

J.E. #25

MACDONNELL

**COLLECTOR'S
SERIES**

The Blind Eye



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THE BLIND EYE

J.E. Macdonnell

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CHAPTER ONE

MANY THINGS ABOUT A battleship's quarterdeck might be expected to strike a destroyer captain as interesting—even extraordinary—so that it was not surprising when Commander Peter Bentley stepped from the gangway platform on to the deck of the flagship in Trincomalee his eyes were attracted directly to the four gun barrels of the after turrets.

And not simply because he was a gunnery-officer. It was the massiveness of the barrels which drew his attention. They reached from the armoured gun-houses in rigid and steely menace, thicker than his waist, slaty-grey monsters whose rifled mouths could vomit man-high shells weighing close on a ton.

The six-foot thick breeches of those guns were rooted in gun-houses greater in area than his own destroyer's bridge, and protected from alien entry by an overlay of armoured steel 11 inches thick.

The respectful pipes of the quarterdeck staff twittered to silence. Bentley was a destroyer captain, but if he had been commanding-officer of the small harbour-defence launch patrolling across the boom entrance, and had come aboard the admiral's ship, he would still have been received with a pipe. A general or an air-marshal would have been met with mere bugles...

"Good morning, sir," a crisp, pleasant voice greeted, "would you follow me, please?"

He returned the officer of the day's salute and trailed him to the large hatch leading down under the quarterdeck. The lieutenant was Randall's counterpart, in rank, but where *Wind Rode's* first-lieutenant had been last seen by his captain in the wardroom in faded khaki shorts and shirt and sandals, this flagship specimen was complete with starch, creases, long stockings, shoes, polished sword belt and telescope.

They thumped expertly down the almost vertical ladder and Bentley found himself in a huge compartment with white-painted walls and bulkheads and polished corticine floor which might have been the *envy* of the most fastidious housewife.

Less than 24 hours before the Fleet, 300 miles east of its base, had been subjected to a heavy and savage air attack. This

compartment would have been cluttered with fire-hoses and sand buckets and men in fear-nought suits. Now, Bentley reflected with an inward grin, it looked as though the ship had been anchored in Portsmouth for the past 12 months.

The Royal Navy may not have founded the Society for Spit and Polish, but it certainly had been an interested spectator at the ceremony.

“Here we are, sir,” the lieutenant said, and halted before a bulkhead door in the after end of the compartment. He inclined his head a little on one side and from the other side of the closed door came a muted murmur of voices. The lieutenant glanced at Bentley.

“Rear-Admiral Jerrold’s still in there.”

Bentley nodded. Jerrold was the flag-officer commanding the cruiser squadron. The thought slipped into his mind that perhaps his own summons to the flagship might be connected with Jerrold’s presence; it was quite possible that *Wind Rode* could be detailed to escort a cruiser on a high-speed mission somewhere.

He stood there, thinking, his forefinger rubbing across his chin, wondering if he should insist on the lieutenant knocking. The admiral was noted for punctuality; Bentley’s summons had read nine o’clock, and it was now almost two minutes past that hour.

The lieutenant in turn had no qualms about not knocking—not with two flag-officers in conference on the other side of that shut door. His eyes were covertly studying the tall, hard officer in front of him, a man not much older than himself and yet already lord of his own command, a modern Fleet destroyer.

Bentley had decided, and was forming in his mind the words which would convince the battleship’s officer that the destroyerman’s presence was connected with the rear-admiral’s, when he was saved the trouble.

The voices came suddenly closer, and the door opened.

“All right then, Jerrold,” came a brisk voice, “we’ll leave it at that. Box-barrage at six thousand feet. It might hold ‘em off.”

Bentley stood at attention, staring straight ahead, not wishing to give the impression that he was listening to this high-level gunnery decision. But he could not help flicking a glance at the officer who sailed under his command a score of fighting ships, including three

battleships and upwards of twelve thousand men.

So that he saw the almost imperceptible and permissive nod the admiral gave to the lieutenant. The junior officer hurried off. Bentley knew why, at the same time as he appreciated the thoughtfulness of the admiral—a flag-officer would shortly be leaving the ship, and the officer of the day, the man responsible for his proper piping and departure, was well down below decks.

“And you, I presume, are Commander Bentley?”

“Yes sir.”

Bentley could look directly into the admiral’s face now. He had met Sir Sidney Granville twice before, and once again he was affected by the contrast and wind-reddened, almost cherubic face, now smiling, and the alert intensity of the admiral’s eyes. The key to the man’s whole success and fighting vigour was in those eyes.

“One of our bright young destroyer boys,” Granville smiled at Jerrold, “and an Australian.”

Jerrold nodded, and Bentley said formally:

“Good morning, sir.”

There was no doubt about Jerrold. He had his cap on, and the tight-skinned face under it was curt and authoritative. The admiral might have been—except for his eyes—a genial type of London office-manager: Jerrold could have been mistaken for nothing but a hard-bitten fighting seaman.

Yet he was two wide ranks away from Granville, and immeasurably distant in power and responsibility.

“There’s nothing else, sir?” Jerrold said.

“That’s all. Do you mind...?” nodding at Bentley.

“Of course not, sir. I know my way. Goodbye, sir. Bentley.”

You do not salute below decks in a British warship, nor can you salute with your cap off. Bentley was already at attention. He answered:

“Goodbye, sir,” and Granville stepped back into his cabin.

“Come on in, Bentley.”

Bentley stepped in over the coaming and at the admiral’s gesture he shut the door. There was another man in the huge cabin, he saw, a petty-officer steward, hastily emptying two ashtrays.

Obviously the steward had been present at the earlier discussion,

but now the admiral said:

“That will do, Jackson. Until further orders I do not want to be disturbed.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” the steward answered, and left the cabin at once.

“Sit down, Bentley. Cigarette?” Bentley took one from the wooden box, murmuring his thanks, wondering why this interview was to be so obviously confidential. He was not in the least alarmed that it might be unpleasant—an admiral of a Fleet was not in the least averse to delivering his rockets publicly, by signal, and for him to send for a junior officer to censure him the offence would need to be grave indeed.

Commander Bentley was no nominee for sainthood, but neither had he blotted his copybook enough to warrant that sort of interview.

“I suppose you’re wondering what this is all about?”

The face looking back at him was quizzical, completely pleasant, the blue eyes magnetised to his with an intensity that Bentley felt was wholly natural, and permanent.

“I have given it some thought, sir.”

“And what have you come up with?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid, sir. Unless it might be some—well, secret sort of mission for a destroyer.”

“Near-miss, Bentley. The damn thing’s secret enough, believe me! But nothing in the nature of a mission. Does that disappoint you?”

That was all, just those four words. Yet Bentley, competent captain and normal human being, knew with absolute certainty that the words were intended to convey that the admiral was acquainted with his earlier lone-handed missions in *Wind Rode*.

He knew also, with the same definiteness, that that would be the only praise he and his ship would receive from this responsible officer.

“I suppose it does a little, sir. Being a destroyerman yourself, you will appreciate the—ah—comfort’s of detached duty.”

The admiral, twenty ships and 12,000 men regardless, was also human. “You knew I had a destroyer?”

“Yes, sir. *Dover Patrol* in the first war, *Dogger Bank*...”

“I see. Well, now...” The voice changed, relegating confidences to their rightful limbo. Bentley leaned forward a little.

“I want your ship to carry out the trial of a new and highly secret

weapon, Bentley. The back-room fellows of the Underwater Weapons Research Section at the Admiralty have developed the thing, and they've sent it out to me for testing."

Granville saw the questions forming in his listener's face and he answered one of them.

"Why out here? I don't know. Unless the weapon's so important that it has to be tested in a comparatively remote area." He leaned back in his chair and fumbled in his pocket, drawing forth a key on a chain. "As a destroyerman, you will appreciate its importance."

While Bentley waited, silent, the admiral unlocked the long drawer running under the top edge of his desk and drew out a photograph. Even before he was shown what the photograph portrayed, Bentley guessed that an enemy power would give a king's ransom for a look at it, yet it was kept locked in a desk drawer. But that desk was in an admiral's cabin in a British battleship. There could hardly be a safer place...

Granville tossed the large square of celluloid on the desk.

"There you are," he said.

Bentley took it up. His first reaction was disappointment. His imagination had been stirred by the admiral's words, and by his novel position alone with him in his guarded cabin. And for what? Something that looked like an enormous, fat shell, but not pointed like a projectile, bearing instead a softly rounded nose. "Well?" said the admiral.

"I've never seen it before, sir," Bentley admitted. "But it looks to me something like an outsize torpedo warhead." Still staring at the photograph, he shook his head. "I can't imagine the size of a torpedo needed to carry a thing like that. Every tube in the destroyer flotillas would have to be redesigned." He smiled, apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir, but it seems to me our torpedo warheads are sufficiently powerful as they are."

"Strange," said the admiral, "that our thoughts should run along the same lines. At first, that is. A destroyerman's mentality, I suppose. No, Bentley, that is not a torpedo warhead. Yet it is designed to be fired from a torpedo tube."

Bentley looked at the admiral, back again at the photograph. Then he said:

“Yes, sir.”

“Neither I nor the scientists are half-witted, Bentley,” the admiral answered the two resigned words, his mouth twitching. “This beast here,” a forefinger tapping the photograph, “is an anti-submarine weapon.”

Bentley’s eyes flicked up to his face.

“A depth-charge?”

“Precisely. It holds more than a ton of a new explosive, Torpex.”

“My God,” Bentley said softly.

“Precisely,” the admiral said again. “If it works, the radius of a destroyer’s lethal attacking area is vastly increased. I have the calculations here somewhere, but without bothering about them I can tell you this—if this thing explodes anywhere in the vicinity of a submarine, just one of them, mind you, the strongest U-boat will be crushed flat both by the explosive blast and the transmitted pressure of the surrounding water. You understand?” Bentley understood perfectly. *Wind Rode*’s depth charges weighed 300 pounds, and they held what was then regarded as a highly efficient explosive, amatol. This new weapon held more than two thousand pounds of an even more powerful disruptive.

His trained thoughts ran on and the admiral answered them.

“There are two complications,” he said quietly. “First, the charge is so large and heavy that existing depth-charge throwing equipment cannot handle it. Hence the tube firing. And if it works as expected, one tube-loading will suffice for one submarine. The second complication is more serious.”

He glanced up at Bentley and the destroyer captain answered the look: “Speed?”

“Exactly. And that is the main purpose of this initial trial of the weapon. We know that an explosive charge as heavy as that could have unhappy effects on a firing ship’s rudder and screws. Unless she is travelling at a high escaping speed. Even then the back-room boys’ calculations could be wrong. But there is only one way to find out.”

“Yes, sir. Er—where is the weapon now?” “In A-turret’s magazine. Crated in a wooden box.” The admiral’s finger tapped again at the photograph. “There are three men on this station who

have seen this, Bentley. The Fleet torpedo-officer, myself—and now you. You follow me?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

“Not a word, not a suggestion of a word, must leak out about this. I doubt if there are any German agents in Ceylon, but the same cannot be applied to Japanese. Once we have tested the thing, and it is a success, it will matter little if word gets around. In fact, it might be a good thing if the enemy learns we have a secret weapon that makes a submarine kill certain.”

“Yes, sir. When will the trial take place?”

“It will be about three weeks before we’re ready. A Reserve officer will join your ship for the test. He is a lieutenant-commander, but I wouldn’t be impressed by his junior rank if I were you.”

Bentley’s lips twisted in a small smile. The lieutenant-commander would certainly be a scientist; he had himself in his own ship a Reserve officer, Lieutenant Peacock, who held, as well as his two navy stripes, a Doctorate of Science from Melbourne University, and who had forgotten more about asdic sets than the regular Navy operators knew.

“No, sir. I imagine we will be conducting the test alone?”

“Not at all. I will synchronise it with a Fleet sailing. I want to see that thing go up myself.”

“I understand, sir.” He paused before his next question. Not that he would mind, at all, giving his men some hard-earned leave, in a decent sort of port; but Trincomalee was not renowned for its recreational facilities, and they would be better off occupied at sea than stagnating in this type of harbour.

“You said three weeks, sir. My ship won’t be held here for that time?”

“Not at all. You will carry on your normal escort and screening duties. In any case I haven’t enough destroyers to relieve you from Fleet duties, even if I wanted to.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well now, that’s about all, for the moment. Keep your tubes normally loaded until you receive a certain package.” The admiral butted his cigarette.

Even in face of that dismissing gesture Bentley said: “If you don’t mind my asking, sir... why was *Wind Rode* selected for this test?”

“Because you have a new ship, and a fast one,” the admiral answered briskly. “I don’t want an engine-room breakdown with that thing about to explode.”

“I see. Thank you, sir.”

“I cannot stress strongly enough the importance of speed in this, Bentley. If you are travelling at less than 30 knots it is quite possible that you could have your whole stern fractured, if not blown off. You understand that?”

“I’m convinced, sir,” the younger man smiled.

“All right then. Depth-settings and other calculations will be decided on later. This morning I wished merely to put you in the picture.”

The senior head nodded and Bentley stood up quickly. He was reaching for his cap when the admiral said, musingly:

“I imagine pretty well your whole ship’s company knows I sent for you?”

The interview had been pleasant. The admiral, once you avoided those eyes, was a very pleasant man. Bentley risked it.

“I imagine they expect me to come back either With the Victoria Cross, sir, or on a stretcher...”

“M’mmm.” Not a very bright joke, Bentley decided. The admiral continued:

“There will have to be some acceptable reason why I sent for you. Let me see—what was that last fracas I heard you got into? And made no attempt to get out of? East of here, wasn’t it?”

“We did run into a Jap cruiser squadron south of the Indies, yes, sir.”

“To their sorrow, I understand. Very well then. You may tell your first-lieutenant and officers that I sent for you to congratulate you and the ship’s company.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“And,” the admiral offered a quizzical grin, “as I don’t wish to be thought a liar, even in this restricted company—congratulations, Bentley, on a fine piece of fighting seamanship.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You can find your own way up through the labyrinth?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

Bentley turned and walked to the door. As he did so he saw the admiral turning back to his paper-cluttered desk, and he got the impression that that smiling face and gimlet eyes had infinitely more to worry about than the testing of a newfangled secret weapon.

He reached the stretching expanse of quarterdeck, and his keen eyes did not fail to take in the covert curiosity on several officer-faces. It was not hard for him to manage a revealing smile, for the very fact of the admiral’s knowing about his defending of his convoy against a Jap cruiser squadron was sufficient, even without his stated congratulations. Commander Bentley, skill and experience regardless, was a very human officer...

He sat in the stern-sheets of *Wind Rode*’s motor boat and as he was taken back across the ship-crammed harbour he was thinking of a soft-nosed, uncomplicated-looking, super depth-charge. The thing looked simple enough, but then so did a fifteen-inch shell, and Bentley needed little scientific background to appreciate the months, possibly years, of research which must have gone into the design and building of the frightful weapon he was to test. If the new depth-charge worked successfully, if it was proved that its discharge was harmless to the firing ship, then the whole war against U-boats could be revolutionised. It would be a case of simply find—and fire. If the fat canister proved harmless for the firing ship. If it did not, then his ship’s selection for the test would prove to be a dubious honour. He was thinking about removing all normal depth-charges and explosives from the quarterdeck, as well as men, when the motorboat ran up alongside the destroyer’s gangway.

CHAPTER TWO

IN HIS CABIN BENTLEY pondered on how he should deliver the admiral's message, and thus satisfy the ship's curiosity about his summons. He would have liked to clear lower-deck and address the men himself, for Granville had been vehement in stressing the need for secrecy, and there had to be no doubts in any man's mind as to the reason for the flagship visit.

But the congratulations could be delivered in a couple of sentences, hardly a justification for gathering almost 200 men together from their work. He had decided that a notice, signed by himself, on the main notice-board would suffice, when a knock sounded at his door.

"Come."

Randall had received his captain at the gangway, but Bentley had made straight for his cabin. Now the first-lieutenant's face as he stepped in was deliberately uncurious. The attempt to hide his concern was so patent that Bentley's mouth pulled down at the corners in an appreciative grin.

"There you are, Bob," he greeted his friend and deputy, "it took you longer than I expected." Randall noticed the grin, and the sheet of paper under Bentley's hand. He said, relieved:

"What are you up to? Writing an application for a V.C., or your resignation?"

"Unfortunately no notice would be taken of either," Bentley grimaced. "No, shipmate—you are looking at an officer who has just been handed a very nice pat on his careworn shoulders by his admiral,"

Randall lowered himself into a chair. His tough, honest face was furrowed with the wide stretch of his grin.

"No! Which shindig?"

"There are more than one?" Bentley laughed. "The Jap cruiser-squadron."

"So the old coot heard about that? Nice work, What'd he say?"

"He didn't write a book about it, I must say. Things were a bit crowded. I followed the Rear-Admiral, Cruisers in, and heaven knows who came after me. Let me see now..."

“As if you don’t remember every damn word he said!” Randall charged.

“I think they might be recalled to my mind,” Bentley smiled. “We talked a bit about destroyers—he was in the boats, you know—and anti-submarine tactics, that sort of thing. Then he asked me if I had a clue as to why he’d sent for me, and I had to answer in the negative, so he smiled a very nice smile and told me to congratulate the ship’s company—negative first-lieutenant—on a fine piece of seamanship and stouthing against those Jap cruisers. Then he butted his cigarette—I must remember the way he did that—and I was in no doubt that the interview had ended. Then back I came to this speck on the water.”

“Well, now,” Randall said, his face quite incapable of concealing the pleasure he felt, and Bentley felt a twinge of conscience at his own deceit, “that was bloody nice of him. Of course you mentioned that it was the first-lieutenant who insisted on remaining and facing the foe?”

“Of course,” Bentley nodded, and his momentary and unjustified twinge was replaced by relief that his second-in-command had accepted the story so readily.

“Will you clear lower-deck?”

“No. Before I was rudely interrupted I was writing a note to the ship’s company.”

“Yes,” agreed Randall, “that might be better.”

“Thank you,” the captain said solemnly. “And now...” taking up his pen suggestively.

“You forgot to butt your cigarette,” Randall grinned. “In any case I didn’t come up here just to hear whether you’d been court-martialled. While you’ve been chewing the fat with four fat rings, something has transpired aboard.”

Bentley’s glance was sharp, the bantering forgotten, but Randall’s unworried face reassured him.

“Such as?”

“Such as the boxing tournament—the Fleet championship. Your cobbler across the way is mighty keen on physical fitness—or didn’t he discuss that?”

“Get on with it!”

"It seems in the flagship," Randall obeyed, "there is a bloke mighty handy with his mitts. Amateur heavyweight champ of England, something like that. Up till now nobody could be found stupid enough to have a lash at him. But as from ten minutes ago—just after you returned aboard, in fact—H.M.A. destroyer *Wind Rode* finds herself the challenger to the flagship."

Bentley's smile was easy, a gesture born of definite conviction.

"That's what you think," he remarked, and shuffled the sheaf of paper on which he was waiting to write. "I'm a bit too old in the tooth to go about taking on amateur heavyweight champions."

Randall's grin widened, and his captain proceeded to disabuse his mind of any frivolity it might entertain.

"First, my stouthing is now confined to getting out of trouble you can't handle yourself. Second. I'm a commanding-officer, elevated beyond the nasty delights of jaw-bashing—thank heaven! Third. I'm way out of condition. And fourth—and final—he might beat me. At the moment I have a nice little cup sitting in that bookcase there. I don't intend it to remain there under false pretences. And there are some pretty hefty specimens on board here. If I came back licked we'd have a mutiny inside twenty-four hours."

Randall looked at him, still grinning, his large head held a little on one side in mock puzzlement.

"I haven't," he said, "a clue what you're drivelling about."

"Eh?"

"I agree with everything you just said. Completely. You're fat as a pig, and you won that cup under false pretences anyway; you couldn't fight your way out of a light fog."

Bentley's smile was still easy.

"There's no fog surrounding your childish intentions," he sneered, "you haven't a hope of talking me into it. Now clear out for Pete's sake."

"At your command, master," bowed his friend, "I'm on my way. But..."

"Well? What is it?"

"I know you're slipping—keenness dies with old age, I suppose. But I thought the commanding-officer would at least show some slight interest in the name of the bloke who's volunteered to uphold

the honour of the ship, and all that.” You don’t get to command a Fleet destroyer with sump-oil clogging up your mental processes. The truth dawned on Bentley before he asked:

“What the devil are you gabbling about?”

“A man. A seaman. A petty-officer, A bloke you’ve had some fisticuffs with.”

Bentley laid down his pen.

“Gellatly,” he stated.

“Gellatly,” Randall nodded. “He’s done quite a bit of it, as you know. Pretty handy with ‘em, they tell me.”

He was watching his friend’s face shrewdly, and he was not surprised to see the pleasure form in it.

“That’s excellent!” Bentley said, and his voice went on quickly and definitely, “give him every facility. Let him ashore whenever he wants to. Running, swimming, toughening exercises, things like that. Organise the loan of a punching bag from one of the cruisers. Not the flagship—we don’t want their chap to know that ours is out of training. A psychological advantage can be damned important. See to that punching bag right away.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Randall grinned. “Ah—there’s one small detail I don’t think I can manage.”

“Oh? We’ll see about that! Gellatly’s to have everything he needs.” He rubbed his chin reflectively, smiling. “I remember in the *Australia* when we towed up the whole Med. Fleet just before the war. This could be another win for the old convict colony.” He glanced up at Randall, his tone unconsciously curt.

“Now what’s this detail worrying you?”

“The provision,” Randall told him, “of a sparring partner.”

“No!” said Bentley at once, but Randall noticed he pushed himself up from his chair. “I’ve got far too much to do. How the hell do you expect me to look after the ship and jump around the torpedo-space in the dog-watches?”

“How the hell do you expect a man to win a tournament when he hasn’t had the gloves on in months?” Randall queried gently.

Bentley looked at the deck. His balled right fist was gently tapping at the palm of his left hand.

“It might do me good,” he muttered, almost privately.

"I'll tell Gellatly to take it easy," Randall grinned. "Today's Wednesday—make and mend for alt hands. It'll be first-class entertainment for them. You could start after lunch."

"I'll handle my own blasted training!" Bentley scowled. "Anyway, what's up with a great lug like you? What are we worried about a punching-bag for?"

"The first-lieutenant," Randall informed him portentously, "is in close contact with the men. I might get some bullocky bloke who says he's in training just so's he can get a crack at me."

"What you really mean is your stomach is so beer-sodden you couldn't last ten seconds," Bentley said rudely.

"You always were one to swing your rank," his friend told him. "Be that as it may—will you do it?"

"Of course," Bentley said, and smiled.

Ashore there were several drinking dives which failed to dignify themselves by the title of nightclub, an open-air picture theatre and a ramshackle dance hall.

All of these forms of entertainment presuppose for their full enjoyment the accompaniment of a lady—or at least a female. But the feminine European population of the big naval base was as restricted as its forms of entertainment for 12,000 men. It consisted almost wholly of nurses, some English, some Australian, and a few American.

It will be appreciated that the nurses' off-duty hours were hardly lonely—fifty does not divide at all satisfactorily into 12,000—and so that afternoon, being Wednesday, and—at least in destroyers—always a half-holiday, or make and mend, there was a solid turn-up of non-paying spectators in the open space directly abaft the torpedo-tubes.

They were not disappointed.

Bentley knew there was barely a fortnight to the tournament, and consequently Gellatly could not indulge in the usual refinements of preparation for a big fight.

In any case, training facilities were limited. There was no small punching-bag on which he could practise his timing, no canvas-decked ring in which to move and judge distance, and only one sparring-partner of any, helpful standard.

Gellatly, therefore, could only concentrate on actual boxing, using his restricted time to practise distance and judgment and timing on Bentley's face and body.

The captain also knew that the contender in the flagship would be afforded every facility, even to an actual ring: you can do a lot with a deck 600 feet long and more than a hundred feet wide. As well, there were certain to be plenty of sparring partners among 2,000 men. And every help would be given their man, for his win would reflect shiningly on the ship.

Bentley was thinking of this last factor as he forced his hands into the gloves. His mentor, old "Aunty" Sainsbury, had done it, in this very harbour, with another Australian destroyer. That time the challenge had been between pulling boats. A second Australian ship had beaten the entire Mediterranean Fleet in Alexandria before the war. It would be very nice indeed if one of the junior units of this great Fleet, and a visitor at that, could demonstrate her country's superiority in a different field.

Randall laced his gloves and Bentley glanced up at his opponent, for whom the gunner's mate was performing a similar service.

Bentley saw the youth of the petty-officer, the breadth of his shoulders, and the smooth muscles which boxing and his frogman training had given his arms and legs and back.

There was no doubt of his fitness. What he needed to win was the experience the erstwhile heavyweight champion of the Australian Navy could offer him. Gellatly looked up, and smiled respectfully at his captain.

"Ready, sir?"

Bentley nodded, and stepped forward.

"It's been a long time," he grinned slightly, "take it easy."

Gellatly was not deceived. But his perception could not prevent a left-handed glove from landing with reduced force three times against his chin in the next ten seconds. Bentley lowered his hands.

"We'll have to keep that right hand up," he warned. "I caught you with a left the first time, you guarded your chin for about three seconds, then you lowered your right. You must remember that a man may repeat the same punch three, four, or even five times in quick succession. All right, then."

They shaped up and Bentley's left hand struck like a snake. It met a protective open glove.

"That's it," he grunted, and struck again.

Again the blow was countered, and again. The next instant Gellatly jerked back, his mouth open, gasping. Bentley had slid in and a fraction after his left hand had snaked out his right hand had jolted forcibly against Gellatly's solar plexus.

"By the same token," Bentley told him, his own breathing measured and even, "you've got to remember that a continuous line of punching may be followed by a totally different attack. All right?"

"Yes, sir," the petty-officer nodded, and fell into his crouch.

They boxed on, and Randall knew that Gellatly already knew what he had been told, and that it was simply the speed of his opponent which had prevented him from countering the punches.

You should be taking on that flagship bruiser, he thought. Gellatly's good, but not in the same class as you. But then you're right. It's a men's tournament. A sub-lieutenant perhaps, even a lieutenant, could safely enter, but a commanding-officer was in a different category.

There was no actual rule forbidding the entry of even the admiral—the Navy is democratic in its sports—but there were certain indefinable lines drawn beyond which the captain of a vessel found it prudent not to step.

Randall heard the swift slap of leather, and the grunts of the fighters, and he covertly glanced about him. The area was crowded, some men perched on the tubes, others looking down from X-gun deck, and on all their faces was intense interest. He knew its cause. Not so much the spectacle of two men boxing, as it was the fact that one of them, and obviously the superior one, was their own captain—their remote and authoritative lord, now descended into the arena of intimate contact and combat with one of their own.

Every ship's captain, Randall mused idly, should be a champion boxer...

A crisp smack of sound broke into his musing. He saw Bentley forced back, at the same time as he ducked the right hook which followed Gellatly's blow to the face.

They clinched, and every man present, Randall included, had his

eyes laid on the captain's face. That was a smart punch, it had caught him squarely, and it must have hurt.

They should have known their captain better than to wait for some sign of anger against their messmate. Bentley broke clear and his grin at Gellatly was friendly and rueful.

"Keep those for the flagship," he grunted, and bore in behind a flashing stab of punches.

They had gone three rounds, a fifth of the distance Gellatly would have to survive, when above the slap of leather and the shuffling of feet Randall heard beside him:

"I didn't know this was on."

The voice was quiet, a little wondering. Randall glanced down into a refined face with soulful eyes.

"Hullo, Ping" he grinned. "The Old Man's tiring a bit—like to take over?"

"No, thank you," rejected Lieutenant Peacock, the asdic-officer. His spaniel-like brown eyes followed the captain with surprised interest. "I had no idea he was expert at this sort of thing."

There's a lot you don't know, Ping—and never will know about that boy, Randall grinned to himself. He said:

"Next time you're in his cabin take a look in his bookcase. There's a silver cup there. It refers to the heavyweight champion of the Fleet."

"My word!" Peacock murmured.

Randall heard the almost effeminate tone, and he thought briefly that there was quite a deal of hidden talent about that boxing arena—remembering what the soulful-eyed asdic expert had done to certain submarines of unregretted memory.

Then he glanced at his watch, guiltily, and saw that the last round had already gone four minutes.

"Time!" he called, and Bentley looked over his shoulder at him.

"And about time!" he growled. "I'd hate to have you in my corner."

The chuckles were not dutiful.

"That will do for this afternoon," Bentley decided, and Gellatly nodded thankfully "When we've got our wind you can have a few shots with that left at my glove. Later on this afternoon we'll have a bag for you."

Both fighters moved around the small space of deck. They were clad in boxing boots and shorts, and Peacock, who had more observation than soul in his soulful eyes, noted that most eyes were on the captain's sloping and muscled shoulders.

No wonder they're behind him to a man, he thought with honest envy; the piratical, burned face, the obvious strength and vigour of the man—he was born to lead a bunch of modern-age buccaneers like this.

"Excuse me, sir."

The deep voice spoke behind Peacock. He looked round, and up, into the giant's face.

"Yes, Buffer?"

Hooky Walker stepped forward, his right "hand" hooked into a set of cords.

"Where the devil did you scrounge that?" Bentley asked, and his eyes squinted in belated recognition of the fact that this was too public a place to ask a leading question like that.

"Ah—I know one of the physical-training instructors in a cruiser, sir. He likes lambs'-wool rugs—just like the Yanks I happened to have one."

"Did you now?" Bentley kept his face solemn "I imagine the *punching-bag* will be returned?"

"It'll go back, sir."

Bentley nodded, thinking the permanent-stores officer of that cruiser would be happy to know it—if ever he did learn of the "transaction."

"Nice work, Buffer. There you are, Gellatly—no excuses now. We'll have to rig it up somewhere."

Four men jumped down from the tubes, and Randall remembered, his first-lieutenant's heart glad, what a scruffy lot of slackers these men had been when Bentley had taken over the old *Wind Rode*, The atmosphere now could hardly be sweeter. It was nice to see.

"Near the spud-locker," Hooky suggested, "I'll run a spar out and secure it from there."

But this novel break in routine was not to be prolonged. The harsher realities of their lives forced through the throng in the person of Nutty Ferris, the signal-yeoman.

"From the Flag, sir," he reported briefly, and handed the message sheet to Bentley.

Bentley read no further than the first few words: "Being in all respects ready for sea..." He glanced up at Randall and ordered curtly: "Secure ship for sea."

Randall showed neither surprise nor disappointment. *Wind Rode's* captain was among the most junior in this seasoned fighting Fleet, and they were used to being shot off to sea at a moment's notice.

"Aye, aye, sir!" he answered crisply, and then, "Chief bosun's mate..."

Neither were the crew, as they bustled about their work, disappointed. There was little to do ashore, and they might as well be at sea as lying in this landlocked harbour, where the tropic nights were muggy in the calm provided by the surrounding hills. The only advantage harbour-time offered them was all night in their hammocks, but after years of war at sea, they were so used to waking up for their night watches that the advantage was minor.

Bentley had a quick shower, then dressed hurriedly. He had sent for the Pilot, and the navigating-officer came into his cabin while he was pulling on his shorts. Bentley wasted no time.

"Trouble," he said. "A merchantman carrying about fifty nurses and Wrens has been torpedoed 200 miles almost due north. She's burning as well. We go out with *Antelope*."

"She's junior, sir," Pilot told him. Bentley nodded.

"Lay off a course and give me a time of arrival at 30 knots."

"Yes, sir. Time of departure?"

"Fifteen minutes from now."

Pilot nodded and left the cabin quickly. He thought nothing about the forethought which had re-fuelled the ship immediately on her return to base yesterday, nor the efficiency which could prepare a 2,000-ton destroyer for sea in twenty minutes. He was refreshing his memory of the courses to take the ship from her destroyer-trot out through the boom, and estimating that 200 miles due north would put them somewhere a little to the south, and east, of the port of Pondicherry. He was also thinking that that was pretty close to home waters for an enemy submarine.

Bentley came on to the bridge as Pilot pulled out from the chart-table. From below the bridge came the steady clanking of the anchor cable heaving in, and from further aft the sounds of men turning-in

the motorboat on the iron-deck.

"It's a clear run, sir," Pilot said; "estimated time of arrival 1850."

"M'mm." Bentley pulled at his nose. Ten minutes to seven was too close to darkness for his liking. It could be nasty, with the rescuing ships nicety oat-lined against the flames for a lingering submarine. It was definitely nasty, his thoughts ran on, for the people aboard that burning ship...

"All right, Pilot," he said briskly, "course for leaving harbour?"

"Oh-four-eight, sir."

A voice hailed from the foc's'le:

"Anchor's aweigh, sir. Clear anchor!"

"Slow ahead starb'd, half astern port," Bentley ordered down the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

She came quickly and smoothly up to the boom-gate. Ahead of her a harbour-defence launch was busily steaming back and forth across the entrance, dropping 25-pound depth-charges to deter any subsurface visitor who might be thinking of slipping in while the two destroyers were coming out.

They passed through, their wash rocking the boom-defence vessel in charge of the gate; then they were clear, and the gate was drawn shut behind them. Across the harbour mouth the protective netting was now complete, with the Fleet berthed safety behind it.

Bentley searched the horizon with his glasses. Automatically he noted the pressure of wind against his face, and the quiet movement of the ship in the moderate sea. Weather would be important for what he had to do.

He glanced astern at *Antelope*, noting that her slicing bow was moving through *Wind Rode's* wake.

"Revolutions for 30 knots," he said to Pilot, and as the navigator spoke down the voice-pipe the signal-yeoman hoisted his flags.

CHAPTER THREE

HOUR AFTER HOUR THE two fast destroyers drove on northward. Bentley had thought of altering the formation to line-abreast, which would give him an asdic-swept path four miles wide—it was always possible that the victorious Jap captain might try his hand at bigger game further south. But, although his asdic dome would possibly have resisted the fractional pressure at that high speed, the sounds of the ship's fast passage would have prevented any sort of efficient detection.

So they swept on in line-astern from the leader, their spuming bows aimed due north, the glowing ball of the sun lowering itself towards the watery edge on their left.

At four o'clock Randall came on deck to take over the dog watches. He shot the sun and put the ship on the chart. Then he crossed to where Bentley was sitting in his high-legged stool.

They were isolated in their starb'd forrard corner, but they were still on the bridge, and the first-lieutenant's voice was formal.

"Any ideas about tonight's job, sir?"

"None—yet," Bentley answered. He had been staring through his glasses at the horizon ahead, for smoke can be sighted a long distance at sea. "Well just have to tackle things as they arise. I don't want to lower boats if I can help it. On the other hand, if she's burning too fiercely we can't poke our nose in."

"They could jump into the water," Randall suggested.

"No. We won't have much daylight left and I don't relish the idea of groping about in darkness looking for swimmers. But..." shifting his weight in the comfortless chair, "we should be able to get in against her somewhere."

"No further signals from her?"

"No. But that's understandable. If the Jap shelled her, as he did according to her first message, he'd certainly aim for the bridge and wireless office."

"You're right," Randall nodded. "What the hell was she doing on her own up there?"

"She's a fast ship, or was. And submarines haven't been sighted so far west before."

“Like their shore-based aircraft?”

“Eh?”

“Those birds who dropped in on us yesterday,” Randall enlarged. “I’ll swear they were shore-based.”

“I thought the same thing—at first. But obviously there must be a carrier out there somewhere. The distance is much too great from the Nicobars or Sabang. We were attacked only 300 miles east of base.”

“All right, then. Just the same, I bet the admiral’s worried about ‘em. So am I. If we had a couple of carriers ourselves, no worry. But a Fleet’s not meant to operate completely without air-cover—not against those yellow-balled birds.”

“I imagine the admiral’s got a hell of a lot to worry him,” Bentley said, remembering that paper-cluttered desk.

“But then he gets paid for it,” Randall grinned.

Bentley glanced down at him.

“But then he earns it,” he grunted. His voice changed. “We’re all set? Lines, scrambling-nets, all the gubbins?”

“The Buffer’s working on it now, sir. The Doc’s been warned.”

Bentley stared thoughtfully at the deserted foc’s’le.

“You’d better get a stack of hammocks up on the foc’s’le. They’ll probably have to jump, and that’s hard iron down there.”

“Good idea,” Randall nodded, and turned. “Bosun’s mate.”

The two ships surged on, quiet, prepared, all the fuss at their bows and churning sterns. Even in the leader’s engine-room it was quiet, apart from the high-pitched scream of the whirling turbines. Mr. McGuire, the engineer, had been too long in destroyers’ engine-rooms to be fazed by a simple high-speed run like this. He knew his engines and he knew his men, and now they went about their tasks with the same phlegmatic thoroughness as characterised their chief.

It was not her radar, balked by the curve of the earth, which made the first contact, but a pair of sharp eyes far up in the crow’s nest. The leaning pillar of smoke was too diaphanous for electronic particles to reflect from, but it showed clearly enough in the twin lenses of the lookout’s binoculars.

His report went down and Randall raised his glasses. Bentley’s reaction was to glance at the sun. With a fractional flash of memory

he recalled, helped possibly by the admiral's mentioning of it a few hours before, that not so long ago he had prayed for that sun to drop more swiftly from sight below the horizon. Now the success of the rescue operation could well depend directly on how long it took for the flaring yellow orb to remain in sight.

Bentley forgot his time limits. He had other things to do than worry about irrevocable natural phenomena.

"Twenty knots," he ordered, "make to *Antelope*: Take station my port beam. Commence asdic sweep."

With the order the bridge team were reminded forcibly of something which sight of their objective had made them forget—it was quite likely that the victorious submarine might be still in the vicinity, either waiting for its victim to sink, or for something to come and rescue it.

If a brace of Fleet destroyers could do anything about it—and it was a bit more than possible that they could—then the Jap submarine might live to regret his dalliance.

The smoke plume grew quickly larger in their light, and then the funnel and masts of a ship, and from the speaker on the bridge there pitched the first resonant pinging of the asdic set.

Bentley was watching *Antelope* creaming up to take station a mile on his port beam. Once in position abreast him she would drop back to 20 knots. Randall said from under his glasses:

"She seems to be burning near the bridge, and forrard. The after part looks fairly clear."

Bentley nodded. He guessed the engine-room bulkheads halted the spread of the fire aft. He glanced at his watch, anxious to know how much time he had left of daylight. His mouth twisted in a brief acknowledgment—Pilot had given the E.T.A. as ten minutes to seven. The time now was 12 minutes to that hour.

Bentley looked at Ferris and the yeoman stepped over. Bentley said to Randall:

"She seems to be down by the bow. That's where she caught it. But she looks level enough. We'll put our bows in on either side of her stern. She's a bit high-out there, but they'll have to risk it."

He looked at Randall. The first-lieutenant had been made a partner in the captain's strategy, and he offered, without deference:

"Don't you think that will make us a rather attractive target? We'll have most of our length nicely stuck out clear."

"I see that," Bentley agreed. The yeoman, listening, found nothing odd about this open difference of opinion—what he would have thought odd would have been Bentley's refusal to listen to other advice.

"But if there is anything hanging around," Bentley went on, "I want to be in position to get clear of that cripple fast. Stuck alongside her further forrard we'll be hampered."

Randall's agreement was in his silence. Bentley spoke to Ferris and the yeoman moved off to make the signal. The captain's voice halted him.

"Tell *Antelope*," he added, "that I'll make an asdic sweep round the ship before coming in. She is to start rescue operations at once."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Bentley gave another order and *Wind Rode*, now under control of Rennie, the coxswain, veered off to starb'd to begin her searching circuit. There were a lot of things Bentley wanted to know from that ship's captain—extent of the fire, if he carried scrambling-nets he could lower down, how many persons left alive—but he knew he could safely leave those details to *Antelope's* captain.

He took his ship well clear of the burning merchantman's starb'd side and he forgot her and her plight. Now he was the trained sub-hunter, and the business of finding and destroying a lurking enemy would require his undivided attention.

The ship moved on at reduced speed and the ping of the set lowered his thoughts down to Peacock, the Reserve officer in the asdic control room; from there his mind went on to that other Reserve officer the admiral had told him he would soon have on board. He should have that tube-fired thing with him now!

The thought was brief, and cynical. With what he might be up against you could not afford playing with untried back-room experiments. He had a quarter-deck stacked with depth-charges, well-tried canisters, and he was quite content to go along with those.

She was circling round the merchantman's bow now, and Bentley judged that the torpedo had hit there, and blown open her compartments for the full width of the ship, for although the bow was well down, it had settled on a level keel.

That circumstance would help him a lot. It would be awkward, if not impossible, for the survivors to Jump from a side which was canted high in the air.

He gave his wheel orders to Rennie and *Wind Rode* continued her wide circle, but although his eyes were continually searching the calm sea Bentley's main attention was in his hearing. The sound pulse of the asdic transmission was loud and crisp, but at any second it could be supplemented by the shorter, higher-pitched peep of an echo.

He had no need to plan his actions if that happened. The ship's submarine-attack routine was well-established and well-learned.

As always, when there was time to think, he put himself in the enemy commander's place. And he knew that he would be lucky to make a contact in this position. Any submariner with any experience would have sighted the two approaching destroyers long before their asdic fingers could reach out and touch him. He would know their object. Therefore he would sail his own vessel clear of the range of the British asdic, guessing that one destroyer at least would make a preliminary searching sweep: and guessing that that searcher would not move out too far from the stricken ship, for the main object of the exercise was to get those survivors off, not to search for a submarine that might not be there.

Bentley was not surprised therefore when he had almost completed the circle and no answering peep had come from the speaker.

They were moving down the port side of the torpedoed ship, and Ferris reported:

"*Antelope's* alongside port quarter, air. Taking 'em aboard."

Bentley raised his closed fist and laid it on the lower edge of the sun. His five knuckles fitted almost exactly between sun and horizon. Five degrees of altitude remaining. Then he turned and laid his glasses on the rescue operation.

He could see no scrambling-nets, but several ropes, down which female figures were lowering. He thanked God that they were nurses and Wrens, disciplined women. Then he saw a man jump, and he knew that there was not too much discrepancy of height between poop and foc's'le.

He tried to judge how many people had been brought aboard

Antelope, but the captain was wisely hurrying them off the foc's'le as soon as they arrived. His desire was to increase speed and get his own nose in on the opposite side, thus doubling the rate of rescue, but his instinct and experience kept him on his circling sweep: the Jap could just as well be astern as out on either beam.

A few minutes later and *Wind Rode* was right round, dead astern. Bentley shaped her up for the run in.

She came in slowly and smoothly, the engine-room, warned, and now they could feel the heat from the blazing forepart beating against their faces. The stricken vessel was lying with her head to the north, where it had been when the torpedo struck, and luckily the wind was from the east, so that the area of rescue was clear of smoke.

Bentley did not like that smoke. It poured out from a thousand crevices, and it lifted to the sky in a thick-based tombstone of blackness, visible for miles. A beacon like that would tell its story plainly—a story of defeat, and possible rescue by healthy ships. If that first submarine was one of a pack.

Bentley concentrated on conning her in. It was not a difficult manoeuvre, yet it would be easy to damage his thin sides or stem; and he had to make it the first time.

He had already given his orders regarding securing her. One wire only was to be used, and a man was to stand by its turns round the bollards, ready to cast off instantly. The danger lay in not only a submarine—Bentley had no knowledge of the extent of the merchantman's damage, and it was conceivable that she could roll over, or sink, at any moment. He did not want to be held fast during either occurrence.

"Half astern together," he ordered, and the big screws thrashed astern and she quivered to a stop.

"Thank God you've come!" an unknown voice spoke above him, and the first nurse jumped straight down on to the hammocks.

There was not much daylight left, but the rescue proceeded swiftly and smoothly. Some swung awkwardly down ropes, others risked the jump. Ready hands grabbed them and then waited for the next.

A man in greasy overalls—he looked like a stoker—took hold of a rope and started his descent. He was unused to ropework, and yet he did not have the unfamiliar caution of the women. He slid down

too fast and his hands burned and he let go.

There was a single sharp cry of fright, and he dropped from sight between both ships. *Wind Rode*, riding easily on her single bow-line, leaned inwards her 2,000 tons as the wave came rolling down and met her starb'd flares.

The cry this time was a shriek of terror, cut off in mid-pitch. Hooky Walker on the foc's'le jerked round to face the bridge, his hands cupped round his mouth. Before he could shout Bentley roared:

"No! Get on with it!"

Understanding, Hooky turned back. A human body is not designed to be a fender, and the stoker's would now be crushed to pulp.

Bentley had little difficulty in forcing his mind away from the vision of what lay between the ships: sympathy and regret were feelings he could not afford. He had ordered the asdic to continue sweeping 180 degrees on the starb'd, seaward, side, and while his eyes watched the smooth proceedings of the rescue his ears were constantly attuned to the sound-pulses.

This was the time, the crucial time, when a submarine would unload everything in her tubes at two such juicy targets. Both destroyers were stopped, and she could come up from astern, so that both ships' lengths would be open to her attack.

This was the worst time for a commander. Of necessity he had nothing to do, nothing with which to occupy himself, so that his mind could wander freely round all the ghastly possibilities. Bentley could not even shout adjurations, for the foc's'le team under Hooky Walker were working faultlessly—grabbing, steadying, saving, and then hustling the rescued clear, all with a disciplined economy of movement and time.

There can't be many more, he thought, his eyes on three Wrens about to step over the guard-rail of the poop. His mind roved again over what should have been done, and he knew he had covered everything—the engine-room warned for full power if it were needed, one single wire holding him, a man tending it, plenty of life-saving ropes provided, hammocks on which to jump, asdic searching on his open side, *Antelope's* probing the other; two of his gun-mountings closed-up, Lasenby alert in his director, the depth-charge crews on the quarterdeck, throwers and rails fully loaded.

No, it was all done. Everything depended on the light, the speed

of rescue, the absence of a watching submarine...

He saw the three Wrens, capless, dragged inboard over the guardrails and his eyes went to the poop and he heard a voice shout:

"Ahoy there, captain! I'm the last."

This man was also capless, but Bentley saw plainly the four gold rings on the shoulders of his shirt. This was the captain, the traditional last to leave. Bentley wanted to shout his urge to hurry, to stop that staring at the ship he was about to leave for the last time. He said, his voice controlled:

"Glad to see you, sir. Please come aboard."

The captain swung his legs over the rail and bent down for the rope, calling something as he came. Bentley never heard the words. The shout reached him from the crow's nest without benefit of the voice-pipe:

"Bridge! Torpedo track approaching starb'd beam!"

For the past half-hour Bentley's mind had been attuned to hearing a report like that. He forgot the captain. He acted without the fraction of an instant's hesitation, and his first order was the most important one:

"Full astern both engines!" And then, raising his head from the voice-pipe, he bellowed at the foc's'le:

"Cast off bow-line!"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the captain crouch and jump for the hammocks. But he was looking at *Antelope*, seeing her already sliding astern, opening a widening patch of water between her bow and the merchantman's stern. Only then did he swing his head back and stare out across the sea on his starb'd beam.

He felt the initial quiver of the deck plates under his feet grow to a violent shuddering. From the bridge he heard plainly the gripping thrash of the screws. He sighted the spear-headed track of the racing missile, aimed for his guts. Feeling, hearing, sight. Three faculties which registered their meaning in his brain, automatically. But the most important faculty, though, was telling him that the submarine had fired from long range, outside the range of asdic, that her captain was probably inexperienced, but that she was so far off she stood a very good chance of getting away.

That was the measure of the man, that was the reason why he was

the captain, the leader, the superior of those 200 in his crew. He had done everything which had to be done to avoid that rushing death, and now his brain had passed on and was forecasting future possibilities and actions; while every other man on the upper-deck and bridge was staring with fixed and fearful concentration at the tell-tale wake of their fate.

She was moving astern now, gathering speed with every second as McGuire far below them gave her turbines the full strength of the super-heated steam in her great boilers.

The torpedo had been fired from long range, but its targets had been easy ones. And if Bentley had delayed a few seconds in passing the most important order it would have found its target.

Antelope was well clear, having cast-off before her sister. It was now *Wind Rode* alone in the arena, and she was fighting for her life not with guns or depth-charges, but with her captain's quickness of thought and decision and her engineer's training.

A modern torpedo in a calm sea travels 23 yards in one second. The torpedo's course was at right-angles to her own, but *Wind Rode* had the priceless advantage of having sighted her enemy's track a few seconds before it was due to end its run against her belly.

If the crow's-nest lookout had been idly watching the rescue, if he had not been concentrated on searching where he had been told to; if McGuire had allowed his engine-room artificers to wander away from the throttle wheels; if Bentley had wasted time looking for the torpedo's track, if he had first ordered the line cast-off, and so deprived the turbines of those few vital seconds; if the seaman on the foc's'le had fumbled with the wire, and so delayed her backwards movement—if any of these "ifs" had eventuated she would have had her guts blown wide open.

But none of those faults occurred, and the sole reason for their absence was the meticulousness of the captain's training.

Through the captain's example the engineer-officer was just that fraction more thorough than his own character demanded; through it Randall had trained his petty-officers, and through them the seamen of the ship had similarity benefited.

As it was, it could hardly have been closer.

The wake of a torpedo reaches the surface some 40 feet behind

the twin propellers. The torpedo is thus that distance ahead of its visible indication. *Wind Rode* was almost 300 feet long, so that as the smooth wake speared out ahead of her receding bow they could judge by how very little the war-headed nose had missed them.

Voices jubilant and relieved broke the silence on the bridge. Bentley's order shut them off:

"Stop both! Full ahead port, half astern starb'd! Starb'd thirty!"

They realised then what they had forgotten in the enormity of their relief—that their enemy was still out there, that they were still almost certainly lined-up in his periscope sight, and that they had to get moving ahead fast if they were to slip his next messengers.

Bentley snatched a look astern. *Antelope's* bow was already creaming, and her stern was dragged down as she headed at speed straight into the approaching night from the east.

A destroyer is built to swing fast, and to gain head-way swiftly. In a few moments *Wind Rode* was chasing after her eager sister. Bentley decided to leave his asdic dome down—it was the hoisting and lowering at high speed that could tear it off. And he knew it would be some minutes before he could hope to be in position to contact his enemy.

Both destroyers surged on, each ship fanning out to open the width of their search area. Bentley had ordered the asdic set switched off, for it was useless at this tearing speed. So that, with nothing for his ears to concentrate on, he heard clearly the step on the bridge behind him.

"Good evening, captain," a deep voice greeted him, "name's Turnbull."

Bentley turned. He could have wished the new arrival to blaze, but he answered courteously:

"Very glad to have you on board, captain. My name is Bentley, destroyer *Wind Rode*."

"I never saw a prettier sight," Turnbull smiled, and held out his hand. "I mean that tin-fish scooting past ahead of your stem."

"It was close."

"You're after the bastard now?"

"That's right."

Bentley's tone was friendly, but the brevity of his answers

penetrated into the merchant skipper's intelligence. "Sorry," he said, his voice a deep grunt. "I'll clear out."

"Not at all," Bentley forced a smile, and looked at Randall.

The first-lieutenant touched the skipper on the arm.

"Would you mind, sir? You can see everything from this corner."

Turnbull looked into a young, hard, friendly face, and Randall saw a weather-beaten visage that might have made a satisfactory patch in a teak desk.

"All right, young feller. I don't want to be in the way. But I'd like to see that Jap mongrel get what's coming..."

The deep voice receded and Bentley forgot him. He snapped an order to Ferris and a guarded blue light flicked out at *Antelope* and in a moment she straightened from her opening course. Both ships drove on in line abreast, half a mile apart.

The sun had lowered itself out of sight. Before they reached the estimated position of the submarine the night had come on in a sable flood from the east. But the asdic, searching in lightless depths, needed no light, and it was unlikely that their enemy would surface. And to maintain their station both ships had their radar.

"Reduce to 15 knots," Bentley ordered, and Rennie's team worked their telegraphs and Ferris's light blinked. Radio-telephony was out of the question, but it was unlikely that the submarine would sight that guarded light. She would almost certainly be dived, for her sensitive hydrophone would have picked up the sound of their thumping approach.

It was about five minutes later when *Wind Rode's* asdic set picked up its target.

The returning peep was unmistakable. It took only a few seconds for Peacock's voice to report: "Target! classified submarine."

Randall had come back.

"We'll get this boy," he said, his voice quietly exulting.

Bentley had more to do than indulge in unstable forecasts.

"Any contact from *Antelope*?" he asked Ferris.

"No, sir."

Bentley spoke again, and the light flickered out its information—submarine contact bearing Green 20, range 1,800 yards.

Antelope should have been in contact, Bentley thought. The

bearing of the contact put the enemy squarely ahead and between them. Then he remembered that the range was almost at the set's limit, and *Antelope* would not have a Reserve officer like Peacock on board.

But he had no time to worry about that. He was in contact, and he proceeded to do something about it.

Wind Rode moved on, music coming from her asdic speaker, point and counterpoint of transmitted ping and echoing peep. Gradually as she moved in closer the time interval between the two sounds decreased; then they became almost simultaneous, and Bentley rapped his orders.

The quarterdeck sprang to life and the charges went over, some flinging from the throwers and others dropping to complete the pattern from her stern rails.

The ship moved on. Beneath her the charges dropped, while the water seeped in and built up pressure on the striker needles. This was the doubtful factor—depth. They had the bearing, they had the range, but the asdic set had not yet been developed to that desirable state of efficiency which would give them an accurate depth. The depth set on the charges was a combination of calculation and estimation, an assessment which could be thrown completely out by the target's alteration of course to port or starb'd, or by its sudden dropping in its three-dimensional element.

They would soon know.

The ship shuddered. Astern of her, disrupting her wake, the ocean flattened, then heaved itself up in a huge dome that retained its beautiful proportions for a fraction of time and then flung itself apart in streamers of sky-reaching spray, white against the darkness.

The sound of the multiple explosions was deep and thunderous, and it reached out to the ship, pressed around their ears, then beat away to silence in the quiet of the night.

On the quarterdeck men bustled round the throwers, for they had not much time before the ship would turn and come in again for the second run—if it were needed. The asdic speaker offered again its double message and the bridge team knew there would be a second run.

Bentley was disappointed, but not surprised, at the first attack's

failure. Depth-charging a hidden and elusive enemy, who can move up and down as well as sideways, had nothing about it of the pinpoint accuracy of surface gunfire. The submarine was smaller than the destroyers, and she could turn much more quickly, because the whole of her body was encased in frictional water, and the extent of her line of advance on a turn was thus restricted.

He gave his orders and *Wind Rode* listed on the turn.

“*Antelope* in contact, sir,” Ferris reported.

Bentley nodded invisibly in the darkness. They *should* get this Jap. Single destroyer against submarine found the odds heavily in favour of the submersible. But there were two boats hunting here, and while *Wind Rode* made her attacking run *Antelope* was out there, in contact, ready to signal any alterations of course of the target.

They should get him... And they almost certainly would if they could have judged the depth precisely. Now there were two factors opposing their success. First, the charges might be incorrectly set for depth, and could explode above or below the target, with the submarine clear of the lethal area. Second, a skilfully-handled submarine could throw even the cleverest depth-settings out by flooding her emergency tank and dropping like a stone.

It was experience now, added to a sizable helping of luck: experience placing the target inside an enclosing pattern of exploding charges, luck keeping it there.

Experience was plentiful. Luck, having offered its portion when the torpedo flashed past a few feet ahead of *Wind Rode*'s stem, now sank deep down and rested unshakably inside the Japanese control-room.

They took it in turn, each ship spawning disruption from her stern, while the other remained in contact. The ocean convulsed itself and the night shuddered under the quadruple blasts. *Antelope* lost the contact and half an hour later picked it up again. The chase led them northward, then south, but always it bore towards the east. And it became obvious to the strained men on *Wind Rode*'s bridge that that torpedo had not been fired by a comparative amateur, but by a master who had been confident in his long-range accuracy.

At first the bridge team had been exultantly alert, positive in their belief that the two destroyers would make short work of this

interloper in Allied waters. But as the hours wore on towards midnight, and the charges exploded, and the ship shook, and the target was lost, and regained, and still maintained its twisting, dropping evasions, certainty dwindled to hope, and then to anger and frustration.

Bentley, his face composed in the upward light of the binnacle, but beginning to line with strain, was worried about their continued lack of success. Yet he had a larger worry. He had been throwing charges over like chicken-feed, and he knew that his supply was dangerously depleted. They had now more than 300 miles between them and base, and at sea you never knew what you might be faced with. A signal had told him the *Antelope* was in the same undesirable state.

For the twentieth time he watched his consort destroyer, a grey shape in the night, move in for her attack. It was natural that his mind should revert to thought of the weapon whose existence the admiral had revealed. Oddly, he found in that existence not so much a desire to have it with him now as a justification for his failure. Certainly months, possibly years, had gone into the weapon's design and building, and that precious time had been spent on that particular project because plainly the normal depth-charges in use were lacking in hundred per cent, efficiency. He and many other escort-ship captains had proved that before—he was proving it now.

Submarines, when skilfully handled, are very difficult birds to kill. Luck might place a first pattern within a few feet of a pressure hull and crack it open to the hungry sea. Luck might also work for the opposite side. It was working overtime here.

Bentley had made up his mind before *Antelope's* charges hurled the water sky-high. They had not sunk the enemy, but they'd certainly frightened hell out of him! If he escaped, he would think more than twice before tackling this unhealthy area again. The thunderous boom of sound reached them. They waited, some searching the empty sea astern, others listening to the asdic transmissions. They had become so used to the double sounds that Peacock's voice reported before they realised that the peep was missing.

"Contact lost."

"Breaking-up noises?" Bentley asked quickly, "Any-thing at all?"

“Nothing, sir.”

He breathed in, a slow tired breath. He knew he should leave now, that he could meet a good deal of unpleasantness over 300 miles of open ocean, and that he had little enough to meet it with. But he had to know...

“Starb’d twenty. Carry out searching sweep.”

Fifteen minutes went by, twenty, half an hour. Nothing, Battlewise, Bentley had his radar sweep continuously round a full arc, conscious that his elusive enemy might have surfaced, and be running for his life at 18 knots while they probed for him 200 feet down. Nothing.

Randall stepped up on to the grating. Captain Turnbull had long since gone below, not understanding, and tiring of the fruitless game.”

“I’m calling it off,” Bentley muttered. “We’ve got three patterns left.”

The dimly visible bow swooped on over the sea, the waves hissed down her sides, the wind of her passage sighed in the mast rigging. The night all about them was quiet and velvety and concealing.

“You think we got him that last run?” Randall said.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. We’ve lost him before.”

“We’ve also scared the pants off him,” Randall suggested. “That I do know!” Bentley said.

His voice was tired, bitter. He tugged nervously at the skin of his throat. “We can’t flap around here all bloody night,” he grunted. His head turned decisively. “Yeoman?”

Ferris, older than any officer on the bridge, had been on it since four o’clock that afternoon. His voice came crisp and alert:

“Sir?”

“Make to *Antelope*—‘Disengage. Take station astern. Speed 25 knots, course 205.’”

“Aye, aye, sir!”

The shaded Aldis lamp clicked on and off. A small dim eye opened from *Antelope*’s bridge. *Wind Rode* heeled on the turn, and her consort swung in behind her. Thwarted, not at all sure of victory, their asdic and bridge teams wearied with strain, the destroyers steadied on the base course and dug their tails down for home.

There was no need for the captain to concern himself with the

comfort of his new guests. The ship's organisation had seen to their bedding down, Hooky and the gunner's mate—with the coxswain closed-up at the wheel—distributing the nurses in the iron-deck messdeck and its former occupants reluctantly bedding down with their male fellows on the foc's'le messes.

There was a spare cabin down aft. It took Captain Turnbull and his first mate. The rest of the merchant-man's officers made themselves comfortable in the wardroom.

Landis the surgeon had reported no wounded, and Bentley was relieved. But that was as far as his interest went. He had rescued the survivors, he had nearly lost his ship in the process, he had had a viciously frustrating night, and sighting of his passengers could wait till the morning. Not even a destroyer captain is psychic, so Commander Bentley merely grunted an acknowledgment to the salute he received on the deck outside his sea-cabin, and moved on into the passage. He saw that the man was Petty-Officer Gellatly, and that he was talking to a nurse: a perfectly normal situation, one which Bentley could not be expected to forecast would have considerable effect on his fairly-immediate future.

CHAPTER FOUR

WIND RODE AND ANTELOPE anchored in their trot at a little after 1.30 of a hot afternoon.

The report of the rescue and the ensuing attack had to be made, but it could have been sent by signal, or by boat. Bentley had decided otherwise. He finished making the report and sent his messenger for the first-lieutenant.

“Yes, sir?” Randall said at the door.

“Come in, Bob. Take a pew. How’d you like a look-see round the flagship?”

Randall had known his captain a long time. He looked at him shrewdly.

“I have to deliver this,” Bentley said calmly, and tapped the report.

“I see. You’re not usually so personally interested...”

“Not in the report, no.”

Randall grinned, suddenly.

“Ah,” murmured Bentley, “I see the dawn of realisation.”

“Damn good idea!” Randall nodded. “We leave now? Right. I’ll get the boat alongside.”

A destroyer’s motorboat is lacking in Rolls Royce qualities of silent running, and they spoke little on the trip across the busy harbour. Bentley was thinking that this was the only way he could get on board the flagship—she was wholly British-manned, and his sole acquaintance on board was the admiral...

But he himself had seen the stream of callers for the big cabin, and more would not be noticed. He would not, of course, ask to see the admiral, but would make his contact with the ship’s commander. This officer wore similar rings to himself, though he was much superior in seniority, being the battleship captain’s deputy.

The commander no doubt would be surprised at this personal delivery, and Bentley decided he would justify it by stating that he considered the presence of an enemy submarine so close into the coast of some importance.

He saw that the motorboat coxswain was heading for the starb’d ladder, the entrance reserved for commanding-officers and others of like eminence, and he knew that would mean the spotlight of a piping

party. But he could hardly alter the tradition-hallowed routine, much as he desired an unnoticed arrival.

They climbed the ladder, the pipes shrilled out, curious faces turned, and the officer of the day saluted him. Bentley saw it was the same lieutenant who had taken him down to the admiral.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

Bentley returned the salute, nodding.

“Is the commander on board?”

“Yes, sir. He’s on the quarterdeck now—standing beside the after capstan. I’ll take...”

“Never mind. What is his name?”

“Commander Letchford, sir.”

“Thank you,” Bentley said, and walked aft Randall waited beneath the giant barrels of Y turret.

Commander Letchford had never seen Bentley in his life. But out of the edge of his eye he saw the tall officer walking briskly towards him, and turned. He was a man to whom keen observation was second nature—having 2,000 men and 40,000 tons of ship to look after—and he pegged the approaching officer instantly and accurately in his mind: three rings, young, executive, therefore a commanding-officer, or a second-in-command of a cruiser. But not British—he knew them all in the Fleet—therefore Australian; and being Australian he would belong to a destroyer—or *vice versa*.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Bentley said.

Not only respectful, the commander judged—he would have to be that, on this quarterdeck—but pleasantly respectful. A pleasant-looking young fellow altogether.

“My name’s Bentley—*Wind Rode*”

“How are you, Bentley?”

Bentley took the proffered hand. Slight, he judged, three stone under his own weight—and, like so many of this British breed, all steel-wire beneath that cultured voice and courteous face.

“My name is Letchford. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Bentley consciously kept the understanding grin from his face. This officer was the approachable boy aboard the flagship, slightly less lordly than the captain, the man on whom all the complaints and requests from the other units of the great Fleet solidly fell. From

destroyers especially. His voice was still courteous, but Bentley recognised an added quality—caution, born of experience. He had been senior officer of a flotilla of boats himself, and he would have treated an unexpected visit from one of his captains with the same cautious reserve.

“No, thank you, sir—all well.” The commander’s smile grew a little. Bentley held out the manila envelope which contained on half a typewritten foolscap page the account of a rescue of 78 human beings and of an eight-hour hunt in darkness for an enemy submarine.

The commander took the envelope. He glanced up from it to Bentley’s face.

“You went out on that rescue mission?”

“That’s right, sir. But we also contacted a submarine. He was quite close-in to the coast and I thought the admiral should know about it.”

“Of course. Ah—you don’t wish to see the admiral... ?”

“Good lord no! But if you’d put that in the right hands... ?”

“I will do that, certainly.” The keen eyes on Bentley were still courteous, but now a quizzical shrewdness had replaced the caution. “By the way,” he said casually, tapping the envelope against one open palm, “I hear *Wind Rode* has put a man in against our chap for the heavyweight title.”

“Yes, that is so,” Bentley answered, as casually.

“The admiral was rather pleased about that. It seems no one else was keen to take on the big fellow. He’s a stickler for physical fitness, you know. The admiral, I mean.”

“I’ve heard something to that effect.”

The commander made to place his foot on the handy capstan and changed his mind—the captain of the quarterdeck would have keel-hauled any ordinary-seaman he caught doing that to the gleaming paintwork. He said, his mouth puckering a fraction:

“I’ve heard something about your own boxing experience. Australian Fleet championship, wasn’t it?”

“Something like that. But it wasn’t yesterday.”

“M’mm. Time marches on, and all that.” His voice crispened. “All right, Bentley, I’ll take care of this report. Is there anything else?”

“No-o, not actually. Except that...”

“Perhaps you’d like to walk round the ship?”

“Why, I’d like that very much!”

“Good. I’ll arrange...”

“Oh, please don’t bother! We’ll just wander around.”

“As you wish. Goodbye then.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

Bentley was approaching the twin barrels of Y turret when the voice stopped him.

“Bentley?”

“Sir?”

“You’ll find our chap sparring on the foc’s’le.”

There was a fractional pause. Then the grins, open and unaffected, warmed between them.

He picked up Randall and they walked forrard together.

“Seems a nice bloke,” Randall suggested, jerking his head aft towards the quarterdeck.

“Nice,” Bentley agreed, “and bright. He was awake up to us as soon as I gave him our address.”

“Yes,” Randall grinned, “I heard the last information. Y’know—I suppose we could have just come on board and asked to watch their bloke? It would have been much simpler.”

“Not quite,” Bentley shook his head. “I don’t want him to know we’re sufficiently interested—or worried—to come over and check his style.”

They walked past the base of the huge main-mast.

“You *are* worried?” Randall asked.

“No. Not yet. The sailors say this bird was amateur champion of England—but you know what sailors are!” Randall smiled, and Bentley went on: “I heard once—midshipman at the time—two sailors discussing with the utmost apparent accuracy of knowledge the bank account of a cruiser captain. A few months later, while I was learning how to cox a motorboat, the bowman told me—for a positive fact—that the commander used to beat his wife.”

“They get around,” Randall grinned in agreement.

“But not always on-course,” Bentley added. “Ah—this looks like it.”

They eased their pace and came up behind a crowd of men. It was certainly the most novel situation for a boxing-ring Bentley had come across, but just as certainly it was being put to efficient use.

There was a large open space of deck between the enormous barbettes of A and B turrets; the ring was temporary, but it was complete with ropes, padded corner posts, and canvas stretched tightly across the deck. Into his mind flashed a memory of he and Gellatly shuffling around in the few feet of space abaft the torpedo-tubes, and then his eyes fell on the main protagonist in this ring.

The boxer was crouched, but patently he was as tall as Bentley. There the resemblance ended. The Australian was lithe and muscled: this man was shouldered massively, and thick all the way down to his bulging calves. His back was towards Bentley, and his head was covered with a leather protector. Then he punched, and side-stepped, and Bentley could see his face—not much of it outside the head-gear, but enough to give the destroyer an impression of harsh and brutal ugliness.

“Hell’s... bells!” said Randall softly and slowly beside him.

Bentley agreed, but he did not answer. He touched the shoulder of a man in front of him. The seaman turned, recognising an officer and a stranger.

“Yes, sir.”

“What is the name of the big fellow?”

“Why, that’s Fairy, sir.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Fairy, sir. Fairy Floss. His name’s Floss...”

“I see,” Bentley murmured, and even through the concern he felt he could not help smiling. Anything more completely dissimilar to a fairy... “He’s your entry in the heavyweight title?”

The seaman nodded, smiling back. This bloke, whoever he was, seemed pleasant enough.

“That’s right, sir. Smasher, ain’t he? I wouldn’t like to be the china from that destroyer what’s takin’ him on!”

The smile went with the last words. Here’s one barracker Floss won’t have, Bentley realised. In the next second he knew why. A collective grunt rose from the crowd as the sparring partner, a much lighter man than Floss, reeled back from a vicious left hook. Floss

was after him like a panther, but he did not strike again. He leaned heavily on his opponent, tiring him with his weight, and his right hand came round and delivered a punishing blow to the kidneys.

You swine, Bentley thought—dirty-punching swine; and he was briefly surprised at how angry he felt. The other boxer sagged. He stared up and muttered something. Floss pushed him away, a powered shove that had the smaller man falling against the ropes. Floss ignored him. He danced round the ring, shadow-sparring, and his voice sneered at them:

“About as good as my ole woman! Come on then, you bastards, I ain’t gonna fight with meself all bloody day!” He halted his exhibition, staring at them. “Well, wot about it? Wot about all your bets? You want this destroyer mug to take me?”

“All right, Fairy,” a voice spoke, and a big stoker bent and ducked through the ropes. He tugged off his boots, and Bentley glanced at Floss. But the ugly face was grinning—apparently he delighted in his grossly inappropriate nickname.

“But none of them kidney punches,” the new sparring partner warned. “I’ll sink me boot where it hurts if you do.”

Two men laced the stoker’s gloves on and Bentley said:

“Come on. We’ve seen enough.”

The faces of both men were worried as they walked aft towards the gangway.

In the motorboat, the great ship drawing astern, Randall said:

“What do you think?”

Bentley’s reply was unequivocal.

“Gellatly hasn’t a chance. Lighter, less experience.” He rubbed at his chin. “Unless...”

“Eh?”

“That Floss is a dirty fighter. Probably learned it in the slums of Liverpool somewhere. Gellatly’s only hope would be to stay out of his reach and wear him down with jabs and straight lefts. But then Floss is cunning enough to lure him in to close quarters. And even if Gellatly did wear him down I doubt if he has the power and the weight to knock him out. The fellow’s an ape.”

“No argument there,” Randall grimaced. “But are you sure? About Floss’s ability, I mean? We only watched him for a few minutes.”

Bentley looked at him.

“All right, all right,” the big lieutenant grunted, “so you know fighters like I know beer. What happens now? Do we pull Gellatly out?”

There it was, the question which had been worrying Bentley’s mind since they had walked away from the battleship’s ring. They had travelled down the length of a cruiser before he spoke again.

“No. I haven’t seen Gellatly in proper action yet. I don’t give him a chance of winning, but that doesn’t mean to say he won’t be able to take care of himself. And in any case, we can always stop the fight.”

“I hope to hell it doesn’t get to that stage,” Randall muttered.

He tugged worriedly at the lobe of his left ear. Then he glanced up sideways into Bentley’s set face.

“Peter?”

“Yes.”

“I hear the admiral’s pretty set on this tournament? Keen on fitness, that sort of thing.”

“That’s right, yes.”

“Then it seems to me that having entered a man, we can’t very well withdraw.”

Bentley nodded; that reason lay partly behind his decision to let Gellatly fight.

“Gellatly hasn’t a hope—you said so yourself,” Randall went on.

“No,” Bentley said flatly.

“Eh? But a moment ago...”

“I mean ‘No’ to what you’re thinking. You want me to take on our Fairy friend.”

“At least he’d be up against someone more his own weight and ability.”

Bentley was silent, and for a second Randall thought he had swayed him. Then the captain spoke, and Randall knew he was wrong:

“I wanted to get into that ring back there more than I’ve wanted anything for a long time,” Bentley said quietly. “I saw the look on the face of the seaman I spoke to—there’s no doubt in my mind that Floss is the horrible example of the messdeck bully. What he needs

is the hiding of his life. But..." he shook his head, short definite movements, "I'm in no place to try and give it to him. Damn it all, you know that!"

"But there's a couple of weeks yet to the fight," Randall protested; "you know you're in tip-top shape. All you need is ten days of training. You could take that boy," he nodded. "I've seen how you can go." Bentley looked at him, and his smile was a small and affectionate offering.

"Do I have to hit you over the head with it?" he asked patiently. "Maybe I could take him—though I doubt it I haven't had the gloves on for a long, long time. But that's not the point. I'm not only an officer, I'm a commanding-officer. I doubt very much if the admiral would consent, even if I were silly enough to approach him. No, Peter, Floss is a rating and one of his own has to take him."

Randall opened his mouth and his friend raised his hand.

"You're wasting your time, Bob. It's impossible." The boat pulled in alongside the gangway and Bentley turned back as he made to jump out. "Nothing to Gellatly about this afternoon," he warned, and Randall nodded.

Half an hour later Bentley walked along the iron-deck towards the group of men clustered about the tubes. They saw him coming and made way readily. Gellatly was waiting, his gloves on. Bentley called him over while the gunners mate laced on his own gloves.

"I saw your opponent this afternoon," he said to the petty-officer.

"I thought you might, sir," Gellatly grinned.

"Talk about a grape-vine!" Bentley grunted. "Well, here it is. He's heavier than you, but from what I saw he might not be as fast. My opinion is it should be a short fast stoush. You've got to get in there and keep at him. He's too strong to be worn down."

If Gellatly felt any concern at this information he did not show it.

"I see, sir."

"We'll go five rounds this afternoon. I want you to come at me all the time. Give it all you've got for five rounds. As hard as you like. Then tomorrow well increase to six rounds, and so on. All right?"

"Have got, sir."

"Remember now—everything in this five rounds. The whole gubbins."

The gunner's mate stepped back and they shaped up. Randall noticed again the greater weight and strength of Bentley, but remembered the bulk of Floss, and he wondered if Bentley was right in allowing Gellatly to go on with the fight.

Then Gellatly moved in and Randall forgot his wonderings,

To the eager watchers it was fast, exciting boxing. To Bentley, blocking and weaving and ducking Gellatly's attack, it brought the conviction that this would not do, that Gellatly was not nearly clever enough; and the doubt that he could coach him to the required standard in two short weeks.

The fifth round came up and Randall called "Time." Gellatly stepped back, his hands lowering and his mouth widely open. Bentley started to speak and Randall thought: "In first-class shape? You could take that ape this afternoon!"

"That's the stuff," Bentley was saying, his chest lifting evenly, "bore in all the time. Now tomorrow—the admiral and the Japs willing—we'll go to six rounds. All right?"

"Yes... sir," Gellatly panted, and shook the sweat from his eyes. Bentley held out his hands to the gunner's mate.

Two hours later, with long shadows streaking the calm waters of the anchorage, Bentley was smoking a cigarette with Randall on the cool of the upper-deck outside his sea-cabin. Normally he would not have noticed him, but for this last liberty-boat ashore there were only a handful of men, and Gellatly in his petty-officer's uniform was conspicuous, Bentley saw the gunner's mate was with him.

"They're going ashore?" His tone was surprised.

"I don't know why not?" Randall smiled, "leave's been piped."

"You know what I mean! No self-respecting sailor would be seen dead in a dump like this."

"Oh, I don't know. There's been an Infusion of about fifty females."

Bentley watched the boat carve a white furrow towards the shore.

"A drop in the ocean with a crowd like this."

"Agreed. But if one of those choice little drops happens to fall on—or for—you...?"

The qualities of a successful destroyer-driver are many. High on

the list is the ability to think fast, added to a shrewd knowledge of your crew. And a retentive memory, a photographic plate on which the smallest happening is indelibly etched. Bentley was a very successful destroyer-driver.”

“So that’s it!” he murmured.

Randall looked at him, and there was a shade of disappointment in his rugged face.

“You know?” he asked, the patronising tone subdued in reluctant wonder. “I thought I was one up on you in this.”

“I know now,” Bentley nodded, his mind recalling two figures outside his sea-cabin after the submarine hunt had been called off. “What’s she like?”

How the hell do you know about it if you don’t know what she looks like? Randall wondered. But his respect for his captain’s prescience and intelligence was deeply rooted. He accepted Bentley’s knowledge, from an experienced recognition of the fact that he saved himself a lot of mental exercise by acceptance without question.

“A peach,” he answered. “What Gellatly’s got I’m damned if I know, but they were together a hell of a lot on the way down. He showed her all over the ship. But then you must have seen that?”

Bentley had no intention of destroying the illusion of his omnipresent perspicacity by revealing the real and meagre source of his knowledge.

“Even so,” he evaded, “he must have worked fast. You think he’s meeting her ashore tonight?”

“He’s not going to the races, or the Trocadero,” Randall pointed out.

“Brilliant!” Bentley sneered. “I hope he’s got enough sense to lay off the jungle-juice ashore.” He smiled. “But what’s he going to do with the gunner’s mate?”

“It can’t be that long ago,” Randall mused, shaking his head.

“Eh? What’s not long ago?”

“The times when we used to do the town over. When *we* used to have a pair of popsies in tow.”

Again Bentley justified his selection for command.

“You mean that once you’re in, you’re in? Get one girl, even in a hole like this, and she’ll bring along a friend?”

“Move,” said Randall, “to the top of the class.”

“I’m moving,” Bentley told him, “down for a pre-dinner snort. And,” gazing after the distant boat, “if he’s bleary-eyed in the morning I’ll stop his leave.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE putting on a bold front. Or so the proprietor of the *Starlight club* believed.

His establishment was afforded an attractive front by virtue of its romantic name, and he could the added justification of honesty by virtue of the astronomical fact that customers could see the stars through the roof. This bringing indoors the tropical outdoors was achieved simply through the materials used in the roof's construction. They were ragged and rotting palm leaves, and though undeniably they let the starlight in, they also offered unobstructed ingress to rain.

But there again the Goanese proprietor had been cunning. A European owner of something named the *Starlight Club* might have felt constrained to provide in the plans for a wooden floor. But the base on which Petty-Officer Gellatly's feet were now resting was a more natural one—beaten earth. The fiercest deluge could not harm it, nor did the tables have anything to worry about—they were wooden, and patina'd with such a coating of grease and impregnated with such a dyeing of stale beer that they could laugh at the best rainstorm Ceylon could produce.

But sailors are an adaptable breed; and everything is relative. Gellatly and the gunner's mate had been in much worse dives than this one, and in any case with what they had in front of them their attention was not on questions of decor.

"Have another?" Gellatly asked, smiling happily. He was not at all averse of being the target for a hundred pairs of envious eyes in that crowded room.

The nurse, prettier than a picture, looked down at her half-full glass and tried not to grimace.

"Not at the moment, thank you," she managed to smile.

Privately, Gellatly did not blame her. They were drinking what tasted like a combination of liquid floor polish and fermented coconut juice—a recipe not so far off the mark. "What about you, Liz?" asked the gunner's mate gallantly.

"I'll stick with Beryl, thanks," a pert voice answered him.

Around them the sound-waves of men determinedly drinking and enjoying themselves eddied and flowed. Words and shouts and

catcalls reached them, and ebbed away making no impression. Then a man at the next table, in one of those odd currents of silence in the most crowded room, mentioned something about the “boxing tournament.” They heard the words clearly.

“You shouldn’t have much more of that muck, Clive,” Beryl advised him. “It’s rot-gut, and it certainly won’t help your training.”

“Frankly,” grinned the boxer, “I’ve *had* training. At the moment, anyhow. How about we leave the ship where she is?”

He raised his glass and the gunner’s mate growled: “You don’t wanta let the Old Man hear you say that. Not after he’s sweated every afternoon for a week lickin’ you into shape.”

Liz leaned forward, her gamin face alert with interest.

“You mean your captain also is a boxer?”

“One of the best,” the gunner’s mate claimed stoutly; “used to be Fleet heavyweight champion.”

“Then why,” Beryl asked, also interested in this unexpected facet to their rescuer, “doesn’t he enter the tournament?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Gellatly answered her. “Maybe it’s got something to do with his being skipper.”

“But if he’s the captain now, then he must have been an officer when he won the championship?”

“Sure he was. But not a commanding officer. There’s a hell of a difference.” Beryl, used herself to a discipline as strict as her companion’s, nodded.

“Yes, I see what you mean. Though it’s a pity that...”

She stopped, suddenly aware that her voice was raised. Then she realised that her tone had been normal for the noise about them, and that it was the noise which had subsided. The four of them turned to face the door.

Gellatly saw a large seaman standing just inside the door, two cronies behind him. Plainly the new-comer—the apparent cause of the sudden silence—was well-known to this British crowd, but to the Australian he was a stranger.

Beryl said, quietly and with emphasis:

“What a repulsive-looking man!”

That seemed to sum it up for all of them. They laughed, and turned back to their own business.

In all that packed room there were no more than half a dozen women, and the other four were seated further back near the walls. Beryl and Liz, in the middle of the floor, were thus conspicuous. Beryl in any case would have been that—as the gunner's mate had mentioned on board that afternoon: "You'd even give her a second look on Bondi Beach of a Saturday afternoon."

It was natural that Floss's ugly eyes should come to rest on her. He had noticed, pleasurably, the cessation of talk as he had made his entrance, and what he now proposed to do should make him even more conspicuous. That was only part of his reason—he was a man used to getting his own way amongst his fellows, and he could see nothing which might constitute an obstruction to his present plans. And they included—in his present state of highly-fit virility—the companionship and comfort of that pretty nurse seated at the table in front of him. The first Gellatly knew of an alien presence was a large and hairy hand which appeared over Beryl's shoulder and took her glass. A gravelly voice suggested, in a mockery of attempted gallantry:

"You don't wanna drink that muck, gorgeous. I can put you on to some real grog. How about it?"

The contempt of the man for the girl's companions was complete and sincere. He was so sure of himself that his hands were already on the back of her chair, waiting to pull it back when she rose to his invitation. Beryl glanced up at him over her shoulder. That shoulder was bare, revealed in a low-cut cotton frock, and the eyes of Floss hungrily gazed their fill from his position of advantage. Gellatly felt the hot blood warming up into his face.

"Are you blind?" Beryl asked coldly. "I already have a friend." Floss leered down at her.

"You gotta friend, sure. But now you gotta man."

The room was silent, tense with the foreknowledge and anticipation of sailors witnessing a familiar prelude in a foreign port. Into the silence Liz's voice dropped clearly:

"You better be careful, you great lug! Her friend happens to be a fighter, and he's in the boxing tournament."

The piggish eyes of the big man flicked over the gunner's mate and came to rest on Gellatly. They saw the petty-officer's tenseness,

his hands on the table ready for the push upwards. They saw, but Floss was unimpressed. His lips twisted.

“Your name Gellatly?”

“That’s right,” Gellatly said crisply. “Now clear out!”

“Well, well,” Floss grinned, “here he is in a sailors’ hang-out and he pulls the old rank. That how you’re gonna win your fight, big boy? ‘Don’t dare hit me hard, Fairy, or I’ll have you up before the Bloke!’”

The two cronies laughed sycophantically behind him. Gellatly’s face reddened. He felt his self-control slipping, and this was so novel an experience, especially when faced by a junior rating, that for a moment he deliberately analysed it—and realised that it was the man’s *repulsiveness* which had surfaced the red anger in his brain.

He said, his voice thick with the control he put on it:

“I don’t know who you are, but if you don’t leave this table at once you will be up before the Bloke!”

Floss looked back at him, the same sneering twist on his mouth. Then he stared round the watching room. He raised his hand and its sweep took in the taut form of Gellatly.

“Y’see, mates? Y’see what we’re up against? What hope’s poor old Fairy got against a back-scratching senior rate like this?”

Even then, through the anger in his brain, Gellatly was not aware of the big man’s identity. He knew his name, as Floss knew his, but he had no knowledge of his appearance. Floss’s indirect reference to himself served to seal Gellatly’s ignorance.

He felt the gunner’s mate’s warning touch on his arm, and he heard the sneering voice, this time directed in a hoarse confidential tone to Beryl:

“So your boy-friend’s a fighter, gorgeous? That means he’s in trainin’. And that means he can’t do no good for you tonight. Now me, I never felt better in me...”

He was leaning over Beryl, his eyes feasting, his ugly face close to her hand. The smack of her hand was as sharp as a pistol shot in the waiting room. Floss straightened abruptly and stepped back a pace, so that he was in position and in readiness to face Gellatly’s swift leap from his chair.

Gellatly’s mind was filled with a hot rage, but he still had sense

enough to judge what he was doing. And in the brief second of his judgment he guessed that whatever happened between petty-officer and rating in this filthy dive no mention of it would get back to higher authority. Rightly or wrongly, that was all the reassurance he needed. His left fist jabbed out towards the leering face.

He was actually a good boxer. But a raging brain does not make for split-second timing and judgment of a punch. Floss, on the other hand, had known what he was going to say, guessed what the reaction would be. So that with little effort he knocked Gellatly's fist aside and struck with his own huge hand.

Floss was not defending his title now. His intention was to hurt, and maim. He succeeded. His bunched knuckles took Gellatly squarely on the mouth, and the force of the blow hurled him backwards.

The men at the table directly behind them had quietly eased aside. The chairs were empty. Gellatly had knocked one of them over in his precipitate rise. Now as he twisted and fell under the force of the blow he crashed down on to the side of that over-turned chair. He was a heavyweight, and the chair was solid. He did not hear the rib crack, but he felt the pain, a sharp, searing jolt of reaction beneath his heart.

He lay there a moment, dazed with the force of the punch and the pain in his side. The sneering voice dropped into his ears:

"Come on, *fighter* boy! Or are you gonna lie there and let your floosie fight for yer?"

Gellatly pushed himself up. He turned about and stepped towards Floss. His eyes were squinted in pain and his left elbow was hugged in against his side. Floss flicked his eyes down to that elbow; it was held in an unnaturally protective stance. And Floss knew.

Gellatly came for him and Floss ducked the southpaw right lead and feinted with his left at Gellatly's face. The protective elbow lifted clear and Floss drove his right fist with all the strength of his shoulders in against the broken rib.

Landis the surgeon diagnosed later that the sharp-pointed bone was lucky not to have punctured the lung. As it was the effect of that cruel smash was definite enough. The abrupt violence of the pain jolted Gellatly's brain over the edge of consciousness. He reeled sideways into the table and then crumpled slowly to the floor.

“Now, gorgeous,” Floss grinned, and laid his paw on her bare shoulder. And a splintering crack brought his eyes up swiftly.

The gunner’s mate was a slight man, but in his rise to gunnery eminence he had been trained in a tough school. And what he held now in his hand negated the slightness of his physical stature. He came warily round the table, his eyes savage, the neck of the bottle gripped in his hand and its jagged broken glass aimed at Floss’s throat.

It was not the first time Floss had seen a broken bottle held like that. His interest was in the face of the man holding the frightful weapon. And he knew in one glance that the gunner’s mate would use it, and that he knew how to use it.

Floss put his hand out in a placatory gesture. The gunner’s mate jabbed, and only the boxer’s quickness jerked his head back in time to escape vicious laceration.

“Now look here...” he snarled, a safe distance between them. “Beat it!” said the gunner’s mate in a hard, quiet voice. The tone told Floss all he wanted to know.

He backed away further, men pressing behind him towards the door.

“What’s up with yer?” Floss snarled, but the confident belligerence had gone from his voice—he knew he could take the smaller man, just as he knew that one jab from those razored edges could mark him for life. “I knocked him down in fair...”

“Beat it!” The voice was still quiet, but it held a whiplash of savage intention.

Floss laughed, and his eyes never left that advancing hand.

“Ah, let’s get outa here,” he said to his cronies. “The joint stinks. An’ I never liked left-overs anyway.”

He swung and strode from the room. The gunner’s mate waited a few seconds, then he threw the bottle on the floor and walked quickly back to his friend.

“That’s about it, sir,” Landis said. “One rib broken, severe bruising of the area. I’d say the injuries could be caused by a heavy fall. But the laceration round the mouth is too localised.”

“You mean a punch? A bare fist?”

“Yes, sir. If his head had hit the same object as his ribs, then nose, and probably eyes, would have been injured.”

“He can stay on board?”

“Oh, yes. He’s healthy enough, and the rib will set all right in the sickbay. But he’s out of the tournament, of course.”

“Of course. All right, Doc. Thank you.”

Landis picked up his cap and left the cabin. Bentley turned to Randall. His face was grim.

“What do you know about it?”

“Nothing,” the first-lieutenant answered at once. His fingers rubbed at his chin, a worried movement. “That’s what I can’t understand about it. Normally—as you know—I’m put in the picture pretty quickly when anything like this happens. But the petty-officers’ mess have clammed up tight.”

Bentley nodded. He lit a cigarette and let the picture shroud itself in a breath of slowly-exhaled smoke. Then he tapped the ash off in the tray, slow deliberate knocks of his forefinger.

“Obviously Gellatly got into a fight ashore,” he started. “He could be reluctant to talk because he feels he’s let the ship down as regards the tournament.”

“That’s how I see it,” Randall nodded. “I’ve spoken to him, of course. All he’ll say is that he broke his rib on a chair. But the getting into a fight part—no, not Gellatly. He’s not the type. Too steady, too much at stake. Maybe some bloke shoved him, accidentally. Then over the chair.”

“He got into a fight,” Bentley repeated, his voice flat. “You heard Landis. We’ll start from there. Gellatly can look after himself. There are quite a number of tough fellows in this Fleet, but few good boxers. Gellatly’s one of them. He’s taken a beating. And obviously a quick, effective one. Therefore his opponent must be a pretty smart boy.”

“I think you’re assuming a hell of a lot,” Randall protested. “And you’re completely ignoring Gellatly’s character.”

“He was with a girl,” Bentley said evenly, “and a girl in a dive ashore in a place like this could lead to all sorts of character changes.”

Randall stubbed his cigarette out.

“All right, then. Let’s say you’re right. But we can’t do anything about it. No charges have been laid from shore, Gellatly says he fell over a chair. As far as I see it, that’s it.”

Bentley did not answer. Randall took up his cap. “It’s bad luck

about the tournament. Our gorilla friend will remain unchallenged.” Still Bentley was silent. Randall said: “If that’s all, I want to check the port cable-holder.”

“That’s all, Bob,” Bentley said.

After he had left the cabin Bentley sat in his chair for several minutes. His face was thoughtful, and he was thinking of what he had said regarding the skill of the man who had taken Gellatly. He knew he had not convinced Randall, but then the big lieutenant was not a boxer. Bentley leaned forward to tap the ash from his cigarette. Suddenly he crushed it out, and pushed himself up and walked to the door.

“Yes, sir?” the messenger asked.

“Chief bosun’s mate, please,” Bentley ordered, and walked slowly back to his chair.

Hooky Walker opened the door and came in and Bentley’s eyes were on his face. Hooky avoided those intense eyes. Bentley said:

“You know, don’t you?”

“Well...” said Hooky. He turned his cap in his band.

“Sit down. Have a cigarette.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The huge man’s right “hand” was gleaming in the morning sunlight shafting in through the scuttles. Bentley lit his cigarette.

“Hooky,” Bentley said quietly, and the chief bosun’s mate knew it was going to be “old ships,” unofficial, a man-to-man calling on old friendship and loyalty—what he had dreaded.

“Yes, sir.”

“Gellatly.”

“Er... yes, sir.”

Bentley waited, smoking quietly. Hooky drew on his cigarette. He blew the smoke out almost fiercely.

“I don’t want to, sir. You know that.”

“I know that.”

Hooky looked up into the lean brown face watching him. It had been a long time, he remembered, almost against his will. Way back to a sub-lieutenant’s ring; then lieutenant, and then three destroyers with this officer, the last two in command. A long time, a long and close and perfectly understood friendship. Bentley now wore three

full rings, and he was in the captain's cabin of a modern Fleet destroyer; yet Hooky felt, at this moment, as close to him as ever he'd been.

"All right," he said, and neither man noticed the omission of the title. "But I've got to ask for this—it stays in the cabin."

"You knew it would."

"I didn't know that at all!"

"As bad as that?"

"Couldn't be much worse. Gellatly took on an able-seaman. Fifty witnesses."

Bentley nodded.

"Floss," he said.

Hooky's head jerked up.

"How the hell...?"

"Never mind how. You can forget the witnesses. Nobody's talked. I would have heard by now—so would Gellatly...! Right. Let's have it."

Hooky drew two puffs on his cigarette. His oaken face was pinched in thought. But not of what he had to say—he was wondering how in hell this captainly recluse had stumbled on a name which only half a dozen senior ratings in the ship knew.

"Gellatly went off with the gunner's mate," he started; "I got most of it from him. They was in this dive with the two nurses and the big bloke comes in..."

Bentley listened without interruption. In the whole recital his expression changed twice. The first time was when Hooky told of the vicious blow to Gellatly's broken ribs. He shifted in his chair, and the creaking of the springs brought Hooky's eyes round to look at him. He saw a face ominous and hard, the mouth a thin tight line.

"Floss deliberately punched at the ribs?"

"That's it," Hooky nodded, his own face bitter, "The gunner's mate reckons the mongrel must've known because Gellatly had his arm held low down, tryin' to protect 'em."

"Go on," Bentley said, very quietly.

Hooky continued the story, and as he listened Bentley could easily reconstruct the crowded and smoky scene in his mental vision. Then Hooky mentioned the breaking of the bottle, and the little man's driving of the fighter through the door. Bentley leaned forward, his

hands clasped across his stomach and his eyes glinting.

“He took a broken bottle to him? Nice work.” His voice was almost soft, with a steely silkiness which belonged wholly to the fighter, not the commanding-officer. “The gunner’s mate might run to ten stone. Floss could have fainted and grabbed that hand. Yet he backed off?”

“Clear outside. Takin’ his crawlin’ oppos with him.”

“Floss,” Bentley said distinctly, “is a dingo.”

“That’s what the gunner’s mate said. Somethin’ about his voice, be said. He knew he had him licked with that bottle. Not that I blame him, mind you. A bottle’s bloody nasty, and the gunner’s mate’s no slouch when it comes to roughin’ it.”

“Nevertheless...” the captain murmured, and leaned back in his chair. Hooky saw that the fingers of his hands were extended into a steeple, and that they were tapping together. “All right, Hooky,” Bentley finished crisply, “that will do. Thanks for your help.”

Hooky stood up. This captain could be the most dismissive man he knew, when he wanted to be.

“Ah... she’ll be right, won’t it, sir?”

“Don’t worry. This was quite unofficial. I imagine Gellatly’s paying for his indiscretion in tackling a junior rating. He must be stewing down there.”

“He’s stewartin’ all right, sir—with pain!”

“I haven’t forgotten it,” Bentley said. He nodded. “All right, Buffer.”

Hooky, now returned to his official position, walked out of the cabin and shut the door.

Bentley waited a few minutes, but it was not indecision or thought this time. When he judged Hooky was clear, he rang a buzzer. The messenger poked his head in.

“Get the motorboat alongside,” the captain ordered. “Tell the first-lieutenant I am going aboard the flagship.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“He’s really very busy,” the flag-lieutenant told Bentley, and moved his carefully-groomed head in a negative, suggestive gesture.

“I appreciate that,” the Australian nodded. “But I think he will see me. It’s quite important And personal,” he added.

The last word decided the flag-lieutenant. His duty was to keep as much of Fleet business as possible clear of the admiral's busy attention; but a destroyer captain's personal business, when it involved Authority as high as this, must be serious.

"Very well," he said, in what sounded like a resigned sigh." "Please wait here."

When he came out of the big cabin the flag-lieutenant's face was more respectful than when he entered it. When he had heard the name of his caller the admiral had consented at once to see him.

"You may go in, sir. But please be as brief as possible."

His cap tucked in the correct position under his left arm, Bentley stepped through the doorway and stood to attention before Sir Sidney Granville. The genial face and the piercing eyes looked up at him.

"I understand this is personal, Bentley?"

"Yes, sir. Mainly personal."

"Sit down. Now—I'm afraid I haven't as much time as I'd like to give to your problem."

"I understand, sir. I'll be brief."

"Well, then?"

"It concerns the boxing tournament."

The face was still cherubic, but the eyes had narrowed. Bentley went on hastily:

"The tournament—and me, sir. I wish to fight your man Floss."

The admiral's ejaculation was old-fashioned, and emphatic;

"Damme! You certainly come to the point in a hurry!" He leaned his elbows on the table. "Am I to understand that you, at commanding-officer, wish to enter a boxing-ring against an able-seaman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?" Coming from that chubby face the word was like a whip-crack.

Bentley breathed in.

"My man, Gellatly, had an accident ashore last night—it seems he fell on to a chair and broke a rib."

"I see. But why your... unusual interest?"

Bentley had no intention of lying, but he could see no point in revealing the whole truth, the real reason why he wanted to face Able-Seaman Floss.

“All my Service career I have been an advocate of physical fitness, sir. I was pleased when one of my men entered the tournament. I have in fact been sparring with him. I appreciate the unusualness of a captain fighting a seaman, but I also think the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages—if there are any.”

“And the advantages?”

“There will be a heavyweight fight, sir—the most interesting in any tournament. Interest in physical fitness should be enlarged. And...”

“Yes?” Granville prompted him.

The admiral was watching his visitor shrewdly, but that visitor owned to a sizable slice of shrewdness himself; he knew he had Granville’s interest. If he had not, by now he would be walking up the ladder to the quarterdeck.

“As I see it, sir, a tournament in a base like this is concerned mainly with creating a recreational interest for the men.”

“That is so.”

“Then, sir, surely a match between commanding-officer and seaman will heighten that interest? They’ll pack in—if only to see the officer get what’s coming to him,”

He smiled, but it was difficult to tell from the admiral’s natural cast of countenance if he were returning the sentiment.

“That’s what worries me, Bentley. Perhaps the officer will get... belted.”

“Perhaps, sir. On the other hand, I might take your man. I see it this way. The match will tend to prove the democratic processes of the Service; and, if I win, or even put up a good showing, it won’t hurt the officer branch.”

Granville picked up a pencil and tapped it on a sheet of blotting-paper. Bentley said quickly:

“It’s most important to stage a heavyweight bout, sir. Especially now since the men expect one.” He hesitated. “I’m not—*ah*—completely a novice in this game, sir.”

Granville’s eyes flicked up to him.

“I’m aware of that, Bentley. And I’m not concerned so much about your capabilities. It’s the disciplinary side.”

“Yes, sir.”

He was about to add more. He saw the thoughtful frown on the admiral's face and he desisted. Granville was no fool. He had made his points, and the decision would be reached without further pressing from him.

Granville tossed down his pencil. It made a sharp rapping sound against the wood in the quiet of the cabin. He looked up.

"All right, Bentley. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir."

Bentley stood up and Granville said:

"That other matter."

"Yes, sir."

"It will be sooner than we expected. Possibly in a few days."

"I'll have a tube cleared at once, sir."

"Do that. Goodbye."

Bentley stepped out into the hot sunshine of the quarterdeck and a pleasant voice said:

"Well, well. I'll have to victual you in if this keeps up."

Bentley turned to see the slight figure of Commander Letchford under Y's barrels.

"Morning, sir. I've just arranged to have my head knocked off."

It was a curious statement to Letchford, who knew nothing of the interview with the admiral, yet it was the beginning of a plan Bentley intended to follow until the fight came off. He knew his own capabilities, he knew that Floss would be in first-class condition, a powerful adversary, and he meant to play for all it was worth his knowledge of the man's real character as revealed to him by the gunner's mate's victory.

Floss was rightly confident that he could win easily over Gellatly: Bentley wanted him to know as soon as possible that he now had another contender to face, a man with a heavyweight title to match his own.

"I beg your pardon?" said Letchford.

"I've just entered the lists against your man Floss," Bentley told him as they walked towards the gangway.

"You? I mean—yes, I see. Hence the high-level discussions?"

"That's right." Then, because Letchford had said that he knew of the Fleet title the Australian owned, and would therefore spread the

word about, Bentley subdued his modesty and the thought of what Letchford might think of him.

"It's not so long ago since I won the heavyweight title," he said casually. "I'm sure I can get in shape before the fight."

"I certainly hope you can!"

The words were spoken with such unexpected emphasis that Bentley glanced sharply at him. Letchford saw the look.

"Floss," he said in explanation, "there's nothing I'd like to see more than this fellow take a hiding."

"That type, eh?" Bentley said, hiding his pleasure. Letchford nodded.

"There is of course no betting allowed on the tournament... But I suspect that a good deal of money will swing in another direction when it's known a title-holder is in against him."

They halted at the head of the gangway and the motorboat came surging in. This could be helpful, Bentley thought—if the crowd's with me because of Floss's bullying, then they'll certainly give voice when I land a punch. And every little bit could help towards the demoralising of Gellatly's attacker.

"It seems I've got to beat this fellow of yours," he said lightly, and he was never more serious about anything in his life. If Floss won, or easily showed his superiority, he would succeed in becoming more of a swine than he was now.

Letchford looked at him, a silent glance of understanding. The officer of the day ordered "Pipe," and *Wind Rode's* captain ran down the ladder.

Bentley took half an hour against the heavy punching-bag before he sent for Hooky.

He had worked-out solidly, almost savagely, for he was under no illusions about the job he had set himself. It was true that he could have taken every man aboard his own ship, and most in the Fleet, with one hand; it was also just as certain that the single man he had to fight was trained to the limit, a tough and skilful boxer, and that Floss's opponent had not been inside a boxing-ring for more than a year.

He stood near the guard-rail, pumping air into his lungs, and he knew with absolute certainty that he had so little time to train that he

would have to take Floss inside three rounds. A year is a long time when the challenge is against an evenly-matched and vicious opponent, and if he did not finish it in three rounds then he knew that Floss could do what he liked with him.

“Yes, sir?” Hooky said behind him.

Bentley turned. He saw Hooky looking puzzlement at the warlike preparations.

“You haven’t heard?” Bentley smiled.

“No, sir I had me head down in the mess.”

“I’m fighting Floss,” Bentley said simply.

There were thirty men gathered about the tubes, but Hooky was not worried about that.

“You bloody little hum-twicer!” he said, with fervent and unofficial emphasis.

“You might change your mind when you know what I want you for,” Bentley told him.

“Oh? What’s that, sir?”

“You’re the heaviest man in the ship. I’ll get in some sparring with the first-lieutenant, but I’ll need *you* to batter against.”

Hooky nodded his big head slowly.

“It’ll have to be short and sweet, sir?”

“You were never more right! I haven’t nearly enough time to train for fifteen rounds.”

“Count me in, sir! And if I wither away there’s a few heavyweights on the messdeck could do with some fender drill.”

That’s about it, Bentley grinned to himself—I want a fender to hammer against. He said:

“Right then. Strip off and let’s see what a year’s beer has done to your belly.”

Bentley had told Randall not to mention his discussion with the admiral—he wanted news of its outcome to originate from a lower-deckman, the Buffer for preference. The men had been close around them, and they had heard his talk with Hooky. Now he saw two or three of them slipping away forrard. Smiling slightly, he shaped up in front of Hooky.

He punched and ducked and punched again and he thought now as he had done many times before—science or no science, he would

not have liked to get embroiled with the chief bosun's mate in a fracas ashore. Hooky was close to sixteen stone, and what Bentley was punching against could have been laid profitably over a gun-turret as armour-plate. The big man grunted as the punches slammed against his gloves, but he didn't fall back an inch. Under the limited circumstances, it was excellent training for Bentley. He had a human body to aim against, face and heart and solar plexus, one that moved, if not like a sparring partner, then with more sympathy than a punching-bag.

He had pulled his punches, but now that he realised what oak he was practising with he smashed them in with almost his full strength. And for Hooky it was comparatively safe, for Bentley aimed only where his gloves were.

He punched for nine minutes without a break, then stepped back and lowered his hands. Hooky cautiously kept his own gloves up.

"Relax for a moment," Bentley panted.

"Thank Gawd for that!" the punching-bag growled, and promptly sat down on the deck.

"How do you feel?" Bentley asked. His query concerned the power of his own punches more than it did Hooky's welfare.

"Like hamburger steak," Hooky grunted, and took in great gulps of air.

"Excellent!" Bentley grinned. "That's fine."

"Glad you think so," Hooky snorted. "Is this to be daily drill... sir?"

"Of course. I'm sorry you can't hit back, but with that thing on your right hand..."

"There's nothing wrong with me left mitt!" Hooky growled. "It might help if I wasn't on the receivin' end *all* the time!"

Catcalls and rude suggestions from the mob. Bentley said:

"All right, then. Any time you like you can lash out. In fact, that will make it even better. In a week's time you'll be the perfect sparring partner."

"I always told you, you open that big mouth too much," the gunner's mate exulted.

Hooky opened his mouth now. He remembered the captain's presence, and shut it. "You'll keep!" his glare said to the jaunty little

bottle-fighter.

“All right?” Bentley asked.

“Sure, sure,” Hooky lied, and got up.

CHAPTER SIX

SHORTLY AFTER A LIGHT lunch the next day Bentley was again down near the torpedo-tubes. One of them was empty, but he was not concerned about that now.

After he had finished with Hooky the day before he had kept at it, skipping, doing body-presses, returning again to the punching-bag. He knew that he was going about it the wrong way for a 15-round fight: what he was doing could be likened to training a Melbourne Cup entrant to sprint for three furlongs, hoping that the judges would be so impressed by the performance they would hoist the nag's number in Number One position.

But then he was entered for a three-furlong run, a three-round fight. Floss did not know that, and Bentley had to concentrate on so toughening himself for a swift killing nine minutes that Floss would know little at the end of them.

The novelty of their captain's pistoning exercises had worn down a little for the crew. Now it was only passing men who stopped for a few minutes to watch him. Bentley noticed this, but he knew that the actual fight would see every possible man ashore. This satisfied him. He had a personal, vengeful interest in whittling Floss down to size, but there was the added inducement of providing for thousands of men the spectacle of a bully humbled. As well, he found himself beginning to enjoy the unaccustomed exercise; he quietly revelled in the feel of his tightening muscles, and the sweat running from his body.

Now he was intent on his task. He had just delivered a whistling right hook that had the bag swinging, when a voice spoke behind him:

"Excuse me, sir."

He turned, recognising the officer of the day's voice.

"Yes?"

"This is Lieutenant-Commander McQueen, sir. Just joined."

Bentley was wiping the sweat from his eyes with the back of a glove. He had not seen the officer with Pilot. He squinted at him, and then found he had to raise his sight to meet his eyes.

"Good afternoon, sir," greeted a slow voice. "I'm here for the test."

Pilot's face was puzzled. There had been no signal received about this Reserve officer joining the ship. But Bentley was not surprised—a signal is seen by all sorts of junior eyes, and it was an elementary security precaution to have the scientist come on board with-out fanfare.

“Glad to have you with us,” Bentley said. He was thinking that the test must be close, and he said:

“Ever done any boxing?”

“Boxing... ?”

Pilot now had a companion in puzzlement. It was understandable—a Reserve officer's experience might be comparatively limited, but still sufficient to realise that meeting one's future commanding-officer dressed in nothing but boxing shorts and boots, and slamming away at a big bag in the middle of a hot afternoon, was unusual. And then to be asked, as the first question, if he boxed... “Boxing, pugging, stoushing, swapping leather. Done any of it?”

The Reserve officer looked at him.

“No,” he answered carefully, “I have done none of those things. Nor, if I may say so, do I have any particular wish to.”

“Pity,” the captain answered seriously. “You've got the size for it and I need another heavyweight.”

The look on McQueen's face was such that Pilot thought an explanation was in order; as well, he was a loyal officer, and he was averse to having a stranger think that his ship was commanded by a madman.

“The captain,” he explained, “is entered for the boxing tournament the Fleet is holding shortly. He's a bit short on sparring partners.”

“I thought I'd made that quite clear,” Bentley said.

“Ah—yes, sir,” Pilot answered. “Shall I show Lieutenant-Commander McQueen to his cabin?”

Bentley nodded, and wiped his face again.

“The spare cabin. He's to be on his own. See that the locks on the desk work properly.”

“Ah—yes, sir,” said Pilot again. He tried, and failed, to hide his puzzlement and curiosity, and turned away. Bentley said:

“When?”

Pilot swung back. He was a bright young navigating-officer, and

now his mental processes were striving overtime. But McQueen answered the enigmatical question:

“Tomorrow, sir.”

“That close? Where is it?”

Pilot heard, tried to digest, and gave up.

“It was flown in this morning. If you’re ready it can be brought onboard within an hour.”

Bentley’s query as to the whereabouts of the weapon had been rhetoric—he assumed it was in the same boat which had brought its operator. He remembered clearly the admiral’s information that the thing was safely stored in the flagship’s magazine.

“But I thought...”

“I brought a replacement with me, sir,” the large officer explained in his slow, careful tone. “We will use the modified version for the first test.”

“I see, Pilot?”

“Sir?”

“Keep quiet about this. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, old chap,” Bentley said to McQueen. “You can get the beastie on board just as soon as you like. The first-lieutenant will give you any hands you need. You want it loaded straight away?”

“That would be best, yes.”

“Very well. Pilot—all shore-leave is cancelled. Warn the torpedo-gunner’s mate he and his team will be required in half an hour.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Pilot’s voice, to the credit of his mental stability, was almost normal.

“Now you can send the Buffer down here. I have even less time than I thought.”

He nodded dismissal, and they moved off. McQueen’s sojourn aboard the Australian destroyer was to be memorable for several things, but he would remember most vividly of all the manner in which news of his brainchild had been received by this captain, and the sound of gloves smacking forcibly against padded canvas as a postscript to that casual reception.

“He’s always like this?” he asked Pilot wonderingly as they headed for the wardroom ladder. Pilot grinned.

"I suppose it does look a bit odd. But he's got a tough match, and there's not much time. You see, he hasn't fought for more than a year."

"Really? And who is he fighting? Another destroyer captain? A cruiser officer, perhaps?"

"Hell no! He's up against an A.B. from the flag-ship."

"Democracy..." murmured the scientist, and followed his guide down the ladder.

It was, Bentley realised, to be as the admiral had advised him—a Fleet sailing for the first test.

He waited on the bridge while the big ships heaved in their anchor cables. The rest of the destroyer flotilla had sailed, their object the usual one of sniffing around outside for any surface skulkers before the main weight of the Fleet stuck its nose through the boom.

Wind Rode had her orders, delivered by hand in a sealed envelope. The order which concerned Bentley immediately was that one commanding him to keep station on the flagship's port beam until the time came for him to discharge what was now resting in one of his torpedo-tubes.

He had watched the loading himself, interested in a first sighting of the new weapon. As before, when he had seen the photograph, he was disappointed. Cameras don't lie, and the weapon's main distinction was its bulbous size. It had no new-fangled and mysterious gadgets breaking up its smooth outline, and the men who had gathered to watch the loading had soon drifted away.

Apart from Randall, whom Bentley had put in the picture, none of them knew the purpose of the thing in the tube. They guessed that it might be some sort of backroom-boys' idea of a torpedo. Their knowledge told them that it would be hard to imagine anything less likely to be effective as a torpedo, but as the Fleets were regularly receiving novel, and useless, ideas from the research departments, *Wind Rode's* men dismissed their new weapon with short and pungent comments, and looked to their well-trying guns.

"Flagship under way, sir," reported Ferris, and Bentley gave his engine orders.

The Fleet had been at sea an hour, with Ceylon an indistinct blue

blur dead astern, when Bentley sent for McQueen.

He would have preferred his sea-cabin for what he had to discuss, but a thousand yards to his right steamed a flagship, with its admiral. A raging rhino could not have dragged *Wind Rode's* captain an inch from his bridge.

"Yes, sir?" said the slow voice.

"Over in this corner, McQueen."

The bridge was a metallic square of curiosity—it was also a disciplined area, and when the captain deliberately retired to his sacrosanct corner you kept your eyes and your curiosity elsewhere.

"I know we went over this last night," Bentley started, hoisting himself up on to his stool, "but I'd like it again. It's ready to go?"

"Everything's set. As I mentioned, the weapon is held in the outer end of the tube, and so it will require a larger charge to fire it than the normal torpedo. That charge is now in place."

"The usual cordite? Compressed air?"

"That is so. There is nothing now but to wait for the admiral's order."

"And for the damned thing to go off!"

"For it to go off, yes, sir. I imagine it will make an interesting spectacle."

"I *hope* it does! You say this is the first firing in actual combat conditions?"

"Yes, If I may say so—if the test is successful—your ship will have made history."

"I'll be happy if we make it back to base! Tell me—the thing is really as powerful as you think? I mean, your calculations must be based on theory?"

"On theory, yes—and the known capabilities of a ton of Torpex explosive."

The voice was slow and quiet. Bentley was reminded of his own asdic-officer—the scientist who looked like a poet and handled his submarine-killing instrument like a Jack the Ripper.

"You know, of course," McQueen was saying, "that water is incompressible. A ton of any known explosive bursting in the vicinity of a submarine would certainly destroy it. This is Torpex, considerably more powerful than amatol. When you add to its force

the crushing strength of incompressible water surrounding a submarine, the effect will be quite enormous.”

Just like that... Bentley thought.

“Which brings me to the main point,” McQueen went on casually. “I cannot stress strongly enough that the ship must be travelling at no less than 30 knots when we fire. You appreciate that?”

Bentley grinned. It was a humourless gesture.

“What’s wrong with 36 knots?”

“If your ship can produce that speed—nothing at all.”

“I’ll make damned sure she can produce it!” Bentley promised. He glanced across at the grey bulk of the flagship. “The admiral gave you no idea of the area for the test?”

“No. I imagine he thought he was better fitted to decide that than me. All I have to do is to fire the weapon.”

Bentley smiled. These were unhealthy waters, and they became more so with every hour which took the Fleet eastward. The admiral would indeed decide just when and where *Wind Rode’s* mucking about would begin.

“You are, I believe,” McQueen said irrelevantly and slowly, “a boxer of note?”

“I’ve done a little, yes.”

“A science that has always fascinated me,” said the scientist thoughtfully. “I envy you. I had ideas long ago, at the university, but mathematics intervened.”

Bentley glanced at him. His first impression of heavy solidity had altered somewhat.

“You should do something,” he advised with a grin, “or that brewer’s goitre down there will run away with you.”

“Brewer’s... goitre?”

Bentley’s hand patted his own flat belly. McQueen nodded, and for the first time Bentley saw him smile. Then he heard Ferris’s voice.

“From the flag, sir. “Take station three miles ahead and stand by to commence test.””

“Acknowledge,” he ordered Ferris, and “Twenty-five knots,” to Pilot. To McQueen he said: “Three miles. He must have a healthy respect for that gadget of yours.”

“Wisely, I hope,” the scientist answered.

“We’ll see,” the captain said, and jumped down from his stool. McQueen, who had been long enough *in* uniform to recognise dismissal when he saw it, moved over to the rear of the bridge.

Wind Rode sliced her way up past the battle-line. Then she was in the open mouth of the V formed by the destroyer screen. As she moved on the destroyers, under orders, fanned out to give her clear passage. They stayed in that formation, and Bentley understood that the admiral was taking no chances with McQueen’s baby.

“In station, sir,” Pilot reported, and Bentley looked at Ferris. In a moment the signal came back: “Report when ready for test.” McQueen heard Ferris call out the words and he walked over beside Bentley. “I’m ready, sir.”

“Very well. Torps? Go down and check the firing yourself at the tubes.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Excuse me.”

Bentley looked at McQueen.

“Yes?”

“If you don’t mind I’d like the normal torpedo-firing procedure to be carried out. From the bridge, as usual. Just as it would be done in an actual attack.”

“Fair enough,” Bentley agreed at once. “Stand by your lever, Torps. And warn the tube crew.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Make to the flag,” Bentley ordered Ferris, “ ‘Ready in all respects for test.’ ”

“Excuse me.”

“What is it now?” Bentley’s voice was a little sharp.

“I understand we’re still at 25 knots, sir,” the slow voice suggested,

Bentley offered him a small smile.

“Don’t worry. That’s one thing I haven’t forgotten! You’ll get your speed all right.”

Ferris, who had waited during this exchange, now rattled his signal-shutter. Bentley leaned forward and took up the engine-room phone.

“Engineer speaking” came back McGuire’s voice.

“Captain, Chief. We’ll be doing the deed shortly. Give me 35 knots, now. And keep it that way.”

“Leave that,” answered the engineer, who had a profound love for his rudder and screws, “to me!”

Smiling, Bentley replaced the phone. Pilot had already spoken to the wheelhouse, thus officially recording the order. The ship began to shudder. She was well ahead of the destroyer screen, behind which loomed the three battleships flanked by their cruisers. Bentley wondered again why, if the admiral wished to witness the test, he had not come out in *Wind Rode*; and came to the same conclusion—Granville had not won his command through playing bridge with the First Lord, and now that he had a Fleet he intended to exercise—and, if necessary—use it. He was an offensive leader, in the professional sense, one who didn’t like keeping his ships idle in harbour.

The time at sea for the test would not be wasted, Bentley reflected, while he waited for the executive signal. They could expect extensive exercises on the way back to base. This fitted in snugly enough with his own philosophy: the price of freedom in this savage war was not only eternal vigilance, but constant drill.

He raised his glasses and scanned the destroyer lines astern of him. His own asdic dome was housed, but those score of sub-hunters would be searching to right and left for anything that might think of taking a bite at this attractive cherry.

Then he rained his sight back on to the flagship, and he thought of the enormous power she represented—and the buzzer of the radar-office voice-pipe pitched sharply across the bridge.

Randall was at the mouth of the pipe in two leaps. He listened, his face forming a plug, then his head swung and his eyes grabbed at Bentley.

“Large formation aircraft contacted dead ahead—coming towards!”

“Range?” Bentley snapped.

“Forty miles. Identified enemy!”

“Ferris!” Bentley ordered, and the yeoman jumped to his lamp.

“McQueen?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Can that thing be set to safe?”

“Why, yes, I can set it to safe easily enough. There’s a pin arrangement in the nose, on the under-side a little behind the primer.”

Bentley listened impatiently to the slow voice. He said:

“Then get down there at the double! Report from the tubes when it’s set to safe.”

“But the test...? We were just about to...”

“You’ll see all the test you want,” Bentley broke in grimly. “Smack it about!”

McQueen was unfamiliar with the Australian adjuration to fly, but he got the message plainly enough. He hurried down the bridge ladder and Bentley ordered:

“Sound action!”

The alarm bells pealed through the ship.

Two minutes later the ship was quiet again. But now every gun she mounted was manned, the barrels weaving about the sky as the crews tested their mechanism. There had been no need for an order to cancel the test, nor was one sent. *Wind Rode* was back in her normal position as rear ship on the left-hand leg of the screening V, under orders of the flotilla-leader, and the cruisers had closed in on the battle-line, their multiple anti-aircraft guns cocked up skyward.

The sea was calm, the ship was quiet, and with this experienced Fleet there was no confusion of signals flashing from the flagship’s bridge. But it does not take long for 300-knot aircraft to travel 40 miles, and every man waiting aboard *Wind Rode* knew that never had there been a more definite justification of the adage that the calm precedes the storm.

Randall stepped up on to the wooden grating beside Bentley.

“This is becoming less of a novelty, and quickly,” he growled. “Four big raids in a bit more than a month.”

Bentley nodded, his eyes on the sky.

“They must have been airborne before we left base,” he decided, “therefore this raid was initially directed at the base.”

“All the same to those mongrels,” Randall grunted. “They find us there, they find us here... But why hasn’t the old boy turned back?”

“I’d say his reason’s plain enough,” Bentley told him. “He’s maintaining his easterly course to draw ‘em away from the base docks and installations.”

“Uh, huh,” the big lieutenant agreed, his eyes also skyward, “but I still can’t fathom out why his carriers haven’t been detected. We’ve got submarines patrolling well over east—why haven’t they sighted them?”

“Because there aren’t any carriers,” Bentley said flatly.

“Oh, come on!” Randall grunted. “I thought we agreed they couldn’t possibly fly this far from Sabang or Malaya.”

“We did” Bentley traversed his glasses across the smiling sky. “I’ve been thinking a good deal about this,” he went on quietly, “We’ve knocked out one secret air-base, remember? Why couldn’t the Japs have another? Or half a dozen others? The police have a word for it—*modus operandi*. If they established one secret base, they’d form others.”

“No argument,” Randall agreed. “But where?”

“Why don’t you ask me something simple—like when the war will end?” Bentley growled. The radar-office buzzer gave tongue again.

The raid developed swiftly and with expected savagery. The British Eastern Battle Fleet looked formidable enough, and so it was—against its designed targets. But it was still in the process of building-up: Granville had no carriers to help him ward off air-attack, nor had he R.A.F. fighters to cover him. The island’s air strength was almost wholly devoted to protecting Colombo and its harbour.

It was to the enemy’s disadvantage that he had found the Fleet at sea—the ships would have been much less formidable firing from an anchorage. As it was the Fleet had miles of ocean space in which to manoeuvre; and the admiral could bring in his cruisers to add their quota to his own massed fire-power.

It was obvious that the battleships would be the main targets. They were more heavily-armoured than the other ships, they would be more difficult to sink—but one battleship critically damaged, or sunk, would be worth three cruisers in cost, in men, and in terms of depleted efficiency of the Fleet. And in that leading giant, flaunting its white flag with the red St. George’s Cross, was the admiral.

The enemy squadrons flew over on a checking run and on *Wind Rode*’s bridge they could hear plainly the multiple thunder of engines.

The noise beat down to them from the sounding vault of the sky and the cruisers and battleships opened fire and placed a garden of ugly black flowers high up in the blue,

Unhurt, for they were very high, the Japanese planes flew on, and then turned.

“Stand by to receive,” Randall muttered, and a moment later the first bombs fell.

Through their glasses the bridge team saw them plainly—black blobs tumbling in swift succession from the spawning bellies of the bombers; still tumbling, until the speed of their dropping allowed the tall vanes to bite into the air and steady the bodies so that they came plummeting down nose-first, a malignant hail of deadly darts.

The bombs had dropped from a great height, and as they neared the water their speed was too great for the eye to follow. They disappeared from sight, and reappeared again a second later in the form of upthrusting gouts of dirty water.

Discoloured water, white spray, black smoke—and no bright red of a hit. The battle-line came steaming massively through the spouts, the huge bulls still leaning on the admiral’s avoiding turn, the sides of each of the three ships jetting orange flame at the sky. With them, turning as they did, maintaining precise formation, went the cruisers and destroyers.

Each of those six cruisers mounted eight four-inch guns, and every gun was in controlled action. The destroyers were under the command of their flotilla-leader in matters of gunnery, and they had not yet opened fire—the targets were too high, the angle of sight was too great, for their 4.7-inch main armament.

Low-level torpedo-bombers were their meat, and strafing fighters. These menaces the destroyers were well-equipped to handle. And, when the high-level bombers had done their worst, the destroyer-men knew they would have something to handle. Torpedo-bombers were especially effective against slow-turning battleships.

The bombers flew on, turned, and made their second run. It was a vicious, and peculiarly intimate, battle. The Fleet was not compacted, nor was it loose—a nice judgment on the part of the admiral which allowed bombs to fall into the spaces between ships, and yet gave him the benefit of massed fire-power. Yet on all that

vast reach of blue sea the battle-area was small, and the attacking hawks hung above it—a localised, intimate, ferocious arena. Waiting, watching, Bentley knew he had little to fear at the moment. No aircraft would dive in while the sky was spawning its destruction, and though the torpedo-bombers were free to attack the destroyers, they would not waste their cargoes on such small game. There remained fighters, but they too, in accordance with the well-tried rules, would reserve their cannon-shells for the battleships, spearing in ahead of the torpedo-bombers to destroy or demoralise the close-range weapon crews and leave the targets wide open.

The fighters *should* reserve their fire for the battleships, but in the next second Bentley realised what he already knew—that in war nothing is certain, no rules can be taken for granted.

Wind Rode was the last ship of the left-hand leg, and Mr. Lasenby reported calmly from his controlling director:

“Two fighters coming in on the port beam, angle of sight four-oh.”

The guns swung.

Ever since he had first heard the radar report of an enemy force Bentley’s mind had been running, as it always did through everything he had done, and should do. Now as he heard Lasenby’s information and heard B-mounting below the bridge grind on to the bearing his mind flashed to the ship’s deadliest close-range weapon—and thus on to something he had clean forgotten.

When the ship had closed-up for action the reports had come in, as they always did, and there had been no discrepancies—*Wind Rode* was ready to fight. It was only now, with the fighters coming in and his mind on the pom-pom, that he thought of Petty-Officer Gellatly. For Gellatly was layer of the pom-pom’s four quick-firing barrels, the finest shot in the ship. And as far as Bentley knew he was now in bed in the sickbay.

His head swung round towards Randall and in the same movement he jerked it back again to the binnacle. There was no time now to check if any member of the pom-pom’s crew were missing. The two fighters were close, and *Wind Rode* would need all her speed and manoeuvrability to slip them.

“Open fire!” Bentley snapped, and a moment later the six 4.7’s belched.

Lasenby was firing in barrage—the range was closing much too fast for the fire-control table and the fuse-setters to handle the changing rate. *Wind Rode*'s shells, preset, burst 3,000 feet from her side. Both fighters flew on through the six black puffs.

“Barrage short short short!” Lasenby ordered, and the next broadside exploded at 1,500 feet. The fighters came on. Bentley took a hand.

“Hard-a-port!” he rapped.

She was moving fast and almost at once the slim bow started to swing. Bentley knew his short-range gunners would be helped by a steady platform from which to fire, but he also knew that their guns could traverse quickly, and that he had to throw that twin roaring menace off.

She was heeling, well into the avoiding turn, when the fighters' wings jetted abruptly into flickering points of flame.

The shells whined over the bridge and struck and burst against the funnel and mast. And from down aft, just forrard of the torpedo-tubes, *Wind Rode* snarled her challenge.

There was only one pom-pom, and it took one target. The shells, visible as fiery tracer streaks, did not hose out low, or to left and right, and then elevate and train on. They bit directly at the fighters nose, a compact cone of meticulously-aimed disruption.

The first fighter whipped overhead in a flashing bellow of sound. It seemed the pom-pom's target would follow. Until, a few feet from the ship's stern, the plane sagged abruptly as though it had flown into a vacuum. Only *Wind Rode*'s hard-over swing saved her quarterdeck and the depth-charges packed on it. The port wing smacked into the stern, and ripped off a second before the rest of the aircraft plunged with a fan-spraying flash into the sea.

“Midships,” Bentley ordered, his voice thick, “starb'd twenty.”

He straightened from the voice-pipe and looked at Randall.

“Gellatly's on the pom-pom,” he said.

Randall nodded, surprised.

“Of course. I reported the ship closed-up.”

Of course... Bentley thought. He watched the single fighter dwindling to a speck to starb'd and his mouth twitched. The ship had been reported closed-up for action. He should have known then

that Gellatly had obeyed the bells and risen from his sick-bed. Of course...

“Midships” he said, “steer 090.”

The destroyers were mainly left alone for the rest of the attack, *Wind Rode* and her sisters joined in the deluge of fire flung at the torpedo-bomber formations as they bore in for the battleships, and though no individual ship could claim a bird from that acreage of bursting steel, there were six low-flying bombers shot into the sea.

The torpedo-bombers came in again, and again they were met by a barraged wall of exploding shells. Forced to unload at long range, they missed with every torpedo, the Fleet swinging ponderously out of the paths of the racing missiles.

The high-level bombers, held off while their low-flying allies made their bid, were more successful.

In they came, remote specks high in the blue, the drone of their engines a steady snarl of sound, their course steady, their intention malignant.

The Fleet's flowers opened amongst them and two bombers changed into plumes of fiery red, the flames flattened back along the fuselages under the 300-knot resistance of the air. The stricken aircraft curved downwards in a steady, symmetrical arch and the rest of the formation moved steadily on. Well ahead of their target the bombs dropped, and came down in a forward arch to match that of the crashed aircraft.

The flags hoisted up the flagship's foremast and the Fleet turned in obedience to starb'd. Watching, his orders given and executed, Bentley felt a sudden and fierce pride. Enough bombs to kill a thousand men were already in the air, dropping down, aimed to hit. And beneath this deadly rain the ships of the Fleet had turned on the order of a few bits of coloured bunting, hundreds of thousands of tons of steel swinging in unison on the order of one man like a squad of soldiers at drill.

The bombs were aimed at the battleships and the admiral's order, and its experienced and instant execution, turned the targets in under the arch. It also swung the starb'd side cruisers in towards those curving black blobs, and from Bentley's forward position it was

obvious that the three cruisers' future position would coincide with the entry point of the bombs.

The admiral was in strict control of his Fleet, but individual squadron commanders could still take avoiding action. Bentley saw the leading cruiser's bow begin to swing, and the others follow. Too late. There were dozens of bombs, and a cruiser's deck is 600 feet long. The last ship in the line escaped with a shaking, a very close shave that brought her clear of the mess with her upper-decks streaming water. Her two companions ahead were smothered in an abrupt and colourful cape of white water, black smoke and red fire.

The bombers sailed on, still high, still remote. They were receding targets, and in accordance with the strict gunnery rule that you forgot passed targets and swung about to meet the next oncomers, the guns of the Fleet fell silent.

The drone of the aircraft and the thunder of the bombs drummed away to silence in the vastness of the surrounding blue. The sea was peaceful, the sun shone brightly, the guns were quiet. Only two things spoiled the tranquillity of the scene—the stench of burnt cordite which hung in a miasma round each ship, and smoke which poured its fouling columns into the sky from the burning cruisers.

Bentley cast a quick look round his bridge. The lookouts were staring at their appointed sectors, the radar aerials still swung above him. Satisfied, he raised his glasses and laid them on the bombers' targets.

The second cruiser of the line was apparently still under control. She was smoking, but she was swinging to starb'd to avoid her sister. This ship, 12,000 tons of eight-inch cruiser, was one huge smoke pall. Sick in his guts, Bentley realised she must have taken a full stick of bombs, a chain of disruption that had laced her from bow to quarter-deck.

A cruiser's steel is thin, to give her long range and speed, and it had afforded her scant protection from the high-velocity entry of the bombs. Everything about her told its story to Bentley's experience—she was stopped, therefore her engine-rooms and boiler-rooms had been savaged; no signals recording damage or asking for assistance flashed from her bridge, therefore the bridge team was out of action; redness, fierce even against the competition of the sunlight, showed

through her portholes, therefore armour-piercing bombs had burst inside her, blowing the dead-lights off the scuttles and firing her innards; and, as the final indication of the extent of her hurt, he saw men jumping from her smoke-wreathed decks and entering the water with minute, telling splashes.

“She’ll go up in a minute,” Randall spoke throatily beside him.

Randall was wrong. It was less than ten seconds after he had spoken when the 600ft.-wide wall of smoke was rent aside under some enormous and clearing breath. On *Wind Rode*’s bridge they saw it plainly—some objects hurtling skyward like meteors, other pieces ascending slowly and gracefully, bigger pieces, turning over and over as they fell back towards the flattened sea.

A warship like a cruiser, charged with shells and cordite and torpedoes from stem to stern, is a much more explosively volatile carrier than even an oil-tanker. Any one of those eight-inch magazines going up would have finished her, but the chain reaction had in a fractional instant of time fired the lot.

The smoke wall welded together again, and now there was nothing there on the sea but that thick and boiling curtain.

“From the flag, sir,” Ferris called hoarsely

“Pick up survivors.”

The reaction of Bentley’s shocked mind was wholly automatic.

“Starb’d thirty,” he said.

“Away seaboat’s crew stand by lines and scrambling nets.”

Once again a rescue ship, *Wind Rode* heeled out of the line and creamed across the advance of the battleships. Two hours later, 48 men on board out of a complement of 650, she hauled herself clear of the stinking scum on the water and increased speed to overtake the homeward-bound Fleet.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“SO YOU’RE LEAVING US?” Bentley smiled. The ship was at anchor in the harbour and he moved his head a little to escape the shaft of sunlight from the porthole. “Had enough destroyer time?”

McQueen lifted his head and stared blankly at the captain.

“God, it was horrible!” he said in a low voice. “Horrible.”

“It was,” Bentley admitted, “but then it’s all in the game. You yourself have got something down there that a Jap skipper might find just as horrible.”

His voice was crisp, curt almost. McQueen’s were dangerous sentiments, ones which Bentley had long ago trained himself to subdue. If a surgeon must deny himself feelings of sympathy at the operating table, then a destroyer captain must deny himself even more stringently with a hundred things to think of in the middle of an air-attack.

“Speaking of your baby,” he said, understanding McQueen’s feelings, “what do you want done with it?”

“I imagine the test will be conducted later on,” the scientist said slowly. “Can’t it stay where it is?”

“All right,” Bentley nodded. The weapon in its tube was surrounded by hundreds of tons of high-explosive—a ton or so more could not hurt “Now what about you? You’re in a berth ashore?”

“No. I’m virtualled in the flagship. The admiral wanted it that way.” He glanced at Bentley “Of course, I’ll have to check with him about the weapon’s staying here. And when the next test will be. But it should be all right.”

“I’m sure it will.” Bentley grinned slightly. *Wind Rode* was stuck with the thing, and his experience of outlandish novelties in a Fleet told him that no one else would volunteer to take it off his hands Well...

Bentley had no need to cultivate the admiral’s dismissive gesture of stubbing out a cigarette. His voice did perfectly well. McQueen stood up.

“Thank you for having me,” he said. “You’ll be informed the time of the next test. Ah—by the way, good luck at the tournament. I think I shall come along and watch it.”

"Do that," Bentley smiled—and thought: it will take a hell of a lot more than a boxing tournament to wash out the taste you've got from this trip! You know a damn sight more about explosives now than ever you did...

"Yes. Goodbye, sir."

"Goodbye, McQueen. See you again."

When he had gone Bentley sat back in his chair, his fingers tapping idly at the desk. He started to think about the scientist, about what a frightful shock that cruiser's blowing-up must have been to him, a man whose experience of war at sea must be nil. From there his thoughts moved on naturally to the cruiser, the sight she had made, the hell it must have been aboard her flaming decks...

He pushed himself up abruptly and strode to the door.

"Yes, sir?"

"Tell the chief bosun's mate I shall expect him in the torpedo-space in five minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I think that's everything," said Randall, looking round the pile of gear on the deck, "gloves, towels, bucket, shorts, boots... yep, the whole gubbins."

They were standing in the burning afternoon sunlight on the quarterdeck near the gangway. Below them the motorboat waited. Most of *Wind Rode's* libertymen were already ashore, complete with the canvas chairs and boxes which would constitute their seating around the boxing ring. The tournament was due to start in an hour with the lightweight bouts, sun regardless—bright arc lamps at night might have brought vicious and unwelcome moths...

"All," said Bentley, "except Gellatly."

"He sent word he'd be right down," Randall told him. His voice lowered a little. "Look, old fellow, I'll be only too glad to act as second. Don't you think it would be better that way? After all, captain, first-lieutenant."

"No," Bentley shook his head. "On the contrary. Democracy and all that."

He was about to add more. Randall said it for him;

"You want Gellatly to see this, don't you?"

"That's right. Win or lose..."

“And you also want Floss to see him there.”

“Badly,” said Bentley, and running steps sounded along the deck.

“Sorry, sir,” Gellatly said, “the surgeon wanted a look at the sticking plaster.”

“Right,” the captain said briskly—there was a limit even to democracy, and it was a long time since he had been kept waiting. “Into the boat.”

The area to which they had walked from the landing-steps was designated here as a football field: at home it would have made a first-class rough for a golf-course. But the tussocks and ruts were now hidden beneath the improvised seats of thousands of men, their faces directed towards the white square of canvas surrounded by its posts and ropes, inside the ring a man was standing.

The Fleet Physical Training Officer owned a very sound brain in a healthy body. The admiral was sitting a few feet in front of him, and even if the P.T.O. had not known of his interest in sport the august officer’s presence here would have indicated it.

This tournament was the P.T.O.’s brainchild, this was his day, and he meant to make the most of it. He held up both hands and the mutter of the multitude died. Without benefit of electronic boosting his voice reached out to their impatient ears:

“We are gathered here today...” a few grins, all dutiful, “to witness a battle which should remain in our memories for years to come. You have waited for this for weeks, and now we have the two protagonists face to face.”

He paused, the slow turning of his head taking them all in.

“Why doesn’t the nitwit get on with it!” the admiral growled to his captain beside him. “I’m damn near dehydrated.”

“Luckily unaware of the impression he had caused, the P.T.O. got on with it:

“Most of you have heard of Able-Seaman Floss, who hails from the flagship. From time to time, here and in the Mediterranean, you have seen him fight in tournaments. So I don’t have to tell you what we can expect from him today.”

Floss was done with—the head turned again.

“Nothing about the amateur title of England,” Randall murmured to Bentley.

“Sailors can be wrong,” answered the captain tautly.

“Opposing Able-Seaman Floss today,” bawled the promoter, “we have someone who is a complete stranger to you. This is only natural—Commander Bentley is captain of an Australian destroyer, *Wind Rode*. You have not seen him before, neither have you seen him fight. But...” a hand came up, as though to stifle the non-existent murmuring, “there are plenty who have seen him fight.”

Blast you for an idiot, the admiral thought. This is what I wanted to avoid; build-up the seaman, not the commander.

“To such effect,” the P.T.O. was saying, “that he holds the heavyweight title of the Australian Navy.”

It was not difficult for the admiral to catch his attention—the P.T.O. was acutely aware of what was making the sun glint from the shoulders in front of him. So that he saw the short and negative gesture the admiral made.

Wondering how he had goofed, the P.T.O. shouted:

“And now I present... Commander Bentley and Able-Seaman Floss!”

The two boxers walked lightly to the centre of the ring. So far as he knew, this was the first time Floss had seen him; Bentley looked into his eyes, smiled, and nodded. It was a deliberate gesture. He wanted no truck with a man who would deliberately punch into another’s broken rib, but he had to take advantage of every effect, no matter how tiny, he could produce. If he had ignored his opponent, then Floss might have been sustained by a hate against curt and snobbish Authority in the form of this destroyer captain. And Bentley could afford no sustenance towards a man who had been training for this for months.

Floss nodded back, without smiling. The P.T.O. was warning them about foul punches and breaking clean from the clinches, and Bentley saw Floss’s eyes flick towards the Australian’s corner. They narrowed, and Bentley knew, for what it might be worth, that Gellatly had been sighted as his second. He was satisfied. He might not win this contest, but neither would he fold in the first few seconds. Floss would have something to remember it by, and he would know that what he received was witnessed by the man he had savaged.

The P.T.O. lifted his head back.

“And now,” he shouted, “Commander Bentley of *Wind Rode* versus Able-Seaman Floss of the flagship for... the heavyweight championship of the Fleet!”

Bentley danced back to his corner and there was a cold shock in his guts. The last words of the P.T.O., now the referee, rang in his mind like a bugle. Throughout his training he had thought of Floss as a swinish bully, a man who had cruelly injured one of his own men, a messdeck thug who needed to be forcibly and physically beaten down. The fact that the beating would involve the heavyweight championship of the Fleet had never consciously entered his thoughts.

The heavyweight championship... When he had won the Australian title, he had trained for close *on* three months.

He lowered himself on the ropes in his corner, flexing his leg muscles, smiling back at Gellatly’s encouraging nod, and behind the calmness in his face ran a thin, taut thread of strain. There was no weakening of will about it, no physical fear—it was the acute tension of a man whose every faculty was pitched to a vibrating string of alertness, the cold realisation of a fighter who knew that he had taken on, through a natural hatred of bestial force, another fighter whose training and physical readiness exceeded his own.

A bell clanged and the two men stepped quickly and lithely to meet.

In those few seconds of approaching, Bentley’s eyes flicked over the body of Floss. He saw the muscled bulk of the man, but he was not dismayed. He was no skeleton himself, and he knew that not all the muscle in the world could effectively protect the vital nerve centres round the chin, the solar plexus, nor cushion the shock of a blow to the eyes or the heart. Floss was not much heavier than he, if at all, and all that Bentley had to do was to get in through his guard—and get in quickly.

He came up to Floss and now his mind was clear, his judgment and his intention glacially cold. Every night for the past fortnight he had worked out his tactics, and he put them into operation at once.

His left hand flashed out and before it had gone half the way towards Floss’s already ducking head Bentley dropped it at Floss’s belly. The big man crouched and his left hand came down protectively; Bentley’s waiting right curved round in a lightning hook and exploded against the side of his chin.

In that divisible instant after the first blow had landed, while the crowd roared, Bentley knew that he was the better boxer. His punch had been faster than Floss's countering reflexes.

Floss's head jerked sideways and Bentley slid in with a feral grace that had its end and purpose in a bunched glove and struck viciously at his enemy's solar plexus. He saw the returning blow and only the quickness of his right hand lifting prevented his mouth from acting as the bumper. As it was Floss's fist jarred his head, and then Bentley knew something else—his opponent owned a hard body and an extremely strong punch.

He went in, punching like a piston.

He punched, and ducked, and punched again, and while the trained part of his brain saw an opening, and struck, saw a glove, and ducked, another section was conscious of one over-riding fact—deep down in his brutal character, Floss was a dingo; and there was only one way with a dingo—get on top of him at once and stay there, batter the weakness in his psychology as well as his body, wear down the overlay of his skill and confidence until you came to the naked cowardice of the man. And he had to do it in three rounds.

It was doubtful if any man watching the dynamos In that ring had ever seen a first round of a major fight proceed at such a furious pace.

Taken at first by surprise, Floss fought back with instinctive fierceness. Bentley was hitting him continually, but his own punches were coming back and rattling the Australian's head. Normally Bentley would have slipped most of them, but his attack was so fiercely forced that he had to take return punishment.

He had struck with a fast left and right at Floss's face when from somewhere a hard glove exploded a pocket earthquake under his chin. It was a beautifully timed and judged punch, and it knocked Bentley sideways to the canvas.

A collective gasp escaped from ten thousand throats. The P.T.O. jumped forward, his hand up-raised to begin the count. On his knees, Bentley squinted up—that punch had hurt like hell, but his eyes were clear, and plainly he saw the brutal, mocking twist to Floss's mouth. Just as plainly he knew he had to wipe out that early psychological advantage the seaman had gained. Normally he would have taken a

count of seven or eight. Now, before the P.T.O. had reached three, Bentley was on his feet and boring in.

This time as he punched he was more wary than hurtful—he had to have time to clear the fuzziness in his head. At the same time he had to impress on Floss, and impress it with indelible starkness, that he was up against a killer.

He had the big man hard up against the ropes, flailing at his heart and midriff, when the bell clanged.

Bentley broke at once and danced back to his corner. Gellatly was ready with the stool and sponge. Bentley spat out the mouth protector and laid his head back and felt the cooling water run down his heated body.

“Nice work, sir,” Gellatly said quickly; “you hurt him against the ropes there.”

“He’s tough,” Bentley muttered.

“You’re faster.” Gellatly stopped, conscious as he worked of his inadequacy in advising a boxer so much superior to himself. He went on, subduing his diffidence:

“I’d stick to your tactics. If you can soften him this round, he’ll be ready in the next.”

“I hope you’re right,” Bentley grinned nervously, and the bell rang.

Bentley came out and he knew Gellatly’s advice had to be followed. It had been a savage first round, the hardest he had ever fought—he had put into it a third of the effort he would have used in a normal 15-round bout.

He led a left and Floss skipped back. Another left, a snaking jab that Floss avoided in the same way. Bentley followed him, and vindicated what he had guessed from the first punch—Floss was aware of his strategy: Floss had realised that his opponent, only recently a contender, had had less than a fortnight in which to train. He intended taking advantage of Bentley’s relative lack of stamina, he would keep away from him and wear him down. Then he would move in for the kill.

Bentley was shockingly out of training for this major fight, but he had been boxing a long time Floss skipped back again and instead of following him Bentley stood perfectly still and lowered his hands.

He waited, while Floss stared at him in puzzlement. Then it came, what years of experience had known would come. The voice was well back in the crowd, but in the watching silence it was as sharp as a pistol-shot.

“What’s up with yer, Fairy? Got the wind up? He can’t stop yer leave!”

That lone sneer was a signal. Ten thousand throats took it up in a multiple roar in which words could not be distinguished, only the general tenor of their anger and contempt. Bentley leaned on one leg and with his right glove scratched at his ear.

Floss was coming in anyway, but that knowing and contemptuous gesture from the representative of a class he hated quickened his approach to a rush. Bentley’s casualness swept from him in a breath and he met Floss with a barrage of blows that had everything in his shoulders behind them.

Floss hit him and the crowd grunted. Bentley landed and they yelled. He hit him again, with the same effect. Their preference was unmistakable. Then Bentley, who if he had not trained for this fight, had meticulously planned it, clinched with Floss and muttered in his ear:

“They’re against you, Floss. Every man. They hate your guts.”

Bentley had no qualms whatever about his tactics—the other’s extensive and superior training completely waived them. And the Australian was not fighting for a title.

Floss snarled and thrust him clear. He followed up with a viciously low punch that Bentley knocked down and countered with a left jab that found the twisted mouth.

Floss jumped in and the bell clanged.

Bentley saw the punch, saw it start after the bell had rung. He leaned his head aside and the glove scraped hurtlessly against the side of his face Bentley went down on one knee, his gloves up even in that inviolate position. The P.T.O. jumped in front of Floss and Bentley got up and moved to his corner. Gellatly squeezed the sponge over his head.

“That punch didn’t hurt you,” he said, his face puzzled.

“That’s right,” Bentley panted, “but it hurt Floss. Listen to them. I think he’s ready now.”

My God! Gellatly thought, and wondered to himself at his own inexperience.

The bell rang.

Bentley came out of his corner still panting. He knew that Floss would see it, but he could not avoid the heaving of his chest. This was totally different to his punching against Hooky's unresisting weight—Floss had hit him many times, and the punches had hurt.

He shaped-up and punched, the spittle forcing from his mouth with the effort of his blows, and he knew that if he did not take the snarling Floss in this round, he was in for the beating of his life.

So convinced was he of his own physical state that he took many blows that normally he would have slipped with ease. The whole object of his strategy was to attack, to hit and keep on hitting, to confront Floss with a typhoon of energy and hurtfulness, to wear down into that layer of weakness.

Floss took a straight left on his glove and came back with a blow that burst in a shock of pain and gasping breathlessness against Bentley's solar plexus. He went down on one knee, helplessly this time, and as he fought for breath and listened dazedly to the referee's inexorable counting he wondered if he could do it after all.

Uncertainty was there, but it was the result of an honest and experienced appraisal of his chances against this brute of a man. His will had not weakened a fraction, and fear of an opponent had no part in the man's nature.

"Seven... eight..." counted the referee, and Bentley forced himself up.

Eight seconds of relief to a trained fighter can be helpfully effective in his recovery. Bentley's head was perfectly clear, and as he traded punches he completed the recovery of his breathing.

There could be only two minutes left. But this was no time to execute the final stage of his plan. Floss now was triumphant. With all the cunning of his skill and experience and flashing hands Bentley proceeded to do something about lowering Floss's confidence.

It was a magnificent effort. The most unskilled observer amongst those thousands could appreciate the whirling savagery of his attack. He bored in at Floss with his hands twin snaking pistons capped with smashing hurt. He forgot his body. He slashed at the ugly face,

clear-minded and determined, even through the exhaustive effort it cost him, that he would mark this bully for all men to see.

When at last he got Floss in the position he wanted, against the ropes in a clinch, he was so near to the end of his strength and will that he could barely speak. He leaned on the bloodied body and he gasped in Floss's ear:

"Dingo! You're a coward, Floss! Dingo!"

Then Bentley stepped back, forcing his body not to stagger, and he stared into Floss's eyes. And knew, for good or evil to his own exhausted body, that his last play had succeeded.

Floss's eyes glared at him sightlessly, without a remnant of reason or humanity in them. There was nothing in those squinted pin-points of red rage but the insensate glory of a barbaric, primeval vengefulness and hate; the raving reaction of a boastfully strong man who has seen his psychological weakness stripped bare.

Floss thrust himself off the ropes and stumbled across the ring. His fists clenched in the gloves but his arms were held out in front of his body in a careless, brutal claw.

Bentley did not wait. He was acutely conscious of his danger. Floss would not fight—he would maim. Hard anger rowelled at Bentley's exhausted will and body. While Floss was still lumbering for him he leaped forward. He bent, his body leaning to the left. Not a single sound escaped on the suspended breaths of the crowd. Then Bentley's left hand whipped up from near the canvas in a bludgeon blow.

The fist smacked crisply against Floss's chin with a force that jolted all the way down Bentley's arm and jerked the ugly head back. Floss tottered on his toes, his body arched backwards, beginning to fall forward. As the muscled mass leaned towards the canvas Bentley stepped to one side and chopped down at the side of his chin with a vicious right hook. Floss slewed sideways and thumped forcefully on the canvas.

The referee pushed needlessly with his hand to keep Bentley off and the Australian performed the hardest act of that killing nine minutes: he walked unaided back to his corner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LARGE LOBBY OUTSIDE the admiral's cabin was full, and of all that gold-braided assemblage Commander Bentley was the junior officer. On the morning following the tournament the admiral had called for his captains. The time of the conference was ten o'clock. It was ten minutes to the hour, but the cruiser and destroyer captains were all assembled, waiting, talking quietly. Apart from a few captains of his own flotilla the Australian knew none of them; he stood a little apart, not wishing to take part in the general talk, and now and again a covert glance would be directed at his bruised face. Every officer there had seen the fight.

The mahogany door to the admiral's cabin opened and the talk ceased. They looked at the flag-liutenant, who looked for, and found, Bentley,

"The admiral would like to see you sir."

Hiding his surprise, Bentley moved forward through the press of khaki uniforms. He stepped in through the door, and not all the glances which followed him were friendly. To take on an able-seaman was questionable enough, though they knew he must have had the admiral's permission, but for senior four-ringed captains to be kept waiting for a junior destroyer commander was not at all to certain likings.

Bentley was quite unworried about his selection. There were a few other Australian destroyers operating in the area, though none in his flotilla, and the careers of their captains and his own lay not with these strangers but with the familiar authorities in Melbourne. He guessed the admiral wished to discuss the time and place of the next test of McQueen's weapon.

"Ah, Bentley. Sit down. I presume your back-side is untouched?"

"Yes, sir—at least I think so."

"M'mm. You don't look a good risk for an insurance policy. But our man is worse. Considerably worse."

"Sorry about that, sir."

"Are you?"

He had heard that crack of tone before, but coming from the cherubic face it still surprised him.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I said 'Are you sorry?' I will enlarge. It was obvious that your attack against Floss was particularly savage."

The intent eyes were magnetised to his face, Bentley felt the vague stirrings of anger, and he crushed them back. He thought carefully for a moment before he spoke, and then he said:

"I'd like to ask a question, sir."

"Certainly."

Even then Bentley hesitated. This was a full admiral, the master of a Fleet. He was also waiting... Bentley wet his sore lips.

"Am I to understand that you are censoring my method of boxing Able-Seaman Floss, sir?"

"Great Scott, no!" the admiral said testily. "How you fellows go about it is your own affair. I am merely curious. Perhaps now you will satisfy that curiosity?"

The ways of women, and admirals, are beyond understanding, Bentley thought briefly. He said:

"Of course, sir." Again, as before, he revealed only half the truth; but that part was sincere. "Floss had had much more training than I had—now I think of it, I realise I was foolish to have entered with only a fortnight's preparation. But that disadvantage dictated my tactics. I gave myself three rounds, no more. If I hadn't taken him in that time I knew he could do what he wanted with me. Therefore I had to make every second of those nine minutes count. The attack may have looked... savage, sir, but it was justified by my relative inferiority."

"I see. And that last punch as Floss was falling? The right hook to the side of the face?"

"That may have been unnecessary, sir," Bentley admitted, "but I had no way of knowing he was down for the full count. No boxer can assume that he has knocked a man out while he is still on his feet. And, as I said, I had to be doubly sure. Another round would have finished me."

His eyes as he spoke were on the admiral's face, trying to read the chubby features. But the man watching him had hidden his feelings from a shrewder glance than this junior officer's.

"Barbaric, but, I suppose, necessary," Granville commented. He leaned forward on the table. "One more query."

“Yes, sir?”

For the life of him Bentley could not subdue his anxiety. He knew that his face mirrored it, and he hoped that the admiral would put his expression down to the fact that he was a junior commander being questioned by one of the most senior officers in the Service.

“When you had Floss against the ropes, just before you knocked him out,” Granville said, “it seemed to me that you said something to him. Am I right?”

Bentley hesitated. The gimlet eyes bored into him.

“Yes, sir.”

“Something happened to Floss when you said that. I would have said he went stark staring mad. Now—what did you say?”

The tournament had been organized, the fight was over. Bentley had provided excellent entertainment for thousands of this officer’s men, and now he ached from his stomach northward. He had trained, he had won the fight, there had been no protest from Floss or the referee, and now he was badgered with these high-level questions. What the hell more do you want? he thought bitterly.

Normally he would have paused before making his answer to that last question, but dull anger rode over his caution.

“Do I have to answer that, sir?”

Slowly the admiral brought his hands together and entwined his fingers in front of his face. Bentley saw the knuckles whitening. It would have been a long, long time since this officer had been asked that question in answer to one of his own. But Bentley was not thinking of that—his troubled mind was on the ramifications of the situation which he would be caught in if he had to admit that Gellatly had fought with a junior rating, and that he, the commanding-officer, aware of the position, had done nothing about it—except to exact his punishment of a brutal bully by engaging with him in personal and physical combat. In the cold judgment of an enquiry Gellatly would be seen as a petty-officer, Floss as an able-seaman. No outside personal influences would be allowed to sway that outlook.

The admiral untwisted his fingers and tapped them softly together.

“No,” he said, “you do not have to answer that question.”

Relief swamped through Bentley. But he had sense enough to answer, simply and without enlargement:

“Thank you, sir.”

The admiral had made his decision. He was too loftily separated from his visitor to have to worry about face. He said genially:

“That was one of the most interesting fights I’ve ever seen, Bentley. And I’ve seen more than a few. My congratulations on a splendid win.”

Women, and admirals... Bentley’s taut face muscles let go in a grin. He instantly regretted the exercise.

“Sore, eh?”

“Damn sore, sir!”

“At your age you ought to have more sense,” Granville smiled. He looked up at the flag-lieutenant near the door and he said crisply:

“All right, Flag, bring them in.”

It took some minutes for the thirty or so officers to get seated round the long polished table. Bentley, by virtue of his unexalted rank, found himself placed at the end, directly opposite the admiral. But patently his intimate contact with high Authority was concluded—Granville was busy scanning a sheaf of papers in front of him.

The flag-lieutenant murmured in his ear and Granville looked up. His eyes travelled round their faces, then he laid his hands on the table and spoke.

“I haven’t much time to spare, and I’m sure you haven’t. I brought you here because I am worried about the frequency and weight of the air-attacks the Fleet has undergone in the past month.”

Bentley listened with interest. He had assumed what the conference would be about, as had the officers waiting outside, and his main interest was centred in his study of Granville’s face. The expression of the chubby features somehow managed to retain their geniality, at the same time as the voice issuing from them was brittle, and curtly authoritative. If I, closed my eyes, Bentley thought, I’d imagine him to be a disciplinary martinet—which, of course, face regardless, he is.

“Obviously,” the admiral continued, “this Fleet is the prime interest of those aircraft. Just as obviously, once the Fleet is knocked out the way will be open for some major enemy exercise—invasion.

We don't know where, but by the time we do know it will be too late for the knowledge to benefit us.

"Air and submarine patrols have satisfied me that the enemy is using no carriers in his strikes against us. Therefore it would seem apparent that he is coming from Sabang, or possibly the Nicobars. and using long-range tanks."

His head turned slowly and his eyes trained on them one by one.

"I and my staff can come to no other conclusion. But there may be another answer. That is why I have called you together. I am open to suggestions, ideas. In fact, I'd be glad of them."

He stopped, and the big cabin was silent except for one or two coughs. Then a captain who, simply because he spoke first, Bentley knew must be very senior, said;

"I agree, sir. There's no black magic about these attacks. Extra long-range tanks could get them over us and back safely enough. Admittedly the distance is long, but we cannot assume that the Japs have not been able to fit the necessary tanks. In fact, we cannot assume anything. What we *know* is that they have an air-base at Sabang, and almost certainly another in the Nicobars, which is even closer. I suggest a bombardment of both, or either place might solve the problem."

The voice was crisp—that was natural in a cruiser captain. But there was also an inflection of almost pompous conviction which vaguely irritated Bentley. The speaker's face was not prepossessing—thin, pinched, it owned a predatory nose and a thin gash of a mouth. He finished talking and his lips drew together, as if in conviction that no further discussion was needed.

The admiral's eyes looked round at them again.

"Well?" he invited.

Two factors governed Bentley's decision to speak. First, being a destroyer commander, and one who had been despatched several times on independent missions, his experience ran to a wider coverage of action than the captain of a battleship or cruiser, ships which of necessity are confined to more strictly defined purposes than a wide-ranging destroyer. Second, he already had had two friendly and personal contacts with the senior officer at the other end of the table.

Bentley had intended to speak, and with characteristic

thoroughness he had prepared his argument. At the same time he realised that he might be faced with very senior objections, even disparagement. He realised the fact, and there his piratical nature finished with it.

He raised his head and the admiral looked at him.

“Bentley?”

“Yes, sir,” the Australian answered in acknowledgment of the query.

Every face down that long table turned towards him. He kept his eyes on Granville.

“It is possible, sir, that the Japanese have a secret base on a nearer island.”

“*Secret* base... ?”

It was not the admiral, but the captain who had spoken first who now uttered the deriding words. He snorted, and looked impatiently at Granville.

“One moment, Sheldon,” the admiral warned. He nodded at Bentley.

“Yes, sir, a secret base. I doubt if any amount of extra fuel could fly fighters from Sabang to Ceylon. They could carry it all right, but they’d never get off the ground. A secret base, on the other hand, could...”

“Really, sir!” Sheldon expostulated. His stare at the young commander was unfriendly, just as it had been when Bentley had been sent for separately while Sheldon and the senior others had waited outside. The pinched face swung to accost the admiral, Granville’s expression did not alter, but this time he nodded for Sheldon to continue. Believing that he had been deputed to handle, and quash, this junior upstart, Sheldon asked acidly:

“You seem obsessed by this nonsense about a secret base? Are you quite sure your experience of—ah—yesterday has not affected your brain?”

Granville was watching Bentley keenly. But his face showed no sign of his enjoyment. In his own mind the conference had achieved its object—all present, except the young Australian, agreed with him that Sabang had to be dealt with. So that now he could relax and watch how this colonial destroyer-captain would handle this senior and acid obstruction.

“No, sir,” Bentley answered easily. But, Granville noted, his tone was still respectful.

“Then what is the reason for this obsession? Too much reading? Cloak and dagger nonsense Or perhaps...” the thin mouth curling, “you have had some experience of *secret* air-bases?”

“No, sir,” Bentley said, and Sheldon smiled sourly “Not a great deal. Only of one.”

“What?” Sheldon was not smiling now. His face was hard, and it was apparent to the watchers that he believed the youngster was trying to rib him. He opened his mouth to wither the destroyerman and assistance came to Bentley from an unexpected source.

“Let’s hear about that, Bentley,” suggested Jerrold, the rear-admiral in command of the cruiser squadron. “Where, when, and what happened about it.”

The mouth of Granville, who had deliberately led Sheldon into this, puckered. He listened with interest, for he knew he would learn a good deal about this versatile destroyer captain from the manner in which he treated his victory over Sheldon, and in which he told his story.

Bentley’s voice was calm and respectful.

“It was in the Louisiades, sir. Several months ago. We were lucky. I was en route Moresby to Guadalcanal, under orders from the American admiral to have a look at the Archipelago. We discovered the Japs had built a secret air-base there for an attack on Guadalcanal, and that night we went back and bombarded. As I said, sir, we were lucky. The base was destroyed.”

“You said,” Sheldon interposed, leaning forward to stare at Bentley, “you were en route. Alone? You bombarded an enemy airfield alone? One destroyer?”

The rapid sequences of questions, the tone of the voice, both indicated plainly that Sheldon believed the Australian was lying about his distant exploits. Granville decided it was time he took a band

“That’s right,” he said calmly, “that D.S.C. there, Sheldon—the second one...”

Now Granville learned something about his cruiser captain. Sheldon, in the expressed opinion of his own ship’s company, was a tiger. He had other qualities.

He looked at Bentley squarely and he said:

"I beg your pardon. Please go on,"

"Thank you, sir. I'm basing my opinion about this base wholly on the assumption that what the enemy has tried once, he might try again."

"*Modus operandi*," murmured Jerrold, and mis-interpreted the slight smile which eased Bentley's tight expression. "I agree—if there was an island where they could establish such a base—one close enough to make it worthwhile."

"Yes, sir," Bentley nodded. "There is such an island." The whole table was interested now in the opinion of its junior member. It was also a very experienced gathering, one which knew the charts of the area like the mirrored reflections of its collective face. A voice, from a cruiser captain down near the admiral, said:

"You mean Naos Island? West of the Nicobars?"

Bentley hesitated. Up to now he had been on the solid ground of personal experience. Now he had to commit himself much further, and into the grounds of pure surmise.

"Naos?" Granville prompted.

"Yes, sir. It's not a large island, but certainly big enough to handle fighters and bombers."

The senior captains, almost as one man, leaned back from the table. Their interest patently had evaporated. Bentley's eyes narrowed. Obviously they knew more than he did. The admiral explained:

"To establish an air-base, Bentley, you must have wharves, piers, for oil-tankers to secure to. Nowhere nearly enough fuel could be flown in to service the number of aircraft which attacked us. Last week one of our submarines patrolled round Naos. Nothing."

"But, Mr..."

The admiral held up his hand. It was an even more effective gesture than the stubbing of a cigarette butt. Bentley subsided. Granville leaned forward to speak and the others forgot the air-base destroyer.

"We have to wipe out those bases," Granville said with quiet emphasis. "If we don't, we're in for heavy and continuous raiding. And we can't take too many more without air protection—which, as

you know, is mainly unavailable to us. There is also the question of morale. The Japanese air-force must not be allowed to think they have bottled us up in or near our own base We will attack Sabang first, then the Nicobars.” Several heads nodded in agreement. Granville laid his hands with a slight thump on the table.

“The Fleet sails at 0900 tomorrow.”

Dismissed, they got up from the table. It was not difficult for Bentley to leave the cabin last—junior as he was. When they had filed through the door he turned to face the table,

“Excuse me, sir.”

Granville looked up.

“What is it now, Bentley?” His voice was not un-kind, but neither did it encourage further discussion on secret bases.

“Lieutenant-Commander McQueen, sir,” Bentley suggested.

“Oh, I see. No, he will not be sailing with you this time. Later. I shall let you know.”

“Aye, aye, sir,” Bentley acknowledged, and shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER NINE

“CIVVIES,” GRINNED RANDALL, “pay thousands for this.”

He stretched his arms to the warm blue sky and allowed the sun to beat down upon a face against which it had already done its worst—a weather-beaten, leathery epidermis which felt warmth, and no other inconvenience.

Bentley grunted, and for the hundredth time that day looked back at the Fleet. It was, as it had been for the past three days, steaming massively in battle-formation, the cruisers out on either side and the destroyers flung well ahead in their arrowhead screen. His glance had been automatic, casual, and he turned his head back to look at the next destroyer ahead. Then, again for the umpteenth time, his sight lifted and he scanned the cloudless dome of the sky.

“I can’t understand it,” he muttered.

“Eh?” Randall grunted helpfully.

“They should have been on to us long before this.”

“You mean aircraft?” Randall’s face was serious for a moment, but it was never in that state for long. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” he advised; “obviously they think they gave us such a clobbering last time that we won’t poke our noses out for weeks. I quite agree with the old boy.”

“He’d be happy to hear that!” Bentley sneered. “Agree about what?”

“On what he did, of course. Take the Fleet to sea straight away. Show those bastards they can’t hole us up. We should’ve been out a day sooner only for certain bods who should have their heads read—and got ‘em battered!”

“My jaw’s still sore,” Bentley murmured irrelevantly.

“I bet that other ape’s still in the sickbay,” Randall said with quick loyalty—and regretted his show of feeling as quickly. “Bad luck he hit his bead on the deck when he fell. Otherwise...”

“Speaking of sickbays,” the captain remarked in loftily disregard of his friend’s grin, “it seems the Doc did a sound job.”

Randall leaned sideways and peered down the deck. He saw Gellatly climbing down from the pom-pom platform. The petty-officer was obviously back on duty.

"Makes you think," he muttered enigmatically.

"That's doubtful. But what about? The Doc's ability?"

"No you..." Randall remembered he was on the bridge. "About what might have happened if Gellatly hadn't met that ape ashore *before* the fight." Bentley nodded.

"Better than having to stop the fight in the ring. And, incidentally and in passing," glancing sideways at his deputy, "that's the last time I get conned into a heavyweight ring with a fortnight's training."

"Conned?" Randall echoed. "A towing hawser wouldn't have held you back! And you know it!"

Bentley smiled. But he was thinking that it would need much less than a hawser to restrain him next time—what he had gone through against Floss, and the effort the win had cost him, was still vividly in his memory.

The smile faded. He looked round the inoffensive sea and rubbed at his chin. Then his eyes lifted up to the crow's nest.

"Put a man up there," he decided suddenly.

"In the crow's nest?"

Bentley nodded.

"I still don't like it. As the admiral said, the Japs are definitely aiming at this Fleet. And I agree with his reasons as to why. If we go, then the whole of eastern India is open to them."

Normally Randall would have had the bosun's mate on his way already in obedience to the captain's wish. But it seemed Bentley wished to talk—a not uncommon situation when he was not sure about something. Randall said:

"But radar will take care of any approaching aircraft formations. It did last time, remember? What's really on your mind?"

Bentley looked at the sun before he answered. Though still hot, it was lowering towards the horizon behind them. He estimated they had little more than half an hour left of daylight.

"As I said," he answered Randall soberly, "they're out to get us. And you don't leave alone for days something you're mighty interested in."

"Well... radar will take care of 'em."

Bentley shook his head.

"It's not particularly effective against a periscope."

Randall looked at him, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

“You mean you think they may have a line of submarines stationed across our path?”

“I’ve given up making definite statements after what they did to my last one in the admiral’s cabin,” Bentley said with a small smile. “But the Japs are no fools. And they know the British. They know that their attacks must have stung the old boy. They also know that he will do everything he can to pinch out their bases. Maybe they’re not ready yet to launch another air raid, but they might be ready to watch and see that we don’t deliver one of our own. Now—crow’s nest.”

“Right!” Randall said at once, “But if they’re going to do anything about it they’d better smack it about. We bombard at dawn tomorrow, remember? Bosun’s mate!”

Bentley remembered well enough. And he was still worried by a vague disquiet. He had been present at this Fleet’s first bombardment of Sabang, and knew how effective it had been. It takes a long time, he reflected, hearing the bosun’s mate rattle down the ladder, for an enemy to build-up to an operating standard after a savage deluge of shells like that which the battleships had hurled ashore. Especially the Japanese, whose commitments here and in the Pacific were wide and heavy. Yet the Fleet had been heavily attacked a few days back.

He was aware that the admiral and his staff could well be in possession of intelligence information denied a lowly destroyer commander, yet still he could not rid himself of his doubts concerning Sabang, and its origin of the attacks. What he was sure of was that the enemy would not leave the approaches to his territory unpatrolled. The admiral of course would also be aware of that. But his destroyers were in asdic operation, and so far they had contacted nothing, and there was nothing further Granville could do about it.

It was less than five minutes later that Bentley’s fears were justified. The seaman had climbed into the crow’s nest and was sweeping the iridescent sea with his binoculars, warned by Randall what to look for. But it was the next destroyer ahead which made the first sighting.

Once again Bentley had looked back at the Fleet. The sight of the huge battleships surging on through the calm sea fascinated him—

they bulged widely sideways, and their armoured stems forced up a toppling pile of white from the blue.

His ears heard it first. His head jerked back, in time to see the white scarf of steam streaming from the next destroyer's siren. Whooo, whooo, whooo—urgent, strident siren, urgent meaning: submarine contact!

Then the signal came, general to all ships, and Ferris read it aloud: "Periscope bearing oh-oh-five, range oh-four-oh."

On their port hand, to the north, distant two miles. Now a red pendant was hauling swiftly to the destroyer's yardarm, a supplementary warning to the siren.

"Flag signalling!" called Ferris, and Bentley stepped quietly to the wheelhouse voice-pipe.

"Cox'n on the wheel," be ordered. Then be looked again at the sun.

The admiral was taking no chances. Four destroyers, *Wind Rode* among them, heeled out of line and dug their tails down for the north. Bentley, because of his position in the rear, now found himself the closest ship to the battle-line.

This was a crucial post. The submarine would know he was sighted. There was still time for him, at that range, to bear towards the battleships and loose everything be carried in his tubes.

Granville had thought of that too, Bentley realised. Three destroyers from the right-hand leg of the screen were belting back, their object to place themselves on the battle-line's port beam, between the big ships and the submarine.

Always analytical, even when his ship was building up to 30 knots on the hunt, Bentley thought for a brief moment on what the sighting of that single black stick had done to the ordered array of ships. But, as their movements had been when under air attack, the disorganisation was controlled, precise. Shortly the protecting three boats would be in position, and the Fleet would steam on as before, zig-zagging to upset the Japanese commander's torpedo-firing calculations.

An automatic calculation, remembering that the four hunters had to build up to 30 knots, told him that it would take some six minutes before they could hope to be above the enemy submarine, in position

to depth-charge him. And in six minutes, if the Jap decided to run instead of attacking, he could be anything up to a mile from the sighting position.

Even so, it looked as if the four ships should have little difficulty in pin-pointing him. On paper. Bentley, his recent experience fresh in his mind, was under no illusions. At the moment their asdic was useless—they had to accept that disability in order to get on to him in the shortest possible time. But even if they did quarter the area in which he was hiding there were other factors which might negative asdic's efficiency. The Jap had hundreds of fathoms to play in—and asdic sets, mostly efficient as they were, were still operated by men. There was also to be considered that bane of sub-hunters, the thermal barrier protecting a submerged object. The water near the surface of this Indian Ocean was warm, its molecular composition not dense, allowing free passage to sound pulses. But lower down, where the Jap could be, there might exist layers of much colder liquid. Submarines were capable of taking measurements concerning temperature and density—a clever commander could hide himself beneath a cold layer, against which an asdic pulse would bounce off; protected by a liquid but impenetrable umbrella.

They would see.

A signal hauled up the halliards of the senior ship in the group and in obedience the four destroyers fanned out, their object to cover as wide a path as possible in their approach.

On either side of *Wind Rode's* bridge the lookouts were tensely alert, but no reports of periscopes came. Bentley was not surprised—unless he were a candidate for hari kari; the Jap commander would have got his glass eye down just as fast as the hoisting wires would bring it.

The really important thing, Bentley was thinking as he flicked his glance sideways towards his immediate consort, was not so much to kill the submarine as to keep it down and prevent the warning signal from being despatched. And that, considering what he had just seen, would be the main desire exercising the Jap's mind—avoid them till dark, then surface, and transmit the vital information.

"Twenty knots," Ferris called, and Bentley gave the order.

Two thousand tons of steel loses speed quickly, and it was only a moment before the familiar pinging started again on the bridge.

The four ships moved on across the sea, stalking now, and behind them the mass of the Fleet pressed on towards the darkening east. While he listened, and waited for the returning peep, Bentley reflected on the concern which must be exercising the admiral's mind. If this submarine escaped, then the British ships would be met at dawn by a smothering weight of vengeful aircraft; they would have no time to spare for firing 15-inch guns, and in any case the winged targets of those guns would be directly above them, instead of sitting on Sabang's airfield.

The future career of Admiral Sir Sidney Granville, as well as the lives of thousands of British sailors, depended squarely on the efficiency of these four hunting destroyers.

The asdic sent out its pulse and the speaker returned no echo and the situation became grimmer and more desperate. An hour passed, and the Fleet had vanished from sight in the encompassing velvet of the night. That was their one consolation—no sounds or reports had come back from the battle-line, therefore it seemed safe to assume that the submarine was alone. And he had not surfaced, for a quadruple radar watch was being rigidly maintained on a 360-degree arc over the sea.

Randall's last-dog watch came to an end. He was relieved by Pilot, who had not left the binnacle:

"Either we're right out of luck or this boy's as clever as the other mongrel."

Bentley did not answer for some seconds. He was staring out ahead into blackness. Then he said, in the same subdued tone:

"We should be split up, ranged further apart. "We're too close, the area is not nearly large enough."

Randall nodded invisibly in the dark. "What d'you think?"

"I think he's scooted to the north. Eastward would keep him in danger from the Fleet, westward would be just as dangerous."

"What makes you think that? Surely to the west he'd be running clear?"

"He would—but he doesn't know that. For all he knows there might be a secondary group approaching from the west. He might decide a carrier-group is also in on this, escorted by destroyers. But to the north he can be almost certain the way is clear."

Randall made no answer, impressed as he was again by his

captain's lucid and unanswerable arguments. All this time the leader of the search had been working to the westward, after he had convinced himself that the target was nowhere in the vicinity of the Fleet's course.

Randall went to speak, and his eyes were attracted to something flickering to starboard.

"Ferris!" he called sharply, "senior ship's signalling."

"I'm reading it, sir," came back the yeoman's calm voice, and Randall pulled at his nose.

The message was short—unfriendly eyes might be watching that shaded light—and Ferris came stepping quickly across the bridge. He spoke to Bentley and the captain said:

"At last! Up dome, increase to 300 revolutions! Steer north-east."

Wind Rode shuddered, and her slim bow slid round to the ordered course.

They had been at high speed an hour, alone, when Randall ventured:

"Do you think he might have surfaced already?"

"No," Bentley answered decisively. "He knows we have radar, and he knows he's got all night to get his message off. It's just as dangerous for him to break wireless-silence now as it is for us. I think he'll wait till well after midnight before he risks it. Remember, it will take him only a few minutes to transmit, and not much longer than that for the aircraft to get airborne." He nodded, defiantly. "He won't have surfaced yet."

Bentley stepped down from the grating and crossed to the chart-table. On the map he had plotted his estimate of the submarine's course and submerged speed. Taking into account the time they had wasted to the westward, and the time necessary to get to the ship's present position, he judged that the estimated position of the target would be to the north still, but in asdic range.

He dropped the pencil and came back to the binnacle.

"Ease to 15 knots," he ordered, "lower the dome."

Anti-submarine warfare was like that, Bentley was to reflect later—hours of search in one area, a shift to another, and then the fish bites at once.

The set had been operating only a few minutes when the report came up:

“Contact bearing 010, range one mile, classified submarine.”

It really was not quite as easy as that—an expert fisherman has to judge where the fish might be... There was a difference here—this one, with the sound pulses nibbling at it, must not be allowed to get away.

Wind Rode’s tracking and firing routine went into action smoothly. Every man concerned was aware of the danger the Fleet was in if they failed, but they were too experienced to allow this to upset their concentration on the instruments.

She ran in, the pings and peeps sounded close together, and her charges went over. The sea heaved, she shook with the blasts, and the asdic speaker gave forth its telltale news—she was still in contact, and the submarine was still alive.

Bentley hauled her round on a fast turn, his eyes on the swinging compass card and his ears attuned to the speaker. Lieutenant Peacock himself was operating the set, but Bentley knew that of all her men, he, the captain, had to subdue the desperation mounting in his mind and maintain a calm dispassionateness of thought and action.

At least, he thought as he straightened her up for the run in, I’m still in contact. Randall said:

“This bird’s more than a bit tricky. I wonder if he’s the same one?”

Bentley had wondered that, hours before. It was quite possible, considering the few weeks which had passed since their abortive attack on the merchantman’s destroyer, that the same submarine could still be on patrol. But it was an irrelevant, academic question. The only thing that concerned him now was the hard fact of what he had to do.

And he had to do it alone. With the Fleet somewhere to the east he did not dare break wireless silence to bring up assistance—no captain could assume that his ship was alone beyond the 20-mile range of his surface radar.

“Stand by,” Bentley warned, and a minute later the quarterdeck spawned its canisters.

The charges dropped down, exploded, and the sea gave forth its

flung white and the asdic speaker its message.

“Starb’d thirty,” Bentley ordered, and kept the worry out of his voice.

Once again she came round. This Jap captain was not tricky—he was an expert, his evasive handling of his craft amounting close to genius. But at the same time as this assessment of his enemy worried him, it offered Bentley some solace. He was absolutely certain that such a brilliant commander would of necessity be also cautious and experienced, that he would not have risked giving his position away unnecessarily by surfacing earlier than he had to. Therefore Bentley could assume that the warning message had not been despatched.

Randall said, his voice frankly worried:

“Look, Peter, we’re not doing any good. And we’re rapidly depleting our ammunition. Why not try that thing of McQueen’s?”

“Don’t you think I’ve thought about it?” Bentley answered him. He shook his head. “I can’t do it. We have no knowledge at all of what it will do. It should blow the Jap to pieces. It could also belt our screws or rudder. What happens then, with us helpless and the submarine still possibly alive?”

“I concede all that. But we’ve *got* to get this bloke!”

“I wouldn’t know about that!” Bentley returned, an edge to his voice.

“Sorry,” Randall said instantly.

Bentley breathed in.

“No, Bob. If I had no charges left I might risk it But not now. Stand by.”

The run-in was faultless, the tracking of Peacock’s meticulously accurate, the firing went without a hitch. And at the last moment, while the charges were dropping, the target altered course violently. He did not escape by much, but then all he had to do was place himself outside the lethal area of the bursting charges. There was no doubt that he was shaken by that last pattern, just as there was no doubt that he was still operational.

This time as *Wind Rode* slid her bow round Bentley touched Randall on the arm. The big lieutenant followed him to the chart-table. There, beneath the tiny shaded light, Bentley stared at the plotted courses of his enemy.

"I thought so," he said, his voice even and hard. "Every time we attack he swings to starb'd. Never to port, though he could escape just as easily that way. Why?"

Randall stared at the chart, his forehead furrowed.

"Damned if I know!" he said in exasperation. "But there's something that's obvious. No matter what he does—see it there?—he's maintaining a definite mean course. A few degrees east of north."

Bentley was silent for the space of one long breath. Then his fist thumped slowly and with emphasis down on the chart.

"My God, yes! You're right!" His forefinger whispered up across the white parchment. It stopped at a small black mark. "I wonder..."

"Eh? What've you got on to?"

Bentley answered with one word:

"Naos!"

Randall was not equipped with his captain's flashing perception of intelligence: but neither was he a fool, and in professional matters, such as navigation, he was very much on the ball. His eyes followed the projection of the submarine's northward course, and then ran on to the island Bentley had pointed out. It lay directly ahead of the pencilled track.

"Naos?" he repeated thoughtfully. His voice firmed. "But you told me there's nothing there."

"I said the admiral said there's nothing there. No wharves, piers. There weren't any on the *Louisiades* either, remember? That's what I was going to say when the old boy stopped me with his hand—that, and the fact that a submarine's periscope could not possibly detect anything that might be hidden behind palm trees and bushes in the middle of the island."

"If you're right," Randall said slowly, "this bloke could be leading us right on to his friends. Aircraft."

"Exactly! We're sixty miles off Naos by dead-reckoning. Another hour of this and our depth-charges will be clearly heard on the island."

"Lord..." Randall breathed. His worried stare stabbed at Bentley. "If this bloke gets away, and we cop the lot, the Fleet's caught with aircraft behind it! You've got to use that new weapon!"

"Not yet." Bentley withdrew from the table. The asdic contact still pitched clearly across the bridge. "We know he always turns to

starb'd, and we think we know why. He's got to get in range of his friends before we get him. All right, then. I've got two patterns left. On this run-in, we'll drop one pattern as usual, then I'll alter hard-a-starb'd and let him have the other. He should run right into *it*."

"Fire two patterns? The lot?"

"The lot," Bentley answered grimly. He stepped up on the crating. "Stand by depth-charge attack."

Bentley gave his orders and she ran in on the asdic bearing and he tried not to think of the magnitude of his gamble. He had two patterns left, eight charges. She might be damaged; two patterns, fired separately, might finish her, even if they were not even close to direct hits. But he was about to let her have the lot in one attack...

He thought about this as he coned the ship in, but it was characteristic of the man that his intention did not waver. He had made his decision, it was based on an assessment of his own skill and experience, and having made it, he would adhere to it.

If he failed... He still had McQueen's weapon. If that failed... His mind was too taut to allow him to forecast his course of action in that event—whether he would break wireless silence and warn the admiral of his surmise; risk having Granville accept his advice and turn the whole Fleet back from its objective.

The ship moved on. He had warned Peacock of his intention, and had told the quarterdeck crews. There would be no time to reload the throwers—the last four charges were now in the stern-rails, and from there they could be quickly dropped down over her tail. The spread of the pattern would be reduced, but if he were right in his judgment of the enemy's tactics, then that compactness would help, not hinder, in her destruction.

Gradually the time-interval between transmission and reception reduced. Bentley's thoughts dwelt briefly on Peacock's competence—the echoes were clear, unblurred—and then his mind shifted down inside the fleeing submarine. They would be tense in the control-room, hearing the tok-tok of the asdic transmission beating against the hull, hearing by now the tearing rush of the screws. The captain would be exercising every atom of his skill to determine just when his attacker would drop her charges. He had done it many times before, he would do it again. Then the order for full speed and the

wheel-order to swing her abruptly out of the line of the dropping destruction. He would be committed to his line of action, he would not know that the destroyer was also swinging, and lowering her second pattern to meet him.

If he turned to port? If he had decided that he had carried out the same tactic too often, that his enemy might have caught on? Then the destroyer would be turning in one direction and its target escaping in the other.

Bentley shook the thought from him with a physical movement of his head. He listened carefully to the transmissions, then turned his head. This was the time of automatically controlled and fired charges. *Wind Rode's* canisters were fired from the bridge, where a torpedoman heaved back on four long steel levers.

He was watching the captain now, and before Bentley had ceased speaking the levers were jerking back. For the last time of that fruitless hunt the destroyer spat out her challenge.

"Hard-a-starb'd!" Bentley snapped.

He knew he had to be quick. The submarine could turn more easily than *Wind Rode*. But now Bentley used his port screw, giving it full power so that its increased thrashing dragged her stern round faster. He waited a minute, giving the submarine time to complete its own turn, then he gave the order which finally exhausted his anti-submarine ammunition.

Randall stepped up on to the grating beside him. Both men stared astern, a little to the left of where the first pattern's explosion had ulcered the sea with white froth. And both of them would remember those waiting moments for a long time.

The first indication of the result of their attack came not visibly, but audibly. Peacock's voice, still calm but obviously controlled, sprang from the speaker:

"Contact lost." A few seconds, while Randall's mind was numb and Bentley's raced with a roiling whirl of possible future action—and then, not calm now, but triumph breaking nakedly through its professional tone, Peacock's voice again:

"Breaking-up noises! Bridge? Breaking-up noises! No doubt about it! She's smashed open! Dropping fast!"

Bentley reached forward and took up the phone.

“All right, asdic-room. Well done. Resume normal sweep.” Bentley replaced the phone and he came upright and Randall’s big hand rested firmly and understandingly on his shoulder.

CHAPTER TEN

“RADAR RANGE OF THE ISLAND?” Bentley asked.

“Forty miles,” Randall answered.

“Well close in and take a look.”

“What about the charges? They might have heard them.”

“At this range. I doubt it. They were set deep.”

Randall nodded. He said, his voice low:

“Peter, you’re going to bombard again if we find anything?”

It had been a long hunt, from just before dark till after midnight. Bentley’s body was tired, and his face still ached, but now his mind was buoyant. He grinned at his friend.

“There are some things—like that girl of yours in Cairo—which should never be taken on twice. I’m about 20 years older than I was that night off the Louisiades.”

“Thank God for that!” Randall said feelingly. “Then we just take a look?”

“We can hardly do less, seeing as it concerns the courage of certain convictions... I don’t know if we’ll be able to see anything—no doubt the Japs learned a lesson from our last crack at an air-base—but we’ll certainly stand a better chance than that submarine who poked round here last week.”

“And if they latch on to us?”

“Then, my optimistic shipmate, we’ve got 36 knots and six hours of darkness to unlatch,”

Randall smiled in the darkness. You’re optimistic enough yourself—now, be thought. And I don’t blame you! Things could have been nasty. So nasty that... The thought slipped in and wiped the smile off.

“Hey! What about the admiral? He doesn’t know if we got that curious bloke or not. He might be waiting for confirmation before pressing on!”

“I’d thought of that” Bentley replied easily. “And I’m sure he would reason that if we failed, we would have risked breaking wireless silence to tell him about it.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Randall rubbed at his stubbly chin. “How about a cup of kai?”

“Thanks. But make it coffee. Black and strong.”

“Sleep-killer coming up!”

They sipped their coffee side by side, tired but content, knowing that whatever the Fleet was steaming into, it had an even chance of getting out again. Not worried much about tomorrow, knowing from hard experience that sufficient unto the night is the evil thereof. The night was moonless, though mainly unclouded, and they should be able to sneak close enough in to Naos Island to detect any large-scale activity without being sighted themselves. There was a risk, of course—there was always a risk. But four years of war in destroyers cause familiar risks to be treated, if not with contempt, then without undue worry.

The island was not large and *Wind Rode* cruised right round it at reduced speed in a little under an hour. She was almost back at her starting point, having seen nothing but the dark blur of trees and “the white necklaces of foam on the blinding reef. It seemed that Naos was completely surrounded by its reef, which would rule out fuelling tankers and vindicate the admiral’s opinion, and it also seemed that it was uninhabited, at least by a large force of Japanese aircraft.

Yet Bentley was restless. He could give his analytical brain no reason for this feeling, unless it was the conviction that the Japs would have learned a wise and bitter lesson from that other bombardment of their secret base. The British assessment of their Eastern enemy had skyrocketed after the sinking of *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, and the warning inherent in the sinking of the *Sydney* by a “merchant-man” was fully understood by the Allied naval forces. It was reasonable to assume, then, that the Japs would have learned their lesson. And if they had, they would be careful to show no lights or any other sign of activity, especially since this base, if it were one, had proved its worth so definitely.

The ship moved slowly on. He was beginning to wonder if his pet theory was not influencing his judgment, and if he should stop wasting time and get back to the Fleet, when Ferris, whose eyes no hawk could sneer at, said:

“Captain, sir? I think the coast falls back there a bit Fine on the port bow.”

Bentley raised his night-glasses. Ferris was right. Only a trained eye would have noticed the indentation, but then the eyes now staring at it from four pairs of binoculars had been looking for signs like this all their adult lives. There was also, Bentley noticed at once, no white necklace barring the fall-away.

“Could be a harbour,” he muttered to Randall. There was no undertone of excitement, even of interest, in his voice. Patently, in an island this size, the bay or harbour would be small, and any tankers secured there would have been audible. *Wind Rode* was grey and low—a tanker, especially an empty one, would be long and high. The destroyer slid on slowly across the mouth of the bay, her asdic set operating, the single ping of the transmission nicely lonely.

“Nothing in there,” Randall grunted.

Silently Bentley agreed. His glasses trained right and picked up the start of the white-flashed reef—he judged the bay to be about a mile wide. The order had formed in his mind. He was about to tell Rennie to bring her up to 30 knots, and give him the course to the Fleet, when the lonely ping of the asdic set multiplied itself. The echoing peep was clear and startling.

Even as his head swung towards the illuminated bearing-repeat dial of the asdic the thought flashed through Bentley’s mind—it might not be an air-base, but there could be submarines in there. Obviously there was a submarine in that bay, and just as obviously the one they had destroyed was trying to make its way home to it.

Then Peacock shattered that pat theory.

“Contact bearing Red four-eight,” he reported. “Stationary.”

Bentley snatched up the phone.

“Classification?”

“I’m... not sure, sir.”

Peacock? Not sure? Bentley snapped:

“Come on, then! What’s it look like?”

“I don’t think it’s a submarine, sir. I’m almost sure it isn’t. But it’s a submerged object, steel I’d say, not as long as a submarine. It looks like...”

Peacock hesitated. Bentley demanded impatiently:

“Come on, man! Looks like what?”

“This sounds a bit odd, sir... But the outline—blunt ends—

reminds me of a petrol tank. I mean the bowzers, the big cylinders sunk under the pumps In a garage... I'm sorry, but that's the closest I can get to a classification. It is definitely not a submarine—at least nothing like any we have knowledge of.”

Bentley was not listening. His brain was trained to think and evaluate at life-saving rapidity, and it was doing precisely that half a second after Peacock had mentioned the words “petrol tank.” He was helped in the decision he came to by the fact that he had been looking for fuelling points for the past hour, and by memory of an earlier experience.

“By God!” he ejaculated, and slammed his hand on the bearing ring, “so that’s it!”

Randall stared at him, not speaking.

“Where the hell was it?” Bentley’s voice ran on. “Madagascar, Mauritius, somewhere down there. Swell too great to go alongside, fuelling lines laid out to seaward on 44-gallon drums. But here they’ve gone one better—they’ve laid the tank itself out of sight! Sure to be lines running ashore. Brother! All they’ve got to do is open a valve. And fifty aircraft sail over the Fleet!”

The speech was staccato, but Randall had followed its implications clearly enough. Instead of answering, he twisted his head to stare at the shore. But he was not looking, so much as sniffing.

“Smell it?” he snapped. “Plain as hell.”

“High octane,” Bentley grunted, “made in Tokyo.”

“You’ll go in?” Randall asked. “It could be touchy. There’s not that much room.”

There was no anxiety in his voice; the tone and the face were eager.

“Revolutions for six knots,” Bentley answered nil question, “steer 095. Start the echo-sounder.”

He felt the variation of the deck ease, and saw the bow come round for the opening, and he thought, as he always did, of what else had to be done But *Wind Rode* had been closed-up for action for an hour; he was taking her in at a safe speed; the echo-sounder was feeling the bottom for him, and Pilot himself was watching the pointer trace the depths. There was acute danger from the shore—he was certain now of what the island held—but this was war.

Satisfied, he let his mind run rapidly over what he had to do, while one section of his intelligence handled the conning of his ship.

The petrol tank must be large, and it would be secured to the harbour bed. Vertical pipes would run from it to the surface, and through them the fuel would be pumped, or sucked, to valves ashore. The shore-going lines would almost certainly be suspended from drums. They would be available; he could get at them. But it was no use simply destroying the pipes. Even if he cut them, and fired the emerging fuel on the surface of the water, he would by his act reveal himself; he would have to depart at high speed, and an enemy frogman could quite easily go down clear of the flames and shut the master valve on the tank.

He had to destroy that tank, and he had to do it completely.

"Gellatly on the bridge," he ordered abruptly. Then he stepped down to the chart-room voice-pipe.

"Pilot? Anything yet?"

"No, sir. Not the tank. But we've plenty of water—20 fathoms, 22, 21..."

"Very well." Bentley did not want to know the readings—he had given orders that he was to be told if the depth fell below five fathoms. He listened to the asdic ranges—the echo-sounder's pulses were shafting straight down—and he knew that if he were to send a frogman down that depth would need to decrease.

"Gellatly, sir."

Bentley swung. "How's your rib?" he asked without preliminary, "Fine, sir."

"No nonsense, Gellatly. This is a vitally important job. How's your rib?"

"I can dive, sir," the frogman answered simply.

"A hundred feet?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Up here."

Gellatly stepped up beside the binnacle. The captain would not leave it again in this confined area. Randall moved to the chart-house voice-pipe.

"There's a petrol tank down there," Bentley said concisely. "A fuelling tank for the Jap aircraft ashore."

"A case for limpet mines, sir," Gellatly said at once.

“Yes—if we carried them.”

“Hand grenades?”

“Not powerful enough. It could be a strong tank. Demolition charges. Pound and a quarter, T.N.T.”

“That should do it, sir.”

“I must be sure. As soon as we’re over the tank you’ll go down. Waste no time. You should tell at a glance the strength of it. Then get up here again. I’ll have the charges ready.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Randall called, quietly:

“Depth 15 fathoms, sir. Shoaling.”

“Right!”

Bentley checked the asdic range and Gellatly hurried from the bridge. The ship was almost over her target. Bentley spoke into the wheelhouse voicepipe:

“Cox’n? Pass all engine orders by phone.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Stop both, slow astern together. Warn the engine-room to stand by for full power.” And to the bosun’s mate: “Tell the gunner’s mate I want a dozen pound and a quarter demolition charges made up—ten-minute fuse. At the rush.”

The seaman leaped for the ladder. The ship quivered as her weight was dragged to a stop. Bentley thought again about that ten minutes. He knew he was right. At any minute he might be discovered; his intentions would be realised at once. A longer fuse-length would allow a Jap frogman to negate Gellatly’s efforts. At the same time, at full power and if all went well, he could be between five and six miles clear before the balloon went up—that would give the enemy aircraft no focal point from which to begin their search.

As well, he would be given a few more minutes before they could take-off. That was all he needed. Once clear of land, a destroyer would be hard to find in hundreds of square miles of night-covered ocean. Once clear...

“Pilot reports we’re right over it, sir,” Randall said. “It’s a tank all right. Resting on the bottom, ten feet high. Some tank! Hold it! Repeat, Pilot! Yes, have got. Two tanks, sir, side by side. There may be more...”

“Blast!” Bentley muttered to himself—that would increase Gellatly’s job to the danger point. He could not expect to hang around here much longer without being sighted. The Japs were certain to have sentries posted. As it was he was lucky not to have been seen already.

“Ready, sir,” Gellatly said beside him.

Bentley crushed down his forebodings.

“Over you go. I can’t waste time with a shot-rope. There are at least two tanks.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The night was so dark Bentley could barely see Gellatly’s face. But his voice was steady. ‘I’ve changed our plans. Take the charges with you now. Six to each tank, split them evenly if there are three. I doubt if they’d have more than three. Place the charges under the bellies of the tanks. But you know all that. Good luck, and quick...’

His voice broke off abruptly. Gellatly’s face was clear, shiningly clear, before him. The whole bridge was shining, gleaming, the bright grey paintwork contrasting vividly with long streaks of black shadows.

Bentley’s head jerked round.

His eyes squinted with sudden pain. The search-light’s baleful glare came from the head of the little bay, and it was trained full on the stopped destroyer. Their luck had run out.

Their luck, but not their lives—not yet.

“Director!” Bentley roared, “take that searchlight!”

He shouted his orders to Rennie and the engine-room bells clanged urgently in reply. Bentley’s hand was up shielding his eyes from the fierce white glare, and he saw plainly the fuelling lines snaking shore-ward, held up on their floating drums. He thought of rupturing those lines with gunfire, firing the petrol with direct-action shell. But that was all his guns would do, he realised—pure petrol would burn no easier than pure water; it had to have its oxygen added, and the vital tanks would remain untouched.

She was swinging now, shuddering as McGuire gave her power as quickly as he dared, and still no guns had opened at them. A full minute had passed since her discovery—the sleepest gun-crew could have got off one round in that time.

Then Bentley realised that this island was like the other one—it needed no defensive guns. Its bombers were its guns. And he had no doubts about what would be happening on the airfield. “God!” said Randall, his voice sharp on the tense bridge, “just one pattern of depth-charges...”

Bentley stared at him.

For two seconds his eyes were fastened on the big lieutenant’s face, and in that time the whole plan of what he would do flicked into his brain, was studied, and was accepted.

“Pilot!” he snapped into the voice-pipe, “give me a depth every five seconds! Torps? That thing’s ready to fire?”

It was the automatic response of long training which brought the torpedo-officer’s instant reply—seconds before he appreciated the significance of the captain’s question.

“Yes, sir. The cordite charge is fitted.”

“Then jump aft and stand by to fire.”

Discipline and training are magical qualities.

“What depth, sir?” Torps asked in a calm voice.

“A hundred feet. Fire to port.”

“Fire to port, sir.” Then Torps was gone down the ladder.

Randall was staring at his captain, but he did not speak. He knew, as every man on the bridge knew, what was in Bentley’s mind; as they knew that the time was so short, and the space so limited, that the leader of this mad and desperate enterprise must not be distracted in the slightest from what he was about to do.

“Director?” Bentley snapped. “Cease firing! I want that light.”

The guns had got off one broadside, and the jungle close to the right of the searchlight had offered back its ugly red bursts. Now the order went down and the firing interceptors were whipped open.

“Starb’d thirty!” ordered Bentley. “Full ahead port, half astern starb’d!”

She had been swinging to face the open sea. Now her sharp snout began turning to the right, towards the dim and distant line of jungle on the north side of the bay.

Bentley’s plan was crystal clear in his mind. Just as was his awareness of the hideous danger he was in both from the bombers and the bay’s possible shoals. The thought of these things he

discarded. Backing his decision to use McQueen's untried weapon, though not consciously thought of, was the knowledge that the future safety of the Fleet depended on the success of what he hoped to achieve.

Pilot's reports came regularly up the voice-pipe. Bentley listened not so much to the actual depths as for a change in the note of the navigator's voice. He was not surprised that the harbour remained safely deep—the gods remain tolerant of those they are about to destroy...

He took her as far as he dared, knowing it was not half far enough if McQueen's estimates were correct, and then with screws and rudder swung her fiercely round again. And all this time his mind was conscious of the minutes which had passed, seeing with its mental projection the aircraft being hurried out of their redoubts, then taxiing to the end of the runway.

She was round, and in the searchlight's helpful reflection he could see the mass of drums which marked the submergence of the pipes, and the position of the tanks. He leaned and he spoke into the wheelhouse voice-pipe, and his voice was calm, and deliberate, and brittle with emphasis:

"Full power both engines!"

Then he came upright and steered his ship for a point fifty feet to the right of the mass of drums.

Full speed in a destroyer is a set, regulated number of revolutions of the propellers. It is fast, but it is not the speed of what she is actually capable. *Full power* means precisely what it says: the complete strength of 40,000 horsepower unleashed on to the turbine blades.

But 2,000 tons of steel is a heavy mass. Bentley knew that he would in that short run get nowhere near the safe 30 knots. He would be lucky if she raised 20.

"Clear the quarterdeck," he ordered, "close all watertight doors." And to Randall, waiting quiet near the wind-break: "Take the torpedo-control phone."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the first lieutenant

There was something in the formality of that reply which rugged at Bentley's attention. He thought about it afterwards, and the

realisation came to him that the three traditional words, spoken like they had been, carried to him his friend's respect and understanding.

But he had no time or inclination for analysis now. They were halfway there, and though the ship was shuddering as he had never felt her before, the knot indicator showed nothing higher than the figure 17.

Randall said:

"Tube ready, sir."

Bentley nodded. The whole ship was still outlined in the revealing light. Eighteen, nineteen knots...

"Director—take the searchlight."

Half a minute. He would need no light now.

"Stand by, cox'n."

"Standing by, sir."

The guns roared and the searchlight beam flung abruptly skyward and went out. Darkness rushed in over the bay.

Twenty knots, twenty-one... *Now!*

"Fire!" Bentley snapped. "Hard-a-starb'd!"

Rennie's repeat of the order had come back before the sound reached them from down amidships. Even through the tension coiling in his guts Bentley was surprised—the whoof of discharge of McQueen's weapon seemed not much louder than a normal torpedo's firing.

He was looking for the splash, and he saw it. Again, not much larger than the entry of a torpedo. Then *Wind Rode* was round, surging for the open sea, and the point of submergence of the new weapon receded into the night.

His glance flicked to the speed dial. Twenty-two knots. The sharp turn had slowed her. But in this unfamiliar bay he had had no alternative but to swing her seawards.

His hands clutched the binnacle, and he waited. He knew the rate of descent of 300-pound depth-charges, and McQueen had given him the relative figures for his monster, but he had forgotten them. He guessed that it would sink more quickly.

He thought of stopping his propellers. But if the explosion were to reach out for them, it would meet the screws, stopped or spinning. And he could rely on McGuire, standing now by his throttles, to take

the power off her instantly if anything went wrong. If... ? Clear in his memory came McQueen's slow voice:

"I cannot stress strongly enough that the ship must be travelling at no less than 30 knots when we fire. You appreciate that?"

Instinctively Bentley's eyes went again to the speed dial. And some enormous force slammed his chest hard up against the compass-ring.

He was gasping, but his eyesight was unaffected. With complete clarity he saw the foc's'le tilt down until the sea creamed past level with the gunwale. The *sea*, not the bow-wave. He jerked his head round to stare aft.

He saw first the quarterdeck slanted upward, as though a child in a bath had placed his hand under the stern of a toy boat and lifted it; as though the 2,000-ton ship were a surfboat riding in on the face of a huge wave. Then he saw the white, back in the bay.

For four years the sight of depth-charges exploding had been as familiar to Bentley as the sight of fried eggs on the breakfast plate. But this was nothing remotely like anything he had seen before. There was a mountain of water back there. Its swelling dome reached up higher than the surrounding island. For a moment as he watched, awed, the dome hung in the sky in dreadful and perfect symmetry. Then the frightful force which had raised it flung the mountain apart in what looked like skyscrapers of white spray.

Wind Rode's stern smacked down again into the water and the blast of the explosion slammed against his ears.

"Stop both!" Bentley ordered.

It was a needless order. McGuire had felt the stern lift and his bellow had the throttles spinning back. But she was still racing when the two engine-room artificers were flung to the deck. McGuire had hauled himself up first and shut her power off. Not before the horrible shuddering had communicated its meaning to his dazed mind.

A minute later, while the bridge team were hauling themselves to their feet, he got through to the bridge.

"Captain? You've done it all right! The port screw sounds like a concrete mixer."

"Is that all?"

"*Is that all!* You'll be lucky if you get 12 knots!"

It was because the ship was still in such deadly danger, and he could do nothing about it, that Bentley's beaten brain relaxed at the outraged expostulation in the Chiefs voice. He smiled into the phone.

"Fine. She seems to be steering all right. Can you work the port screw at all?"

"Sure I can! If you don't mind the A-bracket falling off!"

"We'll buy you another one." Bentley, who knew the idiosyncracies of engineers, knew that the port screw must be capable of almost half speed for McGuire to even admit it turned at all. He said:

"Nice work, Chief. We're on the way home now."

That was the understatement of the year, and they both knew it. McGuire's answer was to slam the pipe cover shut.

"Revolutions for 12 knots," Bentley ordered, and Randall said: "D'you think we did it?"

"One way to find out." Bentley smiled, but his tone was grim. He picked up the director phone. "Light me a match, please, Mr. Lasenby. Direct-action, I think."

"One match coming up, sir," Lasenby returned, and spoke into his own phone. The mountings swung, and the guns belched.

At a velocity of three thousand feet per second the surface of water offers to a direct-action shell a surface as resistant as concrete. The shells hit, the fuses in the noses were jolted into instantaneous action, the shells burst. The result was spectacular.

No one knew how many thousands of gallons of petrol those tanks had held. What was obvious was that McQueen's baby had in its first combat trial efficiently covered the whole of the bay with volatile fluid. In a few fierce seconds acres of water were alight. Eager flames ran along the pipe line and even from *Wind Rode's* position out to sea they could see the shore-line, then the jungle, burning. "Phew!" breathed Randall, and that seemed to sum up the feelings of all of them.

"I can't understand," said Sir Sidney Granville, "how you managed to last through the night."

"If I may say so, sir," answered Commander Bentley, "that makes two of us. We were attacked shortly after the balloon went up, and

many times after that, but never by more than a couple of aircraft. My only explanation is that the fire must have reached right inland to some fuelling-point and the Japs were too busy fighting it to get more aircraft off.”

He tapped the ash from his cigarette into the polished container which had once been a four-inch cartridge.

“What I do know is that I’ll never forget the sight the Fleet made, come the dawn.”

The admiral smiled.

“Your signal was plain enough. I’ve never heard a louder scream for help...”

“I hope never to make one, sir. Ah—Sabang, sir?”

“Sabang? As I said, your signal was plain enough, I turned back at once.”

“Thank God you did!” the destroyerman said fervently. He remembered himself. “As you know, sir, we pressed on out of it at our full 12 knots. I didn’t see much of the fight at all...”

The admiral was not averse to accepting the suggestion implied. He was thinking that it might be a good thing if young destroyer commanders realised that admirals weren’t totally devoid of tactical skill.

“The fight? It was short, and quite sharp. Two destroyers this time. But once I knew where the airfield was—we could see them taking-off—I despatched three cruisers close inshore. They bombarded. Very handy ships for bombardment, cruisers. Twenty-four guns, seven rounds a minute per gun.”

He looked at Bentley quizzically.

“That was a clever move, sir,” the destroyerman said sincerely. “With the airstrip cratered they knew they couldn’t land. And if they couldn’t land they had to make sure they could get to Sabang, which considerably reduced their time in the air over the Fleet.”

He forebore to mention that he had earned out the identical strategy in his bombardment of the Louisiade strip.

“Quite so, Bentley.” The admiral picked out another cigarette. “And now to your personal part in this affair.”

The intent eyes were laid on Bentley’s face. If the Australian had shown the least smugness Granville would have terminated the

interview with a “Let me have your report.” But Bentley’s expression was certainly not smug—it was, Granville realised with some surprise, worried.

“Yes, sir. I’m afraid the ship will be out of commission for some weeks. The port screw is badly damaged, and the A-bracket is loose. Also, due to the strain put on it during the trip back, the rudder is out of alignment.” He looked up. “I’m sorry, sir, but I could think of no other way out.”

Granville’s piercing eyes had never left his face, But he was still not sure that this concern was genuine. He decided to find out.

“You had my express orders, as well as McQueen’s advice, not to fire the weapon under a speed of 30 knots?”

“Yes. sir.”

“Yet you did just that”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did it not occur to you that a signal would have brought the Fleet to take care of that submerged fuelling-point? Without risking your ship and your men in a confined bay within a few yards of an alerted enemy?”

“It did occur to me, sir. But I had no justification for believing that my signal would have brought you. Not until I was certain there were aircraft on the island. And I did not know that until the first bomb fell. Then I made the signal.”

Worry, genuine worry, Granville decided—and a little justifiable anger. This had gone on long enough.

“Good heavens, Bentley!” he said, smiling, shaking his head, “d’you really think I’d reprimand you for what you’ve done?”

I’m not so damned sure about that, at all! Bentley thought. Women, and admirals...

“Ah—no, sir.”

“I should think not! Now. You’ll have a gin?”

“Thank you, sir. But I’m due to take her into the floating dock in half an hour. If you don’t mind...”

“Very well. Let me have your report when you’ve settled down. And convey my congratulations to your ship’s company. For the second time.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He stood up and placed his cap under his arm. Granville smiled genially up at him.

“There is more than one admiral who can turn a blind eye towards an order, Bentley.”

Of course, Bentley thought behind his respectful expression—so long as the disobeyed order results in a successful action!

“Yes, sir,” he said, “thank you.”

He left the cabin and hurried towards the battleship’s gangway. He wanted a gin, badly. In a mess where *he* owned the blind eye...

THE END

The Blind Eye

The huge battleships surged through the calm sea...they bulged wildly sideways, and their armoured sterns forced up a toppling pile of white from the blue.

His ears heard it first, Whooo, whooo, whooo - urgent, strident siren, urgent meaning: submarine contact!

The admiral was taking no chances, Four destroyers, *Wind Rode* among them, heeled out of line and dug their tails down.

The future career of Admiral Sir Sidney Granville, as well as the lives of thousands of British sailors, depended squarely on the efficiency of these four hunting destroyers.



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He served in the Navy before, during and after the War, climbing up through the hawsepipe from ordinary seaman to officer in the gunnery branch. This experience of both lowerdeck and wardroom provided invaluable insight into his fictional characters.

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