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When Eight Bells Toll

Alistair MacLean

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From the acclaimed master of action and suspense. The all time classicMillions of pounds in gold bullion are being pirated in the Irish Sea. Investigations by the British Secret Service, and a sixth sense, have bought Philip Calvert to a bleak, lonely bay in the Western Highlands. But the sleepy atmosphere of Torbay is deceptive. The place is the focal point of many mysterious disappearances. Even the unimaginative Highland Police Sergeant seems to be acting a part. But why? This story is Alistair MacLean at his enthralling best. It has all the edge-of-the-seat suspense, and dry humour that millions of readers have devoured for years.

Содержание

ALISTAIR MACLEAN
When Eight Bells Toll

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To Paul and Xenia

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Dusk Monday – 3 a.m. Tuesday

The Peacemaker Colt has now been in production, without change in design, for a century. Buy one to-day and it would be indistinguishable from the one Wyatt Earp wore when he was the Marshal of Dodge City. It is the oldest hand-gun in the world, without question the most famous and, if efficiency in its designated task of maiming and killing be taken as criterion of its worth, then it is also probably the best hand-gun ever made. It is no light thing, it is true, to be wounded by some of the Peacemaker's more highly esteemed competitors, such as the Luger or Mauser: but the high-velocity, narrow-calibre, steel-cased shell from either of those just goes straight through you, leaving a small neat hole in its wake and spending the bulk of its energy on the distant landscape whereas the large and unjacketed soft-nosed lead bullet from the Colt mushrooms on impact, tearing and smashing bone and muscle and tissue as it goes and expending all its energy on you.

In short when a Peacemaker's bullet hits you in, say, the leg, you don't curse, step into shelter, roll and light a cigarette one-handed then smartly shoot your assailant between the eyes. When a Peacemaker bullet hits your leg you fall to the ground unconscious, and if it hits the thigh-bone and you are lucky enough to survive the torn arteries and shock, then you will never walk again without crutches because a totally disintegrated femur leaves the surgeon with no option but to cut your leg off. And so I stood absolutely motionless, not breathing, for the Peacemaker Colt that had prompted this unpleasant train of thought was pointed directly at my right thigh.

Another thing about the Peacemaker: because of the very heavy and varying trigger pressure required to operate the semi-automatic mechanism, it can be wildly inaccurate unless held in a strong and steady hand. There was no such hope here. The hand that held the Colt, the hand that lay so lightly yet purposefully on the radio-operator's table, was the steadiest hand I've ever seen. It was literally motionless. I could see the hand very clearly. The light in the radio cabin was very dim, the rheostat of the angled table lamp had been turned down until only a faint pool of yellow fell on the scratched metal of the table, cutting the arm off at the cuff, but the hand was very clear. Rock-steady, the gun could have lain no quieter in the marbled hand of a statue. Beyond the pool of light I could half sense, half see the dark outline of a figure leaning back against the bulkhead, head slightly tilted to one side, the white gleam of unwinking eyes under the peak of a hat. My eyes went back to the hand. The angle of the Colt hadn't varied by a fraction of a degree. Unconsciously, almost, I braced my right leg to meet the impending shock. Defensively, this was a very good move, about as useful as holding up a sheet of newspaper in front of me. I wished to God that Colonel Sam Colt had gone in for inventing something else, something useful, like safety-pins.

Very slowly, very steadily, I raised both hands, palms outward, until they were level with my shoulders. The careful deliberation was so that the nervously inclined wouldn't be deceived into thinking that I was contemplating anything ridiculous, like resistance. It was probably a pretty superfluous precaution as the man behind that immobile pistol didn't seem to have any nerves and the last thought I had in my head was that of resistance. The sun was long down but the faint red after-glow of sunset still loomed on the northwest horizon and I was perfectly silhouetted against it through the cabin doorway. The lad behind the desk probably had his left hand on the rheostat switch ready to turn it up and blind me at an instant's notice. And there was that gun. I was paid to take chances. I was paid even to step, on occasion, into danger. But I wasn't paid to act the part of a congenital and suicidal idiot.

I hoisted my hands a couple of inches higher and tried to look as peaceful and harmless as possible. The way I felt, that was no feat.

The man with the gun said nothing and did nothing. He remained completely still. I could see the white blur of teeth now. The gleaming eyes stared unwinkingly at me. The smile, the head cocked slightly to one side, the negligent relaxation of the body – the aura in that tiny cabin of a brooding and sardonic menace was so heavy as to be almost palpable. There was something evil, something frighteningly unnatural and wrong and foreboding in the man's stillness and silence and cold-blooded cat-and-mouse indifference. Death was waiting to reach out and touch with his icy forefinger in that tiny cabin. In spite of two Scots grandparents I'm in no way psychic or fey or second-sighted, as far as extra-sensory perception goes I've about the same degree of receptive sensitivity as a lump of old lead. But I could smell death in the air.

'I think we're both making a mistake,' I said. 'Well, you are. Maybe we're both on the same side.' The words came with difficulty, a suddenly dry throat and tongue being no aid to clarity of elocution, but they sounded all right to me, just as I wanted them to sound, low and calm and soothing. Maybe he was a nut case. Humour him. Anything. Just stay alive. I nodded to the stool at the front corner of his desk. 'It's been a hard day. Okay if we sit and talk? I'll keep my hands high, I promise you.'

The total reaction I got was nil. The white teeth and eyes, the relaxed contempt, that iron gun in that iron hand. I felt my own hands begin to clench into fists and hastily unclenched them again, but I couldn't do anything about the slow burn of anger that touched me for the first time.

I smiled what I hoped was a friendly and encouraging smile and moved slowly towards the stool. I faced him all the time, the cordial smile making my face ache and the hands even higher than before. A Peacemaker Colt can kill a steer at sixty yards, God only knew what it would do to me. I tried to put it out of my mind, I've only got two legs and I'm attached to them both.

I made it with both still intact. I sat down, hands still high, and started breathing again. I'd stopped breathing but hadn't been aware of it, which was understandable enough as I'd had other things on my mind, such as crutches, bleeding to death and such-like matters that tend to grip the imagination.

The Colt was as motionless as ever. The barrel hadn't followed me as I'd moved across the cabin, it was still pointing rigidly at the spot where I'd been standing ten seconds earlier.

I moved fast going for that gun-hand, but it was no breakneck dive. I didn't, I was almost certain, even have to move fast, but I haven't reached the advanced age in which my chief thinks he honours me by giving me all the dirtiest jobs going by ever taking a chance: when I don't have to.

I eat all the right foods, take plenty of exercise and, even although no insurance company in the world will look at me, their medical men would pass me any time, but even so I couldn't tear that gun away. The hand that had looked like marble felt like marble, only colder. I'd smelled death all right, but the old man hadn't been hanging around with his scythe at the ready, he'd been and gone and left this lifeless shell behind him. I straightened, checked that the windows were curtained, closed the door noiselessly, locked it as quietly and switched on the overhead light.

There's seldom any doubt about the exact time of a murder in an old English country house murder story. After a cursory examination and a lot of pseudo-medical mumbo-jumbo, the good doctor drops the corpse's wrist and says, 'The decedent deceased at 11.57 last night' or words to that effect, then, with a thin deprecatory smile magnanimously conceding that he's a member of the fallible human race, adds, 'Give or take a minute or two.' The good doctor outside the pages of the detective novel finds it rather more difficult. Weight, build, ambient temperature and cause of death all bear so heavily and often unpredictably on the cooling of the body that the estimated time of death may well lie in a span of several hours.

I'm not a doctor, far less a good one, and all I could tell about the man behind the desk was that he had been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in but not long enough for it to wear off. He was stiff as a man frozen to death in a Siberian winter. He'd been gone for hours. How many, I'd no idea.

He wore four gold bands on his sleeves, so that would seem to make him the captain. The captain in the radio cabin. Captains are seldom found in the radio cabin and never behind the desk.

He was slumped back in his chair, his head to one side, the back of it resting against a jacket hanging from a hook on the bulkhead, the side of it against a wall cabinet. Rigor mortis kept him in that position but he should have slipped to the floor or at least slumped forward on to the table before rigor mortis had set in.

There were no outward signs of violence that I could see but on the assumption that it would be stretching the arm of coincidence a bit far to assume that he had succumbed from natural causes while preparing to defend his life with his Peacemaker I took a closer look. I tried to pull him upright but he wouldn't budge. I tried harder, I heard the sound of cloth ripping, then suddenly he was upright, then fallen over to the left of the table, the right arm pivoting stiffly around and upwards, the Colt an accusing finger pointing at heaven.

I knew now how he had died and why he hadn't fallen forward before. He'd been killed by a weapon that projected from his spinal column, between maybe the sixth and seventh vertebræ, I couldn't be sure, and the handle of this weapon had caught in the pocket of the jacket on the bulkhead and held him there.

My job was one that had brought me into contact with a fair number of people who had died from a fair assortment of unnatural causes, but this was the first time I'd ever seen a man who had been killed by a chisel. A half-inch wood chisel, apparently quite ordinary in every respect except that its wooden handle had been sheathed by a bicycle's rubber hand-grip, the kind that doesn't show fingerprints. The blade was imbedded to a depth of at least four inches and even allowing for an edge honed to a razor sharpness it had taken a man as powerful as he was violent to strike that blow. I tried to jerk the chisel free, but it wouldn't come. It often happens that way with a knife: bone or cartilage that has been pierced by a sharp instrument locks solid over the steel when an attempt is made to withdraw it. I didn't try again. The chances were that the killer himself had tried to move it and failed. He wouldn't have wanted to abandon a handy little sticker like that if he could help it. Maybe someone had interrupted him. Or maybe he had a large supply of half-inch wood chisels and could afford to leave the odd one lying around carelessly in someone's back.

Anyway, I didn't really want it. I had my own. Not a chisel but a knife. I eased it out of the plastic sheath that had been sewn into the inner lining of my coat, just behind the neck. It didn't look so much, a four-inch handle and a little double-edged three-inch blade. But that little blade could slice through a two-inch manila with one gentle stroke and the point was the point of a lancet. I looked at it and looked at the inner door behind the radio table, the one that led to the radio-operator's sleeping cabin, then I slid a little fountain-pen torch from my breast pocket, crossed to the outer door, switched off the overhead lamp, did the same for the table lamp and stood there waiting.

How long I stood there I couldn't be sure. Maybe two minutes, maybe as long as five. Why I waited, I don't know. I told myself I was waiting until my eyes became adjusted to the almost total darkness inside the cabin, but I knew it wasn't that. Maybe I was waiting for some noise, the slightest imagined whisper of stealthy sound, maybe I was waiting for something, anything, to happen – or maybe I was just scared to go through that inner door. Scared for myself? Perhaps I was. I couldn't be sure. Or perhaps I was scared of what I would find behind that door. I transferred the knife to my left hand – I'm right-handed but ambidextrous in some things – and slowly closed my fingers round the handle of the inner door.

It took me all of twenty seconds to open that door the twelve inches that was necessary for me to squeeze through the opening. In the very last half-inch the damned hinges creaked. It was a tiny sound, a sound you wouldn't normally have heard two yards away. With my steel-taut nerves in the state they were in, a six-inch naval gun going off in my ear would have sounded muffled by contrast. I stood petrified as any graven image, the dead man by my side was no more immobile than I. I could hear the thump of my accelerating heartbeat and savagely wished the damned thing would keep quiet.

If there was anyone inside waiting to flash a torch in my face and shoot me, knife me or do a little fancy carving up with a chisel, he was taking his time about it. I treated my lungs to a little

oxygen, stepped soundlessly and sideways through the opening. I held the flash at the full outstretch extent of my right arm. If the ungodly are going to shoot at a person who is shining a torch at them they generally aim in the very close vicinity of the torch as the unwary habitually hold a torch in front of them. This, as I had learnt many years previously from a colleague who'd just had a bullet extracted from the lobe of his left lung because of this very unwariness, was a very unwise thing to do. So I held the torch as far from my body as possible, drew my left arm back with the knife ready to go, hoping fervently that the reactions of any person who might be in that cabin were slower than mine, and slid forward the switch of the torch.

There was someone there all right, but I didn't have to worry about his reactions. Not any more.

He'd none left. He was lying face down on the bunk with that huddled shapeless look that belongs only to the dead. I made a quick traverse of the cabin with the pencil beam. The dead man was alone. As in the radio cabin, there was no sign of a struggle.

I didn't even have to touch him to ascertain the cause of death. The amount of blood that had seeped from that half-inch incision in his spine wouldn't have filled a teaspoon. I wouldn't have expected to find more; when the spinal column has been neatly severed the heart doesn't go on pumping long enough to matter a damn. There would have been a little more internal bleeding, but not much.

The curtains were drawn. I quartered every foot of the deck, bulkheads and furniture with my flash. I don't know what I expected to find: what I found was nothing. I went out, closed the door behind me and searched the radio cabin with the same results. There was nothing more for me here, I had found all I wanted to find, all I had never wanted to find. And I never once looked at the faces of the two dead men. I didn't have to, they were faces I knew as well as the face that looked back at me every morning out of my shaving mirror. Seven days previously they had dined with me and our chief in our favourite pub in London and they had been as cheerful and relaxed as men in their profession can ever be, their normal still watchfulness overlaid by the momentary savouring of the lighter side of life they knew could never really be for them. And I had no doubt they had gone on being as still and watchful as ever, but they hadn't been watchful enough and now they were only still. What had happened to them was what inevitably happened to people in our trade, which would inevitably happen to myself when the time came. No matter how clever and strong and ruthless you were, sooner or later you would meet up with someone who was cleverer and stronger and more ruthless than yourself. And that someone would have a half-inch wood chisel in his hand and all your hardly won years of experience and knowledge and cunning counted for nothing for you never saw him coming and you never saw him coming because you had met your match at last and then you were dead.

And I had sent them to their deaths. Not willingly, not knowingly, but the ultimate responsibility had been mine. This had all been my idea, my brain-child and mine alone, and I'd overridden all objections and fast-talked our very doubtful and highly sceptical chief into giving if not his enthusiastic approval at least his grudging consent. I'd told the two men, Baker and Delmont, that if they played it my way no harm would come to them so they'd trusted me blindly and played it my way and now they lay dead beside me. No hesitation, gentlemen, put your faith in me, only see to it that you make your wills first of all.

There was nothing more to be done here now.

I'd sent two men to their deaths and that couldn't be undone. It was time to be gone.

I opened that outer door the way you'd open the door to a cellar you knew to be full of cobras and black widow spiders. The way *you* would open the door, that is: were cobras and black widow spiders all I had to contend with aboard that ship, I'd have gone through that door without a second thought, they were harmless and almost lovable little creatures compared to some specimens of homo sapiens that were loose on the decks of the freighter *Nantesville* that night.

With the door opened at its fullest extent I just stood there. I stood there for a long time without moving a muscle of body or limbs, breathing shallowly and evenly, and when you stand like that even

a minute seems half a lifetime. All my being was in my ears. I just stood there and listened. I could hear the slap of waves against the hull, the occasional low metallic rumble as the *Nantesville* worked against wind and tide on its moorings, the low moan of the strengthening night wind in the rigging and, once, the far-off lonely call of a curlew. Lonesome sounds, safe sounds, sounds of the night and nature. Not the sounds I was listening for. Gradually, these sounds too became part of the silence. Foreign sounds, sounds of stealth and menace and danger, there were none. No sound of breathing, no slightest scrape of feet on steel decks, no rustle of clothing, nothing. If there was anyone waiting out there he was possessed of a patience and immobility that was superhuman and I wasn't worried about superhumans that night, just about humans, humans with knives and guns and chisels in their hands. Silently I stepped out over the storm sill.

I've never paddled along the night-time Orinoco in a dug-out canoe and had a thirty-foot anaconda drop from a tree, wrap a coil around my neck and start constricting me to death and what's more I don't have to go there now to describe the experience for I know exactly what it feels like. The sheer animal power, the feral ferocity of the pair of huge hands that closed round my neck from behind was terrifying, something I'd never known of, never dreamed of. After the first moment of blind panic and shocked paralysis, there was only one thought in my mind: it comes to us all and now it has come to me, someone who is cleverer and stronger and more ruthless than I am.

I lashed back with all the power of my right foot but the man behind me knew every rule in the book. His own right foot, travelling with even more speed and power than mine, smashed into the back of my swinging leg. It wasn't a man behind me, it was a centaur and he was shod with the biggest set of horseshoes I'd ever come across. My leg didn't just feel as if it had been broken, it felt as if it had been cut in half. I felt his left toe behind my left foot and stamped on it with every vicious ounce of power left me but when my foot came down his toe wasn't there any more. All I had on my feet was a pair of thin rubber swimming moccasins and the agonising jar from the steel deck plates shot clear to the top of my head. I reached up my hands to break his little fingers but he knew all about that too for his hands were clenched into iron-hard balls with the second knuckle grinding into the carotid artery. I wasn't the first man he'd strangled and unless I did something pretty quickly I wasn't going to be the last either. In my ears I could hear the hiss of compressed air escaping under high pressure and behind my eyes the shooting lines and flashes of colour were deepening and brightening by the moment.

What saved me in those first few seconds were the folded hood and thick rubberised canvas neck ruff of the scuba suit I was wearing under my coat. But it wasn't going to save me many seconds longer, the life's ambition of the character behind me seemed to be to make his knuckles meet in the middle of my neck. With the progress he was making that wouldn't take him too long, he was half-way there already.

I bent forward in a convulsive jerk. Half of his weight came on my back, that throttling grip not easing a fraction, and at the same time he moved his feet as far backwards as possible – the instinctive reaction to my move, he would have thought that I was making a grab for one of his legs. When I had him momentarily off-balance I swung round in a short arc till both our backs were towards the sea. I thrust backwards with all my strength, one, two, three steps, accelerating all the way. The *Nantesville* didn't boast of any fancy teak guard-rails, just small-section chain, and the small of the strangler's back took our combined charging weights on the top chain.

If I'd taken that impact I'd have broken my back or slipped enough discs to keep an orthopædic surgeon in steady employment for months. But no shouts of agony from this lad. No gasps, even. Not a whisper of sound. Maybe he was a deaf mute – I'd heard of several deaf mutes possessed of this phenomenal strength, part of nature's compensatory process, I suppose.

But he'd been forced to break his grip, to grab swiftly at the upper chain to save us both from toppling over the side into the cold dark waters of Loch Houron. I thrust myself away and spun round

to face him, my back against the radio office bulkhead. I needed that bulkhead, too -any support while my swimming head cleared and a semblance of life came back into my numbed right leg.

I could see him now as he straightened up from the guardrail. Not clearly – it was too dark for that – but I could see the white blur of face and hands and the general outline of his body.

I'd expected some towering giant of a man, but he was no giant – unless my eyes weren't focusing properly, which was likely enough. From what I could see in the gloom he seemed a compact and well enough made figure, but that was all. He wasn't even as big as I was. Not that that meant a thing – George Hackenschmidt was a mere five foot nine and a paltry fourteen stone when he used to throw the Terrible Turk through the air like a football and prance around the training ring with eight hundred pounds of cement strapped to his back just to keep him in trim. I had no compunction or false pride about running from a smaller man and as far as this character was concerned the farther and faster the better. But not yet. My right leg wasn't up to it. I reached my hand behind my neck and brought the knife down, holding it in front of me, the blade in the palm of my hand so that he couldn't see the sheen of steel in the faint starlight.

He came at me calmly and purposefully, like a man who knew exactly what he intended to do and was in no doubt at all as to the outcome of his intended action. God knows I didn't doubt he had reason enough for his confidence. He came at me sideways so that my foot couldn't damage him, with his right hand extended at the full stretch of his arm. A one track mind. He was going for my throat again. I waited till his hand was inches from my face then jerked my own right hand violently upwards. Our hands smacked solidly together as the blade sliced cleanly through the centre of his palm.

He wasn't a deaf mute after all. Three short unprintable words, an unjustified slur on my ancestry, and he stepped quickly backwards, rubbed the back and front of his hand against his clothes then licked it in a queer animal-like gesture. He peered closely at the blood, black as ink in the starlight, welling from both sides of his hand.

'So the little man has a little knife, has he?' he said softly. The voice was a shock. With this caveman-like strength I'd have expected a cavemanlike intelligence and voice to match, but the words came in the calm, pleasant, cultured almost accentless speech of the well-educated southern Englishman. 'We shall have to take the little knife from him, shan't we?' He raised his voice. 'Captain Imrie?' At least, that's what the name sounded like.

'Be quiet, you fool!' The urgent irate voice came from the direction of the crew accommodation aft. 'Do you want to -'

'Don't worry, Captain.' The eyes didn't leave me. 'I have him. Here by the wireless office. He's armed. A knife. I'm just going to take it away from him.'

'You have him? You have him? Good, good, good!' It was the kind of a voice a man uses when he's smacking his lips and rubbing his hands together: it was also the kind of voice that a German or Austrian uses when he speaks English. The short guttural 'gut' was unmistakable. 'Be careful. This one I want alive. Jacques! Henry! Kramer! All of you. Quickly! The bridge. Wireless office.'

'Alive,' the man opposite me said pleasantly, 'can also mean not quite dead.' He sucked some more blood from the palm of his hand. 'Or will you hand over the knife quietly and peaceably? I would suggest -'

I didn't wait for more. This was an old technique. You talked to an opponent who courteously waited to hear you out, not appreciating that half-way through some well-turned phrase you were going to shoot him through the middle when, lulled into a sense of temporary false security, he least expected it. Not quite cricket, but effective, and I wasn't going to wait until it took effect on me. I didn't know how he was coming at me but I guessed it would be a dive, either head or feet first and that if he got me down on the deck I wouldn't be getting up again. Not without assistance. I took a quick step forward, flashed my torch a foot from his face, saw the dazzled eyes screw shut for the only fraction of time I'd ever have and kicked him.

It wasn't as hard as it might have been, owing to the fact that my right leg still felt as if it were broken, nor as accurate, because of the darkness, but it was a pretty creditable effort in the circumstances and it should have left him rolling and writhing about the deck, whooping in agony. Instead he just stood there, unable to move, bent forward and clutching himself with his hands. He was more than human, all right. I could see the sheen of his eyes, but I couldn't see the expression in them, which was just as well as I don't think I would have cared for it very much.

I left. I remembered a gorilla I'd once seen in Basle Zoo, a big black monster who used to twist heavy truck tyres into figures of eight for light exercise. I'd as soon have stepped inside that cage as stay around that deck when this lad became more like his old self again. I hobbled forward round the corner of the radio office, climbed up a liferaft and stretched myself flat on the deck.

The nearest running figures, some with torches, were already at the foot of the companionway leading up to the bridge. I had to get right aft to the rope with the rubber-covered hook I'd swung up to swarm aboard. But I couldn't do it until the midship decks were clear. And then, suddenly, I couldn't do it all: now that the need for secrecy and stealth was over someone had switched on the cargo loading lights and the midships and foredecks were bathed in a brilliant dazzle of white. One of the foredeck arc lamps was on a jumbo mast, just for'ard of and well above where I was lying. I felt as exposed as a fly pinned to a white ceiling. I flattened myself on that deck as if I were trying to push myself through it.

They were up the companion way and by the radio office now. I heard the sudden exclamations and curses and knew they'd found the hurt man:

I didn't hear his voice so I assumed he wasn't able to speak yet.

The curt, authoritative German-accented voice took command.

'You cackle like a flock of hens. Be silent. Jacques, you have your machine-pistol?'

'I have my pistol, Captain.' Jacques had the quiet competent sort of voice that I would have found reassuring in certain circumstances but didn't very much care for in the present ones.

'Go aft. Stand at the entrance to the saloon and face for'ard. Cover the midships decks. We will go to the fo'c'sle and then come aft in line abreast and drive him to you. If he doesn't surrender to you, shoot him through the legs. I want him alive.'

God, this was worse than the Peacemaker Colt. At least that fired only one shot at a time. I'd no idea what kind of machine-pistol Jacques had, probably it fired bursts of a dozen or more. I could feel my right thigh muscle begin to stiffen again, it was becoming almost a reflex action now.

'And if he jumps over the side, sir?'

'Do I have to tell you, Jacques?'

'No, sir.'

I was just as clever as Jacques was. He didn't have to tell me either. That nasty dry taste was back in my throat and mouth again. I'd a minute left, no more, and then it would be too late. I slid silently to the side of the radio office roof, the starboard side, the side remote from the spot where Captain Imrie was issuing curt instructions to his men, lowered myself soundlessly to the deck and made my way to the wheelhouse.

I didn't need my torch in there, the backwash of light from the big arc-lamps gave me all the illumination I wanted. Crouching down, to keep below window level, I looked around and saw what I wanted right away – a metal box of distress flares.

Two quick flicks of the knife severed the lashings that secured the flare-box to the deck. One piece of rope, perhaps ten feet in all, I left secured to a handle of the box. I pulled a plastic bag from the pocket of my coat, tore off the coat and the yachtsman's rubber trousers that I was wearing over my scuba suit, stuffed them inside and secured the bag to my waist. The coat and trousers had been essential. A figure in a dripping rubber diving suit walking across the decks of the *Nantesville* would hardly have been likely to escape comment whereas in the dusk and with the outer clothing I had on I could have passed for a crewman and, indeed, had done so twice at a distance: equally

important, when I'd left the port of Torbay in my rubber dinghy it had been broad daylight and the sight of a scuba-clad figure putting to sea towards evening wouldn't have escaped comment either, as the curiosity factor of the inhabitants of the smaller ports of the Western Highlands and Islands did not, I had discovered, lag noticeably behind that of their mainland brethren. Some would put it even more strongly than that.

Still crouching low, I moved out through the wheelhouse door on to the starboard wing of the bridge. I reached the outer end and stood up straight. I had to, I had to take the risk, it was now or never at all, I could hear the crew already beginning to move forward to start their search. I lifted the flare-box over the side eased it down the full length of the rope and started to swing it slowly, gently, from side to side, like a leadsman preparing to cast his lead.

The box weighed at least forty pounds, but I barely noticed the weight. The pendulum arc increased with every swing I made. It had reached an angle of about forty-five degrees on each swing now, pretty close to the maximum I could get and both time and my luck must be running out, I felt about as conspicuous as a trapeze artist under a dozen spotlights and just about as vulnerable too. As the box swung aft on its last arc I gave the rope a final thrust to achieve all the distance and momentum I could, opened my hands at the extremity of the arc and dropped down behind the canvas wind-dodger. It was as I dropped that I remembered I hadn't holed the damned box, I had no idea whether it would float or sink but I did have a very clear idea of what would happen to me if it didn't sink. One thing for sure, it was too late to worry about it now.

I heard a shout come from the main deck, some twenty or thirty feet aft of the bridge. I was certain I had been seen but I hadn't. A second after the shout came a loud and very satisfactory splash and a voice I recognised as Jacques's shouting: 'He's gone over the side. Starboard abaft the bridge. A torch quick!' He must have been walking aft as ordered, seen this dark blur falling, heard the splash and come on the inevitable conclusion. A dangerous customer who thought fast, was Jacques. In three seconds he'd told his mates all they required to know: what had happened, where and what he wanted done as the necessary preliminary to shooting me full of holes.

The men who had been moving forward to start the sweep for me now came running aft, pounding along the deck directly beneath where I was crouching on the wing of the bridge.

'Can you see him, Jacques?' Captain Imrie's voice, very quick, very calm.

'Not yet, sir.'

'He'll be up soon.' I wished he wouldn't sound so damned confident. 'A dive like that must have knocked most of the breath out of him. Kramer, two men and into the boat. Take lamps and circle around. Henry, the box of grenades. Carlo, the bridge, quick. Starboard searchlight.'

I'd never thought of the boat, that was bad enough, but the grenades! I felt chilled. I knew what an underwater explosion, even a small explosion, can do to the human body, it was twenty times as deadly as the same explosion on land. And I had to, I just had to, be in that water in minutes. But at least I could do something about that searchlight, it was only two feet above my head. I had the power cable in my left hand, the knife in my right and had just brought the two into contact when my mind stopped thinking about those damned grenades and started working again. Cutting that cable would be about as clever as leaning over the wind-dodger and yelling 'Here I am, come and catch me' – a dead giveaway that I was still on board. Clobbering Carlo from behind as he came up the ladder would have the same effect. And I couldn't fool them twice. Not people like these. Hobbling as fast as I could I passed through the wheelhouse on to the port wing, slid down the ladder and ran towards the forepeak. The foredeck was deserted.

I heard a shout and the harsh chatter of some automatic weapon – Jacques and his machine-pistol, for a certainty. Had he imagined he'd seen something, had the box come to the surface, had he actually seen the box and mistaken it for me in the dark waters? It must have been the last of these – he wouldn't have wasted ammunition on anything he'd definitely recognised as a box. Whatever

the reason, it had all my blessing. If they thought I was floundering about down there, riddled like a Gruyère cheese, then they wouldn't be looking for me up here.

They had the port anchor down. I swung over the side on a rope, got my feet in the hawse-pipe, reached down and grabbed the chain. The international athletics board should have had then-stop-watches on me that night, I must have set a new world record for shinning down anchor chains.

The water was cold but my exposure suit took care of that. It was choppy, with a heavy tide running, both of which suited me well. I swam down the port side of the *Nantesville*, underwater for ninety per cent of the time and I saw no one and no one saw me: all the activity was on the starboard side of the vessel.

My aqualung unit and weights and flippers were where I had left them, tied to the top of the rudder post – the *Nantesville* was not much more than half-way down to her marks and the top of the post not far under water. Fitting on an aqualung in choppy seas with a heavy tide running isn't the easiest of tasks but the thought of Kramer and his grenades was a considerable help. Besides, I was in a hurry to be gone for I had a long way to go and many things to do when I arrived at my destination.

I could hear the engine note of the lifeboat rising and falling as it circled off the ship's starboard side but at no time did it come within a hundred feet of me. No more shots were fired and Captain Imrie had obviously decided against using the grenades. I adjusted the weights round my waist, dropped down into the dark safety of the waters, checked my direction on my luminous wrist compass and started to swim. After five minutes I came to the surface and after another five felt my feet ground on the shore of the rocky islet where I'd cached my rubber dinghy.

I clambered up on the rocks and looked back. The *Nantesville* was ablaze with light. A searchlight was shining down into the sea and the lifeboat still circling around. I could hear the steady clanking of the anchor being weighed. I hauled the dinghy into the water, climbed in, unshipped the two stubby oars and paddled off to the southwest. I was still within effective range of the searchlight but its chances of picking up a black-clad figure in a low-silhouette black dinghy on those black waters were remote indeed.

After a mile I shipped the oars and started up the outboard. Or tried to start it up. Outboards always work perfectly for me, except when I'm cold, wet and exhausted. Whenever I really need them, they never work. So I took to the stubby oars again and rowed and rowed and rowed, but not for what seemed any longer than a month. I arrived back at the *Firecrest* at ten to three in the morning.

TWO
Tuesday: 3 a.m. – dawn

'Calvert?' Hunslett's voice was a barely audible murmur in the darkness.

'Yes.' Standing there above me on the *Firecrest's* deck, he was more imagined than seen against the blackness of the night sky. Heavy clouds had rolled in from the south-west and the last of the stars were gone. Big heavy drops of cold rain were beginning to spatter off the surface of the sea. 'Give me a hand to get the dinghy aboard.'

'How did it go?'

'Later. This first.' I climbed up the accommodation ladder, painter in hand. I had to lift my right leg over the gunwale. Stiff and numb and just beginning to ache again, it could barely take my weight. 'And hurry. We can expect company soon.'

'So that's the way of it,' Hunslett said thoughtfully, 'Uncle Arthur *will* be pleased about this.'

I said nothing to that. Our employer, Rear-Admiral Sir Arthur Arnford-Jason, K.C.B. and most of the rest of the alphabet, wasn't going to be pleased at all. We heaved the dripping dinghy inboard, unclamped the outboard and took them both on to the foredeck.

'Get me a couple of waterproof bags,' I said. 'Then start getting the anchor chain in. Keep it quiet – leave the brake pawl off and use a tarpaulin.'

'We're leaving?'

'We would if we had any sense. We're staying. Just get the anchor up and down.'

By the time he'd returned with the bags I'd the dinghy deflated and in its canvas cover. I stripped off my aqualung and scuba suit and stuffed them into one of the bags along with the weights, my big-dialled waterproof watch and the combined wrist-compass and depth-gauge. I put the outboard in the other bag, restraining the impulse just to throw the damn' thing overboard: an outboard motor was a harmless enough object to have aboard any boat, but we already had one attached to the wooden dinghy hanging from the davits over the stern.

Hunslett had the electric windlass going and the chain coming in steadily. An electric windlass is in itself a pretty noiseless machine: when weighing anchor all the racket comes from four sources – the chain passing through the hawse-pipe, the clacking of the brake pawl over the successive stops, the links passing over the drum itself and the clattering of the chain as it falls into the chain locker. About the first of these we could do nothing: but with the brake pawl off and a heavy tarpaulin smothering the sound from the drum and chain locker, the noise level was surprisingly low. Sound travels far over the surface of the sea, but the nearest anchored boats were almost two hundred yards away – we had no craving for the company of other boats in harbour. At two hundred yards, in Torbay, we felt ourselves uncomfortably close: but the sea-bed shelved fairly steeply away from the little town and our present depth of twenty fathoms was the safe maximum for the sixty fathoms of chain we carried.

I heard the click as Hunslett's foot stepped on the deck-switch. 'She's up and down.'

'Put the pawl in for a moment. If that drum slips, I'll have no hands left.' I pulled the bags right for'ard, leaned out under the pulpit rail and used lengths of heaving line to secure them to the anchor chain. When the lines were secure I lifted the bags over the side and let them dangle from the chain.

'I'll take the weight,' I said. 'Lift the chain off the drum – we'll lower it by hand.'

Forty fathoms is 240 feet of chain and letting that lot down to the bottom didn't do my back or arms much good at all, and the rest of me was a long way below par before we started. I was pretty close to exhaustion from the night's work, my neck ached fiercely, my leg only badly and I was shivering violently. I know of various ways of achieving a warm rosy glow but wearing only a set of underclothes in the middle of a cold, wet and windy autumn night in the Western Isles is not one of

them. But at last the job was done and we were able to go below. If anyone wanted to investigate what lay at the foot of our anchor chain he'd need a steel articulated diving suit.

Hunslett pulled the saloon door to behind us, moved around in the darkness adjusting the heavy velvet curtains then switched on a small table lamp. It didn't give much light but we knew from experience that it didn't show up through the velvet, and advertising the fact that we were up and around in the middle of the night was the last thing I wanted to do.

Hunslett had a dark narrow saturnine face, with a strong jaw, black bushy eyebrows and thick black hair – the kind of face which is so essentially an expression in itself that it rarely shows much else. It was expressionless now and very still.

'You'll have to buy another shirt,' he said. 'Your collar's too tight. Leaves marks.'

I stopped towelling myself and looked in a mirror. Even in that dim light my neck looked a mess. It was badly swollen and discoloured, with four wicked-looking bruises where the thumbs and forefinger joints had sunk deep into the flesh. Blue and green and purple they were, and they looked as if they would be there for a long time to come.

'He got me from behind. He's wasting his time being a criminal, he'd sweep the board at the Olympic weight-lifting. I was lucky. He also wears heavy boots.' I twisted around and looked down at my right calf. The bruise was bigger than my fist and if it missed out any of the colours of the rainbow I couldn't offhand think which one. There was a deep red gash across the middle of it and blood was ebbing slowly along its entire length. Hunslett gazed at it with interest.

'If you hadn't been wearing that tight scuba suit, you'd have most like bled to death. I better fix that for you.'

'I don't need bandages. What I need is a Scotch. Stop wasting your time. Oh, hell, sorry, yes, you'd better fix it, we can't have our guests sloshing about ankle deep in blood.'

'You're very sure we're going to have guests?'

'I half expected to have them waiting on the doorstep when I got back to the *Firecrest.* We're going to have guests, all right. Whatever our pals aboard the *Nantesville* may be, they're no fools. They'll have figured out by this time that I could have approached only by dinghy. They'll know damn' well that it was no nosey-parker local prowling about the ship – local lads in search of a bit of fun don't go aboard anchored ships in the first place. In the second place the locals wouldn't go near Beul nan Uamh – the mouth of the grave – in daylight, far less at night time. Even the *Pilot* says the place has an evil reputation. And in the third place no local lad would get aboard as I did, behave aboard as I did or leave as I did. The local lad would be dead.'

'I shouldn't wonder. And?'

'So we're not locals. We're visitors. We wouldn't be staying at any hotel or boarding-house – too restricted, couldn't move. Almost certainly we'll have a boat. Now, where would our boat be? Not to the north of Loch Houron for with a forecast promising a south-west Force 6 strengthening to Force 7, no boat is going to be daft enough to hang about a lee shore in that lot. The only holding ground and shallow enough sheltered anchorage in the other direction, down the Sound for forty miles, is in Torbay – and that's only four or five miles from where the *Nantesville* was lying at the mouth of Loch Houron. Where would you look for us?'

'I'd look for a boat anchored in Torbay. Which gun do you want?'

'I don't want any gun. You don't want any gun. People like us don't carry guns.'

'Marine biologists don't carry guns,' he nodded. 'Employees of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries don't carry guns. Civil Servants are above reproach. So we play it clever. You're the boss.'

'I don't feel clever any more. And I'll take long odds that I'm not your boss any more. Not after Uncle Arthur hears what I have to tell him.'

'You haven't told *me* anything yet.' He finished tying the bandage round my leg and straightened. 'How's that feel?'

I tried it. 'Better. Thanks. Better still when you've taken the cork from that bottle. Get into pyjamas or something. People found fully dressed in the middle of the night cause eyebrows to go up.' I towelled my head as vigorously as my tired arms would let me. One wet hair on my head and eyebrows wouldn't just be lifting, they'd be disappearing into hairlines. 'There isn't much to tell and all of it is bad.'

He poured me a large drink, a smaller one for himself, and added water to both. It tasted the way Scotch always does after you've swum and rowed for hours and damn' near got yourself killed in the process.

'I got there without trouble. I hid behind Carrara Point till it was dusk and then paddled out to the Bogha Nuadh. I left the dinghy there and swam underwater as far as the stern of the ship. It was the *Nantesville* all right. Name and flag were different, a mast was gone and the white superstructure was now stone – but it was her all right. Near as dammit didn't make it – it was close to the turn of the tide but it took me thirty minutes against that current. Must be wicked at the full flood or ebb.'

'They say it's the worst on the West Coast -worse even than Coirebhreachan.'

'I'd rather not be the one to find out. I had to hang on to the stern post for ten minutes before I'd got enough strength back to shin up that rope.'

'You took a chance.'

'It was near enough dark. Besides,' I added bitterly, 'there are some precautions intelligent people don't think to take about crazy ones. There were only two or three people in the after accommodation. Just a skeleton crew aboard, seven or eight, no more. All the original crew have vanished completely'

'No sign of them anywhere?'

'No sign. Dead or alive, no sign at all. I had a bit of bad luck. I was leaving the after accommodation to go to the bridge when I passed someone a few feet away. I gave a half wave and grunted something and he answered back, I don't know what. I followed him back to the quarters. He picked up a phone in the crew's mess and I heard him talking to someone, quick and urgent. Said that one of the original crew must have been hiding and was trying to get away. I couldn't stop him – he faced the door as he was talking and he had a gun in his hand. I had to move quickly. I walked to the bridge structure -'

'You what? When you knew they were on to you? Mr Calvert, you want your bloody head examined.'

'Uncle Arthur will put it less kindly. It was the only chance I'd ever have. Besides, if they thought it was only a terrified member of the original crew they wouldn't have been so worried: if this guy had seen me walking around dripping wet in a scuba suit he'd have turned me into a colander.

He wasn't sure. On the way for'ard I passed another bloke without incident – he'd left the bridge superstructure before the alarm had been given, I suppose. I didn't stop at the bridge. I went right for'ard and hid behind the winchman's shelter. For about ten minutes there was a fair bit of commotion and a lot of flash-light work around the bridge island then I saw and heard them moving aft – must have thought I was still in the after accommodation.

'I went through all the officers' cabins in the bridge island. No one. One cabin, an engineer's, I think, had smashed furniture and a carpet heavily stained with dry blood. Next door, the captain's bunk had been saturated with blood.'

'They'd been warned to offer no resistance.'

'I know. Then I found Baker and Delmont.'

'So you found them. Baker and Delmont.' Hunslett's eyes were hooded, gazing down at the glass in his hand. I wished to God he'd show some expression on that dark face of his.

'Delmont must have made a last-second attempt to send a call for help. They'd been warned not to, except in emergency, so they must have been discovered. He'd been stabbed in the back with a half-inch wood chisel and then dragged into the radio officer's cabin which adjoined the radio office.

Some time later Baker had come in. He was wearing an officer's clothes – some desperate attempt to disguise himself, I suppose. He'd a gun in his hand, but he was looking the wrong way and the gun was pointing the wrong way. The same chisel in the back.'

Hunslett poured himself another drink. A much larger one. Hunslett hardly ever drank. He swallowed half of it in one gulp. He said: 'And they hadn't all gone aft. They'd left a reception committee.'

'They're very clever. They're very dangerous. Maybe we've moved out of our class. Or I have. A one-man reception committee, but when that one man was this man, two would have been superfluous. I know he killed Baker and Delmont. I'll never be so lucky again.'

'You got away. Your luck hadn't run out.'

And Baker's and Delmont's had. I knew he was blaming me. I knew London would blame me. I blamed myself. I hadn't much option. There was no one else to blame.

'Uncle Arthur,' Hunslett said. 'Don't you think -'

'The hell with Uncle Arthur. Who cares about Uncle Arthur? How in God's name do you think I feel?' I felt savage and I know I sounded it. For the first time a flicker of expression showed on Hunslett's face. I wasn't supposed to have any feelings.

'Not that,' he said. 'About the *Nantesville.* Now that she's been identified *as* the *Nantesville*, now we know her new name and flag – what were they, by the way?'

'Alta Fjord. Norwegian. It doesn't matter.'

'It does matter. We radio Uncle Arthur -'

'And have our guests find us in the engine-room with earphones round our heads. Are you mad?'

'You seem damned sure they'll come.'

'I *am* sure. You too. You said so.'

'I agreed this is where they would come. *If* they come.'

'If they come. *If* they come. Good God, man, for all that they know I was aboard that ship for hours. I may have the names and full descriptions of all of them. As it happens I couldn't identify any of them and their names may or may not mean anything. But they're not to know that. For all they know I'm on the blower right now bawling out descriptions to Interpol. The chances are at least even that some of them are on file. They're too good to be little men. Some must be known.'

'In that case they'd be too late anyway. The damage would be done.'

'Not without the sole witness who could testify against them?'

'I think we'd better have those guns out.'

'No.'

'You don't blame me for trying?'

'No.'

'Baker and Delmont. Think of them.'

'I'm thinking of nothing else but them. You don't have to stay.'

He set his glass down very carefully. He was really letting himself go to-night, he'd allowed that dark craggy face its second expression in ten minutes and it wasn't a very encouraging one. Then he picked up his glass and grinned.

'You don't know what you're saying,' he said kindly. 'Your neck – that's what comes from the blood supply to the brain being interrupted. You're not fit to fight off a teddy-bear. Who's going to look after you if they start playing games?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. I meant it. I'd worked with Hunslett maybe ten times in the ten years I'd known him and it had been a stupid thing for me to say. About the only thing Hunslett was incapable of was leaving your side in time of trouble. 'You were speaking of Uncle?'

'Yes. We know where the *Nantesville* is. Uncle could get a Navy boat to shadow her, by radar if -'

'I know where she was. She upped anchor as I left. By dawn she'll be a hundred miles away -in any direction.'

'She's gone? We've scared them off? They're going to love this.' He sat down heavily, then looked at me. 'But we have her new description -'

'I said that didn't matter. By to-morrow she'll have another description. The *Hokomaru* from Yokohama, with green topsides, Japanese flag, different masts -'

'An air search. We could -'

'By the time an air search could be organised they'd have twenty thousand square miles of sea to cover. You've heard the forecast. It's bad. Low cloud – and they'd have to fly under the low cloud. Cuts their effectiveness by ninety per cent. And poor visibility and rain. Not a chance in a hundred, not one in a thousand of positive identification. And if they do locate them – if – what then? A friendly wave from the pilot? Not much else he can do.'

'The Navy. They could call up the Navy -'

'Call up what Navy? From the Med? Or the Far East? The Navy has very few ships left and practically none in those parts. By the time any naval vessel could get to the scene it would be night again and the *Nantesville* to hell and gone. Even if a naval ship did catch up with it, what then? Sink it with gunfire – with maybe the twenty-five missing crew members of the *Nantesville* locked up in the hold?'

'A boarding party?'

'With the same twenty-five ex-crew members lined up on deck with pistols at their backs and Captain Imrie and his thugs politely asking the Navy boys what their next move was going to be?'

'I'll get into my pyjamas,' Hunslett said tiredly. At the doorway he paused and turned. 'If the *Nantesville* had gone, her crew – the new crew -have gone too and we'll be having no visitors after all. Had you thought of that?'

'No.'

'I don't really believe it either.'

* * *

They came at twenty past four in the morning. They came in a very calm and orderly and law-abiding and official fashion, they stayed for forty minutes and by the time they had left I still wasn't sure whether they were our men or not.

Hunslett came into my small cabin, starboard side forward, switched on the light and shook me. 'Wake up,' he said loudly. 'Come on. Wake up.'

I was wide awake. I hadn't closed an eye since I'd lain down. I groaned and yawned a bit without overdoing it then opened a bleary eye. There was no one behind him.

'What is it? What do you want?' A pause. 'What the hell's up? It's just after four in the morning.'

'Don't ask me what's up,' Hunslett said irritably. 'Police. Just come aboard. They say it's urgent.'

'Police? Did you say, "police"?'

'Yes. Come on, now. They're waiting.'

'Police? Aboard our boat? What -'

'Oh, for God's sake! How many more nightcaps did you have last night after I went to bed? Police. Two of them and two customs. It's urgent, they say.'

'It better bloody well be urgent. In the middle of the bloody night. Who do they think we are - escaped train robbers? Haven't you told them who we are? Oh, all right, all right, all *right*! I'm coming.'

Hunslett left, and thirty seconds afterwards I joined him in the saloon. Four men sat there, two police officers and two customs officials. They didn't look a very villainous bunch to me. The older, bigger policeman got to his feet. A tall, burly, brown-faced sergeant in his late forties, he looked me over with a cold eye, looked at the near-empty whisky bottle with the two unwashed glasses on the table, then looked back at me. He didn't like wealthy yachtsmen. He didn't like wealthy yachtsmen who drank too much at nighttime and were bleary-eyed, bloodshot and tousle-haired at the following

crack of dawn. He didn't like wealthy effete yachtsmen who wore red silk dragon Chinese dressing-gowns with a Paisley scarf to match tied negligently round the neck. I didn't like them very much myself, especially the Paisley scarf, much in favour though it was with the yachting fraternity: but I had to have something to conceal those bruises on my neck.

'Are you the owner of this boat, sir?' the sergeant inquired. An unmistakable West Highland voice and a courteous one, but it took him all his time to get his tongue round the 'sir.'

'If you would tell me what makes it any of your damn' business,' I said unpleasantly, 'maybe I'll answer that and maybe I won't. A private boat is the same as a private house, Sergeant. You have to have a warrant before you shove your way in. Or don't you know the law?'

'He knows the law,' one of the customs men put in. A small dark character, smooth-shaven at four in the morning, with a persuasive voice, not West Highland. 'Be reasonable. This is not the sergeant's job. We got him out of bed almost three hours ago. He's just obliging us.'

I ignored him. I said to the sergeant: 'This is the middle of the night in a lonely Scottish bay. How would you feel if four unidentified men came aboard in the middle of the night?' I was taking a chance on that one, but a fair chance. If they were who I thought they might be and if I were who they thought I might be, then I'd never talk like that. But an innocent man would. 'Any means of identifying yourselves?'

'Identifying myself?' The sergeant stared coldly at me. 'I don't have to identify myself. Sergeant MacDonald. I've been in charge of the Torbay police station for eight years. Ask any man in Torbay. They all know me.' If he was who he claimed to be this was probably the first time in his life that anyone had asked him for identification. He nodded to the seated policeman. 'Police-Constable MacDonald.'

'Your son?' The resemblance was unmistakable. 'Nothing like keeping it in the family, eh, Sergeant?' I didn't know whether to believe him or not, but I felt I'd been an irate householder long enough. A degree less truculence was in order. 'And customs, eh? I know the law about you, too. No search warrants for you boys. I believe the police would like your powers. Go anywhere you like and ask no one's permission beforehand. That's it, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir.' It was the younger customs man who answered. Medium height, fair hair, running a little to fat, Belfast accent, dressed like the other in blue overcoat, peaked hat, brown gloves, smartly creased trousers. 'We hardly ever do, though. We prefer co-operation. We like to ask.'

'And you'd like to ask to search this boat, is that it?' Hunslett said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Why?' I asked. Puzzlement now in my voice. And in my mind. I just didn't know what I had on my hands. 'If we're all going to be so courteous and co-operative, could we have any explanation?'

'No reason in the world why not, sir.' The older customs man was almost apologetic. 'A truck with contents valued at £12,000 was hi-jacked on the Ayrshire coast last night – night before last, that is, now. In the news this evening. From information received, we know it was transferred to a small boat. We think it came north.'

'Why?'

'Sorry, sir. Confidential. This is the third port we've visited and the thirteenth boat – the fourth in Torbay – that we've been on in the past fifteen hours. We've been kept on the run, I can tell you.' An easy friendly voice, a voice that said: 'You don't really think we suspect you. We've a job to do, that's all.'

'And you're searching all boats that have come up from the south. Or you think have come from there. Fresh arrivals, anyway. Has it occurred to you that any boat with hi-jacked goods on board wouldn't dare pass through the Crinan canal? Once you're in there, you're trapped. For four hours. So he'd have to come round the Mull of Kintyre. We've been here since this afternoon. It would take a pretty fast boat to get up here in that time.'

'You've got a pretty fast boat here, sir,' Sergeant MacDonald said. I wondered how the hell they managed it, from the Western Isles to the East London docks every sergeant in the country had the same wooden voice, the same wooden face, the same cold eye. Must be something to do with the uniform. I ignored him.

'What are we – um – supposed to have stolen?'

'Chemicals. It was an I.C.I. truck.'

'Chemicals?' I looked at Hunslett, grinned, then turned back to the customs officer. 'Chemicals, eh? We're loaded with them. But not £12,000 worth, I'm afraid.'

There was a brief silence. MacDonald said: 'Would you mind explaining, sir?'

'Not at all.' I lit a cigarette, the little mind enjoying its big moment, and smiled. 'This is a government boat, Sergeant MacDonald. I thought you would have seen the flag. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. We're marine biologists. Our after cabin is a floating laboratory. Look at our library here.' Two shelves loaded with technical tomes. 'And if you've still any doubt left I can give you two numbers, one in Glasgow, one in London, that will establish our *bona fides.* Or phone the lock-master in the Crinan sea-basin. We spent last night there.'

'Yes, sir.' The lack of impression I had made on the sergeant was total. 'Where did you go in your dinghy this evening?'

'I beg your pardon, Sergeant?'

'You were seen to leave this boat in a black rubber dinghy about five o'clock this evening.' I'd heard of icy fingers playing up and down one's spine but it wasn't fingers I felt then, it was a centipede with a hundred icy boots on. 'You went out into the Sound. Mr McIlroy, the postmaster, saw you.'

'I hate to impugn the character of a fellow civil servant but he must have been drunk.' Funny how an icy feeling could make you sweat. 'I haven't got a black rubber dinghy. I've never owned a black rubber dinghy. You just get out your little magnifying glass, Sergeant, and if you can find a black rubber dinghy I'll make you a present of the brown wooden dinghy, which is the only one we have on the *Firecrest.'*

The wooden expression cracked a little. He wasn't so certain now. 'So you weren't out?'

'I *was* out. In our own dinghy. I was just round the corner of Garve Island there, collecting some marine samples from the Sound. I can show them to you in the after cabin. We're not here on holiday, you know.'

'No offence, no offence.' I was a member of the working classes now, not a plutocrat, and he could afford to thaw a little. 'Mr McIlroy's eyesight isn't what it was and everything looks black against the setting sun. You don't *look* the type, I must say, who'd land on the shores of the Sound and bring down the telephone wires to the mainland.'

The centipede started up again and broke into a fast gallop. Cut off from the mainland. How very convenient for somebody. I didn't spend any time wondering who had brought the wires down – it had been no act of God, I was sure of that.

'Did you mean what I thought you to mean, Sergeant?' I said slowly. 'That you suspected me -'

'We can't take chances, sir.' He was almost apologetic now. Not only was I a working man, I was a man working for the Government. All men working for the Government are *ipso facto* respectable and trustworthy citizens.

'But you won't mind if we take a little look round?' The dark-haired customs officer was even more apologetic. 'The lines are down and, well, you know …' His voice trailed off and he smiled. 'If you were the hi-jackers – I appreciate now that it's a chance in a million, but still – and if we didn't search – well, we'd be out of a job to-morrow. Just a formality.'

'I wouldn't want to see that happen, Mr -ah -'

'Thomas. Thank you. Your ship's papers? Ah, thank you.' He handed them to the younger man.

'Let's see now. Ah, the wheelhouse. Could Mr Durran here use the wheelhouse to make copies? Won't take five minutes.'

'Certainly. Wouldn't he be more comfortable here?'

'We're modernised now, sir. Portable photocopier. Standard on the job. Has to be dark. Won't take five minutes. Can we begin in this laboratory of yours?'

A formality, he'd said. Well, he was right there, as a search it was the least informal thing I'd ever come across. Five minutes after he'd gone to the wheelhouse Durran came aft to join us and he and Thomas went through the *Firecrest* as if they were looking for the Koh-i-noor. To begin with, at least. Every piece of mechanical and electrical equipment in the after cabin had to be explained to them. They looked in every locker and cupboard. They rummaged through the ropes and fenders in the large stern locker aft of the laboratory and I thanked God I hadn't followed my original idea of stowing the dinghy, motor and scuba gear in there. They even examined the after toilet. As if I'd be careless enough to drop the Koh-i-noor in there.

They spent most time of all in the engine-room. It was worth examining. Everything looked brand new, and gleamed. Two big 100 h.p. diesels, diesel generator, radio generator, hot and cold water pumps, central heating plant, big oil and water tanks and the two long rows of lead-acid batteries. Thomas seemed especially interested in the batteries.

'You carry a lot of reserve there, Mr Petersen,' he said. He'd learnt my name by now, even though it wasn't the one I'd been christened with. 'Why all the power?'

'We haven't even got enough. Care to start those two engines by hand? We have eight electric motors in the lab. – and the only time they're used, in harbour, we can't run either the engines or generators to supply juice. Too much interference. A constant drain.' I was ticking off my fingers. 'Then there's the central heating, hot and cold water pumps, radar, radio, automatic steering, windlass, power winch for the dinghy, echo-sounder, navigation lights -'

'You win, you win.' He'd become quite friendly by this time. 'Boats aren't really in my line. Let's move forward, shall we?'

The remainder of the inspection, curiously, didn't take long. In the saloon I found that Hunslett had persuaded the Torbay police force to accept the hospitality of the *Firecrest.* Sergeant MacDonald hadn't exactly become jovial, but he was much more human than when he'd come on board. Constable MacDonald, I noticed, didn't seem so relaxed. He looked positively glum. Maybe he didn't approve of his old man consorting with potential criminals.

If the examination of the saloon was cursory, that of the two forward cabins was positively perfunctory. Back in the saloon, I said:

'Sorry I was a bit short, gentlemen. I like my sleep. A drink before you go?'

'Well.' Thomas smiled. 'We don't want to be rude either. Thank you.'

Five minutes and they were gone. Thomas didn't even glance at the wheelhouse – Durran had been there, of course. He had a quick look at one of the deck lockers but didn't bother about the others. We were in the clear. A civil good-bye on both sides and they were gone. Their boat, a big indeterminate shape in the darkness, seemed to have plenty of power.

'Odd,' I said.

'What's odd?'

'That boat. Any idea what it was like?'

'How could I?' Hunslett was testy. He was as short of sleep as I was. 'It was pitch dark.'

'That's just the point. A gentle glow in their wheelhouse – you couldn't even see what that was like – and no more. No deck lights, no interior lights, no navigation lights even.'

'Sergeant MacDonald has been looking out over this harbour for eight years. Do you need light to find your way about your own living-room after dark?'

'I haven't got twenty yachts and cruisers in my living-room swinging all over the place with wind and tide. And wind and tide doesn't alter my own course when I'm crossing my living-room. There are only three boats in the harbour carrying anchor lights. He'll have to use something to see where he's going.'

And he did. From the direction of the receding sound of engines a light stabbed out into the darkness. A five-inch searchlight, I would have guessed. It picked up a small yacht riding at anchor less than a hundred yards ahead of it, altered to starboard, picked up another, altered to port, then swung back on course again.

'"Odd" was the word you used,' Hunslett murmured. 'Quite a good word, too, in the circumstances. And what are we to think of the alleged Torbay police force?'

'You talked to the sergeant longer than I did. When I was aft with Thomas and Durran.'

'I'd like to think otherwise,' Hunslett said inconsequentially. 'It would make things easier, in a way. But I can't. He's a genuine old-fashioned cop and a good one, too. I've met too many. So have you.'

'A good cop and an honest one,' I agreed. 'This is not his line of country and he was fooled. It is our line of country and we were fooled. Until now, that is.'

'Speak for yourself.'

'Thomas made one careless remark. An offbeat remark. You didn't hear it – we were in the engine-room.' I shivered, maybe it was the cold night wind. 'It meant nothing – not until I saw that they didn't want their boat recognised again. He said: 'Boats aren't really in my line.' Probably thought he'd been asking too many questions and wanted to reassure me. Boats not in his line – a customs officer and boats not in his line. They only spend their lives aboard boats, examining boats, that's all. They spend their lives looking and poking in so many odd corners and quarters that they know more about boats than the designers themselves. Another thing, did you notice how sharply dressed they were? A credit to Carnaby Street.'

'Customs officers don't usually go around in oil-stained overalls.'

'They've been living in those clothes for twenty-four hours. This is the what – the thirteenth boat they've searched in that time. Would you still have knife-edged creases to your pants after that lot? Or would you say they'd only just taken them from the hangers and put them on?'

'What else did they say? What else did they do?' Hunslett spoke so quietly that I could hear the note of the engines of the customs' boat fall away sharply as their searchlight lit up the low-water stone pier, half a mile away. 'Take an undue interest in anything?'

'They took an undue interest in everything. Wait a minute, though, wait a minute. Thomas seemed particularly intrigued by the batteries, by the large amount of reserve electrical power we had.'

'Did he now? Did he indeed? And did you notice how lightly our two customs friends swung aboard their launch when leaving?'

'They'll have done it a thousand times.'

'Both of them had their hands free. They weren't carrying anything. They should have been carrying something.'

'The photo-copier. I'm getting old.'

'The photo-copier. Standard equipment my ruddy foot. So if our fair-haired pal wasn't busy photo-copying he was busy doing something else.'

We moved inside the wheelhouse. Hunslett selected the larger screw-driver from the tool-rack beside the echo-sounder and had the face-plate off our R.T.D./D.F. set inside sixty seconds. He looked at the interior for five seconds, looked at me for the same length of time, then started screwing the face-plate back into position. One thing was certain, we wouldn't be using that transmitter for a long time to come.

I turned away and stared out through the wheelhouse windows into the darkness. The wind was still rising, the black sea gleamed palely as the whitecaps came marching in from the south-west, the *Firecrest* snubbed sharply on her anchor chain and, with the wind and the tide at variance, she was beginning to corkscrew quite noticeably now. I felt desperately tired. But my eyes were still working. Hunslett offered me a cigarette. I didn't want one, but I took one. Who knew, it might even help me to think. And then I had caught his wrist and was staring down at his palm.

'Well, well,' I said. 'The cobbler should stick to his last.' 'He what?'

'Wrong proverb. Can't think of the right one. A good workman uses only his own tools. Our pal with the penchant for smashing valves and condensers should have remembered that. No wonder my neck was twitching when Durran was around. How did you cut yourself?'

'I didn't cut myself.'

'I know. But there's a smear of blood on your palm. He's been taking lessons from Peter Sellers, I shouldn't wonder. Standard southern English on the *Nantesville*, northern Irish on the *Firecrest.* I wonder how many other accents he has up his sleeve – behind his larynx, I should say. And I thought he was running to a little fat. He's running to a great deal of muscle. You noticed he never took his gloves off, even when he had that drink?'

'I'm the best noticer you ever saw. Beat me over the head with a club and I'll notice anything.' He sounded bitter. 'Why didn't they clobber us? You, anyway? The star witness?'

'Maybe we *have* moved out of our class. Two reasons. They couldn't do anything with the cops there, genuine cops as we've both agreed, not unless they attended to the cops too. Only a madman would deliberately kill a cop and whatever those boys may lack it isn't sanity.'

'But why cops in the first place?'

'Aura of respectability. Cops are above suspicion. When a uniformed policeman shoves his uniformed cap above your gunwale in the dark watches of the night, you don't whack him over the head with a marline-spike. You invite him aboard. All others you might whack, especially if we had the bad consciences we might have been supposed to have.'

'Maybe. It's arguable. And the second point?'

'They took a big chance, a desperate chance, almost, with Durran. He was thrown to the wolves to see what the reaction would be, whether either of us recognised him.'

'Why Durran?'

'I didn't tell you. I shone a torch in his face. The face didn't register, just a white blur with screwed-up eyes half-hidden behind an upflung hand. I was really looking lower down, picking the right spot to kick him. But they weren't to know that. They wanted to find out if we would recognise him. We didn't. If we had done we'd either have started throwing the crockery at him or yelped for the cops to arrest them – if we're against them then we're with the cops. But we didn't. Not a flicker of recognition. Nobody's as good as that. I defy any man in the world to meet up again in the same night with a man who has murdered two other people and nearly murdered himself without at least twitching an eyebrow. So the immediate heat is off, the urgent necessity to do us in has become less urgent. It's a safe bet that if we didn't recognise Durran, then we recognised nobody on the *Nantesville* and so we won't be burning up the lines to Interpol.'

'We're in the dear?'

'I wish to God we were. They're on to us.'

'But you said -'

'I don't know how I know,' I said irritably. 'I know. They went through the after end of the *Firecrest* like a Treble Chance winner hunting for the coupon he's afraid he's forgotten to post. Then half-way through the engine-room search – click! – just like that and they weren't interested any more. At least Thomas wasn't. He'd found out something. You saw him afterwards in the saloon, the fore cabins and the upper deck. He couldn't have cared less.'

'The batteries?'

'No. He was satisfied with my explanation. I could tell. I don't know why, I only know I'm sure.'

'So they'll be back.'

'They'll be back.'

'I get the guns out now?'

'There's no hurry. Our friends will be sure we can't communicate with anyone. The mainland boat calls here only twice a week. It came to-day and won't be back for four days. The lines to

the mainland are down and if I thought for a moment they would stay down I should be back in kindergarten. Our transmitter is out. Assuming there are no carrier pigeons in Torbay, what's the only remaining means of communication with the mainland?'

'There's the *Shangri-la.'* The *Shangri-la*, the nearest craft to ours, was white, gleaming, a hundred and twenty feet long and wouldn't have left her owner a handful of change from a quarter of a million pounds when he'd bought her. 'She'll have a couple of thousand quids' worth of radio equipment aboard. Then there are two, maybe three yachts big enough to carry transmitters. The rest will carry only receivers, if that.'

'And how many transmitters in Torbay harbour will still be in operating condition to-morrow?'

'One.'

'One. Our friends will attend to the rest. They'll have to. We can't warn anyone. We can't give ourselves away.'

'The insurance companies can stand it.' He glanced at his watch. 'This would be a nice time to wake up Uncle Arthur.'

'I can't put it off any longer.' I wasn't looking forward to talking to Uncle Arthur.

Hunslett reached for a heavy coat, pulled it on, made for the door and stopped. 'I thought I'd take a walk on the upper deck. While you're talking. Just in case. A second thought – I'd better have that gun now. Thomas said they'd already checked three boats in the harbour. MacDonald didn't contradict him, so it was probably true. Maybe there *are* no serviceable transmitters left in Torbay now. Maybe our friends just dumped the cops ashore and are coming straight back for us.'

'Maybe. But those yachts are smaller than the *Firecrest.* Apart from us, there's only one with a separate wheelhouse. The others will carry transmitters in the saloon cabin. Lots of them sleep in their saloon cabins. The owners would have to be banged on the head first before the radios could be attended to. They couldn't do that with MacDonald around.'

'You'd bet your pension on that? Maybe MacDonald didn't always go aboard.'

'I'll never live to collect my pension. But maybe you'd better have that gun.'

The *Firecrest* was just over three years old. The Southampton boatyard and marine-radio firm that had combined to build her had done so under conditions of sworn secrecy to a design provided by Uncle Arthur. Uncle Arthur had not designed her himself although he had never said so to the few people who knew of the existence of the boat. He'd pinched the idea from a Japanese-designed Indonesian-owned fishing craft that had been picked up with engine failure off the Malaysian coast. Only one engine had failed though two were installed, but still she had been not under command, an odd circumstance that had led the alert Engineer Lieutenant on the frigate that had picked her up to look pretty closely at her: the net result of his investigation, apart from giving this splendid inspiration to Uncle Arthur, was that the crew still languished in a Singapore prisoner of war camp.

The *Firecrest's* career had been chequered and inglorious. She had cruised around the Eastern Baltic for some time, without achieving anything, until the authorities in Memel and Leningrad, getting tired of the sight of her, had declared the *Firecrest persona non grata* and sent her back to England. Uncle Arthur had been furious, especially as he had to account to a parsimonious Under-Secretary for the considerable expense involved. The Waterguard had tried their hand with it at catching smugglers and returned it without thanks. No smugglers. Now for the first time ever it was going to justify its existence and in other circumstances Uncle Arthur would have been delighted. When he heard what I had to tell him he would have no difficulty in restraining his joy.

What made the *Firecrest* unique was that while she had two screws and two propeller shafts, she had only one engine. Two engine casings, but only one engine, even although that one engine was a special job fitted with an underwater bypass exhaust valve. A simple matter of disengaging the fuel pump coupling and unscrewing four bolts on top – the rest were dummies – enabled the entire head of the diesel starboard engine to be lifted clear away, together with the fuel lines and injectors. With the assistance of the seventy foot telescopic radio mast housed inside our aluminium foremast,

the huge gleaming transmitter that took up eighty per cent of the space inside the starboard engine casing could have sent a signal to the moon, if need be: as Thomas had observed, we had power and to spare. As it happened I didn't want to send a signal to the moon, just to Uncle Arthur's combinex office and home in Knightsbridge.

The other twenty per cent of space was taken up with a motley collection of material that even the Assistant Commissioner in New Scotland Yard wouldn't have regarded without a thoughtful expression on his face. There were some packages of pre-fabricated explosives with amatol, primer and chemical detonator combined in one neat unit with a miniature timing device that ranged from five seconds to five minutes, complete with sucker clamps. There was a fine range of burglar's house-breaking tools, bunches of skeleton keys, several highly sophisticated listening devices, including one that could be shot from a Very-type pistol, several tubes of various harmless-looking tablets which were alleged, when dropped in some unsuspecting character's drink, to induce unconsciousness for varying periods, four pistols and a box of ammunition. Anyone who was going to use that lot in one operation was in for a busy time indeed. Two of the pistols were Lugers, two were 4.25 German Lilliputs, the smallest really effective automatic pistol on the market. The Lilliput had the great advantage that it could be concealed practically anywhere on your person, even upside down in a spring-loaded clip in your lower left sleeve – if, that was, you didn't get your suits cut in Carnaby Street.

Hunslett lifted one of the Lugers from its clamp, checked the loading indicator and left at once. It wasn't that he was imagining that he could already hear stealthy footsteps on the upper deck, he just didn't want to be around when Uncle Arthur came on the air. I didn't blame him. I didn't really want to be around then either.

I pulled out the two insulated rubber cables, fitted the powerfully spring-loaded saw-toothed metal clamps on to the battery terminals, hung on a pair of earphones, turned on the set, pulled another switch that actuated the call-up and waited. I didn't have to tune in, the transmitter was permanently pre-set, and pre-set on a V.H.F. frequency that would have cost the licence of any ham operator who dared wander anywhere near it for transmission purposes.

The red receiver warning light came on. I reached down and adjusted the magic eye control until the green fans met in the middle.

'This is station SPFX,' a voice came. 'Station SPFX.'

'Good morning. This is Caroline. May I speak to the manager, please?'

'Will you wait, please?' This meant that Uncle Arthur was in bed. Uncle Arthur was never at his best on rising. Three minutes passed and the earphones came to life again.

'Good morning, Caroline. This is Annabelle.'

'Good morning. Location 481, 281.' You wouldn't find those references in any Ordnance Survey Map, there weren't a dozen maps in existence with them. But Uncle Arthur had one. And so had I.

There was a pause, then: 'I have you, Caroline. Proceed.'

'I located the missing vessel this afternoon. Four or five miles north-west of here. I went on board to-night.'

'You did what, Caroline?'

'Went on board. The old crew has gone home. There's a new crew aboard. A smaller crew.'

'You located Betty and Dorothy?' Despite the fact that we both had scramblers fitted to our radio phones, making intelligible eavesdropping impossible, Uncle Arthur always insisted that we spoke in a roundabout riddle fashion and used code names for his employees and himself. Girls' names for our surnames, initials to match. An irritating foible, but one that we had to observe. He was Annabelle, I was Caroline, Baker was Betty, Delmont, Dorothy and Hunslett, Harriet. It sounded like a series of Caribbean hurricane warnings.

'I found them.' I took a deep breath. 'They won't be coming home again, Annabelle.'

'They won't be coming home again,' he repeated mechanically. He was silent for so long that I began to think that he had gone off the air. Then he came again, his voice empty, remote. 'I warned you of this, Caroline.'

'Yes, Annabelle, you warned me of this.'

'And the vessel?'

'Gone.'

'Gone where?'

'I don't know. Just gone. North, I suppose.'

'North, you suppose.' Uncle Arthur never raised his voice, when he went on it was as calm and impersonal as ever, but the sudden disregard of his own rules about circumlocution betrayed the savage anger in his mind. 'North where? Iceland? A Norwegian fjord? To effect a trans-shipment of cargo anywhere in a million square miles between the mid-Atlantic and the Barents Sea? And you lost her. After all the time, the trouble, the planning, the expense, you've lost her!' He might have spared me that bit about the planning, it had been mine all the way. 'And Betty and Dorothy.' The last words showed he'd taken control of himself again.

'Yes, Annabelle, I've lost her.' I could feel the slow anger in myself. 'And there's worse than that, if you want to listen to it.'

'I'm listening.'

I told him the rest and at the end of it he said: 'I see. You've lost the vessel. You've lost Betty and Dorothy. And now our friends know about you, the one vital element of secrecy is gone for ever and every usefulness and effectiveness you might ever have had is completely negated.' A pause. 'I shall expect you in my office at nine p.m. to-night. Instruct Harriet to take the boat back to base.'

'Yes, sir.' The hell with his Annabelle. 'I had expected that. I've failed. I've let you down. I'm being pulled off.'

'Nine o'clock to-night, Caroline. I'll be waiting.'

'You'll have a long wait, Annabelle.'

'And what might you mean by that?' If Uncle Arthur had had a low silky menacing voice then he'd have spoken those words in a low silky menacing voice. But he hadn't, he'd only this flat level monotone and it carried infinitely more weight and authority than any carefully modulated theatrical voice that had ever graced a stage.

'There are no planes to this place, Annabelle. The mail-boat doesn't call for another four days. The weather's breaking down and I wouldn't risk our boat to try to get to the mainland. I'm stuck here for the time being, I'm afraid.'

'Do you take me for a nincompoop, sir?' Now he was at it. 'Go ashore this morning. An air-sea rescue helicopter will pick you up at noon. Nine p.m. at my office. Don't keep me waiting.'

This, then, was it. But one last try. 'Couldn't you give me another twenty-four hours, Annabelle?'

'Now you're being ridiculous. And wasting my time. Good-bye.'

'I beg of you, sir.'

'I'd thought better of you than that. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye. We may meet again sometime. It's not likely. Good-bye.'

I switched the radio off, lit a cigarette and waited. The call-up came through in half a minute. I waited another half-minute and switched on. I was very calm. The die was cast and I didn't give a damn.

'Caroline? Is that you, Caroline?' I could have sworn to a note of agitation in his voice. This was something for the record books.

'Yes.'

'What did you say? At the end there?'

'Good-bye. You said good-bye. I said good-bye.'

'Don't quibble with me, sir! You said -'

'If you want me aboard that helicopter,' I said, 'you'll have to send a guard with the pilot. An armed guard. I hope they're good. I've got a Luger, and you know I'm good. And if I have to kill anyone and go into court, then you'll have to stand there beside me because there's no single civil action or criminal charge that even you, with all your connections, can bring against me that would justify the sending of armed men to apprehend me, an innocent man. Further, I am no longer in your employment. The terms of my civil service contract state clearly that I can resign at any moment, provided that I am not actively engaged on an operation at that moment. You've pulled me off, you've recalled me to London. My resignation will be on your desk as soon as the mail can get through. Baker and Delmont weren't your friends. They were my friends. They were my friends ever since I joined the service. You have the temerity to sit there and lay all the blame for their deaths on my shoulders when you know damn' well that every operation must have your final approval, and now you have the final temerity to deny me a one last chance to square accounts. I'm sick of your damned soulless service. Good-bye.'

'Now wait a moment, Caroline.' There was a cautious, almost placatory note to his voice. 'No need to go off half-cocked.' I was sure that no one had ever talked to Rear-Admiral Sir Arthur Arnford-Jason like that before but he didn't seem particularly upset about it. He had the cunning of a fox, that infinitely agile and shrewd mind would be examining and discarding possibilities with the speed of a computer, he'd be wondering whether I was playing a game and if so how far he could play it with me without making it impossible for me to retreat from the edge of the precipice. Finally he said quietly: 'You wouldn't want to hang around there just to shed tears. You're on to something.'

'Yes, sir, I'm on to something.' I wondered what in the name of God I was on to.

'I'll give you twenty-four hours, Caroline.'

'Forty-eight.'

'Forty-eight. And then you return to London. I have your word?'

'I promise.'

'And Caroline?'

'Sir?'

'I didn't care for your way of talking there. I trust we never have a repetition of it.'

'No, sir. I'm sorry, sir.'

'Forty-eight hours. Report to me at noon and midnight.' A click. Uncle Arthur was gone.

The false dawn was in the sky when I went on deck. Cold heavy slanting driving rain was churning up the foam-flecked sea. The *Firecrest*, pulling heavily on her anchor chain, was swinging slowly through an arc of forty degrees, corkscrewing quite heavily now on the outer arc of the swing, pitching in the centre of them. She was snubbing very heavily on the anchor and I wondered uneasily how long the lengths of heaving line securing the dinghy, outboard and scuba gear to the chain could stand up to this sort of treatment.

Hunslett was abaft the saloon, huddling in what little shelter it afforded. He looked up at my approach and said: 'What do you make of that?' He pointed to the palely gleaming shape of the *Shangri-la*, one moment on our quarter, the next dead astern as we swung on our anchor. Lights were burning brightly in the fore part of her superstructure, where the wheelhouse would be.

'Someone with insomnia,' I said. 'Or checking to see if the anchor is dragging. What do you think it is – our recent guests laying about the *Shangri-la* radio installation with crow-bars? Maybe they leave lights on all night.'

'Came on just ten minutes ago. And look, now – they're out. Funny. How did you get on with Uncle?'

'Badly. Fired me, then changed his mind. We have forty-eight hours.'

'Forty-eight hours? What are you going to do in forty-eight hours?'

'God knows. Have some sleep first. You too. Too much light in the sky for callers now.'

Passing through the saloon, Hunslett said, apropos of nothing: ‘I’ve been wondering. What did you make of P.C. MacDonald? The young one.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, glum, downcast. Heavy weight on his shoulders.’

‘Maybe he’s like me. Maybe he doesn’t like getting up in the middle of the night. Maybe he has girl trouble and if he has I can tell you that P.C. MacDonald’s love-life is the least of my concerns. Good night.’

I should have listened to Hunslett more. For Hunslett’s sake.

THREE
Tuesday: 10 a.m. – 10 p.m.

I need my sleep, just like anyone else. Ten hours, perhaps only eight, and I would have been my own man again. Maybe not exuding brightness, optimism and cheerfulness, the circumstances weren't right for that, but at least a going concern, alert, perceptive, my mind operating on what Uncle Arthur would be by now regarding as its customary abysmal level but still the best it could achieve. But I wasn't given that ten hours. Nor even the eight. Exactly three hours after dropping off I was wide awake again. Well, anyway, awake. I would have had to be stone deaf, drugged or dead to go on sleeping through the bawling and thumping that was currently assailing my left ear from what appeared to be a distance of not more than twelve inches.

'Ahoy, there, *Firecrest*! Ahoy there!' Thump, thump, thump on the boat's side. 'Can I come aboard? Ahoy, there! Ahoy, ahoy, ahoy!'

I cursed this nautical idiot from the depths of my sleep-ridden being, swung a pair of unsteady legs to the deck and levered myself out of the bunk. I almost fell down, I seemed to have only one leg left, and my neck ached fiercely. A glance at the mirror gave quick external confirmation of my internal decrepitude. A haggard unshaven face, unnaturally pale, and bleary bloodshot eyes with dark circles under them. I looked away hurriedly, there were lots of things I could put up with first thing in the morning, but not sights like that.

I opened the door across the passage. Hunslett was sound asleep and snoring. I returned to my own cabin and got busy with the dressing-gown and Paisley scarf again. The iron-lunged thumping character outside was still at it, if I didn't hurry he would be roaring out 'avast there' any moment. I combed my hair into some sort of order and made my way to the upper deck.

It was a cold, wet and windy world. A grey, dreary, unpleasant world, why the hell couldn't they have let me sleep on. The rain was coming down in slanting sheets, bouncing inches high on the decks, doubling the milkiness of the spume-flecked sea. The lonely wind mourned through the rigging and the lower registers of sound and the steep-sided wind-truncated waves, maybe three feet from tip to trough, were high enough to make passage difficult if not dangerous for the average yacht tender.

They didn't make things in the slightest difficult or dangerous for the yacht tender that now lay alongside us. It maybe wasn't as big – it looked it at first sight – as the *Firecrest*, but it was big enough to have a glassed-in cabin for'ard, a wheel-house that bristled and gleamed with controls and instrumentation that would have been no disgrace to a VC-10 and, abaft that, a sunken cockpit that could have sunbathed a football team without overcrowding. There were three crewmen dressed in black oilskins and fancy French navy hats with black ribbons down the back, two of them each with a boat-hook round one of the *Firecrest's* guardrail stanchions. Half a dozen big inflated spherical rubber fenders kept the *Firecrest* from rubbing its plebeian paintwork against the whitely-varnished spotlessness of the tender alongside and it didn't require the name on the bows or the crew's hats to let me know that this was the tender that normally took up most of the after-deck space on the *Shangri-la.*

Amidships a stocky figure, clad in a white vaguely naval brass-buttoned uniform and holding above his head a golf umbrella that would have had Joseph green with envy, stopped banging his gloved fist against the *Firecrest's* planking and glared up at me.

'Ha!' I've never actually heard anyone snort out a word but this came pretty close to it. 'There you are at last. Took your time about it, didn't you? I'm soaked, man, soaked!' A few spots of rain did show up quite clearly on the white seersucker. 'May I come aboard?' He didn't wait for any permission, just leaped aboard with surprising nimbleness for a man of his build and years and nipped into the *Firecrest's* wheelhouse ahead of me, which was pretty selfish of him as he still had his umbrella and all I had was my dressing-gown. I followed and closed the door behind me.

He was a short, powerfully built character, fifty-five I would have guessed, with a heavily–tanned jowled face, close-cropped iron-grey hair with tufted eyebrows to match, long straight nose and a mouth that looked as if it had been closed with a zip-fastener. A good-looking cove, if you liked that type of looks. The dark darting eyes looked me up and down and if he was impressed by what he saw he made a heroic effort to keep his admiration in check.

'Sorry for the delay,' I apologised. 'Short of sleep. We had the customs aboard in the middle of the night and I couldn't get off after that.' Always tell everyone the truth if there's an even chance of that truth coming out anyway, which in this case there was: gives one a reputation for forthright honesty.

'The customs?' He looked as if he intended to say 'pshaw' or 'fiddlesticks' or something of that order, then changed his mind and looked up sharply. 'An intolerable bunch of busybodies. And in the middle of the night. Shouldn't have let them aboard. Sent them packing. Intolerable.

What the deuce did they want?' He gave the distinct impression of having himself had some trouble with the customs in the past.

'They were looking for stolen chemicals. Stolen from some place in Ayrshire. Wrong boat.'

'Idiots!' He thrust out a stubby hand, he'd passed his final judgment on the unfortunate customs and the subject was now closed. 'Skouras. Sir Anthony Skouras.'

'Petersen.' His grip made me wince, less from the sheer power of it than from the gouging effects of the large number of thickly encrusted rings that adorned his fingers. I wouldn't have been surprised to see some on his thumbs but he'd missed out on that. I looked at him with new interest. 'Sir Anthony Skouras. I've heard of you of course.'

'Nothing good. Columnists don't like me because they know I despise them. A Cypriot who made his shipping millions through sheer ruthlessness, they say. True. Asked by the Greek Government to leave Athens. True. Became a naturalised British citizen and bought a knighthood. Absolutely true. Charitable works and public services. Money can buy anything. A baronetcy next but the market's not right at the moment. Price is bound to fall. Can I use your radio transmitter? I see you have one.'

'What's that?' The abrupt switch had me off-balance, no great achievement the way I was feeling.

'Your radio transmitter, man! Don't you listen to the news? All those major defence projects cancelled by the Pentagon. Price of steel tumbling. Must get through to my New York broker at once!'

'Sorry. Certainly you may – but, but your own radio-telephone? Surely -'

'It's out of action.' His mouth became more tight-lipped than ever and the inevitable happened: it disappeared. 'It's urgent, Mr Petersen.'

'Immediately. You know how to operate this model?'

He smiled thinly, which was probably the only way he was capable of smiling. Compared to the cinema-organ job he'd have aboard the *Shangri-la*, asking him if he could operate this was like asking the captain of a transatlantic jet if he could fly a Tiger Moth. 'I think I can manage, Mr Petersen.'

'Call me when you're finished. I'll be in the saloon.' He'd be calling me before he'd finished, he'd be calling me before he'd even started. But I couldn't tell him. Word gets around. I went down to the saloon, contemplated a shave and decided against it. It wouldn't take that long.

It didn't. He appeared at the saloon door inside a minute, his face grim.

'Your radio is out of order, Mr Petersen.'

'They're tricky to operate, some of those older jobs,' I said tactfully. 'Maybe if I -'

'I say it's out of order. I mean it's out of order.'

'Damned odd. It was working -'

'Would you care to try it, please?'

I tried it. Nothing. I twiddled everything I could lay hands on. Nothing.

'A power failure, perhaps,' I suggested. 'I'll check -'

'Would you be so good as to remove the faceplate, please?'

I stared at him in perplexity, switching the expression, after a suitable interval, to shrewd thoughtfulness. 'What do you know, Sir Anthony, that I don't?'

'You'll find out.'

So I found out and went through all the proper motions of consternation, incredulity and tight-lipped indignation. Finally I said: 'You knew. How did you know?'

'Obvious, isn't it?'

'Your transmitter,' I said slowly. 'It's more than just out order. You had the same midnight caller.'

'And the *Orion.'* The mouth vanished again. 'The big blue ketch lying close in. Only other craft in the harbour apart from us with a radio transmitter. Smashed. Just come from there.'

'Smashed? Theirs as well? But who in God's name – it must be the work of a madman.'

'Is it? Is it the work of a madman? I know something of those matters. My first wife -' He broke off abruptly and gave an odd shake of the head, then went on slowly: 'The mentally disturbed are irrational, haphazard, purposeless, aimless in their behaviour patterns. This seems an entirely irrational act, but an act with a method and a purpose to it. Not haphazard. It's planned. There's a reason. At first I thought the reason was to cut off my connection with the mainland. But it can't be that. By rendering me temporarily incommunicado nobody stands to gain, I don't stand to lose.'

'But you said the New York Stock -'

'A bagatelle,' he said contemptuously. 'Nobody likes to lose money.' Not more than a few millions anyway. 'No, Mr Petersen, I am not the target. We have here an A and a B. A regards it as vital that he remains in constant communication with the mainland. B regards it as vital that A doesn't. So B takes steps. There's something damned funny going on in Torbay. And something big. I have a nose for such things.'

He was no fool but then not many morons have ended up as multi-millionaires. I couldn't have put it better myself. I said: 'Reported this to the police yet?'

'Going there now. After I've made a phone call or two.' The eyes suddenly became bleak and cold. 'Unless our friend has smashed up the two public call boxes in the main street.'

'He's done better than that. He's brought down the lines to the mainland. Somewhere down the Sound. No one knows where.'

He stared at me, wheeled to leave, then turned, his face empty of expression. 'How did you know that?' The tone matched the face.

'Police told me. They were aboard with the customs last night.'

'The police? That's damned odd. What were the police doing here?' He paused and looked at me with his cold measuring eyes. 'A personal question, Mr Petersen. No impertinence intended. A question of elimination. What are *you* doing here? No offence.'

'No offence. My friend and I are marine biologists. A working trip. Not our boat – the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.' I smiled. 'We have impeccable references, Sir Anthony.'

'Marine biology, eh? Hobby of mine, you might say. Layman, of course. Must have a talk sometime.' He was speaking absent-mindedly, his thoughts elsewhere. 'Could you describe the policeman, Mr Petersen?'

I did and he nodded. 'That's him all right. Odd, very odd. Must have a word with Archie about this.'

'Archie?'

'Sergeant MacDonald. This is my fifth consecutive season's cruising based on Torbay. The South of France and the ægean can't hold a candle to these waters. Know quite a few of the locals pretty well by this time. He was alone?'

'No. A young constable. His son, he said. Melancholy sort of lad.'

'Peter MacDonald. He has reason for his melancholy, Mr Petersen. His two young brothers, sixteen years old, twins, died a few months back.

At an Inverness school, lost in a late snow-storm in the Cairngorms. The father is tougher, doesn't show it so much. A great tragedy. I knew them both. Fine boys.'

I made some appropriate comment but he wasn't listening.

'I must be on my way, Mr Petersen. Put this damned strange affair in MacDonald's hand. Don't see that he can do much. Then off for a short cruise.'

I looked through the wheelhouse windows at the dark skies, the white-capped seas, the driving rain. 'You picked a day for it.'

'The rougher the better. No bravado. I like a mill-pond as well as any man. Just had new stabilisers fitted in the Clyde – we got back up here only two days ago – and it seems like a good day to try them out.' He smiled suddenly and put out his hand. 'Sorry to have barged in. Taken up far too much of your time. Seemed rude, I suppose. Some say I am. You and your colleague care to come aboard for a drink to-night? We eat early at sea. Eight o'clock, say? I'll send the tender.' That meant we didn't rate an invitation to dinner, which would have made a change from Hunslett and his damned baked beans, but even an invitation like this would have given rise to envious tooth-gnashing in some of the stateliest homes in the land: it was no secret that the bluest blood in England, from Royalty downwards, regarded a holiday invitation to the island Skouras owned off the Albanian coast as the conferment of the social cachet of the year or any year. Skouras didn't wait for an answer and didn't seem to expect one. I didn't blame him. It would have been many years since Skouras had discovered that it was an immutable law of human nature, human nature being what it is, that no one ever turned down one of his invitations.

'You'll be coming to tell me about your smashed transmitter and asking me what the devil I intend to do about it,' Sergeant MacDonald said tiredly. 'Well, Mr Petersen, I know all about it already. Sir Anthony Skouras was here half an hour ago Sir Anthony had a lot to say. And Mr Campbell, the owner of the *Orion*, has just left. He'd a lot to say, too.'

'Not me, Sergeant. I'm a man of few words.' I gave him what I hoped looked like a self-deprecatory smile. 'Except, of course, when the police and customs drag me out of bed in the middle of the night. I take it our friends have left?'

'Just as soon as they'd put us ashore. Customs are just a damn' nuisance.' Like myself, he looked as if he could do with some hours' sleep. 'Frankly, Mr Petersen, I don't know what to do about the broken radio-transmitters. Why on earth – who on earth would want to do a daft vicious thing like that?'

'That's what I came to ask you.'

'I can go aboard your boat,' MacDonald said slowly. 'I can take out my note-book, look around and see if I can't find any clues. I wouldn't know what to look for. Maybe if I knew something about fingerprinting and analysis and microscopy I might just find out something. But I don't. I'm an island policeman, not a one-man Flying Squad. This is C.I.D. work and we'd have to call in Glasgow. I doubt if they'd send a couple of detectives to investigate a few smashed radio valves.'

'Old man Skouras draws a lot of water.'

'Sir?'

'He's powerful. He has influence. If Skouras wanted action I'm damned sure he could get it. If the need arose and the mood struck him I'm sure he could be a very unpleasant character indeed.'

'There's not a better man or a kinder man ever sailed into Torbay,' MacDonald said warmly. That hard brown face could conceal practically anything that MacDonald wanted it to conceal but this time he was hiding nothing. 'Maybe his ways aren't my ways. Maybe he's a hard, aye, a ruthless businessman. Maybe, as the papers hint, his private life wouldn't bear investigation. That's none of my business. But if you were to look for a man in Torbay to say a word against him, you'll have a busy time on your hands, Mr Petersen.'

'You've taken me up wrongly. Sergeant,' I said mildly. 'I don't even know the man.'

'No. But we do. See that?' He pointed through the side window of the police station to a large Swedish-style timber building beyond the pier. 'Our new village hall. Town hall, they call it. Sir Anthony gave us that. Those six wee chalets up the hill there? For old folks. Sir Anthony again -every penny from his own pocket. Who takes all the schoolchildren to the Oban Games – Sir Anthony on the *Shangri-la.* Contributes to every charity going and now he has plans to build a boatyard to give employment to the young men of Torbay – there's not much else going since the fishing-boats left.'

'Well, good for old Skouras,' I said. 'He seems to have adopted the place. Lucky Torbay. I wish he'd buy me a new radio-transmitter.'

'I'll keep my eyes and ears open, Mr Petersen. I can't do more. If anything turns up I'll let you know at once.'

I told him thanks, and left. I hadn't particularly wanted to go there, but it would have looked damned odd if I hadn't turned up to add my pennyworth to the chorus of bitter complaint.

I was very glad that I had turned up.

The midday reception from London was poor. This was due less to the fact that reception is always better after dark than to the fact that I couldn't use our telescopic radio mast: but it was fair enough and Uncle's voice was brisk and businesslike and clear.

'Well, Caroline, we've found our missing friends,' he said.

'How many?' I asked cautiously. Uncle Arthur's ambiguous references weren't always as clear as Uncle Arthur imagined them to be.

'All twenty-five.' That made it the former crew of the *Nantesville.* 'Two of them are pretty badly hurt but they'll be all right.' That accounted for the blood I had found in the captain's and one of the engineers' cabins.

'Where?' I asked.

He gave me a map reference. Just north of Wexford. The *Nantesville* had sailed from Bristol, she couldn't have been more than a few hours on her way before she'd run into trouble.

'Exactly the same procedure as on the previous occasions,' Uncle Arthur was saying. 'Held in a lonely farmhouse for a couple of nights. Plenty to eat and drink and blankets to keep the cold out. Then they woke up one morning and found their guards had gone.'

'But a different procedure in stopping the – *our* friend?' I'd almost said *Nantesville* and Uncle Arthur wouldn't have liked that at all.

'As always. We must concede them a certain ingenuity, Caroline. After having smuggled men aboard in port, then using the sinking fishing-boat routine, the police launch routine and the yacht with the appendicitis case aboard, I thought they would be starting to repeat themselves. But this time they came up with a new one – possibly because it's the first time they've hi-jacked a ship during the hours of darkness. Carley rafts, this time, with about ten survivors aboard, dead ahead of the vessel. Oil all over the sea. A weak distress flare that couldn't have been seen a mile away and probably was designed that way. You know the rest.'

'Yes, Annabelle.' I knew the rest. After that the routine was always the same. The rescued survivors, displaying a marked lack of gratitude, would whip out pistols, round up the crew, tie black muslin bags over their heads so that they couldn't identify the vessel that would appear within the hour to take them off, march them on board the unknown vessel, land them on some lonely beach during the dark then march them again, often a very long way indeed, till they arrived at their prison. A deserted farmhouse. Always a deserted farmhouse. And always in Ireland, three times in the north and now twice in the south. Meantime the prize crew sailed the hi-jacked vessel to God alone knew where and the first the world knew of the disappearance of the pirated vessel was when the original crew, released after two or three days' painless captivity, would turn up at some remote dwelling and start hollering for the nearest telephone.

'Betty and Dorothy,' I said. 'Were they still in safe concealment when the crew were taken off?'

'I imagine so. I don't know. Details are still coming in and I understand the doctors won't let anyone see the captain yet.' Only the captain had known of the presence aboard of Baker and Delmont. 'Forty-one hours now, Caroline. What have you done?'

For a moment I wondered irritably what the devil he was talking about. Then I remembered. He'd given me forty-eight hours. Seven were gone.

'I've had three hours' sleep.' He'd consider that an utter waste of time, his employees weren't considered to need sleep. 'I've talked to the constabulary ashore. And I've talked to a wealthy yachtsman, next boat to us here. We're paying him a social call to-night.'

There was a pause. 'You're doing *what* to-night, Caroline?'

'Visiting. We've been invited. Harriet and I. For drinks.'

This time the pause was markedly longer. Then he said: 'You have forty-one hours, Caroline.'

'Yes, Annabelle.'

'We assume you haven't taken leave of your senses.'

'I don't know how unanimous informed opinion might be about that. I don't think I have.'

'And you haven't given up? No, not that. You're too damn' stiff-necked and – and -'

'Stupid?'

'Who's the yachtsman?'

I told him. It took me some time, partly because I had to spell out names with the aid of his damned code-book, partly because I gave him a very full account of everything Skouras had said to me and everything Sergeant MacDonald had said about Skouras. When his voice came again it was cagey and wary. As Uncle Arthur couldn't see me I permitted myself a cynical grin. Even Cabinet Ministers found it difficult to make the grade as far as Skouras's dinner-table, but the Permanent Under-Secretaries, the men with whom the real power of government lies, practically had their own initialled napkin rings. Under-Secretaries were the bane of Uncle Arthur's life.

'You'll have to watch your step very carefully here, Caroline.'

'Betty and Dorothy aren't coming home any more, Annabelle. Someone has to ay. I want someone to pay. You want someone to pay. We all do.'

'But it's inconceivable that a man in his position, a man of his wealth -'

'I'm sorry, Annabelle. I don't understand.'

'A man like that. Dammit all, I know him well, Caroline. We dine together. First-name terms. Know his present wife even better. Ex-actress. A philanthropist like that. A man who's spent five consecutive seasons there. Would a man like that, a millionaire like that, spend all that time, all that money, just to build up a front -'

'Skouras?' I used the code name. Interrogatory, incredulous, as if it had just dawned upon me what Uncle Arthur was talking about. 'I never said I suspected him, Annabelle. I have no reason to suspect him.'

'Ah!' It's difficult to convey a sense of heartfelt gladness, profound satisfaction and brow-mopping relief in a single syllable, but Uncle Arthur managed it without any trouble. 'Then why go?' A casual eavesdropper might have thought he detected a note of pained jealousy in Uncle Arthur's voice, and the casual eavesdropper would have been right. Uncle Arthur had only one weakness in his make-up – he was a social snob of monumental proportions.

'I want aboard. I want to see this smashed transmitter of his.'

'Why?'

'A hunch, let me call it, Annabelle. No more.'

Uncle Arthur was going in for the long silences in a big way to-day. Then he said: 'A hunch? A *hunch?* You told me this morning you were on to something.'

'There's something else. I want you to contact the Post Office Savings Bank, Head Office, in Scotland. After that, the Records files of some Scottish newspapers. I suggest *The Glasgow Herald*, the *Scottish Daily Express* and, most particularly, the West Highland weekly, the *Oban Times.'*

'Ah!' No relief this time, just satisfaction. 'This is more like it, Caroline. What do you want and why?'

So I told him what I wanted and why, lots more of the fancy code work, and when I'd finished he said: 'I'll have my staff on to this straight away. I'll have all the information you want by midnight.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.