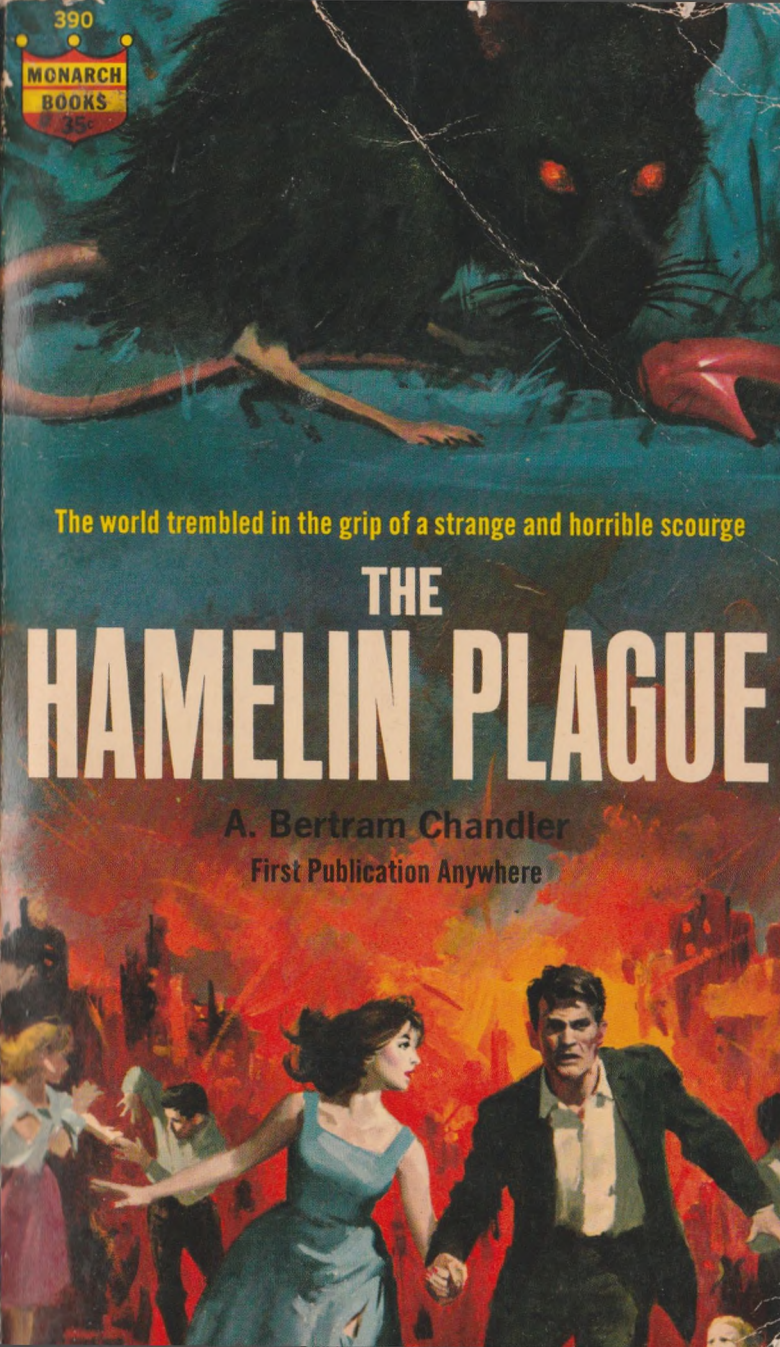
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The world trembled in the grip of a strange and horrible scourge
THE
HAMELIN PLAGUE
A. Bertram Chandler
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IT'S NOT HUMAN

Barrett and Pamela were in the radio room with the admiral when Karl came running into the room, his face white. "Sir, there's something horrible in the paint locker. It's—it's not . . . human!"

Barrett and the others ran from the room, down to the paint locker. They stepped in.

At first Barrett thought somebody had spilled red paint. Then he looked around. There was a cat on the floor, its throat torn out. And there were rats, also dead and mangled. And in the corner, there was something else—

It was bigger than the rats, bigger than the cat. There was a gaping wound in its belly. The forelegs—or arms?—of the thing were almost human.

"What is it?" asked the admiral. "It looks like a monkey, but it has teeth like a rat."

Pamela's eyes widened in fright and she whispered, "It's a King Rat—or one of the many princes . . ."

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

A. Bertram Chandler was born in Aldershot, England, and during World War II served in the British Merchant Navy in all theatres of war with the exception of the Murmansk convoys. He was a gunnery officer on a number of troop transports and later a chief officer on several British passenger liners.

He is well known as a writer of science fiction short stories and novels and he holds a certificate of competency as master mariner. He is also a fellow of the British Interplanetary Society, London.

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A Science Fiction Novel

THE HAMELIN PLAGUE

A. Bertram Chandler

MONARCH BOOKS, INC.

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THE HAMELIN PLAGUE

A Monarch Books
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Published in November, 1963

Dedication
For My Fat Cat

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CHAPTER 1

Barrett heard the rapid succession of short blasts from the captain's mouth whistle and turned to look aft. He could see, by the yellow glare of the wharf floodlamps, the Old Man standing in the wing of the bridge, making the crossed arms signal. The chief officer acknowledged it by repeating the gesture, then ordered, "Make her fast at that, Bo's'n."

"The usual, Chief?"

"Yes. Two eyes and a bight. Shoulder wire." He went to the fo'c's'le headrail, looked down to the wharf, looked aft. As he watched, the ship came alongside with the faintest of jars. "That'll do," he said over his shoulder, "'vast heaving." The windlass ceased its clatter. He called to the mooring gang on the quay, "Let's have that heaving line back. I'm putting out a bight on the offshore Manila."

He stood there, watchful but not interfering, until the ship was securely moored, and the turns of the last line had been thrown over and around the bitts.

"What are the orders, Chief?" asked the bo's'n.

"To begin with," Barrett told his petty officer severely, "don't forget the rat guards this time. Port Health has been very fussy about 'em of late. And it'll be six o'clock turn-to tomorrow morning for breaking out derricks and opening hatches. I shan't be down until eight, but the third officer will be aboard. I've arranged with the engineers for power on deck."

He had a last look around. "See you in the morning, then, Bo's'n," he concluded and clattered down the port ladder from the fo'c's'le head, made his way with long strides along the foredeck, climbed the ladders and companionways to the officers' flat under the bridge. At the end of the cross alleyway, to starboard, was the master's accommodation. Barrett tapped at the door.

"Come in, Mr. Barrett, come in!" called Captain Hall cheerfully. He, already changed into civilian clothes, was seated at his desk, opening the mail that had come aboard on the vessel's arrival. "Now, where did I put the arrival

letter? Ah, here. Commence discharge at 0800 hours tomorrow, Monday, with five gangs. Five twilight gangs tomorrow evening. Expect to complete discharge by noon, Tuesday. Sail for Newcastle at 2200 hours. You'll be in tomorrow, won't you? You can ring the Newcastle office at about ten and give 'em the details of the loading. Here's their freight list."

"I'll do that, sir," promised Barrett.

"Good man. I'll shoot through now. Mustn't keep Mum waiting. Oh, you can give me a ring tomorrow if anything important crops up. Don't bother otherwise."

"Very good, sir," said Barrett.

He walked to his own cabin, glanced at the letters that had been put on his desk. There seemed to be nothing of any immediate importance, and nothing personal. So he made his way down to the foredeck again, jumped up onto the after mooring bitts and swung a long leg over the bulwarks, followed it with the other, dropped the short distance to the planking of the wharf. He strode to the gatekeeper's office. The Old Man was there already; he had just finished with the telephone and pushed the instrument towards his chief officer, saying, "She's all yours, Mr. Barrett."

"How's the taxi situation, sir?" asked Barrett.

"Quite good. Legion have promised to have one down for me in a couple of minutes. But I thought you didn't bother with cabs."

"I don't usually. Jane should have been here to pick me up. I'm going to ring her now to find out what's wrong."

"She's still getting rid of the boy friend," the captain told him cynically. There was the sound of a horn from the street outside. "Well, here's my cab. See you Tuesday. Good night."

"Good night, sir," said Barrett.

He dialed his home number, listened to the double rings, wondered if Jane was on her way down to the waterfront. Then he heard the faint clatter as the instrument at the other end was lifted from its cradle and he heard Jane's voice.

"It's me," he said.

"Welcome home," she said.

"But I'm not home yet," he protested. "I was hoping you'd be down to pick me up."

"I was going to come down, Tim, but . . . oh, I'm furious

with myself. I had the car out yesterday to drive round to Margaret's and—"

"Did you have an accident?"

"No. But I must have driven over something. When I started to get the car out tonight I found that I had a flat. I was damn lucky I didn't have a blowout when I was driving home from the North Shore. The tire's chewed to ribbons."

"I'll look at it when I get home," he said.

"A fat lot of good that will do!" she scoffed. "Well, see ya."

"See ya," he repeated, and hung up. He walked back to the ship. The gangway was out now and already the first of the A.B.'s to get changed into go-ashore rigs were coming down it. "Good night, Chief," they said cheerfully as they passed him. "Good night," he grunted.

Back in his cabin he threw off his uniform shirt, stepped out of his shorts, kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks. He rinsed his face and hands hastily in the washbasin, dried himself sketchily and then, before the mirror, ran a brush over his sandy crewcut. He grinned at his reflection as he did so. For some time now Jane had been nagging him to let his hair grow long enough so that something could be done with it, but he had managed to withstand her demands. His face, he had decided, would not be helped by any sort of hair styling; it was too rugged, too . . . rough hewn? Yes, that was it.

Tim Barrett, the bucko mate, he thought. *But if I were a real bucko mate the Seamen's Union would declare the ship black.* He shrugged, got into his civilian clothing. He looked burlier in them (although no less tall) than he had in the skimpy tropical rig. He picked up the brief case into which he had already stowed his toilet gear. He switched off the lights and went out into the alleyway. The second and third mates, he saw, were already away. Only Sparks, a confirmed bachelor, was remaining aboard.

He called, "Good night, Bill."

"Good night, Timmy," came the reply from behind the drawn door curtain. Then the drape was pulled to one side and Bill Maloney—fat, bald and as glum-looking as always—was standing there. "Didn't Jane come down for you?"

"No. She's buggered the car."

"Sorry to hear that. And I've been saving a bottle of

Cascade beer for her. I know she likes it. I was going to give her a drink. Oh, well, it's only cluttering up the fridge. We may as well split it."

"Not tonight, thanks, Bill. It's late."

"Then I'll have it all to myself. Give Jane my regards."

"I'll do that," said Barrett.

He went ashore, to the gatekeeper's office, and rang for a taxi.

While he was waiting for the cab he made friends with one of the wharf cats—a tough, battered, black-and-white tom. The cabbie, when he arrived, said, "I could do wi' one o' them, mate. What abaht slingin' the bastard inter the boot?"

"So you like cats?" remarked Barrett, climbing in beside the driver.

"Nah. Hate the brutes. But I hate rats worse."

"Troubled with 'em?" asked Barrett, not really interested.

"Yair. Destructive bastards. Yer wouldn't think they'd eat *tires*, would yer?"

"I wouldn't," admitted Barrett.

"But they did. I'm bloody sure as it was them." Then, after a pause, he asked, "Where to, Mate?"

"Woollahra. Erin Street."

"Just off Ocean Street, ain't it? Fasten yer seat belt—we're takin' off."

The vehicle didn't take off, quite, but made good time as far as King's Cross. There the usual harassed policeman was endeavoring, without much success, to sort out the streams of traffic from all directions. During the delay the driver made conversation.

"In from overseas, Mate?"

"No. Just coastwise."

"An' where do yer run to?"

"Mainly New South Wales ports to Tasmania, and back. Coal and steel from Newcastle, general cargo from Sydney, to Burnie and Devonport and Launceston. Potatoes and newsprint and such back to Sydney."

While he was talking, Barrett looked at the placards outside a nearby paper shop. PLAGUE STRIKES DJARKARTA, he read. Then, FIRE BUG STILL AT LARGE. And, SHOCK DECISION AT RANDWICK.

He laughed.

"What's so bleedin' funny, Mate?" asked the driver, pausing in the act of lighting a cigarette.

"Those placards. There are at least three of the Randwick ones to only one each of the others. Fire and pestilence aren't ignored entirely, but the only *real* news is about horse racing."

"You can say that again, Mate. Thanks to them bleedin' judges, I dropped a tenner yesterday. Well, looks as though the mug's made up his bleedin' mind at last."

They turned into the New South Head Road, picking up speed again. Barrett was content to sit in silence, listening to the driver's chatter, mentally ticking off the familiar landmarks as they passed—the Rushcutters Bay Stadium and the big new bowling alley, and the fancy turret clock outside the Customs Credit building that had never kept correct time since its installation, and the Edgecliff Post Office and the turn-off up Ocean Street, and the white, brilliantly floodlit Clyde Industries office and, at last, Trevellyan Street.

"Turn right," ordered Barrett, "then first left into Erin Street. The house with the white fence and the black gates."

"That'll be eight bob," said the driver, switching on the light over the meter.

Barrett gave him ten, got out of the cab. He stood there for a moment or so, soaking up the atmosphere of the quiet, familiar little thoroughfare. On his side the small cottages, with the exception of his own, were in darkness, although there were a few lights showing in the windows of the tall buildings on the other side, the line of private hotels and blocks of flats fronting Ocean Street. The almost full moon gave illumination enough to bring out the gracious lines of the big houses, but not enough to reveal the shabby, peeling paint, the dilapidation of the balconies. A light, warm breeze stirred the foliage of the jacarandas, rustled the leaves of the camphor trees.

The cab backed and turned to go back the way it had come. The twin beams of its headlamps swept over something dark huddled in the middle of the road; swept over it and passed on.

Barrett, somehow, was curious. Ignoring the retreating car he walked slowly towards the thing—whatever it was —a black blotch on the silvery gray of the paving. It was an animal of some kind. It was a dog. A dead dog. Its

blood was spreading about it in a viscous pool. *Probably run over*, thought Barrett, *although there's little enough traffic in a quiet street like this. Poor little bastard.*

He squatted to make a closer examination, hoping to find an identification tag on the collar, but there was none. And then he saw the wound that had killed the animal, the injury from which all the blood had come. It was a ragged gash in the throat. It could not have been inflicted by a car.

He straightened, shrugged. There was nothing further that he could do, and the garbage collectors would be round in the morning.

But what, a little voice at the back of his mind was asking, *had killed the dog?*

He turned abruptly, walked quickly to his front gate, and then along the short path to his front door.

CHAPTER 2

The door opened while he was still fumbling for his keys.

"Come in," snapped Jane crossly. "Come *in*. You've been prowling around outside for *hours*."

"About five minutes, darling," he corrected mildly. "There's a dead dog in the street."

"Then tell me about it, if you must, inside. I'm cold."

"It's quite warm," he said.

"*I* don't think so."

"You haven't been messing around the Tasmanian coast for the past fortnight," he told her.

He followed her into the house and the long living room that opened directly off the front door. He dropped his brief case as soon as he was inside, lifted his hands to her slim shoulders, and turned her so that she was facing him. He looked at her for a second or so, at the thin, finely boned face under the dark, sleek hair, at the wide, generous mouth. (At the mouth that once had been generous, he thought, but that wasn't generous any longer.) He kissed her then, but he knew—they both of them knew—that there was something lacking. (There had been something

lacking for too long a time now.) Nevertheless, his right hand found the fastening of her robe.

She pulled away. "Not so fast, sailor. Not so fast. This isn't my night for being raped."

"I've still got my trousers on," he pointed out sourly.

"Then keep them on. Business first—and I don't mean monkey business. Sit down."

Barrett sighed, let her go, and she headed for the kitchen. He flopped into his chair. There was a little heap of already opened envelopes on the coffee table. He picked up the first one, extracted its contents. Gas bill. He sighed again. He looked at the second one—telephone bill . . .

Jane—tall for a woman, graceful—came back from the kitchen carrying a tray. She was already, he noticed, less tense, in a better temper. She said lightly, "You probably constructed a couple or three Dagwoods for yourself before you left your ship—but I like an occasional meal with my husband."

"The coffee smells good," admitted Barrett.

"Look who made it. And there's some cheesecake from that little Austrian shop."

"Talking of cheesecake—"

"We are. The kind you eat." She primly adjusted the robe which, as she sat down, had fallen away from her slender legs.

"Oh," he grunted. "All right."

As they sipped their coffee and nibbled the pastry, they discussed, first of all, household finances and then the various matters that had cropped up during his brief absence. When they were finished eating he brought out and filled his pipe and then, getting to his feet, began fumbling through his pockets.

"What the hell's biting you?" complained Jane. "Can't you sit still for five minutes?"

"Matches," he explained. "They must have fallen out of my pocket in the cab."

"Stay where you are," she ordered. "I'll get a box from the kitchen."

He picked up the Sunday paper as she got up and left the living room, skimming through its contents. That mysterious firebug, he learned, was having a good run for his money. One of the oddest features of the series of blazes had been the failure of fire-detecting and extinguishing systems. Barrett was inclined to think this somewhat less

odd than the newspaper did. He could remember a fire aboard ship that was discovered only when the hold in question was opened to work cargo—and then, *after* this fire had been extinguished, the smoke-detecting apparatus had been tested and had worked perfectly, with red lights flashing and alarm bells ringing in the wheelhouse and the officers' flat. Even so, he admitted to himself, with a series of fires there was something odd about it all.

He turned to the item of news from Indonesia. The plague there was serious enough—bubonic plague. No wonder the port authorities were becoming concerned about the maintenance of rat guards on ship's mooring lines. Although, he thought, there would be little likelihood of such a pestilence getting out of control in a country with modern standards of hygiene and sanitation.

He irritably shifted his cold pipe in his mouth—*what was keeping the woman?*—as he turned to the sporting pages to discover just what the "shock decision" at Randwick had been. Then he heard, from the kitchen, Jane's heartfelt "Damn!" He got up from his chair and went to see what was wrong.

Jane was standing there, in the middle of the kitchen floor, looking furious. She said, "If you'd had a chance to come in here I'd be blaming you."

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Just the family poltergeist," she told him. "It *must* be a poltergeist. There are so many things—too many things—going missing these days. Little things, like boxes of matches. Like the box of matches that should be on the ledge over the gas stove."

"There aren't any now," he said, investigating.

"Of course there aren't, you clot," she snapped. "What do you think I was swearing about?" She went to the cupboard, opened the door and got a fresh box from the packet on the shelf. "Here you are. Now you can smoke until you're blue in the face. I'm going to bed."

"What about that flat tire?" he asked.

"You are not going to mess about with the car at this time of night," she told him firmly. "Furthermore, you are not going to get up at some ungodly hour of the morning to do it. I want my sleep, even if you don't. You'll just have to get down to the ship by public transport, and I'll ring Mr. Wilkins at the service station to come over and fix it."

"All right," he said.

He decided to do without his smoke.

He undressed in the spare room, hanging his clothes up carefully. From a drawer in the wardrobe he took the black silk pajamas that Jane liked. (Or had liked?) It was a warm night still and he didn't bother with a dressing gown. Barefooted, he walked through to the bedroom. Jane was already between the sheets, her dark auburn hair lustrous against the pillow, the dark tan of her arms and shoulders contrasting with the white bed linen and the pale pink of her nightdress. Her eyes, so dark a blue as to be almost violet, surveyed him critically.

She said coldly, "You're putting on weight."

Hurt, he said, "I wish you'd try to be less unromantic."

She laughed, but not too unkindly. "Don't take on so, Tim. We aren't a pair of grubby teen-agers in the throes of our very first love affair. We've got each other, for better or for worse—and I suppose we could have done worse."

"This isn't the way it used to be," he said stubbornly.

"Of course it isn't. We aren't the same people," she said, a little rueful half-smile playing over her full lips. "There was I, a rather silly little girl blowing a small inheritance to pay my fare out to Australia, the land of golden opportunity, and there were you, the handsome and dashing chief officer of a fine big ship."

"And now I'm mate of a scruffy little coaster," he said. He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Oh, well, the money's better and the responsibilities are less."

Serious now, she asked, "But you have no regrets, Tim?"

"I'd be a bloody liar," he told her, "if I said that I didn't miss big ships—the style of them and the comforts and the social life—*and* the duty-free grog and smokes. But this has its compensations. Home for a couple or three days every fortnight or so. At least three months annual leave, with another month in the middle of the year." His face clouded. "It should be a good life. It used to be a good life, but—"

"But what?" she asked.

"*You* know. Damn it all, Jane, don't you think I envy the other officers, every man in the crew who happens to be married? I see them leaving the ship to go home—to homes not as good as this one, likely as not, and to wives not one half as beautiful. But there's more to a wife than somebody

who's good to look at and who has the same tastes as her husband in books and films and food and drink. Tomorrow morning I shall see the others, and they'll all look smug and satisfied, with all the tensions discharged. More smug and satisfied than *I* shall be feeling. What's wrong with us, Jane?"

She said, "You're you, Timothy, and I wouldn't want you changed. But you know how it is with me—how it still is with me."

He shrugged. "Yes, I know. We wanted the child but—it was just one of those things. I don't know what I'd have done if I'd lost *you.*" He managed a grin of sorts. "Then I *should* have had cause for complaint. But I want you, Jane, rather badly. You know that."

"Yes," she told him, "I know. I know, my dear. But it will all come right. I promise."

She pulled him down to her as he slid into the bed, kissing him warmly. (But there was still that holding back, that cold reserve.) She evaded his lips when he tried to return her embrace, whispering, "No, not now. . ."

"Please," he insisted. He could feel the warmth of her body through the thin silk of her gown, of his pajamas. She pulled away from him with shocking abruptness. He realized then that somebody was hammering on the front door; that a woman's voice was calling: "Mrs. Barrett! Mrs. Barrett!"

Barrett swore and grumbled, "What the hell sort of neighborhood is this?" He declaimed sardonically, "Run for the hills, the Martians are coming!"

"It's Mrs. Purdom, from next door," said Jane coldly. "When you've quite finished carrying on, you might find out what she wants."

"To borrow a cup of sugar, no doubt."

"Don't be a fool, Tim. It must be something serious."

Barrett slid out of the bed then, with a certain alacrity. He picked up Jane's dressing gown, draped it inadequately about his gangling frame. He padded on bare feet out of the bedroom into the living room, opened the door.

"Oh, Mr. Barrett, I didn't know you were home."

Barrett looked down at the little woman, saw that her pinched face was white and tear-stained. "I hate to disturb you, so late and all, but it's serious. Really serious. May I use your phone?"

"But of course," he said gruffly. "Come in."

"It's little Jimmy, the baby." She started to sob again. "Oh, it's dreadful, dreadful. And my hubby's on night shift."

Barrett let her through to the bedroom. Jane was up, belting a heavy housecoat about her slim figure. She asked, her voice concerned, "Is it a doctor you're wanting, Mrs. Purdom?"

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Barrett. Dr. Hume. He's always looked after us."

"I'll find the number," said Jane.

"Oh, Mrs. Barrett, don't bother. I know it." She scuttled to the telephone on its bedside table, dialed with a shaking hand, had to start again from the beginning. "Oh, Doctor, Doctor. . . Oh, Mrs. Hume, can I speak to the Doctor? It's Mrs. Purdom here . . . Yes, it's urgent, *urgent* . . . little Jimmy, his face all bitten, *bitten* . . . No, no—*not* a spider."

"You know something about first aid, Timothy," said Jane quietly.

"Yes," said Barrett.

He hurried through to the spare room, pulled trousers over his pajamas, thrust his feet into a pair of leather slippers. The front door was still open and he went through it with long strides. Next door, he saw the light streaming through the Purdoms' open front door.

He went into their house. Its layout was almost identical with that of his own. There was a second bedroom, and it was being used as a nursery. In it there was a child's cot, and there was blood on the floor under it. There was something in the cot, something that cried not as a baby normally cries, but with a thin, mewling scream.

Barrett looked—and had to fight hard to choke down his nausea. The child's face hadn't been bitten so much as . . . eaten. But he had to do something about it, even though he had not the resources of a well-stocked ship's medicine chest at his disposal. To stop the bleeding, that was the important thing, the essential thing. To stop the bleeding and to prevent infection—if it was not already too late for that.

The window, overlooking the back garden, was open. Barrett saw, by the light from the room and by the moon light, a row of fluttering white squares hanging from the Purdoms' clothesline. They would do. They should be fairly sterile. He ran outside, snatched a handful of

napkins from the line. Carefully, gently, he placed the first square of absorbent plastic over the baby's mutilated face, keeping it clear of the mouth and what was left of the nose. It darkened, reddened immediately. He followed it with a second one. And a third.

"Mr. Barrett, Mr. Barrett." It was Mrs. Purdom at his elbow. "He'll be all right, won't he? He'll be all right?"

"Of course," he lied.

Plastic surgeons, he thought, *might be able to do something about the face, but they'll never restore the sight of that left eye.*

Then, to Barrett's heartfelt relief, the doctor came. He was brusque but not unkind with Mrs. Purdom. He asked Barrett what he knew of the case, what he had done. He made his own examination, rapid but not unthorough. He said bitterly, "There's been far too much of this sort of thing lately. Far too much. God knows what the Council's ratcatchers—rodent control officers, they call themselves, God help us—are doing. It's high time somebody made an issue of it."

Barrett carried the injured child out to the doctor's car, and placed him gently in the back seat. Mrs. Purdom got in hastily, fussing. "Don't maul the brat, woman, don't *maul* him!" ordered the doctor testily. Then, to the Barretts, he said, "Good night to you. And thank you for what you've done."

Barrett and Jane watched in silence until the red taillights had vanished around the corner, then went back to their own house.

Barrett thoroughly scrubbed his hands in the bathroom. It wasn't the blood so much that sickened him, it was the thought of the animal, or animals, that were responsible for the injuries. A seaman hates rats more than does the average landsman. When he was finished, Jane was already back in bed. He got in beside her.

"That poor woman," she said. "That poor child."

"Was it true what the doctor was saying?" he asked. "About other, similar cases in this locality?"

"Not only here," she told him, "but all over Sydney. Somebody was telling me that they get these plagues now and again. It'll be rats one year, and fleas another year, and then it'll be sharks in the harbor and off the ocean beaches."

"The rats," he said slowly, "are worse than the sharks

somehow. At least you only have yourself to blame if you go swimming in an unprotected area. But these filthy brutes attacking children in their cots—"

"Not only children," she told him. "Don't you read the papers?"

"No," he admitted. "I never bother much with the local rags in Tasmania."

"Last week," she said, "there were two old-age pensioners attacked the same way as poor little Jimmy Purdom, one not far from here and the other in Manly. And there was a drunk found dead, with his throat torn out. The police think that it was done by rats."

"And there was that dog," he almost whispered. "The dead dog I found in the road, just outside here."

She said, "And I saw a cat a few days ago. Dead. Something had gone for its throat."

Barrett laughed mirthlessly. "It puts me in mind of that thing of Browning's. How does it go?

'Rats, rats.

They fought the dogs and killed the cats.' "

"Some dogs," she said, "and some cats *ask* for trouble."

He said, "But this is serious, Jane. I doubt if they'd attack a healthy and sober adult, but there's always the risk of disease. I'll get a couple of traps and some poison on my way home tomorrow. And I want you to be even fussier than you usually are about garbage disposal."

She said, "But I'm always fussy."

There was a sharp click as she put out the light.

Barrett said doubtfully. "I suppose it was rats. The Purdom kid, I mean, and that dog."

"What are you driving at, Tim?"

"I . . . I'm not sure. I thought I saw something as we came back from next door—an animal. It was quick, and it hopped rather than ran into the shadows. More like a kangaroo it was. A little one."

She said, "Don't be silly. Whoever heard of kangaroos running around in the inner suburbs?"

He said, "Yes, but—"

She said, "We'd better try to get some sleep."

He put his arms about her and kissed her, but she was cold, unresponsive. She disengaged herself, turned over, her back to him. And Barrett lay there, listening to her even breathing, wondering if she was asleep or merely feigning. He thought, *I'm getting to the stage when I'm beginning to*

think the whole damn universe is against me. If it hadn't been for Mrs. Purdom—

He told himself, *That's a stinkingly selfish attitude, Barrett, and you should be bloody well ashamed of yourself.* He thought, *Even so . . .*

And he remembered how things had been with him and Jane before her pregnancy, before things had gone so very badly wrong that they had lost the child and he had almost lost her. He remembered how things had been—his homecomings, the shared glass of wine and then the frank and unashamed enjoyment of each other's bodies, with the consequent release of all tensions, the dissipation of the strangeness inevitable even after only a short separation.

He remembered how things had been, and thought, *Sooner or later it has to happen. Sooner or later some woman will come along, somebody not unattractive, not unintelligent—and available. And I can't trust myself to be loyal. Oh, I love Jane, and she's given me a good home, but—*

Who was it who said that marriage is more than four bare legs in bed? Johnson? He was right, of course, but . . .

He twisted and stirred uneasily, conscious of the woman beside him, knowing that until she was ready—if she ever would be ready—any attempt to take her would do far more harm than good. With relief he felt himself drifting into an uneasy sleep—and then the ululation of sirens, not far distant, jerked him back to full wakefulness. Was it the police? he wondered. Or the ambulance? Or the fire brigade?

He slipped quietly out of bed, went through to the back garden. The moon was down, and the false dawn was a faint pallor in the eastern sky. And there was a glare to the west, over the heavily built-up suburb of Paddington, a glare that flickered and faded, then flared up to sudden, terrifying brightness. The night was alive with the screaming of sirens.

Egocentrically, Barrett thought, *First rats, and now the firebug.*

He watched and listened for a while, then went inside to the kitchen and brewed himself a pot of tea.

He knew that if he returned to bed he would not sleep.

CHAPTER 3

It was six days later and Barrett's ship, *Katana,* having made a good passage south from Newcastle, had cleared Cape Howe, the southeastern point of Australia, and was now steadied on the course that would take her from Gabo to Deal Island. It was a fine evening, clear, with a gentle northerly breeze and a slight following sea. There was the usual Bass Strait swell, rolling in from the southwest, but it was not heavy enough to seriously affect the vessel's speed or to impart to her more than an easy, not disagreable pitching motion.

At 2000 hours—8.00 P.M.—Barrett handed over the watch to the third officer—course, True and Compass, position on the chart by both radar and visual bearings, other vessels within sight, both of them northbound and well abaft the beam. Formalities completed, he went straight down to the saloon pantry.

The usual supper party was just getting under way. Off-duty officers were making toasted sandwiches, preparing tea and instant coffee and cocoa according to taste. Captain Hall was investigating the contents of the refrigerator and complaining bitterly, "Is it quite impossible to get a piece of decent cheese in this ship? A self-respecting rat wouldn't touch this muck. It's like ersatz rubber."

"According to my taxi driver last Sunday night," said Barrett, "the rats *are* eating rubber now. He reckoned they'd been at his tires."

"No worse than this rubbish," spluttered Hall over a mouthful of cheese.

And then, drinks having been made and sandwiches constructed to everybody's tastes, the officers seated themselves around a table in the saloon. There was a lull in the conversation until appetites had been dulled. It was Captain Hall, sipping his second cup of strong tea, who started the ball rolling again. He said, "That was a shocking plane crash at Essendon."

"I missed the news today," said the chief. "My set's on the blink."

"An Electra," said the Old Man. "It had just taken off, and then it crashed into a street of houses. All hands in the aircraft wiped out—and twenty people in the street where it crashed."

"Flying used to be safer in Australia than anywhere else in the world," stated the second engineer.

"It used to be," concurred Captain Hall. "But it's not now. There's been one helluva run of really nasty smash-ups this last couple of months."

"Sabotage," said the chief engineer. "It all ties in. Plane crashes. Fires. If this government had any guts they'd round up the Commies and stick 'em against the nearest wall. It's worldwide, too. The States. The Old Country. Come to that, the bastards are probably behind the plague in Indonesia."

"I rather thought," objected Barrett, "that Russia was on friendly terms with the Indonesians. As a matter of fact, in last week's *Time,* there was a piece about the Kremlin getting all hot and bothered about the wave of assorted disasters inside the Soviet Union."

"You can't believe everything you read in *Time,*" said the chief engineer.

"Maybe not, Ken," replied Barrett, "but their standard of reporting is pretty high." He took a hasty sip of coffee, then warmed to his favorite theme. "The trouble, these days, is that every disaster caused by slovenly workmanship or criminal carelessness is attributed to sabotage."

"And the Russians *are* having their troubles," contributed Bill Maloney. "There was that S.O.S. last night. From that Russian ship out in mid-Pacific. She was on fire."

"She *said* she was on fire, Bill," sneered the chief engineer.

"If she said she was on fire, she was on fire," insisted the radio officer. "People don't go sending out distress calls just for the hell of it. And that Russian ship was on fire, all right. I picked up the signals from the other vessels that went to her assistance."

"Perhaps the Reds wanted her burned," said the chief engineer with a superior smile. "After all, those bastards'd be quite capable of sacrificing a white elephant just so they could pull the wool over the eyes of the West."

Barrett, with the others, was trying to sort out the mixed metaphor when he heard somebody tapping at the saloon door. He looked up. It was the spare A.B. of the eight-to-twelve watch.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"The third mate sent me down, sir. There's something ahead that looks like a ship on fire."

They hurried topside and found that the burning vessel was a ketch, one of the small, fore-and-aft rigged sailing craft, with auxiliary diesel power, that ply to and from the minor ports around the Australian coast. She was ablaze from stem to stern. *No, not quite,* amended Barrett, studying her through his night glasses.

She was lying head to wind, and the extremity of her fo'c's'le was as yet untouched by the flames. There were dark figures there, two of them balanced precariously on the bowsprit itself. There was somebody flashing a hand torch in ragged, almost unreadable Morse. Barrett made out the letters *S.O.S.* He thought, with grim humor, *A blinding glimpse of the obvious.*

"You'd better see to the boat yourself, Mr. Barrett," said the Old Man.

Barrett went down the starboard ladder to the boat deck. The bo's'n and the hands had already cleared away the lifeboat, were swinging it out. The davits worked smoothly as the handles were turned, as the well-greased worn gear took hold and impelled the steel arms outward. The boat lifted clear of the chocks, out and clear until it was hanging over the dark sea.

Barrett satisfied himself that all was ready for lowering. He gestured to the bo's'n, who was standing with one hand on the winch brake. The petty officer lifted the weighted lever. The falls whined through the blocks and the boat dropped steadily until its gunwale was level with the fish plate. Barrett lifted his hand and the bo's'n let the brake lever fall.

"Man the boat, Chief?" he asked.

"No. Not yet. But send in a couple of hands to check the plugs and ship the rudder. And make sure that everybody who's going away is wearing a life jacket." He paused. "I shall want Stores as bowman. And Woodley and Grant. And Brandt and Mollucca."

He went into his room, pulled his own life jacket down

from its rack, put it on. He went up to the bridge again just as the third officer was ringing *Dead Slow* on the telegraphs. He reported to Captain Hall that everything was in a state of readiness.

"Good," grunted the Old Man. "I'll come as close alongside the ketch as I dare. As soon as I've got the way off her you can lower away and then go for your life." He added grimly, "And theirs."

Barrett went back to the boat deck and found that the second mate was waiting for him there, ready to supervise the lowering. He gave him what few instructions were necessary as he watched the blazing wreck, close now, intently. He heard the Old Man order *Full Astern*, heard the jangle of the telegraphs, heard and felt the heavy thudding of the twin diesels. He went to the ship's side, steadied himself on the outswung forward davit, watched the creamy turbulence creep forward along the hull. He heard Hall order, "Stop both!" and then call, "As soon as you like, Mr. Barrett!"

The men clambered into the boat and Barrett followed them, taking his place in the stern sheets. He gestured to the second mate, who repeated the order to the bo's'n at the brake. The wires whirred through the sheaves as the boat dropped rapidly. The crest of a swell came up to meet her and the wire falls fell slack, the lower blocks clanking against the hooks. Aft, Barrett unhooked smartly, as did the storekeeper forward. Barrett told him to slip the painter, ordered the others to throw the manropes well clear, in towards the ship, then to man the already-shipped levers of the Fleming Gear.

He ordered, "Give way!"

The backs of the seamen rose and fell in the untidy rhythm unavoidable when a boat is propelled by a manually operated screw. Barrett put the tiller hard over, sheered away from the ship. He did not have far to go. Already he could feel the fierce heat from the burning ketch. *Those poor bastards must be cooking*, he thought.

He steered for the bows of the wreck, for the survivors who, he could see now, were busy with buckets of sea water, desperately trying to fight the flames back from their tiny refuge, who were pouring the water over themselves.

The ketch was settling by the stern and her stubby bowsprit was lifting well clear of the sea. Barrett decided

to steer under it, estimating that there would be ample clearance under the short spar. The storekeeper, silhouetted against the fire as he stood in the bows, had his boat hook raised and ready. Barrett called out to the man, telling him his intentions.

The heat was painful now, the glare blinding, but the boat stood on. "Way enough," ordered Barrett quietly. He threw the reversing lever back, said, "Give way again." He could feel the screw biting into the water. The storekeeper caught hold of a stay with his hook as Barrett, for the second time, gave the order to stop.

The first of the two men on the bowsprit dropped, falling clumsily and heavily, crying out in pain. The second man waited until the boat lifted to the swell, timed his descent. And then the others—there were only four of them—were crawling out over the water, dropping one by one into the boat. Barrett assumed that the last one of all would be the Skipper but asked, nonetheless, "Is that the lot?"

"Yes," croaked the man faintly. "Yes . . . That's all. Bill's had it, an' Bluey."

And Barrett realized, sickeningly, that the stench of charred rags and overdone meat was coming from the skipper.

He ordered, "Let go, Stores!"

The storekeeper did not obey. "But there's a cat still aboard, Chief. We can't leave the poor little bastard to fry."

"Let go, you fool!" whispered the injured skipper. There aren't any cats. Let go! The fuel tanks!"

"But I can see it!" persisted the storekeeper.

From a little aft of amidships there was a soft explosion, a *thump* rather than a *bang*. A column of orange fire climbed lazily skyward with a peculiar fluid motion—climbed, then subsided about itself, splashing and spreading as it hit the sea. Barrett did not have to tell the bowman to let go again; neither did he have to order his men to give way. They, together with the survivors from the ketch, bent to the levers with desperate energy and, still under stern power, backed away from the wreck.

And as she pulled away and clear Barrett saw the animals on the now-burning foredeck. They were not cats, although two of them were as large as cats. There were a dozen of

them, easily recognizable as they scurried back and forth, chittering with fear. They were rats. And there were two large ones, standing almost erect, looking like little kangaroos.

He saw them run along the bowsprit, drop into the water. He did not see what happened to them; the glare of the fire was in his eyes. He turned the boat, headed for the waiting ship. He heard the storekeeper demanding of one of the men from the ketch, "Did you have livestock aboard? Wallabies or somethin? An' you let the poor little bastards burn."

"Nothin' but rats," growled the survivor. "Nothin' but bastard rats."

Barrett was sitting in Captain Hall's cabin, talking with the master. The official log was open on Hall's desk, but the entries had yet to be made. They would have to be made before the ship reached Eden, in Twofold Bay, where the survivors were to be landed.

Hall was twisting his fountain pen between his thick fingers as though he intended to break the instrument. He demanded, "What the hell can I put in the log book? You know what these ketch people are like—hard drinkers, every one of them. And who'll believe this story of theirs? Rats like kangaroos taking over the ship and murdering the cat and playing with matches. It's only the skipper who actually saw them, and I doubt if he'll live, anyhow. Did *you* see anything?" he almost shouted.

"I . . . I'm not sure . . ." said Barrett slowly.

He was remembering the kankaroo-like beast that he had seen outside the Purdoms' house that dreadful night. He was remembering the theft of matches from Jane's kitchen. He was remembering the glare of the fire that he had seen from his back garden in the small hours of the morning.

It all made no sense—

Or a terrifying sort of sense.

He shivered, although it was warm in the cabin.

CHAPTER 4

The survivors from the ketch were landed at Eden, in Twofold Bay, and then *Katana* resumed her interrupted voyage to Burnie, on the north coast of Tasmania, her first port of discharge. After arrival at Burnie, life aboard the coasting steamer should have been a matter of routine—but it was not.

There was the long spell of high winds and heavy rain—a torrential downpour lasting for all of a week. There was the strike on the Devonport waterfront. And there was the fire that devastated the wharfage and warehouses at Launceston. *Katana* was actually bound for that port when it broke out, was already proceeding up the River Tamar, was obliged to return to and berth at Bell Bay, at the mouth of the river. She discharged her Launceston cargo there, loaded a few tons of aluminum and alumina, then returned to Burnie to complete loading.

On arrival back in Burnie, Barrett received a letter from Jane. He read and re-read the part about the rats:

> . . . Mrs. Purdom tells me that the baby will make a good recovery. I was very pleased to hear that. It's been a dreadfully worrying time for the poor woman. And there's talk of a petition to both the Council and the State Parliament to demand that somebody do something about the rats—it's time somebody did. Although they're getting to be a plague all over Sydney.
>
> The poison you got for me is quite useless, by the way. The rats are just turning up their noses at it. Of course, I'm assuming that there *are* rats in the house. I've not seen any traces. And the little things that get lost aren't the sort of things that rats would go for: a packet of needles, a pair of nail scissors, the odd box of matches. And as for your traps! I nearly lost a finger last night trying to set one.
>
> All in all, Timmy, I prefer my own poltergeist theory. Or perhaps it's just a common or garden haunt. After all, this is a very old house. And I keep getting the oddest feeling, usually at night, that somebody—or *something*—is watching me. Most uncomfortable, as you can well imagine.

But to get back to the rats. Old Mrs. Hunt—I meet her sometimes in the corner greengrocery—was telling me that she's lost her cat. You know the brute, of course. That far too fertile tabby always having her kittens in other people's sheds and under other people's houses. I was certainly grateful when you blocked that space under our back porch! Anyhow she—Mrs. Hunt—is quite certain that it's "those wicked rats that have murdered poor Tibby."

She could be right, but I'm inclined to think it was some householder tried beyond endurance. Old Miss Wilson in the end house, for instance. She hates cats and she loves her garden and she wouldn't be at all fussy what she used as fertilizer. I was reading somewhere that roses do well on dead bodies. But, of course, poor, dear Tibby is liable to come sauntering back at any tick of the clock with seven little bastard kittens strung out in Indian file behind her.

There's somebody at the front door. I'd better see who it is.

Later: It was a *most* charming young man, all done up in a white coat like a doctor in a B movie. He told me he was the rodent control officer. He looked at the garbage can. He looked *in* the garbage can. Then, with my permission, he inspected the house from stem to stern, from truck to keelson. (I know what *you* mean by "truck" when you use that expression—it's that little round wooden piece on the very top of the mast, isn't it? But when I use it I always think of the faithful VW. Come to that, he did look at the car, both inside and outside. And he asked me—of all things! —if I'd had any trouble with the tires.)

Anyhow, he congratulated me on the clean and tidy premises and told me that our shack is a palace compared with some that he's been inspecting. And he gave me a packet of white powder to spread around, all for free, and his telephone number.

And that's about all the local gossip to date, Tim. Life in this neck of the woods isn't half so eventful as in yours. But try to hurry home, won't you? I know that's a silly thing to say—but, after all, as mate you can exercise some slight influence on the course of events. Anyhow, I just feel that I need a man about the house . . .

Barrett permitted himself a wry grin. He thought, *She always wants me when I'm not available, and then when I'm around, looks at me as though I were something brought in by the cat in an off moment.*

His thoughts followed the line of word association.

Funny about old Mrs. Hunt's cat. As I recall the beast, she was, with all her faults, a good ratter. And there was

that cat aboard the Betty Furness, *the ketch, that they said got killed by something just before the fire. Is there any connection? Any pattern?*

He put down Jane's letter, picked up the daily paper. He looked at the readers' letters. Most of them complained about the inability of local authorities to do anything about the rat nuisance. And rats were not mentioned only in the correspondence columns. There were stories from Perth and Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney; grim little items concerning deaths and casualties for which the vermin had been blamed. There were attacks on babies in their cots, invalids in their beds, and even on a couple of hapless drunks sleeping it off on a piece of waste ground.

He thought, *But they're just doing what they always have done, attacking the weak and the helpless. And they've been known to gang up on dogs and cats before now. This is just a passing plague—not the first one in our history, and not the last. By no means is it the first plague of rats. There was Hamelin Town, by Hanover City, wasn't there?*

He threw down the paper and went on deck to see how the loading was progressing.

At last *Katana* was loaded—with bales of paper, and cartons of canned vegetables, and packs of timber, and sacks of potatoes—and almost ready to make her departure from Burnie to Sydney. Barrett, watching his crew cover the hatches and hammer home the clamps and cross-joint wedges of the steel covers, was not sorry. He wanted to be home, and was sure that every man of the crew, from captain to the deck boy, was feeling the same. Certainly his men were not doing as they so often did: spinning the job out, making it last for the sake of another half-hour's or hour's overtime. They were working well and efficiently, wasting no time.

Walking up and down the wharf, from which he could maintain an over-all view of the little ship, Barrett tried to analyze his uneasiness. And unease had been apparent in each of Jane's letters, had been evident when he had made a long-distance telephone call to his home and, after a long, inexplicable delay, had at last gotten through. His shipmates had spoken of a similar uneasiness. And it was certainly between the lines in every newspaper and news

magazine, an undertone to every radio news bulletin or commentary.

It was like—and yet unlike—the period of international tension that sets in before the outbreak of a major war. It was like it, inasmuch as men had taken to glancing uneasily at the sea and sky, to gathering around radio receivers at the times of news broadcasts. It was unlike it, because there was no grouping of powers, no picking of sides, no definite causes of hostility. It felt—as the third mate, an incurable science-fiction addict, had said—like the eve of the Invasion from Outside.

Whatever it was, Barrett wanted to be home when the balloon went up. (If *the balloon goes up*, he corrected himself.) He looked towards the root of the jetty, saw that the linesmen, with the mobile cranes they used to handle the heavy coir moorings, were beginning to assemble there. He turned to look for the bo's'n, found him on the foredeck hammering tight the last side clamps of Number One hatch. "As soon as you have a couple of spare men, Bose," he called, "you can start singling up."

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied the petty officer.

Barrett looked at his watch, grunted dubiously. He thought, *The end of the world* must *be coming. Normally the boys would have insisted on stopping for a smoke before they'd condescend to touch the moorings.*

The berthing master approached Barrett. He said, "The way your crowd is working, Tim, you'll be ready to shove off an hour ahead of time." He added, "And then we shall all be able to turn in early."

"You know the rule," said Barrett. "We can sail after the time on the sailing board, but not before."

"But if all hands are aboard," suggested the berthing master.

"I'll give it a go," said Barrett. He saw one of the crew delegates working by the bulwarks, coiling a guy rope. "Woodley," he called, "it looks as though we shall be ready at 2100 hours, an hour early. Would the boys be agreeable if we changed the sailing time?"

"Too bloody right, they would," replied the delegate. "And all hands are aboard; I've already checked that."

"Good," said Barrett. He went back on board to call Captain Hall, who was taking a nap prior to departure, and then passed the necessary orders to the engineers and to all others concerned.

Katana slid stern first from her berth, backing from the pier into the waters of the Emu Bay. From the fo'c's'le head Barrett listened to the jangling of the engine-room telegraphs on the bridge, listened and watched, worked out for himself Captain Hall's maneuvers and wondered how *he* would do the job when, in the fullness of time, he was made master. *Full astern starboard,* he thought. *Half ahead port—helm hard to starboard—round she comes, in spite of this onshore breeze. Full ahead both.*

The breakwater light came abeam and Barrett told the bo's'n to secure the anchors, leaving the fo'c's'le head as soon as the compressors and the devil's claws were on the chain cables. He made his way aft, shining his torch on the hatch lids and watertight doors to make sure that all was properly battened down. He climbed the ladders to the bridge, found Hall in the wheelhouse, peering into the radar screen.

"All secure, sir," he reported.

"Thank you, Mr. Barrett." The Old Man looked up from the display unit. "Are you turning in right away?"

"After I've had a shower."

"You may as well drop in for a nightcap. I'll be down shortly."

Hall nibbled his cheese sandwich and then sipped from his glass of brandy on the rocks. His round, rubicund face was set in serious lines. He said suddenly, "You remember the Cuban crisis, Barrett?"

"Who doesn't?" countered the chief officer.

"But you were at sea then, weren't you? You weren't on leave or time-off?"

"I was at sea," said Barrett. "In the *Kanawa.*"

"So you remember what happened just before the fun and games started. There were the so-called fleet exercises, with merchant vessels participating. If we saw a periscope or anything else suspicious we were supposed to start screaming on some damn frequency or other. It was a nice, tactful way of putting us in a state of preparedness."

"So?" asked Barrett.

"So there's nothing at all of that kind this time. The way I feel, the way that everybody feels, I'd have thought there would have been. But no."

"In spite of the way the chief carries on," said Barrett, "I don't think Russia's behind it all. You can't tell me

they went and lost their latest nuclear-powered ice-breaker just for the hell of it."

"But who is?" asked Hall.

"Or *what* is?" countered Barrett.

The Old Man laughed briefly. "You must have been reading some of the third mate's rubbish. But it's all very . . . . odd. And frightening. This sort of general breakdown. Of everything. Transport. Communications." He dropped fresh ice cubes into the glasses, refilled them. He asked, "What do *you* make of it?"

"A sort of revolt of the animal kingdom?" said Barrett slowly. "Suppose they're just tired of being pushed around by us and have started fighting back. A control cable in the fuselage of a passenger plane gnawed through; or holes chewed in the sprinkler fire-extinguishing system of a big building; and the tires of the fire engines in the local fire station shredded just to improve matters."

"Fantastic," said Hall, but without conviction.

"Yes, isn't it? But it's time somebody came up with a few theories. About the hazards of air travel, for example. Last week's crashes—that Electra over New York—probable cause, starlings in the works. That Viscount at Eagle Farm—probable cause, pilot error. That other Visount over Botany Bay—pilot error and/or atmospheric disturbance. That Boeing between Calcutta and Karachi—but need I go on? Eight crashes at least, and the experts have tried to work out a different cause for each one. Wouldn't they have been better advised to try to find some common factor?"

"Sabotage," said the Old Man doubtfully.

"Yes. But by whom? The Chinese had a run of bad luck with *their* Viscounts not so long ago, and the Russians have suffered a few really spectacular crashes." He said, half seriously, "Let's face it, *They* are out to get us."

"Damn it all!" exploded the captain. "Who the hell *are* They when they're up and dressed? And it's not as though aircraft were the only victims. There are still too many unexplained fires at sea."

"It reminds me of Wells," said Barrett. "H. G. Wells, the writer. That odd phrase he used just before his death. 'The terrifying queerness that is creeping over things. . .' "

"H'm," grunted Hall. "Maybe he had something. And I'll tell *you* something, Mr. Barrett; and you can make what you like of it. If any terrifying queerness starts creep-

ing over things when I'm within cooee of my happy home—well, Mum and the kids come first, I come second, and the ship's an also-ran." He added, "Not that anthing *will* happen."

"I hope not," said Barrett.

"It'll all blow over, same as the Cuban crisis."

"I hope so," said Barrett.

"Cheerful bastard, aren't you? Well, I'll pour us one for the road and then you can retire to your scratcher."

"I shan't be sorry," said Barrett. "It's been a long day."

It had been, as Barrett had said to Hall, a long day—but the three days of the passage from Tasmania to Sydney were even longer. All of *Katana*'s people had hoped that the ship would berth at a reasonably early hour on Sunday afternoon, but the combination of fresh northerly breezes and, latterly, a strong southerly set had been too much for the small, underpowered vessel. Once past Gabo she *crawled*.

Northward she crept, along a coast that was veiled by day by the drifting smoke of brush fires, that by night was a dark foreground for the ominous, ruddy conflagrations inland, the hundreds of square miles of blazing forest and scrub, the funeral pyre that was far brighter than the twinkling lights of the coastwise towns and villages.

Said Barrett, when the Old Man wandered up to the bridge during his watch on Sunday evening, "The brush fires are bad this year, sir."

"I've seen 'em worse," grunted Hall, but without conviction. He said, after a pause, "I heard on the news that a couple of towns inland have had to be abandoned."

"It would be a change to hear some cheerful news," said Barrett. He took his binoculars from their box, raised them to his eyes and stared out at the hazy horizon ahead and to port.

"Any sign of Cape Baily?" asked Hall.

"Not yet. Not dark enough, even if it were sufficiently clear to pick up the light at full range. But I thought I might see the gas flare at the oil refinery."

"You've got the radar," said Hall.

"Yes, sir, but I thought it as well to give it a rest. The odds are that we shall need it inside the harbor."

Hall leaned on the forward rail of the bridge, puffing moodily at his cigarette. He asked suddenly, "Do you feel

edgy? I do. As edgy as all hell. *Something's* going to happen; I can feel it in my water."

He looked up at the sky, at the few bright stars that were barely visible through the haze. "How do we know that there isn't something up there with our number on it? Some dirty great rocket with a nuclear warhead, plunging down through the stratosphere, homing on Sydney."

He threw his cigarette to leeward, lit another one. "No. That's not the feeling. Have you ever been in a ship that's had a mutiny? I have. When I was a pup I was on the China Coast, and I was third mate of this little cargo-passenger vessel, and we carried a Chinese crew, of course, and a few hundred deck passengers.

"Oh, I suppose it was piracy rather than mutiny; most of the deck passengers belonged to one of the pirate gangs. But almost the entire Chinese crew was with 'em, so it was mutiny too. And long before the fun and games started we, the officers, knew there was something cooking. You can imagine what it was like; you weren't properly dressed to go on watch until you'd belted on your forty-five, and you wouldn't dream of turning in unless the pocket artillery was parked under the pillow."

He added glumly, "Not that it did much good."

"Any casualties?" asked Barrett politely.

"Just the master and the chief engineer. They had the company's interests a little to much to heart. And that taught me my lesson, one that I've never forgotten. As they used to say in sail: One hand for yourself, and one for the company, and the best hand for yourself."

"But this mutiny idea," began Barrett. He was still sweeping the horizon with his glasses. He ejaculated, "There she is! We must be well inside. It's on the starboard bow."

He went up to the standard compass on monkey island to take a bearing, and then, after he had jotted it down on the chartroom scribbling pad, went back into the wheelhouse to switch on the radar. While he was waiting for the set to warm up he gave an order to the helmsman, altered course until the ruddy flare was broad on the port bow.

The whine of electrical machinery abruptly changed in pitch—the radar was ready for use. Barrett brought the heading marker to the ship's Head Up position, adjusted Gain and Brilliance. He could see the familiar coastline, realized that the ship was not inside her track. But there

was something out there; something on the same relative bearing as the ruddy light that he had seen—a small, fluorescent blip.

He called out to the captain, "It's not the oil refinery. It seems to be a small craft. Range just over three miles."

"And on fire," said Hall, who had his own glasses focused on the unsteady light. "Or in distress. Better call out the hands for the accident boat."

But the launch had gone down by the time the *Katana* reached the spot, and all that remained was a circle of oily, steaming water, slowly spreading and dispersing. Even so, the boat was lowered and taken away by Barrett. By the light of his torch he could see no floating wreckage, nothing that would be a clue to the identity of the burned-out and sunken craft. He was about to return to the ship when he heard someone call, feebly.

It was a man, barely afloat, barely alive. As gently as possible the seamen pulled and lifted him into the boat. Barrett knew that nothing could be done for him in such cramped conditions, and he made his way back to *Katana* with all possible speed. The lifeboat was rehoisted and swung in; the man was passed down to the waiting stretcher and hurried into the officers' bathroom. The second mate, as acting medical officer, took charge while Barrett saw the boat secured. He was back on the bridge, talking with Captain Hall, when the Second came up to report.

"I couldn't do anything," said the young man, his voice strained and uneven. "I couldn't do anything. He just died, and he was lucky he did.

"What do you mean, mister?" asked Hall sharply.

"It could have been sharks," gabbled the second mate, "but it wasn't. It couldn't have been. His shorts were still on. I saw the bleeding there, so I pulled and cut them off him, and he's all eaten away there—just raw flesh. And he wasn't dead then, and he looked down at what had happened to him and started to scream; and then he must have known he was going because he calmed down and whispered, 'but we got the little bastards. They fried, just as they'll fry when they go back to the hell they came from.' "

"What did he mean?" asked Hall slowly.

But nobody was able to answer him.

Barrett went down to look at the dead man. As the

second mate had said, his injuries were shocking, sickening. He tried, without success, to find some identification, but there was none. The shorts—the only garment—were of drip-dry material and there were no laundry marks. The only thing in the pockets was a sodden box of matches. Barrett reported to Hall, who made his own report to Sydney Harbour Control on the VHF transceiver—time, location and a physical description of the corpse. Barrett had the body transferred to the officers smoking room and covered with a sheet and then, his watch being over, stretched out on his settee to try to catch a nap before arrival.

But he could not sleep. There was a pattern, he knew; some design behind all the disasters of the past few weeks; those that he had witnessed himself, those that he had read about and heard about. But what was it?

He was still awake when the third mate came down to call him, fifteen minutes from the Heads.

From the bridge Barrett watched the glimmer of the bo's'n's torch as, on the fo'c's'le head, the petty officer cleared away the anchors. The Old Man had told him not to go for'ard until the ship was just off the berth. Barrett could tell that Hall was still tense, more uneasy than ever, and wanted an experienced officer with him as long as possible.

Speed had not yet been reduced, and at all twelve knots *Katana* proceeded up the harbor. There was little traffic at this late hour—a Manly-bound ferry, a couple of launches, that was all. Surprisingly, there were no yachts. The night was clear, with only the faintest suggestion of haze along the shoreline. The moon, just past its full, was at the meridian. The wind had dropped.

Up the harbor steamed *Katana,* her twin diesels throbbing steadily. To the south, inshore from Double Bay, Barrett could see the blinking red light atop the block of home units that was being constructed not far from his house. For a long time he had regarded it as his own, private beacon. He wondered if Jane was asleep. On the starboard bow the flashing green light on Bradley Head was showing up, and beyond it the riding lights of a couple of ships at anchor. And there was the flashing white at Fort Denison.

"Quiet enough," grunted Hall. "The calm before."

"I can see the weather beacon now, sir," interjected the third mate. "Steady white lights. Fine weather."

"That wasn't what I meant," muttered the captain.

And what did you mean? asked Barrett wordlessly. *What did you mean? Do you, like me, find this calm ominous? But what is there to make anybody so uneasy? Dead dogs, and dead cats, and a mutilated child and an even more horribly mutilated man, and a series of unexplained, inexplicable fires—ships and buildings, forests and oil wells—*

The bridge was in view now, massive yet graceful, its sweeping lines picked out by the lights of the roadway. Barrett realized that Bradley Head was well abaft the starboard beam now. "What about finishing the passage, sir?" he asked. "And reducing speed?"

Hall said, "I"ll not reduce yet."

"But—"

"Don't you want to get home tonight?" exploded Hall.

"The harbor regulations. . ."

"Damn the regulations!"

There was the bridge, the neon diamond marking the center of the span directly ahead. There was the bridge and there, below it, to eastward of it, were the pleasant waterfront hotels and blocks of flats at Kirribilli, lights still showing at a few of the windows. Then Barrett thought, *Something must have disturbed those people. Perhaps our wash, or the noise of our engines.*

But the new lights springing into being behind the big windows were flickering, faint and unsteady at first, red and orange—and then flaring blue and yellow. And the roaring of the flames was becoming audible even as they steamed past—the roaring of fire, the tinkling and crashings of heat-shattered glass, and, worst of all, the screaming. And the wavering, terrifying glare was reflected from the underside of the huge girders beneath which the ship was sweeping, and then from the fantastic minarets and from the huge, laughing face that was the harbor entrance to Luna Park, to the west of the bridge.

And Luna Park exploded abruptly and shockingly, quivering tongues of fire outlining the trestled, latticework hills and valleys of the Big Dipper even as, only a short hour or so ago, they must have been outlined with light bulbs and neon tubing. Then a new sound made the night hideous; some freak of the fire set into operation the machinery that was designed to appeal to the ears of the fun seekers,

and peal after peal of idiot laughter rolled out from the gigantic, blazing face across the still waters of the harbor.

"Sir," the third mate was pleading, urgently, desperately, "shouldn't we stop? Shouldn't we try to help? Shouldn't we—?"

But Hall ignored him, still went on giving his helm orders in a low, steady voice, all his attention devoted to the conning of his vessel. A dense curtain of smoke descended on the ship. "Mr. Barrett," he called briefly, over his shoulder, "keep an eye on the radar, will you?"

Barrett obeyed. He was stunned by the enormity of what was happening, was glad to have some task to occupy his mind. He found a dim sort of comfort in watching the screen, the retina of the electronic eye that perceived only the outlines of shore and ships and jetties, that ignored the mounting flames, the billowing smoke. But, even in the corner of the wheelhouse, he cringed from the wave of heat that surged out from the Circular Quay, and heard the whistle of some big ship at the Overseas Passenger Terminal bellowing like a great beast in agony.

"Where are we now, Barrett? Where are we now?" Hall was demanding urgently.

"Off Walsh Bay," replied the mate.

"I'd put in there, but I can see the flames. Even through this smoke."

"We're heading straight for Miller's Point now."

"Starboard a little, starboard a little," ordered Hall. "How does she look?"

"We shall pass clear," reported Barrett.

"Steady, now. Steady as you go. Do you see that flashing red light? Too much smoke? Then steer by compass."

"Number Five almost abeam to port," called Barrett.

"Anything there?"

"Can't be sure. Yes. All the berths are occupied."

"The smoke's clearing now," Hall was saying. "There's the Pyrmont Bridge. Christ! What a bloody mess! Some silly bastard must have tried to get out before the span was open!" Hall addressed the third mate. "Your eyes are better than mine. Can you see the linesman's launch yet?"

"No, sir."

The captain laughed bitterly. "Always the bleeding optimist, that's me. Sydney going up in flames, and I expect the linesmen to be hanging around waiting for me. Then, to the chief officer, he said. "You can shut down the

radar, Mr. Barrett. There aren't any fires at this end of the harbor, and I can see where we are."

Barrett turned down gain and brilliance controls, then switched off. He went out to the port wing of the bridge. The telegraph pointers, he noticed, were on *Stop*, although the ship still had considerable way on her. Hall pointed to the berth. With the almost full moon, and with the glare of the fires to the eastward reflected from the pall of smoke overhead, details stood out clearly. The captain said quietly, "It is my intention to lay her alongside, starboard side to. Have a man ready to jump down to the wharf to take the lines."

Said Barrett, "There won't be much point in putting out much."

"Of course there won't. I've got a home to go to, and so have you, and so has every man jack of the crew. Tell 'em to put out eyes and bights and shoulder wires and back springs, and I just hate to think of what they'll tell *you*."

"All the same, sir, I think we should—"

"Get for'ard!" roared Hall. "Get for'ard and help me to get this bitch alongside as soon as is humanly possible. You can tie her up with a couple of rope yarns for all I care."

Barrett looked to the fo'c's'le head, saw that the crew were already at their stations, then ran down from the bridge.

CHAPTER 5

With an economy of engine movement that was beautiful to watch, Captain Hall laid the ship alongside the berth, killing her way by going Full Astern just as long as was necessary and not a fraction of a second longer. From the waist the ordinary seaman and one of the A.B.'s jumped down to the planking, the youth then running forward and the older man aft. From fo'c's'le head and poop the heaving lines snaked down, and to them were bent the ends of the Manilas. Hastily, hand over hand, the volunteer linesmen pulled the heavier ropes down to stringer level, then threw the eyes over the most convenient bollards.

Barrett saw them running to the wharf gate as soon as this task was accomplished. There was nothing he could do about it. He gestured to the bo's'n at the windlass controls, saw the slack taken up on the mooring line. When the *Katana* was hard alongside he ordered, "Make fast on the drum end." He might as well have saved his breath; it was obvious that the men had no intention of wasting time transferring the Manila from the warping drum to the bitts.

Down the ladders to the foredeck they streamed and then, clambering over the bulwarks, dropped to the wharf decking. And they were not the only ones involved in the hasty abandonment. From his vantage point at the high stem Barrett saw the tubby figure of Captain Hall running toward the wharf gate, closely followed by the ungainly, gangling chief engineer. And the two cooks were there, and the chief steward and his assistants, and most of the engine-room crowd.

And what am I *doing here*? Barrett asked himself.

He realized he was not alone, that Joe Mollucca—middle-aged, fat, lazy, yet utterly reliable—was standing beside him. He demanded, "What are *you* doing here, Joe?"

"No home, Chief," replied the Italian. "My home in Livorna. Here, in Sydney, only boarding house sometimes. Here, in Australia, this ship my home. I stay." His big hand closed on Barrett's arm. "But you go, Chief. *Molto rapido*. You got wife, home. Karl and me watch ship for you."

The two best seamen—and the two best men?—in the ship, thought Barrett. One brought up in little ships plying the waters of the not-always-calm Mediterranean, the other trained in Baltic schooners. There would be no shore gangway watchman available; that was glaringly obvious. (The fires seemed to be spreading and the city was screaming like a wounded animal.) But the ship would not be left untended.

He said, with feeling, "Good man," and then ran down from the fo'c's'le head to make his way amidships. Before he reached the saloon house he almost collided with the second and third mates. The Second began to talk, urgently and rapidly.

"Mr. Barrett, I know it's not right for us to rush off like this. I know it's not. Somebody should ship-keep. There's only a single line out at each end and we don't know what's

happening ashore, and we don't know what's going to happen next. But the Old Man rushed off before we could ask him anything. And I don't know what's happening to my wife in Kingsford, and Tony's worried about his fiancée in Kensington, and we can't help feeling that our duty is with them rather than here—"

Barrett cut him short. "Go for your lives!" he snapped, adding softly, "And I shan't be far behind you."

But in spite of his growing anxiety, he was reluctant to leave the vessel. It was not altogether that he was conscientious, although it did go very badly against the grain to rush ashore when the ship was so insecurely moored and when disaster, however caused and in whatever form, was as liable to strike here as anywhere in Sydney. Too, there was self-interest. If things ashore should get too badly out of control the ship would be both a shelter and a means of escape, both for her own people and for their families.

He climbed the companionways to the officers' flat. Bill Maloney was there, standing in the alleyway and talking with Ferris, the little, bald, wizened third engineer.

The radio officer said, "Don't be a fool, Tim. Get going. Try to bring Jane down here. We'll keep ship."

"Aye," agreed Ferris. "An' just bear in mind, Mister Mate, that I'm keepin' her warmed through an' in a state o' readiness for instant departure."

"If you don't mind," said Barrett, "you might rig fire hoses. Old Joe and Karl are staying aboard. They'll lend a hand." He muttered, "I don't like shooting through like this—"

"Shoot through, you stupid clot!" growled Maloney. "You've a wife, and your place is with her, not hanging around this rust bucket like a bad smell. Just remember that we shall keep the ship here waiting for you, and the others, as long as we can."

Barrett was still reluctant to go. "What have you heard?" he asked Maloney.

"Too much," replied the radio officer gloomily. "And too little. But enough to make it plain that what's happening here is happening all over Australia. And there was the beginning of a news flash from New Zealand that was cut off almost before it got started." His fat face puckered until he looked like a baby getting ready to cry. "And now practically every station, practically every station every-

where, is dead. This could be the end of the world, Tim. Or the end of *our* world."

"Try to maintain a listening watch, Bill," said Barrett.

"Yes, I'll listen. And you get the hell off this ship and try to find Jane." His plump, heavy hand fell onto the chief officer's shoulder. "And good luck."

"You'll need it," added Ferris.

When Barrett hurried through the wharf gate there were still two of the crew there—two motormen—and they were still trying to get some kind of sense from a dead telephone, still waiting for a taxi that would never come. One of them called in a hurt voice to Barrett as he passed, "This phone's on the blink—"

"You surprise me," grunted Barrett shortly.

As he made what speed he could up the steep slope of Druitt Street he could hear them talking in loud voices. "E's the mate. 'E should *do* somethin' about it!"

"Not 'im. 'E wouldn't know enuff ter get outer 'is own way. An' neither do you, you stupid bastard. Let *me* dial the bleedin' number."

From the top of Druitt Street, where George Street crossed it at right angles, drifted a confusion of noise that drowned the sound of the voices behind him. There was the roaring of engines, a raucous cacophony of horns, a continuous shouting and screaming. It was frightening—more frightening than the spreading glare to the east and the south, more frightening because it was still so much closer. Surprisingly there was no traffic in Druitt Street itself, but, thought Barrett, word must have spread that the Pyrmont Bridge was out of commission.

He could see the crowded roadway now, the artery from the city's heart along which the corpuscles were being swept out of control—beyond *all* control. He could see the mechanical torrent and knew that the yellow diagonal lines of the zebra crossing would be useless as a ford. But he had to cross George Street somehow if he was ever to get home, if there was still a home to justify the journey.

The flames were bright to the east—very bright.

But he had to know. He had to be sure. He had to find out, to see for himself.

Abruptly he was conscious of the painful stitch in his side. He slowed his pace. He was almost at the top end of Druitt Street now, staring at the spate of vehicles, willing

it to stop so that he could cross. A small, beetle-like car broke away from the main stream. There was a tinny crash as it was struck—then another, heavier crash. But it kept on, roaring down the hill out of control, mounting the footpath. Barrett jumped back barely in time to avoid being knocked down. The most terrifying impression was that of the two broken headlamps, like two ruined, sightless eyes.

But apart from this one vehicle—gone now, piled up, no doubt, at the foot of the hill—Druitt Street itself was clear. And on the right-hand side was the Town Hall, and the entrance to the Town Hall underground railway station which, also, was a subway by means of which George Street could be crossed. Barrett crossed the road hurriedly, ran for the subway entrance, started to run down the steps.

Started to run, and then tried to fight and wedge his way through the cramped, seething mob of humanity. It was stifling down there, and the air was foul with the smell of fear, and hot with an ovenlike heat.

"No good shovin', mate," said the man past whom Barrett was trying to elbow his way. He was affable enough, and the reek of cheap wine on his breath explained why. "No good shovin'. We're trapped, an' we may as well admit it. Even if the trains is still runnin'—an' I very much doubt it, 'specially since they'd 'ave ter plough through the bodies on the tracks—they'd never get this crowd out in time. No, mate. May as well resign yerself."

"You may be resigned, you drunken sot," cried a shrill female voice. "But I'm not. My family's waiting for me at Killahra, and I have to get there!"

"Wouldn't be seen dead on the North Shore myself, mate," confided the drunk to Barrett. "Not that it matters—though not so long ago I coulda thought o' better places ter be seen dead than the bleedin' Town Hall station. All goes ter show, don't it? But our Commie friends have made sure that all our worries'll soon be over."

"What do you mean?" asked Barrett, still trying to struggle through.

"Bleedin' obvious. Saboteurs in every big city, settin' fires. An' the Comrades launch their dirty great rockets, all of 'em with nuclear warheads, an' all of 'em designed to home on infrared radiation. Heat to you, missus," he added for the benefit of the frantic housewife from Killahra.

Barrett realized he was being driven backwards. People

must have been pouring into the subway through all its entrances, building up the pressure inside. Something had to give, and for some reason the entrance in which Barrett was jammed was the weakest point. And what were they all after? he wondered. Transport, or shelter from the rumored homing missiles? Or did they, like himself, meely want to cross the road?

Although it was neither one nor the other, the open air outside seemed deliciously cool and fresh after the heat and the stench below ground. But it was not cool for long. All along George Street the fires were springing up—in the big stores, and the cinemas, and in the Town Hall itself. There was the roaring of flames and the crashing of glass and the screaming of people; and from the roadway the clamor of machinery unabated, the rasp and din of the horns, the shrill and wail of sirens, and the screeching of tortured metal as firemen and police battled for the right of way against the refugees in their brainless panic.

And above it all, by some minor miracle, Barrett heard, faintly, the whistle of his ship, the bleating of compressed air expelled around the reed in a sequence of dots and dashes, in readable Morse.

T-I-M, he read. Then, J-A-N-E.

Then, J-A-N-E H-E-R-E.

He ran down the hill back to the wharf, and it seemed to hit him that he was trying to race the spreading flames.

On either side of Druitt Street the buildings were exploding into flame, and at the bottom, where the wharves and the warehouses were, an evil, pulsing red glare was rising and spreading, topped by a billowing cloud of heavy black smoke. The ship's whistle was still sounding, but no longer in the orderly dots and dashes of the Morse code but frantically, erratically.

The wharf gate was partially blocked by a wrecked car. Dimly, Barrett realized it was the one that had almost run him down—and then, by the light of the fire, he read the number plate. It was his own. One door was open and he wasted precious time looking inside, then remembered that whoever it was who had first sounded *Katana's* whistle—it must have been Bill Maloney—had sent Jane's name as well as his own. He clambered over and around the vehicle and then ran past the blazing warehouse, sparks and drift-

ing embers biting through the thin material of his shirt.

The ship was still alongside, although already the wharf was starting to burn, to sag dangerously. From burst drums somewhere a sluggish torrent of fire was spreading over the timbers, cascading slowly, hissing but unextinguished, into the water.

The tide had fallen a little since the ship had berthed, and the lines had slackened so that she had fallen away from the stringer. She was clear of the fire, for the time being, clear of the burning oil. But she was too far off for Barrett to reach the bulwarks. He shouted, but the group of people whom he could see on the bridge—dimly, through the smoke—neither saw nor heard him.

It was a fresh torrent of buring oil that made Barrett's mind up for him. It rolled toward him over the uneven planking—slowly, perhaps, viewed objectively, but Barrett was in no mood to be objective. Desperately he jumped, and with the tips of his fingers secured a precarious hold on the top of the bulwarks. His body slammed hard and painfully against the hot metal of the shell plating. His feet scrabbled, vainly seeking a purchase. And below him the blazing oil hissed and sputtered on the surface of the harbor, sending up waves of heat and steam that scalded and scorched his legs.

Then the toe of his right shoe found the washport and he heaved himself up and over with an effort of which in less dangerous circumstances he would not have been capable. He fell clumsily onto the steel deck, into the blessed coolness of a stream of water from one of the fire hoses that had been turned on and left running. The cold water revived him and he got unsteadily to his feet. Painfully, limping badly, he climbed the ladders to the bridge and the wheelhouse.

Ferris was there, and Bill Maloney, and Joe Mollucca and Karl Brandt.

"We must stay and wait," Ferris was saying. "But we can't stay alongside any longer. We must pull out into the harbor."

"But we can't handle the ship," Maloney was objecting.

"You've got two seamen here," said the engineer. "What do you say, Karl?"

"Mister," growled the old German, "*der Kapitan* say, 'Karl, a liddle to starboard.' I put *der* wheel a liddle to

starboard. *Der Kapitan* say, 'Karl, a liddle to port.' I put *der* wheel a liddle to port. *Ja*, I can *der* ship handle when *der Kapitan der* orders gives."

"Is true," agreed Joe.

"Bill, you'll have to try," urged Ferris.

"All right," said Barrett, breaking into the conference, "I'll give it a go."

"Thank God someone's back!" said Ferris.

"But first of all, where's Jane?" asked Barrett.

"In your bunk, Tim. Passed out. But she's all right."

"Good." Barrett started to give orders. "Better get below, Third, I shall be needing the engines any moment now. Bill, will you start up the radar and then stand by the telegraphs?" He grinned wryly. "I don't think we'll bother testing gear or keeping up the movement book. Karl, take the wheel. And you, Joe, you always carry a good knife, I know. Take it aft with you and cut through the quarter line. The for'ard line's just about burned through," he added to himself.

He limped to the starboard wing of the bridge, looked out and down through the cab window. The narrow ditch of water between ship's side and piling was already alive with flames from the burning oil. A gust of flame from the warehouse scorched his face, singed his hair. And beyond the burning shed there was fire, and more fire, and the billowing smoke in vast clouds, black and glowing ruddily in the reflected light of the conflagration.

Joe came panting up to the bridge, found the chief officer. "The rope. She is cut."

And there'll be a nice long end dangling in the water, from the bollard, to foul my starboard screw, thought Barrett. He gave the order, "Stand by both!" Then, when it was answered, he added, "Slow astern port!"

The maneuver was successful. The weight of the ship, as she gathered stern way, came on the starboard head line, pulling the bow in to starboard, throwing the stern out to port in spite of the effect of the reversed screw. When the headline finally parted in an insignificant shower of sparks the stern was well away from the wharf, the vulnerable starboard screw well clear of both the severed Manila and the wharf piling.

But the ship herself was not yet out and clear. She had to be turned, and there was the projecting wreckage of the pivoting span of the Pyrmont Bridge to guard against, and

the crumpled stem of the collier that had wrecked it and herself. And the flame-shot smoke was over everything, acridly blinding, and the dangers were no more than dimly glimpsed, looming shapes in the inferno.

Barrett sweated and cursed, issuing a continuous stream of orders to Bill Maloney at the telegraphs and to old Karl at the wheel. And the ship blundered around, somehow, without touching anything until she was headed to seaward, and it wasn't so bad then. Barrett could use his radar, and could creep at dead slow speed down the harbor, increasing only when passing through one of the increasingly prevalent patches of burning oil.

Barrett did not hold a pilotage exemption certificate for the port of Sydney—but pilotage, after all, is no more than common sense and, furthermore, Barrett had been in and out of Sydney often enough to relieve him of the need constantly to consult the chart. But it was not easy, with lights either extinguished or blotted out by smoke, with glaring fires to dim the vision, to dazzle the already smarting and weeping eyes. But there was the radar, and in spite of the raging conflagrations the coastal outlines were unchanged and the buoys and beacons presented their fluorescent blip as and where expected.

There was the smoke, and there was the fire, and there was the traffic. There was the ferry, blazing from stem to stern, that overtook them and surged past them, and there were the dark, dreadful figures that still fumbled and stumbled among the flames on the glassed-in upper deck. There was the launch they ran down in the middle of a great, spreading pool of burning petrol, and Barrett stopped the ship in the blistering heat and ordered Joe to go down on deck to put lines or a ladder over the side, and Bill Maloney jerked the telegraph handles to Full Ahead again and cried, "For the love of God, Tim, it's too late to save them! They'll thank us for mashing them in the screws!"

There was the big ship that came blundering out of Woolloomooloo, almost out of control, her crew fighting the fire on the afterdeck. She missed the *Katana* by the thickness of a coat of paint, and the wash of her great, powerful screws set the smaller vessel rocking. And then she was gone, vanishing into the murk, and Barrett, the narrowness of the escape already fading from his mind, was listening to the ominous sound of machine-gun fire from the naval

base at Garden Island and wondering who was fighting whom.

And then, off Bushcutters Bay, there was the big cabin cruiser that tried to cut across *Katana's* bows, but didn't quite make it. Again Barrett stopped, and this time there was no blazing petrol to make the act of rescue one of cruelty instead of mercy.

CHAPTER 6

Barrett watched the launch drifting astern along the starboard side, slowly and more slowly until, in the turbulence created by *Katana's* reversed screws, all relative motion ceased. "Stop her," he ordered. "Stop both." The smaller craft was badly crippled, its stern smashed in. It was settling in the water and, obviously, could not stay afloat much longer. Barrett was about to give *Katana* a touch ahead, just enough to provide steerage way for coming alongside the wrecked cabin cruiser, when, on his second attempt, Joe, on the foredeck, managed to throw a heaving line aboard it. A big man standing on the cabin top caught the end and then, with seamanlike dexterity, pulled it in hand over hand, bringing the launch to *Katana's* side. "You, there," he called in an authoritative voice, "send down a pilot ladder, will you?"

Joe scampered forward, dragged the Jacob's ladder out from under the fo'c's'le head. Barrett sent Karl down to help him. Then he watched the passengers from the cabin cruiser coming aboard and wondered where they had all been stowed. The women were first—twelve of them. They were followed by ten men. Finally there was the big man who had handled the heaving line, and it seemed that it was the backward and downward thrust of his foot as he mounted the ladder that sent the launch under. He clambered aboard rapidly and with an economy of motion. He stood on *Katana*'s foredeck, looking up to the bridge. "Captain," he called, "I shall be vastly obliged if you'll tell your men to find my people some sort of accommodation."

"Joe," ordered Barrett, "show them into the saloon. And you, Karl, come back to the wheel."

It was not long before the German was back in the wheelhouse. Hard on his heels was the big man from the cabin cruiser. He glanced from Barrett to Maloney, then back to Barrett, studying the braid on their epaulettes rather than their faces. He demanded, "Where is the master?"

Barrett returned his stare. There was something familiar about the full, ruddy face, the pale blue eyes, the close-cropped white hair. It wasn't that he recognized the man himself, but he recognized the type. The command of big ships induces a rather surprising gentleness in some, a not unsurprising arrogance in others. And this man, Barrett knew, had commanded not single ships, but squadrons.

"I'm acting master," said Barrett briefly. "And now, sir, if you'll excuse me I'll get my ship under way."

"And may I ask where you are taking her, Captain?" asked the other. He contrived, by a subtlety of inflection, to insert quotation marks ahead and astern of the courtesy title.

"Clear of the harbor," snapped Barrett. "Then I'll see."

"Have you considered picking up refugees?"

"Yes, I have considered it. But where am I to pick them up from? What arrangements have been made?"

"You could establish radio contact with the authorities."

"The air is dead," stated Maloney.

"You're the radio operator, aren't you?" he asked, turning to Maloney. "How do you know the air is dead?"

"It was when we pushed off from the berth," growled Maloney.

"How do you know it is now?" He turned back to Barrett. "I suggest that this man stand his watch in the radio room."

"There are only three officers aboard," explained Barrett. In an aside to Maloney he ordered, "Full ahead both," and then, to Karl, "Port a little . . . steady . . . steady as you go." He resumed, "There are only three officers aboard: the third engineer, the radio officer and myself."

"Can't you put a rating at the telegraphs?"

"That's not standard practice in the Merchant Service. Furthermore, I have only two ratings. One is at the wheel, the other is looking after things on deck."

"I will take the telegraphs," said the big man. He turned

to Maloney, "Sir, I relieve you. Kindly take charge of the radio office."

The radio officer looked to Barrett. "Tim, shall I—?"

"Yes. Off you go, Bill. See if you can raise anybody. See what you can pick up."

Thick smoke billowed down on the ship, reducing visibility to zero. Barrett went to the radar, peered into the luminescent screen. "Port a little more, Karl."

"Isn't your speed somewhat excessive?" asked the man at the telegraphs. "You've already had one collision, you know."

Barrett had been about to order a reduction, but decided against it. He said, "This smoke is from burning oil. It's spreading over the harbor. I've no desire to be trapped in it."

"You've already had one collision."

"And whose bloody fault was it? You were crossing from port to starboard. You were the keeping-clear vessel."

"*You* were the overtaking vessel, young man. And I think my word will carry rather more weight than yours at a court of enquiry."

"If there are such things any more," said Barrett. He watched the screen intently. There was something there, close, fine to starboard. Was it another small craft, or was it a buoy? He tried hard to visualize the chart, decided that it must be one of the buoys. In any case, its relative bearing was opening.

"Let me know as soon as we're clear of the Heads," ordered the big man.

"And who the hell are you, anyhow?" exploded Barrett.

"Admiral Keane. I am taking over this vessel for the Royal Australian Navy."

What a helluva time for an argument, thought Barrett, not daring to let his attention stray from the screen. Nevertheless, he was able to ask nastily, "Active or retired?"

"Retired, if you must know. But—"

Barrett heard high heels tap-tapping on the deck planking. He thought it was Jane, felt deeply relieved that she was making a recovery. He did not look up from the screen. Then he heard a high, musical voice say, "Uncle Peter, there's a dead man down there. In the officers' smoking room.

"There are dead men everywhere, my dear," the admiral

told her. "And dead women. Now go below like a good girl—"

"But I don't want to. I want to know what's happening." She essayed a small laugh. "Old Mrs. Taine is quite convinced the end of the world is coming, and Mr. Hannaway is equally convinced that the ICBMs, with nuclear warheads, are due at any second. They're almost fighting about it, although as far as we're concerned the result will be the same no matter which theory is correct. And there's that man Clarendon, the sanitary inspector. He's got yet another theory, and he's demanding to see the captain."

"This ship has no captain," said Keane nastily.

"Like hell she hasn't," snarled Barrett.

"Are you in charge?" Barrett heard the girl ask. "I'd like to volunteer my services, Captain. I'm a fair yachtswoman and I know port from starboard and the sharp end from the blunt end."

"Starboard a little," ordered Barrett absently.

"Starboard a liddle, sir," repeated Karl.

"Steady, now. Steady . . . ." Then he said, addressing the girl, "I believe you offered your services, Miss . . . Keane?"

"Henderson, as matter of fact, Captain. But you can call me Pamela."

"Then would you mind—" He barked at Karl, "Steady, I said. Steady." Then, to the girl, "Would you mind slipping down to the officers' flat again? My wife's in my cabin—the chief officer's cabin. She managed to get down to the ship, but she's had a rough time of it. I haven't had a chance to see to her yet."

"Certainly," the girl said. He listened to her high heels tapping away from him and then down the ladder.

"North Head abeam," said Barrett to the admiral. "If you like, you can ring Full Away." He changed from the one-mile range to the three-mile range on the radar, then to the six-mile range, then to twelve miles, then to twenty-four. Apart from what seemed to be a cluster of small craft just south of the Heads, the sea was empty. He murmured, "We may as well run until we're out of this blasted smoke, then I'll heave to and we'll get things sorted out."

"But you must be going *somewhere*," said the admiral.

"Have *you* any ideas?" asked Barrett.

He heard the girl returning to the bridge. He looked up

from the radar screen as she came into the wheelhouse. The light was too dim for anything more than an impression of slimness and, surprisingly, of sleekness. And her hair, he saw, was a very pale blond.

She said, "Jane's all right, Mr. Barrett. A few scratches, but I found the key to the medicine chest and fixed them up. And she's sipping hot, sweet tea now. I believe that's the specific for shock."

"What about that radioman?" demanded Keane. "He must have heard something."

Maloney's voice came from the radio office, just abaft the chartroom.

"Not a bloody thing," he said.

Dawn was breaking when the smoke started to clear.

The ship was gliding over a dark blue sea, calm, with the merest suggestion of a low swell from the south'ard. Ahead, the sky was cloudless and the horizon hard, but astern of *Katana* was what looked like a fog bank, a dark, amorphous mass hiding the sea surface, obscuring the skyline. But it was not fog. It was the smoke of the burning of cities and ships, of bush and forest, of the homes of men.

Joe was at the wheel, having relieved Karl for a spell. His glistening, swarthy face was expressionless as he fondled the polished spokes. He appeared at least half asleep, but Barrett knew that if he looked at the compass card he would find the ship not more than half a degree off her course. Not that it mattered. She was going nowhere. She had nowhere to go.

Maloney was still on duty in the radio room, still listening to the meaningless hiss and crackle of static, still transmitting, at regular intervals, unanswered requests for information and guidance. The admiral had gone below to see to the comfort of those whom he referred to as "his people."

And I, thought Barrett, *should like to go below to see to the welfare of my wife. If the old bastard had any imagination he'd have relieved me for a few minutes.*

Pamela Henderson came up to the bridge. She was carrying a tray. On it were teapot, cups, milk and sugar, a plate of fresh buttered toast. Barrett opened a folding table in the starboard cab, took the tray from the girl's hands, set it down. He said, "Thank you. But would you mind holding

the fort for me for a few minutes? I want to go down to see how Jane is."

She said, "She's sleeping. I looked in on my way up with this. And you need it. All the others have been stuffing their guts, but nobody thought of you."

"You did," he said.

She smiled in reply, and he noticed her face for the first time—a strong face, tending to the rectangular, with sculptured planes, but too feminine to be called hard. Her smile was dazzling against the dark tan of her skin, and her hair so pale a gold as to be almost silver.

"Milk?" she asked. "Sugar?" She poured as though she were hostess at an afternoon tea party in one of the more fashionable suburbs.

He said, through and around a mouthful of the hot, crisp toast, "I appreciate this."

"I volunteered my services, you know," she reminded him.

"Yes. So you did, Pamela."

"And what's *your* name when you're up and dressed?"

"Barrett. Timothy. Tim for short."

She said, "I'll call you Tim. And you can call me Pamela. But not, please, Pam."

"Suits me," he said.

After a short interval of tea sipping and toast crunching, she asked, "And what now?"

For a moment he was not sure of her meaning. In the few short minutes that she had been on the bridge, a sudden intimacy had come into being, an awareness of her as a person and as a woman.

"And what now?" she asked again.

He said, "I'll carry on, on this course, until sunrise. We shall be well clear of the smoke by then; there'll be no risk of our being run down. If there's anybody around to run us down, that is. Then I shall stop."

She said, "But you have radar."

"It's switched off now," he told her. "It's time it had a rest.

She asked, "But why stop?"

"Because," he said, "we carry a limited amount of oil fuel. There's no sense in burning any more until we know where we want to go."

"I see," she said thoughtfully. "And what about food

and fresh water, Tim? As I seem to have been elected chief steward, acting, unpaid, they must be my concern."

"The food is. But it's the fresh water that's a fairly immediate problem. We shall have to start rationing at once. Regarding food, the situation isn't too bad, if you don't mind a certain monotony. After we've finished what's in the storeroom there's a thousand tons of spuds in the holds, as well as two hundred and fifty tons of canned fruits and vegetables."

He blinked as the dazzling disc of the sun lifted over the eastern horizon. He turned to look aft, estimated that the ship was now at least five miles from the edge of the smoke bank. He walked, without haste, to the engine-room telegraph, brought both handles to the Stop position with a double ring, waited for the pointers to move in reply. The sound of the telegraph bells was startlingly loud. He went into the wheelhouse, picked up the engine-room telephone, pressed the call button. "Mr. Ferris," he said, "you'd better come up. I don't know when we're getting under way again, but it will not be for a while yet."

Keane stamped onto the bridge. In spite of his informal attire—shorts, sandals, gaily patterned shirt—he radiated authority, an authority to which Barrett was not prepared to submit. The admiral's heavy Service revolver in its holster, only partly concealed by the loose upper garment, made him feel even more stubborn.

"Why have you stopped, Barrett?" demanded the admiral.

"Because I decided to stop."

"As the senior officer present, I—"

"But not, sir, of *this* ship. I am the senior officer as far as this vessel and her owners are concerned."

"Let me finish, young man. As the senior officer present, I demand to know why you have hove to."

"Because, sir, we have nowhere to go. Because we don't carry much oil fuel, and we'd better not burn any more until we have some destination."

"How much have you on board?"

"About sixty-five tons. Twelve days' steaming."

"Ample for a voyage to New Zealand."

"Or," said Barrett, "to Queensland, or Tasmania, or Victoria, or even West Australia. But what's the point of it?"

"There must," said the admiral, "be port facilities somewhere."

"Must there? What about your own base in Sydney Harbor? As we passed Garden Island on the way out there seemed to be some sort of fighting in progress. There was machine-gun fire, and I heard some heavy explosions."

"You should have told me," snapped the admiral.

"You never asked me," countered Barrett. He tried to control his temper. "Look, sir, we're in the same boat. Metaphorically and literally. As far as I'm concerned, the head office in Sydney has gone up in flames, and there just aren't any managers or marine superintendents to tell me what to do next. I hold a master-mariner's certificate, so am competent to command this vessel. As far as you're concerned, your top brass—I suppose you still are supposed to take orders from them, even though you are on the retired list. Or do you have to be called up again first? Anyhow, your top brass has gone the same way as my owners. But if there ever is any maritime law again, I'm the legal master of this ship."

"And is your name on the Register?" demanded Keane.

"No. But it's on the Articles, as first mate—as second in command. When and if Captain Hall rejoins, I step down. Until such time—"

"Bloody civilian pettifogging!" sneered Keane.

"No worse than Admiralty red tape!" retorted Barrett.

"Uncle Peter! Tim!" Pamela's voice was sharp. "Shut up, both of you. This is the best exhibition of fiddling whilst Rome is burning since the late Emperor Nero." She paused. "All right. We're *all* civilians. *You* are, Uncle Peter. You have been ever since they retired you. You are, Tim, as a merchant officer. And I am, as a yachtswoman. But we're all of us seamen, of sorts. For the love of God let's sort this out in a seamanlike manner."

"And have you any suggestions?" asked Keane coldly.

"Yes, I have. When you were a serving admiral, and on the occasions that you actually went to sea, did you interfere in the running of your flagship?"

"No, but—"

"But you left things to the captain. I suggest that you do the same here."

"And I suggest," said Barrett, "that we call a general meeting; that we hear everybody's stories; that we try to

sort out just what has happened and what we can do about it."

"Laws of Oléron?" asked Pamela.

"Sort of . . ." He turned to Keane. "It's an old Swedish custom. When the ship's in a really spectacular jam, and the master wishes to pass the buck, he calls a meeting of all hands to decide the course of action."

"I know, I know," grunted the admiral. "But there's more to it than buck passing."

In the short ensuing silene they heard a fresh sound from the radio office, the clicking of Maloney's typewriter. Barrett leading, they hurried from the wing of the bridge into and through the wheelhouse, into the chartroom. The door between it and the radio office was open. Maloney, seated at his desk, ignored them, intent on the whisper of Morse in his headphones, his fingers flickering over the keyboard.

There was a final clatter, then silence. Maloney waited for a while, and then, without haste, pulled the message pad from his machine, handed it to Barrett. He said, "A ham. In some town called Pleasantville. In New York State. In the U.S.A."

Barrett read aloud: "The fires. Everywhere the fires. Smoke and glare—can't tell if night or day. Watch stopped. Can you hear me? Can anybody hear me? Why don't the rockets come and finish the job? Can you hear me, you in the Kremlin? Fire your bloody rockets and get it over and done with. The rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there. But is it? But is it? The door is opening. So there's somebody alive still. But it's not—"

"And is that all?" demanded Keane.

"No. Not quite. After 'not' there are two letters. 'H' and 'U'."

"And his sending, at the end, was very ragged," volunteered Maloney. He was adjusting controls as he spoke.

And then, from the speaker, came a voice, faint at first and then quite loud. It was a heavy voice, and the language was English, but accented English.

"Cosmonaut Voronov calling Australia. Cosmonaut Voronov calling Australia. What is happening? What is happening? Has the war started? I can see the fires. I have seen the fires everywhere. All over the world. So I have broken radio silence." The voice was fading. "Please reply

on my next circuit. Please try to reply on my next circuit. I shall be listening."

"If atomic weapons had been used," said the admiral slowly, "this man Voronov would have known about it."

"And so should we," said Barrett. He turned to the girl. "Pamela, would you mind rounding up everybody? I think the crew's messroom will be the best place for the meeting." And to the man at the wheel he said, "Joe, will you go down to help the lady?"

Karl—fat, elderly, walrus-mustached—came panting up the starboard ladder, hurried into the wheelhouse. "Mister Mate, in der paint locker I find idt."

"What did you find, Karl?"

"Idt not been human, mister."

Barrett clattered down the starboard ladder to the boat deck, followed by Pamela, the admiral and Karl, then down the ladder to the afterdeck. The paint locker was in the poop space, adjacent to the steering flat. Its door was open. The light was on.

At first Barrett thought somebody had been spilling red paint. But the smell was not that of linseed oil or turpentine. It was a stale, organic smell. A dead smell. And there was a cat there—was it the tough black and white tom, the wharf cat that Barrett had petted by the gate so long ago? It could have been. And its throat had been torn out, and one of its forelegs was missing. And there were rats there, five of them, also dead and badly mangled.

And, in a corner, there was something else.

It was bigger than the rats, bigger than the cat. Its fur, where it wasn't bloodstained, was white. From the body a black, naked tail protruded stiffly.

Barrett was reluctant to touch it. He saw a gooseneck scraper hanging from a shelf, used it to turn the body over, revealing a gaping wound in the belly, a tangle of viscera. The forelegs—or the arms?—of the thing were almost human. In one hand it grasped one of those cardboard folders of matches that are used for advertising purposes. In the other hand was a match.

"The head on it," Barrett heard the admiral whisper. "Like a damned monkey."

"And the teeth," said Barrett. "Like a rat's."

"But what—?"

"Idt not been human," grunted Karl.

"That's what the ham operator in Pleasantville was trying to say, at the finish," whispered Pamela.

"I saw the rats," muttered the admiral. "I saw them in their hordes, attacking people. I saw what they did to the Shore Patrol that the O.I.C. at H. M. S. *Watson* sent out; the bloody fool had his men armed to the teeth, but wearing shorts. But I thought they were just running from the fires, the same as all of us were. I thought that they were crazed with fear.

"But now . . ." He had found a stick and was poking at the white-furred body. "This . . . *thing*."

"King Rat," said Pamela.

Barrett looked at the matches still held in the claws—no, the hands. "The fires," he whispered.

The admiral cleared his throat. "In my younger days," he said, "before there was all this mucking around with rockets and nuclear weapons, it used to be axiomatic that one skilled saboteur with a box of matches could do more damage than a squadron of heavy bombers. How many of these things are there? How many, all over the world?"

"And where did they come from?" asked Barrett. "From Mars? Or perhaps the flying-saucer boys aren't so nutty, after all. And *they* exercise control over rats, use them as their shock troops while *they* do the really dirty work, the sabotage and arson."

"Mars be buggered," growled the admiral. He took the scraper from Barrett, pulled and prodded the body with it. "Look. This brute is as much a native of this planet as we are. Vertebrate. Mammal. Look at its digestive and excretory system. And the way that the limbs are articulated."

"Yes," muttered Barrett. "Yes."

And that, he thought, was the really frightening part of it all. The dead saboteur had not, in life, been pretty—but it was not alien. It was no more alien to Earth than the dead cat, no more alien—and no more pleasant—than the dead rats. *King Rat*, Pamela had said.

King Rat it was—or one of the many princes.

"The Russians," the admiral was saying. "Have to hand it to 'em. Damn clever biologists. Just suppose that over the past twenty years or so they've been trying to breed a race of small, practically invisible saboteurs."

"I rather gained the impression from that poor devil of

a cosmonaut," said Barrett, "that Russia was having her troubles, too."

"The trouble with biological warfare," said the admiral, "is that it's liable to get out of hand. Given three or four turrets of sixteen-inch guns to play with, you do know just what you're doing."

"Your sixteen-inch guns wouldn't be much use now," said Barrett.

"And why not?"

"How can you use a weapon designed for use against ships, or even men, against enemies the size of this? Oh, there's always poison gas, I suppose, but it'd probably be ineffective against enemies normally living underground, whilst finishing off any human survivors left in the cities."

"Perhaps," suggeted Pamela, "if we hold the meeting that we were supposed to be holding twenty minutes ago, sombody will come up with a bright idea."

The men agreed with her.

The crew's messroom provided seating for all the survivors. The only absentees were Joe, who had been left on the bridge as lookout, and Maloney, who was maintaining his wireless watch. Barrett had been able to have a few words with Jane when he had awakened her from her dazed sleep, had supported her down the companionways to the crew accommodation, had seen to it that she was comfortable on one of the padded settees.

While he was concerning himself with his wife, the admiral took charge. He stood at the forward end of the long compartment, an imposing figure despite his informal attire. His pale eyes stared bleakly at his audience until all chatter and murmurings ceased.

He said abruptly, "We're all at sea." He paused. "But we're not so much at sea as we were a few minutes ago. I think we know, now, what's fighting us. I think we know what we have to fight."

"*Whom* we have to fight, sir!" shouted a lean, bespectacled man wearing the crumpled remains of a gray business suit. "Whom we have to fight. There is no doubt, surely. And there must be rockets at Woomera with which we can retaliate."

"To fight, to try to fight would be blasphemy," cried the stout woman with the lavender dyed hair. "How can

one do battle with God's ministers? The world was wicked, wicked beyond belief, beyond imagination, and this is the Judgment. We have hurled our impious rocketry towards Heaven itself—and now fire from Heaven is destroying us. We—"

"Thank you, Mrs. Taine." And Barrett found himself admiring the admiral, wishing that he, with a few short, polite words was able to bring a religious fanatic up short. "Thank you, Mrs. Taine, but I feel that the views expressed by Mr. Hannaway and yourself are not, at the moment, very constructive." He paused. "I am familiar with the stories of all of you by this time. I have heard of your escapes from burning houses, from hordes of hungry, vicious rats. But, unless by retelling them you can make some contribution of value, I do not wish to hear them again. Yes, Mr. Clarendon?"

Barrett looked curiously at the little man who had risen to his feet. He was shabbily dressed in an old-fashioned blue-serge suit, complete with vest. A gold watch-chain was a note of incongruous finery. Over the stiff white collar—now badly crumpled—the face was sharp, coming to a point at the nose, the chin and the forehead receding. An untidy straggle of hair on the upper lip did little to improve it.

His voice was squeakily irritating.

He said, "Most of you here know me. I am—or I was—your local rodent-control officer. Or, as we used to be called in the old days, the rat catcher. I catch rats. Or I'm supposed to catch rats. Or was supposed—"

"Come to the point, Mr. Clarendon!" snapped the admiral.

"I shall, sir, I shall. In my own time, in my own way. As you know full well—I have been trying to make my point for weeks now. For months. But nobody would listen. Nobody! Now perhaps—" His clawlike hands busied themselves with paper and fine-cut tobacco, lifted a bedraggled, skinny hand-rolled cigarette to his lips. He lit it. It went out. He lit it again.

He said, speaking through the acrid smoke, "It's my business to know rats. To study them. And I've made it my business to read all sorts of books on biology. After all, the control of any pest is merely applied science. And I've wondered, often enough, just what would happen to *us* if

the rats started to mutate. There're so many of them, you know, and they're such fast breeders, and the ordinary rat's already quite intelligent.

"Now, this mutation business. There are so many causes, more than ever before. The rising level of radioactivity, due to fallout from tests. The increasing use of chemical pesticides. And some of these poisons are mutagenic. The use of rats in experiments involving radiation. The shooting of rats up into the stratosphere, and beyond, in rocket tests—

"Think it's fantastic? But it's not. Suppose just two mutants—one pair, intelligent, so stand a better chance of survival than others—look after their offspring better; breed as fast as ordinary rats, or faster; interbreed with ordinary rats, and breed true . . . and spread . . .

"How, you ask? How? The same way as rats have always spread. Stowing away on long-distance trains, aboard ships. And remember, too cunning to be worried by those silly pieces of tin you call rat guards—" He looked at Barrett "—which are usually dangling on their lanyards, anyhow. Quite useless.

"So they spread, all over the world. They keep contact with each other. How? Perhaps they can read and write—wouldn't surprise me. Or perhaps they're telepathic. Perhaps they control the unmutated rats by telepathy."

He chuckled creakily. "All theories, mind you. All theories. But nobody else has any. Nobody else has any that suit the facts. And I started making up these theories when the rat plague really got started. The babies mauled in their cradles and the old people and drunks killed. And then there was the so-called firebug, and that tied in with the odd things that rats were stealing, especially matches. There were the outbreaks of rat-carried disease in various parts of the world. There were the fires at sea, and the plane crashes . . .

"They were all building up, you see. All building up to . . . to something.

"And I can't say I blame 'em. Suppose they *are* telepaths. Suppose they can read our thoughts. Suppose they know that we're on the point of wiping out *all* life with our atom bombs. Wouldn't they be justified in trying to stop us?"

He rolled another cigarette. "All theories," he said. "I think there are mutants, but I'd like to see one—"

"Rubbish!" snorted a fat man at the after end of the messroom. "Comic-strip rubbish. I agree with Hannaway. It's the Russians."

"Mr. Barrett," said the admiral, "I think that after the meeting we might bring the mutant along here so that everybody can see what we're up against."

"After the meeting," said his niece firmly, "we're having breakfast, and then Tim's going to get some sleep."

CHAPTER 7

The meeting degenerated into a mere recital of horror stories; Clarendon had been the only person among those present with an important contribution to make. And he admitted frankly that he did not know what could be done at all. Barrett listened to the others drowsily—to the tales of fire and flight, of filthy, gray hordes sweeping up from underground, attacking ferociously anything living not of their own kind. But other people's troubles, he thought, are interesting only when one has none of one's own.

Beside him, on the settee, Jane was already sleeping again. He began to feel resentment. All right, so she had had a rough time of it. But she was not the only one. Some women, he thought, would have been on the bridge with him while he was beating through the perils of the harbor to seaward. Some women would have considered it a wifely duty to go down to make tea and toast for their husbands after a long and exhausting night. After all, Jane knew the ship, knew where everything lived. He turned to look at Pamela, who was sitting on his other side.

"Tim," she whispered. "You're all in. I'll get you and Jane out of here and rustle you up some breakfast."

He grinned. "I'll have my share of the eggs while they last. Soon enough we shall be living on potatoes and what fish we're able to catch."

He got to his feet, as did Pamela. Together they tried to lift Jane to a standing posture. She resisted feebly.

"What are you doing, Barrett?" demanded Keane.

"It's Captain Barrett's wife, Uncle Peter. She's fainted. We have to get her out of here."

"All right. But come straight back, both of you."

"Nobody orders me aboard my ship," snapped Barrett, suddenly wide-awake. He met the glare of the pale eyes without flinching.

The admiral coughed noisily. He said, "I'll deal with you later young man."

"Uncle Peter," Pamela told him. "Captain Barrett is doing his best. So far he has done well. If he is to continue doing well he must have some rest."

The admiral was beginning to look embarrassed. *He thinks we're all letting the side down,* thought Barrett. *Officers aren't supposed to have differences of opinion in front of the lower orders. But* he *started it.*

"We'll talk about this later," said Keane at last.

"Yes," agreed his niece. "Later. At noon. Or eight bells. Or twelve hundred hours."

Supporting Jane, she and Barrett made their way from the crew messroom to the saloon. Pamela left Barrett and his wife there, hastened out. Jane was awake now, after a fashion. She sprawled in her chair, looking at Barrett with dull eyes. "Tim," she asked. "What are you going to do? What are we going to do?"

He said. "I don't know."

She said, "But we must do something." She was becoming more alive. "We must try to rebuild. But it was so heartbreaking—the house we put so much into. First of all, those little, hairy monsters swarming through every room, chasing me as I ran for the car, and then the fire—the fires.

"I'm afraid I smashed the driveway gates getting out. I daren't stop to leave the car to open them. And by that time the hotels on the other side of the road were all blazing, and so was the Purdom house. And Ocean Street was just a torrent of traffic, all streaming down to the harbor, and there was another torrent on the New South Head Road, rushing in toward the city, to get over the bridge, I suppose, and I was caught in that—"

He said, "But you found your way—"

"I don't know how I did. But I was desperate. There was a man that I ran over just by the Town Hall, but I didn't stop—"

"You didn't run over him," said Barrett a little sourly. "You just missed him. It was me."

She ignored this. "And then, getting aboard at last and finding you gone was too much. Luckily Bill was able to do something to call you."

"Very luckily," he agreed.

Pamela came in with a tray. There was a pot of coffee, steaming and fragrant. There were three cups and three plates, on each of which reposed a large egg-and-bacon sandwich. "Dig in," she ordered. "I made these wiv me own fair hands."

Jane looked at her rather coldly. "Thank you, Pamela."

The three of them devoted themselves to their meal in silence, finally broken by Barrett. He said, "You must be tired yourself, Pamela. So must everybody—"

"Too right," she agreed. "But I've arranged with that nice German and that nice Italian of yours about keeping watches, and there's a Mr. Ryan, who used to be a naval telegraphist, who'll relieve your Mr. Maloney."

"Regarding accommodation," he said, "you can help yourselves, so long as you tell the others to keep out of the chief officer's cabin, the radio officer's cabin, the third engineer's cabin, and the two berth cabin in the crew's quarters that Joe and Karl share." He added, "I imagine your uncle will lay claim to the Old Man's palatial suite."

Pamela grinned. "He already has done so. "And I'm in the second mate's dogbox if you want me" Her face was suddenly serious. "And there's still that dead man in the smoking room."

"I'd forgotten the poor bastard," Barrett admitted. "So much has happened. But he'd better be dealt with first of all."

Barrett conducted the service. Oddly impressive it was, the ship lying silent with stopped engines, the survivors standing in reverent attitudes on the afterdeck. Then, as Barrett said, "We now commit the body to the deep," Karl and Joe lifted the end of the painting stage—and the unknown man, sewn in his canvas shroud, with the heavy shackles at his feet, dropped to the surface of the gently heaving sea with the slightest of splashes and fell slowly down through the clear water.

Barrett did not watch. He went slowly to his cabin,

stripped to his brief underpants and fell to his settee. Jane, in the bunk, was already sleeping.

It seemed to him that he had barely fallen asleep when he was awakened by somebody calling in a high, clear voice, "Rise and shine. The sun's burning your eyes out."

He opened his eyes slowly, focused them on Pamela. She was, as usual, carrying a tray. There was a jug on it this time, its sides bedewed with the moisture of condensation. There were three glasses.

He said, "Don't think I don't appreciate this, but already I'm starting to worry about the fresh water."

She said, "As a matter of fact, this is out of some tins of grapefruit juice I found in the stores."

"Oh," he said, "That lousy hound of a chief steward never put it on the table."

"Your chief steward," she reminded him, "is almost certainly a homeless refugee, and very probably dead."

"I'm sorry," he said soberly. "Would you mind passing me my dressing gown?"

She asked, "What does it matter? You're as adequately attired as you would be on a beach."

"Even so." He took the garment from her, got up from the settee and pulled it round himself, and sat down again. He saw that Jane was awake, was looking at him and the girl with a certain hostility. He passed her a glass of the cold drink.

Jane said, "You seem to get plenty of service."

He said, "And why not? I'm the master, even if only acting." He turned again to Pamela, who was sitting in his armchair. "Well, what's new?"

"Nothing. Everybody's sleeping, even Uncle Peter. Everybody, that is, but the lookout on the bridge and the radioman."

"We've nowhere to go," said Barrett. "Not yet, anyhow. It's just as well to catch up on sleep."

"But there must be somewhere to go," Jane insisted. "Something to *do*."

Barrett reached for a cigarette, offering the pack first of all to the two women, both of whom refused. He was relieved. The ship's supply of smokes was far from inexhaustible. He accepted a light from Pamela.

"Timothy Barrett," said his wife coldly, "don't you think that instead of sitting there smoking you might be doing something?"

"But what?" he asked. "I'm not the Lord Mayor of Hamelin. I don't know any pied pipers."

Pamela made an excited gesture, upset her glass. The liquid ran unheeded over the surface of Barrett's desk, dripping to the deck. "But *I* do," she said. "But *I* do!"

"Are you mad?" asked Jane.

"Far from it, dearie. Just wait until I've dragged Uncle Peter from the arms of Morpheus and we'll go into the matter more thoroughly."

"And now," said Jane, "perhaps if you'll get out of the way, I shall be able to get up and dress."

They were sitting in what had been Captain Hall's day cabin—Admiral Keane, Pamela, Barrett and little Clarendon. Jane, in spite of her husband's urging, had refused to be among those present.

Barrett knew where Hall kept the medical comforts, and he brought out the brandy bottle and glasses. Pamela got the tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator in the officers' smoking room. The three men and the woman sipped their drinks appreciatively.

"Now," said Keane. "Let's have it all again for Mr. Clarendon's benefit."

"It started," said Pamela, "when Tim said something about the Pied Piper of Hamelin. And I remembered, quite suddenly, a Doctor Piper whom we used to know well. It was when he was working for the Admiralty as a civilian scientist. He used to be a quite frequent visitor at our place. And then he fell out with the high brass, and the last I heard of him he'd set up his own laboratory on some island."

"I didn't think he was off the beam myself," her uncle said, "but most of the Board did. Frankly, I just didn't like the weapon he was trying to develop."

"Uncle Peter specialized in gunnery," said the girl. "And as far as he's concerned, the sixteen-inch naval gun is the finest flower of our so-called civilization."

"We should all be much happier if it were still the ultimate in weapons," said the admiral. "Anyhow, this thing of Piper's was a death ray. Not *maser* or *laser* or whatever they called this light-beam affair, but a sonic death ray, affecting the brain only."

"But that would be ideal," squeaked Clarendon. "Set

the thing so that you have a wide beam and you could clean up the ruins of the cities in next to no time. Just to make sure, you could flood the sewers with poison gas afterwards. No trouble at all. No trouble."

"We don't know," said the admiral, "if Piper ever perfected his device. We don't know if he's still alive, even."

"We can find out," said Barrett. "Can you remember where he set up his laboratory?"

"One of the Broughton Group," Keane told him.

"Hm. Just north of Port Stephens, aren't they? Trouble is, we have nothing in the way of large-scale charts north of Newcastle."

"You've got radar," said the admiral. "And an echo sounder. You've more than Captain Cook ever had when he first came out this way."

"Captain Cook had cannon and muskets," retorted Barrett, "even if they were only muzzle-loaders. I'd feel happier with a few weapons before I start standing inshore."

"But I thought we'd established the fact that conventional weapons were useless against the rats."

"True, true. But I doubt if the mutants have established complete control over the entire coastline—and I doubt still more if there's any semblance of law and order. This ship will be a tempting prize to any fishermen turned pirate—as a means of transportation and for the sake of her cargo and stores."

The admiral pulled the heavy revolver from its holster, looked at it affectionately. He said, "It's many years since I used this."

"My heart fair bleeds for you," said Barrett.

The admiral glared at him.

"Now, now," chided Pamela. She said briskly, "All right. In spite of Tim's objections, it's obvious that we must go hunting for Doc Piper. But I see Tim's point. A couple or three fishing boats, their men armed with rifles, could prove quite a serious menace to us." She said to the admiral, "After all, Uncle, you must realize that this isn't a man-o'-war."

"You dazzle me, my dear," he said stiffly, "with the blinding glimpse of the obvious."

Somebody was knocking at the door. It was a young man from among the survivors who had been posted on lookout duty on the bridge. He was carrying a message form. After

looking at all three men he handed it to Barrett, the only one in uniform. Barrett took it, glanced over the typwritten page.

"What is it?" demanded Keane.

"Moscow and Leningrad have been bombed," Barrett said slowly. "With hydrogen bombs."

"So it is war."

"No—wait." He rear slowly: "Newscast from unidentified short-wave station. It is reported that the Russians have bombed both Moscow and Leningrad with thermonuclear weapons, and have called upon other major world powers to deal similarly with their own cities, claiming that it is there that the leaders of the rat rebellion must be. In a broadcast, President Wilberforce—lately Vice President—of the United States said that he would not consider taking such a step, mainly because of the strong probability of there still being human survivors among the ruins. From A.P. headquarters somewhere outside Detroit it is reported that a series of explosions has shaken the U.S.A., and that most of these are believed to be in the vicinity of rocket-launching sites. There is, as yet, no confirmation of this. Meanwhile—" Barrett handed the paper to the admiral. "That's all there is. He must have broken off suddenly."

"It's obvious," squeaked Clarendon. "Obvious. *They* have put the rocket-launching sites out of commission. They have the cunning of rats and the intelligence of men."

"Do you think the Russian plan will be effective?" Barrett asked the admiral.

"It might be," said Keane cautiously. "It might be—if they had enough bombs for *all* their cities. But I think that the same happened in Russia as in America. The bombs on Moscow and Leningrad were two that didn't get sabotaged."

"Aren't you supposed to be keeping a lookout?" Barrett asked the youth, who was still lounging outside the door, listening to the conversation.

"But there was nothing in sight when I came down."

"You'd better make sure there's nothing in sight *now*."

"But—"

"Get back on the bridge. That's an order."

Grumbling, the young man slouched away, muttering something under his breath about brassbound bastards who thought they were Captain Bligh.

"One of your crew?" asked Keane.

"No," snapped Barrett. "One of yours. I told you I had only two ratings aboard, and both of them are highly reliable."

"Then why aren't they on duty?"

"Because they're catching up on their sleep. I shall want them on watch and watch, steering, as soon as we get under way."

"You're the master," said Keane. "Or the acting master."

"Might I suggest," put in Pamela, "that we do something about getting on our way for Piper's hideout?"

Barrett finished his drink, got to his feet. "All right," he said. "I'll get up top and lay off the course. The D.R. shouldn't be too far out, and I shall be able to get a radar fix as we close the land. And you, Pamela, can give Mr. Ferris a shake. You know where his cabin is. Tell him we shall want the main engines as soon as he can let us have them."

On the bridge somebody was shouting and jerking frenziedly at the whistle lanyard. Above the clamor sounded a sharp explosion, then another, and another.

"Rifle fire!" ejaculated Keane.

There was a scream, and the whistle no longer sounded an erratic succession of short blasts, but was emitting a sustained, mournful bellow.

The admiral, revolver in hand, pushed Barrett to one side and ran out on deck.

There were three fishing vessels, and they had taken advantage of the light breeze to approach *Katana* silently, ghosting along under stained and tattered canvas. One of them was already alongside to starboard and the boarding party was clambering from the wheelhouse top over the ship's bulwarks. The other two were standing off, one on either side of *Katana*, and it was their riflemen who were opening fire on anything that moved on *Katana*'s decks.

Keane was shouting something, but Barrett could not hear what it was for the bellowing of the whistle. The dead lookout still clutched the lanyard in his stiff hand, his weight dependent from it. There was already a pool of blood on the white deck-planking.

Keane shouted again and his forty-five crashed, the noise of its firing shockingly loud even among the general commotion. And from the fishing boats there was a ragged

volley, and bullets whined overhead, and others punched holes in the brightwork of the bridge apron and shattered the windows of cabs and wheelhouse. The whistle had stopped now, and Barrett noticed that Pamela had succeeded in pulling the dead man away from the lanyard, was bending over him as he lay sprawled on the deck.

The admiral, standing in the wing of the bridge, loosed off four more shots in quick succession. He remarked, as much to himself as to anybody, "Got two of the bastards. The others thought better of it."

Calmly, ignoring the fire from the fishing boats, he pulled a handful of shells from the pocket of his shorts, started to reload his pistol. Almost absent-mindedly he turned to his niece and to Barrett. To Pamela he said, "Better get below, girl, under cover. You can't do anything for *him.*" And to Barrett, rather maliciously, he said, "Well, *Captain*, your ship's being attacked. What are you doing about it?"

Barrett flinched as a fresh volley came over. A bullet, deflected by a stanchion, whined scant inches past his ear. He said, "I intend to get the hell out of here. As soon as possible. But you can't start a big ship the same way as you can a motor launch."

"I know that, young man." The admiral fired a couple of rounds at one of the boats that, now using its engine, was once again approaching the ship. He said, "I *like* a good revolver. Trouble is, it's accurate at short ranges only."

"I will stand by der vheel," said a heavy German voice. "Der third engineer I haf seen. He say der engines not ready yet are. And Joe I haf told der passengers to keep below."

"And you keep down yourself, Karl," said Barrett. "You're a big target." He addressed Pamela. "Better get below yourself and lend Joe a hand. Make sure that everybody's behind steel and not in line with a port."

"And what now, *Captain?*" sneered the admiral. "You've got all hands under cover, except those who're working the ship. Your engines won't start. Furthermore, *I* haven't an unlimited supply of ammunition."

"Fire hoses," said Barrett slowly.

"Good," said the admiral. "Now you're beginning to think. A fire hose would be ideal for repelling a boarding party, as long as the man behind the hose wasn't being shot at with something more lethal than cold water."

Casually he raised his pistol again, snapped off another shot. A string of curses drifted across the water, down the light breeze. "That," remarked the admiral, "will teach you not to come too close."

Barrett walked slowly into the wheelhouse. He wanted to hurry; even though the wooden structure would not stop a bullet it gave some illusion of protection. He told himself that the fishermen were poor marksmen, that the killing of the lookout had been a matter of luck—or of bad luck. He told himself that, but he didn't quite believe it.

His shoes crunched on broken glass. Every window, he saw, was shattered—and the fact that he would no longer be able to fill in and sign a *Requisition for Repairs and Renewals* form suddenly assumed a heartbreaking importance, looming larger on his mental horizon than the breakdown of law and order, than the piracy on the high seas.

He paused as another volley came over, then picked up the engine-room phone.

"Ferris?"

"An' who else would it be?"

"How soon can I have the engines?"

"As soon as I get these starting valves fixed. The damn things were down for overhaul this time in Sydney."

"Can you give me any idea?"

"No. An' the longer ye keep me yappin', the longer it'll be." There was a pause. "Anyhow, what the hell's happenin' up there?"

"Just a slight set-to," said Barrett, "with a few fishermen who think they're more entitled to the ship than we are."

"I'll be as fast as I can," promised Ferris. "I'll ring Stand By as soon as I'm ready."

Barrett put down the phone, reluctantly went back to the wing of the bridge. He saw and heard Keane fire again, and again. He watched the fishing boats slowly circling the ship, just outside effective revolver range, listened to the puttering of their motors. He looked at the body of the inefficient lookout sprawled on the planking, looked down to the foredeck at the bodies of the two fishermen crumpled just inside the bulwarks. He was aware that somebody was speaking to him. It was Maloney. He was saying, "But this is piracy. I've sent out distress calls, but there's been no reply."

"Captain," called the admiral, "what is our situation?"

"As long as you can hold 'em off until Ferris gets the engines started," said Barrett, "we're all right."

"And if I can't?"

There are knives in the pantry and in the galley, thought Barrett. *There are marlinespikes. We haven't got any belaying pins, and we haven't got any cutlasses, but we'll try to repel boarders with what we have.*

"And if I can't?" snapped the admiral. "Damn it all, Barrett, surely my revolver isn't the only firearm aboard this ship. Do'ye mean to say you haven't as much as a toy pistol?"

"Yes, we've got a pistol," snarled Barrett. It was himself he was furious with, not the admiral. He ran to the box at the after end of the starboard wing of the bridge, the large, zinc-lined box with MAGAZINE stenciled on its canvas cover. He fumbled with the lashings and then pulled out his pocketknife and slashed through the line. He threw off the covers—the new one on top, the old one underneath. He flung back the lid.

Inside the box were the ship's fireworks—the distress rockets that threw aloft their parachute flares, a dozen each of red and blue lights. And there were other rockets there, heavy affairs, silver-painted, each with its bridle from which depended a short tail of asbestos-coated line.

And there was a case, which Barrett lifted from the magazine. Occasional bullets were still singing overhead, but Barrett ignored them. He was no longer a helpless spectator, relying for his safety, and that of his ship, on the admiral's marksmanship, on Ferris' engineering ability. He unsnapped the catches of the case, opened it. He took from it the big dangerous-looking pistol, the weapon (although it was not designed for use as such) that had something of the appearance of the old-time blunderbuss. He laid the pistol on the deck, took out the red tin in which were the cartridges. He tore the lid off one of the trays of line packed in the hollow lid of the case, pulled out a couple of fathoms of the heavy, flexible cord, cut it off at that.

"But that's your line-throwing apparatus," the admiral was saying.

"I'm not throwing the bastards a line," snapped Barrett. "Only just enough line to keep the rocket steady, from coming back at us." He was bending the two fathoms that

he had taken from the tray to the bridle of one of the six-pound rockets. Then, with the point of his knife, he pierced the sealing disc at the venturi.

Quickly he loaded the pistol, sliding the trailing end of the rocket into the barrel so that the bridle hung below it. He opened the breech, slipped in the cartridge, snapped the breech shut. He walked to the side of the bridge with the weapon at the ready, his left hand on the grip above the long barrel, his right hand on the pistol grip. His thumb found and pulled back the hammer.

He was making a target of himself. He was aware of that, but a line-throwing pistol is not a thing that can be fired furtively, from behind cover. If it is to be effective—for its proper purpose or as a weapon—the man using it must be in the open, clear of obstructions, and able to take proper aim. So Barrett was exposed to the fishermen's fire and already had felt the wind of a bullet on his left cheek, had felt another one plucking at the right sleeve of his shirt. But he was now in a position to shoot back, and that made all the difference.

About five hundred feet distant was the fishing boat—not far for accurate revolver fire. Three of the men aboard her had rifles, and they were using them. But Barrett was determined not to spoil everything by undue haste. He knew that the correct elevation for the pistol was thirty degrees; and he knew that this applied only when the intention was to throw the line over the target. He estimated that at this range, and with no weight of line on the tail of the rocket, the trajectory would be almost flat. Carefully, he depressed the muzzle of the pistol, hoping that the rocket would not slide out. *Katana* was lying stern on to what little wind there was, and the rocket, influenced by the length of line bent to the bridle, would tend to come up into the breeze. But this, Barrett hoped, would be counteracted by deflection, or aim-off. He thought wryly, *I hope none of those bastards gets me before I've finished making my mind up!*

He pulled the trigger, staggering with the recoil of the cartridge. The back blast of the rocket scorched his hands and bare forearms. Straight and true, the missile roared through the air, trailing orange flame and dirty white smoke. They were yelling aboard the fishing boat and there must have been some frantic, last moment attempt to take avoid-

ing action, and there was a loud, even at this distance, crash of shattering glass, and more shouts and screams.

"Nice shooting, Barrett," the admiral was saying. "Nice shooting. Got him smack in the wheelhouse!"

"Where are the others?" demanded Barrett as he ran back to the open magazine to reload.

"They haven't seen yet what's happened. Ah, here comes one round the bow now."

Barrett was reloaded and was ready for action again. His second shot was not so lucky as the first had been, but it was good enough. It struck the fo'c's'le of its target and threshed madly around in a pile of gear, like something living and vicious. There were nets there, and ropes, and they were dry, and before the cordite propellant of the rocket was burned out they were ablaze.

The admiral had found a megaphone. "Do you want any more, you men? We're always ready to oblige!"

Said Barrett, as he reloaded. "You'd better tell them to watch their language. There are ladies aboard this ship."

And then, at long last, came the jangling of the engine-room telegraphs, the bells that signaled Stand By. Barrett dropped the pistol, ran to the nearest telegraph, and took hold of the handles, and rang Full Ahead on both engines. There was the *chuffing* as the pistons were impelled by the starting air, and then the first explosions as the vaporized fuel in the cylinder heads took fire. There was the vibration—a slow rhythm at first, then faster and faster.

"Sir," called Karl. "Vot der course is?"

"Steer north," ordered Barrett.

"You could ram," suggested Keane. "After all, they started it."

"No," said Barrett, although not without regret. "No. I'm a civilian, as you've told me enough bloody times, and I'm entitled, legally, to use force to resist attack, but that's all."

He looked at the fishing boats now dropping astern—the one he had hit in the wheelhouse was also burning, and the undamaged one was taking men off the other two. He looked at the unlucky, would-be pirates, and at the body of the young man who hadn't believed in taking orders, and then at the other bodies on the foredeck, the remains of men who had been too ready and willing to believe that the law of the jungle now prevailed.

He said, "Having a common enemy should have made us see the folly of our ways; should have obliged us, all of us humans who survive, to pull together—"

"You aren't tough enough, Barrett," said the admiral. "You're too much of an idealist."

CHAPTER 8

Even so, Barrett sensed that he had risen in the admiral's estimation. What he had done, with the only makeshift weapon available to him, had been approved by the gunnery specialist. He felt himself warming toward the older man when Keane said gruffly, "You've a funeral to organize, Barrett. That's your job, as master. Then you can go below to get your head down, if you like. I'll take over. It's many a year since I stood a watch, but I'm still capable."

"There's also damage to check," said Barrett. "We have to find out if anything important got hit. The radar, for example."

Pamela was back on the bridge. She looked at the bullet holes, the broken glass. She said, "I'm glad you made them pay for this, Tim."

"I'm sorry I was driven into it," he replied soberly. "Now, as you know, I'm short-handed. Karl's at the wheel, and Joe should be getting his head down again. Do you think you can organize a party to get poor—"

"His name was Clarry," said the girl, looking at the dead lookout. "I heard one of the others call him that."

"All right. Get Clarry carried down to the afterdeck, and if there's anybody near and dear to him among the survivors, keep 'em under control. Then you can have those two pirates carried aft, too. You saw what we did with the last funeral; you should be able to get things ready for me."

She said, "I'll try. And I'll get somebody up here with a hose, too, for the blood."

He thought, *She* is *hard. But this is a time when hardness is essential.*

He left matters in her hands, prowled through the wheel-

house and chartroom. All the windows had been smashed by the rifle fire but, luckily, the binnacle was undamaged. (Karl would soon have sung out if such had not been the case.) The radar casing was scored by a glancing bullet but, to Barrett's great relief, the set was still operational. Fantastically, it was in the radio office, abaft wheelhouse and chartroom, that the most serious damage had been sustained. Bullets had whistled through the wheelhouse windows and through both open doorways into the wireless room; others had smashed through the side ports. Maloney was uninjured, but he was far from happy. With Ryan, the ex-telegraphist, he was tearing down panels, exposing to view a shocking mess of broken glass and severed wiring. "But we haven't got the spares," he was complaining bitterly. "We haven't got the spares."

"How serious is it, Bill?" asked Barrett.

"Bloody serious, Tim. Bloody serious. We can't send, and we can't receive. And there's not a decent receiver aboard the ship—just these bloody absurd little transistors with no range at all."

"The ship's broadcast receiver?" suggested Barrett.

"You know bloody well it went on the blink on the way up from Burnie. I was supposed to be getting spares for it this time in Sydney." He threw up his pudgy hands in despair. "I was going to make a stab at getting in touch with that poor bloody Russian in orbit. I suppose he's still up there. I was going to keep my ears flapping for all the hams who must still be operating. I was going to—aagh! What does it matter?"

"There's the VHF," said Barrett. "The Pilotphone."

"And what range has *that* got? Can we talk to a cosmonaut a thousand miles up? Can we have a friendly chat with a ham in Greenland?"

"I suppose not," said Barrett.

"I should bloody well think not!" exploded Maloney.

Barrett left the experts to it, went back outside. The admiral was pacing up and down, a pair of binoculars about his neck, every inch the complete watch officer in spite of his informal civilian attire.

Barrett said, "The radio's had it."

"My dear boy," said Keane, "naval battles were fought, and won, long before Mr. Marconi started fouling up the ether."

"They were lost, too," said Barrett.

The admiral laughed tolerantly.

Barrett went below, passing through the officers' flat on his way to the poop. He looked into his cabin. Jane was back in the bunk. She was sleeping. *Christ,* he thought, not without envy, *how that woman can stow it away!*

He continued down through the accommodation, on his way aft. Most of the survivors were gathered on the after-deck. There were three long bundles there. Somebody had lashed them in blankets rather than sewing them in canvas. There was the painting stage, its horns removed, protruding over the side. There was the clean, bright, new Red Ensign.

Pamela approached him. She handed him the book, the *Ship Captain's Medical Guide,* that useful volume covering every medical and surgical contingency in the life of Man, from the womb to the tomb, from childbirth to the burial service. She had marked the place, Barrett saw.

He said, "Will you have the first body placed on the board?"

"Yes, Captain," she replied.

Then there was a little woman confronting Barrett—a little, shabby, nondescript woman, of the type that is almost invisible in normal circumstances. But Barrett could see her now. He could see that she had suffered great loss —the marks of it on her face were all too evident. He could see that she was not far from tears.

She whispered, "Captain, he was a good boy, my Clarry. He was a good boy, and never forgetful of his duty. You'll be writing a report, won't you? And you'll put it all in, so that he gets some recognition. I've all his father's medals at home still."

"Yes," said Barrett, "he did his duty."

And I suppose he did, when it was almost too late, he thought. *He might have bolted for cover instead of hanging on to the whistle lanyard the way he did. We didn't get much warning, but it was just enough.*

He said, "I'll do what I can."

"Thank you, Captain. Thank you."

And then there was the service, and the consigning of the bodies to the deep: the body of the murdered man (dead, after all, through his own negligence) and the bodies of two of his murderers (who would have killed more people had not their victim made belated amends). And there was Barrett, morbidly wondering who would bury *him* when it came to his turn, and the solemn faces and the

hushed voices, and Barrett, wanting to get back to an atmosphere of more or less cheerful efficiency, hurried back to the bridge.

"I'm quite happy up here, Barrett," the admiral told him. "Why not go below and get your head down? You can take evening stars if we haven't picked up anything by sunset."

Barrett thanked him and went down to his cabin.

Jane was still sleeping.

He undressed quietly, threw on a dressing gown and went to the bathroom. He remembered that he still hadn't done anything about water rationing, but he was tired and dirty and sticky with stale perspiration, and the pleasure in renewed cleanliness outweighed all his worries. He went back to his cabin for razor and aerosol lather, shaved carefully in front of the bathroom mirror.

When he returned to his room after shaving, Jane was still asleep. He began to feel resentful. He thought, *She's had a rough time, but so has everybody else. Other people are pulling their weight—Pamela, the admiral, and Ryan in the radio office, and those two motor mechanics who're lending a hand in the engine-room and—after all, as wife of the chief officer—or the acting captain—Jane has more standing in the ship than any of these others. She should be setting the example. The least she could do would be to hold my hand and make wifely noises from time to time.*

He flung himself on his settee in his dressing gown and tried to sleep. He knew it was important that he maintain himself as fresh as possible for whatever emergencies would arise in the future, and he was certain that there would be such emergencies. But sleep would not come. At last he got up and decided to look in the bookcase in the officers' smoking room in the vain hope that there would be some magazine there, or some paperback, that he had not already read.

As he passed the door of the second mate's cabin—open, but with the curtain pulled partially across—he heard Pamela call his name softly. He went in. She was in the bunk, her face and neck and shoulders very dark against the linen, her hair lustrous against the white of the pillow.

"Who's holding the fort?" she asked.

"Your uncle. He seemed very pleased with me after the recent unpleasantry. He thinks I'll make a gunnery officer yet."

She said, "He has his little ways, but he's not at all bad when you get to know him. If you two stop fighting each other we shall get someplace yet."

"Where?" he asked, with a sudden descent into deep depression.

"What do you mean?"

He said, "Have you ever had those spells when everything seems futile? When life boils down to jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but no jam today? Ever. It seems to me, sometimes, that human beings have been constructing this peculiar sort of hell for themselves ever since our first ancestors decided to come down out of the trees or to walk on two legs instead of four or whatever it was they did. Are we so much better than the things that are trying to wipe us out? Or that *have* wiped us out, as a race. Have we the *right* to fight back?"

She laughed softly. "Tim, Tim. Who's talking? You or your glands? I'm a woman, you know, and I'm not a fool, and I've seen how things are with you."

And he could see how things were, too. He could see that the bedclothes were slipping down as she talked, and that under the sheets she was naked. Her breasts were as deeply tanned as the rest of her.

He said stiffly, "There are still certain loyalties—"

"Loyalties be buggered," she said, with a coarseness that somehow did not shock. "For all we know, we're the *only* survivors. We may have to find ourselves an island, and you'll be the king and you'll make your own laws, and if you want a harem, why not?"

"I can guess who *will* be king," he told her. "And it won't be me. Three bands and a diamond on the sleeve are somewhat outranked by gold braid up to the elbow. In any case, where are we getting the oil fuel from to go island hunting? To say nothing of fresh water."

"Don't quibble," she said. "Life's too short."

He was finding it hard to look away from her erect nipples, pink against the brown skin. At last he did so. And to look at her face was worse. (Or better.) There was no mistaking the invitation in the eyes, on the wide, generous mouth. He wondered how he had ever thought her face hard. And he thought, *Surely, after all this, I have earned something. Surely we have earned something, a little respite from the heat and labor of the day.*

He kissed her then, and her slim arms were about him,

pulling him to her. He no longer felt any shadow of doubt and he was reluctant to pull away, yet he did so.

He said a little shakily, "There are some occasions when privacy is essential, and this is one of them."

She said, "Darling, don't be long."

Barrett went to the door to shut and to lock it. But first of all he had to pull the curtain back and clear—and found himself face to face with Jane.

She said tonelessly, "I woke up. I went up on the bridge to find you, to be with you. The admiral told me you had gone below."

He said, "I was discussing water rationing with Miss Henderson."

She said, "I suppose that if people go nudist they'll save on water by having no clothes to wash."

Conversation tended to lag thereafter.

Jane went back into Barrett's cabin. Barrett turned to Pamela, but she made a wordless gesture that said, as plainly as speech, *Not now, you fool.*

Barrett thought of moving into the officer's room, then remembered that it was now occupied by Ryan, who was acting as Maloney's junior.

He went into the smoking room and stretched himself out on the settee. He remembered that it had last been occupied by the dead man from the burning fishing boat off Cape Baily.

He told himself it didn't matter, and this time, to his surprise, he did go to sleep.

Pamela called Barrett late in the afternoon, bringing him a tray with tea and sandwiches. She said briskly, "I've fed all the other animals. Now it's your turn."

He thanked her. "I suppose the situation is more than somewhat sticky."

"It is," she agreed. "Uncle Peter's completely lost. He borrowed somebody's sextant and tried to get a position line, but his sums wouldn't come out at all. And he can't get any joy out of your radar. And Ryan and your Mr. Maloney are still sweating and slaving in the radio office and getting no place."

Barrett said, "I didn't mean *that*."

"There's more yet. Everybody's whining about the fresh water rationing. I had a few words with Mr. Ferris and got it organized."

"And I didn't mean *that*."

She grinned ruefully. "I know damn well you didn't. Anyhow, your so charming wife will have to face facts. The world, the secure (fission and fusion bombs notwithstanding) familiar world that we all knew, has come to an end. We have to start afresh, *if* we can, and make up a new set of rules as we go along."

"Even so," muttered Barrett.

"Even so," she stated flatly. "Now drink up your tea like a good boy and then go and find out where we are."

He said, "You make a good mate."

"Given the chance," she told him, "I'll make a good mate in the other meaning of the word."

She left him then, and Barrett watched her as she passed through the doorway. She had changed from her bedraggled dress into khaki shirt and shorts that had belonged to the second officer, and she was one of those women whose femininity is accentuated by male attire. *Even so*, thought Barrett ruefully, *there are loyalties*. He sipped his tea and nibbled a sandwich. He thought, *There can't be much bread left. I suppose somebody on board is capable of doing some baking. While the flour lasts.*

He got up from the settee and went through to the bathroom, splashed water from the salt tap over his face. It refreshed him after a fashion. He walked to his cabin. The door was shut, but not locked. Jane was in the bunk, her face turned to the bulkhead. She might have been asleep, but he did not think so. He pulled out a drawer, took from it a clean shirt, clean shorts and clean socks. He transferred the shoulder boards from the dirty shirt to the clean one. He dressed quietly. Then, on his way to the door, he paused.

"Jane . . ." he said softly.

There was no reply.

He put out his hand, touched her shoulder gently. She squirmed violently away from his hand. He muttered a curse, left his cabin and went up to the bridge.

The sun was setting as Barrett got out his sextant and tables and work book, busying himself with the preparations for his evening-star nights. The admiral watched with interest. He said, "One gets rusty, Barrett."

Barrett said, "You have to keep in practice, sir."

The admiral said, "You're right. And all of us who have

been lucky enough to survive will have to learn to be more flexible. In more ways than one." He seemed embarrassed. "Yes, in more ways than one. There must be clear thinking, on *all* matters."

"Too right," agreed Barrett absently. He went out to the wing of the bridge with his sextant, brought the true and reflected images of the hard horizon into exact line, read the scale. There was no index error. He should be able to obtain a good fix.

"On *all* matters," repeated the admiral.

"Such as?" asked Barrett.

"I'm very fond of my niece," said the admiral. "And now, of course, I stand *in loco parentis* to her. Normally, I should be horrified if I learned that she was contemplating a liaison with a married man. But these are not normal times."

"You can say that again," said Barrett.

"If," went on the admiral, "it turns out that we are the only survivors, then you, so far as I am concerned—and so far as *she* is concerned—are the only eligible male in this little community. And I—" Barrett caught his eye, and he corrected himself hastily, although not very convincingly. "And *we* shall be making our own laws."

"In other words," said Barrett, "the king can do no wrong, and the crown prince by marriage can have as many wives as he likes."

"Crudely put, Barrett," growled the admiral. "But essentially correct. I would add, however, that the king will have something to say on the subject of divorce." He paused, paced up and down the wing of the bridge for a few moments. "Of course, if any sort of civilization has survived, that will put an entirely different complexion on matters."

"Maybe yes," said Barrett. "Maybe no."

"Why, you—"

"Sir," said Barrett, "it's a bloody pity that I—that we —have this private and personal mess to contend with as well as the real one, the big one. But I guess history is full of such cases: Cleopatra interfering with the smooth running of the Roman Empire, Henry VIII breaking with the Church because the Pope wouldn't let him divorce his wives, and so on. Meanwhile, survival is the main item on the agenda. And getting a good position will be a step in that direction."

He looked up and around. Jupiter had been visible since just before sunset, but it would have given him only a single position line. But now the twinkling yellow point of light that was Alpha Centauri was showing to the south'ard, and there was Canopus, and there were the bright stars of Orion with Sirius, the faithful dog of the heavenly hunter, to bear them company.

Quickly, efficiently, Barrett took his sights, taking his own time from the chartroom chronometer, jotting down altitudes, G.M.T. and log reading. He worked without haste, using the Alt-Azimuth tables, plotting his position lines directly on the chart. They intersected with only a small "cocked hat." The ship was a little to the south of the dead reckoning position, a little to the east, but no major alteration of course would be necessary.

Barrett measured off the distance to go, divided it by the vessel's speed.

"E.T.A. is 0700 hours," he told the admiral.

CHAPTER 9

They divided the night into three watches—Barrett standing from 8:00 P.M. until midnight, Pamela from midnight until 4:00 A.M., and the admiral from 4:00 A.M. to 8:00 A.M.

Barrett's watch was uneventful, although he realized toward the end of it that visibility was deteriorating fast; the ship was once again steaming into the smoke pall that overhung the entire coastline. It was old smoke, stale-smelling; the fires must have burned themselves out. A good downpour of rain would clear the air, but overhead there was no hint of cloud, and stars and moon bright in a black sky.

At 2345 hours Barrett went down to call Pamela. He switched on her light and said softly, "Rise and shine." He didn't touch her, didn't go near the bunk even. As soon as he was satisfied that she was awake he returned to the bridge. He filled the electric kettle from the bucket that held the watchkeepers' ration for the night, switched it on.

He went outside, scanned the circle of the horizon through his prismatic night glasses, decided that visibility was too far reduced for comfort, initiated the switching-on sequence of the radar. After a couple of minutes' warming up the screen came alive. Barrett adjusted Gain and Brilliance controls. On the short ranges there was nothing but sea clutter. On the forty-eight-mile range the outline of the coast was just visible on the port beam, but too faint for the identification of any features.

Italian Joe clumped heavily up the starboard ladder from the boat deck, tramped through to the wheelhouse to relieve Karl. On the port wing of the bridge the lookout was handing over to his relief. Suddenly to Barrett everything seemed normal—the routine of changing watches, the kettle already boiling in the chartroom and the dry tea already in the warmed teapot. (*But for how long would the fresh water last? And the tea, and the milk, and the sugar?*)

Pamela came into the chartroom by the inside entrance. Barrett joined her there. Before he did anything else he poured boiling water into the teapot, switched off the kettle. He said, "I've made the tea."

She laughed. "It makes a change. It always seems to have been my job on this ship."

Barrett moved to the chart table, picked up the dividers, used them as a pointer. "Here she is at midnight," he said, indicating the penciled cross on the course line. "That's giving her log distance from P.M. stars. I've got the radar on, but there's nothing definite showing up yet." He watched the girl as she poured the tea. "The visibility could be better—we've struck the smoke bank again—but there's not much chance of our hitting anything. There's nothing out for us to hit."

"But this is fantastic," she said. "One would think that everybody, but everybody, would have tried to make his escape by water."

"Our little friends," said Barrett, "seem to have had a down on ships from the very start. Come to that, even before the balloon went up they were sabotaging all forms of transport."

Holding their cups, the man and the woman moved out to the wheelhouse. Together they looked into the screen. Save for the sea clutter and the faint, distant shoreline to port it was blank.

"What time will you want calling?" asked the girl.

"Any time at all if you think you want me. Otherwise you can pass word to the admiral to give me a shout at six. It's not that I don't trust him—or you—it's just that there's only one navigator aboard this ship. Me."

She said, "I suppose you're still camping out."

"I am," he told her. "And likely to be until—"

"Until . . ." she repeated softly.

"No matter," he said.

He finished his tea, left her in charge of the watch. He wasn't altogether happy about it. Legally speaking (if those words still held any validity) he was master, and responsible for the ship. And he was leaving an unqualified officer on the bridge in conditions of moderate to poor visibility. But he couldn't keep awake all the time, and there was no traffic around (nor was there likely to be any) and it was important that he be wide-awake and alert to cope with the emergencies that were still to come.

With what was almost a clear conscience he went below and turned in on the smoking room settee.

The admiral sent the lookout down to call him at six.

Barrett opened his eyes sleepily, blinked at the face of the fat man who was shaking him. The name of the lookout, he remembered hazily, was Olsen. He was a dentist. Or he had been a dentist. But what did it matter?

"All right," he muttered irritably. "*All right.*"

"Captain, the admiral told me to tell you that we've made a good speed and that we're well ahead of the D.R. He said to tell you that the E.T.A. is 0730 hours, if not a little earlier."

"Good," mumbled Barrett.

He rolled off the settee, got shakily to his feet. He stumbled through to the bathroom, washed after a fashion in salt water, then returned to the smoking room to dress. He mounted the ladder to the bridge without any enthusiasm.

The admiral was in the port wing. He greeted Barrett jovially. "Clearing up nicely," he commented.

"So it is," said Barrett. "So it is."

To port he could see the shoreline. Inland there was still smoke—gray masses of vapor, sluggishly stirring, slowly rising—but to seaward most of it seemed to have settled on the water, fouling the blue sea with long, drab streaks of filthy scum. And there was wreckage there, too, Barrett

saw. The charred hulk of a launch drifted past, and there was a yacht, dismasted, its torn and scorched sail moving jerkily in the wash of the ship like the broken wing of some wounded bird. But there were no bodies. *The sharks*, thought Barrett, *must be well fed by now.*

"I've got the islands showing on the screen," said the admiral, "although we can't see them visually yet. And I've told Mrs. Welcome—she's taken over the catering from Pamela—to rustle up breakfast for all hands as soon as possible. It's likely that we may have to send a boat away."

"What if *they* have taken over the islands?" asked Barrett.

"Just too bad," said the admiral. "But I suggest that anybody who's setting foot ashore dresses properly; none of this running around in little boys' trousers. I saw what happened to that patrol from H.M.S. *Watson*."

"And I saw what had happened to that fisherman we picked up," grunted Barrett.

He went to the wing of the bridge, looked at the still partly obscured land. He returned to the wheelhouse and peered into the radar screen. He went into the chartroom and compared what he had seen with the shoreline depicted on the chart. He picked up the dividers with his right hand, measured off the distances to go from the fix at 0600 hours. The admiral's estimate of the arrival time was correct.

Mrs. Welcome bustled into the chartroom, "Captain," she asked, "have you seen the admiral?"

"He's outside," Barrett told the stout, motherly woman. "Anything I can do for you?"

"It's the bread, Captain. It's finished. And we're down to the last four dozen eggs. And there's only enough bacon for one more meal."

"If you've no time to make scones," Barrett told her, "open some tins of biscuits. As for the rest of it, we shall have to start on the canned reserves and get a few fishing lines over."

"Will you be having your breakfast up here, Captain?"

"Yes. But I think the admiral will be going down to his room."

Barrett went outside again, the woman following him. He told Keane that he would be taking over. The admiral thanked him, saying that he wanted to change. He said, "Luckily your late captain was about my build."

Barrett paced up and down moodily, checking the ship's position at fifteen-minute intervals. After a while Mrs. Welcome brought him up a tray of breakfast, which he took standing, from the folding table in the port cab. The sun was well up now, but it seemed to have lost its power to warm him. He wondered what Jane was doing, told himself that he could hardly care less. He heard the sound of activity from the boat deck on the other side of the ship, went across to the starboard wing to investigate. Under the leadership of Joe the men were clearing away the starboard boat.

Barrett called down to the Italian seaman, "When you've finished with the boat, Joe, you might get both anchors ready."

He resumed his pacing.

Keane came back to the bridge. He was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt of heavy khaki drill, buttoned at the throat. The ends of his khaki trousers were tucked into his socks. He was wearing stout shoes. His revolver belt was buckled around his thick waist.

"Are you coming in the boat?" asked Barrett.

"Of course, my boy. I know this man Piper."

"Have you had any experience with Fleming Gear?"

"Fleming Gear? I thought that was a motorboat."

"Don't let the screw fool you. The boat's propelled by manpower, by levers geared to the shaft. You have to know what you're doing."

The admiral grunted irritably. "All right, Barrett. What's your suggestion?"

"We're the only two seamen aboard this ship, sir. Or the only two officers. Weighing things in the balance, I suppose that I'm more expendable than you are. I suggest we approach the islands with caution, look for a landing place. Then we stop and lower the boat. I take the boat away and you stand off and on, ready to get the hell out if you have to. How does that sound?"

Keane said slowly, "I suppose it will have to do. Only you don't know Piper." His heavy face cleared. "But Pamela does."

Slowly, cautiously, *Katana* approached the major island of the group, her engines on Dead Slow, her radar scanner rotating atop its stubby mast, Pamela in the chartroom watching the echo sounder and calling out the recorded

depths at short intervals. Maloney was standing by the engine-room telegraphs. Barrett and Keane, binoculars to their eyes, were staring at the yellow line of the beach.

"There's a jetty there, sir," said Barrett.

"Yes, yes. I see it. And there, up the hillside, half hidden by the trees, a building."

"Yes. I've got it. Undamaged, too. There can't have been any fires here."

"We can't be too certain," said the admiral.

"No . . . I suppose not. But there must be quite a few islands along the coast—and the other coasts—where they haven't got yet."

"They can swim," said the admiral. "At least, I suppose they can. The mutated ones, I mean."

"They can," said Barrett, recalling the things that had escaped from the burning ketch. "But there are sharks."

"I never thought I should ever have a kind word to say about those brutes," muttered the admiral. "But—"

Barrett went to the radar. He said, "Seven cables from the beach. I think we should stop."

"You're the master," Keane told him.

"Stop both," ordered Barrett. Then, "Half astern."

The ship shuddered to the vibration of the reversed diesels. Barrett went to the starboard cab, watched the creamy wash creeping forward along the ship's side. When it was directly beneath his vantage point he ordered the engines stopped again. The way was off the ship. From the boat deck big Karl called, "Lower der boat, sir?"

"Lower to fishplate level," called Barrett. "We'll man from the boat deck."

With the way off the ship there was no longer any breeze, actual or relative, and Barrett started to perspire heavily. He was dressed for the landing party—a landing party of two—in long-sleeved shirt and slacks, both of thick khaki drill, with short sea boots on his feet. He was wearing a uniform cap, to lend, as he phrased it, an official aspect to the expedition. He was wearing, too, the admiral's revolver belt. The weight of the weapon on his hip was reassuring.

Pamela came out of the chartroom. She, too, looked hot and uncomfortable. She asked, "Are the Marines ready to land?"

"If you are," said Barrett.

He escorted the girl to the starboard ladder. They looked down to the boat deck. Already the boat had been lowered to the fishplate, and already its crew was scrambling clumsily aboard—a bowman (he had claimed considerable yachting experience) and six men for the Fleming Gear levers.

"All aboard the *Skylark*," said Barrett with a flippancy that fell flat.

"Don't take any foolish risks," admonished the admiral.

"I shan't take *any* risks if I can possibly avoid it," Barrett told him.

He followed Pamela down from the bridge. Outside the starboard door to the officers' flat she turned to him. "Tim, haven't you forgotten somehing?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"But you have," she told him. "You know what my views are on your marriage, but I feel that you should go to see her before we shove off. After all, something just might happen to you."

"And to *us*," he said.

"Never mind that. I think you should say good-bye. Or *au revoir* or whatever. Just in case."

"All right," he said.

He went into the alleyway, walked to the door of his cabin. It was shut and locked. He hammered on it. "Jane! Jane! Are you all right?"

Her voice was cold, distant. "Of course."

"Open up, will you? I'm just taking a boat ashore and —" He hated having to introduce melodrama. "I may not be back."

"What am I supposed to do? Go down on my bended knees and beg you not to leave me?"

Nevertheless, she opened the door. He tried to kiss her, but she evaded his mouth. She muttered, "Good luck," as though she didn't mean it, pulled away from him and locked herself in again.

Barrett went out to the boat deck, caught the lifeline thrown to him by Pamela, swung into the stern sheets of the boat. He called to Karl, standing by the brake of the boat winch, "Lower away!"

The boat dropped to the water.

The big advantage of Fleming Gear is that skilled oarsmen are not required for the propulsion of a boat. There

are levers, geared to the shaft so that their to-and-from motion is converted to a rotary one. There are no heavy sweeps to handle, no crabs to catch. After a slight initial confusion the men at the levers worked with a will, the boat slid easily through the still water. In the stern sheets, Barrett and Pamela looked toward the rather decrepit jetty extending from the sandy beach into the sea, alert for any movement. But there was none. The island might well be deserted. And yet the sign displayed at the head of the little pier—PRIVATE PROPERTY—was in good repair, freshly painted. And the same, thought Barrett, could be said about the building—Piper's laboratory?—that could be glimpsed through the trees.

"Harry," Barrett called to the bowman. "Stand by!"

The bowman got to his feet, holding his boat hook at the ready.

"Way enough," ordered Barrett.

The men at the levers, still pumping, looked at him with puzzlement.

"Stop pulling," amended Barrett. "*And* pushing," he added, just to make sure.

The boat lost way, drifted in to the jetty. There was an iron ladder at the head of it. The bowman caught one of the rungs with his boat hook, pulled the boat in. He called to one of the others to pass the end of the painter ashore.

Barrett stopped him. "No," he said. "No, don't make fast. As soon as Miss Henderson and I get ashore, Harry, you will be in charge. Get the boat out into deep water, well clear of the jetty. Stay there until you see us come back."

"And if you don't come back?" asked the man.

"If there's any trouble," Barrett told him, "you'll hear some shooting." He patted the butt of the forty-five. *I hope,* he added mentally.

He made his way forward, stepping carefully over the thwarts. He clambered up the ladder, whipped out the revolver as soon as he was standing on the planked deck of the jetty. Pamela, who had followed him, laughed a little uneasily. She said, "I wish I had a camera."

He said, "The United States Marines have landed. All is well."

She said, "And what's wrong with the Royal Marines?"

"Make it the Swiss Marines if you like," he told her.

"But I'm afraid that I'm not cut out to be a commando."

He went back to the end of the jetty, watched the boat backing out under the sternpower of her reversed screw. "That should do," he called. "And stay there until you see us coming back." He looked beyond the boat to the ship. She was lying there safely enough, her engines stopped, only the faint feather of her generator exhaust showing at the funnel top. Barrett could see the admiral standing at the wing of the bridge, and another man with him. He could see the figures of men and women about her decks. He wondered if Jane was among them.

"And what now?" Pamela was asking.

"We'll investigate that building. Damn it all, there must be somebody there."

"Or *something*," she said.

"Don't be so bloody cheerful, woman."

Together they walked the short length of the jetty, started up the sandy path that led inland. It wound up the hillside, was bordered by flowering shrubs and creepers. It was wild, but it was evident that trimming had been carried out, and recently. And from the undergrowth came the somehow reassuring voices of birds, the flutterings of wings. A lizard started to run across the path, paused to look at them and then darted from sight.

Then Barrett clicked back the safety catch of the revolver. He could hear movement on the path above them, the scraping of feet over the sand. Of feet—*or claws*? The sweat on his body was suddenly cold, clammy. He motioned Pamela to get behind him. She ignored the unspoken order.

The woman came around the bend of the path, paused to inspect the purple blossoms on one of the vines. She was wearing sunglasses and sandals, and a bright beach towel slung carelessly over one shoulder, the colored stripes of which were in vivid contrast to the dark tan of her skin. In spite of her nudity she conveyed the impression of slender elegance.

Suddenly she looked around and down, stared at the intruders. So self-assured was she, so clothed in her hauteur, that Barrett felt as though he were naked and she fully dressed.

She demanded, "Can't you read? Don't you know that this is private property?"

"But," began Barrett, "this is important."

"It had better be. Who are you? And what do you want here?"

"At least," said Barrett, "*they* don't seem to have reached here yet."

"*Who* haven't reached here? *You* have, that's obvious." She stared at the badge on Barrett's cap, the company's house flag with its surround of golden laurel leaves. "You aren't Navy, even. Are you playing at pirates, or what?"

"If you'd just let me explain," persisted Barrett.

"There is neither explanation nor excuse for wanton violation of privacy."

Pamela stepped forward. "Then we apologize. And, believe you me, we envy you your rig of the day." She was unbuttoning the throat of her shirt as she spoke. "We aren't dressed up like this just for the fun of it. And it's vitally important that we see Dr. Piper at once."

"Piper?" repeated the other woman. "Piper? Dr. Piper? I don't think he's one of our members, although with our Christian-names-only rule—but we have only one doctor—Annette—and I'm sure her other name's not Piper."

"Members?" asked Barrett, mystified.

"Of the Sun Island Club, of course."

"This Dr. Piper," said Pamela, "is not a nudist, as far as I know. And he's not a medical doctor. He's a scientist. We think that he has a laboratory on one of the Broughton Islands."

"Not this one," said the naked woman definitely. "But perhaps if you will follow me to the office."

"Take me to your leader," whispered Barrett, appreciatively watching the swing of the shapely, sun-darkened buttocks—and then yelped as Pamela's sharp elbow caught him in the ribs.

They sat on the terrace outside the club's office—Barrett, still in his sweat-soaked khaki, still with the pistol belted to his waist, Pamela, now as unself-consciously naked as the Sun Islanders, the benign, bronze Buddha whose name was Charles and who was club president, and Betty, whom they had met on the path and who was club secretary. Before the terrace were twenty or so members, their bright towels and mats spread on the cropped grass. It was an idyllic scene, thought Barrett. Incongruously idyllic. And

yet, he knew, it was himself that struck the one incongruous note. In his stiff, hot clothing, with the ugly weapon at his hip, he was like a Time traveler from the twentieth century intruding upon some Edenic culture of the past. Or of the future.

"Well, Captain Barrett?" said Charles.

"Keep to your club rules," suggested Pamela, with not unpleasant mockery. "Call him Tim."

"Well, Tim?"

"I think we had better wait until Sue is back," said Betty.

They could hear the returning messenger hurrying up the path. Then the young girl walked out on the lawn, peeling off her blouse as she did so. She stepped out of her shorts, plopped down on the grass. She looked at Barrett with the scorn of which only adolescents are capable, and said, "I don't see how *anybody* can wear clothes on a day like this."

"That will do," snapped Betty. "Did you pass the message?"

"Of course. I called to the men in the boat, told them that Captain Barrett had things under control and would be some time. They said that they would go back to the ship to wait. There's a ship out there in the bay, Betty."

"So you've a ship," Betty said. "What is this, Captain? *Tim*, I mean. An invasion?"

"Yes," Barrett told them. "But not by us. Don't you people listen to the news?"

"Sometimes," admitted Charles. "But our only radio broke down some days ago and, believe it or not, there's not a single working transistor set on the island. But Tom and Jerry took the launch in this morning for supplies. They'll bring the papers back with them."

Barrett said, "There won't be any papers. Perhaps not ever again. And Tom and Jerry mightn't be back."

"So you really don't know what's been happening?" asked Pamela.

"No," said Charles. "There do seem to have been some rather bad bush fires on the mainland, but that happens every summer. But what was that about the papers, and about Tom and Jerry not being back? What was that about an invasion? Is it the third world war?"

"We should have heard the blasts," said a painfully thin

woman. "We should have seen the mushroom clouds. And surely, by this time, some of us would be exhibiting the symptoms of radiation sickness."

"Are you sure of that, Annette?" asked Charles.

Before she could answer, Barrett said, "There's been no third world war—at last, not the kind you're all thinking about. There have been rockets fired—but, as far as I know, the only cities destroyed by thermonuclear weapons have been Moscow and Leningrad, and they were bombed by the Russians themselves."

"Then our cities," said Charles, "are safe."

"They aren't," said Barrett. "I witnessed the destruction of Sydney myself, and I think that every other town and city—aye, and every village—went the same way."

And then, trying to keep his voice cold and dispassionate, he told his story. He noticed the club members looking at him and at each other, uneasily, as he did so. But he went on. He told them of what he had seen and experienced himself, of what the others had seen and experienced, of what had been heard on the radio before it had been put out of commission by the pirates' rifle fire.

At last he finished.

"He's mad," said Betty scornfully.

"It's true," snapped Pamela. "Every word of it."

And they would believe her, Barrett realized, when they would not believe him. He was still the stranger, the outlander, to be treated with suspicion. She, by disrobing, had made herself one of them, especially since on some private roof or balcony she had already built up an over-all tan as deep as theirs.

"It could be true," said the doctor, Annette, judiciously. "It could well be true. Too much and too far have we drifted from healthy simplicity; too much have we interfered with the balance of nature. I have often had cause to suspect the mutagenic nature of certain chemical pesticides myself. I remember that the last time I took the launch over to see Theodore we discussed the problem."

"Theodore," repeated Pamela. "Theodore Piper—"

"Yes. Piper's his name."

The girl was on her feet. "Is he still here? We must see him."

"Yes. He's still around, as far as I know, although he's more of a recluse than any of *us*, even. But I haven't been across to his island since he got the rats."

"The rats?" asked Barrett, his heart sinking.

"Yes. A cage, or a few cages, of white rats for experimental purposes."

"Then there's still time," breathed Pamela.

"Of course there's time. But you'll never find Theodore's place without a pilot; it's tucked away up one of the inlets. If you don't mind waiting until I get dressed—"

Meanwhile, Betty and Charles were arguing. The girl was saying, "I still maintain that the story is utterly fantastic."

"Suit yourself," said Barrett, breaking in. Then, to Charles, he said, "Meanwhile, what weapons can you muster? There's no police force, no army or navy or air force to defend you."

"I think that Des has a three-oh-three," muttered the president. "That right, Des? And there are a couple of pea rifles."

"Get yourself organized," said Barrett. "Apart from the mutants, there are the odd fishermen turned pirate, and the like." He got to his feet, and the stiff khaki that he had been hating so much now felt like comforting armor on his body. "Furthermore, you'd better get some clothes on, all of you. Rats are dirty fighters and go for the essentials."

"If the rats come," sneered Betty. "If there *are* any rats."

"There are rats, all right," Pamela told her grimly. She quoted:

" 'They fought the dogs and killed the cats.

And bit the babies in the cradles . . .' "

And worse," said Barrett. "Much worse."

"Post lookouts," Pamela told them. "Set up an alarm system. I think you're fairly safe here, but it wouldn't surprise me if they were able to handle a small boat."

Annette came out from a cabin on the other side of the lawn. She was wearing slacks and a heavy shirt. She said, "I overlooked all that, and I advise you all to do as the man says, at the first hint of danger."

"Even so, it's a pity," grumbled Pamela, climbing back into her own clothing.

CHAPTER 10

The three of them—Barrett, Pamela and the woman doctor —made their way down the winding path to the jetty, shouted and waved to attract the admiral's attention. They saw Keane wave in reply from *Katana*'s bridge, saw the crew clambering down the Jacob's ladder to the waiting boat. It pushed off from the ship, moving smartly across the water toward them.

Old Karl was at the tiller. As soon as he was within hailing distance he said, "Mister, der admiral mit you wishes to have der word."

"All right," said Barrett.

He saw the two women into the lifeboat, followed them down the ladder. He told Karl to remain at the tiller. When the boat was alongside the ship he ordered everybody to remain seated, then climbed the pilot ladder to the saloon deck, then the two ladders to the bridge. He was out of breath when he confronted the admiral.

"Well?" demanded Keane. "Did you find him?"

"Not yet," admitted Barrett. "He's on one of the other islands, but we have somebody in the boat who knows the way to his landing place."

"That woman?"

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know her surname. She's a woman doctor. Her Christian name's Annette."

"Must be very informal people at that guest house, or whatever it is in there," grumbled the admiral.

"Yes. Very. Very informal, but far from well informed. They have no radio. They don't know what's been happening on the mainland."

"They know now, I suppose."

"Yes, they know now," agreed Barrett.

"All right. I suppose you know what you're doing. Off you go again."

Barrett sketched a sloppy salute, clattered down the ladders again to the waiting boat.

It was just as well that they had Annette with them. By themselves they could never have found Piper's laboratory. The woman doctor told Karl to steer into what appeared to be no more than a brief indentation in the coast line of one of the smaller islands, a small, shallow bay with bold, bare rocks marking its entrance, a wall of unbroken greenery enclosing its inshore limits. Then she told the German to head for a dead tree, and as the boat approached it the channel beyond revealed itself.

It was deep enough, but winding, and too narrow for any craft of greater beam than the ship's boat. It was more of a tunnel than a channel, actually, roofed by the spreading branches, the dense foliage of the trees. The air was humid, stifling almost, and alive with midges.

Then they came to the wharf. A little, stone-faced quay it was, and there was a flight of weed-covered stone steps, and there was a small, manually operated swiveling crane. And there were notices, huge boards painted a startling yellow, and on each one of them, in scarlet, the conventional skull and crossbones and, below it, the words, DANGER! KEEP OUT! and, anticlimactically, TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

"He missed something," commented Pamela sourly. "He should have added, *This means you!*"

"He'll always see me," said Annette. "Although he hates to be interrupted."

"He used to be fond enough of me," said Pamela, "in the days when he was a frequent guest at our place."

"So if there's any shooting," said Barrett, "I shall be the target, I suppose."

"How right you are," Pamela told him sweetly.

"Better stay in the boat, all of you," said Barrett to Karl and the crew. "There may be mantraps scattered around."

He followed the women up the steps to the quay. He let Annette take the lead. The thin doctor set off at a good pace, climbing the steps of stone and concrete that led up the hillside. Barrett was next, keeping his hand on the butt of the forty-five. Pamela brought up the rear.

They came to a shelf on the slope, a clearing in the

luxuriant brush. It was concreted over. In the middle of this shelf stood a square, unlovely building of fiberboard, with a corrugated asbestos roof. From a smaller building a little to one side came the regular putt-putting of an internal combustion engine. It did not look much like the headquarters of a mad scientist, thought Barrett. It looked more like the home of a not very well-to-do farmer.

"What do we do now?" he asked Annette. "Go to the front door and knock? Or ring? Or knock *and* ring?"

"No," said the doctor sharply. "No. Definitely not. That's something he's always warned me about. Any unexpected visitor is liable to run into something . . . lethal. I don't think it's intentional booby traps, but stray radiation from his experiments."

Mad Scientist, complete with Death Ray, thought Barrett. But still the building—it was a little too large to be called a shack—looked depressingly drab and ordinary. But there was that peculiar humming sound coming from inside, the almost subsonic vibration that raised the gooseflesh on Barrett's skin, sent the cold shivers chasing over his body.

"Theodore!" Annette was calling. "Theodore!"

"Uncle Ted!" shouted Pamela. "Uncle Ted!"

After a while there was an answer. A speaker over the doorway crackled and an amplified, distorted voice said, "I heard you the first time. You'll have to wait."

"This is important!" yelled Annette. She had a surprisingly powerful voice for so fragile-seeming a woman.

"Uncle Ted!" screamed Pamela.

"Is that young Pam?" demanded the disembodied voice. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"I want to see you!"

"Then why didn't you say so?"

The weird humming ceased abruptly. The door slid silently open. The speaker in the wall over the doorway crackled irritably, then said, "Come in, come in. Annette knows the way."

Pamela and Barrett followed the doctor along a passageway. They passed a room that seemed to combine the functions of sleeping quarters and kitchen. Barrett could understand why the two women snorted indignantly. At the end of the passage they came to a white door which, like the signs on the quay, had the scarlet warning stenciled on it. As they approached it, it opened slowly.

The compartment behind the door was a large one—and yet hardly large enough for the apparatus it contained. Later, searching for a simile, Barrett was to say that it made him feel like a cockroach who had wandered into the works of a radar set. There were wires everywhere, and banks of vacuum tubes, some of which still emitted an eerie, pulsing glow, and things that looked like the parabolic reflectors of searchlights, and other things that looked like the antennas of radio telescopes. Half hidden by the massed equipment was the far wall, on which were the shelves and the ranked cages. From behind the bars gleamed the ruby eyes of the big white rats.

Piper emerged suddenly from the confusion of glassware and wiring, stood looking at them. Barrett felt absurdly cheated. The scientist was such an *ordinary*-looking man. He was neither short nor tall, neither thin nor fat, and his face was the face of every man opposite whom Barrett had ever sat on a train journey, the face of every man whom Barrett had ignored and who had ignored Barrett. He was typical of that peculiar breed of invisible man produced by twentieth-century civilization.

But nobody is really invisible, thought Barrett.

The voice, unamplified and without distortion, was quiet and gentle. "Annette! And Pam, of all people. It must be years since I last saw you, my dear!" He looked rather dubiously at Barrett, at the uniform, at the holstered revolver. "I don't think I've had the pleasure. . . "

"Uncle Ted, this is Captain Barrett. You can call him Tim. And Uncle Peter's with us, too, but he has to stay in charge of the ship—"

"But Peter's retired." The scientist looked again at Barrett. "And I always thought a captain's uniform had four gold bands, not three—"

"Dr. Piper," Barrett said firmly. "Is there any place where we can sit down? It's a long story that I have to tell you—that *we* have to tell you. And I'd like to get it over and done with as soon as possible."

"There's my bedroom," said Piper hesitantly. He looked at the two women. "No. Perhaps not. If I'd known you were coming. . ." His face brightened. "There's a bench and a couple of deck chairs outside."

He led the way and they followed. Once settled, Barrett told his story. It was easier to convince the scientist than the Sun Islanders. Piper had not heard any news bulletins

simply because he had not bothered to listen. His powerful short-wave receiver was in perfect working order, even though there was little in the way of information for it to drag in. But there was enough. There was the broadcast made by the provisional government of Canada, urging listeners to detroy by fire all untenanted buildings and all stocks of foodstuffs for which safe storage was unavailable. There was the ham in New Zealand, calling, calling, in the vain hope that somebody, somewhere, would answer, praying that somewhere in the world there was a town or city that had escaped the fate of Napier and Hastings. And then, from England, there was the faint voice, calm and making a virtue of understatement, that was promulgating the order for the evacuation of London—or what was left of London.

"They must have a couple or three bombs that haven't been sabotaged," said Barrett. "They must be going to do the same as the Russians."

Piper asked him what the Russians had done, and Barrett told him.

The scientist got out of his deck chair, stood looking down at the seaman and the two women. He said slowly, "I'm not a nuclear physicist. I can't make you a bomb to drop on Sydney or Melbourne or Canberra. Even if I could—what good would it do?"

"Uncle Ted," said Pamela, "We're not asking you to make a bomb. But this death ray of yours. Is it ready?"

Piper snorted loudly. "Death ray! Comic strip rubbish. I thought better of you than that, Pam. If you must know, I can kill a rat with my supersonic beam. At a range of twelve inches. If I had all the output of the Snowy River power stations at my disposal, I might be able to kill one at twenty feet."

"Even so—" began Barrett.

"Even so, as a weapon it's completely useless. Perhaps in the future it might be some good—but after what you've told me, after what we've heard, it doesn't look as though there's going to be any future."

An odd hunch was troubling Barrett. He said diffidently, "I wonder if we could see the thing in operation?"

"What good will that do? You're not a scientist. Annette can't understand it, and she's more of a scientist than you."

"But—" persisted Barrett.

"Uncle Ted," Pamela cut in, "maybe there's something you've missed."

He said, "What could I have missed?"

Annette had risen to face him. "Theodore," she said, "I've always warned you about becoming too much of a sacred cow. Tim and Pamela aren't scientists, but they aren't fools. And neither am I. I dare say their wits have been sharpened by what they've been through—"

"Laymen!" scoffed Piper.

"Yes," said Annette. "And quite a few scientific discoveries have been made by laymen."

"Yes," he admitted grudgingly, adding, "In *your* field especially."

She said, "I suppose I should resent that, but life's too short, and unless somebody does something it's going to be even shorter. But I think you should give us a demonstration."

"All right," he said abruptly. "It's your time you're wasting as well as mine, but I don't suppose that matters much any more."

He led the way back to his cluttered laboratory, motioned to the others to remain by the doorway. Carefully, he lifted one of the cages from its shelf on the wall, placed it on a table before one of the big projectors. The device was on a trolley and he wheeled it to within two feet of the cage, adjusted the reflector so that if it had belonged to a searchlight the beam would have been shining full on the rat.

"Now," he snapped. "Watch."

He pulled down a switch. A motor generator hummed and whined into throbbing life. He pulled down another, and two banks of tubes glowed faintly. He said sarcastically, "Normally, I should have been taking an encephalogram of the victim, but since our nautical friend wants his quite useless demonstration *now*, he's getting it *now*."

He paused, then went on in a slightly more agreeable voice. "As you all see, at this range the target isn't worried at all. It would have been far less expensive in terms of physical energy to have knocked him on the head with a stick." He paused again. "And now I decrease the range by six inches."

But Barrett was paying no attention. He was listening to the frenzied chitterings of the brutes still in their cages,

had turned to look at them. They were becoming more and more excited, clawing and biting at the confining wire.

He asked, "What about the others?"

"Don't worry about *them,*" sneered Piper. "Some sort of side effect that I haven't gotten around to investigating yet. Or maybe they just don't like seeing one of their cobbers bumped off. But a weapon is supposed to *kill,* not to annoy."

Perhaps Barrett, where he was standing, was feeling some of the side effects himself. Whatever the reason, he was not satisfied with Piper's explanation. He ignored the target rat, the victim rat, started to go to look at the others in their cages along the wall. And with his second step he was in the full field of the vibrations, the inaudible waves spreading from the reverse, the convex, side of the reflector.

There was a singing in his ears (or in his mind) and it was more, far more, than a mere, mechanical whine. It was music. It was raw, blaring brass and throbbing insistent percussion, and somehow woven into the fabric was the heart-rending sobbing of the violins. And (for he had turned around) the convex disc of the sonic reflector was now a great, golden moon, hanging low over a garden—and that garden, he knew, was the garden from which ancestral Man had been exiled and to which his descendants are ever striving to return; the garden in which the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil had not yet been eaten; in which all the other fruit had not yet turned sour and bitter.

And she was dancing in the garden to the sobbing music, to the disturbing throb and rattle of the little drums, under that huge yellow, mellow moon. She was naked, and she was dancing, and there was something in her of Jane, and something of Pamela, and something of all the women he had ever known, of all the women he had ever desired.

And she had turned, and she was facing him, naked and unashamed and beautiful beyond all imagining, and the perfect arms were spread wide to him, and the welcoming smile on her face was the smile of which every wandering man has dreamed, which every wandering man has longed for at his homecoming.

And. . .

Something grabbed his shoulder, pulled him violently to one side, sent him sprawling on the littered floor.

"Bloody young fool!" swore Piper. "He might have electrocuted himself."

Barrett tried to sit up, tried to expel the last, lingering traces of the hallucination from his mind. (And faintly in his ears—the throbbing whine of the generator? the rattle of some loose metal fitting?—there was still the music, and in his heart there was still the desire to return to the garden.)

But, he said, with an effort, "You're the bloody fool, Piper."

"What the hell do you mean?""

Barrett laughed shakily. "Next time you try to make a sonic weapon—or supersonic or subsonic or whatever it is—you might read Browning's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* first."

CHAPTER 11

Katana was at anchor now, lying quietly off the island.

For the remaining hours of daylight there had been a coming and going of boats between the ship, the Sun Islanders' jetty and Piper's wharf. The Sun Island launch had returned, its two-man crew badly frightened but, save for a few scratches, relatively uninjured. The village from which they had always purchased their stores had been undamaged by the fires, but deserted. They had tied up to the pier and gone ashore. They had been puzzled by the concentrations of crows in the street—like, as one of them said, great clots of black flies feeding on something rotten. They had noticed the smell, the sickly stench of decay, and then the first mob of crows, disturbed by their approach, had risen, clamoring, and they had seen what they had been feeding on.

They had seen, barely in time, the things that came leaping out from the houses at them. "They were like little kangaroos," said the more talkative of the two men. "But they weren't kangaroos. There was something of the monkey about them, and something of the rat. And they

came swarming out like bees from an overset hive." He was pleased with his simile. "And they had stings, too. They were holding knives. If you don't believe us, ask Annette."

"Those slashes on your legs were made by a knife," said the doctor.

So the launch was back, and the Sun Islanders were at last convinced of the truth of Barrett's story, and the admiral had gone to see Piper, accompanied by Maloney and Ryan, and, all in all, things were getting under way.

Shortly after sunset the admiral, ferried by Annette in the Sun Island launch, returned to the ship. He sent for Barrett and Pamela and Clarendon. When they were assembled in the master's day room he produced the last bottle of Captain Hall's brandy, looked at it rather ruefully. Barrett got out the glasses.

Annette said, "This is against club rules, you know."

The admiral told her, "You're not on club premises now. This is a unit of the Royal Australian Navy."

Like hell she is," said Barrett. This is the pride of the Tasmanian Steamship Company's fleet."

Both men laughed. "What does it matter?" asked the admiral. He poured a generous measure into each of the glasses. He raised his. "Here's to the daylight that we're beginning to see at last."

"And what does Piper think about it now?" asked Barrett.

"The lethal aspect of his weapon is still useless, but the . . . the lure, the bait, has long range without too great an expenditure of power, and has a fine, shotgun spread."

"The perfect bait," squeaked Clarendon. "I'm not a soldier, only a ratcatcher, but I can see how it will work It will drag them into the sea. Or, used ashore, it will pull them into pits and trenches filled with burning petrol."

"If there's any petrol left to burn," qualified the admiral drily. "But we'll find something."

Annette broke in. She said, "We were drinking just now to the daylight that we were beginning to see at last. But there's still something I'm in the dark about. Tim, just after he was saved from electrocuting himself, was babbling something about the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

"What did you read when you were a kid, Annette?" asked Barrett.

"Mainly my father's books. He was a doctor, too. Anatomy, pathology, all the rest of it."

Barrett chuckled softly. "There was a poet," he said, "called Browning. Apart from all his other work, he turned out one quite famous piece of kids' verse—*The Pied Piper*. It sticks in my memory—possibly because I saw at about the same time as I read it the excellent cartoon film that Disney made of it. It starts something like this:

'Hamelin Town's in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover City;
The River Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its walls on the southern side.
"I forget the next line or so, but—
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin was a pity.
Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles. . .'

"And so on. Anyhow, it's a pretty fair description of what was happening to *us* before the balloon went up. But their mayor offered a reward of a thousand guilders to anybody who could exterminate the pests—"

"They paid their rodent-control officers better in those days," said Clarendon wrily.

"They didn't in the end," Barrett told him. "And that led to more trouble. Anyhow, this piper, the Pied Piper—so called from his parti-colored attire—presented himself to the mayor to offer his services. The mayor promised him the thousand guilders, and so the Pied Piper went out into the streets, piping away fit to bust, and all the rats came out from the houses and scampered after him.

" 'Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
Brown rats, grey rats, black rats, tawny rats. . .'

"And so on, and so on, until, like lemmings, they all plunged into the River Weser and drowned.

" 'Save one, who stout as Julius Caesar
Swam across and lived to carry
To Rat Land home his commentary. . .'

"This survivor described what he saw and heard when the piper started to play: visions of luscious food before him, incredibly tempting. He saw a huge, bulky sugar puncheon (whatever that was) gleaming before him, and he made for it, and found himself in the drink, swimming for his life in the Weser."

Pamela asked rather spitefully, "And what was *your* sugar puncheon, Tim?"

He said, "I'd rather not say."

"I don't suppose," put Annette, "that a human being would have an hallucination of food. Not unless he was starving."

"I wonder," mused Clarendon in his squeaky whisper, "if the legend was founded on fact? The Pied Piper could have been an alchemist who had stumbled upon the principles of supersonics, and that one rat who escaped could have been the first of the mutants. And bred true, and descendants multiplying over the years. . ."

The admiral snorted.

Annette asked, "And how did it all finish?"

"The mayor tried to wriggle out of the bargain. After all, there was nothing in writing. He tried to fob the piper off with a lousy fifty guilders. So the piper took out his pipe again, and played, and piped all the children out of the town. And they never came back."

"I suppose this thing of Piper's could be used on human beings," said the admiral thoughtfully. "After all, it worked on you, Barrett."

"I thought you preferred sixteen-inch guns to all this newfangled gadgetry," said Barrett coldly.

"I do," said the admiral. "They're far more gentlemanly."

The following morning Barrett took *Katana's* boat in again to Piper's island. Before he left the ship he tried to have a few words with Jane. At first she listened dumbly to him, almost without comprehension, and then she flared up.

"Yes, I know I'm useless, Tim. I know I'm useless in more ways than one. Pamela's the woman for you. I can see that. She's your mate now—aboard this blasted ship and in bed."

"No," protested Barrett.

"Yes. I'm not blind. It's a pity I ever managed to get down to the ship the night it happened. It would have been so much better for both of us if I hadn't."

"Don't say that!"

"I am saying it, and you know it's true. I'm just a drag on you in this dreadful new world, and she isn't."

"Jane, if you'd only try."

"Try what? Please go, Tim, and carry on with whatever you're supposed to be doing. When you're trying to save the world your wife is only in the way. I know that. Please go."

So Barrett left her and clambered down the ladder to the waiting boat. He was silent and moody all the way to the little wharf, speaking only to issue orders. He brought the boat alongside the steps, waited until the bowman had made her fast, then stepped ashore.

He saw Maloney coming down the path. The radio officer was dirty and tired, his fat cheeks sagging, the color gone from his face. But he was cheerful. He called, "All right, Tim. Let's have a few strong men and then we'll lug the bits and pieces down to the wharf."

Barrett told the boat's crew what to do, watched them climbing the hillside after Maloney. He did not wish himself to revisit the laboratory. The memory of what he had experienced there was too vivid—the memory of the hunger rather than that of the promise of its gratification. After a while he saw the others coming back. He wondered if it would be possible to stow the apparatus in the boat; its components were awkward shapes and sizes.

But they managed somehow, with Piper fluttering around like an old hen, trying to be helpful but only getting in the way. The equipment was stowed without damage, although for the return journey it was possible to use only four of the Fleming Gear levers, and the boat was uncomfortably crowded.

Then they were alongside the ship, and the crates and boxes, and the uncrated reflector and the motor generator were being passed up to the foredeck and carried aft. And then the boat was dropped astern on its painter until it was under the davits, and the blocks were hooked on and Barrett was scrambling up the ladder to the boat deck so that he could supervise the rehoisting.

He was functioning with a mechanical efficiency, doing all the right things, issuing all the right orders, but without enthusiasm, without interest even. He stood on the bridge with Keane and watched Joe, who had been sent forward to the windlass, to weigh the anchor. He rang Slow Ahead as soon as a single stroke of the fo'c's'le head bell indicated one shackle of cable on deck. Full Ahead when the sustained clanging told him that the anchor was aweigh. He knew that in this ship the stowing of the anchors was,

at times, awkward, but he refused to let it worry him. Joe and the semiskilled man with him—he claimed yachting experience—would have to manage somehow. If they couldn't—well, with a world in flames there were more important things than an anchor cockbilled in the hawse-pipe. (*And more important things,* he reminded himself, *than going to bed with one's wife.*)

He put the ship on to the first of the courses that he had laid off, then said to the admiral, "You may go below, sir. I'll stand the rest of the forenoon watch."

"Thank you, Captain. I think I'll wander aft and see how Piper's getting on with his gadgetry."

Barrett remembered something, sounded three farewell blasts on the whistle. He looked astern, saw the Sun Islanders clustered on their jetty, saw them waving. Through his binoculars he could make out Annette and Betty and the fat man, Charles. He rather envied them, and hoped sincerely that they would be unmolested either by lawless humans or the rats.

At noon he was relieved by Pamela. He went down to the saloon for his lunch. It was mainly boiled potatoes, accompanied by a sliver of corned beef. He made desultory conversation with the others around the table. He went up to the officers' flat as soon as he was finished. He wanted to talk with Jane again, but the door to his cabin was locked.

He wandered aft, to the poop. Piper, assisted by the admiral and Maloney and Ryan, was working on the docking bridge. The thing was taking shape. Already it was beginning to look like something copied from the cover of a science-fiction magazine, too fantastic ever to be workable. But it was no more fantastic than the enemy against whom it would be used.

The men on the docking bridge ignored Barrett, so he returned amidships. He went up to talk with Pamela, and with her stared out to starboard, focusing his binoculars on the wide, dreadful expanses of ash and cinder, on the burned out shells of coastal towns. And yet, here and there, there was an oasis, the occasional small village that had escaped destruction. He commented on this to the girl.

"There was the place where our nudist friends used to get their stores," she said. "That hadn't been burned either. But it makes sense. In the big cities, with so many people

to be . . . to be disposed of, they had to use fire. Where there was only a small population to deal with—"

"Yes," he said, "it makes sense."

She said, "Being intelligent, they'll like their little comforts. It's all very well for the rank and file, the nonmutants, to live rough, but the leaders will want something warm and dry." She paused and shuddered.

"What's wrong?" Barrett asked.

"Just something that just occurred to me. Something rather horrid."

"It can't be much worse than what's already happened."

"Much worse," she old him. "Do you know anything about ants?"

"Ants?" he demanded, perplexed.

"Yes. Ants. When I was a kid I had quite an unfeminine passion for all sorts of creepy-crawlies. As well as conducting my own personal observations, I used to read everything I could lay my hands on. You know, there are some ants that keep slaves. They're warriors, and they raid the nests of the more peace-loving varieties, and as their booty they carry off the so-called ants' eggs, the pupae of their victims. These they rear to maturity—as slaves."

"But what has this to do with the rats?"

"Plenty. If they win—and I'm glad that we can now say *if* instead of *when*—there'll still be quite a lot of machinery and such left undamaged, but all on too large a scale to be handled by the mutants. But if they have human slaves—"

"Impossible," said Barrett.

She said, "I wish it were." After a short silence she went on, "While you and Uncle Peter were otherwise esgaged, I had a long talk with Tom."

"Tom?"

"One of the men in the Sun Islanders' launch. He was very worried. He told me they'd heard a noise in the village, and that Jerry had been sure it was the crying of birds."

"What of it?"

"Tom thought it was the crying of children," she said.

Katana steamed south, her twin diesels beating steadily, while on her poop Piper and his assistants still worked on the supersonic weapon. She steamed south, keeping close

inshore, making as direct a passage as was possible to Sydney, taking full advantage of the coastwise southerly set.

And then, toward the end of the second dogwatch, the admiral sent down for Barrett. He said to him, as soon as he appeared on the bridge, "Your engineer officer has been on the telephone."

"What's wrong?"

"Something about fuel valves. He says he has to stop to make repairs."

Barrett swore. He went into the chartroom, followed by the admiral. He said, "We're too close in just to stop and drift. We'd better drop the pick." He scowled at the tiny symbols denoting the nature of the bottom over which the ship was passing. He said, "Rock. Poor holding ground. And too deep."

"You're the captain," said Keane.

Barrett followed the penciled course line with the points of the dividers, deviated from it. "Broken Bay," he said. "That will do us. Fairly good holding ground and shelter if the wind comes away from the south'ard."

"Aren't we rather laying ourselves open to attack?"

"No more than we were off the Broughton Islands. The sharks'll take care of any swimmers, and I don't think *they* run to artillery."

"Yet," said the admiral.

"Broken Bay it is, then." He went out to the wheelhoue, to the engine-room telephone. "Captain here, Mr. Ferris. Can you keep going for another halfhour?"

"Aye, but I'll not be happy about it."

You haven't the monopoly on unhappiness, thought Barrett. He checked the ship's position by radar, went inside and pored over the chart again. He put a penciled circle on the chart at the place where he intended to anchor. With all shore lights now extinguished he would not be able to rely on transit bearings, but with radar and echo sounder to aid him he should not go far wrong.

Joe was at the wheel, but when the vessel was approaching the anchorage he would be relieved by Karl. "Joe," said Barrett, "we have to anchor. I shall want you to go forward."

"Yes, sir," said Joe. "Clear away anchors. Anchor lights ready. Yes. Is fixed."

"Three shackles, sir. Yes."

"Good."

Barrett went below to tell Pamela what was happening, said that he would like her on the bridge to keep an eye on the echo sounder. He then went to his own cabin to see his wife, but she would not talk to him. He returned to the bridge.

It was almost time for him to take over, anyhow. He did so, bringing the ship around the shadowy headland, steaming into the inlet that in normal times would have been ablaze with the lights of villages and holiday camps. But it was all dark now, and forbidding, and the stink of dead embers was still heavy on the air.

He saw the glimmer of Joe's torch as the A.B. made his way forward, heard his hail from the fo'c's'le head, "All ready!" He listened to Pamela's voice from the chartroom: "Twelve . . . twelve . . . eleven . . . nine . . ."

"Stop her," he ordered.

"Stop her," repeated the admiral. The bells jangled.

"Full astern both!"

"Full astern!"

The diesels thudded loudly. Aloft, some piece of loose gear started to rattle. Barrett went to the wing of the bridge, watched the phosphorescent wash creeping forward. "Let go!" he shouted.

"Let go!" came Joe's answering hail.

The chain cable rattled through the pipes. The fo'c's'le bell clanged once. "Stop her!" ordered Barrett. The diesels coughted diffidently and were silent. The chain still rattled out.

"How's the cable?" shouted Barrett.

"Cable lead ahead!" came the reply.

The bell clanged twice and there was a brief period of silence. The cable rattled again. The bell clanged three times and the ratttle of the chain ceased abruptly. Barrett stood in the wing of the bridge, looking aft, watching the vertical black post of the mainmast swing against the backdrop of the stars. At last it seemed to have steadied.

"Brought up," Joe was shouting. "All brought up!"

"All right, Joe. Screw her up!'" replied Barrett. And to Karl he said, "That'll do the wheel."

And then there was a period of silence, broken only by the mournful crying of some birds somewhere ashore.

Pamela came out of the chartroom. Her face, in the dim glow from the binnacle lamp, was white.

She said, "That's not a bird. It's a child. More than one child."

"What can we do?" asked the admiral helplessly.

Joe was shouting from the foredeck and Karl, who had joined him, was shouting, too. Barrett went to see what the trouble was, found that an abandoned launch had drifted close to the ship's side. Joe had the line and grapnel used for recovering the anchor buoy, had thrown the iron claws so that they had caught on a projection. Karl jumped down from the bulwarks onto the cabin top.

"Is there anybody aboard, Karl?" called Barrett.

"No, mister," came the German's reply after a long pause.

"Cast the bloody thing adrift," advised the admiral.

"Launches don't grow on trees," said Barrett. "I'll rig a derrick and hoist it aboard before we shove off. It might be useful."

"Those children," insisted Pamela.

"They've stopped crying now. And we can't do anything. Not yet," said Barrett.

"And what security measures do you intend taking during the night?" asked the admiral.

"Aldis lamp ready for use as a searchlight. A parachute flare rocket in its firing tube on each side of the bridge. I'll bend on the firing lanyards; all you have to do is jerk."

"There they are again!" cried Pamela.

"It could be birds," muttered the admiral doubtfully. "It could be birds."

"But it's not," said the girl, "and both of you know it."

"And I also know," her uncle told her sternly, "the dangers of wasting time and effort—aye, and lives—on sideshows."

"I suppose you're right," she said.

Barrett went below at midnight. He was not sorry. Normally an anchor watch is pleasant enough, an opportunity for officers to catch up on their clerical work or, even, with their back reading, but this watch was different. There was, all the time, the uneasy feeling of being watched by hostile eyes. And now and again there would be a fresh outbreak of crying and whimpering from somewhere on the northern bank of the inlet, the sound carrying far too clearly in the still air.

It was not made by birds. *And*, thought Barrett, *the poor little bastards must know we're here; they must have heard our engines; must have heard the anchor let go. Even now, the generators are making far too much noise.*

Barrett tried to console himself. *But slaves are property. They're valuable. Those kids are safe. They're safe until such time as we have this problem licked, and it won't be long now.*

A cold voice at the back of his mind said, *But livestock is property, too.*

Barrett walked up and down, wishing he had a smoke. Then he decided it was just as well he hadn't, as the flare of a match or the glow of a pipe or cigarette could well attract hostile action. *But they know we're here*, he thought, *and just where we are. And they have no long-range weapons, and the darkness is their friend rather than ours.* Hastily, he switched on the floodlights on mast and samson posts and boat deck.

Almost at once, it seemed, the boat deck was alive with people.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Aren't you sending a landing party?" called one of the women.

"No," he said.

"But those children."

"We can't do anything for them," he said.

"Better see the admiral," advised somebody.

"What's the use?" said somebody else. "The only thing I ever learned in the Service was that officers always stick together."

"You'd better get below and get some sleep," advised Barrett.

"But those children—"

"We're making a weapon," explained Barrett. "We don't know yet if it will be effective, but we hope it will be. We were going to wait until Sydney before we tried it, but now we may give it its trials here. Tomorrow morning."

"Why not *now?*" shouted a woman.

"Because it's not ready, not finished."

"That's what you say."

"Be reasonable, Liz," a man was admonishing her. "That Piper bloke and the two Sparkses was workin' on it well after dark, an' I heard Piper say ter the others, 'Better

not do any more till we have decent light ter work by; one slip now could bleedin' well ruin the whole shootin' match.' "

"I still think we should *do* something," insisted the woman.

"Nothin' we can do," the man told her. "Not yet."

"But we can *make* him do something."

Barrett walked slowly to the head of the ladder. He let his hand rest negligently on the butt of the admiral's forty-five. He said nothing. He heard somebody whisper, "He's a killer. Remember those fishermen?"

And he was relieved when the crowd on the boat deck thinned and melted, when even the woman who insisted that he do *something* was gone.

At midnight he was relieved by Pamela, and was thankful to hand over to her both the revolver and the immediate responsibility.

It was Ferris who woke Barrett. "Tim," he was saying urgently. "Tim, there's nobody on the bridge!"

Barrett ungummed his eyelids, looked at his wrist watch. It was two-thirty. He mumbled, "There must be. It's Miss Henderson's watch."

"But there's not. I rang up to ask if I could take a turn out of the port engine, and there was no reply, so I came up myself. And there's nobody there."

Barrett rolled off the settee. He did not bother to dress, just pulled his robe about his body. He hurried up the inside stairway to the chartroom, thrugh into the wheelhouse, to the port wing and then to the starboard wing. "Pamela!" he called. "Pamela!"

Perhaps she had gone forward to inspect the cable. But the fo'c's'le head was brightly illuminated by the foremast floodlights, and he could see no sign of her there. And where was Joe? He was supposed to be standing lookout on the middle watch. "Joe!" he called. "Joe!"

Ferris caught his sleeve. "There's something banging in the chartroom."

"Never mind that!" snapped Barrett. "Pamela!" he called again.

"But it sounds like . . . *something* . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Something alive."

Barrett led the way back inside. There was a muffled,

regular thumping coming from behind the door of the oilskin locker. He threw it open. An untidy bundle tumbled out to the deck—a bundle composed of rumpled khaki drill, brown skin and blond hair, secured with log line. Barrett worked on the knots. Luckily they had been made by a seaman and were not of the landlubberly variety made with no thought of subsequent untying. Even so, it took time. And then, as soon as her hands and arms were freed, the girl herself wrenched the gag from her mouth.

She whispered, "That sweet, gentle wife of yours! And your faithful Italian seaman! To say nothing of those two old hellcats, Mrs. Welcome and Mrs. Lane."

"What happened?"

"They came up to the bridge—your wife and the other two women—and they asked me if I could hear those chlldren crying. I said yes, of course I could. They demanded that I do something about it. I passed the buck then. I'll make a good junior officer yet. I said you were in command of the ship, and that Uncle Peter was in overall command of the expedition. Then your wife said, oh, so sweetly! 'But they're *men*. They don't see things the same way as we do.' And Mrs. Lane chipped in and said, 'I lost my son, my Clarry, in the service of your admiral. I think I'm entitled to save somebody else's child to make up for it.'

"Well, there was too much typical female logic floating around for my taste; if they kept it up they'd have started to convert me. So I thought I'd play safe and ordered them off the bridge. Then they pulled knives, all three of them —big knives, from the galley and the pantry. And I pulled Uncle Peter's previous revolver and—"

"And?" queried Barrett.

"And the watch on deck let me down. Your faithful Joe. He pounced on me from behind, and he tied me up while the others held me. He was babbling something about the *bambini*, and about how he would go to their help if the officers wouldn't.

"So they shut me up in that locker and I damn near suffocated, and I could hear the telephone bell ringing outside, and then somebody clumping around the bridge and the wheelhouse. You know the rest."

"Yes," said Barrett. "I know the rest." He walked to the starboard side of the bridge. The derelict motorboat was gone. It must have been a simple matter to slip its

moorings and then to let it drift astern, starting the engine when it was well clear of the ship. Barrett reproached himself briefly for not having cast it adrift, for not having hoisted it inboard. But it was too late for reproaches.

"What can we do?" asked Pamela.

"Better call the admiral. Better call everybody. Looks as though I shall have to take a boat away."

She said, "I know Jane's your wife, and that there are loyalties. But your loyalty to the ship comes first. And your loyalty to the human race."

"I'm not forgetting those loyalties," Barrett told her. "And there's another point to consider. If we don't do something *now*, now that our own people are involved, we shall have a mutiny on our hands. Don't forget that Jane has taken the only firearm in the ship."

She said doubtfully, "There's the rocket pistol."

"Useless," he snapped.

"All right," she said suddenly. "I'll call them all. And if you're taking a party ashore I want to be in it."

Barrett switched on the Aldis lamp, shone its beam along the northern shore. It was useless; the glare of the floodlights was blinding him. He called to Ferris to switch them off. He could see better now. He could see something white against the dark bank. He called to the engineer to take the lamp, to hold its beam steady on the target. He picked up his glasses, looked. It was the launch all right.

The admiral was at his elbow. He said, "You have to go, Barrett."

"I know," Barrett said. "I'm going to call for volunteers. And Pamela's ruled out from the start." He turned to the big German. "And so are you, Karl. I'm not crippling the ship by stripping her of all her skilled personnel." He went to the after end of the bridge. "I want four men," he called. "Four volunteers."

He went down to the boat deck. "No, not you," he said to Piper. "You're too valuable." He dismissed Maloney and Ryan, his unofficial assistant, for the same reason. They were the only technicians who could help the scientist. He turned down Clarendon, but reluctantly. At the finish he had his four men. They were not the biggest men, or the strongest in appearance, but each of them had displayed a certain confidence, had comported himself quietly, had proved—during the boat work off the Broughton Islands—to be able to take orders without arguing.

They were armed, after a fashion, this landing party. Each of them carried a sawed-off broomstick. It wasn't much, but would have to do. Barrett, in addition, had a three-cell torch. The moon, past its full, was at its meridian now; it was giving light but, when it came to a scramble through bush, that light would be uncertain.

They boarded the boat, and with Karl at the winch, it was lowered to the water, hitting the surface in a flurry of phosphorescence. Barrett and the bowman cast off and then, as the crew bent to the levers, the screw turned and the boot left the ship.

The northern shore was in shadow, but Barrett had marked the position of the launch; it had been beached almost directly under a tall, dead tree. He steered for the black skeleton silhouetted against the moonlit sky. As he neared the shore he saw that there was a small cove there, a crescent of sandy beach. His stem was drawing level with the counter of the launch when he felt gravel grating under his keel. "Way enough," he ordered quietly. Gently the boat grounded, and the bowman relinquished his grip on his lever, jumped overside into knee-deep water, pulling the painter with him. The others followed, Barrett last of all.

And they stood there, back again on the soil of their own country—a soil that was suddenly unimaginably alien.

Barrett risked a flicker of his torch, saw that there was a rough path leading up and inland. He hefted his pitiful weapon in his right hand.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

And then suddenly, shockingly, from up the slope came the loud report of a heavy revolver. And another.

And an outbreak of terrified screaming.

CHAPTER 12

They scrambled up the hillside, up the rough path, Barrett now using his torch recklessly. Even so, it was heavy going. The bright moonlight, by the black shadows it cast, hindered rather than helped. And like fairy tale demons, trees

and bushes extended taloned arms and spiny tentacles to clutch and to trip, to gash and tear. But they dare not pause, dare not proceed with caution. Ahead of them was the frightening, noisy confusion—the screams and the scuffflings, a man's voice shouting curses in Italian.

Suddenly, almost directly overhead, there was a sharp *crack*. Barrett looked up briefly, realized his foolishness and looked away. But he had seen the impossibly bright star burst into being, the blue-white glare that hung in the black sky, that was dropping slowly, trailing a wake of luminescent smoke. The admiral had fired the first parachute flare.

The men could make better progress now. The harsh radiance drove back the shadows, threw the obstacles into sharp relief. And ahead of them they could see the white-painted wooden walls of a house, and the glare reflected from the iron roof and the glass of wide windows. From inside the building the roar of the forty-five sounded again.

The door was open and Barrett charged through it. He tripped, fell heavily. His tourch flew from his hand and smashed on the floor. His feet were entangled with what felt like a bundle of rags—a bundle of wet, warmly wet rags. By the light of the falling flare he could see that it was a woman, or what had been a woman. Stupidly, he stared ot the body, and then as the flare dropped lower he could make out the contorted features of Mrs. Lane. He allowed himself a brief moment of sorrow and pity—and relief—as he got unsteadily to his feet, staggered blindly toward the sound of the fight.

Somebody in this other room had a torch, was flashing and swinging it without rhyme or reason. By the uncertain illumination he glimpsed Joe, laying about him with a broken chair, and fat Mrs. Welcome, slashing out with a long-bladed knife, and Jane, backed into a corner, the revolver gripped in both her hands, wavering uncertainly in search of a target. It was the children who were screaming. They were huddled against the wall, and it was one of them who was holding the light, and its beam swept briefly over the little bodies, the white, frightened faces.

"Harry," snapped Barrett to one of the men. "Get that torch. Keep it shining on the ceiling."

He tried to make his way toward Jane and then he felt *them* around him, clinging to his legs, trying to climb up

his body. He felt something sharp penetrate the heavy drill of his trousers. He kicked out violently. And he could hear *their* chitterings, and the acrid stench of *them* was offensive in his nose. But Harry had the torch now, and its beam was directed upward, and was steady, reflected from the white of the ceiling. There was light—enough to see by, to fight by. But for how long? Already a half dozen of the pale, kangaroo-like mutants were hopping towards the yachtsman, and metal gleamed in the hands of four of them.

Jane fired again, and one of the mutants disintegrated into bloody rags of flesh as the heavy slug hit it. But it was like trying to sweep back the waters of the Pacific with a kitchen broom; the others kept on and then Joe, still flailing madly with his broken chair, staggered into the line of fire. Barrett tried to make his way to the A.B., but *they* had immobilized him, clutching his legs so that he could not move. He realized dimly that something was sawing away at the heel of his boot, knew that it was only a matter of time before the blade penetrated the tough rubber and then slashed the Achilles tendon. He caught confused glimpses of the other men, of their improvised clubs rising and falling, swinging wildly.

The light was beginning to waver. Barrett couldn't see what was happening to Harry, but he could guess. He heard the yachtsman scream, "Give me a hand, somebody! I can't—"

Barrett knew he could make no headway, so suddenly, in desperation, he lunged sideways. He was not prepared for the ease with which he broke free of his attackers and staggered out of control, reeling and stumbling. His outstretched hand caught something, a cord of some kind, and he clutched at it for support. It twitched out of his grasp. And then, with a rattle, the roller blind went up and the silver radiance of the moon was pouring through the window.

The torch dropped with an almost unnoticed crash and tinkle, but it didn't matter now. Harry had his hands free to deal with his attackers and Joe, silent and desperate now, was able to wield his chair with some effect, and Mrs. Welcome had fought her way to where the children were and, waving her blood-stained knife, was trying to hustle them toward the door.

But the fight was by no means over. *Their* numbers were limited, and *they* had suffered heavy losses, but there were still *their* storm troopers, *their* brainless (by comparison) cannon fodder. Called somehow—telepathically, perhaps, or perhaps attracted only by the noise and the smell of blood—they came streaming in through the open door, a filthy, gray, squeaking tide. Mrs. Welcome screamed as they overran her; she stood there for long seconds, like a stout tree overgrown with shaggy moss.

Then she was down, and Joe, who had tried to run to her assistance, was shouting and stamping, had dropped his chair and was tearing at his body with his hands. Back to back, kicking and striking out with their sticks, the four men from the boat were edging toward the group of children so as to afford them some protection.

And Jane was screaming at last, and somehow Barrett had got to her side, and with both hands had snatched the hairy monster from her throat, had crushed it and flung it to one side and then, covering the girl's body with his own, was fighting what he knew was a losing fight. There were so many of them, and their insensate fury was more terrifying than the vicious but intelligent fighting of their masters—

Something dropped with a *clang* onto the roof.

It was ignored by humans, mutants and rats.

Something was making a peculiar hissing, crackling noise.

Something dropped through a charred hole in the ceiling, falling to the wooden floor, something that glared blindingly, that threw off a great wave of heat and the acrid fumes of burning wood, the sweet stench of roasting flesh.

They were running then, all of them, fighting in the doorway of the house that suddenly had become a crematorium—humans and mutants, the terrified rats. The mutants had used fire as a weapon, but this was not a fire of their making, was under the control neither of themselves nor of their enemies.

Joe and the other four men had the screaming children assembled in their midst, a compact body, and were trampling purposively towards safety, crunching bodies underfoot with a vicious satisfaction. Barrett pulled Jane away from the wall, followed them. He glanced hastily at the body of Mrs. Welcome—and looked away even more hastily. To attempt to drag a mutiliated corpse out of the flames would be suicidal folly.

Then they were outside and stumbling down the path, made more treacherous by the flickering, ruddy light of the fire. They heard the squealings and chitterings of the rats, knew that the mutants were marshaling their disorganized forces for the last attack. And one of the small girls was sobbing loudly, "I've hurt my leg. I can't walk. I can't walk."

"Carry her, somebody," cried Barrett, and knew that the order was unnecessary.

There was a *crack* overhead and the hard illumination of another parachute flare shone down on them. The going was better now. They could see the path, every detail—and Barrett, stopping and turning, could see the gray flood that was beginning to pour down it after them. He pulled the revolver from Jane's limp hand, put his arm around her and kissed her briefly. That was his intention, but the embrace was not brief. His emotions were an odd compound of bitterness and elation. *At last,* he thought. *But too late.*

He disengaged himself, pushed her down the hillside.

"Tim," she called. "Tim!"

"Go on!" he ordered. "Go on! I'll try to hold them!"

He swore as he saw her stumble to her knees and then stagger erect, turning to climb back up the slope. But there was no time now for arguments, no time to persuade her to make her way to safety with the others.

And how many rounds were there in the revolver?

One?

Two?

In any case, it was a useless weapon, although the weight of it in his hand lent him a certain confidence, and its loud report might have a deterrent effect.

A rocket hissed overhead, trailing a shower of sparks. It hit the path a few yards ahead of him and burst in a sputter of blinding, blue-white flame. And the dry brush caught, the undergrowth that somehow had escaped incineration during the dreadful period of widespread fires. The dry brush caught and the high-leaping flames obscured the yellow glare of the burning house, and something in the conflagration was screaming in a dreadful, high-pitched voice.

Their backs to the blaze, Jane and Barrett stumbled down to the waiting boats.

On their return to the ship there had been no recriminations, no apportioning of blame. "They disobeyed orders," said the admiral to Barrett, privately. "But they paid for it—especially Mrs. Welcome and Mrs. Lane. And those kids were saved—and the devil alone knows what fate was in store for them." He smiled grimly. "And you're learning. For a civilian, you're doing well."

"And *you* are doing well," Barrett told him. "You're alway pining for your sixteen-inch guns, but those two shots of yours with the distress rockets were brilliant."

The admiral coughed with embarrassment. "One shot, my boy. The barrage that I laid down to cover your retreat."

"But the one on the roof of the house."

"If these were normal times," the admiral said, "I would urge strongly that you write a stiff letter of complaint to whoever manufactures your fireworks. That rocket went up all right, and it released the flare, but the parachute failed to open."

"Oh."

"You're a very lucky young man, Barrett."

In more ways than one, Barrett thought. *Apart from anything else, I've got Jane back.* He said, "I hope the luck holds. For all of us."

"I think it will," said the admiral. "Piper's quite confident about his weapon and Clarendon swears that it's the answer to a ratcatcher's prayer. And your Mr. Ferris finished his repairs while you were away with the landing party."

"Then, sir, I suggest we get under way."

"Do you feel fit enough?"

"Yes. I was lucky enough not to get any more than a few scratches, and Pamela's patched me up quite well."

The admiral coughed again. "My niece seems to have lost interest in you quite suddenly. So I gathered."

"I wonder why," murmured Barrett.

The two men left the captain's day room and went up to the bridge. The fire was still raging on the north shore of the inlet, but the growing light in the eastern sky had stolen the brilliance from the flames, had turned them dull, smoky and ugly. From the fo'c's'le head came the rattle of the chain cable over the windlass, the measured strokes of the bell. Barrett went to the telegraphs, rang Stand By,

And then the anchor was aweigh and the ship was steaming to seaward, heading into the golden radiance of the rising sun.

Barrett asked himself, *How corny can you get?*

But he could not shake off the feeling that this was an auspicious omen.

South they steamed with a fair wind, their funnel smoke rising vertically. South they steamed, and they had not far to go. And Piper came up to the bridge to report that all was ready aft, and stayed there with them, and then Jane appeared with a tray on which were coffee and freshly made scones, and the admiral remembered that there was a tin of cigarettes in Capain Hall's bedroom and brought them up and passed them around.

There was no need to hoard any more. There would be coffee again, and fresh bread, and tobacco. There was a holiday feeling, spreading through the little ship. From below there drifted the sound of Joe's voice singing an Italian song to the accompaniment of his guitar, the light tinkling of children's laughter.

Then Pamela reported from the wheelhouse, where she had gone to look into the radar screen, "We have company. There seems to be a couple of ships off the Heads. One big, one smaller."

"Bearing?" asked Barrett. "Range?"

"Red one five. Twelve miles."

Barrett and the admiral picked up binoculars, walked to the port wing of the bridge. The day was fine, but the northerly breeze had brought its haze. And then, at last, Barrett saw something. He thought at first that it was a giant tanker—the bridge amidships, the funnel aft. And there was the smaller ship—gray, wicked-looking.

"A tanker and a destroyer," muttered Keane.

Barrett still looked. "No . . ." he said doubtfully. Then, positively, "No. That's one of Shaw Savill's big ships. *Northern Star* or *Southern Cross*."

And for a moment he began to doubt his sanity. The scene was so familiar, too familiar: the big, overseas passenger liner waiting off the Heads for the pilot.

"Yes," the admiral was saying. "I know them. Engines aft."

And the admiral's words broke the spell. Things were not normal, would never be normal again, whatever hap-

pened. There were all these outsiders on the bridge: Jane, and the admiral, and Pamela, and Piper. And there was that contraption mounted on the poop, the somehow frightening assembly of antennas and reflectors and banked vacuum tubes.

"But what are they doing there?" the admiral was asking, then, in a voice that held disappointment. "Are we too late?"

From the destroyer's bridge a light was blinking. Barrett put down his glasses, picked up the Aldis lamp, sent a long flash in reply.

"What ship?" he read.

"*Katana*," he replied.

"Heave to at once," he read. "Entry into the port is forbidden."

"Tell him that we have no intention of entering," snapped the admiral. "Tell him—oh, hell! Tell the bloody fool to use the V.H.F."

"V.H.F.," sent Barrett. "Channel Twelve."

He put down the Aldis, went into the wheelhouse to switch on the Pilotphone.

A voice crackled from the speaker. "H.M.A.S. *Quagga* calling *Katana*, H.M.A.S. *Quagga* calling *Katana*. Stop at once. What are your intentions?"

Keane snatched the microphone. "This is Admiral Keane speaking. I have on board a weapon effective against the rats, and I intend to use it."

"Heave to," came the reply from the warship. "Heave to."

Barrett knew he should go to the telegraphs, ring Stand By and then Stop. But the logical portion of his mind was no longer in ocntrol. He knew that a delay of a few minutes—or a few hours—would not matter. He knew that, but the weapon was assembled and ready on the poop, and there, on the starboard bow, were the steep cliffs of the Heads, and beyond them the filthy hordes that had destroyed the city. Emotion was ruling rather than reason and he was not alone in allowing himself to be ruled by his emotions.

The admiral was trying to argue. "Damn it, who's your commanding officer? I want to speak to him. At once. Tell him it's Keane. Admiral Keane."

A fresh voice issued from the speaker, a voice that was

a little too unemotional. "Lieutenant Commander Wilkins, officer commanding, here. I demand that you heave to."

"Come off your high horse, Wilkins. Many's the time I had to kick your backside when you were a snotty. Get out of my hair and let me get on with the job!"

"Heave to!" snapped the destroyer captain. And then, barely audible in an aside to one of his officers, "Nutty as a fruit cake."

Keane slammed the microphone to the deck, demanded of Barrett, "Did you hear that?"

"I did," said Barrett, but his attention was taken up with the conning of his ship. It had been decided to put the weapon into operation at a range of half a mile from the South Head, and Barrett was determined to carry this out. He looked up from the radar screen, said to Piper, "Better get aft, Doc."

There was a stab of orange flame, a billowing of white smoke, from the destroyer's forward turret. The projectile whined across *Katana*'s line of advance from port to starboard, sent a brief, foaming geyser climbing off her starboard bow.

"Heave to," ordered the irritating voice again.

Barrett stood on. There was only a mile to go to the predetermined position, only five minutes' steaming. He watched the slowly expanding, slowly shifting picture of the coastline on his screen, concentrated his attention on the half-mile-range circle.

He heard the destroyer's gun again, and almost at once there was a deafening crash from somewhere forward. He heard the admiral say calmly, "You'll have to indent for a new windlass, Barrett. The old one's had it."

"Heave to," said the voice.

"Switch that bloody thing off," ordered Barrett absently.

Again there was the thud of the gun and again the crash of an explosion aboard the ship—but this time oddly muffled, felt as much as heard. The admiral swore. "The bastards! They got us below the water line!"

But on the screen the irregular outline of the promontory had kissed the luminous circle that was the range ring. "Hard a port!" ordered Barrett. "Slow both!"

"Mister," complained Karl, "der ship steer not well."

"Stop port." His attention was fixed on the screen. "Slow ahead port. Steady as she goes, Karl."

"She's settling by the head, Barrett," the admiral said.

"As long as her arse end keeps out of the water," muttered Barrett. "Has the Pied Piper started up yet?"

And then the whole ship, it seemed, was vibrating to Piper's inaudible sound waves, and every metal fitting on the bridge was singing its own note. Something twanged inside the radar console, and something crackled, and the screen blazed up and then went dead. Barrett left it, went outside. With the others he stared aft, to the sheer cliff of the North Head, to the broken face of the South Head.

At first there was nothing—and then it was like a flood of dirty water spilling over the cliff edge, separating into individual drops as it cascaded to the sea, a spray of bodies. And the gray scum thickened and floated and spread and surged out purposively toward the crippled ship. Barrett knew he could not maintain way much longer, that his screws and rudder would soon be out of the water.

And then . . .

And then *Katana* would founder in a sea of her own victims—still living victims who would avenge themselves before they, themselves, drowned.

His arm tightened about Jane.

"Oh, well," he said. "It was a good try."

She said, "The boats."

"In a sea of rats," he asked, "what good is a boat?"

The admiral was laughing. "Oh, clever, clever! It's attracted the sharks and they're finishing the job!"

And then the destroyer was nosing gingerly into the living scum, and there was a great rattling of machine guns, and from her sides spurted the jets of blazing oil from improvised flame-throwers.

Barrett went to the telegraphs and rang Stop, and then Finished With Engines. It was time to think about abandoning ship.

CHAPTER 13

They sat in a corner of the spacious public room, unnoticed now, forgoten. But they did not mind. They could rest, and they were together. Sooner or later they would be called upon to play their part in the rebuilding, but the time was not yet.

Barrett smiled as he watched Pamela turning her charm on a young naval lieutenant who was a member of the prime minister's staff. This ship, by some freak of chance and circumstance the floating headquarters of the government, was topheavy with important people. There was no possibility now that Barrett would ever become crown prince with Pamela as his crown princess. His hand tightened on Jane's. And neither, he thought, would Keane ever become king; already he had been cut down to size by the real admirals, the flag officers still on the active list, resplendent in gleaming gold and starched white.

Only Piper was undiminished in stature. He had, in fact, grown. He had lost the invisibility that had been his main attribute when Barrett had first met him. He was addressing a group of politicians and service chiefs like a schoolmaster talking to a class of backward children. He was saying, "You have all the details now. Please see that they are sent at once to whatever authorities exist in the U.S.A., and England and Russia. And broadcast the information on all frequencies to every, I repeat every, nation."

"Yes, Dr. Piper," the prime minister was saying.

"Of course, Dr. Piper," an admiral was assuring him.

"Meanwhile, the technician aboard this ship and the destroyer can start to make duplicates of my weapon."

"That's already in hand, Dr. Piper."

Barrett grinned a little sourly and quoted,

" 'So, Willy, let you and me be wipers
Of scores out with all men—especially pipers:
And whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,

If we've promised them aught, let's keep our promise. . .'"

Jane said, "I think they'll pay the piper this time."

Barrett looked at the politicians and the service heads making much of the scientist, hanging on his every word.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he said. He held Jane close to him. "But tomorrow is another day."

The End

THE HAMELIN PLAGUE

It began with a few small items in the newspapers — dead dogs and cats, a mutilated child, a series of unexplained fires. Then, suddenly, it exploded into a full-sized catastrophe.

Huge mutants—half rat, half man—began to take over the world, stealing children for slaves and destroying whole cities and their populations.

Only a few people escaped, among them Tim Barrett, his wife, Jane, and a handful of survivors. Alone on the high seas in a small ship, they set off to find the island where Dr. Theodore Piper had been experimenting with a sonic death ray.

They knew Dr. Piper was their only hope for personal and world survival — if he was still alive . . . if the King Rats hadn't forced him to serve their evil purpose . . . and if he could find a way to stop the spreading horror of Invasion.

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