

J. E.
MACDONNELL
CLASSIC*74

THE UNFORGIVING SEA



The Unforgiving Sea

The constant menace of the Japanese enemy troubled captain 'Dutchy' Holland, and so did his mission. But - towering above them all, the pursued and the pursuers - were the turbulent waters in which they meshed . . . the unforgiving sea



James Edmond Macdonnell is one of the most prolific writers in Australia today, His books have been translated into many languages, selling in the millions throughout the world. And he is still writing...

He served in the Navy before, during and after the War, climbing up through the hawsepipe from ordinary seaman to officer in the gunnery branch. This experience of both lowerdeck and wardroom provided invaluable insight into his fictional characters.

He lives with his wife, two daughters and a son in the shorebound Sydney suburb of St. Ives, but his main interest, apart from sports cars, lies in swapping stories, of varying degrees of truthfulness, with old shipmates

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This story was meant to follow immediately after WALL OF FIRE, but business with the United States kept me otherwise engaged, and so kept old Dutchy towing his superior officer toward Darwin. A long haul. But now both Wind Rode and Jackal are safely berthed off the end of Darwin's splintered pier, so let's get aboard and hear the dulcet Dutchy make a request.

J. E. MacDONNELL

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CHAPTER ONE

“STEWARD!” said Lieutenant-commander John Benedict Holland, and the reflection of Captain Bentley shivered a little in the glass face of the book cupboard door. His ears tingled.

In the pantry which his bulk mostly filled, Samson heard the sound, but instead of obedience his initial reaction was alarm. A torpedo streaking for the ship, or dive bombers in sight?

Samson’s momentary confusion was understandable. In his time in the ship he had been called many things, from bollard-headed oaf to a blubber-gutted son of a barnacle; sometimes he was even called Samson. But never in his memory had he been addressed as steward. Then, peering through his little servery hatch, he sighted the glossy shoes and straight-seamed khaki stockings of his captain’s guest, and then Samson appreciated that his captain was putting on the dog for his guest, and thus he came to the understanding that his presence was required in the main cabin. He went into it.

“You called, sir?” he enquired politely.

“Ah, there you are, steward,” said Dutchy, and the glare of his hair-cliffed eyes defied Samson to grin at the form of address. “We will have coffee, if you please.”

The giant’s face retained its expression of diffident respect, which took some effort, considering that the officer now asking for coffee had once intimated, on its being handed to him on the first day of Samson’s servitude, that he placed coffee in a similar category to the bilge water of a derelict Chinese scow. He would drink any sort of liquor, Dutchy had further intimated, but otherwise there was to be presented to him nothing but tea, on pain of keelhauling. All of which presupposed Samson to the belief that Captain Bentley had asked for coffee, thus snaring Dutchy in a hostly cleft stick. Behind his respectful facade Samson was gloating with a pleasurable and disloyal anticipation.

“Coffee, sir?” he rubbed in the salt. “Certainly, sir.” Polite and enquiring his eyes trained to the guest. “Would you like it strong, sir?”

With considerable, if veiled respect Bentley’s eyes had been studying the frame of the man standing before him. This fellow was

bigger even than Hooky .Walker, which took him somewhat out of the midget class.

“Strong,” he said, “and black, please “

“Yes, sir. As Commander Holland likes it,” Samson dead panned.

Just a little, the hairy fingers of Dutchy’s hand curled. Bentley said, smiling:

“Ever done any boxing?”

“No, sir.” The stretch of Samson’s lips was just the .right degree for the flotilla leader’s apparent friendliness. “I’m afraid coffee making’s my forte.”

Never noted for its stability, Dutchy’s restraint broke. “He’s good with ringbolts,” he growled.

“I beg your pardon?” Bentley queried.

“Ringbolts,” explained Dutchy. “Those strong iron things in the deck for securing tackles to. Along this deck you’ll see a trail of bent ringbolts, wherever this flatfooted oaf walks. Boxing? He couldn’t fight his way out of a light fog.”

“Oh, I see,” said Bentley, and he did. Something the same relationship obtained with Jarret, his own steward. Then, automatically and analytically, his thoughts moved on to find the reason for Dutchy’s ire; and because to lead five Fleet destroyers and a thousand men, and to keep alive through years of war requires a needle-witted mind, Bentley had not much trouble in locating the cause. There had been a certain emphasis on a certain substance.

“A pity,” Bentley smiled up at Samson. “I can always use a sparring partner.”

“I bet,” said Samson involuntarily; he knew, of course, that the smartly-dressed officer happened to be the heavyweight champion of the Fleet. Then he realised what he’d said. “Sorry, sir, I didn’t mean...”

His voice trailed, while Dutchy’s grin spread maliciously. But Bentley had a Nelsonian eye, and knew when to shut it. His lips pursed thoughtfully.

“I don’t doubt your proficiency with coffee, Samson, but come to think of it I’ve drunk damn little else since we left Damar.” He turned to Dutchy. “Would you mind, Commander, if I switched to tea instead?”

Dutchy took the grin off his face but couldn’t hide the glint in his

eye. "Certainly, sir. Tea, please, steward. For two.

"Yes, sir," said Samson, and defeated he withdrew. It had been a friendly and insignificant exchange, except for one thing. Both captain and steward, no fools themselves, had been given one further indication of the flotilla-leader's perspicacity. It is on such particles that the base of a leader's success is built.

They drank their tea. They talked professionally of what they had done in Mystery Bay on Damar Island and of the possible enemy reaction to that destructive night; of the damage to *Wind Rode* and of certain seamanship aspects of the tow by Jackal back to Darwin. Yet while they were on this last subject Bentley made no mention of the signal he had made to Navy Office early this morning.

They talked companionably, for they had served and fought together before, these two, and because of that, and other personal things, there was between them mutual liking and respect. Then Bentley laid down his second cup and said:

"Remember what I said, just before we closed down wireless silence last night?"

Dutchy remembered it well, and with anticipation, but he was not wholly graceless, and so he frowned and answered:

"Last night, sir? No, what, was that?"

"I mentioned our liquor supply was left intact. My first-lieutenant insists on throwing a party tonight. He'd like you and your wardroom to attend."

They grinned at each other, reprobates both; Dutchy fully aware where the insistence had come from. "That should be very pleasant, sir," Dutchy said. "In the wardroom..."

"Yes." But a captain, especially a Captain (D), must appear to be just, and wholly devoid of ulterior motives, and so Bentley made no further mention of the pleasures of drinking the wardroom's liquor. He said:

"Shall we say about six-thirty, then? I'm afraid you'll have to use your own boat. My cutter stopped a five-inch shell. In fact, I'd be most grateful if we could have the use of yours for an hour or so today - mail and stores, y'know. Can do?"

"Of course, sir," Dutchy answered the polite, ironclad "request." He took out his pipe, lit it and waited. Captain Bentley had a signalman

or two; flotilla-leaders don't make a habit of personally bringing an invitation to drinks on board. Then why had this cool hard-faced young fellow come? So Dutchy waited to find out why, and puffed.'

In the next second or two he was not rewarded, but Samson in his pantry was, deliciously. The cough started as a politely controlled reaction, then extended quickly into an uncontrolled paroxysm of laryngeal rejection.

"For ... God's ... sake," Samson heard, in a cough-punctuated, choking voice. "What've you . . . got . . . in that thing? Rotten ... cabbage?"

Inured to it - he could have poked his head into a funnel's mouth and breathed comfortably, everything being relative - Samson watched with grinning satisfaction as the man who had deprived him of earlier satisfaction stumbled to the nearest scuttle and got his breath back. Dutchy was looking surprised.

"Sorry about that," he said.

"So . . . am I" "Better put it out, eh?"

"Please. And for the love of Mike leave it behind tonight."

Dutchy looked hurt. "It's not all that bad."

Bentley turned from the scuttle. The smoke-screen was dissipating.

"Not bad? It's rotten! Either you're served by a bunch of craven slaves, or else they're extraordinarily disciplined."

"Or keepers to windward," Bentley thought he heard from the pantry.

He chuckled, coughed, and poured himself half a cup of black tea. Silently and pointedly, Samson came out, switched on a fan, and retired again. After a minute or so Bentley was able to say:

"I suppose you're wondering why I called on you this morning?"

Dutchy was somewhat of a blunt nature. "Yes," he nodded.

Bentley squinted at him. "I think you mean that." Two hairy crescents came together above Dutchy's nose. "Why wouldn't I? We don't get a Captain (D) on board at nine o'clock every day, or every bloody year for that matter. A man'd be a nitwit not to wonder why you're here. Seeing as you asked," he ended politely. In his pantry Samson was suddenly not smiling any more. The silly old goat. This was a four-ringed captain . . . One of the bright young boys, with a reputation to keep up.

Bentley's face too was sombre. It had been a long time since he'd been spoken to in that manner, and then there'd been only two rings. He looked at Dutchy, but in the seamed granite face there was no disrespect. The old reprobate was simply waiting for an explanation of the visit. And then young Peter Bentley was remembering certain things, and his face cleared. What was the opposite, he thought, the absolute antithesis of "yes-man"? Whatever the word, the man was here.

"I came to thank you," Bentley said simply.

There it was, out as easily as that. While shaving this morning, and all the way across in the whaler, he had been pondering on what to say, and how. Of necessity he was a hard man. To some extent his sensibilities had been brutalised by the brutality of his present work. There is nothing at all to thanking a man for a glass of beer or the loan of a fiver; no real sincerity in the gesture, for next day or the next week you return the favour. But thanking a man who has saved your life, and your men, and your ship . . . that requires sincerity, and sentiment. And for a long time now, under the stress of responsibility, Peter Bentley had crushed down on sentiment. There was no place for it in a torpedo attack, taking two hundred men in to possible rupturing death, or in depth-charging a submarine into a pressure-flattened coffin. So he had pondered on how he would thank this man, and now, simply, he had done it.

"What?" said Dutchy. "What d'you have to thank me for?"

It was done, yet Bentley was still feeling the embarrassment of it. And now this old fool had to come back with a damn stupid remark like that! Bentley almost felt grateful for the anger which filled him - which if course was defensive.

"Don't act dumb with me," he snapped. "You know bloody well what I mean. Damn it all, you saved my ship. For that, thanks."

Dutchy looked at him for a long moment. Then he turned his head.

"Samson," he said.

This time he did not bellow. There was quiet, curt authority in his tone. Samson obeyed it at once.

"Sir?"

"Go aft and find the first-lieutenant. Tell him the motor-cutter is to be made available to *Wind Rode* on request." Dutchy did not add,

“Take your time about it.” With Samson, who had heard, he did not have to.

“Aye aye, sir,” said the big fellow, and quietly shut the cabin door behind him.

“There was no need for that,” Bentley said. “I’m going now.”

Dutchy did not move. He sat slouched forward in his chair, his wise seaman’s eyes slanted up at Bentley, then he said, “Just hold on a minute, son,” and he used the word in the most natural way in the world, as he would to a son of his own. Bentley eased back in his chair. Dutchy got up and came back with a whisky bottle and two glasses.

“Scotch,” he said. “Don’t ask me how I got it.” Bentley’s tone was stiff. “Not for me, thank you.”

As if he had not spoken Dutchy generously filled both glasses, then followed with a dollop of water. He held out the glass. He nodded.

“You’re all coiled up like a steel spring. I know why. It’s still bad. Here.”

Bentley took the glass. They drank. Dutchy sat down. His smile was sudden and warm and easy.

“There’s a saying. ‘He that would govern others, first should be master of himself.’ Platitude? Sure. But it happens to be true. Hard, but true.”

Bentley had recovered himself. He was feeling less than friendly, but his anger was smothered.

“Funny thing,” he said, but still stiffly, “I’d imagined I was doing all right in that regard.”

“Professionally, sure. How about personally? You shouldn’t have let go at me like that. Like I said, you’re all tensed up inside. You’ve got to back off, boy, ease your revs. It’s a good thing you’re going south for a spell. You need it. Make the most of it.”

All this time Bentley was aware, of course, of the disparity of rank and superiority between them. This junior fellow should be slapped down, hard. He knew this, and all he said was:

“Let go at you? You bloody well asked for it.”

“Not so. I really didn’t expect you to come and thank me.” Dutchy gave a twisted smile like a shrug. “Maybe I’m glad you did, now. But why? You’d have done the same for me, no question about that. Just

a towing job ... But that's beside the point. The real point," Dutchy said, and his eyes on Bentley were shrewd and kind, "is that your nerves are strung tight. Much too tight. It's time for a rest."

"Nonsense. All I need is a good night's sleep."

Dutchy slowly swilled the amber fluid in his glass. "Nerves," he said reflectively, "are funny things. A man can be in tiptop physical shape, on top of the world, everything under control. He thinks. Then a minor detail can make him blow his valve. Like a minute ago. That's all right - here. But it mightn't be so good if the bridge team saw it in a torpedo attack. Eh?"

Bentley looked at him stonily.

"You're suggesting I mightn't be in good shape to lead the flotilla?"

Dutchy grinned at him, then emptied his glass. "That's right," he said.

In the silent cabin the sound of Bentley's in-drawn breath was quite plain. He said, "How old are you, Lieutenant-commander Holland?"

The leathery fellow seemed unfazed. "Used to be Dutchy. Age? I'm nudging forty. Why?"

"That's interesting. It seems age has its advantages. I presume your nerves are in perfect condition? Nothing to worry about at all."

"I'm different."

"Apparently," Bentley sneered.

Dutchy took up the bottle. "Get rid of that and have the other half." He poured. "No," he said, soberly, "I've had my share of nerves. But I get over it quickly."

"Of course."

"You're damn unsociable for a bloke who's drinking my liquor."

"I beg your pardon." Bentley finished his drink and his hand went out to his cap.

"You see," Dutchy said levelly, "I don't have a flotilla on my back."

It was the tone as much as the words that halted Bentley's hand above his cap. He withdrew his hand, and abruptly, with vivid clarity, the memory rushed in. Only the port was different; a destroyer's cabin like this, an older and a younger man like this, the same sort of advice being given. Except that, then, he had been giving the advice to Captain

Sainsbury. It was the fact of its being accepted that had resulted in his getting Sainsbury's flotilla. That was a long, violent time ago. And now . . . ?

Very softly, staring at Dutchy, Bentley said, "My God." The older man hid, he hoped, his surprise at this sudden *volte face*. He reached for his pipe then altered the course of his hand to a cigarette box on the table. "Smoke?" Bentley shook his head. "No thanks."

Carefully, Dutchy said, "It's hit you? You believe me?"

"Yes."

"Responsibility," Dutchy said, making his tone matter-of-fact, "that's the killer. You know your own ship, you can handle her, you can see what she's up to. But with four other captains behind you, four first-lieutenants, four officers of the watch, each one capable of making a balls of it . . . that's what stops your nerves from letting go. The worry's constant, more so in an attack. A commanding-officer in the army," Dutchy smiled, "gets it easy. In this outfit the boss boy's right up there in the trenches, in the van, first one over the top. You're probably the fittest man in your flotilla. But the old nerves - they take a real caning. It's your duty to give 'em a rest."

"Yes."

Bentley's young face looked oddly humble. Dutchy said,

"Even if they're fool enough to try and fly you back to the flotilla, you've got to insist on a spell, if only for a week. I've seen the signs too often."

"Yes."

Dutchy was a wily old bird but he would have given a lot just then to know why this brilliant, nervy young fellow had so suddenly accepted his advice. Looking into the craggy face, Bentley might have read his mind.

"You're a wise old bastard, Dutchy," he smiled. "In some things, sir."

"My name's Peter." "Right, Peter."

"Or maybe it's that other saying the onlooker sees more of the game. Once, I gave the same sort of advice to another captain. Flotilla-leader, too."

Dutchy grinned. "And you're still alive?" "So's he, thank heaven."

Dutchy would have liked to know the name of that flotilla-leader

from the reminiscent smile on his face Bentley must have been younger then, and junior, and not passed-over like himself - but a query there was not permissible. It must have taken some nerve. He said:

“Should be a good ding-bash tonight. We could all do with a spot of relaxing.”

“No argument.” This time Bentley took up his cap. “I’d like my whaler alongside, please.” His tone was the tiniest bit different.

“Yes, sir,” Dutchy answered. He opened his mouth at the pantry, then growled, “That damned lummock. Never here when you want him.” Dutchy stepped out on deck, and presently half of Darwin harbour learned that Jackal’s quartermaster was required at the rush.

Bentley walked slowly to the cabin door, his face thoughtful. Gradually the smile grew, becoming affectionate as he heard Dutchy’s bellow. In most things they could not be further apart, yet in one category they were like brothers, old Sainsbury and Holland. A very wise old fox indeed, this Dutchy Holland:

They were all there to see him over the side - the captain, the first lieutenant, the quartermaster, the bosun’s mate - for this was Captain (Destroyers), and a V.C. to boot - almost, in the close confines of destroyer life, a legend. He was also the man whose life they had saved, which proprietary interest may have accounted for half the ship’s company being on deck to watch the tall wide-shouldered figure run down the ladder to the sea-boat.

The bowman shoved off forrard. The oars went out. The pipes had wailed to silence as Bentley’s head disappeared below the ship’s gunnel. Still carefully at the salute, Matheson muttered:

“How about that party? She’s still on tonight?”

“For me it is,” growled Dutchy. “For you and your bludging mess-mates it’s a matter of stores and ammunition and fuel before you step into a boat.”

“She’ll be apples,” the first-lieutenant grinned. “Wonder if they run to Scotch? Should, seeing as she’s a flotilla-leader with . . .”

“Give way together!” bellowed the sea-boat’s coxswain, and five oar blades dug into the water, and as the whaler moved ahead another voice, louder and more demanding than Billsons’, lifted into the clear blue, sky above Darwin’s cliffs. Almost at once, as if in echo, the siren on the funnel of the old depot ship gave strident tongue.

“Put your backs into it, snapped Bentley, looking upward, and Billson, less formally, advised, “Break them bloody oars!”

Dutchy spoke over his shoulder as he went forward. “Special sea-dutymen. Sound action.”

CHAPTER TWO

NEVER MIND about loyalty and tradition and training and fear of punishment - the sense of self-preservation is the finest discipline of all. There was no need for Dutchy to mention special sea-duty men. The first jangle of the alarm told this selected body of men what was required unless the ship was to remain a sitting-duck target they had to get her moving, fast. On mess-decks and upper-deck and store compartments they dropped whatever they were doing and rushed to the foc's'le, and the wheelhouse and the leadsmen's chains. And the leading stoker responsible for working the cable holders was not very far behind them. The engine and boiler-rooms, of course, were already manned by a steaming watch. So that Dutchy had only time to place on his bullet head his steel helmet before she was ready. He made a brief circling movement with one forefinger and down at the foc's'le Matheson shouted.

“Heave in!”

She had only one anchor down. The cable-holder, in effect a capstan, was steam-powered and very strong. It had no trouble at all in winding in the tonnage of iron chain. The links came grinding in over the lip of the hawsepipe, thudded on the deck's protective scotchman and disappeared down through the navel pipe into the cable locker. Even now, with gun barrels swinging, men hosed and scrubbed with brooms at the cables as it came in, for harbour mud creates a most foul stench if left to accumulate in the bottom of the locker. It is an unpleasant job to clean it out.

On the bridge all eyes were trained on the sky to seaward, which was to the west. The Japs almost always came in from the sea, not bothering with the subterfuge of swinging in from the landward side, for Darwin's defences to date had been meagre. Matheson voiced his thoughts.

“It'll be the same approach,” he said to Dutchy. “They don't know two destroyers have come in.”

“Don't kid yourself,” Dutchy growled. “I reckon we've brought on this raid.”

“You mean someone got word out from Damar?”

“And someone guessed we'd head straight for Darwin. But maybe

they don't know *Wind Rode's* guns are all in commission."

Matheson grinned nervily. "That's nice. Ten 4.7's. A handy barrage."

"If we can bloody well get moving," Dutchy growled. But neither officer shouted adjurations down to the foc's'le; it could be assumed the cable party weren't reading books. And presently the cable was up and down, and then the anchor was aweigh, which enabled a relieved captain to order:

"Port thirty. Half-ahead starb'd, slow astern port." Normally counter-revolving, now the two big screws were turning together in the same direction, pulling her stern to the right and her sharp stem to the left, toward the anti-submarine boom, and *Wind Rode*.

The Leader was still at anchor. She could do nothing else in the harbour's tideway, for though her rudder had been heaved back to a neutral position amidships,

her screws were still inoperative under the damage caused by that shore battery's last salvo back on Damar. So far as avoiding action was concerned *Wind Rode* was a cripple. But Dutchy could see her twin mountings training as they tested mechanism, and the pom-pom's multiple barrels sniffing skyward, and then she spoke to him.

"I should be glad of your company," Bentley's voice came from the R/T speaker.

It was an order, of course, but Dutchy knew the value of men who were tensed believing that their leaders were not. He took up the hand mike.

"Company? I was heading for the wide blue yonder. You'll attract too many mosquitoes."

"No argument. Leave some beer for us in Fremantle." A loud-speakered voice travels some distance on a still morning in harbour; there could be some younger crew members who might misconstrue those last words. Dutchy said:

"Some hope. Towing ship enters first, remember." Then his voice changed. "My intention is to steam up and down past your stern. I suggest separate control at individual targets. We don't mount enough armament for a box barrage."

Bentley's voice too was crisp. "Concur. I have no radar contact yet. There must have been a recto report from well out. Watch those

wrecks. Over and out.”

The speaker clicked off. Matheson said: “Funnel right ahead, sir.”

That was an unusual report, yet strictly accurate, for the ship was in an unusual position. Bombed in the first raid, the freighter had settled squarely on the bottom, upright, and though her masts had toppled, her single rusty funnel stuck up as a warning evidence of the tangle waiting beneath it.

“Port fifteen,” Dutchy said, then he looked at the navigation officer.

It was a brief glance, but Pilot understood its import perfectly. When the panic started it would be his job to see that the ship was kept clear of this and other wrecks fouling the harbour. The captain of course would control the ship, but there could be times when his attention was fully engaged elsewhere, and this battleground was no wide-open sea. He would need help in navigating.

They rounded the stern of the sunken ship, seeing the oil which still welled from her belly like black blood, smelling its stink, heeding the warning. And just over there, totally submerged, lay the remains of the U.S. destroyer *Peary*, her fighting done, but her memory vitally alive, as always it would be. Under a concentrated and vicious onslaught of bombs and cannon shell *Peary* had dipped her bow and cocked up her stern, and on her stern a gun crew had fired their last shot as the hungry impatient sea reached up for them. But now the placid water glinted in the sunlight above the gallant little ships’ grave. “Starb’d fifteen.”

Jackal’s bow came round, to line-up on the boom entrance. That would be Dutchy’s heading on the westward leg of his protective patrol; coming back he would simply pass clear of *Wind Rode’s* stern, then turn again. Thus he would never be too far from her, which would present the Jap planes with a fairly concentrated volume of fire. “Radar?” he said.

“No contact yet, sir.” Matheson raised his binoculars, but after a moment lowered them. He grinned. “I hope to hell *Wind Rode* doesn’t take a bomb in her liquor store.”

Taken literally, that was a crude and heartless thing to say. But Dutchy made no reprimand; he knew the apprehension and tension which were behind the jocularity, which gave it birth. Indeed, and for the same reasons, he answered in kind.

“It would be bloody stiff luck. Then you’d have to take over your own supply.”

“That’ll be the day . . .” Matheson started, and a disembodied voice cut across him.

“Radar officer . . . bridge. Contact bearing three-one-oh, range thirty miles. Large formation of aircraft, approaching.”

Half a dozen glasses lifted and trained on the northwest. Unrewardingly. Not even black dots. No sound. Yet. But stomachs started to clench.

“They feel sure of themselves,” Dutchy muttered, referring to the direct approach of the enemy. He glanced at his yeoman. “Pass that to *Wind Rode*.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Though it was limited in range, it was possible an English-speaking pilot might pick up a R/T transmission; the yeoman used his light. Through the staccato clatter of the shutters Matheson was thinking that no wonder they were coming in without subterfuge; they must know that one destroyer was so damaged she’d had to be towed, and apart from a couple of sloops and a few corvettes - the latter quite useless against high or medium-level attacks - there was no other defence on the harbour. What the shore had in the way of anti-aircraft batteries he did not know, but he felt certain it could not be much. Of one thing he was sure. *Wind Rode* and *Jackal* would have to defend themselves.

“Starb’d twenty,” Dutchy ordered. “Come round on the return leg. Go on to twenty-five knots.”

He did not explain the increase in speed; to the bridge team its reason was apparent. It doesn’t take long for aircraft to travel thirty miles. Dutchy wanted to be round and once again on the westward leg by the time they arrived, running toward them with only her narrow-gutted length presented and with her two forward big guns able to bear.

As Pilot straightened her up Dutchy glanced at *Wind Rode*. She was lying roughly north-south, which presented her broadside to the enemy’s line of approach. That was bad, offering as it did a target of 350 feet long, but nothing could be done, and at least like that all six of her main guns were bearing.

He noticed her cable snaking into the water, and for a second he thought of suggesting that it should be made ready for slipping. The idea was stillborn. It would be highly unpleasant towing a cripple round a harbour under air attack. He had to keep his own ship free.

Then Dutchy's attention was concentrated.

"Port lookout . . . bridge. Bearing right astern, aircraft! Angle of sight four-five, coming towards."

The glasses swung, and this time were rewarded.

"At least thirty," Matheson said. "Medium-level bombers."

"Complete with a dozen or so Zeros," Dutchy amended. "They're the ones we have to watch."

The bridge fell silent again. No one mentioned *Wind Rode*, whose men would watch - and wait. A Fleet destroyer has a good chance of slipping a stick of bombs.

Some men may have considered the almost certain possibility that the immobile ship could attract most of the attention, thus diverting it from themselves. But no one mentioned that either. They waited taut-minded and silent and determined, knowing the fear would evaporate with the slam of the opening broadside, and knowing, inarticulately, that they would do everything in the power of their eyes and hands and guns to protect the ship they had already saved once.

Dutchy looked aft along the ship's length; seeing Bludger Bent on the layer's seat of the eight-barrelled pom-pom and his trainer Olaf Jackson opposite, both men peering into the westward sky: then the oerlikon crews, who could not do much unless the Zeros came in close - which could be counted upon - and further aft the torpedo tube and depth charge crews; all waiting, all looking to seaward. The whole ship was a tense island of waiting. Dutchy took out the public address mike.

"Tube and depth charge crews take cover."

They were normally brave men, but not foolishly so; they stood not upon the order of their going. Dutchy replaced the mike and took the engine-room phone. "Engineer officer."

Mr. Baxter also was waiting. He answered at once. "Baxter, sir."

"All well, Chief?" "No complaints." "My Gawd. You sick or something?"

These two men had never gone ashore together, and probably never would; they had never visited each other's homes nor met any relatives; in rank they were poles apart. And in knowledge and trust of each other they were closer than twin brothers. Each, in his own field, was expert. Each relied totally on the other. Veritably, they were comrades.

"Sick of being kept in the dark," Mr. Baxter answered
Don't whisper a word about it, will you?"

No one else could hear, of course. Dutchy chuckled. "That's what I called you about. Any minute now we'll be attacked by thirty bombers and a dozen Zeros. We may have to do a bit of manoeuvring."

"I'll give you all the power you want. All you've got to do is slip the bastards."

"Leave it to me. Oh, Chief?" "Yes?"

"I'll try and let you know to abandon ship in time." There was an unprintable sound, then the phone went dead. Dutchy smiled as he replaced his receiver. When he turned round his face was sombre. There was another sound now the deep, powered drone of massed engines. It beat down from the smiling blue sky and enveloped the harbour with menace. They were visible to the naked eye, coming from the direction of Melville Island, heading straight for the cliffs, a flock of vultures.

Dutchy took out the hand mike. He made no rousing appeal, he said nothing of patriotism or loyalty, nor offered any encouragement. He knew these men.

"This is the captain," he said. "Shoot fast and straight, you bludgers. Stand-by."

The bludgers earned their pay that morning.

Their unspoken but natural hope that the town would be the target was unfulfilled. The bombers sailed high above the harbour in terrible serenity and unloaded the first sticks of bombs. Amongst them, small black flowers with a lick of flame in the centre, burst the evidence of the destroyers' challenge. The two sloops with their four-inchers had joined in and from a cliff top ashore there came the timed flashes of a battery's discharge. But the main reception came from the Fleet destroyers, firing fast with their power-rammed semi-automatic guns.

The first bombs appeared.

They dropped like black eggs from the spawning belly their release. Then the heavier foreparts pulled the noses down, and the air took hold of the guiding vanes. Direct and steady in a forward curving parabola they headed towards the water.

The bombers flew on. They left one behind. No one could tell which ship or battery got him, no one really cared. It must have been close to a direct hit, for his port wing sheared off and dropped like a falling leaf. Bereft of its balance, the plane started to slowly turn. It headed downward at increasing speed and the resistant air took charge and the turn became a violent spin. The harbour waited.

Someone reported this success to Dutchy. He raised an acknowledging hand but otherwise he was uninterested. His ship was about to pass *Wind Rode's* stern and all his attention was on the shearing black blobs. Timing and judgement and experience combined to form his decision. "Hard-a-port!" he snapped. "Half astern port!"

She was at high speed and she swung cat-quick, leaning, driving away from the bombs' line of approach. Then both she and *Wind Rode* ceased firing, for it is a waste of ammunition to fire at a fast receding target. The racket eased. Sweating gunners looked back over their shoulders, back towards *Wind Rode*.

His ship silent about him, Bentley waited. Seconds now. There was absolutely nothing he could do. Other men, Randall amongst them, were watching the fighters in case they came in while the bombers were turning. Bentley watched the bombs. In them, in those filled steel casings rested his life, and his ship's. It would be cruelly hard to lose her now, after the saving.

The first of the stick met the water.

Water is soft, sometimes. When an object travelling at hundreds of miles an hour meets it, water is like concrete. The firing needle was jammed back on the detonator and the bomb expended itself in a gout of whiteness, coloured black at the base. One two three four, faster than a man's running feet hitting the ground, the rest of the stick jumped to meet her, each harsh contact a burst of white.

Bentley's flesh crawled.

No more than fifty feet out the column jetted upward. Sound slammed against his ears and whining things tore over the bridge. There was less than a second left him, yet he knew in that tiny split of

time that the next bomb must hit her.

The bomb hit. The same blast of sound. The shrill tearing of white-hot steel. The ship shuddered. In a fractured instant Bentley knew that he was unhurt. He stared forward, then swivelled to look aft. As his head swung his eyes caught sight of the white spout to starboard, then another and another, and he was aware of the miracle. The bombs had straddled her, but they had not hit.

“Jesus,” Randall breathed; and from the director came “Bombers turning for another run,” and Bentley snapped. “Open fire.”

“Commence, commence, commence,” said Lasenby in the director.

This was the executive order to open in anti-aircraft fire. It went down to the transmitting station and forward and aft to the hot guns. The settings went on the fuses of the shells. They were dropped into the loading trays and power-rammed into the breeches. Smoke-trickling muzzles lifted skyward. Warning fire buzzers hooted. Loading numbers leapt clear of the breech-blocks, for those recoiling blocks of steel or the ejected cartridge cases could crush in a man’s chest. There was a second’s silence, then *Wind Rode* roared. On the turn back, *Jackal* bared her own teeth.

They were in the rhythm of it now, loading fast and smooth and sure. Lasenby too had settled down, with his director crew. It was beautiful shooting, the full broadside of six guns bearing; black blossoms just ahead of the bomber formation and right for height, balking them, hurling their jagged slivers forward to meet the approaching planes, firing one in an abrupt and vivid splash of orange flame.

Beautiful shooting, as good as ever she’d done. So that it was understandable that Lasenby could not believe his earphones, and failed instantly to implement the order, thus letting the guns loose another broadside. The order had been “Cease firing.”

The guns fired and the order came again, this time in a familiar and harshly unmistakable voice. There was no doubt at all. Lasenby recovered from his disbelief and bellowed so that the guns might have heard him without benefit of wiring. *Wind Rode* fell silent. Frowning with concern - they had only a minute or so left in which to halt or break up the approaching formation - Lasenby looked out and around.

At first he saw a sight as unbelievable as the captain's order had been; the bombers were swinging to the south, away from the harbour and town, aborting their attack yet still pursued by black puffs which he assumed came from *Jackal*. Then why the hell . . . ?" Then Lasenby heard Bentley's shout. "Pass that to *Jackal*, smack it about man!" and looking above and behind the bombers at last he knew.

It was a long time since Lasenby had been in Darwin, and so he knew nothing at all of the town's defences. But he was a man trained to identify an aircraft instantly when its silhouette was thrown on a screen for only a second. He had no trouble at all in picking the type of plane forming the squadron which was now diving straight on to the backs of the Jap bombers.

"Achtung!" Lasenby said, having got that also from a screen. "Spitfire." And then, softly as a prayer, "You bloody little beauty!"

At that moment on the decks of two Fleet destroyers there were perhaps a hundred men heartfully endorsing that sentiment. Sweating, shells in their arms, they heard the high wild snarl of supercharged motors and the faint hammer of cannon. Celestial music indeed.

There were no cheers. This lot was too hardened for that. But as the Zeros climbed upward to shepherd what was left of the bombers, and the whole snarling pack moved out over the sea, the comments came.

"Bloody Air Force," said Leading-seaman Billson, but grinning Cheshirely, "how come they took so long?" And: "What a pity;" said Randall, gunnery-officer as well as first lieutenant, "we were smack on for height and range. Might've wiped the lot."

His hearers believed that as much as he did himself, but the words were an excuse to release the grins, and so make the fellow next to you believe you were grinning only at Number One's humour, and not because you were nearly wetting your pants with relief.

But two men remained practical, even through their own enervating relief. Bentley ordered his gunnery and search radar sets to remain on guard, and told Randall to take a damage party below and check for any openings from those close-range slams. Dutchy used his R/T.

"*Wind Rode* this is *Jackal*. Have you sprung any leaks? I'm not coming aboard a bloody sieve tonight. Over." Now that sort of query and statement were inexcusable from a commanding-officer, but

Captain Bentley was coming to know his colleagues very well, and right then he didn't give much of a damn for correct forms of address. It is quite nasty being a sitting-duck target for bombs, but very nice when you've weathered the drop. His grin was malicious as he took up the phone.

"This is Bentley. Thank you for your interest. Those bombs were pretty close. I wouldn't be surprised if we were badly holed below waterline. Your concern about tonight is understandable. Perhaps it might be better if we visited you instead? Let me see now ... myself, Number One, Pilot - oh, I'd say about ten of us altogether. I'm afraid they're rather a thirsty lot, but I'm sure you can manage. What d'you think? Over."

Silence.

Bentley pressed his transmitting button. "Hello, *Jackal*. Just a minute ... What was that, Number One?" Randall failed to answer - being somewhere on the foc's'le messdeck. "Good, good. D'you read me, *Jackal*? Over."

Pause. Click. Grins - on the Leader's bridge. "Hearing you loud and clear. Over." If not actually reluctant, Dutchy's voice sounded suspicious.

"I've just had a report. We're quite all right, sound as a bell. We'll let the original arrangements stand. Okay with you?"

Pause, while Dutchy tried to rein on his lack of reluctance. Then:

"Fine, sir, just fine. Ah, I mean about your ship, of course. Good to know you're undamaged. See you tonight, then." And with indecent haste, "Over and out."

Dutchy replaced his instrument with a "Phew" of relief. He frowned at young Matheson.

"What are you grinning at, you ape? We damn near had our liquor stocks wiped out."

Matheson shook his head. "Uh uh. He played you for a sucker. You came right in on that one."

"Eh? What're you gabbing about?"

"Look." Matheson pointed. They were passing *Wind Rode's* stern. Even without glasses Dutchy could see the big blocky figure near the funnel. "He's just come from the messdeck," Matheson gloated, "he was nowhere near the bridge. No damage report yet."

Dutchy stared, and then he frowned. But he was an honest man, one to credit an equal in foxiness. "Well I'm buggered," he grinned. "Bright lad, that feller." But Dutchy was also philosophical, able to take the good with the bad. "We'll learn 'em," he said, "tonight. The locusts are in. Our wardroom bar's closed today. I want empty bellies with me. By the time we leave they won't have a sniff of grog left."

The bridge officers laughed with him, being a dutiful lot. Dutchy patted his belly and gazed complacently around the harbour. Then the grin wiped off and the bellow erupted.

"Christ! Hard-a-port. Full ahead starb'd, full astern port! Get it on, man!"

They got it on just in time. She slipped past the waiting rock of a funnel with feet to spare, so that looking down over the side they could see a murky tangle of submerged steel which in another few seconds they may well have joined.

"Midships. Half-ahead together." And, ominously. "Pilot."

"Yes, sir. I was listening to . . ." Pilot squared his shoulders. "Sorry, sir, I failed to watch that wreck."

It had been just as much the captain's fault. But the captain is the captain. This one stared at his victim with condemning belligerence and growled:

"I've a damn good mind to keep you aboard tonight." Then he loosened his face in a fine show of magnanimity. "Don't let it happen again. Now let's get this bucket stapled to the bottom before you run us up in the main street."

"Aye aye, sir," said Pilot, who liked his grog, and took his bearings.

Being a Leader, *Wind Rode* carried extra officers, so that altogether there were crowded into her wardroom about twenty men. Destroyers don't run to such work-diluting luxuries as supply-officers, paymasters, meteorological officers and suchlike, so that most of those here gathered were executive officers or engineers. But as each engineer had on his slop chit about 40,000 horsepower, he privately claimed himself, and perhaps rightly, to be just as executive as a Ping or a Torps. It's no bloody good at all, as Mr. Baxter or Mr. McGuire would opine at the cracking of a steam valve, having bloody great guns and torpedoes and depth charges without the engines to get 'em there. To which, of course, Ping or Torps would answer that it's no

good getting there if you don't have anything to fight with. But then the rivalry between upper-deck and engine-room is as old as steam, and, especially in destroyers, it is a tongue-in-cheek business. Between these officers was the ultimate respect each man's life depended on the other's knowledge and competence. This makes for well-oiled harmony.

There had been differences, there always would be; they were men. But on this night in this shipwide mess the only differences were physical, or in the liquor level in glasses. There were tall men and short men, some bulky and others spare; most with skins burned to the colour of old leather yet some, like Baxter, with faces untouched by the sun - possibly because he seldom saw it, nor wanted to. Black-gangers find fresh air abhorrent. It lacks bite. Almost literally, they live on the smell of an oily rag Perfume.

With one exception, they were very young; considering that at some time of the day or night one of these fellows in his early twenties would be in charge of a million dollars' worth of ship, two thousand tons of it, and two hundred men; capable of handling the men and the ship, and fighting it. This youngster was a professional ~seaman and navigator, he could control guns and torpedoes and depth charges, he used radar and asdic, he was familiar with Morse code and signals and he could use wireless communications. And he was finely disciplined. Was ever an army or air force officer of comparable rank loaded with such responsibility, or so comprehensively capable?

The exception was over there in the corner with his superior officer. He was old enough to be father to most of them, yet - if this were thinkable - any one of those youngsters would have been unwise to take him on physically. His had been a spartan life, and while his face looked like oak, his body was damn near as tough. Right now he was doing his best to deteriorate his liver.

"The other half?" Bentley smiled, taking the empty glass.

"I might consider it."

A captain's life might be one long responsibility, yet there are privileges. The wardroom was packed and the stewards were flat out like lizards drinking, but in something, like six seconds after Bentley raised his eyebrows towards the pantry his hand and Dutchy's were again coldly filled. Dutchy made no comment on this speed of response

- he was used to it in his own address, or else someone better have a damn good reason why not.

There were other privileges. Each captain had his own ashtray, and a low table on which to rest his glass. Around them in this rumbustious room there remained a small island of cleared space. Insignificant things, you might say from the party-filled comfort of your living room. But say that no one in this wardroom carried any marks of rank - then to a professional observer the above mentioned signs would stand out like a shout. There in that corner, he would instantly know, stood the gods.

The ranking god had an ulterior motive. "You're finding it a bit noisy?" he asked politely. Dutchy too was polite. "Hell, no," he lied, "I can stand it. Good to see 'em letting go."

"Personally, I'd sooner listen to full broadsides." They smiled at each other.

On the way out Bentley spoke to his first lieutenant. He did not have to call him. Randall had forced his way to the door, for in a wardroom with two captains present a first lieutenant is like a chameleon, whose eyes can look two different ways at once.

"You're not leaving us so soon, sir?" Randall protested.

Bentley looked at his guest thoughtfully. "A diplomat, would you say? Wasted?"

"Just a bloody liar," Dutchy grinned.

This was not quite fair, as you know, for unlike Dutchy and Baxter, Randall had been 'ashore many times with his superior, in the pursuit of questionable practices, and personally he would have liked Bentley to stay, as well as his guest.

But facts are facts, and there was no doubt the party would not get really rolling until August Authority had departed. Not all of them had been with Bentley when he'd joined . . .

But Randall was not offended, officially or personally -how could he be when the words had been delivered through such a face-bisecting grin? Then Bentley said, "Midnight, Bob," and the mention of that time seemed to possess some strange alchemy - at least it produced the light of joy in Randall's face.

Dutchy frowned a little. Obviously Bentley meant that the party was to be over by midnight, the wardroom cleared. Didn't this Randall

bloke like parties? Worse didn't he like grog?

"I'll see to it, sir," Randall nodded. "You'll be in your cabin?"

"Yes."

"I'll send Jarret up."

"Leave him here. Looks like you need him. I might be able to tilt a bottle by myself."

"Thank you, sir. Goodnight, sir," Randall said to Dutchy.

"Night, Number One."

The two captains mounted the ladder to the torpedo space.

Normally at anchor it is not vitally necessary for an officer of the day to be on the quarterdeck for the whole of his night watch. Tonight, this one was. Both captains were wryly aware of the reason, but their faces remained impassive.

"Cabin, Pilot," Bentley said. "Aye aye, sir."

They walked forward along the iron-deck past the two-quintuple banks of tubes, past the porn-porn platform and the funnel. There were many men on deck smoking and yarning, for the night was warm, but Bentley had his cap held beneath his upper arm and so, at this known sign, no man stood up. He showed Dutchy into his cabin.

"This is more like it," the old fellow grunted, sinking into an armchair one of the few comforts the cabin conceded to the hazard of fire. Most of the furnishings were steel or aluminium, though carpet was laid over the corticene of the deck. "Thanks." He took the Scotch.

Dutchy drank, put down his glass and felt in his pockets. A little too quickly Bentley shoved across a box of cigarettes. "Help yourself."

Dutchy's mouth twitched. He said, reflectively:

"That ding-bash down aft. The men must hear it, they know what's going on. In the mess-decks they're dry. I've often wondered how they feel about this."

"So did I, until one day I asked my chief bosun's mate. He told me they didn't give a damn."

"Oh?"

Bentley lit both cigarettes. "The reason being that officers are supposed to be intelligently restrained in their intake, and there's less than a dozen of them. But Hooky Walker tells me that his chiefs and petty-officers wouldn't like a couple of hundred men on the mess-decks to have free access to liquor. Come to think of it, neither would

I. What a hell of a mess!"

Dutchy nodded and emptied his glass. His leathery face showed no sign of guilt as Bentley filled the glass. Idly, Bentley said:

"You mentioned something during the fracas this morning about the towing ship being first into harbour-in this case, Fremantle. Were you referring to Jackal? How come?"

Dutchy's tone too was casual. "Just wishful thinking. Nothing miraculous like that happens to me."

Bentley puffed thoughtfully. "It would be no picnic, towing a disabled destroyer almost two thousand miles to Fremantle, then right round to Sydney. It would have to be south-about, of course - I don't fancy dangling on the end of a towline through the Arafura Sea, with Japs about, or through Torres Strait and the Barrier Reef, either."

"It'd be some job," Dutchy nodded. He added, carelessly, "They'll be sending up a couple of ocean-going tugs?"

"Yes, that would be ideal. Unfortunately there aren't any available, not the big powerful ones we'd require for a haul like that. And, of course, a tug has no defensive armament, it can't contact or tackle submarines, things like that."

Dutchy pursed his lips in agreement. "That's so." "And then there's the other factor the Navy likes to handle its own problems in its own way."

"Yes." Dutchy took up his glass, drank, and gently placed it on the table. He did not look at Bentley.

"What have we here, now?" Bentley said, his eyes frowning at the deckhead. "The only possibilities are Swan and Warrego. But they're both sloops, only a thousand tons displacement; two thousand horsepower and sixteen knots. I don't fancy that. What do you think?"

Very softly, Dutchy said, "I think you're a sadistic bastard." Then his eyes pleaded. "For God's sake, Peter . . . yes or no?"

For a long moment their eyes held. Then Bentley took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket.

"Early this morning," he said, "I made a signal to Navy Office. Here's the reply."

Dutchy took it. He tried to take it without eagerness, without his hand trembling. In this bit of coarse white paper lay the boon of unhopd for privileges. He and his men had been up here for many

long hard months, almost constantly at sea, in constant danger. This signal could condemn them to much more of the same - *Jackal* was in perfect shape, there were no valid reasons why she should be taken off her station. Or it could send them to the bliss of home, and leave, and comfort and above all, for strained nerves, to safety.

Dutchy opened the signal and read it.

Through the distant decision of some unknown officer in a building in Melbourne, Captain Peter Bentley was to have his ship prepared for towing. A suitable hawser was to be provided by the boom-defence establishment in Darwin. His ship was to be taken in tow by H.M.A.S. *Jackal*, and delivered as expeditiously as possible to the care of Cockatoo Dockyard in Sydney.

Dutchy laid the signal on the table. He took up his glass and sent the lot south. He glanced at Bentley, then looked away.

“Then it’s us,” he said, and angrily coughed his throat clear.

“You,” Bentley said. “I couldn’t think of a better man.” Again, their eyes held. “That’ll cost you a drink,” Dutchy growled, his eyes dancing.

Bentley obliged. “It’ll be a long hard haul, Dutchy. We won’t get zephyrs all the way.”

Dutchy nodded soberly. “Something over four thousand miles, say an average speed of ten knots, just to make it easy. M’mmm. Three weeks, near as dammit.”

“More like a month.”

“Could be. We’ll be sick of the sight of each other.” “A definite possibility.”

Dutchy looked round. “You don’t happen to have a large-scale chart here?”

“Plenty. In the chart room. In the morning. Say nine o’clock. Get rid of that.”

Dutchy obeyed and handed his glass across. He watched Bentley pour and only his eyes saw his thoughts were winging across a continent. Weather, towlines parting, submarines they were nothing, they were always there. A month, less if their luck held, would see him with Marion, and the boy. The young shaver was halfway towards eleven; probably grown a few . . .

“I’ve checked with the boom-defence people,” Bentley said, and

Dutchy pulled his attention back. “They have a 41-inch hawser available.”

“Fine. But I’d like a spring as well.” “That’s on tap, too - a 13-inch manila.” Dutchy smiled. “All we have to do is hook up.” Bentley returned the smile. Both men knew how much hard and greasy work was ahead of them. Bentley said: “We’ll get cracking on the wires first thing in the morning. That’s why I told Randall to clear ‘em off by midnight. Heads will be hot enough without hangovers.” “So that’s why he grinned like an ape,” Dutchy mused. “He knew.”

“Sorry I didn’t let you in on it earlier, but I wanted to deliver the joyous news personally.”

“Joyous is right! Marion and the kid will think all their Christmases . . .”

Dutchy’s voice stopped abruptly. His hand went to the cigarette box, dropped it, and took up his glass instead. Bentley looked at him curiously. Once before he had tried to get at the domestic background of the captain who was to serve temporarily under him, and had got nowhere. Now, after what had happened back in Mystery Bay, his interest was more kind than curious.

“Marion?” he said. “Your wife?”

Dutchy’s tone was gruff. “I told you before I’m not married.”

“Oh? Yes, of course. So you did.” Bentley smiled. It was a nice smile. “Marion’s the prospective bride? Or your sister?”

“Persistent, aren’t you?” There was denial in the growl.

“No, interested. I certainly don’t mean to be offensive.” After a moment of silence Bentley said, quite softly: “Dutchy, what’s the trouble?”

“Father Confessor, yet,” Dutchy snarled. “What the hell makes you think I’m in trouble?”

Bentley had been nervy that morning but he was relaxed now. “You do, old chap. Your secretiveness. You mention a girl’s name and when I ask a perfectly ordinary question you close up like a Senhouse slip.”

“You’ve got a bloody hide.”

“You didn’t have, I suppose, when you told me my nerves were shot to pieces?”

“That was a professional discussion. Until my domestic affairs

affect the command of my ship they're of no concern to the navy, or anyone else."

The eyes were hard, the voice was raspy. Slowly the younger man blew a breath of smoke.

"You're quite right. Sorry." Bentley butted his cigarette. "These towing arrangements, now. With such a long tow I suggest we use a couple of shackles of cable at each end . . ."

Dutchy's abrupt rising from his chair stopped Bentley, and surprised him. But, he did not speak as Dutchy started pacing the cabin. Dutchy came back and halted by the table, looking down at Bentley.

"My apologies," he said gruffly. "I've been a graceless old bastard so long . . ."

"Forget it. Take the weight off." Dutchy sat down. "Peter."

"Yes."

Dutchy hesitated; then quickly, as if taking a plunge, he said:

"I'm living with this woman. Marion, and her boy. In Sydney."

Now Bentley surprised him. "I see," he said calmly.

"Why?"

Dutchy looked at him suspiciously, but saw only interested kindness in the steady grey eyes; plainly Bentley wanted a fuller answer than the obvious one.

"She's married. Her husband's a swine. He won't divorce her, even though he's left her."

"Couldn't she get him on desertion?"

"To make that stick she's got to ask him back for twenty-one days. Return of conjugal rights, all that. If he refuses, you're okay. But this mongrel would come back if only for one night, just to spite her. And one night's enough. After that you have to start all over again."

"I see. But why doesn't he . . . well, rid himself of a woman he can't love?"

"Why should he? He gets all he wants. One of these slimy good-looking bastards. It's me that sticks in his claw. She's not costing him anything - I'm looking after that. And the treatment, the doctors."

"Doctors?"

"Yes," Dutchy said, and ashed his cigarette with false casualness. "You see, Marion's blind."

“Oh God no!”

Dutchy took a stiff pull. “It damn near breaks me up - after not seeing her for a long time, you know? You forget. And then you see...”

“Hell, Dutchy, I’m sorry about this.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you know. Matheson does. It helps, someone knowing. You can ... well, talk about it, just like an ordinary bloke about his girl, even if you can’t have anybody out home.”

“I’d like to come out home.”

“Yes,” Dutchy said, looking at him. “Yes, I’d like that.” And he began to see that things other than professional competence had rocketed this young fellow so high up the scale.

Bentley leaned forward. “Marion’s blindness. These days, surely something can be done about it?”

“No hope.” Dutchy thought a moment. He said, slowly, “Opacity of the crystalline lens or cornea.”

Bentley judged he had learned the technical term by heart. He said, “Would you mind repeating that?”

“Why?”

“Go on.”

“Opacity of the crystalline lens.”

“That’s very interesting,” Bentley said, but Dutchy could not tell whether for some reason he meant it, or was simply being polite. Then Bentley seemed about to add something, but changed his mind.

He said, “I’d like to have you and Marion out for dinner. There’s my mother and young sister, who Randall’s fool enough to want to marry. We’ll make a night of it!”

“Yes.” Marion would love that; meeting his Service friends, something he’d steered away from. She’d take to this young feller, and Randall seemed all right. He must be, to be here. Dutchy said:

“Provided Jackal gets leave.”

Bentley smiled. “After a tow like that I’d say you’d be right for at least a week’s leave. I’ll certainly recommend it, for what that’s worth.”

“Recommend it to the rear-admiral at Potts Point.” “Truman? You know him?”

“We joined together. That’s why,” the old fellow said carefully, “I get independent command.”

Bentley chuckled. “Don’t worry. I remember the last time I invited

you to join my flotilla. You're safe."

"I'd cut that bloody towline if I wasn't." . "And I wouldn't put it past you. Here."

Dutchy put out his hand. "No more, if you don't mind. Reckon I'll need all the sleep I can get. How about sending for my boat?"

This was outrageous. You leave royalty, or a senior captain, when he has intimated that he has finished with you. But Bentley was not offended; in fact he had trouble holding back his grin. For he found this oaken-faced old

fox refreshingly blunt, and Dutchy had saved his life, and now his superb seamanship was to be used to save his ship again.

"Certainly," Bentley said, and pressed a buzzer. "How about a breath of freshers?"

A few minutes later he had seen his guest over the side. He did not go back to the vociferous gaiety but returned to his cabin. There was a whirl of considerations to occupy his mind-towing arrangements, breaking strains, times, distances, prevailing winds, unexpected winds, stores, action in the event of attack yet the flotilla-leader seemed intent on ignoring all these claims on his attention. Instead he sat down at his desk and wrote a letter.

It was quite a long letter, with a good deal of it referring to a certain action he had recently been in - which emphasis on things naval was somewhat surprising, considering that from the address Bentley wrote on the envelope Sir Roger Nesbitt, the recipient, had nothing whatever to do with the navy.

Bentley read it through, sealed and stamped the envelope, and then propped it on the table where it would not be forgotten. Then he stepped out on to the foc's'le deck, stood for a moment looking across at Jackal's darkened shape, and murmured something which to a seaman lying awake on B-gundeck above him sounded like, "Dear old bastard." Then Bentley started pacing up and down, to the silent displeasure of the seaman, and now his thoughts were on what they properly should have been - towing hawsers and springs and cables.

CHAPTER THREE

PREPARING, and actually taking in tow, a ship destined for a haul of four thousand miles is a highly technical business, one with which you will not be bored. If this miscalculates your interest, then a study of the *Manual of Seamanship*, Volume Two, is recommended. Though it would have been difficult to get hold of one of these estimable tomes in either *Wind Rode* or *Jackal* on the day after the wardroom party. They were all in jealous use, even if by young officers who seemed to squint a good deal as they read, and held hands to heads that might be supposed to be aching. The mental condition of these officers was not helped by the fact that their captains were so obviously and damnably clear-eyed and-headed, and demanded work and concentration commensurate with their own physical state.

But at last all was done, by which time *Wind Rode's* intake had been completely sweated out again, which might indicate that the temperance people have a point after all. Waste is a bad thing . . .

The start of the haul was easy. Bright and early two days after the party, *Jackal* eased alongside her sister and was there secured, with her stern stuck out past *Wind Rode's* and her screws and rudder thus clear for working. This was the attitude she had taken when nudging the cripple out of Mystery Bay, essential when working in confined waters.

Dutchy's bridge was a little abaft the other, in easy hailing range. He had satisfied himself that all the securing lines were set, and was about to give his first engine order, when suddenly he turned away from Pilot waiting behind him and thumped his fist on the curved-over top of the windbreak.

"A bloody man's losing his grip," the yeoman heard him mutter. Then Dutchy raised his voice to *Wind Rode's* bridge. "I forgot to ask if you can steer."

"I forgot to tell you," Bentley smiled back. "Yes, well enough. Proceed when ready."

"Thank the Lord for that," Dutchy mumbled, and louder, "Standby."

He spoke to Pilot.

If was a bit dicey edging her past that funnel-protruding wreck,

but after that, clear sailing to the boom gate. Here the fit was close, and only the slackness of water allowed them through without scraping. But they had allowed for that; it was one of the myriad points discussed after the party. Held tight, *Jackal* shouldered her charge out into the blessed acreage of the Timor Sea. Dutchy took her well down toward Bynoe Harbour and well out from the coast, then he dragged her to a stop and cast off. They went about passing the tow.

Destroyers do not carry padres, which was just as well. Both the Devil and the Deity were frequently called upon that day, in terms not heard from a pulpit. A 4½-inch steel wire hawser is large to grip, very heavy to handle, and slippery with linseed oil; a 13-inch manilla is so thick you can't get your fingers right round it; while iron cable, of course, designed to hold 2000 tons of ship, is more awkward than a shoe lace to handle.

The length of tow had to be quite long, so that the wire would form a catenary, or dipping curve right under the water, and thus come up gently as the weight came on, and not form a straight bar of steel which might part under a sudden tug. For hours they heaved and cursed and sweated, and all the time, spurring them, adding the sweat of fear to that of toil, was the unpleasant possibility that a flock of bombers might catch them like this.

Because of their routine lives sailors like novelty. But novelty prolonged becomes deathly boring. No one cheered, but neither was there any regret expressed, when at long last Matheson reported:

“Tow secured. Ready to proceed.”

Now the two destroyers, well apart, were joined like this. From the towing slip on *Jackal's* stem ran the big manilla rope. It was joined to the wire hawser. The hawser was shackled with a swivel piece to about fifty fathoms of anchor cable. The cable was double-bitted on *Wind Rode's* foc's'le. Thus there was a spring at either lying in the stretch capacity of the rope and in the lifting and falling of the iron cable. It was intended that the towline should never become bar-taut. Nor would it - unless they ran into a cyclone.

While the bridge waited, Dutchy took a final look at the situation. The wind was only a mild breeze, the sea was gently swelling, yet *Wind Rode* had cantakerously swung almost broadside-on to the line

of advance. He would have to pull her round, and he would have to be very careful about that, for the inertia of her 2000 tons would make her reluctant to turn. Once her sharp stem was pointed in the right direction things would be, easier.

Dutchy towelled at his bare head with a sweat rag. He stuffed it in his hip pocket. "Here we go," he growled, and then, crisply, "Slow ahead together. Dead slow."

Slow ahead was not an arbitrary degree of power; not a third of her available speed, which would have meant twelve knots. It is only a general indication of the speed wanted, and can be altered to a specific requirement by the sending down of revolutions. In a destroyer nine revolutions of the screws roughly equals one knot. But in any case Mr. Baxter was warned, and under his watchful guidance his engine-room artificers fed the turbines their steam very very slowly. She had superheated pressure in her boilers for 40,000 horsepower, more than that of a light aircraft carrier seven times their size, but only a trickle of this was allowed through. The gleaming twin shafts began to turn, and the big four-bladed propellers followed in obedience.

Jackal shivered a little, and moved ahead.

Word has been passed to Wind Rode. Bentley warned his coxswain to standby. All of her 200 men were personally concerned, but Chief Petty-officer Rennie was the only one practically concerned, for he was at the wheel of the powerless ship. She had steam up but this was allowed only to service her generators and electrical

Rennie had known he was in for a tough voyage. He was the best steersman in the ship, and she would have to be steered very close. He had selected four quartermasters for this job, all leading-seamen, but if the weather worsened Rennie knew where he would find himself, and he might have to stay there until it eased. But now, at this crucial time, he was fresh and alert.

The ship was barely rolling yet Rennie stood behind the wheel with his legs straddled like a pair of dividers; he had held this pose for so long over so many years that he could stand no other way. His eyes were magnetised to the compass card, for the black lubber's line would give the first indication of her swing, and his white-haired head was close to the belled mouth of the bridge voice pipe. On each

side of him the telegraphsmen waited silent and alert. Though not needed for their normal task, they had closed-up automatically with special sea-duty-men, and Rennie might need a messenger.

Bentley's voice came down the pipe. "Taking the strain."

"Aye aye, sir." Rennie's eyes did not leave the compass.

Every other eye on deck was on the tow. Where before the cable had dangled straight down into the water, now it was swaying a little, and altering its angle upward. Far down under the water the steel hawser was straightening its curve. *Wind Rode's* bow was aimed at the west.

From beside the binnacle Pilot said, "Coming round, sir."

"Pass that to Jackal."

Now the cable was at an angle of about forty-five degrees, and the bow was swinging a little faster. Through his glasses Dutchy could see this, but he kept the same revs on. No point in increasing speed yet - and no point in slowing, either, for then the manilla rope would dangle, and any sort of rope has a marked penchant for tangling with moving screws.

Then *Wind Rode's* navigator said, "Heading 230, sir," which was almost southwest, and the course of their first leg to clear Cape Londonderry.

"Steer 230," Bentley said.

"Two-three-oh, sir," answered Rennie, and a moment later, "Steady on 230, sir."

"Very well. Pass that."

Dutchy got the word with relief. Towing was bad enough, but he had been worried about *Wind Rode's* steering capabilities. Without her rudder operative she would have yawed all over the place, putting a dangerous added strain on the two. They seemed to have fixed that satisfactorily. Dutchy did not think of the sweating work it had entailed, clearing the jammed-over rudder; he had his own immediate problems. He got on the quarterdeck phone to Matheson.

"How's she holding?" "All secure, sir."

"I'm going on. Watch it." "Aye aye, sir."

Dutchy replaced the phone. He kept staring aft, giving it another minute. At the end of her umbilical cord *Wind Rode* was coming along as placidly as a child's toy on its string. Her bow-wave was

small but she was steering steady, straight up Jackal's wake, and only the manilla and the cable were in sight.

"Take her up," Dutchy said. "Four revs at a time." The order went down, the throttle wheels cracked open a little. The first hint of white showed under her tail. Like the sound of a giant turning in bed, the manilla creaked. Dutchy took up the phone.

"All well," he was answered. "Right. Another foul revs."

It took some time, while every second the tow both ends was devotedly watched, for this first increasing strain would tell whether or not their work had been done well, but at last Dutchy was up to 90 revolutions. He let her run like that for two minutes, then he got on the blower to Bentley.

"I'm up to ten knots, sir. I think she'll take eleven." "Concur. Everything's fine this end."

"Well thank Christ for that," Dutchy said, but to himself. Aloud he ordered, "one double-oh revolutions." The extra strain came on. The towing slip bit into the eye of the manilla, the big rope squeezed and groaned, and held. The cripple's bow-wave rose comfortingly higher. She steered steady. The long haul had successfully begun.

Dutchy rolled across the compass platform and plumped his stern down on his high-legged stool in the corner. His head was sparsely covered with hair but the epidermis was tough, but even its leatheriness was bitten into by the near-Equatorial sun. Dutchy wore a cap as infrequently as he could. Instead he draped over his scone the old sweat rag, which sorry-seeming but highly practical article he was never without when at sea. A voice broke in on his pleasant musings.

"Excuse me, sir."

But the voice was several yards away, and no one addressed him from that distance unless it referred to a streaking torpedo or such like, so Dutchy ignored it. He heard Pilot say, "Yes, what is it?" and then he heard:

"I thought I'd remind you, sir. A ship towing or not under command is required by daylight to carry, one above the other not less than six feet apart, two black balls, sir. As a towing vessel we're not under command, sir, but we're not carrying the required signal."

"Good God!" jerked Dutchy, and swung on his stool. He stared,

then he said, "Who the hell are you?"

The man addressed was a leading-seaman. He winced visibly at the rasp in that voice but then he recovered himself, and delivered a hand-quivering salute to the rag-headed figure in the corner. "Leading-seaman Theobald, sir."

It was a long time since Dutchy had been saluted like that, and never in his own ship. Examining the deliverer, he saw a good-looking, dark-haired man of no more than twenty, tall and muscled, and dressed correctly in ironed khaki short and shirts, with long khaki stockings and polished black shoes. This made him distinctive - apart from the officers on watch he was the only man in the ship thus attired.

"Theobald," Dutchy repeated. He knew the faces and names of all his ship's company. This fellow he had never seen before. "Where the devil did you spring from?"

"From *Melville*, sir." This was the shore depot. "I joined just before sailing."

"Replacements, sir," Pilot offered, now over his astonishment and trying hard to hide his grin. "Those two men we lost at Damar."

"I see. Welcome aboard, Leading-seaman Theobald." The leathery face looked friendly, the words sounded the same.

"Why, thank you, sir. As a matter of fact, I'm quite pleased to be here. I've always wanted to serve in . . ." "And what the hell d'you mean by coming up here and questioning my Rules of the Road knowledge?" the blast rode over him.

"Well, sir, I . . ."

"How long have- you had that hook on your arm?" "Two months, sir."

"Two . . . whole . . . months." Nods of the sweat-ragged head punctuated the words. Then Dutchy noticed the concern in the young face, and the grins of the bosun's mate and signalman, and remembered that whatever else this incredible new arrival might be, he was still a leading seaman, now before junior ratings.

"I suppose you know your Rules of the Road pretty well, eh?" he said, in a conciliatory tone that to Theobald

sounded just- this side of the crack of doom. But the lad seemed game, "I got 98 per cent when I passed for leading-seaman, sir."

“Well, now, that is something. And what did they give you for hidebound brass?” .

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

Dutchy recalled himself. He sent a glare at the bosun’s mate and signalman that sent them hurriedly round to the halliards out of sight. Then he said:

“It is not the place of a leading-seaman, no matter how highly qualified, to advise the captain or his bridge officers on the conduct of the ship.”

“No, sir. Of course not, sir. Normally I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Glad to hear it,” Dutchy nodded.

“But in this case, sir, the requirements of a towing vessel haven’t been fulfilled. I assume that the bridge was preoccupied with the passing of the tow, sir. I waited. But when the black balls still were not hoisted I considered it my duty to remind the bridge, sir.”

Dutchy turned his head away. He looked aft at the tow, he looked round the smiling sea, he examined a seagull practising landing circuits round the crow’s nest. Then he looked back at Leading-seaman Theobald and in a controlled voice he said:

“Look there. To your right. At the back of the flag-deck.”

Theobald swallowed. He looked. “What do you see?”

“Ah ... two black balls, sir.”

“What is the present state of those two black balls?” “Well, sir, they’re bent on to a halliard.”

“Fine, fine. Now why would you imagine they are bent on to a halliard?”

“I suppose . . . for hoisting, sir.”

“Excellent! Now, does that satisfy you that we’re not all morons up here?”

“Well, sir, I don’t think you’re a moron.”

“Thank you,” said Dutchy, and glared at Pilot, who turned his quaking stomach away.

“Just the same, sir, might I point out that another approaching vessel would not be able to see those black balls.”

“You think they should be hoisted to the yardarm.” “Why, of course, sir.”

Looking back, Pilot knew that the old devil was enjoying this,

just as he knew that Theobald didn't know. "Leading-seaman Theobald."

"Sir?"

"It's only a minor point, no doubt, when considered with the importance of Rules of the Road - but is it a fact in your opinion that any approaching vessel would know the meaning of those balls if they were hoisted?"

"Why, yes, sir. Rules of the Road are international." "Quite so. Then will you agree that any captain - say, just for the sake of argument, a submarine captain - would similarly realise their meaning if we hoisted them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Even - again for the sake of argument - a Japanese captain?"

"Ah . . .," said Theobald.

"Yes, 'Ah.' Though a Jap skipper finding two destroyers not under command might bloody well say something like 'Banzai!' or 'Come in, suckers.' Eh?"

Theobald swallowed. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir, didn't stop to think..."

Dutchy held no belief in the old Service statement. Instead, he said:

"You're paid to think. That's why they gave you that killick or your arm. You're a leader of men. If you want to stay that way you'd better pull your socks up.

Got it?" "Yes, sir." "That's all." "Aye aye, sir."

Poor Theobald saluted and doubled from the bridge; in that too he was distinctive; here.

"My Gawd," Dutchy groaned. "wait till Bludger Bent and co. get hold of that!"

"Or vice versa," said Pilot.

Dutchy nodded slowly. "Yes, he's too starchy altogether. Might cause strife. Tell Bertie to keep an eye on him. I don't want him lowered over the side on a thin piece of string one dark night."

"Will do. Just the same sir, it took guts to come up with that little lot. As he saw it, he was right."

"Guts in this ship," Dutchy said, "I have plenty of. Friction I can do without." He swung denyingly on his stool, and then suddenly he

said, "Well I'm damned," and then he bellowed, "You, that man there, on the bridge!"

A few second later the bridge ladder rattled, but leisurely.

What is the absolute opposite of "starchy," or of Theobald? Anyway, it stepped on to the compass platform in the form of a middle-aged man of wide shoulders and a face which a bald head and a claw of a nose made vulturine. Being bare-chested, there were no good-conduct badges visible to indicate time in the Service, but the whole of him, from the roll of his walk and the easiness of his grin, from the verdigris on his seaman's knife and the bright metal of its blade to the salted whiteness of his sandals, declaimed in an incontrovertible statement . . . "Old hand."

"G'day, sir," he said. And staring from his to the captain's-matching grin, Pilot would not have been surprised if he had said, "G'day, Dutchy."

Dutchy rolled off his stool. "Well I'll be . . . Angus bloody Seyless! Ha h'mm. Well, Able seaman Seyless, welcome aboard. God help us."

"Thanks, sir. Though it ain't my fault I'm here." "Mmmm. Still got your three badges?"

"All three of 'em."

"Miracle! How come you're here?"

"One day I'll get that . . . Yessir. Well, there I was, billiard marker down in Flinders. Nice sweet berth. Then this flannel-headed clown in the draftin' office got his flamin' digits mixed and next thing I know I'm in Darwin."

"And now here. You couldn't have heard, of course, that we're towing a ship to Sydney?"

"No, sir," said Able seaman Seyless, and grinned affirmation in his new captain's face.

"Mmmm. What's your job here?"

"Ain't been given one yet, sir. Gotta see the Swain now."

"Who of course you know." "Joined with 'im, sir."

"Yes. All right, Seyless. Keep your nose clean." "Allus have, sir, you know that."

"My God. That's all." "Yessir."

Angus saluted - at least his right hand started a flopping motion

which reached almost level with his shoulder. He ambled off the bridge.

“Pilot, I’ll make a little wager with you.”

Pilot had done this before. “You won’t, sir, but what is it?”

“I’ll bet you a bee to a bull’s foot that in five minutes from now that bloke is detailed off as bathroom sweeper.” “But that’s one of the sweetest cops in the ship!” “That’s what I mean.”

“But he’s just joined. How can he work a thing- like that?”

“Wrinkles, my boy. Bloody old Angus knows more wrinkles than you’ve had hot dinners. He’s an institution.” “Not a messdeck lawyer, I hope.”

Dutchy shot him a sharp glance. After a moment he said, musingly, “That fellow saved my Service career once. I was up to my silly young neck, or could have been. Angus took the can. It cost him two good conduct badges, and damn near a spell in cells.”

Pilot’s frowning silence said, “And you let him take it?”

Dutchy’s smile was reminiscent. “I protested, naturally, but he reckoned that he was overdue to lose ‘em anyway; the weight was too heavy on his arm . . .”

“Then you think, sir, he’s a pretty taut hand?”

“Think? That man . . .” Dutchy sought for the word. “That man is a bottler.” His head nodded and the sweat rag moved restlessly. “Yes,” he said. “Put him in Theobald’s mess. It’ll make or break him - and I don’t mean old Angus.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SERVITUDE of the sea is austere. The sea is a hard master, and woe befall those who challenge its authority, or fail to give it the due of unremitting watchfulness and total respect. The sea can lull its users into a sense of false security, and it can strike suddenly.

Dutchy Holland was as respectful a seaman as he was experienced. So that as he paced back and forth across the compass platform at four o'clock of the following afternoon, he ignored the calmness of air and sea about him and instead kept looking ahead, out to where small lumps of black marred the otherwise even marriage of sea and sky. He halted by the binnacle.

"Nimbus," he said to the first lieutenant, who had the dogwatch. "We could be running into strife."

"Maybe it's just rain." "Maybe."

"Should we warn *Wind Rode* to standby to veer cable?"

This might be necessary if the sea got up, to ensure that both ships met the waves and rode over them together, instead of one being in a trough and the other in a crest, when the tow line could slacken and then tighten with a jerk.

"I think Captain Bentley might have that in mind," Dutchy said.

"Yes, I suppose he will." To cover what he should have realised himself, young Matheson shook his head and said, "Y'know, I was thinking. It'll be a hell of a thing if we have to cast off the tow, or it parts. God! It would take half a day to get it passed again. All that wire to be heaved in..."

"For God's sake," Dutchy snarled, "think of something cheerful, can't you?"

"Sorry." To cover that gaffe, Matheson smiled. "I hear tell an old shipmate of yours has joined?"

"We've served together, yes." "How come he saved your hide?"

"Mind your own bloody business. That wardroom's a blasted old hen's coop."

Matheson was feeling pretty chipper. They were on their way, and a few nimbus clouds didn't worry him as much as it seemed to his captain. Next stop, Fremantle ...

He said, "You know Seyless, of course, but I would have picked

him for a skulker, one of the wily old hands who knows where not to be when there's dirty work around."

Dutchy looked at him. "You couldn't pick your bloody nose."

"Well, well, our new rating has a champion. I'll have to step wary with him."

"Might be a good idea. Otherwise you could learn something."

"Funny, funny. We're in good form this ... Say, those clouds got up there damn quick!"

Dutchy had been looking astern. His head swung.

Bloody quick, he thought. For about twenty degrees above the horizon the southern sky was covered.

"There's wind in that lot," he muttered. "Gimme the R/T."

His conversation with Bentley was brief and without argument. The evidence of the clouds was plain. "Let's hope we won't have to get below five knots," he ended. "Yes. Over and out."

Dutchy handed the instrument back. Just then the ladder rattled, with a slow heavy tread, and a curt voice commanded, "Double up there, get a move on."

Their heads turned. Able seaman Seyless stepped on to the bridge. He had a cap on, which was all right, but also his shirt, which was singular. He was followed by Leading-seaman Theobald, wearing a set face.

"Oh God no," Dutchy muttered, and turned his back. Obviously a defaulter, Angus was stood in front of the officer of the watch. "Off caps," snapped the prosecutor. "Able-seaman Seyless, sir. Was found skulking on the iron-deck messdeck."

Dutchy leaned his head against his hand.

"Under what circumstances?" said Matheson. "It's after four o'clock."

"Yessir. But I detailed Seyless as cook ... " "Able-seaman Seyless."

"Yessir. Sorry, sir. I detailed Able-seaman Seyless as cook of the mess. The mess table was not cleared, sir. I found him skulking in the hammock bin. He was reading a . . . magazine."

"Wasn't a magazine," said Angus stolidly. "Was a cunny book."

"Keep silent. A what?" Matheson said to Theobald. The younger man flushed.

“One of those filthy little books from Port Said, sir.” “Oh.” Matheson had been in Port Said. He kept his face sober. “How did you know it was a cunny book? You read it?”

“Of course not, sir! I could tell from the title.” “And what was the title?”

“*In a French Girls’ School*, sir.”

“No,” said Angus. “*A Sailor in a French Girls’ School*.” “Keep silent.”

“Yessir.”

“All right, he was reading. You ordered him to clear up the mess table? What did he say?”

“He said supper wasn’t till seven o’clock, sir, which gave him three hours. Then I gave him a direct order to get on with the job.”

“He obeyed it?”

“Well, sir, he started to climb out of the hammock bin. As he did so he said that he was a cook of the mess before I - er - wet my pants, sir. I considered that was insubordination as well as skulking. So I ordered him on to the bridge, sir.”

“I see. Able-seaman Seyless.” “Yessir?”

“What is your normal job?”

“I been detailed as bathroom sweeper, sir.” “Oh.”

“Come again, sir?”

“Nothing. Can you see any reason why you shouldn’t have been detailed as cook of the mess?”

Angus looked puzzled. “Why no sir, course not. I done a bit of mess-cookin’ in me time. But I was feelin’ a bit stonkered, y’see? No harm in gettin’ me bonk down for ten minutes or so, I says to meself. So I did.”

“Tired? But the towing preparations were made days ago. In any case, you had nothing to do with them.” “No, sir, more’s the pity. Wouldn’ta missed that for worlds, always lookin’ for a chance to learn somethin’ new, sir. Might go for me killick’s rate one day.” Dutchy looked heavenward. “What clapped me out was that bathroom, sir. Very dirty work, bathroom sweepin’, y’know. Sweat yer guts out all day long down there.” Angus shrugged. “But a man’s detailed for a job, he’s detailed; that’s all. Only thing to do is get on with the bludger. Which I did. Gotta make a good impression, sir,

just joinin', y'know. That bathroom's shinin' like a baby's arse. Say, you oughter come down and take a gander at it."

"You know perfectly well I can't leave the bridge." "Oh yeah. Yeah, I didn't think of that."

"This is interesting," Matheson said. "I was always given to believe that bathroom sweeper was one of the sweetest cops ... jobs in the ship. He's on his own, he's excused falling-in, he's always showered and shaved ready to go ashore while his shipmates are painting the funnel."

"Ah," said Angus. "It all depends on the sweeper. *Some* bludgers might work like you say. But then there's others who take a real pride in their work, sir, they'd stay behind and miss the first liberty boat just so's they can clean up the mess after their shipmates, sir. Can't help it if I'm one of *them*, sir."

There came an odd sort of half-strangled noise from the direction of the stool. Hastily, Matheson said:

"But all this is beside the point. You were ordered to clean up the mess table and you failed to do so."

"Well, not exactly failed, sir - just postponed it a while. Soon as I leave here that mess'll be cleaned up in three minutes flat. Even if I fall asleep over it . . ."

It was disgusting, and wholly inexcusable, but for the life of him young Matheson could not clear from his mind the image of a sailor loose amongst the girls of a French school. He had read one of those little blue-covered and shockingly printed books. He had tossed it out the port-hole; and he had never forgotten its contents. Now he had to finish this quickly, else he would burst out laughing - or ask Angus for a loan of his literature.

"I'm concerned about your physical state," he said, and managed to make it deadpan. "Nevertheless, you know well enough that when a leading-seaman gives an order it is to be obeyed, without question and at once. You've just joined the ship. That's the only thing that stops me taking a more serious view of this. But it wouldn't be wise for you to come before me again. Understand?"

"Yessir."

"From now on you do as you're told. Get below and clear up the mess. Case dismissed. Carry on, Leading-seaman Theobald."

“Aye aye, sir. On caps! About turn, double march!” Angus doubled two paces then shuffled his way to the ladder. It rattled again, leisurely. Smiling, Matheson crossed to his captain.

“You heard, sir?”

“Yes. I thought this’d happen, but not so soon.”

“I thought it better to let him off. It wasn’t exactly direct disobedience of orders.”

“You did the right thing, Bertie. Just the same, I’ll have to get rid of him.”

“What? I know I said he looked like a skulker, but this was only a minor offence.”

“I don’t mean Seyless,” Dutchy said. “Oh...”

Dutchy slid from his stool. “Better get battened down for a full due, Number One. Looks like trouble in that lot ahead.”

“Aye aye, sir. Bosun’s mate!”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TROUBLE in that lot hit them just before six o'clock.

Before that there had been wind, of course, gradually and steadily increasing with the march of the black clouds up the dome of sky. *Jackal* had begun to move uneasily. But now there was close to a full gale upon them, of a force which the anemometer showed as thirty-five knots. On land this sort of wind is hindered and diluted by the obstruction of trees and hills and buildings, but when

faced by thousands of miles of open sea a wind like that buffets you with great force, and closes your eyes to slits. The chin strap of your cap or souwester is down, otherwise you are bareheaded. It is also quite difficult to talk, even to a man a few feet away: though the men on these two bridges were used to overcoming that.

Jackal was dropping her bow into the troughs readily enough, but as the waves ran past the point of balance her stern rose labouredly under the tonnage of wire dragging it down. The iron chain securing the towing slip to the deck was a rigid length of metal, as if it were solid, and back and forth in the fairlead surged the big manilla, while its fibres creaked loudly in continuous protest. But it had a breaking load of almost sixty tons, and the strain on a rope towing even a battleship is much less than that; at eight knots, about twenty-seven tons.

Jackal was down to five knots. Dutchy rolled away from the chart table and hauled himself up on to the grating round the binnacle.

"I don't like it," he said. The words actually were shouted, and Matheson replied in kind.

"Why? Tow's holding. This wind's too fierce to last long."

Those could be famous last words, but generally they were right enough. Dutchy shook his head.

"I'm thinking of currents. There are none marked, but then this whole coast hasn't been surveyed like Sydney Harbour. It's possible we could be set down on the Holothuria Banks."

Dutchy looked at the R/T, but hesitated. He was in a somewhat novel position. Normally, for obvious reasons, the officer commanding the ship which is towing a cripple is in charge. But that was no sloop or merchant ship; back there was a four-ringed captain,

a Captain (D) and a flotilla-leader, an officer of great comparative eminence. Also a destroyerman the same as himself, not a desk-wallah. Dutchy was in something the position of a plane pilot who has an air vice-marshal sitting behind him. He was also a man whom decisions did not frighten overmuch. He went to the R/T. “Wind Rode this is *Jackal*. Captain to captain.”

A moment, then, “Bentley speaking. Trouble’?”

“Not yet, sir. But I’m a bit worried about being set down on the Holothuria Banks. I’d like to alter out further, maybe out round the Van Cloon Shoal. We’ll roll our guts out for a bit, but that’s better than having our guts ripped out.”

There was a pause, then over the air came a deep chuckle. Dutchy was thinking he hadn’t been all that funny, when Bentley said:

“You won’t believe this, but I’d just made up my mind to call you about Van Cloon.”

“Great minds . . .” muttered Matheson, but the wind took his jibe away.

“Right,” said Dutchy. “I’ll alter now while there’s still light.”

To that decision there was much which the senior captain could have answered, about small alterations at a time to both power and rudder, about the care required and the watch needed on the tow wire. Bentley said: “Understood. Over and out.”

Dutchy replaced the phone. “Clear the upper-deck,” he ordered Matheson, “stand-fast towing watch. Have ‘em take shelter in the quartermaster’s lobby till we’re round. Warn the mess-decks we’re turning to starb’d.” Then he filled the mouth of the wheelhouse voice pipe with his own mouth and spoke to Rennie.

A destroyer is a beautifully built craft, designed through ages of practical experience. But though she has great power, she has to be kept light to garner the full advantage of her strength. She is somewhat less stable than a battleship. Dutchy eased her round to the right a few degrees at a time, and as her bow; and finally her length, came broadside on to wind and seas, *Jackal* started to roll.

You have been out in a yacht or cruiser, and the sea’s got up a bit. Nasty, you think, hanging on, and you’re right. But when a ship starts to really roll, it’s quite smoothing again. By “roll” is meant scuppers-under, not the soup-sliding gentle waltz of a great ocean liner. *Jackal’s*

roll seemed so great and dangerous - and not only to Leading-seaman Theobald, presently in his first destroyer - because watching it you saw more than three hundred feet of ship lean over crazily, and the lofty foremast sweep fast across the clouds. You wondered how in heaven's name could all that tonnage of metal possibly heave itself upright again; while meantime the hungry sea came washing whitely in through the guardrails, which made it unwise to be caught down there on her narrow-gutted waist.

But all her men were under safe protection, and she was cunningly designed, and she shed her load of white and up she came again - to be clubbed over heavily the other side. And again and again and again, in an endless, plate-straining fight against the unforgiving sea. The waiting sea. Waiting for the least fault in material, the slightest inattention to duty of the coxswain or the captain. Then, so enormous was the tonnage of water in those mile-long waves, her stern might be belted round and she would broach-to, when a succession of waves, catching her off-guard and helpless, might hammer her right over past the critical degree of list. And that would be the end of her.

The same applied to *Wind Rode*, of course. More so. For where *Jackal* could thrust with all her horsepower if the tow parted, her sister would simply wallow - the butt of everything the great waves could hurl against her.

Yet both ships could ride out a gale like this, or even a cyclone; provided they were properly handled.

These ships being were being handled with a combination of something like thirty years' seagoing experience. And every ounce, every second of it, was needed.

Jackal had been straining for half an hour, dragging her cripple to the westward to round Van Cloon Shoal, when Dutchy saw the lifebuoy sentry on X-gun deck up to something strange. He seemed to have his knife in his hand, and with it he was beating against the deck. But against the wind's howl Dutchy could hear nothing.

Then he saw the door in the superstructure open and out came the captain of the iron deck, the petty-officer in charge of the towing watch. His head craned up and the lifebuoy sentry shouted down to him, words which Dutchy had no hope of catching. The petty-officer waved an acknowledging hand and then he started to go aft round

the support of X-gun.

Now that petty-officer was an experienced hand, and Dutchy knew there must be something wrong with the tow to make him risk a passage along the low-sided, unprotected quarterdeck. He knocked Matheson's arm and pointed, and together they watched. Dutchy was ready beside the wheelhouse voice pipe, though he knew there was little he could do if a man went overboard. The drill for that sort of emergency was simple and well-practised, but you can't stop the screw on the side a man goes over, or swing the ship in that direction to clear him from the stern, when the ship's literally tied down and just holding her own against a full gale.

The petty-officer had chosen the lee side, which here was the starb'd side. He had his life jacket on and a lifeline had been rigged right aft, and this wire rope he was gripping with both hands. The waves ran against her side and exploded in a flying wash of white right across the quarterdeck. In a moment he was dripping wet, but still he went on, hand over hand, stopping every few feet, bracing himself against the onslaught of spray, until finally he was out of sight behind Y-gun.

On the reeling bridge they hung on and waited. Dutchy's mind was a whirl of conjecture and possible actions. He had to assume the worst, and that was that for some reason the tow was in danger of parting. If it did break - and from the petty-officer's concern it would break this end - then *Wind Rode* would have to haul in hundreds of fathoms of it, which would take a long time, with every minute subjecting her to the danger of capsizing, or serious damage. And if she did manage to get the tow inboard, it would mean one hell of a job passing it again. He would have to use a shorter wire this time, just enough to keep her head into it while they hove-to until this damn wind ...

The howl of a phone sliced across his calculations. *Jackal* was very clever with her telephones. They were sound-powered, which meant that she still had communication even if all her electrical power failed. To gain attention you whirled a small handle, which resulted in a banshee wail the other end, strident enough to be heard in a hurricane.

Dutchy grabbed out the phone. "Captain speaking." "Petty-officer

Millsom, sir. I've just had a look at the tow."

"I know. Well?"

"It's the scotchman round the manilla, sir. Rubbed clean through."

Dutchy understood at once. Heavy-duty canvas had been wrapped round the manilla rope where it went through the guiding fairlead, and seized with spun-yarn. That scotchman had been on for a fair while now, rubbing constantly. Before, with wind and seas ahead, the big rope had just stretched and contracted easily, with small movement. But now, broadside on to the weather, *Jackal* was rolling and screwing, and the rope would be sliding back and fourth in the fairlead, and its metal had rasped through the canvas. Next would come the rope. With that strain on it, no strand must be weakened.

"You'll have to renew the scotchman," Dutchy said. There was much Petty-officer Millsom could have said to that, and most of it would have been rightly concerned with danger. He said: "Aye aye, sir."

Neither privately nor aloud did Dutchy comment on this disciplined acceptance of his order - Millsom was a trained seaman, he would be simply doing his job. With his mouth close to the phone Dutchy said:

"Rig a strong tackle on the ensign staff to lift the manilla. Use three layers of canvas, doubled over. Seize it with 1¹/₄-inch hemp. That should hold till we can turn into it."

"Yessir."

"Who've you got there in the lobby?" Millsom told him.

"No, you'll need staid hands. Two will do. And, Millsom."

"Better make 'em volunteers."

In those few words lay all Dutchy's awareness of the danger of the task he had ordered.

"Aye aye, sir."

Dutchy juggled the phone back. He looked not at his watch but up at the sky to the westward. The clouds were dark grey, almost black, and they sagged; pregnant with rain. It would be dark soon, and down on the open quarterdeck they could not risk showing a light. It was unlikely a submarine would be surfaced in this, but at thirty feet down it could be fairly stable, and a periscope can reach up thirty feet.

Matheson handled himself over, his face anxious. "What's the trouble?"

"Scotchman's worn through."

"Oh." Matheson was silent a moment, looking aft and thinking about the nastiness of what would be normally a simple job. "Funny, that," he said. All the strength in that tow, yet a bit of canvas can undermine it."

"Very funny," Dutchy growled. "Get extra hands up here with lifebuoys. Have 'em keep a bloody sharp lookout."

"Will do. Standby the seaboat?"

"What for? Even if it gets lowered intact it won't last five minutes in this lot. If they go over they'll just have to wait till the weather eases and we can get the motor cutter back to 'em."

"Pleasant prospect. Sure to be sharks about here." "Don't I know that?" Dutchy rasped. "Get on with it." "Aye aye, sir."

A few minutes later Dutchy saw three men making their careful way aft along the iron deck, one behind the other on the lifeline, but apart from the leader whom he assumed to be Millsom, he could not recognise them. They were seabooted and in oilskins and souwesters, and before they had passed the funnel their protective clothing was gleaming wet. He watched, frowning with worry, until all three disappeared behind Y-mounting. Now all he could do was wait.

Normally a job like that would take about ten minutes. But here, with the stern slewing and tilting with irregular frequency, it was a case of one hand for themselves, and often both, while the great rope ground across its confining fairlead, ready to teach an unwary hand a savage lesson.

Half an hour passed, and darkness fell. So did the rain, sheeting down so that what with it and the inflying spray Jackal might have been sailing under a waterfall. Dutchy cursed. Even with night glasses he could just make out the the swaying bulk of *Wind Rode*. If this blasted weather kept up it meant a whole night on bridge, hour after hour of eye-straining discomfort, for he could trust no other single officer, no matter how competent, to ensure that the cripple was still there. Tonight both captains would earn their pay and privileges. It was not much use keeping an eye on the tow for information; even if it parted the wire's great weight and their forward speed would keep

the strain on, so that it would appear there was still something on the other end.

Dutchy eased back the sleeve of his oilskin and peered at the luminous face of his watch. A few minutes later he did the same thing again. He thought of the quarterdeck phone but decided against using it. The phone was perhaps thirty feet away from those three toiling men; they had enough to do without floundering forward to answer damn fool questions. If they were still there . . . In this watery muck no black shape would have been seen going overboard, no cry heard in the wind's uproar.

Dutchy gave it another ten minutes, then could stand it no longer.

"Number One!" "Sir?"

"Better go aft and see what's happening. And for God's sake watch yourself."

Matheson's teeth showed briefly white. "Watch me!" But as he staggered to the ladder and down, his face was grim.

To Dutchy it seemed an hour, but only a few minutes had passed when the phone howled. He plucked it out. "Captain."

It was Matheson's voice. "Evolution completed, sir. All secure. You won't get through that scotchman with a hacksaw."

"Fine, Bertie, fine." Dutchy's relief went invisibly through the wire. "The tow?"

"All serene. I can't see our friend but at least there's a hell of a strain on this end."

"She's still there. Now get those men out of there - nice and slow and sure."

"Will do. Here we come."

A few minutes later Matheson brought his dripping figure to join the other swaying drippers on the bridge. It might have been a signal, an earned dispensation. As he stepped on to the compass platform Pilot shouted, "In position to turn, sir!" and, almost as suddenly as if a celestial tap had been turned off, the rain ceased.

Through a large cleft in the clouds the moon shone benignly down, showing the white-lashed sea and, plainly on her umbilical cord, their charge and cripple.

"Look at it," Dutchy snarled. "I might've bloody well known!"

But relief was full and heartfelt inside him as he gave his orders

to bring tower and towed round to the southward again, facing the seas. Presently it was done, and the little convoy moved on through the night, still plunging, but spared at least that body-racking side-ways reel.

“Damned if the wind’s not easing,” Dutchy growled. “Like I said,” Matheson dead panned, “it was too fierce to last long.”

There was no doubt about it; they had spoken almost normally. Dutchy longed for the pungent bite of his pipe, but the solace was denied him up here. In a black night the flare of a match may be seen a long way, and if a captain can smoke on deck then 200 men cannot be denied the same privilege. Dutchy stuck the thing in his mouth and contented himself with sucking it.

“Good job down there, Bertie,” he said. “Pass that on.”

“Right. Of course they’d almost finished when I got there.”

“Uh huh. Who were they?”

Matheson hesitated, then he said: “Petty-officer Millsom.”

“Damn it all, I know that. Who else?”

“Well now, there was Able-seaman Bent. Yclept Bludger, y’know? He’s on the pom-pom.”

“I’ve had him on my pom-poms for years. I also know his nickname, and why. Who was the third man?” “Ah . . .” said young Matheson.

“Eh? Who?” “Well . . .” “Who, blast your eyes!”

“Able-seaman Angus Seyless.”

“Ah . . .” said old Dutchy. And magnanimously refrained from saying more.

CHAPTER SIX

BY DAWN things were different; the sea looked as if a fairy's breath would not disturb it. There could be no such things as gales or twenty-foot waves. A zephyr of a breeze came at them from the north-west, in just the right direction to cool their faces and take the funnel fumes clear. Dutchy signalled his intention to go on to eleven knots and found no argument with that. The revolutions and the bow-waves rose, along with their spirits. After a blow like yesterday's, surely they could hope for at least a couple of days of serenity like this? Each twenty-four hours notching up 240 miles?

A great golden sun poked his eyebrow over the horizon and smiled at them warmly. The wet decks began to steam. In a few minutes she was dry, leaving the paint on the superstructure covered with a hoarfrost of salt. Yet even that was a blessing - at least 'to two first lieutenants. The hands would be fully and profitably occupied this day.

Then a voice spoke from beside the bridge, and it looked as if the hands could be very fully, and dangerously, occupied.

"Starb'd lookout . . . bridge! Bearing Green four-five, sir - looks like a periscope!"

"Oh God no!" Matheson breathed as he whipped his glasses up.

Dutchy stared, then lowered his glasses and jumped across to look down into the lookout's platform. A young face about eighteen blinked back at him.

"Are you sure?"

"Not real sure, sir. But it looked like one. I thought I'd better..."

"Yes. Was there a wake?" "Didn't notice one, sir." "Any reflections?"

"No, sir, just this black thing like a stick." "Straight up and down?"

"Well, sir, it might've been a little bit slanted, I couldn't tell before a swell hid it."

"You've seen a periscope before?"

"Plenty of times, sir," the youngster answered defensively.

"Right. Yeoman! Make to *Wind Rode*: 'Suspected periscope sighted my starb'd bow. No asdic contact.' " "Aye aye, sir."

The signal found Bentley still on the bridge, enjoying the

morning's coolness before breakfasting in his stuffy cabin. It shocked him with the nasty possibilities, but he reacted with professional swiftness.

"Warn all lookouts," he ordered Randall. "Asdic and duty gun crew. Man the crow's nest, set all depth charges to 'Safe.'" "

Only then did he raise his binoculars and search on the given bearing. But *Wind Rode* was a good deal astern of the sighting point, and aft of the bearing. He could see nothing, and no reports came from a suddenly tensed crew. Randall stepped up beside him.

"D'you think it could be a stick?" he suggested. "How the hell would I know for God's sake!" Randall said nothing but his mouth tightened and he frowned. This was not the first time of late he had been snapped at, when censure was not deserved.

"Crows nest manned, sir," he reported formally. "About time. He knows what he's looking for?" Randall came very close 'to answering, "Naturally."

But while his unimaginative mind had found no reason for the captain's increasing periods of irritation, he had enough sense to answer, "Yes, sir, I told him myself." Bentley grunted and crossed quickly to the R/T. He demanded and got the captain. "Holland, sir."

"What's the strength of this, Dutchy?" Randall was surprised by the name. His captain was normally most circumspect about correct forms of public address; dozens of men would have heard that nickname. "Is it a periscope or not?"

"We haven't determined, sir. Just a second brief glimpse, then a swell hid it. Looks like it might be just . . ."

"Swell be damned. It could have submerged. Slip the tow."

"What? Er - repeat, sir?"

"I said slip the tow. Get out there after it, full speed."

There was a tight little pause. Dutchy's voice was reasonable. "Yes, sir. But I have no asdic contact. There was no wake sighted or reflection from the glass face."

"A stopped submarine makes no wake, damn it all! Slip the tow and make a search."

There was no arguing the rasp in that tone, "Aye aye, sir. Standby to slip. You'll start reeling in?"

"You look after your own job. Soon as you're close to the sighting

position drop a pattern, even if there's no contact. I want him to know we can look after ourselves. Over and out."

Dutchy shoved the phone at Matheson. The youngster's face held a disbelieving look. "Slip the tow? Is he crazy? It'll take hours and hours, all for a bloody stick!"

As he stalked to the binnacle Dutchy's face held a savage look. "Do as you're told," he flung over his shoulder. "Get down there!"

"Aye aye, sir!"

And so a bad case of ragged nerves caused a furore on that lovely peaceful morning. Of course, as every cursing sailor knew, Captain Bentley might be right. If he were, and a Japanese submarine was chased off or sunk, then good on him. But if he were wrong, and thousands of feet of heavy greasy tow had to be recovered and passed again, then damn and blast the big bastard!

They soon found out who was right.

Bereft of her dragging weight *Jackal* picked up her feet smartly and ran. She was at twenty knots when the estimated sighting position was reached. There was 'no echo from asdic. But that meant little - a submarine could be more than a mile away in any direction by now. Neither, to Dutchy's private concern, was there any sign of a black object, periscope or stick.

"Starb'd thrower. Port thrower. Rails."

The order went down and over went the charges. *Jackal* moved on, thrusting her sensitive tail clear. Then behind her and on either side of her wake the placid ocean flashed whitely; there was a second while it seemed to gather itself, and then great mounds of water heaved up, to fling themselves apart in sky-reaching columns of white spray. Thunder beat across the sea.

"Starb'd thirty. Carry out all-round sweep."

She was heeling on the turn when a voice pipe buzzed. Tinny but clear, the voice came down from the crow's nest.

"Astern off the starb'd quarter, large object in the water."

Even as the binoculars whipped up, no one believed that they could be so lucky, that they had despatched a submarine with one pattern. Yet the report had been definite. A moment later Dutchy knew it was accurate. "What do you think, Number One?"

"Large tree trunk, sir, complete with branches. Waterlogged, I'd

say. We blew it to the surface.”

“I concur with that, sir,” Pilot came in. “We’re not so far north of the Fitzroy River mouth. It could have come down from there.”

“Yes.” His face impassive, Dutchy dropped his glasses on their strap. “Midships, steer east. We’ll search for half an hour.”

“We’ve got all day, damn near,” Matheson said bitterly, “before the tow’s recovered.”

“Enough of that! Get down aft and prepare for towing.”

“Prepare for towing. Aye aye, sir.”

Jackal sniffed around on a comprehensive box search. Apart from the captain, no one appeared to be interested. They *were* satisfied; of the crass error in appreciation of Captain Bentley. The old fox had reckoned there was no need to slip the tow but the bright young bastard had known better. Now, for God’s sake, they had to go through all that again. How the hell, it was unkindly queried, did that bloke ever rate his four rings? He oughtn’t to be allowed in charge of a blasted pram! All of which, along with other unprintable comment, was of course quite unfair, even if understandable. Sailors are only amateur psychologists; they could not be expected to know the state of Bentley’s long-suffering nerves.

Yet Bentley was very much aware of them, and of the error he had made, when Yeoman Ferris handed him a signal. And the very fact that it had been made by light and not R/T indicated Dutchy’s appreciation of the touchy situation.

“Suspected periscope proved to be branch of large tree trunk,” Dutchy had said. “Anti-submarine search negative. Please indicate time when tow may be repassed.” “Acknowledge,” Bentley said, his face tight.

The worst part was the waiting.

As *Jackal* slowly circled her charge the crew had little to do, but their leisure was not enjoyed, for all hands knew what was waiting for them at the end of it. The hours passed and they knew that each hour lost meant a loss of ten miles towards home, while at the same time a change in the weather could occur. And when at long last *Wind Rode* signalled that she was ready, and after a long sweating time the tow was secured again, it was two boiling ships’ companies that set course south-ward into the late afternoon.

But neither comment nor apology came from the senior officer, nor should they have. So far as the men under his command knew, he had made a mistake, but it was one made in the line of duty and careful res-ponsibility. Only Dutchy Holland knew that Bentley had acted with unwonted lack of consideration and fore-thought, under the unthinking impulse of nervous strain. But the granitic mask of his face denied discussion. With his ship finally on course he went below for his first real meal in almost twenty hours.

In the dog watches Matheson thought about it, and then decided that it might be a good thing to make a public affair of it. Sailors are not often praised for the work they do, and word of this getting round the ship might help to offset the bitterness he guessed was pre-valent through the mess decks. He sent for the two able-seamen; there was no need to pussyfoot with Petty-officer Millsom, who knew well enough what a job they'd made of it.

"Well," Matheson said pleasantly when they stood before him, "I suppose you're wondering why I sent for you?"

A pair of old hands, these. They weren't wondering in the slightest. Individually and instantly each had cast his mind back over past known misdemeanors when the summons had come, and had soon satisfied themselves that these, at least to bridge authority, remained un-known. And no petty-officer or leading-seaman had come with them, so there would be no off-caps.

"Yes, sir," answered Bludger Bent, "it's not often a man gets sent for on the bridge. I hope we ain't done nothin' wrong, sir."

Matheson kept his face sober. Even so young, he knew a good deal about sailors from his own experience, and this had been enlarged by his mentor, who knew everything about sailors.

"On the contrary, Able-seaman Bent, you have done very well. The captain also thinks so, and he has asked me to pass on those sentiments."

"Thanks, sir."

"And you, Able-seaman Seyless. You must be feeling especially tired after all the work today?"

"Worn to a frazzle, sir. She's hot yakka in the bath-room, I kin tell you, not that I'm complainin'." Matheson frowned a little. "I was referring to passing the tow again."

“Oh, that,” Angus said, without thinking.

“Wait a minute. Come to think of it, I don’t remember seeing you on deck anywhere.”

Angus realised his mistake. “Well, maybe not all the time, sir.”

“Not any of the time. Where were you?”

“Where was I, sir?” Outraged innocence shone from that salt-weathered vulture-beaked face. “Down in me bathroom, o’ course, sir, where I was supposed to be. Workin’ me guts out, I was . . .”

“While the rest of the crew were loafing on the wires, of course?” What had Dutchy intimated? This wily bird knew all the wrinkles, but he’d be in there cracking when the chips were down. As last night he had been.

-Matheson allowed himself as much of a smile as a first lieutenant responsible for the men’s working should. “You don’t want to overstrain -yourself, Seyless.” “Gawd no, sirt” And Angus was-thinking that this Jimmy mightn’t be such a bad bloke after all.

“All right, carry on.” “Aye aye, sir.”

Bludger went down the ladder first. Angus was at its head when Matheson called:

“Oh, Able-seaman Seyless.” Angus rolled back. “The captain was telling me,” Matheson smiled, “that you did him a good turn once.”

“Thought he might remember.”

“He gave me the impression he would never forget it. He ... ah ... must’ve been in pretty bad strife?” “Yessir.”

Angus’s face made the Sphinx look about as expression-less as Red Skelton’s, but Matheson tried again.

“I mean, you lost a couple of good conduct badges. It must have been something really bad, eh?”

“Yessir. Anythin’ else, sir?” “Doesn’t look like it, does it?” “No, sir.”

“All right, you win. Carry on.” “Yessir. But I’ll tell you somethin’.” “Oh?”

“He made up me loss in pay till I got me stripes back again. **And** in them days he wasn’t exactly rollin’ in dough.”

“I see.”

“Yeah,” said Angus, and ambled away.

Each day took them farther south, away from the operating area of Japanese submarines, and as the weather remained fairly friendly, each day brought them some 200 miles closer to Fremantle. There were no further incidents worthy of being recorded in the log, except one - but that was of interest mainly to Leading-seaman Theobald.

When two days out of Fremantle, smoke was sighted on the horizon ahead.

This probably emanated from a friendly freighter, yet it could also be coming from a German raider, or even a pocket battleship. Both destroyers went to action stations.

They were at ten knots and the stranger was making about thirteen, so that the range closed fairly fast. Just about every man aboard *Jackal* would have bet that the approaching ship was friendly, but stomachs were doing strange things just the same. If ever the maxim "You never know" applied, it did so at sea in wartime.

Then his foremast showed, and then his bridge structure, and Dutchy ordered: "Make the challenge."

The correct reply came back. But Allied code books could have been captured, and it was not too far from here that cruiser *Sydney* had met her "innocent" merchantman. *Jackal* remained closed-up at the guns.

And then in their powerful glasses there was no doubt at all. She was only about three thousand tons, and very low in the water; there was neither the range of operation nor the size to carry guns which a raider would require.

"I think we can assume," Dutchy said, "that here comes Darwin's beer supply. Hoist two black balls." Up to the yardarm went the signal proclaiming a ship which was not fully under command of her normal speed and manoeuvrability, and so the purist in Leading-seaman Theobald was at last satisfied.

"There he is," smiled Matheson, and there he was, Dutchy saw, standing on the iron deck near the tubes, looking up at the ball-hung mast with an expression of stern approval. *Bloody pounce*, thought Dutchy, and Pilot said:

"Merchantman altering to port, sir." "Very well."

The freighter gave them a wide berth, which by law she was required to do, but although her captain must have been curious he

made no signals to satisfy his interest; unless your signalmen are highly competent you talk as little as possible with warships, for the navy makes a report on your signalling efficiency. So the little freighter sneaked quietly past and presently was lost to sight astern. The two black balls came down.

But their hoisting had rekindled Dutchy's interest in Theobald. He said, "How's the new killick shaping up?"

Matheson frowned. "Yes and no," he answered. "What the hell does that mean?"

"Well, he does his job all right. Matter of fact he's dead keen. Too keen. It's my impression he was given his rate too soon. I don't think he's mature enough to handle men damn near old enough to be his father."

"You mean he doesn't close the old eye often enough?" "That's it. In fact, he's had two more men up before the officer of the watch."

"Oh hell no! What for?"

"One was a seaman caught not wearing his knife, the other was a stoker who emptied a bucket of slops over the side instead of down the offal chute."

"Damn it all," Dutchy snarled. "That should have been handled without bringing the bridge into it. This sort of thing'll fill up our punishment return."

"Not to worry," Matheson smiled. "I dismissed both cases. Handing out a hefty rocket, of course."

"But that's just as bad, don't you see?" Dutchy frowned. "Three times he's had men up, and three times it's been case dismissed. It's not only Theobald but the rate of leading-seaman that'll suffer if this keeps up. Whether we like it or not, Theobald represents authority, and the men can see authority getting the knock."

"Yes," said Matheson, nodding slowly. "I didn't think of that."

"A cruiser," Dutchy growled, "that's where he should be. All spit and discipline. They'd love him there. He'd get his petty-officer rate in no time. But not here, blast him!" Dutchy paced back and forth across the bridge. He halted and said, "I'd better have a talk with this fellow. Have him come to my cabin. But do it quietly. You send for him first, then tell him I want to see him." "Right."

At a captain's request, you run; at his order, you fly. So that

Commander Holland was feeling less than be-nign when, a full ten minutes after Matheson had left the bridge, there came a knock at his cabin door. "Come," he growled.

Leading-seaman Theobald opened the door and stepped in. In front of him he saw a squat bow-legged figure wearing a glowering face. Dutchy saw, to his surprise, a rating who looked as if he had dressed himself for an admiral's inspection. The khakis were freshly ironed, the shoes shone and the cap gleamed whitely. Dutchy said:

"The first lieutenant told you I wanted to see you?" Theobald was standing to attention. "Yes, sir."

"At ease, for God's sake. Spread your legs. You can't stand like a guardsman in a destroyer. How long since you were told?"

"About ten minutes ago, sir." "Exactly. Why did you take so long?" "Well, sir, I had to shower first, and then . . ." "You what!"

Theobald flinched under the whipcrack, but he answered promptly:

"When the captain sends for me, sir, I believe I should come properly dressed."

You're game enough, I'll hand you that, Dutchy thought. He mellowed a little, and said, "When the captain sends for you, you get up here on the double, no matter how you're dressed. Got that?"

Dutchy was aware that his words weren't strictly fair, and this irritated him. The fellow could have put on a clean pair of shorts, but there was no need to have a blasted shower! He should have known this. Matheson was right; lack of maturity.

"All right," he said. "Sit down." "Thank you, sir."

Dutchy lit a cigarette but did not offer the packet. He said, "This is unofficial, Leading-seaman Theobald. I just want to have a talk with you."

"Yes, sir."

"You've been in the ship only a few days, yet you've run in three men so far. Don't you think that's a bit solid?"

Theobald wet his lips. "I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. The men I put on the bridge were guilty of breaking regulations, sir. One was without his knife and the other I caught throwing . . ."

Dutchy's raised hand stopped him. "Let's stick with this breaking of regulations bit. There are regulations and regulations. Some are less important than others. You follow me?"

“Not clearly, sir.”

“What’s troubling you, then?”

“Well, sir, it seems to me that an offence is an offence. Once you start differentiating between them, then the whole ‘system of discipline is likely to fall down. One man is punished for committing an offence, yet another man is let off for committing a different offence. I don’t mean to be disrespectful, sir, but I’m afraid I can’t follow your line of reasoning.”

Listening in his pantry, Samson waited for the thunder to burst. He was astonished; Dutchy’s voice remained—at least for him—calm.

“What were you doing,” he said, “before you joined the navy?”

“I was at Melbourne University, sir.” “I see. And what were you studying?” “Law, sir.”

“I see,” Dutchy said again, and mentally he groaned. Bright up top, but no real experience whatever, certainly not of handling men. He said:

“Now you listen to this, and heed it well. While you’re aboard this ship you’ll forget whatever you learned of civilian law. It simply doesn’t apply, nor can it. Punishment in the navy doesn’t require a corroborative witness. It’s not a case of one man’s word against another. We can’t possibly work that way. If a senior rating catches a junior rating up to something, then the word of the senior man is accepted and the other is punished. It’s worked that way for a good many years now and I’m sure it will in the future. In all my experience I’ve come across only one case of victimisation of a junior rating by a senior. Any complaint of victimisation is very thoroughly investigated. You follow me so far?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. These three cases of yours, now. All those men were technically guilty of breaking a certain regulation. Technically, I said. But all three were minor offences. You mentioned the breakdown of discipline. The way you’ve been going, you’ll hasten the breakdown. If a man is put on the bridge for the slightest misdemeanour, then the effect of being run in loses its force. You can see that, surely?”

Theobald swallowed. “Begging your pardon, sir, but to me it seems that the opposite is the case. If the men know that they will be run in for every misdemeanour, then they will be very wary about committing

one. As I understand it, sir, that is the very basis of strict discipline.”

“It is the basis,” Dutchy said quietly, “of indiscipline, even possibly mutiny. A ship run like that becomes a hell ship, a ship full of distrust and fear. The basis of good discipline is not strictness, but intelligence. It means knowing when to close an eye to a misdemeanour. I’ll put it this way. Sailors are not fools. Academically, perhaps, they’re well down the scale. But in other things they’re as wise as wolves. If a man is caught, say, carrying a box of matches into a cordite magazine and he is punished -that is intelligent discipline. The other men appreciate his fault and they respect the action taken. But if a man is put through a similar procedure for failing to carry his knife - that is simply harsh, unintelligent discipline, and they respect it not at all. You should have handled those three faults yourself. Torn a strip off ‘em. Given ‘em a solid blast. If they’d repeated the offence, then put ‘em on the bridge. Is that clear enough?” There was a pause before Theobald answered. “Excuse me, sir, but it seems a counsel of perfection. There is nothing laid down as to the degree of fault before a mans action requires him to be taken before the officer of the watch. How am I to know which offence warrants more severe punishment, and which warrants simply a verbal reprimand?”

No, thought Dutchy, you’ll never know, not with your experience; you should be still an able-seaman. He said: “Already you’ve been given three instances of when a reprimand was called for. From those I expect you to judge in future. I don’t want men taken on to the bridge for trivial offences. Deal with them yourself.” A thought slipped in. He looked at Theobald, his glance not unkindly. “Maybe you feel the weight of your leading-seaman’s rate is a bit too heavy, so soon? That you’re a bit young to handle it?”

“Certainly not, sir. I passed-out, well . . . quite highly, sir. An average of ninety-four per cent., sir.”

All theory, Dutchy thought. But he could do nothing more. Some officer had recommended, and some captain had confirmed, Theobald’s leading-seaman’s rate. He could not deprive him of it unless Theobald committed some grave mistake or breach of discipline.

“All right,” Dutchy said, nodding dismissal. “Remember what I said.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Dutchy climbed back to the bridge. Matheson came over.

“Anyjoy?”

“Not much. He’s intelligent all right, but too stuffy, no experience. Trouble is, you can’t take a man’s rate for doing what he thinks is right.” Dutchy shoved out his lower lip. “He doesn’t belong here. He’ll have to go.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

LEADING-SEAMAN Theobald went earlier than Dutchy expected, or wanted. No one - apart from Perth natives - had hoped for leave in Fremantle, for that would have meant slipping and re-passing the tow, and no night on the turps was worth that. The Naval Officer in Charge had done his job well; out into the calm reach between Rottnest Island and the mainland came the oil and stores lighters, and still joined together both ships took what they wanted. Late that afternoon, refuelled, restocked and refurbished with bags of mail, Jackal set course to tug her cripple round the southwestern toe of Australia. Beyond that lay the oft-times unpleasant vagaries of the Great Bight.

Dutchy denied himself the pleasure of opening his mail until after dinner. It was all official mail, except for two letters, for he had no family of his own. He knew the handwriting on those two envelopes - oh, so well - and he opened the boy's first. Teddy's letter was concerned mainly with the model of Jackal which Dutchy had made and given him some months before, and of the jealousy it had inspired amongst the neighbourhood kids. Smiling fondly, Dutchy laid it down and took up the other envelope. This also was addressed in Teddy's large uneven scrawl, but the sheets inside were typewritten. Dutchy never ceased thanking his Maker for the fact that Marion had learned touch-typing before the blindness had come upon her; now he read the pages avidly, and then again more slowly; savouring, as a thirsty man does a glass of water, this sole domestic connection he had with life ashore.

He looked for, but found no mention of her affliction. Either Marion had not seen another specialist, or else she had and the answer had been the same - no hope.

Dutchy laid down the letter and gazed pensively at the bulkhead. He was glad he had told Bentley about her;

it gave him a sweet feeling of comfort. His craggy face smiled. Trouble shared? But all the trouble was Marion's. What the hell had he to worry about? Dutchy was at his regular habit of thinking how brave she was, never complaining, when the voice pipe buzzer sounded.

“Coming on the bearing, sir,” Matheson reported. Dutchy went up top and saw her safely round Leeuwin, and headed for the Bight.

All that night they made a good ten knots, so that noon of the next day found them well into the great cavity in Australia’s belly. And into weather.

Dutchy had expected it, for the Bight can put on a nasty turn, but he was concerned mainly for their progress; the tow had held through weather worse than this. And down here they should not have to worry about submarines. Regretfully but philosophically he dropped back to seven knots. This was still better than the crawl to which that gale south of Darwin had reduced their progress.

Coming in on their beam from the south, the wind was about 24 knots, which in the Beaufort’s scale is tabled as “Strong.” Jackal was rolling, but then a narrow-gutted destroyer would roll in dry dock, as the saying goes, and Dutchy’s appetite was freshening nicely under the crisp whip of the wind. Yet no word had come up from Samson, and so he lingered on the bridge with Pilot, and thus saw it all happen.

Later, he was able to piece it all together with the slowed motion of memory-step by inevitable step. Yet the thing happened quite suddenly, as disaster usually does.

He had been pacing back and forth across the compass platform, now leaning uphill, now walking quickly on tip toes as she rolled down, and for no reason at all he stopped on the starboard edge of the bridge. He looked aft, seeing the thick manilla disappearing into the sea and the cable, looking like black string, appearing the other end under Wind Rode’s stem. She was steering close, he noted-possibly the coxswain on the wheel, or a taut quartermaster. Then movement below him pulled his attention in.

Dutchy would not have recognised either of the two men-they were in oilskins and souwesters -had they not halted near the whaler and looked skyward, as all seamen do when first coming out into the elements. He recognised Seyless and Theobald, and judged that they were on their way aft to relieve the towing watch. Seyless leading, they began to move sternward along the lifeline. Dutchy frowned. What fool had placed those tv. together, alone on the quarterdeck? Then he corrected his own admonition. The captain of the iron deck, to which division both men belonged, could not be expected to treat

them like prima donnas. They were carried in the ship, therefore they should work together. Dutchy watched them handle themselves aft.

He was not alarmed; she was not rolling all that much. In the next instant, as Seyless came abreast of the tubes, alarm jolted in Dutchy's guts.

Seyless was wearing rubber seaboots. The decks were continually lathered with spray. Jackal rolled to starboard. Seyless hung on, Theobald doing the same a few feet behind him. The ship came upright again. Seyless took a step forward. The ship rolled back the opposite way. His foot slipped on the sloping deck. The ship rolled further. Unbalanced, Seyless toppled. His head cracked hard against one of the tubes. His body sagged limply to the deck, and Jackal lifted her port flanks and rolled and dispassionately tossed Seyless through the guardrails into the sea.

Dutchy saw the lifebuoy sentry heave over a lifebuoy. But that was no good to an unconscious man. His head swivelled and he roared:

"Man overboard, starb'd side! Away lifeboat's crew!" Pilot jumped to the public address mike and Dutchy turned back to stare aft. He saw Theobald fling off his oilskin, tug his feet clear of the seaboots and then make for the rails.

"No!" Dutchy bellowed, "belay that! Stay inboard!" Theobald may or may not have heard him. He clambered over the rails, paused a second while he determined the position of the injured Angus, then he dived into the sea.

It was lucky for both of them that the great screws were turning so slowly, otherwise their bodies would have been sucked under and chopped to pieces. Lucky, too, for the lowering of the seaboat, now a lifeboat. She was a whaler, shaped like a surfboat, sharp-ended at both bow and stern, and Petty-officer Millsom took her as fast as they could pull the oars down toward *Wind Rode*.

After a few minutes Matheson said, "I think they've got 'em, sir ... hauling somebody inboard."

"Thanks to Theobald," Dutchy growled. "The man's a fool, but he's guts all through." He gave an order, bringing *Jackal's* speed right down until she was just keeping the strain on the tow. Then, as Matheson ejaculated, "What the hell's going on?" Dutchy raised his binoculars.

All he could see was that the boat's crew seemed to be using their oars in a strange manner -almost as though they were alongside a ship and had been given an order to bear off. The horrible suspicion slid in, was rejected, and returned.

"Oh God no," Dutchy breathed.

But when the boat came under the falls to hook on, the answer was a horrible yes. She had left with five men and a coxswain. She should have come back with eight men. She came back with seven. The extra man was Angus Seyless.

"Petty-officer Millsom on the bridge," Dutchy ordered. Millsom was a middle-sized man of fair complexion. Sunbrowned. He came on to the compass platform and his face was white. He stumbled across to Dutchy, not wholly through the ship's movement, and he gripped the edge of the windbreak. Dutchy knew shock when he saw it. He spoke with deliberate sharpness.

"Where's Theobald? Well? What happened?" "Sharks," Millsom answered, his voice thick. "At least three of 'em."

"Jesus," Matheson breathed. "They got Theobald?"

"Yessir. We got Seyless inboard. We had hold of Theobald... and they came. He was still dangling in the water. Before we could haul him up . . ."

Dutchy swallowed. "They got his legs? Why didn't you bring his body back?"

"Legs?" Bemusedly Millsom shook his head. "There was only his chest..." Abruptly he swung his head away and retched on the deck.

Dutchy gripped his shoulder. "All right, son, take it easy. Go down to the sickbay, take a sedative."

"Sorry, sir, but I never saw anything like . . ." "Forget it. Bosun's mate, bucket and cloth." Millsom weaved to the ladder. The bosun's mate went down behind him, his own face white. Dutchy said, "Take her up, Pilot, seven knots."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jackal moved ahead, felt the strain, overcame it. Both ships increased speed gradually.

"Seven knots, sir."

Dutchy raised a finger in acknowledgement. Matheson said, "Like

you said - gutsy all through.”

Dutchy nodded, looking ahead over the whitecaps. “A pity. I meant to recommend his transfer to a cruiser. He would’ve fitted in there, probably made a pretty taut hand, in time. Tough luck.”

And that was Leading-seaman Theobald’s epitaph. He was lucky; so many men died without even that.

Even the sea seemed to be satisfied with the tribute it had exacted. Apart from a blow off Gabo Island, it

remained amenable, and the tow remained intact. At long last, a few miles off the Heads, *Jackal* delivered her load to a couple of harbour tugs. They shouldered *Wind Rode* to her refitting dock, and *Jackal* berthed alongside Garden Island. There, according to a signal from headquarters, and which Dutchy knew emanated from Rear-admiral Truman, she was to undergo a boiler-clean, and that meant at least a week’s blessed leave.

It was pure coincidence, but she had berthed at precisely the right time - fifteen minutes before four o’clock in the afternoon; four p.m. being the time the first liberty-men are allowed ashore. Dutchy was near the tubes on his way to the wardroom when libertymen of the off-duty watch were piped to fall in. To one of them he muttered:

“Trust you to be in the first boat.”

Angus halted. His grin was a little strained. “Yessir. But there’s only three days’ leave to each watch.” Dutchy of course knew this. He said, “Sydney’s in for a bad time. You keep your nose clean, -you hear me?” “Yessir.” Angus hesitated. “I’m not stayin’ in Sydney.” “Oh? This is your home port.”

“I’m goin’ to Melbourne.”

“By train? That will take up most of your leave.” “Yessir.” Angus fidgeted. “I’m goin’ down to see his mother She lives in Caulfield. He was the only kid. Least I can do.” Angus’ frown defied comment.

“I see,” Dutchy said quietly. “Yes, I think she’ll like that.” For a moment they looked at each other, miles apart, yet close. Then Dutchy said, gruffly, “Well, off you go,” and Angus doubled aft.

Dutchy had an hour to kill before she would be home. He killed it pleasantly in the wardroom. No one talked about Leading-seaman Theobald. They had seen too many men die, their own turn could come not much more than a week from now. Neither did Dutchy

mention Angus' pilgrimage; that was the seaman's business, though now and then Dutchy thought of it, and felt warmed.

At last it was time to go. Matheson saw him over the side.

"You still have my shore phone number, Bertie?" He could not quite bring himself to say "home" number. "Yes, sir. But it'll have to be the admiral himself before I give it to anyone."

"You will, my boy, get on. Goodbye." "Goodbye, sir."

With Pilot beside him, Matheson watched the stocky figure roll toward the dockyard gates. "There goes a man," he said, "who's earned his sleep tonight. Poor devil's hardly been off the bridge for a month."

Pilot, who had also grown familiar with the bridge, was less tenderhearted and more practical. "Come on," he said, "my beer's getting cold."

They clattered below.

This may seem boasting about the bad old days, but it really was harder to get a taxi then than now, even if that strains your belief. But Dutchy did not have to worry about trying, and for this he had to thank the lower-deck grapevine, which, faster than the bush telegraph, had every sailor on Garden Island informed about the epic tow. And just about every sailor in the Fleet - though he would have been surprised about this - knew, or knew of, Dutchy Holland. The driver of the jeep knew Dutchy Holland. He braked to a halt beside him, near that plaque which commemorates the sailing of other men to another earlier war.

"I'm going up to town, sir."

"Thanks. But you're not supposed to carry passengers." "I won't do meself in, sir."

Now that was taking a bit of a risk; the reason why it was taken became apparent when, squinting, Dutchy said, "Don't I know you?"

"Yessir. In the old Swordsman. I was your cabin hand."

"Jenkins," Dutchy grinned, and climbed aboard. Once, after an especially extended absence, he had met Marion outside the big department store where she worked behind the information desk, and on the footpath had made a damn fool of himself. His flesh could still cringe at the memory of Marion's fingers feeling the wetness under his eyes. So now, even though he had been away many months, he went straight home to the old bungalow in Wollstonecraft.

Dutchy had taken the redbrick house in Milner Crescent for two reasons. First, the elderly female owner had a grandson in the navy and had given the house to Dutchy for four pounds a week. Second, it had three bedrooms, which meant one for each of them. Because of the boy Dutchy would not have it any other way.

He walked up the concrete path in the warmth of this summer afternoon and saw that the door was open. She was home, then. As he quietly mounted the steps to the verandah his stomach was up to the same tricks it performed when the dive bombers started howling down. In the hall he heard a sound from the kitchen. Oh, young Matheson would have loved to see him now - tippy-toeing on his bow legs down the hall, ears cocked, the face that could challenge an admiral now softly aglow as any courting swain's.

Dutchy peered round the kitchen door and found the origin of the sound. He was only momentarily disappointed. He said, in a growl: "How many of those have you had already?"

A curly brown head - the same as hers he was thinking, as always he thought at each first sighting - swivelled round in alarm. Then Teddy had dropped the biscuit tin with a clatter into the sink and was hurtling for the visitor.

"Uncle John! You're home!"

Dutchy's great fists held him out at arm's length. "What's this Uncle John nonsense? I thought we'd fixed that."

"Sure thing, Dutchy."

"Bloody Yanks," Dutchy muttered, and looked over his shoulder guiltily. "Where's your mother?"

"Not home yet. Gee, will she be surprised!"

Dutchy put him down and they stood looking at each other, grinning. The front gate slammed.

"Quick. Back to the sink. I'll hide behind the door." "Aw gee, Dutchy, when you surprise her she always cries."

"She'll cry anyway. Get over there."

The front door was still open. The hallway made a sound funnel. He heard her steps, light and quite sure, on the steps, then across the tiled verandah. And then he heard them stop. A moment, and they started again, slowly down the hall, then faster, and she was calling "John? John?" And she was in the kitchen, the curly brown head

turning as the blind eyes sought, her hands out, seeking, and there was that damned lump again in his throat and he could bear it no longer. Dutchy went out and took her in his arms.

After a long precious moment, while Teddy grinned self-consciously and stuffed biscuits in his pocket - he knew what order *he* would get - Dutchy put her from him and said:

“How the devil did you know I was here?”

Slender and sensitive her fingers patted over his face, feeling the remembered, loved lines of it, then dropped to grip his arms. “Your aftershave lotion, darling. I knew before I came into the hall.”

“You’ve got a nose like a bloodhound,” said Dutchy gallantly.

“For some things,” Marion smiled. Her head turned. “Teddy? Take a couple of biscuits and play with Benny Carter.”

“Okay, Mum,” said Teddy, and took a couple more. When he’d gone, “Now,” said Marion, “sit down and

I’ll make you a cup of tea.”

“Tea be damned. There’s a couple of bottles of Scotch in the bag.”

“You really shouldn’t, John. One day they’ll catch you.,,

Dutchy grinned. “I’m like Caesar’s wife. Anyhow, the stuff’s paid for.

“But it’s duty free.”

“Sweetheart, after, what I’ve been through in the past month the Australian bloody Government owes me some duty. Come on, a stiff slug’ll do you good.”

“Your language hasn’t improved any,” Marion chided, and almost in the same breath, “How long, darling?” “Oh, I dunno.”

“John!”

“Okay, okay. At least a week. But keep that to yourself, now.”

She dropped the lid of his old suitcase and came to him; and feeling her, feeling the quivering gradually ease, Dutchy knew that the endless days and nights of worry and peering astern were worth it all.

“How about that drink?” he said roughly.

During dinner Gwen Carter came in. But Dutchy didn’t mind. Gwen was a plumpish jolly young woman with a husband in the army, and Marion’s friend. Often at sea Dutchy gained comfort from the knowledge that she was close to Marion, only two doors down. He liked her for another reason - Gwen was always ready to baby-sit.

Marion had just poured her friend a cup of tea when the phone rang.

“Who could that be?” Marion said, looking surprised, and Dutchy stiffened. The ship wasn’t due to start boiler-cleaning till tomorrow; right now she was in shape to be sent out . . .

The phone was on a table in the hall. He would be able to hear her clearly. The boy said something and Dutchy gestured him to silence. Mrs. Carter looked at Dutchy with worried sympathy. Marion took up the phone.

“Hello?”

A deep voice, one she had never heard before, said, “Good eveing’
Is that Marion?”

“Yes, I’m Marion. Who is this speaking?”

Dutchy made to get up, then sank back. Was it that mongrel of a husband? But then she’d know his voice. One of his lay-about pals?

“Please forgive me for calling you Marion,” went on the deep voice, “but that’s the only name the old coot gave me.”

“*Who are you?*”

Dutchy went out quickly. In time to hear, from close beside her:

“Pardon? Oh,, I am sorry. My name’s Bentley, Peter Bentley. Should’ve told you that in the first place, but I was a bit concerned how you’d react to that Marion bit. I’m the bloke Dutchy hauled home this afternoon.”

“Oh, I see. Captain Bentley.” Marion flicked a worried glance at Dutchy, who didn’t seem worried at all, not now. Sailing orders would not come from Bentley. “Is there . . . anything wrong?” Marion asked.

“Good heavens, no. Sorry if I gave you that impression.”

“That’s all right. You’d like to speak to John?” “Pardon?”

“Er ... Dutchy.”

“Like hell. Sorry. No, I’ve been too close to him lately. Fact is, my mother is giving a dinner party tomorrow night. Just a small affair. She’d very much like you and Dutchy to join us. Can do?”

“Oh!”

“Repeat? I mean, pardon? Did you say `No’?”

“No. I mean yes.” Marion took a pull at herself. “Thank you. We should be delighted to come, Captain Bentley.” “Fine. But Peter, if you don’t mind. It won’t be a stuffy affair.”

“Very well, Peter.” Marion hesitated. Should she ask what time? And perhaps disclose her ignorance of the sort of social life a full captain was used to?

“Say about sixish?” Bentley suggested. “You’ve been placed next to me. That’ll give you time to change your mind.”

“Six will be fine,” Marion smiled, ignoring Dutchy’s denying gestures.

“Good show. The car will call at 5.45, then.” “The car?”

“No trouble. You’d have no hope with a taxi at that time. By the way, please tell the old feller it’s plain clothes. Absolutely informal. Is he there?”

“Yes. Would you like to speak to him?”

“No thanks. Just tell him to save it for tomorrow night. Goodbye, Marion.”

“Goodbye’ . . . Peter.”

Marion slowly replaced the phone. Dutchy saw that her eyes were shining. “Now that was a damn fool arrangement,” he snorted. “Five-forty-five. You don’t knock off work till five-thirty!”

Smiling, Marion led him back to the dining-room, to Gwen’s obvious curiosity. Marion satisfied it, then, “Tomorrow,” she said firmly, “I am going to be ill.”

“Of course,” Gwen nodded sympathetically. “But just well enough to call in at the hairdressers.”

“And buy a new dress.”

“Oh Gawd,” Dutchy groaned, “a month’s pay down the drain.” Hiding his pleasure at Bentley’s swift implementing of his shipboard promise. Marion looked damn well radiant.

She directed at him a quizzical look. “Old coot, old feller . . . he seemed very familiar with you, considering he’s a full captain.”

“One of nature’s gentlemen,” Dutchy grinned. “You’ll like him.”

“Yes,” Marion murmured; and wondered if the mention of time and dress had been part of that helpful gentlemanliness. She thought she might come to like this Captain Peter Bentley. The she tossed her head up and looked toward Mrs. Carter. “Gwen, what colour do you think?”

“Where’s that bloody whiskey?” Dutchy growled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BY VIRTUE of his training, Dutchy was a punctual man. He was standing, dressed, on the verandah at a quarter to six. Another two reasons had him out there. First, he couldn't stand the fussing of Marion and Gwen inside, and second he had a sneaking curiosity about the kind of car young Bentley would send. For though Dutchy had no financial backing whatever of his own, he didn't at all mind mixing with those who had. No snob in that regard, our John Benedict Holland. Envious, perhaps, but not jealous. He was one of those practical fellows who prefer to dine well than eat at Joe the Greek's. In his time he had done both. Now he stood looking up and down the street, and he had come to the conclusion that Bentley probably would just send a hire car, say a Ford or a Chev, when a car came down the street and pulled up outside his gate.

Dutchy stared. "Christ," he muttered, and hurried inside.

As he walked beside Marion down the front path the old reprobate's face was composed as if for admiral's inspection and inside he was grinning gleefully. Three passers-by had stopped to gawk, and two women in the houses opposite hosing their gardens were not watching where the water-went. He reached the gate.

"A nice evening, John?" Marion asked.

"Clear sky," he answered automatically, and added: "Your stocks have shot clear through the roof, sweetheart.

Damn near all the street's watching." "Oh? Why?"

They crossed the footpath and a respectful voice answered her part.

"Good evening, madam. Good evening, sir." A hand that she knew was leather-gloved took her arm and gently ushered her into the back seat. Marion sat down, and it seemed about a mile later her body came to soft rest. She felt Dutchy plonk down beside her and heard a gentle snick as the door closed. Her hand went out, feeling polished wood.

"Good heavens, John," she whispered. "What sort of car is it?"

"Damned if I know," answered the man who could identify a Zero or a Messerschmitt in less time than it takes to blink. He tapped at a glass partition and at once, silently, the glass slid down out of sight.

“Sir?”

“What make of car is this?”

“This is a Mercedes, sir. The Mercedes 300, the fuel-injection model, sir. The, largest of the *marque*. Would you mind, sir? Madame stressed that I should not be late.”

“Carry on,” said Dutchy, and just stopped himself from adding, “shove off forrard.”

The huge black thing moved off. Not much later, after a swift and silent voyage, they were deposited at the foot of a flight of steps leading up from a semicircular drive. The chauffeur helped Marion out. Still independent, if awed, Dutchy managed to debark by himself from the opposite side.

“Hello, Dutchy,” a cheerful voice called.

Dutchy looked up. Instant and poignant, something dug at his heart. It was all there. Not the car, nor the acre of lawn and trees, not the big lovely old house, but the group. Bentley, young and handsome, one hand lightly on his mother’s shoulder, behind him a slip of a girl who had to be his sister, Randall standing close beside her. A family group. All together. Enjoying the love and the pleasure of each other’s company.

Smiling outside of the strange, sudden pain, Dutchy Holland, orphan, went up the steps to meet his hostess. Five minutes after they had sat down in the drawing room, with Bentley doing the honours Scotch-wise, Dutchy knew that he had been a fool to worry. Bentley’s mother and sister seemed to have taken to Marion instantly, and he was sure there was more than politeness to it, more even than the fact that she was the lady of the man who had saved Bentley’s life. And why not? he grinned to himself - I think she’s pretty all right.

Dutchy was on his third whiskey when there came the sound of a car, followed a few seconds later by the sound of a voice. Unconsciously Dutchy bridled at that voice. He shouldn’t have - it being a fair replica of his own shipboard tones.

“Well well well,” had said the voice. “Everybody happily increasing the fatty degeneration of their damn fool hearts. I’ll join ‘em, Peter. When do we dine, Martha? I haven’t all night to waste, you know.”

Frowning, not knowing he was, Dutchy turned his head to the

doorway. He saw a portly man of about sixty, with an authoritative look about him and a shrewd eye, and a large grey moustache. Dutchy also noticed, with unreasonable satisfaction, that the newcomer's trousers were baggy and that his tie hung from an untidy, lopsided knot. Mrs. Bentley had risen.

"Don't blame us, Roger, you're late. You know everyone except Peter's friends. Mrs. Shepherd, Commander Holland. This is Sir Roger Nesbitt. He's always so rude, so take no notice of him whatever. A deep-seated inferiority complex, I'd say."

"A damn deeply-empty stomach, you mean. Haven't eaten since breakfast. Thanks, Peter. You're looking fagged out, me lad. Too many late nights, I suppose?"

"You might say that," Bentley smiled.

"Young fellers can't take it these days. Same again, please. Bring it to the table. I presume you are ready, Martha?"

"We're ready, Roger," Mrs. Bentley smiled, and Dutchy marvelled at her tolerance. "It's only a smorgasbord. The heat, you know . . ."

"Smorgasbord's fine. No baked dinners this weather, eh, Holland?"

Dutchy just nodded. He should have known, he told himself, it was too good to last. Why in hell did Bentley have to invite this arrogant pest? They started to move into the dining room and the telephone shrilled.

Bentley took it. He called from the hall. "I'm afraid it's for you, sir."

"Oh God no," Sir Roger groaned. But Dutchy noticed that he went quickly enough to the phone. They all waited, Mrs. Bentley murmuring, "What rotten luck," and Dutchy not agreeing with that at all. In a moment Sir Roger came back.

"Sorry, Martha me dear, not tonight. I have to shove. Fix me a sandwich or something, there's a good girl. I'll munch it in the car."

To Dutchy's surprise Bentley stepped forward. His face was frowning with concern. Sir Roger held up one hand.

"All right, young feller, simmer down. I've got a minute or two. Get my bag from the car. The library's vacant? Right, in there." And then, to Dutchy's astonishment, he took Marion by the hand, and in a different tone of voice altogether, he said, "Come with me, my dear, this will take only a moment."

Dutchy was a man of rather quick reflexes, but he was so flummoxed by this stranger's extraordinary action that Sir Roger and Marion were out of the room before he could find his tongue.

"What the devil goes on here?" he demanded of Mrs. Bentley, forgetting his manners.

"Oh?" she said, and then she frowned, but in understanding. "Peter didn't tell you?" At that moment Peter went hurrying down the hall, a black bag in his hand.

"Tell me what?" Dutchy asked bluntly.

Mrs. Bentley seemed unfazed. "The silly boy," she murmured. "I expect he meant it as a surprise. Perhaps he'd better tell you himself."

Bentley came in, smiling a little uneasily at Dutchy. "Sorry about that, old chap. It didn't go quite as I planned. It was to be after dinner, you see?"

"I don't. All right," said Dutchy, "let's have it. Who is that man?"

"I'm responsible," said Bentley. "Maybe I should have talked it over with you, but he's a hard man to get hold of, and tonight was my first chance. But I don't want you to blow your top."

"I will, any minute. Who is he?"

"Sir Roger Nesbitt's an eye surgeon. He's reckoned to be just about the best in the country. An old friend of the family, as you may have gathered. He and my Dad have been bosom pals for years."

"I . . . see."

Bentley's smile was still a bit uneasy as he held up his hand in mock defence. "You can't strike a senior officer, y'know, not in his own house."

"How did he know about Marion?"

"I wrote to him from Darwin, right after you'd told me about her. There was no reply, of course, considering where we were, but I phoned him as soon as we got in and he agreed to come here tonight. For a preliminary examination," Bentley ended carefully. "That's what he's doing now, before he leaves for the hospital."

"I see," Dutchy said again. He was looking at Bentley, but he knew the others were looking at him. Randall.

Junior. That was bad. And then he thought, savagely, Damn the lot of you. He jerked his head up and he said, harshly:

"I appreciate your interest in this matter, sir. But you had not right

to take it this far.” Hard and cold, his eyes held Bentley’s on the probe of their condemnation and embarrassment. “Neither Mrs. Shepherd nor myself are able to pay for the service of a surgeon like that. And I’ll damn well tell him so!”

“For Pete’s sake, Dutchy . . .” Bentley started, and was stopped by his mother’s hand.

“Commander Holland,” she said, and shook her head. “No, Dutchy, whether you like it or not.” Her hand came out and touched his arm. “Peter acted unwisely. He should have consulted you both. But please believe he acted for what he thought was the best. Sir Roger is indeed a hard man to get hold of. However, that’s all done now. But there is this other point. You said we had no right to take the matter this far.” Wise and kind her eyes looked into Dutchy’s, and her lip was trembling. “My dear man, I have every right to help the man who saved my boy. Only for you, he wouldn’t . . .”

She turned her head away. Bentley said, “All right, Mother.” Randall coughed. Dutchy swallowed. And from the door, blessedly relieving the tightness, came:

“There you are, m’dear, they’re right ahead of you.” The voice changed. “Where are those damned sandwiches?”

“Oh, Roger . . .”

“I know, you clean forgot. Never mind, I’ll catch a bite at the hospital. Shocking food, shouldn’t feed it to pigs. Well now, Holland, I’ve had a look at your lass. I can’t promise anything but I think there’s a chance. In fact, a pretty . . . anyway, we’ll see. My secretary will get in touch.” By now he was at the door. Turning, suddenly grinning, lightening his face. “Heard about what you did on that Godforsaken island up there.

Don’t think overmuch of this young shaver but” I’m rather fond of his old man. One good turn deserves another. This’ll be an L. O. G. job. G’night.”

Feet thumped down the hallway. An engine started, faded down the drive. “Now please,” said Mrs. Bentley, putting away her handkerchief, “shall we have dinner?”

They moved off. Bentley took Dutchy’s arm and guided him to the liquor table. “Guess we both need this, eh?”

“My bloody oath!” agreed his guest.

Bentley handed him a near-full glass of relaxant. “Daggers sheathed?”

“Forget it. I shouldn’t have blown my stack like that. Just that it was such a hell of a shock. All of it, beginning and end.”

Bentley looked relieved. “That’s the last time I spring a surprise. I’d meant the thing to come up naturally, after dinner.”

Dutchy was looking at the floor. Suddenly he said, “My God, if only he could!”

“If it’s possible, he’s the boy.”

“Come to think of it, his name does ring a faint bell. Maybe Marion mentioned him - as one of the top boys she couldn’t get to.” Dutchy frowned. “Hold on a minute. What’d he say, going out the door?”

“L. O. G?”

“Yes. What’s that mean?”

“It’s a sort of slang medical term. It means ‘For Love of God.’ An honorary job. Building up points in the old conscience, sort of thing. On the house. Free.”

“I can’t agree to that, for God’s sake!”

Bentley said, softly, “Marion’s over the age of consent, you know.”

Dutchy had no answer to that, and the tremendous things it implied. Bentley chuckled, easing the strain. “Anyhow, he simply wouldn’t take your money. He seems to think you’ve done this family some sort of favour.”

“That’s debatable.”

“No argument. Have the other half.”

Dutch put down his glass. “We’d better go in. She’s in a strange place.”

“Hell, I’m sorry. Of course. Come on.”

But when Dutchy stepped into the dining room and saw her face, and the animation in it, the shining of hope, his own uprising spirits took a check. How awful, he thought, if the operation failed . . .

He went in to stand beside her, ready as always to help her, putting a smile on his face and pleasantness in his voice. And soon the party grew animated.

CHAPTER NINE

HALCYON DAYS, spoiled for Dutchy by two things - the rapidly approaching time of departure, and the absence of any word from Sir Roger's office. Had he forgotten all about it? he had asked Marion on the fifth day, and Of course not, she had answered; braver than he, consoling him, reminding him of how busy a great man like that must be. So he had waited and sweated it out, with the earlier hope that he might be in Sydney for the operation now mocking him with its impossibility of achievement.

On the seventh day, a Monday, with the ship ready and all her men back, he went home early, unable to stand the pre-dinner jollity in the bachelor wardroom, anxious to spend every moment he could in their house, even if she would not be there yet.

Once again he found the front door open, but this time he walked in heavily, and took off his coat and cap in his bedroom. He turned round and she was standing in the doorway. He was looking toward him. Her eyes were blinking quickly.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "Why are you home so early?"

"It's come!"

"What? How? He doesn't know where you work." "Gwen was in here, delivering my groceries. The phone rang. She called me."

"My God, we might have missed it!"

"No, he would have got on to you on the ship." "Yes. Well? What did he say?"

Dutchy realised his voice was harsh. He offered a smile in apology, and put his arm about her. "When, sweetheart?"

"The operation's on Wednesday. I go into hospital tomorrow."

"Oh Lord." He felt her stiffen.

"What's wrong, John? You're not sailing?"

"Nothing's come through yet. Now don't you start worrying about that." He led her to the bed. They sat on it with his arms still around her. "What else did he say?" "

"That's all. It was only his secretary. John." She took his hand. "It was wonderful, at first. Now I'm scared to death."

He comforted her, thinking that whatever they did to her eyes it couldn't be worse, but not saying that, and presently Teddy came in,

looking at them wonderingly, and they composed themselves and went out to the kitchen.

It was a long night. Dutchy was to remember it as the worst in his life. Marion alternated between fright and hope, saying things like, "It's been so long, John, there'll be such wonderful changes, in everything," and he had to play along, not daring even to think of possible failure. While all the time he had to hold himself from going to the phone and calling headquarters; wanting desperately to know his sailing date but at the same time fearing to know; fearing that by phoning he might reawaken interest in the idle ship, even though common sense told him that no one had forgotten her, and that her schedule was already laid down.

They went to bed very late that night.

In the morning Marion said what he had dreaded all night she would say.

"Will you be able to come to the hospital with me, dear?"

Dutchy was not deceived by her casual tone. He had heard it so often, when the end of the precious time drew near. "I should think so," he answered, smiling; for the first time thankful that she could not see. "But heaven knows what'll crop up during the day. You know how it is. You're not due in till three o'clock. If I can't manage I'll phone before then. Now, now," he said quickly, "cut that out."

She nodded, biting her lip. "I'd sooner know, John, if you're going."

"Damn it all, I don't know!" He took a round turn on himself. "Sorry, but I really know nothing. I'd tell you. Now don't worry, sweetheart, you'll only worry me if you do. I've always come back." That wasn't very helpful. He changed tack. "I've made a few enquiries among our surgeons. This Nesbitt fellow is really the top man. Remember what he said? A pretty good chance. He knows what he's talking about. All you've got to do is think about how wonderful it'll be when those bandages come off. My God," he ended with mock fright, "you'll see my ugly dial for the first time!"

Very softly, she said, "That's all I really want, John, just to see you. After that, I could put up with ... this." There was that damned lump again. He stood up from the breakfast table. "All right, old lass, I've got to be off now."

She rose, and long and hard she kissed him, and he thought, She knows it's time. He went down the hallway quickly.

On the verandah he found Teddy, practising his roller skating. "I'm off, lad." "Hooray, Dutchy."

The boy skated up and stopped himself with his hands on Dutchy's midriff. "You look after your mother, now." One arm went round the little shoulders, squeezed. "Gee, you're strong, Dutchy."

Like hell he was. He went down the path, not looking back, and quickly across the street toward the station.

On board he found a subdued but palpable sense of excitement. They were hardened men, not one of them wanted to go to war, but the interest in their disposition was there just the same. It always is with men who know they are soon to sail. Only the Sydney natives hoped that a fully-commissioned destroyer would be left idle alongside Garden Island.

That hope was shattered just as Dutchy finished his lunch. -

All through the long morning he'd waited, while he heard reports and signed documents, hoping with each hour passed, knowing he was a fool to hope. Then the knock came.

Dutchy was about to finish his cup of tea. The cup halted halfway to his mouth. He lowered it slowly to the saucer.

"Come," he said.

Even then he thought it might be Matheson, or the coxswain, the engineer. None of these. Into the cabin stepped a smartly dressed seaman. He handed Dutchy a large manila envelope, and on the envelope was a stamped legend that told Dutchy that inside was the fate of himself and 200 men.

"Thank you," he said crisply, "that's all." "Aye aye, sir."

The door closed quietly. Dutchy laid the thing on the table, looking at it. He pulled out his pipe. He filled it. Then with a grunt of impatience he dropped the pipe, took up the envelope and ripped it open.

Inside was a single sheet of paper. Being in all respects ready for sea - which Dutchy had already reported - H.M.A.S. *Jackal* was to proceed at 1600, four o'clock, this day, and in the earliest possible time was to place herself under the-command in Port Moresby of Commander Arthur Dalziel, presently and temporarily leader of the

Fifth Destroyer Flotilla.

Dutchy lowered his orders and stared at the bulkhead. "Oh Jesus," he said, softly. Then the anger came, and for a few minutes he let it roil redly inside him. Not only had he lost his independent command, but he was to lose it under that sarcastic bastard Dalziel.

Yet the discipline of his training had been long in the learning; he knew the futility of unchecked anger. He lit his pipe and puffed at it, and consideration of the position came to solace him. Truman had made out those orders. It seemed fairly safe to assume that his time with the flotilla would be only temporary, until Bentley's ship could get back into action. As there wasn't much wrong with *Wind Rode* but her screws, and as she'd been in dock a week already, he shouldn't have to put up with Dalziel for too long.

Then the other point struck him - forcibly with the awareness of his selfishness. Dalziel didn't matter a damn. What mattered was that he wouldn't have a hope of taking Marion to the hospital at three. No hope even of seeing her before he sailed. At that moment Dutchy was struck by the total responsibility of his rank. The lowliest ordinary-seaman in the ship had a better chance of getting ashore at three o'clock than her captain, who had none. Failure to find a taxi near the hospital, or a taxi caught in a traffic jam, would find *Jackal* still at her berth at time of departure, and that, even to Dutchy's piratical nature, was unthinkable.

He looked at his watch. Not yet one o'clock. Time anyway to get a letter off. He sat down at his little metal desk and distantly through the scuttle there came the shrill of pipes. Who the hell's that? he thought savagely. Maybe it was Truman. No. A rear-admiral announces his arrival.

In a moment the knock came. Dutchy gave his permissive grunt and Matheson opened the door. "Captain Bentley, sir."

Dutchy was genuinely surprised. "Well . . . good afternoon, sir. Come on in. Excuse me a moment. Prepare for sea, Number One. We slip at 1600."

There was much more Matheson would have liked to hear, but he knew he wouldn't get it now. "Aye aye, sir." He shut the door.

"Take a pew, Peter." Dutchy held up his orders. "You know about this?"

“Yes. In fact I’ve just come from headquarters.” Bentley hesitated, feeling for cigarettes. Normally he would never have mentioned what was in his mind to say, especially to a junior officer - in this Service you went when and where you were told without question - but he had come to a close relationship with the grizzled commander facing him. “I’d like you to know,” he said, “that I had nothing to do with your joining the flotilla.”

“Thanks,” Dutchy said, and Bentley knew he meant for telling him. “I didn’t think you had. I . . . er . . . suppose it’s a temporary arrangement?”

Bentley smiled. “I think we can take that as read. Not much more than a month or so. But then you might get to like our company.”

Dutchy’s smile was brief. “We got word yesterday. Marion goes in this afternoon.”

“We heard. What rotten luck.”

“Yes.” Dutchy was thinking in stronger terms. He looked at Bentley, then down at the deck. “Peter, I wonder . . .”

“What is it, Dutchy?”

“Well, normally she’d be all right; I mean, physically she’s in tiptop shape. But being, you know, like she is, and sort of half-expecting me to be there to . . .” “What. time is she due to check in?” Bentley interrupted him.

“Three o’clock.”

“I have my car. Mind if I take her?”

Dutchy looked at him for a long second, looked away. “Do something with that bottle,” he said gruffly, “while I write a note.”

“And when it’s all over,” Bentley nodded, “I’ll bring her home.”

“That’s damn decent of you, but I don’t want to trouble . . .”

“To my place.” . “What?”

“Old Roger the Lodger says there’ll be a fair bit of convalescent time. Why spend it in hospital, when I’ve got a mother and sister driving themselves nuts with nothing to do in a ruddy great house?”

Dutchy’s had been a hard life; nothing so sweet had ever happened to him before. He shook his head bemusedly. “But there’s the boy, young Teddy.”

“Young Teddy’s on school holidays, still five weeks to go. There’s a pool at the back of the house.”

“But he can’t swim,” Dutchy said, stupidly.

“Then while you’re fighting the foe, I’ll teach him.” As usual, Dutchy’s emotion took refuge behind harshness. “You bastard,” he snarled, “you’ve worked all this out, haven’t you?”

“No, my mother did. You saved my skin and brother, you’re stuck with it! Now then. I can tell Marion that’s the way you want it?”

“I suppose so,” Dutchy mumbled, and fled to his desk, and stumbled his thigh against a corner of the table, and cursed himself for a silly bloody old fool.

CHAPTER TEN

THE SEA was glassy-faced with a long smooth swell as *Jackal* poked her nose between the Heads; and though it was unlikely that a Japanese spy was interested in her departure, the requirements of caution still obtained, and she kept on an easterly heading straight out until Sydney's cliffs became a hazy blur, and then disappeared below the rim of their world. Then -and this was what they all were waiting for, even though no man supposed Melbourne was their next port-she leaned to starboard and sliced her sharp stem round to port; to the north, to the war.

Dutchy took out the hand microphone. "This is the captain. We've all had a good rest in Sydney, and now of course we're all eager to get back into it." Derisive jeers on the mess-decks, rude thumb gestures. "We're heading north, bypassing Brisbane." Ruder expletives from the Bananalanders. "But we will call in at Townsville for fuel and stores." Silence; Townsville was not a sailor's paradise, and in any case it had Yanks. "As there's a possibility of leave in Townsville, I can't disclose our future movements. But it might be a good idea if you sweated some of the slops off with gun and depth charge drill. We'll do that small thing, starting after breakfast tomorrow. That's all."

An unsettled ship -it would take a few days before shoreside memories were dimmed under the familiar monotony of routine and watchfulness - *Jackal* pulsed on at a steady twenty knots. Perhaps the happiest man in the ship was Mr. Baxter, whose boiler tubes had been scrubbed almost as clean as his own immaculate overalls. Least happy were the Sydney natives - memories were still too poignantly fresh.

That night the officers of the watch got small conversational change from their captain. After their first dutifully cheerful attempt, Sheridan the asdic officer and

Pilot left him alone to his pacing - they saw that something was troubling him, but only Matheson knew what it was, and he wasn't talking.

Dutchy did not go below till close on one in the morning, but in the stuffiness of his shuttered cabin he got little sleep. This was

unusual, for he had trained himself to catch every available hour of sleep, even before an expected action. He was not in the slightest worried about the operation; he was deeply troubled about its result. This was the end of the road for Marion. Nesbitt was the top man. If he could do nothing, then a lifetime of blindness stretched ahead. There was no more hope.

It was a bleary-eyed and grumpy captain who showed on deck for dawn action stations. Matheson caught a blast for the crew's slackness in closing-up. This, traditionally, was passed on down. The whole crew was irritable. They knew there was no real danger to get them up before dawn, and they knew that just over there was the coast of New South Wales. Later, it would be different; they would still grouse at being awakened so early, but they would scan the sea and sky alertly. Now they simply whinged. With one exception.

Angus Seyless had been given, due to his stated ignorance of all things gunnery, a nice soft action station on the pom-pom. All he had to do was pass the articulated belts of ammunition from the ready-use locker to the loading number on the gun. This required minimum effort but offered maximum comfort. Angus was up on deck in the fresh air, he could see what was going on, and note well the position and condition of the carley raft which was his abandon ship station. As well, he was closeted with two wrinkle-knowing men of an experience not much less than his own. Olaf Jackson he had not met before, but he had served with Bludger Bent years before in an old S-class destroyer. Angus was content. Not so the younger members of the gun crew. He listened to their griping for a while, his lidded eyes scanning the sea, and then he addressed them.

"Why don't you bastards pack up laughin'?" Angus suggested cheerfully. "You joined the outfit, didn't you? How'd you like to be a silly bloody swaddle, packin' all his gear over the Owen Stanleys or eatin' sand in Tobruk, eh? We got it easy. Look at it." A horny hand indicated the sea, now all a-sparkle with the first smile of the young sun. "Civvies pay quids for this. Looks like a nice easy day, eh? Hey, Bludger. What's on for scran this mornin'?" "Fried eggs'n bacon."

"You're jokin'!" Trained around them, his frowning disbelief gathered the attention of the younger men. "Eggs'n bacon. Jesus wept. Me last ship was a cruiser, a bloody great cruiser, mind yer, and almost

every flamin' day we got stewed termaters for breakfast. No, I'm tellin' a lie. Now'n again they give us cold rice and stewed prunes. Eggs'n bacon. Holy Christ."

"You're having us on, Angus."

Angus was not offended at this use of his name by a fellow supply-number young enough to be his son. "Pig's arse I am," he answered pleasantly. "She's the gospel truth. Ain't that right, Bludger?"

There is in the Service an unspoken loyalty between old hands. Bludger nodded confirmation, though it was ten years since he'd been in a big ship.

"What cruiser was that?" asked a youngster. They had gathered round the old fellow, pretending nonchalance, but their eyes betraying them.

"What ship? The *Canberra*, that's what." "But she's sunk!"

"Sure is."

"Were you on her then?"

"Matter of fact, I was. Matter of fact, I was on the starb'd pom-pom," said Angus truthfully, but omitting to mention he had been the gun's trainer.

"Hell, what was it like? I mean, going down . . ." Angus told them what it had been like that fire-slashed night off Guadalcanal; and presently Jackal had at least one group of men who had forgotten their whinging, and thus' old Angus succeeded where the coxswain or gunner's mate could not have. But he did this intuitively, with no consciously deliberate intention. If anyone had told Angus that he was, naturally, a leader of men, he would have laughed in the analyst's face, and commented crudely on his mental state.

"Secure action stations," Dutchy ordered.

As they started leaving the bridge Dutchy's eye fell on the yeoman of signals. There was a sort of chain reaction in his worrying mind. He cursed himself for his forgetfulness; he should have asked Bentley to send him a radiogram as soon as the thing was done. Bentley wouldn't hang about the hospital, he had his own worries with *Wind Rode*. There was no one else. It might be days before someone thought to inform him how the operation had gone. Marion herself would be too ill. What a damn fool he was!

The radiogram came at four o'clock that afternoon. Dutchy knew

the time, even if subconsciously, because he was on the bridge and Matheson was taking over the dog watches from Pilot. The ladder clattered. It was the signal yeoman, and he was looking at Dutchy as he jumped on to 'the compass platform with something in his hand, and Dutchy knew it had to be a radio message because the sea was empty of ships which could make light signals. It took a deal of willpower to put out his hand slowly to take the message.

Any message received at sea, especially one brought straight to the captain by the yeoman and not sent up the tube, is of interest to a bridge team. They were all looking at him. Dutchy turned his back to them. He opened the folded sheet and his eyes flashed over the typed words. He closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath. Then he opened them and read the signal again, more slowly.

"Nesbitt reports operation successful. Patient well. Teddy with Mother. Will keep you posted on developments. Peter."

Dutchy turned round. The yeoman was waiting. He was tempted; oh, he was sorely tempted. But they were well out from the coast and up past Brisbane. There could be a submarine out there, even a raider, listening for any ship stupid enough to break wireless silence.

"No reply, Yeoman. Thank you." "Aye aye, sir."

Matheson came over. Dutchy handed him the signal. Matheson said, "Why, that's wonderful! How about that? Damn decent of Bentley to . . ." His voice trailed, seeing the worry in Dutchy's face. "What's the matter?"

"Operation successful, patient dead," Dutchy quoted the old jibe. "I still don't know if it's all right. If she can see."

Younger, not so involved, Matheson had no patience with him. "Oh come on! What d'you expect? The bandages will be on for days yet, maybe weeks for all I know. Look, Bentley got his information from the surgeon, you can rely on that. And if this Nesbitt bloke says the thing was successful, then it's a hundred to one that the results will be the same." He shook the signal. "This is wonderful news. Come on, snap out of it. All we've got to do is wait for the next message."

"Yes," Dutchy nodded, "wait. God, I wish I was back . . ." He shook his head, then forced a smile. "Yes, Bertie, you're right. A man should be thankful. Especially that Bentley's there. He'll get any news

...”

A sharp buzzing interrupted him. The bosun’s mate answered it. They watched him haul on a thin cord that ran down a pipe to the wireless-office. Beyond all reason -how could any new developments have happened so soon? His common sense told him - Dutchy waited with dread for the signal to be brought across. So that he read the ominous news with a reaction of relief. *Jackal* was to make Townsville with all despatch, and standby for refuelling immediately on arrival.

Dutchy was glad of the need for action, whatever it might portend. He snapped, “Increase to thirty knots. Give me a new time of arrival.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Matheson jumped to the wheelhouse voice pipe, and read the signal on his way to the chart table.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY WERE ready for her. Before the last berthing wire was secured the big fuelling line was inboard and connected to the valve. It started to pulse, and *Jackal* drank. The Senior Naval Officer ashore came aboard and gave Dutchy the grim news. A ship had got off a garbled message to the effect that she had experienced an internal explosion, believed to be from a torpedo. She had got off her position, a little to the east of Abington Reef, and that was all. The transmission had cut off abruptly in mid-sentence. No name of the ship, nothing about survivors, nor of sighting any enemy. *Jackal* was to get out there fast and investigate.

Dutchy offered his informant refreshment, and was glad when he considerately refused. He saw him over the side, then sent a message to Matheson to join him in the chart-room.

Matheson found him working on a chart. Automatically the first lieutenant's eye noted the black line of the course drawn on it. The course ran almost due east from Townsville, north up through Flinder's Passage in the Barrier Reef, and then northeast past a dot in the Coral Sea which was Abington Reef. Matheson roughly estimated the distance at about 200 miles.

"Trouble?" he said.

"Could be." Dutchy put him in the picture. "It's all pretty vague - an internal explosion could mean anything."

"Like maybe a Jap submarine."

"Maybe. God knows where she is by now."

"Fat chance we'll have of finding her. The wind's getting up, too. It's about Force 6 right now. We'll be lucky to get through Flinder's Passage."

"I bloody well know that!" Dutchy snarled.

Matheson glanced covertly at the granite face, seeing the lines carved in it, and the tiredness. "Any news in the mail?" he asked carefully.

"No. Get down . and see how the fuelling's coming. You can start singling-up wires now. Tell Baxter I'll want steam for full speed."

"Aye aye, sir. Er . . ." "Well, what is it?"

"Just thought I'd remind you. Have you sent off that wire to the

hospital?"

"I'll look after that." "Yes, sir."

Matheson went out with his face sombre. This was going to be one hell of a voyage, until the thing was cleared up-one way or the other.

Dutchy never got to know how it would be to work under Commander Dalziel; which, considering his tension of mind, was maybe a good thing for both of them and for the good of the Service. *Jackal* slipped her wires a little after ten o'clock that morning and Dutchy took her out of harbour like a motorboat, causing comment from shore-side watchers and curses from the owners of small boats rocking in her wash. Angus summed it up.

"Somethin's eatin' the Old Man," he remarked sagely to Bludger Bent. "I wouldn't wanta be anythin' what gets in his way just now. Wonder what's up with the old coot?"

But Bludger had no answer to that. With private messages to the captain both the wireless-office and the yeoman thought it best to be discreet, and so no one else learned that someone known to the captain had undergone an operation.

Jackal pushed on at a fast clip on her own dubious operation. The southern opening of Flinder's Passage is about sixty miles from Townsville, and she reached it in ' just over two hours, which was a stout effort considering the wind that came against her out of the east, and kicked up a short vicious chop even in the protected waters between Reef and mainland. But when he turned northward to pass through the Reef, even Dutchy's impetuosity was restrained, for the passage was only a few miles wide, and on both sides it was ominously whitened by the leaping clash of waves meeting the jagged edging of coral. He took her through at twenty knots, a nightmare passage of some twenty miles with both first lieutenant I and navigator beside him on the bridge, and the echo-sounder in constant operation recording the depth.

Then they had negotiated the last turn of that narrow funnel and had bucketed through into the vast heaving

waste of the Coral Sea, and Dutchy gave her power. She tossed and screwed to the northeast, with the wind and seas on her starb'd bow. But toward late afternoon the wind veered to the southward.,

changing from hindrance to help. There was still plenty of light left in the tropical sky when at last the masthead lookout reported from his lofty swaying post that right ahead he could see a crescent of tossing white that looked like waves breaking on a reef, or small island.

The landfall was first-class, though no one commented on it; they were used to good navigation. They were also used to the oft-times irascibility of their captain, and on this occasion they put it down to Dutchy's impatience at being sent on this wild goose chase after a possible submarine that was certainly a hundred miles away by now, if it had ever been here. Only Matheson was aware of the canker of worry that was eating at Dutchy.

But as Dutchy gave the order to take her south and then east of Abington Reef, they were given grisly evidence that something had been here. First, the lifeboat was sighted, screwing wildly on toe seas that lifted and dropped it in an endless pattern of gradual destruction. The lifeboat was empty. Then they ran upon a large patch of gleaming iridescence, and, in the oil, faces up, faces down, all blackened and shining in the slanted sunlight, floated the dead men. They had been dead for days, but the oil which had burned their intestines and clogged their bronchial tubes protected them, with grim irony, from the inroads of sharks.

For an hour' Dutchy took her back and forth above the graveyard of their ship, but nothing alive was sighted. There was a good deal of floating debris, most of it in small pieces.

"Torpedoed all right," Dutchy growled to Matheson, his nose crinkling with the pungent stench of the fuel oil. "Then her boilers probably blew up on the way down.

Matheson nodded a grim face. "What do we do now?" "What would you do if you were a sub commander, with one success under your belt?"

"I'd stay around here, between Abington Reef and Flinder's Passage. Anything heading for Townsville from the north goes through the Passage."

"Right. Come down to fifteen knots. We'll run fifty miles in towards the _Passage, then out again. Set asdic watch, all-round searching sweep. And put her down plumb accurate on the map. I

don't want to make any close acquaintance with Abington Reef.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The frictional brush of the wind had at last succeeded in changing the direction of the waves. As *Jackal* moved on her westerly course both wind and seas came at her from the port beam. So narrow-gutted, she rolled in wide,

swift arcs that made it unwise to move anywhere without hanging on. Twice, men going aft to relieve for the last-dog-watch had narrow escapes as she reared one flank and dipped the other, deep under the creaming sea. But they met the guardrails upright, and the three strong wires saved them.

“Better get lifelines rigged,” Dutchy said to Matheson, “and tell ‘em to be damned careful about it. That lot

back there will have drawn every shark for miles round.”

“Aye aye, sir,” answered Matheson, and opened his mouth to call the bosun's mate, and a sound, sharp and resonant, shut it.

They all knew that sound. Every man on the bridge had been subconsciously listening for it since the search started; telltale, definite, the returning *peep* of an asdic contact.

Then the verbal report came from the cabinet-con-tact bearing right ahead, moving left to right, range 1500 yards, classified submarine - and Dutchy snapped, “Depth charge crews close-up, warn B-gun,” and *Jackal* bustled with urgent movement.

Listening to the broadcast echo, judging with all his experience, Dutchy looked at the sun. He still had about an hour's light left, and it would be of tremendous advantage if he could do the job within that time. The pulsing asdic shaft wasn't worried about light, but even now it would be difficult reloading the charges on the quarterdeck, without the hindrance of darkness.

He coned his ship down the invisible beam like a hound dog on its scented trail, and closer and closer together came ping and peep, until they were almost simultaneous. Then:

“Port thrower. Starb'd thrower. Rails.”

Three orders which merged into one effort. She dropped a diamond-shaped pattern of big grey cans, and these dropped down, far down until the greenish light dwindled to opacity, and there they burst.

Nothing resulted, except for a wild upflinging of water. To an untrained eye this was impressive, but not to those watching eyes on the bridge. The only thing that mattered was that as Dutchy swung her about, and sniffed in again, she once again rewarded them with the ping-peep of definite contact. Followed, after the charges went down, by a much more concrete reward.

“Close off the port quarter!” Matheson yelled.

Dutchy could believe his eyes - he had seen this sight before-but he could hardly believe he had succeeded so quickly. Either the submarine commander was inexperienced, or maybe she had been badly handled, or *Jackal* had been luckily smack on with her charges; whatever the reason, there she was, barely half a mile astern, a long wallowing black thing that rolled whiteness off her whale of a back - and spilled men from a hatch near the 5-inch gun.

“She’s manning the gun!” Matheson again, now gunnery-officer.

“Fat chance they’ll have in this,” Dutchy growled. “Hard-a-port, one-eight-oh revs, steer for the target. Main armament close-up, standfast A-gun. Get B-gun in action.”

B-gun, the duty gun, was already heading that way; training fast as the ship heaved herself round, loading with direct-action shell - an armour-piercing nose could easily bounce off that sloping back. Then layer and trainer were on, for she was in local control, and Millsom the gun-captain shouted, “Fire!”

Tall and white the spout rose beyond the submarine. Over. “Down four hundred.” Dutchy was only half-listening; the range was closing fast and he had to make up his mind whether or not to ram. Ramming was frowned upon, unless under unavoidable circumstances, for a submarine’s hide is tough and a destroyer’s stem crumples easily under an impact like that. He made up his mind.

“Port twenty, leave her to starb’d. What’s up with the main armament, Number One?”

“Closed-up now, sir, shifted to director control.” “Then get those bloody guns in action!” “Yessir.”

Jackal had four big teeth and she bit with three of them; the spray belting over her forepart made it impossible to operate A-gun. But the range was close, and a broadside of three 45 lb. projectiles flung at huge velocity is quite handy against a target three hundred feet

long. Every shell hit, biting at the enemy with white-hot metallic teeth and the fierce crunch of T.N.T. A few seconds later the dose was repeated, and again and again as *Jackal* drew up to pass her target's stern. Now yellowy-white smoke was coiling thickly from her conning tower, and fleeing downwind in a horizontal scarf of potential disaster.

But Dutchy was watching that stern. He had to assume it held torpedo tubes, and he had no wish to be caught by a salvo as he passed their mouths.

"She's going!" Matheson shouted. "They're jumping overboard."

Maybe not all of them. "Port thirty," Dutchy ordered, "take her out. Keep X and Y guns in action."

Certainly not all of them. In the split second before it happened, Dutchy knew that at least one man had stayed on her deck, the gunlayer, and in the next second he knew that that Jap sailor was blessed with the luck of the devil.

The sound of the explosion was ear-shatteringly close. The 5-inch shell, bigger than *Jackal's*, struck the top of the gunnery director above the bridge. Up there was placed the 285 gunnery radar set. Armoured and slope-faced, the director was not hurt. But a great brief blast and scores of steel splinters ripped the radar aerial from its mountings and flung it down to the deck. Other splinters knifed downward on to the bridge. By a miracle none of the officers or seamen or signalmen were touched. But one big slug of metal, directed by evil chance, dug deeply across Dutchy's right arm just below the shoulder.

His chunky body was hurled round as if it had been struck with a sledgehammer. He brought up hard against the windbreak; against the opened arm. A deep *whugh* of agony was forced from him. Methodically, dispassionately, the ship rolled and he fell on his knees. He was like that when Matheson got to him, holding his arm with his hand and watching the blood seep through his fingers.

"You all right, sir?"

Matheson helped him up and held him there, his own back against the windbreak for support. Dutchy shook his head, clearing the tears of pain from his eyes. But from this position he could not see right astern.

"The target?" he demanded.

Matheson was relieved to hear his voice, raspy as usual. There seemed to be an awful lot of blood. "Gone, sir. Turned turtle, damn near rightover. I'll get you below."

"Be damned to that. Get the surgeon up here. Survivors?"

"Plenty of 'em, at least thirty."

"Good. Bring her round, Pilot. Use scrambling nets and lines. I won't lower a boat for that lot."

"Aye aye, sir."

Jackal came round and nosed in toward the dots in the water and the surgeon-lieutenant came on to the bridge with a stretcher and two of his first-aid party. His young face was solemn and his pronouncement definite.

"That's a bad wound, sir. Have to be sutured. We'll go below. Stretcher!"

"Damn the stretcher! Bandage it, use a tourniquet or some bloody thing. I'm staying up here till those survivors are inboard."

"That's very unwise, sir."

Dutchy looked at him.

"Yes, sir. Though I strongly advise . . ." "For Christ sake get on with it!" "Yessir."

By the time the last survivor was inboard and taken below under guard, Dutchy was feeling he should have taken his doctor's advice. He was also feeling faint. Told the news - it had gone through the ship like a fast breath of wind - Samson did something about the faintness. He appeared on the bridge with a large glass of brandy. Dutchy grinned his appreciation and sent the reviving stuff south. He felt stronger almost at once. Even the throb of pain in his arm seemed to be dulled a bit.

"All right, all right," he growled at the anxious faces covertly inspecting him, "get on with your work. You don't get rid of me that easy." And then, to show them they still had a viable captain in command, in a voice which he imagined was loud and clear he said, "How many prisoners, Number One? What damage?"

"Thirty-six altogether, sir, though three of 'em are in pretty bad shape."

"Too bad. The director?" "Okay. But-the 285's had it."

"Then so've we. I'm not joining any flotilla without a gunnery

radar set.” Dutchy thought he grinned broadly. Actually it was a twitch of his sagging mouth. “Commander Dalziel wouldn’t want a lame duck hamstringing him, now would he?”

“No, sir. But I think you should get below to the sickbay.”

“So do I. But in the meantime I’d be obliged if you’d place the ship on course for Flinder’s Passage.” Matheson squinted at him. The old fellow looked pale, but was he light-headed as well? I’d *be obliged* . . . “Aye aye, sir. But you’re not planning on going through tonight?”

“I am not. We’ll patrol up and down fifty miles this side till first light. We just might make another contact.” That sounded sane enough. “Aye aye, sir. Look, you really should get below. Pilot, bear a hand . . .” Dutchy made to lift a denying right hand; and winced. Then he glared at them. “I can still bloody well walk, can’t I? Take over, Number One.”

“Aye aye, sir. But for God’s sake be careful.” “You be careful. You’ve got my ship.”

And he was off, handling himself with his good hand to the starb’d ladder, the one that led down toward his cabin passageway.

Afterwards, Matheson was to opine that he was a stubborn old goat, and that he himself had been a fool to let him leave unattended. But that was post-event wisdom, and right now he knew Dutchy’s nature too well to force attendance where its benefit had already been denied.

So Dutchy went alone down the steep iron ladder. Thinking of his own pain, he omitted to accord his old enemy its due respect; and the unforgiving sea saw, and took, its chance.

It sent a wave. The wave sent *Jackal* on another of her gunnel-dipping leans. Dutchy had only one hand. It was not good enough. The ladder tilted, his feet slipped on the wet metal, and over the handrail he went.

It was quite a drop to the steel of the foc’s’le deck. Luckily for him, Dutchy’s shoulders met it first, just before his head smacked hard on the deck. His *Jackal* couldn’t help herself; she was rolled over further, and beneath the lowest guardrail his unconscious body slipped and dropped into the sea with a small splash.

Watching him down the ladder, Matheson had seen it all. His

reaction was instant, and took the form of a staccato sequence of trained orders.

“Hard-a-starb’d. Stop both engines. Away lifeboat!” So urgently loud was his yell that the coxswain on the wheel heard it before Pilot shouted down the voice pipe.

Precious seconds gained, so that by the time Dutchy reached the stern it was swinging away from him and the great choppers had dragged to a stop. But it takes time for a boat crew to get from their action stations to a boat, and more time to lower it, and an unconscious man in a wave-ridged sea has ‘precious little time left him.

Able-seaman Angus Seyless was, by strict official standards, if not a skulker then a shirker. Grown very wise in the ways of the Service, he would avoid at all possible times what he considered was unnecessary work. Yet Angus, though he had not been ordered to, had closed-up on his pom-pom, in case the gun was needed. There were some things Angus did not shirk. Like going after a drowning man.

But a wily bird, old Angus. Instead of jumping straight over the side on seeing the accident to his captain, which would have given him so many more yards to swim, Angus ran aft right to the end of the stern, and from there, denuded of all clothing except his shorts, he dived into the sea.

He had one brawny arm round his captain’s chest, and was spitting salt water from his mouth and fluent curses at the slackness of the boat’s crew, when the panting oarsmen reached him. Even then Angus wasn’t finished. At some time in his chequered youth he had been a life-saver, and on the way back to the ship he worked methodically on the captain as he lay face down on the bottom-boards in the stern. Dutchy was still unconscious, but breathing stertorously, when the boat was hooked on to the falls and they ran her up to the davit-head. They carried Dutchy into the sickbay. Angus slipped below to his bathroom.

The wind still blew strongly and the waves washed hissing down her sides, yet *Jackal* was a hushed ship. Not in all their combined experience had a captain ever gone overboard, nor been the only man in the ship wounded. In enemy-frequented waters. They trusted Matheson-look who’d trained him-but there wasn’t a man who didn’t

wish that the old fellow was still on his bridge.

Matheson himself was a deal quieter than his normal self. Being comparatively young he had dreamed, and not always at right, of taking over and fighting the ship to glory. Now he did have the ship. This was no idle daydream. This was a million dollars worth of metal and 200 men, and it looked as if he would have to get them through that funnel on his own, and the weight of it pressed on him sombrely. The other officers too were quiet. They were ready and eager to back him, yet they could not show that they thought he needed it. She was a quiet, tensed ship, that windy night.

About an hour after Dutchy's recovery the surgeon-lieutenant climbed to the bridge to face the worried demand in Matheson's voice.

"How is he? What's the score?"

"Not too good, I'm afraid. I've sutured the wound, but all the other symptoms are there - unconsciousness, of course, the pupils of unequal size, rapid pulse and flushed face. And he drew up his knees suddenly and vomited. No doubt at all about the diagnosis."

"For God's sake ... what diagnosis?"

The surgeon blinked in surprise. "Why, cerebral concussion, of course. It can be caused either by a blow to the head or a fall on the spine. From what I hear, he suffered both injuries."

"Yes. But is he really *bad*?"

"My dear fellow, this isn't a kick from a football boot. A multiple concussive effect can be traumatically . . ." "Skip the mumbo-jumbo. Is he likely to return up here."

"Good Lord no. We've got to get him in hospital, just as soon as we possibly can."

"Oh hell . . ." Matheson composed himself. Not only

Pilot, but other men were listening. "Not tonight," he said, firmly.

"Not tonight? But we're not that far from Townsville, surely?"

"We're on the other side of the Reef from Townsville. It's the captain's orders that we don't attempt Flinders Passage in . . ." Matheson halted himself again. He was the captain. He didn't have to explain. He must not.

He looked away from their faces, into the windy darkness. Dearly he would have liked Pilot's advice, the next senior officer. But this was the first decision he would make in command. He had to make it

himself. The surgeon broke into his thoughts.

“He’s supposed to be kept quiet, in a darkened room. The last bit I can manage all right, but the ship’s jumping about like a damn dervish. A full night of this?” “Just hold on a minute.”

Matheson forced himself to ignore the silent waiting of the others. Calculations meshed swiftly through his mind. One thing was quite certain - Flinders Passage was out. Not only had he had orders about that, but common sense dictated waiting till first light. With no beacons lit and no radar echoes from the wave-washed coral, going through would be suicide. Yet the old fellow had to be kept quiet-he presumed physically still. Rolling would be better than smashing head-on into it. Rolling with the wind and seas astern would be easier than running crosswind. That meant steaming north. Speed? Ten knots would be best, but that was a nice slow speed for a submarine to line-up on. Yet surely no submarine would be surfaced in this? She’d roll her guts out. He had his asdic. He had to risk it.

Matheson turned. “Pilot!” “Sir?”

He was grateful for that word, the instant response. “We’ll steam north at ten knots. Continuous asdic sweep, place extra lookouts.”

“Aye aye, sir. But that will take us toward Flinder’s Reef.”

“Yes. How far?” “Sixty miles north.”

“Right. Five hours on that course, then we’ll alter to the southwest and move in toward Flinder’s Passage. Even then we’ll roll more than pitch.” He looked at the dim face of the surgeon. “I assume it’s more his head you’re worried about?”

“Yes. The other wound is comparatively minor. It was thoroughly cleaned out. Salt water happens to be quite an efficient anti . . .”

“Right. Can you pack his head on either side with pillows, something like that?”

“Of course. Better. I’ll fix it in some sort of a sling. But I cannot stress strongly enough the need for hospitalisation.”

“You’ve stressed it, Doc. He’ll be there just as soon as we can get him there, some time in the morning. Got it?”

Pilot did not feel humorous, yet his lips twitched faintly at those last words. Dutchy’s trademark. And there was a raspiness to Matheson’s tone, not nearly so rough as the other, of course, but still there. He liked that. Indecision would have been terrible. He

remembered his orders.

“Alter to the north now, sir?”

“Wait. Get down there, Doc. Fix him up as quickly as you can, then let me know. Then we’ll turn.” “Right.” The surgeon stumbled away.

“Cox’n on the bridge.”

Some ten minutes later the word came up. Matheson and the coxswain eased her round as gently as the seas would allow, and at easy speed *Jackal* rolled to the northward. Staring into the night, feeling her every movement as he never had before, young Matheson prayed that it would be all right.

She was a stout little ship, she was stoutly manned. It was all right. Dutchy lay in his hospital bed unconscious for several days. *Jackal* lay alongside her Townsville pier, waiting for her new captain. Knowing about the other business, Matheson had telephoned Bentley at his home. He did not mention that Dutchy had been subject to traumatic delirium as the result of his injury and shock, for the hospital had not told him about that. But they were thoughtful enough to inform him when the patient recovered consciousness, and that the prognosis for recovery was favourable - considering, as the doctor had added with a smile in his voice, the toughness of the patient’s frame. He probably meant skull, but he was an ethical doctor.

On receipt of the news Matheson did as he’d been told. He went straight to the post-office and lodged a trunk line call to Sydney. Yet he was somewhat disappointed at the reception his effort got.

“Right,” answered Bentley, and hung up.

This was early in the morning. Matheson was given evidence of the no-mucking-about intention behind the flotilla leader’s cryptic acknowledgement no later than that afternoon. The visitor came on board, issued crisp instructions, and departed again all within about three minutes. So that young Matheson was prevented from doing what he’d intended, which was paying a visit to the hospital.

Yet a visit was paid.

Dutchy didn’t know. He had been back in the land of the living only a few hours. Yet in that time he had made a perfect pest of himself, muttering and growling about making a call to Sydney, and being told in return by a battleaxe of a nurse - in this world we usually get

what we deserve - that he was damned lucky he was not making a call upon his Maker. And was further informed, nothing at all to his satisfaction, that his second-in-command had everything in hand.

He was in the middle of another tirade, with his nurse looking as if she might like to complete the job in which the foc's'le deck had failed, when there came a knock at his door, and the door opened.

He expected nothing, certainly not from this mob of morons by which he was surrounded. He stared at the doorway with a snarl in his eyes. He saw a white uniform, but he had seen those all day. Then he saw another white uniform, this one bright with gold buttons and shoulder-straps - four thick rings make quite a display. Squinting with astonishment, he recognised Bentley. And then he saw, between the white, something blue. A blue dress.

The blue came forward, hesitantly. That was all he really saw, that blue, for his sight was still_ a bit wobbly anyway, and the tears of weakness and gladness and relief didn't help much in the matter of delineation. He brushed fiercely at those damned stupid eyes, and saw more clearly. And then he wished he couldn't.

For Marion was coming toward him with her hand out and her eyes fixed. *But she always walked like that*, his mind screamed silently. *You don't break a habit of years in days.* Oh God no! Then beyond her he could see Bentley's tall bulk, and he knew for, certain. Bentley had come to be with her . . . to help her, still . . .

And Marion had sunk into the chair old battleaxe pushed under her, and he could see the tears streaking down her face, from those poor same eyes, and she had both his hands in hers, squeezing, hard, kissing them, and Dutchy freed one hand and with it tried to brush the wetness away, mumbling, "There now, there now, cut it out, old lass," and thinking, through the exquisite pain, not of his head, thinking, *It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter a damn in hell. I'm all right. I've got her. She's here. Nothing's changed. It's all right.*

Marion took her hand back and sat back in the chair, smiling bravely. Like always, he thought. She clutched at

the handkerchief, a big practical thing which old battleaxe provided, and she blew her nose and wiped her eyes more or less dry. Then she looked at Dutchy - quite directly, he saw, but then she always managed that, so that you'd never know - and in a voice that quavered

a bit, she said:

“At least you might have shaved for your visitors. And don’t tell me you’re growing a beard. I wouldn’t like that, John.”

“Don’t worry,” he growled, scowling up at his nurse, who was sniffing a bit, as if she’d just caught a cold. “Soon as a man can get a bit of decent attention round here, off it’ll . . .”

Dutchy’s voice loitered to silence. There was in that quiet room total silence. He stared at Marion, seeing nothing but her. His tongue came out, wetting lips that seemed to have abruptly dried. Slowly, like a weak man’s, his hand went up and touched his bristly cheek. So lowly that even in that quiet room they barely heard him, Dutchy said:

“But how do you know? You haven’t touched my face.” “I didn’t need to, dear. Now.”

Oh dear Christ ...

She was not looking toward him. She was looking at him. He tried. Oh Lord how hard he tried. For he was a strong man. But it had been a hard time, the waiting, the fearing and the hoping, and a hard blow on his head. And there are some things the strongest of us cannot hold back. Dutchy lay there and he cried.

She cradled his head, that granite old head, like a baby’s, her own eyes closed. While through it all, so used was he, even in the middle of this, to having his mind on a score of different things at once, he could hear Bentley talking in a strong loud voice to the doctor: knowing why he talked like that.

It didn’t last long. He clamped an iron hand on those ridiculous eyes, surreptitiously wiped them clear under the cover of Marion’s breast, then forced her gently away from him.

“And what the bloody hell are you doing here?” he asked in an ungentle tone of his friend.”

Bentley had his back to them. Now he turned. “Well, hello Dutchy. Excuse me, Doctor, we’ll finish this later if you don’t mind.”

What a bloody actor, Dutchy thought, unaware of the warmth in his own grin. “Well? I thought you’d come up just to help the cripple.” He took Marion’s hand. “But it seems that wasn’t necessary.”

“Quite sq. If you hadn’t acted like the greenest ordinary-seaman and fallen on your silly great head you would have learned sooner.

As it is, I'm landed with your job."

"Come again?"

"I'm taking the ship back to Sydney. Something about a gunnery radar set."

"Well I'm damned. Wait a minute, that's not a job for . . . You organised this!"

Bentley shrugged. "Leader's privilege. You'd better run a pretty taut ship. In the meantime, Marion's booked into the Metropole Hotel. When you've finished loafing in here she'll fly back with you. Then you start your sick leave. I couldn't wangle more than . . . ahem . . . you'll only get a fortnight."

After a long moment Dutchy said, "And the ship?" "Bad luck for the eager beavers on board, but she'll just have to wait in Sydney for you. What some people get for sinking- one little submarine!"

It was all too much, much too much, for a sick man, emotionally drained. Old battleaxe saw this in his face. "That's all now. Visiting hours seven till eight tonight." "Bloody gunner's mate," Dutchy growled.

"That's enough out of you."

They went out, Marion last, forgetfully but needfully taking the nurse's handkerchief, looking back at him.

Seeing him.

"Good God," Dutchy said suddenly. "I wonder what she thought of my face?"

"Now that's a question."

Dutchy poked out his tongue at her.

She took up a hypodermic needle. "I'll fix you," she promised. And she did.

THE END

STANDOFF

J. E. Macdonnell

I am not one to slander: and least of all the professional competence of a person or a business. especially one .soy vital to the war effort. Fhus I declare that there was no such person by the name of Ecolette t the business address of Number Six. Sister Street. ,Alexandria. Egypt. What I claim to have happened could happen. and no doubt has. but not at the given address, amongst personnel soy long and widely ex-perienced.

i hcsc books sell in Egypt, and if any of the former i sure:\ the\ cannot still he engaged there) personnel of that establishment happen to read this one la distinct possibility. I like to think, due to their intimate associa-iiion with the Nav_v). then I trust that my declaration is sufficient to quiet the outrage they otherwise must feel at the reflection herein on their professional capacity and expertise. At all times under all conditions. they did their duty!

Jim Macdonnell.

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