

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING

"In my last incarnation but fourteen," said the Mate, "I was Chief Officer of Noah's Ark ..."

"What was it like?" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Wet," said the Mate. "I tell you, I should hate to have to go through it all again. And the stowage problems ... You young beggars growl enough about having to make a few separations in a hold of frozen meat — have you ever thought what it must have been like with live meat? Mind you — it didn't bother us any if the sheep and the goats got mixed, but lions and lambs and such had to be watched. And I got blamed, of course, when the leopards and the pumas and the panthers ganged up on the pair of sabre-toothed tigers — that's why they're extinct. I told the Old Man that it was a pity that it wasn't those cats with funny tufted ears that got wiped out, and he asked why, and I said that it would have given the paelaeontologists of the future a lot of fun speculating about the missing lynx. 'Mr. Shem,' he said (and I can remember it as though it were yesterday), 'I would impress upon you that radio will not be invented for another six thousand years, and that puns which will, doubtless, drive studio audiences to hysteria are out of place aboard my Ark.'

"But all this, of course, was after we had become waterborne, while we were drifting aimlessly and wondering if any of us would ever see land again. It was a long trip, that.

"It's the beginning of it that sticks in my memory most of all, though — every time that I see a New Zealand list of cargo bookings I'm reminded of it. But it's a lot easier in these days—then the Mate had to make the tally as well as attending to the stowage. There I was, outside in the rain (and it was raining, too, I've never seen anything like it since) with a great, long sheet of papyrus, ticking off the animals as they marched up the gangway in alphabetical order; antelopes, two number, bears, two number, camels, two number, and so on. I stood there in the wet, with the tally sheet getting limper and limper and my stub of crayon blunter and blunter, envying the Old Man and Ham and Japhet — the Second and Third Mates — inside the Ark, where it was warm and dry. I thought that the procession would never end — I looked down from the hilltop where we had built the Ark and watched, through the driving downpour, the long, winding column of beasts both great and small, and, for all that miserable wet day, never an end to it. I heaved a big sigh of relief, I can tell you, when at long last, I saw the football jerseys of the two zebras by the glare of the continuous lightning. I'd no idea of the time — my watch had stopped — but it was quite dark"

"Your watch?" asked the Fourth Mate.

"Yes, my watch. We used to wear little sandglass affairs—you had to remember to keep turning them over—and my oilskins were leaking and the water had got into the sand. Anyhow — it was getting darker all the time, even though the lightning, as I said, was practically continuous, and I was glad to see those zebras. The wind was rising, and I could hear the very structure of the Ark groaning as the gusts hit her, and the sullen roar of the

rising waters was audible even above the incessant grumbling and crashing of the thunder. And there were people screaming in the city down on the plain. It gave me the cold shivers, I can tell you. It was like the end of the world. Come to think of it — it was ...

"Anyhow — zebras, two number. I ticked 'em off and then, clutching the bedraggled tally sheet, ran after them up the gangway, into the Ark. It was stuffy inside, and smelly, like an indoor menagerie on a hot summer's day, and you couldn't hear yourself think for the uproar that the beasts were making — but it was dry. I found the Old Man, gave him the sheet. 'Tally completed and correct, sir,' I told him. 'Is it?' he demanded, raising his bushy white eyebrows. 'Is it? You haven't ticked off the mammoths, Mr. Shem, or the megatheria...' 'They didn't come, sir.' He stood there for a few moments, listening to the wind and rain and the thunder. 'They'll never make it now,' he said. He borrowed my crayon and scrawled Extinct alongside their names on the list.

"If you don't mind, sir,' I said, get changed into something dry.'

" 'But you haven't finished yet,' he told me. I've never again been so near to mutiny as I was when he fished another sheet of papyrus out of the folds of his robe.

" 'But there aren't any letters after z", I cried desperately.

"I am well aware of that, Mr. Shem — it is many a long year since I learned the alphabet, but I still remember it. This is the tally sheet for the mythological animals. They, with the others, must survive.'

" 'Mythological animals?'

"Yes. Basilisks and vampires, griffins and chimeras and, of course, such beings as the elves and pixies and leprechauns and the rest of 'em. Oh, be careful of one thing — don't let any krakens or mermen or mermaidens up the gangway, they'll be able to manage all right outside.'

"So out I went into the storm and the night again, not liking it one bit. The water was well up the hillside now, and great sheets of spindrift were blowing over, and there was a horrid yellowish tinge to the lightning and the thunder was cracking rather than rumbling, so that it sounded as though the very sky was shattering and about to fall and crush us all beneath its black, jagged ruins. And the things trooping up the gangway... They'd have been bad enough in broad daylight, but seen by that yellow, flickering glare they'd have given even a producer of X Certificate horror films the willies. To make matters worse they were an undisciplined mob—there wasn't the slightest pretence of embarkation by alphabetical order. It was the case of dragons, Chinese, two number, werewolves, two number, basilisks (and they can give you a dirty look!), two number, incubi, two number, dragons, Welsh, two number, and so on ...

"Yes, I was having a hard tussle with that tally, and I wasn't at all pleased when I noticed that the Old Man had come out and was standing beside me, looking worried. What does the old so-and-so want now? I thought.

"Yes, sir?' I said, seeing, out of the corner of my eye, two creatures that

might have been an Abominable Snowman and an equally Abominable Snow-woman scurrying past. Anyhow, I ticked them off as such. 'Yes, sir?'

"Are you sure that you haven't let any krakens aboard?'

"Positive, sir,' I said, lying like a flatfish. To be frank, I wouldn't know a kraken from a bar of soap, 'Excuse me ... Unicorns, two number, rocs, two number ...'

" 'There are two things with tentacles,' he said, 'and they've already strangled the male diprotodon...'

"Another species bites the dust,' I said. 'I'm afraid we'll have to write 'em off as extinct, sir. Excuse me. Dragons, common or garden, two number
"Then I dropped my crayon and the tally sheet and stared, open mouthed, at two weird creatures that came lolloping up the hillside. Headless they were, and almost legless, and they were clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful ... And a deadly chill came with them, so that the driving rain solidified to a brutal, bruising hail and below us, down the steep slope, the sullen roar of the breakers abruptly became the crash and tinkle of stranding ice floes.

"Sir!' I cried to the Old Man, 'Sir! What are they?'

"They could be sides of pork,' he said. 'They could be cartons of butter. They could be legs of beef ...'

"But they're not,' I told him. 'They couldn't be.'

"They could, Mr. Shem,' he said. 'They could. They're freight carcasses.' "