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South by Java Head

Alistair MacLean

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Аннотация

The 50th anniversary edition of this classic World War 2 adventure set in south-east Asia.February, 1942: Singapore lies burning and shattered, defenceless before the conquering hordes of the Japanese Army, as the last boat slips out of the harbour into the South China Sea. On board are a desperate group of people, each with a secret to guard, each willing to kill to keep that secret safe.Who or what is the dissolute Englishman, Farnholme? The elegant Dutch planter, Van Effen? The strangely beautiful Eurasian girl, Gudrun? The slave trader, Siran? The smiling and silent Nicholson who is never without his gun? Only one thing is certain: the rotting tramp steamer is a floating death trap, carrying a cargo of human TNT.Dawn sees them far out to sea but with the first murderous dive bombers already aimed at their ship. Thus begins an ordeal few are to survive, a nightmare succession of disasters wrought by the hell-bent Japanese, the unrelenting tropical sun and by the survivors themselves, whose hatred and bitterness divides them one against the other.Written after the acclaimed and phenomenally successful HMS Ulysses and The Guns of Navarone, this was MacLean's third book, and it contains all the hallmarks of those other two classics. Rich with stunning visual imagery, muscular narrative power, brutality, courage and breathtaking excitement, the celebration of the 50th anniversary of

South by Java Head offers readers a long-denied chance to enjoy one of the greatest war novels ever written.

Содержание

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

South by Java Head

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To Ian

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ONE

Choking, dense, impenetrable, the black smoke lay pall-like over the dying city. Every building, every office-block and house, the intact and the bomb-shattered alike, was invested by it, swathed in the dark anonymity of its gently swirling cocoon. Every street, every alley, every dock-side basin was full of it, drowned by it. It lay every-where, sulphurous and evil, scarcely moving in the soft airs of the tropical night.

Earlier in the evening, when the smoke had come only from the burning buildings in the city, there had been wide, irregular gaps overhead and the stars had shone in the empty sky. But a slight change of wind had obliterated these gaps, had brought with it the rolling, blinding oil-smoke from ruptured fuel tanks outside the city. Where the smoke came from, no one knew. Perhaps from the Kallang airport, perhaps from the power station, perhaps clear across the island from the naval base in the north, perhaps from the oil islands, from Pulo Sambo and Pulo Sebarok, four or five miles away. No one knew. All one could know was what one saw, and the blackness of that midnight was almost complete. There was hardly any light now even from the

burning buildings, for these were burnt out and utterly destroyed, the last embers, the last tiny flames flickering to extinction, like the life of Singapore itself.

A dying city, and already the silence of death seemed to have enveloped it. Every now and then a shell would whistle eerily overhead, to splash harmlessly into the water or to erupt in a brief roar of sound and flash of light as it smashed into a building. But the sound and the light, extinguished and smothered in an instant by the all-enveloping smoke, had a peculiarly evanescent quality, seemed a natural, an integral part of the strangeness and the remote unreality of the night and left the silence even deeper and more intense than it had been before. Now and again, out beyond Fort Canning and Pearls Hill, beyond the north-west limits of the city, came the irregular crackle of rifle and machine-gun fire, but that, too, was distant and unreal, a far-off echo in a dream. Everything that night had the same dream-like quality, shadowy and unsubstantial: even those few who still moved slowly through the rubble-strewn and almost deserted streets of Singapore were like the aimless wanderers of a dream, hesitant, listless and unsure, stumbling blindly through the swirling banks of smoke, little figures lost and hopelessly groping through the fog of a nightmare.

Moving slowly, uncertainly through the darkened streets, the small group of soldiers, perhaps two dozen in all, made their way down towards the waterfront like very old, very tired men. They looked like old men, they walked with the faltering steps and

the bowed head and shoulders of old men, but they weren't old men, the eldest of them was not more than thirty: but they were tired, terribly tired, tired to that point of uncaring exhaustion when nothing matters any more and it is easier to keep stumbling along than it is to stop. Tired and sick, wounded and ravaged by disease, their every action was now unthinking, automatic, their conscious minds had all but ceased to function. But complete mental and physical exhaustion carries with it its own blessing, its own drug and anodyne, and the dull, lack-lustre eyes staring emptily down at the ground beneath their trudging feet showed this beyond all doubt: whatever sufferings of the body they still endured, they had at least stopped remembering.

For the moment, at least, they no longer remembered the waking nightmare of the past two months, the privations, the hunger, the thirst, the wounds, the sickness and the fear as the Japanese had driven them down the endless length of the Malayan peninsula, over the now destroyed Johore causeway into the illusory safety of the island of Singapore. They no longer remembered their vanished comrades, the screams as some unsuspecting sentry was butchered in the hostile dark of the jungle, the diabolical yells of the Japanese as they overran hastily prepared defensive positions in that black hour before dawn. They no longer remembered these desperate, suicidal counter-attacks that achieved nothing but a few square yards of land bitterly, uselessly re-won for only a moment of time, afforded them nothing but the sight of the horribly maimed and tortured

bodies of their captured friends and the civilians who had been just that little bit too slow in co-operating with the enemy. They no longer remembered their anger and bewilderment and despair as the last of the Brewster fighters and, latterly, the Hurricanes, had been driven from the skies, leaving them completely at the mercy of the Japanese air force. Even their utter disbelief at the news, five days ago, of the landing of the Japanese troops on the island itself, their bitterness as the carefully nurtured legend, the myth of the impregnability of Singapore, collapsed before their eyes—these, too, had vanished from their memories. They no longer remembered. They were too dazed and sick and wounded and weak to remember. But one day, soon, if they lived, they would remember, and then none of them would ever be the same again. But meantime they just trudged wearily on, eyes down, heads down, not looking where they were going, not caring where they would arrive.

But one man looked and one man cared. He walked along slowly at the head of the double column of men, flicking a torch on and off as he picked a clear way through the debris that littered the street and checked their direction of progress from time to time. He was a small, slightly-built man, the only one in the company who wore a kilt, and a balmoral on his head. Where the kilt had come from only Corporal Fraser knew: he certainly hadn't been wearing it during the retreat south through Malaya.

Corporal Fraser was as tired as any of the others. His eyes, too, were red-rimmed and bloodshot, and his face grey and wasted

with what might have been malaria or dysentery or both. He walked with his left shoulder far higher than the other, hunched up near his ear, as if he suffered from some physical deformity, but it was no deformity, just a rough gauze pad and bandage that a medical orderly had hurriedly stuffed under his shirt earlier in the day in a token attempt to staunch the bleeding from an ugly shrapnel wound. In his right hand he carried a Bren gun, and its weight of twenty-three pounds was almost more than his weakened body could carry: it had the effect of pulling down his right arm and dragging his left shoulder upwards, even nearer his ear.

The one-sided hunch, the balmoral askew on his head, the kilt flapping loosely about his wasted legs, made the little man appear grotesque and ridiculous. But there was nothing grotesque and ridiculous about Corporal Fraser. A Cairngorms shepherd to whom privations and gruelling exertions were of the very stuff of existence, he had yet to tap the last reserves of his will-power and endurance. Corporal Fraser was still very much a going concern as a soldier—the very best type of soldier. Duty and responsibility weighed heavily with him, his own pain and weakness didn't exist, his thoughts were only for the men who stumbled along behind, following him blindly. Two hours ago, the officer commanding their confused and disorganised company on the northern city limits had ordered Fraser to lead all the walking wounded, and those whom they could carry, out of the firing-line and back to some place of relative safety and quiet.

Only a token gesture, the officer had known, and Fraser had known it also, for the last defences were caving in and Singapore was finished. Before the next day was through, every single man on Singapore island would be dead, wounded or prisoner. But orders were orders and Corporal Fraser trudged resolutely on, heading down for the Kallang creek.

Every now and then, when he came to a clear stretch of street, he stepped to one side and let his men file slowly past him. It was doubtful whether any of them as much as saw him, either the very ill men on the stretchers, or the less ill but still sick and wounded men who carried them. And every time Corporal Fraser would have to wait for the last of the party, a tall thin youngster whose head swayed loosely from side to side as he muttered to himself continuously in a rambling and incoherent voice. The young soldier suffered from neither malaria nor dysentery, nor had he been wounded in any way, but he was the sickest of them all. Every time Fraser would seize his arm and hustle him on to catch up with the main party, the boy quickened his pace without protesting, just looked at Corporal Fraser out of incurious eyes that were empty of all recognition: and every time Fraser would look at him hesitantly, shake his head then hurry forwards again until he reached the head of the column.

In a winding, smoke-filled alley, a little boy cried in the darkness. He was only a very little boy, perhaps two and a half years old. He had blue eyes, blond hair and a fair skin all streaked with dirt and tears. He was clad only in a thin shirt and khaki-

coloured haltered shorts: his feet were bare, and he was shivering all the time.

He cried and cried, a lost, anguished wailing in the night, but there was no one there to hear or heed. And no one could have heard him who was more than a few yards away, for he cried very softly, short muffled sobs punctuated by long, quivering indrawn breaths. From time to time he rubbed his eyes with the knuckles of small and grubby fists, as little children will when they are tired or weeping: and with the backs of his hands he tried to rub the pain away, from the black smoke constantly laced a smarting path across the tear filled eyes.

The little boy cried because he was very, very tired, and it was hours past his normal bedtime. He cried because he was hungry and thirsty and shaking with the cold—even a tropical night can be cold. He cried because he was confused and afraid, because he did not know where his home was or where his mother was—he had been with his old *amah*, his Malayan nurse, at a nearby bazaar a fortnight previously and had been too young and unknowing to appreciate the significance of the bombed and burnt-out rubble that awaited their return—and he and his mother had been due to sail out on the *Wakefield*, the last big ship from Singapore, on the same night of that 29th January … But he cried, most of all, because he was alone.

His old nurse, Anna, was half-sitting, half-lying on a pile of rubble beside him, like one lost in sleep. She had been wandering with him for hours through the darkened streets, carrying him in

her arms for the last hour or two, when she had suddenly placed him on the ground, clasped both hands above her heart and sunk to the ground, saying that she must rest. For half an hour now she had been there, motionless, her head resting far over on one shoulder, her eyes wide and unblinking. Once or twice, earlier, the little boy had stooped to touch her, but only once or twice: now he kept away, afraid, afraid to look and afraid to touch, vaguely knowing, without knowing why, that the old nurse's rest would be for a long, long time.

He was afraid to go and afraid to stay, and then he stole another glance, through latticed fingers, at the old woman and he was suddenly more afraid to stay than go. He moved off down the alley, not looking where he was going, stumbling and falling over loose bricks and stones, picking himself up and running on again, all the time sobbing and shivering in the cool night. Near the end of the alley a tall, emaciated figure wearing a tattered straw hat eased himself off the shafts of his rickshaw and reached out to stop the child. The man meant no harm. A sick man himself—most of the consumption-ridden rickshaw coolies of Singapore usually died after five years—he could still feel pity for others, especially little children. But all the little boy saw was a tall menacing figure reaching down out of the gloom: his fear changed to terror, he eluded the outstretched hands and ran out through the mouth of the alley into the deserted street and the darkness beyond. The man made no further movement, just wrapped his night blanket more tightly around himself and

leaned back again against the shafts of his rickshaw.

* * *

Like the little boy, two of the nurses were sobbing quietly as they stumbled along. They were passing by the only building still burning in the business quarter of the town, and they kept their heads averted from the flames, but even so it was possible to see the smooth broad-boned faces and upcurving eyes of their lowered faces. Both were Chinese, people who do not lightly give way to emotion: but both were very young, and both had been sitting very close to the explosion when the shell had blown their Red Cross truck into the ditch near the southern exit of the Bukit Timor road. They were badly shocked, and still very sick and dazed.

Two of the others were Malays. One was young, as young as the two Chinese nurses, and the other was well past middle age. The young one's great, sooty eyes were wide with fear, and she kept glancing nervously over her shoulder as they hurried along. The face of the elderly one was a mask of almost complete indifference. From time to time she tried to protest at the speed with which they were being hurried along, but she was incapable of making herself understood: she, too, had been sitting very close to the blast of the explosion, and the shock had blocked her speech centres, probably only temporarily, although it was too soon to say yet. Once or twice she reached up a hand to try to stop the nurse in the lead, the one who was setting the pace, but the other just removed her hand, gently but firmly enough, and

hurried on again.

The fifth nurse, the one in the lead, was tall, slender and in her middle twenties. She had lost her cap when the explosion had blown her over the tail-board of the truck, and the thick, blue-black hair kept falling down over her eyes. From time to time she swept it back with an impatient gesture, and it was then that one could see that she was neither Malayan nor Chinese—not with those startlingly blue eyes. Eurasian, perhaps, but still definitely not European. In the flickering yellow light it was impossible to see her complexion, the colour of her skin, which was streaked with mud and dust anyway. Even under the caked dust, it was possible to see some kind of long scratch on her left cheek.

She was the leader of the party and she was lost. She knew Singapore, and knew it well, but in the enveloping smoke and darkness she was a stranger lost in a strange city. Somewhere down there on the waterfront, she had been told, there was a party of soldiers, many of whom urgently required attention—and if they didn't get it that night, they would most certainly never get it inside a Japanese prison camp. But with every minute that passed, it looked more and more as if the Japanese would get to them first. The more they twisted and turned through the deserted streets, the more hopelessly lost she became. Somewhere opposite Cape Ru on the Kallang creek she might expect to find them, she had been told: but, as it was, she couldn't even find the waterfront, far less have any idea where Cape Ru lay in the darkness.

Half an hour passed, an hour, and even her own steps began to flag as despair touched her for the first time. They could never find the soldiers, never, not in this endless confusion and darkness. It was desperately unfair of their doctor, Major Blackley, to have expected it of them. And even with the thought the girl knew that it was not Blackley who was unfair but herself: when dawn came on the outskirts of Singapore, the life of neither man nor woman would be worth a moment's purchase—it all depended on what kind of mood the Japanese had been in: she had met them before and had bitter cause to remember the meeting, and scars that would bear witness of that meeting, for the rest of her life. The further away from the Jap's immediate blood-lust the better: besides, as the Major had pointed out, none of them was in a fit state to remain any longer where they were. Unknowingly, almost, the girl shook her head, quickened her pace again and turned off down another dark and empty street.

Fear and dismay, sickness and despair—such were the things that coloured and dominated the entire existences of the wandering band of soldiers, the little boy and the nurses, and tens of thousands of others on that midnight of 14th February, 1942, as the exultant, all-conquering Japanese crouched outside the last defences of the city, waiting for the dawn, waiting for the assault, the bloodbath and the victory that must inevitably come. But for one man at least fear and hurt and despair did not exist.

The tall, elderly man in the candle-lit waiting-room of the offices some way south of Fort Canning was conscious of none

of these things. He was conscious only of the rapid passage of time, of the most overwhelming urgency he had ever known, of the almost inhuman burden of responsibility that lay in his hands alone. He was conscious of these things, consumed by them to the exclusion of all else, yet no trace of them showed in the expressionless calm of the lined, brick-red face beneath the shock of thick white hair. Perhaps the tip of the Burma cheroot that jutted up jauntily past the bristling white moustache and aquiline nose glowed just a little too brightly, perhaps he sat just that little too relaxed in his cane-bottomed armchair, but that was all. To all outward appearances Foster Farnholme, Brigadier-General (Ret.), was at peace with the world.

The door behind him opened and a young, tired-looking sergeant came into the room. Farnholme removed the cheroot from his mouth, turned his head slowly and raised one tufted eyebrow in mute interrogation.

"I've delivered your message, sir." The sergeant sounded as tired as he looked. "Captain Bryceland says he'll be along right away."

"Bryceland?" The white eyebrows met in a bar-straight line across the deep-set eyes. "Who the devil's Captain Bryceland? Look, sonny, I asked, specifically, to see your colonel, and I must see him, immediately. At once. You understand?"

"Perhaps I can be of some help." Another man stood in the doorway now, behind the sergeant. Even in the flickering candle-light it was possible to see the badly bloodshot eyes, the fever-

flush that stained the yellow cheeks, but his soft Welsh voice was civil enough.

"Bryceland?"

The young officer nodded, said nothing.

"You certainly can help," Farnholme nodded. "Your colonel, please, and right away. I haven't a moment to lose."

"I can't do it." Bryceland shook his head. "He's having his first sleep for three days and three nights—and God only knows we're going to need him with us tomorrow morning."

"I know. Nevertheless, I must see him." Farnholme paused, waited until the frenetic hammering of a nearby heavy machine-gun had died away, then went on very quietly, very earnestly. "Captain Bryceland, you can't even begin to guess how vitally important it is that I see your colonel. Singapore is nothing—not compared to my business." He slid a hand beneath his shirt, brought out a black Colt automatic—the heavy .45. "If I have to find him myself, I'll use this and I'll find him, but I don't think I'll need it. Tell your colonel that Brigadier Farnholme is here. He'll come."

Bryceland looked at him for a long moment, hesitated, nodded, then turned away without a word. He was back inside three minutes and stood aside at the doorway to let the man following him precede him into the room.

The colonel, Farnholme guessed, must have been a man of about forty-five—fifty at the most. He looked about seventy, and walked with the swaying, half-inebriated gait of a man who has

lived too long with exhaustion. He had difficulty in keeping his eyes open, but he managed to smile as he walked slowly across the room and extended a courteous hand.

"Good evening, sir. Where in the world have you come from?"

"Evening, Colonel." On his feet now, Farnholme ignored the question. "You know of me, then?"

"I know of you. I heard about you for the first time, sir—just three nights ago."

"Good, good." Farnholme nodded in satisfaction. "That will save a lot of explaining—and I've no time for explanations. I'll come to the point right away." He half-turned as the explosion of a shell landing very close shook the room, the shock wave of displaced air almost blowing the candles out, then looked back at the colonel. "I want a 'plane out of Singapore, Colonel. I don't care what kind of 'plane, I don't care who you've got to shove off to get me on board, I don't care where it's going—Burma, India, Ceylon, Australia—it's all the same to me. I want a 'plane out of Singapore—immediately."

"You want a 'plane out of Singapore." The colonel echoed the words tonelessly, his voice as wooden as the expression on his face, then he suddenly smiled, tiredly, as if the effort had cost him a great deal. "Don't we all, Brigadier."

"You don't understand." Slowly, with a gesture of infinitely controlled patience, Farnholme ground out his cheroot on an ashtray. "I know there are hundreds of wounded and sick, women and children——"

"The last 'plane has already gone," the colonel interrupted flatly. He rubbed a bare forearm across exhausted eyes. "A day, two days ago—I'm not sure."

"11th February," Bryceland supplied. "The Hurricanes, sir. They left for Palembang."

"That's right," the colonel remembered. "The Hurricanes. They left in a great hurry."

"The last plane." Farnholme's voice was empty of all emotion. "The last 'plane. But—but there were others, I know. Brewster fighters, Wildebeestes——"

"All gone, all destroyed." The colonel was watching Farnholme now with some vague curiosity in his eyes. "Even if they weren't, it would make no difference. Seletar, Sembawang, Tengah—the Japs have all these aerodromes. I don't know about Kallang airport—but I do know it's useless."

"I see. I see indeed." Farnholme stared down at the gladstone bag beside his feet, then looked up again. "The flying-boats, Colonel? The Catalinas?"

The colonel shook his head in slow finality. Farnholme gazed at him for long seconds with unwinking eyes, nodded his head in understanding and acceptance, then glanced at his watch. "May I see you alone, Colonel?"

"Certainly." The colonel didn't even hesitate. He waited until the door had closed softly behind Bryceland and the sergeant, then smiled faintly at Farnholme. "I'm afraid the last 'plane has still gone, sir."

"I never doubted it." Farnholme, busy unbuttoning his shirt, paused and glanced up. "You know who I am, Colonel—not just my name, I mean?"

"I've known for three days. Utmost secrecy, and all that—it was thought you might be in the area." For the first time the colonel regarded his visitor with open curiosity. "Seventeen years counter-espionage-chief in South-East Asia, speak more Asiatic languages than any other——"

"Spare my blushes." His shirt unbuttoned, Farnholme was unfastening a wide, flat rubber-covered belt that encircled his waist. "I don't suppose you speak any Eastern languages yourself, Colonel?"

"For my sins, yes. That's why I'm here. Japanese." The colonel grinned mirthlessly. "It'll come in very handy in the concentration camps, I should think."

"Japanese, eh? That's a help." Farnholme unzipped two pouches on the belt, placed their contents on the table before him. "See what you make of these, will you, Colonel?"

The colonel glanced sharply at him, glanced down at the photostats and rolls of film that lay on the table, nodded, went out of the room and returned with a pair of spectacles, a magnifying glass and a torch. For three minutes he sat at the table without looking up or speaking. From outside came the occasional crump of an exploding shell, the staccato chattering of a distant machine-gun and the evil whine of some misshapen ricochet whistling blindly through the smoke-filled night. But no

noise whatsoever came from inside the room itself. The colonel sat at his table like a man carved from stone, only his eyes alive: Farnholme, a fresh cheroot in his mouth, was stretched out in his wicker chair, lost in a seeming vast indifference.

By and by the colonel stirred and looked across at Farnholme. When he spoke both his voice and the hands that held the photostats were unsteady.

"I don't need Japanese to understand these. My God, sir, where did you get them?"

"Borneo. Two of our best men, and two Dutchmen, died to get these. But that's not important now, and quite irrelevant." Farnholme puffed at his cheroot. "All that matters is that I have them and the Japs don't know it."

The colonel didn't seem to have heard him. He was staring down at the papers in his hands, shaking his head slowly from side to side. Finally he laid the papers down on the desk, folded his spectacles away into their case and lit a cigarette. His hands were still trembling.

"This is fantastic," he muttered. "This is quite fantastic. There can only be a few of these in existence. All Northern Australia —blueprints for invasion!"

"Complete in every relevant detail," Farnholme assented. "The invasion ports and airfields, the times to the last minute, the forces to be used down to the last battalion of infantry."

"Yes." The colonel stared down at the photostats, his brows wrinkling. "But there's something that——"

"I know, I know," Farnholme interrupted bitterly. "We haven't got the key. It was inevitable. The dates and primary and secondary objectives are in code. They couldn't take the risk of having these in plain language —and Japanese codes are unbreakable, all of them. All of them, that is, except to a little old man in London who looks as if he couldn't write his own name." He paused and puffed some more blue smoke into the air. "Still, It's quite something, isn't it, Colonel?"

"But—but how did you happen to get——"

"That's quite irrelevant, I've told you." The steel below was beginning to show through the camouflage of lazy indifference. He shook his head, then laughed softly. "Sorry, Colonel. Must be getting edgy. There was no 'happen' about it, I assure you. I've worked for five years on one thing and one thing only—to get these delivered to me at the right time and the right place: the Japanese are not incorruptible. I managed to get them at the right time: not at the right place. That's why I'm here."

The colonel hadn't even been listening. He had been staring down at the papers, shaking his head slowly from side to side, but now he looked up again. All at once his face was haggard and defeated and very old.

"These papers—these papers are priceless, sir." He lifted the photostats in his hand and stared unseeingly at Farnholme. "God above, all the fortunes that ever were are nothing compared to these. It's all the difference between life and death, victory and defeat. It's—it's—great heavens, sir, think of Australia! Our

people must have these—they must have them!"

"Exactly," Farnholme agreed. "They must have them."

The colonel stared at him in silence, the tired eyes slowly widening in shocked understanding, then slumped back into his chair, his head resting on his chest. The spiralling cigarette smoke laced painfully across his eyes, but he didn't even seem to notice it.

"Exactly, once again," Farnholme said dryly. He reached out for the films and photostats and began to replace them carefully in the waterproof pouches of his belt. "You begin to understand, perhaps, my earlier anxiety for—ah—aerial transport out of Singapore." He zipped the pouches shut. "I'm still as anxious as ever, I assure you."

The colonel nodded dully, but said nothing.

"No 'plane at all?" Farnholme persisted. "Not even the most dilapidated, broken down——" He stopped abruptly at the sight of the expression on the colonel's face, then tried again. "Submarine?"

"No."

Farnholme's mouth tightened. "Destroyer, frigate, any naval vessel at all?"

"No." The colonel stirred. "And not even a merchant ship. The last of them—the *Grasshopper, Tien Kwang, Katydid, Kuala, Dragonfly* and a few other small coastal vessels like these—pulled out of Singapore last night. They won't be back. They wouldn't get a hundred miles, even, the Jap air force

is everywhere round the archipelago. Wounded, women and children aboard all these vessels, Brigadier. Most of them will finish up at the bottom of the sea."

"A kindly alternative to a Japanese prison camp. Believe me, Colonel, I know." Farnholme was buckling on the heavy belt again. He sighed. "This is all very handy, Colonel. Where do we go from here?"

"Why in God's name did you ever come here?" the colonel demanded bitterly. "Of all places, of all times, you had to come to Singapore now. And how in the world did you manage to get here anyway?"

"Boat from Banjermasin," Farnholme replied briefly. "The *Kerry Dancer*—the most dilapidated floating death-trap that was ever refused a certificate of seaworthiness. Operated by a smooth, dangerous character by the name of Siran. Hard to say, but I'd almost swear he was a renegade Englishman of some kind, and on more than nodding terms with the Japs. He stated he was heading for Kota Bharu—lord knows why—but he changed his mind and came here."

"He changed his mind?"

"I paid him well. Not my money, so I could afford it. I thought Singapore would be safe enough. I was in North Borneo when I heard on my own receiver that Hong Kong and Guam and Wake had fallen, but I had to move in a considerable hurry. A long time passed before I heard the next item of news, and that was on board the *Kerry Dancer*. We waited ten days

in Banjermasin before Siran condescended to sail," Farnholme went on bitterly. "The only respectable piece of equipment and the only respectable man on that ship were both to be found in the radio room—Siran must have considered them both necessary for his nefarious activities—and I was in the radio room with this lad Loon on our second day aboard the ship—29th January, it was, when we picked up this B.B.C. broadcast that Ipoh was being bombarded, so, naturally, I thought the Japs were advancing very slowly and that we'd plenty of time to go to Singapore and pick up a 'plane."

The colonel nodded in understanding. "I heard that communiqué, too. Heaven only knows who was responsible for that appalling claptrap. Ipoh had actually fallen to the Japs more than a month before that, sir. The Japs were only a few miles north of the causeway at the time. My God, what a damnable mess!" He shook his head slowly. "A damnable, damnable mess!"

"You put things very mildly," Farnholme agreed. "How long have we got?"

"We're surrendering tomorrow." The colonel stared down at his hands.

"Tomorrow!"

"We're all washed up, sir. Nothing more we can do. And we've no water left. When we blew up the causeway we blew up the only water-pipe from the mainland."

"Very clever, far-seeing chaps who designed our defences

here," Farnholme muttered. "And thirty million quid spent on it. Impregnable fortress. Bigger and better than Gib. Blah, blah, blah. God, it all makes you sick!" He snorted in disgust, rose to his feet and sighed. "Ah, well, nothing else for it. Back to the dear old *Kerry Dancer*. God help Australia!"

"The *Kerry Dancer*!" The colonel was astonished. "She'll be gone an hour after dawn, sir. I tell you, the Straits are swarming with Japanese 'planes."

"What alternative can you offer?" Farnholme asked wearily.

"I know, I know. But even if you are lucky, what guarantee have you that the captain will go where you want him to?"

"None," Farnholme admitted. "But there's a rather handy Dutchman aboard, by the name of Van Effen. Together we may be able to persuade our worthy captain where the path of duty lies."

"Perhaps." A sudden thought occurred to the colonel. "Besides, what guarantee have you that he'll even be waiting when you get back down to the waterfront?"

"Here it is." Farnholme prodded the shabby valise lying by his feet. "My guarantee and insurance policy—I hope. Siran thinks this thing's stuffed full of diamonds—I used some of them to bribe him to come here—and he's not so far out. Just so long as he thinks there's a chance of separating me from these, he'll hang on to me like a blood brother."

"He—he doesn't suspect——"

"Not a chance. He thinks I'm a drunken old reprobate on the

run with ill-gotten gains. I have been at some pains to—ah—maintain the impersonation."

"I see, sir." The colonel came to a decision and reached out for a bell. When the sergeant appeared, he said, "Ask Captain Bryceland to come here."

Farnholme lifted an eyebrow in silent interrogation.

"It's the least I can do, sir," the colonel explained, "I can't provide a plane. I can't guarantee you won't all be sunk before noon tomorrow. But I can guarantee that the captain of the *Kerry Dancer* will follow your instructions implicitly. I'm going to detail a subaltern and a couple of dozen men from a Highland regiment to accompany you on the *Kerry Dancer*." He smiled. "They're a tough bunch at the best of times, but they're in an especially savage mood just now. I don't think Captain Siran will give you very much trouble."

"I'm sure he won't. Damned grateful to you. Colonel. It should help a lot." He buttoned his shirt, picked up his gladstone and extended his hand. "Thanks for everything, Colonel. It sounds silly knowing a concentration camp is awaiting you—but, well, all the best."

"Thank you, sir. And all the luck to you—God knows you're going to need it." He glanced down in the region of the concealed belt that held the photostats, then finished sombrely. "We've at least got a chance."

The smoke was slowly clearing when Brigadier Farnholme went out again into the darkness of the night, but the air still

held that curious, unpleasant amalgam of cordite and death and corruption that the old soldier knows so well. A subaltern and a company of men were lined up outside waiting for him.

Musketry and machine-gun fire had increased now, visibility was far better, but the shell-fire had ceased altogether—probably the Japanese saw no sense in inflicting too much damage on a city which would be theirs on the following day anyway. Farnholme and his escort moved quickly through the deserted streets through the now gently falling rain, the sound of gunfire in their ears all the time, and had reached the waterfront within a few minutes. Here the smoke, lifted by a gentle breeze from the east, was almost entirely gone.

The smoke was gone, and almost at once Farnholme realised something that made him clutch the handle of the gladstone until his knuckles shone white and his forearms ached with the strain. The small lifeboat from the *Kerry Dancer*, which he had left rubbing gently against the wharf, was gone also, and the sick apprehension that at once flooded through his mind made him lift his head swiftly and stare out into the roads but there was nothing there for him to see. The *Kerry Dancer* was gone as if she had never existed. There was only the falling rain, the gentle breeze in his face and, away to his left, the quiet, heart-broken sobs of a little boy crying alone in the darkness.

TWO

The subaltern in charge of the soldiers touched Farnholme on the arm and nodded out to sea. “The boat, sir—she’s gone!”

Farnholme restrained himself with an effort. His voice, when he spoke, was as calm and as matter-of-fact as ever.

"So it would appear, Lieutenant. In the words of the old song, they've left us standing on the shore. Deuced inconvenient, to say the least of it."

"Yes, sir." Farnholme's reaction to the urgency of the situation, Lieutenant Parker felt, was hardly impressive. "What's to be done now, sir?"

"You may well ask, my boy." Farnholme stood still for several moments, a hand rubbing his chin, an abstracted expression on his face. "Do you hear a child crying there, along the waterfront?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, sir."

"Have one of your men bring him here. Preferably," Farnholme added, "a kindly, fatherly type that won't scare the living daylights out of him."

"Bring him here, sir?" The subaltern was astonished. "But there are hundreds of these little street Arabs——" He broke off suddenly as Farnholme towered over him, his eyes cold and still beneath the jutting brows.

"I trust you are not deaf, Lieutenant Parker," he inquired solicitously. The low-pitched voice was for the lieutenant's ears alone, as it had been throughout.

"Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir!" Parker hastily revised his earlier impression of Farnholme. "I'll send a man right away, sir."

"Thank you. Then send a few men in either direction along the

waterfront, maybe half a mile or so. Have them bring back here any person or persons they find—they may be able to throw some light on the missing boat. Let them use persuasion if necessary."

"Persuasion, sir?"

"In any form. We're not playing for pennies tonight, Lieutenant. And when you've given the necessary orders, I'd like a private little talk with you."

Farnholme strolled off some yards into the gloom. Lieutenant Parker rejoined him within a minute. Farnholme lit a fresh cheroot and looked speculatively at the young officer before him.

"Do you know who I am, young man?" he asked abruptly.

"No, sir."

"Brigadier Farnholme." Farnholme grinned in the darkness as he saw the perceptible stiffening of the lieutenant's shoulders. "Now that you've heard it, forget it. You've never heard of me. Understand?"

"No, sir," Parker said politely. "But I understand the order well enough."

"That's all you need to understand. And cut out the 'sirs' from now on. Do you know my business?"

"No, sir, I——"

"No 'sirs,' I said," Farnholme interrupted. "If you cut them out in private, there's no chance of your using them in public."

"I'm sorry. No, I don't know your business. But the colonel impressed upon me that it was a matter of the utmost importance and gravity."

"The colonel was in no way exaggerating," Farnholme murmured feelingly. "It is better, much better, that you don't know my business. If we ever reach safety I promise you I'll tell you what it's all about. Meantime, the less you and your men know the safer for all of us." He paused, drew heavily on the cheroot and watched the tip glow redly in the night. "Do you know what a beachcomber is, Lieutenant?"

"A beachcomber?" The sudden switch caught Parker off balance, but he recovered quickly. "Naturally."

"Good. That's what I am from now on, and you will kindly treat me as such. An elderly, alcoholic and somewhat no-account beachcomber hell-bent on saving his own skin. Good-natured and tolerant contempt—that's your line. Firm, even severe when you've got to be. You found me wandering about the streets, searching for some form of transport out of Singapore. You heard from me that I had arrived on a little inter-island steamer and decided that you would commandeer it for your own uses."

"But the ship's gone," Parker objected.

"You have a point," Farnholme admitted. "We may find it yet. There may be others, though I very much doubt it. The point is that you must have your story—and your attitude—ready, no matter what happens. Incidentally, our objective is Australia."

"Australia!" Parker was startled into momentary forgetfulness. "Good lord, sir, that's thousands of miles away!"

"It's a fairish bit," Farnholme conceded. "Our destination, nevertheless, even if we can't lay hands on anything larger than a

rowing boat." He broke off and swung round. "One of your men returning, I think, Lieutenant."

It was. A soldier emerged out of the darkness, the three white chevrons on his arms easy to see. A very big man, over six feet tall and broad in proportion, he made the childish figure in his arms tiny by comparison. The little boy, face buried in the soldier's sun-burned neck, was still sobbing, but quietly now.

"Here he is, sir." The burly sergeant patted the child's back. "The little duffer's had a bad fright, I think, but he'll get over it."

"I'm sure he will, Sergeant." Farnholme touched the child's shoulder. "And what's your name, my little man, eh?"

The little man took one quick look, flung his arms round the sergeant's neck and burst into a fresh torrent of tears. Farnholme stepped back hastily.

"Ah, well." He shook his head philosophically. "Never had much of a way with children, I'm afraid. Crusty old bachelors and what have you. His name can wait."

"His name is Peter," the sergeant said woodenly. "Peter Tallon. He's two years and three months old, he lives in Mysore Road in north Singapore and he's a member of the Church of England."

"He told you all that?" Farnholme asked incredulously.

"He hasn't spoken a word, sir. There's an identity disc tied round his neck."

"Quite," Farnholme murmured. It seemed the only appropriate remark in the circumstances. He waited until the

sergeant had rejoined his men, then looked speculatively at Parker.

"My apologies." The lieutenant's tone was sincere. "How the devil did you know?"

"Be damned funny if I didn't know after twenty-three years in the East. Sure, you'll find Malay and Chinese waifs, but waifs only of their own choice. You don't find them crying. If they did, they wouldn't be crying long. These people always look after their own—not just their own children, but their own kind." He paused and looked quizzically at Parker. "Any guesses as to what brother Jap would have done to that kid, Lieutenant?"

"I can guess," Parker said sombrely. "I've seen a little and I've heard a lot."

"Believe it all, then double it. They're an inhuman bunch of fiends." He changed the subject abruptly. "Let's rejoin your men. Berate me as we go. It'll create no end of a good impression—from my point of view, that is."

Five minutes passed, then ten. The men moved about restlessly, some smoked, some sat on their packs, but no one spoke. Even the little boy had stopped crying. The intermittent crackle of gunfire carried clearly from the north-west of the town, but mostly the night was very still. The wind had shifted, and the last of the smoke was clearing slowly away. The rain was still falling, more heavily than before, and the night was growing cold.

By and by, from the north-east, the direction of Kallang creek,

came the sound of approaching footsteps, the measured paces of three soldiers marching in step and the quicker, more erratic click of feminine heels. Parker stared as they emerged out of the darkness, then turned to the soldier who had been leading the party.

"What's all this? Who are these people?"

"Nurses, sir. We found them wandering a little way along the front." The soldier sounded apologetic. "I think they were lost, sir."

"Lost?" Parker peered at the tall girl nearest him. "What the dickens are you people doing wandering about the town in the middle of the night?"

"We're looking for some wounded soldiers, sir." The voice was soft and husky. "Wounded and sick. We—well, we don't seem able to find them."

"So I gather," Parker agreed dryly. "You in charge of this party?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's your name, please?" The lieutenant's tone was a shade less peremptory now; the girl had a pleasant voice, and he could see that she was very tired, and shivering in the cold rain.

"Drachmann, sir."

"Well, Miss Drachmann, have you seen or heard anything of a small motorboat or a coastal steamer, anywhere offshore?"

"No, sir." Her tone held tired surprise. "All the ships have left Singapore."

"I hope to heaven you're wrong," Parker muttered. Aloud, he said, "Know anything about kids, Miss Drachmann?"

"What?" She sounded startled.

"The sergeant there has found a little boy." Parker nodded to the child still in the sergeant's arms, but wrapped now in a waterproof cape against the cold and rain. "He's lost, tired, lonely and his name is Peter. Will you look after him for the present?"

"Why, of course I will."

Even as she was stretching out her hands for the child, more footsteps were heard approaching from the left. Not the measured steps of soldiers, nor the crisp clickety-clack of women's heels, but a shambling, shuffling sound such as very old men might make. Or very sick men. Gradually there emerged out of the rain and the darkness a long, uncertain line of men, weaving and stumbling, in token column of twos. They were led by a little man with a high, hunched left shoulder, with a Bren gun dangling heavily from his right hand. He wore a balmoral set jauntily on his head and a wet kilt that flapped about his bare, thin knees. Two yards away from Parker he stopped, shouted out a command to halt, turned round to supervise the lowering of the stretchers—it was then that Parker saw for the first time that three of his own men were helping to carry the stretchers—then ran backwards to intercept the straggler who brought up the end of the column and was now angling off aimlessly into the darkness. Farnholme stared after him, then at the sick, maimed and exhausted men who stood there in the rain, each man lost in

his suffering and silent exhaustion.

"My God!" Farnholme shook his head in wonder. "The Pied Piper never had anything on this bunch!"

The little man in the kilt was back at the head of the column now. Awkwardly, painfully, he lowered his Bren to the wet ground, straightened and brought his hand up to his balmoral in a salute that would have done credit to a Guards' parade ground. "Corporal Fraser reporting, sir." His voice had the soft burr of the north-east Highlands.

"At ease, Corporal." Parker stared at him. "Wouldn't it—wouldn't it have been easier if you'd just transferred that gun to your left hand?" A stupid question, he knew, but the sight of that long line of haggard, half-alive zombies materialising out of the darkness had had a curiously upsetting effect on him.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I think my left shoulder is kind of broken, sir."

"Kind of broken," Parker echoed. With a conscious effort of will he shook off the growing sense of unreality. "What regiment, Corporal?"

"Argyll and Sutherlands, sir."

"Of course." Parker nodded. "I thought I recognised you."

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Parker, isn't it, sir."

"That's right." Parker gestured at the line of men standing patiently in the rain. "You in charge, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"Why?" The corporal's fever-wasted face creased in puzzlement. "Dunno, sir. Suppose it's because I'm the only fit man here."

"The only fit——" Parker broke off in mid-sentence, lost in incredulity. He took a deep breath. "That's not what I meant, Corporal. What are you doing with these men? Where are you going with them?"

"I don't rightly know, sir," Fraser confessed. "I was told to lead them back out of the line to a place of safety, get them some medical attention if I could." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the intermittent firing. "Things are a little bit confused up there, sir," he finished apologetically.

"They're all of that," Parker agreed. "But what are you doing down here at the waterfront?"

"Looking for a boat, a ship, anything." The little corporal was still apologetic. "' Place of safety' was my orders, sir. I thought I'd have a real go at it."

"A real go at it." The feeling of unreality was back with Parker once again. "Aren't you aware, Corporal, that by the time you get anywhere the nearest place of safety would be Australia—or India?"

"Yes, sir." There was no change of expression on the little man's face.

"Heaven give me strength." It was Farnholme speaking for the first time, and he sounded slightly dazed. "You were going to set out for Australia in a rowing-boat with that—that——" He

gestured at the line of patient, sick men, but words failed him.

"Certainly I was," Fraser said doggedly. "I've got a job to do."

"My God, you don't give up easy, do you, Corporal?" Farnholme stared at him. "You'd have a hundred times more chance in a Jap prison camp. You can thank your lucky stars that there isn't a boat left in Singapore."

"Maybe there is and maybe there isn't," the corporal said calmly. "But there's a ship lying out there in the roads." He looked at Parker. "I was just planning how to get out to it when your men came along, sir."

"What!" Farnholme stepped forward and gripped him by his good shoulder. "There's a ship out there? Are you sure, man?"

"Sure I'm sure." Fraser disengaged his shoulder with slow dignity. "I heard its anchor going down not ten minutes ago."

"How do you know?" Farnholme demanded. "Perhaps the anchor was coming up and——"

"Look, pal," Fraser interrupted. "I may look stupid, I may even be stupid, but I know the bloody difference between——"

"That'll do, Corporal, that'll do!" Parker cut him off hastily. "Where's this ship lying?"

"Out behind the docks, sir. About a mile out, I should say. Bit difficult to be sure—still some smoke around out there."

"The docks? In the Keppel Harbour?"

"No, sir. We haven't been near there tonight. Only a mile or so away—just beyond Malay Point."

* * *

Even in the darkness the journey didn't take long—fifteen minutes at the most. Parker's men had taken over the stretchers, and others of them helped the walking wounded along. And all of them, men and women, wounded and well, were now possessed of the same overwhelming sense of urgency. Normally, no one among them would have placed much hope on any evidence so tenuous as the rattle of what might, or might not have been an anchor going down: but, so much had their minds been affected by the continuous retreats and losses of the past weeks, so certain had they been of capture before that day was through, capture and God only knew how many years of oblivion, so complete was their sense of hopelessness that even this tiny ray of hope was a blazing beacon in the dark despair of their minds. Even so the spirit of the sick men far exceeded their strength, and most of them were spent and gasping and glad to cling to their comrades for support by the time Corporal Fraser came to a halt.

"Here, sir. It was just about here that I heard it."

"What direction?" Farnholme demanded. He followed the line indicated by the barrel of the corporal's Bren, but could see nothing: as Fraser had said, smoke still lay over the dark waters … He became aware that Parker was close behind him, his mouth almost touching his ear.

"Torch? Signal?" He could barely catch the lieutenant's soft murmur. For a moment Farnholme hesitated, but only a moment: they had nothing to lose. Parker sensed rather than saw the nod, and turned to his sergeant.

"Use your torch, Sergeant. Out there. Keep flashing until you get an answer or until we can see or hear something approaching. Two or three of you have a look round the docks—maybe you might find some kind of boat."

Five minutes passed, then ten. The sergeant's torch clicked on and off, monotonously, but nothing moved out on the dark sea. Another five minutes, then the searchers had returned to report that they were unable to find anything. Another five minutes passed, five minutes during which the rain changed from a gentle shower to a torrential downpour that bounced high off the metalled roadway, then Corporal Fraser cleared his throat.

"I can hear something coming," he said conversationally.

"What? Where?" Farnholme barked at him.

"A rowing-boat of some sorts. I can hear the rowlocks. Coming straight at us, I think."

"Are you sure?" Farnholme tried to listen over the drumming of the rain on the road, the hissing it made as it churned the surface of the sea to a white foam. "Are you sure, man?" he repeated. "I can't hear a damn thing."

"Aye, I'm sure. Heard it plain as anything."

"He's right!" It was the big sergeant who spoke, his voice excited. "By God, he's right, sir. I can hear it, too!"

Soon everybody could hear it, the slow grinding creak of rowlocks as men pulled heavily on their oars. The tense expectancy raised by Fraser's first words collapsed and vanished in the almost palpable wave of indescribable relief that swept

over them and left them all chattering together in low ecstatic voices. Lieutenant Parker took advantage of the noise to move closer to Farnholme.

"What about the others—the nurses and the wounded?"

"Let 'em come, Parker—if they want to. The odds are high against us. Make that plain—and make it plain that it must be their own choice. Then tell them to keep quiet, and move back out of sight. Whoever it is—and it *must* be the *Kerry Dancer*—we don't want to scare 'em away. As soon as you hear the boat rubbing alongside, move forward and take over."

Parker nodded and turned away, his low urgent tones cutting through the babble of voices.

"Right. Take up these stretchers. Move back, all of you, to the other side of the road—and keep quiet. Keep very quiet, if you ever want to see home again. Corporal Fraser?"

"Sir?"

"You and your men—do you wish to come with us? If we go aboard that ship it's highly probably that we'll be sunk within twelve hours. I must make that clear."

"I understand, sir."

"And you'll come, then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you asked the others?"

"No, sir." The corporal's injured tone left no doubt about his contempt for such ridiculously democratic procedures in the modern army, and Farnholme grinned in the darkness. "They'll

come too, sir."

"Very well. On your head be it. Miss Drachmann?"

"I'll come, sir," she said quietly. She lifted her left hand to her face in a strange gesture. "Of course I'll come."

"And the others?"

"We've discussed it." She indicated the young Malayan girl by her side. "Lena here wants to go too. The other three don't care much, sir, one way or another. Shock, sir—a shell hit our lorry tonight. Better if they come, I think."

Parker made to answer, but Farnholme gestured him to silence, took the torch from the sergeant and advanced to the edge of the dock. The boat could be seen now, less than a hundred yards away, vaguely silhouetted by the distant beam of the torch. Even as Farnholme peered through the heavy rain, he could see the flurry of white foam as someone in the sternsheets gave an order and the oars dug into the sea, back-watering strongly until the boat came to a stop and lay silently, without moving, a half-seen blur in the darkness.

"Ahoy, there!" Farnholme called. "The *Kerry Dancer*?"

"Yes." The deep voice carried clearly through the falling rain. "Who's there?"

"Farnholme, of course." He could hear the man in the sternsheets giving an order, could see the rowers starting to pull strongly again. "Van Effen?"

"Yes, Van Effen."

"Good man!" There was no questioning the genuineness of the

warmth in Farnholme's voice. "Never been so glad to see anyone in all my life. What happened?" The boat was only twenty feet away now, and they could talk in normal tones.

"Not much." The Dutchman spoke perfect, colloquial English, with a scarcely discoverable trace of accent. "Our worthy captain changed his mind about waiting for you, and had actually got under way before I persuaded him to change his mind."

"But—but how do you know the *Kerry Dancer* won't sail before you get back? Good God, Van Effen, you should have sent someone else. You can't trust that devil an inch."

"I know." Hand steady on the tiller, Van Effen was edging in towards the stonework. "If she sails, she sails without her master. He's sitting in the bottom of the boat here, hands tied and with my gun in his back. Captain Siran is not very happy, I think."

Farnholme peered down along the beam of the torch. It was impossible to tell whether Captain Siran was happy or not, but it was undoubtedly Captain Siran. His smooth, brown face was as expressionless as ever.

"And just to make certain," Van Effen continued, "I've got the two engineers tied in Miss Plenderleith's room—tied hand and foot by myself, I may say. They won't get away. The door's locked, and Miss Plenderleith's in there with them, with a gun in her hand. She's never fired a gun in her life, but she's perfectly willing to try, she says. She's a wonderful old lady, Farnholme."

"You think of everything," Farnholme said admiringly. "If only——"

"All right, that'll do! Stand aside, Farnholme." Parker was by his side, a powerful torch shining down on to the upturned faces below. "Don't be a bloody fool!" he said sharply, as Van Effen made to bring up his pistol. "Put that thing away—there's a dozen machine-guns and rifles lined up on you."

Slowly Van Effen lowered his gun and looked up bleakly at Farnholme.

"That was beautifully done, Farnholme," he said slowly. "Captain Siran here would have been proud to claim such a masterpiece of treachery."

"It wasn't treachery," Farnholme protested. "They're British troops, our friends, but I'd no option. I can explain——"

"Shut up!" Parker cut in brusquely. "You can do all your explaining later." He looked down at Van Effen. "We're coming with you, whether you like it or not. That's a motor lifeboat you have there. Why were you using your oars?"

"For silence. Obviously. Much good it did us," Van Effen added bitterly.

"Start the motor," Parker ordered.

"I'll be damned if I will!"

"Perhaps. You'll probably be dead if you don't," Parker said coldly. "You look an intelligent man, Van Effen. You've got eyes and ears and should realise we're desperate men. What's to be gained by childish obstinacy at this stage?"

Van Effen looked at him for a long moment in silence, nodded, jammed his gun hard into Siran's ribs and gave an order. Within

a minute the engine had come to life and was putt-putting evenly away as the first of the wounded soldiers was lowered on to the thwarts. Within half an hour the last of the men and women who had been standing on the dockside were safely aboard the *Kerry Dancer*. It had taken two trips, but short ones: Corporal Fraser had been about right in his estimate of distance, and the ship was anchored just outside the three-fathom shoal line of the Pagar Spit.

The *Kerry Dancer* got under way just before half-past two in the morning, the last ship out of the city of Singapore before she fell into the hands of the Japanese later on that same day of 15th February, 1942. The wind had dropped away now, the rain fined to a gentle drizzle and a brooding hush lay over the darkened city as it faded swiftly into the gloom of the night. There were no fires to be seen now, no lights at all, and even the crackle of desultory gunfire had died away completely. Everything was unnaturally, uncannily silent, silent as death itself, but the storm would break when the first light of day touched the rooftops of Singapore.

Farnholme was in the bleak, damp aftercastle of the *Kerry Dancer*, helping two of the nurses and Miss Plenderleith to attend to the bandaging and care of the wounded soldiers, when a knock came to the door—the only door, the one that led out into the deep after well. He switched out the light, stepped outside and closed the door carefully behind him. He turned to look at the shadowy figure standing in the gloom.

"Lieutenant Parker?"

"Yes." Parker gestured in the darkness. "Perhaps we'd better go up on the poop-deck here—we can't be overheard there."

Together they climbed the iron ladder and walked right aft to the taffrail. The rain had quite stopped now, and the sea was very calm. Farnholme leaned over the rail, gazed down at the phosphorescence bubbling in the *Kerry Dancer's* creaming wake and wished he could smoke. It was Parker who broke the silence.

"I've a rather curious item of news for you, sir—sorry, no 'sir'. Did the corporal tell you?"

"He told me nothing. He only came into the aftercastle a couple of minutes ago. What is it?"

"It appears that this wasn't the only ship in the Singapore roads tonight. While we were coming out to the *Kerry Dancer* with the first boatload, it seems that another motor-boat came in and tied up less than a quarter of a mile away. A British crew."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Farnholme whistled softly in the darkness. "Who were they? What the hell were they doing there anyway? And who saw them?"

"Corporal Fraser and one of my own men. They heard the engine of the motor-boat—we never heard it, obviously, because the sound of our own drowned it—and went across to investigate. Only two men in it, both armed with rifles The only man who spoke was a Highlander—chap from the Western Isles, Fraser says, and he'd know. Very uncommunicative indeed, Fraser says, although he asked plenty of questions himself. Then Fraser heard the *Kerry Dancer's* boat coming back, and they had to go. He

thinks one of the men followed him, but he can't be sure."

"'Curious' is hardly the word to describe it, Lieutenant." Farnholme bit his lower lip thoughtfully and stared out to sea. "And Fraser has no idea where they came from, or what kind of ship they had or where they were going?"

"He knows nothing," Parker said positively. "They might have come straight from the moon for all Fraser knows."

They talked about it for a few minutes, then Farnholme dismissed the matter.

"No good talking about it, Parker, so let's forget it. It's over and done with and no harm to anyone—we got clear away, which is all that matters." Deliberately he changed the subject. "Got everything organised?"

"Yes, more or less. Siran's going to co-operate, no doubt about that—his own neck's at stake just as much as ours and he's fully aware of it. The bomb or torpedo that gets us isn't very likely to miss him. I've a man watching him, one watching the quartermaster and one keeping an eye on the duty engineer. Most of the rest of my men are asleep in the fo'c'sle—and heaven knows they need all the sleep they can get. I've got four of them asleep in the midships cabin—very handy in emergency."

"Good, good." Farnholme nodded his head in approval. "And the two Chinese nurses and the elderly Malayan one?"

"Also in one of the midships cabins. They're pretty sick and dazed, all three of them."

"And Van Effen?"

"Asleep on deck, under a boat. Just outside the wheel-house, not ten feet from the captain." Parker grinned. "He's no longer mad at you, but his knife is still pretty deep in Siran. It seemed a good place to have Van Effen sleep. A reliable sort of chap."

"He's all of that. How about food?"

"Lousy, but plenty of it. Enough for a week or ten days."

"I hope we get the chance to eat it all," Farnholme said grimly. "One more thing. Have you impressed on everyone, especially Siran, that I'm now pretty small beer around these parts and that there's only one man that matters—yourself?"

"I don't think you're as well thought of as you were previously," Parker said modestly.

"Excellent." Unconsciously, almost, Farnholme touched the belt under his shirt. "But don't over-do it—just ignore me whenever possible. By the way, there's something you can do for me on your way for'ard. You know the radio shack?"

"Behind the wheelhouse? Yes, I've seen it."

"The operator, Willie Loon or something like that, sleeps in it. I think he's a pretty decent sort of lad—God knows what he's doing aboard this floating coffin—but I don't want to approach him myself. Find out from him what his set's transmitting radius is and let me know before dawn. I'll probably have a call to make round about that time."

"Yes, sir." Parker hesitated, made to speak, then changed his mind about the question he had been going to ask. "No time like the present. I'll go and find out now. Good night."

"Good night, Lieutenant." Farnholme remained leaning over the taffrail for a few more minutes, listening to the asthmatic clanking of the *Kerry Dancer's* superannuated engine as she throbbed her way steadily east-south-east through the calm and oily sea. By and by he straightened up with a sigh, turned and went below. The whisky bottles were in one of his bags in the aftercastle and he had his reputation to sustain.

Most men would have objected strongly to being waked at half-past three in the morning and asked a purely technical question about their work, but not Willie Loon. He merely sat up in his bunk, smiled at Lieutenant Parker, told him that the effective range of his transmitter was barely five hundred miles and smiled again. The smile on his round pleasant face was the essence of good will and cheerfulness, and Parker had no doubt but that Farnholme had been a hundred per cent correct in his assessment of Willie Loon's character. He didn't belong here.

Parker thanked him, and turned to go. On his way out he noticed on the transmitting table something he had never expected to see on a ship such as the *Kerry Dancer*—a round, iced cake, not too expertly made, it's top liberally beskewered with tiny candles. Parker blinked, then looked at Willie Loon.

"What on earth is this for?"

"A birthday cake." Willie Loon beamed proudly at him. "My wife—that's her picture there—made it. Two months ago, now, to be sure I would have it. It is very pretty, is it not?"

"It's beautiful," Lieutenant Parker said carefully. He looked at

the picture again. “Beautiful as the girl who made it. You must be a very lucky man.”

“I am.” Again he smiled, blissfully. “I am very lucky indeed, sir.”

“And when’s the birthday?”

“Today. That is why the cake is out. I am twenty-four years old today.”

“Today!” Parker shook his head. “You’ve certainly picked a wonderful day to have a birthday on, by all the signs. But it’s got to be some time, I suppose. Good luck, and many happy returns of the day.”

He turned, stepped over the storm combing, and closed the door softly behind him.

THREE

Willie Loon died when he was twenty-four years of age. He died on his twenty-fourth birthday, at the high noon of day, with the harsh glare of the equatorial sunlight striking savagely through the barred skylight above his head. A white light, a bright merciless light that mocked the smoking flame from the solitary candle still burning on the birthday cake, a yellow flame that bloomed and faded, bloomed and faded, regularly, monotonously, as the ship rolled and the black bar of shadow from the skylight passed and repassed across it—across the candle, across the cake and across the picture of Anna May, the shy-smiling Batavian girl who had baked it.

But Willie Loon could not see the candle or the cake or

the picture of his young wife, for he was blind. He could not understand why this should be so, for the last of these hammer-blows of just ten seconds ago had struck the back of his head, not the front. He could not even see his radio transmitting key, but that did not matter, for Mr. Johnson of the Marconi school had always insisted that no one could be a real Marconi man until he was as good in pitch darkness as he was in the light of day. And Mr. Johnson had also said that the Marconi man should be the last to leave his post, that he should leave the ship together with his captain. And so Willie Loon's hand moved up and down, up and down, in the staccato, off-beat rhythm of the trained operator, triggering off the key, sending the same call over and over again: S.O.S., enemy air attack, 0.45 N, 104.24 E, on fire: S.O.S., enemy air attack, 0.45 N, 104.24 E, on fire: S.O.S. …

His back hurt, hurt abominably. Machine-gun bullets, he did not know how many, but they hurt, badly. But better that, he thought tiredly, than the transmitter. If his back hadn't been there the transmitter would have been smashed, there would have been no distress signal, no hope at all. A fine Marconi man he would have been with the most important message of his life to send and no way of sending it … But he was sending that message, the most important message of his life, although already his hand was becoming terribly heavy and the transmitting key was starting to jump around from side to side, eluding the fumbling, sightless fingers.

There was a strange, muted thunder in his ears. He wondered

vaguely, if it was the sound of aero engines, or if the flames that enveloped the fore-deck were bearing down on him, or if it was just the roaring of his own blood in his head. Most likely it was his own blood, for the bombers should have gone by now, their work done, and there was no wind to fan the flames. It didn't matter. Nothing really mattered except that his hand should keep bearing down on that transmitting key, keep sending out the message. And the message went out, time and time again, but it was now only a jumbled, meaningless blur of dots and dashes.

Willie Loon did not know this. Nothing was very clear to him any longer. Everything was dark and confused and he seemed to be falling, but he could feel the edge of his chair catching him behind the knees and he knew he was still there, still sitting at his transmitter and he smiled at his own foolishness. He thought again of Mr. Johnson and he thought that perhaps Mr. Johnson would not be ashamed of him if he could see him then. He thought of his dark and gentle Anna May, and smiled again, without bitterness. And then there was the cake. Such a lovely cake, made as only she could make it, and he hadn't even tasted it. He shook his head sadly, cried out once as the sharp scalpel of agony sliced through his shattered head and reached the unseeing eyes.

For a moment, just for a moment, consciousness returned. His right hand had slipped off the transmitting key. He knew it was desperately urgent that he should move his hand back, but all the power seemed to have gone from his right arm. He

moved his left hand across, caught his right wrist and tried to lift it, but it was far too heavy, it might have been nailed to the table. He thought again, dimly, briefly, of Mr. Johnson, and he hoped he had done his best. Then silently, without even a sigh, he slid forward wearily on to the table, his head cradling on his crossed hands, his left elbow crushing down on the cake until the candle leaned over horizontally, the dripping wax pooling on the polished table, the smoke, thick now and very black, spiralling lazily upwards until it flattened against the deckhead, and spread across the tiny cabin. A dark, oily smoke, but it could do nothing to soften the cruel shafts of sunshine or hide the three little neat, red-ringed holes in the back of Willie Loon's shirt as he lay sprawled tiredly across the table. By and by the candle flickered feebly, flared up once and died.

Captain Francis Findhorn, O.B.E., Commodore of the British-Arabian Tanker Company and master of the 12,000 ton motor-ship *Viroma*, gave the barometer a last two taps with his fingernail, looked at it without expression for a moment then walked back quietly to his seat in the port corner of the wheelhouse. Unthinkingly, he reached up to direct the overhead ventilation louver on to his face, winced as the blast of hot, humid air struck at him, then pushed it away again, quickly but without haste. Captain Findhorn never did anything with haste. Even the next simple gesture of taking off his gold-braided white cap and rubbing the dark, thinning hair with his handkerchief was made with an unhurried speed, with so complete a lack of

unnecessary and wasted movement that one instinctively knew this calm deliberation, this unstudied economy of motion, to be an inseparable part of the man's nature.

There was a soft padding behind him, footsteps crossing the iron-hard teak deck. Captain Findhorn replaced his cap, slewed round in his chair and looked at his chief officer who was standing where he himself had been seconds before, gazing thoughtfully at the barometer. For a few moments Captain Findhorn studied him in silence, thought that his chief officer was a classic refutation of the widely-held belief that light-haired, light-skinned people cannot sunburn well: between the white shirt and the fair flaxen hair, sun-bleached almost to a platinum blond, the back of the neck was a strip of old, dark oak. Then the chief officer had turned round and caught his eye, and Findhorn smiled, briefly.

"Well, Mr. Nicolson, what do you make of it?" The quartermaster was only feet away: with members of the crew within earshot, the captain was always punctiliousness itself towards his senior officers.

Nicolson shrugged his shoulders and walked across to the screen door. He had a peculiarly soft-footed, almost catlike gait, as if he were stepping on old, dry sticks and feared he might break them. He looked at the brassy oven of the sky, at the oily copper sheen of the water, at the far horizon to the east where the two met in a shimmer of metallic blue, and finally at the glassy swell that was building up to the northeast, pushing up on their port

quarter. He shrugged again, turned and looked at the captain, and for the hundredth time Findhorn found himself marvelling at the clear, ice-blue of his officer's eyes, doubly striking in the sunburnt darkness of the face. He had never seen eyes like them, remotely like them, anywhere. They always reminded Captain Findhorn of Alpine lakes, and this irritated the captain, for he had a precise, logical mind, and he had never been in the Alps in his life.

"Not much doubt about it, sir, is there?" The voice was soft, controlled, effortless—the perfect complement to the way he walked and carried himself: but it had a deep, resonant quality that enabled him to be heard through a roomful of talking people or in a high wind with an abnormal ease and clarity. He gestured through the open screen door. "All the signs. The glass is only 28.5, but it was.75 hardly an hour ago. It's falling like a stone. The wrong time of the year, and I've never heard of a tropical storm in these latitudes, but we're in for a bit of a blow, I'm afraid."

"You have a genius for understatement, Mr. Nicolson," Findhorn said dryly. "And don't refer disrespectfully to a typhoon as 'a bit of a blow'. It might hear you." He paused a moment, smiled and went on softly. "I hope it does, Mr. Nicolson. It's a Godsend."

"It would be all of that," Nicolson murmured. "And rain. There'll be plenty of rain?"

"Buckets of it," Captain Findhorn said with satisfaction. "Rain, high seas and a ten or eleven wind and there's nary a son

in the Nipponese army or navy will see us this night. What's our course, Mr. Nicolson?"

"One-thirty, sir."

"We'll keep it there. The Carimata Straits for us by noon tomorrow, and then there's always a chance. We'll turn aside only for their Grand Fleet and we'll turn back for nothing." Captain Findhorn's eyes were calm, untroubled. "Think there'll be anyone out looking for us, Mr. Nicolson?"

"Apart from a couple of hundred aircraft pilots and every ship in the China Sea, no." Nicolson smiled briefly, and the smile touched and whitened the wrinkles at his eyes and was gone. "I doubt if there's any of our little yellow pals within 500 miles who *doesn't* know that we broke out of Singapore last night. We must be the juiciest tit-bit since the *Prince of Wales* went down, and the size of the flap will be corresponding. They'll have combed every exit—Macassar, Singapore, Durian and Rhio—and the High Command will be throwing blue fits and chucking themselves on to their swords by the dozen."

"But they never thought to check the Tjombol Straits and Temiang?"

"I suppose they're reasonably sane and do us the compliment of thinking we are also," Nicolson said thoughtfully. "No sane man would take a big tanker through these waters at night, not with the draught we've got, and not a light in sight."

Captain Findhorn inclined his head, half-nod, half-bow. "You have rather a pretty line in compliments yourself, Mr. Nicolson."

Nicolson said nothing. He turned away and walked to the other side of the bridge, past the quartermaster and Vannier, the fourth officer. His feet on the deck made no more sound, almost, than the whisper of falling leaves. At the far end of the bridge he stopped, looked through the starboard wheel-house door at the haze-blurred silhouette of Linga Island melting softly into the purple distance, then turned back again. Vannier and the quartermaster watched him silently, tired speculation in tired eyes.

From above their heads came the occasional murmur of voices, or the shuffling of aimless, wandering feet. Up there were the gunners who manned the two wheelhouse top Hotchkisses, .5s well spaced on each side of the starboard compass platform teak screen. Old guns these, very old and feeble and inaccurate, good only for boosting the morale of those who had never had to use them against an enemy. The suicide seats, these two gun positions were called: the exposed wheel-house top, highest point of the bridge superstructure, always held priority for strafing attacks on tankers. The gunners knew this, and they were only human: they had been unhappy, increasingly restless, for days now.

But the fidgety unease of the gunners, the quartermaster's hands moving gently on the spokes of the wheel—these were only small, insignificant sounds that punctuated the strange, hushed silence that lay over the *Viroma*, an enveloping, encompassing silence, thick, cocoon-like, almost tangible. And

the little sounds came and went and left the silence deeper, more oppressive than before.

It was the silence that comes with great heat and the climbing humidity that spills out sweat over a man's arms and body with every mouthful of liquid he drinks. It was the dead, flat silence that lies over the China Sea while the gathering storm bides its time beyond the horizon. It was the silence that comes upon men when they have not slept for a long, long time, and they are very tired. But, above all, it was the silence that comes with waiting. That kind of waiting where a man's nerves are stretched out on a rack, and every hour more of waiting is another turn of the rack, and if the waiting doesn't end soon the rack will turn too far and the nerves tear and sunder with the strain—but if the waiting does end then that will be even worse for it will be the end not only of the waiting, it will almost certainly be the end of everything.

The men of the *Viroma* had been waiting for a long time now, Or perhaps not such a long time—it was only a week since the *Viroma*, with a false funnel, dummy ventilators, the newly painted name of *Resistencia* and flying the flag of the Argentine republic, had rounded the Northern tip of Sumatra and steamed into the Malacca Straits in broad daylight. But a week has seven days, every day twenty-four hours and every hour sixty minutes. Even a minute can be a long time when you are waiting for something which must inevitably happen, when you know that the laws of chance are operating more and more inexorably against you, that the end cannot be much longer delayed. Even a

minute can be a long, long time when the first bomb or the first torpedo may be only seconds away, and you have ten thousand, four hundred tons of fuel oil and high octane gasoline beneath your feet …

The telephone above the flag locker shrilled jarringly, insistently, cutting knife-like through the leaden silence on the bridge. Vannier, slight, brown-haired, an officer of only ten weeks standing, was nearest to it. He whirled round, startled, knocked over the binoculars on the locker-top behind him, and fumbled the receiver off its hook. Even through the tan the red flush could be seen creeping up through neck and face.

"Bridge here. What is it?" The voice was meant to be crisp, authoritative. It didn't quite come off. He listened for a few moments, said thank you, hung up and turned round to find Nicolson standing beside him.

"Another distress signal," he said quickly. Nicolson's cold blue eyes always made him feel flustered. "Up north somewhere."

"Up north somewhere." Nicolson repeated the words, his tone almost conversational, but carrying an undertone that made Vannier squirm. "What position? What ship?" There was a sharp edge to Nicolson's voice now.

"I—I don't know. I didn't ask."

Nicolson looked at him for a long second, turned away, reached down the phone and began to crank the generator handle. Captain Findhorn beckoned to Vannier and waited until the boy had walked hesitantly across to his corner of the bridge.

"You should have asked, you know," the captain said pleasantly. "Why didn't you?"

"I didn't think it necessary, sir." Vannier was uncomfortable, on the defensive. "It's our fourth call today. You—you ignored the others, so I——"

"True enough," Findhorn agreed. "It's a question of priorities, boy. I'm not going to risk a valuable ship, a priceless cargo and the lives of fifty men on the off-chance of picking up a couple of survivors from an inter-island steamer. But this might have been a troopship, or a cruiser. I know it's not, but it might have been. And it might have been in a position where we could have given some help without sticking our necks out too far. All improbable 'ifs' and 'mights', but we must know where she is and what she is before we make a decision." Findhorn smiled and touched the gold-braided epaulettes on his shoulders. "You know what these are for?"

"You make the decisions," Vannier said stiffly. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Forget it, boy. But one thing you might remember—to call Mr. Nicolson 'sir' once in a while. It's—ah—expected."

Vannier flushed and turned away. "Sorry again, sir. I don't usually forget. I'm—well, I think I'm just a little bit tired and edgy, sir."

"We all are," Findhorn said quietly. "And not a little bit, either. But Mr. Nicolson isn't —he never is." He raised his voice. "Well, Mr. Nicolson?"

Nicolson hung up the receiver and turned round.

"Vessel bombed, burning, possibly sinking," he said briefly. "0.45 N, 104.24 E. That makes it the Southern entrance to the Rhio channel. Name of the vessel uncertain. Walters says the message came through very fast, very clear at first, but quickly deteriorated into crazy nonsense. He thinks the operator was seriously injured and finally collapsed over his table and key, for he finished up with a continuous send—it's still coming through. Name of the ship, as far as Walters could make out, was the *Kenny Danke*.

"Never heard of it. Strange he didn't send his international call-sign. Nothing big, anyway. Mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing, sir." Nicolson shook his head, turned to Vannier. "Look it up in the Register anyway, please. Then look through the K's. Obviously the wrong name." He paused for a moment, the cold blue eyes remote, distant, then turned again to Vannier. "Look up the *Kerry Dancer*. I think it must be that."

Vannier riffled through the pages. Findhorn looked at his chief officer, eyebrows raised a fraction.

Nicolson shrugged. "A fair chance, sir, and it makes sense. N and R are very close in Morse. So are C and K. A sick man could easily trade them—even a trained man. If he was sick enough."

"You're right, sir." Vannier smoothed out a page of the directory. "The *Kerry Dancer*, 540 tons, is listed here. Clyde, 1922. Sulaimiya Trading Company——"

"I know them," Findhorn interrupted. "An Arab company,

Chinese backed, sailing out of Macassar. They've seven or eight of these small steamers. Twenty years ago they had only a couple of dhows—that was about the time they gave up legitimate trading as a bad business and went in for the fancy stuff—guns, opium, pearls, diamonds, and little of that legally come by. Plus a fair amount of piracy on the side."

"No tears over the *Kerry Dancer*!"

"No tears over the *Kerry Dancer*, Mr. Nicolson. Course 130 and hold it there." Captain Findhorn moved through the screen door on to the port wing of the door. The incident was closed.

"Captain!"

Findhorn halted, turned round unhurriedly and looked curiously at Evans. Evans was the duty quartermaster, dark, wiry, thin-faced and with tobacco stained teeth. His hands rested lightly on the wheel, and he was looking straight ahead.

"Something on your mind, Evans?"

"Yes, sir. The *Kerry Dancer* was lying in the roads last night." Evans glanced at him for a moment then stared ahead again. "A Blue Ensign boat, sir."

"What!" Findhorn was jerked out of his normal equanimity. "A Government ship? You saw her?"

"I didn't see her, sir. The bo-sun did—I think. Anyway, I heard him talking about it last night—just after you'd come back from shore."

"Are you quite certain, man? He said that?"

"No mistake, sir." The high-pitched Welsh voice was very

definite.

"Get the bo'sun up here at once!" Findhorn ordered. He went over to his chair, sat down, easy and relaxed, and thought back to the night just gone. He remembered his surprise—and relief—when he had gone over the side and found the bo'sun and carpenter manning the motor lifeboat that was to take him ashore, his surprise and relief when he had seen the butts of a couple of short Lee Enfields protruding beneath a piece of canvas thrown carelessly over them. He had said nothing about these. He remembered the distant sound of guns, the pall of smoke lying over Singapore from the last bombing raid—one could set a watch by the appearance of Japanese bombers over Singapore every morning—the weird, unnatural hush that had lain over city and roads. The roads themselves had been empty, deserted as he'd never known them, and he couldn't remember seeing the *Kerry Dancer* or any other ship flying the Blue Ensign as they went in. It had been too dark and he had had too much on his mind. And he had had even more to worry about on the way out. He had learnt that the oil islands of Poko Bukum, Pulo Sambo and Pulo Sebarok had been fired, or were to be fired—he had been unable to find out or even see for himself, the pall of smoke obscured everything. The last of the naval units had pulled out and there was no one to take his fuel oil. Nor his aviation spirit—the Catalinas were gone, and the only Brewster Buffaloes and Wildebeeste torpedo bombers that remained were charred skeletons on the Selengar Airfield. 10,400 tons of explosive fuel,

trapped in the harbour of Singapore and——

"McKinnon, sir. You sent for me." Twenty years that hadn't missed out a sea or port in the world worth looking at had turned McKinnon from a raw, shy, unknowing Lewis boy to a byword among the sixty odd ships of the British Arabian Company for toughness, shrewdness and unvarying competence—but they hadn't altered a single inflexion in his slow, soft-spoken Highland voice, "About the *Kerry Dancer*?"

Findhorn nodded, said nothing, just continued looking at the dark, stocky figure before him. A commodore, he thought dryly, inconsequentially, has his privileges. The best first mate *and* the best bo'sun in the company …

"I saw her lifeboat yesterday evening, sir," McKinnon said quietly. "She left before us—with a full complement of passengers." He looked speculatively at the captain. "A hospital ship. Captain."

Findhorn climbed down off his chair and stood in front of McKinnon, without moving, The two men were of a height, eye to eye. No one else moved. It was as if each one feared to break the sudden, utter stillness that had fallen on the bridge. The *Viroma* wandered one degree off course, then two, then three, and Evans made no move to correct it.

"A hospital ship," Findhorn repeated tonelessly. "A hospital ship, Bo'sun? She's only a little inter-island tramp—500 tons or so."

"That's right. But she's been commandeered, sir. I was talking

to some of the wounded soldiers while Ferris and myself were at the jetty, waiting for you. Her captain's been given the option of losing his ship or sailing her to Darwin. There's a company of soldiers aboard to see that he does."

"Go on."

"That's all there is, sir. They filled up the second boatload before you came back—most of the cases were walking wounded but there were a few on stretchers. I believe there are five or six nurses, none British, and a little boy."

"Women, children and sick men and they stick them aboard one of the Sulaimiya Company's floating death-traps—and the whole archipelago swarming with Jap aircraft." Findhorn swore, quietly, savagely. "I wonder what mutton-headed genius in Singapore thought that one up."

"I don't know, sir," McKinnon said woodenly.

Findhorn looked at him sharply, then looked away again. "The question was purely rhetorical, McKinnon," he said coldly. His voice dropped almost an octave and he went on quietly, musingly, speaking to no one in particular, a man thinking aloud and not liking his thoughts at all.

"If we go north, the chances of our getting as far as Rhio and back again are less than remote: they do not exist. Let us not deceive ourselves about that. It may be a trap—it probably is: the *Kerry Dancer* left before us and she should have been through Rhio six hours ago. If it's not a trap, the probability is that the *Kerry Dancer* is at this moment sinking, or has sunk. Even if

she is still afloat, fire will have forced passengers and crew to abandon ship. If they're just swimming around—most of them wounded men—there'll be mighty few of them left in the six or seven hours it would take us to get there."

Findhorn paused for some moments, lit a cigarette in defiance of the company's and his own regulations, and went on in the same flat monotone.

"They may have taken to their boats, if they had any boats left after bombs, machine-guns and fire had all had a go at them. Within a few hours all the survivors can land on any one of a score of islands. What chance have we got of finding the right island in total darkness in the middle of a storm—assuming that we were crazy enough—suicidal enough—to move into the Rhio Straits and throw away all the sea-room we must have in the middle of a typhoon?" He grunted in irritation as spiralling smoke laced his tired eyes—Captain Flndhorn hadn't left the bridge all night—gazed down with mild surprise, as if seeing it for the first time, at the cigarette clipped between his fingers, dropped it and ground it out with the heel of his white canvas shoe. He stared down at the crushed stub for long seconds after it had gone out, then looked up, his gaze travelling slowly round the four men in the wheelhouse. The gaze meant nothing—Findhorn would never have included the quartermaster, bo'sun or the fourth officer in his counsels. "I can see no justification whatsoever for jeopardising the ship, the cargo and our lives on a wild goose chase."

No one said anything, no one moved. The silence was back again, heavy, foreboding, impenetrable. The air was still, and very airless—the approaching storm, perhaps. Nicolson was leaning against the flag locker, hooded eyes looking down at his hands clasped before him: the others were looking at the captain, and not blinking: the *Viroma* had now slewed yet further off course, ten, perhaps twelve degrees, and still swinging steadily.

Captain Findhorn's wandering gaze finally settled on Nicolson. The remoteness had gone from the captain's eyes now, when he looked at his first mate.

"Well, Mr. Nicolson?" he asked.

"You're perfectly right, sir, of course." Nicolson looked up, gazed out the window at the foremast swaying slowly, gently, under the lift of the deepening swell. "A thousand to one that it's a trap, or, if it isn't, ship, crew and passengers will all be gone by now—one way or another." He looked gravely at the quartermaster, at the compass, then back at Findhorn again. "But as I see we're already ten degrees off course and still slewing to starboard, we might as well save trouble and just keep on going round to starboard. The course would be about 320, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Nicolson." Findhom let his breath escape in a long, almost inaudible sigh. He crossed over towards Nicolson, his cigarette case open. "For this once only, to hell with the rules. Mr. Vannier, you have the *Kerry Dancer's* position. A course for the quartermaster, if you please."

Slowly, steadily, the big tanker swung round, struck off to the

north-west back in the direction of Singapore, into the heart of the gathering storm.

A thousand to one were the odds that Nicolson would have offered and the captain would have backed him in that and gone even further—and they would both have been wrong. There was no trap, the *Kerry Dancer* was still afloat and she hadn't been abandoned—not entirely.

Still afloat, at 2 o'clock on that sultry, breathless mid-February afternoon in 1942, but not looking as if she would be afloat much longer. She was deep in the water, down by the head and listing over so heavily to starboard that the well-deck guardrail was dipping into the sea, now lost in it, now showing clear as the long, low swell surged up the sloping deck and receded, like waves breaking on a beach.

The for-ard mast was gone, broken off about six feet above the deck; a dark, gaping hole, still smouldering, showed where the funnel had been, and the bridge was unrecognisable, a scrapyard shambles of buckled steel plates and fractured angle-irons, outlined in crazy, surrealist silhouette against a brazen sky. The fo'c'sle—the crew's quarters just for'ard of the well-deck—looked as if it had been opened up by a gigantic can-opener, the scuttles on the ship's side had disappeared completely and there was no trace of anchors, windlass or for'ard derrick winch; all this fo'c'sle damage the result, obviously, of a bomb that had penetrated the thin steel deck plating and failed to explode until it was deep inside the ship. No one there at the time could have

known anything about it, for the lethal blast would have been far faster than realisation. Abaft the well-deck, the wood-lined accommodation quarters on the main and upper decks had been completely burnt out, gutted as far as the after well, sky and sea clearly visible through the gaunt and twisted framework.

It was impossible that human beings could have survived the bludgeoning, the consuming, metal-melting white heat that had reduced the *Kerry Dancer* to the charred, dead wreck drifting imperceptibly south-westwards towards the Abang Straits and faraway Sumatra. And, indeed, there was no life to be seen on what was left of the decks of the *Kerry Dancer*, no life to be seen anywhere, above or below. A deserted, silent skeleton, a dead hulk adrift on the China Sea. … But there were twenty-three people still alive in the after-castle of the *Kerry Dancer*.

Twenty-three people, but some of them had not much longer to live. These were the wounded soldiers, the stretcher cases that had been close enough to death already before the ship had pulled out from Singapore, and the conclusive impact of the bombs and the gasping heat of the fires that had stopped short at the break of the after well-deck had destroyed what feeble resources and hold of life were left to most of them, and tipped the scales against recovery. There might have been hope for them, some slender hope, had they been brought out of that panting suffocation while there was yet time and lowered to the rafts and boats. But there had been no time. Within seconds of the first bomb falling, someone outside had sledge-hammered tight the eight clips that

secured the only door—the water-tight door—that gave access to the upper deck.

Through this smoke-blackened door a man cried out from time to time, a cry not of pain but of anguished memory lacerating a darkening mind; there were whimpers, too, from other badly wounded men, again not moans of pain; the Eurasian nursing sister had with her all the drugs and sedatives she required, not pain but just the feeble, aimless murmur of dying men. Now and again a woman's voice could be heard, soothing, consoling, the soft sound of it punctuated from time to time by the deep angry rumble of a man. But mostly it was just the husky undertones of sick men and, very occasionally, the quivering indrawn breaths, the lost and lonely wailing of a little child.

Twilight, the brief tropical twilight, and the sea was milky white from horizon to horizon. Not close at hand—there it was green and white, great steep-sided walls of green, broken-topped and parallel-streaked with the wind-blown spume, waves that collapsed in a boiling, seething cauldron of rushing phosphorescence and foamed whitely across the low, wide decks of the *Viroma*, burying hatch-covers, pipe-lines and valves, burying, at times, even the catwalks, the gangways that stretched fore-and-aft eight feet above the deck. But further away from the ship, as far as the eye could see in the darkening night, there was nothing but the eerie, glistening whiteness of wind-flattened wave-tops and driving spray.

The *Viroma*, her big single screw thrusting under maximum

power, lurched and staggered northwards through the storm. North-west should have been her course, but the fifty-knot wind that had hit her on the starboard beam, almost without warning and with the typical typhoon impact of a tidal wave moving at express speed, had pushed her far off course to the south and west close in to Sebanga. She was far round into the sea now, corkscrewing violently and pitching steeply, monotonously, as the big, quartering seas bore down on her starboard bow and passed over and below her. She shuddered every time her bows crashed into a trough, then quivered and strained throughout every inch of her 460 foot length when the bows lifted and fought their way clear of the press of cascading white water. The *Viroma* was taking punishment, severe punishment—but that was what she had been built for.

Up on the starboard wing of the bridge, muffled in oilskins, crouched down behind the negligible shelter of the canvas dodger, and with his eyes screwed almost shut against the lash of the driving rain, Captain Findhorn peered out into the gathering dusk. He didn't look worried, his chubby face was as composed, as impassive as ever, but he was worried, badly, and not about the storm. The wild staggering of the *Viroma*, the explosive, shuddering impact of plummeting bows burying themselves to the hawse-pipes in a massive head sea, would have been a terrifying experience for any landsman: Captain Findhorn barely noticed it. A deep-laden tanker has a remarkably low centre of gravity with corresponding stability—which doesn't make it roll

any less but what matters is not the extent of the roll but whether or not a ship will recover from a roll, and a tanker always does: its system of water-tight cross bulkheads gives it enormous strength: and with the tiny access hatches securely battened down, the smooth, unbroken sweep of steel decks makes it the nearest thing afloat to a submarine. Where wind and weather are concerned, a tanker is virtually indestructible. Captain Findhorn knew that only too well, and he had sailed tankers through typhoons far worse than this, and not only across the rim, where he was now, but through the heart. Captain Findhorn was not worried about the *Viroma*.

Nor was he worried about himself. Captain Findhorn had nothing left to worry about—literally: he had a great deal to look back upon, but nothing to look forward to. The senior captain of the British-Arabian Tanker Company, neither the sea nor his employers had anything more to offer him than two more years of command, retirement, and a sufficient pension. He had nowhere to go when he retired: his home for the past eight years, a modest bungalow off the Bukit Timor road, just outside the town of Singapore, had been destroyed by bombs in mid-January. His twin sons, who had always maintained that anyone who went to sea for a livelihood wanted his head examined, had joined the R.A.F. at the outbreak of war, and died in their Hurricanes, one over Flanders, one over the English Channel. His wife, Ellen, had survived the second son for only a few weeks. Cardiac failure, the doctor had said, which was a neat enough

medical equivalent for a broken heart. Captain Findhorn had nothing to worry about, just nothing in the world—as far as he himself was concerned.

But selfishness had no root, no hold in Captain Findhorn's nature, and the emptiness of all that lay ahead had not robbed him of his concern for those for whom life still held much. He thought of the men under his command, men not like himself but men with parents and children, wives and sweethearts, and he wondered what moral justification, if any, he had had for risking the life of non-combatants in turning back towards the enemy. He wondered, too, about the oil beneath his feet again, about his justification, if any, for hazarding a priceless cargo so desperately needed by his country—the thought of the loss to his company he dismissed with the mental equivalent of an indifferent shrug. Lastly, and most deeply of all, he thought about his chief officer of the past three years, John Nicolson.

He did not know and he did not understand John Nicolson. Some woman might, some day, but he doubted whether any man ever would. Nicolson was a man with two personalities, neither of them in any way directly connected with his professional duties, or the manner of the performance of them, which was exceptional: next in line for command in the Anglo-Arabian fleet, Nicolson was regarded by Captain Findhorn as the finest officer he had had serve under him in his thirty-three years as master: unvaryingly competent when competence was called for, brilliant when competence was not enough, John Nicolson never

made a mistake. His efficiency was almost inhuman. Inhuman, Findhorn thought, that was it, that was the other side of his character. Nicolson normally was courteous, considerate, even humorously affable: and then some strange sea-change would come over him and he became aloof, remote, cold—and above all ruthless.

There had to be a link, a meeting point between the two Nicolsons, something that triggered off the transition from one personality to another. What it was Captain Findhorn did not know. He did not even know the nature of the slender bond between Nicolson and himself, he was not close to Nicolson, but he believed he was closer than anyone he knew. It could have been the fact that they were both widowers, but it was not that. It should have been that, for the parallels were striking—both wives had lived in Singapore, Nicolson's on her first and his on her second five-year tour of duty in the Far East: both had died within a week of each other, and within a hundred yards of each other. Mrs. Findhorn had died at home grieving: Caroline Nicolson had died in a high-speed car smash almost outside the white-painted gates of Captain Findhorn's bungalow, victim of a drunken maniac who had escaped without as much as a single scratch.

Captain Findhorn straightened up, tightened the towel round his neck, wiped some salt from his eyes and lips and glanced at Nicolson, farther out on the wing of the bridge. He was quite upright, seeking no shelter behind the venturi dodger, hands

resting lightly on the side of the bridge, the intense blue eyes slowly quartering the dusk-blurred horizon, his face impassive, indifferent. Wind and rain, the crippling heat of the Persian Gulf or the bitter sleet storms of the Scheldt in January were all the same to John Nicolson. He was immune to them, he remained always indifferent, impassive. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

The wind was backing now, slowly, very slowly, and as steadily increasing in strength, the brief tropical twilight was almost over, but the seas were as milky-white as ever, stretching away into the gloom. Findhorn could see their gleaming phosphorescence off to port and starboard, curving in a great heaving horseshoe round the stern, but he could see nothing for-ard. The *Viroma* was now thrusting north dead in the eye of the gale-force wind, and the heavy driving rain, strangely cold after the heat of the day, was sweeping almost horizontally fore and aft across the decks and the bridge, numbing his face with a thousand little lances, filling his eyes with pain and tears. Even with eyes screwed tight to the narrowest slits, the rain still stung and blinded: they were blind men groping in a blind world and the end of the world was where they stood.

Captain Findhorn shook his head impatiently, an impatience compounded equally of anxiety and exasperation, and called to Nicolson. There was no sign that he had been heard. Findhorn cupped his hands to his mouth and called again, realised that what little of his voice was not being swept away by the wind was

being drowned by the crash of the plunging bows and the thin high whine in the halyards and rigging. He moved across to where Nicolson stood, tapped him on the shoulder, jerked his head towards the wheelhouse and made for there himself. Nicolson followed him. As soon as he was inside Findhorn waited for a convenient trough in the sea, eased forward the sliding door with the downward pitch of the ship, and secured it. The change from driving rain, wind and the roaring of the sea to dryness, warmth and an almost miraculous quiet was so abrupt, so complete, that it took mind and body seconds to accustom themselves to the change.

Findhorn towelled his head dry, moved across to the port for-ard window and peered through the Clear View Screen —a circular, inset plate or glass band-driven at high speed by an electric motor. Under normal conditions of wind and rain centrifugal force is enough to keep the screen clear and provide reasonable visibility. There was nothing normal about the conditions that night and the worn driving belt, for which they had no spare, was slipping badly. Findhorn grunted in disgust and turned away.

"Well, Mr. Nicolson, what do you make of it?"

"The same as you, sir." He wore no hat and the blond hair was plastered over head and forehead. "Can't see a thing ahead."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"I know." Nicolson smiled, braced himself against a sudden, vicious pitch, against the jarring shock that shook the windows

of the wheelhouse. “This is the first time we’ve been safe in the past week.”

Findhorn nodded. “You’re probably right. Not even a maniac would come out looking for us on a night like this. Valuable hours of safety, Johnny,” he murmured quietly, “and we would be better employed putting even more valuable miles between ourselves and brother Jap.”

Nicolson looked at him, looked away again. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, but Findhorn knew something at least of what he must be thinking, and swore quietly to himself. He was making it as easy as possible—Nicolson had only to agree with him.

“The chances of there being any survivors around are remote,” Findhorn went on. “Look at the night. Our chances of picking anybody up are even more remote. Again, look at the night—and as you say yourself we can’t see a damn’ thing ahead. And the chances of piling ourselves up on a reef—or even a fair-sized island—are pretty high.” He looked out a side window at the driving fury of the rain and the low, scudding cloud. “We haven’t a hope of a star-sight while this lot lasts.”

“Our chances *are* pretty thin,” Nicolson agreed. He lit a cigarette, automatically returned the spent match to its box, watched the blue smoke eddying lazily in the soft light of the binnacle, then looked up at Findhorn. “How much do you give for the chances of any survivors on the *Kerry Dancer*, sir?”

Findhorn looked into the ice-cold blue of the eyes, looked

away again, said nothing.

"If they took to the boats before the weather broke down, they'll be on an island now," Nicolson went on quietly. "There are dozens of them around. If they took to the boats later, they're gone long ago—a dozen of these coasters couldn't muster one regulation lifeboat between them. If there are any survivors we can save, they'll still be on the *Kerry Dancer*. A needle in a haystack, I know, but a bigger needle than a raft or a baulk of wood."

Captain Findhorn cleared his throat. "I appreciate all this, Mr. Nicolson——"

"She'll be drifting more or less due south," Nicolson interrupted. He looked up from the chart on the table. "Two knots, maybe three. Heading for the Merodong Straits—bound to pile up later tonight. We could come round to port a bit, still give Mesana Island a good offing and have a quick looksee."

"You're assuming an awful lot," Findhorn said slowly.

"I know. I'm assuming that she wasn't sunk hours ago." Nicolson smiled briefly, or maybe it was only a grimace, it was very dark in the wheelhouse now. "Perhaps I'm feeling fey tonight, sir. Perhaps it's my Scandinavian ancestry coming out … An hour and a half should get us there. Even in this head sea, not more than two."

"All right, damn you!" Findhorn said irritably. "Two hours, and then we turn back." He glanced at the luminous figures on his wrist-watch. "Six twenty-five now. The deadline is eight-thirty."

He spoke briefly to the helmsman, turned and followed Nicolson, who was holding the screen door open for him against the wild lurching of the *Viroma*. Outside the howling wind was a rushing, irresistible wall that pinned them helplessly, for seconds on end, against the after end of the bridge, fighting for their breath: the rain was no longer rain but a deluge, driving horizontally, sleet-cold, razor edged, that seemed to lay exposed foreheads and cheeks open to the bone: the wind in the rigging was no longer a whine but an ululating scream, climbing off the register, hurtful to the ear. The *Viroma* was moving in on the heart of the typhoon.

FOUR

Two hours, Captain Findhorn had given them, two hours at the outside limit, but it might as well have been two minutes or two days, for all the hope that remained. Everyone knew that, knew that it was just a gesture, maybe to their own consciences, maybe to the memory of a few wounded soldiers, a handful of nurses and a radio operator who had leaned over his transmitting key and died. But still only a hopeless gesture …

They found the *Kerry Dancer* at twenty-seven minutes past eight, three minutes before the deadline. They found her, primarily, because Nicolson's predictions had been uncannily correct, the *Kerry Dancer* was almost exactly where he had guessed they would find her and a long, jagged fork of lightning had, for a brief, dazzling moment, illumined the gaunt, burnt-out scarecrow as brightly as the noonday sun. Even then they would never have found her had not the hurricane force of the

wind dropped away to the merest whisper, and the blinding rain vanished as suddenly as if someone had turned off a gigantic tap in the heavens.

That there was no miracle about the almost instantaneous transition from the clamour of the storm to this incredible quiet Captain Findhorn was grimly aware. Always, at the heart of a typhoon, lies this oasis of peace. This breathless, brooding hush was no stranger to him—but on the two or three previous occasions he had had plenty of sea room, could turn where he wished when the going became too bad. But not this time. To the north, to the west and to the southwest their escape route was blocked off by islands of the archipelago. They couldn't have entered the heart of the typhoon at a worse time.

And they couldn't have done it at a better time. If anyone lived on the *Kerry Dancer* conditions for rescue would never be more favourable than this. If anyone lived—and from what they could see of her in the light of their canal searchlights and the port signalling lamp as they bore slowly down on her, it seemed unlikely. More, it seemed impossible. In the harsh glare of the searchlights she seemed more forlorn, more abandoned than ever, so deep now by the head that the for'ard well deck had vanished, and the fo'c'sle, like some lonely rock, now awash, now buried deep as the big seas rolled it under—the wind had gone, the rain had gone, but the seas were almost as high as ever, and even more confused.

Captain Findhorn gazed out silently at the *Kerry Dancer* his

eyes bleak. Caught in a cone of light, broached to and broadside on to the waves, she was rolling sluggishly in the troughs, her centre of gravity pulled right down by the weight of hundreds of tons of water. Dead, he thought to himself, dead if ever a ship was dead but she just won't go. Dead, and that's her ghost, he thought inconsequentially, and ghost-like she seemed, eerie and foreboding with the searchlights shining through the twisted rectangular gaps in her burnt-out upper-works. She reminded him vaguely, tantalisingly, of something, then all of a sudden he had it—the Death Ship of the Ancient Mariner, with the red, barred sun shining through the skeleton of her timbers. No deader than this one here, he thought grimly. Nothing could have been emptier of life than this. … He became aware that the chief officer was standing just behind his shoulder.

"Well, there she is, Johnny," he murmured "Candidate-elect for the Sargasso Sea, or wherever dead ships go. It's been a nice trip. Let's be getting back."

"Yes, sir." Nicolson didn't seem to have heard him. "Permission to take a boat across, sir."

"No." Findhorn's refusal was flat, emphatic. "We've seen all we want to see."

"We've come back a long way for this." There was no particular inflection in Nicolson's voice. "Vannier, the bo'sun, Ferris, myself and a couple of others. We could make it."

"Maybe you could." Bracing himself against the heavy rolling of the *Viroma*, Findhorn made his way to the outer edge of

the port wing and stared down at the sea. Even in the lee of the ship, there were still ten or fifteen feet between troughs and wavecrests, the short, steep seas confused and treacherous. "And maybe you couldn't. I don't propose to risk anyone's life just to find that out."

Nicolson said nothing. Seconds passed, then Findhorn turned to him again, the faintest edge of irritation in his voice.

"Well, what's the matter. Still feeling—what do you call it?—fey? Is that it?" He flung out an impatient arm in the direction of the *Kerry Dancer*. "Damn it all, man, she's obviously abandoned. Burnt-out and hammered till she looks like a floating colander. Do you honestly think there would be any survivors after she had been through that little lot? And even if there were, they're bound to see our lights. Why aren't they all dancing about the upper deck—if there's any deck left—waving their shirts above their heads? Can you tell me that?" Captain Findhorn was being heavily sarcastic.

"No idea, sir, though I should imagine a badly-wounded soldier—McKinnon said there were a few stretcher cases aboard—would find it difficult, far too difficult, even to get out of bed and take his shirt off, far less wave it all over the upper deck," Nicolson said dryly. "A favour, sir. Switch our searchlights off and on, a few 12-pounder ack-ack shots, half-a-dozen rockets. If there's anyone left alive, that'll attract their attention."

Findhorn considered for a moment, then nodded his head. "It's the least I can do, and I don't suppose there's a Jap within fifty

miles. Go ahead, Mr. Nicolson."

But the flicking on and off of the searchlights, the flat, sharp crack of the 12-pounder echoing emptily over the sea had no effect, just no effect at all. The *Kerry Dancer* looked even more lifeless than before, a floating, burnt-out skeleton, deeper than ever in the water, the fo'c'sle only awash now in the deepest troughs. And then came the rockets, seven or eight of them, dazzling white in the pitchy darkness, curving away in shallow arcs to the west; one of them landed on the poop of the *Kerry Dancer*, lay there for long seconds bathing the heaving deck in a fierce white glare, then sputtering to extinction. And still nothing moved aboard the *Kerry Dancer*, no sign of life at all.

"Well, that's it." Captain Findhorn sounded a little weary: even with no hope in the first place he was still disappointed, more than he would have cared to admit. "Satisfied, Mr. Nicolson?"

"Captain, sir!" It was Vannier speaking before Nicolson could answer, his voice high-pitched, excited. "Over there, sir. Look!"

Findhorn had steadied himself on the handrail and had his night glasses to his eyes before Vannier had finished talking. For a few seconds he stood motionless, then he swore softly, lowered his glasses and turned to Nicolson. Nicolson forestalled him.

"I can see it, sir. Breakers. Less than a mile south, of the *Kerry Dancer*—she'll pile up there in twenty minutes, half an hour. Metsana, it must be—it's not just a reef."

"Metsana it is," Findhorn growled. "Good God, I never dreamed we were so close! That settles it. Cut the lights. Full

ahead, hard a starboard and keep her 090—biggest possible offing in the shortest possible time. We're about due to move out of the eye of the typhoon any minute now and heaven only knows how the wind is going to break—what the devil!"

Nicolson's hand was on his upper arm, the lean fingers digging hard into his flesh. His left arm was stretched out, finger pointing towards the stern of the sinking ship.

"I saw a light just now—just after ours went out." His voice was very quiet, almost hushed. "A very faint light—a candle, or maybe even a match. The porthole nearest the well-deck."

Findhorn looked at him, stared out at the dark, tenebrous silhouette of the steamer, then shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Nicolson. Some optical trick, nothing else. The retina can hold some queer after-images, or maybe it was just the scuttle reflecting the dying glow from one of our ——"

"I don't make mistakes of that kind," Nicolson interrupted flatly.

A few seconds passed, seconds of complete silence, then Findhorn spoke again: "Anybody else see that light?" The voice was calm, impersonal enough, the faint edge of anger just showing through.

Again the silence, longer this time, then Findhorn turned abruptly on his heel. "Full ahead, quartermaster, and—Mr. Nicolson! What are you doing?"

Nicolson replaced the phone he had been using without any

sign of haste. “Just asking for a little light on the subject,” he murmured laconically. He turned his back to the captain and gazed out over the sea.

Findhorn’s mouth tightened; he took a few quick steps forward but slowed up suddenly as the port light switched on, wavered uncertainly, then settled on the aftercastle of the *Kerry Dancer*. More slowly still the captain came alongside Nicolson, shoulder to shoulder, both hands reaching up for the dodger rail to steady himself: but seeking balance alone could not have accounted for the strength of his grip on the rail, a grip that tightened and tightened until the straining knuckles were burnished ivory in the washback of light from the beam pinned on the *Kerry Dancer*.

The *Kerry Dancer* was barely three hundred yards away now, and there could be no doubt about it, none at all. Everybody saw it, clearly—the narrow scuttle swinging in, then the long, bare arm stretching out and frantically waving a white towel or sheet, an arm that withdrew suddenly, thrust out a flaming bundle either of paper or rags, held on to it until the flames began to lick and twist around the wrist, then dropped it hissing and smoking, into the sea.

Captain Findhorn sighed, a long, heavy sigh, and unclamped his aching fingers from the dodger rail. His shoulders sagged, the tired, dispirited droop of a man no longer young, a man who has been carrying too heavy a burden for too long a time. Beneath the dark tan his face was almost drained of colour.

“I’m sorry, my boy.” It was only a whisper; he spoke without

turning round, his head shaking slowly from side to side. “Thank God you saw it in time.”

No one heard him, for he was talking only to himself. Nicolson was already gone, sliding on his forearms down the teak ladder rails without his feet touching one step, before the captain had started speaking. And even before he was finished Nicolson had knocked off the gripes’ release links on the port lifeboat, and was already easing off the handbrake, shouting for the bo’sun to muster the emergency crew at the double.

Fireman’s axe in one hand, a heavy, rubber-sheathed torch in the other, Nicolson made his way quickly along the fore and aft passage through the *Kerry Dancer’s* gutted midships superstructure. The steel deck beneath his feet had been buckled and twisted into fantastic shapes by the intense heat, and pieces of charred wood were still smouldering in sheltered corners. Once or twice the heavy, jerky rolling of the ship threw him against the walls of the passage and the fierce heat struck at him even through the canvas gloves on his outflung hands: that the metal should still be so hot after hours of gale force winds and torrential rain gave him a very vivid idea of the tremendous heat that must have been generated by the fire. He wondered, vaguely, what sort of cargo she had been carrying: probably contraband of some sort.

Two-thirds of the way along the passage, on the right hand side, he noticed a door, still intact, still locked. He leaned back and smashed at the lock, straight-legged, with the sole of his

shoe: the door gave half an inch, but held. He swung his axe viciously against the lock, kicked the door open with his foot, pressed the button of his torch and stepped over the coaming. Two charred, shapeless bundles lay on the floor at his feet. They might have been human beings once, they might not. The stench was evil, intolerable, striking at his wrinkling nostrils like a physical blow. Nicolson was back in the passage within three seconds, hooking the door shut with the blade of the axe. Vannier was standing there now, the big red fire extinguisher under his arm, and Nicolson knew that even in those brief moments Vannier had had time to look inside. His eyes were wide and sick, his face like paper.

Nicolson turned abruptly, continued down the passage, Vannier behind him, followed by the bo'sun with a sledge and Ferris with a crowbar. He kicked open two more doors, shone his torch inside. Empty. He came to the break of the after well-deck, and here he could see better, for all the lights of the *Viroma* were trained there. Quickly he looked round for a ladder or companionway, as quickly found it—a few charred sticks of wood lying on the steel deck eight feet below. A wooden companionway, completely destroyed by the fire. Nicolson turned swiftly to the carpenter.

"Ferris, get back to the boat and tell Ames and Docherty to work it aft as far as the well deck here. I don't care how they do it, or how much damage is done to the boat—we can't get sick and wounded men up here. Leave your crowbar."

Nicolson had swung down on his hands and dropped lightly to the deck below before he had finished speaking. In ten paces he had crossed the deck, rung the haft of his axe hard against the steel door of the aftercastle.

"Anyone inside there?" he shouted.

For two or three seconds there was complete silence, then there came a confused, excited babble of voices, all calling to him at once. Nicolson turned quickly to McKinnon, saw his own smile reflected in the wide grin on the bo'sun's face, stepped back a pace and played his torch over the steel door. One clip was hanging loose, swinging pendulum-like with the heavy, water-logged rolling of the *Kerry Dancer*, the other seven jammed hard in position.

The seven-pound sledgehammer was a toy in McKinnon's hands. He struck seven times in all, once for each clip, the metallic clangs reverberating hollowly throughout the sinking ship. And then the door had swung open of its own accord and they were inside.

Nicolson flashed his torch over the back of the steel door and his mouth tightened: only one clip, the one that had been hanging loose, was continued through the door—the rest just ended in smooth rivet heads. And then he was facing aft again, the beam circling slowly round the aftercastle.

It was dark and cold, a dank, dripping dungeon of a place with no covering at all on the slippery steel deckplates, and barely enough headroom for a tall man to stand upright. Three-

tiered metal bunks, innocent of either mattresses or blankets, were ranged round both sides, and about a foot or so above each bunk a heavy iron ring was welded to the bulkheads. A long, narrow table ran fore and aft the length of the compartment, with wooden stools on either side.

There were maybe twenty people in the room, Nicolson estimated; some sitting on the bottom bunks, one or two standing, hanging on to the uprights of the bunks to brace themselves, but most of them still lying down. Soldiers they were, those who were lying on the bunks, and some of them looked as if they would never get up again: Nicolson had seen too many dead men, the waxen cheek, the empty lustreless eye, the boneless relaxation that inhabits a shapeless bundle of clothes. There were also a few nurses in khaki skirts and belted tunics, and two or three civilians. Everyone, even the dusky skinned nurses, seemed white and strained and sick. The *Kerry Dancer* must have lain in the troughs since early afternoon, rolling wickedly, continuously, for endless hours.

"Who's in charge here?" Nicolson's voice beat back at him hollowly from the iron walls of the aftercastle.

"I think he is. Rather, I think he thinks he is." Slim, short, very erect, with silver hair drawn back in a tight bun beneath a liberally be-skewered straw hat, the elderly lady by Nicolson's side still had the fire of authority in the washed-out blue of her eyes. There was disgust in them now, too, as she pointed down at the man huddled over a half-empty whisky bottle on the table.

"But he's drunk, of course."

"Drunk, madam? Did I hear you say I was drunk?" Here was one man who wasn't pale and sick, Nicolson realised: face, neck, even the ears were burnt brick in colour, a dramatic background for the snow-white hair and bristling white eyebrows. "You have the effrontery to—to——" He rose spluttering to his feet, hands pulling down the jacket of his white linen suit. "By heaven, madam, if you were a man——"

"I know," Nicolson interrupted. "You'd horsewhip her within an inch of her life. Shut up and sit down." He turned to the woman again. "What is your name, please?"

"Miss Plenderleith. Constance Plenderleith."

"The ship is sinking, Miss Plenderleith," Nicolson said rapidly. "She's lower by the head every minute. We'll be on the rocks in about half an hour, and the typhoon is going to hit us again any moment." Two or three torches were on now, and he looked round the silent half-circle of faces. "We must hurry. Most of you look like death, and I'm quite sure you feel that way, but we must hurry. We have a lifeboat waiting on the port side, not thirty feet away. Miss Plenderleith, how many can't walk that far?"

"Ask Miss Drachmann. She's the sister in charge." Miss Plenderleith's quite different tone left no doubt that she thoroughly approved of Miss Drachmann.

"Miss Drachmann?" Nicolson asked expectantly.

A girl in a faraway corner turned to look at him. Her face was

in shadow. “Only two, I’m afraid, sir.” Beneath the overtones of strain, the voice was soft and low and musical.

“You’re afraid?”

“All the other stretcher cases died this evening,” she said quietly. “Five of them, sir. They were very sick—and the weather was very bad.” Her voice was not quite steady.

“Five of them,” Nicolson repeated. He shook his head slowly, wonderingly.

“Yes, sir.” Her arm tightened around the child standing on the seat beside her, while her free hand pulled a blanket more tightly round him. “And this little one is just very hungry and very tired.” Gently she tried to remove a grubby thumb from his mouth, but he resisted her efforts and continued to inspect Nicolson with a certain grave detachment.

“He’ll feed and sleep well tonight,” Nicolson promised. “Right, all those who can, walk into the boat. Fittest first—you can help steady the boat and guide the wounded into it. How many arm or leg wounds, apart from the stretcher cases, nurse?”

“Five, sir.”

“No need to call me ‘sir’. You five wait till there’s someone down there to help you.” He tapped the whisky-drinker on the shoulder. “You lead the way.”

“Me?” He was outraged. “I’m in charge here, sir—the captain, in effect, and a captain is always last to——”

“Lead the way,” Nicolson repeated patiently.

“Tell him who you are, Foster,” Miss Plenderleith suggested

acidly.

"I certainly shall." He was on his feet now, a black gladstone bag in one hand, the half-empty bottle in the other. "Farnholme is the name, sir. Brigadier Foster Farnholme." He bowed ironically. "At your service, sir."

"Delighted to hear it." Nicolson smiled coldly. "On your way." Behind him, Miss Plenderleith's low chuckle of amusement came unnaturally loud in the sudden silence.

"By God, you shall pay for this, you insolent young——"

He broke off hurriedly and took a step backwards as Nicolson advanced on him. "Dammit all, sir," he spluttered. "The traditions of the sea. Women and children first."

"I know. Then we'll all line up on the deck and die like little gentlemen while the band plays us under. I won't tell you again, Farnholme."

"Brigadier Farnholme to you—you——"

"You'll get a seventeen gun salute as you go aboard," Nicolson promised. His stiff-armed push sent Farnholme, still clutching his bag, reeling back into the arms of the expectant bo'sun. McKinnon had him outside in less than four seconds.

Nicolson's torch probed round the aftercastle and came to rest on a cloaked figure sitting huddled on a bunk.

"How about you?" Nicolson asked. "You hurt?"

"Allah is good to those who love Allah." The voice was deep, almost sepulchral, the dark eyes deepset above an eagle nose. He stood up, tall, dignified, pulling his black cap tightly over his

head. “I am unhurt.”

“Good. You next, then.” Nicolson swivelled the torch round, picked out a corporal and two soldiers. “How do you boys feel?”

“Ach, we’re fine.” The thin, dark corporal withdrew his puzzled, suspicious stare from the doorway through which Farnholme had just vanished and grinned at Nicolson. It was a grin that belied the bloodshot eyes, the yellow, fever-ridden face. “Britain’s hardy sons. We’re just in splendid form.”

“You’re a liar,” Nicolson said pleasantly. “But thanks very much. Off you go. Mr. Vannier, will you see them into the boat, please? Have them jump every time the lifeboat rides up near the well-deck—it should come within a couple of feet. And a bowline round each person—just in case. The bo’sun will give you a hand.”

He waited until the broad, retreating back of the cloaked man had vanished through the door, then looked curiously at the little lady by his side. “Who’s the boy friend, Miss Plenderleith?”

“He’s a Muslim priest, from Borneo.” She pursed her lips in disapproval. “I spent four years in Borneo once. Every river bandit I ever heard of was a Muslim.”

“He should have a wealthy congregation,” Nicolson murmured. “Right, Miss Plenderleith, you next, then the nurses. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind staying a bit longer, Miss Drachmann? You can see to it that we don’t do too much damage to your stretcher cases when we start carrying them out.”

He turned without waiting for a reply and hurried through the

door on the heels of the last of the nurses. On the well-deck he stood blinking for a few seconds, unaccustomed eyes adjusting themselves to the fierce glare of light from the *Viroma* that threw everything into harsh relief, a merciless whiteness broken by black, impenetrable blocks of shadow. The *Viroma* couldn't be more than a hundred and fifty yards away: with seas like these, Captain Findhorn was gambling, and gambling high.

Less than ten minutes had elapsed since they had come on board, but the *Kerry Dancer* was already appreciably lower in the water; the seas were beginning to break over the starboard side of the after well-deck. The lifeboat was on the port side, one moment plunging a dozen feet down into the depths of a trough, the next riding up almost to the level of the well-deck rail, the men in the boat screwing shut their eyes and averting their heads as they were caught in the glare of the searchlights. Even as Nicolson watched, the corporal released his grip on the rail, stepped into the lifeboat, was grabbed by Docherty and Ames and dropped from sight like a stone. Already McKinnon had swung one of the nurses over the rail and was holding her in readiness for the next upward surge of the boat.

Nicolson stepped to the rail, switched on his torch and peered down over the side. The lifeboat was down in the trough, smashed jarringly into the side of the *Kerry Dancer*, despite all the crew could do to fend her off, as opposing seas flung the lifeboat and ship together: the two upper planks of the lifeboat were stove in and broken, but the gunwale of tough American elm still held.

Fore and aft Farnholme and the Muslim priest clung desperately to the ropes that held them alongside, doing their best to keep the boat in position and to ease it against the shocks of the sea and the hull of the *Kerry Dancer*: as far as Nicolson could judge in the confusion and near darkness, their best was surprisingly good.

"Sir!" Vannier was by his side, his voice agitated, his arm pointing out into the darkness. "We're almost on the rocks!"

Nicolson straightened up and stared along the line of the pointing arm. The sheet-lightning was still playing around the horizon, but even in the intervals of darkness there was no difficulty in seeing it—a long, irregular line of seething white, blooming and fading, creaming and dying as the heavy seas broke over the outlying rocks of the coastline. Two hundred yards away now, Nicolson estimated, two fifty at the most, the *Kerry Dancer* had been drifting south at almost twice the speed he'd estimated. For a moment he stood there immobile, racing mind calculating his chances, then he staggered and almost fell as the *Kerry Dancer* struck heavily, with a grinding, tearing screech of metal, on an underground reef, the decks canting far over on the port side. Nicolson caught a glimpse of McKinnon, feet wide braced on the deck, an arm crooked tightly round the nurse outside the rail, bared teeth white and deepset eyes screwed almost shut as he twisted round and stared into the searchlight, and he knew that McKinnon was thinking the same thing as himself.

"Vannier!" Nicolson's voice was quick, urgent. "Get the Aldis

out of the boat. Signal the captain to stand well off, tell him it's shoal ground, with rocks, and we're fast. Ferris—take the bo'sun's place. Heave 'em in any old how. We're pinned for'ard and if she slews round head into the sea we'll never get anybody off. Right, McKinnon, come with me."

He was back inside the aftercastle in five seconds, McKinnon close behind him. He swept his torch once, quickly, round the metal bunks. Eight left in all—the five walking wounded, Miss Drachmann and the two seriously injured men lying stretched out at full length on the lowest bunks. One was breathing stertorously through his open mouth, moaning and twisting from side to side in deep-drugged sleep. The other lay very still, his breathing so shallow as to be almost imperceptible, his face a waxen ivory: only the slow, aimless wandering of pain-filled eyes showed that he was still alive.

"Right, you five." Nicolson gestured at the soldiers. "Outside as fast as you can. What the hell do you think you're doing?" He reached out, tore a knapsack from the hands of a soldier who was struggling to slip his arms through the straps, flung it into a corner. "You'll be lucky to get out of this with your life, far less your damn luggage. Hurry up and get outside."

Four of the soldiers, urged on by McKinnon, stumbled quickly through the door. The fifth—a pale-faced boy of about twenty—had made no move to rise from his seat. His eyes were wide, his mouth working continuously and his hands were clasped tightly in front of him. Nicolson bent over him.

"Did you hear what I said?" he asked softly.

"He's my pal." He didn't look at Nicolson, gestured to one of the bunks behind him. "He's my best friend. I'm staying with him."

"My God!" Nicolson murmured. "What a time for heroics." He raised his voice, nodded to the door. "Get going."

The boy swore at him, softly, continuously, but broke off as a dull booming sound echoed and vibrated throughout the ship, the noise accompanied by a sharp, sickening lurch even farther to port.

"Water-tight bulkhead abaft the engine-room gone, I'm thinking, sir." McKinnon's soft-spoken Highland voice was calm, almost conversational.

"And she's filling up aft," Nicolson nodded. He wasted no further time. He stooped over the soldier, twisted his left hand in his shirt, jerked him savagely to his feet, then stiffened in sudden surprise as the nurse threw herself forward and caught his free right arm in both her hands. She was tall, taller than he had thought, her hair brushed his eyes and he could smell the faint fragrance of sandalwood. What caught and held his almost shocked attention, however, was her eyes—or, rather, her eye, for the beam from McKinnon's torch lit up only the right hand side of her face. It was an eye of a colour and an intensity that he had seen only once before—in his own mirror. A clear Arctic blue, it was very Arctic right then, and hostile.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.