

Dover Beach

Leslie Thomas

Chapter One

From below his cottage window the scene abruptly dropped away: an elderly wall with a stile, fields dotted with buttercups and sheep, then the town and harbour, silent at their distance, and cloud shadows skimming the sea. On clear days you could see across the Channel to occupied France. The Germans had mounted a big searchlight over there which, when the sun caught it, flashed like a taunt. His wife Nancy had left the window open and the commonplace summer sounds, birds and buzzing, came into the room. It was one afternoon in 1940.

Ships had always sailed close inshore on the Dover side of the Strait to steer clear of the Goodwin Sands and these days to hug the coast in case of attack. Cotton observed the convoy, solid shapes against a silvery sea, standing at the window, his head touching the flowered pelmet. As he did so a pattern of smoke puffs appeared below the clouds and above the twenty coasters plodding east. He opened the window fully. The air-raid siren floated thinly from the town, and detonations began to roll up the hill. Quickly he took a pair of binoculars from their leather case on the hall stand, and focused on the ships. 'Christ,' he said quietly.

They were being attacked by Junkers dive-bombers, Stukas. He could clearly hear their trademark screams as they descended. He had never seen a dive-bomber except on the cinema newsreel but he knew what they were; swiftly falling almost vertically, dropping their bombs and ponderously climbing again. He opened the window wider. The bombs were causing spouts on the sea. Anti-aircraft fire from some naval escort ships made soft useless-looking puffs in the sky. His telephone sounded. Still watching the ships he stretched and took it from its cradle on the wall.

'Frank!' It was Nancy. 'Look from the window. They're bombing our ships!'

'I was watching,' he said. He kept his voice calm. 'Stuka dive-bombers.'

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She was working at the hospital. 'The patients are all up at the windows,' she said, tumbling over her words. 'Somebody's going to fall out. Where are our planes, Frank?'

There was a roar across the roof above him, then two more. He peered up. 'Our fighter planes have just turned up,' he said flatly. 'Three Defiants. They might as well send three coppers on bikes.'

'I'll call you back when I can,' she said. 'I've got to get these patients in.'

He said: 'I'm going down the police station, Nance. I'm due on duty anyway.'

'Be careful,' she said. 'Please.'

'You as well,' he told her. 'I'll stick my tin hat on.'

He reached for his steel helmet and his canvas gas-mask case, and opened the front door to the dull warmth of the July day, the sound of the explosions and the high whine of aeroplanes. He picked up the binoculars. One of the RAF Defiants was already peeling away and beginning to roll and fall helplessly, black smoke trailing from it. He heard excited voices and looked along the lane to where three boys were shouting and jumping on the stile in the opposite wall.

'You kids!' he shouted. 'Take cover!'

They looked around with almost disdain. They wore lanky khaki shorts and carried bows and arrows. One had a dustbin lid held like a shield and a bread knife in his belt. 'Get under cover,' Cotton ordered striding towards them. 'Get under the roof of the shed there.'

The tallest of the boys, about twelve, who he thought he recognised from the juvenile court, said: 'Those Jerries are miles away.'

'Get under here,' Cotton ordered pushing them beneath the corrugated-iron roof of the shed where he kept his Austin Seven and the lawnmower.

They obeyed sullenly. 'Lot of good this is,' grumbled the taller boy noisily banging the wall. 'This won't take no direct hit.'

'You'll get a direct hit in a minute - from me,' Cotton said. 'There's a ruddy air raid on. Those Germans could be overhead in ten seconds.' He glanced at the bows, the arrows, the dustbin lid and the knife thrust in the snake-buckle belt. 'What do you think you're up to anyway?'

'Waiting for them, the enemy,' said the second boy grumpily. He had scrappy ginger hair and a face full of freckles. 'We've got our own defence patrol.'

'We're going to willy them,' said the smallest boy.

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Cotton said: 'You'll what . . .?'

'He means harry them, not willy,' sniffed the tallest glaring at the small one. 'Like it says on the wireless the resistance do, harry the Germans.'

'I'm getting the car out and taking you lot back into Dover,' Cotton told them. 'You're not going to harry anybody.'

'A bomb could drop on us, easy,' pointed out the ginger boy. He nodded at the small car. 'That's an easy target.'

'I've got to go to the police station,' said Cotton. 'And I'm not leaving you up here.'

'I knew you was a copper,' sniffed the leader.

'I've got "Police" written on the front of this steel helmet, haven't I,' pointed out Cotton. 'Anyway, we've seen each other in the juvenile court. What's your name?'

'Harold Barker. And I got off.'

The explosions from the sea rumbled grimly. The boys watched the diving planes.

'Let's get you home,' grunted Cotton. 'Where is it you live?'

'Me and Spots, 'ere, lives in Seaview Crescent. And Boot . . . well . . .'

'Hostel,' said the short boy.

Harold added: ''Cos 'e's a refugee.'

Cotton had opened the door of the Austin and they piled in, thrilled at the novelty of being in a car. He glanced towards the sea. The battle went on. Smoke was mixing with the low clouds.

Spots began turning the window handle. The glass slid down. 'Like my uncle's,' he boasted. '. . . My mum's friend.'

Going to the front of the square bonnet Cotton powerfully swung the starting handle. The engine fired first time.

'Good starter, mush,' said Harold.

'So's my uncle's,' said Spots.

'Don't call me mush,' Cotton said. He climbed into the driving seat next to the smallest boy. 'Where are you a refugee from?'

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'Poland,' he said. 'I been in Dover since last year. My mum's English, she teaches dancing and she's here but my old man ain't. We had to leave him behind. We don't know where he is.'

'That's why he's called Boot,' put in Harold. 'Polish, see. Boot polish. That's right, ain't it, mush.'

'That's right,' shrugged Boot. He glanced at Cotton. 'They think it's funny.'

Cotton drove the car from the shed. The wall in the lane obscured the view but they could hear the planes and the reverberations echoing off the sea.

'Why ain't you dressed like a copper, except for that tin hat?' asked Harold.

'I'm plain clothes.'

Boot put the window down a bit more and the battle noise increased. They were unafraid.

'If that's plain clothes, what's your best suit like?' enquired Spots. They all sniggered.

'Stop being lippy, mush,' said Cotton. 'And if you see a plane - duck.'

They were getting into the town. The sea came into view again. Eagerly they stretched to see the aircraft. 'Look at everybody!' suddenly guffawed Harold. 'All up on the chimley pots.'

Cotton could scarcely believe it. Every upper window was occupied by people looking out to sea. There were men and youths on the roofs, some holding on to the brick chimneys, others on top of the chimneys, sitting astride the round pots, shouting and pointing. A Dover Corporation bus had stopped and people were crowding the upper deck. The driver and conductor were on the bonnet and there was a man standing on the roof. 'They're mad!' Cotton bellowed. 'Bloody mad!'

'No swearing,' said Boot solemnly.

'Not in front of children,' added Spots.

'A Jerry!' shouted Harold almost deliriously, pointing directly ahead through the windscreen. The plane was coming low, straight up the street at them, the machine guns on its wings sparking.

'Down!' Cotton bawled. 'Get down flat!'

Before any of them could do so the aircraft, at less than two hundred feet, had roared above them and gone. Spots was struggling with his bow and arrow. 'Next time I'll get 'im.'

'See the crosses on the wings?' said Harold breathlessly.

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They had no fear. Cotton had swung the car to one side. Now he righted it and charged it along the street. There were still people on the house tops with others scampering and sliding down tiles, ladders and drainpipes. He searched frantically for shelter. A side turning appeared and he flung the vehicle into it, braking violently in front of a wall.

'This is a petrol garage, mister,' pointed out Harold flatly. 'If that German comes back and hits the pump we'll all be blown to Folkestone.'

'Look!' Spots was pointing from the window. 'Bullet cases. All over the place.'

Cotton tried to stop them but the trio flung the door aside and tumbled from the car. Angrily he shouted but they were dodging about the street picking up brass bullet cases. Other children appeared and ran in excited circles. 'Still hot!' shouted Harold throwing a spent bullet case in the air, catching it and blowing on it.

Cotton got from the car and almost threw himself at them. 'Get under cover!' he bellowed. 'He'll be back in a minute!'

The plane was. It came, guns firing, from the opposite end of the town this time. Children scattered and resourcefully flung themselves flat against walls and railings. The boys piled into the car. 'It'll be this petrol pump next!' shouted Spots.

Cotton was the only one in a panic. The tyres screeched as he backed the car into the road and plunged his foot on to the accelerator. It went between the houses at forty miles an hour. Transfixed, he saw the German plane bank almost lazily above the town and come howling back, its guns hammering up the street. He threw the wheel over and the car went into a front garden.

Now the plane hung to one side as if the pilot sought a better view, made another run and, flattening out, dropped a single bomb. All the earth around them seemed to rise. They felt the car heel. The blast was numbing. Cotton was trying to crouch under the steering wheel, the boys were piled together on the floor. The windscreen splintered.

There was silence. Harold was the first to raise his head and look out. 'They've bombed the Co-op,' he said almost with wonderment. 'Wiped it out.'

'Early closing,' shrugged Sergeant Wallace from behind the police counter polished by years of elbows and arms. A bulky man, his shrug was heavy, and his steel helmet too small. Cotton thought they might exchange because his was oversized. The steady all-clear siren began sounding.

'They bombed the lightship,' said Wallace. 'Two crew dead.'

Cotton said: 'I thought lightships and lighthouses were supposed to be neutral.'

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'Well, the Jerries don't, by the look of it. It was sheer luck with the Co-op, empty, but the Huns weren't to know that. That Co-op could have been packed, housewives, mums. But even the manager was out on the cliff with everybody watching the fun.' He regarded Cotton gloomily. 'I don't know if we got any of them. I saw two of our boys go down, poor buggers.'

'Defiants,' said Cotton.

'With the little beehive gun turrets,' nodded Wallace sadly.

'Flying coffins,' said Cotton.

Wallace sighed. 'No serious casualties in the town though. Two of them half-brained kids fell off the roofs. One got saved by his mother's clothes line, the other demolished a coal shed, broken arm. Only the Co-op cat got killed. Spread all over the counter so they say. Better be careful what you get in your rations this week, Frank. Watch out for lumps of fur.'

'Thanks, I will. We ought to swap tin hats, Wally. They'd fit us better.'

Without replying Wallace took his helmet from his hot and balding head and Cotton handed his across the counter. Wallace put it on. 'That's better,' said the desk sergeant. 'More comfy.' He took out a big blue handkerchief and ran it around the interior of his own helmet before handing it over.

'I was due to go to the Co-op anyway,' said Cotton putting it on and adjusting it. It fitted. 'Some London wide boy has been sounding out the manager about black-market lard. Now there's no shop.'

The black telephone on the counter rang. As he picked it up Wallace said to Cotton: 'They've got 'undreds of branches, the Co-op. He'll have to try to flog it to one of them . . . Hello, police station Dover.'

He listened, then said: 'Detective Sergeant Cotton has just come in, sir. Yes, I'll tell him. Everybody else is out there anyway. Somewhere. Right, sir.'

'The super,' he nodded when he had replaced the telephone. 'They want every copper down on the pier. They're bringing the casualties in from those ships.'

Outside Dover dock gates, wedged along the side of the street, were people eager to see the casualties come ashore. People had stood there just over a month earlier when the angry soldiers from Dunkirk, throwing their rifles into piles, bloodied, beaten, had been brought from the evacuation boats. The spectators outside had clapped them with extra cheers for the badly wounded. But it had been no time for applause.

Now ambulances waited, their doors expectantly open; there were awkward groups of dockers and doctors. Gulls flew noisily around nervous nurses.

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'Cricket will be off tonight then,' said one of the dockers.

'Clergy have cancelled,' said the man beside him. 'Play next week.' He nodded towards a group at the town end of the pier. 'There's some of 'em up there, getting ready to say their prayers.' He scanned the pale blue sky behind the town. 'Would 'ave been a good evening for it too. Here comes the lifeboat now.'

The shoal of rescue craft headed across the bland sea back towards the harbour mouth, led by the shoddy minesweeper HMS Petrel, her captain, Lieutenant Commander Paul Instow, grim on the bridge. She was a wooden-sided vessel safe from magnetic mines but said to have mice in her hull.

Instow was irked because that afternoon it had taken too long in his estimation to get up steam enough to leave harbour and reinforce the anti-aircraft defences of the convoy ships. The pom-pom gun on the bow and the Lewis gun on the stern had both loosed off at anything that looked like a German plane and had hit nothing but low clouds.

Everything about Instow's craft was shabby; he felt shabby too. Shabby and useless. He was a reserve officer and his crew were reservists. The steersman had not been near the sea for years and was as uncertain as the ship he nudged towards the harbour entrance. Instow prayed he would miss the wall.

Forward, around the base of the pom-pom with its multiple barrels, sprawled some of the convoy's survivors who had been lifted from the sea. Two of the ships had been set on fire and one of them had exploded. The minesweeper had arrived after the lifeboats from Dover and Folkestone and some fishermen. By now the sky was unoccupied, an innocent early evening, the Germans gone, the long white Dover cliffs gleaming, smiling blandly, and the green of the Kentish countryside rising above the strong, neat town.

There were six merchant seamen lying, smeared with oil, on the fore deck and another four at the stern, two of them crouching as if ready to run a race. Three canvas-covered bodies were laid on the tarpaulin of the lifeboat. The minesweeper's crew had handed out mugs of coffee and whisky and brought blankets. There was not much noise and not much movement. Anything said was only a whisper masked by the revolutions of the engines. It was oddly peaceful.

From the west two aircraft approached. The klaxon warning honked and Instow bellowed: 'Action stations.' The sailors attempted to drag the wet and oily injured men away from the guns, but Mancroft, the second officer, shouted from the deck below: 'They're ours, sir. RAF Spitfires.'

'Bleeding Spitfires!' suddenly screeched one of the men on the deck managing to get to his knees and shake his fist. 'Young bleeders!' Others, some of those who were able to, followed him, shouting and punching their fists at the planes which mistakenly dipped their wings in salute.

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Instow recognised they were older men. You could tell that even though they were coated with oil. You could tell from their voices. He turned from them and watched the lifeboats trailing him into harbour and beyond them the low and labouring fishing vessels. Altogether they must have pulled thirty men from the sea he thought. How many were alive?

The helmsman, who he noticed for the first time had a nervous tic, correctly placed the bow between the red port light and the starboard green light at the entrance to Dover. As the view into the harbour widened people could be seen grouped on the quay and along the pier, and there were ambulances waiting against the grey buildings of the town. Instow was deeply conscious that they had already lost a battle. How many more would there be? 'Bloody hell,' he muttered.

'Yes, sir,' agreed Sub-Lieutenant Mancroft on the wing of the bridge. He was scarcely twenty, and he was trembling. He surveyed the men on the deck. Two of their crew were rubbing one of the merchant seamen with bare hands. One looked up at Instow and then Mancroft and called: 'Trying to keep 'im warm, sir.'

Mancroft glanced towards Instow, then shouted stoutly: 'Keep rubbing him, boys, we're nearly there.' It made him feel better.

HMS Petrel eased alongside. One of the sitting survivors by the gun coughed and called up. 'Skipper, sir, ain't the navy got anything better than this tub?'

Instow knew. 'I'll tell the admiralty,' he called back.

'You wouldn't have made any difference,' the seaman wheezed. 'Not with these popguns.' He turned his soaked and blackened back to Instow who knew he was right.

Now they were against the jetty, lines were thrown and tied. As the gangway rattled down there was a movement, at first hesitant, of medical men, service and civilian, to board the ship. A group of dockers trailed them timidly, almost with embarrassment. The land men stared at the burned sailors on the deck. The Dover and Folkestone lifeboats and the trawlers were coming to the jetty. The ambulances began to move almost timidly on to the pier.

Stretchers were hoisted aboard, tenderly loaded and carried carefully ashore. The clutch of clergymen hovered uncertainly. Prayers went unsaid. It took an hour before the final casualties were unloaded. The dockers stood afterwards, hapless, unspeaking, until the foreman grunted: 'That looks like the lot, boys. Go on home to your tea.'

One of the men said: 'All old men. They looked so bloody old, didn't they.'

'You'd look bloody old if you'd got all that muck over you,' said the foreman. He slung his canvas bag over his back. His lunch was still wrapped in its newspaper. 'Want a pickle sandwich?' he asked.

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'No, thanks. I'll have my tea when I get home.' The docker's face sagged. 'I 'ope it ain't going on like this.'

A boy with a nosebleed and a woman with a sprained ankle had been hurriedly treated and ushered away. The casualty department was clear. Doctors in white coats, looking uncomfortable in a silent group, waited alongside starched uniformed nurses, some smoking, others drinking coffee, all looking towards the main door. Sister Nancy Cotton had posted herself outside and she saw the first ambulance. 'They're coming,' she said thrusting the double doors wide. They stubbed out their cigarettes, put down their cups and tried to keep calm.

The injured merchant seamen were almost shoved through the entrance by stark-faced stretcher bearers who had never seen anything like it. Twenty were manoeuvred into the department through the entrance and directed to spaces marked with chalk on the cleared floor. Three of the men had already died.

Nancy clenched her teeth and her hands. Shadowing the senior surgeon she moved around the stretchers and finally to the side of one of the prone men. He had a beard, sticking out like a tar-brush, his eyes protruding savagely from a riven face. His mouth was like a hole. 'What you goin' to do wiv them scissors, nurse?' he croaked.

'Cut your clothes off,' replied Nancy primly. 'And I'm sister.'

'Wouldn't let my sister cut my togs off,' cackled the man. 'But I'm buggered down there somewhere, missus. I can feel all my guts hanging out.'

She began to scissor his wet, clogged clothes away. It was as if she was taking peel from his body. The blood and oil looked like heavy paint. Around them doctors and nurses bent working, the men groaning and crying or lying silent. A tubby priest came panting through the main door, blinked and made a swift sign of the cross. Muttering to himself, not to God, he cast his eyes about the room. An Anglican vicar, thin but unfit, came in and pulled up. Blood wriggled across the floor. The vicar almost hung on to the priest. 'We must do what we can,' said the Catholic trying not to vomit. 'You can't tell one from another.'

'Not much point in asking,' said the vicar.

A shadow approached the door. 'Dear Mother of God,' breathed the priest. 'A three-card trick. It's the rabbi.'

Tentatively the trio of holy men went among the wounded, the dying, and those tending them, stepping carefully. A man died with a stoical grunt and the vicar nudged the priest forward. The rabbi hung back, his hands across his mouth. Then an inner door was flung open like an explosion. Some of the casualties jumped. A man shouted: 'No!' Angrily Nancy turned to see a fat woman in a blue bonnet and a red dress splashed with huge white flowers. Her big folded face was convulsed.

'Bertram Bartrip is dead!' she bawled. 'Don't nobody care?'

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The surgeon bending above the man whose clothes Nancy had cut away lifted his head. 'Bartrip was always an awkward man,' he said stoically. He glanced at Nancy. 'Get shot of her.'

Nancy turned from the casualty area and after a moment the young rabbi followed her. 'I think I'm a bit surplus here,' he said to no one in particular. 'It's no time to ask religious details.'

Nancy strode professionally up the corridor after the bouncing woman in the large red frock. The elastic in the short arms dug into the woman's flesh. 'I'm sorry, Mary,' said Nancy tightly as she caught up with her. 'But we've got an emergency.'

The woman snorted. 'Oh yes, I can see that! It's all the glamour, ain't it. Just like on the pictures. Never mind my father pegging out.'

Pushing ahead, thrusting doors open, Nancy said: 'Who said he's dead anyway?'

The rabbi followed timidly, catching the door as it sprang back.

''E's dead all right,' insisted Mary. 'I know 'im better than anybody.'

They reached an unrealistically bright ward, the late sun streaming in on the cheery quilts and flowers. Expectantly upright in their beds were ten men in striped pyjamas. Screens had been placed around the bed at the end. Someone turned off the wireless.

'We put them around, sister,' said one of the patients. 'The screens. Once we knew . . .'

The man in the next bed said: ''E'd started to gurgle.'

Nancy stayed them with a glare. Swiftly she went around the screen, Mary padding after her, now dumbstruck. The rabbi peeped around after them. There was no mistake. Bertram Bartrip was no more. She tested for a pulse and lifted a limp eyelid. 'The doctor will have to certify he is dead,' she said. 'As soon as he's not so busy.'

'Who,' demanded Mary swinging a plump arm towards the rabbi, 'is this bloke?'

'A man of God,' said Nancy firmly.

Mary rolled her eyes. 'Him,' she scoffed emphasising the aspirate. 'God! My father wanted nothing to do with God.'

'I'm a rabbi,' said the young man.

Mary's face colour deepened. 'A Jew!' she howled. 'A Jew boy!'

'Most rabbis are,' he responded evenly. 'I'm Joseph Bentick. If I can be of any help . . .'

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Suddenly Mary deflated, the dress crumpling like a huge coloured balloon, tears gushing down the channels of her red and rough cheeks. 'I'm going 'ome,' she sobbed. 'To tell them.' Hugely inhaling she rallied. Nancy patted her.

Nancy said: 'Mary, as soon as the emergency is over we'll arrange things. You come back tomorrow. We could get Mr Palfrey, the undertaker . . . do you know him?'

'I know Mr Palfrey,' snivelled Mary. 'He arranged my mother. I'll come back tomorrow. I'm sorry about those poor blokes in there. 'Onest I am, poor sods.'

'Bertram Bartrip,' sighed Nancy as she slumped at the table. 'God knows how many deathbeds he'd had.'

'And he had to pick today,' grunted Cotton putting two boiled eggs in front of her. With bread and margarine. He poured her another cup of tea. The cottage was touched by a hushed wind from the distant sea. She put her face in her hands. 'If it's going to be like this . . .'

'It looks like it is,' he said. 'They bombed the lightship, you know. Killed two of the crew.'

'I heard,' she said. 'I thought that was out of bounds.'

'I'm not sure there are going to be any bounds.'

Nancy began to eat tiredly. It was almost midnight. 'Were you all right, Frank?' she said.

'Well, that bomb cracked the car windscreen.'

She sat up. 'Oh God, oh Frank. I should have asked you.'

'I didn't have a scratch. I had three kids in the car, three lads. They enjoyed it, terrific fun. I was trying to get them home when that Jerry came right up the street and demolished the Co-op.'

She leaned across the kitchen table and kissed his cheek. 'I should have asked you,' she repeated.

'Apart from that, and trying to get the gawpers away from the dock gates, Christ, those people . . . Otherwise, everything was all right,' he said. 'Oh, and the key to the emergency mortuary went missing. It just would, wouldn't it. In the end I kicked the door down.'

He stood and went to the wireless set on the sideboard. 'Might as well get the official story,' he said. The midnight news had just begun.

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'In the English Channel today seven German planes were shot down by the RAF as they unsuccessfully attempted to attack a convoy of merchant ships. One of our aircraft is missing.'

Cotton glanced at his wife. She seemed to have aged since that morning. 'Well, well, well,' he grunted. 'Fancy that. Seven Germans shot down. And we didn't notice.'

Nancy said: 'There'll be a lot more lies told before this war is over. It makes you wonder how many lies have been told up to now.' As she spoke the howl of the air-raid siren came on the placid air, floating up the ridge from Dover.

'No,' she said firmly looking up from the table and pushing her plate aside.

'Finish your egg,' he said gently. 'It's probably a false alarm. It's all dark out there.'

'I'm not going into that air-raid shelter,' she said. 'I've had enough of war for one day.'

Cotton went behind her and rubbed her shoulders. 'Thanks,' she sighed. 'I'm so tired. I want my own bed.'

'That's where we're going,' he said.

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