



TURMOIL ON THE TODWICH

1 We were two days out of Sydney, heading south, when I first realised that Greg Johnson had something pretty weighty on his mind. The *Witch* was pushing into a stiff westerly; more than holding her own, as usual, but taking a little punishment in the meantime.

2 Through most of my watch Johnson had been leaning against the rail staring down into the tumbling, foaming, green and white waters. His unceasing, trancelike staring at the water could have fooled one into thinking he was deep in sleep, except that he was automatically riding the roll of the ship. For all my years at sea, taking its good and its demon moods, I am still moved, one way or another, when there is a bit of a blow on, so he must have been struggling with some pretty

knotty problem to remain unaffected by it all.

3 Finally, with the seas beginning to get up dangerously I decided I would feel much happier with him safely stowed away.

I was about to order him below when a monster, coming almost from nowhere, broke over our port bow and went close to washing him overboard. This got through to him. It should have too; he was never wetter, spewing water as he grasped the railing with both hands. He shoved off to his cabin.

4 Assured of his safety and still capable of making his way below, I allowed myself the pleasure of a chuckle; amusement is where you find it.

The *Witch* was mainly cargo; fitted to carry no more than ten passengers. Sometimes I would be happier with less. Cargo and its destination can often be the much more interesting commodity. But; before you are tempted to hang me on the wrong peg, I am always ready to extend a genuine welcome to the occasional interesting soul that climbs aboard and makes that particular trip a pleasant one. A bonus for which I am always watchful and grateful.

5 Maybe the crews of the liners wouldn't agree with me, but I often feel sorry for them; several hundreds of passengers! The trippers who ship with us are, generally, inclined to carry themselves in the most nautical of manners. Always, to them, this is an interesting excursion from their more mundane behaviours, and great pains are made to mimic their seaworthy chaperones. My intolerance of their buffoonery is well-disguised, but I only ask that they keep out of my way, and not ask any fool questions. Usually, they are not particularly interested in the answers, anyway. The Chief Officer on a tub like the *Witch* can get away with that attitude and generally I did just that.

6 The crossing of the non-line separating the Pacific from the Tasman usually livens things up for us. We are always ready for it, and this trip helped to lift the average. Funny about the non-line: it might be non-existent but you knew when you had crossed it because the quality of conditions in the two areas were unmistakably different.

7 With the holds barely half-full we were riding a bit high. The old tub was heaving about like a bankrupt in bed, and we were looking forward to making Fremantle in a couple of weeks. There we would build up to a full cargo, giving us some fervently hoped-for stability.

The weather improved considerably when we headed west out of Bass Strait. The temperature dropped ten to twelve degrees, but at least you

could relax. Temporarily at least; you never fully relaxed on the *Witch*.

8 Almost a quarter of a century ago, to the sound of stirring music and the roars of hearty cheers, she had been proudly christened *SS Todwich* as she sidled smoothly into the water, but as early as her maiden voyage her unpredictable behaviour and tantrums had forced a frustrated and maddened crew to nick-name her, with extreme depth of feeling, the *Witch*.

9 When the going was heavy and her churning innards were threatened she played the lady, willingly accepting your advice and help to save herself a ravishment, and then, perversely, in the gentlest of swells, when you hoped to settle down and enjoy the run with her, she would tumble around like a taunting tease, killing affection and upsetting all but the most serene of bellies. Crewmembers would, in unprintable language, give you a dozen valid reasons for leaving her, but they stayed with her. They were not able (or, perhaps, not prepared) to explain why — sailor superstition, maybe.

10 I know my deep-down feeling about her, and I don't think it was pushing luck to admit it. The *Witch* was a born survivor, indestructible, and nothing was going to topple her. This could also be said of certain people.

Johnson was an interesting character, remote yet intriguing. From his first day his efforts to avoid anything more than necessary communication with anyone on board soon hatched the usual whispers. And whispers, in the close confines of a ship, will easily out-roar any other nerve-jangling din; above or below the waterline. His behaviour fascinated me to the point where I considered breaking one of my golden rules.

11 My watch finally relented three hours later, and I was able to drop below decks for some hard-

won relaxation. Despite swinging in its alcove, my hammock called to me, siren-like, after the tension of the waves above. However, my mind was somersaulting worse than my stomach, and I knew that I would not even be able to do so much as blink my eyes until I settled my curiosity. So it was that I found my fist rapping on Johnson's door.

12 The man that bid my entrance was significantly drier than his earlier counterpart, having changed and dried the brine off. His demeanour, however, was far more pronounced in its coldness. My first attempt was to thaw him, to lay down the law of the ocean — no individual comes before the crew, and a man burdened by his shore life could crack a steamer in two.

13 Johnson would have none of it. As the *Witch* rolled through another indignant swell, he used the shift in balance to drop his weight against me, knocking my frame against that of the door's. The

blow knocked the wind from me, but I stabilised myself in time.

14 I am a man of the sea. Salt water channels carry my blood and barnacles often cloister my brain; calm and squall are the ways of the ocean and so too were they for me. Lurching forward from the doorway, I grappled with Johnson, pushing him into the net of his hammock. We locked eyes — mine, pressed with duty, and his own, gritted with selfish secrecy. Together we stood, frozen in our struggles as the *Witch* heaved about us, muting the tenor of our conflict in the roar of the ocean.

15 Out of breath, we slumped to the ground, our previously magnetised gazes suddenly ignorant of one another. Defeated, wounded in his pride and once more grounded in the reality of our need for his concentration, Johnson opened up to me.

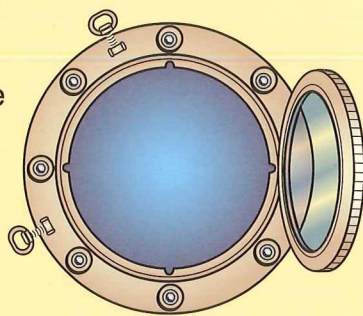
"My brother," he said, "he's been kidnapped."

Questions

1 The sea waters were
a unceasing.
b tumbling.
c westerly.

2 The *Witch* can carry
a cargo only.
b ten passengers.
c several hundred passengers.

3 Where would the *Witch* pick up more cargo for stability?
a Fremantle
b Sydney
c The Tasman



4 When was the *Witch* the worst to handle?
a when the going was heavy
b when facing ravishment
c when in the gentlest of swells

5 Where did the two men fight?
a in Johnson's cabin
b in the narrator's cabin
c above deck

6 What is the 'buffoonery' that the narrator can't tolerate?
a passengers becoming sea sick
b passengers making demands of the crew
c passengers pretending to be like the crew

Vocabulary

Find words in the text that match the meanings below. The word is in the section shown in brackets.

- 7 Stored away (3)
- 8 Something that can be bought or sold (4)
- 9 Had a tendency to do something (5)
- 10 Legitimate or justifiable (9)
- 11 Conceded or gave in (11)

Grammar

A **prefix** is a letter or letters added to the beginning of a word to change its meaning. E.g. like/**dis**like. Add a **prefix** from the box to make words from the text.

up un in no

- 12 mistakably
- 13 tolerance
- 14 where
- 15 setting

Back To The Text...

- 16 Johnson was a very worried man.
a true b false
- 17 If you "hang someone on the wrong peg" (section 4), it means that
a you want to hang them.
b you misjudge them.

- 18 In what section does the Chief confront Johnson about this troubles?
a section 3 b section 12

Sequencing

Look back through the card to find what happened first. Choose **a** or **b**.

- 19 a The ship crossed the "non-line".
b The ship left Bass Strait.
- 20 a Johnson was drenched.
b The Chief went to visit Johnson.
- 21 a Johnson crashed into the Chief.
b A huge wave crashed over Johnson.

Think About This

- 22 The word *mundane* in section 5 means
a ordinary. b stupid.
c outrageous. d time-consuming.
- 23 The term "heaving about like a bankrupt in bed" (7) means
a the ship wasn't making any money.
b the ship was tossing about like a restless person.

Challenge Option

Research: Find the name of the world's biggest ocean liner.

