

WHEN THE ALLIES SWEPT THE SEAS

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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When the Allies Swept the Seas

BY
PERCY F. WESTERMAN

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By Percy F. Westerman

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When the Allies Swept the Seas

CHAPTER I

Brian joins the “Galloway”

Possibly that single-minded young patriot Brian Cardyke was lucky in his own estimation. Now that there was a war on, his chief desire, to see service afloat, was on the eve of fulfilment—thanks largely to a blunder on the part of the naval authorities.

Brian knew Portsmouth fairly well. Not once, but many times had his little yacht *Gannet*—now stripped of her gear and laid up in a mud berth “for the duration”—dropped anchor within that spacious harbour. And with local knowledge he booked to Portsmouth Harbour Station, which is within a couple of hundred yards or so of the main gate of the dockyard.

As he made his way along the asphalted approach to the historic Hard, the lad stopped more than once to look at the harbour—or as much of it as was visible from his view-points. The chief thing that struck him was the desolate appearance of the usually crowded berths. Except for the old *Victory*, her t’gallants towering above the flat-roofed storehouses as she lay permanently in dry dock, the harbour appeared deserted—at least by large craft. Even the South Railway jetty, where rarely a day passed without either a battleship or a battle-cruiser being moored alongside, was a clear space.

The naval recruiting office, Brian knew, was on the Hard, and close to the dockyard gate. As he approached, he noticed a crowd, composed mainly of women, gathered round a varnished notice-board by the side of the smaller gateway of the dockyard. It was a sight familiar enough already to the townsfolk of Britain’s principal naval ports, and one that would be still more tragically familiar long before the War was over—that of relatives of our fighting seamen reading the ever-increasing list of names of those who had laid down their lives, often without even a chance to strike a blow against an unseen foe.

Brian Cardyke's ambitions were to serve at sea. He had weighed the pros and cons and decided not to apply for a commission. He wasn't sure of himself; he shirked the responsibility of having to give orders to others, to be answerable for their lives. Hence, clad in a blue jersey, pilot coat and cloth trousers, he offered himself at the naval recruiting office.

A bluff but genial lieutenant—a retired officer “dug out” for recruiting duties—questioned Brian when his turn came out of a number of other applicants.

“And what are you?” he asked, after Brian had given his name.

“Yacht hand,” replied young Cardyke with perfect sincerity, for had he not been one of the crew of the staunch little *Gannet*?

“That's good!” exclaimed his inquisitor, his steel-blue eyes roaming appreciatively over the recruit's sturdy, well-knit figure. “Not in the Reserve? No; make out his papers, Saunders.”

A naval writer took Brian in hand, wrote down particulars, read out a declaration to the effect that “I, Brian Cardyke, swear by Almighty God, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Sixth, His Heirs and Successors and . . . will observe and obey all orders of . . . Officers set over me.”

The attestation was over. Brian, now vaguely conscious that he was an insignificant unit of the armed forces of the Crown, was bidden to take his place with about a dozen others who had that morning pledged themselves to defend their King and Country.

They were a mixed crowd. Most of them bore the unmistakable stamp of men who earned their livelihood upon the waters—fishermen, trawler hands, yacht hands from pleasure craft now laid up on the mud in the Haslar Creek or hauled up at Camper and Nicholson's across the harbour. One man looked as if he had come straight from a boxing-booth. His flattened nose, square jaw and cauliflower ears gave him that appearance, to say nothing of a livid bruise under his left eye. His answer to a fellow-recruit's questions gave his reason for electing to fight for the freedom of the seas: “I'm a stoker down at the gasworks, I am. The missus an' me don't hit it off, so I'm on this lay for a little peace and quietness. She didn't 'arf dot me one, she didn't,” and his hand went up to the bruise on his heavy features.

“I've always wanted to join the navy,” confided a tall, sallow-faced youth to Brian. “But my people wouldn't hear of it. It's different now.

Wonder where we'll be sent? I've never been abroad. I'm in an auctioneer's office, or was. Isn't this the beginning of an adventure?"

Before Brian could reply, a petty-officer appeared.

"Fall in, you men!" he ordered.

The recruits filed out, were shepherded into double rank on the pavement and in the shadow of a White Ensign that floated over the recruiting station.

"Put those fags out!" rapped out the P.O.

It was a stern reminder that Brian and his companions were no longer free agents. They were under discipline, and naval discipline at that. Quickly the delinquents disposed of their cigarettes. Some of the men looked resentful. They were not used to "being up against it".

"Now, you men," continued the petty-officer; "keep your 'eads up whilst you're marchin' through the street. Don't look like a losing team comin' out of Fratton Park! And mind! In step if you bloomin' well can; and when I orders 'eyes right' or 'eyes front' as the case may be, see you keeps yer optics on the bearin' indicated. Party—'shun! . . . As you were! As you were! (wearily) Can't you put some ginger into it? Now, 'shun!"

More by good luck than good management the men were got moving. To them it was a somewhat bewildering experience, being directed by the burly petty-officer who marched alongside the rear men of the party.

Down the crowded Queen Street they went, doing their best to keep in step and answering with varying degrees of celerity to the commands "Eyes left or right; eyes front" whenever they passed an officer. They passed many in the length of Queen Street, and by the time they arrived at the gate of the naval barracks they had acquired a working knowledge of one of the first principles of discipline.

A stringent medical inspection followed; then the recruits were hurriedly yet efficiently "kitted out", told off to various messes and piped for supper.

The meal—a plain but satisfying one—over, most of the hands were allowed out of barracks; but not so the recruits. Mobilization of auxiliary cruisers, mostly with recruits and pensioners recalled for service, was proceeding at high pressure. The drafting office staff were working day and night; consequently it was not to be wondered that mistakes were made.

There was one in Brian Cardyke's case. He was entered as an Ordinary Seaman, R.N.R.

That meant he would be drafted to a ship at a very early date without much preliminary training, which was what he wanted, notwithstanding the fact that his inexperience would probably cause him to run up against snags.

At six-thirty on the following morning, Brian fell in with the rest on parade. Various physical drills followed and then the men were dismissed “at the double” for breakfast.

Then came another parade and inspection by the commodore; after that Brian found himself told off with a party for gunnery drill at Whale Island, or “Whaley” as it is invariably spoken of in the navy.

His instructor was a petty-officer with a “blistering tongue”, whose job it was to see that his pupils got through their course speedily and efficiently. Most of the men of that particular 4.7-inch gun’s crew knew something about their respective duties. Brian Cardyke knew nothing, except, perhaps, that one end of the weapon was the muzzle and the other the breech.

“Now then, No. 5!” shouted the P.O. “Smartly there! Get her movin’, my hearties! Slap it about!”

The gun in question was a dummy, although with actual breech mechanism. Brian soon found out that what was required was to feed the weapon by hand with projectiles weighing fifty pounds, to close the breech, go through the dumb action of pressing the firing key, remove the presumably discharged cartridge case and so on until the instructor called a halt.

“Stand easy! Not so dusty, you men!” he exclaimed, after consulting his watch. “Take a breather. You’ve got to do better next time.”

The men, breathless with their exertions, stood by until again called to attention.

“Change over numbers!” ordered the P.O. “No. 2 goes up to No. 1 an’ so on. Close up round your gun, me lads. Ready? Commence!”

Breech block clanged, interrupted thread locking gear was thrust home, opened; out came the dummy projectile, its place to be immediately taken by a fresh charge.

“Keep behind the shield, dash you!” shouted the instructor to one of the “numbers”. “You wouldn’t feel happy with a bloomin’ shell splinter through yer stern! Slap it about, men! You’ll have to do smarter’n that when you’re up against a perishin’ German tawpeda-boat!”

Then, in the afternoon, a step forward.

Again the weapon was a 4.7-inch, complete on mountings, but instead of a full-sized projectile, a small cartridge was fired in a sort of Morris tube parallel to and moving with the gun. The target consisted of miniature models of warships moving to and fro by mechanical means. Range and elevation were given by the instructor and each of the gun's crew had to take turns at various numbers.

Presently it came to Brian's turn to be the gun-layer. He had watched the operation carefully.

"Eight thousand!" sung out the instructor.

The sight-setter altered the sights; Brian, shoulder against recoil pad, swung the weapon round on the objective—a model destroyer supposed to be eight thousand yards away.

The gun gave a short sharp bark. A whiff of cordite came from the miniature tube.

"Hit, by smoke!" ejaculated the petty-officer, as a seaman, paint-brush in hand, ran down the range to obliterate a mushroom-like smudge on the diminutive target. "That's the stuff to give 'em!"

Brian's face flushed with pride. He was the "Man behind the Gun!" Simple after all! He knew how to use a rook-rifle; the 4.7-inch, weighing a little over three tons, was as easy to "lay" as it was to aim with a rifle, so smoothly did the well-balanced weapon swing on its oiled bearings.

On the following day the party embarked in one of the destroyers attached to the gunnery school and, proceeding beyond Spithead, engaged in actual target practice with full service charges and projectiles.

It was intensive training with a vengeance, converting a medley of Royal Fleet Reserve, Royal Naval Reserve men and volunteers into a well-disciplined fighting force. Most of the "ratings" had had annual training afloat and that of a practical nature; for, thanks to the efficient organization of recent years, reservists were no longer sent to what were known as "gobby-ships", there to spend most of their time afloat in such menial tasks as holystoning decks.

Soon it became known that the detachment, in which Brian Cardyke was an insignificant Ordinary Seaman, was to be detailed to commission the liner *Galloway*, and that speedily.

"A cushy job, mates!" declared Leading Seaman Tom Buddock who, although a long-service pensioner—he had served twenty-one years and 204

days in the navy, and was now in his fortieth year—had left a flourishing little general shop in Portsmouth to answer his country's call. "I allus said them armed liners was the best lay. We'll be moppin' up enemy merchantmen an' raking in a tidy bit o' prize-money."

"Don't suppose we'll smell powder, Tom," rejoined his "raggie", a burly black-bearded armourer's mate, who in civil life was making a living as a motor engineer. "Your shop'll carry on. Your missus'll see to that, but I don't see my old 'ooman tinkering with motor bikes an' dishing out petrol. My business goes *phut*, I can see."

"Mebbe, Tubby," agreed Buddock. "But wi' this prize-money lay wot you looses on the swings you makes up on the roundabouts. With a reasonable bit o' luck—say we captures a dozen prizes—every rating's out to make a matter o' four 'unnard pounds as easy as winkin'."

"Don't you kid yourself," said another. "Things are different in this war. There's an Admiralty order—if you disbelieves me, go and ask the Chief Writer—that all prize-money is to be pooled and divided between every officer and man in the whole navy. Strikes me we'll get precious little of either prize-money or glory."

"You're welcome to my share of the glory, Dick," rejoined Tubby Allen. "Sooner this war's over and I can get back to my shore billet, the better."

At last—October was still young—the *Galloway's* ship's company mustered on the Whale Island parade ground for the last time. A fine body of men they looked in their full marching order, except that they were without rifles. Young men and middle-aged men, some bearded, others clean-shaven, bronzed-featured and with well-knit frames, they looked what they were—sons of the sea.

Seamen, marines, sick-bay men, writers and stewards were formed up for final inspection by the captain. On the right a naval band had fallen in, ready to march the men to the station.

"Why wasn't I a bloomin' bandsman?" whispered Buddock to his left-hand man during a brief period of stand-at-ease. "Soft job these blokes 'ave got, wind-jamming in officers' mess and playin' the likes of us to the blinkin' war!"

"What are you gassin' about?" rejoined the other in a stage whisper. "That's the *Intrepid's* band. They're off afloat in a day or so themselves. I reckon——"

"Silence there!" ordered a sub-lieutenant R.N.R.

“Thank goodness I’ll have finished with ‘On the square’ to-day!” thought Brian, during the constant issuing of orders. Infantry drill as applied to naval landing parties was his weak point. With luck he had got through the initial mysteries of “forming fours” and “forming threes”, although he found himself asking such questions as: “Do odd numbers stand fast, or is it the other way about?”

At length came the hoarse order:

“Move to the right in fours—Form fours, right! Quick march!”

“Boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom!”

The big drum gave forth its opening notes. The brass instruments broke into a lively march. The men, heads held high and with arms swinging rhythmically, broke into a quick march. For the first time in his life, Brian Cardyke was marching to the strains of a band, and the sensation was a strange one. He could realize now the effect of martial music upon a body of disciplined men.

Off the parade ground, down the incline to the swing-bridge swung the column, gaitered boots crunching the gravel. At the guard-room, the naval guard was turned out and presented arms to do honour to the departing fighting-men.

Then through the streets the *Galloways* marched. Many of the men had to pass their homes. Relations cheered wildly. Mothers, wives, sisters and sweethearts, whatever their secret feelings were at the sight of their departing men, cheered and shouted encouragement.

It was late in the day when the special train disgorged its load of bluejackets at Liverpool. Alongside the landing stage was their floating home, the huge 20,000 ton *Galloway*.

It was not Brian’s first sight of the one-time passenger ship. When last he had seen her in the Mersey—it was on the occasion of Uncle Joe’s visit to the United States—the liner looked what she was, a palatial means of comfortable travel across the Herring Pond. Then her hull was black, her upper-works white and her two funnels red, with black tops. From her ensign-staff flew the Blue Ensign. Her luxurious cabins, white-enamelled, and her magnificent saloons, were the last word in internal decoration.

But now!

The *Galloway* had arrived in the Mersey on the morning of the seventh of September, 1939. Immediately she was boarded by an army of workmen.

Day and night these enthusiastic sons of toil worked to get the ship ready as an armed merchant liner.

When Brian Cardyke saw her a little more than a month later, the task was not yet completed, but already the transformation was astounding. “Battleship grey” was the dingy yet serviceable hue from truck to waterline. Cabin fittings, especially all woodwork, were removed. In certain places the decks were strengthened and shored-up to bear the weight and strain of eight 4.7-inch guns. These were placed on the upper deck, four on each side; but both No. 2 port and starboard were placed sufficiently high to be able to train ahead over the Nos. 1, thus ensuring an end-on fire of four guns.

Naval pattern searchlight projectors were fitted in positions where they were most likely to be useful; on the upper bridge a range-finder was installed for the first time in the ship’s existence. Ammunition rooms with necessary lifts had been built in below the waterline. Protective armour she had none; but thanks to her designers her coalbunkers had been arranged so as to give some protection against gun-fire.

No warship, however well armed and protected, is of much use without a trained crew. Men might be drafted at short notice to join the guns’ crews, but it takes days for new ratings to “shake down” and weeks for a fresh engine-room staff to become thoroughly accustomed to the peculiarities of the huge, complicated machinery by which the ship is driven and lighted. Nor could a *pukka* naval officer expect to navigate and handle a 20,000 ton liner as if she were a battleship or a destroyer.

And that is where co-operation between the Admiralty and the steamship company proved to be of inestimable value. Captain Aubrey Nottingham, R.N., was appointed in command, while the *Galloway*’s pre-war skipper, Captain Jasper Burley, ranking as Commander, R.N.R., became navigating officer.

Every officer and man of the engine-room staff volunteered to remain in the ship, ready and eager to prove their faith in the *Galloway* in her new rôle. Engineers, firemen, greasers, trimmers—theirs was to be the unenviable task. “Signed on” under peace conditions, they had volunteered to remain deep in the bowels of a comparatively lightly-built ship, ignorant of what was transpiring above the waterline, while their new comrades did the actual fighting. On how the human elements fought their 4.7’s depended the lives of the “black squad”, as they fed the furnaces that provided steam for the turbines turning the triple screws that drove the ship at a good eighteen knots.

At nine-thirty on the morning of the 15th of October—less than six weeks from the momentous declaration of war—the *Galloway* left the Mersey under sealed orders. And in her, his Action Station being at No. 3 starboard gun, went Ordinary Seaman Brian Cardyke.

CHAPTER II

From the Land of the Maple Leaf

Up to and for some time after the *Galloway's* departure from Liverpool, the Irish Sea had not become a great scene of activity on the part of German U-boats.

Nevertheless, the skipper of the *Galloway* left nothing undone to safeguard his ship. Before the Barr Lightship bore abeam, the guns' crews were at their stations, and extra look-outs posted; but these precautions, though necessary, were not justified by events. So far the U-boat had not shown herself between the North Channel and the Scillies.

Out on the broad Atlantic, the captain opened his sealed orders and with that uncanny swiftness with which a "buzz" spreads round a ship, the men learned that the *Galloway's* rôle was to be that of patrolling the North Atlantic, stopping and examining any suspicious or neutral craft.

That, in the early stages of the war, was a comparatively simple matter. Later on, when the Germans fitted out cleverly disguised commerce-destroyers, armed with powerful guns behind collapsible sides and fitted with submerged torpedo tubes, the "Examination Patrol Service" became anything but a "cushy" job.

Full of youthful enthusiasm, Brian Cardyke soon began to find this form of national service irksome. Constant gun drill, when apparently there seemed no likelihood of the weapons being used in real earnest, was no longer a novelty but a mere matter of routine. So it was with the boarding duties, when again and again he formed one of the boat's crews that had to make a long and heavy row to a suspicious craft, only to find that she was a genuine neutral. The fact that her cargo might consist of cotton or iron ore consigned to a German port *did* affect the case, for these commodities, essential in the making of munitions, had been deemed to be contraband of war.

Yet in spite of those seemingly futile operations, Brian Cardyke had to confess that he was glad he was in the *Galloway*. From the moment she hoisted the White Ensign she was what was known in the navy as a "happy ship". The officers studied the comfort of the men, while the latter did their

utmost to bring the ship to a state of high efficiency. The food was not only good but on a generous scale; while it was not long before a theatrical and concert party was organized for the entertainment of the ship's company.

But as far as Brian was concerned, it was the human element that most appealed to him. For the first time in his short life he had to eat, drink and sleep in the company of his messmates, men, young and mature, coming within the category of military age; men of all conditions of social life gathered in under the White Ensign for the duration of the War. In the "watch below", Brian heard tales of deeds of naval daring from the lips of men who had actually participated. There were yarns of the icy Arctic, of the sweltering Tropics, from each of the Seven Seas, tales of tragedy, pathos and humour told in the British bluejacket's inimitable style.

There were men of the *Galloway's* peace-time crew, who were now serving under the White instead of the Blue Ensign. Some of them could tell of a gallant fight *with* German ships against those allied foes, fire and tempest. One veteran remembered the British steamship *Volturmo*, that, with more than six hundred foreign emigrants on board, was bound from Rotterdam to New York when she caught fire far out in the North Atlantic. A gale was raging at the time, and an attempt to lower the *Volturmo's* boats only resulted in great loss of life. Before noon the fire was gaining rapidly. In reply to an SOS the *Galloway* tore to the rescue, re-transmitting the distress signal to all vessels in the vicinity. Before very long ten vessels, including the German *Grosser Kurfürst* and *Seydlitz* had surrounded the doomed *Volturmo*, yet owing to the violence of the waves, the would-be rescuers could do little. It was not until the tanker *Narragansett* appeared and discharged quantities of oil upon the surging water that the *Galloway* and the German and other vessels succeeded in lowering their boats and rescuing about five hundred passengers.

"And now we're at war with those German chaps," concluded the narrator. "Seems rummy, don't it, all 'cause that muddle-headed chump of a Hitler don't know when he's well off!"

At length the *Galloway* by devious courses arrived at Halifax, Nova Scotia, coaled and took in provisions. Before she set out on her apparently aimless wanderings, her ship's company had been increased by a draft of twenty Canadians. At least, officially they were from the Land of the Maple Leaf, although at least three were undoubtedly citizens of the Greatest Republic on Earth. Had they been challenged, they would, with their tongues in their cheeks, have denied that they were anybody but patriotic Canadians. For the sake of having a cut at Adolf they were prepared to deny

an impeachment that they were Americans—using the word in its limited form—though only for the duration of hostilities.

Commander Jasper Burley, who had to inspect the new arrivals after they had been “run over” by the regulating officer—the modern counterpart of the master-at-arms in Victorian and Edwardian times—might have had his suspicions concerning the nationality of three of the newly-joined ratings. Since they were stout-hearted fellows and spoke English—though with an accent that differed but slightly from that of the genuine sons of the Dominion of Canada—he kept his thoughts to himself.

There could be no doubt, however, of Stan Lorne. He had been christened Stanley but no one ever called him that. He’d been Stan ever since he could remember.

He was a tall, pale-faced, rather rugged-featured youth of eighteen, with a soft-spoken drawl. Two months previously he had been at college in Victoria, British Columbia, where he was preparing for an examination for a Government forestry post.

The outbreak of war changed all that. Young Lorne wanted to be in it. If he’d been asked why this haste he wouldn’t have been able to give a spoken answer. In his heart he knew that he must, even as his father had served in France in ’14.

Stan did not wait until, as was everywhere expected, a Dominion expeditionary force should be raised. Keen to serve in any capacity, he had a strong wish to go into the navy. There was the old strain reasserting itself, for Lorne’s great-grandfather had been in the Royal Navy in a wooden corvette, the *Clio*. That was away back in the Eighteen-sixties, when the ship was in the Pacific Squadron, and when British Columbia was just beginning its existence.

Young Lorne could remember his great-grandfather Angus, who used to tell him of the times when it was possible to receive a bear’s skin from the Indians of Queen Charlotte’s Sound in exchange for a gilt button from a naval uniform.

He did not know the circumstances under which Old Angus ended his career in the Royal Navy at Esquimalt instead of receiving his discharge in England in the ordinary course of events. Perhaps the canny Scot preferred to draw a veil over that chapter in his career.

At any rate Angus Lorne settled on Vancouver Island where he became what is known on the North American continent as a “realtor” or dealer in

property. He flourished, as did his lineal descendants.

Stan had sea experience. During his vacations he'd made several trips along the Pacific seaboard in coasting schooners: but when he applied for service at the naval base at Esquimalt he was told that there was no immediate possibility of being accepted.

Nothing daunted, young Lorne packed his traps and booked a reservation on an eastward-bound C.P.R. train. Eventually he arrived at Halifax, when he contemplated working his passage on a cargo-boat to Liverpool, with the intention of joining the Royal Navy.

He was still waiting when the armed liner *Galloway* arrived. Quite by chance he heard that she was taking Canadians on board to complete complement; and although hardy Nova Scotian fishermen were most wanted, Stan managed to find himself included in the draft.

"Well, my man!" exclaimed the commander, stopping in front of the tall, lean recruit: "what experience have you had?"

Stan began to explain, but the Bloke—as commanders R.N. and R.N.R. are termed—cut him short.

"I can't hear you!" he interrupted. "Speak up, can't you?"

Lorne was certainly soft-spoken; but the commander was slightly deaf, although he wouldn't admit it. After all, gunnery practice is apt to be hard on one's ear-drums.

"Sure!" replied Stan, adding as an afterthought, "Sir!"

"Good!" continued the commander. "Now let me see how you can speak loudly. I want you to shout at the top of your voice—let me see!—Yes: shout 'fall in the starboard watch!'"

It wasn't a happy choice on Commander Jasper Burley's part, but he was essentially a man of action and lacking in imagination.

"Fall in the starboard watch!" shouted Stan in stentorian tones.

The results of his effort completely satisfied the commander concerning the new recruit's lung-power. It went further, and completely though figuratively took the wind out of the Bloke's sails.

He jumped back, hit by the tremendous volume of the sound. Lorne's messmates afterwards declared that the commander's oak-leaved cap rose a couple of inches above his head; but that might have been an exaggeration.

Certain it was that the order was literally interpreted. The bos'n's mates at the hatchways responded by shrill trills on their pipes. The hands of the watch below—those of the starboard watch—disturbed as they were sitting down to dinner, rose as one man, dropped what they were doing, and poured up the steel ladders to the upper deck!

Fortunately the commander was equal to the unexpected occasion.

“Sound the ‘still’!” he ordered the bugler in attendance.

Such was the discipline that on the note of the bugle every man stopped and stood silent and rigid. It wanted only the “carry on!” to send them below to their interrupted meal.

The regulating officer, note-book in hand, sucked the point of his pencil. He was anticipating having to write down the name of another “defaulter”. They were happily few and far between in the *Galloway*. He didn't know what the charge would be; whether the Bloke would log the recruit for something that certainly wasn't “dumb insolence”. All the same, it wasn't “navy” to shout at an officer second only in rank to the captain. Something ought to be done about it.

Commander Burley, although a strict disciplinarian, had a strong sense of humour. Ordinary Seaman Lorne had obeyed orders literally, but not in the way his superior officer had expected.

“Good effort, my man!” he exclaimed. “Very good effort!”

With that he passed on to question the next “number” of the draft.

In due course, which did not take very long, Ordinary Seaman Stan Lorne was placed in No. 11 mess, which was the same as Brian Cardyke's.

Quickly they discovered that they had much in common even though thousands of miles separated their homes. They were much of the same age. They shared a love of the sea—the sea that had been befouled by the brutal lawlessness of Nazi U-boats. It was part of their job and that of their shipmates to do a little mopping up before the ships of all peace-loving nations could proceed unmolested upon their lawful occasions.

CHAPTER III

The Enemy in Sight

Big events were in the air. Somewhere in the Pacific were two large German merchant cruisers, the *Zeitun* and *Illtis*, each as heavily armed as the *Galloway*—perhaps more so.

Off the Brazilian port of Pernambuco the *Galloway* fell in with H.M.S. *Ajax* and co-operated with her in lying in wait for a German vessel; but the latter must have got wind of the trap that was awaiting her, since she failed to put in an appearance. This was all to the good, since it eventually meant the inglorious end of the *Graf Spee*.

At about two bells of the forenoon watch on the fourteenth of December—a day he had since had good cause to remember—Brian Cardyke and Stan Lorne were engaged in the prosaic yet necessary task of swabbing C deck in company with half a dozen of their messmates. It was a warm day, the wind, contrary to its usual south-easterly direction in these latitudes, was nor'west and light. Rigged out only in singlets and white trousers rolled above the knee, Brian and his messmates paddled bare-footed in the copious stream of water that flowed over the deck from the hoses.

Suddenly came the hail that land was in sight right ahead. So clear was the atmosphere that the distant land, nearly thirty miles away, looked considerably nearer as the needle-like peaks of a barren, precipitous mass of volcanic rock stood out sharp and black against the skyline, the lower portion of the island being yet below the horizon.

“What land is that?” asked Brian of his opposite number, Tom Buddock.

Still working his rubber squeegee, Buddock straightened his back and shaded his eyes with his disengaged arm.

“Trinidad, chum,” he replied briefly.

“But I say,” protested the lad, “aren’t you trying to pull my leg? This isn’t the West Indies.”

“Never said it was, chump-head,” rejoined the man. “There’s more’n one Portsmouth in the world, ain’t there? Wish it was that Trinidad; I could do

with a drop o' leaf in Port o' Spain. There ain't nothin' to write 'ome about over that lump o' rock."

"We're making for it, anyway," continued Brian. "What's the idea?"

"Blest if I knows," replied Buddock, winking solemnly at a third member of the party. "Best nip on the bridge—an' ax the Owner."

Brian shook his head. Young as he was, he was too old a bird to be caught by that kind of chaff.

"I guess I will!" declared Stan unexpectedly.

He would have gone had not his messmates restrained him. His democratic mind couldn't understand why those in authority on board should not confide in their crew and "put them wise" on matters such as these.

Nevertheless it was soon evident that something was in the air. On the upper bridge, Captain Nottingley, the navigating commander and a group of subordinate officers and signalmen were scanning the rapidly rising island with their glasses.

As a precautionary measure the crew were sent to action stations. The guns were cast loose and trained abeam; splinter nets triced up in the wake of the gunshields; hoses were connected up and sand sprinkled on the decks to ensure a firm foothold for the hands working the guns. Already the bridge and other exposed parts of the ship had been festooned with loops of heavy hempen hawsers to mitigate the danger of flying pieces of metal, while the shrouds had been "frapped" with similar cordage as a safeguard against being shot away.

Brian and Stan's station was at 3 P quick-firer on C deck, they being part of the reserve crew for that particular gun. Arriving at his post, Brian found that already the telephone from the bridge to the gun was being tested and that a heap of "present-use" ammunition—steel shells and brass cartridge-cases all in one—were being placed in the wake of the 4.7-inch weapon.

"Is this practice or the real thing?" he asked himself, and found himself hoping that it was the "real thing" and that it wasn't. He tried to keep cool, yet his heart persisted in thumping violently and there was an indescribably dry sensation in his throat.

From where he stood Brian could command a view of the side of the island that the *Galloway* was approaching; yet, so far, there was no sign of another vessel of any sort.

Then, to Cardyke's surprise, the hands were piped to dinner! After all, then, the alarm had been a false one.

But no!

"Look lively, lads, and get a good bellyful before you give the Germans one!" bawled a petty-officer, as the lightly-clad hands bolted for the mess-deck.

"Who is she? What is she?" asked Brian of several of his messmates, but the question remained unanswered, drowned in the babble of voices and the clatter of tin plates, knives and forks.

The men ate hurriedly, keeping up a fire of conversation, for the most part on any subject except that of the probable action. Two able seamen seated opposite to Cardyke were engaged in a hectic argument concerning the exact date on which a certain murderer paid the penalty for his crime. On Brian's left an elderly man was deploring the fact that the house into which he had recently moved was just beyond the penny fare stage of the Pompey trolley-buses. Others were discussing the merits of the respective goalkeepers of Portsmouth and Plymouth Argyle teams. Here and there a few remained silent, thinking, perhaps, of their wives and families.

As fast as each man finished eating he produced pipe or cigarette for the customary "three draws and a spit" before the expected summons came.

Stan Lorne, on Brian's right, offered his chum a "gasper".

"Think we'll——" began Cardyke, but the other made a deprecatory gesture with his hand.

"I'd rather not think," he replied. "Time for that when it's over."

He paused to apply a match to his cigarette.

"Like being in a dentist's waiting room," he added. "That's the worst part of the business."

Above the hubbub of the crowded mess-deck rang the shrill notes of a bugle, sounding General Quarters.

It was now five minutes to twelve.

"Race you on deck for a limer, Jim!" exclaimed Draper, a strapping bluejacket, sight-setter of No. 3 S gun.

"Done!" replied his raggie, elbowing Brian aside, and joining in the helter-skelter rush for C Deck.

The inconsequence of the incident impressed itself on Cardyke's mind. Here were two men in the prime of life hurrying to their action stations, to face death maybe, yet the loser in the race had pledged himself to stand the winner a glass of beverage made from fresh limes. An enterprising marine had laid in a stock of the fruit when the ship was in the West Indies and was doing a brisk trade selling "soft drinks" at a penny a glass, accounts to be settled monthly.

The massive teak ladder groaned under the weight of the confused mass of humanity as the hands jostled and swayed in their impetuous rush to their action stations. Before long some would descend the ladder slowly, painfully. Others would also descend—but they would be carried down.

Arriving at his station, Brian fell in with the rest of the reserve crew in the wake of the gun-shield. Then he looked ahead, to find that the island was considerably nearer than when last he had seen it. Against the dark background could be discerned the masts and funnels of a large vessel anchored off the south-western extremity of Trinidad. She flew no colours. On her far side were four smaller masts which might or might not belong to a couple of German cruisers lying in wait for the approaching British armed merchant-liner.

On the *Galloway's* bridge her gallant captain was keeping the as yet unknown vessels under close and anxious observation. There were no other armed British craft within two hundred miles of Trinidad, nor was there reason to believe that there were any vessels flying the Red Duster. It was safe to conclude that the larger vessel was either the *Zeitun*, the *Iltis* or even the pocket-battleship *Deutschland*, all of whom were known to be using the Island of Trinidad as a coaling base. As for the hidden craft, they might be enemy cruisers that both in speed and armament would be more than a match for the *Galloway*.

It was now that Captain Nottingham displayed the true "Nelson touch". Only the previous day the Admiralty had issued orders, that were communicated by wireless to every vessel concerned, to the effect that henceforth auxiliary cruisers were to work in conjunction with regular cruisers for the purpose of capturing enemy armed vessels in the outer seas. They were never to engage singly a hostile ship of the pocket-battleship class.

"Until I discover what she is, how can I decline or accept an engagement?" asked the *Galloway's* captain whimsically. "Signalman, make the International EC."

While the yeoman of signals was toggling the hoist—EC signifying “What ship is that?”—Captain Nottingley turned to one of his officers.

“I fancy the circumstances warrant the use of a brand-new ensign,” he remarked.

“The largest we have, sir?”

“Make it so,” was the Owner’s response, and in a few seconds White Ensigns were hoisted at both mastheads and also at the staff right aft.

Yet the stranger made no attempt to hoist her colours. The *Galloway*’s signal was ignored. The question was repeated both by Aldis lamp and searchlight, but without eliciting any response.

“I recognize her, sir,” declared one of the R.N.R. lieutenants. “She’s the *Zeitun*. I saw her in B.A. (Buenos Aires) on her first trip. She had three funnels then, but the aft one was only a ventilator. She’s unshipped it. It looks as if she’s trying to disguise herself as a Union Castle boat.”

Just then there were signs of activity from the enemy craft. One pair of smaller masts began to move. For some seconds the British officers waited and watched in anxious suspense. One of the vessels hidden under the *Zeitun*’s lee was beginning to back clear; was she a German cruiser?

A rounded counter, with the froth from the propellers underneath, came slowly into view. No light cruiser had a stern like that. Presently she revealed herself as a small collier. Stopping and then forging ahead, she shaped a course for the south-east, hoisting the “Star-spangled Banner” as she increased her distance.

Soon after, the second small craft also cast off and proceeded in a north-easterly direction, while the *Zeitun* weighed, backed away from the anchorage and proceeded to follow the collier that was flying American colours.

“She’s legging it!” exclaimed a man standing close to Brian.

A loud report made the lad think that the action had begun. It was merely a blank cartridge as a warning to the German as to what she might expect.

Still no answer. The *Zeitun* was making off at full speed.

Then Brian saw the German suddenly alter course to starboard, steady her helm and approach the *Galloway* at three points on the latter’s bows.

As she did so, a small Black Cross Ensign—"defaced" by a Swastika—was hoisted.

"Eight-five-o-o," droned the voice of the range-finding petty-officer. "Eight-two-five-o . . . eight thousand!"

At that range, roughly four and a half miles, a projectile was purposely fired across the *Zeitun's* bows. With its characteristic whine, decreasing in pitch as the distance increased, the shell sped on its way, throwing up a tall column of spray as it ricocheted close enough to deluge the hostile vessel's fo'c'sle.

It was now twelve minutes past noon, and the memorable duel had begun.

CHAPTER IV

An Epic Duel

Although Admiralty instructions to the effect that armed merchant cruisers unsupported were not to engage enemy craft had been ignored, it was evident that the *Galloway* was “up against” a vessel equal, if not superior, to herself. It was the human element that was to prove the dominating factor. Admittedly the German seamen in surface war-craft were brave, determined fighters, but they lacked the traditions of the British sailor. The Celtic-Anglo-Saxon-Danish-Norman strain of the people of the British Islands had produced a bull-dog strain in its fighting men that Germany had failed to achieve.

The *Zeitun* was an almost new vessel of 18,450 tons. She was of 2550 tons smaller displacement than her antagonist, but that disadvantage was negated by a superiority of speed to the extent of two knots—sufficient to enable her to show her heels to the *Galloway*, if she so wished.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the *Zeitun* had hurriedly put into La Plata river, taking refuge at Buenos Aires. Here she was compelled to remain, blockaded by H.M.S. *Achilles*, until the British cruiser was compelled to stand northward in a vain search for the German pocket-battleship, *Graf Spee*.

Directly the *Achilles* was well out of the way, the *Zeitun* left Buenos Aires on the same day as the *Galloway* left the Mersey. At a pre-arranged rendezvous well out in mid-South Atlantic, the German liner met the *Illtis*.

The *Illtis* was an old vessel, built at Danzig in 1921, and carried sixteen 3.4-inch guns, six pom-poms, and eight machine guns in her holds.

A few days before war was declared, the *Illtis* was lying in Table Bay. Doubtless warned by wireless or by cable, she hurriedly left Cape Town and proceeded round the Cape as if bound for an East African port. That was a ruse; well out of sight of land, she turned and made towards the South American coast.

As soon as the *Zeitun* and the *Illtis* joined company, several of the latter’s officers and men “turned over” to the liner, together with half the latter

vessel's armament. There were thus two well-armed commerce raiders in the South Atlantic.

Thus the Hamburg-Sud-Amerika liner *Zeitun* became a German auxiliary cruiser, although it is practically certain that she already had heavier guns aboard. Disguised as a Castle liner, she was painted grey, with red up to her load line. One funnel, as the *Galloway's* officer had declared, had been removed, the others being painted red with black tops to complete the disguise. But the ruse had failed. So many British wireless signals were being sent out that her captain, thinking that these emanated from our cruisers in the South Atlantic, showed far less determination and enterprise than some of his consorts had done.

She was lurking at her desolate base when the *Galloway* hove in sight.

The *Zeitun's* first intention was to take to flight, the boldness of the British armed liner's approach having led her to believe that the latter was supported by a British light cruiser in the offing.

However, the collier that had preceded her from the anchorage under false colours had found that no other vessel was in sight and had wirelessly the *Zeitun* to that effect. Her captain, confident of superior speed and armament, thereupon wirelessly to his senior naval officer—probably in the *Deutschland* and about two hundred miles to the west'ard—asking permission to engage the British ship.

This was accorded and the *Zeitun* ported helm and stood towards her antagonist.

Although Brian Cardyke's action station was in the wake of No. 3 starboard gun and for the present on the disengaged side, he had a fairly good view of the enemy ship.

Barely had the warning shot been fired across the *Zeitun's* bows when Brian saw a ripple of lurid flashes leap from the hostile craft's deck. Then, momentarily growing louder and louder as the sound outdistanced the approaching projectiles, came the disconcerting shriek of the enemy shells. Ten seconds after the first flashes—and ten very long-drawn-out seconds they seemed to the nerve-tautened lad—the projectiles, skimming the *Galloway's* bridge, fell harmlessly into the water at a quarter of a mile away.

"Let her have it, my lads!" roared a voice, high above C Deck. Brian failed to recognize the tones; but doubtless they were the captain's. At any rate P 1, 2 and 3 guns opened fire almost simultaneously.

“Shorts, by Jove!” yelled someone, as columns of spray temporarily hid the midship part of the enemy from view. “Keep her going, my hearties!”

The din was terrific. The 4.7’s barked, emitting lurid flashes and a thin haze of acrid-smelling cordite. Breech-blocks clanged; expended cartridge-cases clattered unheeded to the deck.

Then came a fearful crash as one of the enemy shells burst against metal—the foremost funnel, probably. Slivers of steel and iron pattered on the deck. An empty cartridge-case, that by chance had fallen on its base, gave out three distinct bell-like notes as fragments of flying debris hit it. It was a trivial incident, but somehow it held Brian’s attention for a time above everything else.

Yet he realized events much as if he were in a dream. Inactive, like all the men at the starboard guns, he lay on the deck, bare feet outstretched and head resting on his hands, waiting and watching. The noise well-nigh deafened him; his eyes smarted with the noxious fumes. Subconsciously he realized that he was practically lying in the open, save for the slight partial protection afforded by the gun-shield, and exposed to a rapid fire of powerful modern quick-firers; but somehow, although he knew the danger, all sense of fear had left him. The impulse that had beset him before the *Galloway* opened fire—to run below like a rabbit to its burrow—had passed.

Presently—after what interval he knew not, so uncertain seemed the passing of time—Brian became aware that the *Zeitun* was no longer visible from where he was. The *Galloway* had ported helm slightly in order to bring the aftermost gun of the engaged side to bear.

“She’s well a-fire, lads!” exclaimed the captain of the gun nearest to Cardyke. He had stood clear of the shield in order to see how the enemy was faring.

Even as the man uttered these words there was a blinding flash accompanied by a terrific detonation. The captain of the gun was hurled violently against the shield. He dropped, quivered spasmodically for a few seconds and then lay still, his head pillowed on his arm.

Several of his messmates went to the man’s assistance. They partly raised him, laid him on his back, shouted to the reserve gun’s crew to bear a hand and get the casualty below.

Three of them went. Brian didn’t. It was the first time he had been face to face with sudden death. Twenty minutes or half an hour ago he had been

talking to the man—and now the captain of the gun was a lump of inanimate clay.

It had been a narrow squeak for all hands in the vicinity of 3 S gun. They were on the disengaged side, the weapon was trained outboard, thus leaving the interior of the shield practically facing the direction of the enemy ship. The shell that did the damage had landed fairly and squarely on one of the starboard winches, demolishing it and scattering the jagged fragments far and wide. In spite of the fact that a splinter net was triced up in the wake of the shield, a part of the wrecked winch had caught the unfortunate captain of the gun in the face, killing him on the spot.

The “numbers” moved up. A reserve number took the place of the hitherto lowermost one of the gun’s crew. Then it was that Brian missed his chum. They had been lying on deck side by side during the initial stages of the engagement, but now Stan was no longer to be seen.

“Rough luck!” bawled one of the reserve gun’s crew, shouting to make himself heard. “And ’e hadn’t a chance of a shot at the blighters!”

Men, running swiftly and crouching as they hastened, threw themselves down close to where Brian lay. The sensation of nausea had left the lad. He was aware that the arrivals were the three men who had carried their comrade below and that there was a fourth—to fill the gap in the reserve gun’s crew.

The range had dropped from 7500 yards to a little over 4000 and the fire on both sides increased in violence. The *Galloway* was now using independent control fire from every one of the four guns on her port side. Yet, so far, the damage was chiefly confined to her masts, funnels and ventilating cowls, for the German was evidently trying to cripple the British vessel’s bridge and guns, but was for the most part sending her shells too high.

The order was given for the *Galloway*’s guns to change from independent to salvo firing. Above the irregular detonations of the hostile guns and the bursting of enemy shells came the regular concentrated bark of the liner’s port armament. At the third and fourth salvo her shells were observed to hit all along the *Zeitun*’s waterline, which had the immediate result of making the German decrease the range in order to bring his pom-pom and machine guns into action.

To counteract this manœuvre, which would expose the bridge and control positions to a devastating fire and render them untenable—and

already more than one shell had done a lot of damage to the British armed liner's bridge—Captain Nottingham ordered a sixteen-point turn to starboard. This not only opened out the range, but brought the hitherto idle starboard guns into action.

As the ship swung, so did the *Zeitun* come into Brian's range of vision again. She was maintaining a furious cannonade. The fire that had previously broken out had evidently been got under control; but there was another under the German's bridge. Smoke, too, was pouring out from for'ard, while dense clouds of white vapour indicated that either a British shell had found its way into her boiler room or else the deck steam pipes had been punctured.

But what was even more ominous was the unmistakable fact that the *Zeitun* was also turning under full port helm. Normally a vessel under these conditions would heel outwards; actually she was listing to starboard.

"She's legging it!" exclaimed one of the gun's crew. "She'll give us the slip!"

"No fear," replied another. "She's making water fast. Reckon she's done."

"Three thousand yards!" reported the range-finder.

It was almost, if not quite, the lowest range during the action. Obviously sinking, the *Zeitun* could and did hit back with considerable effect. The *Galloway's* main rigging was hanging in grotesque festoons; derricks were buckled or blown from their sockets; ventilators were either shot away or riddled until they resembled sieves; again and again splinters from the boats in davits flew in showers, though fortunately the splinter nets saved the guns' crews from greater loss.

A shell, fortunately without bursting, passed through three thicknesses of plating of the *Galloway's* superstructure immediately under the fore-bridge; but it did considerable damage, for, setting alight a quantity of hammocks and junk placed there for protection, it started a fire that quickly threatened to burn the bridge, if not the ship herself. The fire-main had previously been cut by a fragment of shell and no water was available from this source. In spite of the action being at its fiercest, men brought smaller hoses to play upon the flames, as well as using fire buckets and extinguishers.

But for the present the conflagration refused to be conquered. The bridge had to be abandoned, Captain Nottingham and his staff making for the after

steering position, while the *Galloway*, running before the wind, prevented the strong breeze from fanning the flames.

Of all this Brian Cardyke knew nothing at the time. Two of S 3's crew were quickly knocked out, one having his jaw carried away, and the other being wounded in the neck; and Brian found himself filling the number of a casualty.

As to what happened next, he had but a hazy idea. All his attention was centred upon supplying ammunition to the hungry 4.7-in. The chase of the weapon became so hot that the paint peeled from it in blistered flakes. In the wake of the gun-shield expended brass cylinders lay ankle-deep; and, as the lad found to his cost, they were unpleasantly hot. Even in the excitement of serving his gun, he distinctly remembered when his bare feet came in contact with those heated metal shell-cases.

The deck, too, was in an awful mess with blood, burnt wood, fragments of shells and debris from the boat-deck. Again and again a hostile shell, pitching alongside, would deluge the gun's crew and cause clouds of steam, as the water came in contact with the overheated barrel of the Q.F., to mingle with the pungent fumes of burnt cordite.

Then the after-bridge was badly hit by a shell that, blowing a hole in the side of the upper deck, exploded and practically wrecked one end of the structure, shattering stanchions and twisting guard-rails as if they were made of copper wire.

The stern chase had resulted in the way Captain Nottingley and his officers had feared. Her superior speed enabled the *Zeitun* to draw out of range of the *Galloway*'s guns, although the latter was still registering hits on her antagonist. Hidden as she was by a dense pall of smoke, the German vessel's list was no longer observable by her antagonist. Apparently the former was under control and well on her way to safety.

At extreme elevation the British 4.7-inch guns kept up a steady fire, hoping almost against hope to be able to gap the five miles that now separated the two vessels. If it did nothing else, it was some satisfaction to be able to return the *Zeitun*'s fire, even though the shells fell short.

"Get some of those gadgets away!" ordered the captain of the gun, indicating the accumulation of brass cases. He, too, had become painfully aware of the disadvantage of being bare-footed in a modern sea-fight.

Brian bent down to carry out orders. As he did so, he felt as if he had been kicked by a horse. His knees gave way under him. He fell on his face;

tried, ineffectually, to regain his feet. Then everything—the gun-shield, the men working the weapon, the deck, sea and sky seemed to be dissolving into a dancing white mist.

After that, things became very hazy for a time, as far as Brian was concerned. He was dimly aware that two men were raising him. A far-off voice inquired: “Where has he copped it?” To which another replied: “Dunno. Best get ’im out of it. Blimey! Mind ’is arm; don’t ’e bleed!”

Then followed an apparently interminable journey, as, carried by the two men, Brian was taken down a number of ladders into an artificially-lighted compartment four decks below.

The reek of blood assailed the semi-conscious lad’s nostrils. He became dimly aware that he was in the after distributing station and that the place was full with humanity, both hale and otherwise. Most of the original staff of stewards were acting as sick-bay men. Some were assisting the doctor as he operated on a severely-wounded seaman. Others were tending those wounded whose injuries had already been dressed; while others, seeing Brian being brought down, prepared to devote their attention to him.

“What’s doin’, chum?” asked one of the attendants eagerly, addressing Cardyke’s messmates.

“She’s hookin’ it,” replied one. “All this bloomin’ muck for nothin’, but I reckons as ’ow we’ve given ’er something to remember us by.”

This information was passed round, for it was only by such channels that news of how the action was progressing filtered below to those who were doing their duty as staunchly as their shipmates serving the guns.

One of the doctor’s staff cut away Brian’s singlet. A piece of steel had embedded itself in the lad’s left shoulder.

“I thought it was my stomach,” he declared.

“You’re wrong, luckily for you,” rejoined the man, as he drenched the wound with iodine and applied an antiseptic dressing. “Just you keep still and wait till the doctor can deal with you.”

For some minutes Brian obeyed instructions. He was feeling less giddy. Objects no longer danced before his eyes. Although the wound smarted considerably, the pain was by no means acute. He had felt worse after a hack on the shin while playing soccer.

But it was his surroundings that jolted him badly. Apart from the reek of gore and iodoform and the groans of the wounded, the din was terrific.

Every hit the ship got seemed to communicate its sound to the dimly-lit compartment.

A kind of panic gripped the wounded lad. If the ship were to founder, he and those with him would be drowned like rats in a trap. Better to make a bolt for the open than to stay in this reeking atmosphere.

Heedless of his injured shoulder, Cardyke slipped out, made for the nearest ladder and gained the next deck. Here were half a dozen men engaged in an apparently impossible task of stopping a jagged hole in the ship's side through which the water was pouring spasmodically.

At the next ladder, Brian had to wait. A couple of men were descending, one with a wounded seaman on his back, the other steadying the casualty's legs.

"Steady, chums!" protested the wounded man. "It ain't 'arf giving me gyp!"

Brian recognized the voice. It was Buddock, of his mess, who had been hit. The man's white trousers were dyed red. There was a trail of blood on the ladder, as Cardyke resumed his way to the upper deck.

The salt air revived him considerably. As he went towards S 3 gun he saw that the crew were no longer at their quarters. With others of the ship's company, they were crowding to the side to watch the death throes of their foe who had fought so cleanly and so gallantly.

The unexpected had happened. Even while the British officers and men were convinced that the *Zeitun* had shown her opponent a clean pair of heels, the German vessel suddenly emerged from the pall of smoke that had obscured her.

Burning fiercely fore and aft, the *Zeitun* ported sixteen degrees, and, listing badly, made a desperate attempt to beach herself on the inhospitable shores of Trinidad.

She ceased fire. Although the German Black Cross *cum* Swastika ensign was still flying, Captain Nottinghamly humanely gave orders for the *Galloways* to cease firing.

Undoubtedly the *Zeitun* was done for. She lost way, heeling more and more. Half a dozen or so of her boats, all in a damaged condition, were lowered, and with the survivors of her gallant crew, rowed clear of the foundering ship.

The end was not long in coming. Over on her beam ends she fell. There she lay for a minute or so; then recovered until she was almost on an even keel, although her bows had dipped.

Suddenly she threw her stern well clear of the water, and dived with very little fuss to the bed of the Atlantic, displaying her ensign to the last.

“Give them a cheer, lads!” shouted Commander Burley. “They gave us a run for our money!”

Then turning to Captain Nottingham he added:

“I’d like to meet that German skipper after the war. He played the game!”

The *Galloway’s* captain glanced at the wrecked fore-bridge—from which smoke was still pouring.

“I should just say he did,” he rejoined.

CHAPTER V

Battered but Undaunted

One of the most stubbornly contested sea-fights in modern times had been fought, won and lost; but the position of the victor was far from enviable.

The *Galloway* was still burning fiercely in the vicinity of the fore-bridge. Every available hand was set to work to get the conflagration under control. On the bridge the result of the *Zeitun's* gun-fire was devastating. The chart-house had entirely disappeared; every one of the engine-room telegraph instruments had been either capsized or riddled by shell-fire. The range-finder that had played so important a part in the earlier phases of the engagement, had been uprooted from its broad base pedestal and lay in a dozen different pieces. Two of the bridge searchlights, though still standing, had been rendered useless; every signal-flag in the flag-locker had been burnt, while the planks were hidden under a thick layer of charred wood and ashes and littered with the scorched remains of hundreds of charts.

The *Galloway* could do nothing to rescue the survivors of her sunken antagonist. She had not a boat fit for service. Badly battered herself, she was threatened by another enemy. Wireless signals from the *Zeitun's* consort had been intercepted during the action and now smoke was visible on the horizon. It might have been the *Illtis*, as it was asserted that four funnels were showing just above the skyline. If so, the second German might turn the tables on the sorely-tried *Galloway*, which, in addition to having been badly alight, had been hit ninety-nine times during the course of the action. Whether or no, the *Zeitun's* consort, aware of the other's fate, and not relishing a like ending, turned away.

Nor was the British armed liner in a fit condition to take on another enemy. Besides the damage to the ship, she had lost nine men killed and twenty-six wounded—roughly a quarter of the hands employed in serving the guns on the exposed upper-deck.

Increasing speed, the *Galloway* made off to the south-west, steering by the sun, since there were no navigating instruments that had survived the terrific hammering.

It was, however, a certain amount of satisfaction to the victors that the survivors of the sunken Nazi vessel were being picked up. The collier *Wussel*, the second to get away from the armed merchantman's side when the latter sighted the approaching *Galloway*, had stood by during the action. It was a decidedly plucky deed on the part of the collier's skipper, since she ran the risk of being captured and sunk; but, when she saw that the *Zeitun* was foundering, she closed the latter's boats, took the remaining Germans on board and landed them at Buenos Aires, where they were to be interned till the end of the war.

Brian Cardyke took part in the cheering that sped the parting *Zeitun* to the bed of the South Atlantic. Then a mist swam before his eyes again, and once more he was carried below. Twenty minutes later he was given an anæsthetic and the surgeon removed an inch of jagged metal from his shoulder. Six hours later he opened his eyes, to find himself in a cot in the sick-bay.

With returning consciousness he became happily aware that not only was the ship still afloat, but was steaming rapidly. The regular pulsations of the triple-screw propeller-shafts told him that. Gun-fire had ceased—another good sign—although there was considerable activity and noise, as the carpenter's crew were shoring up the damaged fore and after bridge and plugging the gaping holes in the ship's side.

But there was the reverse side of the picture.

Most of the "cot cases" were sleeping peacefully, but some were groaning in spite of their efforts to control their feelings. Twenty more or less seriously wounded men were lying in cots; a dozen others, slightly injured, were sitting up. In an adjoining flat were nine still and silent forms each sewn up in a hammock with firebars at head and feet. Amongst them was the man who had raced his messmate to action stations for the sake of a glass of lime-juice. Whether he had won or not, he would never claim the victor's prize for that race—but he had finished his course in a greater contest.

"How are you feeling, chum?" asked one of the sick-bay men, who, ever on the alert, had seen Brian open his eyes.

The lad shook his head. He was feeling the effects of the anæsthetic. So far he had no pain in his injured shoulder except a gentle throbbing sensation. He tried to frame a question, but his parched tongue refused to give utterance.

“Cheer up,” continued the attendant. “You’ve copped a nice little packet. Nothing to worry about; but you’re lucky; you’ll get a tidy drop o’ leaf when we get home.”

He placed a glass to Brian’s lips. The wounded lad drank greedily until with an “Easy on, mate!” the sick-bay man made him desist.

Brian lay thinking. As yet he could hardly realize the exciting action in which he had played his part. Recollection, in all its stark, grim reality, would come later. For the moment his thoughts were of those at home. He wondered what his parents and his brothers would say when they heard that he had been hit. They would be proud, no doubt; and anxious until they knew that he wasn’t badly knocked about—like poor old Buddock, for instance, or his other messmate whose jaw had been shattered.

Then the thought flashed across his mind: what had happened to his Canadian chum? He tried to remember when he had last seen him. All he could recollect was that Stan had been in the prone position, his chin resting on his folded arms. But directly the *Galloway’s* port battery came into action, Brian’s thoughts and actions were otherwise occupied.

He needn’t have worried on young Lorne’s account; for there was the Canadian standing by the side of his cot.

“Say, I’m that sorry you got hit,” began Stan. “I guess it’s my first chance to nip below, and the poultice slapper says he’ll give me a couple of minutes for a chin-wag.”

Already the life afloat had mellowed the various dialects to be heard amongst the ship’s company. Cockneys were using phrases copied from their Yorkshire messmates. Lads from Inverness-shire and boys from Cornwall swapped ideas and idioms; and so it was with the Canadian draft, whose “cute” expressions spread readily amongst their numerically superior British comrades.

But there was one word to which most of the original crew did take exception. They had a grouch against being called Britishers, pointing out that natives of Scotland aren’t Scottishers, that the Irish would have yet another grievance if they were dubbed Irishers, while it would be most impolitic to refer to the sons of Gallant Little Wales—especially in their hearing—as Welshers!

Be that as it may, Stan Lorne had picked up British sea terms as readily as a beaver learns to build a dam. Perhaps it was yet another instance of

heredity, as that “poultice slapper” for “sick-berth attendant” came naturally to his lips.

“And how did you get on?” asked Brian.

“Gee! It was great!” declared Stan. “Wouldn’t have missed it for anything. But I guess I did, though!”

“How?”

“I was helping you below when you got hit,” replied Lorne. “When I got back to the upper-deck, the German ship had dipped. Everything was that quiet after the big din—leastways I guessed so, and it seemed as still as if I’d been in the forests way back home—till I found I was a bit deaf.”

“You’re all right now?”

“Bully!” declared Stan. “I figure I hadn’t taken out my ear-plugs. When _____”

“Now you ’op it!” interrupted the sick-bay man. “ ’Op it or you’ll get me ’ung!”

Slipping a packet of cigarettes into Brian’s hand, Ordinary Seaman Lorne returned to the upper-deck, there to carry on with his task of helping to remove traces of the hard-fought engagement.

Left to his own thoughts, with his wounded shipmates for company, Brian found himself going over the happenings of the day.

And lying there he shuddered. Yet he was thankful that he had come off lightly. He could see, hear, talk and think rationally. Whatever else that piece of flying metal had done (it was wrapped in cotton wool and was under his pillow, although at the moment he was not aware that his “souvenir” had been kept for him), it had left him with his senses unimpaired, and that knowledge was comforting.

The surgeon had gone to another part of the ship. In spite of the mild remonstrances of the attendants, who were as keen to hear details of the action in which they had taken part though seeing nothing, several of the patients were discussing various incidents of the fight.

“It was the hottest half-hour I’ve ever had,” declared a seaman whose left arm was in a sling.

“Half-hour my foot!” rejoined another. “When was you ’it, I should like to know?”

“Last man down, if you want to know,” replied the first speaker. “I walked down by myself. Wouldn’t have bothered if the pusser hadn’t made me.”

“Well, you’re well out of it with your half an hour. I reckons it was three hours—all that—from the time we opened fire. What say you, Bill?”

Bill shook his head.

“Don’t ask me, mate. I hadn’t finished untoggling and stowing the signal flags when something copped me, and I remembered nothing more till I found myself here. Reckon I was the first casualty.”

The men continued arguing about the duration of the action for a considerable time without arriving at a correct decision. In point of fact it had lasted for an hour and three-quarters.

Presently a red-haired man raised himself in his cot and looked around the sick-bay.

“Pipeclay ain’t ’ere, is he?” he inquired.

Pipeclay was the nickname of the marine who had been doing a steady trade with the lime-fruit.

“No, he ain’t,” replied another man. “Wot’s up; want to buy a limer?”

The red-haired seaman, whose leg had been badly cut, gave his fellow patients a solemn wink.

“We didn’t ’arf ’ave a game, Lofty an’ me,” he explained. “We was told off to get that fire under wot broke out when the P.O.’s mess was wrecked. Our mess deck copped it, too. While Lofty an’ me were scroungin’ round, blessed if we didn’t find that old Pipeclay’s limers were all over the bloomin’ deck. An’ there was his tally-book lyin’ on top of his limers. That gave me an idea. I remembered seein’ a pictur’ of a pub on fire an’ the firemen gettin’ to work wi’ hoses, when a chawbacon rushes up an’ yells, ‘For ’eaven’s sake play on the slate’——”

“Wot slate?” asked one of the men.

“W’y, wot the customers’ score was on, you chump!” replied the fiery-headed bluejacket. “So wot did we do but hide old Pipeclay’s tally-book. I reckon ’e won’t know neither when it comes to settlin’ up at the end of the month!”

“I’ll take jolly good care that you pay up, Ginger, my lad!” exclaimed a muffled voice.

The marine, whose hair, eyebrows and moustache had been burnt off by the flash of a bursting shell, had been an unrecognized listener.

Those of the patients who could laugh, did laugh at the red-haired one's discomfiture.

"Now, you men!" exclaimed the surgeon-commander, who had just re-entered the scene of his labours. "Glad to hear some of you are in such good spirits, but remember your messmates."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied one of the patients. "But it's no easy matter to stow your jaw-tackle. And some of us'd give anything for permission to smoke."

"Then carry on," agreed the doctor.

Some of the patients were about to raise a cheer, when, by a gesture, the surgeon-commander stopped them. There was little of the "Popularity Jack" about *him*; he did his level best for the health of the ship's company, but appreciative demonstrations riled him.

Quickly the surgeon went his round, giving a cheery greeting to each man, and, to a great extent, judging his condition by the nature of his reply. Here and there he would pause to beckon to an attendant and give him instructions concerning a certain case.

There were no serious cases in that part of the sick-bay, yet the doctor was taking no chances on that score. He was one of those far-sighted specialists who even in the early days of the war realized that a man's mind can be wounded as well as his body, and that even a slight, superficial injury might react upon the patient's nervous system. Such was his perception that he could detect either by a wounded man's speech or manner the incipient signs of disorder of mind and treat the patient accordingly.

It was not for personal reasons that the doctor appeared to hurry through his inspection. Beyond the after bulkhead was another compartment, formed by removing the partitions between half a dozen third-class passenger cabins. Here were the dangerously wounded cases. Here medical skill and science were fighting an unremitting up-hill battle against the Angel of Death; for here were men mangled, maimed and burnt by modern shell-fire. To a surgeon in the accident ward of a hospital the setting of a broken limb or the dressing of a severe burn is an everyday occurrence; but the terrible injuries inflicted by man's diabolical instruments of war—created purposely for the destruction of human life—were "new ground" even for a highly-experienced specialist.

There in the blazing heat of the Tropics, the *Galloway's* doctor toiled unremittingly as the ship made her hazardous run for safety; and it was due to his skill and attention that the majority of the seriously wounded men were snatched from the jaws of death.

CHAPTER VI

Terence rolls up

Meanwhile the battered *Galloway* was making her way towards the Abrolhos Rocks, off the Brazilian coast, where a base had been formed for British warships operating in the South Atlantic, where they were expecting a “dust-up” with a U-boat-escorted German pocket-battleship. The *Rawalpindi* had yet to be avenged.

It was no slight achievement. There were no efficient navigating instruments left on board. Both the standard and the steering compasses had been damaged by gun-fire; terrific concussions had put the gyro compass out of action; charts had been burnt when the fore-bridge was in flames. But resourcefulness and grim determination won the day.

During the action one of the *Galloway*'s R.N.V.R. midshipmen at great personal risk had contrived to rescue the bowl of the standard compass from the burning bridge, together with some portions of badly charred charts. The bowl had been perforated and the liquid had escaped, but fortunately the magnets of the compass card were still sensitive. Virtually the liquid compass was now a dry one, and, therefore, far from steady. The slightest vibration caused the needle to spin and to take a considerable time to come to rest. To counteract this decided disadvantage the compass was placed on a pillow lashed to the end of a long pole, thus giving the needle a chance to function.

Since all engine-room telegraphs had been shot away, the difficulty that arose was that of communicating with the engine-room from the after steering position. This was surmounted by stationing a chain of men to pass orders by word of mouth—to all intents and purposes a return to the “call-boy” system of the Thames penny steamers in Victorian days.

Meanwhile a temporary aerial had been sent aloft and by dint of great ingenuity and application the wireless staff succeeded in sending out signals. These were picked up by H.M.S. *Achilles*, which hove in sight next morning, to the relief of the *Galloway*'s officers and crew. By the *Achilles*, the *Galloway* was escorted until that duty was taken over by the cruiser *Cardiff*, who saw the damaged armed liner safely to the rendezvous at Abrolhos Rocks.

One morning after he had made his round, the surgeon went on deck for a much-needed breath of fresh air.

“What’s that on your finger, my lad?” he inquired, stopping in his stride to speak to an ordinary seaman, who was engaged in polishing the training wheel of one of the 4.7’s.

“Rag, sir,” replied Stan Lorne.

“That I can see,” rejoined the M.O. “It’s what I can’t see that interests me. What’s wrong?”

Long experience had taught the naval surgeon to discriminate between men who tried to swing the lead and those who were genuine cases. There was a look on the Canadian lad’s face that told him that all was not well with him.

“Only a cut, sir.”

“Any throbbing?”

“Sure!”

“H’m! Report at the sick-bay at once!”

It was a naval surgeon’s undisputed right to order a man to “knock off”, irrespective of the duty the prospective patient might be engaged upon.

“I’ve ordered this man to report for treatment,” he announced to the leading hand of the working party.

Thankfully Stan replaced his “cleaning truck” and went below.

Although he was loath to admit it, the apparently slight injury to the third finger of his left hand was giving him trouble. How it happened he couldn’t say with certainty. He’d noticed a small cut in his finger after the action with the *Zeitun*. Perhaps he’d knocked his hand when he was helping to carry Cardyke below; or it might have been caused by the rim of one of the numerous expended cartridge cases of the 4.7-inch gun that he’d helped to remove after the fight.

He’d thought nothing of it at the time, but now it was throbbing, and there was a dull pain up his arm. It sort of took the stuffing out of him—made him disinclined to “jump to it”. The petty-officer of his subdivision had to “shake him up” for slackness, a thing that hadn’t happened before since he joined the *Galloway*.

“No cot case for you, chum,” declared the sick-berth attendant after investigation. “I’ll clap on a dressing and you can just carry on.”

Then something happened to Stan for the first time in his life. He fainted.

The sick-bay attendant placed the lad on a settee and sent a boy to fetch the doctor.

The result was that shortly after Lorne had recovered from his faint he was dosed and put in a cot. Three hours later he was given a local anæsthetic and the surgeon made a deep incision in the injured finger.

“Serious case,” observed the surgeon to the attendant. “The poison isn’t draining. Keep the incision open with fomentations. He should have reported sick two days ago.”

For the next three days, Stan had a very hazy idea about everything. He’d been given anti-toxin injections that made him feel like nothing on earth, or, rather, on the sea. Without the faintest emotion he visualized himself being sewn up in a shotted hammock and being launched overboard. He just didn’t care, one way or other.

Then came the day when he was able to sit up and take notice in a figurative sense, although he was still kept to his cot.

Alongside of him, making good progress from his wound in his shoulder, was Brian Cardyke.

The *Galloway*, he learned, was still lying off the Abrolhos Rock.

Here every vessel—and there were several merchantmen awaiting convoy—assisted in the task of patching up the *Galloway* sufficiently to enable her to proceed to Gibraltar for repairs. Her gallant duel with the *Zeitun* had gained her honour, but not repose. She was yet to perform yeoman service in other waters; but Brian Cardyke and Stan Lorne had finished with her in body if not in mind.

They were patients in the Naval Hospital at Gibraltar, neither sufficiently recovered to be allowed out in the grounds.

Here they chummed up with another “walking case”, an Australian, Terence Grant by name.

He was a tall, loose-limbed, lean-faced youth of about twenty; six feet three inches in height though turning the scales at just under eleven stones.

Although Terence was born at Sydney and had spent the first eighteen years of a not uneventful life in New South Wales and Queensland, he had put in more than a twelvemonth as a member of the New Zealand Division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. He'd done so after a week's yachting trip in the Bay of Islands, while he was holding a job with the New Zealand railways. Therein he considered himself lucky; for shortly after the outbreak of war he had been one of a draft sent to H.M.S. *Ajax*—lucky because he'd taken part in what he termed a “dinkum” scrap that ended with the ignominious flight of the *Graf Spee* into Monte Video harbour.

Terence hadn't seen much of the chase—he was one of the party operating the smoke-screen apparatus; but he had felt a shell-splinter that had gashed his right leg above the knee. He'd jokingly remarked that it was a good thing that he was a long 'un; had he been a little man the splinter would have got him in the stomach, and he knew what that sort of wound meant!

Of the three chums, Terence was the tallest. His face was of the colour of rich mahogany in contrast to Stan's pale complexion that refused to be mellowed by exposure to tropical sun and salt-laden sea breezes. Brian, the shortest of the trio and also the heaviest, had a complexion that might be described as midway between those of his overseas companions.

The Australian and the Canadian had a grouse in common. Christmas was near at hand, and so far neither had received a mail. They couldn't quite understand it, overlooking the fact that their address for the duration was “Care of Admiralty, London”, and that letters and parcels sent there had been forwarded to their respective ships. Meanwhile they had been sent to hospital and there hadn't been time for the letters announcing their whereabouts to arrive at their homes in far-apart Dominions of the British Empire.

Brian was the fortunate one. Notwithstanding the fact that mails for Gibraltar took twice or thrice as long as in peace time, he received two bumper hampers just before Christmas Eve, and what was, strangely enough, even more welcome, newsy letters from relations and friends.

Everything considered, the patients at the R.N. hospital at Gib didn't do so badly during the Christmas festivities. There were parcels for all, despatched by organizations for providing Christmas cheer for the men afloat and forces overseas.

Over Terence's cot was a bunch of wattle, Australia's floral emblem, while Stan's was decorated with a display of maple leaves. Brian had to be

content with holly, that looked very much out of place in the sun-bathed ward.

It seemed strange to him, too, to eat Christmas pudding with the temperature at over seventy degrees in the shade. Stan also remarked that he wasn't accustomed to associate the festive season with sub-tropical heat; to which Terence replied that he was jolly glad he hadn't to cut Christmas pudding with snow on the ground.

"Swimming and sun-bathing Christmas time; that's bonzo," he added. "But I remember one Christmas Day when a bunch of us up in the bush had nothing but tea and dampers."

"What are dampers?" asked Brian.

Terence explained that they were cakes made of flour and water and without baking powder.

"That reminds me of when I was a scout," declared Brian. "Four or five of us camped out one winter, and beastly cold it was! We made oat-cakes and baked them on hot stones and we snared a rabbit and roasted it. The grub wasn't a success. The cake was like putty and the rabbit was nearly raw!"

The Aussie made a wry grimace.

"Rabbit!" he exclaimed disdainfully. "We treat 'em as vermin 'way down under—same as rats. You don't eat rats, by any chance?"

"You may have to, before this war's over, chum," remarked Stan.

"You've said a mouthful!" jibed Terence. "I'd starve first!"

Fortunately for him he couldn't see into the future, or he would not have been so emphatic.

A few days later the three chums were listening-in to the B.B.C. news bulletins. Britain was doing well in the sea blockade of the enemy, but, added the announcer smugly, the authorities had allowed a cargo of rat-poison and bad cheese to enter a neutral country for re-export to Germany.

"Gee, what darned boneheads!" exclaimed Stan.

"Why?" asked Brian.

"Well," drawled the Canadian, "rat-poison most contains phosphorus; phosphorus is used in tracer-bullets; so I guess some of our airmen will be sore about it."

"H'm, it didn't strike me that way," rejoined Brian.

"I hope it won't anyhow," added Stan ironically.

"What about the rotten cheese?" asked Cardyke.

"I reckon the guys who examined the cargo took good care to probe the stuff—in case tubes of mercury and other chemicals the Germans are in need of might be hidden in the stuff."

"And rotten cheese can be used in explosives," declared Terence. "I remember a big explosion at a store somewhere in South Island, not far from Canterbury, where the cause was set down to gases from over-ripe cheese. And did you hear that bit about a British ship being attacked by aircraft in the North Sea? One of the bombs hit her and she was hidden in smoke and a cloud of coal dust. The bomber reckoned he'd put paid to her, but she wasn't much damaged and continued on her voyage."

"Good for her!" exclaimed Lorne.

"Sure!" agreed Terence. "But say; why did they let that news through? Next time, the German airman'll take good care to round off the job properly!"

"What do you think of this?" asked Brian, pointing to a paragraph in a newspaper he had received from home. "A conscientious objector stated before a tribunal that he wouldn't help his own father if he'd been wounded in action!"

"There may be objectors when there's compulsory service, but precious few have any conscience worth mentioning," observed Terence. "You bet he won't draw the line at gulping Argentine beef; and it was helping to get those food ships through to the Old Country from the River Plate that got us our buckshee packets, chum!"

"I've not joined up to fight for these miserable mugwumps," declared Stan. "We're out to smash the Nazis. The trouble is, I reckon, that Germany didn't learn her lesson in the last war. We weren't hard enough on her, Versailles or no Versailles, or they wouldn't sink merchant ships without warning, and bomb lightships."

"Do you know what happened to a French privateer's crew who captured men working on the Eddystone lighthouse?" asked Brian. "That was donkey's years before our time, old son!"

"No; what?" asked the Canadian.

“The French Government of that day sent the men back to England with gifts to make up for the inconveniences they had been put to; but the captain and crew of the privateer they threw into prison because they had broken faith with humanity. Men engaged on lighthouse duties, declared the French decree, were friends of all seafarers of all nationalities. That principle has been upheld—even by the Germans during the last war, until now. That shows what Nazi-ism stands for!”

“You mentioned Versailles just now,” said Terence. “Shouldn’t have thought you Canadians worried yourselves about that.”

“Why not?” countered Stan, without raising his voice. “Didn’t Canadian troops take part in the last war?”

“And so did our boys,” rejoined the Australian. “See here, if that blinking treaty had been observed properly there wouldn’t be this bust-up, and we three wouldn’t be mooching around in Gibraltar hospital! The Germans weren’t to build submarines or have an Air Force. They promised that. It was you Britishers—sorry, Cardyke, I know you don’t like that word, but it just slipped out—it was some British spouters in high places that encouraged them to kick over the traces—out and out Pacifists and the like. ‘Don’t humiliate Germany, but let’s humiliate ourselves!’ sort of thing. Hitler must have thought you British were a dud lot, though I reckon he’s changed his mind some since we’ve got busy!”

This conversation was typical of discussion on the lower-deck, in army camps and Royal Air Force stations. Men thought and argued more about the causes and possible effects of the present struggle than their predecessors did in the war that was to end war, but didn’t.

Great Britain, the Dominions and Colonies had entered into the war soberly. There were no so-called patriotic demonstrations by irresponsible flag-wagging crowds. A world-conflict was not of their seeking; they had been forced into it, after appeasement had failed dismally and German unprovoked aggression had menaced the peace and security of the world. But having been forced to take up the sword, the British peoples were firmly and grimly determined not to return it to its sheath until Nazi-ism, with all the evils it stood for, was completely and finally crushed.

Brian and his two chums continued to make good progress towards recovery. Actually Stan Lorne was fit for duty; but, because he didn’t want to be separated from his pals, he “swung the lead” and successfully bluffed the doctors.

Although they were having what they described as a “cushy time” in hospital, the three amateur bluejackets irked under restraint. They weren’t allowed out of the hospital grounds, and because they weren’t allowed out the stronger became their urge for even a few hours of more or less unrestricted liberty.

Terence was the ringleader. Like most Aussies under arms, he had a profound contempt for petty, and what seemed to be unnecessary, authority. He was “all out” for discipline when occasion demanded; but being kept in a hospital ward from six in the evening till after the doctors had done the rounds on the following morning was a needless restriction, from his point of view.

“We’re doing a guy from this concentration camp, chums,” he announced. “If we’re copped they can’t do much to us.”

Rather dubiously Brian and Stan agreed to join in the adventure. After that the rest was comparatively easy, once the Australian had taken the rest of the “cases” in the ward into his confidence.

Just after seven the three slipped out, wearing blankets over their “hospital blues”. In the darkness they looked like Moors, who form a not inconsiderable part of the civilian population of “The Rock”. While the porter was opening the gate of the grounds for a party of nurses in a taxi, the three adventurers dodged round the offside of the vehicle and gained the town. Once in Waterport Street, crowded with soldiers and sailors on leave as well as a motley throng of local inhabitants—generally referred to as “Scorps”—Brian and his companions attracted hardly any notice.

“Let’s mooch in there,” suggested Terence, pointing to a sort of music-hall, on the walls of which were large placards announcing that there would be an entertainment for the garrison at eight o’clock. “Talent” was to be drawn from the audience, with the inducement of numerous prizes provided by the management.

They went in and found themselves in a crowded hall, the air of which was thick with smoke from hundreds of cigarettes. At the front of the hall was a raised platform decorated with the flags of Britain and France, and a number of small palms in tubs. At one side of a stage was an ill-used piano, where a “Scorp” in well-worn evening dress and long sleek hair was awaiting the signal to strike up.

This was given by the striking of eight bells. The pianist thereupon thumped the keys, but it took more than one bar before the audience realized

that the concert had started with the National Anthem.

When they did, they rose to their feet as one man. The badly tuned piano didn't signify. It was completely drowned by the deep bass voices of four hundred men singing the familiar words.

Then a padre acting as master of ceremonies ascended the platform and called for someone in the audience to provide the first item.

At first there was no response, but in response to the padre's blandishments a burly stoker offered to sing a sentimental song.

Brian decided it was mawkishly sentimental, but evidently it appealed to the audience, judging by the way they joined in the chorus and by the rounds of applause that greeted the singer.

Other turns followed in quick succession; a cornet solo, a corporal of the Army Service Corps who performed breathless tricks with half a dozen eggs at the same time; two "comic" bluejackets whose patter even brought smiles to the face of the master of ceremonies; and next a bandsman who, constructing a weird instrument consisting of a coconut shell, a strip of wood and three banjo strings, in full view of the audience, proceeded to give a selection of popular melodies. It was not until he'd been made to give three encores that he was allowed to leave the platform.

Then came a lull. The padre tried for some minutes to find another volunteer.

"This is where we come in, chums!" declared Terence to his astonished companions.

"How? What do you mean?" asked Brian, taken aback by the Australian's unexpected proposal.

"I guess I'm no good at this sort of thing," protested Stan.

"Leave it to me," rejoined Terence, with all the assurance in the world. "I do the patter. All you have to do is: You say 'yes' to every question I ask you, Cardyke; and you, Lorne, will say 'no'. Got me?"

Protests were useless. Grasping each of his chums by the arm, Terence Grant led them up the gangway to the stage.

The padre looked a bit mystified at the appearance of three men in "hospital blue". So did many of the audience, although they imagined that this was going to be a comic turn at the expense of a naval hospital staff. As it happened, they weren't far wrong.

“Well, men; what do you propose giving for our entertainment?” asked the padre.

“A comic sketch, entitled M.O.’s inspection in B Ward, sir.”

“Oh—ah! splendid!” rejoined the master of ceremonies dubiously. “And your names?”

“We prefer to be anonymous,” replied Terence.

The padre cleared his throat.

“A comic sketch entitled ‘M.O.’s Inspection in B Ward’, men,” he announced in a sepulchral voice.

A thunderous roar of applause greeted his words. The audience thought that he was “putting on” this intonation, although he wasn’t. Past experience at shows of this description had taught him to be suspicious of anonymities.

He need not have worried.

Terence, in his rôle of surgeon-commander, soon had the whole house rocking. Even Brian had all his work cut out to keep a straight face. He hadn’t up to now had the slightest inkling of the Australian’s art of mimicry.

As Terence had said, there was nothing for his two chums to do or say, but to reply “yes” and “no” respectively to his mirth-provoking questions.

Quickly Brian lost his first sensation of nervousness. It was followed by a strange feeling of abandonment, backed by the vociferous applause and laughter that greeted and prompted the performer’s sallies.

Then, like the sudden descent of a lift, Brian’s heart sank to his boots.

For the first time he noticed that the three front rows of the audience were composed of naval and military officers. On the left of the front row sat the surgeon-commander whom Terence was so successfully impersonating!

“Well, my man!” continued Terence, imitating the M.O.’s voice to perfection. “You’re feeling better this morning, I hope?”

“Yes,” replied Brian in a chastened voice.

“You don’t sound like it. Can you say ‘ninety-nine’?”

Again Brian replied in the affirmative, according to plan.

“Excellent!” continued the chief buffoon. “Eleven nines are ninety-nine; I’ll give you eleven No. 9 pills. They’ll buck you up, my man!”

This reference to the Medical Department's stock panacea fairly brought down the house. Only a Service audience knew why. And—thanks be!—the impersonated surgeon-commander was laughing as heartily as the others.

“Are you perfectly happy in Ward B?” demanded Terence, switching over to the Canadian.

“No!” replied Stan.

“Not if you're given leave every evening?”

“No!”

“What a pity!” continued the pseudo M.O. “I fear I'll have to mark you down for ‘Medicine and Duty’. You know what that means?”

“No,” replied Stan again.

“Then wait till to-morrow morning and you'll know all about it,” rejoined Terence, far more prophetically than he imagined.

Again Brian stole a glance at the surgeon-commander. He was no longer joining in the mirth, but was whispering to his right-hand neighbour.

The turn ended in renewed acclamations.

“Let's get on,” whispered Brian, when they regained their seats. “You've been guying Old Sawbones and he's in the front seats.”

“Didn't know he was so broad as that, chum,” replied Terence. “It'll do him good to hear about himself, so how's it? If we're for it, we're for it; and it ain't sense getting back along before it's necessary.”

“You've said it, chum,” agreed Stan. “I guess we'll stay put and take our medicine to-morrow.”

At the usual hour next morning the M.O. made his rounds. He wasn't smiling when he stopped to ask the Australian how he felt.

“Fine, sir!” replied Terence.

“That's splendid! Judging from my observations, I feel quite justified in discharging you three men to duty. And, by the by, let me thank you for a fine entertainment and the opportunity ‘to see ourselves as others see’.”

CHAPTER VII

An Interlude from War

After a few days in the depot at Gibraltar, the three chums came to the decision that it wasn't so dusty to return to duty after weeks of enforced idleness in hospital.

The commander, for instance, informed them that they were entitled to leave after discharge from hospital on account of wounds received on active service and that, if they wished, that period would be deferred until they reached England.

"Can we be sent back together, sir?" asked Stan.

"It might be arranged," replied the commander, after the reason for the request had been given. "It all depends upon what accommodation is available."

Apparently there wasn't any for the time being. Sloops and light cruisers put into Gibraltar on their way from the Mediterranean; but the three chums remained in the depot. It was interesting, however, watching the assembling of convoys, the arrival of merchantmen that had survived U-boat attacks and other perils of the sea. On "make and mend" days the chums would climb the Rock, while on one occasion they received permission to set foot on Spanish soil by walking across the neutral ground to the town of La Linea.

Then came the day when Ordinary Seamen Cardyke, Lorne and Grant were "warned" that they were to embark for England in the oiler *Bullol*.

"What's an oiler, chum?" asked Terence of a chief petty-officer.

"Trying to pull my leg, are you?" replied the other. "And don't call me chum."

"I'll call you anything you wish," retorted the Aussie. "But I don't believe in being cruel to animals."

"What d'ye mean?" stormed the C.P.O. "Any more of that and into the report you'll go!"

"Now listen," continued Terence unruffled. "I asked you a question all in good faith and you didn't answer. Instead you ask me a question, and so I'll

answer it. You can't put me in the report for that. You asked me what I meant when I said I didn't believe in being cruel to animals. Well, if I pulled your leg, as you suggested I am doing, you'd go hopping around for the rest of your natural on one foot, you caricature of a grasshopper!"

The rest of the mess crowded round, expecting a rumpus. The C.P.O., a tall, lean man with disproportionately long legs, wasn't at all popular. He was worse than that. He was a bully, and specimens of that type, though rare in these days, are still to be found on the lower-deck as well as in barrack-rooms.

Brian and Stan were feeling a bit anxious over the situation. The C.P.O. was a "superior officer", and goodness knows what might happen if that easy-going, scant respecter of persons—and often of authority—Terence Grant, went to the length of "dotting him one".

Although the Australian had been moderate in most of his words he had overrun the bounds of discretion by calling the C.P.O. a caricature of an insect.

"Slog him, Aussie!" shouted a seaman at the back of the crowd. "It's well worth ninety days cells to floor a rotten swine like that!"

Terence did nothing of the kind. He'd joined the Senior Service to fight Germans; not truculent C.P.O.'s, and ninety days in detention quarters might mean that the war would be over before he had a chance to have another crack at the enemy.

For a moment or so there was a tense silence.

The bully, true to type, realized that the young ordinary seaman wasn't "easy meat". For one thing, he'd just discovered that Grant was an Australian and as such would hold his own when brought before the commander. For another, the sympathies of the mess were undoubtedly with the man from "Down Under", which didn't mean that he was an under-dog.

Hesitating, the C.P.O. was lost.

"We'll let it pass, mate!" he exclaimed, with a feeble attempt at affability.

"Sure thing!" agreed Terence. "But you haven't answered my question; what is an oiler? And no leg-pulling, mind!"

The information was forthcoming. An "oiler", he was told, was a vessel of anything up to twelve thousand tons' displacement and was employed to carry oil fuel for the fleet. Although she belonged to the Royal Navy she

was not entitled to fly the White Ensign. The Blue, with an Admiralty “foul anchor”, was the flag that marked her as a fleet auxiliary. Her skipper was a “master” and her officers were called by titles similar to those in the Merchant Navy.

In ordinary circumstances it was not the rule to send ratings home from stations abroad in fleet auxiliaries; but this was war time and in consequence many regulations had gone by the board. Since there appeared little likelihood of a warship proceeding from Gibraltar to England in the immediate future, and the depot was somewhat overcrowded with men waiting to be sent back, it had been decided to embark half a dozen ratings on the *Bullol*.

It promised to be more or less of a joy-ride. Discipline on board there would be, but not strict naval discipline. Even the routine would be relaxed, since the supernumeraries were on passage. They would “mess” with the hands, extra provisions being put on board the ship to meet the additional victualling demands.

The party were in charge of a chief petty-officer, happily a decent sort of man. In addition to the three chums, there was a reservist from Newfoundland and a R.N. volunteer reserve ordinary seaman who a few months ago had been an assistant rate collector in a Cornish town.

A tender took the men off to the *Bullol*, which, with a full cargo of oil, was on her way from Haifa to Portsmouth. She was a craft of ten thousand tons carrying half that weight of inflammable fuel. Her engines were aft, as the position of her single funnel proclaimed. Right aft a quick-firer had been mounted for defensive purposes; but her length, coupled with a moderate speed, made her and her sisters easy targets for torpedoes. German submarine commanders had been given to understand that the sinking of a British Admiralty oiler was to be considered an achievement ranking in importance to that of torpedoing an armed merchant cruiser or a destroyer. Every oiler thus destroyed meant so much less fuel for the British Navy.

Brian and his companions had hardly time to “shake down”—they had been given accommodation with the hands who were berthed aft—when the *Bullol* up-anchored and proceeded on her voyage.

According to the master’s instructions she was to link up with a convoy at a rendezvous fifty miles sou’-sou’-west of Cape St. Vincent. All being well, she should arrive at Portsmouth in five days.

All being well meant attack by U-boat, chances of hitting mines, additional risks of collision which steaming at night under war conditions excepted, to say nothing of the ordinary danger of carrying a highly inflammable cargo. Yet, partly on account of extra pay on top of the general war risk money, there was never any lack of volunteers to man the fleet of Admiralty oilers, whose chances of survival in the event of a hostile torpedo getting home were decidedly remote.

Soon the famous Cape Trafalgar bore broad on the starboard beam. The *Bullol* was lifting her bluff ugly bows to the long Atlantic rollers to the accompaniment of the *swish* of her liquid cargo. Everywhere, in spite of so-called hermetically-sealed tank covers, there was a noxious reek of oil.

One result was that the five supernumeraries, who had fondly imagined that by this time they were case-hardened shell-backs, all succumbed to violent seasickness, later to be followed by the chief petty-officer, who vainly protested that it wasn't the motion of the vessel but the stench!

Of what happened during the next four or five hours, Brian had but a very hazy idea. How he kept to the violently swaying hammock he knew not and cared less.

Next morning he turned out with the hands. Then he had a surprise, for going on deck he discovered that the sun was on the oiler's starboard beam. That meant that the *Bullol's* course was approximately south, and in the opposite direction to Old England's shores.

Nor were there any signs of the expected convoy. The complete circle of the horizon was unbroken, even by the smoke of vessels that might be below the skyline.

"We had wireless orders last night," explained one of the *Bullol's* regular crew. "Previous instructions cancelled. We're bound for Ascension."

"Whatever for?" asked Brian.

"Don't ask me," was the reply. "I've given up worrying. You would, if you were on this lay. Nice little pleasure cruise; it would have cost you fifty quid or more before the war started."

"In a luxury liner, not in an oiler," Brian reminded him.

"Ah well, what's the odds? Going to smoke?"

"Not now," replied Brian feelingly. "But can we? I thought that with this sort of cargo——"

“That’s all right,” interrupted the seaman. “Not allowed ’tween decks. Right aft, it’s all right though, and at any time when we’re not on duty. Been across the Line before? Of course you must have been, you having served in the *Galloway*. Now I wonder if that chap Dixcart——”

“The Newfoundlander?”

“That’s him. I wonder if he’s crossed the Line yet.”

“Why?”

“Only just wondering,” replied the man evasively. “Don’t you go saying anything to him about it, though!”

While the hands were at breakfast more information concerning the *Bullol*’s alteration of course was forthcoming.

Although the South Atlantic could be reasonably assumed to be free from the activities of enemy commerce-raiders, there were a considerable number of German merchant ships held up at Lobito Bay.

To keep a watchful eye on them and to “mop up” any that might attempt to run the blockade, two British light-cruisers were alternately patrolling off the coast of Angola. When obliged to refuel and revictual, these warships took turns to proceed to Ascension. Something had gone wrong with the refuelling arrangements and stocks were running low; so the *Bullol* was to be diverted to the island, there to transfer a thousand tons of oil to the light-cruiser. There was also a possibility that she would have to continue her southward run to Simonstown, the South African naval base hard by the Cape of Good Hope.

“Half-way to Sydney when we’re round the corner,” remarked Terence wistfully. “It’s like teasing a caged bear with a chunk of honeycomb!”

It did not take the three chums long to reconcile themselves to present conditions; although, after being in an armed vessel that had proved herself capable of giving and taking hard knocks, they felt a peculiar sensation of helplessness at being on board a comparatively feebly-armed craft—armed only for defensive purposes—that was in effect a potential floating fire ship!

There was little or nothing to fear from Nazi U-boats. They had been wiped off and from under the face of the waters, so far as the South Atlantic was concerned. Three had ventured south of Teneriffe and of these one had lived to rue the day, having been captured intact and with her entire crew, by a French destroyer. The other two had been “put down” by the same craft—a most creditable effort on the part of our Allies.

Fine weather favoured the oiler on her run down to the Tropics. It was like a voyage under peace-time conditions with little to do and plenty of time in which to do it. In fact, Brian felt that he was being cheated, being shoved into an oiler when he'd volunteered for active service in the Royal Navy!

Before long he knew quite a lot about his temporary messmates. There was one exception, however. That was the Newfoundlander, Dixcart. At first Brian took him to be a taciturn sort of man. Actually this was due to the man's natural reserve. He'd lived a hard life in the cod-fishing fleet, although he was but twenty-five. He rarely spoke unless spoken to. When he did, his slow speech was sometimes unintelligible even to Stan Lorne. When Terence chipped the Canadian about his inability to understand a fellow Canadian's lingo, Stan scathingly remarked upon the Australian's ignorance of elementary geography, pointing out that British Columbia is almost as far from Newfoundland as the *Bullol* was at present from England—a mere three thousand miles—and that, anyhow, Newfoundland wasn't in the Dominion!

By degrees Brian gained Dixcart's confidence, and only then did he appreciate the Newfoundlander's attitude. He'd volunteered for service afloat in the fight against Nazi attempts at world domination. Included in a draft of fifty hardy fishermen, he'd been sent from St. John's to Liverpool and thence to Portsmouth. Here the Newfoundlanders had been split up into small groups. He had been sent to a light-cruiser bound for the Mediterranean to swelter in a relatively warm climate when he would have been of good service in the North Sea in winter. Then he developed Malta fever and after treatment at Bighi Naval Hospital he found himself parted from his fellow countrymen, at Gibraltar.

When the navy is at war, various traditional customs and ceremonies have, perforce, to be suspended. Amongst them is the time-honoured initiation of novices into the Court of King Neptune when first they cross the Line.

On board the *Bullol*, however, there seemed no reason why the traditional ceremony should not be carried out. There was no risk of interruption by enemy action, and the event would help to mitigate the tediousness of the voyage. The master, on being approached, raised no objections, and that was enough for the crew.

For days past the bos'n and one of the quartermasters had been cautiously "smelling out" possible victims. The rôles of King Neptune,

Queen Amphitrite and members of the Court, together with the barbers and doctor, had already been cast. The canvas tank in which the victims were to be ducked, after being shaved and dosed, was ready for erection, together with the gaudily painted thrones for their nautical Majesties' use.

One thing that was still wanting was a sufficient number of novitiates. Out of a total of sixty-three officers and men on board, only three had been definitely established as those who had not yet crossed the Line; and it seemed something of the nature of a "frost", even under a tropical sun, if all these preparations did not produce more numerical results.

Again there was a secret conclave, during which the bos'n, while admitting that several men, including Cardyke, Grant and Lorne, had crossed and re-crossed the Equator, insisted that they had not been duly and truly initiated. War or no war, now that the opportunity offered itself, it was only right that they should submit themselves to the customary rites.

"You can't make 'em, Jimmy," declared the cook, who had been cast for the part of Neptune's spouse, and also had a high reputation as a "sea-lawyer".

"Why can't I?" demanded the bos'n.

"'Cos it's like this, mate; they've been across the blinkin' Line. That you'll not be denying. Very well, then; directly we make a home port they can bring an action against us for assault!"

"Lumme! Is that so?" asked the bos'n doubtfully.

"Not a doubt of it," replied the cook. "But you can ax 'em if so be they'll be willin' just to make things go with a swing, like!"

"I'll have a cut at it," agreed the bos'n. "And there's that Dixcart. You know, the Newfoundland bloke. He's as mum as an oyster; but you can bet your boots he hasn't been far from the Banks afore he joined up. And I happen to know he went no farther than up the Straits."

"Then shove his name down and give him the customary warning," suggested the cook.

Brian and his two chums agreed readily enough when the proposition was put to them, although Terence stipulated that the barber and the doctor shouldn't try any of their rough stuff on them. If they did, he wouldn't be responsible for the consequences!

The Newfoundlander remained as mysterious as the Sphinx, merely observing in slow measured tones that they'd have to force him into

Neptune's presence and then even his Majesty would have a shock.

"Lumme! It looks as if there'll be a good scrap!" confided the bos'n to the chief officer. "That Newfoundland bloke seems as tough as nails; but I reckon a dozen of us'll put the kibosh on him. Then he'll get it in the neck thick and heavy!"

The zero hour approached. The tank was rigged and filled, the Master of the *Bullol*, with his officers, took up his post aft, seated on a crate that contained bottled beer for the entertainment of Neptune and his court.

The sextant observations by the chief officer were awaited with tense interest, as he brought the sun's "lower limb" down to the horizon.

"At that, sir!" he announced. "Make it eight bells."

It was noon and the oiler was now somewhere very near the Line. A mile or so either way didn't matter, and if the subsequent working out of the sights proved that the ship hadn't actually crossed the Line, the chief officer wasn't going to say that she hadn't.

A strident hail coming apparently from over the bows; actually from the cook, temporarily impersonating King Neptune in a weird dress that resembled seaweed, and wearing a gilt crown:

"Ship ahoy! What ship is that?"

"Fleet auxiliary *Bullol*!" replied the master.

"I'll trouble you to get way off your ship!" rejoined Neptune imperiously. "And look slippy while you're about it!"

It was one of the moments in the cook's career. Never before had he dared to speak to his captain, even though he was only a "master", in that dictatorial manner. The chances were that he might never do so again, so he was figuratively grasping opportunity by the forelock.

The engine-room telegraph bell clanged. The rumble of the propeller shaft, that had maintained its steady beats for days, ceased. An uncanny silence brooded over the ship, broken only by the faint hiss of escaping steam and the plashing of water against the bows as the oiler lost way.

Neptune and his court trooped aft, accepted with well-simulated condescension offers of refreshment (thankfully the master inwardly recalled that he'd bought the beer out of bond) and then His Majesty and his consort seated themselves on their thrones.

Brian and Stan were the first to undergo the ordeal and, probably because the tough Australian was standing by ready to butt in, they were let off comparatively lightly. They didn't find a pill made of soap deftly shoved into their mouths when they opened them to reply to the doctor's questions; the barber took good care not to bung up their eyes during the lathering process, although he did ply his wooden razor with zest and effect.

Then, backward, as his chum was unexpectedly tipped, Brian fell into the water, where he was seized by half a dozen "bears"; and when Stan and Terence rejoined him the fun grew fast and furious.

A lull followed while Neptune's minions were routing out the unwilling victims who had vainly hidden themselves, only to be brazenly betrayed by their hilarious shipmates, until only Dixcart remained.

The search party discovered him where they had least expected. Unlike the other victims, who were wearing precious little, and old clothes at that, the Newfoundlander was in bluejacket's tropical rig. He was sitting quietly, the only occupant of the mess-deck.

He came quietly, too.

"Why in this rig, minion?" demanded Neptune. "Prepare him for the ceremony, you men!"

"I guess you'd better hold back a while," rejoined Dixcart severely. "And you, boss, just cast your eyes on this."

"This," was a rolled sheet of cartridge paper. Figuratively thrown on his beam end by being called Boss, King Neptune took the proffered paper, unfolded it and scanned the writing.

"Mebbe you'll read it aloud," prompted Dixcart.

It was a strange scene. Again silence fell upon the revellers. Amphitrite peered over "her" spouse's shoulder, the doctor and the barber left their posts to get within hearing distance, while the bears and their victims grouped themselves at the edge of the tank, wondering what it was all about.

Neptune, otherwise the cook, was what seamen term "jonnick". He now knew perfectly well that the Newfoundlander had got to windward of both him and the bos'n.

In loud tones as befits the traditional God of the Sea, he read out:

"H.M.S. *Redcliffe*. Know all men by these presents, that our trusty and well-beloved John Dixcart has served as a novice on

board the good ship *Redcliffe*, and that on this day he was duly initiated according to the mystic rites and ceremonies, and we do signify to all it may concern that it is our Royal Will and Pleasure to confer upon him the Freedom of the Seas and to exempt him from further homage.

Given under our Hand and Seal at our Court on the Equator on the first day of April, One thousand nine hundred and thirty-two.

NEPTUNE,
REX.”

“Well, that’s a new one on me, mate!” declared Neptune, taken off his guard; then, remembering his rôle, he added: “Carry on, trusty and well-beloved subject. Now, my lads, let the good work proceed!”

The fun was resumed, bears and their victims ducking each other with zest. Led by Terence, the novices pressed home the attack with such vigour that several of the less active of Neptune’s attendants scrambled out of the tank, hotly pursued by their erstwhile victims.

With Brian and Stan hard at his heels, the barber—his ordinary occupation on board was that of donkeyman—climbed into one of the boats which had been swung outboard.

He slipped. His hands slippery with soap and grease, failed to retain their grip on the inboard gunwale.

With a smothered cry he fell, rasping along the ship’s side, and disappeared beneath the surface.

CHAPTER VIII

The “Martha’s” Boat

“Man overboard!” shouted a dozen voices.

Someone aft hurled a lifebelt. The revellers, including Neptune, with his crown and false beard discarded, rushed to the side, waiting for the luckless barber to reappear.

They weren’t at all anxious. The *Bullol* was not carrying way, the sea was calm and the man in the “drink” was known to be a good swimmer. There would be no need to lower a boat. They could haul him inboard by means of a bowline.

But when ten long-drawn seconds passed and there were no signs of the man’s head breaking surface, it became obvious that something serious had happened. Neptune’s court looked like being transformed into a scene of tragedy.

Then, acting on impulse, Brian dived overboard.

He simply had to do something—to go to the aid of the unfortunate seaman, who in all probability had been stunned by his head striking the steel side of the ship.

It was a hit-or-miss dive, with the odds on the miss. All he had to go upon was the approximate spot where the man had disappeared. There were no bubbles on the surface to indicate the position, not even the “barber’s” false hair and beard.

Brian made a clean dive, clearing the surface at about ten feet from the ship’s side. Then, opening his eyes, he continued to swim downwards, using slow steady strokes.

All he could see was a wall festooned by gently swaying creepers. At least that was what it looked like until he realized that it was the side of the ship below the waterline and that it was thickly covered with seaweed and other marine growths.

A few strokes brought him down to the “hard chine”. The oiler, like modern craft of that type, was built more like a box with rounded ends than the round-bilged vessels carrying general cargoes.

“If he’s jammed under there,” thought Brian, referring to the flat bottom of the ship, “it’s all up with him.”

Nor could Brian dare to investigate. He would be caught by the long trailing tentacles of seaweed.

In ordinary conditions, he could remain under water for three-quarters of a minute. Often he’d been timed at the swimming baths at home. But here there was a difference. In the baths he could kick against the floor and shoot to the surface; in mid-Atlantic he’d have to rise by using his arms and legs and without the initial advantage of a kick off.

Still some fifteen feet down, he swam aft until through the clear water he could see the outlines of two of the three blades of the propeller.

But what was that distorted shape hanging limply across the upper edge of one of the blades?

A few strokes brought him within hand’s reach of the object. It was the motionless body of the man he was seeking.

As he grasped the seaman’s arm mild panic seized him. Would his breath last out till he and his burden reached the surface? What if the engines were suddenly started and the huge blades were to mangle them both? Even if he dragged the man from the propeller, would they clear the ship’s projecting counter? And what was that greyish shape gliding past the after end of the enormous rudder? Was it a shark or just a harmless fish, distorted out of all proportion by the refractive properties of the water?

Somehow he planted both feet against the boss of the screw and gave himself a vigorous kick-off. Hampered by the man’s unconscious form, his progress towards the surface seemed exasperatingly slow. Actually it was not, yet every second was precious if he must retain his breath.

His lungs felt like bursting. Air bubbles from his nostrils raced him on the upward journey. He could see daylight above him, but how long it seemed before he could reach the open air—if he ever did!

Yet not for one moment did he relax his grip, hampered though he was by having the use of one arm only to assist his progress to the surface.

If ever the instinct of self-preservation urged him to fend for himself it did then, yet by sheer resolve he even tightened his grip upon the man he was determined to save or perish in the attempt.

At length he had broken surface. Gratefully he drew in the life-giving air, floating on his back and keeping his companion’s head above water.

They were now about twenty feet from the *Bullol's* starboard quarter. Ropes, hurtling through the air, fell close by. One actually dropped beyond, the trailing bight rasping Brian's face.

He was too exhausted even to attempt to grasp them. Another lifebuoy pitched a yard from him, unseen and unheeded.

The crew of the oiler were now engaged in lowering a boat, but before she could be slipped there was a tremendous splash.

Terence had dived overboard to the aid of his chum.

He came to the surface within arm's length of the pair, and Brian never felt more relieved in his life than when he felt the Aussie's fingers clutching his arm.

"All bonzo!" exclaimed Terence. "Let him go; I've got him."

As a matter of fact Terence had to grip both the rescued seaman and his rescuer. After that, Brian's recollections were decidedly hazy. He didn't even remember being lifted into the boat.

When he came to himself, Brian was lying on a mattress placed on deck under the awning. Two of his messmates were vigorously massaging his limbs in spite of the fact that the thermometer was in the neighbourhood of a hundred degrees in the shade.

Hard by, lying on the hard deck with a bundle of clothes as a pillow, was the former official of Neptune's court. He was still unconscious and, in the opinion of the onlookers, seemed likely to be so for all time.

Kneeling astride of him was the "doctor", now hard at work in earnest as he vigorously pressed the palms of his enormous hands against the patient's ribs, alternately applying and releasing the pressure.

He was the third to take on the job of attempting to restore respiration. Two others had each in turn performed the operation for twenty minutes until heat and exhaustion forced them to desist. Still the apparently drowned man gave no signs of animation.

Even as Brian turned his head to look at the unconscious man he hadn't realized what had happened. He'd no recollection of going overboard. The last thing he did remember was skylarking in the tank.

The *Bullol* had been stationary; now the rumble of her propeller shaft told him she was moving again.

"Hello, you!" exclaimed Lorne. "How goes?"

Brian looked doubtfully at his churn, who was still wearing the borrowed pair of blue pyjama trousers he'd put on for the revels.

"What's up?" he asked. "Has Neptune packed up already?"

"An hour back," replied Stan. "That was swell; going after that guy!"

"What guy?"

The Canadian did not reply at once. At the back of his mind he thought that Brian was trying a gentle leg-pull.

"The fellow you went in after, of course," explained Stan. "We thought you weren't coming up either! I guess you were under for a minute, mebbe more!"

Then full recollection returned to the rescuer; the grim underwater spectacle of the "barber" huddled over the propeller blade; his own fears that the propeller might suddenly revolve and cut the pair of them to pieces; and finally the desperate struggle to reach the surface, and subsequent oblivion.

"Is he dead?" asked Brian, giving another glance at the motionless figure.

"He would have been if you hadn't got him to the surface, Cardyke," declared the *Bullol's* master. "We're still hoping to pull him through. Smart bit of work, that of yours! I'll see that it's brought to the notice of the proper authorities. And now you fellows had better get Cardyke below. It's sleep he wants."

It was virtually a command. Although Brian protested that he'd soon be feeling all right, he was glad of the assistance of his chums. His legs felt so weak that his knees gave under him as he was helped to the hatchway. He had to be carried down the ladder and lifted into his hammock. Then someone gave him a hot drink—rum and lime-juice—and a minute or so later he was fast asleep.

That was about two o'clock in the afternoon. It was not until seven on the following morning that he awoke, feeling ravenously hungry. He'd had nothing to eat since breakfast on the preceding day.

"How's the donkeyman?" he asked, and would not have been surprised to hear that he hadn't been restored to life.

He knew the man well by sight. He'd spoken with him on several occasions, but he'd never learnt his name.

"Smithers? He's doing fine," replied Lorne.

“But it wasn’t till sundown that he pulled through,” added Terence. “He’s got you to be thankful for, chum!”

“And I have to thank you,” rejoined Brian.

The Australian shrugged his shoulders.

“ ’Snothing!” he declared.

“Nothing? Wasn’t there a shark?”

“Not that I know of,” replied Terence. “He would be scared blue, any old way! But it licks me how you found Smithers. He’d been properly knocked out—there’s a lump on his head the size of an egg. By rights he should have sunk like a stone.”

“He fetched up against the propeller,” explained Brian.

“Say? Lucky for him! What did you do?”

“Grabbed hold of him,” replied Cardyke. “But it wasn’t what I did, but what I was afraid of! I thought every second that the engines would be started.”

“As a matter of fact, they were almost,” said Lorne. “The chief officer was just about to ring down for a touch astern, thinking perhaps you’d got foul of the weeds on the ship’s bottom and that that would pull you clear, when the cap’n stopped him. That was just before you came up, and Terry jumped in after you like greased lightning!”

The rescue, however, was less than a nine days’ wonder; for, before the *Bullol* reached the island of Ascension, it was almost forgotten except by the principal characters. On the other hand, the crew were not likely to forget the way in which the ship’s cook harangued the captain. That yarn would be spun long after those taking part had reached a stage when for them the sea was only a memory; always supposing that they survived the perils of the deep and of the King’s enemies.

The *Bullol*’s stay at Ascension was of short duration. Thanks to wireless, it was made possible for the light-cruiser to arrive almost at the same time as the oiler. The anchorage off Georgetown was quiet, so that the *Bullol* could be laid alongside the warship.

In an atmosphere reeking of oil, the operation of fuelling the light-cruiser was completed in a couple of hours. Had it been a question of coaling the task would have taken the best part of a couple of days, with a tremendous expenditure of labour and with clouds of coal dust instead of the

smell of oil. From all aspects, save one, King Oil had proved to be far superior to King Coal; but, while coal in bunkers formed some sort of protection against hostile shells, oil-fuel was a source of danger on account of its much greater inflammability.

“Now where are we bound for?” asked Brian, as the *Bullol*, with thousands of gallons of oil still on board, headed nor'-nor'-west.

“One thing's a cert—we aren't off to Australia this trip, Terence,” declared Stan.

“No, worse luck,” agreed Terence regretfully. “But why we didn't dump all the ‘milk’ gets me beat. I shouldn't be surprised if they sent us across the Herring Pond to fill up. Half-way home and back again, Lorne! Guess that makes you feel sore, same as me!”

Speculation was rife amongst the hands until a wireless message was received ordering the *Bullol* to proceed to Portsmouth with all dispatch.

“All dispatch!” exclaimed the chief officer scoffingly. “And we were due for dry-docking three months ago. With all this weed on her bottom I doubt whether we're making ten knots.”

“Eleven, mister,” amended the captain, jealous of his ship's reputation. “Have a squint at the taffrail log indicator if you disbelieve me.”

With several of her oil tanks empty the *Bullol* was rolling considerably. Against a head wind her speed might easily be down to a bare eight knots, and that would make her an easy victim to any U-boat that chanced to sight her.

“You've heard nothing about our joining a convoy, sir?” asked the chief officer.

The master shook his head.

“Nothing,” he replied. “But I have hopes before we pass Las Palmas.”

For the present there was little to fear from hostile submarine action or mines. There'd be time for that when the oiler was north of latitude 20°.

A few days after leaving Ascension—the *Bullol* was roughly four hundred miles west-by-south of Sierra Leone—a small sail was sighted about five miles on the port bow. It literally was a small sail, for when glasses were brought to bear it could be seen that the object was a ship's boat sailing free in a fresh south-east Trade.

“She’s a long way from home,” declared the *Bullol’s* skipper. “Looks to me as if they’ve had to abandon ship and take to the boats. We’ve had no wireless reporting any sinkings in this part of the Atlantic.”

“No,” agreed the chief officer. “And yet no one would be such a fool as to put so far out to sea unless he had to. Do you remember that five-ton yacht we spoke in mid-Atlantic which was well homeward bound from Vera Cruz?”

“Yes,” agreed the captain. “That was before war started. Small sailing craft making the American coast by way of the Azores were almost as common as blackberries. No doubt their crews are otherwise employed nowadays. . . . Port twenty, quartermaster. We’d better see yon craft isn’t in need of assistance.”

The alteration of helm brought most of the crew on deck. Speculation was rife concerning the reason for a ship’s boat to be bowling along far off the land and that none of the people in her had made any attempt to signal to the *Bullol*.

By this time it could be definitely established that the craft was not a yacht, but an open ship’s boat, under reefed main and staysails. There were four, perhaps more, men in her and although they could not help sighting the British oiler, unless they were too weak to see properly, they showed no signs of wanting assistance. On the contrary, the boat had altered course slightly as if to avoid having to “speak” the *Bullol*.

It was now practically a stern chase. The boat was slipping through the water almost as fast as the foul-hulled oiler. Had the breeze freshened the former would have shown the *Bullol* a clean pair of heels.

“What’s up with those fellows?” asked the captain irritably. “It’s up to us to see if they require assistance.”

“They obviously don’t,” rejoined the chief officer. “So why waste time?”

“I’ll see this through!” decided the Old Man resolutely.

He moved toward the voice-tube communicating with the engine-room; but before he could remove the whistle and request the chief engineer for a few extra revolutions the chief officer announced that the boat was rounding-to.

Almost head to wind and with her staysail hauled aweather, the boat was soon almost without way.

As the *Bullol* drew level—her engines had to be put half-speed astern to prevent her overrunning the boat—it was seen that the crew were wearing singlets and shorts. One, evidently in charge, sported a white-topped peak cap without a badge; the others wore sun helmets. All of them were brick-red complexioned as the result of long exposure to the sun.

“Boat ahoy!” hailed the oiler’s master. “Where are you from and where are you bound?”

“We’re from the whaler *Martha* of Martha’s Vineyard, Masschusetts, Yewnited States of ’Merica!” replied the peak-capped man in a strong nasal accent. “I guess we kin seek a whale without you guys nosin’ around! There’s our ship over the horizon and I reckon she’ll close us all right. No, stranger, I reckon we don’t want assistance!”

He pointed in a nor’westerly direction where a trail of smoke on the horizon supported his assertion.

“That’s his way of saying: ‘Sorry you’ve been troubled’, sir!” said the chief officer, secretly pleased that the Old Man had been rebuffed. “I said we were wasting time!”

“So you did, mister,” agreed the captain, as he rang for “full ahead”. “But yon’s not my conception of a whaleboat. P’raps they do things differently in the U.S.A.”

The *Bullol* resumed her former course, while the boat proceeded on a diverging one. An hour later her sail was a mere speck on the wide expanse of wind-flecked waves.

“There is a *Martha* of Martha’s Vineyard, sir,” announced the chief officer. “I happen to have an American *Lloyd’s List* on board, and it gives her name.”

“Is she a whaling vessel?”

“It didn’t say.”

“H’m! I still have my doubts, mister!”

Some fifty miles south of Las Palmas, the *Bullol* was intercepted by a British patrol-ship. A naval officer came on board and handed the master written sailing orders.

The order was to make for the Azores, then steer a northerly course to latitude 48° N., where she would be between the trade routes from New

York and the West Indies before they converged in the Chops of the Channel.

Arriving at the position indicated, she was then to shape a westerly course for the Bishop Light.

“And if you’re lucky you’ll fall in with a convoy,” added the boarding officer. “At any rate there’s little chance of falling foul of a U-boat in that area. We seem to have mopped them up pretty successfully. All the same, keep your weather eye lifting!”

“I have, so far!”

“Splendid! By the by, you didn’t happen to sight a ship’s boat heading north, somewhere between here and Ascension?”

“As it happened, I did,” admitted the master of the *Bullol*. “It’s entered in the log: a Yankee whaler’s boat. Let me see—yes, belonged to the *Martha*.”

“*Martha*, my foot!” ejaculated the lieutenant inelegantly. “The mob in that boat were five German naval officers, making a get-away from a supply ship that slipped out of Lobito Bay from Pernambuco. How they came to part brass rags with the ship’s got us guessing. Mutiny, perhaps! They stopped a Portuguese vessel and got provisions from her. That’s the last we heard of them until now; and you were as mute as an oyster about it.”

Having obtained all the information possible from the oiler’s officers, the lieutenant “repaired” on board his own ship. In a few minutes she was steaming hard in an endeavour to increase the navy’s bag.

Later it was heard that she had been unsuccessful. The boat and its crew of German officers eventually reached the Canaries, where for the present they were in neutral territory.

“How much blood-money have we lost over that lay, sir?” asked the *Bullol*’s chief officer.

“We wouldn’t have lost any if I hadn’t listened to your advice,” snapped the Old Man.

“But you didn’t.”

“H’m! And that gilded popinjay chucked it in my teeth that I hadn’t kept my weather eye lifting. Maybe he’s right there; but next time——”

CHAPTER IX

Torpedoed!

The *Bullol* made the Azores almost without incident. Brian and his chums were beginning to think that they'd done with the war—that they'd left it behind after the *Zeitun* and, later, the *Graf Spee* had met their doom.

There were reports of mines in British home waters and of both warships and merchant craft being sent to the bottom through their action. U-boat activities, however, were approaching vanishing point so far as Allied shipping was concerned; it was the unfortunate neutrals, who couldn't hit back, that suffered severely from Germany's acts of rank piracy.

"And who is to be blamed for that?" asked Terence, who, by virtue of having been born in the Antipodes, claimed that he could take a more detached view of the situation. "You British, of course! In the last war German submarines didn't play the game in spite of previous solemn declarations. At the Armistice they were forced—and force is the only argument a German understands—to surrender all their remaining U-boats and, later, to give guarantees that no more would be built. You British, turning down the French proposal to come down upon the blighters like a cargo of bricks when they began violating the terms of the peace-treaty, foolishly allowed the Germans to re-arm and in particular build submarines and military aircraft. Can you deny that, Cardyke?"

Brian couldn't.

"You've said that before, old son," he rejoined. "And talking about it won't make any difference. The bare fact remains that we're at war and we've simply got to finish a job that should have been done good and proper twenty-one years ago."

Four of the "supernumeraries", Cardyke, Lorne, Grant and Dixcart the Newfoundlander, were yarning on the fo'c'sle head; or rather the first three were doing most of the talking while the rather tongue-tied Newfoundlander expressed agreement or disagreement as the case might be, with a grunt or a shake of the head.

It was close on four bells in the first dog-watch. The sun, a glaring crimson ball, was low in the west. The *Bullol*, having made her northward

run, had made an eight-point turn to starboard half an hour earlier and was heading due west.

“Sail dead ahead, sir!” reported one of the look-out men.

Instinctively the four chin-waggers broke off their conversation.

About two miles off and standing out with startling distinctness in the rays of the setting sun was a large tramp steamer, nearly bows-on.

So much they saw, but the chief officer on the bridge noticed something more. Through his glasses he saw that there was another craft—a low-lying one—alongside, and that the tramp wasn’t making way. The absence of a bone in her teeth, otherwise her bow wave, showed that.

Evidently no one on board the vessel had sighted the approaching *Bullol*, since she was dead in the eye of the sun.

The oiler’s chief officer sent for the captain and before the Old Man arrived had ordered the helm to be put hard over.

“She’s got a submarine lying alongside!” declared Brian.

“One of ours?” asked Stan.

“Goodness knows. We’re turning away from her.”

“Bet she’s a U-boat,” opined Terence. “She’s held up that poor wowser before she sends her to the bottom!”

“I’ve never heard of a U-boat making fast alongside a prize,” demurred Brian. “She’d make the other send off one of her boats. Look, the ship’s moving now.”

The tramp was forging ahead slowly and turning under full starboard helm. By so doing she had masked the submarine from the *Bullol*; but at the same time she had exposed her own broadside. On it were painted two large Dutch flags and between them in huge letters the name *Idjen*.

“I guess the U-boat’s taking provisions on board, and not paying for them,” declared Stan.

“It’s my belief the Dutchman isn’t a Dutchman but a German supply ship,” rejoined Brian. “She’s stopped again. She only turned so as to hide the submarine alongside her. Wonder if it’ll be our turn next. Got your swimming collars handy, you fellows?”

Already the *Bullol* was legging it away from danger. Her master had sent out a general call by wireless, giving the information that he’d sighted a U-

boat in lat. 48° 10' N., long. 20° 15' W., and that she was taking in supplies from a ship disguised as a Dutch vessel, bearing the name *Idjen*.

"I don't think the U-boat will chase us, mister," he confided to the chief officer after the wireless message had been sent out and acknowledged by at least a dozen ships within a radius of two hundred miles. None of them was a warship. Destroyers and other submarine hunters preferred to keep silent on receipt of such information, so as not to betray their presence to the enemy until they were on the spot and ready to pounce.

"Why not, sir?" asked the chief officer.

"She'll have taken in our message and so will her supply ship. That'll scare 'em stiff. They'll leg it for all they're worth. . . . See, the *Idjen*—if that's her right tally—is off already!"

"Let's hope the U-boat's following suit," added the chief officer.

In spite of his optimism the Old Man wasn't taking unnecessary chances. At sunset all lights were screened, boats swung out ready for instant lowering, and the hands warned to keep their swimming collars handy. The quick-firer aft was manned ready for instant action, although, during the hours of darkness, it would be next to impossible to discern the almost submerged form of an attacking U-boat.

Meanwhile the *Bullol* was steering a zig-zag course and steaming hard, although her speed was seriously diminished by the drag of tons of marine growth attached to her bottom.

"Going to turn in, you fellows?" asked Terence, when, the watch having been changed and the hands having had the last meal of the day, there was nothing much to be done by the watch below except to yarn and then go to their bunks—or hammocks, in the case of the supernumerary naval ratings.

"No jolly fear!" replied Brian. "I don't just like the idea, with hundreds of tons of oil a couple of bulkheads off!"

"A fellow's got to sleep, I reckon," said Terence. "Let's have a kip on the fo'c'sle. It won't be the first time I've slept in the open."

They gathered together their blankets and swimming collars and made their way for'ard. If the officer of the watch spotted them in the darkness he did not raise any objection.

Neither did the two look-outs, stationed in the eyes of the ship. They welcomed human society. Except for reporting vessels ahead they had little to do. It was those on watch on the bridge and right aft who had to keep their

eyes skinned for possible attack. Should the U-boat be in pursuit and use her guns in preference to a torpedo, it was from aft or abeam that the menace would appear.

“What’s the bright idea, mates?” asked one of the look-out men up for’ard. “You can’t have three draws here, you know.”

“Nor anywhere else,” rejoined Brian. “No smoking aft; Old Man’s orders.”

“No odds to me,” continued the man. “But you’ll find it downright parky before mornin’.”

“Not for me,” declared Dixcart unexpectedly. “Once, off the bank, I swam for an hour with ice all around.”

“For the fun of it?” asked Terence.

“Ah, no! The dory overturned. There was much fog and our mates could not find us for a long while.”

“’Ere, don’t talk of swimmin’!” protested the look-out man. “I’m no dab hand at it, and it’s four hundred miles, five mebbe, to the nearest land. Anyone got the time? A chap misses the ship’s bell. I reckon our reliefs are about due!”

“I’ve got me watch on me,” announced his “opposite number”. “But you’d want eyes like a cat to see what the time is. No submarine could spot us on a night like this.”

“Don’t you believe it,” rejoined the first speaker. “Lookin’ down from the fo’c’sle and lookin’ up from the sea level is two very different things. I knows that!”

“Were you in submarines then, Lofty?” asked Brian.

“Was I not! Three years an’ six months in the Trade in the last do!”

His listeners didn’t have to ask what the “Trade” meant. It was a “navy” expression for service in submarines.

“What is it like?” asked Terence.

“Not so dusty. ’Course you have to be nippy and keep your eyes skinned. And I’ve had some narrow squeaks, the worst, I reckon, when we were fired upon and depth-charged by a Yankee destroyer. To chuck in a little make-weight she tried her hardest to ram us.”

“Why?” asked Terence.

“ ’Cause we were just a bit too slow answering her challenge. She was an American destroyer operating from Queenstown, and she didn't 'arf give us a shaking before she sheered off, thinkin' she'd done us in good and proper. When we got back to our base, blessed if the Yanks weren't drinking to their success, they thinkin' they'd downed a U-boat. They looked so bucked about it that it made our hearts sad to have to put 'em wise; so we just——”

The narrative was never completed.

With a terrific, ear-splitting roar a torpedo exploded just for'ard of the *Bullol's* engine-room.

No one on board had seen the track of the deadly missile speeding through the dark waters from a U-boat barely four hundred yards away on her starboard beam.

To Brian, sitting on the fore-deck in the wake of a power-driven winch, it seemed as if the oiler had leapt at least three feet vertically. Then down she came, to the accompaniment of rending metal and the roar of water.

He found himself brought up against the guard rails, with two if not more of his shipmates lying across his body and legs. For a moment or so he was too dazed to think coherently. The shattering noise was far louder than the *Galloway's* broadside in the heat of her action with the *Zeitun*.

A deluge of water stung him to activity. He struggled, pushed his shipmates aside and staggered to his feet.

A few seconds earlier everything had been in total darkness. Now his surroundings were brilliantly illuminated by a bright reddish glow that meant only one thing: the explosion of the torpedo had ignited the *Bullol's* highly inflammable cargo.

Right aft orders were being shouted, but their purport was inaudible above the din. Men were shrieking, not from fear but by reason of grievous wounds and burns.

The explosion had almost cut the ship in two. The bows were cocking up at an unusual angle—more than they had ever done when meeting a heavy head sea—while the stern had a decided list to port. Between the extremities was a barrier of oil-fed flames.

No doubt the survivors aft were attempting to lower the boats. That was small consolation to those on the fo'c'sle head. There weren't any boats there and the inferno amidships had cut off all chance of getting aft.

“Jump for it before she dips!” shouted someone. “Keep together, lads, and watch out for oil!”

The warning was by no means precisely worded, but its meaning was no less clear. Unless the group of men for’ard were not to be engulfed in a rapidly-widening patch of burning oil as the ship disappeared, they’d better dive overboard and gain a safe distance beyond the fringes of the water-borne inferno.

A safe distance—what did that mean, and what then? Swimming in the numbingly cold water on the off-chance of being picked up by the *Bullol’s* boats, supposing that any had succeeded in being lowered. Swimming with gradually failing strokes until oblivion overtook them—and they wouldn’t sink; at least while there was air in their life-saving collars.

In moments such as these Brian thought of his life-saving gear and how incongruous it seemed!

“C’mon, you moon-struck guy!” shouted Stan in Brian’s ear. “Overboard with you!”

Three or four men had already jumped and were swimming strongly from the now stationary though rapidly settling forepart of the ship. One man, black-haired with a bald patch on the top of his head, was well away. In the glare of the burning oil that bald patch showed red, just as if he’d been scalped!

“Do you want me to throw you in?” bawled Lorne.

Then Brian’s body responded to his mind.

Climbing over the guard rail, he steadied himself for a moment and then dived. His spring had taken him well clear of the ship’s side. Down he went, perhaps for ten or twelve feet before he came to the surface. As he did so another splash told him that Stan had followed him.

“Keep together!”

Someone about twenty yards ahead kept on repeating the advice. Probably it was Terence. There were three or four heads close together. One swimmer was floundering, splashing as he pounded his way from the immediate dangers of being overtaken by the spreading oil or of being carried down by the suction of the sinking ship.

On they swam, all within a radius of a boat’s length. It might have been a couple of minutes or it might even have been a quarter of an hour—they had lost count of time—when someone shouted: “Easy, lads; she’s going!”

Turning on his back, the better to see, Brian had a nightmare view of the passing of the *Bullol*.

Through the flames, that alongside resembled a field of waving corn although from the sinking ship they rose to a great height, he could make out the bows and stern, now raking so steeply that they looked like jaws of a titanic pair of pincers.

The waist was already under water. The noise of rending metal continued to be audible above the roaring of the flames.

Then, with a vicious hiss the shattered ends disappeared, leaving a huge pall of oily smoke, blood-red in its underside, to mark the spot where the vessel had sunk.

A few sullen undulations, subdued by the action of the oil, were all that the swimmers felt. There was no suction—at least at that distance. Then the flames from the burning oil seemed to increase in intensity.

“Best be getting a move on!” shouted Terence, in order to make himself audible to his temporarily deafened companions. “Oil’s spreading! It’s like a prairie fire!”

“Ever seen a prairie fire, Stan?” asked Brian inconsequently.

“Nope!” replied the Canadian. “Don’t want! I guess this is more than I want.”

Then another peril began to make itself apparent. Pieces of buoyant wreckage, torn away from the *Bullol*, now fathoms deep, were shooting not only to the surface but high in the air before falling with resounding smacks. One plank, about twenty feet in length, missed Brian by a bare yard. Had one end struck him it would easily have cut him in two, so powerfully had it shot to the surface.

A moment later an enormous dark mass shot from beneath and within an oar’s length of the leading swimmer. Emerging diagonally from the water, it was projected perhaps twenty feet into the air, crashing down in a parabolic curve before striking the surface with a noise like a hearty hand-clap magnified a thousandfold.

Wiping the stinging spray from their eyes, for the enormous object had alighted in a shower of foam, the swimmers realized that the averted peril now looked like a means of salvation.

The object was one of the *Bullol*’s lifeboats. Quite possibly it had been lowered and the releasing gear had been slipped just as the vessel was

sinking. Caught by the overhanging davit-heads, the boat had been carried perhaps two hundred feet or more beneath the surface until it had either been swept clear by some eddy or had torn itself away from the tenacious embrace at the cost of a shattered gunwale.

With ever-increasing velocity, the boat had returned to the surface and had come to rest practically on an even keel, though with water almost flush with her gunwales.

Even as Brian swam, with his messmates in distress, towards the waterlogged "double-ender" his knowledge of seamanship showed him that although the boat had filled to the gunwales, there were several inches of freeboard. That meant that the difference in water level was due to some, if not all, of her air tanks being intact and also that she could not be leaking to any extent.

"Easy, you fellows!" cautioned Cardyke. "Mind you don't dip her!"

As a result of the warning three men clambered into the boat on either side, followed by Brian. Instead of capsizing she still remained practically on an even keel; but once on board, six of the seven survivors seemed content to remain inactive and to seek a temporary respite from their danger.

"Bale for all you're worth!" shouted Brian, who instinctively had taken command. What was more, his companions in distress accepted him as a matter of course.

They set to work scooping vigorously with their cupped hands. Then Brian, searching in a locker under the stern bench, found what he had expected, the boat's baler. That helped considerably and presently the lifeboat began to feel lively.

All this while the oil on the surface was still blazing and continuing to spread. If way could not be made, the boat would soon be in danger of being overtaken by the steadily widening pool of liquid fire.

To the thwarts were lashed four oars and a boathook. There should have been a mast, gaff and sails, but these had apparently been shot out of the boat while she was temporarily playing the part of a submarine. There were crutches, too, attached to the stringers by lanyards. Two were lying inside, one was dangling outboard, the fourth had been lost, only the frayed lanyard remaining.

Lorne and Dixcart each manned an oar while the others continued to free the boat from water. At first progress was slow, but they were obviously gaining on the spreading fiery oil. In about an hour there was only a little

water sluicing over the bottom boards and the flames had burnt themselves out.

Again Cimmerian darkness brooded over the scene.

Then the seven men realized that they were cold and hungry—adrift in an open boat some four hundred miles from the nearest land.

CHAPTER X

Not a Friend in Need

“Where are we making for, chum?” asked Terence, who had just relieved Dixcart at the stroke oar.

“Land, I hope,” replied Brian. “Unless we’re picked up.”

“Well, what course are we steering?” continued the Australian.

“Any old course till daylight,” answered the self-appointed skipper and helmsman as cheerfully as he could. “The main thing is to keep ourselves warm.”

The men at the oars were fairly warm through their exertions, but the others—especially Brian, who, in default of a rudder, was steering the boat by means of an oar—were chilled to the marrow. They had wrung out their saturated clothing, but the damp serge was a sorry protection against the night air.

“There should be a compass in the stern locker,” suggested the bald-pated seaman, who, though he had served in submarines, frankly admitted that he didn’t know how to handle a boat.

“There is,” agreed Brian, “but it’s smashed. So keep her going, my lads! Long, easy strokes. If the stars would only show themselves we’d soon see where we’re going.”

Unfortunately there were no stars visible. It was one of those windless, pitch-black nights when the “vault of heaven” was obscured by a thick layer of clouds reaching down to the horizon on all points of the compass.

“I’ve been used to forty below,” declared Stan, breaking a prolonged silence. “I guess it’s not freezing, but I’ve never felt so cold.”

“It’s just use, I reckon,” rejoined the Newfoundlander, who, as might be expected, had stood up to present conditions better than his companions.

The weary night wore on. No one could sleep. The men took turns at rowing, those “standing easy” impatiently awaiting their chance to restore some measure of warmth to their cramped limbs by more spells at the heavy ash oars.

They did not complain of thirst, but they were hungry. There was a box of biscuits in the locker, but, like the compass bowl, it had been crushed by the tremendous pressure of water when the boat had been taken down by the sinking and shattered hull of the *Bullol*. The biscuits, pulped, had been utterly ruined by salt water.

A similar fate had overtaken the fresh-water barrico. There was nothing left but the brass hoops and a few pieces of wood that once were staves.

“What’s that—lightning?” exclaimed Terence.

Brian turned his head to look astern. He was too late to see the vivid flash that swept the sky just above the horizon.

Others of the crew had seen it.

“Gun-fire, I reckon,” opined the bald-pated man, who answered to the name of George.

“Or depth-charges,” added his opposite number.

They waited for about half a minute, but no more flashes were seen.

“Couldn’t ha’ been either,” was George’s amended verdict. “There’d be a rare old shindy if some of our ships had been in action. If it’s not lightning, then all I can say is, another merchant hooker’s stopped a mouldie. ’Ere, Grant, ain’t it about time I had another spell at that perishin’ oar?”

At long last the canopy of haze dispersed, revealing a wide expanse of starlit sky.

Brian must have been dosing. He was unaware of the change until Stan called his attention to it.

Looking up, he searched for several seconds for the Pole Star, found the Great Bear, followed the Pointer and then made the disconcerting discovery that the star he was looking for bore almost dead astern.

Instead of steering towards Old England’s shores, he was setting a course for the Azores!

“Mebbe we’ve been cutting circles,” suggested Stan consolingly. “Shall I take a turn with the steering oar?”

Brian gratefully accepted the invitation, although his teeth were chattering too much for him to express his thanks audibly. He was glad to take a spell at the oars, though many a time he had grumbled when, in a flat

calm and with her engine out of action, he had been compelled to use sweeps in his eight-ton yacht.

That seemed ages ago, but the experience he had gained in those halcyon days was bearing fruit.

Then dawn—with those “roseate hues” so enthused upon by poets. To those who adventure themselves upon the waters, it means something very different—the promise of dirty weather before many hours have passed.

Sunrise—a blood-red disc that seemed to leap above the horizon. It was something to steer by and a promise of warmth when its rays gathered strength. It shone upon the haggard men and revealed for the first time since the torpedoing of the *Bullol* the condition of their temporary floating refuge.

All but two of the metal buoyancy tanks had been stove-in. Those that remained looked more like partly inflated footballs than what they were supposed to be. About eighteen inches of one gunwale had been torn away—the crew were aware of that, since three of them had had their hands lacerated by splinters—and the stern-sheet gratings had vanished. A survey of the after locker disclosed that the “cupboard was bare”—almost. In addition to the spoilt biscuits, the totally damaged water beaker and the useless compass, there was a hank of codline, a boat’s lantern and candles, and what at first appeared to be a fur cap.

“It’s a drowned rat,” announced Brian.

“Then heave the thing overboard,” suggested Terence.

“Hold hard, chum!” protested one of the *Bullol*’s hands. “Might come in useful-like—same as those candles. Mighty useful afore we’re through with this lot.”

“And that’s that!” thought Brian with a shudder. Realities had to be faced. The candles he’d thought to be useless, since they were without matches. At a pinch one could eat “pusser’s dips”—but a dead rat!

“Gimme it!” exclaimed the man who had protested against the dead rodent being committed to the deep.

Without a word Brian passed it across.

Under the head sheets they discovered a tightly-rolled bundle of canvas. At first it was thought to be one of the boat’s sails, but upon examination it proved to be the boat’s cover. Sodden by sea water, it took the efforts of two men to bring it aft.

“Something to cover us at night,” remarked one. “If we dry our togs we’ll lie snug underneath that.”

“Yes,” agreed Brian. “But what’s to prevent us using it as a sail? It’s a pity to have to let that breeze run to waste.”

“But we ain’t got a mast,” objected one of the oiler’s hands.

“We’ll rig up one somehow,” countered Brian.

“And capsize her, most likely,” continued the obstructionist. Like many seafaring men brought up by rule-of-thumb methods, he “didn’t hold with” innovations and expedients afloat.

“I’ll take all responsibility for that,” rejoined Brian cheerfully.

“That’s right,” agreed Terence. “Let’s get on with it. There’s no harm in trying!”

The result, after an hour’s work, would have won admiration from that ever-popular Heath Robinson. Two oars lashed together comprised the mast, which was “stayed” by thin though strong codlines. Another length, rove through a thimble at the “masthead”, served as a halliard.

The awning, too long for the purpose, was “reefed” and the head laced to the boathook that was pressed into service as a yard. There was still enough codline left for the sheets.

Not without a certain amount of trepidation Brian saw the grotesque contraption set up. Then the “sail” was hoisted. It filled, and to the evident disappointment of the “obstructionist” the whole contraption didn’t go by the board. Instead, the boat gathered way and was soon slipping along at an estimated speed of four knots; probably it fell short, but certainly she was moving quicker through the water than she had moved under oars.

Since the first streaks of dawn a sharp look-out had been kept for the *Bullol’s* other boats. None was to be seen.

“Mebbe they all got swamped as they were lowered—if they *were* lowered,” opined George. “Barring the shouting just after the tawpeda got her, I didn’t ’ear nothin’.”

Making allowances for the double negative, Brian had to admit that the seaman was right in his surmise. Since the vessel from the waist aft was enclosed by a sheet of flaming oil before the six survivors had to “jump for it”, it was almost a foregone conclusion that the rest of their shipmates had perished.

“Makes a chap feel sort of sorry for those Germans we saw jumping from the *Zeitun* as she sank,” remarked Stan. “But I forget; you had been carried below, Brian.”

“I came on deck and saw it,” replied Cardyke. “But there’s a difference. There were boats from her collier to pick them up. They weren’t trying to swim in a sea of burning oil; they weren’t torpedoed without warning. Bright sportsmen, those U-boat blighters; yet I dare say there’ll be plenty of people at home willing to shake hands with them after the war’s over and say: ‘Now, be good and don’t do such dirty tricks again’!”

“The Nazis can’t help it,” added Terence. “It’s the way they’ve been brought up. Every beastliness that this war and the last has produced—sinking British and neutral merchant ships without warning, bombarding and bombing open towns, machine-gunning civilians, using poison gas—is of German origin.”

“To say nothing of their deliberate breaking of solemn pledges,” continued Stan. “But I’m hungry some,” he added, not altogether inconsequently, since the present plight of the boat’s crew was due to one of the violations of International Law mentioned by his Australian chum.

The sun’s rays grew stronger. Vapour rose in clouds from the rapidly drying garments of the famished and thirsty men. Some of them had dropped asleep. There was now little talking going on. One man, in an attempt to quench his thirst, chewed a leather strap of one of the fend-offs. Steeped in salt water, it acted only as a temporary expedient. In less than an hour he was seized with violent pains, while his companions had to look on helplessly.

Then he fell into a state of coma until he suddenly sprang to his feet and pointed over the bows.

“Land!” he shouted, in a cracked, high-pitched voice. “There—dead ahead! Can’t you see it?”

“Yes!” agreed Brian, to the surprise of his other companions. “Now lie down and take it easy. I’ll give you a shout when we make it!”

It was a subterfuge that justified itself. The demented man was labouring under a hallucination. The nearest land was two days’ sailing distance, provided the breeze held. Docilely he laid himself down upon the bottom boards and fell asleep.

“I’ve seen men took like that before to-day,” declared Dixcart. “Don’t you guys start drinking salt water or you’ll be feeling more than sore about

it!”

Towards high noon Lorne took the steering oar, while Brian had a few hours’ well-earned rest.

None too suddenly he became aware that someone was prodding him with his foot.

Dazed with sleep and exhausted, Brian could not think where he was. Irritably he protested, thinking that he was having a caulk on the *Bullol’s*—or was it the *Galloway’s*—deck, and that someone was skylarking.

“Wake up, chum!” exclaimed Terence. “There’s another of those U-boats!”

Brian sat up. How weary he felt! He seemed as if he had no strength left in his limbs.

At first he could see nothing but a reddish haze, but after a few moments the colour seemed to change to blue. Then his vision cleared and he could make out a dark grey object about half a mile off.

“What’s she doing?” he asked.

“Coming this way,” replied Terence. “If they’re at all decent they may spare us some grub and water.”

“Some hopes!” rejoined George the pessimist. “Best look the other way, lads!”

The German submarine was running on the surface. There were about a dozen men stationed by the for’ard gun, and two officers standing against the base of the conning-tower were levelling their glasses upon the *Bullol’s* boat. Probably they were first puzzled and then amused by the bizarre rig.

“Look out!” exclaimed Terence. “They’re training that infernal gun at us!”

The U-boat was now abeam. Most of the men had gone aft, where they were joined by others from below, leaving three to swing the gun round until its muzzle was directed at the boat at point-blank range. She had slowed down until her speed was almost the same as her possible victim.

Momentarily expecting to see the flash that would be a preliminary to annihilation, the boat’s crew sat motionless.

Then the German rapped out a guttural order. His voice could be distinctly heard across the intervening stretch of water.

The quick-firer's crew brought their weapon into the fore-and-aft position. A murmur of relief came from the threatened boat's crew.

"Think we dare ask 'em for food and water?" asked one of the men.

"We can try," replied Brian.

He cupped his hands to his mouth to shout their request, but before his parched throat could utter a sound Lorne gripped him by the arm.

"Look!" he exclaimed warningly. "They're bringing up a machine-gun, the rotten guys!"

"Lie down, all of you!" ordered Brian.

His companions obeyed. Although they'd only just faced the prospect of being shelled without displaying signs of fear, the chance of being riddled by a hail of machine-gun bullets did have a terrifying effect.

Only Brian remained seated. He still grasped the steering-oar, though he was unaware of what he was doing. It wasn't bravado, but an indescribable physical numbness that held him motionless. His brain was working; he could see the muzzle of the machine-gun being slowly and deliberately trained upon the boat.

The best part of a minute passed and no spurt of flame leapt from that sinister weapon.

Brian wanted to shout, "Get on with it and don't keep us in suspense," but not a sound could he utter.

Then, at an order from the U-boat's commander, the men removed the machine-guns. Every German on deck, including the two officers, was laughing. Some of them jeered in broken English.

They were a rough-looking crowd, though mostly youngish men. Most of them had beards of several days' growth and pallid complexions. They were obviously "jumpy", for even as they taunted and derided the boat's crew, they were casting anxious glances, not only at the surface of the surrounding water, but up at the sky. From under and on the surface and from the air, danger ever threatened these modern pirates, and they harboured no illusions concerning their unhallowed occupations!

A wave of hot resentment surged across Brian's mind. Being held up to ridicule seemed almost as bad as being threatened by shell and machine-gun fire.

But the torture of hunger and thirst gained the mastery.

“Will you let us have food and water, please?” he shouted. “We’re starving!”

Then he wished he hadn’t, for another outburst of ribald laughter greeted his appeal.

“You Englishmen starving? *Kolossal!*” shouted the U-boat commander. “How Zhamberlain an’ Churchill will pleased be!”

And with that the U-boat increased her speed, nearly swamping the *Bullol’s* boat with her wash as she turned under full helm.

CHAPTER XI

Approaching the Limit

Too exhausted even to speak, the survivors sat listlessly on the bottom boards. Brian still remained aft, keeping the boat on her course.

He could not help feeling bitter at the inhuman conduct of the Germans. Should they chance to fall into the hands of the navy they would be placed in a detention camp, be well housed and well fed. Somehow, thought Brian, it wasn't quite the thing. There should be some middle course between the "eye for an eye" policy and what practically amounted to pampering brutal and debased prisoners of war. And, according to what he'd read and heard, misguided people at home had supplied captured U-boat crews with parcels of food and cigarettes.

His companions were chewing candle-ends!

And what were those two—George and another of the oiler's hands—doing, crouching furtively in the bows? Was that why George had protested when Terence had suggested heaving the dead rat overboard?

Towards sunset the wind piped up, raising a dangerous following sea. The makeshift mast whipped so ominously that Brian, stung to action by the gravity of the situation, shouted to his companions to get the canvas off her before the whole lot carried away.

"Well, it hasn't yet," protested the man who had originally adversely criticized Brian's makeshift rig. "We're moving anyway. You don't think we can get the bloomin' oars out, do you? We're fair done up."

It came like something of a shock when Stan and Terence half-heartedly supported the obstructionist's objection. They had got into such a state of apathy that they hardly cared what happened.

"I'll give you a hand," offered Dixcart, who was "sticking it" better than the rest. "Mebbe if we set a stitch o' canvas it'll save her from broaching-to."

"Good enough!" replied Brian. "Take the helm, Stan, while we get the gear down."

“Sure!” agreed the Canadian, now conscious of his indifference and making an effort to pull himself together.

He stepped over the stroke thwart and was on the point of taking the steering oar and the running part of the mainsheet from his chum, when a vicious gust carried the mast and sail overboard.

As the gear went the boat broached-to, half-filled by a heavy breaking sea.

To most of the crew that looked like the end. They were for the most part so enfeebled that they hadn’t the strength to exert themselves, despite Brian’s shout to “Get bailing for all you’re worth!”

A second sea of that sort would have either swamped or capsized the boat. Providentially there was a temporary lull. With the raffle of spars and canvas hanging over the side the partly waterlogged craft swung head to wind to the unintentionally improvised sea-anchor.

“Good job I didn’t cut that lot adrift,” thought Brian, as another big sea bore down and passed harmlessly by.

More followed, and since little, if any, water broke inboard—what there was was mostly spray—the crew began to realize that the immediate danger was past.

Dixcart began bailing. Terence and Stan followed his example and soon all hands, with the exception of the semi-conscious fellow who had chewed the saltwater saturated leather, were exerting themselves in an endeavour to free the boat from water.

It was the best part of an hour before the boat regained her former state of buoyancy and by then it was dark. Once more, shivering after a sustained burst of activity, the weary, hungry and thirsty men prepared for a night of acute misery and discomfort.

They huddled together for mutual warmth, but in spite of this they shook with the cold. Sometimes some of them slept fitfully. In the intervals they chewed pieces of candle. Meanwhile the boat pitched incessantly in the rising sea.

Some time during the night, Brian began to worry about the improvised sea-anchor. All that held it was three lengths of codline. If these parted the whole of the gear would go adrift. Then, even if the boat didn’t broach-to, they would have no means of making sail if the weather moderated.

It took some time for Brian to make up his mind to go for'ard and "parcel" the ropes to prevent them chafing through; more time before his enervated body obeyed the half-hearted dictates of his mind.

At length he extricated himself from his companions—drawing a muttered protest from the Australian—and groping his way over two of the thwarts, reached the bow-sheets.

To his surprise a man was there, fumbling with something that showed a ghostly grey in the darkness.

"What's up?" asked Brian.

"Frappin'," replied a voice that he recognized as Dixcart's, "jus' makin' sure."

"That's what I was going to do."

"It's done anyway," reported the Newfoundlander. "It's the leg of my trousers I've used. If I'm given a noo pair, well an' good. If not, I'll not be wantin' any clothes, I reckon!"

It was the longest speech Brian had yet heard from the monosyllabic Dixcart, who had sacrificed part of the leg of his trousers to wrap round the "ropes" of the sea-anchor to prevent them from being chafed through by the gunwale and stemhead.

"Think it'll hold?" asked Brian.

"Noo stuff; it oughter," replied the Newfoundlander. "Pity the painter was carried away. That would ha' done well, but it can't be helped!"

Together they made their way aft and huddled on the wet bottom-boards. Satisfied that all had been done that could be done, Brian fell asleep.

It was daylight when he awoke, feeling too stiff and exhausted to raise himself. His limbs were devoid of sensation, and it was not until he had chafed each arm alternately that he was able to raise himself into a sitting position.

The sun was shining, the wind had piped down considerably, leaving a long and still heavy swell. Most of his companions were torpid—either asleep or dead. Only Dixcart was bestirring himself. He seemed proof against exposure to cold, though not against hunger and thirst. No doubt it was he who had set up an oar from which fluttered a shirt—a rough and ready signal of distress.

Dully Brian glanced at the motionless forms of his companions. He began to count, “muffed it”, and began counting again. Including Dixcart and himself there were only six.

“Where——?”

His parched tongue refused to complete the question. There was Grant—yes, and Lorne—and the chap they called George—and the bald-headed man.

Dixcart noticed the perplexed look on Cardyke’s face.

“Slipped overboard during the night, I guess,” he observed in detached tones. “All along o’ chewin’ that leather. An’ he’d been warned.”

Brian closed his eyes again. He was past worrying about anything, even when the Newfoundlander told him that the drogue—otherwise the spars and canvas—had carried away.

Fortunately that had occurred as wind and sea were easing down, leaving the boat and its helpless crew to drift aimlessly but gradually toward the still far-off land.

No one seemed to care any more. The last of the candles had disappeared. So had the rat. Some of the men had even chewed the furry skin, such was the state of hunger in which they found themselves.

But Cardyke knew nothing of this.

Towards night he rallied somewhat. In the dusk, men were stirring. They seemed to be eating.

“Where are we?” he asked feebly.

“You still kicking?” asked Terence, quite in a casual tone. “Thought you’d snuffed it.”

Brian made no comment. He asked what they were eating.

“Eating?” echoed Lorne, since Terence did not reply. “Eating nope! Drinking, yep! Dixcart’s the swell guy. He showed us!”

Then, without revulsion, Brian “tumbled to it”. His companions were each sucking their own fingers, deriving slight sustenance from their own blood.

Another night passed. It did not seem so long drawn out as the two previous ones. The wind had died down and the boat rocked gently on the

long sullen swell. Hardly anyone stirred, nor did they when grey dawn gave place to broad daylight.

Gulls circled overhead, uttering raucous cries. One, bolder than the rest, perched on the gunwale for a moment or so. Dixcart aimed a blow at it with a stretcher and missed. The bird flew off, to resume its circling flight with the others. The Newfoundlander slumped upon the bottom boards.

The boat drifted on in almost complete silence. Only the discarded oars, as they rolled on top of the thwarts, and the shrill cries of the attendant seabirds broke the ominous quietude. The improvised signal of distress drooped listlessly from the upraised oar, symbolic of the condition of the survivors who were now beyond caring what might happen.

On the broad Atlantic, from the fringes of the frozen North to the blazing heat of the Tropics hundreds of British, Allied and Neutral seamen were suffering similar, and worse, privations, because an upstart Austrian—a former corporal of the German army who knew not the call of the sea—had ordered German submarines to carry out a campaign of ruthless destruction in spite of pledges to observe the honourable conditions of war.

Well might the civilized world ask: can the word of a German ever be trusted?

CHAPTER XII

Aboard the “Bison”

As in a dream, Brian awoke, perplexed by his surroundings. He half opened his eyes, only to close them again. It was a painful process, that effort to move his swollen lids.

For a while he did not attempt to repeat the effort.

Something had happened, but what?

He was still afloat. That was evident by the rolling motion; but the hardness of the boat’s bottom-boards—that, owing to the numbed state of his body, hadn’t been so pronounced during the later stages of approaching coma—was no longer in evidence. He was feeling warm, too. Unpleasantly so. Not only was the air warm, but there was something burning—at least it felt so—against the small of his back.

The light, too, was dazzling even with his eyes closed. Was it the sun’s rays pouring down as he lay hungry and thirsty in the open boat?

But no! He was no longer thirsty, though his lips felt, and probably were, thrice their normal size.

With an effort he moved his hand, fumbling to find the source of his discomfort. His fingers touched a flannel-covered hot-water bottle.

Where did that come from? He couldn’t think. There weren’t hot water-bottles in the *Bullol’s* boat—nothing, hardly. Was he alone? Where were his comrades in distress? Six of them or was it five? Hadn’t someone told him that one had disappeared overboard during the night? Was it last night, or the one before, or ever so far back?

He just couldn’t think.

Again he made an ineffectual attempt to open his eyes, then groped with his no longer benumbed fingers. He was lying in blankets—strange! Stranger still when his hand closed round the ironwork of a cot.

Except for a subdued purr, the rapid revolutions of turbine engines, he could hear nothing; until gradually he became aware of voices too blurred to be distinguishable.

“What’s wrong with my ears?” he thought. “They seem to be bunged up.”

Slowly he raised his right arm until his fingers touched the lobe of his ear. The slight touch made him wince. It felt as if he’d touched raw flesh. The haunting fear came to him that his ear had been torn off.

Cautiously he put the palm of his hand to his ear, and pressed it. It hurt, but it showed him that there was no mutilation; but, as in the case of his lips, the ear felt like a mass of bloated blubber.

Then, even as he maintained the pressure, something seemed to go with a pop—like drawing a cork from a bottle. With it the sense of hearing returned, almost, if not quite, to normal.

Now the voices seemed quite close. At least half a dozen men were talking at once. Not in English; could they be Germans? He listened intently. There were no gutturals. He thought he recognized French, but it wasn’t the French he’d tried with indifferent success to learn at school. In any case, they were talking too rapidly for him to detect more than a few words here and there.

Other noises—ship noises—brought Brian nearer to the realms of reality. He could hear boots clattering on the metal deck overhead; occasionally the clank of the steam steering gear and the swish of water as seas broke inboard.

“Attention!”

The babel of voices ceased. Someone, evidently an officer, had entered the flat.

He came to the side of Brian’s cot, felt his pulse and put a question to one of the attendants.

Brian caught the word *manger* followed by a sentence in which *un peu* and, after something unintelligible, *soupe tépide*, and then an attendant’s respectful “*mais oui, monsieur le médecin*”.

Then the spout of a feeding cup was placed between Brian’s lips. He spluttered as the lukewarm liquid was poured into his mouth, but by an effort he managed to gulp the soup down.

“An’ how you feel, *mon brave*?” asked the doctor.

Brian, still unable to open his eyes, succeeded in replying:

“Not so dusty, sir!”

“Dusty, ah? One would think you have had enough *wataire* to wash all ze dust away. Perhaps it is idiomatic? You have pain?”

“Can’t open my eyes, sir!”

“I will attend to it. You vill again go to sleep.”

Brian obeyed, not merely because he’d been told to, but because he wanted to. He dropped off, conscious that something soothing was being applied to his now smarting and throbbing eyelids.

When he awoke some hours later, he found little difficulty in opening his eyes. He felt stronger; so much so that he was able to raise his hand without assistance.

He looked about him. He was in the sick-bay of some vessel. It was by no means as large as the improvised “casualty distributing station” in the *Galloway*. There were only half a dozen swing cots ranged alongside the bulkhead, painted grey from the middle line to the deckhead and—ominous this!—blood-red from the narrow dado to the deck. Overhead were shaded electric lamps that cast a diffused glow upon two dark-featured, white-uniformed men who were bending over a porcelain sink.

Brian glanced at the other cots. Three of them were occupied; but he couldn’t see who the men were. If they were survivors from the *Bullol’s* crew, why weren’t there five?

Seeing Brian sit up, one of the uniformed attendants came to the side of the cot and put a question to him.

Brian shook his head, and that gave him a twinge at the back of his neck.

The Frenchman smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He went to the other end of the flat, returning with a bowl of soup.

“That’s an improvement on the cup with a spout,” thought Brian. “Never did like the beastly things.”

Drinking, he tried to think out a question in French.

“*Où sont mes amis?*” he asked, adding as an afterthought “*monsieur*”.

The sick-bay man pointed to the adjacent cots.

“*Mais les autres?*” inquired Brian.

Another expressive shrug and a movement of outspread hands.

“*Il sont morts,*” replied the man.

With an effort Brian began to tumble out of his cot.

“*C’est défendu*——” declared the attendant, breaking off to catch the Englishman before he slipped to the deck.

Since Brian had already broken the regulations the easy-going Frenchman came to the conclusion that he might go the whole hog. So with his arm round Brian’s shoulder, he assisted him to the nearby cots.

In the first was Terence, lying on his side with one arm extended. The arm no longer looked like a piece of uncooked fish, as it had done when Brian last remembered seeing him in the boat. It showed brown and sinewy. There didn’t seem to be much wrong there, especially as the Aussie was sleeping naturally.

Stan Lorne was in the adjoining cot. His face was the colour of white marble. Brian recalled that it was always so, whether under a blazing sun or in the throes of an Atlantic winter. He too was sleeping, but even as Brian looked, he moaned.

Next, and sleeping heavily, was the *Bullol*’s hand known as George.

So Dixcart and the bald-headed seaman had passed over to the other side—the cheerful A.B. who didn’t play the fiddle half badly and who was ready to crack a joke with any of his messmates; and the dour Newfoundlander, who hid his big-heartedness under a mask of taciturnity.

Brian had only just returned to his cot, much to the relief of the attendant, when the captain entered, accompanied by the ship’s surgeon.

“So you are recovered?” began the former, speaking in good English. “It is fortunate we found you when we did. Rest assured we have sent news by radio of your safety.”

(“How did he know our names?” thought Brian. “By our identity discs, of course; but he couldn’t have known we were from the *Bullol*—unless her name was painted on the boat, and I don’t remember seeing it.”)

“I regret we cannot put you on land for perhaps seven days,” went on the captain. “We set out two days ago on patrol. Of course if we sight a British ship bound for England, then we put you on board. At present you find yourself on board the flotilla-leader *Bison*.”

Brian hoped that he’d remain on board the *Bison* until she returned to port. In his opinion it would be far preferable to being on a merchant ship. There was something reassuring in being in a swift and powerfully armed

destroyer-leader—one that could hit hard—rather than in a relatively slow craft armed for defensive purposes only.

He did not voice his thoughts, but contented himself by replying: “Thanks very much, sir.”

“And now attention,” resumed the captain. “I will not ask you to speak much, but to confirm what I already have been told. After the *Bullol* was sunk you saw the Boche *sousmarin*. When she left, in what direction did she go?”

Brian had to think before he replied:

“In a westerly direction, sir!”

“Good!” ejaculated the captain. “That is proof. Now we know she is not making for home. Perhaps we find her, then——”

A slow downward movement of his hand spoke better than words. Then, having questioned the sick-berth attendant, the captain went out, leaving the surgeon to receive reports concerning the patients’ condition.

The doctor felt Brian’s pulse.

“You eat, you drink, but you no want cigarette? To-night you eat anytink you vish. To-morrow you attire yourself for ze promenade on ze deck.”

Next morning Brian fancied that he had regained his normal condition; and having partaken of a good breakfast, although the French menu differed considerably from the bill of fare in the British Navy, made his way on deck.

Then he discovered his mistake. Almost the first gust of salty air made his head reel. He would have subsided in a very undignified manner had not a *matelot* dived towards him and caught him round the waist.

A white mist swam in front of Brian’s eyes. How long it lasted he had no idea; but when objects again appeared to take definite shape he found he had been placed with his back against a hose reel, while half a dozen French seamen were standing in a semicircle and watching him with marked solicitude.

There was another man also in uniform though without a cap. It wasn’t a French rig. Somehow his face seemed familiar.

Thinking that his vision was at fault, Brian rubbed his eyes and looked again.

“Dixcart!” he exclaimed.

“Sure it is Dixcart,” replied the Newfoundlander.

“But——”

Words failed to express Brian’s surprise and delight.

“But what?”

“I thought—They told me you were——”

“Then they lied,” declared Dixcart bluntly. “I alone was not senseless when they took us out of the boat. I was much alive. After I had been given food, the captain asked me many questions. Then I was given a hammock. Now I have had breakfast and am here. And the others?”

“Doing fine,” replied Brian. “They were all asleep when I turned out. I appear to be the crock.”

“I have seen much the same on the Banks,” rejoined Dixcart. “Men given a big feed after long hours of starvation. They eat in the very warm cabin. They come on deck and are overcome by the cold. It does not last.”

One of the Frenchmen put a question to the Newfoundlander, who replied, talking as rapidly and, so far as Brian was concerned, as incomprehensibly.

“I didn’t know you spoke French,” remarked Brian. “I can’t understand what they say.”

“It is the Breton *patois*,” explained Dixcart. “Often I have spoken with the French fishermen of St. Pierre and Miquelon—these are French harbours off our Newfoundland coast—and so it is not difficult to understand what these sailors say.”

One of the matelots offered Brian a cigarette and smiled understandingly when the rescued Englishman declined it. They then left him with Dixcart.

From him Brian was able to piece together the missing parts of what had happened. To his surprise he learnt that they had been adrift four days before the *Bison* sighted the rough and ready distress signal in the waste of tumbling waters. Even then, suspicious that it might be a trap on the part of a lurking U-boat, the destroyer-leader had circled the *Bullol’s* boat for nearly a quarter of an hour before closing.

The Newfoundlander declared that that period of suspense was one of the worst moments he had ever experienced; and that when the unconscious forms of his companions had been lifted out of the boat he was quite convinced that he was the sole survivor.

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by what Brian had never expected to hear afloat—the rapid beating of a side-drum.

“That is calling the crew to action stations,” declared his companion.

CHAPTER XIII

The Hunter Hunted

“What ought we to do?” asked Brian. “Go below out of the way?”

Dixcart did not immediately reply.

Perhaps some of the *Bison’s* officers would decide that point for them; but, as no one seemed to notice the two *étrangers*, the Newfoundlander suggested they had better stop where they were.

“We might see something,” he added. “If there is danger, I prefer to meet it here under the sky, than down below where I do not know my way about.”

“What about Lorne and Grant—and George?”

“Someone is looking after them,” replied Dixcart. “They are ill. It is best for them to remain below.”

Torn between two desires—to rejoin his chums in the sick-bay or to remain where he was—Brian decided to do as the Newfoundlander had suggested. After all, he had been *ordered* on deck by the doctor and until he received fresh instructions he supposed he’d better “stay put”.

Accustomed to the silent efficiency of British naval crews, Brian was rather surprised at the noise made by the matelots as they went to action stations. Most of them were talking excitedly as they ran; officers were shouting orders simultaneously and frequently gesticulating. Yet, in spite of the apparent confusion, they got down to essentials smartly enough.

The quick-firers were manned, but not the anti-aircraft guns. The triple torpedo tubes were left untouched and in the fore-and-aft position; but right aft men were placing sinister-looking canisters around a pair of stumpy weapons somewhat resembling the mortars of the days of the Crimean War.

Brian knew what they were. Instead of dropping depth-charges from troughs over the stern, the *Bison* got rid of hers by firing them from projectors on either quarter.

“She’s after a U-boat,” he decided. “No enemy aircraft, or those ‘antis’ would have been manned.”

Not far from the spot where Brian and Dixcart were, was a metal cabinet with open windows. Inside were two *sous-officiers*, one with a pair of earphones on and the other at a voice-tube communicating with the bridge.

Brian could see the heads and shoulders above the sill of the nearest window. The man with the earphones was making movements with his hands, sometimes to the right, then to the left and occasionally with palms together in front of him, while his companion shouted “*Babord*” or “*Tribord*” for the information of the officers on the bridge.

One result was a succession of slight curves in the hitherto straight wake, as the *Bison* altered helm.

Again Brian knew what was happening.

The destroyer-leader had not sighted a U-boat, nor had a naval flying-boat informed him by wireless of the presence of one. She had “spotted” the enemy submarine not by visual means but by means of her hydrophone or sound detectors.

A product of the last war, hydrophones had then been used with a certain amount of success for detecting the presence of U-boats. They had been mostly supplied to that type of craft known as M.L.s, and in order to be effectively used the ship had to be stopped.

Subsequent improvements had brought these detectors to a state of great efficiency, so that even while travelling at full speed, a destroyer could pick up the distinctive sounds of a submarine’s propellers at a range of anything up to five miles.

In principle, the apparatus resembled that of a wireless direction-finder and so long as the volume of sound from each hydrophone remained equal, the hunter was on the direct track of the hunted. If the sounds varied, then adjustments to the helm had to be made until they were once more in harmony. The wiring of the headphone was so arranged that, in the event of the operator’s ears being of even slightly different hearing capacity, the sounds from both hydrophones were received through each ear independently.

Once the audible “trail” was picked up, it could be followed until the destroyer was over her quarry; unless, as sometimes happened when the latter was able to detect the thrashing of the surface craft’s propellers, the U-boat stopped her electric motors and rested on the sea-bed.

In the present case the hunted U-boat could not do so. The depth was far too great for her to descend to the bottom, while, directly she lost way, she

would either have to come to the surface or dive until she was crushed by the terrific pressure of water.

Thirty-five knots may seem a mere crawl to the pilot of a high-speed bomber, but it is a nerve-shattering speed from the point of view of an already highly-strung U-boat commander and crew, whose craft, when submerged, cannot exceed nine knots. Nor does much time elapse, as a general rule, between the first indications of the U-boat being detected and the shattering concussions of the deadly depth-charges.

The *Bison* was now almost over the spot where the submarine was laboriously making her blind effort to escape.

From the destroyer's bridge her captain signalled to a lieutenant, who in turn communicated the orders to the officer stationed aft in charge of the projectors.

Almost simultaneously came two crashing reports. To port and starboard two cylindrical objects described curves of high trajectory before disappearing beneath the surface, at fifty feet from the ship, in clouds of spray.

Watching, Brian saw the upthrown water subside and yet nothing seemed to happen. The *Bison* had increased her distance by at least a couple of cables when two submarine infernos leapt skywards.

The *Bison* trembled from keel to truck, heeling heavily outwards under full starboard helm. By this time two more depth-charges were projected.

Still no signs of the U-boat. She must be down somewhere, perhaps two hundred feet beneath the surface. The first depth-charge hadn't forced her to come up; nor had they sunk her, otherwise there would be a significant and sinister patch of oil. *Ergo*, more attempts at compulsion.

Unlike the methods adopted by British destroyers when hunting, the *Bison* continued to describe a series of spirals, each wider than the first, but with one point of each as near as possible over the spot between the scene of the explosions. She was thus describing a series of encircling tactics while at the same time keeping in the direction her intended victim was last found to be taking, presuming that the detector apparatus had been efficiently employed.

All this while officers and men not otherwise engaged were keeping a sharp look-out through all points of the compass. One never knew where the disabled submarine might break surface. It might easily be a quarter of a

mile from the spot where the depth-charge that had “winged” her had been dropped.

Suddenly a mighty shout came from a score of Gallic throats.

A thousand yards away, on the *Bison's* port quarter, the U-boat had broken surface; stern foremost, which was a most encouraging sign.

Round swung the quick-firers, ready to give the enemy the *coup de grâce*; but, before they could hurl a salvo of shells, a white flag was feverishly waggled above the now open after-hatch of the U-boat.

Behind those guns men of lively and excitable temperament were itching to press the firing-triggers; yet, such was the discipline, the quick-firers remained silent, though still trained upon an easy target.

Encouraged by the fact that their token of surrender had been respected, the Germans began to scramble through both the fore and after hatchways. That the U-boat was badly damaged was evident by their mad haste to gain the open. It was noticeable, too, that several injured men were the last to emerge, receiving little or no help from their able-bodied companions.

The *Bison* continued to circle without attempting to close her distance. Caution was still necessary. Experience had taught the Frenchmen that the Boche rarely played the game. The U-boat was still afloat and she had torpedo-tubes in her bows and on either beam. White flag notwithstanding, it was quite possible that there were torpedoes launched home into the tubes and that there were half-demented men below who might release those weapons, with disastrous results to the French warship.

Not until the *Bison* bore astern of the submarine—and the U-boat carried no sting in her tail—did she slow down and close with her victim.

Two boats were swung out, manned and lowered; but there was no undue hurry on the part of the French seamen to pick up the Germans. For one thing, the French nation did not pretend that it was not fighting Germany but only Nazi-ism. Twice within seventy years German troops had overrun French soil and their record as armies of a civilized and cultured nation wasn't quite up to standard; it was far from it. Similarly, the gross excesses committed by U-boats upon merchant shipping, both Allies and neutral, and—to show to what depths of degradation the present rulers of Germany have sunk—the wanton bombing of light-vessels, had steeled the French navy to take stern measures.

Pity upon all prisoners and captives they would continue to show; but there would be no sentimental leniency toward these violators of every

honourable and time-honoured tradition of the sea.

So the *Bison*, bows on to the stern of her enemy and the while keeping a sharp look-out for another U-boat lurking in the vicinity, waited.

Brian and Dixcart had gone to the side to watch the concluding act of the ocean-drama, since owing to the position of the ship they had been unable to see what was going on.

“Say, that’s the U-boat that hailed us!” exclaimed a familiar voice.

Turning his head, Brian saw that Stan and Terence had come on deck, each wearing a French seaman’s greatcoat over his otherwise scanty attire. Unable to resist the temptation to know what was transpiring, in the absence of their equally curious attendants, they had rolled out of the cots and found their way to the upper-deck.

“Can’t say for certain,” replied Brian. “It looks very much like it, though.”

“It sure is!” declared Dixcart.

“Yes, by cripes!” added Grant. “And that big guy with the yellow beard; he’s the fellow who jeered when we asked them for food and water. Ah, there she goes!”

The bows of the U-boat were now well under water, while her stern had been raised until the tips of her propellers were showing. Hitherto huge bubbles were breaking surface on either beam, showing that the compressed air tanks had been opened in a vain effort to “blow” the leaky ballast tanks. Now that the compressed air was exhausted, the submarine was no longer delaying her final plunge.

Some of the survivors had already taken to the water. Others remained until the metal deck slipped away beneath their feet. All of them, some sixteen in number, were wearing life-saving collars.

Actually the U-boat disappeared with very little fuss, although quantities of oil that had previously escaped from her had the effect of subduing any great agitation of the water.

The swimmers appeared to be content with keeping together and making no attempt to make for the French warship. Perhaps they had been told that they might expect no quarter and were reluctant to prove otherwise.

When, however, the *Bison’s* boats were slipped, the Germans did not wait to be picked up. In a bunch they swam towards their rescuers, many of

them appealing for mercy.

“Do not call me *Kamarad*, coquin!” exclaimed one of the matelots; but, all the same, seeing that the German was almost exhausted and that his swimming-collar was leaking, the Frenchman jumped overboard and supported him until the boat could be backed sufficiently for both to be taken on board.

By this time the captain of the *Bison* had gone aft to await the arrival of the prisoners. An armed guard—another example of the determination of the Frenchmen to leave nothing to chance—had fallen in. Sentries were posted at the hatchways; there were more armed guards on the main-deck and at the entrance to the flat set apart for the reception of the captives.

The first boat drew alongside. No accommodation ladder had been rigged, so the Germans, headed by the blonde, yellow-bearded captain, had to come over the side by means of a rope ladder.

The U-boat’s commander, looking scared and shaken, clicked his heels, although the synthetic rubber sea-boots gave out a very dull sound. As he did so, sea-water squirted over the tops of his foot-gear.

Gravely the captain of the *Bison* returned the salute, demanded if the German spoke French, and received a deferential “*Nein, Herr Kapitan*”.

“But you speak English!” declared the *Bison*’s skipper in that tongue and in a tone that took the German completely aback. He was so flabbergasted that he admitted he did.

“Come this way,” ordered the French captain and motioned the two armed matelots to escort the prisoner.

The crew gathered amidships stepped back to give their captain and his prisoner a free passage. Abreast the after funnel, where Brian and his comrades were standing, the captain stopped.

“You recognize them?” he asked, indicating the survivors of the *Bullol*.

“I carried out my orders when der ship I sunk,” declared the German, in an attempt to excuse his action.

“Until you have just spoken I did not know you had sunk her,” rejoined the *Bison*’s captain bluntly. “These men here will be glad to receive this information. But to continue; after you had torpedoed the English merchant ship without warning——”

“Not English merchant ship,” interrupted the German. “She oil-tanker vos!”

The Frenchman gave a characteristic shrug to imply that such a subtle distinction was not worth bothering about.

“After you torpedoed her and these men here were in an open boat you refused to give them food and water. Also you make mock of them. Now what have you to say?”

Brian and his companions were following the conversation with lively interest. Apart from the revelation that the captain of the *Bison* had acquainted himself with most of the facts—he had learnt them from Dixcart—it was intriguing to listen to two men of different nationalities arguing in English.

The Frenchman had obviously scored heavily. The U-boat commander was wilting. The fear of reprisals for his inhumane conduct obsessed him. Like most bullies, he cut a very sorry figure now that the tables had been turned upon him. Perhaps he regretted not having carried out his intention of machine-gunning the *Bullol's* boat and sinking her without a trace.

For several minutes the excitable Frenchman “let himself go”. Perhaps the fact that he had already lost a brother and two other relatives through enemy submarine action had something to do with it. Without mincing his words, and even in his present state he maintained a fluent command of English, he told the U-boat commander exactly what he thought of him, of his late command, of the German people in general and of Hitler in particular. Judging by the expression on the German's face when his Führer was mentioned it looked as if he agreed on that point.

Suddenly the vivacious captain of the *Bison* stopped his harangue and turned to Brian.

“Now you take your revenge,” he invited. “Give the Boche a kick in the pants!”

This colloquial invitation, unexpected from a foreigner, very nearly made the *Bullol's* survivors burst out laughing. It took considerable effort to keep their feelings under control.

Although the U-boat commander didn't know the expression he gathered that it meant something rather unpleasant. He knew what the word “revenge” meant, and the thought of being handed over to the mercies of the men whom he had so barbarously treated made him squirm.

“No, thank you, sir,” replied Brian, shaking his head.

“No? For what reason you decline?” asked the *Bison*’s captain, genuinely at a loss at the English seaman’s refusal to take his revenge.

Again Brian shook his head, but said nothing. To give the real reason would sound priggish, and heaven forbid that he was that way inclined.

The captain did not press for an explanation, but ordered the armed matelots to take the prisoner below, where the German officers and men were indiscriminately herded together under lock and key.

Half an hour later—Brian and his chums were still on deck yarning about recent events—a matelot appeared with a paint-pot and brush.

On the rise of the superstructure carrying the superimposed quick-firers were two dates painted in white: *le 9 septembre, 1939* and *le 15 janvier, 1940*. Under these the matelot added a third.

Gamekeepers frequently nail the vermin they destroy to branches of trees, both as a warning to others and as a record of their own zeal. Similarly on board the *Bison* those dates represented the number of U-boats that had fallen victims to modern methods of warfare properly applied by a highly-trained and efficient crew.

CHAPTER XIV

The Case of the “Hanau”

For the next twenty-four hours, the *Bison* held on a westerly course.

Only her captain and senior executive officers knew why. Amongst the ratings various conjectures and rumours were flying about, even as they do in similar circumstances on the lower-deck of British warships. All they knew was that it would be another six days or so before the ship returned to port, and they had obtained that information from Brian, who in turn had been informed to that effect by the *Bison*'s captain.

Life on board the French flotilla-leader wasn't so dusty, decided Brian. The language difficulty was a bit of a drawback, although the Newfoundlander spoke French well and several of the crew had a working knowledge of English.

The food was good, although different from the fare provided in the Royal Navy. Terence—who, like most Australians, was a confirmed tea-drinker—had to admit that he'd never drunk such excellent coffee, although he couldn't “get on with” the *vin ordinaire*, the thin wine that forms part of the matelots' daily issue. For his part, Brian had some difficulty in smoking *caporal* cigarettes. It was a case of that or nothing. Except when on duty or when turned-in, the French sailors smoked cigarettes incessantly; he'd never seen one smoking a pipe.

They were a friendly, easy-going crowd, these matelots, and Brian quite enjoyed the novel experience of being afloat under the *Tricolore*. At the same time he was looking forward to setting foot on British soil. It was a bit exasperating to know that with every revolution of her triple propellers the *Bison* was taking him farther and farther away from home.

During the greater part of the day not a sail was sighted, such is the vastness of the Atlantic, but about an hour before sunset a thick cloud of smoke below the horizon denoted not one but many craft.

At a cruising speed of twenty-eight knots it did not take the *Bison* long to “raise” the ships, that proved to be a south-bound convoy escorted by both British and French light-cruisers and destroyers.

Wireless messages had already been exchanged between the *Bison* and the commodore of the escorting warships.

Brian and his chums began to wonder whether any of these signals referred to them and if the *Bison's* captain had offered to transfer the *Bullol's* survivors to one of the British destroyers. Although they were anxious to find themselves once again under the White Ensign, they greatly preferred to be in a vessel displaying that flag, heading for and not away from home. Not that they had any choice in the matter. As members of the British and Dominions navies they were liable to be sent on short notice to the uttermost ends of the earth—to swelter in the Tropics or to endure the rigours of an Arctic winter—in order to bring to a successful conclusion the task of sweeping the German navy and German sea-borne trade from the Seven Seas.

“What’s that?” suddenly asked Stan, pointing towards the head of the convoy. “Noo sort of gadget, I guess.”

High above the leading merchantman was a grey oval-shaped object hardly distinguishable against the lowering grey sky. At first it appeared to be stationary, but presently it appeared to be moving in the same direction and at the same slow speed as the convoy.

One of the English-speaking matelots explained that it was a small, non-dirigible airship towed by a French escorting vessel. Again the guardians of the convoy were taking no undue chances. In addition to submarine detectors, depth-charges and other devices to frustrate the knavish tricks of the U-boats, these observation balloons were being employed with marked success. They had a decided advantage over aeroplanes and seaplanes. They kept station with the convoy and did not have to return to the base to refuel, since they possessed no motive power of their own. Their observers could command a wide range of vision and spot any underwater craft lying in wait.

“But they’re no use at night,” suggested Terence.

The Frenchman gave the customary shrug.

“You wait leetle time!” he rejoined.

Even as he spoke, the balloon was seen to be descending. It took only a few minutes to bring the ungainly fabric to within a few feet above the parent craft’s deck. Then the hydrogen was pumped out into a container and the deflated gas bag compressed and stowed below.

“To-morrow she again ascends,” explained the Australian’s informant.

It was now sunset. In the fading light Brian saw that one of the escorting destroyers had parted company and was making towards the *Bison*.

She made a pretty and spectacular picture outlined against the grey sky; but in Brian she aroused thoughts similar to those of British seamen in the Old East Indiamen, who, when within sight of their home port often after a two years' voyage, found themselves "pressed" into the Navy.

Most decidedly he didn't want another trip south with a convoy. It was work of national importance, that he knew, but it wasn't exciting enough for his liking. Being on the *Galloway* was; but now that the South Atlantic had been swept clear of hostile surface craft, there wasn't much fun steaming thousands of miles without another chance of smelling powder. It was the North Sea that stirred his imagination. Something was always happening there. After he'd had his well-earned leave he'd wangle it somehow and get drafted to a destroyer.

By now the vessel detached from the convoy had made a sixteen-point turn and was steaming neck to neck with the *Bison*.

Through the gathering darkness a flashing lamp blinked rapidly; received the "ready to receive" call from the *Bison* and proceeded forthwith to give her message.

In vain Brian and his chums tried to read the signal. For one thing, although they knew the Morse code, they weren't signalmen, and the speed with which the operator worked the lamp was far beyond their skill to follow. For another, the signal, although *en clair*, was in French—not perfect by any means, since it emanated from a British destroyer.

The Gallic counterpart to a Chief Yeoman of Signals got it all right, and smiled delightedly as he handed the written message to his commanding officer.

A reply was sent, acknowledged, and then the two Allied warships parted on divergent courses, the British destroyer to resume her station with the convoy, the *Bison* to pass astern of the far-flung line of merchantmen.

The signal had nothing to do with Brian and his companions. It was a congratulatory message, complimenting the *Bison's* officers and men on the neat dispatch of her third U-boat victim to the sea-bed.

Next morning Brian and his companions turned out with the hands of the watch. With the exception of George, they had been turned out of the sick-bay and had been accommodated for'ard. Enforced idleness did not appeal to them. They would have welcomed the chance of turning-to with their

French comrades, but for some reason their temporary hosts would have none of it, refusing, with cheerful gestures accompanied by offers of cigarettes, their offers to bear a hand.

“I guess they think we’re mascots,” said Stan.

“Then let ’em,” added Terence. “S’long as they don’t think we’re wowsers, I don’t mind hanging on to the slack awhile.”

Shortly after seven bells in the forenoon watch the Frenchmen showed signs of renewed excitement. Although the guns’ crews were standing by there was no call to action stations. On the bridge the officers were peering ahead through their binoculars, while most of the hands were leaning on the rails in an endeavour to look at some object approaching dead on. Most of them were talking excitedly as if there was “something in the wind”.

It was almost a flat calm with a following breeze so light that, owing to the *Bison*’s speed, there was an apparent head wind. There was not a cloud in the sky, and visibility, though not startlingly clear, was good.

Following the general example, Brian and his chums crossed to the starboard side.

About a couple of miles off was either a full-rigged ship or a barque. Seeing her end-on it was difficult for them, being without glasses, to distinguish which she was. Her yards were properly squared and her canvas stowed, which, for a craft far out from land, was somewhat unusual.

Although the *Bison* had slowed down and hoisted a distinguishing pennant, it did not take her long to decrease the intervening distance.

The barque—for that she proved to be—was moving through the water. From her gaff was displayed a French *Tricolore* over another flag that, owing to the direction of the wind, was still unidentified. What was even more remarkable was that she was in tow of a submarine which was also flying the blue, white and red flag of the French Republic.

The voyage of the *Hanau*, that being the name of the captured German barque, was an epic one.

She had sailed from Iquique, a week before war was declared, with a cargo of nitrates. Everything seemed to have gone against her. Instead of running round the Horn before the prevailing westerlies, she met a head wind. For ten days she hardly gained a mile, tacking the while in the teeth of a furious gale.

Contrary breezes were her lot all the way up the east coast of South America until she met the Trades. Miles off the Brazilian coast she fell in with a steamship flying Japanese colours. The stranger wasn't a Jap, but a German that had slipped out of Lobito Bay and eventually went into internment in the port of Pernambuco. From her the captain of the *Hanau* learnt that Germany was at war with Great Britain and France. He was advised to make for the nearest neutral harbour. That was all the assistance the *Hanau* received from her compatriot.

Again left to themselves, the captain and officers of the barque held a conference in which it was decided to attempt to reach Germany by way of Greenland, thence to Norwegian territorial waters and so to the Baltic.

The name *Hanau* was painted out and that of *Trolle*, with Malmo as her home port, substituted. False papers were prepared—crudely, as subsequent events proved—purporting that she was of Swedish nationality.

Bad luck still dogged her.

In the doldrums her auxiliary oil-engine failed, and she drifted in a flat calm for nearly a fortnight, during which period the South Equatorial current set her a long way towards the West Indies.

It was not until the middle of January that she found herself, short of provisions and water, some eight hundred miles east of Cape Hatteras with the most hazardous part of her voyage yet to come.

So far she had not been stopped by any Allied warship. Quite possibly her captain did not know of the "screen" of armed vessels between Greenland and the Orkneys, although he might have suspected it. The long winter nights of the Northern Atlantic and the fact that the barque's canvas was not strong enough to enable her to withstand the wintry gales of those latitudes compelled her to abandon her original plan and make for a United States port.

The yards had hardly been squared for a dead run to the west'ard when a submarine broke surface.

One of the *Hanau's* officers recognized her as a U-boat. The barque's crew cheered whole-heartedly and began to sing "Deutschland über Alles" when they received a rude shock.

The submarine hoisted French colours and fired a shot across the *Hanau's* bows. The song of jubilation ceased abruptly, the helm was put up and the barque hove-to in token of surrender.

Even as she did so, smoke began to pour from her hatchways. Rather than let the barque with her valuable cargo fall into the hands of the enemy, her captain had given orders for her to be set on fire.

The submarine's commander acted promptly.

"Unless the fire is immediately extinguished," he threatened, "no one will be allowed to leave the ship!"

It may have been mere bluff—perhaps it was—or a stern threat that would be put into execution. In any case, it had the desired effect.

Faced with the probability of being burnt alive through their own act, the German crew, ignoring the commands and entreaties of their captain, set to work with hoses and extinguishers.

The fire was put out before it had time to take a firm hold. A prize crew was put on board, most of the Germans sent below under hatches, and the *Tricolore* hoisted over the Nazi flag.

So far, so good; but now the question arose: how could the prize be brought into a French port? The captors were submariners, specialists at their trade but unused to handling a square rigged craft without auxiliary engines. They couldn't spare enough men for the job, even if they were capable of making sail.

Undaunted, the French captain decided upon a bold and enterprising experiment. He gave orders for the *Hanau* to be taken in tow. The submarine, that perforce must remain on the surface during the long and arduous operation, began to haul the barque at the end of a towing hawser, two-thirds of the way across the Atlantic at its widest part.

In order to minimize the great risks and to ensure to the best of his power that the prize would not be recaptured by U-boats known to be at large, the captain of the submarine wirelessly for assistance. With the least delay the *Bison* left Brest, followed by an ocean-going tug, whose mission it was to relieve the submarine of her heavy and cumbersome tow.

But for four anxious days and nights the remarkable Odyssey continued before the *Bison*, far ahead of the tug, arrived upon the scene. Constant vigilance had to be maintained both on the submarine and on board the prize. Men, frequently knee-deep in water, were stationed aft on board the towing craft, ready to slip the hawser should a U-boat attempt to deliver an attack. In that event the French submarine was to make a crash dive, leaving the hawser attendants to swim to the *Hanau* to be hauled on board by the prize crew.

Fortunately these precautions, though necessary, had not to be put into operation; although they might have been had not the *Bison* neatly disposed of the U-boat only a day before she fell in with the captured *Hanau*.

When she did, everybody on board the *Bison* cheered vociferously—even the reticent Dixcart.

Brian agreed with his chums that it was well worth being taken a thousand miles out of one's way to see how the French allies tackled a tough proposition.

CHAPTER XV

Under Arrest

It was not until a week later that the *Bison* returned to Brest. The submarine had preceded her and had received a tremendous ovation from the townsfolk of the French naval arsenal.

By that time Brian had had more than his fair whack of escort work. The *Bison* had stood by the prize both while she was being towed by her captor and, later, when she was taken over by the tug; and since the speed of the towed *Hanau* was approximately twelve knots, the destroyer-leader had to describe circles around her, covering five times the distance made good by the prize.

It was a bitterly cold day when Brian and his companions set foot on French soil. The *Bullol's* hand, known as George, had to be carried ashore on a stretcher and taken to hospital. The others, having been supplied with French naval greatcoats, boots and caps decorated with red *pom-poms*, were given passes for the railway journey via Rouen to Le Havre.

It was at Rouen that they learned to their great relief that thirty-three members of the *Bullol's* crew had been picked up and landed in England by an Italian vessel. They had managed to get away from the burning ship in one of the starboard lifeboats and had pulled away to wind'ard, while Brian's party, after they had found the drifting boat, had made off to lee'ard in order to keep clear of the spreading and burning oil. The men were sixty hours in the boat before the Italian vessel picked them up.

This Brian and his companions heard from a British journalist on the platform, who also gave them the information that the train to Le Havre wasn't due to leave for another two hours, adding that it might easily be an hour late in getting away.

"Why not have a look round the place?" he suggested. "I'd show you the sights; but I'm hoping to get an interview with an R.A.F. merchant who has just got a bar to his D.F.C. I'll wangle it so that you can get past the Military Police, though!"

The pressman managed that part of the business successfully and returned to resume his vigil at the railway station.

“Let’s make for the Cathedral,” suggested Stan, who, though he had never set foot on the Old World before, seemed to know something of the history of every important French town through which they had passed that day.

They did so. No one seemed to take much notice of the four representatives of the British Empire in their French naval uniforms. There were too many matelots in Rouen. On the other hand, British soldiers and airmen attracted considerable attention, especially from the civil population.

The trouble arose after they had left a famous cathedral.

A well-meaning patriot, having overheard four matelots conversing in a language that he took to be German, voiced his suspicions to a gendarme and spoke so loudly and excitedly that passers-by stopped and heard what it was all about.

The gendarme, who could speak no language but his own, strode importantly over the *pavé* to where Brian, Stan, and Terence were waiting for Dixcart, who had gone into a shop to buy postcards.

Accompanied by a steadily-increasing crowd, the gendarme, a short, podgy man of about five feet two, addressed himself to the Australian, probably because he was the tallest of the three suspects, and demanded to know whether he was masquerading in French naval uniform.

“No compree,” replied Terence, taking the whole business as a joke.

Brian, though his command of French was scanty, knew what the gendarme had asked, but was content to let his Aussie chum stand the racket. He, too, thought it would be fun at the French policeman’s expense.

The fact that the tall suspect couldn’t speak French confirmed the gendarme’s suspicions. He broke into a rapid accusation, ending with the menacing words *sales Boches*.

“How’s it, boy?” rejoined Terence. “*Oui*, it’s all bosh!”

Murmurs of the sinister “*Espion*” came from the onlookers. The cry of “spy” rose to an angry roar. The temper of the crowd looked threatening.

Then, seemingly from nowhere, two gendarmes arrived, followed by two more.

Brian felt a hand grip his arm, and realized that it was beyond a joke.

“Best go quietly, you fellows!” he exclaimed.

They went, but not quietly so far as the attendant crowd was concerned. With ten paces separating them, the three suspects, each held by a gendarme and preceded and followed by others, were escorted through the narrow cobbled side street into a busy square.

By this time the crowd must have numbered a hundred, every one of whom was talking excitedly, firmly convinced that the police had arrested *trois espions allemands*.

Almost before they knew where they were, Brian and his chums found themselves in separate cells under the Hotel de Ville.

Meanwhile Dixcart, who had been making his selection of postcards with his usual slow deliberation, had come out of the shop, to find that his companions were nowhere to be seen. Why they'd gone he couldn't understand. He felt bewildered. It was the first time he'd found himself alone in a foreign city, so immense after his home town in far-off Newfoundland. He regretted having bought those postcards. There wasn't much left of the fifty francs that had been advanced to him by the authorities at Brest.

Yet in his solitude he had one consolation. The four *Bullol* survivors had been given official documents called *permis de circulation* and a joint travelling warrant. Since Dixcart could speak French fluently, these documents were entrusted to him until the party embarked at Le Havre. Without them, Cardyke, Lorne and Grant couldn't get very far.

Reassured, Dixcart made his way back to the railway station to await their arrival.

Brian had not been alone in his grim cell more than half an hour before a gendarme entered and, without speaking a word, signed to him to follow.

In the corridor another armed policeman waited to walk behind the prisoner. In this order they entered the inspector's office.

That official, a keen-eyed, visibly alert man, motioned to Brian to stand in front of the table. For quite a minute of most uncomfortable silence the prisoner was subjected to a steady scrutiny during which those keen eyes neither wavered nor blinked.

"Your name?" demanded the inquisitor in French.

Brian understood that question and complied.

"Nationality?"

“British!”

“So? Then explain how you are wearing the uniform of the French navy?” continued the inspector in English.

Brian began to do so, stating that he and his companions were survivors from the British oil carrier *Bullol*.

“Stop!”

The inspector swung round in his swivelled chair and, without rising, took a book from a shelf. It was a *Lloyd's List of Shipping*.

“There appears no such name,” he declared. “Your explanation, please!”

“She’s not a merchant vessel, sir,” countered Brian. “If you have a British *Navy List*, you’ll find her in the list of Fleet Auxiliaries.”

To Brian’s astonishment even that book was forthcoming, although the inspector had to walk across the room to get it.

Rapidly he turned the pages, like a person acquainted with its contents.

“My mistake!” he admitted crisply. “Now continue.”

Feeling decidedly bucked at having won the first round, Brian proceeded, only to be again interrupted by: “What is the name of the captain of the *Bison*?”

That took the wind out of Cardyke’s sails.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” he replied.

“More than a week on a vessel and you fail to remember her captain’s name?”

“I never heard it mentioned, sir.”

“Proceed!”

Brian did so. He’d been speaking for about a minute when his interrogator suddenly rapped out a question in German.

“I don’t understand German,” protested the suspect.

“Really?” countered the inspector. “Not knowing the language, how do you declare that it is German?”

“You wily old bird!” thought Brian. Aloud he replied: “I recognize it from the wireless.”

That apparently satisfied the French official's doubts on that score. He listened to the end of the narrative and then asked the gendarme who had arrested the accused if any papers had been found on him. The policeman replied that he had searched and found none.

"You have made up a fine story," resumed the inspector. "But you fail to convince me. Why you, wearing a French uniform on the strength of your being a 'distressed seaman', find yourself in Rouen without the necessary papers of identification. If you are what you say you are, why were not these documents given you?"

"They were," answered Brian.

"Then where are they?"

"One of my companions has them."

"You have searched the other accused?" inquired the inspector, in French, to which the gendarme replied that assuredly he had and nothing of that nature had been found in their possession.

"You lie!" thundered the inspector, addressing the accused. "According to the testimony of *ce monsieur-çi* your companions are also without papers of identification."

"I quite believe that, sir."

"Then what have they done with them? Destroyed them? If they were forged, then I can well comprehend. All this goes to prove your guilt."

"There are four of us."

"Four?" For the first time the inspector showed signs of a Gallic temperament. Without pausing for breath he went bald-headed for the brow-beaten gendarme for allowing one of four dangerous spies to escape. Did he not know that one spy at large was assuredly far more dangerous than a thousand under lock and key.

To this tirade the policeman replied by saying that, when he'd been called to the scene by public-spirited citizens, there were but three.

"You saw no one running away!"

"No, monsieur; the three accused were standing still and talking. One admitted that he was a Boche!"

This statement was translated for Brian's information.

“That is a mistake, sir,” he expostulated. “Seaman Grant simply said ‘That’s all bosh’.”

“‘Bosh’; what is that? Do not tell me, however.”

Evidently the slang word baffled him, but not for long. From his waistcoat pocket he produced a small book—*A Dictionary of Slang*—and turned over the pages.

“Ah! It means ‘nonsense’,” he continued. “Now, tell me; who is the fourth companion of yours and where is he?”

“He’s Dixcart, a Newfoundlander, and he speaks French well.”

“Where is he?” reiterated the Inspector.

“I don’t know.”

“Describe him.”

It wasn’t an easy matter. Although Brian had been shipmates with the Newfoundlander for more than two months, he couldn’t remember the colour of his eyes or the shape of his nose.

That ended the examination for the time being.

Brian was taken back to his cell, wondering how long he was likely to be there and whether he’d miss the train to Le Havre. But for this annoying incident he should have been in England by nine next morning, and now that possibility seemed to be becoming more and more remote.

Two hours went by, during which Terence and Stan had been separately examined by the inspector of police. Telephone calls had also been put through to the naval authorities at Brest.

Meanwhile Dixcart had been arrested!

The Newfoundlander was on his way back to the railway station when he ran into the British journalist who had just brought off a successful and interesting interview with the recently decorated R.A.F. officer. He’d plenty of time to write up his story and get it past the censor. Perhaps he could gather more “news” from this Newfoundlander in French naval uniform, whose story he had turned down earlier in the day on the score of more important matters.

Dixcart, loquacious once in a while and then only on account of his companions’ desertion, was well away with his tale of woe, when two detectives pounced down and demanded his name. The next thing he knew

was that he was being escorted to the *Hotel de Ville*, followed by a crowd which included his newly-found friend the pressman.

When Brian was told to leave his cell he was again taken before the inspector. This time he was not alone. His shipmates, including Dixcart, were there—and Dixcart held the now all-important documents upon which their release depended.

Now all smiles, although inwardly he was disappointed at not having caught a bunch of Boche spies, the inspector told the four they were at liberty to proceed.

Accompanied by the pressman, who plied them with questions on the way, they hurried to the railway station, only to find that their train—punctual for once—had left five minutes earlier.

CHAPTER XVI

“What does it mean?”

“What’s the hurry anyway?” asked their new friend, the press representative. “Leave for men on active service doesn’t start until they arrive at a British port.”

“It’s not that,” explained Brian. “We’re due for a fortnight’s sick leave.”

“And we’ve earned it, I guess,” added Stan.

“And our passes are made out for the *Aube* and she leaves Le Havre at seven,” continued Brian. “Yes, she’s a French vessel. Apparently the authorities at Brest couldn’t supply us with a pass for a British cross-channel ship.”

“That’s a very different matter,” agreed the pressman, who had already obtained quite an amount of “copy” from the four “distressed seamen”, although they had taken good care to give away nothing of a “confidential” nature. “Tell you what; there are bound to be several G. S. lorries for Havre. I know several of the R.A.S.C. fellows. I might be able to wangle it. With reasonable luck, you should get there well before seven.”

Wangle it he did, but although the sympathetic driver “trod on it” for most of the forty-odd miles’ journey, “reasonable luck” wasn’t doing its bit to get the four chums across the Channel that night.

The *Aube* had left ten minutes before they arrived on the *quai*.

A British military policeman eyed the four English-speaking seamen in French uniforms askance.

“All I knows I can’t pass you on board any bloomin’ ship in those togs,” declared the Redcap after he had learnt of their predicament. “And it’s ’gainst regulations to rig you out in army kit. You’d better shove off to the Red Triangle hut. They’ll give you grub and put you on to a kip.”

“But we want to report for duty at our depot,” Brian stressed.

“Can’t help it! Look in at the office at nine to-morrow. If you had English passes instead of French ones there’d be no trouble. As it is, goodness only knows when you’ll get across!”

“Good old rotten red tape!” exclaimed Terence disgustedly as the four men made their way to the Y.M.C.A. hut. “Nobody wants us!”

“It sure seems like it,” agreed Stan. “Perhaps the war’s over and everyone’s packing up!”

They were directed to the hut by a gendarme, but not before he had examined their papers. Also he took the precaution of keeping them in sight till they arrived, although they were unaware of being shadowed.

At the cost of a few francs, Brian and his chums were supplied with a satisfying meal. After that the situation seemed more cheerful, though it didn’t appear to solve the problem of how they were to cross the Channel.

“Can I be of use to you fellows?” asked an elderly man in semi-military khaki. “That’s what I’m here for.”

Mindful of conspicuously posted warnings against incautious conversations with strangers, Brian, as spokesman, hesitated.

“Merely on personal problems,” continued the Y.M.C.A. Officer, indicating a badge on the lapel of his coat. “Judging by your appearance, if you will allow me to mention it, you seem at a very loose end.”

“We are!” agreed Brian, feelingly, and without more ado told him of the predicament in which they found themselves.

“I’ll see if there’s anything that can be done,” said their new-found friend at the end of the narrative. “If you’d been connected with the Services as long as I have you’d probably know that there are generally two ways of doing the same thing; the official and the non-official. Hang on for a few minutes.”

Actually twenty minutes had elapsed before he returned.

“I managed to get through,” he announced. “There’s the *Royal Crocus*, she’s on cross-Channel troop service, leaving at nine to-morrow morning. At least, she’s timed to leave at nine. The embarkation officer will issue you with fresh passes that will see you right through to Portsmouth. I don’t know what’ll happen to the uniforms you’re wearing. We haven’t anything here to help you over the difficulty.”

“It’ll make the guard at the naval barracks rub their eyes when we arrive,” declared Brian, who didn’t trouble in the slightest what rig he was wearing provided he said good-bye to France, and that speedily. “Where do we land, sir; at Southampton?”

“I expect so,” was the reply. “Still, one never knows!”

The hut official provided them with sleeping accommodation, much needed bath and shave and a substantial breakfast.

Well before nine, having passed muster with the embarkation officer, they arrived at the quay where the *Royal Crocus* was berthed. She was still disgorging lads in khaki, most of whom were having their first experience of setting foot in any country other than their own.

In addition she had already landed thirty-three survivors of the S.S. *Aube*—that was one reason why she was late. The French vessel in which Brian and his chums were to have taken passage had been either mined or torpedoed shortly after midnight, with considerable loss of life.

“Perhaps it’s just as well we missed her,” remarked Dixcart gravely, and the others nodded in silent agreement.

It was noon before the last of the draft disembarked, and an hour later before the homeward-bound men were allowed on board—troops from the front line, complete with equipment, going on leave.

Then it was that Brian discovered that the *Royal Crocus* was to make for Poole. That meant he would have to pass within six or seven miles of his home. He wondered whether he dare wangle a few extra hours and pay his people a flying visit, with his three chums, before reporting for duty.

He soon discovered that for all practical purposes on this trip he was regarded not as a seaman, but as a soldier! Temporarily under the orders of a raw subaltern, who didn’t quite know what to make of the four men in matelots’ rig, Brian and his chums had to fall in, wearing unaccustomed cork lifebelts—and how cumbersome they felt after the navy’s swimming collars—be shown the lifeboat they were to make for in the event of the ship being torpedoed, and warned, in that event, to remain “properly at ease” until the order was given for them to take their places.

It gave Brian a new insight into the solicitous care the Navy takes for the Army while in its charge.

And another when at length the *Royal Crocus* did get under way in company with four other transports and store ships under the escort of two destroyers, while overhead circled several French flying-boats that would accompany the convoy half-way across where British coastal command flying units would “take over”.

Off St. Catherine's, the *Royal Crocus* parted company to make for Poole, while the rest of the convoy proceeded to Southampton.

In the gathering gloom of a moonless and starless night, with occasional showers of sleet and hail, Brian renewed his hitherto brief acquaintance with Britain's "black-out".

It was nine o'clock when he and his chums landed. They'd been told to make their own way to the railway station, so that there seemed no reason why they shouldn't wangle that extra time and spend it with Brian's people.

At a telephone box, Brian managed to "get through" to Lymington and to hear his father's voice after so long an interval.

"Splendid, my boy!" exclaimed Mr. Cardyke. "So you're home at last? Where are you speaking from?"

"Almost, pater; we're at Poole."

"We?"

"Yes, I'm bringing along three chums of mine."

"Delighted, I'm sure!" rejoined Mr. Cardyke. "But the question is how do you propose to get here? There's no train and no buses."

"Thought you could run in and fetch us in the car," suggested his son hopefully. Times were when Mr. Cardyke thought nothing of fetching various members of his family from Southampton or Bournemouth at all hours of the night.

"But, my boy, there's a war on!"

"And don't I know it, Pater!"

"Yes, but do you know how it concerns private cars? I've used up my allowance and can't get more petrol for love or money till next month. Sorry! But you'll be given leave, I suppose, and it'll be only a matter of a few days before—— Ah! They're cutting us off!"

Mr. Cardyke's voice ended abruptly.

Brian left the box and explained the situation to his chums. To all intents and purposes they were stranded, since their last remaining money, changed on the boat for their francs, amounted to eighteen pence.

"Let's get on to the depot," suggested Stan.

“What depot?” asked Brian, thinking that the Canadian meant the naval barracks. “Portsmouth’s a long way off.”

“I forgot,” rejoined Stan. “I guess I oughta said the railway station over here!”

They arrived at the unlighted draughty station, discovered that the next train was due to leave in two hours, and managed to find a bitterly cold, cheerless waiting room, where the fire had gone out and the only illumination was a feeble blue light that, ironically threw a faint glare upon a poster: “Give the Railways a Square Deal”.

Three soldiers were stretched asleep on the hard wooden benches. Brian didn’t know they were there until he sat on one man’s feet. There was no indignant protest; just a weary question to know what the time was.

“Six more blinkin’ hours,” declared the Tommy. “More if the train’s late, and I’ve five miles to tramp at t’other end. Ain’t it parky? Colder than over t’other side!”

He fell asleep again.

“What does he mean by six hours more?” asked Terence.

“He’ll be waiting for the down train, I expect,” explained Brian. “Good old Southern Railway: ‘It’s Quicker by Rail’ used to be one of their slogans.”

“Wal, ain’t it?” added Stan, who rarely complained. “I guess your autos over here ain’t that fast with no gas!”

Forty minutes later their train left Poole. Well after midnight it stopped at Brockenhurst, only five miles from Brian’s home. It might as well be a hundred!

Finally, at half-past three in the morning, after a long wait and change of train at Southampton, they arrived at Portsmouth.

No one expressed any surprise at the naval barracks on their arrival, not even at their pompom-decorated caps, and within a quarter of an hour, Brian and his chums, their wanderings temporarily ended, were sleeping soundly.

That didn’t prevent them from turning out at reveille. Except in urgent circumstances, no one is excused muster. Then breakfast, followed by a cursory medical inspection and the issue of a full kit.

“You blokes can go on leave now,” a petty-officer informed them, presumably on higher authority. “Report for duty at eight on the 29th. You’d

better nip along to the office. There'll be a drop of back pay. And don't forget to leave your home addresses."

"Home addresses!" echoed Terence, as they hurried along the corridor to the "ship's office", which, like the rest of the naval establishment known as H.M.S. *Victory*, is on dry land. "They won't find me there in a hurry!"

The Australian had arranged to spend his "drop o' leaf" with some relations in the Midlands. The fact that he had never met them and that they didn't even know he was in the Old Country didn't worry him.

Dixcart was already "fixed up" also, with a distant relative. Stan Lorne had accepted Brian's invitation to spend his leave at Lymington.

And yet within the next ten minutes their plans were drastically altered.

While waiting outside the office, Terence saw a notice posted up inviting serving members of the Royal New Zealand Naval Division to volunteer for transfer to a New Zealand squadron of the Coastal Command.

"That's my mark!" he declared impetuously. "Leave can go hang! I'm applying for a transfer."

He was the first of the four to be interviewed by the Paymaster Commander, who already had each man's written service history before him.

"Oh, quite!" he replied, when Grant had made his request. "Send in your application and when it's signed by the commodore it will go forward for consideration. Next! Ah, you're John Dixcart. You're to be sent to join the Newfoundland contingent. You'll be given leave when you report. Next man; what's your name and rating?"

Stan, toeing the line, saluted and gave the required information.

"You haven't hurried, it seems," observed the accountant officer. "You'd better cast your eyes over this. It's been hanging about in the office for the last fortnight."

He extricated a sheet of foolscap from a docket and handed it to Lorne.

It was a report from the captain of H.M.S. *Galloway* recommending Ordinary Seaman Stanley Lorne to their Lordships' consideration for training as a Probationary Sub-lieutenant, R.N.V.R. At the foot were the words "Approved" and "Passed to *Victory* for necessary action".

Brian received nothing but his arrears of pay, less deductions while in hospital and his travelling warrant.

An hour later he was on his way home.

Of course, he reflected, it was topping to be back, seeing his parents again, and all that. At the same time he realized that he had parted from his chums, and perhaps would never see them again. Terence in the R.A.F., Dixcart serving in a ship manned entirely by Newfoundlanders—already they seemed as remote as the South Atlantic.

Stan, he might run across; but the Canadian would be on a different plane—a commissioned officer. He was a lucky dog; but——

Brian could not help feeling a little envious. He'd have to carry on "for the duration" as a humble rating; or, with luck, he might gain petty-officer's rank before the inevitable demobilization. Demobilization meant the end of the war, but it would also mean the commencement of a long period of social and industrial distress and unrest.

The train pulled up at a small country station, on the wall of which two uninspiring placards confronted him. One was "Freedom is in Peril: Defend it with all your might"; the other informed him that *his* cheerfulness and courage amongst other things will bring us victory.

"What do they mean, anyway?" he asked himself. "They're not worth the paper they're printed on—and there's a paper shortage, I've been told!"

The door was pulled open and a weedy, flat-chested lout of about twenty, with a stained cigarette sticking to a pendent lower lip, shuffled into the carriage, and, taking a corner seat, put his feet up on the opposite one.

Before the war, specimens of that sort were common enough, hanging round street corners in every town in the country. Now most of them were in khaki; their chests filled out and their ideas broadened under the influence of discipline and comradeship.

Brian thought he'd seen the fellow before. Yes, he remembered; he'd been brought before a Juvenile Court on a charge of maliciously injuring a younger boy. Sent to an approved school for two years. That would make him about twenty.

The lout eyed Brian furtively. He wanted to get into conversation, but appeared to hesitate.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "They've roped you in, then?"

"What do you mean; roped in?"

"Ain't you sort of conscripted?"

“Rather not.”

“Thought you was. Must be taking you for someone else.”

“You’ll be called up, I suppose?”

“Not me!” declared the fellow, with a sly glance. “I’ve just got off. I’m a conshus objector.”

“Conscientious objector, I suppose you mean?”

“That’s right. The blokes said as ’ow I was to go on the land. I can see myself doing that, I can.”

“You prefer to sit tight and draw the dole then?”

“Dole? Unemployment benefit, you mean. That’s right.”

“Sorry! Then you don’t mean to do anything to defend your country?”

“Why should I? What’s it done for me? I didn’t ask to be born in the bloomin’ country, did I?”

“And you’re such a pacifist—that’s a peace-at-any-price person—that if someone smote you on one cheek you’d offer him the other?”

The lout’s knowledge of scripture being of the sketchiest character he could only look at Brian uncomprehendingly and apprehensively.

“Wot’s that?”

“If I punched you on the nose, you wouldn’t attempt to defend yourself?”

“None of that, mate,” protested the “conchie”, visibly alarmed.

“Don’t worry,” continued Brian. “I suppose you had breakfast this morning; tea or coffee?”

“Tea, same as I allus have.”

“Well, then,” continued Brian, “neither tea nor coffee is grown in this country. Nor is tobacco and I see you’re smoking. All that comes from overseas at the risk of men’s lives and if it weren’t for the navy the country would be starving. Men—men, I say—are fighting to feed white-livered rats like you, who only develop what they call a conscience when they’re afraid for their miserable hides!”

“This is a free country, ain’t it?” rejoined the lout aggressively.

“Yes, and we’re supposed to defend freedom with all our might, I believe,” replied Brian, mindful of the slogan he’d noticed at the last station. “All the same, I’d keep quiet over your rotten conscience if I were you or you’ll land yourself into trouble!”

The fellow slunk out of the carriage into the corridor.

Brian let down the window.

A few minutes later the train ran into Southampton Central. In the adjoining docks ships were either tied up or moving in and out upon their lawful occasions, undeterred by war-time perils of the sea.

Another passenger entered the carriage—a short, tubby man with white hair and greyish beard. He was carrying a bundle done up in oilskin and secured by a piece of tarred rope. Brian took him to be about seventy and obviously a seafaring man.

He placed his bundle on the rack, sat down and wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. He’d been hurrying.

Then, without any preamble, he spoke:

“If t’weren’t for the likes of you, I wouldn’t be here,” he declared. “Got in yesterday wi’ a cargo of oil. That’ll be another nail in Hitler’s coffin, I’ll allow. Off again on—forgot, I’d better not say—soon for Tampico for more. And, mind you, I means it. Every time I see a navy man thinks I: Thank God for the British Navy!”

So that was that!

Brian Cardyke had received his answer.

“Your courage will bring us Victory.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

No date of death has been established for the illustrator, J. C. R. Knight. Therefore illustrations have been omitted from this ebook in case they are still in copyright.

[The end of *When the Allies Swept the Seas* by Percy F. Westerman]