A Stranger in our Household

What do you say to the father you last saw ten, or was it twenty years earlier? "Hello Daddy, remember me? Your youngest son?" My mother's last words to me, about finishing his book on the Battle of Jutland, were what drove me to do now what I should have done years before – contact my father. I had written him once, back in 1961; that was to tell him I was going to get married – in fact to ask his permission, an odd formality, a holdover from earlier times. He may have made a reply, but I do not have it now.

John had a phone number for him in North Wales. I phoned him in Pwllheli, and asked him how the book was coming along.

"Oh, it's started well," he said gruffly, and then he added: "It's nearly finished."

My heart sank. I was a writer myself now. He had not really even begun, and we had not many more months to run before the great sea battle's fiftieth anniversary. His housekeeper Phyllis confirmed it – he had made several starts, she loyally said, and had covered a lot of paper in his minute, even handwriting; but he had spent most of his time –since signing Kimber's contract for the book – drawing the sea maps. In other words, the old seadog had refought the battle

for his own entertainment.

"Would you miss him for a month or two?" I asked. She wouldn't.

"Tell him I'll pick him up tomorrow. He'll stay with us in London. We'll see this thing through together."

I wasn't angry with him. When you're writing a book you're stuck in a long tunnel, with daylight at neither end; sometimes you do need another locomotive to haul you on. Pilar and I drove down to Pwllheli and we brought him back to Paddington that same evening. I hauled the desk out of my little study, to make room for a bed, and moved everything into the drawing room. Pilar made no attempt to set her face against this invasion, as she could have, and the children loved this newcomer, a real grandfather for the first time.

Daddy lacked definition. He was a like a slightly out-of-focus, faded photograph – like one of those sepia-stained iceberg photos I had found under the car. He was obese, nicotine stained, and wild haired, his naval beard untrimmed. He wore a long, over-large dark overcoat, a muffler, and cloth cap like a hunger marcher of the Twenties. His voice had a Welsh lilt. He had gone to seed in the principality, and to me fell the challenging duty of snapping him out of it, smartening him up and getting him to finish that book in time for the anniversary, May 31, 1966.

It was hard sledding; unseen, the beginnings of the final illness were probably already gnawing away within him.

That is the image that I retain of him now, dominating our front room, writing about Beatty, Jellicoe, and Jutland. He was of great bulk, with a large distended paunch sagging below his belt; he smoked heavily, which was a burden on us all, and he sent Pilar out daily to get more supplies from the allowance that we gave him.

In no time our little flat reeked of Senior Service cigarettes as he puffed through the daily ration, and he playfully jabbered at us in Welsh if we remonstrated; I was "Dai-*bach*", and even speaking English he spiked his sentences with a teasing "look-you" half way through. But gradually he assumed for us a human form. Once, in later years, when I had committed some minor matrimonial mis-

demeanour – of which as God knows there are potentially legion – Pilar snorted at me: "You are behaving just as your mother told me your father used to behave." I regret to say that I did not take this in the spirit of contrition which she intended.

In a sense we adopted him. Once he started talking he was a wonderful raconteur; he had written a book of witty poems on naval etiquette, including one that I particularly remember, about the knotty problems of naval seniority when being piped aboard. All that spring he crowded the dining table with his papers and charts, but the manuscript at last began to swell. I set up our new Uher Report tape recorder in front of him and forced him to dictate all morning from his handwritten drafts. I sat at the desk with my back to him and worked on *PQ.17*; he took my pages and corrected my naval language. I knew he was an expert on that; I had read his authoritative book, *The Royal Navalese*, as a child.

"Ships don't tie up," he would growl, stubbing out a cigarette. "They make fast. You tie up shoelaces."

In the afternoon I typed up his Jutland dictation, envious and silently cursing his easy command of written English, the facility with which this old sea dog sculpted in the English tongue while I had to hunt and chew and polish and chisel at each damned sentence of *PQ.17* before I committed it to paper.

He savaged every careless usage. "In the case of the deceased" was one target: "In the case of the deceased – which was presumably his coffin!" he roared, transformed for a brief instant into Sir Lancelot Spratt, the testy consulting surgeon in the *Doctor* films as played by James Robertson Justice.

He told me had known Jackie Broome, the PQ.17 escort commander, and conveyed that he was generally disliked in the Western Approaches; whether that was true or one of his shorter tall stories, I cannot judge. There were longer yarns too: He told us of the last throes of HMS *Edinburgh* escorting an Arctic convoy before PQ.17 – bombed to a halt (••), lying seemingly inert with her guns all awry like dead men's eyes (he splayed his fingers like the eight-inch guns, pointing variously at sky or sea), then tracking sinisterly together onto their last target as the German ships came within range, and

opening fire: a bold Royal Navy ruse – it could have come straight out of one of his Dick Valliant adventure books.

"You know, after the Great War we sold off our heavy cruisers to the Turks," he added. He took a long puff on a Senior Service, and a glint of porcine cunning crept into the seafarer eyes. "Before we turned 'em over to the Turks we installed completely pointless steel stanchions in their shell-handling rooms, to get right in their way; just in case we ever found those ships being used against us."

He was a gunnery expert, and the Grand Fleet's inferior gunnery at Jutland had been its undoing. He stubbed out the cigarette and flipped another from the pack, heaving with laughter at getting this story off his gut, and resettled his bulk on our delicate dining-room chair. I hung on every word, and hoped in my reply we were doing the same trick with the military hardware we were selling around the world – installing secret backdoors in the electronics, that sort of thing.

He claimed to have suffered his stomach injuries when in the water as the cruiser *Edinburgh* finally blew up; he was certainly injured aboard some warship, but I suspect that his memory was already clouded between what he had been through, and what he had read since.

Once Pilar took him to a local barber, as we were having Professor R. V. Jones to dinner, and he came back as smart as in any of the wartime photos I had seen, with his beard trimmed and his hair back under control. I took a whole roll of photos, and each of us silently knew they might well be the last. When I was out of earshot he complained to Pilar that I was a bully, and perhaps I was, but I wanted to get that book into print before he died, and we succeeded – together we got *The Smokescreen of Jutland* off to Kimber in time. It would be his last book. I drove him back to Wales on (••) DATE, not knowing whether I'd ever see the lonely old man again. The book appeared on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, and was respectfully reviewed. I was so proud of him.

That summer (1966) we drove in the Rover down to Madrid. We stayed at the *finca* of Pilar's Uncle Livinio at Cubas, a stylish peas-

ant village twenty miles south of the capital on the Tóledo highway, and here I rapidly completed the entire rewrite of the desperately tragic PQ.17 epic, while the family's fearsome Alsatians loped and prowled around the barricaded area that I had had to erect on the front porch for my own safety, snuffling, woofing, and trying to get at me. Ever prone to generalizations, I concluded that Spanish dogs did not like the English at all. On September 19, 1966, I find, I wrote in my diary: "Worked during the rest of the day typing *PQ.17* final manuscript, pages 366-389, the *Hartlebury* story. My blood still runs cold when I read this tragedy, familiar though it is to me." Writing a diary and keeping a tally of the pages completed was a useful discipline, I had found. By the time we left, I had typed the final pages of the final typescript on my Olivetti Lettera 22. I even had time to take three copies of the typescript to a Madrid bookbinder before driving back to London.

On our return to Paddington I left one copy of *The Knight's Move*, as I intended to call it, with Kimber. Of the other two bound typescripts one went to Vice-Admiral Sir Norman Denning, whose opinion I valued; the other I delivered by hand to Captain Jack Broome, the close escort commander during the convoy operation, who had asked for the opportunity to see and comment on it.[1]

Admiral Denning invited me to lunch at The Athenaeum, and handed the book back with the words, "This is one of the finest histories of a convoy operation ever written." His brother, the ineffable Lord Justice of Appeal, Lord Denning, would describe it, as we shall later find, as a foul piece of anti-British propaganda [•• *precise wording*?] But this was England. When one of the Denning brothers, the admiral, died in 1979; the other, the judge, unexpectedly invited me to the memorial service at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, and it is hard to harbour ill feeling toward an Englishman who acts in such a gentlemanly manner.

As for Captain Jackie Broome, I had had not seen him since 1963. When technical questions about the conduct of his Royal Navy escorts arose, I put them to him by letter, I would claim courteously at first, but with diminishing patience, as his replies became

ruder and more evasive. "It has broken my heart," I wrote on one occasion, "trying to get a straight answer." Once he opened a letter with the remark, "Really, you amateur tacticians/historians frighten me!" and some months later he wrote caustically, "Didn't your Father ever tell you that captains' conferences at sea went out with sailing ships?"[2]

William Kimber recognised in Captain Broome the archetype of the publisher's nightmare. As Broome began threatening him, Kimber offered to lend me £2,000 if I would shelve the book altogether – the product now of five year's work.[3] At another stage, he telephoned me in a panic and recommended rewriting the whole book with no reference to Broome at all! Perplexed, I said that would be like writing the Battle of Trafalgar without Nelson. "Broome's no Nelson", Kimber rejoined. "This man's got two arms, hasn't he! Two eyes!"[4] This did not seem to me the best way of writing history. The problem of doing justice to Captain Broome remained – as much in his interest as in mine. I proposed sending him the manuscript to read and offer comment on, as the obvious safeguard to everybody concerned. He wrote back, "Thank you – I'd like to see your manuscript."[5]

A few days later he returned *The Knight's Move* to me with the message that it was libellous; that he was under no legal obligation to assist me to correct the alleged libels, which was correct; and that if I published he would sue for defamation.

This convoy saw the first Distinguished Service Orders (DSOs) ever awarded to Merchant Navy officers. In my Author's Introduction I wrote an apology for the method I had chosen to portray this heroism:

> Lest this book be misunderstood, its readers should know before they enter into the narrative proper that the guiding light in deciding which incidents in this canvas of tragedy to dwell upon, and which to suppress, has been a conviction that gallantry is best portrayed in its real setting; the ships should be shown to be crewed by normal men with normal fears and feelings. Too often one has read histories of in-

dividual acts of heroism, and one's appreciation has been dulled by the picture's lack of relationship to normal human character.

And, referring to the merchant vessels, I added

So *The Knight's Move* is primarily a book peopled with ordinary people: we see how men reacted when confronted with a grim situation which meant certain disaster and probably death. But against this sombre background we shall find that the individual jewels of gallantry sparkle most, emerging unexpectedly to dazzle us by their own unaccustomed shine.[6]

This was one of the passages I first read out to my publishers in London, William Kimber Ltd. Francis de Salis, my editor there, was not enthusiastic about the subject.

In his fruity Joyce Grenfell voice he said ominously, "You know the market for these war stories is failing."

I insisted that this was a book with a difference, as all men were shown to be cowards, from which the *real* heroes then emerged. I should have written a more complete diary entry on the conversation, for this was one of the passages to which a High Court judge later particularly referred. Kimber's accepted the manuscript nonetheless, and began editing it.

Kimber had no time to pass further judgment on the new book, as we almost at once fell out over money, a matter which was of less importance to him than to me. It will be remembered that at his request I had gone over to see the family of the late Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, who was hanged at Nuremberg, when my translation of his death-cell memoirs was at galley proof stage, and had obtained from the son, Lieutenant-Colonel Keitel, all the missing passages. The politically correct German publisher had deleted these. Instead of the agreed £200 fee for my three months' translation work, Kimber now handed to me in his office in Wilton Place a cheque for £67, explaining, with a glint in his eye and involuntarily rubbing his hands, that he had docked the rest for "author's correc-

tions." It seemed rather thin gruel for three months' work.

"All that late material you inserted –," he suavely explained.

"– At your request!" I pointed out, adding with some heat that I was not even asking payment for the travel and extra translation work involved, and that I had deliberately refused to look at the galley proofs to avoid any such misunderstandings.

He tapped the written agreement. There it was – "author's corrections," and strictly speaking he was right: any changes made at galley stage or afterwards count as author's corrections, for which he must pay, if they amount more than ten percent of the setting costs. On that basis, I was lucky, I suppose, to have received anything for my work at all, and not to have been presented with a bill at the end of the job.

To him it was almost a game. Of course, as the English are taught, it is not who wins that matters. . .

It was a game that two could play, I decided. I put down the half-finished cup of pale tea, and gathered up the bound manuscript of *The Knight's Move* from Amy Howlett's desk outside. "We're through," I said, adding that I did not intend to be "cheated" a second time, and I flounced out into Wilton Place. We would never get out of debt if Kimber carried on like this.

As I passed the church next door I heard Amy's heels clicking on the pavement behind. "He asks you to bring it back," she pleaded.

"Wasting his breath," I flung over my shoulder, and marched on. High dudgeon hardly described the altitude I was now flying at. I was not going to allow any publisher, even a friend, to pull a fast one like that on me.

Thus Kimber – whose little firm the novelist Leon Uris had so nearly destroyed by attracting the *Exodus* libel action – would fortuitously escape being sued for libel for the second time in his life, in what turned out to be one of the costliest libel actions ever fought. It nearly bankrupted the book's eventual publisher, and it did little to prosper my family's finances either.

No publisher likes to lose a successful author. His version of our

parting, as given under oath in that libel action in 1970, was different from what I have sketched above. In brief, he had recognized the libel risks, he testified, and had *rejected* the manuscript. Sitting in the front row in court, I was dismayed at this unhelpful testimony, and my own version above is drawn from the diary page which I wrote on the day concerned, seething with rage.[7]

We met for coffee outside the High Court immediately after he had given that inexplicable testimony, and I told him – turning the other cheek, as I had been taught – that although his memory was manifestly wrong I bore no rancour toward him. He explained that he had not volunteered to testify; Broome's lawyers had served him with a subpœna.

That explained why he was in Court that day, but not what he said in the witness box or why he said it. The episode taught me how fragile and flexible the unsupported human memory could be. That day reinforced my resolve to keep a daily diary.

Friedrich Nietzsche once described: "'I did that,' says my memory. 'I could not have done that,' says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually – the memory yields."

It happens to us all.

But de Salis's attitude had been a warning to me. Soon after the street argument with Miss Howlett I wrote to a rival publishing firm, Cassell and Company, and took a second copy of the manuscript round to them.[8] They were the most eminent firm I could think of, since they had published Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*.

Cassell's director Bryan Gentry telephoned me early one morning, five days later: "I think you've written a very wonderful book," he exclaimed. His firm intended to make it their main Spring publication of 1968. I promised that as soon as Kimber's option period expired I would sign the book up with the rivals.[9]

There were already legal problems, and I warned Cassell's of them in a letter: My German colleague Karweina had had the impudence to declare that the book was his (he abandoned his claim

eventually). There were, I furthermore added, parts of the book which might cause offence to surviving British officers. The Royal Navy escorts had been withdrawn from the 1942 convoy before the massacre began, in consequence of orders from London. In particular Captain "Jackie" Broome, RN, the famous senior officer of the twenty-strong close escort of destroyers, minesweepers, corvettes and trawlers in this his first (and last) convoy to North Russia, was disaffected.[10] I sent a note warning them of this threat – an honest scrap of paper that was to save me a fortune when the time came.

Cassell's proved to be technically the best publishers I ever had. I would willingly have stayed faithful to them as an author for the rest of my life, were it not for subsequent events. They even paid me an advance. The agreement contained (at my diffident suggestion) a clause on which the Society of Authors were currently insisting, obliging the author to indemnify the publisher for damages and costs arising from any legal action *only* where the publisher had not been apprised of such a likelihood in advance.

At home now with Cassell & Co, I was happy to be in the big league.

(Endnotes)

1 Vice-Admiral Sir Norman Egbert Denning (1904-1979).

2 Letter Irving to Broome, Jan 15, 1965; Broome to Irving, Jan 15, 1968; Broome to Irving, Jan 13, 1963. All these letters were read out in Open Court.

3 Diary, meeting with William Kimber, Feb 20 and Mar 30, 1967. [•• IS THE YEAR CORRECT?]

4 Recorded telephone conversation with Wm. Kimber, Telephone Log, Nov 10, 1966. Kimber suggested writing to Broome, "... and I was going to recommend to the author that your name [Broome's] be omitted from the manuscript entirely."

5 Cf. letter Irving to Broome, Oct 29, 1966. "You might like to comment on certain passages before, rather than after publication." Reply from Broome, Nov 2, 1966.

6 Introduction to *The Destruction of Convoy PQ.17* (Cassell's, London 1968),

page 5.

7 After a standing row with Mr. William Kimber on the afternoon of Oct 27, 1966 about the royalties dispute, I noted: "Upon much thought decided that best course of action would be to take PQ.17 manuscript away from Kimber's and ask Cassell's when they could publish it."

8 Diary, Oct 13, 1966.

9 Diary, Oct 27, 1966.

10 Letter Irving to Cassell's, Nov 2, 1966.