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San Andreas

Alistair MacLean

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Аннотация

Another magnificent tale of treachery at sea from a storytelling genius.Suddenly, just before dawn, the lights went out aboard the San Andreas. For the British hospital ship sailing the deadly, U-boat patrolled Norwegian waters, a nightmare of violence and betrayal has begun. A terrifying game of sabotage in which an unknown traitor among the crew holds all the cards.The red crosses on the vessel's sides spell anything but safety. For a dangerous secret has turned the ship into a priceless quarry.With the Captain out of action Bosun Archie McKinnon takes over. Alone in treacherous, frozen seas, her compass smashed, the San Andreas is being drawn relentlessly into the enemy's hands.

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To David and Judy

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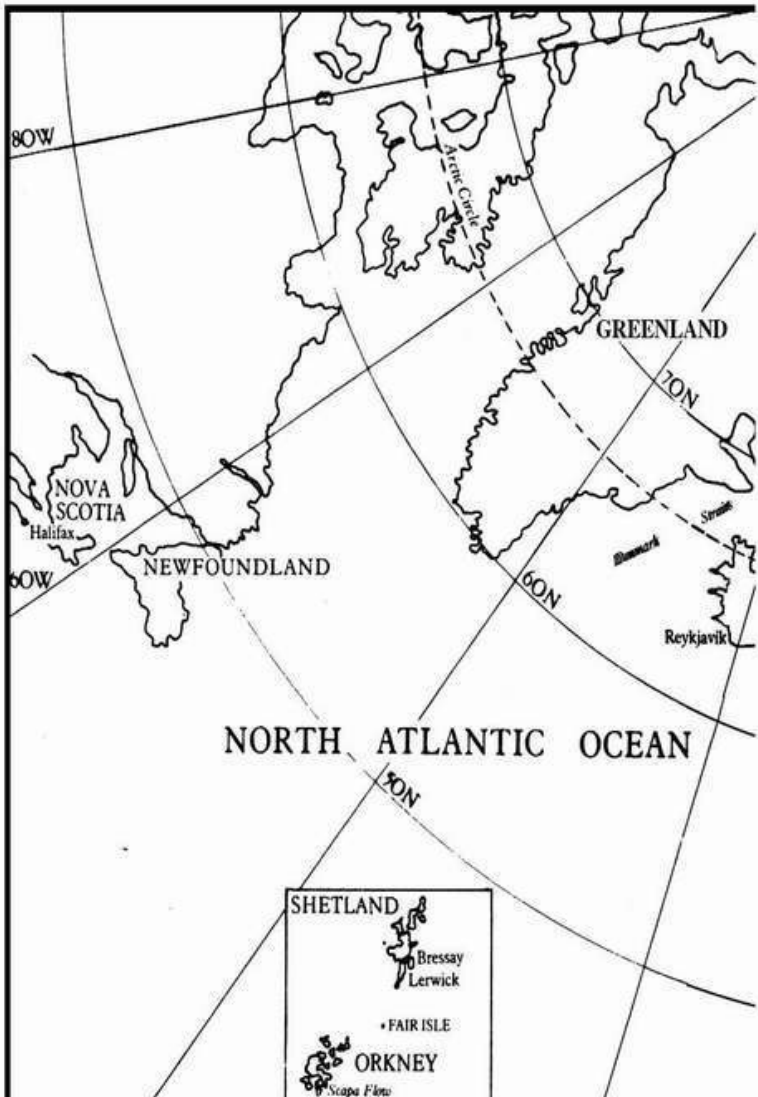
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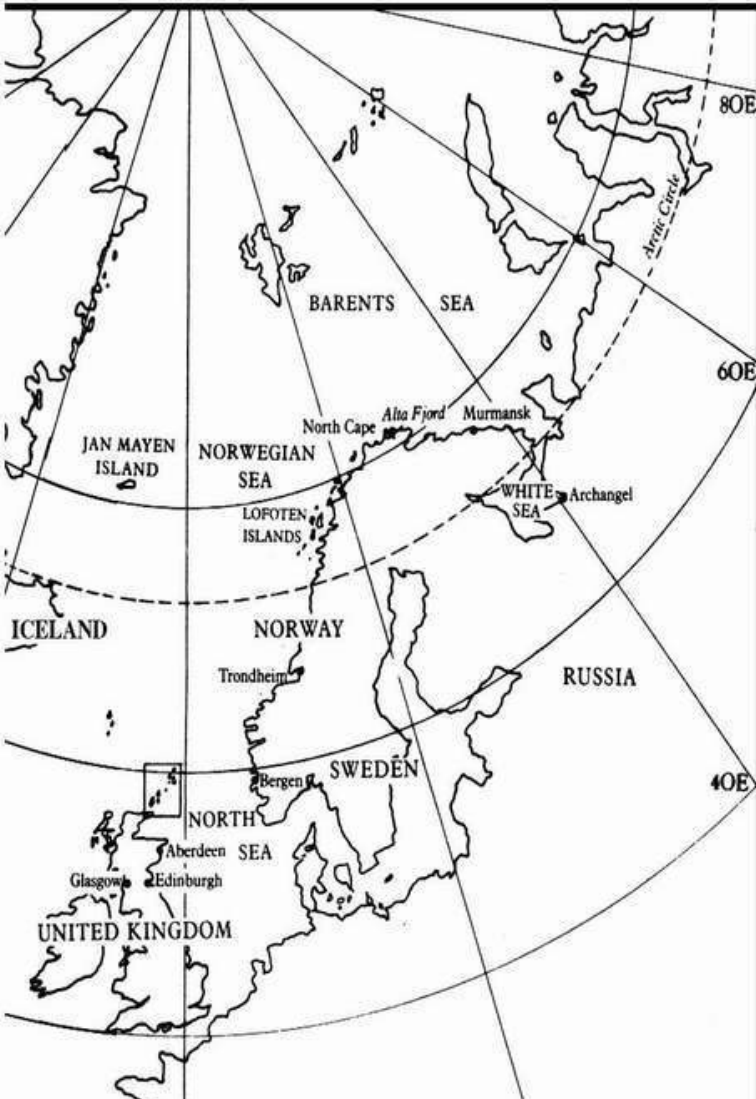
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PROLOGUE

There are three distinct but inevitably interlinked elements in this story: the Merchant Navy (officially the Mercantile Marine) and the men who served in it: Liberty Ships: and the units of the German forces, underseas, on the seas and in the air, whose sole mission was to seek out and destroy the vessels and crews of the Merchant Navy.

1 At the outbreak of war in September 1939 the British Merchant Navy was in a parlous state indeed—'pitiable' would probably be a more accurate term. Most of the ships were old, a considerable number unseaworthy and some no more than rusting hulks plagued by interminable mechanical breakdowns. Even so, those vessels were in comparatively good shape compared to the appalling living conditions of those whose misfortune it was to serve aboard those ships.

The reason for the savage neglect of both ships and men could be summed up in one word—greed. The fleet owners of yesteryear—and there are more than a few around today—were grasping, avaricious and wholly dedicated to their high priestess—profits at all costs, provided that the cost did not fall on them. Centralization was the watchword of the day, the gathering in of overlapping monopolies into a few rapacious hands. While crews' wages were cut and living conditions reduced to barely subsistence levels, the owners grew fat, as did some of the

less desirable directors of those companies and a considerable number of carefully hand-picked and favoured shareholders.

The dictatorial powers of the owners, discreetly exercised, of course, were little short of absolute. Their fleets were their satrap, their feudal fiefdom, and the crews were their serfs. If a serf chose to revolt against the established order, that was his misfortune. His only recourse was to leave his ship, to exchange it for virtual oblivion, for, apart from the fact that he was automatically blackballed, unemployment was high in the Merchant Navy and the few vacancies available were for willing serfs only. Ashore, unemployment was even higher and even if it had not been so, seamen find it notoriously difficult to adapt to a landlubber's way of life. The rebel serf had no place left to go. Rebel serfs were very few and far between. The vast majority knew their station in life and kept to it. Official histories tend to gloss over this state of affairs or, more commonly, ignore it altogether, an understandable myopia. The treatment of the merchant seamen between the wars and, indeed, during the Second World War, does not form one of the more glorious chapters in British naval annals.

Successive governments between the wars were perfectly aware of the conditions of life in the Merchant Navy—they would have had to be more than ordinarily stupid not to be so aware—so successive governments, in largely hypocritical face-saving exercises, passed a series of regulations laying down minimum specifications regarding accommodation, food,

hygiene and safety. Both governments and owners were perfectly aware—in the case of the ship-owners no doubt cheerfully aware—that regulations are not laws and that a regulation is not legally enforceable. The recommendations—for they amounted to no more than that—were almost wholly ignored. A conscientious captain who tried to enforce them was liable to find himself without a command.

Recorded eyewitness reports of the living conditions aboard Merchant Navy ships in the years immediately prior to the Second World War—there is no reason to question those reports, especially as they are all so depressingly unanimous in tone—describe the crews' living quarters as being so primitive and atrocious as to beggar description. Medical inspectors stated that in some instances the crews' living quarters were unfit for animal, far less human, habitation. The quarters were invariably cramped and bereft of any form of comfort. The decks were wet, the men's clothes were wet and the mattresses and blankets, where such luxuries were available, were usually sodden. Hygiene and toilet facilities ranged from the primitive to the non-existent. Cold was pervasive and heating of any form—except for smoking and evil-smelling coal stoves—was rare, as, indeed was any form of ventilation. And the food, which as one writer said would not have been tolerated in a home for the utterly destitute, was even worse than the living quarters.

The foregoing may strain the bounds of credulity or, at least, seem far-fetched, but respectively, they should not and are not.

Charges of imprecision and exaggeration have never been laid at the doors of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine or the Registrar General. The former, in a pre-war report, categorically stated that the mortality rate below the age of fifty-five was twice as high for seamen as it was for the rest of the male population, and statistics issued by the latter showed that the death rate for seamen of all ages was 47% in excess of the national average. The killers were tuberculosis, cerebral hæmorrhage and gastric or duodenal ulcers. The incidence of the first and last of those is all too understandable and there can be little doubt that the combination of those contributed heavily to the abnormal occurrence of strokes.

The prime agent of death was unquestionably tuberculosis. When one looks around Western Europe today, where TB sanatoria are a happily and rapidly vanishing species, it is difficult to imagine just how terrible a scourge tuberculosis was just over a generation ago. It is not that tuberculosis, worldwide, has been eliminated: in many underdeveloped countries it still remains that same terrible scourge and the chief cause of death, and as recently as the early years of this century TB was still the number one killer in Western Europe and North America. Such is no longer the case since scientists came up with the agents to tame and destroy the tubercle bacillus. But in 1939 it was still very much the case: the discovery of the chemotherapeutic agents, rifampin, para-aminosalicylic acid, isoniazid and especially streptomycin, still lay far beyond

a distant horizon.

It was upon those tuberculosis-ridden seamen, ill-housed and abominably fed, that Britain depended to bring food, oil, arms and ammunition to its shores and those of its allies. It was the *sine qua non* conduit, the artery, the lifeline upon which Britain was absolutely dependent: without those ships and men Britain would assuredly have gone under. It is worth noting that those men's contracts ended when the torpedo, mine or bomb struck. In wartime as in peacetime the owners protected their profits to the bitter end: the seaman's wages were abruptly terminated when his ship was sunk, no matter where, how, or in what unimaginable circumstances. When an owner's ship went down he shed no salt tears, for his ships were insured, as often as not grossly over-insured: when a seaman's ship went down he was fired.

The Government, Admiralty and ship-owners of that time should have been deeply ashamed of themselves: if they were, they manfully concealed their distress: compared to prestige, glory and profits, the conditions of life and the horrors of death of the men of the Merchant Navy were a very secondary consideration indeed.

The people of Britain cannot be condemned. With the exception of the families and friends of the Merchant Navy and the splendid volunteer charitable organizations that were set up to help survivors—such humanitarian trifles were of no concern to owners or Whitehall—very few knew or even suspected what was going on.

2 As a lifeline, a conduit and an artery, the Liberty Ships were on a par with the British Merchant Navy: without them, Britain would have assuredly gone down in defeat. All the food, oil, arms and ammunition which overseas countries—especially the United States—were eager and willing to supply were useless without the ships in which to transport them. After less than two years of war it was bleakly apparent that because of the deadly attrition of the British Merchant fleets there must soon, and inevitably, be no ships left to carry anything and that Britain would, inexorably and not slowly, be starved into surrender. In 1940, even the indomitable Winston Churchill despaired of survival, far less ultimate victory. Typically, the period of despair was brief but heaven only knew that he had cause for it.

In nine hundred years, Britain, of all the countries in the world, had never been invaded, but in the darkest days of the war such invasion seemed not only perilously close but inevitable. Looking back today over a span of forty and more years it seems inconceivable and impossible that the country survived: had the facts been made public, which they weren't, it almost certainly would not.

British shipping losses were appalling beyond belief and beggar even the most active imagination. In the first eleven months of the war Britain lost 1,500,000 tons of shipping. In some of the early months of 1941, losses averaged close on 500,000 tons. In 1942, the darkest period of the war at sea, 6,250,000 tons of shipping went to the bottom. Even working at

full stretch British shipyards could replace only a small fraction of those enormous losses. That, together with the fact that the number of operational U-boats in that same grim year rose from 91 to 212 made it certain that, by the law of diminishing returns, the British Merchant Navy would eventually cease to exist unless a miracle occurred.

The name of the miracle was Liberty Ships. To anyone who can recall those days the term Liberty Ships was automatically and immediately linked with Henry Kaiser. Kaiser—in the circumstances it was ironic that he should bear the same name as the title of the late German Emperor—was an American engineer of unquestioned genius. His career until then had been a remarkably impressive one: he had been a key figure in the construction of the Hoover and Coulee dams and the San Francisco bridge. It is questionable whether Henry Kaiser could have designed a rowing-boat but that was of no matter. He almost certainly had a better understanding of prefabrication based on a standard and repeatable design than any other person in the world at the time and did not hesitate to send out contracts for part-construction to factories in the United States that lay hundreds of miles from the sea. Those sections were transmitted to shipyards for assembly, originally to Richmond, California, where Kaiser directed the Permanente Cement Co., and eventually to other shipyards under Kaiser's control. Kaiser's turnover and speed of production stopped just short of the incredible: he did for the production of merchant vessels what Henry Ford's assembly lines

had done for the Model T Ford. Until then, as far as ocean-going vessels were concerned, mass production had been an alien concept.

Mistakenly, but understandably, there existed a widely-held belief that the Liberty Ships originated in the design offices of the Kaiser shipyards. The design and prototypes were, in fact, English and were conceived by the design staff of the shipbuilders J.L. Thompson of North Sands, Sunderland. The first of what was to become a very long line indeed, the *Embassage*, was completed in 1935—the prefix 'Liberty' did not come into existence for another seven years, and only for some of the Kaiser-built vessels. The *Embassage*, 9,300 tons, with a raked stem and rounded stern and three triple-expansion coal-burning engines, was a non-starter in the æsthetic stakes, but then J.L. Thompson were not interested in æsthetics:what they had aimed at was a modern, practical and economical cargo vessel and in this they succeeded admirably. Twenty-four more similar vessels were built before the outbreak of war.

Those ships were built in Britain, the United States and Canada, the great preponderance in the Kaiser yards. Hull designs remained identical but the Americans, and only the Americans, introduced two changes which they regarded as refinements. One of those changes, using oil instead of coal as fuel, may well have been: the other, which concerned the accommodation of officers and crew, was not. While the Canadians and British retained the original concept of having the

living quarters both fore and aft the Americans elected to have all the crew, officers and men—and the navigating bridge—in a superstructure surrounding the funnel. In retrospect—hindsight and bitter experience make for a splendid conductor to belated wisdom—it was a blunder. The Americans had all their eggs in one basket.

Those vessels were armed—after a fashion. They had four-inch low-angle and twelve-pounder anti-aircraft guns, neither of which was particularly effective, together with Bofors and rapid-firing Oerlikons: the Oerlikons were deadly in trained hands—but there were few trained hands around. They also had weird devices such as rocket-fired parachutes and cables carrying coils of wire and grenades: these were as dangerous to those using them as the aircraft they were supposed to bring down. Some few of these ships had catapult-launched Hurricane fighters—the nearest equivalent to the suicidal Japanese kamikaze planes that Britain ever had. The pilots could not, of course, return to their ships: they had the uncomfortable option of either baling out or ditching. In the Arctic, in winter, their survival rate was not high.

3 From the air, on the sea and under the sea the Germans, often with brilliance, always with tenacity and ruthlessness, used every means in their power to destroy the Merchant Navy convoys.

Basically, they used five main types of aircraft. Their standard or conventional bomber was the Dornier which flew at pre-

determined heights and released their bombs in pre-determined patterns: they were useful planes and had their successes but were not particularly effective.

Much more feared, in ascending order, were the Heinkel, the Heinkel III and the Stuka. The Heinkel was a torpedo-bomber, which attacked at wave-top level, its pilot releasing the torpedo at the last possible moment, then using the lightened weight of his aircraft to lift over the ship it was attacking. Those planes had an unusual degree of immunity from destruction: when the anti-aircraft gunners on the merchant ships peered over the sights of their Oerlikons, Bofors or pom-poms—two-pounders—the thought that 'He gets me or I get him' didn't make for the degree of cool detachment which would have been helpful in the circumstances. In the Arctic winter, those torpedo-bombers were not infrequently at a disadvantage, especially for the gallant but unfortunate pilots who flew them: ice could freeze up their torpedo release mechanisms and their burdened aircraft were unable to lift off over their targets. This made little difference to the equally unfortunate crews of the merchant vessels: whether the torpedo was running free or still attached to the aircraft when it crashed into the ship, the results were equally devastating.

The Heinkel III used glider bombers. These were highly effective, exposed their pilots to a much lesser degree of risk and the bombs, once released, were virtually impossible to shoot down: fortunately for the Merchant Navy, the Germans did not have too many of these highly specialized planes.

The Stuka, the dihedral—gull-winged Junker 87 dive-bomber—was the most feared of all. It was their customary practice to fly at high altitude in level formation, then peel off successively in near-vertical dives. Forty years later, the seamen and soldiers—the Germans used the Junker 87 in every theatre of war—who survived those attacks and are still alive will never forget the sound of the banshee shrieking as the Stuka pilots switched on their sirens in their plummeting dive. The sound, to say the least, was unnerving and considerably reduced the effectiveness of anti-aircraft gunners. The Royal Navy used searchlights, customarily of the 44-inch variety, in an attempt to blind the Stuka pilots, until it was pointed out to them that the pilots, who were well aware of this tactic, used dark glasses to reduce the blinding glare to mere pinpoints of light which enabled them to home in even more accurately on their targets. From the German point of view the Stukas had only one drawback: they were essentially short-range planes and could operate effectively only against convoys moving to the north of Norway en route to Murmansk and Archangel.

But, oddly enough, the most effective air weapon the Germans had was the essentially non-combative Focke-Wulf Condor 200. True, it could and did carry 250-kilo bombs and had a fairly formidable array of machine-guns, but with bombs removed and extra fuel tanks fitted in their place, it became an invaluable reconnaissance plane. For that comparatively early flying era, in the early Forties, its flying range was quite

remarkable. Condors flew almost daily from Trondheim, in German-occupied Norway, round the western coast of the British Isles to German-occupied France: more importantly, they were capable of patrolling the Barents Sea, the Greenland Sea and, most damagingly of all, the justly dreaded Denmark Strait, between Iceland and Greenland, for it was through that strait that the Russian-bound convoys from Canada and the United States passed. For such a convoy, the sight of a Condor was the guarantee of inevitable disaster.

Flying high and safely out of reach of antiaircraft fire, the Condor would literally circle the convoy, its crew noting down the number of ships, the convoy's speed, course and precise latitude and longitude. This information was radioed to Alta Fjord or Trondheim and then transmitted to Lorient, the French HQ of Admiral Karl Doenitz, almost certainly the best submarine C-in-C of his time or any time. From there the information was re-transmitted to the growing submarine wolfpack or packs, instructing them when and where exactly to position themselves to intercept the convoy.

As far as surface warships were concerned, the Germans were more than adequately prepared at the outbreak of war. By the Anglo-German agreement of 1937 Germany could build 100% of the British equivalent of submarines but only 35% of surface ships. In fact they built twice as many submarines and completely ignored the other 35% restriction. The *Deutschland, Admiral Graf Spee* and *Admiral Scheer were nominally 10,000*

ton cruisers: they were, in fact, fast and powerful commerce raiders, in effect pocket battleships of a far greater tonnage than purported. The Scharnhorst and *Gneisenau*, 26,000 ton battle-cruisers, were completed in 1938 and it was in that year that the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* were laid down in the Blohm and Voess shipyards in Hamburg. Those were the best and most powerful battleships ever built, a statement that remains true to this day. By treaty limitations they were restricted to 35,000 tons: they were, in fact, 53,000 tons.

The *Bismarck* had a brief but spectacular career, the *Tirpitz* no career at all. It spent its war holed up in northern Norway, where it none the less performed the invaluable function of tying up major units of the British Home Fleet which feared that the giant battleship might slip its moorings in Alta Fjord and break out into the Atlantic. It was at those moorings that the *Tirpitz* was ultimately destroyed by ten-ton bombs from RAF Lancasters.

Although the British had a very considerable advantage in battleships, they were, individually, no match for those of the Germans, as was tragically proved when the *Bismarck* sank the battle-cruiser *Hood*, pride and darling of the Royal Navy, with a single salvo.

Underwater, the Germans used mines and submarines. Less than three months after the outbreak of war the Germans had come up with a rather unpleasant device—the magnetic mine. Unlike the standard type, which had to come into physical contact with a vessel before being activated, the magnetic mine

was set off by the electrical current generated by the ship's hull. Those mines could be laid by either ships or aircraft and in the first four days after their introduction no fewer than fifteen ships were sent to the bottom—the fact that they were nearly all neutrals seemed of no great concern to the Germans: magnetic mines are very clever devices but not clever enough to discriminate between a neutral and an enemy. The British managed to retrieve one intact, took it to pieces—not without considerable danger to those engaged in the dismantling—and came up with electronic counter-measures which enabled minesweepers to detonate the magnetic mine at a respectful distance.

Submarines, of course, were the most deadly enemies the Merchant Navy had to face. The toll taken in the first three and a half years of war was savage beyond belief. It wasn't until the early summer of 1943 that the menace was brought under some form of control, but it wasn't until the end of 1944—during the two years 1943-4 480 German submarines were destroyed—that those stealthy pursuers and silent killers ceased to be a factor of consequence.

It was inevitable that the U-boats should be selected as *the* target for hatred and their crews depicted, both during the war and subsequently, as cunning, treacherous and ice-cold murderers, fanatical Nazis to a man, who hunted down unsuspecting innocents, closed in unheard and unseen, destroyed their victims without mercy or compunction, then moved on

again, still unheard and unseen. To a limited extent, this view was valid. The pattern for this belief was set on the very first day of the war when the liner *Athenia* was torpedoed. In no way could the *Athenia* have been mistaken for anything other than what it was: a peaceful passenger vessel crammed with civilians —men, women and children. This must have been known to the far from gallant Oberleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp, commander of the German U-boat that sent the *Athenia* to the bottom. There is no record that Lemp was ever reprimanded for his action.

The same charge of ruthlessness, of course, could have been levelled against Allied submariners—to a lesser extent, admittedly, it is true, but that was only because they had a much more limited choice of targets.

The overall U-boat picture is false. Ruthless Nazis there may have been among the crews but they were a tiny minority: the men were motivated principally by an intense pride in the traditions of the Imperial German Navy. Certainly there were acts of brutality by individual U-boat commanders but there were also acts of humanity, gallantry and compassion. What was undeniable was the immense personal courage and spirit of self-sacrifice of those men. It has to be remembered that, out of a total of 40,000 U-boat submariners, 30,000 died, the most shocking casualty rate in the history of naval warfare. While the actions of those men are not to be condoned, the men themselves are not to be condemned. Ruthless they were—the nature of their job demanded it—but they were brave beyond belief.

Such then were the conditions in which the men of the Merchant Navy had to live and die: such, too, were their enemies, who sought, implacably, to destroy them. The odds against the health and lives of the merchantmen surviving, respectively, their living conditions and the attentions of the enemy were high indeed: theirs was a classic no-win situation. In the circumstances it was an astonishing and commonplace fact that men who had survived two or three torpedoings and sinkings would immediately, on their return to Britain, seek out another ship to take them to sea again. By definition, those men were noncombatants but their endurance, tenacity and determination —they would have laughed at words like gallantry and courage —matched those of the men who hunted them down.

ONE

Silently, undramatically, without any forewarning, as in any abrupt and unexpected power cut in a city, the lights aboard the *San Andreas* died in the hour before the dawn. Such blackouts were rare but not unknown and gave rise to no particular alarm as far as the handling and navigation of the vessel were concerned. On the bridge, the binnacle light that illuminated the compass, the chart light and the essential telephone line to the engine-room remained unaffected because, operating as they did on a lower voltage, they had their own separate generator. The overhead lights were on the main generator but this was of no consequence as those lights were switched off: the bridge, any bridge, was always darkened at night. The only item on the bridge that did fail was the Kent screen, an inset circular plate of glass directly ahead of the helmsman which spun at high speed and offered a clear view in all conditions. Third Officer Batesman, the officer of the watch, was unworried: to the best of his belief there were neither land nor ships within a hundred miles of him with the exception of the frigate HMS *Andover*. He had no idea where the frigate was and it didn't matter: the frigate always knew where he was, for it was equipped with highly sophisticated radar.

In the operating theatre and recovery room it was a case of business as usual. Although the surrounding sea and sky were still dark as midnight, the hour was not early: in those high

latitudes and at that time of year daylight, or what passed for daylight, arrived about 10.00 a.m. In those two rooms, the most important in a hospital ship, for that was what the *San Andreas* was, battery-powered lights came on automatically when the main power failed. Throughout the rest of the ship emergency lighting was provided by hand-hung nickel-cadmium lamps: a twist of the base of such a lamp provided at least a bare minimum of illumination.

What did give rise to concern was the complete failure of the upper deck lights. The hull of the *San Andreas* was painted white —more correctly, it had been white but time and the sleet, hail, snow and ice spicules of Arctic storms had eroded the original to something between a dingy off-white and an equally dingy light grey. A green band ran all the way around the hull. Very big red crosses had been painted on both her sides, as well as on the fore and after-decks. During night-time those red crosses were illuminated by powerful floodlights: at that time darkness accounted for twenty hours out of the twenty-four.

Opinion as to the value of those lights was fairly evenly divided. According to the Geneva Convention, those red crosses guaranteed immunity against enemy attacks, and as the *San Andreas* had so far been reassuringly immune those aboard her who had never been subjected to an enemy attack of any kind tended to believe in the validity of the Geneva Convention. But the crew members who had served aboard before her conversion from a Liberty cargo carrier to her present status regarded the

Convention with a very leery eye. To sail at night lit up like a Christmas tree went against all the instincts of men who for years had been conditioned to believe, rightly, that to light a cigarette on the upper deck was to attract the attention of a wandering U-boat. They didn't trust the lights. They didn't trust the red crosses. Above all, they didn't trust the U-boats. There was justification for their cynicism: other hospital boats, they knew, had been less fortunate than they had been but whether those attacks had been deliberate or accidental had never been established. There are no courts of law on the high seas and no independent witnesses. Either from reasons of delicacy or because they thought it pointless the crew never discussed the matter with those who lived in what they regarded as a fool's paradise—the doctors, the sisters, the nurses and the ward orderlies.

The starboard screen door on the bridge opened and a figure, torch in hand, entered. Batesman said: 'Captain?'

'Indeed. One of these days I'll get to finish my breakfast in peace. Some lamps, will you, Third?'

Captain Bowen was of medium height, running to fat—'well-built' was his preferred term—with a cheerful white-bearded face and periwinkle-blue eyes. He was also well past retirement age but had never asked to retire and never been asked to: in both ships and men the Merchant Navy had suffered crippling losses and a new ship could be made in a tiny fraction of the time it took to make a new captain: there weren't too many Captain Bowens left around.

The three emergency lamps didn't give much more light than a similar number of candles would have done but it was enough to see just how quickly the Captain's coat had been covered in snow in the brief seconds it had taken him to cover the distance from the saloon. He removed the coat, shook it out through the doorway and hurriedly closed the door.

'Bloody generator having one of its fits again,' Bowen said. He didn't seem particularly upset about it, but then, no one had ever seen the Captain upset about anything. 'Kent screen on the blink, of course. No odds. Useless anyway. Heavy snow, thirty knot wind and visibility zero.' There was a certain satisfaction in Bowen's voice and neither Batesman nor Hudson, the helmsman, had to ask why. All three belonged to the group of thought that had minimal belief in the Geneva Convention: no plane, ship or submarine could hope to locate them in those conditions. 'Been through to the engine-room?'

'I have not.' Batesman spoke with some feeling and Bowen smiled. Chief Engineer Patterson, a north-easterner from the Newcastle area, had a high pride in his undoubted skill, a temper with a notoriously short fuse and a rooted aversion to being questioned about his activities by anyone as lowly as a third officer. 'I'll get the Chief, sir.'

He got the Chief. Bowen took the phone and said: 'Ah, John. Not having much luck this trip, are we? Overload coil? Brushes? Fuse? Ah! The standby, then—I do hope we're not out of fuel again.' Captain Bowen spoke in tones of grave concern and

Batesman smiled: every member of the crew, down even to the pantry-boy, knew that Chief Patterson was totally devoid of any sense of humour. Bowen's reference to fuel referred to the occasion when, with Chief Patterson off duty, the main generator had failed and the young engineer in charge had forgotten to turn the cock on the fuel line to the auxiliary. Patterson's comments were predictable. With a pained expression on his face, Bowen held the phone a foot from his ear until the crackling in the earpiece had ceased, spoke briefly again, then hung up and said diplomatically: 'I think Chief Patterson is having rather more trouble than usual in locating electrical faults. Ten minutes, he says.'

Only two minutes later the phone rang.

'Bad news, for a fiver.' Bowen lifted the phone, listened briefly, then said: 'You want a word with me, John? But you *are* having a word with me…Ah. I see. Very well.' He hung up. 'The Chief wants to show me something.'

Bowen did not, as Batesman might have assumed, go to the engine-room. He went, instead, to his cabin where he was joined within a minute by the Chief Engineer. A tall, lean man, with an unremarkable face and a permanent five o'clock shadow, he was, like a number of men who are humourless and unaware of it, given to smiling at frequent intervals and usually at inappropriate moments. He was not, however, smiling at that particular moment. He produced three pieces of what appeared to be black carbon and arranged them on the Captain's table until

they formed an oblong shape.

'What do you make of that, then?'

'You know me, John, just a simple seaman. An armature brush for a dynamo or generator or whatever?'

'Exactly.' Patterson was much better at being grim than he was at smiling.

'Hence the power failure?'

'Nothing to do with the power failure. Overload coil thrown. Short somewhere. Jamieson's taken a bridge-megger and gone off to locate it. Shouldn't take him long to locate it.'

This Bowen was prepared to believe. Jamieson, the Second Engineer, was a very bright young man with the unusual distinction of being an A.M.I.E.E.—an Associate Member of the Instituteof Electrical Engineers. He said: 'So this brush comes from the auxiliary generator; it's broken, you seem unhappy about it, so I take it this is unusual.'

'Unusual? It's unknown. At least, I've never known of it. The brush is under constant spring-loaded pressure against the face of the armature. There is no way it could have broken in this particular fashion.'

'Well, it did happen. First time for everything.' Bowen touched the broken pieces with his finger. 'A one-off job? Flaw in manufacture?'

Patterson didn't answer. He dug into an overall pocket, brought out a small metal box, removed the lid and placed the box on the table beside the broken brush. The two brushes inside

were identical in shape and size to the one that Patterson had reassembled. Bowen looked at them, pursed his lips, then looked at Patterson.

'Spares?' Patterson nodded. Bowen picked one up but only one half came away in his hand: the other half remained in the bottom of the box.

'Our only two spares,' Patterson said.

'No point in examining the other?'

'None. Both generators were examined and in good shape when we were in Halifax—and we've used the auxiliary twice since leaving there.'

'One broken brush could be an extraordinary fluke. Three broken ones don't even make for a ludicrous coincidence. Doesn't even call for thoughtful chin-rubbing, John. We have an ill-intentioned crank in our midst.'

'Crank! Saboteur, you mean.'

'Well, yes, I suppose. At least, someone who is ill-disposed to us. Or towards the *San Andreas*. But saboteur? I wonder. Saboteurs go in for varied forms of wholesale destruction. Breaking three generator brushes can hardly be classified as wholesale destruction. And unless the character responsible is deranged he's not going to send the *San Andreas* to the bottom —not with him inside it. Why, John, why?'

They were still sitting there, darkly pondering why, when a knock came at the door and Jamieson entered. Young, red-headed and with an ebullient and carefree attitude to life, he was

being anything but ebullient and carefree at that moment: he had about him an air of gravity and anxiety, both quite alien to his nature.

'Engine-room told me I'd find you here. I thought I should come at once.'

'As the bearer of bad news,' Captain Bowen said. 'You have discovered two things: the location of the short and evidence of, shall we say, sabotage?'

'How the hell—I'm sorry, sir, but how could you possibly—'

'Tell him, John,' Bowen said.

'I don't have to. Those broken brushes are enough. What did you find, Peter?'

'For'ard. Carpenter's shop. Lead cable passing through a bulkhead. Clips on either side seemed to have worked loose where it passed through the hole in the bulkhead.'

Bowen said: 'Normal ship's vibration, weather movement—doesn't take much to chafe through soft lead.'

'Lead's tougher than you think, sir. In this case a pair of hands helped the normal chafing along. Not that that matters. Inside the lead sheathing the rubber round the power cable has been scorched away.'

'Which one would expect in a short?'

'Yes, sir. Only, I know the smell of electrically burnt rubber and it doesn't smell like sulphur. Some bright lad had used an igniting match-head or heads to do the trick. I've left Ellis on the repair job. It's simple and he should be about through now.'

'Well, well. So it's as easy as that to knock out a ship's electrical power.'

'Almost, sir. He'd one other little job to do. There's a fuse-box just outside the carpenter's shop and he removed the appropriate fuse before starting work. Then he returned to the fuse-box and shorted out the line—insulated pliers, ditto screwdriver, almost anything would do—then replaced the fuse. If he'd replaced the fuse before shorting out the line it would have blown, leaving the rest of the electrical system intact. Theoretically, that is—on very rare occasions the fuse is not so obliging and doesn't go.' Jamieson smiled faintly. 'Fact of the matter is, if I'd had a cold in the nose he might have got away with it.'

The phone rang. Captain Bowen lifted it and handed it over to Patterson who listened, said: 'Sure. Now,' and handed the phone back. 'Engineroom. Power coming on.'

Perhaps half a minute passed, then Captain Bowen said mildly: 'You know, I don't think the power *is* coming on.'

Jamieson rose and Bowen said: 'Where are you going?'

'I don't know, sir. Well, first of all to the engine-room to pick up Ellis and the bridge-megger and then I don't know. It would seem that old Flannelfoot has more than one string to his bow.'

The phone rang again and Bowen, without answering, handed it over to Patterson, who listened briefly, said: 'Thank you. Mr Jamieson is coming down,' and handed the phone back. 'Same again. I wonder how many places our friend *has* jinxed and is just waiting for the opportunity to activate them.'

Jamieson hesitated at the door. 'Do we keep this to ourselves?'

'We do not.' Bowen was positive. 'We broadcast it far and wide. Granted, Flannelfoot, as you call him, will be forewarned and forearmed, but the knowledge that a saboteur is at large will make everyone look at his neighbour and wonder what a saboteur looks like. If nothing else, it will make this lad a great deal more circumspect and, with any luck, may restrict his activities quite a bit.' Jamieson nodded and left.

Bowen said: 'I think, John, you might double the watch in the engine-room or at least bring two or three extra men—not, you understand, for engine-room duties.'

'I understand. You think, perhaps—'

'If you wanted to sabotage, incapacitate a ship, where would you go?'

Patterson rose, went to the door and, as Jamieson had done, stopped there and turned. 'Why?' he said. 'Why, why, why?'

'I don't know why. But I have an unpleasant feeling about the where and the when. Here or hereabouts and sooner than we think, quicker than we want. Somebody,' Captain Bowen said as if by way of explanation, 'has just walked over my grave.' Patterson gave him a long look and closed the door quietly behind him.

Bowen picked up the phone, dialled a single number and said: 'Archie, my cabin.' He had no sooner replaced the receiver when it rang again. It was the bridge. Batesman didn't sound too happy.

'Snowstorm's blowing itself out, sir. *Andover* can see us now.

Wants to know why we're not showing any lights. I told them we had a power failure, then another message just now, why the hell are we taking so long to fix it?'

'Sabotage.'

'I beg your pardon, sir.'

'Sabotage. S for Sally, A for Arthur, B for Bobby, O for—'

'Good God! Whatever—I mean, why—'

'I do not know why.' Captain Bowen spoke with a certain restraint. 'Tell them that. I'll tell you what I know—which is practically nothing—when I come up to the bridge. Five minutes. Maybe ten.'

Archie McKinnon, the Bo'sun, came in. Captain Bowen regarded the Bo'sun—as indeed many other captains regarded their bo'suns—as the most important crew member aboard. He was a Shetlander, about six feet two in height and built accordingly, perhaps forty years of age, with a brick-coloured complexion, blue-grey eyes and flaxen hair—the last two almost certainly inheritances from Viking ancestors who had passed by—or through—his native island a millennium previously.

'Sit down, sit down,' Bowen said. He sighed. 'Archie, we have a saboteur aboard.'

'Have we now.' He raised eyebrows, no startled oaths from the Bo'sun, not ever. 'And what has he been up to, Captain?'

Bowen told him what he had been up to and said: 'Can you make any more of it than I can, which is zero?'

'If you can't, Captain, I can't.' The regard in which the Captain

held the Bo'sun was wholly reciprocated. 'He doesn't want to sink the ship, not with him aboard and the water temperature below freezing. He doesn't want to stop the ship—there's half a dozen ways a clever man could do that. I'm thinking myself that all he wanted to do is to douse the lights which—at night-time, anyway—identify us as a hospital ship.'

'And why would he want to do that, Archie?' It was part of their unspoken understanding that the Captain always called him 'Bo'sun' except when they were alone.

'Well.' The Bo'sun pondered. 'You know I'm not a Highlander or a Western Islander so I can't claim to be fey or have the second sight.' There was just the faintest suggestion of an amalgam of disapproval and superiority in the Bo'sun's voice but the Captain refrained from smiling: essentially, he knew, Shetlanders did not regard themselves as Scots and restricted their primary allegiance to the Shetlands. 'But like yourself, Captain, I have a nose for trouble and I can't say I'm very much liking what I can smell. Half an hour—well, maybe forty minutes—anybody will be able to see that we are a hospital ship.' He paused and looked at the Captain with what might possibly have been a hint of surprise which was the nearest the Bo'sun ever came to registering emotion. 'I can't imagine why but I have the feeling that someone is going to have a go at us before dawn. At dawn, most likely.'

'I can't imagine why either, Archie, but I have the same feeling myself. Alert the crew, will you? Ready for emergency stations.

Spread the word that there's an illegal electrician in our midst.'

The Bo'sun smiled. 'So that they can keep an eye on each other. I don't think, Captain, that we'll find the man among the crew. They've been with us for a long time now.'

'I hope not and I think not. That's to say, I'd like to think not. But it was someone who knew his way around. Their wages are not exactly on a princely scale. You'd be surprised what a bag of gold can do to a man's loyalty.'

'After twenty-five years at sea, there isn't a great deal that can surprise me. Those survivors we took off that tanker last night—well, I wouldn't care to call any of them my blood-brother.'

'Come, come, Bo'sun, a little of the spirit of Christian charity, if you please. It was a Greek tanker—Greece is supposed to be an ally, if you remember—and the crew would be Greek. Well, Greek, Cypriot, Lebanese, Hottentot if you like. Can't expect them all to look like Shetlanders. I didn't see any of them carrying a pot of gold.'

'No. But some of them—the uninjured ones, I mean—were carrying suitcases.'

'And some of them were carrying overcoats and at least three of them were wearing ties. And why not? The *Argos* spent six hours there wallowing around after being mined: time and enough for anyone to pack his worldly possessions or such few possessions as Greek seamen appear to have. It would be a bit much I think, Archie, to expect a crippled Greek tanker in the Barents Sea to have aboard a crewman with a bag of gold who

just happened to be a trained saboteur.'

'Aye, it's not a combination that one would expect to find every day. Do we alert the hospital?'

'Yes. What's the latest down there?' The Bo'sun invariably knew the state of everything aboard the *San Andreas* whether it concerned his department or not.

'Dr Singh and Dr Sinclair have just finished operating. One man with a broken pelvis, the other with extensive burns. They're in the recovery room now and should be okay. Nurse Magnusson is with them.'

'My word, Archie, you do appear to be singularly well-informed.'

'Nurse Magnusson is a Shetlander,' the Bo'sun said, as if that explained everything. 'Seven patients in Ward A, not fit to be moved. Worst is the Chief Officer of the *Argos*, but not in danger, Janet says.'

'Janet?'

'Nurse Magnusson.' The Bo'sun was a difficult man to put off his stride. 'Ten in recuperating Ward B. The *Argos* survivors are in the bunks on the port side.'

'I'll go down there now. Go and alert the crew. When you've finished, come along to the sick-bay—and bring a couple of your men with you.'

'Sick-bay?' The Bo'sun regarded the deckhead. 'You'd better not let Sister Morrison hear you call it that.'

Bowen smiled. 'Ah, the formidable Sister Morrison. All right,

hospital. Twenty sick men down there. Not to mention sisters, nurses and ward orderlies who—'

'And doctors.'

'And doctors who have never heard a shot fired in their lives. A close eye, Archie.'

'You are expecting the worst, Captain?'

'I am not,' Bowen said heavily, 'expecting the best.'

The hospital area of the *San Andreas* was remarkably airy and roomy, remarkably but not surprisingly, for the *San Andreas* was primarily a hospital and not a ship and well over half of the lower deck space had been given over to its medical facilities. The breaching of watertight bulkheads—a hospital ship, theoretically, did not require watertight bulkheads—increased both the sense and the actuality of the spaciousness. The area was taken up by two wards, an operating theatre, recovery room, medical store, dispensary, galley—quite separate from and independent of the crew's galley—cabins for the medical staff, two messes—one for the staff, the other for recuperating patients—and a small lounge. It was towards the last of these that Captain Bowen now made his way.

He found three people there, having tea: Dr Singh, Dr Sinclair and Sister Morrison. Dr Singh was an amiable man of 'Pakistan' descent, middle-aged and wearing a pince-nez—he was one of the few people who looked perfectly at home with such glasses. He was a qualified and competent surgeon who disliked being called 'Mister'. Dr Sinclair, sandy-haired and every bit as amiable

as his colleague, was twenty-six years old and had quit in his second year as an intern in a big teaching hospital to volunteer for service in the Merchant Navy. Nobody could ever have accused Sister Morrison of being amiable: about the same age as Sinclair, she had auburn hair, big brown eyes and a generous mouth, all three of which accorded ill with her habitually prim expression, the steel-rimmed glasses which she occasionally affected and a faint but unmistakable aura of aristocratic hauteur. Captain Bowen wondered what she looked like when she smiled: he wondered if she ever smiled.

He explained, briefly, why he had come. Their reactions were predictable. Sister Morrison pursed her lips, Dr Sinclair raised his eyebrows and Dr Singh, half-smiling, said: 'Dear me, dear me. Saboteur or saboteurs, spy or spies aboard a British vessel. Quite unthinkable.' He meditated briefly. 'But then, not everybody aboard is strictly British. I'm not, for one.'

'Your passport says you are.' Bowen smiled. 'As you were operating in the theatre at the time that our saboteur was operating elsewhere that automatically removes you from the list of potential suspects. Unfortunately, we don't have a list of suspects, potential or otherwise. We do indeed, Dr Singh, have a fair number of people who were not born in Britain. We have two Indians—lascars—two Goanese, two Singhalese, two Poles, a Puerto Rican, a Southern Irishman and, for some odd reason, an Italian who, as an official enemy, ought to be a prisoner-of-war or in an internment camp somewhere. And, of course, the

survivors of the *Argos* are non-British to a man.'

'And don't forget me,' Sister Morrison said coldly. 'I'm half German.'

'You are? With a name like Margaret Morrison?'

She pursed her lips, an exercise which seemed to come naturally to her. 'How do you know that my name is Margaret?'

'A captain holds the crew lists. Like it or not, you are a member of the crew. Not that any of this matters. Spies, saboteurs, can be of any nationality and the more unlikely they are—in this case being British—the more efficiently they can operate. As I say, that's at the moment irrelevant. What is relevant is that the Bo'sun and two of his men will be here very shortly. Should an emergency arise he will assume complete charge except, of course, for the handling of the very ill. I assume you all know the Bo'sun?'

'An admirable man,' Dr Singh said. 'Very reassuring, very competent, couldn't imagine anyone I'd rather have around in times of need.'

'We all know him.' Sister Morrison was as good with her cold tones as she was with her pursed lips. 'Heaven knows he's here often enough.'

'Visiting the sick?'

'Visiting the sick! I don't like the idea of an ordinary seaman pestering one of my nurses.'

'Mr McKinnon is not an ordinary seaman. He's an extraordinary seaman and he's never pestered anyone in his

life. Let's have Janet along here to see if she bears out your preposterous allegations.'

'You—you know her name.'

'Of course I know her name.' Bowen sounded weary. It was not the moment, he thought, to mention the fact that until five minutes ago he had never heard of anyone called Janet. 'They come from the same island and have much to talk about. It would help, Miss Morrison, if you took as much interest in your staff as I do in mine.'

It was a good exit line, Bowen thought, but he wasn't particularly proud of himself. In spite of the way she spoke he rather liked the girl because he suspected that the image she projected was not the real one and that there might be some very good reason for this: but she was not Archie McKinnon.

The Chief Officer, one Geraint Kennet, an unusual name but one that he maintained came from an ancient aristocratic lineage, was awaiting Bowen's arrival on the bridge. Kennet was a Welshman, lean of figure and of countenance, very dark and very irreverent.

'You are lost, Mr Kennet?' Bowen said. Bowen had long ago abandoned the old habit of addressing a Chief Officer as 'Mister'.

'When the hour strikes, sir, Kennet is there. I hear of alarms and excursions from young Jamie here.' 'Young Jamie' was Third Officer Batesman. 'Something sinister afoot, I gather.'

'You gather rightly. Just how sinister I don't know.' He described what little had happened. 'So, two electrical

breakdowns, if you could call them that, and a third in the process of being investigated.'

'And it would be naïve to think that the third is not connected with the other two?'

'Very naïve.'

'This presages something ominous.'

'Don't they teach you English in those Welsh schools.'

'No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. You have reached a conclusion, not, perhaps, a very nice one?'

The phone rang. Batesman took it and handed the phone to Bowen who listened briefly, thanked the caller and hung up.

'Jamieson. In the cold room, this time. How could anyone get into the cold room? Cook's got the only key.'

'Easily,' Kennet said. 'If a man was a saboteur, trained in his art—if that's the word I want—one would expect him to be an expert picklock or at least to carry a set of skeleton keys around with him. With respect, sir, I hardly think that's the point. When will this villain strike again?'

'When indeed. Flannelfoot—that's Jamieson's term for him—seems to be a villain of some resource and foresight. It is more than likely that he has some further surprises. Jamieson is of the same mind. If there's another power failure when they switch on again he says he's going to go over every inch of wiring with his bridge-megger, whatever that is.'

'Some sort of instrument for detecting voltage leaks—you know, breaks in a circuit. It's occurred to me—'

Chief Radio Officer Spenser appeared at the hatchway of his wireless office, paper in hand. 'Message from the *Andover*, sir.'

Bowen read out: 'Continued absence of lights very serious. Essential expedite matters. Has saboteur been apprehended?'

Kennet said: 'Cue, I think for angry spluttering.'

'Man's a fool,' Bowen said. 'Commander Warrington, I mean, captain of the frigate. Spenser, send: "If you have any members of the Special Branch or CID with you they are welcome aboard. If not, kindly refrain from sending pointless signals. What the hell do you think we're trying to do?" '

Kennet said: 'In the circumstances, sir, a very restrained signal. As I was about to say—'

The phone rang again. Batesman took the call, listened, acknowledged, hung up and turned to the Captain.

'Engine-room, sir. Another malfunction. Both Jamieson and Third Engineer Ralson are on their way up with meggers.'

Bowen brought out his pipe and said nothing. He gave the impression of a man temporarily bereft of words. Kennet wasn't, but then, Kennet never was.

'Man never gets to finish a sentence on this bridge. Have you arrived at any conclusion, sir, however unpleasant?'

'Conclusion, no. Hunch, suspicion, yes. Unpleasant, yes. I would take odds that by or at dawn someone is going to have a go at us.'

'Fortunately,' Kennet said, 'I am not a betting man. In any event I wouldn't bet against my own convictions. Which are the

same as yours, sir.'

'We're a hospital ship, sir,' Batesman said. He didn't even sound hopeful.

Bowen favoured him with a morose glance. 'If you are immune to the sufferings of the sick and dying and care to exercise a certain cold-blooded and twisted logic, then we are a man-of-war even though we are completely defenceless. For what do we do? We take our sick and wounded home, fix them up and send them off again to the front or to the sea to fight the Germans once more. If you were to stretch your conscience far enough you could make a good case out of maintaining that to allow a hospital ship to reach its homeland is tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy. Oberleutnant Lemp would have torpedoed us without a second thought.'

'Oberleutnant who?'

'Lemp. Chap who sent the *Athenia* to the bottom—and Lemp knew that the *Athenia* carried only civilians as passengers, men, women and children who—he knew this well—would never be used to fight against the Germans. The *Athenia* was a case much more deserving of compassion than we are, don't you think, Third?'

'I wish you wouldn't talk like that, sir.' Batesman was now not only as morose as the Captain had been, but positively mournful. 'How do we know that this fellow Lemp is not lurking out there, just over the horizon?'

'Fear not,' Kennet said. 'Oberleutnant Lemp has long since

been gathered to his ancestors, for whom one can feel only a certain degree of sympathy. However, he may have a twin brother or some kindred souls out there. As the Captain so rightly infers, we live in troubled and uncertain times.'

Batesman looked at Bowen. 'Is it permitted, Captain, to ask the Chief Officer to shut up?'

Kennet smiled broadly, then stopped smiling as the phone rang again. Batesman reached for the phone but Bowen forestalled him. 'Master's privilege, Third. The news may be too heavy for a young man like you to bear.' He listened, cursed by way of acknowledgment and hung up. When he turned round he looked—and sounded—disgusted.

'Bloody officers' toilet!'

Kennet said, 'Flannelfoot?'

'Who do you think it was? Santa Claus?'

'A sound choice,' Kennet said judiciously. 'Very sound. Where else could a man work in such peace, privacy and for an undetermined period of time, blissfully immune, one might say, from any fear of interruption? Might even have time to read a chapter of his favourite thriller, as is the habit of one young officer aboard this ship, who shall remain nameless.'

'The Third Officer has the right of it,' Bowen said. 'Will you kindly shut up?'

'Yes, sir. Was that Jamieson?'

'Yes.'

'We should be hearing from Ralson any time now.'

'Jamieson has already heard from him. Seamen's toilet this time, port side.'

For once, Kennet had no observation to make and for almost a minute there was silence on the bridge for the sufficient reason that there didn't seem to be any comment worth making. When the silence was broken it was, inevitably, by Kennet.

'A few more minutes and our worthy engineers might as well cease and desist. Or am I the only person who has noticed that the dawn is in the sky?'

The dawn, indeed, was in the sky. Already, to the south-east, off the port beam, the sky had changed from black, or as black as it ever becomes in northern waters, to a dark grey and was steadily lightening. The snow had completely stopped now, the wind had dropped to twenty knots and the *San Andreas* was pitching, not heavily, in the head seas coming up from the northwest.

Kennet said, 'Shall I post a couple of extra lookouts, sir? One on either wing?'

'And what can those look-outs do? Make faces at the enemy?'

'They can't do a great deal more, and that's a fact. But if anyone is going to have a go at us, it's going to be now. A high-flying Condor, for instance, you can almost see the bombs leaving the bay and there's an even chance in evasive action.' Kennet didn't sound particularly enthusiastic or convinced.

'And if it's a submarine, dive-bomber, glider-bomber or torpedo-bomber?'

'They can still give us warning and time for a prayer. Mind you, probably a very short prayer, but still a prayer.'

'As you wish, Mr Kennet.'

Kennet made a call and within three minutes his look-outs arrived on the bridge, duffel-coated and scarfed to the eyebrows as Kennet had instructed. McGuigan and Jones, a Southern Irishman and a Welshman, they were boys only, neither of them a day over eighteen. Kennet issued them with binoculars and posted them on the bridge wings, Jones to port, McGuigan to starboard. Seconds only after closing the port door, Jones opened it again.

'Ship, sir! Port quarter.' His voice was excited, urgent. 'Warship, I think.'

'Relax,' Kennet said. 'I doubt whether it's the *Tirpitz.'* Less than half a dozen people aboard knew that the *Andover* had accompanied them during the night. He stepped out on to the wing and returned almost immediately. 'The good shepherd,' he said. 'Three miles.'

'It's almost half-light now,' Captain Bowen said. 'We could be wrong, Mr Kennet.'

The radio room hatchway panel banged open and Spenser's face appeared.

'*Andover*, sir. Bandit, bandit, one bandit…045…ten miles… five thousand.'

'There now,' Kennet said. 'I knew we weren't wrong. Full power, sir?' Bowen nodded and Kennet gave the necessary

instructions to the engine-room.

'Evasive action?' Bowen was half-smiling; knowledge, however unwelcome that knowledge, always comes as a relief after uncertainty. 'A Condor, you would guess?'

'No guess, sir. In those waters, only the Condor flies alone.' Kennet slid back the port wing door and gazed skywards. 'Cloud cover's pretty thin now. We should be able to see our friend coming up—he should be practically dead astern. Shall we go out on the wing, sir?'

'In a minute, Mr Kennet. Two minutes. Gather flowers while we may—or, at least, keep warm as long as possible. If fate has abandoned us we shall be freezing to death all too soon. Tell me, Mr Kennet, has any profound thought occurred to you?'

'A lot of thoughts have occurred to me but I wouldn't say any of them are profound.'

'How on earth do you think that Condor located us?'

'Submarine? It could have surfaced and radioed Alta Fjord.'

'No submarine. The *Andover*'s sonar would have picked him up. No plane, no surface ships, that's a certainty.'

Kennet frowned for a few seconds, then smiled. 'Flannel-foot,' he said with certainty. 'A radio.'

'Not necessarily even that. A small electrical device, probably powered by our own mains system, that transmits a continuous homing signal.'

'So if we survive this lot it's out with the fine-tooth comb?'

'Indeed. It's out with—'

'Andover, sir.' It was Spenser again. 'Four bandits, repeat four bandits…310…eight miles…three thousand.'

'I wonder what we've done to deserve this?' Kennet sounded almost mournful. 'We were even more right than we thought, sir. Torpedo-bombers or glider-bombers, that's for sure, attacking out of the darkness to the north-west and us silhouetted against the dawn.'

The two men moved out on the port wing. The *Andover* was still on the port quarter but had closed in until it was less than two miles distant. A low bank of cloud, at about the same distance, obscured the view aft.

'Hear anything, Mr Kennet? See anything?'

'Nothing, nothing. Damn that cloud. Yes, I do. I hear it. It's a Condor.'

'It's a Condor.' Once heard, the desynchronized clamour of a Focke-Wulf 200's engine is not readily forgotten. 'And I'm afraid, Mr Kennet, that you'll have to postpone your evasive action practice for another time. This lad sounds as if he is coming in very low.'

'Yes, he's coming in low. And I know why.' Most unusually for Kennet, he sounded very bitter. 'He intends to do some pinpoint precision bombing. He's under orders to stop us or cripple us but not sink us. I'll bet that bastard Flannelfoot feels as safe as houses.'

'You have it to rights, Mr Kennet. He could stop us by bombing the engine-room, but doing that is a practical guarantee

that we go to the bottom. There he comes, now.' The Focke-Wulf Condor had broken through the cloud and was heading directly for the stern of the *San Andreas*. Every gun on the *Andover* that could be brought to bear had opened up as soon as the Focke-Wulf had cleared the cloud-bank and within seconds the starboard side of the *Andover* was wreathed in smoke. For a frigate, its anti-aircraft fire-power was formidable: low-angle main armament, pom-poms, Oerlikons and the equally deadly Boulton-Paul Defiant turrets which loosed off a devastating 960 rounds a minute. The Focke-Wulf must have been hit many times but the big Condor's capacity to absorb punishment was legendary. Still it came on, now no more than two hundred feet above the waves. The sound of the engines had risen from the clamorous to the thunderous.

'This is no place for a couple of honest seamen to be, Mr Kennet.' Captain Bowen had to shout to make himself heard. 'But I think it's too late now.'

'I rather think it is, sir.'

Two bombs, just two, arced lazily down from the now smoking Condor.

TWO

Had the Americans retained the original British design concept for accommodation aboard the Liberty Ships, the tragedy, while still remaining such, would at least have been minimized. The original Sunderland plans had the accommodation both fore and aft: Henry Kaiser's designers, in their wisdom—blind folly as it turned out—had *all* their accommodation, for both officers and men, including also the navigating bridge, grouped in a single superstructure surrounding the funnel.

The Bo'sun, Dr Sinclair by his side, had reached the upper deck before the Condor reached the *San Andreas;* they were almost immediately joined by Patterson for whom the *Andover*'s barrage had sounded like a series of heavy metallic blows on the side of his engine-room.

'Down!' the Bo'sun shouted. Two powerful arms around their shoulders bore them to the deck, for the Focke-Wulf had reached the *San Andreas* before the bombs did and the Bo'sun was well aware that the Focke-Wulf carried a fairly lethal array of machine guns which it did not hesitate to use when the occasion demanded. On this occasion, however, the guns remained silent, possibly because the gunners were under instructions not to fire, more probably because the gunners were already dead, for it was plain that the Condor, trailing a huge plume of black smoke,

whether from fuselage or engines it was impossible to say, and veering sharply to starboard, was itself about to die.

The two bombs, contact and not armour-piercing, struck fore and aft of the funnel, exploded simultaneously and just immediately after passing through the unprotected deck-heads of the living quarters, blowing the shattered bulkheads outwards and filling the air with screaming shards of metal and broken glass, none of which reached the three prone men. The Bo'sun cautiously lifted his head and stared in disbelief as the funnel, seemingly intact but sheared off at its base toppled slowly over the port side and into the sea. Any sound of a splash that there may have been was drowned out by the swelling roar of more aero engines.

'Stay down, stay down!' Flat on the deck, the Bo'sun twisted his head to the right. There were four of them in line abreast formation, Heinkel torpedo-bombers, half a mile away, no more than twenty feet above the water and headed directly for the starboard side of the *San Andreas*. Ten seconds, he thought, twelve at the most and the dead men in the charnel house of that shattered superstructure would have company and to spare. Why had the guns of the *Andover* fallen silent? He twisted his head to the left to look at the frigate and immediately realized why. It was impossible that the gunners on the *Andover* could not hear the sound of the approaching Heinkels but it was equally impossible that they could see them. The *San Andreas* was directly in line between the frigate and the approaching bombers which were

flying below the height of their upper deck.

He twisted his head to the right again and to his momentary astonishment saw that this was no longer the case. The Heinkels were lifting clear of the water with the intention of flying over the *San Andreas*, which they did seconds later, not much more than ten feet above the deck, two on each side of the twisted superstructure. The *San Andreas* had not been the target, only the shield for the Heinkels: the frigate was the target and the bombers were half way between the *San Andreas* and the frigate before the bemused defenders aboard the *Andover* understood what was happening.

When they did understand their reaction was sharp and violent. The main armament was virtually useless. It takes time to train and elevate a gun of any size and against a close-in and fast-moving target there just isn't time. The anti-aircraft guns, the two-pounders, the Oerlikons and the Defiants did indeed mount a heavy barrage but torpedo-bombers were notoriously difficult targets, not least because the gunners were acutely aware that death was only seconds away, a realization that made for less than a controlled degree of accuracy.

The bombers were less than three hundred yards away when the plane on the left-hand side of the formation pulled up and banked to its left to clear the stern of the *Andover*: almost certainly neither the plane nor the pilot had been damaged: as was not unknown, the torpedo release mechanism had iced up, freezing the torpedo in place. At about the same instant the plane

on the right descended in a shallow dive until it touched the water—almost certainly the pilot had been shot. A victory but a Pyrrhic one. The other two Heinkels released their torpedoes and lifted clear of the *Andover.*

Three torpedoes hit the *Andover* almost simultaneously, the two that had been cleanly released and the one that was still attached to the plane that had crashed into the water. All three torpedoes detonated but there was little enough in the way of thunderclaps of sound or shock waves: water always has this same muffling effect on an underwater explosion. What they did produce, however, was a great sheet of water and spray which rose to two hundred feet into the sky and then slowly subsided. When it finally disappeared the *Andover* was on its beam ends and deep in the water. Within twenty seconds, with only a faint hissing as the water flooded the engine-room and with curiously little in the way of bubbles, the *Andover* slid beneath the surface of the sea.

'My God, my God, my God!' Dr Sinclair, swaying slightly, was on his feet. As a doctor, he was acquainted with death, but not in this shocking form: he was still dazed, not quite aware of what was going on around him. 'Good God, that big plane is coming back again!'

The big plane, the Condor, was indeed coming back again, but it offered no threat to them. Dense smoke pouring from all four engines, it completed a half circle and was approaching the *San Andreas*. Less than half a mile away it touched the surface

of the sea, momentarily dipped beneath it, then came into sight again. There was no more smoke.

'God rest them,' Patterson said. He was almost abnormally calm. 'Damage control party first, see if we're making water, although I shouldn't have thought so.'

'Yes, sir.' The Bo'sun looked at what was left of the superstructure. 'Perhaps a fire-control party. Lots of blankets, mattresses, clothes, papers in there—God only knows what's smouldering away already.'

'Do you think there will be any survivors in there?'

'I wouldn't even guess, sir. If there are, thank heavens we're a hospital ship.'

Patterson turned to Dr Sinclair and shook him gently. 'Doctor, we need your help.' He nodded towards the superstructure. 'You and Dr Singh—and the ward orderlies. I'll send some men with sledges and crowbars.'

'An oxy-acetylene torch?' said the Bo'sun.

'Of course.'

'We've got enough medical equipment and stores aboard to equip a small town hospital,' Sinclair said. 'If there are any survivors all we'll require is a few hypodermic syringes.' He seemed back on balance again. 'We don't take in the nurses?'

'Good God, no.' Patterson shook his head vehemently. 'I tell you, *I* wouldn't like to go in there. If there are any survivors they'll have their share of horrors later.'

McKinnon said: 'Permission to take away the lifeboat, sir?'

'Whatever for?'

'There could be survivors from the *Andover*.'

'Survivors! She went down in thirty seconds.'

'The *Hood* blew apart in one second. There were three survivors.'

'Of course, of course. I'm not a seaman, Bo'sun. You don't need permission from me.'

'Yes, I do, sir.' The Bo'sun gestured towards the superstructure. 'All the deck officers are there. You're in command.'

'Good God!' The thought, the realization had never struck Patterson. 'What a way to assume command!'

'And speaking of command, sir, the *San Andreas* is no longer under command. She's slewing rapidly to port. Steering mechanism on the bridge must have been wrecked.'

'Steering can wait. I'll stop the engines.'

Three minutes later the Bo'sun eased the throttle and edged the lifeboat towards an inflatable life raft which was roller-coasting heavily near the spot where the now vanished Condor had been. There were only two men in the raft—the rest of the aircrew, the Bo'sun assumed, had gone to the bottom with the Focke-Wulf. They had probably been dead anyway. One of the men, no more than a youngster, very seasick and looking highly apprehensive—he had every right, the Bo'sun thought, to be apprehensive—was sitting upright and clinging to a lifeline. The other lay on his back in the bottom of the raft: in the regions

of his left upper chest, left upper arm and right thigh his flying overalls were saturated with blood. His eyes were closed.

'Jesus' sake!' Able Seaman Ferguson, who had a powerful Liverpool accent and whose scarred face spoke eloquently of battles lost and won, mainly in bar-rooms, looked at the Bo'sun with a mixture of disbelief and outrage. 'Jesus, Bo'sun, you're not going to pick those bastards up? They just tried to send us to the bottom. Us! A hospital ship!'

'Wouldn't you like to know *why* they bombed a hospital ship?'

'There's that, there's that.' Ferguson reached out with a boathook and brought the raft alongside.

'Either of you speak English?'

The wounded man opened his eyes: they, too, seemed to be filled with blood. 'I do.'

'You look badly hurt. I want to know where before we try to bring you aboard.'

'Left arm, left shoulder, I think, right thigh. And I believe there's something wrong with my right foot.' His English was completely fluent and if there was any accent at all it was a hint of southern standard English, not German.

'You're the Condor Captain, of course.'

'Yes. Still want to bring me aboard?'

The Bo'sun nodded to Ferguson and the two other seamen he had along with him. The three men brought the injured pilot aboard as carefully as they could but with both lifeboat and raft rolling heavily in the beam seas it was impossible to be too

careful. They laid him in the thwarts close to where the Bo'sun was sitting by the controls. The other survivor huddled miserably amidships. The Bo'sun opened the throttle and headed for the position where he estimated the *Andover* had gone down.

Ferguson looked down at the injured man who was lying motionless on his back, arms spread-eagled. The red stains were spreading. It could have been that he was still bleeding quite heavily: but it could have been the effect of sea-water.

'Reckon he's a goner, Bo'sun?'

McKinnon reached down and touched the side of the pilot's neck and after a few seconds he located the pulse, fast, faint and erratic, but still a pulse.

'Unconscious. Fainted. Couldn't have been an easy passage for him.'

Ferguson regarded the pilot with a certain grudging respect. 'He may be a bloody murderer, but he's a bloody tough bloody murderer. Must have been in agony, but never a squawk. Shouldn't we take him back to the ship first? Give him a chance, like?'

'I thought of it. No. There just may be survivors from the *Andover* and if there are they won't last long. Sea temperature is about freezing or just below it. A man's usually dead inside a minute. If there's anyone at all, a minute's delay may be a minute too late. We owe them that chance. Besides it's going to be a very quick trip back to the ship.'

The *San Andreas*, slewing to port, had come around in a

full half-circle and, under reverse thrust, was slowing to a stop. Patterson had almost certainly done this so as to manoeuvre the temporarily rudderless ship as near as possible to the spot where the *Andover* had been torpedoed.

Only a pathetic scattering of flotsam and jetsam showed where the frigate had gone down, baulks of timber, a few drums, carley floats, lifebuoys and life jackets, all empty—and four men. Three of the men were together. One of them, a man with what appeared to be a grey stocking hat, was keeping the head of another man, either unconscious or dead, out of the water: with his other hand he waved at the approaching lifeboat. All three men were wearing life jackets and, much more importantly, all three were wearing wet suits, which was the only reason they were still alive after fifteen minutes in the ice-cold waters of an Arctic winter.

All three were hauled inboard. The young, bareheaded man who had been supported by the man with the grey stocking hat was unconscious, not dead. He had every reason, the Bo'sun thought, to be unconscious: there was a great swelling bruise still oozing blood just above the right temple. The third man —it seemed most incongruous in the circumstances—wore the peaked braided cap of a naval commander. The cap was completely saturated. The Bo'sun made to remove it, then changed his mind when he saw the blood at the back of the cap: the cap was probably stuck to his head. The commander was quite conscious, he had courteously thanked the Bo'sun for

being pulled out of the sea: but his eyes were vacant, glazed and sightless. McKinnon passed a hand before his eyes, but there was no reaction: for the moment, at any rate, the commander was quite blind.

Although he knew he was wasting his time, the Bo'sun headed towards the fourth man in the water but he backed off when he was still five yards away. Although his face was deep in the water he hadn't died from drowning but from freezing: he wasn't wearing a wet suit. The Bo'sun turned the lifeboat back to the *San Andreas* and touched the commander gently on the shoulder.

'How do you feel, Commander Warrington?'

'What? How do I feel? How do you know I'm Commander Warrington?'

'You're still wearing your cap, sir.' The Commander made as if to touch the peak of his cap but the Bo'sun restrained him. 'Leave it, sir. You've cut your head and your hat's sticking to it. We'll have you in hospital inside fifteen minutes. Plenty of doctors and nurses there for that sort of thing, sir.'

'Hospital.' Warrington shook his head as if trying to clear it. 'Ah, of course. The *San Andreas*. You must be from her.'

'Yes, sir. I'm the Bo'sun.'

'What happened, Bo'sun? The *Andover*, I mean.' Warrington touched the side of his head. 'I'm a bit foggy up here.'

'No bloody wonder. Three torpedoes, sir, almost simultaneously. You must have been blown off the bridge, or fell off it, or most likely been washed off it when your ship went

down. She was on her beam ends then, sir, and it took only just over twenty seconds.'

'How many of us—well, how many have you found?'

'Just three, sir. I'm sorry.'

'God above. Just three. Are you sure, Bo'sun?'

'I'm afraid I'm quite sure, sir.'

'My yeoman of signals—'

'I'm here, sir.'

'Ah. Hedges. Thank heavens for that. Who's the third?'

'Navigating officer, sir. He's taken a pretty nasty clout on the head.'

'And the First Lieutenant?' Hedges didn't answer, he had his head buried in his hands and was shaking it from side to side.

'I'm afraid Hedges is a bit upset, Commander. Was the First Lieutenant wearing a red kapok jacket?' Warrington nodded. 'Then we found him, sir. I'm afraid he just froze to death.'

'He would, wouldn't he? Freeze to death, I mean.' Warrington smiled faintly. 'Always used to laugh at us and our wet suits. Carried a rabbit's foot around with him and used to say that was all the wet suit he'd ever need.'

Dr Singh was the first man to meet the Bo'sun when he stepped out of the lifeboat. Patterson was with him, as were two orderlies and two stokers. The Bo'sun looked at the stokers and wondered briefly what they were doing on deck, but only very briefly: they were almost certainly doing a seaman's job because there were very few seamen left to do it. Ferguson and

his two fellow seamen had been in the for'ard fire-control party and might well be the only three left: all the other seamen had been in the superstructure at the time of the attack.

'Five,' Dr Singh said. 'Just five. From the frigate and the plane, just five.'

'Yes, Doctor. And even they had the devil's own luck. Three of them are pretty wobbly. Commander looks all right but I think he's in the worst condition. He seems to have gone blind and the back of his head has been damaged. There's a connection, isn't there, Doctor?'

'Oh dear. Yes, there's a connection. We'll do what we can.'

Patterson said: 'A moment, Bo'sun, if you will.' He walked to one side and McKinnon followed him. They were half way towards the twisted superstructure when Patterson stopped.

'As bad as that is it, sir?' the Bo'sun said. 'No eavesdroppers. I mean, we have to trust someone.'

'I suppose.' Patterson looked and sounded tired. 'But damned few. Not after what I've seen inside that superstructure. Not after one or two things I've found out. First things first. The hull is still structurally sound. No leaks. I didn't think there would be. We're fixing up a temporary rudder control in the engine-room: we'll probably be able to reconnect to the bridge which is the least damaged part of the superstructure. There was a small fire in the crew's mess, but we got that under control.' He nodded to the sadly twisted mass of metal ahead of them. 'Let's pray for calm weather to come. Jamieson says the structural supports are

so weakened that the whole lot is liable to go over the side if we hit heavy seas. Would you like to go inside?'

'Like? Not like. But I have to.' The Bo'sun hesitated, reluctant to hear the answer to the question he had to ask. 'What's the score so far, sir?'

'Up to now we've come across thirteen dead.' He grimaced. 'And bits and pieces. I've decided to leave them where they were meantime. There may be more people left alive.'

'More? You have found some?'

'Five. They're in a pretty bad way, some of them. They're in the hospital.' He led the way inside the twisted entrance at the after end of the superstructure. 'There are two oxy-acetylene teams in there. It's slow work. No fallen beams, no wreckage as such, just twisted and buckled doors. Some of them, of course —the doors, I mean—were just blown off. Like this one here.'

'The cold room. Well, at least there would have been nobody in there. But there were three weeks' supply of beef, all kinds of meat, fish and other perishables in there: in a couple of days' time we'll have to start heaving them over the side.' They moved slowly along the passageway. 'Cool room intact, sir, although I don't suppose a steady diet of fruit and veg. will have much appeal. Oh God!'

The Bo'sun stared into the galley which lay across the passage from the cool room. The surfaces of the cooking stoves were at a peculiar angle, but all the cupboards and the two work tables were intact. But what had caught the Bo'sun's horrified attention

was not the furniture but the two men who lay spreadeagled on the floor. They seemed unharmed except for a little trickle of blood from the ears and noses.

'Netley and Spicer,' the Bo'sun whispered. 'They don't seem —they're dead?'

'Concussion. Instantaneous,' Patterson said.

The Bo'sun shook his head and moved on.

'Tinned food store,' he said. 'Intact. It would be. And the liquor store here, not a can dented or a bottle broken.' He paused. 'With your permission, sir, I think this is a very good time to breach the liquor store. A hefty tot of rum all round—or at least for the men working in here. Pretty grim work and it's the custom in the Royal Navy when there's grim work to be done.'

Patterson smiled slightly, a smile that did not touch the eyes. 'I didn't know you were in the Royal Navy, Bo'sun.'

'Twelve years. For my sins.'

'An excellent idea,' Patterson said. 'I'll be your first customer.' They made their way up a twisted but still serviceable companionway to the next deck, the Bo'sun with a bottle of rum and half a dozen mugs strung on a wire in the other. This was the crew accommodation deck and it was not a pretty sight. The passageway had a distinct S-bend to it, the deck was warped so that it formed a series of undulations. At the for'ard end of the passageway, two oxy-acetylene teams were at work, each attacking a buckled door. In the short space between the head of the companionway and where the men were working were

eight doors, four of them hanging drunkenly on their hinges, four that had been cut open by torches: seven of those had been occupied, and the occupants were still there, twelve of them in all. In the eighth cabin they found Dr Sinclair, stooping over and administering a morphine injection to a prone but fully conscious patient, a consciousness that was testified to by the fact that he was addressing nobody in particular in an unprintable monologue.

The Bo'sun said: 'How do you feel, Chips?' Chips was Rafferty, the ship's carpenter.

'I'm dying.' He caught sight of the rum bottle in the Bo'sun's hand and his stricken expression vanished. 'But I could make a rapid recovery—'

'This man is not dying,' Dr Sinclair said. 'He has a simple fracture of the tibia, that's all. No rum—morphine and alcohol make for bad bedfellows. Later.' He straightened and tried to smile. 'But I could do with a tot, if you would, Bo'sun—a generous one. I feel in need of it.' With his strained face and pale complexion he unquestionably looked in need of it: nothing in Dr Sinclair's brief medical experience had even remotely begun to prepare him for the experience he was undergoing. The Bo'sun poured him the requisite generous measure, did the same for Patterson and himself, then passed the bottle and mugs to the men with the torches and the two ward orderlies who were standing unhappily by, strapped stretcher at the ready: they looked in no better case than Dr Sinclair but cheered up

noticeably at the sight of the rum.

The deck above held the officers' accommodation. It too, had been heavily damaged, but not so devastatingly so as the deck below. Patterson stopped at the first cabin they came to: its door had been blown inwards and the contents of the cabin looked as if a maniac had been let loose there with a sledgehammer. The Bo'sun knew it was Chief Patterson's cabin.

The Bo'sun said, 'I don't much care for being in an engine-room, sir, but there are times when it has its advantages.' He looked at the empty and almost as badly damaged Second Engineer's cabin opposite. 'At least Ralson is not here. Where is he, sir?'

'He's dead.'

'He's dead,' the Bo'sun repeated slowly.

'When the bombs struck he was still in the sea-men's toilet fixing that short-circuit.'

'I'm most damnably sorry, sir.' He knew that Ralson had been Patterson's only close friend aboard the ship.

'Yes,' Patterson said vaguely. 'He had a young wife and two kids—babies, really.'

The Bo'sun shook his head and looked into the next cabin, that belonging to the Second Officer. 'At least Mr Rawlings is not here.'

'No. He's not here. He's up on the bridge.' The Bo'sun looked at him, then turned away and went into the Captain's cabin which was directly opposite and which, oddly enough, seemed

almost undamaged. The Bo'sun went directly to a small wooden cupboard on the bulkhead, produced his knife, opened up the marlinspike and inserted its point just below the cupboard lock.

'Breaking and entering, Bo'sun?' The Chief Engineer's voice held puzzlement but no reproof: he knew McKinnon well enough to know that the Bo'sun never did anything without a sound reason.

'Breaking and entering is for locked doors and windows, sir. Just call this vandalism.' The door sprang open and the Bo'sun reached inside, bringing out two guns. 'Navy Colt 45s. You know about guns, sir?'

'I've never held a gun in my hand in my life. *You* know about guns—as well as rum?'

'I know about guns. This little switch here—you press it so. Then the safety-catch is off. That's really all you require to know about guns.' He looked at the broken cupboard and then the guns and shook his head again. 'I don't think Captain Bowen would have minded.'

'Won't. Not wouldn't. Won't.'

The Bo'sun carefully laid the guns on the Captain's table. 'You're telling me that the Captain is not dead?'

'He's not dead. Neither is the Chief Officer.'

The Bo'sun smiled for the first time that morning, then looked accusingly at the Chief Engineer. 'You might have told me this, sir.'

'I suppose. I might have told you a dozen things. You would

agree, Bo'sun, that we both have a great deal on our minds. They're both in the sick bay, both pretty savagely burnt about the face but not in any danger, not, at least, according to Dr Singh. It was being far out on the port wing of the bridge that saved them —they were away from the direct effects of the blast.'

'How come they got so badly burnt, sir?'

'I don't know. They can hardly speak, their faces are completely wrapped in bandages, they look more like Egyptian mummies than anything else. I asked the Captain and he kept mumbling something like Essex, or Wessex or something like that.'

The Bo'sun nodded. 'Wessex, sir. Rockets. Distress flares. Two lots kept on the bridge. The shock must have triggered some firing mechanism and it went off prematurely. Damnable ill luck.'

'Damnably lucky, if you ask me, Bo'sun. Compared to practically everybody else in the superstructure.'

'Does he—does he know yet?'

'It hardly seemed the time to tell him. Another thing he kept repeating, as if it was urgent. "Home signal, home signal," something like that. Over and over again. Maybe his mind was wandering, maybe I couldn't make him out. Their mouths are the only part of their faces that aren't covered with bandages but even their lips are pretty badly burnt. And, of course, they're loaded with morphine. "Home signal." Mean anything to you?'

'At the moment, no.'

A young and rather diminutive stoker appeared in the doorway. McCrimmon, in his middle twenties, was a less than lovable person, his primary and permanent characteristics being the interminable mastication of chewing gum, truculence, a fixed scowl and a filthy tongue: at that moment, the first three were in abeyance.

'Bloody awful, so it is, down there. Just like a bloody cemetery.'

'Morgue, McCrimmon, morgue,' Patterson said. 'What do you want?'

'Me. Nothing, sir. Jamieson sent me. He said something about the phones no' working and you would be wanting a runner, maybe.'

'Second Engineer to you, McCrimmon.' Patterson looked at the Bo'sun. 'Very thoughtful of the Second Engineer. Nothing we require in the engine-room—except to get that jury rudder fixed. Deck-side, Bo'sun?'

'Two look-outs, although God knows what they'll be looking out for. Two of your men, sir, the two ward orderlies below, Able Seaman Ferguson and Curran. Curran is—used to be—a sailmaker. Don't envy him his job but I'll give him a hand. Curran will know what to bring. I suggest, sir, we have the crew's mess-deck cleared.'

'Our mortuary?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You heard, McCrimmon? How many men?'

'Eight, sir.'

'Eight. Two look-outs. The two seamen to bring up the canvas and whatever required. The other four to clear the crew's mess. Don't you try to tell them, they'd probably throw you overboard. Tell the Second Engineer and he'll tell them. When they've finished have them report to me, here or on the bridge. You too. Off you go.' McCrimmon left.

The Bo'sun indicated the two Colts lying on the table. 'I wonder what McCrimmon thought of those.'

'Probably old hat to him. Jamieson picked the right man—McCrimmon's tough and hasn't much in the way of finer feelings. Irish-Scots from some Glasgow slum. Been in prison. In fact, if it wasn't for the war that's probably where he'd be now.'

The Bo'sun nodded and opened another small wall locker—this one had a key to it. It was a small liquor cupboard and from a padded velvet retainer McKinnon removed a rum bottle and laid it on the Captain's bunk.

'I don't suppose the Captain will mind that either,' Patterson said. 'For the stretcher-bearers?'

'Yes, sir.' The Bo'sun started opening drawers in the Captain's table and found what he was looking for in the third drawer, two leather-bound folders which he handed to Patterson. 'Prayer book and burial service, sir. But I should think the burial service would be enough. Somebody's got to read it.'

'Good God. I'm not a preacher, Bo'sun.'

'No, sir. But you're the officer commanding.'

'Good God,' Patterson repeated. He placed the folders reverently on the Captain's table. 'I'll look at those later.'

' "Home signal",' the Bo'sun said slowly. 'That's what the Captain said, wasn't it? "Home signal".'

'Yes.'

' "Homing signal" is what he was trying to say. "Homing signal". Should have thought of it before—but I suppose that's why Captain Bowen is a captain and I'm not. How do you think the Condor managed to locate us in the darkness? All right, it was half dawn when he attacked but he *must* have been on the course when it was still night. How did he know where we were?'

'U-boat?'

'No U-boat. The *Andover*'s sonar would have picked him up.' The Bo'sun was repeating the words that Captain Bowen had used.

'Ah.' Patterson nodded. 'Homing signal. Our saboteur friend.'

'Flannelfoot, as Mr Jamieson calls him. Not only was he busy fiddling around with our electrical circuits, he was transmitting a continuous signal. A directional signal. The Condor knew where we were to the inch. I don't know whether the Condor was equipped to receive such signals, I know nothing about planes, but it wouldn't have mattered, some place like Alta Fjord could have picked up the signal and transmitted our bearing to the Condor.'

'You have it, of course, Bo'sun, you have it to rights.' Patterson looked at the two guns. 'One for me and one for you.'

'If you say so, sir.'

'Don't be daft, who else would have it?' Patterson picked up a gun. 'I've never even held one of these things in my hand, far less fired one. But you know, Bo'sun, I don't really think I would mind firing a shot once. Just one.'

'Neither would I, sir.'

Second Officer Rawlings was lying beside the wheel and there was no mystery as to how he had died: what must have been a flying shard of metal had all but decapitated him.

'Where's the helmsman?' the Bo'sun asked. 'Was he a survivor, then?'

'I don't know. I don't know who was on. Maybe Rawlings had sent him to get something. But there were two survivors up here, apart from the Captain and Chief Officer—McGuigan and Jones.'

'McGuigan and Jones? What were they doing up here?'

'It seems Mr Kennet had called them up and posted them as look-outs, one on either wing. I suppose that's why they survived, just as Captain Bowen and Mr Kennet survived. They're in the hospital, too.'

'Badly hurt?'

'Unharmed, I believe. Shock, that's all.'

The Bo'sun moved out to the port wing and Patterson followed. The wing was wholly undamaged, no signs of metal buckling anywhere. The Bo'sun indicated a once grey but now badly scorched metal box which was attached just below the

wind-breaker: its top and one side had been blown off.

'That's where they kept the Wessex rockets,' the Bo'sun said.

They went back inside and the Bo'sun moved towards the wireless office hatchway: the sliding wooden door was no longer there.

'I wouldn't look, if I were you,' Patterson said.

'The men have got to, haven't they?'

Chief Radio Officer Spenser was lying on the deck but he was no longer recognizable as such. He was just an amorphous mass of bone and flesh and torn, blood-saturated clothing: had it not been for the clothing it could have been the shattered remnants of any animal lying there. When McKinnon looked away Patterson could see that some colour had drained from the deeply-tanned face.

'The first bomb must have gone off directly beneath him,' the Bo'sun said. 'God, I've never seen anything like it. I'll attend to him myself. Third Officer Batesman. I know he was the officer of the watch. Any idea where he is, sir?'

'In the chart room. I don't advise you to go there either.'

Batesman was recognizable but only just. He was still on his. chair, half-leaning, half-lying on the table, what was left of his head pillowed on a blood-stained chart. McKinnon returned to the bridge.

'I don't suppose it will be any comfort to their relatives to know that they died without knowing. I'll fix him up myself, too. I couldn't ask the men.' He looked ahead through the totally

shattered windscreens. At least, he thought, they wouldn't be needing a Kent clear-view screen any more. 'Wind's backing to the east,' he said absently. 'Bound to bring more snow. At least it might help to hide us from the wolves—if there are any wolves around.'

'You think, perhaps, they might come back to finish us off?' The Chief was shivering violently but that was only because he was accustomed to the warmth of the engine-room: the temperature on the bridge was about 6°F—twenty-six degrees of frost—and the wind held steady at twenty knots.

'Who can be sure, sir? But I really don't think so. Even one of those Heinkel torpedo-bombers could have finished us off if they had had a mind to. Come to that, the Condor could have done the same thing.'

'It did pretty well as it was, if you ask me.'

'Not nearly as well as it could have done. I know that a Condor normally carries 250-kilo bombs—that's about 550 lbs. A stick of those bombs—say three or four—would have sent us to the bottom. Even two might have been enough—they'd have certainly blown the superstructure out of existence, not just crippled it.'

'The Royal Navy again, is that it, Bo'sun?'

'I know explosives, sir. Those bombs couldn't have been any more than fifty kilos each. Don't you think, sir, that we might have some interesting questions to ask that Condor captain when he regains consciousness?'

'In the hope of getting some interesting answers, is that it? Including the answer to the question why he bombed a hospital ship in the first place.'

'Well, yes, perhaps.'

'What do you mean—perhaps?'

'There's just a chance—a faint one, I admit—that he didn't know he was bombing a hospital ship.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Bo'sun. Of course he knew he was attacking a hospital ship. How big does a red cross have to be before you see it?'

'I'm not trying to make any excuses for him, sir.' There was a touch of asperity in McKinnon's voice and Patterson frowned, not at the Bo'sun but because it was most unlike the Bo'sun to adopt such a tone without reason. 'It was still only half-dawn, sir. Looking down, things look much darker than they do at sea level. You've only got to go up to a crow's nest to appreciate that.' As Patterson had never been in a crow's nest in his life he probably fell ill-equipped to comment on the Bo'sun's observation. 'As he was approaching from dead astern he couldn't possibly have seen the markings on the ship's sides and as he was flying very low he couldn't have seen the red cross on the foredeck—the superstructure would have blocked off his view.'

'That still leaves the red cross on the afterdeck. Even though it might have been only half light, he *must* have seen that.'

'Not with the amount of smoke you were putting up under full power.'

'There's that. There is a possibility.' He was unconvinced and watched with some impatience as the Bo'sun spun the now useless wheel and examined the binnacle compass and the standby compass, now smashed beyond any hope of repair.

'Do we have to remain up here?' Patterson said. 'There's nothing we can do here at the moment and I'm freezing to death. I suggest the Captain's cabin.'

'I was about to suggest the same, sir.'

The temperature in the cabin was no more than freezing point, but that was considerably warmer than it had been on the bridge and, more importantly, there was no wind there. Patterson went straight to the liquor cabinet and extracted a bottle of Scotch.

'If you can do it I can do it. We'll explain to the Captain later. I don't really like rum and I need it.'

'A specific against pneumonia?'

'Something like that. You will join me?'

'Yes, sir. The cold doesn't worry me but I think I'm going to need it in the next hour or so. Do you think the steering can be fixed, sir?'

'It's possible. Have to be a jury job. I'll get Jamieson on to it.'

'It's not terribly important. I know all the phones are out but it shouldn't take too long to reconnect them and you're fixing up a temporary rudder control in the engine-room. Same with the electrics—it won't take long to run a few rubber cables here and there. But we can't start on any of those things until we get this area—well, cleared.'

Patterson lowered the contents of his glass by half. 'You can't run the *San Andreas* from the bridge. Two minutes up there was enough for me. Fifteen minutes and anyone would be frozen to death.'

'You can't run it from any other place. Cold is the problem, I agree. So we'll board it up. Plenty of plywood in the carpenter's shop.'

'You can't see through plywood.'

'Could always pop our heads through the wing doors from time to time, but that won't be necessary. We'll let some windows into the plywood.'

'Fine, fine,' Patterson said. The Scotch had apparently restored his circulation. 'All we need is a glazier and some windows and we haven't got either.'

'A glazier we don't need. We don't need to have cut glass or fitted windows. You must have rolls and rolls of insulating tape in your electrical department.'

'I've got a hundred miles of it and I still don't have any windows.'

'Windows we won't need. Glass, that's all. I know where the best glass is—and plate glass at that. The tops of all those lovely trolleys and trays in the hospital.'

'Ah! I do believe you have it, Bo'sun.'

'Yes, sir. I suppose Sister Morrison will let you have them.'

Patterson smiled one of his rare smiles. 'I believe I'm the officer commanding, however temporary.'

'Indeed, sir. Just don't let me be around when you put her into irons. Those are all small things. There are three matters that give a bit more concern. First, the radio is just a heap of scrap metal. We can't contact anyone and no one can contact us. Secondly, the compasses are useless. I know you had a gyro installed, but it never worked, did it? But worst of all is the problem of navigation.'

'Navigation? Navigation! How can that be a problem?'

'If you want to get from A to B, it's the biggest problem of all. We have—we had—four navigating officers aboard this ship. Two of those are dead and the other two are swathed in bandages—in your own words, like Egyptian mummies. Commander Warrington could have navigated, I know, but he's blind and from the look in Dr Singh's eyes I should think the blindness is permanent.' The Bo'sun paused for a moment, then shook his head. 'And just to make our cup overflowing, sir, we have the *Andover*'s navigating officer aboard and he's either concussed or in some sort of coma, we'll have to ask Dr Singh. If a poker-player got dealt this kind of hand of cards, he'd shoot himself. Four navigating officers who can't see and if you can't see you can't navigate. That's why the loss of the radio is so damned unfortunate. There must be a British warship within a hundred or two miles which could have lent us a navigating officer. Can you navigate, sir?'

'Me? Navigate?' Patterson seemed positively affronted. 'I'm an engineer officer. But you, McKinnon: you're a seaman—*and*

twelve years in the Royal Navy.'

'It doesn't matter if I had been a hundred years in the Royal Navy, sir. I still can't navigate. I was a Torpedo Petty Officer. If you want to fire a torpedo, drop a depth charge, blow up a mine or do some elementary electrics, I'm your man. But I'd barely recognize a sextant if I saw one. Such things as sunsights, moonsights—if there is such a thing—and starsights are just words to me. I've also heard of words like deviation and variation and declination and I know more about Greek than I do about those.

'We do have a little hand-held compass aboard the motor lifeboat, the one I took out today, but that's useless. It's a magnetic compass, of course, and that's useless because I do know the magnetic north pole is nowhere near the geographical north pole: I believe it's about a thousand miles away from it. Canada, Baffin Island or some such place. Anyway, in the latitudes we're in now the magnetic pole is more west than north.' The Bo'sun sipped some Scotch and looked at Patterson over the rim of his glass. 'Chief Patterson, we're lost.'

'Job's comforter.' Patterson stared moodily at his glass, then said without much hope: 'Wouldn't it be possible to get the sun at noon? That way we'd know where the south was.'

'The way the weather is shaping up we won't be able to *see* the sun at noon. Anyway, what's noon, sun-time—it's certainly not twelve o'clock on our watches? Supposing we were in the middle of the Atlantic, where we might as well be, and knew

where south was, would that help us find Aberdeen, which is where I believe we are going? The chronometer, incidentally, is kaput, which doesn't matter at all—I still wouldn't be able to relate the chronometer to longitude. And even if we did get a bearing on due south, it's dark up here twenty hours out of the twenty-four and the auto-pilot is as wrecked as everything else on the bridge. We wouldn't, of course, be going around in circles, the hand compass would stop us from doing that, but we still wouldn't know in what direction we were heading.'

'If I want to find some optimism, Bo'sun, I'll know where not to look. Would it help at all if we knew approximately where we were?'

'It would help, but all we know, approximately, is that we're somewhere north or north-west of Norway. Anywhere, say, in twenty thousand square miles of sea. There are only two possibilities, sir. The Captain and Chief Officer must have known where we were. If they're able to tell us, I'm sure they will.'

'Good God, of course! Not very bright, are we? At least, I'm not. What do you mean—"if"? Captain Bowen was able to talk about twenty minutes ago.'

'That was twenty minutes ago. You know how painful burns can be. Dr Singh is sure to have given them painkillers and sometimes the only way they can work is by knocking you out.'

'And the other possibility?'

'The chart house. Mr Batesman was working on a chart—he

still had a pencil in his hand. I'll go.'

Patterson grimaced. 'Sooner you than me.'

'Don't forget Flannelfoot, sir.' Patterson touched his overalls where he had concealed his gun. 'Or the burial service.'

Patterson looked at the leather-covered folder in distaste. 'And where am I supposed to leave that? On the operating table?'

'There are four empty cabins in the hospital, sir. For recuperating VIPs. We don't have any at the moment.'

'Ah. Ten minutes, then.'

The Bo'sun was back in five minutes, the Chief Engineer in fifteen. An air of almost palpable gloom hung over Patterson.

'No luck, sir?'

'No, dammit. You guessed right. They're under heavy sedation, may be hours before they come to. And if they do start coming to, Dr Singh says, he's going to sedate them again. Apparently, they were trying to tear the bandages off their faces. He's got their hands swathed in bandages—even an unconscious man, the doctor says, will try to scratch away at whatever irritates him. Anyway, their hands *were* burnt—not badly, but enough to justify the bandages.'

'They've got straps for tying wrists to the bed-frames.'

'Dr Singh did mention that. He said he didn't think Captain Bowen would take too kindly to waking up and finding himself virtually in irons on his own ship. By the way, the missing helmsman was Hudson. Broken ribs and one pierced his lung. Doctor says he's very ill. What luck did *you* have?'

‘Same as you, sir. Zero. There was a pair of parallel rules lying beside Mr Batesman so I assume he must have been pencilling out a course.’

‘You couldn’t gather anything from the chart?’

‘It wasn’t a chart any more. It was just a bloodstained rag.’

THREE

It was snowing heavily and a bitter wind blew from the east as they buried their dead in the near-Stygian darkness of the early afternoon. A form of illumination they did have, for the saboteur, probably more than satisfied with the results of his morning's activities, was now resting on his laurels and the deck floodlights were working again, but in that swirling blizzard the light given off was weak, fitful and almost ineffectual, serving only to intensify the ghoulish effect of the burial party hastening about their macabre task and the ghostlike appearance of the bare dozen of snow-covered mourners. Flashlight in hand, Chief Engineer Patterson read out the burial service, but he might as well have been quoting the latest prices on the stock exchange for not a word could be heard: one by one the dead, in their weighted canvas shrouds, slipped down the tilted plank, out from under the Union flag and vanished, silently, into the freezing water of the Barents Sea. No bugle calls, no Last Post for the Merchant Navy, not ever: the only requiem was the lost and lonely keening of the wind through the frozen rigging and the jagged gaps that had been torn in the superstructure.

Shivering violently and mottled blue and white with the cold, the burial party and mourners returned to the only reasonably warm congregating space left on the *San Andreas*—the dining and recreational area in the hospital between the wards and the

cabins.

'We owe you a very great debt, Mr McKinnon,' Dr Singh said. He had been one of the mourners and his teeth were still chattering. 'Very swift, very efficient. It must have been a gruesome task.'

'I had six willing pairs of hands,' the Bo'sun said. 'It was worse for them than it was for me.' The Bo'sun did not have to explain what he meant: everybody knew that anything would always be worse for anybody than for that virtually indestructible Shetlander. He looked at Patterson. 'I have a suggestion, sir.'

'A Royal Naval one?'

'No, sir. Deep-sea fisherman's. Anyway, it's close enough, these are the waters of the Arctic trawlers. A toast to the departed.'

'I endorse that, and not for traditional or sentimental reasons.' Dr Singh's teeth still sounded like castanets. 'Medicinal. I don't know about the rest of you but my red corpuscles are in need of some assistance.'

The Bo'sun looked at Patterson, who nodded his approval. McKinnon turned and looked at an undersized, freckle-faced youth who was hovering at a respectful distance. 'Wayland.'

Wayland came hurrying forward. 'Yes, Mr McKinnon, sir?'

'Go with Mario to the liquor store. Bring back some refreshments.'

'Yes, Mr McKinnon, sir. Right away, Mr McKinnon, sir.' The Bo'sun had long given up trying to get Wayland Day to address

him in any other fashion.

Dr Singh said: 'That won't be necessary, Mr McKinnon. We have supplies here.'

'Medicinal, of course?'

'Of course.' Dr Singh watched as Wayland went into the galley. 'How old is that boy?'

'He claims to be seventeen or eighteen, says he's not sure which. In either case, he's fibbing. I don't believe he's ever seen a razor.'

'He's supposed to be working for you, isn't he? Pantry boy, I understand. He spends nearly all his day here.'

'I don't mind, Doctor, if you don't.'

'No, not at all. He's an eager lad, willing and helpful.'

'He's all yours. Besides, we haven't a pantry left. He's making eyes at one of the nurses?'

'You underestimate the boy. Sister Morrison, no less. At a worshipful distance, of course.'

'Good God!' the Bo'sun said.

Mario entered, bearing, one-handed and a few inches above his head, a rather splendid silver salver laden with bottles and glasses, which, in the circumstances, was no mean feat, as the *San Andreas* was rolling quite noticeably. With a deft, twirling movement, Mario had the tray on the table without so much as the clink of glass against glass. Where the salver had come from was unexplained and Mario's business. As became the popular conception of an Italian, Mario was darkly

and magnificently mustachioed, but whether he possessed the traditional flashing eyes was impossible to say as he invariably wore dark glasses. There were those who purported to see in those glasses a connection with the Sicilian Mafia, an assertion that was always good-humouredly made, as he was well-liked. Mario was overweight, of indeterminate age and claimed to have served in the Savoy Grill, which may have been true. What was beyond dispute was that there lay behind Mario, a man whose rightful home Captain Bowen considered to be either a prisoner-of-war or internment camp, a more than usually chequered career.

After no more than two fingers of Scotch, but evidently considering that his red corpuscles were back on the job, Dr Singh said: 'And now, Mr Patterson?'

'Lunch, Doctor. A very belated lunch but starving ourselves isn't going to help anyone. I'm afraid it will have to be cooked in your galley and served here.'

'Already under way. And then?'

'And then *we* get under way.' He looked at the Bo'sun. 'We could, temporarily, have the lifeboat's compass in the engine-room. We already have rudder control there.'

'It wouldn't work, sir. There's so much metal in your engine-room that any magnetic compass would have fits.' He pushed back his chair and rose. 'I think I'll pass up lunch. I think you will agree, Mr Patterson, that a telephone line from the bridge to the engine-room and electric power on the bridge—so that we

can see what we are doing—are the two first priorities.'

Jamieson said: 'That's already being attended to, Bo'sun.'

'Thank you, sir. But the lunch can still wait.' He was speaking now to Patterson. 'Board up the bridge and let some light in. After that, sir, we might try to clear up some of the cabins in the superstructure, find out which of them is habitable and try to get power and heating back on. A little heating on the bridge wouldn't come amiss, either.'

'Leave all that other stuff to the engine-room staff—after we've had a bite, that is. You'll be requiring some assistance?'

'Ferguson and Curran will be enough.'

'Well, that leaves only one thing.' Patterson regarded the deckhead. 'The plate glass for your bridge windows.'

'Indeed, sir. I thought you—'

'A trifle.' Patterson waved a hand to indicate how much of a trifle it was. 'You have only to ask, Bo'sun.'

'But I thought you—perhaps I was mistaken.'

'We have a problem?' Dr Singh said.

'I wanted some plate glass from the trolleys or trays in the wards. Perhaps, Dr Singh, you would care—'

'Oh no.' Dr Singh's reply was as quick as it was decisive. 'Dr Sinclair and I run the operating theatre and look after our surgical patients, but the running of the wards has nothing to do with us. Isn't that so, Doctor?'

'Indeed it is, sir.' Dr Sinclair also knew how to sound decisive.

The Bo'sun surveyed the two doctors and Patterson with

an impassive face that was much more expressive than any expression could have been and passed through the doorway into Ward B. There were ten patients in this ward and two nurses, one very much a brunette, the other very much a blonde. The brunette, Nurse Irene, was barely in her twenties, hailed from Northern Ireland, was pretty, dark-eyed and of such a warm and happy disposition that no one would have dreamed of calling her by her surname, which no one seemed to know anyway. She looked up as the Bo'sun entered and for the first time since she'd joined she failed to give him a welcoming smile. He patted her shoulder gently and walked to the other end of the ward where Nurse Magnusson was rebandaging a seaman's arm.

Janet Magnusson was a few years older than Irene and taller, but not much. She had a more than faintly windswept, Viking look about her and was unquestionably good-looking: she shared the Bo'sun's flaxen hair and blue-grey eyes but not, fortunately, his burnt-brick complexion. Like the younger nurse, she was much given to smiling: like her, the smile was in temporary abeyance. She straightened as the Bo'sun approached, reached out and touched his arm.

'It was terrible, wasn't it, Archie?'

'Not a thing I would care to do again. I'm glad you weren't there, Janet.'

'I didn't mean that—the burial, I mean. It was you who sewed up the worst of them—they say that the Radio Officer was, well, all bits and pieces.'

‘An exaggeration. Who told you that?’

‘Johnny Holbrook. You know, the young orderly. The one that’s scared of you.’

‘There’s nobody scared of me,’ the Bo’sun said absently. He looked around the ward. ‘Been quite some changes here.’

‘We had to turf some of the so-called recuperating patients out. You’d have thought they were being sent to their deaths. Siberia, at least. Nothing the matter with them. Not malingerers, really, they just liked soft beds and being spoiled.’

‘And who was spoiling them, if not you and Irene? They just couldn’t bear to be parted from you. Where’s the lioness?’

Janet gave him a disapproving look. ‘Are you referring to Sister Morrison?’

‘That’s the lioness I mean. I have to beard her in her den.’

‘You don’t know her, Archie. She’s very nice really. Maggie’s my friend. Truly.’

‘Maggie?’

‘When we’re off duty, always. She’s in the next ward.’

‘Maggie! Good lord! I thought she disapproved of you because she disapproves of me because she disapproves of me talking to you.’

‘Fiddlesticks. And Archie?’

‘Yes?’

‘A lioness doesn’t have a beard.’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.