

ROGUE RAIDER

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After escaping from the museum, he is now a writer and broadcaster and divides his time between London and Indonesia.

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ROGUE RAIDER

**THE TALE OF CAPTAIN LAUTERBACH
AND THE SINGAPORE MUTINY**

NIGEL BARLEY



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INTRODUCTION

The life of Captain Julius Lauterbach was so extraordinary that no one would dare to invent it. Juli-bumm, as he was known to his friends, was very much a real person although he lives on chiefly as the myth he was transformed into. The *Emden* was a real ship. The events described here – for the most part – really happened, though they were later hushed up, especially by the British authorities.

The First World War left Germany feeling a little short of classic heroes. The circumstances of the land campaign were not conducive to gentlemanly conduct and it was only in the air and at sea that a space was left for the conventional hero the public still demanded in an age of callous *Realpolitik*. Hence the continuing importance of SMS *Emden*, a light cruiser of the Far East squadron, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Karl von Mueller, whose story has often been told and is something of a cult in Germany, neatly offsetting that of the negative ‘Rape of Belgium,’ just as frequently repeated in the rest of Europe. Von Mueller was of military family and noble blood, cold, distant, ruthlessly correct and punctilious in the interpretation of the articles of war. In 1914, the *Emden* was sent as a raider into the Indian Ocean to prey on Britain’s merchant fleet. It was not expected she would return. In the course of three months, however, she sank sixteen merchant ships and two warships and carried out

daring raids on the harbours of Penang and Madras, making a mockery of British naval supremacy, paralysing trade and making the Allies fear for their crucial troop convoys from Australasia. In the course of this, barely a life was lost. Von Mueller devoted himself to looking after the welfare of enemy crews and liberated them in safety and good health whenever circumstances permitted. Often, they cheered him as the *Emden* sailed off. His reputation and popularity throughout the Empire became a personal embarrassment for the First Sea Lord, Winston Churchill, who had seventy-eight vessels of British and allied navies searching the world for the enemy ship. In Germany, the legend of the *Emden* remained alive long after the war and spawned a whole series of vessels of similar name, becoming the official, acceptable face of the German navy.

But there is another side to the ship of legend – Captain Julius Lauterbach of the naval Reserve. His memoirs were written up as war propaganda and he too was portrayed as fearless, fanatically nationalistic and inevitably devoid of individual, intelligent thought. Yet, if we strip him of such conventional pieties and try to transform him back into a realistic human being, it seems likely that, for every austere virtue of von Mueller, Lauterbach possessed the corresponding vice. He was gross, beer-guzzling, cigar-smoking and uxorious, a seasoned filcher, braggart and – above all – a survivor. Lauterbach was made prize officer of the *Emden* in charge of loot. Rarely do navies match a man so ideally to his job. Lauterbach stuffed the warship with luxuries and one may suspect that, like others in his position in other navies, he had an eye to his own comfort and profit at the same time. When the *Emden* was finally shot to pieces Lauterbach was snugly

installed in a prize ship a safe distance away.

Captured by the Allies, he was imprisoned in Singapore. In 1915, making opportunistic use of a mutiny amongst his Indian guards, Lauterbach made good his escape. His account of his involvement in that mutiny is inconsistent and shifty and has invited speculation. He now embarked on a protracted series of adventures as he tried to head back to Germany with a price of £1,000 (later inflated in his memoirs to £10,000) on his head and sought by all the British and Japanese agents in the East. He had contacts all over China and the Pacific from his sailing days as well as on German vessels interned in all the neutral harbours. He spoke Malay, pidgin Chinese, Dutch, Swedish and English as well as German. Beneath the flag of patriotism, Lauterbach performed several feats of great physical endurance and bravery, mixed with low cunning and self-interest. He was not a modest man. Often, when he had fooled or tricked anyone, he sent them a gloating postcard. After many adventures, he managed to return to Germany from the other side of the world and resumed an active role in the navy, though again one resting as much on deceit and cunning as military bravery.

Oddly, Captain von Mueller refused to write his own story, feeling it would be a base profiteering that would dishonour so many dead comrades. Lauterbach's tale has been told several times. It appeared twice in German, with a deadly patriotic twist for wartime propaganda purposes, first under his own name as *1000Pf Sterling Kopffpreis – tot oder lebendig* in 1917 and again as *Als Fluechtling um den halben Erdball* by Reinhard Roehle n.d. Then, in 1930 Lowell Thomas, an American journalist, took up the story and reworked it for the German-American market as *Lauterbach of the China*

Sea which went back into German as *Mein Freund Julibumm* by Graf Luckner. It is with the luxury of hindsight that we can now see him as a far more interesting character than the nationalistic obsessions and hatreds of the time allowed him ever to appear. Thomas calls him 'Falstaffian' but we should perhaps nowadays see him as more 'Flashmanesque'. Any truth about Julius Lauterbach goes far beyond the extant straightjacketed patriotic renditions. The version given here is no more than a possible version but to offer it is in no way to denigrate Julius Lauterbach. If anything, it seeks to humanise an exceptional man who has been caricatured as a fanatical martinet and return to him his deserved human condition. He is a man for whom I have a particular fondness. I hope readers will feel the same way.

Nigel Barley

BOOK ONE

THE SWAN
OF THE EAST

CHAPTER ONE

The hard heat beat down upon Tsingtao. No one could remember a hot season like it. For week after week, the black-white-red of Germany hung limp in the air till the meteorological station's equipment, fresh from Berlin, gave one final, desperate click and locked solid. With a thousand brass hammers the sun cracked the red rooftiles of the Chinese shophouses and bleached out the features of the Kaiser's portraits, nailed patriotically above all cash registers. It mined and split the concrete of the new German harbour and sucked the very life from the roses planted by homesick Europeans in the gardens of their villas. On the roof-terrace of the *Dachsaal* beergarden, the troops bleared wistfully at the cool but distant Laoshan mountains, grew tearful and confused at the unwonted tropical vigour of the imported German pinetrees there, drank another beer, sang another "Muss i Denn" and fumbled absently at the breastless Chinese serving wenches whose *Dirndl* bodices flapped limp with unfulfilled expectation. Colonial life was a thin membrane of glory stretched over a yawning pit of boredom.

"Bloody mockery," snivelled Captain Schulz, gulping fizzy beer and belching. Another month and he was due for the more solid forms of German home leave. He would be there now if it hadn't been for the last-minute malaria. Instead

he was on his jack, on this roof, in this mockery of a town, that yodelled with dumpy south German towers and all the gingerbread cosiness of Bavaria. A lissom Chinese waiter in *Lederhosen* minced past on hairless legs and Schulz shook his head in pain.

At the neighbouring table sprawled a bunch of young naval officers, empty steins discarded around them in puddles of beer, sporting a muddled variety of uniforms, military and merchant, that meant nothing to Schulz. The whole of this Kiaochow Chinese protectorate was treated like some bloody great ship of the Reich, Admiral Tirpitz in charge, another popinjay captain as governor. Even the soldiers were called ‘marines’ and only he and a few other officers were real army men, stuck like bored housewives in the stinking barracks at Fort Bismarck while the navy went off to play their silly games at sea.

“Bloody mockery,” he snarled again.

Tsingtao, the capital, was a model city, the teeming humanity of mainland China tamed and dammed by German colonial efficiency and the pouring in of millions of marks – water, roads, street-lighting, hospitals, schools, a railway, a floating drydock, and everywhere great naval guns poking at sky and sea. Undersea cables linked them to the wider world of Shanghai and the Pacific colony of Yap. The other side of the bay, disappearing in blue haze, was German too but under Chinese administration, a convenient muddle that gave excuses for military intervention whenever Germany needed them. The wind shifted and blew a sweet miasma of excrement, *Chinese* excrement over the town. Costive European dung was disdained as poisonous and fed into the maws of proud modern sewers to be belched out beyond

the lighthouse but Chinese was traditionally composted for manure on one of the harbour islands and shovelled lavishly over their food. One way or another the Chinese made them all eat their shit. Schulz belched again. The wind shifted anew and now it was loud, beery conversation that blew over from the next table.

“There is absolutely no doubt about it. A missionary assured me ... with his own eyes ...”

“Ah, Juli-bumm, missionaries ...”

Missionaries had a certain mythic power in Tsingtao. The protectorate had been seized following the murder of a couple back in 1897. German righteous outrage had led to an armed landing, a fine exacted in silver coin, raising of the German flag and the establishment of a profitable trading colony – all in search, not of gain, but allegedly to teach the Chinese a well-deserved moral lesson.

“No, no, a reliable man of experience – with a long white beard – I have known for many years, a Dutchman, a bishop even ...” The speaker was huge, a great bear of a man, well over six feet, 18 stone of bullish flesh, bone and luxuriant fat, barrel-chested, vast Bismarckian head topped by a crewcut, full moustache and beard and little piggy eyes that gleamed like the colonial dollars the sailors were paid in. In his late thirties, he was far older than the clean-cut and pared young men at his table, a sea-dog amongst sea-puppies. He sighed and wiped his sweaty face with a pink, hairy hand, gestured for another round and poured it down as if dousing a fire in a waste-basket.

“I picked the Dutchman up in Talien, the end of the Trans-Siberian railroad.” With a finger, he drew elegant cartography, as in a primary school, in the slops on the table.

“He’d come through from the West and everywhere, he said, Russian troops were moving back the other way. Germany, Austria. Great trains full of them – pale Ukrainians and Siberians – stuffed with rifles. Thousands more shunted into sidings. I tell you there’s a war coming.”

Howls of derision. “Juli-bumm, rubbish. Who are the Russians going to fight?” The Japanese had given them a bloody nose just the other year and sunk their navy. There would be no war. The boys had just come from the beach. The sun was shining. Their skin was taut and tanned. Hair bleached and sleek. Just last week that British navy had dropped by for football, horseracing, horseplay. The admirals had gone snipe shooting together and chortled in their clubs. The ratings got drunk and danced fraternally entwined. There would be no war. The big man sighed and wiped the ruined railway away, flicked the drops from his palm onto the floor.

“It’s this way.” He leaned forward, his voice growling and booming over their boyish piping “You know I have my two months’ reserve duty to do, same as every year?”

Yes, yes, they nodded. “And if a war starts, they can assign me anywhere?” Yes, yes. “But if I’m already serving on a ship they automatically make me part of that crew? Well, if it comes to a war, I can’t think of a better berth than the *Emden*, or better, braver mates to serve with ...”

“Oh Juli-bumm ...” Comradely tears started to their eyes for no heart is more sentimental than the caloused heart of a sailor, riven by a hundred reluctant farewells and with no second home to suborn its affections and Lauterbach knew that the constant presence of a disdainful sea and sky made men on ships huddle together against the cosmic chill.

... Softly ... “So I wonder if maybe we can fix it that I

start my reserve with you boys right here and now ...? What do you think?”

“Oh Juli-bumm. Don’t worry. We can fix it.” Hugs, manly choking. Their smooth, young faces lit up with pure joy. “Franz Josef can fix it. You know, the Kaiser’s nephew. On the *Emden*, a technician looking after the torpedoes. A word with the admiral and he can fix *anything*. But there will be no war.” Still – a war – their eyes shone with bright excitement as they rolled the word round in their mouths. It would mean medals, bugles, cowboys and Indians, promotions ... They pouted, “But we’re all headed for Mexico on a dull official cruise, haven’t you heard?” There could, after all, be no war. Other arrangements had already been made. “Have another little beer.”

It was pointless to argue. The young knew themselves to be confidently immortal while the fat man had attained a terrible awareness of the fragility of human flesh. A fat man has limited options in this world, reduced to the choice between embodying the virtue of joviality or the vice of greed. But Lauterbach, while he might slip in and out of either of these roles, could not make them permanently his own. In truth, he was horribly sensitive and as the years rolled by, he needed ever more flesh, piled up as a barrier against the world, just as he needed money and possessions to protect him from its bruising reality. Among the wildly gesturing boys, he sat back provisionally satisfied, like a man who had spent all day working his way against the wind and finally made it to a safe port. On the *Emden* he would be safe. Over the swimming table, Schulz caught his eye and a strange knowledge flowed between them. The big man stroked his moustache and smirked boldly into Schulz’s crazed grey eyes.

“Of course,” he said, staring, half-challenging, half-sharing cynical insight, “I suppose joining the *Emden* would mean a quiet war. After all, they won’t risk the Kaiser’s nephew’s life on anything too exciting. But one thing I’ve found from all my years in the Eastern seas.” He laid a hand melodramatically on his heart and used the sort of flattery he normally used on women. “It’s comrades that count more than excitement. Just great comrades like you fine boys.”

“Oh Juli-bumm.” They simpered, bathed in rugged mutual respect. Another little beer. Another little beer. A toast to Julius Lauterbach, the best mate a bloke ever had.

Schulz coughed and tittered. Lauterbach. There was a cheap little song that had gone round the world by squeeze-box. In English it ran “Oh where oh where has my little dog gone ...” In German it was “In Lauterbach I lost my sock. / I won’t be going back there. / But if I went to Lauterbach, / I’d once more have a pair there.”

Schulz guffawed and lah-lahed secretly under his breath. “Socks,” he sniggered to no one in particular and stared gleefully down at his boots. Lauterbach raised his glass and smiled peacefully. He had heard it all before. It had no power to upset him. Safe. On the *Emden*, he was safe.

“One for our friend over there,” he smirked with fat generosity, pointing with fingers like pork sausages. “The navy must not totally forget the army.” It was young von Guerard’s round anyway. In such circumstances, generosity cost nothing.

The wind shifted again and the sweet stink of the new brewery doused them in its catholic blessing. It did not smell that different from the dungheap really.

Julius Lauterbach was thirty-seven years old and life –

thus far – had been good to him. He would have been the first to admit it. He was a Baltic German, born within sight of Mecklenburg Bay – the same name as that fancy sanatorium up in the Laoshan hills. Bloody mock ... No, wait, that was someone else.

A Baltic twang still salted his speech. Six years of military school at Lichterfelde had demonstrated beyond all doubt, to himself and the world, his unsuitability for the intended career in the army or the law. He could still feel the knuckles of his Latin master as they pummeled his shaved, schoolboy skull. “Examinations, Lauterbach, Are-Not-For-You. I fear that when the time comes you will have to resit your post-mortem.”

The death of his father, which had seemed at first to cast something of a shadow over the preparations for his eighteenth birthday, had been the making of him. He was free. Not the army then, not the law, not even the navy, but the merchant marine! In those days, it was still all sail. Sixteen months back and forth around the Horn at two dollars a month had hardened his hands and coarsened his speech. He had a pet monkey and a parrot. To be the complete sailor, all he needed was a wooden leg. His bourgeois family had withdrawn into shocked silence. Over the years, he had swopped ships and women, soft berths and hard, got a mate’s ticket, switched astutely to the new thing of steam, gone three times round the world and settled in as quartermaster on the China run of the big smug steamers of the Hamburg–America line. In the East, everything was big but the people and Lauterbach had begun to absorb that bigness into his own unshakeable flesh as quiet speculation lined his pockets from the company’s coffers. There were hurricanes and mountains, elephants and

snakes. Once, six of them had wrestled a huge python back into its cage in a darkened cargo hold in a force nine gale, having stupefied it first with goat. At twenty-nine, finally, he was master of his own ship, the *Gouverneur Jaeschke*, a trim vessel with a gaping Chinese crew that he ruled with a rod of iron as he worked it round every port and up and down every river in the Orient. Shanghai, Tsingtao, Manila, Vladivostok and Hongkong were his regular fare.

He liked the Chinese and learned the simplicities of survival from them, that to die was always bad, to live much better and to live with money best of all. He quietly turned a blind eye to their little scams that hurt only the customs service or the money-changers, deliberately did not notice the odd, too-intelligent, new face among the crew when the nationalist forces were on the move. But he was prepared to pay them out a good thrashing too, with his own hands, often the best-appreciated currency on the coast. He prided himself that a German thrashing was worth three times a Britisher's. While they feared him, they knew that if the worst came to the worst he would never simply tip their bodies over the side, like so many European captains, for burial at sea, so that they would end up as hungry ghosts. He could be relied upon to take them to a port where they could be properly buried and decently furnished with burned paper copies of the goods they would need on the other side. So he toiled with them, called them dogs and whores' sons in fluent pidgin, fought them with his fists and gambled with them, drank them under the table in a hundred, filthy dockside bars and nursed them when they were sick. If they did not exactly love him, they at least respected him as a man to be reckoned with and wreathed him round with silken myth. He was the product of

a drunken union between a mad sailor and a witch who had assumed the form of a fox. If roused to wrath he could turn into a bear. He had been seen to eat iron rivets, chomping them down with his great teeth. There was even a Chinese version of the Lauterbach song whose darker linguistic points he did not seek to elucidate. In those years he had crushed life's grape against his palate and happily spat out the pips. He was young and glad to be free and touched the earth very lightly for such a heavy man.

In the East any white man became upper class, regardless of his origins. He had stayed at the best hotels, dined at the best restaurants and drunk the most subtle vintages. In Shanghai, Lauterbach had sipped pink gins with Kitchener in the International Club and wore a gold ring on his finger given by the Emperor of China, or sometimes it was the other way around. There had been girls – bony Chinese with bodies like bicycle frames, voluptuous, hairy-backed Russians down on their luck. Once, in a casino in Shanghai, he had won a pair of blonde Swedish twins with huge pink breasts like blancmanges and extraordinarily complex underwear you needed a chart to fathom. They had drunk and sung and danced and made love and finally he had recited to them Swedish poetry, remembered from Baltic childhood, and made them cry. To the crash of waves and the throb of mighty engines, Lauterbach had obliged many a lady passenger on the slow Pacific swell, always a generous and unfussy lover, fervent but discreet, so that they usually came back for more of his tasty beef on the bone. As a sailor, he had always prided himself on his bedside manner and his couplings were as efficient and dispassionate as a naval docking procedure. A fat moustache and a touch of gold braid proved an irresistible aphrodisiac to

colonial wives who appreciated his discretion which, in fact, rested on his inability to remember any of their names or faces so that he was frequently astonished to wake and see that of a complete stranger on the pillow beside him. But he always retained an encyclopedic memory of the feel of their thighs as they gripped his comforting bulk and scrambled giggling to his summit. The top drawer of his dresser contained a pile of the conventional gold watches, most of them too tight for him to wear, given by unimaginative but grateful women. He made them the small change of friendship to departing Chinese crew, inscrutable but litigious. Sometimes, he knew, these ran a sweepstake on his exploits, especially on the dull Shanghai stretch. Long faces or grins at breakfast showed who had hit the Lauterbach jackpot on the last night. And towards the end of a run, Ah Ping, the steward, had a way of damping down his boilers or opening his throttle wide to guide his efforts towards the desired total. "You take this boi' egg. You need keep up your strength. I think you get old." Or. "You only get porridge today. No boi' egg. Need rest yourself. You do too much." Sometimes the Lauterbach torpedo was so unpredictably trigger-haired, he thought they must be slipping him other stuff, more than boy eggs or even girl eggs, in the food.

But now war was coming and it was time to batten down the hatches and get under cover. Regulations obliged Lauterbach to serve two months a year in the naval reserve and normally it was a welcome break from the routine of restless motion. They gave him a new uniform, lots of fancy saluting, there was riding, hiking, swimming and banging about with guns. Usually it was here in Tsingtao where the cold inshore winds spared you the humid horror of a summer

in Shanghai. You could afford to rent a room, lay in some wine, fix up a comfortable mistress at long-term rates. The onboard food was awful but often you could eat at the Cafe Floessel, run by a fat Duesseldorf lady with a roving eye, and the only really bad part was being under someone else's orders again, corseted by childish discipline and the starched collar of regulations. It was as good as a holiday. Now Russia would put an end to all that.

Not just Russia, naturally – who would probably just support the Serbs against the Austrians as always. The real enemy in Europe would be the French if the lazy British could be kept out. But the most immediate danger out here in the East was the bustling Japanese. Maybe they would fight the Russians again. Last time, half the Russian fleet had run away to hide from them in Tsingtao. No fools, when they had looked to the West for models, the Japanese had based their army on that of the Germans and their fleet on the British Navy. But their spanking new warships were already arrogantly jostling those of the Western powers in the harbour of Shanghai and the real goal for Japan would be the precious city of Tsingtao itself. Tsingtao and all the German colonies of the Pacific – that was what they would want to join the grown-up nations of the world and there was precious little to stop them. A cruise to Mexico? He thought not. The whole world and all the certainties of this new twentieth century were about to blow up in their faces. Not just a war, a world war. Time to get under cover.

Lauterbach's rickshaw rattled over the railway tracks set into the cobbles and wheeled to a halt in a great arc. It was a comfortingly nautical way to stop. The sweat-

soaked rickshaw man slumped on the shafts in a theatrical demonstration of exhaustion and despair as Lauterbach heaved himself creaking down and looked up at his new ship, the harbour water sucking and slapping at her sides while she gently peed bilge from a rust-rounded hole. Sailors were rubbing down and repainting her sunburned nose. All about were stalls selling food, cheap souvenirs, and great heaped crates snarling with German military and technical reference numbers. Around them, hundreds quacked and shrieked in dialects of Chinese, carried things up, carried things away – maybe the same things – scraped pans, smashed bottles, performed unspeakable acts of mutilation on screaming pigs. A woman was throwing greasy water over a wailing child that danced with rage. China had always been a bad place to have a headache and there was no shortage of headaches this morning. Debauched and stubbly sailors, newly mobilised with kit bags on their shoulders, took queasy leave of their local amours in tones of tragedy or relief to the chink of Mexican dollars. Lauterbach's civilian uniform, provoking neither respect nor salutes, bestowed blessed invisibility. Having newly sacrificed beard and moustache to naval discipline, he seemed, even to himself, like an impostor.

They called His Imperial Majesty's ship *Emden* "the swan of the East." Lauterbach shouted and gesticulated to a stall for hot dumplings and looked her over. He danced the hot food on his tongue, swallowed and grunted, unimpressed. He had visited too many "Pearls of the Orient" and "Venices of the East", that lay choking in their own garbage, and paid court to too many "oriental beauties", who turned out to have pyrrhoea and scabies, to pay heed to any of that. Swans, anyway, he had always found to be unpleasant and pointless

creatures – like aristocrats. He had looked her up in the naval records, rattled the skeletons in her closet, seen her with no clothes on. She was nothing to write home about.

He knew that, technically at least, the *Emden* was less a swan than a white elephant. Her keel had been laid a good eight years back in 1906 in Danzig as part of the Kaiser's first petulant arms race against his British cousins. A policy had sought to cultivate local enthusiasm by naming each vessel after a particular German city. That of *Emden* was informed, in suitably inflated language, that it had now a ship of its very own and had tried to rise to the occasion with a rash of civic receptions and declarations of patriotism that fatigued both givers and receivers but allegedly pleased the Kaiser. In those days of peace and posturing, the navy's main duty was to please the Kaiser and numbers were everything as nations fought with reviews of the fleet like little boys showing off their collections of marbles.

She was obsolete when built. The old stove-pipe funnels had a quaint air of tipped top-hats and her torpedoes were of outmoded design and sorely limited range. The prognathous bow echoed a time when ramming was a standard naval manoeuvre while the old piston-driven engines were cumbersome and unresponsive. Ships were split into categories – battleship, destroyer and so on – so that they could be matched between the various nations but then a sort of cheating blurred the distinctions so that a cruiser could be heavy, light or medium. The *Emden* was a decidedly 'light' cruiser. Those of foreign navies already had smooth-running turbines and were faster, better armoured and more heavily gunned than this white-painted swan. They had more watertight compartments and were less easy to sink. Never

mind. She had one great charm for Lauterbach. She was not intended to stand and fight other armed vessels but prey on helpless merchantmen. She was designed to be the school bully that kicked little kids and took their sweets off them. If anyone her own size or a teacher turned up, she was to run away.

“You givee one piece dollar I takee travel box inside ship-ship.” The rickshawman was there, interrupting his thoughts, grinning through broken teeth and holding out his hand confidently. Lauterbach paused and sighed. Those young puppies had spoiled the market. He roused himself, deliberately stood against the sun so the great shadow of his bulk fell in the driver’s eyes and pointed to the stack of old, well-used luggage, generously embossed with supplementary straps and reinforcements, raised his fist and gobbled a stream of pidjin in the expectant face.

“I reckon you one piece fella him savvy box velly bloke. Chop-chop you takee bloody travel box. You no takee I givee bloody bamboo chow-chow, damn right.”

The scrawny driver quailed, seized a suitcase, clapped it on his head and jogged off up the gangplank at the exaggerated pace they called “the imperial trot.”

Lauterbach watched him with a satisfied smirk and moved gently up the plank himself, clamping the rail with huge, serial, slow hands. Gangplanks could be slippery and dangerous. This one bent under his weight but that was just a comforting proof of his own solidity. Later, he resolved – point made – the Chinese should have his tip. He was, after all, far from being a harsh man. He just liked things to be clear.

His cabin was tailored for one of those slim boys, a thing

of louvred lockers and stick furniture, a doll’s house. Back on the *Kraetke*, his own command, he had a double bed screwed to the floor and chairs of leather and brass. Here, there was a slim monastic bench of leatherette that, he could foresee, would be too short, too narrow and preclude all hospitality. He sat down on it with a groan – that it returned – lit up a cigarette and stared at the pile of luggage, like a new schoolboy waiting for his feeling of blank emptiness to turn into the inevitable homesickness. Only now he was not moving forward to some new stage in his life, with new experiences and privileges but backwards towards adolescence and loss of power. Already the leatherette was sticking wetly to his buttocks. There was a smart tap at the door and young von Guerard was there, grinning through flawless teeth, beckoning in another rickshaw driver with more luggage.

Lauterbach sat his ground, puffed smoke aggressively. “I think you must have made a mistake, Lieutenant von Guerard. They told me this was my cabin.”

Von Guerard laughed with confident charm – threw a fencing foil twirling into the corner, seized and piled boxes and tennis raquets, gave too large a tip. He sprawled back, legs apart, on his boxes and grinned up at Lauterbach. He had been perfectly and expensively finished in all the best schools of the Reich and acquired gentlemanly accomplishments. Great wealth brought with it great irresponsibility. He had the ability to drink a bottle of champagne standing on his head whereas Lauterbach, more pedestrian, merely prided himself on drinking one while still standing on his feet.

“Surely you don’t think you’re having this huge cabin and all this space to yourself, Juli-bumm. We’re lucky there are just the two of us. Will you take the bench or the hammock?”

“The hammock.” He could get one of the men to stitch two of them together lengthwise. The mere thought of trying to sleep through rough weather, swinging there like a bat sent a stab of dyspepsia through his stomach and stuffed suffocation up his nostrils.

“This is going to be such fun.” The boy quivered with excitement. “We’ll give the Brits a pasting.”

“Yes. Such fun.”

Wherever he went, von Guerard expected to be loved and to feel himself immediately and effortlessly at home. He was like some big-footed puppy that had been petted and cosseted all its life. Lauterbach lacked such certainty. He had never found it easy to simply belong or even be accepted. Feeling old and depressed, he rose on shaky feet to stagger to the heads across the way and slam the clanging door shut and sat, fat, mottled knees crammed up hard against the warm metal and held his head. There were the usual pathetic pencilings, “Long live the Kaiser” and “Up the Boys in Blue.” Along the top was a line from a von Eichendorf poem, “Whom God truly favours he sends out into the wide world.” They did you a good class of poems in the navy. Down in one corner, was a further text in a small crabbed hand. He bent to decipher it as von Guerard’s clear happy laughter rang out again in the cabin across the corridor, accompanied by the sound of tennis balls thudding against the bulkhead. It was the optimism and cheerfulness of the young that made them insufferable. “Turpitz fucks pigs,” it read. In support, was offered a sketch of the admiral, hat rakishly askew, engaged in one of the less common forms of congress. It was clear that the artist had studied at no formal school of anatomical drawing and impressed by verve rather than draughtsmanship. Lauterbach

sat back and breathed with relief. He was not totally alone in a conformist world, then. To settle and reassure himself further, he reached into the special, waterproof pocket a cunning tailor had sewn into his waistband and pulled out a fat wad of currency and started counting his money out onto his knees. “Ten, twenty, thirty ...” There were slick dollars and curlicued marks and arrogant pounds but somehow most reassuring were the fat Chinese notes – soft, thick and friendly as bedsheets. “Forty, fifty, sixty.” A comfort blanket against the world. As he counted, his breathing steadied and his heart slowed back to its accustomed pace. He would survive.

“The situation is as follows ...” Von Muecke, the First Officer, was enjoying the chance to perform in public. He raised his pointer with trim authority and rapped firmly on the map pinned to the wall. Early thirties, focussed, a mind devoid of doubt and humour, he reeked of hard beds and cold showers. In his presence, Lauterbach was oddly aware of the dandruff on his own collar. Dandruff was a sort of unpardonable inefficiency. There was no need, he thought with irritation, for von Muecke to rap. Did everything have to be a military parody? At the messroom table, he had noticed him attacking the dumplings in their serving dishes with the sequenced motions of a bayonet charge. He shifted fat buttocks uncomfortably on the hard wooden chair. Von Muecke had made them heroically fling all cushions overboard as part of the change from peace to war footing. The curtains over the portholes had gone too and they had been blacked out with paint. A good nautical fug of armpits, fags and fish supper was building behind them. When on war watch, men slung their hammocks by their stations, slept in

their clothes for days and had no time to wash. The stink of a warship was like that of a prison – all balls and boredom. Lauterbach hated it.

“The war is nearly won. Berlin reports that our forces have already scored significant victories in France and Belgium ...” Von Muecke’s pointer coolly moved whole divisions effortlessly across borders through barbed wire and machine guns. War was then not a thing of rotting green corpses and foul decay but of crisp lines etched on a map. “It was feared that the British, unable to confront Germany as an equal, would take the coward’s route yet again and fight its battles through others. Luckily that has not occurred and Britain has let slip the mask and we see, at last, the naked face of our enemy’s jealous hatred. English greed for wealth and power has deceived and humbled France and Russia, now also enemies, and reveals the sole purpose of that perfidious nation to be nothing less than the total annihilation of peaceful Germany.” His beaky little nose pecked the air with satisfaction. Its silhouette fell across the map of Europe seizing Paris in an ambitious pincer movement between nostrils and upper lip. The eyes gleamed fervently. “Our glorious victory is certain. The land war will be over in a matter of months. Our mighty fleet has gained the open sea. Tsingtao is an impregnable citadel, a secure part of the fatherland, that will vigorously defend the honour of German arms. If we are to deck our beloved vessel with a champion’s laurels we must all lend ourselves swiftly to that great purpose, before our foes bend on trembling knee to sign their unconditional surrender” The pointer became a sword for the flourishing. “Three cheers for the Kaiser!”

The ratings leapt to their feet, crying out lustily, fisting

the air, cheers ricocheting around the steel walls like shrapnel. Lauterbach flourished his pipe silently in token participation, mimed cheers slack-mouthed, being irrelevantly distracted by the irritating image of foes trying to sign while on bended knee. He had no hatred for the British. He had met lots of decent British seamen and the world for him was divided along a simpler line – that between sailors and landlubbers. The sea belonged to no state, neither did sailors so that a seaman’s vocation was its own nationality and brotherhood. One of the turning points in his early life had come with the realisation that his father’s mind was irrevocably decayed when he developed a sudden rabid interest in national politics.

“Three cheers for Admiral Graf Spee!”

The situation was bad then, much worse than he had thought. The rest of the Pacific squadron had got out of port fast and sailed for German Samoa to avoid being bottled up by the British. Tsingtao was undefended and would fall if the Japanese came in on the other side. In a few short months Germany would have no coaling stations left in the East and the entire fleet would be immobilised for lack of fuel, whereas the whole British empire could be reduced in naval terms to a series of heaps of Cardiff coal, dumped arrogantly all over the face of the planet. Earlier that day they had passed through the lingering wakes of a big flotilla of ships and there was noisy wireless in code. It could only be the British foolishly chattering and giving their position away. Germany had eight cruisers, Britain alone had thirty-four, not counting their French, Russian and Japanese allies. A less skilled card-player than Lauterbach could see that those were not great odds. But he would not mention Japan. These happy boys would

not want to hear it and would hold it against him as a mark of his negative thought and lack of team spirit.

“What about Japan?” he asked. The words fell into a deep, deep silence, like a depth charge tumbling in still blue water after the initial splash. Von Muecke wheeled round, sneered briefly and opened his mouth to speak. Before he could do so he was flung to one side and his pointer sent clattering as the *Emden* veered hard over to starboard. Lauterbach hardly had time to feel the pleasure of Number One’s discomfort before the rising revolutions and an abrupt thrumming through the steel deck gave sign that the ship was running at full speed. “Action stations” rang out and the audience disappeared in a thunder of feet that reminded him of boys stampeding at the sound of the bell that marked the end of the school day. Lauterbach – Lieutenant Lauterbach – rose to follow at a more measured pace. This was the navy so there were rules of course. Everyone’s precise status was defined by the rings on his sleeve and precedence and rights of way up and down ladders and corridors were clearly marked in the handbook. Lauterbach’s bulk made such rules redundant for he filled every stairway and gangway and moved like a whale through the ocean, leaving smaller fish to avoid him as best they could. Younger men hitched their elbows into the rails and coolly slid down ladders, leaning back and without touching the treads with their feet. Lauterbach plodded down step by step. Ladders were dangerous. You could hurt yourself. He had seen it happen loads of times.

As acting navigation officer his place was on the bridge and he moved solidly along the passageways and upwards to glowworm illumination. The nighttime waves were rough and heavy and the decks were awash. Rain squalls lashed his

eyes, reducing vision still further. An eerie phosphorescence glowed from the sea and the prow was rhythmically dipped in running gold sending long dark shadows ghosting through the water. The men would be up, panicking, spotting non-existent submarines all night. As he struggled along the open deck and up the ladder, the wind plucked nastily at his tunic so that he gathered it around him. Important not to catch a chill. He knew they were in the Straits of Tsushima, between Korea and Japan. Japanese ships they could not yet touch. Russian they could and would seize. He passed through the door and saluted.

“Lieutenant Lauterbach on the bridge, sir.” Von Muecke was there before him, saying, “I think it’s a Russian, sir, the *Askold*.” The *Askold* would outgun them, blow them to pieces. Bloody hell. Pangs stabbed through his stomach. The captain turned slightly and smiled a superior smile. It was not the *Askold* then.

“Mr Lauterbach, yes. Take a look, please. The Russian heavy cruiser *Askold*?” The voice was hushed, little more than a paper-thin whisper. Von Mueller was the most ethereal captain he had ever met. “Mr” Lauterbach? They had been at naval college together but, even then, von Mueller exuded aristocratic Prussian austerity, played no team games, rode alone or performed cool gymnastic exercises in unsweating geometric isolation. His tall gaunt form was shrouded in a long, shapeless overcoat, so that his feet were invisible and he seemed to float. His face was that of an honest preacher. The granitic features emerged pale and haggard and his fingers, as he passed the binoculars, were cold and unfleshed. Lauterbach shivered to their touch.

He peered through the rain-blurred glass and at first

could see only sea and sky, then between gusts of rain caught a sudden glimpse of something else. There was colour out there. Straining his eyes, he could just make out an all-black steamer with twin yellow funnels running fast without lights. Thank God, a civilian.

“Russian Volunteer Fleet, the *Rjaesen*, built in Schichau, a fast new mailship.” He knew her well. He knew just about every ship on the coast. He had drunk in most of them and blotted his copybook in a few. “Captain Aussen, a fine seaman.” The man was a prat but kept good scotch. Last time he had been on board there was some sort of a disagreement at cards – the reasons were hazy, it had been a long night with drink taken – and Lauterbach had been violently ejected. He had ended up full length in the mud, his hat tossed after him by laughing tars. At least they had thrown him off the landward side and it had taken three Russian sailors to do it. That signified a little respect.

“Confirm Mr Lauterbach that we are in international waters.”

It was touch and go. Sod Aussen. “Confirmed, captain. Well inside.”

“Number one, make a signal. ‘Stop at once – do not wireless.’” Von Muecke barked orders, stood to attention. Soon he would be rapping on something.

“Sparks reports she is sending wireless, requesting help, sir. She’s running for Japanese waters.”

“Jam signals. A blank shot across her bows, Number One.”

The Russian response was to put on more speed, belching black smoke that obscured their view and aim. A shot thudded dangerously close to her bows. Any more of that

and they would sink the stupid cow by mistake. Lauterbach settled back in fat contentment bracing himself against the wheel housing.

“Another round, Number One.” Lauterbach had a brief bewildering vision of them back in the Dachsaaal in Tsingtao bibulously ordering more beer. He was recalled to reality by a third sharp crump, an exasperated puff of smoke and the clang of a shellcase on the metal deck. Because of the smoke, that shot too had gone closer than politeness allowed. Von Muecke was panting and dancing on the spot with excitement like a dog watching a squirrel up a tree. Lauterbach’s eyes never left the captain, fascinated by his detachment. The thin lips parted then closed and he had a mouth as tight and snug as a cat’s bum.

“Live rounds, commence fire.”

Only on the tenth, after another near miss, did the Russian slow. On the twelfth she stopped entirely. The cold blue eyes swivelled round as in a gun turret.

“Mr Lauterbach, arm yourself. Take the cutter and a boarding party of twenty men. Examine the documents. If all is in accordance with the conventions of war, declare her a prize of the Reich. You are her new master. Pray apologise to the captain for the closeness of our shooting. I will have a word with the gunner. Assure him that I take full responsibility for it. We shall escort her back to Tsingtao for immediate conversion to an armed auxiliary. If we sight enemy warships you will scuttle her immediately and without compunction.”

Lauterbach paused. It would be good to see Aussen’s ugly face as he lost his ship. Maybe he would resist a little and he could have him pitched over the rail by three rough sailors and here there was no landward side. Less cheering was the idea of

himself labouring up the slippery steel hull of that great ship, in this filthy weather, swinging like a fat clapper in a bell, and then going down with the vessel. As for apologising to that Russian bastard – forget it.

“Sir. As you know I care nothing for my own discomfort and safety but perhaps the honour of the Imperial Navy requires that the senior officer have the opportunity of performing this historic task. It is, after all, our first prize.”

Von Muecke’s whole face collapsed into surprised sentimentality. “Oh I say. Damn decent of you Lauterbach. May I please sir? Please?”

Von Mueller traced a thin smile. “Sorry, Number One. Your place is on board. Next time perhaps. Mr Lauterbach, if you please. Do not forget to take our flag.”

He looked at that wet steel cliff, heaving in the darkness and fearful sweat gushed copiously from crotch and armpit. For Julius Lauterbach the war had just begun.

CHAPTER TWO

Pagan and the other islands of the Northern Marianas had been bought from Spain in 1899 as a particularly extravagant act of impulse shopping. The natives, of course, had not been consulted in the matter and found the overnight change from Spanish to German disconcerting. Language was like a sink plug that suddenly did not fit any more. Magellan, on his voyage around the world, had given them the irksome name of the Island of Thieves but their principal importance lay now in being the Island of Coal. The entire coal-hungry German Pacific Squadron had gathered to feed in the sheltered bay beneath the volcano that, secure in its own fuel, smoked above them in peaceful parody. Admiral Graf von Spee had surrounded himself with the star vessels *Sharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Nuernburg* with a complete supporting cast of attendant colliers and auxiliaries. In the admiral’s presence, von Mueller had become still more ethereal, disdaining normal meals, spending long hours alone in his cabin doing one knew not what. Sometimes his ghostly voice would whisper through the speaking-tubes calling for a map or a book or soup and rolls. In Pagan he finally became fully invisible. It was rumoured he had been whisked away in the early pre-dawn for endless strategic conferences aboard the flagship. Fearful of British naval dominance in the Indian