

ATLANTIC
STAR by
Michael Page
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1.

CHAPTER ONE
SIGNING ON.

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"Raven," said the loudspeaker in the waiting-room, and a young man started guiltily, stumbled over the legs of the man sitting next to him, and hurried out into the main office of the Maritime Radio Company. "Here y'are, Mr. Raven," said the staff clerk, and pushed some papers towards him. "Sign on the Austrian Duke. This is Mr. Flack, your senior. He'll take you down."

Raven took the hand stretched out to him, and mumbled something in answer to the mumble he received. The two men looked briefly at each other, and then away again; the younger shyly, the elder querulously. Although there was thirty years difference in their ages, they were very similar in build; both tall, lean, and long legged. There was no other resemblance. Raven was dressed in a new uniform; Flack in the usual Englishman's ensemble of baggy suit, grime-serrated raincoat, and weathered hat.

"First-tripper, I s'pose?" Flack enquired in a hoarse, parakeet voice; Raven was about to answer but the staff clerk forestalled him. "Can't help it," he said briskly, no longer interested in these two men whom he was sending to sea. "We do our best, you know."

"Ha-ha," replied Flack, in tones like a cracked bell; he extracted a battered tin from his pocket, and slowly rolled himself a cigarette. "Come on, then," he said to

Raven when it was drooping from his lip, and then

"Where's yer gear?"

"My - ?"

"Your baggage."

"Oh - in the station."

"So's mine. Come on, then."

They emerged into the tubercular pallor of a Cardiff autumn day, and walked to the station. After a brief argument, Flack persuaded a taxi-driver to take them to the docks, and they jolted through streets which looked bedraggled with their two years of war. Flack said nothing during the trip, and Raven did not want to talk; he was watching eagerly for his first sight of the docks, of shipping, and the sea. When he saw three Lascar sailors shambling along in single file, his heart lifted as though he had recognised a friend. One of them was wearing a grimy turban, and the twisted cloth, to Raven, was evocative of all the sombre and spice-pungent Orient.

The taxi-driver drew up in Mount Stuart Square, and as they alighted Raven heard the doleful trumpeting of a siren. It echoed flatly from the cloud-dense sky and the ugly buildings, and he looked about him with an expectant glance. He saw the masts and funnels standing above the warehouse roofs, and gazed at them with his lips parted as though to speak a word of recognition. Flack bumped into him and grunted "Mind out of the road!"

Shouldering his sea-bag, he led the way towards the

Shipping Office; in the entrance, they became entangled with a bunch of negro firemen, huddled in their shabby clothes against the cold. "Ah'm gwine ne tell dat Shippin' Master we ain' no black slaves," one of them told the others in a petulant whine, and they nodded their woolly craniums in agreement. Flack shouldered his way through them, and through a door marked 'Engagements.'

It opened into a big, high room with shabby ochre walls, and divided by a massive mahogany counter. About forty men were already assembled there, drifting in slow eddies about the hall.

"Dump your bags in the corner," muttered Flack, and Raven said "Yes, sir," as he obeyed. "And don't call me 'sir,' either," his senior told him as he straightened up. "You're not in the bloody Navy."

Flushing a little at the rebuke, Raven looked with shy interest at the other men. With a few exceptions, they looked like any poorly paid group of working men. Some of the younger ones tended towards shabbily flashy suits, and shoes with pointed toes; others wore dungaree trousers and jackets, with cloth caps and sweat rags. Apart from the little nickel badge 'M.N.' which some of them wore, there was nothing to mark them as seafarers, and Raven was conscious of disappointment. But at the same time he was aware that there was something in their bearing, perhaps a look in their eyes, which was jaunty, free, and independent; something which made him, in his trim uniform,

feel very callow and innocent.

Flack stood there impassively watching them all, only moving to take out his tin and roll another cigarette with tobacco-blackened fingers. As he lit it, blew out the smoke, and then tucked his hands under his shabby coat-tails, Raven thought he saw in him the same air which characterised the others; an air of being capable, at any moment, of committing some capricious mischief, for no better reason than to pass the time.

The swing-doors clicked again, and two or three more men drifted in, amongst them a rawboned individual with a sharp bushranger's face. He glanced at Flack and his assistant, and strolled over to join them. "Hallo, Sparks," he greeted Raven, observing the single wavy stripes on his sleeves. "Haven't they started yet?"

Raven's heart, which felt like a wizened orange, swelled out with pleasure. Sparks! To be addressed by that honourable nickname made him feel one with the company; visions passed through his mind in which he saw himself involved in heroism. Before he could answer, the newcomer remarked "Bo'sun, me. Just sent me across from the Union. 'Austrian Duke?' I says. 'What's she? One o' Tudor Jones' hungry old wrecks, ain't she?' I said. 'Take it or leave it,' they said."

He cast a wary, humorous eye around the waiting crowd, and continued "Can't be any worse than me last one, anyroad. Proper Liverpool bastard, she was, with flamin' great jumbo derricks to handle all the time. What was your

last one, mate ?"

Raven hesitated, but he was spared the need of answering at all. The doors opened again, someone said "Here's the skipper," and the crowd pressed forward to the counter.

"All right - Austrian Duke signing on," called the Shipping Clerk. "Usual articles - two years, pay off in the last port of discharge. Officers first."

Raven just caught sight of the head and shoulders of a bulky old man, before Flack moved in front of him and obscured his view. As he was pushed nearer to the counter he caught sight of a head of coarse white hair, bent over a document on which the old, massive hands were laboriously inscribing a signature. Suddenly the Captain glanced up, and Raven looked into a pair of grey-green eyes, opaque and threatening as Channel waters on the edge of soundings. Their glance hit the youngster like a bolt from a crossbow, so that he lowered his own eyes in confusion as Flack urged him to take his place before the Articles.

He looked at the big widespread forms, wondering what he was to do with them, when the Shipping Clerk began asking questions. "Name ?"

"Er...Raven. Francis Raven."

"Age ?"

"Twenty-one."

"Last ship ?"

"None. It's my first trip, I mean."

The clerk glanced at him, then continued to ask

questions and fill in the answers in a completely illegible hand.

"Place of birth ?"

"Salisbury."

"Home address ?"

"The Rectory, Fleethurst, Kent."

Raven became aware that Flack was listening closely to the proceedings. At the last answer, he gave a sound midway between a sniff and a snort.

"Next of kin ?"

Should I say father or mother ? Raven wondered desperately. The clerk glanced up impatiently, and he gabbled "Canon Charles Raven."

"Same address ?"

"Yes."

"Second Radio Officer, eh ? All right - sign here. Bo'sun next ? Is the Bo'sun here ?"

The two radio officers pushed their way back to their gear; Flack shouldered his sea-bag and led the way through the door. The negroes were still bemoaning their fate in a languid, whining drawl, and a file of soldiers passed by with their boots ringing upon the bitumen. Raven took a firmer grip upon his suitcases, and was about to step down into the street when the Bo'sun's voice said "Here - I'll give you a lift."

Gratefully, Raven surrendered one of the heavy cases into the Bo'sun's hands. He lifted it as easily as a schoolboy's satchel, and then said as though in surprise

"Hey! We ain't going all that way without a wet, are we?"

As though so obvious a question did not require an answer, he led the way to a pub across the square. In the saloon bar, he cocked his eyebrow at Flack, who grunted "Drop o' whisky."

"No whisky," said the barmaid.

"Gin, then."

"Haven't seen gin for a fortnight. Got some rum, though?"

"That'll do," said Flack, and the Bo'sun said "Pint er bitter for me. What's yours, son?"

"Raspberryyade, prob'ly," squealed Flack, and accompanied his own joke with a rasping chuckle which sounded like "Heck-heck-heck!"

The Bo'sun grinned at Raven, with his weather-carved features showing a mocking sympathy. "Half of bitter, please," muttered Raven, and the Bo'sun slapped a palmful of coins upon the counter. "That's the lot," he said. "It were either sail or starve this time."

The drinks came, and he raised his pint. The cords of his throat pulsed up and down a number of times like a lizard breathing, and he set down the glass half-empty. "Bahhhh!" he gasped. "That's better. I were dry as a witch's tit."

Flack sipped at his rum with a slight convulsive shudder, and then turned with an affronted air as a newcomer swaggered noisily into the bar. It was a burly young man with a flat round face, topped by a filthy, dull-peaked uniform cap with an illegible badge. This, together with

his face and his shabby blue serge patrol suit, was lightly powdered with coal dust.

"Bo'll Guinness," he grunted at the barman, and when it was poured and partly consumed he turned and regarded the others. "Din' I see you signing on the Austrian Duke just now?" he challenged them.

"'sright," answered the Bo'sun, and the newcomer said "Third Mate. Just been getting the bunkers on board."

"Have a drink," suggested the Bo'sun, and the Third Maté up-ended his glass by way of assent. When the drinks were set up again, Raven became conscious of the Bo'sun's gaze fixed reproachfully upon him, and hastily fumbled for his money.

The incident seemed to focus the Third Mate's attention upon him. Slowly imbibing his Guinness, he surveyed Raven with toad-like eyes; when he lowered his glass a moustache of brown foam remained upon his lips. "New Sparks, eh?" he questioned thickly. "Another bloody passenger to lug around."

Raven looked at him, then glanced swiftly at the others. Flack was thoughtfully rolling a cigarette; the Bo'sun's ironic gaze was roaming over the salient points of the barmaid. Uncertain whether to take it as a joke, he looked back at the Third Mate; the flat, dirty face returned his gaze with malevolence. He judged the wisest course was to say nothing, and took a sip of his warm, slightly vomit-tasting beer.

"You'll soon get that pretty uniform dirty on the old

Austrian Duke," sneered the Third Mate. "Nice white collar, eh? We'll have to ask the Chief Steward to wash it for you. And don't forget to salute the Captain - he's got a soft spot for junior Sparks."

"He's not a Sparks - he's a Canon," sniggered Flack. "Heck-heck-heck."

"What d'yer mean - a cannon?" grunted the Third Mate, and Flack explained "His father's a Canon. Some kind of a church bo'sun."

"Is that so?" asked the Third Mate gloatingly. "Well, isn't that lovely? We'll be able to have some Pleasant Sunday Afternoons, with the Curate's wife obliging on the organ."

"Whose organ?" guffawed the Bo'sun, and the three of them elaborated on this theme for some little time. Stories about choir-boys, old maids, curate's honeymoons, and organists, were dredged up from the slime of memory. Raven stood looking down into his glass, drinking when the others drank, his lips twisted into a humorless grin and now and again giving an automatic laugh to keep up with the others.

"No more rum," stated the barmaid when yet another round was ordered, and as though it had been a signal the Third Mate spluttered "Christ! She's shifting again at half past twelve - the Old Man 'll have my tool for a tally-stick!"

He golloped the remains of his drink and plunged out of the bar; the Bo'sun swallowed the last drops of his final

pint, gazed regretfully at the glass and placed it gently on the bar. "Last o' them for a while," he sighed. "Best be on our way."

CHAPTER TWO

Joining Ship

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When Raven first saw the Austrian Duke, he could hardly believe that she was a ship ready for the sea. She looked like some abandoned derelict. He and the other two had trudged through the great complex of the docks, held up by strings of loaded waggons at rail crossings, slipping amongst the compost of clay and coal dust between the lines, and dodging trucks and drays, in almost an hour's search for their ship. "Per'aps the bastard's sunk," said the Bo'sun hopefully, after they had been given a third wrong direction, and Flack gave a despondent hiccup.

Raven, changing hands on his suitcase for another uncountable time, see-sawed between physical discomfort and mental exhilaration. Every sight and sound was a new and inspiring message of its own, finding its way into the filing cabinets of his mind. Some day, he thought, this will all mean something very special to me...I wonder if I should start a diary again, to be sure that I don't forget any of it? The way that every ship is painted grey, and yet all of them a different grey...some new and shining with fresh paint, some sea-bitten and weather-worn, some patched with old and new like a shabby suit of clothes. Flags; gay, gallant spots of colour amongst the dockside monotone of grey-hulled ships, brown muddy water soiled with refuse and the sombre iridescence of waste oil, sullen faced dockers who looked as though their very souls had a

slouch.

"Sooner be bouncin' on that barmaid's belly than soddin' around these docks," panted the Bo'sun, and Flack grunted "There she is."

"Who - the barmaid?" asked the Bo'sun facetiously, and Flack pointed ahead with his chin; between two warehouses, they could see the bridge of a ship with nameboards reading Austrian Duke. They emerged onto the quayside to see a ship which was apparently buried under coal. Huge mounds of it were heaped above her bunker hatches, and it crunched under their feet as they stepped aboard; for a forlorn moment they stood staring about them at a scene of abandoned confusion. There was hardly an inch of uncluttered space; hatch-boards were piled along the scuppers, the holds yawned disconsolately, with a tangle of wire ropes hanging above them from the derricks, great mounds of ashes were heaped outside the stokehold door, and several garbage tins seemed to have been emptied upon the decks.

"Like a mad woman's breakfast," summed up the Bo'sun, and set down Raven's suitcase. With a grunt of "See you later" he strode along aft; he would have plenty to do before the ship warped out of the locks, and his body took on a businesslike swagger as he went in search of his crew.

"We'd better find our keys, I s'pose," mumbled Flack, and Raven followed him into the midships accommodation. They groped their way along a dark alleyway, feeling the coal-dust gritty underfoot, until they found a door which

enclosed a rumble of voices. Flack knocked, and they ceased; there was a moment's suspicious silence, and then the door was opened by a man with a magnificent black eye.

He peered at them with a kind of friendly caution, and Flack grunted "Chief Mate aboard? We're the new radio men."

"Oh, it's you, Sparky!" he exclaimed loudly, for the obvious benefit of whomever else was in his cabin, and then momentarily blinded himself by winking with his undamaged eye. With conspiratorial hoarseness, he whispered "I'm the Chief Steward. Thought you was the Skipper!"

Raven politely refrained from looking directly at the great reddish-purple bulge which, apart from a thin streak like jellied blood, was all that could be seen of his left eye. "We'll want to get into our cabins," suggested Flack, and he exclaimed "Aw, yiss! Well, never mind the Chief Mate. I've got yer keys."

He opened the door wider, and they saw a Customs Officer sitting in the blacked-out, overheated little cabin, cupping one hand over the glass of rum which he held in the other. He smiled meekly at the two Radio Officers, and with an airy explanation of "Ship's business, y'know - ship's business," the Chief Steward pawed amongst the clumps of keys which littered his tiny desk. "Here y'are!" he exclaimed triumphantly, and held out a knot of them to Flack. "They're all on there - your room and the wireless room and your mate's rooms. He sleeps in the hospital, though - haven't got any spare cabins aboard this hooker."

Flack looked thirstily at the rum-bottle, and backed out of the doorway; Raven followed him out on deck again and waited patiently as he sorted through the keys. "Let's see - hospital," he mumbled, and then nodded towards a door besides that into the midships accommodation. "That'll be yours. Might as well get yer bags inside."

He opened the door into a cabin about the size of a railway-carriage compartment, with a bunk, a settee, and a wash-basin against the further bulkhead. Raven peered into it curiously, and asked "But what if they need it? You know - for someone sick or wounded?"

"'strewth, they never use the hospital on merchant ships," replied Flack. "It's just some more of that silly Board of Trade nonsense. If anyone's sick, they stay in their flippin' bunks."

He stood back to allow Raven to put his bags inside, and then led the way up the bridge ladders to the wireless room. This was situated on the top bridge, behind the wheelhouse and chartroom, and with his own cabin beside it. The entire erection was surrounded by slabs of concrete clumsily bolted onto the original structure, with massive steel sheets attached to the doors, which caused Flack to grizzle furiously "I know these bastards! Let a torpedo hit you, an' they'll jam shut sure as bejeazers!"

He wrenched it open and groped his way through the stiff canvas black-out curtains; as he grumbled and muttered about the unmade bunk and uncleaned drawers, Raven walked curiously through into the wireless room. He just had time

to note that the apparatus was totally unlike the gear on which he had been trained, and in fact resembled something out of a Science Museum, before Flack snapped "Hey! Come out o' that!"

He slammed the door shut again almost before Raven had had time to obey. "I was only looking," protested his junior, and he growled "Yes, I know all about that 'only looking.' Next thing I know you'll have started the generator and blown all the bloody valves."

He gave an angry giggle. "Heck-heck-heck! Not the first time I've sailed with you wartime wonders, y'know. Just because you've had three month's training, you think you're bloody Marconi."

"Now then, what's all the arguing?" enquired a voice full of false heartiness, and the Third Mate pushed his dirty face through the black-out curtains. "You guys fighting already?"

Flack jerked his thumb towards Raven. "Young Marconi here wants to teach me how to run the wireless room," he grunted. "Can't even give me time to settle down before he wants to know all about it."

"I only wanted to see what kind of gear it was," protested Raven, and the Third Mate shouted "So's you can save all our lives, eh? Just like on the pictures - Radio Officer stands by his post to the last! Whizzzzz-boom! Ack-ack-ack-ack! Diddy-dit-dah-dit!"

He pointed his index fingers like guns, shot down an imaginary plane, and then mimicked the tapping of a Morse

key, with his eyes gleaming viciously through his mask of coal dust. "I bet you've told all the girls that you'll be back with a medal," he concluded, and then smeared a greasy thumb across Raven's chest. "That's all the bloody medals you'll get here," he said with bitter satisfaction. "So get the big ideas out of your head."

Raven attempted to squint down at the stain on his new uniform, and then looked at the Third Mate. He could feel himself flushing, and was furious to hear his voice tremble as he said "J-just because you haven't got any - "

He stopped, realising that the continuation of his speech would only make him absurd. The Third Mate grinned at him, and said "Anyway, you blokes don't keep any radio watches in convoy nowadays. You keep signalling watches on the bridge. I'll teach you the flags, sweetheart."

He grinned again, backing out through the curtains. Flack, who had commenced disembowelling his sea-bag, gave Raven a sidelong glance, and then said mildly "Nasty piece of work, that one."

Raven stared at him, unable to speak. He watched Flack pull out an ancient pair of trousers, and then asked "Was that right, what he said ?"

"Was what right, what who said, heck-heck-heck ?" enquired Flack jovially, and Raven answered "I mean, about us not keeping radio watches in convoy ?"

"That's right. The commodore ship does all the wireless work, so we help with the signalling. Plenty of that in convoy, and half of those flippin' deck-ornaments can't

read Morse anyway, let alone tell one flag from another."

"Which flags did he mean?"

"Signalling flags. You know - A-B-C-D and so on."

Raven brooded for a moment, and then asked "Are they hard to learn?"

"Heck-heck-heck - course not. Anything a deck officer can learn, a normal person can take in with his eyes shut. Here - wait a minute..."

He groped deeper within his sea-bag, and brought out a tattered copy of Brown's Almanac. He flipped the pages until he came to the brightly coloured alphabet of signal flags, which he tore out and handed to his junior. "Here y'are. Swot it up for a bit before we start."

Raven took it. "Thanks;" he said, and hesitated until Flack glanced sharply at him. "Will you - is there anything I can do now?" he asked, and the older man shook his head. "Not a thing," he replied. "Go and lose yourself until the ship sails, far as I'm concerned."

Raven nodded jerkily, and left the cabin. He went down into his own room, sat on the hard settee, and gazed in bewilderment at his two suitcases standing inside the door. After a while, he opened one of them and found a writing pad. Resting it on his knee, he thought for a moment before starting a letter which began "Dear Mum and Dad, I arrived here safely this morning, and they appointed me to a ship right away. She's not quite what I expected, but I expect I'll settle down soon enough. It feels like

going back to school again in a lot of ways, though a bit stranger, of course; I haven't met many of the other men yet but they seem to be quite a decent bunch..."

CHAPTER THREE

Convoy Port

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For the next three days, Raven felt himself to be completely useless. Whilst the confusion of preparing for sea surged all about him, he had nothing to do, since Flack guarded the wireless room jealously and hardly spoke to his junior.

Consequently, he felt as though he was existing in a kind of dream, in which he saw everything but was himself unseen. Whilst eating the meals which a pair of ambling stewards served in the fuggy saloon, he was never sure who were his shipmates and who were simply shore officials scrounging a feed; they all seemed to be equally shabby, morose, and pre-occupied. He saw the Bo'sun once or twice, striding about the deck at the head of a bedraggled string of seamen, and was greeted with a knowing wag of the head. In the Chief Steward's cabin, a perpetual party seemed to be taking place; various odd characters roamed the ship at all hours, and the bowels of the ship emitted inexplicable rumbles and clangs.

He glimpsed the Captain occasionally, but with the exception of the Third Mate he was unable to place the name or rank of anyone else he encountered. This officer never failed to enquire as to whether the Squire's hassock had been dusted, or the altar-brasses polished; Raven's sole attempt at reprisal had been to ask "Why don't you wash your face?" which was answered with a vicious flow of comments

concerning useless lazy passengers who never had to soil their hands.

The seemingly aimless confusion at last attained the climax of sailing day. The derricks had been lowered and the hatches covered; a huge pile of meat, vegetables, and other foodstuffs had been delivered aboard, and - after lying about the decks for most of a day, and being walked upon by countless feet - had been stowed away in their various lockers; much of the coal and rubbish had been shovelled from the decks. The shore gang emerged from the engine room, and a sooty cloud bulged from the funnel as the firemen got steam on the boilers. The Chief Steward went ashore to say good-bye to his family, and returned with his cap askew and a bottle in each pocket.

The Pilot climbed up the gangway, and had hardly stepped on deck before the Bo'sun and his men began to heave it aboard; there was a bawled eruption of orders from the bridge, and the telegraphs clanged as the mooring ropes splashed into the soupy waters of the dock. Almost imperceptibly at first, the Austrian Duke edged away from the quayside, her bows dragged around by a tug which strained like a dog dragging a cart. A group of dockers watched her departure without emotion. She was just another of the hundreds of ships which they had seen going away; since the war began they rarely knew these vessels' fates or even their destinations. Sometimes they returned, sometimes they were never seen again; the dockers had no

interest either way.

A shunting engine clanked along the quayside, puffing out huge bright clouds of steam, as the ship's head was directed towards the locks; it emitted a derisive-sounding whistle which was answered by a long, rasping bellow from the ship's siren. "Toot, y'bastard!" said a voice behind Raven, and he swung around to see the Chief Steward rambling towards him, with one hand fondling his plum-coloured eye. He came and stood beside Raven against the ship's rail, watching the intricate yet casual-seeming process of warping the ship into the lock; lighting a cigarette, he emitted a number of gritty coughs and then gasped "Now's yer chance, Sparky; hop ashore now before it's too late."

Raven grinned awkwardly, wanting to be polite yet unwilling to be distracted from watching the manoeuvre. The Chief Steward dragged at his cigarette, coughed in his gravel-like fashion again, and asked him "Where's she bound for, d' y' know?"

"Some of the people in the saloon were talking about America, but nobody seems to know yet," answered Raven, and the Chief Steward shrugged despondently. "Jerry 'll know," he opined, and then said "Doesn't make much difference, anyway. One port's the same as another when you've seen enough of 'em. All they're out for is to skin the poor sailor of 'is dough."

The windlass rumbled up on the fo'c'sle head, there was a yell from the bridge answered by another from the bows,

and the engine-room telegraph emitted its grinding clank. From the depths of the engine-room came the steady thudding of the engine, like the beating of a vast imprisoned heart, and the Austrian Duke moved steadily out of the locks and into the surly waters of the Bristol Channel. The world itself, and the whole vastness of yet unknown time, lay waiting for the exploration of her keel.

Their first run, however, took them no further than Milford Haven, where the Atlantic convoys assembled before setting out upon the westward crossing. It was a strange, calm interlude; a time of safety framed within the hills which rolled back from the shore, and a useful shake-down period in which the ship could be squared up for sea, the watches arranged, and the routine of the voyage established. Flack put Raven to work on checking the batteries, and grudgingly explained the operation of the wireless gear and the radio procedure in and out of convoy.

With a feeling that he was at last being permitted to participate in the work of the ship, Raven slipped on the headphones. He heard nothing, for there was nothing to hear; nothing but the background hum of the receiver, sounding like the whole vast empty ether waiting tensely, expectantly, to be pierced by some new tidings of disaster. All the wild medley of peacetime radio signalling had been stilled by the hand of war; nothing was transmitted but the absolute essentials.

Suddenly, the mellow rhythm of expertly-keyed Morse Code beat upon the diaphragms; it was Land's End Radio sending

a mine warning. Raven listened intently, picturing the horned and menacing globe which wallowed in the ambush of the waves; he glanced at Flack and was astonished to see the older man's weary indifference.

"Ole Man just gave me the code books 'smorning," grunted his senior, and dumped a couple of green-covered books on the desk. "You'd better have a look at 'em, because you'll be decoding most of the messages."

Raven set down the earphones and picked up one of the books, leafing through its pages and scanning the columns of letters and figures. He had the sensation of being admitted to the inner sanctum, and felt gratefully conscious of the trust which was being reposed in him until Flack grizzled "You never saw such bloody nonsense as they send out in coded messages. You have to spend hours working 'em out, and then you find it's a warning to observe the blackout or some other tripe like that."

He pulled out his tobacco tin and began to roll a cigarette, finally poking in the loose strands of tobacco and sticking it between his lips. Its smoke streamed slowly upwards as he sat staring morosely into vacancy, then wavered and dispersed as he commented "Breaks your bloody heart to think of how many people there are filling in their time on useless jobs...making a good thing out of the war. Why, if I was Churchill..."

He lapsed into silence again, and then unpasted the cigarette from his lips to continue "Take this convoy conference we're going to to-morrow, me an' the skipper."

24.

Listen to a lot of guff from some geysers that's prob'ly never stepped up a gangway. I tell you, boy, we'll never win this war till we get the Americans in it. We're just fiddling with it, that's all..."

Raven had not heard of the convoy conference before, but the next morning he watched Flack clamber down into a drifter which was making the rounds of the ships. He was followed by the Captain, with the Chief Steward in obsequious attendance. He handed the Captain his brief-case as he went over the rail, and stood there watching until the drifter had turned away towards another ship. "Phew!" he said. "Let's hope the old basket drowns himself before he gets back."

He spat expressively on the steel deck-plates, and rubbed out the biological-looking blotch with his shoe. "I've hardly seen him yet," said Raven. "Only when we signed on, and a few times round the deck. He never comes into the saloon for his meals."

"Ho no!" exclaimed the Steward. "Too muckin' 'igh and mighty for that! Has to have his meals served in his cabin, in case he contaminated himself by talkin' to the officers! Captain ruddy 'ard-case Macnamara! Phluk!"

He spat again, and slouched away into the accommodation. Raven raised his eyebrows at the two smears he had left on the deck, and moved away from them to lean against the door of his cabin. He blinked lazily in the autumn sunshine, and let his gaze roam around the anchorage.

If they're going to the conference to-day, then we must be sailing soon, he thought. A shimmer of excitement

rose within him as he pictured the great roaming seas; the shores of adventure which waited on its farthest rim; the incidents which he could only guess at on the way.

As he stood there he heard the heavy clumping of rubber-booted feet approaching from the bows, and in a moment a file of blue-jerseyed, serge-trousered men appeared around the corner of the deck house. They were the Naval gunners carrying the brushes and pots of paint which they had drawn from the Bo'sun's store in the bows. By contrast to the ship's own crew, they appeared a determined and formidable group of men. This was mainly because they still bore the stamp of the parade-ground and were dressed in a kind of uniform, and also because in great blundering voices they were discussing the orders of a Naval inspector to smarten up the gun-emplacements. Every other word of their conversation had to do with matters below the navel; they expressed their opinion that the interfering Lieutenant had been born in strange and unnatural ways as the result of impossible unions, loaded him with insults couched in Anglo-Saxon terms, and wished upon him fates which would have considerably distorted his sexual functions.

Raven felt that he had learned a lot when the last of them passed out of earshot, and was still staring after them when a timid voice said "Please, sir, could you tell me the time?"

He swung around and saw another gunner, but a very different one from his mates. Where they had given an impression of solid insolence, this one blinked out of wide blue eyes; where they had been coarsely unshaven, this one had a pink and white skin surmounted by a tangle of wind-blown curls. He held his slim body in a hesitant posture, and waited almost cringingly for Raven to answer his question.

"Just gone four bells," said the latter importantly, and when the gunner's smooth forehead wrinkled in puzzlement he explained "About five past ten."

"Oh, thank you," the youth exclaimed. "You see, they told me to dish the char out at a quarter past, and they get so upset if they have to wait for it."

Raven looked at him with his mouth open, and then enquired "Who's they?"

"Why, the gunners. I have to make their tea for them, you see - because I'm the youngest."

He added the final words with a hint of coyness, and then glanced up from wiping his hands with a piece of waste to gesture at the anchorage, and say "Don't you think that it's all simply beautiful? So - so rugged and masculine. The ships, I mean, and the hills behind them. Oh, I think it's ever so impressive!"

Raven, whose thoughts had been running along similar lines, felt embarrassed at hearing them put into such words, and in a voice which had the slightly pinchbeck

refinement of a London shop-assistant. All the same, the comment was so unlike anything which he had heard expressed since he had come aboard that he could not help being interested. He hesitated, and then asked "Is this your first trip?"

"Oh yes," the young gunner replied, and then glanced at Raven with a curiously calculating expression. "Is it yours?"

Raven nodded, and the two young men looked at each other in silence for a moment. Then the gunner said softly "It's horrid, isn't it? I thought it would be ... oh, you know. But it's not. It's just dirty - and stupid."

"Cheer up," said Raven. "It's hardly started yet."

"Oh, it's all right for you, I s'pose, being an officer," the youth replied with a flirt of his shoulders. "You ought to live down in the fo'c'sle along with us. You wouldn't like it so much then."

The words were edged with malice, but at the same time the gunner looked at Raven with a smile. The young officer felt confused, and turned his eyes away when the other enquired softly "What's your name?"

"They call me Sparks," he grunted, and was about to move away when a coarse voice bellowed "Hey, Cecil, where's that ferkin' tea?"

He looked round to see one of the other gunners glaring at them from the top of the engine-room fiddley. "All

right, Stan - I'm coming!" cried the youth with a petulant wave, and turned away to obey; he smirked over his shoulder as he departed. "That's not my real name, you know!" he cried gaily. "They just think they're funny. Ta-ta for now!"

Raven watched him until he disappeared, then shrugged and turned away into his cabin. He took out the alphabet of flags which Flack had given him, and began to impress the flags for W, X, Y and Z upon his memory.

At the same moment, Flack was sitting upon an uncomfortable folding chair, listening in bored silence to an R.N.V.R. Lieutenant. This officer had conducted the convoy conference for radio officers, outlining radio procedure in case of aerial attack, or attack by surface raider or by submarines, and in the event of fog or bad weather. They had heard most of it before, and would hear it many times again.

"Any questions ? Any suggestions ?" asked the Naval man at last, and a lanky individual in a dyed battledress demanded "Why is it that we never get any mail when we get across to the States ? They lay it on for the Navy, all right, but the ruddy M.N.'s spit out o' luck!"

The Lieutenant gazed at him mildly, and replied "I can't answer that one, I'm afraid. You'll have to take it up with your - er - Unions."

"Unions - hah!" Flack interjected enigmatically, and another voice chimed in with a doleful plaint of "That's

the way it is all round, y'see. The Services get taken care of, an' we can go an' scratch."

In a few moments, the meeting degenerated into a noisy discussion upon conditions in the Merchant Navy; how its members got the worst of both worlds in that they had to take the risks of fighting men without being accorded their privileges, and were regarded as civilians without having civilian liberties; how the losses of men were being replaced only by those whom the Services did not want; how the mail service was so inefficient as to be useless, and the shipmasters thought more of feathering their own nests than of the welfare of their crews; how discipline was almost non-existent, the food abominable, and the whole organisation subject to an apparently haphazard administration.

The Lieutenant sighed and glanced at his watch, hoping that the Captain's conference would soon end so that his troublesome classroom could be emptied. And he wondered briefly what it would be like to be sailing with them; to leave his uniformed office-job and walk the decks of a ship which was sailing at dawn of the next day.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outward Bound: Dawn

*

The dawn was like black steel, icy and stark; the first colourless light displayed the long, glassy swells, legacy of the past week's storm, rolling ceaselessly out of the far north; sleek and shining with a dull, seal-like gleam. There was no wind; the heavy overcast of cloud hung in a motionless pall across the sky, showing only a cold, fish-belly streak of light along the eastern horizon.

Soundless, unconcerned, the long swells swooped across the dark bowl of sea and sky; each of them raised the submarine high enough to expose part of her curved, bloated carcass, rust-streaked and already beginning to crust with barnacles; sometimes, as she descended again, she gouged her nose into the steep flanks of the next swell, so that it broke along her narrow deck with a soft, foaming roar.

Leaning back against the coaming of the conning tower, bracing himself against the rhythmic rise and plunge and savouring both the fresh, icy air and the aroma of his cigar, Ober-Leutnant Wolfgang Lowke felt that life was good. His small eyes gleamed with a complacent, almost voluptuous pleasure; his chubby red face looked as though it might break into a smile like that of a welcoming innkeeper's. On the North Atlantic patrol, small pleasures were to be savoured; a good cigar in the brief light of dawn, the chance

to stand in the open without being half-drowned by spray, the memory of two ships sunk without even a counter-attack.

The streak of cold light became flushed with pink, so that the dark swells picked up an occasional rosy gleam; it seemed to bestow a return of personality upon the other five who stood on the conning-tower with him, turning them into men again instead of colourless silhouettes. One of them, checking in his ceaseless scanning of a single quadrant of the ocean, said abruptly "Herr Ober-Leutnant," and pointed towards the sunrise.

Lowke stared into its deepening flush, and then raised the heavy binoculars hanging on his chest. "So," he murmured after a long moment, and glanced at his first lieutenant. "You see it?" he asked.

"Smoke," commented the Freiherr von Muffling, without lowering his own glasses, and Lowke raised his binoculars again. With their officers pre-occupied; the seamen glanced meaningly at each other; one of them raised on tip-toe to catch a glimpse of their objective.

The thin drift of smoke, seeming no more than that of a snuffed candle, still rose against the ruddy streak of sky; Lowke peered earnestly at the horizon beneath it until he found what he was looking for. A cluster of tiny projections silhouetted against the sunrise, vanishing again as the deck fell beneath him. It was enough; he lowered his glasses with a satisfied smile, and snapped out the diving order with automatic harshness.

The seamen tumbled down through the hatch, followed swiftly by von Muffling; the water was already swamping over the decks when Lowke jammed home the clips. By the time he had climbed down into the control-room, the boat was beginning to level off at periscope depth; as always, the switch-over from the hammering Diesels to the barely perceptible hum of the electric motors made it seem as though they had submerged not only beneath the surface of the water, but into an immense silence.

He flipped his hand for the periscope to be raised, cushioned his forehead against the rubber padding, and made a few seconds sweep. Nothing. The long tube sank silently into its well as he stepped back again, and he was conscious of the eyes of von Muffling upon him; the pale blue, expressionless eyes in the skull-like face, with the supercilious quirk to one nostril which always made him feel as though his flies were unbuttoned. Even as his lips formed the first syllables of the attack command, his mind registered a further degree of dislike against his first lieutenant.

Turning to the periscope again, he made a quick sweep of sea and sky and then sought for the convoy. The lenses were smothered by the sudden foaming surge of a swell, and then he saw the convoy's upperworks; the masts and funnels in a straggling cluster against the sky and with a long drift of smoke above them. This windless weather allowed convoys to leave their smoke trailing for miles, until it

became a fatally betraying cloud.

And it was this cloud which had caused the convoy Commodore, for the second time since dawn, to make the signal for 'You are making too much smoke.' The ships in each of the five columns repeated the signal; the gay colours of the flags fluttered in bright contrast to the grey ships and the sombre morning, and the red-and-white barred answering pennants rose upon the rear ships of each column. But still the black smoke coiled languidly up towards the lowering clouds, and drooped into a long sooty streamer which hung far astern of the convoy.

The Commodore, an old Naval captain, stood upon the bridge of the merchant ship in which he and his staff were embarked and stared at it impassively. His lean, lined old face, prickling with white stubble and brown as an autumn leaf, surveyed the forty ships under his control; the five columns of eight ships apiece which should have been like a well-drilled squad, but which as usual - and especially after the long hours of darkness - was sprawling and straggling over miles of ocean. Some ships were almost nudging each other, others were nearly a mile apart; the inevitable straggler was hull-down on the horizon and struggling to make up distance lost during the night.

The Commodore pressed his thin lips, hard and withered like dry orange peel, more lightly together; he meditated a series of scathing signals to be made collectively and to individual ships, and continued to survey the scene which

outraged so many of his professional instincts. Through some recess of his mind there passed an image of a destroyer squadron, shearing through the water with a kind of debonair savagery and in perfect alignment; he contrasted them almost unconsciously with this medley of craft wallowing through the water at a dubious eight knots.

His gaze passed from the Greek Pallas Athene, which had been built in 1912 and bought and sold a dozen times, to the Empire Coronet, a standard ship launched less than three months before and making her first voyage; the Norwegian tanker Hetty, which had spent her past life on the molasses trade, and the broad-beamed, pompous Dutch vessel Cornelius Wyck. Apart from the drab, shabby grey of their rust-streaked hulls, and the fact that none of them could do more than ten knots, the ships of the convoy had only one thing in common - that they were capable of carrying cargoes. This was a fact of overwhelming importance at a time when anything which could move or float at all was as vital as a blood transfusion to a man bleeding to death, in those days when ships were being sunk faster than they could be replaced.

The Commodore's brow tightened; he swung around and beckoned the Yeoman of Signals towards him. A few minutes later, on the bridge of the Austrian Duke, the Chief Officer whirled the handle of the engine-room telephone, and listened for a moment to the slow, steady thump of the engines. They were interrupted by the voice of the Second

Engineer. "Yup ?"

"Your smoke is endangering the whole convoy. Please take measures to minimise it immediately," the Chief Officer read carefully from the slip of paper in his hand, and there was a silence of several seconds before the Second Engineer asked blankly "What ?"

"Yer making too much smoke, and you've got to stop it," translated the Chief Officer.

"Who says so ?"

"The Commodore."

"You tell the flamin' Commodore to come over here an' talk to these pig-faced firemen," shouted the Second Engineer hoarsely. "Ask 'im how we're gonna keep steam up with this lousy coal, half-slate and half-sawdust, without making smoke ? An' send him love an' kisses from me too."

He clashed the phone back onto its hook, and turned away with a scowl of exasperation. "They think all we gotta do is press a button," he shouted accusingly at the Fourth Engineer, who was just descending the long flights of steel ladders to take over the watch. He was a dapper young man, with a small black moustache over pouting, sensual lips. He caressed this moustache as he asked absently "What's the matter now ?"

The Second scratched his bald skull in irritation, imprinting a blotch of greasy fingerprints upon its palely shining surface. He was a tall, stooped man in his late thirties, with a look of eternal exasperation on his large,

bony features. "I dunno," he growled, and laid hands upon the great wheel which controlled the steam-valves. He moved it slightly, his head nodding as he counted the imperceptibly increased beat of the engines as he fed them more steam. "Too much smoke - not enough speed - too much bull, that's the matter with 'em. What's for breakfast?"

"Meat-balls," yawned the Fourth. He looked sombrely at the great piston-rods which marched perpetually up and down, their oily shafts catching a dull grey gleam from the lights; plunging down into the black pits beneath them with a constant rhythmic thump. He and his senior hardly noticed the noise which was going on all about them. They were too used to it, as they were used to the stuffy heat of the engine-room and its angular complications of machinery; the great curving pipes and the skeleton structure of ladders and gratings which enabled them to move about it; the shadowed half-lights in its depths and the dull, dark gleams of lubricated steel and heat-tarnished copper.

"Better go 'n' shake up them blessed firemen, 's'pose," grunted the Second. "The Commodore 'll be grizzling again else."

He ducked through the chest-high door into the stoke-hold, entering a short, narrow passage whose sides and roof were composed of the furnace-walls and the curved sides of the boilers. He experienced as he did so a brief upsurge of the horror which always seized him at this moment; the fear that he should be exactly at this point, with the fires on

each side of him and the boilers above, when the ship was struck by a torpedo.

It disappeared as he crouched through into the stokehold, and stood upright again. It was quieter in there, but very much hotter; he put his hands on his hips and stared about him. It was as though he stood at the bottom of a deep, dark pit, whose soot-caked walls were fitfully illuminated by the glare from an open furnace door. This was an aperture about a foot square and at shoulder level, giving a glimpse of the long bed of flaming coals within.

In front of it stood a brawny man, in a ragged singlet and trousers so clotted with grease and coal-dust as to have lost any semblance to the original material. With his seamed, battered features screwed up against the glare, he was manipulating a slice; a long steel rod with which he was shaking up the fire to make the ashes fall through into the pit. He had just completed this to his satisfaction when, with his habitual accusatory yell, the Second Engineer demanded "Where's Paderooski ?"

The fireman jerked a thumb over his shoulder, towards the soot-black bulkhead a dozen feet away. "In the bunkers, givin' an 'and with the trimming," he said. "We can't 'elp the smoke, Second. Allers the same when the watch changes over. Clean the fires, put a few pitches on, bahnd to smoke, ain't she ? Why don't yer give us some more fan ?"

The Second did not deign to reply, and a cloud of acrid smoke filled the depths as the fireman began shovelling the

smoking cinders out of the pits, and onto the pile beneath the ash-hoist. He straightened with a grunt of exertion, and lurched over to the coal piled at the foot of the bunker-chutes.

The blade of his shovel scraped on the deck-plates as he attacked it, and with a perfectly-timed rhythm began scooping it up and swinging round to shoot it into the fire. The sweat-filmed skin of his shoulders glistened in the ruddy glow as his muscles bunched and slid beneath it; when the glare of the hot coals was blanketed under a fresh layer, he slammed the door shut with his shovel-blade and moved along to hook it under the catch of the next one.

The Second Engineer watched him with gloomy admiration as he repeated the process, then jerked with surprise as a voice yelled into his ear "Dat Big Cyril number one good fireman, yah?"

He swung around to glare at the shambling form of the Polish fireman with the unpronounceable name, whom the others had christened Paderooski. "Where you bin?" he yelled. "Who told you to help the trimmers? What you think you're signed on as a fireman for, to -"

His incipient sarcasm was aborted by a tremendous hollow boom; to the three men it seemed as though the outside of the ship had been struck by a colossal hammer. They tensed, staring at each other; Cyril froze in the act of slamming a furnace door, and his eyes flashed whitely as he looked a wild, silent question at the others.

"Someone's bought it," whispered the Second, and he glanced at the side of the ship as though he expected it to erupt inwards in a fury of water and flame. The thunderous concussion was repeated, this time with an even greater force. The shock-waves from the explosion pounded against the keel, so that they felt the entire fabric of the ship tremble and creak, and then a voice behind them said "All right - it's only depth charges."

They spun around to see the Fourth Engineer peering into the stokehold. "It's only depth-charges," he repeated, with his prominent eyes surveying them earnestly. "They just rang down from the bridge."

The Second winced as another enormous crash rang through the ship, vibrating metallically through her empty holds. "That Christly navy!" he howled indignantly. "What d' they think they're up to, this time of the morning? I'll bet there's not a submarine within a thousand mile! Like to get some o' those brass-bound young officers over here... bleedin' aristocracy...never done a flamin' day's work in their lives..."

He shouldered his way back through the little tunnel after the Fourth Engineer, and after simmering down for a little while he climbed up the steel ladders into the engineer's alleyway. The drumming booms continued at irregular intervals as he washed and changed, and when he stepped out on deck he saw the Cook leaning over the half-door of the galley. He would have walked past him on towards the saloon, but the Cook accosted him with a bitter snarl of

"Look at those silly bastards over there!"

The Second glanced over past the ships in columns parallel to them, towards the two corvettes steaming in apparently aimless circles. They were two or three miles from the convoy, rising and falling on the swells over which they coursed with the eager indirection of terriers on a hot scent. Some distance astern of one of them, the smoothly undulating surface of the sea shivered for an instant and then erupted into a great foaming bubble, collapsing back on itself in a broadening circle of foam. "Just practising, I reckon," growled the Cook. "I don't believe they know what they're playing at half the time, those blokes. Cle Jerry just laughs at 'em, take it from me."

He made this assertion, as usual, with a confident air of knowing all about it. He was a short, paunchy man, with a face in which some shock seemed to have congealed the blood into countless wiry red and purple veins beneath the skin. His habitual expression was one of barely-suppressed resentment, and he seemed like a hand-grenade, full of fury and menace; the slightest upset or frustration served to pull out the pin on his temper, and set him clashing the pots and pans together in a frenzy and swearing shockingly at the galley-boy. The latter, an unkempt and waxen-skinned youth, now peered over his shoulder with a look of eager melancholy, and enquired huskily "What's goin' on?"

"You'll be goin' on if you don't get them spuds peeled lively," answered the Cook. "Bad enough those bludgers over

there wasting all the taxpayers' money, without you wastin' time as well."

He cast a triumphant, man-to-man look at the Second Engineer, who sniffed haughtily at this scullions' altercation. With an abrupt shudder as the cold assailed him, he turned away and hurried towards the saloon.

The watch on the bridge was just being relieved when the first depth charge was dropped; the reverberations had just died away when a voice-pipe whistle shrilled. The Chief Officer, Mr. Keadwell, removed the whistle and spoke into the short brass trumpet, saying in his gentle voice "Only a depth-charge, sir."

"All right," said the Captain's sulky growl. "Lemme know if anything's happening."

"Aye, aye s'ir."

He replaced the whistle, and stepped out of the wheel-house to meet the small procession which was climbing up onto the bridge. This was led by the Third Mate, with his round unshaven face puffy and disgruntled with sleep; he wagged his head at Mr. Keadwell and grumbled "Started already, have they?"

He gestured towards the distant escort vessels, and Mr. Keadwell looked benevolently at him as he answered "I don't think it's very much. Just an exercise, I daresay."

The Third Mate grunted, and made way for those who were following him; a seaman coming to relieve the helm, two naval gunners to relieve the watch on the Hotchkiss guns,

and Francis Raven. One of the gunners was the youngster whom they called Cecil, and Raven asked him "How d'you feel this morning, then?"

"Don't ask me," whined Cecil, looking at him out of a face that was as moist and waxen as old cheese. "I'm not built for this kind of thing, truly I'm not."

The other gunner gave a coarse guffaw. "'ad a nice bitta fat bacon for yer brekfuss, didn't yer, love?" he enquired. He winked at Raven, continuing "Washed it down wiv a nice 'ot cup of milky tea, an' then 'e fairly tucked into a coupla real big cobs of bread and butter. M'm...lots o' loverly butter..."

Cecil's cheeks bulged and he looked piteously at Raven, before staggering across to one of the concrete gun-pits and leaning far outboard. "Poor little bleeder's got nuffin' to bring up," the other gunner said with scoffing pity. "He'd be better off if he et something."

"I suppose you all take it out of him pretty well, anyway," said Raven mildly, and the gunner shrugged. "We're all in the same boat," he replied. "He'll have to grow up sometime."

"You going to spend the whole day nattering?" yelled Flack's voice across to Raven, and the youngster walked across to where he stood leaning against the concrete armour. "Good-morning!" he greeted him cheerfully. "Navy's having a bit of excitement this morning?"

The older man surveyed him with gloomy distaste. "What's so bloody exciting about it?" he enquir'd, and then asked

"What's for breakfast ?"

"Meat-balls."

"Gawd 'elp us," muttered Flack, and slouched away into his cabin. The two gunners who had been relieved thudded away down the ladders in their rubber sea-boots; the Chief Officer and the Third Mate finished a brief conversation and the senior man picked up his life-jacket and steel helmet, ready to go below. "Good-morning, Mr. Keadwell," Raven greeted him, and the Chief Officer nodded a response. He wore a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles with whose aid he had been writing up his log-book; combined with his placid middle-aged face and his short, stumpy body they gave him the air of a side-street grocer, and made his old uniform cap seem somehow ridiculous.

"Don't like the look of the weather," he murmured, as his gentle far-seeing eyes roved over ships and sea, clouds and horizon. "Glass is dropping again...it's too quiet. Like a woman, it is; whenever she's quiet, you can be sure that something's brewing."

He chuckled drily at his own joke, but before Raven could answer the Third Mate shouted "Signal! Look alive, Sparky! What d'you think this is - a rest-cure ?"

"Baloney!" yapped Raven, feeling his face and neck grow red; he snatched the telescope from the rack and focussed it upon the Commodore ship. He already took some pride in reading signals quickly, and his anxiety to decipher this one was heightened by sensing the Third Mate's presence behind

him.

"Prob'ly just the Commodore's dirty old underpants," said that obscenely chuckling voice, and then "Well ?What is it ? Half the ships in the convoy are repeating it already."

Just then the wind blew out the Commodore's flags, and Raven saw them clearly. One of them half red and half blue; the other yellow with a black dot. "E I," he said; dropped the telescope in its rack, quickly unwound the signal halliard from its cleat, and held it in one hand as he selected the two flags from the pigeon-holed locker. By the time he had bent them on and was hauling them up, feeling his usual small pleasure at their bright briskness in the wind, the Third Mate had looked up the signal in the code-book and was saying "E I - enemy submarine in vicinity."

Raven scribbled it into the signal log, and looked with fresh interest at the two corvettes. As to most merchant seamen, the Navy's tactics, manoeuvres, and procedures were quite incomprehensible to Raven. Most of them doubted the Navy's ability to protect a convoy at all; too many ships were sunk in those days to believe that anything but luck could protect them. There was no understanding the Navy; sometimes a couple of ships would be sunk as suddenly and mysteriously as though they had blown up of their own accord, and the escorts would not appear to take the slightest notice; at other times they would spend the whole day like terriers after a rat which could be smelt but not seen, trying with a frenzy of impatience to dig it out. But ships were still

sunk with a deadly and monotonous regularity, and so far as anyone could see the Navy was powerless to do anything about it.

A kind of triple knock resounded along the ship's bottom, rap-rap-rap, followed by a dull boom. That's shaken 'em up a bit, thought Raven, and then in a moment of dreadful insight he saw the U-boat's crew as men like himself; young men who had been hesitating on the doorstep of life when the war started, and for whom the door had opened to reveal something very different from what they had expected. How would I feel, he questioned himself; how would I act if I was one of them ?

It was a question, phrased in different forms, which he had been asking himself repeatedly since the ship left port; the age-old query of the recruit who for the first time stands upon the edge of the battle-ground. How will I withstand the demands when they are made ? How will I face up to danger when it's snarling at my throat ?

His gaze drifted out across the wallowing ships, which eked out fathom by fathom their sluggish progress over the ancient plains of the sea; their masts, funnels, upperworks, slowly and rhythmically tolling out the passage of the swells; grey ships, grey sea, grey canopy of overhanging cloud. He pondered upon the everlasting question, bracing himself unconsciously to the dip and sway of the deck beneath his feet, and was so lost that he did not hear the Third Mate speaking to him until the latter shouted "Sparks! What the

hell's the matter with you ? Commodore's lowered his signal - can't you see ?"

Raven came to with a start, reddening with annoyance. He swiftly loosed the halliards and lowered the signal ; feeling the dully curious stare of Cecil fixed upon him he gave a shrug of embarrassment, and set himself to watching with a greyhound intensity for the Commodore's next hoist.

CHAPTER FIVE

Outward Bound : Morning

*

With appetite sharpened by four hours on watch, Mr. Keadwell entered the shabby little saloon; its almost palpable atmosphere of steam-heat, tobacco-smoke, and food-odours seemed to him to be homely and welcoming. As he applied himself to a plateful of lumpy porridge, the Third Engineer called across "What's all the palaver 'smorning, then, Mr. Keadwell?"

Without looking up, he answered "Just the usual. Navy playing about with depth-charges."

The Third Engineer scraped the gravy from his plate with his knife-blade, and licked it with relish. He was a man of about thirty, with the rubbery face and vulgar crafty eyes of a North-Country comedian. "I were going to sleep in this morning," he commented, "But when I heard them depth-charges I were up an' out of it like the lodger when he hears t' gaffer chapping on street-door. Booger me! There's nothing like a few depth-charges to free the bow-els, though. Better nor all yer Saturday-neet pills, they are. Just set 'em off at right time o' day, did the Navy."

The Second Engineer savaged savagely at the rubbery meat-ball on his plate, grumbling "How they expect a man to do a day's work on this grub, I dunno."

He rattled his spoon on his tea-cup to attract the steward's attention, and a sallow youth with carefully-crimped hair lounged in from the pantry, took the cup and returned with it

refilled. As he did so, a tall heavily-built man entered the saloon, nodding in response to the scattered grunts of " 'morning, Mr. Maclaren."

The chair creaked under the weight of Mungo Maclaren's body; the steward stood behind him and asked respectfully "Porridge, Second Mate ? Meat-balls an' mashed potatoes ?"

"Gimme a cup of tea," growled the Second Mate. His small blue eyes, enmeshed in a web of weather-wrinkled skin, cast one fierce sweeping glance around the table as though he challenged anyone to question his decision. His large head, clustering with steel-grey curls, had a kind of battered nobility; he carried it very upright upon his bulky shoulders and broad chest.

His entry into the saloon seemed to paralyse conversation; the others continued to eat in silence, or lounged out to resume their duties. One of these was the Chief Engineer, who stood out on deck filling his pipe and staring earnestly at the sea, as though it had some secret which would resolve itself under close enough study; a stocky figure in carpet slippers and a uniform so old that the four gold rings on his sleeve were a greenish-black; with a scrubby greying moustach and the sparse hair streaked back over the broad flat dome of his head.

He watched the two corvettes hurrying back to rejoin the convoy, to resume their endless circling and probing, seemingly aimless dawdling, sudden errant dashes or long casts which took them almost out of sight. The short-hulled

corvettes seemed almost to bounce over the swells, and a brilliant eye of light began to blink rapidly against the grey upperworks of the leading craft. The words which it was flashing across the bleak morning were acknowledged by brief, nonchalant flicks of light from the commodore ship. The soundless conversation continued for a few minutes, then ceased abruptly; the Chief Engineer felt as frustrated as a man watching the flickering sign-language of deaf-mutes.

About twenty miles away now, a kind of dimly-lit steel tunnel, its walls covered with intricate apparatus, reeled beneath the surface of the sea. Its sides were no longer shuddering with the tremendous booming clangs as the sound and shock waves of the explosions smashed against them, with an impact as solid as though the sea itself had changed into speeding masses of fluid stone, but nevertheless the craft was barely under control.

Ober-leutnant Wolfgang Lowke stood holding onto one of the stanchions for support, watching the men at the controls as they attempted to balance the perpetually altering trim of the submarine; his ears ached with the pressure which was building up from escaping compressed air, and when he moved a step or two his feet crunched upon the broken glass which littered the deck-plates.

Stooping his angular frame through the doorway, von Muffling returned from inspecting the damage in the forward compartments; his face looked more like a skull than ever as

he made his report to Lowke. The Ober-leutnant was aware of the carefully-studying yet impassive eyes, and his mind flicked back over the minutes of the attack and counter-attack. The torpedo which had failed to run, the plangent rhythm of Asdic impulses against their pressure-hull, the express-train crescendo of propellers approaching at full speed and the grinding, wrenching thunder of the first depth-charge pattern...well, there was nothing much out of the ordinary about all that, and the fact that his boat was still afloat testified to his evasive skill. And yet...it was difficult to feel at ease with von Muffling.

"It seems that the English are improving," he said with deliberate calm, and the Freiherr's taut face flickered with an indefinable expression. Watching his eyes, Lowke said "I shall surface as soon as possible. The engineers will have to do their best while they can."

He looked at his watch, and then turned to give the orders to bring the boat up. The U-boat groped her way upwards as quietly as a fish, and as soon as the periscope could be raised Lowke greedily drank in his first glimpse of the world above. There seemed to be nothing in sight, but he hesitated for some time until he was satisfied that there was nothing to be seen but sea and sky. He stepped back, snapping his fingers through a moment's indecision before he gave the orders to surface.

"Heavenly God," he sighed, leaning back against the coaming of the conning-tower. Nothing had ever seemed so

good as the salt-cold flick of the spray across his face; the draughts of keen air which seemed to flow into every crevice of his being. The officers' steward came up through the hatch, with a tin mug containing Lowke's share of the spirit ration which he had ordered to be issued; he lifted it to his lips and sniffed the aromatic pungency of the brandy before he took a deep swallow.

He felt its mellow warmth expand and glow within him as he groped for a signal pad, and wrote "To Naval High Command West. Enemy convoy approximately 40 ships escort strength 2 to 5 light warships last observed 0730 61.24 North 34.35 West course 230 degrees speed 7 to 9 knots stop. My pursuit uncertain on account damage sustained stop. Further report follows after inspection ends."

He ripped off the form and gave it to one of the seamen. "Request Lieutenant von Muffling to have this coded and transmitted immediately," he said.

Twenty minutes later, the telegraphist on watch pressed the starter button of the motor-generator; the relays clicked and whirred and the generator settled down to a steady pulsing hum. His fingers bounced on the transmitting key, and each time that it closed the circuits the electrical impulses leaped out of the spray-dripping aerial, radiated across the grey prairies of ocean and assumed meaning once more as the receiving operator translated them into typewritten characters.

A little later, and in a different code, a teletype

operator tapped it along the line to Berlin; the next stage of its destiny was fulfilled in a huge underground room, whose walls were almost concealed by the maps framed upon them. Shortly afterwards it was being transmitted in a slightly different form, and received in another radio office. The circuit was complete.

CHAPTER SIX

Outward Bound : Afternoon

*

Since it had left Milford Haven, the convoy had already fought its way through a north-westerly gale. Torn out of their stations by the vicious onslaught of wind and sea, the ships had scattered into a disorderly mob barely able to maintain signalling distance. The escorts, rising and falling dizzily with the waves, butting into them with explosions of spray torn away in hissing clouds upon the wind, had been like sheep-dogs attempting to rally a scattered flock. Hoist after hoist of signals had been dragged up on the commodore ship's halliards, the flags streaming wet and taut in the wind. 'Keep closed up.' 'Maintain proper station.' He had had no need to worry about smoke in those days - it had been snatched away too fast by the shrieking wind.

To Raven, who had the incredibly good fortune of freedom from sea-sickness, it was all magnificent. He was unable to understand the snarling complaints of Flack, who whinged that "A flippin' wireless operator's place is in the wireless room - not stuck out in the open like a bloomin' scarecrow!"

There were scores of scenes impressed upon his eagerly grasping memory; a thousand impression which had now cohered to form a background to his new life. He gazed with endless fascination at the great heaving swing of the decks, glistening dully with shed water, as they raised themselves to climb another wave, and the sudden dive as they

descended the other side; squattering down into huge and outflung sheets of foam and with the spray flung back in a countless teeming of white drops. When he tasted this salt spray upon his lips, he experienced a romantic pleasure.

The sea itself, flogged into charging fury by the wind, an endless succession of waves of which each one seemed to have its own distinct and menacing personality, held him likewise enthralled. The clouds which streamed above them like another intangible sea, rolling and weltering through the sky; the lurid and menacing sunsets, which enamelled the waves with a brief bloody gleam, all seemed to him like glimpses of some great revelation.

Awed as he was by such elemental displays, he was almost as awed by the men with whom he sailed. It seemed to him now that they had been formed and fashioned by the sea, and that they did not come into their own until they were framed by its majesty. The Captain, standing motionless in his gleaming oilskins, staring out through the salt-crustured wheelhouse windows with a slight disdainful frown, seemed like a symbol of the vast patience which old seamen learn. The Bo'sun, slithering about the decks in his sea-boots, leaping for safety with a spatter of oaths when a green sea rolled aboard, and carrying on with a cheerful yell to his men, depicted the careless and casual endurance which buoys the seafarer against the demands of the sea. He even found it possible to admire the Third Mate, simply because of the matter-of-fact way in which he stood his watch on the bridge.

After the storm had passed them by, ravaging onwards to torment the wastes between Iceland and the Faeroes, there had been a lull for several days. Time enough for the convoy to restore itself into some kind of order, for the stragglers to catch up, and for the angry hackles of the waves to sink. They subsided into the voyaging swells which swept endlessly onwards as though to keep another rendezvous with the wind.

They had not far to go. As Mr. Keadwell had predicted, there was fresh trouble brewing, and an icy breeze came hurrying to whip the tops from the swells. By sunset they had lost their rhythmic regularity, and were streaked and veined with foam; the ships rolled more sharply and the overcast was stripped into long ragged streamers against the fading blue of the sky. The Austrian Duke took her first big roll shortly before tea-time; the tables laid in the saloon were cleared in an instant, and the rattling crash of crockery brought the Chief Steward leaping out of his cabin, foaming maledictions against his staff.

"Why'n't you wet the tablecloth? Why'n't you put the muckin' fiddles on?" he demanded of the two youths picking up the debris. "Too flamin' tired, 's all it is. Coupla flaming useless Army-dodgers."

He dragged the 'fiddles,' an arrangement of wooden slats, out from beneath the tables, and fastened them so that they divided the table-tops into a number of small square compartments. "Soddin' old cow!" he yelped as the ship

rolled again, sending him reeling against the sideboard, and he snatched a water-bottle from the rack to dampen the table-cloths, already stained with a week's accumulation of tea, gravy, and tomato sauce.

He glanced nervously over his shoulder as he heard a step on the inside stairs leading up to the Captain's quarters; a moment later the Captain himself appeared in the saloon doorway, and stood there steadying himself against the roll. "What's all this?" he asked gruffly.

The Chief Steward squirmed like an anxious spaniel. "Just an ax'dent, sir," he explained hurriedly. "She took a roll, d'ye see, an' cleared the tables - "

The Captain stood watching the two youths replacing pieces of undamaged crockery on the tables. His keen, scornful eyes looked out from under the brim of a faded felt hat, which he wore at all times and in all weathers. Its ribbon had faded away many years ago, and he had replaced it with a band of woven sennit which gave it a rakish jaunty air altogether foreign to his nature.

Standing in the saloon doorway, ominous and old, he clamped his big hands onto the door-jambs and scornfully regarded the three stewards. Flustered by his steady implacable gaze, the Chief Steward clucked fussily around the other two; picking up a broken plate and holding the two halves together as though his desire to make it whole again could mend the fracture. "Not much damage done," he said with jerky vivacity. "Coupla plates broken, that's all - "

"Those plates cost money," growled the Captain. "Who d'ye think pays for 'em? It's your job to see that plates don't get broken."

"Yessir, yessir."

The Chief Steward surreptitiously toed another fragment of crockery into the shadow of the table, as he ostentatiously busied himself with knives and forks. He longed for this moment to be over, and his mind seethed with retorts and insults which he knew that he would never dare to deliver. But just as the Captain seemed about to depart, a loud voice demanded from the end of the alleyway "Chief Steward 'ere?"

The steward moistened his lips, glanced at the Captain, and called "Here - in the saloon. What's the matter?"

"What's the matter?" demanded the voice. "This muck yer dishing up for tea's the matter. We want to see the skipper about it."

The Captain and Chief Steward exchanged a look which was not a look; a fractional second of communication which yet contained an infinity of meaning. Because these two men, like so many others of their rank in the British Merchant Service, were partners in crime.

Their crime consisted of cheating the shipowners, as most owners of most ships are cheated by their Captains and Chief Stewards. Approximately twenty per cent of the provisions for which the shipowners paid was never delivered, and the value of this proportion was divided between the Captain, the Chief Steward, and the shipchandlers.

All this was contained in the look which flashed between them as Captain Macnamara turned out of the doorway, and began to move slowly down the short alleyway to the deck. His look said to the Steward: "Can't you arrange things better than this ?" and the Steward'said in return: "You're the skipper. You get your whack. You sort it out."

Silhouetted against the fading daylight, the Captain could see the figures of two seamen standing in the doorway. They were holding metal kits from which a faint steam still rose, and muttering churlishly together.

"You want to see me ?" rumbled the Captain, and the two men seeing his bulky form appear out of the shadows stepped back a few inches. For a moment, they were silent; they had been expecting an argument with the Chief Steward, full of sound and fury but in its own way enjoyable. Then one of them spoke up.

"Look at this, Captain," he demanded, and thrust forward one of the kits. "D'you expect a man to do a day's work on this stuff ?"

The Captain said nothing, but continued to move forward until he had reached the weather-sill of the door. There was a clatter above his head, and he glanced up to see the young Radio Officer coming down the bridge ladders.

Raven reached the main deck, hesitated for an instant when he saw the three men, and then dodged into his cabin. He was intensely curious as to what was happening, and once he was inside he stood with his ear close to his door-

ventilator.

"What's the matter with it ?" he heard in the Captain's heavy and uncompromising tones. "It's the same as I eat myself."

"Well, that's as maybe, Captain, but we don't reckon that - "

"Don't reckon what ?"

"Well...we don't reckon we're getting our fair whack."

"Who's we ?"

"Why...me 'n' my mate 'ere. Aye...an' all of us down the fo'c'sle."

There was a moment's silence, and Raven could imagine the Captain's rock-like face gazing contemptuously at the contents of the kits, cold and congealed by now in the knout-like wind. Then another voice broke in; a voice with a touch of Irish, sneering and looking for trouble. "Ach, come away out of it, Geordie," it said. "Ye'll get nothing outa the owld fella here. He's lining his pockets even if he isn't lining his belly."

"That'll do from you," said the Captain. "You - what's your name ?"

"Costello. You know that well enough."

"All right, Costello. You get along aft. You're getting all you're entitled to. Better than I ever fared when I was a seaman."

"Ah, that's just the trouble," said Costello. "Just because you lived on salt junk and biscuit, you reckon we

should have the same. Just let me tell you something,
Captain - "

"No, just let me tell you something - "

"Just wait till we get to the States, Captain!" shouted Costello. "Then we'll have a reckoning, eh? There's a law, y' know! We'll be up to see the Consul, all of us, an' you can tell 'im how much you made on the grub this trip!"

"Don't you threaten me, young fella, or you'll find yourself in the Log!"

"Ach - stuff yer Log! An' here's a present for yer!"

Raven heard a metallic clatter, which he deduced to be the kits of food flung down upon the deck. There was a brief and defiant silence, and then a guttural roar from the Captain. "Now you just clean that up! Just the sort of swine's trick I'd expect from sailors nowadays! Huh - sailors, ye call yourselves! I've spewed up better sailors!"

"Then you'd better start spewing, Mister Captain Macna-bloody-mara," was Costello's parting shot. "Because there's a few of us might be jumping ship when we get to the States!"

There was silence again except for the mournful drone of the rising wind; the slap of a curling wave against the plates. Raven waited a few moments before cautiously opening his door, to find that the protagonists had disappeared. There was nothing left except a greasy puddle of stew at the entrance to the alleyway, over which he stepped carefully on his way to partake of the despised dish.