

TALES FROM THE OUBLIETTE

PART FOUR

THE SUPERNATURAL REARS ITS UGLY HEAD

Introducing, for the first time, CONTINUO

(CONTINUO: THE "FLYING BUTTRESS" WAS PROBABLY THE CRAZIEST SHIP AFLOAT, WITH A CREW TO MATCH. COLIN AND SHEILA, THE HERO AND HEROINE OF THE TALE, ARE A YOUNG COUPLE WHO CAME ABOARD BY ACCIDENT AT THE START OF THE VOYAGE AND FOUND THEMSELVES UNABLE TO GET OFF AGAIN. AFTER THEY HAD BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING ABOARD A FIGHTING BULL FROM A SMALL SOUTH AMERICAN TOWN, THEY WERE ACCEPTED AS BONA-FIDE CREW MEMBERS.

AFTER BEING SEVERELY BUFFETED BY A STORM, THE "FLYING BUTTRESS" WAS SUBJECT TO A PLAGUE OF SHIPWRECKED RATS THAT MADE THE SHIP UNTENABLE BELOW DECKS, SO THE CREW ARE COMPELLED TO WEATHER THE TAIL-END OF THE STORM ON THE OPEN DECK.)

Everybody looked. There, sure enough, was a ship. What was more, a warship, great streaks of flame issuing forth from her guns. What on earth (or in the sea) was she firing at, though? Not at them, surely - she hadn't hit them yet, anyway, and they were close enough in all conscience.

Wonderingly, they stared. The warship, a big one, must have been about five hundred yards off. In the dim light she looked rather ghostly. Some trick of acoustics made the shots (for the identity of the sounds was now certain) sound distinctly eerie, too.

Then Emma barked. Nothing remarkable in that - she'd been barking ever since the banging started. Only, this time she barked in the other direction, over Cap'n Drainpipe's shoulder. Cap'n Drainpipe instinctively glanced round, then dropped Emma with a start. For there, the other side of them, over to port, a bit farther off, were the dim outlines of another great battleship. And she, too, was firing, seemingly in their direction. Presumably, therefore, the two ships were firing at each other. It was just the Flying Buttress's luck to be in the way.

Cap'n Drainpipe made a dive for the frantic Emma, before she barked herself overboard. The mate glanced up at the rigging, wondering whether it would be possible to sail out of harm's way. Shells were streaking by overhead, in both directions.

And then, when all was set for something terrible to happen, Old Salt spoke, and at his words everybody pricked up their ears, glanced at him, at each other, and again at the battleships, in greater alarm than ever.

"Oh my gawd," he said, his eyeballs suddenly nearly rolling out of

their sockets. "It be HMS Charabang - I seen her afore. AND - she's found the Graf von Luftschutzkeller. Them's a-fightin' it out. Oh, my GAWD!"

"Hell's blathering bells!" yelled Colin. "Here, Sheila, I don't believe in ghosts, but I think I CAN see THROUGH that battleship!"

Sheila could, too, clearly, the first one now being even closer than it had been before.

"They're not ghosts," she said, rather more quietly than Colin. "They're PHANTOMS."

"What the hell's the difference?"

"I don't believe in ghosts, either."

"You mean," said Colin, calming down a bit, though his brain was reeling at the idea, as indeed was hers, "that because you don't believe in ghosts, if you happen to see one, it can't be a ghost, because there aren't such things as ghosts, so you call it a phantom, which is the same thing, just to confuse the issue. Eh?"

"Something like that," Sheila replied. "It's just the best I can do to reconcile what I believe with what I see, or think I see, or vice versa."

Glancing to port, it was apparent that the second warship, designated by Old Salt the Graf von Luftschutzkeller, was rapidly drawing away. This was good, and people, after a terrifying half-minute, began to breathe freely again. The further away these things took place, the better.

A shriek from Fernando brought them round again, and consternation broke out afresh - consternation amounting to something very near panic. And little wonder. For while the Luftschutzkeller had been receding, the Charabang had been approaching, unperceived by the crew of the Flying Buttress, and was now well within a couple of hundred yards of them. Furthermore, she was now turned bows on to them, and was heading straight in their direction, looming bigger and ghostlier every moment.

Nothing could be done about it now. Even if it had been possible to remove the Flying Buttress from the path of the oncoming phantom, still nothing could have been done; everyone stood rooted to the spot with horror. For phantom she certainly was. The heaving waters could be clearly seen through her vague, shadowy hull. She was transparent, and no earthly ship had ever yet been that.

Closer and closer she drew; and one-score pairs of eyes watched her, fascinated. Nearer she loomed, in the crepuscular gloom of the morning, her vast bulk rising and falling as she breasted each mountainous wave, thereby proving that even phantoms float. Up and down she went, as did the little Flying Buttress, which was alternately level with her waterline and her deck. Every tiny detail of the advancing battleship could be

made out clearly through the murk; her guns, still blazing away, the shells apparently passing right through the rigging without harming it; her superstructure, the Captain on the bridge - all were as visible as life to the spellbound watchers on the deck, and about one millionth as natural. Nearer and nearer - closer and closer - larger and larger - - - The little vessel was lifted high on a wave above the bows of the battleship, hovered for an instant - - - the battleship rose to meet her - - - her bows were against them - - - she was on them! She was on them! She had struck!

In this most dire moment, the assembled horror-struck voyagers found their limbs, and their voices. Some of them shrieked in terror; some of them groaned, and covered their eyes; some of them fell on their knees; some of them threw themselves on the deck. Fernando threw his arms round his little sisters. Cap'n Drainpipe hugged Emma tighter, and prepared to face whatever might come philosophically, Emma, in her turn, whimpering as if she'd been hurt. Colin and Sheila stood tight-lipped; their hands were clenched in each other's, but they didn't realise this. And the phantom still came. More shrieks and groans; more whimpers from Emma, suddenly and mysteriously ceasing; ghostly bulks hovered all around them for an instant, then were replaced by others; the ceaseless bombardment, still maintained, went un-noticed, even when phantom shells actually exploded among them; a flotilla of bellows issued up from the terrified hull below. Haywire fell with a crash to the deck from somewhere up aloft; then suddenly it was all over. The stern of the phantom towered weirdly to port, still moving steadily on - HMS Charabang had passed right through them!

Colin and Sheila took a deep breath, and looked at each other. Both were quivering like jelly-fish. After all, it isn't every day that one passes right through a phantom battleship, from bow to stern; to tell the honest truth, neither of them had ever done it before, and, what was more, neither of them evidenced the slightest desire to do it again. Then Colin realised that he was holding Sheila's hand, and, most absurdly, blushed, letting go as he did so. This made Sheila follow suit. But their blushes only lasted for an instant, for they turned to gaze at the retreating capital ship, idly noticing the dithering Fuba family on the way. Then Colin turned to Cap'n Drainpipe, and the fun began.

That is, Colin didn't turn to Cap'n Drainpipe. He fully intended to. By all the rules, he should have done, because Cap'n Drainpipe had been standing right next to him, about four feet away, a moment or so ago, the terrified Emma in his arms, and he turned to where he'd been standing. Only Cap'n Drainpipe just wasn't there.

Colin goggled. Anybody would have. He gulped twice, pinched himself, blinked, and looked again. For not only had Cap'n Drainpipe, complete with Emma, clean disappeared off the face of the deck, but - - - and this is the point - - - in his place stood a real, genuine, live ghost.

Involuntarily, Colin stepped back a pace. This brought him cannoning into Sheila. It also brought him down to earth, so to speak. He took a deep breath, then glanced at her. From her incredulous expression it was plain that she'd seen it, too.

"Colin - can you see it?" she gasped.

"Yes - - - I can," he replied, a little uncertainly. " - - - What is it?"

"I dunno - Oh, pinch me, somebody, quick!"

"OK, OK, said Colin, trying to calm her. "I've pinched myself once, but it's still there."

"Oh, hell. This is too much for one person to stand," Sheila groaned (still standing it, incidentally). "Are you sure it's real?"

"No," he answered, "I'm not. Here, excuse me," (addressing himself to the ghost) "but what's all this supposed to be in aid of?"

"Search me," replied the ghost. "Or rather, don't," he added quickly. "You won't find anything - or anybody - there - - - I mean here."

"But," continued Colin, rather amazed at his own audacity in speaking to the ghost like this, and considerably more so at the ghost's non-committal attitude to it all, "surely you've some idea of how you come to be here, on the Flying Buttress, haven't you? And what's become of Cap'n Drainpipe? - - - Here, you're not his ghost, are you?" he queried hastily, as the horrible idea suddenly came to him. "You don't look like him."

"I suppose I'd better introduce myself," said the ghost, "though frankly I'm just as mystified as you seem to be. Caramel's the name; Cap'n Albert Caramel, RN. I was lost at sea during the war. My ship went down with all hands while chasing the German raider Graf von Luftschuttkeller, and we've been chasing her ever since. But I seem to have fallen overboard, or something. There's my ship, away over there."

Following his hand, Colin could just see the faintest trace of the battleship in question, fast disappearing over the turbulent waters.

"The Charabang," continued Cap'n Caramel. "And a better ship never sailed the five oceans. Great pity I couldn't stay with her. We were just beginning to get the range properly. But who's this Cap'n What's-his-name you were asking about?"

"Cap'n Drainpipe. He's the Cap'n of this ship, the Flying Buttress," said Colin. "He should be just where you're standing now. I thought you might have seen him."

Light suddenly dawned - if that's the right expression - on Cap'n Caramel's countenance. "Aha," he said, with the ghost of a smile. (That expression's dead accurate, anyway). "Now I begin to see through things."

"Goodness, I hope not," put in Sheila, who'd by now found it in her to join in. "One transparent object on this ship's quite enough, thank you."

"I mean metaphorically," replied Caramel. "What must have happened is something like this. I'm just about to pass right through your Cap'n when something goes wrong. Perhaps we receive a direct hit. Anyway, I find myself immediately transplanted to your ship. Your Cap'n, presumably, is at this moment standing on the bridge of my ship, the Charabang, chasing the Graf von Luftschutzkeller over the ocean for all he's worth."

"Which'll be precisely nil," said Colin, "if he's got to stay on board that ghost - phantom - ship. He'll fall right through, man!"

"I doubt it," answered Caramel. "I'm not falling through this one, am I? And he's no more out of his element there than I am here. Perhaps he's like I am by now. Anyway, that's most likely what's happened, so where do we go from here?"

"You mean to say," said Sheila, "that Cap'n Drainpipe's somewhere out there, in that horrible spook-ship, and perhaps dead as well? It's it's impossible!"

"So's this bloke," interposed Colin, jerking his thumb in Caramel's direction. "But he's here, all the same. Come to that, I think I did hear an explosion of sorts just next to me, but I wasn't in a fit state to pay any attention at the time."

"Neither was I," said Caramel. "I wondered what we were going through. I was quite worried about it - by the way, young man, seeing I seem to be here for keeps, would you mind giving me the low-down on the situation here? I haven't seen much so far. Where's the crew, for example? Or are you it?"

"They should be here," Colin replied. "They certainly were after your ship had gone. H'm - that's funny. I wonder where they've all got to?"

"Taken to the boats, I suppose," said Sheila. "They'll be afraid of ghosts."

"But the boats are still in the davits," objected Caramel. "Nobody's launched any since I've been here, I'm certain of that."

"They wouldn't have," said Colin. "But they'll be there, or skulking up by the bulldozer, or somewhere."

"Anyway," pursued the spectral Cap'n, "why aren't you two afraid of ghosts?"

"As a matter of fact, we are," Sheila answered. "But we don't believe in them. That's all."

"What, you don't believe in them either?" Caramel gave a shrug. "Well, you're probably the most sensible, in the long run. To tell you the truth, though this'll shake you, neither do I. So," he continued, "perhaps you see the extreme delicacy of my position?"

"I don't know," remarked Colin philosophically. "I think one should always believe in oneself, whether one is a ghost or not. It helps you to face the future."

"You misunderstand me," replied the spook. "How the hell can I believe in myself, when myself is nonexistent? Anyway, there isn't any future in this game - only a present. I'm exactly the same as I was when the Charabang was sunk under me, umpteen years ago. And that goes for the Charabang, too. And the Graf."

"Yes, I think you've got something there," Colin conceded. "But this is absurd. I'd ask you to meet the crew, only they'll take some getting used to."

"Or vice versa," said Sheila. "We'd ask you below, only we daren't go down ourselves. The place is simply choc-a-bloc with rats."

"You're forgetting I'm - - - well, rat-proof," said Caramel. "D'you mind if I have a look by myself?"

"Not at all," said Colin. "Perhaps you'll scare them away. But beware of the bull - he's loose in the cabins."

"Did you say bull?"

"I did. He's as much a part of the ship's company as we are. He's about the sanest thing on board, too, at that," answered Colin. "Take a good look at him. He can't hurt you, if the rats can't."

Together the three of them proceeded along the entirely deserted deck as far as the hatch. Colin and Sheila watched Cap'n Caramel step gingerly down the companion-way. He then began walking slowly along the corridor.

Suddenly he turned. "Here, are you trying to kid me on?" he called. "There isn't a single rat down here, not one. What's the game?"

"What?" called Colin and Sheila, in one breath, and stuck their heads through the hatch. It was true. Not one rat was visible.

The two of them looked at each other. "There's something fishy about this," said Colin. "In fact, I smell a rat. I'm going down to have a look." And he forthwith descended the companion-way, Sheila close behind.

Caramel was awaiting them.

"I'd like to box your ears," he told them sternly. "Only the fact that such a course is an utter impossibility causes me to desist. I'm not in the habit of being made fun of. I'm still a captain in the Royal Navy, and entitled to some respect as such, even if I am transparent. Get that?"

"But there were some rats," insisted Sheila, sorely puzzled by their

sudden disappearance. "Hundreds and hundreds of them. Oh!"

"What's up, Sheila?" cried Colin.

"I don't know," she answered. "Oh! There it is again! Look!"

This time he saw. An indeterminate something had just streaked by along the floor of the corridor.

"Whatever's the matter with you both?" asked Cap'n Caramel.

"Didn't you see?" cried Sheila. "Look! There's another one! See it that time?"

"Oh, that," answered Caramel, slightly disappointed. "What's wrong with that? My ship was stiff with 'em."

"Well what the hell are they?" queried Colin.

"Ghost rats," replied the ghost Cap'n. "I can see I'm in good company, anyway."

"Then - ours'll be on the Charabang, d'you think?" Sheila asked.

"Looks like it," replied Caramel.

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Sheila bent down to comfort the little girls, while Colin held forth to the assembled multitude, before it got a chance to disassemble itself again.

"Friends, Romans and countrymen," he began, for want of a better opening. He felt rather silly, but knew of no way out. "Something's gone wrong. Terribly wrong."

"I knows it would," Old Salt butted in, waving his empty but eternal pipe in Colin's direction. "Cap'n's dead. No need to be tellin' me, young Colin. Soon's I catches eyes on old HMS Charabang, I says to myself, I says, 'Cap'n's a goner'. Wasn't I just tellin' you Bill?"

"Ar, an' a rare good Cap'n 'e be, too," answered Barnstaple Bill. "It's moighty proud I be to serve under 'im. Long live Cap'n Drainpoip, Oi says, an' be danged to them as dasn't."

"But - is he not dead, then, voyez-vous?" came the precise accent of the Breton.

"Shut up a minute, everybody, please," said Colin. "Lets get this straight. I don't know whether the Cap'n's dead or not. But I have very good reason to believe that he is at this moment on board HMS Charabang."

Consternation reigned forthwith. Everybody began jabbering at once

to Colin, to each other, and, in extreme cases, to themselves.

"But - to remain indefinitely suspended on an intangible and transparent article of the nature of HMS Charabang, would be a feat worthy of a magician!" declared Sensasian.

"Perhaps he's holding on to something," suggested Windscreen timidly.

"Oh, just my luck," moaned Funeral. "If someone had to become a ghost, why, oh why, couldn't it have been me?"

"Never again can I dish him up a bit o' the old Burma Road," wailed the cook, almost in tears.

"Look 'ere, Colin," said the mate. "Wot makes yer think 'e's gorn on the spook vessel?"

"Listen, everybody, for goodness sake," said Colin. "Not only does Cap'n Drainpipe appear to have gone off on HMS Charabang, but the ghost captain of HMS Charabang is definitely here on the Flying Buttress. We've swopped skippers. Now d'you get it?"

Again consternation ensued.

"I told you it was a ghost we'd seen, look you," said the bosun to the Breton.

"A g-g-g-ghost - - - that's - what - it - was," chattered Windscreen to himself. "I - thought - it was."

"I wish I was," lamented Funeral.

"I can't get away from it - it's in me blood, and I can't help it," mumbled Mr 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-Crash.

"Silence!" the mate suddenly piped up. "Be quiet, heverybody." Heverybody was.

"Now, cocks," he continued, "hit seems ter me has if we did orter sort things out a bit. We ain't got no Cap'n now, hand I thinks we orter come to an agreement habout our horgan-hi-sation."

"Well, don't you automatically become Cap'n, mate?" asked Colin.

"Hi did orter, Hi know, Colin," the mate replied. "But Hi doesn't. Yer see, it's like this 'ere. Heverybody corls me 'mite'. Yer knows that - yer corls me 'mite' yerself. Ho-ky so far. Hi'm the mite.

"But s'pôsin' Hi becomes Cap'n. Wot's goin' ter 'appen? Heverybody'll 'ave ter corl me 'Cap'n'. An' it ain't natteral ter corl me 'Cap'n'. Hi'm 'mite', hand 'mite' Hi'll horlways be. Ho-ky?"

"It smells," replied Colin. "Stinks to high Hades. But anything can happen on the Flying Buttress, so I'll give you your point. So what?"

"Wot Hi thinks, cocks," went on the mate, "his this 'ere. Hi styes mite, but Hi do the job of Cap'n, an' gives orl horders from now hon. So's that ho-ky by heverybody?"

General assent followed. The mate nodded, and prepared to say something further. But before he could go on, he was resolutely interrupted by the cook, Cucumber.

"No, mate, not on your life," exclaimed that worthy, an expression of grim determination on his face. "I'm standin' by my rights. And my rights is to take my orders from nobody 'cept the Cap'n. The mate's in charge o' the deck, but I work below-decks, an' below-decks ain't in the mate's command. So unless you becomes Cap'n, I'm takin' no orders from you. And that goes for Windscreen and Funeral here, too." And with that lot off his chest, he shut up.

"His that so, Windscreen?" demanded the mate.

"Er - yes - no - I don't know," stammered the unfortunate little steward.

"I'm with you all the way," put in Funeral mournfully. "And if he kills me for it, so much the better."

"They're quite right, mate, look you," said the bosun, to his mind reasonably.

"But - hif I does the job of Cap'n, wot's it matter wot Hi corls meself?" the mate protested.

"One hell of a lot, mate," replied Cucumber. "It's a matter o' principle. I belongs to the Incorporated Society o' Maritime Caterers, and that's one o' our union rules. No orders taken, 'cept from the Cap'n. Same with the stewards' and carpenters' unions."

"What, if I may ask, is a maritime caterer?" queried the Breton.

"Sea-cook, I think," answered Tim the Knacker.

"So it seems there's nothing for it but to become Cap'n after all, mate," Colin summed up.

"Wot? Me become Cap'n? Stop bein' mite? Never hon yer natteral, declared the mate indignantly. "So hit seems we got ter find hanother Cap'n. Hany hoffers? Wot abart you, bosun?"

"I haven't even a mate's ticket, look you," replied Whalebone, "let alone a Cap'n's. Try somewhere else, look you."

"Ho 'ell," swore the mate. "Oo else 'ave we got? Tim?"

"Not ruddy likely," said Tim the Knacker. "Now if you'd said chief jockey, I might've. But I'm not a sailor by rights. Don't know what-ever made me take it up in the first place."

"You haven't made such a bad showing at it, though," Colin told him.

"Maybe not, Colin, but I don't know any more about being a Cap'n than you do."

"Good hidear," the mate cut in. "'Ow'd yer like the job of Cap'n? Serious, now?"

"Whatever next?" said Colin, appalled. "Why, I don't know one end of a piece of rope from the other."

"Is there any difference?" asked Windscreen naively.

"And that goes for me, too, mate," said Sheila, who'd by now, with Fernando's help, succeeded in reducing the two little sisters to smiles. "Just in case you feel like asking me, that is."

The mate was nonplussed. Old Salt refused point-blank, like the others. The Breton and Sensasian courteously declined, the latter suggesting that the mate was possessed of ideas positively antediluvian. He didn't dare ask the cook, the carpenter, or the steward. (Their unions probably wouldn't've allowed it, anyway). He took one look at Haywire and Barnstaple Bill, and thought better of it. Finally he put his hands to his head in a gesture of despair, and sat down on Mr 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-Crash, who didn't bother to complain, even though he hadn't been asked to be Cap'n either.

"This 'ere's a dead lors, cockers," he groaned. "Won't hanybody be Cap'n? Becos hif they doesn't, we might just has well pack hup an' go 'ome, Hi'm tellin' yer strite."

"Well, if none of us'll take the job on," declared Sheila, "there's only one thing for it. We'll have to let Cap'n Caramel take over."

"And 'oo the ruddy 'ell's Cap'n Caramel?" the mate demanded.

"He's the ghost I was telling you about, mate," interposed Colin. "He's a genuine Cap'n - British Navy. What d'you say?"

"Bring 'im along, then, and let's 'ave a look through'im," grumbled the mate wearily.

"I'll go, Sheila," said Colin, and departed. A couple of minutes later he returned, bringing with him the transparent captain as per schedule.

As they approached, the crew, already decidedly on edge at encountering the ghost again, began to back away nervously. Even the mate got up off his human cushion, who, however, took no notice of the apparition.

"Stay still, you idiots," Sheila told them. "He's quite harmless. Look, Colin's quite all right by him."

Partially, but by no means absolutely, reassured, the crew stayed put.

Caramel came right up to them, regarding them closely through keen if somewhat nebulous eyes. Colin addressed the mob again.

"Look here, everybody," he said, in a businesslike tone of voice. "This is Cap'n Albert Caramel, RN. I know he's a ghost. So does he, though neither of us believe in them. However, that's not his fault. The point is, are you prepared to accept him as your Cap'n? I am. So's Sheila. You must agree, he's the only possible choice for the position."

"Looks ho-ky ter me," said the mate, inspecting him with interest. "Wot you say, cooky? Hanything in yer union rules abart servin' under ghosts?"

"S'long as he's a Cap'n, it's all right by me," declared Cucumber.

"I'm all for it, myself," put in Tim the Knacker. "Anything for peace and quiet. I'd even serve under a centipede, if that would help."

"That sounds dangerously like an insult," said Cap'n Caramel coldly. "If it was, please refrain. I'm not used to such treatment."

"Sorry, Cap'n," said Tim.

And so the new Cap'n of the Flying Buttress was appointed, and the crew, under his orders, got down at long last to the task of straightening out the ship.

And a hell of a task it was, too. Not only had the ravages of the ocean and of Haywire to be repaired above deck, but those of the rats, which were infinitely worse, had to be repaired below. The situation was further complicated by the presence of the bull in the carpenter's shop; clearly, not much could be done until he was removed, and nobody had the foggiest idea of how to accomplish this essential task.

Eventually Cap'n Caramel called a general conference in the corridor, and swore vehemently that it would not break up until someone had solved the problem - a ruthless method, which might have had a serious outcome if it had been followed right through.

"It is clear," remarked Sensasian gravely, "that something definite has got to be done about this monstrosity taurian."

"You mean," put in Sheila facetiously, "that we've got to take the bull by the horns. By all means. Go ahead and do it."

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(CONTINUO: THEY EVENTUALLY LED IT BY THE NOSE INTO THE FOC'S'LE, JUST IN CASE YOU HAPPEN TO BE AT ALL INTERESTED. BUT THE VOYAGE CONTINUES - - -)

"Ahoy dahn there, cockers!" the mate shouted. "Heverybody hup on deck, come on, 'urry up! Cap'n wants the lot of yer!"

Sheila and Colin were helping to sort out the remains of the contents

of the main hold at the time, and they thankfully straightened up at the shout.

"Wonder what's up," mused Sheila. "D'you think he's sighted land, or another ship, or something?"

"Perhaps he's sprung a leak," suggested Colin, with his usual light-hearted pessimism. "Or perhaps the bull's escaped, and climbed up the foremast, and can't get down again. Or perhaps Haywire's even set fire to the landing-barge."

Further speculation was precluded by the necessity of obeying the summons, and they joined the little crowd swarming up the various companion-ways and ultimately on to the open deck. On reaching this, their eyes gravitated irresistibly towards the bow, and once more a look of sheer horror came on to everybody's face. For the Flying Buttress was riding along precariously on the very crest of an enormous tidal waterfall about thirty or forty feet high, which stretched away to either side as far as the eye could reach. Below them, a green forest rose up, every second some new slice of it being engulfed beneath the advancing waters. A little to one side, a silver ribbon of river wound broadly along before them. They were, in fact, balanced right at the edge of a tidal wave that was sweeping across the country. (Query - what country?) Half a minute, perhaps, and they'd go over the crest, and be dashed to the ground. At the bottom, there to be covered by the flood. Truly, a precarious position for any ship to be in, from the Queen Elizabeth downwards.

As usual, everybody stood rooted to the spot. Colin and Sheila were unintentionally holding hands again. Fernando held the hands of both his sisters, but that was intentional. And, spellbound, the entire crew watched as their puny vessel was swept along on the tide, unable to move her any more than themselves. Doom was at hand. Having survived the terrible perils of the storm and the phantoms, the Flying Buttress was now to perish far inland - goodness only knew just how far.

It was probably half a minute that they remained poised there, between earth and sky, held by the stampeding waters beneath them. But it seemed like eternity. And then - - - there was a curious scraping noise somewhere beneath their keel. A sort of rustling. It broke the spell. Everybody looked down, and round. The noise continued. Then it stopped. And then all of a sudden, everybody realised that the Flying Buttress had stopped, too. The crest of the tidal bore was sweeping away out yonder, but they were left behind it, in its wake. They seemed to be rather higher in the water than they ought to be, too. And the deck seemed to be acquiring a pronounced list to starboard - - -

Whalebone the bosun walked over to the side of the vessel, to have a look. A peculiar expression came over his face, and he turned to the others.

"By Davy Jones's Locker, me hearties!" he roared. "D'you realise what's up? We're stuck, look you! The water's going down as fast as you can look at it, and we're staying put right at the top of a shivering great tree!"

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"Well," said Colin a couple of hours later, as the landing-party stood on the sodden earth of the jungle. "That's one record for us, anyhow - I'm willing to bet what you like that that's the first ship ever to be found at the top of this particular tree. Any takers?"

"I'll lay you a counter-bet," replied Tim the Knacker with a grin, "that that's the first tree ever to have a ship stuck up it within living memory."

"Maybe it is," remarked Sheila. "But what are you going to do about it? Take it down?"

"Take her to pieces and reassemble her at the bottom's the only solution I can think of," said Cap'n Caramel.

"Who? Me?" exclaimed Sheila indignantly.

"No, the ship, you idiot," laughed Colin.

"And that'd take a year," declared Tim. "At the very inside."

"Well, we might as well have the outside down too, while we're about it," said Colin. "We could sail the thing then. It wouldn't be so likely to sink under us."

"Do you think so?" asked Sheila reasonably. "Because I wouldn't risk a rabbit in it if that lot up there were allowed to have anything to do with it. Why, the vessel would sink before she was launched!"

"I think we'd better leave her up there, and push on on foot," Caramel announced. "In fact, it's the only thing we can do."

"Surely there's some way to get her down," protested Tim. "If Cap'n Drainpipe had been here, I'm dead certain he'd have found a way."

"Maybe he would," replied Cap'n Caramel rather tartly. "But my naval training was not designed to cope with situations where ships get stuck at the tops of tall trees. In the absence of a reputable firm of civil engineers or a water-chute, I see no other alternative than abandoning ship."

"One thing," Sheila remarked brightly. "That's undoubtedly the queerest place a ship's ever been abandoned in so far."

"She hasn't been abandoned yet," corrected Tim, who still nursed crazy hopes of having the situation set to rights.

"Ssh!" hissed Colin suddenly. "Listen!"

Everybody sshed, and listened intently.

"I believe I can hear something," said Caramel, looking round in alarm.

"If you can, bud, you're sure dead right," came an unfamiliar voice from behind them. The party swung round, both greatly relieved and pleasantly surprised. A most peculiar-looking individual stood before them. He was dressed in the threadbare remains of what looked as if might once have been some sort of tropical army kit. On his head was a battered crash-helmet, stuck jauntily at as rakish an angle as its awkward shape would permit. His beard was a good six inches all over, his boots were unquestionably Yankee, and he carried an automatic weapon carelessly over one shoulder. He must have been close on six foot in height, and was broad-shouldered to match. He held himself erect as he stepped springily over the short distance separating him from the others.

The landing-party stared at him in silence. He shrugged his broad shoulders, evidently realising that he did present rather an unusual spectacle, even for the middle of a jungle.

"Hi-ya, folks," he greeted them cheerily. "Hi-ya, baby." (To Sheila). "Waal, what have we here? Hi-ya, ghost." (To the Cap'n). "My, my, but it's good to see some white folks again. Who's the boss around here?"

"I'm the Cap'n of the ship," replied Caramel. "What can I do for you?"

"Plenty, bo," stated the other. "First of all - say, carry me back to old Virginny!" and he stepped back in alarm, suddenly realising the significance of the Cap'n's transparency, and passed his hand over his brow. "Say, youse guys, this place is haunted! Let's get the hell outa here, plenty quick!"

"OK, OK," said Colin. "Don't be nervous. Let me introduce him to you. This is Cap'n Caramel, phantom skipper of the Flying Buttress. Sorry he can't offer you his hand - he hasn't got one. I mean, he has, but it isn't there. Here, you can see for yourself."

"Waal," drawled the stranger, slightly reluctantly. "You're the ringtailed squealer, I guess. If he's good enough for you, I reckon it ain't for me to say no. Pleased to meetcha, Cap. How ya keeping? Apeneck's the name - Apeneck McSchwartz, of Eissburg, Pa."

"Oh, and how's Pa?" queried Sheila, trying to put herself at ease with him.

"Just like yourself, baby, last time I saw it," answered Apeneck, presumably with a smile - he sounded like it, but it was impossible to tell exactly through that beard. "That musta been a coupla dozen years ago. I'd give a million dollars, cash down, to be outa this tarnal jungle and back there right now, so I would."

"Well, what the hell's keeping you here all this time?" Colin asked him. "Why don't you go home, now and again?"

"I guess I'm lost, son," replied Apeneck wistfully. "Never seen a white man since way back in '45, or thereabouts. I was with Erroll

Flynn's parachute bunch when the Yanks conquered Burma, but I guess I musta got separated, or somewhat - I been roamin' around in this jungle ever since, looking fer civilisation. Waal, this must be it. I'm right glad to have found you folks, before I had to use my other shell." And he tapped the magazine of his gun.

"But - if you were lost in Burma," exclaimed Colin in amazement, "how the blazes did you get here?"

"Son, I guess you're the ringtailed squealer, after all. This is Burma - or if it ain't, it ain't anything else as I know of. I ain't been outa this jungle once, since I was first dropped here. Why, where you think it was?"

"But that's absurd!" cried Sheila. "The last land we touched was South America, and that was less than a week ago! Why - - -"

"I guess sunpin's screwy somewhere," declared the Yank. "This is Burma, baby, and you can take it or leave it."

"Thanks, I'll leave it," she answered. "You can keep it, and welcome. A ship like ours can't cross two oceans in one week."

"Excuse me," interrupted the ghostly Cap'n, "but I rather think it can. My own ship put the wind up it, rather. It always does."

"You mean," said Colin, "that you are ready to believe that we're actually in Burma?"

"You've said it," answered the Cap'n.

"By the way, youse folks, where is this ship you keep gassing about?" inquired Apeneck.

"Up there," said Tim the Knacker, pointing.

"Oh. An airplane, eh? But youse ain't dressed for flying. Them sailors' rig-out you're wearing. Or have things changed since my time?"

"No, we're not airmen," said Sheila. "We are sailors - more-or-less. Our ship's - excuse my giggles - up at the top of this tree."

"Heck, baby, you must be screwy," remarked Apeneck, scratching his helmet. "Ships don't climb trees. Leastaways, none of the ships that ever I've seen, and I've seen plenty in my time, I'll tell a man. Take it easy, sister. I guess it's the sun."

"She's quite right," put in Caramel. "Our ship's stranded right at the very top of this tree. Sounds silly, doesn't it. We were washed in on the tidal wave. By the by, how d'you come to survive the tidal wave? You ought to be dead, now, by rights."

"Tidal wave?" repeated the Yank, puzzled. "Tidal wave? What tidal wave?"

"Why, the tidal wave that swamped this territory an hour or two back," said Colin. "Surely you noticed it? - - - I mean - - - well, you can't have missed it! How did it come to miss you?"

"Oh," replied Apeneck, suddenly comprehending. "I guess I know what youse mean. No, that wasn't no tidal wave, son. That was just the Monsoon!"

THE END OF PART FOUR

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