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The saga of San  
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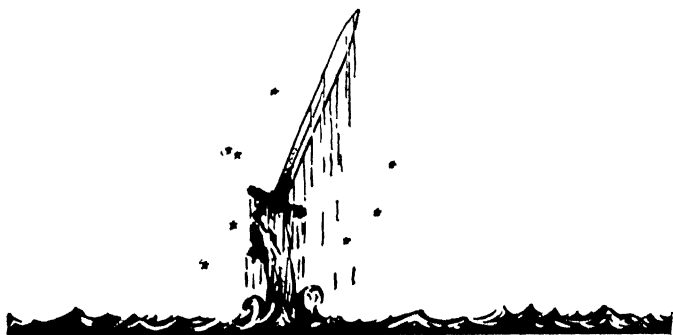
THE SAGA OF *San Demetrio*





THE SAGA  
OF  
*San*  
*Demetrio*

F. TENNYSON JESSE




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1943

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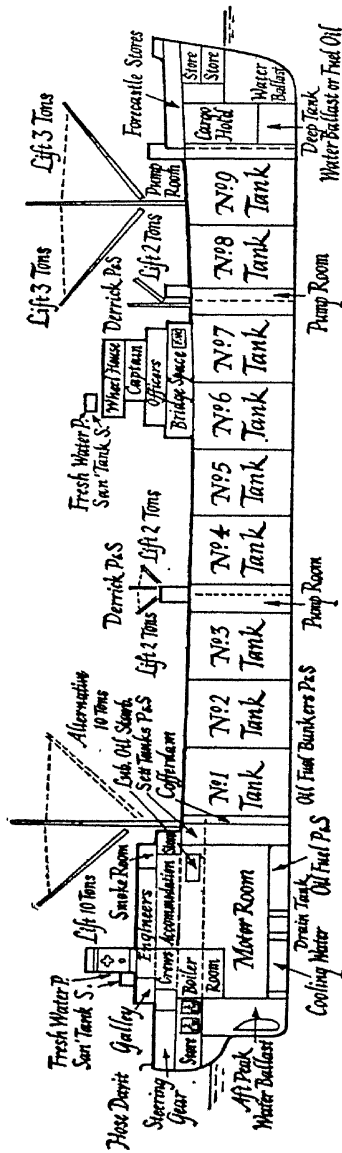
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THE SAGA OF *San Demetrio*

## M.V. San Demetrio



M.V. San Demetrio, a tanker of 8,073 tons gross and 4,815 net, 463 feet in length, fitted with a Kincaid 8-cylinder supercharged engine of 502

N.H.P. Fully laden, she carries 11,000-12,000 tons of petrol. Maximum speed, fully laden, 12 knots. Normal complement, 42 men all told.





## The Ship

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THE GREATEST BATTLE till now of this war is the Battle of the Atlantic; and it may well remain so, even though the Battle of the Pacific has started. For every man who sails that great and difficult ocean, the Atlantic, in the way of a seaman's duty, is fighting in this battle, a battle that is not yet won and is being perpetually fought. Were it to be lost by us—which will never happen—not only would Britain starve, but she would no longer be able to make munitions to send to Russia and to those countries in the Near East and the Orient which we are bound to help.

Never sit at your table and eat the food the merchantmen have brought you, never listen to the anti-aircraft guns firing in your defence, without remembering this; never see a vessel, dingy and shabby, coming safely into port without thanking her, however silently; never see one setting off without the hope that all will be well with her. The life and liberty of man-

kind depends not only on the Navy, but also on the Mercantile Marine.

There is an old tag which says that the Navy is the Silent Service. It is even truer to call the Mercantile Marine the Inarticulate Service, not so much that its members cannot be vocal if they wish, but because they want to get on with the job without any undue fuss, which would mean loss of time. This job was never, at its best, a light or easy one, and it is far worse now. Men who follow the sea are used to danger, but in war time these dangers are more than the usual hazards of the elements; death falls from the air, death lies upon the surface of the waters, and death comes from below.

The waters all over the globe have been the scene of countless stories of valour since this war started—many of them never to be told, because both men and ships are lying fathoms deep. Luckily for the future, survivors of some actions have lived for their tales to be recorded for the inspiring of future generations.

The bravest of the ships are the merchantmen, so vulnerable, often lost and unescorted, and when in convoy only too often protected by armed merchant liners, vessels manned by those whose gallantry is unsurpassed in the proud sea-annals of this war, but which are frail of structure when confronted by a raider's guns. Of the merchantmen the bravest are the

oil-tankers, for they may blow up in a blaze of heat and flames directly they are hit; and of the men aboard them the bravest—and no deck officers or crew will deny this—are the Black Squad.

And, make no mistake about it, for hundreds of years to come, when a story such as that of *H.M.S. Calliope*—who fought her way inch by inch out of the harbour at Samoa in the teeth of a cyclone, cheered by the doomed American sailors on the United States man-o'-war *Trentham*—or that of the *S.S. Trevesa's* boats, is told, then the tale of *San Demetrio* and the armed merchantman *H.M.S. Jervis Bay*, which was in charge of the convoy, will be told also, and may well be given pride of place. There may have been stories of the sea as great, but none greater.

### *M.V. San Demetrio*

*M.V. San Demetrio* was, as the initials in front of her name imply, a motor-driven ship. She was a tanker of 8,073 tons gross and 4,815 net, 463 feet in length, and she was fitted with a Kincaid engine, which is an eight-cylinder supercharged engine of 502 N.H.P. When fully laden, she could carry between 11,000 and 12,000 tons of petrol. She was a single-screw vessel, and her engines gave a speed of about twelve knots in fine weather and when she was fully laden.

A motor vessel is a very different affair from the old

freighter with triple-expansion engines. Men come out from the engine-room almost as clean as they went down. The greasers and firemen wear dungarees and singlets, and go off watch in a very different condition from the sweating, dirty men who go off duty in the old coal-burning boats.

*San Demetrio* is a flush-decked vessel, her main deck of steel runs from fore to aft, but she looks like a three-island ship, and such any layman would take her to be, or any seaman for that matter, if he saw her on the horizon. She has two well decks, one between her poop deck and her superstructure amidships, and the other between this superstructure and the built-up fo'c'sle, so that seen against the skyline she would present the silhouette of three little humped islands. She has a cruiser stern and slightly raked stem. A long, grey, gaunt ship, a tremendous length she seems as seen from her fo'c'sle head, or even looking aft from the bridge, and this in spite of her generous beam. The only signs of colour aboard her are the little wheels which control the valves in the various tanks; the red wheels control the port valves and the green wheels the starboard, the white wheels operate the master or block valves, the yellow the switch-over valves, and the blue the valves of the centre tanks. Sometimes the white wheels denote switch-over valves, and yellow the master—that depends on the colour fancies of the engineer.

From the bridge, these wheels give a note of gaiety amidst all the grim greyness. They sprout up from the deck like huge coloured daisies, iron daisies, tough daisies; lying flat and wide-eyed on the valve spindle extensions that stand up all over the deck like metal stalks, they give a strange impression of iron flowers, as though they had grown on Mars and had been transplanted to this unhappy planet as the most fitting flora.

In the old days, the crew always slept in the fo'c'sle. In *San Demetrio* the paint shop, carpenter's shop and rope locker and under the fo'c'sle head. The crew sleep aft, and they have single-berth or double-berth cabins, with carpets and run-away basins. The engine-room officers also sleep aft, and the other officers amidships. Ordinarily, she carries a crew of forty-two all told. After she had been shelled and set on fire, she was worked home by sixteen men, one of them dying. Normally, the engine-room staff alone numbered fourteen men, besides the Chief.



## The Crew

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WHEN ON 28TH OCTOBER, 1940, *San Demetrio* cleared from Halifax, she was laden with a cargo of petrol, taken in at the brown, dry, hot little isle of Aruba, in the Dutch West Indies. There like great serpents lie waiting on the quays the hoses through which the oil flows to the ship; in the harbour the beautiful clipper-bowed schooners, cockroach-ridden indeed, but gay with carved taffrails and gingerbread work, are still to be seen. In Willemstadt, the capital of Curaçao, the mother island, they lie like birds riding the water before winging away. Willemstadt remains perhaps the most varied and interesting town to those who visit the West Indies, for it seems a part of Old Holland, with streets of Dutch houses with crow-step gables, a lovely harbour, crowded by this mass of white hulls. It is hot in the Dutch West Indies, and canaries, still their pale native green instead of the yellow of which the English think when they hear the word canary, fly

back and forth amongst the dappled sun and shadow of the orange trees and bamboo groves. Dutchmen still use the ports of their West Indian islands, and so can all merchantmen save those of the Axis powers. In those sunny isles, the men of *San Demetrio* were warmer in daylight hours than they were to be again; though at night, even in northerly latitudes, they were always unbearably hot with the deadlights fixed over the ports because of the black-out.

At Aruba, then, *San Demetrio* took on her cargo of "pool petrol"—for instead of each oil company marketing its own special grade of petrol, it is now sold under the ægis of one company. Like most things in this war, it is pooled, though with better results. The petrol carried by *San Demetrio* had the lowest flash-point of any save aviation spirit, and could have ignited on the slightest provocation. This is important in the light of what happened—and did not happen—later.

Her master was Captain George Waite, O.B.E.; a bachelor, but no misogynist, rather what might be called a rip-roaring bachelor; a ruddy, jovial man, weighing about fifteen stone, an irrepressible jester, a fine seaman, a good "mixer," but a good disciplinarian, an officer his men follow anywhere.

In December, 1939, he had been in command of the same company's *San Alberto* when she was torpedoed and broke in half. After some time adrift in the boats,

he, with some other officers and men, re-boarded the after portion of the vessel. They found the main diesel engine and auxiliaries intact, and endeavoured to work *San Alberto* back to England stern first, but after a few days of this in very bad weather, a destroyer had to take them off and sink the after-end of the ship by gunfire. The jagged plates were ripping off her flanks, thus acting as side rudders and turning her round in circles, so that it was impossible to keep her stern first to the seas, and her broken portion kept on wallowing round head on to the gale. Every time this happened, naturally the damage became worse, and she could not have survived much more.

On this occasion, Captain Waite and his Chief Engineer both received the O.B.E. and others were decorated or commended. It was a fine effort, and had it not been for the force of the weather, Captain Waite and his helpers would have pulled off an almost impossible feat.

### *Ship's Officers*

Some of Captain Waite's officers and men on board *San Demetrio* were to make history, little as they thought of it as they lay in the tropic waters of Aruba, so let us take a look at them:

Mr. Wilson, the First Officer, was a Tynesider, with colouring so fair that he was almost an albino. Since he



was a Tynesider, the word "pig" could not be mentioned on board any ship in which he served. This is a peculiarly Tyneside superstition, no other sailormen have it. You may talk of "hog" or "swine," but you must not say "pig," or up go the thumbs of all the Tynesiders aboard to try and counteract the bad luck. *San Demetrio* has a Tyneside Chief Engineer now, and his thumbs are ready to go up if you start to praise the breakfast bacon, then fall again, and he smiles as you do not mention the animal which provided the rashers.

On land, Mr. Wilson was an ardent pigeon-fancier and bred fantails. When *San Demetrio* was outward bound, off Southend, a pigeon alighted on board. Wilson, with infinite patience, gradually tamed the bird by spreading rice for it on the deck, and eventually he caged it.

After ten days, he let it out and it used to fly around, though it always came back to the deck for its meals. But one morning, about three days before making the West Indies, it did not come back, and Wilson got more and more worried. He daylight-signalled in Morse to a passing tanker homeward bound: "Have you got my pigeon?" The tanker said: "Yes, we have your pigeon," much to Wilson's grief. But the pigeon returned half an hour later, even as Noah's dove returned the first time to the Ark.

It finally decided to settle down in the West Indies,

where it may be to this day, mating perhaps with some strange tropical bird, such as the unique sulphur and stormy-coloured parrot of St. Vincent, or those of the Spanish Main, so that we may yet see green and red and sulphur birds pouting out their chests or spreading their tails or tumbling over and over like inebriated rainbows. What a change from the mud of Southend to the jungle of Trinidad or St. Vincent, the orange groves of Curaçao, or the reaches of Amazon or Orinoco!

The Chief Engineer was Charles Pollard, a vigorous, clean-shaven man in the early fifties, with a thick thatch of steel-grey hair, who had obtained his steam certificate in 1914 and his motor-ship endorsement in 1935. He served at sea during the war of 1914-18, and joined the Eagle Oil and Shipping Co. in 1924. He enjoys a glass of beer, but, like Captain Waite, he never takes a drink at sea. He has the gift of being able to go without food or sleep far longer than many a younger man.

There was his Second Engineer, Duncan, a man from South Shields, a good man, the Chief thought a lot of him. He was slightly built, of an Arab type, very dark-haired, with thin features and grey eyes. The last time the Chief was ever to hear his voice was when it hailed him in the darkness, wanting to know whether all was well with him.

There was the Third Engineer, George Willey, also

of South Shields, who nearly lost his feet as the result of exposure, but never ceased working and helping to bring the vessel safe home.

The Second Officer, Mr. Hawkins, now in the R.N.R., was only twenty-six, a lean, dark young man, newly married, the son of a doctor. He was to become Acting Captain.

### *“Other Ranks”*

John Lewis Jones, the Apprentice, was only a boy, and, as his name shows, a Welshman; a thin, red-haired youth, who still managed to lose two stone in the course of his adventurous passage home, one of those boys born for the sea, first in small-boat sailing, then in blue-water ships.

Roy Housden, even younger, was a first-voyage cadet, who showed in all the difficulties and dangers a willingness and a capacity that proved he had chosen his profession well. He was the personification of the ideal English boy, with a fresh, healthy skin, and a smile that no hardship ever wiped out.

Fletcher was the Bo’sun, sturdy and dark, a grand type of petty officer, always helpful and courageous, who knew his work and proved a strong help in time of trouble.

McNeil and McLennan were both seamen from the Hebrides, and beyond value as masters at handling

small sailing craft. Colum McNeil, who took charge of the lifeboat and undoubtedly saved the lives of all in her, was moon-faced, smiling, sandy-haired, looking younger than his tale of twenty-six years.

Then there was an undersized little greaser—one John Boyle, whom no one would have guessed, by looking at him, to have the heart of a lion, a heart that not only sustained him in great danger, but kept him faithful to his duty in pain and exhaustion and the gathering shadows of death.

There was John Davies, fiftyish and grey-haired, the storekeeper, who, in spite of broken ribs, was to turn to and work in the engine-room ceaselessly. There was also the Second Steward, John Halloran, who gave cheerful and willing service throughout, despite the fact that he suffered more from exposure than the others during the two days in the boat, and had to be taken to hospital on arriving at Rothesay. There was the Assistant Steward, John Porter, also very weak and ill from exposure, but he turned to and did tasks entirely alien to him with unflinching zeal; and the Mess-room boy, John Jameson, a cheerful lad, who could turn his hand to anything, and indeed ended up in the engine-room. There was an Ordinary Seaman, Clifford Cottes, who was also—and this is the noteworthy thing about all these men—unflinchingly cheerful throughout the days of cold, of hunger and danger of death.

*San Demetrio* cleared Aruba and made Halifax, where she was to join a convoy. As she was still short of three men, Captain Waite signed on some strangers: young Ernest Daines, an Englishman, who was to die at his post; Oswald Preston, to become famous as "the Yank," although he was of Canadian birth, and a man named Mortimer.

Oswald Preston is a curious and fascinating figure in the story of *San Demetrio*. A born wanderer and adventure lover, he had knocked about the world. He had reddish hair going rather thin, but his eyes were alert beneath his sandy brows, his face was narrow, clean cut and freckled, the reckless face of a reckless man, a keen and witty face. Until the attack on *San Demetrio*, Oswald Preston did not show his worth. The hymn says that the daily round, the common task, should furnish all we need to ask. They furnished more than Preston asked. He disliked them intensely. He did no avoidable work until the disaster occurred and seemed to look on working his passage rather in the light of a pleasure cruise. But from the moment of the attack until the triumphant end of *San Demetrio's* epic passage home, he not only worked like ten men, but kept up everybody's spirits with his gaiety and jokes. It needs a war to bring the best out of men such as the Yank, but their best is so good that a war is no time to criticise them.

*San Demetrio* left Halifax on 28th October, in a con-

voy protected by *H.M.S. Jervis Bay*—that most vulnerable of vessels, an armed merchant liner; but after going ahead for four days she had to leave the convoy and stop for engine repairs.

This little business took some sixteen hours; after that, *San Demetrio* went ahead at maximum speed and caught up with the convoy on the night of 4th November.



## The Convoy is Attacked

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THE NEXT DAY was Guy Fawkes Day, when, in peace time, children let off squibs and rockets and at night light bonfires in gay memory of a feud long happily dead in England. This Guy Fawkes night was to be far more noisy, far more brightly lit, than any in peace time for all the ships in the convoy shepherded by *H.M.S. Jervis Bay*.

They were in latitude  $52^{\circ} 30$  N. and longitude  $32^{\circ}$  W. when the men aboard *San Demetrio* heard gunfire. They thought at first that *H.M.S. Jervis Bay* had spotted a submarine and was dropping depth charges. The evening was growing dark, there was a moderate southwesterly swell, and the dark, slate-coloured sea, not breaking into white water, went shouldering past the dark, slate-coloured flanks of *San Demetrio*. The sky was heavily covered with clouds and only a livid rim of light showed along the horizon. *San Demetrio*

was leading one of the columns of the convoy, and was making about nine knots.

Captain Waite and Mr. Wilson, and the young Apprentice, red-headed John Lewis Jones, were on the bridge; Second Officer Hawkins had just come off the afternoon watch and was walking aft to the gun, when the topmast of a fighting vessel was sighted on the port beam. Young Jones had in his cabin below a photograph of the *Deutschland*, and something about the turret of this vessel, now visible above the horizon, seemed familiar to him. He said he believed it to be an enemy battleship. Captain Waite was in no doubt; that turret looked formidable, and soon he saw the raider hull-up, coming along "with a bone in her teeth." By then she had opened fire. Her gunnery was superb, so the British sailors testify.

The Commodore of the Convoy, who was in command of *S.S. Cornish City*, gave the signal for all vessels to scatter, and to proceed at full speed.

Captain Waite ordered the engine-room telegraph to be rung to full speed ahead, mustered the gun crews and ordered the lifeboats to be swung out. The crew on deck got into their life-saving gear and the two guns, a 4-inch low-angle gun and a 12-pounder high-angle, were manned and made ready.

All the ships in the convoy dropped their smoke floats and fired back. Why they fired back is a curiosity



of the human heart. None of them, not even *Jervis Bay*, was within her own range of the enemy; so it must have been an instinctive reaction on the part of men attacked.

The enemy pocket-battleship—the *von Scheer*—had the whole convoy easily within range. If she had only waited till daylight, she could have picked off every vessel in turn.

Captain Waite, after his guns had been let off, said to Mr. Hawkins: "For God's sake, stop firing. It'll only get her back up!" It was obvious that *San Demetrio* couldn't hit the enemy, and she was exposing her own position in the growing darkness by the flashes from her guns.

### *Bridge and Engine-room*

When the enemy's fire was first heard, Mr. Pollard, the Chief Engineer, was changing for tea (these unalterable British!), and he went on deck and saw flashes of gunfire on the horizon. He, too, could make out the fighting top of a battleship. He had given a standing order that should the vessel, or any of the convoy, be attacked, two engineers whose turn it was should take up a stand-by position, so that they could watch the thermometers to make sure there was no undue or dangerous rise in temperature, which might have caused burning of exhaust valves. If this had hap-

pened, we should have heard no more of *San Demetrio* than that she had been lost with all hands.

The Chief went below after seeing the outbreak of this engagement; the Fifth Engineer, Baird, was at his post; Mr. Lynch, Seventh Engineer, was entering. Duncan, the Second Engineer, whose watch it was, was at the controls and had increased the revolutions to 113, making a convoy speed of about eight and a half to nine knots. For as the strength of a chain is that of its weakest link, so the speed of a convoy must be conditioned by its weakest brethren. This increase gave a speed of a good eleven and a half knots in that weather; there was a swell, and the ship was pitching.

As the Chief entered, Duncan grinned up at him.

"Get to hell out of this. It's my watch. I can handle this job!" he said.

"O.K. I'll just have a look round," replied the Chief, clambering down to the manœuvring platform. He saw that all was going well, and that every man had his life-jacket. Then he went back to the bridge, for he was aware that every engine-room man wishes to know what is happening on deck, so much so that a member of the engine-room staff is always sent on deck when either clearing or making port. How much more, then, does the Black Squad need some communication with the deck during enemy action at sea?

Therefore the Chief left, and for a time went back

and forth between the engine-room and the bridge. On one of these occasions, on his way up, he met the Third Officer, Mr. Knight, who was bringing a verbal message saying that, if the ship were struck by gunfire, the engine-room telegraph would ring to "Finished with Engines," which would also mean "Abandon Ship." Some accounts have said that Captain Waite gave the order that "Stop" on the engine-room telegraph would mean "Abandon Ship," but "Stop" is a manœuvring signal, and might not necessarily mean abandoning ship at all. The order was "Finished with Engines."

The Third Mate asked the Chief whether he would not like him to take the message to the engine-room, and the Chief said: "Yes, sonny." For he felt that if the Third Officer went himself to the engine-room with the Captain's message, it would give the staff there a feeling that those on deck were looking after them.

Now it works two ways being below in an engine-room. The men may have the comforting illusion that a ceiling and walls make at least a sort of token gesture of security; just as on land, when the bombs are falling, one may have the absurd feeling that to keep under cover anywhere, even in a small house, is some slight protection, although one knows that it is not. So it is possible for a man to get some measure of comfort from the knowledge there is a steel deck over his head and steel walls around him.

But no engine-room man in his heart really believes this, however much imagination may try to play this trick on him. He knows that he may be scalded to death by steam or burned by oil or rolled over and over in his dark, steel-walled prison, weaving his way down through the depths of the sea, to a last accompaniment of crashes as everything tears away; imprisoned in the last little bit of air, which is of no worth because it can never be renewed.

Engine-room men would rather die by shot or shell on deck or by drowning in the open sea than be caught in this way, and that is why the men of the Black Squad, which has always valiantly worked on through battles at sea, are among the bravest seamen of them all.

The men in the engine-room of *San Demetrio* worked on, and they were able to do so in the knowledge that their danger was not forgotten by those above their heads.

### *Jervis Bay Steams on to Glory*

After Mr. Pollard had sent the Third Mate into the engine-room, he went up to the bridge, for he wished to know if the top speed that had been ordered was enabling the vessel to keep her position or to carry out any necessary manœuvre. Captain Waite told him that he would like more speed still if possible, so back went Mr. Pollard to work up his engine to the sufficient maxi-

mum. speed. He had to watch very carefully in the engine-room, for he had a very high exhaust temperature which, if increased, would probably cause serious damage and result in a breakdown.

He worked on, so busy that he lost sense of the time, but he knows that it was getting dark when the pre-arranged signal came—the engine-room telegraph rang to “Finished with Engines.”

Up on deck, one of the most awe-inspiring actions of the war had been watched by men who still can hardly describe it, so overcome are they with the horror and grandeur of what they saw.

Directly the attack began, *Jervis Bay* turned to port—towards the enemy battleship—and a shell caught her amidships.

“They’ve got her,” cried one man on board *San Demetrio*. “She’s hit!”

“She’s on fire,” said another, “but she’s making for the raider.”

*Jervis Bay* was indeed on fire amidships, and she hadn’t, as the Chief expressed it afterwards, a hope in hell of saving herself. Few of her men and none of her officers were picked up after the engagement. But she steamed straight on into the range of the enemy’s gunfire for several miles, blazing like a bonfire, riddled by shells the whole time. For some fifteen minutes the men on board *San Demetrio* watched this terrific fight,

this uttermost expression of the human will.

When *Jervis Bay* came within her own range, her bridge had gone, she was alight from stem to stern, and the enemy must have thought she was finished, but suddenly she let off all her guns that could bear.

She had held her fire until she could be sure of hitting the pocket-battleship; she had drawn the enemy's fire upon herself, and given the convoy of which she was in charge all the time she could in which to scatter and get up speed. And only four vessels out of a convoy of thirty-nine were lost.

Thus *Jervis Bay* steamed on to death and immortality.

She went down blazing, her colours shot away, but a new ensign lashed in her rigging; her bridge shot away, but her master still in command, though mortally wounded.

And who shall say that, in the haven where gallant ships drop anchor, Drake and Raleigh, Grenville, Frobisher and a goodly company, led by a little man with only one arm and a patch over his eye, did not come forward to greet the one-armed Fegen, and his battle-scarred men?



## San Demetrio Abandoned

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AFTER "JERVIS BAY" had gone, the enemy attacked first *Cornish City* and then *Rangitiki*. No ship stood a chance against the pocket-battleship: a curious phrase—"pocket-battleship"—that seems almost to impart the notion of a child's toy to this deadly, armed, and kinetic city. Any pocket that a battleship could go into must be as deep and—as the old sailing men used to say—"as dark as the Earl of Hell's riding boots."

*Rangitiki* escaped by a clever use of her smoke-screen. The other ships also tried to hide behind their smoke-screens, but the light of the rising moon, ahead of the convoy, showed the raider where to aim, while she herself could only be placed by her gun-flashes.

Captain Waite discussed with his officers whether or not to alter course. *San Demetrio* was steaming away from the raider at about twelve knots, but she was in the direct line of fire and obviously was going to be attacked next after the Commodore's ship and *Rangitiki*.

It was decided to alter course, and the order "Hard-a-starboard" was given. The ship began swinging as she obeyed her helm, and at that moment, another vessel altering her course to port, a collision seemed a certainty. Only by splendid seamanship and swift decision did Captain Waite avoid this added tragedy. The ships swung clear of each other and steamed on; but *San Demetrio*, as a result, was now heading for the raider, and was silhouetted against a moon that glowed like a vast blood-orange.

Naturally the first thought in the mind of Captain Waite had been to get his ship with her valuable cargo away from the raider. When he felt that that was no longer possible, for the gunnery from the raider was of only too deadly an accuracy, he at once thought of the many lives in his keeping.

The enemy got *San Demetrio's* range, and the first salvo straddled her, the third scored direct hits, damaging her badly amidships and holing her in the port bow just above the water-line. Captain Waite had to make a quick decision. He did make it, and there are some men who would not have resisted the moral grandeur of chancing their luck. His crew and his owners admire him to this day for what he did. As the direct result of his action, although he was not able to partake in the salving of his vessel, he saved his ship, his cargo, and his crew. As a matter of legal fact, had he been able to



re-board *San Demetrio*, there would have been no claim for salvage, the Master being in command.

*“Finished with Engines”*

Captain Waite gave the order, “Finished with Engines,” and Mr. Wilson rang the engine-room telegraph accordingly. Then the First Officer sounded the siren, giving one long blast followed by two short. Then the Captain shouted, for extra precaution, through the hatch to the young wireless operators, but these gallant boys—they were no more—must have stayed a minute too long at their post, for they were never seen again after the bridge was struck. Young Ernest Daines was also killed on look-out duty on the fo’c’sle head when the first shell struck, making a hole in the shell plating of the port bow just below the anchor. Young Daines’s body must have been blasted overboard, for the fo’c’sle did not blaze like the bridge and the after-part of the vessel, and his body would have been found had it fallen on the fo’c’sle head.

Owing to the excitement of the action, gunfire blazing from all round the horizon, the immortal action of *Jervis Bay*, and the infernal din, the Chief had not been particularly struck by the order that “Finished with Engines” would mean “Abandon Ship.” Since seeing *Jervis Bay*, he had been working so hard he had not had much thought for safety. Now in a moment he

ordered all the Black Squad on deck, and followed himself.

The crew of *San Demetrio* went to their lifeboat stations without panic, although high-explosive shells were bursting overhead and the ship was being peppered with shrapnel and steel fragments.

The Chief was making for his lifeboat when it occurred to him that it would be a good idea to go aft to his room and find his steel helmet. He could see nothing, and went quickly back to the lifeboat without it, for *San Demetrio* was by then under very heavy gunfire.

He got into his lifeboat, which was the starboard boat amidships, and was the first to be water-borne, but just as they were about to push off, there came a shout of "Hold on!" and seven men slid down and joined them. The port midship lifeboat had carried away, and thus these seven men, added to the nine in the starboard boat, made up the sixteen that eventually saved *San Demetrio*.

So the disaster proved lucky, for nine men would have had tremendous difficulty in saving *San Demetrio*, however gallant their spirit.

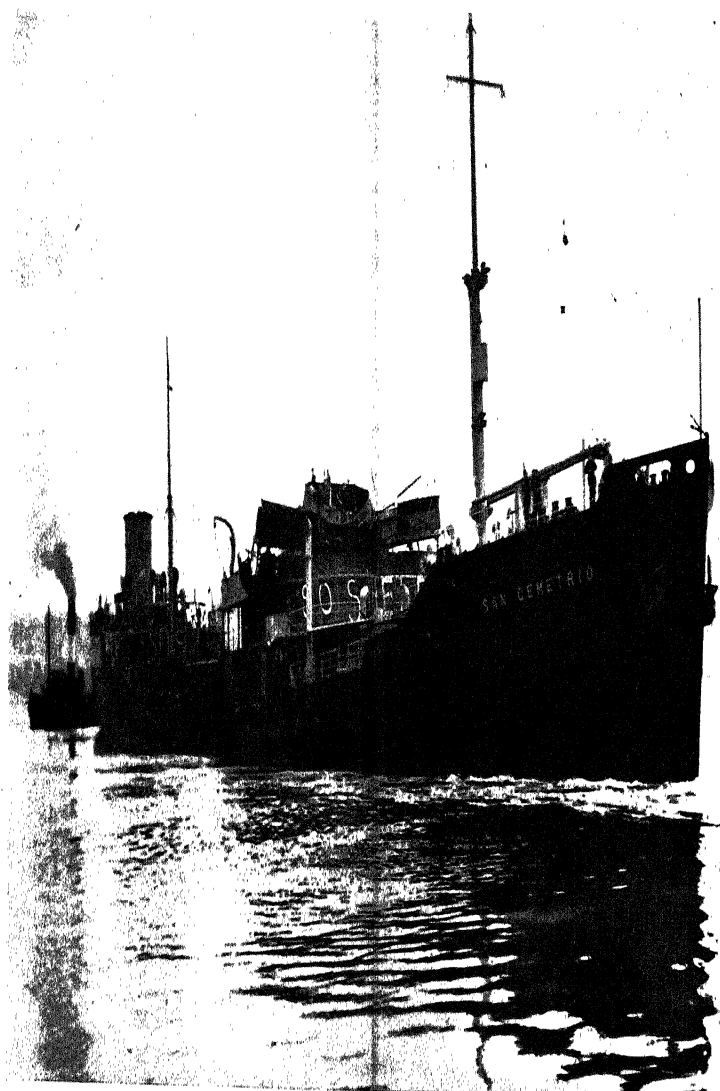
Darkness had come very rapidly; on deck it was pitch black, but the moon showed up *San Demetrio* as an appallingly easy target. The horizon seemed ringed with blazing ships.



*M. V. San Demetrio*

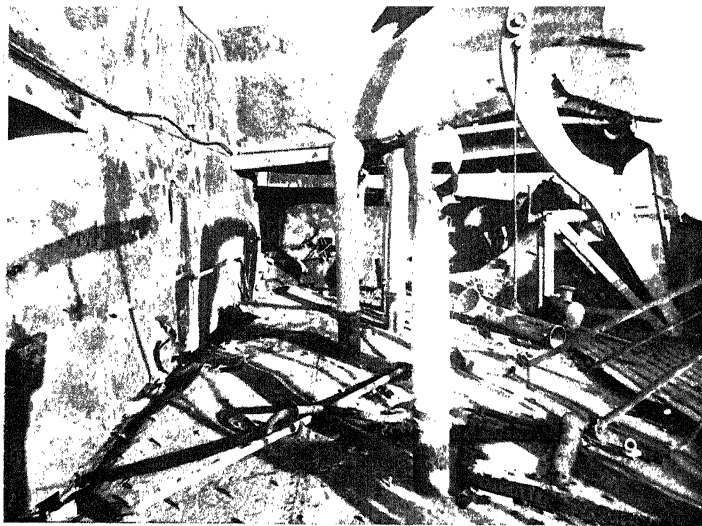
*Signal of Distress*





*Under her own power*





*Upper Bridge Deck, Starboard Side*

*Chief Engineer's Cabin*



As the Chief got into the boat, he caught his right hand between the ship's side and one of the falls, damaging it badly. Davies, the storekeeper, and John Boyle, the greaser, fell into the boat and were injured.

### “Lifeboats Away”

There was a fairly heavy swell, and in the shadow of the vessel's hull there was no light. The Chief's lifeboat began to pull away, and in the darkness bumped the lifeboat in charge of Mr. Wilson, the First Officer. A voice shouted out: “Are you there, Chief?” Mr. Pollard recognised Duncan's voice, and called back: “All's well!”

All was well for both of them, but Duncan's life has ended sooner, though he was the younger man. He was picked up and taken to Newfoundland, but he and the First Officer, Mr. Wilson, the pigeon-fancier, and the Fifth Engineer, Mockford, all lost their lives on the homeward passage, helping to work a short-handed Swedish vessel, none other than the gallant Captain Olander's *Stureholm*, back to England. She has never been heard of since, so it has to be presumed that a very brave, unselfish skipper and crew are gone.

Captain Waite's belief that *San Demetrio* was about to burst into flames proved true only too soon. Hardly were the lifeboats away when the whole of the amidships section and the poop—the portions of the vessel

where the men worked and lived—burst into a mass of flames. *San Demetrio* looked like a three-island ship of which two of the islands were volcanoes.

Even those who do not know the sea can imagine the position the men in the lifeboat were in. They were to leeward of a burning vessel which was laden with a cargo of oil. If she blew up, if even one of her tanks was holed so that the burning oil ran out on the surface of the water, they would have been burned alive while drowning.

“We were then,” writes Mr. Pollard in his report, with his usual masterly understatement, “in an unhappy position, because our ship was burning furiously and we feared that she might blow up almost at any time. We were therefore anxious to get as far away as possible. The position at that time was what I might describe as very dangerous.”

“Put your backs into it, boys,” was Mr. Hawkins’s order: “let’s get to windward of her. If she blows up, we don’t stand a chance.”

The “boys” put their backs into it. Then, as the raider began to spray the surface of the sea with tracer bullets which came over like showers of red-hot cigarette butts, they backed and pulled with redoubled energy to try and get out of the line of fire.

The shelling started again, and a huge splash sent up a firelit fountain into the night, making a crater, gone



almost as soon as made, in the glittering black sea which closed over it in that impersonal and inexorable way in which water ever remakes itself.

For several hours the raider kept on firing and also sent up parachute lights which hung in the sky like chandeliers. So bright was it that at one time the seamen in the boat thought and hoped that it meant a naval engagement, and that a British warship had come up and engaged the raider.

The heavy confused seas rose as the wind strengthened to gale force. Spray and clots of foam came ceaselessly over the lifeboat till every man was drenched; the wind had veered, and a cross-sea arose.



## *San Demetrio Regained*

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AFTER MIDNIGHT the enemy ceased firing, and the only sounds were the creaking of the oars in the rowlocks, the hissing of the sea as it fled past, the retching of the seasick men, and the chant of young McNeil, who called out: "Pull port. . . . Back starboard. . . . Oarss! Pull starboard. . . . Back port. . . . Oarss!"

Occasionally one of the men would speak. "Wonder where our shipmates are?" This question aroused a sense of gloom—all felt that the shell-fire had probably accounted for the rest, for several shells had fallen where the other boats were calculated to be.

Then they cracked jokes. Mr. Hawkins, still young enough to be able to mention such a thing to seasick men, asked: "How would a good steak and mushrooms go now?"

To that last flight of imagination the answer was: "You can all have your fancies, but there are only corned beef and biscuits here."

“How are we going to eat biscuits?” asked the Yank. “We left our dentures on board.”

During the night the weather became steadily worse, and they attempted to get a sea-anchor over the stern, for the danger in putting about so that the boat's head could come up to the sea was that she might be swamped. However, the sea-anchor aft proving a failure, the risk had to be taken, and everyone pulled hard and got her round so that she was head to the storm; then the sea-anchor was cast over the bow. Even so, she had to be kept head to the seas by pulling at the oars all night.

Boyle, the greaser, had internal injuries and was by now in great pain, but he rowed all night uncomplainingly.

As the late and sulky November dawn broke over the heaving waters, the first issue of biscuits and a dipper of water was made by Hawkins. Daylight showed an empty sea and sky. The only sign of life was some screaming gulls. But dawn, however livid, always holds some promise, and men, however terrible the situation they may be in, feel a lifting of the heart as the light grows.

They laboured on, keeping the boat's head to the sea, and early in the forenoon a ship was sighted. Hope sprang up, and the men started shouting and hailing and pulling harder than ever to get closer to the vessel,

for the weather was too bad to put up a sail. Although it was still daylight, they burned flares to try and attract the ship's attention, but alas, she passed without seeing them. It is recorded in the Old Testament that the Israelites were led by a pillar of fire at night, but a pillar of smoke by day, and the Ministry of War Transport is now considering this practical Biblical example.

It was a horrible disappointment, and the usual remarks were passed as to the men on board ship keeping their eyes in the backs of their heads, and even less likely parts of their anatomy.

### *A Blazing Hulk is Sighted*

Later that afternoon, a second vessel was sighted to windward, and they all started to pull, once more speculating about the identity of the ship, wondering whether she were one of the convoy or a stranger. The farther away a ship is at sea, the more she seems to stand out of the water in a cliff-like mass and the bigger she looks. It is only quite close at hand that what has on the horizon seemed a big liner may prove to be a small merchant vessel.

As they drew nearer this floating mass, two things struck them. It was obvious that she was abandoned and drifting, and that she was on fire.

Then something about her silhouette seemed

familiar, and the bo'sun, who had before the attack begun to repaint *San Demetrio* to make her smart for her homecoming, was the first to notice that the masts and funnel of this vessel were vermilion with red lead. He shouted her name, and then they all recognised they were looking at *San Demetrio*, still burning and helpless. She was drifting down towards them and, presenting as she did a much greater surface to the wind, was drifting at a much faster rate than they could. She was not only blazing and pouring out sultry columns of smoke, but surrounded by what seemed an acreage of petrol lying on the waters that spread away from her. Clouds of murky smoke were pouring from her poop and amidships. She was down by the head, and at every roll cataracts of green water poured over both her well-decks.

The sea was running high, blots and patches of foam, leprous pale in the gathering dusk, were slipping past the lifeboat's gunwales. The men in the lifeboat had to be cautious about getting alongside, for the lifeboat was of steel and, had she knocked against the ship's plates, a spark might have been set up and ignited the petrol that lay over the waters, and sent ship and boat sky-high. Therefore it was decided to pass astern of her and keep on her weather side, lest she should come relentlessly crashing down upon them when dark fell.

Once again the men rowed hard, and cleared her stern. She leaned away from them and wallowed into the dusk.

They rigged a canvas shelter over the bows of the boat, a further issue of biscuits and water was made and, for the first time, a little bully beef. The crew was split into two watches, Mr. Hawkins taking one and Mr. Pollard the other, so that there might be some possibility of rest during the night; the watches argued amongst themselves whether to board the blazing vessel or not, providing she was still there in the morning. A helpless and burning ship with a cargo of oil is a sorry city of refuge, but so is a lifeboat in a storm in the middle of the North Atlantic.

### *"Bend Your Backs, Boys"*

The weather became worse, torrential rainstorms added to the men's discomfort. Most of them were now suffering from cold and exposure, and weakened by perpetual sea-sickness.

Darkness closed all about them, clouds hid the moon, still the men rowed on. Suddenly a light shone and a shout of "A 'plane! A 'plane!" went up. "Get the flares out." They started hunting for a torch, and all was bustle, till from the stern of the boat came the soft, low Welsh voice of Apprentice Jones. "That's no 'plane," it said: "That's bloody Jupiter."

Apprentice Jones was right. Bloody Jupiter it was.

The night passed somehow, largely enlivened by a discussion as to where the Governor-General of Canada had been educated, and this discussion so interested the men that political fervour and political theories kept their thoughts away from their plight for an hour or so, incredible as it may seem.

Dawn broke at last, but the sea was bare. Not even a gull flickered over it. *San Demetrio* was lost. True, she was on fire. True, she might blow up at any moment, but it was felt to be rotten luck to have lost her. No one now argued against boarding her.

After a while, one man thought he saw her, and was accused of dreaming, but there she was, still blazing and smoking, and still slipping away from them. And once again the order went out: "Bend your backs, boys."

They bent their backs, but as the weather was moderating, they set a standing lug and foresail, and began to close down on *San Demetrio*. Hope ran through the boat's crew. It wouldn't be long now. Not long till they could get aboard a blazing vessel with a cargo of oil.

She was the only thing to be seen in all the wide circle of the ocean, and she looked good. She might blow up, but that was a quick and painless death compared with this slow freezing, this sickness, this constant forced labour of failing muscles. And she was

their ship, their own ship, still floating in spite of all she had suffered. She meant home to them. She was theirs, a good ship that had not failed them. She had sought them and by some miracle found them, and they would not fail her.

### *Masters of Sail*

Colum McNeil took charge of the sailing. He and McLennan were both from the Hebrides and could do anything with a small boat except make it sing—even do that to ears thankful for the increased rustling of the foam past her forefoot. Mr. Hawkins, who had less experience in sail, was very glad of their help. Young, round-faced McNeil nursed the boat through the gale, handling her as only a man who knows sail well can handle a boat; and purposefully, instead of with the jerky progression of tired rowers, she leaned over and made for her parent vessel.

A little before noon they drew up with her, and once more passed astern, this time to get to leeward of her. They approached her on the starboard side, where the remains of a Jacob's ladder hung over her quarter, left by the members of the crew who had got away in the starboard after-lifeboat. They put the boat's blankets over the gunwale to prevent any sparks striking from the possible clash of steel, and then the Yank made the lifeboat's painter fast. The Third Engineer, Mr. Willey



took in the tiller and unshipped the rudder, then Mr. Hawkins, the Chief and the rest climbed aboard.

It was about twenty-four feet from the water to the boat-deck, and a Jacob's ladder is a horrible contrivance at the best of times. The wooden slats either suddenly turn inwards and pinch unwary toes against the ship's sides, or else they flatten outwards, when the feet are apt to slip off altogether. This Jacob's ladder was but fragmentary, and the Chief, who was no lightweight, in the course of his gymnastic ascent split his trousers into two component parts. He still shudders, being a modest man, at the spectacle he must have presented, but it was good for a laugh from the rest. The men's spirits had leapt up again at finding their feet once more on the battered deck of *San Demetrio*. Everyone was drenched with rain and with spray, everyone had been almost unremittingly seasick. Young Jones's lips were swollen out of shape and blistered; Mr. Willey's feet had turned black from exposure. Davies, the storekeeper, and Boyle, the greaser, were in great pain from their damaged ribs.

But there was too much to be done to stop and think of things like these, and everyone, not without difficulty because of the ship's rolling, climbed aboard. The list to port, slight when seen from the sea, was more marked on deck.

Mr. Pollard's trousers could raise a laugh, but aches

and pains had to be ignored. A small tot of rum was found left over from the week's issue, still standing in the Second Engineer's room, and that was served out. Mr. Pollard was so thirsty that when he found three unspilt mugs of tea in the alleyway, he drank one down forthwith; but it was filthy, covered with cinders and reeking of shell fumes. In a comparatively undamaged cabin he found a boiler suit and tugged his way into it. Then he and the others set to work.



## A Derelict Made Shipshape

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THE FIRST THING that had to be done was to try and get the lifeboat up, for she represented their only chance of safety were it necessary once more to quit *San Demetrio*. The boat was banging about under the counter, and might be knocked to pieces against the great rudder—and these tankers have exceptionally big rudders. The top of this one, as *San Demetrio* was down by the head, was out of the water.

The Yank now volunteered to go overboard with a lifeline attached to him. This he did, and had that lifeline parted, as well it might, there would have been no possibility of saving him. He scrambled into the boat and managed to work her along the ship's side until he got her under the starboard after-davits—a difficult job, for the seas were running heavily. He attempted to bail the boat out and square her up under the falls, and then everyone struggled to haul her up, and indeed did succeed in hoisting her half-way up *San Demetrio's* side.

But she was too heavy and too full of water for them to be able to get her any farther; they could not manage to tip up one end and spill her. They had to leave her hanging half-way up. She hung there from the falls, there was no way of securing her, and about two o'clock that afternoon she broke adrift and was never seen again.

This left the men on board *San Demetrio* with only the Shetland dinghy, a small boat, twelve feet long, pointed each end. These dinghies draw eighteen inches of water, have no centreboard and carry forty square feet of canvas. This one had suffered damage from the action, but had she been whole, she would have been swamped in a storm in mid-Atlantic. It was, however, considered possible to patch her up, so that if *San Demetrio* succeeded in making a landfall, McNeil could have sailed her inshore and got help. He had intimate knowledge of such boats from his childhood, and indeed, until the advent of the motor fishing-boat, fishermen often used to be seen working their lines far out to sea in such small craft under weather conditions that surprised passing steamers. She went like a bird for those who knew how to handle her, and could sail very close to the wind. A Shetland dinghy properly handled is a grand boat for winning regattas and for teaching steamboat men how to sail. The knowledge that, damaged as she was, she was still on deck and

could be used in an emergency, was some small measure of comfort.

The next thing to do, after hauling the lifeboat up as far as she would go, was to start to extinguish the fires, one of which was still raging amidships above No. 7 port tank, and the other aft, in—ironically enough—the freezer. The Chief noticed that the insulation round the meat store aft was burning and sparking very violently.

*“What a Hell of a Mess!”*

There was much to be done, for the sight presented by *San Demetrio* was not a heartening one. Fire had destroyed the poop and the after cabins on the port side, the bridge amidships; the navigation bridge had been demolished by a direct hit, and Monkey Island—the deck-head over the wheelhouse—was white-hot. All amidships was gutted by fire; the wireless, compasses, steering-gear, charts and signalling flags had all gone.

The main deck plating, which was over the main cargo decks, was buckled and crumpled like cardboard, and riddled with shell holes. The shell which had been the first to hit the vessel on the port side of the fo’c’sle had burst in the forepeak, the splinters had pierced the collision bulkhead and the forehold was flooded. The pipeline, steam and exhaust lines and all her deck fittings on the main deck were gone. The only

accommodation left on board was the starboard side aft. Elsewhere every cabin was gutted by fire and holed by splinters; not one scrap of her interior fittings remained, and with them had gone everyone's personal property, and the presents a seaman invariably brings home. The Steward's stores and other stores on the main deck below the midship accommodation were completely gutted, and the fresh-water tanks amidships were destroyed, but luckily the two tanks aft were undamaged. It would have been possible to condense salt water, but it would not have tasted too sweet and would have taken time in the doing.

Every time the vessel rolled, petrol spouted out of the holes in her decks and ran into the lee scuppers, and smouldering debris was everywhere.

The Chief and Mr. Willey, helped by Boyle and Davies, made a hurried splash into the engine-room: "Gee, what a hell of a mess!" breathed Mr. Pollard. For from three to four feet of water had come up to the engine-room platform, and the fuel units were under water. But, for his comforting, the lubricating and water-cooling systems were undamaged, and the main engines proved to be in working order, although everything was wet. A bucket and extinguisher party was formed on deck for the fires there, and while the deck crew worked at this, the Chief and Mr. Willey and their helpers, Davies and Boyle, went below and reas-

sembled the Paxman generator so that electricity should once more be available to start the fuel-oil pump.

Now the Paxman generator had just been overhauled ready for entering the mine danger zone, where it would be in constant use for days supplying current for the degaussing mains. Degaussing is necessary only in mine-infested waters nearer land, and so, just before the attack on *San Demetrio*, the generator had been dismantled for overhaul. Before anything could be done, it was necessary to assemble this, and Mr. Pollard and Mr. Willey worked away. All that was necessary was to replace the crank-case doors and couple up the fuel line, and this was quickly accomplished, but difficulty was experienced in getting the engine started owing to coldness and the water that continually ran over it from the pierced deck-head. However, at last it was got going, and electricity was once more available; but still the electrically driven fuel unit did not start up, and this was found to be because the electric cables had been damaged by shell-fire.

### *Repair Party and Fire Squad*

The next thing was to repair the electric cables; the damaged parts were cut out and the cables reconnected. The auxiliary starboard boiler flashed up

quickly, for, as it had not cooled down, the operation of raising steam could be rushed through. There was seventy pounds of steam pressure soon showing on the starboard boiler-gauge.

This was enough, and a hose was coupled directly on to the ballast pump (this was necessary as the deck water service lines were badly damaged), and so, at last, the fire hoses could be brought into service.

The port auxiliary boiler could never be got going at all; when the feed pump was started to pump it up, water ran from its furnace.

It was now about half-past five in the afternoon, and Mr. Pollard got a little fire going in the galley and boiled water for tea, but he never had time to repeat this operation and would not allow anyone else to do it, it was so dangerous. Some tea, which was being taken home as a present, was found in a cabin. No one as yet had had any food, and now the weary men made their first meal—eggs baked in the *Frigidaire*—the fire had baked these eggs quite black! Young Jones ventured on some of the meat, which was also baked black, but unfortunately it had been soaked in the chemicals from the *Pyrene* fire extinguisher and it made him feel very ill and his face swelled. All this time the after fire, which had already been got fairly under control by the bucket parties, was played upon by the steam hoses. While it was still daylight, Mr. Hawkins dis-



covered some cans of white paint which had not gone up in flames, and set the men on deck to work at painting a huge S O S and the word "Help" across the bulkhead of the forward deckhouse, across the break of the poop, and across the forward part of the bridge. "Help" was also painted on a board hung over the side.

Although it was impossible to work in the engine-room after dark that night as no light could be shown, pumping operations were continued, and several times through the night the hose had to be played on the meat-room aft, which was very heavily insulated and had become the focal point of danger, for the cork insulation all round it was from ten to twelve inches thick, faced with cement and covered with steel outside. This cork insulation kept burning and sparking. In the meat-room a fire was burning, and the break of the poop and the after well-deck were full of holes spouting oil. Every time the wind blew that way it caused the fire in the meat-room to blaze up, and it was not until daylight next morning that the Chief was able to chisel away the cork and cement insulation and get the fire hose down behind it, so that there was no longer anything to keep on smouldering. That night, too, the engine-room was pumped dry of water and soundings taken of all double-bottom tanks. These soundings tallied with those taken before the attack, and showed she was not making water and had no damage below

the water-line. Not much more could be done that night, but the pumps had to be kept under supervision so as to supply water to the deck, and the engine-room itself had to be perpetually pumped out. Next morning, all hands were employed plugging the holes in the deck with cotton-waste pegged into place with blocks shaped from soft wood.

And at last, by about eight o'clock on the morning of Friday the 8th, it could be said that the danger from fire was mastered; every outbreak in the night had been extinguished, the cork insulation was sodden at last. It only remained to be seen that no naked flame was lit and no spark engendered in any manner.

*“Non-stop for England!”*

Why, considering the low flash-point of *San Demetrio's* cargo, she had not exploded, will never be known for certain. The Chief's theory, though it may always be a debatable one, is that owing to the intensity of the fires heat was generated so rapidly that the tanks were, so to speak, converted into gasometers, thus automatically putting a pressure in them which prevented the flames getting back and igniting the oil. Tanks in an oil tanker are always fitted with safety-valves. These valves come automatically into action and prevent the tank pressure becoming dangerously high while still keeping enough pressure to prevent the flames getting

in. The valves operate whenever a pressure of three pounds is reached inside the tanks. They have pipes attached to them leading into a common pipe which is led up the masts to the lower mastheads, where the gases escape and are carried clear of the ship.

Since the bridge had gone, it followed that all communication to the engine-room was out of action, so the Chief set to work to invent a method of signalling from the deck to the engine-room, and by an arrangement of lamps he succeeded in doing this. He fitted lights in a fore and aft direction. When the forward light went on it would signal "Go ahead"; a flickering light would mean "Increase speed"; the centre light meant "Stop," and the after light meant "Go astern." Owing to a shortage of cable, these lights had to be erected high up in the engine-room, and to attract the attention of the men working there, a signal was given by the simple expedient of knocking on the skylight with a hammer. These ingenious and rather Heath Robinson arrangements worked perfectly.

To try and secure the lifeboat had been, of course, the first thing, the next had been to extinguish the fires; the third, to get her engines in working order and the deck holes plugged so that she could be got under way. She was no longer ablaze, but she was rolling helplessly on the heavy and increasing seas.

It must be remembered that all her normal steering

gear had gone. But even her auxiliary steering gear aft was partially destroyed. There was a small auxiliary wheel aft of which all but the hub, four spokes and a bit of rim had been burned away. The wooden deck which supported this wheel had been burned also, and the Chief had blocks of wood cut and fitted to shore up the pedestal. The steering standard aft operates the steering engine by means of a series of shafts and bevel wheels in the steering engine flat below, but owing to the intense heat of the fire the bulkheads through which the shafting passed had become distorted, and those bulkheads had to be hammered out to free the shafts for action.

The binnacle was found, having dropped through two decks, but it was apparently undamaged save for a large and sinister bubble in the compass fluid, and was set up in its proper position again. At about 2 p.m. on the 8th, the steering gear had been got ready, and the Chief then went below and tested his main engines both ahead and astern.

They kicked over sweetly, at about ninety revolutions per minute. So *San Demetrio's* engines were set going ahead at about half-past two on that grey and stormy afternoon. And when the helmsman laid his hands on the tiny auxiliary wheel with its four spokes, below in the engine-room flat the huge green-painted tiller that moves there, apparently without human

agency, began to swing over obediently. For that little broken wheel was connected with the steering engine steam valves; they set the steering engine in motion; this in its turn pushed the great hydraulic rams, sleek and silent; the shafts revolved, the teeth of the bevel wheels engaged each other—all these moved because the endurance and the courage of man had informed what had been dead wood and metal with his unquenchable spirit.

*San Demetrio* was once more under way: “Non-stop for England!” was the joyful cry.



## “By Guess and by God”

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IT WAS a triumphant moment when the vessel was once again under her own power, answering to her helm, a live vessel instead of a wallowing and dangerous brute, a ship that had found her soul. But there was still no rest for anyone, watchfulness could not be relaxed, repairs had constantly to be made. It was discovered almost at once that the compass was useless, for when the vessel swung it was not shown upon the card. The swing was only discovered by the bearing of the sun changing, not from any change in the compass bearing. In fact, when that night the Pole Star rose, if *San Demetrio* had been following her compass she would have been heading due South when she ought to have been sailing East, which was the course decided upon for her, though not without some anxious discussion. If they sailed easterly they were making for home, they were bound to make a landfall, probably Ireland, but if the damaged vessel had shown

signs of giving way, then *San Demetrio* might have had to be put about and make her way towards Newfoundland.

After the compass was discovered to be a faithless counsellor, Mr. Hawkins and Jones sailed by the stars—and “By guess and by God”—but even so, one of the great difficulties was that the chronometer was destroyed, and the men’s wrist-watches were soaked through. The engine-room clock was going, but nobody knew how right or wrong it was because nobody knew exactly where *San Demetrio* was. At the time of the attack she had been at a spot about three and a half hours different from Halifax time, and this discrepancy changed with every day’s sailing and could only be checked if anyone knew exactly her latitude and longitude when she was boarded again. But this could not be known, as there was no sextant to take the sun, and no sun to take; without knowing the latitude and longitude it was impossible to tell what the right time was. It was the familiar vicious circle—not knowing the time meant not knowing the place, and the other way about.

Young Jones knew a good deal more about the stars than merely to be able to recognise bloody Jupiter, and he was a great help to Mr. Hawkins, who was now Acting Captain, and kept alternate watches with him, just as Mr. Pollard and Mr. Willey kept alternate watches below. But, as a matter of fact, two hours’

sleep a night was all the officers allowed themselves, Mr. Hawkins in the Fifth Engineer's cabin, Mr. Polard on a couch he had taken down to the engine-room.

The sixpenny school atlas of which the papers were full at the time when the story of *San Demetrio* was first given to the world, was only discovered just before they made landfall, and would in any case have been useless without instruments or books, charts or compasses. Only able to tell where the sun was by where the horizon lightened at dawn, only able to tell which way they were sailing by glimpses of the stars through the stormy night, the lightening of the east ahead of them at dawn, or the red gleam of the west if the clouds did not hang too low in the late afternoon, yet Mr. Hawkins, aided by the Apprentice, brought the ship to the west coast of Ireland.

One has only to look at a map to see how good this navigation was. A little more southing—and for days the north-westerly gale was setting her southwards—and their first landfall might have been the coast of France!

But *San Demetrio*, when she got going again, still had days and nights of trouble and danger to live through before she made Ireland.



*“Infinite Resource”*

It must be realised that during the whole time the depleted crew, were working *San Demetrio* homewards, work was never-ending. The plugs made for the holes in the decks were perpetually being washed away and had to be renewed. The engines needed careful nursing. There were only four men (besides Mr. Hawkins and young Jones) capable of standing a trick at the wheel; these were the bo'sun, Preston, McNeil and McLennan. Preston also knew some navigation. Boyle was dying, Davies and Willey in great pain and ill, and the Chief Engineer had a crippled right hand.

The hand was dealt with by the Yank—Oswald Preston. The Chief's finger swelled and swelled, but Oswald Preston quite calmly used the remedy of the old sailormen and pierced the Chief's nail right through with a penknife. So great was the relief as the pus and blood flowed out that the Chief still declares he felt no pain. The finger, enormously swollen, began to shrink and now looks normal. The penknife was not sterilised in any way, and so the only conclusion one can arrive at is that luck is more important than hygiene.

The question of food had to be tackled seriously, now that the meat had proved uneatable. There were on board only eight loaves of bread and some raw potatoes and onions, cold comfort for men whose stomachs

had suffered for hours from sea-sickness and who were wet through.

But the Chief, like Kipling's mariner, was a man "of infinite-resource-and-sagacity." He remembered how in his youth he was wont to clean his boiler suits by putting them into a bucket of suds and then putting a pipe from a steam drain into the bucket, whereupon the boiler suits bubbled away and grew clean without any further trouble. If he could heat dungarees, it was obvious that he could heat potatoes and onions; all he had to do was to leave out the soap.

Sometimes he varied the cuisine by roasting the onions on a boiler manhole door. It may seem a small thing to have hot food instead of cold, but at such a time of year and in such bleak and chilly latitudes it makes a great difference both to health and morale.

The food heartened everyone and made it possible to get to work with renewed energy, which was lucky, as *San Demetrio* was still rolling heavily and shipping it green over both well-decks.

Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Pollard examined the bulkhead in the forehold and found that it had been pierced in several places by shell fragments, with the result that there was a steady leakage into the forehold, which naturally put the vessel down by the head. This made her very sluggish and very tender to handle.

The engines were working well, and the Chief estimated the speed at nine knots. Convoy speed . . . but *San Demetrio* was now not in convoy, but an unprotected ship.



## *“The Living shall Praise Thee”*

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JOHN BOYLE'S determination and his lion heart kept him going till Friday night, but he was too ill to carry on with the job of oiling the main engines. He still would not leave the engine-room, so the Chief let him sit and take over the firing, and the maintaining of steam in the boiler. Now, on the Saturday, at last he collapsed.

They made a bed for him in the least damaged cabin aft. He complained about the cold; his circulation was failing and he could not get warm, so the Chief patched a couple of pipes and managed to get steam on the radiator in his room. There was nothing much that his shipmates could do for him except trickle what condensed milk had been found into his mouth. All stores from the medicine chest had been destroyed by fire.

“How do you feel now, Sonny?” asked the Chief when he had made Boyle as comfortable as he could.

“Not too bad. My stomach still hurts.”

The Chief, being on Friday even more short-handed than ever in the engine-room, consulted with Mr. Hawkins, who sent the invaluable Jameson, the mess-room boy, to take over Boyle's work. He did it efficiently, if with rather too much enthusiasm as regards the use of lubricating oil.

“Hi!” said the Chief to him once, when Jameson had streaked through the engine-room in record time, “you can't have oiled the engine as quickly as all that.”

“Yes, sir, I did,” said Jameson proudly.

And indeed he had. The Chief watched him next time and saw that, not content with the ordinary little oil-can by which the feed can be delicately regulated, Jameson had taken a quart measure and had gone at express speed through the engine-room, pouring joyously as he went. He must have thought he was still serving at table.

Davies was in great pain from two broken ribs. “You've got growing pains!” said Mr. Pollard. And Davies, always managing a smile, carried on. So did Mr. Willey, though his feet were in such pain he could hardly bear to stand on them. The other steward, Halloran, though he had suffered more severely from exposure than anyone else, turned his hand to anything required of him; so did Porter, who was feeling very ill. Young Roy Housden did everything he was told and jumped to it, smiling as ever.

On the Saturday, the day Boyle had to give in and go to bed, the Chief decided to make some temporary repairs to the foredeck steamline, because if he could get the forward ballast pump working, it might be possible to pump out the water that had got into the forehold. He and his helpers worked until darkness came on, not very successfully, since the weather was very bad and they lost quite a lot of their tools, which were washed overboard as the seas broke over the ship.

That evening a sing-song was held in the galley, and they all sang with a will, the bo'sun, who had a mighty voice, leading, and the others joining in the chorus. They sang all the old songs beloved of earlier generations. They sang: "Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer, do"; "She was only a bird in a gilded cage"; "Lily of Laguna," and "My Old Dutch." Strange songs for such a time and place, but songs which gave a memory of home to the men singing them. Seamen think much of home, whether it be a comfortable villa with a wife and children to greet them, or a room in a seaport slum. It's all "home," and means the sights and sounds—even the smells—which are familiar and therefore dear. And all the time the men on board *San Demetrio* were wondering whether their folks at home had given them up for lost.

Was there ever a stranger concert than this, held in

a dark and uncomfortable galley in bad weather in the North Atlantic?

### *John Boyle Enters Harbour*

The 10th November was Sunday, and despite a gale and very heavy seas breaking on the main deck, Mr. Hawkins held a short service, attended by everyone save the Chief and the greaser of the watch.

He had no prayer book. The only book in the ship found unburned when they reboarded *San Demetrio* was Oswald Preston's Bible, given him by his children. So Mr. Hawkins said the Lord's Prayer, and then what he could remember from The Form of Prayer to be Used at Sea:—

“Look down, we beseech thee, and hear us, calling out of the depth of misery, and out of the jaws of this death, which is ready now to swallow us up. Save, Lord, or else we perish. The living, the living, shall praise thee. Oh, send thy word of command to rebuke the raging winds, and the roaring sea. . . .

O Lord of hosts, fight for us, that we may glorify thee.

Oh suffer us not to sink under the weight of our sins, or the violence of the enemy. . . .

Thou, O Lord, that stillest the raging of the sea, hear, hear us, and save us, that we perish not. . . .”

And some of the Hymn of Praise after Deliverance from an Enemy:—

“If the Lord had not been on our side, now may we say: if the Lord himself had not been on our side, when men rose up against us.

They had swallowed us up quick: when they were so wrathfully displeased at us.

Yes, the waters had drowned us, and the stream had gone over our soul: the deep waters of the proud had gone over our soul.

But praised be the Lord: who hath not given us over as a prey unto them.

The Lord hath wrought a mighty salvation for us.”

The rest of the day was taken up with fixing extra lights in the engine-room, because the weather became too bad to work upon deck, apart from plugging the holes once more, which had to be done. More water got into the forehold and the ship was still very much down by the head. Mr. Hawkins and the Chief consulted together and decided they would try and alter the vessel's trim by transferring petrol from No. 9 tank which was right forward, to No. 6 tank which was further aft, hoping by this to enable her to lift her nose more easily out of the water. Mr. Hawkins eased *San Demetrio* off her course to minimise the heavy seas that were breaking ceaselessly over her deck.

The Chief asked for a volunteer to assist him. He went forward, having obtained a wheel spanner, his most useful tool, and there he found the young red-head, Jones, waiting for him with a “Gastite” torch,



and the pump-room door open and ready. The Chief and young Jones went down together into the fumey petrol-laden atmosphere.

Once in the pump-room, they managed to open up the block valves which allow for the transference of the cargo, and the vessel rode more easily. The sea was still very rough with a heavy swell, and a fresh breeze was now blowing from the south-west.

Meanwhile Boyle lay, warm enough but very weary, in his cabin. His shipmates slipped in and out and asked him how he felt, and pulled the clothes more comfortably over him. The Yank, who had constituted himself head nurse, was the last to speak to him, at about midnight.

Boyle drifted into sleep, and then, very calmly—for the bedclothes were not disarranged—into his last harbour. And if the trumpets do indeed sound upon that far shore he made, we may be very sure they sounded for him.



## Landfall

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ON TUESDAY, 12<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, there was a fairly strong south-westerly gale; but it lessened as the hours passed, and Mr. Hawkins decided to keep double look-outs that night, as he expected a landfall either in the night or early next day, if the course steered had been good.

By the morning of Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> November, wind and sea had lessened, and at about half-past one in the afternoon land was first sighted. Mr. Hawkins cruised along, looking for a sheltered bay. The land looked as though it might be Ireland, but it had the same characteristics as Cornwall and parts of Brittany; atop of the cliffs a ripple of green turf was broken up by low stone walls into little squares, and there were clusters of white cottages here and there and black rocks, some as big as little islets, standing out of the sea, the surf breaking about them in white rims. There was a lighthouse, but it was impossible to signal to it as the signal flags had all been burnt.

Mr. Hawkins put into a bay, which he afterwards found to be Blacksod Bay, Co. Mayo, and tried to attract attention from the shore, but received no reply. He manœuvred the vessel while the lead was heaved. Blacksod Bay has an excellent bottom, but *San Demetrio* chanced to be cruising round over a deep pocket and only once did the heaving of the lead give any result, and then it showed thirty-five fathoms. In any case, to drop the anchors would have meant losing both them and the anchor chains, for the pipes to the steam windlass were smashed.

So *San Demetrio* stopped her engines and then worked them as necessary, going round all night like a mouse in a pail, and that most lovely sound to a seaman's ears, the roaring of the anchor chains through the hawse-pipes, was still denied to the exhausted men on board.

The next morning the reluctant dawn showed cold and grey. At about two and a half miles away the dark, olive-hued waters could be seen breaking into surf on the beach and curdling round the black rocks whose menace *San Demetrio* had escaped during her anxious night's cruising.

It had been hoped to take the body of Greaser Boyle home, but as it was still so uncertain when *San Demetrio* could make port, it was decided to bury him at sea. His body was made ready, and wrapped in the

spare Red Ensign which, being kept aft, had escaped burning.

Again Oswald Preston's Bible came out, and the First Officer recited the Lord's Prayer, and then read the Twenty-third Psalm:—

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil: my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Thus his shipmates committed the body of John Boyle to the deep, and his soul—in the simple faith of sailormen—to that God who had brought them through all their perils to this landfall.

Except for the tears of his shipmates, who still cannot speak of him without emotion, Boyle slipped unmourned into the icy waters; except for the cries of the gulls that wheeled and mewed above the battered *San Demetrio*, no choristers sang. There have been less sad-

dened and less honest mourners than those men who stood together with bared heads on the port side of *San Demetrio*, when the broken body of a man of unbroken spirit went to what was surely the most fitting resting place. There have been worse choristers than those insentient gulls whose wailing cry probably made the earliest sailormen think that the souls of dead sailors lived again in those swooping grey and white winged shapes.

### *The Navy Lends a Hand*

At about nine in the morning a plume of smoke was seen, and the naval tug *Superman* came bustling into the bay. The arrival of *San Demetrio* had been reported.

“Where are we?” shouted the men of *San Demetrio*.

“Ireland” was the answer, to their intense relief.

The tug master had orders to accompany *San Demetrio* to Londonderry or the Clyde, but the last thing Mr. Hawkins wanted was a tow.

“How many knots can you make?” asked the Chief.  
“Nine,” said the tug master.

“I still can make ten,” yelled Mr. Pollard in triumph—which, though it may or may not have been true, was a good remark.

The tug master advised them to wait for the de-

stroyer, *H.M.S. Arrow*, which was coming up. And then, as her smoke was seen, a Hudson bomber came roaring and dipping overhead.

They were found. They were among friends. They were saved. Surely nothing could go wrong now?

*H.M.S. Arrow* sent a boarding party under Sub-Lieutenant Curd, and not a man but was awed by the incredible sight *San Demetrio* presented and the courage of the men who had worked her home. The sea had got up a bit, and the boat returned to *H.M.S. Arrow* to collect provisions: corned beef, sugar, tea, tobacco and two kegs of rum were put aboard *San Demetrio*, although *H.M.S. Arrow* herself was somewhat short of provisions, being just in from a long and arduous passage. The men of *H.M.S. Arrow* insisted on turning out their comforts store of knitted goods "so that you chaps can get warm." Then a call was made for ratings and engineers to help on board *San Demetrio*. Sixty men volunteered, but only a few were needed, and Second Officer Charles Morfee, Second Engineer Caizley, Third Engineer Drever and Fourth Engineer Semple, survivors of *S.S. Empire Wind*, who had been shipwrecked and picked up by *H.M.S. Arrow*, all came on board, also some naval ratings to help on deck and in the engineroom; and the destroyer's doctor came and attended to Mr. Pollard and Mr. Willey and Davies.

Mr. Pollard tried to borrow rubber boots for the

naval men to work in, for the ship was very low in the water and seas were breaking over her decks. They attempted to patch up the foredeck steampipes with a view to pumping out the forehold, but it was found too big a job to be carried out in such circumstances; however, all holes were plugged once again, and a patch was put over the hole in the port bow. This last effort was disapproved of by Mr. Pollard, who was justified by the fact that the patch fell off when *San Demetrio* set out to sea again. Nevertheless, Mr. Pollard was very impressed with the engine-room staff sent over from the *Arrow*, for they passed from steam to motor propulsion apparently without any difficulty, and both they and the men from the *Empire Wind* were most helpful.

### *San Demetrio Drops Anchor*

The wind moderating somewhat before nightfall, *San Demetrio* started off once again on her passage home.

Sub-Lieutenant Curd and the watchkeeping party sent over from *H.M.S. Arrow* stayed on board till *San Demetrio* was well up the Channel outside. The *Empire Wind* men remained with *San Demetrio*, and the tug also accompanied her the whole way lest she should need help.

The Chief, his engineer's pride strong within him, worked the speed up till he received word that the tug had been left behind, whereupon he reduced speed to

enable the tug to catch up. It is not recorded whether he resorted to the old sailormen's jeer of dangling a rope from the stern of *San Demetrio!*

On Friday night, the 15th November, *San Demetrio* lay at the mouth of the Clyde waiting for daylight. The only incident that had occurred on her passage there was the destruction of a mine by *H.M.S. Arrow*.

On 16th November, as soon as it was daylight, *San Demetrio* came up the Clyde and dropped anchor in Rothesay Bay; five and a half shackles of her port anchor were let out. At last that loveliest of all sounds was heard, and never can it have been more welcome. She was still flying on her foremast the red flag which told of her dangerous cargo; and, half-masted for Greaser Boyle, on the gaff of her main, the Red Ensign which, torn and dirty as it was, has never been kept flying by braver men on board a better ship.

At Rothesay, Halloran and Davies (who was found to have two ribs broken) were taken to hospital. Other members of the original crew were sent ashore to obtain rest and food, but Mr. Hawkins, the Chief and the Bo'sun remained on board throughout the night. Next day, the men who had had shore leave returned, and everyone went to church or chapel. The rest of the day was taken up with hard work. For the job—the great job of bringing in *San Demetrio* not only alive, her



engines kicking over, but able to discharge her cargo—was not yet accomplished.

We must now go back a little in time, and show how the thoughts of those in England had been perpetually on the danger of *San Demetrio* and her crew.



## Good Tidings

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MR. DODDS, the Shipping Manager of the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company, received the news that a surface raider was attacking the convoy in which he knew *San Demetrio* was. On Thursday, 7th November, he was advised by Lloyd's that *San Demetrio* was being shelled.

The Admiralty Casualty Section could give no further news, and we may imagine the anxiety with which he thought, not so much of the valuable ship and her cargo, as of the men aboard her. Over the week-end of 9th to 11th November, official reports kept coming in that a number of vessels had escaped, and names of certain ships were given, but still *San Demetrio* was not amongst them.

On Wednesday, 13th November, the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company received a cable from their agents at St. John's, Newfoundland, saying that *San Demetrio* was sunk and that certain men were missing, but that

Captain Waite and some of his crew had been landed there.

At about nine in the evening of Wednesday, 13th November, Mr. Dodds was told by the Casualty Section of the Admiralty that a vessel bearing a name too like *San Demetrio* to be any other had just been sighted off the west coast of Ireland. Her ensign was flying half-mast and there was a board over the side with the word HELP painted on it.

At once Mr. Dodds's hopes leapt up and he guessed that Mr. Hawkins's boat might have found the vessel still afloat and boarded her. He knew that the lifeboat had an extraordinary well-balanced crew containing men from each department, and the Admiralty were able to tell him that all possible steps had been taken to establish contact with the vessel and afford her the necessary protection.

A coast-watcher agent in Co. Mayo telephoned to Mr. Horne, who was Lloyd's agent at Queenstown and also agent for the Eagle Oil Company, that the vessel had been sighted. Mr. Horne telephoned the British Naval Attaché in Dublin, and then tried to speak both to the Admiralty and the Eagle Oil Company. When he failed to get in touch with them, he got hold of a friend of his, a Mr. Turnbull in Maidenhead, who passed the message on to the Admiralty, which passed it on to Mr. Dodds. Mr. Horne also sent off a doctor on

the night of the 14th, but the boat was unable to get to *San Demetrio* owing to the bad weather. So, all the time the crippled vessel was cruising off that apparently inhospitable shore, everything possible was being done for her.

The last report from Mr. Horne was that *San Demetrio*, accompanied by a tug (but not in tow!), had been seen heading in a north-westerly direction, obviously intending to go "north about."

### *Shipmates All*

On Friday, 15th November, Lloyd's was able to say that *San Demetrio* was proceeding to the Clyde and that there were fifteen men, besides some assistants taken on in Ireland aboard her. Unfortunately, this message did not convey definitely that the men on board were *San Demetrio's* original crew, and so Mr. Dodds's anxiety continued.

Therefore Mr. Kennedy, the superintendent, went to meet the vessel at Rothesay, and his first words were: "How are the men? And who's here?"

The men's first question to Mr. Kennedy was of Captain Waite and their shipmates, and to their intense joy they heard that these were safe in Newfoundland. Only a seaman knows how deep is the bond between himself and his shipmates. They are bound together in the same ship, a small interdependent com-

munity, while they are at sea, by a knowledge of common danger and common responsibility that has a different quality from a landsman's feelings about his friends in the same village.

In any tragedy on land, help can come at once; the land itself is not an alien element as the sea must always remain. A seaman's dangers are not as the dangers of other men, though it may be (and often is) more perilous to cross Piccadilly than to cross the Pacific. But a seaman's danger is implicit in his avocation. Man is still, since his first ancestor with a form of lung crawled out of the sea, a land animal. And if things go wrong, a seaman is left without the homely comforts of the earth. No kindly car stops by him, no one telephones to the nearest police station for an ambulance, he cannot even get out and walk. A seaman takes to an element which is bound to be, however well he knows it, foreign to him. On earth man's feet are planted surely. If he dies behind his Bren gun or his rifle, he falls upon that element which first cradled him, on the very dust of which he is compacted. At sea he may vanish and be no more seen.

Every sailor saved is a life plucked from an element which may always prove his enemy. Seamen know this. They know it without any fuss; they see their duty in the light of a great simplicity, a gift bestowed on men whose lives are spent upon the waters. Nevertheless,

they know, especially in times like these, just how poor are the chances of a small boat in the middle of a big and stormy ocean, and if anything were needed to add to the pride and triumph which the men of *San Demetrio* felt in having done their duty so superbly well, it was the knowledge that these others were saved.

Their joy at hearing of their shipmates' safety was, if possible, increased by the knowledge of how that safety had been attained. S.S. *Gloucester City*, a ship not of the same convoy but which had got lost from her own, received a signal from *Jervis Bay's* convoy that they were being attacked. Captain Smith of *Gloucester City*, knowing that there would surely be some survivors adrift in boats, went straight to the position given in the signal and picked up the first of *San Demetrio's* boats, the one in charge of Chief Officer Wilson. Then Captain Smith marked off on his chart a thirty-mile circle and covered this whole area by nightfall, picking up Captain Waite with the three men he had in his boat, six other lifeboats and men on rafts, making altogether a total of ninety-two survivors. It is impossible to overrate the courage of men who go into an area where a battleship is in action. Normally, all vessels would avoid such an area, but Captain Smith and Captain Olander, the Swedish captain of the *Stureholm*, deliberately went back to save lives.



## Salvage

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AT ROTHESAY the Dutch salvage tug *Zeeland*, working under the Admiralty, supplied flexible steam hoses which enabled the Chief to pump out the flooded after pump-room with the ship's own plant. This operation was essential in order to pump cargo out at the discharging berth. The after pump-room was flooded through the damage caused by shellfire, and the water had risen to a depth of fourteen feet. A temporary fore-deck was also connected up. While this was going on, the forehold was pumped out by the salvage tug, but this was not of vital importance. A watch-keeper from the *Zeeland* kept anchor watch each night, so the tired men could sleep.

On Monday, 18th November, Mr. Keates, the Victualling Superintendent, arrived, having arranged for masses of food even down to bottles of tomato juice. He rolled up his sleeves and sat on an upturned bucket peeling potatoes; he also, by some miracle, managed to

produce forms and benches and rigged up the partly demolished Second Engineer's room as a mess-room. That day the men fed well.

A lot of clothes were brought on board, sent by the Lady Dumfries Fund, including three of the biggest suits procurable for Mr. Pollard. Alas, in spite of the weight he had lost, he still could not make the suit meet! Once again the resourceful Yank came to the rescue. He slit down the back of the trousers until the front met, and then laced up the back with string.

On Tuesday afternoon, 19th November, a berth being available at Bowling, *San Demetrio* moved up to it under her own power, merely assisted by the usual couple of tugs that any vessel has. She was moored by the survivors and all the valve connections and pumps were made ready for the discharging of cargo by the ship's own men and with the ship's own plant. She came alongside the jetty at about four-thirty in the afternoon.

Mr. Dodds and other high officials of the Company were there to meet her. He arranged for a dinner party to be given to the men at the Grand Central Hotel, Glasgow. It had always been the dream of young Jameson, the mess-boy, to have a meal there, and he could hardly believe in his good luck.

The dinner duly took place, with Mr. Pollard extremely nervous in his laced-up suit, his position made



no easier by the fact that the rest of the crew would drop half-crowns in front of him to tempt him to stoop and pick them up! This amused the others enormously. They knew well what would happen to the suit if Mr. Pollard bent. But Mr. Pollard knew it also, and turned his eyes away from temptation.

It was a dinner at which everyone was happy, and of course the usual speeches were made. When Mr. Dodds asked the crew if they had any complaints, they found only one:

“Yes,” they chorused, “the poor sleeping accommodation in the lifeboat.”

It was, everyone agreed, a good party.

### *Fairy-Tale Ending*

Next came the claim for salvage, heard by Mr. Justice Langton and two Elder Brethren of Trinity House. Mr. Justice Langton must have found it a pleasant change from the innumerable divorces he presides over—more marriages being apt to come to grief than ships, even in war time.

The party feeling, which had begun at Rothesay and been intensified at Glasgow, continued. Indeed, save for the death of Boyle and of those who perished during the action, there is the quality of a fairy story about the return of *San Demetrio*. Salvage has always been a seaman's dream of heaven, and good salvage

money fairly earned was paid to the men who had saved her, and paid not only willingly but with the greatest pleasure by the owners.

Everyone was happy in the courtroom when the case was heard. Mr. Justice Langton said that he had never had a happier task to perform. It was perhaps not the first time that the owners of a vessel cared more for the lives of their men than for the value of their cargo, but it was the first time that they assisted in every way in putting the plaintiffs' case forward in court and took the unprecedented action of guaranteeing their costs.

Indeed, and this is almost the best part of the fairy story, the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company to all intents and purposes paid to be told what it should pay out to the men who had saved *San Demetrio*.

Mr. Justice Langton's most difficult task was to apportion among the salvors the proper award for each of them. He put it very clearly when he said:

"Neither of the officers who has given evidence, Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Pollard, has desired to differentiate between any of the salvors. I think Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Pollard would be perfectly satisfied if I were to divide such total fund as I think proper to award in equal proportions among them all. But the law does not allow me to act that way. It is right and proper, and a part of my duty which I gladly discharge, to recognize to the full the courage and devotion and sacrifice

of each of these men. . . . It is not because a man holds a certificate that he is entitled to any greater award in the matter of salvage. If a man holding a certificate, in fact did less than a man who held no certificate, the man who held no certificate would be entitled to the greater reward. But if, where two men are equal in courage and willingness and resource, one of them is more skilled than the other and by the exercise of his skill in fact contributes more to the preservation of the property salvaged, that more highly skilled man is entitled to the greater reward.”

How far we have travelled since the Battle of Navarino in 1827, when the Admiral commanding received £7,800, but the Able Seamen only nineteen shillings apiece!

From the £2,000 each awarded to Mr. Hawkins and Mr. Pollard to the £100 to Mortimer, the salvage was fairly and generously awarded. It amounted in all to £14,700, and the Eagle Oil and Shipping Company were glad and proud to pay it. By the unanimous wish of all the other plaintiffs, the Red Ensign, which had been kept flying as *San Demetrio* arrived in triumph, was given to that amazing Canadian known as “The Yank.”

*Red Ensign Flying*

*San Demetrio* has made many voyages since. What a vessel Sound and well-found with not a scamped piece of work in her. They covered her decks with an amalgam, including gravel—a strange sight aboard ship—and the outer walls of her chart-room with a bullet-resisting plastic. Holes made by shot and shell were covered by flush-welded patches so neat they amounted to invisible mending. All, of course, dark steel-grey. Captain Waite again took charge of her. Mr. Hawkins is now a Sub-Lieutenant in the R.N.R. Mr. Pollard is once more at sea, so is young Jones, who has taken his Second Mate's ticket. Somewhere, these men of *San Demetrio* carry on the great adventure of the sea. All save Boyle, who sleeps sound in the lap of the tides, and, it is feared, save Preston. He spent his money royally and was going to sea again, but it is probable he lost his life when the Over-Seas Club was bombed. If so, a gallant man lies in gallant company. Oswald Preston was born too late in the world's history. He should have sailed the seas in Elizabethan days with Letters of Marque (or without them). His was a character that needed danger, that fed on danger as fire feeds on timber. His courage leapt up to meet emergency and—a rarer phenomenon—it stayed as long as the danger lasted, through dreary, wet, cold

days and nights when it had lost its spectacular quality and needed steadiness of will to meet and overcome it.

These men of *San Demetrio* would be the last to say that they were in any way exceptional. And indeed we may be thankful that the Merchant Service is full of men as brave and as knowledgeable as these, who are fighting for us night and day the battle of the Western Ocean.

The Atlantic . . . summer and winter, spring and autumn . . . think of it . . . in the hurricane season, or when icebergs are drifting or fogs lie thick, or in southern latitudes, when a pampero strikes from the mouth of the Plate, or when, at any time at all, submarines and raiders and hostile aircraft attack—there is no close season for these—such are the conditions on the battlefield of these men. And even when they come home safely and their precious freight is being discharged in the ports at which the enemy batters, they are still there to be shot at.

Merchant seamen have never failed us and are not failing us now. Their flesh is dear to them as ours to us. It shrinks from the burning oil, the hard impact of metal, the cold and choking waters, just as would our own. But, with only a short turn-round at the end of a voyage, these men go out to sea again without complaint. .

“It’s the waiting I mind,” said one captain, in a rare

moment of expansion, to the present writer. "I come and lie down here on the couch and try and rest, and all the time I'm waiting for the crash. Somehow, it's not so bad when it happens."

It has happened twice to that skipper, it may happen again to any of *San Demetrio's* men. *San Demetrio* herself may one day fail to make port. But she will live for ever in the annals of the sea, her tattered Red Ensign flying above the waves of years yet to come.

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE



*The text of this book is set in Caledonia, a Linotype face designed by W. A. Dwiggins. Caledonia belongs to the family of printing types called "modern face" by printers—a term used to mark the change in style of type-letters that occurred about 1800. Caledonia is in the general neighborhood of Scotch Modern in design, but is more freely drawn than that letter.*

*The book was composed, printed, and bound by H. Wolff, New York.*









THIS is the story of sixteen British seamen. It is one of the great stories of this war on the Atlantic, a magnificent epic of courage, endurance and ingenuity which cannot fail to thrill anyone who reads this fine telling of it.

On November 5, 1940, the motorship *San Demetrio* was steaming eastward from Halifax to a British port with a cargo of 11,000 tons of petrol. She was in convoy, the armed merchantman *Jervis Bay* acting as escort. In latitude  $52^{\circ} 30'$  N., longitude  $32^{\circ}$  W., the pocket battleship *Admiral von Scheer* climbed up over the horizon and began pumping shells into the convoy. The *Jervis Bay*, badly outranged, made for the raider with all guns blazing, took the full weight of the enemy's fire-power herself, and soon went to the bottom. Meanwhile the convoy had scattered, and most of the thirty-nine cargo ships escaped scot-free. But four of the merchantmen were sunk.

There was also the *San Demetrio*.

Hit amidships and on the port bow, making water in the forehold, with fires mounting on bridge and poop, the *San Demetrio* was abandoned by her crew. But she did not go down, and her volatile cargo did not explode. Two days later, still blazing and drifting, she was re-boarded by the sixteen men of the Chief Engineer's life-boat; and those sixteen British seamen, some of them wounded, somehow patched her up, got the engines running, and sailed her, without charts or instruments, to safe haven in Blacksod Bay, Ireland. The splendid saga of their voyage, so simply and so movingly told in these pages, is one you are not likely to forget.



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