

*A School-Book Sailor Would Call  
the I-R-3 the Curse of Jonah,  
Would He?*



## THE CURSE OF JONAH

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**T**HE end of an eight-thousand-mile voyage in command of a wooden U. S. Navy submarine chaser left Cap Wetherby irksomely doubting his own established reputation as a blue-water sailor. There lay his command with five other subchasers shored up like toy yachts, fifty feet down below the terraced stone walls, on a Malta drydock's wet floor.

The *I-R-3* looked almost as battered as a derelict flung high and dry on the beach by a howling nor'easter. Bailey, his chief boatswain's mate, was finishing a swearing repair job on a splintered amidships plank. She got that after a tiller rope parted one dark night off the Azores and the *2-N-S*, standing dead ahead on her course, rammed her bullnose into his engine room. Also, the starboard

propeller's blades were curled up uselessly as a wrecked Nantucket windmill after meeting a hurricane full and bye.

Much as it galled his pride, Cap Wetherby had to admit, inwardly, his was the least seaworthy craft in the drydock right then. He pretended to be intently watching his chief machinist's mate Cooper heating the starboard propeller with fishing-schooner profanity as he hammered it back into some semblance of usefulness. The middle-aged skipper of Splinter Boat *1-R-3* was employing this subterfuge to avoid speaking young Aitken, trim and smart in his Annapolis-cut white uniform, as he strolled over from his own command, the *2-N-S*.

"Cap, how is the patch-work coming on the Curse?" asked Ensign Aitken. He eyed the makeshift repairs being made on the propeller. "Wasted effort," he remarked with no attempt to conceal his disgust. "That bungling will cut down your speed at least two knots. Throw it away and draw another screw from the *Leonidas*."

"Just been there," replied Cap Wetherby.

"They got a hold full of left-hand wheels but they're clean out of sta'boards." He turned mildly accusing gray eyes on Aitken. "You got the last to replace the one you just nicked back in Gibraltar. Got the old one yet? I could use it."

Ensign Aitken tossed a critical look up at the *1-R-3* and smiled patronizingly.

"Of course not," he drawled. "I don't carry useless junk lashed on my decks like a fishing smack."

Cap Wetherby knew the point of that comment was directed at the row of empty steel drums he carried lashed to the rails along each gangway. He knew further, that Aitken was thrusting at his own past record as a Gloucester fishing schooner

master who had joined the Navy with the entire crew of the old *Annie May* to man a hundred-and-ten-foot submarine chaser.

"They'll come in handy one of these days," was Cap Wetherby's mild defence as he glanced up at the empty drums.

"Quite likely," retorted Ensign Aitken over his shoulder as he moved on with the air of a man who could put his time to better advantage. "They'll make good floats for a life raft when the Curse of Jonah sinks under you in a flat calm."

Cap Wetherby stoked up his pipe and started puffing furiously. Then rammed it back in his pocket on remembering British dockyard rules absolutely forbade smoking.

**J**UST then Cooper straightened his cramped back after one last blow of his sledge. He glared savagely at the retreating collar of Ensign Aitken's slim-waisted uniform.

"Was that school-book sailor calling us the Curse of Jonah, Cap?"

While Cooper's past service as his auxiliary schooner engineer permitted a wide latitude of familiarity, Cap Wetherby chose to treat the question as having been unheard.

"Engines all ready, Chief?" he asked.

"Port and center, ready and standin' by," answered Cooper. "Got the sta'board engine's circulatin' pump up there in the Limey machine shop. Cylinder is wore. They're relinin' it—if the war lasts long enough."

"Ahoy below there, Cap'n!" sang out Quartermaster Driskell from the *1-R-3*'s deck. "Signal flying from the flagship outside. 'All chasers prepare for sea immediately' it says." Bosun Bailey ceased his hammering on the last spike he was driving into the new plank he had just fitted. A clinched fist smeared with white lead shook upward at Driskell, now

peering down at him.

“Tell that lob-scouse on the *Leonidas* we ain’t putting out to sea till two coats of lead is dry on this new plank!”

But the booming whistle of the pumphouse drowned his voice with the warning that water would be turned into the drydock within ten minutes. Around all the six subchasers there was a wild scramble to gather up tools and paint-gear from the dock floor. Their crews stopped brushing on copper bottom-paint and scrambled up the ladders. Lines were tightened and ladders pulled up just as the flood of water began boiling up through the gratings in the drydock floor.

Less than an hour later, Cap Wetherby’s command limped out of the drydock and stood down the narrow Valetta harbor, trailing the rest of the Splinter Fleet as it stood out to sea on a rush call.

In a rapid series of flag hoists from the *9-T-5*, which was the force commander’s flagship whenever an engagement of the enemy was pending, the reason for this sortie was made apparent. A few hours before, a convoy of fourteen troop ships, loaded with Australians and New Zealanders, had cleared Alexandria, Egypt, under the protection of eight Japanese destroyers which were serving with the Allies in the Mediterranean. In spite of all attempts at secrecy, something had gone wrong. Ten miles out from Alexandria, the first troop ship was torpedoed and sank with fourteen hundred men. Thirty miles further, the second troop ship with twelve hundred men aboard was ripped open by another submarine’s torpedoes.

It was obvious to the British Admiral at Malta, responsible for the safety of these ships, that the secret routing he had given to his troop ship commanders was known to the enemy and that a cordon of

Austrian and German submarines lay in wait all along the route. The Japanese destroyer flotilla commander had wirelessly his inability to protect such a large convoy from a pre-arranged attack. He asked for all possible reinforcements.

There was nothing to send him but twenty-four submarine chasers of the American Splinter Fleet, then in drydock receiving badly needed repairs.

CAP WETHERBY jotted down the last message from the *9-T-5* in his log and without optimism shoved over the idle starboard engine telegraph to FULL SPEED. He was slowly dropping behind the rest of the chasers as they swung out to sea under the frowning fortresses guarding the entrance to Malta harbor.

Receiving no response from the starboard engine, he turned the bridge over to Bailey and walked aft to the engine room hatch to learn the worst.

“Any kind of a jury rig you can fix up that dead sta’board engine with?” he asked Cooper.

His chief engineer pointed over the stem at Malta fading in the distance.

“My circulating pump is back there!” he yelled to make himself heard above the pounding of his two overloaded engines. “I’m hooking the fire hose across from the fire-and-bilge pump on the auxiliary. If I can find the right pipe fitting, I’ll have her going soon.”

“Do the best you can, soon’s you can,” said Cap Wetherby and walked slowly back to his chart house.

He knew what was coming in the way of a reprimand from the force commander as he saw Driskell douse a flag hoist in answer to one with the *1-R-3*’s call letter flying from the *9-T-5*. To make matters worse, Aitken on the *2-N-5* was also “flying the same signal—obviously relaying it back.

Just as he reached his bridge; Glass the radio man poked his head up through the grating under the folding chart table.

"Force commander's trying to raise you on the radio phone, Cap'n."

This new-fangled gadget was something Cap Wetherby never had quite mastered. It didn't seem real to be talking to another man into a telephone without wires connecting them. The few times he had used a telephone from the fish wharf in Provincetown and Gloucester always found him inarticulate.

He picked up his transmitter and fumbled clumsily to get his thumb on the pushbutton switch.

"Ahoy, Captain Guthrie!" he bellowed as against a gale.

"That you, Wetherby?" came the rasping croak from the goose-necked loud speaker mounted over head.

"Aye, aye, sir. Wetherby!" roared the *I-R-3's* skipper.

"What the devil's wrong? Why aren't you maintaining speed and position?" rasped the force commander's questions.

"Dead sta'board engine, sir. Shoved off so quick, we left the circulating pump ashore."

"Then you're useless!" was rasped back. "Drop out and limp back to Malta. This is no show for lame ducks, Wetherby! I'll attend to your case when this is over."

In numb chagrin, Cap Wetherby listened for something else to come from the loud speaker.

"He's switched off, sir," came the report from Glass below at the broadcasting controls.

"Do we put about, Cap?" asked Bailey in a dead voice.

He shook his head.

"Not yet. I'm thinking. Won't do no harm to stumble along for a minute, I guess."

Deep in his heart Cap Wetherby knew the humiliation he was facing in turning back would be unbearable. A Gloucesterman left behind by a shoal of schoolboys playing at sailormen. Poor old Wetherby. War is no place for a broken-down old man of forty.

He tried to comfort himself with the excuse that it was not his fault or Cooper's that the British machinists back in Malta were so slow in making repairs on that circulating pump. But the other twenty-three chasers had had no more warning than his. The *I-R-3* had to be the lame duck. Limp back to Malta and—

"Some kind of a flag hoist on the *2-N-5*," announced Driskell from the bridge. "Can't read it though. Must be a relay back from the *9-T-5*, too."

With a roar and a belching of black smoke from the exhaust, the starboard engine suddenly cut in.

Cooper raised up in the engine room hatch and waved his arm.

"Jury rig's workin', Cap!" he roared joyfully. "Watch her take the bone in her teeth now."

Cap Wetherby cast an experienced eye over the side. The thrill of once again seeing the *Curse of Jonah* tearing along under three roaring throttles set his ears to burning.

"Glass," he roared down through the grating, "hook up your radio gadget and get the force commander on the wire." His hand trembled with eagerness as he picked up his transmitter and thumbed the pushbutton switch. "Captain Guthrie! Ahoy, the *9-T-5*! Captain Guthrie! My engines are all working again. Shall I follow your wake? Ahoy—"

Glass interrupted by raising the grating and scraping it against Cap Wetherby's leg.

"I'm busted down, Cap'n," he gasped through a cloud of burning insulation

smoke. "They musta jerked the wrong charging battery switch in the engine room. I gotta back-surge in the line that blowed my high-frequency generator."

"Then try to raise him on the spark set," Cap Wetherby suggested impatiently.

"That's blowed, too," replied Glass wiping his eyes. "It'll take me an hour, anyhow, to get the spark set working."

CAP WETHERBY hung up the useless radio phone with a leaden hand. Aitken was right—she was the curse of Jonah if ever a ship was. He stared ahead at a ghostly gray speck over his own anchor davit. That was the 2-N-5. Beyond her, the rest of the Splinter Fleet were racing to take part in their first big job of the war.

"Sta'board engine's still hitting a million, Cap," said Bailey at his elbow. "Looks like we're overhauling the Fleet, too. Slow business—mebbe not more'n a half knot an hour. But we're gaining, Cap."

Gaining at a half a knot—that would take until long after nightfall to be back in position. Cap Wetherby glanced down at the chart on which he already had marked the patrol area the 1-R-3 was to cover. His eye traveled across the chart from Alexandria on up to the sheltering islands in the Aegean Sea. His was the last patrol area of all—the closest to Saloniki where the troop ships were bound. That is, if any of them got through the gauntlet of enemy submarines.

Idly, he made a pencil cross on the chart where he then was. Then he sketched in lightly the course on which the Splinter Fleet was standing. There was a difference. Evidently, Captain Guthrie was taking his fleet the long way, dropping them off in pairs at various patrol areas where the chasers would have time to scout and listen for enemy submarines

before the troop ship convoy arrived.

"Change to nor, nor'east, Bailey," he said suddenly.

His chief boatswain's mate turned on him in surprise.

"That's two full points to the sta'board of their course," he said, pointing at the Splinter Fleet in the distance.

"Nor, nor'east, Bailey," repeated Cap Wetherby. "I'm taking the short leg of the triangle. I'll be on my patrol station two hours ahead of Mr. Aitken and his 2-N-5, for all his fancy Academy navigating."

"Now see here, Cap," began Bailey, gruff concern showing in his voice. "You ain't master on your own deck, like the old days we was on the *Annie May*. You got orders to put about for Malta. In war time the Navy is tough as hell on a man for disobeyin' orders."

Cap Wetherby spun on his boatswain, his graying head outthrust on a corded, weatherbeaten neck.

"Obey my orders or leave the bridge, Bailey!"

With a happy grin, Bosun Bailey shoved the helmsman aside, spun the wheel over on the new course, and then stepped back.

"Keep there, sailor. And if a sub gets under your forefoot, cut him down!"

The order Cap Wetherby was deliberately disobeying said that the troop ship convoy would enter his area of patrol at ten A.M., local apparent time—1-R-3 had been patrolling that area since early dawn. Just then she lay on the glassy surface with all engines dead.

"Mark! Mark! Mark!" chanted up through the voice tube from the forward magazine. The listener on the S-C tubes was hearing a submarine.

Cap Wetherby snatched up the rubber voice-tube extension.

"Where away?"

"Submarine ho!" came roaring down

from the crows nest watch.

**U**P SNAPPED Cap Wetherby's glasses.

Eyes trained to be the first to sight a swordfish or schooling mackerel picked up the faint disturbance on the surface instantly. His thumb rammed down on the General Quarters alarm button. The clatter of ten-inch electric gongs resounded all through the wooden hull. Up the hatch boiled the gun crew, leaving their breakfast uneaten.

"Range five thousand!" barked Cap Wetherby. "Get your sights on him. But hold your fire till I give the word."

"Aye aye, sir! Range five thousand it is. Holding fire for orders."

"A long shot, eh, Bailey?" Cap Wetherby's voice came flat, barking. There was no hesitancy—merely practical recognition of a dozen separate phases of the situation. "We shoot now, and he'll dive. We couldn't find him with our S-C tubes alone. See the 2-N-5 showing up any place on the hill to give us a cross-bearing on him?"

"No, sir," snapped back Bailey. "I've been looking my eyes out for that schoolhouse sailor."

"Depth-bombing will be a game of chance, then," snapped Cap Wetherby. "Ha, he's broaching! Thinks he's all alone out here. Good! We'll tease him up a bit. Maybe he'll stay on top and try and shell us out of the water. That's a four-point-two bow-chaser coming up. Umn—and a three-inch long-tom aft. Big as a whale."

"We're outranged by four thousand yards with either one of his guns," volunteered Bailey.

"We have the speed advantage," Wetherby snapped back. "Eleven is his best surface speed. Cooper was bailing out fifteen knots all last night." A brisk, sure hand batted all three engine telegraphs

over to HALF SPEED. "We'll blunder up on him like our look-out was asleep," he announced. "Then as soon as we see he has raised us, we'll turn and limp off."

"Hunh?" roared Bailey. "Damn your eye-grommets, Cap. D'you mean to say we'll run from that Dutchman?"

"Yep. The Curse of Jonah's going to cut and run for it. That is, run a little mite, Bailey. Ever see how willing a bully mate was to lay his boot on a man he saw was backing water from him?" Cap Wetherby stabbed a blunt finger at the glistening submarine. "Hah! The shark's clapped his weather eye on us. Helm hard down, there! Lively now. Bailey, lend a hand. Make this look like we're scared out of our Sunday slops."

With timid suddenness, Splinter Boat *I-R-3* spun on her heel and went scuttling away. The maneuver was almost instantly followed by belching brown smoke from the submarine's diesel engine exhaust ports. Ponderously she swung around and gave cautious pursuit.

"Manning his bow-chaser," announced Bailey, looking astern. "Range about forty-five hundred now. He's gaining a mite. There goes the first shell into her breech. Smooth-workin' gun crew, Cap. Good as ours—almost."

"We'll zig-zag," Cap Wetherby informed the helmsman. "He looks big as Abe Packett's barn to us. But we're shanty-size to him, remember."

A shell screamed overhead and plunged into the sea, three hundred yards beyond. The next came with the proper correction for range, but was wide. The Curse of Jonah had deftly side-stepped and was elsewhere.

**F**OLLOWING the third futile waterspout, a thudding crunch vibrated the deck under Cap Wetherby's feet. He looked sharply at Bailey.

“What was that? The last shell missed us a good hundred yards.” He whirled to meet Cooper’s face staring at him from the gangway as he lunged for the bridge. “What happened, Chief?”

“Port engine crankshaft just snapped. Fetched up standing and wrecked the engine bed plate!”

“What speed can you possibly get out of the center and sta’board?” Cap Wetherby shot back.

“Nine or ten. No better than that. My sta’board propeller is all bent out of shape. And the drag of the dead screw on the port’ll hold us down. And what’s more,” added Cooper, staring straight into Cap Wetherby’s narrowing eyes, “that fire hose I got rigged to the sta-board engine from the fire-and-bilge pump is leaking bad. She’s liable to bust any minute.”

“Bosun!” Cap Wetherby whipped out. “Unship those empty oil drums. Rig a sea-drag out of ‘em. Make fast a steel pennant long enough to pass down and secure to our port propeller shaft.” He whirled on Cooper. “That give you an idea, Chief?”

“Damn right it does, Cap’n!” Cooper shot back over his shoulder as he raced aft. “I’ll knock the coupling adrift on my port shaft and strip her clear!”

Another shell from the pursuing submarine smashed into the sea close aboard. Cap Wetherby gave it only a glance and then said in a quiet voice to the helmsman, “About ship! Bring our gun to bear. Keep zig-zagging till we stop our engines. And keep cool. You won’t feel the one that carries the dynamite. Noise’ll only make you deaf for a spell.”

No sooner had the Curse of Jonah swung round than Cap Wetherby gave his order to open fire with a silent nod of his head. The little gun whipped back and sent a high-angle shell arching for the submarine.

“Short!” he called out, just loud enough to be heard. “Tip her nose up and try again.”

“We’re at extreme elevation now, Cap’n,” the gunner’s mate called back.

Cap Wetherby gauged the range with his eye and nodded. It was so. The submarine had been pursuing cautiously. The moment she saw her quarry turn, she also had shifted her course; speeded up her engines, and was standing off just out of the *I-R-3*’s range. Her next shell dropped within fifty yards of the Curse of Jonah’s bows.

“Ready to stop engines and make fast, Cap!” bellowed Bosun Bailey from the stern.

“Head on, and hold her,” Cap Wetherby said quietly to his helmsman. “We show less of our skin that way.”

His hand dropped on the engine room telegraphs. It was more of an effort than he had anticipated to stop his engines and expose his men to the murderous shell fire converging on his command from the submarine’s two guns.

A shell slammed the water close aboard, ricocheting up and making match-wood of the potato locker.

“He wasted that one,” Wetherby commented grimly as soon as he saw through the fog of splinters that neither Bailey nor any of his crew on the stern had been injured.

Just then Bailey turned and waved his arms.

“We’re fast to the port propeller and clear of the strut, Cap. Want to take the chance and see if we can jerk the shaft clear?”

“Coupling’s adrift in the aft magazine!” Cooper’s head was raised from the hatch to shout.

“What do you think?” Wetherby called back. “Will she jerk free?”

Cooper took a long look at the huge float of empty drums Bailey had poised on the fantail ready to pitch overboard.

"If she don't, Cap'n," he called back, "we won't be able to make six knots dragging that sea anchor!"

"Stand by the engines!" roared Wetherby.

He took a long breath, gripped both center and starboard engine telegraphs, and thrust them to FULL SPEED. He felt the surge of power fling the Curse of Jonah straight at the submarine. Her suddenly changed position avoided two shells that dropped not ten yards astern. Then Bailey's big shoulders heaved on a capstan bar under the lashed oil drums.

Over they went with a clumsy splash. *Thud!* The jar of the dragging weight straightened the steel pennant fastened to the crippled engine shaft. Water boiled around the lashed drums. The Curse of Jonah began to slow down, noticeably.

The wherry on top the engine room trunk vanished right then in a storm of splinters as a shell tore through the side of the chart house and screamed past Cap Wetherby's leg. He caught himself from falling but kept his eyes on the surging drums. Deeper and deeper in the water they rode, dragging down the Curse of Jonah's speed to a vibrating crawl.

Then with a grinding wrench, the drums bobbed up. They leaped high, as if the steel pennant had parted under the strain of almost five hundred horsepower. The splinter boat's slow crawl speeded up. With his hands clinching the edge of the chart table, he turned his head to gauge the increased speed. Nine she was making now—no doubt about it. Ten. Better than ten, he was sure. The sub he was staring at began growing in size. Almost eleven knots, now—equal to the sub's speed.

FOR a moment his judgment wavered. There was still a chance to run for it. His match box with little more than a toy cannon had no business tearing straight into a big steel ship like that. One chance in a million to win. Hardly that—

A little flash winked above the muzzle of the sub's after gun. It wasn't the flash from the big gun, but something else. Cap Wetherby moved stiffly, released one hand from the chart table and leveled his glasses.

Three of the sub's after gun crew lay sprawled out on deck. The gun shield was badly torn. Another whip-like report from his own gun brought him back to the realization that it was not all a one-way fight.

"Too high, that one!" he called out mechanically. "Cut your range about a hundred!"

More men came boiling from the sub's hatch. They tossed over the dead bodies, handling them like sacks of coal, and manned the gun again.

"Torpedo running for us!" came the warning cry down from the crow's nest watch.

"Keep her dead ahead," cautioned Wetherby, watching the rushing streak. "If we turn now, the boys on the gun'll lose their target. They got him ranged to a span. Ah! After-gun clear out of business that time!"

"Change yet, sir?" gasped the helmsman. "Torpedo's almost—"

"No. Hold it—ten seconds yet. Give the boys one last crack at the forrard gun this time—Good! Now, *helm over!*"

Under the thrust of two flailing propellers, the Curse of Jonah leaped sideways like a spurred stallion. The torpedo rushed by, leaving a hissing wake of air bubbles from her turbine motors.

Unexpectedly crippled by an enemy, obviously held in contempt up to the

moment her aft gun had been disabled, the submarine jammed down her own helm in retreat while her crew on deck scrambled for the hatches to beat the approaching crash dive.

Two balls of brownish smoke bloomed from her conning tower in rapid succession. Down plunged the submarine.

“Whoops, we’ve sunk him!” yowled the crow’snest watch.

“We didn’t. He dived,” Cap Wetherby said in reply to the grin of triumph his helmsman tossed at him. “He’s got two holes in his conning tower, though. He’ll have to turn air-pressure into that compartment to keep out the water. We’ll trail his air bubbles.”

“Sail ho!” bellowed the crow’snest watch. “Dead abeam, sir. *2-N-5* coming, rung up on four bells and a jingle.”

CAP WETHERBY shifted his position with a hoarse grunt and swung his glasses on Aitken’s command. She was driving straight for the spot where the sub had just submerged. A big red flag broke out from her yard.

Umn—she was getting ready to bomb. Yep, there went Number One. . . . Two. . . . Closer, but still not on his tail yet. . . . Three, four, five—he wasn’t keeping them for souvenirs, anyway. . . . Six. There goes his two from the Y-Gun.

Cap Wetherby lowered his glasses and groped for the whistle cord overhead. One blast—over went a depth charge from his own launching racks. He heard the wrenching crunch of its explosion telegraphed back through the Curse of Jonah’s sounding-board hull. Another. “To hell with it,” he jerked the whistle cord four times in rapid succession, paused—and jerked it twice.

He felt the deck squat under him as his own Y-gun belched its double charge of depth mines. Back aft, his eyes picked up

the *2-N-5* racing straight through the enormous columns of water falling from his last depth mine discharge.

The crazy fool! Four together. That was shark-guts for you. If they countermined, the *2-N-5* would go up in splinters—a splinter boat, right.

“Oil astern! Oil!” bellowed Bosun Bailey from the depth mine launching rack.

A growing oil-slick increased as Cap Wetherby watched. Then, slowly, the piglike snout of the sub rose lazily. Higher it climbed until it stood almost vertically. Then, as smoothly, it slipped out of sight and was gone.

“Ahoy the bridge on the *1-R-3!*” came roaring jubilantly through Aitken’s megaphone as he came tearing past. “What do you mean, you old silver-tip fox, by hogging all the show?”

Cap Wetherby shifted his body with a grunt and waved a rope-hardened hand at the blond head and the waving cap saluting him. He could hear the rousing tar-cheers from the men lining the rail of the *2-N-5*. . . . Just faintly, though, because of the roaring in his ears.

“Bailey,” he grunted as his big bosun came charging into the chart house, grinning broadly. “Bailey—pull this damned splinter out of my leg. It’s got me pinned to the bulkhead.”

Bailey laid big hands on the splinter, thicker than his own thumb, and brought it clear with a mercifully quick jerk.

“Your leg’s broke, Cap. Here, let me help you.”

Cap Wetherby shook his head.

“They’ll have to shoot the other one out from under me, first. Unh! Get some bandages, Bailey—and see if any of the other boys are hurt.”

He stood there, face as gray as the iron hair over his temples, searching the sea. On the port quarter he saw a flotilla of

destroyers bearing down—British. From up around Saloniki. To pick up the troop ship convoy. With a grunt of relief, he swung his glasses to the southwest. Ships. Too many to count. They came racing on with a buzzing fleet of lesser craft circling and darting in and out—the Splinter Fleet. Old Copper Guts would be on the 9-T-5.

Cap Wetherby dropped his glasses and swayed. He did not feel the powerful hands of Bosun Bailey catching him and easing him gently to the deck.

**H**E TRIED to open his eyes. Now they were open. That was a long heave on the tackle. He blinked and stared up at his force commander. He reached out a hand, experimentally, and felt the smooth edge of an iron cot. He sniffed the air blowing down on his face from a ventilator over head.

“Steam!” he grumbled. “Hell’s bells, I’m laid by the heels aboard that damned barge *Leonidas*.” He stopped short and looked closely at Captain Guthrie standing over him—and smiling. “Sorry, Mister,” he apologized. “Didn’t know I was awake yet.”

Captain Guthrie was holding out his square-fingered hand.

“Congratulations to the Curse of Jonah, sir!” he was saying heartily. “By George, Wetherby, you must have an eye like a hawk to have caught my last order Aitken relayed back to you. Changed my mind about sending you back. Took a chance and ordered you to cut straight across the short leg of the triangle to your patrol area. Umm! You plugged that gap in the line to perfection.”

Cap Wetherby tried to raise up on one elbow.

“Did anybody salvage that propeller shaft I had buoyed back there?” he demanded anxiously.

“Bailey fished it over the side after the scrap,” smiled back Captain Guthrie. “Drums and all. Brought it back lashed along the gangway.”

“Sorry, Captain Guthrie—” it was the ship’s surgeon interrupting—“my patient has lost enough blood to kill two iron men. Please: Save the rest for a day or two at least.”

So he was still the Curse of Jonah, eh? Couldn’t shake that off. He beckoned weakly to the surgeon.

“Where’s that young hellion Aitken?”

“Never mind about him,” rebuked the surgeon good naturedly. “He’s out running around Malta having fun pegging his hat on the British Navy’s eyes every time he finishes telling how you made junk of that German U Boat.”

Cap Wetherby sank back on his pillow with a bored grunt.

“The damn liar. Damn school-book sailor. Hell! He snatched that sub right out from under my nose. Seen the charge he dropped lift the whale right out of the water.”

“If you both keep that up,” grumbled the surgeon, hiding a grin as he felt Cap Wetherby’s quickening pulse, “you’ll lie the pair of you into a brace of Congressional Medals.”

“The Curse of Jonah, eh?” mumbled Cap Wetherby drowsily. “Hunh, the Curse of Jonah’s Whale, they mean!”