The Black Gang

by C. P. Boyko

I

Geoffrey would never understand the rapturous sighs that escaped his sisters' lips as they stood pressed against the promenade railing, as though they could not imagine a fate more romantic than tumbling down into the tumbling waves below. He had needed no more than a single glance to see the ocean for what it was: a cold expanse of grey water; a collection of drool in the gaping maw of the idiot earth. His father was a bridge builder—or, rather, the financier of bridge builders; the owner and exploiter of men who built bridges—and, though Geoffrey despised his father's work, he nevertheless felt that here was a spot that could use a few Stanislee Steel bridges: that, at least, would be one way to divest the sea of its cheap romance. The Atlantic Ocean was a river that did not go anywhere. He refused even to look at it.

After three days out his stomach continued to lurch in response to the incessant roll and pitch of the ship; and no matter how calm the waves, how still the deck beneath him, he seemed always to be stumbling and swaying across some invisible rugged terrain.

> My knees, to which I have never wittingly done any injustice, have betrayed me and become like butter. My feet and my head do not seem to be attached to the same torso. As everyone is only too overjoyed to inform me, I have yet to get my "sea legs."

On second thought, he would not include this in his letter to Daniels, nor in the article to which it would serve as preface. He was afraid such a disclosure, so unrelievedly personal, might strike the wrong note. He did not want Daniels or Higgins or anyone else at the *Tribune* to be able to accuse

him of aristocratic self-absorption.

Perhaps he could somehow incorporate that bit about his torso into a letter to Meredith Quigley. But he would not write to Meredith Quigley.

As the impromptu tour group made their halting way along the promenade deck, Mr. Harbrow drew their attention, quite unnecessarily, to the sunning chairs (empty, of course: the weather had been unremittingly vile since they had put out), to the boys playing quoits, and to the lifeboats in their davits, of which Harbrow seemed quite proud. He went into some detail about their construction, their weight, size, capacity, and number (more than enough to accommodate all the passengers and crew, he assured them), but none of the party displayed any interest: Mrs. Galston, the wife of the factory owner, looked at Harbrow as though he had spit something out onto her plate; Geoffrey's mother said that it was "a pity" the boats took up so much deckspace; his father and the other men passed by without even a glance, murmuring and puffing at their wet cigars. Geoffrey remained behind, staring with stubborn appreciation at the boats, lashed down and wrapped up in white canvas like mummies or madmen.

"Don't worry, they are perfectly seaworthy."

The Galston girl, who had been given some such ridiculous name as Lily or April or Summer, stood at his elbow, suppressing the perpetual giggle of the bourgeoisie.

"We had to take one into shore in Liverpool last winter, if you can believe it. Some fool had spilled coal all over the dock and in the harbour."

"That is not," said Geoffrey evenly, "what I was thinking about."

He shifted his feet as the deck tilted beneath them. The girl, however, behaved as though he had fully stumbled, and quite needlessly reached out a hand to steady him. He did not thank her.

"First time at sea?" she giggled.

Behind her, his sisters Maisie and Lucasta looked on in exquisite amusement, their shoulders shaking, their eyes moist.

"We are vacationing," he muttered, because it was the simplest thing to say. But he was ill content with this bourgeois word, and struggled to explain himself. "That is, my family is vacationing. I am here in order to do

what I suppose you might call research."

In truth, he did not know why exactly he had come (unless it had something to do with the fact that not coming had not been on offer). His father and mother were pleased to describe the trip as an educational adventure, an overdue lesson in history, culture, and geography for their unworldly children—by which they could only mean Geoffrey, who was due to matriculate to the university next year.

But Geoffrey had no intention of going to his father's university; and besides, he was certain that the real motive for the voyage had nothing to do with him: Walter Stanislee was, in fact, going abroad for his health. The air, his parents had been told, was more salubrious in the Old World.

Walter Stanislee was, despite his outward pretension of vitality, despite all his blustering activity, in actuality a weak and frail man, a man who, though he exploited the wage-labour of a force in excess of four hundred men, had not the physical wherewithal to lift a hammer or drive a single spike. Geoffrey took satisfaction in the irony.

> Only under capitalism, with its systematic inequalities, can such a state of affairs obtain. Only under capitalism can the weak thus thrive. Is this outrageous imbalance not a decisive illustration of the inevitability of the proletarian revolution? In the end, as Darwin has felicitously demonstrated, it is the fittest that survive.

With his balding pate, flabby belly, and girlish wrists, Walter Stanislee reminded his son more of the aging apes he had seen pulling out their own hair in the Zoological Gardens in Boston than of a real man. "Nervous exhaustion" and "neurasthenia" were the terms the doctors used; but Geoffrey preferred another word: obsolescence.

At the edge of Geoffrey's vision a black shadow passed. Up ahead there seemed to be some commotion among the men. He pulled away from the Galston girl with an air of grim alertness, like a doctor called to dress a wound.

"Now now," Harbrow was crooning. "Nothing broken, I hope and

trust?"

Walter Stanislee shook his big bald head. "I was not watching my way."

"Nor, it seemed, was your dancing partner," said Stebbins, his man.

"Not even a 'beg your pardon,'" said Lucasta, with unsurprised disgust.

"He looked just like a gorilla," squealed Constance.

"Constance," said Geoffrey's mother in vague admonition.

"Well now, Ma'am," said Harbrow, with factitious good humour, striving to give the impression of still leading the party on its tour. "They tell me we are one and all descended from the gorillas, every mother's son of us."

Geoffrey made a scoffing noise.

"I should rather have a gorilla for an uncle," chortled Mr. Galston, "than something like *that,*" he said, nodding in the direction the black shadow had gone.

Nothing irritated Geoffrey more than a superficial understanding of Darwin. Men like his father, Harbrow, and this Galston fool, who spoke so lightly of the origin of species and the descent of man, were worse than the church officials who had stubbornly refused to look through Galileo's telescope. *Those* old ostriches had at least appreciated the enormity of the debate; they had realized, if nothing else, what was at stake. With his father's friends it was quite otherwise: they had looked, and they had laughed.

What they none of them understood was that, simply put, the line between Man and Animal had been erased—or revealed, rather, to have been artificial all along. It was not enough to say, as porters and publicans and factory owners were so tickled to say, that Man had descended from Gorilla; one had to go further: Man *was* a Gorilla. Man was a beast; his claim to demigodhood had been repealed. There remained standing nothing between him and the jungle. His bones had been found in the swamps and forests; the swamp and the forest were in his bones.

This it was that the intelligent critics, like Soapy Sam Wilberforce, feared and fled from. The unintelligent, like Galston, spoke glibly of the forest as of a thicket, and never looked properly into it; or, if they looked, did not see.

"What was that ... *man* doing on the promenade deck at all?" Mrs. Gal-

ston wailed.

"He was very, very dirty," said Constance scoldingly.

"That was not dirt, young Miss," said Harbrow, arching his eyebrows enigmatically.

Maisie groaned. "It was coal dust," she said, in the wearily omniscient tone that she had affected since her debut. She added through a grimace, like one passing a stone, "Steamships run on coal, you know."

"Now that is a fact, Miss," said Harbrow, rediscovering his tour guide's tone. "Nine hundred tons of coal, to be exact. Fourteen bunkers above, twenty-six below, filled to the brim. That is where our dusty old friend must have been headed—the bunker hatch."

"All the same," said Mrs. Galston, by no means mollified. "They should be kept belowdecks."

"Out of sight," Mr. Galston agreed, sucking aggrievedly on the stub of his cigar. "Where they belong."

Here, Geoffrey sensed with excited scorn, was more material for the article—the "piece," as he supposed Daniels would call it—that was slowly taking shape, like a daguerrotype plate in its developing box, in the dim but fertile recesses of his mind. Here was yet another concrete illustration of what he sensed might become a running theme in the piece, perhaps indeed the very keynote of the entire work: the wilful blindness of the bourgeoisie.

> Just as the controller of capital turns a blind eye to the deplorable conditions of the labourers he exploits, so do the so-called upper classes, in their never-ending hunt for greater ease and luxury, wilfully blind themselves to the distasteful conditions that make their leisure possible.

He turned phrases over in his head like a jeweller appraising fine gems, regretting only that there had not been time after lunch to return to his cabin for his notebook and pencil.

It would be his first piece published in *The Worker's Tribune,* though not the first he had penned. He had, a few months ago, spent several hours in-

terviewing and observing Mrs. Gretl, the woman to whom the Stanislees sent their dirty linen, and whose long hours of back-breaking labour under deplorable conditions of sweltering squalour he had described at some length and detail, and with not a little ferocious (but restrained) indignation. Higgins—Geoffrey had no doubt that it had been Higgins—had summarily rejected the article, ostensibly because Mrs. Gretl controlled her own means of production (the laundry, it turned out, belonged to her) and was thus to be classified as *petit* bourgeoisie. Daniels, to his credit, had, in a handwritten post-script, praised Geoffrey for his manifest passion and for the vividness of his prose, paying particular tribute to the harrowing description of the woman's carbolic-ravaged hands—a detail whose rich symbolic import might have been missed by a lesser editor, and which Geoffrey himself believed he had brought off rather well. Geoffrey still had the rejection letter, locked in his *escritoire* back in Boston. He had, once the sting of disappointment had faded, decided to start a collection of such letters (they were sure to be rarities), and perhaps someday, with ironic humility, he would have them framed and hung in his study. (The article itself, returned by Daniels by post, Geoffrey had, with an artistic impulsiveness he now regretted, set aflame.)

"He looked just like our *negro*," Constance babbled happily.

"Well now, that is just precisely why we call them the Black Gang, young Miss."

The grey sky descended, squeezing out a gust of wind. The deck beneath them lurched; Geoffrey stumbled.

"Oh Walter," cried his mother, "your *suit*."

Meanwhile Poll, Constance's fat negro nurse, went on grumbling and dabbing at the black smudge that had been left, like a giant thumbprint, on his father's lapel.

The man did not look well.

Harbrow showed them the swimming pool, half filled to avoid spillage in rough weather; the racquets room, newly installed this autumn past; the

gymnasium, crowded with all manner of equipment designed to exercise the inactive muscles during long days at sea; the little library, lacking, of course, any edition in any language of the *Communist Manifesto*; the saloon (which they had all seen already), with its gaudy domed ceiling, anemic-looking piano player, and crisp waiters, tucked inside their uniforms like Japanese *origami* and dashing about like battlefield medics with tinkling carafes of ice-water; and finally the ladies' *boudoir,* or lounge, with its quaint little hearth, which burned smokelessly and (in case of the unthinkable) was framed on either side by two gleaming steam annihilators, looking more like clumsy flower-pots than devices for fighting fire.

"Where does that go?" asked Constance, pointing to a door on which were inscribed the words NO PASSENGERS BEYOND THIS POINT PLEASE.

"Down to steerage," Lucasta said with a smirk.

His sister was, in fact, correct. Geoffrey had been through just such a door the previous day, when he had paid Lacklin, his steward, to take him down and show him his quarters. These had, like the steward himself, rather proved a disappointment. Though it was true that the boy was required to share his room with three others, there was in this room none of the claustrophobic sordor, none of the fetid desperation and subdued rage that Geoffrey had been given to understand typified cramped workers' accommodations the world over. The bunks were bigger, the mattresses softer, the blankets heavier, the electric lights brighter than Geoffrey had imagined they would be. There were a shaving sink and a rather surprisingly capacious clothes locker. On the whole, the room was larger and cleaner and altogether much less oppressive than Geoffrey had expected. The crew, it seemed, were "making do" in conditions not far removed from those of the steerage passengers. This was good news for the crew, but bad news for his article.

As for Lacklin himself, Geoffrey soon saw that he would be of next to no use to him, either. The steward had obstinately refused to countenance the possibility that the work he was being paid (by the hour!) to do was in any way demeaning. Geoffrey recognized that this proud stance was only a

defensive reflex, an instinct of self-preservation, but that did not make it any less exasperating. Nor did the steward endear himself to his would-be advocate, comrade, and liberator by extorting from Geoffrey a "gratuity" for every service or favour rendered that fell outside the strict corpus of his duties.

It was not, he supposed, Lacklin's fault. He recalled the words of Marx: *The bourgeoisie has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.'* Nevertheless, Geoffrey vowed to waste no more time on stewards.

"Where does it go?" the child persisted.

Harbrow, ignored by his audience, ignored the question. Instead he put his hand to his face as though contemplating a plan of unutterable daring and audacity.

"I wonder," he mumbled, "I wonder ... Would anyone like to meet the Captain?"

Captain Stegnan was bowed, as though from pain, over the chart table when the tour party silently entered the wheelhouse. Harbrow smiled uncertainly at his group and, drawing himself to his full height, loudly cleared his throat. The Captain popped up like a cork from a champagne bottle.

"O-hoy," he cried. "What have we here? Are these the new seamen you have brought me at last?" The Captain cupped a hand to one side of his mouth and lowered his voice to a bellow. "I must say, Mr. Harbrow, they are a rather hobbledehoy looking lot."

Harbrow, with noticeably less alacrity than he had evinced half an hour earlier, introduced the men—giving their name, their company, their industry, a brief ode to their preeminence therein (less, it seemed to Geoffrey, for the Captain's ears, than for their own). Of this man's wife or that man's children, Harbrow made only glancing mention, thus reducing two thirds of his audience to the status of chattels or *accoutrements*. (The servants—Stebbins, Poll, and Galston's man—were not even conferred this much existence.)

Grinning and nodding oafishly, Captain Stegnan clapped his hands to-

gether and extended them like an offering. "I welcome you all aboard the *S.S. Vanguard.*"

His sisters and the Galston girl were charmed; but Geoffrey was cynically sure that, like Harbrow's sudden whim to "drop in on" him, the Captain's reception was all a performance—one with all the subtlety of a pantomime or Punch and Judy show. The celerity with which Stegnan launched into his speech only reinforced this impression.

"Four hundred forty-four feet in length," began his rumbling litany, ominous as distant thunder; "four thousand nine-hundred ninety-two tons unencumbered; room and strength enough for up to five thousand tons more in her eleven cargo holds. Her speed a stunning seventeen knots in weather favourable, fifteen without fail in any other; eight days thirteen hours, reliably and regularly, from continent to continent. Her keel was laid in 1872, the tip of her topmast completed in February 1873. Aye, twenty-two stupendous years plunging through the waves, come typhoon, come high water, come the devil himself."

His sisters, of course, were near swooning, but Geoffrey felt obscurely disappointed by the bridge. There seemed to be less equipment and gadgetry in evidence than he would have imagined necessary to pilot a 5,000-ton steamship across the ocean. No doubt he had been under an exaggerated (even romantic) impression of the difficulty of that task; apparently crossing the Atlantic, which he could not help but notice lay before them like a tatty blanket of dirty wool, required no more vigour or finesse than conducting a train down the railroad's tracks.

The wheel was really just a big wheel, and the wheelman's only duty, apparently, was to prevent it from turning. The compass, chronometer, and sextant were clever devices that had been invented years ago by clever men, and passed down, with careful instructions, to men who need never ponder why or how they worked. The Chadburn telegraph, in particular, incited Geoffrey's disdain: with its big gilded handle and its simple commands in big black letters—FULL, HALF, and SLOW, AHEAD or ASTERN—it looked like a toy, a child's idea of what a ship's controls should look like.

Stegnan, catching his glance, perhaps, and mistaking disdain for puzzle-

ment, explained—as though it were not self-explanatory—that the telegraph transmitted his or the first mate's order to the engine room, where the chief engineer, alerted by a ringing bell, received the order on a Chadburn of his own—which *he* then put into action.

"Can we see the engine room?" asked Constance.

"Well, now," said Harbrow, "the engine room, you see, is a very hot, very loud, very dark and dirty, very *dangerous* place."

The child pouted. The Captain crossed his arms over his chest and eyed her appraisingly.

"Perhaps that does not dissuade you? Perhaps you are made of sterner stuff?"

The men chuckled; the women smiled indulgently. Constance scowled at everyone, uncomprehending, certain only that the wheels of injustice had been set inexorably in motion.

In the end, it was decided that the girls had seen enough. The women and children would return to the lounge, while the men—Galston and his man Holroyd, Aitkin and his brother, Stebbins and Geoffrey's father—would complete their tour with a descent into the ship's "netherregions" (a phrase of Captain Stegnan's that caused Mrs. Galston visible distress).

"Will you go?" the Galston girl asked Geoffrey.

"Oh, I don't know." He had no real desire to see more of the ship, nor to spend more time in the odious company of the likes of Galston or the Captain; he was, however, distinctly keen not to be left behind with the women and children.

"Oh, but you *should*."

Thinking of his cabin, with its little steam-pipe stove, his slippers and his dressing-robe, his trunk of books, his note-papers arranged neatly upon the desk, he said, "I thought I *might* do a spot of work ..."

He felt his father, whose gaze he had been avoiding, place a hand on his shoulder. He went stiff, and found he could not move.

"I am not ... feeling well at the moment. Geoffrey will go."

Harbrow cast a quick inquisitive glance in his father's direction; Geoffrey felt the hand on his shoulder tighten in a limp squeeze, then fall away;

and Harbrow's gaze slid sideways and settled on him.

Constance sneered, her eyes ablaze with miserable envy.

Geoffrey sneered back. God, what a perfect little fool she was.

After descending another staircase they reached at last an elaborate hatchway. The Captain was explaining the role of this door in the event ("Quite unthinkable event," Harbrow hastened to reassure them) that the ship were to take on water. It had something to do with automatic mechanisms and sealed bulkheads and Geoffrey, though in some obscure way he felt expected, even required, to pay attention, found none of it very interesting.

"A hundred to one are the odds," Captain Stegnan was saying, "that you'll die of thirst at sea as against drowning. Scarce indeed is the ship afloat today that won't outlive her most stalwart passenger or steeliest mate; the captain given the chance to go down with his charge is a dying breed. A brig like the *Vanguard* can lap up no less than 3000 tons of briny deep and keep her head above water for weeks, months. Do what you will to her," he growled, "she will not sink. Be she swamped, flooded, turned turtle, or set afire, she'll stay afloat. Aye, and more's the danger to her sister ships."

Geoffrey was more intrigued by the Captain himself than his disquisition. He seemed to have undergone a change since their descent belowdecks: His voice was deeper, his movements slower yet more assured, his demeanour more grave, as though the bulk of the ship or the sea weighed more heavily upon him down here. Perhaps it was only the absence of the women and children that had wrought this transformation (if transformation was not too lofty a word for it); Geoffrey had seen many men—real men, men's men, not like his father—drained of all *savoir-faire* and dignity in the presence of children.

"Each year I meet men who ask me why today's steamer needs a captain, men whose idea of pushing across the Atlantic is to take aim at the horizon and throttle her full steam ahead. Each year what these men look out upon from their Portknockie or their Coney Island and see as but a wide and vacant void, no more treacherous than a snow-covered meadow, be-

comes more and more like a churning trash heap, a dancing graveyard, a roiling black inferno littered with lost ships, lost cargo, lost souls. Flotsam clogs her valleys and jetsam crowns her peaks. Everywhere dross, detritus, and dead ships lie in wait, with murderous intent, for the blind and unwary. At fifteen knots a steamer collides with the capsized hull of a derelict schooner like a keg of dynamite. *There's* the peril of your indomitable buoyancy: today's ship *will not sink*. Her skeleton, unburied, unmourned, drifts endlessly like one of Hades' shades."

Whatever the reason, Stegnan had shed his clownishness; and in its place Geoffrey thought he detected a sort of battered worldliness or beleaguered cynicism that he could almost (with self-conscious largesse) recognize as kindred. As the Captain went on with his exposition, Geoffrey began to form a fresh impression of the man as a sort of regal caged animal: a circus bear, perhaps, balancing upon a bright red ball for his dinner. But beneath the fur there beat, at the rate of the tides, a sailor's salt-encrusted heart.

Was the man proletarian or bourgeois? he wondered.

The Captain shouldered open another portal, but paused in the passageway.

"There are ships lost at sea still. You'll have heard, I suppose, of *The Brunswick*? No? A 280-foot freighter she was, 2,485 tons, capable of twelve knots with the wind at her chin. Left Liverpool for New York November 19, 1869. Not seen again till February—of 1874."

"Five years!" gasped Aitkin's brother, his moustache trembling.

"Aye, nearly five years the interim. It was *The May Parade*, under Captain William Roscoe (whom I knew), that came upon her, drifting like a phantom, showing nary a sign of life, nor evidence of any stripe or species that she was aught but, as they say of the body after the soul has departed, an empty shell."

"The ship was deserted?" queried Aitkin's brother.

The Captain pursed his lips, as though at some unpleasant taste remembered. "An empty shell."

"But whatever became of them?" asked Stebbins. "The passengers, the

crew? What happened to—"

"All that can be said with certainty is that they were none of them ever seen or heard from again."

"And what of the lifeboats?" said Galston querulously. "Surely they did not every man Jack of them sit cozy as cottage pie in their sun chairs till—"

A hiccuping bleat rose from Captain Stegnan's throat and lifted his head as though it were on a hinge.

"Did they not *have* lifeboats?" demanded Galston.

The Captain slowly lowered his head. "A lifeboat is a fancy bit of wreckage that one clings to," he said contemptuously. "A lifeboat is but a gulp of air in your lungs before you go under."

Aitkin came softly to Galston's aid. "But Mr. Harbrow said that a good lifeboat is as sturdy as a little island. He showed us—"

"An island indeed," said Stegnan. "You can no more paddle a lifeboat out of the middle of the Old Atlantic than you could an island." His gaze flashed pityingly in Harbrow's direction. "Nay, no matter how many push-ups or chin-lifts you do of a morn."

The narrow tunnel they stood in tilted madly as the ship slid sidelong into a trough; but in the absence of any relative cues it appeared as though they had all leaned over in almost perfectly choreographed unison. Aitkin and Galston's man quite lost their footing.

"But what *happened* to them all?" moaned Aitkin's brother.

"None know. Some say fire. Some say disease. Others say pirates. Still others say mutiny—foul play."

Geoffrey sucked in his breath. "What do *you* say?"

Stegnan peered, unseeing, in Geoffrey's direction. "I? I suppose I say hurricane. There are waves the likes of which'll convince even the saltiest seaman that his vessel is sinking fast."

Geoffrey frowned but said nothing. He did not, by any means, think this the most plausible explanation—nor the most satisfying—at all. A hurricane! Indeed!

The engine room, after the drab and silent austerity of the corridors they had passed down to arrive at it, was overwhelming. There had been in those corridors no forewarning, no presentiment: on the instant they were upon it, inside it, looking down on it from a platform above. To Geoffrey the sight was a cloudburst, a *coup de foudre*, a visceral blow.

There was more to see, more going on, than he could process, yet he was dizzyingly aware of his eyes registering every detail, like mean little meticulous clerks recording debts in a vast ledger. For the longest time he could form no idea of what he was looking at. Naturally, as a writer and thinker, his propensity was to view the things that composed the world as elaborate index cards, of varying perspicuity, for the words of which they were instantiations. But here the woeful inadequacy of his catalogue was at last revealed. He could not get a handhold on this world or its things. Such labels as he had collected—pipe, gear, duct, flue, bolt, piston, belt, screw, chamber, and the like—seemed to have no application to the gallimaufry before him. He felt as Adam on the day of his creation.

The thought occurred to him that he might be sick. He closed his eyes at the absurdity of this possibility (only after a few moments bethinking himself to put a hand over his eyes in a gesture that might pass for deep or difficult meditation).

The Captain's voice reached him again above the din, and though he paid no attention to what was being said, the words, the mere flow of human speech, calmed and soothed him, like the reassuring gurgle of an eavestrough in a rainstorm.

"Feeling quite alright, sir?" inquired Harbrow.

Geoffrey wondered what this man would be doing after the revolution. Laundry, perhaps.

"Fine," he said. "Quite."

"Some of her," Stegnan was crowing, "is, in truth, as young as she looks. This beauty, the heart of her heart, as you might say, was put in sometime near on toward the end of the great slump, might have been '88 I reckon,"—Stegnan eyed Harbrow superciliously, as a pupil might eye his doubting teacher—"and more and more gentlemen renewed their interest in

getting things from the wrong end of the ocean to the right."

"The boilers," added Harbrow, "were also replaced at that time. The new 'scotch' or 'fire-tube' boilers burn much more efficiently than the 'water-tube' style that preceded them. We used to burn through nearly three tons an hour; now it has dropped almost to half that."

"*And* a new propeller. Don't forget the propeller and shaft, which bumped no less than two full knots onto her gallop."

Galston took off his spectacles, looked through them at arm's length, and returned them to his nose. "So you," he said, "or she—the ship—the engine—it uses, what did you say, about one and a half tons of coal an hour?"

"Oh, more than that," assured the Captain, who was clearly not much impressed by Harbrow's efficiency. "Two is what I should wager. Why, on our last crossing alone we fired up more than six hundred—"

"That was an anomaly," said Harbrow. "You put in at extra ports. And the quality of coal was substandard."

"Coal's coal," said the Captain. "Carried us across the drink, didn't it?"

"The Captain does not always read the reports. Nor does the Captain often see the inside of a furnace or communicate with our stokers. Nor is he expected to. But Llewellyn—our chief engineer—was quite unequivocal. Uneven combustion, high percentage of clinkers; bad coal. Not our usual supplier. Test mine. We are being reimbursed. An altogether untypical trip, you see. Over the last dozen voyages prior the *Vanguard* averaged only 471 tons per crossing."

"Still comes out to more than two an hour," mused Galston.

"Aye, two tons, as I said," said Stegnan gleefully. "She's a hungry ship. Two tons an hour, that's her feed. Two tons of coal shovelled into her fiery belly every hour of the live long day."

"Two on average, only on average." Harbrow touched his kerchief to the side of his brow and inspected it. "Much of that is spent in maneuvering. In and out of port, around bad weather, that kind of thing. Out at sea, under a constant heading, that will drop significantly."

Galston turned his head and looked thoughtfully at Geoffrey. "I'm sur-

prised," he said, like one confiding a secret. "But hell—coal's cheap."

"Come," said Stegnan, lifting one arm above his head in a rabble-rousing gesture. "Let's all go together, shall we, and see the inside of a furnace."

II

The engine room had surprised him, but it was the sight of the boiler room that remained in his head, like a painting hung on one of its walls, over the next two days. It was this image that he sat for hours at his desk trying to recreate in prose, a *duvet* wrapped around his frame to buffer him from the bitter draft that had begun to slither in through his cabin window no matter how tightly he latched it. How he wished he were belowdecks, in one of the cozy little steerage rooms, with their proximity to the boilers and their portholes that could not in any weather be opened. It was impossible to get any work done in such surroundings as these, with Constance next door bickering pettishly with Poll, shadows darkening his drape every five minutes as another pair of layabout saloon passengers took yet another *faute-de-mieux* stroll along the same old promenade, and all about him there pulsed the chit-chattering thrum of hysterical idiots feigning gaiety at sea.

> The Black Gang is the quintessential exemplar of the dehumanizing exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.

He stared at this sentence for several minutes. At last he dipped his pen and in one confident slash crossed out "quintessential," eventually writing beneath it, after another minute, and with less bravado, "ultimate." Fifteen minutes later he had crossed this out and replaced it with "perfect," crossed out "perfect," replaced "exemplar" with "symbol" and then "apotheosis," and finally blotted out "is" in preferment of "represents." Then he rewrote the sentence in its entirety.

> The Black Gang represents the apotheosis of the dehumanizing exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.

He was not displeased. At the same time, he was keenly aware of not yet having provided his readers any tangible evocation of the image that so haunted him. It would be necessary, he realized, to ply his pen like a painter's brush if he was to limn that scene in the boiler room. In his mind, in fact, he saw it as a woodcut, its lines stark, tortuous, precise, its dark figures locked like Sisyphuses in a frieze of eternal gloom and toil. The ovens clanking and creaking dyspeptically; the glowing coals as bright and hard and round as orange cakes of paint; the blue fires blazing steadily, almost soundlessly; the trimmers and passers, shovels aloft, moving like mercury around one another, their skin soft and supple as burnt and blistered wax, their sleek and gnarled bodies glistening blackly with sweat and steam ... The confounded lines of Blake kept ringing in his head, and in an effort to exorcize them he wrote them down.

> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

As he dotted the question mark with a purgative flourish of finality there was to be heard a sound like chthonic thunder, a low yawning groan as of a mountain pulling up its roots, that arose from deep within the bowels of the ship and sent shudders up through its frame, causing the floor beneath his chair to tremble for a moment before it subsided.

Then came silence.

Then came the dinner bugle, shattering the silence.

He swore, threw down his pen, and tossed off the *duvet*. It was impossible to think, let alone to write, in these conditions. He might as well get dressed for dinner.

After some deliberation, he sat down next to Maisie, who could be trusted not to speak to him, spread his book—*The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*—on the table, and planted his elbows like posts on either side.

But it was soon apparent that he would not be able to concentrate. Across the table, his mother and Mrs. Galston were gibbering excitedly.

"It sounded to *me* as though we had run aground of something."

"Are there islands this far out?"

"Perhaps we have hit an iceberg."

"It *is* that time of year, I suppose?"

"I do hope it's nothing *too* serious."

"But it cannot be. We're due in London Friday."

"What do *you* think it was?"

April Galston had somehow materialized in the seat next to his. She had not been there when he had chosen his seat, he was certain of that.

He blinked at her. "What do I think *what* was?"

She treated this as a jolly good jest. "They have stopped the engines, too," she whispered happily.

"That's nonsense," he said. But, in fact, he *had* felt some change come over the ship since the groaning sound; not till now had he been able to put his finger on it. There was less noise. He had not been consciously aware of any sound or vibrations emanating from the engines but he was aware now of their absence.

He became aware too, as he lifted his head, of the general buzz of suppressed elation. All around him passengers were clucking and cooing and smacking their mouths with relish at their own delicious bewilderment as the speculations passed their lips.

"Why do they not put on the lights," he murmured, noticing for the first time the rows of candles burning at every table. The vast domed room was refulgent and, if not for the continuous rolling of the ship as it was buffeted by the wind and waves, would almost have seemed festive.

Maisie snorted. "The electricity is *out,* you fool."

"They have stopped the engines," April Galston repeated.

They all looked up as a man came clattering through the saloon entrance, then stopped and stood there wild-eyed and panting, like an animal having burst out of the forest onto a road milling with humans. Heads rotated silently in his direction. The *maitre,* without seeming to move his feet,

approached the interloper and, leaning in towards him with a sort of menacing servility, uttered some pointed query or command.

"The Captain," the man was at last able to gasp. "Where's the Captain. We've got to tell the Captain—"

But the *maitre* and two other stewards were already guiding the dishevelled man back through the door.

"Steerage," was Mrs. Galston's curt diagnosis.

There had, Geoffrey thought, been something peculiar about the man's trousers. They had appeared to be wet.

"I *hope* it's not an iceberg," said April, like one expressing a hope that she might shake hands with the Queen. "Would that not be just too utterly devastating?"

"I imagine, my dear," said Mr. Galston from the far end of the table, "that it was nothing more 'devastating' than some of the cargo coming loose and tipping over in one of the holds."

"But didn't you *hear* that sound, Father? It was ... smashing, crashing —"

"A large drum of oil," said Galston, unfolding his napkin one corner at a time, "or a crate of sheet metal, improperly secured with dunnage. Nothing to be alarmed about."

"But, were that so, why would we have stopped the engines?" asked Geoffrey's mother.

"In order to sort things out a bit down there, I should suppose."

Captain Stegnan, Geoffrey saw, was not at his table.

"But why," persisted his mother, "should we need to completely cut the engines, unless we—"

"Lois, please," said Geoffrey's father. "Really. All this clapwaddle is giving me a splintering pain in my head. You heard what Harbrow said. There's nothing whatever the matter with the ship."

At that, the table fell to silent perusal of their meal cards.

"Harbrow was here?" Geoffrey asked.

April Galston lifted one shoulder.

"What did he say?"

"That nothing was wrong, I guess."

"What exactly did he say?"

"Oh, I don't remember *exactly*. You know: That there was nothing for any of us to worry about, that it was all being taken care of, that sort of thing."

"Attended to," Maisie corrected. "'Being attended to,' he said."

"But did he not say what's happened, what has actually occurred?"

"Geoffrey." His mother uttered his name like a reproof. "You heard your father."

He was negotiating again that invisible terrain; his head was not attached to the same torso as his feet. "Did none of you *ask*?"

"I suppose we did not think it any of our business," chirped Mrs. Galston.

"The important thing," said Walter Stanislee, "is that everything is under control."

An anomalous clearing appeared in the heavens and, as the ship plunged into a deep gutter, a pale shaft of dying sunlight spilled down through the saloon's dome windows and rolled sideways like a drunken spotlight over the tables and ballroom floor, before being extinguished again by the churning stormclouds. Those walking stood still, those standing steadied themselves against a table or passing cart.

"Geoffrey?"

"My room," he said. "I left my notebook in my room."

"But Mr. Harbrow said for all of us to stay—"

Geoffrey, with a sudden giddy clarity, felt certain that they were all going to drown.

Everything was being attended to: that was what they had been told. That had satisfied them. It was enough that *someone*—one of their employees, one of their wage-earners—had the matter well in hand. Their complacent indifference was due in part, of course, to their utter ignorance and incompetence; there was nothing they could do to help if they had had a mind to.

But that they did not even want to know what had occurred, wanted only to be reassured that the situation, whatever it might be, was on its way to being remedied, could only be the result of fear. They were like Galileo's persecutors after all: if they did not look, if they turned away, the problem would not exist.

He had not turned away. He was proud of that. He had stood there longer than any of the others. He had stood there, baking and sweating, and watched the Black Gang feed the fires. He had remained behind till his discomfort became acute, till he felt as if he would burst into bright blue flame himself, and still he stood there, watching; and still those men bent and lifted and thrust without rest, without respite.

It was horrible, intolerable. And yet he had withstood it. He had forced himself to look. He had not turned away.

"Quite the sight, isn't it?"

He and the Captain were the last two in the boiler room. The tour was ended; the rest of the party had already gone on ahead, following after Harbrow like wide-eyed baby ducklings.

"It is ... staggering," was all he could say.

"A shame your father could not be here to see it."

Geoffrey felt dizzy; there was on Stegnan's grizzled face a look, not of sickened pity, but of glowing admiration.

"Harbrow's a fool, of course," said the Captain. "But for God's sake, don't let his monkey antics, all his bright shiny facts and statistical baubles, dissuade you. The Blue Line is as stable, as unsinkable a concern as any one of her ships. And she's due for an upswell. She's got the pedigree, she's got the backbone, and you can see for yourself that she's got the strength. All she's lacking is the funds—the capital."

One of the firemen was bent double before his boiler's hatch, screaming with red-faced fury at his counterpart on the other side, who had opened the opposite hatch at the same time and allowed a gust of cold—that is, slightly less scorching—air to pour over his precious coals. The man looked capable of murder.

Geoffrey felt ill, but he did not look away.

"My father and I will discuss it, I'm sure."

Stegnan grinned at him slyly, as though twitting him for some unwarranted modesty.

But Geoffrey and his father had not discussed it. Indeed, in the two intervening days, they had not exchanged a single word. Granted, his father spent most of his time resting in his stateroom; but Geoffrey, for his part, was quite content to avoid him. There was, anyway, nothing to say—just as there had been nothing to say about his coming on this trip, and nothing to say about his presumptive attendance at the university. He could no more talk about the fate of the Blue Line with his father than he could tell him what he really thought of Stanislee Steel.

Something shook him. He thought at first it was the ocean rocking the ship, but then he felt the aching aftershock of the collision, and the hands slapping at his lapels, brushing him off.

"I am sorry, sir. All right? Nothing busted? No harm no foul?"

"What happened?"

The steward chuckled. "Asked myself the same thing. Trimming along I am, you come out of nowhere, and pitch as night's guts it is with the blooming electrics out, and—*pof*. No fault, no flaw, far as I can make it. Bit of hamburger grease on your lapel'll come right out in the wash."

"Oh, God," groaned Geoffrey. "Lacklin."

The hands ceased their slapping. "Mr. Geoffrey? Christ, I thought I knocked me over some blooming saloon passenger."

"I am a saloon passenger," he muttered.

"Never fails. Every time there's a blow-up, out they come crawling, get underfoot and in your way. Sniff a spot of trouble and there they are, tripping you up, slowing you down, and not a nickel of thank-you for your bother." Where a moment before he had sounded relieved, he now sounded angry. He was already hurrying on; Geoffrey dogged after him.

"Lacklin, you must tell me: What has happened?"

The back of the boy's throat rattled. "You all right then, are you?" He

spat it back over his shoulder like an accusation.

"Are we in any danger? Is the ship—"

"Naw, you ain't in no danger. Not the *saloon* passengers ain't."

"Lacklin—where is the Captain? He was not at his—"

"That old log-lump? Like as not cowering in his cabin under his down-feather mattress. What you want the like of him for?"

Geoffrey did not know why. Because he was in command; because he would know what to do. Because ...

"Something has happened. To the ship. There was a man, he came into the ... His trousers—"

"Something happened?" jeered Lacklin. "You want to save this ship, you be wiser help carry food to the lifetubs like me."

"Lifeboats?"

But Lacklin was already out of sight.

The wheelhouse was empty. It looked less forlorn than simply vacant, as though the Captain and wheelman had just stepped out for a minute. This was, he supposed, because it had never been but nominally occupied; you could not abandon that which had no importance. That the bridge had been evacuated did not prove the severity of the emergency, but the inconsequence of the bridge. Whatever might be happening was happening belowdecks. What had Stegnan called the engine room? The heart of her heart. The bridge was, at most, the ship's eyes; and in times of trouble, in times of darkness, there was nothing to see.

The wind up here was a ceaseless and ubiquitous screech. The deck plunged; he grasped the wheel and looked out at the sea.

Though the view was smeared and pitted by rain, the rolling clouds still harboured enough of a charcoal glow for him to see that what had been a tatty blanket two days ago had been transformed into a mountain range of tumbling pitch. The black waves rose up with swift malevolent purpose, as though summoned each by name, before crashing down upon one another in a gulping frenzy of spume. The rain was visible only as a wavering diago-

nal streak clogging the air like a heat mirage, but down below he could see where it chewed and churned the surface of the water into a pebbled froth. In the distance, patches of pale lightning skittered across the ribbed underbelly of the storm.

He imagined, for a moment, that he was guiding the ship to safety. But the wheel would not budge, no matter how hard he pulled.

He turned for the stairs and saw that the A and B Deck promenades were teeming with people—crew members, he surmised, stocking and readying the lifeboats. There appeared to be hundreds of them down there, battered by rain, crawling over one another, running in every direction—not *en masse,* like a mob, but with individual purpose, like ants stirred by some threat to their hill.

He had not imagined there could be so many. They must have all of them been called up from their bunks, their tables, their parlours, wherever they had been resting or recuperating. He wanted to scream down at them: Why are you doing this? Why do you sacrifice yourselves to save *their* lives, when they do not even lift a finger to aid themselves; no, do not even bestir themselves enough to wonder what disaster imperils them?

But, of course, if the crew did not save the ship, no one would.

He had come to the wrong place. It was belowdecks that the real work was done, the real problems solved. It was, he felt sure, in the engine room that he would find the captain of this ship. He descended the stairs at speed.

He paused before the first of the bulkhead doors. At the top of the corridor some light from the lamps of the deck above had still filtered down to him; now he no longer knew if the darkness was total or not. Phantom forms hovered before his eyes, but these might have been due to nothing more than strain coupled with imagination. His hand found the hatch wheel; the hard cold metal seemed to drain his fingers of all their substance, all their strength.

Like the importance of the bridge, the strength of men like his father was only apparent. In calm weather they appeared to be in control of the

world's ships, but with rough seas the superfluousness and superficiality of their reign was revealed—and they sat munching post-prandial cigars while the crew fought off shipwreck.

But if the crew, the workers, the proletariat possessed the true power, could one speak of them as oppressed? Or was it, in the end, their oppression that gave them their power? After all, was it not by enduring hardship that one acquired strength?

One became hard by doing what was hard.

The scene from the boiler room, the image of those blackened figures toiling over their fires, rose afresh in his mind.

He gripped the hatch wheel with both hands and twisted it loose.

He did not close the doors behind him—to allow whatever light there might be to pass through, and because he could not countenance the thought of sealing himself in down here.

Meanwhile, to steady himself, he let his mind turn back to abstract reflection: Who used whom? Could it be that the proletariat used the opposition of the bourgeoisie to make themselves strong? Did the brain use the body to get around, or did the body use the brain to get itself around?

He did not remember the floor sloping downward in this way. Perhaps he was in a different corridor altogether. But at least he knew for certain that he was moving in the correct direction.

Was the brain more dispensible than the body? Was the bridge less important than the engine room? Direction without propulsion was immobility; but propulsion without direction was shipwreck.

He fumbled, fingers now almost numb, with another hatch. This one was harder to release than its predecessors. He had to stand to one side and heave downwards with all his might. He held his breath and tugged.

There was a hard hollow sound like a sledge's runners scraping across ice. He felt a constellation of pinpricks all along the left side of his body and believed for a moment that he had ruptured something, torn some sensitive nervous tissue. Reflexively he gasped and jumped back into the wall, which rang under the impact like a struck anvil. In the two or three seconds before he grasped the nature of this sudden barrage of noise and pain, his mind

reeled vertiginously—seemed actually to spin about, as though his head had swallowed something nauseating—in an abject disorientation and alarm that was a hundredfold worse than what he had experienced in the engine room. For two or three seconds, all he knew was that he was alone in a dark and confined space, some distance below the surface of the ocean, that he was being attacked by some unseen menace and was utterly defenceless, utterly powerless.

Then he understood: Water. A stream of water was blasting in through the door he had partially opened, ricocheting off the opposite wall of the corridor, and drenching and freezing him.

His terror—elementary, without object, absolute—was extinguished by an inrush of fear: He would be drowned.

He turned and fled, one hand skimming the wall to guide him, the other extended before him in anticipation of the inevitable collision.

He was in the dark; his shoes were wet; the floor was slick as though with oil; the invisible corridor continued to tilt and plunge all around him—and still he did not stumble, still he ran. He had his sea legs now, he thought bitterly.

But he miscalculated the distance, the number of portals remaining; the faint lamplight from the deck above reached his eyes only a fraction of a second before the stair smashed into his shin and sent him careening forward in a crashing purler. His chin hit first; he took the brunt of the fall in his teeth and jaw. The pain was immense; it felt as though his face had exploded. He blacked out, and awoke in water.

It gripped him with long sharp claws and shook him. He was floating in a void of cold pain. He could no longer see the light. Up, he reasoned laboriously, had to be in the direction of air. He found the edge of the water by waving his arms: One of them seemed to move more freely. He pushed his head in that direction and sucked breath down into his lungs, as though his throat were a straw. He could not swim.

He realized he was still on the floor: The water had only come up to his

knees. He found the bottom step and pulled himself onto it, then the next, and the next. His legs were half frozen; they paddled him up the stairs like a riverboat.

He came out onto C deck. He had not intended to go out into the storm, but he had to warn the passengers that the ship was taking on water. He had to tell his family, had to tell his father, that they were sinking.

Where was everyone? He could not see anything for the rain. The lancing drops fell on his numbed skin like little pressing fingertips. The sky was now almost completely black; there was not even lightning. Where was the crew? Where were the lifeboats?

With lethargic ease, as though shrugging one of its giant shoulders, the ship tilted; Geoffrey stumbled and was sent sliding into the railing. At the same time, a corkscrewing gust of wind came sweeping in to fill a freak vacuum in the ship's lee—and Geoffrey was blown overboard.

He could but thrash wildly as the waves tossed him about. He was in the ocean in the middle of a tempest and he could not swim, but the magnitude of his predicament did not enter his awareness. His only thought, his only instinct, was to fight the waves until something changed, until the next thing happened. There was only this moment of struggle. The worst never occurred to him.

Then he went under. With an abrupt shocking completeness that seemed almost gentle, the dark viscous water lifted the storm and the rain and the crashing spray over his head, closed around him like a protecting fist, and pierced his lungs.

He was coughing, choking on black ice.

Then, with an effort of will, he was able to suppress the spasms in his chest, and with them much of the fear. It was just like holding one's breath, except that one no longer had any breath to hold.

Then came a moment, almost a respite, in which he could do nothing more.

He thought of his piece for the *Worker's Tribune.* He thought of Meredith Quigley, and the letter he would write her. He thought of the shade-dappled road leading down the hill from his grandparents' acreage. He thought

of his father, and wished him health.

The cold turned to pain and infiltrated his bones. That was good, he thought. That was where it belonged. This way, he would carry it with him always. This way, he would never forget.