

AFTER ALL, A MAN IS STILL A MAN

By WILLIAM C. SAYRES

WE are anchored about three miles out, off Thunder Point. The midnight watch has just started. The barometer is rising. Hayes is fishing over the side.

Ought to hook into something, he says, with the barometer rising like that.

He has been standing there for an hour and twenty minutes. I get bites, he says, I get bites. The Commander has been fishing too, not as long as Hayes, over the same side farther aft, and he has not been getting bites.

That is just your sinker dragging bottom, Hayes, says the Commander. You aren't really getting bites. The Commander smiles at Hayes.

Hayes smiles and goes on getting bites.

(I just got on the midnight watch. I can see Hayes and the Commander and the air is clear so I can hear them. The moon is up low and the water is tar.)

Now that is what I like about the Navy, Hayes, says the Commander. Here we are a Commander and a Seaman, fishing side by side over the same rail.

Ain't it wonderful, says Hayes smiling.

That is the American spirit, says the Commander. That is what makes our country great.

Just to think of it, says Hayes smiling.

The Commander takes off his cap. They'd probably break me for this, he says, in Russia: you can't fraternize with the crew there, you can bet on that.

I would, says Hayes smiling. I'd bet on that.

(Over the fantail you can see Thunder Point Beacon go on and off. It doesn't go on and off, though, it just swings around the horizon and you can't see it unless it shines in your direction. You can't see any other lights on Thunder Point. A couple of sea gulls were down on the water about five minutes ago, but they are gone now, I guess.)

Hayes changes his bait. This'll do it, he says.

The Commander beams: My bait, he says, stays on till I catch something.

There is a splash and Hayes pulls in a fish. Muskie, he says, taking it off the hook and dropping it into a pail of water he'd brought up from the galley.

Beginner's luck, says the Commander. Beginner's luck.

Beginner's luck, says Hayes pulling in another one.

What bait are you using? asks the Commander.

Worms, says Hayes.

I am using worms, too, says the Commander. I can't understand it.

Things happen that way, says Hayes.

Not to me, says the Commander. I've always been lucky. You say you are using worms, Hayes?

Yes, says Hayes: worms.

Funny, says the Commander. I am using worms, too.

(The moon is getting up there now. The engines have stopped: the tanks are full and we are not drawing any more water. Two swabs are leaning against the broom rack on the fantail. I'd better put them away before the next watch. Look at the moon climb.)

Hayes says, I'll be right back. He takes his bucket full of fish (12) below and comes back up again with another bucket of water.

Where did you put the fish? the Commander asks.

In the galley, says Hayes baiting up.

Where in the galley? asks the Commander.

I don't know where in the galley, says Hayes. Not exactly.

Find out, Seaman, the Commander says.

Find out what? asks Hayes.

Oh, never mind, says the Commander.

You can have half my fish, Commander, says Hayes.

That won't be necessary, says the Commander.

You want to try my pole? asks Hayes.

No thank you, says the Commander.

Want to try this side? says Hayes.

Not in the least, says the Commander.

(The water seems to be getting a little choppy. It is pretty hard to tell, though. The log book is almost filled up. We will have to start another one in about three days. In three days we should be in New York.)

Hayes, says the Commander, get me a cup of coffee.

Yes, sir.

Soon he comes back with the Commander's cup of coffee.

Hayes, says the Commander, bring my foul weather gear.

Yes, sir, foul weather gear.

When Hayes hands the Commander his foul weather gear, the Commander says, how many fish did you catch, Hayes?

Twenty-seven, sir. Or maybe only twenty-six.

I see.

Then the Commander says:

Seaman, secure the fishing gear. There is a lot of work that needs to be done.

Yes sir, says Hayes. Sir, I think it was twenty-eight that I caught.

And Seaman, sweep the place down.

Yes, sir.

The Commander walks past me fast. Then he stops and turns around. He looks at me carefully. Sentry, he says.

Yes sir, I say.

Square your cap.

I square my cap.

Tighten your guard belt.

I tighten my guard belt.

This ship, says the Commander, needs more discipline.

He goes into the officer's quarters.

(The ship starts to rock gently. The water is coming in harder against the ship with the wind. Almost time to wake up my relief.)