

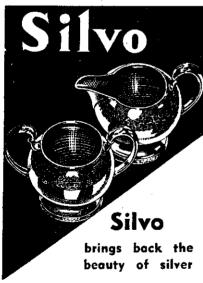
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* THE SPOTLIGHT'S WHILE OTHERS SLEEP

Does The Ferryman Swim Home?

TES, you caught the last ferry (tram, or bus). You had to make a dash for it, but you caught it; lucky, too, a dirty night like this. And now you're home, fairly dry, shaking out your umbrella on the porch. A cup of tea, a hot bath, with luck you'll be in bed by one. Nice place, too, rain falling steadily; do the garden a power of good . . .

"Well, that's that," said the mate; "end of a dirty night."

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"D'you all live on this side?" I asked. "Too flaming right we do. What d'you expect us to do? Swim home?"

"Well," I said elaborately, "I thought you might possibly have a little dinghy He spat. I haven't seen it done better in the pictures.

His aim with the rope was good too. "D'you ever miss?" I asked him as the ferry came alongside, drew past. His mouth was full of tin whistle and he didn't answer. Left-right, left-right, he wound the rope on to the bollard. Crreeeak . . . and the rope slips, slips, slips-and holds. One more quick leftright and another blow of the whistle.

"Miss? Yes. I miss a few."

"In a high sea?"

"No. Funny thing is you never miss the hard shots. It's the easy ones that beat you--you get too confident.'

"And how long does a rope last?"

"Anything from a minute to a fort-night. Depends on the weather. This one's due to go any minute."

I stepped back.

The crew on the ferry boat is four: skipper, mate, engineer, and fireman.

"D'you want to go down and see the engines?" But the smell of an oily rag is enough for me.

"Pity," said the mate. "I was 17 years in the engines. I could tell you plenty about the engines."

"Seventeen years round the harbour here?" I asked.

"Harbour nothing. I've been to sea. There's some chaps in this job got no

adventurous spirit, stick around the harbour all their lives. But I was different when I was young. I've seen some things. I've been in some countries. I could tell some tales, vou I'm telling you."

Yes. He was telling me. I interrupted. How long had

he been in this job?
"Since 1940. Seventeen years I was. without a breakdown in the engines. But 1940 I said to myself, 'Sammy,' I said, 'it's time you were getting yourself an easy job.' And this is it."

Take a Foggy Night

"And is it?"

"Well, it is and it isn't. The like of this trip, now, is easy. But you take a foggy night or a foggy morning. Then the mate's got a big responsibility. He's got to stand up in front and warn the

skipper of anything ahead. You might say he's just as responsible as the skip-per."

So on an easy trip the mate sits and smokes, blows his whistle, ties up, and lets go. On a hard trip he's busy all the time. Only two shifts work each ferryboat. No eight-hour day for the ferrymen: it ranges from eight hours to ten at a stretch. Tea-hour?

"We don't have tea-hours on this job. Our job is to run the boat to a timetable, not to put on our coats and say 'Well, I'm going ashore for an hour now for my tea. No. We just have our tea when we can on the run." The men who work the morning shift start at six, which means they are up by five, earlier for the fireman and engineer; and the men who finish the last run at night get to bed between one and two.

"You wouldn't exactly call us night-workers," the mate said. "But there are plenty of people asleep when we've still got three hours or so to go.'

"How do I get home? I push my bike," the tram conductor told me. "Yes, wet or fine, going home at night. Others are lucky, the ones to the north; there's a bus that serves them. Then the ones who live out towards the suburban depot get home on the last car-it waits for them to count their cash at the depot and fix their timesheets."

"And the bus that serves the northern people—a tramway bus?"

"Yes, a special for tramway people. It's a sore point with us that too many other people use it."

"And the driver?"

"Yes, he lives out that way too. It would be tough if he had to park the bus and walk himself home a mile or

"Do many walk?"

"Well, not so many, but a few do.
There's Percy Bland. He walks in
every morning he's on early shift. He lives out my way and these dark mornings I catch him up on my bike; I can see the dark figure ahead of me on the road—he walks on the road because the footpath is full of holes—and I pass him at the same place at the same time every morning-set my watch by him."

A Son is an Asset

"Now I'll tell you a thing. The man who's got a son as well as a bike is home on the pig's back. Take this afternoon. Raining cats and dogs when I was ready to leave home. So I came in by tram and left the bike for the boy to bring in

when the rain eased off."

"You started this afternoon. What time do you get home to-night?"

"We're due in at the depot at 12.6 and it'll probably be about a quarter past before I'm on my bike and it takes me about 35 minutes to ride home. I get a bit of a meal and I'm probably in bed by about half-past one. Of course, the people on the later runs wouldn't be as early."

It was nice that he thought it was early. It appears that many of them don't arrive home by car (a few of the

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