of the disaster to the reports of commanders and officers for particulars, then quite commonly it is found that owners, listing their ships and voyages, too often follow a ship's name and the date of her last departure with the bare comment, "No other information is available."

It never will be. When a ship is turning over, in the time left before she is gone the chance of a loyal crew to get away is small, after passengers have been served. Should an officer succeed in making the shore, time spent in a Japanese labour camp would probably weaken his desire to revive the past as a literary exercise.

There was the *Trang*. She was a mine-sweeper from early in the war, and continued sweeping almost up to the unlucky Friday; on that day she took away from Singapore a large party of the Army and the Air Force. Boiler trouble developed that night, and it was necessary to anchor off St. John's Island. All next day the engine-room crew tried to put right the defect, but she needed dry-docking through over-work. Her people took to the boats, and the Captain remained to set his ship alight. When the length of her was blazing, he and fourteen men put off in a small sampan, using stokehold shovels as oars, moving away from over two years in a happy ship to three and a half years of captivity. One boat, under Lieutenant H. T. Rigdon, made the Indragiri river, and all in it, excepting its Commander, continued the overland journey to Padang, and got clear. Lieutenant Rigdon, however, elected to stay behind to help refugees along as they arrived at Rengat, a clearing point. The two other boats, one under the leadership of Commander Alexander, and the other under Lieutenant Howell, made Dabo of Singkep island, and left at once for Sumatra; but Commander Alexander remained at Singkep, to take charge of a camp of those who had escaped from many wrecks and must remain where they were.

The *Sin Kheng Seng* left Singapore at the same time, and "no other information is available". The *Hong Kwong* departed then, and made Java; she was abandoned there on 9th March. The *Ampang* had no time to leave Singapore; there she was scuttled. The *Jeram*, Lieutenant J. H. Evans, sailed early from Singapore. She was at Batavia on 13th

February, and continued her patrol of the Sunda Straits, but was sunk by dive-bombers off the south coast of Java a fortnight later. The *Klias*, trapped in the Palembang River, was scuttled on 14th February. The *Malacca*, also in service as a mine-sweeper, got away from Singapore under Lieutenant W. B. Beavis, rescued survivors of the *Shu Kwang* the next day, and then entered the Indragiri river. She embarked all the wounded present at Tembilahan, took them up river to the clearing point at Rengat, and then was scuttled. The *Kedah*, Commander J. L. Sinclair, D.S.O., R.N.V.R., in the evacuation of Singapore, was heavily attacked by Japanese bombers, and would have been lost but for the way she was manœuvred. In a communication to the Admiralty a passenger wrote that "there is no doubt that the ship was saved from direct hits only by the great coolness and skill of Commander Sinclair. We all felt we owed our lives to him."

The *Ipoh* was ordered to leave Singapore on 12th February, to carry to Java 300 of the R.A.F. and 200 women and children. She left hurriedly because of continuous air-attacks along the wharves, and had been damaged. Two bombs fell within twenty feet of her. Her starboard side was holed, but she was flying light, and the gaps were above water-level. The worst of the damage was repaired with tarred paper, small plates and bolts and washers, while she was at sea. She had only enough bunkers to get her to Batavia, where she arrived two days later. She was then abandoned. No repairs could then be done and an ocean voyage was impossible without them.

We have the names of ships, but not much of a log among a fleet. There is little to tell beyond the fact that many ships were lost. Occasionally, when a witness was clear of the confusion, he gives in a letter a glimpse along a deck, into an engine-room, as the end came. For a clear moment, war as a grandiose abstraction comes down to the sight of a man as his world flies apart about him. The *Hua Tong* was bombed in Palembang River on 14th February. An eye-witness on another ship has said how a column of smoke suddenly replaced her as the next ship astern.

The *Hua Tong's* Chief Engineer, Mr. D. R. Horn, survived, and he says his ship tried to get under way when the planes appeared, but a near miss damaged the windlass and loosed both anchors to run right out. The engines went ahead to ease the weight of the cables, and attempts were made to slip the cables, but repeated attacks and more bursts alongside made this impossible. Presently another series of explosions about the ship blew all fuses in the engine-room, and a bomb abreast the bridge carried away the wheel and compass.

"Down below I managed to get emergency lighting going. Fire extinguishers went off and we were deluged in foamite. Two more misses shook the ship violently, and then a bomb hit us forward alongside No. 1 hatch. The explosion flung us on our faces, and when I looked up from the stoke-hold plates I saw the forward bulkhead cave in and water rush into the engine-room. The port boiler lifted on its stool, and the steam-pipes atop of it burst with a roar. Scrambling to our feet we stopped the engines as the ship

took a heavy list to port. I gave the order to abandon the engine-room. As the men were going up the ladder I turned to make sure all fires were shut off, and had just shut the last when I was blown in the air and fell into the bilges with a floor plate across my back and leg. Petty Officer Rosser, who had reached the main deck, missed me and came back looking for me in the darkness and steam. He helped to get my leg free, which was fractured above the ankle. The water was well above the footplates by this time. It was with difficulty and Rosser's assistance I made my way on deck."

He adds, "All engine-room personnel and Chinese cooks and stewards remained to a man, and I have nothing but the highest admiration for them in the manner in which they carried on cheerfully and loyally during those tragic and hopeless weeks in Singapore. All these were Company's men, and not one among them asked to leave the ship. I would like to say that they served their ship, and the Navy in which they served temporarily, faithfully and well. I have been in action on numerous occasions since with British, American, and Australian forces, and found that the conduct and bearing of our men rate very favourably with anything I have seen since. I have remarked that on our ship's return from an assignment, when the Chinamen learned that members of their families had been killed in a raid, and sometimes a man's family was wiped out, that they would get leave of absence for a few hours, but never failed to return to the ship and carry on."

When Malaya was invaded the *Darvel*, 1929 tons, Captain

W. Lutkin, was at Sandakan, Borneo. She returned to Singapore, sighting at night on her way two Japanese destroyers that failed to see her, and was taken over by the Admiralty. Her first assignment was to embark troops at two hours' notice for Rangoon, and she was one of the last ships to pass west through the Malacca Straits. The troops were landed during the daily raiding of Rangoon. She returned to Singapore, laden with rice, by way of the west coast of Sumatra, and north through the Sunda Straits. The proper route was closed by Japanese aircraft. The rice was discharged at night; the hourly round of bombers by day kept labour under cover. With six Bofor guns mounted on deck her next voyage was to Palembang, taking 200 men of the Royal Artillery and their guns, for air-field defence; she left in a convoy of twelve ships, which was attacked in the Banka Straits, but without hurt.

On her return to Singapore most of the wharves were blazing, and there was no labour left, even under cover. On 5th February the C.P.R. liner *Empress of Asia*, the *Devonshire*, and a large French liner, each full of British troops, were attacked off Singapore. The *Empress of Asia* was set on fire and abandoned by the Sultan Shoal, and the *Darvel* went to the rescue work. Though it has little to do with this story, it is curious to note that while troops were sent away to Burmah and Sumatra, yet thousands of men from home, who knew no more of the tropics than can be learned in Kew Gardens, after a long voyage round South Africa were landed at Singapore, to fall into the hands of the Japanese a day or two later.

For the end was within the next few hours, and nobody knew when the hour would strike. On Saturday, 7th February, the *Darvel* was ordered to embark troops for Java, but was no sooner clear with them than she was ordered back, to anchor in the Outer Roads; aircraft had been sighted over the minefields in the Durian Straits. She was brought to the wharf again on Sunday, to crowd aboard still more troops and equipment, and sailed that evening, passing safely through the Durian islands, with instructions to anchor off Singkep in daylight. The course from Singkep was for Banka Island, which was reached on the 11th, some hours after sunrise, and she anchored to one anchor and sixty fathoms of cable.

Within an hour three formations of bombers, twenty-seven in all, were sighted approaching from eastward. The engines were put on, and an attempt made to heave in the cable, but the bombers were overhead before many links were home, and the ship was shaken and smothered by close eruptions of the sea. Steam-pipes burst on the foredeck and hatch awnings took fire. The enemy came low and raked the ship with machine-guns. The falls of No. 3 lifeboat were shot through and the boat lost. The other steel lifeboats were perforated and useless. The bombers may have thought, as their target was hidden by steam and smoke, that they had done enough; they cleared off.

The anchor could not be heaved as the steam-pipes were broken, and the windlass had been left in gear with sixty fathoms of cable in the locker. Captain Lutkin went forward, and with the help of some New Zealand soldiers, and

with heavy hammer and chisel cut the windlass out of gear, and the rest of the cable was brought on deck and slipped. The master found, on returning to the bridge, that the telemotor and steering pipes on the saloon deck were dead. The ship had to be steered from aft. She moved off, and was passing through the Banka Straits when the Captain learned that two of the passengers had been killed and several injured. The ship was brought-to while the dead were buried.

On the following morning, 12th February, she arrived at Batavia, but could not anchor; there was no way to recover the remaining anchor had it been let go. No help could be got from the shore. At Tanjong Priok, the port for Batavia, as at Singapore, knowledge and material were inapplicable. The ship hung about off the port for an hour, and was then taken in and berthed. The troops were landed, but 600 tons of army stores had to remain in the hold. Nobody would touch it. Three boats found on the wharf, anyhow, were hoisted in to replace those the ship had lost. Her master was determined to get her out of it. He knew from what he had seen ashore that if his ship did not leave Java very soon she would remain there, and so might her company. Yet boats replaced was not enough. Below deck the sun beamed through the many holes punched in her, and he might as well ask in Batavia for a new propeller shaft as for shipwrights to weld her plates. One big splinter had gone in at the starboard side, crossed the engine-room, and made a frieze of jagged daylight as it passed out to port. The Captain, with a friend, Captain Matheson, went over-

side on a raft, and spent the night knocking wooden plugs into the gaps. She was made watertight, or it could be called that, prayerfully, if not tested too much, and left Batavia on 16th February. She arrived at Fremantle, Australia, a fortnight later, and continued in service to the end of the war.

The *Vyner Brooke*, of 1679 tons gross, was a ship of the Company that, in the days of peace, ran between Singapore and Kuching, Sarawak. The short voyage to Borneo and back could be a novel and pleasant little holiday; she was a favourite vessel. On the morning of 12th February, under the command of Lieutenant R. E. Borton, she was on patrol in the Straits with H.M.S. *Dragonfly*, and was heavily attacked by enemy planes. She was ordered into Singapore, and in the afternoon of that day was embarking people for Batavia, among them a large party of Australian sisters and nurses.

She sailed that night with 182 passengers, and was in the Durian Straits by midnight. She carried on through the dark, but in the morning anchored in a small bay of the main island of Lingga. There two Japanese planes saw her, but made off without an attack. Her Commander thought he had better get under way, but keep close inshore. Off the Lima Channel, which separates Singkep from Lingga, three planes again circled round the ship, but did not attack. She went on through the channel for Tougou island, hoping to cross the direct line of flight of the planes, and anchored off the island. At daybreak, 14th February, she was taken closer in, but was seen by two planes and

machine-gunned. This happened again some hours later, and the Commander felt he had been there long enough, and headed into the open for the great island of Banka.

In the early afternoon, when closing that island, the ship was attacked by nine low-flying planes. There were many near bursts, but no hit for ten minutes of the affair, and then a strike by No. 2 hatch. The ship listed quickly to starboard. The five boats were lowered, but in a few minutes the ship heeled right over, keel up, and so remained briefly before she sank. The position was about nine miles N.N.E. of Muntok Lighthouse.

The boats were badly damaged. Three of them were waterlogged as soon as lowered. Two, crowded with passengers, reached the shore. All wreckage that would float —the rafts were blown to pieces—had been thrown overboard, but there were drownings because of a large patch of fuel oil on the surface. Swimmers became panic-stricken when it closed round them. The Commander was in the water for nearly eighteen hours, and then landed on Banka by the village of Muntok, where he found on the beach a number of the nurses and two men. He was taken prisoner. It was fortunate for that group they chanced to land just there.

There were sixty-five nurses on the ship. Twelve of them were drowned in the sinking. The others made the shore along the coast of Banka. The survivors were widely scattered in the night following the sinking, but one party of the nurses, with some of the ship's officers and seamen, came ashore on the beach a little away from Muntok.

They were passed in the morning as they were about to turn inland by a Japanese patrol. The Japanese soldiers took no notice of them and disappeared round a point. Presently the soldiers reappeared. They separated the men from the women, bandaged the men's eyes, and led them round the point out of sight.

After a while the soldiers returned, and the women saw they were wiping their bayonets. The nurses—there were twenty-one of them there—were motioned to stand near the sea and to face it. They were then shot down with automatic guns. If one still showed life she was bayoneted. One sister escaped. She was shot through the thigh, fell into the water, and floundered out a short distance. She was left for dead. After the soldiers had gone she scrambled ashore through the bodies of her friends, which lay in and out of the water, and escaped into the woods, but in a few days hunger and exhaustion forced her to give herself up. She survived to be released, at the end of the war, from the misery and humiliations of a prison camp, with twenty-one other nurses of the original company.

There was a survivor among the men of that party on the beach, Stoker Ernest Lloyd of the *Prince of Wales*. He was wounded, but fell into the sea and escaped. Eighty of the passengers in the *Vyner Brooke* died when she sank, or soon after. Of the ship's officers, Mr. W. S. Sedgman, Chief Officer, Mr. D. Reith, Chief Engineer, and Engineer Mr. J. Miller, were among the men shot on the beach. Mr. W. Trewitt and Mr. W. D. Brien, engineers, were drowned.

All this might be the news that whatever goes to make a decent life in fellowship had gone. The original darkness had fallen once more over the face of the deep. Society could not live near it, but was dissolved and absorbed in the dark. For one little fact, then, reported out of dispersion in chaos, let us be grateful. It is as likely a cause for hope as is to be found even now, when peace has returned, good only in parts. In most of the stories and reports I have seen of what happens when cities crumble, nations are scattered, and wrong is free to work its will, instances of selflessness in the spirit of man are as usual as the ugly look of things; as if no calamity could extinguish a spark of nobility in him. He may be a Chinese coolie, but above disaster; or a British officer, as Mr. Gilmour records, whose integrity was untouched, whose good humour was untiring as he put heart and direction into a heterogeneous mob that could not be blamed for thinking that here was the end of everything. There they were in extremity, discovered by misfortune, sound men and women, nurses, soldiers, sailors, and airmen, Dutch officials, Malays, and Chinese, able to forget their own peril while helping others out of it. When nothing appeared left but cruelty and lies, charity would show in the hand of a Chinese coolie, with a gift thrust through barbed wire to a starving stranger.

Chapter Eighteen

Odyssey under Steam

WHILE LISTENING TO CAPTAIN BROWN'S RECITAL OF HIS encounters with Fate, and with Authority and its orders both capricious and imperative, it seemed to me that the last of us to be overcome by the majesty of War may be our merchant seamen. Seamen appear to be embarrassed by the frivolity of the terrifying god. It isn't natural; it tends to confuse a ship's draught with the sea-bottom. War, you know, puts a ship off her course. She never knows where she may fetch up when the grandeur expands, nor why she is diverted when she has almost arrived. Only landsmen, and poets at that, speak of "the thunder of the guns". I cannot believe Captain A. Brown, H.M.S. *Circe*, ever in his life took the name of Jove's voice in vain. It is possible that seamen are less romantic than some others because they live and work in the presence of powers more august than political theories and arsenals.

The *Circe* at first did patrol work, which was quite new to her, off Singapore, under the command of Captain Brown, who had the rank of lieutenant. He did not think the White Ensign suited his nice little ship, taken off the Borneo run to be a policeman on point duty; and he was positive he had never asked to be made a lieutenant. He knew the Straits so well that, after obeying orders religiously for a time, he noticed their deficiency, and ventured advice

to Authority. As Authority knew those Straits chiefly through a telescope he had supposed that it would welcome closer knowledge; but he was told, even brusquely, that when his information was wanted it would be sought.

This rebuke, like much else, did not astonish him; he merely wondered the more, as he left the Depot Ship H.M.S. *Laburnum*, how long orthodox routine could hold out, and so forgot to salute as he left. He always forgot formality when considering what had better be done next, and so he was ticked off once more. He explained to me, in excuse, that he often "forgot to salute the gangway". He never had felt that respect for gangways.

There can be no doubt whatever that Authority should insist on an acknowledgment of its dignity, especially when unseemly interruptions by the enemy have inclined it to fretfulness, and it does not know, dammit, what is going to happen next, except more ugliness. Yet most of us, I think, after a brief appraisal of the man, would take Captain Brown's advice, where a ship and her ability to do this and that was concerned, as the best to be had in a hurry when trouble was about. We would guess, for one thing, that so hard and solid a character was not likely to be overset by mischance; and though his lively comments on a situation would seem irrelevant, if funny, yet inexperience later on might get an opportunity to view the matter in its full aspect, when the mariner's former remarks, though still funny, would appear not at all irrelevant.

On 2nd February, 1942, he was ordered to bunker, ready to leave Singapore at sunrise next day. The bombing was

getting awful. He found the wharves not only piled chaotically with dumped cargoes, but deserted. There was no coaling berth for him. The berthing officer advised him to return to the Roads and anchor.

What! go and be a sitting target? He preferred to cruise about, and did. Later, when able to nose in his ship somewhere near a dump of coal, the regularity of the explosions kept the Chinese labourers under cover. He persuaded his crew of Malays and Chinese to coal her. They responded with a will to the man they knew. The ship's deck was level with the quay, so these men hurriedly threw the tons for'ard till the propeller was out of the water, and then trimmed her by filling the bunkers. This sounds easy, but it isn't when one is wet, hungry, tired, and frightened. Night fell, blowing hard with more rain, and the wind enveloped them in heavy smoke from burning oil tanks. Before he could cast off the Navy sent along sailors and firemen from the lost *Repulse* and *Prince of Wales*, with an order to dismiss his native men.

The master, obedient but dismayed, sent his Chief Officer to Headquarters in a lifeboat, with his crew as requested, expressing disapproval, and also to say that now he was without cook and stewards. His mate returned with the advice that Headquarters hadn't any, either. What was worse, he, the Mate, believe him or not, had been forced to abandon their loyal Chinese and Malays, huddled like cattle into a shed, soaking wet, with nothing to eat, and he had heard their bitter reproaches. Furthermore, they must ship a company of army pay-clerks, complete with Army

archives, but without stores to feed them. No, he reported, back-chat with H.M.S. *Laburnum* didn't get a fellow anywhere. The experts were in too much of a crisis to attend to reason. They had ordered the ship to Batavia; she must depart at 4 a.m.

She departed, working her way in the dark through the minefields south of Raffles Lighthouse. But things were not right. She was being badly served. The sun came up and saw her alone on a polished sea, the only mark there, her speed a crawl. She was making two knots. She was asking for it. Scanning the sky for planes, the horizon for the smudge of enemy cruisers, the anguished navigator on the bridge sang down below for steam, for speed. Raise it! Push her along! Do you want to die?

His alarm did no more than bring up his new navy stokers to loll about the deck. They had belly-ache, sir. Serve 'em right! Of course they had it, drinking all that cold water when it was as hot below as the place where they deserved to be. And there they'd soon find themselves if they didn't go and shovel coal with more sense. His new men continued in languor, with belly-ache but no sense, on deck.

Those men, sir, knew nothing—nothing but the fool-proof switches and nobs for big oil burners! They were so ignorant they didn't understand a proper ship wanted good coal served to her just so. Why, you could count her revolutions if you waited long enough. She was a bomber's practice target. Hour after hour the engines just turned over, and sometimes dropped into a doze. The steam

pressure would hardly have lifted the lid off a saucepan when two Jap planes were sighted, reconnoitring Banka Straits; but nothing happened, except funk, not a pound more steam. Captain Brown and his Chief Officer, Mr. Harkness, took turns on the bridge, and got their rest while blistering their hands raking fires and shovelling coal, helping the engineers.

They made Java, to their surprise; and Authority boarded them as soon as they tied up. Captain Brown was to bunker forthwith and make for Colombo; not a moment was to be lost. On second thoughts, don't bunker, he was told, and don't go anywhere, except get out of our sight. The Captain, protesting against inaction, was then relieved of his command, which was given to an officer of the R.N.V.R., who handsomely admitted that navigation was among the nautical subjects he did not know. The *Circe's* late Captain was free to escape from Java, if he could find a way out; he would have to find it himself.

He lost no time finding it. Java was no longer the place for sight-seeing of the right sort; and at last—it took more words than that—he arrived in Australia. He was ordered to Durban, Natal; and from Natal to Mombasa, and heard there he was wanted at Port Said. So he flew to Cairo, where he was told to go instead to Alexandria, to command the *Kepong*. He knew that ship; she was one of the Company's, and he was grateful. Now there would be real work to do. He was told that, for a start, he must take his ship to Suez to be dry-docked; and she needed it. She was so foul that her speed was down to seven and a half knots,

which might keep her just in sight of the smoke ahead of a convoy of cripples. To Suez he took her, but found the dry-dock was engaged; but meanwhile, that she might be doing something useful, there, on the wharf, it was pointed out to her master, is a cargo of Army trucks and stores; take the lot to Jeddah and Port Sudan!

This he did, and afterwards the *Kepong* returned to Suez. There a pilot waited for her instead of a dry-dock, and the pilot carried with him the honour for her of first priority through the Canal to Port Said. Captain Brown could note, in pride, that though his ship was small, and her speed so-and-so, yet tankers—even tankers—were tied-up to give her a clear passage.

What, wondered her master, could be waiting for him at the other end? What word would he hear, ordaining what sort of fate? It must be a word of consequence, for there stood Authority, waiting his arrival. Without an introduction he was asked: What coal have you?

Our shipmaster explained that he was almost out. She had been kept ready for dry-docking, and the engineer had a further reason for empty bunkers; he had desired to seek below for a suspected fault.

Authority was not interested in that. She was superior to faults. There was a special task for her, and expedition was paramount. Lighters were coming along at once with full bunkers for her.

The lighters did, which was a blessed novelty, emphasizing urgency. The coal was hurriedly taken and trimmed, four hundred tons of it; and there she was, steam up, ready

to depart on her mission, though that was still a secret her master did not share. While the Captain was waiting to have it imparted a further rescript came; the task was off. His ship must return to Suez to be dry-docked, and was honoured once more with priority through the Canal.

Not for an overhaul, however; no dry-dock for her. She was told instead to load again for the Red Sea. Her master was bemused by this game of which-hand-is-it-in, as he could never guess it, but to the Red Sea again he had to go. His ship was loaded to her full capacity at a wharf, and when ready to depart was ordered to an anchorage. She was at anchor there for three days. At the end of that time she was told to return to the wharf, and to put the cargo ashore where she had found it, and then go into dry-dock. Captain Brown did not complain of this. He thought perhaps that the God of War, in his usual idiosyncratic way, wanted to catch two birds at once, and dropped the salt in his zeal as he ran between them. But how it whitens the black hair of a most willing henchman!

2

The *Kepong* was in dry-dock for only forty-eight hours, because there was no time and not enough stuff to put her to rights. Come back later, Captain Brown, remarked Authority, come back when we have some anti-fouling composition; but now take her along to Port Said.

He obeyed, and was ordered from Port Said to Haifa; and that same afternoon, August 1943, his course was set for Haifa. Just before eight bells—midnight—his wireless

operator reported that Alexandria kept calling the ship, but by her name, not the war-call sign. And why Alexandria? Was this an enemy trick?

Her master could not say. He continued on his course; yet two hours later, as the call was insistent, he took the risk and answered it; he was ordered back to Port Said. He put his ship about, and she arrived at her starting point and made fast; the master then went ashore in haste to learn the reason for this.

Why, Authority demanded, was he not at Alexandria? He pointed out that he would be guilty of barratry, or something worse, if he were ordered to one place and went to another; more than that, why was his ship called up by name? Was the war over?

Authority, however, was either considering a deeper matter or did not catch his irony. When, he was asked, would he be ready to sail for Alexandria? Well, he pointed out, she had had steam up for four days now, hoping to get somewhere with it.

As the ship was casting off for Alexandria a Naval Control launch swept alongside with new orders and a route. The Captain learned that he was to take her direct to Haifa after all. Outside Haifa, when he arrived, a pilot was afloat with a sealed envelope; it held a direction to the *Kepong* to return to Port Said without delay.

By then her master was ready and even anxious to confront the very Lords Commissioners themselves; orris of a lesser brightness could make no impression on him; he was sick of it. He disobeyed orders. He took his ship into Haifa,

and sought an interview with Authority, indifferent to the number of gold rings it might be wearing.

Authority opened heavy fire at sight. What, ashore, and your ship should be on her way south? This was a grave matter. Disobedience, and he a naval officer! Did he know the penalty?

Did he not! Authority was assured that he not only knew it, but, since he had committed a crime, now he was going on to blacken it. He was being messed about. There at Haifa he would stay; no return for him, unless a pious signal was made to Port Said to discover whether the omniscient intelligence of that happy haven had veered again in its merry thought since yesterday and, if so, by how many points.

This signal, or one of the same purport, was made; and the answer was, to her master's surprise, that the *Kepong* was to stay at Haifa, and load.

The representatives of Sea Transport and of Army thereupon boarded the ship, the pair of specialists conferred together apart, and then told the master their decision. He was to load to a mean draught of fourteen feet, and no more, with Bofors ammunition, cotton-wool bandages, bombs, and tinned food. They refused to disclose a destination for this assortment, and the loading began.

The loading was finished, and the hatches were going on. Her master, conning her, pointed out to the specialists that his ship was drawing over seventeen feet forward, and eighteen feet six inches aft; and what did they reckon was the mean of those figures? They admitted discrepancy, and

the Navy blamed the Army vehemently, while both assured the Captain there was nothing to be done now. All he had to do was to take his ship to Leros in the Dodecanese.

The Dodecanese? Those islands! Great Neptune's trident! He listened to his instructions in suppressed alarm. The Ægean Sea is always a worrying corner of the Mediterranean, and had become worse since so many of its islands were occupied by the enemy; and, what was more, he had no charts.

He had no charts? That was sad, but his fate must remain as before, Charts, however, were not necessary. He would be escorted by destroyers, as this was a dangerous voyage.

A destroyer on either beam, signalling courses, while he was heading straight for the enemy, was a measure of comfort, for he was unarmed and heavy with explosives. At a certain point the three ships anchored, and the master of the *Kepong* went ashore to report to Naval Control.

His destination, Leros, was confirmed; and he remarked casually, before leaving, that he did not know the island except by name, and was without charts, though as the destroyers were with him this was of less importance.

Those destroyers? Ah! Don't you know, Captain, they are returning to Haifa from here? It is your job now, your sole responsibility.

What, sir, exclaimed Captain Brown, and with the Germans in between me and my port?

Yes, exactly so.

The shipmaster reflected in silence that, having come so

far, he did not want to return to Haifa. He remarked aloud that he would have a go at it, and see what happened. Yet, he still insisted, with a German garrison to be passed at Rhodes, and also at Kos, a chart was essential if only to save time; he would say nothing of saving his ship, cargo, and crew.

Well, if a chart would humour him, there was one. It was all they had, and he could have it. They unpinned from the wall and gave him a R.A.F. map, in which the sea was a beautiful blue, and the many islands all in lovely green, with not a rock showing anywhere, and not a sounding marked. Air-pilots, of course, have no interest in soundings and the sea-bottom; far from it.

Take that and welcome, said Authority; it's all we've got, but you may have it, and hug the coast, but not too close, and make as much of your way after dark as you can, you know why. Good luck, and we shall be glad to see you again, and rather surprised.

The *Kepong* sailed after dark. She was off Rhodes before midnight and the moon not up. Planes droned overhead, but whether they were the enemy, or friends out to learn whether she was still afloat, nobody on her bridge knew. The island of Kos was passed at three in the morning, and after that came the problem: Leros must be sorted out from a muddle of more islands, well-named Sporades by the ancients. She cruised about, standing in to landmarks for a close inspection, and then out again because nothing was kenspeckled. Her discovery of the harbour of Leros coincided with the arrival of a German plane, flying low.

The *Kepong* with her dangerous cargo headed out to sea again with all speed, while shore batteries tried to discourage the intruder.

Anyhow, that gun-fire assured the *Kepong* that she had found the right door, and that her friends were at home. Her master took her in again when the plane sheered off, but he mistrusted the appearance of the water, and took soundings. Soundings told him the reason for a draught of fourteen feet; as she drew more than eighteen he could not get near the jetty. He tied up at a buoy while lighters reduced his draught till he was able to haul inshore, but even so sat on the mud for a few hours.

The Captain heard ashore that his conjecture about being on a hot spot was rather less than his hard luck. He had but to wait and see, and wait he must. Nor had he long to wait. He watched two British destroyers enter that small haven seeking daylight sanctuary. One of them tied up at the buoy the *Kepong* had left, and the other at a neighbouring buoy. They were followed fairly soon by fifteen Jerry bombers, and the nature of the quiet little haven changed completely.

When the moment came that allowed Captain Brown to see beyond his bulwarks again, he saw a few swimmers splashing about where a destroyer had been tied to a buoy. The other warship was on fire amidships. That fire was put out and she made for shallower water, so placing herself that her guns could bear with better effect on visitors, should they return. They returned that night, and Captain Brown forgot the peril of his own ship while watching a

crippled destroyer put up a magnificent fight, till a fire aboard her, and the blaze of her guns, went out, as she sank, and all aboard.

The *Kepong* was now alone in the harbour, and most of her explosives still in her holds. There she was moored for eight days, and by every sign the enemy was preparing to land in force. No interval came for rest and quiet breathing. The raiding was on an endless circuit, and the *Kepong*, it seems, behaved like a concertina because of the continued shocks near her ribs.

"I knew she was well built," mused her master, "but I didn't know she was like a length of elastic." Yet, as all her company had abandoned hope, they no longer paused to wonder why she was not hit, nor why her own bombs did not unload themselves skywards in a conclusive panic. Men of the Eighth Army, who had survived North Africa, laboured desperately to empty the ship, that she, at least, might escape from Leros, though they must stay. Captain Brown falls moody when recalling the demeanour of those soldiers. They were the right fellows.

There was also Captain Baker, R.N., of Naval Control. He sent for the master of the *Kepong* and told him to clear out after dark; tomorrow might be too late. Captain Brown advised him that 1000 bombs, as well as military stores, were still in his ship. Very well, he was ordered, discharge as much as you can till towards daybreak, then go; "and by the way," asked Captain Baker, "what's your speed? I'll get Bomber Command to give Rhodes and Kos a doing while you are passing."

The *Kepong* backed away from the wharf at 4 a.m., but was not clear of the harbour when a delayed-action bomb, which nobody knew had found them, went off among the remaining cargo, and she had another shaking. After that her likelihood of keeping afloat was solely in the fact that Authority knew when she was due to pass certain points. Kos was abeam at ten o'clock that night, and Captain Brown had leisure to admire the protective flashes of noble British bombs; Captain Baker at Leros had not forgotten them; he was keeping his word in style. The island of Rhodes loomed later, and there also at the right instant the Germans became so worried by the sky that they were unable to observe a passing ship. The master of the *Kepong* can always salute respectfully, when the occasion is apparent.

2

If this were fiction—and I wish it were; it would give me more scope—then the Leros affair, with the lucky exemption of the *Kepong* from perdition, would be the proper end to the story of her voyaging. The trouble is that there never is a satisfactory end to war; there is not so much as a dramatic culmination. The anxious eyes of a responsible man, such as the master of the *Kepong*, with little guidance from reason, watch intently for months a prospect infinite, perilous, dreary, and mysterious, for something bad to happen. One day there is a mania of flames and thunder, of course in an hour when least expected, and if anxious eyes are not put out by that crisis they must go on watching grey

monotony in patience for the next upheaval, till at last all dribbles out inconsequentially as a muddle, also infinite, called peace. And that is why Captain Brown is still in it, and another phase begins. Culmination has passed, but his ship must try again.

Why should we keep an eye on the *Kepong*? Well, we need not; I am but trying to make clear that she was one of many ships, and exemplifies most; and that what her men had to take was the usual ration for men afloat. This is an attempt to show the way things happened. She ought to have been down with the fishes, but there she was on the surface as ever, and at first her master had some difficulty in accepting his morning coffee in quietude to the steady rhythm of her familiar tune, on her way back to Haifa.

After all, he mused—for the sweat had had time to dry on him—after all, what are torpedoes, bombs, and gun-fire? They are foully sudden and offensive, yet uncommon and incidental, not like a mariner's ancient and ever-present dreads, not like fire, reefs, implacable authorities, hurricane, collision, fog, blizzard, or a broken propeller shaft. Why, if you think it over, says the captain, even if you have radar, and stability indicator, gyro-compass, echo-sounder, time and bearings by radio, and all the other gadgets for fine liners, it is not yet possible to dodge all the acts of God upon the waters.

So much the better. Ships must still be manned by men. Life wouldn't have the same taste if there was no chance of foundering just when you were sitting down to dinner.

At Haifa he heard the news that he had been sunk and was

dead, and in gratitude for his presence again Authority gave him a destroyer as escort back to Port Said. He should be compensated for the voyage when he had neither escort nor charts. At Port Said a cargo was loaded for Mersin, Turkey. There some Chinese in his crew found trouble ashore with officials—only a little conflict between wrist-watches and the Customs—and they were gaoled. This caused disaffection in the ship, and Captain Brown could not prevent his crew from throwing overboard the police and customs officers present on deck, as a patriotic protest to Turkey.

It is up-hill work explaining the oddities of human nature to officials, and the Turkish variety can be as stony as any; but Captain Brown was anxious to get his men out of prison, and away, and yet leave the port friendly and open to him, for he might have to call again; and he managed it. Tact, my dear sir, tact, will get round a policeman your pals have nearly drowned.

December 1943, and the *Kepong* was at Haifa once more, loading military stores for Italy. She went after that to Alexandria to join a convoy for Augusta, Sicily, but was ordered off Malta to leave it and go in for bunkers, coal being scarce in Sicily. In she went, and departed again that night, with a gale blowing so hard at north-west that the pilot declined to venture to sea, and left the ship before she could face the open. While the *Kepong* was passing out into the weather and the dark her steering-gear carried away—steering-gear chooses such moments—and she sheered towards the breakwater. With that heavy sea running her

master feared she could not clear; and should she strike and block the entrance to Malta the matter would be of the utmost gravity. He let go the starboard anchor and kept her engines at full speed. Dragging fathoms of cable under her, she swung round, missed the masonry by inches, and went out into the seas at the back of the breakwater.

She could not face the wind and seas. Heaving and rolling, it was nearly impossible to move about her deck. She was broadside to the weather and to the breakwater, almost out of control, and though she signalled and whistled for assistance the uproar and the dark hid her plight. The Chief Officer and his men tried to work the chains back on the steering quadrant, but the ship was too exuberant to allow it. The master used the engines to what he thought the best advantage, and saved her from striking; even persuaded her to put more space between her plates and calamity. It was just before midnight when the chains were argued back on to the quadrant and the anchor was heaved.

The anchor, however, had fouled a submarine cable, which was hitched across its flukes and refused to leave them. A couple of Chinese went over in a bo'sun's chair—they deserve a word for that, with night black as the pit, and the ship going it like mad—and with hammer, chisel, and hack-saw they attacked the cable, but it took a long time to sever tough stuff which behaved like a slippery reptile. They cleared it; the *Kepong* was released.

In that moment a signal came. She was to return to harbour. Yes, pass back into the narrow way where you couldn't see where you were, and with steering gear as

touchy as a half-hearted promise? Captain Brown refused, and was given permission to cruise up and down a mile-wide channel, presumed to be clear of mines, till daylight. He went in then, and his gear was repaired.

It was still blowing a westerly gale when Augusta, north of Syracuse, was reached, near midnight, New Year's Eve 1943. With two anchors down and while still dragging them was the hour when twenty-five Jerry bombers came to plaster Augusta and its shipping—eighty ships were there—yet missed them all; missed everything, except one of the shore guns and its unlucky crew. That port was left on 2nd January, in convoy for Barletta, on the Adriatic coast of Italy. The speed of the convoy was seven knots, but its Commodore ordered one extra when the fleet was in position, and the *Kepong* dropped behind.

The wind was high and in her face, but she ploughed through the seas, decks awash all that day and night, hoping the Commodore would spare one of his ten destroyers to return and take care of a little lost lamb. She could not do better than about three knots with the weather piling against her, and she was in a hunting-ground of the submarines. She gave it up; she put about, and returned to Augusta to report. The *Kepong* was doing her best, but she was designed for voyaging in waters where, to Malays and lotus-eaters, the seas of the north, with their cruel weight and relentless pounding, a mariner's purgatory in winter, would suggest that the earth had shifted its axis, and a changed sea floor was being occupied by the waters of Genesis moving in.

Captain Brown was commended for his good sense in taking no chance with submarines when his ship refused to do more than run before the weather, and was told to join a convoy for Taranto. The speed was eight knots, but the weather had moderated, and all went well till the Gulf of Taranto was reached, when, just as you have guessed, another gale sprang at them from the west. As usual, the *Kepong* fell back, escorts and convoy vanished in the mirk, and she had to nose her lonely way through minefields and seas that objected to her. She arrived, and Naval Control wanted to know what she was doing there; she wasn't on the list, was she?

No, she wasn't; Barletta was her destination. Very well, then join a convoy leaving here tomorrow for Brindisi.

She made Brindisi, where she was told to proceed to Bari; and when at Bari she arrived, with three other ships, an Italian pilot refused to accept her; her name wasn't down on the paper. Captain Brown made it clear, even to an Italian, that he preferred the risk of piloting his ship himself to staying out at night waiting for a torpedo; and in he went.

Sea Transport boarded her forthwith, and demanded evidence. Who was she? Why was she there? Where was she from?

Her master, who had not undressed for a fortnight, wet or dry, but had lived on his bridge, was weary of this, and said so. Did nobody know his ship, and what she was for, and where she should go? Was he the *Flying Dutchman*? His luck was only head seas, while seeking ports he could not

make, and meeting people in places not of his own choice who refused to regard his ship as a legitimate fact.

If it's true, mused the *Kepong's* master, that man is as fond of war as he is of his own kids, then perhaps imbecility and common sense are never at odds. Perhaps, he speculated, that is why most of us can't always tell the difference between them.

2

Barletta is a small port—the *Kepong* did arrive there—and is very exposed, with a long breakwater. The Eighth Army was fighting a short distance away. The harbour had the atmosphere always to be smelled of a target conscious of its merit and awaiting its reward. But no, Captain Brown was assured ashore, we've had no air-raids lately.

Upon that advice, for the first time since he left Alexandria, the comforted navigator undressed and turned-in to rest. He had only settled into his bunk when the sirens began; his place was still the bridge. Sirens and bombs alternated at short intervals till daylight, but the *Kepong* escaped.

The Sea Transport Officer there—one who knew the value of tonnage and its quick despatch—arranged for continuous work. The ship had better get out of it. A convoy was leaving at once, and she must join it; just leave the last of her cargo, 200 tons of skidding chain, in her hold. Don't wait; clear out, and put that stuff ashore somewhere else!

She departed for Augusta. But when passing Bari a signal came to go in and surrender those chains. After three days she was ordered from Bari to Brindisi, into which she went, and anchored. Her master knew of no reason for his call, and didn't like the look of it, for the weather was still dirty, and his empty ship was as eccentric as a child's air-ball in the wind. A pilot boarded her, with an order to make the ship fast to a buoy.

Her master demurred. The pilot was told he must wait a little while the Chief Officer unshackled the anchor from the cable and put that to the buoy, for he, her master, was dubious of her wires and mooring ropes; they were old and sad.

Not at all, explained the pilot; one wire on the buoy was enough, it always had been for any ship, and a pilot could not wait.

He was made to wait somewhat, for the Captain insisted on putting three wires to the buoy, having experienced what happens to ships in ballast in heavy weather.

The night was growing towards its worst when the first wire snapped; another went soon after. She began sheering wildly to free herself, and should the last wire part, down she would drop on the ships moored astern of her. That would make a mess of lots of tonnage.

Steam was raised, all hands called, and throughout the night she had to be steered, giving her a kick ahead with the engines when she swerved, and putting the helm hard over to check her aberrations. When daylight came the Chief Officer and the crew unshackled the anchor, and carried its

chain cable to the buoy. That heavy task was no sooner done, and the ship secured, than Naval Control arrived alongside with directions for her to return to Bari and join a convoy for Augusta. That was all that happened at Brindisi.

While remarking the odd chances in the *Kepong's* voyaging in war, as puzzled as was her patient crew by official cross-purposes, by negation, contingency, and fortuity, all still further complicated by explosions and savage weather, what we should keep in mind, says Captain Brown, is that in war not an official dare be confident about facts for more than five minutes or so; little is known for certain except personal impressions and feelings. The truth about things, the unknown reality, remains an abstraction, menacing but obscure. Hopeful guessing, therefore, may thus prove as good as pessimistic reasoning; perhaps better. One never knows, in the middle of a minefield, at night. So the Captain does not blame Authority unduly; he admits he might have done much worse himself if planted in an office, surrounded by hundreds of files and regulations, while orders from distant superiors continued to arrive to contradict what was lawful the day before. From Gibraltar to Port Said all the shores, harbours, and headlands of the Mediterranean were cruel with hate, were secretive, and heavily armed. Neutrality anywhere was a mockery, the air was urgent with lies, and the waters from one end to the other as changeable as the way of the wind with various mines and the enemies' submarines and aircraft. It is not surprising that a shipmaster could never be certain that the

course he was steering was not somebody's innocent error, and his voyage a bloomer at least, if not his last.

Augusta was reached again, but after a long wait the *Kepong* could get no coal. She was sent to Malta for it. But as Malta also was short of coal she went on to Tripoli to bunker. Tripoli had more than coal; that port had a laundry unit, each truck of it weighing eight tons, and was anxious to pass it on to Alexandria. The *Kepong* was a providential sending. When the ship was deep with this cargo she could not get out of Tripoli, for the weather was a muzzler; she had to moor stern on to the breakwater, across which the seas were vaulting, and there she was for ten days, half submerged, wondering which would break first, the weather or the mooring lines.

Nor was that the only trouble. Have you ever experienced a ship's ice-box? If not, don't question a seaman about it, unless you understand his language. An ice-box is meant to keep meat fresh, but ice soon melts, and when it is gone, what other name shall we give an ice-box? And what shall we call the meat in it? The men were compelled to eat what they called tin-tack, and were more than tired of it, and did not care who knew it. Moreover, the Indians in the crew would not, of course, eat tinned meat. They demanded the living sheep. A shipmaster often has to reconcile matters that only deity could resolve. Live sheep! He didn't know it, but he was soon to see flocks of sheep.

His ship went from Alexandria to Barletta with munitions of war, and then back to Sicily for orders. Orders took the ship to Egypt again, to be fitted for carrying

sheep—now for some fresh meat!—to carry to Bari, for the Indian Army. Then she continued to carry sheep, with their accompanying smell, dung, and flies, to Naples and elsewhere. All food is sauced with flies when a ship carries sheep.

At Bari once, the sheep discharged, a cargo of aero-engines was loaded for Alexandria, but on the point of departure another order came; the cargo must be taken out again, and departure made at once for Cagliari, Sardinia, to load there more lambs for Naples. At Cagliari a pilot was waiting for the *Kepong*, and made her fast to the outside breakwater, where she lay for a week, apparently forgotten. Twice she broke away during gales, for the wind was in the wrong quarter, but with the easing of the weather she was observed, and taken inside. Her master then went to Authority for his flock.

Authority was delighted and laughed during a merry interval. Sheep? What sheep? They had no sheep there.

It was all very well to laugh, but, asked her master, must my ship return vainly to Alexandria?

Authority considered this. Could not use be made of her presence? The Army was consulted, and various communications agitated. In three days an order came from Algiers. She was to load 800 tons of cheese for Naples, said Army, and it must be carefully guarded. It was important that only a British ship should touch this cheese, as otherwise the Italians would loot a commodity so precious.

In a day or two cargo began to arrive alongside the *Kepong* and to be taken in. It was not cheese; it was pigments, red,

white, blue, black, and many other colours. The ship's master hurried at once to Authority to explain that it was against nature to stow cheese atop of pigment powder packed in paper bags. Didn't the Army know this elementary fact?

Another message was requested from Algiers, and when it came it admitted there was no cheese. Cheese, it then appeared, could not be sent safely in a British ship because it had already gone in an Italian ship.

The *Kepong* put out for Naples with a load her master did not like. There was heavy stuff in her bottom, and she had a deckload of petrol in drums. In truth, she was crank. In that condition she ran into a Gulf of Lion's special, which any captain invariably calls "the worst gale of my experience". The wind was broadside on, and she rolled so badly that her company waited for the roll that would go too far. The drums of petrol broke adrift in the night and took charge. The ship was hove-to three times when heavier squalls struck her, with rain like the deluge, to lash anew the deadly drums. Captain Brown was uncertain of his leeway, too, in all this. He was fearful of the minefields off Capri, and therefore hove-to again, and waited for daylight.

She was entering the Bay of Naples, thinking all was well on a fine morning after the night before, when an American officer in a launch came out to meet her. He had an instruction that she was not to anchor. A pilot would take her to a special berth.

"How many sheep have you on board?" cried the officer.

He would take no denial. She had a flock of sheep. It was well known that she had 900 sheep on board. "And I'm coming up to see them," he added.

He came, and the master had the hatches taken off to satisfy a stout disbeliever. The American, who was aware of the need for live meat, stood gazing down at pigments, cordage, cork, and hides; a commercial cargo for the Italians. His sudden high pressure of words over the *Kepong's* hatchway was a great relief to Captain Brown, and compensated for much. The ship reached a wharf, along which was ranged a fleet of empty lorries waiting to convoy sheep to the Army.

Shall we go on with the *Kepong* and her adventures in war? No, she has to face too many more of the chances we have glimpsed, and in too many places. At present she is on her way from Alexandria to Salonika with a general cargo, and with an order to call at Beyrout for more sheep. We will leave her off Crete in a snowstorm; the best thing to do, for that blizzard will continue all the way up the Ægean. The mine-swept channel is only a mile wide, stray mines are frequent, and the snow will veil everything beyond her prow. There won't be any fun in it. All we need know is that she did at long last arrive in the Thames, her decks still awash, for she was deep with iron ore from Huelva; it was 5th May, 1945. The war had ended, and forgetfulness was beginning to set in.