

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## Towards the Flame

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For once, the Cook was almost right. They did not sail that day, nor the next, but the anchorage was as busy as a shunting-yard and it was obvious that they would not be there for long. A team from the ordnance workshops came aboard, and spent an ominously long time in overhauling the guns, and they awoke on the second morning to find that all the troopships had gone. For some reason, this seemed like an ill omen; there were a score of arguments as to whether they had gone to reinforce Singapore or up North to Burma, and the Cook even went so far as to threaten Costello with a frying-pan.

When Flack and the Captain were collected for the convoy conference, there was a line of men along the rails to await their return. Captain Keadwell hoisted himself up the last few rungs of the Jacob's ladder and gave a perplexed look at their demanding faces; they watched him silently as he passed his brief-case to the Bo'sun and then straddled the rail. As he reached the deck he hesitated for a moment and then said "Sailing to-night, lads. Don't worry."

Raven looked greedily at the brief-case, and asked "Any mail, sir?"

"No mail - sorry," grunted the Captain, and turned

towards the bridge ladder; some of the men shrugged and turned back to work, and others spat out the customary obscenities. Few of them had received any mail since leaving England.

"Too many fat bludgers sitting around with nothing to do but drink bloody tea," explained Flack wearily. "No wonder we're losing the flaming war."

He followed the Captain up to the bridge, and Costello spat into the still blue waters overside. "Don't worry," he mimicked savagely. "What does he expect us to do - burst out bloody cheering?"

"I thought you were reckoned to be a tough guy," observed the Bo'sun mildly, and winked at Raven. Cecil, who had been standing a little apart from the others, stared after Costello as the seaman turned away with an angry shrug, and then rubbed his hands together as though they were cold. "What does it mean?" he begged of the Bo'sun, who tipped back the felt hat which served him as topee in sunshine and sou'wester in storm and answered "Now you're asking something. What does it mean? I'd say it means that anyone who can swim 'ud better get on their bathing drawers."

He grinned gently as Cecil gave an irritated flirt of his shoulders, and looked after the youngster as he moved cautiously over to the officers' alleyway. "Looking for 'is husband to give 'im a bit of comfort," he grunted

to Wanker's Doom, and to the tune of the usual falsetto screech he began to drag up the Jacob's ladder. "All right, lads - holiday's over!" he shouted. "Plenty to do before the next pleasure cruise!"

Within a few hours he was standing beside the new Chief Officer in the bows, waiting for the signal to raise anchor. "What d'you make of it, Mr McGurk?" he enquired, and the Chief Officer answered in coarse Glaswegian that, for his part, if he'd had the sense he was born with he'd still be sitting in the Mission to Seamen, Cape Town. "All right - heave away!" came a hail from the bridge, and the Carpenter let steam into the windlass; from across the fast-darkening anchorage they could hear the steady clanking as one ship after another commenced drawing in the chain.

Raven stood amongst the other shadowy forms on the main deck, watching as they steamed quietly and as it seemed stealthily through the boom defence, and a voice near him said "Why can't a man get a job like that - on a Boom Defence ship? Just spend your time pulling the boom open to let silly bastards go out to sea?"

No one replied, and after a moment Raven strolled idly along the deck. In the gathering darkness no faces could be distinguished, and when another form drew close to him he paid no attention until a soft voice murmured "Frankie.."

The skin tingled along his scalp; he hesitated, and then began to turn away. The voice repeated his name in a whisper hardly audible above the slathering of the wash and the chattering of the other group nearby; a soft, warm touch fingered its way along his bare arm, and he jerked away as though he feared a knife. "Take your hands off me!" he spat, and swung around to face the pale blur of the gunner's face.

"Dan't be that way, Frankie," Cecil's voice quavered towards him. "Let bygones be bygones, eh?"

"Oh, sure," grunted Raven. "And have you get me into a mess again, I s'pose?"

"I didn't mean it - hpnest. I just...well, I dunno what came over me..."

"I thought that you and the Third Mate were big pals now," said Raven sardonically, and Cecil waited for a moment before answering "He's diff'rent. I don't like him, really. I didn't want to get mixed up with him, only - "

"Only you thought that you could get back at me?"

Cecil said nothing, and Raven moved a little nearer, asking "Will you come up to the skipper in the morning, and tell him what really happened?"

"I - "

The gunner moved deeper into the shadows as feet came hurrying towards them, and after someone had hurried past trailing a rope which swished over the deck-plates he

continued "I - I can't..."

"Why not?"

"I dunno ...I just..."

"Then go to hell," said Raven, and Cecil lunged forward to grasp at him. "Please...don't be that way," he gasped. "Don't you see - I can't stand any more of this without a friend! Everyone laughs at me...makes jokes...Ginger pushes me around...and what's going to happen to the ship? The Third Mate only wants...and if I talk to anyone they only think I...why don't you help me, Frankie? I'll be good this time, honest I will!"

"Then come up to the skipper in the morning!"

There was a long pause, which Cecil filled at last with the soft hopeless snuffling of his sobs. Raven pushed his hands away, and turned to walk towards his cabin. A moment of doubt gnawed at his resolution, and then he shrugged and continued on his way. There was still a watch to keep and the voyage to continue; his affairs were only a single stitch in the tapestry of fate.

The dark ships found their course across the star-reflecting ocean, and by the middle watch had assembled into the convoy; when the first gleam of light appeared before the dawn, the escort vessels became as busy as drill sergeants with a squad of raw recruits. By breakfast time, the twelve ships were as neatly aligned as they ever would be, and to men upon them there was some

comfort in the feeling of company.

Captain Keadwell stretched the weary muscles of his back, and winced as he moved from one foot to another; after a night on the bridge, he thought gratefully of his bunk. "All right, Mister, I'll leave her to you now," he told the Third Mate. "Call me if you have any trouble."

Standing aside to let him down the bridge ladder, Raven thought that his Captain was a sorry sight. In the much-washed grey flannels and sleeveless shirt which formed his tropical rig, glasses pushed up on his forehead and a prickle of beard on his broad jowls, he resembled an elderly grocer on holiday. They exchanged a muttered "Good-morning," and Raven passed on up the ladder to take his watch. He went through the usual careful pantomime of pretending not to see the Third Mate, and was followed by a subdued jeer as he stepped into the wireless room, but was pleased to discover that he now felt almost immune.

He took over the sweaty earphones and signed the log. As usual, the air was almost silent. There was nothing to hear but the occasional distant chirping of an Indian coast station; nothing for him to do but listen for an emergency signal.

Sitting there aimlessly watching the second hand of the clock sweep away the minutes of Greenwich time, and a pool of sunlight moving rhythmically across the desk as the porthole slowly rose and fell, he remembered with a kind

of nostalgia the Atlantic passage during which they had kept watches on the bridge. Apparently the naval planners thought that it was more important for this convoy to be in constant wireless touch.

His thoughts drifted from the past to the future, and as the moments passed it was as though the air began to quiver with a myriad ghostly sounds. Raven found himself tensed to hear them, as though the circuits of the receiver could actually pick up the agonised voice of war. He pictured the sun-dense swamps and jungles which must now be echoing flatly to the noise of steel-torn timber, steel-torn water, steel-torn earth and flesh and air; the entire octave of explosions from rifle to rocket, grinding turmoil of machinery, pad of ambushing feet, warbling shrieks of wounded men and the savage triumph-vibrant screams of the attack.

The sweat drooled down his naked back into the waist band of his shorts, and he sat back with a wry grin at himself. This is why I don't care about the Third Mate any longer, he thought. Compared with what we've got waiting for us, he just doesn't mean a thing.

There was almost relief in the knowledge. He knew that, at last, he was committed to war in its entirety, and as the few days passed which took them across the Bay of Bengal, it was as though the rest of the crew could also hear those ghostly sounds; as though each man suddenly gained a new perception which attuned him to the

vibrations of terror, savagery, and despair. The effect was strange, for it caused a stilling of the tempo of ordinary life. Routine went on as before, but there was far less casual laughter, chatter, and quarrelling. As in a monastery, where each inmate has his own grave duties to perform yet listens always for a voice transcending any tones of man, so did they become more sparing of meaningless chat. Each uttered word took on a new significance; each man drew secretly closer to his neighbour.

Yet there were still no outward signs of war. The deep translucent indigo of the waves, which every now and then tossed up a careless plume, coursed onwards before the steady impulse of the north-easterly monsoon. Each evening, the sun declined through a calm and limitless sky, and every morning woke with a dawn which was equally serene. Only the grey bulk of the ships which pushed their stolid way forward, and the slim escorts which dawdled impatiently at their flanks, gave any hint of mankind's self-imposed torment.

On the Austrian Duke, it was Cecil who first saw the tip of Sumatra. He was keeping the dawn watch on one of the bridge cannons, and perceived the shadowy triangle as it broke the distant horizon; prisoned as he was in the condemned cell of his own imagination, it was a sight which made him give a yell of alarm. Mr McGurk came racing out

of the chart-room, followed his pointing finger, and expressed his feelings in a few hoarse expletives; nevertheless he too remained staring at the approaching headland for a good deal longer than necessary.

"Wonder where Tarzan's got to?" grunted the Bo'sun as they rounded the cape, and he stared up at the massed palisades of trees which climbed steeply up from the water's edge; Costello tossed away a cigarette-end and grunted "There's some of his bloody monkeys, anyway."

The men along the rail gaped at a tiny canoe which was bobbing towards them, being passed by one after another of the ships in their column; as they approached it, they could see three impassive faces gazing up at them. Raven felt a melancholy thrill at his first sight of the East, with the timeless jungle as a background for these brown indifferent fisherfolk; suddenly, as the little craft lurched over the confused wakes of the convoy, he realised that once all this assembly of ships and guns and men had passed they would still be there; that morning after morning would find them putting out from their village onto the glittering sea. This was indeed the East; the almost naked bodies absorbed in their perpetual search for food; the impassive faces regarding the colossal and meaningless transit of yet another war.

"Now we're in it properly," grizzled Flack that evening when Raven took over the watch, and swabbed the

sweat off his bare bony chest. "Soon as you get into the Straits, it's like a Turkish bath."

He probed into his tobacco-tin, and tried to roll a cigarette with sweat-moist fingers. "Skipper told me that we might be turned back if things get too bad," he commented. "They musta warned 'em about it at the captains' conference."

"Seems quiet enough so far, anyway," said Raven, and cocked the ear-phones up on his temples. Nothing came through them after sunset but the constant roar of atmospherics; the snarling voice of tropical storms aprowl through the upper atmosphere. "What does he mean, anyway - "If things get too bad ?!"

"If the Japs walk into Singapore, I s'pose," answered Flack. "Good chance of it, too, by the sound of it."

"Then what's the point of sending us there at all ? Not much sense in discharging all this cargo for the Japs to take over."

"That's no way to talk," reproved his senior. "Might ~~make~~ all the difference, this convoy. Why, there's two ships chockablock with ammo. Nice old thing if our blokes had to give in for lack of it."

"That's so, I suppose. There's those three tankers, too."

"Yes, poor bleeders. Wouldn't want to be in one of them if we get a pasting."

"D'you think that we will ?"

Flack lifted his coat-hanger shoulders in a shrug. "Do you think that we won't?" he enquired, and puffed at his ragged cigarette. The smoke hung densely in the still, sweaty air of the blacked-out and unventilated wireless-room, and he said perversely "We should 've had old Tempest here to keep us up to the mark. We'd never 've got away from that sub if he hadn't had us all on our toes."

He puffed again, and then said gloomily "But what's the diff'rence? If we'd copped it in the Atlantic, we wouldn't cop it in the Malacca Straits, heck-heck-heck!"

But even though the alarm bell had not sounded since the death of Captain Tempest there was no feeling of surprise when it went off at last. Raven was washing his clothes at the time, sitting on a box and scrubbing a shirt in his bucket; the Chief Steward was lolling nearby and yarning about Singapore "in the old days." It was mid-morning of a heavily overcast day, with the air seeming to be trapped between the sullen clouds and the motionless sea; the wash curved away from the bows in a long glassy curve which finally broke with an exhausted whisper, and above the distant horizon they could see a range of ghost-pale hills.

"'strewth, y'oughta 've seen 'em down Lavender Street," droned the Chief Steward. "Women! Black, yellow, pink, brown, white, anything you - Keerist! There she goes!"

Raven felt his pulses begin to chug as the demanding tattoo clamoured through the ship, followed by the familiar pounding of feet. Despite their lack of practice, the crew were at their action stations in record time, and the guns began to point their accusing fingers towards the cloud-blanketed drone of engines.

"All right - they must be ours!" shouted the Third Mate, and put down the glass with which he had been reading a signal from one of the escorts. The droning faded and died in the heat-swamped air, but the men seemed unwilling to leave their action stations. They stood about in little groups, studying the clouds as though they were a curtain behind which an assassin might lurk; studying the sea as though its mercury-still surface was an arena.

Below decks, too, they sweated with an additional unease. The Fourth Engineer blew out his thick lips with relief when the Chief told him that it was a false alarm; Smithers the greaser resumed his interrupted chant of "Maggie Mae" as he squirted oil into the bearings, and the Chief ducked through into the stokehold.

The open fire-doors cast a huge flickering glare upon the sweat-glistening muscles of the firemen, and without interrupting his steady rhythm Big Cyril shouted "What is it now, then?"

"All right - false alarm," replied the Chief, and wiped his overall sleeve across his forehead. He cast a

quick appraising glance about the deep oblong well of the stoke-hold, taking in the great boiler-ends and the twining soot-encrusted pipes; the blackened walls lit by the dancing glare of the fires and the squares of sunlight high above which were the doors out onto the deck.

Big Cyril hooked his shovel-blade under the fire-door and clanged it shut, and the stoke-hold returned to the semi-darkness of its dusty lights. Through the bunker bulkhead came a scrambling, clattering noise as the trimmer on watch moved about his mass of coal, and the Chief looked thoughtfully at the bunker-ports through which coal was delivered into the stoke-hold. A fresh cascade came clattering through them, and his mind ticked another fraction off the constant sum of bunker tonnage divided by days of steaming.

He nodded to the firemen and commenced the long climb up towards daylight; as he neared the top of the ladders, he paused and tensed for an instant at the sound of a distant cracking rumble. He scrambled up the last few rungs and jumped out on deck, and then saw the immense black stain of a thunderstorm spreading up over Malaya.

The dirty grey clouds overhead were scurrying away like sheep before a marauder, and a great puff of rain-cooled wind struck at the ship; the men coming along to collect their dinners jiggled impatiently outside the galley-door. A huge lavender dart of lightning, as

complex as a nervous system, slashed downwards over the towering purplish edifice of cloud; a few seconds after it struck the water a great crack of thunder made the ship vibrate.

The flailing hiss of rain upon the cowering sea could be heard long before it reached them; they watched one ship after another disappear as though they had passed beneath a waterfall, and then the rain struck them too. Within a few seconds the decks were awash, awnings sagged beneath the weight of water, long gurgling streams hosed out of scupper-pipes and a myriad cascades poured from every projection. But the storm was travelling fast, and in a few minutes the final drops had slapped viciously upon the decks; as though it had swept the skies clear, the departing rain was followed by a glory of sunlight, pouring out of a high brilliant sky brushed with a feathering of cloud. And out of this sky came the enemy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## Attack &amp; Retreat

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They were Mitsui bombers, bound for a raid upon Penang; as absorbed upon their mission as a flight of migrating birds, they seemed at first to ignore the convoy which lay far below them. Men who had dropped their dinners when the alarm-bells rang now stood panting beside their guns, gazing up at the tiny shapes which pulsed steadily across the new-washed-sky; they were too high yet for any shot to reach, and for a long aching moment it seemed that they would pass by.

Ginger scratched furiously at a patch of prickly heat, staring upwards through half-closed eyes; the four-inch was at maximum elevation but still would not bear, and he cursed impatiently. Then, with sudden recollection, he glanced across at Cedil, and snapped "You bloody lie down this time, and you'll never bloody stand up again!"

"Here they come!" whooped a distant voice, and he jerked his head back in time to see three bombers drop out of the formation, seeming to fall away upon their wing-tips in the commencement of a long sweeping curve which took them away from the convoy. The whining drone of their engines increased as they lost height, completed their curve, and then began to descend in a long slant upon the plodding ships. They suddenly leapt forward into a startling clarity of detail, their wing-tips wavering

slightly as they tore onwards with an appearance of being only narrowly sustained on their taut equilibrium between sky and water.

The expectant stillness was shattered in a hundred different ways, as almost every gun in the convoy commenced to fire. Dragging out the lifeboat sets from the wireless room, Raven heard the monotonous thump of Bofors guns from the escorts, the erratic BAM..BAM-BAM...BAM... BAM of four-inch and twelve-pounders from ships near and far, the shuddering hammer of automatic cannons and the peevish rattle of smaller armament. "Christ!" he shouted, "Look at this!" and Flack jumped up to stand beside him.

They gaped out at the three aircraft whipping towards them through an atmosphere streaked and stitched with the long slow streams of tracer and blotched with the yellow-black puffs of exploding shells; with a roaring crescendo of engines they shot towards the convoy, and the two men clearly saw the horrid excreta of bombs tumbling out of their bays. "They're bloody mad!" screamed Flack, his eyes bulging as he watched them hit the water, and a few seconds later the ship lurched to the great submarine explosions.

Colossal spray-white blooms rose deliberately out of the flat, blue, shining surface of the sea, obscuring the rest of the convoy from their view, and Raven was vaguely

aware of Flack chattering "Never saw anything like this before...they practic'ly touched our masts...Christ, why weren't we hit?" as the water collapsed back into a seething mass of foam. The guns continued, and a stream of erratically-aimed cannon-shells from another ship hit their own funnel with a succession of howling clangs; Flack's hand clenched upon Raven's biceps and dragged him back into the wireless room. "Listen," he gasped at the youngster, "you look out for yourself if we get hit... never mind about me...you get yourself into a boat as fast as you can...there's only one chance if we cop it out here, and that's to be picked up by another ship. There's sharks and all sorts in these waters, so look out for yourself..."

They both ducked as they heard the bellowing engines approach again, and as they crouched close to the deck Raven heard Flack say calmly "Don't worry, son..."

He wanted to say that he wasn't worried, but the engines thundered overhead accompanied by the tumult of gunfire, and immediately followed by the rumbling turmoil of bombs exploding under water. He opened his mouth to say something, but his words were arrested by a gigantic hissing roar which increased to a seemingly unendurable intensity of sound; a sound so huge that they could feel as well as hear it, and accompanied by a massive blast of heat and of raging orange light which even overcame the sun.

They swung towards the door, and Raven felt his bowels turn over as he saw the immense upward-blasting explosion of flame, reaching up and up as it was fed by fresh surgings from below, which stood upon the water where a tanker had been. Eight thousand tons of aviation spirit were burning, and they rolled upwards in colossal reddish-orange billows of flame surmounted by a soot-black canopy of smoke. After a few seconds, Raven did not want to look at it any longer; he pulled his gaze away, and saw other ships veering wildly out from the spreading lake of flame, and a corvette daring the embrace of two encroaching arms in a vain hunt for survivors.

And yet the convoy was still plodding on; a quarter of an hour later, the towering flame was two or three miles astern, with its smoke drifting and hovering for as far as they could see. The ship was still at action stations, though nothing more had been seen of the enemy, and it was another quarter of an hour before the Captain dismissed them. Sitting on the lifeboat transmitter in the wireless room, Raven heard the incongruous sound of the dinner bell ringing out, and glanced questioningly at Flack; his senior said "You go, son. I don't feel like any dinner to-day."

It was a silent meal, and Raven noticed that the assistant steward's hand was still shaking as he handled

the plates. Captain Keadwell hurried in, ate some greasy soup and bread and cheese, and hurried out again. Mr. McGurk said "Well, we're in for it now that they know where we are," and the Second Engineer grunted a dolorous assent. Mungo Maclaren, as usual, had nothing to say; he ate steadily through the usual menu of soup, roast meat, steamed pudding, and bread and cheese, and marched out of the saloon to relieve the Third Mate. But the fact that a meal had been served meant that the familiar routine was continuing, despite that immense flame, and was somehow comforting.

The clear skies which had followed the storm continued through the rest of that day, and the sun set to bring a night which was close, velvety, and still, with stars like great silver lamps reflected upon the ice-calm waters of the Straits. When Raven came off watch at midnight he paused for a long moment to absorb the calm glamour of the night, gazing out across the convoy to see dark formless ships coursing evenly ahead and scenting the rich, moist aroma of the distant land.

As he turned to go down to his cabin, he became conscious that the ship was strangely alive; that shadows murmured together in the darkness and that other shadows paced uneasily up and down. A moment's alarm went through him as he wondered if there had been some warning which he had missed; but then he realised that the day's

apprehensions had been intensified by night; that some men could not face the lonely darkness of their bunks.

He padded softly down the ladders, and with a sense of foreknowledge saw the white blur waiting for him at their foot; when Cecil's voice greeted him, in an oddly formal and questioning whisper, as "Mr Raven?" he waited with an impatient courtesy. "What is it?" he said softly, and Cecil asked abjectly "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course," he said, and then as an unexpected warmth of compassion arose in him he said "Come inside."

He let Cecil into his cabin, drew the black-out curtains, and shut the door; as the door-switch turned on the light he looked at Cecil standing there blinking at him and asked "What is it?"

The young gunner said nothing, and after a moment Raven realised that he had nothing to say; nothing to add to anything which had passed between them. "Why do you pick on me?" Raven asked wonderingly, and Cecil lowered his eye-lashes; his body, dressed only in shorts, was filmed with sweat and moving with a faint rhythmical quiver. "I...dunno," he said hoarsely. "Can't you help me?"

Raven made a helpless gesture. "What d'you expect me to do?"

Cecil shrugged wearily. "That business to-day," he muttered. "I can't stand no more of it."

"Who the hell can ?" jerked Raven. "We've got to, that's all. There's no way out..."

His voice trailed away on a wondering note, as he realised that he had unwittingly struck upon the truth. Cecil only raised his eyes and looked at him with the dumb appeal of an animal, but suddenly his gaze sharpened; it probed into Raven's and he whispered tautly "What was that ?"

Raven frowned in comprehension, and then he too heard the distant bray of a siren; a second or two later the preliminary hiss and then the deep rasping roar of their own ship's siren sent them scrambling for the door. They joined the silent group of men which had drawn together amidships, looking into the darkness for an explanation; voices from the bridge came drifting through the still air and then someone said "We're changing course."

They scurried to the side to peer down at the turmoil of the water, forced aside by the swinging bulk of the hull, as though it would somehow answer their question, and then Costello said "The whole convoy's swinging. That's what the siren was for - emergency turn."

The babble of speculation became noisy enough to draw attention from the bridge; the Captain's voice called "What's going on down there ?" and the Chief Steward answered "Just wondering what's happening, Cap'm."

"Nothing to worry about," the Captain answered, his

voice reaching them calm and commonplace through the still, warm air. "We're making a ninety-degree turn - right back on our course. Probably means we're not going to Singapore at all."

## CHAPTER THIRTY

## Striking Home

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Before dawn of the following day, the convoy was reassembled on its new course and heading back out of the Straits, going away from danger instead of towards it. So it was something like a sense of affront that the crew heard the alarm bells after breakfast, and they gazed resentfully at the single aircraft which circled out of range. They knew that it was only the forerunner; a reminder that they were not yet out of reach.

As soon as it disappeared, the Captain sent for the Chief Steward. "What's for dinner ?" he asked, and the Chief Steward raised his eyebrows at such an obvious question. "Same as usual," he answered. "Soup, roast beef an' spuds an' cabbage, tapioca pudden."

"You'd better dump it, then," said the Captain briefly, and the Chief Steward's unshaven lips sagged open. "You won't have time for anything like that," the Captain told him. "We're going to get a pasting to-day."

The Chief Steward swallowed, and struck a match with trembling hands before he remembered that he hadn't put a cigarette in his mouth. The Captain continued "You'd better get some cold grub together - sandwiches and such. And dish out all the tea and sugar that they ask for."

"The beggars 'll be stowing it away to take home with

'em!" exclaimed the Steward indignantly, and the Captain's broad face moved into an unusually grim smile. "I shouldn't worry about that," he replied. "And when you've got the grub together, dish it out. Let 'em eat it when they like. After that, stock up all the boats with a good load of tinned stuff. All the tinned fruit you've got left, tinned soup, beef, anything. That's the kind of stuff they'll be wanting in this weather; those darned lifeboat rations are too dry."

The Chief Steward's mouth also felt dry by now, and he felt even worse when the Captain continued "Pass the word for everyone to have shirts on, and some kind of hat. They'll get burnt to blazes by the sun if we're drifting around for very long."

Please stop, the Steward begged silently; he felt as though he no longer recognised this rather stout and stumpy man who ticked off this catalogue of impending disaster. "That's all," said the Captain. "Except that you can serve out a tot to all hands. Make it a good one."

The Chief Steward fled down the companionway and into the pantry; finding his assistants dawdling there he snarled out a string of confused orders, oaths, and prayers. They gaped at him as he dragged open the store-room hatch, shouting "Start making a pile of bleedin' sammiches, I tell ya! Tell the Cook to dice the dinner! Oh, Jesus, how 'd you ever lemme get into this ?

Tell everyone to come an' get a tot! Cap'n says we're going to be blown sky-high any minnut! Nip along to yer cabins an' get some more clo'es on..."

Uncertain which order to obey first, they tumbled out on deck and scattered along aft, passing the Chief Engineer as he trudged towards the bridge. Hauling himself up the ladder with his eyes screwed up against the white glare of the sun, he heard rapid footsteps following him and glanced around to see the Chief Officer; they exchanged silent nods before passing into the shadows of the Captain's alleyway.

He greeted them with a similar nod, and faced them across the green baize table-cloth; with his heavy knuckles resting upon it he said "I'm not trying to put the wind up anybody, but they reckon prevention's better than cure. We might get a real pasting to-day, but all we can do is be ready for it. No use giving up, is there?"

He looked at them as though expecting an answer, and they made slight movements of their heads. "All right, Chief," he continued. "I want to have water on deck right away, and keep it running until further orders. I want all the water we can get, everywhere, all the time."

The Chief stared at him as though at a man who has uttered a heresy. "But the steam, Cap'n," he protested. "The steam 'll drop back if they're using it on the pumps, instead of the main engines."

"Then raise more steam," said the Captain kindly.

"You can do that, can't you?"

"Sure, but that means using more coal. We're not too well off as it is, and now you're asking me to - "

"I'm not asking you, Chief - I'm telling you," interrupted the Captain, and the Chief Officer looked curiously at the pair of them. They looked strangely alike; stocky, rather paunchy, their once hard and fluent muscles beginning to sag beneath the loosening skin, their meaty faces sheening with sweat and their sparse hair disarrayed. They were both old servants of the sea, and they had both subsisted on the coarse bread of its bondage, but now as they stared at each other a distinction appeared as definitely as between a man on horseback and a man on foot. It was the air of command, and it gave a rigid purpose to the Captain's stare.

There's more to this wee skipper than meets the eye, reflected Mr McGurk as the Chief gave a mutter of "Very well." The Captain nodded with satisfaction, and continued with his orders to them both; sending them away with a broad comforting smile, he asked the Chief Officer to send down Mr. Flack. As a consequence of this next interview, Raven was ordered to take the lifeboat sets up onto the boat deck, and stay with them until further notice.

Raven asked nothing better; it made him feel that he had some definite part in all this flurry of preparation.

Walking springily up and down the boat-deck, chewing upon a large ragged sandwich and from time to time pausing to sup from a mug of tea, he experienced a strange tautening of the spirit which was almost elation. At one moment he felt a kind of wild comradeship with all the men of his own ship and even with those, unseen and unknown, upon the ships in company with them; at the next he was struck with a huge wonder that the world should be as it was; that all these men, without their own consent or desire, could be thrust upon the anvil of disaster.

Each sight had a freshly-sharpened outline, each sound a crisp new ring; the red and yellow of signal flags against the blue glare of the sky, strained jokes tossed between men who hurried along the decks, silvery-creaming wake of an escort curving upon the blue silk of the sea, clatter of shovels from down below, deep steady pulse of engines far beneath his feet, vicious snap of gun-locks testing...this is war, he thought, and felt himself to be a seasoned warrior; war which pays all debts, wipes out all scores, destroys all other memories.

The Cook's voice ascended from the galley skylight in a plaintive and blasphemous yell, and the Chief Steward panted up onto the boat-deck shouldering a carton of tinned goods; he was followed by his assistants, and for

some time Raven helped them to stow various stores into the boats. "We'll be all right," the Chief Steward chattered repeatedly. "We'll be all right, lads...nothing to worry about...we got through so far...we're okay..."

A sudden vision of Captain Tempest's shattered body moved sickly across Raven's mind; he remembered the man who had been wounded when the battleship attacked, the horrid smell of burnt meat after the gun's crew was destroyed, the consequent dreams which had tormented him from time to time; his exaltation dissolved into a sudden blank of anxiety. Standing up in the cluttered boat and wiping his hands down his shorts, he gazed at the gunners who were fussing about their weapons like grooms before a race, the sailors unscrewing the brass cocks on the deck-lines to let warm salt water gush foaming around their ankles, the Bo'sun uncoiling canvas hoses like limp grey snakes. Their tanned and solid bodies seemed to become frail and vulnerable, and he suddenly held out his own arm and hand and looked at them as though they could answer a question.

He was standing thus when all activity stilled; like a forest before a storm, there was a strange listening hush against the peaceful background of the ship's wash and engine thump and the gurgling rush of water upon the deck. Everyone paused, listening, and Raven lifted his head to sense the direction of the solemn drone which murmured

across the sky, deepening second by second until it seemed to echo dully from its entire surface.

"There...!" shrieked a voice as sharply as a jabbing finger, and the alarm bells came almost as anti-climax; with his gaze fixed upon the arrow-head of aircraft which was appearing out of the blue distance, moving as it seemed almost casually towards them and yet sharpening in outline with every instant, Raven hardly heard them. The enemy was flying high, and approached with the same casual disdainful air above the first tattered yellow puffs of shell-fire; as the sound of their engines deepened, they appeared to pass through a long moment of indecision out of which they suddenly clamoured downwards.

Raven leapt out of the boat, stumbled, recovered himself, and stood up with his hands clasped over his head. It seemed vitally important to keep his eyes fixed upon his attackers, and he found himself staring with a strangely detached interest at one particular aircraft. He watched it as it fell out of formation and came towards them in a long shuddering dive, and felt that he must not take his eyes off it for an instant; he was hardly aware that the orange sparks of tracer floating towards it were from his own ship, and as it thundered overhead he found to his surprise that he was no longer watching it but that his face was pressed close to the dirty planking of the deck. The tar in the seams clung stickily to his hands.

He scrambled up again, with his mind recording the jerking barrel of the cannon in the boat-deck gun-pit, and unconsciously blinking in time to the flat smack of its explosions as it fired over his head. All at once he became aware of the entire convoy's tumult of explosions added to the thundering drone and whine of engines, and felt a kind of outrage as he glimpsed another aircraft following the same run as the first. I'm not ready for it, he protested silently as he saw the bombs toppling out of its belly; it was overhead and past before he could think again, but as he spun round to watch it he clearly saw a bomb falling onto the ship, passing before his eyes like an instantly-erased streak against the upperworks. A gigantic shock of sound caught him and flung him forward against the tall column of an engine-room ventilator, and he had just time to think wildly that it was all wrong; the bomb had struck amidships, but the explosion came from aft.

Blackness came, then painful light, swirling and dazzling; a kind of fluttering roar shot thinly with yells and cries was coming from somewhere, and as he pushed himself to his feet he found his hands sticky with blood. His stomach turning and knees dissolving, he felt desperately at his chest and belly, but could feel nothing; he saw fresh scarlet soaking into the front of his shirt, and then his groping hands discovered that

his nose was bleeding profusely. His face was swollen and sore, and he stood for a few moments with his legs apart and body bent forward, letting the blood spatter onto the deck and trying to sniff it back up into his nose. Shouldn't be surprised if my nose was broken, he told himself with a kind of miserable annoyance; he was still conscious of the fluttering roar behind him, and saw that the sunlight was strangely obscured on the deck. When he turned himself carefully around, he saw the flames and smoke bursting out of Number Four hatch, with thin streams of water glittering as they played upon them.

His stomach heaved again, and he made a quick run to vomit overboard; spitting and gasping, he straightened again to blink through streaming eyes at a strange sight passing less than a hundred yards away. He was looking straight down the funnel of a ship; a vessel which was slowly capsizing as water rushed in through her broken seams, with men still scrambling about her crazily canted decks. He gazed at this sight with his mouth open, seeing men fall into the sea and hearing tiny shrieks drift over the serene ocean, until it was past, and with sudden memory he glanced wildly into the sky again. There was nothing to be seen, all guns were quiet, and when he looked towards the nearest gun-pit he saw two gunners leaning over its parapet with cigarettes in their mouths, staring blankly at him as though they did not wish to know him.

He moved groggily over to speak to them, and heard the tinkle of brass as one of them moved his feet amongst the empty cannon-shells. "What's happened?" he asked thickly, and one of them answered in a sing-song Tyneside accent. "We're 'it bad, hinny," he replied. "Me an' my mate's just waitin' to jump in the boo-ats."

The other one, a youngster whose face was hideously ornate with pimples, amplified this with "Ah, an' it won't be long now, neether. We're slowing down already."

He cast a mournful look towards the torrents of smoke, streaked with flames which the sunlight made to appear translucent, which obscured the stern of the vessel. "There's all that stuff I bought in New York down in my bunk, too," he remarked.

As though he held the pulse of a dying man, Raven became conscious that the steady beat of the engines was coming to a stop. His hands fluttered wincingly about his face, and he croaked "But how'd it all happen so quickly? I didn't have a - didn't have a - "

He forgot what he was trying to say, and the gunners regarded him with pitying contempt. "What happened to youse?" enquired the Tynesider. "We had a good coupla minutes of it - and we aren't the only ones that copped it."

This was too much for Raven; he turned and stumbled aft. His face felt like a mask, and he was forced to close

his eyes yet further against the waves of heat which came from the burning cargo; he had no idea why he felt impelled to walk towards them, but when he came to the head of the ladder he felt that he was not alone. The flames were being attacked by most of the crew; hoses were pouring water through the ragged crater which was all that remained of the hatch, and a bucket-chain was tossing dollops onto the burning wreckage which lay scattered around. No one else appeared to be thinking of abandoning ship, and she seemed to be perfectly steady even though the engines had now stopped.

The real reason for this was to cut down the draught caused by her forward progress, and when the way died completely off her there was a definite slackening of the flames. Captain Keadwell perceived this with satisfaction as he came paddling aft through the ash-strewn water, and with his face screwed up he watched the efforts of his crew. In a few minutes time the flames had gone, though great greasy clots of smoke still volcanoed upwards, and the Bo'sun dragged a hose nearer to the crater's edge. A black-faced figure attired in a few scorched rags splashed up to the Captain, and out of a throat lacerated with heat and smoke Mr. McGurk rasped out an opinion that the fire was beaten.

Captain Keadwell agreed, but stayed a while longer to

make sure; he kept glancing anxiously up at the sky, and once stepped to the rail to gaze after the remnants of the convoy, now several miles ahead. Astern, smoke was layered across the sky from the merchant ship and the destroyer which had been sunk, and a corvette which had been picking up survivors made a wide sweep towards the spot where a bomber had crashed in the sea. There'll be few left o' them, reflected the Captain with pleasure, and remembered the strange way in which the aircraft had come to a staggering halt in the sky, toppled downwards, and hit the sea in a chaos of smoke and foam.

He looked back at the burned and shattered hatch, glanced up at the melted remnants of the aerial, jackstay, and other rigging hanging from the mainmast, watched the men who with their bodies black with soot and streaked with sweat still hovered around the wreckage, and then turned to go back to the bridge. Before he had taken three steps forward, a hand caught at his arm and a quavering voice enquired "But what about the other bomb ?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## Making the Choice

\*

Captain Keadwell stared for a few seconds into a face which he did not recognise, and then through the mask of dried blood he perceived the features of the Second Radio Officer. "Dear me, what 've you done to yourself?" he enquired mildly, and then said "What other bomb?"

There was another one hit us at the same time - I saw it," said Raven with a desperate calm. "Must 've hit us somewhere amidships."

The Captain eyed him for a moment, wondering whether the lad was panic-stricken or merely wandering in his mind. Raven stared earnestly into the blunt middle-aged face, and then as the Captain did not move he gave a sudden exasperated shout of "It did, I tell you! It did!"

He felt a wild despair of inspiring belief and action in his stolid superior, and even dared to give a savage shake to his arm. But the Captain only remarked "Now you just calm down, sonny. Let's go and have a look at it."

He splashed on ahead of Raven along the port side, until they reached the midships section between the engine-room, galley, and bridge. The Captain had walked aft along the starboard side, and he realised that this was why he had not seen the hole punched in the deck-plates, its sharp edges curling downwards. Water was pouring through it from the spourting deck-lines.

This is nasty, thought the Captain, and looked quickly around trying to place the probable resting place of the bomb. The hole was in line with the after coaming of No.3 hatch, so it looked as though it could be either in the cargo or a little further astern, in the bunkers amongst the coal.

He pondered for a few moments, and then glanced up to see Raven watching him anxiously. Despite the picture which filled his mind, an unaffected and reassuring smile spread across his face and he gave a heavy pat to the youngster's shoulder. "You were right, son," he admitted. "We'd better see what we can do about it, eh?"

He walked quickly back aft in search of the Chief Officer, and Raven limped wearily towards the hatch. As he perched himself upon it, and eased a cigarette between his puffed lips, the Cook came paddling towards the galley, lifting his feet gingerly and with a disgusted expression on his face. He glanced at Raven, pursed his lips as though the sight added to his disgust, and then glimpsed the hole in the deck. He paused, surveyed it with his head on one side, and then asked loudly "What the cripes is that?"

Raven took his time about answering. Watching the cook steadily, he blew out a cloud of smoke and then said casually "A bomb. A bomb went through the deck, and it's still down there somewhere."

The Cook glared at him, looked back at the hole, and then spat in disbelief. He paddled on towards the galley, paused with one foot inside, and then saw the Captain returning with the two other officers. The colour drained from his fiery face until it was as pallid as his own dough, and as the Captain passed him he quavered "Hey, mister...is that true what the kid's telling me ? There's a bomb down there ?"

The Captain glanced sideways, nodded briefly, and went to stand over the hole; the Cook's mouth sagged open and he burst out "Then don't stand over the bloody thing...! It'll blow us all up in a minnut...!"

He propelled himself out of the galley door, and bounded aft, so that the four men could hear him shrieking "There's a bomb in the bunkers! There's a bomb in the bunkers!" in diminuendo as he disappeared.

Perhaps because of this, Mr McGurk showed no particular eagerness to approach the hole. He stood some feet away from the Captain and the Chief Engineer, who stood over it as the Chief expressed his views, and then the Captain looked towards him and said "We can't tell whether it's in the hold or the bunkers. We'd better get the hatches off and find out."

The Chief Officer looked at him without moving, although his tongue licked an area clean of the smudge around his mouth. "An' then whut ?" he demanded hoarsely,

and the Captain shrugged. "See what we can do about getting it out, I suppose."

Mr. McGurk swallowed, with his eyes appearing unusually large and bright in his blackened face. "Ye canna do ut," he stated flatly, and Captain Keadwell eyed him curiously before asking "Why not?"

"Ut's - ut's too much to ask, mon!" burst out the Chief Officer sayagely. "We've tore our guts oot putting yon fire oot, an' now ye want us to creep aroun' the holds looking for a bloody great bomb!"

He swallowed again, glanced briefly up at the smoke-streaked sky, and then said in a reasonable tone "Look, muster, I've been torpedoed twice already in this war. That's enough for any man. All yeer crew have been through plenty this trip. Getting a bomb oot of a place like that is a job for an expert, an' - "

"Hey, Captain!" a loud voice interrupted, and Keadwell frowned up into the sun-glare to see a clump of men assembled on the boat-deck. Others were drifting up to join them, and a figure suddenly burst out of the stokehold door, skidded on the wet deck, and clawed its way up the iron ladder to be absorbed in the group. "Who's calling at me?" asked the Captain, and the voice replied "I am!"

Costello pushed himself forward, and from his advantage in height smirked down upon the Captain. "Is that a fack

there's a bomb down the hold ?" he demanded, and Keadwell replied "Can't tell yet. What about it ?"

"What about it ? What the hell d'you think about it ?" yelled Costello. "Abandon ship, man!"

A movement across the hatch caught the Captain's eye, and he swung round to see the Third Mate walking quietly across it towards the boat-deck. He stopped short when the Captain saw him, and stood looking sheepishly from his commander to the group of sailors, firemen, and gunners. Behind him, the Chief Steward scampered across the deck, and the Second Mate was climbing ponderously down the bridge ladder followed by Old Stanley and the gunners who had been serving the bridge cannons. Raven glanced up and saw Flack standing outside the wireless room, gazing sardonically down upon the scene below him.

"What the hell's going on ?" shouted the Captain. "You! Why 're you leaving the wheel ? Mr. Maclaren! Who told you to bring these men down from the bridge ? We're not finished with this ship yet, by a long chalk!"

"Mebbe you're not, but we are!" shouted Costello, and the Third Mate glanced wistfully at him and then back at the Captain. Mungo Maclaren reached the bottom of the bridge ladder, mounted the hatch, and tramped weightily across to stand looking down at the Captain. "Is it true what they're saying - there's a bomb|doon there ?" he enquired, and Captain Keadwell answered "As far as we know, but \_ "

"Then ye're daft, mon," pronounced Maclaren solemnly. "Come awa' off the top on it. It'll mebbe go up anny minnut, an' you with ut. It's jist in the right spot to blow the ship in half, too. The boilers 'll go if it explodes there."

"But it's not exploded, and we're not leaving the ship until it has exploded," replied Captain Keadwell in tones of exasperated patience. "I dunno what's the matter with you all! You're signed on the blasted ship, aren't you? Well, then! It's up to all of us to keep her going!"

"Leave me out of it, Captain," remarked Mr McGurk, but as he moved past the Captain grabbed at his shoulder. "Where are you going?" he demanded, and the Chief Officer replied in tones of brazen cheerfulness "I'm awa' to me cabin to get some fresh gear on. I burnéd up this lot trying to save yeer bluidy ship for ye."

"And you're the Chief Officer," said Keadwell in a wondering tone, and McGurk nodded good-humouredly. "I am, or I was," he answered. "Have it how you like. Now let me be, Captain, because I don't trust that bomb as much as you do."

Raven glanced from one to another, feeling strangely aloof from the whole affair. He heard their argument through ears which seemed to be plugged with cotton-wool, and through a kind of echoing buzz in his head; now and again he glanced thoughtfully at the hole in the deck, over which he felt a kind of proprietorial interest.

Raising his eyes from it he noticed an intruder on the scene - the corvette which had been picking up survivors. He watched it for some moments as it came creaming towards them across the placid water, and was better prepared than the others for the massive voice of its loud-hailer asking "What's the trouble ? Do you want any assistance ?"

The Captain released McGurk, gaped for a moment, and then stepped to the rail and waved his arms; the corvette approached until it was within easy hailing distance, and they could see a shocked and sodden row of survivors crouching along her narrow decks. They gazed dully up at the Austrian Duke as though at some unwanted entertainment, whilst the magnified voice of the corvette commander asked in deliberate, almost bored accents "What's the matter, Captain ? Why have you stopped ?"

Captain Keadwell sought for words to explain his dilemma, but before he could answer Costello bellowed "We've got a bloody great bomb in the hold, an' the skipper hasn't got enough savvy to abandon ship!"

"PIPE DOWN!" said the loudspeaker in sudden brutal command, and then resumed its suave enquiry of "What's the trouble, Captain ? Do you need any help ?"

"You've heard it!" shouted Keadwell bitterly. "These - men - want to abandon ship!"

"What do you intend to do ?"

The Captain hesitated again, and then shouted "They can

go. I'm staying. If there's anyone else wants to stay, we'll get her under way again."

There was a long moment of silence during which the corvette edged a little nearer to the motionless ship, the ~~whirr~~<sup>thump</sup> of her ~~turbines~~<sup>engines</sup> coming louder and even the voices of her crew becoming audible. Raven looked at their healthy faces gazing curiously upwards, and noticed a black cat stalking superciliously along the deck. Her Captain was also visible now, as a white figure standing with a microphone held up to his lips.

"I can't stay with you, Captain," he explained as calmly as though bidding farewell to a neighbour. "I'm ordered to rejoin the convoy. If you want to abandon, I'll come alongside and take your men off, and then we'll sink her."

"No!" shouted Keadwell, but his voice was drowned by the babble of cries from the boat-deck, the running of feet along the decks from all parts of the ship. He swung inboard again, his face becoming dusky with rage, and as Raven watched him he felt a sudden impulse to go and stand beside him, to show him that one man at least would not abandon him in this hour.

A rope ladder clattered down the side, and men leaned out from the boat-deck beckoning and calling towards the corvette; their voices were overcome by the loud-hailer's boom of "I'm sorry, Captain. Make your decision, please."

"It's made!" bawled Keadwell. "I'm staying! Any of these rats want to go, they can go with you."

"You give permission to abandon ship?"

Captain Keadwell waved his arm as though tossing his crew away, and the corvette captain took this for assent. He eased his ship's bows in towards the Austrian Duke, until they grazed her streaked grey side at a point below the bridge, and only a few yards forward of where Captain Keadwell was standing. Seeing this, Costello led a rush down from the boat-deck and pelted past the Captain, casting a hurried glance overside to see whether it was too far to jump down onto the corvette's deck. He saw that he couldn't risk it, and Raven watched his congested face as he looked sharply about for the means of descent; all the others swarmed about him with wincing glances towards the hole in the deck, and Mungo Maclaren pushed his way through with a chesty bellow of "Unlash them rope ladders on the lower bridge!"

These were the neatly-rolled rope ladders which protruded from beneath the jolly-boat, and Costello leapt up the ladder tugging at his sheath-knife. In a moment they unrolled themselves with clattering thumps down the side, and were steadied by a couple of sailors as they reached the fo'c'sle head. "Take yer time, now - take yer time!" shouted Maclaren as the men jostled past him, and moved over to stand next to the Captain; with an intent frown on his seamed features he paid no attention to him,

but placed a restraining hand upon one or two men who were over-anxious to reach the ladders.

Keadwell moved away a little, and then asked tonelessly "So you're taking charge now, are you?" as Maclaren cursed Wanker's Doom for trying to jump the queue. The Second Mate ignored him, but folded his arms and stood like a farmer counting his sheep; the Captain continued "Must feel pretty proud of yourself with a crew like this to order around."

"I'm not paying you any mind, Captain," rumbled Maclaren. "Ye're at liberty to please yourself what ye do."

"Yes, but you're not at liberty to please yourself," answered the Captain. "I'll see that you pay for this, mind. You and all the rest of you."

"I've done worse, and I've paid more," replied the Second Mate carelessly. "I'm not worried about yer dirty wee ship. There's better ones going to the bottom any day of the week."

"And you call yourself a seaman," said Keadwell ~~in~~ what was suddenly a quavering old man's voice, but Maclaren scoffed "Ach, I havena' call'd myself that for many a long day. I'm just a slave of the shipowners - like all these stupid eediots here."

He nodded at the men who were filing past, and went on in the same casual tone "That's what the shipowners an' the politicians 've made of yer seamen - a bunch of half-trained an' half-baked roustabouts. They willna' pay

enough to get men of any calibre, they willna' look far enough ahead to have 'em trained properly, they willna' make laws to keep 'em under proper discipline, an' if you try to hammer any sense into 'em they'll break you - same as they broke me."

Keadwell glanced sharply up at him, but he continued "Who 're ye saving yer ship for, Captain? Those psalm-singing Cardiff shipowners? Fat lot of thanks they'll give you. They'd sooner have the insurance."

"There's a war on, you know," said Keadwell, and Maclaren nodded judiciously. "So they've been telling me," he replied. "An' a bonny pension they'll pay yer wife an' kids when ye're blown sky-high in this lot."

"There's such a thing as - " began Keadwell, but stopped for lack of words; the Second Mate answered as promptly as though he had expressed himself completely. With a tilt of his head which somehow denoted an arrogant supremacy over such feelings, he said drily "Aye, an' ye're welcome to it. I always heard that it took both fules an' dommed fules to make up the world. But ye're no' lacking for company."

He nodded towards Raven, who was still sitting on the hatch and gazing in a bemused fashion at the men who were hurrying towards the ladder. Watching them pass by, empty-handed in their urgency, the lines from the Burial Service revolved within his mind. We brought

nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. Smoke-grimed, sweat-soaked, some of them with hair and eyebrows burned off or with brown blood drying from small injuries, they were leaving the small world of their ship and carrying nothing with them.

Raven felt himself unable to move, though at the same time he was experiencing a strong compulsion to follow the herd. At one moment his eyes met those of the Third Mate, who was being elaborately officious at the top of the ladder; the other man flushed and looked away, and resumed his direction of the men clambering overboard as though to show that he was performing an essential task. Raven was dimly conscious that he was entitled to feel and even to express contempt for him, but there seemed no special point in doing so. In the brief glance which had passed between them, a silent victory had been won.

Ginger the gunner, who had drifted up to join the group which had found a focal point on Raven, had no such scruples. In vividly decorated language, he expressed his disgust, and the others beside him listened in silence. Beneath their feet lay the bomb, and it was as though by simply standing over it they could point the difference between themselves who stayed and the others who deserted.

Only a few of these even bothered to look at them, but one figure hesitated and stood for a few moments hovering beside the Captain, before crossing the deck with a sick

look sideways at the bomb hole. Raven watched him pensively as he approached, somewhat dazedly aware that it was Cecil, and as the boy's face appeared against the background of aching blue sky he thought suddenly of Kenny. For the first time since leaving New York, it was with a feeling of release; he understood abruptly that the affair was ended, and he found that he did not care. That was an end to the hard physical urgency with which the thought of her had assailed him; an end to the wistful longings with which he had pictured the future.

Cecil paused before him with the nervous alertness of a bird alighting on a twig, looked at him for a moment with his head on one side, and then asked timidly "Aren't you coming?"

He shook his head, and the young gunner's hand went up to his mouth: "You've hurt your face," he said, and Raven nodded. "Doesn't hurt much," he replied.

Cecil became conscious of the other men staring at him, and swallowed painfully. "Do you...do you want me to stay too?" he asked, and Raven looked him up and down as though he had never seen him before. "Please yourself," he replied, and Cecil cast an agonised glance, towards the last few men bunched at the top of the ladder. "I mean... will you think any...any differently about me if I do stay?" he blurted out, and Ginger exploded "For Christ's sake! Buzz off with the rest of the rats!"

The youngster ignored him; his large blue eyes were fixed demandingly upon Raven. "You know what I mean?" he whispered, and Raven shrugged. "Please yourself," he said again. "It's nothing to do with me."

"You'll be best away out of it," said the Chief Engineer gently, but Cecil ignored him too. He stared hungrily at Raven, who looked past him at the Captain and Mr. Maclaren still standing by the rail, and his hand suddenly darted out to grasp the other's shirt-front. "Say!" he demanded in a loud shivering voice. "It's up to you to say!"

Raven's eyes sharpened; he looked at Cecil as though fully aware of him for the first time, and the buzzing inside his head suddenly faded into nothingness. In the tones of a sleeper awaked, he asked "What are you talking about?"

"You know!" sobbed Cecil. "You made me come back to this damned ship when I didn't want to...you pulled me back...now tell me whether I should go or stay!"

"Go, then," said Raven brutally, and wrenched the lad's hand away from its grip on his shirt. "You'll be damned good if you do stay."

Cecil's head snapped back like a boxer's; his eyes flicked over the other men, he stepped backwards as though to turn away, and then he burst out suddenly "To hell with you! I'll show you! I'm as good as you are, any day!"

Ginger guffawed "That's telling 'm!" and there was a responsive chuckle from the others; Raven's mouth fell open, but before he could say anything a hand fell on his shoulder and Flack's voice enquired "Are you coming?"

He spoke as though he were suggesting a walk ashore; Raven looked round to see him holding a carefully wrapped bundle in which he had apparently taken the time to pack a few possessions. Cecil jeered "Yes, take 'im with you!" and Raven frowned angrily. He shook his head, and Flack raised his eyebrows, shrugged, gave a casual wave of farewell to the others, and loped off towards the ladder. Before he had got his leg over the rail, the Chief Officer came hurrying out of the accommodation, wearing fresh clothes and also carrying a bundle. He hesitated when he saw the Captain looking at him, looked round as though uncertain whether he had made the correct decision, and then said "Well...so long, Captain. Good luck."

"Go to hell," snapped Keadwell, and the Chief Officer blinked, grinned, and trotted towards the ladder. Mr. MacLaren moved away from his position beside the Captain, but did not condescend to offer any word or gesture of farewell; slowly and majestically, he paced towards the ladder and swung himself over the side. A few moments later, those who stood above the ~~h~~ bomb heard him saying "Aye, that's all. Ye can shove off now."

The telegraph clanked from the steel intestines of the corvette, water churned and rumbled beneath her stern; funnel, masts, and upperworks moved away until they could see the whole length of her, with their shipmates being chivvied away from the fo'c'sle by a petty officer. "Good luck, Captain, " said the loud-hailer. "I daresay that someone 'll be sent back to you."

Captain Keadwell raised his hand, and as it fell again to his side the corvette completed her turn away from the ship, paused, and then plunged forwards again after the convoy.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## The Bomb in the Bunkers

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Keadwell turned inboard with a sigh, drawing a meaty forearm across his mouth. He was surprised to find himself thinking that he could do with a drink, and he remembered the premature celebration of his promotion. Fat lot of good it did me after all, he ruminated as he surveyed his crew; seven men and a ship that might blow up at any tick of the clock - what sort of a command was that ?

Yet there was no question in his mind as to whether he had done the right thing. A ship was a ship; a kind of sacred bondage which enslaved true seamen as long as she could be kept afloat. He moved forward with his hands on his chunky hips frowning down at the hole in the deck, and just as he did so Ginger flicked away the match with which he had been lighting a cigarette. By chance, it went directly down the hole; everyone jerked back as though they expected its tiny weight to detonate the bomb, and then the Captain let out a long breath. "That was a close one," he said, and their tension sparked into an electric crackle of laughter, slurring back into silence as the Chief held up his hand. He said nothing, but peered upwards with calculating eyes.

The others heard it then; the whining hum which was at first no more than a coming and going in the air, but deepened until they caught sight of the planes fleeting

around the horizon. They scattered across the deck to gaze after the convoy, now just a collection of vague shapes in the distance, and in a minute or so they heard the first detonations shudder through the dense golden air. "Here, lad," snapped Ginger, and led Cecil away to one of the gun-pits; the Bo'sun and Old Stanley went to another, but neither the Chief Engineer nor Big Cyril the fireman had had any training on the armament, and could only stand helplessly beside Raven and the Captain. They could see an aircraft spiral above the convoy like a leaf over a bonfire, but the others had completed their first bombing run and were far on the other side; a few seconds later the air shuddered once again to the deep rumble of bombs in the ocean, the flat thumping of guns and the erratic drum-beat of automatic weapons. The sky above the convoy was clotted with shell-bursts, and then they saw a sudden huge ball of flame drift slowly upwards, consuming itself in snarling cloudy orange. It was pursued by a spouting pillar of black smoke, and then their deck-plates quivered to a massive punch of sound. "The other tanker, eh?" muttered the Chief flatly, and Captain Keadwell said without malice "I reckon our lads jumped out of the frying pan into the fire."

The distant aircraft turned, swooped, clawed their way upwards again through the smoke-speckled sky, and then

all at once began to chase each other into a ragged formation, clamouring off towards the south. The sound of their engines dropped into a growl, a murmur, a hum, and then the merest vibration which lingered on as a memory in the ears, underlying the placid slap of breeze-driven ripples against their sides. "They aren't doing too badly," remarked the Captain. "One ship per visit, so far."

"I don't reckon there'll be anyone coming back for us, at this rate," grunted the Chief. "Those yallah bastards 'll be keeping 'em too busy."

"Never mind - we might be better off without 'em," remarked the Captain cheerfully. "So long as the Japs 've got the convoy to play with, they won't bother about us."

The Chief looked at him curiously. The notion that they could be better off than anyone else seemed to him to be a strange one. For the first time, he consciously examined his own motives for staying behind, and was surprised to discover that he could not find any. Why had he stayed when the Second, Third, and Fourth Engineers had all walked off - in so much of a hurry that they had not even shaken his hand or said good-bye. I'd have expected more of the Second, he thought disapprovingly - and yet he wasn't the only one that you'd have picked for a stayer. Maybe I'm the mug?

His brief self-questioning was interrupted by the

Bo'sun and Old Stanley, followed by the two gunners. "Start work now?" asked the Bo'sun cheerily, and the Captain nodded. "Aye. But we'll drop a boat in the water first. No telling when we'll be needing it, with those boyos around."

"It's wings we'll be needing if we cop another one," chirped Old Stanley, and performed a sprightly little dance on the deck. "See the world from a fahsand feet high!"

Cecil glanced at him with loathing, but followed the others up onto the boat-deck. The seven of them made hard work of lowering the heavy boat, but at last she took the water safely and lay drifting at the end of her painter; the Bo'sun swarmed down the falls and cast off the blocks and the Captain panted "Orright, lads...now we can get out whenever we like. Let's have a look at the baby."

He nodded towards the hatch, and they trailed after him back to the main deck. Old Stanley scampered off and returned with a hammer, and as he dealt the first blows to the wedges which secured the hatch-covers Raven felt his mouth go dry. As each of the wedges fell to the deck he felt a separate shock of apprehension travel from his feet into his skull; he looked warily at the other men, and was almost disappointed to see them unperturbed.

He gave a hand in rolling back the several tarpaulin which covered the hatch-boards, and then in lowering the

hatch-boards gently onto the deck. It seemed strange to see the neatly-stowed cargo, and to remember the icy grey skies under which it had been loaded, but it soon became apparent that its symmetry would have to be disturbed. It had been stowed so closely that it was not possible for anyone to through the narrow space which it left beneath the deck, and in order to shift any of the larger cases it was necessary to take out the hatch-beams which had supported the boards and their covering tarpaulins.

It took them another hour or more to rig the derrick in order to lift out these great beams, lower them as easily as possible onto the deck, and then to start dragging out cargo and piling it willy-nilly upon one end of the hatch. With grazed knuckles and blistered hands, streaming with sweat and gasping for breath, Raven found himself remembering the casual-seeming ease with which the stevedores had handled these same cases; when the Bo'sun raised his hand and said "That's enough. Reckon I can crawl through there now," he slumped down with his head reeling, and shook his head at Ginger's offered cigarette.

They watched the Bo'sun's boot-soles disappearing, and heard the scraping of his gingerly progress over the cargo whilst the Captain bent to peer anxiously after him. After a few moments his muffled tones announced "Can't see nothing here. Must be in the bunkers arter all."

The Chief uttered a protesting curse, and the Captain straightened himself with a jerk of his head at the others. "C'm on," he grunted. "We'll be all day at it else."

Raven pushed himself up to climb out of the hatch and join them as they stripped back the tarpaulins from the bunker-hatch. He felt as though his mind were slowly freezing, and as though he watched himself dragging back the heavy canvas from a little distance away; when the hatch-boards were exposed, and Ginger and Old Stanley began to lift them off to stack them on deck, it seemed that every thump was dealt upon his entire body. He pictured the bomb lying under the coal, with every careless movement above it goading it nearer explosion.

When a space about ten feet wide had been oped up, the Captain and Chief Engineer peered down at the small mountain of coal. The dust shimmered and danced in the sun-rays streaming down upon it, and Keadwell shaded his eyes to peer down as far as he was able. He straightened up with a grunt of resignation, saying "It must 've buried itself, all right. Got any shovels, Chief?"

The Chief Engineer spoke to Big Cyril, and they went down to the stokehold to collect an armful; when they returned, they found that the Captain and the Bo'sun had already climbed down onto the coal. Ginger and Old Stanley were craning over the coaming, trying to see what was happening, but Raven and Cecil were standing a little

way apart. The Chief thought that the two youngsters were looking very sick about the whole project, and for some reason this annoyed him; he pushed roughly past Raven, and leaned over to shout "Can you see anything?"

"Not a sausage. Must 've buried herself properly," replied the Captain in tones which were given a kind of muffled echo. "I think - wait a minute..."

There was a grating scramble over the coal, and then the Bo'sun's voice cried "She's here all right - here's 'er blooming fins!"

He picked his way back to stand beneath the open hatch, and held up a strangely shaped metal object. "Must 've been wrenched off her when she went through the coal," he explained. "There's that young Sparks? I didn't hardly believe him, really, but he's got sharper eyes than I gave him credit for."

The Captain crunched over to stand beside him, and blinked upwards into the square of sunlight. "That's it," he remarked. "What d'you say now, Chief? What do we do with all the coal?"

The Chief cogitated for a moment, and then replied "Depends how far she'd gone down. If it's not too far, we can try heaping the coal up on one side of the bunker. If that won't do, we'll have to heave some up on deck."

"Hope it won't come to that," mumbled the Captain. "We'll be here a week if it does. All right - chuck us down those shovels."

The Chief obeyed, and Keadwell handed one to the Bo'sun as the other men commenced to climb down the ladder. He regarded them as though he were trying to remember something, and after Ginger and Old Stanley had scrambled past him over the coal he looked up and shouted "One of you lads 'd better stay up top and keep a look-out. Give us a yell right away if you hear anything."

"Aye aye," returned Raven, and instantly thought : Reprieve. He straightened up to glance around the horizon, and was shocked to see Cecil staring at him. In his self-concern he had forgotten the young gunner, and he looked into the lad's beseeching eyes with a kind of infuriated despair. "Why the hell didn't you go with the corvette, when you had the chance ?" he snarled at him, but all Cecil could answer was "You wouldn't make me go down there, would you ?"

"Why should I go, and you stay up here ?" demanded Raven. "If you'd only left when the others did, I'd be the one to keep look-out. It's been the same ever since we left England - all I've done is pull you out of one mess after another, and all I've got for it is trouble. And now you want me to - "

He checked, arrested by a strange sound which was floating up out of the open hatch. As a counterpoint to the clank and rasp of shovels, Old Stanley's voice was proclaiming "'Aow, don't go daown the mine, Daddee;

There's plenny a' coal in the 'ole...'"

The old man's cracked and cheerful voice made Raven's throat close up with shame; with a gesture of disgust which was as much at himself as at Cecil, he swung his leg over the hatch-coaming. "You keep a good look-out, hear?" he snapped as his feet found the rungs of the steel ladder, and his last sight was of Cecil nodding humbly.

The clouds of dust rose up around him on waves of heat, and when he touched the coal and began to pick his way across it he found himself clenching his teeth with painful force. His heart was pounding with great shuddering jerks, and after he had taken a few steps he stopped and made a deliberate effort to control himself. Through the dust which now filtered the sunlight into a diffused glow he could see the others toiling, and wondered whether they felt as he did or whether they were somehow able to conquer imagination; the imagination which constantly flailed him with an image of their bodies being flung up through a huge spouting hole in the deck, or of being squashed into a horrid sandwich of coal, flesh, and steel...the noise, he questioned himself; what will the noise be like? Will we hear it, or will we only be conscious of it as part of the whole limb-tearing explosion...or will we feel anything at all? How will it feel...how will it feel...how will it feel...?

He realised abruptly that he must occupy himself; that the longer he stood there the worse it became. A blasphemous shout rose out of the gloom as he plunged forward, sending some of the coal cascading down into the hole which they were digging; someone caught at his arm and thrust a shovel in his hand, and rasped "Throw it all up to starboard..."

He grunted assent, and began jabbing the shovel into the coal. It was torturingly hard work, for each time he took a shovelful he had to turn round upon his shifting foothold and throw the coal round at shoulder-height; no one spoke and Old Stanley sang no more, because the dust filled mouths, noses, and eyes. After a while he paused to rip off the tail of his shirt, and tie it round his face; it made little difference, but the worst thing was the sweat which flowed out of his forehead and washed dust into his eyes, and caused them to burn with its own salt. Like the others, he soon became plastered with a sticky paste of sweat and coal-dust; the breath rose harshly from the depths of his chest and scraped out through his throat, yet he was unwilling to draw further breaths because they drew in almost as much dust as air.

He was dimly conscious that none man or another would from time to time sag down upon the coal, squatting with head between knees in a few minutes attempt to summons up fresh resolution; he was no longer aware who was who, since they all looked alike beneath the black paste which

clung all over them, runnelled by sweat which only made a fresh base for more dust to cling to. As the time passed, he became aware that he was sinking further down; the coal was rising up on one side of him, and the dusty sunlight seemed to be further away. His hands became raw, his arms, back, and shoulder muscles began to burn, at one point he had to rest for an unguessable time whilst his stomach muscles wrenched themselves in and out of a series of knotting cramps. No one took any notice of him, even if they could see him; the erratic clank and scrape of shovels continued, the hoarse panting of breath was all around him, the chunks and cobs of coal rattled against each other as they were flung upwards.

After a certain period of this, he developed an intense resentment; forgetting that it was he himself who told the Captain about the bomb, he blamed him for the whole stupid scheme. He carried on a bitter argument inside his head; he attacked the coal with spurning fury as he made his points of protest; he almost forgot to be afraid. Shortly, he found even more people than the Captain to blame; he spread his resentment over all his shipmates; blaming those who were gone, because they had deserted him, and those who had stayed because they had involved him in this perilous toil.

Engrossed in this massive condemnation, he ignored the

first touch on his arm; until a voice yelled "Stop bloody shovelling!" he continued his furious dig and toss. Turning round, he saw a black figure against the dust-fogged background; the Bo'sun's voice coughed "All right - Big Cyril's found it. Up top - quick!"

"Careful!" he continued as Raven dropped his shovel, and started to scramble upwards. "You'll drive the whole bloody lot back down again!"

This was indeed the danger; the six men had piled the coal so high upon one side that an unwary step would send it all cascading back upon the bomb. The Captain, leaning upon his shovel and seeing them uncertain how to proceed, checked them with a word; he looked about and saw that they now stood at the bottom of a trough of coal, a good deal higher at one side than the other. At the bottom of this trough lay the bomb, but at one end of it the Captain could just make out the ladder. "Don't climb up the coal," he ordered. "Just go across to the ladder - but take it easy."

One after another, they obeyed; when it came to Raven's turn, he found that this procedure forced him to step right over the bomb. He stepped forward as lightly as a cat over wet grass, and could see the metal carcass lying there in ominous inertia; most of its paint had been stripped off on its plunge through the coal, and it gleamed dully up through the dust. He was appalled by

its size, which seemed to be almost that of a man; at one point, it seemed impossible to avoid stepping right upon it, and he felt as though icy water were trickling down from his chest into his bowels.

He had to squeeze his eyes shut against the sunlight when his head rose out of the hatch, but he felt its white shock upon him as the touch of deliverance. When he could see again, he saw the others sprawled on the deck like bundles of black rags, and slouched over to slump beside them. He closed his eyes again and waited for something to happen.

Cecil's voice spoke in his ear, saying "Here, Frankie - drink this," and he pushed himself up on his elbows to see the lad offering him a mug of tea. "Didn't think you had so much sense," he rasped grittily, and folded his sore lips over the rim of the mug.

The Captain stood watching them, drinking his own tea; in a few minutes time the Bo'sun had recovered enough to give him a cracked grin. "Well, we found it," he said. "Whadda we do now? Toss up for who goes down an' pulls it out?"

Captain Keadwell's expression could not be seen through his mask of dust and sweat; he finished his tea, swirled round the dregs, and tossed them neatly over the side. "No need for that," he answered placidly. "I'll be doing it myself."

He set the cup down, and groped in his dank clothing until he found his pipe and tobacco pouch. When he had blown out the first clouds of smoke to drift away on the glowing air, he said "We'll do it like this..."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## Out and Over

\*

While they were making their preparations, an enormous cloud foamed torpidly up the sky; voluptuously white, stained with a pinkish ivory about its upper rotundities, it seemed to soak up the air. From time to time, a snarling grunt of distant thunder throbbed across the glassy water, upon which the cloud was poised as though it was mirrored in self-esteem; once the ship vibrated to a huge pulsation of distant sound, and they looked anxiously up at the sky. "All right," the Captain croaked impatiently. "It's only a storm building up - come on."

Just when they had everything ready, the cloud moved. Huge greyish-purple billows foamed out from underneath it, and forced it up the sky; viperish with lightning, they blotted out its whiteness within a few minutes, and the rain seethed across the sea to fling itself upon the motionless ship. They were forced to run for shelter as the rods of water flailed upon the decks; once it had passed onwards, a myriad raindrops flashed in the returning sun. Overhead, the white cloud was still there; somnolent in the freshened air of the late afternoon, floating dreamily across to yet invisible horizons.

The Captain stepped gingerly out onto the steaming deck,

and after a seeking glance around the sky he said wearily "All right, lads - let get on with it. It'll be dark in an hour or two."

He led them across to the gaping hatch, and the Bo'sun handed him a cut-down cargo net. It was of inch-thick ropes, soft with use and with eyes hurriedly spliced upon each corner; he examined it for a moment and then let it drop down upon the coal. Without another word, he swung his legs over the hatch-coaming and felt for the steel rungs; when he was about a quarter way down, a shadow fell across him and he looked up angrily. "I said no one else," he shouted. "This is my job, I told you!"

Old Stanley's voice came down to him like that of an ancient guttersnipe; cocky, cheeky, springily self-reliant. "I've lived long enough too, Cap'm," he said. "You'll never handle that old beggar alone."

Keadwell paused for an instant, then went on down without answering. He waited for the old man at the bottom of the ladder, looked sternly at him for an instant and seemed about to speak, and then turned to pick his way across the coal. Over their heads, the winch grumbled faintly as the Bo'sun lowered a cargo-hook down into the bunker; someone called "All right!" and Keadwell was conscious of it hanging just above the coal.

As though spreading a blanket for a sleeping child, he and

Old Stanley laid out the cargo-net beside the bomb. It was lying almost on its side, with its blunt nose still covered by coal; they began to pick this off piece by piece, tossing it gently away. The dust had settled now, and the declining sun lay in a brilliant oblong upon the side of the bunker; shadows moving on this told Keadwell that someone was standing over the open hatch. "Why can't they do what they're told?" he grumbled. "I specially mentioned that they should stand well away."

"They're just curious, I s'pose," returned Old Stanley coolly. "'Tisn't often they can see a sight like this."

"You're as bad as the rest of 'em," said the Captain irritably. "What's the matter you had to follow me down? I'd have thought better from an old sailor like you."

Old Stanley said nothing; his almost fleshless arms moved quickly and neatly over the bomb, with the big gnarled hands picking away lumps of coal. "Big old bastard, ain't she?" he commented admiringly when they had uncovered the nose. "Wonder who taught them slit-eyed geezers to make 'em like this?"

Keadwell gave a sudden convulsive shudder, his hands jumping away from the bomb as though they had leapt out of his control; in a second or two he regained command of himself and began work again. In another minute the bomb was fully exposed, and he stood up to stretch his muscles; Old Stanley remained motionless until he squatted beside him again.

"Right," grunted the Captain, and they burrowed their hands

under the smooth metal carcass; exerting all the power of their wrists and arms, they tried to lever it smoothly over onto the net.

"I knew as - you'd never of - done this - alone," grunted Old Stanley as they strained at it, and Captain Keadwell closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. In a moment, he thought, I'm going to get out of here, and they can think what they like...

The bomb moved gently, and he gave an involuntary yap of alarm, but once it had begun the turn, and they could ease it over onto the ropes, it rolled more smoothly. "That's enough," panted the Captain at last, and Old Stanley hunkered back onto the coal with his head on his knees.

"You all right?" enquired Keadwell as soon as he'd got his breath back, and the old man muttered "Queer turn, that's all...never thought we'd do it..."

The Captain watched him impatiently, and as soon as the old sailor wavered upright again he reached up for the cargo hook. They gathered up the corners of the net, slipping its eyes over the hook, and without another glance at the bomb made their way towards the ladder.

When the Captain reappeared, Raven was surprised that he should look no different; his lips were red and moist in his blackened face, and he stuck his empty pipe between them as he nodded at the group watching him emerge. "Why'n't you stand clear like I told you?" he demanded, and the Chief Engineer

answered cryptically "What's fair for one's fair for the rest of us, Cap'm."

"Bloody fools," answered Keadwell as he glanced up at the Merrick, and then said "All right, Bo'sun - let's see how it goes."

The Bo'sun eased steam into the winch, and the wire runner slowly tautened; with his hands gripping the coaming, the Captain stared down at the netted bomb like a fisherman with a record catch. He raised one hand and moved one finger in a circular motion, and the Bo'sun ran the winch a fraction faster; inch by inch, the bomb sidled over the coal until the winch-runner was straight up and down. With flattened hand, the Captain checked the movement, then turned and said "I want everyone out of the way except me and the Bo'sun. Go up for'ard somewhere."

"But you'll want someone to handle the guy-ropes, Cap'm," said Big Cyril meekly, and Ginger's irregular features jerked into a scowl. "I reckon you've done enough," he said in a kind of respectful grumble. "How about you going up for'ard? We can handle this part of it."

"That's the ticket, Cap'm," chattered Old Stanley. "Better be someone left to get the medals."

The Captain gazed at them for a few moments, then shrugged and raised his hand again. "Please your silly selves," he said. "All right, Bo'sun. Easy does it."

The winch clanked the runner slowly round the drum, and

they watched as it wound slowly upwards, as the hook appeared with the net hanging from it, as the dully-shining carcass rose above the hatch-coaming, turning gently round in one direction and as gently turning back again, and then as the Bo'sun checked it a dozen feet above the hatch.

Ginger and Big Cyril loosed the guy-ropes of the derrick, and at the Captain's nod began to heave it slowly round; hypnotised, Cecil stared up at the deadly parcel as it swung across the deck and finally dangled over the side. "Now let her go," said Keadwell calmly. "Easy as you like."

The Bo'sun reversed the winch, letting it unwind slowly; as the bomb went out of his sight he called ironically "Who's gonna shin down an' let it off the hook?"

"Beggan the hook - an' the net an' runner an' all!" replied the Captain with sudden violence. "Let the whole lot go - and good riddance!"

The Bo'sun nodded, letting the winch go until all the runner had wound itself off the drum. He stopped it then, jerked at the spunyard stop, and stood back with a satisfied grunt as the runner whipped itself through the blocks and disappeared with a splattering splash.

"That's it, then," he commented, and looked across at the Captain. Half-jokingly, he asked "What now, then, Cap'm? A hand to the wheel?"

The Captain took him seriously, answering "Better see how the steam is first. What d'you say, Chief? Can we get her

under way ?"

"Oh aye, I daresay," answered the Chief. "Whether we can keep her under way, though - that's the question. 've you ever fired a ship, Cap'm ?"

"Aye - more than once," said Keadwell indifferently. "We'll take turn about in the stokehold, never fear."

He began to fill his pipe, looking appraisingly at his crew. Relaxed and pleased with themselves, they lounged about waiting for his orders; Raven had just lit a cigarette and blown out a cloud of smoke when Cecil jumped to his feet and shouted "Listen..."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## The Bitter End

\*

His voice was like a stone through glass, snattering their brittle ~~single~~ moment of satisfaction; they stared at him in annoyance, and Ginger was about to speak when the Captain held up his hand. "It's them," whimpered Cecil, and Old Stanley cupped a hand behind his ear with a pantomime of deafness; no one smiled at him, for one after another was becoming conscious of that swelling and fading drone which seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere.

"Where are they?" muttered the Captain with his head back, peering up into the sky which was now flushing with the first pale apricot of evening; the Chief stood beside him looking round the horizon, and opining "They'll be chasing after the convoy again, I suppose."

"Up there!" shouted Raven, and his words made Ginger take off like a sprinter from his mark; the others followed Raven's pointing finger, and saw the tiny shapes which were passing far above on the starboard side.

"That's a lot higher than they ever were before," commented the Chief, and the Captain gave a scoffing grunt at the hopeful note which he detected in this opinion. "They'll 've seen us all right, don't you worry," he replied. "The only thing is whether..."

His voice soared into a yell. "...yes, they're coming! Two of 'em turning this way! All right, lads - I don't want

any bloody nonsense! Keep under cover - all of you!"

He sent them along towards the alleyway with broad sweeps of his arms; they went unwillingly, obsessed with the feeling that they must keep an eye on whatever was attacking them. The deep bumbling drone of engines took on added purpose with every instant, and as Raven crouched in the alleyway with the others poised tensely around him he heard the Captain's voice being swamped by that encroaching thunder. "Dunno what they're up to yet," Keadwell told them. "Mebbe they're just going to have a look...mebbe they'll think we've abandoned ship anyway...don't seem to be flying very low, so mebbe they'll..."

His words were battered into extinction by the sudden pounding explosions of Ginger's cannon; they were funnelled into the alleyway and seemed to rebound from wall to wall, joining with the engines to become an overpowering torment of sound. They ceased abruptly as he came to the end of the drum, and the engines swelled to a triumphant climax, thundering up and away; just as Raven thought they must have passed without attacking, the ship slammed violently upwards and to one side, so that they were all tumbled on top of each other to the sound of breaking glass and splitting woodwork.

"What is it...! What is it...! What is it...!" demanded Cecil in a series of muffled screams; someone was lying on top of him, and his choked frantic yells continued during the long moment before there was the colossal thumping splash of water toppling back onto the decks. It surged in through the

doorway, throwing the Captain back upon the rest of them and making them claw desperately at each other in the panic-shot conviction that the ship was going under water; choking and coughing out the brine, he managed a shrieking gasp of "All ri' - all ri' - only the water falling aboard - "

Most of them didn't hear him; they threshed their way upright and plunged towards the door, and were thrown off their feet again as the ship took a sudden lurching list, to the accompaniment of a huge shuddering rumble through her entire frame. Raven felt someone's finger-nails tearing at his shoulders, and with flailing arms and legs fought his own way towards the sunlight; when he burst out on deck he stood for an instant dazed and bedazzled, staring desperately about in search of the damage.

As though to oblige him, a great puff of mingled steam, smoke, and soot billowed out of the engine-room ventilators, followed by others through the stoke-hold doors; a shout drew his eyes upwards, and he saw Ginger gesticulating out of his gun-pit and yelling "Three of 'em right alongside! Must 've split 'er open!"

That was just what had happened. A stick of bombs had missed the ship by a few yards, but the enormous pounding shock of their explosions had done as much damage as a direct hit. It had punched steel plates away from their rivets, twisted the frames, snapped open the shell-plating, and let a myriad torrents pour through into the engine-room.

and stokehold. Within a minute or two, the colossal pressure behind them had filled the stoke-hold up to the fires; the ship began falling relentlessly over on her side, and Raven found himself losing his footing upon the streaming deck.

"That's all! That's all!" the Captain was bawling. "In the boat, lads! You up there - you gunner - quick! Over the side! Come on, you - get moving!"

He hit Raven with the heel of his hand, sending him skidding along the deck; the hissing roar of the water surging up around the boilers erupted out of the stokehold, almost drowning the thunder of the returning planes. With a puzzled shock, Raven saw something slam against the deck with a tremendous vicious force, adding a twanging snarl to the background uproar; an irregular array of holes appeared in the galley bulkhead, and he was dazedly aware of Ginger being smashed sideways as he climbed out of the gun-pit.

"The lifeboat sets!" he shouted to nobody, and began to scramble over the hatch-beams lying about the deck, striving to reach the boat-deck where he had left the lifeboat transmitter and receiver. All at once it seemed desperately important to regain them and to fulfil this part of his duty.

There was a great metallic crash from the engine-room as he dragged himself up the canted ladder, and he found that he had to pick his way along the boat-deck with his feet wedging into the angle made by the skylight-casing with the deck; the lifeboat sets were there, but he struggled with them in vain.

It was impossible to drag them up the sloping deck to the side, and then to lower them into the lifeboat.

He sobbed obscene inanities as he struggled with them, losing his footing again and again as the deck slanted more acutely; he was vaguely conscious of the clattering turmoil of loose gear falling everywhere about the ship, above and below, and he straightened up to look for help. He was just in time to see Old Stanley, the Chief Engineer, and Cecil, who had dodged back into the alleyway when the aircraft machine-gunned them, begin to make another wild scramble across the deck. The first two slithered and clawed their way to the bulwarks, dragged themselves over, and disappeared; Cecil was following them when the scattered hatch-beams began to slide together.

For an incredulous moment Raven watched it happen, and felt himself wince in anticipation of Cecil's terrible scream; with his eyes fixed upon the youngster he tried to hurry towards him, nightmarishly frustrated by the need to keep his balance on the sloping deck. Words were coming out of his mouth, but he never knew what they were; he was only conscious of the need to reach the screaming creature before him.

"All right, son...all right, son...I'm coming...I'm coming," he was gasping as he crawled slowly up to Cecil; one downwards glance at the legs crushed between the great steel beams, each of them twenty feet long, shaped like curved girders, and weighing two or three tons, made a thin vomit surge up into his throat.

Cecil's hands scrabbled at him, and the mindless scream of entreaty tore at his brain; he clutched at the boy's arms and tried to check their frenzied motion, and finally embraced him completely, hugging the pulsing body and striving to keep his balance with one foot on the hatch-coaming and the other upon the beams. The deck began to rise above him like a wall, and his entire being seemed to concentrate through his eyes like the sun through a burning glass as he gazed frantically about, certain that he must see someone coming to help him. "HELP!" he roared, feeling the word burning at his throat, but he knew that it was less than a whisper against the gigantic ~~tormented~~ protest of the ship; the splitting of wood from steel, tumbling clamour of loose gear falling, hissing boom of steam which still jetted from stoke-hold and engine-room, and over all the immense grinding, wrenching creak of the entire ship's tortured frame.

Cecil's screams had bubbled into great chest-tearing sobs, and his body sagged against Raven's; all he could say was "Don't leave me," and then "I never done nothing to nobody..."

"I won't leave you, kid," panted Raven, and threw back his head in another throat-burning scream for help; he thought, this time, that he heard somebody answer, but at the same moment he had a brilliant and incongruous vision of his mother walking slowly through the garden, with a trowel in one hand and a basket in the other and a slight frown of concentration about her eyes. "I can't do it," he sobbed, and

Cecil twisted in his arms like a huge fish, with a shriek of "Don't leave me...don't leave me..."

A funnel-stay snapped with a shuddering twang, and for a final dizzying moment he stared into the young gunner's contorted face; grey with fear and pain, dirtied with dust and sweat and tears. His muscles braced into an agonising tension as he tried to support the sagging body, and then he felt himself falling backwards; his feet scrabbled for a hold and Cecil screamed again as the full weight tore against his trapped legs. As he let go and fell across the hatch, now almost perpendicular beneath him, he heard Cecil's bubbling shriek of "I never done nothing...I never done nothing..."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## Homeward

\*

When the men in the boat heard Cecil's first screams, they stared up at the great rounded bulk of the ship which was heaving itself out of the water; at any instant, they expected to see him and the Captain and young Raven heave themselves over the rail, and crawl - as they would now have been able to do - down the ship's side to the lifeboat.

But when no one appeared, and every moment brought several more inches of rusty steel plating out of the water, they had a brief and bitter quarrel. "I'm going back for 'em," snapped the Bo'sun, and tried to draw the boat back against the ship with the boat-hook; it scraped uselessly down the plates, now exposing the lond dripping streamers of weed, and its copper tip plunged into the water. Before he could lift it again the Chief grabbed at his arm, shouting "Don't be a fool, man! They'll have to save themselves now! What's the good of you going too?"

"Leave 'im be," expostulated Old Stanley in a cracked snarl, and Big Cyril bellowed "Push 'er off, man! Push 'er off! The bloody ship 'll turn turkle in a minnut, and throw us up like a bull!"

"Shut yer gob," grunted the Bo'sun, and stepped up onto the thwarts. He poised himself ready to jump, but the boat herself defeated him by moving further away from the ship, pushed away by the slow surge of water which she was

displacing. "They'll have jumped off the other side, ye daft fule!" screamed the Chief. "Get aroun' and fish 'em out!"

He struggled with one of the heavy oars, dragging it out from the gear with which it was entangled and then trying to ship a rowlock; Big Cyril exclaimed "Aye, that's the ticket! Come on, Bo'sun - get her round the bows!"

Standing poised like a harpooner watching a dying whale, the Bo'sun ignored them; he continued to watch his chance of leaping onto the slippery mass of weed which now glistened above the water's edge, but an instant later scrambled down without a word and jammed an oar into a rowlock for himself. With two oars on each side, the heavy boat seemed to resist their efforts to row it; with teeth clenched and the veins standing out on their necks, the four men leaned back against the long shafts as though they were dragging her through treacle. The Chief felt his heart punching savagely inside his chest, and as he leaned back on another stroke the soft brilliance of the evening sky swam hazily before his eyes. The Bo'sun panted a command to keep in stroke, and the boat swung jerkily around the bows.

As they began to row aft again, the Bo'sun glanced over his shoulder and saw that they were going directly towards the foremast, which was now leaning down so far that its yard was almost touching the water. He gasped an order for two of them to back water, and they were forced to make a diversion until they were clear of its threat; long moments later they were level with the bunker hatch and saw Raven floundering about

in the littered sea.

They saw too that the Captain was on the lower bridge, climbing up the slanting rails as though up a ladder, and they saw his intention of making his way towards Cecil; they all stood up in horror, and commenced to shout warnings and pleas across the water. This thin garble of sound attracted Raven towards them, but there was a nightmarish feeling in the realisation that they did not even seem to see him; they stared persistently over his head, shouting and waving, and even when he had thashed alongside they still appeared to ignore him. Big Cyril leaned over the side, and helped him to scramble inboard, without even looking at him; gasping and shuddering he rolled over onto the thwarts, clawing the water out of his eyes so that he too could stare at the ship.

At this moment she appeared to pause, leaning fully upon her side in the water, as though hesitating to take the final plunge; they could see along the entire length of her decks, standing up out of the water which now covered the starboard rail. A booming hiss erupted through one of the engine-room ventilators, and the Chief muttered something to himself; the others had given up their bawling and watched in silence. "He'll never do it," remarked Old Stanley in a flatly remote tone, and the Bo'sun suddenly bellowed "Jump, you bloody old eejut! Jump while you've got time!"

As though in obedience, the Captain jumped, but he was trying to leap onto the narrow shelf of the hatch-coaming beside Cecil. He sprang off his precarious perch on the rail s,

but did not come within yards of his objective; for an instant he seemed to hang ludicrously in the air, with his arms outstretched and his legs kicking. Before he hit the water, the men in the boat were at their oars again, and their eyes bulged with apprehension as they tugged their boat in towards the ship. Except for the lap of water and Cecil's wavering screams, it was now almost silent.

The Bo'sun's oar clattered over the thwarts as he dragged it aboard, and leaned over to clutch at the Captain; the other's heard Keadwell's voice choke out "Must help 'im... only a lad...we c'n still get 'im out..." and then the Bo'sun snarling "Come OUT of it, yer silly ole bastard! Wanna drown the lot of us?"

"Back water! Back water, for Christ's sake!" he roared as the Captain sprawled over the gunwale, and they felt a threatening rumble shudder up through the water; ignoring the Captain, he also grabbed at his oar and jerked at it frantically. Raven covered his ears and bent his head between his knees as Cecil's voice pierced the agonising distance between them, and then it was obliterated by a great ghastly sound; a huge bubbling hissing roar, mingled with the shrieking grind of collapsing metal.

The boat plunged violently, and he pushed himself upright to see the mad tumult of water where the ship had lain; seething and foaming down into quiescence and at last with only enough turbulence to make the wreckage bob gently upon it. A plank shot abruptly out of the water, leaping into the

air like a fish, and then fell back amongst the other flotsam; a myriad streams of bubbles broke and gurgled upon the surface like a mocking laughter.

At last the Captain moved, slicking his hand back through his wet, scanty hair. "So that's the end of her," he said ponderously, and no one replied; they sat on musingly as the sun dipped towards the horizon, and then glared straight at them with its fury condensed into a cold orange ball. "All that work for nothin'," creaked Old Stanley then, and the Captain grunted "Aye - and there's plenty more ahead of us, too."

"Where'll you make for, Cap'm?" asked the Bo'sun practically, and the Captain roused himself to give a long seeking glance around the horizon; the seaman's glance which recognises dangers, weighs opportunities, accepts the unknown. "Colombo, I reckon," he said, and the Chief gave a despondent whistle. "Colombo! That's a heck of a place to aim at."

The Captain shrugged. "Where else?" he asked. "The Japs 'll have all this coastline in a few days. Maybe they'll even get to Burma or India. Once we get out o' the Straits we'll be able to make a nice long tack across the Bay, with the monsoon behind us all the way."

"Better get the sail up, then," opined the Bo'sun, but made no move to start; the Captain shifted his position to look around at his crew, and saw Raven still lolling there

and staring vacantly at the spot where the ship had disappeared. "You all right, son?" he asked kindly, and Raven's eyes moved slowly to regard him. "It doesn't make sense," he answered dully. "All that gone, and what 've we got to show for it?"

Captain Keadwell cleared his throat, and then said wryly "That's not for us to say. We had to do a job, and we did it. Still doing it, comes to that. That's what we signed on for, isn't it?"

He moved painfully, and started to crawl back towards the stern of the boat. Half-way there he stopped, and said "That's funny. I went back to my cabin to get the ship's papers, and forgot all about them when that lad got caught. The owners 'll have something to say about that, I s'pose."

He continued his move towards the stern, and then settled himself down into his place of command. "All right, Bo'sun," he said. "Let's get that sail up. We've got a long way to go."

THE END