

Middle Watch

Autor(en): **Stornoway**

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Middle Watch

by Stornoway

«Come here, you horrible man.»

A cold shiver ran down David's spine as a stentorian voice boomed these words. To be so addressed on a ship means that one has incurred a senior officer's displeasure, and on David's first day on the «Fandango» he did not want to have anyone displeased with him. On his knees in a flag locker, he at first thought it might be good policy to ignore the voice, but as the long pair of legs in officers' pants outside the locker, which was all he could see of the man, showed no signs of going away, he emerged. A young man wearing second officer's bars on his sleeve, a grin splitting his face from ear to ear, looked down at him. David could hardly believe his eyes.

«Randy», he almost shouted as they gripped hands. «How wonderful to see you! I did not know you were on this ship, or even with this Company.»

«I saw you come up to the bridge and I could hardly believe it.» The officer's voice was equally excited as David's. «It's so nice to see you.»

They talked for a few minutes.

«I've got to go now», said the officer suddenly. «With sailing day I've all sorts of things to do. We'll talk later. See you», and he was gone.

David went back to his locker, closed the door, and sat down to think. He lighted a cigarette, which was strictly against orders, and wished he had a drink. For David, pleased as he was to see Randy, meeting him on board the same ship raised a problem. Randy Howlan was a ship's officer. He, David Wilmor was an able seaman. They had known each other previously under circumstances when rank did not matter; on the same ship, officers and other ranks must inevitably be worlds apart.

They had met some six months previously, by chance, sharing the same cubicle at an all-night Turkish bath in London. Having had their baths and massage, they relaxed on adjacent couches, comfortably wrapped in blankets. They exchanged cigarettes, and conversation was easy. It had not taken long to establish the fact that both were sailors. Neither wanted to sleep, nor could have done so, in any case. All sorts of creeps, old and young, were ambling up and down the corridor, peering through the curtains to see who was in the various cubicles. The place was very noisy and there was an almost complete lack of privacy for anyone who wanted to get some rest. Randy had a flat where he lived when he was on shore. His suggestion was that they should go there, have some drinks, and David could stay there for the rest of the night if he wished. This they did, and when they returned to their respective ships next morning, it seemed as though they had known each other a long time. It seemed also, that they might never meet again, for Randy was an officer on a big passenger ship, and David, who did not like liners, was an able seaman on a tramp steamer.

Now here they were, both on the «Fandango», an old tramp bound for Ceylon with mixed general cargo, to bring back another from the Orient. David crushed out his cigarette, finished sorting his flags, and still feeling very thoughtful, went below.

They cleared the docks late in the evening and headed down the misty river which is London's front gate. David was on the twelve-to-four watch on the bridge; he hoped it was Randy's watch, but was disappointed to find the Third

Officer, a very sour-looking character, appear. The Captain and River Pilot were also there, with a quartermaster at the wheel. There was no sign of Randy, whom David had not seen since their brief meeting earlier.

The watch passed; the ship cleared the river and the Captain and Pilot left the bridge. At seven bells, the Third Officer rapped out an order. «Go shake the next watch; Second Officer; take him some tea.»

David checked the watch list and went below. Then he ran down to the galley, made a strong brew of tea which he took to the Officer's flat. Outside the door marked «Second Officer» he knocked and entered. Randy was stretched out on top of the bunk; he seemed to be asleep. A faint shaft of light came through the open port. Randy's body was dark and suntanned above the waist and so were his legs; in between was a translucent whiteness. He slept entirely unclothed, as most seamen do.

For a few seconds David stood by the bunk. Then, very softly, he whispered, «Randy».

There was no answer. David put the tea-tray on the bedside desk; his memory went back to that other time, when it was Randy shaking him, bringing tea, and afterwards, ham and eggs. Why he thought of the ham and eggs, he did not know. He gave Randy a gentle shake.

Randy sat up laughing, and threw an arm about David's shoulders. «I saw you come in», he said.

David was pleased, but a little embarrassed. «Rise and shine», he said. «It's time for your watch.»

«I know. I've been waiting for you. I knew you would come. I wish we took the same watch, though.»

«I'll pour your tea.»

«Sit down and talk to me while I dress.»

«I should go back to the bridge. I don't think the Third Officer likes me.»

«Mr. Crabbe, otherwise known as Fishface, doesn't like anyone. Stay a little while.»

David sat down on the bunk and Randy passed him a cigarette. He made no attempt to dress, but lay there, propped on an elbow, sipping tea.

«I got fired from my last ship, you know», he volunteered.

«Fired? How come?»

«Yes. Bloody silly woman passenger practically accused me of rape.»

«I say, that's a bit naughty, isn't it. Did you rape her?»

«Of course not. I had her up to my cabin for drinks, strictly against the rules and not because I wanted to, but you have to do these things. The others all had their women up and if I didn't play around a bit they'd think me odd. The silly bitch came in one night and wanted to mess around and when I tried to get her out she said I'd humiliated her and she started to scream her head off. The Chief Officer heard her and had me up before the Old Man. He read the riot act and then said I would be demoted to a cargo ship where I would not be «in the path of temptation» as he so delicately put it. How little he knew the type of temptation that appeals to me. Anyhow, I said to get friggid, and joined this outfit. I'm glad I did now.»

«It's going to be a bit dodgy», David said as he crushed out his cigarette. «We can't really know each other. You're upper deck; I'm lower.»

«Balls!» Randy heaved himself off the bunk and pulled his shirt on. «We'll find a way to get together. You'd better go now I think, or Fishface will get

agitated.»

Reluctantly David left the cabin.

«You've been a bloody long time», the Third Officer growled at him when he returned to the bridge. «When I tell you to do a thing, you run to it, see.»

Randy and the new watch arrived a few minutes later. David felt the warmth of Randy's smile in the darkness; though he could not see it, he knew it was there. Relieved of his look-out, he went below to the cabin he shared with Able Seaman Sullivan, also on the same watch.

«Don't get in wrong with Mr. Crabbe», Sullivan advised him. «He's a right bastard. Now the Second, he's a good bloke. I wish I was on his watch.»

David stripped off his clothes and climbed into his bunk, but not to sleep. Too many thoughts raced through his brain. Though life might be pleasurable from now on, it could also be full of problems. David lacked Randy's casual attitude towards things he thought mattered. For himself, nothing was of great importance, but Randy, with a career ahead of him, could not take chances. When dawn came, David still had not slept.

Days passed pleasantly and uneventfully. From the bleak Atlantic the «Fandango» drifted into the sun-drenched Mediterranean, and from there through Suez to the humid heat-sweltering Red Sea. The two men saw little of each other. There was no opportunity for conversation when Randy relieved the afternoon watch. Almost their only contact was early in the morning when David went in to shake Randy and take him tea. That gave them ten minutes together. One morning as Randy was dressing, and David sitting on the bunk, the door was flung open and the Third Officer burst in.

«What the hell do you want?» Randy demanded.

The Third was a little non-plussed to see David sitting there, a cigarette in his mouth. He also seemed a little angry.

«To see if you'd been called», he announced. «And to find out where Wilmor was. I didn't expect to find everything quite so matey.»

«Wilmor and I have known each other a long time», Randy remarked as casually as he could. Rather sternly, he added. «You know, Third, you are not supposed to leave the bridge under any circumstances.»

«I was just checking.»

«You don't have to. Now get back.»

When David returned to the bridge, the Third Officer was bending over some maps in the chart room. He did not look up, and said nothing.

A few days later the ship was in Colombo harbour. One can smell Colombo long before one sees it, if the breeze is in the right direction. There is a sweet heady smell of spices from the cinnamon gardens, and the mixed perfume of all the flowers of the East. When David went to shake Randy that morning he felt an excitement such as he had not known for a long time.

For two weeks the «Fandango» lay in the harbour with ships of all nations and native craft of varied and fantastic design. Sinhalese in multicoloured sarongs unloaded cargo into barges, and reloaded again. The ship's crew carried on their usual routine, but in a relaxed manner, for in Colombo only the Sinhalese really want to work. Everyone had ample shore leave. Randy and David met daily in a garden by an old Buddhist temple on the outskirts of the bazaar so they might be immune from criticism or gossip on the part of other members of the ship's company whom they might meet ashore. They spent pleasant hours in the bazaar and taking rickshaw rides to a lovely palm-fringed

beach beyond the city limits, there to lie in the sun and talk and sleep and swim in the clear water of the lagoon. Only a few incurious Sinhalese from a nearby village ever frequented the beach and these took no notice of the two Englishmen. It was very pleasant, and remote from reality. Nights they would go back to the garden by the temple, from there to make their separate ways back to the ship. Randy did not care; it was David who insisted they do things this way.

«I wish this could go on forever», he said one day as the sun went down in a blaze of flame beyond the outer reef.

«Yes. I also», Randy answered. «It has all been so perfect, so wonderful. But we sail in two days. This must be our last day here; for me, tomorrow, it won't be possible.»

«I hate to think I'll see you only for a few minutes every morning when I give you a shake.»

Randy smiled. «You won't be shaking me. All crew watches are rearranged homeward bound. You're coming on mine.»

David was pleased, but at the same time a little apprehensive. «A bit dodgy, that, I think. If we talk together on watch, it might be noticed.»

«What if it is? I think I'll leave after this voyage.»

«Leave?» David sat up suddenly, alarm in his voice. «But why? If you do that, then I won't see you again. It's not so bad, really. Though we're restricted, we do have something.»

Randy lay on his back, his hands behind his head, and still smiling. «You could leave too», he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

«Yes I know, but for what? If we went somewhere else together, it would still be like it is now.»

«Not necessarily», said Randy, grinning as though he had not dropped this bombshell. «Not on our own ship. I said *our* ship.» He put his hand on David's shoulder and pulled him down beside him. The sun had gone down; it was dark, and a little cold. «Lie close beside me and I'll tell you about it.»

Randy was at sea, partly to make a career, and partly because he just liked being at sea. Although only second officer in rank, he had his Master's Ticket, which meant that as a navigation officer he was fully qualified to take command of a vessel. He had a small private income, enough to pay for what he termed his minor vices, and to maintain his flat in London. He also had recently received a cash legacy from an aunt amounting to a few hundred pounds. He explained this to David.

«I'm thinking of buying a boat», he added. «Not a large one, about thirty or forty feet.»

«For what purpose, Randy?» David inquired.

«To make some more money, if I can, and also to fulfil an ambition. I've always wanted to sail right round the world in my own boat. Actually, I only want to make enough to pay the expenses.»

«How many crew?»

«Four besides ourselves. You will be my Number One. I've got four fellows in mind. You'll like them. They're good seamen, and what is a big thing for people like us, they understand the facts of life. There would also be two passengers.»

«Why passengers? Will it be a pleasure cruise?»

«Not exactly. I have two friends in Oxford who have a University grant

to study bird life and they are looking for lesser known marine specimens. They could help financially, and it was originally their idea. As we would be away for two years I'd give up the London flat, or let it, and there are also opportunities for trading, particularly in the Indies and in the Pacific. It won't be easy all the time, but lots of people have sailed the world in small boats, and I don't see why we can't do it also. If «Kon-Tiki» can cross the Pacific, so can we.»

«It sounds wonderful», David said. «As long as we eat, and get a drink now and again, and are together, I wouldn't want any more.»

«It *will* be wonderful, David», Randy said. He raised himself on his elbows and looked into David's face. Then he kissed him very gently. «It will be the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to either of us. Without you, I wouldn't want to go, but with you —».

He left the rest of the sentence unspoken, and got up, brushing the sand from his body. «Come on, let's go back.»

They dressed, and whistled for the rickshaw boys who waited patiently further along the beach. They ate a powerful red curry in a native restaurant and went back to the ship, for the first time together. They walked slowly through the narrow streets of the noisy colourful bazaar and it was late when they reached the pier. On the service launch that took them out to the «Fandango» was the Third Officer. He sat reading a newspaper, pretending not to see them, but when they reached the ship he stood aside to let Randy board. He ignored David.

Two days later the «Fandango» was homeward bound. Now on the same watch, Randy and David had a little more time to talk. They discussed their future plans with ever growing enthusiasm.

Time passed; soon they had passed Gibraltar and were only three days from England.

Coming off watch the afternoon they moved into the Atlantic, Randy said brightly. «I've got the Channels. Get some grub. Then come to my cabin and we'll crack a bottle.»

«The Channels» is a mental state which overcomes sailors after a long voyage and comes on when they are within a few days of England. It is a state of careless disregard for everyone and everything, a type of mental intoxication almost like during carnival time in Rio, when anything crazy can and does happen. David also had the Channels. When he arrived at Randy's cabin, two large gins were poured out, waiting.

«I hope Fishface didn't see me come up», David remarked as he downed his first gin.

«To hell with Fishface», Randy replied. «Let's make it a night».

They drank and talked until the gin level was well below the plimsol line. With their new plans there was a lot to talk about.

«Well, Channels or not, we've still got to keep watches», Randy said eventually. «I'm going to turn in.»

He stripped off his uniform and climbed into his bunk.

«Don't go yet», he said to David who had got up to leave. «Stay a little longer. Lie down beside me, just for ten minutes, and then go.»

«It's crazy», David said, but he kicked off his shoes and lay down on top of the bunk. Randy threw an arm round his shoulders. In a few minutes David could hear Randy's quiet regular breathing. «I ought to go», he thought to himself. «I must go.»

It seemed only a few minutes later, though several hours had passed, when the door was flung open and the cabin flooded with light. David sat up, and when he saw Fishface standing there, leaped off the bunk. Randy also sat up, and sweeping the bed covers aside, climbed out.

Fishface was exultant. «You dirty bastards», he said. «I knew there was something going on between you two. And you're late for your watch.»

«We were having a drink», said Randy with an air of unconcern. «Must have passed out.»

«It looks like it, the way you're dressed», Fishface sneered, and was beside himself with excitement. «I knew all the time there was something going on between, you two, you dirty pair of bastards.»

Without hesitating, or even thinking David threw a quick left to Fishface's jaw and followed with a quick right to his face. The officer went crashing into the bulkhead, blood streaming from his nose. Randy pulled on his clothes. Lights came on in the alleyway outside and there was a buzz of voices.

«Get up and get back to the bridge», Randy ordered. «I'll be there in a minute to take over.»

The Third Officer picked himself up; he looked malevolent.

«Wait till the Old Man hears about this», he threatened as he went out. «I'll have the two of you in jail.»

«Hell, what have I done now?» David asked, when they were alone.

«You struck an officer, which is a crime», Randy replied. «But man, am I glad you did. Let's go.»

Outside in the alleyway they ran into a small group of junior officers.

«Get back to bed, you lot», Randy ordered. «It's none of your business.»

They looked curiously at David, but disappeared.

The Third Officer was on the bridge, his nose still bloody and an eye rapidly turning purple. «I'm having you both up before the Old Man», he threatened.

«I know», said Randy impatiently. «You told us before. Now give me the log book and get below.»

The watch seemed endless, but they carried it through, and then after handing over to the next watch, they too went below.

«See me later Dave, and don't worry.» If Randy was himself worried, he did not show it. «We're both right in the fertiliser, and we don't know what Fishface is going to do about it.»

David went into the mess room for breakfast. Only watchkeepers were there, including Sullivan. Usually the mess was a place of noisy and cheerful disorder, but today, each man ate his meal in silence. No one looked at David as he entered, and no one spoke while he was there. On his way back to his cabin he passed two stewards giggling in the working alleyway.

«Well, get her, the crafty one», one of them remarked, and the remark was only too obviously addressed at David.

«Don't be bold, dear», said the other. «Officers' wives don't talk to firemen's wives.»

David stopped, turned back, grabbed them both by their necks, and brought their heads together with a resounding crash. They collapsed screaming in the alleyway. A couple of firemen further along laughed at the incident but said nothing. David did not know if their laughter was friendly or derisive.

In the cabin Sullivan was reclining on the upper bunk reading a comic book

with intense concentration. David lay down on his own bunk and chain smoked. Suddenly Sullivan heaved himself on to the deck.

«Dave», he demanded.

«Well?»

«Is it true you beat Fishface up like he is?»

«What if I did?»

Sullivan was stuck for words. «I'm bloody glad», he said at length. David did not answer, and Sullivan continued. «I'm bloody glad, but is the rest of it true?»

«What rest of it?»

«That — that he caught you and Mr. Howlan in bed together.»

«No. No, that's not true.»

Sullivan seemed unconvinced. «Well, they tell me he said he did.»

«He didn't. The Second was in bed. I was on it. We had some drinks and passed out.»

Sullivan looked really shocked. «But you don't drink with officers, Dave, or do you? That ain't done.»

«I knew Mr. Howlan before either he or I, or even you came to this ship. I knew him on shore. We were friends.»

Sullivan was still doubtful. «Of course, if you like a little carry-on at sea like lots of the lads, no one minds so long as you stick to your own class. Carrying-on with officers ain't right, and that's what the other lads don't like. That's why they won't talk to you. If you was having a bit of the «Oh be joyful» with someone else, they'd just laugh about it and want to come to the wedding.»

«We weren't having a bit of the «Oh be joyful» as you call it.»

«I believe you if you say so», said Sullivan, «but none of the others will.»

A middle aged quartermaster appeared in the doorway.

«The Old Man wants you on the bridge», he announced. «Right away.»

David followed him to the holy of holies, the Captain's flat. They had to wait outside for a few minutes. David could hear the Captain's voice, and knew that Randy was inside.

«And I will not have this ship used for your disgusting, unnatural low-class liaisons with crew members», the Captain was shouting. «The best thing you can do is radio your resignation to the Company today and I will confirm it.»

«That, Sir, I will gladly do», Randy answered coolly. «And it was not a disgusting unnatural low-class liaison. We were friends.»

«Whatever you were, it's nauseating. You may go, Mr. Howlan.»

Randy looked only slightly concerned when he came out. He smiled when he saw David. «Come down when you're through», he whispered. «And don't let him intimidate you.»

«Able Seaman Wilmor», the Captain announced without looking up after David had been ushered into The Presence. The Chief Officer also was there. «You are charged with assaulting an officer and doing him bodily harm. Anything to say?»

«Yes, Sir. I was provoked. The officer made a false accusation and used offensive language.»

«Ordinary seamen are never provoked. You could be sent to jail, but I want no scandals and I cannot waste time with charges in court. You are fined one week's pay and at the end of the voyage you will leave the ship with a bad

discharge. Anything to say?»

David swallowed. The week's pay meant little, but a bad discharge would mean difficulty in ever getting another ship. «No, Sir», he said.

«Then you may go.»

Randy was waiting in his cabin. «We might as well finish the last of the gin», he said cheerfully. «I'll get no more. How did you do?»

«Logged a week's pay and a bad discharge.»

«Me — I've been fired again. Cheers!» They clinked glasses, and after drinking them off, Randy refilled them.

«Funny thing», he said. «Fired from my last ship for the alleged rape of a female, which I didn't do, and from this one for having a disgusting unnatural low-class liaison with a crew member, which I haven't had either, at least not on board. I'm never right.» He grinned mischievously, leaned over, and brushed David's cheek lightly with his lips.

«Only two more days to go in this little hell», Randy continued. «Think you can stand it? What's the atmosphere like down below?»

«The atmosphere's very frigid, but I can stand it», David admitted. «The boys think there has been a disgusting liaison, but they don't put it in those words. It would have been all right if it had not been with you. As an officer, you're untouchable. I think they're all very pleased I beat Fishface up. Sullivan says so, but he's the only one who will talk to me. I couldn't care less of course.»

«In two days time», Randy repeated, «we'll be out of it all. We'll go to the flat; I always keep that on. When I get the other lads together we'll buy the yacht and off we'll go. The end of the world is our limit, our Ultima Thule. What do you say?»

David said nothing. He lay back on the bunk and closed his eyes and smiled. Already he could feel the heat of the sun, and hear the crash of surf on far-away shores; already he could smell the perfume of magnolia and jasmine from the garden by the temple, and from other gardens also. When he opened his eyes Randy was looking down at him, half serious, half smiling. He opened wide his arms.

Problem men of today are often the most talented

Two doctors who have made a special study of homosexuality report today that out of 5,000 patients who went for psychiatric consultation 5 per cent. of males over 16 were homosexuals.

Of 100 homosexual patients they specially studied, 51 had been to public schools, 19 to grammar schools, 13 to secondary schools, and only ten to elementary schools.

The doctors, Dr. Desmond Curran, a consultant psychiatrist, and Dr. Denis Parr, of the Department of Psychiatry at St. George's Hospital, London, report in the *British Medical Journal* that 41 of the 100 had been to universities.

Thirty-four were professional men, including clergymen, doctors, teachers and Civil servants.

Some were «important and talented individuals of high integrity, successful, efficient and respected members of the community.»

Very few showed the traditional «pansy» picture of homosexuals. The doctors discovered that 19 of the 100 had at some time been married and 17 had physical experience of women.»

«Many homosexuals», they point out, «indulge in intercourse with women out of academic curiosity, or in an attempt at self-diagnosis or treatment.»

From: Daily Herald, London.