

## SNOW ON HIGH GROUND

FIRST DAY of the week, last week of the fishing year; and so they cleared the harbour and put to sea, without hope, for the last few weeks had been blank, as if the herring for ever had gone from the ocean. On first watch, the Old Timer loafed in the wheelhouse; abaft it, the boy-Cook in his galley (mince, Gold Leaf and a new war comic) was making the tea; down aft, the Big Fella and the Skipper were in their curtained bunks, studying the newspapers of the previous week.

That night they got nothing, and they saw no marks till dusk the following day, close-in to an island, with a slash of wind screaming over its cliffs and shrouds of spindrift blasting into the growing night. They had a tow, tore the net, and left it in tatters aft. Later, in a sheltered bay, and just as it began to snow, they hauled the net forward and mended it. By the time they had finished the snow had stopped, though it was colder than ever. When they went to sea again, it was blowing harder than ever too.

The Cook produced a meal, which he described as venison chops, and which was even more of a disaster than usual. But the Skipper, poker-faced, said, 'You're fair coming on at the cooking, Cook'; for he too had once been a boy-cook at the fishing. And he knew that for pure nastiness the job would be hard to surpass, and was rendered possible only by the fierce intimidation offered by the crew to the slightest sign of independence on the part of the boy.

In the wheelhouse, the Old Timer turned the boat through the wind and she lurched violently. A basin of beans, a bag of sugar and the tomato sauce hurled themselves off the cabin table. Someone caught the sugar, but the beans exploded on the seat

locker, and the sauce lay smashed and bleeding at the foot of the heavy steel heating stove. No one said anything: speech was an effort, against the roar of the engine. The boy could clear it all up later, as usual.

The Big Fella suddenly roared at him across the table: 'What's for pudding, Cook?'

The boy threw himself waist-deep in an appropriate locker, reappeared, turned and shrieked, 'Peaches'.

'What kind?', screamed the Big Fella, incandescent with mock fury.

The Cook jumped visibly, gaped for a moment, and then, with split-second inspiration and perfect seriousness, bawled back, 'Sliced'.

Later, at anchor somewhere, the men slept while the boy was left in the wheelhouse to get the forecast at the back of midnight.

'What was it?', asked the Skipper when he came up.

'Em - just snow on high ground', said the Cook with confident precision.

There was a terrible silence on the Skipper for a moment, a terrible stillness, in the winking gloom of his wheelhouse.

But all he said was, 'That'll be handy, Cook. You better give the boys a shout now'.

And so they went to work again. Each knew that the weather promised gales and worse on the way, but the night was still clear and the tops of the hills on the mainland coast were indeed white with new snow. In the far north the northern lights were dancing weirdly, very high in the sky. The Old Timer was standing in the door of the casing watching them, with the Cook at his back, taking a break from brewing serious tea in the galley kettle.

‘Do you know what that means, Cook?’, he demanded, taking a cigarette uninvited from the boy’s mouth, to smoke it himself. ‘Ice. When you see them like that, it means bad ice up north’.

The boy, jaunty with pleasure at the recognition of his presence, lit another Gold Leaf and peered aft, over the boat’s wake, into the north - towards which, in due course, he spat with stylish expertise.

‘The hardest man I ever saw was up there’,. the Old Timer said. ‘In Spitzzy. A German. Just after the war. We were in four days sheltering from weather when this rust-bucket side-winder came in. Rust and ice from stem to stern. God knows how she had survived it. Her skipper came out on the bridge wing to have a look at the place. I was never nearer to him that fifty yards. But there was something queer about him. About the way he cocked his eye at the weather. He wasn’t afraid of it, somehow. Anyway, he was at sea up there right through the war. All that time, up there on a U-boat’.

‘What kind’s a you-boat?’, the Cook wondered.

The Old Timer flicked his cigarette over the transom and into the boiling wake. ‘He had a lot of friends in those waters, the poor bastard’, he said; and went down the trap at once, into his bunk, closed the curtains, and retrieved from its hiding-place a half-empty, half-bottle of sweet, black rum.

There was no herring found that night either, and after lying in the lee of the land for the following day, they put to sea again late in the afternoon - a clear and crisp day, with the shadows already on the hills in the east, and to the west the tops of the islands scattered like antique bonnets along the horizon.

The Big Fella, in good form, pointed to one of these far grey-blue tops, and told the Cook about a girl he once had known from its western side. The boy looked doubtful, as if fearful of complicity in something not entirely understood.

That night too there was nothing to be had, nor nothing throughout the following day and evening - by which time, down aft in the cabin, the gloom was tangible. Speculation began as to when they would turn for home and be done with it for the week, the year - with just the prospect of the Christmas break ashore to blunt the pointed injustice of it all.

'What was her name anyway?', the Cook suddenly bawled at the Big Fella, over the roar of the engine.

The Big Fella leaned out from his bunk in his grimy vest and grinned, but shrugged that he just didn't remember: and at that the Skipper was hammering on the cabin skylight and shouting them on deck to get, in a blatter of rain and the best part of a gale.

'But she had beautiful eyes', the Big Fella suddenly volunteered to no-one in particular: 'Aye, like an army with banners'.

They manned the winch and shot away, the wires lashing the length of her and singing with wild hope in the turning blocks, and towed away into the night, with the odd sea climbing the rail of her and rolling solid over the deck of her, and the Old Timer grumbling to himself, 'Just a waste of time, just a waste of bloody time'.

Close to some shore they began to haul, in a hurry, but the net unaccountably jammed somewhere: and before anyone could move, the entire sea right round the boat began to pulse with a sharp, translucent light. The Cook was visibly pale, even in the harsh brightness of the deck floods, as if he expected some creature from the world of his comics to climb calmly from the ocean and stand

beside him on the deck. But the Big Fella was a founder-member of that society which fears little but human company and its wiles, so he leaned over the rail for a look with the tool-box torch, while the Old Timer held his legs for fear that a sea would carry him away.

‘It’s a mine’, the Big Fella announced at length, as if the whole thing had nothing whatever to do with him, personally, like.

‘Don’t be stupid’, the Skipper yelled hopefully from the starboard wheelhouse window, the peak of his tartan bonnet dancing for fear of what might happen to his boat at any moment.

With an air of wonderful nonchalance, the Big Fella heaved himself back over the rail, muttering darkly, and began to investigate the contents of the tool-box beside the cabin skylight. When he found what he sought, he snapped the wire-cutters threateningly at the Cook, who looked as if he might cry at any moment.

‘Boom Boom, Cook’, he roared at the boy, who promptly jumped with fright. The Old Timer snarled with contempt for the boy’s fear - or maybe his own.

‘Stand free of everything’, he growled, ‘and don’t hold on, that way you might get nothing smashed but your ankles, with any luck’.

The Cook opened his mouth: and before he could close it, or utter a sound, the Big Fella had snipped clinically through some wires attached to the mine, and which had been snagging it to the net. Then he stood back with a cool, experimental air, waiting for some sort of explosion: but there was none, though the neon rhythm of the sea went out at once. At that, with much grunting, the Big Fella dragged over the rail the offending mine, and laid it carefully on the deck. The Old Timer peered at it closely for a moment, and then snorted with profession disdain.

The Big Fella announced at the wheelhouse, 'It's just a Navy practice mine. It has to be given back to them if anybody finds it'.

'The hell with the Navy', the Skipper screeched from his window: and the mine, along with the remains of the underwater flare to which it was connected, went over the side without further ado.

'Cook!', the Big Fella howled in his most ferocious manner, and the boy jumped again with fright. 'Where's the biscuits?'

The Cook disappeared down into the Cabin while the Big Fella and the Old Timer watched him through a gap in the cabin skylight. When the boy had buried himself deep in a locker in search of the biscuits specified by the Big Fella, the Old Timer took the heavy wire-cutters and hammered explosively with them on the roof of the cabin; at which the Cook came out of his locker and up the trap like some well-greased sky-rocket. Both men howled with laughter, and ordered the boy below again: and when he had slunk down into the cabin and into his biscuit locker, they played the same trick on him, until the Cook utterly refused to go below again, and spent the rest of the night in his galley, quaking and smoking and trying hard to smile.

Towards dawn there were more stars in the sky than even the Old Timer had seen before, and when the day began to come in, the snow-covered hills of the mainland were smeared with early fire, till the sun itself rose and it was time to head for home - for no herring were likely to be taken in the light of that fine, bright winter's day.

But they did not turn for home yet. With the engine eased right in, the warm soft beat of it dulled, they cruised south towards the land, and then turned north to thread their way along the edge of

the skerries, hard in on the shore under the last towers and ruins of an old construction camp there.

‘At least it’s a Friday’, the Big Fella was saying to the boys down aft, when the Skipper called them on deck - and they shot, and towed for an hour, laughing at the futile nonsense of it all.

When they started to haul the sea-birds began to gather, and when the bag closed the surface the birds suddenly were diving on it from the wing-tip, in a wheeling and murderous frenzy.

‘There’s something there anyway’, the Big Fella at the winch observed with hungry weariness: and then a great tunnel of herring was laying alongside the boat, and all to come aboard: as long as nothing might go wrong. They began to take the stuff up over the rail, the best of stuff too, twenty, thirty, forty and more lifts, a greengold cascade of silverblue, against the angry squeal of the gilson and the scream of a thousand birds.

Then, as suddenly as they had come, there were no more - and the men on deck began to speak to each for the first time since they had seen that great tunnel of fortune alongside, still in hushed voices at the luck of the morning.

They turned for home, in for home and Christmas, through the islands, her bows well-down with the weight in her, and the Cook grinning expansively as he made the breakfast. Down aft, the Skipper slept after a sleepless week, and in the wheelhouse the Big Fella and the Old Timer talked in muted tones, stunned at the waywardness of fortune, stunned at their largest catch of that year, or of any year.

By late afternoon, they were home. At the head of the pier, the garish tinselled livery of the fairy-lit windows in the village shops was strangely welcoming. They got a buyer for the catch almost at

once, for a good price, the best price of the year. They began to discharge; and soon small puffs of steam were observed to rise intermittently from the hold. By the time they were finished landing, it was raining heavily, but the Cook was standing quite happily on the pier, arms crossed on his lumberman's shirt, two empty lemonade bottles at his feet, and a fresh packet of Gold Leaf wedged in the back-pocket of his jeans.

Suddenly, the buyer, oilskin armoured, came out of the rain and stood looking down at the nameboard of the boat bolted to the front of the wheelhouse.

He said, 'Why is she called that, Cook': after a pause in which he appeared to have been thinking deeply. 'That name didn't come off a Christmas card'.

The Cook grinned, as if party some great intimacy: and then he volunteered in a spirit of magical inspiration, 'Maybe it did. Or maybe there was another one first?'

The buyer gave the boy a long, thoughtful look; and changed tack.

'Where did you get them anyway?', he wondered.

'In the daylight', the Cook said. 'Right in on the shore, at the old camp'.

'Oh, it's still there, is it?', the buyer wondered.

'it was this morning anyway', the Cook replied with some asperity.

'Aye, aye, Cook. So that's the way of it. Christmas again, eh? One more, one less. It's a fair shot you have the day, though. That's the biggest landing in here for years. The biggest price I've ever seen paid for them too. You'll make a pound this week'.

‘We will right enough’, the Cook assented modestly. ‘And we got a mine too’.

‘Right enough’, the buyer said, mightily impressed. ‘A mine too!’

‘Ach, it was just a wee one’, the Cook replied with magnificent unconcern: and with every word edging closer to the coveted and elusive status that he so urgently sought.

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