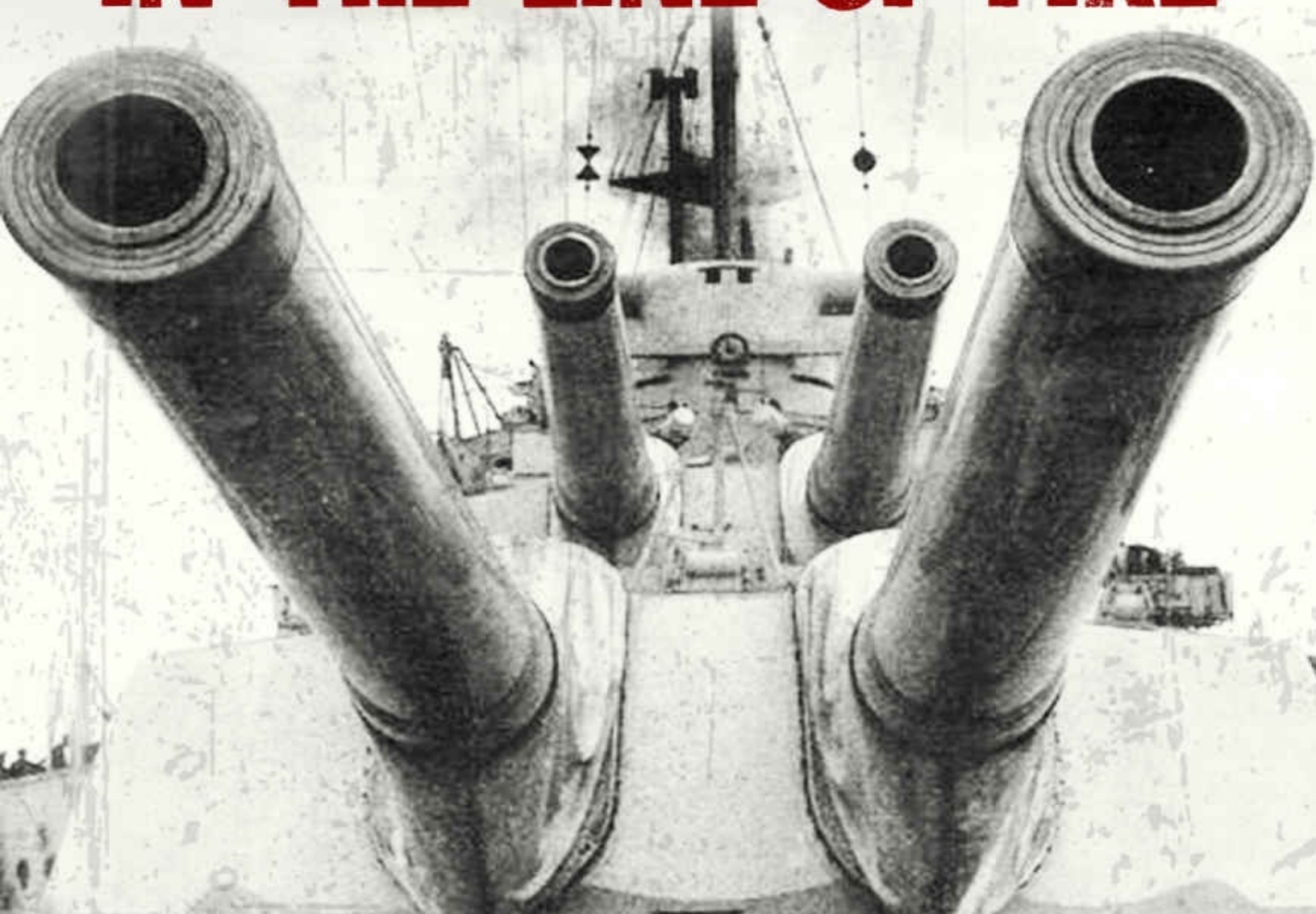


A DONALD CAMERON NAVAL THRILLER

PHILIP

MCCUTCCHAN

IN THE LINE OF FIRE



In the Line of Fire

Philip McCutchan

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First published in 1985 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, as *Cameron: Ordinary Seaman*.

This edition published in 2018 by Endeavour Media Ltd.

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Chapter One

It was all plain sailing still: all the way out from Scapa the Atlantic had been as clear as the skies. No U-boats, scarcely any wind — a winter miracle if a frozen one. This early morning, Dawn Action Stations had just been fallen out and the officers and ratings on the destroyers' compass platforms and on the navigating bridges of the wallowing merchant ships of the convoy flapped their arms to keep the circulation going beneath the heavy duffel-coats and balaclavas; behind the gun-shields the crew stamped warmth into their sea-booted feet and thought of home and girls or beer in the pubs of Queen Street and Commercial Road in Pompey. Winter of 1940-41; and this weird respite in the almost continuous foul weather that harassed the North Atlantic convoys but at the same time gave them a strong measure of protection against U-boat attack. The hidden menace lay powerless in gigantic waves, but came eagerly to periscope depth the moment the weather was fair.

On the port side of HMS *Carmarthen's* compass platform, Donald Cameron, ordinary seaman on lookout, scanned his allotted arc through binoculars. His sector was from right ahead to the port beam, and God help him if he missed so much as a leaping fish. The trick was to spot what was there to be seen before the Officer of the Watch had done so; and on his vision, and that of the other lookouts scanning the other sectors in full protection — theoretically at any rate — of HMS *Carmarthen* and her charges, depended the lives of very many men. A split second could make all the difference to the destroyer's ability to dodge torpedoes and to turn effectively to the attack herself.

On this occasion, however, there was nothing: only the other escorts from

time to time as they altered course to weave in and out of the convoy lines, chasing stragglers, passing orders by loud hailer; and the merchantmen themselves, their masters and mates normally unaccustomed to sailing the seas in company. The station-keeping was naturally poor enough; merchant ships were not equipped for small alterations in engine revolutions such as kept the warships easily in station.

But apart from a few near misses as the mass of ships weaved about it was peace, perfect peace in the midst of war; and it couldn't possibly last. Donald Cameron, straining aching eyes through his binoculars, seeing things after a while that were not there, removed the binoculars for a spell of naked eye work, then went back to the binoculars to check. Again and again, and still nothing but the ships and the sea, which was covered with white horses, just the sort of sea condition that best suited a U-boat captain's purpose, though in point of fact attack normally came during the night watches: at night the U-boats could cruise on the surface and make better speed — and, when surfaced, they enjoyed an immunity from the Asdics of the escorts. It was not unknown for daring captains to take their boats right into the middle of a convoy at night before despatching their torpedoes.

But today fate had decided differently: the conditions were perfect for submerged day attack. *Carmarthen's* Asdic picked up a contact and almost simultaneously the signalling started from the Senior Officer of the escort: more contacts had been established. A hunting pack of U-boats was in position. As aboard *Carmarthen*, to the orders of Sub-Lieutenant Stephenson, Officer of the Watch, the action alarm sounded throughout the ship and brought the upper deck alive with officers and men, Cameron spotted a feather of water, standing out a little above the small, breaking crests. Keeping his glasses on the feather he reported in a voice high with excitement, 'Dead ahead, sir, a periscope!'

Stephenson's glasses moved to the bearing. 'Right! I have it.' He bent to the voice-pipe connecting with the wheelhouse beneath the compass platform. 'Full ahead both engines, steady as you go!'

The reply came up, metallic-sounding, phlegmatic. 'Full ahead both engines, sir, steady as you go, sir.' As *Carmarthen's* Captain, a young lieutenant-commander carrying an immense responsibility, reached the bridge, a 45-degree turn to starboard was ordered by signal from the Commodore of the convoy, and as the convoy swung the warships increased speed, their wakes deepening and widening. The first casualty came within minutes: a three-island 10,000-tonner, in ballast for North America to bring home war materials, suddenly spouted water and smoke and flame from her starboard side for'ard and began at once to go down by the head. As her speed came sharply off, she was cut into astern by a tanker altering course to the Commodore's orders, and then came a second explosion. Cameron saw more trails of torpedoes running through the lines of the convoy.

It was to be a massive attack.

Instinctively, Cameron felt for the inflated lifebelt nestling round his body beneath his duffel-coat, and pulled his steel helmet more firmly down upon his ears. As he listened to the quickening pings from the Asdic he felt he could congratulate himself on having beaten the set to it by giving the Officer of the Watch a visual bearing to attack...

*

Cameron had joined the Navy on a hostilities-only engagement some seven months earlier. At the age of nineteen, he had enlisted at the first possible opportunity, as a volunteer who had not waited to be called up for service. He had joined, not in the first place in the seaman branch, but in the rating of ordinary signalman. The first weeks were to prove that he would never be able to get the hang of flag-wagging, Aldis lamps and the Morse code, but he

was a good seaman — his father had seen to that — and on being recommended for a commission in the executive branch had been transferred to the rating of ordinary seaman. That had been at the former Butlins' holiday camp at Skegness in Lincolnshire, right on the wind-swept Wash, now a naval shore establishment known as HMS *Royal Arthur*. Cameron would not forget his arrival there, in a coach that had met the train from Portsmouth, where he had enlisted along with a number of other new entries.

Over the gate was still set, in very large letters, Butlins' welcoming message to holiday-makers: OUR TRUE INTENT IS ALL FOR YOUR DELIGHT. And an equally large and loud Chief Gunner's Mate, the Navy's equivalent to a Regimental Sergeant-Major, had drawn the draft's attention to it with a wave of a hammy hand.

'Now then. See that sign?'

There had been a chorus of polite yesses.

'Well, it doesn't bloody well apply to you lot,' the Chief Gunner's Mate had said with a certain degree of satisfaction in his voice. 'Get fell in properly...'

They had shambled into some sort of line and had been taken by a petty officer and marched beneath the sign of welcome. Cameron was to find that its message certainly did not apply to the establishment's wartime occupants. The training routine was hard, the life rigorous, the day long — it started at 0630 hours when the trainee sailors were turned out from the chalets in which they slept to muster for inspection by their petty officer instructor, and then set to 'scavenge' — scrabble about among the chalet lines and pick up any piece of paper or other un-Naval objects that might be lying around. The chalets themselves were more spartan than the holidaymakers had known them: each contained three men in two bunks, the double one being for decency's sake split in half by a deep board. Here they washed and shaved in

cold water which had afterwards to be emptied. After scavenging there was breakfast in a vast, noisy building, one of several that were known by such names as York House, Kent House and Gloucester House; and after breakfast Divisions, in the course of which the various classes marched behind a Royal Marine band playing, daily, 'Sussex by the Sea' and 'Heart of Oak', marching past the Training Commander and the First Lieutenant to be dispersed to the different classrooms or other training areas. Much of the daily routine was taken up with square-bashing and with long route marches into the surrounding countryside; the rest was devoted to instruction in Naval routine, shipboard organization and the art of signalling; the latter included many sessions at the semaphore flags, when the arms of the assembled trainees moved rhythmically to the tune, never to be forgotten, of 'The Teddy Bears' Picnic'. Every fault, however small, of work, dress or behaviour was pounced upon hard by the PO Instructor, one Yeoman of Signals Possett, a small, wiry man, a Fleet Reservist who had been called back for active service after some eight years on the beach. A kindly enough man when off parade, he tended to ramble on about the past when he had served in the old *Iron Duke*, Lord Jellicoe's last-war flagship in the Grand Fleet.

'You young lads,' he would say fairly often, 'you've got it soft compared to what we had at your age. Bloody soft! I tell you something, though.'

'Yes, Yeoman?'

Possett would give a characteristic hitch to his trousers. 'Never had a good *laugh* ashore I didn't! Not till I got back in the andrew. Then I laughed again. And every time I sees you lot I laughs again till I splits me sides.'

It was not encouraging, but it was not unkindly meant. Cameron learned, as he was to continue learning throughout many facets of the war, that the chiefs and petty officers of His Majesty's Navy were mostly the salt of the earth, hard but fair, utterly dependable, utterly honest. They chased and chivvied

the new entries but the new entries, as their service proceeded, quickly realized that it had all been for their own good and that of their seagoing mates: one piece of bad seamanship, one signal read too slowly, one moment of slackness, could mean real danger. Yeoman of Signals Possett and his fellow petty officers were not going to have that happen. And many of the new entries needed a good deal of chivvying: they were a mixed bunch, some volunteers, some conscripts — some keen, others far from it. There were plenty of mutinous mutters about hardship. And the backgrounds were just as mixed. The majority were of the working class, from any number of trades from bricklaying to farming. There were clerks, waiters, bookies' runners, shop assistants... men from banks, solicitors' offices, Town Halls, slaughterhouses. There were those who stood out on account of their appearance and their accents: the sons of professional men, of service officers, even of peers of the realm. Cameron was one of those who attracted attention from above, and after a couple of months of being observed discreetly by his Divisional Officer, he was summoned for a word in private. His Divisional Officer was a lieutenant of the Wavy Navy, the RNVR, named Stubbs.

'Sit down, Cameron,' Stubbs invited — or ordered.

'Thank you, sir.' Cameron sat.

Stubbs said, 'I've been looking through your service certificate.' The reference was to the 'parchment' that was started when a man joined and accompanied him as a continuing life-history throughout his lower-deck service. 'You were at a public school, I see.'

'Yes, sir. A minor one, sir.'

Stubbs looked up sharply. 'Not apologizing for that, are you?'

'No, sir,' Cameron said, flushing. 'It's just that — well, it's not the thing to confess to —'

‘Amongst your messmates. So you try to minimize it. I think I understand, but try to drop the habit. You’re who you are and that’s that.’ Stubbs looked down at the service certificate again, then up at Cameron, seeming to stare right through him. ‘School certificate, six credits, Matric exemption. Going on to college, were you?’

‘No, sir.’

‘What, then?’

‘I’d have gone into my father’s business, sir.’

‘Ah, I see. Trawlers, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir. He owns a small fleet sailing out of Aberdeen.’

‘Yes. Yet you joined in Portsmouth, I see. How come?’

Cameron said, ‘I was staying with an uncle, sir. He was in the Navy... invalided out before war started. I had my nineteenth birthday while I was there, sir —’

‘And joined. I see. Like it?’

Cameron smiled. ‘Yes, sir, I do.’ There was a pause, and he filled it. ‘I’m used to the sea, sir. My father often sent me away with the trawlers in the holidays.’

‘Yes, I was wondering,’ Stubbs said reflectively. ‘Yeoman of Signals Possett tells me you’ve taken to boat-handling like a duck.’ He grinned. ‘Knowing Yeoman Possett, the “duck” could be taken two ways, of course... but I think I got the right translation. Tell me this: if you’d gone into your father’s trawling fleet, which I take it would have been on the management side, would you have got yourself some kind of seafaring qualification?’

Cameron said, ‘Yes, sir. My father would have insisted on that.’

‘He has one himself?’

‘He’s a master mariner, sir.’

‘I see.’ Stubbs paused, then said rather sharply, ‘You’re a pretty rotten

signalman, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry, sir, I just can't get to grips with it.'

Stubbs nodded. 'That's honest. Why did you join in that rating?'

'The Chief PO at the recruiting office said there was a shortage of signalmen, sir, and I'd be likely to get to sea quicker than as a seaman.'

Stubbs laughed. 'Yes, and it's true, oddly enough. I'm afraid the Navy's a bit of a shambles in some ways... seamen can spend months sweeping the parade at RNB while signalmen always go to sea. However, since you're no signalman, how would you feel about a transfer?'

'I'd like it, sir.'

'Good! If you wish, I'll put the wheels in motion. And something else: a commission. How about that?'

'A commission, sir?' Cameron looked startled.

'That's what I said. I'm sure you've envisaged the possibility, haven't you?'

'Well, sir —'

'Of course you have,' Stubbs said briskly, and stood up. 'That's settled then. In my view, and in the view of the Training Commander, you have the right qualities of leadership and common sense and personality... they're all summed up in the service phrase, Officer-Like Qualities, or OLQ for short. I'm prepared to put it to the Captain that you should have a White Paper started.'

'Thank you, sir —'

'Don't thank me, thank yourself — and Yeoman Possett. Once it's all put through, you'll be sent to *Ganges* at Shotley for seamanship training, along with your White Paper, and after a course there you'll be drafted to RNB Portsmouth and thence to sea. You'll need to do a minimum of three months' actual sea-time and get your Captain's recommendation for a commission,

then you'll be put before a board at Portsmouth. Pass that, and you go to *King Alfred* in Sussex as a cadet rating. All right?'

Leaving the Divisional Office, Cameron knew that hence-forward life would be a little different. Harder; for he had to prove himself even more and repay Stubbs's confidence that he could make it. He had to show not only seamanship but the vital elements of leadership and initiative. OLQ would loom very important, and his ships and establishments would have eagle eyes on the White Paper, the avenue to a commission that would carry every detail and every report upon his character and abilities. He was now what was known officially as a CW Candidate, CW standing for Commission and Warrant, the hawse-hole in effect through which every member of the lower deck must pass to the warrant officers' mess or the wardroom. And he would pass through it in the hard and bloody world of war.

Within the next two weeks Cameron was drafted to *Ganges*, the former boys' training establishment opposite Harwich at the mouth of the River Stour. Here he learned to climb the great mast on the parade-ground and sit nonchalantly on its truck; learned to scavenge as at *Royal Arthur* but this time with brooms and squeegees along the sloping covered way that ran between the seamen's messes; learned elementary gunnery and torpedo work and how to handle whalers and cutters under oars and sail and how to take charge in his turn as coxswain. After six weeks he was drafted with his class to Portsmouth, with more words of praise on his White Paper. In RNB he loitered, in a seafaring sense, as a seaman of the Commodore's Guard, belted and gaitered and slamming to the Present Arms with a ceremonial rifle made simply of wood. Time-wasting though this might be, a couple of weeks of it gave him a better insight into the Navy than he had so far acquired, for his guard duties included acting as escort for miscreants at Commodore's Defaulters, and as gaoler in the Detention Quarters housing men under such

punishments as ninety days' detention for various offences. It also improved his parade-ground efficiency to the satisfaction of the Chief Gunner's Mate of the Guard.

'Know something, Cameron?'

'What, Chief?'

'It's always said, though never in my hearing, that the order is, Royal Marines will advance in column of fours, seamen will advance in bloody great heaps. Now laugh, cos it's true.'

Cameron laughed.

'But you're better than that. White Paper, eh?'

'Yes, Chief.'

The Chief Gunner's Mate clapped him on the shoulder, 'Go to it, lad, and the best of luck. I'm putting in a word that you should get to sea pronto, and put your time in.'

He was as good as his word; within the next week Cameron was on his way from Portsmouth Harbour Station to Thurso in the far north of Scotland, to go from there by the aged ferry *St Ninian* across the Pentland Firth to Lyness in the Orkneys, to join His Majesty's destroyer *Carmarthen* on North Atlantic convoy escort duty. Her task was to shepherd the America and Canada bound merchant ships as far as was possible, taking into account the limited availability of escort vessels, whence the convoys would chance their luck alone; and to bring in the laden vessels homeward bound. He found life in the fo'c'sle messdeck of a lurching, water-shipping destroyer to be different again from Skegness, or the *Ganges*, or the Pompey barracks. Life here was real and tough and largely filthy, both as regards language and the few amenities: the seamen's heads, or lavatories, containing only five cubicles for some eighty to ninety men, were continually blocked, had no doors, and opened into a space below the break of the fo'c'sle right alongside the

messdeck and the galley. The stench was foul and wrecked the appetite. The messdecks were usually awash at sea, and water swirled about below the slung hammocks and around the lockers upon whose tops those unfortunates who had no slinging billet had to sleep. Cameron was one of these: all the billets, fitted for peacetime requirements and not enough for a full war complement, had been taken long before his arrival. His accent, he found here, was against him: it yelled White Paper. The *Carmarthen* already had another would-be officer in the seamen's messdeck.

A fat able-seaman, a man with three good conduct badges on his left arm, apprised him of this. 'WC candidate, aren't you, Lofty?'

Cameron admitted the fact, accustomed by now to the inversion of CW.

'Join the other little sod,' the three-badgeman, whose name was Tomkins, said with a belch. 'Know what? When you 'ears the pipe, 'ands to dinner, it includes wot it don't say, wot is, we candidates to *lunch*.' He gave a loud laugh and thrust Cameron into a stanchion with his stomach as he moved past towards his locker. 'I s'pose somebody 'as to be officers...'

Carmarthen sailed out through the boom to pick up her convoy before Cameron had been aboard four hours. She sailed into vicious weather, to be thrown about like a cork on vast waters that rose sheer like hillsides and then ebbed away as the destroyer lurched into the troughs, leaving her suspended while her men stared down into a great valley. Cameron, despite his experience in trawlers, was as sick as a dog for the whole ten days of the escort, out and home. He stuck to his duties because he had to, but he couldn't eat anything beyond an occasional biscuit.

A few hours from Scapa inward bound, during the morning watch, the weather moderated as the ship steamed into the lee of the land, and the waters lay flat. Hunger returned very suddenly. *Carmarthen* was a canteen messing ship, as opposed to the general messing system in use aboard big ships; this

meant that each mess prepared its own food, which was then taken to the galley to be cooked. This morning there was nothing Cameron wanted so much as fried eggs, fried bread and bacon. These he acquired when he came off watch and took them to the galley with his mouth drooling in anticipation. They were beautifully cooked, and he carried the plate to the long scrubbed table in his mess and set it down beneath the bottom-bulge of an occupied hammock overhead. Before he had taken so much as a bite, a stockinged foot emerged from the hammock and plunged straight into the bacon and eggs. There was a shout of anger from above, and Able-Seaman Tomkins glared down. No matter that he had worn the sock for no less than six weeks, day and night; it was spoiled and would have to be washed.

‘You bloody little perisher!’ Tomkins yelled down at Cameron. ‘Jus’ look wot you gorn an’ done to me fuckin’ sock!’

There was no come-back on that; Able-Seaman Tomkins not only had three badges but some forty-odd years against Cameron’s not quite twenty. Hunger simply had to endure; but there was always a laugh around the corner. One came that morning: a leading-seaman had gone ashore from the battleship *Rodney* in search of women, of which Scapa held none. Desperation and long abstinence had driven the leading-seaman to make use, so rumour said, of a sheep, an act of bestiality which had been observed and reported. When the miscreant had been brought under escort to Captain’s Defaulters, his excuse had been that he had got drunk in the shore canteen — where in fact each man from the fleet was allowed two pints only of Brickwood’s beer sent up from Portsmouth — and thought the sheep was a Wren with a duffel-coat on.

After this interlude, and a run ashore in the Orkneys’ bleak desolation, it was back to sea again. And again after that, in continuously filthy weather. Again and again, until Cameron’s necessary sea-time was almost up. There

had been some action, but nothing very spectacular; there had been the rounding-up of stray merchant ships whose engines had failed them, or whose steering was erratic. There had been false alarms from the Asdic, and false sighting reports from the lookouts that had sent the ship's company to action stations and caused plenty of sour comment and swearing. And now, on this current run out of Scapa, it was apparently as peaceful as ever even though a highly important convoy was due to cross eastward with valuable cargoes from Halifax, Nova Scotia, a convoy that would be escorted home by *Carmarthen* and the other destroyers of her flotilla — an exceptionally strong escort that had drained other convoys of their protection — once the outward-bound merchantmen had passed beyond the area of attack. Placidly, in their eight columns — five of four ships each, three of five, the longer columns steaming in between the shorter ones at the convoy speed of seven knots — the ships advanced. With five cables between columns and three cables between individual ships in each column, the mass covered some five square miles of the Atlantic.

No attack until now: not until the busy Asdics had spoken and Cameron had sighted that feather of water made by a periscope. *Carmarthen* hurtled on under full power, Cameron still on lookout since his action station as per Watch and Quarter Bill happened to be the same as his three-watch cruising station, still sweeping his arc as the Asdic continued with its ghostlike wailing pings.

A moment later, nightmare burst.

With her captain, Lieutenant-Commander Hewson, now in charge on the compass platform, *Carmarthen* was streaking up to overtake one of the merchantmen on her way to engage the sighted U-boat with depth charges, and passing close, when a shout from the captain of Number Two gun on the fo'c'sle, looking like a daylight ghost in his white anti-flash gear, indicated a

torpedo coming in from starboard, slap across *Carmarthen's* hurtling bow. Just as the shout came, the torpedo struck the great wall-sided merchant ship. There was a huge explosion and a blast of super-heated air swept the destroyer's bridge, bringing with it more lethal matter: slivers of blasted metal moving at the speed of light. Cries came from the decks, from the compass platform itself. Something bounced off Cameron's steel helmet, which went spinning out into the Atlantic wastes. Hewson sagged in a corner with the top of his head missing; on the deck the Yeoman of Signals lay with his neck spouting blood, his head nowhere to be seen. Stephenson, Officer of the Watch, was lying across the guard-rail with his entrails spread wide. As Cameron looked in sheer horror, the body slid away into the sea, leaving its bloody trail.

Cameron looked all around in disbelief, then took in the fact that no officer was now on the compass platform; no petty officer either. Below in the wheelhouse, the quartermaster would be able to see events through the ports, but would be in need of orders. The other bridge lookouts had a dazed, uncomprehending look. Cameron went, shaking in every limb, to the binnacle and the voice-pipe. In action, the Torpedo-Coxswain would be at the wheel, and thank God for it. Cameron spoke down the voice-pipe. 'Cox'n, it's Ordinary Seaman Cameron here. Both officers are dead, and I —'

'All right, lad, I'll keep her clear of the convoy. You just stay where you are and act as a communication number. I'll send a messenger and get Jimmy on the bridge pronto.' Jimmy was the time-honoured lower-deck name for the First Lieutenant. And for Cameron's money he couldn't get there fast enough. As Cameron looked across towards the stolidly-steaming merchantmen of the convoy, a deafening noise and a blast of flame came from *Carmarthen's* fo'c'sle. Jags of metal glowed red where the breakwater had been, and Number One gun leaned drunkenly to starboard.

Chapter Two

‘Petty Officer Thomas!’

Thomas, Chief Boatswain’s Mate, turned as he heard the First Lieutenant’s shout. ‘Sir?’

‘Damage Control report, fast as you can.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ Thomas doubled for’ard, sea-booted feet sliding on the iron-deck’s slippery metal. Seymour, the First Lieutenant, followed, making for the bridge ladder. Reaching the compass platform, he paled as he met the carnage, but controlled himself as he saw Cameron’s eyes watching him.

‘It’s my first time, too,’ he said. ‘They say you get used to it.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Seymour stepped to the binnacle and the voice-pipe. ‘First Lieutenant here,’ he said. ‘Stop engines, Cox’n.’

‘Stop engines, sir.’

Bells rang below as the telegraph handles were pushed over. Seymour said, ‘Warn the engine-room, I may go astern.’

‘Aye, aye, sir. Engines repeated stopped, sir.’ There was a pause. ‘Do I take it you’ve assumed the command, sir?’

‘I’m afraid so, Cox’n. Get the Leading Signaller up here pronto, will you — the Yeoman’s bought it.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

Seymour moved away from the binnacle and stared down at the wreckage of the fo’c’sle, at the dead and wounded seamen gunners, the latter being attended to by the Surgeon-Lieutenant, then away to port at the convoy where more shattering explosions were taking place and where the other destroyers

of the escort were carving wide swathes with their wakes as they raced to drop their depth-charge patterns on the attacking U-boats. Seymour clenched his fists in frustration: if only they could join in! In fact all they could do was to retreat; as a merchantman loomed on the destroyer's port side Seymour passed the word to put the engines half speed astern, in order to take his broken command clear. As *Carmarthen* gathered sternway, Petty Officer Thomas came up to report.

'It's a shambles for'ard of the collision bulkhead, sir, all gone in fact. The bulkhead's leaking, but it's holding.'

'Not well enough to go ahead?'

'No, sir, definitely not, sir.'

'Casualties?'

Thomas wiped the back of a hand across his forehead: he was sweating despite the intense cold. 'Number One gun's crew, sir, all dead. Two dead on Number Two gun, and three wounded. No others, sir.'

Seymour nodded: with the ship closed up at action stations, there would have been no one below for'ard of the collision bulkhead, which was something on the credit side. He said, 'I may have to abandon...'

'Yes, sir. Let's hope not, sir.'

'It all depends on that bulkhead.'

Thomas said, 'Shipwright's doing his best, sir, rigging shoring beams.' Seymour reflected that no shoring beams would be likely to permit headway being made and if they didn't sink then they would complete the escort stern first. By now *Carmarthen* was on a safe course astern, clear of the merchant ships, and Seymour passed helm orders to turn the ship and keep her on station abeam of the convoy. From now on, he would be virtually unable to leave the bridge: with the Captain and the senior sub-Lieutenant dead and *Carmarthen* having sailed short of one officer landed sick at the last moment

— he was left with a sub-Lieutenant RNR and a midshipman RNVR. The RNR Sub could be relied upon, but the RNVR snotty had held his rank for six weeks only and before joining the Navy had been a bank clerk.... As the Leading- Signalman, replacing the dead Yeoman, clattered up the ladder and saluted, Seymour, with the whole responsibility of the ship now on his shoulders, gave himself a physical and mental shake. He must ask for orders in the first place.

He said, ‘Signal to the Senior Officer of the escort, repeated for information to the Commodore of the convoy, from *Carmarthen* First Lieutenant. My Captain is dead and I have assumed command. Damage to the fo’c’sle by torpedo leaves me able to move astern only. Request instructions. I do not require assistance at this stage.’ He paused. ‘Got that?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Right. Make it by Aldis immediately.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ The Leading-Signalman took up the Aldis lamp, already plugged into its socket on its wandering lead, identified the Senior Officer’s vessel away ahead of the convoy, and clacked out the call-sign allocated to the leader. The acknowledgement came quickly and Seymour’s message was passed. Seymour, reflecting on his own responsibility so suddenly assumed, took some comfort in the knowledge that the leader’s responsibilities were infinitely heavier: not only had the Senior Officer in *Raglan* to guard and chivvy the valuable merchant ships and their crews, direct the escort and supervise the current counter-attack on the U-boat pack, but he had to worry about the damage to individual ships, both merchant and Naval, make an assessment from necessarily scanty information, and issue orders accordingly after a fast decision. And after that again, if anything should go wrong, he would have to justify his decision to the Admiralty in London, to high-ranking, largely costive officers who could take days or weeks to arrive at a

judgement on a man who had had little more than seconds to make the on-the-spot decision... and indeed the Senior Officer's answer was received aboard *Carmarthen* within five minutes of Seymour's signal being made. *Carmarthen* was ordered to leave the convoy and make independently for Belfast. Hard on the heels of the order a message from the W/T office, where a listening watch was maintained constantly, brought the weather report: gale force winds were imminent ahead of the convoy's westward track. The *Carmarthen* would be well out of that lot, Seymour thought as he took his departure from the convoy. The North Atlantic, having relented thus far, was once again back to its full winter fury.

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Before contact had been finally lost, eight more ships of the convoy had gone to the bottom. Ten large vessels out of thirty-five, a good bag for the Germans, a heavy loss for Britain: ten ships whose cargo-carrying capacity could not be spared, a worrying delay to vital war material waiting to be brought across from America; and a loss of crews who were not easily replaced. No further attack was made on the *Carmarthen*; the U-boats evidently preferred to concentrate on the convoy and then conserve the rest of their torpedoes for the eastbound ships due through the area shortly. The weather was still good as *Carmarthen* began her lone stern-first voyage back to Northern Ireland and the Belfast repair yard. After the convoy and its attackers had vanished over the western horizon, Seymour had all hands who could be spared mustered along the iron-deck so that he could inform them of the position personally. Rumour was never a good shipmate; 'buzzes' and the 'galley wireless' too often got things badly wrong.

'I'm reducing to second degree of readiness,' Seymour said after he had indicated his orders from the Senior Officer of the escort. Second degree of readiness meant a two-watch system. 'Things won't be too bad unless the

weather moves easterly faster than we do, and I've no information on that at the moment. God knows, we're a slow enough target, but I don't expect any further attacks just yet. I repeat, just yet.' He paused. 'The eastbound convoy out of Halifax will rendezvous with the escort in two days' time, and the Germans will know that. They'll be waiting — and don't forget the FW 200s out of Bordeaux as we close the UK. Because of them and the U-boats I intend to move south until I'm out of the shipping lanes, then east.' He turned to the Chief Boatswain's Mate. 'That's all, Petty Officer Thomas. Carry on, please.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Thomas detailed the starboard watch to close up and the port watch to fall out for part-of-ship duties, while Seymour went back to the compass platform and sent the RNR Sub below for a spell. Later that morning a boatload of merchant seamen was encountered, and engines were stopped whilst they were picked up. They turned out to be from a fast, independently routed tanker, sunk some days earlier. There were some grim sights: dead men without arms or legs, men with severe stomach wounds, many of the living on the point of death from sheer loss of blood if nothing else; men cruelly burned by blazing oil fuel floating murderously on the water, men who still cried out in agony as they were brought aboard the destroyer and continued crying out until the Surgeon-Lieutenant and his sick-berth attendant brought the relief of morphia.

*

The day passed peacefully into night. The lookouts and the guns' crews flailed their arms to keep out the bitter cold, everyone on deck watchful for any surfaced, battery-charging U-boat. Breakfast next morning was cocoa and tinned herrings in tomato, known to the Fleet, either with affection or disgust, as 'herrings-in'. The mixture was a revolting one to a gourmet, if nourishing, and all CW candidates were expected to have fastidious stomachs

and palates. Able-Seaman Tomkins, known as Stripey on account of his three good-conduct badges, remarked on this to Cameron.

‘Not wot Your Lordship normally ‘as for breakfast, I take it?’ The accent was mock middle class. ‘Not wot the bloody butler brings — wot?’

‘I’ve known worse, Stripey —’

Tomkins became belligerent. ‘‘Ere, wot’s this — Stripey! I’m Stripey to me proper mates, see, not to bleedin’ ODS on their first five minutes of the bloody war, all right?’

Cameron shrugged. ‘All right. *Mr* Tomkins, then.’

Tomkins looked baffled, and bafflement worsened his temper. ‘Don’t you be bloody cheeky. Not unless you want a thick ear, that is. Bloody little perishers... WC candidates my arse! Ponces, that’s what they are.’ He assumed a mincing tone. ‘Not good enough for ‘em, we common seamen ain’t. Oh, no. We bloody eats orf of our bloody knives, we do. And we eats ‘errings-in.’ He jerked a hand aft. ‘Down there the officers eats caviare all day long till it comes out o’ their bloody lug-’oles.’

Cameron continued eating calmly, which irritated Able-Seaman Tomkins. He said threateningly, ‘Don’t act dumb with me, Your Lordship.’ He returned to an earlier theme. ‘Wos that wot you wos, before you joined, eh? A bleedin’ ponce?’

‘No. I’ve done time as a deckhand aboard a trawler,’ Cameron said. He finished breakfast and got to his feet: he towered over Tomkins, six feet to five-foot-five. ‘It was a hard life and it kept a man fit. You should try it, Mr Tomkins. You’re all gas and gut, too fat by half. You’ve been eating too well... and you couldn’t give a flea a thick ear. Not that I wish to be disrespectful.’ There was a smile on his face as he pushed past Tomkins, but it was a tight one and his eyes were hard. As he walked away he heard titters at Tomkins’ expense. He had made an enemy but you never went through life

without doing that. Behind him the titters subsided as Tomkins uttered loud threats as to what he would do to WC candidates as soon as he got the chance. Men could vanish overboard during night watches in bad weather, and a time would come. Cameron put Tomkins out of his mind as the boatswain's calls piped the watch to close up; coming out from the break of the fo'c'sle to the iron-deck amidships, he stood back for the acting Captain as Seymour came down the ladder from the bridge. He saluted smartly, and Seymour, returning the salute, paused.

Seymour said, 'I've had a word with the Cox'n, Cameron.'

'Yes, sir?'

'I gather you stuck to your post yesterday. I'd expect no less of any man, of course, but you faced up well to your first experience of action and casualties — and you didn't panic.' Seymour smiled. 'Well done.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Seymour moved away aft. From below the break of the fo'c'sle Able-Seaman Tomkins emerged, his face twisted in anger. He might have overheard, or he might not. If he had, then there would be remarks later about arse-crawling to the officers.

*

Half-way through the forenoon watch a black line of cloud began to form like a mourning ribbon a little above the westward horizon; Humphries, the RNR Sub-Lieutenant, reported to the Captain, whose head was under the chart-table canopy, and Seymour emerged to study the cloud formation briefly through binoculars.

'It's coming,' he said. 'Not unexpected, Sub!'

'No, sir. It's moving faster than we thought, though.'

'Too true. Well, there's always the silver lining — the U-boats don't like it any more than we do.' Seymour swept his glasses round all the horizons.

Already the line of black was extending out towards the labouring destroyer. The air was different now: a curious calm and silence over an oily swell, a swell that took the ship and lifted her, only to slide back and wallow as though at the foot of a craggy Scottish mountain. As Seymour passed the orders for battening-down to meet bad weather, and warned the shipwright's team on watch by the weakened collision bulkhead that their reserve shoring beams might be needed, the wind took them in a preliminary grasp and white horses appeared on the water. Now the cloud extended with extreme speed, seeming to race out towards the lone vessel and place a threatening pall over her head. Then the rain came, a torrential downpour not unlike that of a tropical storm but with the cold of ice in it, rain that brought the visibility right down so that the horizons closed in around them. But just before the visibility went Cameron spotted something and made an instant report:

‘Submarine on the surface, sir, fine on the port bow!’

Up came the binoculars of the Captain and Humphries. Seymour said. ‘Sound action stations, Sub!’

As the alarm rattlers blasted out through the ship, Seymour passed the helm and engine orders to bring the after guns to bear; but the German had the advantage and was the first to open fire. She fired almost from invisibility, only the orange flame of the discharge marking her position. A shell whistled across, close above the bridge, so close overhead that Cameron felt its wind as an extra force in the gathering, Atlantic storm. A second shell sliced through the fo’c’sle debris left by the earlier torpedo attack, and exploded to bring a tremendous blast of hot air and a rain of metal down upon the reeling destroyer. A good deal fell on and around the bridge and by nothing short of a miracle caused no harm although Cameron found his oilskin sleeve torn by a fragment that pinged against his binocular-stand. By this time *Carmarthen*'s after guns were in action, fired virtually blind by the gun-

layers aiming at the German's flash. *Carmarthen* kept up the fire, but it was not returned, and Seymour decided to break off the action rather than waste ammunition upon an unseen target.

'She's probably dived,' he said. A binocular sweep had revealed nothing. 'If so, she'll wait her time and try again as soon as the weather moderates.' He lowered his glasses. 'I'll stay at action stations for a while, Sub, but I've a feeling that U-boat's bedded down.' He turned his head. 'Cameron?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Nicely spotted. She almost caught us with our pants down.' Seymour was about to say something further when the destroyer gave a violent twisting lurch, heeling hard over to starboard as a heavy sea took her, everything movable on the bridge sliding across. Cameron, torn from his position, seemed to drop like a stone, then fetched up hard against the starboard plating with all the breath knocked from his body. As Seymour shouted urgent orders down the voice-pipe to the wheelhouse, *Carmarthen's* stern swung uncomfortably round so that the shattered bow began to come close to the wind and sea; and along the wires of the sound-powered telephone rigged from the collision bulkhead to the compass platform the shipwright's urgent voice came, doom-laden.

'Bulkhead's giving way, sir!'

Chapter Three

It was utter chaos below in the seamen's messdeck, and in the stokers' messdeck below again. The shipwright and his gang, sweat-streaked, wet and dirty, fought like madmen to place more shoring beams in position and to stem the increasing leaks. As the full force of the North Atlantic was flung against the bulkhead, water was forced through, the many jets like a gorgon's head of hoses; *Carmarthen's* messdecks were never dry when any sea was running, but now they were well and truly awash with water that slopped from side to side as she rolled and dipped her broken bows under.

Petty Officer Thomas was below now: Robens, the RNVR Midshipman, was there too but it was Thomas who made the suggestion. 'Hammocks, sir.'

'Hammocks?'

'Yes, sir.' Thomas' voice was brisk and confident. 'Plug the leaks, see.'

'They'll just saturate, won't they?'

'Every little helps, as the old lady said when she piddled in the sea.' Petty Officer Thomas was already passing the orders. There were plenty of hammocks available, belonging to those men who had slinging billets; the others had already had their hammocks removed to act as extra shelter — as substitute sandbags, in effect, against machine-gun attack and blast — around the bridge and the close-range weapons' crews. The lashed hammocks were now brought out from the nettings and passed forward to be battened down with timber and held fast against the many leaks. This brought some improvement though it would have no actual strengthening effect: the bulkhead's future must depend on the ship being brought round again to lie stern first to the wind and sea. Constant reports reached Seymour on the

compass platform as he attempted to do just that, cautiously, knowing that he might all too easily broach-to on the turn, and lie broadside to the mounting waves. With the engines still moving astern he tended the ship's head and inch by agonizing inch *Carmarthen* swung, bringing her counter round to ease the bow to a degree of safety. Seymour appeared to be succeeding when disaster came: a big wave rolled beneath the stern and lifted it in a twisting motion; and the ship's head came round to take once again the full force of the sea's battering. Then it happened: there was a tremendous noise from somewhere below and the remains of the bow dipped very suddenly. In the same second the sound-powered telephone whined into the wind and the Chief Boatswain's Mate's urgent voice reported the bulkhead gone in the stokers' messdesk.

'Sea's coming up the hatch, sir, into the seamen's mess, like a waterspout.'

Seymour's response came as a death-knell: 'Batten down the hatch cover, Thomas, evacuate the seamen's mess and clip down the watertight doors behind you.' His face was set hard as he put the telephone down. He had given the only possible order, but it meant that any men working in the stokers' messdeck who had survived the inrush of water would now be left under hatches to drown. In the seamen's messdeck, Petty Officer Thomas himself ran through deepening water to the hatch and, with the assistance of a leading-seaman and two ABS, fought the cover down against the spouting Atlantic and pulled the clips across. As the upper part of the bulkhead began to break up, all hands cleared the messdeck at the rush and Thomas, having shepherded them all through into the galley flat, closed the watertight door and slammed the clips on. Moving through the galley flat for the iron-deck, he found himself climbing uphill past the engineers' store by the fore funnel. The destroyer was stopped and helpless, the weight of water in her fore section having lifted the screws clear of the sea; she had fallen off the wind

and now lay broached-to, broadside to the great racing waves. For Thomas' money, the old girl couldn't last long now.

*

A sea-anchor had been rigged with much sweat and foul language: three spars lashed together in a triangle and covered with canvas, with a three-legged bridle heavily weighted at one corner. It had been the very devil to construct, was awkward to handle, and in the event didn't appear to help very much. After a few hours it had carried away. Nevertheless, when that day and night had dragged away and the next dawn had come, *Carmarthen* was by some miracle still afloat, though still stopped and wallowing dangerously. Seymour, hunched into a corner of the compass platform which he had not left for more than a minute or two throughout, stared across the wave-crests, knowing he must assess, and assess in good time, when the moment might come to abandon. A second's delay would make the vital difference between losing perhaps a whole ship's company and allowing them to live a little longer in the boats and Carley floats. Cameron, on lookout again for the morning watch, thought about that clipped-down hatch and the dead who surged about below, drifting into lockers and mess tables as the destroyer wallowed in the ocean's grip. He had known all of them for better or worse; some had been his friends, others merely faces met in the course of duty. *Carmarthen* had carried a total war complement of almost two hundred men; now fifteen seamen lay entombed. Thirteen including the Captain and Sub-Lieutenant Stephenson had died in the earlier U-boat attack: the sea and the enemy together had already exacted a heavy toll, and the ordeal had only just begun. God alone could tell what lay ahead on the long haul back to the UK. And even though so many had gone, the ship was now vastly overcrowded as a result of the two main messdecks being flooded. The burned and wounded men picked up from the tanker were being accommodated in the tiny sick-

bay and in the officers' cabins and wardroom. When off watch, the officers just used the deck of the wardroom flat and the ratings dossed down where they could find shelter, the galley flat just aft of the seamen's messdeck being the best billet if a man could squeeze in and find a space on the deck, with just the watertight door and its surrounding bulkhead holding off the Atlantic. Fires had been drawn in the galley itself as a safety precaution and there would be no more hot food. They would exist on cold bully beef out of tins, ship's biscuits and cold herrings-in plus the daily rum issue made by the Torpedo-Coxswain and the Supply Petty Officer. Cameron, dead tired, cold and hungry and wet through beneath his oilskins as he searched the seas of his arc for signs of the enemy or indeed of a friendly ship, thought somewhat bitterly of the days before he had joined. How eagerly he and others had gone to war! Not, according to his father's accounts, as eagerly as that older generation had flocked to the Navy and Army to give the Kaiser what for — but eagerly enough. This time there had been no thoughts of it all being over by Christmas: Hitler had asked for it and now he was going to get it. It was going to be a pleasure to give it to him.

So far, it hadn't worked out quite that way. On land, the Army hadn't yet recovered from the blow of retreat from Dunkirk, though thanking God they had got so many men away to fight again. As for the sea war, Hitler appeared to be winning that as well: the sinkings in the North Atlantic had been far too many for an embattled island to bear. Men and ships took time to replace, and the cargoes were desperately wanted: food, arms and ammunition, oil fuel, the very sinews of war and the ability to continue an unequal struggle. Cameron had passed some of the 'phoney war' period in Portsmouth, doing that spell in the Commodore's Guard at the Naval barracks. Phoney it had been, all right. Pompey Town had been full of uniforms, predominantly Naval, the uniformed sailors with slung gas-masks — and woe betide you if a

chief gunner's mate heard you referring to them as anything but anti-gas respirators. The barracks, crammed with eight thousand men, vastly more than it had been built to hold when at about the time of the Boer War it had replaced the old barrack hulks in the dockyard, disgorged its liberty-men each evening to roister, until their pay ran out, in the many hundreds of public houses. The civil police didn't mind much when a rating got drunk; the Navy was honoured in Portsmouth and they looked the other way. All too soon, the drunken man might die in grotesque agony on the seas, in the flame and thunder of the guns — in agony and in honour and glory too, like the memorials to the last war said. In the meantime, he was well entitled to enjoy his fling. The girls helped, too; there was plenty of talent in Portsmouth, a good deal of it in the women's services. Cameron had drunk his half-pints of Brickwood's bitter in the brasserie bar of the Queen's Hotel in exclusive Southsea along with three or four other CW candidates — in a bar where before the war a rating in uniform would have been directed elsewhere — and had met a Wren there. Mary Anstey had been brought in by a sub lieutenant from the gunnery school at Whale Island, but the sub-lieutenant had become filthy drunk and passed out and somehow or other the girl had attached herself to Cameron and after that he'd seen quite a lot of her when guard duties had permitted...

'Cameron!'

'Yes, sir?'

Seymour snapped, 'Keep your mind on the bloody sea, man! You've been staring at one spot for the last three minutes.'

'Sorry, sir.'

Portsmouth and Mary Anstey faded: the phoney war stage was of the past now and danger was real. Somewhere out there, that submarine might lurk yet, might be manoeuvring into her firing position and never mind the

weather.

The same thought appeared to be in the mind of the RNR Sub as later he came up to take over the watch, relieving decks for the Midshipman to snatch a quick, cold breakfast: Seymour ate his in his corner of the compass platform — a cup of cocoa and two slices of bread and marmalade, brought with a butlerish air by his seaman servant. Humphries asked, ‘Do you expect that U-boat to attack submerged, sir?’

‘I doubt it,’ Seymour answered. ‘She probably wouldn’t waste a tin fish on a ship that must look about to sink.’

‘She could have fired off her stock, I suppose, sir.’

Seymour said, ‘Could be. Could be one of the bastards that attacked the convoy.’

Cameron overheard this. It was on the cards, he fancied, that the U-boat might come to the surface to finish them off by gunfire, and in that event they wouldn’t have a chance, hadn’t had a chance ever since the flooding of the for’ard decks. The after 4.7-inch guns could surely never be depressed to an angle that could hit the target, at any rate if the submarine surfaced close and astern, which she would obviously do after a look through the periscope. And currently *Carmarthen*, with her silent engines, was a sitting duck, unable even to steer, broadside to the sea. A sitting duck some four hundred sea miles from base... the prognosis was not good. In the meantime, however, she was being urged by the action of wind and sea in the right direction, more or less, and that was on the credit side. When Humphries, who had the duty of navigating officer, took the noon sight, then an assessment could be made. Cameron had gathered that it had not been possible to obtain a sight during the night hours: there had been no stars visible.

They wallowed on sideways in a strange and somehow foreboding silence. A destroyer at sea was normally vibrant with her engine-sounds and now

there were none; only the hum of the generators that kept the electric circuits going.

*

In a two-watch system there was scant time for the hands to work part-of-ship when off watch; sleep was necessary so that the watchkeepers could be alert when their watch came round again. Thus the routine work of the seaman divisions — fo’c’sle, iron-deck, quarterdeck — was held in abeyance and only the daymen, those who kept no watches — the supply ratings, the cooks and so on — worked normally. Though dead tired when he came off watch, Cameron found that sleep did not come. His mind was too active. Alongside him in the galley flat lay his fellow CW candidate, by name Lavington, a former medical student who had failed his second MB examination and had thus, aged twenty-one, come into the age group for call-up. No doubt Lavington’s public school education had led to the starting of his White Paper; but he did not strike Cameron as good officer material. He was inclined to dodge the column when possible and had approached the leading hand of his watch, unsuccessfully, with a plea that his seasickness was bad enough to have him excused watchkeeping. Currently, Ordinary Seaman Lavington was looking like death warmed up and was as sleepless as Cameron.

‘What d’you think is going to happen?’ he asked in a strained voice.

Cameron said, ‘Oh, we’ll make it, don’t worry.’

‘I’m not so sure.’

‘I am! Seymour knows what he’s doing.’

‘Well, I hope so.’ Lavington was shaking like a leaf. ‘If we’re attacked... look, what happens when we get into the air attack zone? You know those Focke-Wulf Condors — four engines, long range. They’re way beyond anything Coastal Command’s got, aren’t they? They can blow us out of the

water at the drop of a hat!’

Cameron laughed. ‘Six trips out and we’ve never seen ‘em yet! Why should we this time?’

‘There’s always a first time,’ Lavington said. There was a whine in his voice now. ‘God, how I wish this bloody war was over!’

Once again Cameron laughed and softly sang under his breath: *‘When this bloody war is over, Oh, How happy I shall be... no more bullshit from the wardroom, no more draft chits off to sea...’*

‘Shut yer muckin’ mouth!’ an angry voice said.

Cameron said obligingly, ‘All right, Mr Tomkins. Sorry.’

‘One more muckin’ word and you’ll get filled in.’

Alongside Cameron, Lavington said disconsolately, ‘They’re all so awfully coarse, these men.’ He hadn’t intended anyone but Cameron to hear this, but Stripey Tomkins did. The fat AB levered himself to his feet, his eyes red with lack of sleep and now with anger, and bent threateningly over Lavington.

‘On your feet, sonny.’

Lavington stared back glassily, looking like a ghost in the blue light on the bulkhead. ‘What for?’ he asked.

‘I’m going to give you a lesson in bleedin’ politeness,’ Tomkins said, and reached for Lavington’s duffel-coat. Gathering the material in his fist, he heaved the sick-looking ordinary seaman to his feet and then drew back his other fist. Cameron got quickly to his feet and grabbed the fat man’s arm.

He said, ‘I wouldn’t, if I were you, Mr Tomkins, even though he asked for it.’

‘Don’t be bloody cheeky!’ Tomkins, still baffled as to how to react to the ‘Mr Tomkins’ but well knowing it was said sardonically, glared at Cameron. ‘What if I do, eh?’

‘Then I’ll send your false teeth through the back of your throat, Mr

Tomkins.'

'You an'else?'

Cameron smiled. 'Just me.' He towered, head bent away from the deckhead. He extended his two hands, big hands now bunched into fists. 'This one,' he said calmly, indicating his right, 'is hospital. The other's sudden death. There was a trawlerman once... thought he could take liberties with a green youth. He never tried again. Go back to sleep, Mr Tomkins.'

'You 'it me and you'll be up before Jimmy. Then you can kiss your bleedin' commission goodbye.'

'I'll chance that,' Cameron said quietly.

Tomkins let go of the duffel-coat and Lavington almost collapsed back to the deck of the galley flat. Tomkins, eyes furious, said in a thick voice, 'Sod you, Cameron. I'll get you one day, see if I muckin' don't.' He turned away and flopped back into his billet. Cameron also got down on the deck and once again tried to sleep. He couldn't; Lavington seemed to be talking to himself or something, a low dirge of self-pity that grated badly. Tomkins' reaction hadn't been all that surprising, but Tomkins had all the instincts of a bully and Cameron didn't like bullies, however justified they might be on occasions.

Meanwhile, Lavington worried him: he was no advertisement for CW ratings, already much unloved by their lower-deck shipmates, and he sounded now as though he might well be about to crack up. He had a sensitive face, much too sensitive for the war at sea; he was over-careful of his hands, never bent his full weight to the falls, for instance, when the pipe came for the lower deck to be cleared for hoisting the whaler in port. Cameron's own hands had not been fully toughened up when he had his first experience of Up Whaler and afterwards he had found them badly blistered, but they had soon got their hardness. Minds had to be as hard as hands in the fo'c'sle of

one of His Majesty's destroyers on war service. It was perhaps the toughest assignment in the Navy. Sleep came at last as Cameron drifted off into a nightmare jumble of thoughts and fancies in which Mary Anstey was at one moment about to jump from the after deck of a blazing oil-tanker and the next was on the pier at Lyness in Scapa, welcoming him back from sea, now wearing on her left sleeve the blue fouled anchor of a Leading Wren and thus his superior officer. He was holding Mary in his arms when the shattering sound of the alarm rattlers broke into what was after all only a surface sleep and he came fully awake on the instant.

Already dressed and lifebelted as all hands always were at sea, he joined the mad scramble for the iron-deck and doubled up the ladder to the compass platform just as the three-inch gun amidships blasted off starshell. There was a tremendous crack and seconds later the shell burst off the starboard bow, cascading brilliance to illuminate the seas in the vicinity. In this brilliance could be seen the surfacing U-boat, long and low and menacing as the water foamed from her casing and men scrambled from the conning tower and fore hatch, running for the gun-mounting on the casing. This went immediately into action, belching smoke and flame and sending its projectiles screaming towards the helpless destroyer.

Chapter Four

More starshell went up; the Lewis gunners were in action now, sweeping the U-boat's conning tower and casing. So were the pom-poms and the machine-gun's crew. From the U-boat a man went over the side of the conning tower, plummeted screaming down to the casing, then bounced off. On the whole the German seemed to be getting the worst of it, at least until a shell from her 3.5-inch gun took *Carmarthen's* aftermost 4.7-inch fair and square, burst on the gun-shield and almost took the mounting out of the lifted deck. The gun itself vanished as though it had never existed and the casualties were heavy: strips of flesh and entrails lay with shattered dismembered limbs among the wreckage or flew, in the starshells' light, like bloody pennants, from the standing rigging aft and amidships. Number Three gun's crew, just for'ard of the gaping hole that had been Number Four gun, had been caught by the lethal spread of the explosion and the flying metal and all were dead except for the gun-layer who, miraculously, had survived without a scratch.

Then, as *Carmarthen's* close-range weapons kept up their stuttering fire, there was a swirl in the heavy sea and the U-boat had gone back into the uneasy depths.

Seymour said savagely, 'We haven't heard the last of the bugger. Go aft and have a look... let me know the casualties and damage, Sub. I'll keep the ship closed up at action stations for a while yet.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Humphries went down the starboard ladder at the rush. When he returned, his story was a mixed one: the only further structural damage was to Number Four gun and its mounting and once the hole in the deck had been plugged and covered the ship would be little less seaworthy, if

such was the word, than before — except that, as Seymour had already noted, the removal of Number Four gun's weight from aft had put her a little farther down by the head. The really bad news was that ten more men had died and the Surgeon-Lieutenant had four more wounded to attend to, three of them unlikely to survive into Belfast Lough. *Carmarthen* drifted on, lone and stricken; and during the next forenoon watch the dead were sewn into canvas shrouds and committed to the sea. This was in fact the second committal, for those killed in the initial attack on the convoy had been disposed of as soon as *Carmarthen* had been well clear of the area. Seymour once again read the short, simple service in a voice that rang defiance out over the heaving Atlantic wastes, his face grey with strain, tiredness and sorrow for the men he had sailed with for many months. As each shrouded figure was laid upon the plank beneath the folds of the White Ensign, and the plank was tilted, the Captain's voice followed it:

‘Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live... in the midst of life we are in death... our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the deep...’

It was soon all over and the hands were fallen out. Normal routine was resumed; rum was issued, three-water grog for junior ratings, neat spirit for the chief and petty officers who were presumed to obey the Admiralty's instruction that it should not be bottled for subsequent over-indulgence, but who in fact seldom took any notice of that, preferring to chance their arms. Birthdays cropped up now and again, and needed to be properly celebrated. On the compass platform Seymour brooded, thought again about that U-boat: he would not have expected her to surface in such foul weather, weather that was scarcely conducive to good gunnery — the shot that had taken out Number Four gun was sheer luck — but then of course all submarines needed to charge batteries and no doubt that was what the U-boat had been doing.

When that day's noon sight was taken, using a false horizon — the visibility had come down a little further before noon and the horizons were too close — it showed bad news. The destroyer had in fact made some unwelcome and unexpected northing and although she was somewhat closer to home, she was being taken by the drifting action of the wind and sea into the area where the Germans might be expected to operate the Focke-Wulf 200s. Seymour's hope of making a little south had died with the flooding of the for'ard decks and the consequent lifting of the twin screws out of the water...

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It was no time before the buzz had reached the lower deck: they were not making a good heading.

'It'll be bloody cold if we head up too far,' Stripey Tomkins said. 'Know what?'

'What?' Lavington asked, blue with cold already.

'Freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Know something else, do you, eh?' Tomkins scratched under his right armpit. 'I was off Greenland once, up the Denmark Strait. Fishery protection, back in 1934 it was. Skipper, 'e'd made a cock-up and we was right off course like. Just before Christmas. Talk about cold! One o' me mates, 'e lost 'is wherewithal.'

'Wherewithal?'

'Wherewithal to enjoy life. Got frostbite in it, see. Quack 'ad to amputate it.' Tomkins gave a coarse laugh. 'Bloody fine officer you'll make, without a pr—'

'All right, skip it, Stripey.' This was Leading-Seaman Farrow, a gloomy man with a long, horse-like face. 'We all know your yarns. We don't have to believe 'em, but don't try to make things worse, it don't 'elp at a time like this.'

‘I—’

‘I said, put a sock in it, Stripey. That’s an order.’ Farrow’s voice held the snap of authority and Tomkins subsided, muttering about jumped-up killicks, killick being the sobriquet for leading hands, deriving from the rank-badge of the fouled anchor. Farrow turned his head. ‘You there, Cameron?’

‘Yes, Killick?’

‘You’ve done time in your old man’s trawlers, right?’

Cameron nodded. ‘Right.’

‘Denmark Strait?’

‘No, not that far up. Off the Shetlands... well north of Shetland as a matter of fact.’

‘What’s it like?’

‘Cold but bearable,’ Cameron said, and added, ‘Just. That’s if you’re kept busy on deck and warm below.’

‘Which we aren’t bloody goin’ to be,’ Tomkins said, and said with truth: there was no warmth below at all, other than maybe in the silent engine-room and boiler-rooms where steam was being maintained throughout, and watchkeeping duties on deck were never exactly active physically. You stood about and stamped your feet behind the gun-shields or at the tubes or on lookout, and prayed you wouldn’t freeze to a statue. When it snowed, you became a temporary snowman, and the wind turned you blue. Of course, they all had their cold-weather issue gear: knitted balaclavas, thick socks, duffel-coats and long johns extending from waist to ankles which protected wherewithals but could all too soon get soaked through with seawater or driving rain that could penetrate any amount of oilskin. Life at sea in the world’s extremities both north and south was a cold hell and that fact couldn’t be denied, Farrow or no Farrow. Stripey Tomkins said so, and was again told to put a sock in it.

‘All right, all right, *Bleedin’-Seaman* Farrow.’ Tomkins scowled. ‘Me, I’ll put two pairs of woolly socks *on* it,’ he said. ‘Me old woman, she wouldn’t expect less... nor would a couple of popsies in Pompey, come to that.’

Cameron glanced across at Lavington: the former medical student looked almost on the verge of tears. He’d been, Cameron understood, at Cambridge and hoping to go on to Barts in London. Life as an undergraduate at Cambridge must have been a lovely soft billet and a privileged one too. Set of rooms, servant, good food, soft bed and all that went with all that. A very far cry from the fo’c’sle of a destroyer, even a destroyer that wasn’t in a half-sinking condition in heavy seas and under constant and increasing danger of attack. At Cambridge, there wouldn’t have been any Stripey Tomkinses, and the lascivious talk wouldn’t have been so bald, probably. Cameron was mighty glad his father had made him sail in the trawlers: at least he’d had some sort of preparation for what he was now facing. Like Kipling’s soldiers, trawlermen at sea didn’t grow into plaster saints. But Lavington had had no preparation at all; he was certainly not alone in that, but there was a softness, a basic softness about him that was making it far, far worse to bear. When Leading-Seaman Farrow left the galley flat to go aft, Stripey Tomkins resumed the baiting of Lavington. This time, Cameron didn’t interfere, and wouldn’t do so short of physical threat. He couldn’t be nanny all the time, and it wouldn’t help Lavington if he was. The baiting would only become worse.

*

Three days before *Carmarthen* had left Scapa to pick up her convoy, Mary Anstey had been suddenly drafted from Portsmouth, where she had worked in the office of the Captain’s secretary at HMS *Vernon*, the anti-submarine and torpedo school. She had been given a draft chit and a railway warrant, third class, from Portsmouth to Rosyth on the Firth of Forth in Scotland, to serve

on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief, Rosyth, whose dockyard frequently contained some of the Home Fleet battleships — the mighty *Nelson* and *Rodney*, and the battle-cruiser *Hood*. Never for too long, for Hitler and Goering were in the habit of despatching aircraft to bomb the Forth Bridge, and if they ever happened to bring its great network of spans and girders and railway tracks down, then an important part of Britain's battlefleet might well be hemmed in for the duration. They hadn't got it yet, and Rosyth was in good heart, and able to laugh heartily over the story of the American destroyer captain, dangerously entering the war zone even though his country was not yet at war, who was given by signal an anchorage 'beyond the Forth Bridge'. When he had hit some rocks fair and square he had complained bitterly that, gee, he'd only passed *one* goddam bridge... Apochryphal the story might be, but the Navy in Rosyth enjoyed it as they watched the great ships proceed in safety back to Scapa with their destroyer escorts. Mary Anstey, when she had a moment to spare, thought of writing to Donald Cameron to tell him she was somewhat closer to him, but she didn't; she really didn't know why, though she had a confused sort of idea that to let him know she was closer might disturb him and deflect his concentration on the all-important target of his commission, which meant a lot to him. He had talked in Portsmouth about possibly seeking to transfer to RN after the war, if there was an after. She felt there might not be, despite a popular song of the moment that drooled stickily about after and said, *There's a land of begin again, On the other side of the hill, Where we'll learn to love and live again, When the world is quiet and still*. If Donald wanted to transfer to RN, than an RNVR commission was a first essential; and in any case he would get no leave till — if he got his recommend — he went back to Portsmouth for his commission board, so why bother him now?

Donald Cameron was much on Mary's mind and it showed in pensiveness;

she opened her heart a little way to a buxom, motherly Leading Wren almost twice her age when the latter gave her the opening on her first day in Rosyth.

‘Boyfriend trouble, love?’

Mary smiled. ‘Not trouble exactly.’

‘Oh, I get it. Absence! Down in Portsmouth, is he?’

‘No, he’s at sea.’

‘Well, I hope he loves you in return, love, that’s all. They don’t all, not by a long chalk. Love ‘em and leave ‘em, that’s the motto of some.’ The tone had suddenly become a shade bitter and subsequent conversation revealed that back in 1914 the buxom lady had loved — too well — an able-seaman who had deserted her for another just before he had sailed under Rear-Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock in the armoured cruiser *Good Hope*, to be sunk at the battle of Coronel. There had been issue, fathered by a hero, which was something; and the lady had subsequently married a grocer’s assistant from Clapham who had been willing to accept the child, a girl. ‘Don’t go and get caught like that, love.’

‘I don’t think Donald would do that.’

‘No. Well, I’m sure he wouldn’t, love, but there’s them as do, that’s all I can say. What’s the young man’s ship or shouldn’t I ask?’

Mary told her.

‘*Carmarthen*, eh. First Destroyer Escort Group, out of Scapa.’

‘That’s right. How did you know?’

The motherly woman laughed. ‘My job to know, and yours too from now on.’ Leading Wren Davis was in Operations, for which Mary also had been detailed. ‘You’ll see. It’s interesting, I’ll say that for it, but there’s times when it gets you down terribly, love. The sinkings and that.’ She added, ‘You feel responsible in a kind of way. Not personal exactly... but you’re one of the team that sends them out and gives them their routeing orders.’

Mary did find it interesting, the more so as *Carmarthen* was involved from the word go. She saw the ship indicated on the plot, watched its progress as estimated across the Atlantic with the slow west-bound convoy, day by day. Saw, too, the likely positions of the hunting packs of U-boats out from the Fatherland to attack and sink British ships and seamen to the greater glory of the Reich. She found her nails digging hard into her palms: along with everyone else in Britain she hated Hitler, but now more so because she had that personal stake and was where she could watch by proxy of the Staff Officer (Operations) the progress of the convoy and its escort. If only they could have air cover, she heard SO(O), a Commander, say through set teeth — but the aircraft-carriers were all too few and could not be spared from other war theatres; and the aircraft of the RAF'S Coastal Command hadn't the fuel capacity to extend far enough from their bases and then return.

Then came the shattering news: the Commodore of the OB convoy had broken wireless silence, since his position was now known to the enemy, to report the U-boat attack and the condition of HMS *Carmarthen*. Severely damaged and with casualties, the destroyer was limping home, alone and untended. Mary Anstey's fingers shook as she worked at her place on the plot. The hours dragged; no more news came. SO(O) was non-committal: he'd seen all this many times before, and presumably he had no close ties aboard the *Carmarthen*. At last news of a sort, not directly about *Carmarthen*, did come through: the eastbound convoy, the HX out of Halifax, Nova Scotia, had come under U-boat attack some four hundred miles west of the Bloody Foreland in County Donegal. Two ships, both crammed with munitions, had blown sky-high; the escort was counter-attacking but with no known success so far.

SO(O) said, 'They'll be attacked all the way in, for my money.' He scanned the plot, his face worried, desperately anxious. 'The HX is bearing down on

where *Carmarthen* should be by now. Near enough, anyway.'

Mary Anstey didn't need to be told what that meant: the battered destroyer would come into the dead centre of a heavy attack if the inward-bound convoy should overtake her, and she wouldn't have a hope. She felt cold and dead inside. Those evenings in Portsmouth came back to hit hard. She stared at the impersonal, impassive plot, at the counters that indicated the ships at sea. The one that represented *Carmarthen* took on, in her eyes, the outline of the ship itself, and she tried to pray.

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By now the word had reached Seymour: his W/T office had intercepted the signal from the eastbound Commodore and the Petty Officer Telegraphist had brought it personally to the compass platform; the Surgeon-Lieutenant had been sent for to perform his deciphering duties, such as normally fell to the lot of the doctor in a small ship. The great heavily-laden convoy was, as estimated, some twelve hours' steaming westward; it was almost due west of *Carmarthen*, and Seymour reckoned it was likely to come up dead on his drifting track.

He called down the voice-pipe to the wheelhouse. 'Chief Boatswain's Mate to the bridge, immediately. And the Engineer Officer.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

Petty Officer Thomas was the first to report. 'You sent for me, sir?'

'Yes, Thomas.' Seymour paused, running a hand across his chin's stubble. Shaving often enough went by the board at sea. 'The HX is due to pass us within, I'd say, twelve hours.'

'Yessir. That makes it the dark hours, sir.'

'Right. Now, she's come under attack already. That makes me believe the weather's moderated westerly. If so, then we may come into flatter seas ourselves before long.' Seymour's breath hissed out. 'You know what *that*

means, Thomas.'

'I do, sir. Continuing attack, sir.'

'Exactly. Warn all hands, if you please... full alertness and be ready to abandon if we have to. I don't suppose we're likely to have trouble over lifejackets, but just in case, warn them that any man found not wearing one will be in cells ashore the moment we reach Belfast. That's a promise,' Seymour turned as the Lieutenant (E) reported: Matthews, ex-lower deck, was a prickly character but as dependable an engineer as Seymour had ever met. 'Chief, we've been into this before, but I'm coming back to it again: I've half a mind to flood some after compartments and get those screws down.'

'There's only the after magazines available —'

'Yes. But I've a feeling that to be able to move might be more profitable than an availability of gunfire — our arc's pretty well non-existent anyway. In the meantime, we're a sitting duck, and soon we're going to be slap in the middle of a concentrated hunting pack.'

Matthews eased his cap on his forehead and said, 'Well, the engines are ready whenever you want them. But if we flood aft there'll be bloody little freeboard left.'

'You still don't like the idea, Chief?'

'On balance,' Matthews answered in a sour tone, 'no. But it's your decision.'

Seymour stared bleakly out across the angry seas: every-thing, always, was the Captain's decision, and he had come suddenly and without warning to command and the sobering knowledge that it was *his* decisions, along with those of God and chance, that would bring the *Carmarthen* back to base or send her to the bottom of the North Atlantic. He had a feeling that Matthews had sensed some indecision in him; the Engineer Officer went on, 'We could overdo it and lose buoyancy. Touch and go... it might work out but I don't

believe it would.'

'All right, Chief, we'll carry on as we are for the time being. And I'm glad of your advice,' Seymour added.

'Any time,' Matthews said with a grin, and went down the ladder to the iron-deck and below again to his engine-room.

Later, when the watch on deck was relieved, Cameron found Seymour in a gritty mood, snapping at the RNVR Midshipman and the Leading-Signalman, hunched in his corner of the compass platform, eyes salt-reddened and tired. So much of this was a waiting game, waiting for the unseen enemy to strike and then coping as best possible with the result of that strike. Cameron could begin to understand a captain's anxieties: his own father had held command at sea, and he himself had sometimes seen the trawler skippers under stress in filthy weather. True, they had not had to face the human enemy, but the fight against the sea itself was universal to mariners and the sea at its worst could be as terrible as anything the human hand could do. And Seymour was considerably less experienced than any trawler skipper when it came to fighting the sea. Cameron began to feel a sense of unease; already the buzz had gone around the lower deck that Seymour wanted to put the ship still lower in the water to correct the trim, and that the Chief had said that was bloody daft. Argument, most of it singularly ill-informed, had blossomed: some were for Seymour, others for the Chief. Most in fact were for Seymour. As Stripey Tomkins had said, loudly and with embellishments of speech, they were currently going nowhere and they might just as well take a chance.

*

The dark came down thick and black; but with its coming the weight of wind began to slacken and the waves, though they would remain high for a while yet, no longer lost their crests in blown spume. The destroyer still lay sluggishly at the sea's mercy but the water no longer broke across her or

slammed into her as viciously as before though she continued wallowing in the troughs and then climbing the hillsides to slide away into the next rolling water-valley. Life was as uncomfortable as ever. The wind dropped more as midnight approached and the seas began to become oily, developing an uneasy ocean swell as the wind fell away. All the lookouts were alert to spot the eastbound convoy as the estimated time of sighting drew close. Once again, Cameron saw things that were not there and Seymour's responses grew more snappish as he searched the reported bearings time and again through his binoculars and found nothing. Snappish but not quite reproofing: you didn't scare lookouts from their duty of reporting even what they thought they had seen. In the event it was not until just after a bleary dawn that the convoy out of Halifax was seen away to the north-west, and even then it was heard rather than seen in the first instance. It was heard as long-drawn thunder following the roar of an explosion, then seen as a vast sheet of flame, red and orange and white, and a great plume of black smoke rearing into the overcast sky.

Seymour said bleakly, 'Must be an ammunition ship. Poor sods. Snotty!'

'Yes, sir?' The RNVR Midshipman saluted Seymour's back.

'Sound action stations.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The alarm was pressed and the rattlers screamed out around the ship; men just fallen out from dawn action stations pulled themselves from sleep and hurried back to their positions, cursing. To the north-west debris was still falling from the sky and the smoke was pouring yet. No one in that ship could possibly have lived; and the British Army in the Middle East, the RAF fighter and bomber airfields in Britain, and the seabound ships of the Navy, would feel the loss of her cargo. One more feather sprouted in Adolf Hitler's bloody cap; within the next ten minutes, as *Carmarthen's* company watched in helpless horror, another vessel was hit and vanished in

an individual holocaust. Seymour's voice shook a little as he lowered his glasses.

'That looked like a troopship,' he said. 'Canadians, I suppose... God knows how many.'

No one else spoke, but minds filled with images, images of upwards of a thousand men, probably a good deal more, either mangled when the ammunition-filled holds went up beneath them or cast into the sea to flounder and freeze to death within minutes. Soon the convoy, or what was left of it, was seen clearly, moving now from north-west to north and slowly closing nearer to the *Carmarthen*: Seymour counted twenty merchantmen, all biggish ships, four deep-laden tankers amongst them bringing desperately-needed oil from the United States. Around them the escorting naval ships could be seen, *Carmarthen's* own group now returning with their charges to the Clyde, whence they would break off for Cape Wrath and the Scapa base. As Seymour watched, one of the tankers was hit by a torpedo. Again there was an almighty explosion and thick black smoke rose in a pall that seemed to blot out the entire sky to the north. Fire spread out over the sea, sizzled around any men who might have survived the initial explosion. Then came indications of a depth-charge attack by the escort: the Atlantic erupted in a pattern of waterspouts. In the prevailing swell it was not possible to see the result from *Carmarthen*, but a cheer went up spontaneously from the destroyer's up-ended decks as her company watched the attack. If hopes could help, the Third Reich would now be missing at least one U-boat from Grand Admiral Raeder's lethal packs...

Once again Seymour lowered his binoculars. He said, 'Yeoman, call up the Senior Officer of the escort by lamp. Make: "am flooded forward and unable to use my engines currently but do not repeat not require assistance".'

'Not, sir?'

‘Not.’ God knew, the assistance of a tow was desperately required; but it could be neither asked nor given unless the vital convoy was to be held up or deprived of a part of its escort. ‘This is war, Yeoman, not a bloody peacetime exercise!’

‘Sorry, sir.’ The Leading-Signalman, acting now as Yeoman, moved across to the signalling projector in the starboard wing of the compass platform and clacked out the leader’s call-sign. The acknowledgement came, the message was passed, and Seymour waited for the response. It was more or less what he had expected; the Leading-Signalman reported: ‘Answer, sir: “God be with you”.’

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‘God,’ Stripey Tomkins said bitterly, ‘is all very well but he’s not a flippin’ tow. Them bastards, they could’ve taken us right out of this lot!’ The convoy and its escort had passed on by now, hauling away to the east together with the U-boats that would in all likelihood harry it until it came beneath the umbrella of the Commander-in-Chief, Western Approaches — or met attack by the FW 200s. Once again, there was a naked feeling. The sight of the escorts had provided, very briefly, a kind of companionship. Now they were alone again. It was good that they had come under no further attack themselves, but many of them tended to share Stripey Tomkins’ view even though they knew in their hearts that there was nothing else that could have been done. Lavington seemed closer now to going to pieces. He sat in a corner of the galley flat, hugging his knees, his face dead white and his eyes shining curiously. Suddenly he blurted out, ‘We’re all going to die. You know that. We can’t possibly get home. We —’

‘Shut up,’ Tomkins said threateningly. ‘Bloody spreadin’ alarm and despondency! Course we’ll get ‘ome, we’re bloody *British*. Stands to reason. Senior Officer, ‘e’ll report our position and they’ll send out an ocean-going

rescue tug.'

'Why didn't he say so, then?'

Tomkins raised his eyebrows. 'Wot, an' let the muckin' 'Uns read 'is lamp and then wait for the tug and put a fish in her? Bloody likely!'

Lavington swallowed almost convulsively and went back to his theme. 'We're done for, whatever you say. We can't —' He broke off as Tomkins swiped a fist at him, catching him a hefty blow on the ear. He began sobbing. Cameron watched in pity mixed with disgust: Stripey Tomkins had probably done the right and proper thing. Lavington said no more, but went on crying and shaking. Fear and stress were building up inside him and before long would have to come out. Cameron felt a kind of responsibility for him as a fellow CW rating, and would be watching out for trouble, trouble of a particularly nasty sort if Lavington should crack. The start of panic was something that could not be tolerated in the circumstances. There were a number of hostilities-only ratings aboard who might well be affected; mostly they hadn't the phlegmatic, philosophic steadiness of the experienced RN hands who had been trained from boyhood for war and its dangers. A firm word in Lavington's ear might not come amiss: Lavington might consider reporting sick — in fact it was a wonder, really, that he hadn't already done so since it might get him out of work and discomfort. For the future safety of the ship, he might be much better in the doctor's hands, though of course a lot depended on the doctor himself; Lavington might well be considered as lead-swinging, but Cameron fancied the doctor might take note of his mental condition and come to his own conclusion about ship safety. Cameron was about to have a quiet word when the order was piped:

'Clear lower deck... all hands fall-in along the iron-deck!'

Chapter Five

The reports had been received by now in the operations room in Rosyth: HMS *Carmarthen* had been contacted, still afloat but without the use of her engines. It had been Mary Anstey who had taken the report and passed it to SO(O). The Commander had nodded non-committally and in a dismissive manner, but Mary wanted to know more and, her heart beating fast, she had stood her ground and asked questions.

‘Sir, I was wondering...’

‘Yes? Well, go on, out with it, I won’t eat you!’

‘No, sir. The *Carmarthen*... will anything be done for her, do you think?’

‘You’ll have to ask the Admiral that.’ The Commander gave her a shrewd, searching look. ‘Have you a special interest, or something?’

She said, biting her lip, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Yes, I see.’ The Commander smiled in a friendly way, and put a hand on her shoulder. She was a good-looking girl and he understood well enough. He said, ‘Now look, do try not to worry. It’s no good to anyone. Have confidence in the ship and her company — there’s plenty of experience there. If you want to know what I think, it’s this: the Admiral will send out an ocean-going rescue tug to have *Carmarthen* brought in under tow. She’s around three hundred and fifty miles out... say, twelve hours’ fast steaming for the tug. Okay?’

‘Yes, thank you, sir,’ she said, and went back to her work. The work needed her full concentration and she tried her best to give it, but didn’t succeed too well. The *Carmarthen* was with her all the time. It might be silly, but she couldn’t help it. They hadn’t even an understanding, and it might all be in her

own mind alone for all she knew, but she desperately wanted Donald back safe and sound... and damn and blast the war! It was terrible to think of all the young men, so many of them only just out of school, who were suffering and dying already. More than a year of war now, and Hitler looked very much like winning, and if he did, what then? The Gestapo in English streets, and sudden midnight arrests, and concentration camps and all that went with that?

It didn't bear thinking about. They just had to win this war.

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'I'm going to flood the after magazines,' Seymour said, addressing his ship's company from the searchlight platform amidships. 'That holds dangers and I won't disguise them. We'll lose the use of our main armament once the backed-up ready-use ammo has been fired, but the 4.7s are largely useless already.' The Gunner's Mate had already had hands below, bringing up ammunition for the close-range weapons, plus a box of hand-grenades, and all this would be stowed by the guns handy for use as required. Seymour went on, 'The principal danger is that we'll settle too far. I consider that a danger worth risking. We can't stay here indefinitely, that's certain.' He looked at his wrist-watch. 'I shall flood in five minutes from now. All hands not required will remain on the upper deck and stand by to move fast if things go adrift and I have to abandon. Petty Officer Thomas?'

'Sir?'

'Have the Carley floats made ready for immediate release, and swing out the whalers port and starboard. We'll have one hell of a job lowering them in this swell, but we'll do it, and we'll need to do it fast if and when the moment comes. All right?'

'All right, sir.'

'Good. Well, I think that's all. Carry on, please.'

Thomas saluted and turned about and began mustering the boats' crews and lowerers of the whalers, and detailing hands to stand by the Carley floats that in the event of abandoning ship would be slid down into the sea while men dived in and then swam to grasp the lifelines looped along the sides of the floats, and clamber in. Seymour went to the compass platform, outwardly calm but, inside, a bag of nervous reactions and doubts, largely due to something of a scene with Matthews. Because the exchanges had been in public, the scene had been subdued but the antagonism to Seymour's order could be felt. Lieutenant (E) Matthews was a forthright man and had been at sea a good deal longer than Seymour: all the way from apprentice and Engine-Room Artificer Fifth Class to Chief Engine-Room Artificer and Warrant Engineer until he had made the wardroom with his two gold stripes and purple distinguishing cloth in between. He knew, he had said, all about buoyancy and ship stability and to flood aft was bloody dangerous. He would take no responsibility, he declared flatly, and Seymour answered in cold tones that he didn't expect him to. Go ahead then, Matthews had said, and see what happens. Was it not better to remain afloat and wait for rescue which was sure to come when the Senior Officer reported their position?

Of course, he had a point.

Nevertheless, Seymour had made his decision and it stood. It would be implemented. Taking a deep breath, Seymour, after a final look around the sea's surface, passed the order down for the flooding to begin. It was a simple enough operation, quickly carried out by the opening of a valve. From the quarterdeck lobby, word came back that the compartments were now flooding. Seymour held his breath: the effect seemed little enough so far, barely noticeable in fact from the compass platform. But reports from the quarterdeck, where the RNR Sub was in charge, indicated that the ship was coming down a little in the water although taking into account the sea that

was running it was impossible to be precise...

‘Magazines flooded, sir,’ the communications number reported.

‘Thank you.’ Seymour moved to the engine-room voice-pipe. ‘Chief!’

‘Speaking.’

‘Magazines flooded. I can’t say if it’s done the trick. I want you to turn over the main engines... gently, just for a trial run, all right?’

‘All right,’ came Matthews’ voice, grudging and surly. Seymour stepped back. Within the next few moments he could feel the subdued throb of the main engines as the shafts were geared in and began to turn at dead slow astern. He let out a long breath of relief and mopped at his forehead which was damp with sweat despite the intense cold: there had been no sudden surge, no racing of the screws, and that must mean they had bitten into water. The engine-room voice-pipe whined and Seymour answered it.

‘Captain here.’

‘Chief. She’s all right, anyway for now.’

‘So it paid off, Chief.’

‘Right, it did. I’ll still not speak for the buoyancy if the weather worsens again.’

‘We’ll be all right,’ Seymour said tightly. ‘Obey telegraphs, Chief.’ He slammed down the voice-pipe cover and spoke down the tube to the wheelhouse. ‘Cox’n, telegraphs to slow astern together, wheel amidships.’

‘Slow astern together, wheel amidships, sir,’ the Torpedo-Coxswain repeated. The engines throbbed, and very slowly *Carmarthen* began inching astern through the water, coming back to life. That life spread throughout her company: there were smiles in the wheelhouse and along the upper deck, even though the sea was now so close that the swell was surging inboard from time to time, rushing along below the searchlight platform and pouring past the engineers’ store to pound against the bulkhead of the galley flat,

where the after watertight door had now been clipped down. The ship was moving once again; but she had a far from healthy feel — she was sluggish and wallowing as the swell took her and flung her about, the kind of reaction that said she might not rise to it if the weather should deteriorate again. One of those off watch who now thought she might not was Able-Seaman Tomkins.

‘She’s buggered if you ask me,’ he said, although no one had. ‘What are we making, eh? You, Your Lordship. You’ve just come off the bridge, right?’

Cameron said, ‘Three knots maximum is the Captain’s estimate.’

‘An’ all that bleedin’ way to go,’ Tomkins said in disgust. ‘It’s askin’ too much. One whopper of a sea would send us under if we don’t die of cold first. Or if the ‘Uns don’t get us.’ After this he lapsed into silence and soon was snoring loudly. He was, Cameron thought, only too right about the bitter cold. Down here in the galley flat it was only a degree or so warmer than the compass platform, for the fires still remained drawn, the only warmth coming from the physical proximity of the packed, sleeping bodies. The atmosphere was almost fetid, with a fug that came from unwashed personnel and the foul condition of the seamen’s heads with their doorless openings. It was a miracle that human beings could suffer it all and not mutiny; but hard-lying, as it was known officially, brought a small amount of extra pay called hard-lying money, and the discomforts were accepted as paid for and as a part of naval life, part of the normal lot of the lower deck while the wardroom officers lived in comparative luxury in their cabins aft — except when, as now, those cabins were occupied by the less fortunate survivors of the convoy attack. Lower-deck conditions aboard *Carmarthen* were worse than Cameron had known in his father’s trawlers, though the same didn’t go for all trawlers. Cameron grinned to himself as he thought of his father: the old man wasn’t too well liked by his brother owners. They complained that he made

his boats too soft, thus spoiling the trawlermen and encouraging them to expect similar conditions from other fleets. That had never worried Captain Henry Cameron: one of his sayings was that the labourer was worthy of his hire.

Next time off watch, Cameron had his self-promised word with Lavington and found total opposition. Lavington was oddly adamant; there would be no reporting sick, because he wasn't sick and would be seen through at once. There was a curious underlying insistence that somehow spoke of an inner knowledge that he was on the brink of a breakdown but didn't want anyone to know it. He wanted a commission at all costs; he couldn't go on taking the lower deck, it was bestial and his messmates were morons, working class to a man. Cameron realized it was useless; he was more worried than ever as a result and a little diffidently — the CW label was often inhibiting — he asked Petty Officer Thomas if he might raise a problem.

'Go ahead, lad,' Thomas said, holding one nostril closed and blowing hard down the other to leeward. 'What's it all about, then, eh?'

'Ordinary Seaman Lavington, PO.'

'Him, eh.' Thomas sniffed and adjusted his sou'wester. 'Well?'

'I think he's sick,' Cameron said.

'What of?'

'I don't know, PO, but I think he's going to crack up and that may mean trouble. I was wondering...'

'Well?'

'Perhaps he should report to the sick-bay.'

Thomas laughed. 'Up to him, isn't it? Why not say so to him?'

'I have,' Cameron answered, and told Thomas the result. 'I'm worried both for him and everyone else.'

'It's not your concern, young Cameron,' Thomas said admonishingly. 'His

leading hand should raise it if he wants to. You're not a bloomin' officer yet, you know.'

'No.' Cameron found himself flushing. 'Nor am I a do-gooder, normally! I'm sorry, PO. I expect I should have gone to Leading-Seaman Farrow if anyone —'

'It's not *up* to you! It's Farrow's job to see for himself, and he won't thank you for doing it for him, will he now?' Thomas laid a hand on Cameron's shoulder. 'All right, lad, you've done what you thought best, now leave it, all right? I'm not blind either... maybe I'll talk to Farrow and then drop a word in Jimmy the One's ear. Off you go now.'

He had to leave it there; Jimmy the One — the First Lieutenant, now the RNR Sub — might act or he might not. It would be in his lap. Cameron had his dinner of cold bully beef and turned into his billet in the galley flat. It was two bells in the afternoon watch, and Cameron was dead asleep when the alarm came. The urgent rattlers jarred him awake and he scrambled with the others out from the galley flat to the iron-deck and his action station. It was almost a repeat of the last surface attack: as Cameron went fast up the bridge ladder he saw the U-boat just coming to the surface on the port bow with the water cascading from her casing and her close-range weapons coming into action already. A stream of machine-gun bullets zipped across the span of water and ricocheted off the steel-work of the bridge and midships superstructure, a sweeping arc of fire that scattered the men as they ran to their stations and left a dozen dead or wounded. Cameron watched helplessly as the inboard-sweeping swell took three men, dead or alive he knew not, and swept them willy-nilly into the sea to vanish. There was no time to think about them, however: as he climbed the ladder, a body crashed down from one of the four Lewis guns, then another. Blood poured; Cameron, climbing on, dashed for the Lewis gun which was swinging, crewless, on its mounting.

As machine-gun bullets flew about him he seated himself at the Lewis, brought his sights on, and fired a sustained burst towards the U-boat's conning-tower. He seemed to have taken the Germans by surprise: a cap flew, and a body slumped over the side of the conning-tower. Cameron sent another burst on to the same target. Simultaneously, as the U-boat's casing-mounted 3.5-inch gun opened, another Lewis crew caught the German gunners fair and square and sent them reeling over the side. They were not quite in time: the shell from the U-boat smashed into the *Carmarthen's* searchlight platform, and shell fragments scattered fore and aft. The Lewis gunners, joined now by the pom-pom crews, depleted their ready-use ammunition in keeping up a sustained fire over the German's conning-tower and gun-mounting. Unable to send men to man the gun, and unable to use the machine-gun in the conning-tower, the German captain evidently decided to retreat. There was a swirl of water and the casing began to vanish.

Seymour ordered, 'Cease firing!'

The U-boat disappeared beneath the surface. Seymour leaned over the compass platform guard-rail and called down. 'Well done, Cameron. Quick thinking on your part.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Stock was taken of the situation: fifteen men dead, twenty wounded. It was a heavy toll and there was more bad news to come: an unwelcome quantity of the ready-use ammunition had been expended. With the after magazines now flooded as well as the forward ones, *Carmarthen's* teeth were being drawn. She would soon be able to fight no more.

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Making her three knots' sternway, wallowing in the swell that would not leave her, *Carmarthen* moved slowly eastward. The galley fires had been flashed up again when the weather had moderated further and the off-watch

surroundings were that much more bearable. The hot food was welcome: bangers and mash were a sight better than cold bully beef, and thick, hot cocoa went down well too. Cooked food in the stomach lifted spirits and revived optimism, though by now there was little to be really optimistic about. On the compass platform Seymour, who had had only briefly-snatched sleep for many days — a sum total of maybe four hours, no more — still stared bleakly from his corner, wrapped in oilskins and duffel-coat, the hood of the latter pulled well down around his unshaven cheeks. Constantly he did his sums, praying always that he was wrong. Three knots meant something like a hundred hours of steaming — it was a simple enough sum to do, but the result was unreliable since so many imponderables could intervene and extend the voyage almost to infinity. The weather was one imponderable, the Germans were another, the chance of rescue from the United Kingdom yet another and not to be counted upon. The Navy was over-stretched, badly. Certainly no fighting ship could be spared to search, locate and tow a battered destroyer across upwards of three hundred miles of the U-boat infested convoy lanes, though an ocean tug might be despatched — perhaps. *Carmarthen* would not be the only damaged warship in northern waters, and if, say, a battleship or cruiser was in similar difficulties then all efforts would be directed towards her rather than towards *Carmarthen*. *Carmarthen* had seen better days; she was elderly, having been completed just in time to see service in the last war. If it hadn't been for Hitler's war, she would have been scrapped by now. As it was, she had been withdrawn from the Reserve Fleet to be refitted and sent again to sea. She was expendable if more valuable ships called; that was a simple fact of war and the exigencies of the service. Seymour, as his eyes searched the sea for either trouble or assistance, found his mind drifting back to the piping days of peace. The peace-time Navy manned by the caretakers, as the reservists liked to call the RN, had been a

very different service. The youthful Seymour — and by God he felt pretty aged now at the age of twenty-three — had emerged from the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, to join the Fleet as a midshipman and had been appointed for sea training to the great battleship, HMS *Nelson*, wearing the flag of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleet, a ship that swarmed with gunner's mates afloat on a Whale Islandish sea of gas and gaiters. Everything aboard the flagship was immaculate, from the Admiral's summer-season white cap cover to the pipe-clayed turks'-heads on the hatchway guard-rail stanchions. Everything was done by the bugle calls of the Royal Marines; and when the Home Fleet came to anchor, perhaps in Scottish waters, perhaps off Portland or in Spithead, everything was done to split-second timing: the great bower anchors went down, all ships together, to smash into the water as the brakes came off the cable-holders, and in the exact same instant the duty boats were lowered on the falls and the lower- and quarter-booms were swung out. Woe betide any officer or man who reacted a second late to the Admiral's order. The Home Fleet was a proud institution; so was the Mediterranean Fleet, in which Mr Midshipman Seymour next served on appointment to the *Renown*, also wearing a flag, this time that of the Vice-Admiral Commanding the Battle-Cruiser Squadron, under the overall command of Admiral Sir William Fisher, Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean, whose flag flew in HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. None of this meant a total unbendingness; the Navy was reasonably tolerant of, for instance, a seaman's sense of humour: when *Nelson*, undergoing dry-docking in Portsmouth Dockyard, found herself a main exhibit of one Navy Week, her telegraphists dreamed up sample telegrams that could be sent from her transmitting room to the relatives of the visitors to the ship. The best-seller was the one that read: HAVING A LOVELY TIME WATCHING NELSON'S BOTTOM BEING SCRAPED.

There had been happy, carefree days in Malta and Gibraltar; combined manoeuvres of the Home and Mediterranean Fleets when the harbour had been crammed with British warships of all sizes and the air had been vibrant with the bugle calls from the Army barracks as well as from the ships themselves. There had been regattas, there had been cruises to strange ports to show the flag and give the ships' companies a run ashore. There had been women and there had been drink, although a young officer was well advised, for the sake of his career, to treat both the latter with reserve. There had been sport — cricket and football, shooting, sometimes hunting in the right sort of country: Seymour had borrowed a horse and hunted with the Calpe hounds in Andalusia in Spain, just across the isthmus joining the rock of Gibraltar to the mainland. There had been dances aboard the quarterdecks of the Fleet, romantic affairs under scrubbed white awnings with the Royal Marine band playing softly around the great fifteen-inch or sixteen-inch turrets of the *Queen Elizabeth* or the *Nelson*.

There had been odd interludes, infuriating at the time but laughable at in retrospect: Mr Midshipman Seymour had an uncle who owned a coal-mine in Fife, and while serving in the *Nelson*, visiting the Firth of Forth, his uncle had invited him ashore to have a look around his coal-mine. After this interesting visit, Seymour had returned to the Rosyth dockyard to embark aboard the officers' boat for his ship — and had met the battleship's Commander who had been playing golf. The Commander, bound for a night's entertainment and not wishing to be encumbered with his golf clubs, had asked Seymour to take them back to the ship for him; Seymour had naturally done so.

Upon his return to the quarterdeck, he had met the majesty of the Commander-in-Chief pacing for his evening exercise.

‘Ah, Snotty,’ the great man said genially. ‘Been playing golf, I see.’

‘No, sir,’ Seymour corrected in all innocence. ‘I’ve been down a coal-mine,

sir.'

The result had been a fourteen-day stoppage of leave for impertinence, and no mumbled explanations accepted. Officers never made excuses and that was that, at any rate until the Commander put it right. It had been, all in all, a happy time and a hard one, with much work to be done, but Seymour wondered, as he stared from his shattered command, whether it had really fitted a man for modern war.

It was a totally different service by now: it had been flooded out by the Royal Naval Reserve and the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. RN stripes were becoming a rarity ashore and afloat. The RNR, both officers and men, were of course professional seamen though they didn't necessarily know a lot about RN methods; the RNVR were certainly enthusiastic, but basically they were Saturday-afternoon sailors. The time-honoured saying had it that the RNR were sailors pretending to be gentlemen, the RNVR were gentlemen pretending to be sailors, and the RN were neither pretending to be both. No one took it seriously, of course, but there was a basis of some truth. The plain fact was that the reserve officers had risen to the challenge and were every bit as good as the straight stripers of the RN, without the supposed benefit of the peace-time bull and bugles and all that went with them. The lower deck was a rather different kettle of fish: the volunteers among the hostilities-only men were first-class material, but the majority of the intakes were conscripts, as was inevitable in the case of those who, when war had been declared, had been over the minimum age and automatically liable to call-up; and a number of them were unwilling ones. The peace-time Navy had not contained conscripts since the evil days of the press gangs and it didn't take all that kindly to them now. The unwilling ones among them stood much in need of the stiffening provided by the long-service men, especially the chief and petty officers, as ever the real backbone of the Navy, many of them comparatively

elderly men called back from the Royal Fleet Reserve to which all naval lower-deck pensioners were attached on retirement from active service. And they were the salt of the earth; many had served in the Grand Fleet under Jellicoe and Beatty. It was they, not the officers, who turned raw green youths into seamen.

Then there was that new fish, the CW candidate, the White Paper rating, such as Cameron. Seymour, coming back from the past and once again facing the tense reality of war, thought about Cameron. Hewson, his dead Captain, had been impressed from the start and had fully intended giving Cameron his necessary recommend for his commission. He, Seymour, would honour that, and with pleasure, if nothing happened in the future to make him decide the other way. Cameron was reliable and could think for himself without waiting for orders: that was one of the attributes of an officer, or should be. Then there was Ordinary Seaman Lavington, and Seymour's mouth turned down at the corners as he thought about him. An unforgivable mistake on someone's part that he should ever have been given his first recommend, and that recommend would not be repeated. Lavington didn't pull his weight and appeared to be as soft as soap. He was also a little obsequious, a quality that Seymour didn't admire; arse-crawlers were not to be trusted. However, this was not the time to be worrying about that sort of thing. Proper consideration of Ordinary Seaman Lavington would have to wait till this lot was sorted out; it was essential to be fair, and before making a final decision the other officers, and Lavington's divisional petty officer, would have to be consulted. But as it turned out, events were to force Seymour's hand.

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The weather worsened again later that day; once more the galley fires were drawn and the wind came back strongly to balloon out men's oilskins and fill their sea-boots with a salty drench. That wind was bitterly cold, hinting at ice

and snow, and it cut through to the bone. Now more than ever before, with the destroyer so low in the water, the ship's company was constantly soaked. There was no respite from it as the increasing seas swirled aboard to carry all before them; hands and faces became blue, bristly cheeks became more haggard as the terrible voyage home progressed, hour after dragging hour with the ship yawing badly and making her pathetically slow sternway.

Cameron felt he would never be warm again, and thought of home in Aberdeen with a coal fire burning in the sitting-room and his father worrying about his trawlers, all of them now taken into Naval service for the duration. The old man had been too old for sea service — unless you were a regular officer, the Admiralty had no use at sea for anyone over fifty — and after his trawler fleet had been taken over he'd found a management job in the port. Thus he was in touch with the sea still, and though he hadn't liked being ashore he could at least keep warm, and fed too, so far as the ration books permitted. In point of fact the civilians weren't having it all that easy; last time home, even though some food items were easier in Scotland, Cameron had been shaken by the small food ration and the way his mother had had to skrimp and save on basic essentials, going without herself so that the returning hero could be fed. He'd put a stop to that pronto; the Navy, he said with truth, was going short of nothing except ships themselves. But that was before he had joined *Carmarthen* and suffered drawn galley fires and all that went with that; right now, the shore-side ration seemed like a cornucopia. So did that cheerful fire... Cameron, his eyes busily scanning the seas, thought of Mary Anstey. She was a nice girl, if a little possessive; they'd had some good evenings down in Southsea — it was like another world now, all the difference between the seagoing Navy and the chairborne warriors of RN barracks, HMS *Vernon*, Whale Island and all the rest. He wondered who Mary would be going out with now; she would have the pick of many

officers in Portsmouth. Like him, she had been hoping for a commission but he had a feeling that a commission would change her. Officers of the WRNS were a different breed, largely, from the ratings; and it was said that many a Third Officer WRNS turned up her nose at anyone under the rank of commander. It was also said that WRNS officers were borne on the books as officers' mattresses. Well, it would be up to her; there was nothing much between them. They had parted friends, and that was all, really. Nevertheless, he missed her and hoped he would see her again. She was the sort of girl you didn't forget even though there was nothing all that special in her looks. It was a case of personality: a general merriness and companionability, a ready smile and freckles. Warmth... and right now it was bloody perishing.

Relieved at last from his watch, Cameron went below and was given news by Leading-Seaman Farrow.

'Your mate Lavington,' Farrow said heavily.

'What about him, Killick?'

'Gone sick. By order, like. Know what I mean, don't you?' Cameron nodded.

'Buffer told me.' Petty Officer Thomas, Chief Boatswain's Mate, was known as the Buffer, as were all Chief Boatswain's Mates, possibly because they acted as buffers between wardroom and lower deck. 'Gettin' a shade big for your bloody boots, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry,' Cameron said, wanting only to get his head down and find a little warmth.

'It's all right, I'm not that worried. Anyway, Jimmy sent for Lavington, gave him an ear-bashing and told him off to report to the quack. We're short-'anded enough already... now this 'as buggered up what's left of the bloody Watch and Quarter Bill.' Leading-Seaman Farrow sucked at a hollow tooth, managing to look aggrieved even though his face was only partially

visible beneath the wool of his balaclava. 'I'm takin' you off lookout and puttin' you on three gun which will also mean seaboard's crew if and when required. Buffer's orders. All right?'

'All right,' Cameron said, pleased enough at the shift from the never-ending eye work. Farrow went off and Cameron flopped down on the deck, so dead tired that he found sleep immediately and never mind the wet beneath his body, scarcely kept out at all by his oilskin. Not that it made much difference; like everyone else aboard, he was already soaked to the skin. He came awake very suddenly about an hour later. It wasn't the alarm rattlers this time: it was a running man, a man who burst wildly into the galley flat from the iron-deck: Lavington, visible in the police light, bloodstained and waving a scalpel that he must have snatched up from the sick-bay.

Chapter Six

‘What the hell!’

Cameron was on his feet, leaping over the recumbent bodies. Lavington fell back against a bulkhead, his eyes blazing madly. Cameron grabbed for the hand holding the scalpel, but Lavington squirmed away. Blood was all over him, he was waving the scalpel, and now he was screaming out obscenities. Stripey Tomkins scrambled up, swiped at Lavington, missed, and fell flat on his face on the deck. The destroyer lurched, sagging into a heavy sea, and the savage whine of the wind outside the galley flat came like the very sound of doom. As Tomkins got up again and charged towards Lavington, the scalpel sliced across his right arm, cutting through the sleeve of his duffel-coat, and blood spurted. Cameron got a grip on the man’s shoulder and forced him back against the bulkhead, hard, flattening him with his own weight and then gripping both upper arms so that Lavington was helpless.

‘What the bloody hell!’ he said furiously. ‘What have you done, you bloody little fool?’

Lavington shook in his grip; tears were streaming down his cheeks. There was no fight left in him now; the scalpel dropped to the deck, and another seaman picked it up and stared at it wonderingly. Lavington moaned. Thickly he said, ‘I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t go on.’

Cameron gave him a violent shake. ‘What have you done, for Christ’s sake?’

Lavington’s lips trembled. ‘The SBA.’

‘What about him?’

Lavington said, ‘He... laughed at me. He taunted me. I couldn’t take any

more... everything went red, I don't know if you understand that, but it did. Then I saw the scalpel. I'd used one often in the dissecting room.'

'What did you do with it, Lavington?'

Lavington said unsteadily, 'I think I killed him. Oh, God. What's going to happen now?'

Cameron gave no answer; the answer was only too plain. He thought to himself, the bastard hadn't even the guts to go overboard afterwards and put a quick end to it. From now on, *Carmarthen* was going to be a marked ship in the Scapa base, the ship where murder had been done. And worse was to follow fast: Cameron was moving at the double towards the sick-bay when the urgent pipe was heard along the upper deck:

'Away seaboard's crew and lowerers of the starboard watch! Man your boat!'

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It was a case of man overboard: afterwards, when the whaler had been hoisted again on the falls and secured at her davits, the victim unrecovered, Lavington was taken by the Torpedo-Coxswain into the engineers' store and grilled. When the Torpedo-Coxswain emerged, Lavington was locked into the store and a man of the watch on deck was armed with a rifle and detailed as sentry; *Carmarthen's* cells were, along with the seamen's and stokers' messdecks, submerged. The Torpedo-Coxswain, his face grim, went immediately to the compass platform to report to the Captain. Seymour turned from his cold, windswept corner.

'Well, Cox'n?'

'The man's made a full statement, sir.'

'Let's have the facts, then.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The Coxswain spoke formally as if at Captain's Defaulters. 'Ordinary Seaman Lavington, sir, was interrupted by the Surgeon-Lieutenant

whilst attacking the Sick Berth Attendant, sir. He brandished the scalpel at the Surgeon-Lieutenant, who retreated out of the sick-bay. The Surgeon-Lieutenant was followed by Lavington to the quarterdeck, sir, where he was attacked. He was washed over the side whilst attempting to disarm Lavington.'

Seymour swore. 'A *double* murder!'

'Yes, sir. Sick Berth Attendant Platten, sir, did not die immediately. He crawled out from the sick-bay and witnessed what happened, sir. It was he that gave the alarm, before he died, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain paused. 'As soon as the alarm was given, the seaboat's crew and —'

'Yes, yes, I know all that, Cox'n, thank you. I take it Lavington's in close custody?'

'Yes, sir.'

Seymour nodded. 'He'll remain in close arrest, of course, back to Scapa... if we ever get there!'

'Yes, sir. And Defaulters, sir?'

Again Seymour nodded. 'It'll be done by the book, Cox'n. All the way... he'll have to be brought before the Officer of the Watch and put formally in the First Lieutenant's report. Then I'll see him at Captain's Defaulters.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And there'll need to be a full transcription of all statements and evidence. Word for word.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'That's all, thank you. See to the charge, Cox'n.'

'Yes, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain saluted and clattered down the ladder from the compass platform. Seymour turned wearily and stared out across the surging, hostile seas. Neither he nor the Torpedo-Coxswain — nor anyone else aboard probably — had encountered a charge of murder before. It was an

open and shut case, of course, but with such a serious charge King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions must be followed to the letter. When, within the next few minutes, Lavington was brought in handcuffs to the compass platform to be charged, Seymour withdrew. As Captain he must in due course hear the formal case for the first time at his own Defaulter's table and should not be present at the first proceedings. He felt a pang of sympathy for the RNVR snotty, Officer of the Watch, who would be watching his P's and Q's and hoping desperately to get it right. Going back to the compass platform when the initial statements and evidence had been given, Seymour's mind was filled with the thought that now they had neither doctor nor SBA and there was a hell of a lot of unfriendly ground to cover yet. Any further, unattended, deaths from wounds in action, or from the sea, could also be laid at Ordinary Seaman Lavington's door.

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Next day one of those further deaths became a distinct possibility: a leading-stoker named Crucible developed severe stomach pains. He reported, more or less bent double, to the sick-bay where Midshipman Robens had been detailed to study the quick-reference manuals supplied to all ships, especially intended for the use of those not carrying medical officers. He had coped reasonably easily and efficiently with a number of cut hands, boiler-room burns (fortunately perhaps for themselves, the worst burn cases from the convoy had died) plus some sea-sores and boils, when he was faced with Leading-Stoker Crucible and his obviously serious complaint. Conscientiously, manual at the ready, he asked all the set questions and was able to eliminate both diarrhoea and constipation. The cure-all at sea was a liquid known as Black Draught, which worked wonders. But, Robens thought, not this time. As a youth, he had himself suffered from appendicitis and he played safe.

‘Trousers down, Crucible, and lie on the settee.’

‘Aye, aye, sir. If I can, sir.’

‘Just try.’

Crucible did; but lay with his knees drawn up, in obvious pain. Sweat-beads formed on his forehead and he said, ‘It’s bloody agony, sir.’

‘I’m sure it is, but we’ll do what we can.’ Midshipman Robens felt gingerly around the stomach. He couldn’t identify any swelling or obstruction by touch and wasn’t sure whether or not he should be able to; but Crucible left him in little doubt. The man yelled in extreme pain as Robens’ fingers probed and the sick-bay was filled with obscene language uttered in a very heartfelt manner. The makeshift doctor gave a brisk nod intended to instil confidence, told Crucible to remain on the settee, tucked him firmly in with blankets, put a lashing round his body to keep him intact against the destroyer’s roll, and then went at once to the compass plat-form. He approached Seymour.

‘Captain, sir.’ He saluted.

‘What is it, Snotty?’

‘Acting as Medical Officer, sir.’

Seymour gave a tired grin. Robens, beginning to see himself as a real doctor, noted the signs of strain and felt the Captain, acting like himself, was not so far off cracking up. Seymour said, ‘All they ever get is VD. Can you cope?’

‘It’s not VD this time, sir. I believe it’s an appendix.’

‘God!’ Seymour blew out a long breath. ‘Bad?’

‘I don’t know, sir. It could be burst, sir. That makes it peritonitis, and that’s very serious indeed.’

‘I know.’ Seymour grinned again, but with no humour at all. ‘I suppose it’s no use ordering you to operate, Snotty!’

‘If you give an order, sir —’

‘I know, and I don’t. God, this would go and happen on top of everything else!’ Seymour clenched his fists in something close to despair, and turned away so that the Midshipman should not read that despair in his face. Of all people aboard, the Captain must remain serene, at least outwardly. So many lives depended upon him... as did the man with the appendix. That was his duty and his alone; in the old days of sail, the merchant shipmasters had had to cut off arms and legs and mend gashed stomachs, all with the sole aid of a medicine chest and a publication known as *The Ship Captain’s Medical Guide*. Yes, it was the Captain’s job; and, as Captain, he had to choose between one of his ship’s company and the ship herself. An operation, which he would almost certainly botch, would take time; and he should not be absent from the bridge of his wallowing command. He temporized; the decision would not be made immediately. An operation might not become necessary.

‘Morphia,’ he said abruptly. ‘Or whatever’s in the medical stores — the drugs cupboard, isn’t it? The pain must be stopped. Can you cope?’

‘I’ll do my best, sir. For a start... may I find out if there’s any medical knowledge among the ship’s company?’

It hit Seymour like a blow in the guts. Lavington, who was responsible for the loss of the doctor and the doctor’s assistant, had done two years as a medical student. He would know something — he would know his anatomy, if that could be considered a help. From what Seymour had seen of Lavington when he’d been brought to the bridge to be charged, he wouldn’t be fit to operate but at least he might be able to advise the hand that made the incision. It wouldn’t make any difference to the charge against him — or would it? It would be open to Lavington’s defending officer at the Court Martial to plead diminished responsibility and it might be a sound enough plea in the circumstances; but could you plead diminished responsibility in

the case of a man who had subsequently advised on an appendectomy? Would not Lavington's defence be automatically voided? Seymour had a duty to be fair and not prejudice any man's case whatever the facts might be; on the other hand, another man's life was at risk.

He made his decision. 'Yes, you may. If there's no one else, and I'm pretty sure there's not, try Lavington.' He turned to face aft again as the Midshipman left the compass platform. The weather had no look of moderation about it; the North Atlantic was not a kindly sea when roused and it held no compassion for the sick or injured. The cold, made worse by the keen, icy wind, was like a knife. At least Crucible would be reasonably warm in his sick-bay blankets, but the weather and the resulting motion of the ship would make an operation that much harder and more risky.

*

The vessel was sighted just as Seymour had made up his mind that he must turn the compass platform and the ship over to Sub-Lieutenant Humphries, and go below to operate. Robens had come again to the bridge: Crucible was worse in his view. He was sweating, was deathly pale, had a high and rising temperature and Robens had no idea how much morphia he should give to douse the pain — with the result that he had probably not given enough and the agony was showing through. Well, you wouldn't leave a dog like that; Robens had gone through the ship seeking medical knowledge and had found none. Seymour was about to give the order to have Lavington taken under armed escort to the sick-bay when the report of the sighting was made and Seymour brought his binoculars up on the bearing. Through poor visibility he was able to make out the vessel, which he fancied was lying without way on her. He saw the Red Ensign aft, saw one funnel and two masts, and saw too that the ship was listing heavily to starboard and was down by the stern.

'Probably a straggler from the HX convoy,' he remarked to Robens.

‘Another sitting duck for attack, sir?’

Seymour nodded. ‘No doubt... when the weather moderates.’

‘What do we do, sir?’

‘Do?’ Seymour’s harsh laugh blew along the icy wind. ‘What the ruddy hell *can* we do, Snotty?’ For a while he delayed going below; in the last resort, the ship came first and the lame duck ahead could spell trouble if some submerged U-boat decided to go for a kill despite the weather. Within the next half-hour he was able to see her upperworks clearly through his binoculars: she was a three-island merchantman, a dry-cargo carrier, probably of around ten thousand tons. And she was undoubtedly in a bad way; her list to starboard must be affecting her stability seriously in the heavy sea that was running. Seymour turned to the Leading-Signalman, already expectant at his side. He said, ‘Call her up, Yeoman. Ask who she is and what happened.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ The signalling projector clacked out busily while Seymour and Robens waited. The reply was a long one taken down by the signalman of the watch from the acting Yeoman’s dictation, it was handed to the Captain on a signal pad. Seymour read:

SS WESTWARD BAY TORPEDOED AND THEN ATTACKED BY GUNFIRE WHILST IN EASTBOUND CONVOY. DAMAGE SERIOUS AND AM DRIFTING WITHOUT POWER ON MAIN ENGINES. AM CARRYING CARGO OF MILITARY VEHICLES FOR THE MERSEY. ALSO HAVE ON BOARD SURVIVORS FROM HMS ABERDARE SUNK DURING U-BOAT ATTACK.

Seymour’s face showed shock. *Aberdare* was a sister ship one of their own escort group who had accompanied them out from Scapa and then left to rendezvous with the eastbound convoy only a matter of days before. ‘God, if only we could have a real smack at those bloody U-boats...!’

Robens said suddenly, ‘Doctor, sir!’

‘What?’ Seymour stared.

‘She reports picking up survivors, sir. She could have *Aberdare*’s doctor.’

Seymour smashed a fist into a palm. ‘By Christ, you’re right! Yeoman, make: “have you a doctor aboard and if so can you put him aboard me for urgent operation”.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ The signal was made; the reply came quickly: *SURGEON-LIEUTENANT FROM ABERDARE ABOARD BUT ALL BOATS SHOT AWAY. CAN YOU COLLECT.*

‘Answer yes,’ Seymour said crisply. He bent to the voice-pipe. ‘Cox’n, call away the seaboat’s crew and lowerers of the watch — at the double!’ In fact they always doubled, but the addition of the words would put an extra urgency behind their movements.

*

The seaboat was slipped with considerable difficulty and danger in the rushing seas and high-blown waves and was almost taken and lifted on a surge of water back on to *Carmarthen*’s quarterdeck. Sheer luck and the roll of the ship the right way brought her clear again, and she plunged into the valley whence her crew could stare upwards at their ship until another surge of water lifted her high above. The men, bulky in their heavy cork lifejackets, held their breath as the whaler swooped down again, clear by some miracle of the limping destroyer. Cameron at one moment felt his oar strike fresh air and he almost flew backwards into his next astern; then it bit deep and he heaved as the whaler’s coxswain, Leading-Seaman Farrow, gave the orders to bring them on course for the merchantmen. Seymour had not slipped the seaboat until he had closed the *Westward Bay* enough to give them the shortest possible pull across, but it was still a desperately long one in the heavy Atlantic gale. The exertions almost cracked their muscles and their straining backs as the men pulled on the oars and thrust with their feet against the

stretchers. Up and down, rise and plunge, then rise again, kept efficiently on course by Leading-Seaman Farrow, slowly closing the great wall-like side of the *Westward Bay*. A small party of men could be seen, wrapped in oilskins, waiting by the starboard after rail where a Jacob's-ladder was coiled ready to be sent down. Despite the list, the climb down for the doctor would be a long one and held its hazards: a rope suspended in space, with a man on its end, could sway dangerously; but it was still much less of a hazard than sending him to scramble down the lifted port side.

After what seemed an eternity the whaler came under the lee of the *Westward Bay*, which was lying dangerously across the seas, broached-to at their mercy. With the roaring wind cut off, there was easier work; here the crests had temporarily flattened and there was a reduced amount of blown spindrift to sting the eyes and to blind. Carefully Farrow tended the whaler in, holding her off the steel sides of the 10,000-tonner as the listed deck loomed above. When he was ready he cupped his hands and shouted up:

‘Right, send the officer down now!’

A hand waved from the guard-rail in response and the Jacob's-ladder with its wooden-stepped ropes was sent snaking down, to dangle and sway a few feet above the whaler. With no time lost the Surgeon-Lieutenant, wrapped in oil-skins and duffel-coat, a balaclava helmet beneath his sou'wester, was helped over the guard-rail and held until his reaching feet found the first step of the ladder. Then, taking a grip with his hands, a grip like very death, he started gingerly down, reaching, feeling, finding. Farrow stared up, eyes narrowed, assessing the moment when he should call for the ladder to be lowered with the doctor on its end, lowered so that the officer could be grappled safely into the whaler and not plunged to his death in the foaming sea that still lifted and dropped the boat as the Atlantic rose and fell against the merchant ship's side plating. The slap and thunder of the restless water

formed a backing of sound to the orchestral whine and roar of the wind: a combined sound of savage fury.

‘Lower four feet!’ Farrow yelled as the doctor reached the end of the ladder. ‘Hold tight, sir, and wait till we ‘as you safe!’

The doctor looked down, his eyes wide. There was stark fear in his face as the whaler appeared to jump at him and then in the next instant fell away to show a great yawning pit of disturbed water far below his swaying body. Cameron reckoned he was going to cling to that rope ladder till he was forcibly snatched away from it: it was his lifeline, all that stood between him and drowning, however insubstantial it might feel.

The boat rose again, swift and sharp. ‘Now!’ Farrow yelled, and two able-seamen made a concerted grab for the doctor. No good: Cameron’s guess had been spot on. The doctor didn’t let go and the down-drop of the seaboat brought the grasp of the seamen away from his body.

‘Stupid bastard,’ Farrow said, not too softly, then called out, ‘Next time, sir, and do try not to make a cock of it again.’

The face, as once again the boat swooped up, was whiter than ever, but this time the doctor let go as he felt the hands grab for him. The result was disaster; a leg took one of the grabbing seamen hard in the face and he staggered back, still grasping the doctor, and lost his balance. He just stopped himself going over the side, but the doctor went over head first and vanished. At the same moment a sea took the boat and swung her in towards the ship, to be borne off at the last vital moment by the ready oars and boathooks. Farrow, swearing horribly into the eddying wind below the ship’s side, stared frantically around for the doctor. He said, ‘Bet the bugger can’t bloody swim!’

Then Cameron spotted the white, frightened face, carried by now some twenty feet clear of the boat. It was pretty obvious the doctor was no

swimmer. Not waiting for Farrow, Cameron dived in. As he did so, he heard Farrow yelling at him not to be a bloody fool. Taking the water, he swam strongly for the drowning man and, reaching him, seized him below the arms. By this time Farrow had the whaler turned and making out towards him and within minutes both rescuer and rescued were being heaved, gasping, over the gunwale into the bottom of the boat. Farrow was withering. 'Bloody hero! Might have got drowned an' left us short, then none of us might 'ave got back alive!'

'Sorry, Killick...'

'Disobeyed orders, what's more.'

'I didn't hear you,' Cameron said with a grin.

'Bloody Nelson.'

*

The trip back was made in safety and the whaler was hooked on to the falls; the lower deck was cleared for hoisting and the Surgeon-Lieutenant stepped shakily out to a comparatively safe deck. Seymour called down from the bridge. 'Glad to have you aboard, Doc.'

'I'll be only too pleased to help out,' the doctor called back, 'But what's up with your own MO?'

'It'll wait,' Seymour said, then added, 'He's dead.'

'I'm sorry.'

'What about your lot?'

The doctor, who was an RNVR named O'Connor, said, 'Captain's gone, so's Number One and the Sub.'

Seymour nodded, his face hard. He said in a controlled voice, 'All right, Doctor. Get along to the sick-bay — an appendectomy awaits you. I propose hanging on to you afterwards, seeing as you're part of the flotilla.' He then left the rail and resumed his never-ending vigil at the after end of the compass

platform. *Aberdare* being of their own group, he had known her officers well. Her Captain had been a close friend; her First Lieutenant had been coming up for a command of his own. The Sub had been RNVR, a solicitor in pre-war days, with the makings of a useful officer. The war was bloody awful.

It became bloodier: suddenly, the engines stopped.

Chapter Seven

‘What the bloody hell are you up to, Chief?’ Seymour snapped down the engine-room voice pipe. Tempers, by now, were somewhat more than frayed.

‘I’m not up to anything,’ the Chief snapped back. ‘The bloody engines have stopped, that’s all.’

‘All! Jesus —’

‘It can’t be helped. You’ll not be unaware, I presume, that the shafts have been racing from time to time?’

‘Yes, I know!’

‘Well, then. That’s not done ‘em any good —’

‘So what’s gone wrong?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ Matthews said with exaggerated calm that Seymour found highly irritating. ‘I’ll be finding out just as soon as I can and then I’ll be seeing if I can put it right.’

‘It’s a damn fine time for you to stop engines without warning. There’s one of your own men —’

‘I know, I know. *I* didn’t stop engines, the sods stopped themselves. I’ll be as quick as I can and I can’t do more than that.’ Seymour heard the cover slam back below, and he gave the bridge end of the pipe a vicious slam in return. God help Leading-Stoker Crucible if the destroyer broached-to and came beam-on to some bloody great wave just as the doctor had started to make his incision. Seymour, scowling, sent a messenger from the wheelhouse to warn the doctor of what had happened and what might happen. Maybe he could take some kind of precaution, maybe he couldn’t; in this ruddy war, all life was at risk and uncertain in any case, but it would be bloody hard luck if

Crucible should be killed, or at any rate not saved, because of the God-damn engines! This trip, Seymour had begun to yearn for the days of sail. With sail, he could probably have made better speed and would certainly have remained steadier, and if he'd had any canvas to speak of he would have had the Chief Boatswain's Mate at making and rigging sail on the yards of the fore and mainmasts, but he hadn't, only enough to provide shrouds for sea burial and too much of that had been used up already. Mental note if ever they returned to UK: stores indents to include canvas for shrouds.

He stared aft towards the *Westward Bay*, as useless and as derelict as himself. The *Westward Bay* might carry some canvas — just might. There would be a need to replace the tarpaulins on the hatch covers, and the deck hatches of a 10,000-tonner would be nice and big. It was likely that the master of the *Westward Bay* had spared a thought for the use of sail to propel himself along, but it would take more than hatch tarpaulins to move a 10,000-tonner laden with military vehicles. Thinking of that cargo, so much wanted by the Armies in Britain and North Africa, so much wanted for the build-up that must surely come one day for the landing of an expeditionary force to retake France and Belgium, Seymour pondered the fact that he was now the *Westward Bay's* sole armed escort and never mind that he had little ammunition beyond the torpedoes in his tubes amidships. It was his duty to stand by her, and God damn Lieutenant (E) Matthews and his failed engines. At the moment he was as helpless as he had been when the screws were lifted clear of the water. He might yet ask the *Westward Bay* for canvas.

In the meantime, there was Leading-Stoker Crucible.

*

Below in the sick-bay, Robens was looking green. The operation was not a very spectacular one and not particularly messy, but the atmosphere was close and there was a strong smell of chloroform and the ship's motion was

diabolical. She was heaving and twisting, rising and falling, and making Surgeon-Lieutenant O'Connor's task a difficult one, but he was coping well enough. Blood welled from the incision into the towelling placed by Robens around the site as indicated by the doctor; O'Connor probed around with a finger, then with his whole hand, drew something to the surface, and then used his scalpel again. Crucible's remaining innards went back into place. O'Connor looked up as he dumped something like a piece of smoked salmon into a kidney dish.

'That's it,' he said.

'All done, sir?' Robens was surprised.

The doctor nodded. 'Just the stitching to do yet.'

'He'll be all right?'

'No reason why not. He'll need nursing, that's all.'

'Me?' Robens asked in some alarm.

O'Connor smiled faintly. 'I rather think not. Your other duties are more in your line, aren't they? I'll see to the nursing myself.' He was busy making ready for the stitching. 'I congratulate you on your diagnostic powers, young man. If you hadn't been quick off the mark, he'd have died. I got to him only just about in time.'

Robens, his services no longer required in the sick-bay, reported to the compass platform. Seymour asked, 'Well? How is he?'

'All right now, sir. He'll pull through.'

'Thank God for that,' Seymour said, and meant it. One worry was past, though the others remained. So far there had been no further reports from the engine-room and Seymour was in a fever of impatience, having to force himself not to chivvy Matthews. Matthews knew his job and would report as soon as he had something to communicate. He was the sort who reacted badly to chasing. Seymour attempted the impossible task of trying to forget

his engines, and stared across the heaving grey sea wastes towards the *Westward Bay*. The relative positions of the two ships were shifting as the waves buffeted them; the merchantman was now lying across the destroyer's bows, distant some six cables, maybe a little more. Distances were hard to assess in such sea conditions...

Seymour's mind went to another worry: Lavington. That was a horrible business, and Seymour shrank from the thought of carrying a man across the seas to his certain death by hanging. Or almost certain; the state of Lavington's mind might save him, as he'd thought earlier. He had to be mentally sick; and Seymour could feel pity for him. Life in a destroyer's fo'c'sle would be hell for a sensitive man. Seymour, trained for the Navy at Dartmouth from the age of thirteen and a half, was no stranger to harshness and a tough routine. The Divisional Lieutenants and Chief Petty Officer Instructors at Dartmouth had never been easy to satisfy and the days had been physically hard. But Seymour, who had never in fact had to live in a destroyer's fo'c'sle as an ordinary seaman, had to use his imagination to assess what Lavington had gone through, living cheek by jowl with companions not of his own choosing, men with whom he would have had nothing in common, men who were capable of a merciless hazing of someone of a different class. It was a test of character and Lavington hadn't come through it...

The engine-room voice-pipe whined. Seymour reached for it and jerked back the cover. 'Captain here.'

'Chief speaking,' came Matthews' aggrieved tones. 'We won't move for a while, if ever. I'm sorry, but there it is.'

'What's the trouble, Chief?'

'Bearings running hot — both shafts seized up. There's been a leak of oil from —'

‘Why?’

‘Give me a chance,’ Matthews snapped. ‘I reckon there was a fracture when Number Four gun was taken out. I checked round afterwards, checked personally... I found nothing amiss, certainly, but I think the trouble probably started when that shell hit and it’s worsened.’

‘Yes, I see. How long before —’

‘I don’t know,’ Matthews said. He sounded bloody stubborn, Seymour thought with a flash of anger. ‘We’ll be working on it. I’ll let you know as soon as I can, but it’s going to take time, that’s for sure. We may yet be unable to do it at all, as I said.’ The metallic, disembodied voice stopped and Seymour heard the rattle as the cover was replaced below in the engine-room. He turned from the voice-pipe and looked again towards the *Westward Bay* and thought once more about canvas; there was plenty of wind to drive them home if they could only rig sail. He was about to tell the Leading-Signalman to call up the merchantman when a messenger reported from the W/T office. A radio signal had been received from Rosyth, in Naval cypher. Seymour sent down for the Surgeon-Lieutenant, whose customary duty it was to decipher signals when not medically engaged.

Half an hour later the plain-language version was in Seymour’s hands. Seymour read it with much relief: *OCEAN-GOING RESCUE TUG FORCEFUL HAS BEEN DESPATCHED TO OUR ASSISTANCE AND SHOULD REACH YOU BY 0600 HOURS 24TH.*

That was tomorrow’s dawn. Seymour, feeling a good deal happier, had the news piped around the ship. It brought joy mixed with many doubts. On the iron-deck Leading Seaman Farrow said gloomily, ‘She’ll come if she finds us. It’s a bloody big if, an if as big as the bloody North Atlantic, almost. Eh? What about *that*?’ He indicated the *Westward Bay*. ‘One tug can’t tow two ships, right?’

‘Perhaps,’ Cameron suggested, ‘another’s been sent to take her in. They won’t know in Rosyth that we’ve come together, they wouldn’t have included the *Westward Bay* in the signal to us.’

Farrow lifted his sou’wester and scratched his head through his balaclava. ‘So quick you catch yourself coming back,’ he said with heavy sarcasm. ‘If they don’t know where the *Westward Bay* is, where do they send the flippin’ tug?’

There was no answer to that; if indeed only the one tug turned up, a difficult situation could arise. Presumably the *Westward Bay* and her cargo were currently of more value to the war effort than a crippled destroyer. If that was the way the decision went, then all they could do aboard *Carmarthen* would be shrug their shoulders, wave goodbye, and continue wallowing around until another tug came out for them.

*

That evening a somewhat macabre routine event took place, as it would take place daily whenever the weather and the exigencies of the service permitted: prisoners in cells had to have their exercise period, and Lavington was brought out under escort to walk up and down the iron-deck’s leeward side. He stumbled rather than walked, looking grey and haggard, with haunted eyes that stared wildly but seemed to see nothing. The reactions of the ship’s company were mixed; most avoided looking at the pathetic rating but some stared with naked hostility and with a clear desire to hurt. But Lavington was oblivious, almost automaton-like. There was still blood on his duffel-coat, now dried brown, a grisly enough sight. Cameron, looking down from his station at Number Three gun, which still had a small reserve of ready-use ammunition in the racks, wondered just how alert the escort was expected to be. It would be a relief to everyone aboard, he fancied, if Lavington were to go over the side. But he made no move in that direction;

he was clinging hard to the lifeline and keeping as far inboard as possible. The sea was his enemy, and even in his present condition he had no wish for a confrontation. Up and down he went, forlorn and lonely. Cameron looked away: the degradation hurt. He was glad when Lavington was put back in the engineers' store, out of sight. So was Seymour, into whose vision Lavington had come continually as he kept his vigil on the compass platform. To Seymour, the whole thing was ghoulish, like curing a sick man so that he could live for the execution. Looking out towards the *Westward Bay*, another anxiety that had plagued him ever since the engines had stopped struck more forcibly: the two ships were a little closer. A little, not much, but if they went on closing a highly dangerous situation was going to arise. And neither of them, with their silent engines, would be able to do a thing about it.

Seymour went to the voice-pipe and called the engine room. An ERA answered; the job would take a long while yet, he said. Seymour said, 'Tell the Engineer Officer, we're in some danger of collision with the *Westward Bay* until the engines can turn over. I'll give you good warning to clear the engine-room and boiler-rooms if it looks likely.'

*

Night came down and still the ships lay silent, heaving in the swell, with the wind keeping up its eerie sigh and whistle around the masts and yards, making the wire of the triatic stay between mainmast and foremast sing weirdly. *Carmarthen* was like a ghost ship; below in the engine-room the work proceeded without respite, all hands bent to the urgent task of getting the shafts turning again. Not too much reliance was being placed on the arrival of the rescue tug; they were by now well away from their previously reported position, and it was known throughout the ship that the Captain had decided not to break wireless silence to report his present whereabouts. To do so during or immediately after an attack was one thing and was acceptable

and often necessary; but not in present circumstances. Two sitting ducks could be very quickly and easily despatched if any surfaced U-boat should pick up the signal and alter towards them, or, if the monitors in the German naval or air bases in France should intercept and order an attack. The risk was too great: as ever, the various risks had had to be assessed and the lesser chosen. That was a captain's responsibility, and everyone knew it; but there were those who criticized and said that the fastest possible tow back home would have been better than hanging about in cold and danger, waiting to be found, as found they very likely would be, by a stray U-boat on the prowl. Every minute they were out here increased that danger. That was how Lieutenant (E) Matthews was thinking while he worked, but he didn't voice his opinions. As an experienced man he knew that if you undermined the Captain's authority, you undermined your own at the same time, for your own derived from his.

On the compass platform Seymour stared with aching eyes through his binoculars, watching the *Westward Bay's* great bulk — watching with difficulty, for the night was dark and in wartime no ship burned navigation lights or any other kind of light that would be visible on deck. The night was playing tricks: sometimes the *Westward Bay* seemed to be in one place, at other times elsewhere. It was devilish hard to determine whether or not she was closing; even the old lookout's trick of looking away for a while, or skirting the watched object, failed to work.

*

At Number Three gun, Cameron, acting as communication number from the gun to the control tower at the after end of the bridge, chatted with the gun-layer, Able-Seaman Hodge. Hodge was a two-badgeman who had once been a leading-seaman but had been disgraced for bringing drink back aboard after a night's leave. That had been some four months earlier and having behaved

himself in the meantime Hodge hoped soon to get his killick back. Hodge was a small man, dark and skinny, with a perky manner. He was married and had two children, living in Pompey, where the German bombs were inclined to fall now and again, and he was perpetually worried, this showing in a creased forehead and puckered eyes. He was rather like a monkey, Cameron thought. He was talking now about his family, rather less well-off now he had reverted to an able-seaman's pay, which was basically four shillings a day and a little more with his hard-lying money, his badges and his non-substantive rating of seaman gunner, plus an insufficient marriage allowance. It all added up to little enough, as he remarked.

'Navy's all right if you're single,' he said. 'Just don't get hitched, that's all!'

'I won't,' Cameron said with a grin.

'Not till you get that ring, eh?'

'Ring?' The word held marital connotations at first, then Cameron ticked over. 'Oh — commission. Not then either, so far as I know at present!'

'No popsies?' Hodge asked with an invisible leer.

Cameron said, 'No, not really.' Mary Anstey was there in his mind, all right, but no more than that. Things might develop if he saw more of her, but very likely he would not. Both of them were subject to draft chits, to the whims and requirements of the service, and they might be ordered any-where where there was a naval presence and that meant half the world. His home was in Aberdeen, hers in London. Since joining, Cameron had had one long leave of fourteen days and he'd gone home for it; that was a pattern he had decided to stick to, anyway for the foreseeable future. He felt he owed that to his mother and father. Also, he knew a number of girls in Aberdeen whom he would be glad enough to see again, and they him for that matter. Hodge continued talking — dripping, in the lower-deck phrase for complaint —

about his enforced absence from Pompey and his home comforts, but very suddenly he stopped and said, 'Christ!'

'What?'

Hodge yelled, 'That merchant ship, she's bloody near on top of us!'

A moment later the alarm rattlers sounded throughout the ship.

*

Seymour, cursing himself and the bridge lookouts for not having seen the *Westward Bay's* proximity much sooner, grabbed the cover off the engine-room voice-pipe. 'All hands on deck!' he shouted. 'Clear the engine-room and boiler-rooms, fast as you can.' He looked aft through his binoculars; the big ship had loomed very suddenly, seeming to thrust without warning through the poor visibility, through the night's total blackness, right aft. Seymour sent a warning by Aldis, a fairly useless warning since she couldn't stand clear with her defunct engines any more than he could himself. As the ratings poured up from below, Seymour cupped his hands and shouted down to the upper deck.

'Stand by to abandon ship! Petty Officer Thomas, are you there?'

'Here, sir,' came the Chief Boatswain's Mate's voice from the iron-deck.

'Get fenders out and a party to the sick-bay at once.' Seymour turned as someone came up the ladder at the double. 'Ah, Robens. Take charge of the sick-bay party, will you, and stand by to get the sick to the boats and Carley floats.'

'Aye, aye, sir!'

'How's Crucible, d'you know?'

'Making progress, sir.'

'Well, I hope he'll be able to keep it up. Off you go, Snotty.'

Robens clattered down the ladder again. Seymour gripped the compass platform guard-rail tight, waiting for the bump. It would be more, much

more, than a bump, and never mind the pathetic fenders. The two ships would grind together and *Carmarthen*, half under already, wouldn't have a dog's chance of surviving. The battering effect of the waves would see to that, as they churned her plates against the side of the *Westward Bay*. Riveted seams would go and that would signal the end. Once again Seymour's task was to assess the moment when he should abandon; that must not be left too late, for men would be mangled between the two hulls if they hit before he gave it; nor must it be given too soon, for to abandon would mean inevitably that many would die in the freezing cold of the water before they could be hauled aboard the boats, and to cause men's deaths unnecessarily would be unforgivable. They might never need to jump at all. A miracle could happen at the last minute.

Seymour stood and sweated as he heard the orders being passed for the whalers to be swung out and lowered. The ships were coming closer now: had the moment come? He believed not yet; the *Westward Bay's* bulky profile was altering and he believed she was swinging away and might stand clear with any luck.

Yes, she was swinging...

Seymour scarcely breathed.

Then the *Westward Bay* showed her starboard side, the side to which she was listing, and in the same moment a surge of the sea, some cruel fate, took the semi-waterlogged *Carmarthen* and seemed to lift her and throw her towards that great listed steel side. Seymour cursed savagely: the moment to abandon had gone, if ever in fact there had been the time at all. He shut his eyes and prayed. Then the crunch came, a tremendous impact that threw men to the decks throughout the ship. There was a great shudder and an ear-splitting shriek as steel met steel, and the destroyer gave a curious whipping motion as she came broadside against the merchantman. There was an

agonized cracking noise from overhead as the *Carmarthen*'s masts impinged against the bulwarks above, and a tangled mess of metal came down with a resounding crash on the upper deck, on the guns and torpedo-tubes and on the compass platform itself: Seymour jumped back as something whizzed past his face and smashed down atop the chart table at the after end of the bridge. It was all hell now; the *Westward Bay*'s listed side loomed overhead like the lid of a coffin, a coffin that was about to close. There were screams as men who had been thrown to the destroyer's side were caught and nipped between the two ships, nipped and flattened as though taken by a steam-roller. From the deck above, someone shone a light down, a bright light on the end of a wandering lead, taking a justifiable risk. In the beam Seymour saw stark horror: his whole starboard side seemed to shine red with blood and, as he watched, a man's severed head came rolling for'ard along the iron-deck, to fetch up at the root of the ladder leading to the break of the fo'c'sle.

There was nothing to be done now but wait and carry on praying. Then he heard a voice shouting strongly into the wind against the noise of the grinding metal; he fancied it was Cameron's but couldn't be sure. 'Bearing-out spars!' the voice called. 'It's worth a try!'

Bearing-out spars... Seymour blew out his cheeks. Useless in these conditions — they worked alongside a jetty in a flat calm, but hardly now. Yet that voice was still shouting, urging the hands on to bring out the big lengths of timber and lay their ends against the side of the *Westward Bay*, then back themselves up against the superstructure and shove and push with every last ounce of their strength. But why Cameron? What had happened to his officers and petty officers? Seymour, realizing his own uselessness on the compass platform, went down the ladders at the rush to lend a hand himself. Cameron could be right after all; it was worth that try in the absence of anything better. At the foot of the starboard ladder the severed head had now

rolled away again but Seymour found a body being gradually ground to fragments as *Carmarthen's* gunwale scraped against the *Westward Bay*. Robens, the RNVR snotty, nineteen years of age. Lurching after Seymour found Petty Officer Thomas, his arms around stanchion, clinging like death, both legs taken straight of above the knees as clean as a surgeon would have done it.

Then he saw the bearing-out spars being sent into position and as four men moved past him, staggering and sliding on the bloody deck, he joined them. The spar was laid against the merchantman's plating in the streaming light from above and along the starboard side other bearing-out spars also went into action. Seymour, his back against one of the torpedo tube mountings, thrust with all his strength. Incredibly, after while, *Carmarthen* began to move outwards a little. It was the devil's own task to hold the ground won, but they did it, and Leading-Seaman Farrow and a party of ratings appeared of deck with more fenders which they lowered over the side and made fast to cleats and bitts. These acted as a protection to the hull itself, but the superstructure was still smashing hard into the tilted side of the *Westward Bay* and all manner of damage was being done; but this would be mostly superficial. As the destroyer was held off, Seymour handed over to one of the men who had brought the fenders, and took charge of the bearing-out operation as a whole. He shifted the spars for'ard working almost inch by inch, and inch by inch *Carmarthen* was borne away astern, moving with agonizing slowness toward the bow of the *Westward Bay*, where she was taken by the full force of the wind. Her stern came round quickly, and at the same time the huge looming bow above her decks came round to starboard, swinging into the wind, and smashed into *Carmarthen's* sunken fo'c'sle. There was a lurch and a twisting motion that was felt throughout the whole ship; *Westward Bay* appeared undamaged as she swung away and clear. The

ships moved apart; fate alone would keep them that way. There was nothing any man could do.

Seymour, making his way back to the battered compass platform to survey the damage there, met Sub-Lieutenant Humphries and ordered a full report on the destroyer's sea-worthiness.

*

The casualties had been little short of catastrophic: Robens had been joined by no less than fifty-three seamen and stokers crushed to death or drowned. The Torpedo-Coxswain, who had remained on duty in the wheelhouse to do what he could to tend the helm, was the only senior seaman rating left, apart from the badly-smashed Chief Boatswain's Mate, Petty Officer Thomas, who was under sedation in the sick-bay and would never go to sea again. The Gunner's Mate had gone, as had the Torpedo-Gunner's Mate and all the divisional POS. There were any number of injuries, many of them serious. It was a holocaust, and had been largely due to the parting of the lifelines when the superstructure had been damaged. Seymour's face was like dead ashes as a dim and watery dawn came up and the gale continued to blow at full force. It wasn't the casualties alone: there had been further damage to the ship's structure during the grinding together of the hulls and a number of leaks had started. Also, the quarterdeck had buckled slightly under the heavy gale-driven impaction; and when the masts had gone — and there was any amount of clearing away to be done along the upper deck and compass platform — the transmitting and receiving aerials had gone, so had the H/F D/F, and all of them were lying in a thousand pieces where they had not gone overboard altogether. The Petty Officer Telegraphist was not hopeful in regard to a repair. It would prove beyond the ship's capacity; it looked more like a dockyard job, he said.

'Just do your best, Wilkins,' Seymour said.

‘I’ll do that, sir. I may be able to rig something up, but it’ll not have much range, sir.’

Seymour had to be content with that; and he got no more joy from the Engineer Officer. In fact the news from that quarter was hopeless and final: during the violent battering against the *Westward Bay*’s side, or more probably when the merchantman’s swing had carried her into the *Carmarthen*’s fo’c’sle, the ship had taken a twist and the shafts themselves had bent the stern tubes. Not much, but enough: the shafts wouldn’t turn again. Seymour listened bleakly to the mad roaring of the wind, and the sound of the spume-topped sea as it dropped aboard and raced along the decks to turn the destroyer into something resembling a submarine.

Chapter Eight

Leading-Seaman Farrow was now acting in the room of the drowned Petty Officer of the iron-deck division, men known collectively as iron-deckmen. He had a word with Cameron while the latter was at work around Number Three gun.

‘Reckon you did all right, lad,’ he said. ‘Gettin’ out the spars... it was good work, was that.’

‘I’ve seen them used before.’

‘Maybe. Well, I reckon you saved the ship —’

‘Oh, not—’

Farrow put a hand on his shoulder. ‘I don’t believe anyone else was going to think of it, lad. Me — I should have done, for one. I didn’t. You did. Might even say the skipper should have done or Jimmy. I reckon we was all taken flat aback as you might say.’ He paused. ‘Anyhow, I’ve had a word with the ‘swain. He’ll see that Jimmy knows where the credit’s due.’ He slid down the ladder to the quarterdeck, vanishing before thanks could be uttered. Cameron appreciated what Farrow had said and what he had done, too. It was utterly unselfish: Farrow, as a long-service RN rating having to stand by and see an HO ordinary seaman vault over his head to a commission, might well have sucked his teeth and said nothing to anyone. It would have been understandable, but it hadn’t happened. Cameron got on with his work which, this early morning, was to help in clearing up the general debris of a terrible night. There was mess and confusion everywhere; and during that morning watch some of the ratings had the shattering experience of finding limbs buried beneath the remains of the masts and top hamper. Cameron himself

was one of these: his gruesome find was an arm still in a seaman's blue jumper-sleeve, both arm and sleeve ripped off at the shoulder. It was a right arm, as could be seen from the red woollen non-substantive badge upon it: it had belonged to a seaman torpedoman second class. Was he dead, or was he below in the wardroom, now acting as an overflow sick-bay? It didn't really matter which, Cameron supposed. Arms couldn't be stitched back on again, muscle, sinew, bones, nerves, flesh... one day perhaps, but not yet. Whoever it belonged to, the arm was just 'gash' now, seagull food.

Cameron pushed it overboard along with the rest. A sea took it and surged it for'ard, tossing it above the sunken fo'c'sle and those other dead in the submerged stokers' messdeck. It was a bloody awful war, all right.

Just then Stripey Tomkins manifested behind Cameron. 'I 'eard what the killick said, Your Lordship —'

'Put a sock in it, Stripey. The joke's an old one by now and you're getting tedious.'

'Tedious?' Tomkins' mouth sagged open; the action revealed that he stood in need of a toothbrush. 'What's that, then?'

'What you are — boring.'

'Now look 'ere,' Tomkins began belligerently. 'Boring! No one calls me that an' gets away with it, no one. You, you're just a puffed up little bleedin' poofter wot thinks 'e can stamp over everyone's 'eads to a muckin' officer's billet... you know something, Mister bleedin' Cameron, Your Lordship? You could say you're bleedin' oistin' yourself to a commission over the bodies of the dead, couldn't you, eh?'

Cameron wanted nothing so much as to smash a fist into Tomkins' unpleasant face, but that way lay First Lieutenant's report and a CW rating had above all to keep his nose clean and not appear at Defaulters on serious charges, or any charge at all preferably. So he shrugged and took no notice;

Tomkins continued his baiting but Leading-Seaman Farrow came back and it stopped.

*

Men who go down to the sea in ships are frequently believers in the Almighty without being what a landsman would call religious. Divine Service in barracks and in capital ships might well not have been attended at all if it were not a matter for compulsory parades. But something about the very fearfulness of nature and the sea itself tends to make a man believe in something greater than himself controlling it all. And miracles at sea are not entirely absent from the reckoning; God's hand appears when most needed. Cameron had found this sense of the presence of a superior force among the trawlermen; and this morning, as dawn began slowly and reluctantly to break into something approaching day, the look of deliverance hove in sight from the eastward.

She was seen first by the starboard lookout on the compass platform. 'Ship fine on the starboard quarter, sir!'

Seymour's binoculars came up; he was half expecting a surface raider — perhaps the *Scharnhorst* or the *Gneisenau*, perhaps one of the German pocket-battleships (or as the BBC had rendered it in the case of the burning *Graf Spee* off Montevideo, German bottle-packetships). Thus his look was a long and careful one.

He said, 'I believe it's the rescue tug.' He turned to the Leading-Signalman. 'She's not calling — I doubt if she's seen us.' They were somewhat too low in the water to be seen from the tug's range, while the *Westward Bay*, who was certainly big enough, had been out of sight for most of the night after the collision. 'Call her up. Use the general call-sign.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

The general call-sign went out by lamp, and Seymour waited impatiently.

The reply was just what he hoped to hear.

RESCUE TUG FORCEFUL. ASSUME YOU ARE HMS CARMARTHEN. SECOND TUG WILL ARRIVE FOR WESTWARD BAY WITHIN TWELVE HOURS. DO YOU KNOW WESTWARD BAY'S CURRENT POSITION.

Seymour almost threw his sou'wester into the air. 'Answer: "she is somewhere astern of me. Congratulations on a good rendezvous".'

The signal went out; within minutes the word had gone round the ship that rescue was imminent. Seymour passed the order: 'Prepare to tow aft,' and the hands worked like demons to be ready to take the tug's tow-line. *Forceful* was soon seen clearly, steaming fast towards them and sending up great gouts of water that were flung back over her blunt bows as she bit her stem into the sea. She had a pugnacious look that fitted her name — pugnacious and strong. She came up on *Carmarthen's* lee quarter and began signalling again, this time to say she now had *Westward Bay* in view distantly on the horizon. The visibility was improving as the daylight increased, and the tug's higher bridge gave her master a longer view. Seymour brought up his glasses but was as yet unable to see the *Westward Bay*. However, now that she had shown up and was available, he knew well enough what he had to do: she was the more valuable ship to the war effort, because of her military cargo. And he was the escort. The shepherd... and the shepherd didn't leave the sheep to drown.

He took a deep breath and called, 'Yeoman!'

'Sir?'

'Make to *Forceful*: "I shall await the arrival of the next tug. Your tow should be passed to *Westward Bay*".'

The signal was made and acknowledged; the tug hauled off at once, passing down *Carmarthen's* side towards the listing merchant ship, butting through the seas, disappearing into the valleys and rising again to the crests. It was

going to be the devil of a job for her to get a tow across to the merchantman, Seymour thought, and a continuing foul job to make the tow all the way home with seas such as they were experiencing... but his thoughts were bitter as hopes of rescue faded towards the west. And along his leaky decks the obscenities flew; heroics were all very well, but disappointment was cruel. They all had families to get home to. There was a grudging acceptance that the skipper had been right, but now a total despondency came down like a cloud over the destroyer. They couldn't possibly make it back to the UK. One rescue tug had got through, but to expect another was asking for the moon. There were plenty of Jerries around, above as well as below the North Atlantic waves. This pessimism was to prove only too well founded: as in due course the tug, now with the *Westward Bay* under tow behind her, moved slowly past *Carmarthen* to the east, a lamp began flashing from her starboard bridge wing to be read off by the Leading-Signalman.

He reported, grey-faced, to the Captain. 'From *Forceful*, sir. Rescue tug *Alacrity* has broken wireless silence to report strong air attack. Last message indicated she was about to abandon.'

Seymour nodded. 'Acknowledge,' he said. That was all; there was nothing else to say. The ship's company watched in grim silence as the *Westward Bay* moved past, the towing wire with its rope spring lifting and dipping between the wave-crests; too much lifting and it would part, Seymour thought. A tow should remain submerged, but in seas like this it was asking a lot of it. Below on the iron-deck Stripey Tomkins lifted a fist and shook it, first towards the compass platform, then towards the passing *Westward Bay* from which a farewell signal was coming.

'Bastards,' he said savagely. 'Bastards the lot of you!'

'Shut your bloody gab,' Leading-Seaman Farrow said, and turned to the rest of the hands standing by the guns and torpedo-tubes. 'Poor sods'll likely

come under air attack soon enough,' he said. 'Let's give 'em a cheer, right?'

Farrow led the cheers as the sou'westers were waved in the air. It was probably, certainly in fact, unheard aboard the *Westward Bay*; but Seymour heard it and it warmed his heart a little, and he waved his own sou'wester towards the departing vessels. They were all seamen together, after all. Farrow's action and the response to it made him more proud than ever of his ship's company.

*

The next day's noon sight put *Carmarthen* some fifty miles nearer the Bloody Foreland; the eastward drift, however slow, was continuing, thanks to the wind. In Rosyth, the last reported information for the plot was that *Carmarthen* was lying in latitude 18 west, longitude 55 north. This was only an estimate and it was recognized that it could be inaccurate; and in any case it was out of date. Of recent events Rosyth knew nothing, and would have no further information until the tug *Forceful* was able to report in home waters, which would not be for some days since the tow could proceed only slowly. It was known that *Alacrity* had come under heavy air attack by the German FW 200s and had been forced to abandon. Any survivors would now be rolling about in the floats; and the ship she had been despatched to take in tow would now remain where she was unless and until another tug could be despatched. Currently, this ship was believed to be the *Westward Bay*; it was assumed that *Carmarthen* was already under tow of *Forceful* or soon would be always providing that the dead reckoning of the destroyer's position was not too far out.

The Staff Officer (Operations) was on the closed line to the Admiralty in Whitehall. He was making urgent representations that another tug be made available to bring in the crippled *Westward Bay*. There was no other tug capable of the job available in the Forth or in the Orkneys either; and the

Clyde had been unable to help.

‘Sorry,’ the remote voice of Admiralty replied. ‘Awfully sorry, old chap, but we can’t help either. We’re over-stretched as it is.’

‘Portsmouth dockyard —’

‘No. Portsmouth has nothing available, nor has Devonport. Sorry.’ It was no use; SO(O) banged down the scramble line. He hadn’t had many hopes — for one thing, the whole Navy in home waters, give or take a few ships, had moved north into Scottish bases soon after the outbreak of war and the southern dockyards were virtually empty. If the Forth and the Clyde had nothing, then that was more or less that, but the formal request had had to be made. There was one more line that could be tried, and SO(O) tried it: he called the Admiral direct and outlined the situation.

He said, ‘We have *Nottingham* available, sir.’

‘*Nottingham*? This isn’t a cruiser’s job!’

SO(O) agreed, up to a point. ‘Not for the tow, sir, but she could provide anti-aircraft cover at least.’ *Nottingham*, a County Class cruiser of some ten thousand tons, had recently been converted to an anti-aircraft ship; just recommissioned as such, she was on working-up exercises from the Rosyth base. ‘First-class practice, sir,’ the Staff Officer urged.

‘Damn it, she’s working up! She’s not yet operational, Commander.’

‘That’s true, sir. But ack-ack cover could be absolutely vital to the *Westward Bay*’s survival. There’s the *Carmarthen*, too, presumably coming in under tow. We don’t know her latest state, but it’s a fair assumption she’s in a very bad way by now. *Nottingham*’s cover could make all the difference, sir... as you know, destroyers don’t make very good ack-ack ships. And it’s not as though we’d be taking *Nottingham* off other duties, seeing she has none at this moment.’

The persuasive voice went on; Mary Anstey listened to it, hoping against

hope that it would get through effectively to the Admiral. Although she hadn't been long in Rosyth, just a matter of days, she had gathered that the Admiral was not easy to shift. He was an admiral who worked by the book — by King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. That could mean that ships supposed to be working-up didn't get operational orders. On the other hand the Admiral had once been a destroyer man himself; that had been his speciality, and he had advanced to command of a flotilla as Captain (D) before his promotion to the Flag List. That might weigh, which was why SO(O) was stressing *Carmarthen's* predicament; Mary Anstey went on listening and hoping and found her heart going at a tremendous rate that seemed about to stop her breathing. Then SO(O) put the telephone down and caught the eye of a lieutenant-commander. 'Orders for *Nottingham*,' he said briskly. 'She's to prepare for sea immediately. Detailed orders will reach her within the next hour, by hand of officer from the Admiral.'

Mary Anstey breathed again and realized that her eyes were wet. Off duty that afternoon, she was watching as *Nottingham* steamed outwards beneath the Forth Bridge.

*

The leaks continued through the sprung plates, but seemed to be coped with by the pumps and the baling-out efforts of the seamen, slopping' about the wardroom flat. The ship was a sieve. In fact, according to Matthews who came to the compass platform to say so, the pumps were *not* coping adequately.

'She's lower in the water,' he said. 'Much longer, and we'll submerge.'

Seymour detected blame in the Engineer Officer's tone, blame still for his action in flooding aft. Matthews sounded sourly vindicated. He went on as Seymour didn't respond, 'I reckon we may have sprung more bulkheads below — round the magazines, for instance — when we were bouncing off

the *Westward Bay*. If so...' He raised his arms eloquently.

'If so,' Seymour said, 'there's nothing we can do about it and you know it, Chief.'

'Yes. More's the pity.' Matthews proceeded to underline, verbally, what Seymour had noted already in his manner. 'If we'd never flooded aft —'

'All right, Chief, that's history. I could have been wrong. If I am, I'll be told so by the Admiralty, don't worry! In the meantime I stand by what I did and we all have to make the best of it. Understood?'

'Understood,' Matthews said ungraciously. 'It's just a bloody pity, that's all.' He turned away, the wind blowing out his oil-stained white overalls, which were soaked through after just a couple of minutes of the upper deck and compass platform. As he reached the ladder he was sharply called back.

'Chief.'

'Yes?' Matthews turned.

Seymour walked towards him and kept his voice low. 'You and I, Chief... we're the senior officers. Bridge and engine-room. But I'm the Captain. Let there be no mistake about that. Don't let's fall out, right? It wouldn't be good for the ship — would it?'

Matthews stared him in the face, sour and arrogant, then turned away without a word and clattered down the ladder. Seymour's hands balled into fists and his grey, weary face suffused for a moment. He stared down at the departing figure of his Engineer Officer. Matthews vanished into the battered superstructure aft of the compass platform, making for the engine-room hatch to dry out. Seymour turned away, still angry, but in control of himself. He found his thoughts had come close to murder; in a captain, such thoughts could be dangerous. Dangerous to a hell of a lot of men.

Damn Matthews. Damn him to hell.

*

By now the wardroom flat was no use for dossing down; it was much too wet. More than a foot of water slopped from side to side, pouring over the coamings of the cabins as the destroyer lurched and rolled. The galley flat was just about the only place left for men off watch and here, too, leaks were starting as the bulkhead separating the flat from the seamen's mess began to show signs of strain. Leading-Seaman Farrow set men to plug the leaks; Cameron found himself working alongside Stripey Tomkins.

'Sod the ship,' Tomkins said savagely as he struck a thumb with a hammer. He put the thumb in his mouth and sucked away the pain, plus some blood which he spat out again. Then he said, 'It's all that Lavington.'

'How come?' Cameron asked.

'Jonah.'

Cameron laughed. 'Bullshit!'

'Bullshit, is it?' Tomkins glowered. 'My arse! Jonahs are real, and Lavington's one — little ponce! Takin' 'ome a bloody murderer, it's askin' for trouble.'

'You'll just have to put up with it, Stripey.'

'I don't know so much. An' don't be bloody cheeky, tellin' me I 'ave to put up with it.' Tomkins dripped on, sounding dangerous. Cameron knew that to some of the older seamen jonahs were indeed real. They could be made to take the blame for all manner of sea ills and misfortunes, and there was no doubt whatsoever that Lavington was generating a very nasty taste. Tomkins' loudly expressed views could find a fruitful seed bed. Yet it was hard to see what anyone could do about this particular jonah. Lavington was safe in the engineers' store, still under a sentry, and his daily exercise period was very well supervised. If anyone — say Tomkins — had the idea Lavington could be shifted overboard, then that person wouldn't have a hope of getting away with it. But men like Stripey Tomkins were wily enough, up to all the dodges

even though they had a fairly limited intelligence. Tomkins just might fancy he saw a way that he could manage. Tomkins was going to need watching. There was nothing over-fanciful about it; Cameron had heard of unpopular petty officers vanishing on dark and stormy nights and afterwards the whole ship's company clammed up and knew nothing, hadn't seen or heard a thing. He knew beyond any doubt that the majority of *Carmarthen's* ratings would see a watery grave as being a far better end for Lavington.

He worked on, wet through, cold, tired, hungry; they seemed to be making little progress with the plugging. The leaks continued, spurting icy water across the galley flat. Beyond the bulkhead were curious sounds: trapped mess stools and tables surging about and banging against the plates, ominous noises not unlike the ship breaking up. Farther down in the stokers' messdeck the waterlogged, bloated corpses would still be floating unless they had drifted out past the broken collision bulkhead, drifted out to sea to find peace. Cameron forced his mind away from thoughts like that: all too soon, they might all be the same, drifting corpses...

Beside him, Tomkins dripped on about Lavington.

*

Far to the eastward, HMS *Nottingham* had cleared the Firth of Forth past the Bass Rock, altering northward off May Island for Duncansby Head and the passage of the stormy Pentland Firth for Cape Wrath. From Cape Wrath she would head westerly across the top of Northern Ireland to take her departure from the Bloody Foreland out across the Atlantic on her search for the *Westward Bay* and to watch out for *Carmarthen* believed to be under tow; there had still been no word in Rosyth or anywhere else that the *Westward Bay* was coming slowly in.

Nottingham was steaming fast, her high decks riding nicely clear of the seas as she came up the east coast of Scotland. Her ship's company were currently

in two watches, with the anti-aircraft batteries manned for immediate action, action that could always be expected from the hostile French coast in German hands. Her Captain had informed all hands over the tannoy as to what their mission was; the eyes of the lookouts would be keen enough and the newly-fitted RDF aerials would be on constant search as well. The area where the *Westward Bay* was expected to be found would be well and truly quartered but the Captain's hopes were not particularly high. There was far too much water around and if success came, it would come largely as the result of sheer luck.

As *Nottingham* began to approach the Pentland Firth, it seemed that something of that luck was in fact already on the way. A signal was received in her W/T office, a signal from Rosyth: this signal reported that an aircraft of Coastal Command, searching an area out in the Atlantic from the west coast of Ireland, had sighted a vessel under tow and had made contact by light. The vessel under tow was the *Westward Bay*, the towing vessel was the *Forceful*. The tug had passed the last known position of *Carmarthen* drifting helpless in the westerly gale. So now the facts were known in Rosyth.

Nottingham's captain put a finger on the reported position on the chart. 'She'll have drifted somewhat,' he said to his Navigating Officer, 'But she'll not be too far off. We shouldn't have too much difficulty now.'

'We make direct for *Carmarthen*, sir?'

The Captain nodded. 'We do. The *Westward Bay* should be all right now she's under Coastal Command's umbrella, Pilot.' He looked out through the chart-room ports; the weather was foul still and the passage of the Pentland Firth would be a nasty one. The weather reports for the area west of Ireland were currently bad but a break was expected as a high-pressure area was coming in across the Atlantic. He could only hope the destroyer would last until the weather moderated and until he reached her. Going back to the

compass platform high above the sea he called the Engineer Officer of the Watch on the starting-platform below.

‘Captain here. Maximum revolutions... we have *Carmarthen* virtually in our sights now.’

Chapter Nine

Aboard *Carmarthen* they were very far from knowing that they were in anyone's sights. There were indications now that the ship was going to succumb; she had a deader-than-ever feeling, a feeling of complete rigidity and unresponsiveness. Even the waves were not really shifting her about much; she was half under. The engine-room, that silent place, had been abandoned long since and to Seymour's contained fury Lieutenant (E) Matthews was sharing his vigil on the compass platform, his very presence and his monosyllabic utterances, when they came at all, a reproach; Matthews assumed the proportions of a ghoul, there to criticize and remind his Captain of his mistake in flooding the after compartments.

Cameron, back on lookout following another re-shuffle of the watch and quarter bill, such as it now was, could almost feel the hostility. It cut the atmosphere like a knife — or a scalpel. Lavington was still on Cameron's mind; he couldn't free himself of the man, try as he might. Lavington wasn't his concern; Petty Officer Thomas, days ago, had made that very plain. Yet they had been shipmates, messmates — mates in the struggle for a commission. Lavington had lost that struggle, of course; there would be no future for him... Cameron jerked his head, trying to clear it of a consuming desire for sleep. Future! That was a stupid word in the circumstances. He stared through his binoculars, feeling the uselessness of his watch. What was there to look out for now? Certainly they themselves were too low in the water to be seen from other ships and if, for instance, the *Queen Mary* or the *Queen Elizabeth*, sailing independently as fast troop transports, should be crossing the Atlantic now and loom up ahead, they could do nothing about it

other than wait for the huge knifing bows to cut right through them and bring an end to it all.

The eyepieces looked blank; blank and black. Cameron used all his efforts to bring his eyelids up. He succeeded, but lapsed again. Then again. The compass platform looked horribly close to the water, which was surging right up to it now and threatening to engulf both the Captain and the Engineer Officer, who had now come together in a deathly embrace... Cameron jerked awake, sweating. To fall asleep on watch, especially on lookout, was the cardinal sin. Short of murder... fall asleep and be spotted and *he* wouldn't get his commission either. Now the Chief had his hands round the Captain's neck and was squeezing... it was all very odd behaviour for two officers aboard a sinking ship in wartime, but in some way it seemed at the same time absolutely logical, and became more so when the roles were reversed in the next nightmare-sequence and the Captain seemed to be laughing at the Chief's vain struggles to free himself...

Then something else appeared: a body. A horribly bloated corpse that lifted and fell and seemed to loom towards him from the sunken fo'c'sle. Lavington. Stripey Tomkins had done it. Cameron made an enormous effort and his eyes blinked. He was sure he was awake but the corpse was there still. Lavington had gone overboard. But it wasn't Lavington after all; Cameron came fully awake and saw the corpse, horribly bloated, moving towards the half submerged Number Two gun for'ard, where for a while it stuck and bobbed about. Some quirk of the sea, some movement of the ship, must have dislodged it from the stokers' messdeck and sent it swirling out through the broken bulkhead.

*

The first of the aircraft showed a little after the next dawn: it came in high and alone from a sky that was becoming a good deal clearer and the

silhouette was quickly recognized aboard the *Carmarthen*: one of the Focke-Wulfs, the FW 200s, out from the French coast. There was still some ammunition available for the close-range weapons — the Lewis guns, the pom-poms, the machine-gun — but the FW was unlikely to approach all that close. The three-inch AA gun amidships had been put out of action when the searchlight platform had been hit earlier. Seymour manned his available guns, but hoped the destroyer might not be seen. She would not be presenting a normal destroyer shape and the seas were confused and spume-covered enough, perhaps, to make the outline invisible.

No such luck.

Within minutes of being sighted, the bombs were seen to fall. A stick of six, dropping like eggs to take the sea in a line of explosions some four cables clear of *Carmarthen*'s port side, near enough to send shudders through her leaking plates. The air was blue; the Focke-Wulfs aim was bloody hopeless but it must be just a question of time now. The next stick came down an equivalent distance off to starboard. The third was very much closer: it came down right ahead and the last of the six exploded close to the sunken fo'c'sle. Gouts of water rose to fall back on the compass platform and the ship shuddered violently. After that, inexplicably unless all the bombs were gone, the Focke-Wulf turned away and vanished back towards the east. Within ten minutes of its departure, something curious happened aboard *Carmarthen*: there was a vicious clanging and tearing noise from ahead of the compass platform and the whole ship lurched. When she righted, she was seen to be riding on a more even keel, much less down by the head than before.

'Always look for the silver lining!' Seymour said to Humphries. 'That bomb's sheered away some of the fo'c'sle and taken some weight off.'

'Not much use,' Humphries said sadly, 'without the engines.'

'Don't drip, Sub! She has a better feel and that's something.' Seymour

brought up his binoculars and scanned the horizons all around. Those horizons were much farther out now, and that, together with the clearing skies and a drop in the wind's weight, was good indication of fair weather coming in at last from the west. But there was little comfort in that prospect; with fair weather they would be much more liable to come under attack, and the appearance of that solitary Focke-Wulf, which would now summon up its fellows without a doubt, must surely prove the last straw. Seymour had his depleted ship's company mustered along the iron-deck and spoke to them.

He said, 'I haven't much for you to cheer about, frankly. There's no knowing whether or not another rescue tug will be sent, nor if she'll ever find us if she is. From the point of view of seaworthiness, I believe we have a chance of lasting after all, especially if better weather overtakes us. We're riding easier you'll have noticed that for yourselves, of course. But from now on we must expect air attack at any moment. The Luftwaffe isn't going to allow us home if it can stop us. But I'm going to do my best to get us home — that is, to keep afloat until we find a friendly ship.' He paused. 'It's not much of a prospect, is it, but I know I can rely on all of you not to give in now. We've already come through quite a lot.'

Platitudes, of course, but what else was there to say? As the hands were fallen out Seymour admitted to himself that he was no orator. He wondered if he inspired any confidence at all. There was much that could be said about loyalty, about fighting back for King and country, about the embattled Empire, about the vital importance to Britain of the Atlantic convoys and the need to preserve every vessel capable of acting as their escort. But this wasn't Nelson's Navy and perhaps they wouldn't go much on oratory in any case. Others could do it without indulging in sentiment. Lord Louis Mountbatten, also a destroyer man, could lead his men anywhere and his choice of words was always right. Seymour felt his own inadequacy like a knife in the heart

and felt he had read in the dour faces of his ship's company their inner doubts as to his capacity to see them through anything, let alone get a powerless ship home. In this, he was in fact wrong; and it was Leading-Seaman Farrow who put it best.

He said to no one in particular, 'Skipper's all right. Command was flung at him and he took it. Not done so badly either. What more could he do without the bloody engines?'

*

The Focke-Wulfs came back; this time, two of them, their great four-engined bodies menacing as they came on with the sun behind them. The engine sounds came like pulse beats as they passed over the wallowing destroyer, then turned to release their bomb-loads. *Carmarthen's* close-range armament was once again manned, more as a gesture than anything else. The first stick of bombs landed well off target, the second was closer — just like last time. But then came a difference, a shift in the mode of attack. The aircraft parted company, one machine remaining at a high level while the other circled and lost height and then came roaring in towards the destroyer. She passed down the port side, and the men behind the stuttering pom-poms could see her crew in the perspex-enclosed cockpit and the air-gunner squinting along the sights of his machine-gun. When that machine-gun opened, both pom-poms fell silent: a spraying burst of bullets had found its mark, and the bodies of the gunners hung in their seats, spilling blood.

As Farrow shouted orders, Cameron made a dash for the pom-pom mounting. With another man he dragged the bodies of the dead gunners clear and within half a minute had the gun ready for action. By now the Focke-Wulf had passed astern and was turning to come in for another attack, this time heading to fly along the starboard side. As she came abeam, the German machine-gunner opened up once more. Bullets zipped around Cameron as he

pumped the two-pounder shells blind towards the aircraft without any apparent effect. He had just brought his sights fully on when the pom-pom jammed and fell silent. The Focke-Wulf passed on in safety, with the Lewis guns wasting ammunition as she moved out of their range. *Carmarthen's* superstructure was pockmarked by the machine-gun bullets from aft to for'ard and three more men lay dead. Also an officer: on the compass platform Humphries had taken a bullet through the throat and had choked on his own blood. There were just three officers left now: Seymour, Matthews and the Surgeon-Lieutenant. Cameron had seen the happy grin on the face of the German air-gunner as he had passed by. The Germans, he believed, were treating this as a game, a sport in which the British were to be picked off singly and the *Carmarthen* finally left to lurch about the North Atlantic without a crew. As the Focke-Wulf flew ahead to make yet another turn, the gunnery rates worked fast to free the jammed pom-pom; but this time the aircraft's turn was wider and she was seen to be regaining height. Stripey Tomkins waved a fist in the air and bawled out, 'Bastards! Too muckin' 'ot for you, I reckon!'

There was amazement on deck when both Focke-Wulfs were seen to be departing eastwards. But Seymour had a theory about that and he shared it with the ship's company: 'They could have got word of something more worthwhile in the area, a better prize. That could be our rescue tug... we'll keep our fingers crossed that the buggers don't get her.'

*

Seymour had been partially right: the *Nottingham*, coming in on a course well north of the enemy aircraft's flight from Bordeaux, was now within some twenty miles of the destroyer; and she had in fact been sighted by the Focke-Wulf that had kept her height. The second aircraft had been recalled from the attack on *Carmarthen*. Inside the next few minutes the FWS had

been sighted from *Nottingham*'s bridge and the Royal Marine bugler had, via the tannoy system, sounded her ship's company to action stations on the Captain's order. *Nottingham* was travelling fast, sending up a big bow wave; she would not prove any easy target. She was no sitting duck like *Carmarthen*. As the attack came in, her Captain watched the fall of the bombs and reacted with perfect timing: *Nottingham*'s helm was put over and she swung hard to starboard, away from the likely line of drop. In the meantime her heavy ack-ack armament was pumping away, keeping the Focke-Wulfs high: the screen of fire would be suicide to penetrate. The ship was virtually obscured by the smoke of the discharges and the bursting of the shells as they sent their fragmented shrapnel hurtling out in all directions. The noise was ear-splitting, with every gun in action. *Nottingham* twisted and turned in violent helm alterations as the bombs came down, but luck was with the Germans: the end came very suddenly and unexpectedly as an alteration of course carried the cruiser slap into the path of a falling stick of bombs and every one found its mark. *Nottingham* seemed to erupt from stem to stern as the bombs exploded on fo'c'sle, bridge and quarterdeck; and then from deep down in the ship, as a bomb sped straight down one of her funnels to explode in total devastation in a boiler-room, there came the shattering upheaval that spelled out the end.

Nottingham went up in a sheet of flame and a tremendous roar, broken open like a can. Debris filled the air along with the acrid smoke and flames from burning oil fuel, and fell back on an empty sea.

The FWs flew back to France. The pilots had a need to watch their fuel tanks, and the *Carmarthen* wasn't worth the risk.

*

A final signal had been picked up by Rosyth, a brief indication that *Nottingham* had come under air attack, and then there had been complete

silence. A sinking was virtually certain and it was possible to make accurate deductions: the sinking must have been rapid, leaving no chance to send out further signals. That would have meant a sizeable explosion, something that would have blown the bottom out of her. Thus the question of survivors was extremely uncertain. It was not wartime practice to despatch valuable ships to search for survivors alone; bringing in a crippled ship such as *Carmarthen* or *Westward Bay* was a different matter. In any case, there were no more ships to spare. And that was that. Along with any survivors from the *Carmarthen*, those from *Nottingham* would now have to take their chance. No one liked it, but the facts of war and ship availability dictated. Mary Anstey, off duty soon after the *Nottingham*'s signal had come through and had been assessed, went for a walk by herself, out of Rosyth towards Inverkeithing, which was dreary enough and in line with her mood, though she refused to give up hope.

*

‘Lavington,’ Seymour said to the Torpedo-Coxswain, then stopped.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘I don’t like it. We all know we’re right inside the zone for air attack. I should have thought about him earlier. If we’re hit, it’ll be fast. No time to release him, perhaps, before we go down. Follow?’

‘Yes, sir. He could be let out whenever there’s an attack, sir.’

Seymour nodded. ‘I don’t see any point in keeping him locked up at all, frankly. We’re in a bloody dicey condition structurally — anything could happen fast. What d’you think, Cox’n?’

The reply was doubtful. ‘His own safety, sir. The hands might react.’

‘D’you really think so?’

The Torpedo-Coxswain was emphatic. ‘Yes, sir, I do. The SBA was well liked, so was our Surgeon-Lieutenant. And what Lavington did... no, sir, it wouldn’t be fair on the men. There’d be a temptation, and we don’t want

unnecessary charges of anyone striking anyone, sir.'

'Well, I take the point,' Seymour said reluctantly. The Torpedo-Coxswain could perhaps have added another: favouritism to a CW rating might be suspected, ridiculous as any such suggestion might be. Class rankled a little in the Navy; the gulf between officers and men was so wide that some men — men like Able-Seaman Tomkins, for instance — saw class everywhere. Seymour was well enough aware that collectively Naval officers were referred to as pigs by certain bolshie types of ratings. He went on, 'All right, he stays where he is. He's to be released in action, all the same, Cox'n.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain paused, looking at the Captain through eyes that showed concern. 'You're just about all in, sir. That's not good.'

Seymour smiled. 'It's far from good!'

'Yes, sir. I meant — for the ship, sir. What's left of it.'

'Yes, I take that point too. But I have no officers, Cox'n — no executive officers. So there's no alternative, is there, to my remaining on the compass platform?'

'You'll collapse soon, sir. Then what?'

Seymour answered irritably. 'I've already said, there's no alternative.'

'With respect, sir, I believe there is. There's me. The ship has no way on her. Even if she had, I've enough experience not to do anything bloody daft, sir. Why don't we work watch and watch, Mr Seymour, sir?'

It was said in almost fatherly fashion; in fact Chief Petty Officer Groves, Torpedo-Coxswain these many years, was quite old enough to be Seymour's father. Seymour suddenly felt a sense almost of being overwhelmed, of gratitude that someone had even noticed his terrible weariness, that some-one had realized that a captain was only human after all. He knew that he couldn't go on for ever, couldn't go on much longer in fact; and the suggestion was a

sensible one. There would be complications, however, if anything should go wrong when the Torpedo-Coxswain was on watch. King's Regulations were not unbending in themselves and according to some senior officers were intended only as a guide; on the other hand, other senior officers were capable of their own interpretations and regarded King's Regulations as a bible to be obeyed come what may. They could in fact be quoted either way that suited — as guide or as orders. And any Court Martial would be likely to find a captain guilty of hazarding his command by neglect of duty if trouble came when that captain had allowed a rating to assume his place.

It couldn't be done and Seymour said as much. This the Torpedo-Coxswain had to accept, but did so with an expression that said some bastards were born stupid. He went down the ladder muttering and shaking his head and going aft towards the quarterdeck he met Matthews.

Matthews said, 'You look upset, Swain. And you've just come from the bridge. What's the trouble now, eh?'

'No trouble, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain spoke stiffly; he was aware of friction between the officers of bridge and engine-room, though that was none of his business, and he was also aware that Lieutenant (E) Matthews was quite capable of trying to make use of the fact that he had been a lower-deck man so as to be, when it suited him, matey with senior ratings. This the Torpedo-Coxswain did not much like. As Matthews stood there slap in his path, blocking him, he added, 'No trouble at all, sir.'

Matthews smiled. 'Sure?'

'Quite sure, sir.'

'I see. How's the First Lieutenant?'

'Captain, sir.' Reproof showed.

'All right, all right. I asked, how is he?'

'Captain's all right, sir. Tired, but plenty of fight. And that's what we need.'

‘I doubt if he is all right. I doubt it strongly. No man can keep going day and night indefinitely.’ Matthews paused, stroking his jaw and looking a little sideways at the Torpedo-Coxswain. ‘I’m not too sure... in regard to Admiralty law, that is... how would I stand to take over?’

‘Watch on the bridge, do you mean, sir?’

‘No, no. Command — if necessary, that is. As an Engineer Officer. You’re well versed in that sort of thing, or should be.’

‘Yes, sir.’ The Torpedo-Coxswain spoke briskly. ‘I am. As an Engineer Officer, and this I think you do know very well, you cannot have any executive authority —’

‘But in special circumstances? What I’m asking is this: would I be able to count on your support if —’

‘Against the Captain, sir? Most certainly *not*, sir. And now, if you don’t mind, sir, I have matters to attend to.’ The Torpedo-Coxswain pushed unceremoniously past, his face scandalized. Bloody black gang. The Captain would have his full loyalty and never mind his daft stiff-necked attitude about sharing the watch. Funny that the Chief should have come out with it now, just when he himself had been having a go at the skipper... and of course Matthews knew the score well enough and hadn’t in fact been seeking any information at all — it had just been an attempt to line up allies.

Behind the Torpedo-Coxswain, Matthews scowled and turned away. In his view, Seymour was a danger to those of them that by some miracle were still left alive. Fighting back now, when another attack came, would be nothing short of suicide. Far better to call it a day and throw themselves on the mercy of the Germans the first time a U-boat surfaced. That wasn’t disloyalty; it was prudence. The ship was a bloody wreck. You could go too far in keeping the flag flying. Matthews glared towards the White Ensign, blowing in the diminishing wind from the ensign staff aft. High time it was replaced by a

plain white one.

*

‘Leave it, Tomkins,’ Farrow said. Tomkins was on again, on about jonahs. Farrow fancied the man might be starting to go round the bend as a result of what was fast becoming an obsession with Lavington and his presence aboard. Tomkins had been hanging about around the door of the engineers’ store, looking threatening and muttering away like all hell. God alone knew what he expected to gain by it all; but Farrow had seen to it that the guard on Lavington, when the man was taken out for his exercise periods, was on the alert for trouble. As it happened, Tomkins hadn’t tried to interfere with him — yet, anyway.

Tomkins said, ‘Get stuffed.’

‘Watch it,’ Farrow warned, his long, gloomy face hardening. ‘You and me, we’re long service... we sets an example, right?’ He added, ‘Now more than ever. It’s important, is that. Try and remember it.’

Tomkins sniffed and flapped his arms against the penetrating cold. The weather was better right enough, but the perishing cold was as bad as ever. If ever he got back to Scapa... but if ever he did, it would be out again next run with the next perishing convoy, time after time, world without end amen. The seas wouldn’t leave a man alone, not in wartime. It was a dog’s life. Tomkins was about to slope off and never mind the killick, and dodge into the galley flat for a burn if he could find a fag that wasn’t wet through, when he heard the throb of more aircraft engines. Then the alarm rattlers went and Tomkins saw a sight that at first angered him and then pleased him: Lavington was being brought out from the engineers’ store.

Chapter Ten

Once again it seemed to be a case of attempted attrition; *Carmarthen* would be showing a very small target to high-level bombers, and raking machine-gun fire seemed to appeal more to the Focke-Wulf pilots. Down they came, risking the return fire from the close-range weapons. Puffs of smoke from the pom-poms filled the sky but the Focke-Wulfs penetrated and roared parallel to the destroyer, peppering her decks and superstructure, killing, wounding. Three of them this time, but soon reduced to two: Cameron, now at one of the Lewis guns, found the aircraft slap in his sights, more or less by sheer chance, and fired a burst that shattered the perspex of the cockpit and killed the pilot. As the Focke-Wulf veered right across the destroyer's decks, the pilot's blood could be seen spread like a red mist across the remains of the perspex shield; and as the plane took that course across the decks, Leading-Seaman Farrow, his face murderous, swung his pom-pom to follow her and pumped straight into her belly. Smoke poured from two of the four engines and the Focke-Wulf twisted, losing height until her port wing took the sea. The starboard wing came up and she turned over, to sink within a couple of minutes, some half mile from the destroyer. There were no survivors. There was no time for cheering their first victory; the ship's company were at once engaged by the two remaining aircraft.

Seymour, dodging bullets along the iron-deck, made his way aft as *Carmarthen's* fire slackened: neither the machine-gun nor the pom-poms were in action. The last of the ready-use ammunition had been expended. As he contacted Leading-Seaman Farrow, the Lewis guns also fell silent.

'Get all hands below, Farrow. Wardroom flat. Quick as you can,' Seymour

ordered.

‘Sit it out, sir?’

‘Right!’

Seymour looked up at the sky, bitterly: no British aircraft. It was always the same old story. *Where the hell was the RAF?* Never there when they were wanted... yet that wasn't quite fair. The pilots and aircrews wouldn't have held back; there simply weren't enough planes, that was all. And when there were, some solid-brained bastard at the Air Ministry usually decided that there were better uses for them than supporting the Navy. Carriers were what was needed, more carriers; just now, the Navy had all too few. Keeping in cover, Seymour remained on deck until the Torpedo-Coxswain and Leading-Seaman Farrow had shepherded the men below to the wardroom flat, then he went down himself. Water slopped around; there was nowhere dry, not even in the officers' cabins or in the wardroom itself, but at least the German bullets couldn't reach them. The bombs might, if the Focke-Wulfs decided to climb and drop their bomb-loads. This, Matthews pointed out sourly.

‘Nothing we can do by remaining on deck, Chief,’ Seymour answered. ‘There's no ammo left. None at all.’

‘Except in the flooded magazines.’

Seymour flushed; by now he would have tried to pump out, but that, too, was impossible. Along with the bent stern tubes, the pumping system was bugged. He said, ‘Let's keep to practicalities, shall we?’ Disregarding angry mutterings from the Engineer Officer, he turned to the assembled men. ‘We stay here,’ he said, ‘and ride it. There's no other way.’ He knew he had no need to remind any of them of the stark facts: no engine power, no fighting capacity, no means of communication. Those few facts had to render a warship totally useless and now it was a simple matter of survival until, as they drifted the seas like a ghost ship, someone found them.

‘Suppose it’s a U-boat?’ Matthews asked. ‘What then?’

Seymour said, ‘We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.’

Matthews fished around for a cigarette and lit it. He said, ‘Isn’t it best to have a plan for all eventualities? Isn’t that what Commanding Officers normally do?’

The tone had been sarcastic; the atmosphere became tense as the ship’s company took in the overtones of hostility, of wardroom factions coming out against each other. The men looked anywhere but at Seymour, lifting eyes to the deck-head, waiting to see what might now develop. Seymour said quietly, ‘You’re right, Chief. Let’s say, it depends what the U-boat captain does... if you follow?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Then I’ll spell it out. He may decide to attack. If he does, then we’ve had it. Just like when a submarine’s under depth-charge attack, you sit it out and hope for the best. We’re in no position to fight, Chief — I’ve already made that point.’

‘Yes. And if he doesn’t attack? I’m not sure what you mean. If he doesn’t attack, what the hell *does* he do?’

Seymour said, ‘He’ll see for himself what sort of state we’re in. We’ll look abandoned, right? So it’s on the cards he may decide to board. If he does, well, then we’ll be ready for him. We fight to the last man if that happens. I’ll be watching. We won’t be taken unawares, Chief.’

‘Watching? From here?’

Seymour said, ‘No, I’m going to the wheelhouse. You’re in charge here, Chief.’ He caught the eye of the Torpedo-Coxswain. ‘Yes, Cox’n?’

‘I’ll come with you, sir. To the wheelhouse, sir. That’s my place in action.’ The Torpedo-Coxswain added, ‘On your own, sir, you’ll not be able to keep awake. We can share the watch.’

Seymour nodded and smiled. 'All right, Cox'n, you've got your wish at last. Leading-Seaman Farrow?'

'Sir?'

'You're the senior seaman rating left below. Remember that.'

'I'll remember it, sir.' Farrow was puzzled, uncertain what the Captain meant by his remark, which could in a sense be considered an order. Cameron, watching him, saw his uncertainty; in Cameron's mind there was no such uncertainty at all: he was convinced that the Captain had passed a warning that the seaman branch must if necessary act independently of the engine-room. It would be up to Farrow to decide when that moment might come.

*

Before the Focke-Wulfs turned away for France they dropped their bombs in a farewell gesture. They scored no hits, but some of the bombs dropped close enough. Seymour, from the wheelhouse, watched them fall, helpless to do anything about them. In the wardroom flat the detonations were felt like the thuds of sledgehammers and Cameron believed that more leaks had started; the water seemed to be gaining even though Farrow, his long face gloomier than ever as he pondered that remark of the Captain's, had set the hands to bale out, using any utensil they could find — cups and bowls from the wardroom pantry, even the chamber-pots from the officers' cabins — and emptying them through the opened wardroom ports. Cameron had been detailed by Farrow to stand by the sound-powered telephone from the wheelhouse so that any word from the Captain could be reported without any delay. Lavington was being employed to assist the Surgeon-Lieutenant in the cabins, using his embryonic medical knowledge to keep the tanker survivors and *Carmarthen's* own wounded as comfortable as possible. Most of the burns cases would have been better off dead; some had little visible flesh left

and the eyes seemed to scream with pain that ate even through the morphia. Lavington moved like an automaton, a person quite without volition. His face was virtually expressionless, his mouth hung slack, the lips parted. He looked like walking death.

Soon after the bomb explosions had died away, the sound-powered telephone whined. Cameron took the instrument from its hook.

‘Wardroom flat, sir.’

‘Captain here. Is that Cameron?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘The aircraft are leaving. How’re things down there?’

‘All right, sir.’

‘Good.’ The line went dead. The destroyer rolled and wallowed, heavy, soggy, all but waterlogged now. The water rushed from side to side as she rolled, slopping and dirty, carrying odds and ends from the cabins and other spaces. In the pantry the officers’ cook prepared a makeshift meal: fish-paste sandwiches made from stale bread, cold bangers and tinned tomatoes that looked like red lead.

‘Sandwiches, all nice an’ bleedin’ dainty,’ Tomkins grumbled none too quietly. ‘Officers’ grub! Officers’ wives ‘as pudden and pies, while sailors’ wives ‘as skilly.’

‘Shut up,’ Farrow ordered.

‘Soddin’ class distinction.’

Farrow loomed angrily. ‘I said, shut up, Stripey. So you shuts up or else.’

‘Else what?’ Tomkins responded with a jeer.

‘I’ll have you before the Officer of the Watch.’

‘What Officer of what Watch, may I enquire?’

Farrow breathed hard. ‘Just shut up. Just watch it, that’s all.’

There was a sardonic laugh from Matthews. ‘All right, Farrow, he has a

point, you know.'

'Sir?'

'We're all on a level now, Farrow. I think you'd do well to bear that in mind.'

'If you says so, sir.'

'I do, Farrow, I do.'

Leading-Seaman Farrow wiped the back of a hand across his nose and frowned. He thought the officer was talking balls; officers and ratings were never on a level till they were dead, then they were accorded the same burial unless they were admirals who died ashore heavy with honours and decorations. In the meantime those present in the wardroom flat were not dead, though they might well be close to it. Until they were, the conventions held. And Farrow didn't like having his own authority eroded, which was what that Matthews had done. For an officer, Matthews was a bloody bolshie, though Farrow had a shrewd idea that if he failed to come up with the 'Sir' each time he opened his mouth, the bolshie aspect would vanish fast. Anyway, he didn't open it again; you didn't argue with officers if you valued the hook on your left arm, the fouled anchor that gave you your authority, whether or not you were on a level.

Farrow moved away but before doing so met Tomkins' eye and gave him a look that said he'd better watch it and never mind what the officer had said. Again he thought about the Captain's stricture. Funny, that... almost as though the skipper didn't trust the bloody engine-room. For that matter, neither did Farrow. Stokers — they were all right; they didn't virtually join the service right off in the rating of petty officer, which the tiffies did — the Engine-room Artificers. The ERAs might be good at being tiffies, but as petty officers they were about as much use as Farrow's left tit.

*

‘Weather’s improving, sir,’ the Torpedo-Coxswain said.

Seymour nodded; it was. The day was moving towards evening and the skies were clear and bright; the seas had gone down considerably, which eased the strain on the hull. There was little wind left; it all added up to good U-boat weather, of course. Seymour racked a tired brain, trying to remember, to assess when the next outward-bound convoy would be due to pass through the area. Not just yet, he fancied, though there might be convoys on the move to and from Gibraltar, and their tracks would take them well westerly of the direct peace-time route — the French coast had to be stood well clear of. Even if there was no convoy due, the U-boat packs could be gathering, to lie in wait submerged and then surface during the night once the ships were in their sights.

‘What d’you make the chances, Cox’n?’ Seymour asked suddenly.

‘Fair, I reckon, sir. Jerries always permitting, of course.’

‘Yes. We’ve got this far, we should last in better weather. Someone’ll find us.’ Seymour rubbed at his eyes, which were red and swollen from lack of sleep and from constant vigilance. If ever they were found, he would be faced with the final decision: unless they could be taken in tow, which was scarcely likely except in the event of the finder being an ocean-going rescue tug, he would have to consider abandoning so as to get his ship’s company to safety. That would come hard, very hard; his ship was still technically afloat and from a seamanship point of view could certainly make it home and could be refitted. Where would his first duty lie? To a ship that could be got home but almost certainly wouldn’t be if they met the enemy again, or to men who could live to fight again another day? A captain’s decision; and much as Seymour would have liked to, he couldn’t share it with his Torpedo-Coxswain. When the decision was made, the order would be given and that was all. It hadn’t to be made yet, but it was a captain’s job to have his mind

ready, to have the alternatives assessed ahead taking into account all foreseeable factors, so that instant orders could be passed. Matthews had been dead right. It was a case of weighing likelihoods and possibilities. Seymour's brain was moving in circles now; his mind was as tired as his body. There were times when he would have welcomed the final blow from a torpedo: at least no more decisions would be required. Until he had assumed the command, he had never really appreciated how a captain's day was made up of constant decisions both large and small.

God, he was tired. So tired it didn't seem possible that he could last out. The effort to keep his eyelids open was shattering, taxing all his strength of will. Sagged into a corner of the wheelhouse, he pulled himself upright; the best way was to keep on the move. He took a couple of steps, meaning to walk around the steering position, and was asleep before he had taken two more, asleep on his feet and in motion. The Torpedo-Coxswain caught him as he fell, and laid him flat on the deck.

'Sleep it out,' the Torpedo-Coxswain said, knowing his voice wasn't penetrating. 'Sleep it out. Christ, you've done all you can and that's a fact!'

*

The U-boat, cruising at periscope depth a little before the light went altogether, had the *Carmarthen* in her sights; the German captain was watching carefully, frowning as he did so. It was very strange; there was no sign of life whatsoever. No one on the bridge, no one along the decks, no one at the after gun. One of the after guns seemed to have gone and the destroyer was in a very bad way. Abandoned? The British Navy didn't normally abandon so long as a keel was afloat beneath their feet.

The Captain moved away from his eyepiece and gestured to his First Lieutenant. 'Take a look,' he said. 'Tell me what you think.'

The First Lieutenant took a long, slow look. He said, 'There is no one

visible, sir. That does not mean they're not there, out of sight.'

'But why?'

The First Lieutenant shrugged. 'Sick? Some spreading disease?'

The Captain made a contemptuous noise. 'Come, Franz! That is not likely. More likely it's a trap.'

'To what end?'

'That depends what is in their mind. What is certain is that there are no boats or rafts in the vicinity... no survivors. That's odd.'

'The weather has been bad till now, sir,' the First Lieutenant reminded. 'They could have been separated. They could be miles away by now.'

'Possibly,' the Captain said. He frowned again; the British still didn't abandon. He looked again through the periscope. With the stem so well down in the water, it was impossible to see the destroyer's pennant numbers painted on either bow, so no positive identification could be made. Also, she was so damaged above the upper deck that it was almost impossible to be certain of her class, but it seemed likely that she was of the *Raglan* class. Perhaps in due course this would fit with the situation report from Hamburg, broadcast to all U-boats at sea in the area and picked up whilst charging batteries, which the U-boat would do once the full security of the dark came down. Time would tell and the Captain could afford to wait.

'Down periscope,' he ordered. 'We will hold our present depth — and we shall see.'

The periscope, unseen by *Carmarthen's* Torpedo-Coxswain in the fading light and ruffled sea, slid down below the waves.

*

Once it was dark, the two men in the wheelhouse could be fed from aft so long as no light was shown, but care would have to be taken to move discreetly just the same. There was a moon now and the visibility was good.

Leading-Seaman Farrow whirled the handle of the sound-powered telephone and it was answered from the wheelhouse.

‘Swain here.’

‘Farrow, ‘Swain. I’m sending grub up.’

‘Right. Whoever brings it, tell him to watch it, Farrow.’

‘Will do, ‘Swain.’ Farrow hung the instrument back on its hook. ‘Cameron!’

‘Yes, Killick?’

‘Grub to the wheel’ouse. Keep low, keep against the super-structure — keep on the side away from the bleedin’ moon, too. All right?’

‘All right,’ Cameron said, glad enough to escape for a while from the claustrophobia of the crowded wardroom flat. He went to the pantry and collected the food from Hemming, the officers’ cook. More sandwiches and some herrings-in, plus tinned peas, all cold. A bottle of lime-juice from the wardroom wine store and some water. Cameron lifted an eyebrow and said, ‘What about a bottle of whisky? They could do with it.’

The officers’ cook shook his head. ‘Not Mr Seymour. Late Captain’s standing orders: no drinking while at sea. Kept to rigid. Seymour, ‘e won’t go against that.’ He paused. ‘Not unless it was an issue, like, to the whole ship’s company... and they’re only authorized to drink the rum issue. It’s not on, lad.’

‘Okay,’ Cameron said. ‘It was just a thought, that’s all. Is the Captain as rigid as that?’

‘Yes,’ Hemming answered briskly, and polished up the glasses for the lime-juice and water. Cameron watched the meal being packed into a metal container normally used to keep food hot for transport to the compass platform. He was glad of that; he might prove unhandy with a tray and even the noise from a dropped plate was to be avoided if they were to keep up their

appearance of abandonment — the U-boats had long listening ears. With the box held tightly in front of his body, Cameron climbed the ladder to the deck hatch and with one hand pulled back the clips. He emerged on to the quarterdeck, circumspectly, looking all round in so far as he was able before coming right out into the open. Bending, he dropped the hatch back into place and applied two clips, loosely. Then he faded against the after screen and came round on the moonless side. The Atlantic stood empty so far as he could see. He made his way for'ard as fast as he could and climbed the starboard ladder to the wheelhouse. Seymour was still asleep, looking like a drugged man.

The Torpedo-Coxswain took delivery of the food, gratefully. 'Thanks, lad,' he said. 'I reckon this'll do the Captain a power of good.' He gave his lips a preliminary wipe; like those of everyone else, they were salt-encrusted and unwashed for many days past. Then his eyes widened as he saw Cameron look through the port and stiffen. 'What's up?' he asked.

'Periscope,' Cameron said. 'Or I think so... fine on the port bow.'

Chapter Eleven

Surfacing in the darkness to recharge batteries and take routine transmissions from base, the U-boat's Captain had received information that HMS *Carmarthen* was lying helpless after an initial torpedo attack on the last westbound convoy to pass through and subsequent bombing and strafing attacks by the Focke-Wulfs. It was clear enough that the vessel he had seen through his periscope was the *Carmarthen*; now, his duty was equally clear. The wireless reports had not indicated any abandonment though the FWS had indicated that the British destroyer's guns had fallen silent during the last attack and it was assumed she had expended all her ammunition.

Thoughtfully, in the glow of the lights of the control room below the conning-tower, the German Captain studied the charts; then called, 'Franz?'

'Sir?' The First Lieutenant came to his side.

'We must attack, of course. The destroyer is worth sinking. She is not yet a total loss, and could make port. The question is, how do we attack? I have to bear in mind that another convoy is due to pass through the area and we haven't many torpedoes left.'

The First Lieutenant laughed. 'Sink her by gunfire!'

'Yes. That's obvious, of course.'

'Then —'

'But no. I have another idea, Franz. The destroyer intrigues me... no one moving, no signs of life at all. It's like the *Marie Celeste*. I shall find out more.'

Orders were passed to bring the U-boat back towards the *Carmarthen*'s last observed position; before surfacing earlier, she had been withdrawn some ten

miles easterly so as not to be spotted. Now, making back towards the destroyer, she submerged again to remain until further orders at periscope depth. About an hour later her periscope had picked up the dark blob that was *Carmarthen*, a blob standing out clearly from the moonlit water that broke gently against the base of her forward superstructure. Still there was no one visible; the U-boat captain examined the silent, motionless ship carefully with his motors stopped, then came cautiously nearer. With a better view, he still found no life whatsoever.

*

‘Captain, sir!’ The Torpedo-Coxswain’s voice was urgent against Seymour’s ear. In emergency the regulations had to go by the board: Seymour was dead to the world and the Torpedo-Coxswain did what no rating should do: he reached out, laid hands on the Captain and shook him awake. ‘Captain, sir —’

‘All right, Cox’n.’ Seymour came awake and stared about as though he had no idea where he was. ‘What is it?’

The Torpedo-Coxswain repeated Cameron’s sighting. ‘Periscope, sir, fine on the port bow. I believe it’s closing, sir.’

‘All right, thank you, Cox’n.’ Seymour pulled himself to his feet, staggered a little, then steadied his weary body against the useless wheel. He brought up his binoculars and stared through the port, searching. After half a minute he said, ‘I’ve got it. You’re right, Cox’n, she’s closing. I doubt if she’d do that if she meant to send off a fish, somehow.’

‘Gunfire, sir?’

‘More likely. Warn the wardroom flat, Cox’n.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ The Torpedo-Coxswain took up the sound-powered telephone. ‘Orders for aft, sir?’

‘Tell Lieutenant Matthews to remain where he is unless he gets word from

me. Tell him that if the Jerries don't open with their gun, they may board. If they do, we fight back. In the meantime all men below are to be armed with rifles from the racks. I'll pass the word if they're to come out.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain passed the message down. Below in the wardroom flat, Able-Seaman Tomkins passed it to the Engineer Officer. In the wheelhouse the three men watched the slow, cautious approach of the periscope and its small feather of disturbed water. The tension was immense as they all waited for the German to show his hand; it was clear by now that there was not to be a torpedo attack.

Seymour said suddenly, 'Bare fists for you and me, Cox'n. No bloody rifles!'

'Beg pardon, sir.' The Torpedo-Coxswain gave an apologetic cough. 'I took it on myself to bring up two for us, sir, beneath my oilskin.' He bent and produced the rifles from beneath one of the hammocks used as blast protection at sea, now lying discarded on the deck of the wheelhouse. 'We'll fight, sir, never fear.'

Seymour grinned tightly. 'You're a ruddy pirate, Cox'n, but thank God you are!' Then his tone altered. 'She's surfacing. Tell the wardroom flat to stand by. Cameron — man the phone and act as communication number.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Cameron went to the telephone and wound the handle fast. Below, Tomkins answered once again. Crisply Cameron said, 'Stand by. The U-boat's surfacing.'

'Yes, sir,' Tomkins said before he could stop himself; he could have sworn it was an officer's voice, until the recognition had come. His face went a deep, mortified red: bloody WC candidates! 'Anything else, you little perisher?'

'Not yet. Wait for the Captain's order.' Cameron put back the telephone and stared out through the port towards the U-boat. Her conning-tower was in

view now, with water pouring from the wash-ports. Cameron glanced down at the meal he had brought up, now abandoned. It hadn't been up to much anyway; now it had a forlorn look. The U-boat's casing came into view, streaming water as it rose through the seas, silhouetted beneath the moon, long and low and black. Men emerged in the conning-tower and a moment later all hell seemed to burst upon the *Carmarthen* as the U-boat opened at point-blank range. There was an immensely bright flash and almost in the same instant there was a violent explosion at the base of the destroyer's wheelhouse and the metal bulkhead at the fore end grew red-hot. The concussing effect was immense: the three men were thrown violently into a corner and everything flew around them — cork insulation from the bulkheads, slivers of metal, the wheel and its mounting came adrift. The fire at the base of the superstructure was put out almost at once by the sea's action, but before this happened the German had opened once again. The next shell took the angle of the wheelhouse in the port for'ard corner, but failed to explode. The passage of the projectile, however, twisted the metal into a shambles, leaving a gaping hole in the bulkhead — leaving, too, the broken bodies of Seymour and the Torpedo-Coxswain. Cameron stared in horror at the result, felt a complete paralysis of the mind come over him. Now he was all that was left in the fore part of the ship, the only one in the command position. He had no idea what he should do. There was no further firing from the U-boat, which was now moving closer. Cameron, feeling that to remain hidden was even now the best thing to do, dropped to the deck where he was concealed by the remains of the port bulkhead. As he did so the sound-powered telephone whined and the need to silence it before its noise could reach the Germans overcame his mental paralysis. He grabbed for the instrument, remaining flat on the deck as he did so.

‘Engineer Officer here,’ the voice came up. ‘Who’s that?’

‘Ordinary Seaman Cameron, sir —’

‘Yes. Well, what’s happening?’

‘We’ve been hit by gunfire, sir.’

‘I know that, you bloody idiot, what’s the damage?’

‘Not too serious I believe, sir. Nothing that’ll affect our stability and seaworthiness.’

‘So far as *you* know,’ Matthews said sourly. ‘Is the Captain still expecting the Jerries to board?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Cameron answered almost without thinking. He was about to make the report that he alone remained alive in the for’ard superstructure when the Lieutenant (E) cut in on him.

‘Tell the Captain we’re all armed with rifles but it’s *my* opinion the time’s come to pack it in. Tell him that, Cameron.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’ Again the automatic reaction, much to Cameron’s own surprise. The instrument was banged back hard in the wardroom flat and Cameron replaced his end on its hook. Matthews was assuming the Captain and the Torpedo-Coxswain were still alive; well, let him! With the ship still, so far as Matthews would know, under command, the wardroom flat would continue to obey orders from the compass platform or wheelhouse. That was fine, if ultimately dangerous. One did not play ducks and drakes with officers. But if Matthews was for giving in, Seymour had not been. Seymour had intended to fight it out and had had the full backing of the Torpedo-Coxswain; Leading-Seaman Farrow, too, would back that decision willingly. Cameron intended that the wishes of the dead Captain should be followed out: there would be no surrender if there was anything he could do to prevent it. If the ship couldn’t fight back any longer, at least her company could, and take as many Germans as possible with them in the process.

Cameron tried to project himself into the mind of the U-boat captain: what

would the German be deciding currently? He would probably board; the present manoeuvrings seemed to indicate that he intended to lay alongside. Not an easy task despite the sea's flatness — there was still a swell running, left behind by the recent gales. There would be a need for much care or the submarine could damage her casing, even her pressure-hull, Cameron fancied. Submarines were a closed book to him as yet, but simple seamanship was always to be observed. But what would the German gain by boarding? It could be assumed that the Jerries knew — or thought they knew — that the destroyer had been abandoned; men would have emerged under gunfire, most likely, ready to abandon had they still been aboard. But so what? Sure, the Germans would believe they could board without opposition, but what would be the object of that, for God's sake? A submarine, operational in an operational area where convoys were expected through, could scarcely take a crippled destroyer in tow! She probably wouldn't have the engine capacity or towing points to do it, operational or not. So why? True, it would be a feather in any submariner's cap if he could bring an enemy destroyer back to base as a prize of war. But it couldn't be feasible. On the other hand, a skeleton crew could perhaps be put aboard, and the German might risk breaking radio silence to make a report of his action so that a tow could be sent post-haste from Hamburg or one of the French ports to bring her in from under the very noses of the British. Hitler would rave with sheer joy at a well-cocked snook, and the U-boat captain would have his brass hat the next day.

That had to be stopped.

Cameron watched from cover, saw the U-boat was now lying off with her starboard side parallel to the *Carmarthen's* port beam. He saw the conning-tower personnel, saw both Captain and First Lieutenant studying the destroyer's ravaged decks and superstructure through binoculars. So far there was no closer approach. The moon shone down brilliantly, bringing

everything up clear and stark. That was unfortunate: the moment the seamen and stokers emerged with their rifles from the wardroom hatch, they were going to be spotted. And when they did emerge, they would do so on the word of an ordinary seaman, a word supported only by the dead.

*

‘Leading-Seaman Farrow.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘A word in your ear, Farrow. Come over here.’ Matthews beckoned. Farrow went across to where the Engineer Officer stood just inside the doorway of his own cabin, now occupied by two of the sedated burns cases, one in the bunk, the other on the settee. ‘You heard what came down from the Captain, I take it?’

‘Yes, sir, I did.’

‘It’s bloody suicide!’ Matthews snapped.

‘Maybe it is, sir.’

Matthews gave him a sweeping look. ‘You don’t mind?’

‘Yes, sir, I mind all right. I’ve some living to do yet.’ Farrow drew the sleeve of a jersey across his nose. ‘But it’s orders. Orders from the bridge, like.’

Matthews glared. ‘Is that supposed to mean something, Farrow?’

‘Oh no, sir, no,’ Farrow answered, all innocence, eyes wide. It was a good act. ‘Nothing at all, sir. Just statin’ facts, that’s all. Orders are orders, aren’t they, sir?’

‘Yes! But I don’t believe the Captain’s in a fit state to make decisions, Farrow. So many days and nights up there — no sleep to speak of, cold food —’

‘We’re all in the same boat, sir.’

‘Don’t you damn well interrupt me when I’m talking to you, Leading-

Seaman Farrow!’ Matthews’ eyes blazed redly; in Farrow’s view it was he, not the Captain, who was showing the strain-signals. ‘Try that again, and I’ll have that hook off your arm the moment we reach Belfast.’

Farrow sighed. ‘Sorry, sir, I’m sure.’

‘All right, all right. Now just listen. Don’t get me wrong, but I’m not willing to risk my stokers in a bloody daft attempt at heroics. What’s left of the ship’s not worth it —just not worth men’s lives, understand?’

Farrow nodded. ‘You may be right, sir, but —’

‘I am right and there aren’t any buts, Farrow. Trained men are more use to the war effort than a boat that’s damaged to the extent we are. So my stokers don’t take any part in trying to repel boarders or whatever it is Seymour has in mind to do. Right?’

‘It’s your decision, sir.’

‘Thank you very much!’ Matthews snapped rudely. ‘I know it’s my decision, and you’ll abide by it.’

‘If you say so, sir,’ Farrow said for the second time that night. Inside, as the Engineer Officer uttered a curt dismissal, Farrow was seething. True, it was easy enough to appreciate his point: men were men and often enough throughout history it had been plain daft to throw their lives away. ‘Repel boarders’ had an old-fashioned ring about it, certainly; in Nelson’s day hardy tars had followed their officers often enough, cutlasses in hand, when the old wooden walls of England had laid alongside the French, to cut and thrust into bellies and chests, arms and legs and necks, or to hack away the rigging so that the canvas descended to envelop the enemy and leave them without their motive power if they lived. That had been commonplace, then. Not now. Farrow, going back towards the wardroom pantry where he had taken up his station, sucked angrily at his teeth. God knew, the Navy was crammed to the gunwales with bull, but it was a proud service and the White Ensign was still,

even now, floating out from the ensign-staff aft. Surrender was a dirty word to Farrow. In any case, that Matthews had overstated his case; the old *Carmarthen* was far from lost yet. Given time and a bit of luck, an ocean-going rescue tug would appear over the horizon from the east and would bring her in, bring her home again. That would be a wonderful moment, one well worth fighting for. Farrow intended to fight for it. Like Seymour.

He frowned thoughtfully. The seaman ratings had been very badly hit. Very heavy casualties... and no stokers or tiffies had been lost, not yet. Farrow wished them long life but had to face the fact that without them his fighting capacity would be sadly small, not to say negligible. He pulled at his jaw and glared towards Lieutenant (E) Matthews, who was talking to his Chief Stoker, a little fat man named Peters. Chief Stoker Peters didn't seem to be liking it any more than Farrow. It would reflect badly on the department afterwards. You couldn't keep buzzes at bay, and word always spread like lightning round any naval base. *Carmarthen's* engine-room complement would come in for any amount of crap and Peters knew it.

Farrow, his nails digging hard into his palms as he waited for the sound-powered telephone to whine again with orders, decided that he might have to stick his neck out. He was very unsure of his ground, but he did remember the Captain's remark just before he'd left the wardroom flat, and he remembered the appeal that had seemed to be in it. Mr Seymour, with command suddenly thrust upon him, was doing his best. It was up to the rest of them to give him proper backing and sod Matthews. Farrow, in advance of the expected orders which still hadn't come, was about to start to stick out his neck and make a formal approach to the Engineer Officer, who strictly speaking had no executive authority at all, when he saw a man make a dash for the ladder leading up to the deck hatch: Lavington, with a rifle in his hand.

Farrow came out from the open door of the pantry, yelling. ‘Stop that man! *Get him before he makes the muckin’ hatch!*’ He was moving fast himself as he spoke, running as fast as was possible with all the impediments both structural and human, but was beaten to it by Able-Seaman Tomkins. Farrow had seen murder in Tomkins eyes and he pushed forward to stop tragedy, tragedy that might — indeed would, once Lavington was through the hatch — wreck any plans the skipper might have to continue hoodwinking the Jerries. Farrow was too late: ahead of Tomkins, Lavington made the quarterdeck and began a mad, pointless rush for’ard along the iron-deck towards the sunken fo’c’sle. Tomkins had enough sense not to pursue him once he had been spotted from the U-boat’s conning-tower; Tomkins stopped and took cover in the lee of the after screen, and it was Lavington alone who ran into the Germans’ machine-gun fire. He lurched, his rifle clattered to the deck, and he went overboard with his brains spilling.

Shaking like a leaf, Tomkins went below.

‘Tried to stop the stupid bugger,’ he said to Farrow, but didn’t meet the Leading-Seaman’s eyes. Everyone in the wardroom flat knew what he’d intended to do. In the circumstances he might have got away with it, and anyway he hadn’t stopped to think it through, not really. ‘E bought it from the Jerries.’

Farrow nodded. The machine-gun fire had been heard. He said, ‘Well, that’s that, then.’ It was the best way out for Lavington, without a doubt... The sound-powered telephone from the wheelhouse was whining again. Tomkins answered, then reported to Farrow.

‘Wheel’ouse says the buggers look like boarding — they’re coming alongside and a party’s mustering on the casing. You’re to act in execution of previous orders.’

As Tomkins finished the message there was a bump along the destroyer’s

port side and a noticeable lurch. Farrow lost no time. He called, 'All hands, up on deck. That includes the engine-room.' He caught the furious eye of Lieutenant (E) Matthews and said, 'By my reckoning, sir, the Captain meant me to take charge aft as the senior seaman rating left. So I'm taking charge, sir. And afterwards I'll take my chance that I acted right.'

He turned away for the ladder, ordered the seamen and stokers to fix bayonets, and climbed fast. Out through the after screen and on to the quarterdeck, he heard rifle fire coming from the wheelhouse, heard it being returned, and then saw the U-boat's crew jumping in swarms from the casing to the iron-deck whence some moved for'ard and the rest aft. Farrow fired round the angle of the after screen in an attempt to hold the Germans until he had all his men on deck: he was successful. The rush aft halted, and a body went over the side to be pulped between the two hulls. The Germans, as Farrow fired again and scored another hit, became much more circumspect, seeking cover. The fire was being kept up from the wheelhouse too, though Farrow fancied it was coming from one rifle only; and the moment all the seamen and stokers were mustered behind him, Farrow ordered the counter-attack.

Half his force ran for the starboard side of the iron-deck under Chief Stoker Peters, while Farrow himself took the port side, doubling from behind the after screen with all rifles blazing away. The U-boat crew seemed taken utterly by surprise: the attack was much stronger than they had expected.

While the bullets from Farrow's seamen thudded into flesh, the starboard-side attack came at the boarding-party from over the shattered remains of the searchlight platform and the midships superstructure. As Farrow came to close quarters he reversed his rifle and smashed away with the butt, grinning like a bloodstained demon. At his side Able-Seaman Tomkins did the same and appeared to be enjoying every moment. Aboard the U-boat, an attempt

was being made to man the gun; but Cameron in the wheelhouse was in an excellent position to stop this happening. From cover, he was able to pick off each man as the gun was approached. Bullets pinged around him, ricocheting off the wreckage of the bulkheads. Blood poured from a near miss that sliced a lobe from an ear. From the upper deck came screams of agony as wounded men slid over the side to become fenders for the U-boat. The German Captain, keeping prudently below the lip of his conning-tower, was shouting orders through a megaphone, but no one seemed to be taking any notice as the slaughter continued. Cameron believed that most of the casualties were German; the destroyer's seamen and stokers were fighting like maniacs, giving no quarter at all, determined to save the ship and themselves. After a while it looked as though the Germans were retreating: as their commander's megaphone shouts continued, they began jumping back across to the casing, which was slippery with blood, some of which had dripped over from the conning-tower.

Second thoughts were in the air now; the U-boat would probably withdraw and attack from a distance by gunfire. That must spell the end.

Then Cameron remembered something: the grenades. They had been stowed in the ready-use ammunition locker aft, by Number Three gun. They would still be there and there might just be time. He went down the starboard ladder to the iron-deck, ran like lightning towards Number Three gun-mounting, and opened up the ready-use locker. There they were, a box of them, lethal pineapples. As he lifted the box out and clambered back down to the iron-deck he found Tomkins kneeling on a German seaman and struggling to pull his bayonet out from the chest.

Cameron said, 'Leave it, Stripey.'

Tomkins looked up, his face smeared with blood. "'Oo's givin' 'oo orders, then?'

Cameron grinned and said, 'Simple request, that's all. Something more important. How about a coconut shy... down the conning-tower? As many as possible, in as short a time as possible before they get away. Two hands are better than one — right?'

'Right,' Tomkins said, and got to his feet, leaving his rifle and bayonet to sag from the German's rib cage. Together they ran for the wheelhouse and from there into the port wing with its now useless close-range weapons. Here they were almost immediately above the conning-tower: it was just too easy.

'Ready,' Cameron said, and began counting as he released the lever of the first grenade. Tomkins did the same. Both were thrown together, both found that easy, impossible-to-miss target. One landed in the conning-tower itself, the other fell straight through the hatch into the U-boat's control-room. Before the first two had exploded, four more had gone down. The results were horrible: the conning-tower looked as though a bacon slicer had been at work, strips of bloody flesh hanging everywhere. Below it must have been far worse. Smoke came up through the hatch, and with it the death screams of mangled men. Somewhere, an electrical fire had probably started. It was highly unlikely that the U-boat would be able to submerge until the fires had been dealt with.

Tomkins said as much, in tones of awe. 'Poor soddin' Nazi bastards! They'll fry. I reckon they've had it good an' proper now. Won't have done the periscope much good an' all, eh?'

'I rather think not, Stripey. Nor the circuits. I think we can call it a victory.' Cameron, now in cover behind the mangled metal of the destroyer's control tower, took a cautious look down to the iron-deck. Farrow's hands were in full control and the deck was littered with bodies. The U-boat was bumping the side plating and lurching about as though she was no longer under command. Cameron said, 'Well, that's it. Let's get down.'

He went into the wheelhouse, followed by Tomkins. For the first time Tomkins seemed to realize that there was no one else present and he asked, 'Where's the skipper, then, eh?'

Cameron pointed. 'There, Stripey. And the Cox'n.'

'Strewth!' Tomkins appeared shaken as he saw the bodies. "'Oo did the orders come from, then?'

Cameron said quietly, 'Someone had to give them.'

'You, eh?' Tomkins screwed up his eyes. 'Bloody little OD, makin' out 'e's the skipper! Just you wait till that Matthews get to 'ear, then watch out. Cor! Muckin' we ratings... you even said "Cox'n" like a bleedin' officer.' He minced the word; to the lower deck, the Torpedo-Coxswain was customarily the 'Swain. Just one of the differences... Tomkins went down the ladder to the iron-deck, muttering.

Chapter Twelve

The hands remained ready to return any further fire, but no fire came as the U-boat continued lurching against the side plating. The remainder of the grenades were ready too, ready to be lobbed across if the need should arise. From the compass platform Farrow could see that the conning-tower hatch was open still — it looked as though its closing mechanism had been fouled up by the first of the grenades. Netting had been rigged over it to prevent the ingress of more grenades but Farrow didn't reckon that would help the Jerries much; it could be blown away, he thought. As he looked down, he saw the kerfuffle starting below the U-boat's counter; the main engines were turning over and she was bugging off at last.

That was something; it remained to be seen whether she could use her surface armament, her gun. With any luck, the firing circuits would be out of action... but even so, she could probably still fire by local control.

Hearing a step behind him, Farrow turned. Matthews had come to the compass platform. The Engineer Officer looked sour. He said, 'I'm taking over command, Farrow. It's my entitlement.'

'Very good, sir.'

'You'll obey my orders or you'll face trouble.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Don't sound so damn defiant!' Matthews said loudly.

'I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to.'

Matthews, breathing hard, swung away, then swung back again. 'As Damage Control Officer, I know the ship inside out, know her capabilities. In this situation, that's what counts, right?'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Any fool can be a seaman especially in a ship without power.’

Farrow held on to his temper and said, ‘It’s a matter of opinion, is that, sir.’ He wanted to smash a fist into the Lieutenant (E)’s face but that would never do. ‘The hands haven’t done all that badly, sir. Ordinary Seaman Cameron —’

‘Yes, quite. That lad’s in for trouble, Farrow. He passed orders as from the Captain, who was dead. Those orders resulted in a good many men being killed — my ERAs and stokers among them. That’s something you have to answer for as well and I give you fair warning you’ll do so.’

‘Very good, sir.’ Matthews was in a foul mood, a highly dangerous and far from sane mood in Farrow’s opinion, but something had to be said and Farrow said it. ‘Ordinary Seaman Cameron, sir. Maybe he did exceed himself... but I reckon he’s saved what’s left of the ship, sir. He crippled the U-boat, sir, him and Tomkins between them —’

‘That’s enough, Farrow.’ Matthews was shaking.

‘Yes, sir. And I intend to state all that, sir, to Captain (D) when we get back to base.’

Matthews’ fists clenched. ‘Get below, Farrow. Get below before I lose my temper. When you’re wanted, you’ll be sent for.’

*

When the U-boat had pulled away clear, which was shortly after Farrow had been ordered below, she went into action with her gun. The aim was poor, and the shell went well over. After that, there was no more firing. Farrow believed that the gun had probably jammed. Whatever it was, the end came suddenly and spectacularly: the U-boat blew up, torpedoes and all, a tremendous blast that sent shock waves ringing through the destroyer. Brilliant flame, red, white and orange, lit the area like day for a brief while

after which even the moon seemed to have lost its brilliance. The hands on deck stared in awe.

Farrow said, 'They won't have known much about it.' His guess was that the electrics, damaged by the grenade explosions, had caused further fires. Those fires had reached some vital part, maybe a torpedo warhead. Anyway, it was one U-boat less to harry the convoys and it could be chalked up to young Cameron, whose idea it had been. Farrow grinned to himself: U-boat destruction by grenade was a damn sight cheaper than using depth charges, less of a strain on the munitions factories, but it was never likely to happen again, not in this war. The Nazis would have learned a lesson now, if the facts ever penetrated back to the Fatherland: never put your boat alongside anything that still floated, no matter how beaten it appeared to be. Adolf Hitler would be biting a few carpets when he heard, and taking it out on Grand Admiral Raeder, the bastard. In the meantime, the old *Carmarthen* could settle back into her new routine, the routine of being closeted out of sight below in the wardroom flat. That, and waiting for the base staff to pull their fingers out and send a tow. Farrow spared a thought for Lieutenant (E) Matthews, solitary on the compass platform or more likely in the wheelhouse. He had a word with Cameron, a word of warning of what might come when they made port.

'I wouldn't worry too much, though,' he said. 'The Navy doesn't come down too hard on success, never mind how it's brought about.' He paused. 'Initiative... that's part of Officer-Like Qualities, isn't it?'

Cameron smiled. 'So they say!'

'They say right, Lofty.' Farrow laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. 'You'll make out all right, and it'll take more than Matthews to stop you.'

*

Now that Lavington had gone, the atmosphere in the ward-room flat was a

good deal easier. Carrying a virtually condemned man, a murderer, had cast a blight; Lavington had indeed been a Jonah. Yet the fact of the Engineer Officer's sour-tempered reactions, and his taking over the command, affected the ship's company in various ways that could lead to renewed tension. There was argument as to whether or not Matthews was entitled to take over. True, he was, apart from the Surgeon-Lieutenant, the only officer left, and that presumably gave him some rights. But the belief among the seamen at any rate was that when all executive officers were dead, the command devolved upon the senior lower deck rating of the seaman branch, which was Leading-Seaman Farrow, who happened to be a good hand and a popular one, one who carried authority well and didn't chuck his weight about unduly. Engineers were all very well, but they weren't seamen and didn't think and react as seamen; they had a job to distinguish port from starboard, said some. Tomkins was one of these; and Tomkins was incensed that his and Cameron's grenade-throwing efforts had come in for criticism because they hadn't been authorized by an officer.

'Black gang bleeders,' he said bitterly as he lit a fag. 'Useless lot, they just don't savvy. Me and me mate did the job an' that's wot counts, ain't it, eh?'

Farrow grinned to himself: *me and me mate...* quite a change, was that! Tomkins had accepted Cameron now; they'd done a job together and it looked as though they might both go down in naval history, for what they had done was certainly unprecedented. The night, what was left of it, passed amid a bedlam of snores from weary men. At a little after 0800, when the officers' cook was preparing the breakfasts, the sound-powered telephone whined from the wheelhouse. Tomkins answered.

'Wardroom flat, sir. Able-Seaman Tomkins.'

'Send Leading-Seaman Farrow to the compass platform,' came Matthews' voice, followed by a bang as the receiver was replaced. Farrow, who was

asleep, was woken and went straight up.

‘Ah, Leading-Seaman Farrow.’ Matthews looked frozen, and was throwing his arms about his body in an attempt to find some warmth: compass platforms were less comfortable than engine-rooms, Farrow thought uncharitably. ‘First, burial of the dead.’ Matthews stared around vaguely, as though looking for the bodies of Seymour and the Torpedo-Coxswain; they had been taken below immediately after the action against the U-boat and were lying in the tiller flat aft of the wardroom. ‘Hands to muster at four bells and I shall read the religious service.’

‘Aye, aye, sir.’

‘Next, I intend to pump out aft. Or try to. Not pump exactly — that’s not possible. Bale.’

‘Bale, sir?’

‘That’s what I said, Leading-Seaman Farrow. Bale. By hand.’

‘Bale out the after magazines, sir?’ Farrow stood there amazed.

‘Yes. We’ll ride easier when that’s been done, in my opinion. We’re far too waterlogged at the moment and with the main shafts out of line there’s no point in keeping the screws under. We’ll make a start immediately after the committals.’

Farrow sucked his teeth. It would take a bloody week, and it seemed wholly pointless except as an exercise to keep the hands occupied, which might be sensible perhaps. From a stability point of view... well, they’d ridden out one storm with the stern down and hadn’t done so badly. Any interference with the trim might have unfortunate results, but Lieutenant (E) Matthews, who could be presumed to know something about trim and stability, had spoken and that was that.

*

Once again, the dreadful duty of committing bodies to the deep; and this

time the corpses, sewn into their canvas shrouds, floated alongside the stationary destroyer's decks and by some hideous quirk would not move away; nor, even with the firebars sewn into the canvas at their feet, would they sink. Air, trapped in the canvas, kept them afloat. Feet down, there they remained, heads and torsos moving sluggishly to the slight scend of the Atlantic.

'Bring a rifle,' Matthews ordered. When the rifle was brought he sent several clips of .303 ammunition into the corpses and after that they slowly disappeared. The shots had scattered the seagulls, come as usual to scavenge amongst the 'gash' thrown overboard from the wardroom pantry, but they were soon back, wheeling and crying. Farrow looked at them sardonically; like the albatrosses of the Southern Ocean, maybe they bore the souls of mariners dead and gone and couldn't keep away from ships.

The bodies disposed of, the long business of baling-out the flooded after spaces was put in hand. As the magazine was opened up, Farrow drew Matthews' attention to the western horizon.

'There's a change coming in the weather, sir.' The customary menacing line of black was forming, low down as yet but increasing, and there was a curious oiliness on the sea, too flat a calm for Farrow's peace of mind.

'Then the hands'll work the faster,' Matthews said.

'Aye, aye, sir. But if —'

'Just get on with it, will you?' Matthews ordered testily. Farrow turned away and got on with it; there was no option, but he believed that if the stern was allowed to lift again, then the coming wind might use it, as it were, to drive the sunken stem down farther into the water. They'd been riding well enough; better to leave it. But Matthews seemed obsessed with the idea — Farrow thought — that he must reverse everything that Mr Seymour had done, Mr Seymour who was at this moment somewhere below them,

spiralling down in the Atlantic wastes, Mr Seymour who'd been determined to get the old ship back to base. Matthews, he hadn't quite the same determination; he'd wanted to chuck it in earlier, the bastard. Farrow wouldn't forget that.

As the distant black loomed higher, chains of men, seamen and stokers together plus the daymen, a case of all hands, lifted water from the magazine shaft in buckets, balers, galley saucepans, leather charge cases, anything that would hold water for tipping back into the sea. Under the sour-tempered lash of Matthews' voice, they worked hard. At least it kept out the bitter cold and that was something. But their labours appeared to have no effect on the trim of the wallowing hull, and the Engineer Officer's mood grew worse.

'If anything,' he said to Farrow, 'she's going deeper.'

'Seems like she is, sir. Could be the tiller flat's leaking, sir.'

'Oh, rubbish, everything's tight down there, has been ever since we sounded round after leaving that merchant ship.'

'Worth checking again, sir?'

Matthews breathed hard down his nose. 'Oh, all right, send a man down.'

Farrow called up Cameron, told him off to check right aft. On his way below, Cameron met Chief Stoker Peters: the Chief Stoker had made his own investigation of the tiller flat which was undoubtedly flooding through a sprung plate. 'God knows how *that* happened,' he said, sounding professionally aggrieved, 'unless something was shifted while we were being bashed about and it's just worsened.'

He reported to Matthews. 'I'll do what I can to caulk it, sir. I'll need some hands below.'

'Right you are,' Matthews agreed. 'Take 'em from Farrow's party. And be as quick as you can, Chief. That weather's closing in. We can't afford to be put further down in the water.'

The work continued, above and below decks; there was a real urgency now to get as much water as possible out of the ship before bad weather struck yet again. With the tiller flat flooding, the position had changed. Farrow was gloomy, and confided as much in Cameron and Tomkins. A lot was going to be up to them, he said. Stripey Tomkins was about the most experienced seaman rating now left, and Cameron had proved himself to be quick thinking and not prone to panic.

‘I’ll be relying on you two,’ Farrow said. ‘Don’t let me down.’

It was soon after this that the full force of the weather hit them; Farrow estimated the wind at Force Ten. The White Ensign, still bravely flying from the ensign staff, cracked several times like a whip and then stood out as though starched, held like a board by the shrieking, tempestuous gale. The sky was black with heavy, low cloud and such visibility as remained was further cut by the blown spindrift that lay across the breaking crests. Water boiled along *Carmarthen’s* decks and the baling-out of the flooded after spaces was at once suspended by Farrow without waiting for orders from Matthews. There was a sound like thunder as one wave after another, waves that seemed to be growing larger every minute, smashed into the base of the superstructure and broke in spray that covered the compass platform and the wheelhouse ports and sent its sting aft to lash the men still on deck. Farrow’s voice roared out, ordering all hands back to the wardroom flat; they could serve no useful purpose now.

As Matthews fought his way for’ard to the wheelhouse, Farrow made for Chief Stoker Peters in the tiller flat aft.

‘Need any more hands, Chief?’ he asked.

Peters shook his head. ‘Thanks, I’ve got enough.’ He was slopping about in a foot of water. ‘It’s not men I need now, it’s new stern plating and a D2 bloody refit in Pompey!’

*

In the operations room at the Rosyth Naval base more convoys were indicated on the plot by now: the next westbound and the next eastbound, with their escorts who would change from the one to the other as the westbound convoy passed into the 'safe' zone and the eastbound one left it.

The name *Carmarthen* wasn't there any more among the escorts; she had been presumed lost and already she was past history, her place now taken by one of the four-stackers, the elderly United States Navy boats handed to Britain under the Lend-Lease agreements, weird-looking craft but more than welcome and, so it was said with tongue in cheek, capable of ten knots on each funnel, a statement that landsmen found no reason to doubt. HMS *Pennsylvania* was there instead of *Carmarthen*, though this was a fact that Mary Anstey simply refused to accept. Each time she saw *Pennsylvania*'s name, it was to her *Carmarthen* as it had been in the last convoy-escort pattern. Crazy, perhaps; but she had an inner feeling that to admit the destroyer's loss to herself would in some way ensure that it *would* be lost and somehow she had a strong belief that *Carmarthen* was still afloat somewhere out there in the wild Atlantic gale. That gale was already sweeping in across Northern Ireland and into the Firth of Clyde; according to the reports, it was a bad one, the worst for many years. For the convoys soon to depart, this was good enough news, of course; but Mary's mind was not on the convoys. If only the Naval Command didn't assume a loss so readily... if only there was a better availability of ocean-going tugs... if only there were more long-range aircraft, such as Goering had at his command... there were so many 'if onlys' about this war. There was another: if only she and Donald Cameron had managed to see more of each other when they had both been in Portsmouth. She'd heard it said that the dead go fast when they hadn't had a long time to become deeply known and she was finding it something of an effort to recall

the set of his face... she forced the thought down and away. She mustn't think in terms of death. *Carmarthen* would come through if she kept faith.

That afternoon, with twenty-four hours off duty, Mary took the train into Edinburgh. As the train left Inverkeithing and passed on to the Forth bridge, the battleship *Rodney* was coming in, and as she approached the bridge a single shaft of sunlight, thinly breaking for a moment through the overcast, lit upon the nine great sixteen-inch guns in their triple turrets for'ard of the superstructure, and upon her ship's company fallen in fore and aft for entering harbour, with the Cable Officer standing motionless in the eyes of the ship ready to bring her to her buoy off Rosyth dockyard once the order came from the compass platform to send away the buoy-jumper. With the battleship were her escorting destroyers and astern of her the elderly county-class cruiser *Norfolk* with her high freeboard and thin, raked funnels, a gracious lady from the past. Mary's eyes filled with sudden tears as the warships passed in solemn state below the great dark-grey span of the bridge and from below a bugle-call rang out, sounding clear above the rattle of the train.

They were all one Navy, with the same unvarying basic routine from ship to ship: dawn action stations, change of watches, hands fall in, breakfast, stand easy, Up Spirits, hands to dinner... all the way through to dusk action stations and Pipe Down. There was a security about sameness, like the Church of England's matins and evensong; wherever in the world you found an English church, you found the comforting familiarity of the unchanging order of service. Ships were the same.

For no real reason, she felt cheered by the sight of the ships below, passing from danger and foul weather into the port's safety.

*

Every plate, every rivet seemed to be straining its guts out to keep the

Carmarthen afloat, almost as though she were a wounded animal, facing death but filled with a determination to die in home surroundings. The wardroom flat was a cheerless place, a place of no hope despite the best efforts of Leading-Seaman Farrow and Stripey Tomkins, who was now proving a tower of strength. From some recess in his bulky clothing, Tomkins had brought out a mouth-organ. His repertoire was limited, but adequate. He played 'Tipperary', 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', 'Roll Out The Barrel', and then went into sundry hymn tunes to which generations of British seamen had put words never dreamed of by the clergy. Tomkins got them all singing, but not for long. The future was much too bleak, as were the current discomforts. And Lieutenant (E) Matthews, sod him, used the sound-powered telephone every few minutes to ask about the tiller flat — his line to Chief Stoker Peters had, it seemed, packed up on him. Able-Seaman Tomkins, interrupted in his mouth-organ playing for the hundredth time, grew bitter.

'Pity this soddin' line doesn't pack it in an' all,' he said as he banged the telephone down. 'I don't know what bloody use 'e is up there, buggered if I do.'

'What is it this time?' Cameron asked.

Tomkins wiped the back of a hand across his lips. 'There's a ship in sight and 'e don't know what it is. Comin' up from the west, visible jus' now and again like.' He called out to Farrow, passing the report. Farrow moved fast for the ladder and the hatch and Cameron went up behind him. Emerging on to the quarterdeck, now lower than ever in the water, they stared out towards the west. Their world seemed bounded by the great rearing waves and the breaking crests; from aft no ship could be seen in those heaving, spindrift-filled waters.

Farrow said, 'Come up to the wheelhouse, Lofty. Two pairs of eyes are better than one.'

In the wheelhouse they found the Engineer Officer slumped like a zombie against a bulkhead. Matthews said, 'You took your time, didn't you?'

'Sorry, sir. I looked around from aft first, sir. Didn't see anything.'

'Well, look now, then. Here.' Matthews handed over his binoculars and indicated the bearing. Farrow took a long look; two masts and a funnel were occasionally visible as the unknown vessel rose to a sea.

Farrow said, 'I don't know, sir. She's a merchantman, that's all I can say. Can't see her flag, sir.'

'Cameron? You reckon to be an officer, I'm told. See what you can make of her.'

'Aye, aye, sir.' Cameron took the binoculars, found the vessel, and steadied the glasses on her. He said, 'I agree with Leading-Seaman Farrow, sir. And I can't see a flag either.' He paused. 'She could be a stray from another convoy — or she could be one of our armed merchant cruisers, I suppose, sir.'

'That's what I thought,' Matthews said. 'On the other hand, she could be a bloody Hun surface raider... one of the converted merchantmen.'

'Right, sir,' Farrow said.

'So what do we do? That's the question now, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir,' Farrow said again. There were the two alternatives in his view: one was simply to hope not to be seen — and it was highly unlikely they would be, in fact — and let the ship go; the other was to attract the attention of her Officer of the Watch by signal or rocket. Either way was a risk. To let a British or allied ship pass by would be bloody hard; but to attract a Jerry would mean the end. 'I reckon we'd do better to wait, sir,' Farrow said. 'Wait till she closes and we get a better look.'

'Is she closing?'

'I fancy she is, sir, yes.'

'Uh-huh.' Matthews brought himself upright and moved across the lurching

wheelhouse, grabbing for handholds. He looked sick, dead weary, at the end of his tether. 'All right then, we wait. On the other hand...'

'Yes, sir?'

'Heroics are finished. That part's over and done with, all right?'

'I'm not sure what you mean, sir,' Farrow said. He sounded uneasy. In his opinion the fight wasn't over yet, at any rate the fight against the sea. Let them remain afloat, let the weather improve, and they could make it yet with a bit of luck. But Matthews?

'I mean what I said, damn you!' Matthews snapped. 'We can't fight anyway, whether we want to or not. That's out and we all know it. That ship...'

'Yes, sir?'

'If she's a German, the worst that could happen would be that we'd be taken prisoner for the duration. The way things are now, we're probably going to drown. Either that, or be finished off by bombs once the weather clears enough for the FWs to have another go at us. That's not good enough. If you ask me, it's just plain daft.'

'The Captain —'

'The Captain, Leading-Seaman Farrow, if you mean Hewson or Seymour, is dead. I'm in command now.'

'Very good, sir. But as the senior seaman rating left, sir, I'd like to ask a question,' Farrow said doggedly. 'And it's this: do you intend to attract that ship's notice, sir, whether she's British or neutral or German... and kind of see what happens?' He paused. 'Because —'

'Because nothing. You'll do precisely as I say, Leading-Seaman Farrow, and remember you're a rating.' Matthews lurched back across the wheelhouse, his eyes blazing in the fading light. Cameron noted that the Engineer Officer's hands were shaking badly, that his whole body seemed to

be in a fit of the tremors. His look was wild, far from reassuring in one who had said he was in command. 'I have the welfare of the ship's company to consider — their lives, man, don't you understand that? It's not for me to sacrifice them for nothing — nor you nor anybody else!'

'In my view, sir,' Farrow began stolidly, 'I —'

'To hell with your view.'

'I'm going to say it nevertheless, sir. In my view, to bring a German vessel towards us would be an act of surrender. I don't believe there's any of us would go along with that, sir. Not when we've come so far.'

'The vessel,' Matthews snapped, sensibly enough, 'could be British, couldn't it?'

'Yes, sir. We have to try to make sure first, sir. That's why I suggested waiting.'

'While the light goes, and we can't bloody well see her? Is that what you suggest?'

'There's time yet, sir. We aren't going to lose the light yet, sir. Meanwhile, she's closing.' Farrow was looking through the binoculars again, frowning over them as he studied the silhouette each time the vessel rose to view above the gale-lashed waves. The wind howled eerily around the superstructure, like the voice of clustering devils out to send them to the depths. Farrow could understand the dilemma Matthews found himself in; lives were always a heavy responsibility, but in the exigencies of war an escort destroyer must be considered the more vital: escorts were so desperately short and the convoys with their troops and supplies so badly in need of such protection as could be given them. The old *Carmarthen* could live to fight yet, if only she could be found by friendly hands and brought safely to port. She was badly damaged, certainly, but there was nothing a dockyard refit couldn't put right, Farrow believed, and believed truly. She couldn't be abandoned to be sunk

by Nazi guns and Farrow wasn't going to be a party to any surrender. Mr Seymour had intended to bring the destroyer in; and Mr Seymour had said something that had at first puzzled him but which had since begun to make sense. Mr Seymour hadn't wanted that Matthews to give in to the bloody Nazis. What he had said, it had been like his last will and testament.

Well, then!

Maybe he was obtuse, maybe he was over concerned with Mr Seymour's intentions as last known, maybe many things. But he'd been a good few years in the Navy and he was a tenacious man. And when recognition came to Leading-Seaman Farrow, recognition that the ship coming in from the west was a German surface raider, a former merchant ship that was probably returning home after harrying the South Atlantic shipping routes with her six-inch guns, he knew beyond doubt what he had to do.

Chapter Thirteen

‘German?’ Matthews repeated. ‘You’re sure?’

Farrow handed over the binoculars. ‘See for yourself, sir.’

Matthews focused. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, she’s German, all right. You’re aware of my views, Farrow.’

‘I am, sir, yes.’

‘Right.’ Matthews was still shaking and his face was an unhealthy colour. He licked at dry lips and looked away from Farrow’s accusing eyes. ‘I’m acting for the best.’

‘I don’t think you are, sir.’

‘I wasn’t asking you.’

‘No, sir. I believe we can get her home, sir. We’re sure to be found before long... we’re not far off the convoy routes, can’t be.’

Matthews said, ‘That’s as may be, Farrow. I’m now ordering you to make contact with that German ship. You’ll fire rockets, until she alters towards us, all right?’

‘No, sir. I’ll not do that, sir.’

‘I repeat my order,’ Matthews said in a stony voice.

‘I’m sorry, sir.’

The Engineer Officer turned to Cameron. ‘You heard that, lad. You’re a witness to an act of mutiny, all right?’

Cameron made no response to this; Farrow spoke again. He said, ‘There’s no mutiny in my mind, sir, none at all. I’m just not going to see surrender, that’s all. If Cameron’s a witness to anything, it’s to the fact you wanted to ditch the ship, sir.’

Matthews' face had gone a deathly white and he seemed to be having difficulty with his breathing. He began to mouth incoherent words, and spittle ran down his unshaven chin. Then, suddenly, he seemed to crumple. He put his head in his hands and staggered backwards. Farrow caught him before he fell. 'That's it, then,' Farrow said. 'Go down and fetch the Surgeon-Lieutenant, Lofty.'

*

Wallowing so low in the heavy seas, *Carmarthen* remained unseen as the enemy vessel passed them to the north and faded into the approaching night. But a little before the next day's dawn, heavy gunfire was heard distantly, and then an almighty explosion, the flames of which lit the northern horizon for many minutes before they died away.

'Convoy under attack,' Tomkins said. 'Probably that bleedin' raider.' U-boats wouldn't mount an attack in the current weather conditions. Over the next hour gunfire was heard almost continually: there was quite a battle in progress, and it ended in another violent explosion with more flames to light the sky. Speculation proliferated: how many ships would have gone? Why had that last explosion ended the gunfire — had the convoy escorts managed to get in under those six-inch guns and sink the German? Such ships were certainly vulnerable enough, with their high freeboards and unprotected hulls. They didn't, in fact, normally attack escorted convoys, preferring to hunt for the lone ship or the straggler. Yet on this occasion the raider must have been lying in wait for an unexpected target, the passage of the convoy. Uneasily, *Carmarthen's* company awaited the dawn, fearing what they might find: survivors, most probably, wounded men beyond their reach. It would come hard, not being able to help. The faces of the men were blank from sheer weariness; there had been little sleep and no release at all from tension for so long. As for Matthews, he was lying wrapped in a blanket on some pillows

placed on the wardroom pantry's servery; the cabins were still occupied by the burns cases and the deck still held its surging slop of seawater. Matthews was securely lashed with rope against the destroyer's lurching movement and he lay with his eyes open but his face expressionless, saying nothing but looking haunted by his thoughts. Farrow, in the wheelhouse with Cameron, was now indisputably in charge. Cameron asked what was likely to happen in regard to his refusal of Matthews' order.

'When we get home, Lofty?' Farrow scratched his chin and gave a harsh laugh. 'I don't reckon much is going to happen, somehow. There's only you and me — and Matthews — knows, eh? It'll all come out in the wash — you'll see!'

'How?'

Farrow laughed again and said, 'Me, I don't want to be charged with mutiny. Matthews won't want it known that he was meaning to hand over to the Jerries. Nothing'll be said at all. And I've already had a word, quiet like, with the doctor. He's going to say Matthews wasn't fit to exercise command even in his own engine-room. He was right on breaking point, was Mr Matthews.'

'So —'

'So you needn't bother your arse about it, Lofty. All right?'

Cameron nodded, much relieved. He was well aware he had been placed in a potentially tricky situation. To have had to give evidence against Farrow at a Court Martial would have gone strongly against the grain; to have had to give evidence against an officer might have prejudiced his chances of a commission — the armed forces were in many ways curious institutions, class-structured and rigid to the point at which to acquire notoriety however blamelessly could count against promotion. He was about to speak again when there was an exclamation from Farrow, who was staring northwards

through his binoculars.

‘It’s a bloody cruiser! Sod me if it’s not the old *Emerald*... I did a commission up the straits in her years ago.’ Farrow left the wheelhouse at the rush and climbed to the compass platform. Cameron followed. The cruiser, scarcely visible to the naked eye through the filthy weather, appeared to be turning to the east. Farrow, using his binoculars again, reported the ships of the westbound convoy in sight now. Handing the glasses to Cameron, he took up a battery-fed Aldis, climbed fast to the compass platform, and began flashing the general call-sign towards the *Emerald*. To Cameron he said, ‘Get on the phone, Lofty. Have a bunting-tosser sent up pronto. I’m no bloody signalman!’ Before the signalman had reached the compass platform, *Emerald*’s acknowledgement was seen. *Carmarthen*’s pennant numbers were flashed across to her and inside three minutes Farrow, through his glasses, saw the cruiser’s stem swing round to starboard.

He gave a whistle of relief: she was coming in.

The *Emerald* swept up to them, cutting through the heavy seas and flinging great gouts of water back from her bows. The signal lamps grew busy; *Emerald* would stand by until the weather moderated enough for a tow to be passed. When the towing pendant was sent across, back-up hands would also be sent and these would include a shipwright’s party to help seal leaking plates. Medical assistance would be provided and the sick taken off to the cruiser’s sick-bay if necessary. The cruiser’s captain added words of congratulation: *Carmarthen*’s depleted company had achieved a near miracle. She would be brought back to the UK if it was the last thing the Navy ever did. Relevant news was also passed by lamp: the German raider had despatched three ships of the westbound convoy before being sunk herself by the destroyer escort. *Emerald* had been in the vicinity on patrol and had heard the gunfire, but had arrived too late to add the weight of her armament to the

battle. She was now proceeding to Rosyth, which was where *Carmarthen* would be taken.

*

Six days later *Carmarthen* was approaching May Island off the Firth of Forth. Once in safe waters, *Emerald* had broken wireless silence to send her report ahead. That report included the names of the survivors. Almost disbelievingly by now, Mary Anstey saw the name *Carmarthen* appear again on the plot in the operations room. The news had already swept the dockyard and the Navy was jubilant; and it was not long before the officers and men and the dockyard mateys were able to give exuberant voice to their feelings.

As *Carmarthen* passed under tow beneath the great bridge, the cheering started; as she was turned off the dockyard to be handed over to the care of the tugs for placement between camels — big deep-draught floating pontoons that would be pumped out to act as lifts — the whole yard went mad. Mary Anstey was there with the rest, her face tear-stained. It wasn't entirely with relief and joy: there was the worry that Donald Cameron mightn't be as delighted to see her as she would be to see him. The possibility had to be faced. In any case, his qualifying sea-time for his commission was just about finished now. He wouldn't be long in Rosyth.

*

After the wounded men had been brought ashore the dock-yard took over and the ship's company was marched to the depot ship to be accommodated prior to entraining for Portsmouth barracks and re-draft after leave. Until the fresh draft chits came through from the Drafting Master-at-Arms in Pompey, those that were left would remain together, then they would go their separate ways and might never meet again.

Cameron took his leave of the ship with real regret: his first ship, brought to safe harbour after much ordeal and bloodshed. He would never forget her;

nor would he forget the men he'd shared the ordeal with, particularly Farrow and Stripey Tomkins. On arrival aboard the depot ship, various matters were sorted out. Nothing was going to be said about mutiny or a wish to surrender, just as Farrow had forecast; and Matthews was removed to hospital for observation. Ordinary Seaman Lavington was not so easily disposed of, even though he had been killed: his victims had had families, after all. And nothing on God's earth could prevent the ship's company talking about what had taken place out in the Atlantic.

The staff officer who had taken the reports from Matthews and Farrow had a brief word in Cameron's ear afterwards.

He said, 'If you're worried about your Captain's recommendation, don't be. It'll go through even though he's been lost. From what I've heard you showed all the right qualities for a commission, and I've no doubt at all you'll get it — I'll be having a word with the Admiral as soon as possible, and you can take it you'll be drafted to Portsmouth for the Admiralty board.' The staff officer grinned. 'It must surely be the first time in history that a U-boat's been blown up by an ordinary seaman with a hand-grenade!'

*

Mary Anstey had her ear to the ground and was outside the dockyard gates when, twenty-four hours later, after a weary ship's company had almost slept the clock round, local overnight leave was piped for the men ex-*Carmarthen*. Cameron saw the WRNS uniform; he had to look twice before he recognized Mary, since he hadn't expected her to be in Rosyth, *Carmarthen's* mail having not yet been sent down from Scapa, but he was pleased to see her. He said as much, and she smiled in relief.

He said, 'We've got just tonight, that's all. I'm for Pompey tomorrow.'

'I know. What shall we do?'

'How about Edinburgh?'

She fiddled with the black silk bow of his uniform jumper, the black silk worn in perpetual mourning for Nelson. ‘What about a film in Inverkeithing?’

‘What’s on?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Some old pre-war thing, I expect. Does it matter?’

He grinned. ‘Not in the back row. All right, come on, then.’

They went to a cinema and Cameron was quite unconscious of what was showing. He didn’t see it; all he could see was *Carmarthen*’s lurching, half-under decks and the gun-flashes and the dead faces, and the imagined carnage in the U-boat after the grenades had been thrown. That, and Lavington and, in his mind’s eye, the opening up of *Carmarthen*’s fo’c’sle messdecks and the retrieval of the submerged bodies. When the film ended he realized he must have been a disappointing companion and so he remained for the rest of their evening together; he hadn’t the stomach, yet, for socializing. The bloody awful war kept obtruding.

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