



VINTAGE

North Star

Hammond Innes

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About the Book

Michael Randall flees to the wild seas around the Shetlands to escape an impossible dilemma. There he finds a North Sea oil rig, and the unlikely possibility of a new life. But one stormy night, this glimmer of hope for the future, and Randall's life itself, is thrown into jeopardy.

About the Author

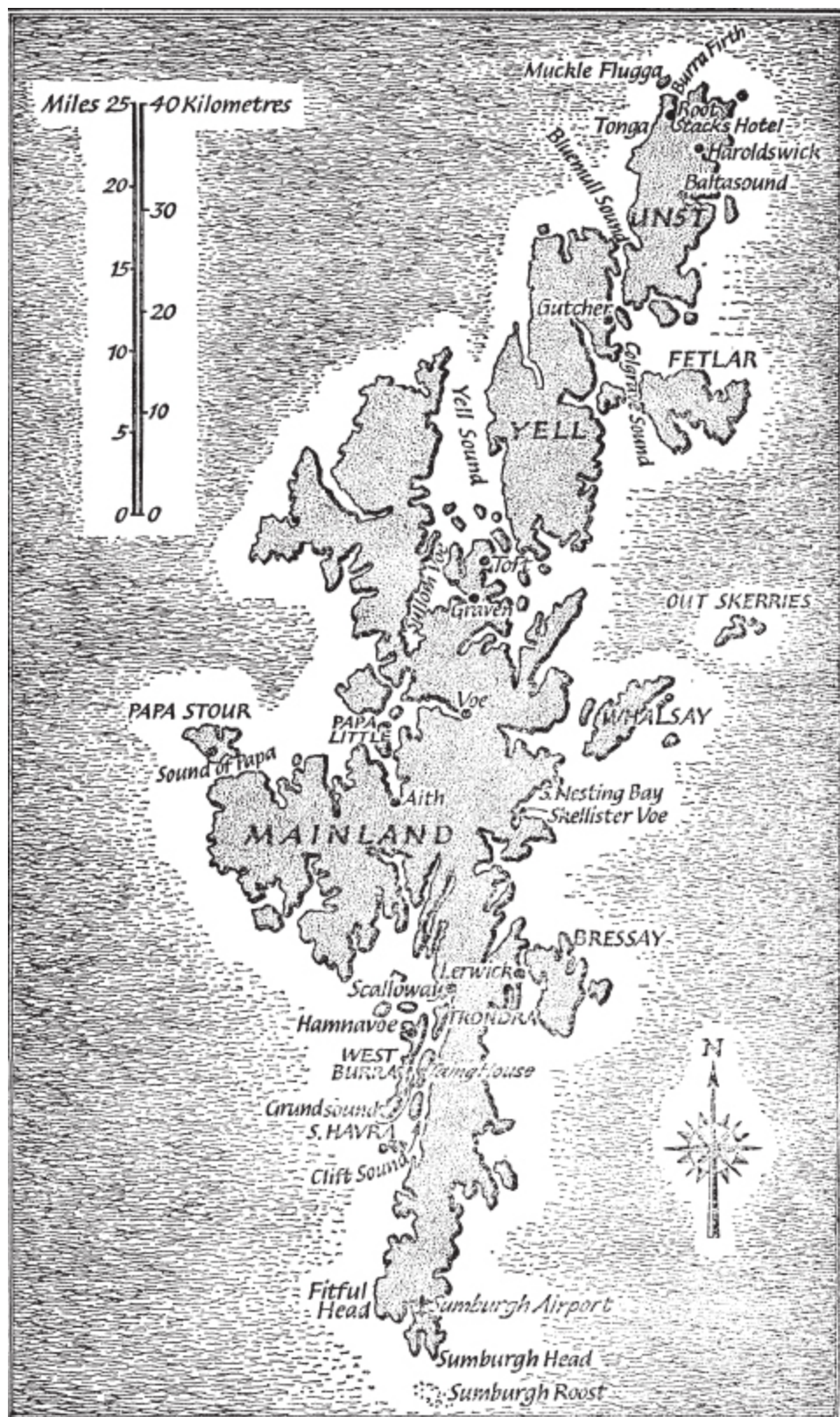
Ralph Hammond Innes was born in Horsham, Sussex, on 15 July 1913 and educated at Cranbrook School, Kent. He left school aged eighteen, and worked successively in publishing, teaching and journalism. In 1936, in need of money in order to marry, he wrote a supernatural thriller, *The Doppelganger*, which was published in 1937 as part of a two-year, four book deal. In 1939 Innes moved to a different publisher, and began to write compulsively, continuing to publish throughout his service in the Royal Artillery during the Second World War.

Innes travelled widely to research his novels and always wrote from personal experience - his 1940s novels *The Blue Ice* and *The White South* were informed by time spent working on a whaling ship in the Antarctic, while *The Lonely Skier* came out of a post-war skiing course in the Dolomites. He was a keen and accomplished sailor, which passion inspired his 1956 bestseller *The Wreck of the Mary Deare*. The equally successful 1959 film adaptation of this novel enabled Innes to buy a large yacht, the *Mary Deare*, in which he sailed around the world for the next fifteen years, accompanied by his wife and fellow author Dorothy Lang.

Innes wrote over thirty novels, as well as several works of non-fiction and travel journalism. His thrilling stories of spies, counterfeiters, black markets and shipwreck earned him both literary acclaim and an international following, and in 1978 he was awarded a CBE. Hammond Innes died at his home in Suffolk on 10th June 1998.

OTHER NOVELS BY HAMMOND INNES

Air Bridge
Attack Alarm
Atlantic Fury
Campbell's Kingdom
Dead and Alive
Delta Connection
Golden Soak
High Stand
Isvik
Killer Mine
Levkas Man
Maddon's Rock
Medusa
Solomons Seal
Target Antarctica
The Angry Mountain
The Big Footprints
The Black Tide
The Blue Ice
The Doomed Oasis
The Land God Gave to Cain
The Last Voyage
The Lonely Skier
The Strange Land
The Strode Venturer
The Trojan Horse
The White South
The Wreck of the Mary Deare
Wreckers Must Breathe



*For
Nora and Jim
whose assistance was invaluable*

HAMMOND INNES

North Star

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

No, when the fight begins within himself,
A man's worth something.

– Browning

I THE TRAWLER

1

It was March, the wind cold from the north-east and the *Fisher Maid* plunging down the waves with a wicked twist to her tail. I shut the door of the bridge behind me, leaving the skipper to listen to the forecast, and went down the ladder, heading aft to check the gear. I knew the forecast would be bad. But it couldn't be any worse than the weather we had had off Bear Island. I paused in the shelter of the superstructure. Here on the starboard side I was out of the wind and I took out my pipe, filling it automatically, standing there, staring out across the darkening sea.

I had seen to the stowage of the gear myself, a thousand miles back when we had finished trawling; it was just an excuse to be out in the open, away from the smell of oil and stale food, the blare of the radio and the company of men I had been locked up with for too long. On a trawler it's bloody difficult to be alone when you want to.

Shetland was still just visible, the black humps of the distant hills like wave patterns against a cold green strip of sky, and the light on Sumburgh Head blinking above the hard line of the horizon. Only that pale green strip to mark the bitter cold we'd been steaming through; the rest of the sky was clouded over now. A flurry of sleet drove like a veil across the starboard navigation light. Inside of two days we would be back in Hull, and still I hadn't made up my mind, the shadowy figures, the crash of glass, the sudden blaze of bottled petrol, and that child's face at the upstairs window ... It had haunted me throughout the voyage.

Slowly the pale light faded in the west. I stood there watching it until that last vestige of the dying day was

engulfed by night, wondering whether the strike would still be on, what the hell I was going to do. Waves were breaking against the stem, the driven spume white in the gathering dark, and the wind whistling in the top hamper. I was thinking of my father then, wondering what he would have done, giving his life for a cause in a country not his own. Would he have allowed his principles to be totally destroyed by a single cruel and senseless action?

The match made a small flared arc as I tossed it over the side, my hands gripping the rail, the metal cold to the touch, my eyes staring westward to Shetland, fifteen miles away. He had been born in Shetland, and I had never been there. I hadn't even known him, only the legend. My mind slipped back, my life in flashes, and always that legend, a guiding light to everything I had done – and I wasn't sure any more. A door opened, the muffled sound of the radio reminding me of the industrial world just two days' steaming away, the docks, the stuffy smoky meetings, the arguments, the pickets, the turmoil of over-population, man in the mass. Christ! How could one man, one individual speck, find his way in the tangle of motives and pressures?

'Mike!'

I turned, glancing upwards to see Sparks standing at the top of the ladder, his thin hair blowing in the wind. The bridge door slammed behind him as he came down to stand beside me, a sheet of paper thrust towards me.

I pushed it away. 'I don't need a forecast to tell me it'll be Force 9 before the night's out.'

'It's not the forecast.' His thin, rather high-pitched voice was half blown away by the wind. 'A message for the skipper.'

'Well, give it to him then,' I said irritably.

'I have. But since it concerns you –' I could smell the beer on his breath as his pale face thrust closer, the eyes bright behind his glasses. 'You in trouble?'

'How d'you mean?'

‘Look, Mike,’ he said, ‘you were shipped at the last minute after Les Sinclair had gone down with a virus. You and the skipper – you’re not buddies like Les, so he may not tell you. I thought I’d warn you, that’s all. The police will be waiting for you when we dock. A Detective-Sergeant Wright. Here’s a copy of the message.’ And he pressed the piece of paper into my hands.

‘Thanks.’

‘They want to interview you. I suppose you know why?’

‘Yes, I know why.’ I stuffed the paper into my pocket, staring out into the night, saying nothing. I had been afraid of this all through the voyage. Somebody must have recognized me, and now, when I stepped ashore, the police would be there, wanting a statement. And if I gave it to them, if I admitted I knew who the men were, then I would be a witness for the prosecution, and the decision would no longer be a personal one, something between me and my conscience and made of my own volition. It would be the result of police interrogation. At least it would seem like that to everybody but me.

‘D’you want any sort of a message sent, a private message – lawyers or anything like that?’ He was still standing there at my elbow, a man whose world was the ether, who fed on information dragged out of the air on invisible wavelengths, his curiosity glowing in his owlish eyes.

‘No,’ I said. ‘There’s nothing a lawyer can do.’

He hesitated, standing there beside me, waiting. Doubtless it was kind of him, but radio operators are all the same. They want to be in everybody’s confidence. In the end he left me and I was alone again, watching as the ice-battered trawler plunged southward down the North Sea, each surge and twist carrying me closer to the moment of decision. But you don’t change the whole direction of your life because a child is nearly burned alive. Or do you?

The storm was rising, and in the end I gave up thinking about it and went to my cabin, lying there, sleepless and fully clothed, the ship's plates writhing to the violence of the movement. I was back on the bridge in time to get the news. It came right at the end, the talks broken off and the strike still on. Weeks now and every shipyard in Hull at a standstill. Did that mean Pierson and Watt were out, too?

The skipper was there and he turned and looked at me. 'You hear that? And the poomps going full bat.'

They'd been going flat out ever since we'd hit the ice. 'They'll get us home,' I said.

He didn't answer, moving to the port side of the bridge, his carpet slippers flapping loosely. He wasn't a big man, but there was a lot of strength in that short, long-armed body, the round bullet head almost neckless on broad shoulders. And he had an inner strength, his silences more telling than words. He stood there for a while, staring out into the murk ahead. 'Better get some sleep. It's going to be a long night.'

I nodded. It was his watch now and I went below, checking the engine-room and the hold. The fish pounds were just about full, almost two thousand kit - that would be about 20,000 stone landed, a lot of it high-priced. Worth the bashing we had taken up there on the edge of the pack and my share as mate looking good. The fact that she was low in the water did not matter now. We were running with a quartering sea and the pumps were holding. If we'd been steaming into it things might have been different.

It was a long night all right. At four in the morning I was back on the bridge, visibility almost nil and the big deckie they called the Porpoise with his eyes glued to the radar screen. The skipper was in the chartroom working out a Decca position. His thick hairy hands juggled with the parallel rule, pencilling a cross just east of our intended course. 'Wind's veered a point, pooshing us more than I thought.' He ordered a correction to the helm as he

entered up the log, and then, instead of leaving me to my watch, he slid the chartroom door shut. 'Three weeks now. You heard what they said on the news. Every yard in Hooll at a standstill.' He had his broad bottom wedged against the chart table, his slightly protuberant eyes fixed on me. 'Every blasted yard.' He pulled his pipe out and began to fill it. 'When did you first go into trawling?'

'Some years back now.'

'Ah asked when.'

'Spring of 1969 - the *Lady Betty*.'

'Old Harcourt. Shipped as a deckie, did you?'

I nodded.

'And your mate's ticket four years later.' He lit his pipe, solid and immovable as the ship fell off a wavetop, sending the rule and dividers skidding across the chart. 'Ah doan't understand you, and that's the truth. A bloke with your education -' He shook his head, frowning. 'Still got your union card an'all?'

'Yes.'

'But not the Hooll Trawlers' Officers - shipyard, isn't it?'

I didn't say anything and he grunted. 'What made you switch to trawling?'

'My own business,' I said.

'Aye.' He took the pipe out of his mouth, his eyes staring. 'But just tell me. Ah'd laike t'know.'

I laughed. What could I tell him? 'The sea,' I said. 'It's in my blood, I suppose.'

'You were at the Marston Yard on Clydebank, a member of the strike committee in 1968. And before that you were in prison, result of a demo that tangled with the police.'

'That's a long time ago.'

'You're still the same bloke, aren't you?'

'Come to the point,' I said.

'Orl raight, Ah will. Pierson & Watt now, if they've coom oot ... Sounds laike it, an' they're non-union, all of them.'

Young Watt won't employ union men. So where do we go for a refit?'

'Not my problem,' I said.

'No. Not your problem. But you're doing, I reckon.'

'Then you're wrong.'

He shook his head, an obstinate look on his face. 'You're a good mate. I grant you that. But you're a trouble-maker. I wouldn't have shipped you if -' He stuffed his pipe firmly back into his mouth.

'If what?' I asked.

'I was doing you a favour.'

'You were short of a mate.'

'Aye. But it didn't have to be you.' And then he shrugged and said, 'Orl raiglit, Ah'll tell you - Jimmy Watt asked me to take you. Get the bugger off our backs, that's how he put it.' And then his big forefinger was jabbing me in the chest. 'Do you deny you were on the Committee?'

'Not on the Committee. I was called in to advise them.'

'Advise them, eh?' His voice was still quiet and under control, but the Hull accent was stronger now, something building up in him, an undercurrent of menace. 'Advise them on what? Intimidation?' He leaned his round head closer, the grey eyes cold and fishlike in the hard light. 'Or did they call you in to get at Jimmy's foreman, to get Bob Entwisle to -'

'What the hell are you talking about?' I was suddenly angry, remembering how I'd walked out of that crowded meeting, the little Congregational Hall thick with smoke and full of violence. 'You know nothing about it.'

'Doan't I? Well I know this -'

'You listen to me.' I was shouting and I reached out and grabbed hold of his shoulder.

'Doan't you dare.' He slammed his big fists down on my arms, wrenching himself free. 'Keep your hands off.'

'Just listen,' I said. 'It was the economics of the strike - the future of the yards, the financial state of shipbuilding in

the North East. They were scared about their jobs.'

He glared at me. 'They doan't care about their jobs. They doan't care about anything - just so long as they can smash us all to hell.'

'You may be right.' What was the point of arguing with him? I suddenly felt tired. 'My watch,' I said. 'You'd better get some sleep yourself now.'

'Why would they ask you about the financial state of the shipbuilding industry?'

'I was trained as an economist. London School of Economics. You know so much about me you should know that.' I turned to the chart. 'What do you intend to do? You can't make another trip without a refit. There's a leak for'ard where we hit that growler -'

'Ah doan't need you to tell me that.' He relit his pipe, staring down at the chart. 'There's no roosh. Ah'll have a word with Jimmy in the morning. Aye.' He nodded to himself. 'We've a little time yet.' And he turned abruptly, without another word, and left me alone to my watch.

It was a long four hours; nothing to relieve the monotony but the slowly changing position of an oil rig seen only as a blip on the radar screen. The wind was gusting 50 knots, the ship standing on her head and no visibility in the blinding murk of sleet and spray. Plenty of time to think, and my brain too tired, too numbed by the battering to work out what I was going to tell the police when we docked. There had been two of them, two shadowy figures, and then the crash of glass, the sudden blaze, their faces lit as they turned and ran.

I switched on the Decca Navigator, concentrating on the clicking dials to get a fix, doing it automatically, knowing I could identify them both and worrying about Bucknall Claxby I didn't care about; he was an older man, a hardline militant brought in to cause trouble. If it had been just Claxby, there on his own, I wouldn't have hesitated. But young Harry Bucknall was the son of a good honest

shipyard worker who had marched to London with the Jarrow boys in the thirties. A post-graduate university student, intelligent and an anarchist. At least he had done it out of conviction, believing that violence was the path to revolution. And I had no doubt who had been the ringleader.

I entered up the fix and went back to stand by the wheel, staring out into the black night. All I had to do was tell the police. Tell them the truth. But it was the charge that worried me. If I hadn't been there, if the little girl had died in that fire, it would have been murder. The charge could still be attempted murder and myself in the witness box, the full glare of publicity, and everybody knowing I had been interrogated by the police. It would be my evidence, my evidence alone, that convicted them. I would be cast in the role of a Judas. And they hadn't meant to harm the little girl. They hadn't known she was there.

All this time I was pacing up and down, the bridge tumbling under my feet, the noise of the storm beating at my ears, the elements in tune with my mood – everything in chaos, the world, my life, everything. Was this a sort of crossroads in the long journey from womb to grave? If only there were somebody I could turn to, somebody to lean on, to give me strength, to tell me what the hell to do.

I was thinking of Fiona then, wishing to God that just something in my life had turned out right. And then a rogue wave came out of the night, hitting us on the quarter, water roaring along the port side, and as the ship fell off the top of it with a slam that hurled me against the man at the wheel I heard him cursing under his breath. Our eyes met and his big mouth opened in a grin: 'Them lads ashore ... all tooocked oop in bed with their womenfolk. Makes me laff on a night like this.'

'Why?'

"Cos they doan't know when they're well off, always itching for something. Me, I joost want what they've got –

raight now I'd settle for the missis, all warm and cosy laike, a naice soft bed that didn't move unless I made it.' He grinned, winking an eye, the longing of weeks at sea on his face.

My watch ended and I went to my bunk, lying in the dark, thinking wearily. I was an idealist, and idealists get cut down to size when ideals are transposed into politics. Maybe I wasn't tough enough. When it came to the crunch ... Was I a coward then, my ideals shattered by a petrol bomb? But the doubts had started long before that. When was it? At that Clydeside meeting when a small group of militants screamed 'Fascist!' at me because I had tried to spell out for them what would happen? I had dried up and handed the mike over to a man, who talked their language, not the logic of falling orders and redundancies. Was that when the doubts had started? I couldn't be sure. It was such an accumulation of things.

It was just on ten when I went back on to the bridge, daylight now, a grey world, cloud and sea all one in colour and the whitecaps rolling in from dead astern. I glanced at the gyro and then at the skipper. 'You've altered course.'

'Aye.'

'Aberdeen?'

He nodded, his eyes on a small freighter headed for Norway and making heavy weather of it as she butted the tail end of the storm.

'Did you talk to Watt?'

He didn't answer me and after a moment I ducked out of the bridge to the door of the radio room. The fug in that little cubbyhole was overpowering, the air thick with smoke. Sparks was thumbing the key, tapping out a message in his shirt sleeves, a cigarette burning beside him in a rusty tobacco tin full of stubs. I waited, sweating there, until he had finished. 'Any news for me?' I asked.

He picked up his cigarette, turning in his chair and looking at me, his dark eyes large behind the steel-rimmed

glasses. 'You know we're headed for Aberdeen?' Morse crackled from the loudspeaker and he reached out tobacco-stained fingers for his message pad, listening with his pencil poised. Then he relaxed. 'That rig again. So much traffic for *Redco 2* I've hardly been able to send at all, and the old man desperate to jump the queue and get us slipped.'

'He hasn't notified the Aberdeen police?'

'Not his job to do that. The office knows, of course, so maybe they have.' He leaned back, his eyes fixed on me, but half his mind on the Morse. 'They're waiting to haul anchors so I suppose they got no joy on the Bressay Bank. Les is fit again, by the way.' And he added, 'Sorry about that. The old man'll be sorry, too, in a way. Les isn't the best mate in the fleet. What'll you do when we get in?'

I hesitated, wondering whether the police would be waiting for me at Aberdeen. 'Go on the club again, I suppose.' One trip in six months. I was hating myself for being so dependent on trawler owners for employment, conscious of a deep-seated urge to start something on my own.

'Why don't you switch to oil - supply ships, something like that? That's where the future is. Trawling ...' He shrugged his shoulders. 'Doesn't matter to me. I go where Marconi send me. But a man like you, with a master's certificate, you want to go where the future is.' He jerked his head at the sound of the Morse. 'He's talking to the tug owners now, a big German job steaming north from Heligoland. The forecast's good, so they'll be under tow tomorrow night. Every trip it's the same; down past Brent and Auk, all this area of the North Sea, nothing but rig talk - *Bluewater, Staflo, North Star, Glomar*. Take my advice - I listen and I know. There'll be more rig supply ships than trawlers soon.'

'Maybe.' I stood there for a moment listening to the crackle of the Morse. Clydebank, Newcastle, Hull, all the

political involvement of my life ... My mind switched to Shetland, to the islands now far down below the horizon. Was it the island blood in my veins that had made me abandon capitalist America as a kid? Was that why I had started on my wanderings, seeking the values I could not find in the rich world my mother had embraced? Or was it the legendary figure of my father? Had I built him up as a hero in my mind simply because she had tried to bury him? I didn't know. My mind was confused. All I knew for certain was that everything I had done, everything I had believed in, had suddenly turned sour.

And then Sparks murmured, 'The offshore capital of the world.' He coughed over his cigarette. 'Aberdeen - you know it?'

I shook my head. 'Never been there.'

He smiled. 'Well, that's what they call it.' The Morse ceased and he glanced at the clock, his fingers reaching for the dials, tuning to the emergency waveband. 'Take a walk round the harbour when you get there. Have a look at the pipe storage depots, the diving outfits, all the clutter of stuff the oil rigs need. You'll get the message then all right. Aberdeen's no longer a fish port. It's an oil rig supply base, and if I were in your shoes ...' He stopped then, his body suddenly tense as a ghostly voice, calling in clear, began repeating the single word - 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday ...' The voice was urgent, giving details now ... It was a trawler with its engines out of order being swept on to a rock-bound coast in heavy seas.

'Shetland.' Sparks was scribbling it down on his pad, and as the voice began to repeat the vessel's position, he glanced up at a large-scale map. 'Looks like he'll drive ashore on Whalsay Island.' He ripped the sheet off his pad and got to his feet. 'Nothing we can do about it, but the old man better know.' And he hurried past me through into the bridge.

The name of the trawler was the *Duchess of Norfolk*. We looked her up out of curiosity. She was just under 200 tons, built at Lowestoft in 1939 and owned now by G. Petersen of Hamnavoe, Shetland. New engines 1968, Paxman diesels, so what had gone wrong? All the Chief said was, 'Bloody Shetlanders, they wouldn't know a crankshaft from a camshaft.' He didn't like the Shetlanders, having been stuck there once with gales and a leaking ship.

The *Duchess of Norfolk* was in fact south of Whalsay and, with the wind backed into the north-east, she drove towards South Nesting. We caught snatches of radio talk, very faint, as the trawler *Ranger* steamed to her assistance. It gave me something to occupy my mind, following her progress on the Shetland Isles chart No. 3059. She cleared Muckle Fladdicap, a bare three cables to the eastward, drifted inside Muckla Billan and Litla Billan, missed the rock islet of Climnie by a shift of the tide and hit Fiska Skerry at 13.46. By then the trawler *Ranger* was almost up with her and inside of half an hour had a line aboard. That was the last I heard of her, for we were already in sight of Aberdeen's North Pier, with the city showing grey through the murk above the pale line of the Links, and I was busy getting ready to dock.

The skipper took us in, heading straight for Albert Basin, where the trawlers lay. As we approached Point Law, a survey vessel sweeping past us and a tug manoeuvring across our bows, the harbour area began to open up. Sparks appeared at my elbow. 'See what I mean?' He nodded towards a cluster of tanks to starboard with supply ships moored alongside. 'Mud silos,' he said. The area beyond was being developed, the sound of reconstruction work coming to us across the water. 'That's the future you're looking at.'

It was an extraordinary sight, the whole harbour area crowded with ships, drilling ships, survey vessels, seismic ships, tugs and ancillary craft all jam-packed among the

fishing vessels. And, up-river from Torry Harbour, a litter of pipes and buoys, equipment of all sorts, lay piled on the quay, more mud silos and a new berth nearly completed. As we moved slowly into Albert Basin we passed very close to Point Law and the supply ship bunkering there. It was the first time I had been really close to one of these flat-bottomed, tug-like vessels that keep the rigs drilling.

‘I only know trawlers,’ I said. Moored there, the ship looked very sleek, very efficient, but I had seen one once heading out to the Brent in a strong westerly gale, seas breaking over the flat, open after-deck. ‘I’d rather have the *Fisher Maid* up around Bear Island than one of those in a North Sea gale.’

He shrugged, his eyes smiling behind his glasses. ‘All I’m saying is, if you got in on the act, you wouldn’t be short of a ship for years, not the way new rigs are coming into service.’

A trawler passed us very close, another just ahead of us, as we nosed our way down the length of Albert Quay, searching for a berth. I could see the fish market now, and then a gap opened up and the skipper said quietly, ‘Looks a laikely hole. Reckon there’s just room for us.’ He ordered port wheel, our bows swinging, and I took the loudhailer out on to the wing of the bridge.

We were tied up by 14.00, the lumpers offloading the catch. Since Aberdeen was not our home port, there was no pay, only subs from the local agent to see the boys home. They had a long rail journey ahead of them and most of them were away by the time the first pound boards were being replaced and the emptied compartments hosed down. The skipper called me to his cabin. He was packing his bag. ‘You in a hurry to get back?’ He knew I was the only officer who hadn’t got a wife waiting for him in Hull.

I shook my head.

He was standing holding a shirt and a bundle of dirty socks in his hand, a slug of whisky on the locker behind

him. 'Ah thought not.' The bulging eyeballs stared at me. 'Take it then you won't object to staying the night aboard. We've no ship's husband here, you see, and Les doesn't arrive till tomorrow.' He waited a moment and then nodded. 'Good. That's settled then. Better use my cabin so's you can keep an eye on things laike.'

The lumpers packed it in shortly before 19.00 and then I had the ship to myself. I sat on the bridge smoking a pipe and watching the lights come on as dusk descended over the city and the high land behind it. A stillness had settled on the Basin, the quay deserted except for the occasional figure moving along the shadowed wall of the sheds. A siren blared briefly and a trawler up near the entrance started backing out. I watched her as she headed for the open sea, thinking of the mate preparing his gear and the ice ahead and the skipper wondering where the hell he'd get a catch that would satisfy his gaffers.

After that the port seemed dead, nothing stirring. Night had closed down on Aberdeen. I tapped out my pipe and went to the galley to collect a plateful of shepherd's pie and veg the cook had left for me. The galley stove was still warm and I put a kettle on for coffee. With the coffee I had a glass of brandy from the officers' ex-bond locker. A cat had come aboard and as I drank I watched it stalk its prey in the shadows cast by the deck lights.

To be suddenly alone on a ship gives one an odd feeling of isolation. All during the voyage the *Fisher Maid* had been alive with men, an organized unit of activity, her hull vibrating to the pulse of her engines, resounding to the noise of the sea. Now it was deserted, a hollow shell, inactive, still and strangely quiet. I had time to think now, but somehow I seemed unable to concentrate. I was tired, of course, but I think it was the stillness and the quiet that prevented my mind from focusing clearly. I finished my drink, went down to my cabin and packed my gear, shifting

it to the skipper's cabin in the bridge housing. Then I turned in.

I was in my pyjamas, having a last smoke, when I heard footsteps crossing the gangway, the murmur of voices. I went through into the bridge and out on to the wing. Two figures stood talking on the deck below. 'Looking for somebody?'

They turned at the sound of my voice, their faces pale in shadow, something slightly menacing as they stared up at me. Then one of them moved, coming out of the shadows to the foot of the ladder. 'Heard you were still aboard. We'd like a word with you.' He started up the ladder, a short, burly figure, his round, pugnacious face framed in dark sideburns, eyes deep-set and a full-lipped mouth. 'Remember me?'

I nodded, the sight of him taking me back to that angry meeting in Hull. He was a Newark man and nothing to do with the shipyards. His name was Bob Scunton and he had confronted me when I was still trying to address the meeting, prodding me in the stomach and telling me to belt up and stop talking a load of statistical rubbish the lads didn't want to know. The other man I had never seen before. 'All right,' I said. 'You can come up.' And I led them into the bridge. There was only one seat, so we stood facing each other, and I didn't like it. I had the feeling of being cornered. 'Well, what is it?'

'Last month, the night of the shipyard workers' meeting.' Scunton's voice was slow and deliberate, his eyes watching me. 'You got a little girl out of a burning house and handed her over to the neighbours. Didn't give your name. Just handed her over and slipped away. Right?'

I didn't say anything, standing there, waiting, conscious of the other man with a slight cast in the left eye that made his gaze oddly disconcerting.

'Thought no doubt you wouldn't be recognized.'

My mouth felt dry, all my fears now suddenly realized. I knew Scunton, knew his reputation. These were men who operated in the shadows, manoeuvring and motivating others, controlling events. They weren't union men. They weren't members of any political party. But they were always there, in the background, whenever there was trouble. 'Come to the point,' I said.

'All right, I will.' He licked his lips, his eyes darting round the bridge. 'What about a drink while we're discussing it?'

'It's been a hard trip,' I told him. 'I'm tired.'

'So are we,' he growled. 'Soon as we heard you weren't putting into Hull we came north.' He thrust his head forward. 'You haven't talked to the police yet, have you?'

'No.'

He nodded. 'Okay, but when you do, what are you going to tell them? That's what we want to know.'

'It's no business of yours.' But I knew it was. I could see it in the way the two of them glanced at each other, and suddenly all the turmoil and the doubts exploded in anger. 'You bastards put them up to it, is that it? Is that what you're scared of - that I'll identify them and they'll involve you?'

Scunton moved towards me. 'You shop them and we'll -'

But the other man interrupted him. 'I'll handle this, Bob.' His voice was quiet, a hard, flat voice. 'You were recognized. One of the neighbours, a man. The police will expect a statement.' He paused, the disconcerting gaze sliding past me. Then suddenly he asked, 'What were you doing standing there in the rain outside No. 5 Washbrook Road?'

I hesitated, unwilling to explain myself to men I knew would never understand. 'You weren't at the meeting that night.'

'No.'

'There was a mood of violence,' I said. 'A lot of threats were made, mainly directed at Pierson & Watt and the yard

foreman –'

'We believe in solidarity,' Scunton growled in that thick voice of his. 'Pierson & Watt were the one yard –'

'You believe in violence,' I told him.

'All right. Maybe we do, when it's necessary.'

I turned back to face the other man. 'If I hadn't been there, Bucknall and that fellow Claxby might well be facing a murder charge.'

'So you know who it was,' Scunton cut in.

'Yes,' I said. 'I know who they were.' And suddenly I didn't care. 'If you want to throw petrol bombs, why the hell don't you have the guts to do it yourselves? And to risk innocent lives – a little girl ...'

'You threw it.' His voice was so quiet it stopped me like a bucket of ice-cold water. 'That's what we came to tell you.'

Staring at him, seeing the hard, bitter line of his mouth, the cold grey eyes glinting in the gleam of the deck lights, I felt suddenly scared of him. 'Who are you?' I asked him.

He gave a little shrug, a shut look on his face. 'We have a witness.' He pulled a packet of cigarettes from his pocket and offered me one, and when I pushed it away, he said, 'You were alone, nobody to corroborate your evidence.' He took out a cigarette and lit it, the movement of his hands deliberate. He was giving me time to take it in. 'So it will be your word against his, and the man who will say you threw the petrol bomb is a local man. He'll make a good witness.'

'Get out!' My hands were clenched, the words coming through my teeth.

He didn't move, drawing in a lungful of smoke and staring at me. 'Bucknall doesn't matter. But Claxby is too useful a man to be thrown away.'

'Get out of here!'

'You could be useful, too.' He said it reflectively, as though considering the matter. Then he shrugged. 'But at the moment we're concerned with the East Coast yards.'

We've failed with the trawlermen. The fisheries officer of their union won't play. But if we can hold the strike long enough, then there'll be very little fish coming in anyway. That will give the unions the leverage they need in their negotiations. A trial, with two militants in dock, wouldn't suit us at all.' He paused, and then added, 'We were able to have a word with your radio operator before coming here. In a pub. You're out of a job again, it seems.' And when I didn't say anything, he smiled. 'He told us he thought you ought to be commanding a supply ship. That's where the future lies, isn't it?'

He was looking at me again and the expression of his eyes had a speculative quality. 'Get into oil,' he said quietly. 'And forget about what you saw in Washbrook Road.' He stubbed out his cigarette, then turned abruptly towards the door, jerking his head at Scunton. 'Think about it,' he said over his shoulder. 'All you need tell the police is that it was too dark to see who they were.'

'And if I tell them the truth?'

He swung round on me. 'Then you'd be a fool.' And he added, 'You keep your mouth shut and I'll see our witness does the same. You understand?' He stared at me a moment. Then he nodded and went out, Scunton following, their footsteps sounding hollow as they went down the ladder and across the deck to the gangway. And after that I was alone again, still in my pyjamas and feeling cold.

I got myself a drink, my hands trembling, wishing, as I had done so often in my life, that I had somebody to fall back on, not just the legendary figure of my father, but somebody, something, to give me strength. And suddenly I was thinking of the islands seen the previous evening black against that green strip of sky. Shetland, the land where my father had been born. I had never been so close to Shetland before, and sitting there, the brandy warming my guts, it gradually came to me that now was the moment. I would go north to the islands - now while I had the chance.

2

My first sight of Shetland was a lighthouse sliding by the window and green lawn slopes falling from rock outcrops, everything fresh and clean, touched with the luminosity of evening light. The Highlander landed and I saw the remains of old wartime buildings as we taxied in to park beside a large British Airways helicopter. There was a light drizzle falling, and as I stood waiting on the apron for my baggage, the smell of the grass and the sea all about me, I had a deep sense of peace, something I hadn't felt for a long time.

Most of my fellow passengers were oil men returning to the Redco rig. For ten minutes or so they filled the little prefab terminal with colour and the babble of their accents; then they trooped out to the waiting chopper and in a buzz-saw whirr of engines and blades they were lifted up and whirled away. Suddenly everything was very quiet, only the rattle of crockery as a woman went round the tables collecting empty cups, the murmur of voices from the BA desk where the despatch clerk was talking to the crew of the Highlander. There was an Ordnance Survey map on the wall. I got myself another cup of coffee and stood looking at it, refreshing my memory based on the Shetland charts I had pored over on the bridge of *Fisher Maid*.

Sumburgh Head is the southernmost point of the whole island chain, the tip of a long finger of mountainous land jutting south from the main port of Lerwick. The distance by road looked about 30 miles. A voice at my side said, 'Can I help you?' He was a small man in blue dungarees, dark-haired with bright blue eyes and a ruddy face.