

KERRELL

"TAFFRAIL"

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TO
MY GOOD FRIENDS
AND

SHIPMATES
IN
HIS MAJESTY'S SHIPS
MURRAY AND TELEMACHUS
OF
THE TENTH, THIRTEENTH, AND TWENTIETH
DESTROYER FLOTILLAS

1914-1918

“If either the honour of a nation, commerce or trade with all nations, peace at home, grounded upon our enemies’ fear or love of us abroad, and attended with plenty of all things necessary either for the preservation of the public weal or thy private welfare, be things worthy thy esteem (though it may be beyond thy shoal conceit), then next to God and the King give thy thanks for the same to the navy, as the principal instrument whereby God works these good things to thee. As for honour, who knows not (that knows anything) that in all records of late times of actions chronicled to the everlasting fame and renown of this kingdom, still the naval part is the thread that runs through the whole woof, the burden of the song, the scope of the text?”

JOHN HOLLOND

His first *Discourse of the Navy*, written Anno 1638.

FOREWORD

EXCEPT where I have referred to people and to ships by their real names, the characters and ships in this tale exist only in my imagination. I will leave my readers to decide which of the events and incidents described are factual, which are fact thinly disguised as fiction, and which are purely fictitious and imaginary, though not, I hope, in any real sense untrue.

TAFFRAIL.

1931.

CHAPTER I

IT was shortly before four in the morning that there came a thundering knock on the door of Toby Kerrell's cabin, followed by the switching on of the light. Then the voice of the seaman doing duty as bridge messenger, a gigantic figure in thick duffle coat and muffled nearly to the eyes in a series of woollen comforters.

"First-lieutenant, sir? It's close on ten minutes to four."

Kerrell, who was lying fully dressed on his bunk, sat up and rubbed his eyes. There was a vile taste in his mouth, for the deadlights were screwed hard down over the scuttles, and the atmosphere below was stagnant and heavy with an indescribable odour of stuffiness.

"What's the weather?" he asked, yawning.

"Clear, sir, and flat calm," the seaman replied.

"Cold?" Toby queried, noticing the man's swaddled appearance.

"Yes, sir. Perishin' cold."

"Very well. I'll be up in a minute," he said, putting his legs over the side of the bunk and sliding to the deck, where he stretched himself and yawned prodigiously.

Lord, how tired and sleepy he was! He had spent nearly four hours in his bunk, but had never really slept. Closing his eyes he had tried every artifice he could think of to induce slumber; but sleep had not come, merely an occasional fitful doze in which he remained conscious of all the racket and turmoil around him.

Life in a destroyer in wartime was not all jam, whatever people might think. With the Libyan steaming at twenty-five

knots, quivering and trembling to the thrust of her turbines, resounding to the hollow drumming of her whirring propellers, a sound not unlike the roar of an express train tearing through an everlasting tunnel, it was sheer purgatory.

Each separate article of furniture, every fitting, played its own irritating little tune, an incessant jarring and creaking and jangling and chattering which spelt added unrestfulness to nerves already frayed by nearly five months of war.

Toby Kerrell, whose age was twenty-four, was blessed with vigorous health and good spirits. He was not ordinarily troubled with nerves. But there were times when he longed for a little peace and rest from this ceaseless activity.

Brushing his teeth and dressing himself in heavy leather sea-boots, 'lammy-coat,' with a thick muffler and a pair of glasses round his neck, four o'clock found him on the bridge. Hendry, the lieutenant-commander, was still up.

"Good morning, sir," said Toby with what affability he could muster.

The commanding officer, never at his best in the early hours, grunted something unintelligible under his breath and walked over to starboard, where he rested his arms on the wire jackstay of the wing dodger and peered moodily out to the eastward. Toby, sensing trouble, proceeded to take over the watch from the sub-lieutenant.

The youth, for Pardoe was little more, told him the course and speed and formation of the flotilla, showed him the position on the chart by dead reckoning, and pointed out the dark shapes of the light-cruisers a few cables to port upon which the leading destroyer was keeping station. It was a calm, moonless night with hardly a ripple on the water. There was a visibility of two to three miles, weather which was

unusually fortunate for the North Sea in the month of January.

For the first time for many months, and heaven knows how many days and nights the *Libyan* had spent at sea since the war had started, the little ship drove along with hardly a curtsy. Built for something approaching thirty knots, she was travelling now at a good twenty-five. The night was full of the swishing crash of parted waters, mingled with the deep, roaring note of the stokehold fans driven at high speed; the air redolent with the overpowering stench of oil-fuel.

Thank God, however, for oil-fuel! It made the task of re-fuelling so much easier than with coal, every ounce of which, in the older destroyers, had to be shovelled into bags by manual labour and hoisted on board before being tipped into the bunkers. With oil one simply took the ship alongside a tanker, connected up a pipe or two, and let the pumps do the rest.

“You’ll find that about ten revs over the twenty-five will keep her in station,” the sub explained to his relief, pointing to the dim black shape with blue shaded stern-light and whitened wash of the next ship ahead, less than a hundred yards over the bows. “She’s steering fairly easily.”

“Any signals?” Toby asked.

“The cruisers are easing to twenty and spreading to visibility distance at dawn, maintaining the present course,” said Pardoe. “We go to action stations at six o’clock.”

“What have we got manned now?”

“Forecastle gun fully manned, with the crews of the watch on deck at the others and the rest of the men sleeping handy. Ammunition-supply parties standing fast. Both pairs of tubes

are trained outboard and ready. Torpedoes set for six feet, as usual.”

“I see,” said Kerrell, having discovered the torpedo-tubes ready on his way forward along the upper deck. “What about the challenge and reply?”

The sub-lieutenant handed him a slip of paper.

“Here,” he said. “The signalman’s got a copy, and I’ve warned him to turn it over to his relief. And that reminds me,” he added. “The leading telegraphist’s been reporting enemy wireless very faint, a hundred and fifty miles away at least, he guesses. That’s what brought the skipper up from the chart-house.”

“Right,” said Toby, unperturbed.

Intercepted German wireless was no new thing. They heard it almost at any time. It might, of course, mean that the enemy fleet was at sea. On the other hand, the chances were a hundred to a halfpenny it did not. The hostile outpost-boats, prowling Zeppelins, and homing submarines, seemed to chatter incessantly in that wet triangle which was the Heligoland Bight.

“Has he told you anything?” the first-lieutenant went on to ask.

“Not a word,” Pardoe replied. “He’s hardly opened his mouth except to curse me all ends up for being out of station, which I wasn’t. I may as well tell you, Number One,” he went on, speaking in a whisper with his voice full of suppressed anger. “I’m getting fed up with the way I’m treated! God knows I do my level best, but nothing I do pleases him. Never a day passes that I’m not called a B.F.! He hates the very sight of me! It’s unfair! I——”

“For God’s sake be quiet!” Kerrell hissed. “Lord, man, the bridge isn’t the place to discuss the skipper! And if you take my advice you won’t discuss him anywhere. That sort of game isn’t worth the candle. D’you want him to overhear what you’re saying and put you under arrest?”

“Of course not,” the boy answered.

“Then keep your mouth shut, you blazing young ass!— Right you are, sub!” he went on, altering his tone as he saw Hendry coming towards them. “You’d better go aft and get a couple of hours shut-eye before we go to action stations. Good night.”

The sub obeyed with alacrity.

Since the early afternoon of the previous day, when the *Libyan* had left Harwich in company with the other destroyers of her flotilla and a squadron of light-cruisers, they had been steaming at twenty-five knots on a northerly course towards the Dogger Bank. Something was in the wind. Why else should the Commodore have made the emergency signal to raise steam with all dispatch, which had been followed by that hurried exodus to sea? And why twenty-five knots, which, as a concentrated force, was practically their full speed? Twenty knots was the usual wartime cruising speed.

Were the German battle-cruisers out for another tip-and-run raid on the east coast, another Hartlepool or Whitby bombardment, perhaps? Or was the High Seas Fleet itself provocatively trailing its coat somewhere over the northern horizon?

Possibly, and more probably, it was another wild-goose chase, another of the many abortive expeditions they had made to sea since war had broken out more than five months before. It was rarely they had had a proper run for their

money since that ding-dong fight off Heligoland in the previous August. Everyone had expected a fleet action within a few days of hostilities beginning, but, as usual, the prophets were hopelessly wrong. The enemy fleet, as a fleet, did not seem to have left its harbours. Ours had covered the North Sea from end to end, its cruisers and destroyers sweeping the waters almost up to the minefields round about Heligoland.

Kerrell was vaguely annoyed, however, at his absolute lack of definite knowledge as to what was expected to happen. What was in the confidential envelope which had come on board by motor-boat just before sailing, an envelope with the Commodore's rubber stamp in the corner addressed personally to Hendry, as commanding officer, and for the receipt of which Kerrell had signed the letter-book?

Taking it below to the captain's cabin, the lieutenant-commander had received it with a muttered "Thanks." Kerrell had waited while he tore open the outer covering, to display another envelope within, sealed and marked "Secret." Opening this, the captain had read its tantalizing contents, a single sheet of typed foolscap, and had then thrown it carelessly on his desk, picked up his pipe, and turned to see his subordinate still standing beside him.

Kerrell could have burst with annoyance and defeated curiosity when his captain, eyeing him without a smile, merely growled—"All right, first-lieutenant. You needn't wait. You have your orders. Let me know five minutes before we're ready to slip."

Hendry always used the formal 'First-Lieutenant' instead of the more familiar 'Number One.' He was invariably aloof and secretive, facts which Kerrell resented. After all, he, Kerrell, was the man upon whom the command of the ship

would devolve if anything happened to the captain. He had a right to know what was happening or about to happen. Nevertheless, the lieutenant-commander rarely told him what was contained in his sailing orders, and on this occasion not a word had been said beyond the customary orders for raising steam and for the manning of guns and torpedo-tubes during the night.

Intercepted enemy wireless might mean nothing. The speed of twenty-five knots, however, and the orders that ships' companies were to be closed up at their action stations by 6 a.m. were not so ordinary. Something was in the wind, something out of the common. Kerrell could swear to that.

THE lieutenant-commander, his hands in the pockets of his thick duffle coat and an unlit pipe between his teeth, came towards him.

“What’s the sub been saying to you?” he asked suspiciously.

“Nothing, sir,” Kerrell replied, thankful it was too dark for the captain to see his face. “He merely turned over the watch.”

“He seemed to take a damned long time about it!” Hendry grunted. “By the way, what d’you make of him?”

“Who, sir? The sub?”

“Of course. Who else should I mean?”

Kerrell thought for a moment before answering. “He doesn’t seem to be shaping badly, sir. He’s not been long in the ship and he’s new to destroyers. But I’ve always found him keen and anxious to do his best.”

The captain snorted.

“That’s where you and I disagree,” he answered. “I’ve always found him a blithering young fool. If I have to tell him a thing once, I have to tell him a dozen times. Why the hell should they inflict such youths on destroyers, where every man’s job counts, I’m shot if I know!”

The first-lieutenant did not reply. There was no sense in doing so. Hendry was obviously in the worst of one of his bad tempers. The obvious thing was to let him blow off steam.

“He’s one of these chaps with influence,” the lieutenant-commander continued. “His father’s a baronet, and as

Pardoe's an only son, he'll be a baronet some day. I hate people with influence, and why the devil should he wangle his way to this ship? Why can't he stick to battleships—flagships, where he can curry favour with admirals, which is about all he's fit for? I've no use for him. Why should we have to put up with his la-de-dah manners and general incompetence, hey?"

Kerrell hardly knew what to say, for Hendry was being monstrously unfair. It was true that the sub was rather exquisite and over-keen on his personal appearance, that he used highly scented hair oil, and that his manner was sometimes irritating. But he was young and would soon grow out of these foibles, and to say that he was incompetent was untrue. His heart was in the right place, and he certainly had the makings of a good officer. He merely lacked experience.

"Perhaps we might get him exchanged, sir," Toby observed, suggesting one way out of the difficulty.

"Exchanged be blowed!" came the contemptuous reply. "If I apply to have him relieved I shall probably be superseded myself. Pardoe's got influence, I tell you! And I," he went on bitterly, "have none. No. I'll lay for the blighter. I'm not going to jamb my promotion by inventing some frivolous excuse. I'll wait till he really makes a bloomer, and then pounce."

Kerrell had not the least doubt in his mind that Hendry meant what he said, for the latter, when once he conceived a dislike, was sometimes cruelly unjust and vindictive. Even Toby himself, who was the soul of loyalty and prepared to get on with anyone, had often thought of applying to leave the ship.

Hendry was so uncomradely and unforthcoming, so captious and so petty-minded in his actions, so utterly selfish and inconsiderate, that life with him was sometimes hardly worth living. Except for meals he rarely entered the wardroom, and when he did a subdued hush came over its occupants and conversation became strained and difficult.

The engineer-lieutenant-commander, easy-going old Mutters, who was Hendry's senior by a year or two, was downright good at his job, and had a heart of pure gold, hardly dared to offer an opinion in his commanding officer's presence. Pardoe was treated sarcastically like a naughty schoolboy, while Hartopp, the fat, merry little R.N.V.R. surgeon probationer, a medical student from Barts, became speechless with terror. As for Mr. Huxtable, the gunner (T), who had a boisterous way of speaking and a laugh like an asthmatic corncrake—he nervously drenched his food with Worcester sauce, bolted it without a word, and discreetly retired to his cabin. His entertaining reminiscences of life on the lower deck were forthcoming only in the captain's absence.

Hendry was a good seaman and in a way zealous, but the *Libyan* was an unhappy ship. The atmosphere of strain and suspicion in the wardroom seemed to have transmitted itself to the petty-officers, and thence to the most junior members of the ship's company. After all, it was not many commanding officers of destroyers who hadn't a good word for anyone, and who never opened their mouths except to censure. And had not Hendry earned unending unpopularity by some pettifogging but irksome restriction as to the men's canteen supplies, an order he had refused to cancel even when its obvious injustice had been pointed out to him? Then

he had forbidden the playing of a mandoline, a concertina, a drum, and several mouth-organs with which the denizens of the stokers' mess had formed a 'band' to amuse their ship-mates and to enliven the monotony of the dog-watches. Even the mess-deck gramophone was taboo if played in the skipper's hearing. "A foul and beastly noise," he called it.

So the men went about sullen and discontented, while the Lord alone knew what they really thought and said to each other on the comparative privacy of the mess-deck. There had even been surreptitious indignation meetings in the wardroom during Kerrell's absence, while old Mutters had had the father and mother of a row with Hendry in the latter's cabin on the subject of leave for the men of the engine-room department during a period of boiler cleaning when the ship was laid up for a few days.

Kerrell, quite by chance, had overheard the tail-end of the discussion from his cabin opposite.

"Well, sir," old Mutters had fumed, his voice trembling with suppressed indignation, "though you are my commanding officer, I'm your senior and an older man than you. I've also a good deal of experience so far as my own job is concerned. Your orders, of course, will be carried out to the letter, but I'll thank you to repeat them in writing or in the presence of a witness. And I wish you to know that I refuse to accept any responsibility for what may happen. My men are only human."

As Hendry hadn't got a leg to stand upon, the result of that particular episode was that Mutters got his own way, since when he and the captain had hardly spoken to each other except on duty.

It was Toby's job, as executive officer of the ship, to smooth things over, to do his utmost to keep officers and men happy, contented, and efficient. And a damnably uphill task it sometimes was, for Hendry was an injudicious slave-driver without a single friend. Without his first-lieutenant's restraining influence, indeed, the smouldering fire of discontent and unhappiness throughout the ship might have been fanned into the flame of open mutiny—mutiny, the ugliest word in the Service, and a crime which in time of war and according to the terms of the Naval Discipline Act was punishable 'by death or any such other punishment as hereinafter mentioned,' which meant penal servitude at the very least. Moreover, and whatever the reason, a mutiny would effectively blast the career of every officer in the ship.

Time and time again, utterly discouraged and sick at heart, Toby had made up his mind to have it out with the captain, to ask to be superseded. As often, however, he had refrained from taking the irrevocable step, not because he was frightened, but because his departure at his own request seemed like leaving the others to their fate. With the exception of the captain, he loved his shipmates, and they loved him. To desert them savoured of pusillanimity. Nevertheless, he realized in his heart that things could not go on as they were. There was a limit to human endurance, and sooner or later something must happen, something serious which he would be unable to cope with. Hendry was impossible. Sometimes Toby had thought him mad, or perhaps it was more charitable to think that the strain of the war had told upon his mind. There was no doubt that there *was* a strain which made people nervous and irritable—not themselves.

For some moments, as they stood together on the bridge, there was silence between them. Then the first-lieutenant, summoning his courage and fully expecting to be snubbed, asked the question that, for the time being, was uppermost in his mind.

“Is there anything special on, sir?” he queried.

“Special?” Hendry grunted. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean, sir, why did we get those sudden orders to raise steam and leave harbour in such a hurry? And why are we booming along north at twenty-five? I thought ... ’er, that is, I thought you might have some orders saying what’s happening, sir.”

“And what if I have?”

“Well, sir. I ... well—the fact is, we’d be rather interested to hear what’s in the wind.”

“Who’s we?” Hendry demanded.

“Myself and the other officers,” the first-lieutenant incautiously replied.

“So you’ve been discussing things with them, have you?” the lieutenant-commander muttered, his voice menacing. “You’ve dared to criticize me to the other officers because you haven’t been told what’s happening. Is that it?”

“Certainly not, sir!” Kerrell exclaimed. “I haven’t discussed you at all. I merely thought you might like to satisfy our natural curiosity.”

“Your natural curiosity be damned!” Hendry retorted angrily. “I’m captain of this ship, and when I think fit to tell you and the other officers what’s in my sailing orders I shall do so, but not before! D’you understand me, or shall I give you orders in writing?”

“I understand perfectly, sir,” said Kerrell quietly, stifling his indignation. “I’m sorry, sir,” he went on to say after an awkward pause. “I didn’t mean you to take it like that.”

“Then you’d better be careful how you say things!” Hendry snapped.

“I’m sorry——” Toby began again.

“Meanwhile I’m going below to the chart-house,” the other broke in impatiently, turning to leave the bridge. “I don’t want your explanations. Have me called at ten to six, or if you sight anything. I want the hands closed up at action stations by six o’clock. What time’s daylight?”

“Between half-past six and seven, sir.”

“All right. Be careful not to get astern of station as the sub did, and for God’s sake see the quartermaster doesn’t use too much helm!” He disappeared down the steep ladder and went into the chart-house.

Kerrell sighed with relief.

The *Libyan* steamed on in the whitened wake of her next ahead.

CHAPTER III

WITH the greyish light of approaching dawn slowly creeping over the sea, the light-cruisers started to move out to their stations. By six-forty-five, when the first signs of full daylight came out of the east in a glare of sulphurous yellow through the rifts in the cloud masses banked up on the horizon, they were in a long line ahead, covering a wide area. The destroyers followed astern of them in groups, the whole force still steering a northerly course at a speed of twenty-five knots. At seven o'clock it was full daylight—a calm, clear morning with an overcast sky and hardly sufficient breeze to ruffle the grey sea.

On board the *Libyan* officers and men were already at their action stations. The ship had woken up. Guns and torpedo-tubes were fully manned, their crews standing easy round them smoking their pipes and cigarettes. From the galley on the upper deck the smell of kippers frying for someone's breakfast ascended to the bridge. It was not until the ship was really in action that the ship's cook and his mates would leave their galley and go to their stations in shell-rooms and magazines. Meanwhile, hungry men must live, and the North Sea air gave them healthy appetites. So, for awhile, cookie and his myrmidons still had their being among their frying-pans and kettles of water boiling for tea.

Hendry, from the starboard end of the bridge, slowly swept the horizon with his glasses from right ahead to the beam, and back again.

“What's he expecting to see?” Pardoe asked in a whisper, looking out on the starboard bow to where, perhaps two miles away, the slim grey shape of a British three-funnelled light-

cruiser drove steadily through the water with the sea creaming round her sharp forefoot and her white wash heaped up astern.

“God knows!” Kerrell muttered with a shrug of his shoulders, remembering his rebuff of two hours before. “But it’s a fiver to a farthing we’re expecting to sight something. Why else are we spread out like this? If you ask me we’re _____”

His sentence remained unfinished, for at that instant there came a tawny-golden flash and a cloud of dun-coloured cordite smoke from the ship they were both looking at. She had fired a gun.

Then another, and another—ranging shots, evidently. Next, a whole salvo. The deep concussion of the reports came to their ears across the water.

“What the devil’s she firing at?” asked the lieutenant-commander, coming to Kerrell’s side. “Her guns are trained over on the starboard bow; but I can’t see a thing.”

“Nor can I, sir,” the first-lieutenant answered, his heart palpitating with excitement—excitement which became almost unbearable when a cluster of tall white spray fountains, an enemy salvo, leapt out of the sea close to the cruiser’s side.

An instant later there came a whistle from the voice-pipe to the wireless office. The leading signalman went to it.

“Hullo?” he said. “Hullo?... Yes ... Yes. I’ve got that. Is that all?—Right you are.”

“*Aurora’s* reporting enemy in sight, sir,” the man reported to Hendry.

“Right,” the captain nodded without the wink of an eyelid. “Tell them to let me know of anything else they intercept. We ought to be meeting our battle-cruisers before long.—But where the deuce are the enemy?” he added, lifting his glasses again.

Battle-cruisers, thought Kerrell to himself. So Sir David Beatty’s battle-cruisers from Rosyth, Commodore Tyrwhitt’s light-cruisers and destroyers from Harwich, and the enemy, seemed all to be meeting at a point. And even now the fun was starting!

“Watch your steering, coxswain!” Hendry cautioned sharply, as the leader of the *Libyan’s* group altered course slightly to starboard towards the *Aurora*, which was still firing intermittently, and round which the enemy shells were still occasionally pitching. “Not too much helm! Steady, man. Steady!”

A moment later, some distance ahead of the British light-cruiser, a faint smudge of smoke appeared on the clear horizon to the north-east. It thickened fast. The captain and first-lieutenant levelled their binoculars simultaneously. In less than a minute they could make out the light-grey hull and three upright funnels and two masts of a hostile light-cruiser. She was fully seven miles away, 14,000 yards, steaming fast on a north-easterly course with her thick smoke drifting down in the *Aurora’s* direction. Even as they watched the golden sparkle of gun flashes showed that she had fired again.

“There are three or four destroyers with her,” Kerrell observed.

Hendry, intent upon conning the ship, nodded in reply.

Before long the enemy cruiser turned and made off to the south-eastward, the increasing smoke from her funnels and

heavy bow-wave showing she was travelling at high speed. Almost at the same time Hendry and Kerrell, indeed, everyone on the *Libyan's* bridge, saw the heavy shapes of four large vessels looming up over the horizon farther to the right. A number of light-cruisers and destroyers accompanied them. They were steering north-east with the smoke pouring from their funnels. There was no mistaking their appearance. Without a doubt they were German.

The excitement became intensified when, two or three minutes later, more heavy ships were sighted right ahead, steaming fast to the southward.

Hendry examined them. "Those," he grunted, "are our battle-cruisers, the *Lion* and her lot."

For a time nobody spoke. The eyes of all were riveted on the one squadron or the other. Those two sets of rushing grey shapes, the one of five ships and the other of four, were approaching each other at the rate of about fifty miles an hour, the speed of a fast railway train. Another few minutes would see them in sight of each other, and a few minutes more within gun range. Were the Germans deliberately seeking battle, or were they blundering blindly into an engagement with a superior force?

It was the sub-lieutenant who broke the silence.

"Oh, curse!" he suddenly exclaimed. "They're altering course!"

"Who?" the captain demanded, wheeling round.

"The Germans, sir!" said Pardoe, pointing. "Look, sir. Look!"

He spoke the truth. The leading enemy vessel, the great *Seydlitz*, blackening the sky with her smoke, was turning to

port. The second ship followed, then the third, and the fourth, until the whole squadron, with the light-cruisers and destroyers almost out of sight ahead, were steaming hard to the eastward—for Heligoland.

Hendry tapped his foot on the deck with annoyance. Two minutes—a minute ago, an engagement seemed certain. Now that the Germans had altered course, however, it seemed unlikely that the British could overtake them.

Signals fluttered from the masthead of the little *Arethusa*, which flew the broad pendant of the Commodore of the Harwich Force, as she collected her light-cruisers and scattered destroyers and steamed at full speed to the eastward after the enemy. Reginald Tyrwhitt was not the man to hesitate with the Germans in sight. Where the enemy were, there must he be also. It was not for nothing that he had earned his nickname of ‘Blood-red Bill.’

Even Hendry seemed excited and pleased when the pursuit started.

“By Gad!” he exclaimed, his usually glum face lit up in a smile as the engine-room telegraphs jangled and the *Libyan*, throbbing to the thrust of her turbines, leapt ahead with two great plumes of whitened water standing up on either bow. “This is the goods!”

“And there go our battle-cruisers after ’em!” Toby suddenly exclaimed, clutching his commanding officer by the arm in his excitement.

He pointed to where the great hulls of Sir David Beatty’s five ships almost obliterated the horizon. They, too, had swung east after the retreating enemy. They were increasing speed, crashing through the calm sea with a pall of dense

smoke trailing in the sky astern, and their heavy bow-waves and humped-up wakes testifying to their speed.

It was a gloriously exciting moment, madly exhilarating. Upwards of fifty British ships, big and little, were now in full cry after a flying enemy. The whole day lay before them, and the visibility was extreme.

But there was also a grave element of doubt, and everybody on the *Libyan's* bridge was thinking the same thing. Would the British succeed in bringing the German squadron to action?

Ship for ship, as everyone knew, the former had no very great superiority in speed, and the enemy were practically hull down over the horizon—at least 28,000 yards, or fourteen sea miles, from Beatty's flagship, the *Lion*. And about 150 miles away, more or less, lay the minefields of the Heligoland Bight—minefields which it was dangerous for heavy ships to penetrate unless they knew the swept channels, which the British did not.

It was before the days of paravanes, and 150 miles meant six hours' steaming at twenty-five knots. And in this time would it be possible for the British, by using every ounce of steam, so to reduce the distance as to enable them to come within effective gun range? A stern chase is ever a long one.

"My God! Will they do it?" Kerrell muttered, half to himself, his fists clenched in his anxiety. "Drive on, you big devils! Drive on, for heaven's sake!"

Hendry put down his glasses with a grunt.

"It'll be touch and go," he said. "First-lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

“You can send the hands to breakfast by watches. It’ll be some time before anything much can happen now.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Breakfast, so far as the *Libyan’s* were concerned, was a scratch meal, a picnic meal eaten on the upper deck—stale bread and margarine and some of the jam left over from tea the evening before, odorous kippers eaten with the fingers, leathery fried eggs, washed down with mugs of unspeakable tea, tea with a real bite to it, and a dollop of condensed milk to give it the proper colour and consistency. Were the ship’s company going off the upper deck when they occupied, so to speak, the front row of the stalls in what might develop into a spectacular battle between heavy ships? Not they!

Despondency was forgotten in the fierce excitement as their ship sped along. Officers and men greeted each other with cheerful smiles. Even Hendry became rather more human and refrained from his usual strictures. The chance of action has a wonderful stabilizing effect in moulding a body of men into one cohesive whole.

Going aft along the upper deck in search of food in the wardroom, Kerrell came upon Mutters, the engineer-lieutenant-commander, solemnly eating sandwiches and sipping a cup of coffee while seated on the casing by the after hatch of the engine-room.

“Hi, Number One!” he shouted cheerily. “What’s the latest from the front?”

Kerrell told him what he knew in a few breathless sentences. “D’you think they’ll catch ’em, chief?” he went on to ask, waving a hand towards the battle-cruisers.

“Catch ’em or bust!” Mutters opined, lifting the bread from a ham sandwich and peering at its contents with disgust on

his face. “At least they would if I were drivin’ ’em. The *Lion’s* good for jolly near thirty if they really push her.”

“I hope to God they do, then,” said Kerrell. “Everything depends on speed to-day.”

The chief laughed as he flung the remains of his sandwich overboard.

“Everything depends on speed on all days,” he said. “And who gives you speed, I should like to know?—Why,” he went on, tapping himself on the chest as he answered his own question, “it’s us, my bloodthirsty warrior, the officers and men of the blinkin’ engine-room department, and don’t you damn well forget it! You can call us ‘scissor grinders’ and other nasty names——”

“I’m sure I never have,” Kerrell broke in.

“Well, you can put on a face like a sea-boot and curse us in your heart when we’re oilin’ and the hoses leak over your sacred corticene, likewise when we go full speed, as we are now, and oil-fuel comes up the funnel in black dollops. But when there’s a job to be done, we’re the boys who get you there, aren’t we now? Without us, where would your blessed guns be, hey?”

“Nowhere, you old reprobate,” the first-lieutenant laughed good-naturedly. “Did I ever deny that you and your brigade were the most useful people in the ship?”

“You did not, my young scapegrace, though sometimes, like all you upper-deck people, you seem to imagine the works go round by themselves. You aren’t properly grateful, I’m thinking.—By the way, are you going to the wardroom?”

Kerrell nodded.

“Then you might tell that lop-eared steward to send me up a couple of boiled eggs and some toast and butter,” said Mutters. “D’you call this a man’s breakfast?” he went on to ask, displaying a meagre ham sandwich. “The man’s mad. I’m not a bloomin’ canary! I refuse to go into action with a stomach as hollow as the inside of a drum!—And while you’re at it, you might tell him to bring me up a tin of gaspers—gaspers, mind, not those beastly Egyptian things the sub stinks out the mess with. I’ll be needing ’em before the day’s out.”

“Why on earth don’t you come aft and have a proper meal in the wardroom?” Kerrell suggested.

Mutters looked up with a smile.

“What, leave my little box of tricks when the old hooker’s going all out? No, my boyo. Not in these trousers.”

CHAPTER IV

IT was some minutes after eight-thirty that Toby, after a hurried breakfast, and having been round the guns and seen everything correct, returned to the bridge.

The four ships of the enemy, fine on the starboard bow, were clearly visible over the horizon, steaming at full speed for home with a dense reek pouring from their funnels. He could hardly restrain a shout of joy when he realized their distance had diminished. They were gradually being overhauled.

The *Libyan* was more or less in company with the entire Harwich Force of three light-cruisers and thirty-three destroyers. As the successive increases in speed had been made, however, the slower and older destroyers, though straining every effort to keep up, were gradually lagging astern.

A few miles to the south-eastward, steaming at twenty-six knots on a course parallel to, but on the starboard quarter of, the enemy, were the five British battle-cruisers, their turret guns at full elevation ready to open fire at extreme range. Already they were travelling faster than the designed speed of the two rear ships, the *New Zealand* and *Indomitable*, which had dropped astern of station and were pounding along in the wake of their newer consorts with black smoke rolling in clouds from their funnels.

Some distance to the northward, the four ships of the First Light Cruiser Squadron, headed by the *Southampton*, were also in chase.

“We seem to be gaining,” said Kerrell breathlessly, peering at the distant shapes of the enemy through his binoculars.

“We are,” Hendry agreed, and more cheerfully than usual. “The fun won’t be long in starting now.—Take her over for a bit, first-lieutenant,” he went on to say. “I want to snatch a mouthful of food in the chart-house. We’re going a shade over twenty-six, and you’ll find she’ll steer easier if you keep out of the wake of the next ahead. Be careful, though. She wants watching at this speed.”

Twenty-seven knots, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine were signalled in rapid succession from the *Lion*. Yard by yard the range of the flying enemy diminished—from 27,000 yards to 24,000, and from 24,000 to 22,000, or eleven sea miles. The *Lion*, *Tiger*, and *Princess Royal* were drawing well ahead of the two older ships. With his three faster vessels the admiral evidently intended to engage the rear of the enemy’s line.

It was at about ten minutes to nine, at the range of 20,000 yards, that a great red flash and a billowing cloud of tawny cordite smoke broke out from the *Lion*’s fore turret as one of her 13.5-inch guns opened fire. The reverberating concussion of the report brought Hendry out of the chart-house and on to the bridge.

The range seemed prodigious and the target absurdly small as, for what seemed æons of time, they watched for the projectile to pitch. At last it fell, its huge pillar of white water rising gracefully into the air some distance short of the enemy’s rearmost ship and high above her mastheads. It was merely a trial shot to test the range.

The *Lion* fired again, and this time the shell dropped into the water beyond its target, the *Blücher*. The British flagship thereupon opened a slow and deliberate fire. Soon after nine o’clock she scored her first hit, which was greeted with a

cheer by the *Libyan's* men, numbers of whom had collected on the forecastle and were loudly criticizing each sound.

It was the first time Kerrell had even seen a really heavy shell drive home on an enemy. He had expected something rather spectacular, a huge splash of flame and a mass of smoke and up-flung debris. Instead, there was merely a dull red glow and a hardly discernible puff of brown smoke which soon dispersed. It seemed absurd that nearly a ton of metal and high explosive could strike with so little commotion. The shell plunging into the sea and wasting their substance upon nothing were so far more interesting to look at.

As the range steadily diminished the *Lion* shifted her target to the third ship in the hostile line, while the *Tiger* and *Princess Royal*, coming into action, concentrated upon the *Blücher*, which was hit repeatedly.

“Lord!” Hendry exclaimed, as the German vessel’s hull occasionally disappeared behind tall pillars of spray, and then came into view again shrouded in clouds of reddish-brown smoke through which appeared tongues of darting flame from her own guns. “Just look at her!”

Kerrell could hear the men on the forecastle cheering and applauding each lucky shot. It was perfectly natural that they should, for here was their enemy. All the same, those who watched from a distance could by no means visualize what was happening in that sorely battered ship. Had they been able to do so, they would have been wrung by pity and remorse.

The *Blücher's* men, with suspense clawing at their hearts, had been watching those spray fountains coming nearer and nearer, this side and that, until the first shell hit and burst with a crash which caused the whole ship to tremble. Then

they started to come in droves, whinnying through the air, tearing their way through armoured decks like paper, and exploding far below to ignite and scatter the very coal in the bunkers, to fling blazing oil in all directions in flames of blue and green and gold. The dynamos were destroyed, so that the interior of the ship was plunged into darkness. Loose fittings were hurled from side to side, watertight doors weighing tons wrenched from their hinges by the air pressure, bulkheads perforated by splinters and buckled and twisted like cardboard. And in the midst of this hell men were slowly being burnt to death, torn in pieces, blinded, scalded, suffocated, hideously mutilated. Lucky were those who were killed outright.

When the *Lion's* first shell went home the enemy returned the fire, at first slowly, then as they found the range, with greater rapidity. For a time the British flagship was the target for three Germans, and as Kerrell watched he saw one great shell splash after another erupting out of the sea all round her, towering high above her mastheads.

Time and time again she was all but blotted out in the turmoil, to reappear with her guns flashing defiance. Several times, however, he noticed the dull glow and tell-tale smoke puffs of hostile shell. A hit on the foremost turret seemed to have disabled one of the guns, for it no longer fired.

The engagement had become general, and presently, steaming at their utmost speed, the British battle-cruisers were forming on a line of bearing to avoid the interference to gunfire caused by smoke and shell splashes. The *New Zealand*, thanks to the almost superhuman efforts of her engineers, had managed to overtake the others; but the old *Indomitable* was over three miles astern. It was about now

that the *Blücher*, burning fiercely and her speed considerably reduced by damage, fell out of the line.

While the air shook and trembled to the continuous discharge of heavy guns, Kerrell had a feeling of intense resentment that the *Libyan* was taking no part in the action. Things were happening all round them. Men were shooting and being shot at. Great ships were in hot action, yet, so far as the destroyers were concerned, they might have been doing a full-power trial in peacetime. And from now on it was rather like being at a theatre. There was so much going on, so much to look at, that his impressions, vivid though they were, became mixed. Time and sequence became things of no account.

He was looking at the *Blücher*, which, badly damaged and on fire, was being rapidly overhauled, when the captain suddenly drew his attention to the *Lion*, which seemed to be hit repeatedly. Her speed, too, appeared to be diminishing. Then, to their anxiety, she swung rapidly to port, while the *Tiger*, *Princess Royal*, and *New Zealand* raced at full speed past her.

“God!” Hendry muttered, as he voiced the thoughts of them all. “Is she done in?”

Signal flags could be seen fluttering from the only two pairs of halliards in the flagship that had not been shot away, though their colour and meaning could not be made out because of the distance. As they afterwards discovered, however, the periscope of a submarine had been sighted on the *Lion's* starboard bow, and the admiral had ordered an alteration of course to port to avoid a possible torpedo. Almost simultaneously, she was badly hit on the port side, her port engines were damaged, and her speed was much

reduced. The alteration of course signal was afterwards modified by a signal 'Course north-east,' while, at the same time, the *Lion* also displayed the flags which meant 'Attack the rear of the enemy.'

So the flagship, with Sir David Beatty in her, was definitely out of the action, dropping every minute farther and farther astern of her consorts.

What happened then can be read in detail in the naval war histories. The *Tiger*, *Princess Royal*, and *New Zealand*, now under the command of the rear-admiral in the last-named, though the command was never formally transferred, steamed on in a north-easterly direction in obedience to the *Lion's* signal, ceased firing on the retreating enemy, and transferred their attentions to the *Blücher*. In short, through misinterpretation of Beatty's intentions, and the conditions were certainly confusing enough, the main action was broken off, and the *Seydlitz*, *Derfflinger*, and *Moltke*, leaving the *Blücher* to her fate, drew rapidly out of range and sight to the south-east. The *Derfflinger* had been hit once, and the *Seydlitz* three times, with terrible results. The very first shell had put both her after turrets out of action, the flames rising as high as a house. Her after magazine was set ablaze, and the fire could only be extinguished by flooding it. There was no time even to remove the men; over 150 of them, cooped up behind water-tight doors, were drowned like rats in a trap.

But for that lucky hit on the *Lion* which put her out of action; but for the unfortunate but understandable misinterpretation of Sir David Beatty's signal 'Attack the rear of the enemy'; and owing also to the fact that the other battle-cruisers did not see his last signal 'Keep closer to the enemy'

because the flags were undistinguishable, the engagement might have resulted in a decisive instead of a partial victory.

Speeding on past the damaged *Lion*, round which destroyers were soon clustering, the *Libyan* was in at the death of the unhappy *Blücher*, which fought gallantly to the last.

Ship after ship opened fire upon her, even some of the destroyers letting drive with their 4-inch guns. She was soon blazing furiously, a layer of heavy smoke, glowing redly with the glare of many fires, hanging over her like a pall. Her steering gear was destroyed and her engines damaged, but she still struggled on, moving slower and slower through the water. One funnel had disappeared, and the other two were perforated through and through and tottering. Her tripod foremast, brought down by an explosion at its base, leaned drunkenly over on one side.

Torpedoed by the *Arethusa* and battered out of all recognition, the stricken ship started to sink on an even keel. But, with most of her crew dead or dying and the stokers supplying the ammunition to her guns, she still moved slowly ahead and fought doggedly on.

It was not until five minutes past noon, indeed, that her last gun was fired at the destroyer *Meteor*, which had approached to give her the *coup de grâce* at close range with a torpedo. The 8.2-inch shell went home and burst in one of the destroyer's boiler-rooms, killing four men and wounding another. It was the *Meteor's* torpedo, however, that finally brought the *Blücher* to a standstill. Striking her fairly amidships, it detonated with a thundering shock and an upheaval of whitish-grey water mingled with smoke. The cruiser listed heavily over to port and lay down to die.

Seen from a distance of a few hundred yards, as the *Libyan's* saw it, the end was horrible.

Those that remained of the *Blücher's* ship's company had obviously been told to save themselves. Some were already swimming in the sea, others were throwing themselves overboard. Her deck seemed crowded with men, who could be heard shouting as she rolled sluggishly over on her side. The sound of those men's voices blending together in a prolonged moaning wail was eerie and nerve-shattering, ghastly in its human anguish and intensity. There was not a spectator whose heart was not wrung with pity.

“Get the whaler away!” said Hendry sharply, when his ship had stopped within 300 yards of the blazing, listing wreck and he saw the boats from the other ships busy picking up survivors from the water.

While the work of rescue went on, the *Blücher* heeled over and over until her deck became vertical, and the muzzles of her guns pointed into the air. Many of her men could be seen walking on her rounded starboard side as she rolled over. Others slid down the curving bottom of the ship and walked along the bilge-keel before trusting themselves to the water. Many, badly wounded or dazed with shock, jumped into the sea and never reappeared. It was mid-winter. The water was icy cold.

The whaler came alongside with her first boatload of survivors—a badly wounded officer, a huge bearded petty-officer, and five men, two of whom were also wounded. Their injuries bleeding, their faces white, and their teeth chattering with cold, they were helped on board, the *Libyan's* men clustering round full of solicitude and not a little curiosity, with young Hartopp, the surgeon-probationer,

bursting with zeal and importance and a first-aid haversack ready to hand, well in the forefront. Wounded men, whatever their nationality, came under the ‘young doc’s’ jurisdiction, and this was his first real job since the war had started. He rather relished it. What a yarn he’d have to tell his fellow-students when he got back to Barts!

“Steady, lads! Steady!” said Toby, as the Germans were lifted painfully on board. “Go easy with that wounded man!”

He need not have spoken. Now that the fighting was over and the guns were no longer firing, the British seamen treated their late enemies more as honoured guests than as prisoners of war. Nothing was too good for them. After all, they were seamen like themselves, and, poor chaps, they had been through hell. Indeed, their ministrations and clumsy attempts to show their sympathy by offering cigarettes, and food, and mugs of tea or cocoa, together with dry clothing, became a positive nuisance.

“Get to hell out of it, can’t you!” little Hartopp exploded, when he found himself hindered in his work by a man offering a thick corned-beef sandwich to a badly wounded and barely conscious German lying on the deck, whose underclothing, sodden with blood and sea water, he was laboriously cutting away with scissors to get at the injury beneath.

“Sorry, sir,” the well-intentioned one apologized, bitterly disappointed. “I didn’t mean no ’arm.”

“Then just remember that the wounded are my business!” the young doctor retorted in his best professional manner. “Don’t you come interfering here!”

The whaler had just left the ship for the second time, when Hendry suddenly hailed her from the bridge to return

alongside. Toby could hardly believe his ears. There were still numbers of Germans shouting in the water and swimming towards them.

“First-lieutenant!” the captain shouted again.

“Sir?” answered Kerrell, from the upper deck.

“Hoist the boat!” Hendry hailed, waving an arm overhead.
“Make an evolution of it!”

His reason for abandoning the work of rescue was not far to seek, and all the other boats were already hurrying back to their ships. Looking up at the captain’s gesture skywards Toby saw the huge bulk of a Zeppelin between the low-lying clouds overhead. She was rapidly approaching, and with her came an aeroplane. Presently the bombs would begin to fall, and a stationary ship is too satisfactory a target willingly to be offered. The drowning Germans must be abandoned. There was nothing else for it.

The *Blücher*, meanwhile, was sinking fast. All that now could be seen of her was the curve of her side just about to disappear beneath the surface. The spot where she lay was marked by a large oily pool littered with debris, dotted with the heads of swimming men, whose agonized voices echoed and re-echoed across the water. “Save, Englishman! Save!” they could be heard shouting, as they saw ship after ship hoisting her boats and realized they were being left to their fate. “Comarade! Comarade!... Save! Save!”

It was a ghastly moment, a piteous thing to have to desert these drowning men when so many more might have been rescued.

Something whistled through the air. A line of splashes stood up one after another across the spot where the *Blücher*

had all but foundered, right in among the heads of the swimmers. They were bombs—bombs from the aeroplane.

“Oh, them bleedin’ swine!” Toby heard a seaman beside him exclaim, as he angrily shook his fist at the heavens. “They’re killin’ their own pals, the muckin’ blighters!”

In point of fact, the bomb-dropper imagined he was attacking the sinking *Lion*, and reported as much when he got home. It did not seem to enter his comprehension that the British would stop to rescue the survivors from a stricken enemy.

“Get that boat hoisted!” the captain roared from the bridge through his megaphone.

“Just hooking on, sir!” Kerrell hailed back, leaning over the ship’s side. “Come on, whaler! For heaven’s sake smack it about!”

Pardoe, the sub, held up his hand from the boat.

“Hooked on!” he called.

“Haul taut singly!” the first-lieutenant shouted to the long line of men on the falls. “Marry! Hoist!—Boat’s clear of the water, sir!” as she came up with a rush.

The *Libyan’s* helm went over and her propellers started to revolve. The water slid slowly past her side, quicker ... quicker.

An ever-widening oily patch lay spread over the sea in the place where the *Blücher* had taken her final plunge. In the midst of it men could still be seen swimming, swimming and calling piteously for help—help which could not be rendered through the action of their own countrymen.

They had fought bravely in action. They continued to fight in the water until their exhausted bodies gave up the hopeless

struggle, their numbed limbs ceased to function, and the cold grey sea closed over them.

“Poor devils!” Toby muttered to himself, turning his glasses from the spot as the *Libyan* circled round, gathered rapid headway, and made off to the westward.

“SHE looks to me to be in a pretty bad way,” said Toby, gazing at the *Lion* with a rueful expression.

The great ship, obviously badly damaged, was listing heavily to port, as, surrounded by destroyers zigzagging to and fro at high speed in case of an unexpected attack by submarines, she steamed westward at only twelve knots. Twelve knots—with one engine *hors de combat*. Not so very long before, still in action, she had been crashing along at nearly twenty-nine. Now, crippled by one unlucky shell, she was a lame duck.

“How far are we off Heligoland?” Hendry asked.

Toby measured the distance on the chart. “About seventy miles, sir, more or less,” he replied.

“Then it’s a bad business,” said the lieutenant-commander. “It’ll be a light night unless I’m mistaken, and if this weather holds there’s nothing on earth to prevent the Germans from sending out every light-cruiser and destroyer they possess. If they sweep to the west-nor’-west they can hardly avoid tumbling across us.”

“That’s just what I was thinking, sir.”

“I don’t like it,” Hendry continued, shaking his head. “Nobody minds a scrap at night, for that’s what we exist for. But I’m shot if I want a scrap with a rotten great target like a battle-cruiser paddling along at the speed of a bath-chair! The *Lion* carries twelve hundred men, or so. If she gets torpedoed it’ll be a sticky business—damn sticky, if you ask me.”

He was only voicing the opinion of everyone else in the ships present who knew something of the real situation. It

was fraught with danger and anxiety. The enemy surely must know that the British flagship had been damaged. And, if they did, they must be aware that she was limping home at slow speed across the 400 odd miles of sea that separated her from the Firth of Forth. She was in a position about 100 miles from the mouth of the Elbe and slightly less from the Jade. At both of these places there were probably torpedo craft. Even now they might be getting under way. It seemed a heaven-sent opportunity for a successful destroyer attack, a chance which comes only once in a lifetime. The enemy, not being fools, must surely take advantage of it.

Transferring to a destroyer amid the cheers of his men and shouts of “Good Old David!” soon after his flagship had fallen out of the line, the admiral had hastened after his squadron to resume the command and continue the action. At noon, however, to his intense mortification, he had met the *Princess Royal*, *Tiger*, and *New Zealand* steaming north-north-west after having discontinued the pursuit. Hoisting his flag in the first-named he had immediately ordered the chase to be resumed.

But it was already too late. Half an hour or more had been lost, and half an hour in time meant a loss in range of nearly 30,000 yards. The enemy were out of sight over the rim of the horizon, their presence only betrayed by a dwindling cloud of smoke in the south-east. Long before they could possibly be overtaken and again brought to action they would be in safety. There were minefields to be considered—behind the minefields, the German High Seas Fleet.

Another thirty minutes of battle might well have seen the sinking of one or more of the escaping ships, two out of three of which were already damaged. But it was not to be. The

opportunity had come and passed. Instead of a great victory, Beatty and his men must content themselves with the *Blücher*, which was not a battle-cruiser at all, merely an armoured cruiser which had temporarily taken the place of the *Von der Tann*.

It was exasperating, a bitter and hideous disappointment. A shattering victory at sea was so badly needed, if only to quieten the senseless cry of the uneducated public at home who asked “What is the Navy doing?” when German battle-cruisers bombarded Hartlepool, Scarborough, and Whitby, and succeeded in making their escape without being brought to action.

To the public, looking at their maps, the North Sea seemed the size of a duckpond. Little did they realize the fogs and uncertainties of war, the difficulty of finding an enemy in thick weather and on dark nights, and the fact that the east coasts of England and Scotland afforded a choice of targets spread over a distance of roughly 500 miles. The Navy obviously could not be everywhere.

At this stage of hostilities, moreover, it was futile to instruct an unthinking public as to what the Navy really existed for, useless to stem the tide of popular opinion voiced by the cheaper and sensation-loving Press. People could not be told that the Navy existed not to protect the coast from senseless tip-and-run bombardments which, though they involved loss of life and damage to property, had no effect on the real course of the war, but to bring the enemy main fleet to action, to ensure the country’s food supplies from abroad, and to keep open the seas for the passage of men and munitions and stores to the different theatres of war in France

and elsewhere. This could only be done by watching and guarding, watching the exits from the North Sea.

It was galling, to say the least of it, to have this spate of uninstructed criticism; to have letters signed ‘Briton’ and the like appearing in certain newspapers demanding to know why the Navy existed if not ‘to protect our shores’; to have officers and men in naval uniform hissed in the streets and taunted with the cry “Why don’t you go out and fight the Germans?”

The vast bulk of the population took their food for granted. They did not realize that, without the Navy, starvation would have stared them in the face. A shattering and spectacular blow to the enemy’s sea power on January 24th, 1915, in what is commonly called the Battle of the Dogger Bank, would have served a most useful purpose.

But one unlucky shot, combined with an understandable misinterpretation of Sir David Beatty’s signals, had made that blow impossible. And early in the afternoon, returning to the westward, the admiral had set about making arrangements for the safety of his flagship. Every available destroyer was sent to screen her against submarine attack as she started to crawl homewards at twelve knots.

As the afternoon wore on, however, the *Lion’s* heel increased and her speed dwindled to eight knots. Finally, unable to steam at all, she had to be taken in tow by the *Indomitable*. And all through that night, a night of brilliant moonlight, expecting every moment to be attacked, the *Libyan* and her consorts kept ceaseless watch and ward round the damaged ship which was towed at seven knots. “If submarines are seen,” ran Commodore Tyrwhitt’s signal to his destroyers, “shoot and ram them without regard to your

neighbours.” If an attack had come, it would have been a bloody business.

Dawn on the 25th came clear with full visibility. The horizon was free, and a force of light-cruisers sent back to search along the track reported nothing in sight. It seemed almost too good to be true. Of what could the enemy be thinking?

The day passed and the night came. Early on the morning of the 26th the *Lion*, passing by St. Abb’s Head and the Bass Rock, was safely in the Firth of Forth after a perilous passage of over thirty-six hours.

“Thank God she’s home!” muttered Hendry with a sigh of heartfelt relief, when he realized the great ship was finally out of danger, and turned to leave the bridge which he had hardly vacated for three days.

He had every reason to be grateful. The expected submarine or destroyer attack had not come to pass. The enemy had missed their chance, though their wireless *communiqué* was shouting to the world that the *Lion* had been sunk.

“The cheek of the blighters!” snorted Pardoe, full of righteous indignation, when, after tea in the wardroom on the day of the *Libyan*’s return to Harwich, he read this titbit of information in an English newspaper. The newly arrived mail, several bags of it, had just been sorted and served out.

“And what’s biting you, young man?” Mutters queried, looking up from a letter.

“The Germans are saying they’ve sunk the *Lion*,” the sub exclaimed. “They’re nothing but ruddy liars!”

“Lucky for us they did think so,” Kerrell said.

“Lucky?” said Pardoe, rather mystified. “I don’t understand, Number One.”

The first-lieutenant proceeded to explain.

“If they’d realized we were steaming home at the staggering speed we did,” he said, “they’d have sent out every destroyer or submarine they possessed. Even if we’d got the best of them, we’d have had a pretty rotten time, taking things all round.”

“But why on earth didn’t they?” Pardoe wanted to know.

“Because, you chump, they honestly thought the *Lion* had gone west.”

The gunner and ‘young doc’ looked up from their letters.

“For mercy’s sake spit it out, Number One,” growled the engineer-lieutenant-commander. “How the deuce do you expect me to read the latest from my missus if you blokes persist in having an argument, hey?”

Kerrell grinned in friendly fashion.

“All right, chief,” he said. “Keep your wool on. Look here, sub, the *Lion*, like the rest of our battle-cruisers and battleships, has a tripod mast, hasn’t she?”

Pardoe nodded.

“You and your tripod masts!” Mutters grumbled. “What the devil are you driving at now?”

“The only German ship with tripod masts was the poor old *Blücher*,” Kerrell continued, ignoring the interruption. “That Zeppelin we saw probably noticed the *Lion* fall out of the line towards the end of the scrap. It was a thickish day overhead with low clouds, you’ll remember, and presently old man Zepp loses sight of the *Lion*. Some time later, though, she saw a ship with a tripod mast sinking, the *Blücher*, in point of

fact. She thought it was the *Lion*, and coming along with that cursed aeroplane, they showered bombs on what they thought were our boats rescuing her ship's company. They hadn't the ghost of an idea they were strafing their own men. Then the German Admiralty, taking the Zepp's evidence, announces that the *Lion* was sunk. If they didn't honestly think she was done in, why didn't they attack us on the way home?"

"Search me!" said the chief. "But to tell the truth, old boy, I don't give a tuppenny damn one way or another. Here's my missus telling me that little Willy's probably sickenin' for measles, curse it all! That's far more important than your perishin' Zepps and things."

Mutters resumed his letter. He was a much-married man.

CHAPTER VI

ACCORDING to someone who should have known better, the war, so far as the navy was concerned, was said to have resolved itself into ‘periods of dreary monotony punctuated by moments of intense excitement.’

This may have been partially true of the battleships of the Grand Fleet based upon Scapa Flow, which, as the months wore on and enemy submarine activity and minelaying increased, spent less time at sea than during the first feverish outburst of activity in the autumn of 1914. There was no sense in exposing costly and irreplaceable battleships to the danger of mines and submarines merely to carry out haphazard sweeps of the North Sea on the off-chance of finding something to engage. Everybody had expected a fleet action at the very opening of the war, but as the days lengthened into weeks, and the weeks into months, it became more and more evident that the German High Command did not intend to risk the High Seas Fleet in battle.

What the enemy did not seem to realize, however, was that from comparatively early in the war, all their important wireless messages were intercepted and de-coded by expert cryptographers at the Admiralty in London. By this means, and by other grains of intelligence obtained or deduced from here, there, and everywhere, any intended enemy movement on a large scale was known with tolerable certainty before it took place. Then was the time to send the British Grand Fleet to sea.

As a collective force, the High Seas Fleet remained safely and snugly in its harbours, while the offensive was carried on mainly by submarines. It was early in February, 1915, indeed,

that the German Admiralty issued its declaration proclaiming all the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel, to be a war zone in which all British merchant vessels would be liable to destruction 'without its being always possible to avoid danger to the crews and passengers.' Neutral ships, the manifesto added, would also be exposed to danger in the same area, and in view of the fact that the British Government had countenanced the use of foreign flags by British ships (a legitimate ruse of war, let it be added), and the unforeseen incidents to which naval warfare was liable, it would be impossible to avoid attacks on neutral ships in mistake for British.

So far as the light-cruisers, destroyers, and other small craft were concerned, however, and particularly the light-cruisers and destroyers of the Harwich Force and at Dover, the war was never dull and monotonous. Far from it. There was always something going on, and the ships seemed invariably to be at sea.

Toby never forgot one occasion, when, after four days and nights at sea for an air-raid on the Zeppelin sheds at Tondern, an enterprise which eventually had to be postponed on account of fog and bad weather, the cruisers and destroyers returned to Harwich in the early morning. After completing with oil-fuel, they secured to their buoys and reverted to four hours' notice for steam, congratulating themselves on the prospect of a couple of days in harbour which could usefully be employed in making good minor defects and in making up for arrears of sleep.

By the usual perversity of fate the bad weather of the past few days had given way to glorious sunshine with hardly a

cloud in the sky. Everything was calm and peaceful, and by 1 p.m., as usual, a proportion of the *Libyan's* officers and men had been allowed ashore until six.

Hendry, the skipper, who was married and had a house in Dovercourt, had gone to see his wife. Pardoe, the sub, and Hartopp, the 'young doc,' had gone ashore together to take some much-needed exercise in the shape of a strenuous walk, while Foley, the nineteen-year-old Royal Naval Reserve midshipman, who had recently joined the ship, had landed on some mysterious errand about which he had been rather secretive. According to Mr. Huxtable, the gunner (T) who had constituted himself Foley's 'sea daddy,' the snotty, as they all called him, was badly smitten by the charms of a young woman in a tobacco shop at Harwich—"one o' them tow-'eaded hee-haw kind no better'n they should be," as the gunner expressed it. In other words, Mr. Midshipman Foley, free once more from the bonds of parental discipline and more or less his own master, was embroiled in his first love-affair, an affair which Toby, as honorary keeper of Mr. Foley's morals, was wondering how he could tactfully terminate.

So half-past two in the afternoon found Mutters blissfully snoring in his bunk with his scuttle curtains drawn, Kerrell slumbering in an arm-chair in the wardroom with the black kitten curled up on his lap, and Mr. Huxtable in his cabin with his coat off writing his weekly letter to his wife at Portsmouth. Except for the quartermaster on deck and the signalman on the bridge, the rest of the ship's company, laid out on the stools, tables, and lockers on the mess-decks like so many corpses, were also sleeping the sleep of the just.

It was at two-thirty-seven precisely by the chart-house clock that the yawning signalman, having lit a surreptitious cigarette, suddenly whipped the telescope from under his arm and levelled it at some flags creeping to the masthead of the commodore's light-cruiser, the *Arethusa*, a mile and a half down the river. A momentary glance was enough. The top flags were the distinguishing signals for the light-cruisers and the two flotillas of destroyers, while beneath them appeared two flags together—the top one red and triangular in shape, the bottom one square and divided diagonally into yellow and red.

“Sufferin’ Susan!” he exclaimed, rushing to the after side of the bridge and bawling to the quartermaster, who, longing for four o’clock when he also could get his head down after ‘a nice cup o’ tea,’ was aft by the gangway.

“What’s up with you, buntin’?” the leading seaman hailed, strolling casually forward.

“Q.O.’s hoisted!” the signalman roared. “Raise steam with all dispatch an’ report when ready!—Tell the first-lootenant an’ engineer orficer, there’s a good chap!”

The quartermaster, galvanized into activity, ran aft and disappeared down a hatchway like a startled rabbit. Even as he vanished the signal was being repeated at the mastheads of all the other ships in the harbour: Q.O.—the emergency signal to raise steam, the signal which might mean that the enemy were at sea.

The general recall for all officers and men ashore to return to their ships forthwith was hoisted by the *Arethusa* and repeated, and within a minute the still afternoon became dismal and raucous with the prolonged howling of many syrens as one light-cruiser after another took up the tale. The

doleful sound, echoing over the countryside, could hardly avoid being heard in Harwich and Dovercourt, in every place where officers or men might congregate, in each house, in every road and every lane. Those ashore were not allowed more than a certain distance from their ships.

The *Libyan* woke up. Stokers and engine-room artificers, rubbing their sleepy eyes, appeared blinking from their messes and vanished into stokeholds and engine-room. Seamen followed them, to set about reeving boats' falls and slip-rope, and making other preparations for sea. The motor-boat, with the whaler in tow, presently left the ship to bring off the officers and men ashore, while an ever-thickening cloud of black oil-fuel smoke rolled from the *Libyan's* three funnels as she hurriedly raised steam. The reek pouring out of the funnels of every cruiser and destroyer present soon lay over the river like a funeral pall.

“And I was looking forward to a night in!” the engineer-lieutenant-commander grumbled with a prodigious yawn, as he paced the upper deck with Kerrell. “War’s a bloody business!”

“Bloody isn’t the word for it,” the first-lieutenant agreed, watching the oily, black smuts raining down on his paintwork—paintwork that had only been renovated that morning and was still tacky. “Look at that muck! Look at it! Do I ever get a chance of keeping the ship even fairly decent?”

Mutters, who had heard this sort of thing before, took no notice.

“What’s in the wind, d’you think?” he inquired, changing the subject. “Is it a pukka show this time, or only one of these blasted spasms?”

‘Spasms,’ ‘flaps,’ or ‘panics,’ as they were variously called, had occurred again and again, when ships had been ordered to raise steam with all possible speed, only to have it cancelled by the signal ‘Revert to usual notice for steam’ when everybody had been recalled from leave and all vessels were ready to slip from their buoys. And more often than once ‘Q.O.’ had been made and cancelled twice or three times in the course of twenty-four hours.

“Are we really going to sea, or are we not?” Mutters asked again.

“Blowed if I know,” Kerrell replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’m no blinkin’ oracle. What’s really worrying me is how long it’ll take us to get all our braves on board. When will you have steam, chief?”

The engineer looked at his wrist-watch.

“We’re allowed a couple of hours,” he answered. “But I’m pushing things. So far as the engines and kettles are concerned, we’ll be ready to move in an hour and a half—say at ten or twenty past four.”

“Then I hope to heaven they’ve all heard the recall,” the first-lieutenant observed, gazing anxiously shorewards.

“I hope to heaven the wardroom steward has!” Mutters grunted. “We’ve hardly a bite of food left on board, the gunner tells me. D’you remember the time the fool got left behind and we lived for nearly a week on corned beef and ship’s biscuit?”

“And tinned rabbit and the coxswain’s haricot beans,” Kerrell put in with a laugh. “Lord! That was an empty-belly trip, if you like.”

The chief made a wry face at the recollection.

“I wonder if the bloke in the contract department at the Admiralty who invented tinned rabbit has ever eaten the beastly stuff?” he asked. “It’s like eating chewed blotting-paper mixed up with boiled string with a few bones chucked in here and there for the sake of local colour. Ugh! I wonder they even trouble to skin the beasts!”

“They wouldn’t, unless they used the fur for making hats. All our tinned rabbit comes from Australia. The men won’t look at it. They say the Admiralty buys up all the carcasses cheap, boil ’em, shove ’em in tins, and then serve ’em out to the simple sailors. But the simple sailors aren’t having any, bless their hearts, and I don’t blame ’em.—Well, Thomas?” he broke off, as a petty-officer came up and saluted.

“Shall we carry on unshackling from the buoy, sir?”

Toby looked over the side and gauged the strength of the tide.

“I’ll come forward and see to it,” he said.

Ashore, meanwhile, officers and men were streaming back to the landing-places at Harwich and Parkeston Quay, where the boats were waiting to take them off to their ships. They came not singly, but in droves, some afoot, some on bicycles, others crowded into taxis or private cars, sitting on each other’s laps and hanging precariously on the running-boards. Every now and then a pedestrian, fearful of being left behind, broke into a run.

By three-forty-five, to Toby’s infinite relief, the last of the *Libyan’s* liberty men had returned to the ship and the boats were being hoisted. A quarter of an hour later, even sooner than he had originally thought, Mutters went down to the captain’s cabin to report the engines ready. Shortly afterwards Hendry himself appeared on the bridge and the signal ‘Ready

to proceed' fluttered from the masthead. It was acknowledged by the answering pendant from the light-cruiser which carried the Captain (D) in command of the flotilla.

"Better get the hands to their stations, first-lieutenant," the captain said, as ship after ship reported herself ready. "We'll be off at any moment—but have a couple of fenders and a boat-rope ready the starboard side. I see the dispatch boat's going round. She may not reach us until after we've slipped."

Kerrell left the bridge and spoke to the boatswain's mate at the foot of the ladder.

"Special sea duty-men to your stations!" the man shouted after a preliminary twitter from his pipe. "Ha-ands to stations for leaving harbour!"

The ship's company fell in on quarter-deck and forecandle. The fat torpedo coxswain climbed ponderously on to the bridge and took the wheel. His acolytes, the engine-room telegraph men, took their stations beside him. For some minutes they waited, every glass on the bridge turned in the direction of the *Arethusa*.

"Signal to slip, sir!" the signalman shouted, as a pair of flags crept up to the cruiser's masthead, to be repeated or answered by the four other cruisers and upwards of thirty destroyers.

"Signal's down, sir!"

Hendry, after a glance at the destroyers at the buoys ahead and astern, walked to the fore side of the bridge.

"Slip!" he ordered.

Kerrell nodded, and a man on the forecandle struck with a hammer. The slip flew open, and the end of a wire

disappeared through the bull-ring to fall into the water with a splash.

“All clear, sir!” came Kerrell’s hail, as he looked over the bows and the wire was hauled in.

The buoy, relieved of the ship’s weight, surged ahead through the water.

“Half ahead port—Slow astern starboard—Hard a’port!” the captain ordered, his eye on the buoy.

The engine-room telegraph reply gongs tinkled and the helm went over. The stokehold fans started to rumble and the haze at the tops of the funnels deepened as the water swirled and eddied under the *Libyan’s* stern. Swinging to starboard, she started slowly to move ahead.

“Half astern starboard!” came another order. “Ease to fifteen, coxswain!”

“Fifteen it is, sir!”

The ship lost headway and began to pivot on her heel. Three minutes later she was jogging slowly down harbour on the last of the ebb, waiting to take her station in the line.

In less than five minutes more the whole of the Harwich Force, some thirty-seven strong, was in motion and proceeding towards the harbour mouth, the ships gradually falling into their stations in the long single line.

It was not until she had travelled for nearly half a mile down-stream that the *Libyan* stopped her engines to allow the belated dispatch boat to come alongside. A letter addressed to the captain was handed up by a marine orderly. Kerrell took it to the bridge.

Tearing open the usual two envelopes Hendry glanced at the contents.

“Keep an eye on the ship, first-lieutenant,” he said, seeing the length of the typewritten document.

For five minutes, while Kerrell kept station on the next ahead, the captain was busy reading.

“Lord!” he exclaimed at last, permitting himself to smile a little. “This looks like the real thing. Here, first-lieutenant, have a look at it. I’ll look out for the ship.”

He handed the paper across.

Never before had Hendry shared any secret with his subordinates. Never once had he told Kerrell what was contained in his sailing orders, far less shown them to him. But to-day, for some inscrutable reason, he was more communicative, and seemed anxious to share his news. He actually looked pleased and cheerful—for once, quite human. What had come over the man?

Kerrell, marvelling at the change, took the typewritten paper and read. One of many hectographed copies, it was marked ‘Secret’ and signed by the Commodore himself. The opening paragraph ran as follows:

“A flotilla of eleven enemy destroyers is expected to leave Wilhelmshaven at 2 p.m. to-day to relieve one of the flotillas now at Zeebrugge. It will probably proceed south, skirting the Dutch coast.

“Take the necessary steps to intercept and bring them to action. Cruisers and destroyers are not to proceed into mined areas or neutral waters unless in actual contact with the enemy. Vice-Admiral Dover has been notified, and may have destroyers at Thornton Ridge from midnight. No British submarines are at sea in the area.”

The memorandum went on to give in detail the positions and movements of the Harwich Force during the night, and in its final paragraph emphasized the necessity for strict wireless silence except for the usual reports if the enemy were sighted.

“It certainly looks like business, sir,” Kerrell agreed, handing the document back to the captain as the little ship rounded Landguard Fort in the wake of her next ahead.

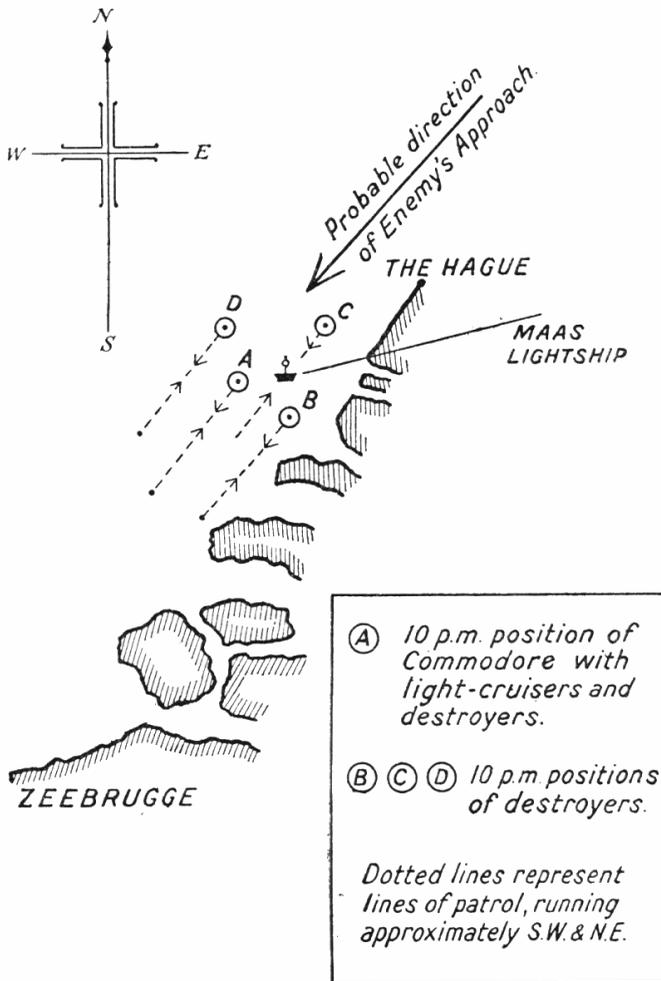
“It might,” Hendry said. “However, have the positions plotted on the chart. I’ll look at them later.”

Toby went to the chart-house, where for some minutes he and Pardoe were busy with parallel rulers and dividers.

Drawn roughly on a signal pad, the Commodore’s plan seemed quite simple and effective. Its success depended upon the authenticity of the information of the enemy’s movements upon which it was based.

The indented line H Z represented the Dutch coast from the Hague and past the mouths of the Schelde to Zeebrugge in Belgium, a distance of about fifty miles. Z represented Zeebrugge itself, and M the Maas Lightship off the Hook of Holland. At 10 p.m. the Commodore, with all his light-cruisers and eight destroyers—Force A—was to be seven miles west of the Maas, and would start patrolling a line, fifteen miles long, running approximately south-west and north-east. His speed would be fifteen knots, and he would turn every hour. The other destroyers were to be divided into three groups, each consisting of a flotilla-leader and seven or eight T.B.D.’s to be known as Forces B, C, and D. Disposed in triangular formation twelve miles apart, with B at the bottom of the triangle about seven miles south-east of the Commodore’s group, they also were to patrol south-west and

north-east at a speed of fifteen knots, turning each hour. The enemy, coming south along the coast, could hardly avoid being sighted by one or another of them if the weather remained clear. All ships were particularly cautioned not to leave their patrol lines unless specifically ordered to do so, or in actual contact with the enemy. The reason for this was obvious. Four separate groups steaming about the ocean at high speed on a dark night might lead to regrettable incidents in which friend might open fire upon friend.



“Which lot are we?” Hendry inquired, glancing at Kerrell’s diagram.

“Force B, sir, at the bottom here.”

The captain pursed his lips.

“I should think the bunch at C have the best chance,” he grunted.

“It seems rather on the lap of the gods, sir,” Kerrell replied. “A mere matter of luck.”

“Is there a moon to-night?” Hendry asked, glancing overhead at the dappled sky.

“No, sir.”

“So much the better. If we do sight ’em, it’ll be at fairly close quarters, and something’s bound to happen.”

By the time the sun had set in a riot of scarlet and orange and purple, the Harwich Force had left Orfordness and the Shipwash Light-vessel behind. An hour later darkness had come, and with every light extinguished, and guns and torpedo-tubes manned, cruisers and destroyers were steaming eastward at twenty knots. There was hardly a breath of wind. The sea was glassy and the visibility good. Everything—everything now depended upon clear weather and the absence of fog.

CHAPTER VII

IT was past 3 a.m., the darkest and chilliest hour of the morning. For the third time since reaching the patrol line five hours before, the *Libyan*, having arrived at its southern end, had again turned to the north-eastward in the wake of the ship ahead. She was third in the long line of eight destroyers.

Though the night was dark and the sky heavily overcast, the visibility was good. There was a slight haze or sea-fret hanging over the low-lying Dutch coast to the eastward, but lights could be seen at their full distance. Throughout the patrol the regular winking of the Maas Lightship had been clearly discernible to the north. From the south-west came the blink of the light-vessel marking the Schouwen Bank, from the south the flash of a shore lighthouse.

The sea was calm and the night intensely still. Moving at fifteen knots the ship slipped along without much fuss or commotion—merely the rhythmic plop and gurgle of the bow-wave, and the hiss of parted waters alongside, mingled with the regular humming throb of the fans in the stokehold uptakes.

Every now and then snatches of conversation from the crew of the forecastle's 4-inch gun, sitting on deck beside their weapon, came to the ears of those on the bridge. Someone on deck occasionally whistled a monotonous little tune, while another man had tried to enliven the monotony and banish his sleepiness by starting to sing a lugubrious ditty beginning with the words, 'She was only a fireman's daughter, but her heart was a heart of gold.' His effort, by no means tuneful, had instantly been nipped in the bud by a

chorus of groans and catcalls and cries of “Cheese it, Birdie! For Gawd’s sake, cheese it!”

And even Hendry the austere had been forced to smile when a loud and plaintive voice, the voice of the cook’s mate, was heard to demand: “ ’Oo’s pinched me purple boots? Carn’t even leave me muckin’ boots in the galley but some perishin’ son o’ sin of a sailor must bleedin’ well nick ’em!”—“ ’Oo in ’ell wants yer ruddy boots, you blistered water-spoiler?” another voice chimed in. “You give me that blazin’ cocoa wot you promised an’ look sharp about it!”—“You don’t get no muckin’ cocoa till I finds me boots!” the cook’s mate was heard to retort. “I carn’t even take the blinkin’ things ’orf for a drop o’ shut-eye but one o’ you lop-eared bleeders must—— Blimey! Sorry, mate. ’Ere they are, all the time! Strike me blinkin’ well crimson if I ’avn’t bin usin’ ’em for a pillow an’ forgot all abart it!” More apologies. Then silence.

The night was still, but above the sounds of the ship there came an insistent rumble like the growling of distant thunder, now swelling almost to a dull roar, now dying away to a muffled throbbing like the beating of far-away drums. It was the everlasting clamour of guns, the guns massed on the Western Front, which, eighty miles away to the southward, came down to the sea close by the little Belgian village of La Panne.

“Poor devils!” Hendry murmured, thinking of the troops in their trenches. “They never get a rest.”

Being in the navy had its advantages. One had a pretty ghastly time occasionally, and little sleep, especially in a destroyer in bad weather. There were few of the usual amenities of life when actually at sea, while at any moment

of the day or night the ship might find herself in action. But anything was better than wallowing waist-deep in the mud and filth of the trenches under constant shell and rifle fire. Moreover, in a ship, however small, one carried one's home with one, and in harbour it was possible to have a bath and a change into dry clothing.

The captain had not left his bridge since the patrol started. With a pipe between his teeth, he stumped nervously up and down, to and fro, with his hands in the pockets of his duffle coat. He paused every few moments to sweep the dark horizon with his glasses, to look at the compass, or to peer at the chart on the dimly lit chart-table.

Throughout the night Toby and Pardoe had taken alternate two-hour spells of duty on the bridge, and three o'clock in the morning found the sub actually on watch beside the captain. The first-lieutenant could legitimately have been asleep in his cabin if he had wished to be, and he was deadly tired. But he had not the heart to sleep when the guns and torpedo-tubes were fully manned, and their crews awake and watchful. It was up to him to set an example. Moreover, weary as he was, he was in no real mood for slumber. The ceaseless muttering of those distant guns was disquieting. The air seemed charged with ominous foreboding, and he had a strong presentiment that something might happen, and happen quickly. He had no wish to find himself below when it did, to scramble hurriedly on deck with his eyes unaccustomed to the darkness.

Instead, he prowled about the upper deck, visiting the men at their guns, stopping sometimes to talk to Mutters, who, wrapped in an oilskin and many mufflers, dozed on the warm casing beside the hatch of the engine-room, or to Mr. Huxtable, who, fair weather or foul, could never be

persuaded really to leave his beloved torpedo-tubes when they were cleared away at night and ready for action. If those torpedoes were fired, they would be fired suddenly, and the responsibility for their straight running and correct depth-keeping rested with the gunner (T) and his torpedo-men. Torpedoes were nervy, erratic things, almost human in their perversity and personal idiosyncrasies. If he were there to see them leave their tubes, they might behave themselves as all good torpedoes should. If he were not, they would most assuredly retaliate by playing him false, either by wandering in a curve due to a gyroscope failure, or by diving deeper than the six feet for which they were set. The ‘mouldies’ were Mr. Huxtable’s children. His was the hand that petted and coaxed them, his the brain that diagnosed their interior ailments—and they wanted some diagnosing.

Mr. Midshipman Foley, however, had no such qualms about remaining awake, nor had the young doctor. Descending to the hermetically sealed and stuffy wardroom to brew himself a cup of cocoa and to nibble a ship’s biscuit, Kerrell found them both fully dressed and fast asleep on the settees on either side of the mess under the rows of scuttles. Hartopp lay with his head on the brown canvas haversack marked with the red cross which contained his bandages and lint and dressings, while a pocket instrument case lay on the table beside him. The snotty reclined on his back with his mouth wide open, and Kaiser, the wardroom black kitten, coiled up asleep in the crook of his arm. Kerrell hadn’t the heart to disturb them. They were both young. If anything were sighted and the ship went into action, the alarm gongs would give them sufficient warning.

Returning on deck and dodging under both pairs of torpedo-tubes, which were trained out on either beam and whose lips extended almost to the ship's side, Kerrell wandered forward, to halt for a moment at the foot of the ladder leading to the forecastle. He was on the upper deck, his eye at a height of about fourteen feet above the water, and looking out on the starboard bow he almost immediately noticed that to the east-north-east and east there was no longer any rigid line of demarcation between sea and sky. The horizon had become indistinct, blurred and nebulous, which could only mean one thing. The low-lying haze over the land must gradually be thickening and moving seaward.

His binoculars, a pair of 12-power Goertz's with wide object glasses, were slung round his neck on their strap, and instinctively, without stopping to think, he raised them to his eyes. The mist, which was still some distance away, was not really thick. It seemed to be lying in thin wisps and streamers and patches a few feet over the surface of the sea, and in places he could see well through it. The wreathing eddies of vapour might unite later to form fog, but now, at any rate, the visibility was still fairly good.

He was swinging his glasses forward for the last time preparatory to putting them down, when he suddenly held them rigid. Fine on the starboard bow their powerful magnification had shown him a long horizontal layer of inky black cloud over the low-lying bank of haze. It seemed rather unnatural and out of keeping with the pervading greyness of the sky. Was it cloud? Was it something else—smoke?

It was indistinct, probably invisible to the naked eye, and hardly daring to breathe lest he should lose it, he kept the glasses to his eyes. And as he watched the dark smear seemed

gradually to be lengthening out to the right and becoming more and more distinct.

By God! It was smoke—smoke, and there, faintly visible as darker shadows in the mist itself, were the ships who were making it!

There were several of them, in close formation. They carried no lights, and in a second or two, trembling with excitement, Toby could even see the whitened blur of their bow-waves. They were at a distance of between three and four miles, steaming fast on a course approximately opposite and parallel to the *Libyan's*.

As yet there were no signs that the strange ships had been seen from the bridge—no sudden clanging of the engine-room telegraphs to show that the ship had increased speed, no clamour of alarm gongs to warn everybody that action was imminent. Toby did not wait. Darting up the two steep ladders he arrived breathless at Hendry's side.

“Captain, sir!” he exclaimed, seizing him by the elbow. “There are ships fine on the starboard bow coming the opposite way!”

“Where?” Hendry demanded.

“Roughly two points on the starboard bow!” Toby said, pointing and levelling his binoculars. “I saw them from the upper deck!”

“Are you dead certain?” Hendry growled, after a few moments' unsuccessful scrutiny. “I can't see anything.”

His voice was full of doubt, almost as though he imagined Toby were suffering from hallucinations.

“I saw them a moment or two ago from the upper deck, sir,” the younger officer replied, still peering. “But—but I

can't see them now.”

Hendry laughed, rather unpleasantly.

From the upper deck, low down over the water, the strange ships had been clearly visible through Kerrell's powerful glasses. Now, from perhaps twenty feet higher, they seemed to have been completely swallowed up in the haze. But their smoke still persisted. It was smoke. He was certain of it.

“Do you see that long dark patch, sir, low over that bank of mist?” he asked, beside himself with anxiety lest his information should be disbelieved and an opportunity lost.

“Yes.”

“If you follow it to the right you'll see it's gradually lengthening out, sir. And——”

“I've got 'em!” the captain suddenly broke in, his voice thrilling with excitement. “Pardoe!” he added over his shoulder, without moving the glasses from his eyes.

“Sir?”

“Alarm gongs, quick!”

A deafening metallic clangour resounded throughout the ship as the sub-lieutenant pressed a bell-push on the bridge. Before it had even died away men could be heard rushing to their action stations and closing up round their guns.

“I can see 'em plainly now!” Hendry murmured. “It was damned good work on your part to spot 'em, first-lieutenant! Jolly good!”

Toby felt an inward glow of satisfaction. It was the first real compliment the captain had ever paid him.

“Shall I get the guns on them, sir?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes! Yes!” the lieutenant-commander hurriedly exclaimed, the glasses still to his eyes.

Toby moved to the centre of the bridge and spoke down a voice-pipe to someone in the transmitting station in the chart-house beneath.

“Gun’s crews, close up!—On loading lights! Range—five five double oh! Deflection—two oh right!—Repeat, man, repeat, can’t you?—Yes, that’s it.... Bearing, sir?”

“Green three five approximately,” Hendry told him.

“Bearing—green three five,” Toby continued. “Enemy destroyers!”

“Don’t load yet!” the captain said. “Wait for orders.—What’s our leader doing?”

Toby looked up and peered ahead.

“Nothing,” he answered. “She’s still steering the same course and hasn’t increased speed.”

“Then she hasn’t seen them!” Hendry exclaimed. “Lord! They’re as plain as a pikestaff!—Signalman?”

“Sir?”

“Whistle up the—no, run down to the wireless office and tell them to make ‘Enemy destroyers steering sou’-west.’ Quick, man, quick! Get a wriggle on!”

The signalman tumbled down the ladder. He needed no encouragement.

The shapes of the approaching vessels could now be seen with the naked eye. Their range was dropping fast.

“Damn it!” the lieutenant-commander grumbled, stamping on the deck with impatience. “I can’t stand this! Those fellows ahead are doing nothing! They’re all ruddy well blind!—What d’you say, Kerrell? Shall I haul out of the line and go for ’em bald-headed?”

“I would, sir,” Toby replied, his nerves tingling. “If they’re Germans we can’t do wrong to engage.”

“Of course they’re Germans!” Hendry muttered to himself. “Port ten, coxswain! Full speed both!”

“Port ten it is, sir!”

The coxswain moved his wheel. The *Libyan’s* bows swung to starboard, and as the engine-room reply gongs clanged, the ship seemed to leap ahead through the water. The telegraphs to ‘full speed’ was an emergency signal to the engine-room, and Mutters, forewarned by the sounding of the alarm gongs that something unusual was happening, was giving the turbines every ounce of steam he could.

“Midships!” Hendry ordered. “Meet her starboard.—Steady so!”

The ship was heading for the centre of the enemy flotilla.

“Enemy right ahead!” Toby ordered to the man who had now come to the voice-pipe. “Range four thousand! Deflection—two oh right!”

The orders were repeated.

“Shall I load, sir?”

“Carry on,” said the captain. “But don’t open fire till I tell you.”

“All guns—load!”

They heard the hollow thump as the projectile was rammed home into the breech of the forecastle 4-inch. Then the metallic sound of the brass cartridge, followed by the clang of the breech-block closing behind it.

“Ready!” a man shouted.

“Range—three five double oh!” Toby passed down, and then, after a pause—“Three thousand!”

“Is our next astern following?” Hendry suddenly asked, his eyes still on the enemy.

“Yes, sir,” the leading signalman answered. “They’re all comin’ round after us.”

“Thank heaven for that! We shan’t be alone. First-lieutenant?”

“Sir?”

“If I have an opportunity of ramming, I shall take it. Otherwise we shall engage on parallel courses with guns to port. I shall run in to point-blank range.—Have both sets of tubes trained to port!—Tell the gunner to fire if he gets a decent chance!”

“Aye, aye, sir,” said Toby, with a coolness that he did not feel. His mouth felt dry. His heart was pounding with suppressed excitement, pounding in a manner that he had never known it throb before.

“Range—two five double oh!”

The suspense was becoming almost unbearable.

The two groups of destroyers, steaming at full speed, were approaching each other at the rate of about sixty knots, the speed of a fast railway train—2,000 yards a minute, 100 yards a second. The enemy seemed to be drawing slightly across the *Libyan’s* bows.

From 2,500 yards the distance dropped rapidly to 2,000, and from 2,000 to a bare 1,500. The enemy were now plainly to be seen with the naked eye—a line of rushing black shapes with plumes of white water curling up from their sharp bows, and huge white wakes astern. A pall of dense smoke trailed in the sky behind them. Two of them were flaming redly at the funnels.

Gazing at them through glasses, Toby could see five or six ships in the nearest column, and others beyond. They each had a couple of widely spaced, upstanding funnels and two tall masts—German, without any possible vestige of doubt. It was unnecessary to make the ‘Challenge.’

“Our leader’s altering course this way, sir!” someone shouted.

“Damn the leader!” Hendry muttered. “It’s too late now!”

Toby heard an order given to the coxswain, who grunted in reply and put the helm over. The Libyan heeled over under full helm with the water nearly washing over her deck as she started to turn to get on a parallel course to the enemy and slightly on his starboard bow.

“All guns!” Toby shouted. “Range two thousand!—No deflection!—Point of aim, bridge of leading enemy destroyer.”

It was a breathless moment.

Hardly had he spoken when a series of brilliant reddish-golden flashes rippled down the side of the enemy’s leading ship. Almost simultaneously, his second and third ships also opened fire.

With the crashing thud of the salvos, there came an eerie whistling and whining overhead as the shell drove through the air. Where they pitched Kerrell had no time to see, for the next instant, when the ship had been steadied on a slightly converging course with the hostile leader slightly abaft the beam, Hendry gave the order to open fire.

“All guns!” Toby howled. “Independent—commence!”

With a crash and a dazzling burst of flame, which for the moment blinded everyone on the bridge, the *Libyan’s* guns

fell to work as fast as the men could ram home projectiles and cartridges.

The range was a thousand yards, and still closing.

CHAPTER VIII

TOBY'S impressions of what happened during the next ten minutes were so vague and nebulous that he never could afterwards describe what actually took place. In the intense stress and excitement of close fighting he lost all count of time. Seconds seemed lengthened into minutes. Looking back, he merely remembered a string of semi-isolated scenes and incidents, some vivid, some absurdly trivial.

The two groups of destroyers, the one British and the other German, approached each other on slightly converging courses at speeds of nearly thirty knots. From a thousand yards their distance apart rapidly dwindled to 500, and from 500 to a bare ship's length, sometimes less.

Hell was let loose.

The air shook and thundered to the roaring of guns, intermingled with the whinnying screech of oncoming shell, the swishing 'plop' as they struck the water alongside, and the clang of riven metal as they drove home and burst. Sometimes, above the din, came the deep, intermittent 'boomp—boomp—boomp' of a 2½-pounder pom-pom, and the wicked, stuttering cacophony of machine-guns.

Toby, doing his utmost to control the fire and to prevent the excited gunlayers from firing wildly into space, had the greatest difficulty in making himself heard above the uproar. At times he was all but blinded by the reddish-golden flashes of the *Libyan's* guns, while at others the view was blotted out by clouds of cordite smoke, the reek from the funnels, and the ghostly grey-white splashes of enemy shell falling short. The ship seemed literally smothered in spray fountains, now

close at hand, now distant. An occasional crash and thud showed that she was being hit, and hit repeatedly. One great spout of whitened water, leaping into the air a few feet from the ship's side, curled over and deluged everyone on the bridge and forecastle as it tumbled in ruin.

The ship shuddered to the discharge of her weapons and the thrust of her turbines driving her at high speed. The air was full of the acrid taste of burning cordite and the sickening tang of oil-fuel.

Toby's mouth was parched. There was a taste at the back of his throat as though he wanted to be physically sick. His knees felt as though they were made of jelly. His hands trembled a little, and his voice sounded strained and unnatural as he shouted his orders.

In truth he felt desperately afraid, not so much for himself and his own safety, but for the ship and her men.

Glancing aft from time to time he wondered how the guns and torpedo-tubes on the exposed upper deck were enduring this tornado of fire; thought to himself that the ship seemed absurdly long, a huge and a vulnerable target at so close a range.

Her steel sides were not much thicker than the covers of a novel, and would keep out nothing larger than a rifle bullet or the smallest of shell splinters. The hull was crammed with a mass of complicated machinery. There were the engine and boiler-rooms, the steering gear, the magazines and shell-rooms, the bridge, which was the nerve centre of the ship. One lucky hit might blow her sky-high, or bring her to a standstill.

Through the rifts in the smoke and spray fountains he caught occasional glimpses of their immediate enemy,

slightly abaft the port beam. She was steaming at full speed, her sharp knife-bow cutting through the water and sending up a cascade of spray. Sometimes she seemed a full two hundred yards distant, at others so close that he could see the dark figures of the men on her deck. At such point-blank range it seemed impossible for any gun to miss; but missing some of them obviously were. Splashes were darting out of the water beyond her.

“Check—check—check!” he heard himself shouting to the man at the voice-pipe, preparatory to transmitting a new order to the guns. “Point of aim—waterline of leading destroyer! Under the bridge!”

For a moment the *Libyan's* guns ceased their uproar, and then, as the order was given, again broke into rapid firing.

Hendry, who had been calmly conning the ship, turned to give some order to the coxswain.

At the same moment there came an appalling crash from somewhere on the upper deck close to the foremost funnel. It was followed almost instantaneously by a great splash of vivid red flame and a wave of hot air, then a metallic clanging as the splinters of the exploding shell drove into the funnel and deck fittings. The air suddenly seemed full of droning hornets. The port telegraph-man, who was standing within two feet of Toby, suddenly collapsed and slid sobbing to the deck. He was dead almost before he reached it—a jagged sliver of steel through his neck.

“’Ere, you, Hastie!” shouted the coxswain, releasing the wheel for a moment and reaching out with his left hand to seize an awe-struck signal rating by the shoulder. “Don’t stand there gapin’! Pull ’im outer the way. Then take the telegraph, an’ do what I tells you!”

“Port ten!” Hendry ordered over his shoulder.

“Port ten it is, sir!” the coxswain repeated imperturbably, twiddling the wheel as though he were taking the ship alongside a dock and jetty. Nothing ever worried Chief-Petty-Officer Bewles, nothing, that is, except that part of his duty which related to store-keeping, a task he cordially detested.

“Pardoe!” the captain shouted.

“Sir?”

“Go aft,” Hendry began. “No,” he went on to correct himself. “Take over the fire control!”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“First-lieutenant!” Hendry went on to say, putting his mouth close to Toby’s ear to make himself heard above the uproar. “I’m going to haul off a bit, then ... turn ... try to ram! Can’t knock ’em out ... gunfire. Go aft ... aft, possible chance ... torpedo! Hurry up, slap one in if you can!... Then come ... come back here. Understand?”

Toby did understand.

Surprised that the captain could think coherently at such a time, he pushed his way to the port bridge ladder and found himself on the forecastle. Looking down he saw the steel ladder to the upper deck was all twisted and bent. The whaler, turned inboard on its davits, was hanging in two halves, splintered and unrecognizable. Tongues of red flame were streaming out of many jagged rents in the foremost funnel, which seemed perforated like a gigantic colander. Somewhere amongst the debris below he could hear a man moaning and cursing and crying in agony.

“Oh, Gawd! Oh, Gawd!” came his piteous wail. “Oh, me bleedin’ legs!—Christ! Won’t someone give me a ’and?—Oh

Gawd!—Ginge, ole chum, where the 'ell are you? For the love o' Gawd come 'ere an'——”

But 'Ginge' was dead, blasted into little pieces by the same shell. So were Nobby Hewitt, and Shiner White, and several others. There was nobody to help. Until there came a lull in the action the wounded must be left where they lay, on the steel deck with the spray swishing over them as the ship turned at high speed.

With the poor fellow's agonized blasphemy and entreaties ringing in his ears, Toby made his way across the narrow strip of deck abaft the wireless-room, descended the starboard ladder, and went aft along the encumbered upper deck.

The midship gun, between the second and third funnels, was still in hot action. In the dim blue illumination of the shaded loading light and the brilliant gun flashes, he could see that the sweating crew had stripped to their flannels. They looked unearthly, like demons dancing eerily on the brink of some bottomless inferno as they rammed home projectiles and cartridges, grunting and shouting.

“Ready!” someone cried, as the breech-block closed with a thud.

The weapon flared redly at the muzzle as the gunlayer pressed the trigger and sent another 31-pound shell hurtling towards the enemy. The gun recoiled on its mounting, ejecting the spent brass cartridge-case through its automatically opened breech. A pile of spent cylinders lay on the deck in rear of the gun platform, they, and a couple of prone human figures, either dead or wounded—Toby could not stop to investigate.

Mutters was not in his customary station at the top of the engine-room hatch. He was probably below, driving the ship, and Kerrell noticed with satisfaction that there were no signs of damage below. The turbines were still buzzing round with their usual rhythm.

Going farther aft Toby came to the foremost pair of torpedo-tubes. Their crews also had suffered, for a wounded man lay on the deck with another attending him.

But Mr. Huxtable, thank heaven, was still seated on his little wooden saddle between the tubes looking along the director in front of him. Toby climbed up on to the revolving platform.

“We’re hauling off a bit!” he shouted in the gunner’s ear. “The skipper says ... may get a chance to fire, so stand by!”

“I’m watching ’em,” Mr. Huxtable grunted in reply, gazing out through the dimly lit sights of his director towards where, on the port quarter, he could see the long black shape and white bow-wave of the leading enemy destroyer, now at a distance of about 600 yards. “Haven’t had no chance yet, sir. These blinkin’ torpedoes dives deep for the first three hundred yards or so ... no good ’gainst destroyers ... close range ... goes underneath ’em.”

The gunner seemed strangely cool and collected, very intent on the business in hand.

“What’s it been like here?” Toby howled. “We’ve been hit _____”

“Stand by!” Mr. Huxtable suddenly interrupted, lowering his hands to a couple of little steel levers on either side of his legs. “Look out, sir! Sights just coming on!”

He had lost his imperturbability. His voice trembled with excitement.

The *Libyan* seemed to be turning slightly towards the enemy. The next moment the gunner pulled the right-hand lever.

There was a moment's suspense. Then, simultaneously with a slight shock and the muffled, ringing report of the powder impulse charge, the torpedo leapt roaring out of its tube and splashed into the sea. For an instant its whitened track could be seen as it sped towards the enemy at thirty-five knots.

"Give 'em another for luck!" Mr. Huxtable muttered to himself, pulling the left-hand lever towards him.

There came another report, and a second great silver fish dived into the water.

Mr. Huxtable sat upright and drew a hand across his forehead, while keeping his eyes fixed upon the leading enemy, now all but obscured in a cloud of funnel smoke through which still could be seen the flashing of her guns.

But she was no longer firing at the *Libyan*. The shell fountains had ceased to spout. Except for an occasional isolated round the *Libyan's* guns had ceased firing.

Toby found himself vaguely wondering what had occurred. Had the bridge and the fire-control communications been put out of action?

Meanwhile, what had happened to those two torpedoes?

Æons of time seemed to have passed since they had left their tubes. At thirty-five knots how long would it take them to travel about six or seven hundred yards? He tried to work it out in his head.

“We’ve missed!” Mr. Huxtable exclaimed fiercely, after waiting for what seemed an eternity. “Damn and blast these noo-fangled gadgets! Why in hell can’t they——”

But he spoke too soon. He had no time to complete his sentence before a huge dome-shaped hummock of whitened water tinged with flame rose into the air at the side of the leading enemy destroyer.

“Hit, by God!” the gunner shouted, jumping to his feet, hitting himself on the chest, and laughing like a maniac.

There came the reverberating, crashing thud of a mighty explosion, deeper and more shattering than any they had heard before—the under-water detonation of 500 pounds of T.N.T.

The mushroom-shaped hump burst upwards and lengthened out into a great whitish-grey pillar over a hundred feet high, completely shrouding the ship beyond it. It hung for a moment, then tottered and fell with the sound of a rushing waterfall, to show the ends of the stricken ship standing blackly out of the water. Her bow-wave had vanished. A shroud of smoke and steam hung over her. Hit almost amidships, her frail hull had been blown practically in two.

“God!” said Toby in an awe-stricken voice.

Even Mr. Huxtable seemed a little appalled at his handiwork. At one moment the ship at which he had fired had been a living, sentient thing. The next, she was a shapeless, sinking wreck.

“But where’s the other blighted thing gone?” he demanded angrily, suddenly finding his voice.

Where indeed?

Nobody saw it hit. Missing any target the second torpedo probably sped on towards the misty horizon, to sink harmlessly at the end of its run.

On the other side of the sinking ship a line of black shapes with their white bow-waves standing out like plumes could still be seen steaming hard to the southward. They were not firing or being fired upon, for with the roar of the exploding torpedo all gunfire had ceased.

Toby felt the *Libyan's* helm go over as she swerved towards them. He glanced astern; but could see no signs of any other British destroyers. They had vanished in the darkness.

The *Libyan* was alone, and the enemy, leaving their consort to her fate, were using their every effort to escape.

And Hendry did not hesitate. The speed of his ship had been reduced to twenty-four or twenty-five knots by damage to the foremost funnel and boiler; but there was yet another chance of sinking another enemy with the ram. So giving the *Libyan* full helm he turned towards the line of Germans, realizing as he did so that if he missed his own ship would probably be rammed. It was a ticklish moment, the most hair-raising incident of the whole engagement.

Even as Toby started to make his way forward, the whole of the enemy line broke into flame and the sea began to spout in geysers. Again there came that demoniacal whistling and whining as the shell drove through the air. Again he felt that crash and shuddering tremor which showed that the ship had been hit. But the *Libyan's* guns, thank heaven, were answering.

He went forward the starboard side to avoid the belching muzzle of the midship 4-inch.

Pausing for a moment behind the gun platform where he had a comparatively clear view, he saw that the enemy line was barely 150 yards distant. The *Libyan* had steadied on her course, a converging one. She seemed to be pointing for the second ship. Within a few seconds she would either ram—or be rammed.

Toby's place was on the bridge. He was just starting to move forward when there came a crashing thud from overhead and a long tongue of flame leapt out of the second funnel. Something heavy fell with a clang on the deck beside him. Something else whizzed through the air, knocked off his cap, and seared his right cheek. Putting up his hand instinctively it came away wet—wet, and warm, and sticky: blood.

But he felt no pain, merely an intense desire to reach the bridge before something happened. The bridge, that was his station.

Stumbling forward, he reached the foot of the starboard ladder reaching to the forecastle. Simultaneously, there came a blinding sheet of flame from above, followed by a blast of hot air and a shower of debris falling all around him. He realized in a moment that the bridge or chart-house had been struck by a shell.

He started to pull himself up the ladder, only to be hurled backward to the deck as the *Libyan's* bows met something substantial with a shock like an earthquake. Then the crunching jar of tortured, riven metal, followed by the roar of escaping steam and the babel of screaming, shouting men.

Half-dazed, he picked himself up, climbed the ladder, and found himself on the forecastle. Even as he did so, two rushing black shapes roared past in the darkness at the

distance of little more than a few fathoms, so close, indeed, that their wash broke over the *Libyan's* deck.

Rushing forward to where he could see the dim figures of a knot of men in the eyes of the ship, he looked over the bows.

The *Libyan*, lurching heavily, was still moving slowly ahead, her grinding stem embedded half-way through the deck of an enemy destroyer at a point just abaft the bridge. Listing heavily over to port with the water lapping over her deck, the stricken vessel was being pushed bodily through the water, her bows to starboard, and her stern portion, pivoting on the wound, coming closer and closer to the *Libyan*. In another moment she would be alongside.

A cloud of escaping steam from some severed pipe overhung the point of impact; but through the haze Toby could see knots of men clustered on the heeling deck beneath him. They were shouting, yelling. Someone could be heard giving orders.

Then there came the sharp report of a pistol and a bullet whistled overhead.

“So they ’avn’t ruddy well surrendered, the muckers!” grunted a bluejacket, unbuckling his holster and producing a service revolver which he fired into the huddled mass beneath him.

“Stand by with your cutlasses, lads!” a petty-officer yelled. “They’ll be boardin’ in a minute!”

His own men, Toby noticed, all carried unsheathed blades. He blessed the forethought that had caused him to provide a bundle of loosely tied cutlasses at each gun position for just such an eventuality as this.

But something must be done, and done quickly, for the stern portion of the German destroyer with its load of men was nearly alongside.

Leaving the petty-officer to direct operations forward, he rushed aft and climbed the ladder to the bridge.

It was in utter darkness, but his first glance was enough to show him that it was a shambles.

He trod on something soft, which groaned horribly.

“Captain, sir! Captain!” he shouted breathlessly.

There was no reply.

The chart-table had vanished, and so had a portion of the rails and protective mattresses. The wheel, compass, and engine-room telegraphs were wrecked and unrecognizable. The restricted deck space seemed to be carpeted with dead and dying. There was a nauseating, acrid stench as though of something burning.

He stooped down to peer more closely at the huddled bodies, only to be reminded of the work in hand when the *Libyan's* bows finally wrenched themselves free and the stern of the German destroyer came alongside with a crash which shook the ship.

From somewhere aft there came the strident crackle of a Lewis gun playing a stream of bullets at a range of little more than twenty feet on to the enemy crew clustered on deck in the stern of their sinking ship. The burst of firing was followed by a chorus of frenzied screams and shouts of “Comrade!—Comrade!—Save! Save!”

“Do you surrender?” he heard Mr. Huxtable’s voice.

“No!” answered a voice in English.

“Ja! Ja!” came a shouted chorus, followed by further cries of “Camarade!” and “Save! Save!”

“Then put your hands up!” the gunner called back, brandishing his loaded pistol. “Those of you who can, can come aboard. But no actin’ stoopid, mind! If there’s any trouble, I opens fire again, so watch out!”

It was unlikely that the Germans understood his words; but there was no mistaking his meaning.

Kerrell hurriedly left the bridge and went aft to push his way through the throng of men clustered along the *Libyan’s* port rail.

Some were stokers in singlets and grimy fearnought trousers; some were in blue dungaree; others, the bluejackets, in flannels or thick duffle coats or oilskins. But all were armed with pistols, rifles, cutlasses, short iron ‘tommies,’ spanners—anything likely to be of least use as a weapon. Mr. Huxtable had summoned them to ‘repel boarders’ in the good old-fashioned way, and, with the assistance of Mr. Midshipman Foley, who carried a pistol in each fist, had the situation well in hand.

The two ships were crashing and grinding heavily together in the slight swell, the German drifting slowly aft with a heavy list. Her steeply slanting deck was littered with dead and dying; but ropes had been thrown, up which a few of her able-bodied were clambering, to be dragged unceremoniously on board the *Libyan* and made prisoners.

Toby went up to Mr. Huxtable.

“Save all you can,” he told him. “I’m going to back the ship clear. If we remain alongside we’ll get our side stove in. The rest will have to swim.”

He went aft to the engine-room hatch and put his head down it, shouting for the engineer-lieutenant-commander.

A face looked up at him.

“I want the engineer-lieutenant-commander!” Toby repeated.

Mutters himself appeared at the foot of the ladder and climbed ponderously up it.

“Gosh!” he exclaimed, as he reached the top and saw the other’s face illuminated in the light from below. “Your head’s all bloody!”

Toby gingerly dabbed his cheek, which had begun to smart abominably and seemed to be swollen. His chin and white comforter were sticky and horrible with half-congealed blood.

“Never mind me,” he replied abruptly. “Are the engines all right?”

“Right as rain. The foremost boiler’s out of action, that’s all. What’s been happening up top?”

Toby told him in a few breathless sentences.

“The skipper’s probably dead,” he concluded. “The bridge was wiped out just before we collided.”

“Collided!” snorted the engineer. “I thought we’d hit a battleship! You might have warned us. As it was I stopped the engines on my own after the bump. We got no orders, not a damned thing!”

“How the hell could anyone give you orders? I tell you the bridge is wiped out. Everything smashed to blazes, by the look of it, and the skipper killed.”

“Killed?” Mutters repeated. “Good God!”

“Yes, and a good many others as well. But I want the after steering position connected up, and you might send someone forward to see what the damage is. I don’t expect we’ve any bows left under water.”

“I’ll get a man forward now,” said the engineer.

“Then give us a few revolutions astern to get clear of this blighter alongside. She’ll be through our side if we hang on much longer—or probably capsize on top of us!”

Mutters disappeared below, and with the first-lieutenant shouting the necessary orders to a man stationed at the engine-room hatch, the *Libyan* slid slowly free of the wreck, stopping at a distance of about fifty yards.

Toby glanced at his illuminated wrist-watch. It was fourteen minutes to four, about twenty or twenty-five minutes from the time the enemy had just been sighted. In something under half an hour there had been crammed enough incident to last him a lifetime.

Eighteen Germans, some of them wounded, had already been rescued from the wreck. Others saved themselves by swimming after the ships had separated.

Their ship, destroyer S.492, heeled over until she lay practically on her beam ends, and floated for perhaps ten minutes more. Then, flinging her dripping bows skywards like a spear-head, she slowly disappeared from view as though drawn down beneath the surface by some giant hand.

Steaming slowly over the spot the *Libyan* rescued five more of her men who were seen clinging to floating wreckage.

There came a heavy burst of firing from the southward, accompanied by the flashing of distant guns, as Toby,

conning the ship from the after steering position, brought her round to the northward on her course for home.

It was with mingled feelings that, for the first time in his life, he found himself in command of one of His Majesty's ships.

Of the eight officers and men on the bridge, the captain, the coxswain, and three others had been killed outright, Pardoe and the remaining two being wounded. In all, the *Libyan's* casualties amounted to ten killed and fourteen wounded out of a total complement of about ninety-two.

Had it been worth it? Was this loss of life compensated by the sinking of two enemy destroyers and the killing of perhaps 150 German seamen?

He supposed so, otherwise, what was the sense of fighting? Results could not be achieved in war without loss of life, and the public thought nothing of even a spectacular victory unless there was a butcher's bill.

When the first flush of dawn came out of the eastern sky the *Libyan* looked little better than the ship she had rammed and sunk.

Steaming at a bare ten knots, she was down by the bows, her stem plating torn away for about twelve feet above the water-line; and her bottom gone forward for a distance of about thirty feet, so that the decks above had to be shored down with spars and planks to prevent them from buckling upwards under the pressure of water as she forged slowly ahead. She carried a list to port due to hits below the water-line from ricocheting shell which had failed to explode. Her bridge and chart-house, together with the wireless-room behind it, were practically destroyed, the plating twisted and bent in all directions, perforated in a hundred places by shell

splinters and flying fragments. The first and second funnels, torn and gashed, looked like enormous nutmeg graters. The whaler was in splinters, and so was the dinghy in its crutches beneath it. There were holes in the high forecastle and here and there along the deck and hull. The stokers' mess-deck, the wardroom pantry, and the engineers' store had been practically demolished, their contents smashed into smithereens and flung in all directions.

Here and there were traces of fire, and at places on deck there were horrible patches of blood which no scrubbing seemed to eradicate. The coco-nut matting and corticene over the twisted steel deck of the bridge were thick with drying blood. Shreds of clothing, and the horrible remains of what had once been men, were spattered over the remains of the wheel and engine-room telegraphs, the bridge-rail, the searchlight platform—everywhere, as though sprayed from some gigantic hose-pipe.

It was sickening, revolting, horrible to gaze upon—the ghastly butcher's bill.

The *Libyan* was a wreck. Her dockyard defect list would be a yard long, though the torn, smoke-grimed ensign at her peak still fluttered bravely in the morning breeze. And at the truck of her stumpy little mizzen-mast flew the short white pendant with its red St. George's cross, the ancient symbol of command—Kerrell's pendant, since Hendry lay dead on the bunk in his cabin.

Poor Hendry! He had been a difficult man to get on with; but Toby was lost in admiration for the gallant way in which he had fought his ship.

When full daylight came, and the *Libyan* turned west towards the English coast, the calm sea was free of shipping

except for the faintest feather of smoke far away to the northward.

Somewhere over the rim of the horizon the Commodore, collecting his scattered flock, was making the *Libyan's* call sign—calling, calling.

But the *Libyan* answered him not. Her wireless was hopelessly out of action, and the instruments wrecked. Her leading telegraphist had been killed by a shell splinter through the head while sitting in his chair with his left hand on the morse key and a signal pad on the desk before him. His assistant, sorely wounded, lay bandaged and groaning in his hammock on the mess-deck.

Young Hartopp, with his coat off and his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his elbows, was attending to a suffering collection of men in the wardroom, some British, some German. He was helped by the wardroom steward and one of his underlings, whose clumsiness he occasionally anathematized in unmeasured terms.

The place reeked of iodoform, the smell of the methylated spirit lamp under the little saucepan in which he was sterilizing his instruments, the odour of blood, and the stench of crowded humanity.

A man, naked from the waist upwards, lay groaning on the table while having his wounds swabbed and bandaged. Two, already dead, lay in the little lobby outside, waiting to be taken on deck and sewn up in canvas. Others, awaiting their turn, lay on the settees or on the floor among the blood-stained swabs and bandages and rags of torn-up clothing with which it was littered.

The eyes of some of them were closed, as they moaned and breathed stertorously with their pallid faces drawn and

haggard with pain. Some, the more lightly wounded, smoked cigarettes and carried on conversations in whispers while watching the 'young doc' with interested eyes. Their rancour for their late enemies had vanished. Already they were trying to make friends, offering them cigarettes, engaging them in conversation, addressing them as 'Jerry.'

And Hartopp, they noticed, made no distinction between friend and foe. He took the most seriously wounded first, irrespective of nationality.

The bloody butcher's bill, the inevitable price of war.

CHAPTER IX

IT was soon after nine o'clock in the morning that the *Libyan*, limping homeward at a bare ten knots, sighted a light-cruiser with a bone in her teeth coming up from astern. She was at once recognized as British, and within a few minutes had started signalling with her searchlight, making the demand.

The *Libyan* replied with her name.

“Are you in need of assistance?” the *Clytia* asked, foaming up abreast of the destroyer and observing her battered appearance.

Toby replied in the negative.

“Have underwater damage forward caused by collision with enemy destroyer last night,” he added. “Can proceed at ten knots.”

“Indicate casualties,” said the cruiser.

“Captain killed, first-lieutenant in charge,” replied the *Libyan*. “Sub-lieutenant Pardoe seriously wounded. Nine petty-officers and men killed, sixteen wounded. Six prisoners also wounded.”

“Propose sending you medical assistance,” the cruiser said after a short interval.

The two ships stopped within fifty yards of each other, while the cruiser, her side lined with inquisitive men, lowered a cutter, which came pulling across.

“*Libyan!*” shouted the *Clytia*'s captain through a megaphone.

“Sir?”

“What happened last night?”

“We had a running fight with an enemy flotilla soon after three o’clock this morning, sir. We sank one, V.307, with a torpedo, and rammed S.492. I’ve got the survivors on board.”

“You bagged two?” shouted the senior officer, very surprised.

“Yes, sir.”

Kerrell noticed the captain, standing at the end of the bridge, turn to speak to an officer beside him. Then he raised his megaphone again.

“Are you dead certain?” he asked.

“Positive, sir. We’ve the surviving officer and men from S.492 on board. They saw V.307 go up.”

“Then that settles it. I congratulate you. Damned good work! I’ll report to the Commodore by wireless and escort you home. I’ll arrange for a hospital boat and a boat for the prisoners to meet you on arrival.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And you’d better have some sort of a written report ready by the time you get in.”

“Lord!” Toby groaned. Written reports were not in his line, particularly written reports of an engagement in which he hardly knew what had happened.

The *Clytia*’s cutter came alongside with her surgeon and a couple of sick-berth ratings laden with the paraphernalia of their business. The boat returned to her ship and was hoisted. The water swirled and fluttered under the cruiser’s stern as she started to move ahead, and before anyone in the *Libyan* realized what was taking place the larger ship’s men, at a signal from someone on her bridge, were waving their caps and cheering themselves hoarse.

It was good to be cheered, though Toby, overcome by his feelings, nearly wept with emotion. The *Libyan* carried her dead. Cheering seemed incongruous. He wished they hadn't.

It was in the dusk of the same evening, soon after sunset, that the *Libyan* finally crept past Landguard fort and steamed slowly up the winding river on her way to the floating dock for temporary repairs. As she passed the cruisers at their moorings every available glass was levelled upon her, and, at the sound of a whistle, officers and men stood strictly to attention.

But this time there was no cheering. The destroyer's ensign flew at half-mast, for the bodies of her dead, and three enemy dead who had succumbed to their wounds, lay swathed in canvas on the quarter-deck ready for transference to the shore.

She secured temporarily to a buoy while a hospital boat came alongside to disembark the wounded, and another boat with a guard of marines for the prisoners. It was noticeable that most of the Germans went away with little bundles of clothing given them by their captors, while few had been able to retain the crested brass buttons on their pea-jackets. They had been exchanged, as mementos, for packets of cigarettes and sticks of chocolate, for the British seaman is insatiable as a curio hunter. Even the 'young doc' treasured an elastic-sided boot acquired from a wounded officer.

It was at half-past nine at night that a couple of tugs ushered the *Libyan* into the floating dock, and half an hour later the Commodore himself, accompanied by the captain (D) of the flotilla to which she belonged, was on board listening to Toby's story of what had happened.

Before he left, 'Blood Red Bill,' as they affectionately called the Commodore, walked round the ship to inspect the damage as best he could in the darkness, and afterwards addressed the ship's company. What he said was short, terse, and very much to the point, for he was essentially a man of action, one who hated to make speeches. But what he did say made the ship's company feel as though they had been stroked.

"S'trewth!" a man muttered to a friend as they dispersed. "We must be blinkin' heroes!"

"I'm very pleased with the way your ship was fought," the Commodore went on, shaking hands with Toby and Mutters and Mr. Huxtable before leaving the ship. "I'm proud of you."

Toby longed to tell him that he, personally, was anything but a hero; that anything praiseworthy that had been done, had been done by others. But he didn't dare to contradict the tall, kind-hearted man with the fierce face and beetling eyebrows. He merely uttered a mild "Thank you, sir."

"I shall expect your written report to-morrow," the Commodore added. "And don't forget your list of recommendations. This hasn't been an everyday affair, by any means."

Ten minutes later, Toby, and Mutters, and Mr. Huxtable, and little Hartopp, were solemnly drinking bottled beer in the wardroom. It still bore traces of the use to which it had recently been put.

They were all weary, and rather overcome by their feelings.

"Lord!" said Toby, trying to start a conversation. "What the dickens am I to say in this report the Old Man wants?"

“Search me,” said the chief, shrugging his massive shoulders. “There’s something far more important on my mind.”

“What’s that?” they all asked.

“The skipper’s wife,” the engineer replied. “She lives ashore here. She’ll have been told of his death by now; but someone’ll have to go up and see her. She’ll want to know all about it.”

“I’d forgotten that,” Toby murmured. “Who should it be?”

“You for one,” Mutters said. “You know more or less what happened. And I’ll come with you. I’m a bundle^[1] man myself, and Hendry was more or less my contemporary, poor chap. Besides, I know his missus, poor little soul!”

For some minutes they discussed what should be said.

Then Toby noticed Hartopp gazing at him with a rapt expression and his head on one side.

“What’s the matter with you, doc?” he asked.

“I’m looking at that face of yours,” said the embryo surgeon.

“Well, go and look at your own!” the first-lieutenant retorted.

“But that slash across your cheek,” Hartopp protested. “It’s pretty deep, and looks nasty. I saw it when the *Clytia’s* doctor put that dressing on. I’m not certain that a few stitches——”

“To hell with you and your stiches!” Toby laughed. “You needn’t think I’m going on the sick list, or that you’re going to have me as one of your victims, you bloodthirsty sawbones! If you really want to know, the *Clytia’s* doctor said I needn’t worry. It’s merely a scratch, though it did bleed a bit.”

“But suppose it goes septic?”

“It won’t go septic, I’ll look out for that. Anyhow, you’re not going to have my name on your beastly casualty list.”

“But it’s already there,” Hartopp pointed out.

“The devil it is!” Toby snorted. “Well, you can bloomin’ well take it off again!”

“But I can’t. The list’s already gone in. The doctor took it ashore with him. He said there was no need for you to go to hospital, but that you were slightly wounded. He left you in my charge.”

“That be blowed for a yarn!” Toby exclaimed. “The first thing to-morrow morning, my boy, you jolly well go and tell whoever’s responsible that you’ve made a mistake! I won’t _____”

“But how can I?” the young doctor broke in. “You can’t deny that you’re wounded!”

“Wounded be damned! I won’t have my tally on your confounded casualty list. It’s just like your cursed cheek to put it there! Who the blazes is going to run the ship if I go sick? God knows there’s enough to be done in the next few days.”

“Very well,” Hartopp grumbled, shrugging his shoulders. “Have it your own way.”

“Of course I’ll have it my own way! D’you think I’m going to obey you?”

“Then don’t blame me if anything goes wrong,” said the ‘young doc.’ “I’ve done my best. I can’t do more.”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Toby retorted. “You’re not a London specialist yet.”

Hartopp flushed, and opened his mouth to reply.

“Girls! Girls!” Mutters broke in with a smile. “How often have I to tell you that I can’t have these unseemly bickerings? Now kiss and be friends and say no more about it. Why argue? What’s the sense of it?... If you ask me,” he added with a yawn, “it’s high time we all went to bed. We’re all tired and feeling a bit ratty, that’s what’s really the matter.”

Toby grinned at Hartopp, and Hartopp grinned back at him.

Mutters, the oldest member of the mess except for Mr. Huxtable, was a regular Mother Superior to the inhabitants of the wardroom.

THE next few days, until the *Libyan* had been sufficiently patched up to allow her to proceed to the dockyard at Chatham for permanent repairs, were trying ones for all concerned.

Toby, who was left temporarily in command until a new captain had been appointed by the Admiralty, had to produce his report of the engagement, a task which cost him many hours of thought and nearly half a ream of foolscap before he completed it to his satisfaction. He had a track chart to make, principally from memory, and took it upon himself to write personal letters to the next of kin of all the men killed. This, in addition to a hundred and one official details and conundrums, and the usual work of the ship.

Mutters was also hard at it over writing out his 'defect list' in quadruplicate for the benefit of the depot ship and the dockyard when they got there, while Mr. Huxtable, in addition to sweating drops of blood over his detailed list giving the expenditure of 4-inch ammunition, and checking the lot numbers of the cordite actually used, anathematized himself and the world in general when demanding a complete new outfit of wardroom mess-traps.

The shell which had burst in the pantry had scattered its contents far and wide, smashing the crockery to smithereens, denting the silver, disintegrating everything. But for the life of him Mr. Huxtable didn't know whether the *Libyan's* silver-plated soup-tureen, which they never used, was pattern 1964A or 1857B, or the precise official designations of the entrée dishes.

It was worrying, to say the least of it, to have to rack one's wits over the matter of knives, and forks, and tumblers, and plates, and tablecloths, and napkins, and skewers, and 'pins, rolling, wood,' and 'choppers, cooks', wooden handled, Patt. 284B,' when the country was at war. And the gunner was reduced to a state of babbling incoherent blasphemy when his carefully compiled demand was returned by the victualling paymaster of the depot ship, together with a long list of errors and omissions; a request that the commanding officer of the *Libyan* would be good enough to refer to certain articles in the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions as amended by the Addenda thereto; the intimation that all damaged plated-ware must be returned for inspection before new could be issued; and the news that milk-jugs, iron, enamelled, were in any case obsolete, though, when available, were allowed in lieu thereof, in substitution therefor, but not in addition thereto, the standard receptacles in earthenware.

"Look at this, sir! Look at it!" Mr. Huxtable exclaimed in a fury, bursting into Kerrell's cabin waving a sheet of paper and dropping his aspirates in his excitement. "For nigh on six hours I've been sweatin' me guts makin' out this demand, an' now the blinkin' son of 'Am 'oo sits on 'is orfice stool ashore says I've done it wrong! Does 'e think I'm the torpedo gunner of this 'ere ship with a man's job to do, or a perishin' clurk in an 'ardware store?"

He paused for breath.

Toby sympathized.

"'Im an' 'is purple teapots!" the gunner grumbled on. "I've eaten better things than 'im in a salad without really meaning to!"

It cost Toby a visit to the captain of the depot ship before matters were finally put right, and the 'dug out' paymaster, who had seen nothing of the sea except a couple of Zeppelins prowling over Harwich, could be induced to believe that 'lost or damaged in action' covered a multitude of sins.

There were some, even in 1915, who still believed that the war would be won on returns and voluminous paper-work, by close attention to business, and the strict letter of the law. It was irritating, after days and nights at sea in bad weather, for instance, to be greeted on return to harbour with the signal, 'Indicate the numbers of Baptists, Wesleyans, and Congregationalists landed for Divine Service last Sunday. Nil returns should be forwarded in future,' or to have one's attention called to the important fact that the report called for by Admiralty Fleet Order 1619, as to whether the sailors preferred gooseberry jam to plum and apple, if so, why, was six weeks overdue?

A shell which had exploded on the stokers' mess-deck also occasioned a considerable controversy. It had done much damage and started a fire, and producing their charred and tattered garments, which had also been drenched by sea water from hoses and the hole in the ship's side, the stokers requested new kits at government expense. The request was granted within twenty-four hours.

This was almost too good to be true. Free clothing was being showered from heaven like manna upon the wandering Israelites; like the woollen mufflers, balaclava helmets, socks and stockings, which the women of Britain knitted during the first winter of the war, and sent to their ungrateful seamen. These gratuitous, hand-made aids to warmth and comfort had sometimes been used for their legitimate object; sometimes,

as Kerrell had discovered, for the ulterior purpose of cleaning brasswork or oiling guns.

But if the stokers were reclothed at the taxpayers' expense because the ship had been in action, why not also the seamen? Indeed, why not everybody in the ship? Sauce for the goose was sauce for the gander. Share and share alike was a good motto, so the seamen communed together among themselves.

And presently one man after another came aft with a mournful face, a specious yarn, and an armful of tattered exhibits for inspection—well-worn trousers and jumpers which had been carefully and realistically torn and cut as though by shell splinters, charred with lighted matches or singed before the galley fire, and finally dipped in a bucket of sea water; patched underwear, well-darned socks. Practically every man in the ship had had holes blasted in the soles of his boots by enemy shell-fire.

It mattered not that the stokers' mess-deck was the only one that had been really damaged, and that the upper mess-deck inhabited by the seamen was largely untouched. It required the wisdom of a Solomon, the patience of a Job, and the cunning of a detective to convince all and sundry that they also were not entitled to free kits.

Toby's decisions in the matter, which were scrupulously fair, were received with some heartburning. For some hours the news of the free issue to the stokers nearly occasioned a feud between the deck and the engine-room department. If the stokers were reclothed at government expense, why should the seamen not derive some benefit through having been in action?

For a whole forenoon the deck department growled and grumbled among themselves at this exhibition of cheese-paring niggardly economy. Millions were being spent upon the war, while “us pore muckin’ matloes,” as one red-faced, adequately covered gentleman expressed it, “ ’ave to go stark, starin’ ruddy well naked!”

Finally, realizing that their bluff had been called, their sense of humour asserted itself and they saw the funny side of it. It certainly was amusing to think that Chats Harris had deliberately burnt the seat of his best trousers, and all for nothing! By the time the rum had been served out at one bell after the midday meal all was peace.

The most difficult task of all, however, was that which had to be undertaken by Mutters and Toby on the afternoon after the *Libyan’s* arrival—their visit to Mrs. Hendry.

The Hendrys had been married only two years, and there were no children. They had had no money beyond Mrs. Hendry’s slender allowance from her people and his exiguous pay as a lieutenant-commander. But somehow they had managed to rub along in the casual way that many married naval officers do; living in their boxes in one set of furnished rooms after another, owning nothing beyond what they carried about with them, screwing and scraping to make both ends meet, occasionally being able to save enough to have a few days in London. It was only when the babies started to arrive that the naval wives forsook the nomadic existence of following their husband’s ships and settled down in a house of their own.

They found Mrs. Hendry in the cheap, shoddily furnished rooms in which she had lived since the war had started and the *Libyan* had been at Harwich, packing her belongings

before going home to her people in the north. She had been told of her husband's death the day before, and had got over the first of her grief. White-faced and tight-lipped, though not tearful, she listened attentively to what Kerrell had to tell her, stopping him every now and then to ask a question. Looking at her, Toby came to the conclusion that Hendry must have kept the worst side of his nature for the ship, for this small, pretty little woman with the large grey eyes had obviously loved her husband.

Toby told her every detail that he could remember—of Hendry's coolness and handling of the ship under heavy fire, of his final decision to ram, regardless of consequences.

"If he had lived," he added, "he ought to have had the D.S.O."

For the first time Mrs. Hendry sobbed a little and held a handkerchief to her eyes.

"He so hoped for that," she replied faintly. "That, and his promotion, and now ... now it's all over ... all gone ... everything, everything!"

"He died in action," said Mutters after a decent interval, his voice very gentle. "If I go under during this war, I ... I hope it will be as gallantly as he did."

"Thank you," she replied quietly. "It is some consolation to hear that."

Before leaving, they went on to talk of other things, delicate matters—money for Mrs. Hendry's journey and for the immediate future; what should be done with Hendry's personal effects from the ship; the question of the funeral.

She, and Hendry's parents, would like him to be buried side by side with the men who had died with him, she replied.

She wished him to have a naval funeral. She would try to be present.

It took place two days later at Shotley, and Toby never forgot the poignancy of that two-mile stretch to the little village churchyard. At the head of the procession went the firing party of seamen marching two deep with their arms reversed, then the guard, followed by the band playing Beethoven's 'Funeral March,' the solemn music and throbbing of drums seeming to echo and re-echo through the still afternoon air. The curious villagers doffed their hats and stood silent as the rumbling gun-carriages went by, each one dragged by seamen and escorted by pall-bearers, each bearing its confined burden with the red, white, and blue of its shrouding Union Flag all but hidden in wreaths.

Behind the coffins came a pathetic little group of private mourners—wives, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, relatives of the fallen; men, women, and children from every part of the country and from every walk of life, dressed for the most part in rusty black. There was a father with a row of medals pinned to the breast of his civilian coat, marching with head erect and misty unseeing eyes; the coxwain's widow with her two children who had come all the way from Chatham; the newly married nineteen-year-old widow of one of the men. Mrs. Hendry, with Hendry's father and mother, who had elected to walk with the relatives of the men rather than to drive, rubbed shoulders with the remainder. In their common distress distinctions of class were entirely forgotten. They all had the same feelings.

Then came the naval mourners, officers and men from every ship in the harbour, including the Commodore himself, come to honour his dead.

Those awful, gaping holes in the ground, and the solemn words of the officiating clergyman—“Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower ...”

Mrs. Hendry, hitherto mistress of herself, swayed slightly as her husband’s body was lowered into its grave. Kerrell found himself gulping, tried hard to think of something else.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust ...” ... the horrible, hollow thuds as the handfuls of loam fell on to the coffins below.

Mrs. Hendry’s eyes were filled with tears. Hendry’s mother, leaning on her husband’s arm, was sobbing unrestrainedly.

Then the final words of the Burial Service, a sharp order to the firing party, followed by the tearing crash of the three volleys alternating with the mournful wail of bugles. Finally the ‘Last Post,’ and the sudden smack of rifle slings and the flash of bayonets as the firing party presented arms in a last tribute to the dead.

The Commodore detached himself from the group of officers, and, saluting, said a few words to each of the private mourners, words that brought a few grains of comfort to their sorrowing hearts. In that moment they felt that the deaths of those they loved had not been altogether in vain.

Leaving the bereaved with their dead, the procession filed out of the churchyard and formed up in the road outside. Kerrell hardly remembered the march back to the jetty with the band playing a lively march. His mind was full of other things.

The newspapers made much of the *Libyan*, and, as their names had figured in the official *communiqué*, Toby, Mutters,

and Mr. Huxtable all found themselves minor public characters. They were pestered with letters from photographers, and those who desired a personal interview for press purposes, though they strenuously refused to be thus honoured. This, however, did not prevent the appearance in the illustrated daily papers of a photograph of Toby taken years before as a sub-lieutenant, or the representation of Mrs. Huxtable and all her children, with an old photograph of the gunner himself inset in the corner. ‘Hero of the *Libyan*,’ they called him.

Even the Admiralty bestirred themselves, for it was a week later, when the ship was safely in dry-dock at Chatham, that the engineer-lieutenant-commander, who had his home at Rochester, came on board to breakfast in a state of considerable excitement.

A special honours list had been published for the *Libyan*—the Distinguished Service Order for Mutters himself; Distinguished Service Crosses for Kerrell and Mr. Huxtable; a mention in dispatches for little Hartopp; and some Distinguished Service Medals and more ‘mentions’ to the men. It was not every day two enemy destroyers were sunk.

It was with mingled feelings that Kerrell had the blue and white riband of his decoration sewn on to the left breast of his monkey jacket before going to London on ten days’ leave. He was proud to wear it; but could not help feeling that he had received a reward which rightly belonged to Hendry; that, had the captain survived, he, Kerrell, would have probably remained undecorated, while Hendry would have been wearing the crimson, blue-edged riband of the D.S.O.

CHAPTER XI

TOBY KERRELL'S mother had died in bringing him into the world, and he was the only child. His father, a retired Indian civilian, had never re-married, and departed this life three years before the war. Except for a few cousins whom he rarely saw, one uncle in the Colonial Service in East Africa, and another, the ex-colonel of an Indian regiment who had settled in Berwickshire with his second wife and a new brood of harum-scarum children, he had no kith or kin. Secure in the possession of a small private income left him by his father, he was financially independent of the Navy and more or less his own master.

Once, but only once, he had spent a fortnight with Uncle Dick and his wife in the north. It was an experience he never wished to repeat.

At one period before the war, he had imagined himself to be mildly fond of Janet Wintringham, whom he had first met at the house of mutual friends. Beyond the fact that she 'did something' in London and more or less earned her own living, he knew little about her.

He knew that she liked him. She had written to him at intervals, and had even gone out of her way to collect home-knitted mufflers, balaclava helmets, and sea-boot stockings from her friends for the whole of the *Libyan's* ship's company during the first winter of the war. She had also sent them parcels of books and literature, plum puddings, chocolates, games, and a gramophone and records through some society or other in which she was interested. Her letters were always cheerful and friendly, and Toby, who liked receiving them,

did his best to reply. But he had little spare time, and hated having to write letters. He never knew what to say.

They had seen each other in London since the war, and for a long time had called each other by their Christian names. But this meant nothing. Everybody did it. Toby was always ‘Toby’ to his acquaintances, and Janet ‘Janet.’

Analysing his feelings, Toby came to the conclusion that he liked Janet, liked her better than anyone he knew, could even imagine asking her to marry him. She interested and attracted him. All the same, he did not quite feel the overwhelming sensation of blind adoration for her which he considered the proper prelude to a proposal of marriage.

To tell the truth, he had purposely steered clear of any serious entanglement. When he married, he wanted leisure to devote himself to a wife, whoever she might be. And how could he devote himself to a wife as the busy first-lieutenant of a destroyer in wartime? She would be ashore and he afloat. They would hardly see each other. He might even be killed.

No. To tie oneself permanently to a woman during the war was a mug’s game. He must wait until it was over. Then, he might seriously think about marrying and settling down; settling down, that is, as much as it was possible for any naval officer ever to do. Unless another war seemed likely, he might even leave the Service and look for some congenial job which would enable him to live at home. At the best of times the Navy, with its ups and downs, and sudden moves, and long spells of foreign service, was no place for a married man.

All Toby’s brief periods of leave since the outbreak of war had been spent in London, where he belonged to one of the best of the Service Clubs.

Club chambers were comfortable enough, and one was well looked after. Though food and cooking hardly troubled Toby at all, both were good. The Club itself, however, though luxurious, rather savoured of a mausoleum, in which he felt frightened to raise his voice above a whisper. It bristled with admirals and generals and elderly retired colonels, now mostly in uniform, who, though kind-hearted enough when one got to know them, looked fiercely and disconcertingly at any member much under the age of forty who was not a habitu . Youth and juniority in the Service seemed to be almost a crime. Almost one could hear the more elderly members asking, "Who's that young devil? What's *he* doing here?"

No. Life in the Club was altogether too constrained and formal, Toby found. If anyone addressed him, he felt obliged to call him 'Sir.' It seemed almost a breach of etiquette if he so much as dared to sit in an arm-chair, or fell asleep over a book in the 'dormitory' upstairs, otherwise the library.

But the Club certainly had its uses. It served as a convenient *pied- -terre* when he was on an occasional week's leave, for he had many acquaintances in London who were always pleased to see him.

Entertaining on any considerable scale had finished on the outbreak of war. Nearly all the young men of Toby's age had joined the army and were already fighting or training in England. Not a few had been killed. Many families he knew were in mourning for sons or brothers. There was nobody who had not lost a relative of some sort.

And most of the women, matrons as well as girls, were feverishly busy. At least half a dozen of the girls that Toby had met at one time or another were actually out in France,

driving ambulances, nursing—enduring all the privations and vicissitudes of the war and many of its dangers. Others, at home, were really doing a job—replacing men clerks and secretaries who had joined up; driving cars and lorries, and cleaning and repairing them into the bargain; nursing, scrubbing floors, or acting as kitchen-maids in hospitals; working in munition factories. There was plenty of work to go round, much that the women of England could turn their hands to.

All the same, there were numbers of women still left who did what was euphemistically known as ‘war work’—collecting ‘comforts’ and packing parcels for the troops; serving on committees for this, that and the other; supervising Belgian refugees; rolling bandages in hospitals. Some took it really seriously, but a good many treated their ‘war work’ merely as a not unpleasant occupation, and as something to talk about.

Their afternoons and evenings generally seemed to be free for the asking, and what with lunches, dinners, theatres, and dances at which the women outnumbered the males by more than three to one, and men out of khaki were so rare as to be conspicuous, Toby’s brief snatches of leave in London had never been really dull.

Nevertheless, this constant round of gaiety whenever he was away from the ship became rather boring after a trial or two. It was a change from the life at sea, a pleasant change so far as creature comforts went; but so purposeless and ineffectual, so forced and unnatural, when, about 150 miles away on the Western Front, men were killing and being killed at the rate of hundreds daily. War and jazz bands and

cocktails and the sophistries of social life did not seem to harmonize.

But he felt desperately lonely and unattached whenever he found himself on leave in London. Other men he knew had homes to go to, and sisters and female cousins; but he had none. He had numberless acquaintances, hosts of them, but they didn't quite fill the gap. It was boring to meet a different set of faces almost every day of his leave.

On this occasion, reaching London from Chatham, he felt he wanted peace and quietness, not an orgy of doing this, that and the other, of rushing from lunch to tea, from tea to dinner, and from dinner to some theatre or dance, a process which generally left him limp and jaded at the end of a week.

But he did not like the idea of being alone, for loneliness was a curse. He wanted somebody of about his own age—somebody not merely to talk to, but a real companion, some congenial soul who would understand him, a person who did not chatter incessantly for the mere sake of making conversation; but one who would understand long silences, and would be content merely to be looked at when the mood for silence was upon him.

It was sheer coincidence that brought him Janet's letter at breakfast the morning after he arrived in London. It had been forwarded from the ship.

DEAR TOBY,—

Heartiest congratulations on your D.S.C. which I noticed in the paper a day or two ago. I want to hear how you got it, as the paper only said "For services in action against enemy destroyers." What precisely does that mean? It sounds vague, but rather dangerous. You're a rotten correspondent and

might write me a letter, however much you hate it. And if you're in town, don't forget to ring me up. I enjoyed last time. I've chucked my job—couldn't stick the horrid old creature I worked for. He was the sort of man who imagined that because I once let him take me out to lunch, he could hold my hand for ever afterwards!

But I'm on the trail of something else which will probably be vacant in a fortnight or three weeks. Meanwhile, I'm at a loose end with nothing to do, and rather bored with my own company. I actually did the British Museum yesterday!

Good luck, look after yourself.

Yours ever,
JANET.

P.S.—Why not snatch a day or two's leave and come up and liven me up? Can't you pretend you're ill and have to see a doctor, or a dentist?

P.S.2.—I mean it.

Within a quarter of an hour Toby was talking over the telephone, and Janet herself was answering. It was pleasant to hear her voice again.

“Come and see me?” she said. “Of course, Toby. When?”

“Now,” he replied.

“But merciful heavens, man!” He heard her laugh. “D’you realize it’s only ten past nine?... You do. Well, the telephone dragged me out of bed, if you really want to know. I’m still in my night attire, and haven’t even had a bath!... What?... Oh tush, Toby! What a wicked fellow you are!... What’s that about breakfast?... Oh, you’ll come straight away and watch me eat it!... Yes, not much. Just an apple and a cup of tea. What about you?... You’ve had it.... Yes, I shall be charmed,

delighted—yes, really.... No, quite alone, so don't be nervous. The woman who cleans the flat doesn't arrive till nearly twelve.... Yes.... Yes.... Yes. At once then. Au revoir.”

She rang off.

Ten minutes later Toby was bowling westward in a taxi.

Yes, he thought, reviewing the matter in his mind. He had always liked Janet, and, bad correspondent though he was, she was frequently in his thoughts.

Until he received her letter that morning, however, he had no idea that she took anything but a sort of tepid interest in their acquaintanceship, not the sort of interest that made her really fond of him.

He took it out of his pocket and read it again. Yes. It was warm and friendly, bless her!

And he wanted a friend.

CHAPTER XII

JANET, curled up in a corner of the big settee in the sitting-room of her flat, with her dark, bobbed head against the brightly coloured cushions. Toby, strangely nervous and ill at ease, perched on the very edge of the deep arm-chair facing her, smoking a cigarette and furtively regarding her through half-closed eyes.

She was certainly attractive. He liked her expressive face and unusual toffee-coloured eyes, and the smooth contour of her chin and neck falling away to the gentle swell of her bosom beneath her thin blouse. He liked her dark hair and the way it curled over her ears, her impertinent tip-tilted nose, her smile, and the fascinating little inflexions of her voice.

Yes. She was soothing and sympathetic—very feminine.

“What *is* on your mind, Toby?” she asked, after a lengthy silence. “You’re not half so full of life as when we last met!”

“It’s this loneliness!” he grunted petulantly. “It gets on my nerves.”

“Meaning, Toby?”

“Meaning that I haven’t any home to go to, that I’m at a loose end, and——”

“But I thought you had swarms of friends?” she put in quietly. “You always seemed gay enough.”

“Gay!” he snorted. “Friends!—Good Lord!”

She raised her eyebrows with an expression of mild concern.

“Why ‘Good Lord!’ Toby?”

“Who wants to spend his time gadding about with one lot of people after another?” he exclaimed. “It’s all so futile and

useless, so artificial!—Don't you realize, Janet?" he went on. "I've no people, no family. What use am I to anyone? What _____"

"And they've just given you a D.S.C. for gallantry in action," she said softly. "Nonsense, Toby! Of course you're some use. You ought to be proud of yourself."

"Proud!" he scoffed. "Why did I get the D.S.C.?—Simply because Hendry and those poor chaps of ours got knocked out doing their job, and I was left to carry on and come into the limelight. Lord! I'd give it up to-morrow, Janet, if it would bring them back to life. What does a bit of ribbon mean to me when I think of those poor fellows' wives and people I saw at the funeral the other day? I feel I'm profiting by—— Well, you know what I mean!"

"But you oughtn't to regard it in that light," Janet pointed out. "They gave it to you because they knew you deserved it."

"I'm glad you think so," he said. "I don't. I didn't do anything that hundreds of others wouldn't have done if they'd had the chance."

"That's just it," she replied. "You had the chance, and made the most of it."

He looked at her, and grinned feebly.

"Anyhow," he said, "I feel I'm utterly useless."

"Nonsense, Toby! You're merely feeling disgruntled. What about the Navy and your ship? D'you mean to say you take no interest in them, that you're not keen on your job?"

"Of course I'm keen," he replied. "I wouldn't be anywhere else, unless—unless——"

"Unless what?"

“Unless I could get a command of my own!”

“Is that what’s troubling you?” she asked sympathetically. “Won’t they give you one?”

“No-o,” he answered. “I’ve been recommended, and shall probably get one of the older destroyers in time. It’s not that, it’s—it’s——”

“I don’t know what you’re driving at, Toby,” she said, looking at him with a puzzled expression. “What is biting you? Is it the war?”

“No,” said he, shaking his head. “There are times when I hate it, but after all, it’s my job, what I’ve been trained for. No. I don’t want the war to stop till we’ve knocked the Huns endways. After all, *we* didn’t ask for the war! We had to fight, hadn’t we? How should we ever have been able to hold up our heads again unless we hadn’t chipped in?—All the same,” he added. “I believe we jolly nearly didn’t.”

“Well, what is the trouble then?”

“It’s this useless sort of feeling,” Toby explained. “This feeling that there’s not a soul in the world who’d give two hoots if I went west to-morrow—not a single soul!”

Janet looked at him, her eyes very troubled.

“You’re bitter, Toby,” she said, shaking her head. “D’you mean to say there’s nobody who really cares for you? Isn’t there anyone you’re fond of, someone who really means something to you, someone you can think about? You’re too introspective, Toby. You brood too much. You—you take the war too much to heart. After all, you can’t help it. You’re a sailor, and have to get on with your job. Where should we be, I should like to know, if there weren’t any sailors?”

“Oh, I’m keen enough on the scrapping,” he said. “That’s exciting.—All the same, it doesn’t make things much better for us from the personal point of view, does it?”

“Is there nobody you really care about?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Anyhow, what’s the good of caring for anyone unless they care for you?”

“And was it because you were feeling depressed and lonely that you came to me to be—to be mothered?”

“Mothered!” he said, taking her literally. “My dear Janet, you’re not nearly old enough.”

She smiled.

“That’s just where you make your mistake, Toby. If we compared notes I don’t expect I’m *any* older than you, except perhaps in experience, and all men are rather like children, sometimes. But tell me,” she asked, “was it because you wanted to be petted that you came to me?”

“I—I don’t know,” he stammered awkwardly. “I felt rottenly lonely. Then this morning I got your letter. It bucked me up a lot——”

“Because it made you feel that I—that someone was a little interested in you?”

“Something like that,” he confessed. “I felt I wanted somebody to talk to.”

“But you must have dozens of people to talk to, Toby.”

“Yes, but not dozens of people I can open my heart to, and say what I like. If I talked to any man as I’m talking to you he’d probably think I was dippy.”

“Ah!” she murmured, gazing at him with a puzzled expression. “I think I’m beginning to understand. So you

came to me because you thought I was sympathetic, and because—because I happen to be a woman?”

He nodded.

“So I don’t bore you?” she asked. “You don’t put me in the same category as those people you so dislike gadding about with?”

“I wanted someone restful,” said Toby. “Someone who wasn’t always anxious to be doing something.”

“Restful!” she laughed. “Gracious, Toby! You wait till you see me on one of my really bad days! I’ve always been on my best behaviour with you, don’t forget!”

“I haven’t seen you really ratty yet,” he said simply. “All I know is that—that I like you better than anyone else I know, Janet. You suit me, and Lord knows, I’m a difficult, moody sort of devil sometimes.”

Perhaps he really loved her, he thought to himself, looking at her. She certainly attracted him, though it was true he didn’t know her really well. Anyhow, he had known her off and on for a good time, and he liked her more than any other woman he had met. Half-guiltily, almost as though he were frightened of her guessing what was in his mind, he averted his eyes and stared out of the window.

“If that’s supposed to be a compliment, I’m pleased to hear it,” he heard her say. “I’m glad you like me, Toby, for I like you, quite a lot. I always have.”

Her words rather thrilled him. Squashing his glowing cigarette into the ash-tray balanced on the arm of his chair, he stood up to face her, his back against the mantelpiece. It was now or never. Would she understand?

“Janet,” he said abruptly, “I’m lonely, devilish lonely! I haven’t a soul in the world I can take an interest in. I like you, and you say you like me. I’ve got nine days’ leave left. You said in your letter you were at a loose end. Will you—er, I mean, why don’t we go down to the country together?”

“My dear Toby!” she gasped, gazing at him in astonishment. “What in the world d’you mean? D’you think I’m——”

“No, no!” he hastily broke in. “I don’t mean anything wrong! I mean, can’t we go off somewhere just as friends? I’m not asking you to—well, run away with me!”

“I should hope not!” she said.

“Can’t we go to some place in the country, an hotel if you like, where we can see something of each other. I hate the idea of staying in London—hate it! I want to get out into the country where I can moon about in plain clothes, feel free for a bit, and forget the war. And I want—I want you to be there too, Janet. Will you?”

“You’re asking a good deal, Toby,” she murmured awkwardly. “Much as I hate having to refuse you, I——”

“But you can trust me, Janet—I swear you can! I promise you there’ll be no nonsense. On my honour, there won’t!”

“I know I can trust you, Toby, you funny old innocent,” she replied. “But what do you imagine people would think? If you and I went off together as you suggest, what sort of a scandal should we find ourselves mixed up in? Tell me that!”

For a full minute there was silence between them. Toby could hear the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. The sound of a motor passing down the road outside came in through the open window.

“I was a selfish beast ever to have thought of it,” he said at last, his voice mournful.

“No,” she replied, regarding him. “Not altogether selfish.”

“I didn’t realize all the difficulties, and what it would mean,” he said. “I’m sorry I ever mentioned it, Janet.”

Janet said nothing.

“And now, I suppose,” he continued, his voice genuinely concerned, “I’ve insulted you by asking. I didn’t mean to do that, really I didn’t! I didn’t think you were the sort of person who’d go off with anyone she fancied. You will forgive me, Janet, won’t you? I see I’ve been a silly fool!”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Toby dear.”

He looked at her suddenly, to catch a fleeting expression in her eyes he had never seen there before. She immediately looked away, but it was the first time she had called him ‘dear.’ He liked it.

“You needn’t be sorry, Toby,” she continued. “I’d—I’d have loved to have come if—if circumstances had been different. I’m not refusing because I don’t like you, and trust you, Toby.”

“D’you honestly mean that?”

She looked at him, and nodded.

“Did you want me most frightfully to come and spend your leave with you?” she added. “You’re certain that there’s no other person who’d have done just as well?”

“I’ve already said so,” Toby answered. “There’s no one else I’d ever dream of asking.—But I see I was a fool, Janet,” he added sheepishly. “I’m feeling rather ashamed of myself, so please forget it, and—and don’t think any the worse of me, will you?”

“No, Toby,” she replied. “I promise you I won’t do that. Don’t be angry with yourself.”

Uncurling herself from the corner of the settee, she slid her feet to the floor and gazed abstractedly at the toe of her shoe, twisting her foot this way and that, her face puckered in thought.

Toby, feeling easier in his mind, watched her.

“What are you thinking about now?” he inquired after a pause.

“Aunt Elizabeth,” she said, looking up with an enigmatic smile.

“Aunt how much?”

“Aunt Elizabeth, my father’s brother’s wife, otherwise my aunt by marriage. Except for some cousins I hardly ever see, she’s about my last remaining relative.”

“But, why should you suddenly start thinking about her?” he asked, rather puzzled.

“Because, Toby, she lives in the Chilterns, near Watlington. I haven’t seen her for ages, and she’s always asking me to stay with her.”

“But what’s all this got to do——”

“It’s delightful country at this time of year,” Janet went on, disregarding the interruption. “Aunt E.’s a regular old dear. I’m just wondering if I’d telephone and suggest myself for nine days.”

Nine days, thought Toby to himself. Why did she say nine days? What was really in her mind?

“Lucky person!” he sighed.

“But I’m going to suggest that she should ask you as well, Toby,” Janet hastily added, seeing the look of disappointment

on his face.

“Me?”

“M—yes. You see, Toby, there’d be no possible chance of a scandal if we both asked to stay with Aunt Elizabeth, would there?”

“But I don’t even know her!” Toby objected. “I can’t force my way into a perfectly strange house. How—how can you suggest asking her to have me?”

“Because, you silly old mugwump!” said Janet, smiling, as she rose from the settee and smoothed her skirt.

“Because she’d be delighted to have you—— No, no!” she hastily broke in as Toby opened his mouth to say something. “Listen for a moment—Aunt E. is my godmother. She lives by herself, in a large country house, and has been a darling to me in one way and another. She’d love you, Toby. I’m sure she would.”

“That’s all very well!” Toby started to protest. “But I don’t somehow see myself——”

“Oh, do let me finish!” Janet exclaimed. “You will keep on interrupting! As I was going to say, Aunt E.’s on practically every War Committee in her district. She’s quite the fiercest old fire-eater that ever stepped, and not content with her other work has been ‘doing her bit,’ as she calls it, by putting up officers on leave who haven’t any homes to go to in England—Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, all sorts. Now, do you begin to understand what I’m driving at, you exasperating creature?”

Toby nodded.

“If I tell her I’ve discovered a British naval officer who’s lonely and hasn’t any home to go to,” Janet went on to

explain, “she’ll probably jump at the idea of having you. I’d better warn you, though, that she looked rather formidable. She has a sharp sort of way of speaking. But she means nothing by that. She’s really the kindest-hearted soul in existence. All you have to do, Toby, is to behave like the perfect little gentleman that you are, to be fairly punctual at meals, not to burn holes in the drawing-room carpet, and to be certain to sign the visitors’ book before you leave. Now,” she added, coming closer, and looking up at him with a hand on his arm. “Is this a brilliant brain-wave on my part, or is it not?”

“Most distinctly,” he said. “But—but I don’t quite like the idea of cadging.”

“Pouf!” she laughed. “Haven’t you ever stayed with people before?”

“Of course, Janet,” he replied. “People that I know.”

“But you’ve got to start knowing them some time,” she pointed out.

“But what about butting into a crowd of strangers? If the place is already full of the army, I’ll be a fish out of water.”

“Nonsense, Toby!” she exclaimed, giving his arm a little shake. “You’re not a baby!”

“But I shall see nothing of you in all this scrum.”

“That,” she replied, “remains to be seen. Anyhow, make up your mind, for it’s the best I can do for you. Am I to telephone, or am I not?”

“Do you want me to come, Janet?”

“You’ll drive me crazy if you go on asking me stupid questions!” she exclaimed. “*Of course* I want you to come. Would I have suggested it if I hadn’t?”

“I suppose not,” he replied, looking at her. “I shall be jolly glad to come, if I’m really wanted.”

“Of course you’re wanted!” she laughed. “I’ll go and telephone now. Help yourself to a cigarette, Toby, or smoke a pipe if you prefer it.”

She left him, crossed the room, and went out into the little hall, carefully closing the door behind her. Toby heard the murmur of her voice speaking into the instrument. Apparently she got through almost at once.

In less than ten minutes it was arranged. Aunt Elizabeth would be delighted.

“She’s sending a car to meet the four-twenty-seven at High Wycombe,” Janet went on to tell him. “We shall have to find out what time it leaves Paddington. But she says, Toby, that I shall have to amuse you.”

Toby laughed happily.

“She’s most frightfully busy with something or other I couldn’t quite catch,” Janet continued. “And——”

“And what?” he demanded.

“She’s there all alone,” said Janet, her eyes twinkling. “She’s got nobody else coming for at least a fortnight!”

“Praise the Lord!” he exclaimed, beaming all over his face. “Heaven, what luck!”

“Then you’re satisfied, Toby?”

“I should jolly well think so!” he laughed, feeling as though he wanted to hug her.

“And so am I, Toby,” said she, looking away.

CHAPTER XIII

JANET'S Aunt Elizabeth, otherwise Mrs. Benjamin Cator, certainly was rather alarming to Toby on first acquaintance.

He had somehow pictured her in his mind as small, gentle-voiced, very prim and proper, and rather early Victorian in her ideas. She was not in when Janet and he reached the house in time for a late tea, and Toby did not meet his hostess until he came down to the drawing-room before dinner.

Instead of the little old lady he had imagined, he found himself being greeted by a tall, rather masculine-looking woman well on in the sixties with a hand-grip that left his fingers tingling. Her iron-grey hair was closely cropped, almost like a man's, and the weather-beaten appearance of her face showed that she led an open-air life and cared nothing for her complexion. She had a direct and incisive manner of speaking, and the warmth of her welcome by no means concealed the penetrating glance of her shrewd blue eyes. Evidently there were few things that escaped Aunt Elizabeth. It seemed incongruous, somehow, to see such a woman in evening dress and jewellery.

"So you are Mr. Kerrell," she said pleasantly, shaking hands. "Janet has been telling me about you."

"It's very good of you to have asked me to stay," said Toby politely, feeling as though her eyes were boring through him.

"I am pleased you have come," she replied. "I have always been interested in the Navy, though living here in the country, I seem to have met very few naval people. Anyhow," she went on with a smile, "here is the house. Treat it as you

would your own, and ask for anything you like. I hope your room is comfortable? Have you everything you want?"

"Everything, thank you," said Toby, mentally comparing his dark stuffy little cabin on board the *Libyan* with the large lavender-scented bedroom he had just left.

He had revelled in its unostentatious, tasteful luxury—the carpet, soft like velvet; the old-fashioned canopied bed with its silk eider-down and crisp linen sheets; the sofa and arm-chairs covered with crackling chintz; the writing-table in the window with notepaper, new pens, and fresh blotting-paper; the shelf of books, the bedside table with its electric reading-lamp and box of biscuits—all the little touches which made for comfort and convenience. It was a happy, restful, livable room.

It was pleasant, too, to have a private bathroom next door with floods of boiling water, to find one's clothes unpacked and put away, and one's evening garments laid out on the bed by someone who knew his or her business. Even the feet of Toby's black silk evening socks had been carefully turned inside out ready for him to put on.

It was all such a contrast to what he was accustomed to on board the ship, where he had his morning bath in a few inches of lukewarm water in a painted iron receptacle not unlike an exaggerated frying-pan without the handle, and was attended to by a horny-handed able seaman—the faithful Rawlins—who was more used to stripping the breech-block of a 4-inch gun or splicing a wire hawser than acting as an officer's servant. Rawlins was a good soul; but he had his limitations as a valet. It was annoying occasionally to find the imprint of a large and greasy thumb on the stiff cuff of a clean white shirt.

Toby could not picture any greasy thumb-marks at Churton. The whole house, or what he had seen of it, was spotless. His hostess must be a model of efficiency, and the servants treasures. Looking at Mrs. Cator, however, observing the firm set of her lips and jaw, he had seen at a glance she was not the sort of person to stand any nonsense. She might even be a martinet.

Regarding her evening dress, he suddenly felt rather ashamed of his monkey jacket, albeit it was nearly brand-new.

“I feel I ought to apologize for my kit,” he said. “We’re not allowed to carry much gear about in wartime. All my evening clothes are in store at Portsmouth, and we’re supposed to wear uniform, even on leave.”

“Don’t apologize!” she returned, giving him one of her rare smiles. “I much prefer a man in uniform, and yours certainly suits you.—By the way, what do they call you?”

“Call me?”

“What is your Christian name?”

“My names are really George Augustus,” he replied awkwardly. “But I’ve been ‘Toby’ ever since I can remember.”

“That is what my niece calls you, is it not?” asked Mrs. Cator, eyeing him.

“Yes.”

“Then do you mind if I call you Toby too? I abhor always using surnames.”

Toby did not object at all, and said so.

“How long have you known my niece?” Mrs. Cator went on to inquire, her eye still upon his face.

Toby told her.

“Are you fond of her?”

“I—I like her as a friend,” Toby confessed, beginning to feel rather confused and sheepish.

“Have you seen her often?”

Toby, wondering what this cross-examination was leading up to, explained that he and Janet had mutual friends in London, and that, off and on, they had met a good many times in a casual sort of way.

What was at the back of Mrs. Cator’s mind? Did she suspect him of being in love with Janet?

“I see,” she said, pursing her lips and still regarding him intently. “You don’t really know Janet intimately? I mean, she’s told you nothing of her people or—or her affairs?”

Toby shook his head.

“No,” he answered. “Practically nothing. I merely know her mother and father are——”

He broke off as the door opened, and Janet herself came into the room—Janet, in a low-cut evening frock of soft apple-green which suited her wonderfully well.

“Well,” she said casually, as Toby gave an inaudible sigh of relief. “What have you two been discussing? Toby, you’re looking quite solemn. Has Aunt Elizabeth been putting you through your paces?”

Mrs. Cator stepped into the breach.

“What I’m wondering, my dear, is how we are going to entertain Mr. Toby. I could get him made an honorary member of the golf club, but apart from that there’s nothing—nothing at all in the way of gaiety.”

“But I don’t want gaiety, Mrs. Cator,” Toby himself put in. “I’d far prefer the simple life, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll take him for walks and show him the country,” said Janet.

A gong sounded in the hall. The door opened. An aged butler announced dinner.

“We’ll discuss it at dinner,” said Mrs. Cator, putting her hand through his arm and manœuvring him gently towards the door. “Meanwhile, having had a scrappy tea, I am famished—positively.”

War or no war, dinner at Churton was still a function. The bottom must drop out of the universe before Aunt Elizabeth would abandon one item of her time-honoured ritual.

The Cators were no *parvenus*. The old place had belonged to them for centuries, and they were the Lords of the Manor with two livings in their gift. Their portraits, from the time of Charles II onwards, gazed down from the panelled walls of the dining-room upon the polished mahogany table with its gleaming glass and silver, and the huge cut-glass bowl of daffodils.

Mrs. Cator’s only son had died as a public-school boy. On her death, the property would pass into the hands of Roger Cator, her late husband’s nephew, a wild, rather irresponsible person who had been abroad since the age of nineteen, and whom she had only known as a schoolboy. Roger, who was unmarried, had joined up with the Australian forces and had fought in Gallipoli. On succeeding to the estate he would probably sell it, a prospect that Mrs. Benjamin Cator did not view with equanimity. So long as she remained alive, however, she would be very much the mistress.

As Toby soon discovered, she was a person of strong will and great force of character, maintaining an almost feudal discipline among her tenants and servants. Some people thought her hard, but those who really knew her soon discovered that beneath her rugged exterior there was kindness itself. She was the soul of generosity and open-handed hospitality.

She was a woman of strange contrasts. It was one thing to see her in the evening, very dignified, very much the *grande dame*, wearing clothes which must have come from Paris, and jewellery worth a fortune. In the daytime, however, she looked a different person, stalking about her estate with a walking-stick, or going off in one of the cars to one of her many committees, wearing an unspeakable hat, and a coat and skirt that looked much too utilitarian to bear any resemblance to modern fashions.

But Mrs. Cator was a law unto herself. If she chose to have her daytime country clothes made by Miss Eames, the village dressmaker, because she considered it her duty to encourage local industries, and because Miss Eames had to support an aged mother, nobody could object.

Toby soon got over his first feelings of nervousness, and the first days of the nine that he and Janet spent at Churton, far out of sight and sound of the sea, were perhaps the happiest of his life.

Mrs. Cator, busy with her many activities, left them much to themselves. Spring had come. The weather was delicious. With Janet in the shortest of tweed skirts, and Toby in the rough shooting clothes he had not worn since the war, they roamed the countryside, keeping as far as possible away from

the roads, exploring the hills, always the hills. They both loved distances.

Sometimes they took food with them. Sometimes they trusted to luck, hoping to find an inn or a cottage where they could have lunch or tea. But food seemed to matter little. They were careless of everything, except each other, and the war, the hateful war, seemed very far away. It was a blessed relief.

When the mood was upon them, there were silences lasting ten and twenty minutes, silences which they both understood.

Janet was no idle chatterer, and Toby had not the art of making polite conversation. There were times when talking seemed almost sacrilegious—when, for instance, they found themselves lying or seated on some sunny hill-top, gazing into the immensity of space overhead, or looking out into the blue, indeterminate distance over miles and miles of woods and fields and rolling hills with hardly a glimpse of a habitation, to where, on the far horizon, the great rounded masses of cumulus, shaded with mauve and buff and orange, seemed to gather themselves together before parting company for their leisurely sail across the heavens.

It was all very calm and peaceful. Toby, solemnly smoking his pipe, would sit with his legs doubled up, his elbows on his knees, and his chin pillowed on his hands; staring, gazing into the far distance; thinking, thinking, and always conscious of Janet close beside him.

Her presence gave him great contentment. Often he turned his head to enjoy her profile silhouetted against the sky. Always, when he looked at her, she seemed to know it, and turned to look at him with that interrogative lifting of the

eyebrows, and that peculiar half-smile that he had come to love.

“Well, Toby? What’s the great thought to-day?”

“I dunno!” he grunted.

Before many days had passed he realized he was in love. Janet meant more to him than anything else in the world. She thrilled him. If only she weren’t so diffident and unresponsive!

Once, overcome by a sudden longing, he had reached out and gently stroked the back of her neck. She had instantly moved aside with a little cry, almost as though he had hurt her.

“Don’t, Toby, don’t!”

“What’s the matter?” he asked, vaguely annoyed with himself. “You’re—you’re not offended, are you?”

“No, Toby. Not offended,” she murmured, looking away and speaking in a voice which seemed to have lost all its gaiety.

“D’you mind your neck being tickled?” he asked.

“N-no, Toby. It’s not that. But you mustn’t do it again. I don’t want you to.”

“But why not?” he persisted.

“Because—oh! don’t ask me,” she replied, suddenly getting up. “Come on. It’s time to make tracks for home.”

“But I don’t understand,” he complained, rising to his feet. “What have I done that I shouldn’t?”

“Nothing, Toby. Nothing at all.”

“Then why——”

“I—I can’t explain, Toby,” she said, as he fell into step beside her. “Don’t ask me to explain, please don’t!” Her voice sounded strained and unnatural.

Utterly mystified, he glanced at her face. Her eyes were troubled, her lips tight set. She knew he was looking at her, yet she would not look at him.

CHAPTER XIV

DURING the last three days of Toby's visit to Churton, something of a change seemed to come over Janet, though for the life of him Toby could not have described what that change was.

She was still friendly. Her friendliness, however, seemed to have lost something of its spontaneity, and Janet herself some of her gaiety. She seemed rather depressed, and distraught in her manner, more shy and formal, almost as though she were trying to hold Toby at a distance. Once or twice he even imagined that she had deliberately avoided being left alone with him.

Perplexed at her attitude, he felt vaguely unhappy. He knew nothing of women, except that they were mysterious and incomprehensible, strangely difficult to please. It seemed almost as if he had offended Janet, though he was not conscious of having done so. What had upset her? What was at the back of her mind, and what could he say or do to make things better?

Was she worrying over that trivial incident when he had tried to give expression to his affection by stroking the back of her neck? She had repulsed his little familiarity almost as though she resented it. Why?

Toby was in no doubt as to his own feelings. He had known and liked Janet for about two years, and had always felt happy in her company. But now she had been his almost constant companion for a week he had become aware of her charm and femininity. Her nearness, and living under the same roof with her, had played havoc with any idea of platonic friendship so far as he was concerned.

Several times he had tried to summon up his courage to tell her what she meant to him. But when opportunities came he felt shy and awkward and reticent, almost afraid. She had given him no encouragement, none at all.

In some ways she seemed cold and unresponsive. Yet, according to what she had said to him in London, she liked him. He remembered her very words, remembered the letter he had received the morning after he came on leave. It was a friendly letter—more than friendly if one read between the lines.

Man-like, he had never noticed the tenderness that sometimes came into her voice as she talked to him; the look that sometimes appeared in her eyes. She had done her best to conceal the true state of her feelings; but at times could not prevent them from becoming apparent. Seeing the two of them together, most people would instantly have realized that Janet loved Toby with all her heart and soul. Aunt Elizabeth had seen it the evening they arrived at Churton, and she was perturbed and anxious.

Janet felt frightened. Pondering over the situation in her mind, looking for a solution, she did not know what to do, could not see a way out. She was fearful of surrender; fearful at the prospect of having to hurt Toby by telling him what she inevitably must when he declared himself. If the truth be known, she was fearful also at the idea of letting him pass out of her life.

She had arranged to stay on for a few days at Churton. Toby, on the conclusion of his leave, was to return direct to the *Libyan* at Chatham. It was on his last morning, within a few hours of his final departure, that he determined to tell her everything.

Seeking her out, he found her in the orchard behind the yew hedge. It was a place of beauty, the lush, green grass spattered with clumps of white narcissi and yellow daffodils. Wearing a pair of long rubber boots, she was cutting flowers. A great bunch of blooms lay in the garden trug at her feet.

“Janet,” he said softly, coming up behind her.

“So you’ve found me,” she replied in a matter-of-fact voice, turning to face him with a smile.

“Didn’t you expect me to?” he asked.

“I really don’t know, Toby,” she answered, the colour flying to her cheeks and her eyes shining.

“*Must* you pick those flowers now, Janet?” he demanded, almost roughly. “It’s my last day. In a few hours I shall be off. This time to-morrow I shall be on board the ship, and heaven only knows when I shall see you again!”

“Don’t, Toby!”

“So you *do* care, Janet?”

“Care, Toby? Of course I care. D’you—d’you think I want you to go?”

“Well, what’s come over you for the last two or three days?” he asked. “Why have you been so sort of stand-offish? Have I done anything I shouldn’t?”

She shook her head.

“Well, why have you tried to avoid me? Why——”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Toby!” she interrupted. “Of course I haven’t been avoiding you. Why should I?” She finished with an almost hysterical giggle, which was so unlike her usual manner that Toby stared at her without speaking. She looked up at him. Then, to his amazement, he saw her eyes were misty.

“I want to talk to you, Janet,” he burst out. “I must talk to you!”

“What about?” she asked weakly, tucking in a strand of hair.

“About ourselves. Where can we go?”

“Go?” she said.

“Yes. I can’t talk here.”

“But why not, Toby?”

“Because, I can’t!” he exclaimed. “What’s that place over there?”

He pointed to a wooden shed in the far corner of the orchard.

“It’s the apple house,” she told him.

“Is it locked?”

“I don’t think so, Toby.”

Before she could object he slipped his arm through hers, and started to walk her towards the little building.

“No, Toby! No!” she cried, trying to hang back.

“You’ve jolly well got to come!” he retorted gruffly. “If you fight, I’ll carry you!”

“But, Toby——”

“There’s no ‘but’ about it! Are you coming quietly, or do you want to be carried?”

“I’ll come,” she answered feebly.

His arm linked through hers, he led her to the shed, pushed open the door, and followed her inside.

“Now!” he said, releasing her.

“What d’you want, Toby?”

“You know what I want, Janet!” he whispered.

Before she could resist his arms went round her.

“Toby! Toby, darling!” she gasped. “You mustn’t! Don’t, Toby, please!”

“But I will!” he muttered fiercely. “Don’t you realize I love you beyond anything in the world? I want to marry you, my sweet, to marry you, do you hear?”

She put up her head to answer him. Before she realized his intention he had caught her face between his own hands and was pressing her lips to his.

Her resistance died away. She lay limp in his arms.

“Don’t you love me a little, you beloved thing!” he murmured, his face close to hers. “You’re all the world to me, Janet!”

“And so are you to me, Toby,” she murmured brokenly.

“Then that’s all right!” he whispered happily. “Just you say the word, and we’ll get married.... Lord, girl!” he suddenly added, peering down at her face in the semi-darkness.

“You’re crying, my precious. What’s the matter? What is it?”

Janet, still part in his arms, hung her head and did not reply. Toby felt vaguely perturbed.

“Janet, darling. What is it? What’s troubling you?”

“It’s—it’s difficult to tell you, Toby,” she murmured. “I don’t—don’t know how to explain without hurting you....”

“Hurting me?”

“Yes. Yes, it’s frightful. I—I can’t marry you, Toby! I love you, Toby; but—but I can’t marry you!”

She was weeping.

“I—I don’t understand,” he said, his voice full of anxiety. “If you love me, and I love you, why can’t we be married? What’s to prevent it?”

“B-because,” she sobbed. “Because I’m—married already.”

“Married!” he gasped, releasing her. “You married? Why didn’t you tell me?”

It was as though the bottom had suddenly dropped out of the universe. Janet, whom he loved and hoped was his, belonged to another man.

The news was shattering, stunning. He felt utterly distracted.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he groaned.

There was an idea at the back of his mind that she had not been straightforward in keeping this knowledge from him. She had told him that she liked him—must have known that he was fond of her, have seen that he had grown fonder of her every day until she now meant more to him than anything else in the world. And now—now ...

Then he suddenly realized he was being unfair. He remembered the incident of a few days before when she had refused to let him touch her, her recent aloofness, her unwillingness only a few minutes before to hear what she must inevitably have known must be his declaration of love, his proposal of marriage.

No. Janet was not to blame. It was he who had taken too much for granted. He had never asked her very much about herself. Beyond the fact that her parents were both dead he knew little of her past life.

But if she already had a husband, why had she told him that she loved him?

“I didn’t mean to deceive you, Toby.”

“I know,” he said.

“If—if I’d thought it w-would come to this, I’d—I’d have t-told you long ago. I—I don’t live with my h-husband. I haven’t lived with him for three years. I l-left him, and ever since then, when—when I’ve been working in London, I—I haven’t worn a wedding ring and have used—used my unmarried name. But, I didn’t mean to deceive you, Toby,” she continued, her voice full of pitiful entreaty. “Don’t—don’t think I’ve been—been dishonourable.”

“I don’t, Janet,” he said, his heart heavy within him. “It came as a horrible shock. You see, I meant every word I said. I love you, and I’d pinned my hopes on marrying you, because—because you meant so much to me.”

“There’s nobody—nobody in the world quite like you, Toby,” she muttered, drying her eyes. “But—but we must look facts in the face.”

By degrees the pitiful story came out.

Five years before, at the age of nineteen, she had been married. Within a year she had found out that her husband was unfaithful. She forgave him twice; but it was no good. He utterly killed her love, and after they had been married nearly two years, two years of absolute misery for her, she left him. Luckily she had a little money of her own. That had been three years ago, when she was twenty-one, since when she had not seen him, had not touched a penny of his money.

“But why can’t you divorce him?” Toby asked.

“Because I couldn’t prove cruelty,” Janet replied. “And he didn’t actually desert me. I left him when things became absolutely unbearable. I’d had two years of hell—hell!”

“But did you try to get a divorce?” Toby persisted.

“Try!” said Janet bitterly. “Of course I tried, and Aunt Elizabeth helped. But the lawyers merely told us what I’ve told you. There was no legal ground for divorce.”^[2]

“Not if he was unfaithful to you?”

“No,” she replied.

“It’s grossly unfair!” Toby exclaimed.

“It may be,” Janet murmured, “but what happened afterwards makes it seem unfairer still. But—but I can’t bear to talk about it, Toby. It’s horrible.” She shuddered at the recollection.

“You must tell me, Janet,” he said quietly. “I’d far rather hear everything.”

“My husband’s a madman,” she said in a hushed voice. “He’s insane.”

“Insane?”

“Within two months of my leaving him I found out he was living with another woman. One day he nearly murdered her, he—he tried to cut her throat. They hushed it up, but had to certify him as insane, and now—now he’s in a mental home.”

“Good God!” Toby muttered, aghast at the idea.

“But—but isn’t insanity a ground for divorce?” he asked a moment later.

“No,” said Janet.

“Which means that——”

“I’m legally tied to my husband for life—until he dies.”

Toby looked at her.

“You poor, poor girl!” he murmured. “Is he—incurable?”

“They say so,” she replied pitifully. “But even if he weren’t, I could never live with him again!”

“But isn’t there any way you can get free of him, Janet?”

She shook her head.

“No,” she answered sadly. “I’m legally tied to him until he dies.”

“And we love each other,” he said simply. “What are we to do, Janet?”

“I don’t—don’t know, Toby. I wish I did.”

“What do people usually do in these circumstances?” he asked. “I’ve never been up against this sort of thing before. What do your relations think about it?”

“Aunt Elizabeth’s about my only remaining relative, or at any rate the only one I care about at all.”

“And what does she think?”

“I don’t know,” Janet said. “I haven’t discussed it with her more than necessary. The whole thing is so hateful, so sordid, Toby. I—I haven’t liked to talk about it. It’s beastly, beastly!”

She was sobbing again, dabbing her eyes with an inadequate handkerchief.

“D’you mind if I go on loving you, Janet?” Toby asked, his voice very tender. “It’s—you’re the only person I’ve got in the world. It’ll break my heart if I lose you now.”

“Oh, my dear!” she whispered, coming close to him, to put her soft arms round his neck and to pull his face down to hers. “Loving you, and being loved, is the only thing which

makes life at all bearable. Put your arms round me, Toby! Kiss me!”

He needed no encouragement.

* * * * *

Before he finally left Churton, Toby managed to see Mrs. Cator alone. He felt desperately nervous; but he must tell someone, ask for someone’s advice. And he liked Mrs. Cator.

“Janet’s told me her story,” he said awkwardly.

“Which means, I suppose, that you asked her to marry you?” she asked, eyeing him.

“Yes,” he nodded.

“It’s a tragedy,” Mrs. Cator sighed. “A tragedy—you poor, poor dears! You realize that Janet loves you?”

“Yes.”

“I knew it,” she said. “I’ve known it ever since you’ve been here. I’ve got eyes in my head. Do you think I haven’t seen you looking at each other?”

“But what’s to be done?” asked Toby pitifully. “What can we do?”

“You can’t marry,” she said sadly.

“But is it fair, is it human, that Janet, who’s absolutely blameless, should be tied to her husband for life after the way he’s behaved?”

Mrs. Cator shook her head.

“Doesn’t the law or the Church recognize insanity as a ground for divorce?”

“The law does not, Toby. And I’m not going to involve myself in a discussion on the Marriage Service.”

“But it’s neither just nor fair for the law to insist that a woman who’s married to a madman must stick to him for life. It’s not human—it’s monstrously unfair and cruel!”

“I agree,” said Mrs. Cator, her eyes full of sympathy, “from the worldly point of view, it *is* cruel.”

“Then what’s the alternative?” he demanded. “If she falls in love with someone else, what is to happen?”

“Circumstances alter cases. You can’t generalize, Toby.”

“I see that,” he said.

“Now take Janet’s case,” Mrs. Cator went on. “She cannot legally marry again. If she took the law into her own hands and decided to—to live with another man, what would happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“She’d be shunned and ostracized. People are horribly uncharitable. Her children, if there were any, would be illegitimate. You must forgive my speaking plainly, Toby, but there it is. You cannot alter facts, can you?”

“No-o,” he was forced to admit. “But—but would you cut Janet dead if she decided to—well, you know what I mean?”

Mrs. Cator thought for a moment, and then shook her head.

“No,” she replied, almost in a whisper. “Knowing the facts, knowing what her life has been, I don’t think I should altogether blame her. But I can’t call myself a religious woman, Toby. Other people wouldn’t agree with me.”

“Then if she were honestly in love with another man, and the man were honestly in love with her, you wouldn’t think any the worse of Janet if she decided to chuck convention and live with him, in spite of everything?”

Mrs. Cator did not immediately reply. Too much depended on her answer. She must think.

“If they’d known each other for a very long time,” she said at last. “If I knew in my heart that they were sure of themselves, and of each other, if I knew that their happiness depended on it, I don’t think I should altogether blame them. —No. I shouldn’t blame them, but I should be desperately sorry.”

“I see,” said Toby, gazing abstractedly out of the window.

“You must do your best to see if you can’t do without each other,” she said softly, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“Don’t think I’m unsympathetic, Toby. Don’t think I don’t understand a little of what you’re feeling. I like you. I know how hard it is on you both; but it’s harder for Janet, believe me.”

“I know,” Toby gulped. “That’s the terrible part of it. It’s a rotten world, rotten!”

“You poor boy,” Mrs. Cator whispered. “Do you think I don’t know?”

But nobody, thought Toby miserably to himself, could possibly realize the aching void that lay in his heart.

A few hours ago he had been so certain of himself, so certain of Janet, so triumphantly happy. And now—now—everything was finished.

He felt stunned and broken and shattered. Never had the outlook seemed more dreary and depressing, or the world more hard and cruel.

PRESCOTT, the new commanding officer, whom Toby found on board when he returned from leave, was the direct antithesis of his predecessor. Hendry, overcome, perhaps, by the inevitable strain of the war and his own responsibility, had been dour, surly, and unapproachable. Nerves, however, did not seem to trouble Prescott, who, whatever happened, was gay and cheerful and pleasant in his manner. All the trivial but inevitable worries and annoyances left him unperturbed and smiling.

He had a good word for everyone. Whereas Hendry had seldom visited the wardroom except for meals, Prescott practically lived there, except when the ship was at sea, and made friends of his officers. The soul of good nature, he never held himself aloof. His very appearance—short and stocky, with a fat red face, a perpetual smile, and a pair of twinkling brown eyes—radiated good fellowship.

It is true, though, that he was abominably lazy over his official correspondence, which he hated like the devil. While Hendry had been prompt and precise in all matters of minor routine, answering all official demands and letters immediately on receipt, Prescott, utterly unmethodical, bundled all official documents except those marked 'Immediate,' 'Urgent,' 'Secret,' or 'Confidential' into a drawer of his knee-hole writing-table with the intention of answering them when the spirit moved him. As he was seldom in the mood for putting pen to paper, he usually refrained from answering them at all, with the consequence that the *Libyan* was bombarded with curt and indignant Reference Sheets and signals peremptorily demanding to

know why such and such an order had not been complied with.

Once, when clearing out the accumulation of several weeks of papers from his drawer, he inadvertently burnt a paper-covered addendum to one of the most confidential of signal books. It was a sin of considerable magnitude which led to an official warning that if such a thing occurred again, he would incur ‘their lordships’ severe displeasure.’ Prescott, so far from being upset, merely laughed and showed the letter to Kerrell. It was not until Toby suggested constituting the new sub-lieutenant the captain’s private secretary and ‘Confidential Book Officer,’ a task which that young gentleman cordially detested, that the official correspondence was put on a proper basis.

“Now, thank God, I can breathe!” the skipper said, dashing signature after signature on the receipt forms and neatly written Reference Sheets produced by his amanuensis. “How lucky for you, sub,” he added, his tongue in his cheek, “to have this glorious opportunity of learning how the Navy’s run and how we propose to win the war. Paper-work is the bane of my existence, but you do it beautifully.”

But in the things that really mattered—the management of the men, the handling of the ship, and tact with his superiors—Prescott was anything but casual. On the contrary, he was very much all there.

Like Hendry, he possessed that innate sixth sense which made him a good seaman, and seemed to know instinctively what to do in every possible situation or emergency. He knew when risks were justified and when they were not, and was undoubtedly a lucky man, in that most things he attempted were generally successful.

And of the two, Prescott, though more lazy and easy-going, was by far the pleasanter shipmate. Officers and men soon came to love him. Their troubles were his troubles, and he left no stone unturned to help them.

Very soon Toby discovered that Prescott had more push and drive than would have been credited from his manner and appearance.

One morning at breakfast, while the *Libyan* was still in the dockyard at Chatham, Mutters, the engineer-lieutenant-commander, looked up with a frown from an official communication.

“They’ve turned it down, Number One,” he said.

“Turned what down?” Toby asked.

“Those alterations we asked for on the mess-decks.”

“The blighters! Do they give any reason?”

“No,” Mutters growled. “It’s the same old game, I expect—alterations unjustified on the score of expense. Lord, these dockyard people make me sick!”

Prescott, who, over his bacon and eggs, was reading a newspaper at the end of the table, pricked up his ears.

“They’re spending millions on the war, millions!” the engineer-lieutenant-commander grumbled on. “When we ask ’em for a minor alteration to make things better for the men, I be blowed if they don’t put the kybosh on it. The job could be done for twenty pounds in forty-eight hours by any outside firm.”

“What’s the trouble, chief?” the captain asked.

Mutters explained in detail.

“And you say these alterations are desirable?” Prescott queried, when he had heard what was required.

“Yes,” said Toby and Mutters together.

“Then *I’ll* see if I can get a move on ’em,” the skipper declared.

Mutters laughed.

“I’ll bet you five bob you won’t get any change,” he said. “I’ve tried all I can, and *I* know this dockyard inside out.”

He rather prided himself on his power of getting things done ‘on the nod,’ as he called it.

“I’ll take you,” said the captain with a grin.

At half-past nine, attired in his best cap and monkey jacket, and carrying gloves and a walking-stick, Prescott disappeared into the dockyard. By ten minutes past eleven, wreathed in smiles, he came on board again.

“What luck, sir?” Toby asked, as he met him at the gangway.

“They’ll start in on the job to-morrow morning,” the skipper replied. “And you can tell the chief he owes me five bob.”

“But how on earth did you do it?”

“Do it? I went and made love to the Admiral Superintendent, Number One. I wasn’t going to waste my time on any of the understrappers.”

“And has he approved it, sir?”

“Has he not,” Prescott laughed. “He telephoned through while I was there and told ’em to start in and get a move on—said the job was to be finished by Thursday afternoon, or he’d have someone’s guts for a necktie. I’ve got his written approval in my pocket.”

Toby stared.

“But we’ve been trying for weeks,” he said. “How in the world did you manage it?”

“Diplomacy,” the captain answered with a wink. “I started in by talking about the war, and what a strenuous life we destroyer blokes have. The old boy got quite interested. Then, more or less as an afterthought, I broached the subject of the alterations, without, of course, telling him they’d been turned down by the head of one of his departments.—‘Of course we’ll do ’em, my lad,’ said old mossy-face, who’s a decent bloke if you take him the right way. ‘That’s what the dockyards exist for.’—The devil it is, I thought to myself, giving him my sweetest smile and thanking him like a five-year-old after a Christmas party.—Anyhow, the old bird was feeding out of my hand before I’d done, so casting my wits round for something else to ask for while the going was good, I suggested a new motor-boat.”

“You did, sir?”

“Yes. Didn’t I hear you say the other day that ours was past redemption, a sort of dot-and-carry-one outfit?”

Toby agreed.

“Then you can return it to store,” Prescott said. “I’ve wangled a brand-new one, just received from the makers. I saw it myself.”

“That’s a good bit of work, sir!” said Toby. “But heaven help the poor devils who get our boat.”

“Can’t help their troubles,” the skipper laughed. “But look here, Number One, let me give you a tip.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you want anything out of the dockyard, or anyone else for that matter, don’t go and see ’em with a grievance and a

face like a sea-boot. No. Smile sweetly on 'em—tell 'em what wonderful good chaps they are, and how the world couldn't revolve without 'em. Then, when you've got 'em purring, just ask 'em for what you want. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, you'll get it, and they won't even realize they've been bounced."

"It doesn't do to take things too seriously," he went on to say, as he walked aft towards his cabin. "I think you're rather inclined to do that, Number One, if you don't mind my saying so. Sometimes, when I look at you, I think you might almost have been crossed in love."

Toby started in surprise, felt himself reddening. Many a true word is spoken in jest, and Prescott never knew how his innocent remark touched Toby on the raw.

"Crossed in love, sir," he managed to reply, "Oh, no, sir."

"Then smile, damn you! Smile!" said the commanding officer, disappearing down the circular hatch to his cabin.

Old Mutters lost his five shillings, and the *Libyan* obtained not only the needed alterations, but also a new motor-boat. The skipper, by what he called diplomacy, had achieved more in an hour by personal contact than could have been accomplished by weeks of correspondence.

But that was Lieutenant-Commander Prescott's way. Nobody could resist his beaming smile and persuasive manner. He was an adept at the gentle art of 'wangling' what he wanted, and persistent, too.

But only Toby Kerrell knew of the aching void that lay in his own heart. Day in, day out, his thoughts were of Janet.

How could he laugh and smile, and be gay and cheerful, when life seemed utterly blank and miserable, a dull, grey

existence with no alleviation whatever? How could he take an interest in other things when she absorbed all his thoughts, permeated his very being?

She was everything in the world to him, everything, and he had lost her. Even when time healed his wound and helped him to forget, Toby felt that his life could never be quite the same.

CHAPTER XVI

THOUGH it was early April, the weather for the past week in the southern portion of the North Sea had been abominable, gale succeeding gale with monotonous regularity. For the most part it had blown hard from the south-west, with general low visibility, occasional rain, and a short, steep little sea which broke in sheets over the forecastles and low decks of the destroyers as they steamed at twenty knots against it. The motion was appalling—a combined pitch and roll and wriggle mingling into a species of corkscrew, switchback movement utterly disconcerting to those who were not inured to it.

Twice, for some inscrutable reason known only to the meteorologists, the wind had flown round to the north, to bring biting cold with snow and sleet instead of rain. The spray froze as it fell, until the exposed upper deck of the *Libyan* was as slippery and as dangerous as a moving skating rink.

At such times it was impossible to keep warm, in spite of oilskins, thick duffle coats, layers of woollen garments, mufflers, and heavy leather sea-boots. The piercing wind seemed to find its way through everything; and water through every crevice. Snow and spray froze round men's mufflers, and then, slowly melting, trickled in a chilling stream down their bodies until their feet were squelching.

Once, going down to his uninviting cabin after a particularly arctic middle watch on the bridge, Toby Kerrell had difficulty in chafing any semblance of warmth back to his numbed feet before turning in for a few hours' sleep under the thick blankets, with the sea banging and the wind

howling at the thin steel side of the ship within a foot of his head, and her whole fabric quivering and pulsating to the thrust of her whirring propellers.

Grey skies, with dense masses of leaden-looking, wind-hurried cloud torn and fretted into a thousand fragments, and streaked with the white, frayed-out filaments of flying cirrus. Grey, leaden-looking seas rioting in confusion and topped with yeasty foam. Blinding snow-flurries which at times shut out all view of the other vessels a few cables distant. No sight of the sun.

At night—intense darkness alleviated only by the dim luminance of breaking seas, the blurred shapes of the ships in close company, and the feeble blue glimmer of their heaving, shaded stern-lights. And blackness overhead, with no glimpse of the stars or moon.

To Toby, Churton seemed like a dream, utterly vague and nebulous. Here, in all this cold discomfort and wetness, with the horrible lurching and sliding of the ship, her jarring and rattling, the fiddles over the stained tablecloth in the stuffy wardroom during meals, the tinned salmon fishcakes for breakfast, cold corned beef for lunch, some ghastly, nameless stew contrived by the seasick wardroom steward for dinner, coffee that tasted as though it were made of charred wood, and tea like boiled filings of brass and copper, it was impossible to realize that only three weeks ago he had been living in the lap of luxury in an old-fashioned house in the country, miles out of sight or sound of the sea.

And now—the stark discomfort of the North Sea in one of its worst moods, cold and grey, inhospitable as ever. Churton and Janet seemed very far away, almost as though they had never really existed.

In the privacy of his cabin, Toby derived a little satisfaction by fingering and looking at Janet's keepsake, a little pendant of carved Chinese jade worn on a gold chain round his neck with his identity disc. He would not have liked any of his brother-officers to know that he even possessed such a thing. To him it was not an ordinary talisman, but something sacred. Janet herself had worn it.

He remembered the pain of their parting, the dismal journey back to Chatham, and his return to the ship with all the attendant cares and worries and discomfort. She teemed with dockyard 'maties' working day and night to get her away to sea as soon as possible, for every destroyer that could float was urgently needed. Even the nights were made hideous by the screech of the pneumatic drills and the deafening rattle of the riveters. Toby found it hard to believe that all that had happened only three weeks before. It seemed more like three years, utterly remote.

On rejoining her flotilla at Harwich, the *Libyan* had been kept busy. Twice she had been to sea to act as part of the escort for the convoys of merchantmen which passed regularly to and fro between the Shipwash lightship, off Orfordness, and the Maas, off the Hook of Holland, marking the entrance of the river leading to the Dutch port of Rotterdam.

What the convoys carried on their outward trips nobody ever discovered. On their homeward journeys, however, they were laden with cheeses, butter, margarine, and other more or less perishable foodstuffs, bought, so people said, by the British Government, to prevent them from finding their way into Germany, feeding the civil population, and thereby

helping to invalidate the strict blockade. Starvation was ever a legitimate weapon.

This escort work was dull and monotonous, for though things rarely happened, there was always the chance that they might. It was anxious, exasperating work too, for the merchant vessels employed, some of them the veriest of crocks resuscitated from the scrap-heap to be insured by the government and to earn good dividends for their lucky owners, all pounded along independently at their best speeds. Some, the better craft, could steam at twelve knots; others, no more than seven with their safety-valves lifting. By the end of a couple of hours they were, therefore, spread out over ten miles of sea. Thereafter, the procession lengthened out at the rate of five miles an hour, until, at the end of eight hours' steaming, the line was fully forty miles long.

Eight destroyers, steaming at high speed, did their best to protect ten or a dozen merchantmen. But the risk was considerable. Zeebrugge, with its enemy destroyer flotillas, was only fifty miles away from the Maas lightship, and it did not require much imagination to visualize what a tempting bait the lumbering convoy must offer to any resolute German commander.

If a hostile force of destroyers had concentrated at the eastern end of the route, and swept down the long line sinking as it went, the protecting craft, widely scattered, could have done little or nothing to avert disaster.

But for the war, most of the older merchantmen employed on the Dutch convoy would have long since been broken up, or relegated to coastal use. Now, however, every ship that could float and steam seemed to have been pressed into

service to make up for the losses caused by enemy submarines.

But if such ships must be used, why not keep them to the less dangerous routes? Here, in the southern portion of the North Sea, within fifty miles of an enemy port and in an area infested by hostile submarines, they were a danger to themselves and to others. Moreover, it was infuriating to think that shipowners were amassing fortunes by sending men to sea in deathtraps.

If the merchantmen had been kept concentrated the work of protection would have been easier. But the speed of the convoy was still the speed of its slowest ship, and a dozen vessels lumbering along at seven knots in close formation offered too tempting a chance for submarine attack. Besides, the merchant skippers were utterly unused to steaming in formation or without lights—which inevitably increased the risk of collision.

It was heartrending to have the job of acting as ‘whipper-in’ at the tail of the long line, a task which sometimes fell to the *Libyan*. Even Prescott became impatient and irritable.

“Can’t you go a little faster?” he would shout through his megaphone, steaming the *Libyan* close alongside a wallowing tramp fussing along at between six and seven knots.

“What’s that?” the tramp’s skipper hailed, his red face appearing over the canvas dodger of his bridge.

“Go faster—faster!” Prescott howled. “There may be submarines about!”

“We’re going all we can!” came back the reply.

“But you’re down on the list as a ten knot ship! You’re not doing more than six and a bit!”

“Ten-knot ship when she was built, near forty years ago!” the exasperated shipmaster bellowed. “We’re drivin’ her all we know! It’s our ruddy boilers, mister, our ruddy engines, and the ruddy coal they expect us to use! The blasted stuff flares straight up the funnel!—Can’t keep a decent head o’ steam, and if we did the blinkin’ boilers wouldn’t stand it!”

This in a howl which could be heard nearly a quarter of a mile, and brought all the ship’s company of the *Libyan* on deck to see what was happening. The merchant skippers, who felt their position more keenly than anyone, did not always stop to consider their language. But the Navy, who knew them, and admired them as brave fellows for going to sea unarmed and risking their lives in the most decrepit old crocks that ever propped up the jetties in a ship-breaker’s yard, understood and sympathized.

It was one thing to be in a speedy destroyer, where one could leap ahead at thirty knots at a minute’s notice by connecting up another boiler and an extra oil-burner or two; but quite a different matter to command an antiquated tramp steamer run on the cheap, with filthy coal—every ounce of which had to be shovelled on to the furnaces by hand—leaky boilers, and engines long past redemption that had to be nursed if they were to revolve at all. One could not make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. But sometimes, like the army wallowing in the mud and filth of the trenches in Flanders, the Navy swore loud and deep at the drudgery of convoy work.

The enemy, however, did not use his destroyers to raid the Dutch convoy, which continued to run until the end of the war, though with better ships, with the loss of only half a dozen vessels through mine or torpedo. In refraining from

using their destroyers the Germans were either singularly lacking in initiative, or else gave the British credit for a more powerful escort than they actually had at sea. It was just as well.

On occasions hostile submarines made their appearance, sometimes to fire a torpedo at long range, sometimes to score a hit. More often than not, however, they were spotted and hunted by the escorting destroyers, who quartered the area in which they had been seen and dropped depth charges with cheerful promiscuity on sighting anything which might, or might not, be the flutter of a hostile periscope. Even if the detonation of 300 lb. of T.N.T. or amatol 50, 100, or 150 feet beneath the surface did nothing else, it was satisfactory to feel the quivering shock of the explosion, to watch a dome-shaped hummock of whitened water rise out of the water, and to see it burst upwards in a great gout of greyish-white spray. It was comparatively rarely that a submarine was bagged until the methods of hunting them became really scientific; but it was good to know that they hated destroyers and depth charges as the devil hates holy water.

Mines laid by submarines, however, were ubiquitous round about the east coast of England. They even appeared in the very approaches to Harwich, and it was one of these, during the early months of 1916, that occasioned the loss of Commodore Tyrwhitt's gallant little *Arethusa*, within a few miles of home.

CHAPTER XVII

SINCE early in 1915 enemy Zeppelins had been making themselves obnoxious over England. They had not done much damage of what the official *communiqués* called 'military importance'; but their bombs had taken a heavy toll of civilian life and occasioned considerable damage to private property. By the man in the street the raiders soon came to be known as 'baby killers.'

The raids were sufficiently alarming to those who experienced them. Toby Kerrell never forgot the hectic night in harbour at Harwich when he was roused from his bunk and rushed on deck to see a great, silvery, sausage-shaped monster moving slowly overhead, lit up in the glare of many searchlights. She must have been fully 8,000 feet up, though her enormous size made her look much lower. Every anti-aircraft gun in the harbour and ashore soon made the night hideous. The dark sky round the visitor sparkled with the flashes of bursting shell, the fragments of which whistled down in all directions.

The Zeppelin duly dropped her bombs, a few in the village of Parkeston, and several more in the harbour, where one fell between the bows of a destroyer and the 'oiler' alongside of which she was secured. They mercifully missed Parkeston Quay, where there were the destroyer and submarine depot ships, the submarines, the railway station, and storehouses containing heaven knows how many tons of explosives in the shape of depth charges, warheads for torpedoes, shell, and cartridges.

The *Libyan's* men, oblivious to the rain of shrapnel fragments descending from the sky, clustered on deck in their

night attire to see the fun. Toby and the sub-lieutenant tried to chase them down to the mess-decks, where they would be comparatively safe from anything but a direct hit from a bomb.

But would the men leave the upper deck? Not a bit of it. Disappearing for a moment they re-emerged the moment Toby's back was turned, one wag with a decrepit umbrella which had been used for theatricals. They did not intend to miss the display. Their remarks were too nautical to be printed; but jocular as ever. They were not perturbed, far from it—merely intensely curious and interested.

As a means of undermining the *morale* of the civil population, and thereby leading to a public outcry for peace at any price, the Zeppelin raids had no more effect than the bombardments of Scarborough and Hartlepool on December 16th, 1914, and the killing or wounding of many civilians; the wanton sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7th, 1915, with the loss of 1,198 men, women, and children; the legalized killing of Edith Cavell by a German firing party at Bruges on October 12th of the same year; or the use of gas as a weapon against troops, with a possibility of its extended utilization against the civil population in air-raids.

According to what Toby gathered in conversation with people ashore, he judged that these and other methods of enemy 'frightfulness' merely reacted against those responsible for them. They caused feelings of the greatest horror in the minds of the public; but this horror was by no means tinged with fear. On the contrary, it caused them to 'see red.' The most peace-loving of people called for retaliation, and, to judge from the newspapers, the great mass of the population became imbued with a fierce determination

that the war could not and must not end until an enemy capable of such misdeeds was finally crushed and vanquished.

Certainly Toby, and Prescott, and everybody on board the ship, ‘saw red’ when, one day in the English Channel, the *Libyan* steamed through a pitiful little cluster of perhaps half a dozen corpses floating in life-belts. They were a portion of the crew and passengers of some ship torpedoed and sunk days or weeks before, and among them was a woman in what looked like a nightdress—her arms, eaten almost to the bone, dangling limply in the water; her ghastly pallid face and sightless eyes turned up to the heavens; her long golden hair trailing out on the water like seaweed.

Both Prescott and Toby, who were on the bridge at the time, felt physically sick.

“The damned swine!” Toby heard the skipper muttering, his usually jovial face distorted with rage and his fists clenched. “May their souls rot in hell!”

They did not stop to investigate, for very soon the merciful sea would obliterate all traces of the tragedy. Nevertheless, there would have been no survivors if the *Libyan* had sunk an enemy submarine on that particular day, or for weeks afterwards.

War seemed a horrible, senseless way of settling differences between civilized nations when women and children were dragged into the conflict. Yet, how could war be waged at all without afflicting them? How could their immunity be guaranteed?

To give the devil his due, however, it was difficult to visualize the situation from the point of view of the enemy himself, to realize that he was struggling for his very

existence, and that, to him, every method seemed justified. If women and children were killed it was unfortunate; but perhaps more non-combatants were dying of starvation in the cities and towns of Germany through the strangle-hold of the vigorous British blockade than ever were killed by Zeppelin bombs in England, or drowned by torpedoes from submarines. Blockade was a legitimate, gentlemanly weapon recognized by the usages and customs of war. The use of poison gas, together with indiscriminate bombing and bombardment and drowning, were ungentlemanly and unrecognized, though in effect they might be precisely the same as blockade.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was in the first chilly grey light of dawn that the Harwich Force arrived at its appointed rendezvous off the Horns Reef lightship, and altered course towards the Vyl light-vessel, some eighteen miles to the south-eastward and nearer Germany. There were present four light-cruisers, headed by the Commodore himself in the *Cleopatra*, a number of destroyers, and the *Vindex*, a small, fast steamer built for the Isle of Man passenger service, but now requisitioned for the Navy and fitted out as a seaplane-carrier.

This was not the Harwich Force's first excursion into the Heligoland Bight, nor yet its thirty-first. Time and time again it had entered German coastal waters in the hope of repeating the success of August 28th, 1914, when three enemy light-cruisers and a destroyer were sunk and several other ships damaged.

But more often than not it had been doomed to disappointment. The enemy patrol craft were too wary to be caught napping, and as the war progressed the chart of the eastern side of the North Sea became more and more congested with the red rectangles and oblongs, marked 'Dangerous Area,' which represented minefields.

On this particular occasion the little *Vindex* was the centre of attraction, for it was her aircraft that were presently to be sent forth to bomb the Zeppelin shed known to exist at Hoyer, on the coast of North Slesvig opposite the island of Sylt.

Attempted retaliatory air-raids were no new thing, though comparatively few had succeeded. Aircraft were still more or less in their infancy, and according to modern ideas were

slow and limited in their radius of action. As yet there were no regular aircraft-carriers fitted with decks for flying off or flying on aeroplanes. Raids had to be carried out with seaplanes, which, transported in make-shift carriers, had to be escorted within striking distance of the enemy coast. There the machines were hoisted out, and had to 'take off' from the water. Various operations had had to be abandoned at the last moment through fierce weather and heavy seas, others because of fog and low visibility in which the aircraft stood little chance of finding their objective.

On this occasion, however, the Fates seemed kinder. The sea had been flat calm ever since leaving England, and now, within an hour or less of zero time, the grey-green water was just furred by a slight breeze from the northward.

It was bitterly cold. There had been intermittent snow-storms since midnight, which shut down the visibility to a few hundred yards. These, however, could not seriously interfere with the operation, provided the snow did not become constant.

Full daylight came to find all ships at action stations, for at any moment enemy patrol or outpost craft might be encountered. But except for the red hull of a Danish lightship, and a few brown-sailed fishing craft, the sea was barren. To the north, in the intervals between snow flurries, the hard blue sky was piled up with masses of light-greyish cumulus. To the west and south-west, the heavy clouds banked upon the horizon were leaden-looking and ominous as they mounted higher and higher towards the zenith.

Prescott, gazing round the horizon with a practised eye, asked for the reading of the aneroid at midnight and 4 a.m.

Kerrell told him. The lieutenant-commander whistled through his teeth and seemed mildly apprehensive.

“Foley,” he said to the R.N.R. midshipman on the bridge, “nip aft and let me know what the glass is now.”

The youngster was back with the reading within a few minutes.

“I thought so,” Prescott murmured, half to himself. “The cursed thing’s dropping fast. D’you see that sky, Number One?”

Toby nodded.

“It’ll be blowing hard from the sou’west before this evening,” the lieutenant-commander whispered in his ear. “We’ll have a dirty passage home, or I’m a Dutchman.”

“What do you make of the weather, McLeod?” he went on to ask the burly fellow at the starboard engine-room telegraph—Angus McLeod, an able seaman of the Royal Naval Reserve from Stornoway, who, having been a fisherman since childhood, had a wonderful instinct for weather prophecy.

The man looked round the horizon, and then overhead. Then at the sea, where he noted the direction of the breeze. His gaze was slow and deliberate.

“The snow’ll be stoppin’ and the wund’ll be backin’ ’afore long, sur,” he finally pronounced his opinion. “To-night, maybe, it’ll be blawin’ harrd from the westarrd.”

Prescott looked at Kerrell with a wry grimace and a shrug of his shoulders as much as to say ‘I told you so.’

McLeod’s weather prognostications had rarely been known to fail, though as a prophet he had sometimes found himself in rivalry with Able Seaman Young, who, having been a farmer’s boy before joining the Navy for the war, also

fancied himself as an amateur meteorologist. It was Young, naturally nicknamed ‘Brigham,’ who once occasioned hilarious shouts on the mess-deck by saying, when trying to remember a date—“Let’s see, it will be two year ago ’coom next dung-spreading time.” But it was Angus McLeod, the seaman to his fingertips, who had earned the nickname of ‘Old Moore’ through his uncanny prescience in anything pertaining to the weather.

“Well,” said Prescott, “let’s hope it will hold up until we’ve had time to get the show off. How soon do we reach the kicking-off place?”

“In about half an hour, sir,” replied the sub-lieutenant, who was also the navigator, running the dividers over the chart.

The lieutenant-commander made a mental calculation.

“So in about two, or two and a quarter, hours from now, the operation should be finished and we should be making tracks for home, eh?”

“There or thereabouts, sir,” the sub agreed.

But in war much can happen in two hours. And on this occasion much did.

Reaching her appointed position, the *Vindex* stopped and hoisted out her seaplanes, the destroyers circling round in case enemy submarines were lurking in the vicinity. One after another, roaring along the calm water in showers of spray, the aircraft rose into the air, and, climbing as they went, disappeared in the haze to the south-eastward. In all, they had some seventy miles to travel, thirty-five to their objective, thirty-five back. It was still bitterly cold, and occasional snow-flurries swept across the surface of the sea. The clouds were slowly gathering, but at times the sun still shone in a sky of the palest blue.

Zigzagging to and fro more or less in the same position, the Harwich Force, while waiting for the seaplanes to return, kept a sharp look-out for hostile aeroplanes, which, stirred up by the attack, must inevitably make their appearance. An hour passed—an hour and ten minutes. Prescott and Toby were beginning to feel anxious when a couple of the seaplanes suddenly shot into view in the midst of a blinding snow-squall, dipped, skimmed along the water, came to rest, and were duly hoisted in by the *Vindex*.

“I wonder what they’ve done?” said Toby anxiously.

Had the raid been successful they would probably have been told at once. It was not until some days later that the news leaked out of its failure. The land was obliterated in masses of thick, low-lying cloud, and only one machine, flying at a very low altitude, had actually sighted the Zeppelin shed. Fired at by every anti-aircraft gun that would bear, she roared over her target at a height of barely 400 feet, confident of success. On trying to release her bombs, however, the missiles could not be induced to drop. The releasing apparatus was clogged and frozen stiff with snow and ice.

Circling round, still under heavy fire, the pilot made another attempt, jerking his controls to shake his machine as she came over her huge target, using every artifice he knew. But again the bombs refused to drop, and cursing the bitter fate which had robbed him of a glorious opportunity of destroying a Zeppelin, the pilot had no alternative but to return to his parent ship far away to seaward.

Half an hour passed.

“Where on earth are the others?” Prescott asked anxiously, when there were no signs of the other two seaplanes.

Something untoward must have happened, but there was a chance, just a chance, that they had come down in the sea.

Then the Commodore's light-cruiser, the *Cleopatra*, draped herself with flags and busied herself with her semaphores.

"Destroyers are ordered to form line abreast, sir, half a mile apart, speed twenty knots, and to search to the south-east," the *Libyan's* leading signalman reported.

Two flotilla leaders and eight destroyers sped off in the direction indicated. Ten minutes passed, twenty minutes, half an hour—but still no signs of the missing aircraft. Then a low streak of land appeared over the horizon ahead, a streak which presently resolved itself into the low yellow sand-dunes and the towers and roofs of an island.

Prescott, peering at it through his glasses, put them down and glanced at the chart.

"Take your first look at Germany," he said with a laugh. "That's the island of Sylt. We'll soon be able to read the time by their town-hall clock."

Toby felt rather a thrill. It was surprising to think of British destroyers within a few miles of the enemy craft in broad daylight.

But still there were no signs of the missing seaplanes.

Sylt came nearer and nearer. The water was shoaling rapidly, until presently the destroyers lifted their bows skywards and tucked their tails well down into the sea with the creamy summits of their huge stern-waves towering high over their low quarter-decks.

"We'll be ashore in another five minutes!" Prescott exclaimed, glancing at the senior flotilla-leader.

Even as he spoke a flag signal streamed out at her stumpy masthead.

“Blue eight, sir!” shouted the leading signalman, as the answering pendant was hoisted.

Blue pendant, eight flag: in other words, ‘Alter course together 8 points to starboard!’ The signal came down. The ten little ships put their helms over, swung through a right angle, and headed south-west in a long single line.

The cruisers were now well out of sight to the north-west. Ahead the horizon was misty, when suddenly, at a distance of about 12,000 yards, there appeared two small vessels in company making towards the German coast. They were craft of the trawler type, and could only be enemy outpost boats or mine-sweepers returning to their base at Lister Deep.

Toby could not help feeling sorry for them. Armed with the puniest of guns, they were not a match for the oldest of destroyers, let alone ten of the most modern craft carrying 4-inch guns. And there they were, cut off within ten miles of home. He vaguely hoped they would surrender to save unnecessary loss of life.

But it was not to be.

The leading destroyer swerved slightly to port to cut them off. A gun boomed, and Toby and Prescott saw a shell pitch into the sea well clear of the leading German. It was a summons to heave to and haul down their colours, for nothing could save them.

The enemy, however, had no intention of throwing up the sponge so tamely. Their tiny guns flashed, and a small shell or two dropped into the sea a long way short of the leading British destroyer. For all the good they could do, they might just as well have been throwing stones.

An instant later the two leading destroyers broke into flame and wreathed themselves in clouds of tawny cordite smoke. The sea round the two little patrol vessels spouted spray, through which could be seen the occasional reddish glow of a bursting shell. Then the nearer one, in a last attempt to save herself, ignited a smoke-box and shrouded herself in a pall of greyish vapour.

The *Libyan's* guns did not open fire. She took no part in the sinking of the two outpost boats, or in the rescue of the survivors of their crews. Indeed, before the one-sided engagement had ceased, there came another diversion.

“Captain, sir! Captain!” the coxswain suddenly exclaimed.

“By God! She’s into her!” the sub-lieutenant shouted simultaneously.

Prescott and Toby, who for the moment were watching the German trawlers, whipped round on the instant.

The destroyer next ahead of the *Libyan*, the *Levin*, which bore slightly on the port bow, and perhaps half a mile distant, had opened fire. The ship next ahead of her seemed somehow to have altered course right across her bows. Both vessels, steaming at between twenty and twenty-five knots, were meeting nearly at right angles.

They were still about a hundred yards apart. For the moment, it seemed as if the least touch of her helm would send the *Levin* clear. The suspense became intolerable. Toby, gripping the bridge rail, caught his breath with anxiety. He felt hot and cold by turns.

Then many things happened at once. A syren shrieked madly, and the two ships, travelling at the speed of ordinary railway trains, met with a crashing, rending thump. The *Megaera*, struck full amidships, seemed to be pushed bodily

through the sea, heeling sickeningly over until the water poured over the port side of her deck and she seemed likely to capsize.

Prescott, shouting an order to the coxswain, leapt at the port engine-room telegraph and wrenched it over. The coxswain twirled the wheel. The *Libyan's* engines stopped, then raced full speed astern to bring her to a standstill.

With the shrill tearing of tortured steel, the *Levin* and *Megaera* wrenched themselves free, the *Levin* with a great bite torn out of her crumpled bows. The *Megaera* swung back to horizontal, and then listed drunkenly over to starboard with a huge gash in her side reaching from half-way across her deck to well below the water-line.

Seeing her damage, Prescott instantly realized what it meant. She was holed amidships, probably in the engine-room and after boiler-room, which meant that two large compartments were open to the sea. By this time both must be flooded. Her motive power was gone. Even if she remained afloat she would have to be towed home at slow speed.

Before the firing had started, the German outpost boats had been heard using their wireless, which had been answered by shore stations. The presence of British vessels off the coast would also be known by the attack on the airship station at Hoyer, now barely twenty miles distant. The glass was dropping fast, and before the day was out the chances were a hundred pounds to a halfpenny that it would be blowing hard from the south-west, the very direction in which the Harwich Force must make its retreat. It was half-past eight in the morning, with fully nine more hours of daylight.

It was unpleasant, to say the least of it, to find oneself so close to enemy coast with a stricken consort, and unknown forces of hostile battle-cruisers, cruisers and destroyers within easy striking distance. It was unlikely that the retreat would be unharried.

The *Levin*, still able to steam, was ordered to report to the cruisers still out of sight to the north-westward. And while a couple of destroyers remained to give the *coup de grâce* to the outpost boats, and to rescue the survivors, the remainder circled round to ward off possible submarines while a flotilla-leader took the *Megaera* in tow. She had started her pumps, and with a collision-mat over the hole, reported by signal that she could probably remain afloat.

It was while the hawsers were still being passed from ship to ship that there came a splash in the water nearly alongside the *Megaera*, followed by the heavy thump of an explosion. Another, then two more, close together.

“Aeroplanes!” Prescott exclaimed, looking overhead. “Get busy with the pom-pom, Number One.”

About 10,000 feet overhead, outlined against a patch of clear blue sky, was an enemy machine with the sun glinting on the white under-surface of her wings. She looked like some remote, harmless insect.

The 2-pounder anti-aircraft guns of all the destroyers fell to work, and the sky became pock-marked with the black, and white, and brown, and golden puffs of smoke from their bursting shell. More aeroplanes joined the first, until as many as ten could be counted at once. More bombs fell with their eerie whining—more splashes in the water, and the dull thuds of their explosions.

But none actually hit. The anti-aircraft shell, bursting about 7,000 feet overhead, kept the enemy machines to a height at which accurate bomb-dropping was impossible. All the same, there were narrow shaves in plenty. The *Libyan* herself was ‘straddled’ by two bombs of the same salvo which fell close on either side of her, to bring miniature waterspouts tumbling down on deck.

“That was a bit of luck!” laughed Prescott, who, now that the firing had started, seemed genuinely to be enjoying himself.

Toby and the sub looked at each other in mute understanding, for they were not enjoying it at all. Those aircraft circling about overhead gave them a horrible feeling of impotent nakedness, and if a bomb did hit, by any chance, well ...

“I wish the damned things would go home!” the sub grumbled in Toby’s ear, as another missile whizzed into the sea almost fifty yards away on the port beam and exploded with a bang. “I prefer being shot at in the Dardanelles to this. One feels so bally helpless, somehow!”

It seemed an age before the *Megaera* was finally in tow, and, with the destroyers spread out on either side and ahead, the whole party made off to the northward to rejoin the cruisers. They steamed at ten knots, the highest speed at which the damaged ship could safely be towed. The cruisers were met within an hour, when the whole force made tracks for home; but until two o’clock in the afternoon hostile aircraft kept track of their movements.

It was at about this time, on his way down to the wardroom for a belated midday meal, that Toby stepped into the chart-

house and tapped on the little window opening into the wireless office abaft it.

“Anything doing, Banks?” he asked, as the red face of the leading telegraphist appeared.

“Doin’, sir!” laughed Banks. “They’re yellin’ something horrid! ’Owlin like cats in a garden!—Just you listen, sir.”

He plugged in a duplicate set of receivers and passed them through the window.

Toby put them on. Above the usual noise of the ship he heard a musical, throbbing sound in the irregular longs and shorts of the Morse alphabet. Then a moment’s silence, following by a hoarse, discordant screeching. Banks’s simile of cats was not altogether inapposite.

“What’s that?” Toby asked.

“Telefunken, sir. One of their high-power shore stations.—There, sir, d’you hear that?” he continued, as a new note altogether sounded in Toby’s earphones.

“What is it?” Toby asked.

“That’s some ship answerin’,” Banks told him.

“They sound pretty busy.”

The leading telegraphist snorted. “Busy isn’t the word for it, sir,” he replied. “They’ve been at it for a couple of hours or more. Sounds to me as if the ’ole German Navy was throwin’ its weight about.”

Toby, who was fully aware of their proximity to the enemy coast, felt rather uncomfortable. Did it mean that the High Seas Fleet was getting under way?

Before going aft, he returned to the bridge, and had a short conversation with Prescott. But Prescott, munching corned-

beef sandwiches in the intervals of drinking hot coffee out of a vacuum flask, seemed quite unperturbed and smiling.

“Let the blighters come out,” he said. “If we sight ’em after dark we may get a chance of slapping in a torpedo or two. Anyhow, don’t you worry, Number One.”

His example was irresistible. Though his anxiety was still there, Toby felt comforted, slightly happier in his mind.

CHAPTER XIX

BY five o'clock the sun was getting low, and a glare of baleful green and yellow shone through the rifts in the dense purple and grey cloud masses piled layer upon layer over the western skyline. The glass was still dropping. The wind, which had been slowly backing throughout the day, now blew from the west-south-west and gradually increased in force.

The sea, deep purple-indigo in colour, had started to rise. Already the steep ridges, advancing in their short, irregular movement on the wings of the new breeze, were topped with foam, stained a sickly saffron by the light in the sky. They rose and toppled confusedly, as though they had not finally made up their minds to their right direction. The destroyers had started to roll awkwardly, with the fag-ends of occasional waves slopping over their decks.

Instead of taking the shortest and most obvious course home, to the westward clear of the southern edge of an enemy minefield, marked on the chart as a red rectangle some sixty miles long, north and south, and about forty miles broad, the Commodore was still steering north along its eastern edge, which meant a considerable *détour* before altering course towards the English coast.

"I wonder why he's going the long way round," Prescott asked himself, looking at the chart and manipulating his dividers and parallel rulers.

He sensed that something unusual was in the wind, though it was not until afterwards that he learnt for certain that the Admiralty had intercepted enemy wireless signals which showed that the German 'Second Scouting Group' of the

High Seas Fleet was at sea. The Commodore had been informed, and instead of steering the direct course homewards, he was taking the least likely. With a crippled ship in tow and bad weather coming on, he evidently did not wish to incur the risk of a night engagement with a superior force.

At 5.30 p.m., when the blaze of the lowering sun was turning into copper-colour and crimson, the masts, funnels, and upperworks of four or five great ships were sighted on the western horizon. They were steaming fast, the reek pouring from their funnels staining the sky astern of them. In the garish, unearthly glare their shapes looked unfamiliar, and for a moment or two Prescott, and everyone on the *Libyan's* bridge, took them for Germans.

The *Cleopatra*, however, still steamed on unconcernedly, and before long, as the huge hulls overtopped the line of demarcation between sea and sky and came nearer, a searchlight started to wink out from their leader. It was Sir David Beatty in the *Lion* with some of his battle-cruisers from Rosyth, which, unknown to those in the destroyers, had been acting as a covering force farther afield throughout the day.

“Intend to remain within easy supporting distance of you to the southward during the night,” was the purport of the signal spelled out by the *Lion*.

“Good old David!” Prescott murmured, his voice very relieved.

Although he did not show it to others, he could not help feeling anxious. And it was good to think that the Harwich Force, with the *Megaera* to look after and to tow 300 odd

miles home if humanly possible, was not alone. The sight of the battle-cruisers gave a wonderful feeling of security.

The night came down dark and overcast, with a heavy tumbling sea. There was no moon. Not a star blinked in the heavens. The wind had increased sensibly, and squall after squall, mingled with heavy rain, whistled down from the westward. At times the visibility was little more than half a mile.

At 9.30 p.m. speed had to be reduced to eight knots as the *Megaera* could be towed no faster without risking the snapping of the hawsers. A quarter of an hour later, however, the heavy motion caused the towing wire to part, and the damaged ship, listing heavily over to starboard, was left wallowing in the trough of the sea with the water breaking over her upper deck.

It was too rough for boats to be used. More than one attempt was made to take her in tow again; but without avail. The hawsers could not be passed from ship to ship, wind and sea combining to prevent it. Finally, after considerable delay, the *Megaera* reported herself to be sinking.

“Lord!” Prescott growled, watching her from his heaving bridge at a distance of little more than a hundred yards. “Here’s a pretty kettle of fish!”

In the darkness he could not pick out details; but through glasses saw her hull leaning over to a horrible angle, and the spray breaking as high as her funnel-tops. Holed in one of her most vital spots, she could neither steam nor steer, while the dynamo was flooded and useless.

“*Megaera* is to be scuttled and sunk,” the orders came back. “Nearest destroyer is to take off crew. Dispatch is necessary.”

“That’s us, Number One,” said Prescott abruptly. “Have fenders ready for going alongside, and people ready with heaving-lines and bearing-out spars. If I can’t do that, I must think of another way.”

Toby, who knew exactly what was wanted, hurried off the bridge to make his preparations.

“Nearest destroyer is to take off crew. Dispatch is necessary,” Prescott thought to himself. It sounded so simple, almost as easy as being ordered alongside an oiler or a jetty on a flat calm day in harbour. It was quite another matter, however, going alongside a lurching, heaving, waterlogged wreck out here in mid-ocean, with the seas breaking, the wind howling, and his own ship pitching and tumbling and rolling. A boat could not be lowered, for it would not have lived for a moment in the sea that was now running. No. The ships must actually come into contact if the ninety odd lives on board the *Megaera* were to be saved.

It was a frightful risk. He could not help remembering that the *Libyan’s* steel sides were little thicker than cardboard. The slightest mistake in handling her, the least error in judgment, even no error at all, might produce two wrecks instead of one.

But the task was not impossible, no task ever is. Provided his luck held, he might pull it off. If he did not, well, it would be time to think about it when he failed. Risk or no risk he’d be damned in little heaps before he allowed any other ship to try it before him.

While Toby collected his men and made his preparations, the *Libyan* moved slowly ahead. Stopping abreast of the *Megaera’s* stern Prescott took up his megaphone and hailed.

“*Megaera!* I want to speak to your captain!”

“Is that you, Prescott?” came back a voice.

“Yes. Look here, Denman, old boy! I’m going to take off your crew! D’you consider it safe to try coming alongside?”

“I shouldn’t risk it! We’ve got a heavy list, as you can see for yourself!”

“Then I’ll steam my bows into your forecastle and try to keep them there!” Prescott howled. “Your chaps must nip across one by one! I’ll have our braves up with all the heaving-lines we can muster!—How soon will you be ready to leave her?”

“We’re ready now!” Denman shouted back.

“How long will the ship remain afloat?” Prescott asked.

“She may go at any moment!” Denman replied. “The heel’s increasing every minute!”

Prescott, who was a few months’ senior to Denman, had it in mind to advise him to make quite certain that his ship would sink when abandoned. It would be terrible if she remained afloat, perhaps to be picked up and towed into some German port, or to drift ashore on one of the numerous islands fringing the Heligoland Bight.

Then he thought better of it. Being forced to scuttle one’s ship was a dreadful expedient at the best of times. If he interfered it would seem rather like rubbing it in. He did not wish to hurt poor old Denman’s feelings, to remind him, among other things, that the secret and confidential books, codes, documents, and cyphers should be burned, or put into the steel safe and weighted boxes and then thrown overboard, to prevent the least chance of their falling into the hands of the enemy. No. Denman himself, poor chap, could be trusted

to do all that. His, Prescott's job, was to rescue the *Megaera's* men, and as speedily as possible.

The *Megaera*, very low in the water, lay almost broadside on to wind and sea. Prescott, turning his ship with her screws, approached her slowly from leeward, aiming to touch her high forecastle nearly at right angles.

The *Libyan* pitched heavily as she approached. The distance narrowed fast—a hundred feet, fifty, thirty—a bare three fathoms.

“Stop both!” Prescott ordered, measuring the distance with his eye. “Slow astern both!... Half astern port!” to pull his bows round a little. “Stop both!”

Kerrell and a dozen men had clustered on the *Libyan's* forecastle, some with fenders, others with bearing-out spars, still more with heaving-lines.

As the distance diminished, Toby found himself looking into the white faces of the crowd of men on the *Megaera's* forecastle, now on a level with his eyes, now beneath him, now overhead, as the two ships plunged and wallowed.

Men lowered heavy hazel-rod fenders over the bows. Someone did the same in the *Megaera*. With a cracking and scrunching of twigs, but hardly a tremor, the two ships touched. Prescott had timed it well.

A heaving-line whizzed across and a wire hawser followed, securing the two ships together for the time being. The first man from the *Megaera*, watching his chance, leapt across the narrow gap amid the cheers and laughter of his shipmates, to be seized by willing hands in the *Libyan* and dragged into safety.

Whatever may have been their inner feelings at having to abandon their ship, the *Megaera's* crew showed no signs of despondency. They seemed as merry as children at a Christmas party.

“Come on! Get a move on!” Prescott shouted through his megaphone. “I can’t stay here all night!”

The *Libyan* had started to roll deeply. She was pitching as well, and he was using his engines to keep her in position.

It was blowing a full gale and pitch dark. Except for the flickering gleams of a few hand lanterns, and the occasional flash of an electric torch, not a light could be shown lest the position should be given away to any enemy flotilla which might be in the vicinity. In such circumstances Prescott’s task was a ticklish one. Already there had been one or two ominous bumps and the shrill scream of tortured steel as the *Libyan's* sharp stern, pushing the fenders aside, ground heavily against the side of the *Megaera*.

One by one about a dozen more men jumped, or were dragged, into safety.

Then Prescott noticed that the two vessels, due no doubt to the pressure of his own ship on the *Megaera's* bows, were slowly coming together. If once they met broadside on, nothing could prevent the *Libyan's* side from being crushed in. Already the curved edges of their forecastles were meeting with crash after crash which shook the whole ship.

A couple more men leapt across. Then the securing wire parted like a piece of pack-thread.

“Don’t let any more jump now!” Prescott shouted above the booming of the wind and the roar of breaking seas. “I’ll have to go astern and make another shot!”

Twice again he repeated the manœuvre, until every officer and man in the *Megaera* had been rescued, together with the ship's cat, a nondescript dog masquerading under the name of an Irish terrier, and a bedraggled canary in a cage. Only one contretemps occurred, and this was when one of the seamen slipped, missed his footing, and fell into the water between the two ships. He was dragged out on a rope's end with no further damage than a thorough drenching, to arrive on deck with chattering teeth, a flood of muttered profanity at his own clumsiness, and the remark—"A bit early for bathin', mate."

Some of the *Megaera's* crew had small bundles containing their most treasured possessions. Denman, the commanding officer, who was the last to leave, brought the ship's log, the signal log, and a bundle of charts. Most of the others had nothing but what they stood up in. The time had been too short for the salvage of effects, and their efforts had mainly been concentrated on trying to save their ship.

Wet through and bitterly cold, hungry and thirsty, they were soon taken charge of by their rescuers and treated like long-lost brothers.

"I can't spare you from the bridge," said Prescott to the coxswain, as the *Libyan* backed astern from the wreck. "But send the messenger aft, and tell your understrapper to serve out a rum ration to all the *Megaera's*, and what food they want."

"Aye, aye, sir."

In obedience to a signal flashed with a shaded light, the *Libyan* joined her flotilla and steamed northward at fifteen knots.

Toby came on to the bridge.

“Well done, Number One!” said the captain approvingly. “Good work! Any damage?”

“There’s a bit of a gash in the stem just below the level of the forecastle, sir, and one or two of the plates on the port side of the forecastle are bulged in,” Toby answered. “It doesn’t affect our seaworthiness.”

“Thank God for that!” Prescott muttered thankfully. “Are the *Megaera’s* being looked after?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve turned ’em over to their opposite numbers. They’re being served out with food and rum, which I understand you ordered, and we’ve issued all the spare bedding we’ve got. Where they’ll all doss I don’t know,” he added. “There’s a hell of a scrum on the mess-decks.”

“They’ll get their heads down somewhere,” Prescott laughed. “Don’t you worry.”

“The *Megaera’s* captain wanted to see you, sir,” Toby added.

“Then ask him to come up. I can’t leave the bridge. You might tell my servant on your way aft to get my cabin ready for him, and give him what he can find in the way of clothes. You’ll look after the other officers in the wardroom, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

A few minutes later Lieutenant-Commander Denman came on to the bridge.

“I can only say thank you,” he said, going up to Prescott and holding out his hand. “I’m most tremendously grateful, and so we all are.” He spoke with a catch in his voice.

“That’s all right!” Prescott replied, patting him on the shoulder. “You’d have done the same for us, old boy!”

“I’m more grateful than I can possibly tell you,” Denman said. “What a rotten business it’s been,” he added, his voice mournful. “You don’t know what I feel at having lost her.”

“I can imagine it. But don’t worry, old bird. That won’t do any good.”

“Worry!” the other exclaimed. “How can I help worrying when my ship’s gone and there’s a court martial hanging over my head? They’ll try to hang me as high as Haman!”

“Don’t be such a damned old pessimist!” Prescott advised, doing his utmost to console him. “If we’re at war we can’t help losing a ship or two now and then. They may not even court martial you at all. If they do, it’ll probably be a mere formality.”

“That’s all very well, but——”

“Go down below, Denman, and have some food,” Prescott broke in. “Use my cabin, and borrow what clothes you want. Go on! Don’t stop up here,” he went on kindly, taking his friend by the arm and pushing him gently towards the ladder. “You’re wet through and shivering. If you don’t watch it, you’ll get pneumonia.”

Denman disappeared, still protesting his gratitude.

It was shortly after ten-thirty, when Toby was on the bridge talking to Prescott, that there came the orange flash of a gun from the north-eastward, in which direction, about two miles distant and invisible in the pitch darkness, steamed the four light-cruisers, headed by the *Cleopatra*.

Another flash—then the thuds of the two reports echoing faintly across the water. It could only mean one thing. The enemy had been sighted.

The *Libyan* was ready for action, with her guns and torpedo-tubes manned. There was nothing to be done but wait until something was sighted.

With their glasses to their eyes Prescott and Toby slowly swept them to and fro, expecting every moment to see the hulls of hostile ships driving through the darkness. But they saw nothing—nothing but the dim phosphorescent glimmer of breaking seas.

When, after half or three-quarters of an hour nothing appeared, they both felt very relieved. A night *mêlée* in weather like this was not much to be desired, and the *Libyan*, with twice her normal complement, was a very crowded ship.

The dismal night wore on, the wind gaining strength and the sea mounting higher and higher. Prescott and Toby took alternate spells on the bridge, the one off duty retiring to the chart-house to stretch himself out on the cushioned settee. But with the crashing and thumping of the seas, the howling of the wind, the heavy pattering of spray, and the maddening motion as the ship rolled deeply with the wind and sea nearly abeam, sleep was impossible. Once or twice Toby dozed off into an uneasy cat-nap, only to be brought back to full consciousness by a heavy lurch which nearly flung him to the deck.

The grey dawn had already started to come out of the east when the course was altered towards the English coast, some 350 miles distant. It was blowing the North Sea counterpart of a hurricane. When it became lighter the great leaden-coloured hummocks of water, topped with yeasty foam, could be seen racing madly down from the south-west, the gale filching the spray from their summits to send it hurtling to leeward in sheets of flying spindrift.

The curling seas looked as steep as the side of a house. At one moment the *Libyan* pitched her bows clear of the water, then poised herself on the back of the oncoming comber. The next instant she fell sickeningly into the succeeding hollow with a thump which shook her to her very keelson and seemed to bring her up all standing; while the next wall of water erupted over the forecastle in a liquid avalanche and broke wildly against the chart-house beneath the bridge. At times, when her stern lifted, the propellers raced wildly in the air. Sea after sea cascaded waist-deep across her deck. The irregular motion, half-pitch, half-roll, with the perpetual bumping and crashing, was maddening to the senses. On the reeling, spray-swept bridge it was impossible to retain a foothold without holding on with both hands.

It was wonderful that so slender and fragile a thing as a destroyer could withstand such an onslaught. The ship could be felt bending and straining as she rose and fell, and the trip-hammer blows under the bows seemed likely to bulge in her bottom plating. So it was with a feeling of infinite relief that, when full daylight came, Toby saw the signal for ten knots hoisted by the flotilla-leader ahead.

But even ten knots was too fast for safety. Within a few minutes speed was again reduced to eight—eight knots, which meant that they were probably making good no more than five or six. Though the seas still broke heavily on board, though the motion was still violent, the ship certainly rode easier, and without those awful thumps and crashes as though she had smitten a stone wall.

Glancing at the sodden chart, however, Toby felt unutterably depressed. There were 300 miles to be covered before they could hope to reach the comparative shelter of the

English coast—300 miles at a veritable crawl, unless the weather moderated beforehand. But this was unlikely. These gales sometimes persisted for three or four days at a time.

He was wet through, cold, tired, hungry, and stiff all over through balancing his body to the pitch and roll of the ship. His eyes were bloodshot and smarting, and his face seamed with little runnels of dried salt. He felt dirty, unshaven, utterly out of tune with his own aching body.

Glancing round the hazy horizon as the light strengthened he could see no sign of the cruisers. Except for the flotilla-leader and five other destroyers, there were no other ships in sight. Surprised, he put his lips to the voice-pipe and whistled up Prescott in the chart-house.

The lieutenant-commander, yawning and rubbing his tired eyes, appeared on the bridge.

“No cruisers in sight, you say?”

“No, sir.”

“I wonder what’s happened. Something to do with that firing we heard last night, I expect. Have we intercepted anything by wireless?”

“Nothing, sir,” said Toby, who had already sent down to inquire.

It was not until ten-thirty that the leading telegraphist reported the interception of an urgent signal from the Commodore to someone in authority. One of the light-cruisers, the *Undaunted*, had been very seriously damaged in collision. Making good three knots she was battling her way westward in the teeth of the gale with a consort steaming by. But there was a possibility that she might have to be abandoned.

“Lord!” Prescott muttered, his face solemn. “Another!”

Not until they reached Harwich thirty-two hours later, after one of the worst buffetings they had ever experienced and no more than ten tons of oil-fuel left in their tanks, that they heard what had taken place.

Hostile destroyers had been sighted by the light-cruisers soon after the *Megaera's* crew had been rescued. The *Undaunted* had opened fire with her 6-inch guns, the flashes of which had been seen from the *Libyan*. The leading cruiser, the *Cleopatra*, seeing two enemy craft crossing her bows from port to starboard, increased to full speed, put her helm over, and rammed the second enemy destroyer full amidships.

The cruiser's sharp bows clove their way through her enemy's thin plating like a wedge. She was cut into halves, her stern portion sinking alongside, and the bows, in which men could be heard shrieking, passing on to disappear in the darkness, to sink in that raging sea. Even if the exigencies of the moment had permitted it, no boats could have lived in the welter. Not a soul on board that destroyer had survived.

It was in the inevitable confusion caused by this incident that the *Undaunted* came into collision with a consort and was very seriously damaged. For a time it had seemed as if she must be abandoned, but struggling on she eventually managed to reach the Tyne.

Prescott, bathed, shaved, and again in his right mind, came back from the depot ship with the news while the *Libyan* was still alongside the oiler filling her depleted tanks. The *Megaera's* officers and men, clothed in a variety of borrowed garments, and having bestowed the dog, the cat, and the

canary upon the *Libyan* as mementoes of the occasion, had long since left the ship.

“It’s strange how these things happen,” said Prescott, sipping his whisky and soda in the wardroom.

“How, sir?” asked the sub-lieutenant.

“If it hadn’t been snowing, those seaplanes would probably have got back, and we shouldn’t have been sent off to search for them,” the lieutenant-commander said. “Even if those outpost boats had been half an hour earlier in leaving their patrol we shouldn’t have seen them, and the *Megaera* wouldn’t have been rammed.” He paused to light his pipe.

“If the *Megaera* hadn’t been rammed,” he continued, “we should have got clear away, the *Cleopatra* would never have sighted that destroyer, and the *Undaunted* wouldn’t have been damaged. In other words, if it hadn’t been snowing, or if someone in the *Megaera* or *Levin* had said ‘Hard-a-port’ instead of ‘Hard-a-starboard,’ we’d have been saved a hell of a lot of trouble and anxiety, and the nation a good deal of money.”

“I’m sorry for those poor devils in that German destroyer,” said Mutters.

“Sorry!” the sub-lieutenant exclaimed. “Why the deuce should you be sorry?”

“Why not? How would you like this ship to be cut in two and to find yourself floating about the ocean, or not floating, on a night like that?”

“I shouldn’t like it at all,” the sub retorted. “All the same, I don’t see why you should be so sympathetic. What about the way their submarines have behaved? D’you mean to tell me _____”

“I don’t say their submarine people have behaved well,” Mutters interrupted. “All the same, they’ve got to obey orders, just like the rest of us. What I do say is that I’m sorry for those poor devils in that destroyer. Most of ’em were probably quite peaceable sort of fellows like you and me. Some of ’em might even have wives and families. If you were a married man, sub, you’d understand; but being young and inexperienced——”

The sub-lieutenant flushed.

“Married men,” he hurled back, “are the bane of the——”

“Tut tut!” Prescott broke in with a laugh. “Don’t let’s argue about it. What you both mean, what we all feel, is that war’s a bloody business, isn’t that it?”

Mutters grinned and nodded.

“But the weather’s a damned sight bloodier, sir,” the gunner observed, joining in the conversation for the first time. “Why I ever volunteered for de-destroyers when I might have gone to a battle-wagon is a marvel to me.”

“Would you rather be in a big ship, gunner?” Prescott asked, mildly surprised.

“Not reely, sir.”

“Well, what’s biting you? Are you seasick?”

“Seasick, sir!—Me, seasick! Lawd, sir! Man an’ boy I’ve served——”

Toby looked up from a letter he was reading.

“The fact is, sir,” he put in, “the gunner had his cabin flooded out by a sea coming down the hatch.”

“Lord, sir!” laughed the sub. “You should just have seen it! The old boy had left his cabin door open, and the sea came

down in a waterfall and flooded our flat. My door was shut, luckily——”

“Not so much of your ‘old boy,’ ” Mr. Huxtable growled with a twinkle in his eye. “Why can’t you young officers behave respectful? Haven’t I bin your sea-daddy ever since you joined this ship? Where’s your gratioode?”

“I love you very much, gunner,” the sub-lieutenant answered. “You’re a pearl among gunners, altogether wonderful. But you must admit you used some very profane and hectic language when the water invaded your cabin, didn’t you now?”

“And wouldn’t you curse a bit if it ’ad ’appened to you?” retorted the other. “Fact is, sir,” he added, turning to Prescott, “all the drawers in my chest of drawers was thrown open, and I goes down into my cabin to find all me clothes, an’ boots, an’ shirts—almost everything I possesses—washin’ about the deck in two feet o’ dirty water. An’ the sub-lieutenant, sir, instead o’ sayin’ how sorry he is, makes a joke of it, an’ stands there laughin’ like a maniac. It may be funny to him, sir, but—but you should see me clothes, sir. Me Sunday uniform trousers——”

“Have a drink, gunner?” Prescott said, touching the electric bell.

“Thank you, sir,” said the gunner, brightening. “I don’t mind if I do.”

“D’you mind if I put on the gramophone, sir?” asked Hartopp, the surgeon-probationer.

“Please do,” said the skipper.

TOWARDS the end of May the *Libyan*, with seven other destroyers from Harwich, found herself in the Firth of Forth temporarily attached to the Battle Cruiser Fleet under the command of Sir David Beatty in the *Lion*. Nobody knew what the move portended. It was merely thought that more destroyers were required in the north to fill the gaps in the flotillas caused by vessels refitting.

Minelaying from enemy submarines was gradually on the increase. Many merchant ships had been lost off the east coast of England, and the *Libyan* and her consorts had steamed north along the War Channel which stretched at that time from the North Foreland to the Firth of Forth.

No destroyer officer who used this channel, and the Harwich Force used it assiduously, could help thinking of the men who maintained it. Day in and day out, fair weather and foul, fog or blinding snow, this narrow sea-lane, half to three-quarters of a mile wide and some 400 miles long, was swept by the indefatigable flotillas of minesweeping trawlers based at Harwich, Lowestoft, Yarmouth, Grimsby, North and South Shields, and other ports along the east coast. Sometimes they found mines, sometimes they did not; but the route was swept daily so that the merchant traffic might pass up and down in comparative safety.

The minesweeping flotillas were commanded by naval or naval reserve officers, some from the active, and some from the retired list. But the greater number of the trawlers themselves were officered and manned by their ordinary personnel, men who in peace earned their livings as deep-sea fishermen on the Dogger Bank, and as far afield as

Spitzbergen, Iceland, and Newfoundland. As the war progressed, more and more trawlers were taken into the Navy and their crews enrolled in the trawler section of the Royal Naval Reserve.

Outside the ports from which they hailed, and outside the Royal and Merchant Navies, however, few people understood how arduous and dangerous was the task of the minesweepers, or how easily and readily the fishermen of Britain had adapted themselves to the circumstances of war. They had none of the honour and glory of open battle. The tales of their exploits seldom figured in the Press, for their work was not spectacular. It was drudgery, nerve-racking drudgery, for they were fighting a hidden, insidious enemy which exacted a frightful toll of human life. At one period a trawler was lost for every two mines swept up, and for every trawler blown up during the war an average of half the crew perished.

The inhabitants of Britain little realized the inestimable debt they owed to their fishermen who now wore the uniforms of the fighting service. Nor does it convey much to the imagination when it is said that, by the end of 1917, when the enemy submarine minelaying effort was at its height, over 1,000 miles of the coastal waters of Great Britain were swept daily for mines so that the ships carrying men, and food, and munitions, and the thousand and one miscellaneous cargoes necessary for the prosecution of the war and the feeding and welfare of millions, might pass in safety.

But the Navy, particularly the destroyers, who saw the minesweepers at their daily drudgery in all weathers, knew what the country owed to them and were loud in their praises. Flashing at twenty knots past a little group of dingy trawlers

with homely names plunging along at six knots with their sweeps out, their smoke-grimed ensigns flaunting in the breeze, and their crews attired in the most nondescript of garments from football jerseys to bowler hats, the destroyers' men would wave their caps and cheer. On the rare occasions they had the opportunity of meeting in harbour they would fraternize in the manner peculiar to seamen the world over. Sometimes, when the fraternization became intense, they even fought for the honour of their respective branches of the Service, then fell on each other's necks and vowed eternal friendship.

The trawler-men were rugged, uncouth, and rather incomprehensible with a strange jargon of their own and a surprising flow of language. Discipline meant nothing to them, and they were as indifferent to the majesty of admirals and senior officers as they were to their own safety. They were a law unto themselves, and the Naval Discipline Act, the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions, and such minor ordinances as the Victualling and the Uniform Regulations, left them scratching their heads and wondering what they all meant. They were stout-hearted, simple-minded fellows whose one idea was to get on with the job, though their habits and ideas occasionally shocked those who, brought up in the rigid tradition of the Navy, imagined that the naval method was the only way of doing anything.

Prescott had once sat as a member of a Court of Inquiry on a trawler skipper who had expended a full month's supply of rum for his little ship's company in something under a week. He never tired of telling the story. It had not occurred to the grizzled North Sea veteran that the spirit was supposed to be served out at the rate of half a gill per man per day.

“Regulations!” he exclaimed, quite aggrieved. “I don’t know no regulations, gentlemen! The blamed stuff’s given us to be drunk, isn’t it? What’s it matter when we drink it?”

With the members of the Court vainly endeavouring to hide their amusement, the delinquent was solemnly warned to be more careful in future.

They steamed north along the bobbing buoys marking the swept channel on a brilliantly fine day with a flat calm sea, eventually to arrive in the Firth of Forth.

The censorship was strict. Most of the subjects that anybody wanted to mention in their letters were strictly taboo, while the movements of ships must not be disclosed. Officers and men, moreover, were trusted not to evade the censorship of posting letters ashore. Toby, however, who had formed the habit of writing nearly every day to Janet, as she did to him, was able to give her a hint or two as to where the ship had gone.

“This place seems rather peaceful after the south,” he wrote guardedly. “The war seems quite far away, for a change, and instead of lying at buoys in a river we are alongside and can walk ashore whenever we are allowed leave. The men even have a wet canteen within half a mile of the ship, though my servant tells me the beer is watered, which I’m certain it isn’t.

“When we are at four hours’ notice for steam, we are allowed to go to——, about three-quarters of an hour away by bus or train, provided we remain in telephonic communication. The skipper and I went yesterday, and lunched and dined ashore. It was a treat to get a decent meal after the stuff we have on board. We had our hair cut and

shampooed, lady barbers, if you please, and the skipper suggested a Turkish bath, at which I jibbed. Instead, we wallowed in long baths with lashings of hot water, did some shopping, and went to a cinema after dinner.

“It seemed strange to be in a city again, with trams and buses with women conductors, and to see the shops and crowds of decently dressed women. I sent you a little thing from Brook’s, the jewellers, which I hope you will like, and something in *crêpe de Chine* from Jenner’s that a beautiful young thing with languishing eyes assured me were quite the latest thing. I only hope they’ll fit, but if not, they’ll change ’em. Knowing how bashful I am, you’ll hoot at the idea of me in Jenner’s, which I believe is a female shop almost entirely, isn’t it? But the skipper dragged me in there to buy something for a mysterious young woman of his, so I did likewise. I’ve also sent you some shortbread. You wouldn’t like a haggis, I suppose? Or perhaps it isn’t the haggis season as there isn’t an ‘R’ in the month.

“It was quite a treat to spend a little money and to be mildly extravagant in a decent shop, and I bought myself a new fountain-pen, some books, twelve collars, some socks, and a dozen new records for the gramophone at the earnest request of Foley, the R.N.R. snotty, who, as usual, hasn’t a bean in the world. This place seems very peaceful after the last, where we had the German almost at the front door. Here they are almost 400 miles away, if not more.”

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN the *Libyan* sailed from the Firth of Forth in the evening of May 30th, presently to find herself acting as one of the anti-submarine screen for the battle-cruisers, neither Prescott nor Toby regarded the occasion as anything but one of the periodical sweeps of the North Sea. Nor had they any idea that, far away to the northward, the whole of the remaining battleship strength of the Grand Fleet was also at sea.

For nearly two years British squadrons and flotillas had crossed and recrossed the North Sea nearly from end to end. There had been the battle of the Heligoland Bight soon after the outbreak of war, the Dogger Bank engagement of January, 1915, and many little excitements off the Dutch and Belgian coasts and in the Straits of Dover. But no sight of a German battleship had been vouchsafed to any British vessel other than a submarine, and, in the course of months of weary watching and waiting, many British naval officers had come to believe that the High Seas Fleet would never venture far enough afield from its own harbours to give the Grand Fleet a fair chance of bringing it to action. The war, so far as the German Navy was concerned, seemed to have developed into a war of attrition—an intensive submarine campaign directed mainly against mercantile shipping in the hope of bringing Britain to terms by starvation and economic pressure.

Except for the reported sighting of a submarine's periscope by one of the outlying cruisers soon after eight o'clock, which occasioned a temporary alteration of course to the northward to avoid it, the forenoon of May 31st was uneventful so far as the *Libyan* was concerned.

It was a fine, sunny day with a flat calm sea, little or no breeze, and full visibility, though to the east clouds were slowly banking up over the horizon. Noon found Sir David Beatty still steaming eastward at about twenty knots, the *Lion*, *Princess Royal*, *Queen Mary*, and *Tiger* in single line ahead, with the *New Zealand* and *Indefatigable* slightly before their port beam at a distance of about four miles. Five miles away on the port quarter came the four battleships of the 5th Battle Squadron, the *Barham*, *Valiant*, *Warspite*, and *Malaya*. The destroyers, as usual, were dotted about the sea ahead and abeam of the big ships as an anti-submarine screen, while nine or ten miles ahead of the *Lion* came the centre of the cruiser screen, a long line of vessels in pairs five miles apart covering a front of about fifty miles.

The Battle Cruiser Fleet swept on, and at 1.30 p.m., the Admiral having signified his intention to alter course to the northward on reaching his rendezvous some fifteen miles to the eastward, the line of direction of the cruiser screen was in process of being altered to east-north-east, while the 5th Battle Squadron was told to take station north-north-west of the flagship.

By two-fifteen the *Lion*, followed by her consorts, was swinging round to the northward, while the *Libyan*, with the other destroyers of the anti-submarine screen, pushed ahead at full speed to take up their new stations.

It was some minutes afterwards that the whistle of the voice-pipe leading from the wireless office to the *Libyan's* bridge sounded with unusual vehemence. Toby, who happened to be nearest, pulled the whistle out of the mouthpiece, lifted the flexible tube, and with a brief 'Hullo?'

put his ear to the orifice. He heard the voice of Banks, the leading telegraphist.

“What?” he exclaimed, stiffening suddenly with his voice sharp with excitement. “Repeat that!”

Prescott turned to watch him.

“Yes!” said Toby, after a brief pause. “I’ve got it! Let us know at once if you hear anything more! The *Galatea*’s reporting enemy cruisers and destroyers to the eastward, sir!” he reported to Prescott.

The lieutenant-commander seemed to take the news quite calmly.

“Ye Gods!” he exclaimed with a smile. “Does it mean they’re out?—Signalman, whereabouts is the *Galatea*?”

“On the far wing of the cruiser screen, sir,” the man replied after a moment’s thought.

“I make her between fifteen and twenty miles to the eastward,” the sub-lieutenant put in, measuring the distance on the chart with Prescott and Toby looking over his shoulder. “It was lucky I plotted their rough positions.”

The lieutenant-commander grunted, knocked out his pipe, and started to refill it.

“You’d better warn the ship’s company we may be going to action stations at any moment,” he said casually, turning to Toby. “Half of ’em will be asleep on the mess-decks by now.”

What had happened, as was afterwards discovered, was that the *Galatea* had sighted a steamer some ten miles ahead of her to the eastward. The merchantman was stopped and blowing off steam, and closing to investigate the British cruiser soon sighted the German destroyers lying close alongside her. Farther to the north-eastward was a squadron

of cruisers. By this trivial incident the British and German fleets were brought into contact.

Almost at once things started to happen. At two-thirty, by which time the *Galatea* and *Phaeton* were reporting themselves in action, the *Lion*, followed by the battle-cruisers, swung round to the south-east and increased to twenty-two knots. Five minutes later the *Galatea's* busy wireless reported heavy smoke in the east-north-east, as though from a large fleet.

“It’s them, sir!” Toby cried, his eyes glistening as the intercepted message came on to the bridge by voice-pipe. “Big ships!”

It was, for at three o’clock, on the receipt of another report that the smoke sighted came from the German battle-cruisers, Sir David Beatty altered course to the east-north-east, and a little later to the north-east.

Soon after three-thirty, with their hearts throbbing, Prescott and Toby, in the intervals of keeping station, were looking through their glasses at a dense pall of funnel smoke overhanging a dark, leaden-looking cloud far away on the north-eastern horizon.

The *Lion*, foaming along at nearly twenty-five knots with the *Princess Royal*, *Queen Mary*, and *Tiger* in her wake, altered course to the eastward. The *New Zealand* and *Indefatigable* presently turned and took station astern of the line, until the six great vessels were steaming full in the direction of the enemy. They were all cleared for action. Not a man was visible on their decks. Their great guns were cocked up at full elevation, and their admiral’s flags, and white ensigns hoisted as battle flags at mastheads and yardarms, streamed bravely in the breeze created by their

passage. Their great plume-like bow-waves and heaped-up wakes testified to their speed. The sight of these great grey hulls driving relentlessly through the calm water gave a wonderful feeling of power and omnipotence. Toby, as he watched them, had a lump in his throat. He felt he wanted to cry, or to wave his cap and cheer, he didn't quite know which.

But he had little time to look about him, for the *Libyan*, due to the frequent alterations in course, was steaming full speed to maintain her appointed station. From her bridge the four ships of the 5th Battle Squadron were nowhere to be seen.

“Where are the *Barham*'s lot, sir?” he asked Prescott.

“Lord knows!” the other replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “I can't see 'em. They may be anywhere.” He was too busily occupied conning the ship to worry about much else.

The smoke to the north-eastward darkened, when, lifting his binoculars in that direction, Toby suddenly glimpsed the masts, light-grey funnels, and upper works of five great ships overtopping the horizon, and barely visible against the dull background of cloud. He had no time to think before he noticed flashes darting redly in and out against this sombre curtain. The Germans had opened fire. Even now salvos of shell were hurtling through the air towards the British line.

He glanced instinctively towards the *Lion*, which, with the ships astern of her, seemed gradually to be edging to the south to a course more or less parallel to that of the enemy. The distance between the opposing squadrons was about nine or ten miles. More and more of the enemy hulls were gradually becoming visible over the skyline, though Toby

realized with a pang that the light in their direction was bad, whereas, from the Germans' view-point, the British battle-cruisers must be clearly silhouetted by the strong light of the afternoon sun against the clear horizon to the westward.

He was wondering how this would affect the shooting on either side, when, with a concussion which shook the air, the *Lion* fired her first salvo. The ships astern of her, which had hauled slightly out of line to get a clear range, followed her example, and the huge grey shapes became all but blotted out in sheets of reddish-golden flame and billowing clouds of tawny cordite smoke.

Then, with a demoniacal whining screech overhead terminating in a series of sharp smacks, the first enemy salvos fell. A forest of great greyish-white geysers, narrow at the base and feathery at their summits, sprang out of the water all round the four leading vessels of the British line. The pillars of water reached high above their mastheads and almost shrouded them from view—rose, tottered, and fell in spray.

Toby could see no actual hits. The great ships drove on, the roar of their firing merging into a confused medley of thunderous sound.

The curtain had rung up on the Battle of Jutland, and the *Libyan*, so to speak, occupied the first row of the stalls.

It was a thrilling moment. In this duel between eleven mighty ships a cataclysm seemed suddenly to have burst upon the world. The spectacle was magnificent, awe-inspiring—frightening. What would happen if one of those great shells drove home on its target, if several struck and burst simultaneously?

“What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?” asked Prescott, turning to look at Toby with a grin on his face and a pipe still in his mouth.

Toby, interested, and keyed up to a state of nervous excitement that he had only once before experienced—when the *Libyan* herself had been in action—was not altogether happy in his mind. He noted with satisfaction, however, that the lieutenant-commander had omitted to light his pipe, and that his teeth bit hard on its vulcanite mouthpiece.

So Prescott, whom nothing generally moved, was also feeling a little nervous. Thank God for that!

Nobody but a fool could really *like* this sort of thing, Toby thought to himself. It wasn't cowardice to feel a little afraid, to wonder what would happen when the *Libyan* herself came under fire, as, sooner or later, she inevitably must. Even one of those 11-inch projectiles could finish her off.

No. Cowardice was only when one showed one's fear, and lost control of oneself, and communicated one's fear to others. He must bottle up his feelings, bottle them up.

So, grinning back at Prescott, he fumbled for his pipe, filled it deliberately, and borrowed a match from the sub-lieutenant.

CHAPTER XXII

THE destroyers, increasing to full speed, were gradually drawing ahead of the *Lion*. Shortly before four o'clock the opposing squadrons, heavily in action, were steering to the south-eastward in gradually converging courses. The range was about 16,000 yards, eight sea miles, no very great distance for heavy naval artillery, though the German line still showed indistinctly against the dull background of cloud. At times Toby saw shell splashes leaping out of the sea around them, but he noticed no signs of any hits.

Shortly afterwards, when he was looking in another direction, an exclamation from a man beside him drew his attention to the *Lion*.

In the rifts between the great plumes of spray and the rolling clouds of cordite smoke he saw a gout of reddish flame rising from somewhere amidships. Before he could draw breath, it blazed upwards in a pillar of flame and an outpouring of smoke which reached higher than her smoking funnel-tops.

“God!” he murmured, as for one sickening instant he thought that her magazine had exploded.

But the flame flickered and died away, and the great ship still steamed on.

A shell, crashing in through the roof of a turret, had exploded, to kill or wound practically every man of the guns' crews, to put the guns out of action, and to ignite the cordite charges.

But for the gallantry of the officer in charge of the turret, Major Harvey, of the Royal Marines, who, though mortally

wounded and dying, calmly gave orders for the magazine door to be shut and the magazines to be flooded, the *Lion* would probably have blown up. His gallantry was recognized by the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross.

Worse was yet to happen. A minute or two later, the *Indefatigable*, at the tail of the line, was seen to be heavily hit amidships. In an upheaval of smoke and flame she swerved out of the line, apparently sinking by the stern. Another salvo of shell drove home, and with a reverberating concussion which was audible even amidst the roar of the guns, an immense column of flame and brownish-grey smoke shot into the air.

The unfortunate ship seemed literally to be divided into halves. For an instant Toby had a glimpse of her bow and stern reared out of the sea, and from between them came a broad pillar of fire topped with smoke surmounted by a corona of leaping flame. Débris, large and small, whirled into the air, turning over and over like flying paper, and then came raining down into the sea. The flame died away, and the position of the 19,000-ton ship became blotted out in a pall of smoke which hung in the air, wreathing and eddying in a thick viscous-looking mass. Some freakish air current caused another cloud of vapour to rise and overtop the first, until the whole looked like some gigantic over-baked cottage loaf sitting squarely upon the sea.

It was an appalling moment. Toby felt physically sick. A thousand and seventeen officers and men, some of them his personal friends, had been blasted to death in the wink of an eyelid. And he was powerless to help, powerless to retaliate on those who had done this evil thing.

The range, which had diminished to about 15,000 yards, gradually began to open, and within a few minutes Toby and Prescott both noticed heavier clusters of shell splashes darting out of the water round the German line. What had happened, although they did not know it, was that the four ships of the 5th Battle Squadron, some six miles astern of the British battle-cruisers, had brought their great 15-inch guns into action at a range of 20,000 yards. The effect of their accurate fire soon became noticeable. The enemy started to zigzag to dodge the salvos, though at times there came the crimson glow and burst of black smoke from their hulls as the projectiles struck home and detonated.

At four-twenty-six the *Queen Mary*, the third ship in the British line, was struck simultaneously by several shells. There came the thundering report and great glare of an explosion, then a huge column of brown-grey smoke shooting upwards to a height of over a thousand feet, in which flames could be seen darting in and out like summer lightning. More débris came falling down before the smoke descended on the water like a curtain and shut out the view.

“What’s the matter with our perishing ships?” Prescott demanded, sick at heart.

Toby stared in awed amazement. After a brief pause he saw the bows of a ship, then the superstructure, mast, and funnels appearing out of the smoke. Had the *Queen Mary* survived? No. It was the *Tiger*, the ship astern of the *Queen Mary*, which finally emerged from the pall. As she passed through the dense smoke thirty seconds after the explosion, there was a heavy fall of wreckage on her decks; but of the stricken ship no sign whatever. The *Queen Mary* had

vanished. Of her ship's company of nearly thirteen hundred only four young midshipmen and thirteen men were rescued.

But there was no time to think. The destroyers had received previous orders to attack on reaching a favourable position ahead of the battle-line, and a two-flag signal fluttered out at the masthead of the light-cruiser leading them. Already the column nearest the enemy had increased to full speed, and, with the smoke pouring from their funnels, swung round to race to a position between the lines whence to fire their torpedoes at the enemy.

In something under two minutes, the *Libyan*, following her leader, was doing the same.

"Now we're going to see life!" Prescott muttered grimly, steadying the ship on her course. "Are you ready with the guns? They'll probably counter-attack."

"All ready, sir!" Toby replied.

The lieutenant-commander, his eyes on the next ahead, nodded.

"Tell the tubes to stand by!" he ordered. "Tell the gunner I'll try to warn him before we alter course to fire. If he gets no orders, he's to fire at his own discretion."

The message went down the voice-pipe. A message came back.

"Stop valves, open, sir. Pins out," Toby reported to the captain.

Now that the supreme moment was approaching, Toby felt perfectly cool, almost joyful. His fear had gone. They were about to attack. This was his job, what he had been trained for. He had something definite to do and to think about, a

merciful relief after seeing over two thousand of his comrades blown sky-high without being able to retaliate.

Revenge—retaliation!

He experienced a fierce satisfaction, and diving his hand through the opening of his monkey jacket, felt through his shirt and vest and closed his fingers on Janet's little piece of jade hung round his neck.

Pray heaven it would bring them luck, for assuredly they would want it.

Already the 5.9's in the enemy's secondary batteries were falling to work. The sea ahead and on either bow had started to vomit spray fountains. 'Overs' were whinnying and whining in the air.

Prescott, his pipe still between his teeth, leant over the bridge rail watching the ship ahead, and giving an occasional helm order to the unruffled old coxswain.

Twenty-eight knots—twenty-nine—thirty——

God! Old Mutters was driving her. The ship was quivering and trembling like a mad thing as she hummed through the water with her stern well down and her bows lifted.

Good old *Libyan*! Good girl! She seemed to know what was happening, that her fate and reputation depended on what happened in the next few minutes. Toby could have patted her.

As the range diminished, he suddenly saw a cloud of destroyers, accompanied by a light-cruiser, coming towards them from ahead of the enemy, either with the intention of delivering a counter-attack on the *Lion* and her battle-cruisers, or to beat off the threatened attack on their own ships.

What happened during the next ten minutes was unforgettable.

The two flotillas, on first sighting each other, were about six miles apart. Both were steaming at about thirty knots, which meant that the combined speed of approach was sixty knots, or a mile a minute. In two minutes the enemy were within easy range, and the guns of the leading British vessels had opened fire on the enemy, slightly on the starboard bow and steering an approximately parallel course. In two minutes more, when the range had dropped to about 4,000 yards, the enemy also had opened fire.

Shell were dropping here, there, and everywhere. Toby heard one hurtle overhead like a whistling railway train entering a tunnel. A cluster of spouting geysers leapt into the air just over the *Libyan's* bows. She steamed through the falling spray of them, deluging the gun's crew on the forecastle and those on the uncovered bridge.

"Damn and blast!" Prescott muttered in a fury, withdrawing his head behind the bridge screens for a moment to wipe his streaming eyes. "The brutes have nearly blinded me, curse 'em!"

"Shall I get busy with the guns, sir?" Toby asked eagerly, seeing the range clear.

The skipper, still busy with his handkerchief, nodded vehemently.

"All guns—load!" Toby howled down a voice-pipe. "Green three oh! Enemy destroyers!—Range—three two double oh! Deflection—two oh sight!—Rapid independent—commence!"

The *Libyan's* three 4-inch guns opened fire with a series of thuds that shook the ship. Their crews, stripped to their

flannel shirts, were ramming home projectiles and cartridges as fast as they could. Toby, shouting his loudest to make himself heard above the din, passed occasional range and deflection orders through the voice-pipe.

It was impossible really to control the fire and to spot the fall of shot, for the enemy were steaming at thirty knots in a forest of shell splashes. Swerving slightly to port they were coming down on an opposite course. From 3,000 yards their range rapidly diminished to 2,000, then to 1,500. And they, too, were firing as fast as their guns could be loaded. The sea round the *Libyan* was spouting. Shell droned eerily overhead. Splinters from those bursting short hummed through the air, rattled and clanged against the ship's side and funnels. A crash and a jar from somewhere on the upper deck warned those on the bridge that she had been hit. But, thank heaven, she still steamed on.

It was this brief but bloodthirsty engagement between the opposing lines of heavy ships that some onlooker likened to 'a dog fight in no man's land.' It was like a dog fight; but a fight between two rival packs of hounds, yelping, snarling, tearing at each other's throats.

The enemy flotillas, having passed at a distance of little more than 1,000 yards, made off to the east at full speed. Two of their number were left behind, stopped, heeling over, low in the water—obviously done for. As yet only one British destroyer had been brought to a standstill by a shell which crashed into the engine-room. Toby had a fleeting glimpse of her lying motionless in a cloud of steam as they flashed past at full speed.

The enemy flotilla drew out of range and the *Libyan's* guns ceased firing. Shell from the German battle-cruisers were still

dropping among the attackers, but already the leaders had reached the position for firing their torpedoes and were turning to port.

Prescott passed an order to the torpedo-tubes to stand by—sent a messenger aft to Mr. Huxtable to make doubly certain.

The enemy battle-cruisers seemed to be circling to port. Their range was perhaps 10,000 yards, and dropping fast. The destroyer immediately ahead of the *Libyan* started to swing to port, and as Toby watched her he saw puffs of smoke and two torpedoes flash from her tubes. They splashed into the sea, their tracks reaching out towards the enemy——

The *Libyan* was turning in the wake of her leader.

“Starboard ten, coxswain!” Prescott was ordering, as coolly as though he were taking his ship alongside a jetty. “Starboard fifteen!” as she spun round, to bring the enemy nearly abeam.

“Ease to five!—‘Midships! Meet her port.—Steady-y!”

The grey sides of the *Lützow*, *Seydlitz*, *Moltke*, *Derfflinger*, and *Von der Tann* sparkled wickedly with gun-flashes as their 5.9’s fired salvo after salvo. The sea still spouted with splashes. Shell seemed to be falling everywhere at once round the attacking flotilla, the leaders of which, having fired their torpedoes, were now steaming at full speed back towards the British line.

But Prescott and Toby had no time to watch others. They were gazing anxiously aft, waiting for Mr. Huxtable to fire his torpedoes. Prescott was beginning to feel impatient. Why didn’t the gunner fire? Had anything happened to prevent him? Had that shell ...

“Give her a degree or two of starboard, coxswain,” he said, to bring the sights on.

Even as he spoke the first torpedo splashed into the sea—then another.

Looking along their oily tracks as they sped towards the enemy at about thirty knots, Toby saw they seemed to be running straight. No gyro failures, thank God!

The *Libyan's* helm went over as she raced off to the west-north-west at full speed to rejoin the *Lion*, which, with her consorts, had turned to the northward.

“Another thing that caught my eye was a flotilla of our destroyers returning from a torpedo attack,” wrote an onlooker.^[3] “They were closing diagonally in the wake of our battle-cruisers, which were then on a north-westerly course. The enemy were firing accurately into the midst of this flotilla, as one might loose off a shotgun into a flight of starlings, but not one of our boats were hit, although projectiles were falling thick in the midst of them.”

The run back was exciting. As each salvo fell, lashing and tearing the water into tall pillars of whitened water within a ship's length, Prescott altered course towards it. His reasoning was simple. If the shell fell short, the Germans would probably apply an ‘up’ correction to hit. If they fell over, they would decrease the range on their gun-sights. By chasing each salvo the moment it fell, the chances were that the next would fall over or short as the case might be.

The scheme was successful. Zigzagging like a snipe, the *Libyan* drew over towards the British line, eventually to regain the flotilla some distance astern of the battle-cruisers without being hit again.

The immediate uproar ceased. Toby had time to look about him.

Far away to starboard, very difficult to see against a bank of mist and smoke on the eastern horizon, the enemy battle-cruisers were still under fire. One of them seemed to be burning.

Immediately astern of the *Libyan*, at a distance of about two miles, were the four ships of the 5th Battle Squadron under heavy fire. The two leading ships, the *Barham* and *Valiant*, with the four battle-cruisers ahead, were still in action with the *Lützow* and her consorts. The two rear vessels, however, the *Malaya* and *Warspite*, about a mile behind which Toby could see four British light-cruisers in line abreast also under heavy fire, were firing their 15-inch guns in another direction, towards the south-east.

Before he had time to look Mr. Huxtable came on to the bridge to make his report.

“I fired two torpedoes, sir, in that there shimozzle,” he said, saluting Prescott, who, with glasses levelled, was looking intently towards the south-east.

“Good for you, gunner!” the captain replied, without putting down his binoculars.

“Did you see any hits, sir?” Mr. Huxtable anxiously inquired.

“No,” the lieutenant-commander grunted. “I was too busy dodging salvos.”

“I’ve two more left in case of emergencies,” the gunner replied, his voice hopeful. “Maybe we’ll get another chance yet.”

“Chance!” Prescott observed, bringing down his glasses. “You’ll get fifty chances! Just take a peep over there!” He waved a hand in the direction in which he had been looking.

Mr. Huxtable raised his binoculars. So did Toby.

“S’trewth!” the gunner exclaimed, as a long line of heavy ships, stretching away into the dim distance, appeared in the object glass. “What’s them, sir? The Grand Fleet?”

“No. The High Seas Fleet—the Germans!”

“There’s ’undreds ’on ’em, sir, ’undreds!” Mr. Huxtable ejaculated, starting to count.

“Not quite so many as that, gunner,” Prescott said. “I counted a dozen just now, and if they’re all there there’ll be between twenty and twenty-four all told. Battleships, gunner—battleships! So for God’s sake be ready with your torpedoes after dark!”

“I’ll be on the top line, sir,” said Mr. Huxtable, rather awed.

“I can count fifteen, sir,” Toby put in. “No, sixteen.”

“Well I never did think I should ever see the likes o’ them!” the gunner exclaimed, after another prolonged look. “S’trewth! But the 5th Battle Squadron seems to be givin’ ’em a proper shake up. Look at them salvos!”

“Like the shake up we’ll get to-night when we go in to attack,” Prescott told him.

“Is that so, sir,” said the gunner calmly, sucking his teeth. “Well, I never!”

Prescott suddenly remembered the hit the ship had sustained earlier.

“Where did that shell go?” he asked. “The one that biffed us.”

“I don’t ’ardly like to tell you, sir.”

“Why? Anyone killed or wounded?”

“No, sir. Nobody ’urt at all.”

“Then where did it go?”

“Well, sir,” Mr. Huxtable explained. “If you reely must know, ’e comes in through the side of your cabin just underneath the bunk, through them long drawers where you keep your shirts and things.”

“Well, I’m blistered!” Prescott exclaimed angrily. “What’s the place look like?”

“A bit of a pot-mess, sir. You see, sir, ’e bursts after effectin’ an entrance, an’ blows your cabin an’ the first-Lootenant’s into one, in a manner of speakin’. A small fire started which we put out with a hose, an’ the deck bein’ punctured, oil-fuel’s comin’ up through the holes each time the ship rolls. I’m afraid you won’t recognize your cabin, sir,” Mr. Huxtable added consolingly. “Nor will Mister Kerrell. We’ve plugged up the holes in the ship’s side, but most of the furniture, an’ all your clothes an’ pictures an’ things have gone to blazes, an’ some of ’em burnt. It looks worse’n my cabin did that time the sea came down the ’atch an’ flooded me out.”

Prescott and Toby, who saw the humour of the situation, looked at each other and laughed ruefully together.

“Your servant’s clearin’ up the mess now, sir,” the gunner explained. “But it looks more like a rag-and-bone shop than a cabin, sir, an’ that’s a fact.”

“We’ll have to put in for new kits at Admiralty expense,” said Toby.

“Fat lot we’ll get out of the Admiralty,” Prescott snorted derisively. “And I only bought a new monkey jacket a week ago, dammit! It’s not even paid for!”

A messenger from the wireless office appeared on the bridge.

“Leadin’ Telegraphist Banks told me to tell you, sir, that the Grand Fleet’s not far off, sir,” he reported.

“The Grand Fleet!” Prescott exclaimed.

“Yessir. An’ the *Lion* an’ *Southampton*’s been reportin’ position, course, and speed of the enemy’s battle-fleet.”

Prescott rubbed his hands joyfully.

“Ah!” he laughed. “Things are beginning to look up at last! But,” he added, looking anxiously overhead and then at the horizon, “there’s not much daylight left, and the visibility’s rather shutting down.”

There seemed time enough yet, however, if things happened quickly.

The net seemed to be closing.

Even now Sir David Beatty must be leading the Germans north into the arms of his Commander-in-Chief—Sir John Jellicoe, with his twenty-four great battleships.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was well past five o'clock. As the afternoon gradually drew into evening the sky became overcast with masses of low, grey cloud. The air seemed heavy, charged with moisture, and the visibility began to close down with a thin mist hanging over the surface of the sea.

The *Libyan*, with the flotilla, was steaming northward in company with the battle-cruisers. They were recrossing the battle-ground of the earlier afternoon, and the natural haze, mingling with the smoke of explosions and the reek of many funnels, formed a pall which the gentle breeze did little to dissipate. To the east and south-east it was thicker than elsewhere—a vague, nebulous curtain which blotted out the shapes of even the largest ships at distances of more than about seven miles.

The low visibility, which had so important a bearing upon what followed, was to persist until nightfall, three and a half hours later. Rifts or lanes in the murk were to vouchsafe occasional glimpses of ships at ranges of 16,000 yards, or eight sea miles. More often, however, they could not be seen at a greater distance than six miles.

The *Lion* and her consorts were no longer in action, their immediate opponents being invisible in the fog to the eastward. The rumble and thunder of heavy gunfire still came from the south, however, where, about three miles astern, the four ships of the 5th Battle Squadron were still firing and being fired at.

Toby could see the clusters of heavy projectiles falling all round them in great upheavals of spray spouting higher than their mastheads. In the midst of the great orange flashes and

clouds of brownish smoke vomiting from their 15-inch guns, he also noticed the occasional reddish glow and puff of thick, black smoke which showed that some of the enemy shells were hitting. In action with the battleships in the van of the High Seas Fleet, the 5th Battle Squadron were under heavy punishment; but were giving more than they received.

Looking at them through his glasses Toby could see no signs of damage. All the same, he felt nervous. Suppose that one of those four battleships, the most powerful vessels of the British Fleet, should share the fate of the *Queen Mary*, and *Indefatigable*? It was a dreadful possibility, horrible to contemplate.

At about five-forty there came a short burst of firing from the British battle-cruisers as their previous opponents slid out of the mist abaft the starboard beam at a range of perhaps 14,000 yards. But it did not last for long. In a quarter of an hour the Germans hauled off to the eastward and again disappeared.

There came the rumble of heavy gunfire from the eastward, and within a few minutes the sight of a cruiser ahead steaming fast towards them told Prescott and Toby that the Grand Fleet itself could not be far away. A little later the *Lion* led her squadron to the north-east, and at a few minutes past 6 p.m. Toby saw the great mass of the British battle-fleet on the port bow.

The sight of it was heartening. The twenty-four battleships were steering about south-east at high speed in six orderly columns, each of four ships. Covering a front of five miles, their great hulls seemed literally to fill the horizon. With the lowest of masts and smoking funnels they reminded Toby of

a densely populated manufacturing town adrift upon the water.

“Thank God!” Prescott muttered. “Now we’ll see something! Blast this visibility!” he added fiercely. “It’s no more than about ten thousand yards!”

Firing still continued. Sir David Beatty, steaming at full speed, was taking his squadron to its battle station ahead of the British battle-fleet. The *Libyan* and other destroyers, led by their light-cruisers, had parted company and were going to their position astern of the Grand Fleet.

Owing to the low visibility and uncertainty the position was still very obscure. Advancing from the southward, but out of sight, was the High Seas Fleet. When last seen, it seemed to be steering straight towards the Grand Fleet, which itself was steaming south-east diagonally across the German line of advance.

Whatever happened, the clash could not be long delayed. The two fleets must be little over ten miles apart, and were closing at the rate of forty miles an hour. At this vital moment Toby could not help realizing a little of the anxious doubt and uncertainty that must now be troubling the mind of the Commander-in-Chief.

His enemy was out of sight in the mist somewhere to the southward. What time had Sir John Jellicoe received his last wireless reports of his opponent’s position, course, and speed? Were these reports correct, or was he beset by vague speculation occasioned by lack of precise and accurate information?

Everything, everything depended upon *where* the enemy was sighted. The least error in judgment, the smallest miscalculation, the slightest faulty movement in the

manœuvring of that vast congregation of ships which represented the Grand Fleet, might jeopardize all chances of success, even bring about irreparable disaster. The British Fleet, as Toby was well aware, had at least half a dozen more battleships than the German; but the thick weather did much to neutralize the superiority. It was inconceivable that every ship in the British battle-line, over seven miles long, could be in action at the same time. Indeed, in the prevailing weather conditions the van would be invisible from the rear.

The responsibility of knowing what to do, and when to do it, rested entirely on the shoulders of one man. Toby, who had met the Commander-in-Chief two years before the war when he was commanding a battle-squadron, could picture him now—a small, stocky alert figure in admiral's uniform with a bronzed face, rather a prominent nose, a pleasant smile, and a pair of kindly dark eyes that seemed to twinkle when he spoke and missed nothing. With a few members of his staff he would be standing on the crowded compass platform of his flagship, the *Iron Duke*.

The C.-in-C. was beloved and trusted by all the officers and men of his great command, not merely as a great leader and a man who had brought his fleet to the pitch of efficiency, but a man full of the milk of human kindness, who took a fatherly interest in his subordinates, and possessed the happy knack of getting the best out of everyone. Many were the tales of his thoughtfulness and kindness which passed from man to man. On the lower decks of his fleet, where he was spoken of in terms of almost personal affection, he was known as 'Our J.,' or 'Our Little Man.' Sailors are not always so complimentary in the bestowal of nicknames.

Unlike the Commander-in-Chief of an army ashore, he would go into action with his men, share all their dangers. And perhaps it was not too much to say that in the coming battle the fate of the Allied Cause, and the fate of the British Empire, rested on his shoulders. Would he be capable of bearing the mental and physical strain and responsibility?

The Grand Fleet never had any doubt. Its answer was an emphatic ‘Yes.’

The *Libyan* was not in action. The news that the Grand Fleet was in sight went round the ship like wildfire. The men, smoking their pipes and cigarettes, clustered on the forecastle and upper deck chattering like monkeys, anxious to see what was going on.

Many things were happening at once. The Grand Fleet had started to deploy into line on its port wing column. The roar of heavy firing had become almost continuous, throbbing and shaking the air. Even as Toby watched the nearest division of British battleships turning to port to form into line of battle, he saw heavy shell from some invisible enemy pitching all round them. They replied, and it was a heartening sight to see the last ship of all, the great *Agincourt*, wreathing herself in smoke and flame as she poured forth rapid salvos from her broadside of fourteen 12-inch guns.

Farther to the right the *Lion* and her battle-cruisers were also engaged, while immediately astern of the *Libyan*, the *Barham*, *Valiant*, *Warspite* and *Malaya*, steaming to join the battle-fleet, were still in action and still under heavy fire from what could only be the van of the enemy’s battle-fleet.

It was no time for conversation. Prescott’s whole attention was concentrated on conning his ship. The flotilla was aiming to get into its station astern of the battle-fleet when once the

latter had deployed. Over a dozen big ships, however, and upwards of thirty light-cruisers and destroyers, all steaming at high speeds and in every direction, seemed to be converging and crowding into a few square miles of sea as they tried to take up their positions. The battleships were replying to the enemy's fire over the heads of any lighter craft that happened to be in the way. The enemy, who apparently had a clear horizon to the north-west and could see farther than they were seen, were concentrating every gun that would bear upon the congested area, until the whole sea spouted with spray fountains.

'Windy Corner,' as it came to be called, "was a strange jumble of ships, shells, and seamanship. There was handling of ships in that ten minutes of crossing the battle-fleets' front such as had never been dreamt of by seamen before."^[4]

The sub-lieutenant, idle for the time being, had time to look about him.

"My God, look at that!" he suddenly exclaimed, pointing to a German light-cruiser which had suddenly appeared out of the mist to the south-east.

Battered, heeling over, and on fire, she was literally smothered in shell splashes—being engaged at about 6,000 yards range of two British armoured cruisers, easily recognizable as the *Defence* and *Warrior*, which were steaming south-south-west at full speed across the bows of the *Lion*. In a few moments the German disappeared in the fog and a cloud of her own steam, obviously sinking. Some of the men clustered on deck raised a cheer.

But their jubilation was short-lived. Almost instantly the *Defence* and *Warrior* themselves came under a tornado of fire. The sea all round them was lashed into tall pillars of

white spray. Then a salvo seemed to strike the *Defence* in the stern with a little burst of smoke and a gout of vivid red flame. The ship seemed to reel under the blow—but, recovering herself, steamed on.

A moment later she was hit again. A flash leapt skywards as if from a submarine volcano. There was an upheaval of spray, the splash of falling wreckage, a cloud of dense, yellowish-black smoke. When it cleared away, no vestige of a ship could be seen.

Toby felt physically sick, almost as if he had received a severe blow in the body. Earlier in the afternoon he had seen the *Indefatigable* and *Queen Mary* sent to utter destruction in precisely the same way. And now the *Defence* had gone. Another 900 officers and men had been hurled to their doom in the drawing of a breath.

It was ghastly, stunning in its unexpectedness, rather unnerving. Did all ships blow up like this when hit by enemy shell? Or was there something wrong with their design? But of course—armoured cruisers were not expected to tackle battleships.

Astern of the *Defence*, the *Warrior* also had been badly hit. Burning, shrouded in steam from many severed pipes, listing over and still under fire, she staggered slowly to the westward, her speed dropping fast. Then occurred one of the most extraordinary and dramatic incidents of the day.

The *Warspite*, the third ship in the 5th Battle Squadron, coming up from the southward to join the Grand Fleet, was suddenly seen to alter course abruptly to starboard, straight in the direction of the enemy.^[5]

Almost at once she came under terrific fire, the tall columns of water from dropping shell completely hiding her

from view.

It was an amazing sight. Toby watched her spellbound, expecting every moment that she also would share the fate of the *Indefatigable*, *Queen Mary*, and *Defence*. She was hit again and again, enduring terrible punishment, but turned a full circle and steadied on a northerly course with her 15-inch guns still firing.

She seemed to have escaped destruction by a miracle, and for a minute or two all seemed to be well. In less time than it takes to describe it, however, she was again turning to starboard, on this occasion describing a complete circle round the disabled *Warrior* which was still under the fire of several German battleships. Drawing their fire upon herself, the *Warspite* undoubtedly saved her battered sister from immediate destruction. It was a spectacular incident, none the less impressive because the *Warspite's* gyrations were entirely involuntary.

The calm sea was stirred into a confused swell by the passage of many ships steaming at full speed. The *Libyan* moved uneasily, sometimes rolling, sometimes pitching, sometimes a combination of both. From her position about a mile from the rear division of battleships, those on her bridge could see practically the whole of the Grand Fleet, which had not yet completed its deployment.

The long line was bent in the form of a blunt arrowhead, about half the battleships having already turned to south-east by east, and the remainder steaming east-north-east and turning one by one into line astern of their leaders. The rear ships, which had become rather bunched up, were steaming at slow speed.

The battle-cruisers, together with certain light-cruiser squadrons and destroyer flotillas, were travelling at full speed and making heavy smoke as they hurried to take station ahead or on the disengaged side of the battle-line. More light-cruisers and destroyers were getting into position for forming up astern. The sea seemed covered with ships steaming confusedly in all directions. Yet there was method in their movement, and the British battle-line, gradually lengthening out, seemed to be crossing the T of the German line of advance. If only the visibility held, all would be well.

Neither Toby nor Prescott could see any signs of the enemy. But he was visible to others, for by six-thirty various of the British battleships had opened fire, and were under fire. A few heavy shells could be seen falling round the rear vessels in a succession of heavy splashes. The enemy shooting did not seem very accurate.

Within ten more minutes the British deployment was complete, and a seemingly endless line of battleships stretched far away into the misty distance ahead. Sunset was due at about seven-forty-five. Less than two hours of daylight remained. The visibility seemed gradually to be diminishing. Would the light and the weather conditions enable the C.-in-C. to bring his fleet properly into action?

From her station astern, it was impossible for the *Libyan* to see all that went on or to follow every movement of the fleet. During the next two hours, steaming at a speed of about seventeen knots, it made various alterations of course, first to south, and then to south by west, south-west by west, and south-west.

Throughout this period fighting was practically continuous. The uproar never ceased, the air trembling to the

thunder of heavy gunfire, now close at hand, now far away. The *Libyan's* range of visibility, however, was bounded by a circle of four to five miles' radius. Beyond that circle it was impossible for those on board her to know what was going on. The inactivity, the utter lack of knowledge, were maddening.

But there was incident in plenty. Now and then a British battleship was seen to vomit flame and smoke as she engaged some opponent invisible to others. A light-cruiser squadron scurried from its station at the rear of the line to administer the *coup de grâce* to an already battered enemy light-cruiser, which lay over to an alarming angle blazing from end to end, and the under-side of the pall of smoke overhanging her stained scarlet and orange by the glare of her many fires. The four British ships broke into a spangle of gun-flashes as they did their work, and scuttled back to safety with heavy shell splashes darting out of the sea all round them. A little later a destroyer division darted out to finish off an enemy destroyer lying stopped and helpless. She rolled over, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke and steam.

The *Libyan* passed three British destroyers which had been disabled in action somewhere at the head of the line. One, the *Defender*, had been crippled by a heavy shell ricocheting into her foremost boiler-room, and could steam no more than ten knots. Another, the *Onslow*, shrouded in steam, lay stopped and unable to move. The battle surged away to the southward to leave this pair alone and in sight of each other. The *Defender* took her companion in tow, and together they struggled across the North Sea in very bad weather, eventually reaching Aberdeen on June 2nd. As their wireless was out of action they had practically been given up as lost.

The third lame duck was the *Acasta*, which lay unable to move with her turbines out of action and a huge hole in her bows.

Next, at a distance of not more than a few hundred yards, they passed the pointed bow and stern of a large ship standing out of the sea to a height of fifty feet. The forepart being twisted round and upside-down, gave it the appearance of a swan bow. Taking it to be a German vessel, a man on deck in the *Libyan* gave vent to his feeling in a cheer, which was taken up by others.

It was not until later that they discovered they had been cheering the wreck of their own battle-cruiser *Invincible*, which, fighting furiously ahead of the line, came under the concentrated fire of several enemy battleships, and, at 6.34 p.m., blew up with a shattering explosion. That patch of oily, discoloured water littered with flotsam was the sepulchre of Rear-Admiral Hood and 1,025 officers and men.

A half-hearted destroyer attack on the rear battleships was beaten off by a squadron of light-cruisers. The enemy, badly mauled, disappeared behind a smoke-screen of their own making. The *Libyan's* ship's company, smoking their pipes and cigarettes, drinking their mugs of tea, and wolfing what food they could lay their hands upon, cheered loudly as the Germans vanished.

Down below on the forecastle, however, two members of the 4-inch gun's crew, indifferent to what was going on, continued a strident discussion about some complicated incident that had happened years before at Chatham. A lady was involved in it. Their voices ascended even to the bridge.

‘I sez to ’er, ‘Rose,’ I sez, ‘you didn’t oughter say things like that. ’Tisn’t respectable, an’ I don’t like to ’ear you say

it. Live an' let live,' that's wot I tells 'er."

"Yus," the other man chimed in with a guffaw. "But wot did ole George say to 'is farther-in-law? An' did 'e make an honest woman of 'er, that's wot I wants to know."

Prescott and Toby and the sub, who were eating thick corned-beef sandwiches and drinking coffee—unspeakable coffee—out of vacuum flasks on the bridge, looked at each other and grinned.

Did nothing ever disturb some seamen? Could they still find time to discuss their intimate private affairs in the midst of the greatest naval action of the war?

Strange fellows, Toby thought to himself, utterly incomprehensible. Incomprehensible, but the most lovable men in the world.

Time was drawing on. The sun had set. Funnel-reek, the remains of smoke-screens, the haze of burning cordite and burning ships, and the mist, all combined to produce an unnatural obscurity.

Daylight gave way to twilight. Twilight gradually darkened into the blackness of night.

The rumble of gunfire was succeeded by an uncanny stillness, in which Toby thought he could hear the throbbing of his own heart.

His nerves all on edge, he felt ill at ease, very disturbed.

Which side had won? What had happened?

What would the darkness bring in the way of horror and surprise?

CHAPTER XXIV

THE story of the night of May 31-June 1 is a tale of desperate, close-range fighting by the British light-cruisers and destroyers stationed five miles astern of the Grand Fleet. It was through these light forces that the great ships of the High Seas Fleet fought and hewed their way to the safety of their own waters.

At the time, there can have been nobody in either fleet who had even a tolerably clear conception of what was happening. To Toby Kerrell in the *Libyan*, as to those in the other destroyers engaged, the situation was incomprehensible—an awful, disordered nightmare; a medley of ships appearing and disappearing in the darkness; of the sudden glare of searchlights and the stabbing flame of gun-flashes; of the roar of heavy gunfire at point-blank range mingled with the screech of passing projectiles, the thud of their explosion, the hum of flying splinters, and the rattle and clang as they drove home; of shell splashes, and burning ships, and the blaze and smoke of explosions.

It was a scene of confusion, a turmoil of fighting ships mixed up in the darkness; confusion worse confounded by an utter lack of information as to what was happening, or which ships were friends and which enemies. Not for weeks or months later was it possible to piece together even a tolerably accurate account of what had really taken place.

For a complete description of the desultory battle-fleet action before dark, and how the enemy made a clever escape from a desperate situation under the cover of the mist aided by destroyer smoke-screens; for the full story of the night fighting, and of how, at dawn on June 1st, the Grand Fleet

swept north in the hope of renewing the engagement; of the bitter disappointment that permeated the heart of every officer and man when it was discovered that the badly battered High Seas Fleet had reached its own waters under cover of darkness—for these, the reader who is interested may be referred to various accounts of Jutland written and published since the war.

The *Libyan* was only one small destroyer in a very large fleet, and Toby was only one of the many officers and men engaged. What he saw, what he experienced, and what he felt, may perhaps be described by quoting his letter to Janet, one of the longest letters he had ever written, hastily scribbled in pencil on the flimsy sheets of a signal pad.

“We are on our way home,” he wrote. “I am writing this on my knee in what remains of the wardroom, my own cabin being uninhabitable through a shell, a 5.9, I think, which burst there yesterday afternoon and demolished practically everything, besides starting a fire. It knocked the skipper’s cabin and mine into one, and water coming in through the ship’s side and oil-fuel through the holes in the deck did the rest. It makes you sick to look at it, books, boots, clothes, undergarments, broken glass and woodwork and the Lord knows what, washing to and fro in six inches of filthy water and oil-fuel. It was a strange thing, though, that your photo in its frame was entirely undamaged. As a rule it stands on my chest of drawers, but my servant had put it face downward on my bunk for safety. It’s about the only whole thing I have left. I think you and that piece of jade you gave me have brought me luck, for except for a vile headache and a rather deep scratch along the outside of my right thigh, in a place

which makes it rather painful to sit down with any comfort, I am undamaged too, though mightily stiff and weary.

“In point of fact, I am waiting for the young doctor to have a look at my scrape, which a drop of disinfectant and a plaster will put right. But the poor chap’s been hard at it since about half-past ten last night dishing up our eleven wounded. We had seven killed as well, including Mr. Huxtable, our dear old Gunner (T). We buried them at sea early this morning, and I felt I wanted to weep when I saw them go over the side in their shotted hammocks. The skipper read the Burial Service with the tears in his eyes, while the men stood round, grimy, unshaven, and very solemn for once. We stopped engines, and the old *Libyan* was lurching and rolling in a bit of a sea which had already started to break. There was a grey sky overhead, and our dirty, tattered ensign, half-masted, of course, flapped in the breeze. It was a dismal scene, the sort of scene that made one go weak all over and want to cry. Several of the men did, and I’ve been thinking ever since of the wives and children. Four of them, including the Gunner, were married men, and the Gunner’s got five children. God knows what they’ll do now.

“The wardroom’s not a pretty sight. There’s a great hole in the deck overhead, and another half-way up the ship’s side, caused by another shell, which if it had gone a few feet lower, might have busted the magazine and shell-room underneath, and blown us to blazes. We’ve plugged the worst of the holes with mattresses and bits of wardroom tablecloths, but the deck overhead, the floor, the port side of the ship, the bulkheads, and, of course, all the furniture, are peppered with splinter holes, rather as though they were cardboard and someone had been blazing at them with a shotgun. You never

saw such a mess, and the sideboard, in which were some bottles of gin, whisky, Worcester sauce, etc., together with a cheese and some apples, are smashed to blazes. The pantry next door is rather worse to look at, a horrible mess of broken glass, crockery, and the remains of the steward's clothes.

“Seven of the wounded have been put in their hammocks forward, though two of them have to be kept under morphia and I fear won't last out until we get home. The other four are down here. Three, trying to sleep, poor chaps, are waiting their turn, and I shall come after them as I'm the least serious. The fourth, an able seaman, who had his left arm practically taken off by a shell, and the left side of his body peppered with little splinters like knife-blades, is groaning on the table. The doctor's removed the arm—but I'll spare you the grisly details. We don't carry anæsthetics—only morphia tabloids.

“The place stinks of iodoform, carbolic, and frowsty cigarette smoke, mixed up with the smell of burning and God knows what, altogether beastly. The deck is littered with old bandages and odds and ends of clothing, and a white-enamelled bucket which Sawbones seems to find useful. Every now and then he drops things into it. But I must say that the young doctor, Hartopp, has turned up trumps. He's done marvels, and working under the most impossible conditions with only a couple of wardroom stewards and the cook to help him. You'd never think he was a medical student from Bart's, bless his heart! I must tell the skipper he ought to be mentioned in dispatches, and recommended for something. The men were marvellous all through, and we couldn't have wished for a better lot. In the middle of one little bust up during the night, when a shell biffed us rather hard, and there was a crash and tinkle of breaking glass, I

heard one fellow on the bridge laugh and say, 'There goes my blinkin' lot of rum!' The old coxswain, sucking his teeth as usual, evidently thought his jest rather untimely, for he growled out at him angrily—'You an' yer bleedin' rum! You didn't oughter to be drinkin' rum at your age!' The skipper was perfectly magnificent, as cool and as collected as anything, and smoking his pipe during most of the shimozzle. The only time I saw him a bit upset was afterwards, when they told him about the casualties. Then he couldn't speak for a bit, and nor could I. It is cruel to lose these men and the Gunner. I've known them for so long now, and know so much about them, that we're all one family, so to speak.

"As usual, I seem to be starting this letter at the wrong end, but I'm still feeling all of a doodah and my mind seems to be working backwards. But to tell the truth, darling girl, it's precious hard to concentrate, and to remember all the things that did happen, and in their proper order. Starting early yesterday afternoon, when we first met the Hun, we had about ten hours of hell upon earth, and enough sights and incidents, and excitement, to last an ordinary person for a lifetime. Some of them were pretty horrible, the sort of things that prevent one sleeping and which one would rather forget. But I can't forget them. And I feel I must talk and discuss them with someone, and as you're my most precious person in the world, I'm afraid you must be the victim. I——

"I had to break off there, to go and help them to lift that poor chap off the table. He's too bad to be moved, so we've bedded him down on the settee as best we can with some morphia to keep him quiet. The doctor's now busy with one of the others, not very serious, I'm glad to say. My turn ought to come in about a quarter of an hour, but if Sawbones thinks

I'm going to be a 'casualty,' he's damned well mistaken. I'm a bit stiff and painful about the stern, that's all. It may be sufficient to get me a drop of leave, though I'll get that in any case as the ship will have to go into dock for, I should think, at least a month. She's badly messed up. We're making for the Tyne. So in any case, by this day week, I should have seen you again. You don't mind if I come and see you, beloved, do you? You're the only thing in the world that matters a hoot to me outside the Service, and I come 'all over a tremble,' as the sailor said, when I think of being near you, quite potty, in fact.—Here I am, wandering again! I must really learn to stick to the point. Well, the show started at about two-thirty yesterday afternoon when the *Galatea*, one of our light-cruisers, reported by wireless that the enemy was in sight. We were with the battle-cruisers at the time, and ...”

It is unnecessary to quote Toby's account of what happened during the afternoon of May 31st. His story, though briefer, was substantially the same as that which has already appeared. He broke fresh ground, however, in describing what had happened after nightfall.

“The battle-fleet took up night cruising stations at about nine-fifteen, before it was really dark,” he continued. “We, the destroyers, were ordered to take station five miles astern, probably to avoid any chance of our getting mixed up with our own big ships at night and wanting to torpedo them. By about nine-forty-five, as near as I can judge, we were more or less in station, jogging along at seventeen knots on a southerly course. It was pitch dark and calm, but the visibility was still bad and one couldn't see the hulls of ships at more than half a mile. From the little information we had, we

gathered the enemy were somewhere to the westward, which meant that we were between them and Germany.

“My impressions of what happened during the next few hours are very hazy. There had been some fighting away on the starboard bow while we were taking up our stations, but at about ten o’clock there was another scrap to starboard, closer to, this time. We saw the glare of searchlights, and almost at once a whole blaze of gun-flashes. Looking through my glasses I could see what looked like one of our light-cruisers and several destroyers lit up in the rays with splashes all round them. Then one big ship seemed to catch fire in a burst of red and white flame. The noise was prodigious, until, quite suddenly, the whole business petered out as abruptly as it had begun, to leave us wondering what had happened.

“It can’t have been more than a quarter of an hour later before there was another fierce little battle. More searchlights, and this time we distinctly saw a couple of our four-funnelled light-cruisers lit up in the glare. Heavy firing started at once, and two groups of ships seemed to be blazing away at each other at point-blank range. We could see clouds of smoke mixed up with the searchlights, splashes, gun-flashes, and the sort of reddish glare as shell burst. It can’t have lasted more than five minutes, but they were at it hammer and tongs. Then, to our horror, we saw one of our ships blazing like an inferno. It looked as if her ammunition had been set alight. Next there came the deuce of a thud from a heavy underwater explosion which sounded like a torpedo, or perhaps a mine or a depth-charge. Then the firing suddenly ceased, the searchlights flickered away, and the blaze of the fire died out. The way everything stopped in a second was uncanny. The skipper and I hardly liked to talk. Personally, I

felt quite sick, for I was certain in my mind that another of our ships had gone.”

Toby, happily, was mistaken. The engagement he describes can only have been that between the four ships of the Second Light-cruiser Squadron—*Southampton*, *Dublin*, *Birmingham*, *Nottingham*—with five enemy light-cruisers of the Fourth Scouting Group. Both sides sighted each other simultaneously, and the fierce action that ensued was fought at a range of less than 1,000 yards. It lasted three and a half minutes, and in this time the upper deck of the *Southampton*, which bore the brunt of the fire, was converted into a shambles. She was set on fire in several places by the ignition of ammunition, and had thirty-five killed and fifty-five wounded, most of the casualties occurring among the guns’ crews on the upper deck. The engagement ceased as suddenly as it started due to a torpedo from the *Southampton* hitting the *Frauenlob*, which sank with all hands.

“We seemed to have about an hour’s peace, and then there was another fierce battle a little distance to the westward,” Toby continued. “I can’t really describe what it looked like. It was a sort of firework display, a searchlight exercise, and night target practice all rolled into one. We saw destroyers steaming fast in the rays of the lights, and at least two of them came under heavy fire at very short range. Both were hit and started burning, and one of them continued to blaze until we lost sight of her, or became too busy ourselves to worry about others.”

Though he could not have known it until afterwards, Toby is here describing one of the many actions fought by the British 4th Destroyer Flotilla which, late in the afternoon of May 31st, steamed into action nineteen vessels strong, and by

shortly after dawn on June 1st had lost five ships sunk, and four seriously damaged. Its total casualties amounted to 473 officers and men killed or drowned, and sixty-five wounded.

The full story of this flotilla's adventures, which would fill a fair-sized volume, cannot be told here; but may be summarized.

The *Shark* was severely battered during the daylight action and eventually sank, fighting to the last under her mortally wounded captain, Commander Loftus Jones. The *Acasta*, badly damaged at the same time, was eventually towed home by the *Nonsuch*. The *Tipperary*, the flotilla leader, was severely damaged and set on fire in close-range action with enemy light-cruisers at about 11.30 p.m. She sank about two and a half hours later, her few survivors taking to rafts on the bitterly cold water, and about twenty of them eventually being rescued by the *Sparrowhawk*.

The *Spitfire*, in action at the same time as the *Tipperary*, came into collision with the *Nassau*, and, little more than a wreck and barely able to steam, eventually reached England with about twenty feet of the German battleship's bow plating still stuck in her damaged forecastle. The *Fortune* was sunk in action at about 11.45 p.m., and the *Ardent* soon after midnight, both with the loss of practically all their officers and men. At much the same time, the *Broke*, *Sparrowhawk*, and other destroyers were in action with a German battleship. In the *mêlée* the *Broke*, disabled, on fire, and not under control, collided with the *Sparrowhawk* and practically cut off her bows. Hardly had the vessels separated, when the *Contest* crashed into the *Sparrowhawk* from astern and reduced her to a floating wreck.

The *Broke* managed to patch up her injuries, and steamed at a crawl across the North Sea, to reach the Tyne on June 3rd. The *Sparrowhawk* remained afloat, and at about 2 a.m. was inspected by a German destroyer which stopped within 100 yards. The British made ready to fight to the last with their only remaining gun and the last torpedo; but the German started her engines, gathered way, and disappeared in the darkness. Another dramatic incident happened in the dim light of the early dawn, when an enemy light-cruiser appeared steaming slowly out of the mist. Again the *Sparrowhawk* prepared to fight; but the German started gradually to heel over, then settled down slowly by the bows, quietly stood on her head, and sank.

Two boatloads of men from this cruiser passed the *Tipperary's* survivors in the water. The Englishmen hailed for help, but, not unnaturally, were told to 'Go to hell!' Shortly afterwards these few survivors of the *Tipperary* managed to reach the *Sparrowhawk*, the wreck of which was finally sighted and taken in tow by the *Marksman* at about 7.30 a.m. Towing was soon found to be impossible, so the officers and men were removed and the remains of the *Sparrowhawk* sunk by gunfire.

"We began to wonder when we should run across something," Toby went on to write, "and to tell the plain truth I wasn't altogether relishing the prospect after seeing all those ships blowing up and burning. I think a fellow who says he likes this sort of thing is a liar, and I felt anything but heroic. All the same, I had a sort of sneaking desire to have a run for our money and to see what it felt like, and the skipper also was rather out for blood, though I noticed he wasn't talking and joking so much as usual. He *is* a good chap, and

never seems to get rattled. He's so cheery, too, and has the knack of making everybody feel pleased with themselves and go all out. The whole ship's company love him. Our show came along at about half-past midnight, just after we'd been looking at another skirmish ahead. It is difficult to describe it, for everything seemed to happen at once, but it was undiluted hell while it lasted.

"I remember we had altered course to south-west by west a few minutes before, and about a dozen destroyers were in a long single line. We suddenly saw a great black mass with a huge bow-wave broad on our starboard bow and about 600 yards away. We were crossing her bows, which meant she'd cut through the line somewhere astern of us. I put up my glasses instinctively, and clearly saw her large cranes amidships outlined against the lighter sky. None of our ships have cranes, so this showed she was a German battleship. There seemed to be one or two others astern of her.

"There was no time to do much. I remember the skipper ordering full speed and shouting to the signalman, 'Tell the wireless officer to report to the C.-in-C., "Enemy battleships steering south-west," ' but I don't know if the message got through, for the show started at once. She put on a string of coloured lights, and at the same time switched on half a dozen searchlights, which lit up our next ahead and ourselves. I shouted down the voice-pipe for our guns to open fire on the lights, and at the same instant she opened on us at a range of about 400 yards, certainly not more. She seemed to be right on top of us.

"Our guns fired one or two rounds apiece and must have done some damage as they could hardly miss. But the sea was literally spouting with shell splashes, and I could feel the

thuds and hear the crashes as our poor old ship was hit again and again. We were dazzled by the glare of her lights and the flashes of her guns and our own, and what with these, and the smoke, and the waterspouts, it was next to impossible to see what was happening. Our own ship seemed to be on fire somewhere. The Gunner, who was aft by his tubes, managed to fire both his two remaining torpedoes soon after we crossed the German's bows and swerved slightly to starboard and brought the tubes to bear. I didn't discover this until afterwards. Whether or not they hit I can't say, for it was impossible to see, or to hear any explosion with the row that was going on.

“I saw their leading battleship crash through the destroyer two or three ships astern of us, and had a fleeting glimpse of her front half rear itself out of the water like a spear-head. We had gone on to full speed, which should have been giving us about twenty-eight knots. But instead of moving faster, the ship seemed to be crawling slower and slower, and we were still under fire. Then a shell hit the chart-house underneath the bridge and burst. I remember a sheet of flame, and the deck seemed to open upwards. Someone yelled, and something hit my right side below the waist. It didn't really hurt, and felt as though someone had slogged me playfully with their fist. (It wasn't until about half an hour later, when I felt my right foot squelching, that I realized I had been grazed by a splinter and that my boot was full of blood which had trickled down my leg.)

“I don't know how long the firing lasted. Two or three minutes at the outside, I should think. It stopped as suddenly as it had started, and we found ourselves out of range. No other destroyers were in sight. We were alone, with the old

Libyan turning circles with the turbines still heaving round slowly.

“When we had time to collect our scattered wits, we found the wheel and engine-room telegraph on the bridge out of action and the coxswain wounded and two men killed. The skipper sent me aft with orders to connect up the after steering position and to find out what the damage was. The ship seemed a perfect wreck. The foremast had gone over the side and the wireless office abaft the chart-house was demolished, and the two telegraphists inside it both seriously wounded. The funnels were torn and riddled through and through, and the upper deck seemed littered with groaning men. It was quite dark, and I felt an awful swine when I trod on something soft and a poor chap rolled over and said—‘For Gawd’s sake, can’t you look where you’re walking!’ I got to the engine-room and shouted for Mutters, and told him to stop the engines and to connect up the after steering position. Then I went round to have a look at the other damage and to see if the ship would still float. Most of our casualties were at the after gun and torpedo-tubes, where Mr. Huxtable and practically the whole of the crews had either been killed or wounded.

“We connected up aft and got under way again, steaming about twelve knots, course west, back for England. There was nothing more we could do, as we’d fired all our torpedoes and our wireless was out of action. Mutters reported that the ship could still float and steam at slow speed, though one boiler had been put out of action. The only damage anywhere near the water-line was that aft in the skipper’s cabin which we had sustained earlier in the day, and a couple more hits in the wardroom. We plugged up the holes as best we could.

“It wasn’t until dawn, which came at about 2.30 a.m., that we could really inspect the damage, and the upper deck, I must say, was a grisly sight. I won’t give you the sickening details. We cleaned up as best we could, and buried the dead. The after gun was hopelessly out of action, though the other two, amidships and forward, could still be used, so we restocked them with ammunition and reorganized guns’ crews in case we sighted anything on the way home. When full daylight came there wasn’t a thing in sight, and as it was no good wasting time looking for other ships, particularly as we’d none too much oil, we jogged on to the west. We are making for the Tyne, as I think I’ve already told you. The weather’s getting rather nasty, with a tumbling head sea. I sincerely hope it won’t get really bad with the ship in this mangled condition.

“June 2nd, 6 a.m.,” Toby ended his letter. “The coast, thank heaven, is in sight ahead, and we’ve just picked up a patrol trawler which will escort us into the Tyne. One poor chap, an able seaman, died during the passage home, which was otherwise uneventful. My own little scrape is nothing to worry about, the young doctor says. He’s cleaned and bandaged it, and I can still hobble about and do my job. With any luck my name will not figure on the casualty list and I shan’t have to go to hospital. Must stop now. Umpteen things to do, and already this is the longest letter I’ve ever written in my life. I pity you having to wade through it, my dear...”

CHAPTER XXV

IT was impossible for any single spectator to visualize as a whole, a great naval action fought over hundreds of square miles of sea, a battle which lasted intermittently for over twelve hours, and in which there were engaged on both sides, 64 battleships and battle-cruisers, 8 armoured and 37 light cruisers, and no less than 143 flotilla-leaders and destroyers.

Jutland, so far as Toby Kerrell was concerned, had resolved itself into a series of semi-isolated pictures projected, rather like lantern slides or a badly connected film, upon the screen of his sight and imagination. Some of them were appalling in their horror and lurid magnificence, some nerve-shattering and alarming, some absurdly trivial.

He had lost all count of time and sequence and position. Events and incidents seemed to bear no relation to each other. During the daytime squadrons, ships, and flotillas seemed to be steering confusedly in all directions, appearing, disappearing, and reappearing in the mist and smoke of gunfire and the reek of many funnels with bewildering promiscuity. Sometimes they were recognizably British, sometimes German. Some were in action with an invisible enemy; others steaming at high speed with heavy bow-waves, clouds of smoke pouring from their funnels, and the great plume-like splashes of falling shell rising out of the water all round them; some on fire or battered almost out of recognition, stricken and heeling over—one, stopped, with the gashes in her hull glowing with internal fires and a cloud of smoke hanging overhead like a pall.

All sense of cohesion or orderliness seemed lost, and the battle, from what Toby saw of it, seemed to consist of a

number of desperate, disconnected squadron-to-squadron, or ship-to-ship actions, rather than a set and formal combat between the two mightiest fleets the world had ever known.

It was not until months afterwards, when he saw the positions and tracks of the opposing forces plotted on a large-scale chart, and had had the opportunity of comparing his own vivid but scattered impressions with the stories of other participants, that he even vaguely understood what had really taken place, and was able to picture the engagement with a sort of omniscient, bird's-eye view.

It was not unnatural. So far as the *Libyan* and other destroyers were concerned, the situation at the time was shrouded by an almost entire lack of knowledge as to what was happening. They had no means of keeping an accurate reckoning, of plotting courses and positions, of gathering in the reports from outlying ships and squadrons, and so visualizing the whole gigantic battle-ground. Even the Commander-in-Chief, with all the means at his disposal and a numerous staff, was constantly beset by the mystifying fog of uncertainty.

The *Libyan* was only a small and unimportant cog in the whole gigantic machine. During the day her limit of visibility was bounded by a circle with a radius of never more than eight miles, which, as the afternoon progressed and the mist and funnel smoke increased in density, shut down to three or four miles, sometimes less. Beyond these radii, somewhere over the rim of the visible horizon, something was constantly happening—the rumble of heavy gunfire; silence; the thud of a distant explosion as though some ship had gone sky-high; another spell of unearthly stillness disturbed only by the noise of the passage of the ship through the water and the

muffled roar of the stokehold fans; the sudden outburst of distant quick-firing guns perhaps beating off a destroyer attack or engaging at close quarters.

What guns were firing it was impossible to tell. Unless they could see them, nobody knew what ships were attacking or being attacked. Men were being killed, and ships sunk and damaged, but nobody knew whose. The uncertainty, the perplexity, the suspense, the anxiety, and the awful feeling of impotence and helplessness, were maddening, numbing to the senses. Titanic forces were at work. They seemed to have got completely out of hand.

At night it was even worse, for though it was dark and the actual visibility no more than a few hundreds of yards, the air sometimes shook to the intermittent throbbing of gunfire, and the horizon became luminous with the greenish-golden blaze of gun-flashes, the redder gleam of exploding shell, the pale questing fingers of searchlights in which could sometimes be seen the dark silhouettes of ships literally smothered in shell splashes, the ruby blaze of vessels blown up, or vessels on fire.

Yet, what precisely was happening, which ship was a friend and which was an enemy, who was firing or being fired at, nobody but the actual participants in each isolated engagement could tell.

It struck Toby at the time how utterly futile it was to compare an engagement at sea with any battle fought ashore. On land, nothing except the result was uncertain. The times of preparatory artillery barrages and of attack could be laid down beforehand, while the advancing troops had definite objectives. Their advance, moreover, was no faster than men could walk or run.

But at sea nothing was certain. Fleets, squadrons, flotillas, and ships could move in any direction at the speed of omnibuses, and the combined rate of approach might be the speed of a fast motor-car. After dark, or in low visibility, there was always the difficulty of recognizing friend from foe, and vessels would be at point-blank range at the moment of sighting. There was no time for leisurely consideration. Decisions, appalling decisions, had to be taken on the spur of the moment. Mistakes once made could rarely be rectified, and an opportunity once missed was lost for ever. A single error in judgment, a wrong order, the least misinterpretation of a loosely worded signal or wireless message made or received in the heat of battle, might bring about a ghastly holocaust.

This was not so at the time of Trafalgar, when war was still a gentlemanly business, when there were no mines, no torpedoes, no submarines, and no wireless. In those days men thought leisurely and in miles, instead of tens of miles, and Commanders-in-Chief were unhampered and unfettered by superior authority. On sighting the enemy they had ample time to think. They could use their own judgment and fight in their own way, without being influenced or guided by a stream of wireless signals, some helpful, some contradictory and puzzling, from outlying squadrons or ships or a well-meaning Admiralty.

At Jutland, as in every other modern naval engagement, responsibility lay heavily upon destroyers during the hours of darkness. On approaching any big ship at night they would inevitably be fired upon, for no battleship sighting torpedo-craft could afford to assume that those dim shapes in the darkness might possibly be friendly.

The destroyers, on the other hand, even if fired upon, must not discharge their torpedoes at any big ships sighted until they were quite certain that they were hostile. And how was certainty possible, except by sheer good luck, when there was an almost complete lack of information as to the whereabouts, disposition, and movements of friend and foe, and when, in the pitch blackness, silhouettes and minor differences were indistinguishable at more than a few hundred yards?

There was, of course, a 'challenge and reply' for identification purposes, but it was cumbrous and useless for modern war, utterly obsolete. The sighting ship was supposed to flash a 'challenge,' consisting of a combination of letters, with a shaded light, and to receive the appropriate 'reply' if the vessel sighted were friendly. Both 'challenge' and 'reply' changed at frequent intervals.

But what happened in practice?

If the challenge were made to an enemy, it at once established the challenger as hostile and evoked an instant tornado of gunfire, with the inevitable result. And not only this. The enemy, once provided with the challenge, could afterwards use it to his own advantage.

It was all very one-sided and unfair on the destroyers, thought Toby to himself. He realized from personal experience that a night action at sea was largely a matter of luck and circumstance; but why had this most important question of recognition at night never received the attention it deserved?

Had nobody in authority ever visualized or thought of the confusion that must inevitably occur during the night following a daylight action, when, with the position obscure

and ships and squadrons scattered in all directions, there was always the possibility of friendly ships being torpedoed and sunk in mistake for enemy vessels, and the chance of enemies escaping scot-free because they were taken for friends?

To Toby's certain knowledge opportunities of attacking with torpedoes and of inflicting losses on the enemy battle-fleet were missed during the short night following the Battle of Jutland for the reason that there was no simple and infallible method of recognition at night.

This was one of the subjects about which Prescott, who had had years of experience in torpedo-craft, had always been particularly vehement. For years past, as he pointed out, the best brains of the Navy, the greatest Navy in the world, had been concentrated upon the perfection of material—ships, and engines, and boilers, and guns, and fire control, and torpedoes, and wireless telegraphy; machines, instruments, and weapons of all kinds, which had been improved and elaborated out of all recognition, and were sometimes so complicated as to be beyond the comprehension of those called upon to work them.

The Navy, he used to say, was intensely conservative; in some ways, absurdly simple. It had a long and glorious tradition behind it, a tradition which made for complacency. Unlike the Army, which had had its lesson in South Africa, the Navy had had no naval war for a century.

The difficulties, dangers, and uncertainties of night action may have been visualized and considered; but they had never been thoroughly explored and investigated from the point of view of destroyers, whose chief opportunities of successful attack came after nightfall.

“Why is it?” Prescott once asked, during one of their ‘cags,’ or arguments, in the wardroom after dinner.

“I’ll tell you,” he said, going on to answer his own question. “Few of the senior officers in the fleet have ever served in destroyers. They’ve reached their exalted rank because they’ve gone in for gunnery or torpedo, which has kept them in big ships or in the instructional establishments ashore. They don’t realize our difficulties, or how we have to work, or, for that matter, what we can do if we’re really put to it.”

He paused for a moment to knock out his pipe.

“Service in destroyers is looked upon as a sort of easy side-line,” he continued. “We are supposed to have none of the drudgery of life in battleships or cruisers, and damned little in the way of brains. All the more ambitious blokes in the Service specialize, or try to. We destroyer fellows are non-specialists, ‘salt horse’ as they call us, and our promotion is slow and uncertain compared with that of specialists who serve in big ships under the eye of an admiral. To put it bluntly, we’re dog’s-bodies, rather looked down upon.”

“But surely not in war, sir?” Toby asked, rather shocked.

Prescott thought for a moment.

“No,” he replied. “During the war we’ve rather come into our own. We’re useful as anti-submarine screens for big ships, for hunting submarines, for convoy work, for supporting an army ashore by gunfire from the sea, even for landing troops. And before long they’ll be using destroyers for minelaying—they’ve got the *Abdiel* already. What it really comes to, is that we’re maids-of-all-work, overworked, run to death, eh, chief?”

“Two thousand miles a week, sometimes more, isn’t such bad going,” Mutters agreed. “It’s a wonder to me that the boilers stand it. It’s precious seldom we aren’t weeks overdue with our boiler cleaning, which is supposed to come after every twenty-eight days’ steaming, or thereabouts.”

“Twenty-eight days!” the lieutenant-commander laughed. “Ye Gods!—But it’s not the running we do that I’m complaining about. It’s the fact that the destroyers with the Grand Fleet, not this mob of ours at Harwich, are regarded more as a useful protection for the fleet against submarines, or for breaking up a hostile destroyer attack in action, than for their proper job.”

“What is their proper job, sir?” inquired young Foley, the R.N.R. midshipman.

“Going in and attacking the High Seas Fleet with torpedoes,” the lieutenant-commander answered.

“Day or night, sir?”

“Day and night,” said Prescott. “But day and night attacks, though we practised ’em often enough in peace, are more or less left to chance. The big bugs haven’t paid a quarter of the attention to them that they have to gunnery and torpedo exercises from big ships. Our torpedoes’ll run straight enough if they’re given half a chance; but a good many of the destroyer skippers I’ve met haven’t a ghost of a notion from where to fire them. It’s all left to chance. We haven’t even got a decent method of recognizing our own ships at night, and one of these days, if we have a mix-up in the dark after a daylight action, it’ll be merry hell!”

Prescott, who spoke from personal experience, was perfectly correct.

On the night of May 31-June 1, 1916, opportunities, glorious opportunities of successful night attacks were lost beyond redemption, not through any lack of zeal, intelligence, or gallantry on the part of the young men who commanded the British destroyers; but because they knew practically nothing of the whereabouts of the enemy fleet, and because a system of recognition signals dating from the 'seventies or 'eighties was obsolete and unsuited to the conditions of modern war.

CHAPTER XXVI

TWO days after Janet received Toby's parcels from Edinburgh, London was full of vague rumours of a great naval battle in the North Sea. The date was Friday, June 2nd, 1916.

The rumours were confirmed by an official *communiqué* which appeared in special editions of the evening newspapers under glaring headlines.

'Great naval battle!' the newsboys shouted. 'Heavy British losses!'

Janet, with fear clutching at her heart, bought a paper.

The battle-cruisers *Queen Mary*, *Indefatigable* and *Invincible* had been sunk. So had the cruisers *Defence*, *Black Prince*, and *Warrior*, together with the destroyers *Tipperary*, *Turbulent*, *Fortune*, *Sparrowhawk*, and *Ardent*. Six other destroyers were still unaccounted for.

The *Libyan's* name was not mentioned; but Janet knew from Toby's letter and parcels that the ship had been in the Firth of Forth—felt it in her bones that Toby also had been in action.

She wearily climbed the stairs of her flat and found herself in her sitting-room without realizing how she had got there. She was dazed and stunned, incapable of clear thought, almost in a trance.

Six destroyers still unaccounted for, and Toby ...

* * * * *

The news, as first presented, was shattering. London was peopled with unsmiling men and women who discussed the situation in awed whispers.

The loss of life must have been prodigious. It seemed as if the British Fleet had suffered defeat,—the British Fleet, the Royal Navy, to which they had pinned their faith and regarded as invincible, had been worsted in open battle. It was unbelievable.

Only the North Sea remained between them and the enemy. What would happen next? Invasion?

At the Admiralty, at the dockyard gates at Portsmouth, Chatham, Devonport, and Rosyth, at almost every naval base and establishment, wives and parents, sons and daughters, frantic with suspense and anxiety, clamoured for news of husbands, sons, and fathers. There were men and women from every walk of life—officers' 'ladies,' the newly-married wives of able seamen and stokers, some with the agony showing only in their tight lips and white, drawn faces, some tearful and sobbing, others almost hysterical with grief.

Was it possible that their men could have been saved from any of the ships reported sunk—their men, their bread-winners, the fathers of their children? What of the other ships engaged?

But for the time there was no further news. The authorities had none to give.

An elderly, white-haired man, whose name was famous and whose face was familiar to every bystander, emerged from the Mall entrance of the Admiralty with a handkerchief in his hand. Seeing the throng, he straightened himself up, squared his shoulders, and with lips tightly set, and dimmed, unseeing eyes, pushed his way through the crowd to vanish, alone with his grief.

In every city in Britain, in each town and city, men and women hung about the streets, talking, discussing, waiting—

waiting for they knew not what.

Gloom and despondency reigned. Had the British Navy, the **BRITISH NAVY**, suffered irreparable defeat? Was this the beginning of the end?

No. The morning papers of June 3rd which contained another bulletin issued by the Admiralty at 1.5 a.m., did much to allay the general depression. The British losses had been very heavy; but those of the Germans had been almost as bad. What really mattered, however, was that the discomfited enemy had hastily retreated to the security of his own harbours, leaving the British Fleet on the scene, ready and anxious to fight.

“This is the worst piece of news that the Government has yet had to communicate to the country,” said one newspaper, to add, a few lines later: “We can only set our teeth and prepare to carry on the struggle with increased determination.”

‘Carry On!’ was the watchword—‘Carry On!’

It was late in the afternoon of June 2nd that Janet received Toby’s laconic telegram announcing his safety.

CHAPTER XXVII

FOR perhaps the tenth time Janet read the telegram sent off from Newcastle-on-Tyne at 12.47 p.m.

“Coming on leave to-day arriving King’s Cross six fifteen may I come see you after dinner going club wire there if not convenient fourteen days leave hope you are free love Toby.”

Bless the man, she thought to herself, did he never think of economy when writing out his telegrams?

It was Thursday, June 8th.

Six days before, on the evening of Friday, June 2nd, the day of the first dismal announcement of Jutland which had said that six British destroyers were still unaccounted for, Janet had received another telegram from Toby announcing his safety.

By the first post on Monday, June 5th, had arrived his long letter describing the battle. She had read and re-read the pencilled, scribbled pages until she almost knew them by heart, trying to put herself in his place, to imagine what it had really been like. But she could not imagine it. A naval engagement seemed nothing but a wild medley of ships firing and ships blowing up, of men drowning and men being smashed to atoms and men horribly mutilated. Reading his words she sometimes felt herself shuddering. War seemed so utterly senseless and ghastly, so cruel, and so unnecessary. Yet, if she had been a man, she, Janet, would have wanted to fight. She was certainly no pacifist.

She had received two other letters from Toby, both very short. He was up to his eyes in work, he explained; busy over the arrangements for getting the ship into dock, making out

the defect lists, seeing people from the shipbuilding firm who were to do the work, disembarking what remained of the ammunition, helping Prescott to write out his official report of the battle, and racking his wits for consoling things to write to the wives or relatives of the men killed or wounded. What with these matters, and a hundred and one others that cropped up every moment of the day, he could hardly call his soul his own. But he had good news for her. Since there was nothing the men could do while the ship was being repaired, orders had come that only a small 'care and maintenance party' were to be left behind. The rest of the officers and men were to be sent on leave.

And now he was actually coming.

Reading his telegram Janet could hardly bring herself to believe that in a few hours she would see him again. Years seemed to have passed since they had said good-bye at Churton, and in the interval so much had happened. For one thing, her feelings had crystallized. She realized in her inner consciousness that she could not do without him. What else could it be when she thought of him every moment of the day, and her heart thrilled at the very sight of his handwriting?

Would his feelings have altered at all? she wondered. From the tone of his letters, and their frequency, it seemed unlikely.

What would happen when they met? How would he behave? Would he be shy and constrained, or fierce and overbearing as he had been on the day he told her he wanted to marry her? She rather hoped that he would. As for herself—she hardly dared to think of herself.

How lucky it was that she hadn't taken that new secretarial post she had thought about, for now she was free—free as the

four winds to do precisely what she wished, whatever Toby wanted to do. It was just like his dear politeness and diffidence, though, to suggest coming round to see her after dinner—after dinner, indeed, when he was due to reach London at 6.15!

Janet smiled at the idea. Probably he hadn't quite liked to ask her to meet him. But what was the sense in wasting over two hours? None at all, she decided. Invited or not invited, she would meet him at King's Cross.

Punctually at five forty-five, after half an hour's searching through her clothes and wondering what to wear, she left the flat on her way to King's Cross.

In a thin muslin dress, she was conscious of looking her best. There was colour in her cheeks. Her heart beat a little faster than usual as she hailed a prowling taxi.

CHAPTER XXVIII

“JANET!”

“Toby! Oh, my dear!”

He looked tired and careworn, a little older than when she had seen him last. But he was still the same old Toby, rather overcome with shyness, smiling back at her in the way that she loved, as if he wanted to hug her, but didn't dare to, in all the hustle and publicity of a London terminus.

“My God, Janet!” he whispered. “You're adorable!”

“Am I?” she said.

“And when you look at me like that you make me feel all dithery inside. For two pins I'd——”

“No, Toby!” she laughed, backing away.

“All right,” he growled, his eyes still upon her face. “But it's your own fault. If you must come and meet me, which was nice of you, you shouldn't make yourself so ravishing. You're looking——”

“Didn't you want me to meet you?”

“Lord! Of course I did. But I didn't like to ask.”

“Silly old stupid!” she murmured. “Don't you realize—I mean, did you think I wouldn't?”

“I rather hoped you might,” he confessed.

“Then say ‘Thank you’ nicely, and be duly grateful,” Janet said.

“Beg pardon, sir,” came a voice behind him, the voice of his porter. “Was you wantin' your suitcases put on a taxi?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Toby hastily, waving him on.

“Janet,” he went on, “What are we going to do? I had an idea

of staying only a couple of days in town, and then—then suggesting that you and I went away to the country.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed.

Her tone was non-committal, but he realized she did not altogether disapprove.

“Can’t we go away together somewhere?” he went on to plead. “After all, if—if things were different, you and I would be engaged. I only wanted to be with you in the country, nothing else. If we were engaged nobody would think anything of it.”

“We’d better discuss it later,” she said, a cloud coming over her happiness. “Here’s the taxi.” Why was Toby so untactful? Why should he remind her?

“Shall I tell him to go to the Club and drop my gear, or do you mind if I deposit it at your place for the time being?”

“Tell him to go to the flat,” said Janet, as he helped her in.

Toby tipped the porter, gave the driver the address, and climbed in beside her. The door slammed, and the taxi rolled out of the station. At last they were alone.

“This is what I’ve been waiting for!” he exclaimed, gathering her hungrily into his arms as they swerved into the Euston Road.

It was not until an hour later, in the sitting-room of Janet’s flat, that they really came down to earth again.

“Are we dining out, or can you put up with a scratch dinner here?” Janet suddenly asked.

“*Must* we go out, old thing?”

She shook her head.

“Then if it’s not a lot of trouble for you, I should love it here.”

“It’s time you learnt, Toby, that nothing, nothing is too much trouble for me so far as you’re concerned,” she replied, moving to the door. “While I’m changing my dress and cooking our dinner, you can have a bath, if you want one. I know baths are a weakness of yours.”

“Can’t I help you?”

“No,” she said firmly. “All you can do is to open a bottle of champagne, later.”

“Champagne!” he laughed. “You’ve even thought of that?”

“Just to celebrate your safe return, Toby.”

Five minutes later, she heard the sound of running water in the bathroom, followed by splashing and a throaty noise which Toby sometimes called singing.

Janet, busy over the gas stove in the kitchen, smiled to herself. So he, too, was happy, strange, incomprehensible lovable old creature that he was.

Toby seemed so unsophisticated, so unfamiliar with women, so old-fashioned and courtly in his ideas of what became them. He seemed so ready and so anxious to place her, in particular, upon a pedestal, to worship her aloofly as a sort of saint, rather than as a human being with many faults and failings and weaknesses. She liked being worshipped and idolized; but Toby was a little obtuse and lacking in subtlety. He took everything she said so literally, never realized what was at the back of her mind. All the same, thinking it over, analysing his character, Janet would not have had him otherwise.

Dinner was a success, and Janet herself was a welcome sight to the tired eyes of a man fresh from the North Sea. She was wearing some sort of *négligé* garment that Toby couldn't put a name to—something made of shell-pink velvet trimmed with white fur, and with sleeves that sometimes fell away from her arms to show the dimples where her elbows ought to be. He loved her smooth arms and neck, her neat dark head and wavy hair, the shape of her mouth and lips, the way she moved and talked and laughed.

After the meal, arrayed in a not unbecoming apron and a pair of indiarubber gloves, she had cleared away and washed up herself. Toby was not allowed to help, but amused himself walking after her to and fro between the kitchen and sitting-room, until in desperation she dragged him into the tiny kitchen and showed him how to manipulate the coffee machine.

For an hour—two hours, they talked of many things; of Jutland and Toby's experiences; of the war in general; of Churton and Aunt Elizabeth; of what Janet had seen and done since they had last met.

"Janet," Toby suddenly said, apropos of nothing in particular. "You know I told you I'd got a little money of my own that my father left me?"

"Yes, Toby."

"I think I ought to tell you that if I go west in this cursed war, it'll be yours. I made a will the other day."

"You—you left it to me, Toby!—Oh, my dear, I—I love you for thinking of me, but—but you're not going west, Toby, so why think about it. Besides, Toby, I don't want your money—I mean——" She paused, looking up at him with tears in her eyes. "I've—I've no right to it, and I—oh, I can't

bear to think of your being killed!—Oh, Toby! Don't you understand?"

"It's mine to do what I like with," he pointed out.

"But you're not going to be killed, Toby!" she exclaimed. "Why think about it?"

"My dear," he said softly. "One *must* think about these things. My lawyer suggested it, suggested, I mean, that I ought to make a will. You see, darling, I—shan't feel happy unless I know you're provided for. I—I sort of look upon you as my—my wife."

"But I'm not your wife, Toby. Oh God!... I only wish I were! Oh, Toby, I'm so tired of it all!"

For some minutes there was silence, silence broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the sound of Janet's strangled sobbing.

Toby felt as though his heart would break.

"Janet, sweetheart," he said haltingly, his face strained and white. "I can't bear to think I've made you miserable. Can't—can't something—I mean, is there no way out?"

"Toby," she breathed, as he held her in his arms. "Promise you'll go on loving me, whatever happens! Don't ever let me go out of your life!"

"How could I?" he murmured, his voice husky. "You're everything to me, Janet—everything! I feel you're part of my life, part of me. I'm sort of wrapped up in you. I can't help it. Is—is there no way out? Can't we be happy?"

"There is only one way out," she whispered.

"But I can't let you do that," he said. "I care too much to let you sacrifice yourself. I know I want you always near me to talk to, to look at, but—but I do know the world a little. I

know the beastly things people would say if we—we decided to go in off the deep end together. It wouldn't matter so much for me, because I'm a man. You, being the woman, would have to bear the brunt of it.”

“I wouldn't mind bearing the brunt,” she replied in a small voice. “I don't—don't care what people might say, not very much, that is. You see, Toby, I love you much more than really to mind—to mind much about anything like that.”

She stirred in his arms. He could feel her heart throbbing.

“If only we—we *were* married!” he said brokenly. “It's hateful always having to tear myself away from you.—All the same, I must.”

For a full minute neither spoke. Then Toby released her, and rose to his feet.

“Are you coming somewhere into the country with me?” he asked almost casually. “What about Dartmoor?”

She looked up at him, nodded.

“Of course I will, Toby. You know I will.”

CHAPTER XXIX

THEY were only two nights and one day in London, and then went west to the idyllic peace and beauty of Dartmoor, which Toby knew of old, but Janet had never seen.

They had booked rooms at an inn at Bittlecombe, a little village miles out of the beaten track. Arriving at the nearest station by train early in the afternoon, Toby, who had travelled in uniform to avoid being accosted and asked why he was not fighting, found himself an object of considerable interest and speculation.

His shy resentment at the undisguised stares and *sotto voce* remarks turned into active irritation when, passing out into the station yard behind their luggage, they were greeted by a red-faced youth disguised in a battered top-hat, a faded blue livery coat with silver buttons worn over a pair of workaday breeches, muddy leggings, and the thickest of hob-nailed boots.

“Be yu the lady an’ gennelman fur the King’s Head, zur?” the apparition inquired, touching his hat.

“Yes,” said Toby, staring at him in amazement. “Are you the chauffeur?”

He heard Janet’s little gasp of surprised amusement.

“Noa, zur. Oi bean’t no shuvver. Oi be coachman tu Mister Fulcher.”

“Coachman!” said Toby in disgust. “But haven’t they sent a car?”

“Noa, zur,” the lad grinned. “We bean’t got no car. I’ve brought carriage.”

“Good Lord!” Toby gasped, catching sight of the vehicle.

It was an old, and battered wagonette drawn by an ancient chestnut animal with a furry coat and strangely sagging knees that gave it the appearance of being tired out and wanting to sit down.

Janet laughed outright.

“But—but how far is it?” Toby demanded.

“Maybe ten-eleven moile, zur.”

Toby looked at Janet.

“What on earth are we to do?” he asked in an agitated whisper.

“What can we do but get in and drive there?” she replied.

“But I can’t drive ten miles through Devonshire in uniform in a thing like that!” he pointed out. “They’ll take us for— Heaven knows what they’ll take us for! The advance guard of a circus, or something!”

“But we must,” she said, stifling her amusement. “They’ll be terribly upset if we don’t use it.”

“But what about me?” Toby wailed. “I can’t go driving about the country in this rig sitting bolt upright in a hearse like that with a fellow on the box dressed like a lunatic! Damn it all, old thing, I’d attract as much attention as a rajah on a gilded elephant!”

“Do be sensible, Toby,” Janet chided, her eyes twinkling. “We won’t get a car, because petrol’s rationed. Put on your Burberry, and take off your cap. Then people will think you’re a commercial traveller on his honeymoon.”

“Sensible!” he grumbled. “And me having to wear a perishing Burberry for ten blazing miles on a sweltering hot

day like this! Mister What's-his-name must be half-baked to have sent this outfit. Look at it! I ask you!"

Nevertheless he took Janet's advice.

Their luggage was put in, they clambered up behind, and the 'coachman' climbed on to the box and carefully draped a rug to conceal his non-uniform nether garments. Having arranged himself to his satisfaction, he clicked his tongue. The horse stiffened itself into an attitude of expectancy, looked round and put out a tentative hoof. The youth flapped his reins, and the chariot rumbled sedately out of the station yard.

Toby, recovering his good humour, began to laugh. It was rather amusing to be borne through a small country town and into the hills and dales and moors of Devonshire in a turn-out dating from somewhere in the early 'eighties, though the faded blue cushions through which straw peeped coyly in a dozen or more places, felt as hard as the nether mill-stone.

"I feel like the Queen of Sheba," Janet observed with amusement.

"If I'm King Solomon," Toby replied, shifting uneasily, "I'm sorry for him if his hinge was no better padded than mine and he had seats like these in his blinkin' palace."

"Sit on my coat, darling," Janet suggested.

The ten or eleven miles seemed more like twenty. Along a winding, white, dusty road, up hills and down hills the old horse grunted and ambled, past picturesque little villages in the hollows, over stretches of moorland.

Benny Wilcox, the driver, in the intervals of encouraging the animal between the shafts, pointed out the beauty spots, kept up a running commentary in the broadest of Devonshire

dialects, rocking with mirth when Janet could not understand his meaning. Benny was something of a character, but inordinately proud of his position. His elder brother had joined the Army and was fighting in France. He, Benny, had stepped into his elder's shoes and assumed the badge of office at the age of fifteen.

“Oi reckons it's a man's job drivin' ole Cæsar,” he proudly pointed out. “Ole Cæsar bean't what he use to be. He wants cossetin', case he falls down.”

Toby could well understand it.

The scenery more than atoned for the slowness and hardness of their going. Walking up the steeper hills and reaching their summits with Cæsar panting far behind, view after view burst upon them—wide vistas of rolling, heather-clad moorland shimmering in the heat haze, the little tors dotted with tumbled heaps of lichenous grey granite, their flanks sometimes torn by the regular, chocolate-coloured gashes of peat cuttings. Sometimes there was never a habitation in sight, nothing to show the presence of man except a few sheep dotted amid the heather, or a thin spiral of blue smoke from some distant fire rising lazily in the still, hot air.

Miles away, the rounded hummocks of rank upon rank of higher tors stood like sentinels upon their lower neighbours. Their edges showed sharply against the pale yellowish-turquoise of the sky on the horizon. They seemed to recede into the dim distance, their slopes now amethyst, now deep purple, now the faintest ultramarine, as the cloud shadows moved across them.

A foreground was sometimes provided by huge, irregular masses of tumbled dark-grey granite slashed and scored by

deep ravines carpeted with lush grass, with patches of vivid green bracken, clumps of bright yellow gorse, and a few stunted trees struggling for existence. Occasionally there were smooth, undulating stretches of root crops or ripening corn, sometimes treacherous-looking bogs, or dark unruffled little tarns bordered with rushes. Most fascinating of all were the tinkling little streams, now tumbling happily over rocky beds in a series of miniature cascades and waterfalls, now flowing silently through natural cuttings in the turf or heather.

Breathless and hot after their climb from the valley, Janet and Toby would fling themselves down on the heather by the roadside while waiting for Benny and Cæsar to toil up the slope and overtake them. The air was full of the buzz of insects, scented with an indescribable and delicious *pot-pourri* of odours emanating from the moist, sun-warmed earth and lowly vegetation—hot, yet invigorating like champagne. A cooler breath of wind sometimes came fanning down from the west, where masses of pale golden cumulus, shaded with mauve, lay banked up over the horizon. The stillness was only broken by the call of an occasional plover or curlew, and the gentle rustling of the breeze in the heather.

“Oh, Toby!” Janet breathed on one such occasion, feeling for his hand with her eyes fixed on the distance. “I’m *so* glad you brought me here! It’s heavenly!”

“It is rather wonderful,” he said. “This time ten days ago we were getting hell in the North Sea, and now—now I’m here with you. Is it possible, Janet? It seems like a dream. How can we believe that a few hundred miles away they’re still at it hammer and tongs.”

“Don’t, Toby! Don’t!” she said, stroking his fingers.
“Don’t talk about the war—now.”

For a minute or two neither of them spoke.

Then the sun suddenly came out from behind a cloud to transform the water of a stream in the little valley at their feet into a clear, translucent brown, through which the whitened stones in the bottom shone almost like jewels.

“Just look at that water!” Toby said suddenly. “What colour d’you call it, Janet?”

“A sort of tawny brown with queer golden flecks in it,” she replied.

“You might look at me for a moment, old dear.”

“Why?” she asked, turning her head to regard him with a solemn expression on her face and her lips slightly parted.

“Am I not always looking at you?”

“I thought so,” Toby said.

“You thought what, darling?”

“That water’s just the colour of your eyes.”

Janet smiled.

“Yes,” he continued. “A sort of toffee-colour.—Rather nice! And if you look at me like that, Janet, I shall be forced to——”

“You can’t, Toby,” she answered quickly. “Rosinante’s coming. Come on, up you get!”

“Damn Rosinante!” he grumbled, scrambling to his feet.

“There be Bittlecombe,” said Benny some time later, pointing with his whip as they topped a hill and came in sight of a little collection of houses and a church set among trees in

the valley below. “Another half-moile an’ we’ll be there, zur.” He put on his brake for the steep descent.

It was a stragglng little place; merely a few stone cottages with thatched roofs, a small general shop combined with the post-office, a derelict-looking garage, the church, the vicarage, and the inn.

Their arrival at the King’s Head, from which they had been sighted five minutes before coming over the brow, seemed to have created something of a flutter in that usually quiet establishment. Outside to welcome them were Mr. Fulcher, the landlord—fat, smiling, rosy-cheeked, and white-haired, in shirt-sleeves, knitted waistcoat and long white apron; Mrs. Fulcher, a smaller edition of her husband, in black silk, a lace fichu, and a huge cameo brooch; Nellie, the pretty, giggling, dark-haired, violet-eyed serving maid, who would be breaking men’s hearts before long; Jim, the potman; a couple of labourers, one armed with a pitchfork; and an aged, shrivelled, toothless man with a face like an old apple, dressed in a smock and ancient black wideawake, who sat on a bench outside with an inverted clay pipe in his mouth and a somnolent dog curled up at his feet.

“Pleased tu see yu, zur, an’ the leddy,” said the landlord effusively, bustling forward with his wife as Toby and Janet got out. “This be my wife, mum, Mrs. Fulcher. We hope yu’ll be comfortable along of us. We’ll du our best fur yu, won’t we, Mother?”

“I’m sure you will,” said Janet politely.

“An’ anything yu wants or fancies we’ll take it kindly if yu’ll tell us. We be simple folk, not much used tu visitors.”

Assisted by Benny Wilcox, who slowly disengaged himself from the rug and climbed down from the box-seat, everyone

was anxious to help, fussing, quarrelling over the luggage, getting in each other's way. Fulcher considered it his duty to interfere.

“Nellie, me gal, doan't 'e stand around gapin', lass. Take the leddy's hat-box, can't 'e?—Jim, yu take that suit-case, an' Benny'll take the little 'un. When yu've taken 'em up, Benny me lad, take Cæsar back along stable, rub 'em down, an' give 'em his feed. Then have yu're own tea, boy, an' cut along home, 'cos yure Dad wants 'e. We shan't need yu no more to-day.—Tom, lay hold the other end o' this, will 'e?—Mother, yu'd best show the leddy her bedroom an' get the tea ready.—An yu, zur,” turning to Toby, “ 'tis a warm arternune. Maybe yu'd fancy a tankard of ale or zider, zur?”

Toby smiled his acquiescence.

It struck Toby as incongruous that half a dozen people should be getting hot and bothered over the arrival of two visitors and a few pieces of light luggage, when, less than fifty miles away in the English Channel, British ships were in constant danger of attack by enemy submarines.

Had Bittlecombe remained untouched by the war?

He was soon to discover that it had not. Except for the obviously unfit, there were hardly any men about the place between the ages of eighteen and forty, hardly a family that had not someone serving. Several had been killed. Two of Fulcher's three sons were in the Army, and one had been wounded in the Dardanelles. The third, an able seaman, was in the Grand Fleet, and, like Toby, had fought at Jutland, of which battle the proud parent was agog for news. Even 'Passon,' as Fulcher called the rector, was serving as a Chaplain to the Forces somewhere in France, and had turned over his duties to a 'guinea pig.'

Conditions must have been the same in every little village in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, Toby reflected. It brought home to one more than anything else what the struggle really meant to the country at large. The grim finger of war had probed the very heart of Britain. It was a national affair, not a war like the Crimea or South Africa, fought merely by the Army and the Navy. No people except the deliberate dodgers, and those amassing fortunes through buying and selling, were really exempt.

The King's Head was more homely than really comfortable, almost primitive in some of its arrangements. But Mrs. Fulcher's food was excellent, and what mattered the amenities when Toby and Janet spent most of their time out of doors? Except for one day of what Fulcher called 'crammy old weather,' when the moor was shrouded in mist and hot steamy rain fell all day, and another morning when it 'rained muck' but cleared up before noon, they had ten days of blazing sunshine.

Wearing their oldest clothes, taking a light luncheon with them, they were out soon after breakfast, sometimes returning long after sunset, hungry, tired out, ready only for food and bed.

Toby had served in a Plymouth ship and had more than a nodding acquaintance with Dartmoor. So they walked for miles by compass across the open heather, splashing through bogs and little streams, to climb Bellever Tor, Ryders Hill, and the great ridge of Baredown Hill overlooking Princetown.

Sometimes they basked in the sun, had their meal, and then dozed on the summits, where the turf had become cracked and yellowed by the heat and the huge granite boulders could

barely be touched with the naked hand. More than once they bathed in the clear, brownish streams of lukewarm water, swam in the inky little tarns, to find them icy cold.

Except with the deliberate object of asking for a lift, which the driver of every passing vehicle seemed ready and anxious to offer, they kept off the main roads as much as possible. In the course of their wanderings they cannot have met more than a score of people.

The ten blissful days they had allowed themselves passed all too quickly. Then the rather dismal journey back to the smoke, and grime, and heat of London—both of them miserable at the thought of Toby's departure in less than forty-eight hours to rejoin the *Libyan*.

The very evening of their arrival in London, however, a telegram arrived from Prescott.

“You are ordered to report Admiralty suspect new appointment good luck let me know result.”

And at ten-thirty next morning Toby paid off his taxi at the Mall entrance and presented himself to the uniformed messenger at the door of the great building which he had never entered before. He signed a paper, was led along a corridor, turned over to another messenger in a glass-sided cubby-hutch, and was requested to wait while the man went into a room.

He soon reappeared.

“This way, sir, please. Commander Lawson will see you.”

Toby was shown into a largish room looking towards the railings of St. James's Park. Four civilian clerks and a woman typist occupied tables wherever room could be found for them. Round the walls ran sloping desks piled with large,

official-looking volumes. These, as he knew from hearsay, were the books wherein appeared the written records of every officer of His Majesty's Navy of and below the rank of commander. Pinned to the walls were various graphs and tabular lists of names—over the mantelpiece a large notice in red—

“PROMOTION COMETH NEITHER FROM THE EAST
NOR FROM THE WEST”

An officer wearing the three stripes of a commander, a pleasant-looking ginger-haired little man with a fresh complexion and a merry blue eye, looked up from his littered table by the window and beckoned Toby to approach.

“Good morning, sir,” said Toby politely.

“Morning,” the commander replied, covering some papers on his desk with a piece of blotting-paper. “You're Kerrell?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I've got your *dossier* here. You've applied for the command of a destroyer. You've been highly recommended.”

Toby's heart leapt.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“You'll have to start at the bottom, you know,” the commander smiled. “We can't put you into a brand-new one until you've served your apprenticeship in something small. —Let's see, now,” he continued, consulting a list at his elbow. “I can give you the choice of two, both thirty-knotters—the old *Seamaid*, doing local patrol from the Humber, or the *Gnome* on the Dover Patrol. Now which is it to be, Kerrell?”

Toby hesitated.

“Which do you suggest, sir?”

“Dover every time,” Commander Lawson grinned. “You’ll get scrapping there. I wish to God I was there myself instead of polishing a chair in this cursed building,” he added with a sigh.

“Then I should like the *Gnome*, sir,” Toby said.

“Right. I’ll see that’s fixed up, Kerrell.”

“When shall I have to join, sir?”

The commander rubbed his chin.

“You’ve been pretty hard at it,” he replied, half to himself. “There’s no urgent hurry. Can you manage with another ten days’ leave from now?”

“Can I not, sir,” Toby exclaimed, overjoyed at the idea.

“Then collect your gear from your old ship and join the *Gnome* at Dover on July the first. Leave your address at the table by the door, and we’ll send along your appointment in due course.—Good morning, and good luck.”

Toby had been led to suppose that the Second Sea Lord’s department at the Admiralty was manned by ogres who took a fiendish delight in sending young naval officers to the most unpleasant and inconvenient appointments they could find. Instead of that, Commander Lawson had turned out a benignant goblin.

Ye gods and little fishes! A command of his own and ten more days of leave chucked at his head! Why in the name of fortune hadn’t he had the presence of mind to turn on the pathetic tap and ask for three weeks?

Leaving the building in a state of joyful excitement, he drove straight to his club and rang up Janet.

“I’ve got it, old thing!” he exclaimed, when the connection was made.

“Got what, Toby dear?”

“A command of my own, at Dover—a destroyer!”

He heard her happy laugh.

“I’m *so* glad, Toby darling.”

“But that’s not all,” he continued. “They’ve given me another ten days’ leave—ten days, just think of it!”

“Oh, Toby!” came through the wires.

CHAPTER XXX

BUT for the war, the *Gnome* would long since have found herself upon the scrap-heap, a nameless tangle of rusty steel in some out-of-the-way corner of a shipbreaker's yard. Thanks, however, to the aspirations of William Hohenzollern and Company, she, like many of her sisters, some even older than herself, was still doing useful service at the respectable age of eighteen.

In her youth—she was completed in 1898—she had been regarded as one of the crack ships of the then new-fangled destroyer navy. Indeed, her builders had cause to be proud of her, for on her maiden trials over the measured mile she had exceeded her contract speed of thirty knots by 1.87, though, if the truth be known, she had never done it since.

Nevertheless, as Mr. Seppings, the artificer-engineer, took care to inform Toby when he joined, the old ship was still a good steamer. She could do her twenty-three knots standing on her head. If they really forced her, they could 'whack her up' to twenty-six, possibly twenty-seven, though the boilers were old and apt to give trouble.

She was a long, low little ship of 370 tons, with the old-fashioned sloping turtle-back in the bows, on the after end of which was the small bridge uncomfortably restricted by a 12-pounder gun on its mounting, a chart-table, and the wheel and engine-room telegraphs. She had three stumpy funnels and one slender mast, and her wireless, hastily fitted on the outbreak of war, was operated by a couple of anæmic-looking youths who seemed to spend most of their waking moments with their instruments in a tiny wooden cubby-hutch between the funnels.

Besides the 12-pounder forward, she carried five 6-pounder guns and a couple of 18-inch torpedo-tubes. Compared with the *Libyan's*, her armament was ludicrous, while being roughly one-third of the *Libyan's* tonnage, the *Gnome* seemed a veritable pigmy. Her deck was so cluttered with ventilating cowls, engine-room casings, torpedo-tubes, and other fittings, that it was impossible to walk more than six feet in any one direction without bumping into something. Toby's tiny little cabin right aft, which he never saw at sea, was about half the size of that in his former ship. He literally hadn't room to swing a cat, the floor space being so restricted that when he turned out of his bunk on the mornings they were in harbour, he had difficulty in putting on his trousers without stepping in his circular indiarubber bath.

She had a ship's company of about sixty all told, about a quarter of which were active-service ratings. The rest were men of the Royal Naval Reserve, merchant-service seamen or fishermen, eked out by a few 'hostility men' who had joined the Navy for the duration of the war. They were a mixed lot, rather unused to naval discipline and routine, rather careless about their personal appearance. All the same, they were a likeable crowd and as keen as mustard.

Toby's actual messmates included Kingscote, the sub-lieutenant R.N.R., who performed the duties of first-lieutenant. He had been an apprentice in sailing ships, but had served most of his time before the war with the P. & O. Then there was Mr. Bundy, the gunner, who occupied his leisure moments in doing carpentering and fancy woolwork; and Mr. Seppings, the artificer-engineer, otherwise 'the chief.' These three had their bunks in the low, dark little wardroom aft, where again most of the floor space was taken up by the

table, chairs, a writing-table in the corner, a chart-locker, book-case, cupboards, and stove.

The ship was a beast in anything approaching a lop, pitching, rolling, wallowing, lurching, and scooping the water over herself with her sharp bows in a manner that the *Libyan* had never done. Moreover, she burnt coal instead of oil-fuel, which, besides raining ‘stokers’ on deck, and on the bridge in a following wind, necessitated wearisome, back-breaking hours of shovelling and filling and hoisting coal-bags alongside a grimy collier the moment she returned to harbour. It was on these occasions that the men sang the hymn “Art thou weary? Art thou languid?” with words of their own—unprintable, unfortunately.

Eighteen years, nearly nineteen! Heaven knew how many miles the old *Gnome* had covered since her birth on the Clyde. But it was good to think that the water of the English Channel was still being thrashed by her restless, jiggling propellers—in war.

She was a relic, a ‘has been.’ Toby, however, who would have admitted her deficiencies and limitations to himself, would never have listened to any word spoken against her by an outsider. *His* grimy pendant flew at her masthead. She was his first command, and he was proud of the poor old dear, proud even of her age.

Damn it all, the *Gnome* had been at sea long before these new-fangled high-forecastle destroyers, with their turbines, their oil-fuel, their 4-inch guns, 21-inch torpedo-tubes, and all sorts of other gilguys had even been thought of!

She had no motto, so Toby gave her one—in letters of gold leaf on a blue scroll conspicuously displayed on the after 6-pounder-gun platform. He thought first of UT VENIANT

OMNES, but eventually decided against this as rather conceited. He compromised with the more appropriate DUM SPIRO SPERO—‘Old Dum,’ the men called it.

At the period when Toby joined it the Dover Patrol comprised a peculiar medley of vessels, and more were constantly arriving. There were war-built monitors, strange, waddling creatures with a full speed of about five knots, but armed with 12-inch or 15-inch guns and used for bombarding the German lock-gates at Zeebrugge and the shore positions on the Belgian coast; various ‘Tribal class’ destroyers, craft that were heavier, more modern, faster, and better armed than Toby’s little command; other old ‘thirty knotters’ like the *Gnome*; ‘P. Boats,’ otherwise twenty-five knot, war-built patrol boats armed with a 4-inch gun and used for submarine hunting or patrol work; a few torpedo-boats; and several old-type submarines. There were fussy motor-launches, or ‘M.L.’s,’ manned by the R.N.V.R., and mine-sweeping trawlers and patrol drifters by the score. Other weird and wonderful vessels, like kite balloon ships, or coastal excursion paddle-steamers converted into shallow-draught minesweepers, arrived from time to time to lend a hand, as did also a few modern destroyers from Harwich when things became more than ordinarily strenuous.

The whole armada, which at one time numbered 400 ships, came under the orders of the V.A.D.P., otherwise the Vice-Admiral Commanding the Dover Patrol, who directed their operations from an office ashore, but hoisted his flag in a monitor or destroyer when anything particularly important was afoot. The V.A.D.P. had a cold and unsympathetic eye, and did not wear his heart upon his coat sleeve for all the world to see. The first time Toby met him, indeed, he felt

vaguely nervous, rather like a junior midshipman joining his first ship. But he need not have worried. Provided one did one's job, the Vice-Admiral was satisfied. It was only the fools and the incompetent who incurred the lash of his displeasure. The V.A.D.P. had an anxious, onerous task full of responsibility. He certainly worked his destroyers and small craft almost to death, and seemed rather to expect the impossible from the personnel. But it was equally true that he possessed all too few ships for the work that had to be done.

The Straits of Dover formed the bottle-neck for a huge stream of traffic passing in and out of the Thames, and to and fro between ports on the east coast of England and all parts of the world. Cargo after cargo of supplies for the British, French, and Belgian armies also went through the area to Dunkerque and Calais, and much coal from northern England to France and Italy. All merchant vessels passed through the Downs. They could not do otherwise. The Channel, from the South Goodwin Lightship to Dunkerque, was barred with mines, mine-nets, and other abominations, with the idea of preventing the German submarines from Zeebrugge passing west into the English Channel. A second barrage of mines and mine-nets existed off the Belgian coast between Nieuport and the entrance to the Scheldt, while another was in contemplation between Folkestone and Cape Grisnez.

Small troop transports passed daily between Folkestone and Calais, and ambulance transports between Folkestone and Boulogne. Enemy submarines were assiduous in laying mines off all these four ports, as well as off the North and South Forelands and between Dungeness and Beachy Head. All these vessels had to be protected, and a huge area swept

daily for mines.^[6] These tasks alone were no easy ones, and absorbed many patrol and escort craft.

As Toby soon found, life in the Dover Patrol was no sinecure. Zeebrugge, with its enemy destroyer flotillas, was a bare thirty-five miles from the nearest British patrol line. On almost any night the enemy might put to sea to raid the scattered patrols with the idea of getting at the transport route beyond. If they emerged, they would come out ready for instant action, with the full knowledge that any vessel sighted out of their own waters was British and could immediately be engaged.

The British patrols, however, had to be on their stations practically all night and every night, for they were working against submarines as well as torpedo-craft. They had always to be ready for instant action, and for nights on end, fair weather or foul, the captains hardly left their bridges or the men their guns or torpedo-tubes. They were operating in an area more or less crowded with their friends, so that any vessel seen in the darkness had to be challenged and identified before being fired upon. If the stranger happened to be an enemy, the immediate answer was a torpedo or a salvo of shell at point-blank range. The Germans, through force of circumstances, invariably had the initiative—they could choose their own time, and with dark nights and low visibility it was impossible to guarantee that they should be brought to action.

The *Gnome* was easy meat for any hostile thirty-three-knotter armed with 4.1-inch guns, but with the paucity of vessels risks had to be taken. She spent night after night guarding patrol drifters while they lay at the long lines of steel-wire, broad-meshed nets used for entrapping

submarines; protecting merchantmen anchored in the Downs, or attending upon monitors anchored off the Belgian coast at La Panne.

At daybreak she would sometimes return into harbour to await her turn to complete with coal alongside a collier, a job often taking two or three hours, after which she would secure to a buoy to give her officers and men some much-needed 'rest.' But the 'rest' period was more honoured in the breach than in the observance. As often as not Toby found himself detailed for an escort trip across the Channel, or rushed to sea in a hurry to hunt some mythical or actual submarine. On top of all this there was the usual routine work—the ship to be kept tolerably presentable; provisions and stores to be drawn; official correspondence and paper-work to be attended to; confidential books and documents acknowledged and periodically mustered, and the mass of memoranda and orders issued by the V.A.D.P.—whose fertile brain thought of every conceivable detail and possible emergency, and had it put down in black and white—read, digested, and read again in case some seeming triviality had unwittingly been skipped.

For seventeen days and nights on end the destroyers kept steam on their main engines. On the rare occasions they were in harbour, they had to be ready to ship at five minutes' notice. Once in every three or four days, when things were quiet, they might spend the afternoon at an hour's notice, which meant that officers could land, provided they remained in sight of their ships in case of a sudden recall. The Yacht Club on the front, within two minutes' walk of the pier, was a favourite rendezvous, though as often as not Toby was too tired even to think of going ashore. Dog-weary, dirty, unshaven, he would take off his sea-boots and tumble into the

bunk in his little cabin without even troubling to wash. Sometimes he would sleep on until the time came for a meal before going out on the night patrol. At others he would be woken up by some trivial routine signal that might just as well have never been made.

According to the official time-table, each destroyer was supposed to have one day and one night's rest in every four. This was not so in practice. There were always the submarine hunts and sudden emergencies, added to which Dover was a crowded and an abominable harbour for small craft. A swell seemed always to be sweeping in through the entrances. More often than not the *Gnome* rolled heavily at her buoy, so that sleep was impossible and life a purgatory. Sometimes she rolled as much as twenty degrees either way, to keep it up until it was time to go to sea again.

Occasionally, when the weather was really bad at Dover, she was sent over to Dunkerque, either lying in the roads, where she spent the night still rolling horribly, or going inside the inner harbour, where there might be an enemy air-raid^[7] or two to enliven the monotony of the patrol work.

The air-raids at Dunkerque were spectacular and unpleasantly exciting, particularly by night. First came the dismal sound of the hooter from the lightship in the basin to warn all and sundry to take cover in their cellars, then the brazen notes of the French trumpets sounding the alarm, followed by the blue-white rays of one searchlight after another sweeping, searching the cloud-wrack overhead. A short breathing space—then the coughing bark of the first anti-aircraft gun, and a tiny sparkle of flame high overhead as its shell burst. The firing would be taken up by gun after gun, until the air shook to the 'poom-poom-poom' of the 2½-

pounders and the deeper note of the heavier weapons. The heavens flickered in and out with a myriad flashes of dancing light as the projectiles drove upwards and burst.

Sometimes the raiders remained unseen. Sometimes, lit up in the searchlights, they appeared as minute silvery insects darting in and out among the clouds and smoke-puffs. But always their bombs came with an uncanny, demoniac whining, followed by a series of shattering, ear-splitting crashes, sometimes far away, sometimes near at hand. Falling in the streets they sent the *pavé* flying in all directions, slashed and pitted the façades of the tall houses with slivers of steel and flying stone sprayed up by the high explosive.

Dunkerque was an unhealthy place. Its inhabitants, however, seemed to take life very calmly, emerging from their lairs to carry on their business or resume their interrupted sleep the moment the 'All Clear' was sounded.

It was rather less pleasant for those on board the ships lying in the basins or alongside the jetties in the shallow 'avant port.' The sailors were intensely curious. They would come on deck to see what was going on, with the consequence that any one of them might have been smitten on the head by one of those pieces of 'friendly' shrapnel which could be heard hissing and plopping into the water in all directions.

From actual bombs there was no shelter so far as the *Gnome* was concerned. A direct hit would have sent her to the bottom then and there. The chance of a direct hit, however, was infinitesimal, and it was not so much the danger that annoyed and worried Toby, as the loss of valuable sleep, and the difficulty of settling off again after the noise and excitement.

Every seventeen days, the destroyers were taken in hand for three days' boiler cleaning, which meant that officers and men could go ashore without any chance of being recalled. Very few of them had their wives and families in Dover, most of them celebrating their temporary freedom by booking a room ashore and making up for arrears of sleep.

Every four months came a twenty-day refit in a dockyard, when the destroyers were taken into dry-dock and their officers and men allowed ten days' leave.

It was a strenuous life—strenuous to the point of utter exhaustion and weariness. What with the dark nights, the low visibility, the occasional fogs, and frequent bad weather at sea, and the petty vexations in harbour, there was no real rest at all during the seventeen days that the ships were running.

Toby, who took the opportunity of snatching forty-eight hours' leave to go to London to see Janet during his first period of boiler-cleaning, looked a shadow of his former self when she met him at Victoria.

“What on earth have they been doing to you, Toby?” she asked, staring in amazement at his pinched, drawn face and the dark rings under his tired eyes. “You look half-starved, my dear.”

“I only feel a bit dead to the world,” he explained.

“More battles?” she queried anxiously. “Your letters haven't told me much.”

“No. No fighting,” he said. “Only an air-raid or two. It's been drudgery, sheer monotonous drudgery, that's all. I've had three nights in bed in the last seventeen, and some stinking weather at sea.”

“You look dead, Toby.”

“I shall be all right when I’ve had some sleep,” he replied.

And sleep he did—eighteen hours by the clock without so much as stirring.

What a blessed relief it was to be in a comfortable bed instead of in a narrow bunk with every piece of furniture, every little fitting, rattling and jarring and jangling as the ship rolled from side to side!

CHAPTER XXXI

A FEW minutes before half-past noon, Mr. Bundy, the *Gnome's* gunner, warmly dressed in a long lammy coat, many mufflers, and leather sea-boots, forced his bulk up the circular hatch from the stuffy little wardroom and stepped on deck. He had eaten, and eaten heartily. Being no teetotaller, he had also swallowed his tot of rum. He felt more like spending the afternoon comfortably asleep in his bunk than keeping a watch on the cold, unprotected bridge.

Before making his way forward to relieve Kingscote he stopped and looked around, sniffing the air like a well-trained pointer.

It was mid-October, a grey day with a canopy of low cloud and a thin opacity on the horizon which shut down the visibility to four or five miles. The breeze of the early morning had almost died away, to leave nothing more than a gentle south-westerly swell which caused the *Gnome* to curtsy slightly as she steamed against it. There was a damp feeling in the air, a hint of coming rain.

“Steward!” Mr. Bundy roared down the hatch. “I’ll thank you to hand me up me oilskin!”

With the garment over his arm and binoculars round his neck, he stumped forward and pulled his great bulk wheezily up the vertical ladder to the bridge. Nathaniel Bundy stood over six feet and was large in proportion. With the lack of exercise brought about by the war, he was rapidly becoming an out-size in gunners.

The *Gnome* was patrolling the thirty-five-mile stretch of water between Dungeness and Beachy Head, where lay the narrow channel swept daily for mines. Patrolled at intervals

by armed trawlers, it was the fairway used by the procession of ninety odd merchant vessels which passed each day through the Straits of Dover. It was essentially a 'danger zone.' Quite apart from the risk of submarine attack with torpedoes, the whole neighbourhood, particularly off Beachy Head, formed a favourite laying ground for the enemy submarine minelayers.

Toby was on the bridge chatting to Kingscote, when Mr. Bundy appeared.

"Well, gunner, all merry and bright?"

"Yes, sir," the warrant officer grinned. "All parts bearin' an equal strain, as they say in the Bible."

"I'm quite certain they don't," Kingscote laughed.

"Maybe not," Mr. Bundy agreed. "Anyhow, what's goin' on?"

"Speed fifteen knots. Course south seventy-three west down the line of buoys. There's the traffic," waving a hand at some merchant ships to starboard, "and there's Dungeness." He pointed to the tall pillar of the lighthouse gradually fading into the mist on the starboard quarter.

"Anything special on?" the gunner asked.

"You'd better have a look at the wireless log," Kingscote said. "But the only thing we've had this morning is a mined area off the South Foreland—a one-and-a-half-mile circle here, look." He leant over the chart-table and pointed. "I've plotted the position."

"Anything blowed up?"

"An armed trawler," the sub replied casually. "But I don't know for certain, I'm only going on what we intercepted. Are

you coming aft, sir?" he went on to ask Toby.—"Or shall I tell them to send your lunch up here?"

"I'll come aft," Toby replied. "There's nothing much to worry about.—We shall be on this course for well over an hour, Mr. Bundy," he added to the gunner. "Keep your eyes skinned, and don't get barging in amongst the traffic and putting the wind up them. Let me know at once, of course, if anything happens. I'll be up again in less than half an hour."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Toby and Kingscote left the bridge together.

Mr. Bundy, left in charge of the ship, filled and lit his pipe, leant against the 12-pounder gun, and looked around him.

The scene was much the same as ever, as he had gazed at it fifty, a hundred times, before. The same grey sky and grey sea, the usual streams of merchantmen passing in both directions, the line of buoys marking the swept channel, and a stubby, armed trawler or two fussing through the water as she directed the traffic.

The merchantmen were always interesting. British ships predominated; but there were many neutrals. Mr. Bundy gazed through his glasses at the *Spurt*, of Tromsö, a Norwegian tramp of dissolute and chastened appearance, whose deliberate, plodding gait and general air of senility belied her name, or at any rate the English meaning of it. Her rusty black hull was decorated with three large squares painted in her national colours, red, with a vertical white-edged stripe of blue in the centre. Next a bulbous, prosperous-looking Dutchman, who seemed to waddle in her, or his, stride. She was slightly faster than the ancient *Spurt*, and boasted a canary-coloured hull bearing her name in

fifteen-foot letters, and enormous painted tricolours striped horizontally in red, white, and blue.

Then two Swedes with unpronounceable names, who announced to the world that they hailed respectively from Göteborg and Helsingborg. They also sported large rectangles painted in vertical stripes of yellow and blue, while close behind them a Dane, with an absurdly attenuated funnel and long ventilators sticking at all angles out of her hull like pins from a pincushion, ambled stolidly along like a weary cart-horse. She, scorning other decorations, merely showed the scarlet, white-crossed ensign of her country.

Some of the neutrals carried signs bearing their names which could be illuminated at night. All seemed equally anxious not to afford any prowling submarine a legitimate excuse for torpedoing them on sight. Mines, however, were no respecters of neutrality.

But the craft which outnumbered the others by more than four to one were the British. They bore no distinctive marks or colouring on their sides, and their travel-stained and weather-beaten appearance, their rusty hulls, discoloured funnels, and generally dingy and unpretentious look showed that they were kept far too busy to trouble about external appearances. Their only tokens of nationality were the wisps of tattered red bunting fluttering at the stern of each; the gallant old Red Ensign which, war or no war, still flaunted triumphantly on practically every sea except the Baltic.

Many of the passing vessels looked out of date and comically old-fashioned, some obviously veterans of the 'eighties, fit only to sail under a foreign flag according to pre-war standards, but dug out of their obscurity to play their part in the war. And a very important part it was. Ships must run,

and at a time when the Admiralty had levied a heavy toll upon all classes of ships and men of the Merchant Navy, every vessel that could steam, every seaman that could serve afloat, could be used many times over. Without the Merchant Navy the inhabitants of Britain would have been reduced to starvation and the war could not have continued. The merchant seamen were not paid, and their ships were not built, to fight. Yet, week in and week out, month after month, they carried on in the face of the hideous danger from submarines and mines.^[8]

Every time he saw them, Mr. Bundy, in common with every officer and man of the Royal Navy, felt an intense admiration for the wonderful pluck and hardihood of the men of the Sister Service of the sea. He himself would not willingly have gone afloat in any ship which did not carry a gun. But these men did.

Toby returned to the bridge, and as everything was still peaceful, retired again to a deck-chair on the upper deck beneath with a pipe and a book. The *Gnome* had nothing so modern as a chart-house in which he could lay his head for occasional naps at sea when nothing was going on; but here, if anything sudden did happen, he was almost within whispering distance of the officer of the watch. Presently, with his sea-booted feet stretched out on the warm funnel casing, the pipe dropped out of his mouth and he fell off into an uneasy doze.

The afternoon wore on. Soon after one-thirty the red shape of the Royal Sovereign lightship was in sight slightly off the starboard bow. Twenty minutes later the *Gnome* had rounded it to seaward of the traffic lane, and altered course slightly to the northward. In another half-hour she would be abeam of

Beachy Head, the western limit of the Dover Patrol, and would circle round and steam back up the swept channel towards Dungeness. By two o'clock the great chalky hummock of the headland itself, with the lighthouse at the cliff-foot, could be seen looming up out of the haze on the starboard bow. Right ahead, a great concourse of merchantmen were rounding it on their way up or down Channel.

"Call the cap'ten," Mr. Bundy gruffly told the signalman. "Tell him Beachy Head's in sight, an' we'll be at the end of our run in about ten minutes."

Toby was duly informed, but before he had even had time to stretch himself the door of the make-shift wireless office burst open and one of the telegraphists shot out like a jack-in-the-box.

"Cap'ten, sir!" he exclaimed excitedly. "There's a ship sinkin' west by south of Beachy Head!"

"All right, all right!" Toby replied, scrambling to his feet and making for the bridge. "Don't get the staggers, man! Bring the signal to the bridge."

He climbed up the ladder.

"Go on to full speed, gunner," he said to Mr. Bundy, going to the chart-table. "There's an S.O.S. from somewhere ahead. —Now then," he added to the telegraphist, "let's have a look."

The man handed him a slip of paper.

The engine-room reply gongs clanged, and the *Gnome* started to quiver as she moved faster through the water. The plumes of spray on either side of her sharp bow heightened, and the thin brownish vapour at the top of her funnels

thickened into black smoke as the men in the stokeholds flung shovelful after shovelful of coal on to the roaring furnaces below.

Everyone knew that ‘full speed’ on the telegraphs was an emergency signal to drive the ship as fast as she would go. Ordinary increases of speed were signalled by the revolution indicator.

The message which Toby read was from an armed trawler, the *Girl Eva*. De-coded, it ran:

“Steamship Cairngorm mined eight miles west by south Beachy Head 1.44 p.m. Stop. Am standing by. Stop. Traffic warned. Ends.”

Toby hastily plotted the position on the chart.

“Keep her on this course, gunner,” he said over his shoulder to Mr. Bundy. “She’s about ten miles ahead. It’s a funny thing, though.”

“What, sir?”

“It’s not near the position of any minefield that’s been reported,” Toby observed. “Yes,” he went on to say, “it’s quite on the cards it isn’t a mine at all. It may be a torpedo. Get the hands up to action stations, gunner. Then go aft and see to your depth charges. Are they set for fifty feet?”

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Bundy removed a clip and pressed a bell-push. Alarm gongs jangled throughout the ship. The men, fresh from their afternoon sleep on the stuffy mess-decks, appeared on deck rubbing their eyes, and hurried to their stations. Kingscote and Petty-Officer Palmer, the coxswain, arrived on the bridge almost simultaneously.

“What’s up, sir?” the former asked.

Toby explained.

The crew of the 12-pounder gun on the bridge cleared away their weapon.

Within ten minutes the damaged steamer, stopped and blowing off steam, with a trawler standing by her, was in sight about five miles ahead. The *Gnome*, meanwhile, had worked up to twenty-five knots, and in eleven minutes more was within half a mile.

The *Cairngorm*, a heavily laden tramp, was holed aft and well down by the stern with her forefoot almost out of water. Toby, looking at her through his glasses, was just about to reduce speed for the purpose of closing to inquire the damage, when the unexpected happened.

A tall, thin column of spray mingled with blackish smoke leapt out of the water to a height of over 150 feet half-way along the steamer's side. Almost simultaneously with the upheaval the dull, thudding 'boo—o—o—mm' of a heavy underwater explosion rumbled across the water.

"My God! That's a torpedo!" Toby shouted in a single breath, sweeping the sea with his glasses for any signs of a submarine's periscope.

The water was perfectly calm; but he saw nothing.

But one thing remained, and that was the track of the torpedo, stretching across the grey sea in a hardly perceptible line of bubbles as straight as if drawn with a ruler. And at the far end of that line of bubbles the submarine must have been at the moment of firing.

There was not much time to think.

His heart palpitating with excitement as he conned the ship, Toby called to Kingscote to have the guns ready—to

warn the gunner to be prepared to let go his depth charges. The *Gnome* was approaching the torpedo track almost at right angles, and at the same time he gave an order to the coxswain which caused the destroyer's head to move slowly to port under slight starboard helm. He was cutting off the corner, with the intention of reaching the track of the torpedo as soon as possible and steaming down it.

He knew full well that it would take him something over a minute to reach the place whence the torpedo had been fired. If the U-boat had an underwater speed of eight knots, she might be anywhere within about 200 yards of the spot by the time the *Gnome* reached it. All the same, there was a chance, just a chance——

The ship was still turning slowly, with the line of oily-looking bubbles clearly visible ahead and on either bow. From a hundred yards its distance diminished to seventy—fifty—twenty-five——

“Starboard fifteen!” Toby ordered, his eyes fixed on the water ahead.

“Starboard fifteen, sir,” the coxswain repeated.

The *Gnome* turned faster.

“Ease to five!” Toby continued, as the *Gnome* turned parallel to the torpedo track. “Midships!—Meet her port! Steady—y!”

Twenty-five knots means something over 800 yards a minute. It cannot have been more than fifteen seconds later that Toby suddenly saw an object like the top of a broomstick appear suddenly out of the water about 150 yards distant and slightly on the starboard bow. It was an insignificant-looking thing, showing perhaps two feet above the surface of the sea.

But it was moving from left to right in a little flutter of spray. He knew full well what moved beneath it.

“Periscope, sir!” two pointing men shouted simultaneously.

“Don’t fire!” Toby ordered. “Port a little, coxswain!—Stand by the depth charges—steady-y!”

The *Gnome’s* head moved slightly to starboard. Kingscote blew a series of shrill blasts on a whistle and held up a red flag.

Five seconds passed—ten seconds—twelve——

There came a hardly perceptible jar from far beneath the water-line as something scraped for a moment along the *Gnome’s* bottom.

“Let go-one!” Toby said, his heart pounding with excitement.

Kingscote dropped his flag. Mr. Bundy, at his station in the stern, saw it. An innocent-looking steel canister containing some 300 lb. of amatol rolled down its chute and splashed into the sea.

“Give ’em another for luck, sir?” Kingscote asked.

Toby nodded.

A second depth charge rolled overboard.

A few seconds delay. Then, with a roaring detonation that shook the ship and seemed to hurl her violently forward, a dome-shaped hummock of white, bubbling water appeared in the wake. It burst upwards in a huge upheaval of spray and greyish spume.

A second shattering explosion.

Toby looked anxiously for any traces of upflung débris, but could see none. Neither were there any signs of flotsam when the turmoil of the explosions subsided.

Yet the *Gnome* had scraped something, that he could swear. It could only be the submarine, the thin top of her periscope, or the jumping wire, by the feel of it, in which case those two depth charges must have detonated within thirty feet of her, probably less.

In the excitement and suspense of waiting for something to happen, Toby had no thought for the safety of his own ship, which might even be holed below the waterline. All that mattered was the submarine.

Easing to slow speed, the destroyer steamed round the spot where the explosions had occurred, which was clearly marked by a widening area of blackish scum and many dead fish floating on their backs.

The seconds passed. Then, a few yards to the right of the patch of discoloured water, a thin trickle of some dark, iridescent-looking substance appeared on the surface. It gradually thickened, and spread.

“Oil!” said someone, pointing.

Hardly had he spoken, when there came a swirling commotion in the sea, and a blunt, grey bow broke surface at a distance of little more than seventy yards. The water cascaded off it. Almost simultaneously, it was followed by the top of a conning-tower.

The *Gnome*'s guns did not wait. Their crews had been aching to do something, and this was their chance. They pumped shell after shell into their enemy as fast as their weapons could be loaded and fired. A few rounds missed, but many more hit. Toby could see the holes in the grey plating, and the red flash and little puffs of black smoke as the projectiles struck and burst.

A man suddenly appeared on the top of the conning-tower, waved an arm, and was instantly blasted into nothing as a 6-pounder shell hit and exploded almost at his feet. Another figure appeared in the place where the first had stood—waved something white.

“Cease firing!” Toby shouted.

“Cease firing, Kingscote!” he bellowed again, as the guns continued. “They’ve surrendered! Can’t you see, man?”

Someone blew a whistle. The firing stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

The U-boat was in a bad way. Her stern was deeply submerged, but she was still moving slowly ahead with the bow and conning-tower out of the water. More men appeared, waving their arms, shouting for help.

“Give the swine another half-dozen rounds an’ wipe ’em out, the muckers!” growled a man on the *Gnome’s* bridge. “Kill the bastards!”

“My God!” Toby muttered, almost to himself. “I can’t let ’em drown!—Kingscote, call away the whaler!”

But before the *Gnome* could approach and lower her boat the end came.

The submarine’s conning-tower slid suddenly backward in a commotion of bubbling, seething water to fling its occupants into the sea. The dripping bow reared itself skyward, to hang for a moment at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Then, with hardly a splash, it too vanished, as if plucked under by some giant hand. The water frothed and splashed as the imprisoned air escaped. A few scraps of wreckage, and

gouts of thick black oil came floating to the surface. In the midst of it could be seen the heads of five swimmers.

These the *Gnome*'s whaler picked up—a petty-officer and four seamen, one badly wounded. Their shipmates, quickly drowned or slowly suffocated, had gone to their miserable deaths in a leaking steel tomb fifteen fathoms deep beneath the swirling tides of the English Channel—food for fishes.

“Evidence,” said Toby grimly, as the whaler returned and he leant over the bridge rails watching the survivors being helped on board.

With a few live German as prisoners, nobody could deny that the submarine had not been well and truly sunk. He was glad to have dispatched her, glad to have had the opportunity, and the luck. All the same, though this was war, though U-boats had committed unspeakable atrocities, and had left men, women, and children to drown without any possible hope of salvation, he could not help feeling a little sick at heart, a little sorry.

The poor wretches he had sent to their doom had died horrible deaths. Yet they, like himself, had merely been carrying out the orders of those set in authority over them. It was the instigators of the ruthless submarine warfare who were rightly to blame, not its humble instruments.

Mr. Seppings, the artificer-engineer, came climbing on to the bridge. He was grinning all over his face.

“Did you feel that bump, sir?” he inquired.

Toby nodded.

“Well, sir. I says to myself we must have punched a hole in ourselves. But I’ve searched the ship below and can’t find no hole. Maybe——”

“No damage?” Toby interrupted.

“No, sir. None that I can find at present.”

“Have another good hunt round, Mr. Seppings,” Toby ordered. “We may have started a plate or two, though if we have we’ll jolly soon find it out.”

The *Gnome* hoisted her boat and proceeded to the spot where the *Cairngorm*, torpedoed twice, had already sunk. Her crew, with most of their effects, had been rescued by the armed trawler *Girl Eva*. Toby, transhipping them into the *Gnome*, shaped course to the eastward and wirelessly a short resumé of what had occurred to Dover.

Half an hour later he received the laconic reply: “Congratulations. Return into harbour.”

Three hours afterwards, in his best monkey jacket, he was smoking a cigarette in the office of the captain commanding the Dover destroyers.

“Well, young man, let’s hear your yarn.”

Toby told him.

“You’ve done well, Kerrell,” said the post-captain, when he had listened to all the details. “I’m pleased with you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“There’s no damage to your own ship, you say?”

“No, sir.”

“So much the better. I’m sorry I can’t give you the night off; but I’ve so many destroyers broken down that I’m afraid I’ll have to send you to the Downs for the usual patrol. Can’t be helped. I’m sorry.”

Toby, who had hoped for a quiet night in his bunk, concealed his disappointment.

“That’s all right, sir,” he said.

“You return into harbour at daylight,” the captain continued. “The Admiral wants to see you at nine-thirty, and you’d better let me have your report as soon as you can manage it. By the way, how d’you like the *Gnome*?”

“She’s all right, sir,” Toby replied loyally. “A bit old, that’s all.”

“I’m merely asking because I’ve put your name down for one of these newer destroyers that’ll be arriving here before long. You’re third on my list, so within five or six weeks you’ll probably find yourself in something a bit bigger and faster with a 4-inch gun or two.”

Toby’s heart jumped. Something a bit bigger and faster with 4-inch guns—what luck!

“Thank you, sir,” he said gratefully.

“Thank yourself,” said Captain Trevor. “Good night. See you to-morrow.”

“Good night, sir.”

Toby left his chair, took up his cap and gloves and stick, and made for the door.

“Oh, by the way, Kerrell,” the captain called after him. “I’d forgotten.”

“Sir?” said Toby wheeling round with the door open.

“About this little show of yours this afternoon—we shall want your list of recommendations, of course. As for yourself, I expect they’ll give you the usual reward for being a good boy.”

“The what, sir?”

“The D.S.O., you fathead!” Captain Trevor laughed. “Good night, Kerrell.”

CHAPTER XXXII

EARLY in December Toby found himself in command of the *Partisan*, a destroyer completed only a year before the war. She had hitherto served with the Grand Fleet, but was now allocated to the Dover Patrol. Compared with the little old *Gnome*, his new ship seemed almost like a battleship, little if anything inferior to the *Libyan*, which he had left six months before but had now almost forgotten. She was a vessel of about 1,000 tons, with a speed of over thirty knots, armed with three 4-inch guns and 21-inch torpedo-tubes. She burnt oil-fuel instead of coal, had a ship's company of over eighty officers and men, and cabins, wardroom and mess-decks that were real living spaces instead of glorified rabbit-hutches.

He considered himself lucky, as indeed he was. A few lieutenants who were his seniors were still serving in command of old 'thirty-knotters' and 'Tribals,' while he, a comparative new-comer to Dover, had been promoted to a better ship over their heads. There was a certain amount of resentment and jealousy. Tales were spread by some of the malcontents that Toby had ingratiated himself with Captain (D) and the Vice-Admiral, and, having become a 'blue-eyed boy,' had obtained his command by influence. Everyone knew that he had come to Dover from Harwich, where he had seen a certain amount of service and had earned a D.S.C. It was sheer luck that had brought him his D.S.O. for sinking a submarine within a few months of joining the *Gnome*. Perhaps he deserved it, but why should they, who had been flogging the Dover Straits ever since 1914 without much luck in the way of glory and honour, but a devilish amount of real

hard work, be altogether forgotten when it came to choosing people for better commands? It was a scandal, an outrage! What the deuce was the Service coming to?

Two officers actually complained to Captain (D) at what they considered the unfairness of Toby's selection. And for once in a way Captain Trevor really showed the devastating warmth of his temper.

"You dare come to me and question my doings!" he fumed. "If I choose to send Kerrell to the *Partisan*, you can depend I've got a pretty good reason! This is wartime, let me tell you, and I choose the fittest man for the job, irrespective of seniority!"

"But, sir," one of the lieutenants started to protest, "there are others like myself who've been——"

"I know exactly what you're going to say, and I won't listen!" Captain Trevor roared, rising in his fury and beating his writing-table with his clenched fist. "If you don't like my decisions, you can damned well lump it! And if I hear any more of your nonsense you'll both be looking for other jobs!" He paused for breath. "And now get out of my sight before I get really angry!"

The complainants retired, eviscerated.

All the same, Toby was not very popular.

But he did not really worry. The work was too onerous to trouble much about what people thought. Life, as usual, was a never-ending round of monotonous day and night patrols at sea; of escorting transports across the Channel and merchantmen along the narrow-swept traffic lanes; of hunting a submarine or two; of Dunkerque and its air-raids, or the bombardment of Zeebrugge or Ostend by monitors a prodigious long way out at sea, out of sight of the yellow

sand-dunes which fringed the Belgian coast; of conning the ship into the crowded, treacherous harbour at Dover to fill up with oil-fuel and to draw provisions; of going to sea again in filthy, stinking weather.

But the everlasting patrols predominated—those nightly vigils in the fierce south-westerly or north-westerly gales; accompanied by bitter cold and occasional snow which, with the invariable dark nights and low visibility, and the presence of innumerable shoals, fierce tides; and mines, mine-nets, and obstructions, with hardly a shore light to steer by; made work in the Dover Straits something akin to a waking nightmare. One became used to it in time, because one became inured and learned to do with the minimum hours of sleep, but that was all.

Ashore, people were beginning to grumble at the shortage of sugar, for, to save tonnage in bringing it from oversea, the supplies to each trader were cut down to half the allowance for 1915. But if Britain was feeling the submarine campaign, what was the effect of the British blockade upon Germany?

Completely cut off from the markets of the outside world except through neutrals, who needed sea-borne supplies for themselves, a rationing system had been in force practically since the beginning of the war. Artificial fertilizers, without which the soil could not produce its normal harvest, had been lacking since 1914. By the winter of 1916, compelled to rely upon her own scanty resources for food and the raw material for the manufacture of munitions, the situation in Germany had become acute.

She had become a country of ‘substitutes.’ Famine stalked through the land. People were starving through lack of bread and meat, and the want of essential oils and fats not only

reacted upon the physique and spirits of the population, but diminished the transporting power of the railways through the lack of lubricants.

All this distress was brought about by the strangle-hold of British Sea Power, and the breakdown of Germany was only staved off for a time by the conquest of Roumania and the occupation of the Ukraine opening up fresh sources of supply.

Since the sinking of the *Lusitania* on May 7th, 1915, with the loss of over 1,000 lives, other passenger vessels had been destroyed by German submarines. Even American cargo steamers were not immune. America, however, held to her neutrality and still strove to find a basis for peace between the belligerents. But no formula could be found. The war had long since left the stage when it was a conflict of differing governmental policies. It had become a desperate struggle of peoples dominated by the prime instinct of self-preservation at any cost.

In 1916, through fear of bringing America into the war on the side of the Allies, the submarine campaign against passenger ships had largely ceased. On February 1st, 1917, however, goaded to desperation by the internal situation and increasing difficulty of carrying on the war with its hands tied, the German High Command launched its unrestricted submarine war. By this declaration areas enclosing the British Isles, France, and the Mediterranean, were to be considered war zones, and all merchantmen found in them, British, Allied, or Neutral, would be sunk on sight. Consideration for the lives of those on board would not be allowed to hinder submarines at their work. So far as Germany was concerned,

the humanitarian principles of war subscribed to by all civilized Powers had deliberately been abandoned.

It was not long before the effects of their ruthless campaign became manifest. Losses soared. In February, 260 British, Allied, or Neutral merchant-vessels were sunk; in March, 338; in April, 430. Of these monthly figures 114, 146, and 196 vessels were British.

The situation was desperate. If losses progressed at this appalling rate, Britain would soon be faced with starvation and the Allied cause would collapse through lack of food and munitions. In May and June an elaborate convoy system was started for all merchant-vessels approaching the British Isles. The toll of sinkings started gradually to diminish.

But before this, on April 6th, 1917, goaded to fury after two years of incessant provocation, America declared war upon Germany.

The tide turned definitely in favour of the Allies—more ships, more men, more food, more munitions at once became available. The grip on the Central Powers increased in severity.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE orders for the night of Saturday placed the *Partisan* to the eastward of the line of destroyers patrolling the net-mines which extended across the Channel between the South Goodwin lightship and the Dyck shoal, in the southern approach to Dunkerque. Six or seven other vessels were on their stations to the westward of the *Partisan*, the whole line of ships, out of sight of each other in the darkness, steaming alternately south-west and north-east and altering course at regular intervals. At the north-eastern ends of their beats they could verify their positions by the winking lights of the gas-buoys marking the line of nets.

Since the previous October various raids had been made on the Channel by the enemy destroyers stationed at Zeebrugge and Ostend, which had been reinforced from Germany. The raiders had sunk or damaged by torpedo or gunfire several destroyers and patrol drifters, together with one empty transport on the route between Folkestone and Dover. Shell had also been fired into Ramsgate, Broadstairs, and some of the towns on the French coast, resulting in the loss of innocent lives.

The initiative for these 'tip-and-run' raids, as they soon came to be called, lay entirely in the hands of the enemy. He could attack anywhere at his own selected moment. The British, with a very small number of destroyers for the extensive area that had to be protected, were on guard every night and all night.

If one could imagine the water of the Dover Straits represented by a black area about the size of a season ticket, the area visible to each British destroyer on an ordinary dark

night would be indicated by a white circle smaller than a dried pea. Without a far larger defending force than was available, it was manifestly impossible to guarantee that the enemy should be brought to action. His tactics being of the ‘shoot and scoot’ order, were exceedingly difficult to counter. He might be intercepted by luck; but that was about all.

But each time a raid or a coastal bombardment occurred, the unenlightened section of the Press burst into a torrent of abuse and invective.—“Innocent civilians murdered. More ships sunk. What is the Navy doing?” Indeed, it was even rumoured that the Vice-Admiral received many fulminatory letters which, with sardonic humour, he zealously preserved in a scrap-book.

Toby would dearly have loved to have taken to sea with him on one of his night patrols some of these self-styled ‘naval experts’ and others who wrote articles and letters damning the Service to which he belonged and villifying its senior officers. For preference, he’d choose a really dirty night as dark as Erebus, with a hustling south-westerly gale sweeping up-Channel, a heavy, toppling sea, and the water coming over everywhere. That, if he weren’t prostrated by seasickness, would give the ‘expert’ something to think and to write about. In future, his articles might be more restrained and generous.

The *Partisan* had taken up her station on patrol at dark. Shortly afterwards came night—calm, moonless, with a heavily overcast sky and a visibility of perhaps half a mile. High water was due at about 9.30 p.m., and, as everybody knew, high water was a favourite time for hostile raids. It gave the enemy a chance of steaming over British minefields which might otherwise have been dangerous.

Toby had long since decided what to do if any raiders came his way. He would try to ram, or to use his torpedoes, as the quickest and surest method of disposing of any antagonist. The use of guns had various disadvantages. He knew from experience that it took many 4-inch shells to sink or even cripple a destroyer, while the flashes of guns had a blinding and paralysing effect upon those using them at night.

So his first instinct would be to ram, then to use his torpedoes. Failing these, he would use gunfire, which, if it did nothing else, would soon bring reinforcements. To this end every member of the *Partisan's* ship's company, except the watch of stokers off duty, remained at his action station all through the night. The look-outs on the bridge, and at each gun and torpedo-tube, were changed every twenty minutes, for eyes soon became tired in the darkness.

Toby himself rarely left the bridge, merely sat down occasionally on a high stool which allowed him to look ahead over the bridge-screens. All his officers were at their stations—the first-lieutenant at the midship gun, the gunner aft at his torpedo-tubes, the sub-lieutenant on the bridge, the midshipman R.N.R. at the after gun. Provided the guns and torpedo-tubes were ready for instant action, a proportion of the crews could sit down beside them and sleep if they could. But as often as not, with the cold and driving spray, sleep in the open was out of the question.

Everyone knew that if a raid did come, it would come with appalling suddenness. There would not be much time to think with a visibility of about half a mile and the enemy steaming thirty knots. Moreover, everybody knew the risk. The enemy destroyers did not come singly. Three or four would be working together, and the *Partisan* was alone, with no

supports within about a couple of miles. The uncertainty of night action perhaps helped to even up the disparity in force. Nevertheless, there was a heavy risk, more particularly as any approaching vessel must be identified beyond doubt before being engaged. But this was war. Risks had to be faced, and there was always comfort in the fact that the enemy usually broke off an engagement and ran like scalded cats if there was any chance of their getting the worst of it. Their main object seemed to be to return safely to harbour, not to press home an initial success.

Ten o'clock came with the *Partisan* still jogging to and fro on her beat and altering course every twenty minutes. At about ten-thirty, according to routine, one man from each gun went to the galley for a mess-kettle of thick ship's cocoa and a plentiful supply of corned-beef sandwiches. The same provender came on to the bridge, and was shared alike by officers and men. Toby gulped his cup of scalding liquid with avidity. It was warming, and delightfully thick.

The coxswain sucked his noisily, eructated loudly, begged Toby's pardon, and then broke into an attack of hiccups.

"Beg pardon, sir," he apologized again. "I don't—hup!—know wot's come over me—hup!—to-night."

Toby laughed.

"Don't stand there larfin'—hup!—at me!" came the coxswain's angry whisper to a giggling young signalman beside him. "There's nothin' funny—hup!—in this 'ere! I'll give you a clout—hup!—'longside the ear'ole if you don't watch it!"

The signalman, aware of the petty-officer's horny hand, moved hastily out of range.

Ten forty-five——

The ship was steaming about north-east, with the winking light on the turning buoy at the end of the beat in sight about a mile ahead, when Toby suddenly noticed an irregularity in its flashes. For a brief space it became obscured, then shone on again. Holding his breath, he put up his glasses.

Yes. The light, supposed to flash every two seconds, was invisible for fully six. Then it appeared again, winking steadily. Next it was obliterated—then blinked again.

It could only mean one thing. Ships of some sort were passing in front of it—three ships one after the other, by the look of it. No friendly vessels were anywhere near, otherwise they would have been warned. They were raiders, something less than a mile distant, and approaching fast.

Toby's hand instantly went down to a bell-push. He pressed it, hard, and the jangle of the alarm gongs sounded throughout the ship. As he passed a hurried order to the coxswain he could hear the men mustering round the fore-castle 4-inch gun, heard the clanging thud of a projectile rammed home, and the metallic clatter of a brass cartridge-case on the loading tray.

“Warn the gunner to stand by!” he said to the sub-lieutenant, his eyes on the darkness ahead. “Tubes to port, Graham.—And don't for the Lord's sake open fire until I give orders!—Starboard a little, coxswain!—Steady so!”

“Steady, sir.”

The *Partisan* had increased speed to twenty-two knots. The enemy, though still invisible, must be somewhere fine on her port bow.

Then, quite suddenly, Toby saw their white bow-waves at a distance of little more than a thousand yards—plumes of white water, three or four of them, a line of dim

phosphorescence, and the black hulls of ships. They were travelling fast, and almost right ahead. He realized he would be unable to ram unless he hauled off a little to give the *Partisan* a chance of turning.

His heart throbbing, every nerve tense, he gave orders for guns and torpedo-tubes to be trained to port, shouted to the coxswain to steer a little to starboard, and to increase to full speed. He heard the sharp 'ting-ting' of the engine-room reply gongs. The *Partisan* quivered as she worked up to full speed.

There was little time to think. The combined speed of approach was about fifty-five knots, a little less than a mile a minute.

The enemy, now clearly visible with the naked eye, were coming down at an angle across the *Partisan's* original course. The *Partisan* was still turning slightly to starboard to a parallel and opposite course. They would pass at a distance of between two and three hundred yards. Four—four against one.

Toby realized at once there was little chance of ramming. Instead, he continued to circle to starboard, with the intention of bringing his torpedo-tubes to bear. So far not a gun had been fired, and the enemy's leader had not swerved from his course.

Five hundred yards—four hundred—the *Partisan's* first torpedo left its tube and splashed into the sea—a second went after it.

There was no time to see where they went. An instant later there came a thudding crash from amidships, a shattering explosion which seemed to lift the *Partisan* sideways in the air, and to drop her into the water again, nearly broken in

halves. The air became suddenly full of the sickly stench of explosives and oil-fuel. A blinding waterspout came raining down on deck. The ship heeled bodily over to port—and stopped.

Toby, collecting his scattered wits, knew she had been torpedoed.

Catching sight of the enemy rushing past at a distance of little more than a cable, he shouted to the guns to open fire. He heard one or two rounds fired. Then the first three of the hostile destroyers broke into flame at point-blank range, pouring salvo after salvo into a target that could hardly be missed.

The *Partisan* shuddered as shell after shell drove home and exploded. The night seemed full of spray and smoke and flickering flame, now red, now gold, and vivid greenish-blue. Things whistled and hummed through the air. Things crashed and shivered. There was a clangour as if from a thousand pneumatic riveters—ear-splitting, stunning to the senses.

There came a roar, a brilliant flash, and a wave of hot air. The bridge seemed to collapse, and Toby felt himself thrown sideways and hurled to his knees. He tried to rise; but his legs seemed to have lost all their power. He heaved himself forward, rolled over on his side.

Did this mean that he was wounded? He felt no pain. Apart from a peculiar inability to move his legs, nothing seemed to be the matter with him.

Putting out a hand to crawl, his fingers touched someone's head, someone lying flat on what remained of the deck of the bridge.

“Hey, you!” Toby heard himself saying again and again, as he tried to rouse him. “Get up, can't you? Get up!”

It took him some minutes to realize he was trying to wake a dead body. His brain seemed numb. It was difficult to think.

The firing had stopped. He could hear the hissing of escaping steam, and men shouting, calling to each other. He tried to crawl to the bridge rails with the idea of pulling himself up by the arms to see what was going on. But the effort was too much.

A wounded man in the tangle somewhere abaft the wrecked wheel and telegraphs was moaning, cursing, and blaspheming in turns.

“Oh, Christ! Oh, Christ!” he whimpered piteously. “Why can’t I move?—For Gawd’s sake give us a hand, someone!—For Gawd’s sake!—Me leg’s jammed an’ broke!—Fur Christ’s sake!—” The voice tailed off into rambling incoherence, fainter and fainter.

There was the acrid stench of burning in the air, blazing varnish and woodwork by the smell of it, this, and the penetrating odour of oil-fuel.

The lapping of water sounded in Toby’s ears. It seemed close, very close. The ship seemed to be floating at a peculiar angle. He suddenly felt very tired. What was happening?

His thoughts suddenly switched over to Janet, dear Janet. How well he remembered her in that jade-green evening dress. How her hair shone—shone. How he loved her eyes, her dear eyes that smiled.

He was sleepy, very sleepy.

Lifting his left hand, he fumbled at the neck of his lammy coat, put his fingers under his muffler, and felt the lump of her little piece of jade hung round his neck.

Jade round his neck—jade green evening dress, and Janet's smooth white arms—jade for luck. Was this luck?

Janet—jade.

Poor Janet!

Toby remembered no more.

It was perhaps half an hour later, twenty minutes after the *Partisan* went to the bottom, that a British destroyer appeared on the scene and picked up eight survivors from the patch of oily, wreckage-littered water where she had disappeared.

As the enemy were still somewhere in the vicinity, no searchlights could be used. The rescuing destroyer, lowering her boat, steamed slowly round in a circle ready to fight at a moment's notice if the raiders returned.

So nobody noticed a battered, waterlogged dinghy floating away on the west-going tide. If they did, they did not stop to examine it. It was so obviously empty.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ON a Thursday afternoon in April, 1917, Janet wrote her usual daily letter to Toby.

When it left London the *Partisan* was at sea, and remained at sea during the night of Friday. Early on Saturday morning she had gone into Dover harbour to replenish with oil-fuel; but sailed again for an escort trip a full hour before the morning mails and newspapers were delivered by the routine steamboat. So Janet's letter, with many others for the *Partisan*, remained in a G.P.O. mailbag in the Mail Office on Dover pier.

Every day Toby wrote to Janet, sometimes two or more pages, sometimes a postcard, or a mere sentence or two scribbled on an odd scrap of paper and thrust into an envelope. The censorship was strict. He could tell her little of what was going on, or what he was really doing. Nevertheless, the mere sight of his handwriting brought comfort to her heart. It told her he was well and safe.

On the morning of the Saturday, she received his letter written the previous afternoon. Sunday was a *dies non* for postal deliveries; but on the Monday she had his scribble written early on Saturday morning. His Sunday letter would probably arrive in the afternoon or evening. But no letter came. Neither was there anything from him by the early post on Tuesday.

Knowing more or less what the *Partisan* was doing, she felt vaguely anxious. He had not written since early on Saturday. Sunday and Monday had passed. Never had he skipped two whole days before. What did it mean?

On casually opening her newspaper at breakfast, her eye lit upon an Admiralty announcement in heavy type.

“Enemy destroyers shelled the undefended watering-place Ramsgate for a few minutes on Saturday night. They retired hurriedly before our local forces, and escaped in the darkness. It was not possible to ascertain the damage inflicted on them.

“At about the same time enemy destroyers engaged one of our destroyers on patrol to the eastward of the Straits of Dover, sinking her with a torpedo. She returned the fire, using torpedoes and guns. The result is not known. There were eight survivors from the crew, but all the officers were drowned. The relatives have been informed.”

Janet’s heart nearly stopped beating. She suddenly felt sick and ill. One of the Dover destroyers had been sunk and all her officers were drowned. Toby had not written since Saturday morning. The *communiqué* mentioned Saturday night. Could it mean, did it mean that the *Partisan* had sunk? Was Toby——

She pushed aside her untasted coffee and rose unsteadily from her chair. With tight lips and strained, white face, hardly knowing what she was doing, she walked across the room to the fireplace and held on to the mantelpiece. She tried her utmost to control herself; but her eyes filled with tears. She felt sick, as if she were about to collapse, to faint.

‘The relatives have been informed.’ She was no relation of Toby’s.

Toby! Toby!—Oh, God!

For some minutes, steeped to the lips in misery, she remained a prey to her emotions. ‘Pull yourself together,

Janet,' her common sense kept telling her. 'Pull yourself together. Don't be a weakling. Be brave, brave.'

But what could she do, what?

She suddenly remembered a casual remark of Toby's months before, at the time he had been appointed to the *Gnome*. What was it he had said?

Oh, yes! Something to the effect that if anything ever happened to him she might do worse than see Commander—Commander——, she couldn't remember the name, at the Admiralty. But merely to please Toby she had written the name in her address book.

Going across to her bureau by the window, she found the little leather volume. A, B, C, D,—What was the name Toby had mentioned, the name of the pleasant little man who had caused him to be appointed to the *Gnome*?

H, K, L—of course, Lawson, Commander Lawson. Would he be able to tell her anything?

There was a chance that the *Partisan* had not been sunk at all, that it was some other destroyer. All the same, Janet feared the worst. Why hadn't Toby written? He had been so regular before, never missing a day. Something must have happened to prevent him. Had he been at sea for three days on end, or was it something else, something worse? She tried to hope for the best, to persuade herself that she was worrying about nothing, that Toby was safe, that some chance circumstance had stopped his letters from being posted. But she *must* find out for certain. She could not have this horrible doubt and anxiety hanging over her head.

So shortly before ten-thirty on that Tuesday morning, Janet presented herself at the Admiralty. After signing the usual

form she was taken along a dark corridor and shown into a waiting-room.

“It was Commander Lawson you wanted to see, madam?” the fatherly-looking messenger inquired, glancing at the card she had given him.

“Yes,” said Janet.

“Could you give me any idea of what you wish to see him about, madam?”

The messenger had strict orders that he was to ‘boom off’ all the visitors he could, otherwise the Admiralty would have been inundated by all and sundry—people who had invented new and fantastic methods of dealing with submarines; people seeking appointments for sons, relations, or friends; folk who had come to report the activities of so-called enemy spies living as British subjects; women come to ascertain the whereabouts of errant husbands; journalists seeking for information; people who had things to sell, or some new-fangled way of winning the war in a fortnight; cranks and harmless lunatics.

But Janet was different. She was a woman, and a pretty one. The messenger could see she was in distress. He had a wife and daughters of his own, and, as an old sailor, a heart that was both soft and susceptible.

“Commander Lawson will be sure to ask me what your business is, madam,” he pointed out, his tone apologetic.

“I—I can’t very well tell you,” Janet replied. “It’s a personal matter, but—but very important to me, really it is.”

“Very well, madam. If you will take a seat, I will inform Commander Lawson.”

He bowed politely and retired, closing the door behind him.

Janet had not more than a few minutes to wait before Lawson came bustling in. He was an alert, stocky little man with a reddish complexion and almost carrotty hair. He would probably have a fierce temper when really roused, she imagined, but his smile was friendly, and so were his blue eyes.

“Good morning, Miss—er—Wintringham,” he said pleasantly, stopping to read her card and coming forward to shake hands. “Now I wonder what I can do for you?”

“I—I came to you because I couldn’t think of anyone else to help me,” Janet confessed. “My—my fiancé said—he advised me, that is, to ask you if I—I wanted to know anything. He said you had been kind to him some time ago.”

“What’s his name?” Lawson asked.

“Kerrell—George Kerrell. He’s in command of the *Partisan* at Dover.”

“Oh!” the commander exclaimed sharply, his expression changing as he took his eyes off Janet’s and started to fidget with his hands.

There was something in the tone of that ‘oh’ which warned her to expect the worst. Lawson, moreover, would not look at her. There was obviously something on his mind, something he would have to tell her, something he would far sooner have left unsaid.

There came an awkward pause.

Janet steeled her heart to ask the awful question. Whatever happened, she must know.

“I read that—that announcement about a—a destroyer in the paper this morning,” she said, in a voice so low that she hardly recognized it as her own. “I promise—promise you I won’t m-make a scene, but—but will you please tell me if it was the *Partisan*?”

She looked up at him, her mouth quivering.

“I’m—I’m afraid it was, Miss Wintringham,” he replied, his face troubled as he looked at her. “Believe me, I’m very, very sorry. I can’t—I mean, you have my sincere sympathy. We all looked upon Kerrell as—a most promising officer.”

Janet, gripping the arms of her chair, managed by a supreme effort to control herself.

“Is there no—no hope that—that he—he may have been saved?” she heard herself ask.

The commander shook his head.

“I’m afraid there’s no hope at all,” he replied unhappily. “Only eight men were picked up, and they—they were all seamen.—I’m sorry.”

Janet sat for a moment staring at the ground, her face working. She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief.

Nothing mattered now, nothing. This was the end of everything.

But she must be brave. It would never do to show her grief before a stranger, however kind and sympathetic he might be.

“Is there anything I can do, Miss Wintringham?” Lawson asked kindly. “Would you like my secretary, Miss Eagles, to go home with you?”

“It’s very kind of you,” Janet replied brokenly, managing to rise from the chair. “I’m very grateful. I—must go now. I—I don’t quite know how I shall bear it. He meant everything

to me. All I had to live for! I suppose I—I must pretend to be brave.—Oh, God!”

It was a cry of agony.

Lawson, fearing she was about to faint, sprang forward and gave her his arm.

“Won’t you stay for a little?” he suggested. “I’ll send Miss Eagles.”

“I must go—go home,” she said feebly, grateful for his support. “Thank you for being so—so nice and sympathetic.”

“I think I can walk by myself, thank you,” she went on to say. “I shouldn’t like people to see you—you helping me.”

He dropped her arm obediently, held open the door.

With a hand across her eyes she left the room, found herself in the passage, outside the building.

Lawson, who had followed, handed her into the waiting taxi. They said good-bye. The taxi rolled off.

“My God!” the commander muttered to himself, wiping his face, as he stared after it. “Some of these women have got guts!—Damn this cursed war!”

CHAPTER XXXV

TOBY returned to a state of semi-consciousness with the sound of lapping water in his ears. There was a gentle swaying movement, rather soothing than otherwise.

Where was he? Was he dreaming?

It was an effort to think. The last thing he really remembered was crawling along the shattered bridge of the *Partisan*. What had happened since?

He wearily opened his eyes.

Daylight had come. The sky was aglow with the magnificent colouring of the rising sun. He was half-sitting, half-lying, on some cork lifebelts on the floor-boards of a dinghy with his back against a wooden thwart. There was water in the bottom of the boat. He could hear it washing from side to side as she rocked.

He felt wet and cold, and stiff and weak. Except for a dull, throbbing ache, he seemed to have lost all sense of feeling below his waist. Someone had covered his legs with a grimy lammy coat. His throat was dry and parched. There was a horrible bitter taste in his mouth. A drink of something warm, even of cold water, would have tasted like a gift from heaven.

Lord, how thirsty he was!

He tried to move himself with his arms. But twisting his body brought him a twinge of excruciating pain. The sheer agony of it caused him to screw up his eyes and to draw in his breath. He groaned involuntarily.

Opening his eyes again, he saw for the first time a man sitting in the stern-sheets of the boat, his head silhouetted against the garish pink glow on the horizon. Dressed in the

oily, fearnought trousers and flannel shirt of a stoker, he was looking out over the port quarter, gazing intently towards the rising sun. Toby could see the movements of his body, noticed the blue tattoo-marks on his bare, muscular forearms. His lean face seemed dimly familiar.

Toby suddenly remembered. Of course! The man's name was William Fearney, Stoker, first class. Only a week or ten days ago Toby had granted him forty-eight hours' leave to visit an ailing wife at Portsmouth. Good man, Fearney. The engineer officer thought very highly of him.

Toby whispered his name.

"Fearney! Fearney!"

The man looked round, met his commanding officer's eyes, and moved towards him with a happy grin.

"'Ullo, sir! This is a bit of all right! I thought you wus a goner, seein' you lyin' there all stiff an' corpse like. 'Ow d'you feel, sir?"

"Not quite so happy as I might, Fearney. Something seems to have happened to my legs. I can't move 'em."

The stoker sucked his teeth and gazed at him with a pair of brown eyes, faithful eyes, rather like a spaniel's.

"What happened?" Toby asked. "The last thing I remember was being on the bridge."

"Don't you worry your 'ead about that, sir—not now, any'ow. Question is, sir, what are we goin' to do for you?"

"We? What d'you mean by we?" Toby queried.

"Me an' Ginge—I mean Able Seaman 'Arker," Fearney explained. "'E's coiled up forward there asleep. Me and 'im as bin takin' turn an' turn about ever since it 'appened."

"Ever since what happened, for God's sake?"

“Ever since we picks you out of the water, sir, larst night.”

“You picked me out of the water?”

“Yessir,” Fearney nodded. “But you ain’t to talk now, sir,” he added. “Doctor’s orders, me bein’ the doctor, so to speak. —’Ere, Ginge!” he continued, scrambling forward to lean over Toby and shake someone by the shoulder. “Show a leg, me lad!”

“Oh, go to ’ell!” a voice sleepily replied.

“Wake up, I says!” the stoker repeated. “It’s blinkin’ well daylight, an’ the capten’s woke up. ’E ain’t dead at all, Ginge!”

“Ain’t dead!” came an incredulous, sleepy voice. “Garn. I don’t believe you!”

“It’s Gawd’s truth I’m tellin’ you!” Fearney said. “Get up an’ see fur yourself, you lazy ’ound!”

The boat rocked a little as Harker scrambled to his feet. Another dirty, unshaven face and a pair of anxious blue eyes peered down at Toby’s. A filthy calloused hand suddenly went down to his, gripped it hard.

“S’trewth!” Harker murmured huskily, overcome by sudden emotion. “But I’m mighty glad, sir, mighty glad!”

“And you two got me out of the water?” Toby murmured, looking at them in turn. “I’m——”

“Ow, forget it, sir,” the A.B. broke in. “Fearney an’ me didn’t do nothin’, not much that is.—Question is, sir, what’ll we do for you? We can’t do much in the doctorin’ line, and you’re bleedin’ something crool.—’Ow would you fancy a little tot o’ navy an’ a bit o’ biscuit?”

“I don’t know about biscuit,” Toby answered. “But the rum—yes, please.”

He blessed the forethought which had caused him to issue orders that every boat in the *Partisan* should be supplied with a case of biscuit, one or more wicker-covered jars of water, and a sealed wine-bottle of rum for just such an emergency as this.

Harker scrambled aft. Toby watched him pull a cork out of a bottle and pour something into an enamelled tin cup.

“Will you ’ave it neat, sir, or with a drop o’ water?” the seaman asked, looking round with a smile.

“About half and half,” said Toby. “I don’t want to get drunk.”

“Navy rum never made no one drunk,” said Harker with a wink, slopping in a minute quantity of water and handing the cup to Fearney, who put it into Toby’s hands.

Toby sipped the liquid and nearly choked with the strength and fieriness of it. But it was warming, comforting, bringing the strength back to his tired body. He drank the whole cup, even felt sufficiently revived to crunch a ship’s biscuit. His companions did the same, sharing a cup of grog between them.

“Now I think you’d better move me aft so that I can have a look round,” Toby said, when the little meal was finished. “You’ll have to go easy with my legs, though. And for heaven’s sake don’t capsize the boat.”

While Fearney lifted his body, Harker lifted his feet. Very tenderly, half-carrying, half-sliding, they managed to get him aft on to the stern bench, his feet and legs propped up on some lifebelts. The pain in his waist and back was abominable as they moved him, but he stuck it out with hardly a murmur.

“There, sir,” said the stoker solicitously, rearranging the lammy coat across his legs. “Feelin’ better now?”

“I’ll be all right in a minute,” Toby hissed through his teeth. “Don’t worry, Fearney.”

“Wot about another sip o’ rum, sir?” Harker suggested.

Toby shook his head and closed his eyes. He felt rather sick.

The two men watched him anxiously, avoiding each other’s eyes. The captain, for all his pluck, seemed in a very bad way.

Fearney’s eye happened to light on the place where Toby had been lying in the bottom of the boat. The life-belts were thickly covered with blood, clotted, horrible. The water washing about in the bottom of the boat was dyed a dirty, pinkish brown.

God! Fearney suddenly thought to himself, suppose the captain died? He didn’t really know him at all well, except in so far that Toby was his commanding officer, whom he had been in the habit of seeing every day of his life. He had always liked and admired him for his fairness, and his many little considerate acts and kindnesses to the ship’s company. But now that he saw him at close quarters wounded and in pain, perhaps dying, he realized that his admiration was really a sort of blind adoration and fidelity, almost love.

Fearney was not a religious man, or even a sentimental one. According to some standards he was a great sinner, a man who saw no wrong in getting drunk when the spirit moved him, and had been habitually unfaithful to his wife. His life had been a hard one, with a sot of a father and a drunken shrew for a mother, nothing but curses and hard

knocks ever since he had been a boy selling newspapers in London.

But at this moment his thoughts were entirely unselfish. He wanted Toby to live, wanted it more than anything he could think of. He wouldn't care so much if he went under himself provided Toby lived. Life was nothing very much for him. His wife? Well, she was no better than she should be, and, thank God, there were no children. Someone would look after her, someone who might be fonder of her than he was. Other married men had been killed or drowned, men much better than himself. He was only a poor stoker, one of thousands. Toby was—a white man.

There was a lump in Fearney's throat. His brown eyes were rather misty as he gazed out towards the horizon, rubbing his unshaven chin.

A slight breeze fanned down from the north-east and stirred the calm water into little ripples. There was no vice in the wind as yet; but it might freshen later. The vivid colouring of the dawn slowly faded from the sky as the sun rose and gathered strength. Its warmth was grateful and comforting to the three men huddled in the boat.

Toby, who felt he wanted to sleep, wrenched himself back to consciousness with an effort and looked around him.

He had no chart; but that didn't matter. Through long usage, the lie of the land, its more prominent features, and the rough distances were indelibly photographed in his mind. The *Partisan* had sunk about five miles north of Calais. In the interval, carried by wind and tide, the dinghy had drifted south-west, for there, little more than three miles away, was the bold, upstanding hummock of Cape Grisnez with the lighthouse on its summit. The line of cliffs and yellow sand

to the left of it stretched away to Calais, some twelve miles to the north-east. It was a wonderfully clear day and in the opposite direction, nearly twenty miles across the Channel, the pale indigo line of land peering over the horizon could only be the cliffs round about Dover.

Toby realized with a pang that the dinghy was in the most unfrequented part of the Channel—south of the usual traffic lane between Folkestone and Calais, north of that between Folkestone and Boulogne. Moreover, all the mercantile traffic passed far to the northward, along the English coast.

About five miles away to the northward he could see a patrol trawler on her beat; farther afield, many columns of smoke which betokened the presence of ships. But no vessel seemed to be coming in their direction, nor was any vessel likely to. There was nothing to bring her there. Their only chance of being picked up was by some French fishing boat. But fishing craft were rare in wartime, and there was no sign of one at present.

What about the coast-watchers at Cape Grisnez? They would have telescopes, and might be able to spot a dinghy even at a distance of three or four miles. And if she showed signs of having men on board, surely they would telephone for assistance, send something out to rescue them. It was a bare chance, only a chance, not really worth relying upon.

No. If they wished to be saved they must do it themselves. If they did nothing, merely allowed the boat to drift, they would be carried past Grisnez and into the broad part of the Channel. Then it would be all up with them, especially if the weather should get bad. Even now the breeze seemed to be freshening and the sky clouding over.

Boulogne, as Toby knew, was about nine miles down the coast from Grisnez. Between the two there might be a village or two, but that he couldn't remember.

The obvious thing to do was to make the land, to get in as close as possible.

Yes—but how should they do it? There were no oars in the boat, nothing but a boat-hook.

But there were the bottom-boards. They could break them up, use the long, broad slats as paddles—at least Fearney and Harker could.

It was Harker who broke in on his thoughts.

“Wot's the programme, sir?” he asked. “Do we carry on driftin'?”

Toby shook his head.

“We haven't a dog's chance of being picked up if we do,” he replied. “We must make the land—if we can.” He went on to explain his idea of using the bottom-boards.

“That sounds all right, sir,” the seaman agreed, unbuttoning his oilskin and untying the knife worn on the lanyard round his waist.

“'Ere, chum,” he added, handing the weapon to Fearney. “You're the me-chanical hexpert, so you get busy takin' them bottom-boards apart, an' fur Gawd's sake don't break the blade of me bleedin' knife.”

“What about the boat's bag?” Toby asked.

He was referring to the bag containing spun yarn, tallow, oakum, canvas, some sheet lead, hammer, nails, and other etceteras, supposed always to be kept in all naval boats.

“I 'ad a look fur 'im, sir,” said Harker. “'E's gorn, worse luck. If 'e 'adn't I'd 'a used some o' the stuff fur caulkin'”

them 'oles. As it was, I 'ad to use bits of me trousis.—Fair sight I am, sir, look,” he added with a grin, holding open his oilskin to display great patches torn out of his blue serge nether garments, and his thick grey woollen drawers showing through the holes. “ 'Ardly decent for the ladies, sir, when we does get ashore.”

“Was the boat making much water?” Toby asked.

“She was full up nearly to the thwarts when we found 'er, sir, but me an' Fearney manages to bale 'er out, me usin' me cap an' 'im that tomato tin in the bows. Then, when it gets light enough to see, before you wus awake, that wus, I tore up me' trousis an' plugged all the 'oles I could find. Fearney gave me a 'nand.”

“Stout fellows!” said Toby.

“She's not makin' much water now, sir,” Fearney put in. “It was only splinter 'oles, an' that gash along the gunnel which don't matter.—But I've got an idea, sir, beggin' yer pardon.”

“Well?”

“Why doesn't we use the boat-'ook an' sail, sir?”

“Sail?” the able seaman guffawed. “You're batty, chum. 'Ow can we sail?”

“By usin' yur oilskin, Ginger,” said Fearney. “It'll get us somewhere, I reckon, with this 'ere breeze.”

Toby vaguely wondered at not having thought of it himself, but it was an effort to think, at any rate, to concentrate. His mind would keep wandering. He wanted to sleep.

Fearney's idea was simplicity itself, merely the boat-hook lashed to one of the foremost thwart as a mast, and Harker's

oilskin, with a slat of wood from the bottom-boards passed through its sleeves like a coat-hanger, tied half-way up the boat-hook. Lashings, and what little rigging was necessary, could be provided by unlaying the stout rope painter in the bows of the boat.

They set busily to work, and by about eight o'clock, as nearly as Toby could judge by the sun—for his wrist-watch had stopped the night before—the boat was actually heeling over a little and rippling through the water as the improvised sail caught the wind and she moved slowly towards the French coast. She seemed to be moving crab-fashion, but she was sailing, and more or less in the right direction.

Toby felt utterly spent and exhausted, so they gave him more rum, and laid him down in the stern sheets, made him as comfortable as they could. He slept.

By about two in the afternoon, Grisnez was nearly astern and they were sailing south along a yellow, sandy beach fringed with little breakers. The wind had freshened appreciably. Harker's oilskin blew out in a hard curve almost like the spinnaker of a yacht as they ran before it.

"I never expected to see me ole 'skin used fur this 'ere when I bought 'im off ole Bob Jephson for seven an' a tanner," its owner laughed. "I'll 'ave to keep 'im—put 'im in a frame, as a curio."

"Not so loud, Ginge!" Fearney growled, an eye upon Toby. "We don't want to wake 'im, not yet, any'ow."

Their spirits had risen. Salvation was in sight.

They could both have shouted for joy when, about an hour later, a small motor-fishing boat, attracted by their waving, 'tuff-tuffed' close alongside and the black-bearded, piratical-

looking man in faded blue dungarees at her tiller started to gesticulate and gabble excitedly in French.

“No comprenez!” said Harker, shaking his head. “We’re English, savez?”

“Engleesh?”

“Yus. We want to get ashore,” the able seaman answered, waving an arm towards the land. “Our orficer’s wounded, ’urt, savey, Johnny?” He pointed to Toby in the bottom of the boat. “We want to get ’im to ’orspital—’orspital, savey?”

The Frenchman nodded, said something in rapid French, and held up a coil of rope. The end of it fell into the dinghy. Fearney scrambled forward and made it fast. The *Trois Sœurs* of Boulogne forged ahead and the rope tautened out. The dinghy moved after her.

“You can take down the mast an’ sail, chum,” said Harker with a happy grin. “We won’t want that no more.”

“What’s happening?” asked Toby weakly, opening his eyes on feeling the unaccustomed movement.

Harker, who was doing his best to steer with a broken piece of bottom-board, told him in a few words. “Don’t you worry, sir,” he added. “We’ll ’ave you safe ashore ’efore long.”

It must have been half an hour later that they arrived at a picturesque, rather smelly little fishing village standing on the banks of a tiny estuary.

Toby, who was past caring for anything, vaguely remembered being carried ashore and up some steps, through a little crowd of people who talked excitedly in some foreign language.

Then a long blank, followed by an impression of lying flat in a clean, white room, with someone dressed like a nun bending over him. Someone else was talking—the nun gave place to a man in a long white coat with bright red hands.

“Allez donc,” said a deep voice.

Something came over his face—a sweet sickly, cloying taste in his mouth. He remembered no more.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IT was on the same afternoon that she had visited the Admiralty that Commander Lawson rang up Janet on the telephone to tell her that Toby and two men of the *Partisan* had landed at a French fishing village.

Toby, it seemed, was seriously wounded, and was detained in a French hospital.

“Does—does that mean he’s not likely to recover?” she heard herself ask, her new-found joy almost shattered.

“Certainly not!” Lawson replied. “He’s seriously wounded. We’ve no details as yet, though.”

“But if it’s serious, what——”

“Don’t be nervous,” he broke in. “Seriously wounded means something a little more than slightly wounded, that’s all. If he were really bad, in danger that is, they’d say so.—He can’t be really bad, now I come to think of it. He’s been moved to Boulogne.”

“Thank God!” she breathed thankfully. “Tell me,” she added, “could I go over to France to see him?”

Lawson discouraged that idea, advised her to wait. He, on his part, had arranged to be informed how Toby progressed. He would let her know the moment he had news; with which cold comfort she had to be content.

It was a week later that she saw Toby again, a pale and haggard-looking Toby propped up among his pillows in a private room in an officers’ hospital in the north of London.

He was not really bad, he told her, as he stroked her hand and smiled at her in the way that she loved. They had X-rayed him and pulled most of the shell splinters out of his

back. Being dressed and messed about was rather irksome and painful; but in a month or two, if all went well, he would probably be trundling himself about in a wheeled chair or hobbling on crutches.

Janet's eyes filled with tears.

"Permanently disabled!" Toby went on in answer to her question. "Good Lord, no! There was no possible chance of that if the surgeons were to be believed. There was nothing at all for her to worry about, nothing."

Oh! Before he forgot, he wasn't in any way held to blame for the loss of the *Partisan*. The big-wigs realized he had done his utmost. It was the fortune of war, sheer bad luck, one against four. The 'Old Man,' otherwise the Vice-Admiral, and Captain Trevor, had actually come to see him before he disembarked from the hospital ship at Dover. They had been charming and sympathetic, and had told him not to worry, but to hurry up and get well. It was nice of them to take so much trouble on his account.

They were still talking when there came a knock on the door, followed by the entry of a Nursing Sister.

"There are two men to see you, Mr. Kerrell."

"To see me!" Toby exclaimed.

"Two sailors," said the nurse. "I said you were engaged and weren't allowed to see many people, but they were very persistent, very. Sailors always are, I find."

Toby laughed.

Very sheepishly, their faces set in nervous grins, holding their caps in their hands, and attired in obviously new and ready-made uniforms, Harker and Fearney tip-toed into the room.

“We came to give you a chuck-up, sir,” said Fearney after a pause, glancing nervously at Janet. “Just to see ’ow you are, sir, an’ to wish you the best.”

“Yessir,” Harker put in.

“We didn’t mean to intrude, sir,” Fearney apologized, shifting his feet. “We didn’t know you——”

“Intrude?” said Toby. “Of course not. I’m delighted to see you. It was jolly good of you to come.—Janet, let me introduce my two very good friends, Able Seaman Harker, Stoker Fearney.—You remember, I told you about them.—This is Miss Wintringham, my fiancée.”

Janet shook hands with them in turn.

“Please to meet you, mum—I mean, miss,” said the seaman.

“An’ the same ’ere, miss,” chimed in the stoker, not to be outdone. “A pleasure, I’m sure.”

“My—Mr. Kerrell’s told me what you did when the ship was sunk,” said Janet, rather overcome. “I can only—only say thank you, from the very bottom of my heart.” She looked at them, her eyes misty.

“Don’t you worry, miss,” said Fearney hurriedly. “ ’Twasn’t nothin’, Ginge—I mean, ’Arker,” he added, turning to his companion, “wus it, lad?”

“Na, nothin’ to get dizzy abart,” the A.B. agreed.

“All the same, I’m grateful,” Janet said.

“And so am I,” said Toby, “jolly grateful.—But tell me,” he added hurriedly, seeing their discomfiture, “what are you two doing up in London?”

Fearney and Harker looked at each other.

“You tell th’ capten,” said Fearney.

“Na. You tell ’im,” Harker protested. “You spins a yarn better’n wot I do.”

“Well, sir,” the stoker explained, twiddling his cap in his gnarled fingers. “When we lands at Dover ’long o’ you yesterday arternoon, we goes along an’ reports ourselves, accordin’ to orders. They gives us a feed, an’ these ’ere clothes, an’ then takes down in writin’ wot we ’ave to tell ’em about the shimozzle that Saturday night. They arks a lot o’ questions, don’t they, Ginge—’Arker?”

“They does that,” Harker agreed. “Fair turned us inside out.”

“Who asked all these questions?” Toby wanted to know.

“A three-striped orficer,” the A.B. replied. “A Commander ’e wus. Don’t rightly know ’is name. ’E wus a long, thin orficer, near a fathom of ’im, a bit thin on top wiv a face like —what sort o’ face did ’e ’ave, chum?”

“Funny sort o’ face,” said Fearney, “sort o’ ’arf-way between larfin’ and cryin’—on the ’ole, a bit mournful-like.”

Toby, rather amused, was unable to fit this description to any commander of his acquaintance at Dover.

“What happened after that?” he asked.

“Well, sir,” Fearney continued. “Larst night we finishes up at the canteen, an’ this mornin’ the Jaunty^[9] comes along an’ gives us railway passes to Pompey^[10] an’ sez as ’ow we are to report ourselves to the Barracks at eight o’clock sharp on Monday mornin’. Then we gets a month’s pay, an’ ’ere we are, sir.”

“But how did you discover where I was?” Toby asked.

“From a bloke in the ’orspital train, sir,” Fearney replied. “Before you left Dover yesterday.”

“And why haven’t you gone on to Portsmouth instead of staying in London?”

“Well, sir,” said Harker, thinking it his turn to act as spokesman. “When we got to Victoria, I looks at Fearney, an’ Fearney looks at me. ‘Bill,’ sez I, ‘t’isn’t often we ’as a chance o’ bein’ in London.’—‘No,’ sez ’e, thinkin’ the same thing. ‘I reckon Pompey ’ll keep fur a bit. Wot about goin’ down there to-morrer night?’—‘Right,’ sez I. So we goes along an’ gets a coupla rooms at the Union Jack Club, an’ ’as a wash an’ a ’nair cut. Then we thinks we’ll come along an’ see you. So we asks the way and gets into a tube, and then takes a taxi. We drives for miles an’ miles, an’ on the way Bill—I mean Fearney, sir—sees a flower shop.—’Arker,’ ’e sez, ’wot abart a flower or two fur the capten, seein’ as ’ow ’e’s on the sick list?’—‘No,’ sez I, firm-like. ‘No flowers, by re-quest.’ Flowers reminds me of funereals, you see, sir.”

Toby grinned. He could imagine these two innocent stalwarts in London with money to burn. He remembered his servant in the old *Libyan*, who, on leave in London, had gone to sleep in a barber’s chair while having his hair cut. He had woken up to be presented with a bill for nearly twenty shillings for face massage and every other sort of treatment the barber could think of. When he threatened to wreck the shop, the barber had compromised for seven and sixpence.

“What are you going to do to-day?” Toby asked.

Fearney and Harker looked at each other.

“We’ll have a bit of a run round, sir,” Harker replied. “We thought o’ goin’ to have a look at George Robey to-night.”

“Yessir,” Fearney agreed. “Something like that.”

Toby would dearly have liked to have given them a five-pound note, and to have told them to have enjoyed

themselves properly without worrying about the expense. But he knew better than to offer them money. Seamen, though simple and sometimes absurdly child-like, were intensely independent. Anything savouring of charity would be bitterly resented.

“Mind you don’t blow all your month’s pay,” he warned them.

They looked at each other and grinned.

“We’ll watch it, sir,” Harker said. “London’s full o’ sharks, these days. A bloke wanted to charge me a tanner for cleanin’ me boots this mornin’!”

“I think we’d best be getting along, sir,” Fearney observed, nudging his companion. “So we’ll say au re-voir.”

They came to the bedside and wrung Toby’s hand.

“Well, sir, she wus a good ole ship,” Harker said with a sniff. “Good lot o’ fellers in ’er, too, poor chaps.”

“An’ a grand lot o’ orficers an’ a good capten,” Fearney added. “She was a nappy ship, sir, an’ that’s a fact. Sorry to see the larst of ’er.”

“The same here,” said Toby feelingly. “Well, good-bye to you both, and good luck. I’ve got your addresses. I’ll write to you when I can.”

“S’long, sir. Get well quick.—An’ when you gets a new ship, sir, maybe you’ll remember we’d like to come along o’ you.”

They shook hands with Janet—and departed, breathing heavily.

“Are all sailors like that, Toby?” she asked, when the door had closed and the sound of their heavy footsteps had died away.

“Why, what’s the matter with ’em, old girl?”

“Matter,” she said, smiling. “Nothing’s the matter, Toby. I think they’re perfect darlings. I could have hugged them both.” There were tears in her eyes.

“You’d better keep your hugs until *I* get better,” he grunted.

“Oh, Toby darling!” she murmured, leaning over to kiss him. “I’m so frightfully happy!”

“Are you, old girl?”

“Of course,” she whispered.

“You couldn’t be happier than I am, my poppet,” he replied, his arms round her neck.

“Do you realize what this means, Toby?” she asked after a pause.

“Do I realize what what means?”

“You’re being wounded like this,” she replied. He looked at her.

“No—o,” he said, rather puzzled. “What are you thinking about now?”

“I’m merely thinking of you hobbling about on crutches or in a wheely-chair, Toby.”

“And what about it?” he queried. “I’m jolly lucky to get off with that.”

“I know, I know. That’s not what I’m thinking of!”

“What, then?”

“Merely that I’m going to look after you in future, Toby,” she answered, averting her face. “I can’t stand our being separated, and to think of you alone while I’m eating my heart out because—because——” She hesitated.

“Because what?”

“Because I love you, Toby,” she said softly. “You’re all I’ve got.”

“D’you mean you’re—you’re—you want to look after me for keeps?” he asked, gazing at her.

She nodded.

“But what will people say?” he asked.

“I don’t care what people say,” said Janet firmly. “I’ve thought it all over.”

“But—but——”

“Can’t we make our own happiness, Toby?” she broke in. “Must we always think of what the world says and thinks?”

“No,” he said.

“And you would like us to—to be always together, Toby?”

“God knows I would,” he murmured huskily, stroking her face.

WOKING,
August 1930—February 1931.

THE END

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FOOTNOTES:

[1 Bundle man: Navalese for ‘married man.’

] [2 It was not until 1923 that the sexes were placed on an equal footing] as regards divorce. Before this time infidelity on the part of a husband had to be accompanied by cruelty or desertion for at least two years before a wife could obtain a divorce. The Royal Commission on Divorce, which

completed its labours in 1912, recommended, among others, as new grounds for divorce—incurable insanity after five years' confinement, or unsoundness of mind, actual or incipient, at the time of marriage, if unknown to the petitioner. Neither of these recommendations became law.

[3 An officer of H.M.S. *Badger*, one of the destroyers acting as submarine] screen to the battle-cruisers. His description appears in *The Fighting at Jutland*, edited by H. W. Fawcett, R.N., and G. W. W. Hooper, R.N. (Hutchinson, 7s. 6d. net.)

[4 *The Fighting at Jutland*, by H. W. Fawcett and G. W. W. Hooper] (Hutchinsons), p. 105.

[5 Her steering gear had jammed with 15 degrees of port helm on the] rudder. As she was steaming twenty-five knots she immediately turned sharply to starboard. It was some time before she could be controlled by working her screws.

[6 I apologize for a lengthy footnote, but during the year 1917, there were] about 3,000 transport sailings to and from Folkestone and Boulogne and Calais, practically all of them with officers and men going on short leave to England and returning to their units in France. From August, 1914, up till the end of December, 1917, 5,614,500 troops and 9,500,000 bags of mail had been ferried to and fro between Folkestone and Boulogne without the loss of a single one, while 810,000 sick and wounded from Calais had been disembarked at Dover. In the same period sixty-four merchant vessels were lost—principally by mine—while thirty-eight patrol vessels—apart from destroyers—were lost through mine, gunfire, torpedo, or the ordinary hazards of the sea. About 1,200 mines were swept up in the area in the forty months.—**TAFFRAIL.**

[7 Dunkerque, about fourteen miles from the enemy lines, could not be] evacuated, as its basins and docks were largely used for the disembarkation of provisions and stores for the army. The civil population remained, and they sometimes endured as many as five air-raids in a single night. The town suffered 214 bombardments from land, sea and air during the war, with a total of 7,514 bombs and projectiles; 233 people were killed and 336 wounded.

[8 Unrestricted submarine warfare upon all classes of merchant vessels] approaching the British Isles, irrespective of nationality, did not begin until February 1st, 1917. Up to December 31st, 1916, however, 519 British merchant vessels, 302 British fishing vessels, 420 Allied and 425 Neutral merchant vessels had been sunk by submarines. The total figures from the beginning until the end of the war for each category were 2,098; 578; 1,442;

and 1,290, or a grand total of 5,408 ships, aggregating 11,189,000 tons gross.

—TAFFRAIL.

[9 ‘Jaunty’: Navalese for ‘Master at Arms,’ the chief of the ships’ police,
] now known as the Regulating Branch. A corruption of the French
‘Gendarme.’

[10 Pompey: Portsmouth.

[The end of *Kerrell* by Henry Taprell Dorling (as
"Taffrail")]