

THE MASTER OF ACTION AND SUSPENSE

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

"A story of exceptional courage
which grips the imagination."

Daily Telegraph



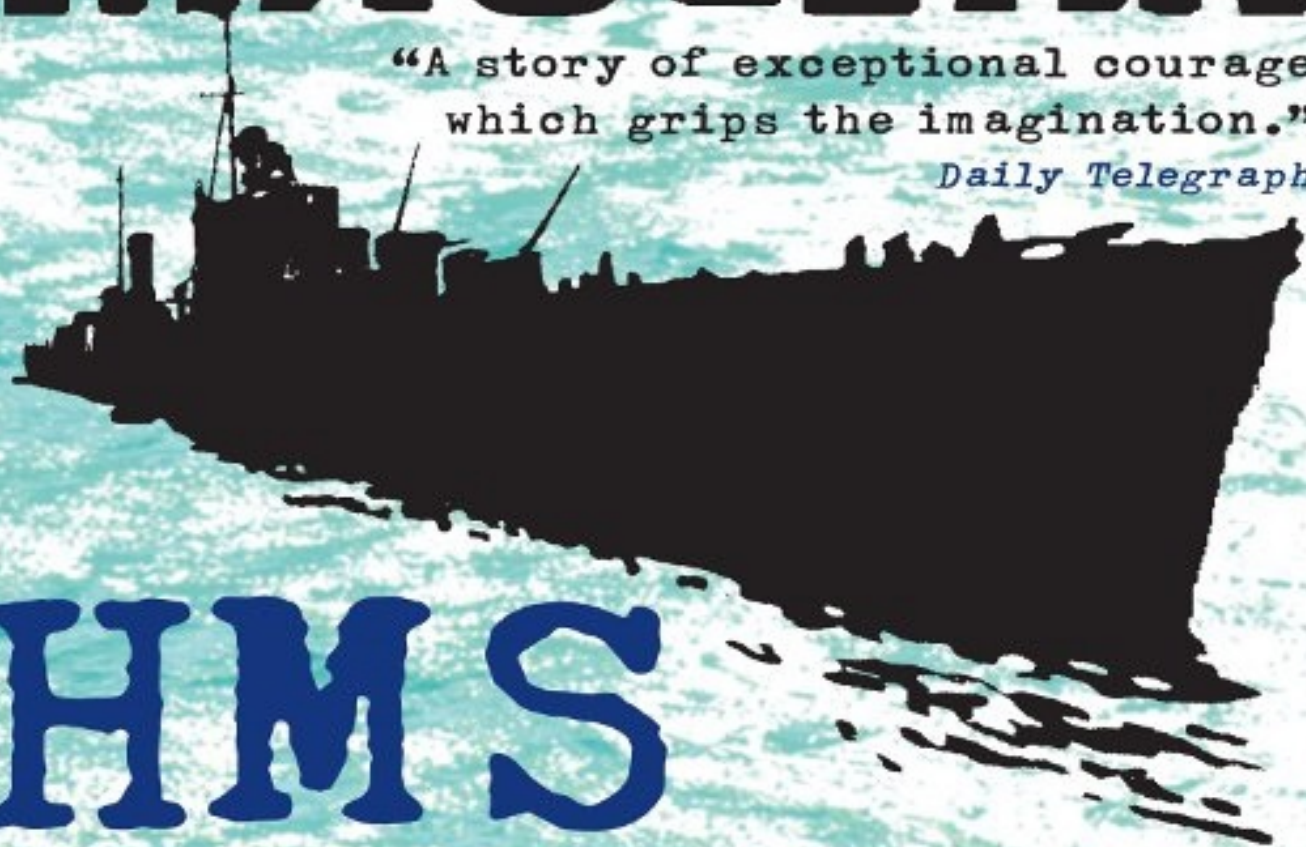
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ALISTAIR MACLEAN

Alistair MacLean, the son of a Scots minister, was brought up in the Scottish Highlands. In 1941, the age of eighteen, he joined the Royal Navy. After the war he read English at Glasgow University and became a schoolmaster. The two and a half years he spent aboard a wartime cruiser were to give him the background for *HMS Ulysses*, his remarkably successful first novel, published in 1955. He is now recognized as one of the outstanding popular writers of the 20th century, the author of twenty-nine worldwide bestsellers, many of which have been filmed, including *The Guns of Navarone*, *Where Eagles Dare*, *Fear Is the Key* and *Ice Station Zebra*. In 1983, he was awarded a D.Litt. from Glasgow University. Alistair MacLean died in 1987.

By Alistair MacLean

HMS Ulysses
The Guns of Navarone
South by Java Head
The Last Frontier
Night Without End
Fear Is the Key
The Dark Crusader
The Golden Rendezvous
The Satan Bug
Ice Station Zebra
When Eight Bells Toll
Where Eagles Dare
Force 10 from Navarone
Puppet on a Chain
Caravan to Vaccares
Bear Island
The Way to Dusty Death
Breakheart Pass
Circus
The Golden Gate
Seawitch
Goodbye California
Athabasca
River of Death
Partisans
Floodgate
San Andreas
The Lonely Sea (stories)
Santorini

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

HMS *Ulysses*





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To Gisela

Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON

Table of Contents

[1 Prelude: Sunday Afternoon](#)

[2 Monday Morning](#)

[3 Monday Afternoon](#)

[4 Monday Night](#)

[5 Tuesday](#)

[6 Tuesday Night](#)

[7 Wednesday Night](#)

[8 Thursday Night](#)

[9 Friday Morning](#)

[10 Friday Afternoon](#)

[11 Friday Evening](#)

[12 Saturday](#)

[13 Saturday Afternoon](#)

[14 Saturday Evening I](#)

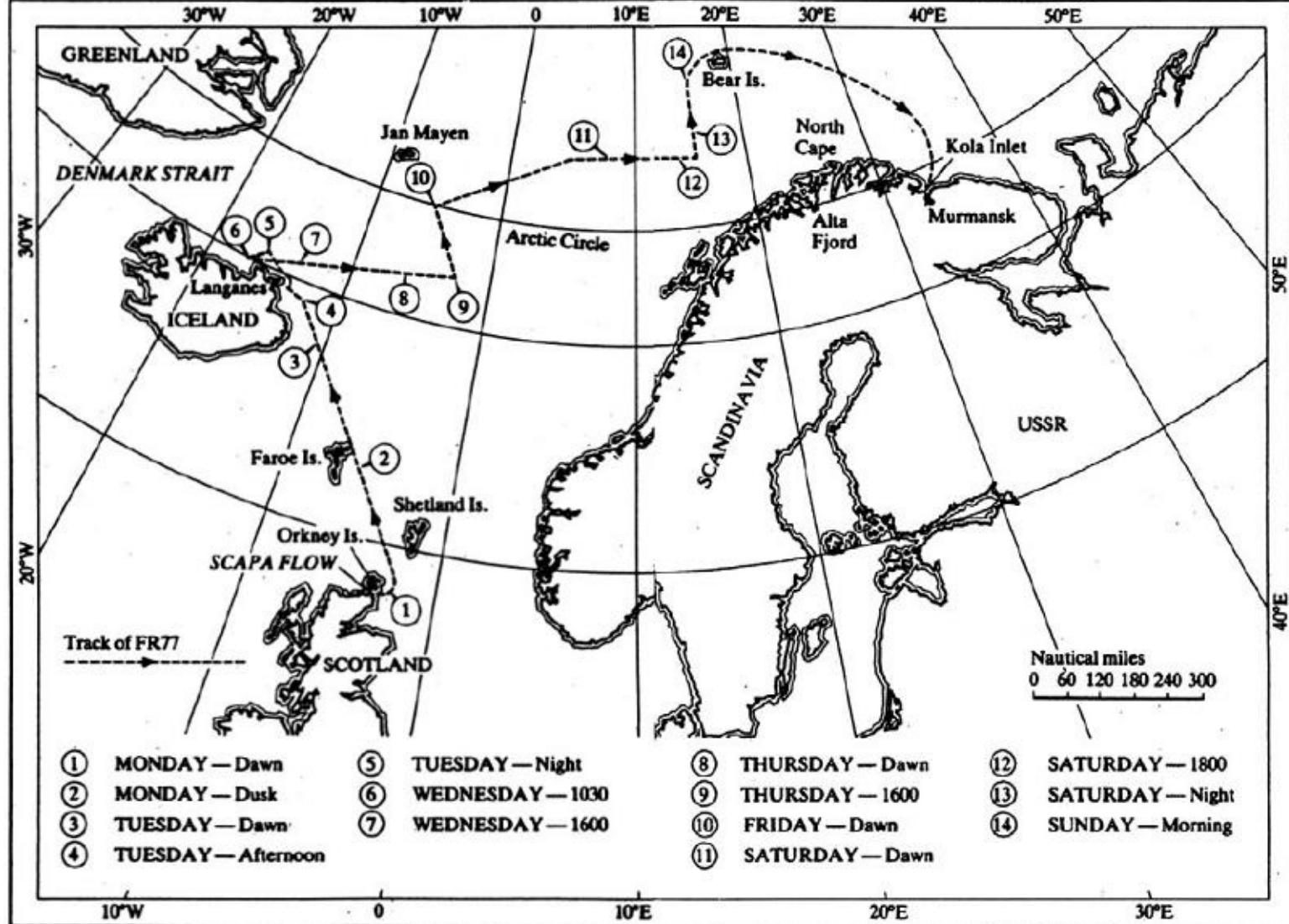
[15 Saturday Evening II](#)

[16 Saturday Night](#)

[17 Sunday Morning](#)

[18 Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)



Prelude: Sunday Afternoon

Slowly, deliberately, Starr crushed out the butt of his cigarette. The gesture, Captain Vallery thought, held a curious air of decision and finality. He knew what was coming next, and, just for a moment, the sharp bitterness of defeat cut through that dull ache that never left his forehead nowadays. But it was only for a moment—he was too tired really, far too tired to care.

‘I’m sorry, gentlemen, genuinely sorry.’ Starr smiled thinly. ‘Not for the orders, I assure you—the Admiralty decision, I am personally convinced, is the only correct and justifiable one in the circumstances. But I do regret your—ah—inability to see our point of view.’

He paused, proffered his platinum cigarette case to the four men sitting with him round the table in the Rear-Admiral’s day cabin. At the four mute headshakes the smile flickered again. He selected a cigarette, slid the case back into the breast pocket of his double-breasted grey suit. Then he sat back in his chair, the smile quite gone. It was not difficult to visualize, beneath that pin-stripe sleeve, the more accustomed broad band and golden stripes of Vice-Admiral Vincent Starr, Assistant Director of Naval Operations.

‘When I flew north from London this morning,’ he continued evenly, ‘I was annoyed. I was very annoyed. I am—well, I am a fairly busy man. The First Sea Lord, I thought, was wasting my time as well as his own. When I return, I must apologize. Sir Humphrey was right. He usually is . . .’

His voice trailed off to a murmur, and the flintwheel of his lighter rasped through the strained silence. He leaned forward on the table and went on softly.

‘Let us be perfectly frank, gentlemen. I expected—I surely had a right to expect—every support and full co-operation from you in settling this unpleasant business with all speed. Unpleasant business. He smiled wryly. ‘Mincing words won’t help. Mutiny, gentlemen, is the generally accepted term for this—a capital offence, I need hardly remind you. And yet what do I find?’ His glance travelled slowly round the table.

‘Commissioned officers in His Majesty’s Navy, including a Flag-Officer, sympathising with—not actually condoning—a lower-deck mutiny!’

He’s overstating it, Vallery thought dully. He’s provoking us. The words, the tone, were a question and a challenge inviting reply.

There was no reply. The four men seemed apathetic, indifferent. Four men, each an individual, each secure in his own personality—yet, at that moment, so strangely alike, their faces heavy and still and deeply lined, their eyes so quiet, so tired, so very old.

‘You are not convinced, gentlemen?’ he went on softly. ‘You find my choice of words a trifle—a—disagreeable?’ He leaned back. ‘Hm . . . “mutiny”.’ He savoured the word slowly, compressed his lips, looked round the table again. ‘No, it doesn’t sound too good, does it, gentlemen? You would call it something else again, perhaps?’ He shook his head, bent forward, smoothed out a signal sheet below his fingers.

“Returned from strike on Lofotens,” he read out: “1545—boom passed: 1610—finished with engines: 1630—provisions, stores lighters alongside, mixed seaman-stoker party detailed unload lubricating drums: 1650—reported to Captain stokers refused to obey CPO Hartley, then successive

Chief Stoker Hendry, Lieutenant (E.) Grierson and Commander (E.): ringleaders apparently Stoke Riley and Petersen: 1705—refused to obey Captain: 1715—Master at Arms and Regulating Party assaulted in performance of duties.” He looked up. ‘What duties? Trying to arrest the ringleaders?’

Vallery nodded silently.

“1715—seaman branch stopped work, apparently in sympathy: no violence offered: 1725—broadcast by Captain, warned of consequences: ordered to return to work: order disobeyed: 1730—signal to C-in-C *Duke of Cumberland*, for assistance.”

Starr lifted his head again, looked coldly across at Vallery.

‘Why, incidentally, the signal to the Admiral? Surely your own marines—’

‘My orders,’ Tyndall interrupted bluntly. ‘Turn our own marines against men they’ve sailed with for two and half years? Out of the question! There’s no matelot—boot-neck antipathy on *this* ship. Admiral Starr: they’ve been through far too much together . . . Anyway,’ he added dryly, ‘it’s wholly possible that the marines would have refused. And don’t forget that if we had used our own men, and they had quelled this—ah—mutiny, the *Ulysses* would have been finished as a fighting ship.’

Starr looked at him steadily, dropped his eyes to the signal again.

“1830—Marine boarding party from *Cumberland*: no resistance offered to boarding: attempted arrest, six, eight suspected ringleaders: strong resistance by stokers and seamen, heavy fighting poop deck, stokers’ mess-deck and engineers’ flat till 1900: no firearms used, but 2 dead, 6 seriously injured, 35-40 minor casualties.” Starr finished reading, crumpled the paper in an almost savage gesture. ‘You know, gentlemen, I believe you have a point after all.’ The voice was heavy with irony. “‘Mutiny’ is hardly the term. Fifty dead and injured: “pitched battle” would be much nearer the mark.’

The words, the tone, the lashing bite of the voice provoked no reaction whatsoever. The four men still sat motionless, expressionless, unheeding in a vast indifference.

Admiral Starr’s face hardened.

‘I’m afraid you have things just a little out of focus, gentlemen. You’ve been up here a long time and isolation distorts perspective. Must I remind senior officers that, in wartime, individual feelings, trials and sufferings are of no moment at all? The Navy, the country—they come first, last and all the time.’ He pounded the table softly, the gesture insistent in its restrained urgency. ‘Good God, gentlemen,’ he ground out, ‘the future of the world is at stake—and you, with your selfish, your inexcusable absorption in your own petty affairs, have the colossal effrontery to endanger it!’

Commander Turner smiled sardonically to himself. A pretty speech, Vincent boy, very pretty indeed—although perhaps a touch reminiscent of Victorian melodrama: the clenched teeth act was definitely overdone. Pity he didn’t stand for Parliament—he’d be a terrific asset to any Government Front Bench. Suppose the old boy’s really too honest for that, he thought in vague surprise.

‘The ringleaders will be caught and punished—heavily punished.’ The voice was harsh now, with a biting edge to it. ‘Meantime the 14th Aircraft Carrier Squadron will rendezvous at Denmark Strait and will be arranged, at 1030 Wednesday instead of Tuesday—we radioed Halifax and held up the sailing. You will proceed to sea at 0600 tomorrow.’ He looked across at Rear-Admiral Tyndall. ‘You will please advise all ships under your command at once, Admiral.’

Tyndall—universally known throughout the Fleet as Farmer Giles—said nothing. His rugged features, usually so cheerful and crinkling, were set and grim: his gaze, heavy-lidded and troubled, rested on Captain Vallery and he wondered just what kind of private hell that kindly and sensitive man

was suffering right then. But Vallery's face, haggard with fatigue, told him nothing: that lean and withdrawn asceticism was the complete foil. Tyndall swore bitterly to himself.

'I don't really think there's more to say, gentlemen,' Starr went on smoothly. 'I won't pretend you're in for an easy trip—you know yourselves what happened to the last three major convoys—P 17, FR 71 and 74. I'm afraid we haven't yet found the answer to acoustic torpedoes and glider bombs. Further, our intelligence in Bremen and Kiel—and this is substantiated by recent experience in the Atlantic—report that the latest U-boat policy is to get the escorts first . . . Maybe the weather will save you.'

You vindictive old devil, Tyndall thought dispassionately. Go on, damn you—enjoy yourself.

'At the risk of seeming rather Victorian and melodramatic'— impatiently Starr waited for Turner to stifle his sudden fit of coughing—'we may say that the *Ulysses* is being given the opportunity of—a—redeeming herself.' He pushed back his chair. 'After that, gentlemen, the Med. But first—FR 77 and Murmansk, come hell or high water!' His voice broke on the last word and lifted into stridency, the anger burring through the thin veneer of suavity. 'The *Ulysses* must be made to realize that the Navy will never tolerate disobedience of orders, dereliction of duty, organized revolt and sedition!'

'Rubbish!'

Starr jerked back in his chair, knuckles whitening on the armrest. His glance whipped round and settled on Surgeon-Commander Brooks, on the unusually vivid blue eyes so strangely hostile now under that magnificent silver mane.

Tyndall, too, saw the angry eyes. He saw, also, the deepening colour in Brooks's face, and moaned softly to himself. He knew the signs too well—old Socrates was about to blow his Irish top. Tyndall made to speak, then slumped back at a sharp gesture from Starr.

'What did you say, Commander?' The Admiral's voice was very soft and quite toneless.

'Rubbish,' repeated Brooks distinctly. 'Rubbish. That's what I said. "Let's be perfectly frank," you say. Well, sir, I'm being frank. "Dereliction of duty, organized revolt and sedition" my foot! But suppose you have to call it something, preferably something well within your own field of experience. But God only knows by what strange association and slight-of-hand mental transfer, you equate yesterday's trouble aboard the *Ulysses* with the only clearly-cut code of behaviour thoroughly familiar to yourself.' Brooks paused for a second: in the silence they heard the thin, high wail of a bosun's pipe—a passing ship, perhaps. 'Tell me, Admiral Starr,' he went on quietly, 'are we to drive out the devil of madness by whipping—a quaint old medieval custom—or maybe, sir, by drowning—remember the Gadarene swine? Or perhaps a month or two in cells, you think, is the best cure for tuberculosis?'

'What in heaven's name are you talking about, Brooks?' Starr demanded angrily. 'Gadarene swine and tuberculosis—what *are* you getting at, man? Go on—explain.' He drummed his fingers impatiently on the table, eyebrows arched high into his furrowed brow. 'I hope, Brooks,' he went on silkily, 'that you can justify this—ah—insolence of yours.'

'I'm quite sure that Commander Brooks intended no insolence, sir.' It was Captain Vallery speaking for the first time. 'He's only expressing—' 'Please, Captain Vallery,' Starr interrupted. 'I am quite capable of judging these things for myself, I think.' His smile was very tight. 'Well, go on, Brooks.'

Commander Brooks looked at him soberly, speculatively.

'Justify myself?' He smiled wearily. 'No, sir, I don't think I can.' The slight inflection of tone, the implications, were not lost on Starr, and he flushed slightly. 'But I'll try to explain,' continued Brooks. 'It may do some good.'

He sat in silence for a few seconds, elbow on the table, his hand running through the heavy silver hair—a favourite mannerism of his. Then he looked up abruptly.

‘When were you last at sea, Admiral Starr?’ he inquired.

‘Last at sea?’ Starr frowned heavily. ‘What the devil has that got to do with you, Brooks—or with the subject under discussion?’ he asked harshly.

‘A very great deal,’ Brooks retorted. ‘Would you please answer my question, Admiral?’

‘I think you know quite well, Brooks,’ Starr replied evenly, ‘that I’ve been at Naval Operations Headquarters in London since the outbreak of war. What are you implying, sir?’

‘Nothing. Your personal integrity and courage are not open to question. We all know that. I was merely establishing a fact.’ Brooks hitched himself forward in his chair.

‘I’m a naval doctor, Admiral Starr—I’ve been a doctor for over thirty years now.’ He smiled faintly. ‘Maybe I’m not a very good doctor, perhaps I don’t keep quite so abreast of the latest medical developments as I might, but I believe I can claim to know a great deal about human nature—this is no time for modesty—about how the mind works, about the wonderfully intricate interaction of mind and body.

“Isolation distorts perspective”—these were your words, Admiral Starr. “Isolation” implies cutting off, a detachment from the world, and your implication was partly true. But—and this, sir, is the point—there are more worlds than one. The Northern Seas, the Arctic, the black-out route to Russia—these are another world, a world utterly distinct from yours. It is a world, sir, of which you cannot possibly have any conception. In effect, you are completely isolated from *our* world.’

Starr grunted, whether in anger or derision it was difficult to say, and cleared his throat to speak, but Brooks went on swiftly.

‘Conditions obtain there without either precedent or parallel in the history of war. The Russian Convoys, sir, are something entirely new and quite unique in the experience of mankind.’

He broke off suddenly, and gazed out through the thick glass of the scuttle at the sleet slanting heavily across the grey waters and dun hills of the Scapa anchorage. No one spoke. The Surgeon-Commander was not finished yet: a tired man takes time to marshal his thoughts.

‘Mankind, of course, can and does adapt itself to new conditions.’ Brooks spoke quietly, almost to himself. ‘Biologically and physically, they have had to do so down the ages, in order to survive. But it takes time, gentlemen, a great deal of time. You can’t compress the natural changes of twenty centuries into a couple of years: neither mind nor body can stand it. You can try, of course, and such is the fantastic resilience and toughness of man that he can tolerate it—for extremely short periods. But at the limit, the saturation capacity for adaption is soon reached. Push men beyond that limit and anything can happen. I say “anything” advisedly, because we don’t yet know the precise form the crack-up will take—but crack-up there always is. It may be physical, mental, spiritual—I don’t know. But this I do know, Admiral Starr—the crew of the *Ulysses* has been pushed to the limit—and cleared beyond.’

‘Very interesting, Commander.’ Starr’s voice was dry, sceptical. ‘Very interesting indeed—and most instructive. Unfortunately, your theory—and it’s only that, of course—is quite untenable.’

Brooks eyed him steadily.

‘That, sir, is not even a matter of opinion.’

‘Nonsense, man, nonsense!’ Starr’s face was hard in anger. ‘It’s a matter of fact. Your premises are

completely false.' Starr leaned forward, his forefinger punctuating every word. 'This vast gulf you claim to lie between the convoys to Russia and normal operational work at sea—it just doesn't exist. Can you point out any one factor or condition present in these Northern waters which is not to be found somewhere else in the world? Can you, Commander Brooks?'

'No, sir.' Brooks was quite unruffled. 'But I can point out a frequently overlooked fact—the differences of degree and association can be much greater and have far more far-reaching effects than differences in kind. Let me explain what I mean.

'Fear can destroy a man. Let's admit it—fear is a natural thing. You get it in every theatre of war—but nowhere, I suggest, so intense, so continual as in the Arctic convoys.

'Suspense, tension can break a man—any man. I've seen it happen too often, far, far too often. And when you're keyed up to snapping point, sometimes for seventeen days on end, when you have constant daily reminders of what may happen to you in the shape of broken, sinking ships and broken drowning bodies—well, we're men, not machines. Something has to go—and does. The Admiral will not be unaware that after the last two trips we shipped nineteen officers and men to sanatoria—mentally sanatoria?'

Brooks was on his feet now, his broad, strong fingers splayed over the polished table surface, his eyes boring into Starr's.

'Hunger burns out a man's vitality, Admiral Starr. It saps his strength, slows his reactions, destroys the will to fight, even the will to survive. You are surprised, Admiral Starr? Hunger, you think—surely that's impossible in the wellprovided ships of today? But it's not impossible, Admiral Starr. It's inevitable. You keep on sending us out when the Russian season's over, when the nights are barely longer than the days, when twenty hours out of the twenty-four are spent on watch or at action stations, and you expect us to feed well!' He smashed the flat of his hand on the table. 'How the hell can we, when the cooks spend nearly all their time in the magazines, serving the turrets, or in damage control parties? Only the baker and butcher are excused—and so we live on corned-beef sandwiches. For weeks on end! Corned-beef sandwiches!' Surgeon-Commander Brooks almost spat in disgust.

Good old Socrates, thought Turner happily, give him hell. Tyndall, too, was nodding his ponderous approval. Only Vallery was uncomfortable—not because of what Brooks was saying, but because Brooks was saying it. He, Vallery, was the captain: the coals of fire were being heaped on the wrong head.

'Fear, suspense, hunger.' Brooks's voice was very low now. 'These are the things that break a man—that destroy him as surely as fire or steel or pestilence could. These are the killers.

'But they are nothing, Admiral Starr, just nothing at all. They are only the henchmen, the outriders you might call them, of the Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse—cold, lack of sleep, exhaustion.

'Do you know what it's like up there, between Jan Mayen and Bear Island on a February night, Admiral Starr? Of course you don't. Do you know what it's like when there's sixty degrees of frost in the Arctic—and it still doesn't freeze? Do you know what it's like when the wind, twenty degrees below zero, comes screaming off the Polar and Greenland ice-caps and slices through the thickest clothing like a scalpel? When there's five hundred tons of ice on the deck, where five minutes' direct exposure means frostbite, where the bows crash down into a trough and the spray hits you as solid ice where even a torch battery dies out in the intense cold? Do you, Admiral Starr, do you?' Brooks flung the words at him, hammered them at him.

'And do you know what it's like to go for days on end without sleep, for weeks with only two or

three hours out of the twenty-four? Do you know the sensation, Admiral Starr? That fine-drawn feeling with every nerve in your body and cell in your brain stretched taut to breaking point, pushing you over the screaming edge of madness. Do you know it, Admiral Starr? It's the most exquisite agony in the world, and you'd sell your friends, your family, your hopes of immortality for the blessed privilege of closing your eyes and just letting go.

'And then there's the tiredness, Admiral Starr, the desperate weariness that never leaves you. Partly it's the debilitating effect of the cold, partly lack of sleep, partly the result of incessantly bad weather. You know yourself how exhausting it can be to brace yourself even for a few hours on a rolling pitching deck: our boys have been doing it for months—gales are routine on the Arctic run. I can show you a dozen, two dozen old men, not one of them a day over twenty.'

Brooks pushed back his chair and paced restlessly across the cabin. Tyndall and Turner glanced at each other, then over at Vallery, who sat with head and shoulders bowed, eyes resting vacantly on his clasped hands on the table. For the moment, Starr might not have existed.

'It's a vicious, murderous circle,' Brooks went on quickly. He was leaning against the bulkhead now, hands deep in his pockets, gazing out sightlessly through the misted scuttle. 'The less sleep you have, the tireder you are: the more tired you become, the more you feel cold. And so it goes on. And then, all the time, there's the hunger and the terrific tension. Everything interacts with everything else: each single factor conspires with the others to crush a man, break him physically and mentally, and lay him wide open to disease. Yes, Admiral—disease.' He smiled into Starr's face, and there was no laughter in his smile. 'Pack men together like herring in a barrel, deprive 'em of every last ounce of resistance, batten 'em below decks for days at a time, and what do you get? TB. It's inevitable.' He shrugged. 'Sure, I've only isolated a few cases so far—but I *know* that active pulmonary TB is rife on the lower deck.'

'I saw the break-up coming months ago.' He lifted his shoulders wearily. 'I warned the Fleet Surgeon several times. I wrote the Admiralty twice. They were sympathetic—and that's all. Shortage of ships, shortage of men . . .

'The last hundred days did it, sir—on top of the previous months. A hundred days of pure blood and hell and not a single hour's shore leave. In port only twice—for ammunition: all oil and provisions from the carriers at sea. And every day an eternity of cold and hunger and danger and suffering. In the name of God,' Brooks cried, 'we're not machines!'

He levered himself off the wall and walked over to Starr, hands still thrust deep in his pockets.

'I hate to say this in front of the Captain, but every officer in the ship—except Captain Vallery—knows that the men would have mutinied, as you call it, long ago, but for one thing—Captain Vallery. The intense personal loyalty of the crew to the Captain, the devotion almost to the other side of idolatry is something quite unique in my experience, Admiral Starr.'

Tyndall and Turner both murmured approval. Vallery still sat motionless.

'But there was a limit even to that. It had to come. And now you talk of punishing, imprisoning these men. Good God above, you might as well hang a man for having leprosy, or send him to penal servitude for developing ulcers!' Brooks shook his head in despair. 'Our crew are equally guiltless. They just couldn't help it. They can't see right from wrong any more. They can't think straight. They just want a rest, they just want peace, a few days' blessed quiet. They'll give anything in the world for these things and they *can't* see beyond them. Can't you see that Admiral Starr? Can't you? Can't you?'

For perhaps thirty seconds there was silence, complete, utter silence, in the Admiral's cabin. The high, thin whine of the wind, the swish of the hail seemed unnaturally loud. Then Starr was on his feet, his hands stretching out for his gloves: Vallery looked up, for the first time, and he knew that Brooks had failed.

'Have my barge alongside, Captain Vallery. At once, please.' Starr was detached, quite emotionless. 'Complete oiling, provisioning and ammunitioning as soon as possible. Admiral Tyndall, I wish you and your squadron a successful voyage. As for you, Commander Brooks, I quite see the point of your argument—at least, as far as you are concerned.' His lips parted in a bleak, wintry smile. 'You are quite obviously overwrought, badly in need of some leave. Your relief will be aboard before midnight. If you will come with me, Captain . . .'

He turned to the door and had taken only two steps when Vallery's voice stopped him dead, poised on one foot.

'One moment, sir, if you please.'

Starr swung round. Captain Vallery had made no move to rise. He sat still, smiling. It was a smile compounded of deference, of understanding—and of a curious inflexibility. It made Starr feel vaguely uncomfortable.

'Surgeon-Commander Brooks,' Vallery said precisely, 'is a quite exceptional officer. He is invaluable, virtually irreplaceable and the *Ulysses* needs him badly. I wish to retain his services.'

'I've made my decision, Captain,' Starr snapped. 'And it's final. You know, I think, the power invested in me by the Admiralty for this investigation.'

'Quite, sir.' Vallery was quiet, unmoved. 'I repeat, however, that we cannot afford to lose an officer of Brooks's calibre.'

The words, the tone, were polite, respectful; but their significance was unmistakable. Brooks stepped forward, distress in his face, but before he could speak, Turner cut in smoothly, urbanely.

'I assume I wasn't invited to this conference for purely decorative purposes.' He tilted back in his chair, his eyes fixed dreamily on the deckhead. 'I feel it's time I said something. I unreservedly endorse old Brooks's remarks—every word of them.'

Starr, white-mouthed and motionless, looked at Tyndall. 'And you, Admiral?'

Tyndall looked up quizzically, all the tenseness and worry gone from his face. He looked more like a West Country Farmer Giles than ever. He supposed wryly, that his career was at stake; funny, he thought how suddenly unimportant a career could become.

'As Officer Commanding, maximum squadron efficiency is my sole concern. Some people are irreplaceable. Captain Vallery suggests Brooks is one of these. I agree.'

'I see, gentlemen, I see,' Starr said heavily. Two spots of colour burned high up on his cheekbones. 'The convoy has sailed from Halifax, and my hands are tied. But you make a great mistake, gentlemen, a great mistake, in pointing pistols at the head of the Admiralty. We have long memories in Whitehall. We shall—ah—discuss the matter at length on your return. Good day, gentlemen, good day.'

Shivering in the sudden chill, Brooks clumped down the ladder to the upper deck and turned for a moment past the galley into the Sick Bay. Johnson, the Leading Sick Bay Attendant, looked out from the dispensary.

'How are our sick and suffering, Johnson?' Brooks inquired. 'Bearing up manfully?'

Johnson surveyed the eight beds and their occupants morosely.

‘Just a lot of bloody chancers, sir. Half of them are a damned sight fitter than I am. Look at Stoker Riley there—him with the broken finger and whacking great pile of *Reader’s Digests*. Going through all the medical articles, he is, and roaring out for sulph., penicillin and all the latest antibiotics. Can’t pronounce half of them. Thinks he’s dying.’

‘A grievous loss,’ the Surgeon-Commander murmured. He shook his head. ‘What Commanders Dodson sees in him I don’t know . . . What’s the latest from hospital?’

The expression drained out of Johnson’s face.

‘They’re just off the blower, sir,’ he said woodenly. ‘Five minutes ago. Ordinary Seaman Ralston died at three o’clock.’

Brooks nodded heavily. Sending that broken boy to hospital had only been a gesture anyway. Just for a moment he felt tired, beaten. ‘Old Socrates’ they called him, and he was beginning to feel his age these days—and a bit more besides. Maybe a good night’s sleep would help, but he doubted it. He sighed.

‘Don’t feel too good about all this, Johnson, do you?’

‘Eighteen, sir. Exactly eighteen.’ Johnson’s voice was low, bitter. ‘I’ve just been talking to Burgess—that’s him in the next bed. Says Ralston steps out across the bathroom coaming, a towel over his arm. A mob rushes past, then this bloody great ape of a bootneck comes tearing up and bashes him over the skull with his rifle. Never knew what hit him, sir—and he never knew why.’

Brooks smiled faintly.

‘That’s what they call—ah—seditious talk, Johnson,’ he said mildly.

‘Sorry, sir. Suppose I shouldn’t—it’s just that I—’

‘Never mind, Johnson. I asked for it. Can’t stop anyone from thinking. Only, don’t think out loud. It’s—it’s prejudicial to naval discipline . . . I think your friend Riley wants you. Better get him in the dictionary.’

He turned and pushed his way through the surgery curtains. A dark head—all that could be seen behind the dentist’s chair—twisted round. Johnny Nicholls, Acting Surgeon Lieutenant, rose quickly to his feet, a pile of report cards dangling from his left hand.

‘Hallo, sir. Have a pew.’

Brooks grinned.

‘An excellent thing, Lieutenant Nicholls, truly gratifying, to meet these days a junior officer who knows his place. Thank you, thank you.’

He climbed into the chair and sank back with a groan, fiddling with the neck-rest.

‘If you’ll just adjust the foot-rest, my boy . . . so. Ah—thank you.’ He leaned back luxuriously, eyes closed, head far back on the rest, and groaned again. ‘I’m an old man, Johnny, my boy, just an ancient has-been.’

‘Nonsense, sir,’ Nicholls said briskly. ‘Just a slight malaise. Now, if you’ll let me prescribe a suitable tonic . . .’

He turned to a cupboard, fished out two toothglasses and a dark-green, ribbed bottle marked ‘Poison’. He filled the glasses and handed one to Brooks. ‘My personal recommendation. Good health, sir!’

Brooks looked at the amber liquid, then at Nicholls.

‘Heathenish practice they taught you at these Scottish Universities, my boy . . . Admirable fellow some of these old heathens. What is it this time, Johnny?’

‘First-class stuff,’ Nicholls grinned. ‘Produce of the Island of Coll.’

The old surgeon looked at him suspiciously.

‘Didn’t know they had any distilleries up there.’

‘They haven’t. I only said it was made in Coll . . . How did things go up top, sir?’

‘Bloody awful. His nibs threatened to string us all from the yardarm. Took a special dislike to me—said I was to be booted off the ship instanter. Meant it, too.’

‘You!’ Nicholls’s brown eyes, deep-sunk just now and red-rimmed from sleeplessness, opened wide. ‘You’re joking, sir, of course.’

‘I’m not. But it’s all right—I’m not going. Old Giles, the skipper and Turner—the crazy idiots—virtually told Starr that if I went he’d better start looking around for another Admiral, Captain and Commander as well. They shouldn’t have done it, of course—but it shook old Vincent to the core. Departed in high dudgeon, muttering veiled threats . . . not so veiled, either, come to think of it.’

‘Damned old fool!’ said Nicholls feelingly.

‘He’s not really, Johnny. Actually, he’s a brilliant bloke. You don’t become a DNO for nothing. Master strategist and tactician, Giles tells me, and he’s not really as bad as we’re apt to paint him; to a certain extent we can’t blame old Vincent for sending us out again. Bloke’s up against an insoluble problem. Limited resources at his disposal, terrific demands for ships and men in half a dozen other theatres. Impossible to meet half the claims made on him; half the time he’s operating on little better than a shoe-string. But he’s still an inhuman, impersonal sort of cuss—doesn’t understand men.’

‘And the upshot of it all?’

‘Murmansk again. Sailing at 0600 tomorrow.’

‘What! Again? This bunch of walking zombies?’ Nicholls was openly incredulous. ‘Why, they can’t do that, sir! They—they just can’t!’

‘They’re doing it anyway, my boy. The *Ulysses* must—ah—redeem itself.’ Brooks opened his eyes. ‘Gad the very thought appals me. If there’s any of that poison left, my boy . . .’

Nicholls shoved the depleted bottle back into the cupboard, and jerked a resentful thumb in the direction of the massive battleship clearly visible through the porthole, swinging round her anchor three or four cable-lengths away.

‘Why always us, sir? It’s always us. Why don’t they send that useless floating barracks out once in a while? Swinging round that bloody great anchor, month in, month out—’

‘Just the point,’ Brooks interrupted solemnly. ‘According to the Kapok Kid, the tremendous weight of empty condensed-milk cans and herring-intomato-sauce tins accumulated on the ocean bed over the past twelve months completely defeats all attempts to weigh anchor.’

Nicholls didn’t seem to hear him.

‘Week in, week out, months and months on end, they send the *Ulysses* out. They change the carrier—they rest the screen destroyers—but never the *Ulysses*. There’s no let-up. Never, not once. But the *Duke of Cumberland*—all it’s fit for is sending hulking great brutes of marines on board here to massacre sick men, crippled men, men who’ve done more in a week than—’

‘Easy, boy, easy,’ the Commander chided. ‘You can’t call three dead men and the bunch of wounded heroes lying outside there a massacre. The marines were only doing their job. As for the

Cumberland—well, you've got to face it. We're the only ship in the Home Fleet equipped for carrying command.'

Nicholls drained his glass and regarded his superior officer moodily.

'There are times, sir, when I positively love the Germans.'

'You and Johnson should get together sometime,' Brooks advised. 'Old Starr would have you both clapped in irons for spreading alarm and . . . Hallo, hallo!' He straightened up in his chair and leaned forward. 'Observe the old *Duke* there, Johnny! Yards of washing going up from the flagdeck and matelots running—actually running—up to the fo'c'sle head. Unmistakable signs of activity. By God, this *is* uncommon surprising! What d'ye make of it, boy?'

'Probably learned that they're going on leave,' Nicholls growled. 'Nothing else could possibly make that bunch move so fast. And who are we to grudge them the just rewards for their labours? After so long, so arduous, so dangerous a spell of duty in Northern waters . . .'

The first shrill blast of a bugle killed the rest of the sentence. Instinctively, their eyes swung round on the crackling, humming loudspeaker, then on each other in sheer, shocked disbelief. And then they were on their feet, tense, expectant: the heart-stopping urgency of the bugle-call to action stations never grows dim.

'Oh, my God, no!' Brooks moaned. 'Oh, no, no! Not again! Not in Scapa Flow!'

'Oh, God, no! Not again—*not in Scapa Flow!*'

These were the words in the mouths, the minds, the hearts of 727 exhausted, sleep-haunted, bitter men that bleak winter evening in Scapa Flow. That they thought of, and that only could they think of, as the scream of the bugle stopped dead all work on decks and below decks, in engine-rooms and boiler-rooms, on ammunition lighters and fuel tenders, in the galleys and in the offices. And that only could the watch below think of—and that with an even more poignant despair—as the strident blast seared through the bliss of oblivion and brought them back, sick at heart, dazed in mind and stumbling on their feet, to the iron harshness of reality.

It was, in a strangely indefinite way, a moment of decision. It was the moment that could have broken the *Ulysses*, as a fighting ship, for ever. It was the moment that bitter, exhausted men, relaxed in the comparative safety of a landlocked anchorage, could have chosen to make the inevitable stand against authority, against that wordless, mindless compulsion and merciless insistence which was surely destroying them. If ever there was such a moment, this was it.

The moment came—and passed. It was no more than a fleeting shadow, a shadow that flitted lightly across men's minds and was gone, lost in the rush of feet pounding to action stations. Perhaps self-preservation was the reason. But that was unlikely—the *Ulysses* had long since ceased to care. Perhaps it was just naval discipline, or loyalty to the captain, or what the psychologists call conditioned reflex—*you hear the scream of brakes and you immediately jump for your life*. Or perhaps it was something else again.

Whatever it was, the ship—all except the port watch anchor party—was closed up in two minutes. Unanimous in their disbelief that this could be happening to them in Scapa Flow, men went to their stations silently or vociferously, according to their nature. They went reluctantly, sullenly, resentfully, despairingly. But they went.

Rear-Admiral Tyndall went also. He was not one of those who went silently. He climbed blasphemously up to the bridge, pushed his way through the port gate and clambered into his high

legged armchair in the forward port corner of the compass platform. He looked at Vallery.

‘What’s the flap, in heaven’s name, Captain?’ he demanded testily. ‘Everything seems singularly peaceful to me.’

‘Don’t know yet, sir.’ Vallery swept worried eyes over the anchorage. ‘Alarm signal from C-in- with orders to get under way immediately.’

‘Get under way! But why, man, why?’

Vallery shook his head.

Tyndall groaned. ‘It’s all a conspiracy, designed to rob old men like myself of their afternoon sleep,’ he declared.

‘More likely a brainwave of Starr’s to shake us up a bit,’ Turner grunted.

‘No.’ Tyndall was decisive. ‘He wouldn’t try that—wouldn’t dare. Besides, by his lights, he’s not vindictive man.’

Silence fell, a silence broken only by the patter of sleet and hail, and the weird haunting pinging of the Asdic. Vallery suddenly lifted his binoculars.

‘Good lord, sir, look at that! The *Duke*’s slipped her anchor!’

There was no doubt about it. The shackle-pin had been knocked out and the bows of the great ship were swinging slowly round as it got under way.

‘What in the world—?’ Tyndall broke off and scanned the sky. ‘Not a plane, not a paratrooper in sight, no radar reports, no Asdic contacts, no sign of the German Grand Fleet steaming through the boom—’

‘She’s signalling us, sir!’ It was Bentley speaking, Bentley the Chief Yeoman of Signals. He paused and went on slowly: ‘Proceed to our anchorage at once. Make fast to north buoy.’

‘Ask them to confirm,’ Vallery snapped. He took the fo’c’sle phone from the communication rating.

‘Captain here, Number One. How is she? Up and down? Good.’

He turned to the officer of the watch. ‘Slow ahead both: Starboard 10.’ He looked over at Tyndall in the corner, brows wrinkled in question.

‘Search me,’ Tyndall growled. ‘Could be the latest in parlour games—a sort of nautical music chairs, you know . . . Wait a minute, though! Look! The *Cumberland*—all her 5.25’s are at maximum depression!’

Vallery’s eyes met his.

‘No, it can’t be! Good God, do you think—?’

The blare of the Asdic loudspeaker, from the cabinet immediately abaft of the bridge, gave him his answer. The voice of Leading Asdic Operation Chrysler was clear, unhurried.

‘Asdic—bridge. Asdic—bridge. Echo, Red 30. Repeat, Red 30. Strengthening. Closing.’

The captain’s incredulity leapt and died in the same second.

‘Alert Director Control! Red 30. All AA guns maximum depression. Underwater target. Torps’—this to Lieutenant Marshall, the Canadian Torpedo Officer—“depth charge stations”.’

He turned back to Tyndall.

‘It can’t be, sir—it just can’t! A U-boat—I presume it is—in Scapa Flow. Impossible!’

‘Prien didn’t think so,’ Tyndall grunted.

‘Prien?’

‘Kapitan-Leutnant Prien—gent who scuppered the *Royal Oak*.’

‘It couldn’t happen again. The new boom defences—’

‘Would keep out any normal submarines,’ Tyndall finished. His voice dropped to a murmur. ‘Remember what we were told last month about our midget two-man subs—the chariots? The ones that could be taken over to Norway by Norwegian fishing-boats operating from the Shetlands. Could be that the Germans have hit on the same idea.’

‘Could be,’ Vallery agreed. He nodded sardonically. ‘Just look at the *Cumberland* go—straight for the boom.’ He paused for a few seconds, his eyes speculative, then looked back at Tyndall. ‘How do you like it, sir?’

‘Like what, Captain?’

‘Playing Aunt Sally at the fair.’ Vallery grinned crookedly. ‘Can’t afford to lose umpteen millions of pounds worth of capital ship. So the old *Duke* hares out to sea and safety, while we moor near her anchor berth. You can bet German Naval Intelligence has the bearing of her anchorage down to a couple of inches. These midget subs carry detachable warheads and if there’s going to be any fitting, they’re going to be fitted to us.’

Tyndall looked at him. His face was expressionless. Asdic reports were continuous, reporting steady bearing to port and closing distances.

‘Of course, of course,’ the Admiral murmured. ‘We’re the whipping boy. Gad, it makes me feel bad!’ His mouth twisted and he laughed mirthlessly. ‘Me? This is the final straw for the crew. The hellish last trip, the mutiny, the marine boarding party from the *Cumberland*, action stations in the harbour—and now this! Risking our necks for that—that . . .’ He broke off, spluttering, swore in anger, then resumed quietly:

‘What are you going to tell the men, Captain? Good God, it’s fantastic! I feel like mutiny myself . . .’ He stopped short, looked inquiringly past Vallery’s shoulder.

The Captain turned round.

‘Yes, Marshall?’

‘Excuse me, sir. This—er—echo.’ He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. ‘A sub, sir—possibly a pretty small one?’ The transatlantic accent was very heavy.

‘Likely enough, Marshall. Why?’

‘Just how Ralston and I figured it, sir.’ He grinned. ‘We have an idea for dealing with it.’

Vallery looked out through the driving sleet, gave helm and engine orders, then turned back to the Torpedo Officer. He was coughing heavily, painfully, as he pointed to the glassed-in anchorage chart.

‘If you’re thinking of depth-charging our stern off in these shallow waters—’

‘No, sir. Doubt whether we could get a shallow enough setting anyway. My idea—Ralston’s to be correct—is that we take out the motor-boat and a few 25-lb. scuttling charges, 18-second fuses and chemical igniters. Not much of a kick from these, I know, but a miniature sub ain’t likely to have a helluva—er—very thick hulls. And if the crews are sitting on top of the ruddy things instead of inside—well, it’s curtains for sure. It’ll kipper ‘em.’

Vallery smiled.

‘Not bad at all, Marshall. I think you’ve got the answer there. What do you think, sir?’

‘Worth trying anyway,’ Tyndall agreed. ‘Better than waiting around like a sitting duck.’

‘Go ahead then, Torps.’ Vallery looked at him quizzically. ‘Who are your explosives experts?’

‘I figured on taking Ralston—’

‘Just what I thought. You’re taking nobody, laddie,’ said Vallery firmly. ‘Can’t afford to lose my torpedo officer.’

Marshall looked pained, then shrugged resignedly.

‘The chief TGM and Ralston—he’s the senior LTO. Good men both.’

‘Right. Bentley—detail a man to accompany them in the boat. We’ll signal Asdic bearings from here. Have him take a portable Aldis with him.’ He dropped his voice. ‘Marshall?’

‘Sir?’

‘Ralston’s young brother died in hospital this afternoon.’ He looked across at the Leading Torpedo Operator, a tall, blond, unsmiling figure dressed in faded blue overalls beneath his duffel. ‘Does he know yet?’

The Torpedo Officer stared at Vallery, then looked round slowly at the LTO. He swore, softly and bitterly, fluently.

‘Marshall!’ Vallery’s voice was sharp, imperative, but Marshall ignored him, his face a mask of oblivious alikeness to the reprimand in the Captain’s voice and the lashing bite of the sleet.

‘No, sir,’ he stated at length, ‘he doesn’t know. But he did receive some news this morning. Croydon was paged last week. His mother and three sisters live there—lived there. It was a land mine, sir—there was nothing left.’ He turned abruptly and left the bridge.

Fifteen minutes later it was all over. The starboard whaler and the motor-boat on the port side hit the water with the *Ulysses* still moving up to the mooring. The whaler, buoy-jumper aboard, made for the buoy, while the motor-boat slid off at a tangent.

Four hundred yards away from the ship, in obedience to the flickering instructions from the bridge, Ralston fished out a pair of pliers from his overalls and crimped the chemical fuse. The Gunner’s Mate stared fixedly at his stop-watch. On the count of twelve the scuttling charge went over the side.

Three more, at different settings, followed it in close succession, while the motor-boat cruised in a tight circle. The first three explosions lifted the stern and jarred the entire length of the boat, viciously—and that was all. But with the fourth, a great gout of air came gushing to the surface, followed by a long stream of viscous bubbles. As the turbulence subsided, a thin slick of oil spread over a hundred square yards of sea . . .

Men, fallen out from Action Stations, watched with expressionless faces as the motor-boat made back to the *Ulysses* and hooked on to the falls just in time: the Hotchkiss steering-gear was badly twisted and she was taking in water fast under the counter.

The *Duke of Cumberland* was a smudge of smoke over a far headland.

Cap in hand, Ralston sat down opposite the Captain. Vallery looked at him for a long time in silence. He wondered what to say, how best to say it. He hated to have to do this.

Richard Vallery also hated war. He always had hated it and he cursed the day it had dragged him out of his comfortable retirement. At least, ‘dragged’ was how he put it; only Tyndall knew that he had volunteered his services to the Admiralty on 1st September, 1939, and had had them gladly accepted.

But he hated war. Not because it interfered with his lifelong passion for music and literature, of both of which he was a considerable authority, not even because it was a perpetual affront to his

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