

At the Midway

J. Clayton Rogers

Copyright 1998

*Midway along the journey of our life
I strayed, abandoning the rightful path,
And found myself within a gloomy wood.*

Dante (Bergin translation)

Part One

Skirmishes

I

July, 1907 * 67°28'N, 154°50'W

The third time they heard the sound they did not jump as far. Although they still had no idea what was causing it, repetition induced a kind of boredom. Even the Unknown could become tedious if it boasted anonymity enough times.

"Ice breaking up?" Cumiskey posed.

Lieutenant Hart shook his head. "All the ice is gone."

"Might be some left coming down the Salmon." Cumiskey found it hard to believe there were places above the Arctic Circle where ice could disappear. It went against his boyhood notion that the Alaskan Territory was a great white wasteland. But the U.S. Army had disillusioned him of any number of fairy tales, not least of which being the impression that seals and polar bears were not the exclusive forms of life north of the forty-six states.

"Think it's something... you know, *alive*?" he asked pensively.

"It doesn't sound dead, does it?" Hart snapped. He was annoyed by Cumiskey's dread. No, he had no idea what made the sound first heard the night before. Lieutenant Hart had scattered the men of his small expedition in order to find firewood for the night. He cautioned them to watch out for wolves. But he also knew that cottonwood, spruce, alder and willow were plentiful hereabouts. His men would not have to range far.

Then the sound. Neither a threatening roar nor a hair-raising screech. Yet its very oddity threw the men into a panic and sent them running pell-mell back to camp. It was a brief sound, preceded by a kind of diphthongized pluck at the air--a vibrato so low and intimate that it almost sounded as if it was coming from within their own heads. "Like goin' up a mountain and havin' your ears pop," someone said later that night.

"Tooo... nel..." the sound went.

There were only a few huskies in camp, yet they set up a howl like a dozen sled teams. The expedition expected to return to Point Hope long before the return of winter, when sledding would become necessary. The dogs had been brought along for canine companionship, not

transportation. They provided a strange comfort. As if, being half wild, they could act as ambassadors of conciliation between the men and the wilderness.

But the first time they heard the sound they seemed as startled and terrified as the young soldiers. They did not dart forward as though to attack the sound source and they did not run because they did not know if there was a need to. They stood in place. And howled. Only after Hart beat them did they stop. The men could tell he really wanted to beat them--to somehow erase the evidence of their cowardice.

"Hell, sir, it ain't as if we're real soldiers," Cumiskey grouched, peering out over the Kiltik and Salmon Rivers. They were at the base of a small peninsula that looked down upon the confluence of the rivers. They could see the pellucid water churned white by migrating salmon beating their way into the shallower Kiltik. The soldiers had feasted on graylings the night before--a meal some of them nearly lost when the thin forest again pitched the chant-like moan in their direction. No one volunteered to hunt down the source. And by now Hart knew better than to order them beyond the light of the campfires.

Certainly, it had given Hart pause next morning when he considered slipping away early with his Remington. But this was ideal bear country. It would be a shame to miss this opportunity. Ordering Cumiskey to come along with him decided things nicely. Not only would he have companionship, but a witness to the fact that there was nothing to fear.

Hart noted the damndest looking island in the middle of the Salmon. More like a huge dune, only dark and glistening. Nothing crawled on it. No birds alighted, though it would have made an ideal perch for the fish hawks waiting to tear into the jagged meat of dying salmon. The island was out of place.

Like the sound.

Like the United States Army?

Cumiskey's disparaging comment had hit the nail squarely. Outside of the frequent pistol shots that punctuated the gritty life of mining settlements, not one of Hart's men had ever heard a shot fired in anger. The heroics of the Spanish-American War, only a baker's dozen years past, were but vivid tales told by the top cutters in the barracks.

But everyone was *doing* things these days. The world was a busy place and America had made a conscious decision to be the busiest of the lot. If she wasn't putting it to the Spanish or Boxers, she was putting it to the earth itself. Witness the gargantuan undertaking in Panama. When finished, the Canal would make the Pyramids look like Lincoln Logs. Everyone said it. The Brits, the Germans, the French, the Japs.... The world--yes, the world was livid with envy of the new giant.

The nervous, excess energy transported down the ranks of soldiers and civilians alike. If the armed forces had their *fata morgana*, so too did the citizenry--a four-letter word that bespoke a world of evil and a heaven of good.

Gold.

Hart and his men had to pass through the gold region on their way up to Napatka country. They'd seen their share of rough places. They were with the Signal Corps, after all. They unraveled mile after mile of telegraph wire over unspeakable terrain just so the generals back home could avoid that terrain. While not front line troops, they'd seen their share of hardships.

Still, Kotzbue threw them. The U.S. Marshals who patrolled the mining camps were not so much peacekeepers as undertakers. Kotzbue boomed in every way. For every lode... how many corpses? Sulfur, rosin, pitch and saltpeter. Gold, guns, a crowd of men and a dearth of women. Only a preacher could decide which was more explosive and there were not many

preachers around.

Lieutenant Hart was determined to get his men out before they too were infected by the fever. He set out to purchase canoes from the natives. He found it strange dealing with the Eskimos and Aleuts. Like Private Cumiskey, he had a number of preconceptions about the Great White North. Certainly, he had not expected to find the natives living in cabins instead of igloos or turning a dollar in Nome rather than hunting seals in the Bering Sea.

When a young Noatak caught his attention and showed him a craft entirely new to his experience, Hart was captivated and forgot his doubts.

Constructed in a variety of sizes, the bidarkis were intriguing vessels. The struts were cocooned in seal skin. Settling himself into one made for a single man, Hart felt snug as coffee in a cup. He took the odd two-flat oar in hand and set course across a small creek.

He immediately fell in love. This was the closest a man could come to being a fish without actually going under water. Unlike the canoe, which sat with bland resolution on the surface, the bidarki was so low that the occupant was, in effect, *in* the water, yet dry. The bidarki put Hart on whispering terms with the river bottom. Having grown up in Missouri, this was as much aquatic mystery as one needed.

Elated with the craft, Hart brought out his notions. In a place where a well-knit animal skin could prove the difference between life and death, sewing needles ranked near the top in local rates of exchange. In no time, Hart had a small fleet and was on his way.

Laurels were not something one could rest on in this busy world. Which was why Lieutenant Hart and his men had been sent up the Kiltik that July of 1907. Someone in the chain of command had decided to look into the possibility of setting up a telegraph line between Unalakleet and Point Barrow. A whaling crew trapped by winter ice could then signal its predicament to rescue crews in the south. At least, that was what the signalmen were told. A few of them believed they knew better.

Lieutenant Hart, for one.

"I want you to find a way to put that line in, Lieutenant," the colonel at the Presidio had told him. "We can't keep having our whalers going over to the Siberian Peninsula every time they get into trouble. Looks bad, the Tsar getting credit for saving American lives. This is for the honor of the country, Hart. The honor of the *Army*."

Which suited Hart fine until the colonel added, "You'll be going into country not many white men have seen, if any. I hear even the natives stay pretty much downriver. Well... between you and me... if you happen to find anything up there, Hart... anything that glitters, shall we say... keep it to yourself. Just bring the news back to me and we'll work it out from there. Clear, Lieutenant?"

Very.

But America was young, America was virile, America was cloaked in manifest destiny. A little duplicity on the side couldn't hurt, right? Hart did, after all, work for the country that had produced J. P. Morgan.

All these concerns slipped from his mind as he came under sway of Alaska's hard-earned glacial scars. On foggy mornings, with the Baird Mountains looming to the north, it seemed they were babes lolling in the cradle of creation.

A nudge at his shoulder. Cumiskey was pointing at something.

"There..."

When Hart spotted the huge bear lumbering up the shore he pulled on Cumiskey's elbow. "Lay low, you idiot!" he hissed.

Cumiskey began to protest, but a second glance at the bear convinced him. He flattened down hard.

"That's no grizzly." Hart's excited whisper mixed dread and elation. "That's a brown!"

The brown bear was moving up the Kiltik towards the shallows of the Salmon. Every time it caught a flash of silver from the river it pumped its legs a little harder. Roughly twice the size of its grizzly cousin, the great brown's eyes gleamed. The two men watching could almost swear it was grinning in anticipation of the meal ahead.

The Remington felt ready and nimble at Hart's side. He was going to bag a brown! Not as large as some of the great browns he'd seen on Kodiak Island. Still... a brute. At least eight hundred pounds. Hart was already calculating ways to ready the head and pelt for shipment back to Point Hope. And God knew he was ready for bear steak after all the fish they'd eaten.

Slowly, he drew the rifle up. The cool barrel brushed his cheek. Prone like this, it was difficult drawing a bead on the moving target.

But the target had stopped moving.

The men held their breath. How could it have detected them? A steady breeze was hitting them in the face. They shared a brief nightmarish vision of the bear charging up the slope. If Hart missed with his one shot, the huge claws would quickly finish them.

Hart indulged in a slim sigh of relief as the bear looked away from them towards the Kiltik. Curiosity prompted him to ease off on the trigger ever so slightly. What in the world was it looking at?

"Hey...."

"*Quiet!*"

"No... there's something...."

The bear hunched back and sniffed the air. It seemed confused. A low grunt precisely defined its perplexity.

"Lieutenant!" Cumiskey jumped to his feet. "Oh God, Lieutenant!"

The bear heard the shout but never finished its turn. Something leaped out of the water about forty feet upriver from the odd island Hart had noted. In half a second a line of water between the object and the island erupted, showing them to be connected. Something like a rocket sliced the air. There was a brief animal screech, then an explosion of blood where the bear had been.

In shock, the men watched as the creature in the river lifted the bear higher, higher. Only the bear's rear legs and head showed outside the huge trap of teeth. Its jaw kept working, as though its last thought was of the salmon breakfast it was missing.

The monster gave a small toss of its head and the last vestiges of the bear disappeared. A lump formed in the neck of the beast and rolled slowly downward, vanishing at the base near the mass Hart had mistaken for an island.

The gun bucked hard when he fired. Though he had no doubt he'd hit it, the monster did not react.

They scrambled down the near slope into a stand of small trees.

"Wait!"

Shots rang out ahead of them. A second later came soul-tearing screams.

"The camp!"

"Are they shooting this way?"

Stray shots became as much a concern as the monster. They looked back. Had the beast in the Kiltik raised itself out of the river, the men in camp would have seen it over the short trees,

but the brow of the low ridge showed scrub grass and sky. Nothing else.

Working the bolt, Hart reloaded his Remington and nudged Cumiskey with the stock.

Reluctantly, Cumiskey hefted his Springfield rifle and followed.

The shooting ahead had stopped. So had the screams. In his mind's eye Hart saw the horror show beyond the thin screen of trees. The camp in shambles. Men injured and shouting. What could be the cause? Had the river beast circled round them?

They smelled smoke. Invisible but potent. Otherwise, all was green. Evergreen and more. One did not expect so much green this far north. A strange misrepresentation. Even the beast matched Hart's preconceptions better. It was huge. Brown. Wild. A killer.

"Oh Christ, I can't...." Cumiskey stopped, then began to pull back. "I can't...."

"Don't make me go by myself." Hart found it difficult to talk.

"I can't...."

Cumiskey was still back-peddling when one of the larger trees came to life. He had no idea what was happening before his head, chest and torso were engulfed in an enormous maw. His feet kicked up, whisking the grass briefly before a smaller version of the creature in the river lifted him off the ground.

Hart stood in shocked immobility. A scream froze in his throat, like a seal trapped in ice. A slight flick... and Cumiskey was gone.

The monster's body had been hidden in a hollow behind a clutch of saplings. Trees snapped sideways and the ground shivered as it hopped up in front of Hart. The lieutenant had a clear look at its strong forward limbs. They were not legs. They were diamond-shaped.

There was a loud report and Hart's arms jerked as his gun leaped out of his hands. Reflexively, he'd pulled the trigger. He'd been holding the rifle waist high, pointed at the monster, but he did not wait to see if he'd scored a hit.

Bolting through the woods, he'd gone about a hundred yards when he burst into the remains of the camp.

Smoke came from the half dozen tents set up the night before. The camp stoves had been tipped over, their fires touching off the tents, which had been waterproofed with paraffin. Highly flammable, they went up like Election Day bonfires.

The fires obviously bothered the creature in the middle of the camp.

It was surrounded by the mangled remains of Lieutenant Hart's little troop and it did not look as if anyone had survived. Shreds of khaki mixed with tattered flesh.

The creature spotted him. It was another small copy of the river beast--still, far larger than the largest bull elephant. Apparently, the only things that kept it from charging were the paraffin-fed fires. It snapped at them, twisting in a circle with snarling whines, its sharp snout sined at each approach. Hart could not see light under its body. The creature moved with its stomach to the ground like a tremendous seal. Its narrow neck was incredibly lithe. It seemed to be trying to pick up the fire so it could set it aside.

"My men... my men," Hart thought. "What will they think of me?"

He ran.

A sound chased him.

"Tooo... nel...."

II

On the Cliffs of Time

The Tu-nel had met many challenges throughout their long history. Older than the family of sharks and the venerable turtles, they had sniffed the fetid breath of extinction more than once....

The last man alive, other than Hart himself, lay hurt and terrified. Both of his legs were crushed and he was quickly descending into shock.

There had been eighteen men in the camp when the two beasts burst into the clearing. The men were presented briefly with the chance to run, but they did not use their opportunity soon enough. They were stupefied by the beasts, yet on first glance it appeared the creatures were too large and cumbersome for rapid movement.

A fallacy quickly and lethally disproved. The Tu-nel dropped to their stomachs, folded back their front paddles and dug their rear limbs into the ground. Large chunks of dirt and grass were thrown back as they thrust themselves forward.

The soldiers managed to fire a few shots--to no effect. Most of them were crushed in their tents. Others were trampled in the open as they tried to make a stand or attempted to run. A few were caught in huge jaws as the Tu-nel flashed their necks like scythes across the campground. The annoying yapping of the dogs was hushed with the flick of a stubby tail, leaving a heap of fur and jutting bones. The struts of Lieutenant Hart's bidarki snapped wickedly as one of the creatures whipped around to chase two men running for the woods. It flattened one man at the fringe, then followed the other into the trees.

Through his agony, the soldier with the crushed legs had a blurred image of animal frolic. These monsters were playing.

At least, that was the misty impression he had the instant before the beast snapping at the tent fires rolled to one side and finished crushing him.

The two young Tu-nel had been snacking on salmon during their entire trip upriver and they'd eaten their fill. Rather than making them lethargic, however, all that food fueled a burst of playfulness. The sounds the men heard the night before and that morning had been made by the mother, still in the river. Only one of the young Tu-nel belonged to her. The other, a male, was a tagalong. The young ones had slipped away from the Kiltik late last evening, chasing each other and knocking about in the trees. The huge adult found it uncomfortable moving on land, so she sat in the deepest part of the river and called to the errant young ones--who did not respond.

When they spotted the men in Hart's camp, they promptly charged. It was great sport treading the bipeds underfoot. They did not make the connection between the soldiers and the tiny wounds caused by their rifle bullets. Certainly the young male paid no notice, for he already bore deep scars on his right flank--inflicted by the mother Tu-nel when he swam too close during their first encounter. Next to that, the .30 caliber bullets slapping into his chest were hardly noticeable.

The burning tents were another matter. The young male had never encountered fire before. When he ducked his head into the fire, the sensation was more peculiar than painful and he snapped at the flames again and again, mystified as to why he could not move them out of the

way.

Once the fires died down, however, the male forgot the strange phenomena and rushed into the woods to find the young female. He discovered her rubbing the length of her body against some trees. This action perplexed the male. The female hissed, rolled to her other side, and began rocking back and forth. Trees snapped and fell under her weight. She moved to the next rank of spruce and repeated the sequence.

The male sniffed and lifted its head above the trees. In the early morning sunlight his skin took on an olive-gold tinge.

Unlike the ancient reptiles that they superficially resembled, Tu-nel had prominent follicles of nasal hair. When the young male caught a whiff of smoke from the camp, his nose was tickled and he sneezed, revealing his teeth. Tu-nel teeth were long, sharp as coral, and socketed. They could slice through the thick shell of a giant marine turtle as easily as a boy bites into a cupcake.

A series of loud cracks and another line of trees went down under the female. As the male lowered himself, he brushed against some spruce boughs and a peculiar tingle shot through him. He lifted himself again and came down on the trees in front of him, his skin rasping against the rough network of limbs. The tingle was multiplied a thousand times.

More trees were felled as the male repeated the procedure. He began to emit little grunts of pleasure as he learned more and more about the art of scratching himself. Resting his chin against the crown of a tree, he slowly moved outward, laying himself and the spruce down in one long sliding motion as the branches scratched neck, body, cloaca and tail.

Within an hour, the two young Tu-nel flattened nearly three acres.

"Tooo... nel...."

All morning long the female had ignored her mother's calls and, now that her thick skin was satiated, she began loping towards the river. Unwilling to be left alone, the male followed. On reaching the crest of the shallow slope where Hart and Cumiskey had lain, they fell to their stomachs and slid down, kicking out like otters on a mud slide. They plunged into the water and darted to the adult. She greeted the young female with a snort.

The male was still excited from the morning's play, but he swam too close and his enthusiasm was rewarded with a sharp tail-slap from the mother. He fell behind the females and sulked, but things had improved. At least now when he approached the mother did not try to tear out his throat.

This trip on the Kiltik had been special to the young ones. The fresh water felt strange and clean on their skin. But the Tu-nel rarely went upriver anymore and the mother was feeling confined by the shallows.

It had been an unintended journey, the result of a combination of misfortunes and one more consequence of the noise.

After one hundred and thirty-five million years and untold tribulations, the Tu-nel had met their match. It was not something they could touch or smell. It was not something they could fight.

It was the Age of Steam.

The ocean had always been a noisy place. For one thing, it held the world's largest collection of ill-bred diners. Fish could be stupendously noisy eaters. Some made feeding sounds that would have reminded a man of a sawmill, and the mammals who shared the seas with them were no less indelicate. Gray whales plowed up large swatches of seabed while tearing through the tiny sand-tube houses of the shrimp-like creatures they preyed upon, making

the ocean thud with avalanche sounds.

And the songbook of the fish was endless. The drumfish *Baridiella* drummed with its swim bladder. The croaker *Micropogon* made frog sounds and peculiar snare-drum rolls. Leaning backward, sea horses joined the two bony projections at the back of their skulls and snap-snap-snapped.

The fish had an infinite number of ways to create snorts, clacks, claps, ticks, squeaks, moans, tones, and groans. Percussive effects could be produced by hitting the ocean floor, each other, or themselves. Many fish sported sonic muscles. By burping gas from their swim bladders into their foreguts, such as the toadfish did, they could peep and burble to their hearts' content. Pufferfish ground their pharyngeal teeth as though they were undersea hurdy-gurdies. All to the accompaniment of crustacean castanets.

Then there was whale song.

There was a time when the singing whales rang the globe with their symphonies. Some could make themselves heard on the other side of the planet, setting up vibrations in the water to carry their news and intent. Those not graced with such talent could at least pass important messages along. All the whales in the world were in-the-know. Yet now, while it was a news service not yet matched by man, man had effectively scotched it. Because man had set upon the great currents engines which disrupted their long-distance communications.

The Tu-nel also had girdled the planet with their songs. One hundred and thirty-five million years of evolution had given them a matchless repertoire. Their most common transmission, "tooo-nel," was fraught with nuances and meanings, which were taught slowly and patiently to all young Tu-nel. Their long necks and lateral temporal vacuities formed, in effect, magnificent Alpine horns. On land this instrument was fed directly from the lungs, but underwater the Tu-nel first transferred air to a special compression chamber near the base of the neck, circulating it for song while losing a minimal amount of oxygen. A glottal cavity was responsible for the hollow double-vowel sound preceding Tu-nel songs and all but erased the subtle consonant at the beginning. In ages past, under the right conditions, they could make themselves heard from sea to sea.

No more.

Disastrously for the Tu-nel, steam engines intruded directly upon the frequency of their songs. Even a small auxiliary engine could deafen them. The roar and ratchets did not hurt their sensitive ears. It was the sudden isolation that threw them into turmoil. They were accustomed to the constant hum and jump of sea music. The songs had provided them with consolation and news. A song could be a night cry or joyous birth. Songs told them where the food was, the best weather was, the enemy was. And now they were gone.

Had they roamed in herds, the result would not have been so catastrophic, but the Tu-nel gathered in large groups only during the mating season. Every year they gathered around a few inconspicuous islands in the Aleutians. As they drew closer, the sounds of the engines grew less intrusive and they could hear each other with relative clarity. This was absolutely necessary, because the Tu-nel were always voracious and the surrounding sea was heavily depopulated during their gatherings. Battling males and choiring females worked up ferocious appetites. They had to stay in constant contact with the scouts who patrolled the outlying areas. On receiving a signal, a temporary truce would be sounded and the combatants would race out to the food the scouts had located. Once fed, the male rivals returned to the deadly scrimmage, while females violently jostled each other as they orbited the arena, determining status in their own particular pecking order. The scouts, old bulls who had given up the mating battles, resumed

their vigil.

In the 1800's whaling ships began plying the area regularly, sailing vessels that little troubled the Tu-nel. But as the century progressed, whalers converted to steam and became even more proficient at depopulating the ocean. The massacre of the fur seals on the Pribilof Islands was a blow. The Tu-nel had pursued the seals even as the seals chased after salmon and squid. A harsher loss was that of the reddish-brown walrus that had thrived in the Arctic. They had once been easy meals as they grazed for gapers and cockles on the sea bed. Now both seals and walrus were threatened with extinction.

Infinitely worse, though, was that the whales themselves were on the verge of sharing their fate. The Tu-nel scouts had to range further and further away from the mating grounds to find sustenance. The Tu-nel were going hungry when they needed food the most, during the mating season. Occasionally they attacked lone whalers and revenue cutters that came their way, but sinking a large whaling ship expended precious energy, and drowning men were scrawny, meager repasts. There were never any survivors from these attacks because the Tu-nel had to pick out every morsel of meat they could find.

And then the planet itself turned against them.

Beginning in 1886, revenue cutters threading their way through the Aleutians began happening upon islands that appeared overnight, then just as quickly disappeared. For thirty years the island chain boiled in geologic upheaval. It was spooky enough for the sailors standing on the narrow cutter decks. For the Tu-nel it was catastrophic, because most of the activity took place in the vicinity of Bogoslof Island.

The heart of their breeding ground.

The ancient mating arenas now had a new topography. In the past, the Tu-nel would have established new arenas with an accommodating variation in song. But the grind of steam engines and the screech and blow of the earth caused males and females to miss connection. The birth rate dropped. There would be no Tu-nel left in fifty years--the average life span of the creature.

The mother Tu-nel and the two young ones made their way slowly downriver. Once again they broke through Naupaktomiut fishing seines, but this time the men did not rush out to fix them, for there had been rumors of something terrible in the river. Villagers were missing. The Tu-nel had reached Kotzebue three months ago. It was night, as it had been when they first entered the sound. There was no need to attack the human settlements, for their guts were full of salmon. Still, they attacked two men in a dinghy who were shooting seals that were preying on salmon. The young Tu-nel knocked the boat over and toyed with the men a little before playfully biting them in half. Then they slaughtered two dozen seals that were great sport because of their agility.

While lumbering over the shoals, they swallowed pebbles to aid in trituration--a bird-like habit they once shared with the plesiosaurs.

Their accidental riverine foray was over. Accidental because the mother had become lost while searching for the mating arena. There was more noise in the area than ever before, for gold prospectors were arriving by the shipload. The steam engine cacophony had reached a crescendo and the earth itself had buckled and screeched like a mad woman, throwing the mother into deaf confusion.

Already, far to the south, the prelude to this tectonic activity on the Pacific Rim had reduced a great city to fire and ruin.

III

December, 1907 * 37°02'N, 76°17'W

From the Deck Log of the *USS Florida*:

0800 Dressed Ship; Quartermaster Jno Smith rerated Schoolmaster; Landsman Jno Wm Watkins shipped at N. News; Ship's Baker Jos Sebastiane disrated Landsman, given 5 days bread and water for neglect of duty and insubordination; Seaman Gunner Chas McCoy discharged at Hampt.; Mast gave Pvt Handly (Marine) 20 hours extra duty for insolence; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; Seamen Atchison and Russell, 3/c Petty Off Jenkins, and 2/c Machinist Anderson declared deserters.

There was a shout as a stream of fire shot from the serpent's mouth. Smoke billowed and catastrophe seemed imminent. Ships churned the water and brought their big guns to bear. Crash after thundering crash followed hard and shook the Capes. But the monster was unimpressed and impervious as it drew closer to shore. The end was near. Sparks flew, smoke erupted, the populace screamed.

The beast reached the shallows, let out a roar--then abruptly stopped. The side of the beast burst open and a score of sailors hopped out. They banked its fires and tossed out mooring lines. Amidst the applause of the spectators, they began to dismantle the dragon and pack it away.

From the poop of the *Mayflower*, President Theodore Roosevelt clapped his hands and bully-bullied. The cannon puffs of breath that materialized in the cold December air made him seem like a miniature dragon himself.

"Signal the rear admiral. I want to board the *Connecticut*."

He stepped into the flag officer's barge. On the way across he surveyed the cheering crowds and watched the bright wakes as they unscrolled behind cutters and small craft zipping hither and thither across Hampton Roads. He thought he could hear the band on the *Connecticut* switch over from the *Merry Widow Waltz* to something more appropriate as the barge approached, then realized it must be his imagination. It was hard enough hearing the coxswain over the roar of the engine, let alone the musicians on the battleship ahead.

Raising his eyes, he saw red and yellow pennants dart up from the *Connecticut's* signal bridge. The shine and spangle was all fine, of course. But nothing matched this sight: the flagship and the fleet.

And the prospect of the journey they were about to undertake.

Over the summer, ships from all over the world had anchored off the mouth of the James. Guns and aigrettes bristled as battle squadrons from Britain, Japan, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, Italy and a half dozen lesser powers puffed and pouted for the citizens attending the great Jamestown Exposition. The excitement had been grand, the competition fierce--not exactly a comity of nations, but who cared? Gathered in a mighty heap in Hampton Roads, it seemed Man could take on the universe. Eventually, though, the party ended. The fleets sailed home. Except, of course, the one that was already home. Norfolk was the sally port of the mighty Atlantic Fleet.

There were twenty battleships in the Grand Atlantic Fleet. Sixteen of them were present,

while the rest were in dry dock for repairs and maintenance. Hulls painted a dazzling white, they were like angels in metal studs--as much a boast of moral purity as of puissance.

"And about as clear a row of sitting ducks as was ever set up for the shoot," said Dr. Singleton from the foredeck of the *Indiana* class *Florida*, in the Third Division.

Midshipman Davis winced. The president himself was being ferried past them, and Singleton still could not hide his want of patriotism.

The crew had manned the starboard rail for side honors and a cheer burst forth as Roosevelt waved at them from the barge. Up on the bridge, Captain Oates wondered how familiar the Chief Executive was with the Fleet's signal book, since every morning at four bells of the forenoon watch the ships hoisted flags indicating their number of sick and absentees. One of the fiercest rivalries between the captains manifested at this time, the winning ship showing the lowest number. As of yet, the Admiral had given no indication these flags should be lowered. Pride and shame were pennants for all to see. The *Florida* had come in second from the last--some consolation since that was better than usual.

Oates frowned at the way his men abandoned themselves to the cheer. The lack of decorum bothered him. But he had it from Evans himself that the president preferred extravagant displays of enthusiasm from his men over dour obedience.

One questioned the Rear Admiral at one's peril. "Fighting Bob" Evans had earned his sobriquet off the coast of South America in 1891. When the Chilean government aimed some rude noises at the United States, Robley D. Evans sailed into Valparaiso and threatened to blow up Chile's navy if they did not promptly apologize--which they did.

Chile! Captain Oates snorted inwardly. What a coup! What a magnificent victory!

True, Evans had fought honorably in the Spanish-American War, was even credited with destroying the enemy flagship at Santiago. But that was not where he had gotten his nickname.

Chile! It said worlds about the Rear Admiral. He was not ashamed to use the big stick, no matter how small the prey. So when he told his captains to allow their bluejackets to engage in spontaneous shouting, cheering, frolicking and other foolish behavior that evinced good morale, the captains bit the bullet.

Chile!

Captain Oates saluted as the president waved. Below and forward, he spotted the peculiar straw hat Dr. Singleton always wore--one more care he did not want to count. The day Singleton came on board, Oates knew that the doctor was going to rub him the wrong way. One of the Navy's unwritten laws was that officers had their own personal spaces, as well as their private ways of getting there. The starboard side of the quarterdeck belonged to the captain. While there, no one was to approach unless he signaled them to do so. To port other officers congregated, avoiding the captain's gaze but keen for his call. These wardroom officers had their own particular hatchway to use when going up to the quarterdeck, staying clear of the captain's personal companionway.

That morning, as Oates ascended the short ladder, the companionway was suddenly blocked from above. He glanced up to see the swaying bottom of a pair of baggy trousers descending upon him and just managed to scamper down and out of the way before getting stepped on.

"See here, sir," he protested when Singleton came to rest at the bottom of the ladder. "This happens to be reserved for the exclusive use of the ship's commander."

"Even when there's a fire?" said Singleton breezily, then sauntered down the passageway.

"A civilian," Oates thought grumpily as he went up. Yet as he stood looking out over the

roadstead, he remembered being told Singleton had spent several months with the Special Service Squadron, so he was undoubtedly versed in maritime formalities. Had he come down the captain's hatch--on *purpose*? If so, why? There could be no other reason than to... than to....

"Annoy me!" Oates struck the rail.

They were going to sail around the world. That was why Roosevelt was here--to see them off. It was an exploit never before attempted by a major steam-driven fleet. The ill-fated Baltic Fleet had only managed half the distance. The technical, logistical and political problems that had to be surmounted seemed inconsequential next to the sheer physical endurance required of them. Not that the thing itself was impossible, but the officers of the Fleet were impossibly old. Oates himself was on the near side of seventy.

And he'd been saddled with the oldest of the sixteen ships.

Twelve years earlier, Congress had grown alarmed by what was happening across the Atlantic, where the European powers were battenning the hatches for a prolonged arms race. In a trice, money was appropriated for a complete revamping of the U.S. Navy and among the first keels laid was that of the *Florida*. Unfortunately, it was hastily constructed, and was out of date within eight years. Newer ships of the *Connecticut* class carried prodigious armor shields that Oates' ship lacked and, naval diplomacy being nine-tenths appearance, the older ship was given a modern-looking exterior. From a distance, she looked as formidable as any man-of-war in the four divisions. But much of it was sham.

Because much of it was wood. Wood that soaked up soot like a sponge. Wood that could hardly be cleaned or repainted.

Evans had expressed his displeasure the previous Monday--'Blue Monday', that day of the week reserved for Admiral's Inspection. Evans and his Board were piped on board with all the pomp of foreign dignitaries. They looked on stoically while the *Florida's* crew was put through foot drills, fire drills, abandon ship drills, division drills, and Colors. To the First Lieutenant, whose job it was to keep the *Florida* spotless, it seemed the men with white gloves inspected every inch of the old ship, from her trucks down to her double-bottoms. But the Admiral's chief complaint was on his lips before he even stepped on board:

"This... *wood*...."

Wood that Dr. Singleton harped on with the insistence of a dog mistaking a neighbor for a prowler and barking all through the night. The false armor would be useless if they were forced to do battle in the course of their journey.

Singleton was with the Fleet as a special correspondent for *Scientific American*. He was on the *Florida* as a special nuisance to Captain Oates. It was as if Evans had assigned him to the scruffiest ship they had just to give Singleton proof for his complaints. The Admiral seemed to be saying: "Here, you want to write reports on the inadequacy of my fleet? Then I give you the *Florida*, sorriest of the lot. That should give you copy, and be damned with you."

The credentials that gave him a berth with the Fleet were impressive--so impressive that the Navy had arranged accommodations for him on the *U.S.S. Minneapolis* when it had been part of the Special Service Squadron. Singleton had helped design and set up the complicated photoheliographs used by the Squadron during its expedition to the Mediterranean to study the eclipse of 1905. Rumor had it that he was with the Atlantic Fleet to observe the effects of twelve-inch shells in case they came up against the Japanese.

Ever since they destroyed the Baltic Fleet, the Japanese had begun to think of the Pacific as their personal swimming hole. Did Roosevelt anticipate a sea battle with their little Asian

brothers, Kaiser Wilhelm's 'yellow peril'? If so, Singleton's presence made sense. It was always a good idea to have a scientist around who could explain a catastrophe.

The British had given Singleton his most potent source of sarcasm to date. For a long time they had heard rumors that the Limeys were working on an entirely new kind of battleship. On October 3, 1906, it fell that, once again, the grapevine of the oceans was accurate as ever. The *H.M.S. Dreadnought* would give its name to an entire class of ships. The particulars were dribbling out--not that the British Admiralty was trying to keep their new toy a secret. The *Dreadnought* could out-gun, out-race, out-maneuver and out-last anything afloat, so the Royal Navy said. And truth be known, as more and more details of the ship were learned, more than one non-English salt sadly agreed.

"We're sailing in antiques, gentlemen," Singleton had stated flatly a few days earlier. "The *Dreadnought* could sail into Hampton Roads and flatten fleet, towns and coastline in two hours. How is that for progress?"

There were plenty of officers who agreed with this observation, but they kept their doubts to themselves. Had any one of them been caught disparaging the Fleet the way the good doctor did, he might not only be reprimanded, but cashiered as well.

For days, an easterly had whipped the ships with fifty mile an hour winds. A cold gust now blew in from the *Florida's* starboard quarter. Hundreds of hats flew into the air and there was a mad scramble as the sailors and marines chased their headgear in circles. Raising himself on his toes, Captain Oates could just make out Singleton's straw hat prominent among the runaways. The doctor watched as Midshipman Davis ran to and fro, chasing the treacherous air currents beneath the turrets. Oates thought it would be a fine thing if he could see the last of that damn hat, so casual, so... *peaceful*. What the hell was he doing wearing sunshine straw on this cold, blustery day?

Oates crossed his fingers. Singleton's hat was still on the loose. The midshipman looked like a lame spider as he dodged this way and that in his attempts to retrieve it. Picture the doctor's grim visage if it flew over the port railing! His blustering at naval inefficiency would attain Lincolnian eloquence if his straw was lost.

Midshipman Davis ran head-on into a marine who was chasing after his own short-visorred hat. They went down in a spastic jumble of gangly arms and legs. The marine hopped up and went his way without a second glance at the sailor. Oates experienced a twinge of sympathy for the junior officer fresh out of Annapolis.

"Blasted way to run a navy," he grouched, turning to his executive officer, Lieutenant Grissom.

"The president has reached the *Connecticut*," the exec blandly informed him.

"Yes...."

Bounding up from the barge, Roosevelt landed on the deck at a gallop and charged over to the admiral of his choice, leaving a martial ring in the Swiss cheese plates and an OOD who could only nod amiably.

In fact, Evans was only a rear admiral. There were four other rear admirals with the Fleet, so he was only unique by presidential fiat. Fighting Bob Evans had desperately wanted the status of full admiral conferred on him in advance of the expedition. But after granting Admiral "You-May-Fire-When-Ready" Dewey the equivalent of five stars, Congress had had its fill of sea-going prima donnas. They refused the president's request to grant Evans a promotion. This meant that in the upcoming journey he would have to sit below the salt at banquets. When

he entered foreign ports, the gun salutes his two stars drew would be over before the echoes came back. All of which could have been forgiven, had his most fervent secret prayer been answered:

God, deliver me from this gout, was Rear Admiral Evans' foremost thought as he hobbled forward to grasp the president's firm hand.

The president glowered at the reporters clustered on the gangway. This was a surprising expression from someone who'd won the Nobel Peace Prize. It was also a caution to the photographers to be ready next time.

Evans could not keep from casting nervous glances about him. A great many of his boys were fresh from the Midwest, where Navy recruiters had gone to flush out good-looking, all-American types. Officially, the upcoming voyage was slated for the training of personnel and the testing of new equipment. Unofficially, everyone knew that Teddy was whipping out his 'big stick' and showing it for all the world to see. In which case, it would hardly do to have foreigners observe the average American sailor--hardened, tattooed and blemished with poor teeth if he was lucky enough to have any remaining. The thousands of scrubbed-pink faces that had been poured into the Fleet had not yet won their sea legs. Standing before Roosevelt, Evans wondered which of the green lads around him would puke in front of the president.

"Bob," Roosevelt declaimed, "you know this is a peaceful mission I'm sending you on. But there's always the unexpected. If it comes to a fight, I know I can count on you."

"Good God, what's he *saying*?" some of the correspondents whispered among themselves. "Is he challenging the *Japs*?"

Fighting Bob smiled with grim equanimity and matched the firmness of the president's grasp. The possibility that they would lock horns with the Japanese was an ironic testament to the fluid world. He had been commander of the Asiatic Fleet when the Naval War College recommended its withdrawal from the Far East in 1903. The Japanese Embassy had lodged a protest. They felt that a strong American presence in the region preserved the peace.

Apparently, that was no longer their belief.

"Well vitted, are you?" the president inquired.

"Captain Ingersoll has the figures."

Evans summoned his chief of staff. Ingersoll, prepared, recited, "Mr. President, the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts has supplied us with more than six million pounds of provisions, excluding fifteen thousand pounds of English plum pudding, just arrived and to be stowed aboard this evening."

Evans noted Roosevelt's keen interest. They all understood this was the tender prelude to the best statistic of all. The admiral nodded for Ingersoll to continue.

"For the pleasure of the men, there are included four hundred sheets of popular music, thirty-two pianos, two hundred sets of boxing gloves, one hundred sets of quoits, three hundred handballs and horse billiards, sixteen tridents and sets of whiskers--for the Neptunes, when we cross the Line--eight hundred packs of playing cards, sixty phonographs, uncounted Bibles, and three hundred copies of your latest State of the Union Address."

"Bully!"

Now... the moment....

"Mr. President, the combined weight of the fighting Grand Atlantic Fleet is two hundred and twenty-three thousand tons. On the sixteen ships there is a total of nine hundred and twenty-five naval guns, perhaps the greatest concentration of firepower in history. Some of the ships mount thirteen-inchers, but just as effective are the twelve-inch guns. In all, one hundred and

forty-four guns of major caliber. In five minutes of firing, one of the newer ships, such as the *Georgia*, can develop 3,927,172 foot-tons of energy. The Fleet carries 35,000,000 pounds in its magazines. We carry not only the standard Whitehead torpedoes, but many of the new turbine-driven Bliss-Leavitt models. Among the explosives are dynamite, maxemite, lyddite and shimose."

Imposing statistics, imposingly stacked. With each increment Roosevelt visibly swelled, as if gearing up for a hunt.

"Wonderful! Marvelous! Absolutely... bully!"

Ingersoll saluted, then vanished like a dropped decimal place.

Roosevelt scowled. This time, the photographers were ready. President and Rear Admiral were surrounded by pops and flashes, as though a battle were already underway.

"Yoo-hoo! Roger! Roger!"

Ensign Roger Garrett was dismantling the head of the dragon when the female voice clanged overhead. He cursed, then threw a vicious scowl at the men of the dragon crew grinning at him.

"Roger! You'll never guess... never!"

Garrett spotted the portly man struggling to keep up with the attractive brunette, and immediately guessed.

They were tied up at the Hotel Chamberlin pier. On the quay between hotel and river a large crowd had gathered to see how the magical dragon was taken apart. It was a clever, portable disguise that extended several yards fore and aft of the cutter. Garrett's dubious command. His main concern had been to prevent the burning naphtha that shot out the nose from catching the dragon and cutter on fire. He'd succeeded, but barely. The dragon's snout was charred to a crisp.

The girl's mouth, on the other hand, was moist, inviting, and constantly open. He'd met Emily--*good God, what was her last name?*--at one of the frequent football games the sailors of the Fleet played on shore while stationed at Norfolk. He'd seen her swooning extravagantly in the bleachers. Covered with dirt and sweat, he'd introduced himself to her after the game, and soon had a pretty decoration to attend his arm at the innumerable parties that made the Capes so boisterous that year. The problem was that Emily pranced at his elbow like one espoused. As of yet, the only banners had been in her heart and mind, which seemed nuptial enough for her.

He gave her a brief wave, then turned and shouted commands at the crew of the cutter at the top of his lungs.

Which did nothing to chase Emily away. Just the opposite. Clapping her hands in admiration, she grabbed the stranger by the elbow and dragged him forward. What was it she said her father did for a living? A dry-goods drummer? Yes, that was it. At least, Emily put out like the daughter of a dry-goods drummer. Things had been too dry in her life and she'd been on the lookout for something a little... wetter. Either that or she was under the mistaken impression that ensigns in the U.S. Navy made more than \$2,700 a year. Of course, if he was ever to advance himself, a wife would be a necessity.

But the daughter of a dry-goods drummer?

"Roger! Look! It's my *father!*"

Damn. For the life of him, Garrett couldn't remember... what *was* her last name?

He turned. "Ah! Emily's father!" They shook hands. The father's palm felt dry.

"Seems my Emily's grown quite attached while I've been away," said the dry-goods

drummer.

"Well," said Garrett, cautiously veering away from the insinuation, "I've become fond of Emily."

Without further preliminary, the man asked, "And how fond is that?"

How in the world did Emily know I'd be here? Garrett wondered. She'd heard something somewhere, that much was obvious. The wonder of it was that she had stopped working her mouth long enough to listen.

Her father was taking full advantage of the crew's presence. Even as Garrett guided him out of earshot, he all but shouted, "And how fond is that, sir?"

The bluejackets in the cutter were privy to a splendid mime show. Ensign Garrett entreated the sky, then begged of the planet. He spread his arms in a bombastic explosion, then shuffled his foot in contrition. He demanded absolution and forgave enormities. He touched the father's shoulder, then the girl's shoulder. One would have thought he was trying to matchmake *them*. Then, after a firm handshake, a chaste kiss, and a display of his hand over his heart, Garrett parted from the father and daughter and returned to the cutter.

"Looks like you've been raked fore and aft, Mr. Garrett," one of the men chuckled.

"Yeah, when's the wedding?"

"Next weekend."

"But we set sail tomorrow!"

"The dragon's packed away? Good. Let's get back to the *Florida*. I've got some holystones need warming up."

"He won't do it, Methuselah. The Navy's changed. You'll see. Oh, he might kick the Japs off. That only makes sense, if we're going to California. They'd only get their heads bashed there."

Methuselah shook his head and emitted a low mucous sound. It could have been disagreement. Or disgust with the nickname the young man had pegged him with. Methuselah! Well, it was true, his face was like worn patent leather. He could no longer hear the surf without putting his ear an inch from the shore and clambering up the shrouds was a dream he'd had long ago. But his hands were still strong. He would have easily squeezed tears out of the spry upstart, if only he could raise his arms high enough to grip his shoulder. When Methuselah spoke of the past, his body filled out like a mainsail in a wester. He had lived events Seaman Second Class Amos Macklin knew only from storybooks. His spyglass was not rose tinted, but blue and white and raucous with roaring waves and rude women.

Seaman Second Class Amos Macklin paused to let Methuselah rest. He nodded amiably at a group of sightseers ogling his uniform. The whites did not know how to respond. They looked away and walked straight ahead.

Negroes had been discouraged from attending the Jamestown Exhibition. They were not allowed to ride the 'rolling chairs' or the Tanner Creek Trolley. There were no separate bathrooms or fountains for coloreds. But now that winter had chased away the largest crowds, the blacks came to see the great things Man had wrought. Most of these structures had been raised from the muggy Virginia mists by Negro laborers.

The black sailors in the Fleet did not participate in handball, quoits, or other games that their white counterparts played during their sojourn on the James. They did not attend the grand fetes, the balls, the jewel-studded ceremonies sharpened by glittering dress swords. That was all right with them. They did not care to play football in the muddy fields--they couldn't have

afforded the deductions from their pay to replace ruined fatigues. Nor did the black sailors think much of the food served at the grand parties. Better vittles could be found at any of the Negro shanty towns lying outside Portsmouth and Norfolk. Of course, white men did not know how to dance, so it would have made no sense to attend their balls, even had they been allowed on the floors of the dance pavilions. Besides, they had no music worth dancing to. As for their absence from the ceremonies--well, that did rankle. But what could they say? The consolation was too rich for the blacks to raise a protest--because, in the place where it most mattered, on the ships, all sailors were equal. The sea and the sun bleached color from all men. Rank was the only distinction on a fighting ship. And Amos Macklin stood a fair chance of making Seaman First Class within the year.

Amos had met Methuselah that summer. Fellow bachelors had urged him to join their liberty party for a bit of carousing, not to mention some trim. But Amos was smitten by a desire for solitude. He borrowed a skiff and rowed upriver. He came to a large creek and turned against its current. Cypress and gum trees crowded the banks, funneling the heat over the shallows. Catfish and bream flicked lazily below.

He came upon a small black settlement and tied up at a rickety pier that pulsed with every small wave. The shacks of the dreary hovel seemed like artificial caves excavated from solid forest. Residents nodded at him as he followed a dirt lane, a glimmer of sea-envy in their eyes. It was always good to see a black sailor decked in the natty summer whites of the Navy. Through him, they touched the horizon.

He came to a tavern. Though he had worked up a prodigious thirst, he could only cut the edge. The depths of drink where a man could, with some illusory luck, find better reflections of himself would have to remain unfathomed. Captain Oates could spot a floating red eye a league away.

The liveliest thing in the tavern was a mutt in the doorway that wagged its tail whenever children darted by. The emptiness of the place, with its woebegone stools and crate-tables, reinforced a sense of destiny thicker than the humidity. And when he saw eyes peering out of a dark corner, he was sure this was the demon he'd set out to meet.

But Methuselah was no demon. His first words did not comprise an incantation, but a complaint:

"Jackies aren't worth shit, these days."

This seemed a fair enough invitation to talk. "How's that, Methuselah?"

Constant exposure to salt spray and tradewinds had etched a convoluted chart of the major and minor sea lanes in the old man's face. The ancient, singular sea had worked its magic into his very bones. Every port had its bevy of crusty salts, the tar from old hemp ropes still clinging to their fingers and innumerable sea-yarns hanging from their lips. Yet Amos had never met anyone so *saturated* with the sea. Just went to show that experience was the man, not the experience.

Amos found he was unable to free himself of the ancient's mystifying influence. He took Methuselah on forays into Norfolk. Once, he managed to get him aboard the *Florida* for a closer look at the New Navy.

"Humph! The *Tin* Navy!" he grouched, unimpressed.

Amos' mates made fun of his affection.

"Found your long lost pappy?"

But the time had come for separation. The Fleet was about to embark on a cruise that might take several years. The old man might not be alive when Amos returned. A mystique

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

