



VINTAGE

ON THE BEACH
NEVIL SHUTE

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About the Book

After the war is over, a radioactive cloud begins to sweep southwards on the winds, gradually poisoning everything in its path. An American submarine captain is among the survivors left sheltering in Australia, preparing with the locals for the inevitable. Despite his memories of his wife, he becomes close to a young woman struggling to accept the harsh realities of their situation. Then a faint Morse code signal is picked up, transmitting from the United States and the submarine must set sail through the bleak ocean to search for signs of life.

On the Beach is Nevil Shute's most powerful novel. Both gripping and intensely moving, its impact is unforgettable.

About the Author

Nevil Shute Norway was born on 17 January 1899 in Ealing, London. After attending the Dragon School and Shrewsbury School, he studied Engineering Science at Balliol College, Oxford. He worked as an aeronautical engineer and published his first novel, *Marazan*, in 1926. In 1931 he married Frances Mary Heaton and they went on to have two daughters. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve where he worked on developing secret weapons. After the war he continued to write and settled in Australia where he lived until his death on 12 January 1960. His most celebrated novels include *Pied Piper* (1942), *No Highway* (1948), *A Town Like Alice* (1950) and *On the Beach* (1957).

Also by Nevil Shute

Novels

Marazan

So Disdained

Lonely Road

Ruined City

What Happened to the Corbetts

An Old Captivity

Landfall

Pied Piper

Pastoral

Most Secret

The Chequer Board

No Highway

A Town Like Alice

Round the Bend

The Far Country

In the Wet

Requiem for a Wren

Beyond the Black Stump

The Rainbow and the Rose

Trustee from the Toolroom

Stephen Morris and Pilotage

Autobiography

Slide Rule

NEVIL SHUTE

On the Beach

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river ...

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

T. S. ELIOT

CHAPTER ONE

LIEUTENANT-COMMANDER PETER HOLMES of the Royal Australian Navy woke soon after dawn. He lay drowsily for a while, lulled by the warm comfort of Mary sleeping beside him, watching the first light of the Australian sun upon the cretonne curtains of their room. He knew from the sun's rays that it was about five o'clock: very soon the light would wake his baby daughter Jennifer in her cot, and then they would have to get up and start doing things. No need to start before that happened; he could lie a little longer.

He woke happy, and it was some time before his conscious senses realised and pinned down the origin of this happiness. It was not Christmas, because that was over. He had illuminated the little fir tree in their garden with a string of coloured lights with a long lead to the plug beside the fireplace in the lounge, a small replica of the great illuminated tree a mile away outside the Town Hall of Falmouth. They had had a barbecue in the garden on the evening of Christmas Day, with a few friends. Christmas was over, and this—his mind turned over slowly—this must be Thursday the 27th. As he lay in bed the sunburn on his back was still a little sore from their day on the beach yesterday, and from sailing in the race. He would do well to keep his shirt on today. And then, as consciousness came fully to him, he realised that of course he would keep his shirt on today. He had a date at eleven o'clock in the Second Naval Member's office, in the Navy Department up in Melbourne. It meant a new appointment, his first work for five months. It could even mean a seagoing job if he were very lucky, and he ached for a ship again.

It meant work, anyway. The thought of it had made him happy when he went to sleep, and his happiness had lasted through the night. He had had no appointment since he had been promoted lieutenant-commander in August and in the circumstances of the time he had almost given up hope of ever working again. The Navy Department, however, had maintained him on full pay throughout these months, and he was grateful to them.

The baby stirred, and started chuntering and making little whimpering noises. The naval officer reached out and turned the switch of the electric kettle on the tray of tea things and baby food beside the bed, and Mary stirred beside him. She asked the time, and he told her. Then he kissed her, and said, "It's a lovely morning again."

She sat up, brushing back her hair. "I got so burned yesterday. I put some calamine stuff on Jennifer last night, but I really don't think she ought to go down to the beach again today." Then she, too, recollected. "Oh—Peter, it's today you're going up to Melbourne, isn't it?"

He nodded. "I should stay at home, have a day in the shade."

"I think I will."

He got up and went to the bathroom. When he came back Mary was up, too; the baby was sitting on her pot and Mary was drawing a comb through her hair before the glass. He sat down on the edge of the bed in a horizontal beam of sunlight, and made the tea.

She said, "It's going to be very hot in Melbourne today, Peter. I thought we might go down to the club about four, and you join us there for a swim. I could take the trailer and your bathers."

They had a small car in the garage, but since the short war had ended a year previously it remained unused. However, Peter Holmes was an ingenious man and good with tools, and he had contrived a tolerable substitute. Both Mary and he had bicycles. He had built a small two-

wheeled trailer using the front wheels of two motor bicycles, and he had contrived a trailer hitch on both Mary's bicycle and his own so that either could pull this thing, which served them as a perambulator and a general goods carrier. Their chief trouble was the long hill up from Falmouth.

He nodded. "That's not a bad idea. I'll take my bike and leave it at the station."

"What train have you got to catch?"

"The nine-five." He sipped his tea and glanced at his watch. "I'll go and get the milk as soon as I've drunk this."

He put on a pair of shorts and a singlet and went out. He lived in the ground floor flat of an old house upon the hill above the town that had been divided into apartments; he had the garage and a good part of the garden in his share of the property. There was a verandah, and here he kept the bicycles and the trailer. It would have been logical to park the car under the trees and use the garage, but he could not bring himself to do that. The little Morris was the first car he had ever owned, and he had courted Mary in it. They had been married in 1961 six months before the war, before he sailed in H.M.A.S. *Anzac* for what they thought would be indefinite separation. The short, bewildering war had followed, the war of which no history had been written or ever would be written now, that had flared all round the northern hemisphere and had died away with the last seismic record of explosion on the thirty-seventh day. At the end of the third month he had returned to Williamstown in *Anzac* on the last of her fuel oil while the statesmen of the southern hemisphere gathered in conference at Wellington in New Zealand to compare notes and assess the new conditions; had returned to Falmouth to his Mary and his Morris Minor car. The car had three gallons in the tank; he used that unheeding, and another five that he bought at a pump, before it dawned upon Australians that all oil came from the northern hemisphere.

He pulled the trailer and his bicycle down from the verandah on to the lawn and fitted the trailer hitch; then he mounted and rode off. He had four miles to go to fetch the milk and cream, for the transport shortage now prevented all collections from the farms in his district and they had learned to make their own butter in the Mix-master. He rode off down the road in the warm morning sunlight, the empty billies rattling in the trailer at his back, happy in the thought of work before him.

There was very little traffic on the road. He passed one vehicle that once had been a car, the engine removed and the windscreen knocked out, drawn by an Angus bullock. He passed two riders upon horses, going carefully upon the gravel verge to the road beside the bitumen surface. He did not want one; they were scarce and delicate creatures that changed hands for a thousand pounds or more, but he had sometimes thought about a bullock for Mary. He could convert the Morris easily enough, though it would break his heart to do so.

He reached the farm in half an hour, and went straight to the milking shed. He knew the farmer well, a slow speaking, tall, lean man who walked with a limp from the Second World War. He found him in the separator room, where the milk flowed into one churn and the cream into another in a low murmur of sound from the electric motor that drove the machine. "Morning, Mr. Paul," said the naval officer. "How are you today?"

"Good, Mr. Holmes." The farmer took the milk billy from him and filled it at the vat. "Everything all right with you?"

"Fine. I've got to go up to Melbourne, to the Navy Department. I think they've got a job for me at last."

"Ah," said the farmer, "that'll be good. Kind of wearisome, waiting around, I'd say."

Peter nodded. "It's going to complicate things a bit if it's a seagoing job. Mary 'll be coming for the milk, though, twice a week. She'll bring the money, just the same."

The farmer said, "You don't have to worry about the money till you come back, anyway. I've got more milk than the pigs will take even now, dry as it is. Put twenty gallons in the creek last night—can't get it away. Suppose I ought to raise more pigs, but then it doesn't seem worth while. It's hard to say what to do ..." He stood in silence for a minute, and then he said, "Going to be kind of awkward for the wife, coming over here. What's she going to do with Jennifer?"

"She'll probably bring her over with her, in the trailer."

"Kind of awkward for her, that." The farmer walked to the alley of the milking shed and stood in the warm sunlight, looking the bicycle and trailer over. "That's a good trailer," he said. "As good a little trailer as I ever saw. Made it yourself, didn't you?"

"That's right."

"Where did you get the wheels, if I may ask?"

"They're motor bike wheels. I got them in Elizabeth Street."

"Think you could get a pair for me?"

"I could try," Peter said. "I think there may be some of them about still. They're better than the little wheels—they tow more easily." The farmer nodded. "They may be a bit scarce now. People seem to be hanging on to motor bikes."

"I was saying to the wife," the farmer remarked slowly, "if I had a little trailer like that I could make it like a chair for her, put on behind the push bike and take her into Falmouth, shopping. It's mighty lonely for a woman in a place like this, these days," he explained. "Not like it was before the war, when she could take the car and get into town in twenty minutes. The bullock cart takes three and a half hours, and three and a half hours back; that's seven hours for travelling alone. She did try to learn to ride a bike but she'll never make a go of it, not at her age and another baby on the way. I wouldn't want her to try. But if I had a little trailer like you've got I could take her into Falmouth

twice a week, and take the milk and cream along to Mrs. Holmes at the same time." He paused. "I'd like to be able to do that for the wife," he remarked. "After all, from what they say on the wireless, there's not so long to go."

The naval officer nodded. "I'll scout around a bit today and see what I can find. You don't mind what they cost?"

The farmer shook his head. "So long as they're good wheels, to give no trouble. Good tyres, that's the main thing—last the time out. Like those you've got."

The officer nodded. "I'll have a look for some today."

"Taking you a good bit out of your way."

"I can slip up there by tram. It won't be any trouble. Thank God for the brown coal."

The farmer turned to where the separator was still running. "That's right. We'd be in a pretty mess but for the electricity." He slipped an empty churn into the stream of skim milk deftly and pulled the full churn away. "Tell me, Mr. Holmes," he said. "Don't they use big digging machines to get the coal? Like bulldozers, and things like that?" The officer nodded. "Well, where do they get the oil to run those things?"

"I asked about that once," Peter said. "They distil it on the spot, out of the brown coal. It costs about two pounds a gallon."

"You don't say!" The farmer stood in thought. "I was thinking may be if they could do that for themselves, they might do some for us. But at that price, it wouldn't hardly be practical ..."

Peter took the milk and cream billies, put them in the trailer, and set off for home. It was six-thirty when he got back. He had a shower and dressed in the uniform he had so seldom worn since his promotion, accelerated his breakfast, and rode his bicycle down the hill to catch the 8.15 in order that he might explore the motor dealers for the wheels before his appointment.

He left his bicycle at the garage that had serviced his small car in bygone days. It serviced no cars now. Horses stood stabled where the cars had been, the horses of the business men who lived outside the town, who now rode in in jodhpurs and plastic coats to stable their horses while they commuted up to town in the electric train. The petrol pumps served them as hitching posts. In the evening they would come down on the train, saddle their horses, strap the attaché case to the saddle, and ride home again. The tempo of business life was slowing down and this was a help to them; the 5.3 express train from the city had been cancelled and a 4.17 put on to replace it.

Peter Holmes travelled to the city immersed in speculations about his new appointment, for the paper famine had closed down all the daily newspapers and news now came by radio alone. The Royal Australian Navy was a very small fleet now. Seven small ships had been converted from oil burners to most unsatisfactory coal burners at great cost and effort; an attempt to convert the aircraft carrier *Melbourne* had been suspended when it proved that she would be too slow to allow the aircraft to land on with safety except in the strongest wind. Moreover, stocks of aviation fuel had to be husbanded so carefully that training programmes had been reduced to virtually nil, so that it now seemed inexpedient to carry on the Fleet Air Arm at all. He had not heard of any changes in the officers of the seven minesweepers and frigates that remained in commission. It might be that somebody was sick and had to be replaced, or it might be that they had decided to rotate employed officers with the unemployed to keep up seagoing experience. More probably it meant a posting to some dreary job on shore, an office job in the Barracks or doing something with the stores at some disconsolate, deserted place like Flinders Naval Depot. He would be deeply disappointed if he did not get to sea, and yet he knew it would be better for him so. On shore he could look after

Mary and the baby as he had been doing, and there was now not so long to go.

He got to the city in about an hour and went out of the station to get upon the tram. It rattled unobstructed through streets innocent of other vehicles and took him quickly to the motor dealing district. Most of the shops here were closed or taken over by the few that remained open, the windows still encumbered with the useless stock. He shopped around here for a time, searching for two light wheels in good condition that would make a pair, and finally bought wheels of the same size from two makes of motor cycle, which would make complications with the axle that could be got over by the one mechanic still left in his garage.

He took the tram back to the Navy Department, carrying the wheels tied together with a bit of rope. In the Second Naval Member's offices he reported to the secretary, a paymaster lieutenant who was known to him. The young man said, "Good morning, sir. The Admiral's got your posting on his desk. He wants to see you personally. I'll tell him that you're here."

The Lieutenant-Commander raised his eyebrows. It seemed unusual, but then in this reduced navy everything was apt to be a bit unusual. He put the wheels down by the paymaster's desk, looked over his uniform with some concern, picked a bit of thread off the lapel of his jacket, and tucked his cap under his arm.

"The Admiral will see you now, sir."

He marched into the office and came to attention. The Admiral, seated at his desk, inclined his head. "Good morning, Lieutenant-Commander. You can stand easy. Sit down."

Peter sat down in the chair beside the desk. The Admiral leaned over and offered him a cigarette out of his case, and lit it for him with a lighter. "You've been unemployed for some time."

“Yes, sir.”

The Admiral lit a cigarette himself. “Well, I’ve got a seagoing appointment for you. I can’t give you a command, I’m afraid, and I can’t even put you in one of our own ships. I’m posting you as liaison officer in U.S.S. *Scorpion*.”

He glanced at the younger man. “I understand you’ve met Commander Towers.”

“Yes, sir.” He had met the captain of *Scorpion* two or three times in the last few months, a quiet, soft spoken man of thirty-five or so with a slight New England accent. He had read the American’s report upon his ship’s war service. Towers had been at sea in his atomic powered submarine on patrol between Kiska and Midway when the war began, and opening his sealed orders at the appropriate signal he submerged and set course for Manila at full cruising speed. On the fourth day, somewhere north of Iwojima, he came to periscope depth for an inspection of the empty sea, as was his routine in each watch of the daylight hours, and found the visibility to be extremely low, apparently with some sort of dust; at the same time the detector on his periscope head indicated a high level of radioactivity. He attempted to report this to Pearl Harbor in a signal, but got no reply; he carried on, the radioactivity increasing as he neared the Philippines. Next night he made contact with Dutch Harbor and passed a signal in code to his admiral, but was told that all communications were now irregular, and he got no reply. On the next night he failed to raise Dutch Harbor. He carried on upon his mission, setting course around the north of Luzon. In the Balintang Channel he found much dust and the radioactivity far above the lethal level, the wind being westerly, Force Four to Five. On the seventh day of the war he was in Manila Bay looking at the city through his periscope, still without orders. The atmospheric radioactivity was rather less here, though still above the danger level; he did not care to surface or go up on to the bridge. Visibility was moderate; through the

periscope he saw a pall of smoke drifting up above the city and formed the opinion that at least one nuclear explosion had taken place there within the last few days. He saw no activity on shore from five miles out in the bay. Proceeding to close the land, he grounded his ship unexpectedly at periscope depth, being then in the main channel where the chart showed twelve fathoms; this reinforced his previous opinion. He blew his tanks and got off without difficulty, turned round, and went out to the open sea again.

That night he failed again to raise any American station, or any ship that could relay his signals. Blowing his tanks had used up much of his compressed air, and he did not care to take in the contaminated air in that vicinity. He had been submerged by that time for eight days; his crew were still fairly fit, though various neuroses were beginning to appear, born of anxiety about conditions in their homes. He established radio contact with an Australian station at Port Moresby in New Guinea; conditions there appeared to be normal, but they could not relay any of his signals.

It seemed to him that the best thing he could do would be to go south. He went back round the north of Luzon and set course for Yap Island, a cable station under the control of the United States. He got there three days later. Here the radioactive level was so low as to be practically normal; he surfaced in a moderate sea, blew out the ship with clean air, charged his tanks, and let the crew up on the bridge in batches. On entering the roads he was relieved to find an American cruiser there. She directed him to an anchorage and sent a boat; he moored ship, let the whole crew up on deck, and went off in the boat to put himself under the command of the captain of the cruiser, a Captain Shaw. Here he learned for the first time of the Russo-Chinese war that had flared up out of the Russo-N.A.T.O. war, that had in turn been born of the Israeli-Arab war, initiated by Albania. He learned of the use of cobalt bombs by both the Russians and the Chinese; that news came deviously from Australia,

relayed from Kenya. The cruiser was waiting at Yap to rendezvous with a Fleet tanker; she had been there for a week and in the last five days she had been out of communication with the United States. The captain had sufficient bunker fuel to get his ship to Brisbane at her most economical speed, but no further.

Commander Towers stayed at Yap for six days while the news, such as it was, grew steadily worse. They did not succeed in making contact with any station in the United States or Europe, but for the first two days or so they were able to pick up news broadcasts from Mexico City, and that news was just about as bad as it could be. Then that station went off the air, and they could only get Panama, Bogota, and Valparaiso, who knew practically nothing about what was going on up in the northern continent. They made contact with a few ships of the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific, most of them as short of fuel as they were themselves. The captain of the cruiser at Yap proved to be the senior officer of all these ships; he made the decision to sail all U.S. ships into Australian waters and to place his forces under Australian command. He made signals to all ships to rendezvous with him at Brisbane. They congregated there a fortnight later, eleven ships of the U.S. Navy, all out of bunker fuel and with very little hope of getting any more. That was a year ago; they were there still.

The nuclear fuel required for U.S.S. *Scorpion* was not available in Australia at the time of her arrival, but it could be prepared. She proved to be the only naval vessel in Australian waters with any worth-while radius of action, so she was sailed to Williamstown, the naval dockyard of Melbourne, being the nearest port to the headquarters of the Navy Department. She was, in fact, the only warship in Australia worth bothering about. She stayed idle for some time while her nuclear fuel was prepared till, six months previously, she had been restored to operational mobility.

She then made a cruise to Rio de Janeiro carrying supplies of fuel for another American nuclear submarine that had taken refuge there, and returned to Melbourne to undergo a fairly extensive refit in the dockyard.

All this was known to Peter Holmes as the background of Commander Towers, U.S.N., and it passed quickly through his mind as he sat before the Admiral's desk. The appointment that he had been offered was a new one; there had been no Australian liaison officer in *Scorpion* when she had made her South American cruise. The thought of Mary and his little daughter troubled him now and prompted him to ask, "How long is this appointment for, sir?"

The Admiral shrugged his shoulders slightly. "We could say a year. I imagine it will be your last posting, Holmes."

The younger man said, "I know, sir. I'm very grateful for the opportunity." He hesitated, and then he asked, "Will the ship be at sea for much of that time, sir? I'm married, and we've got a baby. Things aren't too easy now, compared with what they used to be, and it's a bit difficult at home. And anyway, there's not so long to go."

The Admiral nodded. "We're all in the same boat, of course. That's why I wanted to see you before offering this posting. I shan't hold it against you if you ask to be excused, but in that case I can't hold out much prospect of any further employment. As regards sea time, at the conclusion of the refit on the fourth—" he glanced at the calendar "—that's in a little over a week from now—the ship is to proceed to Cairns, Port Moresby, and Port Darwin to report upon conditions in those places, returning to Williamstown. Commander Towers estimates eleven days for that cruise. After that we have in mind a longer cruise for her, lasting perhaps two months."

"Would there be an interval between those cruises, sir?"

"I should think the ship might be in the dockyard for about a fortnight."

"And nothing on the programme after that?"

“Nothing at present.”

The young officer sat in thought for a moment, revolving in his mind the shopping, the ailments of the baby, the milk supply. It was summer weather; there would be no firewood to be cut. If the second cruise began about the middle of February he would be home by the middle of April, before the weather got cold enough for fires. Perhaps the farmer would see Mary right for firewood if he was away longer than that, now that he had got him the wheels for his trailer. It should be all right for him to go, so long as nothing further went wrong. But if the electricity supply failed, or the radioactivity spread south more quickly than the wise men estimated ... Put away that thought.

Mary would be furious if he turned down this job and sacrificed his career. She was a naval officer's daughter born and brought up at Southsea in the south of England; he had first met her at a dance in *Indefatigable* when he was doing his sea time in England with the Royal Navy. She would want him to take this appointment ...

He raised his head. “I should be all right for those two cruises, sir,” he said. “Would it be possible to review the situation after that? I mean, it's not so easy to make plans ahead—at home—with all this going on.”

The Admiral thought for a moment. In the circumstances it was a reasonable request for a man to make, especially a newly married man with a young baby. The case was a new one, for postings were now so few, but he could hardly expect this officer to accept sea duty outside Australian waters in the last few months. He nodded. “I can do that, Holmes,” he said. “I'll make this posting for five months, till the thirty-first of May. Report to me again when you get back from the second cruise.”

“Very good, sir.”

“You'll report in *Scorpion* on Tuesday, New Year's Day. If you wait outside a quarter of an hour you can have your

letter to the captain. The vessel is at Williamstown, lying alongside *Sydney* as her mother ship."

"I know, sir."

The Admiral rose to his feet. "All right, Lieutenant-Commander." He held out his hand. "Good luck in the appointment."

Peter Holmes shook hands. "Thank you for considering me, sir." He paused before leaving the room. "Do you happen to know if Commander Towers is on board today?" he asked. "As I'm here, I might slip down and make my number with him, and perhaps see the ship. I'd rather like to do that before joining."

"So far as I know he is on board," the Admiral said. "You can put a call through to *Sydney*—ask my secretary." He glanced at his watch. "There's a transport leaving from the main gate at eleven-thirty. You'll be able to catch that."

Twenty minutes later Peter Holmes was seated by the driver in the electric truck that ran the ferry service down to Williamstown, bowling along in silence through the deserted streets. In former days the truck had been a delivery van for a great Melbourne store; it had been requisitioned at the conclusion of the war and painted naval grey. It moved along at a steady twenty miles an hour unimpeded by any other traffic on the roads. It got to the dockyard at noon, and Peter Holmes walked down to the berth occupied by H.M.A.S. *Sydney*, an aircraft carrier immobilised at the quay side. He went on board, and went down to the wardroom.

There were only about a dozen officers in the great wardroom, six of them in the khaki gabardine working uniform of the U.S. Navy. The captain of *Scorpion* was among them; he came forward smiling to meet Peter. "Say, Lieutenant-Commander, I'm glad you could come down."

Peter Holmes said, "I hoped you wouldn't mind, sir. I'm not due to join till Tuesday. But as I was at the Navy

Department I hoped you wouldn't mind if I came down for lunch, and perhaps had a look through the ship."

"Why, sure," said the captain. "I was glad when Admiral Grimwade told me he was posting you to join us. I'd like you to meet some of my officers." He turned to the others. "This is my executive officer, Mr. Farrell, and my engineering officer, Mr. Lundgren." He smiled. "It takes a pretty high-grade engineering staff to run our motors. This is Mr. Benson, Mr. O'Doherty, and Mr. Hirsch." The young men bowed, a little awkwardly. The captain turned to Peter. "How about a drink before lunch, Commander?"

The Australian said, "Well—thank you very much. I'll have a pink gin." The captain pressed the bell upon the bulkhead. "How many officers have you in *Scorpion*, sir?"

"Eleven, all told. She's quite a submarine, of course, and we carry four engineer officers."

"You must have a big wardroom."

"It's a bit cramped when we're all sitting down together, but that doesn't happen very often in a submarine. But we've got a cot for you, Commander."

Peter smiled. "All to myself, or is it Box and Cox?"

The captain was a little shocked at the suggestion. "Why, no. Every officer and every enlisted man has an individual berth in *Scorpion*."

The wardroom steward came in answer to the bell. The captain said, "Will you bring one pink gin and six orangeades."

Peter was embarrassed, and could have kicked himself for his indiscretion. He checked the steward. "Don't you drink in port, sir?"

The captain smiled. "Why, no. Uncle Sam doesn't like it. But you go right ahead. This is a British ship."

"I'd rather have it your way, if you don't mind," Peter replied. "Seven orangeades."

"Seven it is," said the captain nonchalantly. The steward went away. "Some navies have it one way and some

another," he remarked. "I never noticed that it made much difference in the end result."

They lunched in *Sydney*, a dozen officers at one end of one of the long, empty tables. Then they went down into *Scorpion*, moored alongside. She was the biggest submarine that Peter Holmes had ever seen; she displaced about six thousand tons and her atomic powered turbines developed well over ten thousand horsepower. Besides her eleven officers she carried a crew of about seventy petty officers and enlisted men. All these men messed and slept amongst a maze of pipes and wiring as is common in all submarines, but she was well equipped for the tropics with good air conditioning and a very large cold store. Peter Holmes was no submariner and could not judge her from a technical point of view, but the captain told him that she was easy on controls and quite manoeuvrable in spite of her great length.

Most of her armament and warlike stores had been taken off her during her refit, and all but two of her torpedo tubes had been removed. This made more room for messdecks and amenities than is usual in a submarine, and the removal of the aft tubes and torpedo stowage made conditions in the engine-room a good deal easier for the engineers. Peter spent an hour in this part of the ship with the engineering officer, Lieutenant-Commander Lundgren. He had never served in an atomic powered ship, and as much of the equipment was classified for security a great deal of it was novel to him. He spent some time absorbing the general layout of the liquid sodium circuit to take heat from the reactor, the various heat exchangers, and the closed-cycle helium circuits for the twin high-speed turbines that drove the ship through the enormous reduction gears, so much larger and more sensitive than the other units of the power plant.

He came back to the captain's tiny cabin in the end. Commander Towers rang for the coloured steward, ordered

coffee for two, and let down the folding seat for Peter. "Have a good look at the engines?" he asked.

The Australian nodded. "I'm not an engineer," he said. "Much of it is just a bit over my head, but it was very interesting. Do they give you much trouble?"

The captain shook his head. "They never have so far. There's nothing much that you can do with them at sea if they do. Just keep your fingers crossed and hope they'll keep on spinning around."

The coffee came and they sipped it in silence. "My orders are to report to you on Tuesday," Peter said. "What time would you like me here, sir?"

"We sail on Tuesday on sea trials," the captain said. "It might be Wednesday, but I don't think we'll be so late as that. We're taking on stores Monday and the crew come aboard."

"I'd better report to you on Monday, then," said the Australian. "Some time in the forenoon?"

"That might be a good thing," said the captain. "I think we'll get away by Tuesday noon. I told the Admiral I'd like to take a little cruise in Bass Strait as a shakedown, and come back maybe on Friday and report operational readiness. I'd say if you're on board any time Monday forenoon that would be okay."

"Is there anything that I can do for you in the meantime? I'd come aboard on Saturday if I could help at all."

"I appreciate that, Commander, but there's not a thing. Half the crew are off on leave right now, and I'm letting the other half go off on week-end pass tomorrow noon. There'll be nobody here Saturday and Sunday barring one officer and six men on watch. No, Monday forenoon will be time enough for you."

He glanced at Peter. "Anybody tell you what they want us to do?"

The Australian was surprised. "Haven't they told you, sir?"

The American laughed. "Not a thing. I'd say the last person to hear the sailing orders is the captain."

"The Second Naval Member sent for me about this posting," Peter said. "He told me that you were making a cruise to Cairns, Port Moresby, and Darwin, and that it was going to take eleven days."

"Your Captain Nixon in the Operations Division, he asked me how long that would take," the captain remarked. "I haven't had it as an order yet."

"The Admiral said, this morning, that after that was over there'd be a much longer cruise, that would take about two months."

Commander Towers paused, motionless, his cup suspended in mid air. "That's news to me," he remarked. "Did he say where we were going?"

Peter shook his head. "He just said it would take about two months."

There was a short silence. Then the American roused himself and smiled. "I guess if you look in around midnight you'll find me drawing radiuses on the chart," he said quietly. "And tomorrow night, and the night after that."

It seemed better to the Australian to turn the conversation to a lighter tone. "Aren't you going away for the week-end?" he asked.

The captain shook his head. "I'll stick around. Maybe go up to the city one day and take in a movie."

It seemed a dreary sort of programme for his week-end, a stranger far from home in a strange land. On the impulse Peter said, "Would you care to come down to Falmouth for a couple of nights, sir? We've got a spare bedroom. We've been spending most of our time at the sailing club this weather, swimming and sailing. My wife would like it if you could come."

"That's mighty nice of you," the captain said thoughtfully. He took another drink of coffee while he considered the proposal. Northern hemisphere people

seldom mixed well, now, with people of the southern hemisphere. Too much lay between them, too great a difference of experience. The intolerable sympathy made a barrier. He knew that very well and, more, he knew that this Australian officer must know it in spite of his invitation. In the line of duty, however, he felt that he would like to know more about the liaison officer. If he had to communicate through him with the Australian Naval Command he would like to know what sort of man he was; that was a point in favour of this visit to his home. The change would certainly be some relief from the vile inactivity that had tormented him in the last months; however great the awkwardness, it might be better than a week-end in the echoing, empty aircraft carrier with only his own thoughts and memories for company.

He smiled faintly as he put his cup down. It might be awkward if he went down there, but it could be even more awkward if he churlishly refused an invitation kindly meant from his new officer. "You sure it wouldn't be too much for your wife?" he asked. "With a young baby?"

Peter shook his head. "She'd like it," he said. "Make a bit of a change for her. She doesn't see many new faces, with things as they are. Of course, the baby makes a tie as well."

"I certainly would like to come down for one night," the American said. "I'll have to stick around here tomorrow, but I could use a swim on Saturday. It's a long time since I had a swim. How would it be if I came down to Falmouth on the train Saturday morning? I'll have to be back here on Sunday."

"I'll meet you at the station." They discussed trains for a little. Then Peter asked, "Can you ride a push bike?" The other nodded. "I'll bring another bike down with me to the station. We live about two miles out."

Commander Towers said, "That'll be fine." The red Oldsmobile was fading to a dream. It was only fifteen

months since he had driven it to the airport, but now he could hardly remember what the fascia panel looked like or on which side the seat adjustment lever lay. It must be still in the garage of his Connecticut home, untouched perhaps, with all the other things that he had schooled himself not to think about. One had to live in the new world and do one's best, forgetting about the old; now it was push bikes at the railway station in Australia.

Peter left to catch the ferry truck back to the Navy Department; he picked up his letter of appointment and his wheels, and took the tram to the station. He got back to Falmouth at about six o'clock, hung the wheels awkwardly on the handlebars of his bicycle, took off his jacket, and trudged the pedals heavily up the hill to his home. He got there half an hour later, sweating profusely in the heat of the evening, to find Mary cool in a summer frock in the refreshing murmur of a sprinkler on the lawn.

She came to meet him. "Oh Peter, you're so hot!" she said. "I see you got the wheels."

He nodded. "Sorry I couldn't get down to the beach."

"I guessed you'd been held up. We came home about half past five. What happened about the appointment?"

"It's a long story," he said. He parked the bicycle and the wheels on the verandah. "I'd like to have a shower first, and tell you then."

"Good or bad?" she asked.

"Good," he replied. "Seagoing until April. Nothing after that."

"Oh Peter," she cried, "that's just perfect! Go on and have your shower and tell me about it when you're cool. I'll bring out the deck chairs and there's a bottle of beer in the frig."

A quarter of an hour later, cool in an open necked shirt and light drill trousers, sitting in the shade with the cold beer, he told her all about it. In the end he asked, "Have you ever met Commander Towers?"

She shook her head. "Jane Freeman met them all at the party in *Sydney*. She said he was rather nice. What's he going to be like to serve under?"

"All right, I think," he replied. "He's very competent. It's going to be a bit strange at first, in an American ship. But I liked them all, I must say." He laughed. "I put up a blue right away by ordering a pink gin." He told her.

She nodded. "That's what Jane said. They drink on shore but not in a ship. I don't believe they drink in uniform at all. They had some kind of a fruit cocktail, rather dismal. Everybody else was drinking like a fish."

"I asked him down for the week-end," he told her. "He's coming down on Saturday morning."

She stared at him in consternation. "Not Commander Towers?"

He nodded. "I felt I had to ask him. He'll be all right."

"Oh ... Peter, he won't be. They're never all right. It's much too painful for them, coming into people's homes."

He tried to reassure her. "He's different. He's a good bit older, for one thing. Honestly, he'll be quite all right."

"That's what you thought about that R.A.F. squadron leader," she retorted. "You know—I forget his name. The one who cried."

He did not care to be reminded of that evening. "I know it's difficult for them," he said. "Coming into someone's home, with the baby and everything. But honestly, this chap won't be like that."

She resigned herself to the inevitable. "How long is he staying for?"

"Only the one night," he told her. "He says he's got to be back in *Scorpion* on Sunday."

"If it's only for one night it shouldn't be too bad ..." She sat in thought for a minute, frowning a little. "The thing is, we'll have to find him plenty to do. Keep him occupied all the time. Never a dull moment. That's the mistake we made with that R.A.F. bloke. What does he like doing?"

“Swimming,” he told her. “He wants to have a swim.”

“Sailing? There’s a race on Saturday.”

“I didn’t ask him. I should think he sails. He’s the sort of man who would.”

She took a drink of beer. “We could take him to the movies,” she said thoughtfully.

“What’s on?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t really matter, so long as we keep him occupied.”

“It might not be so good if it was about America,” he pointed out. “We might just hit on one that was shot in his home town.”

She stared at him in consternation. “Wouldn’t that be *awful*! Where *is* his home town, Peter? What part of America?”

“I haven’t a clue,” he said. “I didn’t ask him.”

“Oh dear. We’ll have to do *something* with him in the evening, Peter. I should think a British picture would be safest, but there may not be one on.”

“We could have a party,” he suggested.

“We’ll have to, if there’s not a British picture. It might be better, anyway.” She sat in thought, and then she asked, “Was he married, do you know?”

“I don’t. I should think he must have been.”

“I believe Moira Davidson would come and help us out,” she said thoughtfully. “If she isn’t doing anything else.”

“If she isn’t drunk,” he observed.

“She’s not like that all the time,” his wife replied. “She’d keep the party lively, anyway.”

He considered the proposal. “That’s not a bad idea,” he said. “I should tell her right out what she’s got to do. Never a dull moment.” He paused, thoughtful. “In bed or out of it.”

“She doesn’t, you know. It’s all on the surface.”

He grinned. “Have it your own way.”

They rang Moira Davidson that evening and put the proposition to her. "Peter felt he had to ask him," Mary told her. "I mean, he's his new captain. But you know how they are and how they feel when they come into someone's home, with children and a smell of nappies and a feeding bottle in a saucepan of warm water and all that sort of thing. So we thought we'd clean the house up a bit and put all that away, and try and give him a gay time—all the time, you know. The trouble is, I can't do much myself with Jennifer. Could you come and help us out, dear? I'm afraid it means a camp bed in the lounge or out on the verandah, if you'd rather. It's just for Saturday and Sunday. Keep him occupied, all the time—that's what we thought. Never a dull moment. I thought we'd have a party on Saturday night, and get some people in."

"Sounds a bit dreary," said Miss Davidson. "Tell me, is he a fearful stick? Will he start weeping in my arms and telling me I'm just like his late wife? Some of them do that."

"I suppose he might," said Mary uncertainly. "I've never met him. Half a minute while I ask Peter." She came back to the telephone. "Moira? Peter says he'll probably start knocking you about when he gets a skinful."

"That's better," said Miss Davidson. "All right, I'll come over on Saturday morning. By the way, I've given up gin."

"Given up gin?"

"Rots your insides. Perforates the intestine and gives you ulcers. I've been having them each morning, so I've given it away. It's brandy now. About six bottles, I should think—for the week-end. You can drink a lot of brandy."

On Saturday morning Peter Holmes rode down to Falmouth station on his push bike. He met Moira Davidson there. She was a slightly built girl with straight blonde hair and a white face, the daughter of a grazier with a small property at a place called Harkaway near Berwick. She arrived at the station in a very smart four-wheeled trap, snatched from some junk yard and reconditioned at