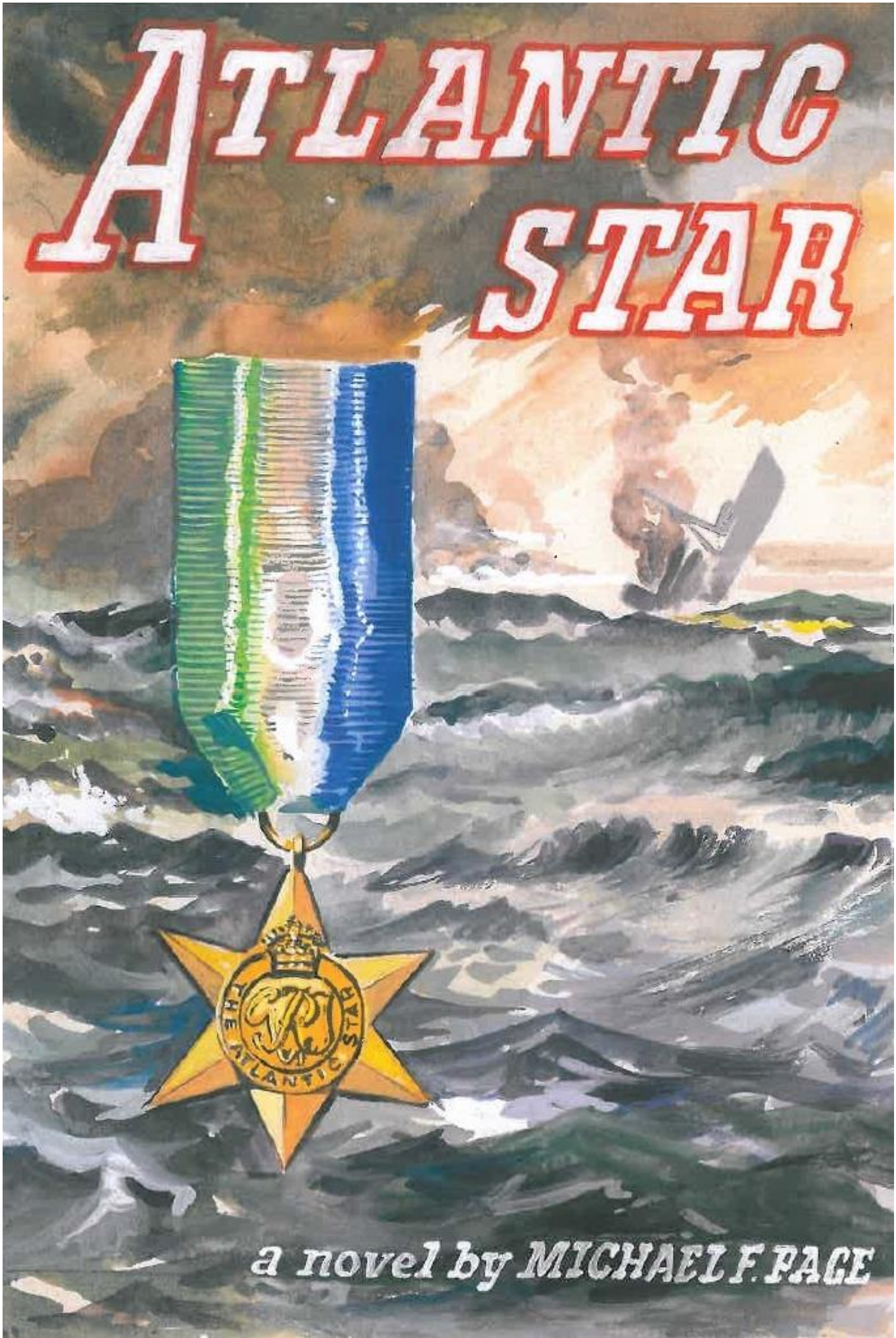
ATLANTIC STAR



a novel by MICHAEL F. PAGE

ATLANTIC STAR by Michael Page 1960

CHAPTER ONE

SIGNING ON.

*

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

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

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

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

Raven when it was drooping from his lip, and then "Where's yer gear ?"

"My - ?"

"Your baggage."

"Oh - in the station."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

feel very callow and innocent.

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

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

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

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

last one, mate ?"

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

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

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

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

"Er...Raven. Francis Raven."

"Age ?"

"Twenty-one."

"Last ship ?"

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

The clerk glanced at him, then continued to ask

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

"Place of birth ?"

"Salisbury."

"Home address ?"

"The Rectory, Fleethurst, Kent."

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

"Next of kin ?"

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

"Same address ?"

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

"No whisky," said the barmaid.

"Gin, then."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

Joining Ship

*

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

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

slouch.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Which flags did he mean ?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

Convoy Port

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

interest either way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

Outward Bound: Dawn

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

became a fatally betraying cloud.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Engineer. "Yup ?"

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

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

"Who says so ?"

"The Commodore."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Look at those silly bastards over there!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aye, aye s' ."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's for breakfast ?"

"Meat-balls."

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

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

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

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

him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

Outward Bound : Morning

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIX

Outward Bound : Afternoon

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yessir, yessir."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ventilator.

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

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

"Don't reckon what ?"

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

"Who's we ?"

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

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

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

"Costello. You know that well enough."

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

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

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

"No, just let me tell you something - "

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

Outward Bound: Evening

*

Costello and his mate hurried back along aft; leaning into the grey sleeting wind which lashed the long exposed stretch of the after-deck, and leaning from side to side to balance themselves to the ship's roll. The Marine gunlayer, at the end of his day-long vigil upon the 4.7 gun platform, watched them as they disappeared beneath the rim of his circular steel platform and plunged down into the crew's quarters.

They inhabited the rounded stern of the ship; sailors to starboard, firemen to port, and the gunners in a section which had been taken out of Number Five hold. The sailors' fo'c'sle into which Costello entered, blinking against the light, was like a kind of steel cave; crowded, cluttered, dimly-lit and smokily warm. Its only furniture was two tiers of bunks, two wooden lockers, and a long table so worn down by scrubbing that the grain appeared in high relief. Those seamen not on watch were seated about it and eating their tea; they glanced up with malicious amusement, and one of them asked "How'd you get on?"

Costello's hard red face broke into a savage grin. "We told the old bastard. Didn't we, Geordie?"

Geordie gave a disgruntled mutter of "Aye...s'pose so,"

and began to carve a hunk of bread from the loaf. "Fat lot of good it did us, though. Prob'ly get logged for it to-morrah."

"Ach - what's a logging?" sneered Costello. "Five shillings fine. Make yer laugh, wouldn't it ?"

The man whom they called Old Stanley piped up with "Wouldn't ha' made you laugh when I first went to sea. Two quid a month was all we had in them days."

"Now don't you start giving us that stuff," jeered Costello. "I s'pose you'll tell us that you'd sooner be eating salt beef, too."

"Nice bit o' salt beef beats all this 'ere Liverpool haggis," chirped Old Stanley. "Something you c'n get your teeth into, that is."

He stirred around amongst the food on his plate, searching for a bit of meat. A small, well-knit man with sparse, silky white hair, he had an air of intense self-reliance and independence, of caring for nothing and nobody; he had a springy cockiness which combined with the oddly reckless look in his faded old blue eyes to give the impression of a man grown old in body alone; as though his hair had whitened and his body shrivelled in a treacherous attempt to defeat the gay, cocky youth who lived within him.

Now as he ate his tea he listened to the others talking; one of them began to tell a rambling disconnected tale of some encounter with the police, and Old Stanley

suddenly asked in his clipped, jerky voice "Know what a p'liceman is? He's a bloke what's too lazy for honest work an ' too scared to steal for a living."

"No, but - no, but - " stammered the man whom he had interrupted, thrown off the meandering track of his tale and still further confused by a whooping shriek of laughter from Wanker's Doom, the eighteen-year old ordinary seaman; a pimpled and vacuous youth who had gained his name from a reputed addiction to certain solitary practices.

"Chuck us the bread," grunted Costello, and the meal continued whilst the fo'c'sle and all that was in it rose and fell like a crazy elevator, swooped, paused, shuddered convulsively as the screw threshed for a moment almost clear of the water, and then dropped with a tremendous squattering thump as the bows lifted to another wave and the stern fell into the trough of the preceding one. "Crazy bitch!" snarled Costello, grabbing at the tin of jam; the oilskins along the bulkheads swung outwards like hanged seamen, and there was a heavy protesting groan from the rudder moving in its pintles.

In the firemen's fo'c'sle, they had already finished their tea, and Big Cyril was dealing out the cards for a hand of solo. The sticky, dog-eared cards flipped down before the other players; Paderooski the Pole watched them with his pale crazy eyes, glancing cunningly at the others and rubbing his knuckles on his hard round head

on which the hair sprouted in ragged tufts and tussocks.

The four men picked up their cards and began to play. "Pass me."

"Solo."

"H'm...ha...I t'ink...yair-r-r...nein, pass me."

"I'll go the bundle," said Big Cyril. "Your come out, Paderooski."

The Bo'sun, looking for something to read, lounged into the fo'c'sle and stood behind the players, watching the big Pole as he frowned at his fan of cards. He selected one and advanced it timorously, but snatched it back again and substituted another which he slipped onto the table. The game progressed through periods of hard-breathing silence broken by howls of triumph or protest, whilst the waves clawed at the steel plates behind their heads and the screw maintained its churning thunder below their feet.

The wind which was now blowing west-north-west was taking the convoy on its starboard bow, but for those in the ship which was racing down over the curve of the world to intercept them it was the first time since leaving home that they had not had a head wind. It had been a dismal and apprehensive voyage from the moment that they had sailed from Kiel; they had gone up the Norwegian coast like a hunted man dodging in and out of doorways, and then struck off north and west; farther and farther north until the days became brief grey intervals between the endless

storming darkness of the nights.

There was no ease on board. The disasters of the Graf Spee and the Bismarck were still too fresh in men's minds; there were over a thousand men in the crew and none of them were under any illusions. The customary semi-hysterical acrimony with which German officers govern their men took on a yet sharper note; the petty officers used oaths, fists, and feet more freely than ever; the atmosphere in the jammed mess-decks was that of a tense resignation.

It did not improve as the days passed and brought nothing but the biting wind from the ice-fields, the grey savage sea through which the great ship plunged with a massive barbaric elegance; an enormous fighting machine upon which had been spent years of toil and millions of money and the most fine and intricate skill and cunning of the human mind, all perhaps to be destroyed in a few minutes of uproarious flame.

But Vice-Admiral Norbert Krefft, commanding the battleship Von Moltke, was subject to no such thoughts as these. There could be nothing less equivocal than his orders, nor the way in which they had been given to him; all that remained was to carry them out. His object was simply to destroy as much of the Allied merchant shipping as possible, to avoid an engagement with other warships, and to bring his command safely back to a French port.

A lean grey man with an intent cold stare, he stood gazing for hour after hour through the slitted armour-plating of the control tower; out at the wind-driven sleet and twisting snow-flurries and the dense shrieking thicknes with which the weather itself seemed to oppose them. The von Moltke had already turned southward, and already entered the Denmark Strait, when the message giving the convoy's position was received. For the first few minutes after reading it, Krefft was inclined to treat it as merely another instalment in the mass of information with which the High Command kept his radio and coding offices busy; information based upon intelligence reports which in their turn were based upon the sinuous activities of agents overseas, and could seldom offer anything substantial. It is believed, it is credibly reported, indications show - they all began with one or another of the threadbare phrases with which officials shield themselves from responsibility.

But this was something different, even though the wording of the last paragraph betrayed the usual unwillingness to commit itself entirely - 'with due regard to existing conditions you are urged to take advantage of this opportunity.' If they meant him to attack, he thought, why did they not say just that ? Attack! Simple enough to say, God knows, but perhaps not so simple to explain away at one of those dreadful conferences ashore.

He pondered over the message for a long time, leaning over the large-scale chart of the North Atlantic and

seeing its blank white spaces, neatly sub-divided by the parallels of latitude and longitude, translated into the relentless eternity of sea. Finally he plotted the convoy's position at the time of the report, drew off the course-line, and then shifted the rulers to draw off the course which he must steer to intercept it.

He picked up the dividers and measured off the distance. Assuming the convoy to maintain the same course, he calculated that the soonest he could expect to sight it would be in the late afternoon of the day after next. He pursed his lips, clicking the dividers together and tapping them on the chart; they would be left with very little daylight, but then if all went well an hour, or even half-an-hour, would be sufficient for their needs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Outward Bound : Night

*

The firemen's card game came to an end, the watch below turned in, and the ship plugged onwards into the spuming darkness in a silence which was of neither sleep nor wakefulness, but something between the two. Up on the bridge, Old Stanley spun the wheel between his hands so that the spokes made soft slapping sounds against his horny palms; his narrowed eyes were fixed upon the only dim glow of light on the blacked-out ship; that of the compass binnacle. He steered by a kind of instinct, knowing just when to bear down upon the helm so that the rudder pressed against the weight of sea; when to let it run again before the ship veered off her course.

Out on the bridge, the Third Mate and Raven stood side by side, staring into the darkness against which a breaking wave made an occasional smudge of light. Their knowledge alone told them of the presence of other ships, until a blur of deeper blackness loomed ahead or upon either hand. Then the Third Mate would call some order into the wheel-house - "Port a little;" "Starboard two degrees;" or would whirl the handle of the engine-room telephone to demand a change of speed.

On every one of the ships nearby there were two like them, and one like the Fourth Engineer, who stood in solitary patience amidst the self-absorbed pounding of the

engines, and those who laboured in the flame-lit darkness of the stokehold or in the dusty glimmer of the bunker lights, with the coal sliding in small rattling avalanches every time the ship rolled. In every ship there were the men who worked or watched whilst the others slept; the waking and sleeping, men and ships, thrusting through the surging darkness in a trust and interdependence unspoken and complete.

The night passed as had so many more, and the day after it and then another night. The ships pushed onwards against the onset of wind and sea, through the grey light of another day which brought nothing new to the vista of tumbling waves and ragged clouds and the ill-assorted mob of ships.

Since there were only two of them, Raven and Flack had to relieve each other at four-hourly intervals. Even though this paid them an extra five shillings a day, this was a source of endless annoyance to Flack; for Raven's part, he did not care. He still enjoyed the novelty of the ship's routine, and revolved a myriad questions within his mind until he could no longer resist addressing one of them to the navigating officer on watch with him.

Mr. Keadwell, the Chief Officer, always answered him with a kind of patient simplicity; the Third Mate would scoff some contemptuous reply, with, if possible, an obscene undertone; the Second Mate, Mungo Maclaren, would turn his formidable head and gaze at him from eyes which

contained an intense and brooding reflection. If he judged the question merited a reply, he would give some gruff explanation; if he did not, he would return a silent stare to the world of tumbling water.

That afternoon, Maclaren had been in a withdrawn mood; and it had seemed to Raven that the watch was dragging more than usual. One of the two gunners on the bridge with him was the one whom the others called Cecil; almost recovered from his sea-sickness, he was disposed to be talkative, and Raven chatted with him until Maclaren grunted without looking at them "Keep yer eyes ootboard an' yer tongues still in yer heids."

The young gunner flushed, pushed out his lips petulantly and whispered "Nasty old beast;" Raven grinned and drifted away to pick up the telescope. With the notion of passing a few minutes he focussed it upon one ship after another, seeing on one a tiny casual figure walking along the deck; upon another a man busily hanging out a string of washing. He moved the glass in a slow sweep around the horizon, along the rim which separated grey sky from grey sea, and at first he hardly noticed the tiny object which appeared in the centre of the lens. He would have passed by it had not some wordless message seemed to flick across the distance between them.

He steadied the glass on the object, unable to relate it to anything in his experience. A ship, it seemed, but what kind of ship ? There was a tiny wisp of smoke twirling

away from it, a wisp which in its very insubstantiability seemed portentous; he screwed the tube of the glass in an effort to focus it better and held it firmly against a corner of the wheelhouse. The ship surged upwards upon a rising swell, and in that instant he saw it clearly.

"Christ," he whispered, and he turned round to look wildly at the Second Mate. For a moment, even as he was speaking, he saw everything calm, normal, quite unwarlike; Cecil leaning against the shield of his Hotchkiss gun and patting away a yawn; Maclaren with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, and swaying easily to the scend of the ship; the background pattern of ships and sea and sky.

"There's a battleship over there," he said hoarsely, and Cecil and the Second Mate looked at him mildly and questioningly as though he had made some commonplace boring remark. Their expressions were changed in the next moment by the sudden urgent blasting of a siren; it came from a ship at the head of one of the columns and they all swung around to look at it. Two flags were jerking up into its halliards, and Raven laid his glass upon them almost automatically. "BG," he read, and the Second Mate repeated calmly and methodically "BG."

"Unknown battleship in sight," he translated from the code book, and then said "Let me have a look through that glass, young feller,"

Raven surrendered it, and then stood looking helplessly round the convoy. The commodore ship was flashing rapidly

at one of the escorts, but the light was not focussed towards him and he could not make out the words; the destroyer was already turning away and starting towards the horizon. Raven could see nothing of the battleship with his naked eye.

"I doubt it's only one of ooer patrols," said Maclaren heavily, and slid the glass back into its rack. Raven looked at it longingly but for some reason could not bring himself to take it out again, and then Cecil demanded in a high jerky voice "But what if it's a G-German ?"

Maclaren gave him a withering glance and turned away; the three of them stared at the destroyer hurrying towards the horizon, becoming smaller with every second, and then suddenly they saw the battleship again. They did not need the glass this time; it seemed to bob up from beneath the horizon in a tiny dark-grey triangle.

And then the destroyer seemed to check suddenly, turning back towards the convoy in a wild upflung flurry of spray. A huge clot of black smoke mushroomed out of its funnels, and across the wind-wild distance of the hurrying sea they could hear its siren whooping and see the signal light flashing with an urgency which Raven could feel lancing along his sinews.

"Signals!" shrieked Cecil, and Raven snatched the glass out of the rack and trained it on the commodore ship. Hoist after hoist was jerking up into her halliards; suddenly they seemed to come into focus, the colours

becoming sharp and clear so that he could read them off, feeling a kind of pride in himself that even in this moment he could read them and speak their meaning.

The Second Mate did not give him their interpretation, but in a moment he heard the sudden desperate clangour of the alarm-bells sounding throughout the ship. Maclaren was pressing his thumb on the button again and again, so that the hard harsh clamour assumed a fearful imperative urgency which tore at the nerves; Raven heard the feet pounding along the decks and the cries which were part fear and part resentment; apprehension mingling with a kind of startled exasperation at this sudden intrusion of the war into a peaceful afternoon.

All at once the ship which had been so calmly and steadily forging ahead seemed to be swarming with excited men, pulling on clothes and shrugging into life-jackets as they ran to their action stations, shouting excited queries at each other and receiving incoherent answers. The convoy itself seemed to be possessed of a similar excited indecision; some ships were already turning off their course, or even beginning to turn completely around.

The thin insistence of the engine-room telephone persisted like an echo of the alarm-bells, as the Captain hurried up to the bridge with the ladder trembling under his weight. "What is it ?" he snapped at the Second Mate, who looked at him sardonically as though pleased at the news he had to tell, and said flatly "There's a Gairman

battleship over yonder."

"What's the Commodore say ?"

"I put the signals in the log," said Maclaren, still with that air of having a kind of detached delight in the impending disaster, and the Captain pushed past him with a growl of fury. "1653. BP - Enemy battleship in sight. MR - Scatter. PQ - Make smoke. LO - Set wireless watches, he read in Maclaren's small legible hand, and shouted "Did you tell the gunners to make smoke ?"

"I was waiting for you, sir," replied the Second Mate calmly, and Captain Macnamara cried in an outraged voice "Waiting ? Are you out of yer head, man ? Tell 'em now!"

He hurried out onto the bridge again, finding time to grunt "Get aft - yer no use up here," to Cecil and the other gunner. He snatched the telescope from the rack and trained it upon the battleship, and just as he brought it into focus he saw a sparkling orange flash against the grey bulk. An instant later he heard the long tearing a-a-a-a-a-ch of the shells plunging towards the convoy.

Instinctively, he ducked, but straightened almost immediately, and was in time to see half-a-dozen huge creaming spouts leap out of the water a hundred yards short of the convoy. He pursed his lips beneath his moustache, and with narrowed eyes looked for an opportunity to steer out of the mob of ships which was now turning in all directions. Many of them had dropped smoke-floats already, and the white smoke was pouring from

them in long rolling billows which clung close to the water not yet sufficiently dispersed by the wind to form a single obliterating bank. These scores of dense white streamers, together with the almost solid looking black smoke which the escorts were belching from their funnels as they raced to lay a protective screen before the convoy, combined with the scattering ships to give a bewildering air of unreality to the scene.

A-a-a-a-ch, went the shells again, and amongst the smoke and the confusion of ships the creaming white columns leapt once more, seeming to rise slowly and deliberately to a great height, to poise there for an instant as though in mocking regard of the chaos which they had caused, and then collapsing back upon themselves in foaming maelstroms upon the waves. But not all of the shells exploded so harmlessly in the sea; two of the ships lurched sideways before the recoil of a great eruption of orange flame and clotted yellowish-brown smoke, through which flew a blizzard of large and small fragments which swept ominously and darkly through the air before falling with countless tearing splashes. The stricken ships began to sink almost at once; one of them, struck fully amidships, had a huge tangled hole torn in her out of which poured steam and smoke in a dense tumbling profusion. Raven stood watching her in fascination, forgetting himself for a moment as she drifted past almost obliterated by the smoke around her, and with a kind of agonized sympathy he

saw a little boat slip out from under the smoke, jouncing on the waves and with the black sticks of oars stabbing jerkily at the water.

He could almost feel himself one with the frenziedly-rowing survivors, his back-muscles tensed and strained as though he himself were tugging at an oar, and he gave a great start as a hand gripped his arm. He swung around to see Flack staring at him with a quivering grin.

"Are you all right, lad ?" asked his senior earnestly, and before he could answer continued "You stay here for a while - they might need you for any signalling. I'll be in the wireless room. Come and get the lifeboat sets if things get bad."

He turned and scuttled off, bending strangely at the knees and hunching up his shoulders as the harsh tearing screech of the shells ripped through the air again. The great projectiles were aimed so as to drop haphazard amongs the eddying bank of black, brown, and white smoke which was all the raider could now see of the target, but none of them found a mark. They were followed by a pause so long that Raven thought the attack must have ended, and with an almost clinical interest he observed that he was trembling violently. He clenched the bridge rail so that it should not be noticeable, and then fished out a cigarette which he managed to light after the first attempt.

"Hard-a-port," shouted the Captain suddenly, and the

bows swung slowly towards a gap in the hurrying mob of ships. For once unrebuked, the black smoke poured from her funnel as the firemen slung the coal into the furnace; sweating and cursing and hammering with their shovels on the bunker bulkheads for those within to deliver more coal to them. The ship's fabric vibrated as though she herself could feel the urgency of the moment; the engines pounding with a brisk stamping rhythm as the Chief Engineer opened her out as much as he dared and the Second bawled into the stokehold for "More steam! More steam!"

"More steam!" shrieked Paderooski back at him. "Whatta Jees Chrise you t'ink we doing yere - eatink our dinners maybe ?"

The long pause in the torrent of shells persisted, so that in the fading light and the artificial darkness of the smoke many men thought that they had escaped. There was one man, however, who could see that this respite was only the prelude to a new danger. This was the Senior Officer of the escort, who had caught a brief glimpse of the enemy as he dodged out of the smoke-screen for a look. He saw then that she was speeding to outflank the convoy; to get around the smoke-screen and pick off the ships before the light failed completely and while they were still clustered together.

CHAPTER NINE

Grey Battleground

Nothing could stop the von Moltke but another battleship, and there was no Allied craft of that size nearer than Nova Scotia. Lieutenant-Commander Julian Fox, of the destroyer Chanticleer, knew this perfectly well. He also knew that within half-an-hour the raider would have cut off the escaping ships, and that even in the darkness she could use searchlights and star-shells to pick them off at her leisure. He made his decision almost without conscious thought; a tall and rather stooped man in the middle thirties, with a kindly mournful face, he gave his orders as rapidly and incisively as a gambler making his final throw. It was doubtful whether his torpedoes could sink the von Moltke, but he might at least cripple her until the fleet could catch up with her.

The look- outs on the von Moltke, seeing the Chanticleer burst through the smoke-bank and begin upon her long piercing charge towards them, yelled warningly into their telephones. On the armoured bridge of the battleship, the officers were jerked into a new activity. Admiral Krefft focused the destroyer in his glasses; she looked very small, hardly more than a dark angular shape above the white bow wave which curled away from her bows. An instant later the air shook to the sharp bellowing crack of the ship's secondary batteries, and the destroyer disappeared behind a foaming explosion of spray. It seemed to take a long time to clear,

and the Admiral made an impatient tut-tutting just before the destroyer emerged from behind it again; untouched apparently, and against that background of white churning water and still falling spray seeming to leap forward into a sudden ominous clarity, so that even her signal-mast was visible etched against it.

Very shortly she would be within torpedo distance; a matte of seconds only. Only a lifetime's discipline quenched the angry shout behind the Admiral's lips; he knew that nothing he could do now would affect the skill of his gunners or the efficiency of their control. Between the grey sea and the grey brooding sky, against the streaked rolling cloud of smok which obscured the convoy, the destroyer plunged towards the battleship in a taut silence which seemed unaffected by the sound of wind and waves. It was a moment which had its own particular symbolism, of the fierce gallant assault in which the power of evil is so often devastated by a lesser strength and in that moment the Admiral seemed to perceive the reason for his navy's history of defeat; the reason why the only victory which could be hoped for was in the twilit chaos of destruction.

The spray from the last salvo had not fallen before the guns shattered the air again; once more the destroyer vanished, but this time it was in a sudden flame-shot eruption of dark smoke. Again and again the batteries crashed out across the tumbling sea, the slim barrels of the guns seeming to move slowly, almost disdainfully, as their control

trained them on the target; their slickly-greased breech-blocks swung open and clicked shut again upon the slender venomous shells, transformed by the snapping blow of the striker into trapped colossal energy which flung the projectiles out of the muzzles towards that fire-glowing clump of smoke which grew and spread sluggishly over the water.

The guns-crews sweated as they worked; almost without thought, with little conscious motivation except that of following through the drill in which they had been trained for so long. When they were ordered to cease fire they straightened their backs, and some of them could see the remains of their target. The smoke rolled away, sullenly, unwillingly, before the wind, and there was nothing else; only a broad dirty patch of oil upon the waves, a few scattered anonymous fragments of which one or two still burned until they were extinguished by a breaking wave.

"So," muttered Admiral Krefft, and without pleasure turned his glasses back upon the smoke which hid the convoy. The von Moltke had all the time been following the course which he had ordered, and very soon now would be able to turn the edge of the screen. With an impassivity which he did not feel, the Admiral allowed his glasses to hang from their strap and paced slowly to and fro between the others at their station on the bridge. With one part of his mind, he could clearly see the Knight's Cross with Swords in Diamonds, could almost feel the handshake and the compelling hypnotic stare with

which it would be bestowed upon him; with another, he depicted the messages which even at this moment must be clicking into Staff offices in Liverpool and Halifax, the ships and aircraft which waited and waited for an opportunity such as this, and the great friendless sea which lay between him and the haven of La Rochelle.

His brief reverie was interrupted by an exclamation from his Flag Lieutenant, followed instantly by a tinny excited crackle from one of the loudspeakers. A ship had appeared at the edge of the smoke-screen, appearing for a moment no more substantial than the heavy clinging vapour from which she had emerged; the Admiral could picture the flurry on her bridge as they saw the warship bearing down upon them, no more than a mile or so away. He saw her commence to swing around, in a desperate endeavour to regain the safety of the smoke, and almost without believing it he saw the orange flash from her poop and the ragged plume of spray which leapt out of the water not far short of the von Moltke.

Almost at once, he saw the flickering stab of the gun again, and then heard a clanging crash somewhere beneath him. A splinter slashed through the air with a terrible menacing scream, and then incredibly he saw a long slow curve of tracer bullets, glowing brightly in the dim light, rising from the ship and splashing into the sea nearby. "What!" he exclaimed with a kind of disbelieving exasperation. "Are they mad, these English ? Firing at us with - "

He was interrupted by the abrupt gigantic detonation

of the forward eleven-inch guns, the four of them firing at once so that for a brief instant the ship seemed to check to their recoil. There was a definite pause; a moment of waiting during which the Admiral watched expectantly. "Good," he breathed, "very good," as he saw the target disappear behind a great angry welter of smoke. The next instant it blossomed into a tall solid-looking pillar of fire, which sank, rose again, and then fell back on itself to billow outwards with the smoke, filling it with a sullen roaring glow.

The oil-bunkers burning, thought the Admiral, and a sudden deep satisfaction welled up within him. This was his moment, his hour of power during which he could strike and strike again, unchecked and unopposed, and with each blow extract some repayment for the long bitter years. Let there be fire, and death, and the brief choking marriage of seamen with the sea - whatever followed could not rob him of this hour. He would teach them to fire at him with machine-guns, to defy his power with their flimsy courage, and as the battleship rounded the edge of the screen with her last victim smoking and guttering behind her, and all the scattered ships came into view, he snapped "All guns fire independently at suitable targets."

The convoy had not seen the sinking of the Chanticleer; had only heard the thudding of the guns beyond the smoke-scree and believed them to be futilely aimed at themselves. A brief uncertain optimism had pervaded the men on the

escaping ships, abruptly dissipated when they saw the fountain of fire which leapt from the most recent victim, and then a few minutes later saw the battleship appear again, a bulky ominous shape in the windy twilight.

Raven hurried into the wireless room, and when Flack swung around from the instruments to gape up at him he gasped "He's after us again - listen to that!"

It was the hoarse tearing screech of the shells once more, following and mingling with each other in a devilish discordance, with a kind of counterpoint provided by the whistling snarl of the smaller projectiles. The air shuddered to an irregular series of explosions, and Flack's face crumpled like a half-filled balloon. He gulped, and said "G-get a hold of those lifeboat sets, son. Take 'em down on the lower deck, 'n' put 'em in the first of the boats to get away."

Raven bent to drag the lifeboat transmitter and receiver out from beneath the desk. The transmitter was in the form of a large suitcase, weighing about fifty pounds; normally he found it hard to lift, but he pulled it out and hefted it without noticing its weight. He slung the receiver over his shoulder by its strap, and began to struggle out through the black-out curtains with his awkward burden. Just before he left, he asked over his shoulder "What about you ?"

"I'll hang on a bit longer," answered Flack. "There's not much we can do, though. The escorts 'll have done all the signalling that's necessary."

Raven nodded and pushed out onto the bridge, where he halted for a moment appalled by what he saw. The cloudy steely blue of the dusk seemed to be illumined in every direction by great drifting bouquets of flame, from the ships which had been struck and which were burning as they sank. It was already too dark to see the battleship, and he glanced despairingly around at the flickering reflections of the flames upon the waves.

His eye was caught by a series of orange flashes in the distance, and he expected to hear the dreadful seeking note of the shells again. Instead, he was shocked by a sudden huge burst of sickly white radiance which burst out in the skies above him, followed by another and another and another until the whole ship seemed to be illumined by a stark phosphorescence, which gleamed off all exposed angles and surfaces and cast an intense black shadow in their shade.

"Coo - just take a look at that!" exclaimed a voice from above him, as wonderingly and curiously as though at a fireworks display. Raven felt himself commence to shrivel up inside, as though his soul were creeping into the most hidden recesses of his body, and he began to stumble down the bridge ladder with his clumsy load. He was almost thrown off his feet by the ship's roll, and felt a savage resentment. He felt that at least the ship and the sea might be quiet when he had so much else to worry about.

¶ On the poop, the Marine gunner braced himself to the same roll. His eye was pressed to the soft rubber guard of the

gun-sight, while his left hand moved carefully on the elevating wheel and his right was curled about the trigger. More than a quarter-century of training and discipline was concentrated into his steady gazing through the sight, and seemed to emanate from him in taut invisible waves which kept the gun's crew poised for his command. He had not received any orders from the bridge, but hardly expected any; the derisive contempt with which he regarded the conduct of merchant ships was making him act on his own initiative. As he silently expressed it to himself, he was going to have a lash at 'em.

All at once he saw the distant flashes clearly through his sights; he made a rapid adjustment to his elevating wheel and sang out the range. The shell was fused, rammed into the breech, followed by the long brass cartridge; as the breech slammed shut on the obsolete quick-firer his hand clenched on the trigger. "Keep 'em going like pints at closing time!" he yelled as the empty cartridge clanged onto the deck, and a moment later clenched the trigger again.

CHAPTER TEN

A Pillar of Flame

Raven's feet almost left the deck at the stunning detonation of the four point seven; with his ears ringing he looked about to see what had caused the noise. As it smacked against his ear-drums again, and he saw the sudden reddish-orange bloom erupt into the dusk, his heart leapt up with an amazed exultation. For the first time, he felt that they were doing something to defend themselves; each of thedetonations which followed each other at rapid intervals seemed like hammer-blows struck at the enemy.

Recalling his duty, he commenced to lug the lifeboat sets along the deck again. He had reached the ladder up to the boat-deck, on which a good many of the crew were already engaged in clearing away the boats and making other preparations for abandoning ship (not without the frequent reference to female organs and sexual intercourse which accompany most maritime operations) when he suddenly remembered that he had left his 'panic bag' in his cabin.

This was a small canvas bag containing his personal papers, some cigarettes, sweets, and other odds and ends which he had judged might be useful in a lifeboat, and was similar to that put together by most members of the crew. He hesitated for a moment, then left the lifeboat sets at the foot of the ladder and dashed back to his cabin.

As soon as he began groping his way through the black-out

curtains, he heard a strange shuddering intake of breath. "What the - " he exclaimed, and groped for the switch; the light came on to the accompaniment of a whimpering cry.

Raven stared down at Cecil, crouched in the corner of the cabin with hands pressed over his face. "What the hell are you doing here ?"he asked. "You ought to be back on the poop with the others."

The gunner shook his head, burrowing his face deeper into the frail shelter of his hands. "Can't," he sobbed. "Can't do it...can't...can't...can't...can't..."

The detonation of the gun struck at the cabin door as though it had been hit with the flat of a shovel; it seemed to impel Raven forward to clutch at the youngster's shoulders "Well, you can't stay here, you bloody fool," he snapped. "We might have to abandon ship at any minute - and anyway you'll get into trouble afterwards. Come on - snap out of it

Cecil shook his head again, twisting his body away from Raven's hands and seeking to push himself yet further back into the corner. "Can't," he blubbered. "It's too terrible. they didn't ought to've sent me..."

There seemed only one way to gain a firm hold upon him, and Raven took it. He twined his fingers into the dishevelled hair, and pulled sharply upwards, so that the young gunner came to his feet with a screeching cry. His face was swollen with tears, and he stood limply staring at Raven with his hands drooping and the tears and snot and spittle drooling down his face, his eyes appearing blind and

his slack lips blubbering out some unintelligible words.

Raven's half-disgusted pity was shot through with the hammering urgency driven home by each explosion of the gun. "You're coming outside," he grunted, seizing the lad and beginning to drag him towards the door. "I can't hang about here, and I'm darned sure that you're not."

Cecil seemed to collapse upon him like a puppet, boneless and inane; Raven was commencing to shake him with exasperatio when the whole ship seemed to jolt immensely sideways, under the impact of a huge clanging roar. The mirror fastened to the bulkhead near their heads flew into pieces, flagellati them with splinters; the light went out and Cecil screamed like a dog disembowelled.

Through the thick teak of the cabin door, Raven could hear a fearful medley of sounds; screams, yells, steam hissin feet pounding along the decks, the gurgle of water and the crackle of flame. He plunged through the black-out curtains towards the door, only to find himself entangled with Cecil's flailing arms and legs. The gunner was now as eager to get out as he had formerly been to stay inside, but somehow they both managed to scramble out onto the deck.

Raven checked and stared at the great tower of smoky flame which silhouetted the funnel, arising from somewhere aft; for a dazzled moment it seemed as though it was all the tumultuous uproar brought to life. Then he was almost knocked down by Mr. Keadwell, leaping down the bridge ladders and hurrying aft with great rubbery leaps of his

sea-boots. "All Hands! All Hands!" the Chief Officer was bawling in a kind of choked automatic roar. "All Hands! All Hands! Fire Stations! All Hands!"

Raven had no recollection of the fact that his own Fire Station was either in the wireless room or in charge of the lifeboat sets; he followed Mr. Keadwell's stocky, bouncing figure along the deck towards the flames. The men who had been clearing the boats away were now milling about in a confused group on the main deck; the deck water lines were open and spouting water everywhere, and he saw the Bo'sun frantically untangling a mass of canvas hose. Everything was thrown into frenzied clarity by the light of that great billowing torrent of upward-rushing flame which poured without ceasing from the poop, and he stood gazing uncertainly around him without knowing what to do.

He saw a man sitting on the hatch, carefully plucking shreds of clothing out the piece of raw meat which had been his shoulder; undisturbed by and as it were aloof from the tumult around him, he craned his head round to peer into the bloody mass, precisely probing and picking with two fingers as he drew out the shreds of burnt and bloody cloth. Suddenly he seemed to realise what had happened to him; he jerked his head up and gazed wildly around, as his mouth opened and began to pump out jets of meaningless sound.

Raven was about to go to help him when the Third Mate grabbed his shoulder, snarling "Be some bloody use, Sparky!

Here - give us a hand with this!"

He thrust part of a leaking, throbbing hose into Raven's hands, and the two of them began to drag it aft; some pattern was now emerging from the confusion, and others were about them pushing towards the flames. The water from the hoses, which sparkled prettily in the leaping fiery light, at last penetrated the flames and was consumed by them. After a few moments the Third Mate grunted "It's about as much use as peeing on it."

"What happened ?" asked Raven above the gale-like sound of the flames, and the Third Mate glanced back over his shoulder. His face was even dirtier than ever; a droplet of jam, from the afternoon tea which he had been enjoying when the alarm first sounded, still clung to the stubble about his lips and glistened jewel-like in the flames. "What d'you think bloody happened ?" he enquired savagely. "I s'pose you were hiding in a corner somewhere ?"

Raven's mouth opened in angry astonishment, but before he could say anything the other man went on "They hit us full on the stern. Must 've set off our ammunition too. All the gunners are amongst that lot, and it must be standing out like the bloody Eddystone. Cripes knows why they haven't hit us again."

This was a possibility which had not yet occurred to Raven; all at once he became aware that he was standing upon an insubstantial hull which surged and swayed to the hissing waves; that the hull was spectacularly aflame and

that it must be a perfect target for further torrents of high-explosive. "Maybe they think that we're not worth bothering about any longer," he shouted in a hopeful quaver, and the Third Mate yelled "Neither we will be if that burns out the steering gear and - "

He and his words were abruptly blotted out by several tons of foaming salt water, which arose out of the sea a dozen yards away, ascended almost to mast-head height, and cascaded down upon the stern of the Austrian Duke. A hideous booming clang resounded through the after-holds, and at the same moment as Raven was squashed down onto the deck by the water he felt it rise up and strike him. For a few moments he thought that he must be over the side; everything was watery darkness full of bruising objects, and when his hands encountered the cold hard roundness of a rail-stanchion he clamped onto it like an oyster to a rock.

Pulling himself upright, he blinked through smarting eyes into a strange greenish twilight; it took him several seconds to realise that it came from a star-shell drifting away astern, and that it was the only light remaining on the scene. A strange wallowing object groped around his feet, caught at his sodden trousers and pulled itself upright; the Third Mate blinked vacantly around. "Jee-zus," he rasped hoarsely. "D'you know what that was ? It was another flamin' shell. Missed us by flamin' inches, it did, but it only put the flamin' fire out for us!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Damage Control

*

Aboard the von Moltke, the vibration of the last salvo had died away some minutes before; since they had fired at that distant pillar of flame and seen it disappear, no further targets had presented themselves. After assessing the chances of doing furhher damage against the possibility of a relief force being on its way, Admiral Krefft had ordered that no more star-shells should be fired. Bursting several hundred feet in the air, they would have advertised his presence to enemy warships which might be far beyond the horizon.

In any case, we have done enough, he reflected coldly as the great ship prowed smoothly over the swells. We can give a definite report of so many ships having been sunk, of so many others known to have been damaged, of the convoy as a whole completely scattered and delayed. Too bad it was not an east-bound convoy, so that the fat hulls would have been pregnant with the tools of war, but one could not have everything.

For the first time since leaving Europe, an air of exhilaration simmered through the battleship; as they cleaned up the disorder of action, the crew sang and whistled at their work. Inside the ship, it was warm and secure; the crowded quarters took on a strange feel of cosiness. Outside, the winds whipped at the complex upperworks, whistled in the dirty barrels of the guns; against the long unbroken streamline of the hull, the icy swells arose and broke in vain.

And like a jaguar which slinks around its kill, the vessel swung across and through the remnants of the massacre. Now and again, outlined against a breaking wave, the look-outs saw a mass of wreckage tumbling on the swells; once they passed a lifeboat huddled full of shocked and silent men, and twice heard faint exhausted cries arising out of the dark. But the great ship passed on, and soon changed course and swung away to the south. The turbines whined into their maximum cruising speed, and the von Moltke faced the long beat down to the safety of St. Nazaire.

From this moment on, the hunter had become the hunted; the ships which still remained afloat had only to face their old enemy, the sea. And as soon as a grey sleeting dawn brought a measure of visibility, the men of the Austrian Duke began surveying the wreckage. It appeared that the shell had struck them to the starboard side of the poop, just under the rim of the gun-platform, and exploded upon impact.

The remains of the gun-platform, the gun, and the petty officers' quarters above which it had stood, were now so rusted and twisted with fire and explosion that they looked like a portion of a very old scrap-heap. Beneath them, a black and jagged hole like the crater of a small extinct volcano led down to the crew's quarters.

A conference of officers was now grouped about this hole, gazing down into it and listening to the comments of the Chief Engineer. The Captain, monolithic in oilskins and with beads of moisture on his moustache, Mr. Keadwell like a

worried grocer in his rubber boots, and the Second Mate maintaining an air of secret amused disdain, all listened to the Chief expounding his views.

"She won't answer," growled the Captain stubbornly, as the engineer paused in a flow of technical terms to which he had not paid the slightest attention. "Look at the wake - bloody ship's all over the ocean. There's something wrong with the steering engine, I tell ya."

"Of course, of course," replied the engineer impatiently. "We're lucky that we've got one at all. But I keep on telling you, Captain, we'll have a hell of a job clearing all that raffle away. We ought to have oxygen burners to cut down through that stuff."

The Captain sniffed loudly, and then wrinkled his nostrils at the reek of charred meat which he had drawn in. "Well, we haven't got one," he replied in tones like a wet deck mop. "So ye'd better think of something else."

The engineer raked stubby fingers through his hair, balancing himself to the sullen heave of the stern beneath his feet. "It's simple," said Mungo Maclaren unexpectedly, and they all turned to look at him.

"Oh aye - so it's simple, is it ?" enquired the Captain with heavy sarcasm. "So what would <u>you</u> do, mister ?"

"Disconnect the steering rods from the gears down to the engine, and then run cables from the after winches to the steering quadrant. Steer the ship with winches," explained the Second Mate. "I did it when I was - when I was on a

ship which had trouble with her steering engine."

He was referring to the long rods which, on an old ship like the Austrian Duke, ran the length of the ship from the bridge to the stern, and through a system of simple gears conveyed the movements of the wheel to the steering engine. There, they opened and shut the valves which made the engine turn the rudder to port or starboard.

The four men gazed down at the steering quadrant, a massive piece of metal in shape like the quadrant of a circle, which acted as a counterpoise to the rudder. "We're lucky that wasn't twisted to billyo," sighed the Chief Engineer, and then said "But we could do it, all the same. We could have it fixed up in an hour or two."

"The men won't like it, having to have a couple of them on the winches all the time, and all their clothes lost in the fire," ventured Mr. Keadwell, and the Captain looked at him as though he wasn't hearing right. "Do 'em bloody good," he grunted, and then said "All right - do it that way. We'll have to stop while we change over, so make it snappy. Tell me when you're ready, Chief."

He turned away and paced deliberately back towards the bridge, his oilskins creaking like some stiff antique machinery. The three men looked after him and then glanced at each other, and the Second Mate's granitic features creased into an ironic smile. "Thank you for the idea, Mr. Maclaren," he told himself mockingly. "Come along to my cabin, and have a tot."

He touched his cap and answered himself. "Thank you, Captain; don't mind if I do," he said, and walked back amidships. The Chief Engineer and Chief Officer watched him for a moment, and then Mr. Keadwell shrugged. "Always said that bloody man was cracked," he remarked a trifle smugly, and walked away in search of the Bo'sun.

When the Bo'sun passed Mr. Keadwell's orders on to them, the crew reacted in the traditional manner of merchant seamen; by delivering themselves of a clattering cascade of curses. They were grouped to the leeward side of the galley at the time, gulping down their breakfast out of any odd pots and pannikins which came to hand; their presence outside made the Cook feel nervous, and he was maintaining a steady aria of obscenity on his own account.

Up to that moment, it had hardly occurred to them that they were homeless and destitute. After the events of the previous evening, they had been in no mood for sleeping anyway, and those who were not on watch had passed the hours roaming about like cats, dozing cat-like in corners which were sheltered from the wind, and scanning the darkness with constant apprehension. The only man who had slept soundly was the one who had been injured, after some rough surgery which had consisted mainly of half-a-pint of rum.

But now, at seven-thirty in the morning, with no further signs of thhenangry to worry them and a meal inside them, they were in the mood to dally with a grievance. With the intention of being heard up on the bridge, Costello shouted

"Not a bloody stroke, boys! Where we gonna sleep that's what I want to know ? Where we gonna eat, eh ? Stuck out here like shags on a rock ? Not on yer life !"

"I'll have the skipper's bunk!" piped up Wanker's Doom, and the Bo'sun surveyed them with the hard good-tempered smile of an animal-trainer. "Save yer growls for the shipping-office," he advised them. "You might find someone to listen to 'em there. Come on - let's get cracking."

Still moaning, they trailed after him; quite confident that their wants would be attended to in one way or another, they had an enjoyable cud of discontent to chew over while they were working. An hour or two later, Raven drifted aft to have a look at the damage; he himself was in a sullen mood, as the result of a tongue-lashing which Black had inflicted upon him for "Playing at being a bloody fireman, heck-heck-heck! You're supposed to be a wireless operator, not a ruddy fire-engine!"

He was in time to see the first trial of the jury steering-gear; as the starboard winch clattered, it tautened the cable running to one side of the quadrant, and the rudder swung slowly over. A similar effect occurred when the port winch was tried, and the Chief Engineer signified that all was ready to proceed. It was going to be an awkward business, but at least they would have reasonable control over the steering.

The Bo'sun drifted up to Raven, wiping his hands on a piece of waste. "Well, Sparky," he greeted him. "Lots of

fun for yer first v'y'ge, eh ? I seen you on the hose last night."

He nodded and winked with approval, and Raven felt his heart expand with pleasure. "Nasty old mess up aft," continued the Bo'sun. "Cawi Y'ought to've seen what was left o' them poor bleedin' gunners. Put it overboard with a shovel, I did. Mr. Keadwell said we ought to 'ave a burial service, but the Skipper said it'd be like preaching over one of Cookie's roasts of beef."

He cackled with reluctant respect, as his huge hands flicked a cigarette into existence out of an oil-stained Rizla and a hank of tobacco. "Tough ole bastard that one," he continued. "But hey - that young gunner was lucky, wasn't he ?"

"Which one was that ?" enquired Raven, but already knowing the answer; he hadn't thought about the gunner since they had both clawed their way out of his cabin, but now felt an urgent curiosity.

"Why, that young chap the others called Cecil," said the Bo'sun round his fag. "The Marine gunner had just sent him off with a message to the bridge, a few seconds before the shell hit us. Talk about bloody gilt-edged! All he got was a cut on the face."

Raven' mouth opened, but he said nothing. A few minutes later, he rambled back amidships; he noticed the Chief Steward standing in the midst of a group of voluble sailors and firemen, but passed on into his own cabin. With

thoughts of death and injury brooding in the back of his mind, he was shocked to discover first an upturned pair of feet and then a blanket-shrouded body lying on the padded locker which was dignified by the name of 'settee', but a gentle snore dispelled his fears. He turned back a corner of the blanket, and then laid violent hands upon the sleeping form. "What the hell are you doing in here again ?" he demanded furiously, as Cecil blinked and spluttered into wakefulness. "Outside with you, my boy - quick-smart!"

The gunner hunched himself back into the corner of the settee, dragging the blanket protectively backaround himself. "The Chief Steward said I was to share your cabin till we got to port," he mumbled. "He's trying to find places for everyone to sleep."

"Well, I dunno how you've got the flaming cheek!" exploded Raven. "And what about this yarn you've been telling everyone ? I've got a good mind to - "

Cecil's large eyes regarded him mournfully, awaiting his verdict, but he found himself unable to do anything but wave his arms about and make meaningless noises. "You wouldn't tell anyone what really happened, would you ?" Cecil ventured at last, and Raven hesitated "I dunno - "

"Wouldn't do no good, would it ?" the gunner asked softly, and then threw off the blanket and stood up to face him. He was wearing only a pair of underpants, and his body was white and smooth. "After all," he said, "if you start talking about it, people 'll wonder what you were doing in

your cabin, too. Best for us to gorget about it, eh ?"

Before Raven could reply, he remembered the Third Mate's contemptuous question: "'I suppose you were hiding in a corner somewhere ?'" Cecil saw the uncertainty in his eyes, and pressed on "You wouldn't want to get me into bad trouble, would you ? And after all, I could say...well, I could say that you were in here with me all the time..."

Raven's hand flew upwards, and the gunner flinched slightly but did not move. The two of them stared at each other for a moment, until Raven dropped his arm and muttered "You know you're talking bloody nonsense, but - "

Cecil waited for him to continue, motionless except for the sudden flicker of his tongue out over his full pink lips. " - well, I suppose you couldn't help yourself," said the Radio Officer reflectively. "I was scared too."

"'course you were!" said Cecil eagerly. "So was everybody with any sense. It's all right for people like that Third Mate, and the Bo'sun, and all that bunch - they're made for it, you might say. But you an' me - well, we're different, aren't we ? I mean - well, we're made different."

He passed his hands down over the smooth and youthful contours of his chest, as though to demonstrate the difference; Raven said feebly "I didn't mean it like that - "

Cecil turned away, still talking eagerly, and began to pull on his clothes. "We'll get on all right, you just wait and see," he said confidently, and then with his voice muffled by the jersey which he was pulling over his head

continued "I'll go an' make us a cuppa tea - the steward said I could get all the things I wanted as soon as I was ready - ."

CHAPTER TWELVE

From the New World

*

Now, they had the ocean to themselves, and the Austrian Duke plodded somewhat erratically towards the North American. Only the Captain knew her destination, and it was several days before he condescended to grunt "We'll be altering course to-morrow, Mister. I'll have to take the independent routeing for New York."

"New York ?" said the Third Engineer when the news filtered down to him, and creased his rubbery face into a look of cunning recollection. "Ah knows a couple o' nice little nooks an' crannies as 'll pay for visiting again. None o' yer two-dollar touches, neither."

"New York!" snarled the Second Engineer, sawing savagely at his breakfast of half-cold, half-cooked liver. "Last place God ever made. Can't even get a decent glass of beer. Frozen spider-spit with a head on it, that's all it is."

He chewed disgustedly for a few moments, then pushed his plate away. " 'bout time those Yanks were coming into the war, anyway," he opined. "They might be able to tackle some of these flamin' Jerries then. Seems to be more'n our flamin' Navy, can do, anyway."

Raven listened to them in silence, attempting to swallow the meal without tasting it. Shortly before he had listened to the Cook giving it as his considered

opinion that "The R'yle Navy is finished - FINISHED!" and pounding one greasy hand into the other for greater emphasis. He had been talking to the Chief Engineer and a couple of other men, whom he had seen standing outside his galley; Raven had drifted up to join them and heard the Cook's diatribe. The Chief Engineer had only given his ironical half-smile and stared out across the tumbling November waves, as though contrasting them unfavourably with the ordered rhythms of his ~~engine~~ engine-room; soon afterwards the breakfast bell had gone, but the Cook's words still simmered as uneasily in Raven's mind as his breakfast would shortly simmer amongst his gastric juices.

He had learned the meaning of fear, now. His mind had received the first crack through which the corrosion could seep; the constant apprehension which accompanied all men to sea. He understood why men did not care to take off their clothes; why they would tense at the sound of a banging door or of feet running along the deck, and could not relax until they had learned its reason; he understood at last that the true purpose of warfare is to hurt, terrify, destroy, and kill.

All the same he did not want to discuss this, and when Cecil persisted in recapitulating the events of that night he would only grunt or turn away, until the youth snapped pettishly "I don't see why you have to be so snooty, anyway. You've never told why you came diving into your cabin when the firing started ?"

Raven stared at him without understanding. They were both off watch, and there was nowhere for either of them to go except out on the wind-swept deck or in the stuffy little cabin. Makeshift accommodation had been fixed up for the crew in the tween-decks of No.3 hold, but as the sole surviving gunner Cecil was still permitted to share Raven's cabin.

He squirmed uneasily beneath his blankets as Raven gazed steadily at him, and then suddenly burst out "I can't help being afraid! I didn't ask to be here, did I ? What right's anyone got to pick me up an' shove me on this dirty old ship to be drowned or - or something ?"

He was silent for a moment, and then his blue eyes widened as though with a revelation. "Why - it's - it's crazy, don't you see ? And they're doing it all over the world! There must be plenty of others like me - Germans an' Russians an' everything! What right's anyone got to drag us out of our jobs and make us fight each other ?"

"Not much good complaining about it," muttered Raven. "It's Happened, and that's all about it. All we can do is push on and hope for the best, I suppose."

"All right then, so don't <u>look</u> at me like that!" exclaimed Cecil shrilly, and humped himself round to face the bulkhead. Raven regarded his back for another second or two, shrugged, and got out his writing pad, to commence a picturesque account of the convoy action.

He was writing the last words of this letter (which would

reach his parents so heavily censored that it looked like paper lace) when the Austrian Duke steamed up the Hudson. For some time past he had been conscious of the hooting of tugs and the spasmodic rattle of the engine-room telegraph, but each time he ventured out into the icy wind there had been nothing to see but the flat, dismal shores of Longland Island. He concluded his letter, folded it into an envelope, and decided to take another look outside; the spectacle caused him to stand unconscious of the bustling preparations which were going on all around him.

He remained gazing at the soaring tawny towers, arising out of the pale mist which hovered over the lesser buildings, until it seemed almost as though he could hear them as well as see them; hear them like some majestic symphony of human aspirations.

"Coo, just look at 'em!" said a voice behind him, and Cecil came to hang over the rail at his side. "Who'd of ever thought that we'd be seeing New York, eh? I bet that we'll have some fun here, won't we ?"

Raven grunted, unwilling to commit himself th that 'we.' Besides, the city had not yet presented itself as a place for having fun. It seemed as lofty and remote as the upper reaches of some great mountain range; a place to be approached with humility and awe.

"If only I hadn't lost my Number Ones in that fire," mourned Cecil beside him. "I dunno what I'll go ashore in. But we'll manage somehow, eh ?"

However, it was not as easy as that. As soon as the ship was made fast, she was boarded by a number of large, solemn, green-uniformed members of the U.S. Immigration Service. They interviewed, finger-printed, photographed, and checked upon every member of the crew, and then left again with their brief-cases and orders that no one was to be allowed ashore until official passes were issued.

These did not arrive for two days, during which a gang of raucous swaggering shipwrights came aboard. To Raven, they all appeared to be made to the same pattern; tight-fitting jeans belted under ponderous bellies, flapping zippered jackets, long-billed caps perched upon Mediterranean curls, and stubbly jowls which quivered to their constant loud-mouthed exclamations. "Gees, lookit what them square-heads did to this old tub," they bade each other as they commenced to cut away the tattered chaos of steel, and the crew's expectations of a long easy lay in port melted as fast as the metal under their burners.

With a noisy belting energy they tore the wreckage apart, and laid the pieces aside to be lifted off by a floating crane. The gangs worked round the clock, with their burners casting haloes of lavender light amongst the rusted steel, and by the time the passes came aboard they were almost finished.

Most of the crew had no shore-going rig but the clothes they had worn during the action, plus various garments

which they had begged from the officers and engineers. All the same they took their passes eagerly, and before long a deputation waited upon the Chief Steward to know if their 'subs' were ready. He gazed at them blearily and stumbled up to see the Captain, returning with the news that "The Ole Man hasn't got the money yet. You'll hafta wait till to-morra."

They were outraged, but there was nothing they could do about it. After tea, they hung dismally around the galley, gazing resentfully at the jewelled towers which stood aloof in the distance; feeling the same restlessness, Raven paced slowly up and down outside his cabin, until a murmur of "Coming ashore ?" made him swing around to see Cecil smiling at him.

He was dressed in blue serge trousers tucked into sea-boots, and a leather jacket which Raven identified as belonging to the galley-boy. He was hatless, and his fair curls glistened in the arc-lights; he had pulled the plaster off the cut on his cheek, and it made an angry seam on his smooth skin. "Come on," he said. "I borrowed a dollar off one of the shore gang."

"A dollar ? That won't get us very far."

"Pay our subway fares, anyroad. Come on - we'll find our way around."

Raven frowned, hesitated, and then nodded assent. In a few minutes he was ready to go, and they walked down the gangway followed by the envious stares of the others. As

they walked through the vast echoing shed towards the gates, Cecil drew in a deep breath and said "God - it's good to be off that old wreck. I wouldn't care if I never saw it again."

He cast a sprightly glance at Raven, and said "But it's made all the difference sleeping with you, though!"

"What the hell d'you mean - sleeping with me ?" demanded Raven, and Cecil tittered "Ow, I didn't mean it that way. I mean...well, it's so different to sleeping down the gunner's fo'c'sle, with all those - "

He checked himself, and after a moment said emptily "Mustn't speak ill of the dead, I s'pose."

They walked on in silence, and asked the gateman how to find a subway station. Raven was content to leave the arrangements to Cecil, who seemed to have developed an airy confidence, and he stared curiously at the dirty, echoing caverns of the subway, the big racketing coaches and the tired, slumping working-folk who travelled in them, seeming hardly fit denizens of the city in whose bowels they travelled.

Cecil nudged him as the train came to one of its periodic halts, and he noticed the sign 'Broadway' upon one of the pillars; they emerged into what seemed like another world, of a myriad neons, countless cars, and a multitude of strollers upon the great broad pavements. He felt dazzled and self-conscious as they joined with them, but Cecil paced along in his rubber boots and with his hands

tucked into his trouser flap as though he had lived there all his life.

In a tone as low as though he was afraid of being overheard by the passers-by, Raven asked "Where are you going ?" and Cecil gave him a tolerant smile without replyin. He began to look more closely at the cafes and bars which they were passing, as though he was looking for somewhere in particular, and Raven asked more impatiently "Where are you off to, anyway ?"

"I dunno," said Cecil, with a chuckling note in his voice. "I guess I'll know it when I find it, that's all."

He made a sudden move down a side-street, and kept moving purposefully ahead until he came to the brilliantly-lit entrance to a small bar. "Now what the hell," said Raven, and then as Cecil pushed open the door he caught his arm and said "You can't go in there."

"Whyever not ," asked Cecil coolly. "Our money's as good as their's, isn't it ?"

He pushed open the door and walked in; Raven followed nervously without knowing what to expect. The sudden change in light bewildered him; it was subdued and welcoming, with the bottles behind the seemingly endless bar glittering with a self-contained sparkle.

With an easy sway of his hips and shoulders, Cecil strolled along gazing boldly into the faces of people standing or sitting at the bar; puzzled, warm with embarrassment, Raven followed until he came to a halt.

Until the bar-tender came for their orders, he lounged easily against the bar, staring with a kind of sly attention at a couple standing a little apart from the others. The girl, dark, slender, and rather tall, was talking earnestly and with a certain amount of gesticulation to her companion, who was a large man of a mature age. He held himself with the arrogance of a conscious personage, and his heavy sensual face held the fixed smile of an adult at a children's party.

"...that's where you come up against the lay-out problems," the girl informed him, and he nodded in careless agreement. His eyes, which hid in their pouches like bandits in ambush, made a sudden quick foray; he gazed at Raven, dismissed him, and then met the steady regard which Cecil was directing upon him.

A strange fleeting expression crossed his face, as though without warning he had received the password of a secret society; his eyes retreated into their ambush again as the bar-tender arrived and asked "What'll it be, boys ?"

"Oh - er - two half-pints of beer, if you please," said Cecil in a loud and exaggeratedly English accent, and the barman stared at him. "We don't serve no half-pints here, bud," he informed him. "You wanna bottle a' beer, or a glass a' beer ?"

Cecil made a curious helpless gesture, then turned upon Raven. "Oh, I'm sure I don't know," he exclaimed pettishly. "What do you say, Franky ?"

Raven stared at him in disgust, with a four-letter word trembling on his lips, when another voice broke in. "Maybe I can help," it said in rich and easy tones. "You got any of that imported beer, Louie ? Bass, or Worthington?"

"Sure, Mr. Armentraut," the barman answered in serf-like tones, and the big man ordered "Well, dig it out for the boys."

His eyes crept out from ambush to reconnoitre Cecil, and he asked kindly "Unless you'd like something a little stronger, maybe ? You look as though you've been having a tough time."

Cecil flushed, and his gaze darted away and back again. "Well, that's most frightfully kind of you," he said in the same exaggerated accent. "To tell the truth, I've always longed to try that drink that you call a - ah - highball."

"Sure thing," said Mr. Armentraut. "Set 'em up for the boys, Louie."

He paid for them before Cecil could fumble for his money, and raised his glass."What'll we drink to ?" he asked rhetorically. "A safe voyage, huh ?"

Raven sipped at his drink in time with the others, and caught the girl's eyes on him. "Is that an officer's suit ?" she asked, and the strange phrase in the unfamiliar accent left him without an answer for a moment. "It's a - er - an officer's uniform, yes," he replied, and her gaze moved slowly over him. After several seconds, her eyes met his,

and she became suddenly animated with confusion. "Gee, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "I didn't mean to stare that way."

Suddenly Raven became aware that the person facing him was an incontrovertible young female. The miasma of embarrassment which had hung about him since they entered the bar was swept away by a sharpp electrifying sensation which prickled over his skin and made his muscles feel taut and alive.

"That's quite all right," he said robustly, and took another sip of his highball. "Do you often come here, Mrs. Armentraut ?"

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted in an expression which was half-amusement, half-dismay. "I'm not Mrs. Armentraut," she said in a low giggling voice, and with a cautious glance at the broad back which was now turned towards her. "My name's Stevenson - Kennet Stevenson. Most people call me Kenny."

She swirled the ice-cubes round in her glass, looking speculatively at Raven. "Mr. Armentraut's my boss," she said. "We've been working late, so he told me that he'd buy me a drink and some dinner. Sure wish he'd hurry up with it, too. I'm starved."

"You're his secretary, I suppose ?" asked Raven, and she shook her head. "Nope. I'm a copywriter in his agency, and we've been working on a new campaign."

She went on telling him about her work in advertising,

and he listened dreamily to her plangent Kansas accent, full of unfamiliar stresses and intonations. He felt as though he were absorbing her through all his senses, and it was a shock when Armentraut turned suddenly to interrupt them with "Say, Kenny! You oughta hear what this young feller's been telling me about their trip across! They were in that convoy that was attacked - remember reading about it ?"

His manner was startlingly changed. He seemed to have become eager and forthcoming; his eyes sparkled and his heavy face was jovial. He looked at Kenny and Raven as though he was their own age, and clapped his hand down on Raven's shoulder. "Why, from what his buddy tells me, this young man oughta be getting a medal!"

"Oh, rubbish!" burst out Raven, and cast a malevolent glance towards Cecil. Several bystanders had heard Armentraut's remarks, and had turned to stare at the quartet; an elderly man with a long vulture's neck came bobbing forward and said "Par'n me, folks, but I couldn't help overhearing. Sounds like these boys 've seen a little action, huh ?"

"I'll say!" boomed Armentraut, and waved towards Cecil. "Go on, kid - you tell 'em. Everyone oughta hear this!"

Cecil gazed modestly down into his glass, and then raised his head with a convincing hesitation. In a low voice, he began to speak, and after a few moments Raven commenced to sweat with vicarious embarrassment. Cecil's tale of the convoy action was a small masterpiece; it was

all quite true, and yet without once mentioning himself he somehow managed to convey that he had played a leading part in it. With his back against the bar, in his costume of leather jacket and sea-boots and with his scarred face and golden curls, he was a poetic picture of the triumph of good over evil; when he had finished speaking there was a long silence, until Vulture-neck stepped solemnly forward and proclaimed "Son, I'm gonna shake you by the hand! And I want you to know that we're with you all the way!"

Raven became conscious that Kenny had slipped her arm through his, and was looking about her with an air of modestly possessive triumph. It was a pleasant feeling, and yet at the same time he wanted to wipe his moist face; he couldn't look at Cecil, and was barely conscious of Armentraut announcing "And now, folks, you'll have to excuse us. I'm going to give these boys a real good dinner, and I guess you'll say they've earned it!"

He began to lead the way out of the bar; as the other three turned to follow him, Raven caught Cecil's eye for a moment. It held an expression of pure triumph; he looked at Raven as much as to say "See ? I told you a dollar would get us all we need!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Love and Money

*

Armentraut took them to his apartment, which was near the summit of a colossal cliff-like building; two Filipino servants scurried to carry out his orders for dinner, and Raven perched uneasily beside Kenny on the edge of a sofa four yards long. He held a long icy glass in his hand, fronded with mint-leaves and trickling with moisture, whilst Armentraut lay back in an armchair and explained how America would shortly win the war. Cecil sat and watched him with a kind of silent adoration, occasionally sipping at his own glass, but a little later Armentraut stood up and exclaimed "Hey, I just can't stand to see you sitting there in those old clothes. Come along with me for a minute, and see if I can't find you something."

He waved his hand at Raven and Kenny, saying "Enjoy yourselves, kids," whilst Cecil padded meekly after him. Kenny relaxed with a long admiring sigh, looking about her at the opulent room. "Gee...what a place! And I don't suppose I'd ever 've been invited up here if I hadn't met you boys."

She transferred her admiration to Raven. "What you must've been through," she murmured. "I'd like to have you tell me all about it yourself."

Suddenly Raven's baptism of fire seemed to have become a mockery. Up to that moment he had thought about it with

mingled pride, revulsion, and relief, content to know that he had at last experienced war and had come through it no worse than the others; now he could only move uneasily on the couch and give a surly grunt into his drink. Kenny let her hand stay lightly on his knee for a moment, saying "I guess I know how you feel," and then after a thoughtful sip at her drink murmuring "I'm not too happy about your buddy, though..."

Raven glanced sharply at her, feeling that she must somehow have guessed the truth; their eyes met and he asked "What d'you mean ?"

Kenny flushed a little, saying awkwardly "Well, Mr. Armentraut's got kind of a - a reputation, you know...of course, I wouldn't say anything. Prob'ly it's only hearsay, anyway...you know that kind of jealous gossip that gets around ? He's a mighty successful man. But what with your buddy being so good-looking and all..."

She peeped sideways at Raven as though to see how he was taking it, burying her face in the fronded rim of her glass; he gave a coarsely laughing exclamation of "Don't you worry about him! He can take care of himself...when he's ashore, anyway."

Her eyebrows lifted, but before she could say anything the other two came back into the room. Cecil advanced towards Raven with a beaming smile, demonstrating the pale blue pyjamas and the heavy silk dressing gown in which Armentraut had arrayed him. "Like them ?" he asked

coquettishly. "Isn't it lucky that Mr. Armentraut had something my size ?"

"Now, son, I told you to call me Otto," said Armentraut in injured tones, and then glanced towards the Filipino who had moved silently into the room. "Dinner's ready, huh ? All right, folks - let's eat."

Cecil chattered gaily throughout the meal, comparing the savour and richness of the food with their meals aboard ship, but Armentraut seemed to become more and more abstracted. His eyes had retreated once more into their lairs, from which they peered calculatingly at Kenny and Raven, and no sooner had the last cups and glasses been cleared away than he stood up with an artificial laugh. "Say, I've just had an idea!" he said. "Franky, why don't you take Miss Stevenson home and then come back and pick up Arthur ? She's got a long day ahead of her to-morrow - haven't you, Miss Stevenson ?"

He looked at Kenny in a way which did not allow any answer, and then pulled out a bill-fold. "I know you guys are short till you get paid, so here's a little for car-fare," he said, and tucked a folded note into Raven's breat-pocket. "I'll have the boy call you a cab, and it'll be waiting for you downstairs."

Almost before they knew what was happening, the two of them found themselves dropping swiftly downwards in the lift; Kenny glanced at Raven's angry face, and then laughed merrily. "Don't take it to heart," she said. "We

didn't want to stay with them, anyway."

"I don't want his dirty money," fumed Raven, and plucked the bill out of his pocket. It was for twenty dollars, and Kenny caught his hand as she thought that he was going to toss it away. "Ah-ah," she cautioned. "I never pay my own way home!"

He grinned reluctantly as they walked out into the waiting cab; the drinks he had taken emboldened him to slip an arm around her as it drove away. She leaned back against him without protest; they looked at each other, with their faces strangely lit by the myriad flicker of the neons, and smiled with a kind of contented expectancy.

In a street of quiet old buildings which stood in the shadow of the skyscrapers like toadstools under trees, she led him up two flights of stairs to her apartment. "I was darned lucky to find this place,"she told him, turning on lights to reveal the small snug rooms with their loaded bookcases and well-used furniture. "It costs the mint to live up to New York, and I sure couldn't stick a rooming-house."

She made brisk tidying-up movements, disappeared for a moment and came back without her coat and hat, and said "I'll make us a drink - or maybe you'd sooner have coffee ? And then I want to hear all about it over again. Gee, it makes the war come real close, meeting someone like you. What'll it be, huh ? A drink, or coffee ?"

"Coffee, please," he answered, and she said "Coming

right up." He dropped into an arm-chair, and began glancing through a bulky volume entitled "How to Write Advertising that Sells."

"I bet you were glad to step on land again," she sang out cheerfully from her little kitchenette, and he answered her with a grunt. By this time, he did not want to talk about it; Cecil's performance had dragged a snail-like smear across the whole experience. When she returned with the coffee, she perched on the arm of his chair and commenced a busy chatter on the details which she had already heard, asking him questions to which he replied so baldly that she finally dried up, and they sat on in awkward silence. The ringing of the telephone bell made them both start, and she took off to answer it like a sprinter from his mark.

"Hallo," she said. "Oh, Mr. Armentraut...ye-es... oh, he's fine...I guess so...yeah...okay, I'll tell him... yes, sir...okay...g'night..."

She replaced the instrument and looked at him with eyebrows raised. "That was the boss," she said. "Says he'll take care of taking your buddy back to the ship, and you're to take a taxi back with what's left of his money. Okay ?"

He nodded, standing up, and she gazed at him uncertainly. "You want to go right now ?" she said, moving towards him, and then "But I guess you must be tired."

She was near to him now, and he stood paralysed with

embarrassed desire. To him, she was a woman of experience, separated from him by far more than three or four years of age; the way she looked at him invited something, but he could not be sure what it was.

Suddenly he made an abrupt and clumsy movement towards her, bumping into her and putting his arms around her at the same time; she stiffened, and then relaxed with a smiling exclamation. "Why, Franky," she said, as he tried to push his lips against hers; she seemed half-amused and half-uncertain, but all at once she not only accepted his kiss but returned it with a sudden thrusting vehemence. For a long moment she pushed herself against him, and then as suddenly pushed herself away; he looked at her giddily and she gave a shaky laugh.

"It must be the uniform, I guess," she told him. "Now you really do have to go."

"Shall I - shall I see you again ?" he asked, and they exchanged a long seeking glance before she nodded gravely . "Sure - why not ? Here - give me a ring at the office."

She found a business card and handed it to him, and then unlatched the door. "Now then, sailor, on your way," she told him cheerily. "Before you get me a bad name with the neighbours."

The door closed behind him, he stumbled down the stairs, and after wandering around for a little while managed to find a cab. He returned to the ship with his thoughts as luridly confused as the neons which flashed by the

taxi windows, and found that the metallic uproar of the shipwrights was still going on; the ship appeared incredibly littered and dirty, and a bunch of men brewing tea in the galley hailed him in to tell of his experiences.

"Did you get yer end in, Sparky ?" leered the Third Engineer, and guffawed as Raven flushed. "It's the uniform as does it every time," he told the others, and the Bo'sun poured a mahogany-coloured stream into his cracked pint-pot. "We'll all need bloody uniforms if the skipper doesn't come across with some cabbage," he grumbled. "We can't stick on this old hooker every night."

"The old bazztard 'ud better have ut to-morra," opined Costello grimly. "Or there'll be one sailor less in the bloody packet."

"You won't get far in New York, sonny," the Third Engineer told him wisely, and Costello's hard red face set into a sneer. "Don't you bother your arse about <u>that</u>," he replied. "There's plenty places I know where to go."

He sipped from his mug, set it down on the fat-spattered stove, and took half a cigarette from inside his cap. "Matter o' that, there won't be any call for it," he muttered after a moment's brooding contemplation. "If he don't come across with ut to-morra, we'll find a way to make 'im."

Old Stanley, peering learnedly over a copy of the 'Herald-Tribune,' chirped "There's no justice for a sailor-man, b'y. They can do anything to you but put you in the family way."

The semi-serious argument rambled on, and Raven drifted out of the galley, stood for a few moments yawning and shivering out on the littered deck, and then went to his cabin and turned in. He slept heavily, half-awakening at some time in the small hours when Cecil crept into the cabin; when he opened his eyes at seven-thirty, the gunner was already sitting up amongst a turmoil of grubby blankets. He looked as fresh and alert as though he had slept for twelve hours, but his eyes slid guiltily away from Raven's.

He had turned in dressed in nothing but his underpants; he stretched out his arms with a voluptuous movement, and looked at himself with appreciation. Still without looking at Raven, he said with a kind of chuckling challenge "I told you I'd see us right, didn't I ? New York's not so very different from London, after all."

Rubbing shaving cream into his face, Raven could see the smooth white shoulder reflected in the mirror. "Little ponce," he grunted, and Cecil chuckled again. "Wrong word, honey," he commented. "Your education's been neglected."

He gave a simpering shrug, and then murmured "Gee, but Otto's a wonderful man. He says he can do a lot for me, too."

"Such as what ?" asked Raven. "Get you a medal for saving the ship, I s'pose ?"

"Now, now, don't be sarky," answered Cecil gaily.

"Just for example, he's going to give me a try-out as a photographer's model. He says that all the advertising agencies use a lot of photographer's models, and after the war he'll - "

"The war's not over yet," Raven interrupted savagely. "Neither's this voyage."

For an instant, a strange expression passed over Cecil's face; like that of a man who sees a ghost but knows how it may be exorcised. Raven took no more notice of him, but huddled on his clothes and left the cabin; as the door slammed, Cecil stuck out his tongue and made a horrible grimace.

After breakfast, Flack told Raven off to service the batteries; standing over him as he manipulated the hydrometer, topped up the cells and greased the terminals, he cross-examined his junior on what he termed his 'night's drift'. Hating him fiercely, Raven was waiting for the time when he could nip ashore and ring up Kenny at her office; when dinner-time came he gulped down the soggy food without tasting it, hurried out of the saloon, barely noticed Captain Macnamara as he passed him on the gangway, and ran through the echoing warehouse in search of a telephone.

As the dialling tone burred in his ear, he gripped the instrument in a sudden cold panic of apprehension. What if last night had been only a dull stitch in the bright tapestry of her days ? What if she had almost forgotten him already ?

The phone clicked in his ear, and her voice spoke in such a

businesslike way that his tongue went dry. "Is that you, Kenny ?" he croaked, and she said at once "Why, hal-lo! Gee, I've been wondering all morning if you'd call!"

The sun came out and shone within his clouded mind; a gentle sweat burst out all over him and a sort of poetry quivered along his tongue. But all he said was "H-have you ? I've been busy, you know, and - "

"Oh, I guess you have," she said soothingly. "I'll bet you've got a heck of a lot to do, getting that old ship in order again."

The single stripe on his arm assumed a new radiance, and he said confidently "I won't be on duty to-night, though. D'you think we could - er - well, sort of get together, so to speak ?"

"Waal...that depends on what you mean by 'get together,'" she chuckled, and he grinned like an anxious dog. "Okay," she said in a different tone. "Why don't you meet me around six-thirty ? You know where Madison Avenue is ?"

She gave him the directions, and he walked hazily back to the ship. He had mounted the gangway and taken several steps towards his cabin before he realised that something was amiss, and he slowed his pace to tread hesitantly into the mob of men which was hanging about amidships. All the crew seemed to be there, standing around with their arms folded against the cutting breeze from the river, and with a peculiar hang-dog defiance about their expressions.

The Bo'sun was sitting on the hatch a little apart

from the others, watching them from under the brim of his felt hat with the two brass grommets let in for air holes, and Raven moved up beside him to ask what was going on. "They want their dough," he said with a sardonic grin. "They saw the Ole Man come aboard after dinner, and they want to know where the cash is."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN 14

Modes of Persuasion

*

At that moment, Costello was standing in the Chief Steward's doorway, telling him to go and summons the Captain. The Chief Steward, who had been engaged upon sketching in the pubic hairs on a photograph of a winsome but depilated nude, stared up at him with his tongue still projecting from one side of his mouth. "But I carn' do that," he protested. "The ole bazztard's still having his dinner."

"Are you going ?" Costello asked quietly, and the Steward shrugged, tucked his nude under a stores-list, and trudged up the stairs to the Captain's quarters. Costello went back out on deck, staring at the others with the hard contempt of a leader who distrusts his material, and Wanker's Doom giggled nervously. "Did you get it ?" he asked, and Costello swung a half-playful punch past the lad's ear. "In the bag," he growled.

Raven stood uncertainly beside the Bo'sun, feeling himself out of place and yet unwilling to push his way through the crowd to go to his cabin. A voice amongst the shipwrights working aft gave vent to a stream of curses, followed by a resounding clang of metal, and at the same moment the figure of the Captain loomed in the semi-darkness of the doorway into the officers' accommodation. He came into the doorway, standing just behind the door-sill, and gazed silently out

at the waiting crew.

For a long moment they gazed just as silently back at him, and two or three of them cast sideways glances at Costello. But the man who stepped forward was Big Cyril the fireman, raising his hand towards his broken-peaked cap. "Afternoon, Captain," he said pleasantly, and the Captain stared back at him without response.

"We was just wondering what you was doing about our money, essetra," continued Big Cyril in the same pleasant tone. "We've been in port a two-three days now, an' the lads are wanting a run ashore."

The Captain said nothing. His eyes remained fixed upon Big Cyril, surveying him like a stern father who is not yet roused to wrath, and then glanced briefly at the expectant crew. "Is that all ?" he said at last, and Big Cyril shuffled his coal-dust clotted boots. "Why, no," he said. "We're still wondering about our clo'es. We've only got what we stand up in, and it's getting pretty cold. We understood we'd get a special grant from the Gov'ment, or the like o' that."

The Captain tugged at his moustache, as though deciding whether this statement deserved an answer. Finally he replied "I've been fixing it up with the Ministry of War Transport. There'll be a ship-chandler coming aboard, and he'll take your orders up to a hundred and sixty dollars a head. That's the maximum you're allowed in compensation. I'm not going to give it to you in money, or you'd piss it

up against a wall."

"And what about our money, Cap'm ?" enquired Big Cyril, and the Captain answered "Anyone that's got it in the ship can have five dollars. That's the most I'll allow."

A passing tug-boat hooted tauntingly, and Big Cyril shuffled his boots again. The Captain did not give him a further chance to speak. Drawing a ponderous gold watch from the waistcoat of his blue shore-going suit, he glanced at it and grunted "Two minutes past one. Time you were all turned to."

He raise his head and swept his stern far-seeing glance over the crew, and they stared back at him with serf-like resentment. None of them had the resolution to utter the words which stumbled around in their minds, and he gave a dismissing nod. "That's all," he said, and began to turn back into the alleyway.

"That is NOT all!" shouted a voice, and he looked back with narrowed eyes. "Och, it's you again, is it ?" he asked with an almost humorous intonation, and Costello answered "Yes, it's me again, and I've got a few things to say to yah.'

"And I'm not disposed to listen to 'em," snapped the Captain, and turned his back completely. Costello hesitated for a second, and then charged through the crew to the doorway. His clutching hand just brushed the old man's shoulder, and the Captain swung around with a sharp cry of "That'll do now - I'm warning you!"

"What sort of a way's this to treat a crew ?" shouted

Costello. "What sort of a cut will you be gettin' outa them shipchandler's bills ? I demand to see the Consul!"

"Get back aft where you belong!"

"There's no bloody aft to get back to, you silly old squit!"

"That's enough! I'm warning you for the last time!"

"Stuff yer warnings! Will yah listen to reason for a change ?"

The two men glared at each other, and Costello pushed his face forward to shout "We'll not be having that shipchandler's junk for the worth of our money! We know the way it is! Sell us a one-dollar shirt for three dollars; one for you an' two for him! Be honest for once in yer rotten life, ye belly-robber! Give us our money!"

"I'll have you in court for this! Will ye stop your - "

"No I will not! An' what's this about only five dollars a man ? I've got six quid coming to me this minnut, an' that's more'n twenty dollars in anyone's language! We've been on this rotten old bucket for - "

"I don't care if you've been on it for a year! It's up to me to decide how much money you're getting, an' that's the law!"

"Bad luck to the law! That was all right for them old windjammer days you was dragged up in, but there's a war on now! We've been through plenty to get across here, an' I'm tellin' yah we mean to have our rights!"

For a bewildered instant the Captain felt that he could

hear the sound of the sea; the rage and roar of it seemed to be mounting in his ears as he stepped forward to push Costello back onto the deck. He glimpsed the avid faces of the crew watching the scene as Costello stood squarely before him, and heard as though through a gale of wind the words "Don't you lay yer hands on me, mister, or you'll be getting more'n you bargained for!"

Captain Macnamara opened his mouth to reply, but found that the words were blocked in his throat. Fora wild dizzying moment it seemed to him that he had gone back almost fifty years; that he was himself a young sailor again, struggling for a hand-hold in the rigging of a ship which swooped insanely down between the greybeards of Cape Horn. The tumult of the sea roared ever louder in his ears; the deck rose and fell beneath him and he raised both hands with their fingers clawing and clutching for a non-existent spar. "Hold...fast..." he croaked, and toppled forward onto the deck.

Costello stepped backwards with an oddly graceful movement, standing poised on the balls of his feet like a matador staring down at the expiring bull. The Bo'sun, who up till then had remained sitting on the hatch and watching events with the air of a critic at a first night, jumped up and shouldered his way forward, reaching the Captain just as Mr. Keadwell came bustling out of the accommodation.

"Now then, now then, what's going on here ?" he demanded fussily; the Captain gave a dreadful slobbering moan and

flapped his hand against the grimy deck-plates. Mr. Keadwell made a tutting noise and knelt down beside him, and then glanced up at the faces which were pressing themselves gapingly closer. "Here, you, Bo'sun, and you two - give me a hand to get him in his bunk," he ordered, and then saw the Chief Steward peering out of the pantry door. "Steward, get hold of a doctor - quick," he said. "The Old Man's taken bad. Stroke, I shouldn't wonder; my old auntie looked just like this when she went down. All right, lads - get a hold of him. Steady does it - that's the way..."

They wrangled the sagging bulky body up into the Captain's quarters, and after a while a sour-faced doctor with rimless eyeglasses and a little black moustache came picking his way up the gangway. His examination was brief, and as the grey chill of the afternoon turned into snow the crew watched the Captain being carried down into an ambulance. "That's the last we'll see of him," grunted the Bo'sun to the Carpenter, an elderly flat-faced Finn, and the latter answered "Ya - you never get no good out o' dem hospiddles. What yeou reckon now ? Old Keadie be Captain, maybe ?"

"Maybe," said the Bo'sun, and a sailor beside him asked "What about our money, Bose ? You reckon the Chief Officer'll dish out anything ?"

The Bo'sun wiped a snowflake off his hand. "I dunno," he said thoughtfully, and then "No harm in asking, is there ?'

He tramped ruminatively amidships, finding as he had

expected that the Chief Officer and Chief Steward had returned to the Captain's quarters. He stood in the open doorway, pulling off his hat and staring at them without speaking, until Mr. Keadwell glanced up over his glasses and asked "What is it, Bo'sun ?"

Then, with a cautious smile, he nodded towards the tarnished stripes on the Chief Officer's sleeves. "I reckon you'll have to be putting up another one soon," he said slyly.

"Eh ? Another one ? What d'you mean ?" asked Mr. Keadwell, and then gave an embarrassed grin. "Oh no," he said. "It's a bit too soon to be thinking of that yet."

The Chief Steward looked at the Bo'sun , and then said with hoarse eagerness "Don't you worry about that, Mister. They won't be bringin' that old - old gentleman back agin."

Mr. Keadwell stared at them, and then cast a long appraising glance around the cabin. It was twice the size of his own cluttered little box, and had a sleeping-cabin and private bathroom attached. "H'm," he said, and then with a half-wistful intonation "Never been in command yet. I was in line for it once just before the Depression, but then...."

He shrugged, and the Chief Steward drew in his breath sympathetically. "You need a tot, I reckon," he said. "You'll have plenty of worries now, and this is only the start of 'em."

He bustled about finding a bottle and glass, and the

Bo'sun's nostrils quivered slightly at the aroma of good Scotch. "Go on - get that down yer," the Chief Steward urged Mr. Keadwell. "Do you a power o' good."

The Chief Officer pushed back the spectacles which were slipping down his nose, and looked doubtfully at the glass. Pleasant visions were shimmering in the background of his mind; of an increased allotment for his family back in Bootle, and a ship run as he wanted it; of all night in his bunk, and other perquisites galore...

He sipped cautiously, took off his cap, and laid it on the green baize table-cloth. "Excuse me bothering you just yet, Captain," said the Bo'sun in wooing tones, and he glanced up sharply. But both men were looking at him seriously, and he inclined his head in a manner which said that he was making a tentative acceptance of the title.

"...but the men are wondering if they could have a few bob to go on with," the Bo'sun continued. "Captain Macnamara was going to give them something, but..."

Mr. Keadwell sipped again, and frowned. The advance of money to crews in port was a perpetual bone of contention. According to the Merchant Shipping Act, the Captain was not obliged to advance them anything against their pay-off, but no crew-member could ever see why he shouldn't have every penny which was due to him.

"Well..." he said warily, and the Bo'sun eyed him like a burglar faced with an unusual lock. "The lads have had a rough time, Cap'm," he offered. "Pretty hard luck on 'em if they have to wait till things are straightened out again."

"Aye, an' it's Friday night, too," said the Steward portentously, as though that made a powerful difference. But Mr. Keadwell said nothing; only sipped and sipped again, with a deep frown curdling on his broad honest face. The pleasant visions had vanished like a mirage; instead, he was seeing the uncharted reefs which could wreck any Master's career.

The silence lengthened, until at last the Bo'sun eased his hat back onto his head and muttered "Oh well...s'pose it can't be helped."

He turned to go, but Mr. Keadwell said "Wait a minute. I s'pose they'd all have ten dollars coming to 'em ?"

"Oh sure!" exclaimed the Chief Steward with a loud false heartiness. "There'd be no trouble about <u>that</u>!"

"All right then. I'll give 'em ten dollars each, and they can have more later if they've got it coming to them."

He drained his glass, and said in a hunted way "Can't do better than that, can I ? I've got to have a chance to look at the accounts."

The Chief Steward raised his hand as though he was about to slap Mr. Keadwell on the back, but decided to scratch his ear instead. "I'll give you an 'and to sort it out," he said warmly. " 've you got the keys to the safe, mister ?"

The Bo'sun dismissed himself, hurried down the stairs and out onto the deck, and grabbed hold of the first man he encountered. "Ten dollars each," he snapped. "Pass the word to hurry along, before the old bleeder changes his mind!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN (15)

A Night's Drift

✠

"...and so I suppose old Keadwell's the Captain now," concluded Raven, and Kenny looked at him over her coffee-cup. "You sure have fun on that old ship of yours," she commented. "All that fuss over a measly five dollars. I guess we'd better take care of your pocket while you're in port."

"I've got enough," he said indignantly, and she reached her hand across to him with a smile. "I know, honey," she said. "I just mean that you can have a good time in N'York without spending a heap of money."

She noticed his sudden change of expression, and followed his gaze down towards her hand. "Why," he said slowly, "I never noticed that before. I didn't know you were married."

Her smile twisted, and she said with forced insouciance "Gee, but men are slow to catch on. That's about the first thing any woman notices about another one. But married's not the word, honey. It just didn't take."

"You mean - "

"Yep. I guess he found that someone else's bed was softer than mine."

The cynical expression caused him to flush awkwardly, and her smile softened again. Collecting her bag and gloves, she glanced around the restaurant and said "Anyway, let's start saving your money. We've got a party to go to to-night, and it won't cost us a cent. Two of our people 've got themselves

engaged, and it's open house."

He followed her out of the restaurant and along the snow-drifting street to a subway station, since she refused to allow him a taxi. The clattering ride, and another walk, brought them to a street of apartment houses; Kenny rapped on a door which was flung open by a bulbous man with a beard. "Come in, folks, come right in," he bawled. "And what's this you've brought with you ? A sailor ? Just what we needed to give us some local colour!"

Raven walked beside Kenny into a room full of highly-articulate men and women, standing, sitting, or lying on the floors and furniture. As far as he knew, Raven never met the people for whom the party was being given; someone pushed a drink into his hand, someone else sat down beside him, and Kenny seemed to disappear amongst the whirls and eddies of people. "British, aincher ?" said a twanging voice in his ear, and he glanced round to see a man with a remarkably sharp face peering into his own. It was something like a paper dart; all point and profile.

Raven nodded, and Dart-Face twanged: "I've gotta theory about this war that you fellers are fighting over there. You're still fighting the Napoleonic Wars, see ?"

He sighted at Raven along the point of the dart, as though preparing to launch it at any signs of disagreement, but when Raven only looked back at him over the rim of his glass he continued "Yes, sir, I've given it a lotta thought. Ever hear what Bismarck said in 1854 ? Well, sir, he said - "

The twanging voice plucked on, and Raven sipped his drink and looked for Kenny. Once he caught sight of her with her head thrown back, laughing at something to her by a sly little dwarf of a man, and he felt a fierce twinge of jealousy. But his attention was distracted by the problems of a young woman who was attempting to keep her bosom within her peasant blouse with one hand, hold a drink in the other, and simultaneously ward off the approaches of a dignified gentleman with a moist and earnest eye. When he looked again, Kenny had gone, and he let his gaze drift aimlessly over the grimacing faces and gesticulating hands. Someone filled his glass again, and as he drank he felt a brief wonder that this could be going on whilst the great frenzied ocean lay at the river's mouth.

" - and so a'course they came to 1914," twanged the remorseless voice in his ear, and then it and all the other voices came to a slurring halt. "Judas," said Dart-Face. "It's the Great White Father himself."

The crowd parted like waves before a liner, and Raven saw Armentraut pacing slowly forward with Cecil a step or so behind. He moved with downcast eyes and a kind of grave simper fixed upon his face, like the sultan's favourite appearing before the court; Armentraut led the way to a couch standing against the wall, and the four people upon it scattered like chickens before a fox.

"Who th' hell is that piece of velvet-tail that he's got with him ?" muttered Dart-Face, and Raven held out his glass

for a refill. "Some little ponce, I s'pose," he said with deep satisfaction, and swigged at the musty-tasting Bourbon.

"Waal, as I was saying," recommenced Dart-Face, and Raven pleasantly "Stop talking crap. This is supposed to be a party."

Dart-Face shot him a startled look, and then said "Gee, you talk real American. Let's whoop it up, kid."

He promptly grasped a bottle from a wandering guest, topped up their glasses, and in a few minutes raised his voice in a jews-harp rendition of "Maisie was Queen of the Cat-House, but she wouldn't Wear Lace on her Drawers."

"Say, that was all right," said Raven experimentally, and Dart-Face said "You're okay too, kiddo. First time I knew the English were human."

Someone began tickling Raven's neck, and he peered around to see Kenny. "See your buddy over there ?" she enquired, and he answered "Don't call him my - hic - buddy. Thish my buddy."

"Darn tootin'," said Dart-Face. "Let's try a couple choruses of 'My Ole Baby's Belly's Gettin' Bigger Every Day.'"

"Why, Mr. Krag," said Kenny in shocked tones, and Dart-Face said "Hi there, Mrs. Whosit. Why don't you loosen up a little ? Haven't you met my British buddy here ?"

He raised his voice again, and Kenny slid down onto the couch beside Raven. "Sure you're okay on that stuff ?" she asked as he clipped his arm around her, and he answered "Sure I'm sure. Why don't you looshen up a li'l, baby ?"

The lights seemed to fuse together in a myriad flashing rainbows, and then to drift slowly apart again. With a strange cold corner of his mind, he saw the rolling clouds of smoke which billowed over the sea....the staggering lurch of a stricken ship as it poised for the last plunge.

The vision passed, and he clutched tightly at the reassuring warmth of Kenny as she half-lay against him. Some great philosophical revelation seemed to be trembling just beyond his grasp; a key to the whole mystery of life which could hold such torments and such ecstasies. With inward-looking eyes, he held out his glass again.

Meanwhile, the officers and crew of the Austrian Duke were having their first run ashore, and around midnight they began to return aboard. First came the Carpenter, who came shuffling up the gangway laden with two heavy shopping baskets, like a faithful suburban husband returning home. The only difference was that the baskets were full of cold canned beer.

Next came the Donkeyman, a tiny wizened fellow like a worn-out old jockey, who wavered in and out of the dockside lights carrying on a venomous whispered argument with himself. He was overtaken and passed by a bellow of roistering voices emanating from the Third Mate, Chief Steward, and Third Engineer, who lurched, stumbled, and cursed an erratic path towards the foot of the gangway.

When all was quiet again, the Fourth Engineer came strolling along with one hand caressing his moustache, as he pondered

his chances with the waitress who had served him in an all-night restaurant. Before he reached his cabin, a long straggling group of sailors and firemen commenced tacking towards the ship, one or two of them pausing to vomit up the despised Yankee beer before they faced the long climb aboard.

One by one they returned, to be met with envious and ironical remarks from those who kept the watch aboard. Mr. Keadwell peered out of his cabin at the sound of crashing utensils from the galley, and the yell of "Who called the Cook a bastard ?" answered by a chorus of "Who called the bastard a cook ?"

He stood there for a few contemplative moments in his old flannel dressing-gown, wondering whether to interfere. There was another crash, and he shrugged, turning back into his cabin. They've had a hard time, he thought, and then as he was drifting off to sleep he heard measured steps pacing down the alleyway, a fumbling at the Second Mate's door, and a few seconds later the protesting squawk of bunk-springs as Mungo Maclaren collapsed fully-dressed onto his bed. Funny chap, ruminated Mr. Keadwell as sleep swirled around him like a Grand Banks fog; same in every port, goes ashore by himself, comes marching back as solemn as a parson...you'd never think he'd taken a drop and yet he's...wonder what there is behind him...prob'ly just like me except...

In the Chief Engineer's cabin, the Second Engineer tipped up the remains of a bottle of whisky for which they had sent ashore, voting it too cold to be worth the bother of

dressing up. So they had enjoyed an interesting technical discussion on the demerits of motor-ships, the idiocy of deck-officers, and the superiority of Liverpool over Glasgow as a ship-building community. "Awwww," yawned the Second. "Wonder how much longer these flamin' Yanks 'll be fixing us up ?"

"Not more'n a few days at this rate," said the Chief Engineer round his pipe. "And then I s'pose they'll start pushing cargo into us."

"Any idea where we're going ?"

"Not a clue. Wouldn't be home for Christmas, anyway. Here it is December the fifth already."

The Chief poked a match-stick round in the charred bowl of his pipe, and continued philosophically "Soon be another year. Nineteen forty-two, eh ? Wonder what that'll bring us ?"

"One thing you can be bloody certain of, it won't bring the Yanks into the war," said Peterson. "I'll just have a look down below before I turn in."

CHAPTER ~~FIFTEEN~~ (16)

All Hatches Working

*

Raven awoke with a start, his eyes seeking for a reference point amongst the dimly lit details of the little room. A soft hand laid upon his side brought recollection surging back, and he turned over to draw Kenny tightly against him. "Oh God, I do love you," he said in a protesting moan, and she smuggled against him with a sleepy giggle. "Not love, just imagination," she told him, and then shivered deliciously as he passed his hand along her smooth flanks. "Is that imagination ?" he enquired, and she crooned "No, expectation...

A little later she pressed her tousled head into the warm curve of his shoulder, and mumbled "How much longer 're you going to stay off that old ship of yours ? Won't they be looking for you ?"

"I've only been adrift one day," he told her. "Or one day and two nights. And it was Saturday yesterday, anyway. I don't suppose that they even missed me."

She yawned, saying "I reckon you'd better go back to-day, anyway. I've got to do my laundry."

"I'll help you," he said hopefully, and she answered "Give yourself a break, honey. We'll have plenty more time. How's about putting the coffee on ?"

Unwillingly, he crept out of bed, and then began to enjoy the domesticity of making coffee and toast, and taking it back to the bedroom to share with her. He still hoped that

she might relent, and managed to stall off his expulsion until lunch-time, but after that she shooed him out of the apartment. Once out in the cold world, his confidence began to evaporate, but in the event his return was met with far less surprise, recrimination, and raillery than he had expected. That was because the day was Sunday, the date was December 7th, and the ship had just heard of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Roused out of their Sunday afternoon sleep, groups of tousled men stood hugging themselves against the cold and predicting innumerable disasters; they had no eyes for Raven, who listened briefly to the news and then slipped into his cabin.

A few minutes later he came out again, feeling that he ought to report himself to Flack. He climbed the bridge ladders and walked softly along to his senior's door, hesitating as he heard voices through the black-out curtains and then knocking softly.

There was no answer and no break in the voices, and so he parted the curtains and stepped inside. Flack's eyes goggled at him over a tilted tumbler, Mungo Maclaren paused in the act of pouring himself another shot of Old Grand-Dad, and the third man gave him a sideways wag of the head. "So you finally condescended to come back, did you ?" spluttered Flack, and gestured with his emptied glass. "Whadda you think of him, hey ?" he demanded of the others. "Goes ashore for two days without so much as a kiss-me-arse, and then walks in on us grinning like the Prodigy Son!"

"Good luck to um," grunted Maclaren, and squinted carefully at the water which he was trickling into his glass. Raven heard the batteries cluck and gurgle in the wireless room next door, and remembered guiltily that he had been supposed to watch their charging. He hoped that they had not been on charge ever since he went ashore.

"Well, y' might as well siddown an' have a drink, now that you did get back," said Flack unwillingly, and rummaged about on top of his wash-stand until he found a crusted tooth-glass. After a cursory rinse, he slopped an inch of whisky into it and handed it to Raven. "You prob'ly need a heart-starter," he said kindly, and then introduced the third man. "Chief Sparks off the Russian Duke," he said. "Just got in yesterday."

Raven nodded a nervous acknowledgement, and sipped cautiously at his whisky. "And she's even worse than this old waggon, if possible," said the newcomer. "Crowd's not so bad, though - all excepting the Chief Officer."

"Boozer, is he ?" enquired Flack virtuously, and the other man said "Christ, no. Might be a bit better if he did take a drink. He's one o' these high-powered efficiency merchants - chases the crew from hell to breakfast. Tempest, his name is, and by crikey he lives up to it."

"I know um," rumbled the Second Mate unexpectedly. "He was on this ship. Third Mate then. Had the cheek to tell me I didn't keep the charts in order."

He took a long swallow, and stared at the bulkhead through eyes cobwebbed with red veins. "Owner's nephew or

something," he commented, and Flack said gloomily "Ah - it's not what you know, but who you know, heck-heck-heck."

The three of them rambled on about men who held down jobs to which they weren't entitled, whilst Raven pecked at his unwanted drink and finally muttered " 'scuse me...gotta write some letters..."

They hardly looked at him as he made his escape, and he stood outside for a moment taking a long breath of the icy air. The darkening clouds of the winter afternoon hung overhead as soggily self-pitying as his own sudden gloom; he looked out over dirty grey ship, dirty grey river, dirty grey corrugated iron of the warehouse roof, but pictured only the polished creamy gloss upon taut-fashioned skin. "Kenny," he muttered to himself, and then with an abrupt laugh at his own dramatisation he ran whistling down the ladders to his cabin.

Time passed quickly in port. Within a few more days, the work on the crew's quarters was completed; the ship moved to a loading berth at the Brooklyn Terminal, and the hatch-boards thundered onto the decks as the holds were opened up. The new berth meant that Raven had to travel further to reach Kenny's apartment, but he soon became familiar with the subway system which led him towards her. His life settled into a routine which he knew must come to an end, but which had too strong a sweetness to allow him to picture that end. Days, nights, dreams, day-dreams, were all filled with Kenny; he wove her so intensely into the pictured fabric of his future that he was unable to foresee a life without her.

"When shall we be married ?" he asked her one night as he lay half beside her and half over her, engrossed in the yet uncloyed sweetness of love-talk and love-play; she turned her head aside with a taunting smile, and murmured "Too many complications. Where'd we live ? In England ? Or are you going to skip that old ship of yours altogether ? Might as well, for all the time you spend aboard her. Doesn't that boss of yours ever make you work ?"

"I'm serious," he protested, and she reached her arms up with a languorous movement, drawing his head down and yielding her lips to his, kissing him with skilfully thrusting tongue. "Take advice from a fool," she told him half-earnestly. "Make the most of what you've got while you've got it, and to hell with the future."

He was pondering this scene as he stood with one foot on the hatch-coaming, watching another tray of cargo drop down into the hold. It consisted of cases of tinned milk, another of the myriad items which they were loading; their manifest of cargo was like a shopping list for modern war.

The winches clattered, checked in obedience to a whistled signal, clattered and checked again. The wire rope which hung taut from the derrick suddenly slackened as the tray reached the bottom, and the waiting stevedores grabbed the cases to pile onto the great symmetrical mass of cargo which they were building up from the bottom of the hold.

Minute by minute, hour by hour, day and night, the work continued. To Raven, the slow settling of the ship in the water was like an hour-glass which silently bled away the

moments of his ecstasy. Each time he returned to the ship, the cargo would be piled a little higher in the holds, the winches would still be pounding out their brutal thundering rhythm, the stevedores and winchmen would be working with that disciplined frenzy which is uniquely American. One day, and one day soon, that cargo would reach the top of the hatch, and then there would be nothing ahead but the sea.

Standing watching the men at work, he was unconscious of Cecil's approach until the young gunner spoke to him. Since the words were the same question which he was asking himself, they were doubly unwelcome; he turned his head briefly, glanced at the smooth face which was pushed anxiously and enquiringly close to his own, and looked away again.

"I said: How much longer do you think they'll be ?" called Cecil above the tumult of the winches, and Raven grunted "How the hell should I know ?"

"Oh, all right, no need to be narky about it," said Cecil petulantly, and offered a pack of Lucky Strike. "Smoke ? Go ahead - I've got plenty."

Raven shook his head; Cecil shrugged and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. They were silent for a moment, and then the gunner asked "How are you getting on with the girl-friend ?"

"None of your business," grunted Raven, and Cecil smirked "Maybe it is."

"What d'you mean by that ?" demanded Raven, swinging around to face him, and Cecil blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Oh, nothing," he said airily. "I might be able to do her a bit of good, that's all."

"What the hell kind of good can a little rat like you do for her ?"

"Nasty," reproved Cecil. "After all, if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't even 've met her. Would you, now ?"

Raven didn't care to answer that, and affected to resume his study of the loading operations. "I've only got to say the word to Mr. Armentraut, and he'll take good care of her," the smirking voice continued. "He thinks the world of me now. I can't put a foot wrong."

Raven answered with intent to wound. "When's the new gun's crew coming along ? 'bout time they got here, isn't it ? I can just imagine some big hairy-arsed petty-officer shaking you up. Make the best of it, sonny. Your honeymoon's nearly over."

"Ah, but perhaps I won't even be here," replied Cecil, but when Raven turned to look at him again he put a hand over his mouth with an affected gesture. "What d'you mean by that ?" asked Raven, but Cecil only shook his head with his big eyes showing above his hand. "Ah, that's telling," he mumbled.

"Out of the way, ratbags!" shouted a loud coarse voice, and the Third Mate shouldered past carrying a cargo-cluster in each hand. The battered metal hoods of the lights clanked against the hatch coaming as he fired a parting shot about bloody useless passengers, and Cecil flounced away.

"At least I might be somewhere where I don't have to put up with that sort of thing," he called over his shoulder to Raven.

The assistant steward came out of the pantry and added to the din by swinging the dinner bell; after a moment Raven went in to eat a meal which their stay in port had not improved. The Third Engineer was in good form that day, telling of his adventures with a Second Avenue hooker, ;and Raven sat on listening to him until the Third Mate came in. "...so I give 'er the money, see, an' she stuck it away in 'er bag. But she weren't too clever about where she put 'er bag down. First time she turned 'er back, I were in an' out of it like a prize cockerel. Cheapest little bit I ever 'ad."

He gazed around triumphantly at the half-believing smiles, and the Third Mate packed beef, parsnip, and potato onto his fork. Carefully topping it off with a dab of gravy, he shoved this load into his mouth and mumbled "Not as cheap as Sparky gets his, I'll bet."

The Third Engineer gave him a questioning leer, and the other man swallowed noisily and gestured with his fork. "What about it, Sparky ? Does it cost you anything, or do you get paid for it ?"

Raven smiled tightly, without answering, and the Third Mate commenced to assemble another load on his fork. His flat round face assumed a thoughtful malice, and he continued "Where's she live, Sparky ?"

"Who're you talking about ?" enquired Raven, and the other looked at him in pretended surprise. "Why, who 'd yer think ? That little bit o' stuff that you go nipping off to see every night."

"Aye, that's reet," interjected the Third Engineer. He anticipated a little sexual innuendo, and his mind slipped into a well-worn groove. "I saw you slipping aboard at two o'clock yes'dy morning. That sort of thing's no good for a growing lad, y' know. Must get yer sleep, or you'll be getting dark rings under yer eyes."

"That isn't what's giving 'im dark rings under his eyes," said the Third Mate wittily. "He's got one o' them real long-bodied New York girls. You know - suck 'em in and blow 'em out in bubbles."

The Third Engineer emitted a loud guffaw, which was checked abruptly when Raven reached across the table, took the Third Mate's plate by the edge, and flipped the contents up into that officer's face. "Hey, that's no way to do," he protested, as the Third Mate jumped up with his face a dripping mask of gravy. "Now just calm down, you boys!"

"Calm down be beggared!" roared the Third Mate. "You - you - hey, come on, we'll settle this on deck! I've been just waiting for a chance to have a crack at you!"

Raven jumped up to follow him out of the saloon, but they collided in the doorway. The Third Mate caught him a short painful punch in the belly, and he responded by jerking up his elbow and catching the other sharply under the nose,

which promptly began to bleed. "Not bloody fair!" howled the Third Mate. "I'll kill you for that, you little bleeder!"

He attempted to lock his arm around Raven's neck, and they wrestled their way down the passage to the outer doorway. The weather-sill and the black-out curtains presented complications here, and they grunted and panted against each other whilst the Third Engineer shouted "Nah then, Queensberry rules! You'll do yerselves a mis-cheef if you fight like that!"

"You bet I'll do 'im a mischief," grunted the Third Mate, but Raven had now got behind him and was pinioning his arms. Half-laughing and half-crying, he impelled the Third Mate forward with a resounding slam against the bulkhead, and the Chief Steward poked an astonished head out of the pantry to shout "Jesus! Bloody Sparky's bloody killing the bloody Third Mate!"

However, it was Raven's turn to suffer as the Third Mate propelled himself backwards with equal force, crushing Raven between himself and the opposite bulkhead. Raven decided that more space was desirable, and at the cost of a couple of savage kicks on the shins he manage to turn the Third Mate round and shove him through the doorway. They tripped on the high weather-sill and toppled forwards, but their fall was somewhat broken by another man who was making purposefully into the doorway at that moment.

"What the flaming hell are you up to, silly idiots ?"

The Leading Seaman raised a ginger eyebrow. "One o' them, is he ?" he enquired, and Raven gave him a brief account of affairs. "Oh well, suits me," said the naval man. "I was afraid I'd got aboard one o' them dirty old tramps, but it looks as though he's going to clean 'er up a bit."

"Why - haven't you sailed on a ship like this before ?" asked Raven, and he made a great contemptuous sound of "Nahhhh!"

Whipping off his cap, discovering a fag-end tucked away within it, lighting it, replacing his cap, and blowing out a cloud of smoke, all as it seemed in one well-trained movement, he commented "I been most o' my time on good ships since I been attached to the Merchant Navy. Good 'igh-class cargo ships, clean an' fast an' comfortable.2

He drew a final whiff on his tab-end and dropped it overside, looking about him with a cheerful disdain. "These old waggons are the slums of the sea," he said. "Proper torpedo-meat, they are. Makes you feel ashamed of yerself when you see 'em flying the Red Ensign."

"There seem to be plenty of them about, anyway," answered Raven. He felt a strange loyalty arising for the despised vessel, and for the moment overlooked all her defects. "They do as good a job as the next one, I s'pose."

"Do a good job for the flippin' shipowners, you mean," said the ginger gunner. "Never mind the poor sods that 've got to sail in 'em. 'course, it doesn't worry me anyway. I'm a long-service man - been in the Navy since before the war.

I'm laughing now that I'm in this job, so it doesn't worry me what I have to sail in."

He waved a casual salute and swaggered off to find the Captain, saying "Ta-ta for now." Raven didn't seem him again until a couple of days later, when he was marching along the deck very closely behind Cecil, grinning ferociously and talking in a rapid undertone. The new gun's crew was being kept busy, since the day after they arrived a floating crane had hoisted aboard a new 4-inch high and low angle gun and four new 20 mm. automatic cannon.

Raven found that his melancholy at the thought of leaving Kenny was becoming tinged with a strange eagerness to go. In fact, the whole crew had become suddenly sick of the shore. They had spent all their money, and Captain Tempest had resolutely refused to allow them any more, but that was only the most obvious reason for this feeling. They had been gripped by the seaman's odd hunger to be on the move, if only because it would bring them closer to the end of the voyage.

The stevedores seemed to work at an ever-increasing tempo, and when Raven returned aboard one early morning he was at once shocked and guiltily exhilarated to see that one of the hatches was completed and battened down, with the tarpaulins already stretched smoothly across the hatch-boards. It was as though a coffin-lid had been closed upon a portion of his life

When he walked with Kenny these days, it was through streets that were gay and flashing with the immediate promise of Christmas, with all the extra glitter of impending festival in a country which has the natural decoration of snow. But this year, there was a strangely doomed feeling about the celebrations. The crowds in the streets and bars and department stores all knew that this Christmas was the last this side of bloody sacrifice, and the news from every front was bad.

The shadow of parting densened between them, and she still refused to answer the question which he asked with such urgent monotony. He asked her again on one of those last evenings, and she gave him a veiled look over the rim of her glass. They were sitting in a quiet little bar which they favoured; one of New York's myriad bars which with their subdued lights and cosy booths and dreamy recorded music make a perfect setting for city lovers.

With sudden resolution, she said, "Franky, I don't want you to talk about marrying me any more. Not this time. If you come back to N'York again, and I - well, if we both feel the same - then maybe we can talk about it. Okay ?"

The strangely metallic tone of her voice seemed to penetrate to him with more decision than anything which she had said before. With a swiftly-quenched flare of realisation, he knew that she was past her first delight in him; it was an effort to smile as he nodded and said "But you won't mind

me writing about it, will you ?"

She hesitated, and a brief brilliant picture went across her mind of his face floating just beneath the surface of the sea; of his arms and legs which had clutched her against his smooth body wavering to the wash and surge of the waves. "If you want to," she said quietly, and then putting her hand on his and smiling into his eyes she murmured "But don't waste too much time on me, Franky. Life's too short to spend on too much remembering..."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A Pier-Head Jump

*

Yet memories were perhaps the best thing that she gave him If it had not been for her, he would probably have seen no mo of New York than the average seafarer. Because of her, he could look back upon countless aspects of the soaring triumphant city, as well as on a myriad poignant recollection of his first love affair.

When through his memory the traffic streamed along Fifth Avenue, and the exquisite women groomed like racehorses and arrogant as boyars stepped along the pavements outside Tiffan he saw with most clarity the swift swing of her walk as she hurried towards him out of the five o'clock crowds. The songs of those days all evoked the picture of her face as they sat endlessly talking; across restaurant tables, upon the couch in her little apartment, in subways and on ferries. When his shipmates' conversation returned to its endless talk of women, he could see one woman alone; the curved white supple limbs, the close breathing warmth of the sleeper beside him in the humming light-and-shadow of a city night, the constant new discoveries when passion itself is new, the tear which slid through closed reluctant lids when the parting came at last.

As the last slings of cargo came aboard, and the Bo'sun chivvied his crew around on clearing up the decks, he was far from the time when he would be able to look back with

a smile. He hung wretchedly about the gangway, without even any work to do which might divert his mind, and exchanged banalities with the U.S. Coast Guard who was posted on watch. "They tell me youse guys are going out East - Singapore or somewheres," the Coast Guard said, and Raven shrugged despondently. "God knows," he said dully. He had heard so many rumours about their destination that he now disbelieved them all.

"Yeah, the boss stevedore told me in confidence," the Coast Guard continued, feeding himself a strip of chewing gum. He chomped upon it until he had obtained a satisfactory consistency, and remarked complacently "Youse can have it for me. I don't wanna be shot up by no Japs."

"Hey, Sparky, you seen young Boyle ?"asked a voice in Raven's ear, and he turned to see Ginger the gunner gazing at him anxiously. "Young who ?" he asked, and the gunner answered "You know - the little twerp that was aboard here when we came."

"Oh - you mean Cecil ?"

"Dunno about that, but where is he ? He's been adrift for two nights now, and I been mug enough to keep it dark. They reckon we're sailing in a couple of hours, an' I'll hatt tell the Old Man. I might do me hook if he cuts up nasty."

"How d'you mean - 'do your hook ?'" asked Raven, and Ginger held out his sleeve with the Leading Seaman's badge embroidered upon it. "You know - lose me killick," he explained. "If the Old Man reports me for letting a man overstay his leave, they'll bash me down to A.B. again."

A worried frown added yet another complication to Ginger's untidy features. "The Bo'sun reckoned you went ashore with him wunst, so I thought you might have a clue. Has he got a bit o' stuff or somethink ?"

"Not exactly," said Raven slowly, and Ginger looked at him with a kind of threatening appeal. "Don't hold out on me," he said. "I'll go an' get him if it's not too far. The coppers'll have 'im, else."

Rave hesitated, thinking what the gunner might do and say if he knew the truth. There would be no subtlety about Ginger's reaction; Cecil would be spared nothing.

"I'll go and get him myself," he said. "Just wait till I get my coat and scarf."

Ginger watched him anxiously as he returned to the gangway. "Don't take too long," he said. "They've got a tug alongside already."

He pushed two or three crumpled notes into Raven's hand, and gave him a clumsy pat on the shoulder. "Get a taxi back, if you have to," he told him. "I'll see that we don't go without you."

Raven hurried down the gangway, and scampered amongst the fork-lift trucks which were still wheeling and grinding about the almost empty warehouse. As he hurried through the gate he remembered with brief astonishment the enormous mounds of cargo which were there when they arrived, and which had already been stowed into their holds. A good prize for a U-boat.

The icy air of the streets crept up his sleeves and trouser-legs as he stood looking about for a taxi, but it was several minutes before one appeared. "Can't take you, buddy, said the driver when he gave the address. "We got gas an' rubber rationing now. Don't ya know there's a war on ? Ya'd best take the subway."

He was luckier at the other end, but even then he had to guide the driver from his recollection of where Armentraut's apartment building was situated. He made several frustrating false moves, and the driver was becoming impatient before he finally recognised the imposing facade. Forty-five minutes had gone before he went up in the lift, but at last he found himself standing before the smug, sleek door which was opened to him by the Filipino servant. "Nobody home," he said. "You come back later, hey ?"

Raven pushed past him and stared about the great living-room; ornate, spacious, and unreal as a picture in a glossy magazine, it offered no clues for his questing eyes. Twittering with fury, the Filipino clawed at him with monkey hands and then scampered for the telephone; Raven opened one door after another, hurried down a corridor, looked into a bathroom all black tiles and pink marble, and then found Cecil cowering beside the bed in the huge master bedroom.

"Clothes on, quick!" snapped Raven. "Up and out of it! We're sailing in an hour!"

"Not me, not me, not me!" wailed Cecil insanely. "What's it got to do with you ? None of your business...I'm all

right here...you leave me alone..."

Raven strode towards him and caught him by one smooth arm, trying to drag him to his feet, but he sagged back to th carpet with a whimpering protest. "Get up, you bloody little fool!" hissed Raven. "You can't get out of it now. They'll only catch you if you stay here, and then you'll spend the rest of the war in jail."

"Don't care, don't care, sooner do that than go back to sea," blubbered Cecil. "It's nothing to do with you...you're not my boss..."

"Come on...where's your uniform ?" snarled Raven, and the gunner screamed defiantly "Burnt it - and I'd like to burn you up too! I'm not going back and you can't make me!"

Raven glanced at his watch, and then hefted Cecil to his feet by hooking his hands under his armpits. "You're - coming - back - with me - now!" he panted. "I don't give a damn about you, but you'll be getting other people into trouble. Get some bloody clothes on! Here - this'll do - and this - "

Cecil jumped up and clawed at him; with a feeling of savage pleasure, Raven slapped him brutally across the face. "There, that'll teach you not to tell a lot of bloody lies about what a great big hero you are," he snapped. "I covered up for you once, but not again."

He pushed and dragged Cecil's shaking body into the flimsy clothes which Armentraut had bought for him, and then shouldered him towards the door just as the Filipino rushed

in shrieking "Mr. Armentraut coming...wait one minute... Mr. Armentraut coming..."

Cecil baulked at that, but Raven shoved him along and out of the apartment. The lift attendant watched with mouth open as he took them down, and Raven was poised for another battle getting him out of the lift, but the youngster shamble ahead like a zombie.

He was galvanised back to life by the sight of Armentraut hurrying into the foyer, and flew forward to grasp at his protector. "Otto," he sobbed. "Otto..."

Armentraut took in the situation with a single glance at Raven and at the lift-man standing in his open door, and his face closed like a safe. "What seems to be the trouble ?" he asked without expression, and Raven burst out in a high jerky voice "You'll be in trouble if you keep this kid away from his ship, you dirty big..."

He could not think of the appropriate word, but glared inarticulately at Armentraut; the big man answered smoothly "You've got it all wrong, sonny. I've never kept him from going back. He must 've got the wrong idea, that's all. Maybe he didn't know that his leave was over, hāh ?"

He disengaged himself, ungently, from Cecil's clutching grasp, and with a sideways look at the lift-man said with horrid amiability "Been hitting the hooch again, have you ? C'm on, stand up straight. Get back aboard and sleep it off, why don't you ? Drop in and see me next time you hit New York. I'm always glad to put one of you guys up for a night

or two."

He was groping for his bill-fold, and with this familiar weapon in his hand he took complete command. Jerking his head at the lift man, he pushed several notes into his hand as he ran forward. "Get a cab for these boys," he ordered. "I'll run myself up to the apartment. Anyone wants to be taken up, tell 'em that I'm engaged."

He looked at the money which the lift-attendant held, and the man said "Yes sir, Mr. Armentraut. C'm on, kids, let's hit the street."

Armentraut paced smoothly across the foyer and into the lift, and in a second or two the door moved silently shut. Cecil gaped at its blank surface as Raven urged him forward, and the lift-man made as though to offer him one of the notes which he held. "I guess you'll need this for the taxi," he said hesitantly, and Raven answered "Get stuffed."

They found a cab outside, and Cecil slumped into one corner with his eyes closed. He said in a bewildered voice "I'll never forgive Otto for this," and Raven answered kindly "It's better this way. You'd only 've got yourself into a lot of trouble."

He looked at his watch again, silently urging the taxi driver to make better time through the clotted traffic, and continued in a voice which was an unconscious imitation of his own father being kind but firm: "Besides, think of your parents. They wouldn't like it if you went to jail."

"Me parents!" said Cecil in a scalding tone, and slid

back into the sullen quicksands of his thoughts. They travelled the rest of the way in silence, and when they reached the loading pier Raven crammed the fare into the driver's hands and hustled Cecil through towards the gangway. With a sinking heart he saw a group of men standing at the head of it; the Bo'sun and a couple of men waiting to haul it in, Ginger the gunner, Mr. Keadwell, and the Captain.

"What sort of god-damned caper is this ?" the rasping voice demanded before he had set foot upon the planks, and Cecil checked abruptly. Raven dug him in the back, muttering "Go on - he can't eat you," and the young gunner faltered the remaining few yards as though they were the steps to the gallows.

The ship was loaded so deeply that the gangway was almost horizontal, and the Captain stood barring the way aboard. "What's the god-damned idea of holding up MY ship ?" he yelled at them, and as he made a dramatic gesture Raven noticed the bright new gold of the fourth ring sewn on his sleeve. "Tugs waiting - pilot aboard - and I've got to hang about waiting for two snotty-nosed spittle spit-bags that should 've been drowned at birth!"

The little man bounced on his toes, glaring at them as they stood awkwardly poised on the narrow planks. The Bo'sun winked at Raven over his shoulder, and Mr. Keadwell made a nervous adjustment to his battered old cap. "All right," barked the Captain. "If you want to play silly buggers, I

can play silly buggers too. But remember this - THE CAPTAIN ALWAYS WINS!"

He bounced on his toes again, opening his eyes very wide. "There'll be no shore leave and no money for the pair of you for the rest of the trip, not if we're out ten bloody years!" he yapped. "And furthermore I'm reporting the pair of you to your respective establishments ashore. All-right-carry-on-Mr. -Keadwell."

He swung around and pattered off towards the bridge, and Cecil shrank back from the lunging approach of Ginger. "Come on, bastard-face," grunted the Leading Seaman. "You 'n' me's got things to talk about."

Raven walked aboard past the Bo'sun, who asked "How's your respective establishment ?" as he bent to loose the gangway lashings. Mr. Keadwell nodded and sighed, and muttered "We'll be better off when we get out to sea. Never get anything but trouble in port."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Big Shake-up

A

Costello's normally red face was almost purple with cold, and his big chapped fingers looked like bad bananas as he clumsily smacked his paintbrush against the bulkhead. "Painting ship at sea in this weather," he snarled to Old Stanley. "He must be bloody mad."

Old Stanley continued his chirpy whistling, wielding his brush with the same tempo. "It's his ship till the owners gets it back again," he commented. "He can paint it sky-blue pink if he's a fancy that way."

Wanker's Doom punctuated this statement with his usual cretinous cackle, and the three of them continued slapping grey paint onto the portion which they had already scraped and red-leaded. Chips of old paint lying about their feet were like miniature strata telling the history of the ship; the white of peacetime overlaid with grey sandwiched in between red lead.

The grey paint which they were now applying, as executants of the Captain's order transmitted through Mr. Keadwell and the Bo'sun that "The god-damned ship wants smartening up; she looks like a floating brothel," was almost exactly the same shade as the calm grey seas through which they were steaming. On their starboard hand was the flat coastline of New Jersey, looking stark and abandoned under the frigid winter sky; they were sailing down to their convoy rendezvous

at Hampton Roads, off the U.S. Naval Base at Norfolk, Virginia.

Costello had just stuck his paint-brush back into the pot, and begun to fumble for a cigarette with his half-frozen fingers, when the three seamen were shocked into activity by the clangorous command of the alarm bells. Spouting curses like a broken sewer, they grabbed up their life-jackets and tin hats and ran to their action stations, conscious that Captain Tempest was only too anxious to catch any stragglers.

That officer stood on the bridge with his thumb pressed against the alarm button, listening to the pounding of feet along iron decks. Releasing the button, he studied his watch for exactly thirty seconds, and the moment he dropped his arm the gun-platform telephone rang. "Bridge!" he snapped into it, and the telephone rating's voice said nervously "Four-inch gun's crew closed up, sir."

"Right," he said, and turned to hurry out of the wheel-house. He collided with the Third Mate coming up the ladder, blinking his afternoon's sleep out of his eyes and fumbling with the tapes of his life-jacket, barked "You're five seconds late - get to your station!" and bounded down the ladders to the main deck.

Within the next two minutes, he had made a complete round of every action station on the ship. On the boat-deck, he reprimanded two men who had left their neatly-packaged survival-suits in their bunks. In one of the gun pits, he tore into the gunners for not having taken off the rubber

"French letter" which protected the gun's rifling from spray. On the gun-platform aft, he made a careful survey of the gun's crew as they posed like a waxworks group at their positions; the loading number with a shell ready for the breech, the gunlayer with his eye pressed against the telescope, and so on. Unable to find any fault, he scampered back to the bridge and rang the "All Clear."

The crew dispersed with mutinous threats and whines, some back to work and others to their off-duty relaxations. "Getting so a man needn't bother to take his friggin' boots off," whimpered the Cook to the Chief Steward. "Four friggin' action station drills since we left New York, and never when you're expectin' of 'em. Me nerves won't stand it, I tell ya."

These unexpected drills were regarded as a totally unwarranted intrusion into the rights of seamen, but after the first two drills no one was game to make any protest. On those occasions, Captain Tempest had made it clear that he was in earnest. "You won't get any warning when you're attacked, and you won't get any warning from me," he had yelled at the group of shivering sleepy seamen who had protested at being startled out of their watch below. "What's the use of these Saturday afternoon drills when you're all expecting 'em ? I'm going to keep you busy as whores when the fleet's in, till I'm satisfied with you."

When they steamed up the Chesapeake a day and a half later, and dropped anchor amongst the fleet of cargo ships

which was already assembled and waiting for convoy, he ordered a full-scale boat drill. The boats were to be actually lowered into the water, fully manned, loaded with all survival equipment, cast off, and rowed once around the ship.

Raven's part in this was to load the lifeboat radios into the boats, and when the bell went he staggered down the ladders from the bridge, lugged the radios up onto the boat-deck, and stood waiting his chance.

The port boat was already being lowered, with the davits springing and bobbing under its weight and the taut ropes creaking like wood as they were slowly paid off round the bollards. A line of men from all departments of the ship was straining back upon each rope as though they were fighting a tug-o'-war with invisible opponents; as anchor-man on one of the ropes, the Bo'sun uttered the strange cries which have replaced sea-chanties. "See-ho! See-hi! Down a bit aft! ah-ha! Ee-hum! Easy forrard! Ah-hum! Ah-ho! So she goes! See-hum! See-hi...!"

Jerking and groaning as the bar-tight ropes crept through the blocks, the boat slowly disappeared below the level of the boat-deck. Glancing over the grey waters of the anchorage to the other grey ships which were anchored there, Raven saw that the nearest of them was lined with interested spectators. "Is she sinking under yer, mates ?" came a faint mocking hail across the water, and the Bo'sun bellowed back "We're get'n out an' letting the rats take over!"

The boat took the water with a squattering splash, the rope ladders were tipped over and unrolled themselves with a

clattering of rungs, and the crew began to swarm down them towards the boat. With the heavy lifeboat sets to lower down, Raven was the last to take to the ladder; he had just lowered himself over the side when a wild chorus of yells, curses and contradictory orders made him bob his head up again. He could see the crew of the other boat milling about the deck, but a sharp hail from his own boat made him keep on going down. "Something wrong with the starboard boat, I think," he panted when he had gingerly squeezed himself into the packed mass of men, and the Bo'sun grunted "Left the bloody plug out, for a dollar."

"Leggo the falls - cast off the painter," ordered Mr. Keadwell from the tiller. "Fend her off, you men on the starb'd side! Unship the oars! Look slippy now - this tide'll have us down to Cape Henry if we let 'er drift."

The clumsy oars were disentangled from the legs and torsos which were resting upon them, and loudly compared to various orifices and organs of the human body as they were fitted into the rowlocks. A few flakes of snow drifted down upon the boat's crew as they made an awkward attempt at rowing, some dabbing the blades into the water, others plunging them deep, others cackling with furious mirth as they missed their stroke altogether and toppled back on the thwarts. "Give way together, now," said Mr. Keadwell patiently. "Dear me, how'd you ever do in a seaway ? You've got to keep time. Now - in. Out. In. Out. That's the idea. Take your time from stroke. In. Out. Keep it up, lads; nicely, now."

"Mind my muckin' neck!" yowled one of the rowers as a clumsily-wielded oar caught him in the back; perched on one of the thwarts, Raven also wondered how the boat's crew would do in a tumultuous Atlantic seaway. Only about half the crew had room to row, and most of them were obviously making their first attempt; they were hampered by the other bodies pressed closely about them and by the gear which was stowed in the boat, and there was no feeling that anyone except Mr. Keadwell and the Bo'sun knew what they were doing. "Dis sailor's yob, not fireman's yob!" squealed Paderooski as he tugged at his oar, and the Cook panted "The man's a bleedun' maniac, that's what 'e is - a bleedun' maniac. I'll see the Union when we get back, see if I don't."

Laden with almost thirty men, with iron tanks containing biscuits and other provisions, water breakers, sea anchor, mast, sails, rigging, the radio sets, bundles of oilskin-wrapped clothing, and a miscellany of small tools and other items designed to sustain the shipwrecked mariner, the boat crawled along like some obese sea-monster which propelled itself by frail and uncertain legs. "I did two weeks in one of these bloody things," remarked the Chief Engineer. "And every minute of it sitting on a bolt-head. Most of the crew were in one boat, and I couldn't get anyone to change places. I've still got the mark on my tail."

Raven gave him a respectful glance, and then looked upwards as they passed round the bows. He could just make out the embossed words Austrian Duke - Cardiff, under their

wartime grey, before the tide caught them and they were swept down the starboard side. Above their heads they heard the Captain squawking "Get the bloody falls onto their winches, I tell you, or I'll log every god-damned man that's here," and then had a fleeting sight of what had happened to the starboard boat. One of the falls had jammed in the blocks, and the other had been let go too quickly, so that the boat was hanging suspended at an acute angle with its stern submerged. "Sounds like a prostitute's picnic - everyone getting rooted," guffawed the Bo'sun as they were carried past.

The snow was beginning to fall more heavily now, and Mr. Keadwell said "Put your backs into it, lads - get her round the stern and back to the falls, or we'll be here all night."

As they strained their cumbersome craft back to the empty falls, a motor-launch came pushing its moustache towards them across the darkening tide. They had just managed to hook on the blocks, and the first men were swarming up the ladders, when it took a sweep alongside them and a voice yelled "Tell your skipper there's a convoy conference to-morrah morning. We'll pick up him and the radio-man at oh-nine-hundred."

"Aye-aye," acknowledged Mr. Keadwell, and the Third Engineer exclaimed "Hey, it's Christmas Eve tomorrow! That means we'll be sailing on Christmas Day!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Orders and Errors

☆

Carrying a brand-new briefcase, Captain Tempest was duly taken ashore to the Naval Base, with Flack shivering beside him inside his old raincoat. They returned at noon, and the Captain sent down word to Mr. Keadwell that he wanted all the crew mustered amidships at one o'clock. He had continued Captain Macnamara's habit of eating his meals in his cabin, so that the saloon was free to discuss this order with many gloomy, ribald, or fantastic interpretations. "That means Russia, see if it don't," predicted the Third Engineer, and Mungo Maclaren glanced up from his plate long enough to grumble "Ach, the wee man was always over-fond of the sound o' his own voice. Likely he'll jist tell us we're no' to drink anything on Christmas Day."

"You're all wrong," said Flack with satisfaction, but would not say any more than that he was not authorised to impart any information. "Always supposing that you have any to impart, of course," said the Chief Engineer with heavy irony, and Flack tucked in his chin with a look of spinterish outrage.

When Mr. Keadwell reported to the Captain that the crew was mustered, he came bouncing out of his accommodation onto the lower bridge, and stood for a moment with his hands on his hips and staring down at them.

"I know that you all think I'm a bastard," he barked, and

a sudden mad squall of laughter rose from the men who were looking up at him. "Oh no, Captin," protested a sarcastic voice, and another one cried "You must 'a' been reading our letters!"

Captain Tempest waited until it died down, frowning at them until they were shuffling uneasily. "But I don't care!" he continued. "I don't like this ship nor anything about it, and I'm going to change everything. I've made a start already, but it is only a start."

He wagged his finger at them, saying "We're sailing at four a.m. to-morrow morning, Christmas Day, for Singapore. Things are tough out there, and they're going to get tougher. For your sakes, and my sake, and the sake of the ship, and most important of all for the sake of the CARGO, you're going to be kept on your toes."

Pausing dramatically, he swept his gaze over them as though in search of one particular face, and then barked "Gunner!"

"Sir!"

Ginger jumped forward, delivering what he afterwards described as a 'very tiddley salute.' Captain Tempest said "You'll exercise your full gun's crews every day, both armed service and merchant service ratings. All gun's crews will stand-to at dawn and dusk. If I catch any man who's not keeping a good look-out at any time on any watch, he's for the high jump. Understood ?"

"Sir!"

Ginger saluted again, and the Captain shouted "Third Officer!"

The Third Mate gave a startled look around, and then raised a hand like a shy schoolboy who wants to leave the room. "You'll see that all boats are in tip-top condition. You have my authority to use any ratings you need to help you, whether they're from the deck, engine-room, catering department, or gun's crew. Understood ?"

The Third Mate gave an embarrassed grin, and Captain Tempest continued "As for the rest of you, I can warn you now that we'll have a full action-stations drill at least once a day, without notice. I don't care what you think about it. I'm doing it to keep you on your toes all the time. Maybe you'll be inconvenienced, but it's a lot more inconvenient when you're dead. That's all."

He swung around and disappeared back into his accommodation, leaving everyone gaping up at the spot where he had been. There was a moment's silence, and then an incredulous voice said "He carn do all that. What's 'e think we are - a shower o' cattle or somethink ?"

"The Union, boys, the Union," bellowed the Cook, "They'll sort 'im out. Just wait till pay-off day, that's all. We'll put 'im through the mincer. Make a note of it. Keep it all in your 'eads."

He rubbed his meaty hands together, and the Bo'sun looked at him as though he was an unpleasant morsel in one of his own stews. "Save yer time, Doctor," he drawled. "Safety of

the ship, see ? The skipper's entitled to do anything he likes for that. Look at yer Articles, an' you'll see it all down in black an' white."

The whipping wind prevented the argument from continuing much longer, and as the crowd broke up Flack beckoned Raven to follow him up to the wireless room. In his usual disgusted manner, he explained that of the fifty-four ships assembled for convoy, by far the greater number were bound for the U.K. Only eight of them, including the Austrian Duke, were destined for other ports, and these were to be diverted towards Gibraltar when the convoy reached Longitude 40°. These were to link up with a convoy bound from England to Singapore via Cape Town.

The executive order for the convoy's departure was to be given by radio. If the Naval Staff decided that conditions were satisfactory, the code-word BRIGHT would be transmitted on 500 kilocycles. If there was any reason for the convoy to be delayed, the code-word BLIND would be used instead.

"So you'll have to be called at three forty-five," said Flack. "Hop up here an' set watch on 500 kc/s, and if you hear the word BRIGHT then tell the mate on watch. He'll pass it on to the skipper, and bob's yer uncle."

"Taking us out in the dark, are they ?" asked Raven, and Flack said "Aye. Looks like being a nice dirty old morning for it, too, the way it's blowing up. But that's none of our worry. Just see that you've got those 'phones on before four o'clock, an' don't wake me up while yer doing it."

The Chief Engineer and the deck officers having been likewise instructed that the actual sailing of the convoy depended upon orders from ashore, it was not long before the whole ship knew of it. With an eye on the weather, which was now sending snow-squalls whirling out of the darkening northern sky, the crew felt that they had a sporting chance of Christmas at anchor after all. "It'll still be black dark at four in the morning," argued Costello with the Chief Steward. He had just brought back the sailor's mess-traps to the galley after tea, and stood warming his bottom against the banked-up fire. "Stands to reason they won't take us out if it's like this."

The Chief Steward, who had been discussing the crew's Christmas dinner with the Cook, gave a knowing sniff. "The bloody Yanks 'll do anything," he replied. "Be just like them to push the convoy out anyway, just to show how good they are."

"Ah, and on a Christmas Day an' all," broke in the Cook. Proper lot of 'eathens, they are. All they think about's their gah-dam Thanksgiving."

"Fat lot we got to give thanks for anyroad," mourned the Chief Steward. "Proper hell-ship this one's going to be."

Costello yawned, seeing that he was not going to provoke anything interesting in the way of an altercation. "Oh well, I'm for me bunk," he said. "I've got the twelve-to-four this passage. That's gonna be fun, too - up there with old Maclaren."

And at midnight, he fumbled his way up onto the bridge.

There was no blackout in port on this side of the Atlantic, but there were no lights on except the ship's riding-lights and a faint blue light in the chart-room. The rest of the ship, except for the engine-room watch, was asleep, and the Third Mate brushed by Costello with a grunted "Stand-by man's already gone down. Mr. Maclaren 'll be up in a minute. G'night..."

His sea-boots thumped softly away down the ladders, and Costello was alone. Anchor-watches were technically kept by one officer and three seamen, but the sailors took in turns to stand by on the bridge and spent the rest of the watch dozing in the galley or on the engine-room gratings.

Costello paced up and down for a few minutes, huddling himself up against the seeking wind and looking morosely out at the riding-lights of the other ships. After a while he began to wonder what was holding up the Second Mate, stepped into the chart-room to see that it was half-past twelve, and muttered to himself "Silly bastards couldn't 've woken 'im up properly. Just like that Third Mate to go down before his relief was up here. I'd better - "

He checked, listening to a confused sound from the lower bridge. Hurrying outside again, he was just in time to meet the Second Mate as he heaved himself up onto the bridge, stumbling over the last step and almost going to his knees.

"Don't wake the skipper!" hissed Costello urgently, and Maclaren gave a cracked laugh. "It's you, me boyo, is ut ?" he demanded. "I didn't think you'd be scared of a wee

fella of his stamp."

"Not a matter of being scared," murmured Costello with a grin to himself, "But what's the use of 'im breaking up the party ?"

Wonder where he keeps it ? he was thinking; I could just do with a good slug on a night like this. "Why 'n't you come in the chart-room - have a lay-down on the settee ?" he asked kindly. "No sense in you standing around out here. I'll give you a shake if I see anything."

Maclaren placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning on him heavily. "D'you know, I believe ye're right," he said portentously. "I'm feeling a wee thing under the weather..."

He moved forward like a blind man, and shuffled through into the chart-room. Costello's brain teemed like a wasp's nest with malicious thoughts as he moved in beside the Second Mate, and watched him first sit and then stretch himself out on the settee.

"Call me an old has-been, would he ?" rumbled the Second Mate with his eyes closed. "I was a shipmaster before he could feed himself...aye, and real ships, too..."

He gave a gargling snore, said loudly and clearly "Call me when you see the pilot-boat, Mr. Methuen," and then his head flopped over onto his shoulder as though he had been cut down from a gallows.

Out for the count, ruminated Costello, and after watching him for a few minutes just to make sure he crept down the ladders and into the officers' alleyway. The Second Mate's

door was ajar, and the cabin was softly lit by the shaded bunk-light; Costello went straight to the bunk, looked under the pillow, and found one empty bottle and one three-quarters full. "Can he stow it away!" he whispered, and then glanced round as though someone might have heard him.

He hesitated for some time after this, staring at the bottle in his hand as though hypnotised by its amber glow. A gentle noise made him start, but it was only the door-curtain moving in a draught, and he muttered "Ach - to hell with ut!"

Jerking out the cork, he took the first long swallow. The amber glow transferred itself to his insides, and he sat down on the settee and gazed calculatingly at what remained. I haven't got the old man's stomach, he reckoned; there's just about enough.

As he took the second swallow, he thought: One of the other lads 'll be around before long. They'll cover up for me, especially if there's a sup left in the bottle. Might as well make myself comfortable...

Lying stretched on the galley bench, Wanker's Doom shifted uncomfortably, opened one eye and looked at the clock. Seven bells, he thought blearily. Wonder why no one called me for stand-by ?

But the galley was warm, and the folded life-jacket under his head gave a modicum of comfort. His eyes closed again.

In the fo'c'sle, the other stand-by man had his head on the table, near the now cold mug of tea which he had poured out for Costello at one o'clock. His gentle snore was repeated by

one of the sleepers in the bunks around him.

At four o'clock, the Second Engineer descended to the engine-room. Normally, one of the firemen would have gone up to the galley to make his tea, but Big Cyril decided that the deck was too cold at this hour of a winter's morning. He took a shovelful of red-hot coals out of one of the fires, and boiled his hook-pot on that. Taking the hot water into the engine room to pour on the condensed milk and tea-leaves in the bottom of the engineer's mug, he asked "Are we off then, Second ?"

"Doesn't look like it," the Second Engineer replied. He took the tattered beret off his naked skull, and wiped it contemplatively over his face. "Merry Christmas," he said grudgingly, and Big Cyril chuckled. "It might be yet," he said, and dodged back into the stoke-hold.

The Second replaced his beret, blew into his mug to disperse the floating tea-leaves, and sucked up a mouthful. Bloody fools, he thought about no one in particular, and then glanced at the telephone to the bridge. No, let them call me if they've anything to say...

Silent except for the occasional clank of a shovel drifting up from the stoke-hold, and the steady pulsing of the dynamo in the engine room, the Austrian Duke lay dark and still at her anchorage as the other ships of the convoy came to life. Their anchor chains rumbled up through the hawse-pipes, engine-telegraphs clanged, steam hissed and engines started their long steady beat. Some of them passed quite near the Austrian Duke, so that their wakes lapped and rippled along her sea-

bitten sides, but none of the sounds they made were enough to waken the sleepers aboard, or to penetrate to the watch in the engine-room.

The Second Engineer idled around his silent machinery, dwarfed by the huge dark-gleaming structures which stood all around him, and at last began upon a small project of his own; a table-lamp made out of solid brass which was destined to grace his Wallasey villa. He was so engrossed in this that he didn't notice the assistant steward's failure to bring him tea and toast at six-thirty, and his file grizzled away at the brass until almost seven.

He bent to blow away some filings, and then straightened with a puzzled frown. Through the great white-painted steel walls which curved up into the shadows on either side, down the ventilators and through the closed skylights and doors, a strange sound was penetrating; a noise like the distant bellowing of a mechanical giant.

"AHOY, AUSTRIAN DUKE!" roared the loud-hailer on the approaching patrol-boat. "WHY AREN'T YOU FOLLOWING THE CONVOY ? REPORT YOUR DELAY, PLEASE!"

The Second heard the muffled thunder of the patrol-boat's screws approaching, beating through the water which reached far above his head, and then heard the enormous voice again. Still frowning, he paced towards the telephone and rang the bridge.

CHAPTER TWENTY

No Rum for Christmas

*

Captain Tempest, stretched rigidly out in his bunk and sleeping with short vigorous snores, opened one eye. " - YOUR DELAY, PLEASE!" he heard overwhelmingly, and the glasses in his bathroom tingled with the vibration. He jerked upright, snapping on his bunk light and staring unbelievingly at his watch. Is it night, or morning ? he demanded of himself, and then the great voice sent him out of his bunk in a single leap.

Barefooted and in orange pyjamas, he bounded out onto the lower bridge; through the dim icy light of dawn he saw the stark outline of the patrol-boat bearing down on his ship, and seemed to shrivel before the simultaneous blast of the northerly wind and the huge shock of sound. "Holy Suffering Jeeeeeesus!" he screamed, and took the bridge ladder in two great skips; a glance into the chart-room showed him the Second Mate corpse-like upon the settee, and then the engine-room telephone rang. "Get those god-damned engines turning over!" he shrieked into it without waiting to hear who was calling; slamming it back on the hook he pattered to the alarm button and leaned his thumb against it.

Anyone who had not been wakened by the loud-hailer was sent pelting out on deck by the clamouring alarm-bells; taking advantage of their last night in a safe haven, most men had taken their clothes off to turn in, and they came scurrying along the decks still hopping into their trousers, dragging

on jerseys, and shrugging on life-jackets. Most of them were uncertain whether the ship was sinking at her moorings or whether this was just another action drill; fearful of the sea on the one hand and Captain Tempest's wrath on the other, they tumbled up to their action stations.

The bridge telephone rang again, and when Captain Tempest snatched it to his ear a feeble voice gasped "Four-inch gun's crew closed up, sir." It paused, and then asked "How many seconds this time, please sir ?"

Captain Tempest threw the instrument against the bulkhead and leapt out onto the bridge, hugging his pyjama jacket around him with arms that were almost paralysed with cold. The bitter wind thrashed tears out of his eyes, and he pawed them away like an infuriated child to see the groups of men assembled on the boat-deck. "Oh you silly goddamned useless lot of bastards!" he shricked at them through chattering teeth. "Get forrard! Get the anchor up! A man to the wheel! Why in the name of the great harlot of Jerusalem do I have to suffer this ?"

Horrified, the crew stared across at the little figure in its orange pyjamas dancing a frenzied jig on the bridge, and then saw it in an access of fury pick up a fire-bucket from the rack and cast it over onto the deck below. It struck with a satisfying crash, and he followed it with several more. "STEWARD!" came a shrieking bellow then. "Bring my clothes up onto the bridge! MR. KEADWELL! Get that christly anchor up!"

A familiar vibration pulsing up through his bare toes made

him cast a look overside. With incredulous eyes he realised that the ship was moving with the anchor still down, and that the engines were going ahead; rushing back into the wheel-house he seized the engine-room telegraph and whirled it backwards and forwards a number of times, returning the indicator to Stop. From that he leapt to the telephone again, whizzed the call-handle round, and as soon as he got an answer yelled "Who the hell told you to start the engines ?"

"You did!" shouted the Second Engineer. "You said 'Get those engines turning over!'"

"Well don't get those god-damned engines turning over till you hear the telegraph next time!"

"Well make up your bloody mind then!"

"Don't talk like that! This is the Captain speaking!"

"Merry Christmas!" bawled the Second Engineer, and both telephones clashed back onto their hooks. When the Captain turned round again he saw Wanker's Doom cringing behind the wheel and the Third Mate standing as far out on the wing of the bridge as he could get, but by this time he was too cold to say anything. "Tea," he chattered to the Chief Steward, who came up with his clothes; by the time he had dragged them on over his pyjamas, and taken a few gulps at a mug of tea made as he liked it, with plenty of condensed milk and sugar, he was beginning to sort out the calamity in his mind.

The slow grumbling of the windlass had been going on as a background to this thoughts, and when the Third Mate timorously

drew his attention to the fact that the anchor was aweigh he snapped "Slow Ahead!"

As the telegraphs gave their whirling clangour he cast a surreptitious glance at the patrol boat which was still standing by. She steamed along beside them as they gathered way, and the light was strong enough now for him to make out the white caps of the Coastguard officers on her bridge. Imagining the comments which they might be making, he clenched his fists in his pockets, then strode to the telegraph and rang Full Ahead. "Keep her as she goes for a moment," he said to Wanker's Doom, and to the Third Mate he shouted "Here - give us a hand."

The Third Mate scurried to obey, following the Captain into the chart-room where Mungo Maclaren still lay upon the settee. "Grab his other leg," grunted the Captain, taking hold of one of them, and commenced to pull.

"But - "

"Do as you're bloody told!"

The Second Mate came off the settee with a sodden thump, and his eyes slitted open for an instant. As the two men dragged him through the wheelhouse his head gave a single protesting turn, and then his face was obscured as the skirts of his coat were pulled up over it.

"Sir, you can't!" protested the Third Mate as he saw what the Captain intended to do. "You'll kill 'im!"

"That's the last thing I'm bloody worried about," panted the Captain as he strove to drag the body nearer to the top of the ladder. "I'd like to kill the whole god-damned lot

of you."

"Not me," replied the Third Mate in a shuddering tone. "I won't be mixed up in it."

Without his help, Captain Tempest couldn't shove the body down the ladder as he had intended; if the Second Mate had landed head first, he would doubtless have broken his neck. The Third Mate received a single venomous look, and then the Captain turned away. "Get some men and take him somewhere," he snarled. "Make sure that I don't see him again."

No one slept during the watch below that morning. After lengthy discussion of the circumstances, in which Costello took no part, a wary cheerfulness began to show like a gleam of light through the clouds. Before midday, cackles of laughter commenced to be heard; the whole affair was passing into the traditions of the voyage, and would be gossiped over, mimicked, boasted about, and finally stowed away into individual collections of yarns, with which to entertain shipmates on vessels and voyages yet far in the future.

In the smoke-fogged warmth of the fo'c'sle and the gunners' quarters, which were already beginning to heave and roll, a certain amount of Christmas spirit was beginning to show itself. This lasted until eleven-thirty, when the men who would go on watch at noon went to collect their Christmas dinners. They departed whistling, and returned subdued, showing their mates the kits in which reposed several slices of cold corned beef and a handful of ship's biscuits. On the galley door, a typewritten notice had been attached which

read as follows:

In order to bring home my disapproval of this morning's lack of seamanship and good order, the following measures are to be taken:

1. There will be no Christmas dinner for the officers or crew of this ship.
2. There will be no Christmas issue of rum or other spirits.
3. M.Maclaren is relieved from all duties aboard this ship.

BY ORDER,

William Tempest, Master.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Eastward Haul

*

For the second time the Third Mate was being disappointed in his expectation of stepping into the Second Mate's berth. After Captain Macnamara was taken ashore, he had been confident of promotion, and had been bold enough to ask for it. "Wait a day or so," Mr. Keadwell had bidden him cautiously, and during that period Captain Tempest had come aboard.

When Mr. Maclaren was relieved from his duties, the Third Mate's hopes had risen again. But nothing had come of them. Three days had gone by, and Captain Tempest had made no mention of it. In fact, he had shown very clearly that he did not trust any of them to keep a watch. He had hardly left the bridge at all. He dozed on the chart-room settee, had his meals brought up there, and made jack-in-the-box appearances into the wheel-house at any hour of the day or night.

The Third Mate was warned of one of these eruptions by hearing his voice snapping at the helmsman. "Watch your steering, now! Don't let her fall off so much!"

"Aye, aye sir."

There was just time for the Third Mate to pull himself upright from his huddled position in the wing of the bridge before the Captain stepped outside. "Seen anything yet ?"

"N-no sir. Not a thing."

"Not very likely to, either - slouching in a corner like a sack of turds. Yes, I saw you! Keep on the move, man! Keep your eyes skinned!"

The lid of the binocular box flew open with a snap as the Captain pulled out the glasses, and climbed up to the space atop the wheelhouse known as the 'Monkey Island'. Bracing himself against the binnacle, he made a long steady sweep of the horizon. There was nothing to be seen; nothing but the long seething battalions of waves which drove endlessly down out of the north; the white-veined tumult of the ocean. There was no scrap of wind-torn smoke, no sky-pricking assembly of masts, no straggler which might act as a milestone to the convoy. Their chances of catching up with it diminished with every hour.

Captain Tempest let the binoculars hang around his neck, and gazed acidly down upon the water which sloshed about the decks. Another wave ran swiftly along the port side, arched its long supple grey-green neck, and casually flicked its crest over the bulwarks. A couple of tons of water surged about the decks, until the ship's roll clanked open the scupper ports and let it out again. Within a few moments, the whole process was repeated again.

Everything was streaming; running with perpetually driven spray and gritty with salt. Ever since they cleared Cape Henry they had been assaulted by this same northerly gale, and the days had passed in sordid discomfort. The decks were constantly awash, everything was battened down, the wind bellowed dismally about the funnel and upperworks as the ship plugged stolidly through the massive wind-flogged waves. Every now

and again, as though the ocean were gathering its strength, a colossal foaming eruption would cascade over the bulwarks, raging completely across the hatches to spill itself over the lee side, charging through an unwarily opened door, washing like a savage brook along alleyways and into cabins. The Cook wore sea-boots as he slithered about his galley, so weary of cursing that he worked in morose silence; down in the engine-room, the greasers clambered warily about the caged monster which they attended.

Chumm-bom-bom! Chumm-bom-bom! Chumm-bom-bom! reiterated the reciprocating engines as they continued their treadmill progress upon the voyage; the great shining thrust-rods swung up and down upon the enormous cams, plunging them down into the pits and heaving them smoothly up again. Seventy-eight times a minute the propeller shaft revolved, almost a hundred feet of steel two feet in diameter; when a seaman went to read the log whose spinner jumped like a hooked fish amongst the waves, he could hear the constant thud-thud-thud of the screw beneath the surface, the occasional thrashing tumult as one of its blades was heaved clear, the straining protest of the rudder groaning upon its pintles.

There was a sense of dogged endurance about the ship and its engines; this was the test for which they had been designed and built those twenty years before. Though she was old and slow, she seemed to have the virtues of a veteran; the wary battle-worn knowledge which enabled her to meet yet another tussle with the sea. And, as with all ships,

it was impossible not to think of her as a living entity. Though she had been conceived in a drawing-office, brought to life in the clamorous womb of a shipyard, and delivered by the gnarled hands of the men who had knocked away her launching-chocks, she had somewhere in the process found a soul.

Eventually she won her contest with the waves, as she had won so many before, and plugged her way through the storm to a longitude where blue-gleaming swells rocked down towards the doldrums. Coming on deck one morning after keeping the four-to-eight watch, Raven was dazzled by an unaccustomed sun; a couple of days later men were working on deck without their jerseys, and lines of washing fluttered in the breeze.

They were almost five hundred miles to the south of the route which they had taken on their outward passage, and were making a little more southing every day. Studying the chart, Captain Tempest realised that they would soon arrive at the dispersal-point for the Singapore-bound section of the convoy, and redoubled his own and his crew's efforts to see something of it.

They were in vain. The Austrian Duke made her solitary way across the swells, rolling in regular rhythm to their rise and fall, and Captain Tempest paced her bridge with a sullen fury at his failure. Even allowing for the delay caused by the storm, he knew that he must have made as much easting as the convoy. A single ship was always faster; she could make her own speed, instead of being restricted by the convoy. Something must have gone wrong; some alteration of course must have been

ordered of which he knew nothing, and the idiots ashore had either neglected to send him a message or had forgotten all about him. At this very moment when he strained his eyes through the binoculars, the convoy might be just over the horizon, but no sign of it ever appeared and no word ever came for him. It almost seemed as though they had given him up for lost.

But Captain Tempest was not the only man who was scanning that area of ocean through binoculars. Aboard the submarine UM 284, there were four look-outs to every watch who spent their whole time gazing out across the surging dark-blue swells which came glittering down towards them, raising the wide-bellied craft upon their sleek backs as they made down towards the south. On one of these rhythmic elevations above the normal level of the sea, the lenses and prisms of one look-out's binoculars tightened their grasp upon the light-rays, and drew a tiny object near enough for him to perceive. He spoke to the officer on watch, who bent to the speaking-tube and said "Captain to the bridge, please."

A few moments later, Ober-leutnant Freiherr August von Muffling eased his angular body up through the hatch. He listened to the report, accepted the glasses which were handed to him, and for a long time gazed through them in the direction indicated.

Eventually he climbed up the periscope casing, and held himself with one arm crooked around it whilst he continued to stare. Several minutes passed without any sound but the constant thudding of the Diesel exhausts and the washing of the sea

through the hull-casing, and then he murmured "So..."

He lowered himself back to the deck and drew a cigarette-case from his pocket, but omitted to light the cigarette which he placed between his narrow lips. His mind was busy calculating a number of chances, but at the moment the chance of being observed did not worry him. A cargo vessel which was so hard for him to see, even allowing for the difference in elevation, would find it almost impossible to pick up a submarine.

Since the moment he had heard that Ober-Leutnant Wolfgang Lowke had been injured in an air-raid whilst returning from leave, and that he would be taking the ship to sea with immediate promotion, he had enjoyed exceptionally good luck. It had been a protracted patrol, one of the first to the Caribbean area and the coast of the United States, and he had found good hunting in waters which were still unused to war.

Only two things were wrong. He had fired all his torpedoes, and he was running low on fuel. In these latitudes, which were well south of the normal convoy routes, he had not expected to meet anything so soon; his worries would start in the dangerous waters closer to Europe. For that reason, it was vital to keep the maximum possible reserve.

Checking the course, he decided that his present course-line would intersect that of the cargo-ship in a few hours at the same speed. But, of course, he could not maintain that speed; otherwise he might be observed before he was within range. If he submerged, then his speed would drop so much that the ship could escape him. It would be impossible to watch her through the periscope at that distance.

The attack should be at dawn, he decided, which at this time of the year and in this latitude would mean shortly before seven. That would be the hour most likely to catch a merchant ship unawares, with most of her crew still sleeping and her look-outs becoming tired. His tactics until that moment were fairly simple; close as near as he dared before sunset, get a little ahead during the night, submerge at the first glimmer of dawn, and be prepared to strike as soon as the target was defined. As he began to give his orders, he knew that it would be a long night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ambush

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Waiting

*

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

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

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

The Chief Officer plodded forward in his rubber boots,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Burial and Acquittal

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Unwelcome Love

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't be like that, Franky," answered Cecil in a crooning tone. "You're just being old-fashioned, that's all!"

He edged himself closer again, so that Raven could see

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Round the Cape

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN
East by North

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon after dawn on the next day the Austrian Duke

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

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

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

"Nahhh!" declared the Cook, as emphatically as though he had been told by the Chief of Naval Operations. "They'll still be trundling up from Cape Town. They'll be the lucky ones, take it from me."

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT
Towards the Flame

*

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, awaiting 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 oause, 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 agd 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 eveneing 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 & Retreat

*

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 incomprehension, 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 sourse."

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

*

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 comtinued "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 domradeship 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 <u>youse</u> ?" 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 wrekcage 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 reasonfor 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 spouting 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 savagely. "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 stoke-hold 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 cheerfullness "I'm awa' to me cabin to get some fresh gear on. I burnèd 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 thump of her engines 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 Tanker'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' calldd 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 no 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 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

*

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 wate 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 ha work of lowering the heavy boat, but at last she took t water safely and lay drifting at the end of her painter; the Bo'sun swarmed down the falls and cast off the block 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 distrubed. 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 Ravem, 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. "Where'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 one 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 spurting 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 agin 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 splied 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 steal 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 conscions 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 pf us, Cap'm."

"Bloody fools," answered Keadwell as he glanced up at the derrick, 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'rard 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 ?"

""Beggar 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 spunyarn 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 jumpdd to his feet and shouted "Listen..."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Bitter End

*

His voice was like a stone through glass, shattering their brittle ~~bitter~~ 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 tremednous 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 lifebaot 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 thedeck; 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 ~~d~~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 long 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 bloddy ship 'll turn turkle in a minnut, and trow 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 threshed 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 drownd 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