Admiral ON HORSEBACK

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“I was seventeen years old before I knew that the word Damn British were two words.”

GENERAL GRUENTHER

“We must try honestly to see the causes which make Americans irritated with our country. They resent what they regard as the cold superiority and self-assured patronage with which we treat them and other people.”

DOCTOR GARBETT

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Geoffrey Willans

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To the corvettes

H.M.S. (“ROYAL”) PEONY

&

H.M.S. SALVIA

and all who sailed in them

Many existing titles in the present structure of allied command are mentioned in this book. Past and present holders of office will not, one is sure, be dismayed that they do not resemble the characters I have invented.

Certain parts of the book have appeared as stories in *Blackwood's* and there will be echoes from other contributions I have made to that magazine.

PART ONE
1952

★

Flag Officer,
Carrier Striking Group

1

‘At least,’ said the Admiral, explosively, ‘we have been spared *that*.’

He folded his copy of *The Times* and laid it on the desk of his day-cabin. It is safe to say that in his long service career he had never regretted his loneliness more. Even the time taken to summon Flags or the Secretary would take the fine, exquisite edge off his indignation. Despite this, however, and the fact that it was not yet nine o’clock he telephoned the Secretary.

‘Secretary, I want you in my cabin at once.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The Secretary, a pale, worried commander, arrived looking bright and enquiring. All the way aft he had been wondering what had gone adrift. The squadrons had flown on perfectly, there had been fresh milk for breakfast, there was no other British admiral of greater seniority in company and the acceptances had arrived for the Press reception. Once inside he had not long to wait.

‘Secretary, have you heard the expression “two-blocked”?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Neither had I,’ said the Admiral. (The Secretary, long schooled to atmosphere, realised that there was going to be nothing personal in this.) ‘Listen.’

He picked up *The Times* again and read aloud the report:

> ‘ “It is heartening evidence of co-operation that an American naval term of long standing—‘two-blocked’—an expression indicating that a flag, pendant or signal has been hoisted all the way up to the signal yard arm—has been dropped. The British ‘close-up’ takes its place.” ’

There was silence.

‘Had you ever heard the expression “two-blocked,” Secretary?’

‘No, sir.’

The Admiral began to speak. He spoke as he was wont to speak on these occasions, picking his words carefully while his eyes looked, from time to time, through the scuttle, to rest upon the other ships at anchor.

‘In the old days, Secretary, as you will remember, our phonetic alphabet had a splendidly traditional ring about it. A stood for Apples, B for Beer and L for London. All typically British allusions. After many weeks of

deliberations during the war a committee, sitting apparently in Washington, decreed that in future A should stand for Able, B for Baker and L'—the Admiral gulped—'L was to stand for, of all things, Love.'

The Admiral's eyes rested upon the American carriers that stretched in his view between Gair Loch and the Tail of the Bank.

'Apparently, Secretary, we have only narrowly missed—narrowly, I repeat—the situation when I might hear my Flags requesting the Signal Bos'n that "Love should be two-blocked." '

The Secretary, relieved, smiled at the Admiral's flight of fancy. This he realized was the humorous monologue, not the more customary impersonation of Captain Bligh or Jack the Ripper.

'We ought to learn a bit of American on this exercise, sir.'

The Admiral's cold eye came back to him.

'They are our allies, Secretary,' he said. 'It is our duty to co-operate with them with best possible endeavour. I should not wish any officer or rating in my flagship' (he pronounced it 'flagship') 'in my flagship to feel otherwise.'

'Yes, sir.'

Rear-Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth, despite his comparative youth, was the old-fashioned type of admiral. He did not still wear a wing-collar, but there was a suspicion of length about his sidewhisker and he sported a swansdown of fluffy grey hair on his upper cheekbones. His was a steel-like personality and it was reflected in the austerity of his quarters. The day-cabin was like a monk's cell—a desk with two Admiralty-pattern lampshades, a blotter and a telephone: a notice board on the sloping bulkhead and the usual standard furniture were all that it contained. There was no picture of a wife taken in wedding dress in 1926. The only softness he permitted himself was an oil-painting of H.M.S. *Nelson* at sea in bad weather.

In the nature of things Sir Strangways' appointment was a curious one. He was Flag Officer Carrier Striking Group, flying his flag in the *Impenetrable*, one of the largest of British aircraft carriers. Yet he wore no wings on his sleeve, and, in the view of the squadrons embarked, he did not know a Swordfish from an Attacker. In this they were wrong, for Sir Strangways was an acute man with a first-class brain. It may well have been that his private dreams had once seen him in command when battle-fleets were brought to action, but he had now focused his entire mind upon his newer problem. If he had not flying in his bones and did not know what the flight-deck looked like when a pilot was coming in with a batsman who didn't know his flying, nevertheless many hours of thought and discussion had put him on top of the job. He looked forward to the exercise ahead as his first real test.

‘After the conference I shall bring Admiral—er—what was his name?”

‘Admiral Burnett J. Kzecky, sir.’

‘Hmm.’

Without a single word, with a single glance from the middle scuttle starboard side, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth implied his opinion of this name.

‘I shall bring Admiral Kzecky aft. I have no doubt that, despite the dryness of American ships, he may appreciate a glass of gin.’

‘Two-blocked,’ added the Admiral, almost to himself. ‘Love two-blocked.’

The Secretary retired, as he put it later, under ‘heavy smoke.’

When he was alone Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stood for some minutes gazing out of the scuttle. It was a perfect autumn morning. Warm, flooded with sunlight, the Clyde looked at its best. The Argyll hills were still covered with mellow, drifting mists and the waters were blue. Against these stood the varying shapes of the ships in company—the dark-grey Americans and the lighter British ships and, borne through the bright, crystal stillness of the sparkling air came a multitude of sounds—a Corsair revving up on the flight-deck, a band playing, the throb of a ship’s boat, the hollow, unearthly boom of a ship’s loudspeaker.

It was a brave sight, the Admiral decided. He had seen nothing like it since the war. A pity though, that he had not another two squadrons on board; a pity that he didn’t have helicopters; that the other two carriers in his group were not more up-to-date. He could see the fighters ranged on the flight-decks of the three American carriers with wings folded upright, looking like black insects. There seemed to be hundreds of them. And what of Admiral Kzecky? He had not met him before. Would he be one of the sandy-haired American admirals promoted by Washington after a successful career in industry? Or the inarticulate type. Rumour had it that Burnett J. Kzecky, U.S. Navy, was the possessor of a sense of humour. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth frowned. Then he settled down at his desk and took up his pen to compose his speech. He wrote:

‘Admiral Burnett J. Kzecky in command of Carrier Task Force .1 and myself welcome you on board H.M.S. *Impenetrable* . . .’

He stared at this for a long time. Carrier Task Force .1. Why point one? Burnett, too! What could the fellow’s parents have been thinking of at the christening? Admiral Foxe-Forsyth forced his pen again along the paper.

In the marines barracks on Three Deck there was much confusion. The visit of the American admiral for the press conference before the start of the

exercise had been made the occasion for full ceremonial. This meant guard and band on the quarterdeck and the major of marines had taken no chances. The band had practised the 'Garb of Old Gaul' until they were something something sick of the something tune and now, in the last minutes before the show, there was a desperate polishing among the crowded tin lockers and plush benches which were the concession to the 'comfort of the modern Navy' in the *Impenetrable*.

The Commander, too, was having a busy morning. The *Impenetrable*, a nightmare rabbit warren of vertical companion ways and wandering gangways in which a man might be lost for days was a difficult ship to keep clean. Paint and holystone seemed to make little difference but, at least, the route to the lower hangar where the conference would be held was clean and efficiently signposted with boards that said 'To the Conference' in red paint (with a pointing arrow). Rows of midshipmen, too, had been paraded as guides to the visiting officers and pressmen: the wardroom had been transformed with spotless napery and piles of cigarettes and cigars stuck into tumblers, while the ship's motor fishing vessel had gone off to Gourock in due time to collect the visitors. The Commander was able to inform the Captain with confidence that he thought the whole affair would go with a swing.

As the hour approached, the quarterdeck presented an animated spectacle. Guard and band were standing-to; the Officer of the Watch was covering his incipient nervous breakdown with a brave display of efficiency; the Chief Bos'n's Mate was standing by with his pipe, and opposite the gangway stood Captain and Commander to greet the early visitors. Once the Press had arrived on board (a curious-looking lot, but no matter), it was the turn of Admiral Kzecky.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, his speech safely in his pocket, left his cabin to greet his fellow commander.

Telescopes raked the carrier *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.* in which Admiral Kzecky flew his flag. Yet no boat had left her: indeed it looked as if the Admiral's barge had not even been called away.

'They have ninety-three boats,' said the Commander pettishly. 'They cannot all have broken down.'

'Helicopter approaching, sir,' came a report from the bridge.

It says much for the training that, for three minutes, all the officers concerned returned to their normal deportment—telescope under arm, bending slightly from the hips, turning importantly or, even, looking critical—all according to rank. It was the Commander, who had been watching in a dispassionate way the approach of the helicopter, who suddenly sprang to life.

‘Do you suppose, sir, he’s arriving by helicopter?’

There was a moment of stunned silence at such a revolutionary thought.

‘Officer of the Watch . . .’

But already the Officer of the Watch (who knew that everything so far had been a lot too easy) had sprung to the telephone.

‘Helicopter is hovering, about to land on, sir,’ he reported.

‘Is there a flag flying?’

‘No, sir.’

‘The helicopter is landing, sir.’

(‘Let them work that one out,’ thought the Officer of the Watch, looking smug and slightly obsequious. ‘What else do they get their pay for?’) Aloud he snapped: ‘Hold on and report who disembarks.’

‘Tell him to report who disembarks,’ said the Commander, the Captain, and the Admiral, almost simultaneously.

‘I’ve given that order, sir,’ said the Officer of the Watch, impassive, but calculating how he would dine out on this.

There was a minute or two of suspense, then the voice from the island above said: ‘The helicopter is down, sir.’

‘Does it bear any identification?’ snapped the Admiral.

‘It is called “Hiya Rosie,” ’ came the grave report. ‘There is a lady painted beside the name. Otherwise——’ the voice broke off. ‘There *is* an Admiral, sir, just stepped out.’

It was a case for quick action. The ancient rule held good. Even in the most difficult and undignified circumstances due honour should be paid to a senior officer. If Admiral Kzecky arrived in unorthodox manner on the flight-deck the ceremony must be taken to him. It would, indeed, take some minutes to transport the band there—but it could be done speedily and most impressively with the band rising in full martial blast on the for’ard aircraft lift. The immediate need was for Admiral Kzecky to remain on the flight-deck.

One could not call the ensuing passage of officers and band to the lower hangar a dignified procedure, but it was carried out at best speed. In very few minutes they were rising past the apple-green walls of the hangar with the ‘Garb of Old Gaul’ in full swing. Those who beheld this spectacle from the island vouched that it was as brave a sight as they could wish to see. Admiral Kzecky, detained by a splendid piece of sprinting by Commander Air, who happened to be in the briefing-room when the telephone rang, must have been deeply moved.

Meanwhile he honoured pipe and salute with a cutaway salute. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth advanced to him with a smile of great cordiality which

concealed his deep private views on admirals who arrived by helicopter without prior signal.

'My apologies,' he said, with a glare at the panting Officer of the Watch. 'Shall we go below? The Press are waiting.'

Exercise 'Flamethrower' was a typical naval exercise of the international type now fashionable. Its aim was to provide training for combined fleets in all aspects of the war at sea. It was to stuff such incidents as air and submarine attack, attack by raider, the flying off of naval strikes, the escort of convoys, and everything else that could be thought of into the days of its duration. As usual Russians were not mentioned by name: the exercise planners, with a humour which must have been the death of the combined headquarters, called Russia 'Pinkland.' Once harassed staff officers had got over the mirth of this, they could be sent into fresh paroxysms by the reference to their own forces as 'Yangland.'

In fact, exercise 'Flamethrower' provided a tremendous thrill for staff officers who, crossing the vague, undefined fringe between reality and insanity in which they normally dwelt, became convinced that the whole thing was real. It was a damned nuisance to the ship's officers, who had their first serious spell of watchkeeping since 1945 in prospect. As for the ship's company, like all good ship's companies, they did not care a great deal what was going on, anyway.

It was not these truths, however, with which the two Admirals had to deal at the conference. To them was assigned the difficult task of saying as little as possible about the exercise while stressing how important, significant, wholesome, and newsworthy it was. The attack on this problem by each of the speakers was curious. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was witty, urbane, making copious service references, while Admiral Kzecky, a bluff man with a skin like crumpled brown paper, was ostentatiously informal.

'At the Battle of the Midway,' he said, jutting out his jaw, 'we had a motto, "If you don't swim, you sink." So we decided to swim. We have three fleet carriers and we are going to operate them as if there were real enemies right over there with real submarines and real bombers loosing real bombs. . . .'

('How many more times is he going to say "real?" ' wondered Admiral Foxe-Forsyth as he automatically nodded his head in agreement.)

'In other words, this is a real exercise, on a real sea with real aims to defend real peace,' concluded Admiral Kzecky.

Curiously enough, this speech went down well with the company and was greeted with audible approval. They had, of course, these American correspondents 'from some of the most influential papers in the States,' a

few questions to ask—questions which made the English correspondents slightly envious: 'Admiral, if Russia declared war during the conduct of the exercise, would you go straight into action?'

'I leave you to guess that,' said Admiral Kzecky, looking bellicose.

'Could you carry the atom-bomb from one of your carriers and drop it on Vladivostok?'

'In the necessary circumstances,' said Admiral Kzecky, 'I am prepared to drop anything on Vladivostok or anywhere else—should The Peace be broken.'

'Do you have an atom-bomb on board one of your carriers now?'

'No comment.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth rose to his feet hastily. What next would be said?

'Gentlemen,' he beamed, 'I shall now ask the Chief of Staff to outline the movements of the two carrier striking groups. After that, gentlemen, the ship's officers will be happy to entertain you in the wardroom.'

The Chief of Staff, who was equipped with a large chart and a lieutenant with a pointer, succeeded in delivering a narrative of such technicality that all further questions were stifled. The gentlemen of the Press were conscious of a growing thirst which corresponded with their diminishing interest. The end of the conference came with almost indecent haste once the Chief of Staff had finished. The party repaired to the wardroom.

Now it is a fact that some thirty years ago a gentleman named Josephus Daniels abolished alcohol from American warships. It is also a fact that a great number of the American nation do not make a habit of drinking in the middle of the day. A third fact is that the Royal Navy, who are fortunate enough to be able to buy a glass of gin for threepence, are renowned for their splendid hospitality.

The *Impenetrable* was a new ship and this was her first major occasion. She had to do it justice. All the ship's officers were imbued with a sunny love of their fellow beings which at breakfast was usually conspicuously absent. Some, like the Commander (S) and the Squadron Medical Officer, were practising a studied charm which they had learned in many a station between Bermuda and Hong Kong; younger officers made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in experience, summoning the white-coated waiters and determined that no visitor should lack for anything he required.

All these matters combined to achieve the desired result. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth mingled in the throng, and, although a young pressman cornered him and instructed him how the Battle of the Atlantic—in which the Admiral played no small part in Western Approaches—should really have been conducted, he felt that the damned nuisance the Press conference represented was a 'Manœuvre well executed.' Accordingly he was able to

usher Admiral Kzecky out past the marine sentries and the polished corticene to his day-cabin to discuss details of the exercise with the Staff.

It was after they left that the trouble began, although, perhaps, 'trouble' is too strong a word. It was mainly the result of a photographer mislaying his camera. If this had not happened there would have been no cause for dismay beyond a couple of gentlemen from Texas in ten-gallon hats crossing the gangway smoking cheroots. As it turned out, however, the motor fishing vessel which was to bear the company ashore was delayed at the bottom of the gangway.

It then became evident that the company of pressmen—and the representatives of some of the most influential newspapers in the United States were far from being an exception—were in a splendidly cheerful frame of mind. The Padre was the first to suffer, as padres often are. Being unwise enough to stand at the rail to bid a courteous farewell designed to cement bonds between nations, he was greeted with a joyous rejoinder:

'Good-bye, Padre. If God's anything like you, He's all right.'

The Padre smiled palely and retired: his place at the rail was taken by the American embarked for liaison in the *Impenetrable*. He was a commander, but he was distinguished by one outstanding feature—he had a clipped, grey moustache.

'Hi, Red,' he called down, leaning over the quarterdeck rail, 'did you get my envelope?'

Red, a stout correspondent with rimless glasses and a sea-green mackintosh, shouted up: 'Sure, boy, I got it here. Look at that! Photographs! And your life-story on the back. You think of everything.'

'Will it make the paper?'

'Sure. I'll see it makes the paper. And another thing—I wanna take another picture of you.'

The *Impenetrable* was a new ship, but her namesakes had performed various heroic feats in the past. It is probable that in none of them had there ever been seen the spectacle of a commander with a grey toothbrush moustache leaning over the quarterdeck rail to have his picture taken for the Press.

Yet this did happen. Red levelled his camera: the Commander's face split into a ghastly grin and he actually held his hand aloft and said 'Hi!' The picture was taken. Lined up was a row of midshipmen to whom the proceedings had proved most diverting. To add to their pleasure Red finally waved at the Commander and shouted:

'So long, Commander. Come and see me when you're an Admiral.'

Mercifully the missing camera had by now been located: it was hustled in almost indecent haste down the gangway into the waiting boat. The

coxswain was told to carry on, and with an uninhibited cheer from the grateful pressmen the boat pushed off and headed towards Gourock pier.

'This,' said the Captain fervently, 'is a morning I shall remember for the rest of my life.'

What Admiral Foxe-Forsyth would have said had he been present to witness such incidents on the sacred quarterdeck cannot be guessed. He had been closeted in the day-cabin with Admiral Kzecky to discuss the operation, and he, too, had been subjected to a certain amount of strain.

Admiral Kzecky showed himself completely impenitent at his unorthodox arrival and seemed, moreover, to be a disciple of that firm American doctrine that the British Navy does not know how to operate carriers. He even went so far as to lecture Admiral Foxe-Forsyth on the Battle of the Coral Sea and aircraft carrier operation 'in the event of a future war.'

'We shall use our task forces to strike unexpectedly to obtain a local air superiority over any given area. Having concentrated fighters over the peripheral defences of the enemy, our bombers could then move in with the atom-bomb.'

'Hmm,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'Cannot an atomic bomb also sink an aircraft carrier?'

'Sure it can, providing it falls within the task force and reasonably close to the ship. But don't forget the vital element of surprise is on our side. A carrier is more difficult to hit than a land base and a carrier task group is difficult to locate, and, owing to its great defensive strength, difficult to attack when located.'

'I cannot agree that that was entirely our experience in the Mediterranean," said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

His companion dug his hands deeper than ever into his trousers pockets —a posture he had assumed the moment official duties were behind him.

'It's the same anywhere,' he said flatly. 'You've just got to *have* the carriers and, then, put 'em in there."

Before them on the desk lay a chart of the waters in which exercise 'Flamethrower' had been planned to take place. It would not be betraying secrecy to state that these were well north of the Arctic Circle. The coastline revealed on the chart conveyed a grim and rugged outline—giving a mental picture of tall cliffs, gulls borne away in the wind, and a grim, steel-grey sea.

'Do you know these waters?' asked Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

'No, sir.'

'Inclined to be treacherous at this time of year. The weather may well hamper us.'

Admiral Kzecky's nod conveyed agreement, together with the unspoken reservation that nothing really mattered so long as you had the right equipment. At that moment, however, a signal arrived. It was brought in by the Squadron Communications Officer—a worried young man when in the Admiral's presence. On this occasion his eyes were positively haunted.

'Received from Admiralty, sir,' he gulped.

The Admiral looked at the signal and the S.C.O. rather as if a stray cat had brought in a mouse and laid it at his feet. This was his normal demeanour with his staff.

Having observed the signal, he immediately looked away, continuing to speak to Admiral Kzecky; then, a full three minutes later, he turned his attention back. He took the signal and read it. It began: 'Exercise "Flamethrower." Assume command of Carrier Task Force Point 2 under Task Force Commander Admiral Burnett J. Kzecky, U.S.N. . . .'

It says much for Admiral Foxe-Forsyth that not a muscle of his face moved. He read to the end before glancing at the S.C.O., who was all too well aware of the biblical precedent for slaying the messenger who brought bad tidings. The Admiral's eyes rested only for a moment upon his staff officer, then he merely nodded a brief dismissal.

'The whole coast is subject to sudden, strong gales, sometimes as much as force nine . . .' he went on.

But this time, by the subtlest fractional intonation which many years had taught him, he made this not a statement, but a submission.

According to the narrative of exercise 'Flamethrower,' Pinkland was at war with Yangland as from 0001 on the following day. Pinkland ground forces were assumed to have made a strong attack on the north of Norway: at least twenty of its submarines were known to be at sea and it had, in addition, possession of two large, well-equipped air bases.

Things, in fact, as they usually do in exercises, looked rather grim for Yangland, whose reply to Pinkland consisted in despatching two carrier groups to the north to attack air bases and give air support to ground troops. Admiral Kzecky was in command of this force and also of Carrier Task Force Point 1, which comprised an American battleship, two cruisers, three large fleet carriers, and some twenty destroyers. Carrier Task Force Point 2, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's group, was a more miscellaneous collection. Apart from the *Impenetrable* and two light carriers, it was made up of a French cruiser, a battleship, and a screen of twelve Dutch, Belgian, Norwegian and British destroyers.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was well aware of the disparity between the two groups, but, whatever private wound had been inflicted on his pride, he

outwardly showed little but a strict determination that the ships under his command should be on the top-line in every respect. Nothing but the best was to be good enough: accordingly it was without signal and at a prearranged time that his group weighed anchor at the sailing-hour. Now ensconced on the tall chair on the admiral's bridge, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth watched the winking signal lamps of the Americans and compared it to the impressive, silent precision of his own ships. He nodded grimly. At least he had suffered nothing by comparison here.

Separated by about fifty miles, the two groups steamed north under leaden skies. The sea stretched out to a far horizon, calm and featureless, like a vast steel plate. It was so still, so unruffled that it seemed utterly silent —a desert, emptied of colour except for varying shades of grey—and the hum and throb of the ships' engines seemed unbearably loud.

Soon after daylight the two groups closed to two miles and, surrounded by the destroyer screens, the ponderous capital ships headed north in company.

The weather was perfect for flying and, as dawn broke, the combat air patrols were ready to fly off. The *Impenetrable* carried three squadrons of jet-fighters and these, combined with two squadrons of piston-engined anti-submarine aircraft, made at least an adequate display of air strength to set against the dozens of aeroplanes silhouetted on the decks of the American carriers.

Earlier the Admiral had sent for the Commander Air.

'Which squadron is flying off?'

'Nine-eighty, sir.'

'What's their state?'

'They've had plenty of flying, sir. Merrihew, the C.O., is first-class, sir. I think you'll find they're on the top-line.'

The Admiral looked at the young commander.

'I don't want any "I think," about it,' he snapped. 'We shall be watched. You know the standard I expect.'

'Yes, sir,' said Commander Air.

He returned to his platform on the island lamenting more than ever over the two squadrons, only half worked-up and with aircraft that were obsolete before the last rivet had cooled. For all this, it seemed, the mistake of policy, the difficulties of the weather, the drafting of pilots, he alone had been made responsible. He had never rated his chances of promotion so low as when the cold, pale light began to drain from the night sky.

The Admiral, who had been aware of the answers to all the questions he had asked (and even of the obsolescence of the aircraft), returned to the high chair on his bridge and sat there, duffel-coated, binoculars hanging round his

neck, waiting for the squadron to take-off. He would never in a hundred years have admitted that he was entering into competition with the Americans, but this, in point of fact, he was doing.

To those unaccustomed, flying off from an aircraft carrier is an exciting performance. The *Impenetrable's* flight-deck presented an animated scene. The first two Attackers, the current jet-fighters, were ready in the port and starboard catapults: the remainder of the squadron, the shapes of the pilots in grey helmets, visible beneath the perspex covers, were waiting aft. Round them were the flight-deck personnel in coloured skull-caps, the Flight Deck Officer with his flag, and the fire parties. To fly off was routine, but some tenseness is always present at such moments.

To the second, Commander Air gave the orders from his platform.

'Stand clear of jet pipes . . . Start up.'

There was a whine of electric starters, then the first roar from the jet pipes of the Attacker. The air was full of numbing sound and the canvas straps of the nylon barrier indulged in a fluttering, fantastic dance. On the port catapult the pilot's thumb went up as the Flight Deck Officer whirled round the green flag. The flag revolved quicker and quicker; there was the thunder of full throttle; the flag went down and, in the little glass cubicle, the catapult operator obeyed. . . . All this meant that the Attacker shot forward and was airborne.

At least that was what it should have meant. In fact, something very different occurred. The catapult did indeed run forward, the wire cable duly shot into the sea—but the Attacker remained precisely where it was. At the same moment the first Banshee left the flight-deck of the *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.* two miles away on the port beam and soared into the pale sky. The Americans were away first.

There was no time to be lost. Attention was now focused on the Attacker in the starboard catapult. Once again the F.D.O. waved his green flag; once again the pilot's thumb went up. Once again came the signal for full throttle . . . at this moment a very small mechanic in a red skull-cap dashed forward, pointing. What had been frighteningly obvious to the bridge now dawned on the pilot. The tips of the Attacker's wings were still folded upwards, a position in which it is unwise to take-off unless keen on swimming.

It took but a moment or two to put this matter right, but in that time a second Banshee was off and away from the *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.* There was no avoiding the fact that with two Americans in the air before a single Attacker had left, the *Impenetrable* had, to say the least, shown up badly. The Admiral, fuming on the bridge, was also aware that the whole unfortunate performance had been witnessed from the other ships. He spoke a few terse, pointed words to the Captain, but his mood demanded blood.

‘Commander Air, He is to report to me as soon as flying off is finished.’

At that moment the signal lantern on the *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.* began to flicker. In due time the signal was brought down from the flag-deck. It was from Admiral to Admiral. It read: ‘My congratulations to Wilbur and Orville Wright. Can I loan you sand for ballast.’

So, in addition to everything else, Admiral Kzecky possessed a pawky sense of humour! Admiral Foxe-Forsyth pictured him across two miles of water in a sea-green jacket and a windjammer cap, laughing his head off at the Limeys. He folded his signal sixteen times and then tore it up. He could hardly wait for Commander Air.

The inauspicious beginning had an unfortunate effect. Of course, the Service held no excuse for either mishap, but it is, in fact, comparatively easy for a cable to become unhooked on one side, and, as for the folded wings, no one but a pilot can appreciate how the mind is apt to go blank at take-off. It was, according to the squadrons, an S.A.M.U.—or Self-Adjusting Mess Up.

‘I hate flying when there’s an Admiral on board,’ as one lieutenant said. ‘Everyone gets into a panic.”

Nor was the atmosphere confined to the squadrons. The Captain vented his spleen on the Major of Marines, the Commander on the Gunnery Officer; and, finally, the Admiral’s cook failed to produce fresh milk for breakfast. The Admiral gave him blazes. ‘One grown man,’ said the C.P.O. cook, ‘speaking to another like that!’ H.M.S. *Impenetrable* was far from a happy ship at this moment.

Outwardly, however, the impressive armada ploughed its way northwards in unruffled calm. The sea and sky were still merged into one mist of slate-grey, save when a squall darkened the water as it poured across the surface and spattered the look-outs with icy drops. There was no sun and no land. In these waters even shipping was absent. There was a sense of tension and loneliness in the air.

Various exercises as designed by the planners of ‘Flamethrower’ were carried out. There were ‘attacks’ by land-based bombers and by Pinkland submarines; on D3 a raider was reported, chased, and ‘sunk.’ It was stuff out of the copybook, and one could picture the joy of the planners at their own cleverness.

The Admiral slowly recovered his equanimity; for no further accidents (beyond an Attacker through the barrier) occurred. He made it a daily practice to speak to his staff officers in the staff office and make an appreciation of the situation as he saw it. He spoke on these occasions very

much as if thinking aloud—addressing no one and with his blue eyes focusing out of the scuttles at the force around him.

'We must yield to the Americans," he said, 'certain basic superiorities. Their aircraft carriers are not only more modern but, in some respects, more efficient than ours. This is not so much the question of design. There is also a simpler matter of practice, in that, once a contract with a shipbuilder is signed and plans approved, no further changes may be made. Our own ship is an example of the possible unwisdom of "Alterations and additions." '

The eyes roved from for'ard to starboard scuttle and then across to observe that a Belgian destroyer was not in station. The staff officers eased the strained lines on their faces which had indicated breathless interest and wholesome respect.

'By comparison,' continued the Admiral, as if aware that most of the forenoon watch lay ahead, 'our aircraft suffer far worse. It is beyond question that the Americans at this time have aircraft which are more robust, whose wings fold as they should, but which suffer little in the matter of speed. I do not need to emphasise that our own planes at the moment have nothing like their range. The Americans, therefore, will be able to attack targets some hundreds of miles more distant than ourselves. On whom are we to lay the blame for this? In its time there was no carrier-borne plane like the Swordfish. Why have we lost that lead? We can in part blame it upon the stringency of the country's economic situation; we can blame the Navy's poor representation upon the appropriate committee of the Ministry of Supply; but there is a far deeper reason than that.'

The Admiral paused and there was a silence of at least three minutes, during which the red-headed pins in the operational charts seemed almost to tremble in expectation.

'That deeper reason is what?'

The Admiral's eyes passed from face to face as if he would force in the truth of his thinking.

'Complacency,' he snapped. 'For nearly a hundred and fifty years the Royal Navy has had no competition. We have lacked a stimulus. We are still possessed of ingenuity. It was we who made the first deck landing, we who pioneered the first naval jet, an Englishman even landed the first helicopter on a naval vessel. We must see to it that, while acting as faithful allies, we nevertheless maintain the supremacy of the Royal Navy in all departments.'

He paused, stood graven for two minutes, and walked from the staff office without a further word. His staff officers sighed. They were well aware of the truth he spoke, hard as it was, but, somehow, spoken by Admiral Foxe-Forsyth the message had a sobering force.

It was almost as if this open acknowledgment healed something of the Admiral's pent-up feelings towards the Americans in general and Admiral Kzecky in particular. He seemed over the next twelve hours more relaxed, almost genial. He could even look at the fuel pipes that honeycombed the *Impenetrable* marked 'Av. Gas' and 'Av. Tur.' without inwardly shuddering for the old 'Aviation Spirit.'

Furthermore, there was more than a little element of doubt whether, in locating and 'sinking' the raider at night, the Americans had not, in fact, attacked one of their own cruisers. The Admiral touched on this in the staff office next morning:

'I, myself, would be strongly disinclined to proceed in these waters without a zigzag. However, that is merely a matter of opinion and I have no doubt that Admiral Kzecky has good reasons for supposing we should be immune from submarine attack. Last night's attack on the raider was successful. Again, in my opinion, the attack was carried out in a somewhat unorthodox manner and it would seem to me that the night action was fought with H.M.S. *Vituperant*, who, no doubt, acquitted herself well by firing at the correct target. However, that must rest until the analysis. The *Vituperant* would not be the first junior ship to be sunk by weight of gold braid.'

A poor, pale ghost of a smile flitted for a moment across the Admiral's set face. He paused in silence for another two minutes. Then, without a word, he left the office. The indications were that he was not displeased.

On the fifth day the 'Flamethrower' force approached the area, some hundred miles from the coast, from which the strike at air bases was to be made. The weather had remained flat, sky and sea a colourless monotone. By now Carrier Task Force Point 2 had assumed an individuality of its own: the black silhouettes of the ships, the positions in the screen, the flying off of combat air patrols and anti-submarine patrols had become routine. The ships plashed through the elephant-grey waters, leaving short, stunted wakes of dirty cream that were soon lost in the colourless expanse of sea. Stationed five miles away, against a curtain of grimy mist, steamed the American force, identified by the occasional flash of a signal projector like a bright golden guinea against the grey curtain.

The air strike was timed for 0925, and in the two vast, pale-green hangars of the *Impenetrable* there had been a frenzy of activity to get the aircraft ready. The Admiral had been on the bridge since first light. He stood now, as the morning watch ended, gazing at the distant horizon, the beetling eyebrows seeming to stand out more than ever. At 0815 there was an alteration of course: at the same time the long-hidden sun came out. It

poured down on the still sea and colour was suddenly flung to the sky—the sea a deep amethyst blue; bright, white clouds: the gay colours of fluttering ensigns were, for a few minutes, warm and inviting. Then, equally suddenly the sun was blotted out and the force sailed through a dead sea that had become a country of ghosts in which every sound was magnified in the stillness.

The Admiral left the bridge without a word and climbed the ladder—emerging through the double doors on the flag-deck and going forward. There he stood for some minutes before going below, where he sent for the Meteorological Officer. When he came, the Admiral tapped the Met. forecast.

'The Americans predict wind force two. You forecast wind force five, from 1400.'

'Yes, sir.'

The Admiral's eyes rested on the 'Schoolie' who was a slight man of remarkably unscholarly appearance.

'You stick to that?'

'Yes, sir. I've never been more sure of anything.'

The Admiral grunted.

'Neither have I. Only it's going to be a hurricane—and we'll have it within an hour. I am going to cancel all flying from this Group.'

It was a brave decision. Admittedly exercise 'Flamethrower' was not war, but it took courage to cease participation in the most vital phases of an exercise which had cost thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money. There was no apparent change in the weather. It looked exactly as it had done for the past five days. As the *Impenetrable's* aerials were lifted inboard and the aircraft taken below, it was as if the ship were huddling into herself against the softest of elements.

The Americans were still flying off from their carriers. With the helicopter hovering astern like a black beetle, four squadrons took off from the *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.*, and an equal number from the sister carriers, until the pallid sky seemed as if full of locusts. They gained altitude and then headed north-east towards the target.

The *Impenetrable* was silent and inactive. Time passed. Forty minutes, fifty. It might have been seemly to pity the Admiral during this vigil. Yet this was far from necessary. Some sense born of seafaring ancestors, of sharing a bridge between Jutland and Matapan with countless men of deep experience, some essence of personal wisdom acquired through contact with the weather, had guided him. The Admiral had never been more confident in his life, and his confidence gave him pride.

He had signalled the Americans in strong terms. A courteous reply had been received:

> 'I have perfect confidence in your judgment. Our appreciation shows strike possible before weather closes.'

Now, as below and between decks gear was lashed down, the *Impenetrable* was waiting. The pilots, lounging in the wardroom despondently, aware that they had 'gone off the boil' after being keyed up, grumbled among themselves. Nothing wrong with the weather, they told each other. The whole lot up top were windy. Up in the staff office the Squadron Aviation Officer took a suck at his pipe and growled:

'Hasn't come yet.'

'It had better,' said the Staff Officer Operations.

And then the weather obliged. The beginning was so gentle that it would almost have passed unnoticed had not so many eyes been straining for it. There was a flutter on the water, which was ribbed like sand where a tide had passed. Wavelets smacked against the ship's side and the first breath of wind passed along the flight-deck. The thousands of tons of the *Impenetrable's* hull gave a short brief shudder. And then, within a few minutes, they were in the teeth of it—the meter on Commander Air's platform indicating forty knots with the first gust.

'The *Pinkerton's* getting in her aerials, sir.'

Later, on the R/T could be heard the signals ordering the American squadrons to land on shore.

'Where,' as the Squadron Aviation Officer observed, 'they will be very comfortable, with no change of kit and not so much as a toothbrush until this lot blows itself out.'

The Admiral received these reports in silence. If he had any private satisfaction it was not visible.

'It is going to blow up to force eight,' was his only comment.

It was. The fleet was now transformed from calm mastery to semblance of a desperate, pitching battle with the seas. They were enveloped in a world of white, blown spume: the nearest destroyer's bows dipped into the waves almost lazily; there followed an explosion of white spray which, from the *Impenetrable*, seemed to drift lazily down her length. The waves were short, bottle-green as they curled towards the ships. Before they were finally blotted out the Americans could be seen pitching ominously, the lashed aircraft clinging like flies to slanting flight-decks.

The Admiral sat on his tall chair, watching, like a conductor with an orchestra. The weather had not let him down.

The gale, which at times swept at a hundred miles an hour down the flight-deck, lasted for three days. It put paid to several dozen Carley floats, boats, booms, and other gear. It also put paid to the planners' dreams for exercise 'Flamethrower' wherein continuous strikes would be made on the spot for refuelling—the destroyers being sent south to Norwegian ports. A scattered 'Logistic Support Group' had to be reassembled. By that time 'Flamethrower' as a set-piece exercise was doomed. The force turned back towards the Clyde.

Throughout all this Admiral Foxe-Forsyth kept his feeling of private satisfaction, of personal vindication to himself. Indeed, he masked it by venting more vituperation on his harassed staff than previously. As the ships headed for home, however, he mellowed a trifle and therein came his downfall.

One day out from the Clyde, a signal was surprisingly received from Admiral Kzecky asking the *Impenetrable* to report her state of supplies.

This was both annoying and unnecessary, but Admiral Foxe-Forsyth complied. In addition, however, he made a personal signal to Admiral Kzecky. This read:

'Your 021347. I. Kings xvii. 12.'

To make a lighthearted signal with a biblical reference at sea is common enough practice among commanding officers of the Royal Navy. The recipient replies with a reference, more barbed, or, even, more improper. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's reference made his signal read:

'Your 021347. An handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse.'

It was not wildly funny, but for him it was a step in the right direction. The American reply was therefore eagerly awaited on the flag-deck. In due time it came. It simply said, 'Roger.'

Nothing could have been more crushing than this Service acknowledgment of receipt. If Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had dressed as a clown and danced on the flight-deck before the ship's company he could have hardly looked more foolish than that 'Roger' (which said in effect, 'You are too senior for poor jokes') had made him. He was perfectly aware that the snub would be right round the fleet, would penetrate the Admiralty, and the United Service Club and, probably, stick to him for the rest of his life.

Although Admiral Kzecky had certainly sinned in ignorance, it became paramount that the position should be salved. But how? It was hardly likely that the triumph of the gale could be repeated. Yet somehow the determination was firmly lodged in the Admiral's brain.

On its return to the Clyde the 'Flamethrower' force had an unexpected honour. It was paid a surprise visit by Royalty. There was precious little time to get shipshape, but wonders were achieved with paint and metal-polish. Ships were dressed overall—the Clyde echoed with pipe, band, and salute. It was a brave occasion and it went without a hitch. When it was over both Admiral Kzecky and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had reason to be pleased. Indeed, Admiral Kzecky proposed a second visit to the *Impenetrable*.

This time no mistake was made about the helicopter. Pride forbade inquiry, but a battery of telescopes raked the *Benjamin O. Pinkerton, Jr.* for the slightest move: the Admiral was seen to emerge from the island on to the flight-deck and proper reception was waiting in good time and good order.

Admiral Kzecky was in high spirits as he shook hands with Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. The two men stood on the flight-deck for a moment, looking strangely similar, as men do who share the common bond of the sea and move upon it on their own occasions. Round them the fleet lay at anchor beneath the mantle of the Clydeside hills which have mothered ships since remembered time. It was a clear evening and still: the aircraft, the Corsairs, the Banshees, the Attackers, were silent. The only sound was that of the liberty boats throbbing to the shore.

'Won't you come down?' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

He had recovered from the pang he had felt when he had almost caught himself welcoming Admiral Kzecky with 'Happy to have you on board.' He led the way to the island, across the flight-deck.

'I have to hand it to you about that hurricane, Admiral,' said Admiral Kzecky. 'You caught me looking the wrong way. You must have quite a weather-nose.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth smiled abstractedly at the compliment. Here was praise, genuine and unstinted. The mood to wound left him. Instead he felt, somehow, that he must repay. Fate sometimes aids generous purposes. A signal was given to him as he led the way below. In his day-cabin he looked at it. It said, 'Splice the Mainbrace.'

'Make it so,' he told the Communications Officer. And he added, with a smile at Admiral Kzecky: 'Have it—er—"two-blocked." '

Then the two of them sat down to work. The trouble was, however, that each was still convinced that he and his navy was right.

2

‘How would you like a trip to Paris, Foxy?’ said the Fourth Sea Lord, helping himself to a portion of the club cheddar.

Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth stiffened instinctively. Paris, in his mind, was synonymous with sex. And after that, Frenchmen. He was not sure that he approved of either.

‘Paris?’ he said, cautiously (for he was aware now that this was the reason for the lunch). ‘What for?’

The Fourth Sea Lord glanced quickly to left and right. Reassured that his neighbour on the right was only the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, he leaned forward. All the same, he leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

‘Ever hear of a “zunk,” Foxy?’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stared. His shrewd brain ticked over all the things a ‘zunk’ could be. Ought he to have heard of it? All the same, he wasn’t going to admit ignorance to Tim, here, who had been a term below him—and not so very bright at that.

‘Umm,’ he growled.

‘I would have been most upset if you had,’ said the Fourth Sea Lord, equably. ‘ “Zunk” is more secret than the sphinx. Project 16678 with the back-room boys.’

‘What does it do?’

‘You know what it would mean if we could bend a radar wave? Well “zunk” can’t do that exactly. It . . .’ The Fourth Sea Lord’s voice sank so low and his nose came down so near to the cheddar cheese that it was all that Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth could do to hear. None the less he quickly realized that ‘zunk,’ although only a development, was important.

‘I see,’ he grunted. ‘Step in the right direction. What’s it got to do with Paris?’

‘There’s an international meeting in Paris next week. Scandinavians, French, Americans, us, everybody. Policy discussions, pooling military plans.’

The Fourth Sea Lord paused.

‘You know,’ he said.

Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth did know. He had had much experience of international co-operation. Indeed, the reason why he was now temporarily at a loose end was a reorganization of command over which there had been protracted political haggling.

Shortly he would be receiving a 'prestige command,' if all went well. In the meantime he was on indefinite leave at the red Georgian house which he owned in Suffolk. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was very proud of his home. He loved the tall elms which surrounded it and the calm cloudy pallor of the Suffolk skies. When he sniffed there was a tang of salt in the air and he enjoyed that. Angela, his wife, and his daughter Mary, had been firm and tactful in the matter of decoration. There were no port and starboard lights on each side of the front door: the suggestion for a ship's bell in the porch had been firmly quashed. Instead, there was a comfortable chintzy home which gave him much pleasure.

He thought now of the garden. Plenty to do there. A weedy herbaceous border was like a dirty ship and his family never seemed to realize that. All the same, duty was duty.

'What do you want me to do, Tim?' he said, adding: 'I'm not a political admiral.'

'This is the situation,' said the Fourth Sea Lord, lowering his voice again. ' "Zunk" is our baby along with the Ministry of Supply. Unfortunately the politicians have got hold of it: they may give it away.'

He smiled, blandly: 'I'm all for co-operation but we've got to have a lead. And a *big* lead.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth understood and approved this sentiment.

'You want me to sit near the Minister with a sledge-hammer and crack him when he opens his mouth?'

'Indeed, I would like that. But it won't be possible for you to take part. You'd go as an observer and a pretty unofficial observer at that. Keep your eyes and ears open.'

'You mean cloak and dagger stuff?'

'I don't mean anything. We'd just like you to be there. They say Paris is very beautiful in the spring—why not take your daughter along?"

That was a second startling thought. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was a devoted husband and father, but he had never considered it necessary to take his womenfolk away from their home. Reviewing this occasion he saw that his chances of going to Paris without taking either his wife or his daughter were practically nil. He sighed deeply.

'You've certainly bowled a fast one this time, Tim.'

'Not a bit, Foxy. You deserve a holiday. Wish I could go myself.' He leaned forward again. 'We've got someone over there who'll lend a hand. Woman called Stopforth. Drusilla Stopforth.'

'How much does she know about——?'

'Nothing. But she'll get your ear to the keyhole. Now about "zunk"——'

But the Fourth Sea Lord, glancing round, suddenly paused and called for his bill. Two air vice-marshals had sat at the next table. Security had diminished. The two admirals got their hats and walked together down the Duke of York's steps. Two grey-suited figures, with black homburg hats, they walked, hands clasped behind their backs, across the Mall. At the Admiralty the Fourth Sea Lord held out his hand.

'There'll be Belgians there, too,' he said, smiling. 'And Greeks.'

Poor old Foxy! It had always been difficult to avoid pulling his leg!

On the following Wednesday Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stood at the baggage counter of the Invalides air station in Paris. He would never have confessed it, but he felt considerably at a disadvantage. He could speak no French and, although his immediate problem was to get from the Invalides to his hotel, he wondered how he was going to manage at a conference with the vague and discreet mission that was his. Wholeheartedly, he wished himself back at sea with a life he understood. The only comfort was that his daughter, Mary, was not with him. She had won the toss with her mother as to who should come with the Admiral to Paris, but a necessary attendance at the Women's Institute had delayed her arrival until the following day.

'Admiral Foxe-Forsyth?'

A strong female voice interrupted his thoughts. Turning he saw a tall, slim, Nordic-looking woman dressed in a sleek black costume. She had piercing blue eyes and wore large ear-rings of imitation gold. She was very blonde. The Admiral's heart sank.

'Stopforth,' she said. 'Drusilla Stopforth. You're just in time. If we hurry we can just get to the opening of the conference.'

She practically knocked down a porter who was in the act of grasping the Admiral's two bags, took them in both her hands, whirled them round like feathers and bore them outside to a black Alfa-Romeo that was standing outside.

'Jump in,' she said.

The Admiral jumped and his neck was jerked back with the violence of the acceleration. The Alfa-Romeo shot out into the main road in front of a bus, a baby Citroën and a man on an auto-cycle and screamed away.

'I think we can make it,' said Mrs Stopforth.

They had now crossed the river and were facing the Place de la Concorde, which, surrounded by chestnut trees in blossom and bathed in sunlight, would have been peaceful and pleasant to see. The Alfa-Romeo screamed to a halt at a policeman's whistle, which released another horde of cars who advanced across its bows like a pack of mad dogs.

‘I’ve heard what you want,’ said Mrs Stopforth, eyeing the policeman for the least sign of relaxation. ‘And I think we can get it. But it may be difficult.’

The Admiral’s cautious reply was drowned in the roar of the supercharger as she raced away again, bearing down on a woman with a covey of small children who were crossing the road. Although obscurely relieved that initiative had been taken out of his hands, he was more than afraid that he was going shortly to be involved in an accident of more than usual horror. When they reached the Maison de l’Espoir, where the conference was taking place, he breathed a silent prayer of thanks.

The Maison de l’Espoir was a large, white prefabricated structure which had been erected in a hurry behind a group of statuary which was already there. It had seen successive meetings and conferences of all nations since those of the early peace. The French were always trying to pull it down because it spoiled the statuary and the fountains, but always some other new gathering stood in need of it. The building itself was now taking the matter into its own hands by quietly falling down of its own accord.

To the Admiral, unused to the sudden beauties and elegances of Paris, the Maison de l’Espoir seemed quite unearthly. This was, it must be admitted, because it was more or less totally obscured by the terraces of statues. These were of vast men and ample women representing ‘Idealisme,’ ‘Le Principe’ and many other virtues appropriate to a building where the French themselves had, time and again, exhibited nothing more than national obstinacy.

Then, too (after a hard decision by a civil servant), the fountains were playing in honour of the occasion. Great cascades rose and fell in graceful arcs, rainbows chased and pools of shadowy water fell from level to level. As he walked up towards the Maison de l’Espoir a light breeze threw a flicker of spray against the Admiral’s cheek. He was delighted. He might have been at sea again.

At sea! It was an unfortunate phrase: how much at sea he was going to be in this new environment he only realized when he got inside the building. It was packed tight with journalists and public relations officers: they were telephoning, gossiping, leaning against a large bar drinking champagne: some were worried, some bright, some listless. Mrs Stopforth carved a path through them and pushed the Admiral into a chair in the conference room, which was already half full. Here the confusion was no less—cameramen were adjusting lights and mechanics were testing the loudspeaker system.

‘Sit here,’ commanded Mrs Stopforth. ‘I’ll see what the “*on dit*” is.’

‘ “*On dit?*” ’

‘The buzzes, the rumours. I’ve heard the Greeks are going to be difficult.’

So Tim was right. There *were* Greeks. And they were going to be difficult! It came to something when a Greek could be difficult at an international conference. Mrs Stopforth had vanished. The Admiral waited in the overheated atmosphere for the proceedings to open: he had a feeling of being in wonderland.

Soon things began to happen. A row of imposing-looking men with bags under their eyes filed in miserably and occupied the seats on the rostrum. They sat behind microphones under the arc lights, fiddling with papers and chatting to each other nervously. They looked like schoolboys who had not done their homework.

One of the miserable men began to speak.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘General Major-General Sveninhanssen of Scandinavia is in the chair. He will read you a special message. After which we shall be happy to have your questions.’

General Sveninhanssen was naturally a sad-faced man. He read, tonelessly, a long message of welcome in excellent, but unmusical English. A French minister read a message in French. Both speeches expressed happiness in the present and confidence in the future. Then the questions began.

Will you be discussing Peace moves with Russia? If the Russians marched could Europe be held? What stock of atomic bombs were present in Europe? What were they going to do about Western Germany? A French journalist made a lengthy statement of policy of his own which was not a question at all.

The imposing-looking men on the rostrum looked more miserable than ever, turning to each other for facts and throwing questions they could not answer to one another. Once and again a strong man would say, ‘No, I cannot answer that.’ The Admiral was glad that it took the Englishman on the rostrum who had hitherto sat there in immaculate silence, looking down his nose to bring sense into the proceedings.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Since all the sessions are in secret, it is clearly impossible to inform you on agenda, which is also secret. In the meantime, may I remind you that it is six o’clock and you are our guests at a small reception?”

There was an ugly rush for the exit, where champagne was being served. The cameramen took their last pictures, their faces contorted with agony. The great men filed off the rostrum. It was all over.

The Admiral followed the crowd into the salon and took a glass of champagne. He was now completely bewildered for, he argued, if the

proceedings were in secret what on earth could any journalist say? Worse, how on earth could he discover whether 'zunk' was given away or not? There had been no sign of Mrs Stopforth, but now she bore down on him, carving a way through the crowd.

'Put that glass down and come into the office,' she said. 'It belongs to Bartolomeo. He's quite a poppet but doesn't know a thing. But they had to have an Italian.'

The office was luxurious: there was a huge desk and a grey fitted carpet. In one corner was a chromium coffee percolator and the walls were covered with graphs which rose and fell (but mostly fell). There were photographs of past conferences with statesmen shaking hands, slapping each other on the back, and showing wide, mirthless smiles. Bartolomeo, a florid young man with a mass of black hair, ivory-white teeth and a lavender-coloured suit rose to his feet.

'Drusilla, my humming bird, what goes on? Tell me because you know all, carissima.'

'The first meeting is on culture,' said Mrs Stopforth. 'Where's the champagne?'

Bartolomeo pointed to a bottle on the table which Mrs Stopforth whisked up and popped the cork. She handed round the glasses.

'Then,' said Bartolomeo, 'I can get on. All this has quite upset a first-class review of Mauriac I was doing for *Il Opopola*.'

He returned to his typewriter. Mrs Stopforth, having finished her glass at lightning speed, poured herself another, talking to the Admiral in a tense voice.

'I don't suppose you want culture, do you? I think everything will go forward, though the French may make difficulties. I'm working on what you want, though. I think I can get it, though the Americans will want watching. You'd like Harry Bopp, junior, I suppose? He's the head man. And Garvice Weller of our delegation? I think we can count on him.'

It was on the tip of the Admiral's tongue to say that he wanted neither. He would have liked, moreover, to have found out from Mrs Stopforth what she thought he wanted. Did she know about 'zunk'? He must go carefully or the situation would get out of hand. He was about to speak, feeling his way, when a girl in a red sweater with honey-blonde hair entered the office.

'Carol!' said Mrs Stopforth. 'The very person. I have to go to a recital of Spanish cello music in the Avenue Foch. Take my car and give the Admiral dinner.'

Carol, the blonde, turned an experienced eye on Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. She saw an elderly man with a graven face and piercing blue eyes: his herring-bone suit, so similar to the herring-bone suit of every naval officer,

was quiet and distinguished. He did not look rich but everyone had a few francs when they first arrived: the trick was to get them on the first few days. She smiled agreeably.

'I'd *love* to,' she said.

'That's most kind,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, with as much gallantry as he could command. 'But first I would like to get my gear into my hotel.'

Bartolomeo suddenly ripped the paper from his typewriter and flung a dart with amazing accuracy into one of the photographs on the wall. 'Take these flowers,' he said to Mrs Stopforth, thrusting into her hands a huge bunch of lilies of the valley. With that he left the office, singing Italian in a rich baritone.

'Don't worry,' said Carol. 'That happens six times a day. And when he's writing a poem, it's more.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's father, Sir Dudley Foxe-Forsyth, had always stayed at the St James and Albany Hotel when he came to Paris. From there he had driven for long, rich and expensive meals at Maxim's or Fouquet's in the style of a rich visiting Englishman. Times change, however, and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had been advised that he could best eke out his currency by going to a small hotel.

When he arrived (driven in the same hair-raising manner by Carol) he was taken aback at how small the hotel was. The entrance was through a small passageway into a hall that could have come out of any sordid French film: he went up to his room in a small, hesitant and trembling lift. The room was ornate. There were mirrors on the walls and candelabra hanging from the ceiling! In the centre of the room was a large brass bedstead. The Admiral noticed, however, that it was spotlessly clean and he had no complaint until, turning the tap marked 'Froid' there issued a jet of boiling hot water. That was slack and reprehensible. French, in fact. Just what you could expect from a navy which kept chickens on board their ships. He unpacked methodically, placing his hairbrushes and razor exactly as he did in his sea-cabin: he placed Southey's *Life of Nelson*, which he intended to re-read, beside the bed. He had intended to write a postcard home, but somehow he could not collect his thoughts. To-morrow would do.

The champagne had had an agreeable effect: he felt mellow as he stood at the window. Opposite him was a little square with the chestnut trees in full, fat blossom; a statue of a somewhat portly lady stood on a pedestal; on one side of the square cars rushed by, blowing their horns. The sky was building up for a vast, satin-like sunset.

'Paris,' he murmured.

There was certainly something disturbing about it. And something agreeable. He would have to get things straightened out with the forceful Mrs Stopforth to-morrow. She might very well go and put her foot in it. But to-morrow would do. In the meantime he was going out to dinner with what he could only describe as a blonde: he must tell Tim about that. He would not mention it at home: his wife would not be so much shocked, as stunned with surprise.

Carol arrived punctually. She had changed into a black frock and wore large green ear-rings. She did not look any less striking.

'You must see Paris from Sacré Coeur,' she said. 'We can eat up there. It's rather charming.'

It was a warm evening and they sat under an umbrella in the little village square. Above them rose the white cupolas of the cathedral against an azure sky: the buildings were quaint and there was much noise and movement of huge American cars.

The Admiral was not a great conversationalist, and he had had qualms about what he could find to say to a beautiful girl who was certainly twenty years his junior. He need not have worried. She was completely unconcerned as, taking the menu, she ordered lobster which (the Admiral saw) was by far the most expensive dish.

'What will you drink?' he asked.

'Oh, I think champagne,' she said. 'Do you know Paris?'

'Never been here in my life.'

'It's gay and attractive. But it doesn't look so good when you're out of work, living on 300 francs a day in a small hotel on the left bank. I've tried it.'

'What's your work here?' asked the Admiral.

She shrugged.

'I haven't the slightest idea. I'm doing something called Research now for the Americans. I don't know what it is, but it gives you lots of time for reading. You see,' she explained, 'I'm an international girl. There isn't an international organization in Paris I haven't worked for. When each of them folds up or has cuts I move to the next. They all pay awfully well. And what does it matter what you do? I've educated Persians, assessed the proportion of oil seeds deficient in Europe for 1947, I've given three million pounds to the French, created an army, and farmed out machine-gun contracts to the Belgians. I am remarkably experienced.'

The Admiral smiled. He felt at ease now. He put away finally his intention of telling her about his daughter, Mary, her aspirations and home habits. Beside a girl of this experience and virtuosity, he felt that Mary would look pretty pale.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘what you’re doing here?’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘If Drusilla’s looking after you, it might be anything. I suppose you’re a journalist?’

‘I’m an Admiral,’ said Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth, stiffly.

‘Oh,’ was all she said.

In the mellow night, beneath the orange umbrella and against the shifting pattern of American automobiles, he heard himself laughing. It was a sound of genuine mirth, foreign to his demeanour. It was pleasant to sit here talking, eating lobster and sipping champagne. He began to talk about the Navy. About his days as a snotty, about the gun-room and his first command, the old *Detriment*, which he had loved like a lady. Then there were tales of the China station, of savage Admirals striding up and down quarter-decks, of girls at Simonstown, of navigators’ errors, of parties in deep shadowy jungles where monkeys screamed. It was an epitome of naval life but, although aware that he was talking too much, the Admiral was unable to stop. He was about to tell her how he wooed and won his wife when (so many years ago!) she was the Hon. Benita ffoster in spite of the competition of ‘Bungy’ Herod. But that was too much. He called for the waiter and paid the bill.

They walked round the corner and Paris lay before them, silver and incandescent in the full moon—rows of lights, necklaces of colour, the line of the Seine. They stood in silence and watched.

‘What are you thinking?’ asked the girl.

‘Hmm. I was thinking if this was a 10-inch cruiser here I could blow the top off Notre Dame and then lay on the Eiffel Tower and blast it out of the water.’

He looked at it regretfully.

‘Pity,’ he murmured.

Perhaps it was this bellicose thought which induced the Admiral at six o’clock next morning to sit bolt upright in bed.

‘Sound off action stations!’

He gave this order in response to a sensation that he was in the middle of a fleet action. Instantly wide awake, he now identified the sound of 15-inch guns as that of the Parisian dustcarts in the square below. The subsidiary armament was the dustbins being rattled across the pavements. He tried to go to sleep again, but heard the unmistakable sound of a squadron of jet-fighters approaching. This he placed as the vacuum cleaner in the hotel entrance, but by then the first autobuses were thundering by in the road.

He sat up again and found his head was throbbing. Clearly he had eaten too much lobster. Had too much champagne, too. He must go carefully. Mary, his daughter, was arriving that evening and he must fulfil his task, in some manner, at the conference. He took up a sheet of paper and wrote:

Situation. In Paris a conference is meeting: the sessions are in secret. At one of them may be discussed:
(*a*) The existence of 'x'
(*b*) The question of international exchange of 'x'.
Objective. To discover (with discretion) if either (*a*) or (*b*) are discussed.
Means. Since the knowledge can only be gained through someone present at secret session——

The telephone rang. It was Mrs Stopforth.

'Sorry to ring you so early. I met Homer Klist last night at the recital. I managed to have a word with him during the 'cello solo. I think we can get Blopp after the session this morning. Be sure you're there at twelve.'

'I wanted——'

But Mrs Stopforth had rung off.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth seldom allowed his icy exterior to be ruffled by an expletive, but he allowed himself the luxury now. He, who above all things had 'power of command,' could quell and shrivel with a glance, was unable as much as to get in a word. Who was Homer Klist? How should he be expected to know? What did she mean by 'getting Blopp?' He really must exert himself.

He dressed, shaved and went 'below' in the lift. It was a brilliantly sunny morning: the white spikes of the chestnut trees glowed against rich green, like candles on a Christmas tree. The lilacs were almost out, and one or two copper beeches. He ordered coffee and croissant in a café, and unfolded his English paper. The news seemed remote, as remote as his own herbaceous border which (he had to admit) would make a very poor show against some of the blooms here. Time passed: he watched the traffic, observing the gendarmes who seemed to be witty, authoritarian, cynical and philosophers at the same time. The whistles blew: the pent-up traffic, released, bore down upon the pedestrians like a pack of mad dogs. Yes, it was strange. He realized, with a slight qualm, that he was not the same man who was a high-ranking naval officer in England. Some metamorphosis had taken place.

He arrived at the Maison de l'Espoir half an hour early. The parsimonious civil servant had only allowed the fountains to play for one

hour over the period of the opening: the statues were now arid and parched, with dry snouts. In the foyer the journalists, queasy and liverish, were drinking Perrier water at the bar. He looked for Mrs Stopforth, but she was nowhere to be seen. He finally tracked her down in the office of Bartolomeo, where she was smoking a cigarette with her feet on the table, talking on the telephone to someone in Madrid.

'Sit down,' she said. 'There have been developments.' Bartolomeo, the Italian, rose from his typewriter, twirled round on his toes, and shook the Admiral by the hand.

'So you are a British admiral?' he said. 'That is interesting. For us, we have the General at the head of the cavalry charge, with sabres flashing. That appeals to our national temperament. But for the British, an Admiral, cold, brave, calculating, patient—yes, one sees it, one sees it.'

He turned swiftly on his toes again and left the room, leaving the Admiral nonplussed. He tried to imagine a defaulter doing the same thing at the Captain's table on the quarterdeck. He could not, but the effort made him smile. How much of anything really mattered? Mrs Stopforth at last put down the telephone.

'Let's get out to the bar,' she said. 'Things are happening: there's nothing we can afford to miss.' Outside, she ordered champagne and bent low, speaking in a low, compressed voice: 'We can get Blopp but Hickenhopper wants him, too. Hickenhopper is close to Ed. Birkbaum, who's here for the State Department in place of Gruntz on the radio side. Now our only approach is Klist, whom I told you about—ah, there he is!'

She broke off and advanced upon a young, bald American with rimless spectacles, slapping him on the back. 'Why, Homer, old boy, old boy. How are you? Meet Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. He wants Blopp.'

The eyes flashed behind the rimless spectacles.

Homer Klist spoke: 'Blopp is a heel, a jerk, and a no-good guy. He's a careerist, a fixer, a political contortionist with one ounce of moral scruple. He represents big-business, he represents Communism, he represents Henry Blopp. I'll get him for you.'

With that Homer Klist took one of the canapés from the plate and disappeared into the crowd. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth decided that now was the time to call a halt, to get his business relationship with Mrs Stopforth upon a clear-cut footing.

'Mrs Stopforth,' he said, crisply, 'I must ask you this: What do you think I am trying to do?'

'Of course,' she said. 'You're trying to get Blopp.'

'There must be some mistake.' He groped. 'May I ask, do we both know exactly why I am here?'

Drusilla Stopforth stared.

'*I* know why you're here.'

'Ah!'

'Of course. You want to get Blopp.'

Full circle. Confound Tim pushing him off on all this cloak and dagger stuff. What was more, putting him in the clutches of this infernal woman. What did she mean by 'get Blopp'? Do the fellow in? He drew a deep breath and began again—'You were put in touch with me through the Admiralty ____'

He got no further. Mrs Stopforth grasped his arm in a grip of steel.

'Here he is! They've finished the session!'

A group of dispirited men were shuffling down the corridor outside the bar. Their shoulders were bowed, they walked as if they were chained together, their hands were dug deep in their trouser pockets. Even so, the Admiral recollected, had he seen a parade of inmates from the local looney-bin shuffling through the country roads.

'That's Harry Blopp! In the middle.'

The man, the chief United States delegate, looked sadder than the rest. His grey face was lined deeply; there were huge pouches under the yellow eyes, the flesh beneath the well-cut suit was shrunken, so that the cloth fell about his shoulders. A man with a commanding voice, who appeared to be his personal warder, spoke:

'Turn right, Mr Congress. This is where you come in.'

The sad procession disappeared into the hall where the journalists and photographers were waiting for them. Mrs Stopforth grasped the Admiral by the arm and hustled him to the doorway.

'When he comes out, grab him. We can do it in the Salle Technique. *Don't let him get away with Hickenhopper.*'

She vanished into the crowd, leaving the Admiral nonplussed. He was quite determined now *not* to get Harry Blopp: in the meantime he deemed it his duty to listen to the press conference. The dispirited men were all now seated on the rostrum with the arc lights beating down on them and the camera flash-bulbs flashing. At length Harry Blopp leaned forward and began to read a statement. It was a very dull statement: the kind that passes straight through the mind, leaving almost nothing behind. Certain phrases were already familiar to the Admiral . . . *Reaffirm basic policy . . . we want Peace but Peace with Honour . . . our military purpose . . . we cannot assume a basic policy has changed until that basic policy has become another, and second, basic policy*.

There was polite applause when he finished and the questions which followed were drowned in a flood of words which appeared to have no

meaning. The conference ended and Harry Blopp, followed by his warder, made for the door. As he passed the Admiral shrank back: only to see a tall dominating figure swoop down upon her victim and grasp him by the arm.

'Mr Blopp,' said Mrs Stopforth. 'I want you to meet Admiral Foxe-Forsyth of the Royal Navy who has a few questions for you.'

The Admiral found himself shaking the limp hand of Harry Blopp; the tired spaniel eyes met his, it seemed, with resignation.

'This way,' commanded Mrs Stopforth.

She led the way through a communicating door into what appeared to be a broadcasting studio. A microphone stood on the table and the walls were panelled with fretted wood; through a large window strange beings moved, swam and gaped, like fish in an aquarium. Harry Blopp and his warder, a large American with a moustache, entered with docility of tame dogs and sat down.

'Have you got your questions?' Mrs Stopforth asked.

The Admiral, meantime, had been thinking furiously. If all this backing and filling by Mrs Stopforth had been designed to provide an opportunity to discover from the Americans whether 'zunk' had been given them, then he must go very warily. In the first place 'zunk' could not be mentioned; in the second, a broadcasting studio, where the conservation might inadvertently be transmitted to millions, seemed hardly the most discreet place even for the most guarded approach. What should he do?

He was saved by the appearance of a small, bald Semitic-looking American with an open collar and a red tie, hanging loose. In his hand was a sheet of paper.

'Sorry, Mr Blopp, but I have this line to New York.' He sat down before the microphone, and began: 'This is Al Shine, speaking to you from Paris, France. This evening Mr Harry Blopp, chief United States delegate, forthrightly told the Europeans . . .'

Mr Blopp, the warder, the Admiral and Mrs Stopforth sank back in silence while the correspondent read the report. The Admiral, relieved at the breathing space, thought it might be a little embarrassing for Al Shine to be reading his piece in front of the man who had inspired it. More especially because Al Shine's version and Mr Blopp's hardly seemed to coincide at any point. But Al Shine was unmoved. Five minutes later when he had finished he began a long conversation into the microphone. 'Is that you, Hagen? . . . How was that? . . . Do you want a follow-up? . . . Well, ask him. . . . You what? . . . If you want a follow-up I'll give you a follow-up: if you don't want a follow-up I won't give you a follow-up. . . .'

He went on for a long time talking to Hagen in New York, in the manner of Americans, always avoiding the crucial point when he came to it. At length the warder stood up and thrust a piece of paper in front of him. The Admiral could not see but it appeared to indicate that a Very Important Member of the United States Government was present. Could Mr Shine yield place? Al Shine did yield place after a few minutes more parley. Hagen could still not let him know whether a follow-up was wanted.

'How was that, Mr Blopp?' he said. 'Did I get it something near right?'

'You did a wonderful job,' muttered Harry Blopp. 'A wonderful job.'

In the meantime the Admiral had time to make a decision about what was to be done. He had decided that, on no account was 'zunk' to be mentioned. Moreover, there was not even to be a hint that he was remotely interested in any interchange on secret equipment. This was not so much because he doubted that, even if 'zunk' had been mentioned, that Harry Blopp would have remembered: but because it suddenly became crystal-clear that this was the right course of action. Having been put in this strange position, however, he had to say something. What he said was born of the realization that he was but one of the phantoms in Harry Blopp's tortured political life. If he had been Malenkov himself, Harry Blopp would probably not have known. He said:

'Would you care to comment on the basic policy of the United States, Mr Blopp?'

The switch clicked down. The floodgates were open. Mr Blopp began to speak:

'Well, sir, the basic policy of the United States cannot cease to be a basic policy until that basic policy has become another, and second, basic policy. . . .'

It went on for quite a long time until the Admiral brought the matter rather abruptly to a close. Harry Blopp and the warder shambled out of the studio.

'That was splendid, first-class, excellent!' cried Mrs Stopforth. 'We got Blopp. Next, it's Garvice Weller! This is thrilling!'

She dashed out of the studio. The Admiral mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

Mary, the Admiral's daughter, shared with him a strong sense of duty. There can, indeed, be few young women who would postpone a holiday in Paris by one day in order to preside as Chairwoman at the Women's Institute: particularly if that involved a performance of a scene from the 'Midsummer Night's Dream.' But Mary, who resembled more her mother

than her father, being pretty and rather vague, had seen this as her duty and nothing would alter her determination.

Now, at ten o'clock on the evening of his second day in Paris, the Admiral awaited the arrival of the airline bus at the Invalides. Since his meeting with Harry Blopp that morning he had eaten well: two good meals washed down with wine, followed by coffee and cognac had left in him a sense of well-being. He saw the events at the Maison de l'Espoir in perspective: he had been set an impossible task and he no longer felt qualms about failure. He would try his best, of course, but there was no longer that nagging sense of urgency. He had lunched with an Armenian and discussed life. Now he awaited his daughter's arrival with pleasure. She deserved a treat like this. He would give her a good time. He ought to have done it more often.

Meanwhile he recollected what the Armenian had said: 'The trouble with the Americans as politicians is that they appear to expect results. Do they not know that for centuries our politicians have been wrangling, coming to agreement, making protocols, breaking them, shaking each other by the hand and stabbing each other in the back. We have had wars: we have made peace—and happily we have achieved nothing. We know that politics are based on human nature. But the Americans think there is a solution in politics, that you can get results like switching on a television set. Let us hope they go on believing it, for Paris would be a sad place without all these dollars.'

Curious, the Admiral thought. An Armenian, too! Might well have been a Greek. Gave a man something quite new to chew on.

The loudspeaker announced the arrival of the bus. Mary came up the steps and threw her arms round his neck.

'Daddy, isn't this exciting! The smell of it all—it's quite different.'

'Garlic,' said the Admiral, briefly. 'Let's get a taxi.'

They went to the hotel. Afterwards he intended to walk her up to the Champs Elysées, where they could sit in a café. Obscurely, he wanted his daughter to see how very well he knew his way about Paris. Quite easy to get on, provided you were firm. Mary was enchanted with her room and the view of the square. The Admiral left her and returned to his own room: in a few minutes the door opened and he saw Mary, aghast, in the doorway.

'Daddy, I've lost my handbag,' she whispered.

'Hmm.'

When moments of deep emotion struck him the Admiral was apt to say 'hmm.'

'Have anything in it?'

‘My passport, my air ticket, my travellers cheques, my keys and five pounds.’

The lot. For years, however, the Admiral had been imbued with the maxim, ‘Don’t sit there, *do* something.’ He rose now superbly to the occasion.

‘Back to the air station. Probably been turned in there. Not to worry.’

But at the air station it had not been turned in. The man at the information desk directed them, with a shrug of the shoulders, to the police. They took a taxi to the prefecture of the 7th Arrondissement and went inside. The Admiral was not well acquainted with English police stations, but this one struck him as very unorthodox. There were two long desks, arranged like an L, and the square in front was full of gendarmes in peak caps, laughing, chatting and smoking. The Admiral clove a way through them to the desk.

‘My daughter has lost her handbag.’

A weary-looking officer looked up from the newspaper.

‘Pardon, m’sieu?’

‘My daughter has lost her handbag,’ repeated the Admiral.

English, however, is not a language greatly spoken and understood by the French police. The subsequent battle for comprehension was exhausting —not only because the Admiral’s French was distinctly of the schoolroom variety but because, intrigued, most of the fifteen gendarmes who had been standing about joined in. At length, tortuously, with gestures and monosyllables, the facts were established. The handbag had been lost. The handbag belonged to the lady. Was she his wife? ‘She is my daughter,’ said the Admiral—adding, as an extra touch *par hasard* at which all the gendarmes joined in a hearty laugh. The facts having been established, the next debate touched on the probable return of the bag. This was carried on exclusively by the policemen who appeared to entertain a low opinion of human nature. Mary by this time was in tears and the Admiral desperate. All the policemen were shaking their heads and saying that there was no chance at all of ever seeing the bag, especially if there were any *liquides* in it. The Chef de Poste arrived. When told the facts he lifted both arms and dropped them helplessly to his well-covered flanks.

‘Une declaration de perte,’ he said. ‘C’est tout——’

At this moment there was a confusion among the debating gendarmes and a tall, commanding figure thrust through to the Admiral’s side. It was Mrs Stopforth. It was curious, but the Admiral had never been more pleased to see anyone in his life.

‘What goes on?’ she said. ‘I’ve tracked you from the hotel.’

‘My daughter’s lost her handbag.’

‘Where? In the taxi, I expect. Don’t worry. We’ll get it back. Don’t worry with these——’

She indicated the policemen, addressed the Chef in a torrent of rapid French and hustled them out to the pavement, where the black Alfa-Romeo was waiting. Once again she let in the clutch and in a few moments they were back at the air station: Mrs Stopforth jumped out and approached the first driver. A rapid parley took place, a note was exchanged and Mrs Stopforth returned.

‘That will be all right,’ she said.

‘What did you do?’ enquired the Admiral.

‘Nothing. I said that the bag belonged to an exquisitely pretty girl who was desolated with grief. I told him there would be a reward. (A mille will do.) The word will get around. A combination of chivalry and cupidity is always irresistible to the French.’

‘I do thank you!’ cried Mary.

‘Nothing to it. Now what are you going to be doing while your father’s working? You’ll need a young man—I’ll send one round to meet you. About twelve to-morrow. Here’s your hotel.’

She left them at the door and roared off into the night. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth and Mary retired to their rooms: in an hour the telephone rang to say that a taxi-driver was waiting below with a handbag. The handbag was intact. Mrs Stopforth—the Admiral decided—was a very remarkable woman. Southey’s *Life of Nelson* remained unopened by his bed.

It says much for the potency of Paris that on his third morning Admiral Foxe-Forsyth ceased to find the atmosphere and events of the conference incongruous. It was a kind of dream, of course, but a pleasant one; and the background was painted in rich colours. The purple polonia trees in the park; the views across to the left bank which changed shade hourly; the shifting pattern of speeding motor cars; the soft cloudland reflected in the Seine. Never the less a whole lifetime of duty and companionship with the broad seas could not be dissolved in a moment: he was still resolved to attempt his mission and to complete it successfully.

This time he was determined to thrash the matter out with Mrs Stopforth, not allowing her to get away until he had been able to utter a few words. At the Maison de l’Espoir he was not long in finding her: she was at the bar drinking champagne with Bartolomeo.

‘I would like a word in private,’ he said. ‘Where shall it be?’

Mrs Stopforth looked, rather furtively, over her shoulder. When at the conference she was always doing that. She bent forward and lowered her voice.

‘At the Exhibition of Modern Art. Twenty minutes from now. There is news.’

The Admiral took the hint and withdrew. Seventeen minutes later he was paying his entrance fee at the exhibition. He stepped into the hall and shuddered at the monstrous figures, elongated and grotesque, which surrounded him. What could anyone see in them? Ought to be burned, not stuffed in a museum. Soon Mrs Stopforth arrived. She shook him by the hand.

‘How nice to see you!’ she exclaimed. ‘Did you get the handbag back?’

‘Yes. It was most kind of you. Mary is really very grateful.’

‘I hope she’ll be just as grateful for Maurice. He’s a nice boy and I’m sure he will look after her,’ said Mrs Stopforth. ‘We’ll walk round the pictures. It looks less suspicious. I think Garvice Weller is going to be all right. The British delegation are always a bit sticky, but Padstow, the Foreign Office man, is coming round to my view.’

The Admiral had a vivid impression of another terrible twenty minutes in a radio studio with the Rt. Hon. Garvice Weller. He spoke forcefully.

‘Will you please understand that I do not want to speak to Garvice Weller nor, indeed, to anybody else. My visit here must be as unostentatious as possible.’

‘But I was told you wanted to know what was going on?’

‘I do, but in respect of only one thing. It’s a—a secret device whose details might be divulged by one of our people.’

‘Then, my dear man, the only person who can tell you is Garvice Weller—the man we’re going to see.’

The Admiral said rather stiffly: ‘As a serving naval officer I can hardly ask a Minister for details of what he says in secret session.’

‘That’s all right,’ said Mrs Stopforth. ‘He thinks you’re a journalist. A journalist can ask anything.’

‘I?’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘A journalist?’

‘If you want to get what you’re after it’s the only way.’

Mrs Stopforth paused opposite a picture of a lettuce. ‘What a lovely Vuillard!’ she exclaimed. ‘I so much prefer him to Dufy and Bonnard. Don’t you?’

‘The only pictures I like,’ said the Admiral, flatly, ‘are ships. Ships at sea. It’ll probably mean a court martial, but I had better see Weller.’

The British delegation at the Maison de l’Espoir had been marked by its aspect of calm and ineffable superiority. Whereas the Americans, with Harry Blopp shepherded by a huge detective, seemed doomed men: the French went about whispering intrigues and the Scandinavians yearned for their forests, the British delegation walked with calm eyes through the corridors.

They were the eyes of men who had just been given five million dollars and know they are worth every cent of it.

They sat now on the rostrum, with the Rt. Hon. Garvice Weller in the centre, looking down their noses. Two Foreign Office secretaries with horn-rimmed glasses sat beside them, looking disapproving. In fact, there was a strong impression that they found the whole sordid mechanics of a press conference unsavoury and distasteful.

The Admiral had been stationed by Mrs Stopforth near the door at the foot of the rostrum. He happened, therefore, to be between Padstow, the delegation's public relations man and what he termed the AK line on the rostrum. He did not feel happy but his mind was made up and there was some relief in that. He would question Garvice Weller in as direct terms as he could, as soon as the conference was over.

At that moment Padstow leaned forward with a piece of paper.

'Will you pass it up?' he whispered.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth could not help glancing at the message. It read: 'You are requested for a personal interview after. Shall I discourage them?' The Admiral passed the paper up and in due time it came back. On it, had been added: 'Discourage them.' He passed the paper on to Padstow but a new and fierce determination, akin to his conduct in naval war operations had gripped him.

Garvice Weller should talk to him.

There was no need for Drusilla Stopforth when the conference ended. Garvice Weller, holding his papers and delighted that it was all over, found himself approached by a stocky man with bright blue eyes and a suspicion of sidewhisker who planted himself in his path.

'We will have our interview in here,' he said firmly. With this, to Mrs Stopforth's amazement, he led the way into the empty studio. The three of them sat round the table.

'Well?' said Garvice Weller, meekly. 'What can I tell you?'

The Admiral came to the point at once.

'Has there been any interchange of technical information during the course of this conference?'

'Everything is technical,' said Garvice Weller, who was not a politician for nothing.

'I mean technical and scientific information as applied to weapons of war?'

Before Garvice Weller had time to reply Mrs Stopforth chimed in: 'Something like the "zunk," for example.'

The Admiral was dumbfounded. The word 'zunk' had never passed his lips. How could Mrs Stopforth have known?

‘ “Zunk” is highly secret and must not be referred to,’ he said severely.

‘I’m sorry. There was an article about it in the French press about three weeks ago, but if it’s secret——’

Garvice Weller smiled suavely.

‘I think I can set your minds at rest. Neither I nor—I am sure—any of my colleagues have ever heard the word before. We, therefore, could hardly have discussed it. Now, if you will forgive me, I am due at the Quai d’Orsay for luncheon.’

With a slight bow he left the studio. In a few moments Admiral Foxe-Forsyth followed, with set face. As the door closed behind him, however, there was a curious suppressed sound. It was not a sound anyone heard often. It was Admiral Foxe-Forsyth laughing. And, as he stood there, grinning, a hand gripped his arm.

‘You old son of a gun,’ said Admiral Kzecky. ‘What are you doing in Paris?’

The two Admirals, rather like guilty children, picked their way out of the Maison de l’Espoir and sat down in a café in the Place du Trocadero. Admiral Kzecky, his rank hidden beneath a service raincoat, his cap stowed beneath the chair, ordered champagne.

‘I certainly need it,’ he said. ‘I flew into Orly at 0700. At 1000 I was giving a press conference at the Crillon. Boy, was it sticky!’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth pricked his ears. A press conference in Paris could only mean one thing. Admiral Kzecky must have been appointed to the southern command in the European defence structure. Well, there could be worse appointments. He was a man of energy and determination, with plenty of ideas. Just the kind to get things going from scratch. Besides, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had a soft spot for Kzecky.

‘You’ve been appointed to the south?’ he said. ‘My congratulations.’

‘Yeah. Quite a responsibility, but I have some ideas for down there.’

He brooded.

‘Do you know what some man asked me at the conference? “Have you been to the Folies Bergère, Admiral?” he said. People have got gall asking questions like that.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stifled a guilty feeling that he, himself, had been guilty of asking questions lately.

‘What did you reply?’

‘I replied, “Paris has not changed, but *I* have.” Have you ever been to the Folies?’

‘No, indeed.’

Admiral Kzecky raised his glass. ‘I wonder what they’re like?’ he said.

Around them the traffic swirled and hooted. The sunshine sparkled. The air was warm and agreeable. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth ordered more champagne.

'You will have to alter your views on aircraft carriers when you get down to the Med.,' he said. 'It is a lake, you know, not a sea.'

'I don't see that makes any difference.'

'We found it so in the last war. I was in *Imperious* and we had a pretty hot time.'

'Oh, sure. You British only had one carrier and no planes.'

Admiral Kzecky spoke with hearty confidence, for which Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was aware of the reason. It was, perhaps, easy to be confident when one had inherited the United States Sixth Fleet. Forty ships, large cruisers and big fleet carriers bristling with aircraft.

'Still sticking to your theories?' he said.

Admiral Kzecky shook his head.

'They are not *my* theories. They are the theories of the United States Navy emergent from, and directly related to, our Pacific experience in World War Two. As you know, we see the role of the large aircraft carrier as being that of a mobile airfield from which local air superiority can be gained or offensive bombing operations against the enemy can be mounted.'

'Exactly. That was how they were to be used in "Flamethrower," and it is my estimate that you would have lost to enemy air at least two of your carrier force on that occasion.'

Admiral Kzecky looked across the table at his opposite number, fingering the stem of his glass.

'That's possible,' he said. 'What of it?'

'You mean that you look upon a fleet carrier as *expendable*——?'

A tall girl with long eyelashes and flashing nylon stockings passed with, beside her, a poodle in white bootees. She might as well have been invisible to the two admirals. Paris and the champagne had loosened their tongues. They were able to talk with an informality that had been impossible on board each other's ship. After an hour they moved in to lunch which they washed down with a burgundy. Their discussion switched, imperceptibly, to the broader realms of life.

'You know what?' said Kzecky. 'Duty is duty, but why don't you and me relax a little to-night? Why don't we take tickets for that show at the Folies?'

'Hmm.'

The Folies? Well, it was a theatre. One of the attractions of the city. And he had never been. Moreover he knew that Mary was going out with Maurice that evening and he would otherwise be alone.

‘Very well,’ he cried. ‘Excellent idea.’

Admiral Kzecky paid the bill and rose.

‘I have to go out to SHAPE this afternoon in the line of duty. I’ll meet you at the Crillon bar at seven.’

He added, over his shoulder: ‘Get the tickets, will you?’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth paced up and down outside the agency in the Avenue de l’Opera. He was in an abnormally indecisive frame of mind. It was not so much that he had never booked theatre seats in Paris before, but a much more chilling inhibition which prevented him going through the doors. The fact was that he, an Admiral of the Royal Navy, was faced with making a humiliating request of an assistant for two stalls at the ‘Folies Bergère.’ Even the fact that boards outside the agency announced excursions to ‘Paris la Nuit’ did not encourage him. He did not like his task.

‘Fool! Fool!’ he said to himself. ‘Old enough to know better. Might be seen by anyone.’

With this he pushed inside. The agency was empty. He went up firmly to the counter and waited. Then, horror of horrors, a girl came up to him from behind the grille. She was pretty and young. How could he ask her for two tickets at the Folies?

‘M’sieu?’ she asked, with a smile.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stumbled.

‘I want tickets for a theatre,’ he said.

‘Oui, m’sieu.’

Try as he might he could not get the fatal words out. His face grew red and he was aware that a quarterdeck expression had settled itself on his face. The girl attempted to help.

‘A comedy?’ she said. ‘Or something more serious. There is an English production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”.’

‘No, no,’ said the Admiral, shuddering.

‘There is “Le Carnaval des Trente Toréadors,” by Poussin. That is having a very big success at this moment.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘It is an examination of virtue and lust, m’sieu. There is, of course, “Phèdre” at the Comedie Française.’

‘ “Phèdre,” eh? That sounded better, almost safe. It was his plan to employ these evasive tactics for a while until, finally, he could bring the subject round to his objective. In any case, he might do worse than ‘Phèdre.’ A musical comedy, probably, like the ‘Maid of the Mountains.’

‘That sounds all right. Have you any other suggestions? How about—er—music halls?’

Even as he spoke Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was aware that the door had opened. A youth of some sixteen years, obviously British, took his place behind him. Curses! How could he ask for the Folies now? Even as this thought crossed his mind the girl behind the grille said:

'Music halls, m'sieu? There is the Casino and, of course, you have always the "Folies Bergère?" '

'No, thank you.' His tone was slightly outraged. 'What was that other thing? "Phèdre?" That will do.'

'Ah, yes, M'sieu. It is classical.'

Two seats, and Kzecky would have to lump it. There were bound to be some girls in it and, even if they were not showing their—er—well, it would not do either of them any harm to see a rattling good musical comedy with some spanking tunes. Healthier. Much. He took the tickets and paid for them. As he stood aside to stow the envelope in his wallet, however, the youth of sixteen stepped firmly into his place.

'I want two seats for the "Folies Bèrgere" to-night,' he said.

' "Phèdre?" ' said Admiral Kzecky, doubtfully. 'Is that burlesque?'

'Musical comedy, I believe,' replied Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, uneasily.

'A nude show?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth shuddered. They were sitting at one of those curious communal tables near the inside entrance of the 'Café de la Paix' and every word they spoke could, it seemed, be heard by about twenty people. Admiral Kzecky had changed out of his uniform. His tall, stringy figure was now clothed in a suit of light sea-blue serge which, together with a Sachs tie, completely changed his identity. He was at once indistinguishable from a thousand other Americans in Paris, lacking only a camera round his neck. He had, moreover, a look in his eyes which, although it meant nothing to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, could easily be identified by the experienced as that of a 'visiting fireman.'

Admiral Kzecky laughed.

'Am I going to enjoy this evening?' he said. 'Let's have ourselves two more highballs. I want to get myself in the mood for the show.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was an abstemious man but long service in the navy had made him equal to occasions like this. He drank neck and neck with Kzecky and, with time, his fears about 'Phèdre' vanished. In this sort of holiday mood, he decided, they were both bound to enjoy it.

Punctually at a quarter to nine their taxi stopped at the end of the short drive to the Comédie Française. Admiral Kzecky stared at the collonades with some disquiet.

'This doesn't look like a burlesque show to me,' he said.

They took their seats in the ‘corbeilles.’ Already a mood of doom was beginning to take possession of Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. Even amid the unfamiliarity of his surroundings there was something that told him that ‘Phèdre’ was not going to be like the ‘Maid of the Mountains.’ Or ‘Miss Hook of Holland,’ either.

At length the curtain rose to discover Hippolyte:

Le dessein en est pris: je pars, cher Théramène,
Et quitte le séjour de l’aimable Tréznèe.
Dans le doute mortel ou je suis agité,
Je commence à rougir de man oisiveté.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth hardly dared look at Admiral Kzecky. The lack of an orchestra was now fully explained. No play in any language which began like that, with a determined air of suffering and drama, was going to be interrupted by a bevy of naked chorus girls. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth waited ten minutes before he forced himself to look at his companion. He looked at Admiral Kzecky’s face and saw it to be graven with suffering.

At the first interval they walked out to the foyer in silence, as if stunned.

‘Can we get a drink around here?’ asked Admiral Kzecky, brokenly.

They went outside and seated themselves at a bar. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth ordered the drinks, and when they arrived Kzecky drank his in one gulp. What was he going to say? Then Admiral Foxe-Forsyth saw that he was laughing. Although little sound emerged, Admiral Kzecky was shaking with laughter deep down inside himself and he was looking at Admiral Foxe-Forsyth with admiration.

‘ “Phèdre,” eh?’ he said. ‘You certainly fixed me good there, you old son of a gun. That’s the trouble with the British. You never know. I’d have laid a hundred dollars that only an American could have thought that up on me.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth absorbed the compliment with relief. Kzecky hailed the waiter.

‘Garçon, two more large dry.’ He added: ‘After those, we’ll go and find ourselves some girls.’

It was a splendid warm evening. The taxi struck upwards from the warm pink neon lights of the boulevards, met comparative darkness again and, groaning a little, plunged into the lake of glittering colour and noise which was the district known to Admiral Kzecky as ‘Pig-Alley.’ The taxi stopped outside a cabaret from the entrance of which bounded a huge Bedouin intent that they should not get away. There was no need. Admiral Kzecky was a willing victim and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth knew his duty. They entered: they

paid at the cloakroom, they paid the old lady in the toilet, they paid five thousand francs each to enter the room and sit down at a table, upon which a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket was dropped with a dull clunk.

'This is life!' exclaimed Admiral Kzecky, rubbing his hands. 'This is the first time I've relaxed since 1941. Why, I even gave up spirits for the duration of World War Two.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth nodded sympathetically. It may have been the drink they had taken but he felt a warm glow of comradeship for Admiral Kzecky. The brotherhood of the sea that unites men whose lives were upon the broad waters! Felicitous! Very felicitous! He no longer felt ill at ease or conspicuous. It seemed perfectly natural to be sitting in a cabaret waiting a nude floor-show with a rackety dance-band deafening him.

'You know something?' said Kzecky confidentially. 'You know something, Strang?'

'No.'

'Back home I play the sax.'

The sax! Presumably the saxophone! Admiral Foxe-Forsyth knew, then, the anguish of a confessional at which some great crime is told. An admiral who played the saxophone, nay boasted about it! Admiral Foxe-Forsyth doubted if there were one member of the Board of Admiralty who had that accomplishment.

'Indeed?' he said, coldly.

'Yeah. I was pretty good, too.'

The situation needed all Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's charity. Even so, he was on the point of indicating some disapproval when a girl sat down at their table. She was heavily made-up and rather stout.

' 'Allo, boys,' she said. 'Can I have a glass of your champagne?'

A glass appeared before either of the admirals could speak and the waiter poured the champagne into it. Here was a tactical situation which Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had not previously encountered. Nor, it seemed, had Kzecky. They all sat without speaking.

'You like to dance?' said the girl, after what seemed two hours.

'No, thank you.'

'If you like I call over my friend?'

'No, no.'

They resumed their silence again until finally Admiral Foxe-Forsyth felt that it simply had to be broken. He leaned across the table.

'Burnett,' he said, earnestly. 'You were very interesting about carriers this morning. Do you really *mean* that you regard them as expendable?'

'I certainly do. So is a battleship, come to that.'

A battleship expendable! Gods! All was forgotten.

‘In what circumstances?’

‘Europe,’ said Admiral Kzecky, ‘is a pen-in-su-la.’

‘A pen-in-su-la,’ he added, ‘is vulnerable to naval power on three sides. I should obviously employ my carrier force against a land threat to the southern flank. If it delayed the advance for one week before being sunk, the carriers would have paid for themselves.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth could not believe his ears. A large period of his naval career had been spent in the Mediterranean, both in peace and war. He knew the limitations of operations in those waters and could not conceive of such recklessness.

‘Against modern land-based aircraft you would be sunk at once. Why, even Malta is more vulnerable than ever to air attack.’

‘If my carrier force was present, there would *be* no enemy land air bases.’

‘And you could not agree that such an operation would be better carried out by your own land-based aircraft?’

‘They’d be there, too,’ said Admiral Kzecky. ‘We pitch *everything* in.’

‘You sure you do not like for me to call over my friend?’ said the girl, yawning.

Neither admiral replied. They were too intent. They had had not a little to drink and this gave colour and some perceptible heat to their propositions. The dissimilarities with which they had each been faced in ‘Flamethrower’ came to the surface again.

‘The Russians,’ observed Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, with that off-handedness which Americans rightly find so difficult to bear, ‘have a crack and highly trained naval air force.’

‘So,’ said Admiral Kzecky, ‘have we Americans.’

He added: ‘We have the biggest and the finest navy in the world. Our carrier forces have the finest planes and the best-trained personnel.’

‘The British——’

Admiral Kzecky laughed.

‘The British navy do not know how to operate carriers.’

At that moment there was a roll of drums and a bevy of bare-bosomed young ladies dashed on the dance floor singing in high-pitched sopranos. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth neither saw nor heard. The world had gone black. He had actually heard it said! *The British navy do not know how to operate carriers.*

He leaned forward, trembling slightly, but with his voice under control.

‘Did I understand you to say that the Royal Navy do not know how to operate carriers?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘I had always understood that we were the pioneers of the aircraft carrier?’

‘Sure. George Stephenson built the “Rocket” but it wouldn’t pull the “Twentieth Century Limited.” Why, we were experimenting in the operation of two divisions of carriers back in 1939. We fought an aircraft carrier war in the Pacific. We fought the battle of the Coral Sea——’

‘A Pacific Jutland.’

‘We turned them back, didn’t we? And we thrashed the guts out of them at Midway.’

Admiral Kzecky was thumping the table and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, his face red, was looking at him with steely hostility. The show going on, unseen before their eyes, wove an unreal, fantastic background. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth opened his mouth to speak but judgment came to his rescue and he closed it again.

‘Will you have another bottle of champagne?’ began the girl.

‘No, thank you,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, shortly. ‘It’s twelve o’clock. Time I turned in.’

‘Me, too, for hitting the sack,’ said Kzecky.

They paid the bill and walked outside in silence. The food and drink of Paris which overheats the passions had overtaken them. Each was inwardly and furiously angry about something they could not define. As they stood on the pavement in Pigalle they might have been divided by the breadth of the Atlantic. And each knew that such emotions could not be. In this moment a girl sidled up to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth and murmured some words. He shook his head violently. She shrugged and handed him a card before passing on. Involuntarily he looked at it, as he did so he suddenly dissolved in helpless laughter.

‘What’s funny?’ growled Kzecky.

Comsumed with laughter, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth handed over the card and in the neon-light Admiral Kzecky read the inscription. It said:

‘SYLVIA’

Particular attention paid to elderly gentlemen.

Pigalle is used to most things, but probably never before had it seen two senior admirals sitting on the curb convulsed with hysterical laughter. The situation had been saved.

The conference at the Maison de l’Espoir broke up next day and the last nail in its coffin was sealed by a statement recording progress, strength,

cordiality, goodwill and closer bonds which had been knit. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth considered his mission accomplished and did not attend. He had other matters on his mind, for his daughter Mary had returned to the hotel later than he: in fact, at three-thirty in the morning. It was noon before she met him downstairs.

'Daddy,' she said, 'I'd like some champagne.'

Why not? He was not feeling too good himself.

'Very well, my dear. The Ritz bar——'

A decision at which his father's ghost nodded approval. They drove to the Ritz in a taxi and ordered the champagne. Mary's eyes were sparkling.

'It was such a lovely day,' she exclaimed. 'Maurice is French and frightfully charming and sweet. He took me to Versailles—and the Bois de Boulogne was looking quite heavenly with all the blossom.'

'And what kept you up so late?'

'We went to a night-club. Would you believe it, Daddy, a Creole woman who weighed at least fifteen stone danced with me.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth winced. His daughter dancing with a Creole woman! Black. In a night-club. Oh, well, it was Paris.

'I don't know whether I should tell your mother that," he said.

'There was a girl called Carol,' said Mary. 'She said she'd had dinner with you.'

'Mmm.'

'She said you were an "old sweetie." I shouldn't tell Mother that either.'

Once again the two Admirals in the club dining-room had reached the stage of cheddar cheese but, quite exceptionally, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had called for port.

'I'm relieved at your news,' said the Fourth Sea Lord, raising his glass. 'You seem to have had quite a job. Hope it was enjoyable in spots?'

'Hmm, yes. Curious place.'

'How were our allies, the Americans?'

'The Americans?' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'The trouble with the Americans in politics is that they appear to expect results. Do they not know that for centuries our politicians have been wrangling, coming to agreement, making protocols, breaking them, shaking each other by the hand and stabbing each other in the back? We have had wars: we have made peace—but happily we have achieved nothing . . .'

As he went on the Fourth Sea Lord glanced at him humorously. Who would have expected old Foxy ever to talk like that? It was what came from mixing in politics. The gift of the gab.

‘After all,” concluded Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, ‘what can you do with a nation that regards an *aircraft carrier* as *expendable*? Hopeless!’

It was half-past two. The two of them went out together.

‘By the way,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, as they walked down the Duke of York’s steps, ‘if you want to recommend a Dame of the British Empire, I have a candidate. The name is Stopforth. Or put her in command at Whale Island.’

He added: ‘An admiral in Paris, all in all, is like an admiral on horseback. In the wrong place. Much better at sea.’

PART TWO
1941

★

Mid-Career

3

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had swum into the sea of international co-operation with one dubious advantage. He had never consciously given a single second's thought to the American people, their great continent, the United States constitution or the impact of climate upon the American national character. Like many Englishmen he regarded himself as being benevolent towards Americans and would have been shocked to discover that this was not in fact entirely so.

But although Admiral Foxe-Forsyth could be regarded as uneducated about Americans, events in his life had undoubtedly coloured his attitude to them. Indeed, when at meetings he found himself unendurably ruffled by the uncompromising attitude of some grizzled Fleet Admiral, he forced himself to think back to the time that he himself had been in the United States.

It was in the late summer of 1941 that, as yet unknowing of promotion ahead, he had sat writing letters on the verandah of a house in East Virginia. The house was quiet, for Eugenia Dunn had taken her two children, Garland Grant Dunn and Dixon Smith Dunn, for a picnic on the beach: George Dunn, her husband, was at the office. Commander Foxe-Forsyth relished the peaceful sounds of the house that came through the mosquito-netted door. He had just completed his 'despatches' to Mary, his thirteen-year-old daughter and his wife, Angela. In his clear, firm hand he had told them what he was able to tell of his news—that he was still 'standing by' his ship at Norfolk, that the bathing was excellent at Virginia Beach, that there was a British cannon-ball embedded in the Church. He was very fit, and was now spending a few quiet days with the Dunns who had kindly offered their hospitality to a war-worn British naval officer.

The envelopes sealed, he commenced to write on the pad some thoughts he had on the adaptation of radio-direction-finding in gunnery and in aircraft. After ten minutes, however, he put down the pen, clasped his hands behind his head, and began to think—and his first thought was a dread that the next car that turned the corner of the sleepy road of wooden houses would contain Eugenia and her children.

This was uncharitable to his hostess but, in the light of events that had followed his arrival, it was not surprising.

Eugenia and George Dunn had met him in their automobile at the Norfolk end of the Portsmouth ferry. Eugenia was a large cheerful woman—plump, with flaxen locks and plucked eyebrows. George, her husband, was

bald and aggressive. He was dressed in a brown linen suit which almost exactly matched his complexion.

'Step inside, Commander,' he said, looking up from the vast white wheel of the Dodge. 'It's fine to see you, boy.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth tried to enter through the rear door. Eugenia stopped him, commanding him to sit beside her in front. They rolled smoothly away, the radio playing.

'It really is——' began Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'Don't talk about it!' interrupted Eugenia. 'None of you poor boys should talk about the war! We want you to *forget*.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth, who had merely been going to remark upon their kindness, was nonplussed. The last thing in the world he wished to discuss was his ship's vivid and damaging experiences with the Luftwaffe in the Mediterranean.

'What's your name, boy?' growled George.

'Foxe-Forsyth.'

'Your Christian name. What do we *call* you?'

'My Christian name is—er Strangways.'

'Strangways!' cried Eugenia. 'That's a cute name! I never heard that before. Would you like a bourbon?'

'What is that?'

'Whisky. Bourbon whisky. I can fix you one now or can you wait until we get home?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth turned his very blue eyes upon her. He was about to say that he would wait, but he never had the chance.

'Those blue eyes!' cried Eugenia. 'They make my heart melt like butter. And that wonderful fresh complexion! And those long eyelashes! Remind me to strangle your wife, Commander!'

'I——'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth wondered what some of his watchkeepers on board the *Imperious* would say if they could hear him addressed in this fashion. As the automobile, filled with song from the radio, traversed the streets, he began to feel that his visit might be destined to be embarrassing. He had, after all, come for a rest from the discomfort of a ship in dry-dock and, within a few moments, he was submerged by Eugenia's talk. She was a nice woman, but she talked. She talked all the way home until the words lost pattern, formed a mist and finally began to bore into his head.

Worse was in store when they drew up at the Dunn residence. They walked up the pathway between the green strips of lawn and into the lounge hall. At the top of the stairs were two shapes, squatting like birds of prey. Children. They had pale faces and sandy hair: green bush-shirts hung

outside their trousers. They peered down at Commander Foxe-Forsyth silently and with great disfavour.

'Hi, kids!' yelled Eugenia. 'Come on down and say hullo to the Commander.'

The children shook their heads. One was ten, the younger eight. They sat and looked down.

'Garland Grant, Dixon Smith,' yelled George, passing into the kitchen in search of ice. 'Do as your mother says.'

He obviously expected no result from this command and he was right. The children did not move. Eugenia threw open a window and drew the curtains, so that the evening sunlight poured into the hall.

'Of course the children treat me just like a sister. Why, only the other day Garland Grant said it was a pity I'd had him so young, that's why he's weakly and suffers from stomach cramps.' She broke off and bellowed up the stairs. 'Garland Grant, will you mind lending me your radio?'

Garland Grant spoke.

'I will not,' he said. 'You'll break it. You broke my alarm clock. You never paid me nothing.'

'I did so too pay you.'

'You did *not* so too pay me.'

The dialogue was interrupted by George's voice booming through the door from the neighbourhood of the ice-box. 'Garland Grant, don't you talk to your mother like that. Don't you dare.'

'It's a pity he won't let me have it,' Eugenia explained to Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'It's the only one with a victrola attachment for records and I have the most wonderful rumba. Do you rumba, Commander?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth thrust back a vision of himself being forced to do the rumba. He was not a dancer. He now saw himself in danger of having to roll the carpet back immediately, but fortunately George came back with a tray of drinks. There were bottles of whisky and rum and gin: there was mint and ice and coca-cola.

'It's fine to see you, Strangways,' he said, briskly. 'Take your coat off. Take off your tie. Scotch, bourbon or a cubalebra?'

'A small scotch, please.'

George half-filled the tumbler with whisky, added ice and water, then handed it across. Commander Foxe-Forsyth took one sip and coughed. He felt himself in a kind of dream. Rolling back carpets, taking off his clothes, listening to radio in the car—and he hadn't known them half an hour! He wished he could have a moment or two alone to find his bearings. This was all too much for him. But there was no hope. George slapped him cordially on the shoulder: 'We love the British down here in Virginia. We are proud to

have you with us at a time like this. The British and American peoples will have to put the world right together. Mind you, it's a pity the British are so goddam snooty——'

'I'll give you a quarter,' yelled Eugenia up the stairs. 'Will you lend me the radio for a quarter?'

'Shut up. Pipe down,' yelled George. 'We love the British down here in Virginia, Commander, and we-all admire England. England is a great country, which has instituted an order of decency all over the world——'

But just then the telephone started ringing. This set the dog howling.

'Isn't he cute?' said Eugenia, struggling to the telephone. 'Pooley always howls at the telephone.'

'If you don't mind,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, 'I'll go up and wash.'

The guest-room was small and neat. Eugenia had obviously taken great care to make it comfortable. By the twin beds was a set of books by Freud, Schopenhauer and a Digest of Kant; the towel beneath the basin was marked 'Guest' in red stitching; there was a print of El Greco over the mantelshelf and a motto which said 'Swete Be Thy Slepe, My Guest' in lavender-coloured letters.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth was not critical. After nearly eighteen months between steel bulkheads a bedroom with cretonne curtains and open windows seemed an extravagant luxury. For the first time he had met the Dunns he felt a sense of relaxation and comfort.

He unpacked. He placed down hairbrushes and razor; his pipe and a round tin of Naval tobacco he put handy on an occasional table: pyjamas he laid on the pillow and then looked at himself in the mirror. He was a man without vanity, but he occasionally studied his face critically, as he might the side of a ship. He knew what he wanted of it—cleanliness and neat lines. No (so to speak) ropes or fenders hanging over the side.

His reflection now was that of a young commander already ingrained with the set of countenance of a naval officer. The eyebrows were liberal, the blue eyes keen, the complexion ruddy, and the whole aspect one of confidence not unmixed with self-satisfaction. He was not a tall man, but neither was Nelson, and Commander Foxe-Forsyth took comfort in that. He leaned forward to the mirror and patted the side of his cheek.

'You'll do, Foxy,' he said aloud to himself.

It was at this moment that he realized that he was not alone. Turning swiftly he saw the door was open and the two small boys were staring at him.

'Hullo,' he said, in a friendly voice.

The boys were silent.

'Come to watch me unpack my gear?' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, persevering. 'I haven't brought much. Always travel light.'

In the stillness which followed he took out a tweed coat, Southey's *Life of Nelson*, some shirts and underwear, pipe-cleaners and a half-filled bottle of eau-de-Cologne. The motionless small boys were unnerving and each article that he brought forth seemed to give a more equivocal rendering of his character. He wished from the bottom of his heart that they would go away.

'What's that fluff on your cheeks?' demanded Garland Grant, the elder boy, at length.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth bristled. In common with many officers of the Royal Navy his cheekbones were lined with a down of hair. He had had it so long that he had almost forgotten it was there.

'Just hair,' he said, laughing a little.

'Chicken!' said Dixon Smith. 'He looks just like a chicken, Garland Grant, doesn't he?'

'Sure he looks like a chicken,' agreed his brother. 'A chicken with fluff.'

'Hi, Chicken!' said Dixon Smith.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth wrung a smile. But he was not a man who gave up easily. It was, moreover, his duty to be friendly to his hosts' children.

'It should be a cock, old cock,' he said.

It fell flat. The open hostility on the childrens' faces increased. They looked at each other, then looked back at him. But they did not move away. Commander Foxe-Forsyth went to the basin and began to wash. During the performance he felt himself watched as a hippopotamus might be at a drinking pool. He dried face, ears, chin and hands. As the minutes passed the tension increased. He was almost glad when Dixon Smith spoke.

'You're a limey,' he said.

'Yes, I'm a limey.'

'What are you-all doing in America?' demanded Garland Grant.

'My ship was bombed and it's being repaired here.'

'It must be a rotten ship. It wouldn't have been bombed if it had been an American ship.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth kept his temper. He said: 'It is very unpleasant being bombed. You see the dive-bombers up in the sky like black flies. Then they come down out of the sun with their engines roaring and, if you're not careful, they make a hole in the flight-deck.'

He brought his hand down to illustrate his description and made the noise of an aircraft engine to go with it.

‘Like that,’ he said, cheerfully.

The two boys looked at each other.

‘The Germans have beaten the daylights out of the British,’ said Garland Grant. ‘They’ve licked you. Everyone says so. Now England wants America to pull her irons out of the fire.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth flushed. For him his country’s honour was very dear. All the weariness and nerve-strain of the past months, the horror of supervising the party that had shovelled out the bodies came back to him. But he kept back his reply. No one could ever know and, therefore, here at peace, they could never care. But this must stop.

‘You shouldn’t believe everything you hear,’ he said, mildly. ‘England isn’t finished. Now, I think, I’d like to be left alone.’

He gripped them by the shoulders and turned them firmly out, closing the door. There was a few moments of silence. Then a bump as some heavy object struck the door.

‘Hi, limejuice!’ they called, from the other side.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth felt that he had not made much ground.

They took dinner in a pine-panelled dining-room off the hall, but not before they had had several of what George called ‘sweeteners.’ These they drank in comparative peace as Garland Grant and Dixon Smith had been driven into the kitchen to eat their supper. There was only the radio, the pealing of the telephone and Eugenia’s voice; above these George Dunn roared his views on England, continuing them as he served the fried chicken and Smithfield ham.

‘People say,’ he said, ‘that Britain is trying to outsmart us. They say they didn’t pay the War Debt. Well, they paid a *half* of it, didn’t they, which was more than anyone else did. Ham, Eugenia?’

‘Our own Smithfield ham. They feed the pigs on peanuts——’

‘Quiet, Eugenia,’ yelled George. ‘But I don’t like your class-system, Commander. No, sir. A duke is just a duke to me—just a plain citizen. Now take us Americans. There’s no class here. If I know the patrol man or the crossing sweeper I call him by his Christian name. Everyone in America knows his place. Why, that crossing sweeper, if he does his job, everyone respects him. Remember Frank Roberts, Eugenia?’

‘Yes, *sir*. Why he was just the cutest boy——’

‘No need to go on about. The trouble about getting married, son. Can’t get a word in edgeways. Now, this Frank Roberts was telling me how the British snooted him in Calcutta——’

A coloured maid walked into the room, rolling her eyes.

‘Mr George, sah. Will you-all come sep’rate Mas’ Garland and Mas’ Dixon they-all just fightin’ away there over the gravy.’

George dived out of the room. Commander Foxe-Forsyth had hardly uttered a word. He sat, slightly dazed by the whisky, wondering why he had found the pneumatic riveters in the Navy yard so oppressive. Now, taking up his knife to the chicken, he found that it bent double. Examination showed that the blade was made of rubber.

‘That’s Dixon Smith again!’ declared Eugenia. ‘He’s such a prankster. He puts rubber spiders everywhere, too. The large, poisonous kind. I scream whenever I see one.’

It occurred to Commander Foxe-Forsyth to enquire why she did not do something about it. Something to correct the child’s tendencies. But he realized that she would not see this point of view and, in any case, George rushed back into the room.

‘They ran away,’ he said briefly. He sat down and began eating before going on: ‘The British don’t make any attempt to understand us. You don’t teach our history in your schools. We are an institution—the American people. Do you know that British history is taught in our schools? Yes, sir, why Garland Grant can tell you the dates of all the kings of England.’

‘Indeed?’

George stood up and yelled out of the window.

‘Garland Grant, what’s the date of that British King Edward the Third?’

Faint but clear came the reply from the bushes.

‘1861.’

‘The first shot in the Civil War,’ said Eugenia. ‘I knew it!’

‘But the principle is there!” yelled George.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth ate on, enjoying his food. He was mellow with Bourbon whisky and it mattered little whether he spoke. He looked forward to an early bed when he could sink between those lavender sheets with an open window instead of a scuttle. He would open Southey and read a few pages before dropping off to sleep. It was while he was enjoying this prospect, however, that George spoke.

‘We can go take a drink off Mary-Lou when we’ve finished,’ he said.

The trouble was that, as it turned out, Mary-Lou lived a long way away through Suffolk, Rich Square, Rock Mount (The Friendly City Come Again), Stanhope and Zebulon. It was all of a hundred miles, and they did not get back until three in the morning.

The next day was Sunday. Commander Foxe-Forsyth was awakened at eight o’clock by the jangling of an electric bell. It sounded, in his deep sleep, exactly like the alarm gong in the destroyer in which he had started

the war. He sat up in bed and in one twisting motion was feeling for his sea boots before he realized where he was. He cursed and lay back on the pillow while the bell continued, stopped, gave way to another bell with another note, and went on with a third which had a low, throbbing tinkle. The bells went on for ten minutes until there was a roar from the Dunns' bedroom, followed by silence.

Sleep was now impossible, but outside the sun was shining. Perhaps they would go to the beach and bathe in the long Atlantic rollers of Virginia beach? He shaved, showered and went down to breakfast. The children had gone out and he ate alone, reading the huge Sunday newspaper. The coffee pulled him together and afterwards he pulled out his pipe, which he smoked with contentment. At eleven o'clock Eugenia came down dressed in a vivid yellow frock.

'Why, Strang! You must be bored sitting there! Did you sleep well? Did those bells wake you? The kids have got bells they ring. Just electric bells. It doesn't prove anything, but they ring them just the same.'

She switched on the radio which provided music by courtesy of the Sunset Cemetery ('You are cordially invited to inspect our plots.').

'George and I have to take the children to some friends at the beach. You-all take the other automobile and meet us at the Murphy's residence, Fort Norfolk. We're taking drinks with them.'

'I'd rather stay here,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'I shall be quite happy.'

Eugenia bent down and patted his cheek.

'Why, Strang, with those blue eyes and long lashes, if you think I am going to let you out of my sight for one moment you are mistaken. You'll go right along to the Murphys there! Twelve o'clock.'

'Very well,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, intimidated.

The Dunn family left ten minutes later in a confusion of cries. Commander Foxe-Forsyth switched off the radio and continued to read the newspaper. He had worked out the time it would take him to get to Fort Norfolk from the map. To the minute he rose, went round to the garage and backed the sedan into the street. He prided himself on his driving and the sensation of being at the wheel again was pleasant. He drove decorously, using a plentiful number of hand signals, to the surprise of other drivers, and arrived outside the Murphy's residence within two minutes of what he called his 'E.T.A.'

It was a wooden house in what appeared to be a military cantonment. The blinds were drawn and the wire door was shut: in the hot, moist morning sunshine, with a sad tree beside it, the house seemed empty and deserted. Commander Foxe-Forsyth walked up the path and inspected the

name on the side of the door. It said, 'Major Thomas A. Murphy.' As he stood there the front door burst open and a young girl appeared: she wore a red sweater and short skirts and she was in a great hurry.

'Do you mind if I borrow your automobile? Ma's forgotten the sausage meat and shrimps. Go right in and sit down.'

She was at the wheel of the car before Commander Foxe-Forsyth had time to speak. He stood and watched her drive off. Then, cautiously, he felt his way into the house. The lounge was on the right. It was deserted and an air of hot stillness, like that of a country churchyard, brooded over it. A victrola stood in one corner, but there were no books or magazines—only a dusty volume entitled *How To Arrange Flowers*. The chairs and sofa were covered with faded cretonne and, on an occasional table, stood a framed, faded photograph of a man in service uniform, looking stern.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth sat down and waited. He listened to the ticking of the clock and wondered what he should do. But there was no action which he could reasonably take, save that of calling out, 'Is anybody there?' The atmosphere of the house forbade that—so he waited. It was ten-past twelve.

After ten minutes, to his relief, he heard footsteps on the stairs. A schoolgirl came into the room—at least in England she would have been a schoolgirl for her age was not more than fifteen. But, to Commander Foxe-Forsyth's horror, he saw that she wore a heavy application of lipstick and, above the young, fresh eyes and tilted nose, were two thin lines of plucked eyebrows. She came up and shook hands with composure.

'I'm Georgie,' she said. 'Happy to know you.'

'I'm Commander Foxe-Forsyth. A friend of the Dunns.'

But somehow the girl drifted away. 'Looking for a screwdriver,' she murmured, vaguely, and disappeared through the far door. Alone again, Commander Foxe-Forsyth wondered whether she had materialized or was just a dream. He sat down again on the edge of the chair.

Evidently, however, the girl had been real, for in the silent hinterland behind the door his presence became known. One of the doors opened and a voice spoke:

'I can't come in. I'm not dressed. P.K. will get you a drink when she comes back. Make yourself at home.'

The door shut and, as it did so, a prim old lady in black came into the lounge. She bowed graciously at the Commander and, with the dying embers of her smile on her face, walked into the kitchen.

That was all.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth was not a shy man, but he began to wish he had not come alone. He found himself walking on tiptoe in the empty lounge

and, as he did so, he wished fervently that George and Eugenia Dunn would appear soon. In his nervousness he mopped his brow and, as he pulled out the snowy white handkerchief from his breast pocket there was a shower of glass marbles. They bounced to the floor and rolled in all directions, making a loud noise on the bare boards. Those boys again! He cursed Garland Grant and Dixon Smith and dropping to his knees peered under the sofa. He was in this position, groping with his face on the floor, when he was aware that he was not alone any more.

He looked round. Gazing down at him was a tall, handsome woman in a black chiffon housecoat which trailed behind her like the wings of some gigantic bat. At her side was the schoolgirl, watching him impassively. Commander Foxe-Forsyth scrambled to his feet, dropping marbles.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was just——'

'You just don't have to explain!' burst out the woman. 'Why haven't you got a drink? Where's P.K.?'

'My name is——'

'I'll get you a Cut-me-Down right away. You'll love it—it's all grapefruit, lemons and things.'

She rushed out into the kitchen. Commander Foxe-Forsyth was left with the schoolgirl, who sat down moodily on the sofa. He perched himself on the arm at the other end. It collapsed and the girl took off into the air, bouncing gracefully.

'It always does that,' she observed, when she came to rest. 'You're British, aren't you?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth assented. The question made him feel rather as if someone asked him if he was the owner of a Rolls-Royce.

'I expect the Dunns will be along soon,' he said.

'Oh?' she said. 'I expect so. Do you have a cigarette?'

'Of course. Have an English cigarette?'

'No, thanks,' she snarled. 'I smoke American.'

But Commander Foxe-Forsyth had extended the packet. As he was fumbling to open it, however, a soft flesh-coloured object fell out on the girl's lap. To his horror he saw it resembled a human finger. Garland Grant and Dixon Smith would have exulted at the thrill of embarrassment and revulsion that swept over him as he saw it. He stared, appalled, until realization came.

But the schoolgirl was undismayed. She picked up the finger and looked at it.

'Is it real?'

'No. I'm sorry. It's a joke. The Dunns have two small boys——'

'You'd better have it back,' said the girl, listlessly.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth put the horrifying object back in his pocket. As he did so, things began to happen. Three middle-aged women and an old grey-haired gentleman burst into the room. At the same moment the handsome lady appeared from the kitchen followed by a Fillipino servant, bearing a tray of deadly-looking white cocktails. Instantly, there was bedlam.

'Help yourself, gang!' roared the hostess. She embraced the old gentleman. 'Why Stevie! I love you!'

The middle-aged women pounced on the drinks. They wore cheeky little round hats which perched upon their parched grey locks. They found Commander Foxe-Forsyth and introduced themselves. They had been to England, all of them. Kent! They just adored Kent! And they had been all around in Devon. Was not Devon the most adorable county?

The girl who had borrowed the automobile came back with the sausage meat and shrimps. After a while Commander Foxe-Forsyth found himself with her.

'You all right?' she yelled above the din. 'My name is P.K. I'll sweeten your drink. Is there anything you want?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth, who had a tidy mind, indicated the lady in the black housecoat.

'Perhaps you could tell me? What is that lady's name?'

'You mean Ma?' bellowed P.K. 'Ma, the gentleman wants to know your name?'

'Murphy, darling. Don't you remember?'

Mrs Murphy followed hard after these words. She curled on the floor at Commander Foxe-Forsyth's feet, looking up at him imploringly. He must tell her all about himself. Did he have a wife? Were there children? He came from London! Her eyes filled with tears and she patted Commander Foxe-Forsyth's hand.

'Poor boy,' she said. 'Poor girl. You English are the bravest people! All that awful blitz! Tell me about it——!'

'Well, you know——' began Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'The actual *bombing*——'

But Mrs Murphy was not listening. She was gazing, entranced at her daughter.

'Don't you love P.K.?' she said. 'Isn't she a darling? P.K., you're the nicest of all my family! Why, Stevie——!'

She rounded on the old white-haired gentleman who had seated himself on the floor beside her, mumbling incoherently, and flung her arms round his neck.

‘Stevie, you came to me! You know I love you. Doris, I’m just mad that you should ever have met Stevie first! How could you be so faithless, Stevie, marrying Doris like that?’

The old man gargled as Mrs Murphy threw her arms round his neck. P.K. had wandered off and Commander Foxe-Forsyth was left sitting alone on the sofa. Minute followed minute. He looked at his watch. It was half-past one. Where were the Dunns? As he sat there in his lonely vigil the women converged in a vortex in the middle of the lounge with a torrent of talk. The little feathered hats nodded up and down.

‘Tony’s *lazy*,’ said Mrs Murphy. ‘Though he is my own son, Tony’s *really lazy*. They stopped his leave at West Point and I was not in the least surprised. And he’s rude. Why, you should have heard what he said to Grace, though I had to laugh——’

‘Listen to this, gang!’ roared a big, raw-boned hag. ‘Go on, Lucy——’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth could stand it no longer. He came to a decision and, strolling nonchalantly, walked out of the house. As he got into the automobile he could still hear them talking. No one had noticed his leaving, he was sure: he would send a note of thanks to-morrow. Back at the Dunn’s the house was empty: George and Eugenia arrived at half-past two.

‘Where did you get to?’ they demanded.

‘I waited for you at the Murphys,’ protested Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

‘*We* waited for *you* at the Murphys,’ said George. ‘You must have found the wrong Murphys, I guess. America’s full of them. Did they show you a good time?’

‘Ripping,’ said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

‘Ripping!’ echoed Eugenia, delightedly. ‘Isn’t that sweet! Strang, you are *fascinating*.’

Since his arrival Commander Foxe-Forsyth had had very little time to think. Much of his immediate waking time had been taken up with the problem of how to dispose of the many powerful drinks that were lavished upon him. The events of the morning, however, had confirmed an irresistible feeling that the real problem which faced him at the Dunns was the two children.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth had been brought up strictly in a tall house in Bayswater. The top of this house had been his territory during the early years of his life. The boundary was marked by a white gate on the stairs, and he lived with a succession of nannies and nurses, who brewed tea, took him for walks in Kensington Gardens and sometimes smacked his little hand. At the bottom of the house a mysterious life went on in which his father and mother were involved. His mother visited him frequently upstairs and he

was, from time to time, put into a white pinafore and taken below to be shown to old ladies. His father was a huge, bluff presence, with a deep voice, who came into his life vividly on the occasions when he administered punishment for various offences, such as kicking the nanny.

Discipline had been the keynote of his early upbringing. Careful limits were set to his natural tendencies and he knew that to exceed them invited retribution. It was, therefore, something totally alien to encounter children like Garland Grant and Dixon Smith upon whom no curb of any kind was put. He was unacquainted with the American conception of child upbringing, by which a child is left to become a reasonable being at some time in late adolescence. If he had he would not have approved of it. 'Little boys should be seen and not heard,' 'Manners makyth man' and sundry other useful slogans had been burned into his brain.

Added to the lack of discipline of the Dunn children (which he could do nothing about) was the uncomfortable fact that they obviously disliked him. He had given them no cause, but Commander Foxe-Forsyth, although no child psychologist, had no illusions about the reason. It was because he was British and this hurt more than any personal element. As an unofficial ambassador, therefore, Commander Foxe-Forsyth felt called to do all he could to win the affections (if they possessed any) of Garland Grant and Dixon Smith.

He set about this task at lunch, laughing at the marble episode and telling the story of the gory finger. The children, however, stared at him with stony faces. They were not amused. And in the automobile, afterwards, as they sped indefatigably to swim at a private bathing pool thirty miles away they ignored his presence, while George and Eugenia prattled happily away, oblivious of the atmosphere.

The bathing pool was small. In its blue water several mothers were dipping very small babies, then holding them up to drain. At the far end was a very tall diving board. They changed and showered—George emerging in blue velveteen trunks which made the Commander's black woollen pants seem very humdrum by contrast. The generous proportions of Eugenia were mostly concealed by an elaborate flowered two-piece. They all entered the water with shouts and enthusiasm. Commander Foxe-Forsyth did a length of breast-stroke.

He paused at the deep end and trod water, blowing vigorously.

'Hullo, there!' yelled George.

'Hullo, G——' began Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

But at that moment his feet were pulled downwards and he sank beneath the surface. He rose spluttering and two figures promptly ducked him again. Commander Foxe-Forsyth had been accustomed throughout his naval career

to various forms of assaults upon his person. He was one, also, who enjoyed a rough-house as his contemporaries at H.M. Gunnery School, Whale Island, could have testified. Therefore, with the greatest good humour, he made a grab at the nearest boy. But in vain, for both Garland Grant and Dixon Smith swam like porpoises. Moreover, there was little of fun in their attacks, which they renewed remorselessly when he relaxed. They plagued and attacked him with implacable hostility. For ten minutes the battle went on until the Commander, needing a rest, climbed out of the water and stood near the diving board.

'You're yellow," they said. 'The Limey is yellow. No wonder you don't win the war.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth, with goodwill in his mind, sought a cheerful distraction.

'Do you know what Nelson said to the midshipmen who were afraid to climb the rigging? He said, 'Well, sir, I am going to race to the masthead, and beg that I may meet you there.'

'So what?' said Garland Grant.

'So I'll race you up the diving board.'

The two boys looked at each other.

'O.K.,' they said—and set off, climbing the ladder with the speed and agility of monkeys. Commander Foxe-Forsyth followed as quickly as he could but he was many seconds behind when he, too, arrived at the giddy pinnacle and could look down at the blue pool below. The pool seemed to have grown small from that height and, although it would have been an exaggeration to say that George and Eugenia looked like pygmies, it was certainly a long way down to the water.

'Shall we push him down?' asked Garland Grant.

'Yeah,' said Dixon Smith. 'Let's push him over.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth began to regret his hasty invocation of Lord Nelson. Horseplay in the water was legitimate fun and he was fair game, but up here on the narrow coconut matting of the pinnacle there was a very real danger.

'Don't talk like a fool, sir!' he snapped in his quarterdeck voice. 'There'll be no fooling up here.'

'Sissy,' said Dixon Smith, in a low, clear voice.

'Either dive off or get below in an orderly manner.'

The boys looked at each other. They were well within his reach on the diving board and, once in his hands, there was the clear indication that they would not be spared. They broke off the fight.

'Come on, let's dive!' they cried.

They took off into the air, gliding down and leaving a small ripple as their ankles disappeared into the waters of the pool. Commander Foxe-Forsyth was left alone and it was only then that he saw he was in the most invidious position. Clearly honour, both personal and that of his country, demanded that he, too, should dive. On the other hand, through a legacy of being pushed off the side of a battleship when 'hands to bathe' had been piped many years before in the Mediterranean, diving gave him the greatest horror. But he was not a man to flinch before his duty. Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes he hurled himself into the void. There was a moment of suspense then a hollow wet explosion as he met the water. He sank in acute pain, leaving awe and silence in the pool above. That silence was finally broken by Garland Grant.

'*Ker-plunk*,' he said.

Later in the automobile driving home Eugenia turned to Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'Say, I hope the kids aren't cutting up too much with you, Strang?'

'No, rather not. Not at all," said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

That had all been at the week-end. Now, as he sat on the porch at the Dunn's house, it was Wednesday. The passing of time had allowed himself to become adjusted to the tempo of life on the mainland of the American continent. He no longer thought that there was anything strange in the term 'juke-box'—he had grown so used to hearing 'Amapola' and 'I don't Want to Set the World on Fire' that they had ceased to jar his nerves. He had begun to appreciate the functions of a drug store and had acquired a taste for hamburgers, hot dogs and coca-cola.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth was an astute man. He realized that he—and what he represented—was as strange to the Dunns and their friends as they to him. It helped him, indeed, if he forced himself to recognize the Americans as being as strange as the Chinese.

As a people, they amazed him. They amazed him with their vitality and, above all, by their lack of reticence. And he could not resist their natural and spontaneous generosity. The kindness of Eugenia and George Dunn was overwhelming. It seemed quite natural to them to give him the use of one of their automobiles. In this large and powerful vehicle, clutchless and well-sprung, the Commander glided for hundreds of miles down the long white ribbons of the state highways. The country intrigued him. Its tall wooded hills repeated themselves endlessly: the broad, slow-flowing rivers seemed weary from the length of their journey. As he drove, Commander Foxe-Forsyth sensed the vastness of the huge continent which lay beyond and seemed to feel its pulsating energies.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth thought often of the resentment which Garland Grant and Dixon Smith bore towards him. It was a pity, and he wished it were not there. In a way, he felt, it was symptomatic. This was not a United States at war. It was a great, peaceful country feeling the pull of the current and dreading the brink. People were buying new automobiles while they could get them, searchlights stabbed the skies in practice, women came up to him and begged, 'Don't take our boys away!' And Commander Foxe-Forsyth knew that the inevitable was only a matter of time.

And so another week-end loomed ahead. Commander Foxe-Forsyth feared the onset of another protracted rush of people and alcohol past his startled eyes. On Friday morning, however, Eugenia met him after a session on the telephone with a tragic look on her face.

'The darnedest thing has happened, Strang! We have had an arrangement with Benny Keppler to fly us down to Alabama in his light plane to see George's mother. Can you imagine, he wants to go *to-day*! What will you-all ever say? Can you ever forgive me?'

'That's quite all right,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'You're so sweet, so understanding! If only there were another seat in the airplane!'

'When shall you be back?'

'To-morrow,' said Eugenia. 'It's just a short trip. Besides, we have to be. Mary-Lou is going back home to see her folks Saturday midday. She'll look after you-all until then."

She dashed upstairs and twenty minutes later came down dressed in a smart costume and an impressive little hat with a veil. Commander Foxe-Forsyth ran her down-town to George's office, then headed out towards the beach. He lay all afternoon bathing and baking in the sun: he wrote contentedly on radio-direction-finding: he dozed. As the evening fell he drove home down the highway fringed with mammoth hotels, shacks, hamburger stands, gas stations and an occasional group of trees. He ate a meal in a seafood restaurant and went to the movies. It was eleven o'clock when he returned home. There was a sound of deep breathing from Dixon Smith and Garland Grant's joint bedroom: they were asleep. Commander Foxe-Forsyth heaved a sigh of relief and climbed, tired and full of fresh air, into the comfort of his bed.

Mary-Lou, the coloured maid, brought him breakfast in bed next morning. It was another warm day with dancing sunlight coming in through the windows and the trees rattling with a little breeze. After breakfast he rose and showered: in the middle of this, however, he was interrupted by a

knock on the door and, turning back what he had now grown to know as the spigot, he listened.

'It's Mrs Dunn, sah. She-all wants to speak to you-all on the telephone. She sho' in a terrible state, sir.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth wrapped a towel round his middle and went downstairs. Garland Grant and Dixon Smith stood in the doorway, hands on hips, scowling. He picked up the receiver.

'Hullo?'

'Strang? Strang, for Lawd's sake! It's Eugenia. Am I glad to hear your voice! Strang, we just force-landed in a cloud of birdseed.'

'Are you all right?'

'I am unmarked. George banged his nose and that dear old constituent, Keppler, he's raising the roof because he scratched his arm.'

'But where *are* you?'

'Strang, I don't know. It's a town called Pook's Creek and it wouldn't be more than a year's trek from here to home, providing the wheel doesn't come off the wagon.'

'Can't you take off again in the aircraft?'

'We could *try*. But the wheels are sticking through the wing. We may get horses any moment, if wishes are anything.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth was thinking fast. Could he send up an aircraft? Clearly impossible as the venerable Swordfish of his ship's squadrons had flown off in Jamaica. Beside, what pilot could ever find Pook's Creek?

'When will you be back?' he asked.

'Tuesday. Maybe Monday. Or Wednesday, I don't know. Strang, can you manage with the kids?'

'Certainly. Perfectly all right.'

'Maybe Mary-Lou would stay? Can I speak to them?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth handed the receiver to Garland Grant. 'It's your mother. No need to worry.'

He stood aside, while Eugenia's voice came squawking out of the telephone, until finally she ended. 'I'm kissing you both. Yum Yum, darlings. Yum Yum.' Garland Grant put down the receiver.

'Ma's O.K.,' he said briefly to Dixon Smith. 'So's Pop.'

'It looks,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, 'as if the three of us are going to see a great deal of each other during the next few days.'

As was his habit, Commander Foxe-Forsyth gave the situation some minutes of concentrated thought. He made his usual mental 'appreciation.' The objective was clearly a simple one—to see that the needs of house and

children were provided for until the Dunns' return. How was this to be achieved in view of the children's attitude to him? Not so easy. But the first essential was to retain Mary-Lou. He went down to the kitchen and found it empty. Mary-Lou had departed: she did not believe obviously in taking any chances of appeals to her better nature.

'Hmm,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'Hmm.'

He stood there by the kitchen table, jangling some coins in his trousers pocket. At length, his chin jutted—a sure sign of some decision, taken. He pushed out of the swing-door and returned to the lounge.

It was some twenty minutes before Garland Grant lounged in followed by Dixon Smith with his hands in his pockets. They found Commander Foxe-Forsyth sewing at a long thin length of material that was crossed with a red stripe.

'Will you run us down-town to buy a milk-shake?' said Garland Grant, at length.

'No,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, firmly but pleasantly. 'It's not eleven o'clock yet.'

He continued to sew. The boys looked at it until their curiosity overcame their resentment.

'What's that?' asked Dixon Smith.

'A commissioning pendant. It's flown at the masthead when a ship is commissioning. That is, when the crew are joining.'

'What are you going to do with it?'

'I'm going to hoist it over the porch. That means that this is a ship we're going to commission. I'm the commanding officer—and you're the crew. It ought to be fun.'

'Come on, Dixon. He's crazy,' observed Garland Grant. 'We'll go down-town on our bicycles.'

'I haven't any money,' said Dixon Smith. 'Have you got any money?'

'Not a nickel,' said Garland Grant.

No muscle of Commander Foxe-Forsyth's face moved. He was intent upon the neatness of his sewing, which was very neat indeed. It was some minutes before Garland Grant broke the silence.

'Can we have some money to buy a milk-shake?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked up.

'I can't talk to you if you are half across the gangway,' he said, mildly. 'Come in.'

After some hesitation the children shuffled a few paces inside the door and stood scowling awkwardly. Commander Foxe-Forsyth continued to sew at the commissioning pendant as he spoke.

‘What I have received from you is a request for pay. In the Navy payment is made once a week and then only if there has been no deduction or forfeiture for bad discipline. So, I am afraid that you will have to wait until you have earned it.’

‘What does he say?’ said Dixon Smith.

‘He says he’s not going to give us any. That’s what you’d expect.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth smoothed the pendant across his knee. Then stood up and fixed it with hammer and nail over the porch. The boys watched him.

‘There,’ he said. ‘We won’t work a routine this morning. Hands will be piped to dinner at one o’clock. I’ll give you your duties then.’

‘Will you drive us down-town and buy us a milk-shake?’ said Garland Grant, again.

‘No.’

They looked in astonishment for it was a word, firm and concise, to which they were not greatly accustomed.

‘He’s nuts,’ said Garland Grant. ‘C’mon, Dixon. We’ll go borrow from Mrs Schlei.’ He added, with a boy’s intense fierceness: ‘You goddam Limey, I hate you.’

‘So do I,’ said Dixon Smith. ‘So do I.’

They ran off down the path into the street.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth spent the rest of the morning in busy fashion. He made an inventory of the contents of the larder and ice-box; he made a list of the food he required and he washed-up. Next, he went upstairs. The beds were unmade. Garland Grant and Dixon Smith’s bedroom was a chaotic place littered with toys and gadgets: a powder of dust lay on the furniture everywhere. The Commander went round carefully, making notes. Then he went down to the kitchen and prepared a lunch of soup from a can and the remains of cold chicken and salad. He laid the table and, promptly at one o’clock, he rang a large cow-bell outside the front door. There was no sign of the boys and no response. He waited a few moments then, as the second-hand of his watch completed the minute of one o’clock, he sat down and commenced to eat.

It was twenty-past one before the boys appeared, bursting into the room, dirty and dishevelled.

‘Chicken, goody!” yelled Dixon Smith, sliding into a chair. Garland Grant snatched across the table for the bread. There were squelching noises as they drank the half-cold soup.

‘Will you lend me your roller-skates this afternoon, Garland?’ asked Dixon Smith.

‘No.’

‘What are y’all going to do?’

‘Ring bells, maybe. Maybe go bathing. Maybe I won’t’ do anything at all.’

It was some minutes before Commander Foxe-Forsyth spoke. He said:

‘Hands to dinner was piped at one o’clock. Neither of you appeared until one-twenty-one-fifty. There is no excuse for lateness and, in future, any member of the ship’s company who arrives late for a meal will find nothing to eat. There will be no playing this afternoon until ‘secure’ has been piped. After you have finished I shall issue you each with a set of mess-traps—plates, spoons, cups and so forth. It will be the responsibility of each of you to wash-up, dry and replace the things you use at table.’

There was a pause. Then Garland Grant tapped his head significantly. Dixon Smith gave a long-drawn-up giggle.

‘We can always eat over at Mrs Schlei or Mrs Franklin,’ said Garland Grant. ‘We can stay there altogether for that matter.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth pushed back his chair and took his dirty plates into the kitchen.

‘Come out when you’re ready,’ he said. ‘Oh, and don’t come to table without washing your hands and brushing your hair. There’s a pay deduction for that.’

In the kitchen he washed-up, but neither of the boys appeared. When he had finished he returned to the dining-room. It was empty and the dirty plates remained. He smiled, for he had expected nothing less. To quote Eugenia’s words, ‘this was going to be a contest of wills.’ He had no doubt about the outcome.

But there was to be another problem.

The front door-bell rang and, answering it, he found a young woman with a baby in her arms.

‘Is Eugenia in?’ she asked.

‘I’m afraid not. She has had a flying mishap and won’t be back for some days.

‘She won’t be back?’ The young woman’s voice was blank. ‘Isn’t there anybody home?’

‘Only me. I am Commander Foxe-Forsyth of the Royal Navy. I am looking after the boys.’

‘Oh, *them*.’

Her voice showed that Commander Foxe-Forsyth’s opinion of Garland Grant and Dixon Smith was one not unshared in the neighbourhood.

‘But this is terrible!’ she went on. ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’m just off to meet my husband in New York and Eugenia promised she’d

look after the baby. It's too late now to find anybody else and if I don't show up at the Pennsylvania station, Lawd knows what will happen.'

'Isn't there a clinic?'

'No, sir. And I don't have the time. If I don't start in five minutes I'm going to miss the ferry.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth made a quick decision.

'Leave him with me,' he said. 'I'll find a qualified person to look after him. Or a place where he can be safe and well-cared for.'

She looked at him doubtfully. She saw a man with clean-cut features and clear eyes: the jaw jutted prominently and beneath the eyes was the first suggestion of small wrinkles that would bring an individual character to his face. Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked, above all, a competent person, and she felt grateful.

'Why, I don't know——' she began.

'That's settled,' he said. 'Bring him in. Has he any gear with him? What's his name?'

'Cornelius.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked at the baby, which was lying back in his mother's arms, looking at him with eyes as blue as his own. He was quite bald. A small thumb was jammed in his mouth and he gurgled. He was about ten months.

'Cornelius, eh? I'd better know your name, too.'

'It's Petty. Georgina Petty. Oh, dear, I don't know? Whatever ought I to do?'

'My dear young lady, I had great experience of babies when my daughter was born. We were in lodgings at Cape Town. There is not the least need to worry. I'll bring in the cot.'

He went out to the parked automobile. He brought in a basket cot and stand, a folding perambulator, an enamel pot. Mrs Petty laid Cornelius in his cot in a beam of sunshine at the corner of the lounge. Then she came out and showed him the suitcases. One contained milk powder: the other, larger, was devoted to petticoats, frocks, shawls, bootees, diapers and other items of a baby's wardrobe. Commander Foxe-Forsyth listened as intelligently as he could to the stream of anxious instructions that were poured at him: finally, he looked at his watch and bundled Mrs Petty into the automobile.

'You must be getting along. Don't worry. I'll see Cornelius is all right. Ring up from New York.'

With a tremulous smile she put the car into gear and moved off down the street. At the corner she waved and Commander Foxe-Forsyth waved back: then he went back indoors. Cornelius was lying back gurgling in the sun. Commander Foxe-Forsyth, hands in pockets, looked down at him.

‘Cornelius, A.B. Reported on joining,’ he said. ‘For temporary duty.’

Cornelius had been easily acquired. To find a place for him was more difficult. From the patrol man Commander Foxe-Forsyth established that there was no clinic or nursery. He doubted, too, about getting a nurse unless the kid was sick. Undaunted, Commander Foxe-Forsyth tried the neighbours. There was no reply from the Schlei residence, while Mrs Franklin turned out to be an ailing lady in a bath-chair. She said, why not try Mrs James, who knew Eugenia? Mrs James’ daughter, however, was getting married that evening and with all those people singing ‘I Promise Thee’ how could any baby sleep?

Commander Foxe-Forsyth returned to the lounge to find Cornelius still asleep.

‘Hmm,’ he said.

He walked up and down, thinking. Then he went to the telephone and dialled. In a few moments a voice answered from H.M.S. *Imperious*.

‘Commander speaking. I want Chief Petty Officer Grace at the telephone—and I want him at the double.’

During the next few minutes as he heard the loudspeaker broadcasting for Chief Petty Officer Grace—his mind went back to the ship. Officer of the Watch and quartermaster at the gangway, the marine sentry striding up and down the jetty, the noise of riveters and the recumbent figures in the wardroom armchairs. Then he heard a voice:

‘Chief Petty Officer Grace, sir.’

‘Grace? I want your help. I’m staying on shore. Come along at once. And what’s that C.P.O. cook’s name? Pierce? Bring him along, too.’

‘Aye aye, sir.’

‘Get me transferred to the regulating office. I’ll fix it up with them.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth spoke to the regulating office, and, after that, he was transferred to the young Doc. They spoke for ten minutes during which the young Doc. suppressed a grave tendency to hysteria while Commander Foxe-Forsyth took notes at the other end.

‘That’s about the size of it, sir,’ said the young Doc. ‘It’s some time, though, since I did my maternity. If you like I’ll come along this evening and bring a handbook.’

‘Excellent. Six o’clock. I’ll give you a gin for your pains.’

Returning on their bicycles at half-past five Garland Grant and Dixon Smith considered it wisest to approach their home stealthily through the back door into the kitchen. Peering through the wire-mesh door, they were

astonished to find two alien figures in occupation. One, a tall, taciturn young man in dark trousers and white shirt was rolling pastry; the other, older, red-faced and cheerful was polishing one of the brass trays until it resembled an orb of molten gold. The boys had no inhibitions about strangers. They looked at each other and then walked in.

'Hi! What are you doing in our kitchen?' demanded Garland Grant.

The tall young man, who was C.P.O. Cook on board H.M.S. *Imperious*, went on rolling pastry. It was Petty Officer Grace who spoke.

'What am I doing? I'm polishing brass, that's what.'

He looked at them sternly and, out of that stern gaze bent fiercely at the boys, there was a sudden flicker. The right eye winked: then the whole front of severity crumbled, and he was smiling.

Petty Officer Grace, as Commander Foxe-Forsyth was well aware, was by no means the smartest and most efficient man in the Chiefs' and Petty Officers' Mess of H.M.S. *Imperious*. He was a pensioner, now recalled, with the best of his service behind him. But he had served in destroyers with Commander Foxe-Forsyth ten years before and, in such confined company, there is little that men can hide from each other. Commander Foxe-Forsyth knew that, without being a 'sea-lawyer,' there was very little on the seamy side of naval service of which Petty Officer Grace was not aware—and, from time to time, took advantage of. He also knew that Chief Petty Officer Grace had the heart of a lion (he had once seen his courage in diving over the ship's side to rescue a rating) and that, with the long wisdom of experience and his cheerful fatherly personality, he was better for the job than a younger man.

'So you're the young gentlemen the Commander was talking about?' he said, eyeing them. 'Well! Well! I wouldn't have believed it of two such nice-looking kids, I wouldn't, really.'

'You mean *he* asked you?'

'He ordered me and I did what he said. Now if a grown man like me can obey orders, so can you, eh? Because'—he looked cautiously, eyes swivelling from one boy to the other—'if you *don't* obey orders, you're in the rattle. You wouldn't want 10A, would you? Washing paint, a leper, a social outcast? Or picking oakum in a cell to keep you from going mad? You wouldn't want that?'

'No,' said Dixon Smith, quavering.

'Orright. Obey orders, that's the first thing. Then we'll have a happy ship. Come here.' He spread his arms wide and brought them in. 'I've one or two stories to tell you, later on. About pirates up on the China Station. And shipwrecks—I was once in a hurricane in Bermuda when the seas were so

high we carried away the bollards from the jetty and the wires split like threads. Would you like to hear those?'

'O.K.,' said Dixon Smith. 'What happened? Did the ship sink?'

'No. She——' Petty Officer Grace broke off, shaking his head. 'Your mess-traps in the dining-room aren't washed-up. You wouldn't want to miss that treacle pastry Cookie's making for to-night? What else is there, Cookie?'

'Soup. Rolled pork and apple sauce——'

The C.P.O. Cook rolled the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other and relapsed into silence.

'Not gonna do what *he* says,' declared Garland Grant, roundly. 'He's a rotten beast.'

'Listen,' said Chief Petty Officer Grace. 'There is two kinds of nattering. In the first you call the officers a something, something, something lot of so-and-so's. That's understood, orright? It let's you blow off steam. Then there's the other kind, when you really mean it—and that's bad. I don't want to hear no more words out o' you about the Commander. He's a fine man and I respect him. Now run along and get those traps.'

'Oh, O.K.'

'And mind the baby, he's kicking on the rug.'

'A baby?' said Garland Grant. 'Has mom done it again?'

They went through into the lounge. There was, indeed, a baby kicking on the rug. Commander Foxe-Forsyth was sitting over it, smoking his pipe.

'Hullo,' he said. 'We've increased our complement since you left. He's a fine kid, isn't he?'

Garland Grant and Dixon Smith had a natural fondness for babies.

'Why, that's Mrs Petty's Cornelius,' said Dixon Smith.

'Hi, Cornelius. How are you?'

The baby gurgled and, without thinking, the two boys settled down on the rug beside him. The front door-bell rang.

'Will you watch him?' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'Sure.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth smiled to himself. The boys were not aware of it, but it was the first time they had spoken to him civilly. He was not without gratitude. He opened the door and found the young Doc outside, carrying a small bag.

'So the Stork has blessed you, sir?' said the young Doc.

The young Doc put down the stethoscope.

'He's certainly a fine, healthy specimen,' he said to Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'Are you breast-feeding him, sir?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth avoided the question.

'I want to work out a routine. Shall I find it in here?' He turned the pages of the book the young Doc had brought with him. It was called *Radiant Mothercraft* by Prunella Mainprice, State Registered Nurse. 'How many a mother,' he read, 'when the day's work should be finished, must spend the evening starching and ironing little garments. But what joyous work it is!'

'Looks worse than the *Manual of Seamanship*,' he grunted. 'I suppose he ought to turn in now? What is the drill, Doc?'

'Bath, powder, vaseline, potty, teeth. That about covers it.'

'Hmm,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. He added suddenly: 'Doc, you'd better stay and cope!'

The young Doc grinned.

'Sorry, sir. I have a date with a blonde. You, of all people, must know how the cycle of nature moves us for our joy and its own mysterious purpose.'

'To hell with you, then!'

'Very well, sir,' said the young Doc, cheerfully. 'Thanks for the gin.'

The young Doc moved, grinning, to the door. He winked at Garland Grant broadly and went out.

'Now,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth to the boys. 'What do we do?'

'Turn on the bath,' said Dixon Smith. 'That's what he said. I'll do it.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth was, for once, at a loss. He turned over the pages of *Radiant Motherhood*, studying the pictures of stout babies crawling, exercising and learning how to eat hard rusks. Cornelius, meanwhile, began to cry. Commander Foxe-Forsyth put down the book and dangled his silver pencil; he pulled a funny face. The baby cried more. Finally Commander Foxe-Forsyth went to the kitchen door.

'Grace,' he called.

C.P.O. Grace appeared smartly.

'Sir?'

'Are you a family man, Grace? Do you know how to stop that infant bawling. And why is it bawling? And can you give it a bath?'

'How about a dummy, sir?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth gave him a withering look.

'He has no dummy, Grace. They are old-fashioned and unhygienic. I see you are a broken reed."

He carried on. The howling Cornelius was taken upstairs and Commander Foxe-Forsyth assumed an apron. The two boys accompanied him and watched with interest as he held the baby by head and body (*Radiant Motherhood* to face p. 18), and lowered it into the water. Cornelius

was now crying with the soul-stirring, heartbroken concentration of which babies are capable. Then he kicked lustily and squirmed out of Commander Foxe-Forsyth's arms, disappearing beneath the water. Commander Foxe-Forsyth fished him out and decided to call the performance to a halt.

'Phew!' he said. 'He's certainly a handful.'

'He's pretty peppy for a baby,' agreed Garland Grant.

'I'll make a confession,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'I don't think I'm up to the job. I wish to heaven there was a woman about who could cope.'

'A woman?' said Garland Grant. 'Is that all? We can fix that for you—come on, Dixon!'

They rushed out of the door and, upstairs, the dishevelled Commander heard the slam of the front door.

'Who the hell is that coming out of the house, Eugenia?' roared George Dunn.

It had taken them four days to get back from Pook's Creek and he was not in the best of tempers. Eugenia looked at the woman who had just closed the front door. She was prim, elderly, and there played a small wistful smile on her lips.

'I don't know who she is,' said Eugenia. 'Pocahontas, maybe?'

The elderly lady bowed as she passed them on the path.

'I have just finished the First Dog,' she said. 'Martha Grimes is on for the Last Dog. She will be glad to see you, good afternoon.'

'Nuts,' said George, briefly. He pushed inside the front door and sniffed. 'Something wrong here. The place has changed. What is it?'

'It's clean! Why, it's spotless!' cried Eugenia. 'And do you notice something more? It's quiet. The kids must be out.'

Eugenia took off her gloves and went into the kitchen. A strange sight met her eyes. A red-faced man in uniform was in the act of pushing a model sailing ship into a bottle, while Garland Grant and Dixon Smith watched breathlessly. At the table a cadaverous young man was making custard of a strange and sickly yellow—an unmistakable sign, did they know it, of a cook of the Royal Navy.

'Why, hullo!' cried Eugenia. 'Did you think I was dead, darlings?'

'No, we-all heard you on the telephone.'

'Aren't you *glad* to see me?'

'Sure,' said Garland Grant. 'Only you could have stayed away a day or two more. We've been enjoying ourselves.'

Eugenia gave it up.

'Where's Strang?' she asked.

‘Upstairs with the baby.’

‘The baby? What baby?’ Realization broke. ‘My Lawd,’ exclaimed Eugenia, ‘I’d forgotten!’

Eugenia went upstairs and heard noises from the bathroom. Commander Foxe-Forsyth was standing by while a very competent lady was powdering an upturned Cornelius.

‘Why, Strang!’ burst out Eugenia in unfeigned admiration. ‘You’re wonderful! You really are wonderful.’

‘Nothing to do with me,’ said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, modestly. ‘The boys enlisted half the women in town—I just organized them into watches. We all got down to things in the house.’

‘You mean you actually got Garland Grant and Dixon Smith to *work* at something?’

‘Why not? They’re good kids. They soon saw the point.’

‘Eugenia!’ bawled George from the lounge. ‘Tell Strang to come along down and have a highball.’

The next evening Commander Foxe-Forsyth, his duty done, returned to his ship. His bags were piled in the automobile and Garland Grant and Dixon Smith came down to the sidewalk to wave him off. The commissioning pendant still hung over the porch. At the corner Commander Foxe-Forsyth turned and waved. The two small figures with the spindly legs and sandy hair waved back vigorously and he heard the sound of their last shouts. Neither they, nor he, knew that time and circumstance would, with the years, see those children fighting as men in Korea.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth meanwhile was an unemotional man but, as the automobile turned down towards the Portsmouth ferry, he said, half-aloud: ‘God, that’s made me feel homesick.’

4

Six weeks later Commander Foxe-Forsyth stepped out of a Skyview taxi that had brought him from the Pennsylvania Station, New York, and lifted his gear down to the jetty.

'That your boat?' enquired the taxi-driver, continuing a conversation begun on Brooklyn Bridge.

'It would seem so,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'She doesn't look much, does she?'

The ship lay alongside the jetty in Bush Docks. She was a merchant liner of some 8,000 tons. Fore and aft over the holds were American-type gantries; a tall, chrome-coloured funnel rose against the pale blue of the autumn sky; the black hull showed rust between the plates. Commander Foxe-Forsyth put her at twelve years old, maybe more. On the bow was her name, *Cornelius F. Judda*.

'They've lost six out of the last twenty ships they've loaded at this wharf,' said the taxi-driver. 'Say each is a million dollars. That's a lot of money lost.'

'A lot of lives, too,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

The taxi hummed away, leaving him with his tin trunk (name painted in white), three suitcases and, incongruously, a bag of golf clubs beside him on the wharf. There was no sign of life from the ship as he walked up the gangway. He walked forward and pushed into a cabin—it was a confusion of paper and open drawers, as if the occupant had had orders to abandon ship in a hurry. He tried next door and found, almost to his relief, a long, sallow-faced lieutenant of the R.N.V.R. lying on the bunk.

'Hullo,' said the lieutenant, almost roguishly. 'What do *you* want?'

'I'm Commander Foxe-Forsyth, in command of this ship. Are you in charge of the naval draft?'

'Oh,' said the lieutenant, 'if you want *them*, they're all up at the depot. They're having a lovely time watching the basket-ball.'

'Stand up when you talk to me,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'Oh, dear——' The lieutenant sighed and swung off the bunk upon which he had been lying rather in the manner of Madame Recamier. He now revealed himself as being very tall and lithe, but Commander Foxe-Forsyth noted no more than a general impression of disfavour.

'Why have you not brought the draft on board?'

‘The American seamen are still on board, sir. They’re all down in the saloon, arguing and shouting in a most distressing manner over their pay. I think the union representative is quite sweet, but he is being just a *tiny* bit tiresome about things.’

‘Is the skipper on board?’ said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

‘I’m afraid,’ said the lieutenant, smoothing back his hair before putting on his cap, ‘that the skipper is drunk.’

The lieutenant was right. The skipper was lying on his bunk with his mouth open, wearing the clothes in which he had gone ashore last night. There was clearly no hope of getting any sense out of him. Commander Foxe-Forsyth stared out of the scuttle at the littered, rusty deck and, not for the first time, he regretted his latest appointment.

It was only temporary. In this crisis of the war, Britain had made a purchase of a certain number of American merchant ships, of which *Cornelius F. Judda* was one. The task was now to take the ships across to the Clyde, manned by naval drafts from British ships repairing in America. It was an unusual job and Commander Foxe-Forsyth did not doubt his ability to handle the ship in convoy. What he disliked was having a mixed, untrained and untried crew. As for the officers—if this willowy youth were any example, he was not due for much sleep on the crossing.

‘Come below with me,’ he snapped.

The saloon was, as the lieutenant had described, a place of raised voices and ugly passions. Outside a little man was smoking a pipe contentedly. ‘I’m the union representative,’ he said, with a broad Scots accent. ‘Is there anything I can do for you?’

‘I’m British. We take over the ship at noon to-day.’

‘Ye’ll be lucky, mon. This lot will be going on until evening. I hate the guts of some of these swine, but the company owe them the money and they’re going to pay. I suffered from owners for sixteen years at sea and all this gives me a great deal o’ pleasure. If you’ll take my advice you’ll get your men on board and take no heed of all this.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked into his twinkling old-man’s eyes and perceived good sense.

‘Thanks,’ he said. He turned to the lieutenant. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Jackie, sir.’

‘Very well, Jack—your *surname*, you idiot!’

‘Johnston, sir, I’m afraid.’

Jackie Johnston! Good God!

‘Very well, Johnston. Get up to the depot and bring the draft down at the double. We’ll begin by getting the ship clean.’

‘Aye aye, sir.’

Lieutenant Johnston saluted smartly and swept away. Commander Foxe-Forsyth went up to the bridge. From there he walked to the peak of the fo'c'sle and worked aft, noting the lay-out and detail of the ship. Before the draft came on board he had a complete picture of his new command in his head.

For the next three days the sun shone brilliantly. The New York skyline glowed white, as if lit from within; the hard colours of funnel and hull that passed in the river seemed bright and precise. The ships swam past in the stillness as if they were insubstantial figures in a dream.

On board the *Cornelius F. Judda* things had begun to happen. An army of painters had arrived and transformed her dingy colouring into a uniform grey; the naval draft had cleaned ship and were in routine and an army of Italian stevedores were loading the ship with an amazing speed and rapidity.

It had become clear that Commander Foxe-Forsyth was due for a very miscellaneous collection of officers in his wardroom. His first lieutenant was a Lieutenant Carboys of the Royal Navy—young, efficient and very sure of himself. Commander Foxe-Forsyth, while recognizing a certain conceit, trusted him in his job. The same could not be said for Johnston, the R.N.V.R. officer, who, curiously enough, possessed a watchkeeping certificate gained in a 'C' class cruiser. Then there were two officers of the merchant navy, Collins and Brent, survivors aboard for passage home. Commander Foxe-Forsyth had no fears about their seamanship but one, Collins, was obviously still shocked from his experience; while Brent, a swarthy young man, was difficult where discipline was concerned.

The engines were turbine-driven. Warrant Engineer Ferguson reported that he was unfamiliar with them but that, as far as he could see, they were in reasonable shape. Good for a steady 10 knots, 12 if pushed. The engine-room complement was manned by a miscellaneous collection of naval stokers, including three Engine-room Artificers.

There was one big worry about the naval draft of fifty. Commander Foxe-Forsyth knew only too well that those sent out of a ship were, always, the more unsatisfactory ratings. He knew many of these from the *Imperious* and regretted the divisional officers' efficiency of selection. He had Petty Officer Grace, it was true—but Grace was a pensioner and Commander Foxe-Forsyth knew that with every year ashore a pensioner acquired more rust between the plates. They were never the same when they came back—and Grace, for all his charm, was from an efficiency point of view no exception.

All in all, it was not an encouraging ship or ship's company with which to cross an ocean with enemy submarines at large. But the job had to be

done and, as the Italians sang and swung the cargo into the holds, while the American security officer sat at the top of his gangway smoking a pipe, there was a sudden change in the feeling of the ship. The White Ensign had been hoisted; it was saluted at colours and at sunset; there was a quartermaster and an officer of the watch on the gangway; orders were piped through the ship. And, on the bow, the name had been changed to *Empire Heron*; *Cornelius F. Judda* had become a naturalized Englishman.

It was at the last moment before sailing that Paymaster-Commander Pringle, R.N., arrived on board. He was an elderly commander with greying hair who, in civilian clothes, would have passed as a prim, precise old gentleman. He came on board accompanied by five large trunks and almost at once there was trouble.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth, sitting in his cabin, had a visit from Carboys, the first lieutenant.

'A pay commander has come on board for passage, sir. I wanted to put him in the vacant cabin on 'A' Deck—it's not at all bad, windows on the deck and a shower. He won't have it though. He insists on the one which the radio operators are using—I've had to turn them out.'

'Damned nuisance,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, 'I suppose they weren't pleased!'

'They were *not* pleased, sir.'

'Had to be done, though. I'll drop below and make my number with him in a moment.'

He gave the commander plenty of time. He remembered what his own cabin had been like when he came into it, with an old Panama hat on a peg, an empty bottle of Four Roses, a broken pencil, a bent drawing-pin and other litter in the drawers. What was the fellow's name? Pringle. He had never heard of him—certainly not Med. Fleet. He picked up his copy of the *Navy List* and turned the pages:

'Hmm,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

He found Commander Pringle laying out silk vests on the bunk. He noticed a set of beautifully-carved chessmen had been arrayed on the chest of drawers alongside the expensive photograph of a handsome old lady in an embossed leather frame. It may have been his imagination, but there was the smell of some scented pommade in the cabin.

'How are you shaking down?' he asked.

'Come in, come in, of course,' said Commander Pringle. 'This is a dreadful cabin but slightly better than the one they wanted to put me in. When do we sail?'

'The Italian stevedores say it's to-night. I had understood it was to-morrow morning. But they are nearly always right.'

Commander Pringle sighed.

'Oh, dear, I must say I had hoped for a crossing in something better than this. What speed will she make?'

'Ten. It will only be seven-knot convoy, anyway.'

'Have we armament of any kind?'

'They've just fitted an old 4-inch B.L. It won't train up, of course.'

They were interrupted by one of the radio operators. His face carried a haughty expression, more hurt than angry. He had, he said, just come back to look for his teeth.

'Teeth? Dear, dear, yes, of course,' said Commander Pringle. He turned back: 'If it was not such short notice I should ask the liaison people to transfer me. Mind you, it's simply that I don't like throwing you all out.'

'Ha!' said the radio operator, who had retrieved his teeth from a ledge in the shower. With a look of scorn at them both he went out.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth had quickly assessed Pringle. Windy! Well, he wasn't the first man to fear an Atlantic crossing—and there was usually a cause for it. Pringle had probably had a caning from the dive-bombers up one of those damned fiords in Norway. The best treatment would be a dose of work.

Commander Pringle, meanwhile, had been making an equal assessment. He had already looked up Commander Foxe-Forsyth's seniority; besides, by that bush telegraph which acts so effectively in the Royal Navy, he knew a great deal about him. A bright officer, not brilliant, but efficient and industrious; due for promotion any moment. Damned bad policy on someone's part to risk him in an old tub like this. Commander Pringle trusted that he was not going to get the ship into any damned tearaway nonsense. He knew the way these up-and-coming fellows performed if they were given half a chance.

'We should have a pretty interesting crossing,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'Interesting to see what tactics Jerry is using. By the way, I don't want you to get bored. Will you take over the victualling?'

'When I have time to think——'

'Of course. We're a pretty scratch lot here, I shall need your help.'

'What are we carrying?'

'A bit of everything. I suppose I should tell you that one hold contains explosives.'

'Oh?' Commander Pringle turned pale and forced a smile to his face. He waved a hand at the chessmen: 'At least I have my delightful good-luck charms to protect me. Don't you think they are exquisite?'

Beneath the monkey-jacket Commander Foxe-Forsyth could see that already Pringle had assumed a kapok lifesaving waistcoat. He smiled and

went out. A dilletante! R.N., too! As if Johnston were not enough. Really, life was not easy.

At about the same time as this conversation was taking place Chief Petty Officer Grace was cheerfully breaking regulations by smoking in the cabin he shared with three other petty officers. But, although outwardly jovial, Petty Officer Grace was full of misgiving. His ragged service documents, still held for the moment in *Imperious*, recorded many vicissitudes of service from that first '*Ganges*, Boy Second-Class.' Many famous ships figured in those documents—*Conqueror*, *Dido*, *Malaya*, *Queen Elizabeth*: there was a sloop that had done a Red Sea patrol and a destroyer on the China station. But never had Petty Officer Grace encountered anything like this—mentally, it was like being torn up by the roots. Everything was on a scratch basis. And here he was—Grace who had been 'buffer' in a battle-wagon!

'I see,' said an E.R.A., looking up from the *New York Mirror*, 'that the Russians claim they've killed a million Germans. The Germans claim they've killed a million Russians. Wonder the war goes on at that rate.'

'Anything about sinkings?'

'Oh, yes. 'Ere we are. U-boats claim twelve. Cold for bathing at this time of the year, too.'

Petty Officer Grace gave that droop of the mouth which is the sure naval prelude to wholehearted 'drip.'

'I wish I'd never got into this lot. The skipper like a cat on hot bricks. Never leaves you alone for a moment. The first lieutenant—well, we won't go into 'im. H.M.S. *Altmark*, that's what she is. If you ask *me*,' concluded Petty Officer Grace, 'she won't ever get to the other side. You know what to-morrow is, don't you?'

'No?'

'Friday,' said Petty Officer Grace.

Meanwhile the winches whined and the stevedores worked like men possessed. Already there was that increase of tension, the change in the urgency of ship's sounds which betokens imminent departure. The ship had seemed, of a sudden, to wake from sleep and become alive. Outside a cold, golden afternoon was drawing to a close. The Statue of Liberty rose from the mists and the magnificent, serrated cliff-face of buildings across the river glowed against the sky. It was that thrilling hour in New York when, at twilight, a million windows break out with lights.

On the decks, now, they were putting the covers on the last hatch. The cargo of eggs, copper bars, canned meat, milk substitute, high-octane fuel

and explosive was safely stowed below. Three aircraft were lashed on the deck. The Italian stevedores were right. An 'Immediate' signal arrived, ordering S.S. *Empire Heron* to sail that evening. In the last hour before leaving the ship fell silent, as if resting before the struggle ahead. The Security Officer made a last check and left down the gangway. There might have been a bomb in the cargo or salted away in a hydrant pipe, he said. That was why Uncle Sam paid him to keep a sharp eye.

'Oh, dear,' said Lieutenant Johnston, 'as if we haven't enough without *that*.'

Sharp at eleven o'clock the *Empire Heron* cast off from the wharf. The engine telegraph tinkled in the silence and, with the first thud of the engines shaking her, she nosed out into the river. The lights of the city glared out from the banks. Over there people were dancing: they had homes and would sleep in bed. For them was the blessed order of life in peace. There were many on board the *Empire Heron* who looked out at New York with an impotent resentment that the cold and comfortless Atlantic lay ahead of them. Not so Commander Foxe-Forsyth. Up on the bridge beside the pilot he looked forward to the next fortnight with eagerness.

The *Empire Heron* bucketed up and down to a head sea. Despite Commander Foxe-Forsyth's curses to the engine-room, a cloud of black smoke issued from her funnel and drifted away in the wind, clinging to the green water. The convoy seemed to occupy the whole visible ocean, spreading in a wide pool to the horizon. There were ships of all kinds—modern cargo liners a few cables from antique Greek freighters with tall, thin funnels; the ensigns of many nations blew stiff in the wind. The ships plunged steadily on, rising and slipping in the green sea.

Disposed about them was the escort—a large United States Task Force, officially 'on excercises in the North Atlantic.' There had been no Pearl Harbour at that time but plenty of what Commander Foxe-Forsyth called 'practical evidence of sympathy.' The *Empire Heron* disposed, as rescue ship, in the rear of the convoy's centre column felt the security of the presence of carrier, battleship, cruiser and a dozen destroyers. It was an improvement on a single corvette and a trawler that had escorted convoys a year previously.

'A funny thing,' remarked Commander Foxe-Forsyth, hunched against the wind cheater in his duffel-coat, 'but I've never sailed these waters before, except once as a snotty with the Home Fleet. They're not exactly friendly at this time of year, are they?'

He gazed at the expanse of heaving, swelling water. The sky was pale white and empty. It was a dead world, a desert with this caravan of black

dots crossing its dunes.

'I had nine months up here in 1940 in a 'C' class cruiser, sir,' said Carboys. 'Cold and damned uncomfortable.'

'Have you seen the U-boat situation report? Hardly encouraging, is it? From the look of them, though, I shouldn't think we'll run into trouble until we rendezvous with the inward escort. Then there's that report of a raider out—well, the only way we can fight is stern first, so I don't think we'll worry.' He broke off and yelled at Johnston, who was officer of the watch. 'You're three degrees ahead of station, man!'

All around them the sea routine of the *Empire Heron* was going on. Hands off watch were lying in the bunks in their unaccustomed cabins; of the sea dutymen, the bridge messenger was running the message before the one for which he was wanted; the quartermaster was thinking of a Miss Lily Upjohn (bird and angel) whom he hoped to see when he went on leave; the coder on watch was reading *She Loved an Earl*—a paper volume with no covers. Everywhere, on ledges and tables, were empty cups bearing the stains of naval cocoa.

Chief Petty Officer Grace had a small party of the watch on deck fallen-in near the after hatches. They stood, blown and frozen in the wind, presided over by the gun's crew muffled like esquimaux above them. The task was the rigging of a kite which involved sending a man up the mast. Grace sucked his teeth while he considered the five dejected ratings before him. The ratings looked back at him furtively.

'Come along, Weldon. Up you go.'

'Who, Chief? Me?'

'Yus. Jump to it. You'll need a 'ammer. If the pulley don't turn in the socket, 'it it. And get a line on the 'ammer or you'll be 'itting me on the head, dropping it. And that would be a pity."

His lower lip projecting, Petty Officer Grace watched Weldon climbing the mast. A seaman passed, whistling.

'Heard the buzz, chief? Taff got it from the sparker. There's a raider out.'

Chief Petty Officer Grace made no comment. Any feelings he had on the subject were concentrated on the mast with the solitary figure groping at the top. 'Kites! Rockets! The ruddy war's going back to childhood! Hit it, Weldon! Don't stroke it, hit it!'

A thin voice, caught by the wind, floated down.

'What's that, Chief?'

The ship's company of the *Empire Heron* were out of routine. They were not trained as a unit: their ship and her ways were unfamiliar. They had not learned about Atlantic warfare out of experience and they had developed no sixth sense for danger. Besides, they were heading for home after months of

parting and it was inevitable that fear and tension should be abroad. It was not naked fear: it was the keyed-up expectancy when every minute passed like an hour, when every sound that was unexpected became an explosion that made the soul jump.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth, delighted, himself, to have the feel of a deck beneath his feet, was well aware of the atmosphere. He had not left the bridge since the *Empire Heron* had sailed, sleeping at night in the bunk in the charthouse. What was, for some, a period of monotonous boredom was for him a vigil of intense concentration with every sense alert to a change of wind, a ship dropping back or the signals at a destroyer's halyards. The whole picture was in his mind and, although personally powerless, he was forecasting each move that the enemy could make, and devising its counter.

Out of this mental effort he spared time to think of the ship's company. There was no loudspeaker system to broadcast information, but he had a daily bulletin prepared and pinned to the notice board giving the ship's position, when they expected to meet the British escort, and guarded references to submarines and the raider—'possibly of the Scharnhorst type.' With the crew disposed in cabins rather than mess-decks, there was little else that could be done. Had he known it, however, the chief factor for confidence in the *Empire Heron* was his own presence and personality.

'This old man knows what he's about,' the ratings said. 'We'll be all right with him.'

Commander Pringle was a continual thorn in the flesh at this time. He haunted the bridge, gazing with anxiety at the heaving water, seizing hold of the signalman's pad for information. He refused to go below to the saloon (now known as the wardroom) for lunch: he had it brought up to the bridge by the steward. He slept, fully dressed, swathed in a huge fur rug at the back of the bridge. Commander Foxe-Forsyth had long since dismissed him as the type who could never be happy unless in a big ship with a marine servant to change his studs. He wished him to blazes.

'Hundreds of them!' exclaimed Commander Pringle, now, gazing at the latest U-boat disposition which had come in. 'There's no chance of us getting through.'

'There are twenty U-boats at sea,' replied Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'Five of them cannot possibly reach our area: five probably can. That leaves ten who might cause us a bit of trouble. It's ten too many and I don't like the way they are disposed; but, you know, at the worst we're not the only convoy at sea. They may have other game.'

'If they spotted us at this speed,' said Commander Pringle. 'They could pick us off like—like cherries.'

'Fortunately,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, 'the sea is a big place.'

While this conversation was going on the two merchant navy officers, Collins and Brent, were drinking coffee in the wardroom. Collins had the habit of sitting for long periods of staring abstracted silence: he was doing so now, moving the spoon round and round the cup. The two of them got on each other's nerves, but because they were of the same service they held apart from the others.

'Glass is falling,' said Brent.

Collins moved his head.

'Always the same at this time of the year.'

'Equinoctial gales! Wouldn't mind if they washed the skipper overboard. He's an insolent bastard. Stuck up. Looks at you as if you were dirt.'

Collins made no reply. He was staring at his cup and in his ears were ringing the sounds he could not banish—the shouts, screams and curses when his ship had been torpedoed. It had been about twenty west, and a pitch-black night. The hit was in the engine-room and they'd taken fire aft; the glare and heat had lit the decks like day so that you could see the naked fear and questioning in men's faces, while the escaping steam made a noise like thunder. It had happened quickly too—when he'd been sitting, as he was now, in the saloon after his watch. One moment he had been sitting there; a few minutes later he had been poised on the rail gazing down at the flat, dark, oily mirror of the sea.

It could, of course, happen again in the same brief time. The teaspoon travelled round and round the cup.

At that moment Johnston came in, pink complexioned, with eyes watering from the wind.

'Thank heavens, my watch is over!' he exclaimed. 'The captain seems to think we're a destroyer the way he fusses about keeping station. He's been perfectly beastly to me for four hours.'

He took his lunch off the hot-plate and plumped down on the settee in his blown-up Mae West. He helped himself to sauce.

'Curious to think that there's a great ridge of mountains submerged down the middle of the Atlantic. I suppose we're still over the western plain now. I always think it's so strange to think of those peaks and valleys and fissures down in the depths a mile under our feet. I suppose there's a strange life down there? Curious creatures, fossils, minerals untold.'

'Mermaids,' said Brent, laughing. 'Or U-boats.'

'Of course, mermaids are only fish. The dhugon. I saw that one they have at Aden—really most unattractive.'

'You've a good chance of seeing another on this trip. You can go right down to those nice mountains you were talking about and look.'

‘You don’t go down,’ said Collins, tracing the spoon round carefully. ‘You float, face up, grinning. As if the whole thing is a joke.’

‘It is, isn’t it?’ said Johnston, comfortably. ‘Imagine me dying like that? It simply wouldn’t be in character. You can put it right out of your head, my dear.’

He added: ‘Nothing ever, I assure you, happens to a ship when I am on board.’

Collins glanced at Johnston’s sallow but cheerful face. Somehow there came forth a feeling of comfort, as a child might feel from its mother. It was very curious. At that moment the ship gave a sudden jerk: there was a rattle as the cups, plates, spoons and forks slid down the table.

‘Altered course,’ said Brent.

By nightfall they had run into the gale. The cross seas were plumed with white and, rolling no longer, they curled angrily at the ship to break and smash on the fo’c’sle and dash in spray over the bridge. The monkey which one of the crew had bought in Brooklyn darted about on its chain, looking about with frightened yellow eyes. The crew tried to comfort it with bits of cheese. In the gathering dusk the Commodore’s night movements flickered out in a pinpoint of shaded light across a waste of roaring spray and desolation.

‘We’re a long way from home,’ sighed Weldon, on watch on the port side of the bridge. ‘A long way from Sauchiehall Street.’

But the fight against the gale brought an ease of mind. The U-boats had to cope with this, too: the danger had diminished as the ship tossed and bumped into the seas, as the water came surging in off the decks into the cabin flat. Little by little, amid the hammering, the tension relaxed—except for Commander Foxe-Forsyth drenched in his duffel-coat, standing on the wing of the open bridge with Commander Pringle asleep now in the bunk in the charthouse.

At dawn the seas were still running. It was bitterly cold and the leaden sky was full of snow. The convoy had maintained contact during the night and now, like ranks of tired troops, they shuffled into station again. At noon they made rendezvous with the British escort. There were three destroyers and two corvettes: five ships in all. After the fullness of the escort from the American task force, the convoy now seemed almost defenceless. The Americans drew out and took station: a signal from the convoy Commodore winked ‘Thank you for your escort’ and then, swiftly, the task force withdrew, heading towards the west. Standing on the bridge of the carrier Commander Kzecky said: ‘Geez, but if we could only get into it and *help* them.’

They slogged on and, at evening, the weather moderated. Next day the sea was almost smooth. It was just after ten in the morning that a destroyer in the van opened fire at an aircraft. It was difficult to see the plane until, by following the shell bursts, it could be seen flying very high, a tiny black speck in the sky.

'Shadowing,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'That means trouble.'

The aircraft disappeared into a cloud.

'We've given him a taste of our British medicine!' said Weldon, who often studied the newspapers of the time.

'Double the look-outs, Number One,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

Almost at once the orders came for an alteration of course and the ships lumbered round into the wind, steering to northward. It was a large alteration. Commander Foxe-Forsyth studied what it implied on the chart and as he did so the lines round his mouth grew grimmer. As he bent there, face in the lamplight, smelling the familiar hot varnish smell of the charthouse with its dividers and ash-filled trays, he looked as if he were playing an absorbing game. Finally, he pushed aside the black-out curtain and stepped out of the heated, smelling atmosphere into the wheelhouse: the quartermaster stood, eyes lifted to the compass, in the dim blue light. On the starboard wing stood Brent, who was officer of the watch. The wind had got up again and, before his eyes grew accustomed to the night, he could see the white crests against the blackness, hearing the surge and thunder as they swept past the rolling ship. Soon his night-sight returned and he could make out the black silhouettes of their neighbouring ships through his glasses: he swung from them to the corvette escorting them on the port beam.

'She's not a great deal of use to us,' he said. 'She's rolling her asdic dome out of the water.'

'It's not a fit escort for a convoy of this size,' grunted Brent. 'We might as well have nothing at all.'

'Have you done many crossings?'

'I bought a "fish" on my ninth. This makes ten. It'll be double that before I finish, but who cares? The old red duster is everybody's dogsbody.'

'I think everyone respects——'

As he spoke there was a dull boom. For a moment they searched for its cause, then Brent said quickly:

'It's the tramp there on our port bow.'

As he spoke the darkness glowed with a small red rose of fire—a round glowing circle in the night which bloomed larger every minute. At the same moment the alarm bell for Action Stations clanged through the *Empire Heron* and men came tumbling out of the cabin flats buttoning their oilskins. The fire on board the tramp gained every moment until in a huge red pyre of

flame she lit the convoy like day. The ship lay there and soon the water around her licked with flames. The scene was like a picture in oils, static and unreal. The *Empire Heron's* bows swung towards it as the depth-charges from the escorts' counter-attack began to rattle in the distance. As rescue ship, it was the *Empire Heron's* job to pick up survivors, but in these seas it was no easy task. There was no hope of lowering a boat; the men on board the ship stood and watched, like spectators at a hideous circus, as they saw small black figures outlined against the flames. The figures moved together towards the bows and then, one by one, disappeared as they jumped into the water, leaving behind their ship in a pool of flame.

The *Empire Heron* nosed up to within a few cables. Commander Foxe-Forsyth stood looking with an impassive face at what lay before him. He knew the decision. Was he to stop the ship so that she should stand there, a sitting silhouette of invitation for another torpedo? Was it worth the risk for so few lives? But there was no hesitation in his mind. He spoke down the telephone to the first lieutenant, below with his parties on the deck.

'I'm going to move in as close as I can. You've got the scrambling nets over? I shall stop for ten minutes, or as long as we can be useful.' He waited as the *Empire Heron* came to within a few cables of the burning ship. They could hear now the roar of the fire and feel its heat. 'Stop engines,' he said.

'Stop engines, sir.'

The telegraph tinkled. The ship became silent as the way died off her. Then she lay there, wallowing in the seas, at the edge of the molten lake. And now they heard other sounds—the cries of men in the water and, in the glaring daylight of the fire, they could see them as small black dots in the water. There seemed to be a dozen of them. The nearest was fifteen yards, the most distant was close to the widening circle of burning oil. And so they waited for minute after minute until at last they hauled the first man grunting and dripping over the side, blinded and coughing. He was followed by a second and a third, a fourth, a fifth. They sprawled with blackened faces on the deck, bleeding, shocked, exhausted. The last had the hair singed from his scalp and then there were no more. The moving heads had disappeared and the oil had moved across the water where they had been.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth strained his eyes at the garish scene of destruction but the swelling seas were empty. And as he looked the stricken ship shuddered, dipped her bows and plunged with a hissing and whistling under the water. And there was nothing but the burning oil.

'Slow ahead,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

The screw turned and the ship pulsed. The tension eased as the *Empire Heron* put on best speed to regain her station in the convoy.

That first sinking had destroyed boredom and repose. Fear took their place. The convoy lost two more ships that night. They had been in the van of the starboard column and ships were warned that the U-boats might be attacking on the surface. All next day the battle continued. Three more ships went. The *Empire Heron* tried to lower boats for the survivors of the first, but the boat capsized in the seas and the boat's crew were flung into the water. There were three men from that ship—and two of them died later.

There was no laughter in the ship now: it had died with that first torpedo. It was like walking through a jungle path with the enemy in ambush. There could be no stopping, no reprisal. There was nothing but to go forward until the shot came which would drop you. And for many it was that feeling of impotence which was the hardest to bear. With fatigue showing only in red-rimmed eyes Commander Foxe-Forsyth fought out in advance every move in the battle, estimating, forecasting from his experience from which way the next blow would come. But there were other things to think about. When the sixth ship went at three o'clock in the afternoon he turned suddenly to the bridge messenger.

'My compliments to Lieutenant Johnston. I want him on the bridge.'

Five minutes later Johnston stood beside him as he leaned against the bridge screen.

'Yes, sir?'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth turned and looked at him.

'You in good heart, Johnston?'

'Very good heart, sir.'

'Excellent. That poor devil Collins wants his mind taking off things. Go below, will you. Tell him stories, sing, play chess, do any bloody thing—but don't let him think, see?'

'Aye aye, sir,' said Johnston, cheerfully. 'It's what I used to do for the stokers. I'm an expert.'

'Oh, Johnston,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, calling him back. 'If you can include old Pay in the party, it might be a good thing.'

He smiled at Lieutenant Johnston for the first time. Johnston's heart warmed. On the infrequent occasions when he used it, Commander Foxe-Forsyth had a smile of great charm.

And then over an hour later the small tramp on their starboard quarter was torpedoed. A sea was still running and the rolling convoy seemed to be making no headway in the falling dusk. The explosion was in the forepeak; a white cloud surged up, the little ship shuddered and then, with bows shot clean away, plunged ahead into the seas. There was a lull of shock. The scene had the static, unreal quality which the vastness of the sea gives to naval warfare—the convoy ploughed on as if unconcerned, the destroyer

astern came up with the black attack flag streaming, and the stricken tramp dipped with a quick list into the waters.

For a few moments Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked at her as the first depth-charges of the destroyer's counter-attack rattled the *Empire Heron's* plates.

'Stand by,' he said. 'I'm going alongside.'

Collins was officer of the watch. He looked dazed and he reacted instinctively.

'You'll never do it, man!' he cried. 'Not in this sea. You'll sink the two of us.'

'Starboard twenty,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

Rolling and bucketing the *Empire Heron* moved in towards the torpedoed ship. The first lieutenant was below on the deck; by his side was Chief Petty Officer Grace with a coston gun. The seas that swept across the deck drenched them and the small party with them.

'Heroics,' said Chief Petty Officer Grace. 'That's what this is. Foxy's made a mistake at last. I always said he would.'

Up on the bridge Commander Foxe-Forsyth nursed the *Empire Heron* in cautiously. The tramp which in the distance had been an impersonal thing, printed on the eye, now became bigger and a part of themselves. They could see the twisted plates of her bow and the surge of the water, foaming white against the bottom of the bridge structure. The funnel had crumpled and lay over drunkenly on the port side while a cloud of escaping steam billowed over her. Half obliterated by this, they could see three figures on the bridge, and a small group of men who were trying to get away the boat. When it became apparent what the *Empire Heron* was doing they left it and crowded to the rail, watching.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth brought his ship in on the lee side until they were separated by only a few feet, yawing and heaving at each other with the sea rushing green between them. The coston gun cracked and the line from the *Empire Heron* fell across the tramp's upperworks, but there was no time to gather it. The bow of the *Empire Heron* moved in when a sea, rising behind the tramp, caught her broadside and hurled her with a sickening crash against the ship's side.

Chief Petty Officer Grace saw it coming and backed away for a hand-hold.

'Here we go! Into the ruddy drink!'

Carboys caught a glimpse of his red face and open mouth, as both of them were hurled bodily across the deck. The *Empire Heron* jarred and trembled, there was a tearing of steel plates; the rope fenders crunched and splintered. They could hear someone shouting on the bridge and there was a

surge of scalding steam. Another sea lifted the tramp and hurled her against the *Empire Heron* again. There were cries and shouts. This time Chief Petty Officer Grace, lying against a bulkhead and badly frightened, saw men through the mist jumping down from the tramp, sprawling on the deck and then clambering away on all fours. One of them, a grey-haired seaman, misjudged the distance. He hit the handrail, clawed and with a scream fell back as the two ships came together for the third time. Just for these brief moments it was possible for the survivors to jump the distance. Twelve did so: two others fell between and were not seen again, their only trace was the blood printed against the ship's side as if by a giant stamp.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth had bent every ounce of concentration on the handling of the ship. Now he saw there was no more to be done.

'Half ahead,' he said.

'Engines half ahead, sir.'

The gap between the *Empire Heron* and the sinking tramp widened: the great broad white surge of the *Heron's* wake washed over the brimming decks. Then there was a wide road of green sea between them.

'Unorthodox,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, half to himself. 'But it was worth it.'

He turned to see a small man in a blue-serge jacket at his elbow.

'I'm her master,' said the small man. 'Can I see her go.'

'Sorry,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'But we've got to push on. You all right?'

'Aye.'

'Go below and get yourself a tot of rum.'

The small Scot shook his head.

'I'm not needing rum, thank you just the same. And thank you for your assistance, sir. There aren't many that would have done it.'

'That's all right. We'll take a drink together in Greenock, eh?'

The convoy had been swallowed up in the dusk. There was a hush in the air; a great mantle of black clouds was spreading over the sky, the sea was steel-grey, rising and falling in creaming surges. A destroyer came nosing up to them, calling up the *Empire Heron* on her loud-hailer. Commander Foxe-Forsyth could see the figures on the bridge through his glasses. The commanding officer was an elegant figure in a yellow polo sweater beneath his monkey jacket and an elegant woollen skiing cap on his head.

'You're a couple of miles astern,' said the voice on the loud-hailer. 'What speed can you make?'

The Aldis lamp from the *Empire Heron's* bridge flicked back: '*Twelve. We will be making best speed.*'

'A bad thing to straggle in a party like this. Good luck.'

The signalman acknowledged the message with his flag. They watched the destroyer gliding forward in the ugly sea, away and out of reach.

'Signalman. Make from C.O. to C.O. What kind of a rig is that, Dusty? R.P.C. Bay Hotel bar on arrival. Foxy.'

The shaded lamp blinked out at the disappearing destroyer. Soon the pinpoint of light began to flicker back.

'With pleasure.'

The destroyer was an insubstantial shadow in the wilderness of night and sea. A ragged white ensign was flying at her stern.

The *Empire Heron* had suffered damage. The bridge stanchions were bent, the port lifeboat had been holed, and there was a wide, gaping rent in the bows which slowed her down. As she struggled to retrieve the convoy she seemed to be panting like a breathless animal in the heavy seas. Before long Commander Foxe-Forsyth was aware that the ship was making hardly more than five knots. He sent for the Warrant Engineer.

'Can't you give us any more, Manners?'

'I'm afraid not, sir. I'm pushing her as hard as she'll go.'

(What did he think she was, thought the Warrant Officer sourly, a blasted thirty-knot cruiser?)

'Do what you can. I want to catch up by midnight.'

The Warrant Engineer went below. In less than an hour he was back: 'We'll have to ease her down.'

'Make it so,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

Standing on the bridge he heard with half an ear the revolutions diminishing, changing the whole tempo and motion of the ship. It was not long before everyone on board knew what had happened. It was no surprise when dawn broke, that no convoy was in sight.

'A straggler, that's what we are,' said Chief Petty Officer Grace. 'A member of the straggler's club. And a raider about, too.'

Every man on board knew now that their chances of survival had been cut almost in half. The odds on their being located by a submarine and picked off almost at will were all too obvious. And there would be no hope if they fell in with the raider. Yet with the desperateness of their position, there came to this ill-assorted collection of uncomfortable and sodden men a sudden gaiety of courage. The spirit of the ship rose; men sang and whistled; from the cabin flats came the sound of a mouth-organ playing. The ship's position was about fourteen west: she might make the Clyde in four days if all went well. There was nothing to be done except to limp along at best speed. As the day progressed the weather moderated: by evening the sea was

no more than a green, surging carpet against a white emptiness of sky in which the bow lifted and dropped gently and comfortably.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth breathed an inward sigh as darkness fell. A commanding officer must act alone and his actions are analysed and debated by the ship's company. Commander Foxe-Forsyth had his own conviction that the action he had taken had been right; the cheerfulness of his ship's company told him that they agreed with it and trusted him. At seven o'clock a raider report was brought up from the wireless office. It was from an unidentified ship giving bearing and distance of a pocket battleship. Commander Foxe-Forsyth took it and went into the chartroom. He plotted the positions and stood staring at them for some minutes. Then he sent for the first lieutenant and handed him the signal. Carboys glanced at the chart and whistled.

'That's uncomfortably close, sir.'

'Right in our backyard,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth. 'It's obvious that the Fleet are out after her. We'll hope they bring her to battle. On the other hand, in this visibility she may get away. If she's on the run she may twist and turn in any direction. There's nothing much we can do about it except make damned sure we get out an enemy report with an accurate position before she deals with us. Have a word with the Petty Officer Tel., will you? Tell him our position will be sent down every fifteen minutes. And he'd better stay on duty in the W/T office until further orders.'

'Yes, sir.'

And so the *Empire Heron* moved slowly and ponderously through the night—an inkier silhouette to be picked up against pitch blackness from a raider's bridge. Of course, if she was on the run, the raider might leave her. Probably would, Commander Foxe-Forsyth decided, rather than risk giving away her position. But, whatever happened, if the German was to be located and sunk, if the vast damage she could do was to be prevented, she must be seen first from the *Empire Heron* and her whereabouts reported. That was a plain and important duty. Commander Foxe-Forsyth envied with all his heart the men in the cruisers and battleships engaged in the chase with such a prospect of action. And here he was in a broken-down merchant ship!

'Lucky devils,' he murmured. 'Lucky devils.'

But no further intercepted signals came in. It was certain that the pocket battleship had not been found. It was even possible that the enemy report was a hoax. At all events, Commander Foxe-Forsyth estimated that the following day was critical.

Dawn, pale and misty, found Commander Foxe-Forsyth hunched in his chair on the wing of the wet bridge. The ship was still making five knots and the Warrant Engineer hoped that he could continue giving it. There was

comfort in that; otherwise the dripping decks, the grey mist and waters were far from cheering. He permitted himself to wonder for a few minutes what his wife and Mary would be doing to-day. He pictured them still asleep in the comfort of home. The longing to see them and be with them again was intense.

'You married, Johnston?' he asked, suddenly.

Johnston, who had been keeping the morning watch, looked rather startled.

'No, sir. Of course not. It's not that I don't like girls. I do. I took one out in New York and she was most gay and intelligent, quite lovely to be with. But marriage——!'

'What do you do in peace-time?'

'I'm a writer. I *wanted* to go in for ballet, but it simply wasn't any use.'

Ballet? Did that mean the fellow wanted to leap about the place like a maniac? Here, in the wastes of mid-Atlantic Commander Foxe-Forsyth was shocked.

'I simply couldn't get my fouettés right,' continued Johnston, happily. 'Port ten, quartermaster. Steady as you go.'

Settled on this leg of the zigzag he came back to Commander Foxe-Forsyth's side.

'What did you write?' asked Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

'Oh, *anything*. One has to live. I really wanted to write novels. I mean, all this'—the hand was waved over the sullen, heaving Atlantic with its pallid skyscape—'there's a novel here. Of course, I shall make everyone very heroic and efficient. And we shall all suffer most terribly. It wouldn't do to admit that bits of it are rather fun, would it? I, myself, will be cool, calm and level-headed. At one point I shall dive into the sea and rescue a rating or something. I really must write it.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth listened to these words in amazement. To him this was a job, his very life. Yet Johnston, this—this penny-a-liner, this writer of penny dreadfuls, was seeing it as something to write about.

'Good God!' he said. Fortunately at that moment Collins came up at eight bells to relieve Johnston for the forenoon watch. Oblivious of the impression he had made Johnston went below, whistling, to the saloon.

'Good morning, Steward,' he said, going into the galley. 'Give the largest possible cup of coffee, there's a dear boy.'

The day was Sunday and as the sea had ironed out Commander Foxe-Forsyth decided upon divisions and church. It was far from customary in a small ship at sea but in the *Empire Heron's* position, he felt obscurely that the routine could only do good. There was just room beside the hatches in

the forward well. Commander Foxe-Forsyth walked past the rows of petty officers and ratings, pale, their uniforms creased, far from smart. For once, however, he could not care about smartness; his heart was overwhelmed with pride and affection for these men he commanded.

He read a brief service himself, standing on the hatch cover beside the cans of high-octane fuel. He normally rather fancied his enunciation and took pleasure in uttering the sonorous words. But he had already read the burial service three times on this trip and he had taken no pleasure in that. And now, in the ship's crisis, himself assailed by fatigue and lack of sleep, there was a special poignancy in the words.

> 'Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious Sovereign Lord, King George, and his Dominions, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions; that the inhabitants of our Island may in peace and quietness serve thee our God; and that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land . . .'

Afterwards he addressed the ship's company. He said: 'As you know, there is a German raider in our area. If we encounter it, then I will make no bones about the situation—we can only commend ourselves to God. You know that as well as I know it. We are in unusual circumstances in this ship. We are not a ship of war, but we fly the white ensign. That being so, I will promise you this: First we will play our part by giving the hunting force a pinpoint accurate enemy report. Having done that, I intend to turn the ship towards the enemy with the intention of ramming—and we shall proceed on that course until we are damned well blown out of the water. Good luck to you all.'

He jumped down from the hatch with a cheery wave of the hand and strode aft. He made a brief return to the bridge where the first lieutenant was doubling the watch with Collins.

'Any development?' he asked.

'Nothing, sir.'

His eyes went out to the horizon. The visibility was clear—that meant that the hunting force would be able to fly off aircraft. It was bad for the *Empire Heron*; but it was bad for the raider, too. He said: 'If the position was accurate in the enemy report, she cannot sight us until two o'clock this afternoon. That's assuming she's making twenty-five knots. If they have found her they may get in a torpedo attack before then. Let us hope so!'

With a final look round he left the bridge again. He had previously only snatched a few minutes to see the arrangements which had been made for the survivors. He found that the first lieutenant had done a good job. The saloon had been stripped and the casualties lay on mattresses on the deck; three suffering from serious burns were still delirious; three more had swallowed oil fuel, coughing despairingly and incessantly, another had a broken leg and there were two cases of shock—seamen who sat up hunched and grey, with the horror of their experience. Commander Foxe-Forsyth looked, but said little. Outside he spoke to Chief Petty Officer Grace, who, in the absence of a sick berth attendant, had given himself the job.

'How are they doing, Grace?'

'Not so bad, sir. I think they'll all pull through; though some of them go sudden, especially the big chaps.'

'Hmmm.'

'I've been giving out the morphia, sir, as per instructions on the label. It ought to last. Commander Pringle—he's been helping, sir.'

'Thanks, Grace. You've done a good job.'

Commander Foxe-Forsyth climbed the companion and went into Commander Pringle's cabin. Pringle was sitting at the desk, writing a letter in a thin, neat hand. He gave the impression of one writing a letter to a duchess. Since the rescue of the survivors he had no longer haunted the bridge. Now he was immaculately dressed in Number One uniform, as if he were about to step ashore to a commander-in-chief's reception.

'Grace tells me you've been doing stout work with the casualties, Pringle,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth.

Commander Pringle laid down his pen.

'I know a little first-aid. I felt I had to help the poor devils. I only wish one could do more. Is there any news?'

'None. If you work out a few permutations and combinations—our chances of not being sighted are rosy.'

Commander Pringle's listless eye brightened a little. 'I hope so. Though,' he added, thoughtfully, 'if one has lived one's life in a little steel box, there may be some completeness in ending it there.'

'No chance this trip,' said Commander Foxe-Forsyth, cheerfully. 'Your chessmen are working beautifully.'

He went out. It couldn't be fun to be a misfit in the Navy: hard to credit how anyone could be, though. He was glad that Commander Pringle had not let the side down.

Aware now of the effort he climbed upwards, back to the bridge.

Early in the afternoon the sun came out: it was like the opening of a vast umbrella that had been obscuring the ship. Colour and sound came back into

their world: banks of cloud and blue sky were lifted above a green carpet of water. Commander Foxe-Forsyth saw the change with mixed feelings, but he betrayed his anxiety only by a sudden and unusual cheerfulness.

'Always remember a print we had at home,' he said. 'French, I think. It was called *Quelle douceur dans le zéphir* and they kindly put a translation, "What fragrance in the gentle breeze." Only French I ever knew, except that bit on the back of the H.P. sauce label."

Brent, who was officer of the watch, laughed politely. Nothing had happened during the past few days to change his opinion of the Royal Navy or its officers. The latter were incompetent and couldn't work a ship unless they had a hundred men to every job.

It was two-thirty. Double look-outs had been posted but, otherwise, the tension in the ship had slackened. They had survived so far and it seemed to most of the ship's company now that they would get through. The ship was silent and deserted as she nosed her way on. Commander Foxe-Forsyth, however, did not let his attention waver for a moment, sweeping the horizon with the vast pair of Barr and Stroud binoculars which had been his for fifteen years. But it was Brent who made the sighting.

'There's smoke over there, about five degrees on the starboard bow,' he said, laconically.

Commander Foxe-Forsyth shifted the binoculars and stared intently. There was nothing to be seen except a small black smudge of smoke, no bigger than a tennis ball, against the blue sky of the horizon. The two men watched it for some moments before Commander Foxe-Forsyth spoke. He said:

'Action Stations. Warn the W/T office to stand by at the ready with the enemy report. Number One, check our position now—1438.'

There was no alarm gong in the *Empire Heron*. A quartermaster ran through the cabin flat with his pipe, which could be heard thinly on the bridge. Then there came a clatter of feet on the deck. Commander Foxe-Forsyth strained his eyes at the distant ship with Brent by his side.

'She's travelling fast,' he said. 'Southerly course. Hmm!'

As he watched the smudge of smoke disappeared and, in its place was a sharper, harder outline: soon they could see her hull down. The minutes passed in sick suspense. It hardly seemed possible that, after all, the worst must happen to them, that they must run straight into an enemy raider. But the suspense was not admitted: it was as if everyone tried to go to the opposite extreme of indifference. The gun's crew at their pathetic 4-inch gun huddled behind the shelter in their duffel-coats, with the muzzle trained to bear:

'Imagine this tub getting hit with a 12-inch brick. What a calamity!'

‘It’s nice weather for a bathe, Skunk.’

‘Thank you, I don’t swim.’

On the bridge there was silence. Commander Foxe-Forsyth watched the ship, which was closing them now with great speed. At any moment, he knew, they would see the puff, the bright flash as her guns spoke: then the seconds would pass and the shells would arrive. Pass overhead on the first salvo, perhaps, like express trains. And then, the next time, it would be the end of his ship.

‘*Quelle douceur dans le zéphir!*’ he murmured to himself.

He saw now that she was a naval ship but she was too far away to betray her class. As he watched, he saw she had altered course. Well, this was it. She was well within range. He waited, with an odd, contented calm, for the unknown. The minutes passed. At any rate, she was going to close them. And then, as with every second her outline became plainer, a bright, glaring signal lantern winked a challenge at them. At the same moment the yeoman of signals spoke:

‘It’s the *Hercules*, sir.’

Commander Foxe-Forsyth dropped his binoculars until they dangled on the strap.

‘Blast her bloody eyes,’ he said. ‘Get that reply out quickly.’

He added: ‘Make afterwards: “Whenever he comes near me I get nervous. What is a girl to do?” ’

The Aldis lamp blinked out its message. The reply came back: ‘Sorry. Intentions honourable.’ Then the racing cruiser, with a great bow creaming, disappeared again towards the skyline. On the *Empire Heron* they watched her go. A false alarm. Somehow the anti-climax needed summing up. It was Weldon who did so:

‘Only bloody British,’ he observed, sucking his teeth.

Three days later the *Empire Heron* limped into the Clyde and dropped anchor, as if weary, in the Gair Loch. Behind them was the battlefield of the Western Approaches, that strange mixture of steel-grey seas, and banked clouds with so often the traces of battle—smashed lifeboats drifting by, a sodden parachute, an oily corpse or merely a solitary empty wooden box. There had been plenty of such evidence washed slowly and sadly past the ship while Mother Carey’s chicks fluttered round the bow. Now they were home, arriving unexpected and unrecognized, almost, it seemed, unwanted.

At the first opportunity Commander Foxe-Forsyth went ashore. In the N.O.I.C.’s office, as he had hoped, he found one of his friends, Commander Burn, seated in an overheated office behind a pile of paper.

‘Hullo, Foxy!’ he cried. ‘Where have you sprung from?’

‘I brought over a merchant ship from New York. One way of getting a naval draft home.’

‘Good trip?’

‘Quite good. A few unfriendly U-boats.’

It sounded lame; but, after all, when you came to sum it up there was nothing more to say. He felt suddenly the strain and fatigue of the past days. He leaned forward and said, more loudly than he had intended.

‘George, I want reliefs for my draft. And I want them quick. Stir them up at the Admiralty, will you?’

Years ago, he reflected, he would have acted differently. He would have said: ‘I’ve just made a crossing with an old woman of a Pay Commander, an R.N.V.R. ballet dancer, a couple of bolshie merchant navy officers. I’ve worked the ship with a gash draft, and, for the moment, I’ve had all I can stand.’ The years brought wisdom. What was the use of crying out at people’s indifference? How could they know?

Outside Commander Foxe-Forsyth gazed at the river and at the ships at rest upon its muddy bosom. It was afternoon. Already there was snow on the hills and a snowy sky. Cargoes were being off-loaded, winches were turning and derricks were swung out. A couple of cruisers lay at anchor, squat and grey against the hills.

Three thousand miles to the west was the humming thriving continent he had just left. He thought of its people, so kind and so cruel, with deep gratitude in his heart. Now he must adjust himself to the slower pace. For a moment he looked at the scene which lay before him under the reddening sun.

‘Funny,’ he murmured to himself.

And, shaking his head at some thought born of utter fatigue, he walked down the jetty.

PART THREE
1952 THRU 1954

★

The Mediterranean

5

The Comet airliner in which Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was travelling as passenger whistled down from its own cloud country over the rooftops of Rome, Italy.

It was five months after his visit to Paris. During that time it had been indicated to him, upon high authority, that when a satisfactory solution of the Mediterranean command structure had been reached, he would be posted there as Commander-in-Chief.

There had been bickering between Britain and the United States. In Washington it was held that overall command of the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to Suez should be exercised by the nation which maintained the largest fleet of ships there. Thus (should The Peace be broken) their vessels could move in concert with the overall European defence plan and atom bombs could be flown off carriers in the Mediterranean in defence of the free world.

Contrariwise, the Admiralty and Westminster retained an ancient British affection for command of a sea which (they felt) was theirs by tradition and which, so recently, they had retained by their own exertions. They had the idea that support for an American commander by the smaller allied nations was based upon the hope of dollars for themselves.

The appointment of Admiral Kzecky to the Southern Command in Europe was in no way a solution. Although his headquarters were in Naples this was primarily a land command for Southern Europe. It was suspected by some, however, that it had been a clever move on the part of the Americans: in effect, their Admiral was already there as incumbent of the Mediterranean.

The storm blew about Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's ears and, as many a storm before, it left him unmoved. He was not a politician and politics did not interest him; sooner or later, he knew, something would be patched up. Strolling across from the Admiralty with his friend, the Fourth Sea Lord, he spoke his mind.

'Frankly, Tim,' he said, 'it don't matter a damn whether I command the Mediterranean or Kzecky does. I know him pretty well and he is more than capable of maintaining an offensive policy and putting his ships where he wants them. I have yet to meet an American admiral who could not do that. There are some people who appear to think God bestowed some kind of nautical monopoly upon the Royal Navy.'

‘Heresy,’ said the Fourth Sea Lord. ‘Don’t you want a nice prestige allied command, Foxy?’

‘Mixed feelings,’ grunted Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘It means the end of my sea time. A Commander-in-Chief these days sits in a concrete cellar in the middle of a field. Might as well be playing halma.’

‘Oh, well. There ought to be a decision soon.’

But there was nothing but delay, frustration and disappointment as high-level meetings were held and letters, memoranda and telephone calls shuttled back and forth across the Atlantic. In the midst of all this, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth received a letter from Admiral Kzecky inviting him to pay a private visit to Naples.

‘You may be interested,’ wrote Admiral Kzecky, ‘to see what is going on in the field of allied co-operation. Also it would be good to see you again, old top.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth read the letter with pleasure. Then he sniffed it. Was there some trick? It might involve a delicate situation and he must take advice. Didn’t want to put his foot in it. At lunch-time next day he tossed it across the table to the Fourth Sea Lord.

‘What do you make of that, Tim?’

The Fourth Sea Lord read the letter carefully, folded it and pursed his lips.

‘Do you like Kzecky, Foxy?’

‘Yes. We get on very well. Very few differences. Why?’

‘You know how damned difficult he’s being these days? He’s been pulling every string back in Washington to keep the “goddamned-limeys” out.’

‘Perhaps he believes we *should* be out?’

‘It would be interesting to know.’ Tim handed back the letter. ‘If you didn’t like Kzecky, Foxy, I would advise you to stay at home. But it is obvious you do—and you don’t like people easily. I should put this forward as a useful venture.’

He chuckled.

‘I can’t see that the two of you would get into trouble if you had a run ashore together.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth remembered Paris. He cleared his throat.

‘Hmm,’ he said. ‘Don’t underrate elderly gentlemen.’

Next day approval came for a private visit. Leave was granted. At the week-end Admiral Foxe-Forsyth took the news back to Suffolk. Away about a fortnight. First stop, Naples, where Kzecky had his headquarters. Mary and her mother exchanged glances. Was there anything in this for them? The Mediterranean in October? Simultaneously they decided that it was out of

the question. When they came to think of it, they were glad that their home had received a reprieve. They might see enough of the Mediterranean later —or, at any rate, some other part of the world.

The Comet landed at Ciampino airport and taxied round to the airport building. The steps were rolled up and the passengers walked across to the Arrival doorway—to be greeted with a smell of wet dust, garlic and tobacco which, somehow, proclaims a Mediterranean country. From Ciampino they were driven back in a huge autobus to the airways office in the middle of Rome.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth would have been the last to admit it, but he felt slightly uneasy. He was wearing plain clothes and there were a couple of hours before he caught the evening express down to Naples. Once he reached Naples all would be well: the appropriate signals had been sent by way of the United States Navy Headquarters in Grosvenor Square and an American Commander had rung up to say that 'the whole operation was on the beam, sir.'

In Rome, in the meantime, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was aware that 'he didn't speak a word of the lingo.' On previous visits to Italy he had always been in a ship: the uniform, the white ensign, the prestige of the Royal Navy had eliminated strangeness. But now he felt lonely. A forlorn man of middle-age who might—-well, he might be a salesman!

This appalling thought goaded him into activity. He must establish a headquarters! He was about to enquire for the best hotel when he was interrupted by the lean, bespectacled American who had sat next to him in the Comet.

'I have just got to get down and see St Peter's, sir,' he said. 'Would you care to join me?'

St Peter's? Why not? The Admiral had 'heard a lot about it' which meant, in effect, that he knew it existed. He did not really care whether he saw it now, but it would fill in the time.

'Delighted,' he said.

They took a taxi and drove past ruin, statuary and vast buildings until they arrived at the piazza, with the mighty outline of St Peter's standing over it in calm domination. They shared the price of the taxi punctiliously and walked up the steps. Within they stood before the vast, imposing drama of the interior. They paused, wordless. Then, as if by signal, they walked down the nave towards the dome, past porphyry, coloured marble incrustation, pilaster and the gilding of the ceiling, until they stood before the high altar and the barbaric majesty of the canopy with its fantastic superstructure. They gazed, unknowing, at the work of Bernini and Michaelangelo,

Bramante and Raphael. Then, with not so much as a whisper they returned, their footsteps sounding hollow on the marble pavement.

The whole operation lasted ten minutes. It left Admiral Foxe-Forsyth at a loss: he recognized the eternal but had no word of feeling for it. As they stepped outside he glanced at his companion. What impact had St Peter's made upon him? The American, brown and lean, walked silently down the slope of the piazza. Finally, he spoke:

'That,' he said, 'is certainly a big church.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was not without a certain grim sense of humour. Nothing about these words on this occasion, however, struck him as funny. Instead, he glanced at his companion. With almost a shock he recognized him—lean, shrewd, serious, kindly and wanting kindness, he was the common denominator of the United States. Charles P. Stump, in whose company he found himself, was 'Mr America.'

'Come and have a cup of tea,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

He was pleased with himself: for if, at some future time, he was fortunate enough to be placed in a top allied command, then Charles P. Stump would be one of those whose money he would carry. He must get to know him.

Stump was a familiar enough figure. He was looking at Europe with the assistance of a travel agency which had furnished him with an itinerary: he was catching a train north to Florence, where he would pick up an appointed hotel, a party of fellow-tourists and a guide.

'What are your impressions of Europe so far?' asked Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

Charles Stump did not speak for a few moments. Then: 'I am favourably impressed,' he said. 'I am not one of those Americans who accuse Europeans of sitting around in sidewalk cafés while America pours out dollars to finance their idleness. I do not think it possible, nor desirable, that we should in any way attempt to mould European nations, with their age-old culture, into some Chinese copy of the United States. Already I have seen signs of recovery here and that means that the primary cause of American assistance has been substantially met. I do not think every other Frenchman or Italian is a Communist: nor can I fail to understand that some resentment towards those whose bounty has been accepted should be felt in the countries of Europe. 'In fact,' said Charles Stump, concluding the litany firmly, 'I am of the opinion that there are too many Americans in Paris and that a half of them should be sent home.'

'What——?' began Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

‘There is one thing above all that angers me as a plain American citizen. When I hear it said that the United States is a warmonger. We are a peaceful people. The record shows that.’

‘Of course——’

‘The record shows it. We never have wanted wars and we certainly do not wish one now. Our policy has grown from isolationism to that of accepting world responsibility. I am one hundred per cent behind that. As an American I believe firmly in the dignity and freedom of the individual, in a Christian tradition and liberal principles. No, sir—I cannot conceive a world in which the political, religious and social ideas of Europe have been drowned under a flood of Russian barbarism; and if, by paying more dollars on our taxes we can prevent that, I do it willingly.’

‘Mind you——’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

‘We are not blameless. We have, I admit it, been clumsy, but we have a lot of time to make up. We have not the experience of diplomacy of the British, for instance. We are impetuous and hasty. We are impatient. We are impulsive——’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth gave up trying to take a part in the conversation. He sat in the warm sunshine, with the white tablecloth flapping in the breeze. He was not laughing at Charles Stump. He took him very seriously, indeed. For Charles Stump, no less, was enunciating the ordinary Americans backing for a new conception and it was that, multiplied millions of times, which ultimately made up a foreign policy. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was grateful.

He caught the Naples express from Rome central station and, now that he was sitting back in his compartment, viewed the future with relief. A car would meet him and take him up to Kzecky’s villa: there would be a late dinner, some pleasant chat over a whisky, then bed.

The electric express arrived punctually. He stepped down from the carriage and looked for Admiral Kzecky and the party which would greet him. Scanning up and down among the hurrying passengers he saw no more signs of an official welcome than a couple of gum-chewing American sailors. Surrounded by his baggage he waited ten minutes near the barrier.

No one came, no majestic car with a flag on the bonnet swept round in front of the station. As the minutes passed he found himself in a dilemma: Kzecky had written to him on headquarters notepaper and he had no idea of the address of his private residence. Still, it should not be difficult to find out. He hailed a taxi.

‘Headquarters, Commander-in-Chief, South,’ he said. Then seeing the blank look on the driver’s face, he added: ‘NATO.’

‘NATO?’

The driver stared. What was it? A night-club?

‘Navy,’ he said, desperately. ‘Admiral where he live.’

‘Ah! Si, signor.’

The taxi-driver went off at great speed and in a few minutes had delivered him down at the rebuilt portion of the port, where two American naval vessels lay stern-to at the jetty. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth paid the driver and went up the lighted gangway. He was saluted by a quartermaster to whom he gave his name: the quartermaster passed him to the officer of the deck who took him to the officer of the day. The officer of the day, sitting in an open-doored cheerless cabin reminiscent of a biscuit box, looked blank.

‘We are happy to have you on board, Admiral, but I have no information on you.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth checked a feeling of considerable irritation by reminding himself that he was in plain clothes on a private visit.

‘I am only seeking the address of Admiral Kzecky’s house,’ he said.

‘I have no information about that, sir.’

‘This is Admiral Kzecky’s headquarters?’

‘Why, no, sir. The headquarters are way round on the hill on Posilipo. There will be no one there at this time. If you will excuse me, sir, I will make inquiries.’

He picked up his cap and left the cabin. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stared at the photograph of a toothy American wife. It was some time before the duty officer reappeared. He looked crestfallen.

‘It seems things are snarled up, Admiral. They are not expecting you to-day at Admiral Kzecky’s villa.’

‘There was a signal made from London. I read it.’

‘They have had no information, sir.’

‘Then, perhaps, I might speak on the telephone with Admiral Kzecky?’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was almost elaborate.

‘I am sorry, sir. Admiral Kzecky is not flying in from Verona until midnight.’

‘And Mrs Kzecky?’

‘She’s out playing bridge this evening, sir.’

‘Hmm.’ Admiral Foxe-Forsyth gave the matter a minute’s thought and came to a common-sense decision. He said: ‘I had better stay the night at an hotel until this is sorted out. Can you give me transportation?’

He took a comfortable room at an hotel, turned in and slept soundly. He was still sleeping at eight o’clock next morning when the telephone rang. An anxious voice spoke:

‘This is Admiral Kzecky’s flag lieutenant, sir. The Admiral wishes me to express his profound apologies. He had no signal, sir.’

‘That’s quite all right,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, graciously. ‘Please tell him not to worry.’

‘Captain Parry is on the way to your hotel now, sir. He will bring you up to headquarters to meet with the Admiral and I will arrange to have your baggage brought to the villa.’

‘Thank you.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth rose, stared out at the marble statues which decorated the terraces above his window, and began to shave. He was half-dressed when the telephone rang to announce that Captain Parry was waiting below. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth took his time, ensured that his appearance was without fault, and took the lift down. A short grizzled Captain of the United States Navy advanced towards him:

‘Admiral,’ he said, stretching out a hand, ‘I am the darnedest man. I grovel before you, sir. That signal was in my pocket all the time.’

‘Has happened with us,’ conceded Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

Parry said unexpectedly, but with deep appreciation:

‘But, boy, was Schlutzie burned up!’

‘Schlutzie?’

‘Yeah, that’s Kzecky’s nickname. Has been for years.’

Schlutzie! Well, well—anything could happen now, anything. And Schlutzie played the sax.

‘He certainly made me hop around,’ said Captain Parry. ‘Shall we go along now?’

They climbed into a black Cadillac and drove round the sweep of the Bay. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth glanced at Captain Parry. A highly developed sense detected that Parry did not quite fit: despite the uniform, he could not smell the sea in him. He was correct. Before very few minutes the Captain made the position plain.

‘I’m no seaman, Admiral. Admiral Kzecky pulled me out of advertising and gave me the trimmings.’

‘What on earth for?’

‘Build-up. I have to put him on the map and see he stays on while he’s out on a limb here.’

Incredible!

Captain Parry handed him a paper. ‘Admiral, I have fixed the following itinerary for your visit to headquarters to-morrow.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth read:

0900-0930 Meet with General Clump
0930-0950 Snack bar
0950-1025 Meet with General Perozi-Gilera
1025-1055 Meet with Admiral Pipe (logistics)
1100-1125 Meet with Admiral Lecran
1130-1330 Lunch with Admiral Kzecky and Admiral Perozi-Gilera
1330-1355 Quartermaster
1400-1425 General Hamble Gubbins (air)
1500-1525 Engineer
1530-1555 Signal
1600-1625 Snack bar
1630-1700 Medical at Hospital Area
1715 'Welcome Club'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was not a man to spare himself, but his heart sank at the formidable nature of the programme. It was far from the leisurely round in the Mediterranean which he had pictured.

'Thank you,' he said, handing back the paper. 'That will do very well.'

The car turned to the right now and began to climb the winding roads of the Posilipo. Behind them was the blue of the bay and the sun was warm. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth experienced that comfortable feeling that life was good. Rounding yet another bend they came to a halt outside a white block of flats: this, a board announced, was 'Headquarters CINCSOUTH.' They left the car and went inside.

Admiral Kzecky had chosen for his office a handsome room on the third floor. Through the windows could be seen the blue carpet of the Bay, with Vesuvius in the distance and the shape of Capri standing out like a sea-serpent. As Admiral Foxe-Forsyth entered with Captain Parry, Admiral Kzecky was sitting at his desk. It was a large, polished desk, furnished only with a plastic inkwell and a virgin blotter. Kzecky sat with his hands clasped together on the blotter, outlined against a relief map of the Mediterranean behind him. There were two flags—an Admiral's flag and the flag of the United States. He gave an impression, so Admiral Foxe-Forsyth decided, of 'owning the place.'

The impression was only momentary. Next moment Kzecky had fallen upon him, was wringing his hand, patting his shoulder and gently punching him.

‘Happy to have you on board,’ he cried. ‘You old sonofabitch, happy to have you on board!’

‘Nice to see you again,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

‘And was I burned up about last night. When I flew in from Verona I found Edie so gosh darned mad she wiped the floor with me. I promise you she did!’

Edie? Must be Mrs Kzecky. Schlutzie and Edie. Was he going to enjoy himself as much as he thought?

Kzecky waved him to a chair: he, himself, sat down on a sofa with Gus Parry beside him. The two admirals were separated by a round table bearing a bowl of salted almonds. Gus Parry took one and cracked it between his teeth.

‘Well, Strang, I want you to see all you want of this command. The Mediterranean is a very fascinating sea. You should get to know it.’

Gods! Get to know it.

‘Next week there are army manœuvres in the north with some of my alpini. I will be pretty busy with the planning, but I would like you to arrange with Gus here whatever you want to see. Incidentally, the Sixth Fleet will be sailing to give support to the manœuvres in the Ligurian Sea.’

(Owns the place, decided Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, quite obvious.)

‘The military battle in the north is vital. If the sea is to be held, the land battle cannot be lost.’

Gus Parry cracked a nut. He sat on the sofa, looking like a man whose host has just put on a record of Bach.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth listened as Kzecky talked ‘broad-brush-wise.’ A curious phenomenon had taken place. Kzecky had changed. He was no longer the same man whom he had known in Paris or during Exercise ‘Flamethrower’: the kindliness, homeliness and humanity were still there but something else was present—a symptom which Admiral Foxe-Forsyth could readily recognize. Kzecky’s feet were no longer securely on the ground.

‘Whom the gods wish to destroy,’ murmured Admiral Foxe-Forsyth to himself, ‘they first make mad.’

Kzecky was talking, talking volubly. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth considered that he should not go on so long, should leave out the ‘I,’ should talk more slowly—as if the hearer mattered. He began to find his attention wavering. He started reaching for the nuts with Gus Parry. But at length his attention was brought back by a remarkable question.

‘Do you know,’ said Kzecky, ‘how much it cost Julius Cæsar to kill a Gaul?’

‘Good God, no!’

‘Forty-five cents.’

‘Wouldn’t he have been dealing in drachma or something?’

‘It’s an off-the-cuff figure. I had it worked out back in Washington. And to-day——’ Kzecky stood up with emotion and paced the office. ‘Do you know that in the last war it cost a quarter of a million dollars to kill one German?’

‘Hmm.’

‘That’s not economic. That’s why I want all the advanced, unrestricted thinkers I can get hold of. I want to get rid of stultified thinking, using progressive thinkers to build on shock techniques that were crystallized in World War Two.’

As Admiral Kzecky spoke the peaceful view of blue sky and sea through the windows turned, in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s imagination, dark as a thunder cloud. There came to mind an apocalypse of destruction, of small blinding suns that scorched the earth, of flame and fear. Was this what the kindly tourist, Charles P. Stump had been supporting? Of course not. No more did Admiral Kzecky who seemed to have this novel conception of his command as a gigantic factory. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had never blinked at facts, but he felt an uneasiness the reason of which he could not quite place.

‘We haven’t come a very long way since Vesuvius,’ he murmured, rising to his feet.

Into these waters after the Battle of the Nile Lord Nelson had followed *Culloden* and *Alexander* in his ‘poor, wretched *Vanguard*’ to be fêted at the Neapolitan Court. And now here, a century and a half later, were his successors. And, incredible thought, he might well be one. He felt a surge of inward pride. Well, Nelson had had a basinful of troubles over allied commands in Naples.

‘ “The Neapolitan officers,” ’ he quoted, irrelevantly, ‘ “did not lose much honour, for, God knows, they had not much to lose; but they lost all they had.” ’

‘What’s that?’ said Admiral Kzecky.

‘Nelson’s words. He had a bit of trouble in this part of the world. Used to make him angry. “A country of fiddlers and poets, whores and scoundrels.” ’

‘Is that so?’ said Admiral Kzecky. ‘Why, that is not my experience. Last week-end I was over there in Capri. I saw the piazza, the piccola marina, I climbed way up to Anacapri and saw Munthe’s villa, I then stood in for a highball at the Canzone del Mare, and as I sat there I was saturated with the beauty of it all. I was, indeed, reminded of the great words of Emil Ludwig. You know them?’

‘No.’

Whatever the answer had been there was no doubt that Admiral Kzecky was bent on quoting. He went on:

> '*Loveliest of all seas, favoured by situation, shape, and climate above all others, and likewise before all others discovered and sailed. This is the Helen among oceans; like her it was desired by all that saw it, and captured by the boldest. But it was fought over not for ten but two thousand years. Then it was half-forsaken, obscured by the fame of new and distant oceans; rediscovered, as it were, after three hundred years; and to-day, before our eyes, it is fought over anew.*'

There was silence, broken by a small sound. It was Gus Parry cracking a nut. Admiral Kzecky looked at his watch and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth realized what a disadvantage it can be to be unoccupied and in civilian uniform when other men had work to do.

'See you at lunch, Strang,' said Kzecky. 'Edie will be tickled to death. Meantime, Gus will look after you.'

They left the office, passing through the ante-room and down the marble stairs.

'The Admiral,' said Gus Parry, after a long pause, 'is certainly articulate.'

They sat in Gus Parry's office to discuss an itinerary. Here Parry was on his own ground. He revealed himself as accommodating and helpful, with a forthright scorn for red tape. He talked of affairs in the Mediterranean with candour and freedom. Much of what he said, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth already knew, but there was always something to be learned.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had fought in Mediterranean waters in *Imperious* and, previous to that, nearly eight years of service life had been spent there. He knew it well. He knew the golden outlines of Ras-el-Tin at Alexandria; equally well did he know the barren rocks of Suda Bay and the palm and bourgainvillea of Gibraltar. He had sailed in the Mediterranean in all moods of weather, and he knew most of it now, as a sailor, instinctively and in his bones. He knew it as he might know a well-read chapter in the *Life of Nelson*.

But since he had last seen it in 1944 there had been a great change. The British Mediterranean Fleet at Malta had first dwindled to a solitary cruiser with some frigate and destroyer flotillas, then recovered a little of its strength with the addition of an aircraft carrier. It was dwarfed by the size of

the United States Sixth Fleet with its sixty ships, comprising large carriers, a division of cruisers, submarines and squadrons of destroyers.

The Sixth Fleet was a new phenomenon to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. He had thought of it often strategically but he had never been close enough to learn of its life. At that moment its units were scattered at ports all round the sea—some at Cannes and Golfe Juan, some at Beirut and Algiers, Oran and Augusta. They would rendezvous for sea training exercises, then disperse again to new destinations. The fleet had no bases then and was forced to wander, supplied by depot ships from America, like nautical Bedouins. The official reasons for its presence were, in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's view, interesting. According to official declaration the Sixth Fleet was operating in the Mediterranean waters:

> 'First: to protect United States interests and support United States policies in the area. Second: training. Third: it affords the opportunity for American personnel to create goodwill and better understanding with the peoples with whom they come in contact.'

Could three different reasons be advanced in the past for the British Fleet? Admiral Foxe-Forsyth doubted it. He realized, moreover, only too well the vastly important role which the powerful Sixth Fleet had played as a stabilizing factor. There had never been any wonder in his mind at American reluctance to give him an overall tactical command of its movements.

'If the boot had been on the other leg,' he admitted. 'We should not have dreamed of it.'

But the Mediterranean had changed in other ways. There was an active and increasing co-operation in training between the allied navies. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth remembered the two or three times that French and British ships had exercised together before the fall of France when Cunningham was Commander-in-Chief. Now, at least, everyone had been let into each other's minds. The kind of operations that were considered inevitable had been discussed, and there was no disagreement on the answers to be made.

All this he knew, having studied the reports at the Admiralty. His knowledge was less precise about a new and important factor—the United States air bases in North Africa. What he wanted to get in his mind's eye was the part that they would play in any future operations and the effect they would have on a naval command. He touched on the point with Gus Parry.

'Sure there are bases there,' said the forthright Parry. 'That information is not Classified. We have inter-Continental B36 bases over there in

Morocco and at points west. At Tripoli, for example, there is Wheelus Field. I need not tell you, sir, why they are there.'

He fiddled in the drawer for a piece of paper and pulled away a typewritten handout. He jammed a pipe in the corner of his mouth and read: 'The stated purposes of these bases are (1) to deter aggression in the Mediterranean and Middle East areas; (2) to provide logistical support to U.S.A.F. units in Europe; (3) to provide training facilities for Strategic Air Command rotational crews.'

He took the pipe out of his mouth and threw the handout away.

'In other words,' he said, 'you can bomb the hell out of Russia from there.'

'Hmm.' Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was trying to see what it meant. 'C.-in-C. South doesn't control these bases or these aircraft? They're Strategic Air Command, aren't they? Directed from the United States?'

'That's so. Though if Schlutzie wanted any help he would get it. Come to that, Schlutzie can drop the bomb himself from his carriers.'

'Of course.'

'Look,' said Gus Parry, 'if you are interested, we can fly you down to Morocco. From there they will fly you all over. We could make that the first item in your itinerary.'

'Morocco? I have no visa for Morocco.'

'Hell, sir,' exploded Gus. 'We'll fly you to Port Lyautey. That's one of our bases. It's "Classified," but we have had it since 1943. You won't need a visa there. Charlie Cameron is the commanding officer. He's a friend of mine. I'll make him a signal and he'll look after you.'

Port Lyautey, French Morocco? Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was dubious. But he wanted to see those bases and, secretly, he feared Gus Parry's scorn at any display of caution. You just went *in* there and saw what happened. He must, he told himself, attempt to think along American lines.

'Very well,' he said. 'Make it so.'

'Don't get Charlie on the bourbon,' said Gus Parry.

A drizzling dusk had settled down over Naples airport. The Admiral, with Gus Parry beside him, stood by the open door in front of the lighted restaurant and watched the row of lights that glowed along the landing-strip. Gus Parry was preserving his good humour with an effort: he was late for a dinner date back in Naples. 'Those last two army planes that came through were half an hour late,' he said. 'Why can't they keep to some sort of schedule?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth could not rid himself of fresh astonishment that such a complete network of routine flights was maintained by American

military and naval aircraft. There was a spiders-web of services across Europe: his plane this evening was coming from London via Paris, but all the important centres were linked, and it had been going on, as it were, behind his back. He grunted and asked Gus Parry about his destination, Port Lyautey.

'It's one of our naval airfields,' he said. 'Why it's "Classified" I don't know: it's just a goddam air base and everyone knows we've had it since 1942. Wish I was coming with you, though, Admiral.'

'I quite understand. You're tied up with Admiral Kzecky and this exercise.'

'Charlie Cameron will look after you when you get there. He'll look after you. Oh, and give him a pat on a shoulder from me, will you?'

At this moment the huge black bat-like shape of an aircraft, with wing-tip lights, roared round the airport to come in down the runway. Soon it was taxi-ing back over the shining tarmac, halting about fifty yards away, its four engines racing.

'There you are, Admiral,' said Gus Parry. 'That's your box-car.'

'Look here,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'I know you're late. You get along now. No need to see me off.'

'Sure you don't mind, sir?'

'Not a bit.'

'O.K., then.' He stretched out his hand and grinned. 'Have a good trip. See you Thursday.'

He ducked into the long, shining automobile that had driven them out from Naples and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth watched the two rear lights fade. He was alone.

For some time nothing happened, then five or six leather-faced American officers strolled across the tarmac to the airport building. They were not speaking to each other and they ordered sandwiches, 'espresso' and coca-cola at the bar. The airport building, apart from the restaurant, was now in darkness. It was half-past eight. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stood by his baggage and waited. Nothing happened. Some tall, loose-limbed men in blue denims, the air crew, appeared out of the darkness and drank coffee. A wind blew the rain against the glass sides of the restaurant.

It was half an hour before anything happened, then an American corporal appeared with a list clipped to a board. He ticked off the passengers' names, but when he came to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth he said:

'Can I see your letter of authorization, sir?'

'I haven't one.'

The corporal did not seem surprised: he just jerked his head. 'O.K. Get aboard. Here's your baggage check.'

In a huddled bunch the passengers walked across the tarmac and stood sheltering from the rain under the wing of the aircraft. Finally, from what hidden impulse none could tell, they began to climb up a steel ladder in the plane.

The interior was suffused with a pale electric light and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's first impression was that he had strayed into a flying harness-room. The sides of the fuselage were padded, four leather bucket seats had been bolted to the deck and, in the forward part, some rods of heavy steel cargo were lashed down. Thrown on top of these were about a dozen large cardboard cartons. The officers, looking grimmer-faced than ever in the jaundiced lights, occupied the leather bucket seats. Two or three ratings sat on a canvas bench, fastening their webbing straps for take-off. There was nowhere else to sit, so Admiral Foxe-Forsyth placed himself beside them. There was a musty smell and the whole scene was very depressing. As the door slammed and the engine roared Admiral Foxe-Forsyth began to regret the alacrity with which he had involved himself in the trip.

There was a young steward in the plane, a sandy-faced youth in overalls who gave out an unvarying air of hostility to everyone on board. As soon as they were in the air he retired to the open galley at the tail end of the plane and began to cut slices from a large gammon of bacon. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth viewed this performance with some interest because he had had no dinner. Soon the frizzle of bacon filled the compartment with delicious aroma. It would be good to eat! The steward took the rashers out of the pan, placed them between slices of bread and then took them forward through the communicating door which separated them from the aircrew. In a few minutes he came back. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had never felt more hungry. The steward cut another two rashers, fried them and spread them on bread—to the Admiral's dismay, however, he began to eat the sandwich himself. A terrible doubt crept into Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's mind that this delightful food was not for him—and soon, as an officer unwrapped some sandwiches he had bought at Naples, doubt became certainty. He must go hungry until breakfast time to-morrow.

'Smoke?' said the rating beside him, handing him a pack.

'Thanks,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

He settled back as comfortably as he was able and began to think of the past three days spent at the Kzeckys' villa. That brought him to Edie Kzecky, whom he found a trifle overwhelming. She was a plain, rather stout woman with pince-nez spectacles: she was voluble and enthusiastic. She loved England, admirals, dogs, children, God, Beethoven and Mount Olive, North Carolina, where she had been born. On the other hand, she hated the villa. It was a decorous place with high cool rooms, sunlight poured into it

and the views from the terrace windows was exquisite. But Edie Kzecky hated it: it was draughty and had no refrigerator.

'There was a lot of old Italian stuff here when we moved in. Furniture—renaissance, would it be? That's all very well to look at in museums or at Fontainebleau—but you cannot *live* with it. No, sir! I made Burnett have it all taken out.'

That switched Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's mind to Kzecky. He had been a good host and he had taken pains to entertain him, but had not Kzecky been slightly too pushing over the need for a single commander for the Mediterranean? There was a good case for it, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth knew; he also knew the British would never accept it (unless, of course, the commander happened to be British). Then they had got on to their old argument about carriers.

'The assignment,' said Admiral Kzecky, 'is to use the Fleet to act in support of land operations. To do that I would put them in anywhere in the area where they were required.'

'But you cannot use them like that in the Mediterranean.'

'I can.'

'Let us be specific. Would you move that Fleet into the Aegean?'

'Yes, sir.'

'With narrow confined waters, shallow and bad radar conditions? You would be sunk, old chap.'

'My Fleet,' said Admiral Kzecky, 'is unsinkable.'

Unsinkable! That was a claim that, in all his naval experience, he had not heard made before. Nor could he recall it in any historical record. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth smiled grimly. Power was a heady mixture: it could affect the judgment on vital issues. It could intoxicate. If ever power on the same scale came his way, he must beware. Beware of the situation when individuals ceased to matter, when charm was only exerted upon groups for one's own purposes.

Meanwhile the aircraft was roaring through a pitch-black void. At intervals the pilot switched on the searchlight and directed it at each of the four engines—the bright beam illuminated the whirling propellers, a trickling flow of oil along the cowling, and a blue mist of exhaust. In his hungry fatigue, borne through the night to he hardly knew whither, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth became convinced that the plane was going to crash. Indeed, when a tall, weary-eyed youth in a peaked cap and blue denims appeared from the cockpit, he was certain that he was going to announce emergency stations. However, the youth took a Dixie cup, helped himself to some coffee from a gigantic thermos and added some cream from a can. It looked delightful from Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's place on the canvas bench.

And so, hungry and tired, he sat out his vigil and the only comfort was the brave inscription ‘Made in Britain’ on the cardboard cartons. These cartons (they contained oil heaters) became for him a strange symbol of hope in a dead world. There was little else to cling to. The steward, satisfied with his meal, had flung himself face downwards on a mattress and was asleep. The steel cargo on the deck developed a throbbing, drumming sound which rose at times to a mild shriek. It became very cold.

After some six hours came the warning that they were about to land. All except the steward, who still slept, began to fasten their belts sleepily and clumsily. Through the window Admiral Foxe-Forsyth saw the safety flaps come down, there was a mild bump, and they had arrived. They taxied noisily, then the engines were shut off and the steward, who had roused himself now, opened the door and pushed out the ladder. A brisk, bespectacled American officer climbed on board and addressed the company:

‘You have arrived at Port Lyautey, French Morocco,’ he announced. ‘The time here is Greenwich time, reset your watches to zero-one-three-zero. When your baggage has been unloaded, proceed to the French customs for clearance, then report to the Passenger Terminal for transportation.’

Here at least was a clear statement in an unspecific world, but the mention of French customs was disquieting. A doubt about the airy confidence of Gus Parry began to creep into Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s mind. It would be all right, of course. Without any doubt Captain Cameron as commanding officer of the base would be at the airport to meet him. He climbed down the steel ladder.

The plane was standing on a square of tarmac between the customs house, a hangar and some lighted buildings. It was cold and the sky above was clear and picked with stars. The air was exhilarating. But there was no sign of any official welcome party. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth paused in doubt. His fellow-passengers had disappeared and he was alone in the darkness, but for a squad of ratings unloading the plane. He walked over to the Passenger Terminal and made contact with the Officer of the Day.

‘I am Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, Royal Navy,’ he said. ‘Captain Cameron is expecting me.’

‘The Captain?’ said the Officer of the Day. ‘Why, he’s leaving for London in half an hour. I guess he’ll be up now, though. I’ll call him for you.’

He dialled a number and said: ‘Captain, Officer of the Day here. There’s a man in my office who says you’ll be expecting him. What was your name, sir?’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth repeated his name slowly and no more than due emphasis on the 'Admiral.' There was a scratch of comment from the other end of the line. Then the Officer of the Day handed Admiral Foxe-Forsyth the instrument.

'Would you talk to the Captain, sir?'

Captain Cameron was very charming and jovial. He knew Gus Parry. Gus Parry was a great guy. But no message from Gus Parry had ever reached him: he had no knowledge of Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's prestige and purpose. Admiral Kzecky's lips, from a practical point of view, had never opened. It was awkward.

'I'm leaving for a conference in London right now,' said Captain Cameron, in the friendliest possible way. 'I hope you'll forgive my not meeting you. I'll leave a message about you, sir, with the Commander who is my deputy. I hope you will have a nice time here, sir. We will certainly do all we can to help.'

He rang off and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was alone again.

His thoughts were mixed between cold rage and mute resignation. After all, there was a certain respect due to a visiting Admiral, even if travelling informally. Gus Parry was charming enough, but there would be a few words to be spoken to Admiral Kzecky when he arrived back in Naples next week. And the Officer of the Day had referred to him as 'The man'—as if he were a—a rag-and-bone merchant or something.

'I will give you transportation to the mess,' said the Officer of the Day. 'Have you cleared the customs yet, sir?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth shook his head silently.

The customs house was built of a glossy yellow brick: there were three stone steps and wide, glass doors. His bags were waiting at the top of the steps: he picked them up and went in. Behind the counter were a French policeman and a dark youth in a black suit. They were both friendly as they chalked Admiral Foxe-Forsythe's bags. He began to hope for the best, when the youth said: 'May I see your passport, m'sieu?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth knew, then, the exquisite feeling of relief that a criminal feels at the moment of arrest. He handed over the passport and waited while the youth took it into an office next door. In a couple of minutes he came out again, agitated: 'But you have not a visa for Morocco, m'sieu?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was tired and hungry. He shook his head. That was all. What was the use of explanation in a matter like this. Let them get on with it. The youth looked at him in acute distress. The distress was not for the Admiral, but for himself. He murmured, 'Un instant,' and went out again into the office. A telephone was unhooked and then the words, urgent

and worried, 'C'est vous, chef?' followed. Then a torrent of French. The policeman on the other side of the counter began to whistle to himself.

The conversation next door was protracted, but one thing was in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's favour. It was the middle of the night. 'Chef' was as little anxious to get out of bed as Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was desperate to get into his. Finally, the telephone pinged and the youth came out: 'You are with the Americans?' he said. 'Then you can go to the mess. Please come back here at nine o'clock in the morning.'

'A neuf heures exactement,' he added.

One matter went right for Admiral Foxe-Forsyth that night. His sleeping quarters were in the 'V.I.P.' hut. The Officer of the Day had met with some resistance to this when he rang the coloured dutyman at the mess, but he had insisted: 'The Admiral is the guest of the Captain, that is where he should go.' Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was hardly getting used to being referred to as 'the man,' but it was too fine a point to take up at that moment. Driven to the mess in a jeep he was rewarded with the use of an iron bedstead, a chest of drawers and an easy chair in one section of a Nissen hut: next door was a bathroom with a shower, opposite a door labelled, 'Flight Nurse.'

His sleep, however, was uneasy. Towards dawn it turned bitterly cold. Outside the window the night was pitch-black and the air was full of the distant roar and rumble of aircraft engines below on the airfield. By the time he stepped out of the hut at eight o'clock in the morning, however, the sun had risen. It shone from a pale blue sky, adding a delicious savour to the brisk air, throwing long liquid shadows over the ridges of rose-coloured desert.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked about him with curiosity. The officers' mess and a block of office buildings, both faced with yellow plaster, stood upon an eminence. Before them was a street of Nissen huts and green, grassy slopes dipped down to a mammoth airfield. Always in the air was the throb and roar of engines, but it was a gay, bright picture. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth found it difficult not to feel cheerful. In an hour, or so, he told himself, his position would be established. Everything would be all right. After breakfast, cheered by the sun and the long-delayed food, he strode down the main road, a solitary pedestrian among lorries, buses and vast American automobiles, to do battle with the customs.

'Neuf heures exactement,' the customs officer had said and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth timed his appearance to the minute. The customs officer seemed relieved to see him. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth handed over his passport and the game recommenced. Overnight Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had developed a formula which, he considered, would meet the situation: this

was that he was ‘in transit.’ If that did not work he would have to get the Commanding Officer’s deputy to intercede on his behalf; but he did not wish to do this if it could be avoided. The customs officer took the passport. He said: ‘Attendez, s’il vous plait. Cinq minutes.’ He then disappeared into his office and, once again, the Admiral heard the ping of the telephone and the words, ‘Chef, chef, c’est vous? Il parait que l’Anglais est un amiral. . . .’

The amount of time which can be covered by ‘cinq minutes’ in France is considerable: in Morocco it is infinite. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stumped up and down the empty customs house, hands behind his back, but after twenty minutes he strolled down the steps and stood in the sunshine. So this was French Morocco! A place, it seemed, brightly painted in two prevailing colours—the reddish desert and the deep unclouded blue of the sky. There was a busy scene in front of the large hangars; two vast transport planes inscribed, ‘U.S. Navy. Atlantic Division’ were being serviced; petrol bowsers were being driven across the tarmac, men and automobiles came and went. To the Admiral’s right hand, however, there was a curious contrast—a very small hangar. Outside it stood a tiny biplane and the two were presided over by a small French flag at the top of a thin mast. In that direction all was peace and immemorial calm, as unruffled as the progress of a merchant ship whose masts and funnels swam past above the river banks beyond.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth snorted. Plenty of evidence of American influence. Indeed, all that he saw showed him that a small American township had, surprisingly, sprouted on the Moroccan desert. Each Nissen hut in the roads of the residential quarter was an American home with gossiping wives and barbecue ovens in the back. Why, a child had even called out ‘Hi, Buddy!’ as he passed. The words ‘U.S. Navy’ had been picked out in a large bed of white and blue flowers and Arab gardeners, speaking a bastard Arabic-French, sprayed water on the avid red soil. There was a well-kept golf-course with a club-house and banks of flowers round the officers’ mess. In the midst of the flowerbed was a large notice board which read:

NOTICE

Please do not destroy me. I am here for your pleasure and admiration. Please let me live.

THE FLOWER

The whole thing, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth decided, was an Alice-in-Wonderland. Nor did the situation unravel when, returning to the customs, he was asked with a smile and a shrug to wait another ‘cinq minutes’: it

appeared that, for some reason, they were awaiting the arrival of a man on a bicycle. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth struggled to retain his composure. This was going too far! He was about to speak strong words when the telephone rang. The customs officer came back with a proposition. He must find out from the Americans when he should be leaving and let him know. Otherwise, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was 'Libre.'

'I thank you,' he growled.

'Good-bye,' said the customs officer.

That was that. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth now set about his task of making official contact with his hosts. He crossed to the Passenger Terminal. It was a different Officer of the Day, but he listened politely while Admiral Foxe-Forsyth told him his identity. He picked up a telephone and talked for a long time. As he spoke it became evident that there was to be no hurried rush down to the airfield with apologies and greetings. It appeared that the Captain's deputy had flown out 'rush-wise' over to Casablanca before the Captain could contact him. It was suggested that Admiral Foxe-Forsyth should see the Intelligence Officer, who would give him any information he wished to have.

'I am sorry, sir," said the Officer of the Day, concluding. 'But that is the way it is. Shall I arrange transportation?'

'Very well.'

As he bumped back up the road in a jeep Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's heart was full. He was not a vain man: but his years of service had taught him what was due to his station. Of course, his was an unofficial visit but he was, nevertheless, a flag officer of the Royal Navy. He was beginning to get very angry, indeed.

The Intelligence Officer lived in one of the rows of white, prefabricated offices on the hill near the mess. He was a tall, lean young commander with a penetrating eye. As Admiral Foxe-Forsyth entered he turned round quickly and drew some black curtains over the boards on his wall. Then, unsmiling, he indicated a chair to sit down.

'And now, sir? How can I help you?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth did not enjoy this repeated recital of the facts behind his presence in Port Lyautey. The mere fact that he had consented to be mixed up in an operation which had gone so badly wrong was, somehow, a personal reflection. He told his story again, tersely.

'I see,' said the Intelligence Officer, 'it certainly seems strange that we have had no signal about your arrival from CINCSOUTH. Do you have any formal documents of identity?'

Gods! Could it be true? Admiral Foxe-Forsyth saw now, with grim amusement, what the drawing together of the curtains had meant. After all

that had gone before, he was now being given a 'security check.' Gods!

'I am here at Admiral Kzecky's personal invitation,' he said. 'I would not have thought this precaution necessary.'

'I'm sorry, sir. It is just a formality. A passport would be in order.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth handed over his passport. The Intelligence Officer flicked the pages.

'I see you have no Moroccan visa?'

Silence. The silence of thunder. At length Admiral Foxe-Forsyth spoke in a compressed voice.

'The matter has been attended to by the French authorities.'

'So long as the French are happy.'

He handed back the passport and leaned back in his chair. 'Frankly, I do not see how I can help you in your object. We have scheduled services touching down here, but to fly around between the bases you would need a special plane. I have no authority for that. I can, however, tell you the broad facts.'

'Thank you,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, politely.

The Intelligence Officer placed his fingers together and looked like a man about to give information.

'The name of this base is Classified. We have used it, however, since 1942, when our troops first landed in North Africa. It may be regarded as a naval aircraft maintenance and logistical base for the Sixth Fleet, also a communication centre.' ('Communications, ha!' thought Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.) 'We hold the base under a joint arrangement with the French and there is a French commandant here with ultimate responsibility——'

(Admiral Foxe-Forsyth thought of the little French biplane and the little French flag down on the airfield.)

'Our relations with the French are excellent,' the Intelligence Officer continued. 'We realize that the French have done an excellent job here in Morocco and our co-operation is working excellently. Mind you, there are Americans who sometimes want to cut red tape and deal directly with the Sultan because it saves time—but there's no real headache there.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth grunted: 'I came to see the air force bases here.'

The Intelligence Officer hesitated.

'We have other bases out here,' he admitted. 'But I don't think it is within my field of competence to talk to you about them.'

'Very well,' snapped Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. '*I* will tell *you* about them. There is Nouasseur, twenty-two miles south of Casablanca; Sidi Slimane, thirty-five miles east of here; and Ben Guerir, north of Marrakesh. They are in the possession of the Fifth Air Division, and if you cannot fly me there, I should be grateful to be put on the next plane that is returning to Naples.'

‘That, sir, is not until the end of next week some time.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, a man of fortitude, was appalled. A week here? Alone? He snapped: ‘Then get me to Algiers. I’ll make my own way from there.’

‘We have a plane for Algiers at 0400 to-morrow morning.’

‘Put me on that,’ he said, rising.

Striding swiftly down the road to his cabin he said to himself: ‘This is what the Americans mean by a “snafu.” A highly efficient one, on this occasion.’

That afternoon, with time to while away, he took himself into the town, walking in the dust beside the main road while the big cars with American wives on shopping expeditions whisked past with the sun gleaming on chromium.

The town of Port Lyautey was an agreeable enough place. It was well laid out, with broad avenues, flanked by palm trees. The influence of the desert there was strong, producing the feeling, in a curious way, that the town floated on a cloud—or was, at any rate, an island, for at the end of every road Admiral Foxe-Forsyth expected to come upon the sea.

He bought a newspaper and sipped a beer in a café, enjoying the sunshine. He was not angry any more: it would, after all, make a damned good story at the ‘Senior.’

‘Meanwhile,’ he thought, ‘here I am in a bulge of North Africa on the Atlantic south of Gib. And everyone thinks I’m a spy. A curious life.’

He took another sip of beer.

In the middle of dinner in the mess that evening the electric light was suddenly cut. There were no candles, so everyone sat in darkness. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had eaten his steak (‘done smoky,’ as the Arab servant said) and had been conversing with an American officer and his wife at the same table. They enjoyed Morocco, they told him. Every week-end they went somewhere in their automobile, Marakesh or Rabat or Casa, and they spoke highly of the good roads and impressive reclamation. It certainly got hot in the summer, over one-twenty at times. But it was good dry heat. They were lucky having quarters here, not like some over at Casa where rents were high as in Paris. *That* was saying something.

The Admiral was glad to have a human contact again. He had begun to think it did not exist for, apart from the friendly gob beside him in the aeroplane, he had been ignored on all sides. He had, moreover, run out of tobacco and had no dollars to buy more.

He said good night in the darkness and crossed the roadway to his cabin. The breakdown of the electric light had confirmed a determination not to trust any arrangement that had been made for his departure. He had been promised transport and a 'shake' at three-thirty in the morning, but he decided to stay awake. He lay on his bed, dozing, and at intervals, he looked at his watch. At three-thirty no call had come from the mess. He reflected, not without rancour, that but for himself, he would have missed the plane. The idea of remaining longer in what had become, mentally, a kind of concentration camp was unwelcome. He packed his bag and went outside. Transportation, however, had been equal to the occasion. He drove down to the airfield in the cold and darkness, elated at the prospect of release.

Elation was short-lived.

The Night Duty Officer stared at him from behind his wooden counter in the Passenger Terminal.

'Didn't you get my message, sir?'

'I did not.'

'I rang the mess to tell you the Algiers plane has developed a defect. It won't be leaving.'

'Until when?'

'The next plane will be Monday or Tuesday, I guess.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's reaction was one of blank dismay. He thought of himself alone in his V.I.P. hut for the week-end. It would be intolerable.

'Is there not another plane?' he asked.

'Going where, sir?"

'Going *anywhere*.'

'Why, yes. There is one leaving for Nice at seven o'clock. I could get you on that.'

Nice! The South of France: a comfortable room in an hotel, a currency he could exchange!

'In that case,' he said, 'I will go to Nice.'

'Nice,' agreed the Duty Officer, 'is nice.'

It might have been Rome, Paris, Vienna, Frankfurt-am-Main, Istanbul, Athens or Trieste—but the plane was going to Nice! Amazing people, the Americans!

An aircraft was about to leave for London. The duty squad in blue overalls and duffel-coats were lounging on the bench and smoking; the Duty Officer was working out the cargo stowage on a printed sheet; a coloured rating was profoundly asleep near the stove, kitbag at his feet. The pilot came in and began to argue about the cargo return; in his opinion the total weight ought to include the weight of the aircraft. The Duty Officer, who appeared to know, disagreed. 'I didn't get the beacon coming in,' the pilot

said. ‘They have a different system here from back home.’ He appeared anxious.

Soon the plane was taxied across the tarmac and the duty squad went out. The Duty Officer shook the coloured rating, waking him with difficulty. Half-stunned with sleep, he stumbled out with his kitbag. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, hands behind his back, watched the passengers climb in and saw the ladder drawn up. The duty squad ran, crouching, to remove the chocks in a whirl of blue exhaust. The chief petty officer acted as ‘batsman,’ resembling some pantomime figure in duffel-coat, waving the lighted bats. There was a dignity of performance about the operation as the giant aircraft taxied away. Soon it could be heard revving-up before take-off, then came the rush of the engines, the change of note as it became airborne, and, unconsciously, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth felt a sense of personal relief as it circled away.

The squad came back, lighting cigarettes and throwing themselves down on the benches, sipping iced water from the drinking fountain.

‘That’s the worst pilot in V.R. 24,’ said one.

‘Who got her up?’ asked the chief.

‘The crew.’

It all seemed less and less assuring to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. This was flying on the inside. The chief, a long, lean, hatchet-faced man with a slow drawl, now launched into a long and apparently interminable monologue for the benefit of the squad.

‘In *my* squadron,’ he said, ‘there will be no take-offs except between the hours of two and four in the afternoon. There will be no arrivals except between the hours of eight and twelve in the morning. In *my* squadron all freight will arrive packaged in cubes of three feet, maximum; and this includes mail.’

‘Sure,’ said one of the squad. ‘None of those little bags. You try to pick ’em up and they almost break your back.’

‘In *my* squadron,’ continued the chief, inexorably, ‘there will be, in fact, *no* freight. There will also be no aircraft, no air crew and no ground squad.’

‘Where will your squadron be in North Africa, chief?’

‘*My* squadron will be in *South* Africa.’

It seemed to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth that there was to be no end to this, but at that moment the dawn came to his rescue. It rose across the desert in a mighty mantle of pink, flecked with black and, as it spread, majestic and infinite, the desert and palm trees became half awake with the beginnings of colour and shadow. Soon the mantle covered half the sky, growing deeper and richer as the flood of light rushed upwards. It was a normal desert dawn and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had seen many. But no dawn, he knew, could be

normal, each has its own poetry. He wondered how the chief would react to this one. The chief looked at it for some moments, and then said: ‘Say, why don’t we have some technicolor film around here?’

At half-past six he walked across in daylight for his final clearance with the customs. Both he and the customs officer were so pleased at his imminent departure that their relationship bloomed into cordiality. They sat in the office and talked and, at length, the customs officer took out a long form which he filled in with a laborious script in purple ink. He asked Admiral Foxe-Forsyth what would have happened if he had arrived without a visa in a country beyond the Iron Curtain.

‘Much the same as here,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, with feeling.

‘Prison,’ murmured the customs officer.

He was a very slow writer. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, however, only became really impatient when the plane taxied up to the tarmac and showed every sign of being ready to leave. The form was only half completed. His replies became shorter. Through the window he watched the open door in the fuselage: it had only to shut and he would be a prisoner again. The engines were now being revved-up very fast when the customs officer finally handed over his passport. He accompanied the Admiral to the steps.

‘I,’ he said, ‘was in England with de Gaulle. First at Knightsbridge, then in Sout’ Kenseengton. I liked Sout’ Kenseengton very much——’

This was too much, even for his companion the gendarme, who was leaning over the counter red-eyed and unshaven.

‘Il doit partir,’ he said.

‘I was with de Gaulle five year in Sout’ Kenseengton——’

Forcibly Admiral Foxe-Forsyth gathered his remaining strength and shook him by the hand. He half ran across the tarmac to the plane and climbed into another interior full of mail bags. Now nothing more could happen, nothing! The door shut with a slam and they taxied away. He relaxed, exquisitely relieved, only to find the steward standing before him, dressed in a bright yellow Mae West waistcoat full of pockets and implements. Looking Admiral Foxe-Forsyth sternly in the eye, the steward said:

‘The name of your pilot is Lieutenant (J. G.) McMahon. The Mae West waistcoat I am wearing is what you will use if forced down over the sea. This is the whistle and this is the dye, used to indicate your position to searchers. This is the CO_2 flask, unscrew the cap to inflate the jacket. Signal rocket flare. Water flask. Emergency rations. This is the knife——’ he paused, impressively, ‘for sharks. Use also this chemical to keep sharks at

distance, unless you are bleeding. If you are bleeding climb on the nearest raft. . . .'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth leaned back on the canvas bench, beaten at last.

After two pleasant days in the sunshine of Nice, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth returned to pick up the threads of his itinerary. Admiral Kzecky and Gus Parry had left for military manœuvres in the Pondenoni area. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth followed by plane and finally came up with them as they stood on the top of a craggy hillside in the rain, surrounded by high-ranking Italian army officers. Admiral Kzecky, he saw, was wearing the ornate plumed hat of the Italian Bersaglieri.

'Why, Admiral!' said Captain Parry, seeing Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'Did you have a good trip?"

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stared at this advanced, unrestricted thinker.

He said nothing.

'How do you like the hat?' said Kzecky.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked at the bersaglieri hat with its jaunty, flowing brim and feather. He looked at the rimless glasses beneath it. He looked at Admiral Kzecky's face. He saw it whole and, with a greater effort this time, he still said nothing.

6

It was at least six months after his return from his visit to Admiral Kzecky that a final settlement of the command position was agreed and announced from the Atlantic Council sitting in Paris. The fact was, nevertheless, that Admiral Foxe-Forsyth woke up one spring morning to find himself sharing command of the Mediterranean with Admiral Kzecky.

The announcement published in the newspapers said: 'The North Atlantic Council has approved the appointment of Vice-Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth to be Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean. His staff will include officers from all nations concerned, and he will be directly subordinate to the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.'

It was a compromise.

What it meant, in effect, was that Admiral Kzecky became a land commander, retaining command of his fleet of heavy carriers to support ground forces. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was responsible for sea communications through the Mediterranean and to the allied countries.

'Well,' Admiral Foxe-Forsyth thought, gazing out of a grimy window in the Admiralty, 'not ideal. But that's that. Wonder what Kzecky thinks?'

He learned later in the day when a cordial signal of congratulation was received and, two days later, there came a letter.

'After all,' Kzecky wrote, 'all that matters is that there should *be* a command, not a vacuum. We can make the thing work between us. You will probably find it strange to work with a European staff—they are very keen but, man, sometimes are they *Trouble*!'

As it happened, however, the main trouble which Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was to encounter upon taking up residence at Admiralty House, Malta, was entirely British and domestic.

7

‘Who?’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘Who did you say?’

‘Arthur Smith,’ said Mary, his daughter, eating her breakfast grapefruit imperturbably.

‘Never heard of him,’ said the Admiral. He added: ‘No one can be called Arthur Smith. It must be a code name, to hide his real identity.’

Mary turned over the pages of the *Times of Malta*. On her right, her mother, Lady Foxe-Forsyth, was reading the letter which had arrived at Admiralty House that morning with the utmost composure.

‘You know perfectly well who he is, Strang,’ she said. ‘We met him plenty of times at Government receptions when the Socialists were in.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth laid down his spoon and enunciated with clarity.

‘Do you mean to tell me,’ he said, ‘that you have invited a *socialist* as our guest at Admiralty House?’

‘And his sister,’ said Mary, intent apparently upon the account of a girl guides ceremony at Sliema.

In fact, she was counting the seconds before the explosion. It came. The substantial table remained as unmoved under the Admiral’s fist as his two womenfolk.

‘I won’t have them,’ he said. ‘Do you hear, Mary? You must put them off.’

‘It’s too late,’ said Lady Foxe-Forsyth, folding the letter. ‘It seems they arrive to-morrow.’

There was silence. The clear golden sunshine of the Malta morning filled the room with a primrose haze. Beyond the windows the sky was a cloudless curtain of blue. The hooting of cars could be heard in Kingsway. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth spoke again.

‘To-morrow,’ he said, ‘the allied ships arrive for “Exercise Barbican.” ’

He let this fact speak for itself in expressing the enormity of what had been done to him. He knew perfectly well who Arthur Smith was. He recollected him as a young, pushing junior minister in the Treasury with (like all politicians) the gift of the gab. He’d had to be polite to him only because of the Naval Estimates and, even with that good reason, it had been an effort.

‘The island,’ he continued, ‘will be thick with gold braid of all nationalities. You are well aware of our social commitments during this

time. And, if I recollect, we are even giving a dinner party here at Admiralty House.'

'We can fit them in perfectly easily,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. 'Among so many strange people two more can hardly be noticed. As I recollect Mr Smith he was a very presentable young man.'

'Very presentable,' repeated Mary.

The Admiral glanced at her. A horrid suspicion came to him, which he put firmly at the back of his mind.

'Hmm,' he said. 'Hmm.'

He glanced at his watch, rose, and left the room. The two women glanced at each other.

'That,' grinned Mary, 'might have been worse.'

'But darling,' said her mother, 'it was extremely naughty of you. You know what your father feels about socialists.'

'That's what is so unreasonable,' said Mary. 'Arthur Smith is a rising young man. He's extremely able and intelligent. I think it's completely unfair to be prejudiced about him, simply because of his politics.'

'I see,' said her mother. 'And the sister?'

'I've never met her,' said Mary. 'I expect she will be delightful.'

'I hope so,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth.

Meanwhile Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had bustled down the right branch of the double-staircase, crossed the hall, returned the salute of the marine sentry and dived into his waiting car. With the Commander-in-Chief's flag fluttering on the bonnet he proceeded to his office at Lascaris. His staff were as yet unaware of it, but they were in for an unhappy day.

It was two months since Admiral Sir Strangways Foxe-Forsyth had hoisted his flag as Allied Commander-in-Chief at Malta and he had entered upon his task with a characteristic energy and efficiency. According to his custom he had written down, for his own information, the objectives before him.

Objectives

(*a*) To ensure an efficient framework of organization for the passage of convoys through the Mediterranean.

(*b*) To weld the allied navies under my command into a unit of co-operation (without sacrifice to the interests of the Royal Navy).

(*c*) To co-operate smoothly with Kzecky's Southern Command (without sacrifice to the interests of the Royal Navy).

He had found that it was possible for him and Admiral Kzecky to 'live together' in their adjacent commands. They exchanged information punctiliously and, within a couple of months of the finish of the present exercise, were due to embark upon the large-scale 'Exercise Ulysses.'

'Ulysses' was to be the first occasion that the two commands worked together. It was to be 'realistic' and presuppose an enemy advance upon Greece through Thrace. Already the two staffs were planning and here they had encountered a first difficulty.

It was a difficulty that was bound to arise because it was over the old subject of the use of carrier forces. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth wished the exercise to be carried out in war conditions. Under these, he felt, Kzecky's carrier force would be unable to operate in the Aegean north of Crete. Admiral Kzecky, on the other hand, maintained that his Fleet could and should operate *anywhere*. The strongest pressure had been unable to make him alter this opinion.

The matter rested there. Meanwhile, there had been plenty to do in organizing the new allied headquarters overlooking Grand Harbour in addition to wearing his 'British hat' at the Royal Navy headquarters at Lascaris.

It was a punctilious habit of Lord Nelson to let his captains into the workings of his mind. This precedent Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had followed in holding, each day, a meeting of allied staff at the headquarters. Although the effort was sometimes difficult, he did his best on these occasions to make himself affable and informal.

He would enter briskly with a broad smile on his face, wave to the company and call out, 'Sit down, gentlemen!' There were some among his staff who vowed that the shining goodwill on Foxy's face on these occasions made it more repulsive than ever. But he was unaware of this.

On the morning when the news of the Smiths' impending arrival came he entered as usual, concealing his troubled feelings with great care. He sat at a large table covered with green baize with, behind him on the wall, a map of the Mediterranean decorated with allied flags. His first move was to introduce the newly-joined Turkish senior officer who had just joined the staff.

'I want to welcome,' he said, 'Captain Turk Akbar of the Turkish Navy who has joined our staff.'

Captain Turk Akbar, a large swarthy man with a bald, bullet head sprang to his feet and stood to attention. As he showed no sign of sitting down again, the Admiral thanked him and Captain Akbar returned to the same level as the others. The Admiral turned over his papers, which dealt with the detailed arrangements which had been made for the exercise.

‘ “Exercise Ulysses,” ’ he said. ‘I will ask S.O.O. to report progress——’

S.O.O. rose to his feet slowly but with confidence, knowing that not one detail was his master. He was about to begin, when the meeting became aware that Captain Akbar was again on his feet, standing at attention.

‘Sir,’ he said. ‘Being newly joined with your staff I have not the advantage of knowing the structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. I should be grateful for information on this point which will assist me in the execution of my duties.’

The meeting received this interruption with kindliness—although the French Vice-Admiral drooped his lower lip with the ghost of a cynical smile. However, it was Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s principle to allow the utmost informality of discussion at these meetings. Added to which, he was confronted with a mental picture of himself representing his country at a meeting conducted in Turkish—unthinkable, of course, but it gave him sympathy.

‘That’s a tall order,’ he smiled. ‘I think it was one of our American friends who described the NATO organization as resembling the wiring diagram of a submarine. Isn’t that so, Loveday?’

The American Vice-Admiral moved his brown, wrinkled face.

‘It certainly is complicated.’

‘To begin with,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, ‘you have the political side. The permanent organization sits in Paris as the Council of North Atlantic Deputies with the Secretary-General as permanent head. Then you have the meetings with the Foreign Secretaries of the NATO countries who take decision based on the recommendations of the Council. All right?’

‘Yes,’ said Captain Akbar.

‘There is also another body—the Joint Chiefs of Staff committee, which sits in Washington. This committee assesses military and naval potential.’

‘I see,’ said Captain Akbar.

‘Then there is the military side. Here you have the Supreme Allied Commander with headquarters at SHAPE in Paris and, under him, four commands—Northern, Central and Southern—and ourselves. All purely military and naval, concerned with forces in the field, overall strategic plan, logistics and so forth.’

The Admiral paused. He was rather pleased with his exposition. Captain Akbar (who had resumed his seat) looked puzzled.

‘I understood it was more confusing than that,’ he said.

‘There are very numerous sub-committees,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

‘And what is the precedence of a Turkish representative?’

‘We are all allies sitting round the table, working for a common aim. There is no precedence.’

‘Then,’ said Captain Akbar, ‘in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which sits in Washington, you are saying that the views of our representative would carry as much weight as the United States representative? I do not believe that.’

Admiral Loveday growled: ‘I guess it’s all worked out for the best. You have a fine army there in Turkey—plenty of divisions.’

‘And the Navy?’ said Captain Akbar, sharply.

This time the French Vice-Admiral was smiling openly. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth saw it and promptly intervened.

‘You’ll get the idea in time, Captain Akbar,’ he said, smiling. ‘I can assure you it works. Now S.O.O. about “Ulysses——” ’

The meeting proceeded. When they broke up an hour later Admiral Foxe-Forsyth drove back to Lascaris with his Chief of Staff.

‘Odd customer, that Turk,’ said the Chief of Staff. ‘Made the situation a bit tricky.’

‘Good fellow,’ said the Admiral, briefly. ‘He’ll shake down. They’re all on the defensive to begin with. Remember a socialist called Arthur Smith, George?’

‘Do I not? Young and pushing. Wasn’t there a lot of trouble with him? Thought he knew a bit about the Navy. Why?’

‘He’s arriving out here to-morrow,’ said the Admiral, adding: ‘Mary asked him.’

The Chief of Staff said nothing. He knew the wisdom of silence on these occasions. In any case Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had said all he was going to say and he knew his message had been clear. The two of them understood each other, like captain and coxswain. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth walked past the marine sentry and across the brown polished linoleum that glistened outside his Lascaris office. Abruptly, he changed the subject once inside the cool, shadowy room: ‘I see they found that Maltese steward—what was his name, Pereira?—guilty. I took a look at the transcript. No question at all.’

‘No,’ said the Chief of Staff. ‘It was a clear case.’

‘Hmm,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

He could wish, sometimes, that he were not so close to politics.

When he was alone the Admiral’s first action was to get through to Admiralty House and speak to his wife. She answered in the voice of one who had been expecting the call.

‘About Smith,’ he said. ‘I suppose it will be the usual form? Polo at the Marsa, then we can take him to the cocktails at the Italian consul’s and, I believe, the *Cobra* is giving a party on board. He might like to go.’

‘I’ll talk to Mary about it,’ said his wife. ‘I expect she has her own ideas.’

‘Flags will have to cope with the sister. Is there any information about her?’

‘None.’

‘I suppose he can be guaranteed not to lose his heart to her. Too many others on the list.’

‘She isn’t an Admiral’s daughter, is she?’ said Lady Foxe-Forsyth, mildly. ‘Or the offspring of a Cuban millionaire. I think Flags will be safe.’

‘Talk to Mary, will you?’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘We must do what we can for them. Um—how long are they staying?’

‘Only a week,’ said his wife. ‘I’m looking forward to seeing them.’

She put down the receiver, realizing that once again duty had overcome the personal feelings of her husband. She had always known that it would, and she was left with her own misgivings. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, for his part, after drumming his fingers on the desk for a few moments, resolutely put the matter from his mind. He was about to apply himself to last-minute details of ‘Exercise Barbican’ when his Secretary appeared.

‘Captain Akbar would like an urgent interview, sir. He seems very worried. I’ve told him it may be difficult.’

‘Send him in,’ snapped the Admiral. ‘You know I will always see an allied officer. I want that understood.’

The Secretary withdrew and, in a few moments, Captain Akbar entered, anxiety written all over his swarthy features.

‘Sit down,’ smiled Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘Have a cigarette?’

The request acted like magic upon Captain Akbar, who put a large hand into his right-hand pocket and withdrew an ornate crocodile cigarette case.

‘Please try a Turkish cigarette, sir. You will, I assure you, find them of a quality and excellence that is nonpareil throughout the world.”

‘Thank you,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, stretching out his hand. Almost before he had conveyed the cigarette to his lips Captain Akbar had flashed his other hand to his left pocket, producing a large box.

‘I beg that you will accept this, sir, as a gift from the Turkish Tobacco Monopoly.’

The Admiral thanked him. Could this somewhat unorthodox pushing of Turkish cigarettes have been the object of Captain Akbar’s visit? He was soon to see that it was not, for the air of gloom settled afresh on the Turk’s face.

‘There is something very worrying, Admiral,’ he said. ‘It is the question of the berth for our Turkish flotilla. I am afraid it is not satisfactory.’

‘You’re over at Manoel, aren’t you? We’ve used those berths for our frigates for quite a time.’

‘Yes, yes, it is not that.’ The gloom deepened on Captain Akbar’s face. When he spoke again it was in a low embarrassed whisper.

‘There is no House, Admiral.’

‘House? I don’t understand you.’

‘No brothel, no——’ Captain Akbar searched for the word and produced it triumphantly—‘no “knocking-shop” for the crew. It is our custom always to provide one. If we are to use Malta as a base it would be a great convenience.’

Not a muscle of Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s face moved. He stared at Captain Akbar with his pale blue eyes.

‘We could see no reason for such—such a . . . er, facility, Captain Akbar. The Royal Navy has long been in existence and we have never found the necessity—er, pressing.’

‘You have rum,’ said Captain Akbar, simply.

‘Certainly. That has been a tradition for many centuries.’

‘Rum is your custom. A brothel is ours. It is a question of a point of view.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stared at him and there was no question now that here was a Commander-in-Chief speaking.

‘Captain Akbar,’ he said. ‘You have only lately taken up your duties here. I beg you not to worry unduly over detail at this early stage. As to your present request there are considerable difficulties—not least, local opinion. In the meantime, remember that as a representative of an allied navy, I shall always hope that you will bring any troubles to me.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As Captain Akbar was about to go through the door, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth added: ‘From my past knowledge of Valetta, Akbar, I do not fancy that your ratings will find any great difficulty in—er, accommodating themselves.’

The door shut and Admiral Foxe-Forsyth permitted himself the luxury of a slight smile. He was almost in a good humour again.

It was the fifteenth of August. The sun shone brilliantly; in the heat the honey-coloured rock and white buildings of Malta stood out against the deep blue of sea and sky. Grand Harbour rang with the dull booming of salutes as the ‘Barbican’ ships arrived.

The London plane bearing Arthur Smith and his sister did not arrive from Rome until evening. By that time a huge, round moon of glowing lemon incandescence had hoisted itself in the sky before the sunset disappeared. The evening was aglow with fat stars and the buildings glowed in the green twilight.

At Admiralty House arrangements had gone forward with accustomed smoothness. There was to be an informal dinner with the Chief of Staff, the Major-General in command of the garrison, and their wives. Mary and the flag lieutenant had gone out to the airport at Lucca to welcome the guests off the aeroplane. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth arrived back from the office at a quarter to eight to find his wife, looking handsome and composed in her blue frock, writing a letter at the desk.

'No one turned up yet?' asked the Admiral.

'I asked them late. We shan't dine until nine. That will give them time to change. The overland flight is very tiring, I always think.'

The steward brought in the Admiral's pink gin. He shook the bitters into the glass and poured the water. He had had a hard day of official receptions and he felt he needed it. In addition, there were certain apprehensions in his mind about meeting Arthur Smith.

What were his objections to the fellow? Politics? Possibly. Unlike some other senior officers of the Services, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had been at that point in his service career when there was no point in declaring a political affiliation to ensure himself a comfortable civilian job. Not that, in any circumstances, he would have contemplated such an action. He boasted that he was without political sympathies. This was true in so far as his actions were concerned, but in sentiment, because he loved England, he was a dyed-in-the-wool reactionary. Arthur Smith was an epitome of the new order which he disliked so much. Pleasant in manner, capable of an able speech in the House, an ex-town councillor and with some sort of a future in the party. All right, in fact, behind a shop counter, but not in a position to guide his country's destinies even in a minor role. The right to that honour was, in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's view, barely won in a lifetime. He could not understand why Mary could not see this, but perhaps it was youth. He had not any doubt about his beloved daughter's real qualities. If only it was not an indispensable part of growing up to make a fool of oneself!

He finished his gin and went to change. When he returned George Cambridge, the Chief of Staff and the red-faced, moustached Major-General Canliss had arrived. They were, of course, talking polo, which both played with little skill.

'Hear we're meeting an M.P.,' said the Major-General. 'Socialist, too. Do you suppose he has a handicap—apart from that, I mean?'

'Mary met him at a local meeting at home,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. 'He's interested in social conditions outside England so she asked him to visit.'

'He'll find plenty of social conditions here, eh? Twenty-four to a family; most crowded island in the world. We could put him on to the real source of

trouble——'

But before Canliss could finish the door opened and Mary came in with her guests. First was Miss Dorothy Smith, Arthur Smith's sister. She was a girl of twenty-four who was almost remarkably unattractive. Her long, dank hair was done up in a red scarf: her complexion was pale and colourless, her eyebrows were heavy and she wore a cheap frock decorated with pale roses. She stood in the doorway, hesitantly, as if the effort of coming into the room were too much for her. In this dilemma her brother pushed past her with assurance, advancing across to Admiral Foxe-Forsyth with outstretched hand.

'Hullo, Foxy!' he said. 'How are you?'

There was a sudden and terrible silence. To call Admiral Foxe-Forsyth by his nickname was a privilege extended only to his senior officers and to members of his term at Osborne. Not even George Cambridge, a Rear-Admiral, would have presumed to it. All those who knew him, including wife and daughter, waited for the explosion. But Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, as usual in a crisis, was magnificent. Not a muscle of his face moved.

'How do you do, Mr Smith?' he said. Adding: 'I am very pleased to welcome you.'

Arthur Smith was not a whit deterred. He was a young man who was not unprepossessing. His face was round and rubbery and he invested it with a permanent smile. Unlike his sister, he was difficult to place, for there was no character in him that was identifiable—his tropical suit was of reasonable cut, his tie and shirt modest. There was only to the Admiral, observing him shrewdly during the next minutes, a permanent thrust going on behind the outward affability.

'This is Dorothy, Mummy,' said Mary now, propelling the reluctant girl beside her into the room, by taking her arm. 'Don't be frightened of anybody because of their coats of mail. They're all poppets.'

'I'm so glad to see you,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. 'You must be exhausted.'

'Oh, yes,' said Dorothy, taking her hand.

'Deff-innally.'

Behind her the Admiral was aware of Flag's face. It was graven with suffering. The situation was awkward, but the Royal Navy has a charm of its own which it exercises on these occasions. George Cambridge and Flags sprang into the breach, the Maltese steward passed the drinks. Lady Foxe-Forsyth made room for Dorothy on her sofa and the atmosphere changed in a moment to that of small talk and affability.

Later, at dinner, there was even a certain gaiety. Arthur Smith could talk well and he gave an amusing account of the political situation at home. He

asked questions about 'Exercise Barbican' and the subsequent 'Exercise Ulysses.' He listened to the answers with attention. Finally, he asked about life on the station. Were 'the men' happy?

'Jack is usually a happy fellow,' said the Chief of Staff, across the table. 'Out here he's extremely well off. I don't think you'll find our ratings have many complaints.'

'Does that mean,' said Arthur Smith, 'that you're satisfied with lower-deck conditions?'

The tone was on the edge of aggression. Again the atmosphere was charged. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was looking at his plate and Mary glanced across with apprehension.

'Lower-deck conditions to-day,' said the Chief of Staff, 'are better than they have ever been.'

'They may be better, but are they good enough?' Arthur Smith turned in his chair, completely without embarrassment. It was almost as if he were addressing a meeting: 'Look at the tuberculosis figures during the war. Are they likely to be better should war break out again? I have these things very close to my heart.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth broke in with a mildness that surprised even himself.

'They are close to the heart of all of us who love the Navy, Mr Smith. You must understand that the first function of a naval vessel is as an efficient fighting weapon. All else must be subordinated to that. Conditions of war, moreover, impose unhealthy conditions when a ship is battened down. I think Nelson would be agreeably amazed at the difference since his day ____'

'Nelson!' said Mr Smith, diving in and bringing forth the word triumphantly. 'You'll forgive me saying this, but the Royal Navy is living too much on Nelson.'

Again, the atmosphere was electric. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stiffened like a mastiff.

'Do leave Nelson out of it,' cried Mary, hastily. 'Daddy worships him.'

The Admiral's veneration for Lord Nelson (as portrayed in Southey's *Life*) was known throughout the Navy. Equally, however, he was insistent that a reliance on past tradition must be guarded against at all costs. Arthur Smith could not have put his foot in it more deeply unless it was by design.

'Have you anything against Nelson, Mr Smith?' inquired Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

'Plenty,' said Smith, unperturbed. 'He was a pure careerist. Look at that perpetual obsession with Westminster Abbey. "Before this time to-morrow I shall have gained a peerage, or Westminster Abbey." And to feed that

consuming ambition hundreds, thousands of good British seamen were sacrificed to slaughter by the cannon-ball.'

'In the process, of course, he saved England.'

'There were half a dozen Admirals who could have done that. Britain was saved by the seamen and soldiers, by the common man in the horrible conditions of the lower-deck. Nelson was only interested in them to further his own insane ambition for glory. He was a reactionary. He consorted with the corrupt court of Naples and left the miserable populace to starve, to stew in their own juice. No,' concluded Arthur Smith warmly, 'I know it doesn't really do to say so, but you can have Nelson.'

No one spoke. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth drummed his fingers on the tablecloth. His wife rose, smiling brightly.

'I think we should go out,' she said. 'As it is late, perhaps the men will withdraw with us?' She took the silent, unprepossessing Dorothy by the arm. 'Come along, my dear. You must tell me all about the wonderful things in the shops in London. I can hardly wait to get back to them.'

Afterwards the men talked about cricket and Arthur Smith was silent. He was clearly uninterested in it.

Next morning Admiral Foxe-Forsyth breakfasted early and left for his office. The French cruiser, *Bar-le-Duc*, was arriving at ten and the visiting French Admiral, Vice-Admiral de l'Escadre Copain was to be received at Lascaris with guard and band. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's feelings towards the French were not cordial; moreover, he had already experience of their extreme sensitiveness in all naval matters. This was not so much due to their high-ranking officers' perpetual weather-eye for their politicians as to the fact that any change was regarded as a criticism of efficiency, and therefore touched their honour. For these reasons Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had been at pains to ensure that all detail of ceremonial should proceed smoothly.

While he was thus taken up with the preoccupations of allied command, his wife and daughter were having breakfast together in Lady Foxe-Forsyth's bedroom. The subject of conversation, of course, was Arthur Smith and his sister. Their arrival was announced in the Social and Personal column of the *Times of Malta*:

> Miss Dorothy Smith and Mr Arthur Smith, M.P., arrived by air from the United Kingdom and are staying as guests for one week of Admiral and Lady Foxe-Forsyth at Admiralty House.
>
> Miss Juno Travays, screen starlet, arrived by air from the United Kingdom and is staying at the Blue Bay Hotel.

Mary handed over the newspaper.

'You should have seen Flag's face when he saw this wonderful creature come into the customs shed. He thought it was Dorothy and couldn't believe his eyes.'

'Juno Travays,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. 'Have I ever seen her on the screen?'

'I don't expect so. She's only a starlet under contract. The Blue Bay are giving her a free fortnight to get publicity. She's going to do a show on board the *Hamper* and a cabaret at the Phœnicia. It's supposed to stimulate the tourist trade.' She added: 'And that is vital, essential to the economic future of this island.'

Lady Foxe-Forsyth looked at her. Mary, she noted, was talking like Arthur Smith. A bad sign. For that reason she did not mention his name.

'Dorothy is a quiet girl,' she observed.

'I suppose, Mummy,' said Mary, 'what you mean is that she is quite dreadful? I can't think how Arthur, who is very intelligent, can have won himself a sister like that.'

'She is very shy, I think. Your Mr Smith is quite used to mixing in company. This may be her first experience of naval grandeur. It is bound to be unnerving.'

Mary said, suddenly: 'You don't care for Arthur, do you?'

'Dear me, Mary, I don't know! He was certainly a little tactless with your father about poor Nelson. I felt quite sorry for him—for Nelson, I mean.'

'Arthur was quite right. All this hero-worship. They never grow out of it.'

'Naval officers,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth, 'never grow out of anything.'

Mary finished her grape fruit, put it aside on the tray, and attacked her bacon and mushrooms with relish.

'It was very brave of Arthur,' she announced. 'He let in a bit of fresh air. And, after all, Daddy's more than capable of dealing with things.'

'Somewhere, where the eternal scroll is kept, your father will have gained a special entry for restraint last night. I do think, however, it will make things easier for all of us if your Mr Smith keeps a few opinions to himself. What are you doing with them this morning?'

'A drive round the island—St Paul's Bay and so on. I thought we'd take them up to the Marsa this afternoon to watch the polo practice.'

'If they would enjoy that,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. She was glad to note that her daughter's appetite was still extremely good.

A few hours after this conversation Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was cordially inviting the visiting French and Italian Admirals to join him—to watch the

practice at the Marsa.

The Marsa is a flat, brown expanse of earth, containing two polo grounds. Around it runs the race track at which pony, trotting and donkey races are run on Sundays. The polo field has a small grandstand and behind it are the club buildings, from which the dull thuds of practice emerged. The select little company who had arrived to watch the practice on this afternoon sat in chairs arranged to the left of the grandstand, behind a straggling row of parched geraniums. They were separated by a hedge from the ponies and grooms.

Mary, with Arthur Smith and Dorothy, arrived early. Flags with evident relief had been able to disengage himself as he was playing. Mary and her guests were left with the General's lady, Mrs Canliss, who knew a great deal about horses. She filled in the moments before the game began by making comments on the ponies, observing that Pixie was going well to-day and that Janus was 'always an absolute pig.'

'Do you hunt, Mr Smith?' she asked.

'No, not me.'

'But I don't believe you, I simply don't believe you.'

'I was brought up in Sheerness,' said Arthur Smith. 'The only hunting we did there was for fag-ends in the gutter. There wasn't any world of privileges there, I can tell you. We had other things than foxes on our minds. Things like the dole.'

'Oh, Arthur,' said Dorothy, speaking spontaneously for the first time, 'it wasn't as bad as that. We were really quite comfortable——'

The conversation was interrupted by the simultaneous beginning of the game with the umpire rolling out the ball and of the arrival of three admirals. They were all in civilian attire and, divested of their uniforms, they seemed suddenly to shrink in significance. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth led the way, behind him came silently Vice-Admiral Copain and the Italian Vice-Admiral Strocco. The Frenchman was tall, with sharp features and restless eyes; the Italian, smaller, had the hooked nose and fine features of the Roman. He also wore a cheerful smile and, unlike his French colleagues, seemed to be enjoying himself. After the introductions had been made he sat down beside Mrs Canliss and asked a stream of questions with that complete lack of self-consciousness which often distinguishes the Continental.

'So,' he said, 'they must hit the little ball between the posts? Are they special horses or will any horse do to play with? Are not the horses in danger if the ball hits them?'

'If they're any damned good,' said Mrs Canliss. 'They take care the ball *doesn't* hit them.'

'And who are the men who are wielding the clubs?'

‘Not clubs,’ said Mrs Canliss. ‘Sticks.’

‘Ah! And who is that stout lady playing?’

‘That,’ said Mrs Canliss, ‘is not a lady. As a matter of fact, it is my husband, General Canliss.’

‘But forgive me! He looks like a lady in those bloomers and that white hat and blue blouse.’

‘Heard him called many things,’ said Mrs Canliss, candidly. ‘But never *that* before. Must tell him.’

Meanwhile Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, having nodded at Arthur Smith, manœuvred Admiral Copain to a seat beside his wife in the front row of seats. Here Lady Foxe-Forsyth discussed with him the cultivation of roses, a subject in which the Frenchman was not greatly interested although Lady Foxe-Forsyth was expert. However, with Admiral Copain murmuring ‘Belle, très belle’ at intervals, the whole thing might have gone off agreeably enough if, suddenly, Arthur Smith had not pushed himself in and sat down.

‘Admiral,’ he said.

Admiral Copain turned on him a look full of suspicion.

‘Admiral,’ said Arthur Smith. ‘I am a British Member of Parliament of the Labour Party. I am the guest of Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.’

It was almost possible to read the workings of Admiral Copain’s mind. So, as always, the British Admiral was playing politics. He was hand in glove with the Socialists. So. Into what were they trying to trap him?

‘Monsieur?’ said Admiral Copain.

Arthur Smith smiled, widely and brightly.

‘Admiral,’ he repeated, ‘I am deeply interested in the psychological workings of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. We have a façade of co-operation, not only in theory but in practice. But behind that there must be the workings of men’s minds—soldiers, airmen and sailors of different nationalities, each with different practice and a different temperamental approach.’

Admiral Copain stared at Arthur Smith in some dismay, for his mind was untutored to the discussion-group form of conversation made regrettably popular by the B.B.C. (from whom Arthur Smith counted on increasing his salary by appearing, from time to time, to argue and instruct on the most tedious subjects).

‘I am sorry,’ said Admiral Copain. ‘I do not understand——’

‘What he means,’ broke in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, brusquely, ‘is how do we all manage to work together? For example, the air forces where you, in France, have had to build from nothing, which is imbued with doubts about the policy of building fighters and which must encounter the opposition of the French military. As far as the navies are concerned, however, I think we

have proved that we can all work together. We have all been brought up to different tactical doctrines, but there is, I think, a brotherhood between men who move across the seas which has made it possible to evolve a single common doctrine.'

These words were tactful and true enough to make Admiral Copain nod his head in vigorous agreement, emitting a string of 'Oui's.' In addition, one of the sides at polo had scored a goal. But Arthur Smith was, apparently, not to be put off with diplomatic platitudes.

'But we must consider the influence of the past!' he cried. 'Let us take your career, Admiral Copain. Where were you during the war?'

The sheer brazenness of this question appalled Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, a man of not greatly sensitive feelings.

'Good God, man!' he exclaimed. 'What has that got to do with anything?"

Admiral Copain made a gesture, then turned and fixed Arthur Smith with smouldering eyes.

'I was in many places, m'sieu. Including Oran.'

'Oran!' cried Arthur Smith. 'That's interesting! What were your feelings then?'

'Fear,' said Admiral Copain, simply. 'You do not feel anything else with fifteen-inch shells directed at your ship.'

'You had no resentment towards the British?'

'Under fire, m'sieu, the identity of those who are firing counts very little. It is the shells which matter. Afterwards, with reflection, perhaps it is different. I was a survivor of the *Bretagne* and many of my comrades were killed. It is not for a naval officer to question a political necessity.'

'Has Oran coloured your feelings towards the British Navy?'

Admiral Copain looked Arthur Smith in the eyes.

'We defended the honour of the French Navy. We did not capitulate or scuttle. That is enough. And now, m'sieu, I am not paying attention to the polo——'

He turned away. Arthur Smith, unabashed, remained by his side until Mary collected him to introduce him to a commander who had no significance whatsoever.

'Sorry,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth to Admiral Copain.

Admiral Copain made no reply.

After the game Admiral Foxe-Forsyth drove back with his wife to Admiralty House to change for the cocktail party that was being given that evening by the Italian consul. Lady Foxe-Forsyth noted with some apprehension that the drive back to Valetta passed in silence. They were

passing the Phœnicia Hotel and about to enter the Gate when Admiral Foxe-Forsyth spoke:

'I'll have to speak to Mary about that fellow.'

'I don't really know what she can do,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth.

'Impudent puppy! Almost think he did it on purpose. I—I'd like to have his guts for a necktie.'

This fearsome wish was one rarely expressed by the Admiral and it meant that he was the prey to deep feelings.

Lady Foxe-Forsyth was disturbed. It really looked as if the visit of the Smiths was going to end in disaster. When she got in Arthur Smith was sitting in an easy chair scribbling notes, Mary was smoking a cigarette and Flags and Dorothy were conducting an uneasy conversation near the window. Arthur Smith looked up, cheerfully:

'No doubt of the value of seeing things first-hand,' he said. 'I have a lot of useful information. I think the allied command can be improved here in a number of ways.'

'I have no doubt that the Admiral would feel the same if he went to Westminster,' said Lady Foxe-Forsyth. 'But please don't frighten us all too much.'

'Just a bit of fresh air,' said Arthur Smith.

Lady Foxe-Forsyth summoned Mary out of the room with a silent but imperious raising of the eyebrow. Beyond the door Mary said:

'Trouble?'

'Trouble,' repeated her mother. 'Your father is really most upset. Do try and comfort him.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was pacing up and down his room, hands clasped behind his back, eight paces each way. Above his head hung on the wall his painting of H.M.S. *Nelson* at sea in bad weather. He looked up as Mary came in. She went up to him and kissed him.

'What is it, Daddy?'

'That pipsqueak upstart Smith——' began Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, who believed in going to the heart of the matter at once. 'He is a——'

For some two minutes the Admiral dealt with Arthur Smith in a series of picturesque nouns and adjectives until he finally stopped for sheer lack of breath.

'Swearing,' observed Mary, primly, 'is the crutch of the conversational cripple.'

She liked to quote from the padres' notices which she observed, from time to time, in United States ships. She knew they had an effect of further infuriating her father.

‘Honestly, Daddy,’ she went on, ‘I don’t think he means it, whatever it was. He’s keen to know about things and find the answers to help people. I rather admire that.’

The Admiral was well aware of the streak of practical idealism in his daughter’s nature. He softened a little.

‘All I ask is that you keep him away. Take him down to the beach and let me see as little as possible of him.’

‘He is seeing Mr Motta to-morrow,’ said Mary, casually.

The Admiral stopped short: ‘He is seeing *who*?’

‘Mr Motta,’ repeated Mary, blanching slightly.

Mr Motta was a firebrand politician. His name could be seen painted white on many of the buildings of Valetta, inviting the population to ‘Vote Motta.’ One thing about Mr Motta was certain that, in the present state of the island, he was ‘difficult.’ And in political affairs the Admiral was, to his great regret, considerably involved.

‘That is impossible,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, firmly. ‘Cannot you see the implications of a guest under my roof mixing with Motta?’

‘But he is only going to talk to him and hear his point of view.’

‘I do not know Smith’s motives. I had understood his visit was social. You must convey my request to him to cancel the appointment.’

‘Very well, Daddy.’

Mary went up and kissed him.

‘I’m sorry I’ve given you so much bother. I didn’t know it would be so difficult. I’ll give Arthur your message and I hope——’ She broke off and waved her hand. ‘See you in church Sunday,’ she quoted from yet another of her collection of padres’ notices, and went out.

Ten minutes later there was a brief knock and Arthur Smith came into the room. He wore his usual easy smile, but there was a suspicion of glittering anger in his eyes. His hands were in his pockets.

‘Mary gave me your message, Foxy. As I simply couldn’t believe it was true, I thought I’d see you myself.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked him in the eyes.

‘Sit down,’ he said, briefly.

Arthur Smith sat and lit a cigarette.

‘My message,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, ‘was a personal request to you to cancel your appointment with Motta.’

‘Then it’s true!’ said Smith, triumphantly. ‘Shades of the dictatorships!’

The Admiral’s face turned a dull brick-red, but he spoke with restraint.

‘Such a meeting would be extremely embarrassing to me personally, Smith. I made the request as your host.’

‘Are you trying to muzzle me, Foxy?’

‘That, unfortunately, is out of the question. We are in an extremely difficult position these days in the island. It is the duty of everyone to act with the highest degree of responsibility.’

‘Is it irresponsible to discuss with an accredited politician his point of view? I am speaking, of course, as a Member of the House. Is it not my duty to get to know the facts?’

‘I had understood,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, coldly, ‘that you were staying at Admiralty House as my daughter’s guest. In those circumstances you might permit yourself some—er—holiday from your political duties.’

Arthur Smith laughed and got to his feet.

‘You were always a damned difficult customer at meetings. But you can’t get away with this. You really can’t, you know.’

‘Does that mean that you will not comply with my wishes?’

‘It does,’ said Arthur Smith, firmly.

The Admiral looked at him for fully half a minute.

‘Very well,’ he said, at length. ‘I have made the request. You must act upon it according to your lights. And now I must get into uniform——’

Arthur Smith was still smiling. He paused before he went out. ‘It might interest you to know that I have one great political ambition. That is to be First Lord of the Admiralty in the next Socialist Government.’

He went out. Later that evening Admiral Foxe-Forsyth saw him in the press of people at the cocktail party at the Italian consulate. He was talking easily and affably to the Maltese Archbishop. Something in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth admired his assurance. Furthermore, his naval training did not allow him to make differences of opinion permanent. On board he would have offered Arthur Smith a gin, now he moved across to his side.

‘Enjoying yourself, Smith?’ He pushed out his case. ‘Have a cigarette?’

‘No, have one of mine.’

The Admiral looked at Arthur Smith’s packet and saw that they were both offering each other the product of the Turkish Tobacco Monopoly. Next moment he was approached by an Italian who wished him to do something about the import of tomatoes into the island. It was not Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s lucky day.

After dinner that night Mary and Arthur Smith left the Phœnicia where they had been dancing with the dutiful Flags and Dorothy and walked up to the battlements above Grand Harbour. It was a hot, clear night. The great, round honey-coloured moon hung suspended in the sky above Fort Angelo. Its reflection shimmered on the water, smooth and black as varnish, outlining the grey hulls of the sleeping ships. The buildings were bathed in the same glow, their outlines white, clear and sharp against the starlit sky.

Mary and Arthur Smith leaned against the parapet.

'Do you like life out here?' said Arthur Smith.

'Of course. I love it,' said Mary. 'Oughtn't I to?'

'It's artificial,' declared Arthur Smith, flatly. 'Superficial and artificial—a relic of the old imperialist days. You have a rich privileged society imposed on a base of poverty and want.'

'I've never heard that the Navy were rich before," said Mary. 'Daddy hasn't exactly made a fortune.'

'Look at Admiralty House! It's an anachronism. All that pomp and circumstance! I say that if a commander needs that to bolster his authority, he's not worthy of his office. It's a needless expense to the country.'

'Better to have thousands of bureaucrats to farm out the results of other people's efforts?' said Mary, nettled.

She wondered, now, what she thought about Arthur Smith. Back in London he had taken her to dinner at the House of Commons. That had been exciting and interesting—he had been young, vital, and his talk had been full of statistics, peppered with intellectual adjectives, rather like an article in the *New Statesman*. It was part of Mary's assertion of her own character, not to admit prejudice. She had to admit that she was flattered. She had even looked forward, with some excitement, to his arrival. She would not have been a young and attractive girl if she had not wondered what he thought about her. But of that, during the past days, there had been no evidence. Indeed, she was coming more and more to the conclusion that Arthur Smith thought only of Arthur Smith.

'Now we're getting to the old arguments!' said Smith. 'All I want is equal opportunity for all.'

'We didn't have that in the past,' said Mary, 'and England didn't do too badly.'

'The past!' he said, derisively. 'We're living to-day—in the most exciting and dangerous century in the history of mankind!'

'I like the past,' said Mary. 'We're standing now where the past breathes. An ancient civilization and, I think, we don't need to feel shame at our country's part in it. We have conducted ourselves with honour. Don't forget that half these people who vote for your Mr Motta, crowded these battlements during the war to cheer British ships. They didn't paint "Vote Motta" on the walls, then: they painted "Good old *Penelope*" and "Gallant *Sikh*." Whatever you politicians do, Malta will always love the Navy best.'

Arthur Smith said nothing. In silence they stared out over the glowing scene. The sound of voices from a returning liberty boat came up to them.

'You see,' said Mary, 'I feel that people like you don't really love England—not in the right way, I mean. Shall we go home?'

‘You’re hopeless,’ smiled Arthur Smith.

Meanwhile, at the Phœnicia Hotel, Dorothy and Flags were sitting in silence at a table near the dance floor. The room was very crowded and the band boomed.

‘Are you sure you won’t have a drink?’ said Flags, who wanted one himself.

‘Well,’ said Dorothy. ‘Perhaps. I’ll have an Angostura.’

‘My dear girl, you can’t have that!’ Flags was appalled. ‘Angostura is bitters. You sprinkle it in and a bottle lasts three years.”

‘Anything that’s sweet, then,’ said Dorothy.

Flags decided that the best relief to himself was to get the drinks in the bar, where he had hopes that Juno Travays might be seen. She was not there, however. The bar was monopolized by American naval pilots, making up for lost drinking hours on board their carrier. ‘Have a drink, old boy?’ they said in elaborate English accents. Then: ‘Fix me a Cointreau, a green chartreuse and a gin. I’m going to get high to-night.’ ‘No,’ said the next one, ‘I’m going to get higher’n you.’ Flags pushed in, ordering a brandy and a cointreau for Dorothy.

He was a tall, immaculate and distinguished young man, well in keeping with the tradition that demands such presence in what the rest of the Service are apt to dismiss as ‘a flunkey’s job.’ Lieutenant the Hon. Cromb-Crumbe, however, was no fool. He had a mind of his own beneath his easy manner and a determination for duty, however unpleasant, which had been particularly evident in his attention to Dorothy during her stay. He returned to her now with the glasses in his hand and prepared for another vigil—it was rather like keeping a watch on the bridge, he thought, the same silence, the same vast vistas of time ahead.

‘Shall we dance?’ said Flags.

‘No, thanks awfully.’

Flags was startled to notice that she had tipped back the Cointreau in a gulp. She sat now very upright, her hands on her lap. Her face, with its sallow skin was impassive: she was a girl who rarely smiled. ‘My God!’ thought Flags, looking at her again with wonder. ‘My God!’ She was staring at the ceiling now and, in addition, she was whistling tunelessly. Flags settled down to his vigil.

‘Bryan.’

He was startled. She had spoken. She was staring, admittedly, at the ceiling still, but she had actually spoken.

‘I wanted to say “thank you.” You’ve been ever so polite and kind. I appreciate it, I really do.’

‘I’ve enjoyed it,’ said Flags, easily. ‘Nice change.’

‘No, you haven’t. Any more than me. I never wanted to come in the first place and every minute has been—well, miserable. Everyone has tried to be kind and that makes it worse, if you know what I mean. We aren’t your sort and that’s all there is to it.’

She paused.

‘That’s why I ordered the drink,’ she said, simply. ‘Because I wanted to say all this.”

‘Have a cointreau,’ said Flags, firmly. He waved to a waiter and ordered a second round.

‘You want me to talk,’ said Dorothy. ‘I’m quite happy being quiet. I’ve always been a lone wolf. Haven’t you got a girl-friend in the room?’

‘Dozens,’ said Flags, equably.

‘Are you engaged or anything?’

‘No. You see,’ said Flags, ‘I love myself so much that I doubt whether I could ever be in love with anyone else. Not, of course, that I’m not perfectly prepared, providing I can find some girl with money and ambition to push me, to make her a present of my lilywhite body.’

‘That’s awful,’ cried Dorothy, who was a fervent reader of women’s magazines.

‘I don’t think so. I should make it clear when proposing that I came first, the Navy second, and her third. At the moment I calculate that I can reach the rank of captain without too much work and without being found out. It would be up to her to push me beyond. Look at Sarah Churchill and Marlborough. William and Mary hated him and without Sarah’s friendship with the Queen, Marlborough would never have had a chance to exercise his talents. It would be up to my wife to get me where I belong, because I feel I have those talents myself.’

‘You sound just like Arthur,’ said Dorothy, as the waiter put the drinks in front of them.

‘Ah, Arthur!’ said Flags. ‘What about Arthur?’

Dorothy sipped the cointreau this time.

‘Arthur’s just got a swollen head,’ she said, simply. ‘He could always talk, even when he was a little boy. And he was always full of go. Do you know how he spent the war? It was lecturing for the Ministry of Information. And then when he got into Parliament he had cabinet ministers walking him up and down with their hands on his shoulders—and it’s all gone to his head. The best one in our family is Perce. Perce is an electrician,’ she said. ‘But he’s a good one and he was a sergeant in the tanks in the war.’

‘So you don’t approve of Arthur?’ said Flags.

‘No,’ said Dorothy. ‘He’s a gasbag.’

Flags chuckled. He wondered why, of all people, he should have suddenly spoken his inmost thoughts to Dorothy. He did not regret it.

‘It all goes to show,’ he said, ‘that life is the same, whatever your line of country is.’

They relapsed into silence.

The next morning Arthur Smith left Admiralty House to keep his appointment with Mr Motta. Motta lived in a comfortable house. Arthur Smith was in good time so he strolled away from Admiralty House until, at the end of the road, he came to the battlements that overlooked Marsamxett. It was already hot. The full sunlight beat down in a rich golden flood, making dark patterns and angles of shadow. Behind him in Sapper’s Street the windows were open and there was a cacophony of noise—children ran screaming, canaries sang in cages, the wireless blared music through open windows and, somewhere, a man was singing an Italian aria in a rich, powerful baritone. Deep bells boomed in the background. Arthur Smith turned to the left, past the old lady seated on a chair outside the lace-maker’s shop. He was noting the poverty and overcrowding, but among all his impressions there was one glaring omission which might have given him some thought—all the people he saw were happy.

He strolled back to the Kingsway and took a taxi down to Manoel.

At about the same time in Admiral Foxe-Forsyth’s office at Lascaris, the Admiral was talking to the Chief of Staff.

‘This fellow Smith, George. He’s getting in with the island politics. Good idea to send him to sea. This convoy exercise gives us a chance.’

‘Shall I give him a berth with F2?’

‘Good God, no. With some of our allies where he can’t speak the language. Only he’ll have to be persuaded tactfully.’

‘We could get him in with the Turks.’

‘No,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, quickly. ‘Not the Turks. Make it an Italian destroyer. Isn’t one due to put in at Kalafrana South to-night?’

‘At 2200. Doesn’t give us much time. By the way, the glass is falling. I hope he’s a good sailor.’

‘I hope so,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, grimly.

Arthur Smith spent two hours with Mr Motta that morning, hearing the politician’s views of the island’s plight.

Some of the basic factors in Malta’s post-war situation were already known to Smith—over-population, the smaller demand for labour in the dockyard, the unstable political leadership. They discussed the solutions of

emigration and the tourist industry: then Motta put, with force, his own pistol-point requirements.

'For me it is Malta, Malta, Malta!' he cried, waving his arms. 'Why is not Maltese labour paid on the same scale as British dockyard labour? Why do Maltese servicemen get half the pay of British, though they serve with British forces? These things must be changed, Mr Smith! Why, the Maltese do not even get justice! The other day a Maltese steward, Pereira, was sentenced to imprisonment for desertion at a naval court martial. Yet there were strong arguments for leniency on compassionate grounds. He had deserted to tend a dying mother. For a British sailor that would have been taken into account.'

'Pereira?' said Arthur Smith. 'I'll look into it. If necessary I can always ask a question in the House, which would draw attention to the matter.'

He made a note in his diary before Mr Motta continued his diatribe. He left the house finally with his head whirling. Mr Motta, like Admiral Kzecky, was 'certainly articulate.' They shook hands on the doorstep and, because he wanted to think, Arthur Smith strolled along the road in the midday heat. He was not the first newcomer to be astonished that soil had to be imported into the island, retained between stone walls and that water, pumped by artesian wells, was an expensive commodity. In the midst of his reflections, however, he was interrupted by a voice:

'Hullo? How are you getting on?'

He looked up to see a girl in a cool summer frock standing before him. She had long flaxen hair and her face was almost totally obscured by a pair of enormous sun-glasses. Beneath these her mouth was wide, red and generous, making it certain that she was a young lady of some attractions. Arthur Smith was so astonished that it took him a few moments to recognize Juno Travays, the actress, whom he had spoken to on the B.E.A. aeroplane coming out. He took off his panama hat.

'Good morning! How nice to see you again. I hope you're enjoying your stay?'

'It's lousy,' said Juno Travays. 'The rooms are all for free, but am I earning my keep? I'll say I am! Crowds following you and wolf-whistles from the sailors, it's no life at all. How are you doing at your dump?'

'I'm at Admiralty House,' said Arthur Smith, not without smugness.

'Snob's Alley, eh? Does that mean you haven't got time for a gin with a girl who'll otherwise have to drink it with the Maltese manager?'

'Of course. Where can we go?'

'Back to the hotel, of course. It's all on the house there. Are you crazy or are you so rich in Parliament or something?'

They walked back a few hundred yards to the Blue Bay Hotel and went into the bar. June perched herself on a stool and ordered two large gins.

'It's bad for my voice,' she said. 'But I'm sick of sailors and sick of Malta—so what the hell? Over the falls, Romeo.'

It was not Arthur Smith's custom to drink alcohol in the middle of the day and even in the evening he was abstemious. However, it was difficult to refuse so glamorous a creature as Juno Travays, star of stage and screen. They took a second and, being joined by the Maltese manager ('Hullo, jerk,' said Juno), a third. It was easy, then, to be persuaded to lunch and Arthur Smith, at about the time when the steward was removing his place at the Admiralty House table, found himself talking quite volubly. Indeed, he was enjoying himself and it seemed easy to promise the earth to everyone. To the Maltese he promised the full backing of the next Labour Government in making Malta a rival of the French Riviera. To Juno he promised an invitation to dine at Admiralty House. He left in a taxi at four o'clock, feeling very pleased with himself.

At Admiralty House he was surprised to find that Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had returned early and was taking a cup of tea. His absence at lunch was not mentioned, nor did he think to apologize. He took his cup of tea from Lady Foxe-Forsyth and perched himself on the arm of a chair.

'Most interesting day,' he said. 'Most interesting. There are a lot of problems here, Foxy, which need, nay must, be cleared up.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth glanced at him. Had the fellow been drinking? His eyes were slightly pink, but otherwise he seemed all right. Still, there was the suggestion and that might help his cause.

'Lot of naval troubles, too,' he said. 'I'm worried about the Italians. Can't seem to get at what they feel. Our liaison officers aren't getting at the heart of matters. We don't want a pantomime of co-operation, we want the real spirit. The only thing that counts.'

'Quite so, quite so,' said Arthur Smith. He was buoyed up with the splendid feeling that here was an Admiral explaining his inside views on co-operation to him—him, Arthur Smith, the kid from Sheerness! Arthur Smith, M.P., friend of the top-dogs!

'What we need,' said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, sighing, 'is a real diplomat aboard one of their ships. Someone who knows men. Pity. Men of that calibre aren't easy to come by.'

In a moment Arthur Smith had seized on the bait. Anything in the nature of a crusade filled him with enthusiasm in his exhilarated state.

'I'd like the chance to do it, Foxy,' he cried.

'No, no. Too much to ask you. Mean joining one of their ships for two days.'

‘But I’d love it——’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked at him from under his eyebrows.

‘Very well, Smith. You embark in *Timbalo* at Kalfrana South at 2200 tonight. My car will take you there. I am deeply relieved that you will be going.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ said Arthur Smith.

In a few moments he went out. There was a silence. Mary and her mother exchanged glances.

‘Would you like another cup of tea, my dear?’ said Lady Foxe-Forsyth.

‘Yes,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. ‘I would, indeed.’

He seemed cheerful.

‘Now I know,’ said his daughter, ‘why they call you “Foxy.” Daddy, how could you?’

‘I don’t understand——’

‘*I have many things to say unto you*,’ said Mary, ‘*but ye cannot hear them now*. St John xii.’

‘Don’t know what you’re talking about,’ grumbled Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

At precisely 2200 the Admiral’s car dropped Arthur Smith at the naval signal station at Kalafrana South. It was a dark night and the wind was rising. Arthur Smith felt suddenly alone as he waited for the duty officer: he regretted heartily his rash gesture which had involved him stepping into the unknown.

‘*Timbalo’s* sending in a boat in ten minutes,’ said the duty officer. ‘Going to blow a bit by the look of things.’

Arthur Smith sat. He preserved, from habit, the cheerful expression on his face but his heart was in his boots. The minutes dragged by in the wan light of the little office. It was forty-five minutes before he was warned that the boat was at the jetty and he picked his way to the water. The boat, heaving and bucketing alongside, had no cover of any kind. Beyond in impenetrable blackness lay the destroyer: the water was choppy and the wind sighed. There were orders in Italian and they chugged out into the night, the bows slapping down into the waves and sending back a drenching shower of spray.

It seemed hours before they got alongside the ship. By that time Arthur Smith was wet through and so was the grip containing his clothes. The boat bobbed and tossed like a cork at the foot of the gangway. Smith had to jump for it. He staggered up the gangway and stood on the wet, steel deck. Sounds came to his ears—the hum and whine of motors, the slapping of water against the ship’s side and the whistle of the wind in the aerials. It was all

eerie and unfamiliar. He began to long for a bed below in a comfortable cabin.

The quartermaster took him aft to the wardroom. A swarthy Italian officer in rather grimy white shorts was sitting on a bench reading a newspaper. He had a voluble conversation with the quartermaster while Smith had an opportunity to study the wardroom.

He had, from time to time, visited the ships of Her Majesty's Navy and knew what a wardroom looked like—the club fender, the copper receptacles for cigarette ends, the serving hatch and round Admiralty-pattern silver trays. Here was something very different. Along one bulkhead was a glass-sided cabinet, lit with rosy lamps, containing brandy 'ballons.' Opposite, in strange incongruity, was a framed engraving of a large number of Italian cavalry charging with swords pointed and fierce expressions on their faces. The horses had flared nostrils and looked very fierce, too. There was a long table on the port side and cushioned benches round the bulkheads. The total effect to Arthur Smith was that he had strayed, by accident, into a continental café. The officer turned at last to Arthur Smith and held out his hand.

'English?' he said, shaking it. 'Like music?'

Arthur Smith nodded, anxious to please. The officer sprang to an ancient portable gramophone and wound it vigorously. He held a needle to the light and changed it.

'English,' he said, 'for you. You like Gilbert and Sullivan? "Flowers that Bloom in the Spring, tra-la-la"? You like that?'

Arthur Smith nodded vigorously. As a matter of fact, he had a peculiar horror for the music of Sir Arthur Sullivan. This dated from the time when, aged eighteen, he had been booed when singing one of Strephon's songs from 'Iolanthe' at a smoking concert. It was a painful memory and it was with an effort that he forced himself to listen now. Moreover, he was aware that he was being anxiously watched by the Italian.

'Good?' said the Italian. 'Now "Three Little Maids from School." You like that?'

'Like very much,' said Arthur Smith, finding himself leaping into the same kind of English. 'But it is late. You show to me my cabin?'

'Cabin, no,' said the Italian, giving a flashing smile. 'You wait a moment. First.'

The needle came down inexorably upon the record, letting loose a flood of soprano voices. Arthur Smith sat smiling with the Italian's eyes fixed upon him. He was tired and depressed, further he was aware that, although still at anchor, the destroyer was by no means steady. The combination of the motion and the music was having a very poor effect on him.

Before the record finished, however, help came. A round-faced, cheerful lieutenant of the Royal Navy came into the wardroom.

'You Mr Smith, sir? I had a signal about you. I see Alberto's been looking after you.'

'Yes. I'd just like to be shown my cabin then I think I'll—er, turn in.'

'A cabin? That may be tricky. They're a bit overcrowded on this trip.'

Alberto now broke in, speaking Italian. The liaison officer replied. The conversation seemed to go on for a very long time before the lieutenant turned to Arthur Smith.

'Alberto's the doc. It seems they are going to fit you up in the sick bay. Delay is due to them having to turn out a case who was in there.' He grinned. 'Suspected smallpox,' he added.

'Smallpox?'

Alberto broke in with a great deal of Italian. Finally the lieutenant translated. 'Fever and impetigo. Might be worse. Anyway, it's somewhere to put your head down. Alberto'll take you along now.'

They went out and clattered along the greasy steel deck. The Italian led the way down a narrow companion ladder and into a narrow passage, bending double beneath the men slinging two abreast in hammocks. There was no light and it seemed an age before they finally stood erect outside the sick bay. Alberto switched on the light and Arthur Smith saw a small, confined box-like cabin just long enough to contain a bunk. In one corner was a hand-basin and there were three medicine cupboards: the whole place smelt strongly of disinfectant.

'Buono notte,' said Alberto, shaking hands. At the same moment there was a tremor in the ship: the glass in the cupboards began to sing and vibrate. The *Timbalo* was under way.

Left alone Arthur Smith had time to crawl into his bunk before there was a thud as the bow struck a wave, followed by a sickening descent. The Chief of Staff had been right about the weather. It was going to be a dirty night. Jammed in his bunk Arthur Smith regretted more than he could say his comfortable bed at Admiralty House. He was feeling remarkably poor as the rolling, pitching destroyer ploughed out into the short Mediterranean seas.

One of the worst features of seasickness is the attendant mental depression. Unable to sleep, sick and morbid, Arthur Smith lay in his bunk, before his eyes a fevered film of his past life—Doctor Trapp, the cabinet minister, walking him up and down the terrace at Strasbourg, bending low and whispering in his ear; the shadowy figures of Gilbert and Sullivan singing and wailing; all his past errors, the humiliations he had ignored came back. He tried thinking of his successes—his maiden speech; the moment when the election result was known and the crowd chanted 'Arthur

Smith is in'; the time when he was told by the P.M. that he was to be a junior minister. All these triumphs now seemed empty and profitless. Arthur Smith was suffering from seasickness. It was after four hours of this torture that the door opened and a figure stood over his bunk in the darkness.

'E l'ora della medicina, Rosso,' it said, thrusting out a glass. Arthur Smith shook his head, feebly. 'No, no. Go away,' he muttered. A strong hand stretched out and raised his head, holding the glass against his lips. 'Bevi,' He gulped back a dose of evil-tasting medicine and sank back on the pillow, groaning. Arthur Smith, although he did not realize it, had been treated for fever and impetigo. It was not his lucky night.

Some miles away, sleeping peacefully at Admiralty House, Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was dreaming that he was back at sea.

Next morning the weather worsened. The sun shone out of the blue Mediterranean sky on a world of steep, glassy-sided waves. The British, French and Italian destroyers pitched and rolled in their stations round the solitary fleet auxiliary which was simulating the convoy. The water came in green across the bridges, slapping and rattling on the deck. A high wind whistled through the revolving radar aerials. It was an unusual sea for the time of year, like that which had attended the amphibious landing at Sicily during the war, and the heat of the sun shining through the scud, gave it added mockery.

It was only by a supreme effort that Arthur Smith, that future First Lord, hoisted himself from his bunk. He unscrewed the dead-light and was faced with a dripping scuttle, washed green from time to time by a creamy flow of sea water. In the intervals he could catch a glimpse of the unfriendly sea and a grey destroyer in the distance, its mast swaying from side to side like a metronome. For some minutes spirit and flesh fought before Arthur Smith forced himself outside the sick bay and lurched along the narrow passage. There was no one on deck which was being swept with flying spray. He climbed up the companion ladder and found himself on the bridge, where he clung miserably to the rail.

'Good morning!' said a hearty voice. 'Afraid the weather hasn't been kind to you.'

He turned to see the beaming face of the liaison officer, who was wearing a white sea sweater beneath his monkey jacket. He was also smoking a very large pipe.

'Yes, a bit choppy,' said Arthur Smith.

'Comes up quickly, and goes quickly in these parts. Half the Eyetais are catting their hearts out. You won't find much for their breakfast, but they do a damned good spaghetti for lunch.'

Arthur Smith shuddered.

'Are we returning to port?' he asked.

'God, no! We're carrying out the exercise programme. E.T.A. 0930, Sunday. Though, heaven knows, they've got an old German asdic in this one which couldn't ping the *Queen Mary* at twenty yards.'

He moved off, exuding cheerfulness and joy of living, leaving Arthur Smith alone to watch the steady, inexorable flow of the waves. He could smell the varnish of the woodwork and the strong impregnation of grease and sea water. He began to calculate how many hours it was until 0930 the next day. In the midst of his reverie he was interrupted by the rattle of a bucket.

'Might find it useful,' said a voice that was unmistakably from the Chatham Division of the Royal Navy.

Arthur Smith turned and saw a red-faced yeoman of signals, who put down the bucket at his feet.

'All sick, the lot of 'em, sir,' he said. 'So you'll be in company. What a Navy! Bumboats alongside selling 'em fruit and wine through the scuttles in harbour and no spirits, not even a cup of Tiffy's prew. Nothing but coffee.' He pointed across to the port wing of the convoy. 'That's my ship, sir. The old *Imogen*. Detached for liaison duties! In an hour and a half it'll be up-spirits over there! I'll never complain about the Navy after this lot.'

He wandered away, grumbling under his breath. Arthur Smith used the bucket. Then, feeling cold, he stumbled aft to the wardroom. Alberto was sitting there. He rose as Smith entered and shook him by the hand.

'Sick, sick, everybody sick!' he exclaimed. 'I play you the "Gondoliers." '

Without a word Arthur Smith groped his way out of the wardroom and back to the sick bay. For the rest of the time he lay there, undisturbed, save at three o'clock next morning when the sick berth attendant came again with the medicine.

It had been a gay week in Malta. After the senior officers had completed their labours at the tactical exercise, cocktail parties, luncheons and receptions were given on board visiting ships. The Maltese, themselves, had been having a religious week with many processions and the skies were bright at night with bursting fireworks.

The culmination of the social side of the week was the large formal dinner given by the Commander-in-Chief and his lady at Admiralty House. On this occasion they had decided to spread the net wide—not only the visiting admirals had been invited, but many people from the island as well.

These included Juno Travays on account of her singing triumphs on board Her Majesty's ships and at the Vernon Club.

Arthur Smith, pale and chastened, was put ashore at Manoel Island on Sunday morning. The shore seemed to heave and sway as he walked to get himself a taxi, but on his journey back to Admiralty House he recovered some of his jauntiness. He could hardly help it, for the sense of relief at being on firm earth again was exquisite. Walking in, he found Mary and Lady Foxe-Forsyth in a bustle.

'Hullo,' said Mary, looking up from the place-cards she was filling in. 'Have a good trip?'

'Most enjoyable. Most interesting.'

'A bit rough, wasn't it?'

'Quite rough, I should say. I enjoy it when there's a bit of a sea running.'

Mary studied his pale face and creased clothes. They told her all and she smiled to herself. Her father had done it again! She, herself, felt that Arthur Smith had certainly asked for it. But she had a soft heart:

'I'm putting you next to Juno Travays to-night,' she said. 'Isn't that nice of me?'

'Juno Travays?'

(He had forgotten his promise to her. Forgotten, too, about the ticklish case of Steward Pereira.)

'They say she's tough, but amusing,' said Mary. 'Your sister has been enjoying herself, I think.'

Mary smiled inwardly. Dorothy's enjoyment had come principally from continuing the hem-stitching in scarlet thread on a huge Tyrolean blouse, while Flags and Mary played tennis. As for Arthur Smith, no one had given him a thought. She wondered now at that momentary enthusiasm which had made her invite him. What had it been? Flattery at the notice by a 'clever' young man? Well, Arthur Smith was certainly not clever. Could she ever have been in the least bit attracted to him? Her mind protested against this vigorously but, whatever it had been, he had shown up clearly in the white sunshine of Malta. Now she could hardly wait until his self-satisfied, smiling face was removed from the island by plane next morning.

'Would you like to sail this afternoon?' she said, not without malice. 'Or, perhaps, you'd prefer to get your head down?'

Arthur Smith said he would prefer a bit of a rest. Lady Foxe-Forsyth smiled to herself.

Admiralty House presented its usual splendid appearance that evening as the guests began to arrive. The hall, with the imposing twin staircase, was a blaze of light and the guests mounted, white uniforms against gay-coloured frocks and the sparkle of jewellery to the tall drawing-room with pale-green

walls where drinks were served. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth—a splendid, solid, chunky figure in white uniform with rows of vari-coloured ribbons, stood at the door beside his wife to greet the guests.

In the midst of the company Arthur Smith had completely recovered his poise. He stood with an American admiral giving his judgment of the problems of co-operation with the Italian navy. He was still giving strong, confident opinions when the guests moved into the dining-room with its long table, gleaming silver candlesticks and bustle of white-coated stewards to take his seat next to Juno Travays.

In this role of the confident, rising young politician, indeed, he might well have passed from the stage of the island. But it was not to be. There came the moment in the middle of dinner when he leaned over from his place mid-table and addressed Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

'Well, Foxy, have you forgiven me about Nelson yet?'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked at him, grave and impassive.

'Nelson? Oh, yes, Smith.' He said at large. 'Mr Smith is not in favour of that great admiral.'

At this moment one of those sudden silences fell upon the table which sometimes occur in any company. Out of this void—in its first hush a voice was heard speaking to Arthur Smith.

'You *fool*,' said Juno Travays, distinctly.

And from opposite came an unexpected sound. It was Dorothy suppressing a long, nervous but completely overwhelming giggle.

Talk broke out again. The evening proceeded decorously. The company repaired to the roof where beneath a canopy of brilliant stars they sat listening to the Commander-in-Chief's orchestra. It was, perhaps, coincidence that the orchestra played 'Selections from Gilbert and Sullivan.' The dictates of host also demanded that Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had a long and cordial conversation with Juno Travays, whom he described later as 'a fizzer.'

Arthur Smith and Dorothy left at seven o'clock next morning, seen off from Lucca by Flags. It was four weeks later that Mary came across an article in the *New Statesman* when her magazines arrived from England. It was called 'Problems of the Mediterranean Command.' Its author, Arthur Smith, M.P. She put it carefully at the bottom of her pile and went out to tennis.

8

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth stood on the balcony of his office in Lascaris and stared down pensively at the Grand Harbour. The boom of saluting guns was in the air and the battlements were crowded with Maltese. Below in the smooth water the first great grey aircraft carriers of the United States Sixth Fleet were moving against the honey-yellow background of St Elmo.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth's face was impassive but in his heart there was an unrepressed feeling of admiration. There was a beauty in naval power to which he could not help responding—and here it was again, large carriers and cruisers, grey, purposeful and efficient. Soon the Grand Harbour would be filled, but not, alas, with his own ships. What could his fleet of frigates and minesweepers seem against this?

He turned away now and went back inside the office, a prey to some emotion. It was hard, hard to bear in Malta, of all places.

He believed, however, that emotion could always be defeated by action. He sat at the desk and read again carefully the operation orders for 'Exercise Ulysees' for which the combined fleets were to sail on the following morning. As he read he frowned slightly, but he did not put the papers down for forty-five minutes, when the Flag Lieutenant came in and they went off to greet the American admiral at the ceremony with guard and band.

Admiral Kzecky, who was watching the exercise officially as Commander-in-Chief South, arrived later in the evening in his own plane from Naples. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth was at Lucca to greet him and they drove back to Admiralty House in the Commander-in-Chief's car. There were twenty people to dinner and many people to be spoken to. It was not until eleven o'clock, when the guests had left and Lady Foxe-Forsyth and Mary retired to bed, that the two admirals were alone together.

'How about a night-cap?' inquired Admiral Foxe-Forsyth.

'A good idea.'

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth rang and the steward brought in two whiskies. The two men sat near each other in the tall drawing-room, relaxed at last.

'Strang,' said Admiral Kzecky, at length.

'Yes?'

'We've disagreed about this exercise. I hope there are no hard feelings?'

'None. Your directive gives you operational command of the Sixth Fleet. How you use it, therefore, is entirely at your discretion. I should, however, have been failing in my duty if I had not pointed out what I did.'

‘That it cannot be realistically operated in the Aegean?’

‘Exactly.’

Admiral Kzecky scratched his nose.

‘You know my answer to that, Foxy. If there are bad radar conditions, confined waters, danger from submarines and mines—we’ll meet them and we’ll beat them.’

‘You can lose very little, materially. It is an exercise, not warfare.’

‘Hell!’ said Kzecky. ‘You’re a straight man, Strang. What’s your real opinion about this fleet of mine?’

‘I think,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, carefully, ‘that it would be better if its great, amorphous mass were removed from the Mediterranean altogether.’

‘What? But it’s the only real *power* you and I have down here.’

‘It cannot operate in these waters,’ repeated Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. He said again: ‘It cannot.’

Admiral Kzecky checked a loud exclamation of anger and disagreement. It was quite an effort. He counted up to twenty before he spoke, then he said:

‘We’ve had all this before. I don’t suppose anything will change it. I still maintain that we are——’

‘Unsinkable?’

‘Well—we’re pretty well trained.’

‘The Mediterranean,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, as if producing the ultimate truth, ‘is a very small sea.’ He paused now and stared in front of him for a very long time. Finally he said: ‘May I ask you a very personal question?’

‘Surely.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked embarrassed, it was as if he could not bring the words out.

‘When we—when we were in Paris you told me you played the saxophone. Was that true?’

Kzecky sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing.

‘Sure it’s true! If you have a sax. handy I’ll give you a run on it, to prove it.’

‘I’m afraid——’

‘And I’ll give it you boogie or Dixieland style.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth poured another whisky. He had wanted to be quite, quite sure. And, far from being ashamed Kzecky was indignant of the suggestion that he could not play. Curious. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth sighed.

Next day the Fleets sailed for the exercise. The two admirals watched the early stages from headquarters, then climbed into two aircraft, decorated

with a suitable number of stars, and were flown on board the United States carrier *Okinawa* to observe the first phase. At the first opportunity, both afflicted with a happiness at being at sea again, they climbed together up to the bridge.

Below on the *Okinawa's* flight-deck they were flying off aircraft. It was a noisy and exciting scene, which never failed to please Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. Against the flat sunlit blue of the Aegean Sea the roaring aircraft took off. The helicopter hovered astern and the red, green and brown of the flight-deck teams made patches against the grey deck. They were tall and lean, these plane directors and handling crews. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth watched them bringing the aircraft forward to the catapults, prancing like dervishes in their eagerness. He looked at his watch. Thirty seconds between each take-off. Good going! He had a deep appreciation of the skill he saw. You would not, he knew, see such flight-deck drill and precision in any other navy in the world.

The last Hellcat took off and disappeared, with wheels lifting. The flight-deck returned to silence.

'Well,' he said, 'here you are.'

'Yes. When you look around, it makes you feel proud.'

'I begin to believe you could be "unsinkable." '

'We *could* be.'

'All the same, submarines are apt to be elusive.'

'Did you ever have an integrated force like this fleet to deal with them?'

'We have not. That is true. I only hope that, in the event of war, you will manage to retain your ships—— Good God!' Admiral Foxe-Forsyth broke off abruptly, pointing at a tall young man below on the flight-deck. 'That's a new one! He's called "Trouble-Shooter Chief." '

Kzecky looked puzzled.

'I don't follow why that makes an impact on you.'

'It's like "Av-Tur," "Logistics," "Gas Crew" and—and "coke machines." '

'Nothing out of the ordinary about a coke machine is there? Or an ice-cream machine, either. Out in the Pacific I saw to it that the ice-cream machine always put out its three-ton maximum of gedunks every week.'

'Gedunks,' breathed Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'Gedunks.' He struggled to express himself. 'It's just that expressions like that seem to us—no, I'm being unfair.'

'I know what you mean. We call this a "canted flight-deck." You call it "angled." It's just two ways of saying the same thing—landing aeroplanes is a darned sight safer. The British thought-up the idea: we put it in ships. That, as I see it, is co-operation.'

‘Agreed.’

‘Come to that, you British are hard to bear yourselves. You’re so goddamned snooty. For me it don’t matter if its Joe Doakes or Joseph-hyphen-Doakes so long as we work together. The rest can come.’

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth nodded. From instinct he had never taken his eyes from the sea and ships around him. He saw the force now—the two large carriers, the escorting cruisers and destroyers. Away to the south-east a small mixed force was escorting a simulated convoy up to Athens, where a Greek admiral commanded as COMEDEAST. COMEDEAST! How it had all changed.

‘It’s a rough road being a leading world power,’ he observed at length. ‘Nobody loves you.’

Admiral Kzecky was shocked.

‘Do you believe that? Why, these ships are grey diplomats! Our boys go ashore and they have the opportunity to create real goodwill and better understanding with the people there.’

‘Do not believe it,’ said Admiral Foxe-Forsyth, firmly.

Kzecky stared at him in real dismay. He and his force were providing help and defence. But for them these countries might have been *communist*! And into the bargain the Americans were men of goodwill, with kind hearts and good intentions.

‘You can’t mean that?’ he said.

‘I do. In the role of master, no nation can ever be loved. But it can be respected. I believe the future of the free world lies with the two of us. The problem is not the problem of Russia, but the more difficult one of your country and mine—in—er—happy marriage.’

‘You could be right,’ agreed Admiral Kzecky.

Admiral Foxe-Forsyth looked out again over the waters. It was sunset—a rich orange glow streaked the sky and split the banked-up clouds. The moon had risen and an unearthly glow lit the sea and the blackening shapes of the ships. Admiral Foxe-Forsyth had seen many sunsets in the Mediterranean and they never failed to move him. It was not a response to the colour of cloud and sea, it was an emotion of love for the Navy. He had seen ships cheered out of harbour to face the dangers of Crete; he had seen the skies blackened with the dark puffs of pom-pom shells and seen the majestic passage of cruiser and battleship. He had known the commanders before him. Perhaps, like some of them, he would be cheered as he left, a small white figure standing at the salute on a gun-turret.

He had known many men out here, and not a few now slept beneath these waters. And, along with the men, he had known ships. Could he ever forget the first destroyer he commanded? Even now he could shut his eyes

and pick his way mentally fore and aft along her decks. Gone now. Indeed, it had all changed. It was almost as if the Mediterranean had been sold, like some estate by an impoverished landowner. But no regrets—there was always the future. He, himself, would never quite fit. But there were younger men for whom the past would not be so strong, who would never have known the days when the Royal Navy sailed alone.

A pipe sounded on the ship's broadcaster: 'Lay aft on the fantail.'

'Fantail!' exploded Admiral Foxe-Forsyth. 'Lay aft on the——' He checked himself. 'Oh, well,' he said.

And then something caught his eye in the water on the starboard side. He looked at it for a moment, silently. It was the first small puff, tiny at first but pouring into a white flood, of a submarine's smoke-candle. The screen had been penetrated! Admiral Foxe-Forsyth did not look at Admiral Kzecky. He trained his binoculars away from the ship on the port side.

'That must be Milos out there to port,' he said. 'A curious little island.'

Transcriber's Notes

Minor changes were silently made to spelling and punctuation to achieve consistency.

[The end of *Admiral on Horseback* by Geoffrey Willans]