



EBEN MCCABE

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At first he'd at least put in an appearance, when all hands was called and he was obliged to be present; and there was still some show of his being captain, there on the quarterdeck when he stood to windward. We'd need to tack ship, or maybe reef topsails in the occasional big blows that gusted up the California coast, or in the unpredictable squalls that sprung up around the Line; and I'd duck below to find him pouring over his log, looking at the entries Jim had written, or lying down resting in his berth. His face would be vacant, but calm and still, and his body, though gaunt—the thinnest I'd seen him since his early teens, when he first started hauling cod with me and Pa—would look capable of strength. By shaking him at the shoulder and speaking clearly in his ear—by pronouncing “Ben, it's time t' tack her” or “Time t' take a reef in her”—I could rally him to action; and hauling on his peacoat or oilslicks and sou'wester, he'd take to the poop and stand there for a spell, looking out on all the commotion around him.

Though he never called out an order and hardly even glanced up at the sticks—though every step of the tacking from putting the helm down to swinging the yards to trimming the sails, was left entirely up to Wood Haskett and me—he still had that air of command about him, that broadness of shoulder and squareness of jaw that gave the idea he was at the helm of events; and all hands still looked upon him as skipper—uncharacteristically wooden on deck, but just the same steadier and calmer than in those hectic weeks riding up to San Francisco Bay. That I was determining the day's work and doing all

the navigating, even plotting our course from my own resources—duties he never would of wholly handed over—no one else knew, since Haskett was always on deck when I was below; but even if word had got around, no one would of been too condemning; for all hands knew the load Ben'd carried since China, the depth of the bond he'd had with Jim, and the challenges piling up for him at home; and nobody would of blamed him for slipping under the burden.

Shorthanded, overworked, and heartsore theirselves, every last one of them related some way or other to the men we'd lost—not censuring Ben for his extraordinary efforts to find them, in fact ready to stand up for him when he took the heat in port—they made way now for his depression of spirit, thinking it the natural outcome of his failed drive; and of the lot of us who looked on in concern, only I really feared for him.

By the time we'd crossed the Line and commenced heading down to cooler latitudes—by the time the crew'd started overhauling their gear in the dog watch, greasing their boots and lining their pea jackets with flannel, or making sou'westers that could stand up to the wind and hail of Cape Horn—he'd begun to complain of pain, hot, tearing pangs which attacked his back and legs, making it hard for him to stand and walk; but this too he managed at first to downplay, taking to the deck with laudanum if he had to, even resorting to his bolted chair. Hobbling about on the poop on Jim's cane, one hand on the line we'd triced up for rough days, or sitting all of a heap near the helm, a blanket about him to keep out the wind, he wore the same vacant gaze he'd worn since the Bay, the same empty air as an uninhabited house, or a shell abandoned by its guest; though a close look at his face showed the eyes of some prey still alive to the darts and swoops of a beak. Sleeping poor with the pain he felt his shoulders go next, his arms aching so he could scarcely carry a dish, and his fingers stiffly lame like one long gone to rheumatics; but even so he managed to rise every day, and show up on deck at the call for all hands.

Still caught up in the tragedy that had befallen—wrapped up too in the concerns of doubling the Horn, on a short-handed ship heavy-laden with cargo—the crew made shift to work around him;

while Haggai stepped in and filled some of the roles that would otherwise been thrown to me. The ship without a steward—and too reduced in numbers to spare one—him and Orin carried on the bulk of the work aft; and freed to absorb more of Ben's captainly tasks, I tried not to let them see the true state he was in, always putting papers before him when they cleaned his cabin, or closing his door when they swept the saloon. But when, after six weeks or so from San Francisco Bay—when about the time we lay off Valparaiso, he took to his berth, in too much pain to sit up, it had to be known he was incapacitated; and carefully I let the word out, never hinting how serious off he was, or how long his illness was likely to last, since I hadn't the faintest notion myself.

Not wanting anyone to suppose I had designs on the helm—not wanting to add one speck of further legal complications, and loath, anyhow, to take Ben's place, or to impair his future reputation—I simply kept on in my capacity as mate, as if it was a question of his being laid low for a spell; while the rest fell in with my example, no one taking matters more seriously than I intended. It was simply a matter of the captain's being ill, with some malady known to science, if not us; simply a matter of the mates carrying on to the best of their know-how, a situation that might happen aboard any vessel, in fact that had already happened to us, when he took coast fever on the Indian Ocean. The entire purpose and training aboard Melchett ships was such that the whole went on despite loss to its parts; and mindful of that, we went on pretty much as before, though without a song at the windlass or halyards—the seas getting longer, the days growing shorter, the temperature crisper, and our time, though slower, still steady enough to fetch us a passage.

But when he begun wandering as if in fever, just as we dug in to double the Horn—when he would go drifting back to the San Francisco Bay hills, or rambling on about the plant life he'd seen at the mission—there was no way to hide from those that come aft that we'd lost him; and it was only a question of time till word worked its way forward, and added to the burden of hardship and winter. When I could I sat by him, trying to get him to see me, to make him realize his loss, or the loved ones and responsibilities that still blessed him;

but in answer—if he was even coherent—he simply reckoned up for the hundredth time Jim’s stocks, and how long they might last if they was rationed.

“Anotheh keg o’ hardtack,” he’d chafe, “I should’ve put aboard two... What possible good did I think I could do with just one?”; then fretfully he’d add, “More wadeh—should’ve stowed anotheh cask of that too; how long d’ye think it’d last, if they stahted t’ ration it as soon as they knew they was lost?” “What day is it now?” meant not what day was it by the calendar—not Sept. 1, 1844—but what day from June 2nd, the day they rowed off—the 91st; then would come recollections of all the accounts of open boats at sea that he carried around in his head, dozens of details and data, him being a champion at such like: thirty days one and forty-two another and fifty-four, the longest he’d ever heard. The other gear he’d stowed in the boat—the compass and sextant, canvas and bucket, the flare, hook and line—he’d take inventory of, wondering if the men’d caught any fish, and trying to remember how frequently it’d rained; then he’d take them to task direct, warning them to keep the chronometer dry, and the canvas inverted over the bucket at night.

Wracked stem to stern myself by Jim’s loss—by the knowledge of what he’d be called upon to endure, even if he was ever picked up—I hadn’t the heart to shake him out of his drift, to force him to see ahead, rather than back; so I simply set by him and petted him with my hand, trying to reassure him in some way. What I would do for him if he didn’t emerge from his daze —what was wrong with him in the first place, beyond the sheer confusion of grief—I was past knowing, being a plain village doctor; but what was happening to Jim was more real than anything else around him—more real than hissself, or the pitch and roll of Cape Horn; and I could only stand by him and wait.

Only once did he show the slightest awareness of what was actually taking place around him; and even that betrayed him in the end. It was off the Diego Ramirez Islands, after nine or ten days of hellish weather—after ten days of head winds instead of the looked-for fair, which even at gale force would of blown us round easy; and I

struggled to make headway like I'd never struggled before when he was on deck, and I had the security of simply following his orders. Staggering under the sweep of his duties—faced with the constant run of repairs, and the press of decisions affecting us all, from how far south to beat before risking ice, to whether or not to strike the topgallant masts, safety arguing for it, speed and the cargo against—I'd been borne down by the responsibilities he'd shouldered, especially since I had to admit I'd failed to carry them as well, with the same seagoing instinct and genius.

A saltwater plodder by dint of my nature—a fisherman rather than a sailor, with more of a knack for what lay on the bottom than for what was going on on top—I hadn't his art for swinging a yardarm at just the right moment, when the cant of the wind did most of the work for you; hadn't his hang for trimming the sails, or feeling ahead for the right slant of wind; hadn't his uncanny gift for direction, or his ability to dead reckon, the days without a sighting becoming more frequent as we worked our way deeper into the snow squalls, and my anxiety mounting as to our true position. On tenterhooks we'd come too far south, and was in danger of running amuck with the ice fields, I'd finally caved in and called on Spooner, who in an unprecedented move came aft to double check my work with me; but even so my worry persisted, there being not another sail in sight that I could speak for a swap of latitudes.

When at last one noon around mid-September we raised our first island, an immense crag of ice, indigo blue almost to its peak, and rocking in stately, solitary motion; when soon after we fetched its smaller companions, and confirming my worst fears, a whole field in the distance—I felt myself snapping under their mute threat; felt myself snapping as though they was Ben's fault, as though they wouldn't of appeared if he'd been on deck. Marching below I strode over to his bed, and shook him awake as if he was a child; shook him by the shoulder even after he moaned in pain, and begun to stir under the mat of the covers. "Ben, get up," I commanded, still shaking angrily away, and stomping my foot as though that would help; "get up on deck—thehre's ice all round us; I can't do this without ye—I need ye, Gawd damn it."

To my surprise he obeyed—painfully got up on one elbow, then old habit coming to the fore, found his clothes layered nearby, and pulled them on, lastly hauling on his tarpulin coat and sou-wester, even remembering to hold out his wrists to be lashed; and on deck for a moment he looked like the old Ben, scanning the snow-blur with one hand on the shrouds, and the ice-caked rigging rising around him. But the next thing I knew my hopes was dashed, and I seen all at once I really was on my own—the crew, fed by rumor so far, in one swift glance seeing it too; for the minute he spotted his first cake of ice he cried, not the directions I sought to work us free—not “Sheet home the mains’l” or “Hard up the helm”—but joyfully, jubilantly “Loweh the laddeh! It’s them—thank Gawd, it’s them!”; and Wood Haskett looking on him aghast, I took him by the arm and steered him back below.

For the rest of the night and following day I shuttled nonstop between him and the deck—between the frigid hazards that threatened the ship, and the raging heat that burned at his brow; for he was in fever now as if the sight of the ice, and the final smash of his sudden hope, had all at once sprung its long-delayed flame. Thinking that if I could just get him home, back home to Maine where familiar surroundings and the honest, confiding faces of young ones might help to heal his broken senses, I battled to bring the ship on her heel, inching her north with the whole crew on the lookout; then back below I ducked for brief spells to bathe him with snow I’d scooped from the deck, or bow my head over him in his daze.

To me it almost seemed—listening helplessly at his side, trying to make sense of the tumbling phrases, or the requests that sometimes come hurling at me—as if he’d somehow taken Jim’s place; as if he was feeling what Jim felt, or what he’d felt earlier on in the summer; as if in some unaccountable way Jim was speaking through his voice, relaying some drama on the other side of the Pacific. “It’s hot,” he’d fret, when all above him on deck the ship hung in a forest of icicles, and the temperature in his cabin hovered at thirty; when the men’s hands was splitting from the cold, and their feet breaking out in boils from the constant wetting in bitter water.

Or “It’s too still; damn the wind; whehre’s the wind,” he’d chafe, with *Abigail* half over on her beam ends in the gale, and the thunderous sea-bolts pounding at the hull. “I’m thirsty,” he’d crack, and I’d give him water, breaking the layer of ice in his pitcher; but no amount I poured could ever satisfy his need; for no sooner would I clamp the cup back in place than “I’m thirsty” would commence all over again. Hunger, fatigue and pain was equally impossible to relieve; and way out of my depth I could only stroke his hand, and clumsily try to reassure him—Haggai unquestioningly taking over the task and carrying on, whenever I had to look out for her on deck.

As I stooped over him them next days off the Horn, rubbing snow on his brow or listening or praying, I seen for the first time the changes in his face; seen them as I hadn’t had time to before, in all the pain and rush of the past months. Looking pretty rugged now from his long spell of neglect, his hair and beard overgrown like all the rest of ours was too, he wasn’t unlike some loafer on the docks, worn out and down at the heels and seedy; but what caught my eye wasn’t the rough angles he shared with us—that look a carving has when it’s only half-finished—but the expression of age, of capsized in the dim light.

Not thirty yet, he nonetheless looked forty, with all them chisels and lines you see on an old face, a face that’s stood up to the battering of time and the weather, yet taken on their scrapes the way scrog takes the wind, or the pulp of a tree the rain-rings and dry spells. But more than that he showed surrender, like a ship’s beam does when it starts to powder, or a figurehead when it commences to crumble. Looking at him bulky and senseless there in his berth, it was almost like stumbling on some plank on the scrap heap, some board that’s been jettisoned as unfit for its task, or set aside to be planed over; like coming on a snowman that’s been kicked down by a child, or a lump of clay that’s been worked and mashed over.

No terror I’d known over sickness or death was anything like the fear I now felt, as I sat and looked on his derelict timbers: even his lung fever a year ago seeming almost pacific, for that at worst would of ended in merciful death; while this had no end that I could foresee, save some darkly barred asylum window. As if he knew

hissself that he was done up—as if he knew he was an unfit timber, he mumbled the terms of his own surrender; murmured “Nothin’ I c’n do... nothin’ I c’n do... nothin’ I cn’ do...” till I ached for him, till I longed to take charge of him myself. Other times it was verses from the Bible he spoke, verses I recognized from Sabbath Schools long ago, or texts I had to memorize for meeting; lines from both Testaments of capitulation and loss, not loss of battle or land but of self; but no words come more often than Jeremiah’s, not Jeremiah the fighter but Jeremiah the accepting, Jeremiah the stalwart on the scrap heap. For long hours one night I listened to such lines, the hop and skip of images of destruction and re-making, from the basket of figs to the clay on the wheel; then come the quiet “Do with me what you will”; and after that he lay there silent.

If I was fearing for him I was fearing as well for the ship; for she rode them vast seas like a millet seed, a speck—a wisp on whose helm lay my inexperienced hand. Free of the ice we begun at last to run down the torturous miles of our easting, still facing unaccountable head winds, and snow squalls so thick we could barely make out the masts; but it was the giant seas that unmanned my wits, great rolling, darksome, heavy masses, at whose heights we pitched in the blasts of the spray, and in whose pits we reeled without the brace of the wind.

With only eight hands to a watch and the work on deck heavy—with the sails frozen solid and stiff as sheet metal, and the rigging so encased that to start it with bare hands, or to climb it with clumsy, waterlogged boots was a perpetual risk and torture—we was obliged to frequently call both watches; and it was rare for any of us to rest more than a couple hours. Beaten out by the work and exposure the men hardly ever exchanged a word, pacing back and forth on walks made of sand, or ashes taken from the galley; while nobody ever spoke with me either, Ben in his berth dreaming faraway dreams, and Haggai bustling from pantry to galley.

Spinning out twenty hours a day in darkness—straining to hear the ship’s needs in the wind, whole choruses of shrieks, moans and whistles roaring in chaotic upheaval—I missed Ben’s command like never before, like I’d never thought possible, on old exasperated days; missed his bark, his bawl, his sense of control, the sheer bulk and size

of him in the dark. If I could of I would of stood him on deck just for my sake—for the illusion of his protection; but without him I had to come to trust someone; and I found I was dumbly trusting the ship—giving her her head as if she had a will of her own, as if she had eyes that could make out our way—even conversing with her as if she was alive, and could answer me back with a human voice. In fact she did answer me back with sounds, motions, shudders—with progress or lurches or sags to leeward; and I took to actually talking to her out loud—to taking myself seriously whilst I did it, as though I was any less mad than Ben was.

When after a fortnight of struggle we'd finally rounded the Horn and the seas had begun to moderate a little, I fell into a sleep like I'd never had, Spooner kindly standing my watch so I might have twelve hours; and coming back up on deck—finding us bound north once again—the first sound I heard was the hurrah of the men, echoing from the heights of the mainyard, and their song that we was homeward bound at last.

It was just at this time, in about the 58th latitude, as we made ready to run between Patagonia and the Falklands, that Ben gave me the greatest scare of all; and my hopes that he might finally be coming round a little was stove in like a plank on a rockbed. For the past couple of days he'd actually been sitting up, and feeding hisself from Haggai's trays; and I'd come in just the night before to find he'd been up, and fished out Jim's trunk from its nook in the locker. Though the lid was open, things looked to be in place, except for Jim's unattended shirt, which'd been on top, and was missing; and I soon seen Ben'd put it by his pillow, and was sleeping with it the way a child does with a bit of blanket. Seeing how it eased him—how just its nearness seemed to bring peace, the kind of healing sleep he needed—I let it go; just as I'd let go his fetching the log and opening it to Jim's hand earlier this morning.

But now come a strange, uncanny evening, all the weirder for the goes-on about the ship; for somewheres nearby in the long, dark, regular seas, a shoal of whales or grampuses was meeting, invisible except for their breathing; and the sudden reports and gusts of their

vapors, rising and falling like the heave of the seas, exploded and sighed in the still night around us. As if that wasn't enough, wisps of fog was trailing about like shrouds and scarves in all directions, the water being warmer than the air; and down below in the forecastle and cabins, eerie noises was drumming in through the hull, whistles and cries like some long-lost mariner's soul, wailing and railing for some deck or haven.

Loosened by the thaw, the ice aloft'd begun cracking, adding to the unnerving clamor; and whole masses and chunks was thundering down on unsuspecting heads without warning. Tumbling up on deck the watch below complained of being unable to sleep; and going below myself for a late cup of tea, I could see at a glance that Haggai was spooked. Not that it was all that grand a feat to spook Haggai: he was, after all, the same man who, when a bolt of lightning once struck a cask of brandy in the general store, took it as an act of the Almighty, and swore off drink forever. But there was plainly something of a large order going on in him now, for he was popeyed as a flounder; and I felt uneasy myself when I seen him.

Coming into the lighted saloon, and finding my tea set sanely at my place at the table, the cup sliding to and fro a little, and the spoon giving a friendly clank with each ride, suddenly cheered me up a degree; but the next moment my heart gave an odd thud; for I seen a light under Ben's door, and the flicker of him moving back and forth; and there come out to me the strains of bright talking that struck me as being not at all natural. Sweeping in with some biscuits, Haggai threw a nod at his room, with "He's up t' some funny business in thehre, mate; asked for a sack o' the pigs' straw, an' I brung it; an' now he's just sent for a pot o' tea, though he wouldn't let me serve it." Thanking him for his vigilance I passed up my own tea, and went and stood by Ben's door for a minute, listening to his hectic chatter; then deciding not to knock, I turned the knob and walked in.

At once I seen he was up and dressed, and looking unaccountably well, despite the dry glitter to his eyes; but my heart, about to rejoice, completely stopped at what I seen next; for there, sitting at the desk, before the cup that only he used, was Jim. Though his back was to me, and he wore his straw hat, the build was unmistakably his; while

the red checkered shirt, the white Sunday duck trowsers, the pumps, even the stockings proclaimed him as well. Too walloped to move, or even utter a croak, I just stood there looking at him; but Ben, undeterred, brightly chirped out a greeting, adding "Bring in youhr tea, mate, an' join us."

My heart starting up again in my chest, thumping on with painful lurches and jolts—my wits gradually coming to life in my head, and clanking back into gear with clumsy strokes—I seen that what I'd taken for Jim was a sort of straw man Ben'd made of Jim's clothes, the broad-brimmed hat overshadowing his face; seen next that what Ben'd set out for him was a kind of feast, with half a dozen glasses and decanters and plates—tea, coffee, chowder, tidbits from his own supper, and above all water crowded before him; and not any less stunned than if he was real, I struggled to find what was left of my voice.

"Ben, this won't do," I said, quavering in my heart, but speaking out hard and firm as I could—somehow knowing I must, or risk losing him forever. "This is dangerous.... This ain't Jim, an' you know it."

His eyes—as if stirring, but resisting waking—stared out at me uncertainly in his dumb hurt; but I kept steadily on with my effort. "Only Gawd makes a man... The only life this man's got is in you. Now take it apaht, an' put these things away: if Jim eveh makes it home, he'll need them; if he don't, they d'serve t' be treated with respect, an' left t' rest."

To my surprise his eyes come all the way present, as if he craved my taking command—as if he'd been wanting me all along to take charge, and 'd just been waiting for me to do it; and he obediently nodded, signing he wanted me to do the job. "No, you do it," I stood firm, speaking to him as though he was a child; "you put him t'gether, you take him apahrt; I'll come back an' help ye put things away."

To start him I instinctively begun clearing the drinks, setting all the glasses back on the tray; but as if this was too much—the great crux of the evening, more critical even than his need for Jim's presence—he cried out in protest, "No, no—he's thirsty—he's thirsty—ye can't take these away, he needs them"; and he clutched

at the drinks, gathering up the glasses, and tugging pitifully at the decanter. Aghast, wrung with pity, I looked down at his hands, seeing them for the first time in all these long weeks of trial—seeing how their big, square, work-hardened shapes trembled and shook now, as if with old age; and collapsing myself I simply dropped down on the floor by him, and wept with him while he rocked in my arms.

“He’s not thirsty anymore, Ben—it’s been too long—it’s oveh,” I sobbed, rejoicing in my heart even as I wept that he’d said “He’s thirsty,” not “I’m thirsty” as he had in the beginning; “he’s either gone, or he’s safe; he’s not thirsty anymore.” Nodding his head at my shoulder he simply wept on, wrenching out his weeks of pain and torture; and when at last he was quiet I left him alone to his task, and went and sat by my cold tea at the table. When I come back I found he’d put everything away in Jim’s trunk, except for the straw, which was back in Haggai’s sack; and tiptoeing over to his berth I seen he was asleep, without Jim’s unmended shirt by his pillow.

Now he begun at last to mend; but he was so run down from prolonged fever and grief, lack of food and erratic sleep, that if possible he was even weaker than before, resting quietly for long spells in his berth, and trying to bring his thoughts up to the present. Every now and again he seemed to know where we was, with a more or less connected train of how we’d got here; but for the most part he was limp and inert as a newborn, taking in what he could in brief snatches, then falling asleep all at once from the effort.

In this state he continued all the way up to the Line; and by that time I knew I’d be at the helm to the end, and had no choice but to order the rest of the voyage. Getting *Abigail* ready for port—scraping her and painting her from the maintruck to the waterline, setting up and tarring the standing rigging, all them hundreds of painstaking physical jobs that needed to be seen to after a long voyage—this sort of thing I knew I could handle, having done it under Ben so many times that I had the whole scenario down pat; but the colossal matter of Ben’s documents—the monumental task of his papers: *that* I quailed before like the plague.

Heretofore his desk was the one thing I hadn’t touched, as if it

was the seat of command of the whole ship, and my intruding upon it would abuse his power; but now, with port three weeks away and Customs looming, I couldn't put it off any longer; and I went through ledgers and drawers from top to bottom, partly to have everything ready for inspection, but more importantly to find out where we legally stood. My heart low, I had a pretty good idea about the latter, even before I broached files and looked up court data; but I soon found matters was even worse than I feared; and up to my elbows one October Line noon, I paused to sip my daily test of the cargo, and take stock of the evidence mounting before me.

First off, there was all the ship's official papers, locked up in a tin safe that could be grabbed in an instant: her certificate of registry and bill of health and sea letter, her bill of lading and manifest and so forth; and amongst them I come upon her certified list of owners—my initial clue that all was not well. It was the first time I realized that both Joseph and Galen had invested in an eighth of the ship—that a percentage of any profit from the freight was automatically owed to their estates, which put Ben in an awkward position with his kin if the tea failed. It was the first time as well I discovered that another eighth was owned by Isaac Howland of Portland—Sal's father and a tough customer, not likely to take a mild view of any lost revenue, especially with all the bones of contention that stood betwixt the Howlands and Melchetts. Though another eighth was mine, and the rest was owned by Ben and Melchett Bros., there was enough of a mess between family, business and in-laws to keep Ben in hot water the rest of the decade; and that was even before taking a look at the owners of the freight.

Thumbing through the mass of freight data, first from Canton, then from Honolulu, I seen how many hands was in the pie of this cargo: Ben having invested in a quarter of the tea, but almost a dozen other entrepreneurs having a hand in the other three quarters, the consignee being Hull and Lombard, the biggest mercantile house in the area, which would demand it in top condition. In addition there was the cargo sold in Honolulu—miscellaneous goods from several sources in Portland—and the odds and ends picked up from the Sandwich Islands, the lot posted to half a dozen local consignees;

so that figuring out percentages of freight and profit, not to mention the tally of Ben's primage, was an undertaking for a genius, even if the main cargo wasn't in condition for sale.

And finally there was the matter of the logbooks: me going all the way back to Canton, and finding our records even worse than I'd thought—the personal log in a jumble of hands, and the official log, though thank God all in Ben's hand and mine, with no interlineations or erasures, nonetheless full of the damning evidence of the deviations, with little or no explanation. Hastily looking things up in Ben's legal dictionaries—wading through all the morass of hypothecating the ship, suing *in personam* or *in rem*, the lot making me lose my appetite for supper—I tried to reckon up where we stood; but the bottom line seemed to be that deviation from course was permissible only in succoring persons in distress, or in case of storms, repairs, or enemy fire, the latter clauses not remotely applicable to us; and to me it looked doubtful whether even John Melchett, up to his eyeballs in settling Joseph's and Galen's estates, could make it stand up in court that our intent to succor our men was the same as our actually succoring them in distress.

Since the insurance on the tea was only valid if we strictly adhered to course, or could show permissible cause of deviation, Ben was liable not only for a stiff fine for wrongful prosecution of the voyage, but for the entire loss of the cargo as well, if the tea failed; and his health being what it was, with the whole crew in the know, there was nothing to prevent him from being sued for mental incompetence as well—me likely to be the chief person called to testify against him in that case. Daily testing the tea, finding it weaker and staler, I knew the only answer was to make port post haste, the voyage already two months longer than we'd expected; and so hellbent was my efforts to keep the sails rap full and every conceivable square inch drawing that all hands on board, from Spooner on down, informed me I was an even worse driver than Ben.

Maybe it was my day at Ben's desk, maybe Ben's illness and the loss of our men; or maybe it was some instinctive vision of greater matters at work outside us; but as we made our concerted run from the Line—

as I looked out from the quarterdeck on all the inter-workings below me—I sensed in my heart that things was about at an end. Though we was going great guns beneath the Gulf Stream cloud banks, and all hands was zestfully manning their stations—though Ben was up on deck now nearby me, out in the sun when there was sun to be had, taking the air from his bolted chair—there was something about all the design and hope of the past, all the achievement and loss of the present, that made me see into the future; something that gave me a degree of perspective about where we was now, and where we was headed.

Like a man on a height, I seen that if we was making good time now, it wasn't just because of my newfound efforts, but because of Melchett principles and methods; because so many of us knew each other's jobs that we could interchange parts and press on; and because we was all kin, shareholders in both the ship and the cargo, and so was committed to mutual success, even in the face of failure. Standing from here, I felt detached enough from the past to see we was part of something unique, part of an endeavor that, despite the perils of legal embroilments and snarl ups, was streamlined and noble and direct, the best tradition of our new country; part of a venture that I could feel in my bones was about to depart forever.

Yet, though I could see for myself where we was heading; though it was plain that bigger ships, manned by a hodgepodge of crews, was going to pander to freights in tramp ports, freights no one aboard had a hand in, any more than they had a hand in the ship; though it was clear that local ventures would gradually cease to be, we still had this voyage, this magnificent vessel, that no portent could take away or diminish; and by some contrariness of nature, if ever I'd felt like a ship master—if ever I'd felt pride in any enterprise that was mine—it was now, on the brink of departure and failure.

Skimming along the Atlantic Coast, standing for a spell longer in Ben's shoes, I seen that this was what it was about, then, this skip and glimmer of possession, this triumphant clockwork of the moment; got a glimpse of his eyes and seen that he knew—that he knew I felt his joy, and looked ahead to the same end. As if all hands aboard somehow shared it all too, our own inevitable failure, yet the

supreme success of the moment, the crew pulled together as never before, like men in one last energetic rush of farewell; and at last, on the twelfth of November, ten months from the date we'd set out, we raised Monhegan and the Isles of Mussel Ridge Channel, and hove into Cape Damaris harbor.

Up and dressed and more or less in his right mind, Ben walked down the gangplank under his own power—so worn and thin that Anne's face went white when she seen him; but before she and the rest of his kin could sweep aboard, we was immediately besieged by the families of the missing men, whose craving for news told us more plain than any words that none of them had yet been heard from. Answering their tumult and addressing their needs, which fell naturally enough to Ben, was hard even after our months' preparation; and I waited with held breath to see how he'd weather it, this his first test of authority and reason. Though he must of hoped against hope that by some freak of chance the men'd already turned up, or sent word safe and sound from some Pacific port, there was nothing in his still face that showed his shock; nothing in his quiet sympathy that showed he couldn't bear their loss as well as anyone else, or in his answers that showed lack of logic and order; and I hovered beside him half-fearful, half-awed.

Nor was our tidings the only news that'd happened, all this long passage of time from home; for in the midst of the usual jumble of launchings and clearings, or accounts of elections and a new President, come tales of new faces added to families, or the reports of sudden losses or the inroads of consumption; and all around us was faces wreathed in joy or sorrow, or half-froze in the expressionless look of numb silence, trying to take in the myriad changes.

In their midst swept up Anne with a new babe in her arms, not her child and Ben's but his brother Jared's, who'd married Sally Wingate last year, and sailed with her for the West Indies just a couple of months after we'd cleared. Before I could stop her or intervene to prepare him, she broke the news of their double loss, to yellow fever in Havana—John having sailed down and brung home little Rebecca, whom Jared in his last words 'd given to Ben. Filled with fear that the news would send Ben under again, I simply stood dumbly by

at his elbow, looking at the little lass as Anne held her out to him; but the news somehow had the opposite effect that I'd feared; for he took her in his arms in all that pandemonium of homecoming and cradled her to his cheek as if she was the only one in the world—as if he found in their mutual loss of loved ones a kinship that went beyond blood and law. Kissing her wee face, he said to me, in the first coherent sentence he'd spoken in months, "Look how silky her hair is... Jim would of loved her."

Word was soon running rampant about our own voyage, Ben's breakdown and the condition of the tea; but before Anne could get wind I steered her and Ben off the wharf, folks respectfully making way for them and their child, in a wordless show of sympathy for their grief; and soon after we was deluged by the rest of Ben's young ones, who'd broke away from Sadie's grip at the carriage. Whilst he was inundated by them like a surfman by a wave—whilst Tom and Jean was hopping about on his toes, spilling out wildly exaggerated tales of their own return voyage—I took Anne to one side for a minute; and very careful of my words I told her of his illness, and advised her to allow him a week of rest at my cabin, especially in view of the news he'd just had. Since she could see with her own eyes the sense of my request, she gave me a nod with very little fuss; and it was to my place we pulled up a quarter hour later, the chimney a-smoke under the bare wintry trees.

For a while it was bedlam, Sadie stoking up the fire she'd earlier started, when the telegraph signals'd posted our arrival; me and Anne hauling in chests and seabags and boxes; the children swarming up wall and down stair rail, or bouncing their new sister till she howled; and Ben standing dumbly in the midst of it all, till at last he drew up a chair to the fire, and set down with small Becky in his lap. After tea and an exchange of the usual stories, Sadie and Anne swept out the children, with promises to send them for visits one by one; and before long the place was blissfully silent, the fire snapping and crackling on the hearth, and the sea droning distantly on out the windows. Giving Ben my room—knowing there was no way he could bear the sight of Jim's upstairs—I soon had him established, and a chowder going for our supper; and for that night at least we had peace and quiet, and

protection from the ill winds that was brewing.

Within a day or two the whole story was out, and the principal actors in it was moving—Hull and Lombard ordering Ben to break bulk, so that they could examine the tea; Isaac Howland taking the steamer from Portland; an insurance adjustor on his way down from Boston; and Melchett Bros. demanding first crack at the log. By the end of a month, when all the dust'd settled—when the tea'd been rejected as I'd expected, and the insurance withheld pending investigations—Ben was served by half a dozen papers, and the trial set in a Court of Admiralty for spring. In between there was mostly talk and speculation, there seldom having been, in the hundred-odd years of the town, a more toothsome series of events to explore; for since the actual legal wheels ground slowly, talk was the only way to keep things in motion, or at any rate, to keep up the illusion of such.

To some, like the families of the missing men, and even a few of those who'd lost out on the tea—Eli Shields amongst them, a long-time friend and backer—Ben was nothing short of a hero; and they as fully supported his decisions at sea as though they'd ended in success. To others, like Melchett Bros.—which remained loyal, but which I knew'd privately censured Ben for the San Francisco Bay run—and some of the charterers of the tea who'd decided to withhold legal action, Ben was simply a man trapped by circumstance and dilemma, who'd done the best anyone could of done, and failed; and to others still, like Isaac Howland, who was a straight-out businessman of the old school, and Hull and Lombard, who had no use for exceptions, Ben was liable for wrongful prosecution of the voyage—unless it could be showed he was mentally incompetent, which was hardly an alternative worth cheering.

Acting as Ben's agent as much as I could, to spare him some of the conjecture and talk, I watched every word that come out of my mouth, with an eye to how it might turn up later on; while Spooner and Wood Haskett followed suit—the three of us having laid plans, even before *Abigail* made port, to protect Ben to the utmost by keeping our words few, as we'd certainly be held accountable in court. Up to the ceiling in Joseph's and Galen's estates—now embarking on Jared's estate as well—John took on Ben's case, and spent long afternoons

with us, going over the log and advising us; but how much any of it really meant to Ben, I would of been hard put to say. Throughout all his business he was stoic and quiet, in a sort of a numb state that neither hurt nor helped him; showed up on time, sanely dressed, in his grey coat, with his tin box and spectacles and fresh pens. But he never once, in John's office or out of it, let drop a remark that opened him to me; and I had no more idea what was going on in his head than I had of what might be running through a haddock's.

If he stood up to matters—if he carried things off with no worse an impression than that of a man recovering from long fatigue and fever—it was largely on account of his stay at my place, where the quiet assurance of familiar surroundings gradually seemed to give him some grip; and —more important still—on account of his children, who come by every day one by one to play with him, or to sit on his lap and confide their thoughts. Anne, too, in her own way, with her household news and social doings—with her consideration in not hurrying him, and her tact regarding his business matters, not to mention his loss of Jim, an event which couldn't possibly of grieved her any—was a steady help; while the whole Melchett family from Sarah on down, and old cronies like Jimmy or Bill Worthing, did their part in shoring him up.

But nobody took him out of hisself and brung him to awareness again like his newly adopted daughter Becky, who at eight or nine months was an appealing armful; for he seemed determined to live up to her need, as if she held out some invisible measure; and frequently I guessed, as I watched him play with her, that he was pretending she was his child and Jim's, just as Jim'd often pretended the same thing with Nat.

Having sent out letters to government officials, the harbor masters in New York and Boston, and various consuls in the Pacific begging for news of the missing men, and having received no word by Christmas; having no ship on the stocks, and no ship to captain—*Abigail* in effect grounded till spring, and the time too short anyway to undertake a voyage—he was without something to do for the first time in his life; and this more than anything else seemed to weigh on

him, though he never said so out loud.

With Galen's bequest, and dividends that come in periodically from investments like *Charis*, he had money for the present, though by no means enough to meet the liabilities he faced, if he failed to carry the day in court; had his family, his friends, the yard just as before—Melchett Bros. even trying to interest him in a new contract, though they must of had reservations about him. But in spite of the forces working for him, to me he looked directionless and lost—not desperately lost like he had on the Pacific, or those weeks at his desk leading up to Cape Horn, but patiently lost like a ship on the bar, waiting for tides and tow ropes and lighters. There was a blankness to his eyes in place of the old will and drive that persisted even when he played with Becky—a vagueness that recalled a fog mull at sun-up; a total lack of the old bluster and order that'd driven me to drink when he was sailing master, but which I would of given my own wages for now.

Though I knew he was wrestling with the question of what course to chart on land or sea; though I could see he was trying to decide when to move back to his own house, whether to sail again or to build, and how to salvage his reputation as a credible master and shipwright, he seemed unable to make choices; and by year's end he hadn't even moved out of my place. From time to time he tentatively ventured out, like a hermit crab scuttling to a new shell—though never far from the safety of the old; and I'd find him upstairs reading in Jim's room, or out in the stable taking care of Dee, who like him was patiently waiting.

But once, hard on Christmas, I come home from town and found him gone from the house altogether—neither upstairs in Jim's room nor in the barn; found Dee missing too, and the cutter; and on a hunch I turned tail and rode back into town, and spotted horse and sleigh outside the Inn. Stepping inside and running into Jimmy—elbowing late afternoon travelers leaving the dining saloon, and early comers on their way down to the tavern—I climbed up to the third floor for the first time since we'd made port; and marching up to Jim's old door, I knocked—Ben, after a moment's surprise, inviting “Come in.”

He hadn't been there long—I could see that by his face, which had the look of a man who's just waked up at sea, with no recollection of how he got there. There was bewilderment on his features, and cautious fear, and delight—all the poignant pain of a hundred associations; and the tentative air of one trying to adjust. He was sitting on the well-worn sofa, before a fire he'd built up on the hearth; but there was no sign of a phantom-like guest nearby him to unsettle my anxious heart—just the cheerful clutter and culch of Jim's things that made me ache myself to see. If I felt Jim's presence, Ben did far more keenly, for his face was a mirror of my hurt; and his hand on the stray jersey he'd drawn into his lap quivered and shook like a limb gone to palsy.

Before I could speak up and urge him to come home with me, he looked round the room and met my eyes; and his lips trembling with the effort, he spoke. "I just... don't know whehre in the world t' go without him," he said hollowly, looking round again as if the walls held some clue, or the jumble of clothes a binnacle pointer. "I've tried, but every time I get hold of an idear, it just slips through my hand like sand."

My heart heavy with the weight of my feeling, I pulled up a chair and set down close to him, so near that our knees was almost touching; but not wanting to crowd him I said nothing in return, simply looked at him and waited gently.

"I... I loved him so, Eben, an' I neveh told him... if I'd even done *that*, I could go somewehre now, an' staht new... without this ache that stops me." His hand left the jersey and clutched at his chest like it had last year in them spells of stress; and watching its taut shape, I made up my mind.

"Would it help ye t' know that he loved you too?" I offered, not taking my eyes off of his features.

Looking up, he studied my face, as if trying to reckon just what I meant; then letting his glance fall, he tugged at the jersey. "If y' mean that he loved me as a friend," he said hoarsely, "I knew that."

"You know full well what I mean," I said steadily, still looking hard at him; and I waited till he slowly raised his eyes again, and met mine.

For a moment there was simply a dumb look to his face, a wondering look, half-numb, half-dazed; then color sprang to his cheeks for the first time since Hilo, a sharpness to his eyes that was wonderful to see; and an eager shyness took hold of his manner till he shook for all the world like a fourteen-year-old, meeting with success at some country shuffle. “He told you that?” he came at me, ardent.

“Didn’t have to,” I said dryly, “since I hadn’t been born dumb; but he did, aye.”

“When?” he pressed me, the word tumbling out, and his eyes shot with the light of a man who hears his hopes met out loud.

“When? Well, that’d be—just b’fore he shipped for Havaner with Tom, two years ago this past fall,” I answered, half-fearful I’d opened the door to fresh hurt, half-hoping I’d given him a lifeline to hang onto. “He swore me t’ keep it to myself; but now that ye’ve spoken, I know he would, if he was here.”

“Two yeahrs ago,” he marveled, eyes hearkening swiftly back to days oft-thumbed, as if he tested each for the testimony imagined so far only in his heart.

“He’s loved you from the minute he laid eyes on ye at Toby’s, nigh onto three yeahrs ago now,” I smiled, “not less.”

His eyes bright and hot, he held onto my words, the weary hues of his face all a-bask, like some cloud-wrack in March when the sun beckons through. “How could he of been so sure,” he murmured, “an’ me so slow—why, I neveh once, till—we was in Portland last yeahr b’fore I understood—an’ even then, I didn’t know what t’ do about it.”

“Well, he’d had the advantage of experience, I s’pose,” I said kindly, meaning only to help him, but realizing immediately my blunder as his eyes shot to search me.

“Then he...he’d gone with others b’fore me,” he said, and I could see he’d had his suspicions—could see the jealous glint before he lowered his eyes.

“They only made him sure it was you he wanted, Ben,” I said gently, anxiously watching every line of his face.

“Is that how he got sent out by the Rom?” he asked unexpectedly,

telling me again he'd done a lot of thinking on his own.

"Aye," I acknowledged, still reading his face.

"I've always wanted t' know, all these years...but he neveh told me; an' I didn't want t' press him."

"He wouldn't of told you till he was sure ye'd accept his feelin's for you. He was terrified you wouldn't—that ye'd send him away like his kin did."

"What...what happened back then, did he tell you the whole story?" he pressed, his hunger for news, and fresh joy for Jim's feelings, winning out over jealousy and hurt.

"Are y' sure you're hale enough t' hear it?" I asked, taking stock of the brilliant red spots on his cheeks, and wondering if looking back was really the best thing for him.

"Oh, Gawd, Eben, don't stop now... You—y' can't imagine how I've waited, how I've wanted t' know him from beginnin' t' end, all this time..."

With his eager gaze on me I cast my mind back—cast it back to the young lad Jim'd been then, that summer's night before he sailed for Havana. "What he told me wasn't much more than a sketch... he was neveh a man of many words, as ye know," I begun, slowly rubbing my brow to ease the ache of my own loss, while Ben leaned ever more eagerly toward me, almost gripping my knees in his anxiety to hear. "But it was him an' his cousin Djemail that got sent out from the Rom together...Djemail bein' the first one t' catch his heart, I would guess. They was just wakin' up t' how they felt about each other; an' they went off one day t' set t'getheh on a hill, I forget its name, overlookin' the lake at Bala, not very fahr from where they was camped."

"Tomen Bala," he said victoriously, as if hearing words hiss from long ago.

"Sounds about right, like I heard it b'fore... One thing sort of led t' anotheh, though nothing much, they was young; but Idris, Djemail's sisteh, who'd followed without their knowin', come upon them there in the holly, an' was surprised at what they was doin'; an' not thinkin', she run back an' told some o' the othehs. Since they was of age, bein' thirteen, they was tried in a court of their elders an' sent

out for good...the Rom bein' a lot stricteh about such offenses than ouhr common notion o' them allows."

"I stahted t' guess that's what'd happened t' him," he murmured, now plucking Jim's jersey there in his lap. "It was so plain he could neveh go back to his own people."

"Nor eveh wanted to; he told me that hissself, many times."

"T' think I talked him int' namin' the sloop afteh Idris," he said wryly.

"Oh, he neveh held that against ye," I smiled; "neveh seemed t' harboh hahrd feelin's towards her, at any rate, not since he come hehre...Told me once he blessed her interference, since without it, he'd neveh of met ye."

His face still aglow he looked down at the jersey, smoothing the wrinkled folds of its sleeves. "So that's the story of Djemail," he murmured, his eyes lighted up with eager satisfaction, the kind of light you see in the gaze of an old friend, hearing years of mysteries and puzzles resolved.

"Aye."

I wondered... There was so many times he called on him, those first few months I knew him...at Hannah's, y' know, the night of the fight...and afteh Cuber when he had that feveh... B'sides his fatheh's name, Djemail's was the one I heard most often."

"I shouldn't wondeh; they must of been close, even aside from bein' lovers—thrown t'getheh like dory mates apaht from their people, an' left t' scratch a livin' by their wits."

"Was he with Djemail when he joined the circus?" he asked, as if with a sudden inspiration.

"Aye, the two of them made up an act t'getheh, bareback ridin', as you might expect. I think they kept at it about a yeah—kept hopin' their folks 'd see their names on the postehs, an' slip int' the tent t' watch 'em perform. But it was a hahd life, the way Jim described it; an' he neveh talked t' me much about it."

"What finally happened, did he eveh say?"

"Djemail took a fall one time from a horse—I guess it broke his neck; he neveh come to again, an' died an oweh or two lateh."

Ben's face went still and tense with the words, as if he hissself

could feel them twin losses, loss of people and loss of friend, so early as they come in Jim's life. "Did he leave the circus, then—afteh Djemail...?"

"Not right away, no... An oldeh man there befriended him, not his traineh, but one o' the jugglers, who'd...had an eye on him, ye might say."

He bit his lip as if with envy, but all he said was, still folding the jersey, "So that's whehre he learned t' juggle."

"Aye."

"An' this oldeh man... He was kind t' Jim?"

"I s'pose he was, in an uneddicated way," I said, choosing my words carefully as I went, and trying not to fluster him by noticing his flushed cheeks, or telling him any more than need be. "But he must of been the possessive sort, or so he come across in Jim's talk; an' you c'n about guess how that went oveh with Jamie... since he runs a mile when his freedom's in dangeh. So he packed up one day, hopped the cars t' Livehpool, an' tried his luck with the sea."

A look of recognition flashed over his features, as if he felt on familiar ground. "Aye, the voyages t' Denmark an' Gibraltar—one of the few true pieces of his story he eveh told me in the beginnin'."

"Aye, an' one o' the few smahrt moves he made then as well... I s'pose it was the Rom blood comin' out in him—his wantin' t' see the world; but learnin' his ropes undeh the likes of John Redmond—then pickin' up sailmakin' an' four or five languages—that's whehre he really learned hissself a trade; an' it sure come t' stand him in good stead afteh... not t' mention us," I smiled.

"How does Walker's packet fit in—was he shanghai'd sometime afteh he returned t' Livehpool, like everybody's always guessed?" he pressed me, as if in a sudden tumult of questions, and a flurry at the thought of their being answered. "Or was he runnin' away from the law? An' what about that Livehpool barmaid?"

I put up a hand to slow him down, wondering again how much to tell him—balancing the probability of Jim's loss against the chance he might ever make it back to port, and trying to feel in my bones whether he'd want Ben to know, if he ever looked him again in the eye; trying to guess as well whether Ben hissself was really ready to

hear my answer, despite the eager hunt of his gaze. With his eyes pinned upon me in anxious attention, as if he understood this was one of the critical points of Jim's life, he even stopped plaiting and folding the jersey; and I felt my way forward with caution

"One question at a time, mate... He come back t' Livehpool from Tunis all right, then got hisself shanghaied aboard Walker's packet—but not for any reason anybody's eveh guessed. It had nothin' t' do with his runnin' away from the law; nothin' t' do with his bein' in trouble with some bahrmaid, or leavin' b'hind a baby he'd fathered—all that speculation we've been hearin' for yeahrs. I b'lieve Jim let them stories float t' keep folks off the scent of the truth, which was that he'd been livin' pretty close t' the edge there on the docks, in cahoots with the crimps an' runners, sleepin' with some of the sailors for money. He'd lure 'em into the boardin' houses, an' receive so much a head for the night; but finally he got fed up with his small cut in the profits, an' stole his fair share from his crimp. T' square the yahrds with him his crimp drugged his dinneh, an' dumped his body aboard Walker's packet—havin' signed him oveh t' the shippin' masteh."

"D'ye mean t' tell me...he was a *hookeh*?" he gaped, in a dumbfounded furor of confusion and hurt, as if he'd never found anything in Jim's past to prepare him.

"You wanted t' know him, Ben... ye can't know him without this."

In his turmoil the jersey, which'd been neatly folded, soon erupted again in a tumult on his knees; and he begun unconsciously tugging at its corners. "I... I just can't imagine Jim sellin' his mind, much less his body—he was such a...a free man," he got out, his voice cracking with the effort. "He could 've...If he'd needed money, he could've made anything out of wood, or gone t' work for a while in a sail loft...you know that."

"He wasn't interested in carvin' or sailmakin', any more'n he was really interested in makin' money," I kept on, watching the struggle of tensions on his face. "He was interested, I guess, in thumbin' his nose at his people—at least at first, when he was still raw from Djemail, when it seemed like he had nothin' more t' lose. He told me he figured if he was banned, he might as well make a good job of it."

A half-reluctant, half-admiring smile broke out on his face in spite of his turmoil. "That does sound like Jim, all right," he admitted, the corners of his lips still twitching and tugging.

"Aye, it does, I thought so m'self... Lateh on, though, by the end of his stint in Livehpool, I b'lieve he kept on b'cause—admit it or not—he needed a loveh, an' was hopin' t' find one amongst the sailohs."

"You just pointed out how he runs a mile at the idear of losin' his freedom," he struggled.

"He was lookin' for someone strong enough t' make him forget that."

He gazed down at his jersey in silence.

"I ain't tryin' t' excuse him, Ben," I said patiently, "just tryin' t' help ye see him in the light of things as they happened. There's some folks as 're born with that need t' pair up, an' I b'lieve he was feelin' it already thehre on the docks—if he hadn't even b'fore in them days with Djemail. At any rate, don't hold it against him—don't feel betrayed he'd sold out t' othehs; he regretted it as soon as he met ye; an' you don't know how it's galled him since."

By the look on his face I could see he understood—that he nursed a score of regrets of his own that left a bitterness in his mouth; but alls he said was, with a simple acceptance, "So he sailed with Walkeh, against his will... an' finally, he came t' New York."

"Aye, he made fast in New York, an' hated it at once... He hadn't a tuppence in his pockets, his wages havin' all been taken up by Walkeh, all them times he logged him for disobeyin' ordehrs; an' he hadn't any decent papehs neitheh—Walkeh's a' course not fit t' look at, an' Redmond's stolen in Livehpool. The first night off, in some tavern in Wateh Street, he got hisself treated t' a few rounds, then arrested for drunkenness an' thrown into the Tombs; an' not long afteh, hustlin' the streets o' Five Points, he met up with a loseh named Lomond, a crimp on the run with his eye on a new stahrt. As soon as they could they took the steameh t' Boston, an' built up a trade like the one Jim'd had in Livehpool—Lomond the crimp, Slateh an' a couple of othehs the runners, an' Jim an' several good lookin' young men the bait.

“They’d hang around the docks or the bahrrooms, even pose for artists an’ circulate their pictures—all them stunts Jim’d tried in England; then they’d steer their prey into the boardin’ house, or meet up thehre with the sailors Slater’d run in from fresh ships, an’ see to it they had a good time—while Slater an’ the rest stole their pocketbooks, rummaged their chests, even filched their very clothes off of the floor. But thehre was a twist t’ the set-up this time; for thehre really was somethin’ about this fellow Lomond that Jim was true to; an’ he tried t’ keep up a relationship with him, though it failed in the end—Lomond bein’, t’ my mind, a ruined man, an’ almost crazily possessive.”

“So *he* was the one Jim fought with that night,” Ben put in, his face a mixture of so many expressions that I could scarcely bear to look at him.

“Aye... The same thing happened as with that juggleh at the circus: Lomond got pretty domineering, an’ Jim pretty sick o’ dancin’ t’ his tune. He even got sick o’ sleepin’ round, by the time they’d been at it a couple months. He’s got a noble heart, at bottom; an’ he knew what he was lookin’ for... knew, by then, he wasn’t goin’ t’ find it that way, an’ that he was pretty much trapped by Lomond. What I said earlieh about some folks bein’ born t’ pair up; well, he must of seen by then he was one of ‘em; an’ he wanted out of the whole business he’d set up. The whole hierarchy, from the landlord an’ ward bosses an’ constables on the street on down t’ Slateh an’ the runners, an’ finally t’ Jim at the bottom, begun t’ stink with pay offs an’ betrayals; an’ it couldn’t of been easy livin’ with the enemies they was makin’... Jim was neveh able t’ talk much about it.”

“How...how in the end did he finally break free...what was it that brought him to us?” Ben stumbled, his hands at last still, and his eyes fixed on me.

“He seen *Charis* by the wharf one day,” I smiled, “just like he told us that night at Toby’s. He’d waked up unusually early that mornin’, d’cided t’ leave Lomond in the lurch, an’ walked down t’ the docks t’ mull things oveh... While he was thehre he seen ouhr ship—seen somethin’ in her that made sense t’ him, that gave out the hope of direction he needed. She must of looked good t’ him afteh what he’d

been through; ‘tenny rate, he made up his mind t’ ship out; to ship out aboard of *her*, if he could. Askin’ around, he got youhr name, an’ heard you usually had suppeh at Toby’s; an’ when we come in he marched up to ouhr table, an’ got up the nerve t’ ask ye for work.”

His face all at once simply went numb, went empty of any thoughts of hisself, his needs or his commotion of feelings—as if he was wholly thinking of Jim, of what his life would of been if he hadn’t taken him on; as if he was seeing, with a kind of dumbfounded irony, that he was in debt to the likes of Billy Walker and James Lomond, for the fortune of Jim’s meeting up with us. The weight and pain of Jim’s early years, on top of the stress of his loss at sea, seemed to deepen the very lines of his face; and I felt concerned that I’d said too much—felt convinced that I should let the rest of the story wait, and dole it out some other time. As though he’d read me off he shook his head, and signaled he was ready for more; and setting aside the jersey, he braced a hand on his knee. “So he left us at Toby’s an’ fought Lomond,” he encouraged, his grey eyes defenseless and honest on mine.

“When he come back t’ his lodgin’s for his trunk, aye.”

“Lomond did care, then, about losin’ Jim; he must of.”

“Eitheh that, or he felt the threat t’ his business... He was a jealous bastihd, an’ a rabid schemer; an’ b’tween the two, he had a hold on them men like no otheh... Jim was lucky t’ get off with his life—maybe wouldn’t of, if some of the others’d showed up.”

“Was it Lomond who jumped aboard t’ ask us about him, just as we cast off next mornin’?”

“No, that was Slateh, a regulah hatchet-faced runneh—vindictive as hell, by the cut of his jib.”

“Close shave, wasn’t it,” he breathed.

“It was, aye; an’ Jim neveh forgot it.”

His face took on an almost rueful humor, as if he was seeing things all at once from a distance. “How different him an’ me are,” he mused, his eyes on the fire. “He’s lived all these yeahrs like a bat out o’ hell; an’ I’ve always gone by the book.”

“Till Hilo,” I pointed out dryly.

“Till Hilo,” he admitted freely; and even then, in the midst of

our tensions, I realized what a good sign it was that he could see this was the point at which his judgment'd finally faltered—at which he'd failed to make rational decisions, and given himself up to need and emotion.

“What did he see in me,” he marveled, with a kind of detached, whimsical wonder—as if he'd seen himself in comparison to them young bucks on the wharves, and come up short.

“What he seen in *Charis*—a man that could take him on, discipline him, lift him out of the chaos of cheap affairs an' carry him into the steadiness of a marriage.”

“He... he *said* that?”

“A' course he did—said it that first night at Toby's, when he rated the crew as likely t' take afteh the ship, an' when he looked at ye with them eyes... But if y' mean, did he eveh put it into plain words, in the form of a confession t' me—well, he did, afteh that month he spent at youhr place, a yeahr ago last summeh... He run oveh t' see me as soon as Anne come home, buried his head in my lap an' cried—said that, till then, he would of been happy with a night now an' then; but afteh livin' with you, he wanted the days too... He'd been strugglin' against it, almost give up a few times, even packed his bags once, did ye know?; but that was the end of it for him, he was hooked; an' I think it was his fightin' his final surrender that partly kept ye in the dahk as t' his feelin's.”

His eager face as he followed my words was almost more than I could take; and I nearly come and set down beside him and took his taut, trembling hand from his knee. But before I could move to get onto my feet he looked up like a bird dog in the field, when it's picked up the air of a foreign scent in the bush; and I seen he'd caught the sound of the wind as it whistled and throbbbed away at the eaves. “Is that a west wind?” he asked suddenly, all at once coming back to the present; and I listened a minute for its strength and direction, after plotting in my mind the position of the room.

“West-nor'west, aye,” I determined, wondering what on earth he was onto.

“C'mon, let's go!” he suddenly jumped up, for all the world like a boy on the wharf.

“Where in blazes to, man?” I gaped, dumbfounded.

“Why, t’ Boston, a’ course!”

“Jesus Christ, Ben, have ye taken leave of youhr senses?”

“No, by thundeh— I’m findin’ ‘em! If I can’t know Jim in the future, why, nobody c’n stop me from knowin’ him in the past! I’ve got three whole months with nothin’ t’ do—an’ it’s winteh, too, just like it was for him. Let’s go find Jim’s past!”

“Gawd almighty, man, this is the craziest trek ye’ve tried t’ rope me into yet!”

“You know Ann Street better’n I do... d’ye think ye could find Jim’s old boardin’ house if y’ tried?”

“I... I s’pose... I know about whehre it was, Jim pointed it out that time he was to the doctoh... It’s on the corneh of Creek Lane an’ Lime Alley, in that mess o’ streets b’tween Blackstone an’ Union, off Ann...that is, if it ain’t been vacated, b’cause Lomond broke up business an’ moved on, or the police kept things hustlin’”

“Oh, the p’lice are all in on it, y’ just said so youhrself... They must be makin’ a pile off that landlord. I’ll bet things’re all thehre; or the set-up’s still thehre with different faces... I could...maybe I could even find Jim’s old room... D’ye have any idear how it was situated?”

“It’d be on the top floor,” I said doubtfully, “undeh the eaves—he wouldn’t of been able t’ afford more; an’ it’d be lookin’ east oveh the harboh—he told me he woke up that last mornin’, threw open the shuttehs an’ looked out t’ sea.”

“That’s it,” he cried, “I’ll bet we c’n find it... We’ll sail down t’ Halifax an’ ship int’ Boston, on some packet or otheh as common sailohs—the runners ‘ll pick us up in a minute. We’ll lodge whereveh they take us, scout around, an’ eventually work ouhr way oveh t’ Jim’s.”

“Have ye thought about how half the ships fast in Boston’ll recognize us as soon as we make port?” I asked dryly. “Why, my cousins’re there—Tom’s lookin’ for a freight—an’ ain’t youhr cousin Jacob due in from Antwerp in the *Malachi Pelham*? Not t’ mention all them stevedores that knows us—the harboh masteh, the newsmen, half the hands in the Maine fleet—why, if we c’n make a pahrty of the folks that knows us in Canton, or a two-bit crossroads like Anjier,

how're we gon' t' escape it in Boston?"

"We'll just have t' chance it—I'll shave off my beard- we'll leave b'hind ouhr names, ouhr money—not that I've got any anyhow! Nobody'll be lookin' for us t' hop off a packet, in company with a runner an' handcart; an' if we get into a tight spot thehre—if we have a hahrd time passin' ouhrselves off—why, you could always pose as my loveh—we'll get int' places we neveh could othehwise that way—"

"Gawd Almighty," I stared at him, dumbstruck by the direction his thoughts was running, and the speed with which he was adjusting to Jim's past. "Not the wildest imagination on earth could eveh conceive of us as such, man!"

"A' course it could, all ye've got t' do is lean on my shouldeh now an' then, an' look at me like—well, not like that! Look at me like Jim would of, for Christ's sake—I'm not *that* bad a catch, ye just said so youhrself!"

"An' supposin' somebody that knows us catches us up in that act—wouldn't *that* make a pretty piece o' news at Eli's! Can't ye just see us bein' read out of the congregation, turned out by ouhr families—all that rejection Jim faced?"

"Oh, Christ, McCabe, why balk at such an unlikely turn t' events, when you know damn well nobody we know even slums around Pohrtland, much less the back watehs of Ann Street!"

"An' just what is it ye hope t' accomplish with this?" I sighed, watching him industriously bank the fire, for all the world like the hard-driving old Ben.

"I want t' know him, know all thehre is t' know about him—see what he sawr, feel what he felt, taste whateveh made him Jim... I've been cheated out of his body, out of any yeahrs we might of had in the future; I want t' at least touch his past... D'ye understand?"

"I ought to," I smiled, looking back on afternoons gone; "it was what Jim wanted... what he loved, all them times rambling through Cape Damaris, or listenin' t' my stories of you as a boy."

He looked at me wistfully over his shoulder, dusting his hands off there on the hearth.

"We'll have t' be careful not t' get caught up—t' be customehs comin' an' goin' on the outside," I cautioned; "otherwise, we'll be

liable for what we know, an' not any betteh off than Jim was."

"That's all I want," he said eagerly; "don't need t' stay long—just need t' get a feel for the place...An' we could turn oveh any useful information we pick up t' John t' use in his cases—or t' pass on t' othehs."

"An' what're ye plannin' on tellin' folks hehre?"

"I'll tell 'em I'm goin' t' Boston on business, lookin' into the insurance an' so on, stoppin' t' see Jackson or t' see off Tom... We'll take *Idris* t' fool folks, run her down t' Halifax, dock her thehre an' hop one o' the packets makin' for Boston from Livehpool... Now, are ye shipmates with me?"

"I s'pose ye'll go it alone if I ain't?" I asked dryly.

"Damn right I will; be off in an oweh."

"Then I'm comin' with ye; ye'll louse up without me... I need a drink first, a real stiff whiskey an' wateh; then I'll be ready for anything."

Having no one to answer to, I could be off with no notice, with my canvas bag slung at my back; but for Ben, who was tied to half the town, it was a more difficult matter; and I never knew for sure how he did it, or how hard Anne hit the roof—just seen him walk briskly up to *Idris* at supper, his old seabag aloft on his shoulder. Aboard for a spell already, I'd cleaned out the cabin, stowing Jim's stray gear away in the cuddy, before Ben should happen to see it; and I was busy overhauling the rigging, and taking inventory of our paltry needs.

Grub for supper, breakfast and noon dinner the next day, with extra stores in case we didn't ship out from Halifax directly; heavy sailing gear and a few changes of clothing, nothing worth keeping, since it'd probably be stole any way; these made up the grand total I'd stashed; and we hung around now only long enough for Ben to shave his beard, and strap his trunk under his berth. With the wind strong and steady out of the northwest, we tripped our anchor and quickly cast off, running before it out of the harbor; then in our seamen's gear—woolen jerseys and peacoats, dreadnaught trowsers and well-greased boots, with our sheath knives fastened at our belts—we stood off for Vinalhaven, and the turbulent mouth of the Bay of Fundy.

Beating down the coast of Nova Scotia next morning—Ben never sailing better, and *Idris* fleet and adept under his hand—we made as good a time as a steamer; and I kept a weather eye on him at the tiller, glorying in his reflexes and timing. I'd only thrown in my lot with him in the first place to support him in the trials ahead—his state of mind as much a worry to me as any hot water he might get hisself into; and I'd already privately made up my mind that, if he showed signs of breaking under the strains of Jim's old life, or under the stress of memories of him he met up with, I'd steer him straight over to Jackson's place on Long Wharf, and care for him there as long as need be.

But now I seen he showed every sign of the old Ben, there at the tiller in the wintry sun: a woolen cap in place of his visor, and the beard he'd worn for years neatly shaved, but his grey eyes as obstinate and bullheaded, and his attitude as straight-ahead and on course as they'd ever been at the peak of the old days, when he'd been hellbent to make a passage. Clamped between his teeth, his clay pipe smoldered and puffed, for all the world like the well-stoked funnel of a steamer; and his eyes was the eyes of a man with a clear head, positive he's on the right track. Far from needing me to care for him, I seen he was back in charge, running my life along with his like in days past; and with a grin I set by and bided my time, awaiting the moment to stick my oar in.

Hauling into Halifax early that evening—running down the stream along the hillside of houses, chapels and shops and modest shipping, then making fast to one of the quays near the town wharf—we paid off the bulk of our spare funds for wharfage, buttoned *Idris* up and treated ourselves to a spree, the last we'd be likely to have in some time; and somewheres along the line between oysters and dessert we turned up the news a packet was due in next day, one of the liners bound from Liverpool to Boston, stopping only long enough to exchange the mails. Getting into character we laid up in a cheap room, bare of anything save a bedstead and washstand, and managed to snatch a few hours' sleep in the cold; and next day we took to helping the stevedores gratis, to keep warm till the packet hove into

view.

Hove in she did, pretty much on time—Ben viewing her broad beams and bluff bow with distaste; and turning to me he tried to encourage hisself with, “Afteh all, how bad c’n it be? Even if the masteh’s a complete soger, the crew’re all drunk an’ it blows a blizzard, we couldn’t possibly spin out the trek longer’n forty-eight owehs.” Giving him a droll look, I grunted in answer; and as soon as she’d made fast and her passengers’d swarmed off, some of them kissing the earth in their frank glee, we steered a straight course for the captain, me struggling to keep up in Ben’s wake. Being strong-looking hands, the packet short-handed and the weather making up, we had no trouble shipping ourselves for the brief run, a dollar a head in wages; and giving out the names we’d chosen—keeping our Christian handles, since we couldn’t imagine answering to any other, but Ben for his surname using Wood—Jim’s mother’s maiden name—and me using Lovell, another Rom connection, we signed up and carried our personal gear forward.

With the wind still northwest we commenced our run, me and Ben before the mast for the first time in upwards of ten years; and swarming aloft with a score of others—mostly stolid Dutchmen, Germans and Limejuicers—we cast off our buntlines and overhauled rigging, pitching to and fro in the gathering dark. Though Ben had a battle keeping his station, he managed to do a tolerable job as a grumpy down-easter, and resist giving orders to the whole ship; and I, though as appalled at the state of the rigging, and not any keener on the mate myself, managed, by dint of long practice, to keep my mouth shut. With the wind veering round to the northeast, and a thick squall of snow setting in with it, we raised the distant blurs of Cape Ann and the vague, dark hills of Boston two herculean days later, without running up on George’s Island as Ben’d snorted; and getting into the roads early that evening—hearing the bells ring out from the city, as we worked our way in under the pilot—we at last rounded to off the end of Long Wharf, and made her fast to the gloomy pilings.

The usual mob of landsmen swarming aboard and dogging the steps of the immigrants and crew—it being late, and immediate

housing needed—we could scarcely wrap up business; and we wrestled to make up bunts in the half-dark. Waving some of the runners off—pretending to have boarded before at a particular place—Ben and me held out for what we wanted; and when an energetic-looking shark missing his front teeth promised us a berth at Nel's on Creek Lane—when we heard the price, which was suitably slovenly, and got wind of the girls said to be waiting—we hoisted our gear, and followed him down to his handcart.

All around us mountains of luggage intermingled with the mounds of cargo, the lot looming about in the snowy dark; while the passengers pouring down the gangway—in a stream of great coats and beaver hats, thick dresses and mantles and quilted hoods—and the immigrants following in their wake, in a mass of threadbare skirts and waistcoats, and linsey cloaks not much better than blankets—all competed for space amongst the chaotic stacks.

Here and there we could pick out a few loafers with no place, not even Creek Lane, to go to, hunkered down in the lee of the hogsheds, their hatbrims turned down against the snow; or a stray dog nosing amongst the offal, or a pig on his way home to some crate. In the dim orbs of the lamps, just being lighted, the long line of wharf buildings marched off toward the street—curio shops, counting houses, warehouses and sail lofts, some still alive with late evening business; while in and out of the snowy lights loomed carousing bands of seamen, on their way into town for a hot mug of flip. But thankfully in all the commotion of landing, unloading and matching of faces and luggage, there was scarcely a chance for anyone to recognize us; and we disappeared behind our runner into the night.

So late did we get in—after a considerable walk, mostly down dark, narrow streets, where lanterns was swinging crazily at doorways, and well-muffled men was scurrying by us, or dodging down stairways diving off from the street—that there was no time for anything but bed; and we postponed any thoughts of exploring and hobnobbing till the broad, sober light of the morrow. Taking the cheapest room we could get—a dormitory up under the eaves, where a score of men was already bunked down, two or three to a rickety bedstead—we

toted our gear up the creaking steps, and dumped it at the foot of our berth; then casting dubious glances at the snoring shadows around us, we paused to take stock of our lodgings. In the dim arc of our candle we leerily eyed the bed, with its ragged counterpane and grey-hued linen, a long time—and numerous inmates—from washday; and warily we met each other's eyes.

“Anything alive in thehre, d'ye think?” Ben asked, as if realizing for the first time what he'd brung on us; and ruefully I turned back the covers.

“Considerable,” I answered, “an' soon t' be lunchin' off us”; and wordlessly we eyed the option of the floor. Bare of any covering, it looked oddly stained in the dark, besides being game to the mice, if not rats; and in the end we voted the bed—thinking of placing our spare clothes between us and the sheets, but soon changing our minds, not wanting to infect them too with vermin, and compromising by wearing our pilot coats, as much for warmth as for the illusion of protection.

What with the run down to Halifax with just me and Ben to work *Idris*, then the two-day trek, short on sleep, to Boston, I was feeling pretty beat; and my mind made up, I piled in with my boots on, figuring they was my most valuable property, and guessing that was how the sheets'd got into their present condition. Not long after we'd laid down—tumbled close together for warmth, the temperature in the room at freezing, if that—there was an eruption of noise on the stairs, and two or three choice spirits staggered in to sleep on the floor, too awash to care there was no more spare beds. With some wretched moans and groans, one of them was soon thoroughly sick—on the floor, I supposed, since there was no chamber pots in sight, nor anything that would pass for a wash basin; and between the reek of that, the stale, greasy bedding, and the tobacco juice congealing in the spittoons, I begun to feel unsteady myself—supper that night having been a last-minute scouse, and its mishmash of leftovers sitting none too well now.

“Sure ye don't want t' change youhr mind about this?” I persuasively hissed in Melchett's ear; and in answer he give me a stubborn scowl. Conditioning ourselves to wake at the first creak of

a tread, at the first hint of some joker coming to filch our gear, we lay for a long time waiting for sleep, watching the snow drift down through the rafters; then at last in the snoring and wheezing around us, and the droning of wind a few feet away at the eaves, we dropped off into an uneasy slumber.