

## PART SEVEN (AND LAST)

IN WHICH ORDER SINGULARLY FAILS TO BE RESTORED AT THE LAST MINUTE

BELATED INTRODUCTION.

All through my childhood I used to amuse myself by making up stories.

Some of these stories concerned my toys - running the gamut from woolly animals to lead soldiers, and were of course acted out by the characters concerned. Others were more of a group-activity, acted out by myself and my brother and one or two others. Still a third category, that gradually came to supersede the other categories, was entirely mental, in which I romanced myself into sundry adventures and out of them again while just lying down, or walking, or something.

Eventually even these became largely superseded. Not entirely - I still like to extrapolate myself into any circumstances that happen to catch my fancy - but I was struck by the realisation that I couldn't be in two places at once. If I was HERE, thinking, I couldn't simultaneously be THERE, doing. So I began to postulate a succession of heroes, who were stipulated as being other than myself (though an outsider might not have been able to tell the difference) and who were thus able to roam at will untrammelled by such mundanities as the day-to-day life of Meicer, A. This phase lasted all through my military career (sounds good if you put it that way), and came in very useful for whiling away the hours on guard-duty etc at times.

In those days, most of my spare time was usually spent reading. I used to frequent all the forces welfare libraries in the vicinity, at any given time I would probably have three or more books stuffed into various portions of my battledress, either just being taken out or just being returned or simply being read. Now I'm a very choosy reader, and I soon found that the vast majority of what I read was not nearly so enjoyable as I would have wished. I was reading the wrong things to a great extent, admittedly - but I was well aware of Sturgeon's Law (that all literature is 90 per cent crud) without however consciously formulating it into words. But the sort of story that I most enjoyed reading was becoming harder and harder to locate all the while.

Sometimes I'd read a thing and think to myself - how the hell did THIS ever get published? - I've made up better stories in my head. And from there I developed a Theory all my own. And entirely incorrect, as I have subsequently found out after far too much trouble. But this Theory went as follows: the sort of stories I want to read

are not being published in anything like enough quantity for the simple reason that not enough of them are being written. Therefore, if I was to write one myself, the publishers would welcome me with open arms - and a whole host of assumed readers wandering around looking for this sort of literature would again find their appetites temporarily gratified.

Therefore I decided to write a novel.

For the purpose, I invented an entirely new hero, and called him Colin - because I like the name. If I was to chose my own nomenclature, that would be my favourite. The feminine lead I named Sheila, also because I liked the name. Still do, too. Most of the subsidiary characters were invented for the occasion too, though a few of them were salvaged from past lives.

And then, of course, there had to be a STORY.

Now I, like most people, am capable of deriving enjoyment from a number of different types of story. So I thought of all my favourites, and set out to combine them into one grand, if not overly harmonious, whole. The story therefore was planned as an adventure-story of the far-fetched variety, basically humorous though charged at times with the deepest emotional depths I could rise to, and with a strong element of fantasy running through it. Now this is of course something of a tall order, particularly for a beginner (though mentally, of course, I considered myself an old hand at the game). Actually, I see no reason why such a combination of ingredients should NOT be welded into one effective entirety, though not of course by me. Dornford Yates, for example, has combined adventure-humour, adventure-emotion, and adventure-humour-fantasy into coherent wholes. Anyway, that was what I TRIED to do.

Dornford Yates, as a matter of fact, was one of the examples I consciously bore in mind as I worked. Other prominent examples were Thorne Smith, Dorothy Evelyn Smith, G.K. Chesterton, and the famous "ITMA" radio programme. Sundry incidents, characters etc were inspired by each of the above - though the source of such inspiration didn't always necessarily reflect itself in the quality of the result. In fact, may well at times have failed to reflect itself ANYWHERE except in my mind. But anyway, that was what I fondly imagined was going into it. What came out was a 125-thousand-word novel that proved to be unpublishable - as nowadays I can well understand. In fact, if by some freak of fate it HAD come to be published - at any rate without extensive re-writing under skilled supervision - I'd have probably been extremely embarrassed by it. But I was younger then.

Two or three years ago, being temporarily up to date with my reading, I dug the typescript of this story - THE QUEST OF THE GLOBE-TROTTERING TREASURE - out of the oubliette and re-read it just for the hell of it, like. Time had set me somewhat apart from the thing, and I was able to appraise it comparatively critically. Much of what I found was frankly not worth reading. On the other hand, quite a lot

of what I'd written had stood - for me - the test of the years, and I still tended to be pleased with. Largely because, as I've already mentioned in AQOS or somewhere, things happen in it which OUGHT to happen, either in fact or fiction or both, and which I've never come across any other reference to. So I conceived the Project of extracting the wart from the chief and running the better portions in OMPA, meanwhile banishing the remainder beyond recall. Just about then, they got a new electric duplicator at work, without the moral support of which I don't think the Project would ever have got under way. But as it happened, it did. Already it has run to more than a hundred sides of quarto, spread over six consecutive OMPA Mailings. And now at last the Project is on the verge of completion.

If perchance you didn't care for it, I'm sorry. But think of the number of times I'VE had to read through the furshlugginer thing.

Incidentally, before I get on with the last instalment proper, I append here a specimen of the part I threw away - for amusement and like that. Dig this - I wrote it:

"But I just love this ship, and everybody on it," Sheila suddenly came out with, "but I could almost have wept --" And she stopped, suddenly realising what she'd just said. Her face crimsoned all over in an instant, and she was covered with confusion. Had Colin noticed what she'd said, albeit perfectly accidentally, his presence being entirely overlooked when she'd said it, he'd certainly have looked at her. If he had, naebody kens what would have happened. Though I doubt if the main course of events in this book would have been deflected much, their personal relations would probably have undergone an entire change, possibly for their common good, or possibly for the worse, and then the story wouldn't have been able to have so neat an ending. Or maybe nothing would have happened at all just then, beyond an answering blush from Colin. But the phrase passed unnoticed through his far-away mind, and he still rather absent-mindedly regarded the horizon. So the situation was saved, or the opportunity was lost, or neither, as the case may, or, on the other hand, may not, be. (See?)

And this "neat" ending? Oh, right on the last page or so, they made the mutual discovery that they CARED, like. (They'd been sharing a cabin, at first by themselves though later with a number of other people, throughout the voyage, but I assure you on a strictly platonic-type basis.) And the book closed with them falling into one another's arms in an open boat in midocean (still in the presence of several other people). But I'm running ahead of myself - back to the plot, if such it can be called:

(CONTINUO: THE GOOD SHIP "FLYING BUTTRESS" WAS LAST HEARD OF SAILING THROUGH A SIAMESE SWAMP IN SEARCH OF THE LOST TREASURE OF THE TINCANS. IN FACT, AS THEY NOW HAD A TINCAN ON BOARD TO GUIDE THEM, THEY MIGHT BE SAID TO BE HOT ON THE TRAIL THEREOF. SINCE THE PREVIOUS INSTALMENT,

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THOUGH, THINGS HAVE BEEN HAPPENING - THE EXPEDITION HAS IN FACT ARRIVED AT THE TINCAN CITY CONCEALED AMID THE SWAMPS. DISEMBARKED IN ITS SOMEWHAT IRREGULAR ENTIRETY, BEEN PROMPTLY ARRESTED AND MARCHED OFF, AND WE NOW FIND THEM LINED UP AGAINST A CONVENIENT WALL AND FEARING THE WORST. LIKE:)

What the presumed Tincans were going to do became only too obvious during the next half-minute. For the captives were shaken into single file, marched up to one wall of the court, and stood against it. Colin had Sheila on one side of him and a very dazed Peter on the other. Sheila's other flank was occupied by the bosun. Fernando stood next to his sisters, a little way along.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," apologised Cap'n Caramel, (CONTINUO: HE'S A GHOST, REMEMBER) appearing beside the row of live bodies strung out along the wall, "but I can't do a thing. They're wise to me now. I can't even speak their lingo, to remonstrate with the blighters." (He didn't actually say "blighters", but Sheilas don't care.)

All along the line, about ten paces off, the coppery spearmen formed up facing their prisoners. Their faces were grim. Their spears were held at the ready. To one side, their captain stood ready to give the command that would forever seal the fate of the doomed band. There was a tense hush. Death hovered in the atmosphere. The spearmen raised their spears, ready to hurl them crashing into the breasts of the condemned. And then suddenly:-

"Hey!" gasped Sheila. "Look on that wall over there!"

All who heard, looked. Moulded on to the opposite wall to that against which they were so soon to be butchered in cold blood, was a great, black marble cross, of the St Andrew's or diagonal variety, running to the full height of the building. It was typical of the ornamentation of this city.

"What's wrong with it?" asked Colin. "I can only see a great cross, that's all."

"That's what I mean!" Sheila replied excitedly. "X marks the spot! That must be it! The treasure's in there, on the other side of the courtyard!"

She could hardly contain her excitement. Colin looked at it in astonishment. He'd not seen it that way before. But, after all, the treasure HAD been marked on the map with an X - - -

Still, what was the use of wondering? They'd all be dead in a few seconds. The hands that held the spears moved relentlessly back. The little girls screamed. So did Windscreen. Most of the crew shuddered, and closed their eyes. A look of inexpressible contentment came over the face of the carpenter.

"No more of the old Burma Road," remarked the cook stoically - - -

And then it happened.

There was a sudden commotion over to their left. Eyes popped open like corks, heads shot round to the left or right, spears quivered and fell in their wielders' hands. Attention was focussed on the archway that formed the one and only entrance and exit for the courtyard.

And through the archway there scuttled a panting, terrified little man dressed in tattered and soiled seafaring garb, looking like nothing on earth so much as a rather overgrown monkey. Close behind him, head lowered, horns at the "on guard" position, bellowing with rage, wrath and fury, charged an enormous bull. The warriors in the courtyard, taken absolutely unawares, forgot they carried spears. They broke away in confusion. The bull dithered. He didn't know exactly who to chase now. The only people he never had time to consider chasing were those who were lined up in a row against one of the walls; with their hands bound to their sides.

The scene in the courtyard was positively indescribable. I shall therefore proceed at once to describe it. Hordes of copper-bottomed warriors, with spears or without, were rushing frantically around the place, dodging behind one another or trying to, while the bull lumbered furiously round after them, trying to catch them. Every now and again he succeeded, and some luckless Tincan soldier went flying <sup>fully</sup> grace through the air, to land in a huddle on the grass of the court. Great hoof-marks were appearing as if by magic in the hitherto satin-smooth turf, as the Great Bull of Santo Elbo bounded this way and that, bellowing like a steam-engine, in the wake of one or other of the panicking troops. The air was filled with shrieks, cries, groans and bellowings, and the archway was jammed with those of the Tincans who'd had the sense - or the opportunity - to make for it. Confusion reigned in triumph, and was making the most of its great chance.

Only along the walls was there any comparative security, and none of the warriors thought of making for there. Cap'n Caramel had a full-sized job on trying to prevent any of his more incapable underlings from rushing, bound as they were, out into the thick of everything without thinking. Somehow, with the help of those who were more level-headed, he succeeded. Nobody left the protective shelter of the wall. Instead, they all moved stealthily along it, congregating eventually in one corner, as near as possible to the archway that led to freedom.

"What can we do now?" asked Sheila, in a hushed voice.

"I wish I could get my hands free!" exclaimed Colin, struggling and wriggling in his bonds. "I'd feel able to do anything then!"

"Wait till the crush has gone down a bit," hissed the Cap'n. "Then, with any luck, we may all be able to slip through un-noticed. Be quiet, everybody!"

In silence the party watched the goings-on in the centre of the

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court. One by one, more and more of the warriors who had so nearly taken their lives fell victims to the bull's lust for humans to toss. One of Fernando's sisters began screaming, followed promptly by the other. Fernando soon found that it would take more than words, even Spanish words, to shut them up. But luckily amid the screams of the Tincans they went unheard.

Colin turned to Sheila.

"It would seem that there is some use in carrying a bull on board ship, after all," he whispered with a grin.

"If they didn't deserve it, I think I'd burst into tears," Sheila whispered back. "But as it is, I can only bring myself to shudder."

Suddenly out of the blue, a dishevelled, breathless, slightly sub-human figure materialised alongside the huddled group of bound people in the corner.

"Haywire!" breathed several of them at once.

(CONTINUO: HAYWIRE HAD LAST BEEN SEEN A GOOD FEW HUNDRED OR EVEN THOUSAND MILES TO THE NORTH, BEING CHASED BY THE BULL IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION.)

"I thought he'd got you!" exclaimed Peter.

"Here, Haywire, quick!" hissed Colin. "You got a knife?"

The crazy little sailor nodded, forcing a scared-looking grin to his monkeyfied countenance.

"Good! Then cut these ropes - and look pretty slippery!" Colin ordered, straightening himself. Help, it would seem, was at hand.

And now for once in his mad life Haywire performed something useful. Perhaps it was more the discomfiture of the Tincans by releasing their victims than the service to the victims themselves that prompted him to do it. Be that as it may, he did it. Colin's bonds fell from him at one stroke of the over-sharp blade, then Peter's, then the bosun's - in a trice the entire ship's company was flapping its arms about in an effort to remove the stiffness. Even the little girls had stopped crying. A new fire of hope blazed brightly in the eyes of all, and only the carpenter looked downhearted.

Cap'n Caramel shot a glance in the direction of the archway, then with another satisfied himself as to the position of the bull. The latter was some distance away, and the arch was, for the moment, empty.

"Now for it, everybody!" he proclaimed in a loud whisper, and sidled along in the archway's direction, followed cautiously by all the rest in a closely-packed string. Then he darted through, and, one after another in non-stop succession, the others did the same. The

bull was still having the time of his life with the Tincan Army in the courtyard. All the pent-up fury and anger of many years' degradation went into that bout of havoc. He probably deserved it as much as did his victims. The Crazy Crew of the Flying Buttress was fully content to leave him to it.

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The bulldozer duly departed, and the others commenced wandering round on their detailed inspection of all that was visible. (CONTINUO: X HAD OF COURSE MARKED THE SPOT, AND THE EXPEDITION WAS NOW LEGITIMATELY ENGAGED IN LOOTING THE TREASURE CHAMBER BEFORE LEAVING THE VICINITY.) Suddenly Sheila heard her name called, in Colin's voice. (I nearly said "handwriting", which shows what a state I must be in).

"Yes?" she answered.

"Come over here, and see what you make of this," called Colin.

Sheila went, and saw. What she saw might have been a present-day European lavatory-pan, the same as they'd found in that organ in the swamp, only it was made of solid virgin silver. The seat was of flawless ivory, with golden hinges held in place by a festoon of glittering jewels. Sheila goggled at it a bit, then, without a word, the two of them stooped down and picked it up, for it was heavy, and carried it back to the break-through end of the chamber. Exhibit A, without a shadow of doubt.

When the bulldozer returned, the load it carried away was even richer than the last one, thanks to Colin's policy of pre-selection. Tim the Knacker and the mate accompanied it this time, to give the bosun and the cook a chance to look for valuables. Twice more it came and went, each time carrying away a load richer than the one before, until, on the fifth time of departure, Colin called the mate and bosun into conference, and they agreed with him that, though the Flying Buttress could probably take a good bit more, to do so would be futile. What they had already was far more than sufficient to see the whole crowd of them comfortable for life, and long after.

"Besides," said Sheila, glancing round at the hundreds of tons of treasure that was still heaped up round the enormous chamber, whose surface had in fact hardly been scratched by the inroads made upon it, "we've got to leave them something to be getting on with, haven't we?"

There was of course no room on the bulldozer for anybody except the driver, and so all the others had to trot behind, or alongside. Thus they all went for ever out of the great treasure-chamber of the Tincans, leaving behind them a fabulous amount of articles beyond price. What they'd actually removed had been merely a few of the topmost or visible things; just what lay beneath all those piles of invaluable is better left to the imagination. Maybe finer treasures than the world has ever known still lie there for the taking. Maybe it's only silver lavatory-pans.

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Nobody seemed to want to interfere with them. Nobody even seemed to be about, whether to interfere or not. The broad grassy boulevards were poked with cloven hoof-marks, and on one occasion Colin saw, at a distance, the bull chasing a small, shrieking bunch of coppery citizens. But the bulldozer finally arrived back at the unloading-point for the last time. The empty barge stood waiting, Peter leaning against the front, Fernando with him, the two little girls playing around in the stern, and the last and most valuable load of treasure was soon being unladen and re-stacked on board. Work proceeded apace.

Then a cry from the Flying Buttress made them all look up.

It puzzled them at first - they couldn't see anything. Then suddenly they realised that there was a heck of a row going on somewhere - a succession of ethereal explosions, strangely reminiscent of the phantom ships of the storm. They hadn't noticed it before, because their minds were intent on the treasure in hand.

Wondering, sporadically speculating, they continued to stare out over the lagoon. Then, like a whip:-

"It's the Charabang!" cried Tim the Knacker. "She's coming in!"

Slowly, steadily, the ghost of the great battleship nosed her way through the impenetrable screen into the lagoon. Not a ripple showed on the mirror-like surface where she sailed. She was in a really bad way, there could be no doubt about that. Phantom shells were continuing to explode all around her. Her own guns, though, now seemed to be silent.

Still she came. Gradually her entire bulk made itself plain to the astounded watchers, on ship and on shore.

"That ain't the Charabang!" Old Salt declared at last. "She's the Graf von Luftschutzkeller, sure's my name ain't King Canute."

Which fact gradually made itself evident all round, as the idea sunk in. To tell you the truth, everybody was distinctly relieved. After all, the Charabang was their own ship, so to speak, and they knew her Cap'n - nay, both her Cap'ns - personally. Then:-

"Sure an' begorra, but it's her that's sinking!" came from Mary.

Everybody looked twice as hard. Yes, it was true. The ghost of the Graf von Luftschutzkeller was certainly lower in the water than when she came in. The Charabang's guns had stopped firing at her now. Perhaps the Charabang, too, knew the vessel was played out.

Have you ever seen a ghost ship sink? I very much doubt it. Ghost ships seldom do. However, the Crazy Crew of the Flying Buttress were privileged spectators at the end of the phantom Graf von Luft-



schutzkeller. They watched her as she settled; slowly at first, as she'd entered. Then, as she sank lower and lower, she began to tilt towards the stern. All of a sudden, her bow rose right up in the air, yet still without causing one ripple on the placid lake, and there was an unearthly shriek as the crippled wreck sank for ever beneath the surface of the shallow water of the lagoon. It was an eerie experience, that nobody who witnessed it is ever likely to forget. Neither would you, IF you saw it.

With the advent of the Graf von Luftschutzkeller, nobody was astonished when HMS Charabang eventually pushed through the screen and followed her into the lagoon. They all craned their necks eagerly to see. Yes, there could be no doubt about it. There, on the phantom bridge, as solid as they were, all intent on his unusual command, his dog wagging beside him, stood the indefatigable, the indomitable, the one and only - Cap'n Jacob Japheth Hamilcar Drainpipe!

A loud, prolonged chorus of cheers, whoops and whistles came from ship and from shore as the hero of all made his appearance. Only Cap'n Caramel, glad as he was to have his vessel restored to him, was glum.

"Just my luck," he groaned. "All these years I've been chasing that Jerry packet, and then as soon as this feller comes along, he corners her and sinks her right away. And he isn't even Royal Navy! What a life for a dead Cap'n."

And then at last the great phantom dropped her ghostly anchor in the shallow lagoon, and came to rest alongside its old acquaintance, the Flying Buttress.

The reunions of the two Cap'ns with their respective crews must have been a touching sight. But the entire augmented firm of Wrought and Barrow was destined to see neither. It happened this way. Just as everyone was embarking with the last load of the treasure for the Flying Buttress, leaving the bulldozer temporarily on shore, they heard a noise behind them, just up by the edge of the buildings. Several of them turned to look. What they saw was the Great Bull of Santo Elbo, in what they had now come to regard as his natural posture, furiously chasing a coppery little Tincan across the sward. The Tincan carried a bow, and an empty quiver of arrows swung by his metal loin-cloth. He ran like a hare (in speed, that is, I don't mean on all fours), but so did the bull (and there I do). And the bull, as usual, looked like being the ultimate winner.

"It's Woolly Wolly Westwog!" cried Sheila in alarm. "He'll be gored! We must save him, Colin!"

The fugitive was, like as he was to most of the Tincans they'd so far seen, undoubtedly the same Woolly Wolly who had guided the Flying Buttress through the terrible trackless swamp, where La Femme Perdue, The Lost Woman, who had no name, not even Little Audrey, pursued her weary way unceasingly, uncomplainingly, uncomprehendingly. (Here - wait a moment - how the devil did she get into this chapter? I thought

we'd have finished with her when we got out of the swamp, didn't you?)

"What, save that little traitor?" exclaimed Peter. "The little so-and-so deserves all he's going to get, and more, believe you me."

"He's not a little traitor!" declared Sneila hotly. "How could he know, when he brought us here, that they'd only want to kill us? If he'd known that, he might have shot us unseen in the swamp, and saved them the trouble. I simply can't think any harm of him - he's such a sweet little thing! Come on, somebody! We've got to distract the bull's attention, quick!"

Blindly, ridiculously, she rushed forward.

"Hey! Sheila! Come back!" cried Colin in alarm. "I've got a much better idea!" And he swarmed into the bulldozer's seat and threw over the still ticking engine. Once more the thing roared into life. Seeing he was intent on helping the wretched Westwog, Peter clambered up beside him as it started. Sheila, hearing the sound, brought up short and swung herself aboard as it lumbered past her, gathering speed. Fernando was too far away to join in, but seeing his friends venturing forth to give battle he refrained from boarding the landing-barge, which therefore sailed without him. His sisters had wandered ashore while the treasure was being loaded, and all those on board were too intent on the forthcoming meeting with Cap'n Drainpipe to pay any attention to them. So they stopped ashore too.

Colin, meanwhile, opened the throttle or whatever the gadget's called full out, and charged. The bulldozer simply soared over the dead-smooth turf of the lake-lawn, straight at the bull's wobbling behind. The bull did some hard thinking. Where had he heard that noise before? Then, in the nick of time, he remembered. The nick of time for Woolly Wolly as much as for him, for the distance from the bulldozer's flying scoop to his elevated bottom was just about the same as from his horns to the seat of the little Westwog - that is to say, about a foot.

I said, he remembered. Two behinds were thus saved from a most painful experience. For, instead of consummating his victory over the Tincan hunter, he slewed round to the left as if he'd seen a particularly good-looking cow, dodging the edge of the scoop by a couple of inches. But the unfortunate Westwog's danger was not yet over. The bulldozer was racing at him nineteen to the dozen. Colin roared "Hang on for your lives!", clapped one brake dead on and spun the wheel furiously to the right. For the second time within a matter of seconds Woolly Wolly was saved by a matter of inches. The bulldozer rocked crazily on its right caterpillar, nearly overturned, changed its mind, skidded six yards and stopped. Woolly Wolly Westwog stopped too - he must have realised that something unusual was happening. Then he turned, glanced at the retreating bull, saw who it was who had saved him, recognised them, and smiled. He approached, holding his reversed bow before him, evidently as a symbol of friendship.

"Woolly Wolly Westwog furla cho gunflag," he greeted them.  
"Cucu?"

"Cuck-oo!" came that inevitable bird from some neighbouring tree.

"This," announced Colin, "looks like the beginning of a very bea-yeautiful friendship."

"Another recruit for the Crazy Crew," declared Sheila.

"I doubt it," Peter replied dismally. "I doubt it very much. Look at the Flying Buttress if you want to know why."

They looked, and their hearts fell within them. For the Flying Buttress, all sails set full, the landing-barge swinging crazily over the side from its davits, was dashing wildly straight for the leafy barrier in one hell of a panic. The reason for this was only too obvious to the beholders. For behind her, swimming towards her for all they were worth, were literally tens of thousands of rats. The whole surface of the lagoon was covered with them, pursuing their old home in a ravenous horde that boded nothing but ill for the crew, should they catch her. As the six stranded erstwhile members of the crew watched her dumbly, she crashed full tilt through the green screenery and vanished for ever out of their sight into the dreary, interminable Siamese swamp, where La Femme Perdue, The Lost Woman, who had no - - - (Get out of it!!!)

That is the explanation of why any future pioneer who stumbles upon the Lost City of the Tincans will find within, among all the treasures and palaces and lavatory-pans, a bulldozer. Perhaps also a bull, if he's quick enough.

(CONTINUO: AT THIS POINT THE TINCANS ATTACKED IN FORCE. THE SIX CASTAWAYS, PLUS WOOLLY WOLLY, FLED INTO THE LAGOON, WHERE THEY WERE GIVEN REFUGE ABOARD HMS CHARABANG - PORTIONS OF WHICH, AS CAP'N DRAINPIPE HAD ALREADY PROVED, WERE CAPABLE OF PROVIDING SUFFICIENT SUPPORT FOR A CORPOREAL ENTITY.)

It was while the Charabang was being manoeuvred round the lagoon that the little group huddled on a submerged and invisible scupper-vent heard a groan from somewhere above them. Looking up in surprise through the haze of the upper decks, they saw what was unmistakably a man, solid as themselves, lying on the phantom battleship.

"Ahoy, up there!" called Colin, too superlatively amazed already to be so any further. "Who the hell are you?"

"Oh, shut up, please!" came a moan from the man above them. "I can't help it! It's in me blood, and I can't get away from it!"

(CONTINUO: THAT, OF COURSE, WOULD BE "MR 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-CRASH", THE DRIVER OF THE BULLDOZER AND THE WORLD'S WORST SAILOR.)

HMS Charabang removed herself from the lagoon, the swamp and the River Mekong without mishap, and once again put to sea. She was not capable of showing much speed, owing to the severe damage inflicted on her by the Graf von Luftschutzkeller before she sunk her. One day, the hazy bulk suddenly quivered, and came to a dead stop. The peculiar Tincan boat (CONTINUO: THEY'D BROUGHT IT ALONG FOR THE GENERAL CONVENIENCE) ran up on to the squadgy something that it was tied to, throwing its seven occupants off their seats.

"Whatever's up?" cried Sheila, as she scrambled back into position.

"Why have we stopped?" demanded Colin.

"Cho barrawid ner larkag?" chattered Woolly Wolly Westwog.

Cap'n Caramel came swarming down the companion-ladder with a rush.

"You'll have to cast off, quick!" he hailed. "We've struck a phantom rock, and we're sinking!"

"Hey! What about you?" cried Colin. "Don't your men want to come in this boat with us?"

"Oh, we're all right, thanks," the phantom Cap'n reassured him. "We'll get away in the phantom lifeboats! No time to stop now. See you some day. Goodbye!"

And he rushed back up on deck.

The boat's nose was being dragged down, so Peter hastily untied the rope from the bow. She bounded back into the air, and her occupants bent themselves to the oars and rowed out of harm's way, lest some partly de-ghostified piece of decking should drag them under. From there, they witnessed the final death-throes of one of the most historic vessels that mankind had ever built. Several phantom boats were seen to leave the stricken vessel before she sank. And when it was all over, the bow of the Tincan Galley was set towards the direction in which land was thought most likely to be lying.

"I wonder what's become of Mr 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-Crash," remarked Colin as he yanked an oar.

"I don't know, I'm sure," Sheila replied with a frown. "I can't imagine him sinking, somehow, can you? If ever we board another ship, I shan't be in the least surprised if we see him there."

THE END

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