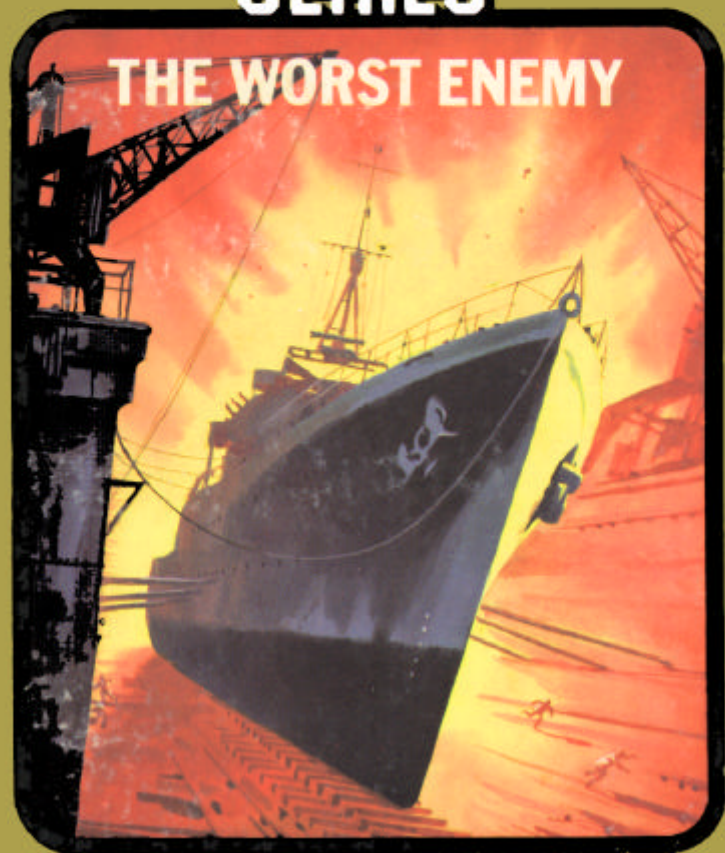


J.E. # 114
MACDONNELL
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SERIES



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Characters: 164855
Words: 34519
Sentences: 3430
Paragraphs: 1499

THE WORST ENEMY

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

THE WORST ENEMY

Distributed by: Cap_One Productions © January 2003 (Version 2)

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Programs Used

Adobe Photoshop 7

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Typeset in Australia by: Cap_One

Published in Australia by: Adobe PageMaker 7

Printed in Australia by: Adobe Acrobat

Distributed all over the world by: #bookz and other good undernet ebook channels

Distributed by

Horwitz Grahame Books Pty Ltd,

506 Millet Street, Cammeray, Sydney, Australia, 2062

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Second Edition 1974

Classic Edition 1979

Collectors Edition 1985

National Library of Australia Card No.

and ISBN 07255 1854 5

Printed in Australia by

The Dominion Press-Hedges & Bell

Victoria

CHAPTER ONE

CAPTAIN Peter Bentley lay in his bunk with his jack-knifed knees making a tent of the sheet and hands clasped behind his head. It was a relaxed posture—physically. His face belied it.

The bunk's inward edge was bounded by the white-painted steel and rivets of *Wind Rode's* side. Along the outer edge there ran a board high enough to prevent his being rolled out on to the deck; right now he had no worries about that.

At the bunk's head, close beside his head, yawned the mouth of a voice pipe; this gave him instant communication with the bridge, even more quickly than a telephone, for through the pipe he could hear a shouted warning if he were out in the main cabin.

Close by the pipe, handy to his reach, were fitted several sound-powered phones; sound-powered because a destroyer's electrical energy could be quickly and effectively cut. It was for this same reason that most of her vital functions could be performed manually as well as by power; not so efficiently, of course, but still allowing her to remain in action. She could also remain on-course, using the auxiliary magnetic compass.

At the foot of the bunk, above the level of his head as it lay on the pillow, was fitted a repeat of the master gyrocompass, so that at a glance he could tell the ship's course; and, for that matter, how the quartermaster was holding to it.

But now the gyro repeat was dead, no quiet clicks coming from its bland face, and Bentley's eyes were not interested in it. His eyes were fixed on the deck-head above him, in a steady, almost unblinking and morose stare.

Suddenly there came a sound, the hiss and the splatter of running water. At once his head jerked sideways and automatically his mouth opened. He was not ready for his shower, and wasting water aboard a destroyer was a heinous offence.

Then his mouth shut, the bellow choked off by realisation. Brisbane had a plentiful water supply, and *Wind Rode* was connected to it. A cheerful voice spoke beside his head.

"Good morning, sir. Your shower's running."

"So I hear."

“Lovely morning, sir. Clear and sunny, with a slight breeze from seaward.”

“Damn you and your blasted weather.”

“Yes, sir. We have a nice steak for breakfast.”

“What!”

“Steak, sir. With fresh mushrooms done in...”

“I’m not bloody well deaf. Steak, steak, day after day. Is that all this damned town grows, steak?”

Petty Officer Steward Jarrett could mind the time—it was mostly all the time—when rump steak was as foreign to the captain’s table as champagne and caviare; something to be looked upon with incredulity and partaken of with salivatory delight. Disciplined, poker-faced, and knowing, he said:

“Sorry, sir. I haven’t started it yet. Would you prefer something else? I’m sure I could rustle up some of those tinned sausages you’re so partial to.”

Bentley swung his legs from the bunk and looked up at him; and Jarrett, who had never been inside a boxing ring in his life, knew precisely what that stoker had felt like and seen the instant before he stopped with his jaw the punch which had transferred the Fleet heavyweight title from him to Bentley.

“Ah...” said Jarrett. “Perhaps fried eggs and bacon, sir?”

“Oh, cook your damned steak and be done with it,” growled Bentley.

He tugged off his pyjama shorts, hurled them on to the bunk and strode naked to the shower.

“Jesus,” Jarrett muttered to himself, looking after the big brown body, “they’d better smack it about with that asdic dome, or else.”

Here—safe and secure, in the capital of a State world-renowned for the quality of its beef, with the light of a golden morning dappling the cabin through wide-open scuttles—breakfast should have been a bright and cheerful meal. It was a moody one.

Jarrett cleared away, noting the half-eaten steak left by fourteen stone of normally hungry muscle; even the toast and marmalade were untouched. He walked down the passage on his way to the offal bins and there, coming in, he met the yeoman of signals.

“G’day,” smiled Nutty Ferris, his stomach happily full of steak

and the daily signal log under his arm.

"Watch it, Flags," warned Jarrett.

"Eh? Why?"

"He's worse. Got an outsize liver on this morning."

"Again? Why, for Pete's sake?"

"You know."

"Yeah," muttered Ferris; along with Jarrett and the first-lieutenant he was closer to the captain than most men, being in many things his confidant. Then he slowly wagged his head. "Though it beats me, brother. After all, we've only been in port ten days, and he's got his squarie and mother ashore. What else could a man... ? Hold it, hold it," Ferris said, triumph dawning in his grin, "maybe that's what's got him by the cods." He nudged Jarrett with the log book. "Too many cooks, eh?"

"Come again?"

"Gawd... Too many women, you bollardhead. In his squarie's house at New Farm there's her, her mother, and his mother. Hell's bells, that'd cramp any bugger's style!"

It was Jarrett's turn for head-wagging. "I think he's fair dinkum about Doctor Prescott. She's not just his squarie."

"There's a difference?"

"Not to you, maybe. You'd come at a hairy goat. No," Jarrett decided, "he's worried about the flotilla up there, the strife they could get into."

"Ah, bollocks. Dalziel's got the weight, and he didn't join yesterday. I still reckon it's all that skirt ashore..."

Ferris stopped. His face went rigid. Jarrett swivelled. Now they could both see—the open cabin door, and the wide-shouldered figure standing there, and its face. And both petty officers, at the same instant, wondered the same thing: had they been heard? If so, how much?

In a quiet voice that held all the softness of a razor's edge Bentley said:

"You were saying, Yeoman?"

Now you don't become chief of a Flotilla Leader's visual communication system through being a muddled minded moron. Nor, in a ship of *Wind Rode's* violent experience, do you retain that

elevated position by lack of guts. So, trapped, Nutty Ferris straightened himself, looked his captain in the eye, and with manful intent, not wanting to hurt, he lied to the best of his ability.

"I was talking to Jarrett here, sir, about all the skirt ashore. I mean squaries, sir. With no Yank ships in port it's, well, laid on, sort of."

"I see."

Ferris felt a vast relief, and hoped to hell it didn't show.

"Though no doubt of considerable interest to Jarrett," Bentley went on in that quiet, cutting tone, "the availability of feminine company ashore is of no interest whatever to me. Therefore, in future, you will confine discussion of the subject to your own quarters, and not outside mine."

Relief was still in Ferris; that had been just a normal captainly blast.

"Aye aye, sir. Ah, I have the signal log here, sir."

"Then it might be a good idea to bring it in."

"Yessir!"

Bentley turned away. Ferris' mouth made a silent *Phew* at Jarrett, then he hurried along the passage.

Bentley took the log, still standing. "Anything from the flotilla?"

"No sir. No news is good news, eh?"

Sharp as a lance the grey eyes jabbed at him. Ferris' smile dropped off.

"No mention of our time of departure?"

"No, sir." Unaccountably, unless it was because Jarrett's diagnosis had stuck in his mind, Ferris made his second mistake. "But that shouldn't be too long now, sir."

Quite distinctly Ferris heard the breath drawn in through his captain's nostrils.

"Tell me, Yeoman, what is it? You've taken to analysis? Or can't you wait to get back to sea?"

"Ah... I'm not sure I follow you, sir."

"You lie, like a pig in mud."

Faced with the truth, Ferris thought it best not to argue.

"Out in the passage we're as talkative as a barber's cat," Bentley went on remorselessly, driven by what was eating him, "but all of

sudden we're tongue-tied, eh? I must say it's a refreshing change. However, as it seems you are in possession of facts regarding the ship's state which have been withheld from me..."

"No, sir."

"... I'd be most grateful if you would acquaint me with them. Our time of departure shouldn't be too long now, you were kind enough to reveal. Now be kind enough to reveal how you know this. The dockyard manager's taken you into his confidence? Or maybe he's the father of one of your numerous squaries?"

Ferris looked hurt: he just succeeded in hiding his rising anger. The captain sometimes talked in this strain, but never in this tone, nor from a face set like that.

"Well, man? I'm waiting."

On a sudden impulse Ferris decided to play the captain at his own game; he would take him literally.

"No, sir, I am not in the dockyard manager's confidence, and he is not the father of any girl I know."

Ferris' decision faltered under the abrupt hard intentness of Bentley's stare, but he was a brave man.

"I'm sorry if I misled you, sir. My comment on the time of departure was idle, not meant to be serious. I have no idea of when we leave, therefore I have nothing to reveal. Will I wait for the log, sir?"

It was a long time since Bentley had been pulled up with a round turn by a lowerdeckman, or for that matter by any junior. His anger flashed quick and fierce. Yet it was also a long time since he had lost control of himself.

In automatic reaction he forced down on his anger, and in the doing of this there flicked through his consciousness certain vivid images of the man before him—of cool courage, of absolute loyalty, and complete competence; whenever there'd been trouble, Ferris was always beside him, staunch as a stanchion.

His anger cooled. He wanted to make it up with Ferris. But the other thing causing his present state of moroseness would not allow him to go that far.

"No," he said. "I'll send the log down when I'm finished. That's all."

“Aye aye, sir.”

Ferris went out quickly. He closed the door quietly and strode down the passage to his mess.

There were a few minutes before hands fell-in for the day's work. The mess was full. A short man with the crossed guns and surmounting crown on his sleeve of a gunner's mate, or gunnery instructor, looked up at Ferris' entry. His glance was idle, and then sharp.

“What's eating you?” he asked. It was more a demand, uttered in a voice of brass, but then Saunders could speak no other way, having been trained to it for years. He was responsible for the ship's gunnery efficiency. “Your mother-in-law's lobbed here with the wife and kids?”

This was the worst eventuality Saunders could imagine; but Ferris was single, and so his comment referred to the yeoman's expression.

“The bastard,” Ferris scowled, thumping down on a padded bench. “The big bullocky bastard.”

“Who?” asked another man, reasonably enough. This fellow, in proportion, was as big as a bullock; he had a horn, too, in the form of a shining steel hook at the end of his right arm.

“The Old Man.” Ferris dug out a cigarette from a pack on the table, lit it and puffed jerkily. Saunders casually poked the pack in a safer place, the pocket of his shorts.

“Tore a strip off you, did he?” asked Hooky Walker. This was an unusual thing to happen to a chief yeoman of signals, yet Hooky seemed less surprised than he might have been expected to.

“No, not that,” said Ferris, “not in the normal way. It was just his...”

“Attitude,” Hooky finished for him. “Yeah, I know. He bit my head off yesterday.”

“You?”

Ferris, all of them, looked at Hooky with surprise, knowing that he and Bentley were as close as captain and rating could get. Then memory swamped back over Ferris, making his tone bitter.

“He had no call to come at me like that. Sarcastic as hell, that's what sticks in my craw. It's that bloody dame ashore, I tell you, keeping her legs crossed. But that's no excuse for him to take it out

on us, I'm buggered if it is. If she won't come across, let him look somewhere else. God knows there's lashings of grommet ashore, specially for officers. What about that girl reporter he knows? *She* made him happy. But this bloody doctor dame...!"

A cough sounded.

It was a quiet cough, coming from a quiet-faced white-haired man at the head of the table, yet it swung all their heads towards him.

"Nutty," he said, his voice soft, "I don't think I like your reference to the captain's friend. I'd say she's close to being his fiancée."

Ferris looked down, jerkily tapped ash off his cigarette, and looked up again.

"Okay, Swain, okay. Maybe I went off half-cocked. But I'm still right, and you bloody well know it."

"No," said Rennie, "I know you're wrong. It's nothing to do with the girl."

"Oh? I suppose he sobbed his head out on your shoulder?"

Rennie ignored that. He was the coxswain, the senior noncommissioned officer in the ship, but here they were all chiefs together, and this was mess talk. Not a word of it would reach past the door.

"He's worried—fretting might be a better word—about the flotilla," Rennie said.

"Come off it, Jack," Ferris said, smiling twistedly. "You sound like Jarrett. Damn it all, Dalziel's up there. He's a three-ringed commander, not a bloody sideboy!"

Ferris was at one end of the table, Rennie the other. As each man spoke in turn, the heads of the others turned towards him, then back again, like spectators at a tennis match. It seemed from their expressions that not all of them agreed with Rennie's diagnosis of the captain's complaint. Hooky did; he was simply curious to learn how his friend would vindicate it.

Rennie was silent, his weathered face thoughtful. Ferris seized the advantage.

"No man's indispensable, Swain. The captain knows that. He also knows, or he bloody well should, that a man has to delegate responsibility."

Their heads swung to Rennie.

“Natty, when did you last check your flag lockers?” he asked with apparent irrelevance.

Ferris frowned. “Yesterday afternoon, and two days before that. Why? What’s that got to do with the price of fish?”

“You checked them?”

“Of course. I always do.”

“Not Leading-Signalman Corby, or one of your junior hands?”

“You’re joking! Who cops the can if the right flag’s not in the right locker? Look, what the hell has this...”

“Why can’t Corby check them?” Rennie persisted in the same quiet tone. “He’s a leading-hand, not a bloody sideboy.”

At those last words Hooky’s grin started.

“Who said he was?” Ferris demanded. “I trained him, didn’t I? But it’s just like I said. Who cops the can if the right...”

His voice loitered to silence. A pipe shrilled out, calling the hands to muster. Hooky rose, his grin wide and malicious.

“Save yourself a lot of worry, Flags,” he said, “if you learned to delegate responsibility. Talk it over with the Old Man.”

“You bastard,” Ferris said, but he said it to Rennie, and somehow he looked relieved.

“Not to worry,” the coxswain smiled faintly. “Once we’re at sea, heading back, I think you’ll find the Old Man’s back to normal.

CHAPTER TWO

THE Old Man—he was just on the weather side of thirty—was at that moment doing his damndest to get back to normal.

Up and down the cabin he paced, his face frowning with the memory of how he had acted, and with regret that he had. The passage outside was common ground; as well as his cabin at one end, it gave access to the wheelhouse and the chart-house from the other. There was no reason why two senior men like Jarrett and Ferris should not pass a few words there, and no excuse for him to treat Ferris the way he had.

After all, the yeoman's comment *was* idle. *It shouldn't be too long now.* Just a conversational statement, as innocent as say *We should get some rain out of that muck up there.*

But was it innocent? There could have been a point to it; helpfully meant, but still a point. If so, Bentley realised with an unpleasant jolt, then the reason for his chaffing moroseness must be understood, and not only by Ferris.

This was bad. As is the captain, so is the crew, and that meant the ship. The chain of reaction was so elementary, yet potentially dangerous. Ferris had gone out obviously upset. He might snap at his leading-hand, who would in turn deliver a rocket to one of the signalmen, and so the canker of discontent would grow. Not fast, in a ship so disciplined, but insidious and definite just the same.

Bentley halted his pacing. Almost certainly Ferris would have gone straight to his mess. Had he mentioned his unmerited treatment to *them*, the chiefs, the backbone of the ship's company? Bentley couldn't blame him. The memory of his sarcastic words flashed back to mock and trouble him. They were sound men; but only as sound as the man who led them. God, if only the dockyard would finish its repairs, and finish this blasted worry that was fretting his nerves raw. Things were starting to move up there, even before he'd left. Even now Dalziel might be faced by a superior squadron, or planes or a pack of submarines...

The door opened. Jarrett came in with the slop bucket. His glance at Bentley was covert, cautious, and Bentley knew that he knew. It took not too much effort—a successful leader must be an actor, if

only to convey the calm and certainty of achievement he did not feel—for Bentley to say, smiling:

“Well, Jarrett, this is your lucky day.”

“Is it, sir?” Jarrett said warily. Under different circumstances he would have answered with something like: “Fine, sir. You’re shooting me off on another fortnight’s leave?”

Bentley kept his smile on. “Yes. I’ll be lunching ashore. Dining, too.”

In this, also, Jarrett was awake up. Every day the captain lunched and dined ashore. But if the hand was offered you took it, especially when there were four rings above it. So Jarrett matched smiles and said:

“I’d better phone Mrs. Prescott, sir.”

“Eh? She knows I’ll be there.”

“Yes, but she might have steak in mind.”

“If so, you bloody banana balancer,” snarled Bentley, using the generic term for stewards, “it will at least *taste* like steak.”

Jarrett went into his pantry, relieved at this return to normalcy. Bentley put on his cap, took up the signal log and went out.

Chance seemed to favour his second intention. It would have been too obvious, sending for Ferris and having Jarrett hear the conversation; as it was, he stepped from the ladder on the fo’c’sle deck and a few feet away Ferris appeared from his mess. His glance, too, was covertly wary. Bentley smiled; a brief normal gesture, just the right size.

“There you are, Yeoman. Saves me the trouble of sending it along.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ferris took the log. Bentley cocked his head in a listening attitude. Faint but distinct, resonating from the keel up through the iron of her body, came the sound of tapping tools at work.

“Well, they’re on the job.”

“Yes, sir.”

Still careful, that tone. Bentley made his own easy.

“Have you ever known this to happen before, in your experience?”

“This” was the ripping off of *Wind Rode*’s asdic dome against one end of an uncharted reef near Trobriand Island, some eighty

miles from the northern coast of New Guinea's toe.

"No, sir, it's the first time." But the face looking at Ferris now, burned and handsome and quizzical, was the old one he knew. Like Jarrett, he took the hand. "And the last, I hope. If that niggerhead had been a foot higher, we'd have had more than the dome torn away."

"Nightmares, Yeoman, I can do without, if you don't mind."

"Yes, sir."

They exchanged grins and turned away, Bentley walking aft and Ferris mounting the ladder. Ferris had climbed past the wheelhouse before he consciously realised what his mission was: he grinned, widely this time, and went on to check the flags in their lockers.

Bentley found the man he was looking for down near the tubes. Lieutenant-Commander Randall was on leave in Sydney, comfortably esconced in his captain's house with his wife Gwen, who happened to be Bentley's sister. Bentley halted beside the temporary first-lieutenant.

"Well, Pilot, what's the news this morning?"

Wind Rode was in dry dock close by one end of the Storey Bridge. Pilot had been watching the testing of a torpedo-loading derrick, trained outboard with its wire shackled to a hefty lump of iron on the dock floor. He came up from the guardrail with a start.

"Good morning, sir." He saluted, as was the custom on first sighting of the captain each day: a very sensible custom, otherwise in a ship 350 feet long carrying 200 men, hands would be flapping up and down like yo-yos all day long.

"The news isn't so hot, I'm afraid, sir."

"Oh, God." Bentley had less need to dissemble in front of his second-senior officer. "What the hell's gone wrong?"

"Nothing, actually. It's just taking longer than he thought."

"The dockyard-manager?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll see about that!"

Pilot had been with his captain a long time, and in other ships than this one. His hesitation was so brief that Bentley was still on the turn away when he said:

"That mightn't be wise, sir."

Bentley swung back. His stare fixed on Pilot's sober young face, demanding.

"We've already had words about it, sir. They got a bit heated, in fact. McPherson's last words—and I quote, more or less verbatim—were: 'I'm up to my bloody eyeballs in work. You come busting in here with a rush job. I take some of my best men off other work and I'm doing a bloody rush job. Now stick that up your bloody jumper and smoke it.' His metaphors might be a bit mixed, but he's really doing his best, sir."

Disappointed though he was, Bentley had to nod agreement. Scotland produced fine engineers, and McPherson was provenly one of the finest. This wasn't the first time *Wind Rode* had received his attentions.

"All right," Bentley murmured. "How much longer?"

"At least three days."

"What!"

A couple of torpedomen painting the tubes looked around. Bentley turned his face away, feeling the flush of anger and frustration mounting in it. Then he remembered Jarrett and Ferris. This time the effort took much more—there are occasions when even the best actor-captains long to vent their feelings—but he managed to say in a fairly reasonable tone:

"Oh well, that's it, then. We can do nothing about it."

This time Pilot hesitated a bit longer. Then:

"There's something I had in mind, sir."

Bentley's eyes flashed at him. "About the dome?"

"Not directly, sir, though it affects him. I was thinking of the first lieutenant."

"What the hell... ? Talk plain, man."

"Well, he's due to catch a plane back tonight. But if we're to be here another three days..."

"You mean I should give him an extra three days? That bloody great loafing lummock? Guzzling my whisky, forcing himself to get up in time for lunch, *my* food, lounging all bloody day on the beach...! What the hell are you grinning about?"

Pilot was not grinning; trouble was, he was trying hard not to. But Ferris held no monopoly on bravery.

"I was thinking," Pilot pressed, "more of his wife... your sister."

"I know she's my sister, damn you."

"Yes, sir. A phone call, even a telegram would reach him in time. Your mother would like that."

"Damn my... Ha hm! What's he got on you, eh? You owe him money or something?"

Pilot pretended to ponder, fingers pulling at his chin.

"No," he said at last, "you're quite right, sir. He should come back on time, as ordered. There's discipline to be considered, things like that. The other business shouldn't be given the slightest consideration."

"What business?"

"Nothing of any import, sir. Just his attitude when he gets back tonight and finds he could have had three more days with his wife, three days that you'll have with Doctor Prescott. I mean his attitude on the bridge. You know, when you're up there together in the dog-watches. I imagine it could last for three, maybe six months. And the wardroom, of course, will be hell. But then, like I said, orders are orders."

Bentley was glowering at him. "You're biting the apple deep, me lad."

"Yes, sir. Phone call or telegram?"

"You don't phone a bludger on Avalon Beach, where he'll be right now, with my car and using my petrol."

Pilot knew the car belonged to Mrs. Bentley. He said:

"No, sir, of course. I'll send a wire."

"Two days."

"But McPherson said..."

"Two days."

Pilot knew a shoal when he saw one. He backed full-astern.

"Two days, aye aye, sir. He'll be delighted."

"Now that's made my day!"

And mine, Pilot thought, watching the big figure stride lithely past the tubes. Their dialogue had been vehement, malicious, and perfectly normal.

"Thank God," Pilot muttered aloud, then turned back to the torpedo derrick.

Perhaps because it was forced, and the worry still gnawed at him, Bentley's changed mood lasted only until he got ashore. Here, in front of the G.P.O., the actor was separated from his audience.

His male audience.

It was summer. Required by wartime regulations to be in uniform ashore, Bentley wore drills. The white trousers and jacket with its collar fastened at the throat—no tie—combined with the row of gold buttons and the four gold rings on each of his shoulder-pads to form an eye-catching contrast against the weather-hued brown of his face. And there was the white-covered cap, also golden around the edge of its black peak, set at the precise angle of tilt. Not too rakish, which would denote immature conceit. Here, said that angle, is experience.

It was lunchtime. Here, said the swift, repeated glances of typists and office girls, is a man!

Three girls—to be magnanimous in the matter of age—who knew little of typewriters or offices, swung happily up to him one after the other at intervals and intimated a desire to prove what they did know of their profession. To each of these Bentley offered a salute, and the information that he was waiting for his wife and children. They moved on quickly.

And he was waiting. His meeting with Meredith Prescott had been set for twelve-thirty. Above him the big minute hand of the G.P.O. clock was arcing towards one-thirty. His thoughts turned northward, more than a thousand miles away from this safe, bustling street, to the dangers up there that could pounce from above and below the blue water, and now even men looked at him curiously, for the face under its golden peak was hard, almost savage with the force of his ugly thoughts.

But his eyes remained unaffected, their sight independent of his mind's worry, roving restlessly. He sighted her at once in the hurrying mob on the opposite footpath, heading for the *Courier-mail* building and the pedestrian crossing.

She walked fast—so she should, he thought, hearing the half-hour boom out above him—and he wondered why she came that way: the hospital lay in the opposite direction.

Then the increased pulse rate throbbed for attention over his moroseness and his eyes fixed on her, feasting, his hunger drawing

her close like Ferris' telescope.

She wore a navy-blue frock with white piping, and everything else, shoes, bag, gloves, were white. Sleeveless, the dress showed her arms as brown as his own; flared at the waist, it swung with a purely feminine grace as she hurried and twisted her way through the crowd. Her head was bare, and even under the shop awnings he could see the gleam of her short brown hair, and the curl of it.

He saw something else—the turn of men's heads as they looked back at her. This gave him a half-malicious half-proprietary pleasure. Look, boys, but don't touch...

She stepped on to the crossing. A youth in a soiled blue singlet driving a huge garbage truck leaned out of his cabin and whistled appreciatively. Above the stopped and slowing traffic Bentley heard it clearly. She turned and smiled at the youth, inclining her head the tiniest amount. Bentley liked that, too; the cool assuredness of her. But then she was a surgeon as well as a woman.

Halfway across and she saw him. Her stride lengthened, which made the dress flare more. She came up to him in a rush of blue and white and rising on her toes she kissed him.

"Easy, there," he growled, but smiling a little.

"Oh, damn the crowd. That's for keeping you waiting. I'm terribly sorry, darling, but it couldn't be helped. I have the most wonderful news!"

Normally, he was an equable man. He felt for this lovely girl all the passionate strength of a first love. A day away from her seemed like years; time criminally wasted when there was so much joy with her, so much still to learn about her, all the tiny, trivial, wonderful things. He looked at her oval face framed by the curly hair he loved to ruffle, he saw the blue eyes wide with love and eagerness, and then...

Surely, some time, you must have put on a big and carefully-prepared show when entertaining acquaintances, and yet for known, loved friends offered the most casual fare? Friends understand, you comfort yourself, they don't want a fuss.

Certainly Bentley's men, for whose feelings he had shown such consideration, were more than acquaintances, but still hardly in the category of this girl whom he loved. And yet, goaded by that devil

on his back, in answer to her brightly eager statement he said:

“Nice to hear someone’s got good news. I’m dry as a bone. Let’s get a drink.”

Oscar Wilde wrote that each man kills the thing he loves... Bentley saw the light seep from her eyes, and her face wince as though he had struck her. Instantly he was filled with hatred of himself.

“All right, Peter,” she said in a small voice. “Where would you like to go?”

The crowd bustled about them but he might have been on a desert island.

“Merrie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so bloody. Lately I’ve been so damned... What is this wonderful news?”

“All right, Peter,” she said again, “it can wait. You probably won’t be interested anyway, not being in your line.” She pointed. “That hotel over there has a passable lounge. Come on.”

She took his arm and they crossed the street. The men were different but they looked at her in the same way, and this time Bentley glared their eyes down.

It was a small, crowded lounge, but he was lucky. Two journalists—they sometimes drink just like ordinary people—got up from a table for two near a window as he ushered Merrie in. She moved for it so rapidly that she was seated before he could help with the chair.

“You have to be quick,” she said in explanation.

“Yes.” Bentley knew something of conditions ashore. Damn near half the country was in barracks or overseas, yet congestion was worse instead of easier. He had no explanation for this phenomenon, nor any interest in it just now. “What would you like?”

“Gin, I think.”

“Good, girl.” He was trying to make up for his crassness. “That’s the Navy’s drink.”

Merrie smiled a little. “Then the Navy had better fetch it.” She gestured to the busy blonde behind a small bar, hardly wider than the servery to Jarrett’s pantry. “There’s a war on, you know. And I suggest taking these, or we’ll be stuck with them.”

“And sailors long to get ashore...”

Bentley took the two dirty beer glasses. Her disappointment and

concern at his reception eased away as she watched him walk across the room; the carriage of shoulders and brown-haired head, the quick light stride. He was going for drinks, but he might have been striding to front the devil.

Merrie's fanciful thoughts took a more practical course. With hair like theirs the children should be brown-haired, she was musing fondly, when the table moved.

It was not a bump of someone passing, more a shiver. Her head turned. She saw at first how big and thick-fingered the hands were, spread on the table, then she noted the dirty nails, and then she looked up. Heavily-set on a strong neck, the big burned face looked down at her with a leering grin.

"What do you want?"

The crisp hospital tone had no effect here.

"What do *you* want, gorgeous," the big man said, leaning closer, "with a tailor's dummy like that?"

Merrie smelt brandy on his breath, though he did not seem drunk. She glanced quickly at the bar. There was a man ahead of Bentley, being served beer. Bentley was watching the barmaid at her slow, disinterested work.

"He's my husband," she said, unknowingly using Bentley's ploy with the prostitutes. "Please go away."

Her ruse was less effective.

"Husband, eh?" His hand slid on hers, rubbing the fingers with a touch that revolted her. "Too stingy to buy a ring. Me, now..."

Merrie had jerked her hand clear, was pulling on her gloves. He slapped his trouser pocket.

"I got a wad here that'd choke an elephant. All I want is someone to help me get rid of it. Christ," he said, "you're a looker!"

He was looking straight down the scoop-necked bodice of her dress.

Merrie heard the thickening of his voice. She glanced again at the bar, wanting to shout but dreading a disturbance. The other patron was trying to gather up his glasses of beer, having trouble with the five of them. Oh God, Peter, she thought desperately, please come; and at once: No, wait till this swine leaves. He had to leave before Peter turned from the bar.

Bentley was having trouble with language.

“Good afternoon,” he said pleasantly, aware of the need these days to treat barmaids like queens. “I’d like a pair of gimlets, please.”

He got them, in the form of a stare from two mascara’d and unsmiling eyes.

“What d’ya think this is? A bloody hardware store?”

“Eh? Oh, sorry. My mistake. Two gin and limes.”

“We ran outa gin yesterday. Gawd knows when the next lot comes in. Beer? Come on, sport, make up ya mind.”

Merrie didn’t like beer. What with his edgy moroseness, his annoyance at the barmaid’s tone, and trying to think what Merrie would like in lieu of gin, Bentley made his second mistake.

“I’ll have a couple of horse’s necks.”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud!”

Her voice was loud. Several heads turned. Bentley flushed.

“That’s brandy and dry ginger ale.”

“Then why don’t ya say so?”

“With ice,” Bentley said. “Is that plain enough?”

“We’re outa ice, too. Is *that* plain enough?”

Bentley waited while she poured the nips and then sloshed ginger ale in. The big man was saying:

“My name’s Bill. They call me Big Bill. Y’can see why. I’m a commando, just in from the Middle East. Jesus, I didn’t see nothing like you over there. What’s your name?”

Mutely, lips compressed with embarrassment and worry, she shook her head.

“Aw, come on, gorgeous. I bet you’re not always this cold, eh? What you need is a man. Well, now you got one. I’ll show you. Jesus, I will! Give that pansy the brush and meet me later, like about half an hour later, front of the Post Office. How about it?”

Desperate, Merrie was thinking of telling him she would think about it, anything to be rid of him, when she saw Bentley turn from the bar.

She saw him halt his turn, and his face tighten as he saw the man leaning over her, then he came for the table in a swift sliding movement. Merrie had been fearful. Now she felt sick.

The man they called Big Bill could not see her face, turned away

as it was and had been several times during his conversation; in any case, he was staring down at something much more promising.

“Look, sweetheart,” he said, “I’m loaded, I tell you. We can really show this town a rare old...”

“Something I can do for you?” a voice said suddenly beside him.

Bill looked up and as part of the same movement his body straightened. He saw a big man, but not as bulky as himself. His mouth twisted.

“Yes,” he said, “you can get lost.”

Bentley had already noted the grey sports coat and the khaki, open-necked shirt. Army issue. He should have been in uniform, and wasn’t. This presupposed an anti-regulation, belligerent nature. Now Bentley was seeing that twisted smile, ignoring the sneer in it, noting the self-assurance.

“What’s your rank, soldier?” he said evenly.

Merrie was looking up at her man, apprehensively surprised to see that this was nothing like the man she knew. Bentley’s face had hardened to a total blankness of expression, with his eyes slitted and his mouth a thin straight line. He stood with feet apart and his arms hanging down, apparently slack, but the fingers curled in, as if waiting to be balled instantly into fists. Very gently, his body moved back and forward, as if he were slightly drunk. She knew he was wholly sober.

“What’s my rank gotta do with you, *Captain*?” Bill said.

The widened smile, the gleam in his eyes, the emphasis on that word, warned Bentley that he’d been right; his opponent was a hater and a decrier of Authority. And he *was* his opponent—this fellow was spoiling for trouble.

Quickly, a hiss of fearful warning, Merrie said:

“Peter, he’s a commando!”

Without turning, keeping his eyes on Big Bill, Bentley said:

“I presume he told you that?”

“Yes, of course.”

Bentley knew he should get out of this; shrug it off, get Merrie and himself down to the street, near a policeman. There was his elevated rank, plainly uniformed in the crowded, suddenly silent room, and there was Merrie. *He was required to get out of it.*

And there was the worry and the concern for his flotilla which had been sandpapering his nerves for weeks, and he said:

"I've known many commandos. I've never known a single commando who boasted that he was one. And to a girl."

"Peter..." Merrie said despairingly.

"I was hoping you might say something like that, pretty boy," said Bill. "Standby to receive."

His left hand was still resting on the table. It moved rapidly across in front of Merrie, without a check to its movement grabbed up one of the glasses Bentley had put down, and flung the contents straight for his face.

Bentley's face was not there. Nor, in the next instant, was Bill's. His mouth caught full and square the pistoning force of Bentley's fist and his face slammed back against the wall beside the window.

A woman screamed. Spitting blood, Bill thrust himself from the wall and lunged forward.

Amongst men whose interests incline practically or theoretically towards such vehement pastimes, there has always been discussion as to who would win—the boxer, the wrestler, the karate or judo expert, or the man skilled in unarmed combat? It is a perennial and profitless problem, for the solving of it would require too many equations. Each practitioner would need to be equally fit and proficient in his art—how could that be judged?—And the number of variables is enormous. If the boxer got in his first uppercut to the jaw, the karateist the first *shuto* to the neck, the wrestler his vice of a bearhug around the back, the unarmed combat man his kick to the groin... It all depends.

Here it depended on two things. One of them was skill. The sailor was a boxing champion, provenly the best amongst thousands. The soldier could hardly rate so relatively high in his nasty field.

The second thing was feeling. Big Bill had been simply looking for trouble, this day, now. Bentley had been troubled for weeks, with the edginess and frustration mounting inside him like a volcano's heat, but denied an outlet.

Big Bill found his trouble.

Sprawled back again to the wall by Bentley's second sledgehammer rip into his guts, held there by a flashing succession of blows

so bewilderingly fast that he had no chance of avoiding them, Bill's face was a bloodied mess when at last Merrie's scream pierced into Bentley's consciousness.

"Peter! Peter! *Stop it!*"

He stopped, his muscled shoulders crouched and his right fist cocked for the next punch; he saw what he had done to the body sagging against the wall and the inhuman rage drained away, the flaring of this nostrils eased.

"Je... sus," Bill gasped. "No... more."

Both of Bentley's hands flashed out, gripped round his shoulders and lowered him to the floor. Weakly, his eyes squeezed shut, Big Bill shook his head.

"Get... out. Before... they come."

"Yes. Thanks."

Bentley jammed on his cap, took Merrie's hand and dragged her across the room. There was shock in some of the faces they passed, in others fear and disgust, and from a few men, stares of admiration. Bentley was concerned with only one type—new faces, running up the stairs.

But though fierce, the fight had been short. They made the street unhindered.

"Taxi!" Bentley yelled.

Merrie had got a grip on herself. "We haven't a chance," she said as the taxi sailed past.

"Tram," Bentley said, "there's one stopping."

"But where are we...?"

"Come on."

Bentley almost shoved her aboard. He led the way to an empty seat at the rear, conscious of his hands. The tram jolted off.

"Thank God," he muttered.

She gave a little shudder. "It was horrible. Peter, you looked so... so frightening."

"I'm sorry." He put his hand on hers. "I didn't want to get involved in anything like that. But he did." He shrugged. "If it hadn't been me..."

"Yet you thanked him."

"Did I?"

"I heard it distinctly. You said, 'Thanks'."

"Oh, that. You didn't hear what he said before that. 'Get out, before they come'."

"The police?"

"Worse, the military police. It was decent of him to think of that."

"My God."

"Yes, it could have been damned awkward. Quite nasty, in fact."

"I didn't mean that. You half kill a man and then you call him decent!"

"You don't understand."

"You are absolutely right. Good heavens," she said suddenly, "your hand, both of them."

Bentley looked at his bloodied knuckles. "He's a tough boy." Then he was grinning. She frowned her query. "I feel like a lanced boil," he said. "I mean, after a boil's been lanced. I also feel like a drink. Where's the nearest?"

"The Gresham." And because her own boil of tension was draining, she added, a bit archly: "I don't imagine we'll be interrupted in *there*."

"You're forgetting, sweetheart, just who was the basic cause of that ruckus back there."

Smiling that way, she thought, he looked normal again. Out of evil... But would it last? A little hastily, she said:

"Maybe you'd like me to go around veiled like a harem woman?"

"An excellent idea."

"I have a better one. We stop at a chemist before the Gresham. You won't be allowed in looking like a damned gladiator."

He played along with her lightened mood." Not even one just returned from the wars?"

"Thank God you have," she said softly, and then her own smile slipped as she saw his tighten.

Oh God, she thought, staring miserably ahead, what was eating him?

CHAPTER THREE

WITH his knuckles swabbed, ointmented and taped—a dead giveaway, he reflected, except that the soldier would have told the police, if they'd been sent for, that his attacker was anything, between a sub-lieutenant and a French legionnaire; he felt sure of this, after that warning to get clear—Bentley walked behind Merrie into a different type of lounge.

All the Servicemen present were officers. There were waiters, and there was gin. For himself Bentley ordered a double whisky, diluting it with the smallest amount of water. He wasted no time in sending the stiffener south. Merrie, too, seemed thirsty.

“That’s better,” Bentley said, raising a finger at the waiter. “Now. What’s this wonderful news of yours?”

The suddenness of his question took her by surprise, so that she answered without thinking:

“Doctor Warren’s asked me to be his assistant surgeon.”

“Bully for you,” said Bentley, to whom the news meant nothing. “Is that why you came from the opposite direction this afternoon?”

“You were watching me?”

“Like Ferris and the flagship.”

“Pardon?”

“Let it slide. Assistant? I thought you were a surgeon for a full due. In your own right, I mean. Qualified, practised, the lot. Damn it all, you practised on me once. Weren’t you qualified?”

There was the slightest edge to his bantering. It made Merrie’s answer sharper than she wanted it to be.

“Don’t be silly. Doctor Warren happens to be the finest obstetrical surgeon in the State. At least I think so. I *know* it’s an honour to assist him.”

“Okay, okay, ease the strain, I was only kidding.”

Were you? she almost said. Instead: “It came as a complete surprise.” The waiter came, giving her time to choose her words; he seemed so touchy these days, she did not want to start him off. “Any surgeon would give his eyeteeth to work with Warren. I mean, anyone of my age and experience, or lack of it. And then, out of the blue, his call this morning. Phew...”

"You make this fellow sound like he's Hippocrates himself," Bentley growled. She hadn't meant to, she thought, her heart sinking. "Humility's all very well, so long as it's not overdone. You shouldn't underrate yourself. If Warren's so damned good, and he's made you his assistant, then it follows that you must be good."

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"Then why the sackcloth and ashes bit?"

"Oh, Peter..." she started, and stopped, but he seemed not to have noticed.

"If any man on my bridge," he said raspily, "jabbered on about his lack of experience, I'd bloody soon see that he got it in some other ship. You carry on like that in front of this Warren bloke and you'll find yourself back setting broken fingers. And I wouldn't blame him. So have confidence in your own ability, for God's sake."

Anger was flashing in her. She tried to dampen its fire, and failed.

"The subject was Doctor Warren's ability!" Bentley shrugged. "I see it differently."

"*You* see it differently! You haven't the faintest idea what you're *jabbering* about!"

"Is that so?" Bentley sipped at his drink, then laid down the glass gently. "I'm not so damned humble that I don't claim to know a sizeable bit about experience, and ability, and self-confidence. And, for that matter, the lack of those..."

He stopped. At last, it seemed, he saw the anger sparking in her eyes.

"Oh, hell. I'm sorry, old girl." He shook his head. "How the devil did we get into this lot? Here, have another drink."

"I would prefer lunch, thank you."

He took a deep breath, and let it out on a sudden grin, which made his face look younger, and a lot less hard. She wanted to warm to him, to let him see it, but fear of his inexplicable touchiness held her back: and just then, unbidden and shocking, the thought struck her; was he growing tired of her; was that the cause?

"I'll just finish this, then we'll go in." He took up his glass, but did not drink. "What exactly will you be doing with Doctor Warren?"

"Gynaecological surgery, naturally."

"Naturally. For instance?"

“You... really want to know?”

“Of course. It’s a pleasant pre-luncheon subject.” But he was smiling.

“Well, there’s a Caesarian section coming up in a few days. Julius Caesar was supposed to have been born that way.”

“What way?”

“By means of an incision into the uterus, usually through the abdominal wall.”

“It sounds gruesome, but fascinating.”

“Fascinating, yes, especially with Doctor Warren at the table.”

“Mmmm.” Bentley looked up at her from under his brows. “No chance, I suppose, of my seeing something fascinating like that?”

“No chance. An operating theatre is not a picture theatre.”

“Damn it all, I’m only trying to show interest in your work.” He tossed down his drink. “Let’s eat.”

“You’re acting like a spoilt kid.”

The truth hurts? Certainly it flushed his face. She smiled, trying to placate him, spoiling him...

“You can do rounds with me. That will be in order.”

“Great.”

“Tonight, then?”

“Oh, forget it. Let’s eat,” he said again, and stood up.

Dinner at Merrie’s home was easier than lunch, though not much. It is difficult for the most vivacious trio of women to produce a sparkling atmosphere in the face of a single, brooding male, and these were not vivacious. Mrs. Prescott was naturally quiet, and had lost her husband at Tobruk. So had Mrs. Bentley, aboard her son’s ship. Now, like Merrie, she was concerned about Peter’s attitude. The fact that she knew its cause didn’t help at all.

Dessert came. It was Pavlova made by Mrs. Prescott, passionfruit and cream, the lot, Bentley’s favourite sweet.

“Not for me, thank you,” he said.

Mrs. Prescott looked hurt; it had taken a deal of searching and persuasion to get that cream. His mother spoke quickly:

“But Peter, you’ve always liked it so much.”

“Not just now, thank you.”

“Just a small piece?”

“No thanks.”

“But surely you have room for...”

“For God’s sake, Mother!”

He shoved his chair back, threw down his napkin and strode out on to the front verandah. Staring after him, Merrie made to rise. Mrs. Bentley’s hand pressed her arm.

“Not just now, Merrie.”

She sank back. Her eyes were sparkling, with anger. Her voice was brittle with it.

“He has no right to act like that. What’s wrong with him? I can’t stand much more of it.”

“You can, my dear,” his mother said quietly, “and you will. Just so long as the war lasts.”

“What! I’m sorry, Mrs. Bentley, but we have men in the hospital from the war—men with no legs, men with practically no faces, and they don’t carry on like...”

She stopped, seeing the older woman gently shaking her head.

“If it were something like that,” Mrs. Bentley said, “he would take it, the same as those other men.” She tapped her forehead. “His trouble is up here.”

Merrie looked unconvinced. “Overstrain? Battle fatigue? We have men suffering from that, too. Peter’s not.”

“I know, my dear. Not your medical strain. But he is suffering—from worry, from responsibility and uncertainty.”

Merrie frowned at her. “About his ships, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“But there’s an officer in charge of them, a senior officer. He told me so himself.”

“It’s still Peter’s flotilla, his responsibility.”

“But surely he can’t be blamed if something happens to them?”

“No, but then blame doesn’t come into it. Those are his ships, his men. He loves them, you see. Let me put it this way. How would you feel if one of your patients, someone you loved and for whom you’d worked hard and long to keep alive, died when you were absent, when you couldn’t be contacted in time? Wouldn’t you think, always, that if you had been there, things just might have been different?”

After a long moment, Merrie said: “Are you sure?”

"I've lived with it long enough," Mrs. Bentley said distantly. She looked at Merrie and smiled. "Go out to him now. Just remember that he loves you. I'm sure about that, too. It will help you to put up with his brooding."

Merrie went down the table. She kissed Mrs. Bentley on the cheek. "You're sweet," she smiled, then walked towards the wide double doors opening on to the verandah.

"Well, Agnes," Mrs Bentley said, "it looks like we're stuck with clearing up, again. Keep that Pavlova. I don't think it will be wasted."

Merrie walked up and stood beside her man. The night was warm, but she tugged his arm around her. "She shows up quite plainly," she said. "The top part, anyway."

"The upper-works," Bentley corrected, but a smile in his voice. "I'm sorry, about in there."

"Not to worry, cobs. How's that?"

"You're catching on fast."

She snuggled against him, feeling the hard masculinity of his body. Together they stared across the river, *Wind Rode* showing greyly in the moonlight. She hesitated, then decided.

"Peter, I understand now. About your ships, how you feel."

There was a pause, then she was glad to feel the squeeze of his arm.

"That mother of mine's been blabbing."

"She's a darling. I wish you'd told me yourself, earlier."

"God knows I wanted to. But it's something... well, you find a bit hard to talk about."

"Never mind," she said bravely, "you'll be up there again with them before very long."

"Yes," Bentley said and looked up at the star-pricked sky. "I wonder what they're doing now? Probably swilling beer in Morseby, while I worry myself stupid about 'em."

"They'll be all right, darling. Nothing's happened so far. Anyway, they might be glad the Boss is away." "You could be damned right about that." "So how about doing rounds with me tonight? At least..." She faltered, the earlier doubt returning. "Yes?"

"At least we'll be together."

"Then let's go!"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE flotilla-leader had sailed from Hollandia, on her own, at five o'clock that still-heated afternoon. She was the temporary leader, of course; her name was *Whelp*, and the name of her captain was Commander Philip Dalziel.

There was whingeing amongst her men, naturally: a ship had sailed to sea. Water runs downhill, does it not, the sun rises in the east?

Even in the variety of their whingeing they were conformist. A seaman complained because they'd got no mail in Hollandia, which is on the northern coast of New Guinea, and a torpedoman was irritated because he'd been able to post a wifely letter containing half his pay.

A signalman moaned about the fine weather because he'd had to spend most of the afternoon airing flags, and a stoker whinged Where's them bloody clouds to shut out the flamin' sun? In harbour they'd complained because there was no breeze, at sea they cursed because the wind of *Whelp's* thrusting prevented card-playing on the upper deck.

And all of them whinged because they were heading north instead of south.

Yet they whinged with a laugh, without malice. When a man inadvertently kicked the bare toes of his sandall'd foot against a ringbolt on the deck there was always a friendly observer to chortle, "You won't shift it that way, Blubberguts."

When a man heading for the bathroom with a dhobyng bucket full of dirties was thrown an extra pair of shorts or overalls, he cursed luridly, but he washed them. He cursed the coldness of the hot water, or its too-high temperature, but he sang amiably as he made contact with khaki and soap.

On the bridge and at the duty gun-mounting lookouts and gunners cursed the monotony of their existence, and hoped fervently that it would continue thus.

All through the three hundred feet of speeding ship men washed, or wrote letters, or re-read old ones, or played cards, or just talked—and hoped; and waited, fearful but controlled, for the clangour of

the alarm. She was an efficient ship. Thus, according to the saying, she should have been a happy ship. To a certain degree she was; but not quite like Benson's *Witch* or Bentley's *Wind Rode*, for Dalziel was nothing at all like those captains.

Perhaps it would be truer to say that *Whelp's* men were content. They had for their captain a man of iron will, hard discipline, and no humour. But he knew his job. He had kept them safe so far, they could count on his doing his damndest to keep them safe, and they settled for that. Few of his men liked him; their respect was total. Commander Dalziel was quite content to settle for that.

He had come down from the bridge an hour after dusk action-stations had secured—at about the time Bentley wondered what his flotilla was doing—and now he was drinking with enjoyment a cup of coffee whitened with tinned milk. This enjoyment did not show; from his face he might have been drinking water. He had a dark thin blade of a face, and unless tightened with the alertness of danger, its expression was sardonic. You never quite knew where you stood with Dalziel; he was content about that, too. In his mind it kept men on their toes, efficient, and efficiency was his god. He would never make an Admiral, a great and successful leader of fleets and men, but what he did not know of driving a destroyer it was not much use asking the next man about.

This was normally a pleasant time, with the dangers of daylight behind you, dinner and sleep ahead. Dalziel felt neither pleased nor relaxed; he felt guilty.

Not too much, or he would never have done what he had, bringing the ship out on her own. And the flotilla was safe, back there at MacArthur's head-quarters. Dalziel's sense of guilt was directed solely at himself; he was alone out here because he had a longing to be alone: just a few hours away from the carping nag of worry and responsibility—expected and waited for, even if not actual.

There was the sighting report from that American Catalina, of course, vague and indeterminate, but the real reason for his darting off on the hunt was this urge to be in control of and responsible for just one ship. He believed he would benefit from the break, a fair enough assumption. And after all—and this was the prime consideration—the flotilla was safe. It never occurred to him to worry

that *Whelp* might not be. She was his ship, his weapon, tried and true. If it were too dangerous for her to fight, she could run, and there was nothing up here capable of out-pacing a modern fleet destroyer. Aircraft? Of course. But there was some element of risk always, everywhere. A man could miss his step on a ladder and break his neck...

Thus, in his cabin, Dalziel mentally justified his action, and the sense of guilt dwindled.

He finished the coffee and sat on the settee, rifling through a magazine four months old, and now his nose became titillated by the aroma from chops grilling under the competent care of Petty Officer Steward Taylor. He had already established the identity of the garnishing—mashed dehydrated potatoes, tinned peas, and fresh cabbage which Taylor had by some miracle of blandishment obtained from ashore that day.

Yet, not really miraculous, even though the pantry refrigerator now held enough cabbage to last three or four days, some tomatoes, and even a couple of lettuce, flown in from Townsville by an American aircraft. But it would be stiff luck for the captain—and Taylor—if he happened to ask for that bottle of Scotch tucked away, for then he would find that half of its contents had miraculously evaporated.

But Taylor was not unduly worried. The captain hardly ever drank at sea, and certainly nothing so alcoholically inclined as Scotch. Before the details of this peculiar but effective bartering could be discovered, the ship should be in a port where the bottle's deficiency could be made good. And anyway, Taylor would have justified himself if called upon to do so, tomatoes and lettuce were better for a man than whisky. The American quartermaster-sergeant in Hollandia might have disputed that contention, but that was no concern of Taylor's.

Nor did Dalziel, being an experienced destroyer-driver, concern himself with the origin of those fresh greens; had it been a Pavlova, complete with fresh passionfruit and cream, he might seriously have wondered about the price—Admiral Nelson managed all right with one blind eye, but when it came to food-providing stewards, it were better to be blind, deaf and dumb. The eye does not see, so the heart

does not grieve—nor the stomachs of destroyer captains.

No lack of efficiency was involved; the contrary, in fact, with initiative added. Dalziel was content to smell, and anticipate his dinner. By no means a meal for a steak-denying gourmet, perhaps, though the sailors down below, fronting up to their tinned sausages laid upon with tinned tomatoes, might have judged otherwise. It was a simple meal, yet Taylor was garnishing it with the sauce of his own cunning skill, and Dalziel, out here at last on his own, was looking forward to it.

It was unfortunate that the waiting diner never tasted his dinner.

Dalziel was gazing at a coloured photograph of a girl whose strapless bodice was demonstrably defying the pull of gravity, and excusably thinking other than gastronomical thoughts, when a buzzer sounded sharply behind his head. His eyes, but not now his thoughts, still on the seductress, he reached up and pulled down the tube. “Captain.”

It was not yet eight o’clock. Northam the first-lieutenant had the last dogwatch.

“Radar contact, sir, right ahead. Two, possibly three ships, range fourteen miles, course all-same ours. It’s a bit difficult at this range, but they’d seem to be doing about eight knots.”

Like his Leader, Dalziel had also been trained by Sainsbury, and in the flotilla. But his mind was incisive anyway, and swiftly it interpreted Northam’s facts. That was no heavy fighting squadron ahead, not at eight knots and returning indefinite radar echoes, nor were there friendly ships in the area. It was a convoy, it was lightly escorted, and it was Japanese. Chance had brought him up with what the Catalina had sighted.

Chance... ? He was out here deliberately. How would he explain his presence to Bentley, if anything went wrong? The questions were harshly obvious: why hadn’t he sent Benson or Cartwright on such a vague report, why had he left the flotilla?

But he was here, so were the Japs, and Northam was waiting.

“Go on ten knots and maintain course,” Dalziel rasped. “Close-up for action.”

He grabbed up his steel helmet and strode out. He was not feeling hungry.

Lieutenant Northam was one of the few who liked Dalziel, maybe because of the attraction of opposites. He had been in the ship only six months, which was more than long enough for him to appreciate Dalziel's calibre, but he was a slouch-shouldered, amiable bear of a man, an unflappable type against whom Dalziel's sardonic shafts were blunted. The result, of course, was that now they were rarely directed at him. They made a good team; the one saturnine, incisive, the other stoically calm.

Dalziel stepped on to the bridge. Men tensed, but Northam spoke in his normal deep rumble.

"Now and again we get the third ship," he said, his rotund face faintly limned by the radar scanner, "but she must be about a mile ahead of the other two. Escort, probably."

Have you noticed how celluloid captains on their "bridges" continually raise and lower their binoculars like yo-yos? Here the range was fourteen miles, with no moon. This captain peered into the repeat radar scanner.

"That escort could be a destroyer," he murmured. "Though I doubt if she's a large one with such a small convoy. Now where have they come from?"

It was a general question. Carefully, the navigator answered:

"Supplying Jap troops in Dutch New Guinea, sir? They've unloaded, and now they're heading back to the Moluccas—or any one of the clutch of islands to the east of them."

"*Clutch* of islands? An appropriate term for a navigating officer. However, I think you could be right, Pilot."

But it was the fact of the convoy's presence, more than its reason, which interested Dalziel. At thirty knots *Whelp* was overhauling swiftly. He examined the tiny glowing blips on the screen with care, then he said:

"We will assume that ship in the van is the escort. The other two will be merchantmen, probably a couple of thousand tons apiece. Warships wouldn't dawdle like that around here."

"Unless they're luring us in," Northern rumbled.

"They were at that speed when we made contact," Dalziel decided after a moment's speculation. "Unless their radar is superior, which I doubt, then they haven't contacted us, and they're steaming at eight

knots because they can't make any better."

"That sounds reasonable," Northam agreed.

"Thank you," Dalziel said drily. "The whole team is in agreement?" Silence. "Good. Now we have to do the dirty on those boys, and do it fast, especially the escort."

The word "boys" was at harsh variance with his tone. Bentley had commented once that Dalziel turned into a well-oiled machine, like an automatic gun, when the enemy was sighted. *Whelp's* bridge team had not heard that assessment, though they would have agreed with it, and so they felt no surprise at the bristly menace in his tone. He was not only an efficient killer, but a dedicated one. In fact, Northam suspected he liked killing, and that his sardonic attitude was an attempt to cover this primeval urge.

Uncaring just then of what anyone thought, Dalziel stared out into the moonless night, seeing nothing at that range, judging and deciding, feeling his heart quicken with the knowledge that three enemy ships were there. The bridge team waited.

"Let's assume," Dalziel went on, "that the crews of the merchantmen are tired. If they've unloaded a full cargo then they'll have worked flat-out to finish by dark so they can have a full night's run to get clear. Coming up astern, we can reasonably expect that the lookouts' attention is mainly for ahead and on either bow."

There was a lesson there, he realised, but none of these officers was in need of it.

"So we stand a good chance of getting in close before they sight us. But God knows what else is around them. A sighting signal might be nasty for us. Our attack must be quick, and definite. Torpedoes, then." He paused suggestively. Pilot turned his head.

"Torps!"

A gangly youngster came from the side of the bridge. He was not much more than twenty, with innocuous eyes, but those eyes had aimed torpedoes at a Japanese heavy-cruiser squadron.

"Yes, sir?"

Dalziel outlined the enemy's positions quickly—the blips were larger now.

"It looks as if we're still unsighted. We'll come up fast, then slow down for more accurate shooting. I want one torpedo each for

the merchantmen, at close range. Can do?"

"I think so, sir," answered Torps solemnly.

Considering Dalziel's passion for efficiency, his question was as rhetorical as its answer. Another captain named Holland—his efficiency gained in a vastly different fashion—would have capped his orders with "Got it?" And Bentley, "Understood?" Different ships, different cap tallies, as the saying goes.

"We'll handle the escort depending on his size and movements, probably with gunfire. But I want the merchantmen hit hard before they can start transmitting. They'll have big holds and they'll be empty. You should be able to cause quite a fuss with your tin-fish."

His cynical tone said, You'd *better*.

"Yes, sir."

"Number One." It was always that—never One, or James, or even Northam. The use of his Christian name, which was Barry, would be unthinkable.

"Sir?"

While he had been talking, Dalziel's eyes—they were palely grey, a disturbing contrast to his dark visage—alternated between the radar scope and the horizon. His night glasses were specifically designed, and very powerful.

"I have them in visual," he said quietly, then lowered the glasses. "Number One, I want the guns laid on the base of the bridge structures. Their transmitters should be in there."

"Aye aye, sir."

None of Dalziel's listeners even thought to consider that guns could easily sink merchantmen without wasting expensive torpedoes. In daylight, with the sea plainly clear and time on their side, fine. But there could be other enemy ships out there in the dark, hull-down and with slender top-masts returning no radar echoes, but well within the range of shortwave radio transmissions. This was a job for swift, hull-splitting torpedoes.

"Right," Dalziel said crisply. "Load all guns with semi-armour piercing shell. Quietly."

"Aye aye, sir."

Northam passed the word to the captain's messenger, now doing action-duty on the director phone. The control officer spoke to his

guns; they were loaded without the normal explosions from gun-captains. Dalziel heard the faint thump of power rammers, and the slither of steel as the twin breech-blocks closed on B-mounting. The torpedo tubes were already loaded, their natural state with the ship at sea.

With the plan of action formulated and the ship prepared to fight, Pilot was back at the binnacle and Torps over beside his pronged sight. Dalziel stood in the starboard forward corner of the bridge—the enemy would be engaged to starboard—and Northam walked over beside him. No other officer would have dared this, even if his action station had allowed him to.

“The Japs must need supplies badly,” Northam said, in a tone of a man discussing the quality of a cigarette. “Those ships took a pretty big risk. We’re not all that far from Hollandia.”

Dalziel nodded. He felt no actual fear himself, though certainly apprehension as to the outcome of the action, but he wondered if Northam did; could that bluff, casual tone be a cover-up. If so, it was bloody well done.

Then he forewent pointless speculation. He needed to be as much on the ball here as he’d been with the flotilla against those cruisers. *Whelp* was on her own—no four ships in company with Sainsbury’s *Tempest* in the offing, no Leader to make the tactical decisions. Just to shoot angry questions...

His mind veered away from that speculation, too, back to the present situation.

It looked a sure thing, one modern Fleet destroyer, undetected, against merchantmen and a small escort. But war at sea was never certain. There was only the certainty that overconfidence or slackening of concentration could bring swift disaster. *Whelp* was more powerful than those ships, fast and heavily-gunned; but at sea, at war, you are certain at your peril.

So Dalziel’s mind was as taut as piano-wire as his ship closed the enemy three. In the plan he was following he was sure of only two equations—neither the Jap’s speed nor course had altered. And then, with a jolt in his guts, another equation clanged for recognition by his mind.

How did he know that escort was small? It was purely an

assumption based on the size of the convoy. She could be newer, bigger than *Whelp*, coincidentally due for a return to base, taking the convoy with her. Its size might have nothing to do with hers.

And the merchantmen themselves; armed raiders were not the sole prerogative of the German Navy. Those two “innocent” ships could mount five-inch guns, ten between them. Even torpedo tubes. The *Sydney* had gone like that.

But there was one vital difference between these ships possibly luring him on, as Northam had mentioned, and what had happened to *Sydney*. If these three knew of his presence, then they knew he was enemy, and they would know that he knew. *Sydney* had steamed close to an allegedly Dutch ship. To him, those three ships were definitely Japanese; they knew he would come up with his guns trained and loaded, his tubes ready, and with one intent.

Then, Dalziel worried, if they were armed raiders, if the escort were larger than she seemed, why were they steaming on regardless, allowing danger to approach so close without taking avoiding action?

Was it because they realised they could not outrun a destroyer, but could easily outfight her once she got in close enough?

Or was it because this worry nagging at him concerned Bentley more than it did the Japs? His reaction, not theirs? Probably those ships were exactly as they seemed to be, slipping hopefully back to base through the night.

There was one other certainty in this soon-to-be violent scheme of things—shortly he would know.

“Position?” he called sharply to Pilot.

“Course and speed unchanged, sir. Range four miles.”

Surely they’d been sighted! No moon, but the sky was star-bright. Through his night glasses he could see them plainly, could see even the white wash of screws, and the gentle swaying of masts and funnels in the swell. Surely, if just one man glanced astern... *Whelp*’s mast was lofty, her bridge structure and gunnery director lifted almost fifty feet above the sea.

He could see their wash, and he was showing a thirty knot bow-wave...

“Reduce to twenty knots.”

“Twenty knots, sir. Wheelhouse? One-eight-oh revolutions.”

Dalziel kept his glasses up, speaking from beneath them.

“Tubes?”

“All tubes standing-by, sir.” That had been an unnecessary question, Dalziel realised. Where the hell did he think the tube crews were? Playing mahjong on the messdeck?

He castigated himself so vehemently, knowing the reason for his nerviness, that his thoughts almost became vocal. *Come on, come on! It's two merchantmen and a small escort. Nothing else, no tricks, no cunning. You've got in so close because they haven't seen you. That's all. Forget Bentley. Pull your bloody finger out.* “Torpedo sight bearing,” Torps called quietly. With the words, with the knowledge that action was imminent, Dalziel's worry dissolved. He returned to normal. His meshing thoughts became calm and cold and precise. Not turning his head, not for an instant taking his magnified sight from the white-washed shape so close on the starboard bow, he ordered: “Broadsides.”

Down at the guns gloved hands swept up beneath the electrical firing interceptors. Dalziel could not hear the six clicks of contact, but plainly he heard the reports from B-mounting a few feet below him. “Left gun ready.” “Right gun ready.” He knew *Whelp* was ready.

But not yet. Not quite yet. A matter of seconds yet and the first target would be broadside-on. There was his bow surging level with the other stern, an ugly, bulking, practical stern, built for carrying, not racing. Now it was moving on past a deckhouse, approaching the funnel. God, hadn't they seen them yet!

Easy, easy. Why the surprise? Wasn't this just how you'd planned it? The crew tired from unloading, the lookouts tired, unworried about water they'd already steamed over?

But not so tired as all that!

“Enemy altering course to starb'd!” Pilot shouted.

“Open fire!”

Six 4.7s—trained, loaded, laid almost horizontal—belched.

The eyes of every officer on the bridge were magnetised to the target. But not Dalziel's. He was the captain, he had brought his ship into firing position, and now it was up to the specialists. The captain had other considerations.

First he laid his glasses on the escort, his main contender. He

heard the guns fire again, felt B-mounting's blast, but his attention was for the escort's wake. That would tell him everything.

The escort's wake was still straight, an unbending arrow of dim white. Swiftly his glasses trained right and rested on the leading merchantman. She also was on her original course.

Dalziel's mind exulted. Then it wasn't a trap. The Japs had been caught with their kimonos down. The officer of the watch of the last ship had sighted them and altered course on his own initiative, without informing his consorts.

And you couldn't blame him, Dalziel thought with harsh satisfaction, seeing at last the vicious red gouts spewing from her bridge structure. Only a trained warship's officer, and a warship's bridge team, could have instantly carried out the many duties required upon sighting an enemy ship close by.

Dalziel was shifting his attention back to the second ship in line when a cavernous boom slapped against his eardrums. He didn't bother to look; he knew he could forget his first target. Dalziel concentrated on the next.

Even at twenty knots *Whelp* was overhauling at a superior twelve knots. The distance between targets was small. Before the dumbfounded Jap could get his rudder over, Torps' voice came, high and clear:

"Fire two."

And the director control officer, who had already ordered. "Shift target, next ship in line", said:

"Shoot."

The gunnery problem was elementary. She carried equipment which if operating normally could land her shells on a thirty-knot target ten miles off. The range here was a fraction of that. The barrels were almost level. The shells hit.

The torpedo-firing was something different. It required a very nice calculation. Shells from a high-velocity naval gun travel at two thousand miles per hour; torpedoes at forty. The range was against Torps in two values. Because it was so close, the *Whelp* travelling faster than her target, the bearing was altering very quickly, and thus the deflection. As well, if the torpedo did not have the correct depth-setting on, it would run clear under the Jap, for at that range it could

be past before regaining the right depth after its initial plunge into the sea.

Torps calculated, and allowed for, these values precisely. He was the pupil of a tough master. The torpedo ran straight and the second ship took nearly half a ton of Torpex fair in her empty guts. She was savaged by a wound thirty feet long.

Now Dalziel had no need to worry about reduced speed or deflection. The escort ship was of too shallow a draught, and too nippy, for torpedoes. The final engagement would be gunnery. "Full-ahead together."

Engine-room repeat bells were still clanging when the signal yeoman reported: "Escort altering course towards." That meant to port, to cross *Whelp's* bows. It was either a clever move, Dalziel reflected swiftly, or else the result of confusion. Clever if the Jap were turning to escape the fate of his charges, for thus he would make the destroyer also turn to port before she could fire torpedoes, and so gain time.

But the Jap should realise he was too small to invite a torpedo. As it was, in turning to cross *Whelp's* bows he was opening the whole length of his ship to entry by shells. Confusion, Dalziel decided.

The four forward guns bellowed.

In the few seconds before the shells finished their run, Dalziel had identified the class and type of his broadside-on enemy. He was helped by the initial assumption that she would be small with such a convoy, but identification would have been almost instant anyway.

In nearly all destroyers the break of the fo'c'sle, that part where the higher forward section cuts down to the lower after part, is abreast or a little abaft the bridge. But the ship in Dalziel's glasses had the break of her fo'c'sle quite noticeably *ahead* of the bridge. Between bridge and fo'c'sle was a well-deck, as in a merchant ship.

There was only one type of Japanese destroyer with a silhouette like that.

Kuri-class, he thought. Just under eight hundred tons, only three 4.7s, but thirty-one knots. She was shorter than *Whelp*, and with her power and much lighter weight would be able to turn more quickly.

Then he realised that it didn't seem to matter if she could turn fast or slow.

The director control officer had her. He held her and he punched broadside after broadside into her thin skin. The range was so helpful that almost every shell of those four-gun broadsides struck home. Bright sparkles of red glittered down her length, and then leaping flares of red licked at the night as her funnel split open. And so far she had not fired a shot in return for that cruel intake.

Dalziel felt not the slightest shiver of pity. He felt a cold sort of excitement and considerable relief, but no pity. Now he was the dedicated killer, yet there was the other thing, which even in a kindly captain would have stifled pity.

The Jap carried four tubes and three guns as large as his enemy's. It needed just one shell in *Whelp's* forward magazine.

Dalziel thought of altering to port and bringing his after mounting into action. But that would open out his own length, and the two forward mountings were doing well enough.

They were doing splendidly, he realised, though no man could have detected this feeling from the hard, almost vicious set of his face. The loading was smooth and as fast as he could remember; between them the four guns were firing sixty rounds a minute. Shouted orders, clang of loading trays, thud of breech-blocks, hoot of fire-buzzers, the multiple bellow of all guns firing precisely together, then the brassy ring as the empty cordite cylinders ejected onto the steel decks.

To Dalziel it was all as beautiful as a designed orgasm—swords of yellow flame slashing the night, clouds of acrid smoke billowing back over the bridge, repeated roars that numbed the ears. For this, day after day and in night-time too, he had trained them. It was pandemonium—disciplined, ordered, controlled, and dreadfully effective. Then why was the Jap still there? Burning, smoking, alight in a dozen places, the destroyer was still there, still turning towards. What was holding her up? There must be scores of holes punched in her hull, that vicious flail must have lacerated the human content of her upper-deck. Unless, Dalziel thought, she's out of control. The Jap was not out of control. Even a *Kuri-class* rates more than 17,000 horsepower. That output requires considerable furnace heat. Being small, the base of her funnel where *Whelp's* shells had burst was only a short distance above the white-hot flames wreathing in her

furnaces. For practical purposes the furnaces were discharging their fiery breath almost straight on to her upper-deck. The illumination outlined her with ghastly vividness.

In the reflected glare Dalziel could see her forepart, which itself was framed whitely by the branching bow-waves. He saw that the stem had stopped swinging. Still at high speed, the stem was driving straight for *Whelp*.

“He’s going to ram!” Northam shouted. Pilot, too, had seen. God knows it was plain enough. He stood on the grating, crouched forward, one hand steadying on the compass ring and the other gripped round the throat of the wheelhouse voice pipe. His mouth was close to the pipe, but his eyes were fixed on Dalziel, waiting.

Dalziel felt no relief now. It had evaporated under the heat of this sudden and unexpected threat. He might not have his ship simply damaged; he might well lose her.

But all this concerned a small part of his mind, and briefly. Incisive, brittle, his orders came—not to the wheel, but to the engines. “Full power both engines.”

Obediently Pilot passed the order. The bells clanged. She was at thirty knots and she answered the call for maximum output swiftly. Her plates vibrated with the force of that enormous thrust, 40,000 superheated horsepower.

Still crouched over, pilot snatched a look at the enemy. The Jap was less than half a mile off, belching fire and belting to hit. If both ships maintained their present courses the Jap would strike smack amidships on the port side, a vehement meeting which would drive her stem right into the engine-room.

Then Pilot understood Dalziel’s delay of the wheel order. As of now, the Jap could match *Whelp*’s avoiding turn; he too could swing, and still hit. They had to wait till the last possible second— “Stand by for manoeuvring,” Dalziel said. Pilot warned the coxswain, while he wondered at the icy levelness of the captain’s tone; his own guts were cringing with fear. It never occurred to him that he, also, had spoken calmly. But that was through the force of example, and right then Pilot was singularly uninterested in analysis.

Dalziel stood a few yards distant in the starboard forward corner of the bridge, the captain’s corner. His hands gripped the windbreak

and his pale eyes stared unblinkingly at his enemy.

He had no need of the compass. There was no time for the usual checking of bearings on a collision course, for measurements to determine if the other ship were drawing aft or ahead. And no point to all that, for the other ship was intent on collision.

This was all eye, and experience, and judgment. The eye judging distance and speed, and experience judging how quickly a ship could swing under full rudder at thirty-six knots.

This was the moment. This was the supreme and final responsibility for which he had been trained, and had trained himself through the years. This was to be the justification of why he had been given his command of a ship and all its privileges; or else proof of his unfitness to command.

At this climactic moment there was one man in *Whelp*. The responsibility for that final and single order was absolutely his. Her guns were firing and her screws were thrashing, performing their ordered jobs, but her life depended upon one man.

Then Dalziel snapped, "Hard-a-starb'd!" and then there were two men.

Never before in his life had this second man failed to repeat a wheel order. Until now.

He had delivered the demand for full power, he had been warned to stand by for manoeuvring, which meant an emergency was jumping upon them, and a less experienced man than *Whelp's* coxswain would have known from these things that another ship was trying to ram. He understood, also, the reason for the captain's waiting. The order had to be given at the last moment, and it had to be executed with the utmost rapidity.

So that instead of wasting even a second in shouting the repeat of his order at the voice pipe, the coxswain bent his body far to the right and jerked his right hand down towards the deck.

The wheel spun.

Whelp weighed almost two thousand tons. To angle her rudder across a torrent of water rushing against it at forty miles per hour, great force was required. No man could have done this unaided. She had power-steering.

Clever, cunning, the coxswain's hand caught the spokes again

before they had stopped moving under his initial thrust, and thrust down. He did this again and again, very quickly, his hand like a striking snake. The wheel did not stop spinning until it jerked against the stops, and the brass pointer on the helm indicator was jammed against the figure 35.

Now *Whelp's* rudder was angled at thirty-five degrees from the fore-and-aft line, as far as it would go. A larger angle would not have increased her rate of turn, but would have hampered her speed.

It was a big rudder; like the screws, for her size it was huge. Its strong, steely face met the rush of water steadily, not giving an inch to that massive pressure, held fixed by the steering engine. Something had to give. The stern slewed to port, the stem sliced round to starboard.

She leaned, not only under the inertia of the turn but in obedience to the tremendous thrust against the rudder. She leaned, then she tilted, and then she reeled; far over until the sea rushed in like a cataract over her low iron-deck amidships. Each guardrail stanchion down there magically had its own bow-wave, and rope reels fronted the onrush with white faces.

On X-mouting aft, the layer and trainer were held securely in their seats. At this target they had not fired a shot. The rest of the gun crew held on to whatever they could grab hold of. The gun-captain was behind his loaded charges, high up on the weather side, his hands behind him gripping the top guardrail and his body bent forward like a bow.

The gun-captain was a seaman petty officer. In normal times he was captain of the quarterdeck, responsible for a third of the ship's working efficiency and its cleanliness. But in a destroyer in the Pacific times were not often normal, and Petty Officer Rainer spent almost as much time at his guns as he did down on the deck. He knew them backwards, and he knew precisely what he had to do now.

Northam and the gunner's mate had trained him, with the overriding example of Dalziel's fetish for efficiency always close in the background. Yet Rainer was himself a quick-thinking man; one reason why he was now behind his guns, in charge, instead of hanging on with a shell under one arm.

He was a thin, loose-limbed man with a normally pleasant face

whose expression, its owner being gunnery, could change in an instant. He had been given no orders. In giving him command of the twin after guns it had been assumed that in a moment like this he would need no orders. The assumption was justified. In a strident, carrying bellow, Petty Officer Rainer gave voice to his snap decision.

“Local control! Point of aim waterline below the funnel! Rapid broadsides. Fire!”

That order to fire was more permissive than executive. The target was rushing past a few yards away, thus altering the bearing rapidly, and the trainer had to give the hydraulic pump full belt so as to swing the tonnage of mounting round in time.

But the mountings were fitted with dual-purpose guns, designed to engage aircraft as well as ships, and so designed to swing quickly. In a swift arc the two barrels trained, and then, momentarily, steadied. Both oily snouts were aimed at the frothing white below the flaming funnel; past that white, past the thin side, were the destroyer’s boiler-rooms.

On the bridge after he gave the order Dalziel worried if he had left it just that second too late, the delay which would allow the Jap’s stem to crush in against his screws and rudder.

He had felt like this before, and he would again. There was always doubt; for although he felt confident in the handling of his own ship, there was in this case that other imponderable about which he could do nothing—the intentions of the enemy captain.

Dalziel’s mind, when he had made the decision and given the orders, had been glacially calm. This state had been induced as much by training as by natural aptitude. For years as a subordinate he’d had instilled in him the need for calmness when ordering a fast destroyer about, and as a commander he had practised it.

But now, with the ship swinging, with the Jap rushing on, and with nothing more he could do but wait, Dalziel saw that spuming stem driving for his stern and he felt a glacial cold, not in his brain but in his guts.

At just that instant Bentley was not in his thoughts, concerned as they were with more intimate and harsher dangers. Fires and hurts regardless, the Jap must be doing close to thirty knots. Eight hundred tons of steel striking at thirty knots could carve the stern off her.

Even if she did not sink, *Whelp* would be left as useless and immobile as if she were stranded on a reef.

At this instant in the progression of his thoughts, Dalziel suddenly had the flotilla-leader forcibly in mind.

The forward guns had ceased firing, their loading cycle broken by the acuteness of her heel. Before they could reload the target would be past. Close, one careering round, the other thrusting forward, and the two ships fought their battle in silence.

Dalziel had decided that the Jap would just manage to catch his stern when the silence was broken.

The sound was brief and deep, from that distance more of a roar than an ear-punching slam. X-mounting was much further from the bridge than the forward guns. The ships were so close that, staring at the Jap, Dalziel caught the flash of guns in the corner of his eye. Automatically he waited for the flash of arrival against the target, but he saw nothing.

Surely they could not have missed, at that range... And then, quite definitely, he saw the enemy ship had slowed her speed.

The gunlayer of X-mounting had heard plainly enough Rainer's orders. But he, too, was savagely trained by experience, and he waited till the vertical wire in the end of his telescopic sight, sweeping round under the strain of the hydraulic pump, reached the flame-spouting funnel.

He depressed his barrels a little until his horizontal wire was on the waterline, then he squeezed the brass trigger of the local-firing mechanism. It was this small movement which broke the silence.

Nor could Rainer see any evidence of his shells arrival. Not at first.

The projectiles weighed fifty pounds apiece. They were semi-armour piercing. The casings were quite strong to withstand the shock of discharge, but the noses were capped with specially hardened steel. If they had struck at long range, arriving on the target with a good deal of their initial high velocity expended, they would probably have burst on the upper-deck or against the superstructure.

But here, against this close target, they arrived at a velocity of two thousand miles per hour. Both shells bored easily in through the quarter-inch steel of the destroyer's side. Both fuses were jolted into action.

The fuses were designed to delay the explosions for only the briefest fraction of time, just sufficient for the shells to get in through the side before doing their job. And so neither captain nor gun-captain saw any evidence of their arrival. Not at first.

The pipes delivering superheated steam to a destroyer's turbines are large. They are encased in a white-painted insulating material which keeps heat in, but which is of small use for keeping jagged steel slivers out.

The shell from the right gun of X-mounting exploded a short distance from the steam pipe supplying power to the starboard engine.

The compartment was filled abruptly with a white mist: steam gains its propulsive properties from its expanding qualities. Men looked up towards the sound of the shrieking ejection, saw the whiteness, breathed in once, and died. Their bronchial tubes and lungs were shrivelled instantly to uselessness by that scalding intake; the steam was at 600 degrees F.

The explosion of the shell from the left gun was not, at first, nearly so spectacular. It burst between the ship's side and the side of the port boiler.

The boiler was thick-sided and strong. Normally, perhaps, an explosion even so close might not have ruptured that steel. But *inside* the boiler there waited an eager ally of the T. N. T. That steel was already withstanding a high-speed pressure of almost four hundred pounds per square inch.

The side of the boiler split, but not right through. For a moment, it held.

On his bridge Dalziel naturally knew nothing of these inner forces at work. He could see only that the speed had slowed, and that the Jap would miss his stern. This was more than enough to occupy him, and to replace the coldness in his guts with elation.

Whelp was nearly round now, racing at right-angles away from her enemy's course, opening the range swiftly. The distance was further enlarged by the Jap ship, still moving on to the south.

No guns were firing, for on the leaning deck the crew of X-mounting were slow to reload, and the forward guns could not bear. All lay quiet under the star-glittering sky.

Then the sky thundered.

Luckily for Dalziel and his bridge team the sides of the compass platform and the base of the director barred the full force of that gargantuan breath. But the men of X-mounting and those at the tubes could not hear properly for hours afterwards; which was bad luck for the torpedomen, but poetic justice for the gun crew.

The thunder rolled away to silence across the sea. When they stared back astern there were no flames from the funnel; there seemed, in night glasses, to be nothing of anything.

"Boilers," rumbled Northam, and nodded with a fat satisfaction.

Dalziel was more widely perceptive.

"X-gun," he said. "One salvo, and it hit the waterline." He almost added, "Thank the Lord", but it does not do to imply even the possibility of disaster on one's own bridge, and anyway his nature precluded such a thankful admission.

"Of course," Northam agreed, nodding again, and then: "Survivors? There's sure to be some from the merchantmen."

Having come through the valley of the shadow of death, Dalziel had no intention of lingering near it, but it was satisfying to have the reason for his denying decision made so opportunely public. A buzzer sounded from the wireless-office voice pipe. Pilot answered it. He listened, then hurried over to Dalziel.

"Chief telegraphist picked up a radio transmission, sir. It was short and quick, but he thinks from the strength that it could have come from that destroyer."

"I'm sure it did," Dalziel replied grimly. "Let's get out of here. Resume course for base."

"Aye aye, sir."

The violent evasive action had swung *Whelp* round towards the position of the merchantmen. By the time Pilot had got the wheel off and straightened her they were close.

"One's gone," Northam muttered, "but the other's afloat. A couple of broadsides?"

Dalziel was not so much concerned by the fact of the radio signal as by the reason behind it. The Jap might have simply sent a conventional S.O.S., but he might also have known of heavy friends in the vicinity. Dalziel had no wish to prove the latter possibility.

"No, she's well listed. She should go before morning."

“Survivors off the port bow,” reported the signal yeoman.

Dalziel strode to that side of the bridge and looked down. Battle had been joined, and concluded; his killer instinct satisfied. He had no inclination for men, alive or dead, to be mixed up with his screws. His dedication stopped short of brutality.

But the survivors were clear to port. In the starlight he could pick out the black blobs of heads, and the occasional lighter patch of an upturned face staring at its destroyer, with here and there the small red light burning on a life-jacket. An arm waved, whether cursing or in supplication he could not tell.

He was tempted to stop; activated by the magnanimity of his own relief. The ocean would seem incredibly vast and lonely and hostile to those men so close to it. They would be shocked with the suddenness and savagery of their fate. Before, enemies, now they looked simply pitiful, bobbing helplessly on the dark face of the sea.

Yet if he stopped there could be a malignant eye, in no degree helpless, examining his fool behaviour through a periscopic lens. Or half a dozen bow-waves hurrying from over the horizon. Dalziel easily overcame his momentary temptation.

“They will have boats and rafts,” he growled, impelled in the presence of less harsh natures to justify himself even through the validity of his reasoning. “And plenty of flotsam.”

“And maybe plenty of friends soon,” added Pilot, remembering the conviction in the chief telegraphist’s voice.

But to Dalziel this smacked of connivance in his own conniving; he could do without a junior’s collaboration. His tone had a rasp in it.

“We’re on-course yet?”

“Ah...” Pilot peered at the compass. “Yes, sir, just coming on now.”

“Then report it in future.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

At this time, with violence so recently behind them, the navigator was not analytically inclined. In any case, he had been a trifle remiss with the course, and to his mind this was sufficient justification for the captain’s attitude. He took no offence at it.

Dalziel could not have cared less. There was another

consideration claiming his attention. For some time his ship had been cavorting over the sea, altering courses and speeds, and this was hardly conducive to accurate navigation. He had a navigating officer, but the ultimate responsibility was the captain's.

For the next few minutes Dalziel was busy at the chart.

When, finally, he turned the ship over to Torps, officer of the first watch, he said:

"Yeoman, take the signal."

Dalziel talked deliberately, outlining all relevant details of the action, while the yeoman scribbled busily. It was a short report, but an experienced reader could readily fill in the gaps.

"Have that transmitted when the ship is fifty miles from Hollandia," he finished.

"Aye aye, sir. Usual address?"

"Yes." Dalziel hesitated, then he did a brave thing. "*Repeated Wind Rode*," he said.

"Aye aye, sir."

The Yeoman's was the only comment. Nobody else but its originator appreciated the significance of having that signal repeated to the flotilla-leader. Just then their whole appreciation lay in the fact of their being still alive, and able to steam back to safety.

"Sea-cabin, Torps."

"Sea-cabin, aye aye, sir."

Dalziel went below. Taylor the steward was not put out when his lord said:

"Just coffee and a sandwich, please."

Taylor went about caring for Dalziel's reduced appetite with a neutral expression, and then he turned down the sheets on his bunk, and when the captain had finished showering and was in his pyjamas, Taylor in his little pantry ate thoughtfully and without expression the chops, the mashed potatoes and the hardly-gained fresh cabbage.

Ignorant of this, his appetite for loneliness more than satisfied, Dalziel turned in.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I'M GLAD you've come in just now, Doctor," the ward sister said. Her expression was not worried, but sober.

Bentley knew that expression, usually worn by Pilot when the captain had strolled on to the bridge. *So-and-so Reefs ahead of us, sir, and that nimbus might confuse the navigational radar.* No real trouble, yet...

"This is Captain Bentley: Sister Clifford."

"How d'you do, sir?"

"Good evening, Sister."

"Mrs. Nelson?" Merrie asked.

"Yes."

"Symptoms?" Merrie's tone was crisp. To some degree Bentley was seeing her as she had him with the soldier; this was a different Merrie.

"Temperature's spiky and she's been vomiting," answered Sister Clifford. "Diarrhoea too, but no rigours yet. I've just taken her pulse—one hundred and ten, her systolic close to a hundred."

The words were almost staccato—a few experienced sentences indicating the identifiable danger signs of the disordered metabolism which was circulating toxic poisons through Mrs. Nelson's body. Her baby was almost at full term, and Merrie knew her trouble was nephritic toxemia; she knew also that if the pregnancy were not removed there would be no improvement in the mother's condition. Those insidious poisons circulating through her blood-stream would eventually result in an epileptiform seizure, the dreaded convulsions of eclampsia.

But Merrie had to be clinchingly sure; this was one of the reasons for her rounds tonight.

"Put her up in lithotomy, Sister. I want to do another vag. examination. While I'm at it, check the operating list for tomorrow morning. We might need a theatre, setup for Caesarian section. There's someone with Mrs. Nelson?"

"Nurse Moreton."

"Good. I'll be there in a moment." The sister smiled at Bentley and went into a private room. To Bentley it seemed like a goodbye

smile. He said: "I'd better shove off."

"Mmmm?"

Bentley repeated his statement, adding, "I'll leave the car for you. See you at home."

Merrie came out of her preoccupation. "No, that's all right. I won't be long. You can wait in here."

She opened a door. Bentley stepped into an office. To his mild surprise Merrie followed him.

"Doctor Warren's warren," she smiled. "I have to wash-up first."

"Oh." Bentley remembered something. "Tell the switchboard where I am, will you?"

He liked the way she lifted a phone at once and obeyed his request. There was intelligent discipline here, too...

Merrie slipped into a white coat. She washed her hands at the basin, and looked at the mirror's sober comment on her face. But only her eyes saw the face; her mind was diagnostically and anatomically meshing. Bentley sensed this. Watching her in the mirror, he said: "Is this the Caesarian section you mentioned?"

"Yes."

"A major job?"

The mirror reflected her small smile. "They all are. A minor operation is minor to everybody except the patient."

"That sounds like a hospital cliché."

"It is. It's also true."

Bentley leaned back against Doctor Warren's desk and crossed his arms. His eyes patrolled. The desk was neat, like the whole room; like his cabin, or the chart room. Warren must see his pregnant mothers in here. There would be the joy of growing life; and drama, Mrs. Nelson, and sometimes death... Suddenly he said:

"I'd like to see you at work."

"You have, during rounds."

"Those women? They looked fitter than me."

"Some of them looked at you, the wretches. Not that I blame them. You look sweet in civilian clothes, just like a doctor."

"I feel like a blasted tailor's dummy."

Merrie smiled, remembering Big Bill's similar description. Bentley said:

"I mean really at work."

"Not this case, Peter. Mrs. Nelson would not be amused."

Her smile dropped off, replaced by thoughtfulness.

"This Caesarian thing," Bentley said, tracking her changed mood. "It's a complicated job?"

"In principle it's quite simple." Merrie was rinsing her hands clear of soap. "But the actual work can be damned difficult. So much depends on the imponderables, what Doctor Warren calls the mystical equations. There's the state of the patient's health, her will to live, how much she wants the baby, the strength a diseased female frame can rake up to fight the hardest fight of all. But in this case there's one equation we have no doubt about whatever—Mrs. Nelson's courage."

Change a few words here and there, Bentley thought, and you have a related picture of a ship's crew going into action. The imponderables of weather and enemy movements, the mystical equations of will to fight and courage. The correlation so impressed his mind, made imaginative by his surroundings, that he said on impulse:

"Who's the enemy here?"

Merrie looked startled for a moment. "Toxemia," she answered, "poisoning from the kidneys."

"Poor woman. All that, and a baby too. I hope to hell she comes through. Both of 'em."

His attitude pleased Merrie; he seemed to have forgotten his own worries. If he could be kept occupied... She hesitated, then almost at once castigated her stupidity; in the wards he easily passed for a doctor, but there was no chance whatever of his seeing what she had to do with Mrs. Nelson.

Merrie dried her hands, pushed the towel down on the rack and walked to the door, turning there to look back at him.

"I won't be long, darling."

Bentley wagged his head. "Take all the time you like. I'm the least of your worries."

Merrie opened the door on to the quiet night corridor of the hospital and Peter Bentley and his worries fled into the back recesses of her mind. In front, there was room only for Mrs. Nelson.

She was in the lithotomy position when Merrie entered the room, on her back with legs raised and apart, ready for the examination. Merrie nodded at Nurse Moreton and took the gloves she handed her. She dug her fingers expertly down into the tight thin rubber and now her eyes were on Mrs. Nelson. She did not need the chart's evidence—the high temperature was indicated in the feverish flush of her damp face.

"I think we're going to have to do something about you, Mrs. Nelson," she said soberly. No falsely reassuring smiles for this woman.

"Thank God for that, Doctor," she returned. Her eyes stared up at Merrie. "I won't get the fits?"

"No. We're ahead of the convulsions. That young fellow who's causing all this... we'll get him out where he can do only good." Merrie held out her gloved hands and the nurse poured the antiseptic cream over her fingers.

"I won't hurt you much—just want to see how much you've dilated. All right?"

Mrs. Nelson nodded imperceptibly, and her eyes closed. Warily, Merrie noted; and no wonder. Then she put pointless sympathy from her mind and her fingers under the sheet went into the birth canal.

At almost exactly that moment there was another entry. A man with a face the colour of dried coffee beans and quick bright eyes came into the reception foyer. He was in uniform. He strode to the desk.

"G'night. Where can I find Captain Bentley?"

His tone was curt, his face experienced but unhandsome. The nurse was very pretty, unused to such an approach from men. She jabbed her finger at a phone on the desk and her tone matched his.

"I'll connect you."

"Belay that. I want to see him."

"Please."

"All right, all right. Please."

"That's better. You're not on a ship now, you know."

"Strike me up a bloody gum tree... Look, sister, this is important. Where is he?"

The nurse thought he meant "Sister". Mollified, she told him:

“He’s on the first floor. Turn left out of the lift and you’ll find him in Doctor Warren’s office near the end of the passage. And don’t go thundering all over the place. This is a hospital, remember...”

He was already striding for the stairs.

When the knock sounded Bentley unconsciously gave his normal brief answer; in this case it happened to be the right one.

“Come.”

The door opened and Bentley saw who was standing there and alarm tightened his mind.

“What is it, Yeoman? Trouble?”

It had to be, to bring Ferris out here, but Ferris said, coming into the office:

“Not really, sir. Just that you wanted to know at once if anything came from the flotilla. This did, just now.”

Bentley’s hand started to dart out. He slowed it in time to take instead of snatch the signal. He read Dalziel’s report swiftly; then, with no mention of damage contained in it, he read the signal again slowly, while his mind enlarged, with easy and worrying facility, the few terse sentences into a volume of knowledge; and round his mind caroomed five words: *The enemy tried to ram.*

Seeing what was in his face, Ferris spoke placatingly:

“A pretty successful action, sir. One hundred per cent, in fact. Two merchantmen and a destroyer sunk, all without loss.”

Bentley frowned up at him from the chair. His words seemed irrelevant. “There’s no mention of the flotilla.”

Irrelevant only to Ferris’ words. The yeoman wet his lips; he had hoped that bit wouldn’t be noticed. A stupid hope, he realised now.

“No, sir,” was all he could answer.

“Dalziel out on his own,” Bentley muttered, like a man talking to himself.

“But the flotilla must be all right, sir,” Ferris said, glad to be able to. “If it wasn’t, *that* would’ve been mentioned.” You know what I’m thinking, Bentley thought. He said:

“Thank you, Yeoman. That’s all. Log this.”

Ferris took the signal, knowing it was burned into Bentley’s brain.

“No reply, sir?”

Bentley flicked him a look, and Ferris interpreted it, pretty

accurately, as: *What should I send him? Congratulations?*

“Aye aye, sir,” said Ferris, and closed the door behind him.

Leaving less urgently than he’d entered, Ferris did not look at the reception nurse, but she noted his face, the hard set of it. Somebody’s in strife, she reflected, and then, So what? They had a hospital full of it.

Nutty’s concern lasted as far as the first pub. It wasn’t his bloody pigeon, he reflected; if that sour-faced bastard up there was wet enough to take his ship out on her own, then he could take the can for it.

Nutty stepped into the public bar. He still felt sorry for Bentley, believing now the coxswain’s diagnosis of the Old Man’s prickly attitude, and so, in absentia, he gave vent to his feeling. He ordered a double rum.

CHAPTER SIX

MERRIE'S examination was not prolonged—she knew the patient's condition prior to this. She stripped off the “dirty” gloves and said to the nurse: “Mark Mrs. Nelson down for pre-operative sedative, Nurse, 1/100 grain of atropine sulphate hypodermatically.” The nurse nodded, and Merrie said: “You understand why?”

Mrs. Nelson might be listening, but she had to weigh a possible effect on her against a definite advance of the nurse's learning. “Not the technical reason, no Doctor.”

“A nurse will have to resuscitate the baby when we deliver. If we add morphine or Nembutal to the general anaesthetic, then that of course goes in part into the child. It will make the nurse's job more difficult.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Right, then.” Merrie smiled down at the damp, pain-tightened face. “I'm phoning Doctor Warren to fix a time. Sometime in the morning, probably. Just a little longer and you'll have your baby.” In answer, Mrs. Nelson barely lifted her eyelids. Stepping into the office, Merrie said: “There now, that didn't take long, did it?”

Bentley failed to answer from his position by the window, just as Merrie missed his introspective attitude. She went straight to the telephone. Her conversation was brief, which at another time might have indicated to Bentley the unknown Doctor Warren's faith in his assistant; right now Bentley was brooding over a different operation, one which had already happened.

“That's that,” Merrie said, replacing the phone. “We operate at eight in the morning.” She looked thoughtfully at Bentley's back. “Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that.”

Thinking he was addressed, Bentley turned. “Why not?”

“I mean what I said to Mrs. Nelson, telling her she would have her baby shortly. If anything goes wrong...”

“If this Warren fellow's half the surgeon you say he is, what could go wrong?”

“Peter,” she smiled, “there are only a couple of thousand things could go...” She stopped, recognising the mockery in his tone, seeing the change in his face; changed back to what it had been at dinner.

Oh God, she worried, what's brought this on?

"Is anything the matter, darling?"

"No."

"Peter, I understand now. Out on the verandah, remember?"

His face remained hard. Hers hardened to match it; maybe Mrs. Nelson's real torment had something to do with that.

"Oh for God's sake," she said, "why don't you talk about it, instead of bottling it up inside? After all, it's imagination, and that can be worse than..."

"Imagination be damned," he said, almost in a snarl. "It's fact! It's happened!"

She stared at him. "Dear Lord, not one of your ships?"

"Bloody near." His voice had lowered to a growl, seeing the concern in her eyes. "I've just had a report of the action."

"Action? Can you... tell me about it?"

He told her, filling in the gaps so that she had a clear harsh picture of that violent engagement, and the climax which had come so close to smashing Dalziel's ship to uselessness. Bentley finished, his face bitter.

"Darling, I'm sorry," was all she could say.

"He will be, when I get up there. Bloody fool, taking her out alone like that. What's he after, glory? Christ!"

She had never seen him like this. With the soldier it had been all ice and control; this was anger, naked and hot.

"But Peter," she tried to help, "he may have had a good reason for going out alone, and after all he did sink those ships."

"What reason, for God's sake? A flotilla's a flotilla, it's meant to operate as one, it's never broken up... Oh, what's the use! Are you finished here?"

"I'm finished," she said, quietly.

"Then let's get to hell out of it."

"Keep your voice down, please."

"Sorry," he said in a hissing whisper. "Would you care to lead the way, Doctor?"

"In a moment." Level and steady, her eyes held his. "Are you sleeping at home, or shall I drop you off at the ship?"

"Home. And I'm driving."

“Very well.”

She picked up her bag and gloves, putting on these looser coverings slowly, controlled fury in the deliberation of her movements; then she walked to the door, switched off the light and walked out. Passing Reception, she smiled goodnight at the nurse.

Bentley wasn't fooled. He knew something of steely rage; just then Merrie reminded him of what he had seen in a captain named Sainsbury. He knew something else; this was their first row. Damn and blast that bloody Dalziel!

But here the innate honesty of the man stiffened his self-pity into self-denigration. He was to blame. Whatever Dalziel had done was no fault of Merrie's. Chastened, he helped her into the MG, went round and slumped into the driver's seat, and smiling at her he said:

“I'm sorry, Nipper,” using his own affectionate name for her, “you've got your own worries in there.”

“Peter,” she answered, ominously quiet, “I'm getting a little tired of your attitude and your blasted ships. Please take me home.”

He let in the clutch savagely. The car jolted forward.

It is a woman's place to forgive; this is in the natural order of things, she being the stronger of the species. As witness, go no further than Mrs. Nelson—poisoned near to death, still with her other ordeal ahead of her, and still willing, and able, to surmount it.

Early next morning Merrie was on the phone again. This time she had to talk longer, and persuasively, even to the point of explaining something of her problem. But she came away from the phone smiling, and smiling she took Bentley in his breakfast.

“Rise and shine, me hearties, or the sun'll burn your eyes out. Show a leg there. How would I be as a bosun's mate?”

“My God,” he said, blinking at her, and not only from sleepiness, “you on the messdecks... C'mere.”

She put down the tray, and came, and felt nothing of his bristles, while skylarks poured forth inside her, then she disengaged and stood up. She wanted to say *Is all forgiven?* but being wise as well as strong she said instead:

“Do you have anything special on this morning?”

“I could have,” he answered huskily, “right now.”

So could she. But she placed the tray across his lap. "I'm serious, Peter."

"Well, then," giving his boyish grin, "I'd better be. No, I have nothing special on this morning."

"You could have."

"That's my line."

"Eat your breakfast. We haven't much time. The operation starts at eight, and nobody, but nobody, keeps that Warren fellow waiting. So pull the old digit out."

He roared, nearly upsetting the tray. "I didn't teach you *that*, I'm damned if I... Wait a minute." He squinted up at her. "You're going to let me see the operation?"

"Doctor Warren is. By the way, surgeons are called Mister while in the hospital. It's an old tradition, and rather highly valued, so try and remember."

"You asked him," he accused her.

"A reasonable assumption, considering he's never heard of you. Hurry, please."

"Hold on. Why the sudden change? I know. You want to occupy me, keep my mind off my blasted ships."

"Yes," she answered, simply.

After a moment he said, very quietly: "God, I love you. God knows why I deserve such a..."

"Enough of that, now," she said crisply, her eyes shining. "Will you hurry!"

"I might faint."

"Probably. Just so long as you fall away from the table. I'm leaving in half an hour."

They had passed through the Valley, Bentley driving and feeling a strange tension he had not experienced before, when Merrie spoke in a crisply assured tone; he had heard that before, during his first conscious meeting with her, after she had sutured his injured thigh.

"You might find Doctor Warren a little odd, at first," Merrie said.

"In what way?"

"He can't abide fools. Apart from that, he's naturally brusque."

"So what's new?" Bentley smiled, thinking of Sainsbury.

“He also tends to talk rather a lot while he’s working. In explanation, I mean.”

“Well, naturally, for you, seeing you’re assisting him for the first time.”

“For you, too.”

“Come again?”

“He’s quite brilliant. Don’t misunderstand me, but he likes an audience. Normally it’s professional, of course, but this morning it’s you. So please try and appear interested.”

“That,” Bentley said, feeling a shiver inside, “you need have no worries about.”

“Good. And Peter?”

“Yes, my sweet?”

“Please don’t faint.”

“That,” said Bentley, “I do not need. Obviously your knowledge of psychology is zero. As a cheerer-upper you’d make a bloody good bosun’s mate!”

“And another thing. Watch your language.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“About the fainting bit,” she went on casually. “I told him you had the Victoria Cross, so keeling over wouldn’t look so good, would it?”

“No,” he said, a bit weakly, and wished he hadn’t eaten all that breakfast. Already it seemed to have ideas about getting out.

“I’d like to go into the hospital,” Merrie said, “not past it.”

“Hell!” Bentley braked hard and swung into the staff parking area.

From then on he was in a whirl of novel activity; but ordered and designed, he noted, as on a busy bridge. A bald-headed, friendly young fellow—he learned later this was the anaesthetist—helped him into a long-sleeved white gown and canvas boots that completely covered his shoes, then gave him a mask and showed him how to tie it, with the top strings running over his ears like reins. Finally, the cap, also tied behind.

“There we are, chum. By the way, I’m Frank Drummond. Call me Bulldog and I’ll clobber you, big as you are.”

“Peter Bentley. I’ll watch it.”

“You’re Doctor Prescott’s friend, right?” *Doctor?* But they’d hardly call her *Mister*. “That’s right.”

“First time in an operating theatre?”

“Conscious, yes.”

“Hmmm. Two words of advice. On no account, absolutely on no account, touch anything, not a bloody thing. It’s not all sterile in there, but you won’t know the difference. Right?”

“Right. Where do I stand?”

“We’ll come to that. Now the second thing. If you feel like fainting, for God’s sake don’t... What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“I can see your eyes, remember.”

“Oh. Well, then, Merrie’s been on to me already about that pleasant little possibility.”

“Who the hell’s Merrie?”

“Doctor Prescott. Meredith, actually.”

“Hmmm. Sorry, chum, but the Old Man’s been on to me about it, too, so you’ll just have to hear it again. If you feel faint—cold sweat, tight band around the forehead—for God’s sake don’t topple...”

“Seasickness,” Bentley said, “symptoms of.”

“Hmmm. Okay, then. But don’t topple towards the table. In fact, get outside at the first sign. In fact, I’ll be watching for it. The forehead turns white, even under that leathery tan. But you’ll be all right. Seen a bit of action, eh?”

“A bit.”

“Hmmm.” Drummond stepped outside the dressing-room and looked through a large glass window, almost a wall. “They’ve got her all setup. Let’s go.”

Bentley shuffled down the passage, feeling awkward in the boots. Then, copying Drummond’s movements, his wide shoulders had pushed open the swing doors and the brilliantly lit theatre shone before him and his mind became a tautly receptive mesh of awareness.

“This is Captain Bentley, sir,” he heard Merrie saying, and he dragged his eyes away from the mounded mass of drapes on the table.

“Good morning, Mister Warren,” he said, the mask crinkling with his smile, just in time remembering not to put his hand out.

“Captain.” The voice was brusque, as expected, but Bentley was surprised to see, looking at him from a gnome-like face, that Warren’s eyes were almost sleepy. “Glad to have you aboard.” Now the eyes woke up, twinkling. “All right, so I watch naval films.”

“American,” Bentley said.

“Is that so? Well, well. However...” The subject of naval terminology was closed. “Drummond’s given you instructions?”

“Yes, sir.” Bentley had no hesitation about the title, even though in his own field he was as senior as Warren in his. He offered it as a mark of respect. Warren looked pleased. He said:

“I understand you have the Victoria Cross?”

Bentley saw the heads turn, and Drummond look up quickly from his anaesthetic machine. But Bentley’s forehead was bare, and Warren saw what happened there. So did Merrie.

“Didn’t mean to embarrass you, Captain,” Warren said. “We don’t meet V.C. winners every day, that’s all.” Bentley regretted his reaction, but before he could speak Warren turned to the head of the table. “What are we using, Drummond?”

“Cyclopropane.”

“Good. We’ll keep her as light as possible. I’ve had one suffocating baby from a uterus full of meconium. One’s enough.”

“That makes two of us, sir,” Drummond said. “I’ll watch it.”

Warren nodded. “I won’t need Trendelenburg,” he said, “I like to keep ‘em horizontal. The other way,” he said to Bentley, “the table is elevated about forty-five degrees, with the patient’s abdominal organs pushed up towards the chest by gravity. Not for me, this morning.”

“No,” said Bentley, and flicked a glance across the table at Merrie, seeing her mask crinkle in answer. But only slightly; Merrie’s eyes were intent, and fixed now on the master.

Warren walked round Drummond, careful to keep his hands clear, to where the theatre sister waited with gown and mask and gloves. She was scrubbed-up and dressed, little more than her eyes showing. Bentley heard her saying:

“Remember, Nurse, I want those packs shaken out before they’re counted. Last night two were hung up stuck together. That won’t happen again.”

Bentley felt at home. But then, he reflected, you expected that sort of discipline in a place like this. His eyes went to Warren. The surgeon slipped his arms into the gown's sleeves; deftly the sister knotted its tapes behind his neck and back. The rest of the operating team were busy. No one was paying attention to the familiar routine in Warren's corner. Now his gloves were on; to Bentley, it seemed with one swift thrust for each. Nothing sleepy about those hands. He flipped the ends of the gloves up over the sleeves of his gown, where they gripped the fabric like elastic bands. Then Warren held out his right hand. Startling Bentley, both because it broke the quiet and he recognised it, came Merrie's voice: "Another glove, sir?"

"The second glove, for the right hand." Warren glanced at Merrie. "Haven't seen it before? You'll get the point later." The glove went on easily over the smooth rubber of the first. "Doctor Prescott will be assisting, as no doubt you know," Warren spoke generally. "I'll describe as I go. If anything bothers you, don't hesitate to ask. The same applies to you, Captain." He chuckled, a dry rustling sound. "Within reason, of course. Now please stand up there beside Drummond. Careful does it. Imagine you're in a cordite room with a lighted match."

The chuckle came again, and cut off sharply. "Sister Lennon?" The theatre sister turned. "The patient's been catheterized?"

"Yes, sir."

Warren gave the reason for his question. "I want the catheter withdrawn on the table just before I start the operation."

"Not... left in?" Merrie asked, making sure she had heard correctly.

"No. I believe a bladder gradually filling towards the end and after the operation provides a small amount of pressure, just enough to stop the oozing spots you sometimes get after separating the bladder during the exposure of the low uterine segment."

"Yes, sir," Merrie nodded.

She was right about the explanation bit, Bentley thought, but it's damned interesting. Obviously Warren had his own technique, carefully thought out and precisely practised.

Bentley tensed. Warren was walking to the table. Mrs. Nelson's abdominal area had been liberally swabbed with red-coloured

antiseptic. No other part of her body was visible. Warren stood on her right side and glanced at the anaesthetist.

“Ready, Drummond?”

“Ready to start, sir.”

Warren held out his right hand, palm uppermost, and Sister Lennon laid the scalpel gently in it. His eyes flicked to Bentley.

“See that, Captain? These knives are damned sharp. We’ll let the film nurse slap ‘em into a surgeon’s hands.”

“Yes.”

Bentley could say no more. His eyes, all their eyes, were on the knife and its downward movement.

Warren rested the razored joint on the red skin, and cut. He cut with a swift, steady firmness. The skin opened out like a miniature ploughed furrow behind the blade, an incision six inches long from umbilicus to symphysis.

“Human skin can be scratched. Human skin, incised deeply like this, is remarkably tough.”

Bentley knew the comments were for him, without Drummond’s surreptitious nudge.

“Yes,” he said, “I noticed.”

Then he was noticing Merrie. Her hands began swabbing at the seeping redness and her forceps, looking to Bentley like toothed scissors, picked up and squeezed off the bleeding points. But mainly he noted the assured deftness with which she worked. This, like Sister Lennon’s discipline, was to be expected; he was impressed just the same, and a proprietary sense of pride moved in him.

Warren glanced up at Merrie, opposite him across the table.

“You’ll notice I’ve incised half an inch to the left of the midline. If I have to extend upwards I won’t have to cut the ligamentum teres running from the umbilicus to the liver. Damaging any tissue or cutting unnecessary structures—that’s bad surgery, Prescott.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bentley was pleased at the use of her surname; somehow it wiped out any inferior implications of her sex and made her simply one of the operating team.

Merrie’s hands drew back clear and the scalpel cut an inch-long incision in the rectus sheath, the thin membrane covering the long

straight abdominal muscles. Through the slit the reddish muscle showed. Warren said:

“Muscle, Captain; that’s what you know as steak. Blunt-pointed...”

Before he could get further Merrie had placed in his hand the pair of closed, curved scissors. Warren made no comment on her prescience or knowledge of operative technique. He pushed the scissors down beneath the sheath, thus separating it from the underlying muscle.

“How are you feeling?” Drummond asked lowly.

Bentley nodded. “I’m too interested to faint. I think.”

“You’ll make it. The first cut’s always the worst. I’ve seen nurses keel...”

“I’m working on the sheath well down on to the symphysis,” Warren said brusquely, though not glancing at Drummond. “It’s the unyielding sheath which limits your exposure, and in a pelvic operation like this you want every bit of room you can manage low down in the wound.”

“Yes, sir,” said Merrie.

The two pairs of hands worked on, one incising and scissoring, the other at their complementary work of swabbing and retracting the wound edges and tying off bleeders.

Fascinated, Bentley was reminded of a pair of experts splicing wire together. Merrie was impressed too, though for a different reason. She realised that she was watching as neat and economical surgical work as she had ever seen.

Warren called for the special retractor and Merrie contracted her thoughts to the job in hand. The uterus was now exposed.

“There you are, Captain.” Bentley leaned forward, careful to touch nothing. “The uterus, or womb. In some places it’s more than an inch thick with powerful contractual muscles. Now, of course, they’re receiving no messages from the brain, thanks to Drummond.”

Bentley just stared. The uterus showed in the wound as a smooth, rounded, board-hard organ, extended to its limit by the precious life it couched. He never felt less like fainting in his life; there was no room in his mind for anything except fascinated wonder.

Warren placed the retractor across the bottom of the wound; this was large, and allowed the whole width of Warren’s gently feeling

hand entry into it. Quite a big hand with thick fingers; so much for the popular conception of a surgeon's slender fingers, Bentley thought.

From beneath the gleaming edge of the retractor holding the wound open a small segment of an organ peeped. Warren's forefinger pointed at it.

"Danger, Prescott. Pregnant tissues are very vascular, they tear easily. I'm going to roll that bit of bladder back down out of the way, with a small sponge over my finger. If the bare finger should slip with a pushing movement, then we could have more blood on our hands than we want. Retractor, please."

Merrie lifted it a little and Warren's protected finger very carefully rolled the peeping segment back.

That was the bladder... Up till now—and this was partly the reason why he felt no faintness—Bentley had been looking at things totally alien to his knowledge, exposed between the anonymity of covering drapes. Umbilicus, symphysis, rectus sheath... these meant nothing, less familiar to him than the most complicated parts of *Wind Rode's* machinery. But that was a bladder, and bladders he knew about, and with an abrupt shock of awareness it struck his consciousness that this was a human body hidden under these sterile drapes, a woman. A living woman.

He looked at the red-edged violation of her abdomen and involuntarily he whispered to Drummond:

"My God, what if she wakes up?"

Drummond's mask moved with his smile. "I was waiting for that. You took longer than usual to ask. No, chum, she won't wake up. Even if she looked like coming round, we'd have plenty of warning." "Sorry," Bentley said, feeling a bit foolish.

"Don't be. I'd be lost in one of your gun turrets. Each to his own. Look here. Now comes the important part."

"Critical part, Drummond, I would say," Warren said.

"Yes, sir."

Drummond agreed so quickly that Bentley got the impression he had used his less-vehement adjective deliberately. Then he forgot analysis, for Warren had the scalpel in his hand, with the uterus waiting distended beneath its gleaming point. No medical knowledge

was needed to understand what would happen shortly. Bentley felt his scalp tighten, but instead of cutting, Warren spoke to Drummond.

“Ergometrine, please, 0.5 milligrams intravenously.”

“Right.” Drummond picked up a hypodermic needle, already filled.

“The purpose of this drug,” Warren said, his hand still poised, “is to constrict veins and reduce bleeding. Our object is to confine tissue damage and blood loss to the smallest possible degree.”

That was layman’s language. “I see,” Bentley responded. He looked at Merrie, but from her intentness of attitude he might have been in New Guinea.

The drug went in. Warren got a pulse and blood-pressure reading from Drummond, and then, satisfied, he lowered the scalpel.

The cut, in contrast to the gaping, retractor-held wound, was almost tiny. Warren held the knife vertically, pressing down with it until he was through the muscle, and then the inside membrane. Through that small hole liquor began to flow. Bentley wasn’t the only one affected. Above her mask Merrie’s eyes narrowed a little, not in alarm, but interest and attention. This liquor was the amniotic fluid, a clear watery substance which surrounded the baby and cushioned it from outside shock. They were getting very close.

Warren dropped the scalpel and into his hand Sister Lennon placed the curved scissors. With his left hand he carefully drew the uterus upwards. He said to Merrie:

“As I cut—the retractor to one side a little, then the other.” Merrie nodded understanding. The theatre was very quiet.

The jaws of the scissors went into the tiny cut. Warren’s fingers moved, and the sharp steel cut a curved wound upwards. *This was the entry—the* intrusion of medical science and years of skill and training, the final and vital entry into the very couch of life. The uterus, the natural and jealously protective sac, was now violated. For thirty-six weeks Mrs. Nelson had borne and nurtured her baby, but now the child was bereft of protection; it was viable, alive, but its continued life depended utterly on the skill and experience in the fingers of Doctor Warren.

He dropped the scissors and flexed his fingers and the blood spurted.

Even Bentley could see the bleeding was profuse, much more voluminous than anything before. His startled eyes flicked to Warren's face. He could see nothing in those sleepy eyes, except that they were not sleepy, but steady and alert.

"Duval's," he said crisply.

A shade quicker than before, Sister Lennon passed over the light, soft-gripping forceps. Merrie watched, her forehead screwed up into intentness. There was no sound in the theatre but the soft bubbling of the anaesthetic machine and the small, steady gurgling of the vacuum suction-nozzle placed in the wound.

The hands of Warren and Merrie worked swiftly. After his gaffe about the patient waking up Bentley could not be sure, but he sensed a crisis, regardless of the operating team's control. He watched with greater interest, if that were possible.

The forceps went on, fluttering silver vices holding back the flow, holding in the stuff of life. A minute more and Merrie swabbed. The cut-open uterus showed again, reddened but clear. Merrie released her breath, seeming to confirm Bentley's opinion. Warren also heard the exhalation. His mask crinkled.

"Your first Caesarian section, Prescott?"

Merrie's eyes said, *You know it is*. She said: "Assisting, yes."

"Of course," Warren answered her eyes. His chuckle came, even more of a rustle through the mask. "Don't let that flow bother you overmuch," he went on, disproving Bentley's opinion. "Certainly the bleeding was profuse—but you've got to remember that it was coming from blood sinus, not blood vessels. The vessels of a pregnant uterus lose their muscular and elastic coats—the gentlest of pressure can stem their bleeding. That's why we use those Duval lung forceps, nice and gently-gripping, or at least I do. Ordinary artery forceps can tear the soft muscle and you'll have your bleeding all over again. Right. Let's get on with it."

His right hand went in.

This was the moment. There was an electric intentness in the half-dozen pairs of eyes watching that hand; Merrie and Sister Lennon close by; Drummond and Bentley from the head of the table; the "dirty" nurse, the one with a roving commission to pick up anything dropped on the floor; the nurse waiting clear with a sterile cloth laid

over her hands, waiting to take what Warren had to deliver.

Warren's eyes were slitted almost closed in his concentration. The whole faculties of his trained intelligence were devoted to the sense of feel in his fingers. His hand went down, insinuated in until the sensitive fingers slipped in under the baby's head. Then he stopped, and his voice, still crisp but conversational, rang like a pistol shot in the tense room.

"No hurry now, Prescott. This is where speed kills." Bentley wondered at his self-control. Instructing, now... "Don't hurry at all over this. The pressure of the head against the wound will help control the bleeding. And remember that you can lose a baby through cerebral haemorrhage by too quick a delivery."

Even Merrie's eyes narrowed at him in admiring respect. But Warren seemed oblivious of their impressions. Now he had the head visible in the wound, the tiny, wet, black-haired head. Staring at this thing showing in *that*, recognising it, Bentley was seized by a profound sense of wonder, amounting to awe. He caught his breath, unaware that he did.

Warren made a trough for the little head with his right hand, and with the other he pressed gently but firmly on the upper part of the uterus. Merrie wet her lips. The head had come through beautifully.

Intent of mind and eye, unconscious of Bentley's presence, she saw the upper shoulders appear, purplish-blue, sheathed in the cheesy vernix, the protective covering designed for this entry into atmospheric pressure and temperature. And then Warren's fingers went down and in again, this time lodging carefully beneath the little armpits; beneath comparatively hard bone, not pulling on tiny, unhardened muscles.

Gently, the shoulders eased out. Then the gloved hands, big with strength, gentle now with skill and always-renewed wonder, closed about the little rib-cage. Warren held it up, head down, and Sister Lennon softly inserted the rubber catheter attached to the sucker and cleared the mucus from the mouth and naso-pharynx.

But no longer "It". No longer just a hope, or wondering. Now revealed to all their smiling eyes as Mrs. Nelson's daughter.

"She'll like that," Warren murmured.

The team heard him, they knew what he meant, they had delivered

babies before. But no comment was made. They heard Warren, but their ears were waiting for another, infinitely more significant sound.

The nurse with the sterile cloth over her hands moved forward and in the enclosed quiet of the operating theatre the sound pierced out—small, shrill, tremendous in its implications; baby lungs, baby diaphragm, giving tongue for the first time, a tiny and triumphant paean of life.

“Well,” Warren chuckled, “that’s a woman’s voice if ever I heard one. We’ll clamp the cord please, Prescott.”

A minute later the baby’s umbilical link with her mother was severed. Literally and symbolically on her own, she was taken to the resuscitation room just outside the theatre.

“Good Lord,” breathed Bentley.

“Gets you, doesn’t it?” said Drummond.

“Right,” said Warren, “let’s get rid of this one.”

Merrie was watching him, ready for what still had to be done, so that she realised at once what it was he wished to be rid of. He peeled the glove from his right hand and dropped it into a bowl behind him. The “dirty” nurse moved automatically to clear it away. Now his right hand was gloved cleanly with that second glove, unbloodied.

His eyes, sleepy again, fixed on Merrie. “That other glove was passed below the baby’s head. It may have come in contact with the external os, even the birth canal. Therefore I regard it as contaminated. And I don’t intend to do a manual removal of the placenta with a dirty glove. You’ll agree there, Prescott?”

“Yes, sir,” said Merrie, nodding so quickly that Bentley knew how impressed she was. “But this is your own technique?”

Warren coughed, a grunt of sound. “It is.” You’re embarrassed, Bentley thought, and felt a malicious pleasure; it made up for the Victoria Cross bit.

“All right, Prescott,” Warren said gruffly, “let’s patch her up. We’ll have a small hot sponge tucked over the uterus, Sister Lennon.”

When they had finished, and Mrs. Nelson was whole again, Warren stepped clear of the table and said, untying the tapes of his mask:

“So our warrior hero didn’t faint after all.”

Bentley looked him in the eye, smiling at the smile there.

“No, Mister Warren. I was too interested in your technique.”

“What he means, sir...” Merrie started hastily.

“I know damn well what he means,” Warren growled, “thanks to you, *Madam*. Serves me right for picking a female assistant.” He swung back to Bentley. “I see you’re something of an analyst, Captain. But then you’d have to be, eh?”

“It helps,” Bentley replied easily. The operation was done; they were two men now, equal in their fields. Warren seemed to sense the subtle change in attitude. Bentley pulled his mask down. For the first time Warren saw his face. He studied it for a moment with those sleepy eyes, then he smiled.

“Just how many men do you command?”

“Just under a thousand.”

“Good Lord. A battleship?”

“Heaven forbid. I have a flotilla, five destroyers.”

“I see, I see.” The eyes seemed to go right off to sleep. “I’m an old man, so you can’t tackle me. So I’ll risk your renewed displeasure and ask how you won the Victoria Cross.”

Again the heads turned and the theatre fell silent from the bustle of clearing up. Bentley caught Merrie’s pleading glance, but his nervy edginess prior to the operation had quite eased away, and he answered pleasantly:

“My ship sank a Jap battleship.”

“Christ,” jerked Drummond.

“Your ship, eh?” said Warren, “not your own technique?” Before Bentley could reply he slapped his arm. “Take care of my assistant, she might make a good surgeon one day. Goodbye, Captain.”

His untaped gown flapping, Warren brushed through the swing doors. The bustle started again. Drummond came up grinning.

“Come on, chum, I’ll get you out of that sweat suit. If Madame will excuse us...”

“I’ll give you five minutes,” Merrie hissed at Drummond, and stood there smiling after her man.

Half an hour later—Drummond had been persistent about that Jap battleship—Bentley joined his girl in Warren’s office. They were alone. Merrie poured coffee.

“Thanks,” Bentley said, “I can use this. Brother...”

“Glad you came, then?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “I learned a lot. Mostly I learned about you. Apart from anything else, that made it worthwhile.”

Merrie’s heart sang. The phone shrilled. She took it up, smiling her secret gladness.

“Doctor Warren’s office.”

She listened, and her smile drew in a little, then she said, “Yes, one moment,” and handed the phone to Bentley. He took it, frowning.

“Yes? Bentley speaking.”

Merrie walked to the window; trying not to listen, failing.

“Yes, Pilot, what’s the strife? Say that again. That’s what I thought you said. Marvellous, bloody marvellous! Give the old devil a bottle of Scotch, with my personal compliments. Wait. Have you done anything about Randall? Good man. Yes, of course it was the right thing. Don’t forget to cancel all leave. I’ll be on board in... an hour. Yes. Goodbye.”

The phone clattered back. Merrie turned. He was staring at her, his face alight.

“Good news?” she said. Her voice was husky. He failed to notice that.

“Is it ever! That bloody old Scotsman. Worth his weight in Scotch. I felt all along he’d manage it.”

“Manage what?” she asked, knowing, dreading to know.

Bentley jumped up. “Everything’s fixed. We’ll be ready to sail this afternoon, soon as Randall gets back. Ah...” he breathed, grinning at the desk.

“That is good news,” Merrie said, and behind her bright smile, much too bright, she thought: So there was no need to see the operation after all. But he had learned more about her, he’d said that. It would be something for him to think about, to remember, up there...

“I’m ready,” she smiled, and walked steadily to the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DRIVEN by an eager master, *Wind Rode* went up there at thirty knots.

She refuelled at Townsville, and there learned that the flotilla was back in Port Moresby. Late in the afternoon of that same day, shaping up for Palm Passage through the Reef, Bentley learned for the first time something of how his brother-in-law had fared in Sydney. Until then he had been busy with gun drill and testing the new asdic dome, dreading it would prove faulty. Now, with that happily behind him, they stood in the starboard forward corner of the compass platform, talking quietly. Pilot had the ship.

"I was bloody glad to get away," Randall muttered. "Not that," he said hastily, "but the farewell bit. You know. The more Gwen pretended it didn't matter, the more I knew how upset she was."

"Can't imagine why," said Bentley, deadpan. He felt a new man.

"Funny, funny," Randall said sourly. "Wait till you're spliced. How did you go, anyway?"

"Oh, fine. Merrie was understanding about it, quite bright in fact," said this supposed analyst. "I think she was more or less glad when the time came, me being a bit edgy, y'know."

"What about, for the love of Mike?"

"The flotilla, you nit."

"Oh." Randall grinned. "Didn't worry me."

"I bet. Me Mum was the worst, actually. Like Gwen, all stiff-upper-lip. Sometimes I wish they'd bawl their heads off, then you could comfort 'em. But this strong silent stuff..."

"Damn it all," Randall defended, "she's had to practise it long enough. First your old man, never knowing when he'd be back, and now you. By God," he said vehemently, "my kids'll never join this outfit!"

"I'd like to make a small wager on that. Anyway, it's about time you had one."

"It takes nine months, chum."

Bentley's eyes opened at him, gleaming. "You mean...?"

"No, I don't. I mean we haven't been married nine bloody months."

"Oh. Never mind, maybe you'll learn this trip you're to be a daddy. God, how will we live with it!"

Randall opened his mouth and Pilot called:

"Coming on the bearing, sir."

Bentley's tone changed. "Right. Take her through."

"Aye aye, sir."

Wind Rode leaned gently on the starboard turn; no thirty knots here, with pretty, ugly whiteness frothing close on either side. And here the captain stood beside his navigating officer.

Presently she was through, with the binding Reef astern and ahead of her the comparatively empty reach of the Coral Sea. Bentley nodded. Pilot spoke to the wheel. Rennie turned it, then steadied her up, and now she was running almost due north for Moresby.

"Speed, sir?" Pilot asked.

"Thirty knots."

"Two-seven-oh revolutions," Pilot said down the pipe.

"Soon as she's got it, you can secure special seaduty men."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Number One."

"Sir?"

"I think... Yes. Exercise the seaboat's crew, just manning and falling-out from the boat. You never know, we might have to use it."

Bentley never spoke truer words. But of course, blessedly hidden as the future is, he could not know that.

"Sea cabin," he said, and went below to write a letter. He hadn't posted one in Townsville; he'd better have one ready for Moresby. Seemed like Merrie had handled the farewell thing better than Gwen, but she still liked her mail...

"Is this all?" snapped Commander Dalziel, slamming shut the cover of the signal log.

"Of course it's not all," said the yeoman, "some of the signals I make paper darts with, just so's the log won't get too full."

The yeoman said this to himself. To Dalziel he said:

"Yes, sir. No estimated time of arrival from *Wind Rode* yet."

Dalziel glared up at him. "Why the devil do you mention her E.T.A.?"

The yeoman had no valid reason, not being privy to his master's

worries, but he was painfully aware that the Old Man had been snarly ever since receiving a departure signal concerning a certain destroyer which had left Townsville two days ago.

"I just thought you'd be interested, sir," said the yeoman, "seeing as she's due any time now."

"Is that so? You know her speed, then?"

The yeoman happened to be one of those few who liked Dalziel, having been close to him for a long time, but that sarcastic tone and curled mouth tried him sorely. Yet he was a disciplined man.

"No, sir," he answered evenly. "But I know Captain Bentley, and I don't imagine he'll linger on the way back. Say twenty-five, thirty knots?"

Now that helped Dalziel's temper a lot, but happily for the yeoman's peace of mind there was more to him than sneering sarcasm; he knew the value of valued men, amongst whom the yeoman ranked high. His mouth uncurled into its normal thin-lipped line, his voice became normally curt.

"You're right, of course, about the E.T.A. Let me know as soon as it's received."

"Aye aye, sir."

On his way down the passage, mollified, the yeoman was hit by a bright thought. Maybe that was it—the Old Man didn't fancy giving up the flotilla. Of course!

Just below the horizon, out of visual range, Bentley was rounding off the account of his hospital experience.

"I'm damned glad I saw it. Not the blood and gore bit so much—though I'll never forget that kid's first cry—but Merrie. Oh, there are plenty of women doctors, but not so many surgeons, I imagine." He shook his head. "It was a revelation, seeing her like that. Cool, calm and collected? Brother! Nerves like steel, no different whatever to the men in there. In fact, she could have been a man, the way they treated her. I liked that."

"I dunno," muttered Randall.

"What's that mean?"

"Forget it."

"Come on."

"Well, she sounds like... mind you, I like her, very much in fact."

“Let joy be unconfined,” Bentley jibed. “Now what’s really on your mind?”

“Well, she sounds a bit... sort of masculine. Hell, I don’t mean sexually. There’s no doubt about...”

Randall stopped again, colouring. Bentley grinned.

“Damn you,” Randall snarled. “She’s feminine enough, you know that. I mean her attitude, like in that operating theatre.”

“What you mean is you’re worried she might wear the pants.”

“It’s happened before.”

“With you and Gwen?”

“Like hell. That’ll be the day.”

“Then don’t worry about me. No,” Bentley mused, “there was something got to me in there. Damn it all, I suppose I was proud of her. Yes, that’s it. After all, she was doing things that would turn your stomach up, and not turning a hair. I don’t want a pretty little mincing milksop for a wife.”

“So you’ve got a girl of steel. So why the hell don’t you marry her?”

Bentley was silent, pretending interest in the horizon ahead.

“It can’t be the war,” Randall persisted. “God knows you told me often enough that waiting till after the war was a load of codswallop. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, you said, make hay while the sun shines. What’s stopping you, then?”

“Yes, I advised you along those lines,” Bentley said quietly. “But that was before Dad went, and I saw what it did to Mum.”

“Oh.” After a while Randall said: “You’re forgetting the years she had with him, during the first war. The same applies here, to you and Merrie.”

A call from Nutty Ferris broke up the conversation, much to Bentley’s relief.

“I’ve raised the Port War Signal Station, sir.”

“Right.” Bentley moved towards the binnacle. “Identify, and request fuel and water lighters.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Cable party, Number One. Clear away the starb’d anchor.”

When the buzzer sounded Dalziel answered it quickly.

“*Wind Rode’s* in visual, sir,” the yeoman told him, “coming fast.

Captain Bentley requests your presence on board as convenient after anchoring.”

“Very well.”

In Dalziel’s lexicon “as convenient” meant “pretty damn quick, if not instantly”. He told his messenger to have the motorboat called away; then, already clothed in freshly starched khakis, he put on his best cap and went out on deck to watch.

It was pretty to watch. *Wind Rode* belted up with a flashing bone in her teeth, slowed for the reef entrance, and slipped through. It was a big harbour, with plenty of room to turn, but she swung swiftly and neatly, using screws as well as rudder, and when straightened-up she was in position at the head of the flotilla, with just sufficient way on to lay her cable along the bottom.

She was directly ahead of *Whelp*. Clearly Dalziel heard the iron rattle of running cable. His face expressionless, he walked aft to the motorboat.

The shrill of pipes welcomed him, and a smiling, respectful Randall. This attitude neither impressed nor fooled him; it was simply normal.

“Good afternoon, sir. The captain’s in his cabin. Would you follow me, please?”

This, too, was normal, even though *Whelp* was identical with *Wind Rode*. Dalziel walked behind his “guide”, noting the cleanliness of decks and superstructure; without surprise, seeing what ship this was, but his eyes noted as automatically as his nose breathed.

They mounted a couple of ladders, walked along a passage which might have been the one he’d just left, then Randall knocked on a door.

“Come.”

Randall opened the door and stood back. “Commander Dalziel, sir.”

“Thank you, Number One, that’s all. Ah, Philip, come on in and take the weight off.”

Nor was Dalziel fooled here. How many times had he himself started off mildly with a defaulter, and ended with a whiplash? And this greeting was plainly for the first lieutenant’s benefit.

He stepped in over the coaming, hearing the door close, sat down

and waited. Bentley frowned a little, then smiled.

“Cat got your tongue, Philip?”

“Sorry, sir. Welcome back.”

“That’s better. For a moment I thought you hadn’t missed me. Beer?”

“No thank you, sir.”

“Randall’s gone, for God’s sake.”

Listening, Jarrett thought: So much for me, then...

“Yes... Peter. I trust you had a pleasant spell in Brisbane?”

Those pedantically formal words, the back stiff in the chair... Oh, Bentley knew, all right, the reprobate, but he wasn’t quite ready, not just yet. The hot iron of worry had to burn a little longer; like it had with him.

“Yes,” he smiled, this other wielder of the whiplash, “very pleasant, in fact. Good weather most of the time, and then old McPherson—you’ve come across him?—He got the job finished ahead of time. That made you happy, I imagine?”

Try as he might, practised as he was with men, Dalziel could find no cynical undertone in Bentley’s tone or face; both were simply pleasant. But still he was wary, waiting. And two could play at this little game.

“Of course, Peter,” he matched the other smile. “It’s good to have you back, not to mention *Wind Rode*. One from five doesn’t seem much—until you’re the bloke, and you think in terms of six four-point-sevens and ten tubes.”

“Yes,” Bentley chuckled. “Well now, what’s been happening up here?”

Dalziel didn’t flinch, not on the outside. “Surely you got my report on that night action? I had it repeated *Wind Rode*.”

“Oh, that. I was thinking more of... Never mind. Yes, I got your report. Good show. Three out of three, eh? As Ferris mentioned, one hundred per cent. But that attempt at ramming must have given you a few nasty moments. He got in close?”

Dalziel very nearly said, *I never knew you to be sadistic before*.

“Bloody close,” he answered, suddenly uncaring. “I was hard-over, but if X-gun hadn’t got into his boiler-room he would have carved my stern off.”

"I see. But he didn't, that's the main thing, eh?"

Dalziel's worry flooded back; his wariness tightened.

"There's just one point I'd like to be clear on," Bentley said, and *Here comes the lash*, Dalziel thought. "Why did you go out on your own?"

Dalziel had had enough. He answered without thinking, harshly:

"That's it. To be on my bloody own, to get away from the damned flotilla!"

There was no lash. "So now you know," said Bentley.

Dalziel heard the voice, but in his imagined guilt and definite anger he failed to distinguish the words.

"What was that?"

"So now you know," Bentley repeated in the same quiet tone, "what it's like."

"Good God," Dalziel said lowly.

Their eyes met, and held; a communion of understanding. The moment lasted, then broke. Jarrett came out of his pantry.

"Excuse me, sir, was there anything you wanted?" he asked, blank-faced.

Bentley damn near burst out laughing. Instead, he lifted an eyebrow in enquiry.

"Yes, please," Dalziel nodded.

"Beer, Jarrett."

It came quickly. They drank, while through the vastness of his relief Dalziel thought: It's being back with the flotilla again, that's what mellowed him.

Dalziel's diagnosis was, of course, spot-on.

"Ah..." said Bentley, and put his glass down. "Now, as I was saying. What's been happening up here, if anything?"

"Plenty. Nothing definite I've been able to get hold of," Dalziel amended at Bentley's sudden frown of interest, "but the staff ashore have been in a flap for days."

"They were like that before I left."

"It's hotted up since then. They're running round like headless fowls. The flotilla's been put on standby, with all leave expiring at 1800. It could be faulty Intelligence—or a big build-up somewhere. I saw no point in passing this on to you."

Bentley shook his head, in agreement. His eyes had taken on that hard intentness peculiar to him when faced by a serious problem.

"Intelligence up here has always proved pretty reliable," he muttered, "with our coastwatchers on the islands, even in the Philippines. I think we can expect trouble. That convoy of yours..." His voice trailed suggestively.

"My appreciation is that the Japs landed a fair tonnage of supplies on the northern end of Dutch New Guinea."

Bentley nodded slowly. "Supplies mean troops. We know there are Japs up there already, but the convoy could have landed men as well as supplies, and from the destroyer, too. Maybe there were other convoys which we missed. If so, there's your build-up."

"For an attack on Hollandia?" Dalziel said quickly.

"Could be. After all, it's MacArthur's headquarters."

"Agreed. But there's a lot of rough country between where I caught that convoy and Hollandia."

"An Army that crossed the Owen Stanley Mountains and damn near reached Moresby won't be worried overmuch by rough country."

"All right."

Listening, Jarrett knew that the two men were acting as counterpoint to each other, one setting up the arguments for the other to knock down, if he could.

"But Hollandia's not only MacArthur's headquarters," Dalziel went on, "it's a naval base as well. Japs attacking from inland could be bombarded from the harbour. God knows those Marines on Guadal Canal have learned that."

"Yes," murmured Bentley.

"So any land attack would require support from the sea. We have no battleships in Hollandia, but there's a cruiser squadron. They'd have to take care of that first, and with superior strength—at least eight heavy cruisers, I'd say."

"Yes," Bentley said again. He was staring at the ship's side, but not seeing it; seeing instead a large-scale map of the southwest Pacific, ranging as far north as the Philippines and westward to the Indies.

"You're right," he nodded, bringing his eyes back. "Now where would such a cruiser squadron come from, or from which direction?"

"The Philippines, the Palau Islands, maybe Guam."

“Hmmm. And the direction?”

“Why, from the north, of course. It’s the obvious direction.”

“Exactly.”

Dalziel frowned at him. “What have you got in mind, Peter?”

Bentley gave a short laugh. “Nothing, really, except that I’m assuming the Japs will think as I think, and that’s stupidly presumptuous as well as bloody dangerous. A man can be too clever, and find himself right up to his neck in it. Anyway, all this is supposition. An interesting exercise, but still based on theory, totally unsupported by factual knowledge. If there is a flap ashore, it could be concerned with Guadal Canal for all we know, or...” He laughed suddenly, at himself.”... or just a large convoy we’re being held ready to help escort. Here, have the other half.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Dalziel, and a knock sounded.

“Come.”

It was Ferris; nothing of urgency about him, just with a signal. Bentley read it, then rose and took up his cap.

“I’m wanted by Staff Officer Operations,” he said to Dalziel. “Perhaps... yes, you’d better stay a while.”

Dalziel nodded his understanding. With Benson or Cartwright, Bentley might have said, “Mark the level on the whisky bottle, Jarrett.” Now he said, “Look after Commander Dalziel, Jarrett,” and stepped out.

There are many things done aboard an experienced destroyer without need of orders. Randall had been told of the signal; the motorboat was waiting. It took Bentley inshore at full clip.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HE was back within the hour. The pipes met him, but Randall's eyes, under his saluting hand, were keen to detect some clue about that summons ashore. The hard browned face gave him nothing; the voice did.

"What's the fuelling position, Number One?"

"We should be finished in about fifteen minutes, sir."

Here was evidenced the reward of Bentley's caution and prescience in fuelling at Townsville. From there to Moeresby is six hundred miles; at economical cruising speed *Wind Rode* could steam for five thousand, and thus had topped up her oil bunkers quickly.

"All hands aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

"Secure ship for sea," Bentley ordered, then he sent for his captains.

They, too, came quickly, their quarterdeck staff having seen and reported the flotilla-leader's trip inshore, and mustered in the cabin. Bentley's eyes trained from one to the other of the three faces; for some reason he failed to fathom just then, Dalziel noted that Bentley did not look at him.

What Bentley saw in those faces—youthfulness of age matured by harshness of training and experience; respect and controlled eagerness—made him smile, inside, and feel warm there. His face stayed sober.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. It's good to see you again."

They smiled, openly, and waited.

"I presume your ships are ready to sail?"

It was more a statement; silence gave him his answer.

"Good." Bentley took up the chart he had collected on his way past the chart-room. "Have any of you heard of Wetar Island?"

Somewhat to his surprise, Lieutenant-Commander Newton, the junior of them all, answered:

"It's in the Dutch East Indies, sir."

"Quite right."

Then Newton—he was just past his mid-twenties—had to spoil the effect.

“Right at the eastern end of the chain, sir,” he went on, “about fifty miles east of Alor Island and forty north of Timor.”

From these details it was obvious to their experience that Newton, quite by accident, had been browsing over a chart of the Indies. He heard Cartwright’s chuckle and caught Bentley’s quizzical look, and flushed.

“Yes,” said Bentley, while his nod added: In future don’t open your flap so wide.

He held up the chart, a finger tapping. “Here, as you will have already learned from Newton’s remarkable navigational knowledge, is Wetar Island. It’s about sixty miles long and twenty wide, but we’re interested only in the small town of Ilwaki, here. The town stands on a sheer promontory halfway along the southern coast. The cliffs are steep-to.”

This meant that the cliffs not only rose sheer, but also went down that way, straight and deep under the sea; and this would allow ships, if for some strange reason they so desired, to get in quite close to the cliffs.

Bentley turned and laid the chart on the table, against which he was leaning. “Commander Dalziel,” he said, still not looking at him, “tells me he thinks the staff ashore are in a flap. He’s dead right. Intelligence reports that an attack can be expected in the fairly close future on Hollandia, both from inland and the sea. The reason is obvious; not so the direction of the sea attack.”

There was an emphasis on *obvious* and *direction*, but so slight that only Dalziel caught it. Now he looked at Bentley, directly, with his dark, sardonic eyes. The others wondered why their captain, at that moment, seemed to be trying not to grin. Then their attention was held by more important things.

“The Jap is no longer an imitator,” Bentley continued, “but an innovator, as the Eighth Division in Malaya learned to their surprise and sorrow. Instead of from the north, as might be expected, his naval force will make its approach from the west. Jumping off, in fact, from Wetar Island. You’re with me?”

“Not quite, sir,” Newton jumped in, apparently eager to negative his earlier gaffe. “They’ll have to round the northern tip of New Guinea, and that will still bring them down from the north.”

“Quite so. However, there’s a matter of mileage, Newton. Guam and the Palaus are about a thousand miles to the north, whereas Hollandia is only a couple of hundred from the tip of New Guinea. That distance can be covered by cruisers in less than one night.” “Ah,” said Newton, and then, leaning forward:

“Cruisers, sir?”

“According to Intelligence, yes. But not to worry,” Bentley smiled, “we’re on what the Air Force calls an interdicting mission. Our job is not to engage the enemy, but simply to delay him. Now, Newton, what d’you think might be the best way of doing that?”

For the second time Newton wished he’d kept his mouth shut. But all of them were waiting, especially that big coot there with his mouth trying to keep itself straight. Newton felt nothing humorous in the situation.

“Without engaging the enemy, sir?” he repeated, to show the impossibility of the mission. Then he laughed, to show he realised the impossibility of his coming suggestion. “There’s only one other way you can stop a naval force, sir. Deny it fuel.”

Bentley stared at him, shaking his head in wonderment. “My God,” he said, “I must be careful not to let the staff ashore hear about this, or they’ll grab you away from us. Eh, Philip?”

“Not a word, Newton,” Dalziel warned, his eyes glinting, “you understand?”

Newton flushed, his lips compressed. Bentley thought of a captain named Sainsbury, and how he himself had been treated like this, and how he’d felt, and sympathy moved in him.

“Right,” he said, the tone snapping their grins off. “Newton happens to be dead on-target. Ilwaki holds oil tanks, recently installed. They will fuel the Jap force for its final fast run across to New Guinea. We have to destroy those tanks. The Japs will have to steam all the way back to Sourabaya for fuel. The delay will give MacArthur time to organise a suitable naval force to handle ‘em. But time is the thing, and there’s precious little of it. We’ve got to get to those tanks before the Japs. If we don’t... The Flotilla sails in thirty minutes. Good day, gentlemen.”

They shouldered through the door. Dalziel lingered.

“Right on the knocker, eh?”

“An educated guess,” Bentley demurred.

“Hmmm. What did the staff office say when you told him of our little discussion?”

“I didn’t.”

“What?”

“Remember Newton? There’s a time to talk, and a time to keep your lip buttoned. Anyway, he wouldn’t have believed me.”

“I suppose not. Well, I’m off.”

“Don’t let me delay you.”

The distance to be run was more than a thousand miles. The speed ordered was thirty knots, only six under the maximum. This could be risky, Bentley knew only too well, but the objective justified any risk, and if a ship broke down, even two, he could still manage a cluster of oil tanks with eighteen 4.7s; with his own six, if it came to that. It shouldn’t, for Intelligence believed there were no sizeable enemy forces near Wetar Island—yet. This was reasonable; the Japs must consider their secret unviolated. If they didn’t...

But there were some things it was better not to think about. Bentley occupied himself with sending the gunnery control team to bombardment drill, even climbing into the director to watch Lasenby at work, and then down to the transmitting-station where Saunders the gunner’s mate held sway.

The flotilla had not carried out a shore bombardment for some time. This one had to be hard and quick and thoroughly effective. He’d been dead serious about the time factor; there would be no second chance.

There were no breakdowns, either. No miracle or happy chance was involved here, but meticulous adherence to a rigid maintenance schedule; and all five ships were modern.

Bentley was in his cabin, having slipped down for a bite of dinner and a smoke, when the voice pipe burred. He jumped to it. Radar, Pilot told him, was in clear contact with the eastern end of Wetar Island.

“Close-up for action,” Bentley ordered. “Pass that to the flotilla.”

No need to designate how; nothing would be used here except Ferris’ shaded Aldis lamp, with each ship passing the message down the line.

Bentley came back on to the bridge. He looked about him and wondered at their luck. Not the navigation—that was expectedly precise, with all the electronic aids to it—but the weather. There was no moon. Clouds which had sailed southward from the Banda Sea that afternoon still covered the sky. Rain would be even better, but you couldn't have everything. As it was, he could just pick out *Whelp's* bow-waves astern, and required night glasses to spot her superstructure.

Bow-waves, five sets of them...

"Distance to Ilwaki?"

"Twenty miles, sir."

"Come down ten knots."

"Down ten knots, sir." Into the voice pipe Pilot said: "One-eight-oh revolutions."

Randall said: "Ship closed-up for action, sir."

"Very well. That was quick."

Randall smiled, too, just as nervily. "Could be they want to get this thing over and done with. It's damn lonely over here."

"No argument. Bombardment ammunition ready?" Bentley asked, knowing.

"All provided. Just give me the target and I'll rip her apart."

"Me? You find it your bloody self. Unless you left the starshell behind?"

They talked like that, amicably insulting, while navigational radar outlined the cliffy coast and the flotilla pushed on at twenty knots. But as the promontory of Ilwaki drew nearer and nearer, their conversation dwindled; stomachs tightening, both men listening to the soft whirr of the search radar aerial and the bell-toned ping of asdic, dreading to hear this sound pitch up to the sharper peep of contact.

It was pure assumption that the Japs believed their new fuelling point to be unreported; or so it seemed to Bentley now, so close. They could have surface ships guarding the promontory, and submarines waiting. Just then, coming from nowhere to penetrate his tautness of mind, a thought struck him. He had wanted—bollocks, he had longed and yearned—to get back up here, to this.

"Man wants his stupid bloody head read," he said, involuntarily.

“Repeat?” Randall said sharply. But Pilot saved Bentley the trouble of explaining.

“Ilwaki coming on the beam, sir.”

Bentley stepped to the radar scanner. There it was, all right, clear-cut as a triangular piece of cheese, with the cliffs running back from the point on either side.

“Look at that,” Pilot said.

“What d’you mean?”

“Those cliffs, steep-to as any I’ve seen. A fleet could hide up against ‘em masked from radar.”

Bentley knew he was talking for the sake of it; his voice was too calm.

“Yes,” he answered, straightening from the scanner, “but not for us. This will do fine out here. Number One, you remember the position of the oil tanks I told you?”

“On top of the cliff. I’d hardly forget that.”

“Then light the bloody things up,” Bentley snarled. “Yeoman, make to the flotilla... ‘Standby to bombard.’”

CHAPTER NINE

AS ALREADY planned, B-mountings of *Wind Rode* and *Whelp* were used to fire starshell. This left twenty-six 4.7s for the real work.

Bentley felt the first shock of discharge like a punch in the guts. Never mind the Japs' secrecy; now theirs was violated, in the clearest, most emphatic manner. The gun flashes were momentary, yet he felt as though the largest searchlight in the world was glaring upon him.

Then, high above the cliffs, four bright stars were suddenly born in the night. Swaying, they dropped slowly, their light showing the smoke above the parachutes like twisted threads of grey wool. Just as the soft thump of the shell's explosion reached *Wind Rode's* bridge, four more stars burst into light.

Every pair of glasses on the bridge was up, yet only one man was really required to see. *He had to see.*

He saw.

"Director target," Lasenby reported to the bridge.

"Open fire!" Bentley roared, and managed to pull his voice down to half a gale for the next order: "Rapid broadsides."

The flotilla belched.

They were modern destroyers. Not so modern as some—there is always one type just a bit ahead of you—but they all had special gunnery radar sets, and these were patched-in to the control system, which by itself allowed for enough variables to make an Army gunner weep with frustrated envy, and they were supposed to be able to hit with damn near every shell.

In theory, that is. There are always some imponderables where human manipulation is concerned. But here the size and total immobility of the targets neutralised any human faults, which anyway by training had been reduced to the smallest possible degree.

The very first broadside burst smack amongst the close cluster of tanks.

They saw it plainly; vivid gouts sparkling red against the flares' white glare, against the steely sheen of the tanks.

"You little beauty," Randall exulted, in a low tight hiss through his teeth. "We've found the range, sir."

"Yes."

The next broadside found its target, flashing back to them the same evidence.

But that was the only evidence.

The first twist of worry started to worm in Bentley. Those shells should be blasting the tanks wide open. The heat generated in each explosive burst was tremendous. God knows he had proof enough of that. Then why wasn't the oil burning?

Bentley jumped to a phone and revved the handle.

"Engineer, at the rush!"

McGuire was standing-by his throttles; he came at once. "Yessir?"

"We've got a problem..." A multiple blast made his pause. "At what temperature does fuel oil explode?"

"It doesn't. It ignites. You've got to bring it to such a heat that the vapour rises, say about 175 degrees Fahrenheit."

"Shells should do that? Our shells?"

"Christ, yes. Under heat like that the oil will vaporise instantly."

"In a big tank?"

"In anything. Look, would you like me to come up and..."

"Hold it!" Bentley said sharply, for Randall had called. "Repeat, Number One."

Randall's arm jabbed out. "There she blows! Any second now and the lot'll... There's another one!"

Bentley had been crouched below the windbreak to escape some of the gun blast. Now he stared over it, seeing the flames leap, playing redly on the black smoke. Relief swamped through him.

"Belay all that, Chief. You were right, they're starting to burn. Not to worry. Standby for full speed."

"You don't have to worry about *that*," said McGuire, and the phone went dead.

Bentley came back to the binnacle. He looked shoreward, still feeling that sense of relief, and then he frowned, though only slightly; curious instead of concerned.

"That's a lot of oil up there," he said generally. "It doesn't seem to be making much of a fire."

"Funny," said Pilot; he was the sober one, of necessity, and more thoughtful than the others, all of whom wore exultant smiles. "I was thinking that myself. Remember the bombed oil tank in Moresby?"

The flames rose damn near a hundred feet.”

“Oh, bollocks,” Randall chuckled; a few more broadsides and it would be all over—full speed for home and most of the night ahead. “In Moresby you were looking straight at the tank, right down near the pier. Here there’s the angle of sight to consider. Those cliffs are bloody high, hiding most of the bonfire. You jump up there and you’d see flames, all right. Most of the oil’s burning on the ground, remember. It’s the angle of sight,” he repeated.

The argument sounded logical. Bentley was almost convinced. He said:

“What do you think, Pilot?”

“Sorry, sir, but I have to admit Number One could be right.”

“That’ll cost you a beer,” Randall growled.

Bentley raised his glasses, feeling but ignoring the gun blast. There seemed to be at least three fires, though he couldn’t be sure. They were fairly close in to the cliffs. Then, damn it all, he thought; they’d found the tanks, they’d fired hundreds of shells at them, and the tanks were burning. What more was needed? Except the need to get to hell out of it before daybreak...

He made his decision. “Cease firing. Yeoman. ‘Alter course in succession ninety degrees to port, speed thirty knots.’ Got that, Pilot? We’ll run straight south for a bit, just in case they have anything coming round the eastern end of the island.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Quiet again, stinking of cordite, *Wind Rode* swung left to head directly away from Wetar Island. One after the other, as they reached the turning point, each ship turned to follow. Presently the column was complete, line-astern from the Leader. In this formation it offered the smallest target to radar, even in the unlikely event that the Japs on such a small island had any.

Bentley let his flotilla run fast for several minutes, with radar searching back over the quarters to east and west, the dangerous directions. Nothing showed, at least moving on the sea; nothing but the cliffs dead astern.

He would never know what made him raise his glasses astern; they had just come from there, it was empty water. Maybe he responded to an automatic reflex to check the flotilla. What he saw stiffened him.

Or didn't see. "Pilot!"

"Sir?"

"I know this, but I want confirmation." Pilot frowned; what the devil..." We've moved some distance away from the cliffs," Bentley went on, his voice tight, "Therefore the angle of sight is less acute. Correct?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"Then why can't I see more of the flames? Why, in fact, can't I see any flames at all?"

Pilot swivelled to stare astern. He had no need of glasses, they hadn't come that far. Like the water behind them, the cliff tops were bare; no flames, no red-lit smoke, not even a glow.

"Christ," he muttered.

"Exactly. Well, Number One?"

"I just... can't understand..." Randall trailed off, shaking his head.

Bentley's mind was a whirl of galvanised thought, catching at every item that had concerned him back there and shaking it into an ugly pattern.

"Then try this for size," he said to Randall, but really for all of them. "It took some time for the first fire to show, when it should have showed at once. Oil burns or it doesn't, it's not a bloody slow-match. And the fires were small, much smaller than expected, angle of sight regardless. Two of us thought that. Now there are no fires at all. Even petrol couldn't burn that fast. And here's the clincher... Why," Bentley said, his eyes grabbing at them in turn, "would the Japs, in what's supposed to be an undetected fuelling point, place their oil tanks smack on top of a cliff where they're visible for miles?"

There was dead silence—broken by the sharp slap of Bentley's hand against his forehead.

"God, I should have thought of that!" He stared at them. "We've been tricked, don't you see? Taken for suckers. The Japs must have some sort of arrangement, maybe oil pipes with their nozzles poking above the ground, that they can fire or turn off at will. Whatever it is, we fell for it. Or I did," he ended bitterly.

"It wasn't your fault," Randall defended him. "The show they put on would've fooled anyone."

"Yes," Bentley nodded, "and it did."

Pilot coughed; more than any of them, he appreciated the basic fact of command, which was that no matter what happened to a ship, the captain took the blame. Loyal and devoted as he was, it affected him to hear Bentley castigating himself in public, and for something which was not really his fault. It was bad enough when a captain was blameworthy.

At his cough Bentley turned. "Yes, Pilot? A bright idea—I hope?"

"Sorry, sir, I was just thinking of what we know. We did clobber those tanks, but they didn't burn, therefore they held no oil, or maybe just enough to make us think they did."

"Which brings us," Bentley said, in a tone which Pilot was glad to hear held more thoughtfulness than bitterness, "to the jackpot question: if the oil's not in the tanks, where the hell is the bloody stuff?"

He got no answer. Predictable and expected at first, the silence grew until it threatened to become embarrassing. Pilot wasn't the only one devoted and loyal. His voice unconsciously harsh with feeling, Randall said:

"What happens now, sir? It seems to me we've done all we can, carried out our orders."

"Yes, Bob, but without result. If I'm right, and you all know I am, then the oil's still there, and the Jap squadron can complete its mission."

"But what can we do, for God's sake?" Randall said desperately.

"We can turn around."

"You mean go back?"

"We have to go back," Bentley said, almost to himself, and they knew, knowing him, how his mind was racing. "There's the time factor, you see? That Jap squadron could arrive..." His voice changed, sharpening decisively. "Yeoman. Signal the flotilla to follow me round in a 180 degree turn."

"Aye aye, sir."

It was one of the luckiest decisions Bentley had ever made, that turn away from his present course. No one who heard him order it was feeling lucky, least of all Randall. The big fellow could fight like a typhoon—against something he could see, an enemy he knew. But here...

“What’s the point?” he asked worriedly, leaning with all of them to *Wind Rode*’s lean. “We’ll only waste ammunition.”

“Maybe, maybe not, It all depends. A fleet could get in close against those cliffs, eh Pilot? Well then, so can we—and masked by the cliff echoes from enemy radar.”

Somebody drew his breath in; a quick sharp hiss. Bentley looked round, identifying the youngest of them.

“Don’t worry, Torps, we won’t be tackling a cruiser squadron.”

“No, sir,” said Torps, trying to speak naturally.

“Then just what the hell will we be doing?” asked Randall.

In clipped sentences Bentley told them.

No one spoke when he’d finished. The plan was horribly dangerous, but they were used to danger. It was the foreignness of the thing, so alien to their natural element, that kept them silent.

CHAPTER TEN

THE seaboat was a whaler twenty-seven feet long. Used as a life-boat, it was designed to carry twenty-seven men. Now, on the dark, still sea, it held eight men—five on the oars, Hooky Walker at the tiller, and Bentley and Petty-Officer Gellatly in the stern-sheets directly below his big feet.

Bentley had selected suitable men for this affair with great care. They were all seamen, of course, and gunnery, competent to handle any types of small-arms in the Service, from rifles down to sub-machineguns, Webley or Smith and Wesson pistols and hand grenades. Tonight they carried .45 calibre tommy-guns, and Bentley a .45 Webley. Every man, sheathed in its scabbard on the webbing belt, had a bayonet.

But the men had not been picked for fighting qualities alone; in fact, Bentley wished to avoid fighting at all costs. His men were here in the boat with him mainly because of their steadiness; their proven ability under stress to obey orders swiftly and correctly, without the least hesitation. On this their lives depended.

“Feather your oar,” Hooky hissed, leaning forward to glare at the stroke. “All that white...”

Leading-Seaman Billson made no reply, but he pulled more carefully. In their padded rowlocks, the oars made barely a sound, while the boat’s progress caused only a soft swishing. Bentley had his night glasses up. He touched Hooky’s leg.

“There’s a pier. Starb’d a little. Steady.”

Bentley kept the glasses up, training them with slow care along the pier. His forehead ridged in puzzlement. Though dim in the darkness, the pier was plainly a rickety structure, nowhere near strong enough to take a cruiser, nor even a corvette. There must be floating fuel lines, he thought, held up by buoys. The cruisers would anchor stern to the cliff, then ease themselves shorewards until they were in position to pick up a line and connect it to a fuelling valve on board.

It had to be that, if there was oil here. He could remember seeing a similar arrangement in at least two ports where entry was difficult for ships of deep draught. Nothing novel about it—but what the hell could he do about it? Casting off the buoys was impossible; they

would be secured to the heavy fuel lines by chain, or at the least a binding of steel-wire rope. And shells were a waste of time. Nothing short of a direct hit would be effective—against targets he couldn't even see from here!

The only thing, he told himself, as he had before leaving the ship, was somehow to find the real oil tank; certainly camouflaged and probably down on some stretch of beach or level rock. And the only way to find them was to find a native who could be persuaded to tell him.

And if all natives had been cleared from the area... ? Bentley had considered that, too, and he forced the debilitating thought from his mind. His mission was forlorn and dangerous enough without worrying over it before he'd really started.

"Oars," he whispered suddenly.

They came out of the water. Hooky had the pier in sight now. He leaned against the tiller and the bow curved round.

"Way enough."

They let their oars go fore and aft, those men on the side nearest the pier lifting them into the boat, very quietly. She bumped, and the bowman grabbed hold of a pier leg. It was ebb tide; the pier reached a little above Bentley's head.

"You know what to do," he whispered and made sure: "Remain in the boat and keep absolutely silent. Not a word, you under..."

His voice bit off. The footsteps sounded slow and regular, and approaching. Bentley crouched down, with Hooky beside him in an instant. *Boots*, Bentley thought, *sentry*. He tensed his muscles for the leap upward. All their faces were blackened and they wore no caps, but the woodwork of the boat, so assiduously scrubbed, seemed in his mind to stand out like silver paper in moonlight. If the Jap looked down...

The footsteps stopped.

His eyes slitted, not daring to risk even their minute reflection, Bentley squinted up. It was a Jap, he was a sentry, and he was standing directly above the boat.

Then, to Bentley's astonishment, he spoke, turning his head a little in the act. Bentley heard no reply, didn't need to. There were two of the bastards. And now this one was turning his head back,

while one of his hands fumbled, the other holding his rifle, and then a stream of liquid played into the boat.

Discipline... Not a man moved, nor uttered a sound. There was only one sound—of that repugnant stream splashing against wood, instead of into water.

Bentley saw the Jap bend over; heard him utter a grunt of astonishment; saw another face appear dimly behind the Jap's shoulder; and then he saw, as if in the harsh clarity of noonday, the rifle come up and steady on his chest.

A second for the trigger finger. There was no time to leap, or get his gun out.

The Jap leaped.

With his body bowed backward, so fierce was the thrust, he came out and down in a curve that ended in a sudden thump across the gunwale beside Hooky. Instant, swift, the dreadful "hand" buried its point in the Jap's neck. He gurgled horribly, then lay still.

"Hullo," said a voice above them. "You English?"

"Christ," breathed Hooky.

"Yes," said Bentley. "You pushed him?"

The head nodded. "I go now. My family in the village, bad trouble if I am caught."

"Wait!"

Under that sharp command the head swung back. Bentley saw a rifle, then recognised a fishing rod.

"You're a brave man, you saved our lives. Help us just once more. Where are the oil tanks?" he said, quickly before the native could go.

"Under the ground."

"Where?"

"No good, you cannot see. Your guns cannot reach."

Bentley felt the savage bitterness of defeat. All the flotilla's destructive power out there, useless...

"The pipes, over there."

"What?"

"Over there." He saw an arm pointing. "The pipes come down. Now I go."

"Wait!"

Not this time. Footsteps padded swiftly along the pier and faded into silence.

“That mongrel pissed all over...” Billson started.

“Silence! Get rid of him, the tide’s ebbing.” Hooky lowered the Jap overboard. “You saw where he pointed?”

“Yessir, at the cliffs. What’d he mean, pipes?”

“Let’s get over there. Smack it about.”

They pulled hard; not knowing what they were pulling towards, but thankful to get away from that pier. The sea was calm. Bentley stood in the stern-sheets, his glasses never leaving his eyes, training along the black loom of cliff, all the years of experience at sea straining his sight.

“Hold it,” he said abruptly.

“Oars,” snapped Hooky. The boat rocked gently, men panting with the effort of their pull.

“I can see whiteness,” Bentley said. “Not much, not like waves against a cliff.”

“Maybe a rock shelf?” Hooky suggested. “Water washing over it?”

“That’s what I was thinking. Give way together.”

The oars strained. They were all big men; picked for this, too. The boat made hissing bow-waves. A few minutes of rapid progress, then Bentley lowered his glasses.

“Way enough. Easy, Buffer. Watch her planks, for God’s sake.”

Hooky was watching it—the soft murmur, the lazy wash of whiteness that warned of boat-gutting rock. He took her in very gently. Ready hands pressed against the rock and held her clear.

“A ledge, all right,” Bentley said. He peered to right and left. “Looks pretty long, Buffer, Gellatly, come with me. Watch the boat, Billson.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Billson, a world of meaning in his tone; they couldn’t walk home from here.

Bentley and his men walked quickly across the ledge. It was wet from the ebbing tide, but not too slippery. Above them the cliff reared darkly sinister, and in a minute they’d reached it.

And there they stood, almost directly in front of what they had come so far to find. It was not just chance, as they understood a

short time later, for there were eight of them altogether, spaced at regular distances apart.

“Valves, by God,” said Bentley. “That’s what he meant.”

Hooky gestured upward. “There’s the pipe, running straight up the cliff. You’d never spot it from seaward.”

“Try the valve,” Bentley said. “You,” to Gellatly, “Nip along there. Anything you find, open it.”

Gellatly hurried off—just in time.

“Christ, look out!” Hooky jerked.

The black stinking flood swamped over Bentley’s boots. He couldn’t have cared less. The stench in his nostrils was attar of roses—the perfume of success, of mission accomplished.

For a moment he watched the oil gush across the ledge, and smother with its blackness the whiteness of water, thinking that’s a six-inch pipe at least, and then, his voice exulting:

“Come on. There must be others.”

They found the eight of them, and turned the big wheels with the exuberance of children at a fire hydrant; slipping in the stuff, catching at each other with fouled hands, ruining their clothes and not giving a damn about that. Then Gellatly came back, hurrying slowly, now and again falling flat on his arse, for the ledge was a running slither of oil fifty yards wide. Yet there was little sound, because fuel oil is very thick, and from those eight big valves it poured out like treacle.

“Hell’s bells,” Gellatly panted, rubbing his backside. “What a mess!”

“How many?”

“Three, sir and all gushing.”

“Well, well.” Bentley’s teeth gleamed faintly. “I think that should do it.”

“What about the smell, sir,” Hooky asked, “up there?”

“It’s an offshore breeze, and the tide’s ebbing.”

“Huh,” Hooky sniffed. “Next time you’ll be telling us you planned it this way.”

“Of course I did. Right. Dunno about you two stinkers, but I’m for the boat.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"IT was too easy," Hooky said, wiping his hand on the canvas boat's bag. "All that gunnery schemozzle, then one Jap and bingo! She's done."

"Easy for you, maybe," grunted Billson. "Try pullin' an oar in this lot. It's like bloody molasses."

Bentley smiled. He leaned down and took up the portable radio set, placing it on the bench beside him clear of the oily bottom-boards.

"How far would you say we've come, Buffer?"

"About two hundred yards, sir, near as I can tell."

Bentley nodded agreement. "And we're still in the middle of it. Lords knows how many tons that means."

"I know," said Billson.

"Didn't you say the breeze was offshore, sir?" Hooky asked. "Behind us?"

"That's right."

"Funny." Hooky sniffed. "I'd swear I was in the heads."

Billson maintained a dignified if eloquent silence, which took some effort; the heads is naval terminology for the toilet.

"Sorry, Billson," Bentley said, keeping his voice straight, "I'm afraid you're in for a bit of a roasting over this."

"Not with a bit of help I wouldn't be, sir."

"Like what?"

"Like me reportin' to you every smart-arsed coot who mentions it, and you makin' him scrub out the heads in the dog-watches. That'll fix 'em."

"Consider it done. You heard that, Buffer. Any man..."

A burring crackle sprang into sudden life beside Bentley, cutting him off.

"Nipper, Nipper, Nipper," said a voice they recognised as Ferris'. "I say again, Nipper, Nipper, Nipper. Acknowledge."

Bentley grabbed up the mike. "Acknowledged. Out."

That was all, but it said plenty. Nipper was the code name he had decided on, being his nickname for Merrie, and short. Nipper meant enemy ships were approaching. One Nipper meant from the west,

two from the east, and three from the south.

Bentley's first reaction, the briefest flash of insight, was how lucky he'd been with that turnabout of course; heading south would have taken the flotilla straight towards the Jap squadron.

His second thought was for the oil. *Wind Rode* would have made contact by radar, at extreme range. This could have been up to twenty miles, possibly more against heavy cruisers. With their plan of attack supposedly unknown to the enemy, the Japs would be at economical cruising speed, about fifteen knots. Then there was the turning round to seaward, the anchoring, the easing back: with any luck he could count on an hour and a half at least; ninety minutes for those eight big valves to gush out their precious liquid, added to the tons of it already wasted. For the Japs to have built a fuelling base here, they must have come a long way from the last one. Their bunkers would be almost empty. They'd get nowhere near enough from those draining tanks back there. So the mission was successful.

All this went through Bentley's mind with the velocity of galvanised thought. And brought him hard up against his next consideration. Mission completed... flotilla lost? With its leader stuck aboard a boat in a morass of oil? The Japs had only to get in close enough to the cliffs and the flotilla would no longer be masked: It would be on the squadron's beam, wide open to radar contact from God knows how many sets!

For the second time Hooky said, louder this time:

"Mind telling us what that message means, sir?"

It got through the moil of his mind. "No, Buffer. It means that Jap ships are approaching from the south. They'll be cruisers, and they're heading for those fuelling points. So bend those bloody oars!"

They tried to break them. The boat shook with their effort.

Those dragging minutes were amongst the hardest of Bentley's life. In close companionship with straining men, he was yet alone, beset by the worst enemy.

Not fear. He was used to that, used to overcoming it. To feel fear, you knew its cause, what you were up against, and to fight that you had your skill, and weapons, and men; all known quantities. But worry... This was the abstract, formless thing that bit like acid at a man's mind. You could not fight because there was nothing to fight.

Like in Brisbane; infinitely worse, like now.

“Christ!”

“Sir?”

Bentley was startled, unaware he had spoken aloud. “It’s all right, Hooky. Can you see anything yet?”

“No, sir. Blacker than the inside of a bunker cat. Maybe with the glasses...”

Bentley whipped them up, savage with worry and what it was doing to him. Yet his self-rowelling had beneficial effects—it occupied his mind and keened his eyes. So that he saw...

Or thought he saw. He couldn’t be sure. The glasses lowered a little and he closed his eyes. For ten seconds he rested them, before looking again; not straight at the object, but with the corners of his eyes. And then he said, quietly with the hugeness of his relief:

“Torch, Buffer.”

Five minutes later *Wind Rode* was alongside.

Bentley-hit the deck first. Torps was waiting.

“Back to the bridge,” Bentley snapped. “Come round to east, thirty-five knots!”

“Aye aye, sir! Are you hurt?”

“Move, damn you!”

Torps moved. Bentley leaned over the rail.

“Ditch the boat. Last man out pull the plug. Smack it about!”

And now Bentley moved forward; two paces before he slipped arse over head. Sitting on the deck he dragged off his oil-soaked boots. That gained him the tubes, and treated Hooky and co. to a selection of unrepeatable oaths so fruity that they listened with admiring respect. On the deck again, he tugged off his oil-soaked socks. And now he moved somewhat faster than a crippled tortoise, until at last most of the oil was wiped off his feet on to Gellatly’s spotless iron-deck and he gained the bridge in a stumbling run.

“Ah, there you are, sir,” greeted Torps, greatly relieved.

“No, I’m down in the bloody cable locker!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where’s the flotilla, what’s that squadron doing? Suffering Christ in Heaven, do I have to put in a request to be told these things? Number Bloody One!”

"The flotilla, sir," Randall answered, daring to grin in the dark, "has almost completed the turn. We're on east, working up to thirty-five knots. The enemy squadron is fine on the starb'd quarter, distant twenty miles. From that position we're still masked against the island... sir."

"Twenty miles, now? You mean they're stopped?"

"No, sir. Enemy speed is fifteen knots. We have them nicely on the radar plot. Would you mind keeping to leeward, sir?"

"But how the hell did you pick them up so... They didn't make arrival signals, for God's sake?"

"That they did, sir, and the chief tel. got a beautiful R.D.F. fix. Hence our call to you."

"And all the time I was worrying my guts... What d'you mean, keep to leeward?"

They knew it was all right, now.

"Because," Randall said, "you stink."

Bentley pretended to stumble, and stumbled against him—black arms, fouled shirt, odorous feet, the lot.

"Oh, Jesus."

"Sorry, Number One. Still a bit unsteady on the old pins."

"I gather you found the oil, sir?" said Pilot.

"No, I had Chief pour a bucketful..." But suddenly he could joke no more. "Yes, but that can wait. I'm going below to change. Let me know any alteration in the squadron's movements."

"Aye aye, sir!"

He went carefully down the ladder, along the passage, opened his cabin door and said:

"Jarrett! Brandy!"

Jarrett appeared at once from the pantry, glass in hand. It held two nips of brandy. Bentley looked at him in wonderment, an expression which found its mate in the steward's face; added to a touch of horror.

"Jarrett, you're a bloody marvel."

"Yes, sir," said Jarrett modestly. He watched the stimulant go south, took the empty glass, knowing there would be no demand for more, and said: "Would you mind undressing in the bathroom, sir?"

"You're a bloody old woman."

“Yes, sir. Take long steps, will you?”

“Maybe you’d like to carry me?”

“We’re in a frivolous mood tonight, sir.”

“Yes, Jarrett. Now.”

They looked at each other, master and minion; captain and confidant. Just for a short, good moment, then Bentley stepped on long strides to the bathroom; feeling the quiver of *Wind Rode*’s rush from danger like the beating of her heart, like a benediction.

THE END

The Worst Enemy

"Ilwaki coming on the beam, sir"

"Yes," Bentley answered, straightening from the scanner, "but not for us. This will do fine out here. Number One, you remember the position of the oil tanks I told you?"

"On top of the cliff, I'd hardly forget that"

"Then light the bloody thing up," he snarled. "Yeoman, make to the flotilla... Stand-by to bombard."



James Edmond Macdonnell is one of the most prolific writers in Australia today. His books have been translated into many languages, selling in the millions throughout the world. And he is still writing...

He served in the Navy before, during and after the War, climbing up through the hawsepipe from ordinary seaman to officer in the gunnery branch. This experience of both lowerdeck and wardroom provided invaluable insight into his fictional characters.

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