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JOHN BROPHY

GENTLEMAN OF STRATFORD

IMMORTAL SERGEANT

SPEARHEAD

*TARGET
ISLAND*

A N O V E L B Y
J O H N B R O P H Y



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TARGET ISLAND

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CHAPTER ONE

THE wind was blowing gustily when the priest left the little town and set out to walk westward into the hills overlooking the sea. Although his big black hat was bound with a cord under his chin, he often found it necessary, as he trudged up the narrow winding road, to hold the broad brim with his hand. The wind whipped the skirts of his black soutane about his legs. The priest took all this for granted. He had been born on the island, rather more than sixty years before, and had never left it for more than a few months since his seminary days. He was taller and paler than most of his countrymen, thin of face and body. The hair that showed under his hat, as well as his eyebrows, was tufted thick but grey. There were long furrows in his cheeks, folding them into ridges and hollows beside the corners of his thoughtful mouth.

For a parish priest—he had the care of nearly two thousand souls in the modern and prosperous little town, set between two harbours, which now lay behind him—his appearance was exceptionally ascetic, meditative, unworldly; he seemed more fitted for the cloister than for the administration of a busy parish with every day a crop of old and new personal

troubles to be attended to as scrupulously as if they were his own; more scrupulously for he was widely respected for his conscientious ways as well as for his gentle tolerance. He had thought it his first duty to care for the poor of the island, and had been dubious when, fifteen years earlier, he had been moved to a new parish in a town that was really a rapidly extending suburb. He was persuaded to go because he was told that as he was so studious, his conversation would be an asset with better-educated parishioners. And he had enjoyed a deal of cultured conversation in exquisite drawing-rooms. Yet he still thought of the poor as his primary care. It was because he thought like this that he had left the town this fine, windy afternoon.

His bearing was erect, his step brisk, and both in the mobility of his lips and the occasional sharpening of his lambent brown eyes it was possible to see indications of humour and practical good sense. He liked to think sometimes that he might have been, had the will of God and his own election so coincided, a scholar, an historian, or a theologian. But such speculations were, with tobacco and a little wine in the evenings, his only luxury. He did not take them seriously. He mocked his own vanity if ever he found himself regretting the forty years he had devoted to the care of the Catholic laity of the island.

As the road began to twist and loop up what appeared to be the final hill slope, the priest wrenched his attention away from his inward contemplation and looked about him for a moment or two. Prudence

was rightfully esteemed a virtue, and for nearly two years now, as he had often proclaimed from the pulpit, in the streets, in hundreds of houses, and in the underground caves hewn into the rocks, it had been the duty of every islander to maintain alertness as a means of preserving life. So the priest looked first at the skies, above and around him, a wide expanse hard and deep as a cosmic sapphire and so bedazzled with sunshine in this early part of the afternoon that the eyelids involuntarily contracted. There were three aircraft, far to the west, beyond the smaller, adjacent island, tiny shuttles of twinkling light, high above the green and foam-flecked ruffings of the sea. At such a distance he had no means of judging whether the aircraft were hostile or not, but as there were but three, and they kept flying in a wide circuit, he felt safe in assuming them to be Spitfires.

There had been five raids already that day, and an hour and a half had gone by since the last. There would surely be another before the day was out, and after nightfall the high-level bombers would come, without fighters to escort them, depending on darkness for protection. He would be fortunate if he got home before the last alert of the daylight hours. But he had known all about that risk before he set off. His mind was at ease; he was making this excursion into the countryside, at an hour when all sensible men without urgent employment were asleep, because his duty prompted him to do it. If bombs began to fall near him—and bombs were apt to be dropped almost

anywhere on the island or in the sea nearby, whenever the Stuka pilots felt themselves endangered by flak or by a Hurricane or Spitfire; if bombs began to fall, or if a Messerschmitt armed with cannon and machine-guns came his way, flying low after attacking an airfield, he would take shelter behind one of the innumerable great boulders strewing the hill slopes. He would crouch in the shadow, pulling the broad-brimmed circular hat over his eyes; his black priestly habit would merge into the shadow, all the darker for the blaze of sunshine around. He would crouch and trust in God, and wait as fearlessly as he might, and afterwards resume his journey.

The island was rocky, so small that none of its watercourses could be called a river. It was not mountainous, though where the priest was now standing, high above sea level, he had almost reached the crest of the topmost ridge, the farthest west of a long irregular series of ridges which shouldered their way upwards and culminated in a long precipice, a sizeable geological fault. From this precipice the narrow slopes which constituted the westward part of the island could be overlooked, as well as the other, smaller, flatter island of Gozo, six miles away, sand-coloured where it was not green, stretched out in the sea like an animal's pelt, prepared for the beater and the tanner. Along the precipice a principal part of the land defences were deployed; fire-trenches, barbed wire, gun-pits, searchlight stations, even fortified crevices in the cliff face where machine-guns commanded the plain. Many parts of the coast consisted

of steep cliffs and were reckoned impregnable against sea-invasion; the few sandy beaches were well guarded with minefields and barbed wire.

Except for one night assault with E-boats and two-man submarines against the harbour shipping—an assault rapidly quenched with gunfire—the enemy had not attempted to attack this fortress by sea. Nor had he sent airborne troops; whenever white parachutes unfolded in the island skies, the watchers knew that fighter pilots, British, Italian or German, or the crews of German or Italian bombers, were abandoning aircraft no longer safe to fly. The enemy had other means with which to exert his vindictive will; he sent his heavy bombers by day and night, from bases in Sicily, only a few minutes away by flying time. He exploded thousands of tons of bombs on the island, seeking now to make airfields unusable, now to silence the anti-aircraft guns, now to destroy already damaged shipping in the harbour, and almost always by noise and horror and shock to overwhelm the spirit of the people. Nearly two years of air assault had not succeeded, though all that there had been to oppose him in the early days was one flight of obsolete aircraft, three Gladiators hurriedly assembled from overloaded packing cases and flown, slow but undaunted, by pilots trained to other aircraft. The islanders, turning in their time of trouble to Christine doctrine, had named these three valiant primevals Faith, Hope and Charity. The Gladiators had held off the enemy longer than any had dared to hope, and then one by one they had perished. By

that time Hurricanes had come, not quite so obsolescent. Some Hurricanes were still in use, although they could scarcely engage the enemy fighters and had to concentrate at great hazard on the slow dive-bombers. Later there was a time when the island depended chiefly on its anti-aircraft barrage to keep the bombers away from the vital targets. More recently Spitfires had come, but all too few. The Spitfires alone could match the Messerschmitt escorts swarming to guard the German bombers which came by tens and twenties and thirties, sometimes a hundred in a single raid.

The Nazi terror hurtled and screamed down from the air and burst death and destruction on the island, but the deadliest threat came from afar, unseen but always felt. To maintain its existence the island needed constant replenishments: it needed soldiers, sailors, airmen to replace those who were killed and wounded in its defence; it needed new aircraft, new guns, more and more shells, bullets, bombs; above all it needed aviation petrol and food, for even in peacetime the inhabitants were far more fertile than the soil. From east or west the convoys had to travel a thousand miles under naval escort. The seas were narrow and the shores were held by the enemy, so that throughout its slow progress each convoy was blasted by bombers and torpedo-planes. Alternating or coinciding with the relayed attacks from the air would be onslaughts by U-boats and the faster motor launches called E-boats, and at least once in every convoy the Italian fleet would put to sea. It was

only at long intervals that battleships, cruisers and destroyers could be spared to escort a convoy, and very often only a small proportion of the ships reached harbour. The remainder, split open, lay at the bottom of the sea—the price paid for the food which kept the islanders alive to serve their guns, to keep their few aircraft flying, and the whole island denied to the enemy.

The priest had reached an age when he no longer cared to lay claim to any especial or privileged knowledge about the conduct of affairs. But he was aware, like every other adult on the island, that several months had passed since the last convoy, damaged and reduced, had entered the Grand Harbour. He knew that another must come soon or else food supplies would peter out to starvation, the guns cease firing for lack of ammunition, the two diminished squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes be unable to take off to fight against the heavy odds they were accustomed to, because there would be no petrol to set their airscrews spinning. The convoy must come soon, and because it must, it would come. The British Empire was hard-pressed in all its resources. It was facing the greatest and most prolonged crisis in its history. But the island had known the British intimately for more than a century. The island had become British in fact and in spirit. It had the pride of an ancient tradition developed into quite a modern one—like Britain herself. The priest was born on the island and had lived there for sixty years. He shared

its faith in the survival of the British Empire. The convoy would come.

An outburst of noises behind him, diminished by distance, but eruptive, vehement, insistent, made him halt and turn round. High above the narrow peninsulas enclosing the double harbours anti-aircraft shells were exploding. He could see, crimson against the golden sunshine and the jewelled blue of the sky, the tiny flash as each shell burst, and then the soft expansion of smoke, black or grey or white. He could see the bombers, too, curving and diving one by one into the barrage to release their loads at the end of the dive; sometimes they made streaking glimmers of rose and gold; sometimes they were silhouetted in dark lines for a second or two, as if by rapid pencil strokes in the sky. Higher still, the Messerschmitts wheeled, almost out of sight, tiny restless gleams of opalescence, seemingly no bigger than tracer bullets fired from a machine-gun. The raid must have come in from the north or the east, the priest decided; that was why, with this powerful spring wind blowing, he had not heard the sirens wailing the alert signal in the town. He looked westward again and, as he had expected, saw the three Spitfires in arrowhead formation rapidly approaching the island. Hurricanes would have taken off from the airfields; not that they could hope to do much damage to the enemy, but they were safer in the air. The Spitfires, faster, armed with cannon-guns in their wings, were the only effective striking force the island possessed. If they were ten times as many, they would still be outnumbered. But

even three of them could break up a raid. They had been waiting out at sea, till the bombing began. Otherwise twenty or thirty Messerschmitts would have engaged them at once, distracted all their attention, and left the Stukas free to bomb without interruption. Now, called by radio from the fighter control room, the Spitfires were coming in at nearly four hundred miles an hour, streaming along in a tiny arrow at a height of fifteen thousand feet.

The priest watched them; they had begun the twenty-mile flight before he turned to find them. Now they were almost overhead. He lowered his gaze for a moment to the land, to the city of Valetta, small, beautiful, compact, built with its ancient forts and palaces and churches and terraced gardens all over the sheer rock rising between the two harbours, Marsamxett and Grand Harbour. Valetta looked down on blue water, and the sunshine would be reflecting its terraces of white and pale pink and saffron and gold, interflecked with deep purple shadows cast into its narrow streets. Nearer, built round the curving shores of a peninsula, stood the smaller town of Sliema, where his parish was, similarly terraced upwards on the edge of the water, as if the shadow-stippled buildings formed a solid encrustation on the rock. It was a sense of duty which had called him away from his parish, yet the priest felt a poignant emotion of guilt as, from the lonely hillside five miles away, he stood and watched the guns firing upward and the bombs whistling down. At such a distance, both towns seemed intact, but the

priest knew only too well that hundreds of houses, churches, hospitals, centuries old, had already been tumbled into ruins, some roofless, doorless, windowless, some fantastically reorganised in shattered arches and jagged, distorted walls, some burst apart and pounded into mere heaps of rubble. When he went back to Sliema there would be still newer wreckage to be tidied up. Human survival would have been impossible in the towns and cities of Malta but for the underground caves, Phœnician, Roman, Turkish, mediæval, or cut in the last year or two. The quality of the island rock might have been providentially designed in the distant primal ages for these opening years of the nineteen-forties; it was soft, easy and quick to cut, but it hardened rapidly on all its newly exposed surfaces. His parishioners, like all the islanders, were by now well schooled in air-raid discipline: they would be sheltering far underground, in the caverns and tunnels, while the guns and the bombs were shaking the town.

Broad columns of black smoke and paler, wider-spreading columns of dust were rising in both Valetta and Sliema from the bomb explosions, with the intermittent muzzle-flashes from the guns on land and the guns on the harbour shipping glittering through. Then the priest saw that the three Spitfires were over the Grand Harbour, wheeling together in formation for a moment as the pilots selected their targets. One by one they tilted their wings, dipped their noses and dived after the dive-bombers steep and fast, straight into the barrage. He could not hear the stutter of

their guns; he could not follow the course of the pursuit once Spitfire and Stuka were among the shell bursts. He could only marvel at the courage of the British pilots who chose this method of making certain of their prey. They would shoot down the dive-bombers, two, three, perhaps more of them—they always did. The Germans kept up their attacks obstinately, recklessly, but, harried by the Spitfires, many would make off, jettisoning their bombs on the countryside or in the open sea. Within a minute or so the escaping raiders and their Messerschmitt escorts would be crossing the hill where he stood. It was time for him to move on.



CHAPTER TWO

THE boy had come up from the west, where a long and shallow indentation, scored at the bottom with a winding ravine, was folded into the hill slope. He had come to watch the raid from the top of the ridge. He was fourteen years old, but small for his age, even for Malta where few grew to be more than five and a half feet. He was small because he was exceptionally poor. He had rarely eaten meat, and often went hungry, even before the war made food supplies uncertain, restricted and, for the future, hazardous. His mother had died when he was born and his father, a fisherman who cast his nets in and off St. George's Bay, despite many urgings had never married again, preferring freedom; for him freedom meant the opportunity to get drunk two or three times a week. The boy did not hate his father, now he was old enough to earn a few shillings a week and to take himself out of the way when a beating was threatened. His father was carelessly indulgent when he was sober; carelessly harsh when he was drunk. Other women, neighbours, had tended the children in their infancy; a family of two seemed absurdly small in Malta, where many families numbered ten to twelve, and a pair of half-orphans could always find some temporary accommodation in a cottage or hut.

Where the boy lived had once been a small, isolated village; the expansion of Sliema, with its villas and theatres and big restaurants, had brought modernity and prosperity close, and many of the more enterprising and industrious villagers had found new homes and occupations for themselves. But the boy's father preferred to drift on in his own way.

Father Julian had made it his responsibility to watch over the welfare of the children. There had been a time, Carmel knew, when the priest had wanted to obtain powers to take him and his sister, Manuela, away from their dirty, untidy, fish-smelling home; but his father, who after all must be fond of them, had made energetic protests, now promising to reform his ways, now threatening if his children were removed to damn his soul to all eternity by committing suicide. Father Julian had not been greatly moved by the promises of future sobriety, but he knew that the old fisherman, once he was roaring drunk, was capable of the most reckless behaviour—and suicide was of all mortal sins perhaps the deadliest, for of its own nature it could never be redressed. So the children stayed with their widowed father, sleeping elsewhere on the nights he came home in a violent mood. And now Carmel was fourteen and Manuela nearly seventeen, and both of them earning their own livelihood. Compared with that solid achievement, the day and night impact of war on their lives seemed to Carmel trivial, irrelevant, ephemeral.

It was not strictly true that the boy earned enough to feed and clothe and lodge himself. But he no

longer needed to ask his father for money or even to snatch some of the fish the old man brought home. That was because Manuela earned so much that she gave him every week at least ten shillings. And often she brought home, wrapped in paper and folded in her scarf, pieces of delectable food, chicken bones, caviare, and sometimes even an apple or two or three chocolate creams. And English cigarettes. It was marvellous, this sudden prosperity. It made Carmel hold up very proudly his round head, close-cropped with a forelock left long—a fashion his father had picked up from the soldiers of the British garrison when he, thirty years earlier, had been a boy. It enabled him to visit one of the cheaper cinemas once a week, at his own expense, and with a friend whose seat he paid for. In the cinema he saw the big world outside Malta; he saw the course of the war portrayed in vivid snippets, British troops fighting Rommel in Africa—that was not so far away; bomb damage in London, where the people were not so fortunate, lacking rock caves to shelter in; British, Australian and American troops fighting the Japanese in the Pacific jungles; and British and American bombers over German cities which flamed as the bombs fell, a very satisfactory sight to Maltese, proving that what they endured was not in vain. In the cinema also, which invariably opened the minute an afternoon or evening raid ended, Carmel was introduced to a grander spectacle which he took to be an equally veracious transcription from life as it was lived outside his island. Inside the cinema he entered on a

vicarious life of bold or comic adventures, and very touching to the heart also when beautiful young women and handsome young men at last found their way to each other's arms. In those pictures there was often a great deal of dining and revelry and dancing, amid scenes of unbelievable splendour which Manuela reported to be even more magnificent than the place where she worked.

It was not to be expected, of course, that everything in his new way of life should be satisfactory. There were nights when Manuela came home not only tired but angry, unwilling to speak, her lips tightly pressed together, her eyes cold and resentful. Every week she gave money to her father, as well as to Carmel. Her father accepted it, but ungraciously, and if, by an error, they stayed at home on one of his drunken evenings, he would overwhelm his daughter with reproachful curses. When he was sober, he never spoke about her work. And Father Julian sometimes put stern questions to Manuela, making her weep. Carmel did not know what these questions were. He did not want to know, because he was afraid he would guess and his guesses would be correct. He only saw Manuela shaking her head, denying everything. Lately she had evaded the priest. Whenever he came asking for her, she would be gone, in a second, snatching up her bag and her coat, out of the back door. Twice Carmel had seen in the priest's old, sad, wise eyes the impulse to put the questions to him instead. But he had refrained. Carmel believed that the priest

judged him to be more innocent than he was. He wanted that state of affairs to continue.

As soon as he came up to the crest of the hill, he saw Father Julian, not three hundred yards away, his back turned as he also watched the dive-bombers and the barrage and the fighters over the Grand Harbour. The boy guessed that the priest had come out of the town to talk to him for, following Manuela's example, he also had been evasive lately. Here, on these hills, with the goats he tended, was the one place in daylight he was sure to be found. The boy's first impulse on seeing the priest was to drop down out of sight, behind a boulder. He obeyed it, and at once felt guilty and unhappy. He had loved Father Julian through all of his short life that he could remember; he was tied to him also by his devotion to the Church, for Carmel served at the altar. He ranked first among the boy acolytes, and he was proud of the honour and the privilege. He might be able to dodge out of church after early morning Mass every day of the week, but on Sunday, when Mass was sung with a full choir, the priest would be sure to instruct him, explicitly, to wait behind in the vestry. He could hurry back now, and drive his goats—there were more than a hundred of them—farther along the dark shadowed ravine, so that even if he was not out of sight when the priest resumed his journey and reached the top of the hill, he could pretend he was too far away to hear shouts. He could keep moving, and agile, young and strong, could outpace the old priest easily enough. But that would only post-

pone the ordeal till Sunday. Unless he pretended on Sunday to be ill. But no lie was so abominable as a lie told to the Church, and especially one which made a false excuse for not attending Mass. Besides, it would be shameful to disappoint Father Julian after he had made the long journey here, on foot, in the heat of the day. On the other hand, Carmel realised, his ten shillings a week, his cinema visits, his occasional gifts of exotic food from Manuela, were all imperilled. And ten shillings a week for doing nothing was a great deal! It was a fortune!

While the boy was debating what to do or not to do, he noticed that the barrage put up by the Grand Harbour guns had moved. The shells were bursting almost directly above Sliema. He knew what that meant! And to confirm his deduction, he saw the Stukas moving up out of their dives, circling to regain formation, and making off westward. The Stukas did not matter; they had in all probability dropped their bombs by now; they were slow and were flying too high to machine-gun stray civilians. Some people said the Luftwaffe pilots would not waste ammunition in that way, and that when civilians were killed it was by accident, because they got in between the plane and some more important target. But anyhow civilians *had* been machine-gunned. And Carmel did not trust to the chivalry of any Germans! But only part of the Messerschmitt escort was gathering round the bombers. The other must have dived lower, to wait for the Spitfires emerging from the barrage. That meant there might be a helter-skelter fight at low

level all across the island. And Father Julian was standing there exposed on the hillside, actually outlined black in the sunshine against the white dust of the road! Carmel stood up, shouted to the priest, and then set off downhill with great leaping strides. The priest seemed to move towards him very slowly and, when they met, the boy chided him, taking his hand, leading him up by a direct route over the short grass, away from the road.

The old man was breathless by the time they reached the crest, but the boy gave him only a second's pause. He glanced back over his shoulder. The Stukas passed high overhead, like monstrous storks with their angled wings and their unretractable undercarriages drooping like webbed feet. Nine Messerschmitts were spread out far above them. The other Messerschmitts were fighting the Spitfires now among the smoke and dust clouds over Sliema; the barrage had ceased.

"Come on," said the boy. "The ravine. That's the safest place."

They had only a quarter of a mile to go, and downhill, but a fighter plane could easily overtake them before they reached the shelter of the ravine and open fire as it roared past. They did it often enough, those Germans!

Father Julian faltered and slowed, his hand on his heart, when they were only twenty yards from the ravine, and Carmel was terrified as he heard the deep continuous throb of aircraft engines edged with the singing and whistling note made by wing surfaces

cutting through the air. Without looking back, he felt the menace sweeping down on them over the hilltop. He screamed a warning and then, seeing that the priest did not understand, or did not understand quickly enough, he clasped him round the knees, clenching his fists on the thick black stuff of the soutane, till they both fell to the ground. Even then it was the boy who directed their fall so that they dropped together behind a big tawny rock. Almost at once they heard the machine-gun bullets rapping in peremptory succession on pebbles and turf and, finally, on the rock itself rearing above them. The bullets struck tiny golden sparks off the rock. It seemed a whole second afterwards that they heard the noise of firing, thrust staccato into the crescendo of the engine roar overhead. Then the sunshine was blotted out as the Messerschmitt passed over them, only twenty yards high.

Carmel looked back, to see if more enemies were following. The others were flying much higher. Then he looked forward.

“He’s banking now! He’s turning! He’s going to attack us again!”

This time it was the priest who decided what to do. They rushed together to the edge of the winding, rocky, deep-shadowed ravine, and threw themselves down in it, among the goats, already startled by the sudden noise.

But the Messerschmitt did not come to seek them out. Instead, not far away, but out of sight as they

crouched in the bottom of the ravine, they heard the sound of more firing, louder now.

The priest bade the boy wait in patience and thankfulness, but Carmel could not bear to do so. He stood against the steep side of the ravine, and levered himself up with hands and toes till he could see over.

"Spitfire!" he cried. "There's a Spitfire after him. Chasing him. No, it's the German chasing. No, it's the Spitfire. They are turning in circles. Oh! Clever! Beautiful! Got him! Got him! The Spitfire's got him! He's smoking! He's going down! He can hardly keep up. The Spitfire has hit him. He will crash. He *must* crash!"

Father Julian, unable to make the boy attend to his advice to come back to safety, and himself consumed with curiosity, by now had found a foothold and was also peering over the lip of the ravine. He was just in time to see the Messerschmitt fall in flames and disappear into the sea. He released the grip of his right hand to cross himself. The passing of a human soul, even of a German enemy who had tried to kill an old man and a young boy for casual sport, was a solemn occasion.

But Carmel's exultation had changed to anxiety. He was shouting aloud again, shouting advice to the Spitfire pilot who could not possibly hear it. Two more Messerschmitts were diving down now out of the central blaze of the sunshine. It was not a long dive—about four thousand feet—but straight on to the black and silver elegance of the British plane circling just off the coast, where wide ripples and oil

stains marked the place where the German plane had sunk out of sight.

Awed and fascinated, Father Julian watched in silence. Another young life, and a cleaner one, would be ended, violently and dramatically, in a few seconds, and there was nothing the onlookers could do to preserve it. The priest began a prayer, but Carmel's shouts of alarm changed suddenly to exultation. The Spitfire, suddenly banked, turned out of its leisurely circle, and as the two Messerschmitts, nose to tail, feathered in the lower part of their dive, it rose vertically, looped sharp on to its back, righted itself, and flew rapidly into place behind the rear one.

"Now! Now!" Carmel shouted. "Fire. Press the button! Now!"

As if obedient to the boy's advice, the two cannon guns in the Spitfire's wings flared and smoked. The rear Messerschmitt seemed to stagger in the air. Pieces flew off its cowling. It reared on its tail, lost speed, and then dived into the sea. The Spitfire chased its companion for two miles—a matter of seconds—fired a short burst, and then turned and made for the airfield at Luqa.

"Run out of ammunition," Carmel explained. "What a pity! But it was a wonderful fight, wasn't it, Father? Three to one, and he shot down two of them. There is nothing in the world can stand up to the Spitfire."

Dropping back into the ravine, he turned two rapid somersaults and then cried: "Victory roll! The Spitfires always win!"

It was, thought the priest, crossing himself again, the innocence of the natural man, the joy in combat which every one must have known, pure, untroubled by thought, in the distant past before mankind awoke to its responsibilities, a joy without cruelty because the imagination never extended a tentacle of sympathy to identify itself with the opponent. Only boys like Carmel and immature adults could experience it now.

"We have had a merciful deliverance from death, my son. In great part, it was due to your prompt action, and I am grateful."

"Oh, Father Julian, that was nothing. Any one would have done the same."

"You might well have thought only of your own safety. You thought of me also, and that shows that you are good at heart. Indeed, I have always known you were. But remember, it was God who gave you keen eyesight and quick intelligence. Let us give thanks to Him for preserving us alive and unharmed."

Side by side they knelt on the mossy stones at the bottom of the ravine, their rosary beads draped over their folded hands, the priest murmuring the prayers, the boy the responses. While they prayed the long-haired goats, black and brown and white, goats which had scattered up and down the ravine, began to come back, reassured by the return of quietness, picking their way in twos and threes in the shade to crop the grass and mosses beside the dried-up watercourse. Before the prayers were finished, the goats were all

round; the rank smell of their shaggy pelts filled the hot air, but neither the old priest nor the boy paid any attention. The smell of goats had been a part of their lives as long as they could remember.

When they stood up, Father Julian said: "Carmel, I want to talk to you. About Manuela."

The boy nodded, resigned. There was no escape now.

"I hear"—the priest modulated his irony with a gentle intonation—"that you have become quite a rich man, lately? You have money to spend? You eat chocolate. You visit the cinema?"

"Yes, Father."

"And this money comes from Manuela?"

A nod.

"It is a good thing for Manuela to give it to you. But for you to accept—I am not so sure."

"She is my sister. She is older than I am."

"That cannot be denied. But you have responsibilities also, Carmel. Your father is—I do not wish to offend you. But he is not a strong character. We must not judge him. On the other hand, we must think of Manuela. We must think of her as a girl beset by many temptations, temptations from which most other girls, not having the dangerous gift of beauty, are exempt. And she has no mother, and a father who—well, you understand, Carmel. *Do* you understand what I am trying to say?"

"I think so, Father."

"It is like this, my boy. Manuela has obtained employment at this—this restaurant where there is

dancing every night. You know about that? I thought you did. Now mind, I do not say there is anything wrong in it. Manuela is a good girl, at heart. I consider that is proved by the fact that she gives money to you and to her father."

"Every week, without fail," the boy said proudly.

"Now your father does not need that money. You know and I know that he never saves it. It goes straight to the tavern. And you do not need it, Carmel."

"But I like going to the cinema. And I was going to save up and buy myself some new clothes," Carmel protested, his thin, sharp-featured face puckered with misery, his voice rising to a thin wail.

"Clothes, yes." The priest regarded the boy compassionately, in his glance taking in the short forelock of black hair showing under the broken peak of an old cap, the torn jacket too big for him, the patched trousers with a hole showing at the right knee and the bottoms turned up in four loose double folds lest they drag on the ground over his tattered shoes.

"Yes, Carmel, you need new clothes. The winter is almost over. We shall have little more rain and cold, and I see that in warm weather you cannot wear the overcoat and the boots I got for you. And you are growing up. It is natural, and not wrong, that you should take a pride in your appearance. Now I will make a bargain with you. Listen carefully."

The boy threw a stone to drive an intrusive he-goat away, and then set himself apprehensively to listen.

"If you will promise to take no more money from

Manuela, I will get you a new summer suit. Yes, there are still a few to be had in the shops at Valetta. I have made sure of that. A grey suit, Carmel. Made in England.”

“Oh!”

“And more than that. Every week I will pay for you to visit the cinema. Once a week. But you must not take a penny from your sister.”

“Do you think, Father, she will save the ten shillings if she does not give it to me?”

“That will be Manuela’s responsibility, not yours, my son. But I will tell you, in confidence—you must not repeat it to any one—the little plan I have for her. I believe she is a good girl. I believe she has become—what do they call it, a dance-hostess?—partly from vanity, perhaps, but also because she has been so poor. The temptation must have been very great. I understand that. But if she realises that her father does not need her money, and if you refuse to take yours, she may listen to my suggestion. For I have found another kind of employment for her.”

“In the laundry?”

“No, Carmel. Better than that.”

“Manuela is not a good cook.”

“She could learn.”

“Where is she to cook? For the soldiers?”

“No. She is too young for that. But she can make lace. Our famous Maltese lace. There is still a little being made, in spite of the war. I have arranged that she shall be given this opportunity. And she will earn good wages. As much, perhaps, as she earns at present.

It will be more than enough—especially if you take nothing from her, or your father.”

To Carmel it seemed a reasonable proposition—better than he had expected. He did not like to think of losing his ten shillings a week. But it would quiet the uneasy spot in his conscience, and perhaps Manuela would be happier. But would she? Would she give up the cabaret? Would she not hate to work from morning to night? Nevertheless, when the priest said: “Well, is it a bargain between us?” the boy assented. He always gave way to Father Julian, because the priest was so kind and gentle. But he was not at all sure that Manuela would yield so easily.

After making a count of his goats, he walked up the hill with Father Julian, to the top of the ridge. Now in the quiet of the late afternoon they had time to look about them. There were still clouds of dust over Valetta and Sliema, but people were about again. They could see tiny figures at windows, on roofs, and launches and boats moving in the harbours: and in St. Julian’s Bay—the priest had been born in a village overlooking it and had taken his vocational name from it—*dghaisas*, the little Maltese boats, painted a rich red or green and propelled by standing oarsmen, were busy gathering fish floating dead on the surface, killed by bombs falling in the water.

The hillside was strewn with boulders, black, grey, sulphur yellow, tawny gold, with a few gnarled bushes spreading low and, in the barer places, cactus plants, but the grass grew thick and lush on the shallow turf between. And the grass was richly studded

with flowers: wild marigolds, vetches of many colours, scarlet, yellow, mauve, purple anemones, big iris blooms on tall broad-bladed stems, golden oxalis; and everywhere the asphodel, its white petals tinged with silver and pink, clustered among the grasses.

“This is a very beautiful island on which it has pleased God to let us live,” said the priest. “I have seen other countries. Italy and France, and, once, England. They are beautiful, too. But none of them, I think, as beautiful as Malta in the spring. When the war is won, when we have peace here again, no more death and destruction, and good food for every one, you will know better how fortunate we are on our island. The flowers—look at them! So many kinds, such richness, such profusion. But best of all I like the asphodel.”

The priest stood for a moment staring down at a wide cluster of the delicate blooms.

“The asphodel—it disregards the war. It survives all wars. It flowers now as it did in Greece when Homer was alive and when St. Paul came here to Malta, shipwrecked, and made the island a Christian bishopric.”

“Yes,” the boy conceded, without much show of interest, “it is a pretty flower. But when the spring is over, it is gone.”

“Then,” said the priest, “we have other flowers to take its place. The big purple clover, that the goats and the cows love to crop, the gladioli, and the plumbago. Yet, most of all, I think, the asphodel is the proper emblem for Malta.”

But Carmel would not give way.

"No," he said. "I can show you a better emblem for Malta. Look!" And he pointed away to a heap of rocks along the ridge, where a dozen tall prickly-pear bushes spread out grotesquely, cactuses which flourished on ground that defeated every other growth. "The cactus, that is Malta. Because it can live on next to nothing, and—look at those spikes!—because it cannot be attacked without doing hurt to the attacker."

The priest looked down at him and at last smiled.

"You do not mind the war, do you?" he asked.

"I'm frightened sometimes," Carmel admitted. "I was just now, when that Messerschmitt fired at us. But that does not last long. It is exciting, the war. And after all, the Spitfire shot down two of them. I wonder which pilot it was? To-night, when I get home, I will ask questions. I will find out. Three to one, and he shot down two of them! I wonder who it was?"



CHAPTER THREE

THE doorway was recessed deep under a carved stone archway—the upper part of the old building had finally collapsed, right and left, into the street and on top of other ruins, after a third bomb hit it. But the stone cellars remained intact. The engineers judged there was enough rubble on top to give protection, not enough to make the weight dangerous. A flight of steps led down from the street to the door, where a shaded lamp, throwing its light inwards, illuminated a sign made of glass studs: Dinkum Bar and Restaurant. The name had been given years back by an Australian ship's officer who had christened it with overflowing champagne. It was not an easy place to find in the blackout, unless its location had been fixed in daylight. That was why the three Spitfire pilots had decided that one of their number must call for Pauline at her quarters and escort her. Mac, the Canadian, had done the tossing with his lucky penny, and when the lot fell on Harry, the nineteen-year-old from New Zealand, he winked at Peter and said: "Fine, that gives you and me time for an extra drink before dinner."

Harry was tall, fair, pink-cheeked, handsome. He was also earnest and idealistic—everything that he

ought to be. Mac, who was ten years older and infinitely richer in experience, called him the perfect answer to a maiden's prayer, refused to believe that he ever needed to shave, and once, when Harry mentioned that he had gone straight from school into the R.A.F., asked gravely, affecting an English upper class accent: "Sunday school, I presume?" Harry would not drink anything stronger than lemonade. It took Mac some time to get used to that, and he regarded it as a triumph that Harry had consented to come to the Dinkum at all. He said as much to Peter as they stood at the bar, among a little crowd of R.A.F. men, coast gunners and anti-aircraft men, naval officers from the Dockyard establishment, infantrymen on leave from inland camps, and a few merchant navy officers, wounded when the last convoy arrived and now awaiting the next, already overdue.

"If you ask me," Peter replied, "Harry suspects both of us!"

"How?"

"About Pauline."

"You mean, he thinks we might lead her astray?"

"Not me so much," explained Peter. "I don't flatter myself to that extent. But you're always shooting a line about the girls you've had a gay time with."

"Never in front of Harry. I stopped the minute I found out he was as innocent as a new-born babe. For the matter of that, I'm always careful how I talk in front of Pauline. Between the two of them, they've reduced my repertory of stories to about five per cent of what it used to be."

"You forget, sometimes. Anyhow, I think Harry's idea is to protect Pauline. That's the only reason he's coming along to-night. He regards this place as a sink of iniquity."

Mac finished his beer, stared round the big cellar, transformed into restaurant, dance-hall and cabaret, and said: "It's a mother's meeting, compared with some places I've been in."

"Pretty tawdry, anyway," Peter amended.

"Not up to your West End standards, I suppose?"

"Oh, there are some awful holes in London. Not that I ever really went in for night life."

"You ought to see New York. And San Francisco. Not that for real toughness, you can beat Cairo. Ever been to Cairo? No? Well, you ought. Myself, I don't like a place to be too ritzy. This suits me."

At the far end of the bar a group of gunners were playing darts. Mac watched them for a moment. "I guess that's how Hitler's bomber-boys feel when they come over here. Pitching darts into a battered old board. Practically nothing to disturb their aim. Yeah, that's what Malta looks like from the air. An old dart board. An easy target."

"Dart boards last a long time—some of them last for ever."

But Mac was now looking elsewhere.

"Say, have you noticed that girl over there? I was dancing with her the other night. She's got something."

Peter glanced across the room to where the dance-hostesses, young and not so young, most of them

dark-haired and dark-eyed, but a few with bleached blonde hair and pallidly powdered faces, sat smoking and talking among themselves, waiting for the pleasures of the night to get under way.

"Which one?" Peter asked indifferently.

"The one in white. With the blue ear-drops. I gave her those. Got 'em in Kingsway day before yesterday. Cheap. I can bargain."

"I thought you never needed to give presents to get all you wanted!"

"Not real presents. Nothing expensive. That's my rule. I'll set up as a sugar-daddy when I'm seventy. And that's a long way off yet."

Mac waved across the room, and the girl in the white frock smiled at him and half-rose from her chair. But he shook his head.

"Not to-night, Josephine. At least, not yet."

"So her name's Josephine?"

"That's only a saying. Never heard it before? Belongs to history. Napoleon. I was forgetting they don't teach you anything in those English Public Schools, except Latin and Greek. Her name's Manuela, as a matter of fact."

"She's quite pretty," Peter conceded. "If you like that type."

"That's right. Whatever you do, don't get enthusiastic. I tell you that girl's more than pretty. She's got temperament, too."

"I suppose you mean she might scratch your eyes out, one day. Well, why don't you go over and join her? Pauline wouldn't mind."

"Maybe I will," Mac decided. "Later on. After Pauline's gone. She won't stay late."

"I should say this was no place for Pauline after midnight."

"No. Pauline's different."

"It's time Harry brought her along, or we'll lose our table."

They thought of Pauline as a friend, not a girlfriend. There was a world of distinction between the two conceptions. Pauline herself had set the tone of her relationship to the three pilots from their first casual meeting. She was an English girl who, returning to join the Services from a business engagement in Turkey, had found herself stranded in Malta after her ship was sunk. It seemed there was work for her to do on the island, and she had quickly trained as a plotter in the Fighter Control Room. She shifted wooden symbols about on a big map table, rapidly, deftly, precisely, as news came in over the radio telephone. It was natural that she should take an interest in the pilots whose air activities she "plotted," and between her and Peter and Harry and Mac, who always flew together, there had sprung up a quick, cool friendship.

Everything about Pauline was cool and quick. She had been in Malta less than three months—and that made her an older inhabitant than the three pilots, who had flown in reinforcement Spitfires from an aircraft-carrier only six weeks before. The winter gales and rains had reduced the number of raids at first; they were given time to become acclimatised, to get

the feel of Malta and its peculiar forms of air combat, against odds, as often as not over the sea, and with only narrow lanes for taking off and coming in through the co-ordinated barrage. Mac had flown a Hurricane in the Battle of Britain, and been wounded. Then he had gone to the Western Desert. Transferred to Malta, he was made flight leader, to put his knowledge and experience at the service of the two younger pilots who had never met their enemies in the air before they came to Malta.

Because of the winter weather the three had done no sustained air fighting until the past ten days; but those days had been hard and dangerous. Hardly any Italians came now. It was all Junkers, Heinkels and Messerschmitts, and the British strength was so low that there could be no question of holding off the Messerschmitts with part of the force, to give free play to the remainder. The Spitfires had to dodge in order to ambush the bombers at the only moment they were at all vulnerable to surprise—as they “peeled off” and dived on their targets. The Spitfires followed them into the barrage, shot down all they could reach amid the bursting flak, and then rocketed out, tired but exultant, only to find Messerschmitts by the dozen, fresh and formidable, waiting for them. Mac said the technique made him feel like a G-man who had to chase gangsters into a burning house, after which, as he emerged with smoke in his eyes and his hair singed, he was set on by the rest of the gang with tommyguns. They had survived the last ten days by luck as well as by skill, and they had shot down eleven

of the enemy for certain. Mac had got seven, Harry four, and Peter nothing except a probable—a Heinkel which continued to make off in the direction of Sicily with black smoke pouring from its starboard engine.

Harry, who had been with him at the time, told Peter that the Heinkel must have ditched itself in the sea, but the Intelligence Officer refused to count it as more than a "possible." And Peter could not be consoled. He made no parade of his feelings, but the other two knew he reckoned himself a failure, a liability to the triple partnership. Four days back he had been saying, not unhopefully, that his luck must change soon, that he had always been a bad starter but a good finisher, that, playing cricket at school and at Oxford, he was the sort of batsman who nearly loses his wicket half a dozen times in the opening overs and then goes on to make a century. But he had stopped talking like that now. Mischance dogged him. His radio would break down and he would fail to receive instructions of the enemy's whereabouts from Operations Control. Once his engine caught fire—with no enemy near at hand—and he had to bale out at twelve thousand feet. In the early fighting he used up his ammunition too quickly, firing when his target was taking evasive action, so that later on, when clever flying had earned him better chances, he pressed the firing button and the guns did not respond. Every one—despite all the advice and good resolutions in the world—made that mistake in his first air encounter. Twice he had been unable to take off, owing to mechanical troubles (that certainly was a fault he

could not blame on himself) and by the time he had gained sufficient height, Mac and Harry were doing victory rolls in and out of the clouds, and the enemy was almost out of sight. Peter had hit both bombers and Messerschmitts with his guns—making careful mental notes of the “strikes”—but never in a vital part. Technically he was an excellent pilot, alert but not over-rash, blending caution nicely with opportunism. He ought by now to be well on the way to earning a reputation as an “ace.” He ought to have shot down almost as many German aircraft over Malta as Mac. But nothing would go right for him. His luck was fantastically bad. And he did not want to talk about it.

Mac once tackled him bluntly. “You don’t want to worry,” he said. “You’ll be O.K. so long as you don’t worry. You’re good. I know it, if you don’t. As soon as you’ve got one of the bastards, you’ll feel fine. You’ll get lots more after that. And quick. You’ll catch up on me in no time. You’ll knock my record skewiff, once you get going.”

“I’d like to believe it,” Peter had said. “But I can’t. There’s a hoodoo on me. I’ve mistaken my vocation. That’s all. I’ll do my best. But don’t expect anything.”

Then he added: “I heard one of the Hurry boys talking about me yesterday. They’ve got a name for me. Know what it is? The Lily-white Virgin.”

“Hurry boys! What do they know about it? I’ve flown Hurricanes myself. How many do they shoot

down here, I'd like to know, since the Huns came along with their new Me.'s?"

"That's not their fault. And I don't blame 'em for being sarcastic about me. They must be thinking, if one of 'em could only fly my Spit, he'd have some results to show."

Mac tried another way of consolation. "Virgin! Just because you haven't opened your score yet. They'll live to eat their words. Anyhow, every one's got to be a virgin some time."

"Yes," said Peter, "but not too long. That's the point. And if I go on like this, by next week, they'll be calling me a withered spinster. Now take this afternoon. I got on to two Stukas, one after another. Right on their tails. I throttled back to make sure I couldn't overshoot. I closed the range to fifty yards before I opened fire. Fifty yards! And each time I could only hit armour plate."

"They want a lot of knocking down, those Stukas."

"Maybe, but other chaps manage it. You do, for one."

"Hallo," said Mac, with relief. "Here's Pauline at last."

Most of the men at the bar and the dining tables watched her as she entered; not many women came to the Dinkum, and few of these were English. Harry was just behind her, scowling a little; he was so young that a supercilious frown was his automatic reaction to any circumstances in which he was not quite at home. Pauline had come bareheaded. There was a lustre in her hair which made the other blondes in

the room at once look synthetic and unsatisfactory, and her complexion was so clear in the smoke-laden luminance of the electric lamps—for once, the lighting system of Valetta had not been put out of action by the day's raids—that every other woman in the room seemed to have put on too crude a make-up. Or so Peter thought as he went to meet her.

“You've got a new frock,” he said.

“Thank you for noticing. It's not new, though. It's borrowed. Angela lent it me. You know Angela, don't you?”

Peter was angry with himself because he had forgotten that Pauline had arrived at Malta, shipwrecked, with only the clothes she had worn in the lifeboat. Like all the other women, except the nurses, doing war jobs in Malta, she had no uniform. For her off-duty time she was forced to borrow; the few clothes she had acquired were strictly utilitarian.

“Angela!” he said. “Oh, yes. At the hospital? I know her. I daresay I'll be getting to know her better soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“I shall be one of her patients. Unless I'm in the cemetery yonder.”

“Peter! What's the matter with you? Did you have a shaky do this afternoon?”

“Not a bit. Everything was as easy as pie. I ought to have got two dive-bombers but the bullets bounced off. Harry got a Stuka and an Me. probable. And Mac had a field day. Two Messrs. All on his own. No confirmation, though. It was away beyond Sliema. No-

body there to see. So they probably won't let him count them."

"Anyhow, that's no reason for you to talk about hospitals and cemeteries. Every one knows it's only bad luck holding you back, and bad luck's bound to change."

"I'm tired of hearing that. Where's Mac?"

The short, stocky Canadian came up at that moment with Harry, who had gone to deposit his cap and coat in the cloakroom as soon as Peter met Pauline.

"Let's grab our table quick," Mac said. "I'm hungry. How about you, Pauline?"

"I could eat a horse."

"You may have to. Part of one, anyhow. We never ask questions about the meat nowadays."

"It will be goat," Harry decided. "Kid, if we're lucky. I don't dislike it."

"Nor do I," said Pauline. "We're lucky to be able to get meat at all."

"I hope the next convoy brings some beef."

"Sure it will, Mac exclaimed. "In the tin. Straight from Chicago."

"Never mind, we'll celebrate when it arrives."

"If it arrives."

"Let's not talk about the war," said Pauline. "Let's forget it for a while."

Mac gave the order, and then asked what they would drink. Peter noticed how his manner had changed now Pauline was present. He never swore nor talked about his past life, and he told no risqué stories. Peter supposed this was, in a way, a tribute

to the girl. He wondered if she guessed how much effort this unaccustomed discipline cost the Canadian.

Harry said he would drink either lemonade or the apricot-flavoured cordial called tamarinda, and surprisingly it was not Mac but Pauline who commented on his choice.

"But you can't drink a toast in that," she protested.

"What toast are we going to drink?" Peter asked.

"To all of us. The four of us."

Harry leaned forward across the table, his smooth boyish face frowning.

"Do you really mean I'd spoil the evening if I——"

"Well, it would be nice, for once. It couldn't do you any harm, could it? One glass?"

"All right, then."

So the waiter brought a big flask of Chianti, a rarity, a treasure, a privilege.

When Harry tasted it, he pulled a face.

"Now don't think all drink's as bad as this," Mac admonished him. "Chianti's sour and tart because it's an Eyetie wine, and the Eyeties use a lot of oil in their cooking. One counteracts the other. Still, better Chianti than nothing."

"This meat's delicious. I was hungry."

"You'd never think, the way these goats smell, they'd be good to eat."

"Oh, I don't know. What about pigs?"

"It'll be wizard to get back to bacon and eggs for breakfast, every morning, when the war's over."

"Forget the war."

"I was trying to."

They drank to their friendship, and then Peter insisted on a toast to Mac and his double air victory that afternoon.

Afterwards he whispered to Pauline: "Look at Harry! He's taking very small sips to make sure his glass hasn't been refilled."

She whispered back. "I'm glad. Perhaps I shouldn't have objected to his lemonade? He's only a boy, after all."

"Harry's all right. He's got his head screwed on the right way."

A moment later, Pauline said, still whispering:

"That was very sweet of you, Peter."

"What?"

"Proposing the toast to Mac."

"I'm not jealous, if that's what you mean. Mac's a better pilot than I'll ever be, and I know it."

But the Canadian was calling for attention. "The next toast is Peter. We want him to know what we think of him. We want him to know we believe in him. And here's to the end of his bad luck—may it change soon."

When they had drunk that, Pauline said to Peter: "He's a dear, isn't he?"

And then Peter was not so sure he felt no jealousy. Mac was a grand fellow, among men, but with women—Pauline must have been the first good-looking girl, except his sisters, if he had any sisters, to whom Mac had not tried to make love at sight. It was queer, that. Queer, the way Mac seemed to change his whole personality when Pauline was about. She had no idea

what sort of a man he really was. He respected her. They all respected her. They were firm friends, all four of them, an alliance—and it had all happened in ten days, these past ten days of strain and hazard. Though no one had said anything openly, it was understood between them that each of the four was equal with the others, and affection was never to be complicated by desire. That had arisen from Pauline's attitude. She was not exactly one of themselves, because they were never ribald in front of her, but they spent most of their free time together, the four of them, they used Christian names, they were all good friends. Pauline was boyish; almost like a boy with them, intimate but cool. Almost like a boy. Not quite. Mac had once said: "She hasn't realised she's a woman yet." But Mac himself had realised it. Only, he was not taking advantage of his knowledge. Why not? Because he respected Pauline? Because he knew he wasn't the sort of man she would want? He could get round that objection easily enough. The way he behaved with her, she would never be able to guess the way he behaved with other women. Harry, of course, didn't count: he was still wrapped up in schoolboy idealism. Harry was an innocent. He didn't even feel temptation. Or did he? Harry was a bit queer to-night, and it could not be accounted for by one glass of unaccustomed wine.

They ought to drink to Harry! Peter rapped on his glass, and made his little speech. "The next toast is Harry. Never mind the Junkers he got to-day. That's only what we expected. I give you Harry, the

brave boy who is not afraid to look on the wine when it's red. Here's to Harry. May he always be as nice as he is now."

"And that," said Mac, "leaves us one more to finish the bottle before we dance. The principal toast of the evening. Pauline. Our pal."

"If you don't mind," said Harry suddenly, "I claim the privilege."

And, unlike the others, he made it quite a ceremony, pushing his chair back and standing up. "Gentlemen, we're leading a crazy sort of life. Living on our nerves, I suppose. We're fighting for something we all believe in, but sometimes"—he glanced round at the tables and the small dance floor, where revelry was now becoming noisy and unrestrained—"it's not always easy to believe that what we're fighting for is worth it. That makes our debt to Pauline all the greater. If ever we're in danger of losing sight of our ideals, she is always there to remind us that there is goodness and decency left in the world. I'm not going to shoot a line about that. But I do want you to know, Pauline, how much it's meant to all of us, knowing you and being friends with you."

And, afterwards, it was Harry who was first to ask her to dance.

Peter and Mac sat smoking and watching them.

"Solemn young devil, isn't he!" said Mac.

"He's naïve, that's all. Pauline took it very well."

"She was almost crying before he'd finished."

"I noticed that too," Peter admitted.

"It's because she knows any one of us may be killed

to-morrow or the next day. She knows, but she's got too much sense to talk tearful. Thanks be! But she knows, and she thinks about it."

"Maybe that's why she goes out of her way to be so decent to us. It's funny, Mac. Somehow I didn't think you'd be the sort to bother with Pauline. On her terms, I mean."

"No funny business, eh? Well, it's a new experience for me. Yeah, it's a rum go. Three of us fond of her, and none of us trying to get any further. You think I'm too much of a womaniser to appreciate Pauline? Maybe. But I've never denied there were good women in the world. Only most of them don't interest me. And most of them aren't half as good looking as Pauline."

"Aren't you going to dance with—what's her name?"

"Manuela? I shouldn't be surprised if I did! Later on. After Pauline's gone."

"You may be leaving it too late. The girl's got someone else in tow."

Mac turned round to watch Manuela sitting at a table in a recess with a bald-headed engineer from the Dockyard. She caught his glance at once. He waved, and then, turning back to Peter, said: "That's only business. She gets a percentage on the drinks. They always do in these places. And a commission for every dance. And a tip as well. I can put an end to what's going on over there any minute I choose."

Half an hour before midnight, Pauline, accepting a hint from Peter, decided it was time for her to leave.

The decorum of the early part of the evening was wearing thin. Harry declared he would see her back to her quarters and Peter, though he had no interest in staying, elected to let Harry go with her alone. He knew the boy wanted to get away from the Dinkum as quickly as possible.

“Thank you all for a very nice evening,” Pauline said. And then, cool, brisk, boyish: “And good luck for to-morrow.”

Peter wondered if she meant that specially for him.



CHAPTER FOUR

MANUELA danced the last dance and prepared to say good-bye to her pilot friend, the one they all called Mac. It was recognised now among the other girls that he was hers, her special property, to cherish and exploit whenever he appeared at the Dinkum. He asked her if he could see her home and when she thanked him and said no, he accepted her refusal at once.

“O.K. I ought to be in bed already.”

“You are to fly again to-morrow?” she asked anxiously.

“That’s an official secret, and anyway, Manuela, you’re not cut out for a beautiful spy.”

“A spy? Me? What do you mean? I am Maltese. I am loyal.” She was tense with indignation. All Malta was fervently proud of being British, proud of its police force with dark blue uniforms and tall helmets, like the London police, and proud that only English money was used on the island.

“My, what eyes you’ve got.” Mac laughed and patted her on the shoulder. “Don’t be dumb, kid. It was a joke, see? Because you asked me if I’d be operational to-morrow. That’s all. Just a little joke.”

“I do not like jokes of that kind.”

"O.K. I won't do it again."

"I am Maltese. I am a British citizen, like you. I hate the Nazis and the Italian Fascists."

"O.K., Manuela. No one doubts it. You are not a spy, but you *are* beautiful. Very beautiful."

That made her smile. He had never come so near to saying he loved her and wanted her. Always he made jokes, always he said the opposite of what he meant. He had a word for it—kidding. He kidded her all the time. He was very nice, but he would never be serious. The only time men were serious in the Dinkum was when they were drunk. Mac never got drunk. She was glad of that, except that if he got drunk he might become serious about her for a while. He might show some sentiment. But then it would not mean anything. She was used to seeing men who had had too much whisky or rum—there was no champagne left—sitting at tables with tears running down into the sweat on their faces while they talked in sobbing voices to girls who pretended to sympathise and then winked and grimaced when the men were not looking. She did not want Mac to be serious about her in that way.

They walked to the door together and up the steps and out into the moonlight, falling clean and cool on the blasted windows, the broken roofs, and piled up rubble of the street.

"Fresh air!" Mac explained. "One thing about Malta—you can always smell the sea. Seems to be quiet to-night."

"They've been over once already, since blackout,"

said one of the other pilots. "Dropped their stuff the far side of the Dockyard, Vittoriosa way."

"You got far to go?" Mack asked her.

Manuela shook her head. She did not tell him she had to cross the Marsamxett Harbour—the way to Sliema by road was long, longer than ever since half the streets were blocked by bomb damage. She did not want him to know where she lived, because it was a hovel, nothing better than a one-story hut, and dirty, smelling of fish. She never told him anything that was precisely a lie, but she had dropped enough hints to mislead him into believing she came from—not one of the wealthy families of Malta, who lived in old palaces, dating from the time of the Knights of St. John, or at least in mansions with, in peacetime, dozens of servants to wait on them. No, she would not try to deceive him so far as that. But he must have the impression by now that she lived in a comfortable, middle-class home, with silver for the table on Sundays and feast days, and carpets on the floor, and big, expensive furniture. And once or twice she had covered her tracks even there, referring casually to her home as if it had been bombed, not damaged irreparably, but enough to make her seek temporary accommodation elsewhere. She was proud of that phrase: she had read it once in *The Times of Malta*, the newspaper which appeared every day despite all that the Luftwaffe and the Regia Italia could do to destroy the normal life of the island. And the other impression he must have received from her casual, elusive conversation was that she was a girl with a

personality of her own, a girl with caprices which an indulgent family permitted because her charm held them all under a spell: and one of her caprices was to come to the Dinkum in the evenings, not because she needed to earn money—absurd idea!—but because she liked dancing, liked to enjoy herself, liked to meet nice people such as Mac. Especially Mac.

He bent over her—he was not tall for an Englishman—no, no; she must remember, he was Canadian!—but he was tall enough to have to bend when he wanted to kiss her. He had never kissed her before. And now his kiss avoided her frankly pursed mouth and dropped, cool and casual, on her cheek.

“Good-night, kid,” he said. “See you soon.”

That was all.

Some of the other girls brushed past her in the door-way, giggled, and one of them said: “Not getting very far, are you, Manuela?”

She hated them all! All of them! All going off with men now. She could steal their men from them easily enough—if she wanted to. But it was Mac she wanted—and all he did was to kiss her on the cheek and walk off with Peter and his other friends.

The sirens sounded the alert when she was crossing the creek beyond Fort Manoel. At one moment everything was tranquillity, the old palaces and churches of Valetta rising in steep angular terraces from the edge of the water, and looking too insubstantial to have been crumpled and burst open by bombs. The Valetta heights were reflected by the moonlight in the level waters of the harbour: the image glistened, silvery

pale, scarcely quivering, not so brilliant, but, to Manuela's eyes, still lovelier than when it was reflected by the noonday sun. A beautiful silver scene, though it was familiar and Manuela, sleepy-eyed, felt the chill of the night air. She huddled into her coat, and pulled her coat collar closer round her throat. Her old scarf was dirty, stained by carrying home scraps of food for Carmel. She needed a new scarf. Soon she would be able to afford it. Then the sirens started their melancholy wail of foreboding; the boatmen cursed; the passengers crossed themselves and called for more speed. On shore, from here and there, unseen, came the noise of cars and lorries and ambulances spluttering and racing their engines, and searchlights began to sweep, slender and only partly effective against the moonlight, this way and that into the skies. At last the boat drew into the great pool of shadow cast by the modern town of Sliema, spread over lower slopes on the far side of the inlet.

Manuela was the third passenger ashore. She had been sitting in the stern of the boat, but she was nimble and anxiety made her urgent. As she ran off through the streets, watchful to avoid any ambulance or rescue lorry or mobile anti-aircraft gun which might come careening round a corner, she thought of her young brother. Ridiculous to bother about him, when from nine o'clock to nearly two she had been carefree at the Dinkum. Carmel, like all the boys of Malta, knew how to look after himself. He had all the Maltese stolidity and commonsense. He might be in a shelter already, and, if she could have been sure, she would have gone now to the nearest shelter she

could find. Lots of people spent every night in the long rock-walled galleries hewn into the hillsides. There was room there for the whole population, for all except those who had duties to perform, actively resisting the enemy. The authorities had even opened the catacombs, and people slept happily and safely among the tombs and sacred relics of the faithful who had died centuries before. But the hovel which Manuela's father clung to as his family home lay on the outskirts of the town; most of the bombs fell near the harbours and the Dockyard and, unless the raids were very prolonged and intense—some of them went on continuously all night and then through the day—Carmel preferred to stay at home. Unless, again, his father was in one of his drunken bouts.

The guns were firing now, harsh ejaculations of sound overlapping each other. All the guns seemed to be firing. That meant many bombers! A big raid! Manuela hurried on, keeping in shadow wherever she could; to feel that one was not observed gave a comforting illusion of safety. Now and again she looked up to watch the shells bursting like crimson sparks, momentary and remote, apparently among the stars. They were bursting over Valetta. The attack was once again to be on the Grand Harbour, then; not the airfields. She was glad, because of Mac. But when the enemy raided the harbours a lot of the bombs were sure to fall in Sliema. She hoped she would not find Carmel at home.

But he was there, lying under the ragged, threadbare blankets in his corner, wide awake, his arms behind his head.

“You ought to have stayed,” he told her. “It’s not safe to be out in the streets with all that shrapnel coming down.”

“It’s not safe for you to be here. They are going to bomb Valetta.”

The first bomb exploded as she spoke. Then another. And another. Not very near. But the old hut built of loosely cemented stones rocked and shook.

“Come on, we’ll go to a shelter.”

“I’ve been to a shelter. For the first raid. Then I thought it was all over. So I came home.”

“You should have stayed. Come on. Get up.”

“What about him?”

Manuela turned and saw her father, still dressed, lying on the one good bed in the room. A coat and a blanket had been thrown over him. He was sleeping heavily.

“That’s why I went to the shelter,” Carmel explained. “He was drunk but strong. He cursed me a lot and took off his belt. So I went. I wasn’t afraid of the Germans.”

Two more bombs! Nearer!

“Don’t boast!”

“I’m not boasting. But I’m not afraid. Not much. This afternoon a Messerschmitt tried to machine-gun me.”

Manuela caught her breath.

“But it didn’t. Father Julian was with me. He says I saved his life.”

“You can tell me about that afterwards. Get up now.”

"All right."

The boy was fully dressed, except for the overcoat he quickly pulled on. It was the new coat Father Julian had given him. Now the warmer weather was coming, he rarely wore it except at night.

Manuela went to the sleeping man and shook him violently by the shoulder.

"Father! Father! You must get up! There's a raid on. A bad raid."

"If the bombs don't waken him," said Carmel, "you won't."

"We can try to carry him to the shelter."

"With his weight!" The boy shook his head. "He slept through the first raid. At least, I expect he did. He'll sleep through this."

"It seems awful to leave him here. Look, Carmel, you go. I'll stay."

"Not on your life." He repeated the phrase and added proudly, "That's what the Spitfire pilots say. I saw a Spitfire shoot down two Messers this afternoon. I wonder which one of them did it?"

"It was Mac, if you want to know."

"Did he tell you himself? Did he describe it all?"

"No, someone else told me."

"That's how it would be. Mac wouldn't shoot a line about it," said Carmel. "He's the best of them all."

Manuela smiled at him then.

"Come on." She blew out the candle in the lantern. They crouched at the doorway as more bombs fell.

"About four hundred yards away," Carmel guessed.

Manuela glanced back as she shut the door. But for Carmel she would have stayed, but without her he would refuse to go. She wondered at the good fortune some people had, with mothers to look after them, and fathers who were sober and reliable.

In the shelter, dimly lit, most of the people were already asleep. When she had said her prayers, Manuela went across to Carmel.

"Before I forget," she whispered, "here it is, for this week."

She had ten shillings, three florins and four shilling pieces in her hand. She held them out to him.

But Carmel would not take the money.

"No," he said. "Thank you, but I won't."

"Why not?"

"I don't need it."

"Carmel, have you been gambling?"

He shook his head.

"What is it, then?"

"Nothing. I don't need the money."

"I'll keep it for you, for next week."

"I shan't take it next week, or any week. But thank you, Manuela."

Puzzled and hurt, she went back to where the young girls and the unmarried women had their rough beds in a series of bays off the rock gallery.

It was only as she was almost asleep that she remembered Carmel saying that Father Julian had been with him during the afternoon. She clenched her mind round that thought, to examine it closely at a more suitable opportunity.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE NEXT MORNING Pauline stayed in bed till nine o'clock. This was because she was to spend the whole day off duty. This freedom came once in every ten days and made an occasion. While she bathed she heard the guns greeting the first daylight raiders, but by the time she had dressed herself the sirens were blowing the All Clear and the red flag was being lowered from the masthead on the highest hill in Valetta. She wished that her three pilot friends also were having a free day, but such coincidences were not easy to arrange. Then, remembering what had happened the previous night, what her dreams had blissfully omitted to consider, she frowned unhappily. It looked as though things could never be the same again. Not for a while. The unspoken pact between herself and the three men had been broken—though two of them knew nothing about what had happened. Nor should they ever know. If the boy had the sense not to talk, if he would only realise that a foolish mistake, though it should never have happened at all, might be covered over and healed by time and commonsense, the pact could be renewed. The four-fold friendship could pick up again. Pauline valued that friendship. It was queer that it should be endangered by the one

man among the three she had never, not even for a second in her most private feelings, thought of "like that." She blamed herself. She ought to have seen the way things were drifting, and prevented that absurd, humiliating, embarrassing contretemps.

In the afternoon she was to meet Angela, the nurse at the military hospital, who had lent her the evening frock she wore at the Dinkum. It would have been a relief to tell Angela about last night and ask her advice. Angela was only two years older, but she was married, and therefore she ought to understand men. Or so Pauline imagined. But Pauline also despised women who trotted off after every mild adventure they achieved by chance or scheming to pick it over in words with some other woman. A pilot whom she had reckoned to be merely a friend, one of four co-equals with no emotional nonsense between them, had lost his head for a minute or two, kissed her, tried to make love to her—and had been deeply chagrined when she did not respond. That was all. He had been very contrite afterwards. What was it Peter had said, proposing that toast? "May he always be as nice as he is now." It had not taken Harry long to make nonsense of that. Yet she was irritated rather than angry. He had not been horrid even when he had his arms round her in the shadows of the *carozza* and had not yet understood that her attempts to evade his kisses were not merely conventional struggles but earnest and determined. He wore such a hangdog look when he said good-night that she had been tempted to laugh and pat his cheek. That very

impulse indicated that she did not take him seriously. He had meant no harm. Harry was only a boy, and a decent boy, and if he had made a mistake, the least she could do was to keep his secret. Pretend it all arose from the fact that he was not accustomed to wine. One glass! So Angela would never know. No one would ever know.

Pauline hurried off into Sliema to breakfast, off coffee and rolls, on the terrace of a café; a day off duty was a luxury not to be wasted in futile introspections. She intended to get all the fresh air and sunshine she could. The war gave to a few hours of freedom and leisure a sacramental quality, a definition and a golden patina, making it glow like a painting by Vermeer of Delft. You treasured every moment, for its own sake, and to retain afterwards in memory. From where she sat in front of the café there were a dozen bomb-ruined buildings in view, yet the shattered walls, the piled-up rubble, the great blocks of masonry tumbled this way and that, all looked lovely to her eyes, fantastically shaped, the tawny stone glittering warm in the morning sunshine, and with tall campion flowers already sprung up among the rubble, and geraniums, in bud now, straggling over broken walls and balustrades.

On one ruin at the end of the street, however, no flowers had yet rooted. It was too recent. It was—it had been—a church. Closing her eyes, she could recall its former appearance; classical pillars, a flight of steps, a gilded cupola. Yes! Everyone had marvelled that the church had survived so long with no more

damage than the blasting out of its windows. But now the cupola was blown off and the walls showed torn edges. The steps survived, and most of the pillars, with fragments of the carved capitals still in place. But the great doors had been blown from their hinges and now through the gap she could see into the interior of the church. It was no longer dark there; the sunshine streamed unimpeded through a large hole in the roof. Chairs had been tossed in grotesque and shattered disorder against the walls. But the altar seemed to be intact and a priest was kneeling there, without alb or surplice, a thin, grey-haired priest in a black soutane. It felt like an act of trespass to watch him, alone amidst the wreckage of his church, in the solitary communion of prayer. Pauline averted her gaze.

When she called for her bill, however, curiosity made her ask the waiter about the church.

"It must have been a big bomb," she said.

"Two bombs. Both big. One outside, and then the other burst right in the chancel. It was my church. Every morning I went to Mass there."

What could she say? Something! Anything! Quick!

"I hope there is another you can go to?"

"It will not be the same. Perhaps we shall have services there, in daylight, in the ruins. When it has been tidied up. The altar, as you see, still stands. But the next raid, that may go. And so Father Julian—look, miss, you can see him. He has been at his prayers more than an hour now. He is a good priest.

It is a heavy blow for him. He will decide what to do."

"When did it happen? This morning? Last night?"

"No, miss. Yesterday. In the afternoon. And Father Julian was not here. The first time for months he has been out of Sliema. A great grief to him, that it happened when he was not here."

She crossed the harbour to Valetta in a scarlet-painted *dghaisa*, with a blade-shaped ornament vertical at bows and stern. All the men left to work the ferries were very old. Already the sunshine was fierce and warm; they said it would be too hot by April to go out without a hat. She was glad to find herself in the narrow, shaded streets, winding steeply uphill from the waterfront. She refused to ride in one of the horse-drawn carriages the Maltese called *carozzas* and the British, importing a name from India, *gharries*, but presently she tired of the city; it was impossible to walk a hundred yards without coming on a wrecked building or a mass of stone *débris* blocking the roadway. She made her way southwest through Floriana and had just come in sight of open country when the sirens began to wail the Alert. The harsh, undulating noise, as always, rasped her nerves. She felt a relief when it ceased. By that time the anti-aircraft guns, big four-point-sevens, sited in concrete pits at the other side of the road, had begun to fire. She stared up into the sky to watch the bursts, long seconds after the deafening breech explosions. A mobile Bofors gun, mounted on a lorry, came up the road and halted a hundred yards away. But it did

not open fire. The Stukas—she could count fifteen of them at least—were too high. The Bofors would wait till they reached the bottom of their dive. It would wait also until the Messerschmitt fighter planes, at present mere twinkling points of light nearly twenty thousand feet up, elected to come down for a dog-fight or to machine-gun ground targets.

The barrage was in full operation now, hundreds of guns in and around Valetta all firing and—high overhead—the shells bursting in brief crimson flares and lingering puffs of smoke.

Pauline suddenly became aware that an officer was beckoning to her from the four-point-seven battery. He stood behind a circular sandbag rampart, a little distance away from his guns. She ran across to him and when she arrived he was talking fast into the mouthpiece of a telephone.

“O.K. Range 8000. Bearing as before,” he said, and had no sooner spoken the words than they were repeated by the man at the gun controls, who moved discs and levers as he spoke.

The officer turned to Pauline. “You’d better get down into the dug-out,” he said sternly. “It’s liable to be hot round here. That’s one of the jobs these chaps come to do—knock out my guns.”

“I’m all right,” she shouted back through the noise of the breech explosions.

“Here comes the first dive,” the officer exclaimed, turning his attention away from her.

She watched the Stuka, far away, diminished, sliding nose-down, apparently slow, into the barrage.

Into the telephone, the officer said: "The first one's started. How about the range? O.K. We'll stick to 8000, if someone else looks after that. Yes, we've got the Bofors here if they come in low."

Watching the sky again, he said: "There go the bombs. Not near us. The Harbour's the target. But the others may have a crack at us. Some of them, anyway. You never can trust the swine. Some day they stick to one target. Others, they drop 'em all over the place." Then to Pauline: "I told you to get into that dug-out."

"But I want to stay and see it all. I'm off duty and I never get a chance to see anything."

"What's your job?"

"Plotter. Fighter Control Room."

"A hundred feet underground! Very nice, too! What do you want to come up here for?"

"I'm sick to death of moving things about on a table. I want to see my Spitfires in action."

"*Your* Spitfires?"

"Yes. I look after them. And the pilots are all my friends."

"Well, come in here behind the sandbags. And don't get in the way. And for the love of Mike put your tin hat on."

"You're not very hospitable," Pauline protested, as she made her way behind the circular rampart.

The officer did not reply. He was using his field glasses.

"Another Stuka diving. Christ Almighty! All the

muck we send up, and not a bloody scrap of it seems to hit the swine."

"Spits! Spits! I can see the Spits!" one of the artillery men shouted.

"You're right," the officer admitted. "There's a Spit right on his tail."

Fascinated, their ears deafened by the noise of the guns, they stared, watching the German bomber sliding down in its steep dive, with the smaller British plane immediately behind it, slowly overtaking it, both of them surrounded by bursting shells.

"Fire! Fire!" Pauline shouted. "Now's the time."

"Not yet," the officer reproved her. "Those Spitfire boys can do the job. They make sure before they press the button."

"Don't I know it!"

The gunner officer, his head tilted back, had pursed his lips to whistle a tune but Pauline could not hear.

He stopped whistling and shouted to her: "That's what I call courage. Diving after a Hun right into our own barrage. Now watch. He's going to open fire. Got him! Got him!"

The Stuka was suddenly enveloped in flame and smoke. Then there was no Stuka.

"That was us, sir," some shouted excitedly. "It wasn't the Spit got him. It was us."

"How do you know?" Pauline asked indignantly, feeling that the honour of her three pilot friends was imperilled.

"He blew up, bombs and all," the officer explained.

"I'll put in a claim for that one right away. Hallo! There's a parachute."

A little below where the Stuka had exploded in the air a tiny canopy of white silk had unfolded; just beneath it a dark spot was swaying.

"One of them's baled out."

"Impossible," said the officer. "Not after an explosion like that."

"Where's that Spit?" a corporal asked.

The officer and Pauline stared at the sky, but it was some time before they saw the Spitfire. It was much lower than they had expected, falling in a straight line, twisting as it fell and with a long trail of smoke behind it.

"Hell! That's one of our chaps baled out!"

One of the Spitfire pilots! Peter? Or Mac? Or Harry? Falling slowly through the air, wounded already perhaps, and with the anti-aircraft shells bursting all round.

"Quick!" said Pauline to the gunner officer. "Tell them to shift the barrage! That part of it, anyhow. Tell them to fire on visual targets. Quick! Or else your guns'll kill him."

"If we move the barrage, the Messerschmitts may get in and machine-gun the poor blighter."

"No, they won't. The other two Spits will see to that."

"O.K."

He spoke urgently into the telephone, but it seemed a long time, though it was only a matter of a minute or two, before the shells began to burst in

a different part of the sky, away from the slowly dropping parachute.

"It'll be five minutes before he's down, poor blighter," said the officer. "Hope he's alive."

The parachute sank a little lower, drifting with the wind, down the channel of clear sky and safety prepared for it. All round the shells burst, as other Stukas dived to drop their bombs, and then the Messerschmitts came down, in formation of three in line.

"I was afraid so," said the officer.

But the Messerschmitts never got near the parachute. Every time they approached, two Spitfires held them off, darting, wheeling, banking, always intercepting. It was impossible to hear anything but the reverberation from the gun-breeches, but Pauline knew the Spitfires were firing their cannon and machine-guns. Two of her friends were safeguarding the third. Which of them was it had baled out?

The officer moved a switch on the radio-telephone and suddenly said: "Bofors? Look out. Me.s coming our way."

To Pauline he said: "Duck!"

He put a hand on her shoulder and thrust her down beside him, till they were both crouching behind the sandbags.

A pause. Then the Bofors began its rapid, angry ejaculations. Peering up, Pauline could see the tracer shells streaming in swift succession overhead, glowing pink, each apparently speeding to overtake its predecessor.

“Low trajectory,” grunted the officer. “Those Me.s are hedge-hopping. Keep down! Lower!”

Next there came a crescendo of engine noise; then a stutter of machine-guns, and bullets thudded into the sandbag rampart. Then the Messerschmitts roared over their heads, green and apparently huge. Three of them. The officer sprang to his feet. The Bofors had stopped firing. It began again.

“Good shooting!” said the officer. “He’s hit. That one’s hit.”

Pauline peered over the sandbags and saw two of the Messerschmitts making away, and the long muzzle of the Bofors swinging to follow them. The third Messerschmitt, far behind, even while she watched it, suddenly dipped its nose and dived into the ground.

A cheer went up from the gun pits.

“That’s two!” the officer exclaimed. “Not so bad. One for the big boys, and one for the Bofors.”

He took a rapid glance round the sky.

“Cease fire. But stay at readiness.”

To Pauline he added: “Doubt if they’ll come back for any more. And the Stukas have beetled off home already. Well, young lady, have you had enough excitement for one morning? Don’t forget I warned you. But if I’d known how it was going to turn out, I’d have taken you by the scruff of the neck and pitched you down that dug-out myself.”

A sergeant came running from the Bofors gun.

“One man wounded, sir. Robinson. In the leg.”

“Badly?”

"Might be worse, sir. The M.O. knows. He's sent for an ambulance."

The ambulance arrived almost at once; there was a hospital not far away. The ambulance already had two stretcher cases inside. The wounded gunner was loaded in. Pauline climbed on to the seat beside the driver.

"Where are you going?" the officer asked.

"To the hospital. I've got to go there anyhow."

"Well, it's the likeliest place to find that chap who baled out. Do you know who it is?"

"How can I tell? I only know he's one out of three."

"All friends of yours?" the officer asked, with a grin.

"Yes," said Pauline defiantly. "All of them."

"Pretty girl that, sir," said the sergeant as the ambulance drove off.

"Pretty? Yes. I'd have asked her to stay to lunch but she wasn't in the mood. These R.A.F. wallahs have all the luck. Three of them! No, it can't be. She's not that type. I wonder which——"



CHAPTER SIX

THE pilot who had baled out was Peter. As soon as Pauline heard, she felt that she had known from the first, from the moment she had first seen the white parachute "developing" among the shell-bursts. She told herself that she would have felt just the same misery of helpless anxiety if it had been Mac or Harry, and at once began to wonder if the assurance so glibly and quickly offered to her heart was a lie. Peter was not badly hurt; the surgeon on duty was examining him when she arrived at the hospital. He was to come to Angela's ward, and Angela told her to wait. Angela was busy, preparing a bed with extra blankets and hot-water bottles. When the telephone rang at the end of the ward, Angela asked her to answer it.

The call was from Mac. He and Harry, with a reserve pilot who was to take Peter's place with a Spitfire just made "serviceable" by the ground staff, were "at readiness": they waited ready to take off at the dispersal point near the blast-pens built round the edge of the airfield, the blast-pens which guarded grounded aircraft against bombing and gunning. Neither of Peter's friends could leave till their tour of duty ended in the late afternoon. Mac asked a lot

of questions. Pauline repeated what Angela had told her: a fractured forearm and a burn on the same arm, the left one, from the wrist to the elbow; also a cut across the forehead; all caused by fragments of exploding Stuka. The injuries were not dangerous; what the doctors feared most was shock. Peter had been very close to the Stuka when it blew up; his Spitfire was blasted upwards, the hood ripped off, the wing torn, the engine damaged and set on fire. He had only a few seconds in which to make his jump, and, as he must have been dazed when he did it, his actions could only have been instinctive, automatic, the product of good training.

"I always said he was a first-class pilot," Mac asserted.

"You kept the Messerschmitts away from him, you and Harry."

"How do you know?"

"I was watching it all," Pauline said. "It's my day off, you know."

"The main thing was, the Ack-Ack were on the lookout and shifted the barrage."

"I know. I made them do it."

She had to explain that to Mac. He said, lapsing for once into the Transatlantic slang he usually tried to avoid in speaking to her: "Gee, you're a swell kid!" He made her promise to telephone the airfield as soon as she had seen Peter—"leave a message for us, if we're in the air"—and to tell Peter that both his friends would come to the hospital as soon as their duties permitted.

While she waited, Pauline talked to the other patients, soldiers, sailors, airmen. Two were Germans: Stuka pilots. Another was an Italian; his leg had been amputated and he rejoiced every day that he need never again take an active part in the war. One of the Germans spoke English, slowly but correctly. He said to Pauline: "So you have another Spitfire pilot shot down to-day? Soon you will have none left."

"He wasn't shot down, and he will be flying again in a few weeks," she said. "But your fighters tried to kill him while he was coming down by parachute."

The German, sitting up in bed, propped with pillows, shrugged his shoulders. "That is war. A pilot is more valuable than his aircraft. You must not be sentimental in war."

Angela came up then. "You're talking again," she admonished the German. "And as for being sentimental! You were sentimental enough before your wounds began to heal."

"I was not myself then," the German replied solemnly. "This Spitfire pilot who comes to that bed—is he an ace? Has he achieved many victories!"

"Dozens!" said Angela. "But don't ask him about them. He will say he has done nothing. It is the famous English modesty."

"Hypocrisy!" the German corrected.

Angela winked at Pauline, and then hurried off. Peter was being brought into the ward in a wheeled chair, and Pauline felt her heart expand and contract painfully as she saw how pale he was.

He was surprised to find her there.

"I say, you are a pal!"

The inadequate, inexpressive words meant much to her.

"Don't be silly," she said briskly. "Of course I had to come."

English modesty? Or was the German right—was it hypocrisy? She felt far more than she could reveal in her voice and her eyes. She had not expected to feel so much, and surprise made her guard her behaviour more closely than ever. Did Peter keep back the intensity of his emotions in the same way? Or was there no intensity in his feelings towards her?

He had a bandage round his head—the cut had been stitched—and his broken forearm was carried in a sling. He was still wearing his flying suit, and he protested vehemently when he was brought to the bed, round which, with professional deftness, Angela rapidly arranged screens.

"What's all this?" Peter demanded.

"Now don't be silly. We're going to put you to bed. You've got to rest. Besides, you're under observation."

"I'm all right. Let me go back to camp. All I want is to come here once a day to have the dressings seen to. I feel fine. All this fuss. It's not necessary."

"That's because you're still excited."

"Nothing to be excited about."

"I warn you," said Angela, "in a little while you'll begin to feel rotten. Sick and shivering. When the reaction sets in. Now, be sensible. Do as you're told."

An orderly came up, peered round the screen, and

told Angela she was wanted urgently. Another patient, the Italian, had started a hæmorrhage.

"Blast!" Angela exclaimed. "It would happen when we're so short-handed. I'll have to go. Look, Pauline, help him to get undressed."

"But I'm not a nurse!"

"Doesn't need any training!"

That was just like a married woman to assume it was as simple as all that, stripping a young man of his clothes and bundling him into bed. It would have been bad enough with a man she didn't know from Adam, or care two hoots about. As it was—she felt angry with herself, knowing her cheeks were tingling. The knowledge made her still more confused.

Peter was alarmed too.

"What about that orderly?" he called after Angela.

"He's got plenty to do."

Peter sat on the bed, and suggested: "Suppose we wait till they're not so busy?"

But Pauline saw that already tiny, uncontrollable shudders were running through all his muscles, making his hands tremble. He sat there looking paler than before, clenching his teeth to prevent them chattering. And to Pauline the atmosphere in the ward seemed warm and close. He must be very ill. No wonder. Every pilot dreaded having to bale out under fire, and he had had to do it with a broken and burnt arm, and his head cut open.

"No," she said. "The sooner you're in bed, the better."

She turned back the sheets and found a suit of

flannel pyjamas folded on top of three hot-water bottles. She took the pyjamas out, and replaced the sheets.

“Come on!”

The zipp fastener of the thick flying suit was already open to the waist, and the burned sleeve had been cut away. She pulled off his fur-lined boots and then it was not difficult to ease him out of the one-piece suit. Then she gently pulled a woollen sweater over his head, unfastened his tie and collar, took off his shirt.

“This is damned embarrassing,” he grunted.

“It’s no better for me.”

“Look!” he exclaimed, when he was sitting in his vest and underpants. “Skip outside those screens a minute. I’ve got one good arm. I’ll give you a call when I want some more help. O.K.?”

She was gone almost before he had finished speaking. From the other side of the screen she heard him moving about, standing and—the bed springs creaked—sitting again. When he called, she found him leaning back on the pillows. He was wearing the trousers of the pyjama suit: from the waist upward he was naked. His skin was very white, smooth, polished.

“Sorry,” he said. “I seem to be terribly tired suddenly. Don’t know why.”

She took the pyjama jacket and put it round his shoulders, supporting his weight on her breast. His body was beautiful, firm, strong: it was merely odd, interesting, and poignant, that at the moment he

should be weak and inert, dependent on her. She slid the right sleeve over his arm, and left the other empty, buttoning the jacket across the sling.

“There!”

When he stretched himself, she covered him quickly. Then she arranged the hot-water bottles in their covers, one at his feet, one at his back, one near his uninjured arm. He became merely a long shape beneath the blankets and a pale, serious face on the pillows, with wisps of dark hair showing under the head-bandage. He was a hospital patient now, not a young man with a deep chest and muscular arms and shoulders.

“You’re a grand sport,” he whispered. “And I haven’t even thanked you.”

“Better not talk.”

He disregarded that. “It was good of you to come. Just like you. Sorry you were let in for all this.”

As if her simple, diffident ministrations had not been one of the experiences of her life, as if, after what he called “all this,” she would ever be the same girl again. He had got in among her emotions, with his beautiful half-naked helplessness. Because of him she had lost something she had prized, her cool, unsexual detachment. She ought to resent the loss. She ought to have a grudge against him. And instead she knew that she loved him. She had loved him long before today. She had known it for the first time—when? When she saw the parachute unfold among the clustering shell bursts and hoped and prayed that the tiny figure swaying at the ends of the cords might

be Harry or Mac, but not Peter. Or the night before, when she was so intent on maintaining the equality of the four-fold friendship, and Harry had been eager to escort her back to her quarters and Peter—damn his stupidity!—had let him? Now she had said good-bye to the cool certainties of comradeship. But he must not suspect. Not yet. Not unless— Those thoughts were absurd and foolish. Peter thought of her as a friend. That was what he called her in his mind, as well as with his tongue: a “real pal,” a “grand sport.” That was the way she had wanted it, and she had no right to be hurt because he took her at her word.

She gave him Mac’s message and added: “I’ll go and telephone the airfield now. They’ll be waiting for news.”

“Tell them I’ll be up and batting again to-morrow.”

Outside the screen, she saw Angela coming away from the Italian’s bed with the physician at her side. Afterwards, when she had telephoned, Angela was waiting for her.

“Thank you for looking after him.”

“Peter? Is he all right?”

“Yes. You packed him in well. That’s what he needed. Warmth. It keeps the shivering fits down.”

“He thinks he’ll be better by to-morrow.”

Angela laughed. “They always do. Those that have guts. It’ll be a week at least before we can be sure he’s over the shock.”

“And that cut on his head?”

“It’s not much. And the burn isn’t severe. But it’ll

take time to heal. And the bone—it's a simple fracture, but you can't expect it to mend for a bit."

Good! The longer Peter was grounded, the longer he would be safe!

"He wants to talk to you again. If you don't go, he'll get himself worked up. But you mustn't stay long. I'll give you five minutes."

When she pulled the screens behind her, Peter turned his head on the pillow. There was more colour in his face now, and he smiled.

"Mac and Harry will be over to see you this evening. I'm told I mustn't stay more than five minutes. Are you comfortable?"

"Much better. I'm warm now. Funny I should feel so cold. Ought to be used to it by this time. Flying," he added in explanation. "Over ten thousand feet, it gets icy cold. That's why we wear all that clobber. And Mac always has a scarf round his throat. But I've never felt as cold as I was just now."

She pulled the bedside chair round to face him.

"How about your arm?"

"O.K. Hurts a bit, of course. And the head's all right too. All the way down the blood kept getting into my eyes. I got very peeved about it. But I was never unconscious. I wish I had been, with all that flak bursting round. I can tell you I was glad when it stopped. Somebody must have been smart, spotting me and calling off the guns."

If I were as honest and direct as I'd like to be, Pauline thought, I'd tell him right now that I did that. The way I told Mac over the telephone. But

Mac would explain, when he came to the hospital. It would be better that way. The fact was, she did not want Peter to say "thank you" and call her his pal, all over again. She wanted love now, not friendship. And she must never admit it, except in her most private thoughts, in her secret waking dreams.

"I've been thinking," said Peter.

"About?"

"About my luck. Do you know, Pauline, I had that Stuka all lined up. I had him fixed. I marked him off and followed him down when he began to dive. I didn't overtake too fast, either, and I kept my ship thirty yards to the right of his tail, so when I opened fire the armour plate behind the seats wouldn't save him. I had it all worked out. I was going to put an end to that run of bad luck. I was going to shoot down my first Hun. I couldn't have missed, I tell you."

"I know. I was watching."

"Were you! You're a marvellous girl, Pauline."

But when he said "girl" he only meant "pal."

"I was just moving my thumb on the button. Just going to press it. I'd closed the range, and throttled back, and I had the Stuka right in the sights—and then it blew up! It's terrific, you know, seeing a big plane like that smash itself to bits. In a second or two. You can't believe it. Not that I had long to watch. The explosion threw my poor old Spit all over the place. Part of the wing came off. I had my hood drawn back and something hit me across the head. I put up my hand and that got hit too. Smashed back

against the top of the cockpit. Then there was flame in the cockpit. And before I knew what I was doing, I'd baled out. Lucky the Spit was upside down at the right moment."

"You've gone through a lot," she told him.

"Not half so much as some chaps. One thing about my luck—it doesn't seem to kill me off, does it?"

"Peter, don't talk like that."

"But I must talk. And you're the only one I can talk to properly. You see what it means! I've baled out twice. I've smashed up two good aircraft. And I still haven't brought down a Hun."

"But it's not your fault," she protested. "Every one knows it's not your fault."

"Listen. This isn't a parlour game I'm in. It's kill or be killed. The only other alternative is to be grounded. Worn out! Dud! Useless! Wouldn't matter so much if I'd a good operational record behind me."

"You mustn't talk like this. Mac and Harry wouldn't let you."

"No. They'd try to laugh it off. They'd jolly me out of it for all they're worth."

"But they're your friends. You can trust what they say."

"No. They'll put on an act after this. I know. I've seen it done to other chaps. Chaps who haven't come up to expectations in training. Not their fault. Nobody's fault. Not the right temperament, that's all. But it's no consolation. Not if you want to fly and

go on flying. And I do, Pauline. I can't talk to Mac and Harry about this. Only to you."

They were beautiful words; they rang sweet in her ears. He set her apart. Perhaps she was still only a friend—but a friend who was different from other friends.

"I'll tell you what they'll do to me, after this. They'll keep sending me to medical boards. They'll work it out that my nerve is gone. Lots of chances—never taken one of them. Baled out twice. They'll reckon I'll never be reliable in the air, after that. They'll want to ground me. And Pauline, they mustn't."

But if he were prevented from flying, honourably prevented, he would be safe. He would survive the war, almost certainly he would survive the war. He would be kept safe—for her!

He twisted in the bed, grimacing with pain, and put out his uninjured hand to hold hers. Very earnestly he said: "Pauline, I want you to listen to what I'm going to say. I haven't lost my nerve. And I'm not a dud pilot. Before this morning, after all the things that went wrong for me, I wasn't sure. Not perfectly sure. I'd begun to doubt. But—I had that Stuka. Nothing could have saved it—except that accursed ack-ack bursting right into it. It was done for, anyway. I knew it then. I know it now. Pauline, I'm going to fight for my own hand. I'm going to insist on getting back to the squadron the first possible moment. They'll try to make me doubt myself. But I won't—if you believe in me. That's what I want to

know. And don't say yes merely to please me. I'd never forgive you for that. You're honest, Pauline. Tell me you believe in me? Tell me you believe I'm worth my place in the squadron?"

And she could not speak.

He loosened his grip on her hand.

"Oh!" he said, in a different voice. "You, too! I see!"

"No, no!" she cried. "It's not that. I believe in you, Peter. I always have. Only——"

He was still suspicious. "Only what?"

"Only, it's like sending you back to—if only you were grounded permanently, I wouldn't always be terrified, every minute of the day, that somewhere you were in danger, crashing, dead already perhaps, for all I'd know."

He laughed. It was the first time he had laughed since he'd come into the hospital, and it was his old laughter, boyish, without care.

"Oh, that!" he said. "Well, there's always the risk, of course."

Risk! They were all shot down sooner or later, the fighter pilots in Malta. It was inevitable against such odds, only a handful of fighter planes to put into the air against Germans coming in tens and twenties. Sometimes three against fifty or more. Sooner or later——!

"You're always outnumbered!" she said. "It's so damnably unfair."

"Oh, there'll be reinforcements coming soon,"

"There's supposed to to be a convoy coming as well. You know what happened to the last one?"

"That means Malta's survived the worst of its luck. And that's what I feel about myself. I've used up everything bad that can happen to me. From now on it's going to be different. Especially now I know you believe in me. You're a real ——"

She obliterated the hateful word by scraping her chair on the floor as she got up.

"Anyhow, you won't be able to fly again for a bit yet."

He laughed at that too. "Sooner than you think. Sooner than any one thinks."



CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR MANUELA the weeks that followed seemed to stumble lamely on their way, dilatory, sharpening her expectations at intervals, never satisfying them. Every Monday morning she went to her brother and offered him money. Always he refused it. She was convinced that he refused because Father Julian had instructed him to do so, and the thought made her slender shoulders stiffen with resentment. Father Julian considered her no better than the other girls at the Dinkum. He sat in judgment on her, without allowing her to plead in her own defense, and he condemned her. He tried to come between her and her brother, whom she loved best in the world—after Mac. He exceeded his rights as a priest. She longed to tell him so. Every morning she resolved to seek him out and tell him to his face what she thought of him. But the day passed, the night came, and invariably she had not seen the priest. Yet she longed to tell him, also, what evidently he did not believe, that she was a good girl and still a virgin. When she thought of Mac she despised her virginity. Mac came to the Dinkum at least twice a week and bought her little presents, danced with her and drank with her, and made his queer jokes. He would not take her

seriously: that made her heart ache, but it made him no less attractive. He must know what she felt about him. He could not expect her to tell him in words. He liked her. He was fond of her. But he did not love her, as she loved him, or else he would stop "kidding" and, when he kissed her, it would not be on the cheek or—even worse, her face burned as she thought of it—on the top of her head. As if she were his young sister! Or a nun!

Mac insulted her. But she loved him. Father Julian insulted her in a different way, through Carmel—and, had he not been a priest, she would have hated him. When she thought of Father Julian she no longer despised her virginity. She became proud of it. It vindicated her. It gave her a status which Father Julian must acknowledge. She longed to see his face when she told him she was ready to swear the most sacred oaths that she was still virtuous. For Mac she would have surrendered all that which enabled her, in her present thoughts, to stand up to Father Julian's criticisms, surrendered it willingly, joyfully, in a rapture. She wanted Mac to love her, fully, as a man should love a woman, without stint or reckoning. And at the same time she wanted to be restored to Father Julian's approbation. She took care never to let the two conceptions overlap in her mind.

Carmel puzzled her. He was wearing a new suit, and new boots, both of good material, and expensive. And he would not say where he had obtained them, or how. But she knew they could not have been

bought out of the tiny wages he earned as a goat-herd. She discovered that he was still visiting the cinema once a week. There could be only one explanation—Father Julian. And then three times she was stopped in the street by the supervisor of the lace-making firm, who offered her work. At good wages. As much money as she earned at the Dinkum, for, because she was not like the other girls there, she took only her fees for dancing, and not many commissions on drinks. And the little presents Mac gave her, which—just to show she was not like the other girls—she never sold. She would not let any other man give her presents. It was only by comparison with the intense poverty of her life hitherto that what she earned at the Dinkum made her feel rich.

She ought to have been thankful to be offered employment at the lace-makers. Before the war thousands of girls worked at lace-making, mostly on the smaller island of Gozo. It was a craft, skilled and beautiful, using not looms but spindles and pins, and Maltese lace was renowned all over the world. Now only a few establishments carried on, making do with cotton because the linen-thread could not be brought to the island. The finished product could not be exported either. It was put to stock. The ships were needed for food and munitions. The ships were sunk, coming and going. The ships were overdue now. She ought to have accepted the offer gratefully. There were hundreds of women in Malta who were expert at lace-making and would have rejoiced to be offered the opportunity. But that only made her sus-

picious. Why did the supervisor come to her, Manuela? Again there could be only one answer—Father Julian. It was all part of a plot, to make Carmel independent of her help, to find her the sort of employment a priest would consider respectable; in brief, to get her away from the Dinkum. And that meant, to get her away from Mac. She saw through it all, and scorned it.

During these weeks the weather was rarely good. First there were high winds raging across the island, driving low clouds before them, and chilly rainstorms. Then, suddenly, came a premature, brief sirocco, and in a day or two the heat dried up all the watercourses, and in place of rain there were dust storms, day and night. The weather tried the nerves. It made every one irritable, but not Manuela, for it meant that there was some respite from air raids, and Mac, with the other pilots, was not in the air more than once or twice a day, and often without having to fight Germans at all. But sometimes, when Manuela expected him at the Dinkum, relying on an off-hand, half-promise, he did not appear, or came very late. And the only explanation he offered was that he had been visiting one of his friends, Peter, at the hospital.

Manuela knew that Peter was being treated for a broken arm, but she had been told it was not a serious injury. It needed time to heal. That was all. Jealously she wondered if Mac were telling the whole truth. She wondered if there were another woman—perhaps that fair-haired English girl who had come to

the Dinkum the night before Peter had to bale out? That was a greedy woman. It was not sufficient for her to have Mac at the table, to drink healths and touch glasses and look into her eyes; no, she must have three men at once. Shameless! So Manuela set her brother to ask questions. Carmel knew all the pilots, and, though he persisted in his refusals to take money from her, he was anxious to be friendly. Carmel came back and reported that it was true Mac visited Peter at the hospital almost every day, talked with him and played cards. The fair-haired woman, Pauline, was sometimes there as well. And the other pilot, Harry. But there was no scandal. They were all just friends. It was the English way. Under her questioning, Carmel suggested that, if there was any love between the three of them, it must be between Peter and Pauline. He had seen them looking at each other, and had formed an idea. But you never could be quite sure with the English. This, Manuela considered, was little enough to go on, but it sufficed to placate her suspicions.

Not only the weather tried the nerves of the people of Malta during those spring weeks. Every day they expected to hear news of the convoy, and every day there was no news. The food rations were further reduced. The military and even the R.A.F. were under orders to conserve petrol. There were rumors that guns were able to fire only at half-rate, for lack of ammunition, that aircraft were being kept on the ground to save petrol. The siege was tightening its grip. Disaster was fended off by two very fast light

cruisers, *Manxman* and *Welshman*, which several times came through alone from the west.

And every night a civil plane, unarmed, flew in from Gibraltar, often in the middle of a raid, with bombs bursting on the runways. The civil plane brought newspapers, orders, very urgent medical stores. It kept Malta in touch with the outside world. It was an assurance, solid, visible, regular, more comforting than all the radio and cable messages in the world, that the island was still part of the Empire, that personal communications were not entirely broken. But civil planes could not bring the vast quantities of food, petrol, oil and ammunition that were essential if Malta was to continue her lonely fight against odds.

The only ships which now put into Valetta were, at rare intervals, submarines, big ocean-going submarines—and they did not come to be refitted and replenished. They came with freight: aero-engine petrol. Some who heard this news were heartened, but the more thoughtful realised that here was a desperate and temporary expedient, a mere alleviation. Only the arrival of a convoy could preserve the island from starvation and impotence. And that meant, ultimately, surrender. All along the vast Russian front the German armies gathered for another summer offensive. Japan had overrun the Pacific islands, almost to the frontiers of Australia. The United States was powerful, but had scarcely begun to recover from the effect of Pearl Harbour. Her armies and her air force were still largely poten-

tialities, plans, marks on paper. Her armies and her air force were far away from Malta. What was near was Italy and North Africa: Sicily, the Luftwaffe base, lay only sixty miles away, with the snow-capped peak of Etna visible in clear weather: and in Libya, across the narrows of the Mediterranean, Rommel, half-way to Egypt, commanded the shores and prepared to advance on Cairo and Alexandria.

One afternoon, in a cafe, Manuela overheard an argument between two men, prominent citizens of Malta. She had no doubt they would not have talked so frankly had they known that a girl, coming to the café alone in the immodest new fashion, had slipped into a chair at the table behind them.

“The situation is worse than you realise.”

“But we must keep a sense of proportion. The people in Britain are short of food also.”

“Yes, but they grow more crops than we can in Malta. This is the most thickly populated piece of land in Europe. And what extra food Britain needs will be brought to her, from America and Canada.”

“If food reaches Britain, it will reach Malta also.”

“That is not so simple. Here is no wide ocean, and the enemy uses the shores, on both sides, as bases for his bombers and his U-boats.” The man who called himself a realist paused to coil the springs of argument. “Besides, it is not only food. There is petrol. And munitions. Shells, bullets, bombs. Britain produces these for herself. She has iron and coal and electric power. Great industries. Malta has none. And that is the whole point. We must view the situ-

ation with detachment. We must set aside our own personal troubles and think of world strategy. What is the function of Malta in the war effort? To guard the centre of the Mediterranean, to provide a link between Gibraltar and Suez. That has always been her task and privilege since the times of the Saracens and when the Knights first brought their Order here from Jerusalem. But Malta can no longer fulfil this function. The naval base is useless. It is too dangerous for warships to refit at the Dockyard except when they are driven to shelter here; and once they are in harbour they are motionless targets for air bombardment. Again, for want of planes and bombs and petrol, few bombers can be sent out from Malta to attack Rommel's forces or his supply routes from Sicily and along the African coast. These are facts, my friend. They are undeniable. They must be faced."

The other man, plump, not accustomed to unhappiness, shifted in his chair, and exclaimed: "Yes, but ——"

"No. You are seeking to evade the issue. Malta has become useless to the United Nations. It is dead wood. Therefore it must be lopped off. And it will be. The convoy will not arrive. And soon we shall find we can fight on no longer."

"But I tell you I have positive information, absolutely reliable, that the convoy left Gibraltar yesterday afternoon."

"Rumours, my friend! Wishful thinking. I have heard that sort of thing so often before. And so have

you. I do not blame the British. It is inevitable. They are merely bringing a realist attitude to bear on the problem."

"You think Hitler will win?"

"Oh no. Not in the long run. But sacrifices must be made for victory. Malta unfortunately is one of them. Like Singapore. Like the Philippines. Like the Channel Islands. It is unpleasant for us who live here. But it would be foolish not to face facts, because they are unpleasant."

"I see what you mean," the plump man conceded. "Yes, I see that Malta is of little value now. All we can do is to defend ourselves a little, to shoot down a few raiders, and keep as cheerful as may be. We do not sustain the Fleet. We do not impede Rommel. We suffer passively. We cannot hit back. Not effectively. That is the truth of the situation."

"My friend, I congratulate you. You are one of the very few human beings capable of changing an opinion under the influence of reason."

"You mistake me. I do not agree with you. I think the convoy will arrive. Perhaps not to-morrow. Perhaps not next week. But soon. In time to save us. The British are reasonable, yes. But they are not wholly governed by reason. There is sentiment also. Honour. Malta has fought, and fought well, for the Empire to which she belongs. The British will not overlook that. They will keep faith. Whatever it costs them in men and ships——"

"It cost a lot of ships in the last convoy that attempted to reach us."

"Such ill fortune cannot be repeated. When the next convoy leaves Gibraltar, some of the ships will get through. Britain will not abandon us. And even though we are useless now, the situation may change."

"Perhaps for the worse. Rommel may reach Egypt."

The plump man stood up. "I listened to you while you claimed to speak as a realist. But now I suspect you of defeatism. Well, suppose the worst happens. Suppose Rommel reaches Egypt. Is that the end? Never. The British will fight on. And we with them. And so long as they have ships to sail, the convoys will come to Malta. I wish you good afternoon."

When Mac arrived at the café, Manuela told him of this conversation, in whispers. He stared angrily at the back of the realist, sitting alone, smoking one of the cigarettes now so difficult to come by, gazing idly into the street.

"The swine's a fifth columnist! Here, I'm going to give him a slug in the jaw."

Manuela put out her hand to restrain him as he pushed back his chair.

"No. I know him. He is honest. And there is no fifth column in Malta. Besides, if he meant mischief, he would not speak so openly."

After a minute, Mac said: "In a way, I can see what he's getting at. Yeah. The situation's lousy. No dodging that. And I suppose his is just one way of looking at it. But he's wrong. The other guy had it better weighed up."

"I think so, too. The British will never let us down."

"No. They make mistakes, sometimes. Gosh, they fairly make mistakes. But they don't quit. And they don't do dirt to their friends. The convoy will come, all right. Don't you worry, kid. It'll come."

To Manuela that was greater comfort than all the official communiqués.

"I only hope," Mac added, "when the convoy does arrive, it'll bring us some Spitfires. We need 'em."

The island had entered a period of its severest ordeal. By now feeling the effect of short rations, and almost helpless under the bombardments, the islanders and the garrison, British and Maltese, found new reserves of courage and even of high spirits to sustain them. And then, in April, came the announcement that the George Cross, the highest decoration for civilian bravery, had been awarded to the island. Henceforward it would be known all over the world as Malta G.C. The people received the news with elation, with a naïve delight. The unprecedented award was not a utilitarian benefit, such as the arrival of the overdue convoy would have been. But it was a spiritual recognition. It fortified the pride of the Maltese and their resolve to continue the fight. They were a small nation which had renewed its glorious history. They were not merely unforgotten by the free world, but honoured.

Everywhere in the island people showed themselves unusually excited and pleased. Hunger and anxiety and private griefs were temporarily forgotten.

Manuela shared the common pride, and she was in a mood of enthusiastic happiness when, the first time for long weeks, she met Father Julian. This time she could not avoid him. They came face to face at a street corner. The priest was carrying in his hands a large piece of carved alabaster. Manuela knew what it was: part of the altar from his ruined church, which he was rebuilding for the little chapel he had made in one of the rock shelters. Carmel had been helping him, whenever he had a few free hours.

The priest put the heavy stone on the ground, dusted his hands, and smiled at her.

“Well, Manuela, it is nice to see you again.”

She scarcely knew what she muttered in return. She ought to hate him. She could not. And it was unfortunate that he should have encountered her when she was in this elated mood. It made it all the more difficult to remember that he had insulted her, subtly, indirectly, but unforgivably, and that he was seeking to take Mac away from her.

“I heard that you had begun to work at lace-making, my child. But it seems that it is not true.”

“No, it is not true.”

He was watching her closely. A priest's scrutiny.

“I am very happy where I am,” she added.

“But your work, if it can be called work, hardly helps to win the war. Does it, Manuela? And I doubt if it is pleasing to God.”

“Lace-making has nothing to do with the war, Father Julian.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps I did not choose my words

very well. But if you were making beautiful Maltese lace, you would be at least preparing to bring back prosperity to our little island, after the war."

"Meanwhile," she flashed at him, "the war has to be won. And what am I doing? I dance with men. I entertain them. I make them happy. And they are all men who are fighting against Hitler. I never dance except with men in the Army or the Air Force or the Navy. Or from the merchant ships. That is war work, is it not?"

"The argument is just tenable," the priest admitted.

"Then why do you condemn me?"

"I, Manuela? I condemn you?"

"You know you think hateful things about me. Yes, you do. You think I have become a wicked girl. But I am not. I am a good girl. As good as when I went to the convent to school. I will swear an oath to that, Father Julian, at the altar."

"Truly, Manuela?"

"Truly."

The priest smiled. "I shall not ask you to swear any oath, my child. If you say so, that is good enough for me. I know you are truthful. But you must understand, I have never thought that you were what you call wicked. Only foolish. Very young. It is natural to be foolish when one is young. I fear you do not understand the great risks you run in your present way of life."

"I can look after myself, Father."

"None of us can say that, Manuela, and be sure.

I am told you have formed a friendship with an R.A.F. pilot. A Canadian. Is that so?"

She nodded. Now the danger was close to her. Now he was seeking, openly, to separate her from Mac. And what could he, an ageing man with grey hair, a priest sworn to celibacy, understand of her feelings towards Mac? For the first time she felt older than Father Julian, older, tougher, stronger.

"Is that not rather a foolish thing to do, Manuela? Notice I say foolish, not wicked."

"He is a good man. He never done me any harm. He is always kind."

"Nevertheless, he has made you fond of him? He has aroused your affection? And what can that lead to? He will not marry you, Manuela. Do not deceive yourself about that. When the war is over, perhaps sooner, he will leave Malta. He will go back to Canada, and Canada is very far away. You will never hear of him again. He will forget you."

Yes, Mac might leave her. She had always known that. But he would never forget her. She had her own inward wisdom, deeper in her instincts than the probing investigation of any priest could reach, to tell her that Mac would not forget her. He would always remember Malta and Manuela.

"I think you are right," Father Julian admitted. "This man does not mean any harm. If he did, you would not have been able to say what you did a minute ago. But you do not know as much about the world as I do. It is only a few of those who commit sin who choose to realise what they are doing,

or who admit to themselves, at the time: This is sin and I do not care. Human nature is full of frailty. It is our duty not to put it to over-severe tests. We should avoid temptation. This man is young——”

“He is twelve years older than I am,” Manuela said proudly. The priest’s mouth remained stern, but a transient smile came into his eyes.

“Still, he is young. Every day he is risking his life. Every day he wakes and feels that before evening he may be dead.”

“Yes. He is a hero.”

“But these dangers, Manuela, make men eager for the quick pleasures of life, for everything that promises happiness for the next few hours. I do not judge them. They have many virtues. Virtues I could not aspire to. If the sin ended with the man, if it affected him alone, I should say, subject to correction, it was venial, more than counterbalanced by courage and endurance. But it may affect you, Manuela, and you are one of my flock. You are under my care. My child, why not accept my guidance?”

What he meant was: go into the quiet respectability of lace-making, see Mac no more, let another girl step into her place in Mac’s affections. But a priest was a priest, holier than an ordinary man, and yet less than a man. And she was a woman, not a child as he thought, but a woman: a woman in love. He could not understand. He would never be able to understand.

“No, Father Julian. I am sorry. But I cannot do it.”
The priest shook his head.

“You are obstinate, my child.”

“But not wicked, Father. Look, I have an hour. Let me help you to rebuild the altar. Give me that stone. It is too heavy for you, anyhow. Let me, Father Julian. It will always please me to think I did a little to set up the altar again. That is”—she paused, with the alabaster held in front of her in her hands—“unless you think I am unworthy?”

“Now that, Manuela, is the most foolish thing I ever heard you say. We are all of us unworthy. But we are not despised of God for that.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

INTENT on studying what he considered to be the problem of Manuela, Father Julian thought it his duty to talk once again with her father, Marco. He called in the morning, not too early, for he knew that if Marco had been drinking the night before he would be sore-headed and surly till about noon. The priest was so careful that he left his visit too late: Marco's ramshackle house was empty when he arrived; even Manuela, who always rose late, had gone out. A neighbour, a housewife, gave it as her opinion that Marco might possibly be found with his boat, on the shore of St. George's Bay, and then again he might already have put off and be fishing out at sea. The woman offered to send one of her numerous children to discover whether Marco was within reach or to take a message, but Father Julian refused. He would walk the two miles and see for himself.

He found Manuela's father still on shore, his nets spread wide on the pebbles beside the boat. The priest was not by temperament a very practical man, but he noticed at once that there were several small holes in the nets still unmended, and Marco showed no signs of producing cord and tar. Instead, he was, without

undue haste, fixing bait to a number of long lines. He greeted the priest respectfully, rising and taking off his hat, but without enthusiasm.

Father Julian sat down on the fretted gunwale of the boat, and they began to discuss the weather. Marco thought the wind would change and drop considerably by afternoon, but the distant cloud-bank by then would have moved up over the island and would probably stay there till nightfall. There might be some rain, but it would not be heavy. The priest accepted this expert opinion, and asked if the weather would be favourable for fishing. It was contrary to his judgment, in dealing with a man like Marco, to approach the main subject of conversation at once, and even when he came to it, which would not be for some time, he intended to bring the talk around to Manuela and Carmel casually and circuitously.

Marco stared across the shores of the bay, and out to the open sea which, beyond the headlands, looked rough, green rather than blue, and was tossed with foam-capped waves. Then he scrutinized the sky, clear enough overhead, but stored with grey cloud to the north and the west.

“By afternoon,” he declared at last, “the weather will be good enough. Not excellent. Not even very good. But still, good enough for fishing. Not that it is of any great interest to me.”

“And why not?”

The fisherman explained. His partner in the boat, a single-sailed, broad-beamed vessel, was sick, house-bound.

"I am sorry to hear that."

"It is not serious. To-morrow he will be well again. To-morrow the weather may be bad. He has a poor weak stomach, that one."

Father Julian realised then that Marco had persuaded the other man to a bout of heavy drinking the previous night. He thought it wiser not to discuss the causes of the present trouble.

"In times of peace," Marco went on, "it would not much matter. A day's work lost—it could be made up. Besides, I could always find a young man in those days to come out with me and draw the nets. I would pay one, perhaps two shillings. But not now. All the young men work for the war. I must have a mate with me to cast and haul the net, especially with a fresh wind blowing. Well, I cannot have a man. So I go alone this afternoon, and do some line fishing in the bay. I shall catch a little, perhaps. Not much. Not valuable. But it will be something."

Father Julian saw his opportunity then.

"Listen, Marco. This afternoon I will come with you, and we will take a net. True, I am not young, and no expert fisherman. But I can help. I will be your mate for the afternoon."

"Would you do that, Father Julian? And can you spare the time?"

"It will be a little holiday for me."

"By two o'clock I will have all the nets mended."

"And at two o'clock I shall be here, beside the boat. It will be a pleasure for me, Marco, to help you. To get food is good work, and this will be food we can

obtain for ourselves. It has not to be brought over the sea, at the risk of men's lives. To be a fisherman is to be a valuable citizen."

"It is a way of earning a living," Marco admitted. "If I were younger, doubtless I should be in the Royal Navy. As it is, I fish. I am grateful to you, Father Julian."

"And I to you, Marco," the priest replied courteously. In the boat there would be good opportunities to talk seriously to the fisherman about his children.

"Shall I pay you the two shillings?" Marco inquired, half seriously, half in mischief.

"Better wait till you see what we catch. No, Marco, do not pay me. But remember when you make your offering on Sunday."

So in the early afternoon, the wind having dropped to a pleasant breeze and the cloud bank holding high, half over the island, half over the sea, as Marco had prophesied, they pushed the boat off and tacked across the bay and sailed a mile, then two miles, out to sea. There were other fishermen at work, and a patrol boat farther off, but none near them. On the way out they trailed the baited lines from the stern, and at intervals Marco (who held the tiller and managed the single sail) allowed the priest to haul them in. They caught in this way a dozen mackerel, and a few bream and brightly coloured wrasse. But the colours faded on the wrasse a few seconds after they ceased to flap about in the well of the boat. They became inert. Even while the priest watched they stopped being living creatures and were transformed

into uncooked food. That was the way things were ordained. It was God's way, and therefore good. Fish were spawned by the million, and only a tiny proportion survived to maturity. One kind of fish lived by eating other kinds. It was a cycle of pursuit, a cycle of ever-renewing hunger. And men dipped here and there into the sea, never very deep, and took out an infinitesimal portion of the immense abundance for their own use.

Father Julian did not hope for any good result from an intervention by Manuela's father. Marco might promise to influence his daughter, to order her to go to work at the lace-making establishment, to forbid her to see the Canadian pilot. He might even carry out his promises, but after one violent row he would forget. And Manuela, knowing this, would pay no attention. She would, in fact, be confirmed in her obstinacy. No, what the priest wanted from Marco was talk; there was always the chance that the fisherman might reveal something, an unsuspected fact or an idea whose value he did not realise, which might suggest a way to save Manuela from herself. Marco must be made to talk. To bring this about would be what Protestants called priestcraft, but Father Julian did not doubt that he was justified in using it.

He bided his time. When they were three miles out to sea, beyond the headlands, Marco decided to cast the net. As he made the tiller fast and lowered the sail, a light rain began to shower down from the cloud overhead.

"Won't last," said Marco. "Won't do any harm either, while it lasts."

The net was fixed to the side of the boat by hawsers and dragged behind. As soon as they had cast it overboard, Marco hauled up the sail and set the boat in motion to prevent the net fouling. The net sank quickly out of sight. The boat had a sluggish, steady movement now as it sailed on. Marco lit his pipe.

"Told you the rain would stop," he said. "We'll soon have a bit of sun. And we ought to get some herring."

He glanced up at the sky, and then cursed.

"Here they come."

High from the west and the north two squadrons of bombing planes were moving in towards Malta, with the fighters, tiny twinkling points of light, stepped still higher above them. Faint, far away, they could hear the sirens sounding the Alert in Valetta.

"Better here, anyhow," said Marco, "than on land."

"You are not worried about Carmel and Manuela?"

"Manuela's a sensible girl. She'll go to a shelter. And Carmel will be looking after his goats. I hear you were with him the other day, Father, and you both had a narrow escape? Never mind, that won't happen again. Not for a long time."

"Carmel saved my life. He knew what to do, and made me run to the only safe place, quickly. Youth is a wonderful thing. It adapts itself to war. Myself, I feel I am too old for war."

"They are swine, those German pilots," Marco declared. "As if it were not enough to bomb the

island, they must come down low and shoot at a priest and a small boy. That I cannot understand.”

“The German did not come down to shoot at us. He was trying to fight a Spitfire, or to escape from it. I am not sure which.”

“Still, he fired at you.”

“Perhaps he did not realise. Those aircraft move so fast. He can only have caught a glimpse of us. I thought about that afterwards. He might have mistaken us for soldiers. Or, perhaps, we made the mistake. He may have thought he was firing at the Spitfire. Flying so fast, and turning this way and that, he must have been very excited and afraid. Perhaps he did not even see us.”

“They are swine, those Germans,” Marco repeated. “But it will not happen again. A thing like that could not happen twice to Carmel. Anyhow, he will take care of himself in future. He has a good head on him, Carmel.”

“You are very fortunate in both your children, Marco.”

“Yes, they are better Christians than I am, Father. I admit it to you, freely. But to them I say—I am your father! Obey me! Respect me! That is right, is it not? That is good for them.”

“I am rather worried about Manuela, Marco. She is too good a girl to work in that place. She is not like the other girls there, you know.”

“That, doubtless, is the reason she earns so much money. She does not complain. I have suggested to

her there are other ways of earning a living, besides dancing. But she says she is happy and content."

"Happiness is not everything, Marco. In that place, there are many temptations for a young girl."

"Ah, you don't know Manuela as I do, Father Julian. You think she is only frivolous, light-headed, easily persuaded. But it is not so. What Manuela wants to do, she will do. And what she does not want to do, no one can make her do it."

"She has not spoken to you about a pilot, a Canadian?"

"No. There are many such."

"But this one, especially. He is her great friend."

"You are mistaken, Father. Manuela comes home every night. A little late, perhaps, but that is in the nature of her occupation. She always comes home. I see to that. I would not tolerate it otherwise."

"I did not mean to suggest Manuela is not a good girl. I am sure she is. Only yesterday she told me she had done no evil. I wished to hear that, for lately she has not made me her confessor."

"Young girls are shy, Father. Well, then, there is nothing for us to worry our heads about."

It was easy enough to make Marco talk; not so easy to make him talk the way, as the responsible father of a young daughter, he ought to talk.

A minute later, Marco brought the boat to, and slackened sail. With the priest to help him, he hauled in the net to the side of the boat, and then hauled it higher, until in the water between the wooden guardrails, a few fish could be seen swimming and leaping here and there.

"Not much," said Marco. "Not worth while pulling in the net yet. We must try again."

They let out the ropes, and as the bow swung and the sail filled out again, they watched the barrage over the Grand Harbour and the planes plunging, circling and climbing.

"Nothing near Sliema, I think," the priest said, and murmured a prayer for the safety of his parish.

"Another ten minutes, and we shall see them scurrying back to Sicily. Ah, there goes one of them."

They watched a plane dropping, almost vertically, leaving a long thin trail of black smoke behind it.

"Crashed somewhere near Musta."

"You are sure it was not a British plane?" the priest asked.

"Too big. No, it was a bomber. That means, German. I hope none of them got out in parachutes. I cannot see anything in the sky that looks like a parachute, can you?"

"No. But my eyes are not so good as yours, Marco."

"I see no parachute. That means three or four Germans the less."

"Some of them may not be wholly wicked. Some are good Catholics, I am told."

"Then why do they serve Hitler? No, Father Julian. I say nothing of their immortal souls. That is your concern, not mine. To me they are enemies. I hate them. They come to Malta to kill and destroy. The more of them that perish, the better I am pleased."

Perhaps Marco's whole-hearted patriotism was one reason why he did not feel perturbed about Manuela's

friendship for the Canadian? The priest decided to test the idea.

“And the R.A.F. pilots——?”

“They are very brave men,” said Marco quickly. “I admire them.”

“So does Manuela.”

“It is natural.”

“It is also natural that they should like Manuela. She is pretty and charming. But is it likely one of them would marry her?”

“Doubtless they have their own girls in England.”

“And Canada,” said the priest slyly.

“And Canada. Anyhow, Manuela is young yet. It is too early to speak of marriage for her. After the war, it will be different. We shall settle down. The young men will come out of the Army and the Navy. Then, maybe, Manuela will find someone she wants and it will be time to talk of marrying. Meanwhile, she enjoys herself. And why not?”

“It seems to me, Marco, that you are being wilfully blind to reality.”

“I speak with respect, Father Julian, but in this matter I believe I know more of the world than you do.”

“Doubtless you know more. But do you understand? I have been trying to persuade Manuela to take up a new employment, quiet, respectable. But so far——”

“Yes. I have heard about that. She has refused. I could beat her, if you wish, Father. But I should have

to get drunk to do it. You see, I am very fond of Manuela."

There was a simplicity that was holy, and a simplicity considerably less than holy; Father Julian was unable to make up his mind to which kind Marco's belonged.

"You must not beat her. That would do her no good, or you either."

Marco thanked him, as he might have thanked a confessor who had given him lighter penances than he expected. Then he added: "Of course, when I am drunk, I do not always know what I am doing. But Manuela is a sensible girl. She knows when to keep out of my way."

"It might be better if you did not get drunk at all."

"It would be much better," the fisherman agreed heartily. "That is how I feel now. But when I am beginning to enjoy myself in a tavern, then I feel quite differently."

"But about Manuela——"

"Father Julian, I beg you not to distress yourself unduly about her. She is my daughter. I know what is in her blood. We of the laity, who are not priests or nuns, we do not feel as you do. We live another kind of life. Not so exalted as yours. Yet it has its compensations. Some of them perhaps are sinful. However, there is forgiveness for sins, as you teach us."

"My son, are you seeking to instruct me in doctrine? Forgiveness is conditional on sincere repent-

ance. And it is a grievous error to go to meet a sin half way."

"But, Father Julian—pardon me, if I persist in my argument. This is something I have thought about often. In an ordinary man's life—and I admit it is inferior to a priest's—there is no necessity to go to meet sins. They are everywhere around us. If we run away from every temptation, we are cowards. More than that, we cannot do our work in the world. It is the world which is sinful, Father, much more than us. You see our faults, our errors, our ill-doings, and you reprove us for them. That is right and proper. That is your function as a priest. Without you, we should be lost souls. But you do not always see our triumphs, our little victories. Consider myself. Two, sometimes three, nights in a week, I drink too much. I shout, I sing, I curse, I quarrel with my friends. I am disgusting. But the other four nights, sometimes five nights each week—do you suppose I am not just as thirsty on those nights? Yet I stay sober. After one or two drinks I say to myself: Enough! That doesn't mean much to you, Father Julian, because you live another kind of life, holier than mine. But to me, it is a great deal. It is a victory. Five times a week. Well, four for certain."

The priest sighed. The conversation had gone quite differently from the way he had designed for it.

"I see your point of view, Marco. I cannot give it my full approval."

"Of course not. I should be shocked if you did."

"But I understand, Marco. Or I try to. Yet I must

point out that you exaggerate the distinction between priests and laymen. It lies in the vocation, and the ordination, the separation by the laying on of hands. Not in ethical degrees." Seeing the fisherman look puzzled, Father Julian added: "That means conduct, morals."

"Oh," said Marco, "I know there are bad priests, quite unlike you. But they are few."

"I was not thinking of them. What I am telling you is that I, a priest, am just as much subject to temptation as you or Manuela or any one. Perhaps my temptations are more subtle, concerned with the mind rather than the appetites of the body. The more dangerous for that, Marco. You must not form an exaggerated idea of the priesthood, as something which removes a man out of the world."

"It removes him," said Marco obstinately, "half out of the world. That is why you are mistaken when you try to persuade Manuela to your will. If she had a vocation, if she were impelled to fear the world and shun it, that would be a different matter. Then she would become a novice in a convent. But Manuela is not made that way. I know. I am her father. Such as the world is, she must live in it. She must not turn away."

"You do not fear then, that if she goes on meeting this Canadian— She is young, you know, headstrong, romantic, ignorant. And I have no reason to believe this Canadian is a saint."

"If he were, he would have no attraction for Manuela. Or she for him."

"She may be imperilling her immortal soul."

"I do not think so, Father Julian. If I did—but what could I do? I offered to beat her. That was to please you. I do not really think it would do any good. Perhaps between us we could argue with her and in the end make her promise to go to the lace-making. Perhaps we could make her promise not to see this Canadian again. She would not keep her promise. It would only set a higher value on the man in her eyes. And she would hate us both—her father and her priest. Would that be good for her immortal soul?"

Father Julian stared at him, but said nothing. Marco was wise in his generation, wiser than the priest had believed possible.

"There is nothing we can do," the fisherman went on.

"To interfere might set off an explosion. Manuela is entering on adult life, and it is her life, not ours. She is young, and that means she may do foolish things. I hope not. But if so, Father Julian, I ask you to remember that there is forgiveness for sins."

Which of them now was speaking like a priest? Father Julian commended to himself the virtue of humility.

"Perhaps you are right, my son. But there is one thing we can do. We can pray for her."

"Will you, Father? Your prayers will have much greater efficacy than mine. I am a very sinful man. But I also will pray for her, every morning. And four nights in the week. Sometimes five."

The priest suppressed an almost automatic suggestion that if Marco were to promise to pray for his daughter every night, to keep the promise he would need to remain sober, and that would be to his own benefit. It was not for him to judge this man. Besides, Marco had, with an ingenious slyness, forestalled the reproof by claiming credit for the four or five times out of seven when he refrained from hard drinking.

As if to end the discussion, the fisherman looked up and then leaned out of the boat to peer round the sail. "Here's more rain coming," he announced. "A bit of a squall. Better put on your cloak."

The broad extension of cloud overhead seemed darker than ever, and the silver luminosity of its outer edges was now diminished. The wind began to blow harder and colder, and presently rain descended in sharp drenching showers. It was hardly possible to see the German bombers, picking up formation again, as they made off overhead. The rain was noisy on the sails, but Marco detected a different, more distant sound above the vehement patterings.

"Machine-guns," he said. "Good. The Spitfires are after them. It needs more than a spell of bad weather to hold back the R.A.F."

The boat had not quite completed its second course, and, although the wind strained gustily on the sail, the bow, riding high, surged forward with a heavy, ponderous deliberation due to the weight of the net trailing behind. Marco decided to heave to.

"The rain won't last, but now is as good as in ten minutes. They're still fighting up there. A pity the

weather has thickened. We might see some Germans shot down if it were clearer.”

With the sail again flapping loose against the mast, and the tiller lashed to keep the boat head to the wind, they set to work on the arduous task of pulling in the net. The rope was wet and rough in the priest's hands. He could not keep pace with Marco, who every now and then moved across to help him.

“I think we have a good haul.”

“Can't tell yet. It is all water, this weight, till we have the net closer. But you may be right, Father Julian.”

The shore was out of sight, hidden by cloud and rain, and on the grey expanse of the sea, so far as it was visible, no other boats were now to be seen. The seascape which enclosed them had become suddenly much smaller, as well as dark and wet and chill.

They hauled again, the priest striving to pull level with the fisherman's deft and powerful tuggings. He began to see pieces of brown wood in the water beside the gunwale, near the stern; the net was coming inboard at last. Then he paused as a new sound reached his ears: the noise of an aircraft engine overhead, growing louder and closer. Its pulsations were uneven, staccato, sharp, but irregular in rhythm.

Marco looked up into the driving rain.

“Something coming down,” he said. “A curse on the weather. I can see nothing. I hope it is a German.”

The priest took the opportunity to make three more short, quick hauls, to bring his end of the net level with Marco's.

"Engine's stopped," the fisherman exclaimed. Then: "There it is! There!"

Looking round, the priest caught a glimpse of an elongated shape, pallid and grey amid the rain squalls, only a few yards above the sea. The plane fluttered its wings unstably as it passed, three hundred yards away, off the starboard bow. They listened, and heard a faint, flattened sound, a weary clap that almost at once repeated itself even less distinctly.

"He's down," said Marco. "Did you see the markings?"

Father Julian shook his head.

"Nor me. Too far off. But it was a fighter. It might be British."

"We must go and help."

"Of course. I have noted the place. We shall not need to search for long. In this weather, the rescue launches will never find him. It is not likely they even know he has come down. Haul in now."

Sweating and straining on the ropes, the priest asked: "But won't the plane have sunk already?"

"Not yet. He did not dive. He was able to come down gently. And he will have his rubber dinghy."

"But suppose he is wounded? Suppose he cannot get into the dinghy?"

"That is true," Marco admitted. He paused. The priest stopped hauling too. The net was closer. They had been hauling in the far side of it, drawing the wooden guards to the top of the water, and close to the gunwale there was a turmoil as fish leaped and darted, heads and tails and white bellies showing in

violent confusion. It was a good haul, a wonderfully good haul.

"We have not time," said Marco suddenly. "We must let go."

That was a sacrifice, to yield back their big catch to the sea, to surrender all the profit of hard and fortunate work. Father Julian looked at Marco with a new appreciation, and with inexpert fingers began to grabble the knots which held the near side of the net; if that were let go the fish would quickly escape.

"Too slow. The whole net must go."

And already Marco had produced a big clasp knife and flicked it open. With half a dozen rapid slashes he cut the ropes. The net sank out of sight. While Father Julian was still marvelling, the fisherman had run up the sail, unloosed the tiller, and the boat, free from its burden, was bounding forward through the rain, the bow running high over the waves that broke and slapped noisily along the sides.

They had to make three short, circling casts before they sighted the aircraft. The wings—it was a small monoplane—were under water, and most of the fuselage. The tail was broken, half shot away, the understructure showing and the rudder folded over. As they came nearer, they saw a man lying with outspread arms on one of the wings. He did not move as the boat drew gently alongside.

"I don't believe it is British," said Marco.

He let the sail go, and handed the tiller to the priest.

"Keep her like that. Be careful. If we get entangled

with the plane, it might drag the boat down with it."

The airman must have been too exhausted, the priest thought, to get out his dinghy. He might be dead already.

Marco leaned across the thwart, got his hands under the pilot's armpits, and dragged him aboard. As he did so, the swastika sign on the plane's wing was uncovered.

"German!" said Marco, and spat into the sea. "And it was for this I sacrificed my net."

He took the tiller again, and pushed it hard over as the boat rode free, leaving the priest to attend to the rescued German. As they turned away towards the shore, the aircraft reared up, its shattered tail planes rising at a steeper angle, before it sank out of sight.

The pilot remained unconscious. Now that he was out of the sea water the blood began to spread over the chest and hips of his flying suit. The priest tore the clothing apart and found two wounds. He used his handkerchief, ripped in two, to try to stem the bleeding. Then he went to the well of the boat and brought a flask of wine which he tilted, trying to force the wine between the pilot's teeth. The German was blonde, long-faced, very pale, handsome in a bleak kind of fashion; the leanness and pallor of his face was accentuated by the flying helmet, clasped round it from forehead to chin. His goggles had been thrust up to the top of his head. The wine spilled out of his mouth and over his pointed chin. He muttered something, and then moved violently, as in a con-

vulsion. This ended in a series of shudders. The priest stood up to take off the loose cloak he had put on when the rain began. But when he bent down again to put it over the wounded man, he saw that the head had fallen rigidly to one side and the eyes had opened and were staring blankly. He put his hand on the heart, and then crossed himself. It was not till evening that he remembered there were two wrasse, cold and colourless, lying in the bottom of the boat near the pilot's head as it turned stiffly away.

"Is he dead?" Marco asked from the stern.

Father Julian nodded, and kneeled on the floor boards of the boat, in the bilge water. He commenced to recite the prayers for the dead. Reluctantly Marco took off his hat.

When the prayers ended, "It was best he should die," Marco said. "He was a German."

"He has no nationality now. He is not here. This is only the body he possessed for twenty years or so."

"He did much evil with that body."

"Now it is my turn to remind you, Marco—there is forgiveness for sins."

"Just the same, I am thinking of my net. For a British pilot, I should not have minded. But for a German, and a dead one! It would have made no difference if we had taken in the catch, and then gone in search for him. He did not even know you bound his wounds and gave him wine."

"But he knows now. And he knows that you took him into your boat, even after you discovered he was a German."

"I have my weaknesses. I am a sentimentalist, sometimes. Besides, Father Julian, if I had thrown him into the sea, you would have persecuted me ever afterwards with reproaches and penances."

"You do not like priests, in your heart, do you?"

Marco was shocked.

"I have a great respect for the Church, Father Julian. And especially for you."

"But you would find life easier without me to harry you!"

"This life, yes. But then, Father Julian, there is always the next life. A man must think of that."

Marco always had the final word. But no, this time, he should not.

"Marco, you shall not lose by what you have done to-day. I am not a rich man, as you know. But I have saved a little. I will buy you a new net."

Marco said simply: "Thank you, Father Julian. I expected you would do that."



CHAPTER NINE

PETER was ordered to stay in hospital longer than he had expected. He went into Valetta fairly often, but never visited the airfield. His friends had to come to him. When they grumbled, he said: "When I turn up, it won't be as a spectator." Harry thought him a queer fish, but Mac nodded, as if he understood.

The plaster cast round the under part of the broken arm had been removed, after the fracture set, and saline solutions were no longer used to treat the burns on the upper surface. The stitches had been taken out of the cut on the forehead; there was a small, red-rimmed scar there, but Peter wore no dressing. He was especially delighted to get rid of the head-bandage.

"The less I look like a wounded hero," he said, "the better." And to Pauline he added: "I'm still an unknown quantity, a theory that hasn't been proved. I don't feel a dud—I told you about that. But I feel just a bit of a fraud with these stupid injuries. The sort of thing any one might get in a railway accident. Still, I shan't have to wait long now."

The broken bone was knitting together again, but the muscles had been torn and twice a day he was set to perform exercises with his fingers and his wrist,

bending and flexing, stretching and turning. This made him very impatient. He often expostulated with the surgeon in the hospital, complaining that he felt perfectly fit and well, urging that he ought to be flying again.

One morning the surgeon retorted tartly: "Your opinion doesn't matter. It's my job to say when your muscles are functioning properly again. When you're flying, you carry your life in your hands? Very good. They've got to be in perfect working order before I pass you out."

"But damn it all, I expected to be back with my squadron, or what's left of it, a fortnight ago."

"That's because you're impatient. All you fighter pilots are the same. Restless lot of young devils. Because you can dash about the sky at three hundred odd miles an hour, you think nature ought to be pepped up just to satisfy you. Well, it can't be done." The surgeon suddenly softened his manner. "I suppose if you had a different sort of temperament, you wouldn't be a fighter pilot. Racehorses and carthorses, eh? I'm doing my best for you, my lad. But you'll have to wait a bit longer. You can't turn your arm fully from the elbow, and that second finger doesn't respond properly yet."

"But, after all, it's only my left arm."

"Oh! I suppose you'd be willing to take on the whole of the Luftwaffe with your right arm alone?"

That shut Peter up. The surgeon knew nothing of his combat record, and probably imagined he had already shot down dozens of Junkers and Heinkels

and 109's. Peter would not talk about that sort of thing to any one but Pauline. Not till he returned to the airfield; then would come the real conflict, when he saw doubt in the Station Commander's eyes—doubt whether his sustained run of bad luck had rotted his nerve, doubt whether he could ever prove himself an effective fighter pilot, doubt whether he ought to be allowed to return to operational duties. Peter was saving his energies to fight that battle on the ground, across an office desk—the battle he dreaded most of all.

The burn on his forearm became painful again as it healed. A new skin was forming, a marvellous renewal. But the scorched flesh underneath had not yet recovered its full health. The last dregs of poisonous matter were being drained away into his blood. He suffered from headaches and from a less locatable malaise, all due to what went on under that film of new skin on his arm. Angela explained to Pauline that this was inevitable: the burnt tissues corrupted where they had not been destroyed, and after the greater part of the poisons had been washed away by the saline douches, the diminishing amount still formed every day was absorbed by the body. This absorption disordered the health to a certain extent, but every day there was less poison produced, and less strain on the whole body.

"It just needs time," said Angela.

Unlike Peter, Pauline regarded the deliberation of the healing process as a blessing. The longer Peter was kept under medical care, the longer he would be

safe. Her love and her faith in him compelled her to stand by him in his belief in himself. He needed the assurance of her loyalty; therefore, without question, she gave it to him. But whether or not he was a good pilot dogged by ill-luck, or a natural failure whose misfortunes arose from his own inadequacy, she loved him. He had volunteered for the most hazardous of all war duties. No man could do more. His courage was proved all the greater if, by some uncontrollable freak of temperament, he was not destined to success in the air. She admired him because he flew a Spitfire; at the same time, illogically perhaps, she prayed he might never leave the ground again.

But she told him nothing of these feelings. Since the day he was brought into the hospital, nerve-shocked, shivering, tense with complicated emotions, their relationship had slid back, swiftly, imperceptibly, irresistibly so far as Pauline was concerned, into the cool ways of their former friendship. Or so it seemed. Yet it could never be the same again. In those first few hours in hospital, when Peter was a sick man, unable to muster his customary pretences, and Pauline had been shaken by new emotions, they had stepped closer to each other, into an intimacy which made all that happened now between them appear slightly false, superficial, illusory. Just as the burn on Peter's arm was covered by a new skin, so the intimacy of these few hours was hidden now behind a renewal of their offhand, comradely manner. But what had happened was not to be expunged so simply. They could draw

back, they could pretend, but, each of them separately, secretly, remembered the step forward they had once taken. Pauline revealed the knowledge least of all; in Peter's eyes, whenever they met, it glinted, shy and startled as a faun in a forest.

Nothing would ever be quite the same again, and Pauline did not regret the change. The fourfold friendship she had once prized so dearly held fast, but with hidden modifications. Its character was subtly and vitally altered. Harry had been the first to break the implicit pact. It was queer that betrayal should come from him, the most youthful of them all, the naïve, the innocent, the boy who trusted with a child's faith in the simple verities of life. On an impulse, produced by irrelevant circumstances—moonlight, the quietness of a canopied *carozza* drawn by clip-clopping horses, a little fresh air after dance music and wine, all the theatrical paraphernalia of romance, so trite that any one but an ingenuous boy would have been on guard against the promptings of instinct—Harry had thrust aside the pretence of friendship. His effort at escapade had been ludicrous in its conformity to type. He had sat close to her in the *carozza*, and rhapsodied for a moment or two on the loveliness of the stars and the baroque architecture, ruined or intact, under the moonlight. Then he began to murmur endearments, and before—fool that she was!—she realised what was happening, his arms were round her, and his kisses were urgent on her face. Never since had he attempted to say a word about that evening. Not that she had given him the

chance! Better to let him know from her casual, easy manner that she kept his secret—he was so young that nothing would hurt him more than a disclosure of failure—and that she bore no resentment.

Had it been Mac, instead of Harry, who broke the rules, she would have been much less surprised. Mac was a different sort of man from his two friends. It was not only that he was older. It was not only that the extra years had given him a varied experience which neither Harry nor Peter would ever acquire. Mac had nothing fastidious in his character: he would never refuse the coarse food of experience to-day for fear it spoiled his palate for some more subtly flavoured dish to-morrow. In that sense, Mac was less mature than either of the other two pilots. What was happening in the present was so vivid and pleasurable to him that the past hazed away into unreality, and the future—even the future of the next week or the next day—seemed remote and incredible. You could not dismiss him simply as a splendid animal, to be admired for its strength and vigour. There was any amount of good in Mac, in addition to all the virile qualities you expected in a daring pilot: kindness, sympathy, modesty, loyalty. But it was a goodness unthinking, instinctive, not durable perhaps. Put him with decent people and it sprang up in him, like flowers opening to sunshine. Among men and women of another sort, however, Mac might be unrecognisable to his friends. He lived for the moment. That meant he lived for whatever environment chance dropped him into.

In one way he had been the most loyal of them all to the pact of friendship Pauline had instituted; not an amorous word or glance came from him. She had ached to be treated by three men as an equal, as if her sex were an irrelevant factor, and Mac had taken her precisely at her word. Yet she knew, almost as soon as she began to talk to him, that he was a man who had made love to many women. Some of them, in all probability, had been "nice" women; others—no, others had not been so nice. Mac was not fastidious, and what he had done yesterday, in his eyes, had no connection with what he chose to want to do to-day. With Pauline he had decided to be a friend, a pal, a comrade. It was not that he found her less than desirable; in his slightly formal Canadian way, rolling out rather pompous phrases with complete seriousness, he paid her compliments, and meant what he said. Besides, she had seen the way he had looked at her sometimes, with an expert appraisal in his eyes; yes, if he made love to a girl, he would not bungle the job. He would never make the sort of mistake Harry had made.

She supposed that Mac had classified her: not the type of girl to be flirted with. He had her mentally docketed, like a valuable work of art: "do not touch." She was a little amused, a little relieved, because she did not want any extraneous complications to her love for Peter—and also a little piqued. She asked herself why the perfection of Mac's behaviour should cause her this annoyance. Was she vain? Or greedy? By upbringing well behaved, but by nature a co-

quette? After all, there was a simple explanation for Mac's attitude; he was interested in another girl, a Maltese girl, employed to dance and talk and flirt with men at the Dinkum Bar. The girl was pretty. Indeed, she looked charming. And no doubt she was forthcoming enough for Mac's taste. Pauline had not visited the Dinkum again since Peter went into hospital. She knew that Mac was there often, and the girl was considered, by all the R.A.F. Station gossips, "his"; a word which might mean anything. No, it meant they were lovers. Mac was not the sort to have scruples because the girl was young. Probably scruples would be wasted on a girl of that sort. Mac would not stop at half measures; if he were balked, he would quickly shift his attentions to another girl. He was an expert at rapid and casual love. You could see it in the way he walked, the way he looked round a room as soon as he entered it.

There were always three kinds of love affairs going on where men and women were thrown into each other's company by the intimate but temporary associations of war. Some were sober, earnest, single-minded, aiming at durability. Others were high-pitched, passionate, liable to gutter out suddenly from their own intensity. And others again were gay, irresponsible, an exchange of entertaining sensations, varying between a more or less elegant flirtation and a highly organised liaison. Pauline checked her thoughts. It was a new departure for her, to put love under a microscope. Love catalogued by science. Groups A, B and C. Subdivide at leisure. No, there

was a fourth kind of love affair. Her own with Peter. Group D. Recognised by a characteristic retrogression: after the two parties have almost fallen into each other's arms, they draw back and think again. Why? In science, there must be a reason for everything. Why then? Because of the war. Because Peter wanted to prove himself in the air, because he wanted to shoot down German aircraft and so far he had been prevented. Because the war had given him a neurosis, a personal equation to be solved inside his own conscience and, until it was solved, he would not admit, even to himself, that he loved her. That was it. Love hindered by an impalpable barrier, a barrier which existed only in the mind. Love affair—Group D. And why, why in the name of all simplicity and happiness, could not love have come to her the normal, direct way? The way that led straight to an honest, honourable, if you like conventional fulfillment, without misgivings, reticences, evasions and hidden obstacles, the way her heart longed for in the secret, wakeful, honest hours of the night?



CHAPTER TEN

CARMEL was bringing his goats in from the hillsides an hour before the usual time. He had driven them, earlier in the afternoon, to the collecting station, and the milk had been taken away for pasteurisation—a measure which had delivered the population of Malta from the recurrent danger of fever. When he appeared at the little farm, opened the gate in the stone wall, and drove the flock into the yard, the farmer's wife came to the doorway, hands on hips, demanding an explanation.

"Father Julian requires my services this evening. There is to be a special Benediction, from the rebuilt altar in the chapel in the shelter. I should have thought," the boy added, quick and cunning to seize the initiative, "you would have heard of it. It would profit your soul to attend in person."

"We are not in Father Julian's parish," the woman retorted, "as you well know."

"In or out of any parish, no one is turned away from the altar of God. As you well know yourself. Besides, Father Julian is a good priest, an exceptionally good priest."

"I have heard that he is always disposed to be indulgent. No doubt that is why he tolerates your

lazy, careless ways, Carmel. The goats would have benefited by the hour's grazing they have lost. The ewes will give less milk, and all of them are lean."

"Woman, use your eyes! Your goats drip with fat. They can scarce stagger on their feet for the weight of flesh they carry. It was an act of compassion to bring them home before they burst their ribs with gluttony."

"Your tongue is more powerful than your intelligence, Carmel. Well, I suppose I can say nothing if you go to the service of the Church. Remember me in your prayers."

"I will, surely. One day you must come to see our altar. It is most beautiful. All of white alabaster, most exquisitely carved. I helped Father Julian to carry it piece by piece from the ruins of the church down into the rock galleries. There, in the darkness, illuminated only by candlelight, the alabaster seems more white and pure than ever. My sister also helped Father Julian. We are a devout family."

"Your sister? The priest allowed her to help?"

"And why not?" Carmel demanded.

"Oh, no reason. I always heard he was indulgent, that Father Julian of yours. Be sure you are here in good time to-morrow morning, Carmel."

Deciding that the farmer's wife disapproved of most people and, therefore, her opinion of Manuela was neither here nor there, the boy went away whistling. But when he came to a fork in the road he took the branch which led, not to Sliema and Father Julian's parish, but straight into Valetta. There was a

last hour of daylight before him and he wanted to see the sights of the streets and talk to any friends he chanced to meet—provided an air-raid did not interrupt his pleasures. It was now a little after six in the evening and he was not due to report to the priest until half-past seven; his evening's duties as acolyte had given him a ready-made excuse to obtain an illicit hour of freedom. He began to run, in order to have the more time in Valetta. To get back to Sliema, he would be compelled to spend a penny on the ferry across Marsamxett Harbour, but he had calculated that the outlay was well worth while.

His conscience was not greatly troubled by the deception he had just practised on his employer's wife. He would remember it later, and include it in his next confession—meanwhile, to allay the disconcerting thought, he murmured an act of contrition. Father Julian would listen and remonstrate with him gravely, give him a penance, and expect him to better his ways in the future. The boy had stated the truth when he said his family was devout. Even his father was not content to keep himself barely in a state of grace by the mere performance of his Easter duties; at least thrice a year, sober and gaunt-faced, his father was shriven and took the Sacrament. And Manuela had been confirmed. Manuela, it was true, of late had avoided Father Julian whenever she could. But Carmel knew that she went to confession at one of the big old churches in Valetta, one of those still in use: a huge church where confession was a completely anonymous rite, where there was no chance of the

concealed priest recognising a voice, where a penitent could seek out a different confessor on each visit. Doubtless Manuela had her own good reasons for going to the Valetta church: the important thing was that at frequent intervals she made her confession. Therefore she was in a state of grace. Therefore she could take the Sacrament with benefit to her soul. The whole family was truly devout.

Carmel's religion gave him faith and a profound satisfaction. He believed, with a simple and comprehensive acceptance, in the Father, in Jesus, the Son of God who was also perfect Man and the Saviour of the World, in the Holy Spirit who inspired all the Faithful, and in the Church visible on earth, and especially in Malta, where—for Carmel—it was headed and summed up in the person of Father Julian. The round of duties he performed for the old priest formed the anchor which kept his soul secure and calm, preserving him from mortal sin and from the inward storms which, he had been told, ravaged those who departed from the Faith. Sometimes Carmel held his day-to-day life close to the anchor; sometimes he let it drift away, but never too far to be hauled back. Many hours of the day—just now, for example, when he had glibly told a lie in order to obtain a little extra freedom—his mind was apparently empty of all awareness of religion, given up to mundane botherations, plans, day-dreams or active mischiefs. As soon as early morning Mass was over, he would not spare another thought to the Church or Father Julian until night came and, his eyelids

drooping, he knew it was time to get through his prayers as best he might before sleep overtook him.

He kept himself mentally alert when he performed his acolyte's duties. It was for him then to strike the sanctuary bell three times at the Elevation; the whole assembly in the chancel waited on his promptness. But at other times, when a different acolyte was serving at the altar, he could lose all awareness of himself and his surroundings in the intensity of his devotions. He was satisfied that, now his voice had broken and he could no longer sit with the choir, he had put away for ever the naughtiness of childhood, the tendency to develop amusing, irrelevant thoughts at solemn moments, to exchange jokes with other boys by glances and whispered words. Yet the moment he removed his acolyte's robes and his lace-bordered, half-length surplice, he was eager to be out into the world. The performance of duties that concerned the eternal welfare of his soul seemed, once they were completed, to set him free to enjoy the richness offered to his senses by all the varieties of human experience. Even for a boy of fourteen, he was singularly free from introspections and scruples. Or he had been free until recently.

As he trotted uphill into the streets of Valetta he saw much to interest him. Lorries were bringing in the twisted fuselages of crashed German aircraft, for salvage—they did not stop or he would have asked for a small souvenir. Near the great cathedral of St. John he saw the crew of a British submarine which must have arrived that day; he knew what they were

by their beards and their tourist air. And he met a boy who had been at school with him, but much older, and was now old enough to join the Royal Malta Regiment. Carmel listened to his stories and envied him. Then he hurried on. He stopped to inspect a newly bombed house, a big house—it could almost rank as a palace. The façade had been torn off. He could see into all the rooms, and he marvelled at the brocade hangings, the polished furniture, the big old pictures askew on the walls. He hoped he would meet with some of the R.A.F. pilots coming off duty. He knew them all by sight, and many of them by name. He counted them his friends. And his luck was in, for, taking a short cut up a flight of steps between terraced streets, he saw four, five, six pilots jumping down from a lorry drawn up close to the Governor's Palace where General Dobbie lived.

Carmel knew at a glance they were pilots, from the spread-wings emblems on their breasts. He knew what kind of pilots they were, and the R.A.F. slang name for them—"fighter types." He hurried closer and recognised them as men who flew Hurricanes. They walked away, a group on their own. But there was Harry, from New Zealand. He flew a Spitfire. And Mac, the Canadian. Mac was Manuela's friend. It had nothing to do with him, Carmel decided, how Manuela chose to conduct her life. He had obeyed Father Julian's wish: he took no more money from his sister. That absolved him from further responsibility. Besides, he liked Mac. Mac was the best of all the fighter pilots. It was fantastic that Mac should

find Manuela beautiful and attractive, for Carmel could not see her like that at all; to him, she was simply his elder sister. But that, again, was Mac's lookout. Mac must know that he was Manuela's brother, yet he never spoke about it. Mac never seemed to regard him as a small boy. They always talked man to man. Mac was a great pilot, an ace, a hero. It delighted Carmel to see him now.

He called out, from a hundred yards away, at the top of his voice, and then began to turn exuberant cartwheels, shouting as he finished each somersault on straddled feet: "Victory roll! The Spitfires always win!"

Mac turned and waved his hand. "Hello there, Carmel. How are you keeping?"

"Fine! How about you?"

But Mac had turned back to the lorry, thrusting his arm out rigid against the tail-board.

"Put your hand on my shoulder before you jump. Easy! You don't want to knock yourself up again."

Carmel saw then that there was another Spitfire pilot in the lorry. It was Peter. The one who had broken his arm. He jumped down easily enough. He was no longer wearing a sling. There was a scar on his forehead: it showed as he eased the peaked cap back off his head.

"Fit again?" Carmel asked politely.

"Absolutely. Fit as a fiddle."

"Not quite," said Mac. "Can't use his left arm properly yet. Thinks he can. But he can't. He'll have to lift his elbow to-night, though."

"Are you going celebrating?" Carmel asked as he

walked along beside the pilots. "What is it? A birthday?"

"Use your eyes, kid," Harry told him. "Can't you see that eye-dazzler on Mac's manly chest?"

Carmel looked and saw a small piece of medal ribbon, diagonal stripes of violet and white.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed, using the slang he had picked up round the camps and the airfields. "Distinguished Flying Cross! What a gong!"

"That's what comes of telling everybody every day what a smashing fine guy I am," Mac explained. "They gave me this in the hope it would shut me up. But it won't."

"I never heard you shoot a line yet, Mac."

The boy kept glancing up at the man as he walked beside him. He had always known Mac was the best of them all. Now Mac was marked for the whole world to admire. His name would be in the newspapers, in the *Times of Malta*, in the *London Times*, too. It was a great privilege to know him. And what would Manuela say? He would have liked to ask if she had been told yet, but he and Mac did not talk about Manuela. There were some things better left unspoken. He hoped every one in Valetta, and all the visitors from Sliema, would notice him, walking along, friends, equals—no, not quite equals, but certainly friends—at the side of a pilot with the D.F.C.

"I'd like to drink your health," he said at last.

"So you shall, kid. Just stick around. We're going to make a night of it. It's going to be a real party. We're just looking for a bar right now to start the

evening. Come on. What's that I see ahead there?"

But Peter objected.

"No, look here, Mac, you can't do that! You can't take the kid into a bar."

"Oh, I see. You're coming the little English gentleman on me? It simply isn't done! As if one drink would hurt the kid. Besides, these people in Malta, they all drink wine. That's right, isn't it, Carmel? You're not T-T?"

"I have often drunk wine," Carmel said proudly. "But we drink with meals."

"Yeah. And you start the habit in the cradle. I daresay you were weaned on brandy."

But Peter would not give way. "That's different from boozing in bars. Besides Mac, you know what'll happen. You'll get lit up, and then you'll want to take him on to another bar, and then you'll end up by dragging him into the Dinkum."

The name of the Dinkum made Mac pause. Carmel knew he was thinking of Manuela, wondering if she would be angry, or pleased, if he brought her young brother along.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "The kid's a kind of friend of mine. In a way, I look on him as a mascot. And if he wants to drink my health, I can't turn him away."

"How old are you, Carmel?" Peter asked.

"Fourteen!"

Peter turned to Mac. "You see!"

"I could look after myself when I was fourteen."

"I daresay. You're a rough-neck Canadian from the backwoods. Carmel's different."

"Maybe you're right."

Seeing which way the discussion was going, Carmel said: "Anyhow, I'm afraid I'll have to be going. I have to attend to my duties."

"Duties?"

"Yes. At the altar. I serve the priest. There is a special service this evening."

"Well, that's different," Mac admitted. Carmel could see that he was relieved to be delivered so easily from his dilemma.

"Thank you just the same, for thinking of me."

"Polite little beggar, isn't he? Wish my manners were as good as yours, Carmel. Here, before you go." And Mac pulled something out of his pocket and tossed it to the boy. It glittered, very pale in the dusky air of the evening. A half-crown. "Buy yourself a Coca-Cola. That won't do you any harm."

Carmel caught the coin and then, as his fingers shut tight on it, he could not thrust out of his mind the thought of Father Julian. The money he had been told to refuse from Manuela came, a good deal of it anyway, from Mac; certainly it came from the Dinkum, out of the pockets of men like Mac. Half-a-crown was a lot of money. He thought of all the things he could buy with it. But Father Julian would not approve.

He held out his hand with the silver coin lying flat on the palm.

"Thank you, Mac," he said. "But I must not take money. Only what I earn by working."

"Go on. Don't be a little fool."

“No. Thank you just the same.”

Mac took three rapid strides and stood close to him, pushing his hand aside. The striped medal ribbon on the light blue tunic was level with the boy's eyes.

“Look, Carmel. I don't like prigs. Know what a prig is? Well, you're being one right now. And it's not your style. I'm twice your age, and if I want to give you something, I give it? See? And no questions and no preaching about it. If you don't take it, I'll be insulted? Want to insult me?”

“No. I only meant ——”

“O.K. Forget it. Off you go. The sooner you get into a shelter, the better. It won't be long now before the night bombers are over.”

At the end of the street the boy turned, and saw them all pushing their way into an already crowded bar. He put the half-crown into his pocket, and hurried on down the slopes to the waterfront. It seemed more delectable than ever, that half-crown; it had come from Mac, whom he idolised; he had placated his conscience by trying as hard as he could to refuse it; and now it was his, by Mac's insistence, a windfall, a piece of wealth the more precious because of the money he had been forswearing week by week. To be wholly virtuous, and yet to get half-a-crown as a free gift he dare not refuse—this seemed to him the zenith of beatitude.

He arrived at the rock shelter in good time, early enough to take the key from Father Julian and open the old brass-bound chest, brought down from the

ruined church, in which the vestments were kept. He set out the priest's robes, slipped quickly into his own, and then hurried off to where a big bay had been excavated from the side wall of one of the galleries. This was the new underground chapel improvised to replace the church until the war ended and the rebuilding of Malta began. The chapel was dark, and cold with the chilliness of rocks which had never known sunlight. An oil lamp or two at the sides, marking small shrines, the offertory box, and the stoup of holy water by the entrance; these were the only illuminations, except the candles on the altar. The altar had been dedicated by the Archbishop the previous Sunday and was now to be used, in its new setting, for the first Benediction service in the new chapel. Carmel trimmed the candles and lighted them, adjusted the hassocks on the stone steps, and the markers in the altar books, genuflected, and went back to find Father Julian, whose smile told him he was in high favour.

The congregation numbered more than two hundred, the late-comers arriving with an air of breathlessness and relief which indicated that above ground the guns had already opened fire. While the *Tantum Ergo* was being sung, there was now and again a reverberation of the rock walls, a shock transmitted through age-old strata. Each time the candle-flames on the altar quivered, and the older men and women in the congregation bent their heads a little lower and crossed themselves, deflecting their prayers for a second or two to an entreaty that the bombs might

be directed away from human flesh and explode only among already existing ruins. The congregation was held in an impalpable, indefeasible unity by worship. It was sustained in the ordeals of the present by long unconscious memories of the past, by its mixed ancestries reaching far back into the remote pagan worlds of Greece and Rome, Carthage and Araby, all long since assimilated; and, far more immediately by its ancient tradition of Christianity, sprung from St. Paul, himself painfully and violently converted, who had been shipwrecked on this island and had converted and consecrated the island's first bishop; from the primitive churches which likewise had been driven underground into catacombs; and from the Knights of St. John who had held Malta as a fortress outpost of mediæval Catholic Europe against the Saracens. The spiritual strength of the islanders was limitless, for it was perpetually replenished and from outside themselves. They had come to the rock chapel this evening to engage in a sacramental act, a renewal of faith and hope.

It was strange, Carmel thought, that never before, while the church he had been familiar with as long as he could remember still remained undamaged, and the same alabaster altar before which he was now kneeling was coloured by brilliant lights cast by the sun through stained windows now in fragments, had he felt so keenly the necessity of his religion, the personal humility it enjoined in him, and the corporate pride. He had no words for this emotion; he could only marvel at it, as a new and strange experience. It

did not occur to him that he was ceasing to be merely a small boy, an engaging and intelligent little animal, and had caught his first glimpse of the responsibilities of manhood. He was so absorbed in his thoughts that when the time came for the exhibition of the Host, in its golden monstrance, he was taken un-awares, and it needed a sharp glance, sharp but not unkindly, from Father Julian to make him move to the sanctuary bell and set it clanging its signal of recognition throughout the dark chapel.

Afterwards, when he came back to tidy everything for the night, he passed by the offertory box, and his hand went, under his vestments, to his trousers pocket. He fingered the coins there, the milled edge of the half-crown easily distinguishable from the pennies. It was a penny he took out and dropped into the box.

He snuffed the candles, pulled a fold out of the altar cloth, closed two books left open on the choir stalls, looked round again, and was prepared to hurry away and disrobe himself. Yet on his way out he found himself again lingering by the offertory box. This time his fingers rejected the three pennies in his pocket and clutched at the half-crown. It was not necessary to part with that! It was too big a sacrifice! He had given a penny already, a penny he had earned by hard work. The half-crown had been Mac's and Mac had compelled him to accept it. Mac meant him to spend it on himself, to celebrate the new medal. Mac was not a Catholic—which did not mean that he was to be damned: Father Julian had explained that

many were protected from the fate of the unfaithful by invincible ignorance. Father Julian had prayed this same evening, publicly, for all sailors, soldiers and air-men fighting in the cause of freedom, and especially those engaged in the defence of Malta. That included Mac. That included Mac especially. Perhaps, if he surrendered the half-crown—but it would have to be done quickly, lest the impulse weakened—the offering might help to keep Mac safe. He wanted Mac to be safe for ever, and victorious for ever. And Manuela would be pleased, too.

He had the half-crown out of his pocket now, held tight between his first finger and thumb. His wrist touched the edge of the box; the rim of the coin was poised over the slot, gleamingly in the light from the oil lamp above. It was not too late, even now, to change his mind. He could give another penny instead. No one would ever know. But suddenly his finger and thumb loosened their hot grip. The coin dropped out of sight. The clinking sound it made echoed for a second or two afterwards. As he turned away the boy thought proudly that it was unlikely there would be another coin as valuable in the whole offertory. To find half-a-crown in the box would be a pleasant surprise for Father Julian, and never, never would he guess who had put it there.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE celebration party reached the Dinkum soon after eight, and before they could sit down to dinner a number of Hurricane and Beaufighter pilots, and bomber men, the navigators, bomb-aimers, air gunners and pilots of the few Wellingtons on the island, were crowding round, anxious to drink to Mac and his decoration.

"It's swell of you guys," he said. "But it'll have to be one round, understand? Not that I'm mean, but I'm due at dispersal bright and early in the morning."

"O.K."

The barman produced some unsuspected whisky for the toast, and afterwards they all sang "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Harry, of course, stood out, and drank lemonade. He did not like to be reminded, either, of the one evening he had broken his own rules and taken wine. But no one objected to Harry's high principles. Then a bomber pilot with a spreading and well-brushed moustache, said: "And what about Mac's girl friend? We must drink to her!"

Mac was on the point of refusing when he saw the excitement in Manuela's eyes. She was standing close beside him, clutching his arm. It was a great occasion for the girl, and hell, she didn't get so much fun out

of life, after all. Every one thought he was sleeping with her. If he had denied it no one would have believed him. He could hardly believe it himself. He did not quite know why—it was his doing, not Manuela's, he was sure of that—he had held back all this time. She was young and pretty, and a nice kid into the bargain. The lights were green, the road clear, and yet he wasn't getting anywhere. It wasn't as if he were still an infant, like Harry, wrapped in idealistic napkins; or as if he had a serious attachment, like Peter. He knew his way around. He'd met cabaret girls before who seemed virginal and demure, and when he'd called the bluff, they'd always turned out to be putting on an act. Yeah, every goddam one of them. And Manuela wouldn't take fright if he went all out for what he wanted. She was no hypocrite. It was true, she wasn't the sort to ask in so many words. She was more of a lady than lots of ritzy dames he'd come across. Maybe that was it? He was holding back because he was afraid of spoiling things. It would never be the same again, once they had got beyond kidding and kissing. It never was. With most girls, you didn't care. There were just a few preliminaries to be skipped through as fast as you could. Only, with Manuela the preliminaries had been so sweet, he had taken a strange pleasure in protracting them. Yet he knew that Manuela, secretly, was disappointed in him. The knowledge amused him a lot, chagrined him a little. No other girls had ever complained that he was slow off the mark!

"Sure," he said. "Let's drink to Manuela."

The barman managed to make the whisky last another round.

Pauline came in while they were raising their glasses. She had brought Angela with her. Mac took her aside and asked her if she would mind if Manuela had dinner with them.

“She’s a nice kid. I wouldn’t ask if she wasn’t.”

“Of course. Where is she?”

And Pauline went over and shook hands. Pauline was always a sport. Manuela got a great kick out of that handshake. Ladies who came to the Dinkum usually behaved as if the girls employed there did not exist. They looked straight through them. Pauline wouldn’t do a thing like that.

Mac drank water with his dinner. Maybe he’d have a beer later on, in between dances. But that was all. Flying came first in importance in his life, and not for anything would he have risked his efficiency in the air. He had a strong constitution, and could throw off all kinds of strains and excesses very quickly. But he had known quite a few tough guys who ran things close and got away with it—for a time. Only for a time. He meant to have clear eyes and quick responses to-morrow, and the day after, and every day he was due for patrols or interceptions. This was his war-time rule of life. He took it for granted. It was queer he should even bother to think it all out again this evening.

Peter talked mostly to Pauline. Mac would not be surprised any day now to see her appear with an engagement ring. That would mean another celebration.

In a way, it might be better if Peter was kept grounded. The Station Commander had talked to Mac about that, in a roundabout way, fishing for his opinion. Mac saw the point. After a pilot had had such a run of bad luck as Peter, so many failures on top of each other—because they were not his fault made the ordeal all the worse—and had baled out twice, and broken an arm, and been burned, it was not to be expected that his confidence would be the same. And to send a pilot who'd lost confidence in himself into the air, against Me.s coming in clouds, was just plain murder. Of course, you couldn't tell. With some guys, it wouldn't make much difference. Water off a duck's back. But not with the highly strung type, like Peter, the type that was boiling over inside and would rather die than show it.

There could be no half measures with Peter. He would never make a reliable, run-of-the-mill pilot. He'd either be tops, or a downright failure. And he wanted to be tops. Of course, he did. If the Station Commander made him operational again, the first day or two would show which way he was going. But if they had guessed wrong, as likely as not Peter would be dead inside those two days. Take it all round, the wisest course would be to ground him. That was undoubtedly what would happen if he had been at a station in England. But there were plenty of Spits and plenty of men to fly them in England. In Malta, everything was short, from food to petrol, from whisky to trained pilots. Even some of the mechanics to service the planes, to bomb-up and re-load ammuni-

tion belts, came from the Army, infantrymen learning a new job in a hurry. It was a good thing Peter's arm would not be completely fit for use for another week or two. The problem could be put off till then.

Harry sat next Angela. He had little to say to Pauline these days, though she was always nice to him when she could spare time from Peter. Harry was not making a play at Angela. The way his mind worked, a married woman was not open to advances. A fat lot young Harry knew about life! But this time he was right. Angela was easy to look at, and her husband was far away—God knows where on one of the seven seas where U-boats and Dorniers and torpedo-planes pirated for merchant ships—but Angela's thoughts were always with him. He was a lucky guy, to have a wife like Angela—well, he was lucky provided his ship was still afloat.

Mac leaned across the table and asked Angela about her husband.

Her face was transformed as she answered: "I had a letter yesterday. By the civil plane from Gibraltar."

"Is he at Gib? That's not far away. Did he say if he was coming here? In the convoy?"

"No, he didn't say anything. I don't suppose he'd be allowed to mention it."

"I'll bet you're hoping his ship's in the next convoy. What a break for you, if he turned up here. It's bound to arrive soon, that convoy. It must!"

"Yes," said Angela. "It would be wonderful to see him again. But I don't know. For his sake, I'd rather he went to America or round the Cape. He told me,

once, the Malta convoy was reckoned the worst job of all. Except the northern route to Russia.”

What the poor guy meant by that, Mac decided in his private thoughts, was that if you got spilled out into the sea, the water in the Arctic Circle was colder than in the Mediterranean; otherwise, there was nothing to choose between the two routes. A lot of ships set out, and a few reached port. Why were his thoughts this evening turning so often to death and disaster? He glanced down at the D.F.C. ribbon, fresh and bright, on his tunic. No denying he had got a kick out of putting up a gong, but now he began to wonder if there was something unlucky about it. He had never felt like this when he was still undecorated. He disliked the thoughts that kept creeping and sidling into his head this evening when he ought to be carefree and happy.

He had always laughed at superstition. He had never carried a mascot or a lucky charm. Yet when they reached Valetta in the late afternoon, and met the little boy he knew was Manuela's brother—a nice kid!—he had called him not only his friend but his mascot. Maybe he needed a real mascot? Something he could carry with him everywhere, take along with him when he climbed into the cockpit and set the prop turning. Maybe he'd feel better if he had a mascot? Only, he would do it secretly. The other guys would rib him hard if he went back on his natural principles, and took to himself a St. Christopher badge, or a golliwog, or an ivory elephant. Besides, his mascot ought to be something different, something no other

pilot would have, something no one would ever guess was a mascot at all. He'd have to give it a thought, sometime. Meanwhile, touch wood! But no one must see!

He slipped his hand off the tablecloth, then right under the table, gathering up the folds of the white cloth to reach the surface of the wood. He knocked softly, once, twice, three times! That ought to put him out of reach of the gremlins and geezels and all the other intrusive agents of the devil lying in wait to snatch an airman's luck away.

He was about to fetch his hand up again when his fingers touched something that was neither wood nor napery. A hand. Manuela's! The kid had mistaken his intention. Her fingers held on to his, small, soft, hot. He was talking to Peter but he looked sideways and, as he expected, Manuela's glance met his for a second, warm and confiding as her hand. Then she looked away, but he could feel her fingers moving, squeezing and stroking the palm of his hand. It was coming to something when a guy who had been places and done things in three continents, a guy with a gong on his chest and more women in his record than he cared to add up, fell to holding hands under the table. And liking it! Maybe it was because Manuela was enjoying herself so much? With her blue frock and the scarlet ribbon in her black hair she looked like some of those old pictures he'd seen once in an art gallery. He hadn't been impressed at the time. Art wasn't his cup of tea. But now he admired those pictures—Italian, they were—because Manuela put him

in mind of them. Better not tell her that. She was Maltese, and that meant she hated the Eyeties as much as the Jerries.

Before midnight Peter and Pauline had gone, and Harry and Angela left five minutes later.

"You'd better be heading for home, soon," Harry told Mac before he went. "Remember all your good resolutions."

"Well, I've kept 'em. Only one glass of beer since those two whiskies."

"You'd have been better without them."

"Don't worry. I've danced all the wicked alcohol out of my system already. O.K. I'll have one more spin round with Manuela, and then I'll follow you."

And after the next dance, he said to Manuela: "Time for me to pack up now. Must get my beauty sleep."

He said that every night he came to the Dinkum, as soon as he had danced with her for the last time. He never tired of the same little jokes. And she loved him for it.

"You going to stay on?"

She shook her head. "Not after you go. I never do."

Outside, in the street, the night air was chilly. Manuela wrapped her scarf, a new one of scarlet silk, close round her throat. She tossed the fringed end over her shoulder.

"Suits you, that scarf."

"You like it? Good. I bought it yesterday. I

wanted it a long time. I saved up. It was not in the window. The man in the shop kept it for me.”

“It’s pretty. Like you. Mind if I walk a bit of the way with you? Or should we look for a *carozza*?”

“No. Let us walk.”

“Matter of fact, I’d like to see you home. Wanted to before this, only I thought perhaps—where do you live, anyway?”

“In Sliema. Across the harbour. It is too far for you. You would never get back to the airfield.”

“A walk’d do me good.”

“No. You must say good-bye at the ferry.”

“What’s the matter? Think your father’d get a shock if I turned up at the front door?”

“No. It’s not that.” Then she had to be honest with him. “I do not want you to see where I live. It is horrible. It is very poor.”

“Gee, I’ve been poor, too. What do you think I am? A duke or something?”

“But, Mac, I really don’t want you to come. If you like ——”

“Yes!”

“I will go somewhere with you.”

Well, why not? It had to come to this some time. This was what they’d been heading for a long while now. He must have been growing old before his time, leaving it so long on the boil. And it had to be to-night. There was always a time when you could take your chance, or it never returned.

He stopped, put his arms round her, kissed her.

"That's a bit different, isn't it, kid? Not the way I've been treating you up to now?"

Manuela laughed, and then bent her head into the opening of his greatcoat again.

"No," she murmured. "It's different. And nicer."

"Gee, you're a swell kid."

Now where the hell could they go? It wouldn't do to march into any of the hotels, the two of them, at this time of night, without luggage and no room booked. But there must be places? There always were, everywhere. If he hadn't been wasting his spare time ever since he came to Malta, he'd know some addresses by now. If he had had any idea, this morning, what was going to happen to-night, he would have found out an address before he left the airfield. If it were any other girl he could ask her for a suggestion. But not Manuela. Anyhow, she wouldn't know. Perhaps she would, though, being at the Dinkum. The other girls there must have talked in front of her, often enough. But he couldn't ask her.

There was something nagging at his mind, something he ought to clear up.

"Listen, kid. Have you ever done this before? With some other guy?"

"No."

"I thought not. Look, you can't know what you're letting yourself in for."

"Yes, I do."

"No. No one ever does. Not the first time. You're sure you want to? Quite sure?"

She nodded.

"You trust me, don't you? Yeah, I know you do. That's what's been holding me back, I suppose. Don't be afraid, kid. It'll be all right. It'll be fine. It'll be lovely. I'll see it is. And go on trusting me. I'm not such a roughneck as some folks think."

He kissed her again.

Ahead of them, a group of ten or a dozen men appeared suddenly, noisy shadows in the dark street, apparently stepping, one after the other, talking among themselves, out of the piled-up ruins of a house. As they came nearer, Mac saw that there was a doorway there, roughly built of timber balks, like pit-props, with a double curtain to safeguard the blackout.

"Do you know what that place is?" Manuela asked. "The underground workshops. Moved from the Dockyard. For safety."

Mac remembered he had heard of the place. It was a long tunnel, deep under the earth, transformed into an engineering factory and repair shop. There were no delays due to air-raids down there, and no danger of essential machinery being destroyed.

"That will be the late night shift leaving now," Manuela said. "The last of them. There will be no one there now, except the watchmen, till morning."

"It's a wonder they don't post a sentry."

"But they do. Only he is not here at present."

Mac laughed. Maltese discipline was magnificent under fire, but easy-going when the raiders were far away. The sentry would be having a drink somewhere round the corner, to keep out the cold night air—

though already the weather had changed. The stars were clear and soft overhead. There was a promise of summer to-morrow. Mac was glad: it was so cold in the cockpit of a Spitfire at operational heights he wanted all the warm sunshine he could get when he was on the ground.

"If you like," Manuela whispered, "we could go in."

It was she who took his hand, led him to the doorway under the piled-up bomb debris, and pushed the curtains aside. But once they were in, he led the way along a short corridor, and then down several flights of steps cut in the rock. If they came across the watchman, he could always pretend he had come in to make a row about the missing sentry. It could easily be construed as part of his duty; they were always being lectured at the airfield about security measures. But he did not want to meet the watchman, so he walked softly and slowly, and Manuela behind him, was just as quiet. They did not speak to each other. He was intensely aware of her. Excitement pounded in his veins. This was something that had to happen before—before what? Before to-morrow. That was the only answer which made sense.

At the foot of the stone stairs they saw a long gallery stretching in front of them, most of its width occupied by lathes and turning machines, with dynamos and tool boxes at intervals. The machines were all still and untended, covered with dust cloths. The air down here was warm and close, and there was a sweetish smell of oil. It was very quiet and still. They

could see because, although the shaded lamps over the machines were switched off, every fifty yards there was a low voltage lamp clamped to the wall. It was a complete factory stretched out into a long line underground.

They walked on, and soon they came to an embrasure enlarged out of the rock wall. There was a desk with papers on it, a filing cabinet, a chair. Somebody used this place as an office, and sometimes slept here when work was finished, for there was a mattress on the floor, behind the desk, covered with blankets.

Mac walked straight across and with a turn of his wrist took out the dully glowing lamp. Partial darkness became total darkness around them. Before his eyes had grown accustomed to the change, Manuela was standing beside him. He held her close. He kissed her fiercely, then gently. He had not known he wanted her so much. He stood back, to unfasten her scarf, and to help her out of her coat.

A minute later they heard noises. Not very near. But coming nearer. The sound of men's voices. And almost at once some of the big lights over the machines farther down the tunnel came on, brilliant, glaring white.

They lay side by side on the mattress. He could hear her breathing, feel the tension of her body in his arms. They listened. The voices, speaking Maltese, meant nothing to him.

Presently she whispered: "It is an air raid. Some of the men have come back here for shelter."

He cursed under his breath. It was no good. The raid might go on all night. And even if they waited, hidden in the darkness here, and no one came to disturb them, it would still be no good. You couldn't pick up again, after a thing like this had happened. It was not going to work out after all. His luck had got out of step. He ought to have had a mascot. He supposed there would be other nights, and better places than this. Manuela was a sweet kid. She was more than that. He had never felt the same way about any one else. He never would again. And it had not happened after all.

He stood up.

"Better put your coat on."

Well, as there was a raid, they could always pretend they had come in for shelter. But it was a lousy let-down. He ought to have had a mascot.



CHAPTER TWELVE

THE next morning Peter was told that he could leave the hospital.

“But you’re not going back to duty yet,” the surgeon said. “You’ll have to report to me here every second day, for orthapædic treatment. Oftener if your own medical officer thinks it necessary. I’ve sent him a chit.”

Peter had not wanted to return to the Station until he was allowed to fly. His intention had been then to dump his kit in his quarters, have a word with the Adjutant, and walk straight out on to the field and into an aircraft. The shorter the gap between his return to duty and his first take-off, the less time there would be for argument about it, to his face or in his absence; the less time also for him to become self-conscious and introspective over what he privately knew would be an ordeal. Let him get into the air again in one swift move, without discussions and considerations, without being made to feel that others were watching him surreptitiously, observantly. After that, the rest was up to him. But to be compelled to hang around the airfield while other men were taking off and coming back—or not coming back—made everything a thousand times more difficult. He would

have liked to explain all this and make the surgeon see that, if it was absolutely necessary for him to wait longer yet for his arm to regain full suppleness, the interval would be much better spent away from his squadron. But once he opened up that subject, the surgeon would get ideas; he would hare off to consult the physician, and the next thing would be a confidential report to the Station Commander, medical boards, endless delays. Better to say nothing, and accept the decision. But Peter did not look forward to the next few days.

A lorry was setting off from the hospital and its route would be close to the airfield, so he arranged for it to make a detour and drop him and his baggage. The place seemed quiet enough when he arrived; more bomb craters on the field; the newest—touching one of the runways—was being filled in. There were two delayed action bombs marked with red flags, at the far side of the perimeter. The dispersal point for the Hurricanes had been moved to avoid them. The control tower had been knocked about a bit, and the roof of the mess showed some new patches. And two of the blast pens were stove in, the bigger pens used for the Wellingtons; the aircraft between the shattered concrete walls looked as though they would never fly again. Things had been lively. Three aircraft were at readiness, over by the Spitfire dispersal point. He could see the pilots sitting out in the sunshine—it was much warmer this morning—in deck-chairs. That would be Mac, Harry and the other fellow who had taken his place in the flight. They

were too far away to distinguish which was which. One of them had something in his hand, something coloured bright scarlet, which he was flapping slowly about, probably to keep the flies away. There was no sign of the Hurricanes: they must be up on patrol.

He reported to the Adjutant, who seemed glad to see him, and did not ask any awkward questions. While they were talking, the Station Commander came in. Peter came to attention and saluted.

His commander also was glad to see him. Perhaps he had been fancying things?

"They're trying to argue I'm not fit yet," he said. "It's all bilge, sir. Arm's as right as rain. Look!"

He held up his left hand, spread the fingers, clenched them, twisted his forearm and wrist this way and that. It hurt a bit, but that was his own affair.

"Seems all right," the Station Commander commented casually. "But we must go by what the M.O.s say."

"They're too damn cautious for words," Peter grumbled.

"I'm going out to Dispersal now," the Station Commander announced. "Care to come with me?"

"You bet."

"Shove anything urgent through on the phone."

"Very good, sir," said the Adjutant. And to Peter: "Your pals'll be glad to see you. Or did you know you were coming out of dock? We only got word just now."

"Same with me. These doctors never let you know what's in their minds."

The car took them around the outer edge of the airfield. As it drew near the dispersal point, Peter saw the three pilots look around in their deck-chairs, and then, in their heavy flying suits—the parachute harness lay on the ground beside them—get to their feet one by one. It was Mac who was carrying the scarlet oojah. He slipped it loosely over his shoulder as he stood up.

“What’s that Mac’s got round his neck?” Peter asked.

“A scarf. Present from his girl friend.”

“It’s new.”

Of course: Manuela had been wearing it at the Dinkum last night.

“Has Mac lost his own scarf?”

“Not that I know of. But he prefers this one. What’s called sentimental associations. Myself, I think it’s far too conspicuous to use in the air. It might identify him to the Huns.”

And when they got out of the car the Station Commander told Mac he ought to have the scarf dyed dark blue.

“Thanks. But I like it as it is.”

The third pilot grinned at Peter and asked: “Coming to shove me out of a job?”

“Not yet,” said the Station Commander sharply. “He’s not passed fit yet. Got to hang around a bit. Have to find you some work on the ground, Peter.”

The telephone bell inside the concrete hut rang loudly. They all looked towards the open door, where a signaller was sitting at the instrument. He put his

head out and called: "It's for you, sir. Adjutant on the line."

"O.K."

They had only a minute or two to talk before the Station Commander came running out of the hut.

"Scramble!" he shouted. "But I'll give you your orders first."

The mechanics were standing back from the Spitfires now; they were soldiers, but wearing R.A.F. overalls. The pilots were already fitting their harness and flying caps. Peter helped the third man to buckle his straps. He felt envious as he did so, and commended himself for keeping his feelings out of his voice and his expression.

"It's good news, boys," the Station Commander explained. "More Spits coming to Malta."

"How? When?"

"Right now. From an aircraft-carrier. An American one. Hundreds of miles away, of course. But they've started to take off. Forty-five of them. Forty-five, my lucky lads! In one dolop."

"It must be a hell of a big carrier."

"We shan't know ourselves after this," Harry exclaimed. "There'll be so many Spits in Malta we'll be knocking the tails off each other."

"It'll certainly change things a bit," said Mac. And, to the Station Commander: "Well, sir, I suppose our job's to provide top cover?"

"That's it. Due west, sixty miles out. They're rendezvousing at ten thousand feet. You'd better climb to fifteen. Quick as you can. The Hurries are coming

back now. I'll get them airborne again as fast as I can. These Spits are coming right off the carrier. It's a difficult take-off, off the deck, so they've just enough gas in the tanks to get them here. They'll touch down right away. Eighteen of them here, the rest at the other fields. They'll have to refuel at once. All O.K.?"

"O.K., sir."

"You'll pick up any further orders on the R.T. Good luck."

"Good luck," Peter echoed. It hurt to see Mac and Harry dashing off without him, Mac pulling the red scarf closer round his throat as he ran. Mac was the first to take off. Harry followed on his starboard side. They began to climb steeply as soon as they had retracted their undercarriages. Where the hell was the other chap?

The third Spitfire was still on the ground, the pilot bending forward in the cockpit, two fitters standing by with anxious faces. A sergeant came running over, but before he got to the aircraft the spasmodically turning propeller faltered to a standstill.

"Blast!" said the Station Commander. "Gone U/S." Unserviceable—like me! thought Peter.

The mechanics were talking to the pilot. The sergeant swung round as the Station Commander came up.

"Can't understand it, sir. She was all right five minutes ago. I tested the engine myself. Running as sweet as a tune on the banjo, she was."

The mechanics had exposed the engine and were examining it closely.

“It may be the carburettor, sir.”

The pilot climbed out.

“Bad luck, my lad. There’s nothing you can do about it. Lucky it didn’t happen when you were taking off. You might as well come back to the mess. I’ll give you a lift.”

The third pilot, depressed and frowning, removed his flying kit, all except his boots, and dropped it in a heap by the deck-chairs.

The Station Commander left his instructions: “Phone through to me, sergeant, the minute you’ve found the trouble. But you’d better get the engineer officer on duty to give the O.K. before that ship’s used again.”

“Very good, sir.”

Peter preferred to wait at the dispersal point for Mac and Harry to return. It would be a sight worth seeing, eighteen Spitfires coming in to land. And how many altogether—forty-five! It was difficult to imagine so many in Malta. The odds would still be well in favour of the Luftwaffe, but their picnic days were over. And if an aircraft-carrier were only sixty miles away, that surely meant that the long overdue convoy would be arriving soon. Then he cursed as he realised that this unexpected event intruded on his personal problem: now he would never be able to claim that he had been a success in the bad days, the days when there were only a few overworked British fighters to dispute the air with the crowding wings

of the Luftwaffe. He would never now be able to feel himself on equal terms with Harry and Mac. By the time he was flying again everything would be easier.

He looked at the flying suit, the fur-lined cap, the woolen scarf, the leather gloves and the parachute harness left behind by the third pilot. The fellow was just about his size. They would fit. He was possessed by a sudden longing to feel his professional equipment clasped on his body again, to pretend that at any moment he could take the air, as if nothing had happened. It was an absurd and fanciful notion, but it nagged at him. It would only take a minute to try. No one would notice him across the width of the great field. And the fitters were far too busy trying to put the U/S Spit to rights. Why not?

He had pulled up the zip and fitted the helmet—not perfect, but near enough—when he heard the sound of approaching aircraft. Only the Hurricanes coming back from patrol. The worst of fighters was that you were always running short of gas; you had to work on a short leash to get speed and climb. The Hurries flew in by twos, almost over his head. Their dispersal point was some distance away. He watched them critically, absorbed.

Afterwards, forgetting that he was wearing another man's kit, he strolled over to the Spitfire under repair. The sergeant looked up.

"It *was* the carburettor, sir. The intake. I've fitted a new one. She'll be all right now."

"I'll try the engine for you."

It was good to settle into a cockpit again, even on the ground. He felt for the g-pedals, and only then remembered he was not wearing flying boots. He pushed the starter button. The fuselage began to throb gently. He eased the throttle: gently; gently. There was the power. Plenty of it. He shifted his hands over the instruments one by one, taking the reassuring feel of them into his mind, through the familiar responses of his muscles. He was fit enough—a little strange and awkward with his left hand, but that would soon pass. His old confidence flowed back into all his nerves, with a quiet certainty.

The sergeant came and leaned over, behind the wind shield. He was shouting something. Peter lifted the earphone flap away from the right side of his head. The sergeant shouted again and pointed upwards.

Shell bursts in the sky. Four miles away. A raid. Of course! They would be after that carrier, and trying to jump the new Spits as they came in to make their first landing. Peter eased the throttle back, and then became aware of another noise, overhead and not far away.

A Spit coming in to land, with the undercart already down.

He assumed it was the first from the carrier, but, as it swept by, low and close, in a tight right-hand turn, he recognised the numbers painted large on the side. It was Harry! He had been in a fight. The Spit had a torn wing and a pattern of holes in the fuselage. And he was going to land right away. No

orbits. That meant an emergency landing. Levelling off now. Touch. A bit shaky. Touch again. Down! But the Spitfire hardly lost air speed. It tilted and scraped its good wing along the ground as it evaded a bomb crater. Then with a sickening inevitability it ran on and hurled its nose into the concrete wall of a blast pen. The tail reared up. There was an explosion, smoke, flame. Then the fire, roaring up from the nose to the tail. The fire-tender was dashing across the airfield, and men were running there too, but Peter knew it was too late. It needed time to climb out of the tight, narrow little cockpit of a Spitfire, and Harry was dead already, burned to death. He ought to have baled out and let the Spit ditch itself in the drink. Silly to try to save an aircraft now, when forty-five new ones were coming in. Harry was dead.

But Mac was still alive. Somewhere out above the sea. Alone. The only surviving escort, till the Hurricanes could take off again, for the new pilots due to make their first landing on Malta; pilots who did not know the tricks of Malta air fighting, pilots who were short of gas, and had to touch down quickly for replenishments. They'd be lucky if they were not greeted by a heavy bombing raid as they made their landings.

Mac was alone. Peter looked around the field from the cockpit of the stationary Spitfire. All the mechanics except one had run off toward the blazing plane. As if there was anything they could do! The firemen in asbestos clothing were playing hoses on the blaze. He looked at the burning plane, thought of Harry,

and closed his eyes. If he were in danger of losing his nerve, this would do him no good. The old and proven remedy for lost confidence was—get into the air again. At the first possible moment. Mac was in the air—somewhere, alone. Mac would need him.

Peter leaned out of the cockpit and shouted to the mechanic standing a few yards away. It took a long time to attract his attention. He signalled for the chocks to be pulled away. The man looked astonished, disbelieving. He shouted again, violently. At last the man took up the rope, and stared at him again as the engine roared louder. Then at last he pulled. Peter taxied the plane away. Better take off correctly, into the wind. He was out of practice. He wheeled carefully, drove up the revs, held the tail firmly down. Airborne! Now he was clear of the field! Height one hundred. Up with the undercart. As he set the hydraulic mechanism working, he became aware that guns were firing close at hand. Steady. Three hundred. Then—astonishing sight!—he saw a bomb dropping past him, black, finned, spinning slowly. As he made another turn, he caught his first sight of the enemy. A Stuka, zooming up at a sharp angle after its dive. He climbed after it, using the boost. Marvellous! He was overtaking fast. The swine must have been bombing the Hurricanes on the ground. He needed a lesson.

The Stuka, like a mechanical stork, with a kink in its wings and the big spats on the landing wheels projecting underneath, began to level off out of its climb. Peter levelled off also. He reduced his speed

so as not to overshoot. Closer. Range about a hundred and fifty yards now. A bit to the right. Aim to strike wide of the armour plating behind the seats. He took a sight, and moved his fingers to the cannon gun button. Off the mark. More to the left. Now close the range. Nearer. Was anything else coming at him? He glanced in the mirror. Nothing. He took aim again. Adjust a little. He had been through all this before, and it had ended suddenly, in an explosion in front of his eyes, his aircraft tossing about, pain in his head and his arm, and then the short drop through space and the long slow fall under the parachute with endless sky around. But not this time! He pressed both gun buttons. The Spitfire quivered. Easy on the ammo. Two seconds was plenty. He saw his shells and bullets striking and splintering. He edged away to the right to get a better look. And then he saw the black smoke and the flame, and the Stuka began to stagger from side to side, till its nose dipped. He made a half-turn and came back to watch. The Stuka hit the ground very soon—it had been a low-level fight—and exploded.

So he had opened his score. As easy as that! There was nothing to worry about now. He was good, as he had always known. He had proved it at last. That was all. But it made a hell of a difference. There was nothing more to worry about. Except Harry, who was dead. And Mac, who was alone somewhere in the Malta skies, perhaps needing help.

It was time he tried the R.T. He went for height and then he moved the switch over to the correct

frequency. Transmitting and tapping back to reception, he quickly got in touch with the airfield control, reported his position and claimed the destruction of the Stuka. He half expected to receive a reprimand even here, ten thousand feet up. But the voice in his headphones, low, calm and clear, speaking with deliberate slowness, only said: "Sure you are O.K.?"

"Yes, thanks, I'm fine."

He flew on, climbing fast till he reached fifteen thousand feet. Then he saw aircraft below him. He identified them carefully. They were the new Spits all right. They flew in tight formations: about twelve in each. He could not spare time to count carefully. It was marvellous to see so many aircraft in the sky at once and know they were not Germans or Italians. He tried to make contact with Mac on the R.T.

"Hallo, Mac! Hallo, Mac! Peter calling. Peter calling. Over to you."

But the only answer he received was from the leader of one of the formations below him. He warned them to expect bandit bombers and fighters as they came near the airfields and promised to keep guard above them as they landed.

He wheeled to fly back on the same course, the new Spitfires far below him, hardly distinguishable against the wide silken shimmering of the sea. He could watch Malta now, twenty miles away, with the smaller island of Gozo, both of them tawny and apparently flat, very small in the infinite expanse of the sea. They looked like those very thin loaves he had seen Indian troops baking in open pans, last

winter in England. Chapatties, they called them. Something like that. Or like dartboards knocked slightly out of shape. Someone once, somewhere or other, had compared Malta to a dartboard. Old and battered. A target for Hitler's bombing boys. But indestructible. It was Mac who had said that. Or else he had said it himself sometimes, to Mac.

He tried again to find Mac with the R.T. and again he failed. But Mac must be somewhere about. There was cloud behind him. Lots of it. A bank about three miles long, behind him, to the north and still higher. He did not want to go higher. It was cold enough already in the cockpit, even with the hood closed. His feet, without the fur-lined flying boots, felt frozen, stiff and clumsy. There might be bandits in that cloudbank. Peter decided to look and turned back on his course, after making sure the new Spitfires were still free from attack. They were moving slowly; quite right, too; they had to conserve their petrol, in case they were forced to fight. But he would have to be quick inspecting the cloud, if he was to keep his promised rendezvous over the airfield.

In little more than a minute he was flying blind into the cloud of vapour and almost at once he saw another aircraft, shadowy and ill-defined, in front of him. Going slow. He throttled back but overtook it, twenty yards lower. As he came up it reared into a loop, turning clean above him, to tuck itself in behind his tail. His senses quickened. But he had had time to see it was a Spitfire. He kept straight on—the only safe thing to do in cloud with other aircraft about.

It must be Mac. Trust Mac to pull off a fast manoeuvre like that. He must have been almost automatic on the controls. Better make sure! Peering over his shoulder, Peter saw the other plane coming up alongside him. It was certainly Mac. Flying with an open cockpit even in this cloud. He could see the bright patch made by the red scarf at his throat. He smiled and lifted his hand to wave.

Mac pointed to his ears, and Peter realised that his radio was still set at transmission. He flicked the switch over.

Mac tilted his wings and they wheeled together, still keeping inside the cloud. Then Mac's voice sounded in his earphones:

"Hallo, stranger. What are you doing up here?"

"Thought I might help."

"Harry got shot about a bit. Do you know if he landed O.K.?"

"Yes. He landed." It was useless to tell Mac the truth about Harry while they were up here. Bad news would always keep.

"I've been trying to get you on the R.T.," he said.

"You must have come through when I was on transmission."

They turned again, inside the cloud.

"I've seen the new Spits coming in. They'll be landing in a few minutes."

"Yeah. I've had a couple of peeps at them. Time we went down to cover the landing. What say?"

"O.K. with me. Mac, I got a Stuka."

"Did you? That's fine. You'll get lots more yet."

Say, be careful when we come out of this cloud. A hell of a lot of it, isn't there? And thick. And somehow I got an idea we're not alone up here."

"Right. I'll be watching."

"Level first, till we're out. Then dive."

"O.K."

It all happened in a second. Mac was flying ahead now, and Peter was surprised to see the nose of his Spitfire dip suddenly. That was the direct opposite of the plan. Then he saw another aircraft rushing out of the vapour, straight at Mac, head on. A Messerschmitt. And the German pilot had exactly the same idea: he tried to dive and pass under. As Peter lifted his own plane and rolled away to the right, reaching for the boost, he saw the collision. Fragments flew through the vapour. He circled, and then dived. As he came out of the cloud, he saw what was left of both the aircraft falling towards the sea, not far apart, each in the steep, diagonal, smoky descent of fatality. No parachute unfolded.

And then there were cannon shells, the self-extinguishing type that exploded in little white puffs, shuttling past his wings. He worked furiously on the controls with hands and feet, swung to right and to left, spiralling, and then making a climbing turn. He could see them now. Two Me.s yellow noses, 109's. They came after him again, and as he made sharp aileron turns, he saw the tiny ejaculations of pale blue smoke from the gun-muzzles in their wings. He made a stall turn, and the Spitfire spun as he came out of it, uncontrollably, till he almost blacked out. But

he managed to correct the spin, and found he had evaded the attack. He could see one Me. five hundred feet below him. He put the nose of the Spitfire down and opened fire.

Far below and far away, the staff of the Fighter Control Room, deep underground, were busily recording the progress of events in broad outline. Officers sat at a balcony with a big wall map behind them. Others, in the main room, sat at small desks surrounding a large table map. On the table were geometrically shaped symbols representing aircraft formations, with indicators to show which were enemy and which were friendly, and the number in each formation as last reported. The British symbols were still heavily outnumbered, yet there were far more represented there than ever before in the history of Malta.

The main task was to bring the forty-five incoming Spitfires to safety. Pauline was on duty as a plotter, moving the symbols about the table with a long magnetised rod as information was passed to her through the single headphone clasped to her right ear. She could take instructions by broadcast or direct by word of mouth. She worked with a concentration which mercifully restricted the secret anguish of her mind. Fighter Control was concerned with the strategy of battle; the fate of individual aircraft and their pilots could hardly be taken into account. So far as combats could be controlled—and that was confined to heading aircraft towards their enemies—it was done by radio telephony from the airfields, each squadron having its own control.

Yet there was other, unofficial, more personal information coming in by telephone and passed, whenever there came a momentary lull, by word of mouth. Pauline had heard that Harry had been killed in a crash landing. Five minutes later, another woman plotter told her that Peter had taken off, without orders, had shot down a Stuka, and flown out over the sea to join Mac.

Somebody at the far side of the table said: "But he's not supposed to be flying again yet. Must have gone crazy." And somebody else said: "Well, you never know what to expect from these fighter types."

After that came, not silence, but no information, except instructions about hostile and British formations moving here and there. Then, while she pushed the symbols about—one of them, or part of one of them, must represent Peter!—she gathered that the airfield control had overheard Mac and Peter talking over their R.T. That meant they had made contact! That meant that Peter would not fight alone next time he encountered enemy aircraft.

Another space of protracted ignorance and activity, while every one in the big room grew tense as the new Spitfires, flying low now, came nearer to Gozo island. Then she was told to reduce the numbers on two of her symbols. Minus one for the Germans; minus one for the British. A Spitfire and a Messerschmitt destroyed, far out over the sea. The Spitfire might be Peter's!

But almost at once, she was told to remove the German symbol altogether. Three Messerschmitts in

all destroyed. Who had shot them down? Who survived—Mac or Peter?

For the next half-minute she was kept frantically busy, moving the symbols of the new Spitfires over to the different landing fields, and then changing the numbers, as one after another they touched down, and were run into the blast pens.

“But they’re not all safe,” said a Flight Lieutenant behind her. “Those Stukas are bombing as hard as they can. Must be hell out there. Damned hard luck, to get our new Spits in and then have some of them destroyed on the ground.”

A Wing Commander replaced the receiver on the telephone at his desk and came and stood beside her. He waited till she could spare him her attention. He was an oldish man with grey hair.

“Thought you might like to know,” he said. “Peter’s putting up a terrific show. It was he who got that Stuka, you know, and both of those Me.s. Now he has no ammunition left, but he’s making dummy attacks over the airfield, putting the bombers off their aim. It’s a sight worth seeing, they tell me.”

The telephone rang, and the Wing Commander went to answer it.

She listened to the broadcast in her headphone, and altered the numbers for the new Spitfires, again reducing them. There were now only three to touch down. Then she had to increase the numbers again, for each airfield. Some of the newly arrived aircraft were taking off again, despite the bombing. They

must have been very quick with the re-fuelling and re-loading.

The Wing Commander came back and said: "The new boys are mixing it already. And the Boche isn't a bit happy. He'll be licking out for home in no time. By the way, Peter's just touched down. Made a perfect landing. They won't let him fly again. Not to-day, anyhow."

"Oh, thanks," said Pauline. "Thanks very much."

The Wing Commander jogged her elbow and indicated the rod in her hand.

"Better mark him off on the table. One Spitfire, resting. He's earned it."



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR more than a hundred years Malta, at the express wish of her people, had been part of the British Empire, and Valetta had served as a naval base for the Mediterranean Fleet. The arrival of British battleships in the Grand Harbour was always an occasion for popular celebration, but since 1940, when Fascist Italy entered the war, the custom had perforce lapsed. Owing to the fall of France and the avaricious expedients of Mussolini's policy, Malta suddenly became a beleaguered outpost instead of an island base. The Mediterranean Fleet swept from Alexandria to Gibraltar, and back again, driving the Italians to harbour and often pursuing them there. Convoy runs were protected by the fleet operations, but when the merchantmen came in sight of Malta the battleships and cruisers sailed on, east or west. Battleships could not be put underground or concreted against blast, and the Germans had air bases in Sicily and North Africa less than twenty minutes distant by flying time. Malta was preserved through the long siege by the tiny force of fighter aircraft precariously maintained on the island, by the guns served by both British and Maltese, by the resolution of her people under the most protracted and intensive bombardment in his-

tory, and by the essential supplies brought to her at heavy cost by sea. But for the merchant ships there would have been no survival. But for the British Navy the merchant ships could never have reached Malta. Yet for three years following the dramatic summer of 1940 Malta never saw any British warships larger than destroyers and corvettes, except when a cruiser or an aircraft-carrier, so heavily damaged that she could not risk the remainder of the voyage to Alexandria or Gibraltar, came to shelter a while in the Grand Harbour and be made seaworthy again under a persistent day and night bombardment.

The people of Malta, cherishing all their traditions and drawing inexhaustible strength from them, felt the severance keenly. A hundred and forty years is not a long period in Maltese history, but it was the most recent one, and happy, prosperous and proud. When, therefore, one warm day in the autumn of 1943, the rumour spread through Valetta and Sliema that battleships were approaching from the west, the people revived a custom older than the oldest great-grandfather could remember. They turned out to watch the majestic spectacle of steel-clad ships coming slowly and ritually to anchor. Young and old and middle-aged, boys and girls, babies in their mothers' arms, the Maltese thronged the streets, came out on to balconies, climbed on to roofs, and lined the pillared terraces overlooking the promontories which faced out to sea. Afterwards the more active would hurry along by lanes and flights of steep stone steps, keeping pace with the ships as they passed one by one

through the narrow Harbour entrance, and all the way they would cheer and wave handkerchiefs, and shout excitedly to each other.

It was a festival, unprepared, spontaneous, and work could be forgotten for a few hours in the sunshine. Already better times had come to Malta. The grim task of holding on under bombardment and despite hunger and privation had not been in vain. The unbroken faith of more than a century, founded when Nelson's ships of the line delivered the island from the Napoleonic tyranny, had proved its efficacy. The British Empire, scattered wide across the world and bound by informalities and almost inarticulate agreements, had withstood the worst shocks the enemy could deliver. It recovered its strength rapidly. The Eighth Army had smashed the Afrika Korps at Alamein, pursued it across the width of a continent and, combining with the First Army in Tunisia, compelled three hundred thousand Germans and Italians to surrender. The modern siege of Malta faltered. And when British and American troops landed in Sicily, Malta—with bomber aircraft thick on her air-fields—could hit back at more than supply routes. Now Sicily was conquered and the Italian mainland itself invaded. And the Mediterranean Fleet, or some substantial part of it, was coming to anchor off Valetta. The people of Malta G.C. felt they had due occasion to rejoice.

Many of those who thronged the streets on the seaward side of the two cities were in uniform. The Maltese had their own infantry and artillery, and

their own Home Guard. Thousands of buildings were in ruins, but mere material substance could always be rebuilt. The people, by nature phlegmatic and reticent, openly rejoiced. They laughed and exchanged jests with the British who also had come out to watch an old tradition renewing itself: sailors, soldiers, air-men in many different uniforms. Among these was a young Squadron Leader. A fair-haired girl was walking at his side. They were making their way to St. Elmo Point, just beyond the old fort, overlooking the seaward approach.

On the way they passed a grey-haired priest with a boy at his side. The boy glanced up as the Squadron Leader approached and then gave him a smart military salute, which was returned.

“Someone you know?”

“Yes. Haven’t seen him for quite a while. In the old days, he used to be a very lively kid. Used to turn somersaults whenever he set eyes on us and shout out: Victory Roll.”

By “us,” Pauline thought, he meant Mac and Harry and himself.

“The kid’s growing up, I suppose,” Peter went on. “Too dignified to turn cartwheels now.”

“After all, it’s more than a year, fifteen months in fact, since——”

The words trailed away into silence. Fifteen months was a long time, even in a long war, to young people. In that time Peter had twice been promoted, had been grounded, for a rest, and was flying again now. Soon he would be posted away from Malta. The

war must go on, till it was won. But that time, the spring and early summer of 1942, when the Luftwaffe was making almost its last—though no one knew that at the time—big attempt to subdue the island, when food and petrol and planes and ammunition, everything except courage, was running short—that period would always remain vivid in their memories. It was then they had met and fallen in love. It was then Peter had had to fight inwardly against a sequence of casual misfortunes which sapped his confidence—and he was still bitter that the day on which he had at last proved himself, shooting down three German aircraft, was the same day on which both his friends were killed.

Pauline blamed herself for recalling these happenings to his mind. She had sufficient wisdom never to tell him of the silly, meaningless mistake Harry had once made. Let the young dead lie quiet in the memory of their friends. Better to let all the past lapse into remoteness, the nerve strain, and the foolishness, and the things that were unworthy. Mac, for example, lying strapped in a burned-out aircraft somewhere at the bottom of the sea. Let Mac remain in memory what indeed he had been: a grand pilot, a first-class fighting man, a good friend to other men. Better to forget all the women he had treated not as women but as that strange amalgam seen by sensual hallucination, resembling by turns a toy, a pet animal, a child, a prey, and an appeasement for an appetite. Even the night before he had been killed, Mac had been fooling with some poor little Maltese girl in that under-

ground bar he was so fond of. She was pretty, that girl, and Mac had never behaved badly with her; not while Pauline was present, at any rate. Give him credit for that. Give him credit for everything that could possibly be reckoned good, and forget the rest, for Mac was dead, and had been dead for more than a year.

Peter, however, wanted to talk about the past.

“Do you remember,” he said, “when the convoy arrived? After we got all those new Spits from the carrier? I was thinking just now. I was thinking about Angela. She had an awful time that day. I didn’t realise it at the time. Not properly. She knew her husband’s ship was in that convoy. She was on duty in the hospital. She couldn’t get away. She kept asking and telephoning for news of that ship. And no one could tell her it had arrived. Then she heard it had been sunk. It wasn’t till evening she knew her husband had been picked up and brought in on another ship. Not till he walked into the ward.”

“Poor Angela! She must have thought he was a ghost.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. That sort of thing. It will always be a bit queer for us. For us who are in this war. These ships that are coming in now. We’ll watch them, and cheer with all the others. But the Navy men—they’ll be thinking of the ships that are missing. The same with us in the R.A.F. Every time we see a squadron come back, we count. We hope for a bit longer. Then we think of the aircraft that are

missing. And the men in them. And the same with the soldiers.”

There was nothing she could say. Peter was flying again, and soon he would be posted to another station; to Italy, perhaps, or to Britain, to guard the coasts or to make sweeps over occupied Europe. Every day there were aircraft which did not return. It was the war. It had to be accepted.

They were walking now along a road overlooking the harbour of Marsamxett, and the crowds were thick. They overheard someone say the warships were plainly in sight from St. Elmo Point; the first would enter the Grand Harbour within half an hour. The noise in the streets was tremendous. They pushed their way round the old Fort of St. Elmo with its slanting walls overlooking the waterfront, and at last came in sight of the open sea. And there were the battleships. Five, six, eight, ten, more than a dozen of them. And more coming up. Battleships, battle-cruisers, and—smaller, faster, more slenderly built—the cruisers.

A naval officer came and stood beside them and produced field-glasses. He focused them carefully and shifted his inspection from one ship to another.

“That’s not one of ours,” he exclaimed. “Nor that. Damn it all, half of them are Italian. That’s what it is. Italian.”

Rapidly the news spread among the crowd. A large part of the Italian fleet had escaped from Tarranto and Spezia and now had made its way under escort to Malta. The Battle of the Mediterranean had

come to this spectacular close, and the people of Malta were present to see it. They cheered and sang and danced in the bomb-damaged streets.

In the middle of this outburst of excitement Pauline became aware of a Maltese girl standing near—but dancing rather than standing—whose charming, pretty face seemed familiar. She looked again. The girl was with a young gunner in the Maltese Artillery. He held her close to him, one arm round her waist. They looked into each other's eyes. They were young and in love, and when they were not dancing they were singing. But the girl was Mac's girl. When Mac was killed, he had been wearing her scarf. And Pauline felt cold with indignation that in so short a time, in a mere fifteen months, this girl should have forgotten Mac and found herself another man.

The girl saw her watching, glanced away, then stared at her. A moment later she had hurried her gunner into another part of the crowd.

"I saw that, too," said Peter. "Yes, it was Manuela."

"Evidently she's got a bad conscience. And no wonder."

Yet a few minutes ago Pauline had found it hard to forgive Mac in death for the way he had behaved to women while he was alive. It was obvious that some women could behave just as badly to men.

Peter, however, thought differently.

"That's not quite fair," he said slowly. "Mac's dead. Nothing any one can do will bring him back to life. And the girl's got to go on living a long time

yet. I think she was genuinely fond of Mac. Maybe there was even more to it than that. But she's got to go on living. And she's right to face life, instead of fixing her thoughts on death. And Mac wouldn't mind. He loved being alive. He won't grudge Manuela her happiness. After all, he was no saint himself."

After a moment he added: "But he was a damn fine chap, just the same. I shan't forget him."

"Perhaps," Pauline suggested, surprised and relieved by her own tolerance, "Manuela won't forget either."

She turned to watch the Italian battleships dropping anchor.

"No, none of us will ever forget."

Set in Linotype Caslon Old Face
Format by A. W. Rushmore
Manufactured by The Haddon Craftsmen
Published by HARPER & BROTHERS
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is a novel of men beaten like men and fighting for their lives with what inadequate means they had, of men waiting desperately for supplies from the sea and the air. More than that it is a picture of an island, battered almost out of recognition, and of its people who struggled on, living their lives with a kind of desperate calm.

Malta was known in 1942 as the most bombed spot in the world. Night and day for over a year Stukas, protected by Messerschmitts, had flown over the little British fortress dropping their deadly eggs. Her sole protection was an infinitesimal complement of Spitfires, and a group of hardy pilots to fly them while a scattering of ack-ack guns provided an inadequate barrage. The natives had become hardened to this Nazi brutality as an inevitable evil, each man facing the waves of attackers in his own way.

John Brophy, the author of *Immortal Sergeant* and *Spearhead*, has reconstructed a moving, telling picture of this Nazi target and of the lives that defended it.

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