

PATRICK O'BRIAN

The Centurion's Gig

THE wind went down with the sun, and presently there was nothing but a hot air wafting out of Africa. It was just enough to fill the sails of the *Wager* as she stood south-south-west a half west under her courses, topsails, and topgallantsails, exactly in the wake of her next in line ahead, that elegant rakish forty-gun ship the *Pearl*; but it was not enough to send the least breath down into the suffocating depths where the *Wager's* midshipmen had their being.

The midshipmen's berth in H.M.S. *Wager* was low, cramped, awkward, and crowded; and therefore, it was in these latitudes — not far to the north of the tropic of Cancer — uncommonly hot — a perfectly normal state of affairs in the Royal Navy; but the young gentlemen, the midshipmen, the master's mates, and other such low forms of life that dwelt there, had seen fit to make it very much hotter, first by eating a supplementary two pounds of salt pork a head in honour of their guests, Mr Palafox of the *Centurion* and Mr Shovell of the *Gloucester*, and then by launching into a most passionate argument about when the century would end.

'It is so startlingly obvious to even the very weakest understanding



that the nineteenth century will begin on 1 January 1800,' said James Campbell, staring round the table and automatically ducking as the Atlantic swell sent the heavy brass lamp swinging at his head, 'that I am amazed any poor clot-polled gowk should think it worth his breath to deny it. Amazed, amazed.' And indeed he looked tolerably amazed, for the punch that was supposed to be quenching the pork-raised thirst had been given a double ration of naval rum, by way of celebration, and its fumes were fast mounting to his head, giving him a very glassy and stolid expression indeed.

Three voices from the gloom instantly broke in with three different but very heated refutations, and above them all could be heard the piping of William Teape, the youngest of the company — he was but twelve, though he had been on the books of his uncle's ship these last three years — crying, 'It all started with the year nought. You must count the year nought!'

It so happened that all these people exhausted their breath at the same moment, and in the momentary silence Jack Byron said to the surgeon's mate, 'What do you make of it, Toby?' The surgeon's mate was peering intently at a scaly creature about three inches long that had dropped from the beam above his head and that was now eagerly devouring the piece of cheese he held towards it on the point of a lancet. 'Why, I take it to be a form of Willoughby's great chaenomastrix,' said Tobias Barrow.

'No, no. I mean what do you make of it — when will the century end?'

'What century?'

'Why, the century we have been talking about this last age — this century, our century. It ends in 1800, does it not? With 1801 as the first of the next. It stands to reason.'

'Dr Price,' said the surgeon's mate, taking a sip of punch to refresh his mind, 'the great Dr Price, as he is properly called, for his eminent

talents and particularly his transcendent skill in civil calculation, was applied to, to settle the astronomical, or chronological, or grammatical, or metaphysical point in question — for it partakes of all these qualities . . .’

‘Have a banana!’ cried a great spotted youth named Cozens, banging the table with delight at his own wit. ‘Haw, haw!’

‘Though why you should worry your heads about the matter puzzles me, I confess,’ said Toby, glaring sharply at them through his thick spectacles, for Willoughby’s great chaenomastrix had taken offence at the noise and had darted into the bosom of the sleeping Mr Shovell of the *Gloucester*, ‘seeing that it is only 1740 now, and to judge by your manners, your gross beastly appetites — or shall I say bulimies? — and what I know of your healths, not one of you is likely to survive six months, let alone sixty years.’

‘Never say that, soul,’ cried Cozens, who was in fact to leave his bones on a desolate frozen shore before his next full year was out. He spoke in a suddenly uneasy voice, for he had been bred to the sea (which Tobias Barrow had not), and like so many sailors he was deeply superstitious: indeed the whole berth fell so gloomy all at once that Jack Byron thought it his duty to say to their guest, ‘Mr Palafox, sir, would you care to take a turn on deck? It’s most uncommon hot below.’

‘With all the pleasure in the world,’ said Peter Palafox; and then remembering his manners he added, ‘though this is the most elegant berth, sure, for comfort and amenity, that ever the heart of man could desire.’

‘Lard above,’ said Jack, stepping on deck, ‘it’s hotter still.’

They stood for a moment on the port gangway, and the ghost of a breeze coming in over the bows made them gasp. Jack and Peter glanced instinctively up at the sails, and at that moment the foresail shivered. ‘That bowline!’ called an angry voice from the quarter-deck, though even before that the bowline had started to guilty life and the

bridles were plucking the weather-leeche taut. The *Wager* was as close-hauled as she could be, pointing up between four and five points of the wind, which was the best she could manage. She was a comfortable ship, a converted East Indiaman, but she was not much of a sailer, particularly close-hauled, and now although she was keeping her station a cable’s length astern of the *Pearl*, she had made rather more leeway than the rest of the squadron, which could therefore be seen from her deck at an angle, a stately line of ships stretching away over half a mile of sea, their crowded sails pink with the reflected glory of the sunset — the *Severn*, the *Centurion*, the *Gloucester*, the *Pearl*, with the victuallers to leeward and the fast-sailing *Tryall* to windward, watching for the Spaniards who might have set out from Cadiz in pursuit, for the squadron was bound for the Horn, to pass into the Great South Sea, there to take, burn, sink, and destroy any of His Most Catholic Majesty’s ships they might fall in with, and to harass his subjects and possessions in Chile, Peru, and all points west of the Isthmus of Panama. What with battles, shipwrecks, and above all the ravages of the scurvy, few of the members of the squadron were ever to see Portsmouth again: but fortunately sailors are an unreflecting race, and now with abundance of confident good spirits and speaking in a high, carrying voice, Jack Byron gave Mr Palafox his views on how the squadron, and the *Wager* in particular, ought to have been handled.

‘All this standing for hours on the same tack is a great error,’ said he. ‘We’ll be in with the loom of the land presently, and everybody knows how that sets you inshore directly — that is to say eastward, whereas we ought to make our southing as soon as we possibly can.’

‘I suppose the Morocco coast won’t lie much above twenty leagues away, at all,’ said Peter Palafox, nodding eastward over the rail.

‘Just so,’ said Jack. ‘We must be off Salee at present. So what we ought to have done was to make our southing in short boards far to the west, for these long tacks close-hauled are only a kind of seesawing —

they will bring us back over precisely the same piece of sea tomorrow; and that is what I should have said two days ago, if they had asked my advice. In such an unweatherly old tub as this . . .'

'Mr Byron,' called a voice from the quarter-deck behind them.

'Sir?'

'Pipe down.'

This threw a certain damp upon the conversation; but after a while Tobias Barrow said privately to Jack, 'Do you think we might be indulged in the use of the long-boat again?'

'Why, certainly,' said Jack. 'But on second thoughts,' he added, casting a look over his shoulder, 'it might be better to go into the *Centurion's* gig. If agreeable to Mr Palafox?'

The gig was, for the moment, Mr Palafox's kingdom, for he was delivering the commodore's orders throughout the squadron — orders to rendezvous at Madeira in case they were scattered. 'With all my heart,' he said, swinging over the rail into the chains and hauling on the painter to pull the boat alongside.

'I will just hurry downstairs and bring up my little net and a jelly-bag,' said Toby. 'With so placid an ocean it is possible, just possible, that we may light upon yet another pedunculated cirripede.'

'Would he be making game of us, now?' asked Peter Palafox, who was very quick to resent anything like an affront.

'Never in life, upon my word and honour,' said Jack. 'You would never believe what a learned cove he is — reads Greek for the joy of it, has filled our cabin with curious flayed monsters in spirits of wine, and has never spent five minutes of daylight below since we left the chops of the Channel in case he might miss some sea-fowl, in spite of being as sick as a dog every time we meet the slightest hint of a sea. And now ever since we have reached these latitudes he has spent every night in the long-boat, staring at the things that light up, like a cat at a vase of goldfishes.'

'Well, I honour learning, the Dear knows,' said Peter. 'So he's not the great seaman, at all?'

'Lard no. He had never seen salt-water, never smelt the bilges of a ship, till I brought him to Portsmouth at the beginning of this commission. He is my particular friend, you know — you should see his prodigious curious collection of serpents at home — and I have brought him into the Navy by way of making his fortune. But I should never call him a seaman: no. He looks upon the whole ocean as a museum of natural curiosities; why, the other day he desired the first lieutenant to put the ship about because he fancied he spied a turtle. I try to keep an eye on him and make him understand our ways, but he's in the moon three parts of the time, parsing his Sanskrit verbs.'

'What did your first lieutenant say?' asked Peter, with an inward smile.

'Oh, our Mr Bean is as good-natured a man as ever breathed,' said Jack, 'and he's beginning to know Toby by now — knows he would never do it for a cod. But he did not choose to put about, I must confess.'

'You astonish me, sir,' said Peter Palafox. 'And so your friend has a serpent, by land?'

'A vast number of serpents, I do assure you — carries 'em in his pocket. "Admire my new serpent," says he, plucking one forth and waving it under your nose. The one he gave my sister measured two yards and an inch.'

'How I should love to see a serpent,' said Peter.

'Han't you ever seen one?'

'There's never a snake in all Ireland,' said Peter Palafox with a sigh. 'Not so much as a cobra's child nor yet an asp.'

'Toby,' said Jack, 'Mr Palafox tells me there are no serpents in Ireland.'

'No indeed,' said Toby, 'poor people, poor people. No moles either, and only one kind of crow.'

Jack and Peter stepped down from the chains into the gig, received Toby's trawl, his dredge, his jelly-bag (for animalculae), his hand-net, a variety of pots and cans, and lastly his person. He was a clumsy, awkward creature, descended no doubt from some stock other than the nimble ape, and his way of coming down the *Wager's* side was to hold his breath, close his eyes, clench his teeth, and let himself drop, trusting to gravity to get him down and to Providence to preserve him from drowning in the gap between the boat and the ship's side; though this time, it must be admitted, he gave a kind of cataleptic jerk as he let go.

Fortunately the gig was at the height of its rise and both Peter and Jack were natural born seamen; they collected him and set him upright in the stern-sheets. 'That was better, I believe,' he said, staring round with modest triumph. 'Was you amazed at my leap, Jack? I am becoming quite the mariner.'

Peter Palafox let go and they went slowly astern, to be brought up aft of the long-boat with an almost imperceptible jerk, so little way did the *Wager* have upon her. Down there on the face of the water there was a delightful freshness, a marvellous atmosphere for meditation and repose. They handed all the gear into the long-boat and sprawled at their ease in the gig, trailing their hands and feet in the lukewarm sea.

The sun was well down now, and only the highest of the western clouds showed that he was still to be seen from the top of the sky; night was sweeping up fast from Africa, so fast that the stars were coming out in scores rather than one by one. Jupiter first, a great blazing round, and then the fixed stars, all rather farther over to the north than they were at home, leaving room on the southern rim of the sky for quite new constellations, Corona Australis, Ara, and low down the topmost stars of the Southern Cross. From far over the water there came the sharp tang-tang of two bells in the last dog-watch, probably from the *Severn*; the

sound was repeated in all the other ships, and in the silence they could even hear it from the little *Tryall*, far up to windward. In the *Wager's* great stern-lantern there appeared a small glow that rapidly became a splendid effulgence, lighting up the great sweeping curve of her driver and the tall figure of Captain Kydd, standing with his hands behind his back, staring up into the sails.

'There will be a heavy dew tonight,' observed Jack, nodding towards Jupiter.

'Maybe that will make it a little cooler,' said Peter, who had rolled his coat into a pillow and who was now quite ready to go to sleep.

'Can it be . . .?' cried Toby, starting to his feet. 'Can it be?' he cried, pointing and putting his foot on the gunwale to crane up a little higher. The gig lurched under his sudden movement and he instantly fell over the side face-first, without the slightest motion to preserve himself. They seized him as soon as his upstretched hands reached the surface and hauled him in, spouting pints of pure Atlantic. 'Infinitely obliged,' he gasped, as Peter Palafox wrung the sea out of the skirts of his rusty black coat and dried him with a handkerchief. 'Most kind.' He leapt up again. 'Easy, now,' they said, steadying him. 'I was not mistaken,' he cried, stabbing the air with incredible eagerness. 'A whale!'

'There she blows!' roared a voice from the *Wager* above them — Henry Doggett, who had been pressed out of a Hull whaler, and who now flew up to the maintop to regale himself with the sight of a whale, until a bosun's mate with a rope's end persuaded him to return to his duty below.

Staring out over the sea in the direction of Toby's pointing hand, Jack and Peter saw nothing, nothing whatever but the long oily swell with here and there a little ripple as the light air touched it. And then, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, a double jet shot up fifteen feet and stayed there in the motionless air while you might have counted three: there was the easy heave and roll of something dark, then a broad

spread tail appeared, stood motionless for an instant, and so vanished, leaving the sea as apparently deserted and uninhabited as it had been before.

'We shan't see him again,' remarked Jack, sitting down.

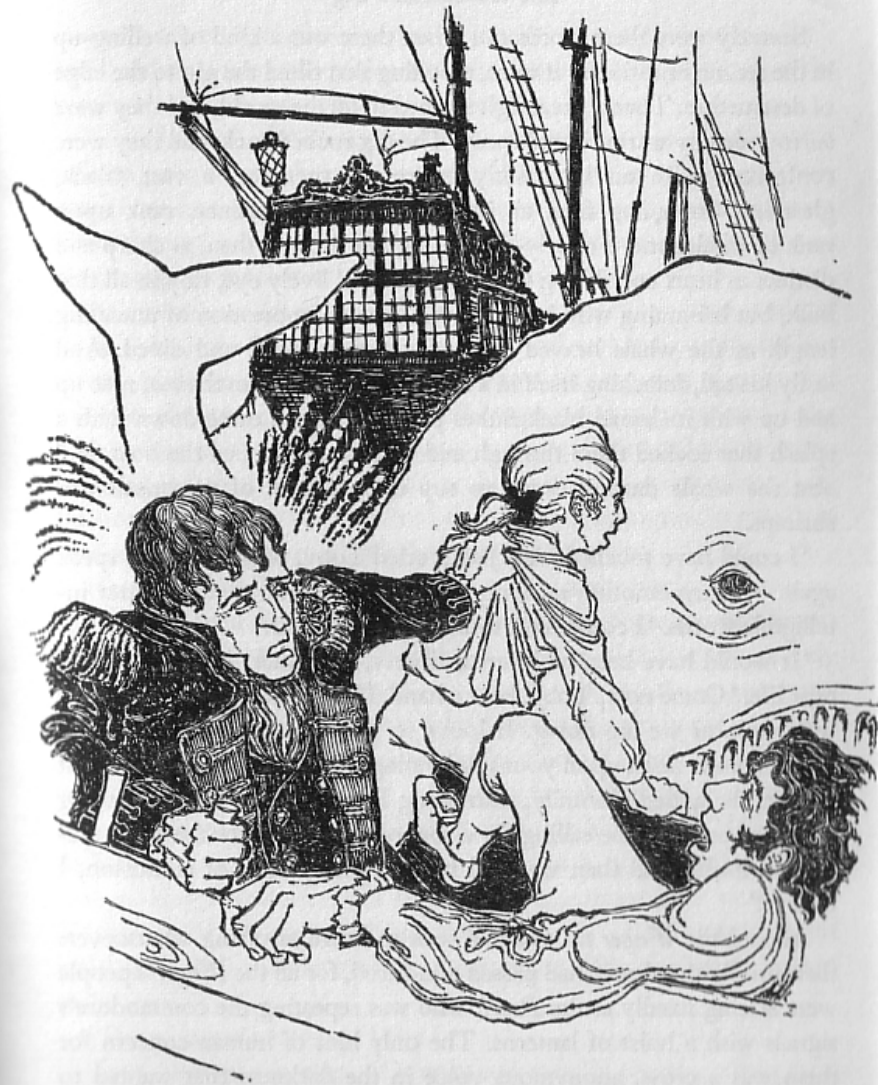
'Why not?'

'They always sound deep when they put their flukes up like that — stay down perhaps half an hour and come up a vast way off.' They listened to him with profound attention, and Jack, pleased with being an authority on whales, added his remaining piece of lore. 'Their throats are so small that a penny loaf would choke them, however.'

This had much less success. Mr Palafox turned away with the air of one who is being trifled with: how could a whale come by so much as a Wood's halfpenny, let alone any greater coin, for all love? And Tobias Barrow returned to his rapt contemplation of the place where the whale had been. 'I am penetrated,' he said after a while, '*penetrated* with admiration. What happiness to see a whale! I have beheld Leviathan.'

The twilight was darkening now, and the lights of the ships ahead mingled with the blaze of stars that reached quite down to the sea; the *Wager's* stern-lantern filled what faint wash the ship possessed with a river of light, and from the warm dimness behind the lantern came the squeak of a fiddle as the watch below took their ease on the fo'c'sle.

Already the cold unearthly phosphorescent gleams were showing in the sea — pale flames here and there that would presently join, giving every rippled surface a coruscating life of its own. This was the beginning of the night, a new world; and countless myriads of creatures were mounting towards the surface. Toby put out his trawl and his jelly-bag, and some ten minutes or so later he said, 'You will not think me ungrateful, Jack — you will not think that I repine at my lot — when I say how I should like to see him again, just once more?'



Scarcely were these words out when there was a kind of welling-up in the sea, an eruption as it were, a boiling that tilted the gig to the edge of destruction. Then a great sigh seemed to fill the world, and they were surrounded by warm air and spray. The gig rocked back, and they were confronted with an impossibly enormous presence, a vast, black, gleaming, streaming face, an immeasurable countenance, rank upon rank of whalebone, a clearly-defined lighter lip, and then, as sharp and distinct as heart could long for, a small round lively eye, tiny in all that bulk, but brimming with intelligence. Then an impression of unending length as the whale heaved up its shoulders, rolled and dived. And lastly his tail, detaching itself in a leisurely manner from the sea, rose up and up with its broad black flukes poised before it came down with a splash that soaked them through and through, swamped the boat, and sent the whale darting down to sup upon a host of pteropods and shrimps.

'I could have touched him, Jack,' cried Toby, when he could speak again — when emotion no longer choked him and he could utter intelligible words. 'I could have touched him, I swear.'

'It would have been an infernal liberty,' said Jack, baling away for dear life. 'Come now, Toby, bear a hand, I beg, and scoop some of this water out, as we are doing. It looks so much better in the sea. And Toby, I must insist upon your moderating your wishes. I know how it will be,' he added gloomily, addressing Peter Palafox, 'the next thing we know and he'll be calling for a roc, or a chimaera, or the great sea-serpent itself. And then we shall be in a pretty state of confusion, I believe.'

Aboard the *Wager* no one had seen or heard anything whatsoever: their prodigious drama had passed unnoticed, for all the *Wager's* people were staring fixedly at the *Pearl*, who was repeating the commodore's signals with a hoist of lanterns. The only hint of human concern for them was a cross, anonymous voice in the darkness that wanted to

know 'what all the splashing and assing about in the boats was for'; but it did not press its inquiries, and presently, after the changing of the watch, everything fell wonderfully silent.

'Only yesterday luminous squids seemed to me the height of human felicity,' said Toby, after a long pause. 'But now they will be precious small beer. I am very happy to see them, however,' he observed, peering down through the water, where a darting like a swarm of comets showed the passage of those same enterprising creatures.

Jack swam up from his soft, warm, overwhelming sleep, realised what Toby had said, replied, 'To be sure,' and sank back again. He was aware, without knowing how, that Peter Palafox was already fast asleep in the bows; and for his part, although he once more heard Toby address him on the subject of whales — the benignity to be detected in their gaze — their length — their probable weight — their diet — reflections upon Jonah — he did not open his eyes again until a pale light told some vigilant part of his mind that it was dawn.

He sat up, feeling splendid, cool at last, and wonderfully rested, though still wet, either from their swamping or from the prodigious dew: but he was almost immediately conscious of something gravely amiss. He stared round to make out what it was, and the answers presented themselves at once. In the first place the gig was in the midst of a thick fog: and in the second it was quite alone. The white world that surrounded them was wholly and totally mute; and the gig's painter drooped alongside, limp, attaching them to nothing at all. No wonder he had not heard eight bells in the middle watch, when he should have woken. He glanced round to see whether his companions were there. They were there, right enough, draped in the unlovely attitudes of sleep, with their mouths open. For a moment Jack was almost afraid to wake them.

'Toby,' he said, softly. 'Toby.'

Toby opened his eyes. His pale and usually serious, thoughtful

expression suddenly blazed with delight. 'The whale, Jack. Do you remember the whale?'

'I do indeed. But where's the *Wager*?'

Now it was Toby who stared about. 'Why,' he said, 'it was there when I went to sleep. I remember tying the rope again by the light of its great lantern.' He went exceedingly red. Jack cocked an eye at him, but said nothing: the words 'tying again' had told him all he needed to know. He had the greatest admiration for Toby's mind, and he loved him dearly; but he had seen Toby's knots. 'The fact of the matter is,' said Toby in a low voice, 'that I saw what I conceived to be a particularly interesting object up by the pointed end of the ship — in the event it proved to be only an unusually bright patch of phosphorescence — and I thought no harm in undoing us and clawing along by a variety of projections on the ship's side to see. I did the rope up again with extreme attention, I do assure you, Jack.'

Jack nodded, fanning the mist with his hand as though to dispel it. 'As soon as this burns off,' he said, 'I dare say we shall see her lying becalmed a few hundred yards away.'

For a little while they let all the possible consequences of the situation sink in: then, both stirred by the same thought and both turning with the same movement, they looked round at Peter Palafox. There he lay with his head partially buried in his coat and his mind racing along the green roads of his native land on an unbiddable left-handed horse, terrified that he might not reach his ship in time to join the Navy and take part in all the delights it held in store. They were exceedingly unwilling to wake him: they would infinitely have preferred that he should sleep on until the dissolving of the fog showed the *Wager* lying there with limp, dew-dripped sails, within easy hailing distance.

The dissolving of the fog showed them nothing of the sort. Its attenuation to mere vapid mist, the appearance of a suffused blueness

above them, and the dispersion of the last wafting veils by the rising sun took half an hour — thirty minutes in which their ears strained for the slightest sound or the slightest glimpse of the ship, and strained in vain; thirty minutes in which their hearts sank lower and lower. By the end of this time the whole bowl of the sky was clear — not a cloud upon it; and the whole round of the horizon was clear too. They lay in the middle of a great blue disc of sea, and there was not a ship or a boat or anything whatever to break its even surface upon the whole of its vast extent.

Just as the sun in setting had swallowed the breeze, so in rising it brought it back again. The glassy surface ruffled over, and with a sensation of quite extraordinary anguish Jack thought of the *Wager* heeling to the breeze under a press of canvas, fetching the white wake of the *Pearl*, and the whole squadron racing away in a long line far, far to the south.

'Jack, I am infinitely concerned . . .' murmured Toby, and for some reason they both looked guiltily round at Peter Palafox. He was sitting on a thwart, wide awake, and his mouth was poised for whistling: as they turned, however, he unpoised it, and said with a smile, 'Good day now. How charmingly cool it is, too.'

'Here's a pretty kettle of fish,' said Jack, blushing; and Toby said, 'Mr Palafox, I am infinitely concerned, but it seems that through my negligence in fastening the rope I have cast us all away.'

'Well, never be in such a taking, joy. It could happen to anyone, I am sure. Think of Saint Brendan — he was from Clonfert, not far from us. Or Saint Ruadan, who crossed the ocean in a villainous little small meal-trough, whereas this is as solid a gig as ever a man could look for. Though it makes my heart black to think how I gave the water-keg to the cooper to mend.' He looked thoughtfully into the empty locker. 'How far off the coast of Africa do you suppose we might be?' he asked.

'Fifty miles, perhaps,' said Jack.

'But surely the ship will turn round directly they find we are gone?' cried Toby. They both looked at Jack, who was by far the most experienced in naval ways.

He shook his head. 'Captain Kydd might signal the commodore — he probably will,' he said doubtfully, 'but upon my word I can't see him putting about just for a gig that has gone astray, not with every day as valuable as it is. I know I should not, if I were commanding a squadron upon such urgent service.'

There was a silence while they digested this. 'They were going to tack in the middle watch,' said Peter. 'Now suppose we went adrift about midnight, and suppose there has been no shift in the wind, and suppose 'tis about one or two bells in the forenoon watch now, why then we should see their topsails a couple of leagues, say, due south or thereabouts about noon. So if we pull south or a little west of south, we shall cut right across their path.'

'Very true,' said Jack, 'if we had anything to pull with.'

'Oh, oh,' murmured Peter, with a sudden piercing recollection of their wild prodigal thrusting of oars into the long-boat, together with everything else that might hinder their luxurious sprawling.

'Furthermore,' said Jack, 'you're forgetting their leeway. *Wager* was steering south-south-west a half west, but her true course was at least a point and a half off; and if this goes on,' said he, as the freshening breeze sprinkled them with little drops from a chopping wave, 'they will have the topgallants off her in ten minutes' time, which will mean another whole point . . .'

The conversation grew more and more technical, quite out of Toby's reach, and he sat there in silent misery, only rising once, to be sick over the side as discreetly as possible, until they had finished.

This took a long while, a very long while: for a great deal was at stake — everything, indeed; and a wrong decision could lead to a protracted and very horrible death. In the end they decided to remain

where they were until the evening, in the hope that the squadron, beating up into a contrary wind and lying no closer to it than the least weatherly ship of them all, would pass again on the opposite tack at least so close that they might be seen from the masthead. And then, if they saw nothing by twilight, they would rig the best jury-mast they could, using the gig's top-strake and their shirts for a sail, and make for Gibraltar.

'Africa is nearer,' said Peter Palafox.

'Why truly, so it is,' replied Jack. 'But what happens to people cast away on the Morocco coast? They are either knocked on the head by the Moors directly or else they are sold as slaves. Or else they run ashore on the edge of a vast howling waterless desert and wander up and down and perish miserably. Besides, the wind has been fair for Spain these last three days, and they say it won't change till the dark of the moon. With this breeze we could run it down in what — four or five days?'

Peter looked grave. 'Sure, it's the only answer,' he said: but he scanned the southern horizon with an even greater longing than before.

The sun climbed up the sky, and the freshness left the breeze. By noon the morning seemed to have begun quite six weeks ago — a remote, unpleasant memory. Time passed slowly, slowly, and with every minute the air grew hotter. Once, at about eleven o'clock, Toby had seen a turtle, apparently sleeping on the surface; but he had not liked to mention it.

'You may strike me down if ever you see me without a needle again,' said Jack. 'I shall always carry a dozen in the handle of my knife.' He was laboriously sewing their shirts together, pricking the holes with a sharpened splinter and threading them through with a yarn from the unlaid painter.

At last the sun reached its height, passed over the meridian, and began

its unbelievably tedious downward course. According to their calculations this was the most favourable time for them to see the white gleam of topsails against the southern sky; and although these calculations had very little solid fact behind them, every heart in the gig was painfully wrought up. No one spoke, or very little; for not only were they far too concerned with staring over the sea until they could scarcely make out anything at all, but even a very little talking increased the enormous thirst that had been parching them for as long as they could remember.

One o'clock. Two o'clock. Three. Four, and the gig was filled with very slowly disappointed hope, too bitter to express.

'Perhaps we had better set about starting this strake,' said Jack, tapping the gunwale with his knife. 'It will be a long business.'

'Sure it's a desperate . . .' began Peter; but he checked himself and began to consider how best to work something like a mast out of the living timbers of their boat without weakening it too much. Neither Jack nor he had any liking for their task — no heart for it at all, and they pondered long and gloomily over its technical difficulties.

'Jack,' said Toby in a tone of hesitant triumph, 'is that a sail over there?'

'Yes!' cried both Jack and Peter in the same instant, staring rigidly away to the east, not to the south at all. Then Jack said 'Yes,' again, but in a woefully doubting, crushed kind of voice.

'What's amiss?' asked Toby.

'Wait a minute,' said Jack, wishing to make quite sure. 'No topsails. No topmasts. She's lateen-rigged. A polacre.'

The polacre was coming along very fast, with the wind on her beam, steering a course that would carry her some way north of the gig. Her three immense triangular sails showed up sharp and clear, each like the dorsal fin of a shark — three sharks crowded close together and racing

over the sea. 'She must be running close on ten knots,' he muttered. She was hull-up already. Peter gathered their sewn-up shirts and he stood on a thwart to wave them.

'Wait a minute,' said Jack.

'Why?' cried Peter in amazement.

'Well, the fact of the matter is . . .' said Jack, and paused, still staring under his hand at the long low black hull. 'The fact of the matter is, she's a Salee rover.'

'Oh, oh, oh,' said Peter, dropping the shirts.

'What of it?' cried Toby. 'Are the men of Salee never to rove, forsooth? A most eligible vessel — a very pretty vessel, indeed.'

'They are Barbary pirates,' said Jack.

The three of them gazed at the Salee rover, and their hearts were filled with a strange turmoil of feelings.

'They sacked Baltimore not a great while ago,' said Peter. 'And one of them sheltered from a westerly under Inishkeeragh; they landed in the morning and killed all the men in the village — cut their throats in the street — and they hanged the priest in the chapel there with a hog beside him. They carried off the women and the middling children, and when they left they fired every roof and stack and barn in the place. You'd never believe the desolation. There was a Dutch renegade among them, a man with a yellow beard, and he was the worst of them all, they say.'

They sat down, still gazing at the polacre; in the last five minutes she had run off at least a mile, and now every detail was clear — the short, forward-raked masts, the immense curved yards, and the high bow-wave she threw up gleaming white on either side.

'She's seen us,' said Jack. The corsair's long single deck was crowded with men, an improbable number of men, and now there was an agitation among them, a swarming into the bows and up the shrouds — dark arms pointing, turbaned heads staring towards them.

'If she don't put her helm a-lee directly she'll never fetch us on this tack,' observed Peter.

The stir aboard the polacre increased, but still she held her course, and the heads of the three watchers in the gig pivoted steadily from right to left as they followed her. From right to extreme left, when their heads could turn no more unless they changed position altogether and faced north. This they did unconsciously, moving as though in a dream. Now their backs were to the wind and the corsair was directly downwind of them, rather above half a mile away: they could see a man in a red turban waving both arms, as though he were in a terrible passion.

'Do you think . . .' began Toby, but as he spoke the polacre flew up into the wind and came about on the starboard tack.

'That's the strange thing to do,' said Peter, frowning.

'A rum go altogether,' said Jack. Obviously there were divided counsels aboard the polacre, for if the corsairs had merely altered course and run up to the windward of them they could have tacked and picked up the gig at their leisure. But as it was they were pointing up into the wind so much that the polacre could hardly get along, and even so it was not sure that her course would bring her to the boat. It was as though the Moors had hesitated again and again, and as though they were now trying to snatch up the gig in the shortest possible time.

'They are counting upon the way we make with our drifting,' said Jack. 'I dare say with this breeze we shall go a hundred yards downwind in the next half-hour. But why do they cut it so uncommon fine as to rely on that? Why?'

Answer came there none until Toby, whose eye had involuntarily followed the passage of a Madeiran petrel overhead and southwards, muttered in an uncertain, troubled voice, 'May I say there is another sort of ship over there?'

'Where?' they cried, spinning round to see a brig bearing down on

them, a brig that any normal person would have recognised as the *Tryall*, although she was a mile and a half away. She was coming down at a great pace with a brisk following wind — perfect for a square rig — and she had all her canvas abroad, even her topgallants, which was uncommonly brave in such a breeze. Jack glanced from the brig to the polacre and from the polacre to the brig. 'Upon my word I don't know,' he said. The brig was a great way off, but she was coming down like a racehorse: the polacre was horribly close, but she was beating up at barely three knots, if that. Furthermore, although she was as close-hauled as she could be it was not quite certain that her course would carry her to the gig. But at all events the situation was clear at last: the polacre had hesitated because of the brig — her topgallants must have been visible from the polacre's masthead long before they could have been seen from the gig, even if the gig's crew had been looking in the right direction — and then at the last moment the Moors had decided to make a dash for it, to sweep up the gig, go about and run on the larboard tack, for sailing on a wind she could run three miles to the brig's one.

'Faith, I cannot tell, either,' said Peter. 'But one thing's sure — we must stop our drifting. Mr Barrow, my dear, will you cast your jelly-bag astern and haul it in with all your might while we make a drogue?'

He and Jack seized the shirt-sail, made its corners fast to the unlaid painter, working with incredible speed and co-ordination, carried it to the stern, flung it as far as their line would allow, let it sink, and then hauled. The sail opened like a parachute: the gig moved towards it: their drift was checked — reversed. This was not unnoticed aboard the polacre, which was less than two hundred yards away, and the angry roar from aboard her was an unmistakable command. Jack snatched the jelly-bag — its extra line gave them a longer haul — and they flung out their drogue again and again and again. Then something skipped in the sea beside them and passed between Jack and Toby with a shrill hum.

'They're firing a patarero,' observed Jack, casting the drogue.

The next ball hit their gunwale, flinging up slivers of wood, and a second later there was a volley of musketry from the polacre: white splashes appeared all round the gig.

'Come on,' cried Peter, diving into the sea. The others hesitated — they could not swim, but the flash of the patarero made up their minds, and they slipped awkwardly over the side, grimly clinging to the thole-pins and straining up with their chins. The firing stopped: and now after their furious activity with the drogue they could look around again. It was not an encouraging sight: the brig was still a quarter of a mile away, and she did not seem to be moving quite so fast, whereas the polacre was slipping easily towards them, terribly close — perhaps the wind had shifted a trifle. Fifty or sixty dark faces lined the rail, and their talk came clearly over the water, excited and harsh. A tall Negro was standing on the rail, one hand holding the shrouds, the other swinging a grappling-iron.

Their three heads turned back to the *Tryall*, as though begging for a sign. And the sign came: a puff of black smoke on the fo'c'sle, instantly torn away by the wind, and then the deep boom of the *Tryall*'s bow-chaser, accompanied by a wonderfully heartening cheer from her crew. The ball pitched short, between the gig and the polacre, ricocheted in a high leap, and passed through the polacre's foresail, leaving a neat hole.

'There's a chance, there's a chance,' screamed Jack. The polacre's helmsman had let her fall off a little at the sound of the gun, but now he brought her up, and the Moors all gave an answering cheer.

Another bang, another cheer from the *Tryall*: but they never saw the flight of the ball. Another, that kicked up a white plume a few yards from the polacre's forefoot. Another, and they heard it pass singing high overhead.

Jack broke one of the thole-pins as he tried with all the strength of

his mind and body to force the *Tryall*'s shots to strike home: Peter was speaking in a steady, conversational tone beside him, but in Irish: Toby was repeating the Miserere psalm. The Moors' faces were very clear now, and so was the white grin of the black man with the grapnel. A chopping wave broke over Jack's head, but he cleared his eyes again just in time to see the taut perfect triangles of the polacre's sails dissolve in total confusion. A high shot, just grazing the mast, had cut the main-sail halyard and the yard had come down with a run. The Moors instantly started the fore and mizzen sheets, the helmsman bore up, and the polacre ran straight down the wind. In two minutes they had cleared their deck, and hauling their wind they went limping fast away towards Africa. And five minutes after that the *Tryall* backed her topsails, coming neatly into the wind alongside the gig.

The gig's crew were pleased to be given huge quantities of tea and water and wine; they were pleased to eat again and to be able to oil their scarlet sunburnt backs; but once the first enormous relief was over they were almost equally pleased — or pleased on another plane, to put it more exactly — to find that it was not *they* who were considered the poor helpless lost boobies. The unhappy lieutenant temporarily in command of the *Tryall* had wandered from his station in the night and had been frantically beating to and fro in search of the squadron; and since Peter Palafox was the bearer of orders for him from the commodore, to be delivered in the *Centurion*'s gig, and since the said orders had in fact been delivered in the manner specified, there was a very strong likelihood that when the squadron reached the rendezvous mentioned therein — to wit, Madeira — then everything would pass off perfectly well, with no wry looks or harsh words on the part of any of the superior officers. Indeed, so persuaded were Jack, Peter, and Toby of this prodigiously comforting truth that their confidence returned to an almost overwhelming degree, and as they ate their second enormous supper of the day they kindly gave the *Tryall*'s solitary

midshipman hints and advice on the care of open boats on the high seas, when delivering orders about a somewhat scattered squadron.

When the young man, duly impressed, had gone about his duties, Jack yawned, stretched, and remarked, 'I think I shall turn in. Hot again, ain't it?'

'I make no complaint,' said Peter, with a grin.

'It *is* hot,' said Toby. 'Really the most favourable sort of weather for observation . . . Jack,' he added, with a certain hesitation, 'I have noticed that as there is no room for the gig on the deck of this otherwise most commodious, agreeable vessel, they are towing it behind. Now do you think — it being understood, of course, that I touch nothing — that we might be indulged . . .?'

