

J. E.
MACDONNELL
CLASSIC* 70

UNDER SEALED ORDERS



Index

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	14
Chapter Three	28
Chapter Four	39
Chapter Five	49
Chapter Six	59
Chapter Seven.....	73
Chapter Eight	84
Chapter Nine	93
Chapter Ten	105

Characters: 174076

Words: 36227

Sentences: 3859

Paragraphs: 1576

UNDER SEALED ORDERS

J.E. Macdonnell

HORWITZ PUBLICATIONS

UNDERSEALED ORDERS

Distributed by: Cap_One Productions © March 2003 (Version 2.0)

Find me on Undernet in channels: #0-day-warez

Bringing Australian Authors to the world.

Programs Used

Adobe Photoshop 7
ABBYY FineReader 6
Adobe PageMaker 7
Acrobat Writer

This book has been read again and checked against the original, if you find anything that looks like an error, I am sorry, if you can contact me please let me know. If you find this in any other format except PDF someone else has done it and may contain errors, find the PDF format for a true copy of this book.

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

Published 1976

by Horwitz Publications

a division of Horwitz Group Books Pty Limited
(Hong Kong Branch)

Prince's Building, 8th Floor, Hong Kong, B.C.C.

a wholly Australian owned publishing company.

Australian address: 506 Miller Street, Cammeray, 2062

Distributed by: Horwitz Group Books Pty Ltd.,

506 Miller Street, Cammeray, 2062

and Gordon & Gotch (A/asia) Ltd., 374-380 Lonsdale Street,
Melbourne, Vic. 3000

Copyright © 1965 by J. E. Macdonnell

Classic Edition 1976

National Library of Australia

Card No. and ISBN 0 7255 0347 5

Printed in Australia by

New Century Press Pty Limited

5 Cumberland Street, Sydney, 2000

CHAPTER ONE

“Why you?” said Rear-admiral Truman, with the rising inflection of his words matching the downward stretch of his mouth. He tamped the tobacco down with an adequate forefinger and over the tip of the match flame shot at the man opposite him a quizzical look which came close to affectionate. “Because I recommended you,” he ended on an expulsion of grey.

“Why?” persisted his visitor.

Truman took his time. You might have thought he was gaining pleasure from question and answer. If so, this was unusual, for the man across the desk was a Lieutenant-Commander, and rear-admirals do not make a habit of dallying with such inferiors; certainly not a rear-admiral with a face and bearing as experienced as Truman’s. He flagged the match slowly from side to side till it went out and then he opened his fingers and dropped it into the tall brass ashtray beside him which once had held other igniting properties.

“Because,” he said at last, “this job requires a fox. An old cunning fox who knows all the traps. A pirate,” said the admiral, mixing metaphors carelessly, “a sneaky hound who knows when to bite and when to run, a lone wolf. You, Dutchy, are the only man I know who qualifies.”

“Thank you,” said Dutchy Holland, without expression. “Thank you very much.”

You think you have seen a tough face. You think, perhaps, your own facial state is not exactly babylike after those Saturday afternoons on Bondi, or Cottesloe, or Caloundra. Do not, unless you are a good loser, stack your face against this physiognomy.

Human skin consists essentially of two layers, the *epidermis* and the *corium*. The *epidermis* is composed of four main layers of stratified epithelium. The outermost, the *stratum comeum*, is formed of several layers... Enough. Medical science has been proved wrong before. Human skin can be formed of a marriage between mahogany and granite, and—in some of the more soft parts—of rawhide which has been exposed to the desert sun for a year or so.

Of such elements was the *epidermis* of Lieutenant-Commander John Benedict Holland. He owned rather a hard face.

Dutchy himself, the whole of him, was something of a legend. At least he was to the young and impressionable aide, the Flag-Lieutenant standing in respectful quiet behind the admiral's chair. He did not know of another officer who had lost two ships in not much more than two months, and certainly he knew of no other Lieutenant-Commander who had been admitted three times to the Distinguished Service Order; nor one, in command of a ship, who was so old. Dutchy was pushing forty.

A fox, a pirate, the young Flag-Lieutenant was thinking as he looked at the back of the admiral's iron-grey head and the weather-leathered face of Dutchy Holland. You're both pirates, a couple of old buccaneers together. His gaze lifted, and he smiled a little. Down there, below and out through the window, there shouldn't have been that U.S. cruiser and those trim grey destroyers. They should have been ships of the line, canvas furled on the yards on the lofty spars, and Garden Island should have been a palm-edged bay somewhere in the West Indies. Then these faces would have fitted. And that, the mental relation between these two, was the real reason why Truman had insisted on Holland for the job. Pirates of a feather. Truman would have gone himself if he'd been younger. They understood each other perfectly. That was why he'd given Dutchy another...

"I think of them as electronic officers," the admiral said, breaking into his aide's fanciful reflections. "All these bloody gadgets... Necessary, of course... time marches on. I'm not a blind old barnacle yet. But they tend to rely too much on electronics, for navigation as well as gunnery. They've been trained in a different mould. They haven't the mental outlook for a job like this. You, now... Even in a war like this there's still a place for an anachronism like you. The job's made for you."

"For God's sake," Dutchy said, "what blasted job?"

The contents of Truman's bowl were glowing. The tobacco was projecting a little. Idly he laid the tip of his forefinger on the cherry red and tapped it down. He did not wince. He might have been using a miniature furnace rake. He might not have heard Dutchy's expostulation.

"It's not all science, you know." Truman aimed the stem of his pipe at Dutchy like a gun. "In England commandos are trained to use

bows and arrows. Did you know that, now? Swift, silent killing. Right. Up where you're going some of the old sneaky tactics can still apply. Well, for God's sake, look at it!" The gun trained and jabbed. "Hundreds of islands, scores of deserted anchorages, reefs to run behind where a cruiser wouldn't dream of following. Here."

Truman pushed himself up. Dutchy rose with him. Even physically, the Flag-Lieutenant thought; both short, both built like barrels—a couple of old boars. Dutifully he followed his master to the big chart rolled down on one wall.

"You see what I mean?" Truman said.

Dutchy saw. The chart covered almost the whole of the Philippine Islands, from the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao in the south up to Luzon in the north. Even apart from the many large islands the chart was crowded; it looked like a white magnetic plate on to which had been flung handfuls of iron filings. All the fleets in all the world could hide unseen in that lot.

But Dutchy did not need a chart to tell him that; he knew the Philippines from before the war. There was something he did not know.

"Why?" he said again, as though his vocabulary had become suddenly limited. With the same economy the admiral said: "Raider."

Dutchy did not jump with surprise, nor did he gape. His face remained closed. Only his eyes, alert and grey, were considering. He trained them from the chart onto Truman.

"My idea," the admiral confessed. "Back to the old days of raiding." His finger flicked at the chart. "Never mind squadrons of cruisers and fleets of carriers. A single ship. One ship up there could be in and out like a terrier. Bite—then back into a hole. Remember the *Emden*. No need to go back to that war. Look at the *Kormoran* in this, all the other German armed raiders. There's one vital difference. Where they hid in the wide open spaces, you'll hide in deserted bays, handy. Take your pick. Holes galore. What d'you think?"

"The idea's wonderful." Dutchy picked out a cigarette and lit it. He inhaled so deeply that his cheeks pinched in. "On paper," he said.

"In fact," Truman amended. "Up there not all supply ships are in convoy. Naturally you'll keep clear of large formations. But scores of Jap landing areas have to be supplied, by single ships. The country's

too rough for overland supply, it all comes by sea. That's where you come in."

"Fine," Dutchy nodded. Unheeded, ash dropped from the cigarette jerking in his mouth. "I sink a ship, the first ship, and as soon as the crew's picked up, up goes the balloon. And down goes good old Dutchy. He wasn't a bad old bastard," he grinned his own epitaph.

"You flatter yourself," Truman said. "And you're wrong." The pipe pointed. "In the middle of that clutter the Japs won't be running large naval forces, but they are running supply ships. If a crew gets ashore they'll be jungle-bound, possibly for weeks. That's not the coast of England, you know. I estimate that by the time you're discovered you'll have just about expended ammunition and you'll be on the way out anyway. With a bit of luck you might get ten or a dozen supply ships. Anything up to sixty thousand tons. When the Japs do wake up they'll have to divert badly needed warships to convoy even single ships, a sort of cumulative continuing effect. But you'll be out by then. It's a damn good idea," the admiral said, without pride or modesty, but flatly. "It will only work once, but you could do a hell of a lot of damage. Now what d'you think?"

Truman knew already. Standing behind them, the aide could not see Dutchy's face. But Truman was looking directly at that oaken dial he'd joined with so long before, and he could see its eyes, snapping as they roved over the multitudinous islands on the chart.

"Mmmmm," Dutchy said.

Normally that is a considering, thoughtful expression but to Truman it was definite.

"Fine." Without turning he held out one hand. The aide placed in it a manila envelope stamped TOP SECRET. "Here are your sealed orders."

Dutchy took the envelope. "You've told me everything." What the hell do I want sealed orders for?"

"Because I was told to give you sealed orders..."

They looked at each other, and for that moment between them was the communion of complete understanding. Then Dutchy looked away. He smiled faintly.

"Y'know, I think you'd like to be in this yourself."

“Could be,” the admiral murmured.

Dutchy’s voice became brisk. “All right,” he said. “I know my sealed orders... but there’s the small detail of what I’m going to carry ‘em out with. Not,” he said belligerently, “another old ship. Not up there.”

Truman smiled at this junior warning.

“That’s taken care of. It’s accidental, of course, but I couldn’t have picked a better bloody name. Your new ship,” Truman said, “is *Jackal*.”

Again, Dutchy’s eyes fastened on him. Then he looked away and through the window, down over the berthed destroyers. His voice had a grin in it, but his face, turned aside, was distant.

“I don’t believe it. *Jackal*’s no more than four years old.”

“You wanted one straight off the slips?”

“No.” Dutchy shook his head. *Jackal* will do fine.”

For a moment silence hung in the big map-lined room. Truman was thinking of the fight he had put up. Holland had lost two ships—old or not, the figure was two, in only a few months, and regardless of the reasons—and there were some in high authority who believed the idea was hairbrained anyway, and that a comparatively new ship should not be risked on such a foredoomed mission. But he said nothing of his thoughts. Jibingly, he said:

“Don’t lose this one, old fellow.”

“I won’t lose her.”

Dutchy spoke calmly, and his heart was jumping. *Jackal* was four; old *Pelican* had been twenty-five. After his leave, after his loss of the aged *Utmost* when he’d rammed her into a fleeing Jap destroyer, he had not even dared to hope that they would give him another ship. Neither loss had been his fault—in fact, the ramming had brought his third D.S.O.—but that record of two in so short a time was something to live down.

Why then, this *Jackal*, so young, and him so old? There was no doubt whatever where lay the answer to that. Not turning his head, still looking down on the dockyard, very lowly Dutchy said:

“Thanks, Tom.”

Truman coughed, an embarrassed bark of sound. He jammed the guiltless tobacco down in the bowl. He turned and walked back to his desk.

"Sailors are a wet bunch, y'know," he growled.

Dutchy followed him to the desk. "Oh?"

"Almost every man from your last ship, *Utmost*, has put in a request to be drafted to your next. I can't understand it. They didn't even know you'd get another. This smacks of connivance, a get-together. Bad. Unheard of with matloes. I don't like it," Truman grinned, "it's unnatural..."

He stopped. Here was something else unheard of. Surely... ? Yes, he was sure. Those damned gimlet eyes were misty.

Truman wet his lips. Then harshly he coughed.

"But we've wasted enough time," he growled. "You've got a ship, get down there."

Dutchy kept his face turned away a moment longer, blinking rapidly, cursing his stupidity. A moment, and he had control again. He swung back and his voice was rough.

"Matheson, Baxter? I've got them?"

He leaned on the desk and his eyes were not misty. They were as hard as the contours of his face.

"My God," Truman muttered, "I bet they were glad to get rid of you in the Med."

"Have I got them?"

"You have."

The hardness cracked into a smile.

"Fine. Then I'll say good-day. When do we sail?"

"Look in your blasted sealed orders!"

"Yes, sir."

They shook hands.

The Flag-Lieutenant was largely inexperienced. Yet somehow the understanding glimmered in him that he was in a privileged position right then, watching two men like these shake hands, the way they did... a brief communion, looking into each other's eyes, the grip short and hard. Then Dutchy was rolling to the door, and quietly it shut behind him.

"Holmes," the admiral snapped over his shoulder.

The Flag-Lieutenant stepped forward. "Sir?"

"*Jackal*, She's to get everything she wants. Pass the word."

Lacking experience, especially of men like these, the Flag-

Lieutenant frowned.

“But there’s *Quiberon*, sir, and *Matchless*. They’re top...”

“Everything, I said!”

Not so inexperienced that he didn’t recognise a tone like that.

“Aye aye, sir!”

The Flag-Lieutenant hurried out a few seconds behind Dutchy, and was thus privileged, or at least fascinated, to witness an odd meeting.

In the passage beyond Dutchy’s barrelled body a Lieutenant was waiting. He was about the same age as the Flag-Lieutenant, but nowhere near as smartly dressed, nor as smart in his attitude. His attitude, in fact, was decidedly lax. He was leaning against the wall when his captain appeared. But though he shoved himself up casually, his glance was keen enough.

The glance of Bertie Matheson was directed at Dutchy’s face. He saw no expression in that granitic dial, and so he knew. He voiced his knowledge.

“You’ve got another ship.”

“Says who?”

The Flag-Lieutenant moved in exalted circles. He knew, of course, that Lieutenant-Commander Holland was a Commanding-Officer, just as he knew that the Lieutenant was not. He was therefore astonished at the tone of his voice, at the absence of a title, and at Dutchy’s easy response to that heretical address. The Flag-Lieutenant should have gone into the door nearby. Instead, intrigued, he stopped in front of it, took out a piece of paper and busily scribbled nothing on it while he listened to further heresay.

“I’m with you?” said the erstwhile First-Lieutenant of *Utmost* and *Pelican*.

“That’s right. I’ve got a base job. You’re my second-dickey.”

“You’re a ruddy liar.”

“How dare you talk to me like that. You realise you’re in a naval headquarters?”

“I realise if you were in a base job you’d have a face like thunder. Now, for God’s sake, what ship?”

“*Jackal*”

“*Jackal*! But she’s not old!” Now there was thunder, sudden

and belligerent. "So?"

"Ah... nothing. Nothing at all, sir. Congratulations, sir! Let's get down there."

"Ease your revs down. You've got Baxter's home number?"

"Sure."

"Ring him, tell him to get in here at the rush."

"Hold on a minute."

The Flag-Lieutenant was about ten paces clear. The other two men were facing the passage entrance, not in the slightest interested in him, even if they were aware of his presence. He saw the Lieutenant look towards a door marked MEN.

The door opened. A man came out. He was young, and his white drills were even more immaculate than the Flag-Lieutenant's. But here Holmes' inexperience could not be blamed. No man would have suspected the dapper Mr. Baxter of being an engineer. He joined the other two, his eyes searching, and the Flag-Lieutenant heard:

"I rang him and told him there might be news when I knew you'd been sent for."

"Cocky little bastards, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Dutchy turned to Baxter. "What d'you know about a Rotherham-class destroyer?"

"Not a thing."

"Great. That makes three of us. Just how I like it," Dutchy said sourly, "no man able to lord it over his shipmates. All hands equal. Great. Come on."

The Flag-Lieutenant had got over his astonishment.

His face as he watched the trio hurry towards the door was wistfully envious. He went in, passed on his lord's instructions, and returned to his own exalted, dull domain. He found the admiral at the chart of the Philippines. The Flag-Lieutenant thought he saw an odd expression on Truman's face, but that might have been simply the extended mirror of his own feelings.

"Lieutenant-Commander Holland, sir," he said, "seems rather an unusual officer. With an unusual crew..."

Rear-admiral Truman was not inexperienced. He could read more complex natures than his aide's. For an instant level grey eyes studied

the young face, and then,

“You’re a bloody young fool,” Truman growled, “wanting to get into anything like that. Don’t worry, the war will last long enough for you.”

“I hope so, sir.”

“My God... All right,” the admiral said, and there was the briefest hint of malice in his eyes when he added: “Let me have that guest list for tonight’s party.”

But the Flag-Lieutenant, insofar as manners and the receipt of orders were concerned, was well trained. He allowed no distemper at this mention of his shorebound duties to show on his face.

“Aye aye, sir,” he said. Yet as he turned away in obedience he could not help the question:

“When *are* they sailing, sir?”

Nor could Truman help his smile. “All hands should be on board by tonight. She sails at six in the morning.”

CHAPTER TWO

The three of them stood on the pier, not feeling the heat of the February sun. They were looking out more than up, for *Jackal*, so soon to sail, was berthed outboard of the other two Fleet destroyers. From ahead of her they could see the high sharp bow, the two forward gun mountings and then the bridge. The bridge was rounded for streamlining, and topped by the gunnery director with its wide slim radar aerial. Above this were the legs of the tripod mast merging into the single reach of the topmast.

What they could see of her looked solid and speedy; and identical with the Australian *Quiberon* alongside of which she was berthed. Both ships, in fact, had been together before, in their conception and birth. They came from the same experienced dockyard on the banks of the Clyde, the birthplace of so much of Britain's seapower.

Silent, they gazed.

If you are as devoted as you should be, you have been sailing for some time in destroyers, and perhaps one destroyer is like another. If so, please turn this page of description.

But to these three men she was more than a destroyer. This quiet grey length of seventeen-hundred tons was at the same time the culmination and the end of years of inferiority. They had loved their first two ships, but in spite of, not because of their age and slowness. Theirs had been a forced pride, the feeling of a man with a battered Morris Minor who is forced to associate with that gleaming Jaguar next door.

Now their pride and love could be natural—unforced, freely given, deserved. For to them, four though she was, *Jackal* was brand-new. Everything—as you may remember—is relative.

They went aboard.

To his surprise, for the ship had seemed deserted, Dutchy was piped aboard. When he saw the face behind the bosun's call surprise altered to relief. Dutchy's face remained solemn, as though he was used every day to taking command of ships like these, and being piped aboard by the coxswain.

"Morning, Swain," he greeted. "You've joined early."

"Five minutes ago, sir. Forty-two hands aboard, sir."

Dutchy had last seen his coxswain only three weeks ago at the start of long leave, but now he looked at him with disguised pleasure. Chief Petty-officer Toddy Verril (christened, but seldom named, Hubert) was a small, quick man with a totally bald head and a staccato voice to match the vitality of his movements. He had looked after the discipline of *Pelican* and *Utmoot*, and steered them in action or whenever adjacent to navigational dangers, and he would perform the same functions in *Jackal*. He was a stanchion of strength; with him added to Matheson, and Baxter, Dutchy felt there could be no wrong in the world.

“Forty-two?” he said now.

“Fine. The rest will be joining today.”

“Yessir.”

Dutchy trusted this man; he knew him much better than did Verril’s own mother. With no hesitation he informed:

“I don’t know exactly when we’re sailing, but it shouldn’t be long.”

“Yessir.”

“While we’re here it might be a good idea to see that the men are in the correct rig of the day at all times.”

Rear-admiral Truman would have appreciated the implication of those words, and the grins. No captain, of course, should, especially in a large port like Sydney, have to warn his men about an elementary thing like that. Automatically they should have been in caps and shirts and shorts and long socks and polished shoes. But Dutchy’s pirates had been automatically used to shorts and sandals and naught else. *Jackal*’s youth and power had changed all that.

Or had it? Dutchy wondered as he walked beside Matheson past the two banks of quadruple torpedo tubes. Not only tigers were characterised by the unchangeability of their habits and natures. It might be inadvisable to try and alter certain habits of certain men. *Jackal* after all was only a ship, designed and dedicated to destruction, and his team of reprobates had proved themselves not inapt at that. But for the moment, under the eye of the Flag-Officer on the hill, they would have to conform.

“Eight tubes,” Matheson murmured.

“Handy.” Dutchy nodded. Some destroyers, such as the *Wind*

Rode-class, mounted ten. But then *Pelican* had rated only six, and *Utmost* none at all. He was eminently satisfied with eight.

The tubes were mounted on top of the engine-room. The conjunction stirred Dutchy's mind.

"Where's Baxter?" he asked.

"Can't you guess?"

Dutchy didn't have to. "Just the same," he growled, "he might have requested permission to go below, or at least mentioned it."

"Of course," Matheson returned easily, "except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"You trained him. Independence, remember? Act on your own initiative, remember?"

Dutchy glowered at the fair smiling face. "I can't say I've bloody well trained you to any degree of respect!"

"No, sir."

"There's still plenty of time for a new First-Lieutenant to join."

"Yes, sir. Until he does, I'm the gunnery-officer. I'd like to have a look at the main armament."

Dutchy straddled his bow legs on the bare steel. "You think you're bloody well safe, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You think I couldn't have a second-dickey aboard here..." he snapped his fingers, "like that?"

"No, sir. But there's a difficulty."

"Oh?"

"He wouldn't last a dog-watch. He wouldn't believe it. He'd go stark-raving bonkers. He'd jump over the side. You couldn't inflict that on an innocent young lieutenant."

Dutchy turned slowly his face from Matheson's grin and looked patiently up towards the crow's nest. Slowly he shook his bullet head.

"I'm sorry, Bertie. I'm really sorry for you."

"Why is that, sir?"

"If ever you leave me, if ever you get into another ship, they'll bloody well keelhaul you. I suppose, in a way, it's my own fault."

"Precisely, sir. So I'll just have to stick around. Now can we inspect the cannons?"

A wonderful, beautiful morning, Dutchy thought, as with a grin behind the mask of his face he walked forrard beside the youngster he loved.

There were four 4.7-inchers as opposed to *Wind Rode's* six, but these would be more than sufficient against merchant supply-ships, and there was a compensation mounted abaft the funnel—a massive two-pounder pom-pom with *eight* barrels. An aircraft caught in its outpouring was finished. Its thousand shells a minute, as Matheson suggested, would also be handy for keeping an eager Jap away from the merchantman's wireless-office or a gun, while the main armament dealt with the waterline.

For the rest there were the usual quick-firing oerlikons and the depth-charge arrangements on the quarter-deck. These, like the 4.7's, were familiar appurtenances. Less so was the bridge's equipment.

"Hell's bells," Matheson muttered as he stepped on to the compass platform behind Dutchy. "What's all this lot?"

Dutchy stared at the banks of phones and voice-pipes and dials; at the viewer which he guessed looked down upon a plot he had hardly used, certainly not in his last two commands, where there had been none; and at the repeat radar scan mounted beside the chart-table—this, too, a stranger. He said nothing. In his concern at such comparative lavishness of equipment his eyes settled gratefully on the old faithfuls—the binnacle with its gyro compass and the flanking iron spheres, the voice-pipe to the wheelhouse, the speed dial of the log. These things he knew, and these were all he needed to get this fancy brute of a ship clear of watching eyes so that he could learn the functions of the more exotic instruments.

"I think," Matheson said, not smiling, "we need a working-up period. Bit frightening, isn't it?"

"Be damned to that," Dutchy said valiantly, "she's only a ship."

"Oh, we'll get to handle her all right," Matheson said, confidently from the depths of his junior responsibility. "I was thinking of money. A ship like this would cost not much under half a million."

"And you think I might pile her up like the others?"

"There's always a third time."

But the words were spoken jocularly. Youth is a wonderful antidote against superstition and pointless worry. Dutchy read his

deputy accurately. His tone was not offended.

"There'd better not be a third time," he growled. "A man can stretch his luck so far. Come on, I'm thirsty."

"No argument. But the bar mightn't be stocked yet."

"We'll see." Dutchy was not surprised to find that the ship's store of liquor was complete. Truman's was a thorough hand. *Jackal* might go to sea with a tyro bridge team, but she would be otherwise ready in all respects to help them.

They drank beer, served by a familiar face; but only two glasses each, for there was much to be seen and done. Then another familiar poked his face in.

"Thirty-three more hands joined, sir," Verril reported. "Torpedo-gunner's mate, gunner's mate, Buffer..."

"All the old hands?" Dutchy asked.

"Not all, sir. Some of 'em are radar ratings."

"Thank the Lord for that," Matheson muttered.

"Then there's a couple for the plot."

"Ditto," Matheson said.

"Thank you, Swain," Dutchy nodded. "Keep me listed."

"Aye aye, sir."

"D'you know?" Matheson said thoughtfully, "that those ratings will know more about that plot and that damned radar than I do?"

"Then you'll have to pull your socks up and do something about it, won't you?"

"It had occurred to me."

Dutchy got up and walked slowly across the ship-wide wardroom. Still looking through the scuttle towards Pinchgut he turned his head a little and spoke over his shoulder. His voice was serious, a slight rasp to it. Matheson's face sobered.

"Bertie. I know you feel the same about this appointment as I do. Back there, we knew everything there was to know. We knew it blindfold." Matheson nodded. "But there's a hell of a difference here. We have to learn. We have to learn from specialist ratings. Remember that. If you don't know, ask. We'll have new men on board, specialists. Whatever else they might be they're not fools. They'll want an officer to know his job. They'll respect one who asks, they'll despise one who doesn't, rank regardless." Dutchy

turned from the scuttle. "You're with me?"

"All the way, sir."

"We have to learn how to handle every aspect of this ship, and fast. Pass that on to every officer."

"Yes, sir."

"Right, here endeth the lesson. I want to see a watchbill by 1800. Now I'm going down to the engine-room."

Unconsciously formal under the captain's tone, Matheson stood up and made his acknowledgement in an unusually crisp voice:

"Aye aye, sir!"

Mr. Baxter, commissioned-engineer, had handled the truth a trifle carelessly when he'd claimed no knowledge of the innards of a Rotherham-class destroyer.

This one had Parsons geared turbines on two propeller shafts, two Admiralty three-drum-type boilers and a shaft horsepower of 40,000; there were sprayers and fuel-pumps and condensers and feed-backs to boilers, and with all these things Mr. Baxter was quite familiar. They were newer and modified and more powerful than those he was used to working with, but these qualities served only to please their engineer. He was impressed, but not awed. After all, as his captain had earlier opined, *Jackal* was still only a ship, and ships Mr. Baxter knew something about. So that he was able to answer Dutchy's query with a casually confident:

"All well, sir. We've got the hang of her. When you're ready they'll spin."

Dutchy's engineering knowledge was as small as his seamanship experience was large. Yet his eyes followed with interest the wave of Baxter's hand to the twin mounds of metal encasing the high-speed turbines. They looked innocuous enough apart from their size, but it was what came out of their after ends which betrayed their strength and purpose. Side by side perhaps twenty feet apart, the driving shafts were thick and long and smooth, and in the electric light they gleamed. They looked enormously strong; Dutchy knew they must be to lift along almost two-thousand tons of steel.

Baxter smiled a little. "You don't often find your way down here, sir."

"I don't find you sleeping on the bridge."

Old friends, these, though Baxter was his junior by more than ten years.

"It's really all pretty simple in its essentials," the engineer said. "The steam from the boilers is not only damn hot, it's under high pressure. It's directed by guide vanes against blades fixed to the outer surface of a drum. In passing through them the steam gives up its kinetic energy to the blades. The drum spins. Then the steam is allowed to expand in passing through another set of guide vanes—these are stationary, of course—and jets on to a second bank of moving blades, and so on. In this way we control the expansion of the steam through all stages. Simple, really."

"Quite," Dutchy agreed, deadpan. He actually had much more to engage him than the engine-room, and now that he knew Baxter was happy with his job the main object of his visit was achieved. He was ready to leave. Luckily he was denied clairvoyance, else his passing interest in Baxter's domain would have been very greatly enlarged.

"You'd like to see the boiler-room, sir?" Baxter asked politely.

Dutchy could not help his grin. He read that tone precisely, and knew that Baxter, busy, found his presence a nuisance.

"Some other time," he said easily, and turned for the tall steel ladder. At its foot he halted, malice in his eyes.

"Tell me, Chief—how long have you been in the Service?"

Baxter frowned slightly. "Well, now... close on sixteen years."

"I see." Dutchy began climbing.

"Why?" Baxter called after him.

"Nothing really. I was just wondering," Dutchy said, still climbing, "if you'd *ever* owned a pair of dirty overalls."

And that, Dutchy thought as he chuckled and saw Baxter glance down in instant concern at his immaculate overalls, makes up for your bloody "simple" explanation of a turbine's mechanics.

Dutchy walked forrard to his sea cabin in the bridge structure. On the way, his face set in its habitual scowl of hardness, he was delighted to see men on the decks, and others making their way under hammock and kitbag along the pier. Some of the faces were new, but most he knew as well as his own, and most of these, as they saw him, were grinning. Dutchy scowled harder.

But abreast the base of the funnel he halted.

Those of you old or careless enough to know the joys of the pattering of little feet, and the concomitant pleasures of chicken-pox and measles and mumps they bring, will agree that even in the best-ordered families there is a favourite, perhaps two?

Dutchy now had a family of almost two hundred, and most of them—via the virtues of courage and loyalty and shared dangers—he loved. But here now were three who sparked in his tough old breast a slightly enlarged degree of affection; here now, one skinny son digging another in the ribs with an elbow sharp as an ice-pick, whispering, turning their heads. Together, as if at the commanding sweep of a conductor's baton, they grinned. Dutchy halted.

"So," he scowled. The grins did not lessen. Dutchy's eyes trained from face to face—from Bludger Bent, layer of the pom-pom, to red-headed, cold-eyed Olaf Jackson, his trainer, and on to the chubby brown Eskimo face of Norm Claxton, likewise pom-pom. He knew their names, their rates of pay, their alcoholic and sexual propensities, their very natures. Oh yes, he knew these three.

"One of the larger advantages of losing a ship," Dutchy said, his mouth snarling, "is that usually you lose the crew as well. Usually. You three fowls are, of course, simply on board to visit." Bludger Bent, as he knew he would, made answer. His voice, used to rising above the cacophony of four blasting barrels, had something of the dulcet susurration of a tip-truck unloading blue metal.

"That's right, sir. We just come to see you off. But we might be talked into handlin' the pom-pom for you."

"You've been trying to 'see your mother off' ever since the pitiful day she bore you," the captain said. "Not to mention your messmates. How much did your leave cost you. I suppose you *had* to buy your own breakfast."

Now this was less than fair. The acquisitive propensities which had given birth to Bludger's nickname were confined wholly to the garnering of his messmates' cigarettes. He possessed a pathological aversion to smoking his own. Bludger was hurt.

"That ain't fair," he said.

"No, sir," Olaf chipped in. "Matter of fact, he reckons he's given up the fags."

"This ship's a helicopter," the captain stated, doubtfully.

And then, because he could no longer contain his pleasure at sight of their tough, lovely faces, he matched their own grins and said:

“Nice to have you aboard. You’ve got eight barrels now, Bent.”

“Yessir,” I’ve taken a gander at her already. She might do all right, that one.”

Dutchy nodded. Scowling, he moved on.

In his cabin he was met with a surprise not quite so pleasant. He had taken out the manila envelope, interested to look at his sealed orders and learn the time of sailing, when sounds came from the pantry and a man emerged into the cabin.

“My God,” Dutchy said startled, looking up. “Samson!”

The giant frowned, then smiled diffidently. “That’s right, sir. Samson.”

Now Dutchy’s scowl was genuine. Smart-aleck talk, from a strange rating, he could not tolerate. It was impertinence. His voice was a warning rasp.

“Who the devil are you? What are you doing here?”

The smile retreated, the frown returned. “Samson, sir. Steward Samson.”

“You mean your name *is* Samson?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good Lord!” Dutchy chuckled. “Stand back a bit. I’m getting a crick in my neck. Where’s Hawton?”

“Hawton, sir?”

“My steward.”

“I dunno, sir. I’m your steward.”

Oh no... “Where’ve you come from?”

“The *Australia*, sir. I was commander’s steward.”

Dutchy heard the words, he recognised their implication, and suddenly he was ashamed.

Hawton had known he was poor, with nothing but his pay to draw on. Hawton had accepted the one good serge suit in his meagre wardrobe, and zealously nursed it, as he did the faded khakis, knowing there was no money to spare for frequent replacements.

That had been all right. Hawton was loyal. Most of all, he was discreet.

But this fellow came from the sartorial splendour of a cruiser's wardroom. Every morning he had laid out the fresh clothes of a commander; an officer no doubt with private family means.

Dutchy looked at him, and his mind saw the crisp starched khaki, and the mind which had overcome its fear when he'd rammed his old ship into a superior Japanese vessel could not overcome its shame.

He told himself that this fellow was a rating; that clothes don't make a man; that he was the captain, and Samson had better do his job, or else. And all he could say was, cautiously:

"You've unpacked my gear?"

"Yessir, it's all stowed away. Some of it'll need ironing again, but at the moment I'm preparing lunch. If there's something you need now..."

Dutchy waved a hand in negation. His eyes were intent on Samson's face. But he saw only alertness and a basic good nature—neither pity nor guarded sneer.

"You're permanent service?" he said.

"No, sir. Reserve."

A smart Rocky, Dutchy thought. He couldn't have been in more than four years yet he'd become a commander's steward. The recognition of Samson's competence gave him no comfort. Smart, he would be used to smartness... in uniforms.

"What were you before the war?"

"A journalist, sir."

Dutchy frowned in surprise. Reserves covered a multitude of occupations, from bellboy to bricklayer, from trammies and wharfies to jackeroos, but he'd never come across a reporter before.

He wanted to say, "What the hell made you a steward?" but that came close to being slightly personal, and stewards in fact did a good job in action stations. Instead, he said:

"What paper?"

"*Adelaide Advertiser*, sir. I was a feature writer."

That didn't mean a thing to Dutchy. "How come you landed here? Drafted?"

"No, sir. I requested transfer to a destroyer."

Dutchy's wariness eased a little, but his voice was blunt when he said:

“Why?”

Samson smiled; that, too, Dutchy liked.

“I started in a small ship, sir. She was the *Dungowan*, a supply-ship operating from Darwin. I was a seaman then, loading-number of an oerlikon. The captain’s steward was killed by a Zero in the first raid. We rated only one steward. I was detailed off for the job.” A pair of barn-door shoulders shrugged. “Liked the job, sir, and changed branches. But a cruiser... I preferred the small ships, sir. And in a destroyer you...”

His voice trailed. There was a hint of embarrassment in his face. Dutchy finished the sentence.

“You see more action.”

“Yessir.”

Suddenly, the grey eyes in the weathered face were very shrewd.

“What is a feature writer?” Dutchy said.

“Well, sir, he writes special articles. A sort of enlargement on the news as opposed to the normal reporting. Stories in the magazine section, that sort of thing.”

“So that’s why you became a steward.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“You’d get better stories from a commander, or a captain, than you would from the messdeck. You’d be in on the ground floor. You’d hear things, you’d get the correct background to an action. Eh?”

“Well, sir, I...”

“You’re still writing?”

“I turn out a story now and again, sir,” Samson said, cautiously.

Dutchy was silent. Worse and worse, he was thinking. His experience of journalists was as meagre as his wardrobe, but he knew they would be trained to observation. Ferrets. This fellow would not only see his uniforms, he would *note* them. And compare...

Samson misread his silence as an invitation to continue.

“All my stuff is factual, sir, no fiction.”

Too late to get rid of him, Dutchy argued with himself. Truman had given him his sealed orders, therefore they would be sailing shortly. And sending him ashore wouldn’t be fair. A man’s berth can’t depend on the state of a captain’s clothes. Damn the clothes! Journalist or the King of England, he wasn’t going to worry *him*!

“This Silent Service stuff is all very well, sir,” Samson was saying, “but it doesn’t do much good for recruiting. There are plenty of war correspondents but you don’t find them sailing with the Navy. The Army, sure, and now and again a reporter flies on a bomber raid over Berlin, but our lot’s in a backwater as far as publicity’s concerned. I try to do something about that.” Suddenly, relief was strong in Dutchy.

“I agree,” he said, smiling easily. “But unfortunately there’s a regulation preventing serving personnel from writing for the press.”

“That’s so, sir—but it’s all right if the stories are submitted to the censorship liaison officer in Navy Office. After, of course,” Samson said a shade quickly, “being vetted by the ship’s commanding-officer.”

“Exactly,” Dutchy nodded, hiding his satisfaction. “Everything you write goes through me.”

“Yes, sir, I understand that.”

“Bad luck, Samson.”

“Pardon, sir?”

“Oh, you can write your head off as far as I’m concerned. But for the women’s papers, about sailors peeling spuds and how they do their dhobying. Domestic events, you might call it.”

Samson was frowning. “I don’t quite understand, sir. In the cruiser...”

“Understand this,” Dutchy said, not harshly. “You won’t be writing a word about our mission. Not till after the war.”

Samson’s frown altered to an expression of eagerness.

“A secret mission, sir?”

“What’s for lunch?” Dutchy said.

“Ah... I thought a salad, sir. There’s a nice leg ham...”

“Fine. Get on with it.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Coffee,” Dutchy said.

“Coffee, sir.”

“I mean coffee all the time. As far as I’m concerned kai is sludge. Got that? Never cocoa, always coffee. And every time I come down from the bridge, especially at night. You’ll find,” Dutchy said poker-faced, “plenty of action for yourself in a destroyer.”

Samson grinned. A pleasant-enough face, Dutchy thought. Hard,

with something open about it. Or was that expression just an occupational acquirement? Cultivated to make the victims talk? Never mind. The big bastard could think all he liked about his clothes, but for damn sure he'd never *write* anything about them, not while he was aboard here!

"Pity about that story, sir," Samson said.

"Lunch," Dutchy growled. "And Samson?"

"Sir?"

"Hawton was a very quiet chap. He hardly opened his mouth. We got on well together."

"I get the message, sir. Though it's a pity."

"What is?"

"I could make you famous. If they're any good, newspapers syndicate their special articles all over Australia."

Sharp and sudden, a wary irritation filled Dutchy. Samson was a steward now; and there was nothing more pesty than the Reserve who brought the imagined superiority of his peacetime occupation into the simple, uncomplicated disciplines of the Service.

Yet there was a deprecatory smile on Samson's face, as though he might be joking against himself. But Dutchy had neither the time nor inclination for analysis of his steward. Nor did he intend explaining his own motives. "Get on with your work," he growled.

"Yessir."

Samson walked quickly into the pantry. Dutchy sat down at a small steel desk bolted to the deck, laid on it the manila envelope and forgot him.

Inside the larger envelope was a smaller one, sealed, and a single sheet of paper. The sealed envelope was marked, "To be opened on clearing the Heads." Dutchy placed it in a drawer of the desk, turned the key and put it in his pocket. He unfolded the sheet of paper. "Being in all respects ready for sea..." the orders began conventionally, and ran on for two terse lines.

Dutchy put the paper in his short's pocket—things had a habit of falling out of unbuttoned shirt pockets—and climbed up to the compass platform. He found the engine-room phone in its expected place, on the windbreak ahead of the binnacle. He pulled the receiver from the clip and whirled the handle.

Jackal's phones, like most modern ships', were sound-powered. This was a solid advantage if the electricity supply were cut off. Down in the engine-room another phone howled. Knowing the call from the bridge, Baxter took up the receiver himself.

"Engineer."

"Captain, Chief."

"Yessir."

"Those damn moving blades of yours on the turbines... I want them ready to move at six in the morning."

CHAPTER THREE

To a man who had been in destroyers most of his Service life—and who had handled the stripped-down *Utmost*, the fastest ship in the R.A.N.—the removal of *Jackal* from her berth presented little difficulty.

Dutchy went ahead on a spring, swung her stern out, got the spring in and put his engines half-astern. She slipped away easy and smooth. Over towards Pinchgut he stopped her, swung her with counter-revolving screws with barely forward movement on, and then aimed her sharp nose to clear Bradley's Head. At thirteen knots *Jackal* knifed through the early-morning sparkle under a clear pale sky. Even in the air's coolness there was a promise of heat.

No man, not even privately on that bridge, commented on the clean getaway. Dutchy's handling of her was something like an experienced driver getting from one car into another of an identical make. And Baxter, the deep-down extension of his judgement, ensured there were no kangaroo starts. Shaking a little, *Jackal* drew abeam of her grey length *Sydney's* old foremast and altered to port.

Towards her came one of the earliest Manly ferries of that fine morning. No crowds lined the rails. Faces were barely lifted from newspapers as quietly she slipped past the hundreds of city-bound workers. She was leaving for possibly hideous danger, and they were heading for safety, from safety, but they were used to seeing warships go to sea. I wonder, Matheson mused as he gazed at the incurious passengers, if they even give a thought to their safety, and the reasons for it? As though he were inside his mind Dutchy grinned and said:

"How'd you like that, Bertie? Nine to five, weekends off..."

"I'd like to give it a try," Matheson growled. "For five years or so..."

"And miss all the excitement?" Dutchy jibed. He was in pleasant mood, another ship under him, his old team with him. "Nothing but cricket matches and surfing and beer parties all weekend."

"Horrible," Matheson grinned.

Uninterested in these idle polemics the navigating-officer said:

"Coming on the bearing, sir." He waited, crouched over the

bearing sight on the gyro compass.

“On!”

“Starb’d twenty,” Dutchy said.

His eyes were on a couple of small boats eight-hundred yards off the port bow but he was feeling her swing: she was answering the rudder with the neat fussless economy of a destroyer, and he felt satisfied. She was a good ship anyway, considering her birthplace, and Truman would have seen that her refit was thorough. And Baxter was down there.

Dutchy took the wheel off her and gave Verril the course to sail her through the Heads. Then he leaned forward to a phone.

“Captain, Chief. All well?”

Through the wire he could hear dull mechanical noises, and above them, high and thin, the whine of those “moving blades.” But Baxter did not mention blades or guide vanes or kinetic energy—you never got a joke from him when he was in his engine-room with the ship in confined waters.

“All well, sir,” he said.

“Very good.”

Dutchy replaced the phone and looked at the massive loom of North Head, that part he could see shadowed from the level rays of the young sun. As with the two boats he was thinking more than looking—thinking that a hundred and seventy men were waiting for his next order.

But not yet would they learn whether their destiny was south or north. *Jackal* would run on for twenty miles straight out into the east before turning invisible from curious eyes. There was small danger here, but you did it when sailing from more dangerous ports and so even here the routine was the same, for in the Navy the drill is repeated over and over until it becomes automatic, and is performed without thinking. This is necessary because things happen quickly, whether it’s towering a seaboat in a rough sea or engaging a 400-knot fighter, when there is no time to think.

So Dutchy let her run for an hour, and then he ordered casually, seeing an unusually large number of men on the upper deck:

“Port twenty.” And as she came round to the northward, toward nastiness, and they knew what already they had guessed, he said to

the navigator:

“Course for Hervey Bay, please.”

And then Matheson said, wonderingly:

“Good Lord. What’s *that*?” He and Dutchy were standing at the edge of the bridge as he spoke. Dutchy followed the direction of his gaze and looked down. He gave a small smile.

“Samson,” he said, “my new steward.”

“That’s his name?” Matheson wondered, watching the figure turn from the rails and disappear in the direction of the captain’s cabin.

“Or Hercules, take your pick. But watch him Bertie.”

“Oh?” Matheson flicked a glance at him, half-enquiring, half-wary.

“Used to be a journalist,” Dutchy grinned. “Don’t do anything heroic or you’ll find your name in all the papers. Any worthwhile articles,” he said casually, “are syndicated throughout Australia. Special features, that is.”

“You’re well up on the subject,” Matheson said suspiciously. “He’s been buttering you up already?”

“Let’s say he’s just interested in first-class material,” Dutchy said.

“Gawd,” said Matheson. His grin tightened into a frown. “Don’t you go doing anything childish, like tackling a battleship, just because you’ve got your own special correspondent on board!”

“A man does what he’s ordered to do,” Dutchy said loftily.

Matheson’s look was shrewd. “Which is?”

“You heard. To sail this vessel to Hervey Bay.”

“And...?”

“There to work-up its crew—including the first-lieutenant. And for the moment that’s all you need to know. And in five minutes time you can clear lower-deck.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Matheson, thwarted.

They mustered down near the tubes. There was not much spare room and they were packed tight, the old faces and the new. Verril reported to Matheson. The first-lieutenant roared and three hundred feet came together. It cannot be claimed that there was a sharp and unanimous crack, as heard at Sandhurst or Alder-shot; there was a

scraping sort of shuffle and *Jackal's* ship's company, at their idea of attention, was reported to the captain.

"Stand at ease, please," Dutchy said, and his men took him at his word, straddling their feet, lolling over the tubes, leaning against the quartermaster's lobby. But not one man leaned against the guardrails. Slack at parade-ground drill, this bunch, but experienced in other things. The slipping sea, and the two big screws, were a few feet below.

For a few seconds Dutchy's grey eyes patrolled their faces, recognising the false boredom in the old, the genuine interest in the new. These were as much interested in him, he knew, as in their destination and mission. He decided to settle one question at once.

"We're bound for Hervey Bay between Maryborough and Bundaberg, for a ten day working-up period. After that... you'll know when I consider you're competent to move on. And *that* will be in ten days, no more. Now this is a vessel. In ten days from making Hervey Bay she will be a fighting ship. Some of you don't know me, yet. If you have any doubts about that statement I just made, ask those who do know me.

"Reference to that... my name is John Benedict Holland. Any man heard repeating that second name can forget about shore leave. Some of you I don't know, but this I do know. The new men are all specialists. The old hands are specialists in many things, like whoring and guzzling, but in this ship they have a lot to learn. That includes me. The new men will remedy that lack. You're used to the equipment this young cruiser carries. You'll be asked about its operation, by me and my officers as well as ratings. You'll tell us and you'll teach us.

"You may hear all sorts of things about me," Dutchy said, unsmiling. "But here's something I'll tell you. I believe false pride is the equipment of an idiot. There'll be none of that nonsense here." He paused, holding their eyes, old and new. "On the other side of the coin," he said quietly, "I want you specialists to know that the men you'll be teaching aren't exactly girl guides. Each of us has something to learn from the other. This has to be done quick and accurately. I don't have in mind an admiral's inspection at the end of our ten days—I'm thinking of our lives. Maybe I don't know much about that new-fangled radar scan on the bridge, but I'm not exactly a

stranger to Japanese naval efficiency, or aerial for that matter. The Japs are good—bloody good. When we leave Hervey Bay we have to be better. Simple as that.”

Dutchy paused again, looking down at the deck. No, Matheson hoped, watching the craggy profile; no mention of the ships you’ve lost. No matter what you say, how you put it, they’ll think you’re excusing yourself. The old hands will tell them the story... let them tell it, not you.

Dutchy lifted his head.

“Now a final word,” he said in his gravelly voice, “to the old hands. I happen to know you all volunteered for this berth. You want your heads read, the bloody lot of you.” He coughed. “Just the same, it’s nice to have you with me again. You remember the old boats? Well now we’ve got something a bit different. We won’t be always last in the line any more. We’ll be up there with the best of ‘em. A nice change, eh? What nit said crime doesn’t pay? That’s all—except the ship will close-up for action in five minutes. Carry on, Number One.”

She rounded Sandy Cape on Fraser Island early in the morning and slipped alone, unnoticed, into the vast deserted reach of Hervey Bay; with Jervis Bay the Fleet’s peacetime exercise area, now dedicated to a sterner purpose. She came to anchor well clear of the shore and went to breakfast. And immediately after breakfast the agony began.

It would be pointless agony to recall for you wartime visitors the memories of that bay of travail, and purposeless to describe for gentler readers the running and the shouting, the sweating and the cursing of a working-up period. Let it suffice for our purposes to record that at the end of ten days *Jackal* was a vastly different ship to the one which had sailed from Sydney, and to mention that no one who knew her captain was at all surprised at this metamorphosis. An innocent patch of sand on the foreshore still had black smoke boiling above it from *Jackal*’s bombardment—no misfires, a fast rate of fire—when Dutchy lowered his glasses and grunted:

“I think that might do it.”

“Thank the Heavenly Host for that,” Matheson said fervently,

but strictly to himself. Neither was he the same young man who, refreshed and plump from three weeks' leave, had sailed from Sydney. Matheson had in fact lost half a stone in weight, and gained circles under his eyes and lines on his face. He was a very tired young man, and fed up to the teeth with gunnery and radar and torpedoes and seaboats and shoring up bulkheads, for while a captain may order and supervise and watch and condemn, it is the first-lieutenant who carries out those orders and receives the condemnation.

"Yes, sir," Matheson said aloud.

Dutchy looked at him. There was cynicism in the twist of his mouth but affection in his eyes, before he veiled that treacherous expression. Surprisingly, he had learned even more about his young deputy than he had known before. In the other ships Matheson had been loyal and competent, but there he had been master of his environment: he had carried out his job efficiently and without complaint. Here it was different, a different sort of test altogether—not so much of professional competence as of personal characteristics. There he had been simply told, and the thing was done: here he had been hounded, at all hours, day after day and night after night, and the hounder had watched his personal reactions as much as he had the professional results.

And only once had Matheson cracked under the whip, and snapped back from the exhausted limits of his tolerance; and he had come to the bridge again an hour later and said, quietly, "Sorry, sir, it won't happen again," and had departed, not seeing the little smile which had tenderised his tormentor's face.

Young Matheson had come through his own accentuated ordeal splendidly, a tougher man than he had been, mentally more than physically, and so now Dutchy looked at him with veiled affection, and said in his rasp of a voice:

"You look bushed, Bertie. What's up? Don't tell me a little picnic like this has got you down."

Matheson knew his tormentor.

"Bushed? Hardly. I was just beginning to enjoy it. Pity we haven't another month of it." And then he closed his eyes against the pitiless glare from the sea and said, almost in a whisper: "Tonight, for God's sake—an all-night in?"

Almost, Dutchy put a hand on his shoulder. He killed that feeling by brushing roughly past the youngster and plucking out the microphone.

“This is the captain. The exercise period is completed. I’m quite satisfied that now we have a ship. We’re returning to anchor. Ship will remain at anchor all night. There will be no drills. You’ve earned your all-night in. We sail after breakfast. That’s all.”

Dutchy replaced the microphone and came upright. He smiled faintly at Matheson.

“Happy now?”

“Seventh heaven. But where do we sail to?”

“Dunno,” Dutchy said, “I’m sailing under sealed orders.”

Matheson’s eyebrows drew together. “That’s odd. When do we open ‘em?”

“Now. But first break out a chart of the Philippines.”

“Aye aye, sir,” Matheson responded automatically, and then he did a beautiful double-take. “You said you didn’t know!”

“Sea-cabin, Number One,” Dutchy said, solemnly, “immediately after anchoring. Bring Pilot and the chart with you. And your own beer.”

“A caseful,” Matheson promised.

Two hours later *Jackal* was at anchor, quiet.

There was a lookout in the crow’s nest, and the petty-officer of the watch had been given orders that the position was to be relieved every half-hour. Asdic and radar were operating, for even here you never knew, but the decks were deserted. No men dhobying in buckets, no tombola game, no men pacing for exercise; they were all below, flaked out. Matheson could hardly remember a quieter ship as he walked forrard with Pilot.

Pilot’s name—purely for the record, for he answered to nothing but his title—was Raoul Shepherd, given to him by a fondly fanciful mother in the little riverside town of Wilcannia, some 400-odd miles to the north-westward of Sydney. As for exchanging the waters of the Darling for those of the Pacific, he could give only as a reason his boyhood readings of R. L. Stevenson’s South Sea tales. Since then, Pilot had travelled in many seas.

A little older than Matheson, he was a mainly reticent man with a

sober face and an unflappable competence in his job. He would need this quality, in a destroyer headed for the Sulu Sea. There was another minor characteristic. Pilot hated exercise and liked beer; the combination had resulted in a brewer's goitre which bulged betrayingly over the waistband of his shorts. Dutchy, though now and again he jibed at this evidence of Pilot's two weaknesses, was not worried. So long as Pilot laid his courses and read his weather signs accurately, and could work out a starsight on the back of a matchbox, he could be afflicted with gout, gangrene and gallstones for all Dutchy cared.

Abreast the funnel Pilot said:

"It looks like the Philippines, then?"

"Looks like," Matheson agreed.

They were up the foc's'le ladder before Pilot spoke again.

"Why? With a Fleet?"

"Haven't a clue," Matheson said to both questions. "Ask me in five minutes' time."

They knocked at a cabin door, heard a permissive growl, and stepped in.

"Well now," Matheson said, "look at that."

"That" was a brown bottle with streaks of condensation on its sides, but less anticipatory eyes than Pilot's could have described that it was empty. This, perhaps, lent more point to Matheson's remark. Dutchy took the point.

Most captain's cabins are fitted with a bell-push as a means of communication between the occupant and his steward in the pantry. *Jackal* was no exception. But Dutchy was more direct.

"Samson!"

Promptly, the giant appeared.

"Two more..." Dutchy started, and was stopped by sight of the silver tray already on Samson's hand.

"Yes, sir," Samson said, and placed the bottles and glasses on the occasional table. Removing the dead marine, he made to depart.

"Samson."

"Sir?"

"I am about to discuss my orders with these two officers. You remember what I said about writing nothing on this mission?"

“Yes, sir.”

“I was not joking. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Absolutely nothing, not even notes. If the ship has to be abandoned before we reach the operating area, even if she is sunk, paper can float. Information obtained by the enemy could jeopardise any ship ordered to follow-up our mission.”

“I understand, sir. Would you like me to leave the pantry?”

“That won’t be necessary. The ship’s company will know shortly. In any case,” Dutchy said, looking at him levelly, “I have given my orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s all.”

Pilot waited till Samson was in the pantry before he made his economical comment. “A large fellow,” he said.

“Could be a large bloody pest,” Dutchy muttered. “A man could go for a morning George in the afternoon and find himself in the ‘Women’s Weekly.’ All right, you’ve got your beer—let’s have that chart.”

Matheson placed the bottles on the deck and Pilot spread the chart. Both lieutenants stared at the conglomeration of islands and reefs as though they had never seen a chart before. There was in their interest the suggestion that they believed they would be seeing a lot of this one.

“Right,” Dutchy said. “As of now we’re a raider.”

The young men were silent. Then Matheson pointed.

“Through there? Alone?”

“Bright boy. Where a fleet mightn’t get in, we can. Now here’s the picture.”

To these men, once the destination and the intention were revealed, there was need of little more to tell. Imagination and experience supplied the rest. After a few minutes Dutchy said:

“Our steaming range, now.” Pilot leaned forward a little. This was the vital consideration—there were no fuelling bases where they were headed. Dutchy took up a piece of paper. “Chief tells me we have a radius of five-thousand miles at fifteen knots. Five hundred tons of fuel, working pressure three hundred and fifty pounds...

Mmmm. That doesn't concern us." Dutchy dropped the paper. "But we can't hope to be at fifteen knots all the time. We'll gulp the stuff at high speed. I'm working on a radius of three thousand. Right, Pilot?" The navigator nodded. "How long will we be up there?"

Dutchy grinned. "Until our fuel runs low." He did not mention the other reasons which might expedite their departure, or ensure their permanent residence there.

"Then we'll need to top-up our tanks at the last available place," Pilot said. "I suggest Darwin."

"No argument," Dutchy agreed. "The Philippines wouldn't be the best place to run out of juice."

"Refuel at Thursday Island?" Matheson asked.

Dutchy wagged his head. "The less people who know we're about the better. Next stop, Darwin."

Agreement in his silence, Matheson looked again at the chart. Then he pulled it towards him.

"Well, I'm damned," he said, softly. His finger moved out, touched. "Look at that. History repeats itself."

"I bloody well hope not," Dutchy growled.

Together, silent, remembering, they looked at the Talaud Islands, in the Molucca Sea almost due north of Darwin. There was big Karakelong, and off its southern toe, the smaller Salebaboe; and there between them was the three-fathom channel through which old *Utmost* had surged her two-fathom draught to surprise and fling herself upon the fleeing Japanese destroyer.

"Ugh," Matheson said.

Dutchy chuckled, a little hollowly.

"Don't worry, Bertie, we won't be trying that caper again."

"You might," Matheson promised. "I'll be over the side!"

"H' mm," Pilot coughed. They looked at him. "En-route Darwin, sir," he brought their minds back, "what speed?"

"Fifteen knots. It's a long way and I want enough for an emergency. They've left Darwin alone for a while, but you never know when they'll change their minds."

"Yes, sir."

"Any further questions?"

Matheson smiled. In the gesture there was over-much cynicism

and resignation for one so young.

“Fine. Now that everyone’s happy we can get on with these bottles. If you youngsters can stay awake that long...”

CHAPTER FOUR

Oil-bunkers topped-up to the limit, revitalised and refreshed, they steamed past Salebaboe Island; but instead of through that channel of three fathoms they sailed to the south, across twelve hundred fathoms. And at night. They were more than a hundred miles from Mindanao, one of the southern-most islands of the Philippines, and much further than that from what they hoped to get in amongst.

Thus, by the dawn's early light, Dutchy was not surprised to sight a group of warships each one of which, he knew by their silhouettes, would be wearing Old Glory at the gaff.

"Yanks," he said to Matheson from under his glasses, "let's get out of here. They'll want to know why we're here on our lonesome and I don't want the world and his dog to know. Starb'd twenty, increase to thirty knots."

The turn placed the cluster of big ships astern, while the speed placed them hull-down. The lofty masts showed no alteration of inclination; they were continuing on-course to the eastward, away from the Philippines.

"Looks like they haven't sighted us," Matheson said.

By inclination and experience Dutchy was pro-British, like most of his colleagues. He was not anti-American, but neither was he overly fond of their methods or national character. "Yanks," he said again, with a different intonation. "Lucky for them we're not a submarine. The coots are probably still at their ice-cream and doughnuts."

And in dispassionate refutation of his slight, a voice sprang from a pipe.

"Radar-office... bridge. Aircraft approaching from astern, identified friendly."

"One of them's on the ball," Matheson grinned, maliciously.

"So's our I.F.F.," Dutchy defended.

Matheson had no argument with that. I.F.F. (Identification Friend or Foe) was an ingenious British radar invention which, perforce, they had not used before. Its pulse triggered off a certain response from an airborne radar set, and so identified the visitor as friendly—or otherwise.

"What the hell..." Dutchy snarled, before his voice was drowned.

Instinctively he ducked, thus joining his companions, as a Corsair fighter howled a few feet above the topmast.

"Bloody nit," Dutchy finished, "What's he think he's playing at?"

The R/T speaker told him.

"Who are you?" a nasal voice enquired. "What ship, where bound? Identify yourself. Waste no time, Mac."

Dutchy's immediate answer to that threatening injunction must remain unprinted. He jumped to the radio-telephone, and as he spoke vehemently a spatulate finger at the end of an indignant arm jabbed at the ensign on the gaff, heedless of the aircraft's position now well ahead.

"What the bloody hell do you think I am? A... Chinese sampan? That's a White Ensign... Mac! You buzz me again like that and I'll crease your silly bloody... with hot lead!"

Swift and graceful, and deadly, the Corsair banked. It speared for them in a growing snarl of supercharged sound.

"Japs can make a White Ensign," Dutchy was informed. "What ship? Quick with it, Mac. You want I should turn nasty?"

"Oh Jesus," Dutchy groaned. He aimed an exasperated face at the aircraft. "We've identified you as friendly," he said into the telephone. "What the hell's up with your I.F.F. gear?"

There was a pause, while the Corsair thundered by and banked with-its wings vertical. Then:

"Guess you're okay. My I.F.F.s got you tagged."

"Oh sure," Dutchy said to his grinning bridge. "The newt's just started to operate it."

The Corsair was turning back.

"Sorry, Limey, but you should have answered quicker. I might have hurt you a little there."

Dutchy was silent for a moment, shaking his head at the deck, while Matheson, looking at his face, was shaking his stomach with laughter. Then Dutchy, with great forbearance not mentioning how early they had identified the fighter, said:

"We're not Limey. This is *Jackal*, R.A.N., on independent mission."

"You look British to me, Buster."

Dutchy breathed in.

"You," he said, gently, "are a misbegotten son of a boiler-room yak. You," he said, rising a little, "should not be allowed in a machine like that. You should be up at the Cross, hogging all the bloody taxis, bringing bunches of flowers to Mum so's you can get your legs in under the table with her daughter. There," Dutchy said, "you can get only the girl into trouble. Now shove off to hell out of here."

Pause. Thin and distorted through the speaker, but still a chuckle.

"Reckon you're an Aussie after all. Say, Mac, you wouldn't have an address up the Cross? Looks like we might be headin' down that way."

"God help the old town," Dutchy said, and hung up.

Matheson smoothed out his face.

"He seemed satisfied with that independent mission bit," jerking his head at the dwindling aircraft.

"He had to be," Dutchy growled. "Tell him what we're up to and he'd entertain every tramp in William Street with the story. Yanks! The idiot damn near took our top mast with him."

"He was only doing his job," Matheson said, solemnly.

"His job! If the nit had any idea of..." Dutchy woke up. "How about you doing your bloody job, Number One? Come the dawn, the dawn's gone. Why are the men still closed-up at action?"

"Because you haven't fallen them out, Mac."

"Then fall them... *What?*"

"Sir..."

"Don't you ever call me that again."

Slowly, Matheson's smile faded. He wasn't quite sure if the old devil wasn't serious. He took the wiser course.

"Sorry, sir, of course not." He swung. "Bosun's mate," he said crisply, "pipe 'Secure action-stations, hands to breakfast.'"

"Aye aye, sir."

Dutchy rolled to his stool in the corner, and only the empty foc's'le saw his leathery grin.

Their next sighting was different.

No escape here, no talking themselves out of enquiries. The flotilla approached from ahead, fast, and fanned out to encompass them and impede their progress. A hard, competent look about those

closing destroyers. Peremptory, a light flashed.

“Challenge, sir,” the yeoman called.

Dutchy had no thoughts of King’s Cross or boiler-room yaks. He had only one thought.

“Reply,” he snapped, “and make it fast.”

The yeoman’s hand quivered. Dots and dashes merged almost into a stream of light. No need to repeat words, not with that signalman on the receiving end. His forbears had made signals at Trafalgar.

There was a pause, while the fanning ships swung back again into their former line. Then:

“What ship, where bound?”

“H.M.A.S. *Jackal*,” Dutchy ordered, “Lieutenant-Commander Holland, detached duty.”

The pause was a little longer this time. Matheson could imagine the flotilla leader, who would be a four-ringed captain, digesting this surprising information. To be detached, in the direction in which *Jackal* was heading, could hardly be healthy.

“Heave-to. Commanding-officer repair on board.”

“Hell,” Dutchy growled, and involuntarily looked down his body. Here, he had his oldest khakis on, and a pair of salt-whitened sandals completed his uniform. But there was no gain saying that sharp order. The British and Australian navies were more than allies; they were brothers, interdependent, interchangeable, in effect one service.

“Stop both,” he ordered. “Take over, Number One. Keep the asdic on their toes.”

He turned for his cabin, and even as he moved Samson and the unknown British captain were conjoined incongruously in his thoughts. Be damned to both of them, he decided with sudden belligerence. His best khakis were not much better than these, and he would not have Samson, in this emergency, noting the fact. And probably he would never see the British officer again.

“Away seaboat’s crew,” he ordered on his way to the ladder.

But if not uniforms, there was something else he wanted from his cabin. The thought occurred to him that Truman may have foreseen a situation like this, hence the provision of those sealed orders. No officer, allies regardless, would dare question them.

Dutchy grabbed up the manila envelope, made a concession by

putting on the better of his two caps, and hurried down to the seaboat. It was waiting for him level with the gunnel. As he made to climb the guardrail he glanced about him.

The Leader, a modern brute of a destroyer, was hove-to close alongside. But round both stopped ships the remaining four were circling. Their asdic made a sonic barrier against the intentions of any interested submarine. Satisfied, impressed by the Britisher's efficiency, Dutchy dropped into the boat. A few minutes later he was walking along a spotless iron-deck.

She was Battle-class, he noted. One of the very latest, only a few months old, well over two-thousand tons. Her crew, curious with the visitor, were correctly dressed. They'd need to be, Dutchy thought with a return of defensive belligerence—as protection against sunburn. Not like his ragged reprobates...

Then he was climbing a ladder to the bridge, and a salute greeted him, and a voice:

“Morning, Holland. My cabin, if you please.”

You have at some time, perhaps, had the experience of speaking to a stranger on a telephone? His voice is abrupt, curt almost. Like an order. And when you meet him personally you find that his natural voice is not like that at all; that he is in fact quite a charming fellow.

Thus it was here.

The words in themselves were curt, yet they were delivered pleasantly, nothing like he'd imagined from that “Repair on board.” And the smile behind them was friendly.

“My name is Trelawney,” smiled this tall thin officer with the gold on his shoulders. “I'll lead, shall I?”

“Please do,” Dutchy smiled back, and had to grin inwardly at his own unwonted diction.

He stepped into a large sunlit cabin and Trelawney closed the door behind them. “Please sit down. I'm afraid I can't offer you any hard stuff.”

Dutchy sat. “Fair enough,” he said, this time in his usual growl; he wasn't going to be intimidated, or even affected, by this British courtliness.

“You must forgive my calling you on board,” the captain smiled,

and crossed his thin, immaculately stockinged legs; the shoes gleamed glossily. Should've brought Baxter, Dutchy thought irrelevantly.

"But you must admit I was somewhat surprised to find an Australian ship—any ship, for that matter—in this area hurrying along on your course. Or perhaps," Trelawney smiled, his eyes shrewd, "you are an advance scout for a larger force?"

"No, sir, we're on our lonesome."

Dutchy was watching carefully, but not only did Trelawney not look down at his uniform, he gave the impression that faded khakis were furthest from his thoughts.

"Might I ask why?"

Dutchy was not fooled. The smile, the tone, were silky—like the silkiness of steel being drawn from a scabbard.

"I'm under sealed orders, sir."

Eyebrows rose a fraction. "Oh? Surely that's rather odd, these days? And surely..." Trelawney produced a platinum cigarette case, offered it. "... by now you would have opened your sealed orders?"

Dutchy grinned, openly. No bloody Yank pilot, this charming devil.

"That's right," he said. "Now we know all about it."

With long thin fingers Trelawney lit Dutchy's cigarette. Dutchy breathed in gratefully, and then with surprise. He just managed to stop himself from looking at the cigarette. Though hardly used to them, he judged he was smoking Turkish tobacco.

Trelawney leaned back in his chair. "All about what?" he suggested. He smiled. A tiger must smile like that, Dutchy thought. "You must understand, my dear fellow, I'm somewhat curious. There is also..." Trelawney coughed politely, "the matter of my duty. I think you will agree it is—ah—unusual to come across a single ship in your position?"

"You think we might be defecting to the Japs?" Dutchy said.

"My *dear* fellow..." And the eyes said, those suddenly glacial eyes in the thin aristocratic and smiling face, said: *Enough. What are you up to?*

"Yes, sir," Dutchy answered verbally the eyes. This'll put you in the picture."

Trelawney opened the envelope and read quickly. When he looked up the eyes were no longer glacial: they were gleaming.

“By Jove,” he said, “you might have something here. Who thought of this? One of your chaps? Mmmm, I’m not surprised. Always believed Australians to be original blokes. Met some of your Army fellows in the Middle East... By Jove,” he said again, “back to the old bad days, eh? Strike, and out. The Japs won’t be expecting anything so fool... so original. Jolly good luck to you.”

“You were right the first time,” Dutchy grinned. “But we might pull it off. That’s if,” he suggested with the subtlety of a trip-hammer, “we get on with the job...”

Suddenly it seemed as if Trelawney was not listening to him. He was looking at Dutchy’s walnut face but his fingers were rubbing gently at his lower lip and his eyes held a distant expression.

“Holland,” he said, and again, thoughtfully, “Holland. I wonder if you ever met a colleague of mine named Masters?”

Mildly surprised at the change of tack, Dutchy pushed out his lips in thought. “Masters?” he said, and shook his bullet head. “I don’t think so. Wait a minute,” he said abruptly. “R.N. Captain, flotilla-leader?”

“That is the gentleman.” Trelawney smiled, his eyes curious on Dutchy. “And you must be the gentleman he picked up—after you’d rammed your ship into a Japanese destroyer carrying an Army general?”

“I seem to remember something like that. You might give him my regards if you strike him again.”

Trelawney seemed unshocked by this suggestion in regard to an officer remotely Dutchy’s superior.

“I shall indeed,” he murmured. “And may I say it is a pleasure to meet you, Holland? Masters has told me of that action. Perhaps you would dine with me if ever we are in port together?”

“Pleasure, sir,” Dutchy grunted, hiding his own pleasure. So the story of the old girl’s one and only fight was known... “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get moving again. Bloke feels a bit creepy,” he explained, needlessly, “sitting in these parts stopped.”

“Of course.” Trelawney stood up, handing back the envelope. He held out his hand. “Good luck, Holland, and good hunting.”

“Same to you, sir. So long.”

The seaboat swept in under the falls and was hooked on. As it rose to the davit head Dutchy noticed that the destroyers were still circling, now joined by Trelawney’s ship, and he knew that they would remain in that protective position until *Jackal* got under way again.

The Yanks would have probably done the same thing, he thought; but so quietly, without fuss... ? He was smiling to himself when he made the bridge.

“Half-ahead together, revolutions for fifteen knots, resume original course.”

Jackal moved ahead, quivering until the strain of shifting her immobile tonnage eased. Quietly and without further signals the British flotilla formed line-ahead and sliced past her, and shortly they were hull-down to the southeast.

“Number One,” Dutchy said, casually. “We carry a British Navy List?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me have it, please.”

Matheson’s stare was understandable. Normally the reply to his affirmative statement would have been something like, “Then why the bloody hell isn’t it on the bridge where a man can get at it?”

But, “Aye, aye, sir,” the youngster returned, and spoke to the bosun’s mate.

Dutchy flipped through the pages of the thick book with his head inside the chart-table. Then a horny finger followed the lines of print, and then he backed his stern out. He strolled over to Matheson.

“I suppose,” he started, and nodded his rock of a face thoughtfully. “Yes, one imagines one would dress for an invitation like that.” Matheson frowned at him; at the diction as much as the words. “I should think it would be drills.” Dutchy nodded again. “Certainly drills. Luckily one has an almost unused set of drills.”

Matheson found his voice. “What the blazes,” he enquired, “are you talking about?”

“Mmmm? Oh, yes, I see. An invitation, my dear boy. But one, I’m afraid, to which you could never aspire.”

“Gawd,” said Matheson. What did he give you aboard there?”

Dutchy gazed reflectively at the sky. “Just an invitation.”

“So I gathered. An invitation to what? Visit him in the psychiatric ward?”

“My *dear* fellows... An invitation to dinner when next in port.”

“Is that all? Even I’ve dined with captains before. It’s part of the drill.”

Very carelessly, Dutchy said:

“You’ve dined with a viscount before?”

“Eh?” Matheson stared, then he gestured vaguely over the port side to where the Leader had waited. “You mean... over there?”

Dutchy dipped his head slowly and solemnly.

“Viscount the Right Honourable Percival Trelawney, D.S.O. and Bar, captain, Royal Navy. Now, how the devil does one address a viscount?” And now Matheson was grinning.

“‘Sir’s’ good enough for the King of England.”

“Mmmm,” said his captain. “But one does not meet the King of England *socially*, does one? Not *tete-a-tete*...”

“I still think he might settle for ‘sir.’ But how come?”

“I beg your pardon?”

Matheson was still patient. “I repeat—how come? One somehow does not see you,” he mocked, “as buddy-buddy pals with a belted earl. How come you’re invited to dinner with same?”

“It would seem he has heard of a ship named *Utmost*.”

“A British captain? Well I’m damned.”

Dutchy returned to normalcy.

“That rocked you, eh, you cocky young nit.”

“But that bloke’s name wasn’t Trelawney, it was Masters.”

“A colleague of my dinner companion.”

“That’s one thing you won’t have to worry your drills about.”

“Eh?”

“Dinner with the viscount. That flotilla’s probably working with the American Seventh Fleet. We’re not You won’t see him again.”

Dutchy’s grin was wide and sudden. “Guess you’re right. But she was nice while it lasted.” The grin twisted into a sneer. “It’s nice to mix with a gentleman now and again.”

“Yes, M’lord.”

“I’m going below,” Dutchy growled. At the head of the ladder he

turned, and returned completely to normal. “From 1600 today the masthead is to be manned at all times in daylight hours. And warn those bludgers to keep their fingers out.”

CHAPTER FIVE

At four o'clock Dutchy was back on the bridge. Matheson had just taken over the first dogwatch. Together they examined the sky. There is nothing, especially in equatorial waters, so consistent as change; the friendly blue sky of the morning had altered to sullen grey. But the clouds held promise of rain more than wind. And this, seeing they were almost a hundred miles closer to Mindanao than when Dutchy had met his viscount, promised to help more than hinder them. Rain would cover them, whereas big seas could hinder their flight from nastiness.

It was getting on towards a cloud-accelerated dusk when Dutchy's masthead order paid its first dividends.

So high, the lookout could see much further than the bridge. Dutchy himself answered the voice-pipe's buzz.

"Bridge. What is it?"

It would take more than a length of vertical pipe to disguise that gravelly rasp. The lookout made himself speak deliberately.

"Ships in sight bearing fine on the port bow, sir. Moving from right to left, to the southward. About a dozen, sir."

Dutchy did not bother to try with his binoculars. With him on deck the bridge lookouts had been searching assiduously, and they had made no sighting report.

"What d'you make of 'em? Moving fast?"

"There's only the masts, sir, but I'd say they were merchant ships. Hard to judge at the speed."

Dutchy did not press him, A man needed bow-waves or a wake for an estimate of speed.

"No alteration of course?"

"No, sir, steady to the south."

"Good. Keep your eyes peeled."

There was no answer to that automatic injunction, and none expected. Dutchy came up from the voice-pipe.

"Convoy," he said to Matheson. "That means escorts. Alter three points to starb'd, go on to thirty knots. Tell the engine-room I want no smoke."

"Aye aye, sir."

Matheson's acknowledgement was the only comment on those orders, private or vocal. They knew their mission. They were fighters, but shrewd fighters—like tigers who have more sense than to go in against odds. Or more like jackals, perhaps—after pickings, but without pointless risks. They had enough ahead of them without asking for trouble.

Yet there was comment passed, if on a different subject. Bludger Bent was on his pom-pom with Olaf Jackson, checking without orders that the, eight-barrelled weapon was ready to engage if anything should come at them from the night. This was unlikely, but at war at sea at night you were likely not to have any more earthly worries if you disregarded the unlikely.

Bludger came upright from his examination of a firing lock mechanism as he felt her heel and heard the rising voice of the blowers. He had no knowledge of the distant convoy, and Bludger's was of that happy nature which does not worry about what it does not know. He could see *Jackal's* movements, and this was enough to spark his comment.

"Look at the bastard go," he said, nodding in appreciation of the piled-up wake.

"That's not the point," Olaf rejoined sombrely.

"That so? You got another point?"

"Sure have. She can go all right, but the main thing is she can *keep* on goin'. That, I like. No worry about flamin' fuel pumps or bearin's. Not like before.

"You gotta point," Bludger said sagely. He grinned. "Nice feelin', ain't it?"

It was a very nice feeling, and it was universal throughout the ship. Pride in an old bomb of a ship was all very well, but there was no harm in having that pride in a ship whose machinery was barely, comparatively, run-in. Nice, indeed.

"This is the first-lieutenant," the voice quietened them throughout the ship. "We have sighted an enemy convoy well clear to the westward. We're getting further clear. That's all."

It was not quite all, before the night enfolded them.

An hour later, with the convoy's masts long since vanished and nothing else in sight, Dutchy brought her back to her northerly

course. She would dawdle through the night, which would bring her off the southern coast of Mindanao, near the entrance of Davao Gulf, at first light.

But the time for dawdling was not quite yet.

Directly ahead of them as she moved into the dimming light was a brilliant natural phenomenon. The sun was low, but some property of high reflection was allowing its light down through an oval-shaped hole in the clouds. The light poured through. It fell between cloud and sea in dusky triangular shafts with silvered edges, and made a sheeny patch of silver in the otherwise dark sea.

“Like light in a cathedral,” Matheson murmured.

Dutchy was less romantically inclined. So close to enemy ground, so close to safe night, he could have done without that light. The gleaming patch was right ahead of the bow, and if the sun did not sink in time, or the oval hole close up, he would have to go round it.

But the human eye, naturally, is drawn to light. He cursed the patch but he looked at it. Not carefully, not warily, simply with exasperation. And in the next second he was very wary indeed.

There was a flash. The sea was not flashing. It was oily, without wind; it was simply gleaming reflectively. Yet there was the flash, and again. Low-down, brief, definite.

“Hard-a-starb’d!” Dutchy roared. “Full ahead together!”

This is the sort of time an admiral should carry out his inspection of a ship’s competence. At a time like this he would learn infinitely more about a ship than her brightwork and boats and messdeck cleanliness could tell him.

Dutchy’s orders exploded on the bridge utterly without preparation. They were completely surprised. And they acted with an instant, disciplined, automatic swiftness.

Nearest, Pilot bellowed down the wheelhouse voice-pipe. The telegraphsmen rang the change on the engine-room telegraphs. The helmsman leaned sideways a little and then with all the galvanised force of his arm whirled the spokes of the wheel. The engine-room artificer spun the throttles. The rudder heaved over, the turbines sang. *Jackal* heeled, and shook.

And from the crow’s nest, scorning the voice-pipe, high and urgent, came the lookout’s cry: “Right ahead! Torpedo!”

They could see now, every eye on the alerted bridge, even without glasses; springing from the base of those cathedral shafts came the three smooth tracks, racing, converging, heading at forty knots straight for her reeling guts.

She had been at an easy fifteen knots. She was powerful, designed for swift movement, but time is required to shift seventeen hundred tons from fifteen to full speed. The torpedoes were faster than that. Only her captain's quickness, and their quick obedience, might save them.

There was no time for another alteration of course, to turn and try to comb the triple tracks. She was committed. It was her great heart now, pumping and thrashing, and the thoroughness of Rear-admiral Truman; and, of course, the British workmen who had built her.

Old *Pelican* or *Utmost* would never have made it. This was a strain only young sinews could bear. And they held, and thrust her, and took her ten yards clear of the right-hand track.

"Jesus," Matheson breathed. He stared astern, after the racing points of smoothness which prolonged themselves on into the gloom.

But Dutchy could spare time neither for relief nor sightseeing. Not this time could they run for their lives. They had been seen. The lives depended on their staying, and killing.

"Midships," he rasped, "hard-a-port. You got that bearing, Pilot? Take her down it. Stand-by depth-charges."

For the first time since he had sighted the periscope flash Dutchy stared at its point of origin. The oval of light had gone. The cloud had sutured its wound. Now the sky was an overall grey. No flashes, no black stick of a periscope. But he was still there, angry perhaps at his failure, perhaps apprehensive, but still deadly. For the Jap knew, and he had wireless.

But now Truman's cunning old fox was a bull, eager to gore. Time was the only equation, not subtlety. The Jap knew of their presence but they knew where he was, right beneath the origin of those telltale tracks, and they had to get there fast before he could move any distance away. Asdic dome up, the log needle quivering on 34, *Jackal* rushed down the line of bearing. She was moving almost four times as fast as the enemy's maximum dived speed.

As they waited on the bridge and at the guns and depth-charges

on the quarterdeck, and felt her shaking power, once again they felt how good it was to have a young ship like this; good to know that all they had to do was find him and that *Jackal's* sustained strength would do the rest. There was no need to worry about a steering-engine packing up on a tight turn, or engines failing as she leaped in to attack again.

Dutchy slowed her speed well before the point of torpedo discharge and ordered the dome down. His experience was rewarded almost at once. The peep of contact came strong and clear. The Jap, cunning, was aiming to sneak away beneath them; he was coming towards, knowing that the destroyer would be at high speed with her dome up. Another few minutes and his plan would have succeeded.

He was met instead with a diamond-shaped pattern which exploded all about him. Like a reined horse Dutchy wheeled her round. The men on her quarterdeck were shabbily and improperly dressed, without shirts and without caps, but they wore heavy protective boots and they knew their business. The deck heeled, but the charges were swayed up into the throwers so quickly that by the time she had straightened from the turn and the call came again they were ready. Dutchy spoke.

Whoof, whoof. The sound was dull, not loud. The propelling charge did not need to be large. The canisters shot out only a few yards, joined by others from the stern rails. *Jackal* slid on, and then behind her the sea burst up.

They did not see their enemy again. They did not need to. "Breaking-up noises" came from the speaker, then they heard the vindication of that report. Snaps, cracks, whistles. Bulkheads going, water rushing in and forcing air out. Up swelled the oil, to spread with faint but definite iridescence in the lingering light. They could smell it. Too much," Matheson said, his young face set with hard satisfaction.

Dutchy nodded. Oil could be discharged to dupe an attacker, but not this quantity. This was an involuntary release. And no submarine could fake those breaking-up noises. Dutchy made a circling motion with his hand.

"Bring her round," he said to Pilot.

For ten minutes they circled, waiting not very hopefully for

survivors. Large bubbles came up, which burst quietly, and then they ceased, and there was only the spreading evidence of the pungent oil.

“We’re wasting time,” Matheson smiled, “and that oil is fouling my paint.”

Dutchy was not deceived by the smile or the words. They indicated only a reactive defensiveness; it is not pleasant to know seventy men have been engulfed by black death. But he answered in the same falsely jocular tone:

“You’re right, Bertie. Put her back on course, Pilot. Fallout action-stations.”

The night gathered fully about her and *Jackal* moved on into its helpful obscurity, darkened and quiet and still safe. Hands went to supper, their appetites unimpaired. The initial sickness had passed quickly; this is easy when you remember that the men you’ve killed had been devoted to your own destruction.

Except for a broad stern poked out from the chart-table Matheson was alone on the bridge with the bosun’s mate. The rain had held off. He hoped it would till he was relieved at eight o’clock. The sea was calm. Asdic was echoless and above his head the search radar whirled comfortingly. There was little to occupy him. Matheson took a look at the gyro compass and then walked over to the chart-table in the port forrard corner.

He pressed in under the shielding canvas beside Dutchy. A dim blue light glowed over the chart. But Matheson saw that Dutchy was not concerned with the chart.

“What are you up to?” he asked, looking at the photographs.

Dutchy tapped a page with his finger. The recognition book was thick, with foolscap-sized pages.

“Look at ‘em,” he said. “*Kagero-class, Sigure.*” He flipped a page. “*Kamikaze-class, Uduki, Hubuki...* what’s common to all those destroyers?”

Matheson’s examination of the Japanese ships was brief; he was trained to snap recognition, especially of aircraft, when seconds could mean the difference.

“They all have two funnels. That what you mean?”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” Dutchy turned back a bunch of

pages. "Look at our lot. How many classes of destroyers have one funnel? *Javelin*, *Onslow*, *Hunt*, *Zambesi*—damn near all of 'em except the *Tribals* and *Heros*. We have one funnel. A Jap sub. sights a single-funnel job out here and that's all he has to worry about. He knows she's hostile."

"So all we want is another funnel," Matheson jibed.

"That's right."

"Pity you hadn't thought of this bright idea at Garden Island. They have a dockyard there, y'know. Though I'd like to see the requisition chit... 'Please supply and fit H.M.A.S. *Jackal* with one extra funnel. Never mind about connecting it to the furnaces.'"

"You're killing me," Dutchy sneered. "Lucky that German skipper didn't rate such a funny bastard for a second-dickey."

"Eh?"

"The *Emden*'s captain."

"Come again?"

"Don't they teach you young swabs naval history in college? *Emden* rigged a dummy funnel."

"Oh, come on," Matheson grinned. "That was back in the bow and arrow days."

Dutchy nodded. "Like the commandos."

"Eh?"

"Forget it. Get the Buffer up here. Better have the cox'n, too."

"You're serious?"

"No," Dutchy snarled. "I just want to see they get enough bloody fresh air! Smack it about."

"Yessir. Bosun's mate!"

The Buffer was the oldest man in the ship. He had been in on the last stages of the Great War—the one to end all wars—and had been within six days of his retirement when history and Hitler made liars of the pundits. He had also been with Dutchy since the beginning of this one.

Like Viscount Trelawney, Chief Petty-officer Herbert John Wallace was tall and thin, though there similarity finished. The Buffer had neither lineage nor medals—he had only an equable nature which showed in his spare face, a hatred of serving in big ships, and a vast experience in small ones. He'd been in one cruiser, and would go to

inordinate and immoral lengths to stay out of another.

“Yes, sir?” he said now to the dim figure on the stool, and waited beside the dully-shining baldness of Verril’s head. Neither man saluted, for they were capless—which says something for the discipline, or lack of it, on this bridge.

Dutchy swung on the stool. “I want,” he said, “another funnel.”

“Yessir,” the Buffer answered automatically. Then he scratched his head. “A dummy funnel? Can do.”

Dutchy shot a malicious glance at Matheson. “That’s what I like,” he grinned. “Optimism.”

“Did that in the first stoush,” the Buffer said. “I was in an old D-class cruiser at the time, off the Dogger Bank. We rigged a dummy chimney that made us look something like the present County-class. I remember there was a lot of Jerry torpedo-boat destroyers about at the time. Matter of fact, I was loading number of one of the forrard six-inch. No turrets, of course, just a gunshield open at the rear. A man copped the salt, I can tell...”

“Oh, my Gawd,” the Coxswain groaned. “He’s off again.”

“Very interesting, Buffer,” Dutchy said quickly. “But this funnel, now. Here’s the picture.”

“I’m in it, sir,” the Buffer nodded. “We change to a Jap destroyer.”

Matheson leaned forward. “How the devil did you get on to that?”

“Elementary, ain’t it, sir? Man’s only got to look at the silhouettes. They all have two stacks, most of us rate one. We’re headin’ for Jap country, so...” The Buffer shrugged his bony shoulders.

Dutchy looked at the invisible clouds. “It’s a pity,” he said gently, “more people aboard here don’t study their recognition books.”

“All right,” Matheson said viciously. “Just how do you propose to duplicate a steel bloody funnel?”

A staccato voice jumped in. Verril was not to be outsmarted by his messmate and longtime friend.

“I wasn’t in the *first* war,” he jerked, “not being a shellbacked barnacle. But all you need is canvas, painted grey, and wooden slats to keep it stretched at the top. She don’t have to be round like a real funnel—just hang her up there like a curtain. From a few miles you couldn’t tell the difference.”

“And how are you going to hang it up?” Matheson asked.

“Easy. Run a wire, a sort of triadic stay, between the fore and mainmast. Couple of blocks on the stay, heave-oh and there you are.”

“Wonderful,” said the Buffer, “bloody marvellous. There’s only one small objection.”

“Yeah?” said his friend, suspiciously. “What?”

“This ship don’t carry a mainmast.”

Matheson burst out laughing. Dutchy chuckled, sensing if not seeing in the dark the expression on the coxswain’s face.

“He’s got you there, Swain,” he said.

Verril thought for a moment. Then:

“Like hell he has. What are the aerials secured to aft? A flamin’ licorice stick?”

Easily, triumphant, the Buffer countered: “Too low. The top of that thing’s below the top of the funnel.”

“So what?” Verril snapped. “We can bloody well...”

“All right,” Dutchy said, and slipped from the stool. They were instantly quiet, capless heads withal. “The aerial mast is steel. We could fish a spar to it, then run the triadic stay.”

“Just what I was thinking, sir,” said the Buffer. The quick turn of Verril’s bald head said: “You bloody liar!”

“How about the lower boom for a spar?” Matheson put in.

“Brilliant, Number One,” Dutchy said, solemnly. “I was just thinking that myself.” He turned to the other two. “This is a daylight job, and this weather won’t last much longer. There’ll be wind tomorrow or I’m a Dutchman. We’ll have to sneak in somewhere first thing in the morning. But tonight you can get the canvas and slats ready. Make it slightly narrower than the real thing. But no doubt you noticed the difference in size of Japanese funnels, Buffer?”

“Well...” the Buffer admitted.

“All right, hop to it. Don’t forget eyelets for stays. I’ll come down when you’re ready.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

When they had gone, Matheson said:

“Y’know, I think this might work.”

“Fine, Number One. I’m glad.”

“All right, all right. I don’t imagine we’ll need it to fool a merchantman—he won’t be that well up on his recognition, even of his own Navy. But it might save us from another pot-shot like that sub. took at us. Next time they’ll make sure before they let go, and by that time we could be on to ‘em.”

“My reasoning exactly,” Dutchy murmured.

Matheson ignored the tone. “You’re going to hole-up tomorrow,” he said. “Where?”

“Chart.” They walked over. “Here,” Dutchy said, pointing to the eastward bulge of the toe of Mindanao. “In behind Calian Point. There are mountains right on the coast and twelve fathoms close inshore. No town or villages marked. In any case they’d have to be cliff-dwellers to squat there.”

“We hope.”

“There is,” said Dutchy, “a volume called the *Philippines Pilot*. It tells you all sorts of things about coasts and mountains and rivers—and villages.”

“So there is,” Matheson nodded.

“Then,” said Dutchy, in an un-viscountish voice, “get the bloody thing up here!”

“Yessir.”

CHAPTER SIX

There were no villages behind the point, neither according to the *Pilot* nor according to their anxious binoculars. Dutchy took her in close to the steep-to shore and came to anchor. The long rectangle of canvas was ready, its coat of grey almost dry in the night's humid air. Out past the point a Force 5 wind whipped white from the wavetops, but in here *Jackal* rolled gently to the deflected swell.

The lower-boom, used normally to secure boats when they were in the water, was long and fairly heavy, but under the Buffer's seamanship it was soon fished securely to the aerial mast with three lashings of 1½-inch manila rope, and strongly stayed. Then the triadic stay, a thin tough wire, was run between boom and foremast, with two blocks already seized to it. Dutchy had ordered the smallest tackles in the ship to lift the "funnel," for the canvas was not heavy and he did not want inquisitive glasses noting how it was supported.

Dutchy had remained on the bridge. He had, in fact, paid the work amidships little attention; his interest was to seaward. But nothing passed to jump his already taut nerves. Then from amidships Matheson called:

"All set, sir. One funnel coming up."

But first, careful of the time factor, Dutchy gave another order, "Lower the motor cutter." When it was in the water he gave Matheson the go-ahead. There were no hitches. The apparatus had the advantage of simplicity. It rose easily and hung there, looking from close up nothing like a funnel, bellying in the breeze before they hauled in on the guys.

Very carefully Dutchy studied the horizon. To southward his view was blocked by the rearing point, but mile by slow mile to the east and north he examined the saw-toothed edge. No steady flash of bow-wave, not even a mast. The sea was clear. There was the possibility of aircraft; there was also the possibility of choking while you ate. There are limits to man's precautions.

"Right," Dutchy said to Pilot. "Trouble... one blast on the siren."

"Aye aye, sir."

The cutter took him out a mile. They would be unlucky to have a submarine fire at them from closer in than that; so would be the

submarine. Dutchy stood up in the sternsheets and looked back at the ship. Not even through his glasses were the tackles visible, and he could see no wind movement in *Jackal's* acquisition. He called back over his shoulder.

"What d'you think, cox'n?"

"I reckon she's apples, sir."

"All right, then," Dutchy grunted, "back to the ship."

He was not wholly relieved until he was back on deck with the cutter hoisted and the cable grinding in. Then he said to Matheson:

"Fine, except for one detail. Your funnel's too clean. Get it down and splash black paint round the mouth." An hour later she was out and round the point. The wind was from the north. She started to roll. Dutchy looked aft. His brainchild was bellying a little, but steady under the pressure.

"Come round to south," he ordered. This should be a good spot for ships making up into Davao Gulf, and too far north for our crowd to worry 'em."

No one mentioned that such a busy funnel into a great gulf might attract escorts as well as merchantmen.

It might have been a good spot for their purpose, but not on this windy day. Dutchy took her a hundred miles to the south, almost level with but out of sight of the Sarangani Islands, and then back again to a little north of Calian Point, and no call came from the radar or crow's nest. All day it was the same.

Watches were relieved, and gun crews, while she bucked on one course and rolled on the other, and the fruitless day drew on towards dusk. On-watch, Matheson commented:

"It must have been like this in the old blockading days off Toulon or Brest. I remember they went sometimes for weeks without sighting a sail."

"They did teach you some history," Dutchy growled. He searched the horizon for the hundredth time and lowered his glasses with a grimace of exasperation. "There was one advantage those ships of the line had over us."

"Such as?"

"Wind," Dutchy said. "That's all they needed."

"You're not worrying about fuel, for Pete's sake?"

“Not yet, no. But we can’t gander up and down here for bloody months.”

“Never mind, something’ll show in the morning.”

“Fine... In the meantime this weather’s going to get dirtier. Bring her round. We’ll sit out the night behind Calian.”

Matheson passed the orders. “Excellent idea,” he smiled, “I could do with an all-night in.”

“You’ll be clever to manage that. Ship will remain in normal sea routine.”

“You think something might jump us?”

“It’s just possible,” Dutchy sneered.

But nothing appeared to spoil their protected nocturnal wait behind the point. As though the sun had eaten it up the wind died at dawn and they sailed out into a clean-washed morning, all blue and white. The sky arched clear, the sun shone warm. They were rested, and their bellies full. And the masthead said:

“Bearing Red four-five, mast. Coming towards, nothing else in sight.”

“Come round,” Dutchy snapped, “full ahead together, close-up for action.”

Before the ship quietened again a bridge and bow had grown beneath the mast. Dutchy was not immediately interested. His glasses were sweeping on either side, and it was a full five minutes before he satisfied himself that Truman had been right. So safe, so close to home territory, the merchantman was unescorted.

“Come down to fifteen knots,” Dutchy said. “No point in frightening him.”

Closing on an opposite course, the merchantman could see only the forepart of a destroyer which obviously was in no hurry. She came steadily on. So did the destroyer. “A big bastard,” Matheson said. “Must be eight thousand tons.”

The words came a fraction quicker than normal. He had faced different targets to this one, many times, but that large black unarmed shape was different in a separate way—she was the first pawn in this untried game.

Dutchy did not answer. High out of the water, he was thinking; unloaded probably up at Davao, now on her way back to Manila for

more. A pity about the stores, but eight thousand tons of emptiness were better than a slap in the face with a wet fish.

“One torpedo,” he said curtly. “On the way in all guns will aim for the bridge. I want his wireless-office. Main armament engage soon as we alter in. Stand-by.”

The range was one mile. If unaltered, their courses would take them past each other half-a-mile apart. What a bloody fool, Matheson thought, and amended that as he put himself on the other bridge. Why would the Jap be suspicious of a single destroyer, approaching so leisurely in such an area? He was not naval-trained, he could not distinguish between an Australian and a Japanese bridge, nor a Brazilian for that matter. The destroyer had not challenged, but then why should she? Obviously to her the merchantman was Japanese. And the warship’s guns were still fore and aft, a friendly position.

Matheson’s nervy reflections were shattered.

“Open fire!” Dutchy rasped. “Starb’d thirty, steer for the target, full-ahead both, revolutions for thirty knots. Stand-by tubes.”

She leaned. The four big guns trained, fast under valves opened full. For minutes they had been loaded with semi-armour piercing shell. Before she was halfway round to her target the guns let go. They could hit at nine or ten miles. The range was less than one.

It was absurdly easy.

The Jap’s bridge was a red-flashed mess before Dutchy swung her again and the tube spat. Before the torpedo finished its run the foremast with its aerials was hanging over the side. Stunned by the vicious suddenness of the disaster the Jap was still on-course, and the torpedo had no trouble in finding its home.

She was empty. Her holds were large. Against an unarmoured side a torpedo with a warhead holding close on half a ton of Torpex makes a huge entry. The door was thirty or forty feet long, well under, and through it the sea rushed forcefully. The Jap leaned towards them.

Towards their stern. *Jackal* was on the way out from her deadly impregnation. Dutchy kept her on the turn until once again his full broadside was bearing.

“Half-ahead together,” he ordered. “Main armament point of aim the waterline near the bow.”

Then he disregarded his listing target and concentrated on the horizon.

His vision went unrewarded. Not so Matheson's. The torpedo had hit almost dead amidships, and now the punching shells were enlarging the hole forrard. Matheson saw broadside after broadside hit in a splash of white and vivid red. He enjoyed this sight immensely. The shells were hitting not far below the waterline, but they left holes, and the further she listed the deeper sank the holes, helping to drown her. It would be like, Matheson was thinking with an enthusiasm almost boyish, having thirty or forty fire-hoses jetting at full belt into her holds. No, nothing like that. Much more. The hole ripped by a shell was much bigger than a hose...

A less fanciful, more practical thought occurred to him. Darwin was a long way off.

"I think she's had it, sir. We're wasting ammunition."

Dutchy continued his horizon study for a few seconds before turning. The guns fired again. A lifeboat filled with men which had just met the water rose again on the point of a vehement thrust and disintegrated. Black things dropped back.

"We got that boat!" Matheson shouted.

"Tough luck," Dutchy said calmly. "They knew our point of aim. Cease firing."

Jackal ceased her barking. Quiet and a sulphurous stink settled over the bridge. No one choked. It was the explosive odour of victory. They had all smelled it before.

"Take her round the other side," Dutchy ordered.

They didn't make it. She was moving at fifteen knots and water in quantities like that does its work busily. They were passing the down-tilted bow when suddenly, smooth and without hesitation, the Jap rolled. For a few last seconds, a huge whale, the ship wallowed, oscillating gently, and then she was gone; bubbles, big and quiet, black oil, black heads, two boats, rafts, smoke walking away on the wind, a ghost leaving its grave.

"Come round to south," Dutchy said. "Secure action-stations. Log that, Pilot—eight thousand tons will do, empty."

Matheson looked back at the boats, and the heads making towards them.

“Our funnel wasn’t much good,” he said. “They know it’s not made in Japan.”

“It’ll be a long time before they tell anybody about it,” Dutchy grunted. “More than a hundred miles up to Davao. I don’t like their chances in that muck ashore. The funnel doesn’t worry me—but that does,” he said grimly, and pointed aft.

Matheson nodded slowly. “Lucky we were on a reciprocal course,” he agreed. “They couldn’t have sighted it till the last minute.”

“Luck’s not good enough.”

Matheson looked at him. “You wouldn’t!”

Dutchy turned. “Yeoman?”

“Sir.”

“How long to knock up a Jap ensign?”

The yeoman’s grin showed his teeth and his lack of scruples.

“Give us an hour, sir.”

“Right. Rig a jury set of halliards. Keep our ensign bent on ready. We’ll hoist it as soon as we open fire.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The yeoman departed with alacrity. Matheson shook his head.

“I dunno if that’s legal. In fact, I think it’s very doubtful.”

“Too bad,” said the fox.

“There could be international complications.”

“I’m worried sick. Like they worried over Pearl Harbour...”

“But you’re bringing yourself down to their level.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“You don’t give a damn for the niceties of conduct, do you?”

“No.”

Matheson grinned.

They found their next merchantman an hour later down near the Saranganis and they found her full, northbound. She fell just as easily, but died more spectacularly.

Dutchy had only seven torpedoes left but with his false ensign he got in very close and he risked saving his tubes. As before it was the bridge structure, and in a few minutes it was wrecked. The wireless-office reported no transmissions.

“Engine-room,” Dutchy ordered.

They missed the engines but they got the boilers. Inside those

big steel pots there was steam at more than three hundred pounds per square inch. A brace of shells let it out. Violence escaped in a blast that broke her in two.

Above the hissing white the sea rushed into each broken end. The bow lifted until the forefoot was clear, and the stern showed its screws and rudder. For a moment she hung there, a giant V of disaster; then the hand of destroyed buoyancy dragged them under.

There were no boats this time and only a few rafts which had broken loose. But the sea was covered with floating boxes, probably of tinned stuff, or cans of petrol. "You wouldn't consider picking up survivors?" Matheson asked.

"No."

"U-boats," Matheson said. "They don't pick up survivors,"

"They're not expected to. No room."

"We've got room."

"And supplies and water for hundreds more? And who's going to guard 'em when we're closed-up at action? Look," Dutchy growled, "I'm getting a bit jack of your blasted scruples. We're not playing at water polo, y'know. If it's any help to your tender emotions, my sealed orders forbid the rescue of survivors. For obvious reasons."

"I haven't any scruples—under the circumstances..."

"Then get off my bloody back."

"I just wanted to see how far you'll go."

"You haven't seen nothing yet. Like I said, this isn't a game. It's them or us. We're not the People's Palace. We came here to do a special job and we're doing it, in the only way possible."

"All right, I'm with you. I understand."

"Now I feel much better," Dutchy sneered.

Matheson took his gaze from the scummed area astern. It was nasty, he thought, but it was necessary.

And he wasn't really fooled by Dutchy's apparent callousness. He smiled placatingly.

"The ensign worked all right."

"The ensign worked."

"We'll stay round here?"

"No. The balloon will go up soon. We're shifting to another happy hunting ground."

“Where?”

“Up into Illana Bay. Pilot?”

“Sir.”

“Take her south of the Saraganis. Lay off a course up into Illana Bay parallel to the coast, forty miles clear.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Matheson waited till the navigational work was completed, then he crossed to the chart. The idea seemed sound enough. Illana Bay was west of Davao Gulf, on the other side of Mindanao’s heart-shaped southern portion. It was approached through Moro Gulf, towards which they were now heading. The gulf was more than a hundred miles wide before it narrowed into Illana Bay at its top, and bounded on the west by the Sulu Archipelago and the hooked finger of Zamboanga Peninsula.

There was a song about Zamboanga, Matheson thought vaguely. There’d be a different tune if their success held. Louder, no romance in it.

But there was also something unlovely about that wide width of clear water. If they were caught by destroyers it would be several hours’ run before they could hide in the clutter of the Sulu Archipelago, and they could only hide in darkness, and entering that lot at night might be less than healthy.

But then, Matheson comforted himself, they had been here several days without sight of a warship. And for how much longer? That thought, as he crossed back to Dutchy, he forced deep back into his consciousness.

Like the gunners, the crow’s nest lookout earned his pay that rewarding day.

The first sighting in the new area was made just before lunch. About five thousand tons, the Jap approached them from ahead, moving methodically and without alarm at about eight knots. Dutchy kept her down to fifteen, and her guns trained fore and aft.

“He’s come through Basilan Straight,” he judged. This was a narrow stretch between the Sulu Archipelago and Zamboanga. “I’d say he’s rounding the Saraganis and then heading up to Davao. Make a note of that, Pilot. Looks like there could be a big concentration of Japs up that way, to need so many supply ships.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

What everybody thought, and nobody mentioned, was that those Japs might be interested in why their supply ships hadn't arrived...

“She's maintaining course,” Dutchy said. “This is too easy.”

He fooled neither himself nor his listeners. It was easy, and would continue to be easy, just so long as no one knew they were there. Then their thoughts were contracted.

“Open fire,” Dutchy ordered.

The shells left, and landed, and Dutchy through his satisfaction at the red splashes reflected on how quickly his team of pirates had swung into the routine of this new and profitable game. No need now to designate the point of aim, or the form of firing. With rapid broadsides *Jackal* was biting at the Jap's bridge, killing the important people quickly, smashing the wireless gear which could kill them.

In all that action Dutchy spoke no word except to the wheelhouse. Without orders, with the Jap's bridge a spilling mess of metal, the director shifted aim to the waterline. This ship was heavily loaded, but there was room enough for the sea. The weight of water and munitions combined. She sank on almost a level keel, straight down, slow and smooth. A minute later the sea burst up as her boilers exploded, but that was a needless disruption.

Jackal moved on, skirting the faces and bodies, the faces shouted obscenities and the bodies bobbing gently as she passed.

“They seem annoyed,” Matheson commented; he was becoming used to slaughter.

“You know why,” Dutchy grinned, humorously.

“That's obvious enough.”

“It is?”

“Well, of course...”

“I wonder. It hasn't occurred to you they might think they've been sunk by their coppers, by mistake?”

“That's nonsense! They'd know a Jap destroyer would know who they were.”

“On the face of it, yes. But those men are shocked. They're not thinking as brilliantly clearly as you, my boy. They're only thinking what they've seen, and experienced. And that's a trigger-happy Jap destroyer too edgy to make sure before she lets go. And now that

destroyer is intent only on clearing out from the scene of her crime, hoping no one survives to tell the tale.”

“Oh hell...” Matheson said with exasperation, “they’ve seen our ensign.”

Dutchy gestured aft. “Look.”

Matheson looked. Then, slowly, he nodded.

“Yeoman!” Dutchy snapped.

“Sir?”

“You forgot to hoist our ensign.”

“Hell... Sorry, sir, I was busy looking out for her coppers...”

The yeoman’s face was taut with concern. Dutchy’s grin wiped it away.

“Forget our ensign,” he said, “let the red ball fly. Let’s make confusion worse confounded.”

“I’m quite sure” Matheson said, “that *that* is highly illegal.”

“Fine,” the fox nodded. “If those boys in the water get back to spill the beans, then the Jap destroyers will know they’re after a ship wearing their own ensign. But they won’t know who’s knotting who. They’ll have to get very close, and be very careful, before they open fire. That’ll give us a chance to let ‘em have it. And here, Bertie, we have to take every chance offered to us.”

“Fair enough,” Matheson said. “But if it’s so easy and profitable to wear a false ensign, why don’t all navies do it? What’s to prevent them?”

Dutchy looked at him poker-faced.

“National honour,” he said.

“And you haven’t any?” Matheson dared.

“Sure,” Dutchy replied, easily. “When I’m against an honourable foe.”

And before young Matheson could answer that speciousness the crow’s nest interrupted:

“Bearing fine on the port bow, smoke.”

Less than an hour found that funnel smoke considerably added to...

A ship’s oil bunkers extend right to her sides. With the bridge demolished in what had become an expert routine, the shells were sent into her bunkers. Like black blood the oil gushed forth. More

shells followed. The heat in bursting high-explosive is intense. Oil is made to burn. The luckless Jap was curtained by boiling billows of smoke.

Dutchy was satisfied and worried at the same time. That sky-reaching tombstone could be seen for miles. It could frighten off other possible prey, or bring inquisitive destroyers. He didn't want to, but he had to waste another torpedo.

With her wounded belly ripped wide open the merchantman reeled and went under. There was a ten-knot breeze. On it the betraying smoke drifted to the eastward, and dissipated long before reaching the coast of Mindanao. *Jackal* moved on.

"Log that, Pilot," Dutchy said. "Six thousand tons. Full."

The next ship was sighted late in the afternoon to the westward, on her port beam.

"We'll alter towards," Dutchy said. "A friendly destroyer doing her inspection duty. Action-stations."

Easily, without fuss or urgency, *Jackal* came round to the west. And that unhurried turn very nearly took her into disaster.

The bridge and wireless-office were destroyed, the Jap was heeling. She was finished. Or should have been.

Jackal moved slowly down her side, guns pumping. If anyone noticed the movement on the Jap's stern they did not comment. Why should they? Those crewmen were throwing those crates over the side simply as additional rafts. Obviously they were working so furiously because they were in a panic.

So that no one—not even Bludger Bent on his pom-pom, who was watching the shells burst against her side—saw what was revealed when the wall of crates was demolished.

But they heard harshly enough.

Not the crack of the Jap's stern gun. That was smothered in *Jackal's* continuous roaring. But a depth-charge exploding makes a loud and distinctive sound, especially when it bursts out of the water.

Her continued life was a miracle. On her quarter-deck she carried scores of amatol-filled canisters. If they had exploded together or in succession the whole stern would have been ripped off her. But that evilly-aimed shell, streaking low over the quarterdeck, struck a charge

on her far side and punched it clear before the heat of the shell's bursting fired the amatol. Thunder erupted, and an eye-searing splash of red, but the rest of her touchy stern was left intact. Saved by a few yards of distance.

Dutchy bellowed. But Bludger had seen.

It would have taken too long for the heavy mountings to shift target. The pom-pom was lighter. Olaf spun his training wheel like a demented merry-go-round. The eight silent barrels swung. The next round was already loading into the Jap gun. They had seconds.

Before his webbed sight came on, hoping to panic them, Bludger opened fire.

To the right of the four-inch gun the steel deck suddenly grew red flowers. Startled, men looked up.

The gun-layer looked up.

They shouldn't have done that. They had seconds in which to cripple their tormentor and they wasted those seconds. A pom-pom trains fast, it is designed to follow a diving fighter. A storm of steel burst on the gun.

Bludger kept his trigger pressed. Hosing fire. Eight barrels coughed and jerked and ran out again and hundreds of two-pounder shells flayed the mounting. It was tough steel, and even that lashing whip could not seriously harm it. But steel jolts fuses into action, and human bodies are not as tough.

Two loading numbers, standing a little to the right of the gun, were cut literally in half. With a harsh and sickening clarity Matheson saw the four separate parts stagger, and fall on the deck. He saw the parts still jerking, but that was not life, it was the lash of Bludger's whip.

Then *Jackal's* after gun, seconded temporarily from its other mission of destruction, roared. Again. That second hurtling shell demolished what had withstood the pom-pom. Bludger ceased firing and stared with satisfaction at the split ruin of the Jap mounting. With a forearm he wiped his sweating forehead and called over the gun to Olaf.

"Better watch them bastards from now on. They might come that caper again."

And on the bridge the captain ordered:

“Detail a hand to watch for that sort of thing, Number One. That was close. Give me a damage report on the quarterdeck.”

Matheson, part of whose duties included watching for that sort of thing, answered a little more crisply than usual:

“Aye aye, sir!”

But Dutchy said no more about it. The lesson had been learned more succinctly than he could deliver it. There would be more than one pair of eyes from now on watching for movement on a target’s stem. And for the moment Dutchy was eminently satisfied. The tally of ships met and sunk was growing very nicely. It was like, as he commented to Matheson with the scummy patch well astern:

“The Atlantic coast of the United States, remember?”

Matheson nodded. Shortly after Pearl Harbour the U-boats had swarmed over to America’s east coast. Not having learned their Lesson from the British convoy system, the Americans had continued despatching their merchantmen and tankers without escort and not in convoy. This suited the U-boats splendidly; they slaughtered at will up and down the coast from the Gulf of Mexico to New York. The pickings had been juicy. Like here.

Dutchy looked at his watch, and then more significantly at the sun. The flaring Ball was only a few degrees above the horizon. With a glance at Matheson he walked to the chart.

“We’re clearing out?” Matheson said.

“We’ve done enough for today. The men need sleep tonight.”

“But we’re clearing out?”

“No.” Dutchy’s forefinger touched the mountainous representation of Basilan Island, south of the strait. “We’ll hole up behind Matanal Point.”

“But that’s only a few miles west of our last sinking. You’re not staying in this area, for God’s sake?”

“You don’t think we should?”

“*Come on...*”

“That’s what the Japs will think,” Dutchy grinned. They’ll reckon only a congenital idiot would hang about here. If they’re awake-up—and it can’t be too long before they are—they’ll search further to the south.” His finger tapped. “Mantanal Point. That’ll do us nicely.”

“You shifty old bastard,” Matheson said, but wisely in the privacy of his thoughts. He took up the parallel ruler and laid-off a course.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Japs were awake-up. At least partly.

From his harbour-side office, Vice-admiral (Chu-sho) Samurati could see the whole of Manila Bay, right down to Corregidor Island in its throat.

The time was early morning, considerably earlier than Samurati was normally to be found in his office. Lieutenant-Commander Holland was on his bridge conning his ship out to sea past Matanal Point, but then he knew what he was up to. Samurati's thoughts and intentions were not so definite.

He was looking at Corregidor but that rocky bastion of earlier gallantry made no impingement on his consciousness. Samurati had an owlsh face, an expression which his eyes belied, and now his face was corrugated by ridges of frowning thought."

"Submarines," he said, without turning his head.

"Almost certainly, Chu-sho. There are three ships failed to arrive and no surface units reported. Submarines, of course."

The speaker was Captain Sigure, chief of staff, His face and body were thin. Neither man was short, in the accepted tradition of Japanese, and neither wore glasses. Their eyes were keen.

Samurati snapped his fingers. "Signal."

Sigure handed him the flimsy sheet. Still facing the dawnlit harbour Samurati read it again. His face was tough, and expressionless as he noted the tally. "Three ships," he said slowly. "All bound for Davao. By now there could be more." He put out his hand behind him and Sigure took the signal. "We have lost ships there before? In Davao Gulf?"

"None, Chu-sho."

Samurati turned from the window. His voice was flat, the tone of a man used to losses and the prevention of their continuance.

"We will increase our destroyer patrols. How many in harbour?"

"Two flotillas." Sigure was frowning. "But they are needed, Chu-sho. There is the carrier force..."

"There are submarines down there," Samurati broke in. "It is bad enough that they sink our supply ships. It will be worse if they are not attacked. That sort of encouragement will bring their friends up.

They have to be taught a lesson, quick and severe. Route two destroyers down through Basilan Straight. See to it.”

“Yes, Chu-sho.”

Signore picked up a telephone.

Jackal picked up her first target of the day while her men were at stand-easy. Samurati’s destroyers were five hundred miles to the northward—seventeen hours at an urgent thirty knots.

But *Jackal*’s men were not thinking about enemy destroyers. So casual had they become about sending fat helpless ships to the bottom that when the alarm bells rang their only concern was for their unfinished coffee. Stand-easy was a pleasant time on a hot sunny morning. The morning looked unpleasant for the Japanese ship.

Her masts were sighted almost right ahead up toward the bottom of Illana Bay. Shortly her hull marched up over the northern horizon, and continued to meet them.

“No alarm yet,” Matheson said.

Dutchy grinned with satisfaction. “Looks like we’re still a ghost ship.”

He was wrong, of course, yet there was an excellent reason for the merchantman’s absence of alarm. A general signal had gone out from Manila—but warning all shipping of the presence of enemy submarines. This ship was not at all unhappy about sighting an apparently friendly destroyer. Perhaps, they thought on her bridge, she might escort them.

It looked as if the destroyer had that intention in mind for she came in very close. And then, oddly, her guns swung, and then, incredibly, they belched flame.

Two close broadsides and there were no thoughts any more on that bridge. Then the usual “Abandon ship” order was flashed. It was doubtful if any Japanese understood the yeoman’s plain English, but his signal was not needed. They took to boats and rafts with alacrity. *Jackal*’s teeth took to her fat belly.

Then there was only the boats and the scum-fouled sea, and Dutchy saying:

“Five thousand I think, Number One?”

“I’d say about five, yes sir.”

That was her epitaph. Men sponged out guns and stowed the empty cordite cylinders below.

More than anything, this last task impressed on them the oddness and the easiness of their present occupation. In normal action, against their own kind or aircraft, cordite cylinders were heaved over the side to prevent loading numbers slipping on their rolling brass. This lot was like a practice shoot...

But for most of that burning day further practice was denied them. Certain now that no warships patrolled this hitherto untouched area, Dutchy took her well up into Illana Bay, even past Cotabato on the Mindanao River. And sighted nothing.

She turned and moved south into Moro Gulf, as far down as Basilan Strait before Dutchy swung her and coursed north again. Up and down she prowled, never very far from the strait, the opening for ships heading for Davao. The sun lowered.

It looked as though, as Matheson commented:

“They might be on to us, you know.”

Dutchy pushed out his lips in negation. “They’d have aircraft over if they were, certainly destroyers. I’d say we’ve just run out of ships.”

A minute later the crow’s nest gave him the lie.

She was small, about five hundred tons, but with an importance far outweighing her size, if what Dutchy could see in his glasses were what they seemed to be.

“Forty-four gallon drums,” he said. “Stacked chock-a-block all along the deck. The same below, I should think. Close her, Pilot.”

Jackal closed the Jap slowly, like a hunter sure of her prey; and to find that this was no mesmerised rabbit.

The Jap captain could have been a retired naval officer, expert in ship recognition. Or perhaps she came in so close that the wind billowed her “funnel”. But as Bludger Ben prepared to fire a burst across her bows, and Dutchy was ready with his loud-hailer to order abandon ship, the little vessel broke into sparkles of orange light.

The balmy late-afternoon air was suddenly filled with hornets. Directly below Dutchy two men of A-mounting flung backward and then lay twisted and still on the deck.

“Take cover!” Dutchy roared. Then, scorning the loud-hailer, he

directed his voice at Bludger.

“Pom-pom, let him have it!”

Bludger obliged.

That Jap was foolish. Urged by the sparkles of his machine-guns *Jackal's* men dived for the shelter of steel. There was little he could accomplish. But then courage is not renowned for its weighing of the odds. And these were indeed weighty.

The range was very close. If he'd been drunk Bludger could not have missed. The target was about two hundred feet long, something the tonnage of a small corvette, with her upper deck crammed. If there is one material loved by explosive pom-pom shells it is high-octane petrol, contained in the thin metal of forty-four gallon drums.

The first redness showed amidships. Though low, the sun's light was still quite strong, yet that red competed vividly against it. Bludger trained right, towards the flickering machine-guns near the bridge, swinging slowly his dreadful scythe.

He never reached the machine guns. In the next second he could not see them. For long seconds afterwards he could see nothing; his retinas seared by the enormous flash of red.

It leaped at them, outward and upward. They felt the heat like a furnace door opened in their faces. There was practically no smoke, just the eye-hurting red, climbing, feeding, reaching higher and higher as the flaming stuff poured through burned decks and cascaded over the lower cargo.

“Take her out,” Dutchy gasped.

Jackal swung away from her prey, as though ashamed. The others had been easy but their men had had a chance. This was ghastly. And this one had had the incredible guts to fight back.

With the stern to the flaming pyre and the heat reduced, Matheson muttered:

“That's the worst one. Poor bastards...”

“All right, all right!” Dutchy snapped, defensively belligerent. Almost gratefully he stabbed a finger at the foc's's'le. “Look down there. That should ease your bloody conscience.”

Matheson looked, down at the two figures laid out in the protection of the gun-mounting, needing no protection now.

“Two good men,” Dutchy snarled. “Their mothers will be very

worried about those Japs. Well now they're your worry. They won't last in this heat. Get them buried at once. And if you feel like crying, cry over them!"

"Yes, sir," Matheson said, lowly. "Just the same, it was..."

"Get on with it!"

"Aye aye, sir."

The sun was resting its edge on the horizon when the pipes shrilled and the canvas-shrouded shapes slid down the uptilted planks. The ship was moving slowly. Two circles showed on the face of the sea, briefly, and then the swell smoothed them out, leaving nothing. From his pom-pom Bludger watched. His words indicated a less refined sensitivity than Matheson's.

"Bastards," he growled. "A minute sooner and I'd have had that bloody machine-gun. Bastards," he said again. "Ginger Walker had two kids."

The smiling face of Norm Claxton was now sober.

"It wasn't your fault, so pack it up."

"Funny," Olaf said, his eyes bleak. "All the others we got, no trouble at all. Yet that little bitch of a thing..."

And that was it. They had seen men die before, they had had messmates killed beside them, they were not amateurs in these things. But this was different. Things had been so easy, so consistently easy, and suddenly there was death, the old reminder, back amongst them. Against a cruiser, or Zeros... But Ginger Walker and Bill Thompson shouldn't have died, not against that cockle of a craft. It started them, it reminded them, it made them wonder...

Dutchy Holland was not wondering. He was faced by fact, in the form of Baxter's fuel report. There was no real cause for concern, but indubitably their fuel state was reduced, and the day had brought small recompense. To justify the danger of remaining in the area he had to produce additions to that tally. The longer they stayed, the greater the risk of detection, and he had to balance the risk with results.

Dusk was softly all about them when he said to Matheson:

"Tonight we'll patrol. We can't afford to waste ten hours holed-up."

"Yes, sir. But will they try the strait at night?"

"I don't see why not. There's deep water and it's five miles wide at the narrowest. It's familiar country for Japs. Post extra lookouts on B and X decks. Tell radar to search mainly to the westward. We'll patrol up and down past the strait thirty miles clear."

"Aye aye, sir."

That night Dutchy had Samson bring his stretcher up to the bridge. He ate his dinner there. The first watch relieved at eight o'clock and the middle at midnight. Dutchy was still there at two o'clock, and still awake. He was not tired, for there were reserves to be drawn on, the reserves of harsh experience in destroyers, and not yet even tapped.

And nothing to reward his vigil.

At two-thirty, drinking strong black coffee, he was beginning to think that Matheson might have been right. Basilan Strait was the main door opening from Manila for the run across to the Saranganis and up to Davao, but tonight nothing had attempted it. In his patrol position, with radar operating normally, he was certain he would have contacted anything which tried.

But damn it all, he growled to himself, the passage was quite safe at slow speeds on a calm night like this. But then Jap merchant ships would not be fitted with radar which, ranging on the mountains of Zamboanga to the north and Basilan Island to the south would have made the passage so easy. It looked as if he had wasted sleep and fuel for nothing.

Dutchy finished his coffee. Longing for a smoke, denied it, he reached out to place the cup on a small shelf secured to the forrard windbreak. His hand halted in mid-reach. Sharp, the voice-pipe buzzed.

Dutchy slammed the cup down and jumped to the voice-pipe.

"Bridge!" he snapped into the always-open mouth.

"Radar contact, sir, bearing Red eight-five. Ship, large one by the look of her. We're plotting it now."

"Right. Range?"

"Twenty miles, sir."

"Good man. Keep on it."

Dutchy walked back to the binnacle. He was smiling faintly and contentedly. They were abreast the strait. That bearing on the port beam pointed directly at it. Young Bertie was wrong. Something had

come through. It could be a cruiser, but that was unlikely. A cruiser would be escorted, and if radar had the main target it would have picked up escorting destroyers. She was a merchantman all right, big to be so definitely contracted at that range. Big and fat, and that eastward course, loaded.

The buzzer sounded.

"We've got her now sir. Speed twelve knots, course unchanged, still coming towards."

"Very well, No other contacts?"

"She's on her own. sir."

Dutchy came up from the voice-pipe. To the officer of the watch he said:

"Close the ship for action."

Towards three o'clock in the morning a sleeping man's metabolic rate is low. He is, in a sense, hibernating, with the transformation of food to mechanical energy reduced considerably, for his body does not need it. He is, in short, somewhat less on the ball than a heavyweight boxer entering the ring. And the atmosphere of *Jackal's* 'tween-decks, darkened as they were and with all scuttles tightly shut, did nothing to help towards mental alertness.

They woke. They heard the demanding clangour and automatically their sleep-drugged minds strove to ignore it, to sink down again into blissful disregard. The clangour continued, loud and pitiless. Then the almost-as-strident voices of petty-officers were heard in the land. Uncareful hands tugged at hammock nettings. Hammocks bounced. Blear-eyed faces lifted up, followed by reluctant legs which groped for mess-tables. They dressed, still dopey. But they did not forget life-jackets, nor steel helmets. Then they tumbled up onto the dark decks and sour-natured they closed-up at the guns and tubes and depth-charges. And in a minute or two, fanned by a cool breeze and the imminence of danger, they were wholly alert.

"Still closing, sir," the plot reported in answer to Dutchy's query, "still at twelve knots, course unchanged."

"Right, Starshell, Number One, when he's in close."

Certainly the Jap had no radar, and probably at this ungodly hour his lookouts were half asleep. He came on steadily towards the long dark shape of his Nemesis. *Jackal's* gun's were loaded, and laid by

radar, and behind the four quiet mountings men waited with shells in their arms. In the silence of the bridge a telephone howled.

A seaman answered it "Captain, sir. Engineer wants to speak to you."

"What the hell..." Dutchy growled. He took the phone. "Yes? I'm about to open fire."

"Sorry, sir," Baxter said, his voice thin through the wire. "You're on to a merchantman?"

Dutchy was in no mood for persiflage. Even without glasses he could see the looming bulk, and the Sashing white at its bow.

"Yes. What's up?"

"Fuel, sir. We're all right but topping-up wouldn't hurt. In fact it'd be damn handy. How about we milk her? I could get enough before daylight."

"Now you tell me," Dutchy snarled. But the engineer had a good point. "All right. But it depends how she reacts."

He replaced that phone and plucked out another.

"Director? Captain. If possible we want her oil. Fix the bridge and then cease fire."

"Understood, sir. Starshell?"

"Now," said Dutchy.

B-gun was the starshell mounting. There was a scuffle of feet, the metallic slide of the rammer, the thud of the breech, and silence. Then a roar and a lance of flame, and presently above the Jap incandescence burst. B-gun fired again and again, and before the third flare exploded the other three guns were savaging at her bridge.

This was the first night action of their piratical mission. The red splashes were satisfyingly vivid in the white "light of the flares. Matheson saw that the bridge was burning.

"My God," he said, between broadsides, "that gave him a hell of a shock."

Dutchy failed to answer the obvious. His words were for the yeoman.

"Burn the ten-inch. Train it down his length. Watch out for a gun."

The thick white finger of the signalling lamp stabbed out, trained slowly to the left. Dutchy saw no gun, but plenty of men. Shocked

and dazed by the abruptness of their disaster, the Jap crew were concerned solely with boats. The shells slammed into the bridge and abaft it the crew worked furiously to get the boats lowered. "Nice," Dutchy said, "very nice. She's losing way."

Don't blame 'em, Matheson thought through his own satisfaction. Those stokers down below would be expecting a torpedo any second.

"Cease firing," Dutchy ordered. "Keep that starshell going. Bring her in closer, Pilot." He took up the microphone of the loud-hailer. "Ahoy there." Magnified, his gravelly voice rang across the gap. "Heave-to and abandon ship or I'll blow you open."

He would never know whether his shells or his words enjoined obedience. But in a few minutes the Jap was stopped, her bridge burning and her body rolling gently in the swell. In the mixture of red and white light they saw men scrabbling down lifelines, and boats pulling urgently from her side; and through all this evidence of abandonment the yeoman trained his baleful eye from right to left and back again.

Dutchy took the engine-room phone.

"All right, Chief, she's yours. I think they've abandoned but I'll send an armed party with you. Smack it about."

"Will do."

Dutchy took the con himself. Moving very slowly, his guns trained on the big ship's decks, his mind warily alert for tricks, he edged her in. Nothing happened. The Buffer jumped from her foc's'le across to the Jap's low well-deck aft and in a minute *Jackal* was secured alongside with a head-rope.

The Buffer leaned his Tommy-gun against a hatch cover and yelled back: "All quiet, sir."

First, two men armed with rifles and fixed bayonets, and then Baxter's stokers swarmed aboard. The seamen prowled warily about the apparently deserted deck and the stokers hauled in the six-inch fuelling line. Baxter grunted with satisfaction when he saw that the Jap's fuelling connection was standard size; he'd had visions of having to turn one to fit.

The lines were connected. Baxter was about to order his transfer pump started when, quickly, the Buffer said:

“Hold it.”

Baxter swung about and stared where the Buffer was looking. A figure was approaching from the direction of the bridge. The Buffer quietly took up his tommy gun.

“You there,” he ordered. “That’s far enough.”

The figure halted. In the moonlight it seemed to be swaying a little. Then slowly it came on. The Buffer switched to automatic.

“You steal my oil.”

The voice was hoarse, through anger or weakness they could not tell.

“Who are you?” Baxter asked curtly. “Why aren’t you in the boats?”

“I am the captain.” Then they knew anger was the reason. “You are swine. You are dirty swine. You fire, and no warning. That is wrong. That is terrible. All my men on the bridge—killed. English pigs.”

Baxter had no time for polemics with an enemy who had proved himself less than meticulous with the niceties of warfare.

“Heil Hirohito,” he grinned tightly, and turned to wave to the stoker waiting aboard *Jackal*,

Suddenly, the (Jap’s hand moved. It disappeared inside his open shirt. They would never know whether he was after a gun or a knife or a handkerchief, or simply intent on holding a wounded torso. The Buffer was not inclined to wait and find out. The stabs of orange were bright in the moonlight. The tommy gun’s voice was a short harsh yammer. The Jap went backward as though jerked from behind. He hit the deck in a crumpled coil, and he did not move again.

In all his experience of killing this was the first time the Buffer had killed a man face to face. He stared down at the still form, thinking how easy it was, before realisation rushed in.

“A gun,” he said, jerkily, “I thought he was going for a gun.”

“Forget it,” Baxter snapped. “Heave him over the side if he worries you.”

“Yessir.”

The Buffer moved forward and a raspy voice called:

“You want any help?”

“Everything under control, sir,” Baxter answered. He looked up

at the dim form of Dutchy's head and shoulders above the windbreak of the bridge. "I'm ready to start the transfer..."

His voice cut off. Miraculously, the dim form had leaped into vivid clarity. For a second Baxter could see quite plainly the grimace on Dutchy's mouth, the painful squint of his eyes. Then Dutchy was jerking his head away, shouting orders, and Baxter swung about—to see, and squint himself against the blue glare of the distant searchlight.

"Disconnect," Baxter heard. "Get that hose inboard!" Baxter raised a hand, plain in the ominous glare. "Move!" he said to his stokers.

It took only seconds; fear is an efficient prod. *Jackal* was moving ahead as the Buffer, the last man, jumped for her low waist, as the fuelling pipe dragged in over the gunnel. The alarm was clanging.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Two of them,” Matheson said tersely. “Destroyers. They’ve got us with that blasted searchlight.”

“Then do something about it,” Dutchy snapped “Hard-a-starb’d. Pilot! Take her south.”

Jackal picked up her feet and ran.

In less than a minute Matheson fixed the searchlight. There were no red splashes from the falling shells but the baring eye went out. The Japs realised what a handy aiming point it made for a director’s filtered sight. *Jackal* ceased her bellowing and extended her sinews.

The time was a little after three a.m. The place was a little to the south of Basilan Strait. Samurati’s hounds had found, but could they hold?

They bared their teeth. Astern, brief and regular gouts of red split the night, and the mutter of thunder chased them. But *Jackal* was slim and remained unwounded. And as Dutchy saw the ghostly white spouts erupt well astern he saw the evidence of what already he knew—the Jap radar was inferior to their own. In a destroyer, he reasoned, it would probably be a primitive set.

“Bloody fools,” he growled to Matheson, “they should have crept right up on us before opening shutters.”

Matheson nodded, happily. The range was almost eight miles. “You never know,” he said, “the range is a bit long but it’s not opening that much. We could be lucky.”

Dutchy had his night glasses up. He watched a group of white stalks leap dimly up well astern and then he said:

“Take the left-hand ship. If you can’t do better than that you should be knotted.”

Matheson spoke into the director phone.

Jackal’s radar, manned by her new specialists, was ranging accurately on the enemy. The director’s set fixed on the left-hand target. Higher up the mast the search aerial ranged further afield, checking frequently on that right-hand ship. The two after barrels sniffed up, steadied, then belched. A high shearing noise dwindled to the north. They waited.

Jackal was shaking in every plate with the thrust of her forty

thousand horsepower and thirty-four knots. No one felt it. A score of men were busy round X and Y mounting but every other man on the upper-deck was staring astern. In the quarter-minute of the first broadside's time of flight no one spoke.

The director officer had a monocular sight, and it was extremely powerful. Another broadside was on its way when on this side of that dark silhouette he sighted what looked like the tips of a pair of asparagus shoots growing from the sea. They glimmered briefly, and then were gone. The director officer gave his corrections.

At that range, with all ships at high speed, even with radar it was lucky shooting. But none of them, not even Dutchy, thought of luck. They saw instead of the asparagus tips a gout of distant red and they were fatly satisfied. As Bludger growled: "That'll give them monkey-faced bastards somethin' to chew on."

It did. There were no more hits, but the first was enough.

"Range increasing," came the report.

All ships would be at about the same speed, so they knew what that meant. The Japs were easing back out of range of those lucky guns, intent on maintaining radar contact while remaining safe. But, as Dutchy

"They'll be sending for help. They'll try and get us boxed in. We've got to get out of here."

There was no argument to that.

"Keep her south." Matheson nodded. "It's all clear water down there."

"Like hell I will," Dutchy surprised him. "That's what they'll expect."

"Eh? You don't think you can turn and slip past them to the north!"

"To the west," Dutchy said. "Here."

Matheson followed him to the chart. With the range increased the ship was silent.

"There," Dutchy said, tapping. "Tapaan Passage."

Matheson looked at the channel through the swarming islands of the Sulu Archipelago. It would take them into the Sulu Sea.

"She's wide enough," Dutchy said, "and far enough south to make them think we're continuing to the south. Once through we'll

alter to the north up past Zamboanga and then turn east into the Mindanao Sea. How about that?"

"No argument at all." Matheson smiled nervily. "You're quite right. No Jap would dream we'd be such bloody idiots as to head up there..."

Dutchy backed out from the chart-table, his sweaty face grinning.

"You're serious," Matheson said, flatly. "You mean to tell me you're still going on with this raiding mission?"

"Why not? What'll I say to the admiral? Aborted the mission because we were sighted by a couple of destroyers? At long range?"

Two destroyers can have a lot of friends."

"So they can. But I can't see 'em."

"But it's dangerous going through that passage at night!"

"So it is. It's a bit dangerous out here too." Dutchy's head turned. "Pilot? Over here."

The enemy was at the limit of their radar range when Dutchy swung her round to westward. Not due west, not at first, just a slight alteration to starb'd. In the unlikely event of the Japs being able to plot them at that range Dutchy hoped that they would believe their quarry was simply running down the full length of the Sulu Archipelago.

Half an hour later he turned her fully to the west. At full belt she bored across for the clutter of the island chain. By the time she slowed, with the hills of the Tapul Group contacted to starb'd, there was nothing else showing on radar.

Very carefully Dutchy conned her through the passage.

But they weren't out of the jungle yet. Facing them as they emerged from the passage was a short reach of water with depths of more than two hundred fathoms, and beyond that lay the reefs and snags of the Pangutarang Group.

Dutchy altered to the south and eased her down until he was below Pearl Bank; and then he let her have her head for the Sulu Sea, and as the blowers rose a miniature typhoon of released breath exploded on the bridge.

Pilot's was a phlegmatic nature; it fitted perfectly his feelings at that moment. He wiped at his forehead and simply, briefly, he said:

"I'm glad that's over."

Dawn action stations were somewhat different that morning. No man had slept during the night; they were tired but they were alert.

The ship was heading northward, up toward Zamboanga. A dozen binoculars and scores of eyes searched to the south and east. The sun rose hugely orange and they squinted into it with apprehension. But nothing followed them through Tapaan Passage.

Matheson dropped his binoculars until they hung by the strap and knuckled at his eyes. But his voice and grin weren't tired.

"Done it," he said. "Lost the bastards."

"Could be," Dutchy said carefully, exulting. "Could well be."

And then the masthead lookout said:

"Smoke on the port beam."

Binoculars swung.

They should have noticed it from the bridge. Dutchy thought. It proved how tensely tired they all were. The smoke also proved that its maker was no warship, unless she was criminally handled.

"What'll we do?" Matheson asked uneasily. "Have a go?"

Dutchy's answer was prompt. "Like hell. Today we hole up. Sufficient unto the day, Number One..."

No argument there, either. They altered a point to starb'd away from the smoke and in toward the Pangutarang Group—they were now on the group's other, western side.

"There," Dutchy decided, pointing at the chart. "Get leadsmen in the chains."

It was shortly after breakfast when they rounded Kulassein Island in the group and shaped-up for the indentation on its eastern side. There they would be invisible from the Sulu Sea, and to the eastward lay a veritable mess of reefs and shoals and banks.

"A good spot," Matheson agreed, looking at the hills which fell, steeply jungled, to the water's edge. Provided no one came round the point looking for them he might have added, but didn't.

The cable clattered out and *Jackal* came gently to rest.

"Keep steam on all boilers," Dutchy phoned the engineer.

"Yes, sir. That'll use fuel, remember."

"Your nine bloody lives might be used up if you don't."

"Yes, sir."

All that burning day she lay there. Men slept where they could

find a patch of shade on the upper-deck. Apart from the messes being cleared up there was no thought given to the normal cleaning routine. The motor-cutter was lowered and sent away with the Buffer. His orders were to poke his nose round the northern point and sight those destroyers if they came north on the hunt Dutchy slept on the settee in his cabin—there was more air there than in his bunk.

Just before lunch time Samson came out of his pantry and moved towards him. Silent, he stood looking down; at the weathered face, harsh even in repose, the mouth open as Dutchy inhaled with short breaths in the hot air; the nose big and aggressive, and the jut of his chin.

Not a handsome face, Samson thought, ugly even. But good-looks didn't bring you out of this safely back to port. There was toughness in that sleeping face, and the carved marks of a vast experience.

Quietly Samson returned to his pantry. He took out a reporter's notebook and in it he wrote down his impressions of the face on the settee, just as he had felt them. One day, when it was all over and done and these things could be written about, that face would reappear, in print.

Samson put away his notebook—there was nothing in it of their recent actions; that was indelibly in his mind—and took up a pair of khaki shorts. Quietly, the big fingers nimble, he started on repairing a tear above the hip pocket. With that done he busied himself with catching up the loose hem of one leg. His face as he worked was composed, not scornful.

That was the expression Dutchy noticed when fifteen minutes later he woke and padded to the pantry to see about his lunch. For a moment he stood in the doorway, unseen by the bent-over head, feeling the shame move in him.

"Well," he growled, with a roughness he did not intend. "Is that all you have to do?"

Samson looked up startled. "Sorry, sir. I thought I'd let you sleep."

"So you could get on with that bloody women's work? Heave those things over the side. They've had it long ago."

Even as he spoke Dutchy despised himself. His animosity was wholly against his own weakness. He knew damn well those shorts

had to last him another three months.

“Over the side, sir?”

Samson was frowning. With all the intensity and experience of his gaze Dutchy could not tell whether the fellow was putting it on.

“That’s a bit wasteful isn’t it, sir? These shorts are quite good enough for shipboard wear.”

Suddenly, with a complete clarity of conviction, Dutchy knew he had misjudged this man. He was a seasoned journalist, one of the least likely of men to be fooled by outward trappings. Very quietly, Dutchy said:

“You’re quite right, Samson. I need those shorts.”

Samson looked up and their eyes held, and between them understanding flowed.

“All right,” Dutchy growled, and couldn’t for the life of him help his grin. “Now I want my lunch.”

“Salad coming up, sir!”

That night a high wind came up. But it blew from the west, and howled over their heads. Dutchy decided to stay where they were, even though fuel would be burned all night with no return. Here, protected from the wind, he did not dare shut down even one boiler. *Jackal* might well need all her strength, and need it in a hurry.

They slept soundly that night, and woke rested and refreshed. Yet there was one sombre face on the bridge at dawn the next day—above a pair of spotless overalls.

“No,” Baxter admitted, shaking the sheet containing his fuel report “no real cause for worry. Just the same, I’d like to have milked that Jap.”

“Now look here,” Dutchy said. “Can I continue with this mission or can’t I?”

“Well... Let’s put it this way. If there’s to be a prolonged high-speed chase, it had better be to the southward.”

“My job’s to keep out of high-speed chases.”

“Like the other night?”

“I slipped ‘em, didn’t I?”

“Sure you did. Just keep on slipping ‘em, that’s all.”

Dutchy gestured at the fuel report.

“We’re well above the minimum requirements to get us to Darwin?”

"Above, yes. I wouldn't say well above."

"You bloody black-gangers. You'd whinge if a man gave you four weeks leave. All right, Chief, you let me know when we're getting close to that minimum. In the meantime I'll try and get you another milch cow. That makes you happy?"

They were alone in the starb'd forrard corner. "I bet you'd be happy if all your main-armament bricks were gone," Baxter jeered.

"My bloody oath," Dutchy grinned. "I'd head straight for home at a rate of knots. But all my fuel's not gone, not by a long shot. We have enough for a day or two longer."

"More than that, actually. Providing..."

"Yes, yes, I know. I assure you I'll do my best to stay away from cruisers and destroyers. Now can I get this bucket to sea? You've got no idea what this raw morning air could be doing to your lungs."

Baxter gave an I've-warned-you shrug and departed to his own hot and oily paradise, where there were no decisions other than his own.

"D'you think he's really worried?" Matheson asked.

"Hell, no. He'll yelp if she gets anywhere near too low. Now let's get that anchor up."

"Aye aye, sir."

They steamed up the hooked appendage of Zamboanga Peninsula almost to the 40-mile-wide entrance to the Mindanao Sea and back again, and then back again. They did this all day and the following night, and they got nothing.

But they did get the morning they left the shelter of Kulassein Island—some devoted attention.

"How?" snapped Vice-admiral Samurati in his Manila office. "How did they fail to get him?"

Samurati was not looking distantly out through the window this time; his angered stare was directed at his chief of staff.

"Well?"

Signe wanted to shrug—it was hardly his fault—but he dared not. Instead he held up the wireless report, like a placatory offering.

It seems they allowed the enemy to get out of radar range, Chu-sho."

"I know that! What I want to know is why the fools allowed such a thing."

You know as much as I do. Sigure thought. But he knew his master, and realised that Samurati was arguing more with himself. Sigure played along.

“One of them was hit. It was extreme range, and excellent shooting. They eased back to open the range. The next thing they knew...” this time Sigure shrugged. “... the enemy had vanished, still coursing to the southward. He will be well on his way home by now.”

Samurati nodded, but with no agreement in the gesture.

“They know that, of course,” he sneered. “The enemy wirelesslyed his intentions.”

Here Sigure felt he was on sounder ground.

“He was heading southward, Chu-sho, at high speed. He has been sighted. Surely he knows the game is up.”

“I see. You would run for home?”

Sigure frowned. “Under the circumstances, of course. Only a fool would remain in this area now he’s been sighted.”

“Or a brave man,” Samurati said thoughtfully. “A clever man. One who believes we will think precisely as you think.”

“But surely no man could be so...”

“Recognition book,” Samurati snapped.

Sigure stepped quickly to a cabinet and returned with the volume. He laid it on a table and opened it at the section marked BRITISH DESTROYERS. Slowly Samurati turned the pages.

“One funnel,” he said. “Ship after ship with one funnel. Until we come...” he opened the page and slapped his hand upon it. “To this. Two-funnel Tribal-class. New ships, Sigure, almost two thousand tons; forty-four thousand horsepower and more than thirty-six knots. That, of course, suggests something to you?”

“Well... Yes, of course this class of ship is well-fitted for operations against merchant ships.”

“Nonsense. Any destroyer is well-fitted to handle an unarmed merchant ship. *This is a modern ship*. There must be a flotilla of them about, even a cruiser squadron. No admiral would risk sending a single new ship like this up here alone. You understand?”

Sigure nodded, conviction in his thin face.

“That would account for the numbers of ships sunk.”

“Exactly.” Samurati closed the recognition book and looked at

the big chart on the wall. "There is a carrier in Leyte Gulf?"

"Yes, Chu-sho, the *Hayataka* is in San Pedro Bay."

"Get her through Surigao Strait at once."

Signore looked less convinced.

"Into the Mindanao Sea? You still think they have come north instead of south?"

"I thought I made that plain," Samurati rasped. His finger tapped the Mindanao Sea, ran down the Zamboanga Peninsula. "I want this area scoured. When we find them, then we bring in our surface units. We'll have that flotilla trapped. Send the orders at once."

"At once, Chu-sho."

Signore took up a telephone and spoke; and so Dutchy's new funnel brought him more than he'd bargained for.

CHAPTER NINE

Sixty miles south-west from the entrance to Surigao in the Mindanao Sea lies the island of Camiguin. Shaped like a balloon with a short thick neck, it is about ten miles long. From its centre rises a peak almost six thousand feet high. A smaller peak studs each end. Also studded about its environs are smaller islands and the inevitable reefs.

At eight o'clock of a dark rainy night, at the chart with Matheson, Dutchy Holland was thinking about Camiguin Island.

"This isn't so hot," he was saying soberly. "Baxter *is* worried. So am I. Stooging round for twenty-four hours and nothing sighted. There's enough fuel to get us back, but not much to play with. Looks like our little game has had it."

"Looks like to me," Matheson said, "as though they've clamped down on their sailings." His fingernail whispered across the chart. "Mindanao Sea, Leyte Gulf—this should be one of the busiest parts round here. And we're the only ones using it. Those two destroyers must've spoke nasty words about us. Maybe," he said, smiling but with his eyes blinking nervily, "we didn't fool 'em after all?"

"You could be right, Bertie," his captain admitted. "But now we're up here we might as well linger till morning."

Matheson breathed in slow and deep—and, he thought, quietly. But the mouth in that leathery face twitched.

"That means we head out of here in the morning?" the youngster asked.

"Unless you suggest staying."

"Like hell!"

"That sort of attitude won't get you on in the service."

"I just want to get home."

Dutchy chuckled. "You've got a few friends. In the meantime, we'll anchor here." A spatulate thumb more than covered the representation of Camiguin Island. "Go in on the eastern side, protected by Jigdup Reef. Normal sea routine, with radar searching to the north and east, especially the east. Lord knows what they've got in Leyte Gulf."

The good Lord grant we never find out, thought young Matheson, and went about preparing the ship to anchor.

That night Dutchy did not remain on the bridge but went below to his sea-cabin. He believed Matheson's theory that the Japs had cancelled all merchantmen sailings until the position was clarified, yet he could not believe that they had woken up to his trick of coming further north instead of running south. Added to this solacing conviction, he was very tired. Since he had left Viscount Trelawney, it seemed years ago, there had been small chance for a full restful sleep; and only he knew how the continuous strain of danger in these waters had sapped him.

He fell into his bunk fully clothed at half-past nine and almost instantly he was asleep. He was given ninety minutes.

The voice-pipe buzzer sounded. So deeply asleep, he still heard it, but as though across a reaching distance. The training of the man heard it, and nature strove to overcome training and ignore it. Dutchy stirred. His eyelids flickered. Then they were still, and down again, deep down, he started to drift.

The buzzer came again, longer this time, more urgent. Hearing its stridency for the second time, unanswered, Samson jumped out of his pantry. He shouted "Captain!" into the tiny sleeping compartment and then he was at the voice-pipe.

"Captain's cabin, steward speaking."

"Get the captain," Pilot ordered. "At once."

"Yessir."

Dutchy was out, coming for him bleary-eyed. Samson said, "Bridge, sir," and dived for his pantry. Dutchy listened, said "Right," and made for the door. Samson called, "In here, sir," and then nodded vehemently at Dutchy's impatient frown.

Surprised into acquiescence, Dutchy entered the pantry. Samson pointed to the sink. It was half-full of water. "Good man," Dutchy said, and plunged his hands in and scooped water over his face. And then, "God!" he said, and spluttered. "That's bloody ice water."

"Yessir." Samson handed him a towel.

Dutchy's face was still tingling when he made the bridge, sleep shocked out of it. He barely felt the soft rain.

"What's the range?"

"Just over eleven miles, sir, still closing. They're at fifteen knots. On this course they'll clear the island to the north by twenty miles."

As Pilot was speaking Dutchy was striding to the radar scanning tube near the chart-table. Not like old *Pelican*, he thought grimly, and then his whole attention was on the greenly-glowing round face,

There they were, sausage-shaped and plain, heading to pass *Jackal's* hideout. Two smaller ships, destroyers obviously, in the van, then the big one, and astern of him another destroyer in the usual position to handle a submarine which might have ideas about closing fast on the surface from behind.

An idea began to glimmer in the forced alertness of the old fox's mind. Pilot had a totally different idea.

"We're shielded in here, sir. The best radar in the world couldn't pick us out against that mountain back-drop. They won't see us either, not in this rain. I'd say we're sitting pretty."

Dutchy hardly heard the obvious. The idea was growing, forming towards the crystallisation of decision. It was dangerous, hideously dangerous; but they had surprise, and the black night.

"I'd say the big bloke was an aircraft carrier," he muttered.

"Looks like it, sir."

"He's after us," Dutchy nodded. "No doubt about it. He'll have recco aircraft off at first light. They're sure to search back over their wake. We won't be shielded then."

"My God," Pilot said.

Dutchy lifted his head and stared into the blackness. The idea was formed, rounded, complete, awaiting only decision. The fear and the caution were overlaid by the harsh dictates of necessity.

"Sound action," he said. "Get the ship under way."

There were men on the foc's'le ready for an emergency. The anchor was clear of the bottom when Matheson made the bridge and felt his way over to the dim figure in its corner. Dutchy wasted no time on preliminaries.

"Carrier and three destroyer escorts," he said curtly. "We'll attack with torpedoes."

Matheson was eloquently silent.

"Two destroyers in the van, one astern," Dutchy said. Matheson got the impression he was talking more to himself. "If we slip in between the nearest destroyer in the van and the rearmost, the first

might think we're the second out of station, and the second vice versa. Get it?"

"My God," Matheson breathed. "What if *they* get it?"

"Then we scoot to hell out of it. They won't leave the carrier, not if they think we have company, and if they've sent a force like this after us they can't think we're alone. They won't fly off in this muck, even if they did what could they see? They might detach one destroyer but I don't think they'll risk even that." Dutchy laughed harshly, nervily. "She's a big valuable property. Those destroyers will cling close. So we'll give it a go. Tell the ship's company, Bertie. And for the love of Mike," Dutchy grinned invisibly, "keep your voice steady."

Through the speakers Matheson told the ship's company, keeping his voice steady. There were no cheers. *Jackal* slid out from her safe island, past Jigdup Reef and shaped-up for the southwesterly course of her huge enemy.

As they went in through the rain and the black night, and finally sighted the Jap formation visually, and altered gently to a parallel course, every second seemed split. The whole ship was alive with tension and fear, but subdued beneath the magnitude of their presumption.

Dutchy's voice broke the electric silence on the bridge.

"Main armament will engage the destroyer ahead. Open fire as we turn in for the run. Stand-by all tubes There'll be only one run. I want the lot."

Muted words of acknowledgement answered him. Dutchy did not hear them. He had his night glasses up, staring through the rain at the looming bulk of the carrier, less than a mile away on the starb'd beam. His guts cringed with tension. He wondered what was happening aboard the two destroyers this side of the carrier. They must have seen him. Officers of the watch would be debating whether a signal should be made, or the captains called, to correct the error in station keeping. From his position midway between both destroyers Dutchy could barely make them out; he was almost certain they could not see each other, and thus see that where before there had been two, now there were three.

But one thing he was absolutely certain about; he had to act now. Hard and raspy his voice came.

"Full ahead both engines. Hard-a-starb'd. Main armament open fire." And as the bells clanged, and *Jackal* tilted her lean flanks and the forrard guns belched, splitting the night with flame and sound, Dutchy snarled at the yeoman:

"Get that bloody Jap rag down. Hoist battle ensign!"

And that was how the staggered carrier saw her—a midget, spitting, flinging white back over her bows, plunging in, and wearing, high at the truck of her foremast, board-hard in the fierce thrust of her passage, bright and proud in the searchlight's glare, the red white and blue of her belief.

Shocked out of her shock by what the midget carried amidships the carrier began to spit back.

Jackal was held firmly in the grip of that incandescent finger. The range was too close, the time too short, to zig-zag. But the range was also decreasing—so rapidly under the influence of her utmost speed that the Jap's shells screamed over her body.

"Hit!" Matheson shouted, and again, "Hit!"

Dutchy snatched the briefest glance to port. He saw redness flaring from the target destroyer, leaping tongues of red, and he knew that the way out was clear. The destroyer on the far side could not leave her station, could not leave her charge totally unguarded from the north. He did not know if the rearmost destroyer had opened fire, and in the total concentration of his faculties he did not care.

"Hard-a-port," he shouted. "Fire when your sights come on!"

They were close, the sights came on swiftly. The pronged instrument swept round until it was on the carrier's rearing bridge and the torpedo-officer spoke in a thin, tension-cracking voice: "Fire one, fire two, fire three..."

One after the other in quick succession *Jackal* emptied her tubes. Unseen, tracks invisible in the cloud-hung night, the deadly shoal fanned out and ran at forty knots. The carrier was very close, and she was more than seven hundred feet long.

Momentarily, Dutchy was not interested in her.

"Midships," he yelled, "steer two-two-five!"

Below him Toddy Verril took the wheel off her then spun it the opposite way, checking her wild swing. When she was steady he laid her nose on southwest, gently, for at thirty-four knots she was

as sensitive as a racehorse.

His main task was done, whatever its result, Dutchy could look about him. He could not see if the carrier was turning, though he guessed her wheel would be desperately hard-over. But her bow was plain enough, and they were racing clear of it. Dutchy looked at the fiery destroyer to port—ready-use ammunition there, initiating other fires—and then he ordered:

“Radar range on destroyer to starb’d. Main armament engage with rapid broadsides.”

The bridge team knew what he meant. The intention now was not so much to hit or destroy as to confuse the escort. Shortly they would be level with him, and while he could not leave his station there was nothing whatever to stop his guns from preventing their leaving.

Radar reported it was in contact and ranging. The director swung, the four guns followed. Their blackened snouts lifted and then they fired.

It was known that they fired only by the stabs of orange flame. No man heard their discharge. For as the director layer squeezed his electric trigger the shoal of torpedoes hit.

The lot. It must be the lot, Dutchy exulted, staring back—that was solid white, hundreds of feet long; not individual spouts but a wall of white, marking the now-invisible carrier, marking her doom.

“Got the bastard!” someone said, and Dutchy thought that must be the needless statement of the year, and then found that he was on the verge of giggling; and thus, as he quelled the urge, found how tight had been his tension. His ears were still tingling with the massive sound when he said, in a voice he had to make firm:

“Cease firing. No need to give our position away. Keep radar on those two destroyers. Ask the engineer if he can give use another knot.”

The engineer could. She was strained, but she took it. Staring astern, seeing nothing but the waning glow from the wounded destroyer, Dutchy felt through his feet and his hands on the windbreak the strain of her speed, and he thought of what was happening to the fuel. He shook free of the thought. No matter what the possible consequences, they had to get clear, and fast.

At the end of half an hour radar told its story, and Dutchy knew he had been wrong about those clinging destroyers. They were clinging all right, but not to the carrier. He came back from the radar screen to Matheson beside the binnacle.

"They're after us, Bertie," he said soberly.

"So I see," Matheson nodded. "You sank the reason for their staying."

Dutchy was honestly surprised. "I didn't think of that."

"Nor did I. But we'll shake 'em. I presume," Matheson smiled, "we're homeward bound?"

"Where else?"

A phone howled.

"Bridge?"

"Captain!"

Dutchy took the phone. "What is it, Chief?"

"As if you didn't know. How long, for God's sake? She's gulping the stuff."

"She'll have to. We've got a brace of destroyers on our tail. You can't go up another knot?"

"I cannot! She's shaking her guts out."

Dutchy smiled into the phone. There were two reasons behind the gesture. The first was something close to exaltation; the danger now was only normal, not hideous as it had been—he could think about the fact that he had sunk a carrier; with one destroyer he had sunk a thirty thousand ton aircraft carrier. The second reason was experience. Engineers were always morose about their fuel. They were something like, Dutchy thought, the petrol gauge of a motor car—it showed empty, but there was always a gallon or so left in the tank. Not as bad as it looked, or sounded. So he smiled.

And then Baxter wiped the smile. Very quietly, so that his voice barely reached above the high-powered whining.

"Dutchy. I'm dead serious about this." That first word was the catalyst which changed Dutchy's attitude. He was perfectly aware of his nickname, but never in his life had it been used to him by a junior officer. He was not in the least offended now—he was simply aware that Baxter must be really troubled to allow the name to slip out.

“Yes, Chief, I know you are. But there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s not only the destroyers. We have to put as much distance as possible between us and the place we sank that carrier before daylight.”

“There’s only two. Can’t you fight the bastards?”

“That would use up just as much fuel. You can’t fight a gun action against two ships at fifteen knots, you’ve got to have speed to slip his fall-of-shot.”

“All right. Then if you keep up this speed we’re in trouble.”

Silence fell between them. Faintly up the wire came the mighty sound of the ship’s effort. Dutchy stared sightlessly ahead into the murk, not feeling the rain. He had been in some taut spots, but there had always been luck, and your own guts and skill, and the favours of heaven; just so long as you still had speed. But nothing like this. Running out of ammunition was bad. Running out of fuel was... unimaginable.

But he was the captain. He kept his tone crisp.

“I’m not so sure, Chief. We might slip them. We’ve got a few hours yet.”

“At this speed?”

There was no fooling a *man* like Baxter, no point to it.

“I’m afraid so, yes.”

“Very well, sir,” Baxter said unemotionally, “I’ll let you know ten minutes before the engines stop.”

The frightful part about it, Dutchy thought as he replaced the phone, was that Baxter was not joking.

“Where’s the enemy?” he asked curtly.

“Position unchanged, sir,” Matheson said. “They’re holding us. I’ve looked ‘em up in the recognition book. Assuming they’re modern ships they rate a top speed of thirty-four knots. With five-inch guns,” he added.

“Helpful,” Dutchy muttered. “They can’t lose us. Their heads will roll if they do, after the last lot.”

“Not to mention the carrier they lost...”

“Mmmmm.” Dutchy rubbed at his bristly chin... “Bertie. Bring Pilot over to the corner. Let Torps take her.”

They came quickly, and stood on either side of him in the dark,

straddling their feet as she swooped over the swells.

“Radar,” Dutchy said. “They’re holding us by radar—bloody electronics! That’s the crux of our problem. Somehow we’ve got to confuse their radar. Well, I’m waiting.”

Both youngsters thought, and returned nothing.

“Get the radar petty-officer up here,” Dutchy said.

He too came quickly—a gangling man named Robinson with his fair hair sticking out below the edge of his cap.

“Yessir?”

“We’re in strife, Robinson,” Dutchy started. “I want to confuse the Jap’s radar. Any ideas? It can be done?”

“Yessir, it can be done all right.”

“Well, now...” Dutchy grinned. “They’re doing it all the time over Europe,” Robinson told them. “Our planes drop this sort of tinsal stuff and it...”

“*Planes.*”

Yessir. Bombers. Small patches of stuff, I think it’s aluminium, something like that, good reflective properties, ‘window’ they call it, darned if I know why. Anyhow, it confuses the German radar, they range on it while the bombers slip through.”

“Marvellous,” Matheson said, sourly.

“We don’t have a bomber, Robinson,” Dutchy said. “Come down to earth. How can we throw those blokes back there off the scent?”

“Dunno, sir. Never thought about that before.”

And all your thinking now won’t do any good, Dutchy thought. And the radar man gave him the lie.

“The thing is to give them something else to range on, sir.”

“Fine. Like what?”

“Well, like a boat.”

“At this range? They’d never pick it up.”

“They pick up bits of aluminium, sir. The whaler, say. Drop the boat, hoist the sail, square it off so that it sticks out at right-angles, like she was running goosewing before the wind.”

“Canvas,” Matheson said, “low down. They wouldn’t get any sort of an echo from that. Certainly not enough to throw them off us.”

“Canvas,” Robinson nodded. “Laced with metal strips. *That’ll*

give ‘em an echo.”

Dutchy thumped a fist into a palm. “Robinson,” he grinned, “you’re a bloody genius.”

“Yessir,” said Robinson, modestly.

“See to it, Number One. Aluminium strips. Kit-lockers. Chief’ll have tinsmith’s cutters somewhere. Hang ‘em all over the mainsail. Secure ‘em with sail-maker’s twine, sew the things on. Make it a sort of metal shield. The bastards will echo from that. Well? What are you waiting for?”

“Just a small thing, sir, but I don’t want to be the instigator of a mutiny... Whose kit-lockers?”

Dutchy almost laughed in his relief. If it worked, they’d gain time, maybe an hour, while the Japs crawled up cautiously and investigated this second contact. And in that time he could alter to port in through Basilan Strait, throw the mongrels right off the scent, and then scoot southeastward down through the Celebes Sea for home...

“Kit-lockers? Mmmm, I see what you mean. Well now, this is a democratic service. Let’s show we don’t differentiate between the mighty and the offal. We’ll use the chief petty-officers’ lockers. The Cox’n, the Buffer, the chief gunner’s mate. That should be enough.”

“I’d like that order in writing, sir.”

“Get moving!”

Desperate men work swiftly. In less than an hour the job was done. Strips of shiny aluminium were caught to the whaler’s mainsail by tight loops of sailmaker’s twine. As they hoisted the sail it rattled like a coat of chainmail. Braced outboard with guys, the sail projected at right-angles to the boat, a shining reflecting target twelve feet wide at the bottom and more than twenty feet high. The boat was lowered carefully to just above the water, with the ship still at full speed. Dutchy eased her down to a few knots. They could not afford the refinement of having a man in the boat to slip the disengaging gear; the falls were cut. The boat hit with a small splash and drifted astern, and even near the davits Dutchy’s bellow was heard:

“Full ahead both engines!”

“Y’know,” Matheson said from beneath his night-glasses, trained on the dimly-shining shape astern, “I think this just might work.”

“It bloody well better work,” Dutchy growled. “Just the same, I

think we'll make a general signal for help."

"But we have no friends round here."

Dutchy gestured impatiently. "I know that. But it can't do any harm."

No harm at all, Matheson thought—the Japs knew where they were...

The signal went out and so did *Jackal*, still at high speed down the coast of Zamboanga. They were closing the western entrance to Basilan Strait, with not much of darkness left, when radar reported that contact astern was lost.

Inexcusably, the captain punched his first-lieutenant on the back. It was a heartfelt contact, and young Matheson staggered forward against the windbreak.

"All *right*," he snarled. "You want to break my blasted spine?"

"We're home and hosed, Bertie. There's cunning in the old hound yet, eh? Make a note of that radar trick. I'll mention it in my report of proceedings."

"You'll mention, no doubt," Matheson sneered, "the name of Robinson?" And then grinned with his own relief.

"When you're ready, Pilot," Dutchy said, "bring her round for Basilan. That'll fox the bastards."

She came back through Basilan Strait faster than she'd gone in. She slipped past the doused light on Sibago Island, its structure just visible in the early dawn, and then Dutchy gave her her head again. Anticipating Baxter's call, he took up the engine-room phone.

"Just a while longer, Chief. We're into the Moro Gulf and we're heading for the Celebes Sea. We've slipped those two destroyers but we have to get well clear of land before full light. How are things down there?"

Flatly, Baxter said:

"I'm worried stiff. You can't have more than half an hour at this speed. You don't seem to understand, sir. We've been running flat-out damn near all night! No fuel tanks can stand that, not after the time we've been up here. At this speed she's... oh, what's the bloody use!"

"All right, Chief," Dutchy said quietly, "take it easy. I understand. Half an hour will be fine. Then we'll drop back to fifteen knots."

“Ten, if you want to get home.”

“You mean that?”

“I never meant anything so much in my bloody life!”

“We’ll make it.”

Baxter was a practical man. He made no reply to that theorism.

CHAPTER TEN

They ran on fast until the island of Basilan sank below the horizon astern. Compromising between the engineer's advice and the danger of a submarine's torpedoes, Dutchy dropped her back to twelve knots. The extra two knots might make all the difference between swinging in time.

They moved on across a glassy, glaring sea, burned by the sun's equatorial fierceness, not noticing it, their attention solely for the unbroken weld of sea and sky astern. All hands knew of the radar trick, just as they knew that the Japs would not be forever fooled by it.

No man laughed that morning. Compared to the night's run she seemed to be crawling. They were at twelve knots. Unworried by fuel shortage, the Japs could be at thirty-four. She was a ship taut with tension.

Just after stand-easy, a little before eleven o'clock, the tension broke.

"You're sure?" Dutchy said, his voice tight with concern.

Robinson himself was on the set. "No doubt about it, Sir. Two contacts right astern. We've had them on the plot only a few minutes but I'd say they're closing fast."

"Destroyers?"

"Looks like it, sir."

"Very well, Robinson," Dutchy said, and it took all the will of the man to keep the wearied resignation out of his tone. "Stick with 'em."

"Will do, sir."

"It's them?" Matheson asked.

Dutchy nodded, once. "Our old friends. Sticking like burrs to a blanket."

"It's not fair," Matheson exploded. "We gained time, we got through the strait. Only for that bloody fuel we'd be clear to hell by now! It's too much to..."

"All right, Number One." Quiet, incisive, Dutchy halted him. The bridge team looked away; agreeing with Matheson, they still felt embarrassed by his revelation of their feelings. He was an officer.

Matheson shook his head. "Sorry Sir." He firmed his voice. "What do we do now?"

“Simple, Bertie.” Dutchy turned his head a little. “Pilot.”

“Sir?”

“Bring her round to face the enemy. Close the ship up for action, please, Number One.”

For a moment, for a long significant moment, Matheson looked back into the tired, strained, tough face. For a moment he drank of its strength. Then:

“Aye aye, sir. There’s just a chance we might thrash those bastards.”

Then Matheson stepped forward and pressed the brass gong of the action alarm.

There was no lucky shooting this time. The sea was calm, the sky was clear, the visibility was unlimited. There was only guts and toughness, and desperation and, perhaps most vital of all, training.

Clever, the Japs fanned out one on either side of her bow, so that *Jackal* was at the juncture of their fire. Between them they mounted twelve five-inch guns against *Jackal*’s four four-point-sevens, and Dutchy was unable to have his whole armament bearing at once—he was forced to twist continually to escape the savage deluge of shells.

An hour passed. An hour at high speed, using their precious fuel; an hour which saw *Jackal*’s men, strained already, closer to exhaustion, and which brought two hits near the tubes and a fire which luckily was doused in a few minutes. So far as they could tell they had scored no hits on the enemy.

And as Dutchy squinted his reddened eyes into the sea’s pitiless glare, watching for the orange tongues of discharge and swinging his ship to escape the arrivals, feeling the weariness clamp upon his limbs and his brain, he felt another sensation. Red and full the rage mounted.

This was no good. This long-range dancing about was begging the issue. This was sparring, when every minute was telling against them, in the oil bunkers and in their bodies. Matheson was right. They were clear through the strait. They’d be clear to hell out of this—only for those two blocking the way. Cats playing with a mouse.

The redness in his mind spilled over.

“Cox’n!”

“Sir?”

“Open your scuttle. There’s a destroyer right ahead. Steer for her. You hear me? Steer for the bastard!”

It was the most unusual reply ever to have come up that wheelhouse voice-pipe, perhaps any voice-pipe.

“Steer for the bastard,” answered Toddy Verril.

He steered well. He took her in a straight undeviating line for the enemy’s smoke-wreathed greyness. The sea spouted all about her but *Jackal* bored on, careless and desperate and vengeful. The rage of the captain’s intention communicated itself electrically to the crew. They had little fuel but they had plenty of ammunition. Broadside after broadside roared.

The Jap was at first unalarmed. To him it looked like simply another of the hundred manoeuvres the target had performed that morning. When she did not alter course away he was a little surprised. By the time he realised that she would not alter course it was too late. The range was four miles.

Quite calmly, the rage still forcing but controlled, Dutchy ordered: “Starb’d twenty. Rapid broadsides.”

They caught the Jap hurrying round on the avoiding turn, showing his stern. This halved his offensive capacity. *Jackal*’s full broadside was bearing. She sank her claws in and savagely she kept ripping.

A yellow wall burst from the quarterdeck. Deep, the thunder reached them. When the smoke drifted clear they saw nothing of her stern. Through binoculars they looked directly into twisted pipes, the entrails of her engine-room.

“Depth-charges,” Matheson breathed. Dutchy’s voice was louder. “Hard-a-starb’d! Steer for the next target!”

But not this time. The lesson had been learned. Easily at her speed the Jap destroyer heeled away and opened the range, losing shells at them from her after part as she swung. A gout of red broke from the foc’s’le and in that explosive instant *Jackal*’s main armament was reduced by a quarter.

“Midships,” Dutchy croaked. “Port thirty.”

Weary, she followed her elusive enemy, dodging the returns, firing more slowly now after that supreme effort, stumbling from the ammunition hoists to the reeking breeches—but still firing.

Another hour passed. All the time she had been at high speed.

But nothing came up from the engine-room. Baxter's silence was a measure of his resignation.

Quietly so that no one else could hear, Dutchy said to Matheson:

"We've had it, Bertie. We can't run and we can't finish him. He's playing with us, waiting for his friends to join in."

"What do we do, then?"

"God knows," Dutchy said, and closed his eyes.

He wanted to keep them closed; to rest from the glare, the constant need for watching; to sleep, to escape the mind-numbing roar of the guns and the scream of shells overhead. Urgent and hoarse, a shout opened his eyes.

"Enemy altering towards!"

Galvanised by some untapped reserve of strength Dutchy thrust himself up from the windbreak. His glasses whipped up. There was no doubt about it. Elusive, taunting them with distance, drawing them up to the north, the Jap was now heading directly for them. Straight and fast he came, bow-waves spuming below the spaced stabs from his forward guns.

"He's crazy," Matheson muttered.

"He's woken up," Dutchy amended. "He suspects we're down on fuel, which he should have done long ago. He knows we're down one gun. He's tired of playing. He's in for the king hit."

Matheson stared at him with eyes watering from strain. "Then alter round! We've only got one gun bearing!"

Without hurry—he could not have hurried—Dutchy walked to the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

"Cox'n, you've still got your scuttle open?"

"Yessir."

"You see that destroyer?"

"I've got her."

"Then steer for the bastard."

Verril was less surprised this time. "Aye aye, sir."

Dutchy plucked out the microphone of the ship's address system. His voice was hoarse, but neither he nor any of his hearers cared about that.

"This is the captain. Our target is tired of his little game. He's heading straight in to finish us off. We are now both on a collision

course. I have no intention of altering. If he does, I want every weapon in the ship in action. Rifles, tommy-guns, everything. Open the gunner's store. Rake the bastard. You hear me?"

They heard. Dutchy paused. He looked not at his enemy but at his friends, the faces turned towards the bridge all down the upper-deck. "You're a bloody good bunch," he said huskily. "God bless you. That's all."

He replaced the microphone and then he looked at his enemy.

The destroyers were approaching each other at a combined speed of close on seventy knots. The Jap seemed to leap for them. All about them the air was torn but the rate of change of range was tremendous and most of his shells landed over. Yet the same applied for *Jackal*, Both untouched, the hounds jumped for each other.

"He's not going to, alter," Matheson said.

"That makes it simple," Dutchy answered. "I never fancied muck made in Japan. We'll see how good his bow is."

Neither man wondered at the calmness of their voices. Weariness and shock were in it, but mostly it was the calmness, the resignation of the imminence of an awaited finish.

"Give me the microphone," Dutchy said.

Matheson handed it to him. Dutchy held it without speaking. The range was less than a mile. He could see the men round the Jap's forward mountings; could see them staring, instead of loading. Dutchy glanced down at his own foc's's'le, and as he saw the gun crew absorbed in their job, not staring, loading, the first flicker of hope rose in him.

So that on the sweating leather of his face there was a savage grin of vindicated belief when Matheson flung out an arm and yelled:

"He's giving way! Altering to starb'd!"

Training, Dutchy thought, with some incredibly free section of his consciousness; training and guts and national character. The difference. Then he was speaking into the microphone, and the three big guns were swinging on to the port beam, and the oerlikons and the eight-barrelled pom-pom.

"Now," Bludger Bent was muttering to himself, "now... now... NOW."

His target was a blurred streak, so close. Bludger cared not. It

was big, and all he had to do was keep his trigger pressed. Eight of them, the red claws raked down the Jap's length.

As fast as they could be loaded the big guns were firing, with every single shell a hit. Bludger cared not. All he knew was that the Jap skipper wasn't worth a bucketful of garbage compared to their own, that he hadn't warned his gun crews to stand-by for close range action. Bludger knew this quite certainly, for there, as his claws raked, were the big five-inch mountings still trained ahead, with their crews beautifully exposed in the rear. And there they were flinging in all directions, arms flailing, guts ripped out, being torn to pieces.

And now the bridge. Elevate a little, give the brass a taste. Down a bit, take those close-range crews, then on to the tubes. Wait for it, boys—here she comes. This is the story of a starry night... Red stars, you sloe-eyed bastards. Beautiful red stars, bursting an biting.

And then there was only the white picket-fence of splashes in the guiltless sea, and they were past, and still the two after guns were belching away, hit after hit, still so close, smashing. Dutchy swung her. The guns ceased firing. There was no further need of their attention. The Jap was heeled over, burning—the bright orange flames of cordite and the smoke of other things.

Someone on the bridge was shouting. Dutchy heard but took no notice. The sound was half-hysterical, not urgent. Someone was laughing, a continuing zany cackle of sound. Dutchy let them go, enervated to carelessness by the huge swamp of his own relief. Matheson was gripping his arm, making little squeezes with his fingers, not knowing he was doing that, pointing with his other arms across at the cripple. Not talking, just pointing, infinitely more than words in the mute gesture. And into the odd sounds of the bridge there sprang a voice.

“Wheelhouse—bridge. Wheelhouse—bridge.”

Dutchy answered. “Yes, Cox'n?”

“What bastard do I steer for now, sir?”

They were steering southeast three hours later, heading to clear the Talaud Islands, the place where old *Utmost* had had her last fling, when Mr. Baxter made his report. He made it personally, and when Dutchy saw his overalled figure step on to the compass platform he knew that the worst danger of all was upon them.

"How long he said.

"You've got a handy place to anchor?"

"That bad, eh?"

Listening, this time Matheson noticed the calmness of their voices. But he did not think to analyse the reasons. His interest was for Baxter. "Half an hour, no more."

"Fine," Dutchy said. "That gives us time to get organised."

Baxter wiped at his hands with a clean wad of cotton waste. Then he flicked with his finger at a speck on the arm of his overalls. But Matheson noticed that Baxter did not notice he had missed the speck.

"I suppose you're thinking of feeding other fuel into the furnaces?" Baxter asked calmly.

"Bright boy. There's stacks of wood, clothes, stuff like that."

"I see." They might be discussing the painting of a messdeck, Matheson thought. "You think that will give us anything like the heat of oil? You think that will last till Darwin?"

"I think it might keep us going till nightfall. *I know* I've signalled for help."

"That so? You won't get anywhere near a working pressure of three-fifty pounds, you know. Wood in an oil-fired furnace! Clothes... You're back in the bow and arrow days."

"Everyone talks to me about bows and arrows."

"Eh?"

"Skip it. It *might* work?"

"Been thinking about it," Baxter admitted. "It might Matter of fact, it's been done before. Once."

"Wonderful! What can you give me? Twelve knots?"

Baxter looked at him pityingly. "Eight. If you're lucky."

Dutchy looked at the sun. "Three hours till dark. Eight knots will take us clear of the Talauds by then. Then we can sail gently on through the kind bosom of the night."

"You'll need the night. She'll smoke like a smoke-screen. How many men can you give me?"

"The ship's company."

"Flat-footed swabs cluttering up the boiler-rooms? Half-a-dozen will do, passing the stuff in through the air-locks."

"You won't mind if the others, the gunners who saved your bloody

black-gangers, work to supply those half-dozen?"

Baxter shrugged. "Please yourself." And then, because although experienced he was really quite young, the facade broke and he grinned like a boy into Dutchy's rawhide face. "It'd be something, you know, really something! Bringing her home on a wing and a prayer? Steaming her home on a pair of bloody drawers."

They toiled. It was their lives, of course, and the craved blessing of darkness, but mainly it was the novelty which wiped away weariness on that unique afternoon.

Man, one hears, is naturally destructive. These men were trained to be that. They found a delight in swinging fire axes against wooden mess-tables and stools, in lumping paint and kerosene from the paint locker, in pulling gear from other men's lockers, hoping not very hopefully that their own might be missed.

They ripped the planks of the motor-cutter from their ribs and cut out the thwarts. They took down the mast and the sails, and even the water barricoes. They unlashed hammocks and teased out the filling of and writing pads, and piles of ledgers and books and the mattresses. There were spars and rubber seaboots signal pads. There was in their ship, they found, a great deal that would burn. Including spirits from the wardroom liquor store.

All this was hefted aft and piled up near the air-locks leading into the boiler-rooms. Pile after pile—which the big furnaces would gulp like a shark a minnow. But even if they knew that, they did not think about it.

Down below Baxter had been busy. Sweating, burned in many places, his men had removed the sprayers. He had to be quick with the replacements, for the boiler temperature must not be allowed to fall too far.

Then he was ready, and the wood went in.

After a while a phone howled and *Jackal* crept ahead. She moved as friskily as a Chinese scow, and from her funnel she coughed stinking blackness, but she moved. They dared to hope.

Stupidly. The sun lowered behind them, but slowly; it was still an hour from vanishing when the masthead lookout proved how stupid were their hopes.

"Bearing right astern, three destroyers coming towards."

He would never know how, but Dutchy kept his voice controlled. "Identification? Can you make them out?"

Before the lookout could reply the strange ships identified themselves. The flashes were small at that distance," merely eyes blinking, but the splashes were high and definite, and they rose on the point of ominous thunder. Dutchy came away from the masthead voice-pipe.

"All right, Pilot," he said, "bring her round. Clear for action, Number One."

Automatically with the instinct of training, and some other quality, young Matheson answered:

"Clear for action. Aye aye, sir."

Sluggish, *Jackal* heaved her length round. The single gun forrard cocked up its paint-peeling barrel and waited for the range to close. One hundred and fifty men waited.

There was a perfectly solid reason why every man on the upper-deck was looking ahead, which was now to the northward. Just the same, it was inexcusable—technically speaking—that no man was searching the whole horizon. She was a ship about to go into action and every point of the compass should have been taken into careful account. Yet one cannot be too hard on her. She was very, very tired...

Dutchy was the first to notice something odd about the situation, though he, like his juniors, was remiss in that he had failed to pinpoint the reason.

"What the hell's going on," he growled. "They're shooting bloody short." He pointed, frowning with puzzlement. "Look at that."

Matheson had seen. But he, too, had failed in his executive officer's duty. He saw the fence of white spouts shoot up close ahead of the Jap destroyers but he had no answer as to why they should be depressing their guns to such an incredible degree. Even while he stared the fall-of-shot came again, even closer to the enemy. Inexcusable, their obtuseness. A sea scout would have provided the answer. Except that sea scouts seldom come very close to the point of mental and bodily exhaustion. As it was, a youth who could have been not long out of his scout ship gave them the answer. He was the bosun's mate, aged seventeen.

“Oh God,” he said, in a whisper. No one heard him, no one saw that he had happened to glance astern, to the southeastward. He raised his voice. “Captain, sir.” But the captain, his faculties not rejuvenated by what the youth had seen, was staring in bemusement at the enemy line, which was turning away. “*Captain.*”

They heard him this time. His voice was a high cracking scream. Dutchy swung. He saw the face, contorted, streaming with tears, and that he ignored as being in the expected order of things from a boy on a dreadful day like this. But he could not ignore the outstretched arm, for that was pointing, rigidly with vehemence, not towards the enemy but in the opposite direction. Dutchy turned his head and his tired eyes looked. And saw.

Matheson was to screw a good deal of questionable pleasure out of what immediately followed. “The big act,” he was to call it, “when you were damn near wetting your pants with relief.” For Dutchy said, in the tone of voice he might have used to comment on a mild change in the weather:

“You were wrong, Bertie. We have seen our belted earl again.”

The sun was shining on them. On the five of them, the grey lean strength of them; flashing back from the bow-waves hosing side by side and showing the battle ensigns; a still-bright sun, but not so bright that it smothered the brighter flashes stabbing from their foc’s’s’le.

It was then that young Matheson afforded Dutchy the counter to his own jibing-to-come. In a casual tone to match, he commented:

“Your belted earl, eh? By jove, he can belt.”

They were silent after that. The whole bridge was silent, listening to the wondrous music of quick-firing four-point-sevens, watching Japanese ships heading in the direction of Tokio, two of them trailing smoke, then watching a powered shape turning back and sliding in close alongside, and hearing, casually cultivated, a voice:

“Good afternoon, Holland old chap. We got your message all right. Of course you realise you’re a little south of Salebaboc? Where Masters found you? History repeats itself, what? Over.”

“Nice to meet you again, sir,” Dutchy replied. But with Matheson’s daring grin on him he didn’t dare try an imitation. “Bloody nice, in fact. There’s one small problem?”

“Oh? Anything I can do to help, old chap.”

“We’re fresh out of fuel. We’ve been burning mess-tables and old socks.”

The British, generally speaking, are a phlegmatic race, unflappable. There was only the briefest pause before Trelawney came back:

“I must admit I was intrigued why you were making so much smoke. Our friends seem to have departed. Could you be ready to take on fuel in ten minutes? Perhaps it might be better if I came alongside you?”

“Please do,” Dutchy said.

It was about the same time the next day. The British flotilla had just departed. *Jackal* was in handy distance of Darwin, and an extensive boiler-clean. Dutchy Holland was in his cabin. His face was lined, but only slightly more than usual. His face was frowning, a not unusual setting for it.

“You’re a damn pest,” he said.

“Yes, sir. But it *should* be told. You yourself mentioned we won’t be able to send another raider up there after what’s happened.”

“Bloody hydrophones for ears. You don’t miss much.”

“The public shouldn’t miss this, sir.”

“Bulldust. Ships are in action all the time.”

“We know that—but the public don’t. All they get is ships and tonnage sunk. None of the details. We’re the Cinderella service.”

“Damn the public.”

“They pay our wages, sir. They own this ship.”

“Oh my God...”

“It’s true. You know it is. You can’t let this slip by. I’m—well—a pretty experienced journalist. I saw it all, the lot. You’ll be doing the service a service. It’s your duty, sir. Public relations is a most import...”

“All right, all *right*.” A hand like a meat axe descended and the table shook. “You’re worse than a bloody wife, Samson. Write your saga of the bloody sea but leave me alone!”

“Thank you, sir. Here it is.”

“What?” Dutchy took the sheaf of foolscap pages. “You’re quick off the mark, I’ll say that for you.”

“What?” he snarled.

“What’s this? Built like a barrel.”

“Well, sir,” Samson smiled placatingly, “a journalist has to be factual. Come to think of it, that is a bit of a cliché. Maybe I’d better change it.”

“Maybe you’d better. I suppose the rest of it’s tripe like that.” The fox’s eyes “read swiftly. The pages turned. “Bloody bulldust.” But the frown, the author noted, had smoothed away. From the safety of his great height he smiled. “Rubbish. Exaggerated out of all proportion. Overstated.” The bull head bent. “Twenty thousand tons? That carrier was every bit of thirty thousand.”

“Understated,” the author murmured.

The reader read on. He seemed not to have heard. He turned a page, came back to it, smiled. The author smiled, a trifle cynically, yet without malice. The reader finished, handed up the manuscript.

“You really think a paper will print that guff?”

“There’s a slight possibility, sir.”

“Must be damn short of material.”

“Yes, sir. Can I send it from Darwin. Time is the essence, sir...”

“Oh all right, if you must.”

“Thank you, sir.” Samson turned away.

“Samson.”

“Sir?”

“You like this berth?”

“Of course. Suits me fine, sir.”

“You don’t want to be recommended for a cruiser?”

“Hell...”

“Then you delete one word of that article.” “Certainly, sir. Ah—which one.”

“Benedict, damn you!”

“As you wish, sir,” Samson answered poker-faced. He kept his grin for his pantry.

THEEND