

*The Survivors Club of the
Old "Venezoil" Was a
Good Outfit All Right*



THE FOLLOW- THROUGH GUY

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NOBODY liked the guy. They just endured him along with the stench of oil and the Old Man's nightmares. For this was a tanker crew and there was nothing else to do about J. P.

"Jack Phoney" was second assistant on the *Venezoil*. He was plenty hep all the way down from control platform to the uptakes. On the job, a thoroughly informed engineer. As personnel changed,

he often knew better engineering than the first and the chief they placed above his rating.

Why above him, then? J. P. was the victim of his own disposition. At times he'd withdraw into a fit of utter strangeness. When in the mood, he clean forgot the genuine gentleman he was. His talk could turn downright embarrassing, even to tankermen, which says a lot without saying it.

No end of queer guys take to the sea. So far as that goes, the crowd could have classified the Second and let it go. Every guy has his thoughts and a right to them, certainly on tankers where sudden fire or explosion or flaming death haunt the hardest throughout twenty-four hours of the day. No, it wasn't J. P.'s queerness. The curse of him was that nobody could account for it. Nobody had a theory. Nobody understood the guy. He worried them.

He did so tonight. The officers' mess was clean to shininess, the cards were new. The betting was ten cents a point and the game was auction bridge. Hands ran screwy in the new deck.

"All right, Chief, what the hell do you think of this mess you've dealt?" J. P. was speaking slowly with vindictiveness. He was off the beat again tonight, losing consistently, sullenly.

Chief Gilman eyed him appraisingly. A look went the rounds. The mess room grew abruptly tense. Where had this guy been anyway! What had happened to him that left him this way—and to his own chief?

"Pass," the chief growled. "I'll throw in for a new deal—with anybody."

Promptly the other two players tossed in, face up.

J. P. cursed them and showed all the heart honors plus the other three aces. "Where the hell did you men learn card manners?" he snarled. "Throwing down before all of us has a chance to bid!"

No excuses. Nobody would give him a comeback. It would be just the thing to— to what? How far would this man go? The other two men could not forget that Chief Gilman and the skipper were dead set against violence and liquor aboard the *Venezoil*. They had to take their cue from the chief, had to keep shut.

J. P.'s face went white, glaring down

at the money. His own numbered only three dimes; the others had nearly cleaned him out. And the chief had them stacked double anyone else's count.

Chief Gilman had not entered the game to make money. Small change or twenty-five dollars, he didn't care a cuss. He was here solely to forget old steam piping which worried him. One hour with that off his mind would be worth twenty bucks, easily.

But he had been winning; and he it was who had made the chance remark which had prompted the throw-in and robbed J. P. of a neat pile of change. Chief felt guilty in a minute way; being chief engineer, the others had acceded to his whimsical impulse.

He read the rage and chagrin on J.P.'s pale face. It was too late to recall the hand.

He decided to divert J. P.'s attention from it. "Well," said he, "if we had the third mate here we'd all be survivors. Anybody think of that?"

J. P. glanced up, his eyes narrowed.

Leighton, first mate, said, "Yes, sir, the Survivors Club o' the *Venezoil*." It was not a club in fact, though these five did gather for cards at times and did sense this that they had in common above the rest of the crew.

To further the diversion, the chief said, "Skipper's been pretty lucky, hasn't he? Never last a tanker and never at sea in a lifeboat."

Second mate Tyson spoke up. "Ah, but he'd be better off if he had! I mean his nightmare. Considers he's made a record and can't sleep right f'r fear o' waking afire or in a collision or something."

"Or bursting old steam lines," the chief grunted.

Suddenly J. P. swept his three dimes up, snapped to his feet and glared at the others. "Listen," he began thickly. "You men think I'm a survivor—oh, I knew it

all along; but tonight you talked it openly. Survivors Club! I never abandoned ship in my life. Who the devil said I had? Me? Huh.”

“I—well,” the chief put in soothingly, “but you—”

“I never survived shipwreck and there’s no use trying to talk around it,” J. P. almost shouted.

“Seen some hell, though,” little Tyson offered.

At which J. P.’s eyes reflected memories. Would he detail some tight squeaks, a few of his close calls? He couldn’t miss the anticipation in their eyes. He said, “All right, you’ve treated me human, you three and the second mate.

“I went to sea for the hero stuff. Thought sure I’d run afoul of big events. The papers were plastering Cap’n Fried and Manning in big headlines, back in those times, the way that European war gets ‘em nowadays.

“Well, I got trouble, plenty of it. But no matter what I did, I didn’t figure out as a great guy. Sounds foolish, doesn’t it? All the same, I know lots of men at sea today that came for the same reason, originally, if they’d own up to it.”

He dashed sweat from beetling brows. “You’ve sure owned up yourselves, Survivors Club and the skipper playing for a record and all that stuff. I dunno.” His flashing eyes lost their fierce lustre. As though baffled, he added, “I guess I got off on the wrong foot. It’s a dizzy life anyhow. I—”

A bell sounded outside, the quarter to midnight, time to call second officers and their watches. Tyson rose; this was too melodramatic for him.

“To hell with it!” J. P. exploded. He wheeled to the door and went below.

CHIEF GILMAN watched the second mate leave more quietly, a wry smile

on his puckered face. The first assistant touched off a cigar. “Queer man, huh?”

“Sorry. I was in the wrong. But he sounded off just the same, even after I’d got him away from the card idea.”

“About himself, yeah. Life story—what ails him is frustration.”

“Think so?”

“Sure, Chief. You heard him.”

“I don’t. Takes more than what he spilled to make a man that way. Between us here alone, I happen to know what’s the matter.”

Berger perked up. “For cripesake, Chief! Is he a genius or insane?”

Gilman smiled. “Neither. He’s a feller who does a fine thing in a pinch, then follows through with some fool move that overshadows it. I call him unlucky.”

Berger refrained from disagreeing, but his features gave him away.

“Look. He was Third on the old *Tukim Oil* to China. Her whole engine room went dead in mid Pacific. Right away the place was aswarm. Electric torches made a June night of the place, all poking along lines for vacuum leaks. And what happened? J. P. left.

“His chief hollered for him, got no answer, set others to hunting for this man whose watch it was—J. P. The chief damned him for a crank, a coward, a nut, a screwball. In the midst of it, J. P. enters, hears himself blasted and absorbs a detailed record of what his shipmates think of him. He locks his tongue—momentarily—and, Mister, he gets the ship under way almost before they all quite realize who did it and how.

“Finally, when her cranks resume rolling, his chief says, ‘All right, now you tell us where the leak was.’ ”

“Now you or me would have seen that right here was the payoff, the chance to get credit for it. But J. P.? He’s got a terrific temper and he’s very uncommon sensitive

too. He turns from the butterfly valve, glares and then faces his chief and says he, 'You wouldn't ask a crank, a nut and a coward, now would you, sir?' "

"Ho, ho-oo," Chief Gilman laughed. "When his chief told me that . . . 'Where was it?' he barked at J. P."

'Your third assistant found it in a steam line to the bridge. On deck while his superiors poked round here in the dark – sir.' "

Berger exclaimed, "Well, the damned fool! And clever!"

"Another time in the *Elvirando*, a Diesel job, J. P. and his oiler fitted a new piston skirt while she wallowed east of Hatteras in half a gale. The *Elvirando's* Diesel was no picnic to repair, and in that slatting and rolling, but he and all hands knew she was leaking for'd. With pumping suspended she'd go more and more by the head. 'Twas a serious situation and too rough to launch boats.

"So he off with the head in chainfalls, up with the piston, and sent for the chief—when he got round to it. Of course the chief was there soon as she quit churning. When J. P. senses him close to, it's the chief asking him, 'Is that one of the new replacements we got last trip or that older one?'

"J. P. was beating the clock, mind, hoping to break the record for the job. He didn't propose to have the chief or anybody else say, 'Wrong one, change it' at that stage. So his answer to his chief is what robbed him of the credit for breaking the record; it just wasn't logged as such. Without even a glance off 'm the job he answers, 'Hell with it. Pass me that oil-can, she's binding.' "

Berger chuckled, "Smart engineer, what? But—"

"That's only two cases on him, tame ones. Sometimes he heaves a wrench; that is why I play him so carefully below."

"Aw knock his dam' block off," Berger protested.

"That's where you're wrong. Fights only make matters worse. Oh, if two reach a point where they can't live aboard the same ship, I say make a business of a fight, see which one goes ashore. But you never'd get satisfaction on any issue by fighting J. P."

"But he can't expect everybody to—"

"Wait. I figure he'll get over this; some day his follow-through will work to his advantage. Then he'll rate better than the thousands of men at sea and shed all this irritability. J. P. simply wasn't born to be a nobody."

"Wait a minute, Chief; you seem to know all about this case. You haven't told me how he got this way."

"Didn't intend to but . . . John P. Addison used to be on the palm oil run out of African rivers. He took dengue fever there and somehow, after his mind wandered for days, he came back with this hero bug. What he spilled tonight was really worked out in his head, coming out of the fever. Too bad."

Berger squirmed in his chair to say, "Why keep him on? The guy's sick."

"Berger, I wouldn't lose him for the best replacement afloat. He's smart. He's going to work out his own salvation and I aim to witness it. And," he added emphatically, "he's a fine engineer. Put him in a bad spot; while the others run, he'll switch into a different set of nerves and do the important thing regardless. Thorough to a fault; look how he'd watched those steam lines to know exactly their weakest spot."

Berger rose to leave. "Maybe so, Chief. I think myself you're playing animal trainer."

"I am. You're all a bunch o' caged cats. How is that main feed line standing up tonight? Last till we make drydock,

think?"

"Better had. Still squirts round that connection overhead when you're cuttin' throttle. I say we got oil in the boilers."

"My guess is scale, but number two boiler's got a front plate too rigid; can't breathe for the expansion of the flue tubes. J. P.'s theory, by the way."

Berger wasn't so sure. "Anyway, 'tain't scale or oil ails him," he laughed in the doorway. "That's something."

"Keep watch o' that man, he's smart," the chief retorted.

THE *Venezoil* plodded on a line up the chart between Matanilla Buoy and Block Island. She received wireless orders, well in advance, advising to discharge at Riverside and go directly to drydock, this time on the Jersey coast.

As J. P. Addison heard from Gaye, his voluble oiler; both were watching the leaky connection. J. P.'s eyes moved somberly down toward the fire room. That number two boiler with the rigid plate—"More'n three hundred miles yet," he murmured. "She won't make it."

He went to the log, made notes, then checked gauges and stared a long time over the engine. Finally, his mind made up, he left the engine room—and came back with the chief. They looked up. They went below. The chief even ventured to tunk at the plate. J. P. saw him note the firemen and wag his head as he led the way out.

Up above again, he said, "I know. You want to ease off, say fifteen pounds pressure. Maybe more."

"More. A week ago I wanted to isolate that boiler, Chief."

"But the skipper's got definite orders for drydocking now."

"Provided we make it to Providence. Let's cut out number two or reduce

pressure or anything that'll assure our making it without a breakdown out here."

"No, chance it on thirteen knots a while longer."

"But if that plate should blow off—"

Chief Gilman cut in impatiently. "Jonnie, m' boy, I have to consider the skipper. We've got some casinghead for'd and he despises it. We wants to get in; he doesn't want a breakdown, much less an explosion; he half expects one or the other all the time lately. Now here's where you and I differ: you'd go for'd and jolt him, if or no if, with the unpleasant facts here aft; I prefer to keep going as is and chance my luck."

J. P. shouted in his ear, "His mental condition against the boiler."

The chief nodded.

"My wipers' lives are more to me than his worrying," J. P. shouted, but his chief was stepping out over the weatherboard.

IT MUST be obvious by now that the *Venezoil* was an old ship. She had spent the Depression Thirties up a river, her bearings in lead. Britain's plight revived shipping. Prospects investigated the *Venezoil*, noted that she had a short-stroke engine and disapproved of the design—for some reason. Came Dunkirk and a redoubled cry for almost anything that could move oil across. The old *Venezoil* got the call and came out of seclusion.

In the ensuing rush, only the most urgent things were done to get her in charter. Today, those less pressing needs had caught up with her and become very urgent demands. Nobody knew it better than her master, chief—and J. P. Every storm stood Captain Cusik on his anxious toes, expecting the worst, hoping to get by while drydocks were crowded. When, indeed, he and the chief launched a concerted howl for overhaul, the country

began to take on the repair of British casualties.

J. P. reviewed all this tonight when only a hundred and seventeen miles below Southeast End Light. Nine more hours of this storm, of boarding seas lapping at catwalks, of loud reverberations the length of her weather side, of creaks and groans and the rheumatics of a hunted old moose.

Berger came in for his four-to-eight trick. He sized up the hissing connection. "Well, no worse."

J. P. wiped his hands and grimaced. "Don't forget my wipers below, Mister, if and when."

Berger snorted, "That boiler? Aw hell, we might even crowd 'er some, once we pass No Man's Land for the lee."

J. P.'s mouth gaped. Impulsively he wheeled from Berger's wise-guy, scornful grin and left on the stroke of the eight bells.

Berger chuckled. Funny guy, makes the firemen a family responsibility. Of course, stokehold and its men are the Second's responsibility, but . . . sure a jerk phoney.

Now the First happened to be a fatalist. When the steam plant was due to bust, bust it would, at the allotted hour and nothing anybody did would vary its timing. He read in the log and discovered that J. P. had speeded up some 05 to 10 r.p.m. at 2:12. Within half an hour he had gone below and ordered less pressure on the gauges. "F'r cryin' out loud!" Berger yelled.

He hurried below. Sure enough—"That's what the other watch said, keep 'em soft," his crew declared.

Berger changed that promptly. He sent his oiler aft to J. P.'s oiler. "Wake up that guy. Ask him did the bridge or the chief order pressure cut down."

Gaye, being a busybody, would know. He did. His answer was "No!" He came

along back with Letters and cried, "Now listen, First, I ain't gittin' the Second into a jam."

"Go turn in. Keep y'r tongue."

The *Venezoil's* engine stepped up to full ahead, went on a bit faster and those short rods were whooping the cranks. S'posing the bridge did phone for an explanation; then cut 'em back to full speed. "The idea," Berger snorted, "within a few hours o' port, a storm gettin' worse and that jerk phoney cuts us—" He glanced up sharply at the tune the leak overhead was playing now. "Chief's overratin' that guy, he's just scared of his own shadow. It's his sassy lip that does it to 'em; not to me!" He gave her a hair more on the butterfly.

The boiler in question took it for exactly thirty-seven minutes. The old *Venezoil's* bows reached anglewise off over a big sea, then lunged down into the next. Her stern came out, her screw raced. Okay, that was eating up steam pressure a few moments. But now her stern dropped like a plummet, deep in. The racing screw bit deep abruptly. The quick slowing created a sort of back pressure, a delay in steam consumption. Number two boiler couldn't take it, not at that speed.

The big plate tore free of its rivets along three sides and bent outward before the fearful blast. Steam whistled across the fireroom, filled the place, dripped scalding water on the wipers caught in there.

Meanwhile the leak over Berger's head burst forth at the same time. It blew out a steam of seething white, wet heat through a ninety-odd degree break that cooked one side of Berger's head and neck and dropped him before he could even move away automatically.

The chief came running at the first dull thud and strident hiss. But J. P. was inside the door before he even saw him, inside and gone in that cloud. J. P.'s supreme

concern was the wipers below, but he had to make sure that the First had escaped that sheet of steam from overhead. Within a few seconds, he was cursing Berger for the damnedest fool ever licensed; at the same time he dragged his limp hulk out toward the door where he'd soon be seen and taken away to be dressed for the awful burns now puffing his face like steak.

J. P. let go of his soggy clothing and made straight for the low line of oil feed valves. He closed them all and half ran, half jumped the four flights to the bottom of the engine room. Then he entered steam and groped his way inside the boiler room. He tried to call Murphy, Hank, big Mayo. Steam and scalding spray shut his mouth, forced him lower. He got down and crawled farther in. Dying fires spluttered, escaping steam still screamed over him.

HE MOVED on blindly, reaching ahead, feeling his way. He found Murphy at his right; the man was dazed, going he knew not where, dragging Hank over the plates. J. P. took over; he got them both outside. Then he turned back, not waiting to ask them how about Mayo. Again he crawled, sweeping his arms, trying to outcry the steam, hunting, cooking, praying. "Mayo—Mayo—"

Eventually he emerged, parboiled, red-eyed, blackened and dripping. The steam pressure had eased away so that he heard voices above. He got to the iron stairway and started up. The ship, wallowing in the trough of a real easterly now, slatted him from pipe rail to rail, dropped from under him, came up at him again. His eyes scarcely functioned, his hands felt afire.

The Third's oiler discovered him. Two ran down to help him, guide him aft where the steward and cook were dressing burns. He objected, then thought of Berger and went on.

He entered Berger's room and braced

himself against the ship's motion. He thought he saw what was Berger on the bed. "You, First?" he asked thickly.

The moan was Berger's basso. J. P. drove the two away and turned on the bandaged mass heading out of the bedding at the far end. "Berger," he croaked hoarsely, "you're the damnedest fool that ever posted a license. Damn your craven belly, if you weren't flat out I'd boot your pants all way up y'r blistered thick neck! I hope t'gawd y're worse cooked than they are." He spit on the floor and went out.

To be dressed aft for burns? Not J. P. He scuffed to the engine room. Hough, the third assistant, was already patching up the leaky connection to get in on. The chief and others were inspecting damage below, isolating number two and a score of other things to get under way as quickly as possible. She rolled viciously the while. J. P. forced his vision until he could make them all out, swaying with tools, lunging for more tools—until he made out the skipper like a ghost, hoisting a work lamp high up to see something being done.

Until the skipper chanced to turn his way. "My gawdamighty," he cried, "Addison—here! Get out before you pass out."

J. P.'s blackened face wrinkled sourly; the guy with the nerves and nightmares!

Chief Gilman looked quickly, saw the makings of an embarrassing situation. He dropped his tools and went directly to J. P. "Aft, Second. Come, get cleaned up. You saved Berger's life—and two wipers of his, now go look to yourself."

"I couldn't find Mayo in here," J. P. snapped back.

"Mayo beat the gun, he was near the exit. Come, we're busy's hell here."

J. P.'s face contracted again. "Cutting out number two," he said. Before he could spill it to the skipper that he and the Chief had long ago wanted to do it, but the Chief

had spared the skipper's jitters—before he could get going on that theme, Gilman led him out.

On the way, J. P.'s disgust mounted swiftly. The utter needlessness of it all—then he glimpsed a wrench. So did the chief. He beat J. P. to it and came up with the thing like a weapon, saying, "I know, I know, Jonnie. Sore because we didn't cut out number two, because Berger pulled a fast one, and the firemen got burned and we're rolling t' beat hell out here when we would have been up the bay by now and so on. But this is how things are and—"

J. P. made a huge swipe for the wrench. Missed by a hair.

Gilman wielded it like a weapon and cursed him. "You're not yourself. Now get the hell outa here 'fore I crown you!"

J. P. obeyed.

When the ship finally got in, he quit her cold.

DR. FESSENDEN was not the usual urban physician. After long years in country practice, he never had quite acquired the habit of leaning on hospitals or resorting to psychiatrists.

Tonight J. P.'s earnest eyes seemed to travel all over the doctor. "You brought me into this world. Remember? Now I've hunted you out—no, I'm sound in bone and sinew, as you used to put it, but—" And J. P. related his experiences all the way from dengue fever in Africa to a few days ago when he had quit the *Venezoil*.

A few minutes after 2 a.m., old Doc Fessenden summed up his decision in the case. "John, you've had dengue fever, you say, it might possibly have left a trace—er, of mental hangover. I doubt it. We don't know too much about that disease, it's true, but you've laid too much against it."

Doc leaned closer, looking more the family councilor and less, perhaps, the

physician. "You're John Palmer Addison but you're more Palmer than you are Addison. The Palmers gave you their hot temper, impulsiveness, touchiness. But the Addisons also gave; they armed you with their self-respect and particularly with the ambition to make a big mark in the world. Don't you forget, John, their fleet of schooners once led the way in the Gulf trade.

"So you are a living conflict—and while the dengue might have somehow worsened it, I don't really know."

Doc had spoken, but John kept watching his lips, straining for more. No more came. At length J. P. said, "Well, Doc, it is fine to know all this. But you are our old family doctor, I came here for you to prescribe."

"Prescribe!" Dr. Fessenden fixed his black eyes on the engineer. "Me prescribe? No. You will do that!"

CHIEF GILMAN knows today what took place in that doctor's office. He makes no joke of it; nor of what J. P. "prescribed" for himself. For J. P. made himself do the hardest thing in sight: he returned aboard the *Venezoil* and asked the chief for his old rating back, asked to be rehired.

The observing chief thought he discerned a change, at least in attitude, in J. P. when he entered. Was sure of it when J. P. locked the door behind him and said, "Chief, I owe you an apology. I've thought out a lot of things in three weeks ashore. Pushed myself into crowds, waited in long lines, let slower people step ahead of me, all that sort of drilling. 'Tisn't so easy, Chief, this cold-blooded business of measuring one's self in the crowds ashore and admitting the findings. And now, I—"

"Frankly, Johnie, I'm glad you came back aboard. I hope we offer you no more opportunities to fame via the scalded-men

route,” Chief Gilman said.

“Heroics!” J. P. snorted. “Foolishness.” He looked a bit anxious and added, “Got to consider the men around me and get on with all of them. I mean, did you survivors go looking for shipwreck? Surely not! Me, I guess I just had to take three weeks alone to grow up. It seemed like seven years—”

Thus did J. P. lay bare his troubled soul to the one man at sea before whom he’d risk it.

THE *Venezoil* sailed for the Gulf of Venezuela just as the great assault by U-boats on American tankers began. Naval escort had not been developed; they sailed solo and very soon became the grim harbingers of inevitable war. Yet they sailed, got crews and sailed.

The *Venezoil* was southbound, therefore light. But her lifeboats were swung ready and her black gang stood each watch as though it might be the last. Some slept on deck, others scarcely closed their eyes. Old minor interests like the ways of J. P. and the Old Man’s nightmare tales brought aft now lost their former interest—

Or should have. But first assistant Berger’s oiler Letters still blew the old wind; for Berger had been replaced by a Mister Nichols and he must “be wised to all the low-down, see?” Said Letters, “Y’ never knew our Second ‘fore you came aboard here, huh? Mister, that guy saved three men outa steam, last run north; but the chief run ‘im ashore. Yeah, really. One or the other done things to ‘im, I guess. Ain’t so jerk phoney—”

“You gab too much, kid. That’s the best engineer you’ve got here.”

“Not countin’ y’rself, o’ course,” eyes a-twinkle. “Oh, boy!”

“Get the hell behind y’r oilcan!”

One day on deck, men saw two

columns of smoke rise off the sea to the westward. The *Venezoil*, fresh from machine-shop, with new steam lines and revamped boilers and much more, raced south through the danger stretch. J. P. read the growing dread in the men’s eyes; he secretly pitied the lot of the fellows below, the wipers. With them, he resented the lack of protection against U-boats. If only these vessels had guns, guns to force the rats to submerge so the tankers could outspeed them!

He heard men curse and rave on for hours at a stretch. He felt even worse about it, seeing the skipper stare over his meals, gulp down coffee and leave. Once he followed the chief to his room. “Old Man looks like he sees sure death walking aboard, Chief,” he said softly.

“Maybe he does. Here’s his old ship; he had her before the Depression forgot her. Now she’s all reconditioned and refitted like new. For what? Sixteen or eighteen trips of oil? More’n likely for a fiery funeral—if you ask him. And if he’d speak his mind.”

“Oh, well, he’s up there amidships and most of the torpedoes, they say, are aimed aft. His chances are better than ours.”

Chief Gilman gave that burst of ideas a long, silent look.

“Wait a minute, Chief; you don’t think he’d go down in her! Suicide?”

The chief nodded.

“Ah, but that’s wrong, it’s old fashioned. It’s wasteful. We’re going to run short of good skippers, especially for tankers. And we’ll be sucked into a war on both sides of us; you’ll see it.”

In measured tones, Chief Gilman insisted: “Old Man Cusik will see every living man get away if we’re hit. Then he will go down in her.”

J. P. felt the old, insistent urge coming on; he wanted to argue this folly down, speak his mind, perhaps call names and air

some unpleasant truths . . . then he recalled his weeks ashore, his night with Doc, his folly aboard the *Tukim Oil*, the *Elvirando*, other ships.

J. P. bit his tongue and went aft. What a mistake it would have been to offend or hurt the chief, for he happened to be a close friend of Captain Cusik. Worse still, why had he, alone in all the crew, happened to start this actual out-and-out talk that the *Venezoil* was going to be sunk?

But she was. She got hers like so many others that year. It came early in the trip north, off the east coast of Florida. Three-eleven a.m. by J. P.'s watch and on his watch. The tin fish killed his firemen outright. Its shattering explosion fluttered him like a falling leaf and dropped him flat on the gratings.

He got to his feet quickly, though, surprised to be alive—and whole. He heard flames roaring outside; the noise came in through the hole where the skylight had been. Up there he saw smoke rolling aft, heard the men up there on the boat deck trying wildly to launch a boat and escape that flame and stifling smoke as it reached across the hole after them.

J. P. moved stiffly. The grating grooves had cut into his flesh. Now came fumes of burning cargo; the engine room was fast becoming a deathtrap for him. But he did exactly what the chief had once told Berger he'd do: the right thing when all others ran. He whisked a torch off the shelf by the log. He threw the big engine in full astern to kill headway and end the flow of smoke and flames pouring aft at the men above. Now they rolled down over him and he coughed to keep breathing. But J. P. stuck it out.

Now he had to judge motion by the feel of the ship. And when he felt sure she had lost headway completely and was starting a stern way, he shut off the engine.

He made for the starboard passageway like a cornered deer. His next move would be to run aft, climb to the boat deck and join the others if indeed it was not too late already. But no, he ran out the forward end of that passageway and on to the break of the poop. Rubbing at his eyes, he saw that the great column of smoke was rising straight up in the lazy air. Although smoke rolled down over the entire main deck, it looked like a better chance along this side.

Aye, J. P. was going to attempt to carry out a plan that formed in his mind on the day the chief had told him what to expect of the skipper in this event, this disaster to his ship.

HE dropped off the poop and began the boldest, most hopeless, foolhardy undertaking of his eventful career. And just as he started into the smoke, he saw that the sea alongside already was a sheet of burning oil. Yet he went on.

He filled his lungs, ducked his head and bored into the blackness. Familiar with the deck fittings, he ran. Deep into it, he felt the sear of fire, the sting of hot gas. He kept going.

He fetched up against a stanchion in the open space under the bridge. It was sizzling hot and the opening had become a sort of flue through which the holocaust was racing forward. J. P.'s hair and clothing were smoking by then, but he chanced it on for a better lee.

He got his wind in the lee of the bridge house. He climbed in leaps. At the saloon-deck level, he was afire. He spanked at the worst of it and climbed again. On the boat deck, boatfalls hung free; maybe the Old Man had gone. He slapped at his clothing, rubbed at his singed scalp and went on up.

J. P. leaned to the side of the wheelhouse, up there, panting for the better air. He was black as soot. His jersey was afire in earnest, his dungarees more

so. He tore himself out of them. All the while he surveyed the bridge—and spotted the skipper, true to the chief's forecast, standing alone in the farther wing, grimly watching for whatever he might see of boats getting away aft.

J. P., true to his nature and viewpoint, was disgusted. It was sheer suicide without benefit to anybody. "Silly ass" he muttered. But he also realized that no amount of urging could induce the Old Man to leave. Well, J. P. had prepared for that, too; he had a plan. It was not decorous, it would be far from dignified, and if it worked he'd probably catch merry hell from Captain Cusik afterwards.

Nevertheless, he determined to see it through. As he started around the wheelhouse, however, he recalled his past mistakes, his phoney follow-throughs. Again he was up to his old folly; he had stopped the burning ship and thereby saved considerable of her crew, now he was about to follow the good deed with one that bade fair to overshadow it.

"All the same," he muttered, and went into action.

J. P. took advantage of the skipper's concentrated attention on the escape of his crew. He grabbed a life-ring and ran to the skipper. The latter was astounded at sight of the blackened, blistered, singed apparition racing at him.

"Look, look!" J. P. panted and he pointed beyond and behind the skipper over the end of the bridge.

Captain Cusik turned his dignified back. He leaned out over the rail and looked at flaming oil reaching toward him

as far as the aft end of the bridge house. But he saw no reason, no boats or men there.

J. P. saw at a glance that the ship had settled so deep in that her decks were going under. Then it wouldn't be much of a fall for either of them; and whether Cusik could swim or not, here was a life-ring. J. P. upbraided him over the rail before he could grip at the pipe rail.

He threw over the ring, close to the skipper, and followed in a dive. He came up into a furor of flaying arms and saw that Cusik couldn't swim a stroke. "Okay, Cap'n," he spluttered, "grab this thing and get into it."

Which took precious time, for it was now these two against the spreading fire on the sea. J. P. finally almost knocked his skipper down under and up through, but he got him inside the ring. Then he swam and towed for their very lives.

He got so far ahead of the ship and he made so much fuss about it that the first, false dawn shone on his flying foam. And the still air carried his cries to one of the boats.

THEY say that the Old Man was badly broken up over the loss of the old *Venezoil*, and that he made J. P. swear on the Bible he wouldn't tell friends how he had tricked him into the sea. The facts are: J. P. has a letter from the skipper's whole family, thanking him for the deed; and while the Survivors Club lost one member that fatal day, Chief Gilman and J. P. have made of it a bona fide organization which is growing apace.