

Title

Lonely Road

By

Nevil Shute

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About this eBook

“Lonely Road” by Nevil Shute

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LONELY ROAD

Author's Note

This was the third of my books to be published, in 1932, when I was thirty-three years old. It took me about a year to write it, in the evenings after a day spent on other work, and it was written twice through from start to finish. I was evidently still obsessed with police action as a source of drama, but with the growth of experience in writing, the character studies and the love story appear to have smothered the plot a bit, and these aspects of the book now seem to me to be the best.

The first chapter was quite frankly an experiment, and one which pleases me still. It was a dangerous experiment, however, for a young writer to make in the first pages of a book, for it defeated a good many readers who might have enjoyed the story if they had been able to read on. In spite of this the book did moderately well in this country and in America. In 1936 a film was made from it at the Ealing Studios, starring Clive Brook and Victoria Hopper.

Nevil Shute

When thy story ...

When thy story long time hence shall be perused,
Let the blemish of thy rule be thus excused—
None ever lived more just, none more abused.

Thomas Campion

Preface

The writer of this book, Malcolm Logan Stevenson, was born in the year 1891. On the death of his father, in 1895, the boy came under the care of his uncle, Sir Lionel Cope, the greater part of his boyhood being spent at Courton Hall in West Sussex. He was educated at Winchester and New College. Throughout his life his financial position was such as to cause him no anxiety; he was, in fact, a man of very considerable estate.

As a young man he displayed little enthusiasm for any form of regular occupation, in marked distinction to his later life. His interests at that time were essentially in things adventurous rather than academic. From Oxford he joined the ill-fated Catter-Delina expedition to the Amazon, leaving this country for Para in the autumn of 1911. He returned to England with the survivors of that party in the spring of 1913 and devoted himself with some energy to the sport of yacht cruising, an exercise to which he was much attached. In the winter of 1913 he commenced a desultory study of the economic factors affecting commercial ships and shipping, spending some months upon the Clyde. Previous to the war, however, he made no venture in this business.

In September, 1914, he was granted a commission as Sub-Lieutenant in the RNVR, and served upon minesweepers until the summer of 1917, principally in the Channel and the Irish Sea. During this period his vessel was twice mined; in the second of these explosions he lost the third and fourth fingers of his left hand.

In September, 1917, he was promoted to Lieutenant and was posted to a so-called mystery ship, the *Jane Ellen*, of Bideford, under Commander D. A. Faulkner, RN. This vessel was a coastal schooner of some one hundred and fifty tons, normally trading in china clay and coal between the southern ports of Cornwall and the north-east coast. Under Commander Faulkner she was employed as a submarine decoy.

The action of the *Jane Ellen* (HMS Q 83) will be found described in a supplement to the London Gazette published shortly after the Armistice, together with the list of awards. Sir Arthur Mortimer, in the second volume of his 'Naval History of the Great War', gives a reliable account of the engagement, which he refers to as 'one of the bloodiest naval actions ever fought'. Briefly, the *Jane Ellen* engaged the U187 at dawn, on April 18th, 1918, at a point some forty miles west of the Scillies. Casualties on the British vessel were extremely heavy and included the Commander, the ship's company of forty-seven being reduced eventually to three in number. Finally the U187 was sunk by gunfire at about noon, the gun being manned by Lieutenant Stevenson and a midshipman. No survivors were rescued from the German vessel.

As a result of this action Stevenson was promoted to Lieutenant-Commander; he was then about twenty-seven years of age. Injuries to his lungs, aggravated by exposure, necessitated a prolonged period in hospital subsequent to the action. It would not be beyond the truth to say that these injuries were ultimately responsible for his early death.

In the spring of 1919 Commander Stevenson commenced to build up a fleet of schooners and small ketches which had carried the bulk of the coastwise traffic of this country before the war. At that time these vessels had disappeared almost entirely from British waters. A certain

number of them were sold abroad during the war; the remainder were sunk as they carried on their business.

In the years following the war Commander Stevenson repurchased a number of these vessels from their Scandinavian owners and, establishing himself in a shipyard on the River Dart, commenced to operate them in their ancient trade. At the time of his death he was the owner of no less than seventeen of these ships. At the outset this speculation involved him in a financial loss which was severe even for a man of his resources; in later years the losses decreased, and at the time of his death the business was in a fair way to show a profit.

In the settlement of his estate the fleet was broken up, the majority of the vessels being sold abroad again. It is doubtful whether this form of coastwise trading can be regarded as an economic business in these days. It is at least doubtful whether Commander Stevenson cared if it were so or not.

From the year 1919 until his death, ten years later, he lived in the Port House above Dartmouth Harbour, alone but for a housekeeper and a few servants. As the business of his fleet became stereotyped, demanding less of his attention, he showed some inclination to develop his shipyard as a building centre for yachts and small sailing craft of various kinds.

In the winter of last year he died, after a comparatively short illness, at the early age of thirty-nine.

In person, Malcolm Stevenson was a man of medium height; his hair, from the war onwards, was almost completely grey. He walked with a slight limp; he was sensitive to the injury to his left hand, for which reason he usually wore a glove. In temperament he was very taciturn, perhaps bitter. He was popular with his acquaintances but admitted few to friendship; with women he was diffident and shy. He had few interests beyond the sea. For recreation he was accustomed to cruise single-handed, or with at most one friend, in his tenton cutter Runagate; he was a regular competitor in the Ocean Race. He was a member of the Squadron. He held both Master's and Extra Master's certificates, and on occasions when he was short of a skipper would sometimes act as Master in one of his own little ships upon a coastal cruise.

He had few relatives, and those few he neglected. His closest tie was with his cousin, Lady Stenning. In the later years of his life he seldom left Dartmouth except to stay at her house in Golders Green, and he became on terms of considerable friendship, if not intimacy, with her husband, Sir Philip Stenning. To Sir Philip he left a very considerable legacy; for the remainder, his testament was eccentric and beyond the scope of this preface.

The book which is now published was written by Commander Stevenson shortly before the illness which terminated in his death. The MS is written in pencil in a foolscap ledger freely interspersed with memoranda of a personal nature; it would seem from internal evidence that the compilation of this book was a relaxation for his leisure hours over a period of about two months.

In the settlement of his estate the MS was read first by the writer of this preface, and later by Sir Philip and Lady Stenning, who confirmed the truth of the account. It seemed desirable, and even necessary, that the facts contained therein should be made public at an early date, for which reason it was first proposed that a condensed and impersonal edition of the narrative should be prepared. Upon a closer investigation, however, it became evident that the task of expurgation would prove to be a most formidable one, and that a great mass of extraneous matter would require to be inserted in explanation of motives which were wholly personal and therefore to be omitted from the book. In these circumstances it has seemed better to publish the MS substantially in the form in which it was discovered, only modifying those names and places which bear too close a relation to the world as it is lived in today.

With this course the relatives of Commander Stevenson are in agreement. I am indebted to Sir Lionel Cope for advice upon matters pertaining to the family, and to Lady Stenning for

much assistance in the preparation of the narrative. If the effect of publication in this form should be to indicate a quality of greatness in a man of singular reserve, then the intrusion into his privacy may not be quite unjustified.

*T. A. Jenkinson
Messrs. Loudon, Jenkinson, and Priestly,
Lincoln's Inn Fields,
London.*

Chapter 1

I think that as a man pursues his life he sometimes comes to a point, just once and again, when he must realise that for the last three weeks or six he has been living as a stranger to himself. That has happened to me on two or three occasions, generally in connection with some girl; I cherish these vignettes, only a few weeks each, in which I have been kind and true, thought clearly and acted generously. I cherish them as an old lady cherishes her love-letters—things unreal, almost unbelievable in their tenderness, and yet which actually happened. For this reason I want to write down something about the weeks I lived last summer, so that if I live to be old I may have this notebook with me to look over. It is the details, the silly little things that mean so much to me, that I want to remember; I should be very willing to forget the major incidents.

I crashed my car one night last spring, driving home along the shore road in the dark. That is what they told me in the nursing home, when I recovered consciousness on the evening of the following day. But I think I must begin my story before that, and try if I can put down all that I have ever been able to remember of the earlier portion of the night, before my accident.

What I have to write about that evening will appear confused. Bachelor evenings sometimes are like that, and I had much that day that I would willingly have drowned in gin. Looking back now upon that evening I think I must have had some measure of success, and that is what made the elucidation of my accident a little difficult when I came to my senses in the nursing home. But I had better start by putting down exactly what I can remember of that night.

I was in Plymouth. I don't know exactly when it was that I left the club; it was after midnight. I must have been the last to leave, or one of the last. I remember we had dinner in the club and went on to the Empire; we had a box there. Then we went back to the club for a game of snooker. I won that, not because I can play snooker, but because I was practically stone sober. Nothing seemed to sink me that night, which was a pity.

I was the last to leave, or one of the last. Our three cars were drawn up together outside the club, and because I could see that the others might want help I waited till they got away. Kennet was the first to go; he got in to second all right, but third defeated him, and so he went home like that. It was Jim's turn next, and I put him into his saloon and pressed the starter for him, and shut the door, and pushed him off back home. I was left by myself on the pavement, then, thirty miles from my own place. And I was alone, or I supposed I was. I don't remember anyone else.

I stood there for a bit looking round, and the moon was very round and plain and the sky was deep blue, so that the moon hung in it like a great shilling. Behind me and to the left there were lights in the downstairs of the house; I stood there nursing my apples and wondering what they would do if they knew that I was there. By standing on my toes I could rest my arms on the top of the wall and see into the paddock. I had to rest my arm like that because the faggots hurt my bare feet, and the roughness of the bricks rasped my arms and chest

through the woolly stuff of my pyjamas. And where I pressed my chest against the wall the apple crammed into the pocket of my jacket stuck into me and hurt, and I think perhaps I may have bruised it because there was a great scent of apples in the brilliant silence of the night.

I saw an owl fly out from somewhere into the trees on the other side of the paddock; I heard him hoot and I wondered if that meant that he had caught a mouse. I knew that was what he came out for, to catch mice. And I wondered, as I stood there shifting from foot to foot, how he could manage to see such a little thing as a mouse in the darkness or whether it was just a sort of story like they tell you when they think it's something that you ought not to know.

I could hear the pony chumping away over on the other side of the field, but he was in the dark shadow of the trees and I couldn't see where he was, but only hear him chumping. I wondered if I could catch him with an apple, because I could spare one of my apples to catch him and have a ride on his back. I could get another one as I went back through the garden to the house. I'd probably have to leave one apple behind anyway, because I didn't see how I was going to climb up to my bedroom window carrying three of them, because you want two hands to carry three apples and I had to have one left to climb with.

I thought he might come for an apple, but it wasn't so good as a bit of sugar, because I knew he'd come for that, because I'd tried it. And they said I must hold my hand quite flat, and not be afraid. And then I wondered if I caught him whether he would let me get on to his back, or whether I could, because he was much too high for me to get up on to unless he would let me lead him up to the gate and get on him from that. I wondered whether he would stand still and let me climb up his front leg. I thought that I could get on his back that way if he'd stand still and let me, and I wondered if people ever tried that way of getting on to a pony's back. Because I'd never heard of it being done.

I stood there for a long time in the bright moonlight, shifting from one foot to the other on the crinkly woodpile, resting my folded arms on the wall and looking over. I had three apples in my hands and another in my pyjama jacket that was digging into me as it rubbed against the wall. And I stood there till I was sleepy for my bed, and cold in my pyjamas, and stiff with standing on my toes and with the pain in my feet.

And presently somebody touched me on the shoulder. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but was you wanting . . . anything?"

Very slowly I raised myself and turned my head; then I dropped my arms from the saloon top of my car and stood erect upon the kerb. The moon was very round and plain and the sky was deep blue, so that the moon hung in it like a great shilling. It was Nicholson, the grey-haired, infinitely discreet, head waiter at the club. He was in a soft hat and a raincoat; on his way home, I suppose. And I had something in my hand, and I said to him: "What's this I've got, Nicholson?"

I think I remember that the old man chuckled, and he said: "Why, sir, that's the apple what you took away with you from the dinner table, and you've been carrying about with you all evening."

And I stared at him, and I said: "Is it an eating apple?"

And he said: "Yes, sir, they're very good apples, those."

"Then I'll eat it," I said, conscious of having reached a true decision after wading through a tangled mass of evidence. "I'll eat it, Nicholson. And I'm bloody sorry to have kept you up so late."

"Oh, that's all right, sir," he said. I think I must have got away then, because the next thing that I remember is that I was sliding through the outskirts of the town at fifty or sixty, raucous on the horn at every corner that I passed.

Some time that night I passed through a village, the street brilliant in the yellow light of the acetylenes. I remember that very clearly. I swung her round by the school and opened her out as we dropped down the hill into the country, and as we went I looked at my watch and calculated that we had averaged twenty-eight miles an hour for the run. With open country and clear roads ahead it ought to be possible to do better; with luck I might push that up to an average thirty for the journey. I thought that there were very few cars in England that could do that speed at night. And full of this I leaned over to Jardine beside me in the bucket seat and shouted against the roaring of the engine that I would bet him a sovereign that we should be in Oxford by eleven.

He pulled out his watch, snapped it open, leaned forward to study it in the dim light reflected from the road, and shook his head. "You can't do seventeen miles in thirty-one minutes," he shouted.

I laughed. "I can. She'll go up to fifty if I let her out."

He went fumbling round the back of his seat as the great car pitched and dithered. "Have an apple," he said, and held one out to me. "What's she doing now?"

I peered at the square box of the speedometer, but it was too dark to see the flickering needle. "I bet we were doing forty-five along that straight," I said, crunched my teeth into the apple, and dropped it on my lap to clutch the jerking wheel before we left the road. And as I drove I can remember that the scent of apples rose all around me in the draughty stuffiness beneath the hood.

I don't know what time it was when we drew up before the new motor garage in Longwall Street, but I remember chucking the sovereign to Jardine for him to catch as we stood upon the pavement waiting for the young manager to come and open up. In that place there was a light in the offices upstairs to all hours of the night. I think he used to design cars up there by night after the work of the garage was over for the day; I remember going up there one night when I was late and drinking coffee with him and listening as he told me of the cars he had in mind to build. Cars for everybody; the cars of a dream. He was very lean and restless; he brushed his hair straight back from his forehead and he worked all night.

We walked on down Holywell to the digs; the moon was round and bright and the sky deep blue, and it was very still. There was whisky and a siphon left out for us on the table in the digs. I had driven the car too hard upon the run from London; that and perhaps the whisky filled my night with dreams, the nightmares of the road. Once a white donkey walked out of a gate into the road in the brilliance of my headlights not thirty yards ahead of me. I must have been doing sixty and I flung the car sideways beneath its nose, and missed it, and took the grass by the roadside with a lurch and a tremendous skid, and I awoke clutching the blankets in a sweat of terror. And once, sitting quiet in the saloon, driving with one hand and with the other fingering the apple in my pocket because it seemed to be that that was the only thing worth having that remained, I came round a bend in the road at a great speed to find myself faced by a plain brick wall and a shop front, where the road made a T-turn in a little town. In such a case the movements are entirely automatic. I remember the ringing grind of the brakes, the scream of the tyres, and a series of swift accelerations and rotations, and the Bentley came to a standstill ten yards up the top right-hand arm of the T, broadside across the road with the front and rear wheels in the gutter on each side.

And there was a man standing by the corner of the pavement. It was very quiet in the little street, and I said to him: "I didn't drop my apple." Because when we had broadsided to a standstill I found I had it undamaged in my hand, and it was fragrant in the stuffiness of the saloon.

He said: "What's that?"

And I said: "I didn't drop my apple."

In the dim light he walked slowly towards the window at my elbow. “You didn’t ought to drive like that,” he said heavily. “Where d’you want to go to?”

I sat there staring at him for a minute. I could go anywhere I liked, because I had had the car filled up in Plymouth. Three hundred miles. I could go on the run and get right away, if that was any good.

“London,” I said at last. “I should be there by dawn.”

He said: “You want to go through Totnes for that. That way.” And he pointed to the other road.

I jerked my head towards the road that I was on. “Where does this go?” But I knew. It went home. And I knew that if I went the other way that night it would only be because I was afraid to go back and be alone.

“Slapton,” he said.

I nodded. “That’s right,” I said. “That’s where I want to go.” I backed the car a little and then swung her forward over the pavement of that narrow street and went gently up between the houses for fear that I should wake the sleeping people of the town, and over a bridge across a river and so out into the moonlit country where I was alone again.

I shall always be alone. It seemed to me then that I was back in the little town that I had left that afternoon, and although I suppose that these things must have happened earlier in the day I cannot expunge them from the sequence of my memories of the night. I think they may have happened to me that afternoon. I only know they happened to me that night.

There was a sunset in the room. There must have been, because there is no other light that could have given to her face and throat the warm glow, translucent, that was spreading slowly downwards as she leaned forward to scrape the ashes from the grate. It was early in April, and it was a Wednesday, because that was her free day. It was just after tea. I remember that because she had given me tea in her little room; the teapot and the large, blue-rimmed cups with oranges on them were still upon the table. I don’t know why there was a fire, or how there could have been a sunset at tea-time on that day. But there was. No other light could have given to her the warm colours that I remember, and I remember them so well.

We stayed there like that for a long time in silence. I had said all that I had to say; I leaned back in my chair and watched her playing with the poker till the fire glowed in the bars with a fierce, destructive efficiency that was foreign to that room. I knew what was coming to me, and as I sat there I can remember thinking that one should just take what little pleasures one can get and let the big ones go, the policy of small profits. And so I sat quiet in her room while she would let me, watching the play of the light upon the soft, straight hair that ended at her neck, and the grace of her movements. I have these things still, so that I saved something after all from the disaster of that afternoon.

And presently she looked up at me. “I’m so frightfully sorry,” she said quietly. “You do know that, don’t you? I never knew you cared for me like that a bit. Or not so much. I thought we were—just friends.”

My time was getting short, and at the thought I stirred a little in my chair. “Well, we weren’t,” I said. “That was just my cunning. You ought to have seen through that.”

She shook her head. “I didn’t. You’ve been so quiet about it. Honestly, I never knew that you were thinking about me in that way. Or I’d have let you know before—that it wasn’t any good.”

I nodded. “I know you would.”

She laid the poker down and turned to me. “It’s been a wonderful thing to hear you say this,” she said simply. “For me. It means a lot to a girl to hear what you’ve said to me. I’m only so frightfully sorry that I can’t play up.” She paused, and turned again towards the fire so

that she gave me back her profile. “Of course, I know that you could make things different for me—with all your money. I suppose you’d be able to give me all the little bits of things I’ve wanted all my life”—her voice dropped a little—“things that I’ll never be able to afford. But that’s not everything—is it? You wouldn’t want me to marry you for that?”

I roused myself. “No,” I said quietly. “I wouldn’t want you to marry me for that.” It wasn’t true, but it sounded as if it was the right thing to say.

“And there’s nothing more to it than that,” she said.

I winced a bit at that one. I suppose everyone likes to picture himself as a Lancelot, though God knows I ought to have outgrown that by now. And while I was recovering I said:

“You’re quite sure about it? You know you can have as long as you like, to think it over.”

She shook her head. “It wouldn’t be any good. I’m most frightfully sorry—for myself as well as you. But if it was ever going to be different, I think one’d know.”

“I suppose you would,” I said.

I would willingly have spun out the Indian summer that remained to us. I would have liked to have sat on for a little longer in the room with her, but there was nothing left to stay for. And so:

“I expect it’s time I went away,” I said.

She came with me to the door. “There’s such lots of other girls,” she said quietly. “Malcolm, you won’t go worrying about this? It’s not worth it. You’ll find somebody else”—she did not say ‘with all your money’—‘and then you’ll probably be glad it wasn’t me.’

I turned to her and laughed. “You don’t want to worry about that,” I said. “This happens to me every eighteen months. There’s only another seven or eight months to go before I start again. I run pretty regularly to schedule.”

She eyed me a little wistfully. “I wish you didn’t live alone.”

I laughed. “I’m not going to—not next winter, anyway. I’ll pay some sweet young thing a salary to come and live with me.” I think that reassured her a little, because she was smiling when I went away. We succeeded in making a joke out of what might have been a most embarrassing affair, and so it is that my last memory of her is of her laughter.

All that night her laughter followed me along the winding roads that stretched brilliantly in front of me and eddied into dust behind. I remember that there was a bridge. I stood there for a moment staring down the stream, and as I stood there listening to the rippling of the water it seemed to me that here was a pause in my journey, a little time when I might be alone. I had left my hat somewhere, and a wind came down the river lifting the hair upon my forehead and blowing coolly in my face. My mouth was dry and parched. And so I went down the bank a little way until I reached the gravel spit where the cattle went down to drink. I had an apple with me in my hand, and as I stooped to drink I thrust it deep into the pocket of my ulster to be safe. I can remember that the water was very cool and sweet upon my face, dipping it up and drinking from my hands, and the moon most infinitely clear. Beyond the bridge the Bentley loomed silent by the roadside, a dark mass pierced by the brilliance of the red tail light. It was very quiet by the stream.

I left the water and went and sat down upon a hummock of grass on the bank, and as I went I shivered. And I remember that I was concerned about myself because I was feeling cold; I wrapped my coat more closely round me and thought I must get back to the car. I thought that I must be very careful now and look after myself very well, or I should be ill again. That, I suppose, is one of the last tenets of the bachelor, but for three months I had forgotten it. But now, from now onwards, I said that I must be very careful and look after myself, because there’d be nobody to do it for me. And that amused me a little, and I remembered being amused by it before.

And so I went back to the car upon the bridge, fingering the apple as I went; I swung the

door open and got in and we moved away down the lane. And as we went the lights by the roadside loomed and swung, so that each standard as we passed it threw a beam of light into the car, gleaming upon the white and silver of the young woman's dress beside me. I forget her name now, but she was a wombat, a little brown furry animal that Joan had wished on to me because she thought I ought to have a wife.

In the front seat Joan sat impassive by Stenning; beyond their heads the street shone glimmering in the rain. We were in Baker Street. I knew that neither of them would dream of turning round and that it was up to me to get on with it, and make the most of my opportunities. It was quite a nice wombat; I wish I could remember its name. And so I talked to it about the play that we had seen—Lilac Time. A good dinner, a play like that, and then a nice long drive in the narrow back seat of a warm saloon, in the dark. It should have worked all right.

Stenning was in the game. He took his right-hand corners normally because I was sitting on the right-hand side, but on the left-hand ones he swung her round as if he was road racing on a dry road in the summer. And after the second or third of those I found that she was snuggled in against my shoulder with my arm round her, and there was Schubert in the car. And she said:

"They'll look round." I can remember her little whisper in the darkness as she raised her face to mine.

"Not unless you scream," I said. "And I don't think that would be a very good idea, myself." And true to programme I bent and kissed her, because it's perfectly absurd for a man like me not to be married, with all my money. And true to programme, she whispered: "You did that because you know I daren't scream."

And as I held her in my arms I knew that here was a termination of the matter, and that Joan had failed. I had set a new mainsail on Runagate before I came away, and I was worrying whether I had left enough slack in the clew to allow for the shrinkage of the wet weather. I wanted that sail for racing, and it wouldn't do to have the shape all spoilt. I knew that I oughtn't to be thinking about that sail with the wombat in my arms; that I should have been giving my whole attention to the job in hand. And I wasn't.

The lights dipped and swung as we ran out into the suburbs. It was warm and comfortable in the saloon, and the wombat seemed to fit my shoulder pretty well. She was very quiet after a bit, and I was worried about the sail and not sorry not to have to talk. And presently I realised that she was asleep. Asleep with my arm around her and her head on my shoulder. I have never had a girl like that before or since. If I hadn't been a bloody fool I should have married her, I suppose, but I was much more worried about the sail.

And presently I took my arm from her, and stopped the car, and got out by the roadside. It was where the road ran not far from the sea; the rain had all gone and left a dusty road; there was a bright moon on the tumbled water and a sound of surf. And as I crossed the field I had a great desire to get where I could see the surf running up the dim line of the beach; on a night like that it would be silvery beneath the moon, with little flashes of bright fire where it drained. All my life I have lived with no other thought than to satisfy my own desires; at that moment I wanted above all things to see the surf breaking on the beach beyond the field, and so I pressed on across the grass.

And presently it seemed to me that I came to a place where the field petered out in sandhills that ran down to the beach, and the line of the surf perhaps two hundred yards away. There was a vessel there anchored very close inshore and black against the moonlight, not quite opposite me but a little way along. From the set of her one-pole mast she might have been a Thames bawley of about fifty tons, or she might have been like the smacks that I have seen in Rotterdam. I only saw her silhouette. There was a dinghy drawn up on the beach

opposite her; the surf was very low. And the surf was as I had known that it would be; it was running up the sand around the boat all silvery in the moonlight, with little flashes of bright fire where it drained.

I moved forward down a valley of the sandhills to where the girl was standing with her back to me. She was dressed in some dark manner, black or blue, and she was staring at the boat and at the running surf, as I had done. And I came quietly through the deep sand till I was very close to her, fingering my apple, and I said: "That would make a dry point, Achaersen could do it, but he couldn't get it into the Academy, could he?"

She swung round on me. "You should have stayed up by the lorry. It's no good your trying to get on board yet. There's half a dozen carpet sweepers to come off." And then she said: "Is Peter coming down?"

I didn't understand what she was saying; I was tired, and I was very lonely. I had nothing but my apple. "You're wrong," I said. "I'm not going to sea tonight. I'm tired. I think I'm going home."

She leaned forward suddenly and stared into my face, and I can remember a look of great anxiety, of terror, as she stared at me.

"Who are you?" she exclaimed. "There's something wrong. You're not the man who was here before. You're English."

I nodded. "I'm a sojourner," I said, "as all my fathers were."

I drew my apple from my pocket, because she looked a friendly sort of girl who would be nice to me, up to a point, and I wanted to show it to her and tell her all about it. But she drew back and stood there staring at me, quite still, and it seemed to me that she thought that something terrible was going to happen in a moment.

And then she said, very quietly: "Oh, don't."

And then it seemed to me that I was down upon my face in a little lapping noise of water and a smell of burning, and somewhere about me there was the beating and tumbling of a sailing vessel in irons in a light wind. And somebody bent over me and said:

"He isn't dead."

And presently they turned me over, and there was a splash of water on my face. I stirred and opened my eyes, half blind with pain. I was lying in a slop of blood and water on the deck. I would have sat up then, but Wallis, leading seaman, pressed me down upon the deck and whispered: "Keep down, sir." And then the snotty came crawling back along the bulwarks with another pannikin of water.

I took it from him and drank. "How many of us are there now?" I asked.

"There's only us," he said.

The vessel was on fire aft and it seemed to me that she was settling by the stern; the whole stern must have been blown out when the magazine went up.

"They stopped the shelling ten minutes ago," he said. "They're practically dead ahead, sir. A little on the port bow."

"Where's the panic party?"

Wallis swore, "The dirty b—rs," he said. The snotty said: "They shelled the boat, sir. I don't think there's anybody left." And then he said: "It wasn't playing the game, sir."

I retched violently. And when that was over I asked: "Is there any armament left?"

"Aye, sir," said Wallis, "there's the port six-pounder and eight rounds. She'll want to be broad on the beam for it, but the gun's all right."

I saw it lying on the deck upon its swinging mounting, behind the bulwarks. It had not been touched. The vessel lay upon the water like a log; she lay heavily and each time she sank into the trough the coming swell sluiced down the bulwarks burying the hull, so that I thought

that she was never going to rise. Astern she was awash, so that there was a hissing and crackling, and a great cloud of smoke where fire and water met. I thought of Jardine, dead in the Dardanelles, and of Fordyce.

“This is the end for us,” I said. I knew that there would be no relief from the outside; we had sent no wireless for assistance before the action had begun, and that had been the first to go. “It’s no good surrendering.” I could see the wreckage of the boat astern.

The snotty had wriggled on his stomach to the hawse-hole. “She’s running slow ahead,” he whispered. “She’s coming round on to the beam.” I wriggled up beside him. The submarine was running slowly across our bows, submerged but for a portion of the conning tower, and the twin periscopes; occasionally, as the waves swept over her, we could see the gun. Then she went down entirely but for the periscopes, and began to travel slowly down the port beam, distant perhaps five hundred yards from us. She was examining her handiwork. Then she got on to the quarter and the smoke hid her from our gaze. We lay motionless upon the deck.

Ten minutes later we saw her again on the starboard quarter, approaching us from the direction of the boat. She came close up to us this time, the periscope passing up the vessel’s side not fifty yards away. If we had had a depth-charge thrower left we might have got her then, but all that stuff had gone.

She turned slowly across our bows, and broke surface dead ahead. I couldn’t see her from my position; I had to depend on whispers from the snotty. And then I saw her. She was running on the surface very slowly, perhaps two hundred yards away, and turning to pass down our port side again.

“Come up to finish us off, I reckon,” whispered Wallis.

“Be ready for it,” I replied.

Her speed slowed to a crawl, and a man appeared in the conning tower, and then an officer. And then in a moment there were men on her deck and about the gun; there was nothing now to wait for. And I said:

“Right. Get on with it.” Then we were on our feet and racing for the gun. It swung up smoothly; the shell slid into the chamber and the breech clanged home, and I swung her by the rubber at my shoulder and laid her to the water line below their gun. We got our first shot off before they did and that was a pretty good show, but the vessel lurched as I fired and it went over their heads. They hit us with a burster forward while we were loading, and I laid and fired again. And this time it went well, because I holed her on the water line between the gun and the conning tower, and our third shot burst beside the gun, so that when the smoke cleared there was nobody standing up on deck to serve that gun. The fourth shot I laid more slowly and more carefully, and holed her again at the base of the conning tower and a little aft.

She began to blow her tanks, and the water came foaming up around her all white and creamy and mingled with a little oil. She took a list to port, and then the hatches opened both forward and aft. Men began to stream up on deck out of the forward hatch; they held up their hands and one or two of them waved to us.

There were three of us, and thirty odd of them.

I snapped the breech open and the case clanged out, but the next shell was not there. The snotty was holding it and staring at the submarine crimson with excitement. He was yelling:

“Oh, damn good, sir. Bloody good.”

“Stop that row,” I snarled. “Get on with it.”

He stared at me. “Aren’t they surrendering?”

I ripped out an oath, and the shell slid into the bore. I clanged the breech to, and swung the gun till it bore upon the fore hatch with the men still coming up. And then I glanced aside, and

that damn boy was staring at me in a sort of horror, and I cursed at him again

And then began my struggle towards consciousness. This was no real scene; it was a dream that I had will and power to prevent. This was no new experience to me; it was my fever dream, the recurring nightmare that has been with me for the last twelve years. But I still had my will; still power to prevent this frightful thing. And with a stern effort I awoke, and opened my eyes to an unfamiliar room, white paint and green distemper.

Nurse Malone was there, bending over me. I could not move in bed, but I was damp with sweat and quivering with fright and with the horror of the thing that I had done. I knew that I was awake and safe, and I burst out to her:

“I don’t want to do it again.”

She smiled a little, bending over me. “It’s quite all right,” she said. “I’ll see that you don’t do it again. But now I want you to lie quite quiet and not try to move about. Just see if you can have a real rest. You know, you’ve had a motor accident.”

Chapter 2

The next point of significance in my story is a conversation that I had with Dixon in the nursing home after my accident, a few days before I was taken back to my own house.

He came and sat beside my bed one morning when he had examined me and the nurse had gone away; he must have had an easy round that day. “I’m going to move you back into your own house next week, I think,” he said. “Would you like that?”

I was as weak as a kitten. I had a continuous headache, and I was pretty miserable at night. I told him this, and said that I didn’t think that I was fit to go.

He eyed me seriously. “You don’t get over an accident like this in a day, or in two days, you know,” he said. “For one thing, you evidently lost a great deal of blood from the wound in your head. Quite apart from the concussion.”

Irrelevantly I cut him short and asked what I had wanted to know for some days now. “What’s happened to my car?”

“It’s been taken down to Walker’s garage and they’re waiting for your instructions before beginning on it. I saw it the day after the accident, and I was very much interested.”

I asked: “Is she very much knocked about?”

“The radiator and the wings were very badly damaged,” he replied, “and there was a lot of glass broken. But I found the most interesting part to be the hole in the fabric of the roof over the driver’s seat, where your head had hit. Your head must have gone very nearly through the roof—I never saw such a thing. You must consider yourself very fortunate that it was not a coach-built body.”

I was quiet for a time. “It’s a hundred-and-fifty-pound job, I suppose,” I said at last, a little painfully. “She must need re-upholstering with all that blood and muck.”

He wrinkled up his brows a little. “I doubt if she does,” he said. “There was a little mess on the roof, but the inside of the car was quite clean. I think you must have done your bleeding out of the window. She was lying on her side, you see.”

I asked: “How long was I there?”

“A labourer found you on his way to work—one of the men on Halls Farm at Stoke Fleming. He must have found you at about half-past six. When did you leave Plymouth?”

I tried to recollect. “I think it must have been about half-past twelve.”

He nodded. “You must have been lying there for about five hours. You know, seriously, you’re extremely lucky to have come out of it so well. You might very well have died in that five hours.”

I said: “Providence looks after fools and drunken men.”