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FULL CIRCLE

RECORDED AT SS OF THE
PERPETUAL VENERATION
PLAS GAERLLWYDD
LLANGWYNYDD
WEST GLAMORGAN
FEBRUARY 1987

They say—whoever "they" are— that a drowning man's entire life passes before his eyes. But as a lifelong sceptic, and also as one who has himself come near to drowning on several occasions during a long seafaring career, I must say that I find myself raising a number of queries about this confident assertion. Quite apart from the obvious one: how do they know? (Did they ask people who had nearly drowned and then been fished out and resuscitated?) there is also the question of whether this is a privilege granted only to people dying from an excess of water in the lungs. Do people who are in the process of being run over by a lorry experience the same phenomenon, or those who are slowly and unwittingly being asphyxiated by a leaking car exhaust? Surely, if time is an illusion, then where reviews of one's entire life are concerned it makes no difference whether one is dying a leisurely gurgling death by drowning or being summarily snuffed out by the high-speed train at Taplow Station after venturing too near the edge of the platform.

Many years ago now, about 1908, when I was a young lieutenant in the Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Navy, my ship was on a visit to Toulon and I went for a day's outing to Marseilles with a lady acquaintance. Not having much else to do, since it was a public holiday, we went for a stroll and chanced upon a small museum of the police force, packed with relics of notable crimes solved by the local Gendarmery over the years. Among the exhibits, I remember, were two

mounted skeletons of convicted mass-poisoners. Each had the fifth neck vertebra painted red to show how neatly the guillotine blade had sliced through it, "thus causing" (the display card read) "no suffering or distress whatever to the condemned person." Even then I found myself moved to ask: how were they so confident of that? But suppose that the entire life-passing-before-the-eyes business applied to them as well, when did it start and when did it finish? When the catch clicked to release the blade, or as it struck, or as the head tumbled into the basket? And if they did have their entire lives pass before them in that instant, was it the whole thing: every last cup of coffee and every last darned sock over forty-odd years? Or was it only selected highlights? If it was the former, how did they distinguish it from the real thing? And if it was the latter, on what basis were the significant bits selected? And did they view it as spectators or in the starring role?

No, no: the whole thing is too shot through with difficulties and unresolvable questions for people to pronounce upon it with any confidence. All I can add to the debate is to say that on the occasion when I came nearest to drowning, aboard a sinking U-boat off Corfu in 1916, I was perfectly conscious almost until the end and really felt nothing but a curious inner calm and a strong desire for it all to be over with as soon as possible. My last thought before I passed out, I remember, was that I had not settled my wardroom bill for September and that I hoped my servant back at Cattaro would find the envelope and take it to the purser's office for me.

But even if I doubt this business about drowning people being treated to a replay of their entire lives, I have to say that now my own life is drawing to a close—and about time too I might add, now that I am into my hundred and first year—I have noticed lately that long-forgotten events have been bobbing to the surface among the flotsam of the present, as if my past life was indeed passing before my eyes as a series of disconnected episodes, like pieces of film salvaged from a cutting-room waste-bin. I suppose that this is not to be wondered at really: just before the Sisters moved me down here to Wales last summer my old photograph album from the First World War was retrieved from a West London junk shop and restored to me; an event which might

well be expected to turn even the most hard-boiled materialist towards reverie. That started me talking with young Kevin Scully, the handyman here, about my experiences as a submarine captain, and that in its turn led me to commit other memoirs to magnetic tape, once he and Sister Elisabeth had persuaded me that it was worth recording. Then I was laid low with bronchial pneumonia over Christmas—but perversely refused to die of it. So now that the harsh weather of January has given way to a February of equally unusual mildness, I find myself once more with time on my hands, allowed now to get up and dress and even to sit out in a sheltered corner of the garden, provided that they wrap me up well beforehand and keep me under supervision.

I was out there this afternoon and really it was quite delightful: the usual westerly half-gale subsided into a calm, the sun shining and the waves rolling gently on to the sands of Pengadog Bay. With the limestone headland in the far distance at the other end of the bay, I might almost have imagined myself to be at Abbazia in late winter—minus the palm trees, of course.

No, most definitely not with palm trees: the Antarctic beeches of Tierra del Fuego would have difficulty surviving the wind out here on the far end of the peninsula, with nothing beyond for three thousand miles until one reaches the shores of Massachusetts; nothing but a heaving expanse of slate-grey waves and roaring westerlies. The trees about the Plas are no more than bushes and grow along the ground to escape the wind. All things considered the Sisters would have been hard put to it to find in the whole British Isles a spot less suited to be the last earthly abode of fifty or so aged Polish refugees of the male sex, attended by eight or nine almost equally decrepit Polish nuns.

By the looks of it Plas Gaerllwydd was built about the turn of the century by one of the Swansea copper barons, who chose this windswept headland partly (I suppose) out of late-Victorian romanticism and partly from a more practical desire to be upwind of the poisonous fumes from his own smelting works: also perhaps with an eye to defence against his own employees if things got nasty, since the house is at the end of a two-kilometre sunken lane and Llangwynydd post office would have had ample time to telephone for

the mounted constabulary. Such considerations aside though, the place was clearly an ill-judged venture. A low, two-storey building in Jacobethan style—all mullioned windows and oak panelling now painted a dingy umber colour—the house is surrounded by terraces cut into the hillside above the cliffs, long since overgrown by shrubbery run wild and connected by slippery flights of rocking flagstone steps which produce such a regular crop of broken hips each winter that Swansea Hospital now keeps two beds and a Polish-speaking nurse on standby from October to April. And not only broken hips: Mr Stankiewicz went for a walk the November before last, I believe, and was picked up six weeks later on Ilfracombe beach, to be identified by his false teeth. The roof leaks, the gutters are collapsing and while I was laid up in December a gale brought two chimneys crashing through the roof, which has now been patched up with plywood and polythene sheeting.

Young Kevin does his best with the place, but the Sisters of the Perpetual Veneration are hard up, and anyway it would need a regiment of pioneers permanently based here to keep the place in order. They should really have sold it and used the money to extend the Home in Ealing. But then, who would have bought it? It was a deathbed bequest from a local Polish farmer who purchased it with a partner in 1946, then (it is said locally) killed the partner in a drunken quarrel and disposed of the body so neatly that in the end the police had to accept his explanation that the man had gone back to Poland and been liquidated by the communists. The people hereabouts regard the Plas as being haunted, Kevin tells me, and, although most of the land was sold off over the years to allow the proprietor to maintain his daily intake of vodka, no one would come near the house. I suppose when we are all dead, in about twenty years' time, the Sisters will move out and the place will finally fall into ruin or suffer a convenient fire.

Myself, having been a seafarer, I do not mind the Plas Gaerllwydd very much. But for my fellow-inmates it is a bleak place to spend their last years: a place of exile for people who are exiles already, uprooted from their own land-locked country and dumped here at the very outer edge of nowhere, left to quarrel among themselves and to dream their dreams of a world dead now for half a century. Exile to the moon could

scarcely have been crueller, since one can at least see the moon from Warsaw. For them, brought up among the cabbage fields and pine forests of the Polish plains, a thousand kilometres from saltwater, it must be a very unsettling place indeed. But for me the howl of the ocean wind and the crash of the gale-driven waves on the rocks below are not at all disquieting. True, I am a Czech by birth, brought up in northern Moravia at the very centre of Central Europe. But I chose a seafaring career at a very early age, and, even if it is now many years since I felt a ship's deck roll beneath my feet, there is nothing particularly alarming for me in the faint but still perceptible shudder when a particularly large wave hits the headland below, or in the salt spray being lashed against the window panes by the winter gales.

Yesterday afternoon though, the weather was fine and calm. Dr Watkins had examined me that morning and found me to be in reasonable shape, so Sister Felicja, the large and ugly Prussian-Polish nun who acts as adjutant here, gave leave to Kevin and Sister Elisabeth to take me out for a couple of hours' drive to give me a change of scene: very welcome indeed as it was the first time I had been outside the confines of the Home since last autumn. It was not very far: only to the other end of Pengadog Bay, but it was most refreshing to be out for a while away from the miasma of incontinence and pickled-cucumber soup that hangs over the Plas like the clouds over Table Mountain. So we set off in Kevin's battered, rust-pocked Ford Cortina with a vacuum flask of lemon tea and a couple of rugs to put over my knees. Sister Felicja was even in sufficiently jolly mood to wave us goodbye from the kitchen door as we left, perhaps hoping that they would bring me back wrapped in one of the same rugs, much as the Spartans came home on their shield rather than with it.

I suppose that for someone who has already passed the century I am not really in too bad shape at all: continent, still mentally alert and capable of getting up flights of stairs without assistance. Cataract and stiffness of the joints trouble me a little and I get breathless, but apart from that I am not in bad condition. They helped me out of the car when we arrived at the bottom of the muddy lane beside the little church, but after that they merely stood near by to assist me if needed:

none of this officious fussing around supporting me under the armpits and steering me by the elbow as if I would wander down the beach and into the sea unless guided around by my attendants.

They are an ill-assorted pair, this uneducated, uncultured Welsh youth and the dowdy little Austro-Polish nun in her mid-sixties with her wire-framed pebble glasses and her mouthful of stainless-steel teeth. Yet both are wonderful companions, instinctively kind and with none of this tiresome nonsense about speaking loud-ly and slow-ly to an old man whose wits are undimmed and whose hearing is still quite sharp. I suppose it was as much an outing for them as for me. Kevin is long-term unemployed apart from this job "on the side" arranged for him by Father McCaffrey, confined otherwise to some dreary housing estate in Llanelli; while as for Sister Elisabeth—or El–zbieta as they call her here—the Order of the Perpetual Veneration has been her prison ever since she came back from Siberia in 1956. We looked at the little graveyard (the church has no congregation and is permanently locked now). There were a couple of Commonwealth War Graves tombstones, one from each world war—Merchant Navy badges, so drowned sailors washed up on the beach I suppose—and a row of nineteen creosoted wooden crosses marking the graves of Poles from the Plas. I said that they ought to run a sweepstake on who would be number twenty: me or someone else, and Sister Elisabeth laughed—without affectation since I can safely make heartless jokes of that sort with her. Then we walked down to the shore.

They are fine sandy beaches here at the end of the peninsula, but too windswept and difficult of access to attract more than a handful of holidaymakers even at the height of summer. Above the sands, cast up by the storms, is a long bank of pebbles curving the length of the bay. We stumbled up the reverse side, Kevin and Sister Elisabeth supporting me, until we were on the crest and could watch the blue Atlantic waves rolling on to the beach. Then I saw it some way along the bank: the skeleton of an old wooden ship embedded in the shingle; blackened ribs of oak eroded now to spikes, some side-planking and a few rusted iron knees, a decaying stem and rudder post, and the rotting stumps of three masts still pointing forlornly at the sky. She must have been quite large,

I thought; perhaps eight hundred or even a thousand tonnes. We went to examine her. A sizeable section of deck with the remains of a hatch coaming lay on the landward side of the bank, dune-grass growing up through the cracks between the crumbling planks. Sister Elisabeth and I sat down on a fallen deck beam among the ribs while Kevin leant against the stump of the mainmast and pulled a little book out of his pocket.

"There, Mr Procházka, always prepared: that's me. Brought a guide book with me I did." He thumbed through it. "Ah, here we are then: Pengadog Bay.

> In the beach below the church, visitors can see the remains of the Swansea copper barque *Angharad Pritchard,* 830 tonnes, built 1896 and beached here in October 1928 after a collision with a steamer in fog off Lundy Island. The ship's figurehead can be seen outside the Herbert Arms public house in the village.

I was silent for a while. Surely not?

"Excuse me, Kevin, but what was the name of this ship?"

"The *Angharad Pritchard,* Mr Procházka: built 1896 and wrecked 1928."

Yes, it must have been her: the name and age, and the tonnage and the Chilean copper trade. It was a very curious feeling, to realise suddenly that, eighty-something years before, my own juvenile feet had trodden perhaps that very same section of silvery-bleached deck that now lay decaying there among the grass and pebbles. And that now we had met again, both washed up at the end of our days on this lonely shore at the far edge of Europe.

Kevin wandered down the beach after a while to throw pebbles into the incoming tide while Sister Elisabeth produced her mouth organ from the folds of her habit (the Sisters of the Perpetual Veneration still cling obstinately to the old long-skirted style of dress). She really plays quite well, having learnt the instrument about 1940 in a labour camp in Kamchatka, but she has little opportunity to practise up at the Plas.

Émigré Polish Catholicism is intensely conservative, and harmonica-playing is still regarded as an improper pastime for a nun whatever the Second Vatican Council might have had to say on the matter. It was a sad little air, "Czeremcha" or something of that kind, the wind sighing in the far-off Polish birch trees as we both sat absorbed in our own thoughts.

So the wheel had come full circle: eighty-four years since I had last been aboard the *Angharad Pritchard,* the day of the earthquake at Taltal. It was—let me see—February 1903 and I, Ottokar Prohaska, third-year cadet in the Imperial and Royal Naval Academy, was with the steam corvette S.M.S. *Windischgrätz,* eight months out from Pola on a scientific cruise which was now turning willy-nilly into a circumnavigation of the globe. We had been there for two days in Taltal Roads off the desert coast of Chile, anchored among twenty or so other ships: mostly sailing vessels like ourselves but with a sprinkling of steamers now that the despised "tin kettles" were eating even into the difficult and unprofitable South American trades.

In normal circumstances Taltal was a place such as no self-respecting European warship would have deigned to visit. It was a typical West Coast South American port, like several dozen others straggling the three thousand miles up the Andean coast from Coronel to Guayaquil: just like Talcahuano and Huasco and Caldera and Iquique and Antofagasta and all the rest. There was the same bay with the masts wagging like rows of metronome pointers as the ships rolled at anchor on the oily Pacific swell. There was the same drab greyish-brown shoreline of the Atacama desert and beyond it, seeming close enough to touch in the clear, dry desert air, the same row of mauve Andean peaks capped with snow. There were the same rickety wooden loading jetties and the same miserable cluster of adobe-and-corrugated-iron shacks along the same dusty streets where sewage ran in rivulets, the flies buzzed and the trains of half-starved mules staggered in from the desert laden with sacks of nitrate and copper ore. And there was the same local populace: a dispirited collection of mestizos squatting about dozing in their ponchos or occasionally stirring themselves to do a little desultory cargo-handling when the mood took them or when they were

low on pisco money. It was the stultifying indolence of the locals which allowed sailing ships to hang on in the West Coast trades. A steamer had to be moored against a wharf and loaded in a couple of days to be profitable to its owners. But here where the loading was by bags into lighters and then into the ship's hold, the sailing vessel had the edge, being perfectly able to wait here for months on end and use its own crew as stevedores.

In the normal course of events, no European warship would have bothered with Taltal. But S.M.S. *Windischgrätz* in February 1903 was in no position to be fussy. We had recently spent six weeks trying—and failing—to get around Cape Horn into the Pacific, and then a month cruising in the waters off Tierra del Fuego. Our orders now were to sail up the Chilean coast and make for Callao before turning west to cross the Pacific. But our progress up the Andean coast had been miserably slow in the light airs of summer, and the ship's wooden hull was in poor shape after eight months at sea, leaking like a basket so that the crew were now having to work at the pumps for a couple of hours in every watch. We had put into Taltal so that the ship could be heeled to allow the Carpenter to get at a particularly troublesome and persistent leak about a metre below the waterline.

Like most of the harbours along that coast, Taltal was a poor anchorage. The seabed fell away so steeply that even two hundred metres offshore the depth was seventy fathoms, and the ground so hard that throughout our stay there we were obliged to post an anchor watch to warn us if the ship was dragging. It was mid-morning now and most of the port watch was ashore on various errands. One exploration party led by the anthropologist Professor Skowronek had landed armed with picks and shovels to look for Inca cemeteries to pillage for the Professor's skull collection. Another party had set off for the mountains on hired mules to assist the expedition's geologist Dr Pürkler. As for the officers, although Taltal had not been included in our schedule for official visits our commander Korvettenkapitän Festetics and the GDO Linienschiffsleutnant Mikulić had decided to make a virtue out of necessity and had gone ashore in the gig at eight bells, cocked hats balanced on their knees, to meet the District Governor and

representatives of the local German community: mostly Scandinavians and Swiss in fact but never mind. Leave ashore had been offered for those not detailed for anything else, but few men had taken up the offer. In so far as Taltal ever came alive it did so only at dusk when the sailors' bars and the delicately named "fandango halls" opened for business.

The same could have been said of most of the Chilean coast. Bleak and arid by day, the onset of darkness would cast a magical veil over the place. The sun setting below the dark rim of the Pacific would light up the distant mountains into an unearthly blaze of ever-changing oranges and purples. Then the ultramarine velvet night lit by brilliant stars would fall over the ships rolling at anchor on the swell. Many of the ships in those waters were Welsh copper barques, like the one next to us in the row: the *Angharad Pritchard,* which had just finished loading ore for Port Talbot. I had been aboard her the previous afternoon. One of her apprentices had developed appendicitis and our surgeon Korvettenarzt Luchieni had been summoned over to operate, taking me as an interpreter since he knew very little English. While not interpreting, my duties had consisted of bringing the sterilised instruments from the galley stove to the scrubbed table beneath an awning on the poop deck where the young sailor was being operated on.

It had been a straightforward enough operation. Dr Luchieni had popped the appendix into a jar of spirit to give to the apprentice as a souvenir when he came round, then he had washed his hands, rolled down his sleeves and packed his instruments, pausing only to receive the Master's thanks at the gangway as we climbed down into the boat. The Welshman was due to sail next morning. That afternoon the last bag of copper ore had been swung up from the lighter with an apprentice standing on it waving his cap to a chorus of cheers from his shipmates. And that evening, as the carpenter finished battening down the hatches for the long journey around the Horn, the Southern Cross had been hoisted: a wooden frame with paraffin lamps hung on it in the shape of that constellation, swayed up to the masthead as the ships round about gave three cheers. The song "Homeward Bound" rolled

out across the dark waters of the bay. Then there began an impromptu concert of Welsh hymns and music-hall songs. We were all agreed that steamship men were a pretty spiritless lot, no more than paint cleaners and grease monkeys: but aboard the sailing ships everyone still sang to ease the burden of the work, and most vessels could turn out a band of some kind even if it was only a broken-down concertina and some beef-bones. The crew of the big German windjammer the *Paderborn* gave us the "Wacht am Rhein." Then it was our turn. Whatever the deficiencies of S.M.S. *Windischgrätz* as a sailing vessel, we were an Austrian warship, and no Austrian man-o'-war could possibly sail on an ocean voyage without taking along a Schiffskapelle of naval bands-men. Our twenty musicians gathered on the fo'c'sle deck and did us proud over the next couple of hours with a concert of marches and waltzes such as would have done credit to the Prater on a Sunday afternoon in May: Strauss, Millöcker, Ziehrer, Suppé; the entire café-terrace repertoire. They finished, I remember, with Lehár's "Nechledil March" which had been all the rage in Vienna the previous year. This brought so many encores that it was almost midnight before we were finally allowed to turn in.

So much for fun: the next morning had brought us work once more, shovelling our remaining coal over to port and lugging guns and stores across the ship to give us the necessary heel for the Carpenter and his assistants to strip off the copper sheathing over the leak. With the Captain and the GDO ashore, the officer of the watch was my divisional commander Linienschiffsleutnant Zaleski. The pump had not been drawing well of late, so now that the ship had been heeled and the water was low in the bottom of the ship, Zaleski had determined to send someone down to see what was the matter. The choice had fallen on me. I had been obliged to undress to my underpants, a bowline had been slung beneath my armpits, and I had found myself being lowered into a ridiculously narrow pipe leading down into the very nethermost bowels of the ship. I have never suffered much from claustrophobia, but I came as near then as I have ever done to a fit of panic, as the light diminished to a grey-ish dot above me and the dismal, slimy shaft echoed to the sound of my breathing. As I sank up to my knees in the bilgewater at the bottom I became painfully aware that if the ship were

to come upright again for any reason the water would surge back up to its original level and I would drown—that is, if I had not already been asphyxiated by the foul air at the bottom of the well.

It was certainly far worse than I had imagined, down there in the lowest part of the ship. The *Windischgrätz* had been in service now for nearly thirty years, and all the effluvia of several hundred men crowded together into a wooden hulk over a quarter-century had accumulated here: all the off-scourings and slops and seepage from provision barrels mingling with the oozings of decaying wood to produce a liquor rather like that evil-looking greyish jelly that one finds inside the U-traps of old sink wastepipes. And here was I, shoulders pressed together and standing up to my thighs in it, waiting for further instructions. I felt sick and already rather faint. At last an electric lamp shone into the shaft and Zaleski's voice came echoing down.

"All right down there, Prohaska?"

Restraining a desperate urge to vomit I called back: "Obediently report that yes, Herr Leutnant."

"Good man. Now, put your hand down and find what's blocking the pump inlet filter. It's a sort of bronze box-thing with holes in it."

"Very good, Herr Leutnant." I clenched my teeth and bent my knees to try to get my hand low enough under water to find the inlet. The well was too narrow to allow me to bend down. I found it at last, thickly encrusted with slime—and straightened up suddenly with a yelp of pain. Something had bitten me! Blood was already dripping from my finger. I wondered desperately whether I could climb up the well by bracing my back against it. Court martial for disobeying orders seemed infinitely preferable to another five seconds at the bottom of this sewer pipe.

"For God's sake Prohaska, what's the matter down there?"

"I obediently report … something bit me, Herr Leutnant."

"Bit you? What do you mean, you young idiot?"

"There's something alive down here, Herr Leutnant, in the pump inlet."

There was silence for a while. I knew that a debate was taking place above me. But as I waited, hoping desperately to be hauled up from this

slime-pit and whatever nameless horror was lurking at the bottom of it, I became aware that something out of the ordinary was taking place. The water in the well was shaking and slopping to and fro as the ship shuddered around me. And there was a curious noise: a heavy, irregular rumbling like a train with badly worn wheels in a railway tunnel, or perhaps large empty barrels being banged about in a cellar. I called up.

"Herr Leutnant!"

The lamp shone down again, blinding me.

"What on earth is it now?"

"Herr Leutnant, I most obediently report that there's a funny noise down here."

There was a pause.

"What sort of noise?"

"A kind of rumbling and banging, Herr Leutnant; coming from below the ship I think."

There was silence again, broken only by shudders and more dull concussions. At last Zaleski called down. "We're hauling you up."

I emerged from the well like the prophet Jeremiah to find the entire ship suddenly alive with men turning out and running to quarters: feet pounding on decks and up the companionways as the starboard watch scrambled into the rigging to loose sail. Men were already at work dragging the guns on the battery deck over to starboard to rectify the list.

"But the pump, Herr Leutnant … ?"

"Damn the pump. The pump can wait. There are more important things to worry about than the pump. Get aloft now!"

So I lay aloft with the rest to make sail. After eight months at sea I was well used to this sort of thing and would have found my way to my station blindfolded or asleep: port-yardarm man on the royal yard of the mizzen mast, which was the province of the forty cadets aboard since the sails were somewhat smaller—and thus rather lighter work—than on the other two masts and there was anyway one less of them to handle. I scrambled up the rope ladder and out on to the swaying footrope, sliding down since the ship still had a marked heel to port. My friend Max Gauss, our mess-mate Tarabochia and a fourth-year

cadet called Arváy were there with me. As we loosed the gaskets holding the furled sail to the yard I began to realise that this was no random sail-drill to keep the crew alert: a sudden tremendous rattling and clouds of red dust up forward, followed by a splash, announced that we had slipped our anchor cable in our haste to put to sea. But there was no time to wonder. We let go the last gasket and the canvas tumbled down to be sheeted home as the men on deck hauled at the halyards to raise the yard. Gauss and I stayed aloft to overhaul the buntlines, as was the custom, but Zaleski's voice called up to us:

"Never mind the buntlines! Get down on deck and man the braces!"

This was clearly an emergency, so Gauss and I slid down the mizzen backstays instead of going via the shrouds in the approved manner. As we left I saw that whatever this madness was that had gripped our ship, the *Angharad Pritchard* alongside us had been seized by the same unaccountable frenzy. They had been preparing to sail anyway, but now they were raising the anchor and loosing sail as though the Devil himself were rowing out towards them from the shore. I also caught a glimpse of the seaward horizon, and noticed—although it meant nothing to me at the time—an unusual straight, dark line extending across it.

Down on deck once more, I hauled at the braces with the rest to trim the yards around to the light morning breeze. As the ship began to move through the water I noticed that the air was tainted with a faint but disturbing whiff of rotten eggs, and that the sea around us was boiling and throwing up stunned fish to float belly-upwards. Something sinister was happening. By now Taltal Bay was filled with a frightful clangour of bells and sirens and anchor chain rattling through hawse pipes as ships tried to get under way, or at least to veer enough cable to ride out whatever was coming. For the first time since this alarm began I felt frightened.

Not the least of my reasons for feeling uneasy was the fact that just as this all started the Captain had arrived back aboard from his brief visit ashore. He was now engaged in a loud argument with Linienschiffsleutnant Zaleski as the latter tried to get the ship under way.

"Zaleski, I demand to know the meaning of this. Have you finally taken leave of your senses? Why is the ship putting to sea? Why have you just abandoned an anchor and five hundred metres of cable? I swear I'll have you pay for it in person …"

"A moment if you please, Herr Kommandant, I shall explain—yes that's it you men there. Don't bother about squaring the lifts. Just let's get moving for God's sake! Yes Herr Kommandant, I know … A moment if you would be so kind."

As the mizzen topsail filled with the breeze and was sheeted home I did indeed wonder whether Zaleski had gone mad: so many strange things had happened on this voyage and misfortune seemed to have dogged us ever since we left West Africa. But speculation ended at that moment as the tidal wave hit us, fine on the starboard bow. It was most dramatic: one moment the clear Pacific blue sky above the fo'c'sle rails, the next a glassy, seemingly motionless hill of dark green water looming ahead, capped by a crest of foam. That was the last I saw for several moments because, like most other people who were not holding on to something, I was thrown off my feet as we met the wave. The ship's bow rose to the surge—and rose, and kept on rising as the masts and rigging squealed and groaned in outrage above us, flung back only to be flicked forward again as the ship breasted the first wave and plunged down into the trough, burying her bowsprit before shaking herself and rising to meet the second wave rushing landwards from the epicentre of the earthquake far out to sea. Our vessel had not been too solidly built to begin with, and by the sound of it her brief but violent switchback ride at Taltal that morning was doing nothing to improve her structural soundness.

But somehow we surmounted that peril as we had surmounted so many others since we left Pola the previous summer. The only other ships unscathed by the tidal wave were the *Angharad Pritchard* and a Spanish vessel which had just arrived at Taltal and which still had sufficient steam up to be able to put to sea. Without Linienschiffsleutnant Zaleski's presence of mind we would have suffered the same fate as the rest. Loss of life had not been great, apart from a few unfortunate boat's crews and the men aboard a lighter which

had been swamped. As for the townspeople, they were well used to this sort of thing and had all run to a hillock behind the town at the first rumblings of the earthquake. But the other ships anchored in Taltal Roads had suffered badly. The magnificent *Paderborn* had been struck broadside-on and rolled on to the shore, to lie there in a sorry-looking mess of broken masts and tumbled yards. Two ships had foundered, two more had been smashed against one another and an Italian barque whose anchor had held had remained afloat only at the price of having the chain cut down through the hawse-hole like a bandsaw blade and tear out most of her bow timbers.

As for the pump inlet, by the way, and the bitten finger, once we were at anchor again and the ship had been heeled I was sent back down into the well, this time with a spanner and hammer, to unbolt the inlet filter box. When we got it up on deck we found that it contained a fair-sized crab which had evidently taken up residence there while it was small and which had grown fat on the nutritious soup at the bottom of the well until it could no longer get out. It must have been there for years. Herr Lenart the biologist pickled it in alcohol for his collection.

As we lay there back in the wreckage-littered bay, with our diver down looking for the lost anchor, we were passed by the *Angharad Pritchard,* heading now for home after returning to pick up two of her men who had been ashore when the wave struck.

"Are you all right?" Zaleski shouted through the speaking trumpet.

"All right thank you, *Windischgrätz* . No damage. How are you?"

"All right also I think. But what a wave."

"Oh, that's nothing, look you. Only a little one, about forty feet I reckon. You should have been in Valparaiso back in '73: an earthquake, then a fire, then a tidal wave there was. Lost half our crew when a dance hall slid down the mountainside we did. This one here was just a little love-tap. Anyway, thank you for operating on our apprentice. Send the bill to the owners at the address I gave you in Carmarthen."

"Thank you. We will. And bon voyage!"

The *Angharad Pritchard* sailed on, and that was the last I saw or thought of her for eighty-six years, until I found myself sitting among her bones on the beach below Pengadog Church. The old *Windischgrätz*

is long gone now, like the empire whose flag she flew. And as for the men who sailed aboard her, I was one of the very youngest and I am now nearly a hundred and one, so I imagine that the rest of the 356 have gone to their graves many a long year since. As for the ports of that coast, Taltal and Meillones and Arica and the rest, they too must have been dead for a good half-century, the loading jetties silent now as the deserted adobe houses crumble in the desert wind and the ceaseless Pacific rollers crash on the shore where the sea lions bark undisturbed by human traffic. Only I am left now, come full circle at last to join the remains of this long-forgotten ship.

These thoughts on the transience of earthly things were only interrupted when a man came past us walking a dog. Clearly unused to the spectacle of mouth-organ-playing nuns and ancient mariners sitting among the timbers of wrecked ships, he bade us a rather forced "Good-afternoon" and hurried off towards the church and the lane. It was beginning to get dark now and Sister Felicja would expect us back for tea at 5:00 p.m. sharp, so we called Kevin and the two of them helped me into the car to take me back to the Plas. As we drove past the Herbert Arms I looked for the ship's figurehead, but failed to see it. I did have the satisfaction though of seeing the man with the dog standing outside the telephone box by the pub, talking with a policeman in a patrol car and pointing him down towards the beach.

Back in my room that evening I thought on the afternoon's events, and of that ill-starred voyage when the twentieth century had scarcely begun. I have recorded most of my wartime reminiscences over the past few months—for what use they may be to anyone—and I could very well leave it at that, with two entire shoeboxes full of tape cassettes in my cupboard. But the meeting with the remains of that old sailing ship had set my mind rolling back towards my far-off youth. And I thought, Why not? I have not got far to go now: perhaps only days rather than weeks. Dr Watkins says that my heart is unimpaired by my illness, and that the Swansea area already contains two of the oldest people in the world—one of them 114, apparently—so there is no reason at all why I should not last for years longer. But inside me I know better. Once I have told you this last tale I shall be ready to leave, knowing that so far

as I am concerned nothing more of any importance remains to be said. So let it be told: the story of the world scientific cruise of His Imperial, Royal and Apostolic Majesty's steam corvette *Windischgrätz.* And of the colonial empire that somehow never quite came into existence.