

Chapter 15

"Say, 'Cheese!'"

No time for hesitation

Many moons later; in fact, more than 40 or so, Sam was wallowing in the peace of his own company and the afternoon sunshine in a remote sector of the new land in which he had made his home (or, rather, the new home he now enjoyed in the land that had silently invited him). He was wading sun-bound along a rivulet. High foliage arched over his bliss. In his arms mounted a pile of detritus, for Sam's interest in clearing pollution had found even greater scope to reign. Suddenly he thought he heard the moans of distressed seahorses; moreover, the moaning was eerie and deathly. It sounded as if a dreadful accident had occurred. He couldn't establish the direction from which the sounds emanated as the pile of synthetic rubbish grew about his ears. He heard more noise. It was unmistakeable: something appalling was happening within earshot. He pushed the litter away from him towards one bank of the river, and scanned the horizon rapidly. Much further downstream - as the estuary broadened - he could make out staggering figures - seahorses struggling from open water towards the refuge of the beach. The shallow ocean there was awash with lifeless, floating bodies. A large sailing vessel of some kind lay on the ultra-horizon, semi-submerged as if scuttled. One of the approaching seahorses fell as if exhausted or dead - and then another. Perhaps now a dozen or so remained standing. Then another fell: now 11 stood or staggered. Some of these had made their way clear of the tide. Moments later only 10 remained vertical. The moans continued unabated and, now that Sam had identified their source, they seemed to intensify in both volume and anguish. Sam became aware of a most strenuous competition between two competing instincts at his core. In the intensity and urgency of his subjective mental experience, half of him was filled with fear. *Who were these visitors, and what had become of them? Were they armed as well as bloody? What were their intentions? Had they been defeated in a battle? If so, perhaps they were guerrilla seahorses, and would stop at nothing to preserve themselves.* The other half of him wanted to run towards them - to assist them - to be as helpful as possible in their trial. *Just a moment's delay could cost the life of one of these wounded! Run away! Find safety! Help these distressed souls!*

Sam remembers who he is

A torrent of courage descended upon the torn animal. The Feather's words rang with an assurance that was absolute and serene: *The only requirement we place upon you is that you must desire to remain reclaimed (i.e., you maintain your position about not putting out to sea), and that you remain available as a foremost call on your time to attend shipwrecks - working with us to see others reach dry land.* But Stocky and The Feather were not at hand. Sam had no idea of their whereabouts, for he had last seen them several days since. *Attending shipwrecks is a commitment I undertook with enthusiasm,* he reminded himself. But it wasn't convincing he needed: by now he knew not to draw upon reason, but upon spiritual intuition. Re-phrasing to his own ears he asked himself, *What is the correct course of action in this moment?* Knowing he was alone - and that, as a rule, a salvage crew comprising at least two seahorses should be formed to attend any wreck - he knew equally well that he had no hope of help. *Run then! But the situation is desperate! And what about my spiritual purpose? Then, there can be nothing to fear!* The only possible course ahead gradually fortified itself as an inner conviction, and he let loose a canter towards the gory carnage. *But wait! Who ... on earth ... is that?*

Should old acquaintance be forgot

Sam and Clive recognised each other simultaneously at about a hundred yards' distance. As they moved towards each other, both paused to stop and take in the shock of the moment. To Sam, Clive seemed older, and tired far beyond his years (even if several of those had elapsed since the last time they had encountered each other). The Clipboard seemed desperate too - but that could be explained by today's awful happenings - whatever they may have been. More than anything, Clive was tearful, and seemed broken - or very near broken; and Sam knew that (he knew that) because of his own experience of shipwreck, and the way that that experience had been consolidated as autobiographic narrative in his own mind. *It takes one to know one! and You can't kid a kidder!* ran through his thinking with far more a hint of echo than personal superiority or ego-satisfaction. To Clive, on the other hand, Sam seemed healthier, cleaner and stronger - almost invincible. *What had happened to the little nuisance?* For all Clive knew, Sam had perished miserably at sea. Clive had run into serious trouble with the community on the hospitable jetty - for it had attributed Sam's sudden and unexplained disappearance to Clive's mistreatment of him.

Sam is curiously unafraid

By the time the two old antagonists were close enough to converse, only four of Clive's comrades remained alive, leaving five survivors all told including the notorious Clipboard. The other four hung back behind Clive as if he were their leader, and had ventured forth on their behalf as an envoy suing for peace with a mightier adversary. Sam was the first to speak, nevertheless, and found himself parlaying as if assisted by a force or power that was not himself - a power of quiet yet unboundaried truth; a power of simple and incontrovertible justice, and a power with which he discerned a shade of familiarity.

Sam carries his message of hope

The cluster of distressed sailors - including two females - seemed anxious to listen to Sam's words carefully - as if their lives depended on what he had to say. Sam held forth about hope - seeing the obvious need and that it required nothing in the way of expansion or additional explanation. *I can see that you have encountered serious difficulties, said Sam. I can see that many of you have been injured or killed. Just a small number of you have survived. I can see your plight, and how baffled you seem about whatever might happen henceforth. I can see your powerlessness and your hopelessness. I can see it in both your circumstances and your hearts. Do you know that your hope lies not in where you find yourselves now - but where you go next? Do you realise that there is always hope - as long as breath and life remain? Do you know that what seems impossible to you now will seem only a chapter of history in the days to unfold? Your next step means everything. You have found yourselves cruelly shipwrecked. This once happened to me - not many leagues from where we find ourselves now. Utterly grounded, and with nowhere to go, I had lost confidence in my own capacity to mould my days, and resigned myself to nature's mercy. Two seahorses appeared as if in a dream - seemingly from nowhere - just as I may have appeared to you today. After the briefest of interviews, they transported me to their community - since which time I have ensconced myself amongst them with a deep sense of privilege. They asked nothing of me for their kindness, explaining that the same favours were once afforded to them - and that I must render myself equally dispensable. I was finished in the same painful manner in which you have found yourselves beached now. Those friendly seahorses asked me whether - should my splintered vessel be repaired - I might wish to set back out to sea. I knew in my heart that I should not desire that course under any circumstances - and told them so. Satisfied, they led me away to happy destiny.*

A round of introductions

At Sam's pause, the group started to chatter amongst themselves. They seemed confused as if struck simultaneously by optimism and futility. Sam couldn't discern the true nature of their quandary. One of them started to explain. Her voice was plaintive but lacking in self-pity.

I am Coalshed Carol ... she started.

Sam intervened immediately. *Why Carol, are you known as "Coalshed"?* He appended understanding to his gaze - as if affording unconditional and loving acceptance of her answer before she had delivered it.

I have lived a foul and dirty life, she said. I was raised in sordid circumstances. I perpetuated that pattern of abuse with a vengeance in my adult life as if - perversely - I could expunge the memories - and all they represented - from my aching soul, by stamping them violently into my social sphere. It was as if by perpetually forcing their re-enactment, I could somehow lever recognition of my protests in the heavens: my complaint that my past was not acceptable to me. Everyone ran out of patience with my behaviour. I was antisocial in dreadful ways and made a pillow in many strange and dangerous places. After a particularly nasty fight, I ran away. I met Clive. He took me to sea. We have been mercenaries extraordinaire. The rest is history.

Mercenaries? enquired Sam, surprised. His saccadic gawking betrayed the triangulation he sought. The other female seahorse spoke gently.

I am Sly Shirley, she said. Pre-empting Sam's inquisitiveness, she continued, I am known as "Sly" because, unlike Carol, I think twice - or more often - before I act. In fact, I am our chief-strategist. I have lacked scruples in all my affairs, and I am employed to devise every possible underhand approach to any of our gainful exploits - negotiating away nothing in the way of courtesy, mercy or compassion.

By "mercenaries" and "gainful exploits", said Sam, do you mean that you raised the Jolly Rodger? Have you taken lives at your pleasure?

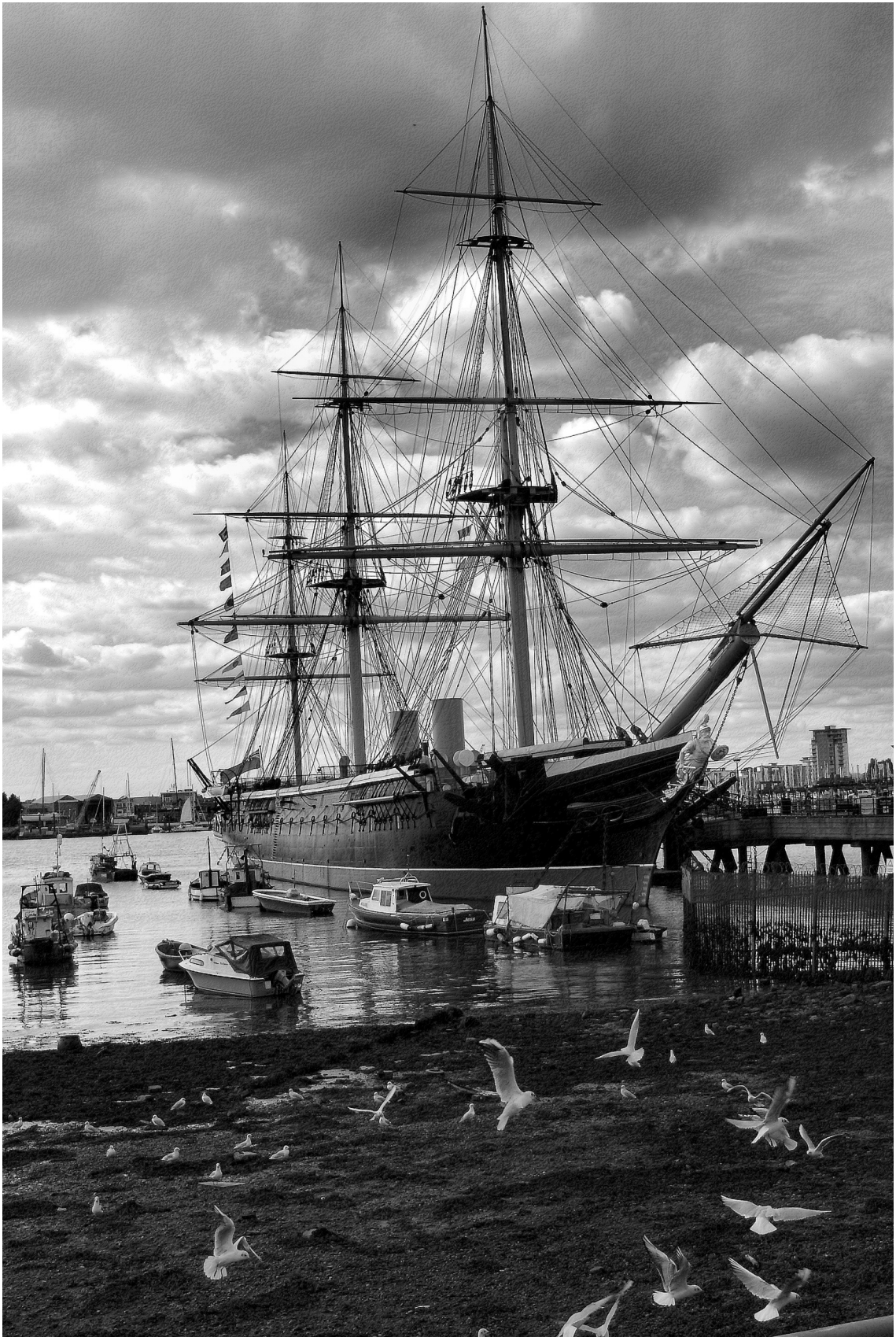
That was always my undertaking ... I am Poop Deck Pete. A willowy character had piped up - seemingly as honest as Carol and Shirley had been rendered by their sudden misfortune. We would always raise some flag rather than none - the Jolly Rodger or the King's Standard. We worked as mercenaries if the King required it - retrieving treasure from his enemies. His commissions were always generous. If he had no use of us temporarily, we raised the Jolly Rodger. We even raised the Jolly Rodger sailing under the King's orders, never revealing that we had taken a ship for our own profit. Now we have foes everywhere.

You are referring to the King of Thorland, aren't you? demanded Sam. Sensing a myriad of defiant, unassembled parts in a complex jigsaw of past events, he felt a quickening of personal fear - and knew it had to be expunged instantly. The King of Thorland was a thug: a fearsome character whose reputation was loathed by the community on the jetty.

Yes, answered Pete. As long as we brought him booty we were highly favoured, and enjoyed the freedom of his kingdom. On the last voyage paid for from the King's purse, one of the King's other assassin-ships witnessed an attack we made under the Jolly Rodger. Only when we had sunk the plundered vessel, and later retired to dine on the gun deck of our moored fighting ship, did our rival-assassins surprise us. We prevailed for a while - to the point of forming a boarding party - but our hull yielded to cannon shot at close range. We had to attend to the bilge. Before we knew it, we had been boarded ourselves. Our adversary, seeing that we were doomed, was content with swag, and left us with our stricken ship and perishing lives. You can see the remnants of last evening's skirmish before you now.



and later retired to dine on the "Gun Deck" ...
HMS Warrior, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard



... of our moored "Fighting Ship"
HMS Warrior, Portsmouth Historic Dockyard

Drowned in blind self-pity

Your words are tremendously comforting to us Sam, said Shirley, yet we feel undeserving of your goodness. We have such squalid histories as individuals; and as a cohort we have been dismally steeped in unscrupulous brigandry - not one of us innocent of mutual encouragement, aiding and abetting. Accordingly, we are a morally forlorn lot as well as terribly dilapidated in our bodies. We are pathetically dispirited and can't raise ourselves to welcome your kindness with a smile. Although drowned as much in blind self-pity as barely-mitigated felony, Shirley seemed to mean what she said, as if suddenly through some inner transformation she had won the right to discard her moniker; moreover, she had earned the approval of the sad posse to speak on their behalf going by the sundry submissive gazes and fawny countenances amongst her friends. But there was a notable exception - and everybody knew (although hadn't said as much) that the large, bedaggered and violent-looking seahorse fully shielded by Clive's still-imposing façade hadn't spoken at all - let alone amicably. Sensing the support of the group, hiding his consternation and speaking through Clive as though he were invisible - Sam spoke up bravely, *Would you care to introduce yourself? I am Seahorse Sam.*

Terribly dissolute

The huge seahorse answered, *I am known as Hittite Hal. Glad to make your acquaintance. I'm afraid I am the most terribly dissolute survivor amongst us. I am Master-at-arms. Formally speaking, Clive is our Captain, but it is me to whom every shipmate answers. I have had sole responsibility for the accumulation and use of all of our munitions and weaponry - a duty from which I have drawn much pleasure. Armed not so much with the pistol, sword or the pike, but surreptitiously and wordlessly with base and sinister intimidation, I have overseen our ship's discipline vigorously and enthusiastically. In the course of prosecuting my duties, I have supervised and participated in the pressing of numerous juveniles into service - including many married fathers. Countless young seahorses have been scourged, chained to cannon shot and made to walk the plank at sea. The sole charge on our ship's statute book was "insubordination combined with loathsome cowardice for which the penalty seen fit by the Master-at-arms shall apply". Of course, these coerced, imprisoned and tortured youngsters were only ever trying to stick up for themselves - or defend their free consciences. I and my cronies have much to answer for. As you can see, my subordinates have expired, and now it seems I am the only living perpetrator of all this injustice.*

An infectious atmosphere of repentance

Sam considered it more likely than not that Hal was sincere in his apologies - in so far as the outsized pirate could assimilate his own responsibility with any kind of perspective at this juncture. Whilst he may have been as much a convincing orator as a ruthless oppressor (having eased into his deft delivery shrewd use of the past tense), he simply couldn't have reported all this regret conniving such an authentically remorseful timbre to his voice. Clive, too, seemed to have been afflicted by this open atmosphere of repentance, declaring:

I fear I am indebted to you personally Sam. Clive paused, seemingly unsure how to proceed. We go back a long way, don't we? I'm not sure that I can begin to quantify the psychological anguish I have occasioned you with my extensive catalogue of tyrannical schemes and castigations. They were not so different in quality and technique from Hal's modus operandi; actually, just more subtle. Once upon a time, Hal was just an unfortunate vagrant - skinny to the point of starvation from a run of calamities in his business as a butcher. But I took him in and trained him in the art of plunder on the high seas. I mean to say - I admit with a great deal of personal anguish how I

have mistreated you, Sam - over many years. I regret especially that time when I plotted to take photographic "evidence" that you were polluting the water concourses near the jetty when the reverse was true. In fact, you were the only litter-conscious seahorse amongst all of us. I have wronged you dreadfully. I'm sorry, Sam. Clive effected an about turn, uttering a quieter retraction to the Hittite.

Immeasurably precious healing and reconciliation

Sam discerned a multi-faceted compulsion within himself to interrupt the Clipboard - to halt him in his tracks - for whilst he sensed the immeasurably precious process of spiritual healing and reconciliation proceeding between them, he didn't want to confront the rising sap of all his old memories - including his own resentments towards Clive. But he knew equally well that as long as Clive was clearing his own laden decks, Sam's own were not yet entirely free of moral detritus. Sam knew there was precious little moral mileage in permitting superordination to his self-centred fears, and he remembered that Stocky had cautioned him about how delicate the business of establishing restorations can turn out to be. Sam's intuition told him that care was needed most wherever amends had not been invited - or any other circumstances in which insult may be taken to have been added to injury (or salt rubbed in old wounds). Sam had no doubt that these conditions did not belong in that category. He turned to Clive.

Sam lapses momentarily into confusion

Clive, pleaded Sam. *Some say it takes two to tango, and whilst we were never equal partners on any level or dimension one might choose to invoke, I bore you a great deal of ill-will. I can see how my attitude towards you must have been difficult to bear. And I can see how my feelings as a vulnerable youngster must have been all too visible and amenable to sympathy within our seahorse community. Whether or not you were responsible for all you say, I am sure I milked and exploited the protection and solidarity (for me and against you) that I could have mustered from seahorses amongst your own generation. Perhaps I contributed to the deterioration of your reputation, adding to the marginalisation that you came to know within the community that once welcomed you, talking of which ... um ...*

Unco-operative pieces of this complex yet appealing jigsaw

Sam tried to gather his thoughts frantically as if they were diverse chunks of this complex (yet strangely appealing) jigsaw that wouldn't co-operate in forming the image anticipated by the fervent hobbyist. Something was wrong. He couldn't tie together into a single coherent narrative the legend of Clive's arrival on the jetty, the shocking discovery of the "wanted" poster in the Captain's cabin aboard Sam's now stranded vessel - and the unanticipated events of recent hours.

... Clive - is the story of your arrival on the jetty an accurate one? Is it true that you were an innocent fugitive from a distant land - and that you secretly did away with your benefactors prior to your rising through the ranks of powerful administrators in the warehouse?

Clive was visibly disturbed at Sam's line of questioning, seeming least of all to have expected the intrusion of the "wanted" poster. At the same time, his perturbation seemed to have more to do with the unavoidable precipitation of his past than any intent to obfuscate. Clive made no motion to press Sam on how much he knew, as if he might yet gauge how much he could dissimulate. Instead, he began to account for his history in chronological order, as if realising that such a report were the only means of satisfying Sam's frustration at the disparate shreds in the storyline. After all, there was no doubt that Sam was interested in what Clive had to say, and there was an equal and opposite intent on the Clipboard's part to set matters straight.



Demise of self-centred fear: "Keeping Your Feet On The Ground"
Heracles and Antaeus, Studley Royal, North Yorkshire

The truth is revealed at last

Once, Clive started, I was young like you! A nipper in Thorland, I had a well-connected father and a devoted mother. I was an only child and spoiled. I realised quickly which side my bread was buttered - and learned about politics instinctively. I was obedient to my father, because I appreciated that maintaining such a position - foiling all intrusions of potential controversy - I would inherit his position and status within the wealthy aristocracy of that realm. The King of Thorland acquired his position - like all but the most recent monarchs of history - through armed might and forced dominion. My father was a Duke appointed to his inner circle. My mother never exploited her talents as a social architect, but remained loyal to the regime, clandestinely soliciting the comforting services of itinerants peddling mysterious potions which worked to quieten her conscience. I rose rapidly in the King's Navy - from Midshipman to Captain in no time at all. The King was avaricious, constantly declaring war on his enemies. I don't wish to shock you Sam, but that vessel on which you escaped from the jetty was at one time a superbly equipped espionage-ship, employed by me commanding a small and very well-formed band of elite troops. The King swore us to secrecy in all but the most trivial of matters, even within our privileged families. My father knew nothing of my military escapades - for which I received much recognition from the King - but none from his subjects. On one such spying mission, we were discovered in spite of our precautions. The scouting force in question was a small one. We overpowered it without great difficulty, and I killed its leader with my cutlass in the Captain's cabin of my own familiar craft. One of the deceased's party escaped with news of the encounter, and I was branded and sought as a murderer in that foreign domain. The King of Thorland, naturally, took a different view, regarding me as a state hero as long as his ulterior appropriation in that neighbouring land was not exposed. But exposed it was, and the King framed me as the perpetrator - forging copies of his rival's notices about my crime. I took off, knowing a kinder death awaited me unrescued at sea than staying at the King's mercy. My ship landed where you took it, for it got washed up near the jetty by sheer twist of kindly circumstance. I tethered it to the same tree from which you eventually released it, and made my way to the warehouse with my tale. There were never any rescuers and there were no benefactors (hence none to be despatched). The jetty community was generous - and gullible in my eyes. I wore my aristocratic demeanour as if an unassailable passport to elevated position within the administrative echelons of the innocent neighbourhood in which I found myself - and no-one challenged me. I corrupted its culture with psychotic plotting. You were only one of its victims, Sam. I was a lone and unencumbered persecutor. Every seahorse within many miles succumbed to my megalomaniac spell. I couldn't hope to be popular with everybody, and the community turned against and hounded me sorely when it was reported that I was responsible for your disappearance. I harnessed my old repertoire of skills - turning pirate - letting myself believe that that occupation was my only means of survival. I let myself believe I was desperate.

What do you make of your seafaring ambitions now? asked Sam sharply.

I wish to relinquish them all unconditionally, answered Clive.

The other four intruded immediately: Me too! And I! And me! Also I!

It seems to me, said Sam (ensuring that Hal was paying attention) - that by far the most potent device in any delinquent's armoury is the lie through which its wielder and executor cannot themselves see. It is the illusion of self-centred fear, and its demise is partly assured by keeping your feet on the ground and your life in the day.

A little clarification for Shirley, Carol and Pete

What do you mean by "keeping your feet on the ground", Sam? enquired Shirley, for surely such an expression is wide of the seahorse mark!

And what does life in the day mean? harmonised Carol.

And why is the demise of self-centred fear only partly assured by these two? requested the Poop Deck.

Well, began Sam, in ancient mythology amongst humans, an infamous pugilist dwelling in a remote place would challenge every passer-by to a wrestling match. Being at the top of his game, he invariably won and, possessing a rather nefarious streak, was disposed to retain his victims' skulls as trophies. The misanthropic fighter was eventually defeated by an exceptional adversary who realised that the wrestler's supremacy depended entirely on his maintaining contact with the ground. Accordingly, the guileful challenger held the hitherto unbeaten combatant aloof in a bear-hug (I do hope I am not confusing you too much with these cross-species references, Sam interjected), thereby depriving this newly-defeated rogue of his uncommon strength. Amongst us seahorses, "keeping your feet on the ground" just means being reasonably concrete about life. The surest manner of achieving this is the mental surrender of tomorrow's projections and fantasies. Perversely, we indulge them by way of defence - as if we could ready or steel ourselves against the ghastly events we imagine might occur. Since these rarely if ever transpire, we are better off reserving our energy for living in the moment - with as much as possible of our attention located there. This isn't just an idea, or, rather - it is! But it is one that demands perseverance - for practice makes perfect.

I think you have answered my question, said Carol, satisfied.

Pending our having practiced sufficiently (when, one delightful day we are struck with a peace which settles upon us just as if we hadn't truly earned it), we need to find a means of "letting go". It seems we are built - psychologically speaking - in such a fashion that our surrender is more meaningful if it identifies an object - a resource greater than ourselves upon which or upon whom we may learn to rely.

I think, now, you have answered mine, added Pete.

Sam looked at the Clipboard. If you concentrate hard enough, Clive, you may discern a loving whisper. If you do - don't complicate it!

A modest spring in Sam's step

There is somewhere I would like to take you all, Sam appealed to the queer quintet. Heading off, he noticed that his Parent ego state had become diminished in power - spiritually neutralised, you might say. Clive the vile and hateful introject had clicked his heels thrice and departed. Had Clive poured coals on Sam's head deliberately in this strange turn of events (you couldn't have contrived it in fiction)? No, Sam told himself, now you are being paranoid. Sam couldn't bear how beautiful the world had suddenly become. A peace and a softness descended. But for common-or-garden sensitivity, he could almost have skipped with gay abandon alongside the desolate vagabonds beside him.

Back at the inn there is joy - and conspiratorial satisfaction

Sam noticed that Stocky and The Feather were present at the crowded inn, but having seen Sam enter with Clive and his bedraggled crew, they remained curiously reticent, seated privately at a table in the shadows, apparently cutting each other knowing and satisfied glances. Sam thought to himself (in a spirit of earnest spiritual equality), I must introduce Clive and his companions to my friends, for as a band of associates, now we shall number nine not four! Sam felt peculiarly comfortable and secure at one spiritual epicentre of Nine Seahorses.



"Say 'Cheese!'"