

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ambush

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Raven watched the approach of evening from a favourite spot he had found; perched on the vegetable lockers abaft the engine-room skylights. Three four-hour watches out of every day spent in the wireless room, and the stuffiness of slumber in his blacked-out cabin, gave him a hunger for fresh air; this vantage-point made him feel that he was a little above the iron confines of the ship.

The long easy voyaging of the swells, which now took a paler colour from the fading sky, reminded him in their constant rhythmic passage of the music 'Fingal's Cave' which Kenny had often put on her record-player. Overhead, seemingly endless lines of clouds journeyed like some vast dreamy armada from one rim to another of the horizon; 'fine weather clouds,' he had heard Mr. Keadwell describe them, and stored up the information to use in one of his close-packed letters to Kenny.

Moving his gaze from the sky to a movement along the deck, he saw Cecil strolling aimlessly forward from the stern accommodation; the young gunner saw him looking down, and climbed the boat-deck ladder to join him. Raven watched him lazily, neither welcoming nor repelling; the ocean passage seemed to have washed away most of what had gone between them as the storm had swept off rubbish left around the decks. He greeted the gunner with an amiable condescension, like a

very much older brother; he found that he was not displeased by the manner in which Cecil had turned to him again as though he was the one person to whom he could talk freely.

"What you were saying yesterday," began Cecil abruptly as he hoisted himself up beside Raven, and the latter gave a parsonical nod. These discussions of the youngster's anomaly gave him a pleasingly mature feeling.

"It's not easy, you know," asserted Cecil argumentatively. "I didn't ask to be the way I am. In fact...well, I wasn't really as bad before I went in the Navy. I used to get around the West End a lot with the other lads, but I never... well, you know, actually gave in to anybody. I just used to think it a joke, stringing along the old geysers who wanted to buy me drinks. I got so I could see 'em a mile off."

Remembering the way in which Cecil had grappled himself to Armentraut, Raven could picture that apprenticeship. "It wasn't till I got amongst all those men that I went overboard," Cecil mumbled. His head was turned away, and the curve of his cheek was flushed with the pale tangerine of the declining sun. "You never knew anything like it...dirty bastards wouldn't leave me alone. If they weren't after...you know... they were teasing me all the time. They were the worst, I s'pose."

He drew his cigarettes out of the neck of his jumper, and offered one to Raven. "Be black-out time soon," muttered the Radio Officer as they lit up, and Cecil blew a long streamer of smoke into the breeze as he continued "I went to the Regulating Petty Officer once when I was in barracks, an'

asked to see the Captain. All 'e did was push me out of it, and tell me not to try on any of those larks or I'd be sorry for it."

His voice died away into an aggrieved whine, and he smoked in silence for a minute or two. "The young blokes, an' the H.O. ratings, weren't so bad," he said eventually. "They just used to kid me. It were the regulars that were the worst. There was a couple of 'em that really wanted me, you could see that, an' the rest were real sarky. So finely I just... gave in..."

"It beats me," said Raven into the following silence, but he suddenly pictured his father; bluff, uncomprehending, the big dark muscular Christian. The memory made him change his tone, thinking: Who am I to preach ?

He murmured "All that's in the past now. You don't have to think about it. Everyone makes a false step now and again, but now you can start afresh."

The sun had almost gone now, and there was an angry shout from the bridge as Cecil tossed his cigarette-end overboard, trailing a pennant of sparks. The two young men sat on in silence, feeling the breeze bite colder, until Cecil remarked almost conversationally "I'm afraid. I'm afraid all the time. If there's another do like the one we had coming out, I'll bet you I just go mad."

Oh God, thought Raven; what do I say now ? All the words in his mind became meaningless as he remembered Cecil during the attack. He shivered, and then lowered himself down from

the locker. "I dunno what...well, I just wish I could help you, that's all," he said quietly. "The only thing you can do is remember that we're all in it together. It's just as bad for all of us."

"You'll be my friend, though, won't you?" demanded Cecil softly and pleadingly. "I'm sorry for all that happened in New York - honest I am. I've made up me mind to be better now."

Raven turned away, not wanting to answer but knowing that he had to. "Just don't worry about it," he said. "I'll see what I can do to help you when we get home again, if you like. Come on - it's getting bloody cold."

They parted at the foot of the ladder, groping their different ways along the darkening decks. Before long Raven relieved Flack in the wireless room, and put on the earphones through which came nothing but the faint hiss of the circuits. Flack was disposed to gossip, and rambled on for some time about the minor scandal of the ship; how the assistant steward had told him that Mungo Maclaren lay all day in his bunk, staring at the deckhead; what the Captain had said when he came into the wireless room and found that he was not wearing a life-jacket during an action drill; how the Second Engineer had been in the lavatory when the bells sounded, and refused to come out until he had finished, and so on.

"They're a bit of a joke, now, anyway, these action drills," ventured Raven. "Everyone's expecting a drill all the time, so we'd probably think something had gone wrong if it was a real attack."

Flack wagged his head, yawning. "We ought to be pretty safe all the way down here, anyway," he opined. "All the Jerries 'll be way up north, watching the convoy routes. Oh well - I'm gonna turn in. Gimme a good shake at midnight."

Raven braced himself comfortably against the constant steady roll of the ship, and picked up the magazine which Flack had been reading. Outside on the bridge he could hear the steady pacing of the Third Mate as he kept his watch, and every now and again the steering gear would give a rumbling clatter as the helmsman moved the wheel. He felt scruffy and unwashed; like everyone else on the ship, he slept in his clothes all the time and never removed any part of them except for a rapid toilet. A lifeboat passage in pyjamas, or without his trousers, would reduce his chances of survival to a minimum.

This same condition of unwashed scruffiness plagued the submarine's crew as well, but to an even greater degree. There was no water at all left for washing with, either laundry or personal, and von Muffling hated the wispy beard which he was forced to grow. He pulled at its sparse tufts as he stared into the darkness, making an effort to stop himself from asking the helmsman for yet another check on their course. He told himself that there was nothing more to be done; all his orders were given, everything was prepared, and the fiercest efforts could not advance the dawn. He found himself wondering what Ober-Leutnant Lowke would have done in such a position, and checked himself once more. A

spectre moved within some convolution of his mind, and with a silent sneer enquired: And if the enemy can strike back and damage us, what then? How shall we get to port if we can't submerge?

The muttered words of a look-out drove the spectre away, and he looked in the direction indicated. For the merest instant, he perceived a tiny scattering of distant sparks, like a cigarette-end caught by the wind; glancing at his luminous watch-dial, he saw that it was midnight. The watches would be changing, and the engine-room cleaning fires; soot and sparks were rushing up the funnel to provide them with a homing beacon. "Very good," he acknowledged curtly, and moved away to lower himself through the hatch. There was nothing more to be done before morning...except think.

His thoughts followed remarkably similar lines to those of Captain Tempest, at present impatiently blowing upon a mug of tea until it should be cool enough to drink. There was nothing definite in the Captain's mind, merely a vague premonition of disaster; everything about this first command of his seemed to have gone wrong, and his present habit of irregular meals and of broken sleep which was merely beneath the surface of consciousness, with his mind perpetually tuned to the wavelength of apprehension, did not allow him to see any silver linings.

His lips sipped at the hot tea, his eyes roved about the midnight sea and sky in which nothing could be seen except the occasional seal-like glisten of a voyaging swell, his

mind saw the shabby Cardiff office with its dirty windows and overflowing pigeon-holes which was the headquarters of the shipping company. Damn it, I did want to make a go of this trip, he thought miserably; where did I go wrong? Now's the time when a man gets a chance to establish himself; who's to know what will happen after the war?

A shadowy form insinuated itself past him and moved on rubbery feet into the wheel-house, taking over the helm; the departing helmsman reported his course and was answered with a grunt. "Keep a good look-out, now!" he heard flung after him as he plodded down the ladders, and answered casually "Aye aye s'."

Mr. Keadwell, arriving on the bridge at four a.m., found the Captain leaning wearily against the slabs of cement which were bolted round wheel-house, chart-room, and wireless-room; he was tempted for a moment to make a fatherly suggestion that he reinstate the Second Mate for watch-keeping purposes, and give himself a more normal routine, but when the Captain pushed himself briskly forward to meet him he thought it wiser to say nothing.

The Captain seemed unwilling to leave the bridge, but finally drifted away into the wheel-house; at about a quarter to seven he reappeared again. Mr. Keadwell, anticipating his cup of tea and then a few minutes of enjoyable discussion with the Bo'sun, as they mapped out the day's work, allowed himself to purse his lips; he glanced at the Captain as the latter roamed uneasily about the bridge, took out the binoculars to

stare out over the swells which were just beginning to show a glimmer of reflected light, and then looked at him and muttered "Let's have 'em out of their bunks, shall we ?" as he moved towards the alarm-bell button.

Mr. Keadwell felt a brief sense of outrage that the Captain should thus attempt to associate him with his unsympathetic scheme, and then began to shrug on his life-jacket; as the alarm-bells clamoured he stopped moving, looked up under his eyebrows, and then cocked his head sideways. What...

"Did you hear that ?" yelled the Captain, and the sound was promptly repeated; a whistling scream that was followed by a distant sullen bang. The Captain leapt past him and up onto the monkey-island in what seemed to be a single movement, and a few seconds later shouted "Submarine to starboard... hard-a-port! Hard-a-port!"

Mr. Keadwell thumped into the wheel-house and bore down upon the wheel, looking into the startled face of the helmsman and snapping "This is real! Bear hard over!"

The telephone rang, and when he answered it a voice spluttered "There's a - a - "

"Open fire immediately!" he shouted into it, and collided with the Captain in the wheel-house doorway. The little man's eyes were bulging, and he gasped "Would you believe it ?" as he snatched the megaphone from its hook.

The ship was swinging fast now, to present the smallest possible profile to the submarine; as the Captain scampered out onto the bridge with his megaphone a massive clap of

sound seemed to hit him as the new four-inch was fired. At the same moment an eruption of sea-water spouted up amidships, and as it collapsed he saw the submarine for the first time; a tiny shape which rose on the swells a couple of miles astern.

"Himmeldonnerkreutzsakramentscheissarsch!" snarled von Muffling as he saw the sudden orange spout of flame against the grey dawn and the grey ship's upperworks, and for the second time a shell howled somewhere over his head. Their aim at the moment was hopeless, but they had the advantage over him of a far steadier gun platform and might get over their surprise too soon to be comfortable; he was about to bawl at his own gunners when the shock and flash of the U-boat's three-inch slammed back against the conning-tower.

He clenched his teeth when he saw the white fountain rise a hundred metres to starboard of the target; the U-boat sank like an elevator down the side of a swell, so that the ship was obscured by the rippled slope which surged up ahead of her, and when the target was bearing again he saw three looping streams of scarlet sailing gracefully towards him in long slow-seeming arcs. They rose to the limit of their trajectory, and then came faster and faster as they descended; smacking against the water with vicious spurts some distance ahead.

Ginger and his gun's crew heard the cannon-shells make strange whipping cracks and howls as they passed overhead on the upward arch of their long trajectory, and Ginger jerked the words "Tell those crazy bastards they're wasting their time" out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrated upon his aiming. In a surface action, all the naval ratings were

employed on the four-inch gun; the 20-mm. cannons and other armament were being fired by members of the ship's crew, laboriously trained by Ginger himself.

He hissed between clenched teeth as he attempted to lay his gun upon the tiny target, and his bowels flinched as he saw through his telescope the puff of ochreous smoke which was snatched by the breeze, stabbed by orange flame, and followed instantly by the long hurtling scream of the shell. Pom! said the flat explosion in the distance, and he clenched his own hand upon the trigger.

"C'm ahn, you bastards!" he yelled at his crew, knowing that they could not hear him with their ears ringing like his with the tremendous concussion. The ship was now headed directly into the swells; the gun-platform alternately rose majestically into the air and then swooped downwards with a thundering vibration as the screw bit deeper into the water; it demanded every atom of his skill and concentration to lay his sights on the target for more than a second or so at a time. Neither gun had scored a hit so far, and when Ginger's next shot screeched far over von Muffling's head he was sufficiently encouraged to order more speed. It seemed to him that the enemy gun was being served by amateurs, and that by closing the range he might finish this affair without much trouble.

On the bridge of the Austrian Duke, the Captain poked his head into the wireless room to watch Flack methodically sending out the signal 'SSSS - GUNNED,' followed by the position. Raven was standing by him, and met the Captain's stare with wide excited eyes in a pallid face; as soon as

Flack's hand ceased its staccato dance upon the key, the Captain shouted "What's he doing up here ? He's supposed to be standing by the boats with the radio gear ?"

"I might want 'im," grunted Flack. "Don't bother me when I'm busy." The Captain opened his mouth, and then jumped backward backwards as their gun went off again. "You're as well off up here," muttered Flack as he moved the receiver dials. It was unlikely that any craft would give away her own position by answering or acknowledging his call, but he automatically followed the correct procedure. "No sense in standing out in the open to be shot at. Plenty of time to go down when - "

A series of concussions hammered into the wireless room from the automatic cannon in the port wing of the bridge, and Raven's ear-drums seemed to flick rapidly in and out. This gun was being enthusiastically served by the Third Mate, one of the assistant stewards, and Old Stanley. "The queer fella means business," Old Stanley was saying as he squinted at another puff of smoke from the U-boat, just as the Captain roared "Stop wasting god-damned ammunition! What d'you think this is - a god-damned Brock's benefit ?"

Raven noticed with almost detached interest that Flack's hands were trembling as he fiddled with the knobs of the receiver, and that his own muscles were leaping and quivering like those of a fly-pestered horse. It was as though they were attempting to assert their independent command, and to force him to remove them to a place of safety; he clenched his teeth together and gripped the back of Flack's chair with a mixture of defiance and shame. Out on deck, there were

many in the same state as himself; it was worst for those who had nothing to do but wait, and listen to the irregular slamming of the four-inch, the ear-beating staccato of the cannons, and the dreadful sounds of the shells which passed now overhead, now to port or starboard; each time sounding different according to the angles at which they passed, but always having that sound of intense and incredibly vicious speed, so that the bowels turned to jelly and the flesh was paralysed at thought of their impact.

Mr. Keadwell had made all hands take cover who were not serving the guns, and he moved steadily from one little group to another saying "All right, lads...it'll soon be over now... he'll get tired of it in a minute," in the manner of a trusted old physician who is reassuring a patient. Down in the engine-room the Chief was standing on the foot-plates, with his hands on the regulating-valve whilst he leaked more and more steam into the pounding engines; the Second Engineer had taken charge in the stoke-hold, and with a wealth of bitter sarcasm directed the placing of each pitch of coal.

Through his binoculars, von Muffling could now see the gun's crew on the Austrian Duke as a tiny huddled group about their weapon, with some ratings a little apart from the others; as the ship's stern dropped down into a trough of the swell, he had a momentary glimpse along the whole deck of the ship as her bows rose steeply upwards, and bellowed "Fire!" at his own crew. But he was an instant too late; the gun exploded as the submarine's own bows slid downwards, and the shell hit the

top of a swell and went skipping and bouncing off end-over-end over the palely-gleaming surface of the water, passing so close to the ship's side that he gave a frustrated gasp. When he had his glasses trained again, he was just in time to see the sudden blossom of yellow-brown smoke which flowered from the mouth of the gun, but could see too that it was trained well to starboard of the submarine. This is absurd, he thought; we can both do this all day. After a moment's hesitation, he leaned over the conning-tower to yell a stream of guttural orders at his gunners.

Ginger the gun-layer was sweating with the effort of trying to train his gun against the rhythmic rise and fall of the ship's stern, of the distant submarine, and of the scend from side to side as the apprehensive helmsman let the ship fall off; he straightened up for a moment and turned his head to yell "Tell 'em to stop this bloody ship wagging her tail!" at the telephone rating. This was Cecil, and he perceived with astonishment that the lad was stretched full length on the cleated steel plates of the gun platform, with his hands pressing tightly against the earphones of the head-set which he wore; almost unable to feel or comprehend fear, he thought for a moment that the youngster must be hurt. An instant later he forgot all about him, as a splitting bang somewhere over the funnel informed him of the submarine's new tactics. "Air-bursts, be Jesus!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of that!"

The men in the gun-pits and otherwise exposed were not so quick to realise what was happening, but the second air-burst sent them scurrying for cover. The splinters which sounded

like great vicious knives being slashed through taut canvas, and which hit the vessel's decks and upper-works with huge shuddering clangs, seemed to have each member of the crew as their target; Ginger realised that one burst above the gun would finish him and his mates. Even so, he used particular care in sighting his next shot; what they could do to him, he could also do to them, and he set himself upon this object with a frigidly savage determination.

"Stand still, you bloody shagging old bitch," he mumbled to the ship as she cocked up her stern once more, and then waited coldly for the moment when it began to descend. Another shell burst somewhere off the bridge, and he thought he heard a ghastly masculine scream; the next second he began to brace his feet against the descending stern and to prepare his mind for the moment when he must fire. His brain ticked off the time in milliseconds, his hand about the trigger-grip poised with its muscles needing but an extra fraction of strength, and then his fingers tightened towards his palm.

The striker snapped home, the detonator exploded, the cartridge thrust its colossal prisoned strength along the barrel of the gun and burst forth into smoke, flame, and air-shattering sound. Before it went the shell, curving upon its graceful trajectory with the fuse within it eating its way towards destruction.

The Freiherr von Muffling actually saw the shell coming in his direction, and there had been so long a pause since the last shot that he was almost surprised. He had thought that one of his air-bursts might have demoralised the amateur

gun's crew, but in any case he was not, in those last few seconds of his life, very much disturbed. The shooting had been so bad, and he had perceived that the aim, as usual, had been somewhat off.

He was still looking through his binoculars when the shell burst, about twenty feet above and to the left of his head.

He barely had time to hear the splitting noise before a piece of metal of rather peculiar shape, something like a wedge with many sharp serrated edges, struck him with immense velocity where his neck joined his left shoulder. Perhaps he was luckier than some of the others upon the outside of the submarine, who also received odd-shaped pieces of steel within their bodies but had to live on for some time afterwards.

During the next frantic minutes, in which several more shells from the merchant ship burst close nearby but did no more than to thresh the sea into spurning foam, the unhurt ratings dragged screaming and gurgling men down through the hatch, and followed them down a ladder which was slippery with blood. As the U-boat submerged, the corpse of von Muffling floated off together with that of a petty officer, and they were gathered together and tumbled down the slope of the next journeying swell. For a little while afterwards, the water where the submarine had been was stained with murky crimson, but very soon that too had disappeared and the swells moved rhythmically on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Waiting

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As cautiously as turtles, the men who had been sheltering from the air-bursts poked out their heads to examine the meaning of a strange outcry of singing and cheering, and they saw the crew of the four-inch holding a kind of corroboree upon the gun-platform. Capering round and round, shaking hands and slapping each other on the back, they celebrated their victory; even Cecil came in for tolerant smiles and yells as he leaned back against a ready-use locker and tried to force his erratic hands to light a cigarette.

They continued to caper upon their heaving stage until an urgent yell from Mr. Keadwell brought them back to reality. "Stand by the boats, lads," he bellowed. "They'll be letting drive with a torpedo next!"

As soon as he saw them scampering towards him, he bobbed into the engine-room and bawled the news down to the Chief Engineer, telling him to clear the engine-room and stokehold. Feet were pounding towards the boat-deck from all directions as he came out again, and a wavering shout from the bridge made him glance upwards. He observed the exceptional sight of the helmsman being sick over the bridge rails, whilst Raven stood beside him and beckoned to Mr. Keadwell. His face was as yellow as cheese, and he called in the same quavering voice "You'd better come up here, Mr. Keadwell. Something's happened to the Captain."

The Chief Officer plodded forward in his rubber boots,

climbed the ladder to the lower bridge, plodded the few steps forward to the bridge ladder, and then checked sharply.

A little cataract of blood was trickling down from step to step of the ladder, and collecting in a pool at its foot; he noticed with a sudden nausea that the surface of this pool was riffled with the wind, just as though it had been any other liquid, and furthermore that it was sending rapid little streamers in every direction each time the ship rose and fell.

He hesitated, then hurried around the lower bridge and up the port ladder, passing through the wheelhouse to see a heap of bloody rags flung up against the concrete armour. He was conscious of eyes watching him, and looked over to see the Third Mate, Old Stanley, and the assistant steward all crouching in the gun pit, staring at him like a litter of frightened puppies. "This won't do," he remarked. "There's no one at the wheel."

"Gerrooo," came in a moaning retch from the helmsman; Mr. Keadwell glanced at him and snapped "Take the wheel, Third Mate. We're going to have a torpedo up our bum in a brace of shakes."

The Third Mate obeyed, tip-toeing carefully between the runnels of blood, and Mr. Keadwell bent to look at the Captain. Nothing to be done, he decided promptly, and then meeting Old Stanley's gaze he said "Cover him up with a couple of flags out of the locker."

"Aye aye," replied the seaman briskly, and as he stepped forward he remarked "Copped the lot, he did...or plenty of it, anyway. Look here - and here."

He pointed towards various great chunks which had been savaged out of the concrete armour, and to a piece of metal which was stuck in the deck like a spear-head. Mr. Keadwell grunted, and then said "Don't stand around up here - and you two Sparkies get out of it, too. We're going to cop it ourselves in a minute."

He went into the wheelhouse and stood beside the Third Mate, who asked meekly "Shall I put her back on her proper course, Mr. Keadwell?"

"Don't suppose it signifies," said the older man wearily, and groped for his pipe. He did not hurry about filling or lighting it, feeling a comfort in the familiar motions, and when he had puffed out a few aromatic clouds he leaned upon the engine-room telegraph, bracing himself for the shock to come. Gazing out upon the long eternal undulations of the swells, now all a-sparkle with the glitter of the morning sun, he pictured to himself the bitter voyage which he imagined lay ahead. Over a thousand miles of sea in any direction, and all to be traversed with sail and oars alone. Oh well, he reflected, plenty of others have done it since this war began, and plenty more of us will do it before it ends; some of us will survive...

"I can't bloody stand much more of this!" exclaimed the Third Mate suddenly, and Mr. Keadwell gave him a puzzled frown. The Third Mate gave the wheel a vicious shake, grumbling "If they're going to bloody well do us in, why don't they hurry up about it?"

Mr. Keadwell glanced at the bulkhead clock, rasped his hand across his chin, and then moved out onto the bridge. He stepped delicately around the slaughterhouse debris which lay there, and walked along to look down towards the boat-deck.

The groups of men assembled by the boats stared dumbly back at him, with their allegiance already transferred to the one in command. He regarded them for a moment, and then let his gaze roam seekingly around the horizon. It gave him no answer, and he reached sudden decision with a shout of "Bo'sun! Bring a couple of men up here and help me clear up this mess! Get one of the hoses rigged!"

When the bridge had been washed down, and the shattered little corpse of Captain Tempest rolled into a piece of canvas, Mr. Keadwell sent for the Chief Steward. "A glass of rum for all hands, Steward," he told him. "And let's get some breakfast under way. Make it bacon and eggs, will you?"

The Chief Steward turned to obey, and Mr. Keadwell said "Oh - Steward. What happened to the poultry we should have had for Christmas dinner?"

"Still down in the ice-box," answered the Steward. "Half-a-dozen lovely big turkeys. They won't last for ever, neether."

"Then tell the Cook to put 'em on to-day," said Mr. Keadwell chirpily. "I reckon we've earned our Christmas dinner now!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Burial and Acquittal

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The remains of Captain Tempest were committed to the deep next morning, with Mr. Keadwell peering earnestly at the prayer-book as he spoke the service. As a parson's son, Raven thought that he read it rather well, and yet there was no solemnity about the occasion. The ship had been stopped for the few minutes necessary for the occasion, and the assembled officers and crew felt a certain uneasiness about this fact; she rolled so heavily that the Bo'sun and Carpenter could hardly prevent the neatly-sewn canvas bundle from sliding prematurely off the hatchboard, and when they did tip it over the corpse turned half-over in mid air, and hit the water with a splash which sent up a gaily-sparkling explosion of spray.

Raven, who had read about the unutterable finality of the noise with which a body plunges into the deep, felt somehow disappointed; he turned away and saw that Mr. Keadwell, with his finger still tucked into the prayer-book and his cap under his arm, was about to address the crew.

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"Well, lads," he commenced in a slightly unsteady voice, then paused and repeated "Well, lads...we were lucky yesterday. Let's not forget it, and don't start slackening off ju st because - because we got away with

it this time. Only one more thing. According to the Merchant Shipping Act, if the Captain should die upon the high seas then the Chief Officer is legally entitled to assume command of the vessel. I call you all to witness that I do so take command."

He gazed around as though anticipating some objection, and then placed his cap firmly on his head. "That's all," he said, and began to move towards the bridge ladders. As he passed Mungo Maclaren, he muttered "See you up in the skipper's room for a minute."

The Second Officer, who was now seen on deck for the first time since Captain Tempest had confined him to his cabin, and was even rumoured to have stayed there during the attack, rasped his hand across the thick reddish-grey stubble which he had allowed to grow. He seemed to be undecided whether to follow or not, but then tramped stolidly up the ladder behind Captain Keadwell.

"Come in, Mr. Maclaren," said the Captain solemnly as he hesitated in the doorway, and gestured him to a seat on the cushioned locker which ran half-way round the Captain's cabin. Maclaren sat down heavily, and they exchanged a non-committal glance before Captain Keadwell began to busy himself with a large, thin book, covered with flimsy blue paper. which lay on the table before him. It was the Official Log, and the Captain riffled through its pages as he said in an embarrassed tone "The

Captain - the late Captain, that is - put some hard things in here about you, Mr. Maclaren. Now, it's not in my power to alter them, but - "

"It doesn't signify," growled Maclaren, and the Captain raised his thick seaman's hand to adjust his glasses, peering over them at his officer. For a long moment, he permitted himself a curious examination of the large head with its formidable features, engraved with the hieroglyphics of experience, whilst the enigmatic eyes stared back at him with the ruthless indifference of a cat.

"H'm...well," murmured the Captain. "I can reinstate you, though, and I want you to be Chief Officer."

"Very good of you," remarked Maclaren, and the Captain was stung into replying "I'm not doing it for your benefit. We'll be short-handed for a while, but I'll promote the Third Mate to Second, and sign off a new junior in Cape Town. That suit you?"

"I'd prefer you to look for a new Chief Officer," answered Maclaren drily. "I'll be content with my old job back."

Captain Keadwell brought his hand down with an exasperated slam. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "It's extra money, and you can hold the job as long as you please. The owners'll never shift you, with men as short as they are nowadays."

He paused for a moment, and then continued "Why, with all the new ships building, you'll likely get a command again."

Mungo Maclaren did not divert his stare, but simply asked with his air of secret amusement "Why do you say 'again ?'"

"Oh, I - why, I simply took it for granted that you'd -" began Keadwell confusedly, and then gave an angry jerk of his head. "Oh, well, have it your own way," he grumbled, and flicked over the pages until he found his place. The Chief Engineer appeared while he was still writing, and he grunted "Come in, Chief. I'll just get you to witness this while you're here."

Mr. Maclaren having been duly reinstated as Second Officer, Captain Keadwell attempted to lighten the occasion by pouring drinks for them. He hesitated a moment as he opened the bottle of Scotch, and the aroma reminded him of the last time he had drunk whisky in the Captain's cabin, but then he splashed out a generous portion into the three glasses. "I've decided to make for Cape Town, Chief," he told the engineer as he passed him a glass, and trickled water into it until the Chief gestured his satisfaction. "God knows where this convoys got to. How is it down your end ?"

The Chief sipped gently at his glass, gazed up at the steel beam overhead on which was chiselled the words Certified for Master's Accommodation, and then said "All right. We'll be needing bunkers, though."

"No trouble about that, anyway. How are we fixed now? Can we keep our speed up all right?"

The Chief nodded, sipped again, and remarked "Ought to be able to keep ten knots. When d'you reckon we'll get to Singapore?"

Captain Keadwell shrugged. "Depends on how long they keep us waiting around for convoys and so on. Let's see, now ..."

He reached for a Brown's Nautical Almanac, and looked up the distances between ports. After a minute or two of calculation he said "I make it about fifty-three or fifty-four days from the States, providing they don't keep us hanging about anywhere. We've made good time so far, even in that bad weather."

The Chief Engineer closed his eyes to make his own reckoning, and said "That makes it about February the fourteenth. Oh well - one day's as good as another, I suppose."

The Captain replaced the book, said "Well," and lifted his drink. Gradually the three men relaxed into the contemplative silence of old friends, undisturbed by all the small busy noises of a ship at sea. Woodwork creaked to the steady roll, pans clattered in the galley, footsteps thudded along the deck over their heads, a scrap of song rose from the engine-room from which came also the constant pulsing which enlivened the whole fabric of the

ship. The three men sat idly on, pondering their thoughts and their memories which all had the same enormous background ; the sea, their knowledge of the sea, their experience of the sea; the sea on which they had all three spent the greatest and most significant part of their lives, and upon which they might all too easily discover their deaths.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Unwelcome Love

*

As the ship turned further southwards, and with every day proceeded another two hundred and forty miles into the tropics, the crew settled down into a life as peacefully monotonous as that of a monastery. As the long swells eventually lost their impetus, and drowsed their way down into the blue translucence of the doldrums, the previous events of the voyage smoothed themselves out into the undemanding routine of a ship on an ocean passage. Even though the war was still blundering on through its bloody catalogue of stupidity, the men of the Austrian Duke began to feel themselves strangely remote from such affairs. Their monastery walls were those of distance, chance, and time; they were protected by them from the sins of the world.

Oilskins, jerseys, boots, and all such hard-weather gear was stowed away; white skins became brown, the sun at noonday was an incandescent shock. Men crept up from the engine-room with their filthy garments sodden with sweat, and hung limply over the rail until they regained the ambition to return to normal life; at night-time, men lay in their bunks in the blacked-out accommodation and felt the sweat slide greasily over their naked flesh. It was hard to believe that the still, golden air and the limpid sea were the same elements which had slashed them across the North Atlantic.

"Be across the Line to-morrow," remarked Cecil one evening, and stretched out his arms towards the declining sun. Raven eyed the gesture with distaste, but said nothing; it seemed to him that Cecil was assuming more of these little gestures since they had entered the hot weather, but he felt a delicacy about mentioning them.

They had taken their mattresses up onto the boat deck, in order to sleep in the open air. Even though Flack gave doleful warnings about 'chills on the liver,' most men had begun to do so, and when Cecil joined him in the corner which he had found Raven could hardly object.

"There's that nasty-minded Third Mate," muttered Cecil with a tilt of his chin towards the main deck; following the gesture, Raven saw the Third Mate step out of the midships accommodation, pause to light a cigarette, and then lumber towards the group of men who were chatting near the galley. Since he had learned that Mungo Maclaren had blocked his promotion to Second Mate, the Third's temper had been positively shark-like; poised beneath the surface and ready to snap at any instant.

Over the polished curve of Cecil's sun-browned shoulder, Raven watched him join the group which loitered round No.3 Hatch. Similar groups were disposed at various points about the ship, enjoying the chance to have a cool smoke and a yarn in the sunset; right aft, a group of gunners was larking about, and on the lower bridge the Captain

And Chief Engineer paced solemnly up and down as though powered by the slow puffing of their pipes.

The group which the Third Mate had joined were discussing football, and Raven heard the Cook's voice state categorically "I tell ya Sydney Marshall played left-half for Blackpool in thirty-seven!" followed by the Bo'sun's rebuttal of "Never in the creation of Christ!"

Someone passed round cigarettes, there was a ritual pause for lighting-up, and then the Third Mate glanced upwards and noticed the two youngsters watching them. "Yoo-hoo!" he called in a high falsetto. "Waiting for the dark, duckies ? Watch out someone doesn't step on you!"

The others followed his gaze, and the Chief Steward guffawed "Hey, that reminds me of the time when the copper stepped on the feller that was having a go, an' the feller said - "

His voice dropped and the others pushed a little closer, forgetting the two up on the boat-deck; Raven felt himself flushing, and muttered to Cecil "You've only yourself to blame if he picks on you. Why don't you pull yourself together ?"

"Why, what did I do now ?" demanded Cecil in a wounded tone, and Raven snapped "It's not so much what you're doing now as what you do all the time - flouncing about like something off Piccadilly. If you can't buck up you can take your bed somewhere else. I don't want people talking about me."

Cecil remained silent long enough for Raven to simmer down, and then the young gunner asked almost idly "Remember what it's like in New York round about this time ? Everyone getting warmed up for the evening ?"

This was the subject to which they could make endless return, like Adam and Eve discussing Paradise. Even though their experiences had been so utterly different, they had at least happened on common ground; a casual phrase or a clumsy allusion could make the whole magic city come to life again. As they talked on and the sun disappeared and the groups on deck drifted away, Raven's mind re-charted the lovely terrain of Kenny's body; absorbed in the memory of her flesh, there seemed for a moment to be no anomaly in the touch of another warm smooth skin; through the memory of caresses, he was slow to realise the practised seeking of an alien hand. Then, as he awoke to what was happening, a sudden repugnant whiver of goose-pimples swept across his body, and he flung Cecil away with a hiss of "Get to hell out of this, you little - "

Cecil sprawled away across the mattresses with a sound which could have been either a laugh or a sob; unable to see him through the warm darkness, Raven whispered furiously "You're bloody hopeless! Just keep out of my way in future, that's all!"

"Don't be like that, Franky," answered Cecil in a crooning tone. "You're just being old-fashioned, that's all!" He edged himself closer again, so that Raven could see

the glisten of his teeth and eyeballs, and continued in the same crooning tone "Why shouldn't we be a comfort to each other ? There's no sense in being lonely for a - "

Raven flung himself upon him, but was horrified when Cecil made no attempt to fight off the attack. Instead, he gave a giggling squirm, making Raven begin to jerk backwards at the very moment when the Third Mate jeered out of the darkness "Ah-haaah, so yer just enjoying a little bit, are yer ? Well, there's laws against this kind o' thing, y'know."

"Don't be such a bloody fool," snarled Raven as he completed his movement upright. "This little rat was - "

"Not so much of yer insults," called out Cecil shrilly. "You know what you were trying to do!"

"Yes, I wouldn't be surprised at that, neither," said the Third Mate in unctuous agreement. "I know these parson's sons, and I just thought there might be something funny going on. Just come up in time to catch you, didn't I ? And we've got a couple of old scores to pay off, haven't we ?"

"Oh, get stuffed!" snapped Raven, and the Third Mate's temper rose like a shark to a swimmer's leg. He began to shout, and continued shouting until men came running from various parts of the ship, and Captain Keadwell bellowed to know what was going on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Round the Cape

*

The scandal formed a pleasant topic of conversation all the way to Cape Town, with no one able to resolve the urgent question of whether Sparky did, or whether Sparky didn't. Ginger the gunner informed Cecil tersely that "The minute we get to Cape Town - out! I don't want no bum-boys in my mob!" and was a staunch supporter of Raven's explanation, whereas the Third Engineer wagged his head solemnly and opined that there was no smoke without fire, and produced a pile of old Sunday newspapers to quote cases concerning chdrmasters, curates, and scoutmasters. "No doubt about it, too much religion's got a funny effect on yer," he told the Chief Steward, who cackled in mischievous delight.

Captain Keadwell simply didn't know what to make of it. "Never came across a thing like this in all my time at sea," he informed the Chief Engineer as they paced out their regular evening constitutional on the lower bridge. "Dunno what's come over the youngster's nowadays. There's that young Sparky-boy swears he's innocent, and the other two swear that he attacked the youngster. What's a man to believe ?

"That Third Mate's a bad little bastard," grunted the Chief Engineer. "No use worrying about it."

"That's all very well," grumbled the Captain. "I've had to log all this, and there'll be an enquiry sooner or later. What'll the owners say ? There'll be some nice old bills run up over this lot, you mark my words."

So it was with a heavy heart that Raven watched the approach of land, as the Austrian Duke moved placidly over a morning calm into the shelter of Table Bay. He stared gloomily at the red and white city spread like skirts about the feet of the great mountain, and did not hear the pad of the Chief Engineer's slippers as that officer moved up beside him. The Chief smoked silently for a minute or two, and then commented "Pretty sight, isn't it?"

He pointed with his chin towards the land, and Raven made a sound of assent; after a few more moments of contemplative puffing, the Chief asked "Worried ?"

"Who wouldn't be ?" burst out Raven bitterly, and then said in a trailing voice "I've never been through anything like this in my life, and it's all so...I dunno..."

"Why's the Third Mate got it in for you ?" asked the Chief, and Raven shrugged. "You tell me," he said. "He's been like that from the start. No reason that I know of."

The Chief Engineer knocked out his pipe against the rail, and began to carve a refill from his plug. "Funny, that," he commented, watching the flakes fall into the calloused cup of his hand. "Way people just take a dislike to each other, I mean. There's never any sense to it, and it causes all kinds of trouble."

"Even war," he continued after a moment, packing the flakes into his pipe, and Raven burst out suddenly "You don't know what it's been like this last few days! Everyone looking at you sideways...hearing 'em sniggering when you go past...not knowing what they think about you! I don't think that even old Flack believes me really. He keeps picking it about like a dog with a maggoty bone."

The Chief squinted at the steady rise and fall of the match flame which he was holding above his pipe bowl, and then grunted "Help you grow up."

Raven stared at him with his mouth open, regarding this entirely novel conception, and still hadn't formed any answer to it when the Chief resumed his comfortable position at the rail. "You'll laugh at it in a year or two," he said. "Put it down to experience."

"Yes, but what about now?" demanded Raven. "What's going to happen when we dock?"

"Don't worry," answered the Chief. "Not even a judge could believe that the Third Mate was ever ~~telling the~~ telling the truth. And by the way - *'ve you noticed -*"

He interrupted himself to give several strong puffs at his pipe, and then continued " - that he's thick as thieves with that young gunner nowadays?"

" 'course I have!" said Raven indignantly. "Why, I reckon that young Cecil's - well, just taken up with the Third Mate."

"That's what I mean," said the Chief. "Don't worry. Things never turn out the way you expect 'em to."

In this respect, at least, the Chief Engineer was right. For instead of a few easy days at anchor waiting for orders and a convoy, the Austrian Duke was ordered directly alongside. As soon as she was made fast to the bunkering berth, and the first truck-loads of dark-brown African coal were cascading into her bunker hatches, a Lieutenant-Commander drove up alongside and was ushered into the Captain's quarters.

"So that's the way of it, Captain," he said a quarter of an hour later, and made a gesture of refusal as Captain Keadwell offered him another drink. "You've beaten the convoy to it, and they want you to push on alone. You'll be all right as far as Colombo - the Japs are still tied up in the East Indies."

"Doesn't look too good there, either," answered Captain Keadwell, nodding towards the newspaper which the Pilot had brought aboard. "Getting pretty hot, by the sound of it."

"Not to worry," the Lieutenant-Commander assured him cheerfully. "They'll have to be going pretty strong to make a dent in Singapore. Still, I suppose we need everything we've got. That'll be why they're pushing you along."

He began to shuffle his papers together; a sturdy youngish man in a gleaming white uniform, and with a glossily cheerful face. "Anything else I can do for you?" he enquired.

"I don't think so," answered the Captain slowly. "I've got to find a Chief Officer, if I can, but that's up to the Shipping Master. There is one thing, though..."

The naval officer cocked his head expectantly; he saw the Captain frown, and thought: Really extraordinary fellers, these merchant skippers. Fancy an old codger like that being in command of a ship.

"No, it doesn't signify," murmured the Captain at last. "If they want to push out of here to-night it would only hold them up."

"That's the idea!" said the naval man heartily. "Well, I'll just tootle along and have a word with your gunner."

He picked his way carefully along the coal-littered decks towards the after gun-platform; seeing him coming, Ginger was at first struck into immobility and then galvanised into activity. He threw himself down the companionway into the gunner's quarters, jammed on his cap, hissed "Orficer coming!" to the men who were sitting half-naked round the mess table, and propelled himself on deck again in time to salute the Lieutenant-Commander.

It was not until the guns had been looked at, the ammunition returns checked, and the sea-fight thoroughly

discussed, that Ginger managed to mention his feelings about Cecil. The officer's round face puckered into a frown of distaste as Ginger stumbled through the story, and when it was finished he asked "D'you want to make any specific charge?"

"Well, no, sir, not exactly, sir...I just thought, sir, that, well...seeing as there's a base at Simonstown, we could just make a quiet little swap, like," explained Ginger, and the officer rubbed his chin. "No time," he said briefly. "It's probably all a storm~~x~~ in a teacup, anyway. I'm sure the Captain would have brought it up if he'd thought there was anything in it."

The two men regarded each other for a moment, with Ginger's erratic features falling into the lower-deck mask, and the officer continued "Anyway, don't let's spoil things. You and the Captain have both made up nice little reports on that action, and there's just a chance there'll be a gong in it for somebody. Be a bit ticklish if anything like this came up at the same time."

"Sir," said Ginger, and the officer turned away. "Good luck, Sprott," he said cheerfully. "Don't bother to see me ashore."

Ginger watched him go, and waited until the white back had dodged safely into its car. "Officers!" he growled. "I've spit 'em!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

East by North

*

"Being on board a ship of this kind is like living in a village a hundred years ago," wrote Raven in one of his multi-paged letters to Kenny. "Our lives are just about as simple as theirs must have been. There are no modern entertainments, no newspapers, nothing to spend our money on, little or nothing in the way of luxuries. When we want a bath, it's out of a bucket. Even our doctoring is old-fashioned, since it just comes out of a medicine chest with a few stock remedies."

"And just as they do in a village, gossip and rumours fly about all the time. I'm amazed at how small-minded some of the men can be. Before I went to sea, I used to think that sailors were something special. You know - bold, open, free, all that kind of thing. But the fact is that sailors seem to look inwards, instead of outwards. Maybe they have too much time to think."

"Our likeness to a village is carried through by the people on board. The Captain is our Squire, the officers are our gentry (?), and the crew are the peasants and workers. We even have our village scandal-monger, in this case one of the officers. He is a vicious type, and at the moment he's doing his best to destroy the character of another officer."

"So far, he has accused this man of sexual perversion,

and of cowardice during our escape from the battleship - saying that he has PROOF that this officer was skulking in his cabin during the attack. Well, I know where he obtained this proof, as he calls it; from the same little rat who - "

Raven stopped writing and read back over the last paragraph. No, that's getting a bit too personal, he reflected, and looked up from his pad to gaze across the ruffled mirror of the Indian Ocean. Oh, Kenny, he thought miserably; if only I was with you all this would seem such a little thing, and yet I can't even write to you about it in case you should think that it's true.

He scrambled to his feet, moving out of the patch of shadow in which he had been sitting on the boat-deck. Tucking his pad away in a spot where the steady northerly breeze could not disturb it, he commenced to pace up and down between the slung-out lifeboat and the engine-room skylight, unable to keep still and yet with nowhere to go.

The ship was still sailing on a long northward slant parallel with the African coast, on the route ordered for her by Naval Control. She was making good time in the serene January weather, with the sun making its daily transit across a rarely clouded sky and the steady monsoon breeze robbing it of its sting. Day after day, Raven spent much of his watch below in lonely basking in

this sun; his face and body were tanned to a deep brown in which he took a melancholy pride.

Now, as he paced up and down, his thoughts were like an accountant who wearily checks and re-checks a column of figures, seeking for the tiny error which prevents him from striking a balance. He had passed the stage of furious questioning of fate, demanding why this should have happened to him on his first voyage; passed too the stage of condemning himself for having attempted Cecil's reform. He simply plodded through and through the entire sequence of events, over and over again, and however he cast up the figures of his enigma there seemed to be only one answer - that to involve oneself with others is to gamble with destruction. And because this seemed to him to be the wrong answer, he refused to accept it, and checked and re-checked again.

It was late afternoon, and before very long the bell would ring for five o'clock tea; as he patrolled up and down he could see another figure, pacing up and down the bridge; the new Chief Officer who had joined in Cape Town. He was a middle-aged Glaswegian whose accent was so thick that Raven could hardly understand him, but in any case he was afraid that the Third Mate would have told him the whole story, and so was unwilling to communicate with him or even to meet his eyes. He found it hard to talk for very long with anyone these days.

After tea, the usual groups of seamen and firemen and gunners assembled upon the after-deck, perching upon the hatch-coamings or parading up and down, smoking and yarning and supping from pint-pots of lukewarm tea. That evening they were listening to Costello, who was declaiming viciously "I reckon they oughta give us the chance to say whether we'll go on a stunt like this, not just bung us off like a shower o' flippin' cattle."

"What do they think we are, anyway?" he demanded, clutching at his heavy biceps with his arms crossed across his chest. "Most of us was at sea before the war. This is our regular job, like. We're not fighting men, we're civilians. Well, then, they oughta give us the chance to volunteer, didn't they? They got no right to sling us off to Singapore without even asking us."

"Reckon this ship 'ud be undermanned if they asked us to volunteer, anyroad," opined the Bo'sun drily, and gave a sharp-featured grin at the cackle of ironic laughter. Ginger the gunner ~~brew~~ on his fag, and grumbled "At least you blokes get paid for it. War bonus - 'strewth! We're taking the same risks as you are, and there's no one paying us an extra five pounds a month."

"Seven pun' ten for officers," remarked Sidney Rogers morosely, probing a forefinger up his cavernous nostrils. "They don't take no more risks than we do, do they?"

"Didn't notice you getting killed when the pore little skipper was cleaned up, anyroad," piped Old Staley, and

Wanker's Doom gave his usual falsetto screech of laughter. Tatty the fireman wiped a sweat-rag over the fantastic engravings upon his torso, and growled "Come to that, the black gang oughta get more 'n any of yez. How'd y' like to be down below there when there's torpedoes flying around ?"

"At that rate, young Cecil oughta be getting more ~~da~~ danger money than anyone," said the Bo'sun. "I'll bet there's plenty of youse blokes 'ud torpedo him!"

Costello waited impatiently until the laughter had stopped, and then returned to his theme. They listened to him half-bored and half-assenting, ready enough to agree but knowing that there was nothing they could do about it anyway. "What's the diff'rence ?" asked the Bo'sun at last, slipping down from his perch and expanding his sinewy, rufous chest in a yawn. "You die if you worry, you die if you don't, so why worry ? Anyone for a hand o' crib ?"

The vanishing sun was their signal to disperse, and as the constellations swung across the tropic night their ship plodded her patient way towards the north. Immersed in the perpetual and changeless routine of their voyage, it was almost as though they remained fixed upon the ocean whilst the land and all its tumult crept a little nearer, day by day.

"Don't like the sound of it," grizzled Flack to Raven

on the day before they reached Ceylon. "I picked up a bit of B.B.C news during the night, an' the Japs are giving our blokes a proper pasting. I reckon they'll be walking all over 'em before we ever get there."

"They probably won't send us, then," said Raven idly, adjusting the tuning-knob a little more finely. "Wouldn't be much good routeing a convoy to Singapore if it was being attacked."

"Those mad bastards would do anything," answered his senior. "Don't expect any sense in war-time, for cripes' sake. There's too many fat bludgers sitting on their fat tails in offices, that's the trouble. All they've got to do is sign a bit of paper, and we're gone. Why should they worry? Plenty more where we came from."

He drifted out of the wireless room on his way down to dinner, and Raven swabbed the sweat off his forehead, lit a cigarette, and wrote the date on a fresh page of the log-book. Ought to be in Singapore about the middle of the month, he mused, and a sudden picture wavered across his mind of a tropical city being looted by the Japanese. He shook his head, and the words of the Chief Engineer returned to him. 'Help you grow up.' Hell of a world to be growing up in, he reflected, when you've even got enemies on your own side.

But at least their prime enemy, the sea, was observing

a truce. The ship drove quietly through a gleaming ocean towards the still invisible land, though frequent aircraft droned across the blue intensity of the sky. There was a feeling of unrest through the ship, and some men began to ramble aimlessly about the decks as though they were at last beginning to chafe against their treadmill of routine. Others were busily starting or finishing off their letters home, and in his cabin Captain Keadwell wrote " - I asked the Owners to increase my Allotment when I wrote them from our last Port, informing them of this Turn of Events, so hope that you have commenced to receive same. Don't see how they can quarrel with my taking Command now, & at least will receive Captain's Wages for the remainder of this Voyage, however long that may be. On the whole this is a good Ship, I could have gone further and fared worse, and the Crew is tolerable for these days, not that you often find Sea Men of the old stamp anywhere. Have plenty of Paper Work, etc., to wade through but Thank God am fit and contented - "

The stack of letters for mailing grew higher upon the Chief Steward's desk, and he reflected wistfully that there should be some way in which he could make a few bob out of their postage. After all, a man ought to be paid for his trouble. Luckily things had improved since Captain Tempest went, and old Keadwell let him and the Cook arrange things pretty much to suit themselves...

Soon after dawn on the next day the Austrian Duke

steamed into the great Naval anchorage at Trincomalee, and the Cook stared contemptuously at the great array of vessels which was assembled there. Big Cyril the fireman came up from the stokehold for a breather, and lolled against the galley bulkhead beside him; absent-mindedly rolling a cigarette he muttered "Caw! Look at all the troop-ships!"

The clear plangent tones of a bugle cut through the moist warmth of dawn, and they could see pink-cheeked soldiers doubling along the decks; motor-boats were already stitching their busy seams about the anchorage and a destroyer hummed casually past on her way to the open sea. "Don't like the look of it," growled the Cook dismally. "Too many ships about. "They've got a convoy practic'ly made up already, if you ask me."

"What about all them other ships that were supposed to be with us?" enquired Big Cyril. "You reckon they're here already?"

"Nahhh!" declared the Cook, as emphatically as though he had been told by the Chief of Naval Operations.

"They'll still be trundling up from Cape Town. They'll be the lucky ones, take it from me."

"Why can't we get no more news?" he whined after a minute. "All them two Sparkies 've got to do is sit there listening all day, and they won't give yer a bit o' news. Oughta get the Union onto it."

"Young Sparky reckons they can't hardly hear the B.B.C no longer," answered Big Cyril. "Reckons their set's too old, or summat."

"Flaming scandal," snarled the Cook, and then gestured angrily towards the ships slipping past on either side. "Look at 'em, will yer? Mark my word, we'll be on our way before the day's out."