

L. RON HUBBARD



THE PHANTOM PATROL

GALAXY
P R E S S

THE SINKING PLANE

CRISP and brittle, the staccato torrent ripped out from the headphones. “SOS . . . SOS . . . Down in storm twenty miles south of Errol Island. SOS . . . Hull leaking. Starboard wing smashed . . . Cannot last two hours . . . SOS . . . Transport Plane New Orleans-bound sinking twenty miles—”

Johnny Trescott’s opinion of the matter was amply summed up in a single word, “Damn!”

“Bad news, Chief?” asked Heinie Swartz, above the yelling gale.

“We’ve got to forget Georges Coquelin,” Johnny replied. “This makes the third time in a row. Why can’t these Two-Continents pilots take care of themselves?”

Heinie Swartz eyed the dripping foredeck of the lunging seventy-five-footer. Green seas topped with froth were breaking. The one-pound gun was alternately swallowed and disgorged by water. The two 200-hp Sterling Diesels throbbed under the deck, pounding out their hearts against the blow. For five hours the Coast Guard patrol boat 1004 had barely held her own.

Heinie turned back to Trescott, noting the wild look in the CPO’s sea blue eyes. “Don’t take it so tough, Johnny. Georges will still be around.”

“Sure,” muttered Johnny. “Sure. But he’s getting into my curly locks, even so. He’ll run a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of dope into the coast tonight, and nobody will be there to say boo! Hell, this will make the third time!”

Heinie eyed the earphones, which still crackled stridently. “Well, you can’t leave that crate to sink.”

“No, we can’t leave it to sink,” Johnny agreed. He turned to the helmsman standing two feet behind him. “Change your course to south-southwest.”

The helmsman stared from under the damp, glistening brim of his sou’wester. “But, Johnny! That’ll stick us into the trough! It’ll knock the stuffing—”

“I said change the course,” Johnny rapped. “Who the hell is captain of this scow, anyway?”

Heinie thrust his head out of the doorway and brought it back in an instant, drenched. “Blow’s picking up. Be a hurricane before morning. Never did like this coast off here anyway. Give me N’Yawk every time. I was telling Max yesterday that this Louisiana duty was the bunk. All sweat and no time in port. If it keeps up—”

“Shut up,” said Johnny, “they’re calling again.” He slapped the phones back over the sides of his damp head.

“SOS . . . SOS . . . Transport Plane 37 in sinking condition twenty miles south of Errol Island . . . Hull filling with water . . . Two pilots, James Ferguson and hostess aboard . . . SOS—”

Johnny Trescott picked up his key. Bracing himself against the dripping side of the pilothouse, he rattled, “Coast Guard patrol boat 1004 on its way. Keep your belt buckled.”

“Okay,” clicked the receiver. “Okay, Coast Guard.”

Johnny hung the phones over a peg. “Good boys, those Two-Continents pilots. Cool as a ton of ice.”

“Don’t talk about ice,” complained Heinie, “I’m out on my feet for a drink. Who’s aboard her?”

“The pilots, the hostess and one passenger. Bird by the name of James Ferguson. I’ll bet he’s having a tough time of it.”

“James Ferguson? Of New Orleans? Why,” said Heinie, “he’s the guy with all the dough. Made it in real estate. Hostess too, huh? That’s good news. They’re generally swell girls.”

Johnny growled, “Nix on that dope. This isn’t New York.”

The CG-1004 was now in the trough. The great green mountains hit her broadside, smothered her, but each time she went down she struggled back, shaking herself like a gray whippet. Occasionally she ran against a cross wave. The effect was the same as a train striking a mountainside. She crashed down, stayed there for a moment, shuddering, and then, as if the effort was far too great, came sluggishly back, to plow onward again. The deckhouse windows were alternately green with sea and gray with sky.

Johnny Trescott pulled the bill of his battered white-topped cap down over his left eye and sighed. “Would have been all set if this hadn’t come up!”

“Oh, stop worrying about Georges. He’ll still be around. What’s it to you anyway?”

“Plenty. I’ve been chasing him all over the Gulf of Mexico for two months. He’s landed enough dope to supply the US for years to come.”

“I don’t like those dope guys. The rummies, now,” said

Heinie, judicially, “they were different. They knew they weren’t going to get anything stiff and they never did a thing about it. But dope— I remember one guy we nailed off Maine. Had a three-inch gun and three machine guns. That was one sweet fight. Means a lot of time to those birds if they’re caught.”

Johnny nodded. “They’re poison, Heinie. But this Georges makes the rest of them look sick. He’s got a couple murders tied to his tail already.”

“What’s he look like?”

“Nobody knows. Runs a fast twin-Diesel ship with about thirty men aboard.”

“And we were going to tackle her with this scow?” Heinie whistled.

“Sure. Orders are orders, aren’t they? I hope he didn’t get that radio. Ferguson would be good bait to bring him around. We’d have a hard time fighting him and taking that plane out of the water, too.”

The earphones were chattering crisply once more. “Sinking fast. This is last message. The others are on the top wing. Ferguson is offering ten thousand to you if you get here in time.”

Johnny threw the switch. His finger quivered on the key. “Hold everything. We’ll be with you in twenty minutes. Can you hold out?”

“Okay, Coast Guard. Okay. I’m going up to admire the view.”

“She’s in a bad way,” said Johnny. He leaned over the engine room tube. “Hi! Joe! Get a little more out of those tin cans, will you?”

Blasphemy sizzled back up the brass cylinder. “What the hell do you think this is, anyway? I’m ripping hell out of her as it is!”

“That’s your worry, not mine,” barked Johnny. “He’s sore,” he told Heinie. “Must be a hundred and twenty down there.”

“Think we’ll make it?”

Johnny shrugged. “Might bust down before we even get near to it. Hope that Georges doesn’t pick this up and come tailing up. That would be bad.”

“Think he would?”

“If you’d chased that guy as long as I have, Heinie, you’d know all about him. You’re damned right he would. And plenty more.” Johnny looked into the spinning compass bowl. “You’re a point off your course, sailor.”

“She’s bucking,” protested the helmsman.

“Well, did you think she’d pray? Lean into it, you dummy! We’ve got fifteen minutes left to get there. Otherwise, all we’ll find will be a couple struts.”

Under the additional two knots, the patrol boat was straining every timber in her sleek hull. The waves were sledgehammers, and the sea and sky spun like a jumpy motion picture. The muzzle of the one-pounder drooled saltwater. Its plug had long since been snatched away.

Except for the translucent side walls of the house-sized waves, the sea was the color of the sky. The horizon itself was obscured, but heaven and water touched, seemingly, a hundred yards before the bow.

“It’s getting thick,” observed Heinie. “Be the devil finding the plane, even if we almost run it down.”

“You’ll have to stick your nose out there and smell it,” Johnny grinned.

“Say, lay off my nose. I can’t be a collar ad like you.”

Johnny grinned, more to hide the worry which seeped into his eyes than to stamp Heinie as a humorist. The wind-whipped leather of his face was taut. His hard jaw pulsated. Johnny knew they might run within a thousand yards of the plane and miss it altogether.

He looked back at the lashing thread of the log. The spinning propeller of the knotage instrument was at times entirely out of the water. Small chance to trust that thing. But the dripping dial and the ticking chronometer said that they were less than a mile away from the shattered transport plane. Four people, drenched and weary, and clinging to a wing . . .

“Hope Georges didn’t beat us to it,” murmured Johnny. “Glue your ugly pan to that port, Heinie, and look sharp. We’ll be there in a moment.”

Johnny tugged at his cap and tried to appear at ease. Long and rangy, he leaned against the chart table and looked ahead. He had a dread of the floating things which had been men. Too many of them in this work.

“What’s that two points off the port bow?” he said.

“Dunno. Can’t see it.”

“Looks like a—by golly, I’ll bet it is. Sheer off!” he cried to the helmsman. “And don’t flop us over!”

“It’s a wing,” replied Heinie, squinting his watery eyes. “They’re right close to us.”

“Wouldn’t kid me, would you? There they are, Heinie.

That's the girl on this side. Poor kid looks like she's all worn out."

"The hell she is!" cried Heinie. "She's holding that fat guy from sliding off. Look at her wave!"

Johnny turned to the brass speaking tube. "Slack off, Joe—we've arrived!"