

Delilah

DELILAH

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With Decorations by Earle Winslow

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DELILAH

*These, in the day when heaven was falling,
The hour when earth's foundations fled,
Followed their mercenary calling
And took their wages and are dead.*

*Their shoulders held the sky suspended;
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;
What God abandoned, these defended,
And saved the sum of things for pay.*

—A. E. HOUSMAN

This volume contains the first of two separate novels concerning its subject. Nevertheless, the two books are assured an added general continuity by the author's having planted some seeds in the pages of the first novel that will be seen to burgeon in those of the second now in preparation.

Delilah is a work of fiction, in the writing of which no character was designed to bear resemblance to any actual person, living or dead.

CHAPTER I



ONE

1

SHE WAS very slim and light. She was always tense, often atremble, and never failed to give the impression of being a mass of almost terrible power wrapped in a thin and fragile blue-grey skin. The materials that went into the making of her complete being were more curious and varied than those that went to compose her creator, Man,—for Man, himself, formed part of her bowels, heart and nerve centres. She ate great quantities of hunked black food, and vented streams of grey debris. Through her coiled veins pumped vaporous, superheated blood at terrific pressure. She inhaled noisily and violently through four huge nostrils, sent her hot breath pouring out through four handsome mouths and sweated delicate, evanescent, white mist. Her function in existence was to carry blasting destruction at high speed to floating islands of men; and her intended destiny, at the opposite pole from that of the male bee, was to die in this act of impregnating her enemy with death. It was, perhaps, for this reason that she carried her distinctly feminine bow, which was high and very sharp, with graceful arrogance and some slight vindictiveness, after the manner of a perfectly controlled martyr selected for spectacular and aristocratic sacrifice. Her name was Delilah.

2

The suave, glistening Sulu Sea parted before Delilah's sharp bow and slid under her flat stern with great but smooth rapidity. It was only in her wake, where was left a white commotion, that there was betrayed the adequate evidence of the effort of her progress. A few feet above the cause of this foaming propulsion—two whirling typhoons of metal—an old Irish monk sat on the edge of a camp cot and gazed intently forward

along the destroyer's narrow steel deck at what was taking place amidships. He seemed unmindful of the sweat that exuded from his tonsure and leaked down the white fringes of his hair and over his big hands, in which he was resting his head. He seemed unmindful of the very sun, itself, which so fiercely inflamed the universe with white glare that it was difficult to look at the opal circle of the sea and impossible to look for long into the sky. Yet he was sitting in the full blaze of it, because even the quarter-deck awnings had been furled as possible hindrances to the attainment of maximum speed.

The ship, too, seen from one of the small islands she occasionally passed, must have appeared insensible to the limitless conflagration, a compact creature skimming easily along the water, naked to the sun and docile bearer of the few visible people ensconced along her thin length.

Deep inside of her, however, the Engineer Officer, who was also the Executive Officer, was thinking that she was a skidding shelf of hell. Stripped to the waist, he was standing Machinist Mate's watch in the Starboard Engine-room. He was used to this sort of thing only in theory and in the pleasantly inauthentic reputation he enjoyed amongst the lounges and bungalows ashore. "Fitzpatrick," said the Service people who gave parties in Manila and Zamboanga, "is one Engineer Officer who really gets acquainted with his enemies. If he had to, he could stand a watch shoulder to shoulder with his Machinist's Mates . . . Most promising youngster the Academy has turned out in a long time" But now, in the midst of just such an emergency, Lieutenant Fitzpatrick (Junior Grade) was not shoulder to shoulder with anybody. He was alone with what he was wont to refer to importantly as "my starboard engine," a thing that suddenly had turned out to be chaos of scorching oil jets, hissing steam tentacles, pounding verticals of steel, and wet heat that brought him almost to the fainting point. The oil-splashed floor plates and gratings made even standing precarious, and a slight movement of the ship often sent him careening threateningly towards the maze of flashing, metallic pandemonium beneath the three cylinders. As he performed the dangerous ritual of feeling bearings for excess

neat, he said to himself: "This business is more dangerous than sticking *banderillas* in a Muros bull . . . poor old Hemple, who does this all the time . . . he ought to be rated Chief . . ." Lieutenant Fitzpatrick groped gingerly with his right hand for a bearing the size of his neck. It was necessary first to synchronize his hand with the up and down movement of the bearing, which was moving so fast that he barely could distinguish its location. Finally he caught up with it and reassured himself that it was not running too hot. ". . . This certainly is risky business . . . next month I'll manage to give Hemple his Chief's rating . . . the 'Old Man' will kick . . . there are already more Chiefs than the complement calls for . . . do something for that new man, the Oiler, too . . . soon as I can." He looked up longingly at the brilliant blue oblong of the open hatchway. Privately, he did not think that they would get there in time.

The Machinist's Mate and the Oiler for whom Lieutenant Fitzpatrick was substituting were in the fire-rooms exigently shovelling coal into the flaming areas beneath Delilah's sensitive boilers: and so was everyone else except Ensign Snell, who, like Lieutenant Fitzpatrick, was standing the watch of two men in the other engine-room; Ensign Woodbridge, who was acting as helmsman; the Captain, who had succeeded himself on the bridge as Navigator and Watch Officer ever since eight o'clock in the morning; and the elderly monk, who was sitting meditatively on the camp cot—where the Executive Officer had urged him to nap—turning over in his mind how best he could help speed on this craft that was rushing him along to what might prove his destruction.

3

On the galleons of old, the highest part of the hull was astern in the form of a gallant, elevated deck called the poop. Delilah had one of these rearing decks, but it formed part of her high, sharp bow. This forecastle deck extended sternward for about one-fifth of the length of the ship, then fell sharply away like a steel cliff down to the destroyer's main deck, which was a

convex strip of thin steel twenty-one feet wide stretching back for two hundred and fifty feet to the low, flat, rounded stern. Almost on the edge of the cliff formed by the break of the forecastle deck, was a thick steel conning-tower. It contained on its inside an auxiliary steering wheel. On its roof were mounted the regular steering wheel and a three-inch gun; and this conning-tower roof was Delilah's only equivalent of a navigating bridge. Also, the squat tower shouldered, in appearance, a bold but graceful mast much after the manner that a soldier shoulders a rifle with fixed bayonet. The Captain invariably referred to this mast, as well as to the one which was similarly shouldered by the After Conning-tower, as a "signal stick." Squeezed into the space between the foremast and the conning-tower was the "Radio Shack" into which fitted comfortably one man and his apparatus.

Down the narrow convexity of the main deck—it really was like the back of a thin whale—stretched in single file the external structures indispensable to Delilah's purposes and functions. First came the short, formidable, stream-lined Smokestack Number One, leaning backward toward the stern as if unable to meet upright the strain of Delilah's fierce, forward leaps. Back of the stack, side by side, came the two capacious nostrils of the big blowers that sucked a heavy pressure of air down into the Forward Fire-room. Between these was the air-tight little hatch that provided the only access to this fire-room. Next came Smokestack Number Two, precisely similar to the first and succeeding stacks, and after that the rectangular hatch of the Starboard Engine-room, echeloned to port of which was the hatch of the Port Engine-room. It was not mere coincidence that Lieutenant Fitzpatrick was sending his longing glances staggering up towards the fresh, blue mirage framed in the Starboard Engine-room Hatchway, while Ensign Snell was glancing up as desirously at that framed in the Port; for as Fitzpatrick was senior to, and took precedence over Snell, so the starboard engine took precedence over, and set the pace for the port engine.

Mounted between, and swinging over the two engine-room hatches, Torpedo-tube Number One—which was about as long

as the ship was wide—marked the middle of the destroyer, and, like a lengthy, grey womb, ever harboured one of the polished steel seeds consecrated to her deadly fertility.

Following the torpedo-tube and the engine-room hatches, after a longer interval than any of those between the other stacks, was Smokestack Number Three, followed by the After Fire-room blowers and fire-room hatch. Behind these came Smokestack Number Four, then the square, iron box of the galley or kitchen. Aft of this galley was a sizeable space centred by a Hotchkiss Rapid-fire Six-pounder, which overshadowed the hatch of the Chief Petty Officers' sleeping compartment. Forming the after limit of the space was the After Conning-tower; and this marked the border line where manual labour and implicit obedience ended and intellectual effort and supreme authority began: For the After Conning-tower, besides mounting on its top another three-inch gun, enclosed within its exclusive, steel walls the sacred hatchway down to the officers' Wardroom, and, with its whole, conical bulk, shielded from the forward, vulgar seven-eighths of the ship the gentle after eighth. This miniature quarter-deck between the After Conning-tower and the stern was shaded, ordinarily, by a smart, well-cut awning; and its steel deck area was handsomely covered with red shellac. In its centre was a spruce, little skylight, fitted with lace curtains that delicately filtered down into the Wardroom the *mélange* of light that diffused through the white awning and reflected up from the red deck. It was the only part of the destroyer's exterior, with the exception of the bridge, that could be kept anywhere near clean; and it was there that, on ancient fighting ships, stood the altar of the gods.

Four more six-pounders, like grey claws, projected from either edge of the ship's long body: a pair on the main deck at the break of the forecastle, which partially protected them in battle, and the other pair on the main deck just forward of Stack Number Three.

And all this, Delilah's top side, was fenced in from bow to stern by a railing formed of four bronze cables arranged one above the other at twelve-inch intervals. The narrow,

bulging deck of the craft provided such insecure footing that without the railing there was proven danger of people tumbling over the side. Even with the railing, men sometimes went over, —through the interstices.

4

The monk on the starboard side of the quarter-deck had been for thirty-five years in the multitudinous islands that stretch from the Malay Peninsula to the Kamchatka Peninsula, and he had been used, exploited or persecuted in so many of the crises that had splattered these brilliant archipelagoes with blood that his body and soul seemed to have assimilated certain aspects of them. People who encountered him even superficially were prone to imagine that "if he had lived in the Middle Ages he would have been a saint." Yet, as Lieutenant Fitzpatrick had observed to the Captain that morning after the monk had boarded Delilah alongside the Zamboanga dock, "The old boy seems to have too much of a sense of humour to make a good saint."

"I don't know," the Captain had answered, "he evidently hasn't enough of it to make him unimportant."

The monk's arrival had been preceded by urgent, emergency orders to get Delilah under way immediately he boarded her and proceed at the utmost speed possible to Isla-Sulu, one of a cluster of coral islands that lay at the southern limit of the Sulu Sea. On this small island the Moros had risen. Some of the dozen or so white and Chinese traders on it were dead or wounded. Survivors were besieged. The order surprisingly further instructed the Captain to land the old holy man on the island, and under no circumstances to send ashore a Landing Party unless the monk called upon him to do so or failed to communicate with Delilah within an hour after landing. The Captain had been ruffled by this order.

"Well, if they want to kill off a priest or two, I suppose it's none of my business."

Even Lieutenant Fitzpatrick, who had an emotional leaning towards confidence in the monk, had not been able to help

feeling uncertain about one or two aspects of the affair. As he had hurried about preparing to get Delilah under way, he had told himself that "it was a very curious idea . . . paradoxical . . . this trying to pacify a bunch of Mohammedan fanatics by dumping a Catholic monk on them . . . as if he were a damn barrel of oil on a rough sea . . . And what the devil would happen to the people who were besieged during the hour the Landing Party held back . . . if the Father failed to straighten things out?"

Shortly after Delilah had steamed westward through the Straits of Basilan, it had become clear to Lieutenant Fitzpatrick that his short-handed fire-room gangs could neither meet the demands made upon them nor even survive in the fierce heat developed in the ship by the sun and the four boilers. The Captain, still worrying in a minor key over having to do with the monk, had dismissed what Lieutenant Fitzpatrick had considered a formidable difficulty with swift efficiency, not appearing to dispel wholly from his mind its preoccupation.

"Put all hands below, Mr. Fitzpatrick, in short shifts. You and Mr. Snell stand the engine-room watches; that is, if you think Snell can handle it. Mr. Woodbridge and I will take the bridge." His pleasant, ugly face had set amiably as it often did when he was dealing with younger men whom he liked. "We have to get there, you know."

The crew's astonishment at the radical rearrangement of its duties, as well as its uneasiness at having the monk on board, had given way as soon as it was miserably immersed in the black and fiery struggle to drive Delilah along at a steady twenty knots, a cruising speed that no longer was the easy matter it had been for her some sixteen years before when she and the century were born: But the Captain had peered back over the bridge railing once or twice, and had been relieved to find that apparently the monk was sleeping soundly back there, his lanky frame stretched out passively on the cot Lieutenant Fitzpatrick had had rigged for him.

About three o'clock in the afternoon the monk had sat up in a manner that seemed to indicate that he had not been asleep at all. Now, two hours later, some complication in what he was

gazing at forward made him get to his feet. As he balanced himself against the starboard railing, with his worn, black galoshes showing up drably against the shining red deck, and with the edges of his dark robe flapping slightly about the hairy angularity of his spread, bare legs, he appeared a rather terrible and thrilling figure; and his blue eyes, intense with a sort of aggressive sweetness, contained as much violence as the scene upon which they were fixed.

A thin man, named Poe, under normal routine the Chief Electrician, was being hauled up through the After Fire-room Hatchway, black with coal dust and stricken with heat. He was sobbing raspingly in rhythm with the pulsing engines.

5

It is probable that the early torpedo-boat destroyer, which is practically all raw engine and boilers, was not designed with a view to Sulu Sea operations in the hot season. Even in cold weather, with fire under all four of Delilah's boilers and the engines running under maximum steam pressure, it was necessary to wear thick wooden sandals in order to tread the burning expanses of deck over the fire- and engine-rooms. This also was more economical, because it took longer to char away the wooden sandals than it did leather shoes, and the sandals could be sawed out of any thick board as fast as they were needed. Now, even though shod with the thick wood, the men waiting to relieve those below in the fire-rooms climbed off the scorching deck onto every shelf and corner that would hold them. A number even perched on the bronze cables of the railing, a thing normally not permitted because it stretched the cables.

An Ordinary Seaman, a young Texan named Warrington, with nothing on his body but a thin, sleeveless undershirt, dungaree trousers and a pair of wooden sandals, was crouching on the torpedo-tube base, two feet above the deck, waiting for his turn below. He, too, was staring at Poe's agonized face. Three men dragged the Chief Electrician off the After Fire-room Hatch rim, where he had collapsed, and hung him on the railing. Another, who was playing a vigorous stream of salt water

on the deck in an attempt to keep the heat down, turned the nozzle on the fainting electrician to revive him. He screamed as the column of cold sea water broke against him. From Poe, the Texan's glance slid down the iron perspective of the deck and encountered the formidable figure of the monk. The association called up in his memory a story of Inquisitional torment . . . the men hung on the bronze wires like black, rotting victims of some ancient torture rack . . . soon he'd have to tackle it again . . . the hour wasn't nearly up, but the other gang seemed to be passing out for good . . . fifteen minutes up . . . fifteen minutes down . . . for an hour . . . then try to rest . . . for an hour . . . like this . . . on an incandescent deck . . . fifteen minutes up . . . fifteen minutes down . . .

As a matter of fact, in this heat very few were able to stick out the full fifteen minutes below, and only the most rugged of the "black gang," the regular coal heavers, were expected to. When a man was on the verge of collapse, he crawled up the ladder and those above hauled him through the hatch onto the deck. Then the man whose turn it was next climbed down in his place. There was no question of anyone being a quitter: the crew knew instinctively and at once when a man was all in, and every one realized that they knew, so there was no shame about giving up and no thought of giving up while there was still strength enough to shovel. Some stuck it out eight minutes, some nine, some ten, some twelve and some thirteen minutes; even Rene, the bulky Chief Machinist's Mate in charge of the resting gang to which Warrington belonged, had stayed the full fifteen minutes only twice.

"Stand by, you guys!" yelled Rene.

His gang had been seriously reduced by the necessary transfer of two members to the other gang as replacements for four men who had suffered permanent collapse; and in the resulting rearrangement of pairs to work below, which now took place, Warrington, the Ordinary Seaman, found himself linked with the one thing in his hated surroundings that he hated most, a thing that infected his consciousness with an unrelaxing dread of terrific power coupled with devastating irresponsibility. This thing was O'Connel. Warrington and O'Connel, the Water-