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WREN JANE BEACON GOES TO WAR

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Published By **CreateSpace**

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Wren Jane Beacon goes to war

On the beaches of Dunkirk

A long swell set in during the morning, and by early afternoon was making operations straight from the beach difficult. This was a problem for Jane – she could go to the lorry jetty to the west and see if she could load from its lee side, but there were a few naval types about who might order her home. So she persevered with working from the beach despite the difficulties. Several boats full of soldiers had beached to and were pounding helplessly side on to the sand, so Jane decided to see if she could sort them out. One great advantage of Kitchen gear is that it gives full power astern so towing was easier than for most boats. In the course of a couple of hours she took off the loads of soldiers, put a line from her bow onto each stranded craft and pulled hard.

The first to come was an open trip-round-the-bay launch with a couple of matelots in it. She went to pull it off bows first but they called to her “Can you pull us off stern first, please? Our props stick out below the boat and we need to get them into deeper water.” So she got a line onto its stern, and with the swell helping to lift it, tugged the stern round. They needed help to back out as the swell smacking the broad transom stern kept knocking the launch about but eventually they got it into deep enough water to turn and motor away. Casting them off Jane called “You’d be better off working from the lorry pier there. From half tide rising there’s enough depth of water for you at the end.” They waved acknowledgement, blew her a kiss and pushed out to seaward.

Next was a good-sized motor yacht with a long cabin and small cockpit aft. This was more of a problem, deeper-drafted and with a civilian crew who didn’t know much

about handling the boat. In manoeuvring to put a line on it P36 also fell across the swell and grounded athwart the tideline. Cursing, Jane put her gear hard over and using the forefoot on the sand as a fulcrum drove the stern out, the breaking swell splashing her a good deal in the process. Then straight back to the job; with some yelled instructions the yacht's crew got a line onto the windlass and giving her engine full astern she inched them off. Once off, the yacht came alongside to thank Jane for her help. Her crew, military-looking old gentlemen with big moustaches and gin-soaked accents, were appreciative.

"You must be that Wren we've been hearing about. We never expected to meet you but thanks for your help – real seamanship. We'll tell them about that." And the yacht with its thirty-two soldiers set off with its bows firmly pointed back to England.

Number three was an old fishing boat, rough and battered but strongly-built. Again, it was deep-drafted and it took some dragging to get it unstuck from the sand but with the towline tight each rise of the swell saw its bow bump a little further round and after twenty minutes of tugging the boat came free. Her fishermen crew waved thanks to Jane in passing, and again she suggested they'd be better off working from the lorries. "Sod that," called the fishing skipper. "We've got twenty-five men on board and we're off back home. We've had enough of this nonsense. See you sometime." And like the yacht they turned their bows to the north-west and set off.

That left one stranded boat in this collection. She was a beautiful Thames cruiser, all polished brass and shiny brightwork, obviously a well-loved craft. Her owner was on board with a couple of matelots for crew, and between them they didn't seem to have much idea. To complicate it all, as Jane approached it shells suddenly got closer –

the *Wehrmacht* artillery had got their range. With splashes and crashes around her, Jane put her bow onto the elegant old yacht, passed them a line and using the time-honoured sailors' phrase for a tow, asked "Would you like a pluck?" This startled the matelots a little and with sly grins they chorused "Ooh yes please" but the old owner had understood her. With a line made fast round the bow fairlead she backed off and pulled hard. Nothing happened. Despite the swell the boat did not seem to be lifting. Between the rising swell and falling shells it was getting uncomfortable on the beach. Jane took the soldiers from the yacht, but still no luck with it coming off. After half an hour of pulling and twisting and getting nowhere, Jane called to the crew "I'm sorry, we're going to have to give up. I can give you a lift out to one of the ships if you want." The two matelots didn't need a second invitation but the old owner refused, tears in his eyes. "I can't leave her like this, she's too precious. Perhaps she'll come off at high water." Well, it was only an hour after low water so perhaps, but Jane doubted it – the boat was well settled into the sand. So she just said "All right, up to you. Good luck." And she set off out to the waiting ships, dodging shellfire as she went –this was scary stuff. She never did find out what happened to the old owner, but next day his beautiful boat was a charred ruin, burnt to the waterline with polished brass debris around it.

Jane looked around. Now what - salvage or moving men? She was debating this but there wasn't much to salvage where she was. Abandoned rowing whalers were being pounded in the surf but their usefulness was limited so she didn't bother. Looking further along the beach she saw a Thames sailing barge sitting forlornly on the tideline, looking abandoned. Curious, she motored over to it and saw a lot of

soldiers on its deck, not doing very much so she laid alongside and called up “Hello, are you trying to sail this boat?”

A sergeant looked over the side “Well we would if we could but we don’t know how.”

“Shall I show you?” queried Jane.

“Yes please. Do you know what to do with one of these?”

‘If only Punch was here,’ thought Jane ‘she’d show them.’ So she shinned up a rope ladder and looked around the deck. The barge seemed to be in good order and she could feel it lifting to the swell, so it was almost afloat. Jane checked her watch – now two hours after low water, so there was time enough to do something. There was an anchor out forward; she detailed some of the troops to get it in smartish, looked aft and found the barge had no engine so she dropped down into P36, lashed it securely alongside the barge and as soon as the anchor was up she put the boat full astern. Slowly, slowly, with each lift of a swell, the barge dropped a little further astern until suddenly it was afloat all the time. It started yawing about badly with the swell on its square stern, so she turned it round as tightly as she could to avoid going aground again, and headed out into deeper water. The Squaddies on board cheered as the barge turned to seaward. Safely out of the shallows Jane stopped and climbed aboard the barge again. “Who’ in charge here?” she queried.

“I suppose I am” said the sergeant “but I don’t know anything about boats.” There was a gentle breeze blowing from North-East so Jane figured even the totally ignorant could get the barge going in the right direction. “All right sergeant, pick half a dozen men and come for a quick lesson.” She explained how the sails caught the wind and made the barge go, very roughly how to set the sails, and checked their condition. The mainsail had been set anyway and was a bit ragged with holes in it, but its tan form was still good enough to work. She got the Squaddies to set the jibs

and the mizzen, which seemed to be untouched, and decided against trying to set the tops'l. With this done she explained the compass - at least they understood that from their land navigation. A quick run-through steering – “Remember it’s the ship you are steering, not the compass. It stays still and the boat moves round it. Move the steering wheel the same way as the compass card seems to be going.” They appeared to grasp that fairly readily. Finally, she explained that if a tug or similar passed them going west, the universal signal for a tow was to hold up a rope’s end. A tow would make their lives much easier. “Aren’t you coming with us?” Asked the sergeant.

“No, I’m afraid not. I’ve lots more work to do here. But I’ll get you going in the right direction.” And with sails trimmed the bow pointed to the west-north-west. Being light it only drew a few feet and could go over the banks but she dropped the leeboards for extra security. It was some time later that an ecstatic letter from Punch thanked her for rescuing her father’s barge. The squaddies did very well overnight, making steady westward progress and at dawn got the tow Jane hoped for them. Tug and barge arrived in Dover in some triumph. Throughout her gender had not been mentioned but the sergeant’s report paid full tribute to the helpful Wren.

During this time the bombs went on falling and guns shelling. It was noisy but so far Jane had only her shoulder wound and damaged ears. ‘How long can my luck last?’ she wondered, looking at the mess of sunken ships, bits of boats and bodies floating in the water. That damn face kept coming back in her mind’s eye, its mouth hanging open like a hungry fish. Getting the barge going had taken her away from the beaches and it took her a while to get close again. Ever mindful of a Navy looking for her she had been gently chugging east again, to where the shells were heavier

but the mass of soldiers much thinner. Despite her injuries there was no point, she reflected, in hanging about – either go and pick people up or clear off. And there were lots of people still to be collected so really it was no choice.

Running P36 in to the beach again, debating who to work with next, she was startled to hear a female voice calling to her. “Hello, can you help?” Looking to port Jane saw a figure with a red cross armband. She waved to it to come over. “Hello, We’re QA sisters. We’ve got six ambulances of stretcher cases in the dunes. Can you take us off to a ship?” Round this lone figure a clump of soldiers had gathered, eyeing the nurse and the boat equally hungrily. Jane weighed up the situation. “Yes I should think so. Have you anyone to carry them down to here?”

The QA sister shook her head wearily. “Afraid not, just us.”

“Right” said Jane decisively. She stood on a thwart. “Listen, you men. There are ambulances with stretcher cases in the dunes there. Any of you who carries one down can come with it to a ship. Now get busy.” On occasion Jane could still sound very head girl.

Her instruction caused a stampede. The QA smiled at Jane. “Thanks for that. I’d got nowhere.”

In no time the first stretchers arrived, were passed over the bulwark closely followed by their bearers. With six stretchers and two nurses to each ambulance plus their four carriers, it was a case of one ambulance load at a time. Jane pulled off and looked around for a suitable ship. There, just arrived, was her old friend the *Medway Queen*. That would be a good place for them. As she came alongside she called up to the car salesman who seemed to be in charge on the upper deck “Hello Dylan, got some specials for you. Can you take thirty-six stretcher cases?”

“Don’t see why not, Jane. Pass ‘em up.”

By the time she got back to the beach most of the stretchers were assembled at the water’s edge and the QA sister was having difficulty keeping order. Before they rushed the cutter Jane stood up and shouted at them “Take it steady. You’ll all get off. Now, in an orderly fashion bring them aboard one at a time.” Discipline is a remarkable thing, and despite their exhaustion and desperation the soldiers did as they were told. With the last load the QA sister also came aboard, and came aft to Jane as she turned the boat seaward. “You’re a girl, aren’t you?”

“With your knowledge of anatomy you ought to be able to tell that.”

“Yes, but what on earth are you doing here?”

“Oh, I’m a boat crew Wren and just using my skills to rescue lots of pongoes. Before you ask, no the Navy doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Well I’ll be damned. I’ve never seen anything like it. I thought I was tough but you.....” And her voice trailed off, looking at Jane’s shoulder. “That’s a nasty looking wound. What happened?”

“Oh, a splinter from my boat caused by a bullet from a passing Messerschmitt.”

“Let me look at it.” So Jane slipped the shoulder of her boiler suit off. “Hmm. Nice and clean and it looks like it missed everything vital. You should get it seen to, though. It’s clean now but won’t stay that way.”

“Thanks, I’ll do that as soon as I get back.”

The QA looked at her quizzically. “I’m Louise Joycey, senior sister with QAIMNS. We only just got out with Jerries chasing us down the road. Talk about chaos. I’m not sorry to be away. But who on earth are you?”

“Leading Wren Jane Beacon at you service Ma’am. I’ve been here for a couple of days now. With you lot I’ve moved a bit over two thousand people off to the ships.”

They were now coming alongside the *Medway Queen* and Jane berthed with casual skill. The offloading went well until there were just the two women in the cutter. They looked at each other, a spark of mutual respect and recognition flashing between them. "Can I write to you? I wouldn't mind staying in touch."

"Yes sure. I'm at *HMS Lynx*, Dover. 1095 Leading Wren Beacon. Maybe we could meet in London sometime."

"Duty permitting that would be nice."

Jane waved to her as she climbed the scrambling net, watched by the car salesman.

"Dylan, any chance of a meal and a cup of tea? I'm famished."

"For you Jane, anything. Come on board." Climbing the net with her damaged shoulder proved difficult but the thought of a square meal spurred her on. Coming on deck she asked "any chance of a tiffy checking my engine? I think it's fine but it wouldn't hurt to have it checked over."

"I'll fix it Jane. Go to the wardroom."

"But I'm a rating on duty. I can't go into the wardroom"

"Oh don't be silly. The mess decks are heaving." So she was well fed in the cosy womb of the wardroom. Feeling warm and comfortable she went round to the galley

"Thanks for that Tommy. It was great. Any chance of some sandwiches to keep me going?"

"Be my pleasure Jane. Wait one." Five minutes later a whole loaf had been sliced and wrapped round corned beef, and cheese, and jam so she had a nice assortment all stuffed into a muslin bag. "Here Jane, got something special for you." And with a broad wink he produced a bottle which proved to be well filled with Pusser's rum. A generous tot rounded off her visit nicely. She was so pleased with it all that she gave him a hug and kiss then wandered off wondering why these middle aged men

went pink when she did it. Coming on deck again she found the same old engineer who had bored her with his boiler problems, coming up from her cutter. "It's all fine. I've greased the gear and shaft bearing, given the engine some lub oil and checked the cooling system and it looks good to me."

She smiled her thanks and eased back into the cutter. As she cast off Dylan appeared again. "Good luck Jane. We're weighing now. Maybe see you in a day or two back in Dover." A wave and she was gone. Night was falling as she headed back to the beach, debating where to go next. Approaching the beach in the gathering gloom she heard weird honks and screeches. This was something strange that merited investigation. As she ran the bow onto the beach she found a tall strikingly handsome Indian major waiting. "Good heavens, was that you making those funny noises?"

The major laughed. "No memsahib, not me but my most precious friend. Can you help me? We are a troop of muleteers and I want to get my men away."

"Yes of course, get them on board"

"Well thank you, but I have another request. We have killed or abandoned our animals except for The Emperor and we desperately want to take him with us. Can you do that?"

"Who's The Emperor?"

The major smiled, that sweet gentle smile so characteristic of India. "He is my prize stallion donkey."

"Good Lord, you're mad. How on earth are we going to get a donkey off? We'd never get him into the boat." She thought about it for a moment. "Tell you what, if

you can get him in, I'll take him off but then we'd have to get him onto a ship. It'd be awfully difficult."

"I have some planks so maybe we can walk him on board."

Jane laughed and shook her head in disbelief. "I'll give it a go if you will but you'll have to do the work. I'm injured you see."

"No problem Mem" and he called out loudly in a language Jane didn't recognise. Twenty-three men came out of the dunes leading the donkey which brayed loudly whenever a loud noise went off nearby. It was plainly terrified. They brought planks with them and there was a lot of shouting and waving hands in the air as they went to work. A couple of the team stayed close to the donkey's head, whispering into its huge ears and gently stroking it. This seemed to keep it calm enough to be coaxed up the planks, over the bulwark and into the bow of the boat. Even Jane, whose knowledge of donkeys was effectively zero, could see that this was an exceptional animal. The major looked pleased. "Acha, bot tighai. Thank you Mem, can we go?" Jane did not need a second invitation.

But now, with the poor beast in the boat, what on earth was she going to do with him? She pulled off the beach and went out into the darkness to find a ship that would take him. As they went she asked the major "What on earth are you doing here with a prize donkey? It's totally crackers."

In the darkness the major laughed gently. "The British Raj extends a long way, you know. I am being sent from India with my donkeys and mules to help your army move things around where there are no roads. My animals do it very well. We are all sad to leave them behind but The Emperor we could not give up – we would as soon lose our own lives. Y'know, he came to us as just another working donkey in the last draft but he has been so brave and is such a noble specimen that we

decided we wanted to save him for breeding. He kept on working hard when the other animals were paralysed by fear and nothing daunted him. But I am thinking your army has been given a big defeat and we are very lucky to get out. Maybe we have to go further than England to escape the enemy but that is far enough for now.”

The first two ships she tried laughed derisively and told her in no uncertain terms what she could do with a donkey. The major stood impassively beside her while the negotiations went on. Jane was starting to feel a little desperate – to be stuck with a donkey in the boat seemed the height of craziness. Then she spotted a Naval tug, with low freeboard and a useful-looking derrick. “Hello, can you deal with a strange request? I’ve got a prize donkey and its handlers here. Could you take them to England?”

“You what?” The incredulity was plain. But the British seaman is famous for his adaptability; the first lieutenant on the deck snorted a laugh and said “Anything for a challenge. How do propose to get him on?”

“Well we’ve got planks – perhaps we could walk him on.”

“All right, give it a try.” So they rigged the planks and started to coax The Emperor up them. As he started Jane went forward and patted his nose. He was trembling with fear but nuzzled up, seeming to want to be friendly – perhaps responding to her femininity - so she gave him a hug and his warm woolly coat was oddly comforting. His handlers clearly knew just how to deal with him but the poor animal was terrified and honked continuously as he was coaxed and pushed onto the planks. Half way up disaster happened. The tug swung a bit to put the rising swell beam on, the cutter took a roll one way while the tug rolled the other, the planks slipped off the bulwark and with a splash The Emperor fell in. There was a shout of “Kabada nichi”

as he went in; his handlers roaring with laughter at this and seeming to find it all very funny. The Emperor proved to be a powerful swimmer but was panic-stricken; his two handlers immediately dived in and got hold of his halter, again making soothing noises in his ears. The first lieutenant looked pained. "Now what are we going to do? We can't mess around here with a donkey all night."

The major who had stood silently watching the drama, now took charge. "Do you have some canvas?" he called.

"Yes"

"We'll make a belly-band sling and lift him on your derrick. He's not very heavy." So they rapidly improvised a belly band, attached it to the derrick's hook and swung it over. The two handlers in the water fed the band round the squealing animal and back onto the hook, waved to the sailors on the tug's deck "Ast Asti Tano" and slowly the dripping animal was hauled out. Hanging in the belly band the fight seemed to go out of The Emperor who hung limply as he was swung over. "Aria, aria, ast asti" they called as he was lowered. Limp he might have been in the air but landed on the deck, he tried to charge the tug's deck party; fortunately some of his handlers were there waiting for him and managed to restrain him. The mule troop took all this in high spirits, laughing and joking to each other in their own language as they settled the Emperor down, tethering him to the towing hook. "Now we can see who is the stronger" joked the major.

The tug captain came down from his bridge. "I don't know, I've done some strange things in my time but rescuing a donkey from these beaches has to be the daftest yet. What do I do with him now?"

The major appeared out of the dark, shook the captain's hand and said "Please sir, you take him and my troop over to England. The future quality of donkeys and

mules has just been saved.” He turned to Jane. “Ekdum Kolass. I thank you, mem. I will tell them how helpful you were.” Jane gave him an ironic grin then saluted, acknowledging his officer status. “Good luck. I’ll have one of his offspring one of these days.” And that was how, sometime later, a useful young donkey, looking remarkably like his father, came to take up residence in the Grange’s garden.

As Jane cast off, the tug was already weighing its anchor, England’s green fields suddenly its priority. Jane was left with a cleaning job before the cutter was fit for use again. The swell had mercifully fallen light while she took off the stretcher cases and The Emperor, but was rising again. In the dark running onto the beach with a swell high enough to throw the cutter about did not seem to be a very good option. So she took her chances on the western lorry-built jetty, and headed that way. There were still Naval officers about but on the quay end it seemed to be mainly army people. By saying as little as possible and keeping her helmet on she hoped nobody would notice her –she would pass as just one more matelot running a boat. But there were a couple of naval personnel on the quay end, directing the boat traffic. As she came alongside a chief petty officer looked at her closely “Ere, you’re not that daft Wren are you? We’ve been looking for you.”

“What’s it to you?” She demanded crossly.

“There are orders out for you to go back to Dover immediately. This is no place for a woman.”

“This is my fourth day here so it’s a bit late. And anyway, there’s still lots of soldiers to lift. So you know what you can do with your orders.” The cutter had been loading during this exchange and as soon as it was full, she backed out before the Chief

could say any more. He reported back to the beach officer that he'd found the Wren, but that she'd refused to go. "What did she say?" queried the officer.

"Well actually sir, she told me to go and fuck myself and then pushed off. But at least we've found her."

"Yes, we'll keep an eye open. She seems to be a fairly determined young lady."

A message was flashed back to Dover that the errant Wren had been found but was resisting orders to return. This got a terse response from Dover Command.

Jane was now in a quandary. Working from the jetty would mean falling into the hands of Naval authority. After two days and nights without sleep she was beginning to understand the absolute exhaustion shown by the soldiers, and the temptation to pack it in was strong. But, on the beaches masses of men remained and it seemed wrong to give up when there was still work to be done. So once she had delivered her load she took a long drink of water, demolished some of her sandwich stock, and headed in again. There were plenty of soldiers who had waded out, some up to their necks in water, and they seemed like a good bet for rescue while keeping out of the Navy's clutches. This worked fairly well but slowly, the men taking time to scramble in using the loops in the bow ropes. With three boatloads delivered to a trawler which had come quite close in she turned to the shore again, passing close under the stern of her trawler's neighbour. This boat shone a light to see what was happening; this was a big mistake. The *Luftwaffe* was still prowling overhead and immediately pounced on the light source, bomb after bomb raining down. For Jane there was a dazzling flash then blackness.