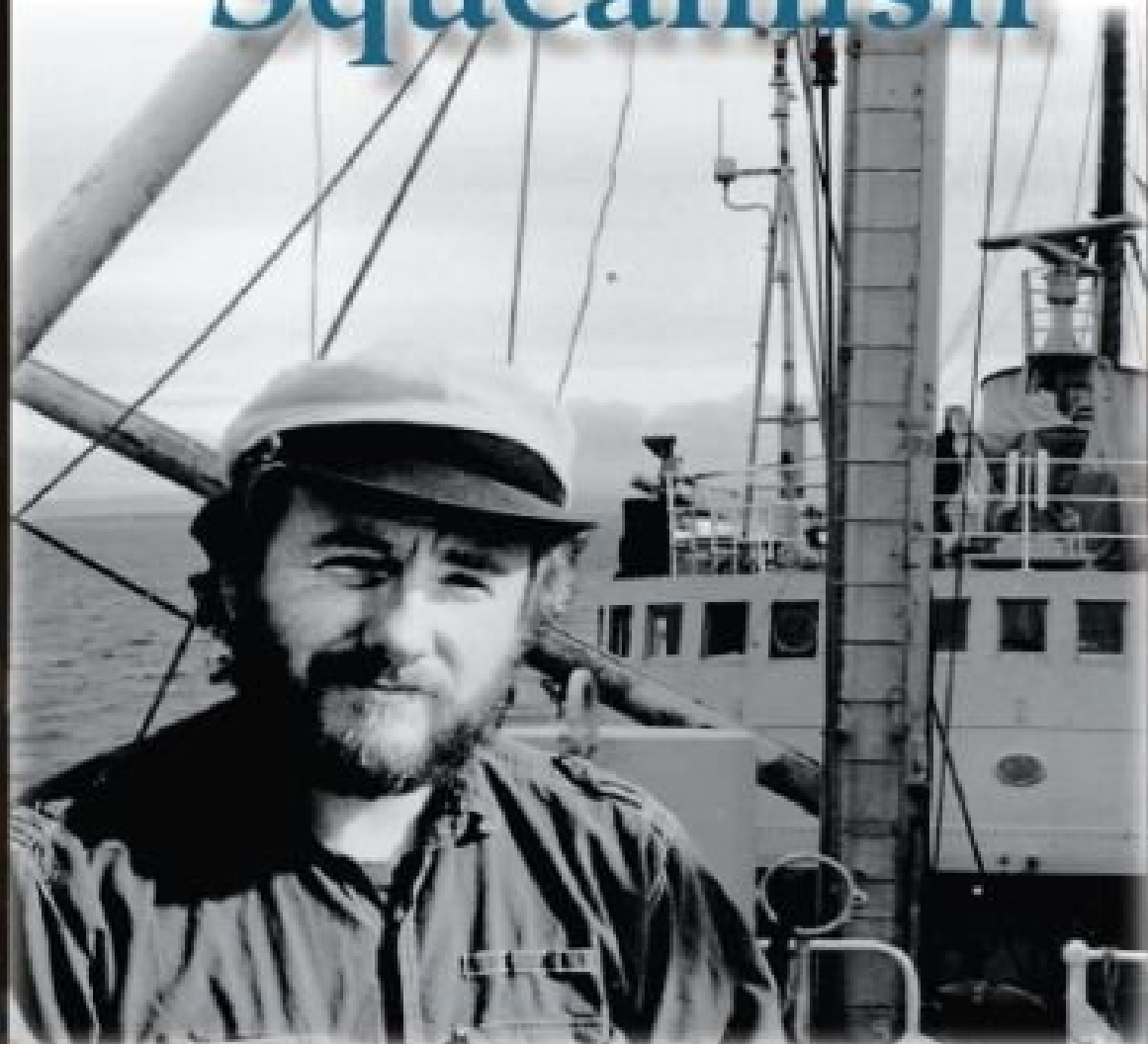


"Watkins' gift is as a storyteller."

—Herald Sunday

Scotland Is Not for the Squeamish



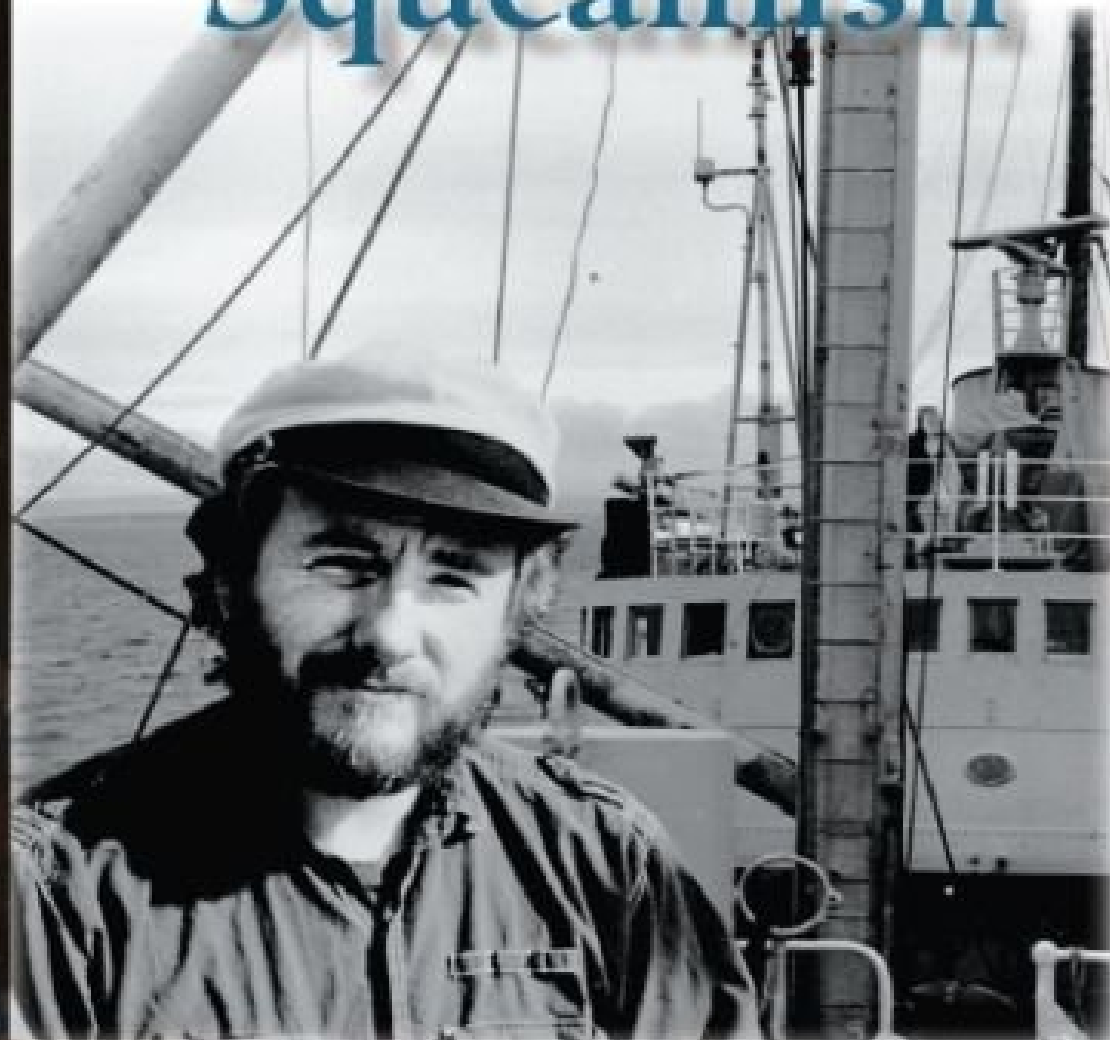
Bill Watkins

Author of A Celtic Childhood and The Once and Future Celt

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Scotland Is Not for the Squeamish



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for the Squeamish*

Bill Watkins

SCARLETTA
PRESS

MINNEAPOLIS

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Dedication: To my wife Katie

AS A SMALL CHILD, in my grandparents house in Birmingham, I spent many hours thumbing through Robert Bain's book *The Clans and Tartans of Scotland*. One hundred and fifty richly colored plates depicted sets of plaid that dazzled my imagination. I knew little of Scotland, except what I had learned from comic books, where the kilted hero Rob Roy harried English redcoats in 1715, and Andrew Glenn, a quiet shepherd, outwitted bank robbers, sheep stealers, and Nazi spies, with the aid of his faithful dog, Black Bob.

Many people in England had grave misgivings about the Scots, whom they considered unruly and wild, but my Welsh granddad, Jim, was a self-confessed Scotophile, and my Irish grandda, Willie, had a best friend called Jock, from Ardrossan in Ayrshire.

Dr. Johnson is reputed to have said, "The finest aspect a Scotsman may behold is the road that takes him to London." In my case, this sentiment can be reversed, but the method and means of my first excursion to Scotland were more by default than design.

I returned from adventuring in Ireland in the spring of 1967 and found myself immersed in the odd epoch known as the "Summer of Love." At first the radical trend looked promising—"flower power," "freedom," "make love, not war" were the watch words of the day—but all too soon, what commercialism hadn't hijacked, wreaths of pot smoke had debilitated to the point where I lost interest. One scene that did benefit from the hippie movement was the folk club circuit. In the early summer of that year, I formed a guitar trio with Mack Tressler and A. Jones, playing at the Troubadour club in Bristol, along with Ian Anderson and "Spider" John Koerner. Later, I found myself in Liverpool, doing spots at the Green Moose café with the guitarist Gordon Jones and the playwright Will Russell. Some elements of "the Alternative Society" were fun. I enjoyed the music, but I didn't care for the drugs, and still I was restless. After a string of dead-end jobs and failed relationships, I decided to swim against the tide and turn off, turn out, and drop in. There were alternatives to being alternative, and I took one of the most time-honored routes for my escape. I went to sea.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary of Unusual Words and Phrases and Their Derivation

Aen: one (Scots, from Gaelic, aon)

Afore: before (Scots)

Alba gu Brath! (Ala-puh goo brow!): Scotland forever! (Gaelic)

Amadawn: Idiot (Gaelic: amadan, fool)

Aye (eye): yes (Scots; never confused with eye, which is pronounced een)

Balmpot: crazy person (British slang)

Banjaxed: surprise attack (Gaelic: banaghaisge, the surprising feats or exploits of a woman)

Barry: very good (Gypsy)

Barry gadgie: Good lad (Gypsy)

Besom: awkward or spiteful woman (Scots: besom, a witch's broom)

Bint: woman (Arabic)

Black Watch: famous Highland regiment (Gaelic: An Freiceadan dubh)

Bloke: a man (Gaelic: buachail óg, young man)

Bollix: Hot ashes, used as a curse (Gaelic: beolach, live ashes)

Bollocks: testicles, or used to indicate nonsense (As above)

Breid (breed): bread (Scots)

Broch: a wide-based circular fortification with only one entrance (Pictish)

Brown breid (broon breid): dead (Rhyming slang)

Cailleach: an old woman, also a witch (Gaelic; perhaps from Hindu goddess Kali)

Cat o' nine tails: a punishment lash with lead pieces on the whip ends (Nautical)

Chancer: a liar, or one who boasts of skills he doesn't possess (Tailor's slang)

Char: tea (Hindi)

Chorrie: to steal (Scots)

Cougar: wild cat (Gaelic: cu gar, garden hound)

Craic (krak): fun, also witty conversation (Gaelic)

Crikey: a contraction of "Christ help me"

Crivens: a contraction of "Christ in heavens"

Crofter: a subsistence farmer, usually in the Highlands and Islands

Deek: to look about (Doric)

Deid (deed): dead (Scots)

Dingle: a small copse of deciduous trees

Divil a thing: not much (Irish)

Divvy naw?: Do you know? (Geordie and Lalland Scots)

Dreep: to slither, especially down a wall (Scots)

Dreich: overcast or rainy, bleak (Scots)

Dyke: a stone wall (Scots)

Eejit: idiot (Irish)

Fettle: to be in good health or spirits (Gaelic: feudail, a wealth of)

Fiddler's Green: the luxurious heaven reserved for dead sailors (Naut.)

Fit like?: What are you like? How are you? (Doric)

Frowsty: stinky, mildewy

Gambol: to frolic about or cartwheel (French: gambald, to leap or spring)

Ged dear: a phrase used to show forbearance (Gaelic: ged Dia, although God)

Geordie: a native of Newcastle on Tyne and environs, so named for supporting King George during the Jacobite rebellion

Glasgow kiss: a head butt (Scots slang)

Glic: wise (Gaelic)

Golden elbow: to get fired, get the push; also known as the Spanish Archer, or bow (British slang)

Guzzunder: a chamber pot (Goes under the bed)

Gypsy's kiss: a piss, especially to put out a campfire (rhyming slang)

Hame moot: home place (Norse)

Hank Marvin: starving (rhyming slang)

Haukin (howkin): picking up or digging (Doric)

Havering: not getting to the point, useless talk (Scots)

Hawse pipe: the porthole through which an anchor chain runs (Naut.)

Jacobite: supporter of Bonnie Prince Charlie's and his father, King James Stuart's claim to the throne (Latin: Jacobus, James)

Japester: a practical joker, a wheeze wizard

Killick: an anchor (Naut.)

Kirk: the established Presbyterian Church (from kirke, a circle)

Knackered: tired out (from nackers, traders who buy and slaughter broken-down horses. ME. nage: old horse)

Knackers: testicles (Gaelic: cnag, ball used in hurley games)

Knocking shop: brothel (Brit. slang)

Langer: penis (Irish)

Langers: obviously drunk (Irish)

Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519): daughter of Rodrigo, who became Pope Alexander VI; hobbies included incest with her father and brother and poisoning various relatives

Mickle: small (Scots)

Moich: mad, enraged. Moicher: a lunatic (Tinker cant)

Monkey's: not to give a damn (British slang)

Muckle: big (Scots)

Neb: nose (Scots, from nub)

Nicked: stolen (British slang)

Nudey-noddy: to be in an embarrassing situation (Gaelic: niúidi neáidi)

Och: but or however (Gaelic)

Oil tot: a favored place or occupation (perhaps from Gaelic: Ól tigh, drinking house)

On the tear: out on the town, drinking (British slang)

Otter boards: large paddle-shaped boards that keep the mouth of a trawl net open (Naut.)

Pagging: a severe beating (Gypsy: probably from Spanish, pagar, to pay out)

Plus-fours: baggy tweed ankle breeches, equiv. U.S. knickerbockers plus four inches (Tailor's slang)

Poncing: living off a prostitute, pimping (British slang)

Rakes: lots of, an abundance (Irish)

Raga: an impromptu tune played on the sitar (Hindi)

Rob Roy: the famous MacGregor guerrilla warrior who fought against the British redcoats in the years leading up to the 1715 rebellion

Rugged: torn away. (Scots.)

Scallywags: petty criminals, jokers (Old Norse: skjalla-weg, a swaggering loud mouth)

Scouse: a native of Liverpool (from lobsouse, a seafarer's meat stew)

Scrapper: fighter, boxer (British slang)

Scunnered: bemused, bewildered (Scots)

Shagging: from shag, sexual intercourse (Gaelic: seircín, [shac-een], a little love making)

Shielings: huts or houses (Scots)

Shufti: look (Arabic)

Slacker: a lazy person (Gaelic: salachar, a filthy fellow)

Snacker: a deck boy on a trawler (Nautical)

Swithering: unable to make up one's mind (Scots)

Tadger: a penis. (British slang probably from Taddler, a sausage)

Taen: taken (Scots)

Taking the piss: to mock, taking the mickey (Latin: micturitus, to urinate)

Teuchter: country person (Gaelic: tuathachdair)

Thon: that (Scots)

Trews: trousers (Gaelic: truis)

Tumbrel: French farm cart used to take aristocrats to the guillotine

Victualers: store providing food and supplies for shipping (Naut.)

Wadi: dried-up river bed or depression (Arabic)

Walloch: penis (Scots)

Wanker: equivalent U.S. term: someone who jerks off

For honour's the sum of the mind.

JAMES HOGG, THE ETTRICK SHEPHERD

TWO POINTS OFF the starboard bow, at the end of an isthmus, a giant crag thrusts skyward like a decayed incisor. Mottled in dun and ocher, this fang of the faded British Empire roots deep into the jaw of General Franco's fascist Spain. The Arabs know this rock as Tariq's Mountain, which in their tongue carries the harmonious epithet Jabal Tariq. Defiantly, our imperial forebears, whether by linguistic choice or indifference to euphony, contracted the musical Arabic into the angular English nomen Gibraltar.

To port and some eight nautical miles away, across the lazy expanse of a languid azure sea rises Mount Abyla, also called Jabal Musa, shimmering in the jaw of Morocco.

These two mighty eminences are the Pillars of Hercules, in legend forced apart by the Son of Zeus to let the rushing Atlantic waters slake the thirst of the arid Mediterranean. Now they quiver in the heat, tusks in a giant maw seemingly waiting for some tectonic tremor to overturn the Herculean feat and again clamorously shut the gaping mouth.

Position: 36° 06' N. 5° 21' W.

The Straits of Gibraltar

The western end of the ancient world, beyond which, it was thought, fearsome sea monsters and sirens lay waiting to snatch the unwary into the torments of some unknown watery hell. They named it Ne Plus Ultra—"Nothing Lies Beyond."

The intrepid Phoenicians had no such qualms, and if they did, they kept their quiet. Even before the birth of the Roman Empire, these seafarers knew the straits as a portal to the riches found in the islands beyond where the great north wind blew. To assist their explorations, the ancient entrepreneurs established the great cities of Gadir (now Cádiz), in Spain, and Tangier, on the northernmost tip of the African continent.



Following the timeworn seaway from Barcelona, the sturdy freighter SS Isle of May, grinning with rust and rivets and loaded with barrels of green olives and red-tinned tomatoes, makes steady progress toward North Africa.

The wireless cabin aft of the bridge hums and crackles with the cacophony of shortwave whispers amid the static crashes of a thunderstorm ravaging the Bay of Biscay, five hundred miles to the north. Ethereal voices in a clamor of Greek, Portuguese, Spanish, and Arabic filter from the loudspeaker and are lost in the warm hiss of spray-ridden wind from the open portholes. In the corner of the radio shack, the old Creed teleprinter starts an erratic tap dance. An oblong sheet of crisp white paper rises from its top as the carbon ribbon jigs out a message. As it is typed by a ghostly hand, the message reads:

SS ISLE OF MAY STOP
CARGO 3278/CDZ
FROM CADIZ WILL BE SHIPPED BY
CONTAINER SHIP TODAY (24/8/69) STOP
AFTER OFF-LOAD TANGIER RETURN LONDON
STOP STOP NNNN

I tear off the paper and take it through to the Old Man, Captain Metcalf. He regards its contents with a noisy suck on his briar pipe.

"At this bloody rate we're working for bugger all. Bloody containers—they'll be the ruin of trampers like us!"

"Any reply, Captain?"

"No, no reply, Sparks, just acknowledge receipt. I think I know what this means." He taps the note with the stem of his pipe.

"What does it mean, sir?" The helmsman shifts his gaze to Captain Metcalf.

"It means . . . it means the old lady will be for the breaker's yard when we get back to London. Aye, and me along with her, no doubt. Two old dinosaurs ready to be fossilized. Is that not right, Mr. Mackenzie?"

The mate looks uneasy and little wonder: had the captain retired as he was due to, command of the vessel would surely pass to the mate, Mackenzie. A bit embarrassed by the directness of the question, the lugubrious Scotsman clears his throat before replying.

"Och, they'll tart the old doll up enough to get her through the Board of Trade inspection and she'll be fine and no mistake. Ye just see if she don't."

"Oh, ho! Well, now, Sparks, do we detect a note of optimism from the otherwise dour Scot?" The captain grins and pushes up the peak of his cap with his briar.

I take this as an invitation to comment.

"I'm sure it will be all right. The old girl just needs a bit of powder and paint and a working radar and she'll be grand!"

"H'm, yes, the radar. It hasn't worked properly since that dockside crane gave it a dunt yesterday. We may need to post extra lookouts, Mr. Mackenzie—and Sparks, see if you can at least make the scanner go round, so it looks like the bloody thing's working."

"Yes, sir."



We are closing on the port of Tangier, capital of the International Zone of Morocco. I peer at the headland through the bridge binoculars.

“I’ve never been to an Arab country. Any chance of a spell ashore, sir?”

“Well, I’ll do you a deal. If you can fix that bloody radar, you can go ashore if you like. We’ll need it working tomorrow night on the downhill run, and mind, we sail at dawn. So if you’re off whoring, get the bint to wake you up!” He shares his laugh with Geordie Whittle, the helmsman, who doesn’t miss the chance to needle me.

“You don’t go wi’ hoors, do ye, Billy boy? Aw, Jasus, look at him! He’s gone a red!” Delighted at his own display of Geordie wit, he pulls sharp down on the steam whistle cord, sending busy flotillas of Arab lateen-rigged dhows scurrying for safety.

“No chance of steam giving way to sail here! Steady as she goes, number one!”



The bay area is thick with skiffs and lighters of every size and age. Only divine providence and a loud hooter avert disaster as we close on the harbor jetty. Around, brightly painted dahabehs pour gaggles of camera-clicking tourists onto the pierhead.

An eternity of verbal thrust and parry forms the negotiations between Arab dockers and the ship’s master. Enticements and insults, in pidgin English, are flung to and fro on the warm spicy wind, until a bargain is struck.

We make fast alongside the white stone jetty. Before the mid-starboard companionway can be lowered, smiling stevedores climb over the side rail sporting all the nimbleness of their Barbary ancestors. Some even have knives in their teeth.

Once on deck, the chattering throng assembles under the flapping arms of an elderly gentleman in long scarlet robes and a fez. Perched on top of an iron capstanhead, the gnarled old maestro conducts the ensuing performance with a bone-handled riding crop. Orchestrated by alternate curses and cajoling, his contingent’s eager hands tear at the deck cargo, spurring crates and boxes aloft soon to be spirited to the dockside by a forest of waving sunburned arms. Hundredweight bags of grain and burlap sacks full of chickpeas are scurried to the pier by sweat-soaked laborers who are nigh-on bandy-legged with the effort.

Despite their exertions, each manages a nod or a smile to the mate taking tally at the head of the gangway. Mr. Mackenzie ignores the gestures and stands aloof, stone-facedly ticking off items on the manifest sheets on his clipboard.

There’s a sudden flurry of excitement, as a case of ball bearings bursts open

sending cascades of the silver spheres hissing to the deck. The ancient red-cloaked gaffer launches into a new frenzy of invective, lashing the air above his subjects' heads with both his words and his whip. The once orderly disembarkation now dissolves into a scramble for the metal orbs.

MacKenzie shakes his head and looks up as if wondering why rain is falling onto his paperwork from the clear blue sky. Above the melee, the source dangles from the derrick of a dockside crane loading the next ship in line. Hanging like a giant tea bag, a terrified donkey brays pitifully from a swinging cargo net, its traverses from the dockside marked by a rainbow curve of urine droplets refracting in the sparkling sunlight.

Shadows shorten as the noonday sun climbs to its daily zenith. The deck is picked clean of cargo, and the porters retire to the shade of a stone archway to make their ritual ablutions and turn toward Mecca. All becomes still as, from the mosque and minaret, electrically amplified voices call the faithful to prayer. Echoing from the lustrous mosaic of pastel stucco buildings rich in pink, red, ochre, and cream, the chanting soars into the heavens. I ascend with it, climbing the ship's signal mast to tend to the injured radar scanner, only to find that the problem is nothing more than a loose antenna connector. All it needs is a little jiggery-pokery and—there now! Coursing crisply in the fligid air, the radar scanner turns, and I've earned my passport to adventure.

For a while I squat on the masthead, as in a crow's nest in the days of tall ships surveying the view and musing on my good fortune to be in the here and now. On my left, North Africa beckons with an alluring intrigue. To my right, across the blue expanse of the Mediterranean, the Rock of Gibraltar, no longer looking so imposing, is dwarfed by the mountains of mainland Spain. At a distance of eighteen miles, this once impregnable British fortress seems strangely out of place in a world of free markets and international trade, but the garrison is still there, dwelling like trolls in the tunnel-riddled rock, training their guns on peaceful shipping and singing of the halcyon days when Britannia ruled the waves. The other creatures infesting the rock are the Barbary apes, Europe's only species of monkey. Legend has it that if these little monkeys ever leave the fortress, the great British Empire will fall. I wonder how many are left . . . Should Gibraltar be given back to Spain? Of course, but not while Franco and his fascist pals still rule the roost. My father fought for the Spanish Republic in the 1930s and he told me how Britain, France, and other so-called democracies turned their backs on Spain, letting Hitler and Mussolini aid Franco in the overthrow of the legal government. That was all a long time ago. Dad was my age, just a wee lad, with a mauser rifle and a noble cause. I don't think my father approves of trading with fascist dictators, but I had no say in the matter when we off-loaded in Barcelona. At the dockside, the Guardia Civil asked the names of all the ship's crewmen and looked them up in a big red book marked "Insurgentes y Criminales Internacionales." Like most volunteers at that time, Dad wasn't daft enough to enlist under his real name, but he will be pleased that the Spanish police are still looking for him and his comrades after all these years.

I chuckle my way down from the rigging. On entering the wheelhouse, I see that

the beam sweeps the radar screen once more. The captain is pleased.

~~“Good man! You’re a veritable Marconi, only he was Italian, wasn’t he?”~~

“Half Italian, sir. His mother was Irish.”

“No kidding? Did you know that, Mr. Whittle?”

“Micks, spicks, what’s the difference?” mumbles the ghastly gargoyle, folding his toothless face in half, in a self-congratulatory grimace. Steering me away from the grisly apparition, the Old Man puts an avuncular arm on my shoulder.

“Well done, Billy. Now you’re free to melt into the aromatic delights of this medieval metropolis! Beware of pickpockets, and don’t go catching the clap!”

“I’m telling you, Capt’n, he doesn’t go wi’ the lassies. If we didn’t know better we’d think he’s a poof! Divvy know, when we went to the cathouse in Barcelona he went to the bloody cathedral!” Geordie Whittle twists his red-faced leer into a hideous version of a smile. He looks like a smashed pomegranate.

“Well, bully for you, Sparks! At least you’ll have something nice to remember when the rest of these randy bastards are pissing razor blades and getting the spotty arses jabbed with penicillin! By the way, how old are you?”

“I’m nineteen, nearly twenty, Captain!”

“Ah, nineteen, d’ya know what I was doing when I was nineteen?” He looks to the mate and the quartermaster.

“Aye!” comes the chorus, “ye was the bo’sun’s mate on Noah’s fuckin’ ark!” I leave the three of them to their laughter and go below.

Captain Metcalf, forty years’ service and still a spry old salt, leans on the bridge wing, pipe stuck fiercely into his white beard, a seagoing Santa Claus, always neat in his old double-breasted navy tunic and seldom a harsh word even in the foulest weather. He had “come up the hawse pipe,” as they say, starting on square riggers as a deckboy apprentice and learning every part of a ship, from the top gallants to the keel plate. He always exudes a quiet confidence that is infectious among the men, even a bridge crew as diverse as the saturnine mate Mackenzie and the giggling, Popeye-faced pisstank Geordie Whittle. Aye, he’s a good old stick. It would be too bad if they beached him when we get back to the blighty.

“Stepping ashore, sir!” I call from the well deck.

“Carry on, Sparks—have fun!” He returns my salute as I tread the white gangplank down to the limestone dock.

I can’t believe my luck. A whole day to myself and a pocket full of Yankee dollars to blow. The language of the sea may be English, but the currency of the merchant marine is the U.S. dollar, acceptable everywhere at exchange rates legal and otherwise.

Tangier’s catacombs of narrow, flagstoned alleys teem with kaftane merchants. Against the press, I jostle my way toward the fortress walls of the old town. On every side, open-fronted shops and street bazaars spill their exotic goods out into the golden sunlight. Pungent smells of coffee, leather, and cooking spices issue from each portal, coalescing with the more delicate fragrance of sun-warmed fresh fruits.

Marijuana, being the ancient drug of choice, wreathes freely in the smoky air

I'm much taken by the sweet aroma of kif that fulminates from the hookahs of the worthies sitting stoically on their lush carpets. If you care to sit down with them they will offer you the fuming silver mouthpiece of the bubbling apparatus as casually as a cucumber sandwich at a vicar's tea party. However, smoking pot has never been to my liking, as it gives me a sensation akin to toothache and bollocks to that.

The sound of a tinkling hammer draws me to the front of a metalworking shop where the proprietor effortlessly taps a lump of silver into a splendid drinking cup. The unassuming craftsmanship of these Moroccan artisans is breathtaking. His apprentice, a lad of maybe fifteen years, sits behind him turning out identical and beautifully intricate Islamic brass plates or wall plaques. There's a tug at my jacket sleeve. I look down.

Staring back up at me is a skinny barefoot laddie of eight or nine.

"Effendi, you American, yes? You want guide, yes?"

"No, not American!" I walk off up the street toward the seventeenth-century Great Mosque.

"Effendi, you English?" tries the waif.

"No!"

"¿Habla usted español?"

"¡No!"

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?"

"Nein!" I toy with the boy's persistence.

"Parlez-vous français?"

"Non!"

The small lad, nonplussed but determined, continues to skip along rapidly firing barrages of multilingual questions at me.

"Ruskie?"

"Nyet!"

The boy is becoming a bit of a pest, and I've half a mind to tell him to bugger off.

The little bleeder tries several more languages that I don't even recognize. I shake my head in the negative. Crestfallen, he stops running and stands in puzzlement. Seemingly beaten, he shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head in the most forlorn fashion.

Shit! I've been a cad and now feel sorry for the street urchin. The poor little scoundrel is only trying to make his way in the world by living on his wits, and I know what that's like.

"I'm Irish!" I smile at him. His face lights up.

"Conas atá tú?" the child blurts out in Gaelic.

Vindicated, the smiling youngster shakes my hand furiously. Any Moroccan mudlark who knows the Irish for "How are you?" has certainly gained my respect and earned his position as my guide.

The linguist's name is Mahmood, which is pronounced Machmood. For a bit of fun, I call him Mack, which means son in Gaelic. He tugs and capers me through the labyrinthine guts of the old city's sprawl. His enthusiasm is tireless.

"Shufti! Shufti! Look, look here! Is beautiful, yes?" Without pausing for a

answer, I'm snatched away to the next vista point.

~~Within the hour my poor brain, suffering from dehydration and kaleidoscopic contusion, threatens mutiny.~~

"Enough, Mack, I'm knackered!" I sink down onto the cool stone steps of a well hole.

"What is knack-ka-red, please?" inquires my walking lexicon, eager to add to his stock-in-trade.

"It means, very tired, exhausted, you have run the feet off me!" He looks at my shoes and mouths, "run the feet off me," then shakes his head.

"Ah!" He points skyward in heavenly inspiration. "You want drink beer, yes? know place near, is good, not clip joint, savvy?"

"Yes, I savvy, but I thought there weren't any bars in Muslim countries. Drinking not allowed?"

"Is okay for you infidel, but not for Arab to drink al-kho-hol. Is Arabic word savvy? Good to drink, but not for us—ha-ha-ha!"

He skips along the smooth stone slabs of a shady thoroughfare to the wonderful mirage of a Carlsberg lager sign. From the open window beneath, a ghastly rendition of Bob Dylan's "Where Are You Tonight, Sweet Marie?" is being battered out unmercifully on an excruciatingly out-of-tune piano.

"You Irish is same as Scotchman, yes?"

"Er, in a way, yes, I suppose."

"Come see crazy Scotchman . . . in here . . . he my friend Anxious, shufti!"

He vanishes into the yawning black portal. I pause for a minute on the doorstep, but when trepidation gives way to thirst, I follow.

The joint, copious with sundry ne'r-do-wells in crumpled cotton suits and smeared sunglasses, carries the expectation that any moment Joe Cairo will appear and say, "The Fatman wants to talk to you."

The low roof is hung with faded pink silk and dusty plastic palm leaves. The bar is a mess of old ship's timbers tied together with hemp rope, at the end of which stands a surly-looking stuffed camel with an ashtray stuck in its mouth and a device for opening beer bottles in its arse. The barman is obscured by a fury of French sailors roaring through their gesticulations at a shifty-looking gentleman who periodically breaks away to consult a group of bar girls in the corner. The lassies take up the shouting and arm waving until the go-between, sweating profusely and dabbing his head with a red damask handkerchief, makes his way back to the waiting matelots, who resume the tumult. In the uproar, it is impossible to tell whether the sailors' display is negotiation or complaint. When not screaming, the miniskirted strumpets sit demurely sipping ice water. Surprisingly, these lovelies wouldn't look out of place on Sunset Boulevard or the Reeperbahn in Hamburg; there lives are a far cry from the traditional purdah of Islam.

As if the air weren't pungent enough with the lingering aroma of bhang and the more intimate fragrances of the prostitutes, the music, for want of a better word, would take the face off of you. The cause of the infernal din is a rubicund copperwire-headed Scotsman with a smile like a boiled herring and a voice no

unlike a cat caught in a mangle. He seems to have a vendetta against the ill-starred piano, which he is pulverizing into submission with all the demonic relish of Vlad the Impaler. Most surprisingly, no one takes a blind bit of notice of him. He flails at the doomed instrument, sending pieces of stained ivory springing skyward from the aged keys. In accompaniment, his great sandaled foot pounds on the fortissimo pedal, while a sentinel glass of beer does a Highland jig along the defaced lid of the once-fine walnut upright. With a final tumultuous discord, he brings his concerto crashing to a halt. For a few seconds, he lies prostrate across the battered keyboard, then leaps to his feet, giving a great sweeping bow. To my amazement, the crowd gives him a hooting applause and me the growing idea that smoking kif does make you daft and they don't call it dope for nothing!

"Wha' have ye got wi' ye there, Mahmood? Who's this character?"

"He sailor Bill . . . nice man . . . drink beer . . . he my friend like you, Anxious!"

"Shut yer mouth, ye'll catch flies!" says the stranger, tapping me under the chin. "Ye have every right to be impressed. That piano has no been tuned since the Second World War! Onyway, my name's Rab, but folks call me Angus!" He thrusts out a long bony hand.

"Yes, shake hands with my friend Anxious . . . crazy Scotchman, yes!"

"Aye, I am, and I'll eat ye for dinner, wee laddie! Now away and get Seffri to bring us some beers. Tell him to put it on my account." The lad worms his way through the white bell-bottom-clad Frenchies, who are still arguing with the pimp.

"Listen," he says, "can ye get me on a ship fer Britain? I've been stuck here for two months and I've got to get back to start university in September. I'm a geology student and I was doing my research in the Atlas Mountains until . . . er . . . until . . ."

"Until what?"

"Until I blew all my money on kif and got stranded here playing piano for handouts."

"You mean people pay you to play?"

"No, not at all. They pay me to shut up! Onyway, the owner's tone-deaf and the regulars don't like the Arabic music. Can ye help me? Could ye smuggle me on board yer ship?"

"No chance! Our ship's too small and there's nowhere to hide above decks."

"What about the hold?"

"It's refrigerated."

"Fuwk it! Jest my luck! Listen, Bill, I'm desperate. This is a British Post Office savings bank account book, showing a balance of thirty-four pounds seventeen shillings and sixpence. It's yours if ye can help me. If I give ye the book as security, would ye lend me ten pounds to get home? Give me yer address and I'll mail the money to ye. My folks are well off, so there's no problem there."

"Then why don't you ask your folks for the money?"

"I did and they sent it, but that was last month."

"Well, what happened to it?"

"He smoke it all away . . . bad man . . . smoke kif . . . money all gone . . . crazy Anxious, crazy Scotchman. Seffri say, 'No music, no beer, no account . . . a

fucked up!”

“Here, Bill, fer God’s sake! Can ye no pay this little bugger, so he can piss o and bother somebody else?”

“Aye, I forgot, I’ve got some American dough here somewhere. What should give him?”

“Gi’ him a dollar and a kick up the arse for being a cheeky wee shite!”

“Here, Mack, here’s a fiver and thanks a lot.”

My guide’s face beams.

“Allah be praised! You a good generous man—not like Anxious Scotchman. He mean bastard!” He ducks the swipe Angus fires at him and skips out into the blinding sunshine.

“Bye-bye, Bill, bye-bye, Anxious, fuck you!”

“He’s got a great command of the language, that wee laddie. I’d no be surprised if he became the next president o’ this kip! Onyway, can ye help me oot?”

I look him hard in the eye. He doesn’t blink. I get the feeling he’s telling the truth, and if he isn’t, what the hell? The other guys were blowing their money in the brothel, and there is something about this rogue that I like. He seems to be, as my dad would say, “a man to ride the river with.”

“Here, take this, it’s thirty American dollars and keep your wee book. We’ll just shake hands on it and have a few beers. I’ll give you my folks’ address in Birmingham. Let me know how you get on.”

“Thanks, Bill. You’re a pal and you’ll never regret this! I’ll gie ye the money back when I get hame, Scot’s honor!”

“Is that Scout’s honor or Scot’s honor?”

“Scot’s honor, ye Sassenach, Scot’s!”

“I’m not a Sassenach! I’m an Éireannach!”

“What in the name o’ Christ is that?”

“I’m not an Englishman. I’m an Irishman.”

“That’s almost as bad!”

“Thanks, Angus. If you don’t spunk the money on hashish, I’ll maybe see you in Scotland one day?”

“Aye, ye will, sure enough. I’ll see you in God’s ain country. God’s ain country Irishman!”

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