**JAN MAYEN: MEANDERINGS IN UNFATHOMABLE SEAS**

*James Fenton,* james@fenton.scot

**Prologue**

Out of our window, as I write, I can see the mist swirling around the distant crags of High Fell and I can imagine the wind howling through every gully, the driving rain battering any living being foolish enough to be at that height; or maybe it is driving snow? – no matter. The summit itself is lost in the cloud, but it must be there, surely?...

There are reports of an island in the northernmost reaches of the Atlantic Ocean, an island not too far south of the everlasting mass of pack ice which makes progress further north impossible (although, in these troubled times, everlasting for how much longer?). The island is said to be beset by fog so that a mariner might sail right past without knowing it is there, although he may be puzzled by the gatherings of seabirds he encounters. There are also reports of earthquakes and of pillars of dark smoke. But few sailors pass that way nowadays for there are no great whales left to hunt in our impoverished oceans, and today, in any case, whale hunting is frowned upon. The waters are too deep to fish and for the tourist, who wants to travel north just to see fog?

I am told also that when south of the island's supposed location, impossibly far south, mariners have reported a distant snow-white volcano rising above the foreground of fog, rising to heaven and catching the gold of the sun. Can these reports be true

or are they just the wild imaginings of sailors too long at sea? (My wife who is of a more practical nature, looking over my shoulder while I write, tells me not to be ridiculous: just look it up on the internet. Before I can reply she is called away by the crying of our baby, Alastair).

This story is about that island, or at least the island has a large part to play in it. So... is the story true or is it just meanderings through the waters of various oceans which are, to all intents and purposes, unfathomable? And what of Henrik and Henderson, without whom there would really be no story? They do not exist, of course, or if they do, only in myself and my imagination.

I leave the reader to straighten out the meanders if they so wish, but this is not an injunction, merely a suggestion. I prefer the meanders myself, for a meandering river holds more aesthetic appeal than a straight one. And in any case, what is the rush? Maybe there is also a message here about the need to look after our planet which, after all, is the only one we have; but is this not so self-evident that it cannot be really be called a message?

Ultimately, though, it is perhaps just a love story (of course it is, says my wife who has just come back into the room, and she kisses me) – so maybe I did catch the gold of the sun after all...

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Where to start? Not an easy question to answer. My first meeting with Alison, was she the true beginning? With all that came to pass,

hindsight indicates that our fates were intertwined from the outset, perhaps from birth? Or was it that faraway day when we all first beheld the great volcano, dazzling its whiteness into the skies? A mountain that held us trapped in its thrall for so many years. Maybe it would have been better if the clouds had kept it enveloped, a mere atmospheric greyness as insubstantial as a will-of-a-wisp, or perhaps better if it had even pretended it was not there at all?

Or perhaps the story should start with the more mundane aggregation of fish boxes on the quay at Tórshavn that memorable afternoon? Or should it be that night aboard *The Tangle*, the aftermath of the storm? Or maybe the day Henrik first entered into all our lives? Unlike Henderson, he was such a presence, taking centre stage wherever he was; of course he could be irritating as well at times...

More likely, though, no story has a beginning, just emerging from the background, taking centre stage for a while, and then once more becoming reabsorbed into the vicissitudes of everyday life. But I do have to start somewhere so I will begin with the fish boxes.

## Chapter 1. The Faeroes

You know the quay at Tórshavn, its length as it pulls away from the town? At the far end stacked below the outer concrete retaining wall were the boxes awaiting carriage to the freezer unit.

'That's just typical,' said Henrik, in as argumentative mood as usual. 'Just look at those. What do they say on them?'

I peered at the blue writing neatly inscribed on each of the full boxes of fish.

'There,' he continued, ' "Product of the Mediterranean", I tell you! The Mediterranean! Those fish were no more caught in the Mediterranean than I was born in Constantinople!'

He was obviously correct (he always was) for moored on the quay nearby was the trawler *Mykaris* with its country of origin, Cyprus, printed in large white letters on its stern. The boxes appeared to be its recently discharged cargo.

'It's typical. There're no more fish left in the Mediterranean, so all their boats come up here, catch and process the fish, and because the ship is Cyprus-registered claim they are a "Product of the Mediterranean." '

He turned to face me, his narrow eyes piercing mine. 'Do you ever question the source of fish? When eating in a restaurant, I mean?'

'N-no,' I mumbled. 'I'm sure if I was in Italy, or wherever, and the menu said "local fish", I would believe it.'

'Of course you would! You're like everyone else – apathetic. It's

no wonder the planet is in such a state!'

This was typical Henrik. Quick to accuse anyone who was not continually alert on environmental issues to be actively against the planet. I looked around. It was a rare cloudless day for the Faeroes, the sea reflecting the blueness of the sky with that added hardness of colour which is present when there is a stiff breeze ruffling the surface. The houses of the old town with their brightly painted red roofs glowed in the sunlight, the terraces of the hill behind almost artificial in their green. Across the sparkling water, the island of Nólsoy stood out with every detail pin-pointed in the clearness of the air. A couple of Arctic terns flew past overhead, their harsh trills echoing off the quay. But did Henrik see all this? Was he even aware of the beauty of the day? My mind started wandering... Why was it that many dedicated environmentalists did not even notice the environment, perhaps had not the aesthetic passion to appreciate the beauty of the moment? Too wrapped up in their own energies to notice. Was the idea more important than the reality?...

Henrik physically shook me by the shoulder. 'You weren't listening, were you?'

'No, not just then. Isn't it a beautiful day?'

'Anyhow, if we continue to overfish the oceans...'

And so it went on as we turned round and headed back down the jetty. I switched off mentally, I had heard it all before, and even if I did say anything, Henrik would not have listened. He was too wrapped up in his own arguments and not many of us have the single-minded energy to pursue external causes to the bitter end.

We have our own lives to live. Henrik would have argued that saving the planet was just as much an internal issue as external, our fates being inextricably linked with that of our environment. In return I would have argued that the imperative of living meant we had to be self-centred at times… Aargh! What was I doing? There was Henrik arguing in the external world and here was me simultaneously arguing with him in my head. There was no escape from the man...

I heard him saying 'Do you want a coffee?' which reconnected me with the real Henrik. Those of the Scandinavian race seem unable to survive more than an hour without their interminable coffees.

'Seems a good idea. We could sit outside at that place…'

He interrupted me by grabbing my arm and pointing to the harbour with a shining look in his eyes. 'Look, something's happening?'

'What're you talking about?'

'Just look!'

And on looking around the harbour I did notice a movement, like the first stirrings of a breeze over water. There was bustle in the air, people moving seawards, calling, shouting.

'I know what it is,' he said as he grabbed my arm even tighter. 'The *Grind*! Forget coffee, where's your boat?'

'Just there,' and I pointed to the floating pontoons below the old town. 'That one with a dark blue hull and the wooden cabin aft.'

'We are going to sea. Is it fuelled and ready?'

'Yes.'

I cheered up for the boat, *The Tangle*, was my pride and joy and the action of putting to sea would dilute Henrik. I am sure you all know what the '*Grind*' is, when the collective bloodlust of the Faeroese is let loose and a passing school of pilot whales is corralled into a cove and butchered. You've all seen the pictures, a temporary madness taking over and the sea turning a deep red with the blood. I suppose because war is frowned on in civilised countries, running amok amongst the whales is an opportunity to let loose the violence that perhaps lies deep within us all.

In the old days the *Grind* was a necessary part of survival on these islands, where it is always a surprise to find anyone living at all. Steep-sided and cliff-fringed with little flat ground for crops and no trees for fuel. The whale meat guaranteed survival through the long, dark winter, providing food for the table and oil for the lights. It was the same in many coastal communities throughout northwestern Europe. But nowadays? Henrik, I am sure, would soon be telling me why it was barbaric, an affront to civilisation and spelt doom to whaledom.

'I don't know why I want to see this,' Henrik said once we had cast off and were joining the ever-increasing throng of boats heading out of the harbour. 'I know I will hate it. It is barbaric and an affront to civilisation.'

But I did note a gleam in his eyes, the thrill of the chase. For whatever you might say about its outcome, it was exciting to be heading in convoy out to sea, following the crowd. Maybe the pilot whales were doing the same in their own way? Boats were now all

around us, from large fishing boats to smaller craft with outboards. There were even a couple of jet skis at the start. We had heard that the plan was to beach the whales at Hvalvik, about fifteen miles up the coast, although currently the whales were about five miles south of there at the mouth of Kollafjørdur.

As the throng headed north up Tangafjørdur, I stood leaning against the wheel, with an occasional turn to keep us in line with the throng, while Henrik stood half in and half out of the open door on the lee side. He was strangely silent. As we passed Kollafjørdur a scan with the binoculars showed no sign of any whales so I assume that boats from settlements north of Tórshavn had shepherded them on into Sundini, the sound where Hvalvik is situated. I knew I would not enjoy the scene that would soon be unfolding but, perhaps in agreement with Henrik for once, I felt I had to see the event with my own eyes. Just the once, I said to myself. For now, with the boat rising up and down with the gentle swell, with the swish of the small waves against the bows and the silent chug of the engine, it was a peaceful scene. The boats all around made it seem like a family outing – and it probably was. I fell to wondering if every Faeroese wanted to continue this tradition, or whether it was only supported by the minority; or, looking around me, if many people, like me, felt impelled to attend without really being in favour.

The channel narrowed as we entered Sundini and it would not be long before the bay where Hvalvik was situated would be visible. Henrik, who had been silent so long I had almost forgotten was there, broke his and my reveries by saying, 'The whales, poor things,

must be trapped in that bay. Why can't...' But before he could finish, pandemonium broke out. A large ship, or it seemed large at the time, had appeared apparently from nowhere and was steaming at speed through the flotilla, scattering boats in all directions. I had to make a sudden turn to port, so sudden that Henrik was thrown to the deck and only good fortune prevented him being thrown over the side. 'Bastards,' I heard myself shouting.

There was a lot happening around me. Several of the smaller boats had capsized and the one nearest me looked as if it had had its stern sheared off. It was sinking fast. I reduced the throttle and swung the wheel around so we could come up alongside.

'Get the lifebuoy,' I screamed at Henrik. He stood up slowly, keeping a tight hold of the rail and shaking his head gently from side to side as if dazed. 'Hurry!' I shouted. He looked around and then recovered remarkably quickly on seeing the sinking boat.

'Where? Where's the lifebelt?'

'Right next to you, on the side of the wheelhouse.'

He grabbed it while I attempted to manouevre the boat beside the sinking vessel. This took all my concentration for, with a sharp swell running, I had to take great care not to crash into the stricken boat or the survivors; there were three of these, one drifting away and two holding firmly to the remains of the gunwale. All luckily were wearing lifejackets but I had to act quickly in case the remains of the vessel sank, sucking the two of them underwater. Then I noticed that the one drifting away was a young girl.

Instantly I pointed at her and before I had time to tell Henrik

what to do he had already let fly the lifebuoy in the child's direction. I gesticulated to the two others in the water that I would rescue the girl first, but they were already swimming towards us and I had to be careful not to run over them or cut them up with the propeller. You so often hear in situations like this that everything happens very quickly but at the same time in slow motion, and it was certainly true for us that afternoon on *The Tangle*. I can remember vividly every detail of the rescue but it must all have happened in an instant. Soon we had the three waterlogged mariners on deck, for Henrik had got the lifebuoy within reach of the child on the second throw and I had quickly put the throttle in reverse, stopped the boat and hauled the other two aboard.

It was only when the three were safely onboard that I took time out to see what was happening around us. It looked as if there had been several rescues such as ours. I checked to see if we could help anyone else but everybody by now seemed to be safely out of the water. The Faeroese are equally at home on sea as on land, if not more so, and the whole operation was probably second nature to them, as it was to me.

Henrik was standing with our new passengers, looking at the wreckage of their boat. Judging by what was still visible, it must have only been a small fibre-glass day cruiser. The remains of it did not however seem in any immediate danger of sinking because, with the stern cut off, it was floating vertically upwards, air trapped in the forward cabin keeping it buoyant. Its crew were incredibly lucky not to be injured. Or were they?

'Are you alright?' I asked, 'Anyone hurt?'

They looked at each other before the man replied, 'No thank you, we are all fine? Anna,' he added looking at the girl who must have been aged about fifteen, 'Are you hurt?' She shook her head. And then he put his arm around the woman, whom I assumed was his wife, 'And you?'

'No, I am fine,' she replied.

The girl Anna suddenly burst into tears. 'Take them into the cabin,' I said to Henrik, ‘and find some towels and warm clothes.’ The mother took the daughter by the hand and they followed him through the wheelhouse and down the steps to the cabin, but the father stayed on deck.

'I must thank you. You saved our lives.'

'It was nothing,' I murmured.

'No, it was good seamanship. You picked us all up first run, which shows no mean skill in seas like this.'

I was pleased with this compliment, particularly coming from someone who probably had the sea in his blood. I also noted the perfect English common to many Faeroese.

'Anyone would have done it. By the way, I am James, what's your name?'

'I'm Nordrin, and in the cabin are my wife and daughter, Sandra and Anna,' he replied.

We formally shook hands. 'Welcome aboard *The Tangle*,' I said.

'She is a nice little boat, well-maintained.' I could not help a glow of pride at this second compliment.

'But that ship,' he continued, 'the one that just ran straight through us...' He paused, as if lost for words. 'That captain is mad. He must have his licence – and his ship – taken from him.'

In truth I had forgotten about the cause of all the mischief, the ship that had appeared from nowhere. 'You know the ship?' I queried.

'Of course, everyone in the islands knows it. It is the *Ocean Campaign*, the environmentalists' ship...'

'Run by Seas For All,' I finished for him. The names were familiar to me, and indeed who had not of heard of Seas For All's virulent anti-whaling campaign and their ship full of passionate campaigners from all over the world?

Nordrin then filled me in on recent events in the Faeroes. The *Ocean Campaign* was planning to spend the whole summer in the islands, just waiting for situations like this: the occurrence of the *Grind*. She realised she was not popular in the islands, and generally kept herself hidden in bays or behind islands. Later it emerged that in this instance she must have been off the village of Hósvik, round a bend in the sound just out of sight of the flotilla, awaiting an opportunity to ambush us and interrupt the chase. Until there had been an official inquiry into the incident, it could not be ascertained at this time whether the ship's captain intended to collide with the flotilla, or whether he had merely meant to frighten us and any collisions were brought about by an error of judgment, or even a technical fault.

Meanwhile *The Tangle* was hove-to, bobbing around in the sea,

waiting sheep-like to see what would happen next. The surrounding boats appeared to be doing the same. I noticed that the *Ocean Campaign* had stopped, turned around and was now facing the flotilla. Henrik appeared at the top of the stairs with mugs of hot cocoa for myself and Nordrin, muttering something about keeping naval traditions. I introduced him to Nordrin who then excused himself and went down into the cabin to be with his family. Henrik went back for his own drink and then reemerged. We stood in the wheelhouse supping our hot cocoa.

'Wow, that was exciting!' exclaimed Henrik eventually.

'Yes,' I agreed. 'Not something we would want happening every day!' I updated him with what Nordrin had told me about the *Ocean Campaign*.

'How wonderful,' he said when I had finished.

'Wonderful? It was only by good luck that no-one drowned.'

'But to have that passion,' Henrik countered. 'The passion to actually put into practice what you believe in. It may have been a bit irresponsible, perhaps, but what commitment!'

'Irresponsible? Criminal, more likely. If you really admire such criminal activity, why don't you join them? I'm sure there will be space on the ship while the captain, and possibly some of the officers and crew as well, are in prison awaiting trial. There will be no sympathy from the Faeroese authorities. The ship will probably be impounded as well.'

'What a great idea...!'

I did not immediately realise the implications of my caustic

suggestion, the way it would eventually lead Henrik to achieve great things – for you will all have all heard of Henrik. You could not really miss him, particularly once he became director of Seas For All. The passion, the advocacy, the commitment. His professional success and his legacy are indisputable – unlike mine as I always think I am a bit of a *dilettante* (Alison would disagree, of course, saying I always do myself down). Would there have been any mangroves left in Indonesia without him? Or any fish on the coral reefs of the Indian Ocean? And would the global network of marine protected areas have been as strong? I did envy his success. But Alison would point out that this success did not extend to his personal relationships – and from her experience she would know (ironically I benefited from his failure in this quarter). He will leave a legacy, surely, but could you say he was relaxed and happy in the present?

To choose between the present and the future, perhaps a choice we all have whether we know it or not. A legacy will be of no benefit while you are alive, and surely being alive is all there is? And if you are not happy while alive, then it is too late. But is being relaxed in the present all there is to it? Will you be satisfied with your life if you have not at the same time achieved something professionally? Or is professional success a vicious circle of unattainability – you never quite get there and are always wanting that little bit more? Eventually everyone has to stand down – or gets deposed… Maybe the answer is a 'rounded life', minor success in everything, balance in all things. But can this not become unutterably dull, and was it not this dullness that Henrik was avoiding and myself seeking? A seaman, as we all know, is never

really happy: at sea, he wants to be ashore, on land he wants to be at sea. The fate of us all, perhaps, the greener grass on the far side.

But there are moments of true happiness (and true sadness) within this general discontent: the immediate moments of arrival and departure, the return to the sea, the return to the land. This appears to be a characteristic extending beyond humans: a dog is at its happiest when its owner returns, at its saddest, almost like the end of the world, when the owner departs. And indeed, happiness only has any meaning in relation to its opposite, sadness. So moments appear all important, memories to cherish; the present at its most pure? The present must be more important than the future…

With Henrik's departure, our voyage to the volcano had to be abandoned, or at least postponed. Maybe fate intervened, for who were we to have the presumption to go without Alison and Henderson also being present? All those hours of preparation, the buying of stores, the planning of routes, even my very presence in the Faeroes, were brushed aside by Henrik. Self-centred as ever, he followed his star, while I was left floundering amongst constellations. But I did spend a happy month exploring the Faeroes in the company of Nordrin, Sandra and Anna.

## Chapter 2. First Meeting

Alison and I go back a long way. We were both working on the *Ice Bear*, migrating like terns from one pole to the other. Zodiac drivers, the best job in the world, or so I thought at the time. You are captain of your little craft, the lives of the passengers in your hands in often difficult seas, but at the same time the joy of introducing them face-to-face to the natives, whether walrus and polar bear or leopard seal and penguins. Alison always looked so unapproachable, friendly and easy to chat to, but out of reach to a mere man like me. Tall and slim, yet exuding strength and vitality, her brown eyes reflecting her long, straight brown hair, too often severely kept in firm control, her short nose and almost rabbit-teeth meant that I fell in love with her the first time I saw her. But standing tall and sun-tanned, her professional red jacket, the mark of the serious driver, her black much-used radio slung carelessly over her shoulder – how could I possibly live up to her expectations? She was way beyond my reach.

We were both leaning over the rail, eyeing-up the passengers as they came aboard for the first time. It is always surprising how, if you take a group, say, of a hundred people, the personality of the group as a whole can vary so much: to me, still one of the mysteries of group psychology. I remember that the last group had come across as dull and unwitted, no particular interest in anything and no spark.

‘Let’s hope this lot has more going for them,’ she said. ‘Another

group like that and I think I'll go mad!'

'Yes,' I agreed. 'I don't know why they come on these cruises if they are not going to take an interest in what they're seeing.'

'Or even in their fellow passengers,' added Alison. 'Nobody seemed to talk to… Hey, look at him!'

'Him' was our first sighting of Henderson. I always called him 'Henderson' in my mind rather than by his first name. I could see why Alison was immediately drawn to him, the stereotypical tall, dark, handsome young man. By young, I meant our age.

'Not our usual passenger.' Few young people could afford the prices we charged on our ships.

'No,' Alison replied. 'But I think he's with his parents. Look, those two immediately behind him.'

We watched them all walk up the gangway. Henderson, tallest of the three, although his father coming up behind was himself a large man, led the way. He had jet-black hair and a clean-cut face with a prominent, square jaw, handsome in the film-star mode. The kind of man around whom women like to flock, although I find this hard to understand as to me they possess too much of the Neanderthal. Father and son were both wearing jackets and ties, and the mother at the back, well dressed in a tweed skirt and with neatly coiffured hair, also gave an air of smartness and respectability – and wealth. They seemed out of place on a small expedition ship such as ours, which is dedicated to exploring the remoter corners of the planet: explorers in the nineteenth century might have worn jackets and ties, but it is frowned upon in the

twenty-first, where fleeces and gilets are the norm.

Alison quickly moved to the top of the gangplank to welcome Henderson aboard – and so she missed seeing Henrik – perhaps for the first and only time, for in the normal run of things it was impossible to miss Henrik! Henrik was not as tall as Henderson, or maybe he was but just stooped a bit more in his normal shambling manner. His mop of dark brown hair kept falling over his brow, and even in the short journey up the gangway, I noticed his vain attempts to brush it back with his left hand, a characteristic gesture that remained with him all his life. However, unlike Henderson whose first impression was that of calm and composure, Henrik came across as full of restless energy. He seemed to be unaccompanied, so I went across to greet him.

'Hi there. Welcome aboard. I'm James.'

'Great to be here! When do we sail?'

'Six thirty. So plenty of time to relax and explore the ship.'

'Why so late? We've the whole voyage to explore the ship. It's the wildlife I'm here to see, not the insides of a ship!'

I was a bit taken aback by the lack of normal courtesies and introductions. He hadn't given me his name and I couldn't really ask direct, 'Who are you?' Well, I could have done but such directness is not in my nature.

'Are you on your own?' I asked, only to get the simple answer, 'Yes'.

I tried again. 'What wildlife in particular are you hoping to see?', for this voyage had been billed as a trip to Spitsbergen in the

Arctic and the normal answer is ‘polar bears’ and ‘whales’, sometimes ‘walrus’ as well.

‘What do you think? All of it! The complete marine ecosystem and how we are affecting it.’

‘That’s good,’ I answered blandly. By now we had reached the reception area and I was pleased to be able to offload Henrik to the stewardesses. Alison was there as well.

‘Phew,’ I said once Henrik was safely down a passageway. ‘I don’t think this is going to be a bland and dull voyage, especially with him aboard.’

‘Why, who is he? He looked an interesting type.’

‘I don’t know, I didn’t even get his name. But certainly he’s here because he wants to be. What’s the tall dark stranger like?’

‘Very nice. His name is Alastair, Alastair Henderson. He’s travelling with his parents to keep them company who, he said, were worried there would be no-one his own age to on this trip. And most of them do seem to be pretty elderly.’

‘Yes, apart from that chap I was just talking to.’

It turned out that Henrik and Henderson were the youngest passengers by a long chalk so it was inevitable that they would seek out the company of Alison and myself. It later emerged we all four were born in the same year and, unlikely as it may seem, also in the same month (June). Many a time we would be together on the deck, or in the evening at the bar, chatting, or more often with Henrik present, arguing. It was hard to tell what Henderson thought of Henrik. Henderson had now dispensed with his tie but still gave the

impression that he was only onboard because of his parents, not for any particular love or interest in the Arctic or its environment. And Henrik was always haranguing him once he found out that his father was a wealthy industrialist. ‘It’s your sort that has got the world into this environmental mess,’ he would say unashamedly.

‘Henrik, you can’t say that,’ Alison would reply on Henderson’s behalf. ‘Alastair had no say in what “sort” he is. He didn’t choose his background. In any case, how do you know what “sort” he is?’

‘Well, what sort are you, Alastair?’ Henrik asked.

Henderson would fluster when answering. ‘I don’t know,’ would be his lame response. Agile responses did not seem to be his strong point. I am not sure he had met anyone like Henrik before. In fact none of us had, but one thing was certain: conversation never lagged when Henrik was around.

I was insanely jealous at this time. I could not get it out of my head that Alison was infatuated with Henderson. If one or other, or both, were present, I was relatively happy, but if neither were around I immediately suspected the worst, with wild imaginings of what they were getting up to. I was also under the thrall of Henrik and fastened on his every word. Perhaps I envied his commitment to something, to anything. He inspired me to look inwards: Did I have a cause I could devote my life to? Was there anything rooted in me? Was there a seed of interest waiting to germinate and grow? To this day I am not sure of the answer, although I do have many interests. Too many, perhaps. Perhaps I possessed a whole garden of seeds and it was just that no single one grew to dominate the

others. I am passionate about the sea, though, but this is not a cause to live or die for; and there is little apparent reciprocity: the sea can be beautiful one minute, a raging torment the next with no concern for those tossed about on the surface. I find it amoral, existing only for itself. But Henderson? What lay at the root of his ambition?

## Chapter 3. The Volcano

That first sighting is etched with equal intensity in all of our memories, mine, Alison's, Henderson's and of course Henrik's. We were standing on the back deck, arguing over some triviality, oblivious to our surroundings. Our surroundings were also oblivious to us, a thick swirling fog so that not even the sea was visible. I saw it first. I remember glancing up and seeing through and beyond the blanket of mist to a patch of brilliant white.

I interrupted the general flow of argument. 'Look. Did you see that?'

'See what?' asked Henrik. 'There's only fog. You're probably hallucinating.'

He could have been right, for the apparition had immediately disappeared and fog can play tricks on the eyes – swirling shapes that echo the swirls of the imagination.

'No. I'm sure, I'm nearly sure, I caught a glimpse of a mountain.'

We stood in silence for a while staring into the fog, a cool, dripping blanket obscuring both sea and sky with an indivisible greyness. The only sound was the quiet throb of the engine below us in the bowels of the ship and a gentle swish of water as we ploughed northwards into the Arctic Ocean on a flat calm sea. A peaceful scene but eerie, for although our ears convinced us we were moving, reinforced by a gentle movement of air that meandered inboard from time to time (I still remember noticing

how its eddies wafted Alison's hair into her face), our eyes insisted otherwise. I did begin to hallucinate, the stationery movement lulling me into a belief that it was an invisible world drawing us into its clutches. Would we ever escape?

'Up there!' Alison shouted, bringing us all out of our reveries, and she was pointing not sideways as is normal when indicating the view, but upwards, impossibly upwards. We all looked upwards. Out of the grey was emerging a virginal white, pure, bright, lit with the full power of the sun. The area of white expanded as we watched in silence. A curtain was being mysteriously pulled back and a new world was emerging. A world of eternal purity, the world of the gods, unreachable, untouchable, unsullied by the hand of man. This world continued to expand out of nowhere as did its backdrop of a uniform dazzling blue, the only suitable foil to a mountain of such stark grandeur. Its shape as it crystallized was as perfect in its proportion as the contrast between deep blue and sunlit white. A child's drawing of a mountain, an artist's drawing of a mountain, the archetypal lines of a volcano. We watched as detail began to appear – delineated in a blue-tinged white and crystal clear as if etched on glass – crevasses, cliffs, ice falls, rocks.

There before us, from sea to sky, was the grandest mountain any of us had ever seen, dazzling in its intensity, where a minute before there had only been grey. I looked around me, but we were the only ones on deck: everyone else must have given up on the outside drabness and gone below decks. They were missing this miracle. I turned back to the mountain, only to see it vapourising

into indistinction. It disappeared as suddenly as it arrived.

Alison, Henrik, Henderson and myself stood around in silence for a while, once more peering unsighted into fog, waiting for the impossible to return. This was to be our dream, our vision, our imagining – a magic, almost mystical experience that, although not obvious at the time, held us together by invisible threads for the rest of our lives.

Henrik spoke first, although his exclamatory 'Wow' did not seem to me to up to the standard required. 'Did I just imagine that?'

'No,' responded Alison and Henderson simultaneously.

'What a mountain!' I added. 'It's as if someone pulled back the curtain just for us.'

'But why not for longer?' Henrik asked. 'Why dazzle us with just a glimpse? I'm beginning to doubt I ever saw it. Did anyone take a picture?'

We all shook our heads. It had all happened so quickly, and it was so awe-inspiring, I do not think the idea of taking a picture had occurred to any of us. But perhaps it would have been better in the long run if one of us had, because as the years passed it became obscured by the aethereal mists of forgetfulness.

'No, it was definitely there,' said the matter-of-fact Henderson. 'No dream, but certainly a perfect mountain. Tantalising certainly, and not nearly long enough to take it in.'

'Who can we blame for that?' I added jokingly.

Henrik rose to the bait. 'Don't be silly. You can't blame anyone.' For in his way, Henrik was essentially pedantic, with no

sense of humour; or at least, unable to see the absurd in things – and never in himself. He certainly took himself very seriously, but then again we probably all do.

***

A few days later we four were in a Zodiac together, cruising the mirror calm water of an ice-bound sea on an evening when the low sun was adding an orange tinge to every floe and berg. It was after dinner and Alison had offered passengers the opportunity for an evening cruise along the edge of the pack ice. Maybe we would see walrus and polar bear? However it had been a busy day, with three polar bears already sighted, and most people were too tired for further activity. Only Henrik and Henderson were up for it.

Alison was driving, standing proud at the stern, holding the tiller with practiced abandon, her red jacket catching the sun and her sunburnt face adding the professional outdoor look I found so appealing. I was sitting at the bow, looking back at her, thinking it all wrong – she should have been the lady, the figurehead of the bowsprit (which meant I wished I was driving, not she). Henrik and Henderson were on either side, and Henrik was telling anyone who was listening that we had better make the most of this as in a few years' time global warming might mean there would be no ice left. He was probably right, but it was a time for quiet reflection and enjoyment rather than deep thought, a time just to enjoy drifting on the sea. I have said it before, but I do believe that cruising in a small

boat amongst the ice of a polar sea, in full sunshine with a clear blue sky reflected in a calm sea, is one the finest riches the world of nature has to offer.

'Shut up, Henrik,' Henderson said suddenly, surprising even Henrik. 'Can you stop talking, just for once, and let us enjoy the peace?'

I saw Alison give Henderson an admiring look.

'What? Certainly, I was only saying…'

'Well, don't say it!' continued Henderson.

'Later,' I put in. 'We can talk about global warming at the bar when we get back.'

'Good idea,' agreed Alison. 'I'll just shut off the engine and let us drift. Let's listen to the stillness for a while.'

But just as she was about to do this there was a sudden whoosh, swirls in the water and a great splashing.

'It's a walrus,' I shouted. 'Watch out, it may surface under the boat.'

Both Alison and I knew that there had been cases of small boats like ours being upended by walruses surfacing underneath. Their tusks could also puncture the rubber buoyancy tanks. No harm meant, of course, as walruses live on sea shells not people, but just being playful.

'Look, there's another one.'

A whole pod of walruses had appeared, surfacing and then immediately diving right next to the boat. Henderson and Henrik both looked worried and the gripped the side ropes hard as the boat

began to rock. Alison, however, started the engine, calmly turned the boat around and sped away at speed. The seals did not follow.

'Phew, that was exciting,' said Henrik. 'Young males by the look of things. You can tell…'

But Henderson interrupted before Henrik could give us a full breakdown of the habits of walruses (information already given to them by us during lectures onboard). 'Well done, Alison. A good bit of driving.'

'No, standard procedure,' she replied modestly. 'Let's try again to enjoy the stillness of the evening.'

'You're sure the seals have gone?' asked Henderson.

'Yes. And if they come back, I'll just start the engine again and away we go.'

We were far enough away from the ship for no sound to carry, so it was perfectly still. Only the occasional light swish of a wavelet hitting an ice floe, or the occasional call of an Arctic tern flying past. A silent Henrik was an experience to be enjoyed while it lasted. And it did. Snow-topped mountains, their glaciers streaming down to the sea, were visible in the distance, and a great plain of pack ice stretched away to our north all the way to the pole. Around us were ice floes of all shapes and sizes, objects that in polar regions convert the monotony of the open sea into a place of endless interest.

It was Henderson who broke the silence. 'I've been thinking. Someday I would like to climb that volcano. I cannot get it out of my head. Maybe I just need to be reassured it really was there.'

'It was there, right enough,' I confirmed. 'And I've been

thinking the same. It is as if it showed itself to us on purpose, to whet our appetites for more.'

'I'm with you,' said Henrik. 'It's just waiting to be climbed. Count me in.'

'And me,' added Alison. 'It was so perfect. We have to go there.'

'We?' I queried. 'All of us?'

'Why not?' said Henrik. 'What's stopping us?'

'It's not so easy,' I continued. 'Getting there, I mean. And expensive, and the time, the planning…'

'Have you no ambition?' Henrik asked. 'If you want to do something, why not just do it?'

We talked about it amongst ourselves for a long time, while lazily drifting amongst the ice. But we were of one mind, the volcano was there to be climbed. It had showed itself to us, and just to us, and it seemed there had to be a purpose to this. It was as if fate had taken a hand, bringing us together and binding us irrevocably to a common purpose. And so it was agreed: at some unspecified date in the future we would all assemble at the base of the volcano and ascend to its summit.

## Chapter 4. The Falklands

About three years after this I was taking *The Tangle* down to the Falkland Islands, an island-rich archipelago I had always wanted to explore under my own steam rather than under the continuous beck and call of cruise ship passengers. It was a lengthy voyage, a trip across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, an area where I had daundered amongst the islands for many a month, and thence down the South American coast, calling at Recife, Montevideo, Mar del Plata and Punta Arenas. The crew member I had taken onboard for this leg of the journey had just left, without regrets on my side but perhaps some on hers, and it was at Punta that I was to meet Alison and Henderson. While waiting for them I had completed the necessary formality of asking permission from the Argentinian consulate to visit their Islas Malvinas, in violation of the law of the sea, in my view. Although I am generally not political by nature, I am a great upholder of the long tradition of the freedom of the seas. Why else do people like me tend to spend so much time afloat if not to free ourselves of the bureaucracy of terrestrial life?

I was moored about half way down the long pier, the one which sticks out into the full wind-driven fury of the Straits of Magellan, when the taxi discharged them right opposite my boat. Henderson was clad in a thin blazer with collar and tie while Alison had on a thin, summery blouse. It may have been summertime, but they were dressed more for the summer in Santiago, which they had just left, rather than the breezy, open shores of Patagonia. I may be

reading too much into my memory, but I noticed a certain tension between Alison and Henderson even on that first day.

'Hi there,' I called as I looked up to them from the deck of *The Tangle*, 'I'll be right up.'

Alison smiled down at me, while Henderson held his thin blazer tight around himself, shivering slightly. I clambered up the ladder, hugged Alison and formally shook Henderson by the hand.

'This is a God-forsaken place, isn't it?' were Henderson's first words, as another gust of wind piled into us.

'It does tend to be a bit breezy down here,' I replied. 'But nice and refreshing! Had a good journey?'

'Great,' said Alison. 'I liked Santiago, although it is much like any other big city. But after all the crowds and bustle, I'm now really looking forward to getting back to the Falklands.' She did not seem to be noticing the wind, in fact rather enjoying it, while I enjoyed seeing how it blew her thin blouse tight against her breasts.

Henderson gave an impatient snort. 'Come on, let's get aboard. It's getting chilly.'

We formed a sort of chain as Alison handed their bags down to me standing halfway down the ladder, and I passed them on to Henderson on the deck below. They seemed to have an inordinate amount of luggage.

'What's all this?' I asked. 'Have you a change of clothes, Alison, for every day?'

'No, it's all Alastair's suits.'

'Seriously?' I was not sure if she was joking or not, although I

did know that Henderson had been in Santiago on business.

'Of course not,' replied Henderson gruffly. 'I have a lot of papers with me. Things I have to read and decide on.'

'I thought you were here on holiday?'

'A chief executive can never be on holiday,' he replied pompously.

I looked up at Alison. 'Is he joking?'

'Alastair doesn't joke.'

I looked down at Henderson. 'Don't you?'

'Of course I do!'

I have not yet described the layout of *The Tangle*. She is not a big boat and somewhat of a compromise between power and sail. Her mast is quite stubby, so her sail area is modest and likewise her speed, but she has a good, robust inboard diesel engine which has never let me down yet. Of course this is expensive to run, and fuel supplies are limited, so we travel by sail whenever we can. The wind on that day at Punta was such that we would shoot across the Patagonian Shelf and be in the Falklands in no time, perhaps two to three days. I would not be returning against the prevailing wind, but sailing on to Cape Town while Alison and Henderson returned to Britain. But back to the layout of the boat. There is a high wheelhouse at the stern, just big enough for about four people to stand around and watch the world go by. This overlooks the cabin roof, which has skylights to let in the light below. The airy cabin is reached by a short flight of steps from the wheelhouse and is spacious for four people, cramped for six. It has a central table with

comfortable bench seats on each side which can double as berths. There are two more single berths in the bow beyond the heads and under the wheelhouse there is the galley on the port side and a double cabin on the starboard. Like any yacht, space is at a premium and I was at a bit of a loss to decide where all their luggage was to go. I had given them the double cabin (which was normally mine), and put myself in one of the berths in the bow: I would probably have to share it with their suitcases, whereas my preference would have been with…

Soon we were all in the cabin drinking tea, catching up with news and discussing plans for the next fortnight. I had not seen Alison since her marriage to Henderson a couple of years back (I had made excuses not to be at the wedding); since we had first met him that day on the *Ice Bear,* I was aware that she had not taken her eyes off him, and so I was not surprised at the outcome. However our relationship appeared to have remained unchanged: we remained relaxed in each other's company in a brother-sister way, and we always seemed to have had a natural *rapport*. I was glad to see this was still the case, but perhaps surprised, and inwardly glad, that during this voyage she would sometimes give me 'good grief' type glances at some of the things Henderson was saying or doing.

While talking the normal inanities after a long time apart, I was at the same time trying to assess Henderson. I kept casting him surreptitious glances. What was it that Alison saw in him? There must have been something, for she was not stupid (or if she were, I would be the last to admit it). He was handsome and had money,

that much was certain. It looked as though he had now been successful in the business world, although at this time I was never quite sure what he 'did'.

'Will we be in mobile range?' Henderson was asking.

'Good God man! No, not while at sea,' I replied. 'Possibly in the Straits, but once in the open sea there will be no signal until the Falklands. And even there, coverage is variable.' I was not going to tell him that I had a satellite phone on board, which could be used anywhere in the world, albeit at a cost.

'When do we sail?' he asked abruptly.

I looked across at Alison. 'It's up to you, really. Is there anything you want to do in Punta before we sail? Or you Alastair?' I knew he had not been here before, and might want to see some of the sights.

'There seems to be nothing to see here,' he answered dismissively; and then as an afterthought, 'You, Alison?'

'No, let's get going,' she replied neutrally. 'Is that alright with you James?'

'Certainly. But let's finish our tea first!'

'Can you wait an hour?' Henderson asked. 'I've some calls to make,' and without further ado disappeared into their cabin. This left Alison and me alone together, the first time for many a year. Strangely I felt embarrassed, feeling that any conversation would only be out of politeness.

We both said at the same time 'What have you been…?', and stopped simultaneously, without completing the sentence. I was

afraid to look at her, but I knew she was studying my face. But all she came up with eventually was, 'It's great to be at sea again.'

'Yes, she's a nice little boat, even if I say so myself. Shall we go up to the bridge and plan our route?'

'Good idea.'

So in a business-like and professional manner we went up to the wheelhouse, studied charts, downloaded weather maps and discussed time and tides. It took me straight back to our time on the *Ice Bear*.

We set sail a couple of hours later. With the wind from the port quarter we could put the sails up straightaway and so we sped down the straits. The plan was to sail until nightfall and anchor overnight in the lee of some sheltered shore. Alison and I were on the bridge the whole time, but Henderson was not much in evidence. He said 'paperwork', but we all knew that he was finding even these relatively calm waters a trial. However, he was up and about come anchor at dinner time and while I cooked a typical yacht scradge of what happened to be the nearest food to hand, he produced a bottle of best Chilean wine – from a client who owned a vineyard, he said. We all proceeded to get mildly drunk and I have to say it was an enjoyable evening. Alison was telling me about her new life as a married woman, and the circles she now moved in; coming aboard here had convinced her that they must buy a yacht for themselves. 'Yes, my dear,' agreed Henderson. He was not particularly forthcoming about his job and his business, but it appeared to centre around that general heading of 'Import/Export'

– a title much loved in crime thrillers as a catch-all for all kinds of nefarious business (although why did I think his business was in any way nefarious?). I meandered on about my recent travels, and my plans for the future (what plans?).

We set sail the next morning in a strengthening westerly and as the yacht slowly veered round to the east in tune with the Straits we soon had the wind directly behind us. We shot out of South America and began what turned out to be an eventful crossing to the Falklands Islands. It is only about 300 miles which at a comfortable six knots should only take two days. The sun was out in a clear blue sky, the sea was lit with white horses, there was a steady following breeze, Alison was with me on the bridge and the freedom of the seas beckoned. All was well with the world.

'She sails well,' commented Alison.

'Yes, she does, doesn't she?'

'It's good to be on a boat again. I miss the hustle and bustle of the old *Ice Bear*.'

'Yes. It's strange to think she'll still be carrying out the same routine, migrating with the terns to follow the summers. This very moment she is probably not far to the south of us. Do you think we'll see her?'

'Possibly, but I'm not sure of her exact schedule. It would be funny though if she were in Stanley when we're there.'

'Like old times…'

We stood quietly for a while, swaying gently with the movement of the boat. The silence was only broken when she

asked, ‘Why did you leave the company?’

‘Well, I was getting tired of seeing the same old places and answering the same old questions. I wanted to get my own boat, and be in charge of my own life. Being nice to people all the time becomes a bit wearying.’

‘Yes, it does, doesn’t it? But I do miss the fun and excitement of Zodiac driving in all weathers. I could put up with any number of inane questions to go boat driving.’

I looked at her sharply. Was she bored? Was she not getting enough excitement in her life with Henderson?

‘Are you going to buy a yacht, then?’ I asked.

‘It’s a good idea isn’t it, especially when I see how happy you are on yours. But Alastair… Look at him now. He’s not out here now enjoying himself.’

‘Isn’t he doing paperwork?’

‘No, he’s flat on his back, looking a bit green. He’s okay on big boats but I think he finds this one a bit claustrophobic.’

‘He’ll probably get his sea legs soon.’

‘I hope so, I do hope so. This was meant to be a holiday. It was me who dragged him away from his company for a fortnight, but it won’t be much of a holiday if he’s sick most of the time.’

‘No,’ I agreed. I took a deep breath and then asked, ‘Are you enjoying married life?’

‘Of course,’ she replied quickly, perhaps too quickly. ‘It’s great…’ and she launched into a description of all the places she had visited while accompanying Henderson on business. I only half

listened: it was like the endless descriptions of destinations you get in conversation with cruise ship passengers. Was she turning into one of them?

I broke it off by asking if she would like a cup of coffee. She answered yes and disappeared off into the galley to make some. While she was away I dreamed of the impossible, of what life would have been like if it were just she and me wandering the oceans. She came back up the stairway, giving me a cup of coffee, together with a glowing smile. She went back for hers and once more we were together in the wheelhouse.

'This is fun, isn't it?' she said, then added after looking around, 'I think the wind's picking up a bit.'

'Yes, probably reaching about Force Five. It's forecast to get up to about Force Seven.' That is one short of a gale.

'Poor Alastair. I'd better go and see how he is after I've finished my coffee.' Soon she disappeared below decks.

The wind duly picked further during the course of the day, so much so that I had to reef in the mainsail. Alison spent her time between keeping my company at the wheel and Henderson's in his cabin. At this speed, I thought, we should reach the Falklands tomorrow and poor Henderson would soon be out of his misery. For, to be fair, I did feel sorry for him: no-one would wish seasickness on anyone. It was not that I did not like him, for in his way he was an admirable character. He may not be good in a boat but he had the strength and determination to make headway in the world of business and would probably go far; indeed, he had

probably already gone farther than I ever would. But it is hard to like, or be objective about, someone of whom one is insanely jealous. Perhaps I should not have invited them to join me…

But soon my thoughts were taken up by more pressing matters. The wind had not stopped at the agreed Force Seven but was now passing Eight on the way to Nine. Alison and I had, with difficulty, taken down the mainsail and we were now being pulled along by the jib alone. The wind was still straight from the west, pushing us directly to the Falkland Islands. Big waves were building up and, looking astern, they took on a threatening aspect. I began to get worried because with the wind this strong we had no option but to run before it: we would capsize instantly if we tried to veer to port or starboard. And I did not like to think what would happen if land of any sort reared up in front of us – we would be approaching a dreaded lee shore and nothing would prevent us being dashed against the rocks. I glanced at the electronic chart. We were heading for the northwest of the Falklands which consisted of an array of islands, reefs and submerged rocks. Once in their lee we should be relatively safe, but could we get through them without coming to grief? Just then Alison appeared at my side. I immediately relaxed, for with her beside me I could talk through my fears.

'Can you check our heading?' I asked. 'What will be our landfall?'

'Certainly,' and after a minute or two peering at the screen and adjusting the settings, she announced, 'Grand Jason.'

'When?'

She did a few more calculations before replying, 'Ten hours at this speed. That takes us to four in the morning.'

'Will it be light?'

'You ought to know. You've been down here longer than we have.'

I thought for a moment. 'Just getting light, I think. Depends, how overcast it is.'

Currently the sky was a clear dark blue with not a cloud in sight. Ten hours gave us plenty of time before landfall. We could veer our course ever so slightly to just miss the south of Grand Jason and pull up in its lee to weather the storm. The island was quite mountainous and would show up on the radar long before we came anywhere near. But we would have a long evening and night ahead of us. Holding the boat on course when every wave was trying to push us round or break over the stern took every ounce of concentration and I was not sure if Alison was experienced in seamanship of this order to take her turn at the wheel. I glanced across at her, standing easily in the rough seas, one hand for balance on the sill, and as I did so she turned her head round, caught my glance and smiled.

'Getting rough, isn't?'

'Yes,' I replied.

''Can I take over for a while?'

'No, I'm fine at the moment. How's Alastair?'

'Not good. I should be keeping him company in the cabin but it's too stuffy and claustrophobic at present.'

We lapsed into silence watching the sea and the storm, although it was anything but silent with the wind howling around the wheelhouse and through the rigging, and above it all the continual roaring of the waves. Every now and then an extra-large wave would hit the stern and slew us round and it took all my concentration and strength to bring us back on course. I realised I would be exhausted after ten hours of this and so swallowed my pride and asked if Alison would like to take over for a bit. I could watch how she coped while it was still light and before the wind got any stronger. As it turned out she got on fine. There seemed to be a gleam in her eye and she appeared to treat each wave as a personal challenge, turning the wheel with vigour to keep us true to the wind and waves. I relaxed. With her to help and with her apparent confidence, we would get through anything! I looked up at the anemometer and noticed the wind speed was the same as when I had last looked about half an hour ago – a good sign that we might be through the worst.

As if reading my mind, she shouted across, 'Yes, but the waves will still get bigger for a while.'

It happened so quickly. Maybe it was a lapse of concentration from shouting to me, or maybe it was just an extra-large wave. In any case, in no time at all the stern had swung round and we were broadside to the sea. Alison was caught off balance and crashed to the floor, the boat rolled violently and the port rail disappeared underwater. There were loud crashes from below decks, audible even above the noise of the sea, and books, mugs and other

assorted objects were flying around the bridge. I grabbed the wheel instinctively and turned it hard a starboard so that as the deck emerged once more from the sea, with water streaming back through the gunwales, the boat was slowly able to regain its course before losing too much way. My mind was fully occupied with the imperative of the moment so that when I eventually found time to look around I noticed that Alison was nowhere to be seen. My first thought was that she had been washed overboard but the wheelhouse door was still firmly shut. She must be below decks, checking up on Henderson. I sighed.

I was alone on the bridge a long time. Being fully occupied with keeping the boat on course l had no opportunity to go below and check on the cabin, although looking around the bridge things must be in a sorry state. Luckily, with the outside door closed and all the portholes screwed shut, no water would have got in.

Evening was approaching and it was getting dark and the seas were moderating when Alison finally emerged. She was very apologetic.

'Sorry to abandon you, James, but I had to go and check up on Alastair.'

'How is he?'

'Not too well. He fell out of his bunk when we broached – and I must apologise for that. I think I must have taken my eye off the sea for an instant, just as an extra big wave hit...'

'Don't worry about that,' I interrupted. 'What's the damage below decks?'

'I've not really looked, but there a lot of things lying around, some broken. Poor Alastair, though. No bones broken, but badly bruised. One minute he was lying on his bunk, he said, and the next he was rolling about on the floor. Banged his head in the process. It's all my fault.'

'Not really. In seas like this it could happen to anyone. How's he feeling now?'

'Still as seasick as hell, made worse by a sore head. How long until we make landfall?'

ƒ 'Check for yourself, I can't leave the wheel.'

I noticed she limped a bit as she went to look at the electronic chart. I had forgotten about her fall. 'What about you? Are you okay?'

'I landed on my knee. It's a bit bruised, but okay.'

There were still eight hours to go before we could find any lee from the storm, but with the wind dropping and the waves easing I was now less worried about the our safety. Alison cleared up the mess on the bridge as best she could, saying it was all her fault, and then volunteered to take the wheel again. I let her, but did not like to leave her alone because in the dark you have to steer more by feel than sight and I wanted to keep an eye on things.

It was a long and tiring night for both of us. We ended up taking turns at the wheel and it was with relief that, as dawn was beginning to break, the island of Grand Jason slowly loomed large on the radar and then large in reality. We crept in behind it and suddenly the violent pitching relented to a gentle rolling. Once the

sonar indicated a suitable anchor depth, we let go and could finally begin to relax. I set the alarm so that if the anchor dragged we would all be woken up by the sound, and then Alison and I headed below decks, for me the first time since the broach. The cabin was a mess but I was too tired to take it all in. I had a drink of water at the galley and then collapsed into my bunk. Alison went to join Alastair.

I awoke about midday, not fully rested but feeling better for all that. The boat was still rocking gently, a restful motion that made me want to stay relaxed in bed. But get up I did and ventured into the cabin. It was not the mess I expected, but extraordinarily tidy. Alison must have been at work, perhaps still feeling guilty for having caused the mess? There was no sign of her though and I did not like to disturb them, so I put on the kettle and enjoyed a meal of hot soup, bread and cheese.

On deck it was a lovely day. The sun full out with still no cloud in the sky and the wind now only a moderate breeze from the west. I pondered on the chart and decided that the best course of action would be to up anchor and head for the settlement of Hill Cove, in sheltered waters and about four hours sail away. Alastair would be able to go ashore and stretch his legs on stable dry land and we could all relax.

It was a great sail, blue seas with scattered whitecaps, and *The Tangle* scudded over the water. I had the bridge to myself.

If you do not know Hill Cove on West Falkland, it is a grand setting. The ridge of Byron Heights descends into the sea at Westpoint Island, giving shelter from the cold Antarctic winds from

the south, and in the other direction the ridge rises to the heights of Mount Adam, providing a grand backdrop to the small farming settlement. To the north, the islands of Carcass and Saunders, with their rounded hills, provide both great views and shelter from the Atlantic Ocean. I anchored off the old jetty by the shearing shed, and the clatter of the anchor going down must have woken Alison and Alastair for both of them soon came into the wheelhouse. It was the first time I had seen Alastair for a whole day. He looked the worse for wear, pale and wan, but put on a brave face.

'Land at last,' he exclaimed. 'Am I glad to see dry land! When can we go ashore?'

'Anytime,' I replied. ‘But do you want something to eat first?'

'No thanks. A walk in fresh air is what I need.'

'How's your head?'

Alison answered for him. ‘Still sore, isn't it dear?'

'No, not too bad.'

‘Luckily my knee’s better.’

We all went ashore in the dinghy and explored the settlement, a scattering of brightly painted houses with corrugated iron roofs. I think Alastair was hoping to find a restaurant or hotel into which he could decamp, but all we found was the social club and bar which looked little used. Alastair was reluctant to go back on onboard but as there was nowhere to visit we had little option. Alison cooked us a supper of rice and tinned meat and with the boat only rocking gently even Alastair ate some. We did not talk much.

I think Alastair had been building up to the discussion that

followed the meal, perhaps reluctant to admit to a weakness.

'I noticed that there is an airstrip here,' he said eventually.

'Yes,' I answered.

'Well, would you mind if I abandoned ship and flew to Stanley instead? You and Alison could take the boat round and meet me there.'

'Abandoning ship, eh? Although I might do the same in your shoes! I am not sure about flights. I don't know how the system works here.'

'Well, let's go ashore and ask,' Alison suggested and to this we all agreed. So once more we decamped into the dinghy, rowed ashore and knocked on the door of the nearest house. The residents were friendly and said, yes, it was an on-demand air service. Although it was probably too late to book today, they volunteered to phone on our behalf. As it turned out there was an afternoon flight due in tomorrow with space for a return to Stanley, and Alastair was duly booked in.

So it was that the next afternoon Alison and I found ourselves alone on *The Tangle*; ahead of us was twenty four hours together, the time we estimated it would take to get to Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands. We sailed for about four hours before finding a good overnight anchorage at Ship Harbour on Pebble Island.

I think we were both still tired after the storm and did not have the energy, or perhaps the will, to interfere with the natural course of events. We opened a bottle of best Chilean white wine, one of those that Henderson had brought aboard, and poured ourselves

two full glasses. It was companionable as we both pottered about the galley, getting in each other's way, accidentally brushing against one another, putting together a meal, laying the table, drinking more wine. We talked mainly of the old days, of the times exploring the seas upon the *Ice Bear*, of shared experiences, of people we both knew. I had the heater on so there was a comfortable fug in the cabin as we sat down to eat, directly opposite each other, pretending not to stare at each other, pretending this was the way it was. Then it was sitting side by side, finishing the wine, not talking much but enjoying the gentle rock of the boat and the gentle rustle of light waves against the hull. My arm was around her, and hers around me, and then we were leaning against each other, and then I kissed her lips, and she mine. And then we were lying full length together and I could feel her breasts against my body, and then clothes became a hindrance...

We awoke in my cabin at first light, naked under the sheets, and together we whiled away another hour or two. At breakfast we were relaxed and happy, this was the way it was meant to be, the way I had always imagined it. It was still the same as we made passage round the north of the islands, discussing charts, waves and tides – and nothing much else. The present was all important, the future too far away to think about. But it could not last, of course, and the feeling of contentment slowly faded the nearer we got to Stanley – for both of us, I think. I was tempted to drop anchor in Port William and delay our entry into Stanley Harbour for another night, but I knew it would be an anti-climax.

Alison was standing beside me as we entered The Narrows, under power, not sail. I looked across to her and said inanely, 'Well, here we are. Stanley.'

'Yes, here we are.'

I was wanting to say, 'Will you abandon Alastair and stay with me forever on *The Tangle*?', but came out instead with, 'What now?'

'What do you mean?'

I never answered that question, not then at least, because of the intervention of fate in a big way. Instead Alison was pointing to a ship coming into view as we progressed into the harbour.

'Isn't that the *Ocean Campaign*? The Seas For All boat?

'Looks like it.' I checked its name through the binoculars. 'Yes, it is.'

'Do you think Henrik will be aboard?'

'Henrik?'

'He's their campaign director, isn't he?'

'Of course.'

I was not in the right state of mind just then to take on Henrik as well but would probably have no choice. We had to moor alongside the jetty, right next to the *Ocean Campaign* as it turned out, while I went to the harbour office to sort out the formalities incumbent on arrival at any port. Alison said she did not want to get involved in the bureaucracy so stayed on board.

The jetty was the floating metal monstrosity put in place after the Falklands War as a temporary measure, certainly practical but not beautiful. It may still be there to this day. The bulk of the *Ocean*

*Campaign* towered above me as I walked past, its dark blue hull and white superstructure still as I remembered it those years ago in Tórshavn. A converted trawler, a turncoat, destined to harry those very fleets of which it was once a part.

Coming back from the office I got a shock, for walking towards me were Henrik and Alison arm in arm. It probably did not mean anything although I was reluctant to think so.

'Ah, my dear chap, well met,' he called as soon as he saw me. 'And the beautiful Alison as well. Whatever happened to Alastair?'

'Hello Henrik,' I replied shaking his hand. 'Still after the whales?'

'Of course. The Japanese fleet is between here and South Georgia and we have been harrying them. They've not managed to catch any when we've been around.'

'Why aren't you there now?' I asked, half hoping he would be going back soon.

'An accident. I've been telling Alison. One of our RIB drivers broke his leg, poor chap. A heavy swell caught him unawares when he was on deck. We've taken him to the hospital here and then he'll have to fly back home.'

'That's bad luck.'

'And the good luck is that Alison has agreed to take his place.'

I was stunned and stared at her. 'Is that true?'

She nodded, and then said challengingly when I continued to stare at her, 'Well why not?'

'Indeed, why not?' chorused Henrik. 'She's an excellent driver, I

witnessed that in Spitsbergen. Just what we need – and the longer we stay here in Stanley the more whales that are getting killed. We leave tomorrow.'

'What about Alastair?' I asked him stonily. 'Will you leave him behind? You can't have asked him already.'

Henrik looked surprised, brushing back a fop of his hair in the familiar gesture. 'Why, is he here as well?'

'Yes,' admitted Alison after a pause. 'He's somewhere in Stanley. He flew in yesterday as he was too seasick on board.'

'Great,' said Henrik. 'We will all meet for a drink tonight and plan our trip to the volcano. But I must go now. I need to check on Pierre at the hospital and sort out his flight back to France. Alison, just put all your bags aboard – I'll go and let the crew know you'll be joining us.'

And with that he was off. I was at a loss for words for a while. Alison took my hand and looked at me intently. 'I think it will be for the best, James. Alastair, as you have seen, is not really suited to this kind of holiday and is probably keen to get back to his business. He won't miss me for a month or two. I'm sure he'll agree.'

'I wasn't thinking about Alastair,' I replied eventually.

'No, I know you weren't...' She paused. 'I have enjoyed the past twenty four-hours, really enjoyed it. Let's keep the memory intact, unsullied... But this opportunity, out of the blue, to do something I believe in, a bit of adventure.'

I heard myself say, 'So you find married life with Alastair boring – and me as well, it looks like.'

'No, James, no.' She gave me a big hug and a light kiss on the lips, and then pulled away. 'What would you do in my position?'

I had no reply to this, my only comment being, 'I suppose we better find Alastair, then.' We headed back to my boat in silence.

That evening we four were together again, the first time for several years, sitting round a table in one of the many pubs in Stanley. I studied the faces of our small group. Henderson, probably keen to forget the past couple of days, not really enjoying being in Stanley, anticipating a return to his real world of meetings and commerce. Alison, probably looking forward to an enjoyable few months driving inflatables in rough seas, for a cause she believed in, without having to think too deeply about anything else. Henrik, single-handedly Saving the Planet, impatient to get back to the fray pursuing the enemy, living his passion. And myself, the eternal, rootless wanderer, unsure where the road was leading next...

What had we in common? Perhaps only that one minute of shared experience, a transient vision barely rooted in reality, that mountain of virginal snows whose summit we had not yet reached. Were we any nearer the summit?

'Well, it's good to see you all again,' said Henrik, raising his glass and we all raised ours. 'Here we all are at the bottom of the world, met by chance. Skol! To the volcano!'

'The volcano?' queried Henderson. 'I'd forgotten about that. Are you still planning to climb it, Henrik?'

'Of course, we all are, aren't we?' he answered, looking round the table.

'I am,' replied Alison.

I nodded in the affirmative, 'Yup.'

Henderson studied each of us in turn. 'You're serious, aren't you? And I suppose we did make a pact... Yes, I'll come – as long it's at some indeterminate date in the future.'

We drank to that and it was perhaps that common bond, no doubt helped by a beer or two, which turned it into a pleasant and companionable evening. It was just four friends met up in a far-flung corner of the world, catching up with each other's news, although it has to be said that the conversation was mainly dominated by Henrik with his exploits of whaling in the southern ocean. My feeling of companionship was not destined to last, breaking at the end of the evening when Alison went off with Henderson to his hotel. Why was I so resentful? – he was her husband after all.

While we were walking back to the jetty with Henrik, he suddenly asked, 'Well, James, why don't you join us on the *Ocean Campaign* as well?'

'Are you serious?' I was stunned, it had never occurred to me even to ask. Various thoughts whizzed through my head. To follow Alison? With Henrik? What about *The Tangle*?

'Yes, of course. We can always make use of someone with your seamanship skills.'

'But I can't just leave my boat...'

'Why not?'

I am not sure what it was that stopped me from accepting his offer. I am certain I could have found a berth in Stanley for *The*

*Tangle* while I was away. Maybe I was still not sure about myself and Alison, maybe I was too scrupulous, having just seen her go off for the night with her husband.

'It's a great thought, Henrik. But now I have my own boat I like to be my own master: I don't think I would like being at the beck and call of your good self. And, anyhow, you have Alison as a replacement for Pierre.'

'But do you approve of whaling? The slaughter of such magnificent animals?'

'Of course not!'

'Well now's your chance of doing something about it, instead of endlessly pottering around the world in your little boat.'

'Henrik! That's not fair!'

'Isn't it?'

It probably was, but I was not going to admit it to Henrik. 'No. I cannot just drop everything at a moment's notice and follow you.'

'Look at Alison, James,' he persisted. 'She did.' This put another thought into my head which, surprisingly, had also not occurred to me before. Was she following Henrik rather than the whales? In that case, should I not follow her? Did I trust Henrik?

'True,' I replied eventually. 'No, Henrik, thanks for asking me. You've got Alison, and she'll be excellent. I'm sure you don't really need me as well. And I can't just leave *The Tangle*, she's all I've got.'

'If you say so! But let me know first thing tomorrow if you change your mind.'

I think that after the ups and downs of the last few days, what

with the storm and both gaining and losing Alison in a short space of time, the thought of being stuck on a ship, with possible complications I could not foretell, was too much. Better to retreat snail-like into the comfortable shell of my little boat.

With Alison and Henrik gone, Henderson and I were thrown into each other's company. He had managed to book a flight out, but not for a couple of days, so I joined him in some sightseeing. We obviously had to see penguins and I think even Henderson lost himself for a whole day in their observation, perhaps not even thinking about takeovers, meetings and emails. Gentoos are my favourite. I think they are particularly intelligent, curious about us but much more interested in their own world. You may have noticed that when watching a gentoo colony that there is always a lot going on – a bit like us, a restless breed. And, also like us, unpredictable in terms of group behaviour, subject to the whims of cultural change.

That evening Henderson and I got drunk together. Alison had abandoned us both.

## Chapter 5. Whales

Alison now relates… Had I? An adventure beckoned and I just took it. Who has not seen the pictures of the campaigners' rigid inflatables, dodging the water-cannon of the enemy fleet, boats tearing through the sea, the foaming wake, earnest individuals at the wheel, yet grinning broadly in the excitement of the moment, the wind streaming through their hair, keen to be doing something worthy – on a mission? How could I resist such an opportunity? I may be on world television, or the front page of a national daily, my blogs would be more interesting than my friends', more to say about myself compared to the recent trailing around the world after Alastair.

Why had I fallen for him? We had some good times, certainly, and I very much like him, admire him, but love him? He was ambitious, as was Henrik, but was it only for himself? Henrik would argue that his own work was more of a crusade, he was working on behalf of the planet, for the animals and plants that lived on it. But I have always been dubious about crusades, feeling that the participants were motivated more by an excuse to escape problems at home, or by the excitement of the journey, rather than retaking Jerusalem for Christianity. But hang, on! Am I now contradicting myself, for surely I was more drawn by the escaping from man trouble and the possibility of adventure than the plight of the whale?... Was Henrik also escaping something, himself perhaps? I am not so sure that he was. He was the original spiritual leader, the

charismatic figure at the head of the clan, and we onboard were his groupies.

Henrik, Henrik, exasperating Henrik. He took over my life for a while. A wasted period? No, certainly not, at least less wasted than those with Alastair, although I learnt a lot from Alastair as well. It is interesting to compare those two now: polar opposites yet at the same time very similar. Both were self-possessed, both driven, both good leaders in their very different ways, neither suffered fools gladly, neither let other peoples' views get in their way, neither was particularly democratic – and both knew they were always right. I don't think either imagined they could ever be wrong. Was another similarity that they both lacked imagination, perhaps lacked that most human of skills, creativity? They were certainly lacking in empathy; in fact I don't think either capable of seeing things from another's point of view, from my point of view. I believe they were not particularly interested in women either, other than for physical need, that is: they were too self-centred to concern themselves with what I would be feeling...

We, Henrik's groupies, were all gathered in the bar of the *Ocean Campaign*. A multi-national and heterogeneous bunch: Johan with his narrow face and sunken eyes, pale, long-haired, often embarrassed to speak, always wearing the same jeans and white tee-shirt, but passionate about the environment and saving it, without ever being very clear about what the environment actually was. Peters, the only smoker in the group, with a rasping cough and gravelly voice that went with it, thickset but with a skimpish beard,

intense eyes, wedded to his black denim jacket, but to the environment? I am not sure. Andrea with her long, flowing blond hair (I could never work out if she were a natural blond), her big round blue eyes of the type that men find so attractive, figure hugging blouses, passionate about the whale – and its soul. Justinia, round-faced, pink-cheeked, dark short hair, verging on plumpness, with a tendency to wear men's sweaters, always with something to say for herself, always talking about the environment, and, a bit like Henrik, telling us what we should or should not be doing. And Xiang, short, black-haired, in trousers and shirt always the most smartly dressed of us all, his infectious grin and enthusiasm for everything, but particularly marine biology, an inspiration to us all.

We were two boats, Peters at the helm of one and myself, replacing Pierre, the skipper of the other. We were two crews which, for unspoken reasons, never varied. Peters was with Andrea and Justinia, and with me were Johan and Xiang. I never saw Henrik in one of the inflatables for he always stayed on the deck of the ship, or more often on the bridge, directing operations.

The bar was where we discussed our operations and planned our attacks, although it slowly dawned on me that the actual planning had all been done beforehand by Henrik, who must have spent a lot of time on the bridge studying charts and radar, listening-in on the radio and discussing things over with the captain. But in our discussions round the bar it appeared as if Henrik was giving us free reign...

'Well, captain,' I had heard him say when last on the bridge.

‘What are their positions?'

'There's three of them, Henrik. 59° 38' South, 25° 47' West. They're steaming due west and at our current speed we should be on them in three hours.'

'What's happened to the other two?'

'I'm not sure, but I don't think they have moved from their last position.'

'Broken down?'

'Possibly… But I think it more likely that it's the mother ship and a standby vessel, possibly still securing the last catch.'

'I know,' sighed Henrik. 'The ones they caught while we had to divert to Stanley. So like last time we shadow them, remaining just out of water-cannon range?'

'Sounds good,' replied the captain.

'And when they sight a whale we immediately get the boats ready, with crews on standby. I'll keep a watch on the whales while you get the ship ahead of the catcher.'

'If I can. Depends on how much a lead he has on me.'

'I know. We'll launch the inflatables once we are ahead, before they have a chance to fire. And then keep as close to the whales as we can. Meanwhile you close in on the catchers, and have the crew fire our water-cannon at the bridge windows to block their view.'

'That's a good idea. And if there's more than one pod of whales, do you want to send one of your boats after the other whale catcher?'...

Five minutes later Henrik was down in the bar with us.

'Right, guys. Rendezvous in three hours.'

A murmur of excitement went round the group. This after all was why we were all here, eternally putting up with the rolling and pitching of the ship, with the nausea and seasickness that went with it, and with long hours of inaction. We had been four days sailing from Stanley.

'Is it the whole fleet?' asked Justinia.

'Not at the moment. Just three catchers, we think,' Henrik answered. 'What shall we do?'

'How about going alongside each on and throwing paint at them?'

'At the bridge windows,' I suggested.

'No,' replied Henrik emphatically. 'Remember, we agreed not to do any damage, but only to interfere with the whaling itself.'

'And blocking the view from the bridge could have serious consequences,' put in Xiang. 'It could cause a collision.'

'In any case,' Peters added, 'it will probably be too rough to aim the paint accurately. But we could use the hosepipe on the windows and block their view of the whale.'

And so the discussion went on, but invariably we ended up doing exactly what Henrik and the captain had already agreed. Whether he was prescient as well as manipulative I am not sure.

Soon we were all on the bridge, excitedly waiting for our first glimpse of the whaling fleet; perhaps we would be as excited when we first spotted them as the whalers would be when sighting their whales. Of course we could see the ships on the radar well before

they were visible to the eye. I think it was Justinia who saw them first through binoculars, calling out 'I can see the top of a mast,' and we all watched as they slowly emerged from below the horizon.

There was a moderate sea running but it was not so rough that we would be unable to put the boats down. I was impatient for action, this my first skirmish with the enemy, and I could feel the adrenalin beginning to course through my bloodstream. I was even hoping the catchers would find some whales so that we could fulfil our role. The *Ocean Campaign* kept her distance from the fleet as there was little point in interfering with them when there were no whales about. In fact it was our boat which sighted the whales first, off the starboard bow. Henrik seemed to have a sixth sense where whales were concerned. He had sent Xiang up to the crow's nest which happened to be higher than those on the whale catchers and was not surprised when Xiang pointed excitedly while shouting 'Whales ahoy.'

The effect was electric! We rushed below to put on our survival suits and lifejackets and in the blink of an eye our two RIB crews were back on deck waiting for our boats to be lowered. When level with the deck we clambered aboard and were dropped the last few feet into the sea. Johan unhitched the cable and I immediately started the twin 40 horsepower outboards. We were off at speed, with Peters' boat just behind, tearing through the sea, a foaming wake, all grinning broadly in the excitement of the moment, the wind streaming through our hair. I glanced across at Peters and he looked at me with a gleam in his eye, a challenge, the childish

excitement of a race. I could not refuse.

We all had our roles: while Peters and I concentrated on driving (and it was great to be back at the helm), Johan and Andrea were the cameramen at the bow, recording everything for publicity and posterity, while Xiang and Justinia were spotters, looking out for both whales and danger, in constant radio contact with Henrik back on the ship, giving directions. We were to position our boats between the whales and the catchers, spoiling their aim and relying on them not to endanger life, our life, that is – but what publicity if they did this! While the ship with its greater bulk skilfully wended its way between and in front of the catchers, causing them to constantly change course. It was a game of bluff and counter bluff, of playing chicken – who would give way first? But it did mean that the captains of the whale catchers could not give their full attention to the whales.

Our RIBS were much faster than the other craft, so we could weave around at twenty-five knots, easily avoiding both the bows and the water-cannon. I had not had such excitement for years! We sped up to the whales in a matter of minutes, both to position ourselves between them and the catchers and to frighten them into diving ('Do we have to frighten them?' asked Andrea during our briefing in the bar. 'Better to be frightened than have an explosive harpoon in your back,' replied Xiang). But they did not dive at first and our leaping up and down only seemed to get them interested in us. I heard myself shouting, 'Dive you stupid creatures. Can't you see those harpoonists bearing down on you?'

And soon the whale catchers were upon us. What had seemed a straightforward task in the comfort of the bar disintegrated into a haze of complexity: I had to concentrate on so many things at once. The state of the sea, the position of the whales, of the whale catchers, of the other boat, continual instructions being shouted by Xiang... And with three whale catchers and only two RIBs, how could we prevent all three from firing their harpoons? We, including the *Ocean Campaign*, should have been allotted a ship each. And then the whales dived.

Henrik immediately directed us to head off at speed to the northwest, presumably having had divination from them as to their intentions. You will remember what James said about Henrik: 'He's right of course. He always is.' Well, he was. Having headed northwest for ten minutes at twenty knots, he ordered us to stop. It is ironic to think that in another time and place Henrik, together with Captain Ahab, would have been one of the finest whale captains of all time: he appeared to be on their wavelength and seemed to be able to predict what they would do even before they knew it themselves. It was because of this that during my time on the *Ocean Campaign*, excepting our time in Stanley, the fleet only managed to catch two whales, making the whole exercise grossly uneconomic. Almost single-handedly he managed to put a permanent end to this fleet's activities. Of course, I like to think that I, together with my crew, did play a part as well…

After waiting around for about five minutes with our engines turned off we all got a shock when a long sleek body smoothly

emerged from the water right next to our boats, to be followed shortly after by a second and then a third. Their beauty and elegance, and indeed their sheer size, is indescribable. A hundred tonnes of living flesh, living beings, inquisitive, intensely social – and nearby were men who wanted to fire harpoons deep into their bodies where they would explode to give a long, lingering death. I turned round and looked back towards the whaling fleet. They were coming up fast but I was glad to see that our ship was out in front. I fired-up the engines ready to do battle and Peters did the same. There were three whales, three whale catchers and our three boats, or rather our two inflatables and our ship. An even contest!

Henrik was on the radio to Xiang: 'You take the catcher to the north. We'll take the centre one and Peters will take the one to the south. Stay close to the whales. Make sure you are always between the catcher and the whale.'

'Roger,' replied Xiang and he relayed the message to me.

I was both excited and tense. I knew the power of those harpoons and did not like the idea of high explosive whistling past my ear. What if they fired even if we were in their line of sight? And if the whales were hit, would they thrash around and swamp us? Meanwhile the whales were moving slowly to the northwest, on the surface one minute and smoothly diving the next. When surfaced they breathed deeply, often close enough that the spray from their spouts rained down on the RIB, enveloping us in a fishy aroma.

We kept pace with the animals as the catchers slowly drew near, Xiang keeping me up-to-date with the various ship movements

and Johan at the bow with his camera at the ready. Xiang suddenly shouted 'Look' and pointed excitedly over my shoulder. I turned round and saw that the *Ocean Campaign* had turned ninety degrees to cut across the bows of the middle catcher, which in turn had to take avoiding action. The battle had begun. Things happened quickly. My catcher was headed at full speed straight for us, its water-cannon, or rather fire hose, trying to distract us and swamp the boat. I held my ground until its bow was almost upon us but had to give way eventually as the catcher apparently had no intention of stopping. Although I could easily out-manouevre it, our boat could in no way survive a direct hit. As I veered away we received a direct hit from the water-cannon, the force of the water knocking Xiang to the deck, but I was pleased to see that Johan had not stopped filming. However I was horrified to see that there was now a man standing at the harpoon gun mounted on the bow of the ship. Where were the whales? I had to get in front of them, but with our boat so low in the water, our horizon was limited.

I shouted at Xiang, who was now standing up again, 'Where’re the whales? Which way is the harpoon gunner facing?'

He looked up then pointed to starboard. I sped off at full throttle hoping to get to the whales before the gun was fired, but where were the animals? Surely the noise of all the boats would have frightened them away? Once well ahead of the catcher I released the throttle and as I did so there was an almighty bump and we came to an abrupt stop, apart from Johan that is who continued over the bow into the sea. We had collided with a whale!

It immediately dived and the resultant backwash dragged Johan underwater. My God! Xiang and I stood looking helplessly at the empty sea, probably both thinking of the worst case scenario, Johan drowned. Thankfully he emerged spluttering shortly after and we dragged him aboard. I looked up to see the crew of the whale catcher looking down at us and laughing. There would be no sympathy from that quarter. Although Johan coughed up a lot of water, he was otherwise unhurt, with his dry suit living up to its name. The camera, though, had disappeared into the depths. It was not our only camera and in the event there emerged plenty of opportunities that season to gain good quality footage. Careful editing always ensured that it was the whaling fleet acting recklessly and endangering the lives of the campaigners. And I did myself end up in the sea a couple of times...

The whales dived for another ten minutes or so and then the whole play was acted out again, everyone trying to second guess both the whales and each other. This remained the pattern of the day, indeed of the whole summer, until the whaling fleet retreated back to the east with its tail between its legs.

It was exhausting work, exhilarating but exhausting and it was probably because of this that I ended up with Henrik. As the season wore on I realised I did not like just waiting around being told what to do, so I would be on the bridge with him and the captain, monitoring the movements of the fleet and the whales, planning the next stages of our campaign, and gaining an insight into how his mind worked. In time Henrik came to accept my opinion as much as

the captain's and I think we made a good team.

I spent a lot of time studying him, his unruly hair, his almost flabby face, his close-set eyes, his lack of interest in dressing, although, perhaps by instinct, his clothes always suited. As I have said before, he did not appear particularly interested in people and never cared about how he came across to others. He was driven by an inner force, not selfishly but selflessly. I watched his mind at work; he was very good at relating our human actions to their impact on the living world, but was unable to relate his own actions to the emotional world of others. A strange dichotomy here: he could relate to all forms of biological life – except to the dominant species on the planet, his own species. But he did have a power over others, a charisma, that drew people to his cause, perhaps because of the energy he radiated: I think people were fascinated by his complete self-belief.

I was as well! We all have self-belief, of course, and in my mind I was confident I was the equal of Henrik. I saw him as an equal, and half-way through that long tiring summer season of whaling, often working on adrenalin alone, I needed a confidant, someone to talk to, to comfort me – and he was all there was. I think I saw it as a challenge to bed him, having pushed Alastair to the back of my mind, if I thought of him at all, and James, well James... It was one evening in the bar, after four eventful days of eco-warrioring, everyone tired and inebriated (apart from Xiang who never drank). Peters was with Andrea, both close together, head to head in a corner of their own; Johan was with Justinia, similarly inclined; Xiang

was with crew members, playing some computer game or other. Which just left me and Henrik. The ship was gently rolling and there was a warm, womb-like feel to the small bar.

'Alison, you are good! Why not join us for next season? You could take my place, while I coordinate our mangroves campaign in Indonesia.'

I was flattered. He had noticed me! I took a sip of wine, and then realised he would in effect be sending me away. Perhaps this led to what happened next, or maybe it was just the wine?

'But Henrik, this would mean I would not be with you!'

He looked closely at me then. 'Do you want to be?'

I pretended to hesitate, before answering, 'Of course! Who wouldn't? I'm just one of your groupies, and you know what groupies do.'

'Do I? What do they do?'

I was not sure if he were serious or not, but before I could stop myself blurted out, 'Invite you into their bed.'

It was out now, and could not be unsaid. He gulped down his lager and then repeated, 'Into their bed? Your bed? My bed?'

I did not answer but leant against him, for we were side-by-side on the cushioned seats that ran round the bar, shut my eyes and relaxed. His body tensed at first but soon relaxed in response to mine. I knew then that I had my way. We sat pressed together in silence for a while, perhaps both at a loss for words, or perhaps there was no need for words. Indeed, we spoke little that first night. I realised that Henrik was not very experienced, and for once I felt I

was in charge of him. It was more animal passion than emotional satisfaction, but we both needed it. Who wouldn't after days alone in the thankless Southern Ocean?

I think we were both a little embarrassed next morning when we woke up in the same bed, and possibly hung-over as well, and said little, pretending that nothing had happened. But a barrier had been crossed and I rarely slept alone again that cruise. During the day it did not really change the pattern of our life, and we showed little attachment in public, but it was good to have company at night.

## Chapter 6. Business as usual

This was the second time I had lost Alison, who was now far beyond my reach, somewhere in the bottomless seas of the southern hemisphere. So what did I do after she had left? My grand plans of spending time with her (and unfortunately Henderson as well) island-hopping around the Falklands had come to naught. Henderson had gone back to his boardrooms and I felt lonely. I did spend a week more in the islands, circumnavigating the whole group and visiting the penguins, but I cancelled my plans to sail on to South Africa and instead sailed due north to Montevideo, where I had persuaded a friend to join me. Thereafter we sailed up the coast of Brazil into the tropical Caribbean seas, onward to the eastern seaboard of the States and then across the Atlantic to Scotland. A pleasant enough cruise, but for me without purpose or motivation. *The Tangle* was all I had and ships may be feminine in gender but not in body. It was not enough! Also I viewed myself through the eyes of Henrik, Henderson and Alison: I had imagined they despised my lack of drive, my aimless meanderings across the seas. Indeed, had not Henrik accused me of pottering? What was I doing with my life? Was I making full use of my skills? It did not occur to me then that they might envy rather than despise me...

It was these thoughts that inspired me to contact Henderson, perhaps combined with the fact that we had the common bond of both having lost Alison – for I was sure in my own mind that she would not be returning to him. That night he and I had spent

together in the pub in Stanley he had talked about entering the shipping business and, as you will have noticed, ships and boats interest me. I imagine he was talking large container ships whereas my expertise was more the small ship and boat line. But it did give me an opening, so after my return to Scotland I contacted him expressing an interest in his company (or was it companies?) and asking if there would there be an opening for me?

Surprisingly he did agree to meet me to discuss possibilities, and perhaps more surprisingly he said he would come to me. I was living on *The Tangle* at the time, then moored at Kerrera opposite the west coast town of Oban, and he flew to Glasgow, then on by the small seaplane which at that time landed directly opposite the moorings.

I met him on the pontoon and we shook hands.

'Hi Alastair, good of you to come.'

'No, there are plans I'd like to discuss with you and it seemed best to do it in person.'

'Great! Come aboard for a drink and some grub.'

He had only one small bag this time compared to the *impedimenta* he had brought aboard in Punta Arenas. We walked along to my boat and I reflected on both the previous times when members of our 'volcano group' had boarded *The Tangle*: auspicious events had soon followed.

'Gin and tonic?' I asked once we were below decks.

'Yes please,' and I poured one for myself as well. Why is it that gin is the obligatory nautical drink?

We raised our glasses, 'Cheers.' I noticed that Henderson looked slightly more drawn and tense since we had last met. Had his loss of Alison affected him? – but I was sure we would get around to talking about her later in the evening. He got down to business straight away.

'James, you have worked extensively on small cruise ships, haven't you?'

I nodded.

'Well, do you think there is money to be made in the business?'

I thought for a while before answering. 'It depends. Running a ship is an expensive business, fuel costs, crew costs, insurance, maintenance – and these are pretty well fixed. If you can keep the ship full of passengers, then the odds are stacked in favour of making a profit. But obviously the smaller the ship, the more you have to charge as there are no economies of scale. A very small boat like this is different, as costs can be kept down – but the profits would not be big as you cannot take many passengers.'

'I'd come to the same conclusion myself. But what about the market, how much demand is there? Is it fully met?'

'There is, I think, plenty of demand: the number of people taking cruises seems to rise year-by-year. There are a lot of rich people out there, and not so rich – and one thing you do when you have money is take to the sea: buy a yacht if you are super-rich, or go on a cruise if you're not. And the exclusiveness of small ship travel does appeal – it's almost as if your passengers are on their private yacht, particularly if you pander to them. And with the

continual rise in global population, and the rise in the number of retired people, who tend to have more money, I think demand will continue to rise.'

'I see,' replied Henderson.

'And,' I continued, 'the specialist market seems to be rising as well, particularly wildlife cruises or history cruises. This is partly marketing. For example, going up the Amazon is probably pretty dull and monotonous, but if you can market the wildlife, or the historical aspects, this gives people a reason to go. Every excursion must offer something: you cannot just drop people ashore and let them find out for themselves what is there. Passengers like to be given a reason for being somewhere – especially Americans.'

'Interesting. And what are the risks in the business?'

'Running aground or sinking,' I said frivolously, or perhaps not so frivolously as there had been several cruise ships come to grief recently. 'But particularly fuel costs. The cost of bunker fuel can make or break the economics, although modern ships have better fuel economy. And mechanical problems...'

'So probably better to charter ships at an agreed price,' he interrupted, 'so that these risk are born by the ships' owners.'

'Probably,' I answered, although I had not really thought about it before.

'Alternatively, I could enter the ship chartering business...'

And so the conversation went on. I saw that Henderson was serious about entering the cruise market and was really picking my brain as someone with inside knowledge. It appeared he was

considering entering the exclusive higher end of the market, although I am not sure whether this was because he was happiest working with people of his own social class or whether it had the potential for greater profit.

The upshot of a long discussion was that Henderson asked if I would like to spearhead a new business venture with the working title of 'Elite Cruises' at the smaller, specialist end of the market. I would not be part of his company, but be a paid consultant to advise on destinations, ship chartering, the marketing angle, *et cetera*. I agreed there and then, and we formally shook hands on the deal. I would be earning more money than ever before, but I was duty bound to produce results.

We broke for dinner, a stew I had prepared previously in the galley, and Henderson brought out from his bag a fine wine to go with it. The discussion had been good for me, taking me out of my normal small world of winds, tides and harbourmasters, and I definitely wanted to rise to his challenge. Hence it was a pleasant evening thereafter; we had both achieved something and were celebrating.

Inevitably, late in the evening, the conversation turned to Alison and Henrik. I wanted to know whether Henderson trusted her, or even himself, enough for him to be relaxed about her being away with Henrik for several months.

I started neutrally enough. 'Have you heard from Alison? How's she getting on?'

'Only the occasional email. She sounds tired and I get the

impression there's been continual too-ing and fro-ing with the whaling fleet. She's had no time to relax.'

'Well I suppose that's her job, why she's there. Incidentally, Alastair, what do think of whaling? Do you approve?'

I noticed that he did not answer straight away, and thought that maybe there would be a tension in him between the business opportunity provided by whaling and the moral aspects of slaughtering large, intelligent and social animals. But I did him an injustice.

'No, I don't approve. And I am proud of Alison putting her money where her mouth is. How many of us really dedicate our lives to a cause we believe in?'

'Henrik,' I said instinctively.

'Yes, of course. But he is an exception. And now Alison. I admire her!'

Was he that naive, I thought to myself? Did he not realise that Alison had gone off campaigning not to Save the Whale, but to create some space for herself? Or was it me that was being cynical? Why did I think there was more to it than her belief in environmental campaigning, her following her star?

'Yes,' I replied eventually. 'It's good that she has found purpose in her life.' But as soon as I said this I realised what it implied: her life with Henderson had been purposeless. But again he surprised me.

'I agree. I don't think she really enjoyed trailing around after me as a good wife! I am pleased she is doing something

worthwhile.'

Was he really unconcerned that a relationship might develop between Henrik and her? To this day, I think he was. He could not envisage that any girl would not be attracted to him, being stereotypically rich, powerful and handsome, and, once attracted, would not want to keep what she had. In a funny sort of way I felt sorry for him...

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I was surprised by our success. Henderson's business acumen combined with my experience of the market produced a strong team, even though I say it myself. Elite Cruises went from strength to strength. We scoured the charter market for the best boats, small cruise ships of about a hundred or so pax such that exclusiveness was paramount. We had the best destinations, the Amazon, the North West Passage, the Norwegian fjords, the islands of the Pacific, Antarctica, Tristan da Cunha, Easter Island... And our marketing was superb. I will say this for Henderson, his instinct for tapping into a given market was spot on. A year later we were in there amongst the best and our cruises were fully booked.

Thus it was that I was drawn into Henderson's commercial world for a period. I saw that he was successful because of his very self-centredness combined with his belief in hierarchy (and, of course, through him always wearing the right clothes). I particularly remember one board meeting of Henderson Holdings at its

headquarters in Manchester. I was there because Elite Cruises was an item on the agenda, but before then there was discussion about Solway FineFish Ltd. This was a company that Henderson Holdings had only recently taken over...

'Right,' said Henderson to Megrett, his finance director. 'How do Solway FineFish's finances stack up?'

'Profits are not high. Last year they were only just over three hundred thousand pounds based on sales of eleven million pounds.'

'That's less than three percent,' put in Henderson. 'How does that compare to Anglian Peas?' I happened to know that Anglian Peas was a company Henderson Holdings had acquired last year.

'They made ten per cent,' replied Megrett.

'Not bad, considering the increasing costs of production. What are your forecasts for Solway FineFish?'

'Pretty flat. It will take many years with current profits to recoup the purchase costs.'

Henderson turned to his director of operations, Phillipson. 'I'm sure you've looked into this, Phillipson, but how can we increase the profits of Solway?'

'Well most of the costs are staff wages. As you know, the prawns are brought in from all around the Solway Firth, and beyond, and they have to be shelled by hand before being processed. We have about forty people doing this, whereas the cooking and processing is largely automated.'

'Is it possible to automate shelling?'

'I've looked into this, but if we want to send high quality

prawns to the top end of the market the answer is "No".'

'So what do you suggest?' queried Henderson.

'Well, we could freeze the prawns and send them to China for shelling,' Phillipson answered. 'Labour, of course, is cheap there, about an eighth of the price here. We could then bring them back to our Solway factory for processing and packaging. This is state of the art and nearer our main European markets.'

'And the overall improvement in profit margins would be?'

'Megrett and I have looked into this. Give him the figures, Megrett.'

'If we transferred the shelling operation to China,' responded Megrett, 'we could hope for a profit margin of twelve per cent.'

'A lot better than the current three per cent,' said Henderson. He looked around the table. There were about twelve directors in total, most of whom rarely spoke and, even more rarely, voiced an opinion.

'We are all agreed then?' he continued. 'We transfer the shelling operation of Solway FineFish Ltd to China?' There was an array of silent nods. He turned to his personal assistant who was sitting next to him. 'You've minuted that Miss Faraday?'

'Yes,' Mr Henderson.

'What's next on the agenda?'

'Elite Cruises'

'Ah yes. Over to you James...'

I had been so keyed up about my presentation to the board of Henderson Holdings that I had hardly paid attention to the above

discussion of Solway FineFish. It was only after the meeting that it fully came home to me and I became cross with myself for not having intervened. For I know the Solway area on the Scottish side, rural Dumfries and Galloway that is, and I had just witnessed the elimination of forty jobs in area that was crying out for employment. The board had thrown forty people from a small rural town 'onto the scrapheap' as the expression is. The company was making a profit – but obviously not enough to satisfy the greed of the directors (which is how I saw it at the time). And, what is more, we would be shipping prawns halfway round the globe and back again: did that make environmental sense? The energy costs of transport?

No, a group of spineless directors, without any debate, had just ruined the lives of forty people and helped also to ruin the climate of the planet. Did the company not have a responsibility to its employers, those whose work had enabled the profits to be made in the first place? Indeed, was the company itself not part of the community? Well, no longer: a divide had been opened up so that Solway FineFish had now just become one more rootless multi-national, a parasite almost, taking what it could from where it could and putting the minimum back. And environmental responsibility? It did not appear to be even on the agenda. I thought of Henrik and what he would say.

I realise now that the board, in agreeing the decision, were not necessarily bad people, just lacking imagination: they had perhaps not even thought through the implications of the decision, or translated an abstract board discussion into reality. I think they also

lacked the strength of character to put their head above the parapet and argue against the prevailing business and corporate paradigm: and if they had, would the decision have been different? And if the decision had been different, would Henderson Holdings survive in the competitive corporate market place?

For a while after that meeting my relationship with Henderson cooled. And in the short-term I think he suffered as well for it did result in some bad publicity for him. The local media went to town in castigating his company: 'Corporate Vandalism', 'No Social Responsibility', 'Scottish Jobs Exported to China', and so forth. But he went ahead regardless and in time the brouhaha died down, as it always does when the world moves on.

I probably would have broken my contract with Henderson then if I had not been so involved in Elite Cruises, work I was enjoying – which just goes to show that one's principles generally take second place to one's own selfish interests.

## Chapter 7. The Far East

Elite Cruises was doing well and I had pulled back from direct involvement in the company as I did not want to be involved in the day to day running of the business. I think, like many people, I was more interested in an idea, putting it into practice and then moving on before becoming involved in the routine and humdrum: it was the role of lesser mortals to continue with the tedious business of maintaining the world – and where would the world be without these lesser mortals?

Henderson was looking for new avenues to develop in the cruise business, at the higher end of the market of course, and I had suggested river cruises in the Far East; there were a couple of boats I knew of that might be suitable to charter and we agreed I would go and check them out. But I was not going to be flying out there but testing out another idea of mine: travelling on a cargo ship. Some of these ships took passengers and I wanted to see what the experience would be like – and in particular whether we could market them as part of Elite Cruises. Such a trip would not be for everyone but for those who were not in a hurry, perhaps harking back to the time before modern aircraft made travel too easy, to a time when the journey itself was part of the adventure.

I enjoyed the trip aboard the *Ocean Container*, a ship not designed for its beauty but for pure functionality: typical of the modern business world, perhaps, where the bottom line is efficiency not aesthetics. There are some who subscribe to the view that pure

functionality gives a structure a certain innate beauty, but I am not one of them; aesthetics has to be designed into artefacts, as shown by the ugliness of much of our modern world. A shipping container is not designed to be beautiful, but why not? I believe that aesthetic appreciation is one of the things that contributes to our humanity, and should not be seen as an expensive, frivolous or elitist add-on – the Victorians had it right. We have to live in the world we create, so why does it have to be ugly? It's probably cheaper in the long run to create a high quality of life at the outset...

Still, aesthetics aside, I did enjoy the trip, perhaps partly because in three directions the sea dominated the view – I did not have to look forrard to the mountain of containers. I was the only passenger because it is rare for these ships to have more than one or two cabins for paying guests. And that is what I was, a paying guest allowed into the world of commercial shipping. There was no entertainment laid on, just plenty of that rare commodity in this modern world – time. The accommodation was spacious, comfortable in the modern style if not luxurious. I had a large, airy cabin and the freedom to go where I pleased: the bridge, the decks, the gym, the sauna and the officers' lounge. I could either eat with the officers in their mess, or have the food brought to me in the lounge or to my cabin. The officers were of various nationalities, friendly, if a bit reserved, but at no time did I feel I was imposing on them. In fact I think they welcomed my presence for I helped relieve their tedium. Four weeks at sea on a large modern ship which virtually drove itself was a holiday for me, but cannot have been very exciting as a job when done month in and month out. It is only

really at berthing or leaving port that there is anything challenging for the crew to do.

Passing through the Suez Canal did add interest to the voyage but I enjoyed most the crossing of the Indian Ocean: day after day of limpid seas, hazy blue skies and a feeling more of existence than movement. We were high above the ocean, hardly connected to the sea at all, and on a ship this size we were oblivious to the rise and fall of the swell. In fact it felt so disconnected from the sea that I thought of Conrad's Lord Jim: I felt we could have ploughed through any number of small boats without even knowing they were there.

The *Ocean Container* was bound for Shanghai but Henderson had agreed that I would disembark at Singapore for my river reconnaissance and he would send out a helicopter to pick me up. In the event, passing through the Straits of Malacca proved a memorable experience....

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Alison takes up the story… I was exhausted after a season chasing whales, both physically and emotionally. No-one can live full-time on adrenalin. After biting on the heels of the whaling fleet all the way back to Japan, the *Ocean Campaign* had headed to Singapore for the start of Henrik's mangroves campaign; you remember the one, where he moored the ship off-shore from mangrove swamps that were about to be cut down to make way for a shrimp farms. And very successful the campaign turned out to be too.

I stayed with Henrik for the start of that summer, maybe because I was interested in the issue of coastal conservation, or maybe because I was still interested in Henrik. And perhaps also because I had nothing else planned until the start of the next whaling season which Henrik had in fact asked me lead. There was not much for me to do because, while we had been away whaling, the Seas For All team in Singapore had been working on the plan for the mangroves' campaign and would then join the ship to put it into practice. I felt somewhat side-lined, which, together with the humidity of tropic seas, did not make for a very enjoyable summer. In contrast, Henrik, with a new campaign to direct, became reinvigorated – but paid less attention to me.

It was becoming a bit like my time with Alastair in that, after a few months, we had exhausted all our conversation, personal conversation that is, for there was plenty to talk about in the world of environmental campaigning – but I was not motivated enough to talk about it all day and every day. Once I had got to know him I realised that perhaps there was not much to know although I admit I might be a bit biased, and James would definitely say that I am doing him down. During the whale campaign because there was always too much to do we got on fine, but these more negative thoughts began to emerge while I was hanging around Singapore. I wanted to see the sights for funnily enough I had not been here with Alastair and it is not much fun sightseeing on your own, but Henrik was not interested – immediately going into the Seas For All office and virtually living there. I suggested a holiday for us, but Henrik said 'no', there was too much to plan, adding graciously, 'But

feel free to take one yourself.' I did get a few days with Johan, Peters, Justinia and Andrea, but they were not around long before flying back to their respective homes.

The *Ocean Campaign* was also in port for its annual dry-dock and refit so that the ship was in Singapore for about a month in total. We were still able to live onboard while this happened, but I found it strange living on a boat without the surrounds of the sea for company, and without the throb of the engine which seems to give life to a ship. When we eventually set sail with the new team for the mangroves of Thailand, or what was left of them, I stayed the course for only six weeks – although I did learn a lot about mangroves in the process.

Hence I was in a bit of a dilemma. There were over six months before I needed to rejoin the *Ocean Campaign* for the whaling season, and what to do until then? Alastair was now in constant contact asking me when I would be returning to Britain – and to my life as his wife – and James also had been emailing me. I had not formally broken off with Henrik, if indeed a relationship had formally started; we just drifted apart. I could have returned to the UK (and probably should have) and had it out with Alastair there and then, thereafter falling into James' arms. However the geographical separation helped me distance myself from the problems of my own making: I could parcel them off to some unused corner of my brain in just the same way that Alastair and James were safely parceled ten thousand miles away. I think I probably lacked the self-confidence, both to tell Alastair I would like

a divorce – and to start another relationship having failed with Alastair and Henrik, although they would always remain as friends; and I think, on reflection, I was not ready for James. I needed to prove to him that I could be a success on my own account, and my road to this would be as leader of Seas For All's next whaling campaign – with no whales caught (to be one-up on Henrik). Hindsight suggests that James was pursuing a similar path, in which he was singularly successful with his creation of Elite Cruises. Maybe we both had to first prove that we could ascend to the glittering summit, following, and perhaps overtaking, the footsteps of the other two?

So I remained in the east, joining up with some friends of mine who were on expedition to Sumantri, hoping to reach the equatorial glaciers – while these still existed! I had always thought that travelling from tropical seas, through steaming jungle to snow-clad summits would be a wonderful experience. In the event, though, the expedition was an anti-climax and we spent most of the time in the hot and humid zone dealing with bureaucracy and the unsympathetic mining companies who owned the land we needed to pass through. The planet together with its natural wonders is surely the heritage of us all: why do we add so many encumbrances to those wishing to experience them? What right has any individual or group to claim any particular corner of the planet exclusively for themselves? After all, they are not responsible for creating the natural wonders in the first place...

## Chapter 8. Food miles

I will not bore you with the details of my second season's whaling because the pattern was the same as the first, with the same team of Peters, Johan, Xiang, Justinia and Andrea – but without Henrik. The responsibility for a successful campaign rested with me and I took it seriously; although responsibility for the safety of the crew, which included us, rested with the captain, it was often my decision whether or not we put our small inflatables down into the sea and I am sure I would have been held to account had any tragedy befallen.

I was exhausted come the end of the season, but also elated because the fleet only managed two whales when we were around – the same record as Henrik's. I feel I helped in the demise of commercial whaling once and for all – which itself would, in my view, be a commendable lifetime achievement. But, as you know, a ship is a world to itself and the outer world is but a distant irrelevance. Hence the months at sea were an excuse for me, nay a real reason, to put aside any thoughts of my future: the present was all I had time for.

So I would be returning to the same issues. I think by the time of my return to Singapore, Alastair had got the message that I would never be coming back to him, but at that time he appeared so wrapped-up in his business ventures that I think he hardly noticed. Our separation had been so long that by default it had become permanent. I think you will have noticed that for all of us, being

busy enabled us to sidestep our inner, emotional lives. Maybe in time such lives would shrivel up and we would lose much of our humanity?

Meanwhile Henrik, after his successful mangroves campaign, had opened up a new direction for Seas For All. He told me that the idea had come to him when considering the shrimp farms that were set up in areas of destroyed mangrove forest. Was it sensible to send these farmed shrimps half way across the world to their main market of Europe, rather than to manage better the indigenous European shrimp and prawn fisheries? This led him to think of the issue of food miles in more detail. How many foods were being traded unnecessarily halfway round the globe?

Was it sensible to send lettuces or strawberries from Africa to the northern hemisphere in order that people could enjoy fruit and vegetables out of season?

'One of the most ridiculous things I have heard recently,' Henrik told me, 'is that the pampas of South America, which are great natural grasslands rich in wildlife and ideally suited to cattle grazing, are being ploughed up to grow soy beans. And do you know what happens to these beans?' he challenged.

'No.'

'They are exported by sea to China. And what do you think they are used for there?'

'I've no idea.'

'To feed to cattle! Isn't that ridiculous?'

And I had to admit it was.

'And think of the energy costs,' he continued, 'the energy costs of taking a supertanker of soy beans from South America to China. It would be much more energy efficient just to let the cattle eat the natural grass of the pampas and, if China really does need more meat, to export the meat to them. It would reduce the energy costs of transport by ninety per cent. It's no wonder the climate of the world is in such a bad *way.'*

So a couple of weeks after the *Ocean Campaign* arrived back in Singapore she was to head out to intercept international shipping involved in unnecessary food transport. Henrik's team in the Singapore office had spent the previous months undertaking the detailed research that is essential to any successful campaign and had identified a couple of ships that could be used in high-profile publicity. I had agreed to stay on to man one of the RIBS and thereafter to help Henrik deal with the subsequent media spotlight. With two weeks in hand I had booked into a comfortable hotel and spent the time just relaxing, swimming and enjoying the luxury of being pampered – and pampering the well-heeled is something the Singaporeans are particularly good at. Henrik visited several times, mainly to agree the details of the next trip, and although we were companionable he never shared my bed. By unsaid agreement, that was all over. Had he another girl in his life? One of his campaign groupies?...

The plan was simple in theory if difficult in practice. It had to be a night operation in one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world, but at least the *Ocean Campaign* was known in these waters and

would not be out of place. Radar was the problem because how could we get close without being spotted by those on the bridge? And if we drove without navigation lights we could technically be prosecuted if caught. Additionally, in such crowded waters every ship would be monitored by the authorities and suspicious moves noted, especially with the recent increase in piracy.

With advance planning Henrik positioned the *Ocean Campaign* to be in front of our victim and travelling in the same direction, but at a slower speed. Once the container ship had overtaken us the two RIBs were dropped and we crept up to be alongside the hull, hoping that the attention of the duty officer and watchman would be focused ahead rather than astern and also that the radar signature of inflatables would be too small notice: once we were alongside the hull we were invisible to radar and would only be spotted if anyone on the bridge wing looked directly down or, less likely, a crew member peered over the railings from the deck. On such a dark night as this, and it was not chance that it was a moonless night, we would be hard to see: two small RIBs tight against the massive hull of a container ship.

The ship was travelling at fifteen knots, a speed I had to match exactly, while our specialist climber, supported on each side by Xiang and Johan, attached himself to the hull. He had to this without being drowned or trapped between the RIB and the ship as we rose up and down with the waves, which luckily were not big. The hull was of course totally smooth without any holds so magnetic climbing pads attached to hands, knees and feet were used. We had

trialled these in Singapore and they seemed to work, but I would rather not have been the climber myself. Once attached to the ship I took the boat forward a bit so if he fell he would land in the sea. The plan was that he would scale the hull as quickly as possible, trailing a rope below him, but it was nerve-wracking to watch. We had practiced the manouevre several times on the *Ocean Campaign* but that ship was much lower in the water with a hull only a third the height; and there was some trepidation as to whether this ship might have thicker paint and so reduce the magnetic attraction. The tension eased when we noticed that he stuck-on no problem, but it was not until he reached deck level and put a belaying hook over the scuppers that we could relax. Now, staying below the scuppers, he could traverse safely along the hull without being spotted by any wandering crew member.

We had nineteen self-adhesive letters to haul up. The climber had put a pulley at the top of the hull so while I kept our RIB in position, Xiang and Johan held the rolled-up letters horizontal while Peters positioned his boat alongside mine and Justinia and Andrea pulled on the rope and hauled them up. Xiang and Johan then pulled on another set of ropes that peeled off the backing tape, allowing the letters to stick to the hull. The climber then abseiled down over each letter to make sure they were firmly stuck before jumaring back up. With nineteen letters it was a slow process, with Peters and I taking it turn and turn about to be the boat against the hull. The whole operation took over four hours and it was with immense relief all round that the climber finally lowered himself back down and we could cut our engines and drift astern of the ship. Once a

couple of miles distant we opened the throttles and headed back to the *Ocean Campaign* which, strangely enough, seemed to have picked up speed since being overtaken.

There was a strip of dawn brightness over the eastern horizon as we finally got back onboard – we had cut it a bit fine, but were elated by our success. Henrik was there to welcome us back. As a precautionary measure we had kept radio silence during our raid so he had no idea how we had got on.

'I was getting a bit worried about you guys,' he said. 'How did it go?'

We all spoke at once. 'Fine, not a hitch.'

'What took so long?'

'Nothing. Everything,' I replied. 'It took about a quarter of an hour per letter rather than the planned ten. But otherwise exactly to plan.'

'Any sign of life on the ship?'

'Nope, it was as quiet as a bell.'

'Mouse.'

'Mouse. I'm sure no-one onboard saw us.'

'And the magnetic climbing pads worked?' Henrik asked.

'Yup. They stuck on fine.'

'Great, well done. And were the letters all in the right order?'

I gulped. 'Gosh, we never checked before leaving, not that we could have done anything about it. But they went up in the order they were numbered, so I can't see any problem.'

'With your skills, Alison, I'm certain there aren't any. Why don't

you all head to the bar for a celebratory drink. I'll go on the bridge to confirm tomorrow's activities, then join you.'

I was always flattered by a compliment from Henrik.

The story now passes back to James…

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I was up early the day I was due to leave the *Ocean Container*. Was it perhaps because I knew Alison, whom I had not seen for nearly two years, was in Singapore? In any case, I was on the bridge when the first helicopter came over. My first reaction was that my lift ashore had come early but the pilot made no effort to contact the ship, instead hovering a short distance off our port side. We were then in the narrowest stretch of the Straits of Malacca, with land not far distant on both sides and the skyscrapers of Singapore visible in the distance.

There was a stir on the bridge when a second helicopter turned up, followed shortly after by a couple of light aircraft. The crew were puzzled as to why they were so interested in our ship? None of the aircraft made any attempt to contact us, so the captain in bemusement used Channel 16 to contact the local coastguard. But they were as unclear as we were as to why the *Ocean Container* had become a focus of interest.

It was about an hour later that the chopper chartered to take me off arrived. I said my goodbyes to the crew, thanking them for my relaxed time aboard, and then, while the helicopter hovered

over the ship it winched first my bags and then myself into the aircraft. Once strapped in, the pilot talked to me through the headphones.

'What's happened to your ship?'

'What do you mean?'

'Look down there,' he replied gesticulating down to the side of the ship.

And then I saw it. The phrase "☑ CHECK YOUR FOOD MILES." Written in white letters along the full length of the long red hull, it would have been visible for miles, in effect being one huge advertising hoarding in what was probably the busiest shipping lane in the world. It could not be missed.

'What does that mean?' he asked.

Of course I knew. 'Looks like some environmental group is sending out a message.'

'What – it was not done by the crew?'

'No, they knew nothing about it, and probably still don't.'

'Probably that Seas For All, group, then. Their ship has been in-and-out of Singapore a lot recently.'

'Probably,' I answered.

'Well, they're not very popular around here. Interfering with things. Anyhow, what does it mean "Check your food miles"? Seems pretty pointless to me.'

'Well, I think they are complaining that often our food comes from far-away places at huge environment costs.'

'You mean they want to interfere with trade?' the pilot asked.

'Singapore depends on trade, we wouldn't be here without it. They can go to hell as far as I'm concerned.'

The conversation lapsed.

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It was a great success as far as Henrik was concerned. The photograph was front-page on newspapers around the world and underneath it was Seas For All's news release in a virtually unedited format. There was film footage on the television and videos on the web. Henrik was often seen talking:

'What does "Check your food miles mean"?' the interviewer would ask.

'Well so much of what we eat is grown miles from where we live and then transported half way round the world at huge environmental cost. Think of the amount of fuel used by a ship such as the *Ocean Container* taking a full load of food from Europe to China.'

'Why did you choose that ship?'

'We know it contains prawns taken from Britain to be shelled in China and then shipped back to Britain. What an immense waste of energy. Why not just shell them in Britain?'

'Why were they sent to China?'

'Cheap labour, of course.'

'Does not China need the jobs?'

'Of course. Everyone needs jobs. Jobs were destroyed in

Scotland to create jobs in China – all because the environmental costs of transport are not part of the business equation.'

'What do you mean by that?'

...and so the conversation would go on. Excellent publicity and, one has to give this to Henrik, a superb opportunity to raise public awareness.

Once I had landed at Singapore I took a taxi to the hotel I had booked for a couple of nights before flying onward to Rangoon, where I was to join the river boat for the voyage up the Irrawaddy River. After an excellent buffet breakfast I then took another taxi to the Seas For All office, a first floor suite overlooking the harbour. I noticed the *Ocean Campaign* moored not far away and pondered on the battle between the two *Oceans* that must have just taken place: the *Ocean Container,* symbol of commerce and trade, activity which had enabled us humans to develop, to progress to the civilised state we had now reached. But at what cost? Maybe the *Ocean Campaign*, symbol of the environment we had inherited from nature, was making us realise that our commercial activity was forcing the natural world to relinquish all its wonders – just so that we could live, or at least aspire to live, a life of luxury. It was with these thoughts that I strode up the stairs, thoughts that maybe I had allowed free rein so as not to think about the possible meeting with Alison. How long had it been? About two years? Those Falklands days seemed so long ago. We had corresponded in the interim, but only in a neutral manner, without passion. What would I say or do – or feel – if she were in the office? How would she react?

But as I opened the door, who did I meet first but Henrik.

'Why, hello James,' he said. 'A bit busy at the moment, as you might have guessed, but what a success!' And he clapped me on the back.

'All Alison's doing,' he added graciously. 'Anyhow I'm just heading out, various television interviews and things. Make yourself at home!' And with that he brushed past me and was gone.

The first office I entered was a hive of activity, full of earnest-looking young people sitting at screens, writing on flipcharts or talking on mobile phones. But there was no sign of Alison so I asked the nearest person if they knew where she was but he shook his head and suggested I look around.

I found her in the kitchen, alone and leaning against a sideboard clasping a cup of coffee in both hands. She looked tired and did not look up as I entered. I briefly studied her face. She had let down her long brown hair, enclosing the face just as I remembered it – or was it in some immeasurable way more mature?

'Hello,' was my rather feeble opening remark.

She looked up with a start. 'Why, James!'

Putting down her coffee, she rushed up and embraced me firmly. 'Why didn't you tell me you were coming?'

I was busy trying to decide whether to kiss her or not, eventually deciding 'not'.

'What was that you said?' I asked.

'It doesn't matter. But great to see you!'

'You mean that?'

'Of course.'

Just then a group came in the door, catching us in still in full embrace. We disengaged, myself resenting their intrusion, unreasonably of course as they had a perfect right to come in to make coffee. I had so much to say to Alison, and probably she to me as well, and, I know it sounds cliched, I did not know where to start. Although I was desperate to know where her affections lay, the kitchen of a busy office was obviously not the place for this heart to heart.

With others present, we resorted to polite conversation.

'How long are you in Singapore?' she asked.

'Only two nights. I fly to Rangoon the day after tomorrow.'

'That's a pity.' My heart missed a beat at this response.

'Why?' I queried, prompting for an answer.

'Well it would be good to see some of the sights together, but for the next week I am tied up in this campaign.'

'You couldn't take a couple of days off?'

'Are you joking? It only started today and the first days are crucial – while there is still media interest. I must help Henrik.'

I inwardly winced at the sound of his name but hopefully, my face retained its calm exterior. 'I suppose so. But there seem to be so many people in this office, are you really needed here?' As soon as I said this I realised it was probably not the right thing to say.

'Of course, Henrik relies on me.' Then, adding quietly, she added, 'Look around.'

The group who had entered were hanging about and chatting while waiting for the kettle to boil. I looked at them, and they were young! The media would probably tear them to pieces if they put their heads above the parapet. Alison and I were old and wise to the ways of the world by comparison.

'I see what you mean,' I whispered.

'Anyhow, I'm knackered. I've been up all night and must get some sleep.'

'Where're you staying?'

'On the ship of course. Seas For All has not the money to put people up in luxury hotels. What about you?'

'Oh, I'm in the Singapore Royal.'

'Which I imagine Alastair is paying for?'

'Yes.' But why did she have to mention his name at this time?

'There's plenty of space and I'm sure it's more comfortable than the *Ocean Campaign*,' I added. 'Why not sleep there?'

'It's a nice idea but the ship's just around the corner. And I must get some sleep now. By the way, Henrik is organising a special Seas For All celebratory dinner tonight at the Raffles Hotel.'

'Wow, that's expensive.'

'Yes, but some well-wisher insisted – and is paying for it.'

'I hope the food is sourced locally,' I could not help adding.

'I hope so too. But what I was getting at is, do you want to join us?'

'Sounds great.'

'Okay, see you there at eight. I must get my sleep now.'

'Can I walk you to the ship?'

'No, it's okay. And you don't have a pass into the harbour, do you?'

'No.'

'And I'm too tired to talk.'

So I had to be satisfied with that. Was it a brush-off? But I did get to walk her down the stairs...

***

I entered the grand portico of Raffles Hotel and asked at reception where the Seas For All dinner was to be. I was directed to a private dining room on the first floor and when I entered I found the room already crowded and filled with noisy chatter. I felt out of place and looked around for Alison and Henrik because, apart from those two, I knew none of the campaign team. I could not see Henrik anywhere but on spotting Alison chatting to a small group, I went over to join them. Her hair was still down, she had a silver pendant around her neck and was wearing a simple but elegant long blue dress with a silver chain around her waist. I felt under-dressed in comparison.

She looked as she saw me and smiled. 'Hello James. Let me introduce you to our whaling team.'

So I met for the first time Peters, Johan, Justinia, Andrea and Xiang, Alison's team of the past two years and, I was to gather, responsible for the recent poster on the *Ocean Container*. They were a tight-knit group and I was the outsider – having not shared

months at sea in confined quarters or the excitement of the chase. However over the years that followed I did get to know them well and in time they became great friends.

That evening, though, I did feel like an intruder into a private world and, I have to say, did not enjoy it very much. Alison seemed to know everyone and both she and Henrik were the centre of attention. But the food was good (and could have been locally sourced) and there was plenty of drink. I had imagined a romantic ending of Alison and me strolling off together into the twilight. Instead she and Henrik went off arm in arm and took a taxi back to the ship. I was left alone, non-plussed and uncertain. The only upside was that they had both invited me back to the office tomorrow as, with a day in hand and nothing else to do, I had volunteered my services to the campaign.

I slept badly that night. I was uncertain how to play the next day and in the end was resigned to let fate decide. Hence it was with uncertain feelings that I arrived at the Seas For All campaign office that morning. It was the same bustle as the day before and I eventually found Alison and Henrik down the corridor in a small room and deep in conversation. They looked up when I came in.

'Good to see you,' said Henrik.

Alison smiled at me. 'Would you like a coffee? And you Henrik?'

'Yes please,' we both answered, and she left the room.

'You'll never guess, James, but Alastair is coming over. He'll be arriving tomorrow.'

'Why?’

'Well our campaign has created such a stir and media frenzy that he wants to be here in person to take charge. As you well know, and of course you were on the thing, the *Ocean Campaign* was one of his charters.'

'I know. What time's he arriving?'

'The afternoon, I think.'

'I'll be away by then, off to Rangoon. I'm checking out the river for Elite Cruises.'

'Yes, Alison told me. Pity you won't overlap – it would be quite a reunion.'

Indeed, it would have made sense for me to meet Henderson. I could have given him there and then my report on the possibility of Elite Cruises chartering passenger space on container ships and discussed also my forthcoming cruise up the Irrawaddy. But the timings were wrong – I had to be in Rangoon tomorrow to join the boat. And also I was selfish: if there were to be a reunion, I wanted it to be just Alison and me. At that time coping with both Henderson and Henrik with her present as well would have been too much.

Henrik prodded me. 'Are you still with us?'

'Sorry, yes, I was thinking... Do you think a reunion is a good idea? Isn't Henderson cross with you? Won't he think that Alison, who is still his wife after all, has betrayed him through interfering with the business of his company?'

For perhaps the first and last time in my life I saw Henrik at a loss for words. He brushed back his hair with his hand and gaped – and if I were P.G.Wodehouse, I would add that at moment he bore a

striking resemblance to one of the fish he was seeking to conserve. A mullet perhaps?

Eventually he responded. 'I hadn't thought of that...' but before he could say more Alison came in with the coffee.

She looked at both of us. 'What is it? You look worried.'

'It's Alastair,' I answered. 'I gather he'll be here tomorrow. I imagine he will be furious with you. What're going to do? After all it was you who put the banner on one of his ships.'

'Oh, is that all? No, he doesn't mind.'

'You've been in contact with him?' I queried.

'Of course. All publicity is good publicity, he says. And he adds that he is going to use it as a platform to announce a more environmentally-friendly business strategy for Henderson Holdings in the future.'

I was suspicious, and Henrik also peered at her sharply. I queried, 'You didn't tell him about the campaign in advance, did you? I mean the great billboard on the *Ocean Container* was not news to him?'

Alison was silent for a while. She blushed, then stammered. ‘Of course n-not... I might have let it slip... Well yes, I might have told him...'

'You did tell him!' stated Henrik peremptorily.

There was a long pause. Alison was looking crestfallen and sheepish, not her usual proud self, and I was at a loss for words. The silence was broken by Henrik bursting out into laughter.

'Well done Alison. I don't know how you did it, but don't you

see what a success for us this is? It is achieving exactly what we wanted it to achieve. If Alastair keeps his word and Henderson Holdings really does become more environmentally responsible, what could be a better outcome?'

I immediately thought of all those jobs in Scotland: would the people thrown out of work now get their jobs back? But what about the poor people in China?

Instead I said, 'Yes, you probably achieved more this way, Alison. Alastair has had time to prepare in advance for the Food Miles campaign, and instead of reacting aggressively against environmentalists at short notice, has turned the whole thing to his advantage. How Machiavellian! Did you plan all this with him? Is this why he is coming to Singapore – to announce the new whiter-than-white Henderson Holdings?' I should not have added that last phrase, but could not help myself. After all I was part of it.

Alison surprised us by bursting into tears. 'Was it so wrong? I didn't mean to tell him, it just came out.' I put my arm round her shoulders, meeting no resistance in the process.

'Well,' said Henrik. 'Design or no design, all's well that ends well. Cheer up Alison! If only all campaigns were so easy to win – you wouldn't have had to spend two years in the rough seas of the southern ocean, and I wouldn't have had to spend two summers sweating it out in the tropics.'

I let go of her then and for a while we all sat round the table, sipping our coffee and meditating. Eventually Alison said, 'Alastair is not your couldn't-care-less industrialist you know. Deep down he

really does care. I'm sure he is serious about making his company "whiter than white", as you call it, James.' I, who had seen him close-up as a business manager, was not so sure, but I let it rest.

'Well,' said Henrik, 'let's get down to discussing our plan for the day, and also how we will react to Alastair and his forthcoming announcement.'

I will not bore you with the minutiae of news releases, interviews, and media manipulation that is part and parcel of modern media management and which took up the rest of the day although, unlike the one before, the day ended on a positive note. Alison had agreed to join me for dinner – just her and me.

So that evening I met her at the office and we took a taxi into the city centre. She was not the elegant lady of the night before in a long evening dress but the normal Alison in a loose-fitting V-neck blouse and jeans.

We wandered around the pedestrianised area, just like the other couples on holiday here who thronged the streets, and chose a restaurant at random: a small one with an intimate atmosphere which specialised in Thai food. I do not remember much about the food as I was so focused on Alison. There was so much catching-up to do that most of the evening was spent with her telling me about her experiences with Seas For All and myself recounting my (much less exciting) times with Elite Cruises. We were probably both putting off any intimate discussion but we got round to it in the end. I can remember well how the evening ended after we had exhausted the factual exchanges and had both shared an excellent

bottle of Chilean white.

'What next?' I finally asked.

'How do you mean?'

'With us... You remember that day in the Falklands?'

'Of course.' I noted that she immediately knew which day I was referring to.

'Favourably?'

'Yes, I still think about it.'

'So why did you immediately dash off the next day? And the two years interregnum?'

'I...', she paused. 'I couldn't just drop everything. You must realise...' She tailed off.

'Of course. You couldn't just drop Henderson...'

'I wish you wouldn't call him that.'

'Sorry, Alastair. You were still married to Alastair – in fact you still are. Are you hoping for a reconciliation tomorrow? You seem to have been helping him with his business interests...'

'Stop, James, stop. I still like Alastair, don't do him down. But no, I will be formally separating from him.'

'Divorcing, in plain English. Does he know?'

'Not yet, I haven't the heart to tell him. But I will, I really will.'

'Tomorrow? But he must suspect?'

'I don't know. Well yes, probably. And the sooner the better to tell him.'

'What about Henrik?' for I had heard rumours of her affair with him.

'Henrik? Yes I like him as well, indeed I really admire him. But love him? No, definitely no.' She had not assuaged my fears, but it was good to hear all the same.

'And me?'

'You, James? Of course I love you. I realise I always have.'

I moved my chair next to hers and put my arm around her shoulders. I could not say anything so said nothing. I was close to crying.

'Do you mean that?' I asked eventually.

'Yes. I have loved you for many years. In fact I think I fell in love with you the first time I ever saw you, those many years ago on the *Ice Bear*. But you always seemed way beyond my reach.'

'Beyond your reach? Why?'

'I don't really know, James. I think you seemed on a different level... You seemed so aloof.'

'That's funny, it was the same with me. I always thought *you* so aloof, and I probably also lacked self-confidence – I didn't think I was good enough for you.'

'James, you do yourself down… But I suppose we were both younger then and, whatever our outward appearances, we weren't so sure of ourselves.'

We carried on talking for a while longer but all that had needed to be said had been said. However Alison was adamant that she would go back to the ship tonight. It was only fair to Alastair, she said, that, until she had formally broken with him, she did not want to appear openly adulterous. In any case, she would be seeing him

tomorrow and did not want to emerge from another man's bedroom (her words) into her first meeting with her husband for two years. She wanted to remain friends with him...

However we did make some plans for ourselves. In a couple of weeks' time the *Ocean Campaign* was sailing for the Maldives, an island group that was steadily disappearing into the sea, and Seas For All was soon to mount a global warming campaign centred there. She would stay on board for the voyage there and then jump ship. I would join her, as my cruise up the Irrawaddy would have finished by then, and we could enjoy a romantic holiday together in the islands.

So I kept her company in the taxi back to the harbour, parted with a long lingering kiss, and returned to my hotel happily dreaming of the future.

## Chapter 9. The Maldives

I was in Rangoon when I heard the news, enjoying a cup of coffee *al fresco* at a small restaurant and watching the life of the streets go by. It had been a successful trip and I am sure Elite Cruises would be chartering the river boat, so adding another adventure to its portfolio. Suddenly my phone rang, interrupting my thoughts.

'James, is that you? It's me, Henrik.' He sounded agitated.

'Yes.'

'It's the *Ocean Campaign*. She's been hijacked. Pirates.'

'What?' I exclaimed. 'Where?'

'Just short of the Maldives.'

'Somalis? But they do not normally operate so far from their coast.'

'We think so. Anyway, Alison is on the ship.'

'I know.'

'Can you come and help? We have a lot of thinking and planning to do.'

'To Singapore, or the Maldives?'

'Singapore, at least at first.'

'I'll be on the first flight.'

'Thanks,' and he rang-off.

My mind was in turmoil. Alison, captured by pirates? It was like some old-fashioned melodrama...

I leapt up, left a pile of money on the table and flagged down the first taxi I saw. It took me to my hotel where, as I passed

reception I called out for them to get my bill ready, and dashed up four flights of stairs to my room. I quickly stuffed all my belongings into my bags, rushed back down to reception, signed my bill and rejoined the taxi which I had told to wait.

I had not checked the flight times but on arrival noticed on the departure board that there was not a flight to Singapore for another four hours. Four hours! Luckily there was space on the plane so I bought my ticket and then slumped down on the nearest airport chair, chairs, which for some reason best known to the airport authorities themselves, are never really comfortable. I tried to relax and calm down, but it was impossible. It seemed at the time that those four hours were the longest of my life although, like any time of waiting, once over it seems as if they had never existed. Things were made worse when I noticed a picture of the *Ocean Campaign* on a screen in the lounge, obviously a news broadcast but unfortunately in Burmese, a language of which I had only picked up a smattering. There was also an interview with Henrik, but dubbed so that I could not pick up any of what he said, and also pictures of the *Ocean Container* with its unsought-for message and of the *Ocean Campaign* with a back-drop of mangrove swamps; most heart-rending for me was a shot of Alison at the helm of a RIB with its foaming wake tearing through the sea, she grinning broadly in the excitement of the moment, the wind streaming through her hair. I was almost in tears.

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I took a taxi direct from the airport to the Sea For All's office, even if it were after eight o'clock in the evening. I was hoping to meet Henrik there, for I had been unable to reach him by phone, and with his ship no longer in port I had no idea where he would be staying. Getting out of the taxi I noticed that all the lights were blazing on the first floor, so rushed up the stairs and burst through the door. The place was full and I immediately saw Henrik talking earnestly with a small group. He saw me come in, broke away from the group, grabbed me by the arm, led me into the small office where I had previously met him and closed the door behind us.

'Glad you could come,' were his first words.

'News? What news is there?' I blurted out.

'None!'

'None? What's happened?'

'Nothing, nothing's happened.'

'You mean I've come all this way...'

'Calm down, James,' he interrupted. 'Let me tell what we know. As you know, the ship was headed for Male...'

'Yes, I was going to meet Alison there.'

'...But the day before the ship was due in we lost contact. We couldn't get her on the radio and her satellite beacon stopped working. And there's been no contact since. Being honest with you, that is all we know.'

'But Henrik, you said "pirates" and so did the news. I saw it on the telly.'

'I know. That's the most likely explanation. The weather was calm and settled and there've been no reports of tidal waves – and what else could have happened? An electrical fault, or even a fire, and we would at least have got a distress message using the battery-powered back-up radio system; and even the handsets might have been in range of the Maldives. But to just disappear...'

'But pirates east of the Maldives? The Somalis are all operating to the west.'

'Up to now, yes. But there has also been a lot of piracy in the Andaman Sea, and even in the Straits of Malacca, although it has not received global publicity.'

'Still, a long way from the Maldives.'

'I know, and don't think we haven't been through it all. But piracy seems to be the most likely explanation, and that's what we said in the news release.'

'But if it were pirates, wouldn't they have sent a message?'

'We've been looking into this. Apparently they don't send out any demands until they have their victim safely in port. And if Somalia, that could be five days away.'

'Five days?! My God. We can't just sit and wait five days...'

'Of course not, James.'

'Sounds a bit risky for the pirates, though. They could be easily intercepted in that period.'

'And?' queried Henrik.

'And what?'

'Well, if the ship were intercepted what could they do? The

pirates would merely hold a gun to the head of the captain or crew and say that if any rescue attempt was attempted, they would be shot.'

'Bloody Hell!'

'And it would probably be the same if it were a naval craft that found them. Would a naval captain risk the lives of the hostages by charging in, guns ablazing?'

'Not unless it were a carefully executed night raid – which of course we know, Henrik, from our own experience can be done! Although not against guns,' I added sombrely.

'Is it worth the risk?'

I thought of Alison. 'No, probably not. But still, can't we arrange a search? Charter aircraft? Helicopters? At least get some indication of what is happening...? What was the last known position?'

'Yes, we've been working on it. We've not been sitting idle these past few hours,' Henrik added a little testily. 'Oh, by the way, Alastair is flying over as well. He'll be here first thing tomorrow morning.'

'To do what?'

'Well, what are you going to do?'

'*Touché*,' I replied.

For what could Henderson and I do? Just hang around and get in the way? I had rushed to Singapore without any real thought of what I could achieve, but on the principle that I needed to be where the action was. Henderson was probably doing the same.

'Now you're in the picture, come and join our team,' said Henrik encouragingly and leading me towards the door. 'We've got all our campaigning brains here working on the case.'

'We need them,' I thought.

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To be frank, we did not achieve much over the next couple of days. The *Ocean Campaign* had disappeared into the aether like the *Marie Celeste*. With no communication from the kidnappers, and no sighting of any kind, radio, radar or visual, there was nothing definite to go on, and so nothing definite to do. Discussions and arguments at the Seas For All office tended to go round in circles and a feeling of frustration, combined with gloom, began to permeate us all. In the absence of information there is always a tendency to think the worst.

On my second evening back in Singapore Henrik, Henderson and myself found ourselves together in the bar of my hotel enjoying, no, that is not the word, needing a drink. We were back to a conversation we had had many times already.

'Why the *Ocean Campaign*?' I asked. 'It's not that Seas For All is a rich organisation. What ransom do they expect?'

'The kidnappers might not know that we're not rich,' put in Henrik.

'Be that as it may, you are potentially rich,' said Alastair. 'You've made the organisation well known around the world,

Henrik, and I am sure you could raise a large ransom if you had to.'

'But would our supporters give us money for a ransom? They might think the government should pay for that,' answered Henrik.

'Which government?' I asked. 'Seas For All is international.'

'Good point, although our head office is in the UK, Southampton. And how much should we negotiate? Do we pay immediately what they ask?'

I thought of Alison, indeed we probably all did. It is one thing to pontificate about how to respond to kidnappers in the abstract, very different when your own friends, loved ones and assets are involved.

'What if,' I said, 'it is not pirates or kidnapping at all?'

Henrik and Henderson stared at me. 'What do you mean?' they said together.

'Well, Henrik,' I continued. 'You've made many enemies, or at least Seas For All has. Think of the Faeroese...'

'That wasn't me!' Henrik interjected.

'No, you're right. But the Japanese – and all the countries you've been campaigning in recently,' and I thought of the unsympathetic helicopter pilot I had been with, 'and, of course, big business.'

'Hey, that's not fair,' complained Henderson. 'We're now fully behind you, Henrik.'

'But maybe your company is the exception? In any case, don't you remember that Greenpeace boat sunk by the French in New Zealand? And that was by a western, enlightened democracy.'

'Gosh James!' said Henrik. 'You could be right – and someone was killed, weren't they?'

'Yes, a photographer who was unlucky enough to be on the boat when it was scuttled,' I replied.

'So you think our ship has been sunk?' Henrik paused for a while. 'And the crew?'

'It's unlikely they would be callous enough to kill them. It would also undermine any support they might have.'

'So what would they do?'

'Let them loose in some remote location after a few days,' I suggested.

We were all silent for a while, cogitating on this new line of thought.

Eventually Henrik spoke. 'Yes, you could be right, James. What do you think, Alastair?'

He did not answer straight away. 'I think it makes more sense than kidnapping, bearing in mind the location – a long way from any potential base. Yes, on reflection, I think it has been sunk, and the crew will be put ashore in the next few days. You may not realise it Henrik, but you have made many enemies.'

'But in this day and age?'

'Things may appear more civilised,' I responded, 'but often it is only a veneer: commercial and state interests are still all powerful – and often unscrupulous. I agree with Alastair: your environmental campaigning has upset many people.'

'And I thought everyone took the environment seriously

nowadays,' said Henrik.

'Lip service. For many people, and most states, the environment is still something that gets in the way of normal life: much easier to stick your head in the sand and carry on as normal. Taking it on board is just too complicated...'

'You're right,' agreed Henderson. 'For businesses at least, having to take on board environment concerns is just an added burden above the already complex and stressful day-to-day commercial concerns...'

'Good God man!' interrupted Henrik. 'You mean that you can't be bothered to worry about the natural world around us, the very foundation upon which all human activity, including business, depends? What if we destroy it? What then of the chances of our own survival on the planet?'

'It's all too complicated...' he replied lamely.

'Complicated? You mean just because something's difficult...'

'Let's stop this,' I cut in. 'This is not the time to argue environmental economics. Let's focus on the main business in hand. If the *Ocean Campaign* has been sunk in order to put Seas For All out of business this opens up a whole new avenue of thought...'

At the end of that evening we had agreed a plan of action. We had worked through what we would have done if we had wanted to capture and sink the ship. We knew how to get aboard unobserved having done this ourselves – and it would be ironic if the perpetrators had learnt the technique from us! They would not want to give the crew any warning, which meant getting to both the

bridge and radio room unobserved and capturing people before they could send any signal. This implied the use of professionally trained troops, perhaps a state-sponsored operation. It would all be done under cover of darkness and the twenty-four crew would be blindfolded immediately on capture so they could never see the faces of the perpetrators. They would be bundled into the inflatables, while the marauders took away any satellite distress beacons and then went into the engine room to open any stop-cocks. We weren't sure if ships had such things, but concluded that they could have set a small explosive charge to punch a hole in the hull instead. They would also remove or put below decks any life rafts that would stay on the surface after the ship had been sunk so that there would be no visible trace left behind. For we were certain that they would want to give the impression that the ship had been taken by pirates. Meanwhile the crew would be taken aboard the marauders' mother ship, which would sail for a few hours before putting the prisoners and some guards ashore on some pre-planned uninhabited atoll. The guards would pretend to their prisoners that they were pirates and that they had captured the ship and it was now being sailed to Somalia. The mother ship could then continue about its normal business without arising suspicion. After the hue and cry died down the prisoners would be released, perhaps continuing with the pretence that it had been a normal kidnapping for money rather than some state-sponsored vendetta against Seas For All.

After a few drinks, we had convinced ourselves of the above scenario, studied it from all angles and considered it foolproof.

Remember, Henrik was by now expert in the art of campaigning and 'environmental piracy' and so could put himself in the others' shoes and visualise likely courses of action.

Our plan of action was fairly simple, having two main threads to it. Firstly we would try to find out which ships were known to be in the vicinity at the time the *Ocean Campaign* disappeared: we were now not just looking for pirate ships, but any ship, whether fishing boat, naval craft or merchant navy. We would put the Seas For All office team on to this, but ask them to keep it secret: at this stage we did want our theory to get out. If the perpetrators thought they had got away with it, with all our efforts directed at the piracy theory, they might be less on their guard. Secondly, we three would fly to the Maldives, charter a boat and undertake our own investigations, starting with a search of the uninhabited atolls nearest to the ship's last known position. Even if we were utterly wrong, we would at least be *doing* something.

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We could not get a flight straightaway, so it was the day after next that we flew in to Male. As we came in to land there were glimpses through the clouds of coral atolls, limpid blue lagoons and azure seas. We had some time in hand before our onward flight to Hanimaadhoo, so we took the ferry across to the capital for a bit of sightseeing and also to buy local maps and charts. Male, as you know, takes up a whole island and is mostly only about a metre or

two above sea level.

Henrik was amazed. 'Look, this island is less than two kilometres long and yet look at the traffic jams! Why does *anyone* need a car here? And I thought the islanders are concerned about global warming.'

'They are,' I replied. 'They have been lobbying the United Nations about it.'

'I know. But why do they drive cars and motorbikes to get around, when everyone could just as easily walk? They are contributing to global warming as much as anyone else. I'm not sure they deserve my campaign.'

'That's a bit harsh. Anyhow, what campaign?'

Henrik turned and looked at me sharply. 'You're right. What campaign? We have no ship...' I thought he might burst into tears for he had the look of a little boy who has had all his toys taken away from him.

Maybe for a moment we had forgotten why we were here. So it was in sombre mood that we returned to the airport.

With my cover as a director of Elite Cruises prospecting for new holiday destinations in the remoter parts of the Maldive archipelago, with Henderson's kudos as a successful entrepreneur, and with Henrik there as our environmental adviser, we were without suspicion able to charter a comfortable, mid-sized cabin cruiser together with a local crew of three – captain, deckhand and cook; although we would have liked a self-drive boat so as to have been completely independent, in the event this proved impossible.

As we pulled away from the shore through the crystal-clear waters, the low evening sun etching with gold the palm-fringed coral sand, I thought of might-have-beens. It should have been Alison and me, alone, enjoying a romantic break in this Indian Ocean paradise, spending our time exploring the underwater world of the reef with its myriad of colourful fishes. Instead, here we were on some wild-goose-chase, playing the James Bond, with no real clear plan of what we would do if we did happen to find Blofeld's hideaway with his armed guards and his captives locked away in some well-hidden enclave. And there were three of us, all after the same princess – her husband, her lover and her ex-lover: whose arms would she fall into? I shook my head to chase away these thoughts, but they stubbornly remained. Hence it was in gloomy mood I went into the cabin to join Henderson and Henrik for our planning meeting. They were both sitting round the table with maps spread out in front of them.

'Why don't we ask the captain, Ibrahim, to join us?' I suggested. 'His local knowledge might prove invaluable.'

'Possibly,' replied Henrik. 'But we mustn't give away what we're about.'

'Why not?'

'Well...' He paused. 'Word might get out... back to the pirates,' he finished lamely.

'If we find them, word would get out in any case. But I think the crew would put more effort into the search if they saw we were here with real purpose, rather than just sightseeing and looking for

nice places.'

'I agree with James,' put in Henderson. 'If we bring the islanders into it, word will get around about what we're looking for, and that can only increase our chances.'

'He's right, Henrik. In small communities like this, nothing ever happens totally unobserved. There'll have been a lot of boats going around the atolls, fishing and things. And I'm sure they won't be on the side of the kidnappers – who would only bring a bad name to the islands.'

It was hard to convince Henrik, but eventually he agreed that the benefits outweighed the risks, so I went up on deck to find the captain, Ibrahim, a short swarthy, dark-haired character with broad shoulders and a short neck. Up until now we had merely given him instructions to sail north, but once he had overseen our exit through the channel in the reefs to the deep water beyond, he was happy to let the deckhand take the wheel and come below to join us.

Ibrahim's English was good. So we explained to him what we were looking for and he took the information matter-of-factly: in fact over the next few days I found it very difficult to read his face and elucidate what he was really thinking. We showed him on a chart the last known position of the *Ocean Campaign* and identified the nearest atolls, asking him which were uninhabited and also rarely visited. He immediately pinpointed two small ones, outliers of the main group, about ten hours away. However we had not realised that we would not be sailing after nightfall, there only being only, in effect, one watch. We were keen to keep going and

volunteered ourselves as lookouts, but he was adamant that we would stop at night; in about half an hour we would be dropping anchor in the lee of a small atoll. We had to be content with this, but an hour later we did enjoy sitting on the deck in the twilight eating our evening meal of freshly-caught tuna and local salad. When the cook announced the menu I looked at Henrik quizzically to check with him whether we were allowed to eat it: but he nodded and said most fishing around here was sustainable.

There being good mobile phone reception in the area from the tall masts scattered around the islands, after our meal we caught up with what was happening in the outside world. There was a shout from Henrik as he checked his emails.

'Hey, guys. The kidnappers have been in contact: they want twenty-four million dollars to release our crew and ship.'

'What!' Henderson and I exclaimed in unison.

'Yes, they contacted our head office a few hours ago. A very short message, together with a photo of everyone. Here, look at it.' The message was to the point:

"$24 million will release the crew and ship of the *Ocean Campaign*. To be paid within one week through our Somali agent based in Hobyo..."

The accompanying photograph showed the whole crew, alive but looking unhappy, crouching on what looked like a sandy beach under some trees. I'm sure we all started by looking for Alison, and there she in the front row, her hair unkempt and a grim look on her face.

'Well, at least they are alive,' was all I could think of saying. 'And it puts paid to your Maldives theory, Henrik. We might as well all go back.'

None of us said anything for a while, alone with our thoughts.

Henrik broke the silence with 'twenty-four million dollars, where are we going to get that from? Yes, I must go back straightaway and help raise the money. Can you drive this boat, James?'

'You mean, commandeer it?'

'Yes.'

'Don't be ridiculous Henrik! How am I going to navigate through the reefs in the dark, even if I was willing? We would all be drowned when I hit the coral. Anyway, you don't have to be there in person, at least not yet. You're not thinking straight! Use your brain – and email. We've got all night to plan.'

Henderson suddenly spoke. He looked pale, probably suffering from shock, and I probably looked the same. 'Henderson Holdings could probably raise the money. I... we... we can't afford not to pay it… Think of Alison.' I am sure we all were.

We sat around gloomily in silence for a long time, and I at least could have done with a strong whisky, but in accord with local sensibilities it was a dry boat. After several minutes we were interrupted by Ibrahim coming into the cabin. He looked at each of us in turn, taking in the atmosphere.

'What is this?' he asked. 'Why the silence and the sad faces?'

'We've had a message from the kidnappers,' explained Henrik.

'They are holding our crew in Somalia,' adding as he showed him the screen: 'Look at this picture.'

'Is this your missing crew?' Ibrahim continued.

'Yes.'

'In Somalia?'

'Yes, I just said that,' replied Henrik testily.

'No.'

'No? What do you mean?' I asked.

He stabbed at the screen with a thick finger. 'This is not Somalia.'

Henrik perked up. 'Not Somalia? Why not?'

'The trees,' said Ibrahim. 'These trees not found in Somalia. Too dry.'

We passed round the photograph, but none of us were knowledgeable enough about the botany of the western half of the Indian Ocean to know all the trees found around the coasts, although it did look to me as if these were not desert species.

'Could the photo have been taken here in the Maldives?' I asked excitedly.

'Yes. For certain, and in the north here as well.'

Our mood went through a sea change: from glumness to excitement.

'Could it be one of the two atolls you pointed out earlier?'

Although we were all hanging on his answer, he did not respond straightaway, but furrowed his brow in an attitude of intense concentration.

'Yes,' Ibrahim answered slowly. 'Yes, I am sure. I know which island, I recognise the trees.'

He went over to the map and pointed at one of the two islands. 'Here, this one! And I have also been asking the fishermen. They say they have seen a boat there – and not a local boat.'

We looked at him with our mouths open, not really believing that we could have hit the jackpot at the first attempt. 'You really are certain?' I asked.

He nodded, and for the first time for many days I noticed smiles on all our faces. We spent the rest of the evening discussing the implications of the ransom with its apparently misleading reference to Somalia, together with our knowledge of where the captives were actually being held – knowledge we decided to keep to ourselves, so as to follow the time-honoured approach of letting the enemy think we had fallen for their dissemblances. Hence Henrik spent a lot of the time emailing the Seas For All offices about how to respond to the note, and what to do about raising money, while Henderson similarly was in contact with Henderson Holdings. Luckily they both caught the end of the working day in the United Kingdom.

I meanwhile had been allotted the task of thinking through how we would approach the atoll and what to do when we got there. Ibrahim with his local knowledge and contacts was to hand to help me in my planning.

We could not just turn up at the atoll in this cabin cruiser, challenge the pirates, pick up the captives and return as conquering

heroes! No, we would need reconnaissance. Here I turned to Ibrahim.

'Ibrahim, we need to go to the atoll without arousing suspicion, and find out the situation. Have you any friends, with a fishing boat perhaps, who could innocently visit the island?'

'Better, still, I have a cousin with a fishing boat on the nearest island. I will talk to him.'

'Could he start tomorrow?'

'I will ask,' and he took out his cell phone and dialled a number.

I returned to my planning. Although impatient to effect the rescue, we could not afford to take risks and rush things. We had to have detailed knowledge of the whereabouts of both the pirates and captives, and of the lay of the land, the sea and the reefs. We should allow at least a day for this, if not two. The nearest island was fifteen miles away from the atoll and by happenstance it was where Ibrahim's cousin lived; this was the obvious place to base ourselves.

Ibrahim finished his call and turned to me. 'It is all fixed. I will personally take command of his dhoni and go to the atoll.'

'That's great! Has it got motor and sail?'

'Yes.'

'What time will we get to his village?'

'Nine hours if we leave at dawn.'

'Which means arriving at about three in the afternoon?'

'Yes. I could then set off to the atoll straightaway. We would use the dhoni's engine to get near the atoll then put up the sail and

start fishing. We could slowly work our way round the island and sail into the lagoon as it got dark. We would spend the night there, return to the fishing the next morning, and get back about midday.'

'Isn't that all a bit dangerous? Will they let you anchor in the lagoon?'

'They cannot stop us. I know the waters. We will enter the reef as darkness falls, and anchor a long way away from them. What can they do?'

'All sorts of things,' I thought. They could put a bullet through the hull, threaten the crew with guns, take them captive, dump them on the island with the others... On the other hand, if they did that they would risk a search for the missing boat within the next day or two.

'Would you be joining us?' Ibrahim asked me.

'Mmm. It would be good to see for myself... But too risky, I think, if they saw me. A white man aboard would definitely arouse their suspicions... Another thought. When you enter the lagoon why not go to their boat to sell them fish? That would be a natural thing to do, wouldn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Then you might be able to find out how many of them there are... Could you swim ashore at night and look round the island? We need to know where the captives are being held and if there any guards ashore. But you must not talk to anyone, or even let the prisoners know you're there. Any noise would be dangerous.'

'This will be no problem.'

'Are you sure?' I queried doubtfully.

'Yes! We know these islands.'

'Could you describe the atoll?' And Ibrahim proceeded to draw a plan for me because the chart we had was small scale and lacking in detail.

The island ran north-south and was crescent-shaped, about five hundred metres long and three hundred metres at its widest in the middle. It was covered in dense forest apart from a thin coastal strip of sand all the way around. There was deep water immediately to the west, which meant the beach here was exposed to the wind and the waves, whereas the east side possessed a sheltered lagoon, with the reef about a kilometre offshore. The lagoon itself was shallow with a sandy bottom. There was only one safe channel into it, due east from the centre.

The finalisation of our plan of action would have to await the return of Ibrahim's reconnaissance trip, which meant that Henrik, Henderson and myself would have to spend a couple of days impatiently hanging around on the boat; but there seemed no way round this.

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And so it turned out. Our voyage north to Ibrahim's cousin's island was uneventful and in any other circumstances would have been an enjoyable cruise: bright blue seas, dappled clouds and a gentle refreshing breeze. Our arrival at the small fishing village of low

houses set amongst palm trees was obviously anticipated because most of the village seemed to be on the shore watching us – men, women and children. Ibrahim set off in the tender to his cousin's dhoni moored nearby, a solidly built traditional wooden fishing boat with a short stubby mainmast and an inboard diesel engine. It had a canvas awning over the stern which provided the crew with shade from the sun and shelter from the rain and also a substantial cabin below decks. Ibrahim embraced his cousin and soon we were watching the dhoni sail out of the harbour on the start of its reconnaissance mission.

We three decided to stay onboard rather than put up with stares and questions of the villagers and the enforced inaction was certainly a strain. We had discussed plans together many times that day, but now the situation for the time being was out of our hands. The local situation, that is. There were still events in the wider world we had to deal with: arranging ransom money if all else failed, carrying on the pretense of not knowing where the captives were and so continuing the coordination of their search, dealing with the relevant government departments of many nations (for the crew of the *Ocean Campaign* were multi-national), dealing with relatives, the media...

That night we ate a cold supper, hardly talking at all and I spent most of the next morning staring out to the sea to the east, willing the sight of the returning dhoni. Alison was so close but yet she was as inaccessible as in the old days.

## Chapter 10. Rescue

About midday I sighted a boat and called excitedly to Henderson and Henrik, both of whom immediately emerged on deck. Through binoculars it looked like a dhoni, and was certainly coming from the right direction. Three quarters of an hour later the boat was at anchor nearby and Ibrahim, his cousin, and his cousin's two crew members came across and clambered aboard. They were excited, all talking at once. This is their story:

Everything seemed to have gone to plan and Ibrahim assured us that they had aroused no suspicions. In fact, said Ibrahim, the kidnappers seemed bored and not particularly on their guard. The crew had started fishing when in sight of the atoll, not unsuccessfully as it turned out, with Ibrahim saying that his cousin was happy because the whole trip would prove profitable. They worked their way round to the lagoon, going through the reef at dusk as agreed. There was nothing visible on the island other than its thick belt of trees: it was impossible to see if anything or anyone was hidden in the interior.

The kidnapper's boat was a powerful motor cruiser, about fifty metres in length, with masses of aerials, radars and satellite receivers. As they entered the lagoon they saw four Africans emerge on its deck who stayed to watch them set anchor about a hundred metres off. Ibrahim's crew waved a few fish in the air, loaded their small tender with freshly-caught tuna and motored across. The Africans although not unfriendly would not let them come aboard

although did buy some fish.

'How many men did you see in total on their boat?' I cut in.

'Five,' replied Ibrahim. 'There were five on the rail while we were bartering fish.'

'Any ashore?'

'No, or at least we did not see anyone.'

'James, don't interrupt,' said Henrik. 'Let him get on with his story.'

They returned to their dhoni, continued Ibrahim, and carried on as any normal fishing boat would: gutting fish, cooking their meal, talking leisurely on deck and then drifting slowly below to sleep. There appeared to be little action from their neighbours, whose boat was brightly lit with music blaring forth. Occasionally someone would come onto deck and look across to them, but that was all.

'We waited until two in the morning before making a move,' said Ibrahim. 'My cousin and I slipped out of the forward hatch and dropped noiselessly over the side. We swam ashore, ran across the beach and entered the trees. There was no sign of life from the other boat, although it still had all its lights on. We then went right round the island, but saw no-one. It looked as if there no guards ashore. We then went round to the far side again and headed through the trees to the middle of the island. But after about a hundred metres we came to a wall of razor wire: we were lucky we didn't walk right into it in the darkness, it would have given us nasty cuts. We followed this round, looking for a gate, but there was

none.'

'You mean there was no way in?' I asked.

'No, none. It seemed to form an unbroken square, about a hundred metres wide and a hundred metres long.'

'There was not even a gate at the side opposite the lagoon?' I persisted.

'No. We could find no way in.'

'Did you see or hear anyone inside?'

'No. It would have been difficult to hear anyone above the sound of the leaves in the trees and the waves on the shore, unless they had been talking loudly – and they would have been asleep. And in the darkness you could not see through the trees to see inside.'

'Are you sure there were no guards amongst the trees?' queried Henrik.

'Yes. My cousin and I think that there was no-one ashore – apart from anyone who might have been being held prisoner within the razor-wire cage.'

'Are you absolutely certain?' I questioned.

Ibrahim looked at me sternly before replying. 'Yes. It is not a big island.'

That was the full extent of Ibrahim's report. No absolute proof that the *Ocean Campaign's* crew were there, but a pretty near certainty. All that remained now was to rescue them without anyone getting killed. We spent the whole afternoon arguing over a plan of action and on whether to bring in outside help. In the end

we decided that the smaller the number of people involved the better – we could manage the rescue ourselves. Although impatient to get going as soon as possible, we agreed eventually that it would be best not to rush things but to spend the next day practicing what we would be putting into practice, with the rescue effort following once it was dark.

It was a restless night for me, which I spent tossing and turning, alternating between the thought that we were completely mad and would all get ourselves killed, and the exciting expectation of action – and the uncertainty of what I would do when reunited with Alison.

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Alison takes up the story… I was tired. The last two seasons' whaling, the raid on the *Ocean Container*, the constant nervous tension, the everyday adrenalin rush, the responsibility, the continual decision-making, everyone looking to me for the answer: it had taken it out of me. I was also lonely, longing for company, close company, that is; someone to share my life, to unload my thoughts on, to comfort me, to hug me, to take the strain. I thought of James, of our last evening in Singapore, and also back to that wonderful evening on *The Tangle*. Why had it taken me so long to realise that he and I should have got together years ago? Why had I wasted years when we could have been together? No, that was not right. On the contrary, these last years had not been wasted. Would I have set off whaling and led a whole campaign if James were

around as well? Surely it was only now that were we ready for each other, that we could respect each other... I would be in Male tomorrow and James would arrive the day after. We would soon be alone together enjoying a romantic break in an Indian Ocean paradise, spending our time exploring the underwater world of the reef with its myriad of colourful fishes.

I watched the fading of the fiery tropical sunset, cloudwracks edged in gold, sunbeams rising to the sky indicating the last gasp of the dying sun, a mirror-calm sea upon which the world floated. My energy faded with the light so I went below deck to an early night, but with a smile on my face as I thought of the days ahead.

I did not know what was happening. There was a man standing above my head, pointing a gun at me, his face invisible behind his black balaclava. In broken English I was told to get dressed. He did not move, but waved his gun towards my clothes. He watched me dress, myself not certain whether this was dream or reality. He put a hood over my face and then prodded me forwards with his gun. 'On deck,' he said and I stumbled out of the door, along the gangway and up the ladder to the boat deck, all the time a gun in my back. They must have let down the gangplank for I was soon man-handled into a boat – and that is all I remember for a long time.

When I awoke from my drugged sleep – how long it was I had no idea – I was still hooded but knew it was daylight because I could feel the sun on my face. I was lying on a hard wooden deck and I felt terrible, incredibly thirsty and with a blistering headache; it felt as if I had wet myself at some stage. From the sounds around me I could

tell there were other people around me. I was about to remove my hood when a sharp voice rang out 'keep your hands by your side' and I felt the muzzle of a gun against the side of my face. I froze, not daring to move. I think I started crying.

An hour or so later I felt myself being lifted up, and carried onto a boat. It was obviously a small rubber dinghy, and I was not the only one in it. There was the sound of an outboard and I felt the coolness of the breeze as we headed off. It was only a short journey and soon the boat grounded, I was lifted out, carried a short way and then dumped on some sand. I was told to stay down, but probably could not have stood up even if I wanted to. At least it appeared that I had been put down in the shade of some trees, which was a small mercy.

I then got a surprise: I could feel someone fumbling around my ankles and then heard a couple of clicks. By moving my legs I knew they had put leg irons on me. Soon after a voice barked out. 'Everyone stand up.' I tried, got halfway, wobbled, then fell back into the sand. A strong arm grabbed me. I was walked a short distance, having to shuffle in the shackles, but was soon told to sit down. My dark hood was taken off, the sudden light dazzling and totally blinding me again. When my eyes eventually adjusted, I looked around. I was sitting in the sand looking across the beach to a deep blue lagoon with a motor cruiser at anchor not far offshore. Either side of me and behind me were the members of the crew of the *Ocean Campaign*, all looking as miserable as I felt. There were several men with guns watching us, all with their faces hidden

behind black balaclavas. There was a shout for us to look forwards and I noticed a man with a camera take a picture of the group. Our hoods were put back on.

Thereafter we were told to stand. I had to grab hold of the nearest crew member to stay upright before we were marched forward at a slow shuffle. We were obviously entering the trees. After a short while we were stopped and told to stay still. I collapsed to the ground but no-one intervened. My headache was still terrible, as was my thirst, and I felt like dying. After what seemed an interminable age someone shouted that we could take off our blindfolds. I fumbled with my hood until I had it off and then looked around: we were in woodland, with no distant views, only trees, and it looked as if the whole ship's company of the *Ocean Campaign* was with me. They were all dishevelled and bleary-eyed and I noticed were all, like me, wearing leg irons. None of us would be going very far or fast. I noticed the captain was going around issuing water bottles which were eagerly grabbed and lustily drunk.

I do not really want to recount the routine of the next few days. Suffice it to say that we were held within a circle of razor wire, that food and water was thrown over the wire on a daily basis, so we were never hungry or thirsty, a plastic spade had been provided for digging latrines, and there was a blanket apiece. That was all. We never saw or heard our captors, apart from brief glimpses when they were throwing over food. All our personal possessions had been removed from us, including our watches, and there was much discussion on how long we had been drugged and on where we

were being held. The consensus was that we had not been prisoners long enough to have been taken to Somalia. There was nothing sharp or strong enough to cut through the razor wire, and digging out underneath through the root-entangled soil with one plastic spade proved impossible. Our leg irons prevented us climbing the trees and in any case would have hindered any escape from the island. We were effectively trapped.

The uncertainty of our future was the worst thing and I think we were all hoping that a ransom would soon be paid and we could get back to our lives. I spent most of the time curled up in a corner feeling sorry for myself and was not very communicative with the others, particularly as my headache and the effect of the drug took days to wear off, not to mention the tiredness I have already alluded to. My body needed relaxation, not more strain. I held desultory conversations with some of the crew, particularly the captain, but for the most part was silent and brooding. The thought of ever being with James again slowly disappeared. Without doubt, these were the worst days of my life, and the only time I have been miserable and depressed, for normally I think of myself as being a strong character well able to cope with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It had been so unexpected: to be suddenly and without warning removed from a safe, secure life where one was near-enough responsible for one's own fate and converted instantly to a prisoner no longer in control of anything was more than I could cope with. I just wanted to curl up and die. Enough said.

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It is strange. As we set off in the dusk to the atoll I am sure Henderson, Henrik and myself were all thinking about Alison but none of us mentioned her. In fact we were generally silent on the crossing and I think all a bit nervous about what we had let ourselves in far. Looking back at it now, I think we were all a bit mad to have attempted it ourselves and not tried to gain any official support or back-up. The trouble was that it was personal to all of us, perhaps more so to Henrik because it involved both his personal relationship with Alison and his ship and crew. For Henderson and myself, we were only committed because of Alison. But I am sure all of us felt that it was our personal battle and we would have resented outsiders coming in, taking us over, organising things and ultimately receiving the thanks for a job well done. After all we had taken the initiative and found out what was going on. We had talked this through earlier and concluded that the kidnappers might be off their guard because Henrik had arranged that Seas For All staff were continuing to give the impression to the wider world that Somalia was where the search was currently centred.

The crossing was uneventful. We had switched off our navigation lights as a precaution and we knew also the atoll itself would shield us from the radar of the kidnapper's boat. However there was a strong following wind so it would be a rough landing and it might be difficult getting the released prisoners back on the boat. We went in under sail to avoid the throb of the engine drifting

downwind, and so giving us away, and dropped anchor as near the shore as Ibrahim dared to take the dhoni, probably about a hundred metres off. We tied a rope to the rubber dinghy and then let Ibrahim and his cousin paddle ashore in it. They would do a quick circuit of the island to make sure none of the pirates were on land and then report back. We had decided against any use of radios as we did not know what channel the pirates were using and did not want to risk being overheard. The half hour until the return of the scouting party was agonising but come back they did, reporting the coast was clear. Apparently the kidnappers' ship was well lit up with music blaring from the decks and if the pirates continued with the same routine as on Ibrahim's last visit, then they would remain onboard all night. In any event, we had to risk that they would. We had earlier spent a lot of time discussing whether we should disable the pirates' dinghy, or cut it adrift from their boat, to prevent them coming ashore, but in the end decided it was too risky: the last thing we wanted was to arouse the suspicions of the enemy and if they noticed something was amiss they might come and investigate; if all our activities took place on the far side of the island, then the risk of us being spotted remained low. Our main fear was that one of the captives might shout or cry out and the sound be carried downwind to their ship, although the knowledge that they had loud music on reassured us somewhat.

We lowered our equipment into the water – two wooden ship's gangplanks with handrails – and then clambered into the dinghy: we three, Ibrahim and his cousin. The rest of the dhoni's crew were to remain on the dhoni and help haul the captives

aboard. We tied a rope to the gangplanks and then rowed and drifted downwind to the shore, breaking waves coming aboard and soaking us to the skin as we entered the surf – but I do not think we noticed for the adrenalin was beginning to kick in. Once on the sand Henrik and Henderson each grabbed an end of one of the gangplanks, and Ibrahim and his cousin the ends of the other, and carried them up the beach. We put them down at the edge of the trees and Ibrahim proceeded to lead us quietly through the forest to the edge of the wire. We soon reached this and saw that it was razor-sharp, about a metre and a half high and tightly stretched, being stapled to trees every few metres, the trunks on the inside of the wire. We observed it in silence with shielded torches for a while and headed back to the beach.

'This is going to be straightforward,' I whispered. 'We can do exactly as planned.'

The others nodded.

'Let's get going, then,' Henrik said impatiently.

I led the way back, the others behind me carrying the gangplanks. At the fence, Ibrahim and his cousin put one end of their plank down on the ground as close to the wire as possible, lifted the other end into the air and then gingerly lowered it to come up against the wire. They stood at the bottom, supporting it firmly, while I slowly walked up it; ascending it was a bit like climbing a ladder as there were crosspieces every half metre or so. As I neared the top it subsided onto the wire a little. Once I was there Henderson and Henrik pushed their gangplank up to me; this was

always going to be the difficult part as the bottom of the plank was likely to catch on the wire as I pulled it up – and it did. However with a bit of hauling and shoving I got it over the top of the wire and managed to push it down into the compound on the other side, having first used a rope to join the tops of the two gangplanks. The plan had been to make an A-shaped stile but unfortunately the wire was wider and stiffer at the top than we had planned for: there was a gap of about a metre between the top of the two gangplanks, with nasty razor wire beneath. It would have been impossible to shepherd the captives over our makeshift stile without mishap. We held a whispered conference and decided there was nothing for it but to go back to our dhoni, collect a couple of spare planks and use them to bridge the gap. So Ibrahim and his cousin set off back to the boat and the wait for their return seemed interminable: we were so near and yet so far... But return they did with a couple of planks and some rope for lashing them on. We quickly laid the planks over the top of the razor wire, tied them down to the top of the two gangplanks and used some of the rope to make handrails across the gap – and we were ready!

The noise of the wind in the trees and the crashing surf beyond meant that no-one could have heard us. However, although we had carried out most of this in the little starlight that filtered through the trees, we had had to use our torches occasionally – but there was no sign of life from the compound. Hence as we descended our stile we still had had no definite confirmation that the crew of the *Ocean Campaign* were being held here. What if there were nobody here at all or it were another group of prisoners altogether?

Shielding my torch so that it only lit up the ground immediately in front of my feet, I hesitatingly set off with the others in line behind me. I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock in the morning, a time when the captives would most likely be in their period of deepest sleep. Suddenly all my doubts were set aside when I came across the first person, a man lying on his side on the bare ground with a blanket over him. I waved for Henrik to come forward for we had decided earlier it would be best if we could find the captain first so he could tell us the situation and organise the crew; I would not have recognised the captain. However as Henrik came up the man in front of me awoke with a start and sat up. While he blinked in the torchlight I made the universal signal to keep silent – putting my finger to my lips in the 'shh' position. Henrik whispered 'Captain' to him but he merely shrugged.

We came across many more bodies until we found the captain, signalling to everyone who woke up to keep quiet, although it was inevitable that a few shouted exclamations came out. We did not realise at first that everyone had on leg irons, but once people started standing up and gathering around us we soon realised something was amiss. Henrik talked in excited whispers to the captain and we soon found out that the whole crew of twenty four were here, including Alison. While Henrik was explaining to the captain the plan of escape, I looked around for her. I shook gently the shoulders of those still asleep on the ground, whispered 'shh' to each one, and found Alison eventually. She sat up with a start, a wild look in her eyes, saw me and gasped. I helped her to her feet and gave her a hug, a move that was only weakly returned. Henrik

and Henderson also came up to hug her, with a muffled exclamation of 'Why, Alastair' on seeing her husband. But it was no time now for a reunion – escape was the priority.

The whole group shuffled in line to our stile. We had to help each crew member up as their leg irons made climbing difficult, but it all went remarkably quickly and quietly. The incentive for escape was a strong motivator! We left the stile in place after the last person had crossed – there was no further need for it and removing it would have taken valuable time – and led everyone to the beach. We put five prisoners and one of us in each boat run, the crew of the dhoni hauling the dinghy by its rope through the waves and helping people onto the deck. So after five runs everyone was aboard. Ibrahim started the dhoni's engine, there being no way of heading back into the wind under sail, and so we had to risk the sound of the engine being carried to the other side of the island. We upped anchor as soon as the engine fired. We were sure the pirates' boat would be able to overhaul us in the open sea, although it would take time for them to find out their captives were gone and thereafter for them to take their boat through the reef in the dark. However we would not feel safe until in sight of the fishing settlement.

We need not have worried. There was no sign of the pirates and to this day I wonder what their reaction was on finding their prisoners gone – and how their paymasters reacted on hearing the news. Ibrahim had found some bolt cutters onboard so we could release the prisoners from their shackles, but it was cramped below

decks on the voyage back. Everyone had become soaked coming out through the waves and many were now shivering, perhaps both from being wet and also through the release of nervous tension, and in a small boat like this there were not enough blankets or spare dry clothes for everyone. It was a generally silent group, perhaps through the shock of being woken up in the middle of the night and the speed of the escape. Alison, I noticed, was sitting next to Henderson with her head on his shoulder. This simple fact overrode any elation I might have had in facilitating the successful release of the *Ocean Campaign's* ship's company. I should have done something about it then. Why did I hold back? Old fashioned British chivalry, an ultimate lack of self-confidence, or just a feeling that this was not the time?

## Chapter 11. The Aftermath

We had been so focussed on the escape that we had not thought through the next stages. We were tired, we had been up all night and dawn was not far off. However as we became more weary our passengers began to wake up, their realisation of freedom dawning with the sun. Even at this early hour there was a crowd on the shore watching us come into port, which became animated as more and more people came up from below and crowded the deck. Our passengers cheered and waved as we drew alongside and leapt ashore as soon as we were made fast.

For a short while Henderson, Henrik and myself found ourselves alone in the cabin of the dhoni, drinking strong coffee and too tired to celebrate our achievement. Instead, Henrik was bringing us back to earth with some practicalities.

'Do we take everyone back to Hanimaadhoo on Ibrahim's cruiser?' he was saying. 'Or even all the way to Male?'

'A bit risky, isn't it?' ventured Henderson. 'I mean the pirates might find us and we would be back to square one...'

'Unlikely,' said Henrik. 'But not impossible – unless we went in convoy with some official patrol boat.'

'Are there any?' I asked. 'At least nearby?' But nobody knew the answer.

'If they were armed, and I think Ibrahim said they were, they could even mount a raid here and take us all,' suggested Henderson.

'Again, unlikely,' Henrik answered. 'Which settles it in my

mind...The sooner the outside world knows what we've done, the sooner the media spotlight will deter any further thoughts of kidnapping. Let's get the media ball rolling. This is going to be big news.'

Henrik went to Ibrahim's cabin cruiser to alert the world to our achievement – and I am sure you all remember the subsequent media coverage and world excitement at our derring-do: media manipulation was Henrik's speciality. Henderson and I left him to it and went ashore, both instinctively looking for Alison whom we found sitting in the morning sun, her back against a wall and talking quietly with the captain. She looked up when we approached and gave us both a wan smile.

'Hello,' I said lamely.

'Hello.' she replied, pausing before adding, 'Thank you.' To which I responded, 'It was nothing.'

This was ridiculous, I thought. Stilted conversation... I should there and then pulled her up and embraced her tightly, asking if she would be mine for ever. But with Henderson standing beside me I could not do it.

She turned back to the captain and I heard her say, 'No, I think I will go back home. Stay with my mother for a while. Get my life back...'

Henderson and I wandered listlessly back to Ibrahim's boat, although our spirits rose slightly as we were thanked profusely by any rescued *Ocean Campaign* crew member we encountered.

I will not bore you with the bureaucracy that followed and the

media circus that descended on the Maldives. Suffice it to say that it is difficult to get a multi-national crew out of a country when they have no papers or identification with them, and also it becomes increasingly tedious to answer over and over again the same questions from film crews derived from a multitude of nationalities. The beauties of the Maldives and their idyllic coral reefs, atolls and palm trees were at that time lost on me. We never did find out who instigated the sinking of the *Ocean Campaign* and the kidnapping of its crew, although the majority media view, and our definite view, was that it was not Somali pirates carrying it out for the ransom money. Several countries were suspected, but nothing could ever be proved.

Henrik went back to find a replacement for the *Ocean Campaign* and to continue his relentless battle against the forces of darkness, whilst Henderson went back to turn Henderson Holdings into a company that was whiter than white. I returned to Scotland and to my beloved *Tangle*, which I had abandoned during my two years with Henderson Holdings. She looked rather sorry for herself and unloved: the hull was weed encrusted, the diesel in the engine had suffered bacterial attack and the superstructure was stained green with algae. I spent a couple of weeks getting her shipshape, the activity giving me an excuse for not thinking about the future. But once she was ready for sea again, I did not want to go. Indeed, I had nowhere to go, and, what was worse, no one to go with. In my mind I had pictures of Alison spending the rest of her life with the captain of the *Ocean Campaign,* for does not a shared experience bond people together? I floundered. For company I bought, or

acquired, a dog. It was a terrier kind of thing from a broken home and he was called McCorquodale, or Mac for short. He enjoyed being on a boat.

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Alison relates… I could not understand James. I should have been elated after our escape and all I wanted to do was fall into his arms, but at the time of our rescue he was so out of reach and uninterested in me. Without his support it took me a long time to get out of the depression that had set in during those terrible days on the island. I could not cope with the banalities of the questions from television crews and newspaper journalists. The beauties of the Maldives and their idyllic coral reefs, atolls and palm trees were at that time lost on me. So I went home to my mother.

She looked after me until the normality of home life caused my spirit to stir and rebellion set in. What was I, a mature women who had led a flotilla of boats into the southern oceans and inspired a committed team in a successful world-class campaign, doing sitting at home being waited on and mollycoddled by my mother like a five year old? I had had three powerful men after me, and must have still been desirable, and here was I feeling sorry for myself because no one loved me – or rather the one I had chosen did not love me back. I did, though, instigate divorce proceedings with Alastair. There was no bitterness on my side, although I cannot be sure about Alastair's, and, from my perspective at least, we parted amicably.

Being at home did make me yearn for a proper home of my own, where I would have things the way I wanted them, not the way of my parents; there was still the house where Alastair and I had once lived, which had indeed been a home for a while, but I could not return there. Years were passing, and, although I would never admit it out loud, I was terrified of being left on the shelf, of not being able to settle down and grow roots, instead remaining as the eternal Flying Dutchman. Wanting children must have come into it somewhere. But I had no idea of where to go next. For company I bought, or acquired, a dog. It was a terrier kind of thing from a broken home. He was called Skimp and he and I took to the fells of my native Cumbria. James takes up the story again…

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I am sure by now you can see where this is all leading – and you would be right. Maybe our individual paths are set in stone at the time of birth, with an inevitability totally outwith our control. Or maybe we are free elements, able always to make our own decisions and judgments, our fate in our own hands. And Alison and me? Were our parallel and converging paths in our control or was there some mysterious force directing operations? Can it really have been coincidence, for instance, that we both independently acquired a canine companion? Or was there some underlying biological determinism at play?

I found out about Skimp on the internet as I browsed her

pages: I was a friend in the sterile digital meaning of the word. She found out about Mac on the internet as she browsed my pages as a friend. We compared and contrasted the dogs, arguing the relative merits of each, but never talking about ourselves. Ultimately there came a time, of course, when Skimp had to meet Mac. I would sail *The Tangle* down from Oban to Whitehaven and we would meet at the harbour.

It is amazing how hope can transform a mood: when there is something to look forward to, major obstacles become mere minor irritants and there is a tendency to see the best in all things – the bottle is always half full. It is strange in a way, for nothing has changed in the physical world, yet nothing is the same. Life is full of potential... I enjoyed the sail down, even though it was mainly against a light southerly wind and I had to use power (only because I was in a relaxed hurry). However, in our northern latitudes a southerly wind brings warmth and a promise of better things to come. It was surely an omen. I sailed by day and anchored by night. McCorquodale enjoyed the voyage too. He sat outside on the coaming, nose facing into the wind, taking in the southern scents while I stood in the wheelhouse day-dreaming and more relaxed than I had been for years – not planning but letting my mind wander where it would. At times I had gentle music as a background to my thoughts, music in tune with the gentle rhythm of sea; I remember in particular that Liszt's Peregrinations featured prominently. I think there must have been a smile on my face much of the three days it took me sail south.

I reached Whitehaven at about midday but frustratingly had to wait for three hours outside the harbour for the tide. If I had been concentrating I would have planned my timings better. While at anchor I scoured the breakwater with binoculars and even from the distance I could see a girl walking along with a dog. It was too distant to be certain but I had no doubt it was Alison. The tide came in eventually at its own pace while I fretted at how unfair it was that man had to wait for time and tide. But the time at last came when I could motor in and soon, as I passed through the narrow entrance into the inner marina, there was Alison beside me on the sea wall. She looked as tall and elegant as ever, although there seemed to be a new fragility about her (or was that my imagination running riot?). She was wearing a loose-fitting white blouse over-topping her jeans and her brown hair was blowing about her face in the light breeze. She shouted across to me and waved and I shouted 'hello' back – I could not think of anything else suitable to say. Mac started barking at Skimp causing him to take refuge behind Alison's legs, and then the sea walls opened out and I was in the marina.

It would take Alison a bit of time to get round to the moorings so I had a few more minutes to myself while I came alongside and made fast. Unexpectedly I became nervous: it felt like a first date, as if it were just Alison and me for the first time with no back-up. What would I say? I never envisaged that the first thing would be an apology, for McCorquodale, as soon as he saw Skimp coming along the pontoon, leapt ashore and went for him hammer and tongs. Mac had him by the scruff of the neck and would not let go; Skimp squealed, which only made Mac all the madder. Alison looked

worried. I jumped onto the pontoon and went to break up the fight. I grabbed Mac by his tail and scruff and hauled him up; he eventually let Skimp go and I roundly scolded him. Hence our first meeting was not an embrace and kiss as I had long imagined, but me standing next to her, a barking dog under one arm and profuse apologies emanating from myself.

Alison bent down to check on Skimp, who was tight against her legs for moral support, but on seeing he was undamaged, stood up again, looked at me and laughed.

'Skimp seems to be a bit of a wimp,' she said.

'I'll go and shut Mac in the cabin.'

'No! That's not fair. He was only establishing the pecking order.'

'Possibly,' I replied uncertainly. 'I'll put him on a lead and see what happens.'

So saying, I went onboard, found a bit of rope, attached Mac to it and introduced him to Skimp properly. Skimp cowered behind Alison while Mac sniffed nose and tail, Skimp eventually plucking up courage to do the same. There was no more fighting.

'You could be right,' I concluded eventually.

'I know, I was brought up with terriers.'

'Were you? I didn’t know this' – suddenly realising there was a lot I did not know about her.

'Won't you come aboard?' I continued.

'Oh how polite! I would love to. Can I have a cup of tea?'

'Tea it is.'

It was funny. Neither of us knew what to say at first, or how to react to each other. So we looked at the dogs and talked about them while the kettle boiled.

‘Skimp,’ I said. ‘That’s a bit of a silly name, isn’t it?’

‘I agree. But I inherited the name with the dog, so I couldn’t change it.

‘I suppose not.’

‘Anyhow, what sort of name is McCorquodale?...’

While we were talking I could not help remembering that evening together in this very same cabin: we were not strangers, so why were we acting this way? The surreal situation continued all afternoon. Alison invited me back to her house. I collected a bag of things and we went to the harbour office where I paid my dues. When asked how long I would be moored here, I replied that I did not know. Alison had come in one of the farm's Landrovers so we shoved the dogs in the back and drove off. As we went along she pointed out all the local sites, a proud resident showing off her county to the ignorant visitor, to which I responded with intelligent questions, illustrating a keen interest in the area. We arrived at her parents' farm at the foot of the fells, a typical Lake District stone-built affair that looked as if it had been around for as long as the hills.

Her mother greeted us at the door and after having let loose the dogs we went into the kitchen for yet more tea. I could see I was being inspected! Did I come up to her mother's standards? Thereafter I was shown to my room, one with a single bed, which

got me thinking. What had Alison told her mother about me? Was I just a colleague at work paying a social visit? Or had she said more? What had she and her mum talked about in the weeks since she had returned from her ordeal?

I went to collect my bag and took it upstairs and then joined Alison and the dogs outside. I looked around, taking stock of my surroundings. The grass-covered hills rose up behind the house; there were bright green fields enclosed by tight stone walls on the lower slopes with moorland and crags above; ancient sycamores with mottled bark and wide crowns were scattered around the farmstead; and there was the distant bleating of Herdwick sheep being carried down the hill in the breeze. Small white clouds scudded across a pale blue sky high above us and there was a summer warmth to the air.

'This is a beautiful place you have here,' I said.

'Yes, it is, isn't it. Except we don't own it, only rent it from the National Trust.'

'But it is still home?'

'Yes, my family have been here for generations.'

'Can you show me around?'

'I would love to. Does Mac chase sheep?'

'No.'

'Fine! That means we can take the dogs.'

So I spent the late afternoon being introduced to the farm. It seemed to me an idyllic spot, an unspoilt corner of England which had escaped the intrusions of the modern world. But modernity had

not escaped it completely, for we met Alison's father coming home on his quad bike, his Border collie sitting on the back like Lady Muck rather than running along behind!

I joined the family for dinner and it was as if I had the privilege of being let into their private affairs, for I was soon no longer being treated as a stranger – except perhaps by Alison. But over time even this wore off as we spent the days climbing the hills together, those Lake District fells with strange names such as Glamara, Blencathra, and Skiddaw. We enjoyed sitting outside in the sun, a beer in front us, pleased with ourselves and pleasantly relaxed after a day's hard walking. We even became true tourists, enjoying a trip on the Ratty and on the steamer on Coniston. And we relaxed into each other's company, companionable, easy, no awkward silences. We began to talk about the past, but not yet the future, and in time Alison relived for me her time on the atoll.

We sat closer together, accepting and enjoying the warmth of proximity. We began walking hand in hand under the alders of the riversides or the shores of the lakes. And there came the day, after a long walk up some distant fell, followed by a much-needed pint at a rural hostelry, with the summer heat just beginning to fade to its evening coolness, and the gentlest of ripples rustling along the lake shore, that I took Alison in both hands and gently kissed her. There was no resistance, but a feeling, that slowly intensified, of long-pent up passion.

We returned late that night, both glowing, and it was obvious as we came through the farmhouse door that Alison’s mother had

sensed the change. She fussed over us more than normal. But it was our last night in separate beds, because the next day we took our leave.

Alison's father drove us in the Landrover to the harbour at Whitehaven and his parting words were, 'You will look after our Alison, won't you?' I looked across to her, she returning my glance, and replied, 'Of course.' He shook my hand firmly and then left.

We two alone, the whole future ahead. Strangely, I felt nervous, for now it was just us two: I had never been alone with her before for more than a day or two; but at the same time I felt as if the world beckoned, a world made for living, a world made to be shared. But, a little tongue-tied at the enormity of possibilities, I reverted to the formula of talking about the dogs.

'Has Skimp been on a boat before?'

'There was the steamer on Coniston, of course.'

'Of course.'

'And he didn't seem to mind.'

'No. But with rough seas and things it will be a bit different.'

'Yes, he'll be fine... Come on, let's go aboard.'

We climbed onto *The Tangle* and entered the wheelhouse. Alison looked around.

'Do you remember when at the wheel here I almost capsized the boat?' she asked. 'With books and things flying all over the place?'

'Of course, but it was pretty rough at the time.'

She went down the steps into the cabin, looked across at me

and smiled, a smile that almost reduced me to tears. 'And of course, do you remember our last dinner here all those years ago?'

'How could I forget?'

'Yes, I have often thought back to that day, and the "what ifs?" Let's collapse the intervening years and carry on where we left off...' She paused and went into the galley, opening cupboard doors and peering in.

'Let's not go to sea tonight,' she continued. 'I'll cook ourselves a grand feast while you pour the wine.'

'That's a wonderful idea – except I don't have any wine onboard.'

'Well go and buy some!'

So thus ordered off my own boat, I put Skimp and Mac on leads and sauntered down the harbour, a smile on my face, and spent a happy hour in the shops of Whitehaven buying wine and other goodies.

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The wind had gone round to the north as we headed back up the Irish Sea the next day, with a cold bite to the air and occasional spray coming over the deck as we rolled in the cross-sea. But it was bright and sunny with a scattering of cumulus clouds, clouds sensible enough to deposit their rain over the land, leaving only their smallest companions to scud harmlessly over the sea. Skimp had joined McCorquodale on the roof of the cabin, and both were

sitting contentedly with their noses into the wind. Alison and I were standing contentedly in the wheelhouse, at ease, and both glad to be at sea. For the time being the rest of the world had ceased to be relevant and, after last night, I had ceased to be nervous about being in the sole company of a beautiful woman for years to come.

We went into the sheltered harbour of Portpatrick for the night, walking the dogs around the port and choosing, as one always does, which boat to buy. She chose a sleek yacht with a superstructure covered in wood and brass, 'Think of all the maintenance,' I said – while I remained faithful to *The Tangle*.

The next day we entered the Firth of Clyde, with the brisk northerly now dead ahead and cold spray coming off the bow, causing the dogs to retreat to the sheltered lee of the wheelhouse. We were headed for Brodick, the capital of the Isle of Arran and my home town, for it was my turn now to bring a stranger into the parental home. Unlikely as it may seem, it was the first time I had ever brought a girlfriend ('girlfriend'? Was that the right word? Alison was surely not just a girlfriend?) home while I visited my parents.

The harbour at Brodick is mostly taken up by the ferry terminal, so we anchored off the sands of the Bay and went ashore in the dinghy, the dogs at the bow, each attempting to outcompete the other in leaning over and trying to lap up seawater. My home, or rather my parents' home, was one of the traditional stone villas along the waterfront with, as is typical in these places, a big sign outside saying 'Guesthouse', although our family did have the house

to themselves in the winter months. I had not been home for a long time but had no qualms about introducing Alison to my parents, indeed showing her off. She was well-received and luckily they refrained, at least at first, from asking her about the Maldives affair; this had been a major international news story and everyone had heard of her. The local media clamour had died down in Cumbria by the time I had arrived, but she would be news in Brodick and it was inevitable that the *Arran Banner* would at some time have her as the front page.

The next day Alison and I escaped with the dogs for a walk up Goatfell. It is, as you know, a steady but not too steep climb to the summit, which on a clear day provides one of the finest views in Scotland: from the neighbouring rock-infested peaks to the distant mountains of the Scottish Highlands, and even across the Firth of Clyde to Ireland. Today, with the wind still in the north, the air was crystal clear and the views undiminished. We found some shelter near the summit, our backs against a rock, out of the wind and with the warmth of the sun on our faces, the warmth temporarily replaced by a refreshing coolness every time a cloud passed over the sun. I had my arm around Alison, her head was on my shoulder, the dogs were sitting lazily at our feet, their heads between their paws, and the whole world was spread out below.

'It's beautiful up here, isn't it?' Alison said.

'Yes, one of my favourite places. You can't beat the combination of sea, sky and mountain.'

'It's almost as good as the Lake District!'

'Humph!'

'Why can't we just stay here forever?'

'It will get cold at night and what about food?'

'You're just too practical, James!' She paused before adding, 'I've not felt so relaxed for a long time,' and she lifted up her head and kissed me gently on the lips, causing a little jealous growl to emanate from Mac.

'Nor me. You don't know how lonely I've been since I got back. Now there's everything to look forward to...'

We sat in gentle silence for several minutes, our thoughts intermingling with the view, until I broke it by taking a deep breath and asking, 'Will you marry me?'

She lifted up her head again while eddies of wind caught her hair and wafted it around her face. Unsuccessfully brushing it aside, she looked me full in the eyes and said simply, 'Yes.' I put my arms around her and embraced her tightly.

Generally the talk between two people in love is of little interest to outsiders, so I will not bore you with our conversations that followed that day and subsequent days. We stayed in Brodick because neither of us had a house of our own we could repair to. I had *The Tangle* of course and it was to here that we retreated every night. And what more do two people need than a cozy cabin and comfy bed where, after a little activity, one is lulled to sleep by the gentle rocking of the boat and the plash of the ripples on the hull? And the galley is only a short distance away for morning tea...

It was headlines in the next week's *Arran Banner*: "Local man to

wed kidnap girl" or somesuch and soon the whole world knew (although the people of Arran would probably argue that their island was the world!). We could not arrange a date for the wedding until Alison's divorce proceedings had come through, but that did not stop us taking the ferry and train to Glasgow so that Alison could select a wedding dress and the other necessary paraphernalia. We also met Henrik there.

'I must come up and congratulate you in person,' he had said on hearing the news. We were to meet him at a famous restaurant in Byres Road, for he insisted on taking us out to dinner. As we entered there was the same old Henrik, bursting with enthusiasm and obsession.

He slapped me on the back, shook us both by the hand and kissed Alison (I could not help remembering their one-time intimacy; that was the past, though, and the future was all that was important).

'It took you a long time,' he said. 'You were always too good for Alastair, Alison. He is an admirable chap, of course, and look at him now being a credit to responsible capitalism, but you two had little in common. *He* could not have led an Antarctic anti-whaling campaign.' I noticed Alison blush at this compliment. 'But James, he is just right for you. Perhaps not quite as strong as you in the environmental field, but... Anyhow, I have a table reserved, over here.'

We followed him, exhausted already by his presence, but were surprised to see that there was to be a fourth person with us for

dinner.

'Why, Justinia!' Alison exclaimed in surprise.

'Hello, Alison,' she replied, getting-up and kissing her on both cheeks.

Henrik went round and put his arm round her, announcing, 'Yes, we are engaged as well. As soon as I heard your news, I proposed to Justinia – I had to keep up! We'll both be leading the next whaling campaign.'

'Have you a new ship?' I asked.

'Not yet, but we'll have one by the autumn. The *Ocean Campaign II* I think I will call her... Anyhow, you can see I have already ordered some wine, organic by the way, so let's have a toast.'

So Justinia and Henrik toasted Alison and me, and we toasted them in return.

'I've looked at the menu,' said Henrik, 'and I don't think anyone should have the king prawns or scallops as their provenance is doubtful, or the chicken which is probably battery-reared, but everything else appears okay.'

'What about the water?' I asked jokingly.

But he took it seriously. 'I wouldn't go for bottled water, too many food miles. On the other hand, tap water is piped...'

It was an enjoyable dinner all the same and one always felt a different person after a few hours of Henrik's company, some of his enthusiasm seeping into one's own unconscious. We learnt from Henrik that Henderson appeared to be courting one of his business

associates: 'Much more suitable for him than you were, Alison,' he had said. 'Unlike you,' he added I thought presumptuously, 'interested in a business career. In any case, you have in effect been separated from him for over two years, and he has probably forgotten about you.' Neither she nor I rose to that last remark.

Alison and I were spending a night with an aunt of mine in town but we agreed to meet Henrik and Justinia for coffee at Glasgow's Central Station the next morning before heading south on our separate ways. It was over coffee that Henrik once more made that fateful suggestion.

'What about the volcano?' he said. 'We are all probably about to get married and have children and whatever and then there will be too many ties. I've discussed it with Alastair and he is keen. "It will be good to go and climb that mountain, and to get some physical activity," he says. "It will refresh me and help me clear by brain before I merge Henderson Holdings with Alesha Holdings." By the way, Alesha is the name of the woman he is hoping to marry.'

Alison and I looked at each other. We had both forgotten our pledge to return to climb the mountain, the sudden bringing up of the topic by Henrik catching us by surprise. I thought back to that time on the deck of the *Ice Bear*, of that great, white mountain of ice towering over the ship and our desire to reach its peak. Was it that joint agreement that had kept us all linked these last few years, kept our paths forever crossing? And what Henrik suggested did make sense. Alison's parents had arranged that we rent for the time-being a house on their farm that was currently used for holiday

lets – and I could see children ahead. And, as Henderson had said, it would be good to go out and undertake a physical challenge: we four could climb the volcano, and thereafter be free to go our separate ways.

Alison answered before me. 'Yes, let's go for it. What a great idea. And sooner rather than later, don't you think, James?' I wondered at her. The expedition would mean she would once again be in close proximity to the three men in her life, but with my new found confidence this did not worry me unduly.

'You're right Henrik,' I replied. 'We did agree amongst ourselves to do it – we can't put it off for ever, and Alison and I don't have any other plans at present. Yes, I'm keen as well.'

'Great,' said Henrik. 'You'll take us in *The Tangle*? We'll fly to the Faeroes and meet you there.'

'You have it all planned,' I answered. 'Will Justinia be coming as well?'

Henrik looked at her, then answered on her behalf. 'Why not. As far as Jan Mayen, but not up the mountain. You'll need someone to man the boat in any case while we are climbing. There's no harbour there.'

'I know. I think I will ask Anna as well? You remember her, Henrik?'

'The Faeroese girl we rescued?'

'Yes. I've kept in touch with the family and she is old enough now to help us. We had better set off soon, though, before autumn sets in...'

Henrik interrupted me, standing up and saying, 'Sorry, we have to go now, our train is about to leave. Let me know if you want any help sorting out the logistics...' And he and Justinia were gone.

I looked at my watch. 'We'd better get going as well, Alison, if we are to catch our train and ferry.'

The ferry back to Arran seemed unconnected to the sea, smoothly traversing the channel without even a hint of movement, so unlike *The Tangle* which was intimately connected at all times. We had another cup of coffee in the cafeteria on board, watching the Firth of Clyde slowly slip past the window.

'This is exciting, isn't it James. Adventure, but on our own terms: not campaigning for someone else or being nice to clients. It's just what I need after the last few months: a chance to lose myself in action. In the company of the man I love,' she added, leaning across and giving me a kiss.

'Note how Henrik left us to do all the hard work,' I could not help saying.

'But it will be fun. It shouldn't be too difficult, we just need food, ice axes, a tent or two...'

I interrupted her by broaching the subject of being in the company of both her ex-husband and her ex-lover.

'Why, you are not jealous, are you James?' and she laughed. Then she stretched her arm across the table and took my hand. 'Don't be silly. Just because I have had relationships with Alastair and Henrik doesn't mean I stop liking them, or can't bear their presence. Intimacy with them, though, is past. I am not stupid

enough to get my fingers burnt twice.' She then added mischievously, 'Having experienced you all, I know which one is right for me – permanently, that is.' And she squeezed my hand.

I was, by then, confident enough in myself to know she was telling the truth. And after all, I counted Henrik and Henderson as friends: now that the competition for the woman had been won once and for all, I could enjoy their company. More than that: I could enjoy their company as the winner! Of course I did not mention these thoughts at the time, but she has since allowed me add them to this account!

Instead I asked, 'I wonder why Henrik didn't suggest the climb last night at dinner?'

'Henrik is not quite as unaware of how to interact with people as you might think. In fact, when he puts his mind to it he is very manipulative. Think of his dealings with the media, for instance. And I remember that on the *Ocean Campaign* he was excellent at dressing up his autocratic decisions as the democratic will. No, he just wanted us all to enjoy a reunion and celebration without any distractions.'

'You could be right.'

'I know I'm right! I know Henrik.'

'Tell me about Justinia...'

## Chapter 12. To Jan Mayen

It was two months later and I was once more in Tórshavn where this story started. Alison and I had left the dogs behind in Cumbria and sailed *The Tangle* to the Faeroes. The crossing from Scotland had not been too rough, but we were less than halfway to our destination and there was still a lot of open ocean ahead. It was for this reason that Henrik, Justinia and Henderson would be joining as at Seydisfjordur in Iceland rather than Tórshavn, leaving them only four days of tossing and turning. Henderson in particular had remembered how sick he had felt on *The Tangle,* which made me realise how strongly motivated he must be to come on this trip at all. 'Why?' I wondered.

We had agreed to meet Anna at the same cafe where I had almost drunk coffee with Henrik all those years ago. She was there waiting for us and I would not have recognised her if she had not come rushing up to me as we entered. From the young girl I had pulled out of the sea she was now a mature woman, very similar to Alison in many ways, I thought. Tall, straight-backed, her hair a bit fairer, a face that brooked no indoor pallor and that confident look of the self-assured woman.

She and I embraced, exchanging formal kisses, and then she embraced Alison as well. We ordered coffee and went to sit down at a table.

'It is good to see you back in the Faeroes, James,' Anna said. 'Do you remember the month we spent showing you around our

islands?'

'Of course! And it’s great to be back. But, as you know, we are only passage migrants this time.'

'Yes, tell me your plans. You want me to stay with the boat while you climb your mountain?'

'Yes. There will be Justinia with you as well.'

'Henrik's girlfriend, I hear. Is she a good sailor?'

'Yes. She has spent a couple of whaling seasons in Antarctic waters with Alison, experience which it is hard to beat,' I answered. 'How did she cope, Alison?'

'Very well. She hasn't much experience of taking the helm, but she is an excellent crew member, not worried at all by rough seas and rough weather.'

'That is good to know,' replied Anna. 'How long do you think we will be looking after your boat while you are climbing your volcano?'

'It's not very far to the summit,' I answered. 'If we can land near enough, only about eight miles. By the way, if the wind changes direction you may have to sail the boat round to the lee side of the island as there's no shore sheltered from all four quarters. You will need to sail round the south end of the island, not the north, as new uncharted reefs can appear suddenly – from underwater volcanic activity.'

'That sounds worrying,' put in Anna. 'The south will be safe?'

'Oh yes! There’s never any volcanic activity at the south end, at least not nowadays. How long we take all depends on the weather.

If it's foggy, and of course it normally is, once we get to the snow after the first mile or two we won't be able to travel fast, if at all, as it will be whiteout conditions. The climb is not technically difficult but there are plenty of crevasses we could fall into.'

'Please don't!'

'We'll try not to! So we could get to the top in a day or two if the weather is with us, and then back in another day. If the weather is against us, we may have to lie up. So the whole climb could take anything from two days to one week. We'll aim to be back after a week in any case: any longer than that and we would have to be carrying too much food and fuel.'

'And radios?' Anna asked.

'Of course. We should be line of sight the whole time. Distances aren't great, so the standard ship's walkie-talkie will do.'

'What about Henrik and Alastair? From last time, I do not remember Henrik as the climbing type,' (which I thought was percipient of her), 'and I know nothing about Alastair.'

'You are right,' I had to admit. 'Neither of them has much experience of walking and climbing in snow and ice, although they are both competent walkers.'

'Competent walkers?! It is the high Arctic you know,' Anna said sternly. 'Is it sensible to take them?'

'We made a pact,' I answered lamely. 'We made a pact that we would all climb...'

'I don't think you should worry,' interrupted Alison. 'The climb is not difficult. Henrik is used to rough weather and rough seas – he

is hardy. As is Alastair; I've been hill climbing with him in the English Lake District in the worst of weathers, including snow, and he has coped fine.'

'Well I hope so,' Anna concluded. 'It will not affect me as I will be the one on the boat.'

'James and I have plenty of experience of taking passengers,' added Alison, bristling slightly, ‘some even elderly and lame, for walks in both the Arctic and Antarctic where the weather, as I am sure you know, can change suddenly. Not climbing mountains, certainly, but Alastair and Henrik are both young and fit by comparison. We will take no risks – James and I know what we are doing.'

'Good. As long as I know where I stand. Sorry to persist on this, but I like to know what I am letting myself in for.'

'Absolutely,' I said. 'Alison and I spent a month sorting out the details of this trip and think we have covered every angle. There is one thing, though, we still haven’t finalised.'

'What is that?' asked Anna.

'Permission to climb. The Norwegian authorities said no at first. I think it was because they saw that Henrik was involved. There is no love lost between Seas For All's anti-whaling campaign and the desire of many Norwegians to be allowed to kill whales in peace.'

'And Faeroese, as you know,' put in Anna quietly. 'I don't approve myself, but see their viewpoint. But they relented in the end?'

'Yes, partly because Alastair intervened. Henderson Holdings

has a Norwegian arm, shipping containers.'

'And he pulled a few strings? Friends in high places?'

'Apparently. In any case, we are allowed to land on Jan Mayen, but we have to visit the Norwegian base on arrival so they can check our equipment and assess our competence.'

'Which is fair enough,' Alison added. 'If anything did go wrong, they would have to rescue us. It is after all a remote island with appalling weather, thousands of miles from anywhere. I think we are lucky enough to get this far because even getting permission to land can be tricky – and to climb the mountain, more so.'

'And the volcano could erupt at any time!' I spoke flippantly, gaining dirty looks from both Alison and Anna, and so added quickly, 'But very unlikely!'

'Actually I am envious,' Anna said. 'I would really like to climb that mountain as well. To get above the fog into the clear sky, with sparkling snow and ice, that would be wonderful.'

'It would,' I agreed, 'you will have to arrange you own trip one day.'

Thereafter the conversation moved on to reminiscences of my last time in the Faeroes, to Seas For All (which still had a bad name in the islands), and, of course, to Alison's kidnapping.

We spent a couple of days in Tórshavn, invited back to Anna's comfortable home up on the slopes overlooking the harbour near the Nordic House, and then once more we were in *The Tangle* tackling the high seas. The wind remained relatively calm but the long, oily swell of the Atlantic was coming from the port quarter so

that *The Tangle* rose and fell in a sedate manner, leaning to port as we ascended gently to the top of the swell, and then leaning to starboard as we descended into the trough. It was a relaxing movement so that we three spent the days standing in the wheelhouse, either chatting quietly or just lost to our thoughts while watching the sea, accompanied at times by favourite music from our sound system; *The Tangle* was well-stocked with CDs. At night we took turns of four hours at the wheel while the others slept.

With slack and variable winds, we were mostly under power and at our steady eight knots it took us three days to reach Iceland, a voyage I still remember as a time of great peace. I was, after all, with Alison, the weather was kind and adventure beckoned. Anna was also good company and took it upon herself to do all the cooking, as well as keeping us well-watered with tea, coffee and cocoa.

We could tell we were approaching land before we even saw it because of the increasing number of seabirds coming to look at the boat. They would fly towards us, circle us a few times and then carry on with their journey. Perhaps they find the open ocean so monotonous that a boat is something interesting to look at? I thought also how much more interesting these seas would be if we had not made the great auk extinct: the northern hemisphere's very own penguin with Iceland its last stronghold. Now people have to go to the southern hemisphere to see them; but how great it would be to have *Pinguinus impennis* still swimming around the coasts of

Britain, at one time common enough to be used as source of food by island inhabitants. And I thought of Henrik, hearing his voice in my head:

'Think of the great auk, James. Would the seas not be all the richer if it were still around?'

'Yes, definitely. It's a tragedy that they're extinct.'

'A tragedy of our own making. This is what Seas For All is about, avoiding future tragedies along the same lines. The blue whale almost went the same way, and it may be too late for the right whales.'

'You are right Henrik. And I admire you for what you do.'

'And mangrove swamps, coral reefs, sea grass beds, fish...'

In a few hours he would once more be upon this boat. Why was he so keen on this expedition, for it was he who kept reminding us of our pledge and he who had instigated this whole trip? He was more at home at sea than on land and climbing was certainly not one of his things, so what was driving him? Or Henderson for that matter? I was musing over this, not for the first time, when my thoughts were interrupted by Anna calling out that land was in sight.

The land of eastern Iceland slowly hove into view, with its grey, horizontally-bedded basalt cliffs sometimes rising to hills above with drifts of winter snow still present even this late in the year. We motored up the great length of Seydisfjord to the picturesque town at its head, with white-painted wooden buildings and the characteristic Lutheran church. We moored alongside the jetty in

the harbour on the southern side and went ashore to stretch our legs. There was no sign of the others, but that was no surprise as our plans for meeting-up were a bit vague: "See you at Seydisfjordur on such and such date." It is a small place, after all, and they could not really miss us. I imagined they would be flying from Reykjavik to Egilssstadir and taking the bus over the pass to here.

Alison, Anna and I walked through the town, round the head of the fjord and up into a side valley. It was one of those days which is possible in Iceland: bright sunshine, clear blue skies and a calm, cool crispness to the air. We wandered up the stream that flowed hurriedly down the valley, its waters cold and crystal-clear with clean white foam at the bottom of every fall. The grass was bright green and still fresh with the summer's growth and the air was full of the call of the whimbrel, that characteristic sound of the tundra; the occasional bleat of a sheep added to the solitude of the place. Alison and I walked up hand in hand, not saying much, still in the phase of being sated merely with each other's company; I wondered if Anna felt left out or was envious. However she seemed happy and cheerful, like us, just enjoying being outside on a day when God's creation was intent on wearing its Sunday best.

We walked up the stream for a couple of miles and then at the top of a waterfall sat down facing the sun with our backs comfortably against a sheltering rock. In addition to the warmth of the sun on my face I could feel the warmth of Alison's body as we sat shoulder to shoulder and started musing on the world.

'On a day like today,' commented Alison, 'what is necessary

above mere existence?'

'Nothing,' I replied, 'apart from good company, for as a species we are essentially social. Would we be so relaxed here if each of us were on our own?'

Instead of answering, Alison turned to look at Anna. 'Would you be as happy here today if it was just you?'

'I don't know,' she replied. 'I often climb my Faeroese hills on my own, keen to get to the top, and once there keen to get down again. But you are right, I do not tend to sit down, relax and enjoy the view as though there is nothing else in the world of concern.'

'How about you, Alison?' I asked.

She paused in thought before answering. 'No I suppose not. If you are content within yourself – and being with you, James, I am – then the whole world tends to take on a glow. Look at these mountains around us, the sheep contentedly grazing the pastures, the small streams tumbling down the hillsides, the sunlit crags, the white snowdrifts above: they are all glowing, in tune with my heart.'

'Wow,' said Anna, 'what romantic and sentimental twaddle!'

Alison laughed. 'Absolutely! And what is wrong with that? Have you never been in love, Anna?' Alison bent over and kissed me. 'James, do you not agree?'

'How could I not agree with everything you say,' I answered. 'On a day like to today it is impossible to disagree with anything.'

'That is one of the problems with the world,' put in Anna seriously. 'Disagreement. Why could we not bring the whole world here on a day like this – and then everyone would agree with

everyone and we would all be at peace.'

'Who is talking sentimental nonsense now?' I could not help saying.

It was Anna's turn to laugh. 'In any case, they would not all fit!'

We sat silent a while, myself pleased to hear what Alison had said: she was in love – and with me! Soon Alison and I drifted off to sleep, dozing contentedly together in the sun, although in periods of relative wakefulness I noticed that Anna was wide-awake, looking at the ground in front of her and idly dropping small stones through her hands.

As the sun moved across the sky and its warmth gave way to coolness, we agreed it was probably time to wander back down the valley to see if the others had arrived. So we three reluctantly got up, with me noting that once the day started lengthening the cooler air made 'mere existence' less appealing, its place being taken by a desire to 'do something.'

The sun had lost itself behind the hills by the time we were back at *The Tangle* and there was an evening feel to the place. There still being no sign of Henrik, Henderson and Justinia, we decided to head back into the town, find a place to eat and have a meal, 'Without bankrupting ourselves,' I added as Iceland is notoriously expensive.

We about halfway through an excellent fish platter (and what else is there it eat in Iceland?) when the door of the restaurant burst open and in breezed Henrik, Henderson and Justinia.

'Hi, there,' said Henrik as we all stood up and embraced each

other. 'What's on the menu? I hope it is all sustainably caught fish?'

'I am having whale meat,' I said. I could not resist teasing Henrik.

'What?' he exclaimed with a fierce look on his face, before realising I was not being serious. 'There are some things, James, you should not joke about.'

'Probably... Anyhow, are you joining us for a meal?'

'Of course!'

So the whole team was finally assembled, the four climbers and the two boat handlers. The party was evenly sexed, with Henderson and Anna being the odd ones out, although over the next few days I sensed a growing attraction between these two – or was it just my imagination, an innate desire for symmetry, to pair people off?

We had a lot of catching-up to do. It was the first time Alison, Henrik and Henderson and I had been together since our valiant rescue – and it was now distant enough for Alison to be more dispassionate about the event. So Anna and Justinia took a back seat at first while we reminisced. I am probably going on about this too much in this account, but I could not help thinking that we three men had been all trying to rescue the same damsel – and I had ended up with the prize. How had they taken it? I looked at Henrik and Henderson: Henrik was now with Justinia and, as I have said before, was perhaps more interested in his campaigns than women. However I noticed Justinia across the table was hanging onto Henrik's every word, an infatuation if ever I saw one: maybe she

would succeed in breaking through his barriers, make him take notice of her and eventually bring out his feminine side? Or maybe she was the type who needed a man to look up to and admire, and was not looking for an equal relationship? I had not been acquainted with her long enough to know the answer.

And Henderson? Was he still in love with Alison? I think the answer was yes. I noticed that evening that he could not stop looking at her. It was perhaps surprising that a man like him, a rich and successful businessman, who could buy anything he wanted, could not retain the woman he loved: acute and assertive in business, but not assertive in personal relationships. If he had given Alison attention, maybe he would still be with her? No, no and no! I knew Alison well enough to understand that there had to be common interests if love were to prevail, and, at the end of the day, Henderson and her had little in common: biologically they might be suited – a rich man able to cater for his wife and children – but there is more than biological imperative. We can move beyond our biology and determine our own fates.

'It is the first time I have really had to thank you all in person,' Alison told us. 'I still think it remarkable how you found out where we were. And then to mount the rescue without any outside help, apart from Ibrahim that is, that was foolhardy. But I'm glad you did it.' She stood up, motioning Anna and Justinia to do the same. 'On behalf of all the crew of the *Ocean Campaign*, I formally propose a toast to Henrik, James and Alastair. Thank you for what you did.'

After they had downed their drinks it was Henrik's turn to

stand up. 'We had no choice,' he said, glancing at Henderson and myself in turn. 'There was no way we were going to abandon you all to who knows what fate. I felt myself responsible for the *Ocean Campaign*, as it was after all the Seas For All boat. But I could not have done it without the help of Alastair and James – and neither of those were going to leave you to your fate! So I propose a toast to Alastair and James.'

And we in turn proposed a toast to Henrik. He continued: 'Chance, or fate, brought us all four together all those years ago and since then has followed us around the world. We will climb this mountain together, as we once promised... I propose a final toast: to everyone here and a successful expedition.'

Henderson's divorce from Alison did come up during the evening. It was raised by Henrik, as bluntly as ever, 'Alison, have you managed to disentangle yourself from Alastair? The divorce, I mean?' Henderson replied on her behalf, saying that the process was almost at an end. He seemed relaxed enough about it, or at least resigned at it. I looked at Alison, sitting next to me: she had made no effort to dress for dinner, but she was still beautiful, could not help being so. Her long brown hair framing her face, her out-door complexion needing no make-up, her nose verging on snubness, her wide mouth given to smiling, her wide eyes, her upright posture... And she was mine! Soon the four of us would be confined to one tent for perhaps days on end, forced on each other's close company, but, as I keep reiterating, by now I was confident in myself.

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It was intimate on *The Tangle* next day as the boat once more headed northwards over the high seas. We had set off in the morning after taking onboard a last stock of fresh bread and milk. There was not really enough space in the wheelhouse for all six of us at once although, not unexpectedly, Henderson spent most of the voyage flat on his back below decks, ministered this time by Anna. Although it has to be said that Anna, who must have spent most of her life in small boats, took it on herself to minister upon all of us, producing delicious meals from the cramped galley in spite of horizontal having become an unachievable concept. We put Henderson in the cabin which he and Alison had had before because this was the area with least movement: the forrard berths tended to toss you about, and the only other berths, the bench seats in the cabin were needed during the day. However it meant that Alison and I were done out of our cabin – and our double bed.

We lost the sun on the second day out from Iceland, the bright blue of the sky slowly turning to a dull, featureless grey, and the air becoming noticeably cooler. There was a feeling of raw dampness in the wind which was fresh from the southwest: a mixture of moisture picked up from the Atlantic Ocean to the south and of coolness from the Greenland ice sheet which was not too far away to the west. Hence there was no incentive to go out on deck, except when whales were sighted, for Henrik spent a lot of time in the

wheelhouse scouring the seas with binoculars looking for these behemoths of the ocean. He kept a tally and by the time we reached the island, I think it was one blue whale, two humpbacks, three fin, four minkes and a pod of killer whales, not to mention a couple of Greenland sharks. Occasional fulmars and shearwaters came to peer at the boat from above but for most of the time we felt like a small boat alone in the middle of a large and unforgiving ocean, far distant from any shipping lanes – which of course we were.

'Think of the great auk, James,' said Henrik during a long period when no wildlife was around. 'Would these seas not be all the richer if it were still about?'

'Yes, definitely. It's a tragedy that they're extinct.'

'A tragedy of our own making. This is what Seas For All is about, avoiding future tragedies along the same lines. The blue whale almost went the same way, and it may be too late for the right whales. A century or two back these seas would be full of them. And have we seen any? No!'

'Have you ever seen one?' I asked.

'The southern right whale yes, but not the northern one. There are not many left, and perhaps too much shipping now in their breeding grounds.'

We lapsed into silence for a while, watching the empty sea. 'And do you know what happened at Jan Mayen recently?' Henrik continued.

'No.'

'They discovered clams around its shores…'

‘Who’s “they”?’ I interrupted.

‘Oh, the Norwegians. They built two boats to dredge up the clams, process them and freeze them. They fished for two seasons but the boats are now lying tied up in Tromsø.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, they never assessed the stocks properly. After two seasons the clams were all gone.’

‘But that’s ridiculous!’

‘Much of what we do in the oceans is ridiculous. It does not stop it happening, though.’

‘I suppose not…’

As we neared the island of Jan Mayen on the fourth day out the air thickened with cloying mist so that it was impossible to tell sea from sky. With nothing for the eye to focus on, it was mesmerising – very similar, you will remember, to the conditions when we were last here. Only the radar confirmed that land was near, although the increasing number of seabirds on the water suggested this as well: auks, puffins, fulmars, kittiwakes and glaucous gulls dived or flew up in surprise as the bulk of *The Tangle* loomed up on them unexpectedly out of the mist. Eventually we could see the land as some darker patches through the fog, interspersed by white stripes of snowdrifts, but no detail was visible. We were making for the Norwegian weather station on the east of Jan Mayen and were close inshore before we could see it: a collection of buildings just visible through the fog. However there was a strong sea running together with a lee shore so that Alison

and I determined that a landing here would be foolhardy. We were in radio contact with the base and told them that we would move round to the other side of the island and contact them again once we were there.

So we spent four hours beating around the south of the island to the sheltered waters on the west. We put the anchor down about a hundred metres off the shingle beach and soon after Henderson emerged on deck. It is always a relief when, after days at sea, the boat decides to take on a more relaxed mode of rocking and it is possible to move around easily without holding on to things! We all stood looking at the island, but there was still not much to see beyond a few scattered buildings at the top the beach. I knew that there was a track from here across the island, so I suggested we go ashore and walk to the base, a course of action to which we all agreed. However I was reluctant to leave the boat at anchor unattended, so Anna and Justinia agreed to stay behind.

It takes just over an hour to walk round to the base from the landing on this side, a landing mainly used by the Norwegian occupants to unload cargo. So it was an hour later, after walking the gravel track in the fog, with the gloom of the surrounding mist-encrusted black basalt relieved occasionally by patches of yellow-green moss, that we reached the weather station. This is an agglomeration of low buildings of a type characteristic of polar stations the world over, with the hum of a diesel generator always somewhere in the background. We were expected, for Anna had radioed that we were on our way, and after taking off our boots and

outdoor clothing, were welcomed into the overheated lounge and bar by several of the base members.

The base commander was there to greet us, a tall thin man by name of Leif who had a military moustache and an upright bearing: probably an officer in the Norwegian forces, I surmised. He offered us all coffee followed by a seat in one of the comfortable armchairs that littered the room.

'So you are the famous three!' is how Leif started the conversation. 'And this is the beautiful lady you rescued! I may not approve, Henrik, of how Seas For All interferes with the lawful pursuits of other countries, but I disapprove even more of piracy and kidnapping. You must be congratulated... Sven,' he called out to a bearded colleague, 'Sven, fetch the aquavit. We must toast their bravery.'

It would appear that even in the remotest corner of the planet you cannot escape the curse of the media spotlight! It is not so much the drawing to attention of oneself as the constant repetition of the same tale. People like to hear things from the horse's mouth – but the horse doth weary of the telling! Still, aquavit does provide lubrication and eases the weariness...

We were invited to stay for dinner, which we happily accepted – and we had not yet even discussed the reason for our visit. Following a hearty meal and several beers, Leif suggested we stay the night. 'We will talk about your plans tomorrow, there is no hurry. I will drive you over to your boat in the morning and inspect your equipment then.' I think in a remote base like this, members

who are cheek by jowl with each other month in, month out just appreciate different company on the rare occurrences when it turns up. I radioed Anna and Justinia that we would not be returning to the boat that night.

We were all a bit bleary-eyed and hung-over the next morning so that there was little conversation round the breakfast table but a lot of strong coffee drunk. Outside there was still the all-enveloping fog that is so characteristic of the place and no sign of the mountain we were here to climb. After we had finished eating, the table was cleared and Leif put a down a map of the island. We explained our plans which, in a nutshell, were for us to be put ashore at the end of the beach on the west side near the bottom of the mountain, to trek over the tundra in a southwestern direction to the edge of the snows, then to follow the rocky spur that continued upwards in the same direction, before taking to the glacier and reaching the summit on the snow slopes from the south.

'Yes,' agreed Leif. 'That is the easiest route. As you know, crevasses, avalanches and weather are your real dangers. However, this is a weather station! Here is the forecast for the next week,' and he handed me a print-out. 'It is not too bad, typical in fact. Fog remaining at low levels, but above one hundred to two hundred metres you should be in clear skies. High cloud will come and go all week, but you should basically be clear at the upper levels, although cloud can descend quickly at any time on the summit.'

'What about wind?' I asked.

'Varying between northwest and north, but probably never

above Force 4.'

'It doesn't sound too bad.'

'No, average for this time of year. But things can change quickly. What you don't want is a polar low to come over. These can start without warning and are virtually unpredictable. They have intense winds but pass over very quickly. Unlikely, but not impossible.'

'Mmm. We don't want one of those! We will have supplies for a week, but if it looks as if it will take longer than that, we will turn back. At least at this time of year we can never be caught out by darkness, which makes things a lot safer. In any case, we will be in daily contact with our boat to let them know what we are doing. Shall we contact you daily as well?'

'Yes,' replied Leif. 'But via your boat as you should only have one regular call-in point. If the boat does not hear from you, then they should contact us. Only if you cannot contact them should you contact us direct.' He paused and then added, 'I think that is all, unless there is anything else you want to talk about.'

'No, I don't think so. Anyhow, thank you for your support, it is much appreciated.'

'No problem! We'll meet at the main door in half an hour and I will drive you all back across the island.'

Anna and Justinia had not been idle in our absence. They had unloaded onto the beach all the supplies we would be taking so we were able to show Leif our equipment without him having to go aboard. 'No skis?' he queried. 'The British way, jah? All hard work!' I

don't think a Norwegian can imagine anyone going onto the snows without skis! But he was generally satisfied and gave us formal permission to climb, which was a relief all round. He also said we could use the well-furbished cabin nearby if we wanted more comfort and space than the boat could offer.

Anna suggested he go aboard *The Tangle* for a coffee, an offer which he readily accepted with Justinia joining them. Meanwhile Alison, Henrik, Henderson and myself took all our gear up to the cabin where we would do a final sort and pack our rucksacks ready for the start – which we had agreed would be the next day.

When Leif returned from the boat I told him to wait while I went onboard myself to fetch a bottle of our best malt whisky to thank him for his troubles. He took this willingly, shook us all warmly by the hands, wished us good luck, climbed back into his vehicle and drove off.

I suggested that everyone except Alison and me should sleep in the hut tonight, giving Anna and Justinia a break as they would have to be on the boat the next few days and also providing a more restful night for Henderson. And of course even the most basic Norwegian *hytte* is a paradise of luxury within its often hostile surroundings. We cooked our evening meal there and all of us enjoyed eating it in the warmth and comfort of the hut, the calm weather meaning it was not such a risk to leave *The Tangle* untended for an hour or so.

So it was that Alison and I had a night alone together. The wind had now dropped completely and for a while we sat together

outside on the coaming drinking mugs of cocoa. The fog had lifted a little so you could see the base of the hills with their strips of white snow and yellow-green moss falling down into the sea; the boat only had the smallest of rolls with flocks of kittiwakes and fulmars feeding in the water around us; there was the occasional call of an eider duck and the harsh piping of a tern, but in general there was that Arctic crisp, cool stillness which is particularly enjoyable late in the evening when you know the rest of the world is in darkness. We sat without talking for a while, relaxed in each other's company and just listening to the silence of the Arctic sounds.

I broke into the peace. 'Are you looking forward to the trip?'

'Absolutely! I need to purge my demons – and to get above this infernal fog would be exhilarating in itself. To see into the distance...'

'Can you see into the distance? Our distance, I mean? What shall we do with ourselves once this is all over?'

'Do we have to discuss this now?' she answered, drawing close to me and resting her head on my shoulder before adding after a long pause, 'Let's go to bed. We have the boat to ourselves.'

## Chapter 13. The climb

We were all back on board next morning for a short sail up the coast to our starting-off point. The wind was now round to the north as forecast but it had not managed to clear the fog which still hid all but the lowest slopes. Anna took us ashore in the dinghy, landing on the last of the shingle before the coast turned into rock and cliff. The waves were somewhat unspirited so we managed to land without getting our feet wet. Then it was on with our packs, a last wave to Anna and Justinia and, turning our backs on the sea, the start of our march to the summit of the island.

As you may know Jan Mayen is north of the tree line and hence properly in the Arctic. Thus we were walking on low-growing tundra, no plant daring to raise its flower-head too high in case of a blasting by ice-laden air; in this damp climate mosses tended to dominate, great carpets of yellow-green *Racomitrium*. Travel was not too difficult across the bare gravel, moss and snow and we quickly lost the sight of the sea. On gaining even a little height the fog bore down on us, necessitating navigation by compass. We did have a GPS unit with us, but I preferred not to use it unless we had to because the battery would not last long in the cold.

Walking in fog is not particularly conducive to talking so we were a largely silent group. I took the lead and Alison was the back marker and we had agreed to keep in sight of each other as we did not want to lose anyone this early in the journey – if at all! There was brightness above, and occasionally we could even see the rim of

the sun through the mist; however the fog, as is its wont, kept stubbornly close to the ground. Our packs were not too heavy, especially as we had decided on only one tent between us, but still they bore down on our shoulders making it more than an afternoon stroll. But we were all in confident spirits and I think also in competitive spirit: we did not want to slow each other up.

As we tramped over the tundra I cogitated about our little group: we were four competitive individuals heading off on a mountaineering expedition and successful expeditions, in my experience, were those where everyone worked well as a team – and rarely do four leaders work well as a team! What was the measure of success, though? Achieving the goal at all costs or the shared experience of a time well spent together? Maybe we were all doomed as none of us would give way for the common good. Or would we? – for we were all friends and this friendship should keep the competitive spirit at bay...

I was interrupted in my thoughts because we had encountered our first obstacle of the journey, a meltwater stream pouring down from the melting snow above. We stood at its edge discussing what to do. Henrik was all for marching across until I pointed out to him that we must keep our feet dry at all costs. Wet feet and snow do not go well together as there is nothing more certain to make yourself miserable than having constantly cold feet. Wet feet while marching over the tundra would not matter, but once we were on the snows of the mountain it would certainly make a big difference. The art of survival on expedition is primarily to look after yourself

because you are not really much use as a support to others if you are unnecessarily letting your own condition deteriorate: the gung-ho attitude may make good film footage but does not work in practice! Thus Henrik's simple suggestion made me doubt his suitability for this kind of trip. Was Anna right after all? In contrast, Henderson held back and had no suggestions to make: was he also out of his depth with a simple stream crossing in the fog?

Alison and I pointed out that all we had to do was follow the water uphill until we found a place we could cross and Henrik and Henderson accepted this suggestion without dissension. So we followed the stream up, sliding about as we traversed its sloping banks of mobile gravel. I kept having to stop to allow the others time to catch up, but eventually we came to a place where a large drift of snow bridged the stream. I proposed we crossed it here.

'What, walk over that snowbridge?' exclaimed Henrik. 'Won't we just fall through it into the water – and get our feet wet?'

'We check it first,' answered Alison patiently. 'We'll probe in front of us with an ice axe.'

'They are generally safe if you know what you are doing,' I could not help adding.

'Do we need the rope?' Henderson asked.

'No,' I replied. 'It looks safe enough. But if you'd be happier, we could rope up?'

'It's okay.'

'Alison, could you give me my ice axe?'

My axe was an old-fashioned long-handled one, a type I prefer,

and Alison removed it from the back of my rucksack and handed it to me. I started walking across the snow bridge and, testing the snow in front of my every step by pushing the axe in deep, and made it across without mishap. I waved the others to cross and soon we were on the move again, tramping gently uphill across the open tundra.

So much for competitive leadership, I thought! Henrik and Henderson had just shown me that they could end up being putty in my and Alison's hands. They might be leaders in their own field, a director of a high profile campaigning organisation, always telling the rest of the world what they should be doing, or a leader of a multi-national business empire, always telling their staff what they should be doing, but put them in an environment alien to themselves and they become totally out of their depth. I had noticed this before in the days I had been working with cruise ship passengers: a group might well contain chief executives and other leaders but when actually in the great outdoors they would flock around me like sheep, hanging on my every word. Frightened of the very planet on which we all lived! This, I mused, had become a common theme of apocalypse movies. When the world of civilisation collapsed, those who knew how to survive in the wild came to the fore! Were Alison and I such people – the uncivilized elite?

What nonsense, I argued within myself. It is just observation and common sense. If you are going to be walking in cold snow, you do not want wet feet! If you are going to cross a stream by a snow

bridge, just check first you will not fall through! Nothing difficult or complicated. I have come to realise, though, that observation, and then application of observation, is not an innate skill for most people. I cannot really explain it. However I will pass on the view that this approach is the basis of the scientific method – action based on evidence – and it has taken thousands of years for humans to learn to follow the precept: but it is the straight and narrow path, and we do not seem to be biologically or genetically programmed to follow it. It is only for the self-selected minority!

Such were my thoughts as we slowly gained height through the fog, fog which removes all sense of progress. We may have been proceeding further from the sea or higher up the hill, but what was there to show for it? Nothing but dankness. After about an hour we stopped for a rest by a large black rock, a lump of lava, took off our packs and indulged ourselves each with a bar of chocolate.

'How far until we get out of the fog?' asked Henderson.

'Soon, I hope,' replied Alison. 'It gets you down after a while.'

'It certainly does,' Henrik agreed. 'But don't forget why we are here. We had fog like this before, you will remember, but it lifted long enough for us to see the mountain. It will happen again, I'm sure.'

'If the mountain exists at all,' I put in. They all stared at me. 'Maybe our previous sighting was a dream?' I added.

'But the map,' replied Alison practically. 'It's on the map, and I've seen photos. Don't be ridiculous James, of course it's there.'

'But what if it's not?' I persisted. I am not sure why I was being

so contrary. Maybe the fog was seeping into my brain? 'In which case,' I continued, 'we've come all this way for nothing.'

'You may be right, James,' said Henrik, supporting me unexpectedly. 'If the fog persists, even if we climb to the top and back, we will never have seen it. It's as though the volcano was never there.'

'And it will have been a wasted trip,' I added.

'We'll just have to come back then,' Henrik said.

'No!' interjected Henderson. 'You are all being silly! If we climb to the top in the fog of course the mountain will be there. What else would we be walking on?'

'But without sight of the mountain itself, how could we prove it?' Henrik replied...

'Come on,' Alison interrupted. 'Enough banter!... It's my turn to lead, James, you take the back.'

So we upped packs and set off once more into the gloom. Being at the back takes away all responsibility but can also lead to irrational accusations. Why was Alison going so slowly? Why did she turn left then when it would have been easiest to go straight on? Why can't she slow down, this is a silly pace!... This tramp through the fog was not the exhilarating climb I think we were all anticipating but a dreary trudge. Why had we come? We didn't have to spend days travelling this far north just to be in the fog when we could have enjoyed fog of equally high quality on the top of any Lake District hill... Our moods are very much influenced by the weather, I thought: think of the words we use. A sunny disposition.

A grey mood. A bright outlook. In the fog of despair... Was I now in the fog of despair simply because I was in fog? How silly! Whatever happened to the rational individual in charge of his own destiny?

We carried on unmoving through this landscape of mist for another hour or so. It was a surreal world of monochrome, with great blocks of jagged black lava laid randomly on the hillside which suddenly appeared, as if out to get us, alternating with damp gravel that sucked at our feet, and wet snow in which we sank up to our ankles. The only colour came from the increasingly rare hummocks of moss, themselves made drab by grey droplets of mist – perhaps not daring to be too colourful in the unremitting black and white monotony.

And then the sun came out, just like that! Above us was a sky of unbroken blue, below us a field of fog, it's surface now bright and cheerful in the sunshine. We stopped. And looked ahead. And up. And gasped. We were at the edge of the snows, a ridge of rock bisecting the unbroken slopes of white which curved up to the perfect volcanic cone high above our heads. It was too dazzling for the eyes so we had immediately to look away as if a glimpse of heaven was a forbidden pleasure that would blind us forever. Without speaking we took off our packs and sat down, although the fact it was lunchtime might also have had something to do with it! It was the time for sunglasses to come out.

'Wow,' exclaimed Alison with a smile on her face. 'It was not a dream after all!'

'Of course it wasn't,' said Henderson. 'And it doesn't look too

difficult.'

'No,' she agreed. 'Easy snow slopes, although you can see some crevasses at the top. We'll have to be careful there.'

'Yes,' I agreed.

While eating lunch we radioed *The Tangle* and commiserated with Anna and Justinia for their still fogbound existence. In fact they still had not seen the mountain by the time we finally sailed away from Jan Mayen, perhaps doubting its existence until the last. We planned our route ahead: follow the ridge as long as possible, as it would be less tiring than walking in wet snow where every step would sink in deep, until we came to the end of the rock and snow tramping became inevitable.

We set off, confident of being at the top before evening, not that it got dark, and then being able to enjoy an overnight camp on the heights while looking down sympathetically at the lesser world beneath our feet. The ridge, though, turned out to be moraine, mostly covered in wet, slithery stones and mud, but probably still an easier route than the snow. So progress was not particularly quick. Alison and I took it in turns to be at the front, not quite trusting the others to be able to choose the best route. But, in spite of the sticky ground under foot we were now a cheerful group, our spirits having lifted with the fog and now in full clarity with our goal.

When we came to the end of the rock after about another hour of slogging uphill, we stopped for a rest and a much-needed drink. It was hot in the sunshine, with what little breeze there had been having fallen away to calm, so we were down to shirtsleeves. Above

us the snow stretched upwards in an unbroken dazzle of white and below us, now that we had gained a good amount of height, we looked over an unbroken sea of cloud. Apart from the rock ridge we had climbed, the whole view was white in its brightest form, the cloud perhaps a slightly yellower version. We sat in silence, drinking lustily from our water bottles.

The heat of the sun had melted the snow making it wet and heavy, so it was extremely tiring for the person breaking ground. Thus for the next phase of the climb we all took it in turns to lead, those behind following exactly in the footsteps of the one above. The climb was not too steep, the only significant slopes on the whole expedition being those leading up to the final summit ridge, but it was long and unrelenting. I thought of Leif and his surprise that we would not be on skis. He was right. Here were we like Scott plodding along on foot whereas we could, like Amundsen, have been effortlessly gliding over the surface. Well not effortlessly because skiing uphill is always hard work, although less so than walking. Alison and I had considered using skis but although Henderson would probably have coped, Henrik had never been on skis in his life. I amused myself by imagining him, like Bowers, running along beside us three on skis, his legs working twenty to the dozen to keep up and not having enough breath to regale us with our environmental sins!

Skis, of course, spread your weight and make it less likely that you will break through a snow bridge into a hidden crevasse below, so are safer to some extent, and even inexperienced people will find

skiing easier than walking on the way up. The difficulties come on the way down where someone who cannot control speed or direction is in very real danger of ending up in an open crevasse, especially if the cloud is down in whiteout conditions. Thus it was that Alison and I decided not to bring skis although I was regretting it at the moment. We were roped up, though, in case of crevasses, and in any place where there was a depression in the snow, the sign of a possible snow bridge, the person in front probed ahead with an ice axe; maybe there had been a lot of snow the previous winter for we found nothing we could not cross.

There is not much to report about the next three hours of plodding, each of us no doubt lost in our own thoughts, but we were definitely gaining altitude. Even though we were on snow, overheating was the main problem in the sunny and calm conditions and I for one was sweating profusely. Not a good idea in mountain or polar conditions because you need to keep dry to avoid the coldness of damp when you stop or conditions change. Still it was nice to be in the great outdoors in the sunshine with the whole world to ourselves, for it could not be said that the slopes of the mountain were crowded.

I was at the back when it happened. One minute Henrik was walking in front of me, the next minute he was not: he had totally disappeared. I was jerked forward by the rope around my waist and instinctively dug in my ice axe. I noticed immediately that the rope was tight to Henderson who was being pulled to where Henrik had once been so shouted to him to sit down, dig his feet in the snow

and take the strain – which I am glad to say he did immediately. Alison at the front had been pulled to a stop by the rope and turned round, quickly taking in the scene. She took off her rucksack, emptied most of its contents into the snow, quickly walked back past Henderson and put the rucksack under the rope in front of him. Shouting to Henderson and myself to keep a firm hold of the rope, she then pushed the rucksack forward, keeping it under the rope, until it went no further, lay on her front and gingerly wormed her way forward to the hole where Henrik had once been. With the rucksack preventing the rope cutting back into the snow, she looked into the hole, calling 'Henrik, are you alright?'

There was a muffled 'Yes' in response.

She looked up at me and said, 'It looks okay James. Henrik's head is not far down and I think we can haul him out.' Once more looking down the hole she asked Henrik to put his arms above his head, which he did, told Henderson to pull hard on his rope, grabbed Henrik's hands and told him to walk up the crevasse wall in front of him while she and Henderson pulled.

A short while later Henrik's head appeared, then his body and soon he was lying down on the snow beside Alison. I had been concerned that his rucksack might have fallen off and tumbled into the depths but it was still attached to him. I breathed a sigh of relief and congratulated Alison on her quick thinking.

'A bit of a worry,' she replied calmly, 'but all's well that ends well. How are you, Henrik?'

'Fine, thank you.' But when he sat up we could see from his

face that he was not, obviously shaken and suffering from mild shock.

'We'd better move a bit further back from the edge of the crevasse... James, if you untie yourself, we three will move back a bit, and then I will belay you across.'

They moved to where Alison had emptied her rucksack and Henderson and Henrik detached themselves from the rope. She threw the end over to me, I tied it round my waist and, moving a little further uphill and carefully probing with my ice axe, I crossed the hidden crevasse safely.

We sat around on our rucksacks taking stock of the situation. Above us, glowing with a tinge of gold in the westering sun, and the parallel lines of numerous crevasses showing clearly, the slope steepened to the summit ridge.

'We might as well camp for the night here,' I suggested.

'I agree, James,' said Alison. 'We are more than two thirds of the way up, so it is not far now to the summit, but look at all those crevasses. Better to tackle them when we are still fresh in the morning...' She looked across at Henrik. 'Assuming, that is, we still want to carry on?'

'I'm fine,' he replied. 'A bit shaken, but fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. I agree about stopping now, though. A good meal, a drink and a night's sleep and I will be ready for anything in the morning.'

'Isn't a bit risky to go on?' asked Henderson. 'There could be a lot more crevasses to fall into?' This was certainly not the confident

boardroom director I once knew, I thought.

'It was just bad luck,' I replied. 'It is quite common to have a foot fall through, particularly on wet snow, although, I admit, not so common to disappear completely. But as you can see, our safety rope system, worked well...'

'But Alastair,' interrupted Alison, 'if you don't want to continue, I would fully understand. We don't have to get to the very top, look how high we are now.'

We stopped talking for a while just to take in the view. And it was magnificent, the virginal mountain arising alone above its surrounding blanket of cloud. That was all. A clean simplicity of excellence.

'She's right,' I said eventually. 'There's obviously some risk, especially if the weather deteriorates. Although there's not a cloud in the sky at the moment, it may be different tomorrow. Let's make a final decision then.'

'Good idea, James,' put in Henrik. 'I think I will have more confidence in the morning.' A Henrik without confidence? This was new to me, but I did not say anything.

'That's all agreed then?' asked Alison. 'We sleep on it and make a final decision in the morning?'

We all nodded.

'We should make contact with Anna and Justinia and then get the tent up...'

After an excellent meal of curry and rice – after a day's exercise in the fresh air even the worst of dehydrated foods tastes excellent

– we sat outside the tent drinking coffee and feeling relaxed. There was not a breath of wind and the sun, now low on the horizon, was shining directly into our camp; it would not set tonight. The long summer evenings of the Arctic, a time for talking, a time for reminiscences, and time for just enjoying being alive...

With four of us crammed into one tent and with the sun beating down on the canvas all night it was hot and stuffy inside, so I don't think anyone slept particularly well. Next morning we were up bright and early and I think each of us took a breath of wonder as went out of the door for the first time: we had forgotten what the view was like. Nothing had changed other than the movement of the sun across the sky. The sea of fog was still brightly lit below us, the sky above was still a bright blue and the whole mountain still glistened with snow. 'This is why we are here' was the comment consent.

On such a day as this, and with the summit beckoning not too far above our heads, it was impossible not to go on. We even discussed leaving the tent here while we did the summit push, but in the end decided this was an unnecessary risk. A quick change in weather could not be ruled out.

After yesterday's incident and with many more crevasses ahead it was agreed that, as earlier when in the fog, Alison and I would take turns to be at the front; the others certainly did not have the experience to lead us in a zigzag route through a crevasse field. But it was in cheerful and optimistic mood that we set off, the incident yesterday but a dim and irrelevant memory. The slope

slowly became steeper, but there was nothing technically difficult about the climb, just one foot in front of the other. However as the slope steepened the snow hardened and we felt it safer to put on crampons to stop us slipping backwards; but it was never steep enough to feel exposed or unsafe.

We had planned the route from below, following mostly a snow-covered ridge coming down from the summit alongside which crevasses were fewer; however, every now and then we did have to take a detour round the end of a crevasse blocking our direct route. We plodded on upwards, gaining height quickly but stopping for a rest every fifteen minutes or so. When we were about half way up I noticed the first wisps of cloud go past me, brought in by a light breeze coming up the slope we were climbing. Insubstantial, nothing much. I looked up. Nothing else had changed, the sky was still a clear blue, or was that just a hint of high cirrus coming in from the northwest? Still, it would not be long before we were on the rim of the volcano – the summit ridge.

After a couple of hours we came to a break of slope with a steeper ascent ahead and the surface changed from smooth, hard snow into a crystal agglomeration of rime. This meant we could not be far off the ridge. To our left there looked to be an easy traverse upwards, over small mushrooms of rime which would give an easy foothold, and this route we followed. By now there was a strong wind following us up the slope and the wisps of cloud had turned into denser fragments streaming over the summit ridge.

It was not long before we broached the ridge to find a

wonderful sight on the other side: we were looking down into the mouth of a volcano, a beautiful crater filled by a covering of untramelled, virgin snow. Every now and then it disappeared into the vapours of a passing cloud, but it soon returned unsullied in all its glory. But it was not a place to linger, for the biting wind indicated that the mountain had started to turn against us. Still we could see the summit not far away to our left, an easy walk along a ridge wide enough to be comfortable. True every now and then the rime-encrusted summit itself disappeared and there was now a definite sheet of high cloud covering half the sky, but the peak was still catching the gold of the sun and drawing us onwards. So by common consent and after putting on an extra layer or two layer of warm clothing we agreed to march on.

The distance was deceptive, though, and it was further than it looked. The summit became more often lost in cloud than not and by the time we reached the final slope it had disappeared completely. The wind was now approaching gale force and the cloud was beginning to freeze on our hair and jackets, giving us that epic polar explorer look. We had a quick conversation and decided to make a dash to the top and come straight down again. I looked at my watch and it was still before midday so time was on our side. However we were not going to be having that enjoyable sun-drenched experience we were imagining when we left our camp. Our goal had changed by necessity from experience to achievement: we were so near what we had planned all those years ago that the idea of turning back had little chance of penetrating our brains, especially as cold and wind tend to militate against rational thought;

and in any case an epic adventure is generally more memorable in the long term than an easy route to success, or success itself. It is certainly a better route to fame – think of Scott and Shackleton!

The summit was as we had first experienced it on the deck of the *Ice Bear* all those years ago – invisible; that time the curtain was pulled aside long enough for us to behold its beauty, but not this time. When eventually we found ourselves no longer going upwards, we stopped, raised a half-hearted cheer and quickly formed into a group hug, before turning round and heading straight back the way we had come. That was all. To this day I cannot be sure we reached the actual top because we might have been standing on a false summit a few metres below the real one?

It was worse going down because we were headed more into the wind and there were now icy spicules stinging our faces. We had brought goggles for such conditions, but as these tend to get condensation or readily ice-up I am never quite sure whether they are a help or a hindrance. So we were half-blind as we descended, just following the person in front, and the person in front keeping to the crest of the ridge more by feel than sight.

In these conditions we could not find the exact place we came up but by careful dead-reckoning Alison and I agreed roughly where it was. We looked over the edge to the slope below, or where the slope would have been if we could only see it, and it was like being hit by a sledgehammer. The wind had gone beyond gale force and was howling uphill battering any living thing foolish enough to be at that height – us! What is more it was carrying ice pellets, probably

fiercer than pellets discharged from a shot gun at close range. Alison and I were literally blown backwards. There was no way we would be able to go back down until the wind had dropped; with no alternative we would have to find a sheltered spot in the lee of the ridge and sit it out in our tent.

Shelter was hard to find; the leeward side of the ridge was certainly experiencing less of a gale than the windward, but it was by no means calm. We did not dare go too far down the other side because there looked to be a cornice building up there, which if trodden on could easily break and take us down with it. The rime was too hard to easily dig a shelter but, while we put up the tent, Alison and I set Henrik and Henderson to cutting what blocks they could with their axes to build a wall that might mitigate the full force of the wind. I do not know if you have ever tried to put up a tent in strong wind, but the canvas takes on a life of its own, manically flapping and trying to tear itself from your hands. It took all our concentration as we struggled, our task not made any easier by the stinging snow and spindrift, and with the cold beginning to seep into our bodies. I had to take off my mittens to attach the guy ropes and my hands froze instantly. But we got the tent up eventually and flung our rucksacks under the fly sheet to stop them drifting up.

Alison and I looked around for the others. It was full white-out conditions with visibility restricted to what seemed like only an arm's length or so. We called out, probably a pointless activity with the wind tearing away our voices and causing our hoods to flap

loudly in our ears so that we probably would not in any case hear any shouted reply. We started walking around the tent in ever widening circles looking for them. We blundered into what turned out to be beginnings of a wall but there was no sign of Henrik or Henderson, not even their rucksacks which we assumed they would have taken off when building the wall. Carrying on round from there to the other side of the tent Alison suddenly put her arm out in the universal sign to stop. I stopped, and it was lucky that I did. Right beneath my feet the cornice had recently broken away causing a snow-slide down into the crater. Although there were no footprints visible on the hard surface of rime, or if there were they had immediately filled in with spindrift, it seemed obvious what had happened. Alison and I walked back from the edge and shouted at each other.

'They must be down there.'

'Yes,' Alison agreed. 'One of us better go down after them. I'll go.'

'No, you belay me and I'll go.' It was no time for arguing. 'I'll get the rope. I'll tug three times when I want to stop, once to carry on down again and two to come up.'

'Okay.'

There was no need for further talk as we both knew what we were doing. She stuck her ice axe into the snow to assist with the belay while I tied the rope round my waist and over the edge I went. It was not particularly steep but for safety I still walked down backwards as Alison slowly let out the rope, my axe at the ready in

case I needed an emergency stop. There was hard rime and snow underneath with a thin covering of loose new snow that slid easily down over its surface. A short way down I suddenly realised it had become silent, totally silent. I was in the full lee of the ridge. There was only a gentle sprinkle of snow falling down around me and I remember thinking that this must be what it feels to be in the eye of a hurricane: an oasis of calm amid the mayhem of storm. It was so still, and such a contrast to the previous battering, that it felt unearthly, as though I had entered the realm of the Snow Queen. Maybe she had taken Henrik and Henderson to her own? Which thought brought me immediately back to the task in hand.

I looked below and immediately tugged on the rope three times. Beneath me there was darkness, the gaping blue-tinged darkness of a massive bergshcrund. The crevasse walls were smooth, becoming wider with depth and opening out into a bottomless chasm which would irrevocably swallow up anything that fell into it. There was no way I would be able to penetrate its depths even if I had the courage – our rope was simply not long enough.

I did not linger but tugged twice and immediately felt Alison pull on the rope thereby helping me climb back up. I was soon at the top and reported, or rather shouted, my findings. Alison said she must see for herself so we reversed roles and I lowered her down the slope. It was not long before she was back up beside me. We hugged briefly then made for the tent. There was nothing else we could do.

We took off our outer clothing in the shelter of the entrance and then bundled into the tent. It was not restful inside as the canvas was flapping madly and there was the constant hiss of spindrift striking the outside. We tried the radio but got no reply, presumably being over the ridge enough to be out of direct line of sight, or maybe it was that the atmospheric conditions were wrong. It seemed spacious in the tent with just Alison and me but it was cold so after eating some chocolate we climbed into our sleeping bags and snuggled up to each other. We did not talk much, each of us lost to our own thoughts. The noise made it difficult to relax but we did manage to doze on and off and eventually must have fallen asleep completely.

We awoke at the same time because something had changed although we did not realise what it was at first: there was no snow battering the tent and the wind had dropped so that the canvas had resorted to only a gentle flapping. I stuck my head out of the door hoping for clear skies but the cloud was still down, thicker than ever if anything. I looked at my watch: it was six in the morning.

We melted some snow over the stove, and for breakfast enjoyed a hot cup of tea and some biscuits and cheese. Thereafter in the relatively calm conditions it did not take long to pack-up and soon we were off. The descent off the ridge proved straightforward and losing height quickly we managed to avoid falling into any crevasses. After about an hour we came out of the cloud: just like that! One minute we could hardly see in front of our noses, and the next minute we were in the dazzling world of sun – a world as we

had experienced it on the way up: the same clear blue sky above, the same glistening snow slopes below and the same carpet of cloud shrouding the snow-free ground and the sea. A world of white and blue above mere mortals, mortals who were trapped in the grey fog beneath.

Even though we had seen it all before we had to stop: it would have been sacrilegious not to. Alison and I sat down side by side on the snow, shoulder to shoulder and took it all in. I turned round and looked up the slope we had just come down. It quickly disappeared into the mist and the summit was still absent. Had it ever been there, I wondered? Had all we had been through ever happened? It seemed impossible that two worlds could be so near yet so different: the crystal clear and the obscuring fog. And yet this whole story is of these two worlds, one real, one imagined – reality overlapping with might-have-beens.

Alison turned to me. 'It's hard to believe, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'To have finally reached the summit...'

'Yes…'

I sighed. 'So that's it, then?'

She laid her head down on my shoulder. 'Yes, that's it...'

We sat together in silence.

'I suppose we'd better contact Anna and Justinia,' said Alison eventually.

'I suppose we had.'

'But I don't want to go back down.'

'No, neither do I…'

We could not stay there forever so once more we were heading downhill, the snow cushioning our steps and enabling quick progress. We lost height quickly and it seemed no time at all before we were at the edge of the fog which was waiting below, determined to envelop us. Before entering the gloom of restricted visibility Alison and I stopped and took one last look back at the soaring heights of the volcano. I took her hand and squeezed it.

It was the last time either of us were ever to see the mountain. By the end of the day we were back on board *The Tangle* supping refreshing and much-needed mugs of tea with Justinia and Anna, having informed Leif that we were back safely. With the fog all around us, lapping the very edges of the boat, the volcano was already fading into a dream of unreality. There was much to tell, and yet not much to tell: were those who had not seen the volcano particularly interested in the details of our climb?

That night I had a strange dream. Henrik was on the bridge of the *Ocean Campaign* steaming at speed across the Indian Ocean whereas Henderson was on the bridge of the *Ocean Container* steaming at full speed in the opposite direction. They were on a collision course and neither was willing to give way. However at the last minute they both turned the wheel, passing so close to each other that their bridge wings almost clipped and at the same time Henrik leapt aboard the *Ocean Container* and Henderson the *Ocean Campaign*. They immediately took command of their respective vessels.

'Slow down by three knots,' said Henrik to the helmsman. 'Travelling at this speed is wasting too much fuel and think of the global warming impact. It will make us more efficient.'

On the other ship, Henderson was telling his helmsman to speed up. 'This will maximise use of our time with the whaling fleet,' he explained, 'making us more efficient.'

I awoke with a start. Were Henrik and Henderson still in my life? I cuddled up to Alison for comfort.

The next morning we upped our anchor and began the long sea voyage south. Most of the time we four were standing in the wheelhouse, swaying gently in tune to the movement of the boat and just watching the sea in silence.

'What was it really like on the summit,' asked Anna suddenly. 'Was it worth it?'

I looked across at Alison who replied for us both. 'Worth it? I don't know. The actual summit was horrible – unwelcoming and inhospitable… We achieved it, but at the top there was no sense of elation, only an immediate desire to turn round and get off the place as quickly as possible. Isn't that true, James?'

'Yes, absolutely. And I didn't like to say this before, Alison, but can we be sure we actually reached it? I mean, we might have been on a false summit a few metres below the real one invisible in the mist.'

'Does it matter?'

'Yes and no. I suppose a few metres either way makes no difference…' I paused. 'But more importantly, when on the snowy

slopes of the mountain, going up and coming down, it was like catching the gold of the sun…'

There is not really much more to tell. After leaving Jan Mayen our return southwards on *The Tangle* was a repeat of the way up, Scotland via Iceland and the Faeroes. The seas and winds were favourable with no rough weather to report and, being in no particular rush, we managed most of it under sail. We were sad to part with Anna whom we dropped off at Tórshavn, where we also spent a couple of days enjoying Faeroese hospitality. Justinia left us back in Oban to return to her campaigning.

And that left just the two of us, as it always had been, perhaps finally ready to cease our wanderings and allow deeper roots to grow – but I am not certain about this as *The Tangle* would always be there to tempt us away. With the sea on our doorstep, and the whole world beckoning, who could resist? But for the moment we are content.

**Epilogue**

Out of our window, as I write, I can see the mist swirling around the distant crags of High Fell and I can imagine the wind howling through every gully, the driving rain battering any living being foolish enough to be at that height; or may be it is driving snow? – no matter. The summit itself is lost in the cloud, but it must be there, surely?...

You now have read the story. Do you think it true? Or is it merely meanderings through the waters of various seas which are, to all intents and purposes, unfathomable? And what of Henrik and Henderson, I hear you ask, without whom there would really be nothing to tell? Do they, did they, exist beyond myself and my imagination? Perhaps the question you should really ask is, 'Which of the three paths did I take?' I hope my reply would be along the lines that I have or, in time will have, taken them all…

I leave the reader to straighten out the meanders if they so wish, but this is not an injunction, merely a suggestion. I prefer the meanders myself, for a meandering river holds more appeal than a straight one.