

Something Rich and Strange

"YES, yes," sighed Dingness, tucking into our eggs at sixpence the egg. Dingness is a large man, nearly all soul. We have gained so much by winning him from the North that we shall hardly be the losers now even if they conduct the entire output of Roxburgh Hydro across the straits.

"I have made my forty-seventh trip," he told us. "I now find myself in the island I was not born in. I shall no more visit the scenes of my childhood traumata and the negative transfers of my youth. I shall never cross Cook Strait again."

We all gazed sympathetically into the sauce-boat, as he went on: "What is being done to protect our children against this conspiracy of salt-mongers? The true stories of the sea are never told—the publishers are confederate with the shipping magnates." He thrust back his chair and paced about among the Hornby train rails. Sensing the approach of a great Human Interest Story I followed him round and round the table, jotting it all down. I give it to the world.

"I look back on the first crossing I made as a child, a child nourished on the fictions (to give them no harsher name) of Stevenson and Ballantyne; and still it fills my heart with tears to see children mounting the gangway, their hopes sharp as brine, their wishes tasting the wooden decks, the brass, the sleek corridors, the humming washrooms and the fabulous two-decker bunks.

"All of us have known it as children: being put to bed before the ship left by mothers who disguised their own alarms. Lying awake we thought and thought that the ship was leaving, was at sea. From pillows like the bosom of an aunt our eyes burned with wonder at the crudity of pipes and wires, bolts



"A countenance pale green like ectoplasm"

and girders, all left naked, painted certainly, but having no shame.

"There were hooks and brackets and knobs studded about that bedroom, all of them bright and cold, superfluous. The electric light was fierce. There was no turning it off because there were too many switches—one of them might sound the fire alarm or the fog-horn. We waited in the long alien sheets until suddenly there was no mistake, we were at sea. The ship had been full of ship noises all the time, but now there was a purpose in it.

"And suddenly the ship slid down a wave. It was the beginning of our loss. I remember at first I thought it couldn't be true. It seemed that the world of childhood, of pirate chiefs and coral reefs, was too substantial to be spun

so soon into giddiness. Incredibly the ship persisted in its error, the girders leered and moved along the bed, the light was as cruel as ear-ache. All night the mad old hooks clapped against the wood and the bedroom was as hot as a summer shed."

Dingness's face struck me as being like parchment, and I made a note of this.

"... And then there were the other forty-six trips, each made worse than the last by the increasing weight of memories. The horror begins now at the booking office. The rubber flooring becomes those corridors. The long counter sways away as I buy my ticket and there is the sharp tang of verdigris on my tongue—it is the brass railing.

"In all those trips I have never carried the thing off. I have tried it all. Sometimes I have leaned on the rail waiting as though bored for the ship to leave, my macintosh collar turned up to suggest I shall still be about the decks off Kaikoura, my pallor the result of a tropical fever (Amazon Basin). As I have puffed on my pipe the girls along the rail have been giggly and smug, making hysterical talk to motor-bike boys down below.

"What about last Saturday, one of them screams, and the boys and girls racket off into demented laughter. Once I heard a girl shout: *Don't forget to tell Ida*. It stabbed my mind like silver paper on a filled tooth. What could anyone tell Ida now?—That her friend gone to sea with the beret and the thick fingers was doomed?"

We swallowed anxiously as Dingness loosened his tie:

"There is a breed of humans who are Good Sailors—which means they

win doubles and bluff at poker. You can find them in ship saloons eating the water biscuits while they wait for more cheese. I shall never forget once seeing an old woman drinking stout. Perhaps she was someone's mother—I see that now. But at the time the thing was too macabre. Grendel, of course, had a mother who also haunted the deep.

"The sight of that crone with her wicked drink drove me straight down to my bunk. There, after I had suffered for many years, my fellow passengers joined me. That is always an anguish and a mockery. With what deliberation they wind up their watches. Fully dressed I lie and see them unbuttoning, hanging up clothes, planting their money under their pillows where I cannot steal it, I who am already numbering with remorse my sins in this world. Their naked feet climb up past my face, and I listen to their escape into sleep. I am alone again.

"One can only go through this thing alone. One time, after the ship had carried me beyond the clutch of life and yet had flung me back once more upon the long shoals of my despair, I looked up and saw before me a form made beautiful by a similar purgation. The brow was all spirit. Eyes that had seen further than man is given to see looked at me from a countenance pale green like ectoplasm. We smiled, and I saw that his smile was a private mystery which would pass another's understanding. It was a moment of perfect communication. . . . There was a mirror above the wash-basin.

"There are no two trips alike, such is the infinity of damnation. During my middle period I made something of a cult of the grotesque and allowed myself to be laid out on the floor of the dining saloon. That night I tried to discipline the distending hours by counting my afflictions, but by three in the morning the tally of my woes, even at sea, was beginning to run out, and I was faced with an awful vacuum of thought. Just then a redeeming foot on its way to the washroom pressed upon my upturned face. I bit into a calloused heel, the rank air was filled with sea-songs, and emptied of rancour I slept for the only time.

"The sea has its sublimities. During the war when our coastal waters were assumed to be spawning mines and submarines and the steamer was trailing wire netting to capture them in, I made a daylight trip at the suggestion of a Posting Officer at Wigram. I had left the holiday laughter on deck and laid my body on a bunk deep in the stern. By ship's time it was perhaps two in the afternoon, though I was lost in a long night.

"All of a sudden there was an explosion which rocked the ship and sent loose bits of it rattling down between the partitions. The light above me went out. We were hit. I did not move. We were sinking. I folded my hands on my breast. The waves were swilling along the corridors. I smiled.

"Again came an explosion. The ship rocked and the loose bits tumbled near my head. Feet scurried along the passage. The sea, the enveloping sea, was licking under my bunk. I was more happy than I have ever been. Later when we reached Wellington I learned that a four-inch gun mounted on the stern had been fired twice, in practice."

He paused, a hand against his livid, liquid brow. At that moment a voice on the radio announced: *Strange Stories of the Sea*. Dingness flung himself to the open window.

—Augustus

(Solution to No. 708)

O	V	E	R	C	A	S	T	H	E	E	L
U	X	O	I	P	M	A					
T	R	A	I	N	L	A	R	C	E	N	Y
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Clues Across

- Conclusions of volumes sometimes enclose them.
- The Darlings' dog follows a man of low degree and is rewarded with a fruit.
- You'd hardly expect this in a clean bar.
- In your cap it's a symbol of achievement.
- Lame.
- Entertained.
- Confused prose offers a bit of a puzzle.
- "Or to take — against a sea of troubles" ("Hamlet," Act 3, Scene 1).

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Confused lies.
- Crowds of beheaded spectres?
- Drink to the dregs.
- Row of seats.
- Bats are on the same level.
- Protests loudly that the shellfish belongs to us.
- A small reinforced hole in a sail or belt.
- Churchwarden's assistant.
- She lured sailors to the rocks with her lovely voice.
- "Thy soul was like a —, and dwelt apart" (Wordsworth, on Milton).
- Tried.
- Author of "Ghosts."

No. 709 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

Clues Down

- Belvedere.
- This wild beast begins with a sign of shortness of breath.
- Confused noise of conversation.
- Angling monarch?
- Subtle qualities of pleasing neckwear.
- Side seat (anag.).
- A bachelor of these could be a married man, or even a woman.
- Tuneful, although it begins with damage and ends with I.O.U.'s.
- Yields.
- A native of Arabia, in the middle of the desert apparently, in a slow Spanish dance.

