

CHANGE OF HEART

Once, during the Second World War, I depth charged a whale.

Those of us who served in the fast (but not fast enough) well armed (but not well armed enough) independently sailing merchant ships were apt to suffer from itchy trigger fingers, were liable to shoot first and to ask questions afterwards.

This was such an occasion.

We were homeward bound, running north and east from Bermuda to Liverpool. It was a typical Western Ocean morning — not too cold, for we were in the Gulf Stream and the following half gale was south-westerly. There was a penetrating, unpleasant drizzle that threatened to turn to fog at any moment. We had no radar, neither were we equipped with asdic. The possession of either instrument would have made us much happier, especially since we knew that a convoy not very far ahead of us had been badly mauled by a wolf pack. But we were not lacking in armament. We mounted a six-inch gun, a twelve pounder, eight Oerlikons, half a dozen light machine guns and our full quota of assorted rocket weapons. In addition we carried, sitting smugly in their racks right aft, three depth charges.

It was my forenoon watch.

I was nervously pacing the bridge, checking the alteration of course every time that the bell of the zig-zag clock in the wheelhouse sounded, making sure that the Oerlikon gunners in the bridge wings were keeping an efficient look-out. With my own binoculars I scanned the heaving greyness ahead and astern, to port and to starboard.

And then I saw it, fine on the port bow, a long dark shape that broke surface briefly in a smother of foam, that was crossing our bows and heading out to starboard. It was, perhaps, half a mile distant. The port Oerlikon gunner saw it too; his weapon hammered suddenly and shockingly, sending a stream of twenty millimetre tracer shells hosing out over the waves. I ran for the wheelhouse, shouting to the helmsman. "Starboard a little! Starboard five degrees! Steady!" I pushed up the plunger switch that actuated the alarm bells, then twirled the calling handle of the sound-powered telephone.

"Six inch!" I snapped.

"Six inch here, sir."

"Arm and set depth charges!"

The six inch gun's crew would have closed up by now; there would be somebody to attend to the telephone while the gunner on watch set the charges. There would be somebody to stand by the docking telegraph, which could be used for warlike purposes as well as for its original function, a means of rapid communication when berthing the ship. I made a mental computation, felt rather than reasoned that at our speed we should be, now, right over the submarine. I was dimly aware that the other officers

were on the bridge, that the Old Man was standing at my elbow. He did not interfere, but followed me out to the wing of the bridge, to the telegraph.

I jerked the handle to Let Go. The bell jangled as the pointer came round to acknowledge the order.

"Submarine?" asked the Captain tersely.

"Yes, sir. She was right ahead when I picked her up. I tried to ram, but she must have dived . . ."

We stared aft, at the turbulence of our wake. And then there was more than the disturbance created by our racing screws. We saw the surface of the sea boil and break before we felt the hammer blow of the underwater explosion. We saw a geyser of white water — and lifted on it, twisting and turning, the great body. The enormous head, the fluked tail, made recognition instantaneous.

The broken thing fell back into the violently disturbed water, remaining afloat for a few seconds. The sea around it was red with blood. Then — but it was a long time ago — I felt sorry for that whale.

Now ...

The war was over, and then there was the Cold War, and there was the Korean War, and there were the various revolutions and the suppressions of revolutions—but we, in the Merchant Navy, soon forgot all that we had ever learned about guns and gunnery, very soon lost the feeling of naked defencelessness that at first afflicted us when we ventured out of port without as much as a light machine gun mounted about the decks. Our status hadn't changed. We were still civilians — but we were no longer civilians expecting to be shot at and equipped with the wherewithal for shooting back.

Time passed, and with its passage came the usual promotions until, not so long ago, I found myself master of one of the company's smaller and older vessels, outward bound from the U.K. to New Zealand via the Panama Canal.

Frankly, once the initial worries were behind me I was enjoying the voyage. I had no intention of running "a taut ship" — that phrase, in fact, has always rather repelled me. A happy ship is not necessarily an inefficient one; the so-called taut ship very often is just that. My officers were capable and no lazier than the generality of certificated personnel. As long as things got done I let them do them in their own way. My attitude, I admit has rather changed of late. I am apt to be extremely fussy about an efficient lookout. Recently I overheard my disgruntled Third Mate complaining to the Second Mate at the watch relief, "The Old Man's getting worse. He gave me hell because I hadn't seen a blasted porpoise playing about the bows!"

So my not very taut—but quite happy—ship was in mid-Pacific, a little artificial satellite falling down the long orbit between the gulf of Panama and Auckland. (After all, a Great Circle track could be classed as a surface orbit.) There was the sky, usually cloudless, above us, there was the blue,

empty sea all around us. There was the familiar, pleasant ship's routine — the routine that on a long voyage seems to be built around meal times and deck golf times and gin times. There was a well-stocked ship's library, supplemented by the books that I had brought with me. There was the novel — the novel — that I was going to write some time when I felt strong enough; at the moment, however, I was enjoying the laziness after years of a more or less strenuous life as Chief Officer far too much to be able to drive myself to break out my portable typewriter and supply of paper.

And then, one fine afternoon, I was awakened from my afternoon sleep by the buzzing of the telephone.

I took the instrument from its rest, said drowsily and irritably, "Captain here."

"Second Officer, sir. I've sighted something ahead and a little to starboard. Looks like a raft."

"I'll be right up," I told him.

I found him on the starboard wing of the bridge, his binoculars focused on the distant object. I brought my own to bear. It was a raft all right — a roughly constructed affair with a mast from which a tattered rag depended limply. There was a man sprawled at the foot of the mast. I thought that I saw him move. I depressed the lever of the automatic whistle control, heard the deep, organ note go booming out over the gently undulant water. The man heard it too. He tried to stagger to his feet, managed to get to his knees. He clung to the mast with one hand, waved feebly with the other. Then he collapsed.

Meanwhile, my Second Mate had not been idle. I had been faintly conscious of the shrilling of his pocket whistle as he called the stand-by man of the watch. Shortly afterwards I realised that the Chief Officer was standing behind me, waiting for orders, and that the bo's'n was waiting behind him.

There was no need to give any orders really. It was just a nice, uncomplicated rescue job, with weather conditions more in favour than otherwise. I could have brought the ship right alongside the raft and sent a man down with a gantline to make fast around the castaway — he would obviously have been unable to climb a pilot ladder. But I wasn't sufficiently sure of my abilities as a ship handler; it would have been a cruel irony to crush or upset the flimsy craft and to kill the man at the very moment of rescue.

So I stopped the ship about a quarter of mile from the raft and lowered and sent away the motor boat, under the Chief officer. The mate handled the boat well, laid it alongside the rough platform and then sent two A.B.'s to help the man aboard. They had to lift him, to carry him, to pass him over the gunwhales into the lifeboat. One of them reboarded, the other one remained on the raft for a minute or so, searching the small area. He found nothing — I could see the gesture that he made with his empty hand — and then rejoined his mates.

I went down to the boat deck when the lifeboat returned. I looked down into the boat as it was rehoisted. The castaway looked more dead than

alive. He was bearded, shaggy, emaciated, deeply sunburned. He was naked but for a ragged pair of shorts. A jolt as the gunwale of the boat fouled a plate edge seemed to stir him into consciousness. He started up, looked around wildly. The mate put out a hand to restrain him. He seized the mate's hand in his own two claws, hung on to it desperately. The sight could have been ludicrous—but it was somehow frightening.

The boat was brought up to fishplate level and then the winch was stopped. The castaway was lifted and passed inboard — "light as a bleedin' fevver, 'e is," I heard one of the A.B.'s say — and then strapped into the waiting stretcher. The glaring eyes in the dark brown face — the face that was little more than dry skin stretched over a skull — found mine.

"Captain?" he croaked.

"Yes. I am the Captain."

"Must ... Must tell you. Must warn ..."

"In a little while," I told him.

"Now," he whispered demandingly. "Now."

But I had other things to attend to. I ignored his pleadings, went back to the bridge where I waited until the boat had been swung inboard and secured. I gave the orders that put an end to the interruption to our voyage. Then, with the ship once again on her course and with the engines turning at full speed, I left the bridge to the officer of the watch and went down to the hospital.

We carried no doctor that trip, but it didn't really matter. Given the Medical Guide and a well stocked medicine chest the average ship's officer can manage as well as the average G.P.— rather better, perhaps, as he has a deeper understanding of the psychology of merchant seamen.

The Mate, I found, was coping quite well. He had put the man into one of the hospital bunks. He had smeared the cracked lips and the cracked skin of the upper face and body with petroleum jelly. He was holding a cup of hot, sweet tea from which the castaway, Propped up with pillows, was sipping slowly. He was saying soothingly, "You can tell your story later. You must get your strength back first ... "

The man jerked his head violently so that the tea slopped over the Mate's hand and over the white bed linen. He cried — and already his voice was stronger, was less of a croak — "but this is important. You must be warned. You have radio. You must warn the world!"

Pirates? I wondered. Russian submarines on the prowl? Little green men from flying saucers?

"Let him talk," I said.

He turned to stare at me. "Yes. Captain. I'll talk. And you will listen. You must listen. You must. You must!" His voice had risen to a scream. "Yes," I said soothingly. "I'll listen."

I listened — and this is what I heard.

There were six of us (he said). There were six of us, and we were bumming around the islands, picking up the odd parcel of cargo, the occasional deck passenger. She had been a smallish patrol craft during the war, and then she'd been converted into a fishing boat, with refrigeration, so we could always catch and later sell fish when there was nothing else offering. Jimmy Larsen — he'd been in the Navy — was our navigator, and Pete Nusso was the engineer, and Bill and Clarry and Des and myself just lent a hand as and when required. It was a good enough life while it lasted. But it didn't last.

We were making a passage from ... from ...

Sorry, I wasn't the navigator, and I could never remember the names of those islands. But it was a French island, a small one, and we had this cargo of government stores. And it doesn't matter much where we were taking it to because we never got there.

It was a fine morning when it happened. I was at the wheel. Bill and Clarry were sunbaking on the foredeck, Pete was in the engineroom, Des and Jimmy were sleeping. I was damn' nearly asleep myself, but I was keeping the lubber's line steady enough on the course.

I heard Bill call out, saw him get to his feet. He was pointing, out to starboard. Clarry got up to look. I looked too. I thought at first that the broken water was indication of a reef — then saw that it was a school of dolphins. Nothing unusual, perhaps — but this was unusual. There was a whale among them. A big fellow. A sperm whale, by the looks of him.

They were heading our way. I didn't worry, neither did the others.

Porpoises are friendly brutes. They like to show off their superior turn of speed. like to make rings around even fast ships. And the poor little Sue Darling wasn't a fast ship. She may have been, when the Navy had her, but she wasn't now.

She was Jimmy's girlfriend in Honolulu, Sue Darling. Yes, that was her name. You'd better tell her, Captain, but break it gently to her if you can. She was a good kid, and she thought the world of Jimmy.

They were heading our way and then, as I had known they would, they altered course before they hit us, half of them passing astern, the others passing ahead. But the whale didn't alter course. He was a big brute. There must have been damn' nearly a hundred tons of him and he was doing a good twelve knots.

He hit us at speed, right amidships, and that was the end of Sue Darling. She was a wooden ship, and she was old, and she just fell to pieces at the impact. The diesels must have gone straight down when the bottom fell out of her, taking Pete Russo with them. We never saw anything of him. I did glimpse Jimmy briefly before he went down. He must have been dead — there was a lot of blood. Something must have hit him, must have smashed his skull in. Des got out of it all right — not that it did him much good in the end. I shall never forget the absurd look of amazement on his face as

he woke up to find himself struggling in the water.

The porpoises were all around us, buffeting us with their sleek bodies, making odd grunting noises. At first I thought that they were attacking us. But they weren't. They were herding us to where the dinghy that had been lashed to the ship's cabin top was floating, bottom up. And it seemed — I thought at the time that I was going mad—that those grunting noises were some sort of speech, that they were talking among themselves and trying to tell us something.

They helped us to right the dinghy. Yes, Captain, they helped us. And one of them surfaced under me and gave me a boost as I was trying to struggle over the gunwale. I should have been grateful to the brute, but I wasn't. I was frightened. It was ... uncanny.

Anyway, there the four of us were — Bill, Clarry, Des and myself. The four non-specialists. We were seamen by courtesy only. We were no more than pen-pushers who had heard the call of the islands, who had found a nomadic life in a rickety little island tramp preferable to an existence chained to an office desk. But we were none of us much good at doing things — which perhaps, was just as well. But the porpoises weren't to know that.

There were no oars in the dinghy. They had fallen out, and were drifting with the wreckage of the ship. We argued among ourselves about it, tried to decide which one of us was going to swim from the boat to bring them back. But none of us was keen on going over the side. That water was too ... too crowded. And for the same reason we weren't keen on using our hands as paddles until we recovered the oars. Suddenly we had become very frightened of the sea and of everything that moved within it.

The porpoises settled the argument. They surrounded the boat — to port, to starboard, astern. I was afraid that the pressure of their bodies would push in the planking. They got under way — and we got under way with them. I don't know what speed we were making — but it was a respectable one. We were soaked by the water slopping in over the bows and the low sides.

We travelled — towed or pushed by the porpoises — all that day, and all the following night. We travelled all the next day as well, and the day after that. When, in the late afternoon, we saw the island, a blue smudge on the far horizon, we were in a sorry state. It was Clarry who had kept us going. He had read a lot. He was one of those people who reads anything and everything. It was Clarry who told us to keep our bodies immersed in the sea water — there was plenty of that — so that our skins could absorb the moisture. It was Clarry who told us to tear buttons from the shorts that were all that we had in the way of clothing, and to suck them. It was Clarry who told us about the old legends concerning porpoises or dolphins that have saved the lives of shipwrecked sailors.

But he never convinced me that those porpoises were really friendly.

It was just on sunset that our dinghy grounded on the sandy beach of the island. It wasn't much of an island, although we were glad enough to

tumble out of the boat and to stagger up on to the dry land. It wasn't much of an island, as we were to discover when we got around to exploring it the next day. There were a few palm trees, but either they weren't coconut palms or coconuts weren't in season. There was some low scrub. And that was all.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We staggered up the beach, as I have said, and then, after we had got some of our strength back, we began to feel thirsty. But there wasn't any water—we never found any then, neither did we find any later. Clarry suggested that we dig — which we did, with our bare hands. The trickle of moisture that oozed through into the holes —after a long, long time — was salt. Clarry said that we should pull the boat well up on to the beach so that it would not drift away during the night; it seemed that we should not be able to stay on the island, there was nothing there to support life.

But the boat was gone. There was no sign of it.

And then we saw a commotion out to sea. It was light enough — the full moon had risen as the sun had set — and we could see the flurry of white water, the leaping bodies. It was the porpoises back again—and this time they were driving before them a shoal of mullet. They chased those fish right up on to the sand where they flopped, energetically at first, then more and more feebly.

"Water," said Clarry.

"Food," croaked Des. "Food — if you don't mind eating raw fish. But where is the water?"

"In the fish," said Clarry. "In the flesh of the fish. You always have to take salt with fried fish, don't you? The body fluids are practically pure fresh water."

Those body fluids were fresh water all right — but far from pure, very far from pure. Raw fish is so very much fishier than cooked fish. There was food, and there was water, and we got the revolting mess down somehow, tearing the still living bodies to pieces with our fingers and teeth, spitting out scale and bone and ... and other things.

And that was the first night on the island.

We slept well enough. Come to that, we slept surprisingly well. When we woke up at sunrise we made our exploration of the tiny island, found nothing that would raise our hopes. But we were alive, and that was something. And then Clarry set us to building a pile of brush for a signal fire. How we were going to light it — in the unlikely event of our sighting a passing ship or aircraft — nobody was quite sure, not even Clarry. It's one thing reading about making fire by friction — the acquisition of the necessary technique isn't so easy.

The porpoises came back at mid-morning — about forty of them. There was great splashing and confusion as they pushed something up on the sand. We ran down to examine it. It was a tangled mass of wreckage—steel wreckage. What paint that remained on it was grey. It may have come from

a surface ship, it may have come from a submarine. None of us know enough about ships to be able to hazard a guess.

Another school of the brutes drove in from the horizon. They were pushing more wreckage, but floating wreckage this time. There were shatter timbers, some of them old and barnacle encrusted, some of them comparatively new. There were planks that could have come from the Sue Darling, from her dinghy. Led by Clarry we waded into the shallows, dragged the wood well inshore. It seemed that the sea beasts had presented us to the wherewithal to construct a raft. (But why had they taken and broken up the dinghy?)

Then the porpoises all retired to seaward but one of their number; he cruised up and down in the shallow water, pointing with his beak first of all at the steel wreckage, then at the timber. He grunted and he whistled. It seemed that there was a note of exasperation in the sounds that he was making.

He dived at last.

"He wanted something," said Bill. "He wanted to tell us something. What did he want to tell us?"

"But he's only an animal," objected Des.

"What are we?" asked Clarry. He said softly. "The history of Man is the history of the tool-making, fire-using animal ... What must it be like to be intelligent — as intelligent as Man, perhaps — but to have no hands, no tools, no fire?"

"Rubbish," said Des. "Those things aren't intelligent."

"Their brains are as heavy as ours, and as controlled. Nobody is sure just how intelligent they are. They are at least as intelligent as dogs. At least ..." He stared out to sea, looking worried. "But there could have been changes, mutations. Radiation is supposed to be one of the causes of mutation — if not the cause — and there must be large volumes of radio-active water in the Pacific after the various Bomb tests. And all the cetacea — the whales and the porpoises — must be genetically unstable. Think of it — not too long ago, geologically speaking, their ancestors were bearlike mammals, living on dry land. They returned to the sea, and must have been able to adapt themselves to the new conditions — or the old conditions? — rapidly, in a very few generations. And now there's been another mutation, another jump ahead ..."

"Hogwash," said Des, but his voice failed to carry conviction ...

While Clarry talked and we listened the porpoises returned. We became aware that a half dozen of them were pushing something else through the shallows. It was a large slab of slatelike rock. There were scratchings on its smooth surface. At first they made no sense at all as we studied them after we had pulled the slab ashore. Human artists see things differently from each other and such differences are obvious enough in the finished paintings. An essentially alien but intelligent being will see things differently from a man.

And then, quite suddenly, those pictures made sense. There was a fire — depicted by curly lines — about which stood vaguely manlike figures. There were those same manlike figures engaged upon some sort of work, hitting something with hammers. And then there was a porpoise — the shape of that was more easily recognisable — and then there was a swordfish. But it wasn't a swordfish. It was a porpoise and it was wearing a sort of harness from which the sword projected ahead of it.

Clarry — he was quick on the uptake — started to laugh. He spluttered, "The damned things want us to turn armourer. They want us to fit them out — for war!"

Well, that was what they wanted.

They kept us fed — and I never want to eat fish again! — and as long as they saw us working they seemed to be satisfied. Oh, we never did get around to making fire, although it would have been a pity to have burned the timber that we were supposed to use for firewood. We had other ideas about that timber.

We used stones for tools at first—there was a rocky outcrop at the centre of the island—and managed to knock conveniently shaped hunks of iron from the jagged wreckage of the submarine or whatever it was. And with these crude hammers we knocked the nails out of the timbers — and knocking the same nails back in again as we constructed the raft. We were cunning enough to do this inshore, well out of the reach of prying eyes. (At times I thought that the seabirds had become intelligent too, would report to what we were doing our captors). And those of us who stayed on the beach put up an impression of business. Towards the end, however, the leader of the school — I suppose you could call him that — was getting impatient, was cruising up and down snorting indignantly. Clarry tried to tell him that we were handicapped by having no fire; he pointed to the sun, he pointed to the diminished pile of timber, and then he shook his head violently. Whether or not he got the message across I don't know.

And then the raft was finished. We launched it that night. There was no moon, and the sea was quiet, undisturbed by splashings or snortings. We all clambered aboard the flimsy contraption somehow and the current took us out and away. We knew that our attempt at escape was almost certain death — but we were crazy enough to consider death superior to serfdom to low animals.

But were we so crazy?

And were those animals so very much lower?

Lower or not — they found us.

They found us at noon, when our spirits were at a low ebb, when we were looking back with regret to the scanty shade offered by those few poor palms, when we would have sold our souls for a trickle of the fishy water, that we had found so revolting, down our throats.

They found us at noon — and I, I must confess, was glad to see them. When they pushed us back to the island I would be a good boy, I decided. I

would try to make a fire. I would try to make one of the sword and harness affairs that they wanted. I would try to turn swords out in dozen lots.

They found us — and the others found them.

They came sweeping in at forty knots or so from the south'ard, great, vicious brutes, in appearance not unlike the creatures milling about our raft but bigger, much bigger, black, with white bellies and with great dorsal fins. They may have been what Clarry called mutants; they may have been killer whales. Whatever they were — they were killers. They drove in like a charge of marine cavalry, heavy cavalry, and as they smashed through the squadrons of our captors the water was reddened with blood. They turned, charged again.

And again.

And then one of them nudged the raft. Des was the first to go, to slide, screaming, into the bloody water. His screams ceased abruptly. Then Bill went as the raft was almost capsized, and then Clarry and I were fighting for the mast, for a firm grip on the shaky pole that could mean salvation. I'm glad about one thing, Clarry was unconscious when he went overboard. I felt like a murderer when I hit him as hard as I did — I am a murderer—but at least he didn't feel those teeth that chopped him in two.

I don't know why they left me. Perhaps they thought that there were only three men on the raft. Perhaps they were so well fed that they just didn't bother me. But, quite suddenly, they were gone — and the sea was empty but for the floating fragments of fish, left-overs from the feast. (The air wasn't empty; the birds were feeding well).

And that's all. That's all as far as I'm concerned. Captain. When we get to port I'm leaving this ship, and I'm going as far inland as I can get, and I never want to see the sea again. It's up to you, now. You must get the messages out — for your sake, as well as everybody else's. You aren't safe. Those things—as we found out — can control whales. Think of it — think of a hundred ton whale sent to mash himself in your screws and then, while you're drifting, helpless, a dozen or so of the brutes charging against the plating of your side.

You're not safe.

Nobody's safe.

You must warn . . .

You must . . .

"He's passed out," said the Mate. "He excited himself too much."

I looked at the sleeping man. There was nothing, I hoped, wrong with him beyond exhaustion and the effects of prolonged exposure. His breathing seemed natural enough.

"What did you make of it?" I asked.

The Mate put his finger to his forehead, made a circling motion. "Round the

bend, sir. Round the bend. Probably his raft was chivvied by porpoises. But all this talk of mutants and such — why, its straight out of science fiction!"

"So are artificial satellites and rockets to the Moon," I told him.

"They're different," he said.

"Detail the cadets to stand a watch in the hospital," I ordered. "And arrange for the watchkeeping officers to look in when they come off-watch."

I went back to my quarters and started to draft a radio message. A warning? No — not yet. I had no desire to expose myself to ridicule showered upon such master mariners as observe sea serpents and then are unwise enough to report it. "Picked up survivor from island trader Sue Darling." That would do. That would have to do for the time being.

But a full report would have to be made.

I was still working on that report after dinner. It had not been continuous work — I had gone down to look at the rescued man at frequent intervals, and each time he had been sleeping. But I was working on it when I heard the weird whistlings and snortings drifting in through my open port.

I went out on to the lower bridge.

It was a brightly moonlit night, and I could see that the sea around us was alive with porpoises, with sleek, leaping forms that matched our seventeen knots with ease. Suddenly I felt afraid, found myself scanning the ocean for the tell-tale spout that would betray the presence of a whale.

There was a shout from aft.

I heard a youthful voice crying, "Stop him! Stop him!!!"

I ran down the ladder, then to the after end of the boat deck. I saw the castaway standing on the bulwarks, shaking his fists, hurling imprecations at the things in the sea. Then the ship lurched and he overbalanced. He kicked at the ship's side as he fell, so he hit the water well clear of the suction of the screws. It should have been easy enough to pick him up again — especially since the cadet who had been on hospital watch threw him a lifebuoy.

It should have been, but . . .

They say that porpoises will never attack a man in the water. These porpoises could never have heard of the saying. They made a quicker and messier job of their victim than a school of starving sharks would have done.

Somebody with both authority and imagination will read my report in time, I hope. Meanwhile, there are far too many small ships going a-missing, far too many little craft, built of wood, of the type that can be disposed of by one charge of a single whale.

And what was it that the castaway had said?

"You aren't safe. Those things—as we found out—can control whales. Think of it — think of a hundred ton whale sent to mash himself in your screws and then while you're drifting, helpless, a dozen or so of the brutes charging against the plating of your sides.

"You're not safe."

"Nobody's safe ..."

I felt very sorry for the whale that I depth charged all those years ago. But now ...

But now I'd feel a lot happier if somebody in authority did something about the situation, if once again I had those horribly lethal ashcans sitting smugly in their racks at the stern.