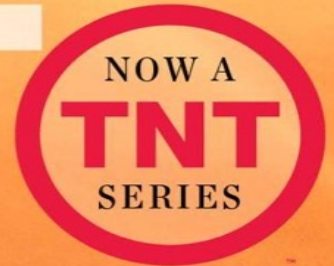


THE

A NOVEL



LAST



SHIP

WILLIAM

BRINKLEY

WILLIAM BRINKLEY (1917–1993) was a commissioned officer in the U.S. Navy during World War II before becoming a reporter and bestselling novelist.

Praise for *The Last Ship*

“A combination of *On the Beach*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, and a Bible in which the doom of Revelation precedes the promise of Genesis.”

—Harry Levins, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“With a spare, introspective monologue and a minimum of showy devices, *The Last Ship* achieves a gentle sort of horror climaxed in one of the most hair-raising scenes in any novel: the voyage up the Thames into the shrouded poison of bombed London.”

—Chuck Moss, *Los Angeles Daily News*

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—Frank DeMarco, *The Virginian-Pilot and the Ledger-Star*

The Last Ship

A NOVEL BY

WILLIAM BRINKLEY



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Version_1

**FOR GORDON KINGSLEY
“A FRIEND MAY WELL BE RECKONED THE
MASTERPIECE OF NATURE.”**

—EMERSON

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PROLOGUE

The Sword of the Fleet

In bravura beauty, no ship has ever come off a Navy ways to be compared with the destroyer and she was a fine example of a noble breed. Rakish and swift in the seas: 466 feet overall, beam of fifty-nine feet, draft of twenty-seven, of 8,200 tons displacement with full load, rated speed of 38 knots, nothing existing in any navy of the world that could overtake her on long waters. But most of all her worth was measured in what could not be seen, by what she carried in magazines deep within: She came armed with Tomahawk. She was named the *Nathan James* after a young ensign who had received the Navy Cross for valor in the Second Battle of the Philippine Sea in World War II.

A word about Tomahawk. It was fundamentally different from the big fat intercontinental ballistic missile. Powered by a small air-breathing engine rather than by huge rockets that lifted ICBM's above the atmosphere, Tomahawk "cruised" aerodynamically: a pilotless torpedo-shaped airplane, ingeniously preprogrammed to do all its own work, and of wondrous virtuosity; altogether, perhaps the smartest weapon yet contrived by the heartfelt genius of man. All we did was launch it. A "fire and forget" weapon, it totally guided itself from the moment it left the ship until the moment it found target. Initially it climbed and cruised at around 10,000 feet to conserve its fuel. As it made landfall, activated its TERCOM (terrain contour matching) attribute, comparing the ground over which it flew with a map stored in its computerized brain, periodically correcting course. Because it was so small and flew so low, hugging the earth, often at treetop level, its own radar return one one-thousandth that of a B-52 bomber, equipped now also with both stealth technology and ECM (electronic countermeasures) to confuse or jam enemy radars, it was virtually impossible to detect, track or intercept. And finally its accuracy defied imagination, an order of magnitude more so than ballistic trajectories. Having flown a couple thousand miles or more, from a ship standing far at sea, it could have guided itself through a selected window in the Kremlin.

Its history had been a curiously sly one. It was with the Tomahawk cruise missile, sometimes it seemed with scarcely anyone noticing the fact, that matters began to get beyond all hope of control. It was almost as if it grew and flourished while people were looking the other way, attention focused on the more glamorous showcase ICBM, due to its enormous size, its silo fixed-residence, and its far smaller, treaty-restricted numbers quite easily verifiable; while all the time, in the back shop, these little things, free of any limitations whatever, were being turned out like sausages, by the thousands. Length twenty-one feet, diameter one foot nine inches, weight 3,200 pounds, wing span eight feet; by comparison with the ICBM, dirt cheap to manufacture (\$1.5 million per missile). Until then a crucial premise had been that each side could employ satellites to count nuclear weapons the other deployed

But here now was a device entirely beyond any such reins. One woke up one morning and realized that a weapon had come into being and was proliferating wildly which was literally immune to restraint. By now cozily in place inside hundreds of movable ships, it had become impossible to count, much less to verify, by any system, any more than you could verify the number of chaff launchers, torpedoes, five-inch rounds—or, for that matter, loaves of bread—in the fleet; no way even to determine which Tomahawks were conventionally armed, as many were, which enclosed nuclear warheads, or which of the two a particular ship was carrying: Nothing told them apart. Counting—hence control—was now forever out of reach.

The astonishing thing was how little appreciation existed for what all this meant; for what Tomahawk could do. As if it had not penetrated human understanding that each of them could transport a 200-kiloton nuclear warhead and that ships carried them by the score; the circumstance scarcely realized that Tomahawk embodied a revolution not just in seapower but in warfare itself, to the extent one could fairly state that it made little difference any longer what happened to land weapons, whether they were banned or not. It is a hard thing to say but the fact was this: All of the talk concerning the restriction or elimination of land-based missiles constituted a historic charade, terrible in its meaning, its illusion. If the last one of these had been removed by such negotiations, nothing would have changed. It was almost as though people were being lulled into forgetting that there existed something called the sea: and that there are many seas, indeed that they occupy seven-tenths the planet, and that there is no spot of land on it that cannot be reached by an object launched from some sea by a ship. People either did not know or could not grasp the fact that a single ship, such as ours, could fairly well exterminate a continent. And there were many ships.

The Navy's consciousness of these matters had certainly penetrated, doctrinal writings soon quit accurately enshrining Tomahawk as "the sword of the fleet." We were fitted with two sixty-one-cell Mk 41 VLS's (Vertical Launch Systems) each including at the time of these events twenty-eight TLAM-N (Tomahawk Land Attack Missile-Nuclear) missiles for a total of fifty-six; each of these incarnating the 200-kiloton warhead for an aggregate of 11,200 kilotons. Employing the fission bomb dropped on the city of Hiroshima—yield 12½ kilotons—as a benchmark to determine our strike capability, the *Nathan James* constituted an 896-H ship. Put another way, we could inflict that number of Hiroshimas. Perhaps no one could be expected, in the sense of truly received knowledge, to comprehend this fact. The human mind seems curiously designed to contain the ability to invent such weaponry while in any effective manner lacking that to take in the reality of the force thus created. I, the captain of this ship, scarcely comprehended it myself.

I have often felt that the captain of a Navy ship is the last absolute monarch left on earth, as close to possessing the divine rights of kings as remains. A man-of-war is an autocracy to a degree scarcely explicable to those who dwell out their lives confined within the littorals of the world. Little has changed in this respect since John Paul Jones, under date of 14 September 1775, wrote the Naval Committee of Congress:

A navy is essentially and necessarily aristocratic. True as may be the political principles for which we are now contending they can never be practically applied or even admitted on board ship, out of port, or off soundings. This may seem a hardship, but it is nevertheless the simplest of truths. Whilst the ships sent forth by the Congress may and must fight for the principles of human rights and republican freedom, the ships themselves must be ruled and commanded at sea under a system of absolute despotism.

A letter, indeed, reasserted in all editions of *Naval Leadership*, the present-day bible in the education and making of officers of the United States Navy. On a vessel carrying nuclear missiles these elements of prepotency and authority reach levels suggestive of the limitless. No Caesar, no Alexander or Napoleon, ever had a fraction of the power of a single such ship's commander. The power to launch missiles on their own initiative was given solely to ship's captains, both of surface vessels and of submarines, who were freed of the elaborate system of safeguards—including electronic locks and fail-safe Go-Codes from the President—that presided over the launching of land based missiles. The “fail-deadly” firing mechanism for ships operated in precisely the opposite manner; this remarkable autonomy considered necessary to insure retaliation after an enemy first strike in the event messages could not get through from National Command Authorities.

The Navy was by no means unaware of this circumstance. It did all, it seems to me, that it could do about it. Before being chosen for command, a captain of such a ship was put through a prolonged and cunning series of tests, not a few brutalizing in character, far beyond in their thoroughness those traditionally rigorous ones given prior to the same assignment to the identical ship conventionally armed, involving, I suppose, every means of prediction as to behavior of a given human being known to modern psychological and psychiatric science. All of it cloaked in every secrecy. Even the existence of the tests and their nature were matters of top-secret classification, even their location (the center happened to be situated in one of those not infrequent naval oddities, landlocked Kansas). It was a procedure of weeks, carried out by teams of ingenious and merciless examiners; examiners not there to determine one's qualifications for sea command—the Navy had already done that—but something quite different and infinitely more difficult of ascertainment.

I can remember feeling a sense of total mental and moral nakedness that I have not experienced before or since, a period associated in my memory with an unalloyed torment, a devastation of the spirit, which I do not enjoy recalling even today, the examiners at times appearing to me as medieval demons whose purpose was to break me. Yet the crucible, in my view, was entirely necessary: an attempt to determine the possession in a single human being of two qualities on the face of it so utterly opposite in nature as to be on the order of demanding of a man that he be both an atheist and believe absolutely in the existence of a Divine being. In this case, involving the extermination of a million souls, that he would (1) not conceivably of his own volition, having become momentarily crazed, send off the missile that would accomplish that deed and (2) not for a moment hesitate to do so if thus ordered. So far as one could tell a number of such creatures were found—myself among them; though no way ever of testing the matter to a certainty beforehand. The failure rate was high. I have had close friends, actual classmates of mine, men I knew with great intimacy from Annapolis days, who appeared to me the soul of dependability and calm, who were turned down for command of a nuclear-armed ship, no reason of course ever being given, who would have been considered eminently qualified for the captaincy of a vessel not so armed, as evidenced by the fact that they were normally then given such commands. At the end of it I can remember scarcely caring whether I was one of the chosen or not: and yet came that leap of pure joy in me when such became the case. The truth was, I wanted it dearly. Why is a mystery even to myself.

* * *

There follows the story of my ship, the *Nathan James*, DDG (guided missile destroyer) 80. I sometimes have wondered, as perhaps did every soul of the 282 men and twenty-three officers in ship's company, as to the extent to which what happened was affected by the fact that thirty-two of these—six officers, twenty-six enlisted—were women. What the difference might have been had they

not been present and aboard.

BOOK I

THE ISLAND

1

Land

The island lay alone in the sea, moored in tranquil waters of turquoise, embraced in a radiant stillness, trees rising from it beyond the sienna beaches, and no sign whatever of life.

“Right standard rudder,” I said.

“Right standard rudder, aye, sir,” the helmsman repeated.

I could feel the ship swerve under me, elegantly responsive. “Steady on course two two five.”

“Steady on course two two five, aye, sir . . . Checking two two eight magnetic.”

The words needed little more than whispers in the undivided quiescence that reigned everywhere.

I stepped out on the starboard bridge wing, the ship brought now line abreast to the land. Not a breath of wind stirred the morning. The last stars paled in the sky, the silent waters stretched away in a vast mirror, glittering in the oncoming sunlight, bringing with it the softened sky of low latitudes, sea and sky so deliquescing into one that I would have had difficulty taking a sextant bearing, making a horizon. I brought my binoculars up and slowly glassed the one object that broke the endless blue. It stood flat on a bearing N.E. to S.W., then rose sharply to a curious, shelflike protuberance before falling off again to the sea. The island was perhaps a dozen miles in length. The far side of the island was shrouded in low flocculent clouds, opaque cumulus, so that I could not make its breadth. I brought the binoculars down, returned to the pilot house, looked at the Fathometer, and gave the command to the lee helm.

“All engines stop.”

“All engines stop, aye, sir.” I heard the clank of the engine-order telegraph, then a slight shudder through the ship. Then she lay still in the water.

“You may resume the conn, Mr. Thurlow,” I said to my navigator. “Let go the anchor.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

I stepped back to the wing and looked over into the blue-green water, luminescent with sunlight. Then the anchor hit it in an explosion of turbulence. I could hear the long-drawn rumbling of the chain through the hawsepipe as the great cast-iron thing descended. Presently the ship gave another shudder then settled, as the anchor payed out. I stepped back into the pilot house.

“Ship anchored, sir,” Thurlow reported. “Seventy fathoms on deck.”

“Mr. Woodward,” I said to the JOOD. “Take the conn. Mr. Thurlow. Will you please prepare a

landing party. Yourself. Chief Delaney. Silva, Preston. Eight hands, marksmen. And myself. Number Two boat—Meyer, Barker. Bring a shovel. An ax. We've got a couple of machetes?"

"Aye, sir. A couple."

"Officers to carry side arms. All others to sling carbines. Except Delaney and Travis."

"When will we be shoving off, Captain?"

"Immediately. Look alive, Mr. Thurlow."

"Yes, *sir*."

He disappeared with a quickstep out the pilot house. I glanced once more at the island; from the ocean rising, it looked like an emerald of unimagined beauty, worn as an adornment by the sea simply to relieve its vastness, its impossible loneliness. I went below to my cabin and strapped on the web belt and the service .45 and joined the others at the accommodation ladder. On the hushed water the boat bobbed hardly at all below us. The men descended. Then the chief. Then Thurlow. Then myself. We came over the mile of lagoon, the boat's engine sounding shamelessly loud in the great stillness, and slid gently onto the sand. We debarked in reverse order, myself first. The Navy: officers last into the boat, first out, and by order of rank. We stood on the sand, feeling the immense strangeness of earth under our feet, saying not a word, regarding the island with the careful, suspicious appraisal one gives a stranger, credentials unknown, with whom one is required to have dealings. I looked at my watch. 0745.

"Mr. Thurlow. Single-file, couple paces apart. Steady as you go, men. Look about. Chief. Come along with me, if you will."

Chief Gunner's Mate Amos Delaney had grown up on a Missouri farm and had known farming as a first love, the sea as a second. I think perhaps he loved both farm and sea in equal measure, as a man might reasonably love two women, differing in aspect rather than degree, both of high charms. He played the fiddle, quite well, and on good evenings, with the ship running a gentle sea, the men liked to gather round him on the fantail and listen to the old songs. If the sea was calm enough I could hear the music faintly from the bridge, and sometimes the low lilt of sailor voices drifting out over the water, telling of hills and loves far away.

With Thurlow and Delaney alongside or directly behind me at the lead, we entered into the island and commenced our reconnoitering. Its denseness closed quickly around us as we moved through an abrupt chillness of air, not unpleasant, thickets, shrub, and the high clashing branches of trees blotting out the day, so that soon looking back, the men in their dungarees, I could see only the sailor's white hats strung out behind me through the foliage. Then a little farther on the curtain parted, the sunlight came leaping through the spiring trees in long dazzling white shafts, mote-sparkling, then sweet clearings, green grown as lawns, appeared, oases for a look at the cerulean island sky before plunging back into the forested caverns. In there seemed eerie, a mystery of hush; one wondered if man had ever before disturbed these dark silences. A seaman forgets: The myriad odors of the land sprang at us with a keen awareness after the long uniform smell of the sea. And in riotous flourishings the multicolors after the sea's single one. Everywhere, in tree and shrub, in jubilant fertility, flared the discrete greens, a queen's offering of shades, from yellowy lime to deepest tourmaline, and often the fragrance of strange flowers in lavish presentations, cerise, indigo, a royal lavender. It brought a soaring of my spirit to see the manner in which the men, in their state of debilitation not just physical but mental and emotional, too, were so marvelously lifted by all of this, by these sights, the smells, the sounds: that quick leap inside like an extra heartbeat when we saw the first bee, nuzzling into some bud, intent on its ancient business of pollination as if it were the most important work on earth. "Isn't that a pretty sight, Captain?" Delaney said as we paused and watched it almost reverentially.

Exploring as we went, feeling our way with due tenderness, I was leading us to the island's southmost end, our clear objective that shelllike eminence I had observed from the ship's bridge, for if the island had what we were looking for it would in every likelihood have it there; or have it not at all. From within our darksome cover, we could hear just ahead a curious tinkling sound, not unlike wind chimes where no wind blew. We shouldered our way against the growth and broke through it onto a ravine that curled around the base of a hill.

A creek gleaming in the patches of shadow and light, the broken sunshine slanting through the trees that climbed the hillside, rippled through the ravine, clean and clear and washing over shining white and tan pebbles. I looked back and saw the men still single-filed. I motioned them up and we bunched around the creek and stood regarding it and listening to its gurgling sound as a kind of marvel. I kneeled, bent, and sipped. Then so did Delaney, then the men fell upon it, all of us lapping the water with eager avarice.

"That is fine water," I said, straightening up. After living for so long on the ship's evaporator water, whose taste was that of a yet-to-be-discovered species of metal, it was nectar and achingly cold.

"As good as anything in the Ozarks," Delaney said. This was the gunner's mate's metaphor for all heavenly things. "There have to be springs up there, Captain."

We curved around the creek and started up, the sailors with their carbines slung loosely over their shoulders, through the stands of trees that held to the gently rising hillside, the shimmering bolts of sunlight penetrating the branches and seeming to draw us upward. Here and there we stopped at a tree and examined it. I called up Noisy Travis, the shipfitter and a first-rate carpenter. He was a tall, angular Maine man and so taciturn as to earn that nickname from the crew. But he communicated eloquently with wood. Delaney had spoken of the usefulness of stakes. And wood of a certain strength could have other employments.

With his ax Travis skillfully cut into the bark of a couple of the trees to reveal the white wood beneath and then cut into that. Into one the blade went much more deeply.

"Well, Noisy?" I said at last. He never volunteered information. You always had to ask.

"A kind of ash," he said of the harder one. "Like. Couldn't say the name. But it's working wood."

"I wonder if you could make a wheelbarrow out of that wood," I said.

Travis gave the wood a somber, thoughtful look. "Aye, sir. Make about anything out of that wood, Cap'n," he said.

We moved on, climbing slowly, inspecting various growths. Suddenly there appeared a large bush on which a small scarlet fruit hung in many clusters, at one of which a yellow-and-sapphire bird one could have enclosed in a hand hovered like a toy helicopter, wings flapping vigorously to keep him in place, long tail employed ingeniously as a rudder, while he pecked away at the fruit. We watched in rapt fascination, feeling the wonder and comic aspect of the sight. He seemed concerned not at all by our approach but continued pecking, independent as you please, as if he were not about to allow these vulgar and impolite newcomers to interfere with getting his fill. Having done so, he regarded us dismissively with his outsized orangeish eyes, emitted a burst of high-soprano song, and took his leave, sweeping swiftly upward through the trees. He had told us that the fruit was safe, and Delaney plucked one off and popped it in his mouth.

"Wild plum," he said. "Something like. We've got them back home. Try one, Captain."

He held it out. It had a lovely fresh tart taste.

"Why aren't you men helping yourselves?" I said.

With that the sailors descended upon the bush, tasting the fruit, then coming back for more until the bush was stripped as naked as if a whole flight of birds had fallen upon it.

“I can’t remember the last time, Captain.” The voice had the depth and resonance of the sea itself. “Something fresh like that.”

It was Preston, boatswain’s mate first, a man of the Old Navy. He was not a man one could simply glance at and ignore. It was not just his size, his armory of biceps, musculature, rock-hardness, and the vast reserves of strength these suggested. There was a certain nobility of bearing in him, a seaman’s bearing—I think it would have been apparent to a stranger, perhaps in his case in a manner he did not understand, that here was a man apart. My feeling of this was of course bound up in the fact of his being the finest pure seaman we had aboard, as pure Navy as a man could be, a thirty-year man, knowing as much about those demanding, sentient structures called ships as it is possible to know. He had a deceptively sanguine face, as a roll call of liberty ports had discovered during my command of the ship. I had sometimes felt that the port itself should be warned that we were coming ashore with Preston, though in reality he was a gentle man unless aroused, and afterward, if at captain’s mast, sincerely contrite that he had been forced by those shore people to use his extraordinary strength to straighten them out on something or other. Under his sailor’s hat his shirt was open, and through the thick blackish hair I could view the full glory of the battle of Trafalgar. A delicately lettered “Sharon” was etched across a small heart in the great fold of a shoulder, and immediately above the nipples the artist had depicted two bluebirds, meant to guarantee that you would never drown: the bluebirds would bear you up. As Preston sometimes pointed out, he had never drowned. The Navy life had been the only one he had ever known, the sea his home as much as it was that of any fish, and only on the land did he have confrontational difficulties with his species, never with his shipmates. It was as though the shore were alien to him and existed largely to provoke him. Partly because of his seaman’s skills and partly because of his strength and his huge magnanimity concerning it—if anything heavy on the ship needed lifting someone would always say, “Get Preston”—I somehow counted on him in a special way in the times ahead. Looking at him now as he went for the fruit, I thought how that great body of his, as with the others, had been so depleted.

“Nothing could taste better, Boats,” I said. “Let’s see what’s up there.”

We pushed upward on a steepening grade, crested the hill, and came to an abrupt halt, as one man without the necessity of a command.

A sunlit plain, high above the sea, stood spread out before us, stretching to the island’s end until halted by the blue, and covered entirely in a long and glistening silky lime-green grass. A good dozen acres of it, I calculated, plain and growth seeming altogether unlike the rest of the undulating, thick-grown island we had just traversed, a pasture of promise and orderliness perched above the jungle wilderness. From off the sea came a faint southeasterly freshening, setting the willowy grass singing in the wind and bearing on it a scent half sea and half the tart fructuousness of earth in growth.

“Well, what do you know,” Delaney said.

We marched gingerly forward into it, the grass rustling around our shoe tops. Then the gunner’s mate stopped, knelt, shoved back his hat, and began to pull away the grass until he had exposed a patch about a foot square. Then he took the shovel and plunged into it, turning over a large bladeful of earth of a chocolate-brown dampness. From it rose an odor pungent and parturient. The gunner’s mate leaned nose to it.

“The smell is the first thing, Captain,” he said. “To tell you what you’ve got. This one’s farmer’s perfume.”

Delaney cupped a handful of earth. I was astonished to see him actually taste it, with the profound concentration of the winegrower sampling a new vintage. Then he let it dribble slowly out of his hand, squishing its texture with his fingers. When it was gone he held his hand straight up, like a man being

sworn, to show how the soil clung to it.

~~“Porous. Moist. And notice how deep that shovel went with hardly no resistance, Captain?”~~

I knew nothing of the land but I had begun to learn. The gunner’s mate looked around the shining expanse of grass, then at me.

“I’d say it would grow most anything. I mean, that grows in this latitude. What was that you were saying about the rains, Mr. Thurlow?”

“Most of the year about twenty minutes a day,” the navigator said. He was an officer almost feverishly committed not just to the stars which guide ships but to geography, seasons, weather, the movement of waters, to all the permutations of the earthly system, a Vesalius of the planet. “By the clock.”

“That explains,” Delaney said. “That and the springs, that creek. And those bees. Nothing is as smart as a bee.”

I could feel the men looking at one another. Sailors are slow to question a ship’s captain but I could sense theirs as clearly as if they had spoken them aloud. Was it to be here? Delaney picked up another handful of earth and let it run through his fingers.

“It’ll grow things, Captain,” he said. “But it’ll take a load of work. The hardest kind of work in the world, I mean.” He paused a beat. “Stoop labor.”

He looked at me rather intently as though, too delicate to put the matter directly, he was wondering whether I comprehended what was meant by those two words.

“I understand, Gunner,” and said it back myself to make clear that that at least I knew: “Stoop labor.”

“Aye, sir. It’ll be the only way here.” And once more like a couplet clap of somber bells: “Stoop labor.”

Gently embracing us on either side was the sound of water, one way the creek on its course through the ravine, the other the murmuring sea. The former sound certified the first indispensable gift we asked of the island. We walked through the grass and came to where the island ended. A gentle cliff, itself like an immense dune, dropped down to clean beaches.

A sound startled us. We turned to see a white burst of birds, cawing and wings flapping, take flight. Some kind of tern. They caught a wind current and headed out, seaward.

“Let’s have a look,” I said.

We climbed along the top of the dunes and found their nests, tucked in astutely under the protecting ridges. Not all the terns had taken wing at our approach. Three remained on guard duty, looking entirely stalwart and competent, fussing furiously, snapping out savagely to stab at us with their respectable beaks and keep us off their nests. So there were creatures approaching birth beneath them. Silva looked at me, eyes point-blank on mine, and then out to where the diminishing white shapes of the hunting terns could be seen flying in tight formation low above the blue.

“There are fish out there, Captain. The question is . . .”

Once Angus Silva had been a trawler fisherman, out of New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was a born sailor, almost literally so, having been in either boats or ships since he was seven. He had the burnished skin and chiseled features of generations of Portuguese ancestors who had known no livelihood save the sea, and curly hair, thick, black as licorice. Into that face his Scotch mother had inserted eyes as blue as the sea beyond soundings and they gave it a curious effect, to me a somewhat saintly one, as though above some altar. Silva would have been rightly startled to hear that. He, too, now would be counted on much beyond his rating of boatswain’s mate second. I spoke to him.

“The question is,” I said, “in what abundance.”

“Aye, sir,” he said soberly.

~~“Tomorrow morning: take a boat out. Very early.”~~ If I knew little of the land, I knew the sea and when fish ran. “We have to be certain, Silva. Very certain. Beyond any chance of mistake. You understand?”

“Aye, sir. I’ll be over them before first light, Captain. If they’re there.”

We stood a few moments more, all of us, unspeaking, with our thoughts. One of these, an alleviation to the unpredictability that was never absent, surely was a kind of quiet exultation at seeing these living things. The hummingbird, the bee, the terns: they bespoke the island, a thing that lived, breathed. Another, certainly for me and doubtless for all, was a somber taking the measure of that willowy grass, which we continued to study like appraisers. We came back from the nests and I stood on the heights looking out into the vastness of the ocean reach. Beside it everything else had always seemed small to me, almost insignificant. I never really felt free ashore and cared little for what went on there. But now it was the shore I had to turn to, the land which offered sustenance, if such were to be found at all, though the sea would have to provide its share. The water stretched, great and silent as a painting, far as the eye took you, as virgin as at the first creation save only for the ship, slightly darker, sitting in regal stillness between pale azures; as though too painted there and seeming but to enhance the infinite loneliness. The destroyer: I had always loved them. I thought how lucky I had been to spend nearly all of my Navy life in them and luckiest of all, or so I felt at the time, finally to be given this one to command. Then I thought of her company and how they had thus far borne up, under trials, under calamity and horrors to test the most valiant of men. A fierce resolve filled me: to shield them from all further harm; to bring them through. Then as I looked at the ship, the pain came as it had so often, a quick, throbbing thing, an overpowering sense of loss, of the men taken from her I had learned to be prepared for it. I waited, confronting it as an old enemy by now, forcing it down, burying it as I had learned to do, knew I must, until its next sure resurrection. I faced back, from sea and ship, and stood looking at the plateau of grass: another thought, one I was not prepared for, struck me like a blow. Had we not lost them, the food which that field might, with immense work and even more immense luck, yield, together with what we had aboard, could not have been enough, whereas with present size of ship’s company we stood a chance. I stood shocked with a sense of shame that such a thought could occur to me.

Vertical sunshine now fell full on our plateau as the sun crossed over and brought a new awareness: the sun nourished; it would yet, on this latitude, add a sure fierceness to the struggle of parturition, of making this meadow yield to us what we wanted from it.

“Men, let’s go back to the ship,” I said.

We came down off the plateau and along the creek, through the trees and brush to the beach, and started along it toward the boat in the distance, sitting intrusively on the naked shoreline. The navigator and I walked a little behind the others, speaking in quiet tones.

“Well, Mr. Thurlow?”

“Favorable climate for it, you’d have to say, sir. Two rainy seasons of about two months apiece. November-December, May-June. Most days in the nonrainy season, just a twenty-minute shower as noted. Usually about thirteen hundred hours. We’ll probably have today’s before we get back.” He looked at his watch. “In fact, almost any moment.”

We stopped and studied the countenance of the island, trying to penetrate it with our minds, to break through its secretive demeanor. I looked north and then across it, where the low ledge of cumulus still preserved unrevealed the far western side. Were there people somewhere in there? I was on the verge of an hallucination. We had become accustomed to, experts in, hallucinations, in

chimeras. I looked back to this side, where each way the land curved to form the U-lagoon. To the south the grassy plateau ended in the long ridge which sat like a sea lookout above the beach.—

“That ridge,” Thurlow said thoughtfully. “Nothing else but just that. Reminds me a touch of the coastline down toward Carmel. The way it sits up there, I mean, rather cockylike, looking down at the sea. Were you ever in Carmel, Captain?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Thurlow. I was in Carmel.”

We went on. Sure enough Thurlow’s rain came up. Just out of nowhere. We stepped off the beach and stood under some trees and waited for it to finish. And sure enough, only about twenty minutes. A clean, straight fall, virtually soundless, gentle as dew. Then the sun was back out, just as though it had never happened. The island had taken a shower to refresh itself.

“Congratulations, Mr. Thurlow.”

He looked at his watch. We started back up the beach. “Actually I was seven minutes off. Highly irregular, what?” Lieutenant Thurlow was a sort of defrocked Rhodes Scholar, with the distinction, he once told me, not without pride, of being the only grantee ever to be sent down from Oxford. For what transgression he never said. At least he had been there long enough to get fluent Russian out of it, a linguistic talent that had served us well beginning with that astonishing arrangement with the Russian submarine at Gibraltar. It was his conceit, and form of humor, at times to speak in mock British tone phrases. It was not a type of wit I would ordinarily have appreciated but in Thurlow even I sometime found it amusing, I never knew why. Maybe it was just Thurlow himself I found amusing, most of the time. He had an undeniable charm: off and on he was by way of being my court jester. No one aboard had been so . . . well, almost blithe about our circumstance; no one seemingly so little changed by it. This acted to give him an edge, an advantage. He was a truly gifted navigator, and, as I have said, knew a great deal concerning the earth’s manifestations other than just stars. Within the limits of his one central interest, he was a sound thinker. If he had a fault, it may have been that when he ventured beyond that interest he sometimes thought too much. He understood things better than people. I had had little choice but to make him executive officer, the ship’s assigned exec having been on emergency leave when we launched in the Barents. Still I would much rather have him than not have him. He had the far-ranging mind, inventive, out there on the frontiers. Qualities we would need, need now and later.

“No problem about showers,” he was saying. “All hands can just strip and stand outside for twenty minutes.”

“I don’t think we can keep looking.” I stopped and picked up a handful of beach. It was uncommonly fine sand, in texture and tint like a woman’s face powder. I looked up to where, considerably down-beach from us now, high above the sea, stood the tableland of the silky grass. “Delaney seemed pretty sure it would give us, stand a good chance of giving us, what we need. Not easily. But nothing will be. Replenishment of stores.” Food, we both understood. For some reason, perhaps because it was the final barrier, one tried not to say the word. “We’re getting too close.” Nor did I mention fuel.

I spoke without looking at him.

“That rainy-season pattern. Planting times in that kind of situation?”

Ignorant as I was of such matters, I imagined I knew that one, just by common sense, but Thurlow would know more.

“Right after the close of one rainy season. The drill is: get them in and out before the next one arrives.”

“Do I understand you correctly? Another such calendar arrangement would not come again for

five months?"

~~"That seems so if these calculations are accurate. And they have to be. My opinion, sir."~~

There would be hard work, brutal as work could be, in that sun, of a kind most of the men had never been near, knew nothing whatever of. Stoop labor. The phrase was not hard enough to convey the ferocity of it, especially in these latitudes. The men to endure it. Then the land up there to come through, that dozen acres to harbor a fecundity we in truth could only guess at. The contents of Delaney's shipboard greenhouse to take to their new home. The necessary luck, the gunner's mate had educated me, wherever growing things are in venture . . . if all that came together. We needed to be right the first time. The reserves for fail-and-try-again were simply not there.

"So we would have to move fast. Begin right now, in fact?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

He stopped there, waiting. There would be no further help from that quarter. But none was really expected. I knew it and he knew it. It was not his part to take responsibility, not this one. He had learned well the old Navy lesson: Never stick your neck out an inch further than is required, lest it get chopped off at the collarbone. Not applicable to ship's captains, these not being chosen for their ability to avoid hard decisions.

"Then that would seem to settle it. We have no choice."

We stood silent on the strand. He said nothing but gave me a look that contained a question as to whether there was more. So I offered a little of it. A lie would not do. But vagueness, given things as they were, was acceptable, even imperative. A captain was allowed that in the name of his men's welfare. It was no time to get the other started as scuttlebutt. It could whip through ship's company, and as the most disturbing of elements, just when all our powers, physical, mental, emotional, were spoken for by the plain of grass.

"For the time being," I said. "For our immediate needs. Then we'll just have to see." I stopped there. Thurlow, or any other of ship's company, would get no more for now.

I looked seaward. "And of course out there will have to deliver. If we can trust those birds. Well, we can trust Silva. We'll know that part by tomorrow."

I turned and scanned the land again. "It's a pretty place," I said finally. I seemed to want to conclude it with an inanity.

This he safely agreed with. "That it is, Captain. A pretty place. When will you tell the others?"

"Soon, Mr. Thurlow. Soon."

"Oh, Captain?"

"Yes, Mr. Thurlow."

"The women, sir. Do you plan to bring the women ashore or leave them aboard?"

I turned, facing him. I saw his knowledge that even as he said the words he had gone too far.

"Who said I was planning to bring anybody ashore, Mr. Thurlow?"

I could hear the hardness in my voice, and it must have been in my look as well for I saw the sudden fear in his eyes, fear of me. Well, that was all right, too. If ever exactitude in matters of discipline, than which nothing else can hold a ship together, were demanded, it was in this.

"All I meant, sir, was if just possibly here or somewhere else . . ."

"Mr. Thurlow."

He stopped, I think truly aghast now that he had ventured there, in such forbidden waters. "Mr. Thurlow," I said, and heard the cold edge. "When I decide something, and then when I decide it is time to tell you of my decision, I will do so. Do I make myself clear?"

"Entirely, sir. My fault altogether. I was out of line, sir."

“Embark the men, Mr. Thurlow.”

~~We came up to where they were waiting at the boat. They stood in a desultory silence, their eyes ranging slowly back and forth over the island. I looked down the beach at our many footprints, winding away and out of sight, violations of the chaste sand.~~

“Do you think men have been here before, Captain?”

I turned, somehow startled. It was Barker, seaman apprentice, coxswain striker, only eighteen, a boy from Texas, literally the last hand, joining the ship in Norway straight out of boot camp at Great Lakes; had not, before coming aboard, even set eyes on the sea; lean and supple of body, tall, in any other society but that of sailors to be considered almost wondrously handsome, radiating an exceptional air of innocence. The question was almost as if, had they not been, how could they intend to be here now?

“If they were, it was a long time ago, Billy.” He was the one hand aboard everyone called by his Christian name, seeming that boyish, that young: nonetheless already on his way to becoming a fine seaman. My hand touched his shoulder, dropped. A gesture I would once not have made. “But—may it’s us—wherever there’s land somebody has to be first.”

He spoke almost shyly. “Yes, sir. I guess that’s so.”

I followed the men into the boat and we made for the ship. She rose gray and gallant beyond the blue-green lagoon, lean and alert, seeming to strain against the leash of her anchor, as if telling us that she was ready to up anchor on a moment’s notice. It was not so. The most brutal fact of all: so little fuel left. Still, she has done her job, I thought. She had brought us here, nearly a hundred degrees in latitude, from the frigid Barents to tropical seas, to all appearances sound in body and mind, if near, possibly, certain edges. Now I had to do mine.

All the rest of the day long, to the last of dusk, I kept the boats going back and forth from ship to shore, in a kind of series of liberty parties, such as they were, so that all hands could touch down on the island for an hour or so. So that all could feel the spectral, unreal thing I had felt: Land under our feet after four months on the oceans with only the decks of the USS *Nathan James*, DDG 80, guided missile destroyer, first of her class, beneath us. I stood watching the boats; stood looking, studying, in profound concentration, the stranger island, its plaintive scents drifting across to me, as if it should somehow be about to speak some counsel into my ears, saying either “Come and see” or “Stay away from me.” The one or the other. Knowing that it would say neither, holding steadfast to its impregnable air of mystery; knowing that the answer could come only from where answers always must in a ship off soundings—from within a captain’s secret all-lonely soul. Yet feeling surely it must be the former, how could it be otherwise: Remembering that moment when Lieutenant (jg) Selmon, gone ashore all alone with his instruments, staying overlong to make sure beyond all doubt of his findings, had finally returned, climbed the accommodation ladder to the quarterdeck where I stood awaiting him, and spoken in his quiet manner that imprimatur that took us a while even to comprehend before belief set in: “Captain, the island is uncontaminated.”

2

Band of Brothers

I: Morning

The memory so seared in my soul as to have become forever a part of me, as deep scars leave their rubrics upon the body; occasionally coming upon me suddenly, at unexpected times, but coming without fail at night, as ritualistically as the prayers children say on their knees before tumbling into bed; the very act of turning into my bunk presenting me with the terrible vision, clear as on a slide-viewer, of those four boats disappearing over the western horizon, swallowed up by the sea: 109 shipmates, two of these women, in a desperate, yes, in my view, fraudulent attempt to reach home, the mutiny led by an officer who I believed had deceived them. It was as if I had reached a compact with that remembrance to allow it its two minutes or so of daily reenactment if it then would allow me to find sleep; or perhaps a ship's captain's special knowledge that to permit it more was to surrender to yet another victim, making it impossible for me to command. The tenacity of the memory was not altogether a negative thing, for it constituted also a warning that kept forever alert an absolute resolve on my part, exceeding all others, that it should never happen again with this of my ship's company that remained; the memory rendering the further service of causing me to bear indelibly in mind that grim truth I had so imprudently, in an almost criminal negligence, let slide before: most mutinies are led by officers.

* * *

Nothing is more deadly to a ship's company's confidence in its captain than undue hesitation or procrastination. Thus well I knew the urgency of making my initial will concerning the island known quickly, decisively, for any trepidations could only build and fester if the captain were seen as irresolute. The island's first reconnoitering had implanted a cautious hope. I felt the prudence of a second appraisal. For that purpose I had sent Gunner's Mate Delaney off, accompanied by Lieutenant Thurlow, in the early morning for a final assay of the grassy plateau. Since sea as well as land must prove fecund for us, Silva also I sent forth, seaward in a boat long before daybreak. One thing more. I determined that it was insistent that I take an exact and meticulous inventory of the ship as of this our moment of crossover. Delaney and Silva not being due back until noonday or beyond with their findings, I began on this matter.

To assist me in the first part of the task I would require Lieutenant Girard, my supply officer, and the lieutenant's efficient if somewhat free-mouthed deputy, Storekeeper First Class Talley, and had alerted them the night before. The three of us started on the task at 0600, when light was just appearing from beyond the east's horizon, casting its halo of rose over the dark island which sat impassively awaiting our decision. Not until the sun had reached its blazing zenith, six hours later, did we complete the grim labor of tabulating what we had brought out with us, to last us for—how long?

* * *

When the Navy not long ago first commenced assigning a few women to ships, I felt it to be one of those incalculable fundamental errors that seem to be made only by civilizations in decline, a lapse profound and past comprehension in both the most elementary morality and judgment. The idea that we should take these embodiments—harbors, repositories—of all that is gentle and of final value in life, and God and Nature's chosen instrument for the species' very survival, and place them where they would be caught up in the ancient rough-and-tumble of shipboard existence, where peril was one's daily bread, indeed where they might be maimed or slaughtered, and this act based on the concept that equality consisted in women doing exactly what men do: this seemed to me wicked to the point of malignancy, an abomination in the sight of the Lord and of pure reason, and a consummate fraud pulled off on half the human race by their own kind, abetted by a number of men masquerading as their champions. Besides these lofty moral considerations there lay a practical one. To add to the already immensely complex daily burden of operating a fighting ship a required ship's company mixture of female and male appeared to many of us charged with the task an aberration little short of madness, comparable to putting ammunition stores alongside engine-room boilers. There was even this: any true sailor has learned long since the first lesson of the sea: never trifle with it, lest it turn on you. The sea is a tyrannical place, ruthlessly unforgiving of man's frailties and miscalculations. I was not at all certain but that it might look upon this novelty—women aboard warships—as some kind of personal affront, a violation of the natural order, an act of hubris, an insolent challenge let loose upon its domain, not to be tolerated: and in its Olympian wrath in some fashion exact the terrible toll it never fails to levy for man's arrogance toward it.

However, since the deed was struck, I treated females, once they began to come aboard the *Nathaniel James*, exactly as I did the men and officers. If equality was what they wanted, equality I would give them. I was not prepared further to insult them by setting for them standards lower than those I enjoined on my other sailors.

I never changed a particle in my view that the placement of women on men-of-war was a fallacy grave in the extreme. In particular, all my ethical reasons against doing so stood. But, that aside, I must in fairness say that, where practical matters are concerned, it worked out considerably better than I had foreseen. The doom and gloom predicted by many Navy men, myself among them, for ships with "mixed crews" was not forthcoming. Certainly not on my ship, or on any ship of which I had knowledge. For, I believe, a number of reasons. To start with: As it is true, by a process akin to natural selection, that the very best men and officers in the Navy make certain that they go to sea while the worst just as diligently seek out a "dry" career, earnestly managing never to set foot off the land onto blue waters—an odd, forever incomprehensible sort of sailor to my mind—such was true also of the women when the Navy began to send a certain number of these to sea. We got the best.

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