

THE FIREMAN

BY A. P. HERBERT

I

THE next case was George Berry, fireman, of S.S. Miranda. He ought never to have been called George, being a weedy, scraggy person with hunted eyes. To-day he was unshaven, naturally, and he had dirty trousers which once must have been blue, but were now dark and blotchy with grease and did not match his undersized coat. The clerk of the court read out the charge against him 'for that, etc., on the 14th, etc., he did leave his duty in the stokehold against the lawful orders, etc.'

From the Bench Sir Henry Roberts looked at him wearily. As stipendiary in this town — a large shipping centre on the West Coast — he had a number of such cases before him. He knew something of conditions in the Merchant Service, how little real power a master had, and how much trouble was needed to bring such cases into court. So when they did get there he was very stern and severe with them. Especially since the war — most certainly. With so many poor devils in the trenches, mud, shells, and all that, a fellow having a comparatively soft time at sea could surely be expected to do his job without fusses. And without finking. That was all there was in this case. 'Enemy submarines 'ad been reported in the vicinity' — that was the evidence. So this fellow came on deck. Left one man to keep the furnaces going 'just when we wanted all the steam we could get.' He did n't deny the fact. The only words he said at all, half

defiance, half apology, were: 'It's all very well on deck, sir. It's all very well on deck——'

There was something else he had been going to say, but he stopped there, shrugged his shoulders, hopelessly. That's how he ought to feel. Sir Henry wasted no time with this case. It had been a long day and he was tired. He wanted to get home. But he could not let the man go without really bringing home to him the rottenness — that was the word — of what he had done.

'The only way,' he told him, 'in which I can express my disgust at your action is to pass on you the maximum penalty within my power, and I wish it was more. A man like you ought to be in the army — in the trenches. The only reason you are not is that you are a seaman, and are needed for a seaman's — a stoker's — er, fireman's work' (he was not quite clear about all these terms). . . . 'Some of us have sons and brothers fighting out there bravely for us. And when I think of them' — here the voice began to tremble a little with genuine emotion, for had he not himself a son at the front? — 'and when I see men like you before me, I — I' — (how was this sentence to end?) — 'I wish very much that I could impose a heavier penalty.'

They took George Berry away and Sir Henry went home. In the car he thought of the case again and muttered angrily, 'Miserable cur, when I think of poor Billy — shell holes — no dug-outs. My God!'

II

They were three days out from Liverpool, and they were beginning to breathe more easily. The Stout Heart had left Liverpool with a convoy of twelve merchant ships and four or five destroyers, though none of the passengers knew that. For all down the Irish Channel there had been heavy weather, thick weather, too, so that the convoy had been badly scattered. So far as the passengers knew there had never been more than seven of the ships together at the same time, never more than two tiny destroyers, diving and rolling about at what seemed an immense distance. Everyone had been a little nervous from the beginning, for lately there had been many sinkings, and the additional uncertainty produced by the storm had not helped to soothe anyone's nerves. . . . On the second morning Sir Henry, waking early, had wandered on deck in the cold dawn; all round in the thin unfriendly light was the endless, heaving, inimical water. There was a cold wind which flapped his pajama trousers against his legs, and he disliked it all very much. And there was nothing in sight — no other ships — no destroyers. Disgraceful! Gross mismanagement somewhere! No ship ought to be *allowed* to lose her convoy! . . . All that morning the passengers had felt very small and lonely till they caught the convoy about noon. Then at dawn on the next day there had been a dull boom and a long vibrating concussion that shook their cabins and sent them scampering into trousers. They had streamed up on deck, very hurried in the passages and on the stairs, very careless looking as they stepped into the open. It was a depth charge — and after it there were five others. Afterwards they heard that one of the ships had straggled in the night, had been caught by herself

in the first twilight, and sunk in the heavy sea without launching a boat — without launching a boat. . . . It might have been the Stout Heart!

So they slept little that night.

Oddly, though, in spite of the roughness and the endless rolling no one had been seasick. All their thoughts had been too busy with submarines for that. But by this evening, it was said, they would be out of a mysterious area called 'the danger zone.' The sun had been seen early in the morning; the wind was falling, and though the ship still rolled heavily in a long swell, the waves had no white about them. So they were happier, and three of them were absent from dinner — they had time to be seasick now.

There were about forty of them, mostly Anglo-Indians, returning from furlough. Sir Henry, though not yet an Anglo-Indian (he was on his way to a new appointment in Burma) was among the three biggest men of the party. He sat next to Macdonald, the chief engineer, and that officer was urging him for the third time to visit the engine room and 'see the old wheels go round.' So far Sir Henry had excused himself because 'the smell of the oil might make him seasick.' When he said that he felt secretly dishonest — he was never seasick. 'But they are rather bores — these technical fellows. . . .' Yet the invitation was a high compliment, and now he had agreed to go. In the morning the sun was well out and the sea well down at last. Macdonald, a dark, good-humored person, with twinkling eyes, piloted him proudly to the top of the iron stair. Up there, poised over the roaring muddle of engines, it was horribly hot; they went down one flight and stood as it were in the tree tops, just bits of wheels on each side, odd mechanisms and gauges. Macdonald stopped and shouted in his ear. Sir

Henry heard nothing, but nodded wisely. As they moved on to the next flight he looked up and was glad to see a streak of sky showing through an opening; nothing between them and the deck yet. Then they went lower and they were in the heart of it (hellish hot now), and they walked all round on a narrow, slippery, iron path (suppose you slipped!). . . . At every turn there were more explanations; fragments of words reached Sir Henry — ‘pressures — steam — channel — water gauge — main engine — pipes — cock —’ All very slow and Scottish and precise. This had been tedious higher up; it was becoming worse than that. Sir Henry was beginning to imagine. These three days had discovered his imagination; and he did not like it. Suppose a torpedo — just now while this old boy talked about pressures. When he looked up now there were wheels and huge lumps of metal whizzing above him, all round him. Let’s get on with it. He became impatient with the explanations, and began to bawl ‘Yes, I see,’ half way through them, but this made no difference. They proceeded slowly, pitilessly, to their appointed end — maddening. This heat. . . . Then they went down again; on the top step Sir Henry turned and looked back, he hardly knew why. Then he found he was taking note of the way up — along that narrow bit round the red arrangement with the glass and then another twist and there was the stair — all very awkward, if you were in a hurry — if — (don’t be a fool, man).

At the end of the next descent they were on the very engine-room floor where, astonishingly, it was almost cool because of the ventilating shaft. Sir Henry felt better. But here the explanations threatened to become interminable; there were so many odd appliances and gauges and sign boards

with white discs and things that looked like gas metres — very useful things, no doubt, but incomprehensible. But he did not want to comprehend them; certainly he did not want to stand in this clattering inferno while an old ass — he was an old ass now — explained them all. He hardly pretended to listen now; he was looking at the big things, those enormous piston affairs, thumping up and down a foot away from him. Suppose a torpedo — just now. Those things would fly out, no doubt, and mangle him — fling him down there perhaps, in pieces, down among those little wriggly things, where the great rods kept sweeping past — just above the pool of oil. ‘The Bicycle with the little Oil Bath.’ Ha, ha! Or perhaps all that monstrous mass of glistening metal above him, metal revolving, metal rotating, metal wriggling or sliding or jerking or pushing, all roaring and all greasy, would come crashing down and tear him and keep him there. Then the water would come in, in great spouts. Or creeping, maybe — rising slowly, as it did in the shockers. ‘Then the steam goes through yon pipes,’ shouted Macdonald. He jumped, and they went on to the ice machine. It was near the bottom of the stair, and he saw this happily. The engines were talking now, shouting, thumping in his head. ‘I want to go up on deck — I want to go up on deck.’ But now they were at the staircase, in the cool air from the shaft. There was a dirty man squatting on the floor, darning some trousers, placid. After all, what a fool he was to be upset.

‘Well, many thanks, chief. It’s been most interesting. I must n’t keep you any more’; and he put a foot on the wished-for step. Then, ‘Eh, sir, but you must see my fires,’ said the chief, ‘and the stokehold.’

Sir Henry groaned in his heart, but followed. They stooped through a hole

in the bulkhead, and then they were in a really terrible place — a long dark passage where you had to stoop low, where your elbows nearly touched the side. Behind this wall on the right were the boilers or the furnaces, something sultry and hostile; no doubt, if you touched that wall your flesh would sizzle.

The boilers might explode at any minute. Or a torpedo. How would you be then in that rat hole with the water surging in — and the steam — the steam — yes, that was worse? That always happened; 'scalded stokers,' he had read it somewhere; cold water or the hot pipes — boilers bursting. Why did they burst? Scalded to death in the dark — a bad thought. On then — there is a light ahead — a flamy light. This was the stokehold, a place of grime and coal dust, and fierce light from the furnace doors, with two men shoveling, half naked, in front of them. These were firemen, 'not trimmers,' you understand — more explanations. Sir Henry did not listen. He was thinking it was cooler here; he was looking upwards an immeasurable distance to where a faint daylight showed through a grating at the top, where the spidery black ladders went. Firemen! That was what that fellow in the dock had been. He must have been in a place like this — sweating, afraid. That depth charge the other morning — how did it sound down here?

Then back through the terrible passage, crouching. What was it that fellow had said? 'It's all very well on deck — it's all very well on deck.' It was n't — but it was better than down here. 'I want to go up — I want to go up,' said the engines. Once more the little speech of thanks, rather hurried now, and then up — up and away — away from that roaring conspiracy of wheels and pipes and furnaces and grinding steel — up on deck — up in

the cool, clean air. That was better. Ah-h! Sir Henry sat down and wiped his face.

III

Sir Henry thought about that morning a good deal. And he was not pleased. He was surprised and disgusted at himself; disgusted, because he was a proud, conscientious person. He would not have believed that he could be so afraid. And he could not help thinking of George Berry and similar cases. What sentence had he given him? He could n't quite remember, but he knew it had been severe. And who was he to pass sentence on a fireman if half an hour in the firemen's regions had upset him so much? Of course, it was n't his *duty* to be down there — that made all the difference. But suppose it *was* his duty . . . suppose it was his *moral* duty now, to himself, to his conscience, to go down there again and stay there, justify himself, satisfy himself he was worthy to sit in judgment on the George Berrys. That was it. He would go. He would be a stoker or trimmer or whatever it was. He was a tough athletic fellow. And now, after all, they were out of the danger zone — though you never could tell — and it would be calmer soon, after Finisterre.

Chief Engineer Macdonald agreed very readily. He was short handed in the stokehold, and he liked Sir Henry's spirit. So they dressed him up and Sir Henry took his trick — eight hours — eight awful, aching hours. He learned quickly and he was strong, but it was a day or two before he could really do a man's work. And by that time he was cursing himself for a fool. But he would not surrender. The other passengers applauded his spirit, though they knew nothing of his secret reasons, and laughed at him behind his back.

It would be too silly to give in after three days.

And really he had achieved his aim. He had beaten his terror; was getting used to it. He was too busy down there, too exhausted, to imagine things about torpedoes and escaping steam all the time. Only sometimes when the whistle hooted dully above, his heart gave a jump, and he looked furtively at his mate to see if he had noticed anything.

When there was more than one hoot, some signal or other, he counted them with a sort of secret panic. For six hoots (was n't it?) meant a submarine. When they stopped at four he breathed again.

He thought then always, 'It's all very well on deck'; that was a kind of religious axiom now. For even without being frightened he found a fireman's life sufficiently vile — the aching exhaustion, the pains in his back and arms, and the coal dust, the coal dust in his eyes and lungs and the pores of his fine skin, the heat and racket, and the hungry roar of the wild furnaces when the doors were opened. He hated it all, but he would not give in.

They passed Gibraltar without further alarms. And now it was very hot, even on deck. Down in the stokehold. . . . But he had only done four days.

One day beyond Gibraltar. Sir Henry had the morning watch. He had started shoveling at eight o'clock

in the morning, and he was about done.

. . . Also, he believed, something had been going on in the night. He had heard clattering feet on deck above his cabin. There had been much hooting. . . . The Captain had not come down to dinner last night. Well, they seemed to be all right at present — shovel away, shovel and sweat.

Then the whistle sounded, muffled but urgent — One — Two — Three — Four — Five — My God! *Six!* A submarine — a torpedo — steam! He looked at the other man. The other man was shoveling harder than ever — all he had said was 'Struth.' Sir Henry was still shoveling, shaking all over, but shoveling and thinking — madly. 'Damned fool — what the hell am I doing here? — can't go up now — can't go up on deck — all very well on deck — all very well — quite calm today, launch a boat easily — soon picked up. Down here — torpedo — steam — drowned among the coal — caught on the ladder, perhaps — hell! — can't go up now — taken the job on. What will the Government say? Never know, perhaps. After all — Government servant — valuable life — no right to throw it away. Not my own life — steam — steam. My God! . . .' Sir Henry looked at the other man. The other man had his back to him — he was still shoveling. Sir Henry put his foot on the ladder and looked up. . . . Far away he saw the daylight. Sir Henry went on deck.

Land and Water

A MEMORY OF WILD COUNTRY

THE thirst for wild country belongs to the two extremes of the human scale — the savage at one end and the sophisticated at the other. The descendants of the savage in modern life are the gypsy, the squatter, and all those on the outskirts of the village who, from some streak of blood or circumstance, prefer the companionship of wild things and a good deal of elbow-room to the tight atmosphere of a village community. The savage made his living out of the wild, but did not know he was a part of it; his few surviving imitators are more aware of what they are doing. Perhaps it is the same far-drawn strain of nomad or shepherd which makes sophisticated people desire scenes of untamed loneliness. Certainly the two men who did most to set the fashion had this strain; Rousseau was a vagabond and Wordsworth a pastoral mountaineer. But the village mind does not understand this point of view. It is agrarian, industrious, economical. We know how Cobbett, who embodies the rural temper at its keenest, talks of heathland; he called it fuzzy, spewy, villainous. It is quite true that he could admire a fine stretch of downs, and lament when he saw turf broken up into inferior cornland, but it was usually for economic reasons. Horseman though he was, he looked at nature with the eyes of a busy, social being.

In the case we are thinking of, the village and the heath are uncongenial neighbors: The village, nestling among woods and fields, feels the heath to be a contradiction. Its inhabitants will not frequent it unless business compels them. To them its rude tracks are 'not a very nice walk'; they prefer

the smooth road which runs past them and makes a sheltered corridor. Even the town-dwellers who come this way in summer to get a taste of wild nature seldom venture to explore the heath; chained by car or bicycle, or, perhaps, by sheer terror of the unknown, they picnic obstinately by the side of the high road. The general impression does seem to be, as one pungent speaker put it, that the heath is neither for use nor ornament. A claim to usefulness is certainly the last thing the heath would assert, unless it were on behalf of that Ismaelite among domestic animals, the donkey. Indifferent to time and history, it breathes mute defiance of the Minister of Agriculture. It asks nothing but the right to survive as an 'obscure, obsolete, superseded country.' But what of its possibilities as an ornament? That is a point less easily decided; but no one who contemplated the heath at this moment could help having it vividly impressed on him.

It may be a trait of lonely 'cussedness' that this rainy, dark December should be a moment of high brilliance for the heath; but it is so. Not having the dense heather carpet of the northern moors, it does not reach its zenith with the crimson glories of the summer. A tangled stretch of heath, bracken, moss, and grasses, it waits for the lash of the rain and the hour of the falling year. Then it seems to come to life again, and in this season of low heavy clouds and waning half-light, it wins one's gratitude with its splashes of radiant color. The patches of bracken, not yet quite shriveled, show against the brown heather in every tint of red, and sometimes of