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Taffrail

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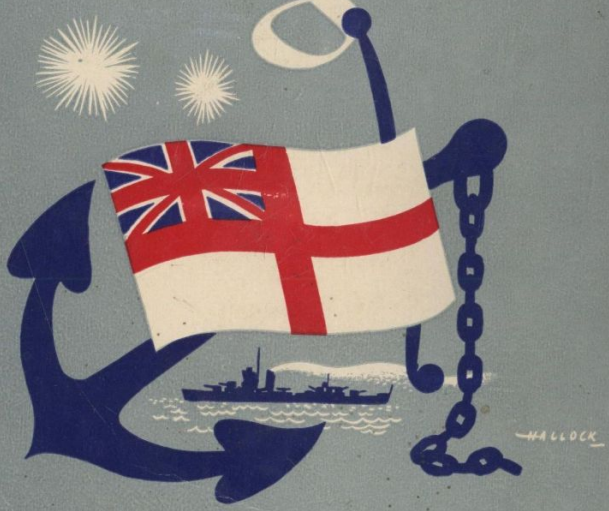

A NOVEL OF BRITAIN'S FIGHTING NAVY

by TAFFRAIL

(CAPTAIN TAPRELL DORLING, D. S. O., R. N.)

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BY

TAFFRAIL

(CAPTAIN TAPRELL DORLING, D.S.O., R.N.)

G • P • PUTNAM'S SONS • NEW YORK

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Second Impression

PJ

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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TO

TWO GOOD AMERICAN FRIENDS

Margaret and Webster

WHO HAVE DONE MUCH FOR BRITAIN.

The ships and principal characters
of this story are entirely fictitious.

WHITE ENSIGNS

CHAPTER I

CAPTAIN PETER CHENIES, Royal Navy, had left the bridge soon after midnight, when the middle watch had been taken over. The clock on the bulkhead of his sea cabin showed twenty-three minutes past twelve. Hanley, Lieutenant-Commander R.N.R., one of Chenies' most trusted officers, was in charge on the bridge outside. They had known each other for over a year of war. Hanley could be depended upon to do the right thing in any sudden emergency. Even the captains of His Majesty's armed merchant cruisers must rest sometimes, though a thump on the cabin door or a voice through the unplugged voice pipe over the bunk would bring Chenies out on to the bridge in something like thirty seconds.

Presently, he would climb into his bunk and compose himself to slumber—clothes, sea boots and all. Before dawn he would be on the bridge again to see the first gleams of daylight creeping up over the rim of the heaving sea to the eastward, to run his eye over what routine cipher messages had come through by wireless since he had retired—they would have called him at once for anything requiring immediate action. He would anxiously count the ships of the convoy as daylight broadened, look round the horizon to see that it was clear, perhaps exchange a signal or two with the convoy's Commodore, a retired rear admiral whom he'd known in the Navy years before.

Between seven and half-past, if nothing particular was going on, he would retire to his cabin, presently to emerge in shorts, singlet, and gym shoes for twenty minutes skipping, followed by half-a-dozen circuits of the promenade deck at

the double. Then a cigarette, a cup of tea, the B.B.C.'s first news bulletin, and his morning bath. Next Chivers, his steward, with breakfast. Beyond this Chenies never undressed at sea. It simply wasn't worth it. In this war things had a habit of happening in split seconds.

And now, at twenty-three minutes past midnight, feeling wakeful, he was sitting at his writing table, a pipe between his teeth and a gradually cooling cup of cocoa in front of him, trying to think of something to add to the letter to his wife. He wrote bits and pieces every day, and a thick packet addressed to Mrs. Peter Chenies, Holmfield, Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire, England, would be posted when the ship reached harbor.

When Maggie would receive it was quite another matter. Air mails weren't always available. Letters posted in the ordinary way sometimes took weeks to reach her, and months might elapse before he received her replies. By that time he'd often forgotten what he'd written, and the affairs of the moment, important enough at the time, had become meaningless and obscure.

Then, since the ship might be sent off here, there, or anywhere at a moment's notice, mails had a habit of going astray. "H.M.S. *Fonthill Abbey*. C/O G.P.O., London," was the only permissible address, and the people at the Admiralty and the General Post Office, excellent though they were, couldn't be expected to know immediately if the ship had suddenly been diverted to Iceland, the South Atlantic, or perhaps the Indian Ocean. The mails might be on their way to one place, while the two hundred and fifty officers and men to whom the parcels and letters were addressed were proceeding at full speed in a direction completely opposite. It

was exasperating, but inevitable. One couldn't really grumble.

Letter writing was most unsatisfactory in wartime. Because of the necessary censorship, there was so little one could say. One couldn't mention what the ship was doing, where she was, whither bound, whence she had sailed. Nor could one describe the more exciting incidents like encounters with enemy U-boats or aircraft, or the rescue of the survivors of a torpedoed ship during a gale of wind. Many subjects were taboo, and rightly so. One had to confine oneself to family affairs, to vague generalities about one's shipmates, to one's state of health and daily habits.

He would have liked to have written something about this particular voyage, but he couldn't. It had been even more strenuous than usual—first, the difficulty of meeting the convoy at its predetermined rendezvous because of the low visibility, and a heavily overcast sky which had prevented the taking of sights for a full three days. This meant that the *Fonthill Abbey's* position on the chart was largely a matter of guesswork. It might be thirty or forty miles out, and so might the convoy's if they had had the same weather. Anyhow, the convoy had been met thirty hours late.

Next, when it had been found, the breeze dropped and there followed two days of thick mist hanging in patches like cotton-wool over the surface of the sea. This had meant considerable difficulty in rounding up and keeping touch with a large number of merchant ships of varying types, speeds, and sizes, and not all of them British.

Then the barometer started to fall. The thickness lifted, but was succeeded by a blustering southwesterly gale and a

heavy breaking sea in which some of the smaller ships had difficulty in keeping up.

It was one of the *Fonthill Abbey's* jobs to whip up the stragglers and encourage the laggards. The speed of the convoy was always the speed of its slowest ship, and most commodores, quite rightly, objected strenuously to reducing the speed of the whole collection because of the tardiness of a few.

So soon after daylight, and again before dusk, if there were any signs of straggling, Chenies often steamed round the convoy with signals hoisted, or else winking on his ten-inch searchlight. The purport of his messages was generally the same—"Please do your best to keep up."

It rather went against the grain to harry the masters of merchant ships whose facilities for signaling did not approximate those of a man-of-war, and who were probably doing their best already in the matter of speed. Some of the older ships were coal-burners, and Chenies could imagine the tired, grimy, sweating firemen down in the boiler rooms flinging shovelful after shovelful of coal into the blazing furnaces with the slippery steel floorplates underfoot moving through the most impossible angles as the ships rolled and wallowed. Other men, working with slush lamps, would be trimming coal in the dark recesses of the bunkers. Theirs was the most unenviable job of all.

Chenies could almost hear the growls and grumbles ascending from the bridges of the assorted flock as he took the *Fonthill Abbey* past them with the bunting fluttering from his triatic stay. "The blinkin' Navy's busy again. Can't they ever stop worrying us chaps?" was mild to what they would really be saying.

Chenies knew the Merchant Navy pretty well. He had been at sea with many convoys and had attended the conferences at ports where before sailing the merchant ship masters were given their final instructions for the conduct of their vessels during the forthcoming voyage. He had many personal friends among the masters and officers and had heard their tales of being stopped by enemy surface raiders, attacked with guns and torpedoes by submarines or "E" boats, bombed or machine-gunned by aircraft, blown up by mines. He had met men whose ships had been sunk under them miles away from land, and had made long voyages in open boats in vile weather. He knew of others who had not lived to tell the tale; but those that did invariably went to sea again the moment they could get a ship. There was no flinching or hanging back. Hardy, cool, modest, and almost incredibly brave in the midst of danger, the merchant seamen would be boiled, baked, and blistered before they'd be driven off their rightful element by an enemy who knew no mercy or humanity.

The merchant seamen were not trained to arms, yet in a hundred and one individual encounters with raiders, U-boats, or aircraft, they behaved like battle-tried veterans.

And the engineers and their men in the engine and boiler rooms. They, too, deserved well of the country. They worked below the waterline, with the thickness of a steel plate between them and the sea, where the explosion of a mine or torpedo might convert the engine and boiler room into a shambles of twisted metal, flooding water, and clouds of steam from damaged boilers or fractured steampipes. On deck men might have a chance of escaping with their lives. This chance was infinitely less for those below.

And what of that extra knot coaxed out of some vibrating ship which enabled her to escape from a pursuing U-boat or perhaps a bombing airplane? What of the everyday repairs to machinery and boilers, the ingenuity so often displayed in making good war damage or some temporary breakdown?

Seamanship was for those on deck; but seamen and engineers were interdependent when it came to steaming a ship from port to port. Like the seamen, the engineers and their men were the last to consider themselves brave or heroic. They talked little, and boasted not at all. They considered themselves as normal people carrying on their peacetime jobs with a good many additional dangers thrown in.

Yes. Chenies, like all those other naval officers who had come into contact with them, regarded the men of the Merchant Navy as the salt of the earth. It went against the grain to be forced to harry some of them on these ocean voyages, but it simply had to be done—to keep the convoys closed up and concentrated.

The gale had started to ease off the morning before, and by nightfall had subsided entirely, to leave a long, smooth swell in which the *Fonthill Abbey* rolled and tumbled. Seated at the writing table in his cabin, dallying with the idea of adding something to the letter to his wife, Chenies could feel the change in movement every time the ship altered course to the new leg of the zig-zag, with the convoy altering in conformity. He could hear the noise of the breeze whistling outside his cabin, sometimes thin and shrill like the sound of a fife, sometimes deeper, like the throbbing of distant drums. The sound was never the same for more than a few consecutive seconds. It altered as the ship rose and fell.

Even through the closed door and carefully screened scuttles of his cabin, the muted swish and gurgle of the water alongside as the ship drove her way through it was always present in the background of his hearing. Nearer at hand he could hear, and feel, the sound of the steering wheel as the quartermaster moved it. When Hanley spoke to the engine room through the telephone, he could almost hear what was said. Never through all the long days and months spent at sea was Chenies wholly divorced from responsibility. His officers, luckier, could turn into their bunks, though generally in their clothes, and forget for a time the cares and anxieties of wartime.

Outside, he knew, the night was moderately dark. There was no moon, nothing but a few pale, silvery stars blinking through the frayed-out cloud masses streaming across the sky from the southwestward. While there was no more than a gentle breeze on the surface, it still blew hard five or six thousand feet overhead.

No lights were being shown. The nearer ships of the convoy showed as black silhouettes against the lighter background of sky whenever they lifted to the swell. Even with the naked eye one caught sight of the dim, whitened phosphorescence of wakes and bow waves as the vessels plunged. They were keeping good station and were well closed up. Looking through glasses one could almost count the whole collection. The visibility was improving. It would have been too good from the point of view of the enemy if the convoy had been in the submarine danger zone.

On board every one of those merchant ships, like the *Fonthill Abbey*, men were alert and watchful.

The convoy steamed on.

Chenies wrote perhaps a dozen lines to his wife about nothing in particular. Ideas would not come. Then his tiredness overcame him. He yawned, stretched himself, and rose.

By five minutes to one he was stretched out on his bunk, asleep.

2.

Chenies, luckier than some, had been home for two periods of about a week since the war started. On another occasion Maggie had spent five days at the port where the *Fonthill Abbey* was refitting.

Mrs. Chenies was busy enough at home. She belonged to the Women's Voluntary Service and was up to the eyes in work helping to look after women and children evacuated to the country from their homes in the bombed towns and cities. Minchinhampton, that little gray country town in the rolling Cotswolds which centuries ago owed its prosperity to the manufacture of woolen cloth, had fewer than four thousand inhabitants. Its accommodation had been strained almost to bursting point, particularly since the attacks on Bristol, only twenty-four miles away as the crow flies.

Minchinhampton people had heard the buzzing of aircraft passing overhead, followed by the thud of bursting bombs, and the rumble of distant gunfire. They had seen the pale, questing fingers of searchlights wheeling across the sky on the far horizon, the bluish-white flashes of guns, and the golden sparkle of their shells bursting high in the air, the chandelier-like clusters of flares falling slowly to earth on their parachutes, the reddish-orange glow of fires in the city reflected on the underside of the dark clouds.

Some of Minchinhampton's evacuees, though grateful no doubt in their hearts, were occasionally a little difficult to please. Chenies had chuckled at his wife's tale of a boy of five who hailed from the east end of London. He, billeted in the house of a kind hostess with children of her own, had been duly fed and bathed and bedded on the evening of his arrival. On the second evening, after supper, a bath was again suggested. The urchin surveyed the preparations with disgust. "Look here, old hen!" he demanded fiercely. "D'you take me for a bloody duck?"

Then the mothers and fathers and cousins and aunts who appeared at week ends to see the children. Most of them were grateful, though some expected to be lodged and liberally fed in spite of the rationing. Others complained if little Gladys or Alfie hadn't been to the cinema twice weekly, as they had been in the habit of doing from their own homes, and didn't receive their due quota of sweets or licorice "all sorts." It was useless to explain that the nearest cinema was three miles away by bus, and that it opened just about the time young children should be going to bed. Sweets, too, from being difficult to buy, were gradually becoming unprocurable. Sugar was strictly rationed.

Mrs. Chenies, doing her best to smooth over difficulties, soon realized that it takes all sorts to make a world.

She harbored no evacuees at Holmfield. Instead, she had two soldiers, who slept in camp beds in a spare room. Steve and Willie were pleasant boys, both of them, leaving the house each morning before seven and returning at any time between eight o'clock and midnight, to creep upstairs with hoarse whispers after leaving their boots in the kitchen. They were immensely helpful during their free time at week ends,

digging over the garden, planting out the vegetables, painting the garage, and polishing Mrs. Chenies' car. They chopped wood, carried in the coal, cleaned Mrs. Chenies' best suede shoes with a preparation of their own invention which completely ruined them, made a hutch in which they hoped to keep rabbits, and occasionally laid the table under the direction of Effie, the maid. No doubt they did some of the washing up as well, for Effie ruled the pair with a rod of iron.

Mrs. Chenies' letters to her husband were rather full of the perversity of Mr. Wilkes, the gardener, and of what was happening to the cabbages, the potatoes, the fruit trees, the rhubarb, the sweet peas, and all the rest of it. Mr. Wilkes wanted the latter sown in his way, in the open, the same as his father had done, and his grandfather before him. He couldn't see the sense of coddling sweet peas like babies—planting them in paper containers in boxes which one kept under glass in the little greenhouse till they sprouted, and then transferring them later to their specially prepared bed in the open. All these newfangled ideas of horticulture didn't please Mr. Wilkes a little bit. "Let the durn things take their chance along wi' the rest," said he.

There were times when Mrs. Chenies badly wanted her husband at home. Mr. Wilkes had deteriorated since his departure. Chenies could tell the recalcitrant one where he got off. His wife couldn't. Mr. Wilkes went his own way, regardless.

Every one of the older people in Minchinhampton knew everyone else, even if they weren't actually related. Newcomers were rather regarded as barbarians from strange parts until they had lived there for at least five years and had been duly assayed and proved worthy.

The Chenies' were more or less accepted. For one thing, they both belonged to Gloucestershire families. Mrs. Chenies came from Cirencester, and Peter from a village in the Cotswolds within twenty miles of it, where his father, old Admiral Chenies, had reigned for so many years in the rambling old gray stone house in which he had been born and brought up. Predeceased by his wife, the old man had died in 1924, aged eighty-seven. Peter was the only son. It irked his soul to be forced to sell the old house; but a mortgage, with death and estate duties, had swallowed up most of his patrimony. In any case the Manor was far too large and expensive to keep up.

Five years after his father's death, on retiring from the Navy, he had bought the house at Minchinhampton. It stood by the road beside the common with its old trees, and a view of the church tower and roofs of the sleepy little town beyond. At the back it overlooked the Golden Valley.

Minchinhampton knew the Chenies' well. People often asked after "the Cap'en," just as they inquired about "Miss Toppy" and "Mister Tony," his daughter and son.

Toppy, aged twenty-five, very capable, with a fluent knowledge of French, German, and Italian, had had an appointment in the Ministry of Information since soon after the war. Disliking work in an office, however, she was thinking of following in Father's footsteps by joining the Women's Royal Naval Service. She put in an appearance at home for very occasional week ends. Frances was her real name—Frances Elizabeth. But she'd been "Toppy" since childhood. It was short for "Copper top," because her parents had discovered red lights in her hair. They still persisted. She

was an attractive person with decided opinions and a will of her own.

Anthony, aged twenty-two, a lieutenant in a destroyer, had appeared hardly at all since the war started. His ship had certainly been run off her legs, and he had had more than his fair share of excitement for one so young. Also, he had grown what purported to be a beard, which occasioned a protest from his mother when she first saw it because it destroyed his good looks and made him appear so old. But beards, it seemed, had rather become the fashion in destroyers and submarines. Apart from saving the trouble of shaving at sea, they were the Navy's prerogative and couldn't be imitated by the Army or Royal Air Force.

Didn't the "King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions" lay down that—"The Captain is to permit all officers and men of the ship, including the Royal Marines, to wear beards and moustaches if they so desire. When the permission is taken advantage of, the use of the razor is to be discontinued entirely, as moustaches are not to be worn without the beard, nor the beard without moustaches.... The hair of the beard and moustaches and whiskers is to be kept well cut and trimmed. The Captain is to give such directions as may seem to him desirable on those points, and is to establish, so far as practicable, uniformity as to the length of the hair, beard, moustaches, or whiskers of the men...."

The Navy is nothing if not meticulous. It was quite useless for Mrs. Chenies to protest.

That, with Tinker, the aged and beloved Sealyham, and Tiger, the cat with the engaging manners, completes the catalogue of the Chenies family.

3.

Peter loved his little house, as he loved Gloucestershire and the Cotswolds. There was a fascination in the rolling plateaus and barren limestone uplands, alternating with deep, narrow valleys, well-wooded and traversed by their shallow, rapid streams. He loved the seventeenth century, gray stone houses with their thick slate roofs which harmonized so well with the landscape, the gray stone walls and the gray Cotswold sheep.

He had spent so much time and trouble over his new home, and had hoped, when he left the Navy after more than thirty years, to remain settled and quiescent for the rest of his life. He wanted to call no man his master, to play golf, when he felt so disposed, to ride and to fish, to devote himself to his wife and two children and give them a fair deal in life, to take an interest in his garden, and in local affairs, if people wanted him. They might also travel a little, and have an occasional trip to London to do a theater or two, and for Maggie to do her shopping while he renewed acquaintances at his club.

It had all worked well enough to start with. They had had their jaunts and travels. Life had been enjoyable. Variety, not routine, was certainly the sauce of existence.

Toppy had done well at school and had early developed that taste for languages which proved so useful afterward. Later, with one girl friend or another, she had traveled over a large part of Europe. By the time she was twenty-one she was in a tolerably well-paid post in London on the staff of an organization which dealt with international affairs, and that was only a beginning.

Tony, too, had passed into the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth, and had duly gone to sea as a midshipman.

Though not possessing the quick brain of his sister, he was a hard worker and well-liked and very keen. Most of the Service certificates signed by his captains said, “To my entire satisfaction. A zealous and promising young officer.” These encomiums, Tony said, were entirely because he had never been found out. He far preferred to be considered a hard-boiled roysterer and a rip than a plaster saint with a nice little golden halo. Some of his wilder adventures might certainly have shocked his doting mother. Anyhow, in due course he had become a sub-lieutenant.

With both his children provided for, Peter imagined he would be able to sit back and relax, to enjoy the blessings of the land with the fruits of his labors. For a time all went well, but not for very long.

Being a naval officer on the retired list, sound in wind and limb and under the age of sixty, Peter Chenies was still liable to be recalled to the Navy in the event of war. He had volunteered for service when the Navy mobilized at the time of the Munich crisis, presenting himself at the Admiralty with a horde of others, and having his name noted.

Nothing happened until the following January when, coming down rather late to breakfast at Holmfield, he found a long official envelope beside his plate with his other letters.

“Probably some foul communication about income tax,” he observed, tearing open the envelope and extracting the contents. “No, by gum, it isn’t!” he continued after a moment. “It’s my war appointment!”

“Your what?” his wife demanded. “What does it mean?”

“That if war comes I’m off to sea again,” he told her. “I’m to command an armed merchant cruiser, Maggie. Just think

of that, old dear! What luck!" He was obviously pleased, and a little excited.

Mrs. Chenies looked distressed. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that he was far too old to think of going to sea in command of a ship. But that would annoy him. She checked herself in time.

"But Peter, dear," she asked, "wouldn't you be *far* better in some appointment ashore?"

"Ashore?" he echoed, looking at her. "Ashore, if I can get a command at sea?"

Mrs. Chenies sighed as she poured out her husband's coffee. "I hope there'll never be another war."

She remembered the last war, when Peter had spent the whole four years in command of destroyers. If war came again it would be bad enough having Tony at sea. If Peter went also—well, she hardly dared to think of it.

4.

The *Fonthill Abbey*, to which Peter had been appointed a month after the outbreak of war, was a sixteen-knot, turbine-driven, twin-screw passenger steamer of 14,200 tons, which had formerly been on the Australian run. He joined her in the northern shipyard where she had been converted into one of His Majesty's armed merchant cruisers. They had painted her gray, and had provided her, among other armament, with eight six-inch guns.

The ship originally had accommodation for nearly seven hundred passengers, but when Peter joined whole tiers of cabins had been demolished to provide space for messdecks. All fripperies had disappeared. Where there was originally

paneling or tapestry, now there was nothing but bare steel. Smoking rooms, lounges, and dining saloons, bereft of most of their furniture and trimmings, were almost unrecognizable as such. The *Fonthill Abbey* was stripped for war.

Of the officers, all but Chenies and his executive officer Wenlock, a commander from the retired list, belonged to the Royal Naval Reserve. Some of them, and practically all the engineers, who had been given temporary commissions in the R.N.R., had served in the ship in peacetime.

Except for a handful of petty officers and a solitary Royal Marine bugler, the ship's company, which numbered about 250, was entirely made up of naval pensioners, men of the Royal Naval and Royal Naval Volunteer Reserves, and others who had joined the Navy especially for the war and were being sent afloat after a few months' intensive training. Among the men were a score of Newfoundland fishermen, expert boatmen in all weathers, and likely to be useful for boarding intercepted steamers. Many of the peacetime stewards, as well as firemen and greasers, had volunteered to stay on when the ship was taken over by the Admiralty.

The ship's company was a likely crowd of men who worked well. They were keen to do their best, but a good deal of hard, grueling work had to be done in the way of "working up" before the *Fonthill Abbey* could be considered efficient as a warship.

Throughout the autumn and the first fierce winter of the war the ship had formed part of the Northern Patrol of cruisers and armed merchant cruisers which watched the northern exits of the North Sea. One cannot specify her exact patrol ground, which varied from time to time, but for bad weather, heavy seas, cold, and general nastiness, that grim

stretch of water between the Faroes, Iceland, and Greenland was one of the worst during winter. The *Fonthill Abbey's* normal routine was eighteen to nineteen days out, followed by five days to a week in harbor for refueling and storing. Officers and men had about three days' leave every six weeks, and well they deserved it.

Peter would never forget that first winter. Daylight came at about ten in the morning and darkness at about half-past three. It was generally heavily overcast, with low, driving clouds. Most of the time it blew like the wrath of God, with a steep, leaden-colored toppling sea in which the ship rolled and pitched, plunged and wallowed, with the spray sweeping over her in sheets.

Then the fierce snow blizzards, which reduced the visibility to a few hundred yards and coated every exposed part of the ship in a thick layer. The driven spray, freezing as it fell, converted the coating into solid ice, until masts, rigging, boat's davits, rails, and the like became three or four times their normal girth. There was floating ice about on occasions, and several times they sighted icebergs. For days on end the temperature never rose above zero, which meant thirty-two degrees of frost. Men became frostbitten as, muffled almost to the eyes in all the woolies they possessed, they strove to peer out through the darkness. The lookouts kept tricks of only half an hour and spent the next hour of their watch below chipping the ice from their oilskins and inducing some semblance of warmth and feeling into their numbed limbs and extremities.

"Wind northwesterly, force 9 to 10, tending to back during the forenoon," ran an entry in one of the *Fonthill Abbey's* reports of proceedings. "Heavy breaking sea from same

direction. Storms of snow and hail, in which visibility did not exceed one cable. At 0130 port lifeboat carried away by heavy sea. Hove ship to with wind on starboard bow.”

That time the weather became worse before it improved. The ship remained hove to for forty hours. There was nothing else to do.

The monotony of the gales was occasionally varied by a blanket of thick fog through which the wind and cold persisted. The number of really fine days, with sun and full visibility, could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Unless they deliberately closed the shore to verify their position because sights of the sun or stars had been unobtainable for days, they rarely saw the land. Peter remembered sighting the glittering, snow-covered peaks of Iceland, fifty or sixty miles away, on no more than three occasions during the brief spells of really fine weather.

For the rest, during the whole of that first long winter, they saw little on patrol but the somber sky, and the gray, heaving sea dappled with the white of breaking combers. The sight of another ship was rare, and more often than not it was one of their consorts, with whom they exchanged signals. Whenever this occurred the word was passed round from mouth to mouth, and most of the men gathered on deck to feast their eyes on the spectacle.

When, after their period on patrol, they met their relieving ship at the appointed rendezvous and shaped course for home after turning over, the whole atmosphere changed. There was more cheerful noise on the messdecks, more singing and playing of harmonicas and accordions. There was a queue at the barbers, and men might be seen darning their socks, and ironing and furbishing up their best shoregoing uniforms.

Also, they washed and pressed the square blue-jean "dickeys," or collars, with the three rows of narrow white tape, worn at the back of their jumpers.

Some of the youngsters had been led to believe that the three rows of tape commemorated Nelson's victories at the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar. The collar, officially introduced when the bluejacket's uniform was first established in 1857, was undoubtedly a survival from the days when seamen sported pigtails and were in the habit of wearing a square of cloth or a tied handkerchief round their necks to prevent the flour, grease, or tar with which their queues were sometimes anointed from soiling their clothing. The three rows of tape, however, had merely been put there by way of ornament in 1857, and had since been copied by most of the navies of the world. But the recently joined men soon discovered that to wear new dark blue "dickeys" ashore was to brand themselves as newcomers to the Navy. Preferring, in spite of their youthful appearance, to be considered ancient mariners, they washed and scrubbed their shoregoing "dickeys" until the pristine navy blue faded to azure.

The *Fonthill Abbey* had intercepted various neutral merchant ships, boarding them if the weather permitted to examine their papers and credentials, otherwise sending them into harbor for examination.

On one occasion they sighted a large merchant steamer coming out of a bank of haze at a distance of twelve miles. Chenies, who had his glasses on her, noticed her sudden alteration of course and the increase of smoke from her funnel. He didn't wait.

“Go on to full speed,” he ordered the navigator. “Steer straight after her. —Warn the Commander we’ll be going to action stations. Have a boarding boat’s crew ready.”

The helm went over, and the *Fonthill Abbey* swung round in pursuit. Her speed gradually increased.

The stranger’s outline was becoming dimmer—swallowed up in the mist on the horizon. Was it merely mist, Chenies wondered, or real fog? Searching for another ship in really thick weather was like looking for a needle in a truss of hay, particularly if she didn’t wish to be found. Meanwhile, he couldn’t bring her to with a shot across the bows. His six-inch guns wouldn’t carry 24,000 yards.

The *Fonthill Abbey* steamed on.

The strange ship might be good for about twelve knots, Chenies thought. The *Fonthill Abbey* could do nearly sixteen at a pinch. If they were twelve miles apart on sighting, that meant a chase of three hours before he was up to her, or about an hour and a half before he was within gun range.

An hour and a half, and the time was about half-past two. It would be getting dark by half-past four.

And what of the mist? Was it thickening into fog? No. It didn’t seem to be. The stranger, though indistinct, was still visible after ten minutes. The haze seemed to be hanging in patches over the surface of the water. Consumed with impatience, Chenies would have given a month’s pay to be in a destroyer. There, a simple order on the engine-room telegraph would have sent her cutting through the swell at over thirty knots. The *Fonthill Abbey* seemed like a lumbering hearse in comparison.

A message came up from the wireless office to say the stranger was using her radio. They knew it was hers, because

the wireless bearing coincided with the compass bearing from the bridge. The signals were unintelligible, but judging this was one of the occasions when it was justifiable to break wireless silence, Chenies ordered a message to be transmitted on the same wave length. “Cease using radio. Stop your engines instantly.”

The radio ceased, but the ship ahead showed no signs of stopping her engines. The mist was still patchy in places, though it seemed gradually to be dispersing. The *Fonthill Abbey* was gradually creeping up.

An hour passed ... an hour and three-quarters. The stranger was still over four miles ahead, steaming in almost the contrary direction to that in which she had been steering when first sighted.

Chenies gave more orders. One of the *Fonthill Abbey’s* guns went off with a crash and a spurt of flame and cloud of dun-colored cordite smoke. The shot, as intended, fell slightly ahead of its target and to one side.

It was enough. The steamer stopped. Those on board the armed merchant cruiser could see she flew no ensign. Large white letters on her side purported to show she was a neutral, but the letters were new, and very clumsily painted. Moreover, the bottoms of the letters had been partly washed away, which showed they had been painted since leaving harbor.

Chenies was taking no chances. Mindful of incidents of the last war, he couldn’t be certain the steamer was not an armed raider in disguise. Making a wide circle with his guns trained upon her, he signaled by International Code flag signals, “What ship? Where bound?”

There was no reply. But men on board her were throwing things into the sea and turning out and lowering boats, into which more men were scrambling. Presently, looking through glasses, it could be seen that only one man, an officer by the look of him, was left on board. He sauntered aft, hoisted the German flag at the ensign staff, and then went leisurely forward again and clambered down into one of the boats waiting alongside.

One of the *Fonthill Abbey's* boats, meanwhile, in command of Lieutenant Williams, R.N.R.—Roughneck Williams, as his messmates called him—was in the water and pulling for all her crew were worth toward the abandoned ship. On the way she met one of the German boats and stopped while Williams ordered the Germans to return to their ship. Chenies saw Roughneck's angry gesticulations, and could imagine his lurid language. But it had no effect. He heard afterward that the Germans pretended not to understand.

So Williams' party boarded the vessel, presently to signal back that plates had been removed from the condenser and the seacocks opened. She had been scuttled, and was making water fast.

The boarding party was ordered to return, and the steamer's sinking was accelerated by a few rounds of gunfire. In less than a quarter of an hour she flung her bows skyward, and disappeared to the bottom—the *Paraiso*, of over 6,000 tons, bound from Santos to a German port. Roughneck brought back the Nazi ensign with its swastika and Iron Cross and was apologetic at not being able to save the ship. The Germans, it seemed, had made a thoroughly good job of the scuttling.

It was not until well after darkness had come, by which time the breeze had risen and there was a little breaking sea, that the fifty-seven Germans were rescued from three lifeboats and put below under guard. As usual, full arrangements had been made for scuttling the ship on sighting a British warship. The *Paraiso's* crew had even packed their bags and suitcases ready for a hurried departure.

Later that evening, the *Paraiso's* captain requested an interview with Chenies. Chenies saw him in his cabin. Captain Schultz was by no means the typical Nazi, either in demeanor or appearance. He talked English very nearly as well as Chenies himself.

He wished to know what was to become of him and his crew. Chenies could only tell him that they would be handed over to a military guard on the *Fonthill Abbey's* arrival in harbor, and would eventually find themselves in a camp for prisoners of war. Provided they behaved themselves, they would be well treated.

"Why did you try to run the blockade?" Chenies went on to ask him.

"We have orders so to do," the German answered.

"Who from?"

"From the Führer through our Navy."

"Does that apply to scuttling your ship, too?"

"Yes. We seamen must obey, Herr Kapitän."

Chenies could understand that. The alternative to rigid obedience was a concentration camp, if nothing worse.

"May I say something, Herr Kapitän?"

Chenies nodded. "Go on," he said.

“I can never speak freely on board my own ship, Herr Kapitän. Not for years can I say anything but it is reported. It is the same on shore. The Gestapo, you understand.” And a look of hatred came over his face. “They are everywhere. In foreign countries also.”

“There is no freedom in Germany,” he continued, his voice rising. “No free talking, no thinking for yourself. —But not all Germans wanted to fight with England. Many merchant seamen, certainly not!”

“Then I take it you’re not a Nazi?” Chenies asked.

Schultz winced.

“Me, a Nazi!” he exclaimed. “I tried to become an American citizen in 1935, but they won’t have me. My wife is Polish,” he added bitterly. “What has happened to her and my three children since this war? I have no news.” There was a look of misery on his face. He held out his hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

Chenies looked sympathetic.

“You’ll be able to write,” he answered.

“You do not understand, Herr Kapitän.—To where do I write? The last time I hear of my wife she was in Warsaw with the children. They live with her parents while I’m away at sea. What has happened to them now that Warsaw is bombarded and destroyed?”

“I can’t volunteer any opinion about that,” Chenies said. “As you’re a German it’s a matter for your government.”

“The German government!” Schultz exclaimed. “What do they care for me? I marry a Polish woman. My children are half Polish. Damn Hitler!” he broke out, trembling with

emotion. “Damn the Nazis who make war and misery in all the world!”

Chenies wished that more Germans thought the same.

CHAPTER II

CHIEF Petty Officer Reginald Ebenezer Buttress, doyen of the C.P.O.'s mess and one of the more elderly men in the *Fonthill Abbey*, was a seaman of the older school who came of a naval family.

He was a shortish, deep-chested, stockily built man in the middle fifties, nearly as broad as he was long. His tanned face was almost the color of mahogany, his eyes bluish-gray and piercing, and his eyebrows the bushiest you ever saw. His hair, rather thin on top, had originally been auburn, but was now nearly gray. It matched his reddish beard and mustaches, grown only since the war, which were trimmed in proper Navy fashion and cut to a point.

Powerfully built, Buttress appeared fiercer than he really was. He could certainly frighten the life out of newly joined ordinary seamen who, new to the ways of the Navy, gave lame excuses for dereliction of duty or tried to throw their weight about or argue the point. His voice, when he chose to raise it, could be heard from one end of the ship to the other in a deep-throated bellow. However, when chiding those who displeased him he addressed them out of earshot of others, advancing his face to within a foot of theirs, gazing at them with a steely glare, and growling deep down in his throat like an angry bear.

"I don't care who you are, what you are, where you came from, or what your father was," he would begin. "But you're in the Navy now. You're an Ordinary Seaman wearing the King's uniform. Someday, if you behave yourself, you may be made Able Seaman and Leading Seaman. But you've got to obey orders, my son, and jump to it. If I tell you to run,

you've got to run, or I'll know the reason why. I've got me eye on you all the time. 'Bout turn. Rejoin your part of the ship. Double march."

Suitably chastened, the delinquent doubled away.

Fiercely energetic himself, Buttress detested sloth or anything approaching slovenliness and didn't hesitate to say so. He lived for precision, neatness, and the teaching and training of the gunnery school. Brought up in the meticulously disciplined atmosphere of Whale Island, the Alma Mater of naval gunnery at Portsmouth, where he had first gone through a course for seaman gunner in 1906, and which he had constantly revisited to qualify for one higher gunnery rating after another and still regarded as his spiritual home, he lived for guns and gunnery. He even dreamt about them.

At "Whaley," otherwise H.M.S. *Excellent*, smartness in movement and appearance was the rule, and orders were obeyed at the rush, not at a leisurely amble. In these days of war and the National Service Acts, all sorts of young men came into the Navy's net, for nearly everyone joined through the ranks. If some of them came from public schools and the Universities or were born to the purple, Buttress didn't believe in differential treatment.

If it came to that, most of the young seamen of this war differed from the youngsters with whom he'd joined the Service way back in 1901. On the average, the new breed was more cultured and refined, more mechanically minded, less uncouth in habits and ideas. And among the young men who'd joined up for "hostilities only" one met people from every walk of life—artists, actors, and artisans, butchers and bakers, theological students and clerks, haberdashers and

undertakers' assistants, comedians and men who played in dance bands, a man who had run the steamheating plant at a lunatic asylum on the south coast of England working side by side with a professional ratcatcher from Somerset.

There were men from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and many of the Colonies. One lad from New Zealand, desperately keen on joining the Navy, had tried to enter out there. Told he might have to wait a month or six weeks before there was a vacancy, he became impatient, worked his passage as an assistant steward in a passenger ship, and joined up in England.

Buttress, steeped in the traditions of the Navy and of Whale Island, treated them all alike. They were there to be drilled and disciplined as seamen, a credit to the Navy, the ship, their officers, and himself. He was no believer in favoritism. He did not suffer fools gladly, but hated the sea lawyers, the slovens, or the shirkers even worse.

Among the younger men of the *Fonthill Abbey* Buttress had the reputation of being a proper old tartar on duty but a rare old bird in his moments of relaxation. People went to him for advice in their troubles and perplexities. Often during the dog watches or in the evenings, when nothing else was happening, he would take voluntary classes of men who wanted a rub-up in gunnery or seamanship before passing for higher rating.

Though his words of praise were confined to a very occasional "Well done, lads," Buttress for his part was immensely proud of the "youngsters," as he was pleased to call them, and wouldn't hear a word against them. If anyone had told him that the young of Britain lacked guts, or were in

any way soft or sissy, Buttress would have called him a damned liar!

2.

Apart from being right-hand man to Commander Wenlock, the *Fonthill Abbey's* executive officer, Buttress was also the chief gunnery instructor. With a petty officer and a pensioner sergeant of Royal Marines to help him, he had the job of licking the guns' crews into shape.

Besides her 3-inch anti-aircraft piece and a number of machine guns for dealing with dive bombers, the ship carried eight six-inch guns. Originally mounted in a cruiser long since scrapped, they were by no means new. All the same, they were good, useful weapons and the delight of Buttress' heart. He invariably spoke of them as "my guns," and heaven help any young officer who dared to interfere.

Twice every day at sea, once before dawn and again at dusk, the whole ship's company went to action stations and the guns' crews and ammunition supply parties were drilled and exercised. At other times during the day the guns' crews were drilled individually by their own officers with Chief Petty Officer Buttress or one of his acolytes looking on and occasionally holding up the proceedings to correct mistakes.

Buttress, with the two others, also lectured to classes of seamen on guns, projectiles, ammunition, fuses, fireworks, and anything else that came under the general heading of gunnery. When he wasn't doing that he was organizing loading competitions among the guns' crews for tins of cigarettes provided by the officers from the canteen, drilling classes of newly joined men with rifles in case the *Fonthill Abbey* was ever required to send an armed party ashore, and

prowling round his beloved weapons to see that everything connected with them was in perfect order. Woe betide the man responsible if Ben Buttress discovered a speck of rust on a breech block or something that looked like dirt or a piece of fluff left in the bore.

3.

As has already been said, Buttress was steeped in the tradition of the Service.

His father, who had married late in life, had lost an eye as a nineteen-year-old able seaman at the capture of the Taku Forts in 1860. Taking pity upon him, the authorities had permitted him to become a sailmaker. Serving on in the Navy for another twenty-one years, he had left it when canvas, hemp, masts, and yards, and the four winds of heaven were still regarded as the main motive power in most of Her Majesty's ships. Except in the then newfangled "ironclads," engines and boilers were entirely secondary and for use only in cabins, emergency, or in action.

After leaving the Service, Buttress the elder was employed for many years in the sail loft at Portsmouth Dockyard, to see sails practically abolished except in boats, and himself employed stitching awnings for great battleships and cruisers that were as unlike the ships of his early manhood as modern destroyers are unlike frigates. All the same, sailmaking, or its modern equivalent, was still a craftsman job, and old Buttress took an intense pride in it. He was an expert in the use of the palm and needle.

Older people in Portsmouth still remember "Old One Eye," for he didn't go the way of all flesh until the ripe old age of eighty-two, and that was in 1923. He became garrulous as

time went on. Folk remembered his yarns of an old-time Navy, when ships were really ships and sailors seamen. These new-fashioned men-o'-war didn't resemble ships at all to his way of thinking. As for the modern sailor, they were nothing but "blurry scientists," what with their mechanics and electrics and all. They couldn't hand, reef, or steer—didn't know what it meant to cross royal and t'gallant yards, or to shift the main topsail in a gale of wind. Also, and what was much worse, they had smarmed hair and wore wrist watches. They ate jam and had ice-cream bars and soda fountains in the canteens of larger ships. Half of them didn't take up their tots of rum, either, but drew the money instead. Moreover, and this was their greatest crime of all, they didn't drink beer like ordinary human beings in the pubs ashore. They went to the cinema, and became sick from eating chocolate.

Chocolates and ice cream! Hair oil and wrist watches! Blister and burst him, if these sort of things weren't signs that the Navy had gone to the dogs, his name wasn't Buttress, one of the best sailmakers the Navy had ever produced, single optic and all!

Stiffen his guts, he'd work blindfold! What's more, he'd drink any modern sailor under the table, old though he might be.

These ebullitions generally occurred after he'd had two or three pints in one of the pubs on his way home in the evening.

"One Eye" never tired of telling how he had been spoken to by King Edward VII when His Majesty had been making a tour of the Dockyard in 1903, the year after his Coronation.

Buttress, it seemed, had been specially pointed out by the Admiral Superintendent, and with his neat white beard cut Navy fashion, his polished pink cranium and fringe of snowy hair, and the black patch over his left eye socket, he was certainly something of a show piece. As told by Buttress the story ran something like this:

"The King he says to me, he says, 'When was you born, Buttress, my man?' 'The same year as Your Majesty, sir,' says I. 'Eighteen hundred an' forty-one!' The King laughs at that. 'An' a damn good vintage, too!' he says, with all the Admirals standin' around him in their gold lace and swords, him bein' dressed in his yachtin' suit. He goes on to ask where I lost me port optic, so I says, respectful like, it got shot out by some blinkin' Chinee at the stormin' of the Taku Forts way back in 1860. An' he says, while all the Admirals was fidgetin' around and wantin' to get on 'cos there was plenty other things the King had to see an' big nobs to talk to, but he wouldn't be hurried—well, he says to me, 'That was a long time ago, that was!' I says to him it was, nearly as long ago as Trafalgar. 'But you wasn't at Trafalgar,' he says. 'No, Your Majesty, sir,' says I. 'It was me father who was at Trafalgar, along o' Admiral Collingwood in the *Royal Sovereign*.' 'Is that so,' says he. 'Like father, like son, both gallant veterans. I congratulate you, Buttress, my man!' With that he shakes hands, wishes me the best of health, says he likes havin' old sailors like me still workin' for his Navy, an' passes on, me feelin' that proud an' flustered-like. But the King hadn't finished, for in a minute or two an orficer came back. 'Buttress,' he asks. 'His Majesty wishes to know if they gave you his Coronation Medal?' I said no medal had come my way, though I knew one o' the foremen riggers had got one. All I got, I said, was the China medal for Taku, the

medal an' bronze star for that there 'Gyppie business in eighty-two, an' the long service an' good conduct medal for not being caught out. Well, the orficer takes my name an' number, an' sure enough I'm sent for by the Admiral Superintendent a week or two later, an' presented with King Edward's medal what he'd had struck special for the likes o' them who deserved it. A kind and thoughtful gentleman, King Edward was. 1841. Him and me. 'A damn good vintage,' says he. I should ruddy well think so."

4.

Reginald Ebenezer Buttress, the one serving in the *Fonthill Abbey*, still possessed his grandfather's Naval General Service medal for Trafalgar, issued forty-four years after the battle. It hung in a frame over the mantelpiece in his living room in Kensington, with a faded newspaper cutting describing the funeral of a Trafalgar veteran and the many "floral tributes." Beneath it, in another frame, hung "One Eye's" five medals on their varicolored ribbons.

Ben was proud of them, proud that they served as an outward and visible sign of his naval ancestry. It wasn't everyone who could boast of a grandfather who had fought at Trafalgar, or a father like old "One Eye," who was something of a celebrity. Sons following their fathers in the Royal Navy are not confined to the families of officers.

He himself had joined the Navy as a boy of fifteen in the old *St. Vincent* at Portsmouth. This was in 1901, before sail finally disappeared from the Navy. At all events, sail drill still formed an important part of the training in the old line-of-battle ship with her three masts and black and white checkered sides which swung round her buoy near Nelson's

Victory. Attached to the *St. Vincent*, too, were two smart sailing brigs in which the boys spent the last months of their training at sea. As Ben sometimes said in talking over old times, it was a sight to warm the cockles of any seaman's heart to see the brigs beating out of the narrow bottleneck of Portsmouth harbor, or bowling along with every stitch of canvas drawing in a stiff breeze in the Channel off St. Catherine's.

There was no softness about the training of boys in those days. The discipline was harsh, the life strenuous, and the food scanty. Boys were called out of their hammocks at five o'clock, followed three mornings a week by a cold plunge, after which they were inspected for cleanliness. Breakfast, at six o'clock, consisted of no more than dry bread and cocoa, with fried salt pork once a week. At six-thirty they scrubbed decks, followed at half-past seven by general sail drill aloft. At eight-forty-five came divisions and prayers, after which classes were sent to school and practical instruction, with a break at ten-thirty when a hunk of dry bread was served out to each boy. Dinner, the only square meal of the day, came at noon, pea soup and hot salt pork alternating with fresh meat and potatoes. Twice a week, as a treat, they were given suet pudding punctuated with a few currants. It went by the name of "spotted dog."

Instruction and work continued during the afternoon until four o'clock, when came supper of dry bread with occasional dripping, or jam in huge pots, reputed to be provided out of the kindness of her heart by the wife of the captain. Tea, ladled out of a large tub, was provided without milk or sugar. After supper, or earlier in the afternoon during winter, boys went ashore to the recreation ground on two days in the

week, while Thursday afternoon was always set aside for making and mending clothes. A certain amount of schooling and instruction continued after four o'clock, or else classes took it in turns to scrub and wash their hammocks, white duck suits, flannel vests, and underwear. A minute amount of water was allowed for the operation, and to make matters worse the "nozzers," or novices, usually had their soap and water purloined by those who had been longer on board and knew the ropes.

The last meal of the day, a piece of bread with the boilings of the salt pork if the ship's cook happened to be in a good temper, came at seven o'clock. An hour later hammocks were piped down and slung and the boys turned in.

It was a hard life, Ben always said, nevertheless a life which made them strong and hardy. His chief recollection was of always being hungry, and of the cakes retailed by the bumboat at a penny a time. But they hadn't much money for luxuries. Their pay as nozzers, served out on Thursdays, was no more than sixpence a day. Most of it was stopped for necessary replacements of kit or saved for the three weeks leave at Mid-summer or Christmas.

Boys were certainly taught and made to jump to it from the moment they arrived on board. Official canings at the hands of a ship's corporal for practically any offense, but particularly smoking, took place before the midday meal in the presence of the assembled multitude. Since the last six boys in the early morning race over the mastheads were invariably regarded as defaulters, these public beatings were of almost daily occurrence. Nobody paid much attention to them, and it was part of the unwritten law that they should be borne without a whimper. Smoking in the heads, in the

chains, or aloft during the dog watches was the most frequent "crime." Cigarettes, which sold ashore at one penny for a packet of five, were smuggled on board in boots or socks and disposed of at a penny apiece. Woe betide the boy caught smoking. There were plenty of lynx-eyed, keen-nosed petty officers and ship's corporals to play the part of detectives.

All the instructors carried rope's ends, or "stonikys," with which they lambasted the laggards, some even running up the rigging behind their victims smiting indiscriminately at their laboring sterns and bare feet. During sail drill a ship's corporal with a whistling cane took post at the foot of each ladder, and didn't hesitate to lay about him at the pipe, "Clear lower deck." No one thought anything of it, and if a boy showed signs of resentment, he was probably "put in the report" for insolence, which meant an official beating.

The day one was promoted to "boy, first class" was a red-letter one. One had first to be examined and to produce a complete set of clews and lashings for one's hammock, duly pointed and grafted in true Navy fashion. But having got over the first hurdle and become a "first class rock," as they called it, one drew pay at one shilling a day and was eligible to become a "petty officer boy" or "sub-instructor boy" with badges to wear, and an additional threepence or sixpence a week, plus an extra penny for a good conduct badge.

Having achieved the dizzy height of boy, first class, one became a real sailor, and behaved accordingly. Nozzers wore soft serge caps with plain cap ribbons, and trousers with a patch in the seat rather like riding breeches, which they cordially detested. First class rocks, on the other hand, were served out with the proper sailor's cap with the gold-lettered cap ribbon, H.M.S. *St. Vincent*, and the regulation cloth

trousers and “frock,” or best jumper. Consequently, when they went on long leave, they could act the part of real sailors after removing the red “watch stripes” still worn on the left or right shoulder by boys under training but not afloat in the fleet. Also, since the H.M.S. *St. Vincent* cap ribbon stamped them as boys, they usually sported the cap ribbon of some well-known battleship or cruiser.

Knife lanyards with pineapple knots, embroidered black silk handkerchiefs, and high-heeled shoes were also the fashion. These, with the cap ribbon of any ship in the Navy, and “tiddley” suits with tight jumpers and bell-bottomed trousers cut far wider than the regulation permitted, at ten shillings and sixpence a suit, could be obtained from a gentleman called Jack Ward, of The Lighthouse, Walthamstow. His agents at Portsmouth visited the ship with catalogues. Jack Ward, whoever he may have been, did a roaring trade.

One swaggered a bit on leave, swore lustily, and adopted a deep sea roll. To enhance their personal appearance, boys even greased their hair with the skimmings of the ship’s cocoa begged from the cook.

After the *St. Vincent* the boys migrated to the old five-masted ironclad *Minotaur* at Portland, where for three months they were instructed in the elements of gunnery and did rifle practice on shore. Later they went to the *Minotaur’s* sister ship, the *Agincourt*, for a final “shake-up” before being drafted to sea.

And a shake-up it certainly was, according to Reginald Ebenezer, worse indeed than being a nozzer in the old *St. Vincent*. Those who survived were as hard as nails and proper little sailors. The Navy had no use for weaklings. Even the

soles of their feet were as tough as leather. They never wore boots on board except for Sunday divisions or when parading to go ashore. Coming off from the shore, the order "Off Boots" was given in the boat before they climbed on board the ship.

It was the men entered as boys and trained in this way who were the leading seamen, petty officers, and warrant officers of the Fleet during the war of 1914-18.

Someone once referred to them as the backbone of the Royal Navy.

5.

There is no need to follow Buttress' twenty-one years in the Navy in full detail. His first seagoing ship as a youth of seventeen was the battleship *Hannibal*, in the Atlantic Fleet. Rated Ordinary and Able Seaman in due course, he served a commission in the Mediterranean, and was then sent back to Whale Island to pass for seaman gunner.

A commission in China followed, with promotion to leading seaman, then a return to Whale Island to undergo a course and to pass for higher gunnery rating. A petty officer in 1909 at the early age of twenty-three, he was serving as an instructor in the gunnery school when war broke out in August, 1914. To his intense mortification, mobilization found him sent to one of the older battleships long past the age for serving with the Grand Fleet under Admiral Sir John Jellicoe. However, after a dreary spell of convoy work, during which they saw nothing of the enemy, the old ship was sent to the Dardanelles and had her full share of excitements in the landing and support of the Army, and the attempts to force the Straits.

Considerably to his surprise, but also to his gratification, Buttress was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for "coolness and gallantry under fire on many occasions." He had been in charge of a boat during the first landings on the Gallipoli beaches, and later had distinguished himself by carrying on practically singlehanded when the fore control position of his ship was swept by splinters of a shell which killed or wounded most of the people around him.

"Old One Eye," then a widower of seventy-four, celebrated the occasion by making a night of it with convivial friends in a private room of the Admiral Collingwood at Landport. To his dying day the old boy couldn't remember who put him to bed, or how he got there.

"Dear Son," he wrote some days later, "I was that pleased and proud when I saw your name in the newspapers. A pity your dear Ma isn't with us to enjoy it, and your old Grandad would have cocked a chest like a pouter pigeon if he'd knowed it. All the boys was patting me on the back like I'd got the medal, not you, and Ginger Bate suggests a bit of a do at the Admiral Collingwood. So me and seven of the boys got together and had a bite of something to eat. We drank your health and I made a bit of a speech. They tells me that after that someone got arguing the point and broke up some furniture and stuff dancing on the table. It wasn't me, son, not at my age. The last I remember was old Barney Rogers kissing the redheaded barmaid for a bet when she came in with a cargo of drinks. She squawks and drops the tray and catches old Barney a clip alongside his earhole which near lays him out, she being married to a leading stoker. My share of the damage was 8/9, which was worth it.

"Your young lady's as pleased as me. Write to your old Dad sometimes. I don't like news second fiddle from Laura.

Love from Dad.

P.S. My roomaticks isn't too good. Come back safe."

Coming home in 1916 and being rated Chief Petty Officer at the age of thirty, Buttress, reporting at Whale Island, found himself sent on a fortnight's leave. It was then he married Laura Button, the fair-haired cashier in a draper's shop at Southsea. He had had his eye on her for years. They had carried on a regular correspondence, and it was always half understood that they were to be married eventually, though Laura had always avoided naming the day. On his return from abroad, however, she fell into his arms and suggested that it might happen just as soon as Ben liked. They were very happy until Ben went off to sea again, this time in a battleship of the Grand Fleet.

There came the Armistice and the surrender of the German Fleet, and then, for Ben, a year in the Atlantic Fleet followed by two years as an instructor at Whale Island. Next they sent him out to a battleship in the Mediterranean. Laura, with her two small sons, remained at home in the little house they had rented at Cosham.

Leaving the Navy on pension in 1926, Ben had cast round for something to do. He had saved money, and at the age of forty didn't feel like sitting round on his hunkers doing nothing.

Then, through a friend of Laura's, they had heard of that little business in London—a combined tobacconist's, sweet, and newspaper shop near the corner of Brompton Road and Montpelier Street whose tenant had died. Laura, investigating, reported favorably. Ben, too, saw possibilities

when he went into the details. So they decided to take the plunge. They acquired the lease and good will of the shop, and by sheer hard work and personality built it up into a thriving little business.

Laura had ideas for her sons. She, knowing all the disadvantages of the Navy in the way of long absences and an unsettled life, wished them to go into business, and to make money. Ben, who would have preferred them to join the Navy, did not attempt to coerce them, but was secretly overjoyed when both Alfred and William announced their desire of following in Father's footsteps.

So by the time Hitler had come into power and Germany was desperately rearming, both the lads, with an interval of two years between them, were in H.M.S. *Ganges*, the naval training establishment on shore at Shotley, on the Stour opposite Harwich. Visiting the place for the annual sports and prize-giving, Buttress was impressed with the smartness and well-being of the boys, the excellence of their food, and the interest taken in their welfare. They were treated like dukes and earls compared with what he'd had to put up with in the old *St. Vincent* nearly forty years before. He never got cake for tea and potted meat or jam for supper.

On each of the occasions Ben and Laura visited Shotley, the Commander and the divisional Lieutenant had a word with them about their sons. They were good lads and keen to get on, they said. Ben particularly remembered the conversation with the Commander just after William, the youngest, was rated a petty officer boy. The Commander knew all about the Buttress who had served at Trafalgar, "Old One Eye," and how Ben had acquired the D.S.M.

“How did you find out all about that, sir?” Ben asked, rather pleased with himself.

“We make a habit of finding out what we can about the boys’ families. Your lad’s rather proud of his forebears, though he took a bit of drawing out. This is the second son you’ve had here, Buttress, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. There was Alfred, a couple of years ago. He’s an ordinary seaman in the *Nelson* now. Getting on well, he says, and about to pass for A.B.”

“Any more coming along?” the Commander asked. “We can always do with them.”

Ben shook his head.

“No, sir,” he replied. “That’s all our little lot, Alfie and Bill.”

“It’s never too late to mend,” said the officer, with a sly look in Laura’s direction. “Buttress is a good old name. The more the merrier.”

It was one of the few occasions when Ben had seen Laura blush. It certainly became her.

“I never heard of such a thing!” she said, when the Commander was safely out of earshot. “Him telling me to have more babies at my time of life!”

“You shouldn’t look like you do,” Ben told her.

“Get away with you, you old silly,” said Laura, secretly rather pleased. “I can’t help how I look.”

“You haven’t changed a bit since I first knew you,” said Ben, full of gallantry.

Laura, at forty-four, was still an attractive woman.

Came September, 1938, and Munich, with the mobilization of the Navy, when Buttress rejoined as a pensioner of fifty-two but was sent home again after ten days at Portsmouth.

A year's suspense, followed by the outbreak of war with Germany. Recalled to the Navy, Buttress refurbished his knowledge at Whale Island, and was then appointed to the *Fonthill Abbey*.

During that first cruelly hard winter of the war, as has already been said, they spent most of their time on patrol in the wild waste of water round about Iceland. Christmas Day, indeed, had been spent in a furious gale from the northwest, and a heavy toppling sea in which the ship literally buried herself. The wind howled and shrieked in its fury, and the spray, freezing as it fell, converted the snow driven on board by the frequent blizzards into a thick layer of solid ice. The visibility was never more than a couple of hundred yards, and the day was one of the worst of Buttress' long life at sea. Even the plum pudding and an extra tot of rum served out by Captain Chenies' orders did not alleviate the wet and frozen misery. Later, in the spring of 1940, when the ship was detached for convoy duty, there was not a soul on board who was not supremely thankful.

Alfred and William Buttress, both able seamen by this time, were also serving in the Fleet—one in a destroyer, the other in a cruiser. The boys sometimes wrote to their father, though more often to their mother, who laboriously redrafted their letters and sent the copies on to her husband. It would never have done to send the originals. They were heirlooms.

Ben, imagining things, sometimes felt anxious about his sons, though not so anxious as their mother, who had her

husband at sea as well. He, she considered, had no right to be afloat in a ship at the respectable age of fifty-five.

Ben, who would have hated to be in any sort of a job ashore, was even more worried about his wife. During his occasional spells of leave, he had seen something of the air-raid damage in London. And every time he listened to the B.B.C. bulletins describing the bombing of London, his heart nearly stopped beating.

Was Laura zealously going to the air-raid shelter whenever she heard the alert wailing on the sirens, as she had promised faithfully to do, or had she become inured and indifferent?

He couldn't bear to think of her mangled and buried beneath a pile of shattered debris, or laid out bleeding on the pavement. In this sort of war, where even the women and children weren't immune from bombs, life at sea sometimes felt like a rest cure.

War was a wretched business, particularly a war of this kind. And what would happen when it was all over? Laura was now bravely striving to carry on the business singlehanded. From what she said in her letters it was becoming more and more difficult.

So many of the regular customers had left London for the country to avoid the bombing, or had been called up, or were doing war work. All had been jolted out of their normal habits and were doing all they could to economize. Sweets and chocolate were practically unobtainable and supplies of cigarettes and tobacco precarious and heavily rationed. In an effort to make ends meet Laura had launched out into a lending library and stationery, but the sweets and cigarettes were what really produced the profit and paid the rent. For the first time since the business had been started a deficit

stared her in the face, though war or no war the rent had still to be faced. It was by no means inconsiderable, and as things were at present had to be paid out of savings. By the terms of their agreement they were bound until 1944—unless, of course, the shop happened to be bombed beforehand, which didn't seem too unlikely.

An antique dealer just down the Brompton Road toward the Oratory had caught it already, and Laura would never forget the strange sight.

A bomb, bursting at the back, had blown out the front and center of the house and converted it into a mass of shattered debris and rubbish, leaving the attics and roof suspended precariously from the houses on either side like some sort of aerial bridge. It collapsed in ruin before many hours; but the most remarkable sight of all was outside on the broad pavement, where one of the skeleton trees was hung and festooned with blankets, sheets, counterpanes, pillowcases, shirts, blouses, pajamas, and all manner of male and female undergarments hurled there by the blast of the explosion. Though it meant the wreckage of somebody's home and business, Laura couldn't help laughing when she saw it. As she described it in a letter to her husband, it looked like washing day gone wrong.

There were strange sights in London in the days of the intensive blitz—whole streets littered with broken glass and shattered masonry, broken and demolished buildings, which ordinarily looked so strong and impervious, converted into heaps of rubble with blank walls and gaping fireplaces facing the open air and pictures and photographs left hanging for all the world to see. It was, Laura wrote, somehow indecent to see people's most treasured belongings exposed to the public

gaze, with chairs, sofas, tables, bookcases, clothes cupboards, bedsteads, and washstands complete with chinaware, balanced insecurely on sloping, shattered floors and liable at any moment to crash down into the pile of wreckage beneath. Furniture which might have looked well in a room appeared incredibly tawdry and forlorn in the full glare of daylight.

In Hyde Park, opposite Knightsbridge Barracks, on the grassy space where they once played football, there was an area of several acres covered with the miscellaneous debris of broken buildings. It was a huge, sloping ramp, fully twenty-five feet high at its highest, with lorries moving over it to tip their loads of shattered bricks and masonry. Bricks still useful for building were neatly stacked near by, with heaps of timber and boarding, some of it charred and blackened by fire. Other pounds contained hundreds of doors, cisterns, tanks, radiators, piping, lavatory basins, twisted girders.

The dismal collection grew almost daily according to the severity of the air raids, and as the men of the Pioneer Corps and gangs of laborers cleared the ruined areas.

But people all went about their jobs as normally as they could. Train, tube, and bus services might be temporarily interrupted, but the swarm of city workers and girls still found their way to business by devious routes, or by being "lifted" in lorries and private cars. What was more, they were entirely good-tempered about it.

Costermongers' carts, laden with fish or miscellaneous vegetables and drawn by their shaggy, fast-trotting little ponies, were still to be seen in the streets. The open-air markets and junk stalls continued, and the barrows piled high with flowers were still in evidence on Sundays.

The newspapers were still printed and delivered with the early morning milk. Shops sold what they could, taxicabs plied for hire, and the dustman collected the refuse. Even in the midst of the fiercest raids the police, the A.R.P. men and women, the rescue squads, the regular and auxiliary firemen, the men and women of the ambulance services, and scores of willing helpers were in the streets assisting to put out fires, or to rescue people buried in the ruins of demolished houses. Doctors and nurses stood by their patients in the hospitals. Train drivers and guards, railway employees, omnibus and tram drivers carried on.

A woman doctor was awarded the George Medal for crawling beneath the wreckage of a bombed hospital to administer an anesthetic to a girl buried under girders and masonry. A slight subsidence might have resulted in both rescuer and girl being trapped and fatally crushed. But held and suspended by her ankles by a porter, the doctor gave the injection.

Employees at a gas works which had been bombed and set on fire, thus providing a target for further bombing, went from one gas holder to another to close the inlet valves, in spite of the flames surrounding them and the bomb and shell splinters dropping around.

When a high explosive bomb struck a hospital, two nurses climbed through a first floor window, crawled across the floor of a ward in a highly dangerous condition, and released several patients who were trapped. A few minutes later the floor collapsed. A girl telephonist, acting as a bicycle messenger during an air raid, twice crawled through a small opening in the debris of a bombed house to render first aid to the casualties, and afterward helped to release them.

A nurse shielded a patient from falling debris with her own body. The names of a lift boy, a girl shop assistant, and a costermonger's boy all appeared in the *London Gazette* for gallantry at fires or in air raids.

The inhabitants of London, men, women, and young people in their 'teens, could take it. So could those in the bombed cities, towns, and villages throughout the length and breadth of Britain.

In spite of the heavy air raids Britain carried on.

So did Laura Buttress.

CHAPTER III

THE officers and men of the *Fonthill Abbey* were fairly typical of the crews of other ex-passenger ships which had been taken over by the Admiralty for service as armed merchant cruisers.

Apart from Chenies himself, Commander Richard Wenlock, R.N. (Retired), the executive and gunnery officer of the ship, was the only officer on board who had graduated, so to speak, through the Royal Navy. A man of about forty-nine, tall and slim, with graying dark hair and brown eyes, Wenlock was always meticulously dressed and careful of his appearance. Even at sea, when most people, including Chenies, were content to wear their oldest clothes, mufflers, and sea boots, the Commander usually appeared in highly polished shoes and immaculately creased trousers. It was up to him, he considered, to set an example to the other officers, many of whom had little or no experience of the Navy and its customs. The *Fonthill Abbey* might be an armed merchant cruiser, but that was no reason why officers or men should go unshaven, wear non-uniform shoes with toe-caps, or such things as brightly-colored woolen caps or mufflers knitted by their wives or sweethearts. Wenlock was rather a stickler for uniform. If he could help it, nothing should be worn that wouldn't be allowed in the Flagship of the Home Fleet under the eye of the Commander-in-Chief himself.

There were occasions, when the Captain himself appeared bareheaded on the bridge in a brown suede coat worn over a canary-colored sweater, with the ends of a bright red and blue United Services woolen scarf flapping in the breeze, that Wenlock, deeply shocked, felt half inclined to remonstrate.

Not that Chenies would have changed his habits because of what the Commander thought. The Captain had spent most of his time in destroyers, where no one much cared what people wore at sea provided they did their jobs. Wenlock had been a gunnery specialist before his retirement in 1927, since when he had been the personnel manager of one of the largest high-class department stores in London, with branches in most of the big cities.

For the rest, Wenlock was fiercely busy about the ship and in his brief spare time read a great deal and painted in water colors. Also, he was something of an ornithologist, and played the harmonium on Sundays.

Of the thirty other officers in the wardroom all but three belonged to the Royal Naval Reserve. The exceptions were Goodchild, the Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander, who had been in practice at Bournemouth before the war, and two lieutenants, Steel and Bartley, who all wore the wavy stripes of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. Steel, who had been in the R.N.V.R. for eight years and had done his peacetime training and cruises at sea with the Fleet, was an architect in civil life with a yacht of his own. Bartley, no less useful, had no previous experience of the Navy. Before the war he had been articled to a solicitor.

When the ship was at sea Chenies rarely went below, and then only for an occasional half-hour when they were out of the operating zone of enemy submarines and aircraft and the code and cipher messages regularly coming in by wireless assured him that no trouble was brewing. He always messed in his cabin abaft the bridge, but hating solitude and keen on getting to know the officers, usually invited three of them to dine with him when circumstances allowed it. Sometimes

they played bridge afterward, though more often they just sat and talked. In fine weather, too, when nothing particular was happening, the Sub-Lieutenant or Midshipman who had been the junior officer of the morning watch and was normally relieved at seven-thirty was sometimes invited to breakfast with the Captain. It was a better breakfast than that provided in the wardroom, with omelets, kidneys and bacon, kedgeree, and really good coffee.

So in one way or another Chenies got to know a good deal of the outlook, careers and family histories of his shipmates. Their combined experiences would have filled many books.

Percival, the senior Lieutenant-Commander, for instance, had been First Officer of the *Fonthill Abbey* in peacetime. Some years before the last war, as an apprentice on his first voyage in a sailing ship, he had been wrecked on an island in the Pacific and had subsisted for eight weeks, according to his own account, on a diet of coconuts, limpets, seagulls eggs, and land-crabs. He had been in the Navy through most of the last war, and had finished up in a "Q" ship fighting enemy submarines. Then, joining the Abbey Line as a junior officer, he had been in it ever since except for his periods of naval training as an officer of the R.N.R. Rather fat, florid, and easygoing, nothing ever disturbed Percival's equanimity or sense of humor unless they heard over the wireless that Merseyside had been bombed. His wife and three children lived at Bootle.

Percival was a good seaman and shipmate. A talented amateur conjuror and pianist, he was in great demand at evening entertainments. His droll stories, Rabelaisian or otherwise according to his audience, were inimitable.

Hanley, the other Lieutenant-Commander, had left the P. and O. three years before the war on marrying a well-to-do widow from Australia. Having been in the R.N.R. in the last war, he had volunteered for service on the outbreak of hostilities, only to be told he was over the age limit. That wouldn't do for Hanley, so he dyed his graying hair to preserve a youthful appearance, wrote to an Admiral he happened to have met while serving as second officer of the *Assam* years before, and generally raised Cain until they appointed him to the Contraband Control Service. Leaving his wife to run the chicken farm in Sussex, he gaily refurbished his old uniform with new gold lace and repaired to his place of duty, only to find that going out in tugs in all sorts of weather to examine neutral steamers for contraband wasn't at all his idea of war service. Through an influential relation of his wife's this time, he managed to get himself sent to Portsmouth to refurbish his somewhat antiquated knowledge of gunnery, after which he was appointed to the *Fonthill Abbey*. What was more, they made him an acting lieutenant-commander.

A man of few words, stolid and dependable, Hanley was one of Chenies' most trusted officers. No one ever saw him flurried or excited or heard him raise his voice above the tone he used in ordinary conversation. He had leanings toward religion, though not obtrusively, and would have shared his last shilling with anyone in distress. Tolerably well off, he was in the habit of doing good turns to any of the men who came to him with a genuine tale of woe. But the tale must be genuine. Hanley was no soft-hearted old fool to be taken in. Several people had tried that, to discover he had a rough side to his tongue when he chose to use it.

Tanner, the Junior Lieutenant, who for some abstruse reason went by the name of "Tugboat Annie," had also been with the Abbey Line before the war, though not in the *Fonthill Abbey*. Apart from his height, which was something over six feet, and his red hair and freckles, there was nothing remarkable about his appearance. Aged about twenty-four, he was a product of the Nautical College at Pangbourne and had been in the R.N.R. before the war. He was reputed to be engaged to a young woman in Bristol, though from the many signed photographs in his cabin and the facility with which he made new female friends at every port they visited, his bow had as many strings as a harp.

Rather boisterous on occasion, particularly when it came to playing practical jokes and pulling the legs of his messmates, Tanner certainly kept the wardroom lively—too lively according to Commander Wenlock's ideas, who, in his precise way, once referred to his irrepressible junior as "a riotously disposed and somewhat disrespectful young officer."

Tanner was certainly rather prone to work off his superfluous energy by inventing noisy games which they played in the wardroom after dinner, sometimes to the detriment of the furniture and glasses. Wenlock was horrified one night when, hearing sounds of raucous merriment, he put his nose inside the wardroom to see the most respectable chief engineer, Commander John Edward Jamieson, R.N.R., swathed in a rug like a sausage and rolling himself across the floor while someone took the time with a stop-watch and the others cheered him on. It seemed it was some new form of obstacle race invented by Tanner. Whatever its disadvantages, it caused the wildest hilarity. Moreover, John Jamieson, the

father of five grown sons and daughters and a pillar of the kirk, seemed to be enjoying it as much as the others.

"Come on, sir," someone shouted to Wenlock above the babel. "Have a shot and see if you can beat the Commander."

"God forbid!" said Wenlock, departing hurriedly. There was no knowing what the bright young sparks mightn't do when they really got going.

Then there was Tanner's exploit with the trousers, the story of which went the rounds of the ship and occasioned great amusement, except to the victims of the joke.

Goodchild, the Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander, was tallish and rather thin, while Paymaster Lieutenant-Commander Herbert was short and distinctly plump. Ridley, one of the engineers, was betwixt and between.

And at half-past eleven at night, when all three were safely asleep in their cabins, Tanner had the idea of abstracting their trousers and transposing them. Ridley's trousers went to Goodchild; Goodchild's to Herbert, and Herbert's to Ridley.

There was considerable commotion next morning and shouting and ringing for officers' stewards, while Tanner and some of his cronies, listening in a cabin near by, enjoyed the fun.

"Do these *look* like my trousers?" the P.M.O. angrily asked his steward, standing in the alleyway outside his cabin clad in his short underpants and holding out the offending garment for inspection. "Have *my* trousers got a bright blue patch in the seat?"

The steward examined them.

"There's no name in them, sir," he stammered. "Only the tailor's name on the buttons."

“Don’t stand there gibbering like a lunatic! Put out another pair, and find out who these belong to.”

“Yes, sir.”

Goodchild was inclined to be taciturn and uncommunicative as he started his breakfast. Then Herbert came into the wardroom and sat down opposite. He also had a grievance.

“I don’t know what’s come over the officers’ stewards in this ship,” he grumbled.

“What’s biting you now, Pay?” someone asked.

“Biting me? My idiot of a man’s lost my ruddy trousers and expects me to wear a pair more suited to a giraffe. Do I look like a giraffe, or....”

“More like a giant panda, dear boy.”

“Panda, my foot!”

Goodchild looked up from his porridge.

“Do I understand you to say you’ve lost your trousers, Pay?” he wanted to know.

“You do indeed, P.M.O.”

“And so have I.”

“And so’s Ridley,” Herbert’s neighbor put in.

“The mystery deepens,” said Goodchild.

“What d’you mean, P.M.O.?”

“Two pairs of trousers being exchanged might be a mistake, but three’s beyond a coincidence. —Yes. I must make a few discreet inquiries.”

He proceeded to do so. It didn’t take him long to find out who was responsible.

Herbert and Ridley, having recovered their apparel, thought nothing further of it. Not so the Surgeon Lieutenant-Commander. He bided his time.

There came the day when Tanner, having enjoyed a hectic week end in London while the ship was refitting, came back rather listless and jaded. Visiting the P.M.O. in his cabin, he requested something in the nature of a pick-me-up or a tonic.

Goodchild's eyes brightened.

"Yes," he said, after feeling Tanner's pulse, looking at his tongue and the whites of his eyes, and taking his temperature. "I can see you're very run down."

"Am I?" asked Tanner, somewhat alarmed at what he thought was a purely temporary indisposition being taken seriously.

The P.M.O. wagged his head and looked very wise. He clicked his tongue.

"What you want is rest, my boy. Now go along to your cabin and turn in. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

"But I've got a date tonight!" Tanner exclaimed.

"No dates for you, Tanner," said the P.M.O. firmly. "Away with you to your cabin, and no nonsense."

"But ... but, P.M.O.! For the love o' Mike! I've got a very important engagement, really I have!"

"No engagements for you, my boy. You're on the sick list now, and under my orders. So no argument, please. Away with you."

"Oh, hell!" Tanner groaned, departing. "I'll never come to you again for sympathy."

So the patient, who was anything but ill, was kept fuming in bed and fed on slops. What was more, he was dosed with

some vile medicine which produced the strangest sensations in his inside.

Goodchild went to see him next morning after breakfast.

“What sort of a night have we had?” he inquired.

“Too ruddy awful for words,” said Tanner, proceeding to go into details.

“Rather restless, Tanner?”

Tanner intimated that restless wasn’t the word for it.

The P.M.O. chuckled.

“You can get up now, Tanner,” he said. “I think you’re on the road to recovery.”

“But you haven’t even taken my temperature, you old fraud!” the invalid exclaimed. “I’m not getting my money’s worth.”

“Perhaps not, Tanner,” Goodchild grinned. “But I think *I* am.”

“You! Where do you come in? I thought *I* was the invalid.”

“No doubt, Tanner. But perhaps your brief illness will teach you to mend your ways, my boy.”

“I was only feeling a bit tired and under the weather, P.M.O. London’s pretty exhausting when one’s only there once in a blue moon.”

“No doubt. But I wasn’t referring to your ... ’er goings-on in London, whatever they may have been.”

“What then?” Tanner demanded.

“Your brief illness may teach you for the future *not* to take liberties with the P.M.O.’s trousers, or anyone else’s.” Goodchild smiled. “Good-by, Tanner. You’re off the sick list now.”

Tanner was left speechless.

The P.M.O. had won.

2.

Young, the Senior Lieutenant, commonly known as "Dundee," because he hailed from that city, had been at sea since the age of fifteen. He, too, was in the Royal Naval Reserve before the war—a husky, dependable, rather serious-minded Scot with sandy-colored hair and bright blue eyes who stood no nonsense from anyone, least of all from young Tanner, whom he regarded as a brand to be snatched from the burning.

A good seaman, Young had spent nearly all his time at sea in cargo liners voyaging out east to China and Japan. For two unhappy voyages, however, he had been Second Officer of a passenger ship, and hoped never to repeat the experience. Women were all very well in their proper environment, which was on shore. At sea on long voyages they seemed to go slightly mental, dolling themselves up to outvie the others or attract the men, or spending most of their time in discussing each other's looks and failings. New cliques used to form every few days, and new enmities. The calm seas, the balmy breezes, the brilliant moon, and the starlit nights of the tropics were responsible for certain titbits of scandal. Mrs. This had actually spent until half-past one talking to Mr. That on the boat deck—or at least they called it talking.

All passengers were kittle-cattle in Young's estimation, necessary evils. They asked such cuckoo questions about the sea and ships and were so ready to complain if the ship rolled or the overworked stewards didn't immediately fullfil their varied demands. Moreover, he hated wearing a mess jacket at

dinner and trying to make affable small talk at table to some fluffy-haired grass widow with a painted face and flashing eyes who did her best to vamp him. Women were the very devil on board ship, particularly when they “adored” blue-eyed, reddish-haired sailors with that strong, silent look about them. Young was not unattractive in his peculiar way.

He was happily married, with a wife at Dundee and two sons aged five and three who were replicas of himself. He possessed an intimate knowledge of the works of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, of which he knew long passages by heart. Most of his leisure was employed in making thrummed woolen mats and knitting socks for himself and the children. Also he collected postage stamps, and made little sailing ships which he inserted in bottles. His great spatulate fingers were rarely idle.

Lieutenant Robert Wellington Ayres, next in seniority to Young, had been in the New Zealand coastal trade before the war. Unmarried and with no responsibilities, he was desperately keen to get to the scene of fighting, so threw up his appointment and worked his way home to England. There, by dint of pulling strings with someone who had met his father in New Zealand, he was given a commission as a temporary sub-lieutenant, R.N.R., and sent to an establishment where in a few hectic weeks they taught him a certain amount of gunnery and a great deal about minesweeping.

He had served in minesweeping trawlers in the early days of the war, and had been blown up twice. Still a third little ship would have sunk beneath him after a bombing and machine-gun attack by two enemy aircraft if Ayres hadn’t held his fire until the Heinkels were at point-blank range and

brought one of them crashing down into the sea. The other, misliking the entertainment, climbed and made off at full speed.

Two of the trawler's crew had been killed by machine-gun fire, and three others, including Ayres himself, wounded. The little ship was fairly riddled with bullets and bomb splinters. Funnel, mast, ventilators, superstructure, wheelhouse, ship's side, and deck were punctured again and again. The compass and engine-room telegraph were damaged; the shrouds, rigging, and wireless aerial, practically every rope in the ship, cut or stranded. One bullet went in through the open door of the galley and punctured the oven door after wounding the cook.

Ayres achieved the nearly impossible by keeping his battered ship afloat and bringing her safely back to harbor. He also had on board as trophies two dazed survivors from the demolished Heinkel.

For that exploit, added to his minesweeping service since the beginning of the war, Ayres wore the blue and white ribbon of the Distinguished Service Cross. They had also promoted him to lieutenant.

It had irked him to be sent to a big ship like the *Fonthill Abbey* on recovering from his wound, but someone in authority had decided it would be as well if he had a few months' rest from the undoubtedly strenuous life in small craft. He had already petitioned Chenies to be sent back to his beloved trawlers, and the Captain, not wishing to stand in Ayres' way, had written privately to a friend at the Admiralty. Chenies would be sorry to lose Ayres, so was not altogether displeased when the reply from the Admiralty was noncommittal. They knew all about Ayres, and his name was

on their list. The young man would be considered when a suitable vacancy arose. Meanwhile, he must possess his soul in patience.

3.

The father of the *Fonthill Abbey's* engineering department was the Commander (E), John Edward Jamieson, whom we have already met—rolled up in the wardroom carpet after dinner at the instigation of Tanner.

White-haired and rather bald on top, red-faced and very burly. Jamieson's age was something of a mystery, though people said he was nearer sixty than fifty. A great-hearted, hardworking, phlegmatic Scot, Jamieson had the reputation of being a driver. He may have been, though this did not prevent the officers and men of his department from loving and trusting their old "Chief." So did Chenies and all the others on deck.

Nothing was ever too much trouble for Jamieson and his men. He forestalled and smoothed over many difficulties. If something went wrong below, he was first on the scene to put it right. This wartime running with convoys meant that the ship was never at the same speed for more than a few consecutive hours, whereas on her regular peacetime voyages she had traveled for days on end at the normal economical speed for which she was designed. Service in an armed merchant cruiser also meant long periods at sea with short spells in harbor, which helped to increase the strain on the boilers, turbines, pumps, and a mass of auxiliary machinery. The ship required careful nursing. Many repairs and minor defects which would normally have been made good in

harbor by shore labor, had to be undertaken at sea with the ship under way.

Jamieson had been with the Abbey Line for more than thirty-five years and in the *Fonthill Abbey* since her maiden voyage. He knew every inch of her, every joint and steampipe, almost every bolt and rivet. She wasn't an easy ship, but it was his pride to keep her running and efficient. The Chief was a wizard at improvising and contriving, but how difficult his job sometimes was not even Chenies realized. What Chenies did know was that the engineering department responded to every emergency and never let him down.

Jamieson had never served with the Navy before the war. He regarded it with a certain amount of distrust and suspicion, or had when they first gave him rank in the R.N.R. as Commander (E). The Navy's ways were not his ways. All the same, his invariable reply to the request for an extra turn of speed to make up for lost time, or for anything else out of the ordinary, was a flick of his forefinger to the peak of his cap—his idea of the naval salute—and the observation, "Aye, Cap'en. We'll do it somehow, if we burrst the old cow." And he and his men always did what was required, though nobody in Jamieson's hearing would ever have been permitted to refer to the *Fonthill Abbey* by any epithet so opprobriously bovine.

Working under the Chief's orders were fourteen other engineer officers holding various ranks in the R.N.R. from lieutenant-commander to sub-lieutenant. Dyer, Speer, Edwards, Ridley, Fernie and the rest came from all parts of the United Kingdom, one from Australia and another from Canada. Three or four had belonged to the R.N.R. before the

war and had previous experience of the Navy. The others had been given temporary rank in the R.N.R. when the *Fonthill Abbey* was taken over by the Admiralty and commissioned as a man-o'-war. What it really came to was that they altered their uniforms and carried on with their old jobs under the White Ensign instead of the Red.

Even from the engineering point of view, however, the new life took a little getting used to. Naval ideas and customs were rather different from those of the Merchant Navy. So was the naval discipline and routine with its constant supervision—the daily musters and inspections, the regular action stations before dark and dawn, the preparation for every conceivable situation and emergency, the insistence upon rigid compliance with the immutable laws of the Navy as set forth in that substantial tome known as the King's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions with its appendices, brought more fully up to date by the periodical Admiralty Fleet Orders.

In the Merchant Navy an officer or man was more or less his own master when ashore. Moreover, by the terms of the Merchant Shipping Act he could legally be discharged at the end of each voyage and had to be signed on afresh for every new one. In the Royal Navy, on the other hand, he belonged to the State all the time, from the moment he joined the Service as a youngster until the day he left it as a hoary-headed veteran. Even as a pensioner he was liable to be recalled for war.

4.

By the Captain's orders Tanner was officially the "midshipmen's nurse." In other words, it was part of his duty

to supervise the instruction in navigation, pilotage, and seamanship of the two "young gentlemen" of the *Fonthill Abbey*, Messrs. Rigby and Hastings, both of whom wore the blue patches of midshipmen R.N.R. For gunnery these two young officers were handed over to Chief Petty Officer Buttress or one of his assistants. For signals, which included a knowledge of flags, morse, semaphore, and a smattering of wireless, not to mention a working acquaintance with the codes and signal books, they were supposed to work with the yeoman of signals and petty officer telegraphist.

Formal instruction was not easy, though Rigby and Hastings were excused watchkeeping during the daytime to enable them to perfect their knowledge of the maritime art. However, their instructors had other work to do, while the two midshipmen, with the two sub-lieutenants, Scott and Granville, kept regular watch on the bridge from dusk until seven-thirty next morning. With four of them to share the watches, it meant they had one full night in bed out of every four.

With the best intentions in the world, it *was* a little difficult to concentrate on book work on gunnery when one had kept four hours' watch the night before. Rigby and Hastings, being young, liked their full whack of sleep almost as much as they liked their regular meals. Though not exactly idle—indeed, they agreed between themselves that they were quite the hardest-worked people in the ship—they welcomed the days that were too rough for gun drill, or when all their instructors were otherwise employed. They were glad, too, when the mornings were too cloudy and overcast for the taking of sights and working out the noon position. They wanted to fight the Germans, not to keep their noses glued to

books like glorified schoolboys, nor yet to work out abstruse problems in spherical trigonometry.

When the ship had been on the Northern Patrol and a steamer was intercepted, one or other of them had always gone away in the boarding boat with Lieutenant Williams. They looked forward to that more than anything else, for it lent a spice of adventure to their young lives. It did provide a thrill to be lowered in a boat with a loaded revolver belted round one's middle and a party of armed seamen, added to which "Roughneck's" language was nautically picturesque. He rarely repeated himself, and his lurid epithets added enormously to the vocabulary of aspiring young officers. On one occasion, too, considerably to Rigby's disgust, for he was the senior of the pair, Hastings had formed one of the party of three officers and ten men detailed to take an intercepted steamer into harbor for further examination. Hastings had been away from the *Fonthill Abbey* for nearly three weeks and had had the time of his life.

Periodically, the Commander read what he called the "riot act" to bring up the midshipmen in the way he thought all young officers should go and to develop their officerlike qualities. Once, when Tanner was too busy to instruct them personally, he had set Rigby and Hastings to reading their Seamanship Manuals to learn something about the lights shown by ships and the rules for avoiding collisions at sea. Conferring together, the couple decided that the reading could best be done stretched out in a horizontal position on the bunks in their cabins. There, as was perfectly natural, they presently fell asleep.

It was unfortunate that the Commander chose that particular morning for one of his habitual prowls.

Discovering the pair, he promptly exploded.

Sleeping in the morning, even if they had kept the first or middle watch the previous night, was a disgusting habit only indulged in by such people as bar-loafers, beer-swillers, pot-wallopers, and demi-mondaines. When *he* was a midshipman, he rarely slept at all. If one believed what Wenlock said, which neither Rigby nor Hastings did, he himself had been the smartest and best-behaved midshipman in the Navy, a model of all the virtues, the apple of his commander's eye, and a regular fountain of energy. As for Rigby and Hastings, they were nothing but idle young scamps. He trembled to think what their parents would say if they really knew what their sons were like.... He went on for a full five minutes.

"Gosh!" said Hastings later. "The old boy certainly let us have it. D'you think we'll be reported to the Captain?"

"Don't you worry," Rigby grinned. "Old Wendy's only got a bit of liver this morning and had to let off steam at something."

He was right. The Commander's "hates" never lasted for very long. They resulted in a bout of fierce energy for a day or two, and then all was forgiven and forgotten. The hearts of the two midshipmen in the *Fonthill Abbey* were very much in the right place, and Wenlock knew that as well as anyone. Their faults were the mere peccadilloes of youth.

Rigby was the son of a country parson in Somerset. Shortish and well-nurtured for his age, which was just over nineteen, he had fair crinkly hair, rather bulging pink cheeks, and a pair of innocent-looking blue eyes. Before the war he had been a cadet in the New Zealand Shipping Company, and before that in the training ship *Worcester*. Bursting with good spirits and *joie de vivre*, it was his chief aim in life to become

a good seaman of the tougher kind. His heart was really in the sea, and it irked him to think of all the theoretical knowledge he was supposed to acquire before passing for second mate. Mathematics entered so largely into the examination, and he hated mathematics like the plague.

Rigby would have bartered three months' pay to be sent to some smaller ship like a destroyer, a corvette, or a motor torpedo boat. They had all the fun. Life for a junior officer in an armed merchant cruiser like the *Fonthill Abbey* savored of monotonous drudgery and seemed so dull and purposeless. And living in a wardroom as a "dog's body" among a crowd of more senior officers was rather cramping to one's style. One had to be so careful to mind one's P's and Q's—very different from the rough-and-tumble existence in the cadet's mess of the old *Durham*, where thirty of them lived together and did all the seaman's work on deck.

No. Rigby wanted more responsibility and a chance of showing his mettle. Above all, he wanted to see something of his enemy. Fellows much younger than himself had had their chance. He felt green with jealousy at hearing of their exploits and had half a mind to throw up the sea and join the Royal Air Force, if they'd have him.

Hastings, six months younger than Rigby, was the very antithesis of his shipmate. Just over six feet tall, clumsily built, very thin, solemn-faced and earnest in his manner, he went by the name of "Lampy," which was short for lamp post. Rigby, when he wanted to annoy, referred to him as "You fathom of misery." He had none of Rigby's boisterousness, but was strong on mathematics and other theoretical subjects which left Rigby cold. Hastings knew all about wireless telegraphy and the insides of engines and

motor cars. He also knew the names of all the stars in the heavens and the habits of the tides and revolving storms. He spent most of his spare time reading pseudo-scientific books, and at sea in fine weather during the dog watches had almost to be dragged from his cabin to play deck hockey. Violent exercise, he sometimes said, was contrary to nature. Life being short, he far preferred to improve his mind. For the rest he was an encyclopedia of miscellaneous knowledge, punctilious in his behavior unless led astray by Rigby, and meticulous almost to a fault. If anyone gave Hastings an order, they had the satisfaction of knowing it would be obeyed to the very letter. He was certainly useful about the ship; but he was desperately seasick in really bad weather and treasured the secret ambition of deserting the sea to become some sort of scientist.

5.

Lieutenant (Roughneck) Williams, R.N.R., sometimes called "Tarzan," was one of the most picturesque characters in the *Fonthill Abbey*.

Short, squat, deep-chested, slightly bowlegged, and immensely powerful, he had a square red face with a deep scar running across the right cheek, and beetling black eyebrows with a thatch of unruly black hair. His eyes were dark and deep set, his chin blue even when freshly shaven. There was thick black hair on the back of his huge hands. People who had seen him stripped said he was covered with a thick mat of dark fur from head to foot—hence "Tarzan."

Apart from the fact that he was somewhere in the late forties and had run away to sea at the age of fifteen, his origin was obscure. But there was hardly a part of the world he

hadn't visited in one sort of ship or another, hardly anything he hadn't tried his hand at. According to his own account, which was strictly true, he had even worked on an ostrich farm in South Africa and a cattle station in Australia. He had been a hobo in the United States, a clown in a traveling circus, and a minor character in a film at Hollywood. The slash across his right cheek had been received during an altercation in a waterside tavern in South America. He had been mixed up in a revolution or two in Central America and the Civil War in Spain. In prison twice, he had actually been condemned to death on one occasion and would have been put against the wall if the Government forces of a Central American republic hadn't captured the town at the last moment and caused the insurgents to fly for their lives.

During the last war, having achieved his mate's certificate, Roughneck had been a sub-lieutenant, R.N.R., in minesweepers. All his other adventures had come in the interval. He had never remained in any ship for more than a voyage or two, never stayed in any job for longer than was necessary to earn sufficient money to move on elsewhere. When this war broke out he had been commanding a steamer on the Great Lakes.

Roughneck had no wife or parents, nothing in the way of kith and kin except a few remote cousins in South Wales whom he hadn't seen for years. He was a rolling stone, free and utterly fearless, somewhat uncouth at times in his manner and behavior, and one of the toughest guys in a tough world.

Commander Wenlock, while recognizing Roughneck's qualities, regarded him with some suspicion because of his language and free-and-easy unorthodoxy. Chenies loved him, for drawing him out, probing beneath his rugged and

somewhat simian exterior, he had discovered a heart of pure gold. There was nothing the man wouldn’t do if it was put to him, nothing for which he wouldn’t volunteer, and the more dangerous the better.

CHAPTER IV

YOUNG Tony Chenies, having completed his gunnery and other courses on shore, was a sub-lieutenant in a destroyer when the war began. The *Vexatious* was over twenty years old, a veteran of the war that had ended before Tony was born. With other ships of the Reserve Fleet, she had been commissioned early in August 1939 for exercises and an inspection by the King in Weymouth Bay.

They cheered the King as he passed through the lines of assembled ships in the motor barge from the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*. Trouble was brewing with Germany. Everybody knew that, though many imagined it might blow over. Anyhow, the ships were dressed overall with colored bunting, and Weymouth was filled with its usual quota of summer visitors and motor coaches with crowds of excursionists who had flocked there for the King's visit. The town was decorated. Yachts were much in evidence. Bands played. People bathed from the crowded beach, and paddle steamers laden with sightseers chugged dangerously round the fleet. All was peace—a normal English summer.

The King left for London by train, and that same evening the fleet started to disperse. The *Vexatious*, with the rest of her flotilla, went to the Firth of Forth for working up exercises. There was much to be done, for the greater proportion of the ship's company was made up of young men, pensioners, and reservists of various kinds. Some of them had never served in destroyers before. Others had not been to sea for some years. They were all keen to do their best, literally bursting with zeal, but required a good deal of

licking into shape before the *Vexatious* could be considered efficient as a fighting unit.

Except for three months' destroyer training as a midshipman, Tony had never served in a small ship before. His captain, Commander Rupert Bickerstaff, was a retired officer recalled to the Navy. He had commanded destroyers in the last war, but after eight years "on the beach" in civil employment as manager of a fleet of lorries belonging to a large transport firm, was quite prepared to admit to being a bit rusty. The Service had developed and altered a whole lot since he had left it in 1931.

The First Lieutenant, Richmond, who had been qualifying as a torpedo officer in the *Vernon* on mobilization, had served three years in destroyers and was a tower of strength. So were Mr. Hebard, the Gunner, and Mr. Walton, the Commissioned Engineer, who had his work cut out in nursing his somewhat ancient boilers and turbines with new petty officers and men unaccustomed to their particular idiosyncrasies. However standardized, the machinery of no two ships behaves exactly alike. Nor, for that matter, do ships. Stephen, the junior sub-lieutenant, had no more destroyer experience than Tony, so they all had a good deal to learn.

The ship's company had to be organized and drilled for every emergency that might arise. Guns and torpedoes had to be fired. They had to practice towing and being towed, fire and collision stations, the repair of damage sustained in action, laying out anchors, man overboard, sending an armed party to board an intercepted ship.

The summer days passed in a whirl of activity. They were at it all day and through much of the night. Before they were

halfway through all they wanted to do, however, there came the general mobilization of August 31. War was imminent.

Shells and cartridges were got up for the guns and shell fuses. Warheads were shipped on the torpedoes, the exercising heads landed, and the depth charges primed. Brass work, which they had spent time in scouring and polishing to normal peacetime brilliance, was ruthlessly painted over. Additional stores, provisions, and clothing were embarked, and all superfluities were landed, including the officers' plain clothes. The ship was rigorously darkened at night. Steam was ready, and preparations made for slipping the cable and buoying its end. Extra lookouts were placed, and the guns were ready for instant action. The captain, fully dressed, slept in his sea cabin within a few feet of the officer of the watch on the bridge. Tony, keeping the middle watch and peering out through the darkness of the starlit summer night, felt the same thrill of suppressed excitement as his father had experienced in his destroyer away back in August 1914.

Anything might happen at any moment before a formal declaration of war—enemy minelaying off British harbors, attacks by U-boats or aircraft.

A short breathing space during which affairs grew from bad to worse, and officers and men wrote letters to their wives, relations, and friends. A rigid censorship was introduced, and Tony and Stephen, under the direction of Number One, otherwise Richmond, the First Lieutenant, had the job of compiling a list of the next of kin for every officer and man in the ship. The addresses ranged from Houndsditch to the Hebrides.

Then, at 11:15 A.M. on Sunday, September 3, by which time the *Vexatious* was already at sea, there came the Prime

Minister's broadcast and the British declaration of war against Germany. It came almost as a relief after the suspense of waiting. It being Sunday, a fair number of the men were below. A suppressed cheer came up from the messdeck.

Number One and Tony were on the bridge with the Captain when the news came through the loudspeaker fitted from the wireless room.

Bickerstaff had listened to the end without a smile on his face. He remembered the last war. Some of his memories were none too pleasant, even after twenty-one years.

"Will you speak to them, sir?" Number One suggested. "It'll put their tails up no end."

The skipper nodded. "Yes," he replied. "I'd better do it at once. Have them mustered on the upper deck abaft the break of the foc'sle."

"Aye aye, sir."

Tony never quite forgot the gist of that impromptu little speech, or its audience, variously dressed in its oldest seagoing garments or blue overalls, the cooks in their shirtsleeves, white trousers, and aprons, gazing up at the Captain as he stood facing them from the top of the ladder leading to the forecastle with the binoculars slung round his neck and his hands gripping the rails. It was a lovely summer's day, with a bright sun, a blue sky dappled with rounded cumulus, and a calm sea furred by a gentle breeze. Slipping along at twenty knots, the *Vexatious* was gently rolling to an almost invisible swell.

The paint on the foremost funnel was still badly blistered as the result of a full power trial a few days before, Tony Chenies noticed. He found himself wondering when it would

be painted again. Paint work, he imagined, rather went to blazes in wartime.

"All present, sir," the First Lieutenant reported.

Bickerstaff nodded in reply.

"Men," he said, "you've all heard the news, and I've not sent for you to make a formal speech. Some of you, like myself, were in the last business, the whole four years of it. You younger men haven't had that experience, and may be pleased at the idea of a fight. But I'd warn you war, however necessary, is a beastly sort of business at the best of times. Anyone who says he prefers war to peace is either a fool or a knave. —However, we're all in the Navy here. It's our job to fight, and we're up against the toughest enemy we've ever had. You know as much as I do about the goings on of Hitler and his Nazi gang. You know how Germany's been rearming for years, and is out to overrun Europe and smash us if they can—smash us beyond recovery. I think it was Bismarck who said that if we were ever defeated, we'd only be left with our eyes to weep with. Judging from what the Germans have already done in Poland and Czechoslovakia they'll stick at nothing.

"Most of you will have heard the Prime Minister," he continued. "I merely want to warn you we're in for no picnic. Unless I'm a rotten bad judge, you'll have plenty of sea time in all sorts of weathers and your full share of excitement and danger. There are times when you'll feel fed up to the teeth with it all—I'm damn certain I shall—but remember always when times are bad that you're doing an important job for the country, and that the country couldn't get on without the Navy of which you're a part. The long and short of this business is that we've got to endure and to fight on, whatever

happens, until Hitler and his gang are put in the place where they belong."

The men cheered at that. Bickerstaff paused for a moment, looking from face to face, then held up his hand for silence.

"I'm glad we're all agreed about that," he resumed, smiling. "But remember it'll be a tough job, tougher than we realize. What you have to do is to stick it and do your damnedest, always. —I'm not in the habit of handing out bouquets," he went on after a slight pause, "but I've been long enough in this ship to realize we've got the makings of a fine ship's company. You've worked well in these last few weeks. You'll have to work harder still before you've finished, so put your backs into it and do your best. Well, that's all I've got to say at the moment, but good luck to us all and the old *Vexatious*."

The men cheered again and again.

"All right, First Lieutenant," said the Captain, turning to go back to the bridge. "Carry on."

That very evening, as though to give point to Bickerstaff's words, the passenger steamer *Athenia* was torpedoed without warning by a German U-boat 250 miles off the northwest coast of Ireland.

2.

Somebody once described naval war as "long periods of monotony punctuated by moments of intense excitement." That was wholly incorrect so far as the *Vexatious* was concerned during the first nine months of the war.

Since monotony implies inactivity, the generalization was also incorrect for every other ship of every type in the Royal

Navy, including those hundreds of merchant vessels and fishing craft which were taken over by the Admiralty for purposes of war.

Up till 1935, year after year had seen the Navy pared and whittled down in the interests of national economy. Lulled into a sense of false security by the existence of a League of Nations which was supposed to prevent future wars, the British public as a whole did not see the sense of paying huge sums for the upkeep of a navy which they hoped might never be called upon to fight again.

Moreover, under the terms of the various Naval Treaties, other nations were permitted to build newer ships and better ones. Britain was content to disarm to set the example to others—to refurbish her old battleships instead of replacing them with new ones, to scrap many vessels that were still useful, to cut down the number of her cruisers and destroyers, and to reduce her naval personnel.

It was useless for realists in the House of Commons to point out that British armaments were being reduced below danger point, or for the Navy League and retired admirals to draw attention to the fact that collective security was a delusion unless the majority of nations had a will to peace and were prepared to act in unison. They were called warmongers, scaremongers, and diehards. The country as a whole heeded them not. The thoughts of the bulk of the population were centered upon peace—peace at almost any price.

Then 1935—Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, Germany's feverish rearmament in defiance of the Versailles Treaty, and Japan consolidating her unprovoked conquests in North China. People began to see the red light. Why didn't Britain,

and the League of Nations, step in and prevent this wanton aggression and the rearmament of Germany?

The answer was simple. All nations were not members of the League. Some of those that were members were not wholehearted. Britain, with an old and attenuated navy, a very small air force, and an army that was wholly inadequate for her vast responsibilities all over the world, could not shoulder the responsibility alone.

The red light of aggression was heeded at last. Hence the start of the rearmament program in 1935, by which time many warship-building and munition firms were moribund through inanition, and their experts had gone to other occupations. It takes years to design and to build warships and to manufacture their armaments, longer still if the plants for constructing and equipping them have been allowed to fall into disuse and the skilled craftsmen and workers to disperse.

The leeway of sixteen years could not be made good in three or four, a fact of which Germany was fully aware. Britain was unprepared for war at the time of the Munich crisis in September 1938. She was rearming against the threat from a nation already armed, whose whole energy seemed to be concentrated upon war and conquest. But in September 1939, when war did come, the Navy, through years of parsimony and neglect, was woefully weak for the vast responsibilities thrust upon it.

Nowhere was this weakness more dangerously evident than in the destroyers and other small craft required for protecting the merchantmen against the German U-boats, which had been stationed on the most crowded trade routes round about Britain before the war was declared and before

the full convoy system could be put into operation. It naturally took time for the system to be inaugurated, for the merchantmen were scattered all over the oceans on their normal peacetime voyages. They had first to be collected and brigaded and their escorts arranged.

Unofficial diaries are not allowed on board His Majesty's ships in wartime. If they had been permitted, Tony Chenies wouldn't have kept one. Apart from the natural aversion to writing which was evident in his letters to his people, he literally hadn't the time to keep such a record.

With Stephen, the other sub, and Mr. Hebard, the Gunner, Tony kept a regular three watches at sea. The Captain never left the bridge or his tiny sea cabin immediately abaft it. Unless things were unusually quiet, when he might indulge in a cat nap, the skipper and Number One shared the night between them.

Depending on the weather and on the frequent difficulty of picking up a homeward bound convoy in mid-Atlantic after several days without sights, the *Vexatious'* trips lasted anything between a week and fourteen days, during which nobody removed their clothes except for a perfunctory wash in the mornings. The weather was seldom good. They had fogs at all times, and fogs, with a large number of merchantmen steaming in close formation, and without lights at night, were the bane of the escorts. But as summer gave way to autumn, and autumn to winter, they had the fierce southwesterly gales.

The wind blew like the wrath of God, converting the long swell into a huge, breaking sea which looked as high as houses when the ship was in the hollows between them. At one moment, as the *Vexatious* poised herself on the crest of a

steep comber with her forefoot and a portion of her keel out of water, the whole laboring convoy might be in sight with the clouds of spray driving high over their bridges and funnel tops. At the next, when she dived dizzily down the weather face of some foaming hillock and into the next watery valley, not a sign of another ship might be visible.

Hanging on to the bridge rails with his sea-booted legs wide apart to retain his balance, Tony had never experienced such motion before. The old ship sometimes rolled more than fifty degrees from the vertical, burying herself until the rushing water swept halfway across the upper deck to the base of the funnels—reeling, staggering, fighting herself free. She lurched and she wallowed, pitched and heaved herself to the crests with a movement like that of a switchback at a fair. Sometimes, combining a pitch with a roll, she adopted a corkscrew motion which was wholly disconcerting and unpleasant. Occasionally, losing her rhythm, she would fail to rise to an oncoming wave and plunge her sharp bows clean into the heart of a wall of gray water. Thundering over the forecastle, a liquid avalanche would come surging aft to burst against the superstructure and to cascade on to the upper deck over the break of the forecastle. At such times, even with lifelines rigged fore and aft, it was dangerous to go along the upper deck. Cooked food was a practical impossibility, and they had to be content with corned beef sandwiches and something hot out of a vacuum bottle.

Watching the ship as she labored, Tony sometimes wondered how she stood the strain, or how she ever righted herself after rolling over to some impossible angle. Pitching as she did must put a terrible strain on that long slender hull. The bows might be suspended in mid-air at one moment, and

the stern, with its rudder and propeller, the next. Occasionally, balanced precariously amidships on the crest of a wave, both bow and stern might momentarily be out of water. The old ship must be bending like a sword blade. Indeed, one knew she was, for the awning jackstay, stretched fore and aft about ten feet over the upper deck, was bar taut at one instant and hanging in bights the next.

Tired out when he went off watch, Tony soon became adept at sleeping in the worst of weathers. His cabin was in the flat before the wardroom. There was no real ventilation. The atmosphere was cold and damp, charged with the combined odors of humanity, wet clothing, food, tobacco, and general fugginess. When the motion was really bad he had to lash himself into his bunk, but always he was asleep within five minutes of his head touching the pillow.

The scene on the battened-down messdecks in rough weather baffled description. One-third of the men might be on watch on deck and in the engine and boiler rooms. The rest slept how and where they could on the messdecks. All wore their clothes, with oilskins, duffle coats, and sea boots. Some lay on the deck, or the lockers along the ship's side. Others swayed in their bulging hammocks suspended from the beams overhead. A few groaned in the various stages of seasickness. Dirty water surged from side to side on the deck each time the ship rolled. The seas crashed overhead and alongside. The atmosphere was thick and indescribably horrid. The few electric lights shone redly through a sort of miasma of clammy steam. They were hardy souls indeed who endured the long hours of watchkeeping in the cold and wet on deck, or the heat and oily steam of engine room and stokehold, and ate, slept, and had the rest of their being in the

fetid squalor of the heaving caverns which were the messdecks. It was virtually impossible to keep the crowded living spaces wholesome and tidy with the old *Vexatious* plunging madly into the teeth of a gale.

Yet Tony never heard a grumble from any of the men, even the youngest. Some of them were fearfully and wonderfully seasick until they became inured to the comfortless rough-and-tumble of a life which was entirely new to them and was far more strenuous than anything they had undergone before. They stuck it without complaint. They wouldn't have been elsewhere for worlds, certainly not in a big ship where the living might be a bit easier.

This was rather borne in upon him when he heard the Captain and First Lieutenant discussing an ordinary seaman who in his civil life before the war had been a clerk with an insurance company.

"I'm wondering if we ought to apply for Ordinary Seaman Beecher's relief when we get back to harbor, sir," Richmond said.

"What's the matter with him, Number One?"

"He's as keen as mustard, sir, but always as sick as a cat when it comes on to blow a bit."

"Is he the freckle-faced chap with ginger hair who works the port telegraph going into harbor?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he likely to get over it?"

"He says he will, sir, though I have my doubts. I sent for him the other day and asked how he'd like a transfer to a big ship. He nearly burst into tears, poor chap."

“Does his seasickness interfere with his job?” the Captain asked.

“No, sir. Not when he’s really got something definite to do on deck. He doesn’t seem to eat anything much when its blowing though. ‘Can’t touch his vittles, no ’ow,’ as Leading Seaman Jenks put it. He’s the leading hand of Beecher’s mess and seems to have constituted himself his unofficial sea daddy.”

Bickerstaff grinned.

“*That* hoary old villain!” he laughed. “He’s much more likely to lead friend Beecher astray if they go ashore together. —But am I to understand that Beecher’s going off into a decline?”

“Oh, no, sir. He has most of his meals on deck.”

“Then give the lad another month or two before doing anything drastic. He’ll probably get over it. He’s keen, you say. I’d rather have one volunteer than a dozen pressed men. You never know what the depot might send us in exchange for him. It’s really up to you, but I suggest you stick tight for a bit and do nothing.”

“Aye aye, sir, I will.”

Bickerstaff started to load his pipe.

“I often wonder how I’d feel if I had to feed on the messdeck in a gale of wind,” he observed. “From what I’ve observed it isn’t precisely a health resort.”

“You’re telling me, sir. I go the rounds there, twice a day.”

“And if anyone tells me that the young of this country are in any way soft or decadent I’ll call ’em a damned liar,” the Captain said. “That’s just where Hitler and his pals are making their big mistake. —But hush,” he continued,

catching sight of Tony out of the corner of his eye. “I observe the young are listening. We mustn’t fill them with conceit and self-importance. —Mister Chenies?”

“Sir,” Tony answered.

“If I ever see you putting on airs, I’ll bite you full and hearty, remember. Meanwhile, keep your eye on the steering. The quartermaster seems to be trying to write his initials in the blinkin’ ocean.”

“Very good, sir.”

“And how often have I told you never to use the expression ‘very good,’ Mister Chenies?” demanded Bickerstaff, pretending to be angry. “I was taught that in my first ship as a junior wart. You’ve got a naval father and ought to know better. Use the proper naval answer, you young rapscallion.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Tony, saluting.

He knew better than to take Commander Bickerstaff seriously when he had a twinkle in his eye, though on occasions, when people really deserved it, the skipper could bite very hard indeed. His language was sometimes choicely forcible, and he himself referred to the biting process as having someone’s “guts for a necktie.”

3.

In that first winter, the time spent by the destroyers in harbor between successive trips was nominally supposed to be four days. During this period they were intended to refuel, to rest their crews, to complete with stores and provisions, and to effect what running repairs they could with the help of a dockyard or depot ship. Every so often came longer spells

for boiler cleaning or docking, when officers and men were allowed leave away from the port.

More often than not, however, and because of bad weather, convoys being delayed or diverted, the acute shortage of escorts, and occasional mishaps or casualties, the period spent in harbor between trips had often to be cut down from four days to two, or even to thirty-six hours.

It was certainly strenuous going, both for the officers and men, who badly needed rest, as well as for the ships, their machinery and fittings, which were long past their youth. Figures convey little, but from September until the end of January the *Vexatious* spent between seventy and eighty per cent of her time at sea, or between twenty-two and twenty-five days a month. Without adding up the actual figures, Mr. Walton, the Commissioned Engineer—"Our Little Jewel," as the Captain called him in his more affectionate moments—reckoned the old ship averaged between eight and nine thousand miles' steaming a month. It was probably an underestimate.

It was always a frantic rush to complete the necessary work in harbor to get the ship away to sea in time. While the "Little Jewel" scurried round the dockyard wangling this, that, and the other in the way of necessary stores, or persuading someone in authority to undertake repairs which were beyond the slender resources of the ship, the First Lieutenant, among a multitude of other jobs, had to get the ship tolerably clean and habitable, draw stores, and make good defects on the upper deck caused by heavy weather. There were always plenty of these—fittings washed overboard, guard rails bent or broken, and the like.

Mr. Hebard, the Gunner, had more than enough to do with the upkeep of his guns, torpedoes, depth charges, and a mass of electrical equipment. Sea and spray played havoc with such things as electrical circuits and lubricating caps. Then in his charge was a miscellaneous assortment of ammunition and stores, every item of which had to be accounted for. Mr. Hebard, worthy man, was an excellent messmate and normally phlegmatic. He sometimes played the mandolin in the wardroom and sang to his own accompaniment in a fruity baritone—songs of the lower deck which were occasionally sentimentally lugubrious, though more often unprintable. But there were times when his complicated store books nearly drove him into a frenzy of despair. The Captain hated paper work like the plague, but it was quite useless for him to say, "Guns, this is wartime. A murrain on your blasted store books! Why worry about the damn things?"

Mr. Hebard thought otherwise. Brought up to the mysteries of storekeeping, accustomed for years to the meticulous ways of the Navy, stores were Government property for which he was responsible. "Sir," he would say, mournfully shaking his head when the Captain told him not to bother. "Sir, if I was to take your advice I'd be hung, drawered and ruddy well quartered as a living example to all other gunners in the Service. I've got a wife and four children, sir. What 'ud happen to them if I was disgraced and made an example of?"

During the short time in harbor Bickerstaff was busy with a mass of paper work and reports and had to pay formal visits to the Captain in charge of the flotilla, who had his office ashore, as well as to the Commander-in-Chief, who liked to see the commanding officers of all ships working under his orders.

Tony, who was the nominal navigating officer, had charge of seven large folios of charts and all the navigational books. What with new minefields, British and German, the alterations in lights and buoys, and the multiplicity of wrecks and areas dangerous to navigation, the chart corrections were prolific indeed. Every one of them had to be inked in by hand on the small table in the charthouse forward. It wasn't until Morgan, a midshipman R.N.R., joined the ship two months after the outbreak of war that things became a little easier. Morgan was roped in as Tony's assistant.

Stephen, the junior Sub-Lieutenant, was the correspondence and confidential book officer. For the correspondence he was assisted by an A.B. to work the battered typewriter. The A.B., who received sixpence a day for his labors, was at the beck and call of everyone in the ship who needed him. He was a self-taught typist, using only two fingers of each hand, and spoiling much paper and many carbons with groans and muttered imprecations. There were a good many confidential books for Stephen to look after and correct. They were constantly being superseded and corrected, and the corrections had to be done accurately and zealously, otherwise there might be trouble. Add to these sheaves of Admiralty and other printed orders, and registers of all documents and outgoing and incoming correspondence, and it will be realized that Stephen's job was no sinecure. He, too, was sometimes heard to groan that he had not joined the Navy to become a blinking pen-pusher.

The doctor—otherwise temporary Surgeon Lieutenant Roderick Gordon Maclean, R.N.V.R.—who joined the ship at much the same time as Morgan, used to help Stephen out when he had nothing else to do. Apart from cut fingers,

bruises, and contusions the “Doc’s” medical duties were comparatively light. The men were disgustingly healthy, and if one did fall ill, he was usually whisked straight off to the hospital on arrival in harbor. For the rest Maclean acted as mess, wine, and tobacco caterer for the wardroom, and a very good one, too, wrote up the wine books, censored the outgoing mail, and at sea did much of the ciphering and deciphering of radio messages.

The Doc was popular with his messmates. Huge, husky, and brawny, he had played Rugby football for his university and had abandoned a thriving little practice near Kilmarnock to come to sea as a volunteer. From his height, weight, and girth he was more suited to a battleship than a destroyer, and complained that he had to curl himself in his narrow bunk like a periwinkle in its shell. He played the ukulele and was thinking of buying a saxophone.

“You and I can have some nice musical evenings, Guns,” he said one evening at dinner in harbor. “We’ll buy a drum and a nice pair of cymbals for our dear little midshipman. He’s itching to play.”

“God forbid!” said the First Lieutenant glumly, looking up from his curried mutton. “If you devils are thinking of starting a jazz band I’ll chuck my hand in.”

The skipper looked up from his end of the table.

“Don’t be such a Mouldy Mike, Number One,” he grunted. “Give the boys their chance. Let’s have the sackbut, psaltery, harp, dulcimer, and all other kinds of music. —No, honestly, I’m all for it.”

The doctor’s face brightened. Only the First Lieutenant looked a little glum.

CHAPTER V

THERE were incidents in plenty while the *Vexatious* was at sea in those early months of the war. Some of them, the most lurid, became indelibly stamped on Tony Chenies' memory.

At about a quarter-past four one December morning, having kept the middle watch, he groped his way along the heaving, darkened upper deck and went below to his cabin. He was tired and chilled through to the marrow.

His four hours on the bridge since midnight were among the most cheerless he had ever experienced. The *Vexatious*, with her convoy, was steaming against half-a-gale from the north-northwest with a heavy toppling sea which seemed gradually to be getting steeper and more confused. She pitched jerkily and uneasily, with occasional seas breaking over the forecastle and the aftermath of wind-driven spray sweeping as high as her bridge. The barometer was falling, and so was the temperature.

To make matters worse, the night was overcast and as dark as the inside of a cow, so that Tony had difficulty in keeping touch with the nearest ships of the convoy at a distance of even two cables, or four hundred yards. And if that weren't bad enough, the frequent flurries of snow and sleet driving down from windward sometimes blotted out the visibility to little more than zero.

The skipper had been on the bridge most of the watch, though he hadn't interfered. Tony, however, felt confidence in his presence. Keeping touch with the convoy had been anxious work. The merchant ships seemed to be yawing all over the place. If he sheered too close in to the lines during

one of those blinding snow squalls he ran the risk of collision. If he steered too far out, he ran the chance of losing them. It had been a job to strike the happy mean; but Tony had managed it—somehow. Bickerstaff's, "Good work, Sub!" just before he left the bridge after turning over to Number One and Stephen would have made Tony glow with pride if he hadn't been so numb with cold.

Reaching his cabin with chattering teeth, he flung off his oilskin and reached under his pillow for the vacuum flask of hot beef extract which he knew would be reposing there. The middle-aged Able Seaman George Henry Flagg, Tony's faithful retainer for the honorarium of ten shillings a month, would have seen to that.

Flagg, being a creature of routine, never forgot anything. As a naval pensioner, he had been a tram driver before being recalled to the Navy at the outbreak of war, and having discovered that Tony was the son of the Chenies with whom he had been shipmates years before, had practically insisted on becoming his body servant, sea daddy, and Mother in Israel rolled into one.

Intensely possessive, Flagg kept a jealous eye on Tony's small wardrobe. He mended his socks by the simple expedient of sewing the edges of the holes together with coarse thread, saw to his laundry, ironed his trousers, polished his shoes, and scrounged shirts and collars from other officers—without their knowledge—if Tony ran short. He scrubbed and polished the little cabin until it shone, stole canvas from the store and laboriously teased it out and fashioned it into an elaborately tasseled fringe for the boot-rack overhead. But Flagg *was* possessive—at times almost tyrannical.

“No, Mister Cheenies, sir. We can’t have a clean shirt today. We’ve already had our two for this week.”

“Flagg, you’re an old devil!” said Tony, full of wrath. “Give me back that shirt at once!”

“With all doo respect, Mister Cheenies, sir, you’ll get no clean shirt from me. We’ve had our ration till Sunday mornin’. You’ll wear the old one, or none at all.”

“Dammit, Flagg, you’re mutinous!” Tony exclaimed.

“No, sir, beggin’ your pardon, not mutinous. I’m merely lookin’ arter our interests—your interests, sir.”

Coming up to Tony one rainy afternoon when he was waiting to go ashore in the motorboat, Flagg shook his head and clucked like a disapproving hen. “We didn’t reely oughter be wearin’ our number one trousis on a day like this,” he whispered hoarsely in Tony’s ear. “No, Mister Cheenies, sir. What’ll our best trousis look like arter we done trampin’ through the dockyard, an’ they not paid for yet.”

How the blazes did Flagg know that, Tony wondered. The old codger seemed to know everything. However, he duly went ashore in the offending garments. All the three other pairs were beyond redemption when one had a date to dine with a sweet young thing and her family.

On that dismal morning in December, Flagg had duly left the vacuum bottle under Tony’s pillow—the only really safe place with the ship rolling as she was. With it, as an unexpected *bonne bouche*, were three rather stale corned beef sandwiches wrapped up in a piece of the *News of the World* three weeks old.

Tony gratefully sipped and munched before wearily dragging off his sea boots, damp stockings, and socks, and

massaging his tired feet. Putting on clean socks, he hoisted himself into his bunk, snuggled down under three blankets, and switched off the light.

Warmth gradually returned. The ship plunged wildly. He could hear the rush of the seas outside, and the regular chugging of the propellers further aft. But neither the motion nor the usual sounds of the ship ever disturbed Tony. He was tired, and had all the resilience of youth. Within ten minutes he was asleep.

Some time later he was roused by a voice and someone tugging at his shoulder.

“Mister Cheenies, sir, Mister Cheenies!”

Tony opened his eyes. The light in his cabin had been switched on.

“What is it?” he demanded sleepily, rolling over to see the burly, oilskinned figure of his retainer, dripping with wet, standing beside his bunk. “What d’you want, Flagg? It isn’t time....”

“The Cap’en wants you on the bridge, sir. I brought you along a cup o’ cocoa.”

Tony sat up blinking.

“What’s the time?” he yawned. “What’s happening?” He realized from the vibration and sound of the propellers that the ship had increased speed. Her motion had altered. He could hear seas rushing across the thin steel deck overhead.

“It’s about half-past six, sir,” Flagg told him. “We’ve parted company from the convoy an’ increased speed. It’s blowin’ somethin’ crool, sir, and snowin’ hard at times.”

Tony groaned.

“Come on, sir,” Flagg implored him. “Show a leg. Drink your cocoa an’ turn out. It’s the Cap’en who wants you.”

“Hell!” Tony muttered, flinging his legs over the side of the bunk and taking the proffered cup. “What’s the racket now?”

“We’ve picked up a distress signal, sir. A ship’s torpedoed an’ afire.”

Tony swallowed the cocoa at a gulp, thrust the cup back at Flagg, and lowered himself from his bunk. Still blinking and yawning, he sat down to pull on his thick stockings and sea boots.

Flagg stood by with his oilskin and sou’wester.

“If you take my tip, you’ll wear a towel round your neck, sir,” he volunteered. “We’re taking it green over the forecastle.”

Tony stood up and was helped into his outer garment. Cramming a sou’wester on his head he slung the glasses round his neck.

“Gloves, Flagg! Where the devil are my gloves?”

The A.B. produced the sodden sheepskin gantlets from the deck where Tony had dropped them on coming below.

“For the love o’ Mike, watch your step goin’ forward, sir,” Flagg cautioned. “Hang on to the lifeline an’ watch your chance. She’s all over the shop in this here sea an’ the deck’s like a ruddy skatin’ rink.”

Tony left the cabin, climbed up the ladder into the dimly lit after superstructure, moved aft over the sprawling bodies of sleeping men, through a canvas screen and so out through the open door onto the quarter deck. Holding on, he could see the white crests of the seas as they raced by and vanished astern.

Overhead the wind howled and shrieked like a million banshees. After waiting a little to allow his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness, he stepped out from under the lee and started to claw his way forward.

The wind cut like a knife. The air was full of stinging spray. Water broke across the upper deck as the *Vexatious* rolled and the seas dashed on board. He was breathless, wet almost to the waist by the time he finally hoisted himself to the bridge and reported to the Captain.

Bickerstaff apologized for pulling him out of his warm bed, but young Stephen, who should really be on watch, had fallen and twisted his ankle and was being attended to by the doctor. Neither the Captain nor Number One wished temporarily to blind themselves by gazing at the chart.

"Distress signals have come through," the Captain continued. "They're on the file in the charthouse. We parted company from the convoy at oh-six-one-oh and belted on to twenty-five, course two-seven-eight. I don't know if we can keep it up in this lop, but I hope so. Work out the proper course from our latest position with the convoy. Let me know if two-seven-eight's all right as a course, and what time we're likely to reach her."

Tony disappeared.

The distress signals came from the *St. Isabel*, a large British tanker. Torpedoed twice by an enemy submarine, she reported first that her oil cargo was on fire, and later that two of her boats had swamped while being lowered. The ship was sinking slowly.

Apart from the *Vexatious*, two other destroyers were speeding to her assistance, but the *Vexatious* was the nearest. Working it out on the chart, Tony estimated the *St. Isabel* was

thirty-eight miles away at six o'clock. But it was rather a matter of guesswork. The weather had been so overcast they had had no sights for days.

Leaving the charthouse he made his report.

"I think we should steer about five degrees to the southward, sir," he said. "If our positions are correct and we're making good twenty-five, we ought to be up to her just after seven-thirty."

"What time's it daylight," Bickerstaff asked.

"About seven forty-five, sir," Number One answered.

"Huh!" grunted the Captain. "What d'you make the visibility?"

"Possibly six miles between snow squalls, sir."

"We might sight the glare in the sky," the skipper continued. "On the other hand, we mightn't. God help the poor devils in a sea like this!"

Bickerstaff was thinking of a good many things at the same time. The convoy he had left, after exchanging signals with the commodore and senior officer of the escort, was protected by other destroyers, so he had no apprehensions about that.

Two other destroyers from elsewhere, but farther away, were racing to the *St. Isabel's* given position. That also was all to the good. When would they arrive? That he didn't know. They had not mentioned their positions or speeds.

What was worrying Bickerstaff was that the U-boat, having lit a flaming beacon that would be visible for many miles, might remain in the vicinity to torpedo any rescuer.

And even supposing they found the *St. Isabel*, the rescue would be confoundedly difficult. Two of her boats had already been swamped. What other boats did she carry?

Would they live in the sea that was running? It seemed unlikely.

What was the alternative? To take the *Vexatious* alongside the tanker if survivors were still on board.

But to take a fragile ship like a destroyer alongside a great wallowing ship like the *St. Isabel*, moreover, a ship that might be blazing from end to end, was running a frightful risk. So much depended upon how she was lying in relation to the direction of the wind and sea, how badly she was on fire, and in which direction the flames were spreading.

If there were men left on board, it might be possible to fire a line across and drag them one by one through the water to safety, but so much depended on circumstances.

With these thoughts in his mind Bickerstaff took the First Lieutenant aside out of earshot of the others. They consulted together for more than five minutes before Number One left the bridge to turn out the hands and to make various necessary preparations.

The *Vexatious* plunged on.

A little later there came a hail from the port lookout.

"A light in the sky on the port bow, sir!" he sang out, as a sea broke over the forecastle and a heavy burst of spray swept across the bridge.

"Where away?" asked the Captain, staggering to the man's side.

"About a point and a half on the bow, sir. I saw it clearly."

The *Vexatious'* bows lifted momentarily. The spray subsided, to be succeeded by a whistling snow squall which reduced the visibility to zero for several minutes. It departed

as suddenly as it had come as the ship ran through it and emerged on the other side.

"There, sir. There!" the lookout man exclaimed, pointing.

This time the skipper and Tony saw it for themselves—a bright, pinkish-orange glow spreading over the horizon and reflected on the undersides of the low driving clouds. It reminded Tony of a brilliant dawn with the sun just nearing the horizon before leaping into space.

Bickerstaff had his glasses to his eyes. He could see no actual flames.

"Steer straight for her, Chenies," he ordered.

"Port fifteen, Quartermaster," Tony howled down the voicepipe to the lower bridge.

"Port fifteen it is, sir," the reply came back.

"Steady!" from Tony after an interval.

"Steady it is, sir. Course two-five-six, sir."

2.

They drew near the *St. Isabel* in the gray half-light of the early dawn. The wind still blew furiously, with a heavy, breaking sea as steep as before. The tanker, which was one of those large ships with a bridge structure about two-thirds of the way forward and her engines, boilers, and funnels right aft, lay almost broadside to the wind and sea, rolling heavily. Only the very end of the stern and funnel were visible as the *Vexatious* approached. The rest of the ship, over four hundred feet of her, was obliterated in flame and dense clouds of rolling black smoke blowing almost horizontally along the sea and rising as it went.

It was an awe-inspiring spectacle. The flames, driven by the wind, seemed to be licking the very wave crests for hundreds of feet to leeward of the stricken ship. They varied in color from vivid scarlet to orange, pale yellow and sickly green, reminding Tony of some huge, flickering fiery tulip beaten flat along the stormy sea. Beyond the actual flames the billowing smoke was stained crimson by the reflected glow of the conflagration. It flashed and sparkled, as though little pockets of inflammable vapor had become ignited in mid-air. Low down, over the ship herself, the seas breaking on board were converted into clouds of white steam.

Reducing speed when within a mile, Bickerstaff took the *Vexatious* nearer to the blazing ship, keeping well clear of the blinding smoke. All the glasses on the destroyer's bridge were leveled on the only portion of the *St. Isabel* that was visible, her stern with its overhanging counter, the funnel and the deckhouses around it, as yet apparently untouched by the fire. The wind was blowing from her port quarter, so that the flames were blown forward rather than aft.

Tony could see no signs of any men in the *St. Isabel's* stern, the only possible place they could be if still alive. He noticed, too, that the two boats on the starboard side were missing, with the falls hanging loose from the davit heads and trailing in the water.

It was almost daylight now and still blowing hard, with the wind cutting the tops off the curling seas and sending them hurtling to leeward in clouds of flying spindrift. However, there had been no snow squalls for fully half an hour, something for which they were all thankful.

Bickerstaff, standing by the standard compass, and occasionally lifting the binoculars to his eyes, was himself

conning the *Vexatious* through the voice pipe to the lower bridge. The Asdic, that mysterious instrument used for submarine detection and likened by Mr. Winston Churchill to "impalpable fingers groping beneath the surface of the sea," was in use. The depth charges were ready, guns manned.

If a U-boat did happen to be in the vicinity of the *St. Isabel* in the hope of torpedoing a rescuer, the Captain thought she would probably be to windward, clear of the smoke. As he could see no signs of life in the tanker, no traces of boats with survivors, he thought it advisable to make a careful cast round before closing the burning ship.

Taking the *Vexatious* within two hundred yards of the *St. Isabel's* stern, where the heat of the fire could be felt and its muffled roaring heard even above the howling of the wind and the sound of breaking seas, he told a signalman to blow short blasts on the siren. The air was full of the stench of crude petroleum.

The siren yelped. Nothing happened. No waving figures appeared on the *St. Isabel's* after deck.

Bickerstaff shrugged his shoulders. "It looks to me as though they'd all gone west, poor devils," he said to Tony at his side.

"Would all her boats be aft, sir?" Tony asked with seeming irrelevance.

"Lord knows, Sub," said the captain, his mind largely concentrated upon other matters. "Why?"

"Because her wireless signal said *two* boats had been swamped, sir."

"What of it?"

Tony explained that though the *St. Isabel's* two starboard boats were missing, two others were still visible turned in under their davits on the port side abreast the funnels. Being deeply laden, the tanker was evidently homeward bound, and in this wind and sea she would have lowered her lee boats first on being torpedoed. These were the starboard ones. They were swamped, and she'd reported it.

Bickerstaff, thinking of other things, looked puzzled. Beneath his sou'wester his face was lined and gray, its normal sunburn hidden by the salty deposit of windflung spray and the stubble of several days. He had little chance to shave at sea.

"What exactly are you driving at, Sub?" he asked, his voice very tired.

"Only that her men may still be on board, sir," Tony answered. "They got off at least one signal *after* two boats were swamped."

Bickerstaff nodded.

"I see your point," he said. "But that signal was sent off hours ago, Chenies. If we felt the heat as we passed, what's it like on board there? The poor souls'll probably have been burnt or suffocated to death by this time, unless they were forced overboard in lifebelts. And how long could they live in lifebelts in this sea?"

"Not long, sir," Tony agreed. "But they may have had one of those life-saving rafts."

"Possibly, Chenies. What I'm going to do is to have a snoop round to wind'ard. If they *are* in lifebelts or on a raft they'll be somewhere along that. —Look."

He was pointing to a broad slick of brown oil stretching out toward the horizon from the *St. Isabel* in the opposite direction toward which she was drifting at the mercy of wind and sea. The thick oil, or maybe the *St. Isabel* carried petrol also, seemed to be burning close to the ship. Further afield it spread in a gradually widening wake, converting the breaking sea into a heavy swell. Its purport was plain enough. Driving bodily to leeward the tanker was leaving the *oil* behind her. If any of her men had gone overboard in lifebelts or on a raft, they, or their corpses, might be found somewhere near the oil track, or possibly beyond it.

The *Vexatious* steamed on at easy speed, rising and falling to the seas, rolling from side to side; but no longer shipping heavy water. Half a dozen watchful pairs of eyes from her bridge scanned the water ahead.

Then something happened with dramatic suddenness.

"Contact! Red-four three! Contact!" a man shouted.

Bickerstaff, galvanized into activity, rapped out a question or two, and was answered. There was no doubt about it. Something had been located by the Asdic—something not visible on the surface.

"Starboard fifteen!" he ordered. "Twenty knots. Depth charges ready, Sub! Sound the alarm gongs."

Tony spoke hurriedly through a telephone, and was answered. Removing a clip, he pressed an innocent-looking bell push. Klaxons sounded throughout the ship. As the *Vexatious* swung and increased speed men rushed to their action stations.

"Steady!" Bickerstaff ordered, his voice showing his pent-up excitement. "Cox'n at the wheel!"

“Contact!” came the man’s voice again. “Contact!”

The *Vexatious* was increasing speed perceptibly. The First Lieutenant arrived breathless on the bridge demanding to know what was happening.

At almost the same moment, Tony, looking through his glasses, saw something lift on the top of a sea with the water breaking over it. It was long and gray, with the broad hump of a conning tower at one end of it. Just clear of the floating oil track it was perhaps half-a-point on the starboard bow, and distant perhaps eight hundred yards.

“Look, sir! Look!” he exclaimed breathlessly, clutching the Captain by the arm.

The object had already disappeared, swallowed up in the deep trough between two waves, but Bickerstaff had seen it. With a calmness he didn’t feel, he gave an order to the coxswain. The *Vexatious* swung a little—steadied.

The U-boat, for it could be nothing else, did not reappear.

Seconds seemed to dawdle into minutes as the destroyer steamed on. At twenty knots she would cover eight hundred yards in about seventy-two seconds. It felt more like a quarter of an hour before Bickerstaff gave the order, “Stand by!”

The message was passed aft. Mr. Hebard would be ready there. They had let go depth charges before, sometimes for practice, twice in earnest without results, but never with such a heaven-sent target as this. Shaking with pent-up excitement Tony found himself repeating over and over in his mind, “Pray God there’s no hitch-up!”

Bickerstaff himself gave the necessary orders. A steel cylinder about the size of an ordinary domestic dust bin rolled off the *Vexatious’* stern into the sea. The throwers on

each side of the ship projected two others into the air. They curved over and fell some distance away. More followed from the stern.

The men gazed aft, watching the sea. There came a lengthy pause—then the thud of the first heavy explosion. Others followed. It felt as though some titanic iron fist had struck the ship under water. She shuddered to the blows. One after the other dome-shaped mounds of whitened water rose from the surface of the sea. They looked like huge puffballs on a lawn until they burst upward in gouts of heavy spray.

Turning sharply on her keel, rolling heavily as she went with the spray flying over her upper deck, the *Vexatious* recrossed the spot.

The Asdic still gave the unmistakable signs of a submarine.

More depth charges—more under-water explosions. Their thudding died away.

"Lord!" said Bickerstaff suddenly, starting to fill his pipe. "I'm as hungry as a python! —Starboard fifteen, cox'n!" he added down the voice pipe. "Revolutions for twelve knots."

The engine room reply gongs clanged. The ship started to circle.

Tony, whose heart was throbbing with excitement, had lost all sense of time.

It may have been two, perhaps three, minutes later when the blunt bow of a U-boat suddenly hove itself out of the water about three hundred yards on the *Vexatious'* port quarter. It rose in a flurry of spray with the water cascading from it, lifted until it hung at an angle of thirty degrees from the horizontal with the orifices of the bow torpedo-tubes and

about twenty feet of the keel clearly visible above the surface.

Such a contingency had been rehearsed—not once, but many times. The U-boat, wounded and perhaps struggling to come to the surface to surrender, must be killed. The *Vexatious* was taking no chances.

One of her after four-inch guns roared, the shell striking the crest of a sea and ricochetting into the distance. Another thud—a third and a fourth. The two-pounder pom pom joined in.

At almost point-blank range, though with shooting made difficult by the destroyer's wild motion, the submarine was hit repeatedly. They could see the dull red glow of explosions and the little puffs of yellowish gray smoke as the shells drove home. In the midst of the smoke and spray Tony thought he could see the gaping wounds torn in that blunt gray bow. No conning tower appeared above the surface.

It was all over in less than a minute. A shell struck and burst. Simultaneously, there came the bright orange flash of a heavy explosion with masses of debris whirled high into the air through a cloud of dun-colored smoke. The shattering roar of it seemed to shake the air and to compress the eardrums. It was louder by far than the boom of a gun or the thudding hammer blow of an exploding depth charge.

"God!" said Bickerstaff to himself. "That's her torpedoes!"

Bits and pieces came splashing down into the sea. A large, twisted fragment of gray-painted steel, with the rivets still in it, clanged on the destroyer's steel deck within three feet of the after torpedo tubes.

"How's this for a blinkin' memento!" said a seaman, pouncing upon it. He dropped it at once. "Coo lummy!" he

exclaimed, sucking his fingers. “The ruddy thing’s nearly red-hot!” His friends laughed.

The smoke of the explosion drifted away and dispersed. There was no trace of the U-boat to be seen. She had sunk stern first.

Steaming over the spot some minutes later, they saw the corpse of a single German sailor in a lifebelt floating in the midst of a patch of water heavily discolored by fresh oil and what looked like soot. There was also a solitary hammock, some gratings, and fragments of floating wood.

There were no survivors.

3.

Over a mile to leeward the *St. Isabel* was still blazing furiously. The *Vexatious* was steaming downwind toward her when the yeoman of signals, with his eye to his telescope, turned to the Captain.

“I can’t swear to it, sir,” he said, “but I think I can see figures right aft in her.”

Bickerstaff, cramming the remains of a corned beef sandwich into his mouth, raised his glasses and gazed in the direction.

“Gad!” he exclaimed after a moment, “I believe you’re right, yeoman. But where the devil have they suddenly sprung from?”

Nobody could answer that. No men were visible when the *Vexatious* first steamed by the *St. Isabel’s* stern.

The First Lieutenant, overhearing the conversation, came to the fore side of the bridge.

“What d’you want done, sir?” he asked.

“I’m not lowering a boat in this sea unless everything else fails,” Bickerstaff replied. He went on to point out that the *St. Isabel* had an overhanging counter stern. It *might* be possible to take the *Vexatious* sufficiently close in to get a line across and a wire after it. Both ships would be rolling and pitching; but in any case the destroyer’s bows would be below the *St. Isabel’s* stern. Her men must lower themselves on rope’s ends. If any of them were burnt or injured, they must be lowered by their friends. There was no other chance unless the poor devils jumped overboard in their lifebelts and took their chance of being picked up one by one.

“Have wires and rope’s ends ready on the forecastle, Number One, and what heavy fenders you’ve got. I’ll take her up dead slow, and look slippy about getting your wire across. Warn ’em not to jump on any account, and see you’ve a man tending each rope’s end on the forecastle as they lower themselves. I don’t want ’em falling in the pond. If they do that, God help ’em! —I may smash up the ship, but there’s no other way that I can see. All right, carry on, and good luck.”

“Good luck to you, sir,” said Richmond, turning to leave the bridge. “You’ll need it.”

More than twenty disconsolate figures could be seen in the tanker’s stern as the *Vexatious* approached at her slowest manageable speed. The faces of all of them were blackened. Some seemed to be dressed in rags.

Richmond, with a number of men, had collected on the destroyer’s forecastle. Tony Chenies was with them. So was Mr. Hebard. As they approached, the heat was almost unbearable, the air full of the suffocating reek of oil and the stench of burning. Beyond that little group of men in the *St. Isabel* the flames streamed out like huge ragged banners

straining in the gale. There was smoke everywhere, trails and whorls of it eddying in every direction, and that dense black pall to leeward. They could hear the roaring of the fire, a sizzling like the sound of escaping steam as fire met water.

Thirty-three officers and men were rescued from the stricken *St. Isabel*. Fifteen others had been lost—four in the fire or when the ship had been torpedoed, the others when the boats had been swamped during lowering.

Some of the survivors were badly burned and had to be lowered to the *Vexatious'* forecastle by their friends. The others, more able to fend for themselves, slid down ropes and were dragged on board by many willing helpers. The *St. Isabel's* captain was the last to leave.

How it was managed, or how long it took, nobody quite knew. Time and time again Bickerstaff's heart was in his mouth lest the wire should part when the ships swayed in opposite directions with men dangling overhead, or the *Vexatious'* sharp bows came perilously near the *St. Isabel's* stern. Once they did touch, with a shuddering crash which bent the destroyer's stem head and crumpled about two feet of the forecastle, but that was the only time.

"Are you sure that's the lot?" Bickerstaff howled through his megaphone to the forecastle.

"That's all, sir," Number One shouted back.

There was no recovering the securing wire, the eye of which was over the *St. Isabel's* bollards. It was allowed to run overboard as the *Vexatious* backed slowly astern. The bare end splashed into the sea.

"Lost overboard by accident," Mr. Hebard observed, watching it with a glum expression. "There goes my year's income tax!"

“Come off it, Guns,” Tony laughed. “It’s cheap at the price.”

“Sez you, Mister Chenies. But you’re not the father of four children. No wonder this ruddy war’s costing us nine millions a day.”

“Huh!” said Tony, waving a hand at the *St. Isabel*. “And what’s the value of that ship, and all the oil that was in her?”

“Thank the Lord we got something as a make-weight,” said Mr. Hebard.

“I congratulate you, King of the Depth Charges. Good work!”

Mr. Hebard permitted himself to smile.

“If I wasn’t a teetotaller at sea I’d have a double tot o’ whisky tonight, Mr. Chenies. But seeing that I am—”

“You’ll have one with me the first night in harbor,” said Tony. “If you can be dragged away from your blasted storebooks we might even make a proper binge of it, just to celebrate.”

“There’s something in that,” Hebard agreed. “All the same, Mister Chenies, I can’t help feeling a bit sorry for the poor blokes inside that U-boat.”

“Would they be sorry if it had been the other way round?” Tony inquired.

Mr. Hebard had no reply to that.

4.

The *Vexatious* steamed up to windward along the oil slick, looking for traces of overturned boats or men floating in lifebelts. She searched for over an hour, to find nothing.

There was no saving the *St. Isabel*. She was sinking by the bows, her captain said, and even if she were still afloat when the fire burnt itself out it was unlikely she could ever be towed back to harbor. So the *Vexatious* fired a few shells along her waterline to accelerate her end, and stood by until she reared her stern in the air and slid to the bottom. Nothing remained to mark the presence of a once fine ship except that thick cloud of black smoke rolling to leeward and the ever widening patches of oil floating on the surface—these, and two capsized boats and much wreckage floating on the water.

Using his wireless to report what had happened, Bickerstaff was ordered to return to base with the survivors. By half-past eleven in the morning, in weather that was gradually moderating and with a few patches of clear blue in the sky to windward, the *Vexatious* was steaming to the eastward at twenty knots with the wind and sea astern. With six officers and twenty-seven men from the *St. Isabel* on board, her accommodation was taxed to the limit. All the officers gave up their cabins to those suffering from burns, and Maclean had his work cut out in attending them. According to the First Lieutenant, it was the first real honest-to-God job the Doc had done since joining the ship.

Later that day Captain Mortimer, the *St. Isabel's* master, came to see Bickerstaff in his little sea cabin leading off the charthouse. Tall and grizzled, with a bandage round his head, Mortimer wore his uniform jacket, sadly the worse for wear, and a pair of borrowed gray flannel trousers that were much too short for him.

His gratitude was almost pathetic. He had come, he said, to thank Bickerstaff for saving their lives. He had heard of

destroyer seamanship, but he had never seen a ship handled like the *Vexatious* during the rescue.

Bickerstaff, very embarrassed, cut it short. He hated being thanked.

"Tell me," he asked. "Are they looking after you all right? I'm afraid we're a bit tight for accommodation, but we'll be in harbor in less than forty-eight hours."

"Your chaps have done marvels, Commander. They're mothering us like children."

"Good!" said Bickerstaff. "You've only to ask for what you want. We're not the *Queen Mary*, but all we have is yours. —Now tell me what happened."

The *St. Isabel* had originally been with a convoy but had lost it when a temporary breakdown had occurred in the engine room. Having effected repairs she pushed on at full speed. The convoy had not been sighted again, so the *St. Isabel* went on alone.

The previous afternoon a U-boat had appeared on the surface some distance astern. She opened fire with her gun, to which the tanker replied. The duel went on for about forty minutes, after which the U-boat disappeared.

"Did she hit you?" Bickerstaff inquired.

Captain Mortimer shook his head.

"No," he replied. "She landed one or two pretty close, that's all. Shooting wasn't easy in the sea that was running."

"And you didn't hit her?"

"I don't think so. All I know is she disappeared. We thought she'd given up the chase."

Mortimer went on in his short clipped sentences, at times nearly overcome with emotion. He was still suffering from

the strain of his experiences. Little wonder.

The night, he explained, had come down dark and stormy. Nothing had happened until just after five in the morning, when the *St. Isabel* was torpedoed on the port side just abreast the bridge. Three minutes later she was hit again forward. There was petrol in some of the tanks, and this flared up in an instant. It set fire to the cargo of heavier oil, and in less than no time the forepart of the ship was ablaze.

The ship, considerably down by the bows, was turned stern on to the wind to keep the fire forward. Officers and men fought the flames with all the appliances they had; but it was no good. Even the seas breaking on board did nothing to damp it down. The fire drove aft in spite of everything. Within ten minutes the bridge had to be abandoned. It all went up in smoke and flame. All this time the wireless operator had been sending off distress signals.

Then the after tanks started to catch fire, and the officers and men were driven to the stern. The ship was doomed, so Mortimer had stopped her broadside on to wind and sea to give the two starboard boats a lee. They lowered them. First one had been swamped, and then the other.

“We heard the poor chaps shouting in the water,” Captain Mortimer continued. “There was nothing we could do. It was pitch dark, blowing a gale, and the spray driving over everywhere. It was pretty awful, Commander,” he went on, wiping a gnarled hand across his forehead and looking at Bickerstaff with a pair of pathetic brown eyes rather like a dog’s. “We felt so utterly helpless. Those poor chaps went quick. We, the rest of us, might last a bit longer before being burnt alive or driven overboard in lifebelts. We could never have lowered the port boats in the sea that was running.”

“What about your distress signals?” Bickerstaff asked.

“It was only by the mercy of God we ever got ’em off. Our two operators, the eldest’s only twenty-three, stuck it out in their cabin near the bridge until the place was practically red-hot around them. One of them, young Winfrey, managed to make his way aft, *through* the fire mark you. His clothes were burnt to rags and he was all but done in when he arrived. We did what we could. Your doctor says he’s a fifty-fifty chance of saving him. He’s a hero, that little chap, and only nineteen. So was Carver, the senior man.

“We never saw him again, Commander. I reckon he died in his radio cabin, burnt, if he wasn’t suffocated first. The last chap to see him was Winfrey. Carver pushed him out of the place and told him to skip for it before it was too late. Winfrey starts arguing about it, so Carver pushes him out bodily telling him not to be a bloody young fool. How Winfrey ever got aft I don’t know.”

“I take off my hat to both of them,” said Bickerstaff quietly. “Let’s hope Winfrey pulls through.”

Mortimer nodded. His face was very sad.

“Carver was only married at the end of last voyage,” he said, his voice husky with emotion. “A nicer little thing than his wife you never saw. She is my niece. How I’m to break the news I don’t know!”

“That’s the hellish part of war,” Bickerstaff murmured, not knowing what else to say. “It’s worse for the people left behind.”

“Aye, Commander. That’s true. I’m a widower with grown-up children, thank God!”

The rest of the story was soon told—how the flames in the *St. Isabel* drove farther and farther aft until they licked round the after superstructure and funnel. Driven below by the fumes and intolerable heat, the thirty-three of them took refuge in the engine room. The end, they expected, would come in a few hours.

Someone was sent on deck now and then to see if by any chance a ship was coming to the rescue. No. They had not seen the *Vexatious* as she passed, had not heard the blasts of her siren. The roaring of the fire and the noise of the seas drowned everything else. It wasn't until they heard those under-water thumps which someone recognized as the explosion of depth charges that they realized another ship was anywhere near. They came on deck then, in spite of everything, to see the *Vexatious* up to windward. If Bickerstaff could have heard the cheering, it would have done him good.

The cheering redoubled when they saw the end of the U-boat. They had no idea she was still in the vicinity.

"Well, we had the luck to get her," Bickerstaff said.

"Aye, Commander. One less of the murdering devils. — But it's you I'm thinking of, and what we owe to you and your chaps."

"Let's take it all for granted," the Commander smiled. "Say no more about it."

5.

Soon after daylight on the next morning but one the *Vexatious* reached her base and landed her passengers. An ambulance was waiting for the injured, motor coaches for the others. Winfrey, the young wireless operator, was on the way

to recovery. Carried ashore on a stretcher, with most of the visible part of him swathed in bandages, he was gaily smoking a cigarette. A few farewells with words of gratitude, a little burst of cheering, and the incident of the *St. Isabel* was closed.

Just as Bickerstaff turned to go below he was intercepted by the yeoman of signals.

"Signals, sir," he said, thrusting a pad into his captain's hands.

"COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF TO *VEXATIOUS*. HEARTIEST CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR SUCCESS. REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY TO LUNCH AT 12:45. CAR WILL BE SENT."

"Reply, 'With much pleasure,' " Bickerstaff said.

"CAPTAIN (D) TO *VEXATIOUS*. EXCELLENT WORK. WELL DONE. SHOULD LIKE TO SEE YOU AS CONVENIENT THIS FORENOON."

"CAPTAIN (D) TO *VEXATIOUS*, *VIGILANT* AND *WRANGLER*. COMPLETE WITH FUEL TODAY THURSDAY. YOU WILL BE REQUIRED FOR DUTY AT 0600 ON SATURDAY."

"Number One!" Bickerstaff called.

"Sir?"

"We're off again at six o'clock the day after tomorrow. As it doesn't affect our seaworthiness, they're evidently not worrying about that damage forward. As soon as you're ready we'll shove off and go to the oiler."

Number One's face fell. He had much to do in the ship. After sinking a submarine and saving most of the *St. Isabel's*

crew he had hoped for, though not expected, at least three days in harbor. But necessity knows no comfort. However, even two whole nights in bed was something for which to be thankful. So he shrugged his shoulders and grinned.

"There's certainly no peace for the wicked, sir."

"Nor ever will be so long as this war lasts," said Bickerstaff. "It's a rum sort of life taking it all round."

Assuredly it was, thought Tony Chenies. If anyone had told him a year before that he would see a great tanker on fire and a U-boat sunk in the space of about two hours, he wouldn't have believed him.

"Is it tonight or tomorrow night I'm going to have the pleasure of drinking your health, Mister Chenies?" came the voice of Mr. Hebard behind him. "I'm not forgetting that double tot you promised."

"Trust you for that," laughed Tony. "But I hadn't forgotten. —Well, Flagg?" as his retainer appeared with a questioning look on his face.

"Beg pardon, Mister Cheenies, sir, but will we be goin' ashore for a scamper 's afternoon?"

"No, Flagg. We shall not scamper. We shall spend the afternoon asleep in our bunk. We may go ashore tomorrow if nothing happens to prevent us."

"And when shall we want our bath and shavin' water, Mister Cheenies?"

"We'll have our bath when we've secured alongside the oiler. Having decided to grow a beard, our shaving water will not be required."

Flagg's eyes opened wide in amazement. He shook his head.

“You didn’t oughter, Mister Cheenies, sir,” he said, in a hoarse whisper intended to be confidential. “You reely didn’t oughter. What’ll we look like with whiskers? ’T isn’t as if....”

“D’you mean I *can’t* grow a beard, you old reprobate?”

“That I couldn’t say, Mister Cheenies, sir. But what I do say is that maybe that bit o’ ... beg pardon, the young person we sometimes goes ashore to see, mightn’t like it. Some of ’em’s a bit particular. We don’t want to get spoilin’ our prospects. No, sir. That ’ud never do. How should I explain it if we was crossed in love, the same as I was at your age when the party I was walkin’ out with took on with a hussar, one o’ them blokes with thin legs an’ yellow stripes down his pants, an’ spurs. Me, spurned and forsook for the blinkin’ cavalry! Mortifyin’ to the flesh? I should say it was.”

“I expect you soon got over it, you old villain,” said Tony, used to Flagg’s familiarities.

“I got her photo still, sir,” said Flagg, looking sentimental. “I haven’t got over it yet.”

“But you’re a married man, Flagg.”

“So I am in a manner o’ speakin’,” the able seaman replied, rubbing his unshaven chin. “But there’s wimmen an’ wimmen, if you’ll understand me. —Don’t you never grow a beard, Mister Cheenies. Take the advice o’ one who knows, one old enough to be your—”

“I’ve heard you say that before,” Tony managed to get in. “I wish you’d stop dictating to me.”

“All for your good, Mister Cheenies. I know’d your father, an’ a proper gentleman he was. I remember the time he said to me, ‘Flagg,’ he says, ‘Flagg. You’re the one man—’ ”

Perhaps it was as well that at that moment a boatswain's pipe trilled and a voice shouted an order. The *Vexatious* was about to leave the jetty.

Tony sighed with relief.

Flagg was sometimes a little overpowering, but so loyal, so anxious for what he considered was Tony's welfare that it was difficult to snub him.

CHAPTER VI

THE *Vexatious* refitted early in the New Year, and Tony Chenies found himself given eight days leave. He wanted no theaters, no dances or parties with various relations and friends in London. He went straight to Minchinhampton to make up for arrears of sleep, to wear plain clothes, to do exactly as he liked when he liked, to be pampered as a war-weary veteran by a doting mother.

Eight days—one hundred and ninety-two hours. It didn't seem long after all he had seen and done since the previous September. But it was very pleasant, all the same. He felt like the mythical old retired bos'un who hired a boy to call him at half-past five in the morning with the message, "Please sir, the Commander wants you at once." And the bos'un, rolling over in his bed, replied, "Tell the Commander, with my compliments, to go to hell!"

It was pleasant to hear the wind howling in the chimney and rattling the windows, to look out of one's window in the mornings and to see the thick carpet of snow. Tony pitied the poor devils at sea.

Effie became his devoted slave—pressing his trousers, sewing on buttons that Flagg had overlooked, wrinkling her nose at Flagg's ideas of darning, producing the food that he liked best, making no bones about breakfast in bed, and keeping the independent boiler going full blast to provide hot water for a late bath.

Even old Wilkes contributed to his entertainment with two pounds of bloody beefsteak oozing through the local newspaper and obtained on the sly from a friend who was a

butcher. Wilkes' gift cost Tony half-a-pound of dark shag tobacco. Effie had also to be rewarded with ten shillings.

They both loved Tony in their own way.

Mrs. Chenies was able to make other arrangements for Steve and Willie, the two soldiers billeted upon her. It was as well, for Toppy, on her first holiday from the Ministry of Information, was at home for most of Tony's leave.

"Tony came on leave on Monday," Mrs. Chenies wrote in a letter to her husband. "Luckily I knew he was coming, so Toppy arranged her holiday at the same time. I was very busy with the W.V.S. and the usual etceteras, but they have both found plenty to do and I think are enjoying themselves. They seem to be in and out of the rectory most of the time, and the rectory gang in and out of here. I must say it's a great asset having the Dodsons so conveniently close. They're always ready for anything, and never at a loss for a suggestion.

"Some charming Americans, man and wife, have come to live in one of the houses near us. They're lively, and most kind and hospitable. Webster, the husband, has work of some sort not far from here. We've all taken them to our hearts, though Tinker is rather aloof and growly with Sammy, their young spaniel. Margaret, the wife, is a darling—blond, blue-eyed, and so spontaneous and open-hearted. I hope you'll have the chance of meeting them.

"Tony sleeps a great deal, and his appetite is as good as ever. It was lucky he brought his naval ration card with him. We'd have been rather lost without it. He's looking very well, I think, though rather thin and lined about the face—sort of old and tired looking. Also he's grown what purports to be a beard. It's more like a sandy-red fringe, and makes him look hideous. Toppy and I tried to make him shave it off. So did

the rectory party. But he's very proud of it and utterly refused to remove it. It seems beards have become the fashion in destroyers, though goodness knows why. I suppose they think it makes them look older and more sea-doggish. He's very pleased with his ship, and likes all the officers, particularly the captain. But he didn't say much about what they were doing, except that it was convoy work in the Atlantic and they spent a long time at sea. I asked him to come and talk at the Women's Institute, but he refused point-blank. He goes back on Tuesday. Toppy has given up the idea of joining the Wrens. She's happier now at Miniform, as she calls it, and has been put on to more interesting work. She doubts if her languages would be much use in the Wrens.

"P.S. I've opened this letter to tell you that we saw in the papers this morning that Tony's captain, Bickerstaff, has been given the D.S.O. for a successful action against an enemy submarine. One or two others, including Tony, have been mentioned in despatches. Tony says he doesn't know what for, as he didn't deserve it. But someone must think well of him, so I hope you're as proud of your son as I am. It took about an hour's hard pumping on the part of Toppy and myself to get a few details. They sank the submarine all right and saved some of the crew of a burning ship. Apparently it was all very difficult. But Tony didn't want to talk about it. You know how oysterish and reserved he becomes when he's asked questions. The rectory people spotted it in the papers and rang up to congratulate him. They've got up a fork supper on the spur of the moment with dancing in the drawing-room, but will have to close down before midnight as tomorrow's Sunday. They mustn't desecrate the Sabbath, or the whole village will be scandalized. You know how their tongues wag at the least little thing...."

2.

Early one morning, on the way back to the base after their first convoy trip after refitting, Mr. Hebard, who was keeping the morning watch, suddenly sighted an open boat about two miles to windward. It was blowing hard, with an overcast sky and a heavy, leaden-colored, breaking sea, so that at times the boat was completely hidden in the troughs. Keeping his glasses leveled, the Gunner waited till she rose on a crest, and then made out that she was flying what looked like a dirty white flag. For the moment he could see no figures.

His first act was to alter course to investigate, his second to call Bickerstaff, who was dozing in his sea cabin after spending most of the night on the bridge.

The Captain was up in less than a minute. He raised his glasses as the boat lifted into sight.

“Mister Hebard,” he grunted. “There are probably men in her. I’ll take the ship to wind’ard and drift down to make a lee. Nip down and have men ready on the upper deck. You’ll want boat rope, fenders, rope’s ends, and the life-saving net. Look smart, and send a hand along to warn Number One.”

Mr. Hebard left the bridge in haste.

“Have the Doctor warned, too,” Bickerstaff shouted after him. “He might be needed.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Within a few minutes the *Vexatious* had stopped to windward of the boat, and was slowly drifting toward her. Juggling with his propellers, now slow ahead, now astern, Bickerstaff was keeping his ship in position with the wind and sea on the port bow. The boat was a trawler’s boat. Ten exhausted-looking men, dressed in the usual variety of

garments, were on board her. One of them was bailing. When nearly alongside, Bickerstaff, looking down from the bridge, saw that the scooped-up water was reddened with blood. Several of the occupants wore improvised bandages. Another, badly wounded, lay prone on the bottom boards with the water swishing round him.

They were hauled and helped on board. Two seamen, jumping into the boat, lifted the badly wounded man. The right sleeve had been cut off his jersey. The dirty bandages on his arm were soaked in blood. His teeth were clenched in agony.

"Sorry, mate," said one of the bluejackets. "We may have to hurt you a bit."

"Carry on," the wounded fisherman replied. "Don't mind me."

It was not easy to transfer him to the rolling deck of the destroyer from the boat plunging alongside. The pain must have been excruciating. The man's face showed it. But except for a hissing intake of breath as he was lifted and passed to other hands and the *Vexatious* rolled to starboard, he never uttered a sound.

The improvised flag on the boathook was passed into the destroyer. Some oars, the boat's compass, and a few other things followed. The seamen scrambled back on board. The boat itself, torn and punctured by splinters, drifted astern as the *Vexatious* steamed ahead—another pitiful piece of drifting flotsam eloquent of enemy savagery at sea. Turning his ship, Bickerstaff rammed her, cutting her in halves and turning what remained into splintered wreckage. She was not worth saving, and submarines, he had heard, sometimes stopped near drifting boats to torpedo would-be rescuers.

Tony heard the whole tale later, when the *Evening Star's* skipper, a bluff and breezy person called Tempest, dressed in borrowed clothes, sat before the blazing stove in the wardroom clutching a glass of whisky in one huge fist. He had eaten well.

"It was like this," he explained. "We was on our usual fishin' ground, an' at four o'clock yesterday mornin' hauled our trawl an' starts guttin' an' stowin' fish. All our deck lights was burnin' as usual, there bein' no orders to the contrary. 'Bout five, or thereabouts, all hands bein' on deck, we was standin' by to shoot the trawl agen."

"What sort of weather, Skipper?" someone asked.

"Fine. Light southerly breeze, an' a heavy ground swell from the sou' west. Stars overhead, but pitch black otherwise. —Well, I'd just gone to my room below the wheelhouse to take a sounding with the echometer gadget when I hears the bang o' a gun close to. I shins back on top fast as I can make it an' realizes we was bein' attacked by somethin', couldn't make out what, though I thinks of them damned U-boats. So I shouts to the lads to douse all lights an' rang down for full ahead...."

Almost simultaneously, he went on to say, he saw the flash of a gun about five hundred yards to starboard. The shell struck and burst in the chartroom under his feet. It set the ship on fire, smashed the wheelhouse windows, splintered doors and bulkheads, and filled the wheelhouse with the sickening stench of explosive and burning.

The *Evening Star* stopped, clearly visible in the light of her own flames. They realized it was a U-boat by this time.

"The murderin' devils pumps shell after shell into us at point-blank range. I gives orders to abandon ship, there being

nothin' else to be done. The lads starts hoistin' out the boat over the port quarter. —I lost all count o' time wi' things happenin' as they was."

Rather overcome with emotion he went on to describe how one man, a fireman, had already been killed. Of the ten others, seven got down into the boat, leaving Tempest himself and his second hand with a deckhand with a badly lacerated arm on board the trawler, which was now blazing furiously.

The submarine, coming within one hundred and fifty yards, continued her fire. A shell hit the trawler's bridge and blew it to pieces. Another burst close to the stern of the boat lying alongside, its whizzing fragments wounding the chief engineman and some others and perforating the boat in many places. Another shell missed her by a few feet.

The wounded deckhand was passed down, and the second hand and skipper followed. They cast off and backed astern with their oars. A few minutes later the trawler sank by the stern.

A little later the submarine approached the boat within about fifteen yards, then disappeared into the darkness leaving the ten fishermen to their fate. They were about seventy miles from the nearest land. The boat was leaking badly, and several of its occupants were wounded. They had about a gallon of water and two dozen biscuits.

"The swine!" muttered Mr. Walton between his teeth, his fists tightly clenched. "The unspeakable swine! Why do we trouble to rescue them, I wonder?"

Tony Chenies was asking himself the same question. He wondered what would happen to the survivors of a U-boat if the *Vexatious* sank one that afternoon. When the time came,

he supposed, they would turn soft-hearted and go all out to save the poor devils struggling in the water, no matter what they had done beforehand. One couldn't leave people to drown. But the enemy had no such scruples, even with noncombatants.

Tempest continued his story.

The boat lay to until dawn, and all through the next day her crew rowed in the direction of land. The sun went down in an angry blaze of orange and yellow which presaged wind. The breeze backed anti-clockwise and increased in strength. Before long the smooth-bosomed hummocks of the rolling swells were toppling and breaking in foam.

It became bitterly cold as the night came down, and the wind continued to freshen. The sea grew steeper and more confused. The breaking crests glimmered in the darkness and started to break on board. The boat was enveloped in flying spray. The sound members of her crew, exhausted by the day's rowing, bailed with the single dipper and their boots to save the lives of them all.

"It was the longest night I ever spent," said Tempest. "She was full nearly up to the thwarts most of the time, an' we expectin' every minute to be our last. The wind, which was soon half-a-gale, was blowin' us off the land, not towards it. I weren't the only one who thought we was finished. Jimmy Haskins, him wi' the wounded arm, that was, was pretty near done. We'd bandaged him wi' someone's shirt an' gives him sips o' water through the night. There was no more we could do. About midnight I serves out a biscuit an' a sip o' water to all hands, though some of 'em couldn't eat the biscuits. Then dawn comes, an' the seas lookin' horrible, wi' the lads well nigh done in. I puts 'em to rowin', to give 'em somethin' to

do more'n the good it could do, but it wasn't no use, they hadn't the strength left. I'd just made up me mind to rig a sea anchor wi' the oars when we sighted smoke down to loo'ard. We'd seen lights durin' the night, which was trawlers. We'd lit flares, but no one seen 'em. But when daylight comes an' there's smoke to loo'ard, I ties the cook's apron to the boathook an' props it up. Also I prayed a bit—reckon we all did ... we thought you'd miss us. Well, you know the rest. I'm a plain man. I can't say thank you like I feels—reckon none of us can. But we'd 'a gone but for you. Thank God for the Navy, says I."

The incident of the *Evening Star* was not an isolated one. From the very beginning of the war certain U-boat commanders had not hesitated to torpedo British and neutral merchant vessels on sight without giving passengers and crew a chance of saving their lives.

It is doubtful if anyone in the Navy *really* expected the Germans to stick to the terms of a protocol, which they themselves had signed, forbidding submarines to sink merchant ships without first putting passengers and crew in a place of safety; but early in the New Year this form of indiscriminate slaughter was increased. Enemy aircraft started to make ruthless attacks with bombs and machine guns on merchantmen and fishing craft, even firing on survivors in boats and on trawlers rescuing the crews of others from the water. They also bombed and machine-gunned lightships and the tenders relieving their crews and supplying them with stores. Lightships, which served no military purpose and were placed in position for the benefit of the seamen of all nations, had always been regarded as sacrosanct in every previous war. Not so with the Nazis.

It was murder, brutal and unrestrained. The chivalry of the sea seemed dead.

3.

It was on a cold morning in March, with a blustering wind and sheets of driving rain, that Bickerstaff went to make his usual report to the Captain in command of his destroyer flotilla on bringing the *Vexatious* back into harbor after a trip with a convoy.

He shed his dripping raincoat, climbed the stairs, and opened a door with the painted inscription, “DON’T KNOCK. COME IN.”

Captain Hardcastle, a keen-eyed, sunburned man in the early forties wearing the ribbons of the D.S.O. and of the last war, sat at his table in the far corner. The room overlooked the harbor, though there was little to be seen through the rain-patterned windows.

A stove, with the wind roaring in its funnel, blazed in another corner. The cream-colored walls were nearly covered with charts. Some of them bore pins with heads of different colors with strings stretched between them, others mysterious little flags and movable symbols. They all meant something —convoy routes and the positions of convoys and individual ships, the reported positions of enemy submarines. Another chart, hatched in red and blue, showed British and enemy minefields, another the channels regularly swept by the minesweepers.

A large diagram, dated along the top, had the name of every ship in the flotilla down the side with broad lines of colored chalk indicating whether she was at sea, in harbor, or

in dock for repair or refitting. The walls of the Captain's office told much to the initiated.

There were four telephones on Hardcastle's desk, the usual pile of papers and correspondence on his blotting pad, and an "In" tray that was nearly full.

His job of running the flotilla was no sinecure. A camp bed on the opposite side of the room with a telephone nearby showed where he spent most of his nights. A table with a blue cloth near the fire carried most of his meals. They were always hurried meals.

The war was a war of "bits and pieces" as the Captain sometimes expressed it. His destroyers and escort craft never operated in flotillas, as they used to do in peacetime. They were at sea singly or in couples, and there were never enough of them to go round. They were overworked, and well he knew it. The officers and men showed the strain. So did some of the older ships. Nevertheless, they carried on.

For himself Captain Hardcastle would have far preferred to be on the bridge of his ship at sea, as he had been in the early days of the war and had had the luck to sink a U-boat. But their Lordships at the Admiralty and the Commander-in-Chief had decreed it otherwise. Captain Hardcastle couldn't possibly keep touch with his widely scattered chickens from a ship at sea, and a small one at that. Nor could he issue the necessary sailing orders, arrange the refits, supervise the fueling, storing, and a hundred and one other things which kept his flock at sea and running.

Here, ashore, with ample means of communication, and a considerable staff, which included a number of Wrens, otherwise women and girls of the Women's Royal Naval

Service, he could compete with the job—though there were never enough destroyers.

The Wrens were magnificent. They didn't care how long they worked or what they had to put up with in the way of discomfort. Their pride was in belonging to the Navy and in doing their jobs as well as men. Their keenness was infectious. One found the daughters of Admirals and other notabilities serving in the ranks. They also added a decorative touch to an otherwise monastic establishment and brightened the dull routine work. The men minded their manners and their language. The Wrens sometimes darned the men's socks and sewed on their failing buttons. One of the young women, working in Hardcastle's office, saw to it that fresh flowers were provided for his room. In winter they came from her parents' greenhouse in a Somersetshire village. In spring and summer they would come from the garden. Hardcastle was safely married. There was no ulterior motive—nothing but abounding good nature and a liking for color.

The Wrens certainly pulled their weight. They were very much part of the Royal Navy in the war. Hardcastle swore by them.

All the same, office work of any kind irked him. The Navy was fighting, and like all other sailors he yearned to be at sea. He was secretly jealous of his own destroyer captains who had all the fun and excitement.

The Captain, pipe in mouth, looked up as Bickerstaff entered the room.

"Oh. It's you," he said smiling. "How did the last trip go? Any excitement?"

Nothing but the fag-end of a gale and a bit of thick weather, Bickerstaff told him.

Hardcastle nodded.

“I fear I’ve got some bad news for you,” he said, and then, noticing Bickerstaff’s change of expression, added, “at least I think it bad. You mayn’t.”

“What is it, sir?”

“I’ve been ordered to detach four destroyers to help with the east coast convoys. I fear the *Vexatious* has to be one of them.”

“The east coast convoys!” Bickerstaff protested. “But we haven’t enough to do the job properly here, sir. You’ll be frightfully shorthanded if four of us are taken away.”

“You’re telling me!” said Hardcastle, shrugging his shoulders. “Don’t think I haven’t shouted to keep you. I’ve been howling for more destroyers ever since I came here, and so has the C. in C. You bet I protested at four being pinched, and the C. in C. agreed. —But what’s the use? Destroyers simply don’t exist for all the jobs they’ve got to do in this sort of war. We could do with double the number and still run ’em off their legs.”

Bickerstaff nodded in agreement. He knew.

“But the east coast, sir,” he said. “Why the east coast?”

“Because, for the moment, there’s a temporary lull in submarine activity in the Atlantic, I expect. Meanwhile, to keep us on our toes, the Hun’s making himself obnoxious by using aircraft to bomb and shoot up our coastal convoys. That’s the reason, I suspect.”

“So we’ll have excitement, sir?”

“It looks like it,” the Captain answered. “A good deal more excitement than you’re getting here, and on the whole, I should imagine, better weather.”

“I’d sooner stay here, sir. I’m used to the work.”

“I know. I’m sorry to lose you, and hope you’ll soon be back. But there it is. When—”

The conversation was interrupted by a ring from one of the telephones on the table. Hardcastle took up the receiver, pushed a cigarette box in Bickerstaff’s direction, and waved to him to sit down.

The Commander listened to the one-sided conversation.

“Good morning.... Yes ... I hear you perfectly.... Then I’m to understand you propose the *Whimbrel’s* completion date shall be extended by three days.... Yes, I know all about that. I saw the Commander-in-Chief and Admiral Superintendent yesterday.”

The tone of the Captain’s voice was hardening. He was impatiently stabbing his blotting pad with a pencil.

“ ...No. She’s definitely required for duty on Thursday. I haven’t the ships to go round as it is.... Yes, night and day, and work double shifts if you like. I’ll take full responsibility, but ask the Admiral Superintendent if you like. The ship must on no account be delayed. It’s got to be done.... Right. Good-by.”

He replaced the receiver.

“Some of these damn fellows don’t seem to realize there’s a war on and how hard up we are,” he grumbled. “What were we talking about, Bickerstaff? Oh, yes. When can you be ready to sail?”

“This afternoon, sir, as soon as I’ve completed with stores.”

“It’s not so urgent as all that,” Hardcastle said. “Have you any defects?”

“No, sir. Nothing that matters.”

Hardcastle thought for a moment, rubbing his chin.

“Today’s Tuesday,” he said. “You’re wanted there by Saturday. If you sail P.M. on Thursday it’ll be time enough. —Yes, Miss Charters, what is it?”

A girl in blue W.R.N.S. uniform had entered the room.

“I’ve brought you the incoming signals up till ten o’clock, sir,” she said.

“Anything vitally urgent, Miss Charters?”

“The *Virago’s* reported condenser trouble, sir,” she said.

The Captain sighed.

“The *Virago’s* condensers are one of the banes of my life,” he answered. “They’re always going wrong. —She’s with that A. K. convoy, isn’t she?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, Miss Charters. Leave the signals with me. You needn’t wait. On your way back tell the Engineer Commander I’d like to have a word with him.”

Miss Charters put the file of signals on the desk and retired.

“It’s one damn thing after another,” Hardcastle grumbled. “First they take away you four, and now the *Virago’s* busted herself! I hope it’s not going to be serious. —Well, Bickerstaff, I mustn’t keep you. I expect you’re up to the eyes in it. Are you dining anywhere tonight?”

“No, sir. I’ve no plans at all.”

“What about a spot of dinner at the yacht club? I’m taking the evening off, for once.”

“Thanks very much, sir. I’d like it.”

“Rendezvous there between seven and seven-thirty, then. I shall come back fairly early.”

“Aye aye, sir,” said Bickerstaff, rising.

It was the first time Captain Hardcastle was to have a meal outside his office for over ten days.

CHAPTER VII

THE meeting room in the Naval Headquarters at the convoy assembly port was uncomfortably crowded and the air blue with tobacco smoke. Between thirty and forty merchant ship masters were collected there to be given their last instructions before sailing in convoy that evening—their exact places in the lines, all about the latest minefields and other navigational dangers, what times they might expect to alter course, what destroyers, corvettes, and armed trawlers were detailed to act as escorts, what was to be done in the event of attack by enemy aircraft or motor torpedo boats.

Bickerstaff, who had taken Tony Chenies with him as ex-officio navigator, had never attended such a conference before. If they hadn't realized it previously, they now came to understand what meticulous organization a coastal convoy required.

The Commander in charge of the gathering stood in front of a blackboard and spoke for perhaps seven minutes in short, clipped sentences, and then asked if everyone understood. One or two members of his audience had suggestions to make, which were duly noted. A few asked questions, which were answered.

"Well, Captains," the naval officer said. "I think that's about all. You've got the rendezvous, and I want you to be under way at a time that'll get you there at half-past five at the latest. There you'll find your escorts, and will form up in the order shown on the blackboard. Is that all clear?"

He was answered by a chorus of "yes" and "aye."

“Commander Bickerstaff, here, of the *Vexatious*, whom most of you have already been introduced to, is one of your escorts. He’s been on the Atlantic convoy job since the war started, so you’re in good hands.”

Bickerstaff, shuffling his feet, looked supremely self-conscious. Who was he to blurt out that in this gathering of seamen he felt rather like a new boy at school, and that, in any case, convoy work in the Atlantic was very different from that on the east coast?

So he said nothing, but glanced at Tony to see how he was taking it. Tony, busy scribbling notes, was looking rather more earnest than usual. As navigator of the *Vexatious* he felt the responsibility.

“Well, good luck and a safe passage to you all,” the Commander was saying. “Remember the old, old story you’re all sick of hearing. Keep well closed up, and be careful about darkening ship at night. No flashing torches, no matches, no smoking on deck. Send an officer round before dark to make certain about your lights. But above all, keep closed up, gentlemen.”

There were smiles and titters at that. How often were they told the same thing? How often had they been begged, besought, and goaded through the loudspeakers in their destroyer and other escorts to keep closer to the next ship ahead, always closer? The Navy chaps were sticklers for close station.

“Do we get Paddy Carver and the *Shellback* along with us this time?” a voice asked.

There was loud laughter. Paddy Carver of the *Shellback*, one of the corvettes, was an old friend to most of the men in the room. Through traveling on the same convoy route time

and time again, he knew most of the masters personally and all of them by name. He knew their ships also and was renowned for the remarks howled through his loudspeaker in a voice like the bull of Bashan as he circled the convoy twice, three times, or four times a day shepherding the miscellaneous collection of ships into closer station. The masters liked to see Paddy's burly figure hanging over the bridge rails of the *Shellback*, with his great black beard blown by the wind. He looked so solid and dependable. His very presence inspired confidence.

But Bickerstaff had never heard of Paddy Carver, much less met the great man. So in the conference room that morning he whispered to his neighbor, a gnarled-looking person with a bright mahogany-colored face and thick reddish hair growing out of his ears.

"I thowt all folks knew Paddy Carver," came the almost reproachful answer. "He's cap'en o' one o' these corvettes, an' a graand chap. He makes us laugh, the things he says. He's champion as Haw-Haw. 'Cher-many calling. Cher-many calling.' Takes yon blatherskite off to a T. He asks after the wife an' children, an' how's the allotment getting on wi' all the tribe digging for victory. 'Ee, but he's a graand man is Paddy. Keeps things cheerful. But if any of us chaps is in trouble, he's there reet on the spot every time."

Bickerstaff made up his mind that Paddy Carver must be met on the first possible opportunity.

The collective experiences of the merchant ship masters in that room would have filled many books. They were men of all types and ages, some young and spruce, others regular old seadogs. Most of them had been on coastal work since they'd first gone to sea as boys fresh from school. One that

Bickerstaff talked to had spent two nights at home in three months, reaching his house on one occasion at seven o'clock in the evening and leaving again at 5 A.M. in the dark. Another had been disabled after his ship was mined and sunk, but was now back at sea again. The veteran of the party, sixty-three years old, had started life in sail at the age of sixteen and was the possessor of a square-rigged master's ticket. He had gone into ocean-going steamers after that, but was in the coastal trade before the last war and had been in it ever since.

Taken in the mass, they were a tough and rugged-looking crowd, dependable, phlegmatic, determined. Looking at them, Bickerstaff realized why nothing, certainly no Germans, would ever break their dogged spirit and courage.

2.

The convoy was marshaled and formed up by dusk. Before darkness came the whole strange collection of ships—colliers, several deep-sea tramps, and coasters of all ages, shapes, and sizes—was on its way south shepherded by its escorts.

So far as the weather went it might almost have been summer. The air was balmy. There was no breeze, and the smoke of many funnels trailed out in a gradually thinning cloud toward the darkening horizon astern. In places, where the vapor looked denser, one could tell when the men laboring in the stokeholds had shoveled coal into the furnaces minutes before.

The sea, unruffled by any wind, had the appearance of a sheet of dark burnished steel. It undulated with an almost invisible swell, which showed in moving lines of deep

shadow on its metallic-looking surface. High overhead in the zenith a few patches of woolly cirrus showed pink, orange, and yellow against the vivid blue of the sky. Over the horizon to the westward, where the long line of the coast appeared as a serrated ridge of deep purple and indigo, the sky was still stained with the brilliant afterglow of the sunset.

The night came and the stars shone out, to be reflected in pale trackways of light wavering across the water. The vivid color in the sky to the westward faded into pale opalescence and then into a deepening misty blue. The details of ships gradually became indistinct, until they appeared as black silhouettes sliding along over ruffles of disturbed water.

The *Vexatious*, steaming at easy speed ahead of the convoy, rolled gently with a motion that was more soothing than otherwise—in distinct and pleasant contrast to the turbulent Atlantic, where it always seemed to blow.

The smell of frying rose from the ship's company's galley beneath the forecastle. Those on the bridge could hear the splash and gurgle of the bow wave, the subdued throbbing of a fan down in one of the boiler rooms. Somewhere below a man was playing a mouth organ. Rough voices broke out into the familiar chorus:

> "Roll out the barrel,
> And we'll have a barrel of fun.
> Roll out the barrel...."

It all seemed very unwarlike. But for the complete absence of lights, the men clustered round the guns and the extra lookouts, it might almost have been peacetime.

Bickerstaff was talking to the First Lieutenant on the bridge, talking quietly so as not to be overheard.

“There’ll be no moon till about five o’clock in the morning,” the Captain said, looking at the horizon to the eastward. “I shouldn’t at all wonder if they didn’t have a crack at us tonight. I believe they had planes over just before we sailed. Coastal Command were busy, anyhow.”

“I’m keeping all guns ready through the night, sir,” Richmond said. “Two men on the lookout, that is, and the others standing by.”

“Keep ’em so,” Bickerstaff grunted. “You’d better send someone round at intervals to keep ’em up to scratch. If anything does happen, it’ll be in split seconds.”

“What about the officers’ watches, sir?”

“Arrange ’em as you like, Number One. I shall be up till daylight. I’m taking no chances with the weather like this.”

The convoy moved on through the darkness.

Eight o’clock ... ten ... midnight ...

It had become much colder. A shrewd little breeze from the southeast was furring the surface of the water into minute corrugations. It was darker, too. The stars were slowly becoming obliterated in cloud breaking away from the main mass of dark cumulus encroaching on the sky to windward. The land was out of sight. Only the nearest ships of the convoy could be seen as blurred black shadows forging through the night.

Bickerstaff stamped his sea-booted feet. Shivering, he sent a man down for another sweater, undid his thick duffle coat to take another turn round his neck with the woollen comforter knitted by his wife.

One o’clock ... a quarter past ...

The sky was still clouding over, and the night darker than ever.

The First Lieutenant was dozing in a deck chair on the lower bridge, ready for an instant call. Tony Chenies, keeping the middle watch, found comfort in a jug of hot thick ship’s cocoa sent up from the galley.

Skilton, the leading cook, was one of the oldest men in the ship, a pensioner well on in the fifties who had been recalled to the Navy on mobilization from a comfortable billet as chef of a hotel at Bournemouth.

He was nothing much to look at, small and wizened with a face all creased and crinkled like the skin of an old apple. But he was a demon for work and certainly had a way with him in the galley, where he was a fierce martinet. His wrath fell heavily on trespassers who tried to borrow his utensils and implements to fry their fish and eggs and bacon for tea. He knew the mess they made, with frying pans dirtied and fat sizzling and smoking all over the top of the galley stove. Chastened ordinary seamen would be hurled out of the galley followed by a torrent of vituperation. “You dare to put your nose inside *my* galley agen, my lad, an’ I’ll cut the blinkin’ liver out o’ you!” the little man stormed, brandishing a fish slice. “If you want cookin’ done, just you ask me or one o’ my assistants!”

Cookie was a regular little tiger when roused. Moreover, he never seemed to sleep. It was a matter of pride with him and his two assistants that hot soup or cocoa was available all through the night when the ship was at sea. And even in rough weather, with his pots and pans sliding and spilling over his stove, he usually managed to provide hot meals for a

hundred men and more in a violently swaying box measuring perhaps twelve feet by eight. It was only when the sea actually invaded his galley and put out his fires that he confessed himself beaten by the elements.

Yes. There was dignity in the culinary art, even in a destroyer. Skilton invariably wore a tall white cap and spotless white uniform and apron on Sunday mornings if the *Vexatious* happened to be in harbor and the Captain went on his rounds. He saw to it, too, that his pots and pans were brightly scoured and the galley clean and in apple-pie order.

Bickerstaff was a nailer for prying into holes and corners when the mood was upon him. A pair of old shoes or greasy overalls hidden away behind a locker excited his indignation. He even investigated Skilton's stock pot and inquired as to its ingredients.

People sometimes said of cooks at sea that the Almighty sent the food and the devil the cooks. In the "good old days" to call a man a something "son of a sea cook," was to use a term of opprobrium. There were always good cooks and bad cooks. In the days of sail, when the seamen's food consisted largely of salt pork, salt beef, and biscuit, the cooks might often be crippled or wounded ex-seamen whose knowledge of their art was gained through bitter experience on their victims. Their victims, being sailors, not unnaturally growled, and "cookie" was unpopular.

Sailors still growl, but for a more devoted and hardworking band of men than the cooks of His Majesty's Navy one had to go far. The authorities had long since recognized that good food makes for contentment, especially in war. Unpalatable, ill-cooked provender will produce a hubbub of

disgruntlement. “Feed the brute” is not merely excellent advice to housewives. It applies also to cooks at sea.

No one would have dared to cavil at Bob Skilton.

The father of three children, ugly and harassed-looking, people suspected him of being henpecked. Yet in his galley he was king, and indefatigable in his efforts to please the ship’s company.

3.

The convoy plodded on.

It was at about ten minutes past three, by which time the sky was heavily overcast and the cloud ceiling had dropped to about two thousand feet, that the little group of people on the *Vexatious’* bridge heard the roar of a single aircraft overhead. Nothing could be seen against the canopy of cloud; but the machine, judging from the sound of its engine, seemed to be traveling more or less diagonally across the convoy from east to west. There was no knowing whether it was friend or foe. By orders from the bridge the crews of the *Vexatious’* anti-aircraft guns swung their muzzles skyward and followed the sound of the engine. The machine guns were ready in case of a low-flying attack.

The pulsation seemed to recede on the starboard quarter. Then it increased again, coming closer, then died away.

“The blighter seems to be circling overhead,” Bickerstaff murmured. “Is it one of ours who’s lost his way, or is it—”

He never finished the sentence, for high overhead and almost immediately astern the clouds suddenly took on a silvery sheen as though the moon were behind them. The illumination brightened and broadened as a ball of light

appeared and seemed to hang suspended in the air. It was reflected from the sea. The outlines of the nearer ships of the convoy stood out in dark silhouette.

At the same instant one of the escort ships somewhere down the line opened up with her pom-pom. Other ships chimed in, their gun flashes sparkling red and orange against the background of black and silver.

As the thudding of the reports came traveling across the water and the sky started to scintillate with the golden sparkle of exploding shell, the single globe of white light, already glaringly brilliant, seemed to disintegrate into five or six others. Falling slowly, they bathed sea and sky alike in a radiance almost as bright as sunlight. A photograph might have been taken of the *Vexatious'* upper deck. Against the dazzling silver sea every ship in the convoy appeared in full relief as though cut out in black cardboard. They stretched far away toward the horizon.

The noise of the guns completely drowned any sound of the airplane's engine. The firing persisted for over a minute and then died gradually away. Next silence—a dead, uncanny silence broken only by the rippling of water alongside and the sound of men's voices.

"The blighter's gone," Tony heard himself say.

But still the chandelier-like cluster of the parachute flares dropped slowly toward the sea. From each of its balls of brilliant incandescence fell a little vertical trail of smoking red sparks.

Though nobody timed it, the glare must have continued for a full five minutes. It made Tony Chenies feel as uncomfortable as when, as a small child, he had been discovered stealing jam from the larder. He felt he wanted to

creep away under cover, to hide, for from somewhere up aloft the convoy was being watched and reported. The sensation was eerie, disquieting.

One by one those bright globes flickered out in mid-air, or became extinguished when they met the water. Darkness came gradually, as if by the slow drawing of a curtain. When it did finally come, the night seemed doubly black. It took time to refocus one's eyes.

Bickerstaff said nothing, but a good deal was running through his mind.

What was the meaning of that illumination? What did it portend?

Half-past three ... a quarter to four ... four o'clock ...

Number One came up yawning from the lower bridge to take over from Tony. The helmsman, signalmen, and lookouts turned over to their reliefs in whispers. Men took each other's places at the guns. The morning watch reliefs for the engine and boiler rooms found their way aft along the darkened upper deck and disappeared below.

In his galley old Skilton, with his cap tilted over his eyes, lay prone on a locker with his head pillowed on one arm. His legs were doubled up almost to his chin. There was no room to stretch out. Nevertheless, he was asleep, and snoring gently. One of his mates, a lanky youth softly crooning "Little Old Lady" under his breath so as not to awaken his superior, was stirring a great caldron of bubbling cocoa.

A figure in a balaclava helmet and dirty duffle coat appeared in the doorway. It held out a tin mug.

"Got a drop to spare, Cookie boy?"

“*Ssh!*” hissed the cook’s mate, flicking a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the sleeping Skilton. “Don’t wake him! Give us your mug, mate.”

The mug was duly filled.

Tony, leaving the bridge, went below to the charthouse. He took a fleeting look at the dimly lit chart spread out on the table, and then coiled himself down on the cushioned settee. It was much too short for him and very hard. Turning over to keep the light out of his eyes he tried to sleep.

4.

With the advance of one hour in the clocks, sunrise was not due till about quarter-past seven. At about half-past six, when the sky to the eastward had just started to lighten, there came a sudden shout from the port lookout on the *Vexatious’* bridge.

“Objects bearing red two-oh, sir!” he hailed.

Bickerstaff and Richmond could see them with the naked eye—two small indistinct shapes at a distance of perhaps eight hundred yards. They were motionless, and looked about the same size as ordinary fairway buoys. But no buoys were shown on the chart in this particular neighborhood. Moreover, why should two buoys be placed within a few yards of each other?

The Captain and Number One raised their glasses practically simultaneously. Bickerstaff dropped his a moment later. He remembered the final paragraph in his sailing orders which said, “No friendly vessels of any sort will be found on the convoy route during darkness north of Latitude ——. As speed is imperative in dealing with enemy motor craft, you

are at liberty to take instant action against any ships sighted without waiting to identify.”

And these *were* motor craft. They were becoming plainer every minute.

Things began to happen.

Alarm gongs jangled. Bickerstaff shouted some orders down the voicepipe to the lower bridge. The *Vexatious* swung slightly to port and steadied. The engine room, prepared for an emergency increase in speed, answered the bridge telegraphs immediately.

The two motor craft were now dead ahead ... six hundred yards ... five hundred. Number One was passing orders to the guns as Tony Chenies arrived breathless on the bridge. Bickerstaff, with his glasses up, saw a sudden white wash at the stern of both “E” boats. They were moving ahead, gradually increasing speed and separating.

“Let ’em have it!” the Captain shouted.

One of the foremost four-inch guns went off with a great crash and a sheet of golden flame which temporarily blinded everyone on the bridge. A wave of warm cordite smoke came sweeping aft.

The *Vexatious* was rapidly increasing speed; but so were the “E” boats. Tony had a fleeting glimpse of both of them traveling all out, with their broad wakes stretching astern and the V-shaped plumes of their bow-waves. They were about five hundred yards ahead, steering divergent courses. They must be traveling a full thirty-five knots. The *Vexatious’* full speed was—well, nobody quite knew what she could do at a pinch, but she was very old.

Another gun roared out. A two pounder pom-pom, finding its sights bearing on the enemy to port, suddenly chimed in with its deafening, deep-throated cacophony. Someone was also using a light machine gun. Its staccato chatter could be heard as a shrill treble accompaniment to the din of the larger guns.

Breathless with excitement, Tony watched. It was difficult to see, but the spectacle, with its noise and rapidity of movement, was even more thrilling than the blazing *St. Isabel* in the Atlantic.

Through the smoke and glare of the gun flashes, now scarlet, now golden, he saw the tall white pillars of a four-inch shell striking the water and the smaller spurts kicked up by the lighter projectiles from the pom-pom. He saw the smoke and the dull red glow of their explosion. Beyond, when she wasn't obliterated by water and shell bursts, he could see the dark hull of the enemy motorboat racing through the water with her heavy bow wave and humped-up stern wash. She was traveling at full speed and gradually edging away to the eastward, her lifted bow visible at times against the pearly sheen of dawn encroaching on the sky over the horizon.

The *Vexatious*, working up to full speed and vibrating with every ounce of steam her boilers could give her, was following her enemy round. The captain was evidently trying to make certain of one bird, though the "E" boat was gaining rapidly.

Tony was watching the motorboat to port. It wasn't until later that he discovered that her consort to starboard had circled round, and was also being engaged by the after guns and the starboard pom-pom. Some said that the enemy had

fired torpedoes at a range of a few hundred yards. Mr. Hebard, who was at the after guns, later swore that he had seen the telltale splashes as they were discharged, and their whitened tracks in the water passing across the *Vexatious'* wake. There was no reason to disbelieve him, but at any rate the torpedoes missed. Mr. Hebard also averred that his particular enemy had been hit before putting her helm hard over and disappearing in the darkness. His evidence, however, conflicted with that of other witnesses, who said that this particular "E" boat nearly completed a full circle and then vanished to the southward, still at full speed.

Things happened in split seconds. Guns blazing and roaring, orders being shouted, and smoke and flame combined to give a series of fleeting glimpses rather than any consecutive view of what happened. The whole affair was over in a few minutes. It was later difficult to establish any sort of sequence when a whole series of incidents occurred in such rapid succession. Everyone had a different story. They were all convinced that their tale was the correct one.

Anyhow, watching the "E" boat to port, Tony suddenly became conscious that she was firing back. In a rift between the smoke and shell splashes he caught sight of the bright sparkle of gun flashes from her lifted forecastle, and a series of flaming trails speeding through the air in his direction. The enemy was using tracer ammunition from some sort of heavy machine gun. He heard a vicious "*Whee-uu*, *whee-uu*, *whee-uu*," overhead, series after series of them as they came over in bursts—then a thudding clang as some part of the ship was hit. It was followed by a second clang, and a third.

It was the first time Tony had been under fire. These things which buzzed like swarms of angry hornets were heavy

bullets. He felt rather naked and unprotected, but more angry than frightened. The damned cheek of it!

The "E" boat, twisting and turning, still seemed to be increasing her lead.

Someone must have given the orders, for the pale, blue-white finger of the *Vexatious'* searchlight suddenly flashed out and swept forward, with funnel and cordite smoke eddying through its brilliant ray. It illuminated the enemy for a flickering instant—the dark hull and the silvery whiteness of her wake and bow wave. The next moment, as the ray moved farther ahead, the image was completely blotted out. Tony noticed that where the light touched the water the sea became a wonderful translucent blue.

"Damn and blast it!" Bickerstaff roared, forgetting his usual politeness in the stress of the moment. "Give those nitwits the bearing, and tell 'em to hold her! Train aft, damn it!"

What had really happened was that the men at the searchlight or those controlling it could not see the target through the clouds of drifting smoke.

The light moved slowly aft again, to hold the "E" boat in its glare whenever she was not obliterated in smoke and spray. She was drawing away, but the *Vexatious'* guns still thudded.

Then, when Tony had made up his mind that the enemy would escape and he was wishing with all his heart that he was in a brand-new thirty-six knotter instead of an ancient relic of the last war, something happened.

There came a bright pale yellow flash from somewhere amidships in the target—then a spurt of orange flame mingled with smoke. The searchlight was full on her at the

time. The bow wave and wake vanished. The next thing Tony saw was a dark object like a blunt spearhead standing vertically out of the water—the “E” boat’s bows.

He could have shouted with joy. There came a little burst of cheering from some men on the upper deck.

“Well, that’s that,” said Bickerstaff breathlessly, as the guns ceased firing and the turmoil died away. “Well done, Number One! Jolly good work!”

Richmond grinned.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “It looked to me as if something touched off her petrol and blew her stern off. Damn lucky shot. Are you going to stop for any possible survivors?”

“Not on your life I’m not, with that other blighter sculling around! We’ll tell one of the others.”

The *Vexatious* swerved to port. With her searchlight still on, she steamed past the remains of the “E” boat at a distance of little more than a hundred yards. The water was covered with oil and splintered wreckage. The sharp bows were gradually sinking lower in the water. They could see no signs of any survivors. Still, it was wise to investigate. Survivors were always useful. Bickerstaff, using his wireless, detailed one of the escorting corvettes to proceed to the spot and search. An hour later she reported. There were no survivors —only the corpses of four men in lifebelts.

Until half an hour after daylight the *Vexatious* hunted for the other “E” boat, which might have been damaged. There were no signs of her. She had vanished into the blue, probably streaking at full speed toward Germany hoping to escape British fighter aircraft on the way.

The *Vexatious* rejoined the convoy. Bickerstaff retired to his sea cabin to make up for a sleepless night. Tony Chenies ate an enormous breakfast in the wardroom and went to his cabin to sleep. He was too tired even to brush his teeth.

5.

They had an air attack that afternoon, but the enemy was not particularly venturesome.

The sky had cleared and the sun shone overhead in a dome of almost cloudless blue. The Germans, flying at about seven thousand feet in a series of V-shaped formations, first appeared as a swarm of midges high up to the eastward. They came closer, the sun glinting like gold and silver on their wings as they turned and came in to attack.

The anti-aircraft guns of the escorts pumped shell into the sky until the blue became pockmarked with little puffs of smoke of browny-orange, lilac, sooty black, and gray. The enemy came down on a long slant, to scatter their bombs at random among the convoy. The sea spouted tall pillars of white and gray in all directions while the guns redoubled their uproar. No ship was hit, though there were many near misses. On more than one occasion Bickerstaff's heart was in his mouth as he watched a small coaster steaming unconcernedly through what looked like a forest of waterspouts.

Then, when least expected, one enemy aircraft seemed to crumple and halt in mid-air. She started to flame, then to smoke, before falling to the sea like a plummet leaving an inky trail behind her. She hit the water with a splash and disappeared. Another machine broke away from her formation with smoke pouring from her tail and made off to

the eastward, gradually getting lower. Nobody saw her end, but it was unlikely she ever reached Germany.

Next a squadron of British fighters appeared from the direction of the coast and engaged about three times their own number of opponents with undaunted courage. The enemy promptly turned tail and fled. Firing ceased for fear of hitting friends. The guns' crews, clustered round their weapons, cheered on the British team as though they were watching a football match. Amid the roar of many engines one heard the *rat-tat-tat-tat-ta* of machine guns as the two parties met almost immediately over the convoy. The sunlight flashed from many wings as the machines swooped and circled and tumbled. It was a thrilling and breath-taking performance to watch.

Another enemy started to smoke and came rushing toward the sea on a long slant. About halfway down a small black dot detached itself from the machine and started to fall vertically. A white flower-like parachute opened out and retarded its headlong progress. A corvette put her helm over and made for the spot where the airman might be expected to fall into the sea.

A third airplane started to drop vertically, turning over and over like an autumn leaf fluttering from a tree. No one in the *Vexatious* saw where she descended before the Germans disappeared to the eastward with the British still in full pursuit.

As an official communiqué described it two days later:

"An attack by enemy motor torpedo boats was made on a convoy off the east coast before daylight on Wednesday morning. After a short and spirited engagement one of the enemy was sunk. We sustained no casualties. An air attack

was carried out on the convoy during the same afternoon, one enemy machine being brought down and another damaged by the ships' gunfire. Fighters of the Coastal Command soon appeared on the scene and drove off the attackers, four of the enemy being destroyed and several more damaged before the chase had to be abandoned. Our aircraft sustained no losses. All ships of the convoy reached their destination in safety."

Tony Chenies read the communiqué in the newspapers. He was secretly disappointed at so terse a description of the "short but spirited engagement" which had been so wildly exciting while it lasted.

But the old *Vexatious* had something to show for it—two ragged holes in her foremost funnel and three more through the seamen's messdeck.

And Able Seaman Flagg had a grievance.

"I ask you to look at this here, sir," he said, appearing in Tony's cabin with a rolled-up serge garment. "I calls it a blinkin' houtrage!"

He unrolled his best jumper, torn and punctured in four places.

"It's lucky you weren't inside it, Flagg," Tony laughed.

Flagg was not amused.

"Me inside it!" he snorted. "What I wants to know, Mister Cheenies, sir, is if the Ad-miral-ity gives me a new shoregoin' jumper instead o' this here one what fitted me perfect an' hasn't hardly been worn? Them perishin' Huns! Why must they go makin' a target o' my blinkin' locker? There are plenty o' other lockers in the ship. Why single out me?"

Why indeed?

Captain Hardcastle was right when he spoke of more excitement on the East Coast than in convoy work in the Atlantic. Hardly a trip passed but that the *Vexatious* sighted enemy aircraft and saw bombs dropping among the ships of her convoy. Sometimes, more venturesome, the hostile planes came down to less than a hundred feet to use their machine guns.

The anti-aircraft guns of the *Vexatious* and other escorts were constantly in action. Once or twice merchant ships were sunk or damaged by bombs or hit by machine guns. Several times enemy aircraft were brought smoking down into the sea by the ships' gunfire.

Aircraft of the Coastal Command were usually quickly on the scene to chase the attackers back across the North Sea and to bring others tumbling down from the sky. People got rather blasé about craning their necks to watch the dog fights overhead, and on clear days to see the whorls and twisting curves of the white vapor trails against the blue of the sky as opposing machines circled, jockeyed for position, and engaged each other. Men of the watch below, stretched out asleep in their clothes after being on the alert on deck all night, grunted and turned over when they heard the roar of aircraft engines and the rattle of machine guns.

It was a strenuous time for everyone. Here, as elsewhere, the escorts were all too few for the work in hand. The time spent in harbor was reduced to a bare minimum. Moreover, navigation was never easy. Lights and buoys were extinguished or removed, and the tides were strong and uncertain. There were outlying shoals and sandbanks, and fog and haze were not infrequent. The chart became more and

more congested with the symbols denoting wrecks dangerous to navigation, while the harbor entrances and coastal channels were constantly being mined by enemy aircraft dropping their cargoes by parachute during the hours of darkness.

Several ships fell victim to this method of attack, and twice in three weeks the *Vexatious* had the job of rescuing survivors from stricken ships. On one occasion she towed a damaged, unmanageable tramp for eight hours in half-a-gale of wind and a roughish sea until salvage tugs came out to take her over.

Yes. The work was full of incident and excitement. New situations and problems arose nearly every day, and one never quite knew what would happen next. It was a supreme test of seamanship and endurance, but comfortless and extremely wearing. Bickerstaff and his officers averaged perhaps one night in bed out of every eight or nine. Men fell asleep over their meals, lay comatose on the messdeck lockers during their watch below.

But the convoys continued to run. Oblivious alike to the dangers of mines and the attacks by enemy aircraft and motor torpedo boats, the processions of little coasters, some of them dating back to the eighteen-nineties, plodded up and down the East Coast and along the English Channel. The men in them were every bit as stout-hearted and brave as those in the deepwater ships plying across the Atlantic in the face of the U-boat campaign.

This particular phase of the *Vexatious'* work, however, lasted just under a month. She was suddenly sent north under secret orders. Not even Bickerstaff knew what was in the

wind until the ship reached her destination and he went ashore to report.

Two days later, with a large troop convoy, they were on their way to—Norway.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM the point of view of the navigator, the mountainous coast of Norway is one of the most dangerous and inhospitable in the world. It presents a multitude of fiords and narrow gulfs, hardly distinguishable one from the other, with the snow-covered hills and glaciers always in the background. For a depth of five or more miles off shore it is thickly fringed with masses of clustered rocks and islets through which the surf boils incessantly. It has fierce tides, strong rips, and whirling eddies. In thick weather the soundings give little indication of the proximity of land, for the hundred-fathom line often runs within a mile of the shore. When the weather is stormy and cloudy, with the landmarks often obscured by snowstorms, or rendered nearly indistinguishable by a uniform covering of snow, navigation is a veritable nightmare.

It was thus on a morning in April when the *Vexatious* was approaching the coast, having been sent on ahead of a convoy of transports and store-carriers bound for Namsos.

The two days' passage across the North Sea had been about as bad as could be imagined. At the outset it had blown a full gale from the northwest with a heavy sea and sheets of blinding rain which shut down the visibility to a mile. The wind started to lull soon after midnight the first night out, but six hours later, just before daylight, the convoy ran into thick fog, which persisted intermittently all through the day and into the night.

By one o'clock the next morning the wind started to freshen from the old quarter and five hours later was again blowing a full gale with heavy rain mingled with driving

snow. It became bitterly cold. The visibility was less than a mile and the convoy was nearing its destination. The position was full of anxiety.

The *Vexatious*, in so many words, was ordered to go ahead and try to make a landfall or locate a certain lighthouse. Thus, at seven o'clock on that wild morning, rolling and lurching in a furiously breaking sea with no other ship in sight, Bickerstaff, the First Lieutenant, and Tony were peering ahead over the bridge rails.

The visibility was still closing down when at about half-past seven a rocky islet with the seas erupting over it and the spray flying to leeward in masses of spindrift was sighted about half a mile away on the starboard bow. It was quite unrecognizable from a hundred others shown on the chart. A moment later more rocks and islands were sighted ahead. They, too, could not be identified, and since no sights of the sun or stars had been possible during the passage across the North Sea, the *Vexatious'* estimated position, with that of the convoy twenty-five miles to seaward, might well be fifteen or twenty miles out.

The situation was unpleasant. The rocks and little islands the *Vexatious* was now skirting at reduced speed must be some of those fringing the mainland, though what part of the mainland it was quite impossible to guess. The lighthouse for which they were looking was a red and white structure on an isolated cluster of rocks five miles off the coast.

"I'm damned if I know!" Bickerstaff muttered to himself.

He was doing some hard thinking. So were Richmond and Tony.

The visibility had shut down to little more than five hundred yards, with the reefs still in sight to starboard, a

regular barrier of them. The weather showed no signs of clearing, and the convoy of between fifteen and twenty merchantmen, not counting the escorts, was approaching the coast at about twelve knots. In little more than two hours those ships and all they contained would be close up to the rocks now in sight.

There was a cruiser present with the convoy, and she or one of the escorts could be informed of the situation by wireless and advised to turn the ships back until the visibility lifted. But the sailing orders had enjoined strict wireless silence except in grave emergency or on sighting the enemy. The reason was sufficiently obvious. Enemy surface forces and submarines were probably at sea. One touch on a wireless key, let alone a message, might bring them hurrying to the scene to see what was in the wind. British covering forces were also at sea, but if the Germans got in among the convoy anything might happen. Moreover, there was always the enemy's aircraft.

Bickerstaff made up his mind. He had nothing whatever to guide him. It was like looking for a needle in the proverbial truss of hay, but hoping and praying that the visibility might improve farther out, he swung the *Vexatious* out to sea and after steaming three miles started to zig-zag over a broad front. The gale still blew furiously, but once clear of the coast the sea became less confused and the motion easier.

For an hour they steamed to and fro at fifteen knots without a glimpse of anything. The convoy, meanwhile, must be within about twelve miles of the land, and was still approaching. The rain had ceased, but there were frequent snow flurries which shut down the view to a few hundred

yards. In the intervals between the squalls one could see a mile, no more. The peculiar, obliterating haze persisted.

Eight-forty-five. Unless the convoy had reduced speed or altered course, its plotted position put it no more than eight or nine miles to the westward. There was little time to spare.

Bickerstaff, munching at a sandwich which served him for breakfast, was examining the chart.

“I don’t like it at all, Number One,” he said between mouthfuls, shaking his head. “We don’t want the convoy blundering head on into stuff like this,” dabbing a gloved finger on places on the chart where the closely clustered dots and crosses indicating rocks and shoals obliterated all else. “Remember the visibility close inshore? It was barely more than a ship’s length at times.”

Richmond agreed.

“Added to which there’s the difficulty of turning the whole bunch in thick weather and passing the orders down the line, sir,” he said. “There’ll be a regular pot-mess, everyone getting the staggers and going off on his own.”

“You’ve said it, Number One.”

“Then what’ll you do, sir?”

“I’ll carry on looking for this blinkin’ lighthouse for ten minutes more. If we don’t sight it by then, and I doubt very much if we shall, I’ll shape course direct for the convoy and suggest to the *Endymion* that we wait till the weather clears. I know it’s urgent to get the troops ashore, and all that, but we *can’t* take the risk of wrecking the whole outfit.”

The First Lieutenant agreed.

“But can we afford to wait ten minutes, sir?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ve worked it out. —Lord! Why the devil should we have weather like this in April?”

“We’re pretty far north, sir.”

“We might be pretty nearly at the North Pole from the snow and perishin’ cold—*Grr!* What a place! Why didn’t they send me to the tropics, for the love o’ Mike? I’m no Arctic—”

“Rocks right ahead, sir!” Tony suddenly howled from his position on the compass platform. “Port twenty, Quartermaster!” he shouted down the voicepipe without waiting for further orders. There was a note of alarm in his voice, as well there might be.

“Port twenty of helm on, sir,” came the comforting voice of the helmsman.

They were passing through the tail end of a snow squall. The visibility was no more than four hundred yards, and there, almost dead ahead, Bickerstaff saw an area of leaping surf with ugly-looking fangs of dark rock showing amidst the yeasty white.

The ship was steaming fifteen knots—four hundred yards in forty-eight seconds.

She suddenly seemed very sluggish on her helm, and from where Bickerstaff stood looking over the bridge rail the patch of surf seemed to extend well across to the port bow. It was coming nearer.

Would she clear, or wouldn’t she?

“Hard a’ port!” he ordered. “Stop both engines! Half astern both!” His heart was in his mouth, though his voice showed none of the emotion he felt.

Tony was frankly alarmed. His mouth went dry. He felt sick inside, desperately sick.

The rocks and surf were perilously close now, barely two hundred yards away. They could see the broad streamers of kelp washing to leeward as the waves surged over them.

But the *Vexatious* had started to turn. Her speed was dropping. What seemed to be the southern edge of the rocky patch was sliding away to starboard.

"Stop both!" Bickerstaff ordered. "Helm amidships, Quartermaster!"

The snow squall was passing. An instant later, beyond the rocky area, they saw the dim shadow of a tall, cylindrical object towering nearly a hundred feet out of the water well clear on the starboard bow. There had been no time for the *Vexatious* to gather sternway. She was still moving slowly ahead, and in a few seconds the shape resolved itself into the tower of a red-painted lighthouse set upon a plinth of dirty white with the sea boiling madly round its base.

"Lord! What a stroke of luck!" Bickerstaff breathed, his heart full of thankfulness. "But a damn narrow squeak for us, all the same. If the weather had been a bit thicker, well...." He shrugged his shoulders.

Within three-quarters of an hour the *Vexatious* was rejoining the convoy to seaward. She had sighted it at a distance of four miles, for the visibility was rapidly improving. Her ten-inch signaling searchlight started to blink.

"*Vexatious* to *Endymion*," it spelled out letter by letter. "Kya Lighthouse bearing 087 distance 8½ miles."

"*Endymion* to *Vexatious*," came the reply. "Thank you. Well done."

2.

Namsos, twenty miles from the sea toward the head of a narrow fiord zig-zagging inland between high, barren-looking hills nearly covered in snow, had railway communication with Grong and Stenkjer and Trondheim to the southward. Hence its use as a disembarkation port for part of the Expeditionary Force. The little wooden-built town, with its jetty and quay, surrounded by thick woods and overhung by the inevitable snow-clad mountains, was typical of many others.

The *Vexatious*, however, was due to escort another convoy home. On that first visit she stayed at Namsos for no longer than a few hours, just time enough to see the first of the troops disembarking. They were in the highest of spirits after their stormy passage across the North Sea. Singing and shouting, they seemed pleased at the idea of coming to grips with the enemy.

Greatly outnumbered, ill-prepared for the onslaught of the German armored troops and motorized columns, too far from home to be provided with fighter aircraft to keep off the enemy's low-flying bombers using their machine guns, harassed by the heavy fire of enemy light naval craft at Stenkjer, where the railway line ran close to the arm of a fiord with communication with the sea, the troops fought with desperate courage and tenacity. They could do little against a determined enemy who had prepared every detail of the campaign months beforehand and was helped by traitorous elements within the country itself.

In something less than three weeks the campaign in southern Norway was at an end, and the Navy was helping in the re-embarkation of troops at Namsos and Andalsnes. For

part of the time the *Vexatious* was at Namsos, a period which no one on board was likely to forget.

The tired troops were marching through the town to embark in small craft and boats alongside the jetty for transport to the ships when the German planes first came over. Every ship in the anchorage opened up with her anti-aircraft guns as they appeared. The sky became dotted with the varicolored smoke puffs of exploding shell, and one aircraft came tumbling down in a black trail of smoke to disappear behind a hill. Then came the eerie whistle of the falling bombs and the thudding crash of their detonation as they struck. Some, falling in the water, raised their ugly waterspouts. Others fell ashore in great bursts of smoke and up-flung debris. No ship was hit on that occasion, though there were several near escapes. On the outskirts of the little wooden town, however, long tongues of bright flame and a gathering volume of smoke drifting down wind told their tale.

There was a short respite, during which the sweating, steel-helmeted crews of the anti-aircraft guns replenished their ammunition, snatched some food and drink, and lit their inevitable cigarettes. They knew, everyone knew who knew anything, what to expect next.

The Germans had occupied all the airdromes in the south. There could be no fighter protection against the enemy bombers. Except for the gunfire from the ships, Namsos was defenseless. Having seen what was going on, the enemy would not spare it. Night might give some protection, but in that high latitude dusk did not come until nine o’clock, with darkness about an hour later. The night would last no longer than four hours, and then the all revealing dawn.

The drone of distant engines sounded over the hills to the southward.

"Here come the sons of witches!" muttered a petty officer on the *Vexatious'* pom-pom platform, searching the sky through his glasses. "Stand by, lads."

Very soon the machines were in sight, a flock of nine midge-like shapes flying in three little V-shaped groups of three each.

It seemed incomprehensible that such delicate, ethereal-looking things could wreak incalculable devastation by killing and wounding hundreds, shattering buildings, sinking ships, and setting towns and cities ablaze. With the sunlight glinting on their wings they looked beautiful, as harmless as dragonflies. Yet—

The drumming of the engines grew louder as they came on at something over ten thousand feet. The first gun went off with a crash. In a moment every other ship joined in. A little sloop became sheeted in flame and clouds of dun-colored cordite smoke as her six four-inch guns fell to work. The noise was deafening as four-inch, three-inch, and two-pounder pom-poms hurled their projectiles skyward.

Once more those pretty, woolly-looking shell bursts of mauve, gray, black, yellow, and white broke out against the clear blue of the heavens. Once again the bombs came down with their eerie whistling....

The raids continued off and on all through the day. Ashore, the little wooden town began to burn furiously with the showers of high explosive and incendiaries. Embarkation had to cease. Inhabitants and troops alike had to take shelter in the woods while Namsos was gradually reduced to a smoking shambles.

The wooden wharf, on which were some tons of ammunition and hand grenades, started to blaze redly. There were explosions, with little gouts of multicolored sparks and flame shooting skyward. There was no water supply ashore to deal with the fire, they all knew that.

But through the clouds of smoke drifting over the water a bedraggled-looking trawler steamed stolidly shoreward. She flew a grimy White Ensign, and was commanded by a lieutenant of the Royal Naval Reserves.

Placing his little ship's bows against the wharf, the commanding officer held her there with the engines. Then, sending all but two of his men aft to the comparative safety of the stern lest a heavier explosion than usual should wreck the ship and kill all those in its immediate vicinity, the Lieutenant and his two men tried to put out the fire with hoses from the trawler's forecastle.

"My God!" breathed Bickerstaff, watching with his heart in his mouth. "That fellow's got the guts of a lion!"

Bickerstaff was undemonstrative and not at all emotional, but his simple remark came from a heart full of admiration. He knew bravery when he saw it. The man commanding that trawler was a hero, nothing less.

For two hours the Lieutenant and his devoted men played their hoses on the fire. But their puny streams of water could do nothing against a blaze that was rapidly gaining ground, and might at any moment cause an explosion which would destroy them. They were forced to give up the task as hopeless. The trawler was seen to back astern, and for the moment vanished from the picture.

It wasn't until afterward that those on board the *Vexatious* heard the full story of that little ship. With their own eyes

they had seen the incident alongside the jetty at Namsos, and had marveled. But there was much more to it than that.

Later it came out how that same ship was bombed six times in twelve hours. Though she was not hit, a near miss damaged her engines. Apparently she could still steam dead slow, and was able to go to the help of other trawlers who were in difficulty. One, which had been bombed, was blazing furiously and had to be beached.

The Lieutenant's own ship was in a bad way, so he placed her close to the shore under a beetling cliff which afforded a certain amount of protection from the air from one direction. Landing his own men with the crews of two other trawlers, he formed a camp ashore, arming it with all the machine guns he possessed. While the engineers did what they could to effect repairs to the ship, the party ashore kept watch day and night. There was some chance of interrupted rest for those off duty, and rest was what they most needed.

In five days the trawler endured thirty-one bombing attacks, while the camp and gun positions ashore were repeatedly and mercilessly machine-gunned. But so well had the camp been sited that only one man was wounded.

The trawler was repaired, and got away. When leaving the fiord she was sighted by an enemy airplane, which came low and signaled to her to steer a certain course. This was tantamount to surrender.

The Lieutenant was not that sort of man.

Obey a German? Surrender while he still had a ship that would float and could steam?

Never. Not he!

Reserving his fire until the plane was close enough to make certain of hitting he opened up with every gun he possessed, and the German was brought crashing down into the sea.

The trawler steamed on.

History does not relate what other adventures that little ship and her gallant men endured before they reached home. The passage across the North Sea in a sorely-damaged ship cannot have been wholly uneventful.

That Lieutenant of the Royal Naval Reserve became the first surviving recipient of the Victoria Cross awarded to the Navy during the Second Great War against Germany.

3.

At what precise time it happened Tony Chenies never troubled to find out. With the almost continual firing and bomb explosions he lost all count of time, but the most terrible and spectacular incident of the day was when the sloop, which had brought one enemy plane flaming and smoking from the sky and had damaged others, was herself hit.

Three planes were overhead at the time. Two remained at about nine thousand feet. The third peeled off from the formation, came down in a screaming dive, and seemed to flatten out at about a thousand feet.

All the guns were firing furiously at the attackers, who continued their advance through the barrage. Black specks could be seen dropping from the belly of the lowest plane. They grew larger and elongated as they came down in a long slant. Their screeching became louder as they fell. It was audible even above the tumult of the gunfire.

Minutes of suspense seemed to pass before those bombs struck the water in a series of towering, whitish-gray splashes. There came the deep *crump-crump* of their detonation.

"My God, they've got her!" someone suddenly said in a strangled voice.

They had. A bomb had landed on board the sloop somewhere near the stern. They could see the flash and smoke of its explosion, followed almost simultaneously by a mighty upheaval of flame and yellow smoke and flying wreckage behind which the whole afterpart of the little ship became hidden. A fraction of a second later a shattering roar broke out across the water. No words could adequately convey the immensity of that sound. It came like the crack of doom, compressing the air and driving the breath from men's bodies. The sea danced and shimmered as though beaten by heavy rain. The *Vexatious* shook herself.

The gunfire presently ceased as the planes turned to the southward and made off, one with black smoke pouring out of her tail. A deathly silence followed.

The stricken sloop, her stern practically level with the water and her afterpart a mass of tangled wreckage, was drifting helplessly on the tide. She was on fire, with the flames and clouds of yellow smoke pouring out of her. Her depth charges had exploded. All the ships near by sent boats to succor the wounded, but many of her comparatively small complement had been killed.

Time and time again the planes attacked. As often, the sloop's gunners manned their foremost guns and fired until all their ammunition was spent. Her stern continued to blaze, and the fire could not be controlled. She drifted ashore, to be

carried off again when the tide rose. Later, when she was carried farther out into the open fiord still on fire she became a danger to navigation. Her survivors were rescued. A destroyer, standing off, fired a torpedo. The devoted little ship rolled slowly over, and sank bottom up in deep water.

She had fought gallantly, and to the end.

In the evening the enemy made further attacks upon Namsos, spraying the town with incendiaries and high explosives, setting it on fire in many more places. The conflagration spread until when the dusk came the whole town was an inferno of leaping red and yellow flame, with the sparks and heavy black smoke rolling skyward. When the night finally came the scene was almost as bright as daylight.

Through this crackling, blazing hell, with occasional dumps of ammunition exploding, the troops were shepherded into the small craft, ships and boats which took them to the transports farther down the fiord. Many of them were wounded. All showed traces of their ordeal. Too tired in some cases even to eat or drink, they slept with their heads pillowed on their haversacks. The naval beach parties, unshaven, begrimed with smoke, and some of them bandaged, were the last to leave. They had done magnificently.

Tony watched some of the exhausted troops coming on board.

“Good old ruddy Navy!” said a dirty, bandaged corporal, carrying his own and someone else’s rifle and an assortment of kit. He sat himself down on deck and in a moment was asleep.

The *Vexatious* left before dawn with her upper deck and living spaces crowded with exhausted men, some of them

survivors from the sloop. Maclean, assisted by Midshipman Morgan, did all he could for the wounded. In the ship's galley Skilton and his assistants were working overtime. So were the officers' cooks in the galley aft. Bluejackets went round with sandwiches and mugs of soup and cocoa. It was one of the occasions when Bickerstaff felt himself justified in authorizing an extra issue of rum, rum, mixed with hot water and brown sugar, a full tot to every man who needed it. Few refused. Someone produced an accordion, someone else a mouth organ.

"Are we downhearted?" a raucous voice shouted.

"No-o-o!" came the answering chorus. —"*Roll out the barrel....*"

"Damn that blasted song!" growled Bickerstaff on the bridge. "I'd like to throttle the man who wrote it. Can't they think of anything else to sing? I'm sick of barrels."

"Shall I send down and have it stopped, sir?" someone asked.

"God forbid!" the Captain replied. "Let 'em sing, poor chaps. It'll cheer 'em up. Lord knows they can do with it."

As the *Vexatious* steamed down the fiord, the rosy glare of blazing Namsos was reflected in the pall of smoke showing over the gaunt silhouette of a great mountain. The color faded as the pale daylight crept slowly out of the east. All that remained against the opalescence of the dawn was a tall pillar of dark smoke rising high above the mountains before drifting horizontally away on some upper air current.

The passengers were safely transferred to a transport. Four hours later the *Vexatious* was at sea steaming westward with a convoy. The mountainous crags of Norway were slowly disappearing over the horizon astern.

Mr. Hebard arrived on the bridge to relieve Tony halfway through the forenoon watch. Nobody had had much sleep for the past forty-eight hours. The regular watches were upset for the time being.

"I've come up to give you a spell, Mister Chenies. It's time you had a drop of shut-eye."

"It's time we all had a drop of shut-eye," Tony answered. "I don't seem to have slept for days."

"How many more shimozzles like yesterday are we going to get?" Mr. Hebard queried. "If it goes on like that we'll have to tow a lighter astern carrying extra A.A. ammunition. I've been trying to reckon out how much we expended."

"Store books again?" laughed Tony, smothering a yawn.

"Someone's got to keep tally, Mister Chenies. There's rules and regulations."

"To hell with your rules and regulations in wartime, Guns! Who cares?"

"I dunno," said Mr. Hebard. "I suppose *someone* looks at the bloomin' store books."

"I wonder," Tony said. "What a depressing occupation."

"All I know is I get rude letters when the figures don't tally, Mr. Chenies. Anyhow, though we don't get much money we *do* see life, and that's a fact."

"You're telling me," said Tony with deep feeling. "If anyone had told me a year ago that I should see what I have I should have called him a damned liar."

"Aye," Mr. Hebard agreed. "And we'll see a lot more before we've put that Hitler where he belongs. That's got to be done before I go back to growing sweet peas, carrots, and tomatoes in the nice little house and garden it took me years

to save up for. I got third prize for cucumbers at the flower show, Mr. Chenies. It would have been first prize by now if it hadn't been for Hitler. Aye, it would indeed. I'm a born gardener."

CHAPTER IX

DUNKIRK was blazing. It had been bombed day and night for weeks. The funereal black pall of its burning oil tanks pouring into the sky and constantly replenished was visible far beyond Dover, where the *Vexatious* was completing with fuel after being sent down from the north "with all possible despatch," as the sailing orders put it.

Every soul on board knew that the situation in France was serious. They had been aware of it from the rare occasions when they had a chance of looking at the newspapers in harbor. They knew it still better from the regular news bulletins broadcast by the B.B.C. which reached them also at sea.

Before passing the North Foreland they had seen that ominous dark cloud in the sky over the French coast, and could hear the occasional rumble of guns from the same direction. It sounded like the throbbing of distant drums, and was not continuous. It might persist for a minute or more and then die away, to revive after a short breathing space.

They noticed there was much more shipping about than was usual for wartime. The anchorages off Ramsgate and in the Downs were well filled. Later, passing by that tall buttress of white cliff between the South Foreland and Dover, many more vessels could be seen at sea, some moving in the direction of France, others proceeding toward Dover and Folkestone. They formed a varied collection—destroyers, minesweepers, trawlers, and drifters, cross-Channel steamers serving as transports, white painted hospital ships, little coasters, tugs, and pleasure paddle steamers, motor vessels,

miscellaneous craft of many kinds, mostly small. Their presence, with the other ships lying in Dover harbor, and the steam and motor-boats passing between them and the shore, showed that something unusual was in progress. So did the signals received on arrival:

"COMPLETE WITH FUEL. DESPATCH IS NECESSARY. KEEP STEAM AT FIVE MINUTES' NOTICE. COMMANDING OFFICER IS TO REPORT AT VICE ADMIRAL'S OFFICE AFTER SECURING. ANY RIG. CAR WILL BE SENT TO ADMIRALTY PIER."

It was followed by another:

"INDICATE IMMEDIATELY EXTRA QUANTITIES OF ANTI-AIRCRAFT AMMUNITION AND CALIBERS THAT CAN BE EMBARKED FOR READY USE. INDICATE QUANTITIES OF PROVISIONS REQUIRED. AMMUNITION AND PROVISIONS TOGETHER WITH EMERGENCY RATIONS WILL BE SENT BEFORE SAILING."

Giving himself time to change into a fairly respectable monkey jacket, to slip out of his sea boots, and to replace his blue jersey with a collar and tie, Bickerstaff got into his motorboat and went ashore. He was still unwashed and unshaven.

The car was waiting at the landing steps.

"Are you Commander Bickerstaff, sir?" the Wren driver asked.

"Yes."

"I'm ordered to take you to the Admiral's office, sir."

She was quietly efficient and uncommunicative. She probably knew what Bickerstaff was longing to know, but he abstained from asking too many questions, particularly when she was driving. He noticed how tired she looked, how serious her expression.

She was a pretty girl, with curly corn-colored hair escaping under the rim of her blue hat with the gold H.M.S. on the ribbon. She was almost young enough to be his daughter—charming, well-spoken, intelligent, intent on her job, "strict Service," as the Navy would put it, with her quiet "Yes, sir," or "No, sir." In point of actual fact she had hardly slept during the last three days.

"Yes, sir," she admitted. "We have been rather rushed lately."

"D'you like it?" Bickerstaff asked, as they turned into a straight bit of road with no traffic.

"Of course, sir. It's my job." And then, as an afterthought, "My father's in the Navy."

"What's the name?" Bickerstaff inquired.

"Hawksworth."

"D'you mean the Vice-Admiral?"

"Yes, sir."

Bickerstaff remembered. Vice-Admiral Hawksworth, who had retired some years before the war, was at sea again as a Commodore of convoys, one of the most strenuous and thankless jobs of the war at sea. His slim, golden-haired daughter, who wished she had been born a boy, would have liked to be at sea also. Instead, she was driving a car with the equivalent rating of ordinary seaman. There were others like her.

The Admiral's Office was buzzing with activity. Officers, orderlies and messengers came and went. Telephone bells rang and people answered. Passing by an open door with a petty officer guiding him Bickerstaff caught a glimpse of a group of officers poring over a chart spread out on a large table, with a tray containing the remains of someone's breakfast pushed to one side. A yeoman of signals stood by with a signal pad. Beyond, a Wren sitting at a piled-up table was entering something in a book. Another, with a pair of earphones clipped over her head, was plotting something on a chart tacked to a matchboard partition.

It was not unlike other rooms in other naval ports, but the whole atmosphere was different. People looked taut and anxious, and seemed to be talking in whispers.

Shown into a crowded room Bickerstaff was introduced to a Commander who obviously hadn't slept properly for days. His face was lined and gray with weariness. There were dark shadows under his eyes, and a thin stubble on his chin. He wore a tattered monkey jacket with the lace all frayed and torn.

There was the usual battery of telephones on a table near by, the usual piles of papers and dockets. Another table carried a litter of charts, with a dark blue volume of the *Channel Pilot*, a copy of the Tide Tables, and parallel rulers and dividers. There was a safe and a tall steel filing cabinet. Two other officers, both Commanders, were at work in other corners of the room. A camp bed along the wall showed where someone occasionally slept.

"So you're *Vexatious*," said Bickerstaff's Commander, waving him to a chair and holding out a packet of cigarettes. "I'm Hartopp, Staff Officer Operations."

“Are you giving me the lowdown?” Bickerstaff inquired.

“Yes. I doubt if you’ll be able to see the Vice-Admiral. He’s up to the eyes in it. —Your ship’s oiling, I take it?”

“Yes.”

“How long will it take, d’you think?”

“We ought to be ready in about an hour from now.”

“Good! You got our signals about extra ammunition, provisions, and so on.”

“Yes. The replies were being made as I left,” said Bickerstaff.

“You’ll need all the A.A. stuff you can stow. It’s being used up on the other side like blazes. But our people’ll see to that. D’you know Dunkirk?”

Bickerstaff said he had been there occasionally during the last war, but only occasionally.

“Apt to be nasty if you don’t know it,” Hartopp returned. “It’s full of banks and shoals, and the tides are the very devil. What about your charts?”

“I’ve got the usual folios.”

A telephone buzzed. The S.O.O. picked up the receiver. He listened, and replied.

“No,” he said. “I can’t talk to anyone now if it’s not urgent. I’m engaged. If he leaves a message I’ll deal with it later and let him know.... Yes, all right.... Exchange.... What about that call through to Dunkirk? I’ve been waiting twenty minutes.... Yes. Hurry it along, please.

“Sorry for these interruptions,” he continued, turning to Bickerstaff. “Now your charts. If you’re not certain about yours being fully up-to-date, ask for a special set on your way

out. Third door down on the left. The people there'll give you the latest route orders and all the dope you want."

If he hadn't done so before, Bickerstaff sensed the atmosphere of urgency. From all this talk about Dunkirk and extra anti-aircraft ammunition he realized that something especially important was brewing on the other side of the Channel. But still he didn't know precisely what it was, except that Dunkirk was on fire.

"What's the situation?" he asked.

"We're withdrawing the B.E.F.," he was told.

"Withdrawing it!"

"Haven't you followed the news?"

"I've been at sea for...."

"Of course," he was interrupted. "I forgot for the moment. The fact is the confounded Hun's crashed through everything with his tanks. The B.E.F.'s fighting a rearguard action and retreating to the sea. They'll be cut off and pushed *into* the sea unless they're taken off. That's where we come in. We're collecting every mortal thing we can, every sort of ship or boat that's available and can cross the Channel to work off the beaches or alongside in Dunkirk. The weather's good enough now, thank God! If it comes on to blow, well ... I'm damned if I know." He shrugged his shoulders.

"How many troops?" Bickerstaff wanted to know.

"Something over a quarter of a million. I can't give you the exact figure, but that's near enough to go on with."

Bickerstaff gasped. A quarter of a million, he thought to himself—250,000 men! How ever many destroyers and other craft would it take to carry that number? Where would the ships come from? In ordinary peacetime conditions the task

would be difficult enough to tackle. In war, with enemy interference ...

But Hartopp was speaking again and might almost have guessed his listener's thoughts. He described how the work must probably be carried out under harassing artillery fire and continual bombing and machine-gunning from the Luftwaffe. The R.A.F. were putting up a magnificent show, but they simply hadn't the aircraft for all the jobs they had to do. They were fighting all out, as hard as they knew, and the odds were fully fifty to one, probably more.

There came a ring on one of the telephones. It was the call to Dunkirk. The S.O.O. spoke for two or three minutes in short, clipped sentences, arranging, it seemed, about temporary repairs to a damaged destroyer. Whatever happened she must carry on. If nothing could be done over that side, they'd have a look at her when next she arrived at Dover. —Yes. He'd see to it.

"Sorry to be so disjointed," he said to Bickerstaff, scribbling a note on a signal pad. "I'm kept pretty busy, as you can see. Where was I?"

"You'd mentioned the R.A.F."

Hartopp went on to say how the Germans were advancing rapidly with the avowed intention of annihilation. They had driven an armored spearhead, so to speak, to the coast south of Cap Grisnez. Boulogne, held by a few battalions, might fall very soon under the pressure of the advancing hordes. Calais was also held for the time being, though the Lord only knew how long the defense could be maintained. Dunkirk was under artillery fire and bombing. The port itself, and a short stretch of open beach to the northeast up toward Ostend, were all that remained for the embarkation. If

Dunkirk could be used, so much the better. It had quays and jetties. If the ships had to lie off the open beaches and use boats for ferrying men off, the job would be slow and difficult. If the wind and sea rose, it might even be impossible. But the situation was changing practically every hour. Bickerstaff must be guided by any orders from the Senior Naval Officer at Dunkirk, those and his own judgment. The Army had *got* to be lifted. That was all there was to it.

"And I wish to God I could come with you!" Hartopp added with a sigh. "Here am I, an old destroyer bird, cooped up with these telephones, and you lucky devils getting all the fun. Well, I think that's the lot. You're clear about the charts?"

"Perfectly."

"Then get away as soon as you can, and let us know about ten minutes before you leave. You're sure there's nothing else you want?"

"Nothing that I can think of."

"Then that's all. But take my tip and don't make more signals than you absolutely need. We're overdone as it is. Act first and argue later. So long, and good luck."

Bickerstaff was outside in the passage before he knew it. It was with rather mixed feelings that he collected his charts and route orders and returned to his ship by the way he had come.

Little more than an hour later the *Vexatious* slipped out to sea through the gap in the breakwater. Her engine room telegraphs jangled as she increased speed, steaming in the direction of that cloud of black smoke which indicated the position of Dunkirk.

Her officers and men knew what was happening. Bickerstaff had called them aft and made them a little speech. Some of the men were already wearing their steel helmets. The gun's crews were furbishing up their weapons. The anti-aircraft and machine guns were ready for instant action. Men with glasses were sweeping the blue sky to the eastward for those speeding black specks which might herald a bombing attack. A flight of British fighters roared overhead and disappeared in the same direction.

The day was without wind, and a sea that was almost oily in its calmness. A large and miscellaneous flotilla was steaming in the same direction as the *Vexatious*. The Channel seemed dotted with ships.

The dark lump of Cap Grisnez, with the lighthouse on its summit, showed over the horizon broad on the starboard bow. To the left of it the buttress of tall white cliff between Wissant and Sangatte glimmered almost like frosted silver in the sunlight. So clear was the weather that looking through glasses one could even see the tall pillar of the Dover Patrol Monument of the last war at Cap Blanc Nez. When that memorial was raised to the seamen of 1914-18 people little thought they would be fighting again in the same area in twenty years.

The sable cloud still hung in the sky in the direction of Dunkirk. Freakish air currents high overhead had wafted the dark pall into the semblance of a titanic black hand severed at the wrist with the index finger pointing downward—pointing at the doomed town and its crowded mass of troops and civilians against which the German hordes were advancing.

Above the rippling sound of the *Vexatious'* passage through the water came the steady throbbing of bombs and

gunfire. It grew louder as she approached.

2.

In the light of after events Tony Chenies never properly remembered the details of that first day.

In the midst of a crowd of other ships, a destroyer or two, trawlers, tankers, tugs, store-carriers, and motor craft, some of them with lifeboats in tow, the *Vexatious* steamed past Calais and Gravelines without incident, and ten miles on to Dunkirk.

Navigation was simple enough in daylight, with the buoys in place and some of the banks showing. But in thick weather, or at night with all the lights on shore or on the buoys extinguished, the area must be a navigator's nightmare. The tide ran like a mill-race, and for fully ten miles seaward the coast was hedged round with a maze of dangerous shoals and banks with narrow channels of tolerably deep water running between them. And where there wasn't shoal water there were minefields and obstructions in profusion to entrap the unwary.

Tony didn't know the coast, but had heard Bickerstaff saying something to the First Lieutenant about the possibility of embarking troops in boats from the nine-mile stretch of sandy beach east of Dunkirk and in the direction of La Panne. The ships, unless they drew very little water, would have to lie between half and three-quarters of a mile out from the gently shelving shore. Looking at the large-scale chart it seemed as though men might have to wade a quarter of a mile or more into the sea before getting wet up to their armpits. Even the lightest boats would ground some distance out, and there would come the usual difficulty of refloating them and

getting them off to the ships when full up with their human cargoes. If it came on to blow at all and the wind kicked up a surf, boatwork would be the very devil, particularly with tired soldiers laden with all their paraphernalia. Quite apart from any bombing or shelling by the Germans, one could see at a glance it would be a difficult sort of business.

On that first trip of hers, however, the *Vexatious* ran into Dunkirk harbor and alongside the tidal basin. Within a few hundred yards of where she lay warehouses and oil tanks were blazing to the heavens and vomiting forth clouds of inky black smoke. The air was full of oily smuts, and the very water covered in places with thick scum. Hardly a minute passed without the whistle and crash of falling bombs, whole clusters of them. Little could be seen of the sky for drifting smoke, but now and again they could hear the rattle of machine guns or rifle fire. Ships had already been sunk in the inner basin. Other wrecks were restricting the already narrow channel between the twin wooden breakwaters giving access to the port.

Bomb after bomb rained down through the pall wreathing and eddying overhead. Time after time Tony heard their shrill crescendo. Once, out of the tail of his eye, he glimpsed a muddy, whitish-gray waterspout leaping out of the harbor within what looked like thirty feet of the ship. The *Vexatious* leaped and rattled to the explosion, the blast of which knocked Tony's steel hat sideways. A cascade of water came tumbling down on deck, drenching many people and covering them with evil-smelling mud blown up from the harbor bottom. Where all the splinters went no one discovered.

Flagg, the ever faithful, was standing beside Tony at the time.

“So they calls this France, Mister Cheenies, sir,” he remarked breathlessly, wiping the slime out of his eyes. “It’s a bit too impolite for the likes o’ me.” His face, or what could be seen of it, was almost the color of a Negro’s.

But there was work to be done, and that quickly. Troops were waiting on the jetty, whence a naval officer in a steel helmet with a revolver belted round his waist was shouting something to Bickerstaff on the bridge and gesticulating with a walking stick. He had difficulty in making himself heard above the uproar.

Ladders were passed down from the shore and the troops started to come on board—exhausted, dirty men in bedraggled battle dress, some limping and helped by their friends, some wounded and wearing bandages, some scorched and blackened by fire—all unshaven, hungry and thirsty.

At least twenty men brought dogs slung over their shoulders, strange animals of no known breeds and of many different colors—would-be Pomeranians and fox terriers, reddish dogs, tight little black dogs all sleek and shiny like top hats, black and white dogs with spindly legs and long bushy tails, to all of which their owners are profoundly attached.

“What’s to be done about these here dogs, sir?” a harassed-looking petty officer asked Richmond.

“Let ’em be, Scroggins,” said the First Lieutenant, who loved all animals.

“But supposin’ some of ’em’s cavalry, sir, and tries bringin’ horses?”

“Horses, elephants, crocodiles, and performing bears are barred,” said Number One without a smile. “We must keep our sense of proportion, Scroggins.”

Number One, Tony, young Stephen, and Mr. Hebard, who were superintending the embarkation and shepherding and packing the troops on deck and below wherever room could be found for them, hadn’t it in their hearts to forbid the canine invasion. It would have been sheer inhumanity to leave dogs behind in the blazing hell of Dunkirk, though what finally became of them, except for one pug-like creature called Joe who was formally adopted by the *Vexatious*, nobody ever discovered. Dogs landed in England were normally impounded by the authorities to undergo six months’ quarantine.

More bombs came crashing down while the troops came on board. One, bursting on the jetty near by, sent its splinters hurtling through the closely packed ranks. There came a call for stretcher bearers, and Maclean, the young doctor, scrambled ashore with his medical bag to give what help he could. There was little he could do beyond giving first aid to some of the living, before, fuming with annoyance, Bickerstaff sent a messenger to tell him to return. Maclean’s job was on board the ship. There was more than enough for him to do there among the wounded.

How long that first embarkation took nobody discovered. If the times were entered in the *Vexatious’* log, they were probably inaccurate. But after what seemed an age, Bickerstaff, having consulted the naval officer on the jetty, ordered the work to cease. The ship was already packed full —messdecks, the living spaces aft, and the whole of the upper deck and forecastle. Another destroyer and some

smaller craft were waiting to come alongside and take her place.

The ladders were hauled ashore and the securing wires cast off. The *Vexatious* yelped thrice on her siren as Bickerstaff, using his engines cautiously, started to back astern. A blanket of smoke drifting across the narrow entrance made it difficult to see.

"Damn!" he muttered to himself, peering aft from the bridge. "She's as cranky and as sluggish as a cow in the family way! Half astern starboard!" he gave the order. "Port fifteen!"

The extra weight of nearly six hundred men certainly made the ship very difficult to handle. She seemed to heel over, and to remain there, whenever the helm was put over. But Tony and the First Lieutenant were lost in admiration at the way the Captain took the *Vexatious* stern-first out of harbor through the long narrow channel between the wooden breakwaters with a sluicing tide running across the entrance.

Tony gasped audibly as they missed an incoming trawler, which should have waited, by a matter of a few feet. Bickerstaff, with his ship still moving astern under difficult control, only avoided a nasty collision by going full speed ahead on one engine at the critical moment. The ships just slithered by each other without touching. Tony could have lobbed an apple on to the trawler's bridge, where stood a purple-faced officer clutching the rails with his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

The Captain had noticed Tony's agitation.

"All right, Sub," he said airily. "Don't get the wind up. You'll have plenty more to worry about before this show's finished. As for that potbellied pirate over there," he added

wrathfully, shaking his fist in the trawler's direction, "I'd gladly have his guts for a necktie, the blundering, fat-faced old blighter!"

Once more "Cookie," his mates, and many willing helpers were busy providing thick sandwiches of bully beef, with hot soup, coffee, cocoa, and tea to the famished soldiers, though on a far larger scale than at Namsos. And the troops, duly grateful, blessed the Navy for its foresight.

On her way back toward Dover, the *Vexatious* was twice attacked by formations of enemy aircraft, though the Germans kept up to about 3,000 feet and no bombs fell nearer than a hundred yards. But it was sufficiently exciting to watch the destroyer's anti-aircraft guns pumping shell into the sky and at least two of the machines driven back to the east and probably damaged.

At the height of the second attack, which was more determined than the first, three British fighters appeared flying in rings round the greatly superior mass of their opponents. The *Vexatious'* guns ceased firing during the dog fight that ensued. One heard the staccato stutter of machine guns as the Spitfires sailed right into the enemy and fell to work. There came a roar of cheering from the closely packed troops on deck as a Heinkel burst into flame and smoke and came hurtling down to the sea like a comet. Another enemy was brought down before the Germans, misliking the entertainment, turned and fled in the direction of France. Against the blue sky in the place where they had been three white flower-like parachutes descended slowly toward the sea.

Dover was reached without further incident, and steaming alongside a jetty the *Vexatious* disembarked her troops. A

defect in the engine room caused by something being shaken off its seating by a bomb exploding unpleasantly close occasioned a few hours' delay before it was put right.

It was half-past two in the morning when she finally slipped out through the entrance in the breakwaters, and turned her bows in the direction of that luminous reddish-gold glare in the sky on the French side of the Channel.

3.

It was about an hour before dawn that the *Vexatious* cautiously threaded her way through the narrow anchorage off Dunkirk. The area seemed to be crowded with shipping without lights.

On shore the fires were still raging in great flickering streamers of orange and scarlet flame. The smoke cloud drifting overhead was incarnadined on its underside as though in the blood-red light of a rising sun. The night, however, had brought little respite to the bombing. Attracted to the spot by the glare, the German aircraft were still busy. One heard the constant thud of heavy explosions and saw the yellowish-white flash of bombs exploding among the thickly clustered buildings.

Bickerstaff had been instructed not to attempt entering Dunkirk, but to anchor some three miles to the eastward and to use his boats for embarking the troops collecting on the beaches. A considerable number of ships were already anchored in the narrow channel off the coast between Malo-les-Bains and La Panne—destroyers, minesweepers, tugs, trawlers, and drifters. Their boats were at work, ferrying off the soldiers in tens, twenties, and thirties at a time.

There was hardly a breath of wind or a ripple on the water, but the work was slow and laborious. Because of the shallow water the ships had to lie half or three-quarters of a mile from the shore. The boats returning were so crowded that speed was impossible. Every round trip from ship to shore and back again laden with men took something over half an hour, though nobody kept count of time.

Choosing a convenient billet the *Vexatious* let go her anchor. The pearly light of the dawn was creeping up over the eastern horizon. The broad stretch of the sands between the water's edge and the dunes was broken by great rectangular blocks of deep shadow, with thinner lines of black stretching down to the sea. The effect was so peculiar that at first those in the *Vexatious* couldn't realize what the dark shadows represented—men in their thousands patiently awaiting their turn to be embarked; hungry, thirsty, weary men, many of them wounded, who had fought and marched and turned to fight again against the oncoming German panzer divisions with the hordes of mechanized infantry behind them. Looking at those waiting multitudes Bickerstaff realized that only a miracle could save even half of them.

The day started to broaden. The boats were turned out and ready for lowering. Within ten minutes, wearing his steel helmet and with a revolver strapped round his waist, Tony Chenies was on his way ashore in the motor boat with two other boats in tow. They took with them numbers of petrol cans filled with water, cases of biscuit and corned beef, provender for soldiers who hadn't eaten a proper meal for days, but a mere drop in the ocean for the huge numbers of famished, thirsty men collected on the beaches and still arriving.

When full daylight came and the enemy realized what was in progress his aircraft appeared overhead. They came first in pairs and in threes, then in droves and swarms—diving down to within a few hundred feet of the beaches to bomb and to machine-gun the waiting multitudes. Time and time again fighters of the Royal Air Force sailed gallantly in to attack vastly superior numbers of opponents, to bring many flaming and spinning down from the sky and to send others into headlong flight. They attacked with magnificent courage, risking everything and achieving a lot. But bravery alone could not make up for lack of numbers. The Royal Air Force had commitments in many other directions. For every enemy aircraft destroyed in the neighborhood of Dunkirk there were hundreds more to fill their places.

On some days the bombing was practically continuous. On others, when the punished Luftwaffe was organizing and hiding its wounds, the sky was sometimes clear of enemy aircraft for hours at a time.

It took over four hours before the *Vexatious*, using her own boats and such others as were available, was laden with as many men as she could accommodate. Throughout the whole of that period, so far as Tony could recollect, aircraft came diving down from overhead. The air was full of the roar of planes, the staccato *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-ta* of their machine guns, the swishing whine of dropping bombs, and the dull *cru-u-m-p* as they burst in the water or along the sandy beaches. The medley of sound increased in a confused crescendo as the anti-aircraft guns of the ships in the anchorage found their targets and pumped a barrage of shell into the sky. At times the gray outlines of the ships were

almost hidden in the reddish-brown clouds of their own cordite smoke punctuated by the quick stabs of orange flame.

The bullets spurted into the dry sand to raise their little clouds of dust. They lashed the water in swathes until its calm surface flashed with silver as though from shoal after shoal of mackerel. The bombs falling ashore seemed to bury themselves before bursting and raising their geysers of brownish-gray. In the sea they flung up fountains of whitish-gray spray which shimmered in the growing sunlight.

Both bullets and bombs were frightening at first. The noise, too, was sometimes shattering to the senses. It seemed to overpower, to stun, and to paralyze. One felt inclined to stop everything, to fling oneself flat and burrow in the sand. Yet, before long, Tony and his boats' crews found themselves ignoring both bombs and bullets. Considering the number of aircraft overhead the damage was insignificant—out of all proportion to the magnitude of the attack.

There was a job of work to be done. That was all that mattered. Recovering from their first feelings of helpless fear, Tony and his men carried on.

Able Seaman Flagg, provided with a bulging haversack which there had never been time to investigate, had insisted upon accompanying his "Mister Cheenies."

"Who the devil sent you here, Flagg?" Tony had demanded wrathfully, seeing his henchman in the boat when she first left the ship. "Who told you off?"

"No one *reely* told me off, Mister Cheenies, sir," the seaman replied, looking at Tony with eyes of doglike devotion. "I volunteered like, and Petty Orficer Scroggins says I wouldn't be wanted for an hour or two."

"Huh!" said Tony. "He did, did he?"

“Well, sir. I know’d *you’d* want me to keep an eye on you.”

“The devil you did!” said Tony. “D’you take me for a baby in arms, Flagg?”

“No, no, sir. I’m your sort o’ flag lootenant, like. You gives the orders, an’ I sees ’em carried out.”

Tony gave way, and Flagg had certainly been useful. Transferring himself to the beach after carefully divesting himself of his sea boots and stockings and rolling his trousers well above his knees, he fussed like an old hen with her chicks over trifles that didn’t matter. But bombs and bullets alike left him completely unmoved. Until ordered to do so by Tony, he didn’t even trouble to lie flat as enemy aircraft came whizzing down from the sky. He argued that he presented a less conspicuous target in a perpendicular position.

He was a real tower of strength when it came to helping the soldiers into the boats.

“Any more for the fleet? One at a time, mates. Take your places in the queue, if you please. Come on lad,” to a tired man nearly up to his waist in water struggling to get into a bobbing whaler. “Give us your blinkin’ musket. Now, put your right foot in me hands. Right. One, two, three, an’ up she goes!”

He treated everyone alike, privates, corporals, sergeants, subalterns—even majors and lieutenant-colonels. Indeed, with most of them wearing battledress, it was not easy to tell them apart.

But Tony did hear the end of an argument with one rather senior officer.

“Are you aware I’m a major, my man?” the officer asked Flagg with some show of indignation.

“Sorry if I offended, sir,” said Flagg, touching a finger to the rim of his steel helmet as he stood nearly up to his waist in water. “But I can’t help who you are, not even if you was Mister Churchill. Orders is orders. If you don’t squeeze up tight an’ sit familiar in the sternsheets of that there boat, there won’t be room for all. With all doo respect, sir, please, kindly get a move on and tuck them blinkin’ legs o’ yours out o’ the way.”

The officer glowered, but obeyed.

“Easy, Flagg. Easy,” Tony chided. “You must be more civil.”

“Civil, Mister Cheenies, sir! How can I be civil if they gets spreadin’ themselves all over the shop an’ then arguin’ the point as to how they sits. Who’s in charge here?”

The beaches and anchorage were under intermittent shell-fire from the direction of the Belgian frontier by the time the *Vexatious* left. But occasional shells added little to the effect of the bombs. What was far more serious was that Calais had fallen to the enemy, and ships approaching Dunkirk and the beaches by the shortest and most usual channel from the west were being heavily and accurately fired upon. The distance to and fro between Dover and Dunkirk by this route was about eighty miles. While an alternative passage of about 110 miles for the double journey was laboriously swept and buoyed through the extensive minefields in the English Channel, ships had to use another route skirting their northern limit. This meant a wide detour. Instead of the original round trip of eighty miles, the distance was lengthened by nearly one hundred miles. This, by increasing the time spent in transit, reduced the number of ships available at any one time for embarking troops from the beaches or from Dunkirk.

Moreover, the sweepers engaged in clearing and buoying the shorter route were constantly and heavily harassed by enemy aircraft all through the hours of daylight.

On her second trip back to Dover with troops, which she disembarked alongside the jetty, the *Vexatious* suffered no more inconvenience than three half-hearted bombing attacks. Her anti-aircraft guns were again in action, but no bombs fell really close, thanks to the Royal Air Force.

The tired troops on the upper deck cheered and cheered again as on one occasion a solitary Spitfire charged straight into the middle of a formation of eleven Germans, shot down one, and sent the rest hurtling off to the eastward.

"Coo lummy!" said a weary, bandaged corporal, gazing up at the sky. "They're running like scalded cats."

They were. Aircraft for aircraft, or man for man, the Royal Air Force more than had the measure of the much-vaunted Luftwaffe.

4.

"Mister Chenies, sir."

Reed, the wardroom steward, was gently shaking Tony by the shoulder.

"Mister Chenies, sir!" louder this time. "Wake up, sir."

Tony didn't stir.

Exhausted, he was asleep in a hard chair at the wardroom table, his head bowed down and pillowed on his folded arms. His arms were on the dirty white tablecloth, which bore the gruesome traces of past and recent meals—stains, cups with their dregs and high-water marks of coffee or cocoa, two empty beer bottles, dirty plates in profusion, bottles of sauce,

half a loaf of bread, and some butter in a saucer, a slab of tinned beef that might have been carved with a hacksaw.

The decencies of life had completely gone by the board. With so much to do, people snatched food how they could, when they could, and were thankful for it. Also, the wardroom had been crowded with officers of the Army—thirty or forty at a time, crammed into every corner they could sit, some half asleep on the deck. They also had been fed. No man had gone away hungry.

The wardroom stores were practically denuded except for tins of sardines, bottles of anchovies, and a few tins of custard powder. Whisky, gin, and cigarettes had given out. Only two bottles of beer remained. Fresh meat and vegetables were exhausted. So were Reed's precious reserves of tinned sausages and soups, his potted meat and tinned salmon. There was practically no fresh bread left, nothing but ship's biscuits. A swarm of locusts might have invaded the *Vexatious*.

But it must never be said that the Royal Navy had allowed its famishing guests to depart hungry or thirsty. Reed, that loyal soul, had seen to that so far as the officers were concerned. However, he was at his wits' end as to how to supply the next consignment of guests that must descend upon him before long. It had been as much as he had been able to do to provide sandwiches of cold bacon for the Captain's belated supper at midnight.

Bickerstaff had wolfed his food on the dark bridge without noticing what he was eating.

"Lord, Reed!" he had said gratefully. "You've saved my life. How are things aft?"

“Terrible, sir,” Reed had answered. “The wardroom’s like Hampstead Heath after a Bank Holiday. Your coffee’s in the thermos, sir. Anything else you’d care for?”

“Nothing except my bunk,” Bickerstaff told him. “And God Almighty knows when I’ll see that again!”

Reed himself had not enjoyed anything more than occasional twenty minute cat-naps in the pantry during the past sixty hours. Nor had anyone in the *Vexatious*. But nobody complained. If they had, they would have been silenced. All hands were on their mettle.

It was long past midnight now. Another dawn was breaking in the east beside and beyond the dark cloud and rufous glare in the sky which showed the position of Dunkirk. The *Vexatious* was steaming toward it, rolling gently to a little sea. The wind had freshened. It augured ill for boatwork off the open, shallow beaches, where the sea might be breaking surf.

Reed, swaying to the gentle movement and listening to the comforting rhythmic chugging of the propellers which told his experienced ear that the ship was traveling at something like twenty knots, stood irresolute at Tony’s elbow in the wardroom. Should he wake him, or should he not?

On the one hand, he felt he would like to let Tony slumber on, to enjoy every precious minute of sleep he could get. The lad, like the rest of them, had had a proper doing during the last few days, and young people always needed more sleep than their elders. On the other hand, in ten minutes or a quarter of an hour the ship would be close up to Dunkirk, and Tony would be required on deck. Mr. Chenies never liked being wakened in a hurry. He preferred the more leisurely method of yawning and stretching himself, with a cup of tea

or cocoa at his elbow. Tea was already brewing over the Primus stove in the pantry outside. Reed, who was well on in the forties and the father of a family, had seen to that. He liked Tony.

Meanwhile the atmosphere in the wardroom was thick with the odors of stale tobacco smoke, food, crowded humanity, damp clothing, and general fugginess. The doctor, bulky with a kapok lifebelt worn under his monkey jacket, lay stretched out asleep on the starboard settee along the ship's side. The opposite settee was occupied by Stephen, the junior Sub-Lieutenant. Midshipman Morgan snored in an armchair with his sea-booted feet on the unlit anthracite stove. Behind it, on the white bulkhead, a note of incongruity was struck by a framed, colored picture of an undraped blonde with blood-red fingernails. Reed, who strongly disapproved of it, understood it had been presented to the mess by Mr. Morgan.

"Mr. Chenies, sir," said Reed again, returning to his attack on Tony's shoulder. "Wake up, sir."

"Ugh!" Tony grunted, raising his head. "Whassa matter now?" He blinked and gazed around him, not realizing for the moment where he was.

He yawned, leaning back to stretch himself. "What's up, Reed?" he asked, catching sight of the steward.

"We're getting close up to the other side, sir. You'll be wanted soon."

"Half-past four," Tony murmured, blinking at the clock on the bulkhead. "How long have I been asleep, Reed? I meant to go to my cabin when I'd had something to eat. Did I eat, Reed?"

Reed smiled in spite of his weariness.

“You did, sir, and you’ve lain doggo for just about an hour. It’s getting on for daylight. We’ll be on the job again presently. Will you have a cup of strong tea, sir?”

“Yes, please. With two spoonfuls of sugar.”

Reed disappeared. Tony rose to his feet, lit a cigarette, and proceeded to wake Midshipman Morgan. Then he roused Stephen and the Doc.

There was considerable protest and grumbling.

“Lazy devils!” said Tony. “The sun’ll be up in another half-hour, and we’ll be on the job again. —Phew! The stench in this confounded mess is enough to suffocate. My mouth tastes as though I’d been sucking brass filings for a week. What about a pick-me-up, Doc?”

Maclean was sitting on the edge of the settee with his head in his hands.

“It’s poison you want, Tony, not a pick-me-up,” he said wearily. “You’re too damnably robust and cheerful for this ghastly hour of the morning. I feel about all in.”

“Huh!” Tony retorted. “You’re not the only one. What about the skipper and Number One? What about the whole ship’s company? D’you think we’re not tired?”

“Suffering Susan!” retorted the doctor. “I’m not complaining. I merely observed it was time you were put into a lethal chamber, Tony. You’re too ruddy cheerful.”

“Cheerful be sugared! I’m feeling like a bit of chewed string. But we’re all in on this racket. We’ll have to carry on until we damn well drop. Tell me, Doctor dear, how long can a bloke really go on for without sleep?”

Maclean snorted.

“It depends on the bloke,” he answered. “You’re soft and well nurtured....”

“Soft be blistered!” Tony hurled back. “For two pins I’d....”

It was at that moment that Reed banged down the trap-hatch for the pantry, to pass out a huge metal teapot which he put on the sideboard. It was followed by cups, a bowl of brown sugar, a tin of condensed milk, and a plate of ship’s biscuits.

Tony proceeded to pour. The four helped themselves.

“Hear that?” Tony asked, listening as the rhythm of the propellers slowed down.

“Hear what?” demanded Maclean.

“We’ve eased down,” Tony said. “That means we’re passing over the banks. We’ll be on the job again inside twenty minutes. Be on the top line, chaps.”

He stirred the tea in his cup and proceeded to swallow it in noisy gulps. Three minutes later he was making his way forward along the upper deck.

5.

The day that followed was one of the worst they had experienced. The rising wind had raised surf on the beaches to add to the other difficulties. Boat after boat was damaged. Others were capsized, swamped, or washed bodily ashore. Always it was difficult to embark tired, burdened soldiers unfamiliar with boats into small craft bumping perilously among the breakers.

To add to everything else, the artillery fire, with the bombing and machine-gunning from the air, was accentuated.

Many men were killed or wounded on the beaches.

So for one reason and another the work of embarkation from the shore was greatly slowed up and impeded. Few of the men forming the boats' crews had enjoyed proper rest for days. Working to keep their craft serviceable and afloat soon reduced them to a state of physical exhaustion. Apart from getting the troops into the boats and ferrying them off to the ships in the anchorage under fire, food and water had also to be landed for those that remained ashore.

More boats were constantly arriving to join the veritable armada of small craft used off the beaches. They came from all round the coast of England from Yarmouth to Portland Bill, many of them manned by amateur seamen or civilian volunteers. They included privately owned motor craft, pleasure boats from beaches, strings of ships' lifeboats in tow of tugs, lifeboats of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, with Dutch and French coasters and fishing boats. Pleasure paddle-steamers of the sort that took peacetime excursionists from London to Southend and Margate came also. Officers and men of the Merchant Navy lent a willing hand. The boats came in their scores, many to be sunk or damaged by bombs or gunfire, others to be cast up and broken on the beaches. Their crews, or those of them that were unwounded, manned other boats—and carried on. Their courage was magnificent.

On one occasion a large concourse of fishing drifters, motor-boats, lifeboats, and other craft in convoy was approaching the channel leading to Dunkirk when a horde of German bombers came over. Two destroyers fully laden with troops on their way to England were in the vicinity, and it was thought they would be attacked. The Nazis, however, ran true to type. Avoiding the destroyers with their anti-aircraft

guns, they dived down on the defenseless small craft and literally smothered them with heavy bombs and bullets from their machine guns. When the smoke and spray of the attack cleared away only one or two of the small craft had been badly hit, though the convoy had become disorganized and scattered. One of the convoy leaders signaled to a destroyer, “Is it all right to carry on to Dunkirk now?” On receiving a reply in the affirmative the leader wheeled round at once and made for the harbor, his faithful flock turning after him and resuming their original course.

The ships in the anchorage were still being bombed at intervals, and their anti-aircraft guns were continually in action. Bickerstaff, on his bridge, was fretting with impatience. He could see the breaking surf on the beach, the concourse of boats plunging up and down, and the troops endeavoring to embark. He could realize something of their difficulties, and prayed to heaven that his own boats and crews would somehow emerge from the tangle.

But surf never looks so heavy from the sea as it does from the shore, and not even Bickerstaff fully understood what the beach parties were really up against. When Tony returned to the ship with the first boatloads of troops after nearly two hours, the Captain, tired out, was inclined to be rather terse and to cavil at the delay. Tony had to explain. The conditions on the beaches, if not impossible, were very nearly so until the surf subsided.

“All right, Chenies,” the skipper said. “I know you and your chaps are doing your damnedest. What about relieving you for a bit?”

“I’d much rather not, sir. We’d sooner carry on. We’re getting used to it.”

Bickerstaff smiled. He liked that sort of spirit.

"I don't know who I could send anyway," he said. "I want Number One on board to take over in case I'm knocked out."

"I hope not, sir," Tony put in. He had noticed various telltale gashes in the *Vexatious'* funnels and side, the results of a bomb bursting fairly close on impact with the water. Two men had already been wounded.

"I can't spare Stephen or the Gunner," Bickerstaff continued. "They've enough to do with the fire control. But we might relieve some of your men."

"They'll be as sick as mud if you do that, sir."

The Captain nodded.

"All right, Chenies. You know best. Get away again as soon as you can, and good luck to you."

So Tony and his party, refreshed with hurried coffee and sandwiches, went back to the beach in their boats and carried on.

The surf continued. So did the shelling, the bombing, and machine-gunning. Many times the R.A.F. fighters brought enemy bombers hurtling from the sky in trails of flame and smoke. But even the R.A.F. couldn't be in all places at once with the huge numerical superiority against which it was fighting.

Tony Chenies and his boats' crews could only see what went on in their immediate vicinity, where it was obvious to all concerned that the withdrawal of the troops was not going too well. That was not due to any human shortcomings but to the state of the weather and the many difficulties involved in working in small boats on open beaches.

But nobody on the spot realized the full gravity of the situation. The enemy had started to lay mines from aircraft during the night. Various ships had already been sunk or badly damaged by bombs or in collision. Wrecks were already starting to congest the inner harbor at Dunkirk. During the night, too, two destroyers laden with troops had been torpedoed and sunk by enemy motor torpedo boats or submarines while on their way back to England. The loss of life had been grievous.

Only the Vice-Admiral in command at Dover, and the devoted band who worked tirelessly with him throughout those anxious days and nights, had their fingers fully on the pulse of one of the most complicated and dangerous operations the Navy had ever undertaken. With his charts spread out before him, and the minute-to-minute reports coming in by radio and telephone, the Vice-Admiral had a bird's eye view of the whole complex picture as it was drawn.

There were times, no doubt, when he felt the urge to be in the midst of the fighting on the other side of the Channel, like an Admiral on the bridge of his flagship in action. Wisely, however, he resisted the inclination. The conditions were constantly changing. He was dealing with the movements of scores of ships and hundreds of boats. Had he left the nerve center of the operation and cut himself adrift from his communications even for an hour, the result might have been chaos.

His was the responsibility of sorting out the tangle, and of making the rapid decisions that spelled success or failure.

The Eastern Jetty at Dunkirk was primarily designed to break the sea in the entrance to the harbor during heavy weather. It was a lattice-work wooden structure about three-quarters of a mile long jutting out into the sea with a narrow wooden pathway along the top. It was neither designed nor built for berthing ships. Yet it was here, when the embarkation from the surf-frilled beaches became too slow and too difficult, that troopships and destroyers went alongside. It was here, in the afternoon, that the *Vexatious* was ordered to go.

Tony never forgot the sight as she lay off awaiting her turn. In the background the pall of dense black smoke still drifted across the sky in a sable curtain, with occasional eddies wafting across the entrance of the inner harbor. Ships could be seen alongside the Eastern Jetty, the narrow gangway of which was crowded with slowly advancing troops. The area was under heavy shell-fire, while the enemy aircraft continued to circle and to dive down from overhead. The crackle of machine guns and rifles mingled with the roar of planes and the crash of bombs and gunfire.

Whenever the smoke drifted clear and gave her gunners a clear view overhead, the *Vexatious'* anti-aircraft guns were in action. So heavy and continuous had been the firing throughout the day that Mr. Hebard was becoming anxious about his ammunition. The supply was running very low.

Looking shoreward, it was difficult to make out details because of the smoke, but time and time again Tony saw the telltale splashes and gouts of grayish smoke raised by bombs or shells bursting in the water. Many times, with a catch at his heart, he noticed reddish flashes and showers of up-flung debris as the pier, or the ships alongside it, were hit. Farther

away, inside the harbor entrance, at least two ships, one of which looked like a destroyer, were ablaze and apparently sinking. However, it was impossible to see for certain.

It was into that witches' caldron of fire, when some other ship backed out and made room for her, that the *Vexatious* must presently advance. To Tony, standing there on the bridge, the prospect was unpleasant. Though not directly hit, the ship had again been riddled with the splinters of bombs falling close. Down in the engine room, Mr. Walton and his men were struggling to repair a bad leak, which really required the services of a dockyard. He had not reported it to the Captain, for Bickerstaff, he knew, had more than enough to think about. So trusting to providence and his own ingenuity, Walton carried on and hoped he could "make do" for the time being. He was a marvel at improvisation. It was not for nothing that his messmates called him "Our Little Jewel."

Bickerstaff himself was an inspiration. Whatever he felt in his heart, he handled his ship with his usual imperturbability while waiting to take her alongside what looked like the brink of the nethermost pit. He was even smoking his pipe. Beneath his steel helmet his tanned face was grimed and covered with a frost of grayish stubble. His tired eyes were red-rimmed with weariness. Tony couldn't remember when the Commander had last slept. He must be nearly dropping from sheer exhaustion. Yet he carried on as though his ship were miles away from any enemy—a fine example to his officers and men.

At last a destroyer appeared stern-first out of the smoke with her decks packed with troops. Her siren yelped thrice as she backed into open water preparatory to turning and

making for home. A figure on her bridge waved a hand at the *Vexatious* as she slid past within a hundred feet. Bickerstaff, using his glasses, thought he recognized a friend.

"Tiny, you old stiff!" he roared. "How goes it?"

"Who's that calling me names?" came back.

"Bicky!" was the reply.

"Bicky! —What the blazes are you doing here?"

"Mucking around, old boy, the same as you. What's it like inside?"

"A bit bloody at times; though not so bad as it might be!" floated over the water. "They've knocked seven bells out of my foremost funnel and wasted gallons of rum, blast 'em!"

"Rum?" howled Bickerstaff, mystified.

"Yes. A crop of bomb splinters through my spirit room. Over a month's supply gone west, the clumsy bustards! Good luck, Bicky," as the ships rapidly passed out of earshot, "see you later. We'll have a...."

The rest was inaudible.

Bickerstaff had no idea that his friend "Tiny" Pym was even in command of a destroyer. The last time they had met had been at a Navy Club dinner in London some months before the war, when both had been wearing the tail coats, the white ties, and waistcoats that were ordained for such occasions.

Bickerstaff wondered when he would wear a boiled shirt again. As for his tail coat, his wife would have seen to it that it was safely wrapped in brown paper, with plenty of moth balls. How he hated the clinging stench of them!

A signalman on the *Vexatious'* bridge read out a message flashed from the temporary signal station at the end of the

pier.

"Come—alongside—ahead—of—second—transport—inside—lighthouse."

"All right. Here goes," said Bickerstaff, putting his lips to the voice pipe leading to the wheelhouse. "Slow ahead together. Port twenty. —Number One," he added, "and you, Chenies. Have everything ready for going alongside, and plenty of fenders. Let's make an evolution of getting these chaps on board."

The guns were still firing spasmodically whenever enemy aircraft offered satisfactory targets. Even as Richmond and Tony turned to leave the bridge there came that fiendish whistling in the air followed by the usual thumping crashes as three bombs fell ahead of the ship. The *Vexatious* shuddered to the explosions. A waterspout, leaping out of the water perhaps thirty feet off her port bow, curled over in the breeze and drenched practically every man on the forecastle. No splinters came near the ship on this occasion.

Taking his ship close past the two outer transports, Bickerstaff took her alongside the narrow wooden jetty, the top of which was jammed tight with troops awaiting their turn to embark. Many were wounded. Unshaven and grimy, they all showed traces of their prolonged ordeal. But their bearing and demeanor were beyond all praise. They were being heavily shelled and bombed. Fresh casualties were occurring almost every minute. Yet there was no confusion, no pushing or shouting, no scramble to be the first away. Stolid, patient, and full of pluck they awaited salvation or death.

This was no defeated Army, but an Army which had fought until it could fight no more and had been overwhelmed by the

sheer weight of numbers and mechanization.

In the midst of that crashing turmoil of battle Bickerstaff, his pipe in his mouth and his "battle bowler" on his head, leaned over the rail of his bridge watching the weary troops coming on board. Some came by way of the improvised gangplanks between the jetty and the *Vexatious'* high forecastle. Others crawled down the ladders farther aft leading to the lower upper deck. Bickerstaff was tired enough himself, weary almost to the limit of his physical endurance. So were his officers and men. But these soldiers, who had fought and fought so well, were more exhausted still.

"God!" he breathed, lost in admiration. "They're magnificent, wonderful!"

And so they were—the young troops from every part of Britain, with some middle-aged veterans of 1914-18. They were no less admirable than the hundreds of civilians from every profession and walk of life who had flocked to the work of rescue in their boats and pleasure craft, the merchant seamen, fishermen, lifeboatmen, and longshoremen, the many others serving in the Navy who would still have been civilians but for the war.

It was a spectacle that would have gladdened the heart of Britain, if Britain could have seen the behavior of her sons.

Once more, people lost all count of time while the troops, unused to the way of a ship, stumbled and scrambled on board. Nobody could say to twenty minutes when the embarkation started, or when the *Vexatious* finally cast off and went stern-first away from the pier with some hundreds of troops on board and a fresh crop of splinter holes through her forecastle and bridge structure. There had been many

narrow escapes, both from bombs and exploding shells. Nobody troubled to count them.

The ship was dive-bombed as she drew clear of the smoke round the pierhead, alongside of which a transport was on fire and apparently sinking. She was dive-bombed again by three enemy planes as she turned short under her propellers and headed for open water. Down below in the engine room Mr. Walton and his men hadn't fully succeeded in stopping the leaks, though by some merciful dispensation of providence the ship had suffered no further disabling damage, and no casualties beyond two seamen very slightly wounded, and proud of it.

On the run across the Channel to Dover they were attacked another five times, again without result. That was almost entirely due to the gallant young fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force, who were going bald-headed for any enemy they saw even if outnumbered by thirty or forty to one. It was stirring to watch those friendly planes, to realize the cold-blooded heroism and self-sacrifice of their pilots.

The Channel was crowded with a stream of shipping—some vessels moving in the direction of Dunkirk, others, like the *Vexatious*, returning. There were ships large and small, every sort of ship, many varieties of boats and motor craft. The Luftwaffe had an infinite number of targets for their bombs and machine guns.

Yet only once during the passage those in the *Vexatious* saw a ship actually hit, when a trawler, two miles away, suddenly became enveloped in an upheaval of smoke and spray. It cleared away, to show the little vessel on fire with her stern cocked in the air. She was sinking fast. Men could be seen taking to the water. A minesweeper, another trawler,

and some smaller craft hurried to her assistance. Bickerstaff also would have gone if he had had room for more men. But he hadn't. The *Vexatious'* upper deck, and all the available spaces below, were crowded with as many as they could hold. In places, too tired even to move when anti-aircraft guns came into action, soldiers lay asleep with their heads pillowed on each other's laps.

Very little A.A. ammunition remained when the *Vexatious* slid in through the opening in the breakwater at Dover. She must replenish to full capacity before going to sea again. Moreover, as Mr. Walton reported to the captain just before arrival, those leaks in the engine room must be properly seen to by the dockyard.

"Why didn't you let me know before?" Bickerstaff demanded.

"I hardly liked to bother you, sir," the Commissioned Engineer explained. "I reckoned we'd make do as far as Dover. But it isn't worth risking another trip and running the chance of stopping dead in mid-ocean."

"How've you kept her going all this time?"

Walton, wearing dirty brown overalls, shrugged his shoulders. He personally had been in the engine room for over twelve hours, where every bomb or shell bursting anywhere within a hundred yards had sounded like the muffled clang of a titanic hammer striking the ship's side. A hundred times she had shaken and quivered to the shock of the explosions, so that they could have sworn that her end was come.

"It was a bit of a job, sir," the Engineer replied. "We had to keep going all the time. We might have been done in

otherwise, with all these chaps on board." He went on to explain the technicalities.

"Good for you, Chief," Bickerstaff nodded. "I'll make the necessary signal when we arrive."

Dusk had already fallen by the time they had landed all their troops at the jetty at Dover, and had gone alongside a depot ship in another part of the harbor for the damage in the engine room to be made good for the time being.

Bickerstaff retired to his sea cabin and flopped onto his bunk without removing his clothes, to be asleep in a few minutes. Some others slumbered also, though many were busy drawing ammunition, provisions, and stores.

It was past one o'clock in the morning before the *Vexatious* was once more on her way across the Channel.

7.

The breeze had died away. It was a golden summer's morning, a morning that promised great heat at midday. High up in the blue, larks were singing above the cliffs round Dover. In the Channel there was hardly a ripple on the water, a flat, oily calmness that seemed to offer ideal conditions for embarking troops, even from open beaches.

But with daylight the enemy aircraft attacks had become intensified. All the available strength of the Luftwaffe had been concentrated to frustrate the withdrawal, to convert a retreat into annihilation. Relay after relay of Germans came in to attack—plastering the whole of the Dunkirk area with bombs, flying low over jetties, beaches, and ships, machine-gunning as they went.

As the day wore on, British fighters, with the heavy anti-aircraft fire poured in by the ships and such guns as there were on shore, brought many of the attackers flaring and smoking down from the sky. But more got through. For every one shot down at least a hundred more blackened the sky, to come screaming down from the heavens. There was no alleviation from the thudding of bombs, the crash of gunfire, and the incessant crackling of machine guns.

The situation looked black indeed. The Eastern Jetty at Dunkirk provided the most rapid means of getting the troops away. But the jetty itself had been damaged and there had been many casualties. Worse still, ship after ship had been sunk, set on fire, or had limped badly damaged home to England for repair. Many boats, too, had been destroyed. The supply of ships and boats was not inexhaustible.

What it came to now was that the withdrawal of troops could not be continued from the jetty during daylight without running the risk of complete failure. It must be postponed until dark. The tired troops crowded there had to be ordered back to the beaches to take what cover they could among the sand dunes.

Soon after five o'clock in the afternoon, having stopped to pick up the crew of a trawler which had been bombed and sunk in mid-Channel, the *Vexatious*, steaming a full twenty knots, was again approaching the French coast. The rumble of gunfire still came from the direction of Dunkirk and the thick smoke cloud lingered in the sky, but for the moment all was quiet in the vicinity of the ship. Tony had seized the opportunity to pay a hurried visit to the wardroom to eat some very stale bread and jam sandwiches and to drink a cup of stewed, lukewarm tea.

“Let me make you some more, Mister Chenies,” said the wardroom steward, his head framed in the trap-hatch. “That stuff’s been on the table for over an hour.”

“No time, Reed,” Tony told him, standing there with the cup in one hand and a bitten sandwich in the other. “I must get back to the bridge.”

“I can have it ready in a few minutes, sir,” Reed remonstrated. “You’ve had no proper meal today.”

“No time now, Reed,” said Tony, masticating. “We’re damn nearly over the other side.”

“What about some sandwiches, sir? I’ve managed some cheese, and have a tin or two o’ tongue stowed away. S’pose I make you up a packet and send ’em forrard? They might come in handy when you’ve a spare moment.”

Tony, bearded, unwashed, and wearier than he had ever been in the whole of his life, grinned his satisfaction. He had reached the state when if he had sat, even for a minute, he would have fallen fast asleep.

“Reed,” he replied. “You’re full of bright ideas. Bless you for the sandwiches, and don’t forget the mustard with the tongue. Wrap ’em up in paper.”

“Very good, Mister Chenies. I’ll see to it.”

Tony was not below more than five minutes. His haste may have saved his life. Climbing up the steep ladder from the wardroom lobby he passed through the after superstructure, and had just gone out through the door leading to the upper deck and stepped a few paces when he felt a mighty, thudding concussion from somewhere far below the waterline. Simultaneously, the whole stern portion of the ship whipped up like a released spring, flinging him into the air so that he

fell heavily back to the steel deck sprawling and half-sitting. The shock was sufficient to knock the breath out of his body and left him dazed and nearly stunned.

Half-lying, hurt and gasping from the heavy impact, he could still see and understand. Time seemed leaden-footed. He noticed a wall of whitish-blue water tinged with gray smoke and shot through with shafts of brilliant sunlight bursting into the air alongside the ship abaft the after funnel. Hanging there, it shut out all view of the forepart of the ship. Thinning slightly, the upheaval suddenly became suffused by a brilliant arch of prismatic coloring like an unnaturally bright rainbow. How long it lasted Tony couldn't know, for the next instant a deluge of solid water descended upon him from above. It drenched him to the skin. At the same time, the ship, still moving ahead, lurched bodily over to port, throwing him hard up against some solid deck fitting with a spasm of sickening pain in his side.

The splash, if it could be called by so puny a name, would naturally fall aft because the *Vexatious* had been steaming fast. The water went draining away to port in a miniature cascade. Clinging on as best he could, Tony realized the deck had tilted over to an almost incredible angle. Looking to port, he could see the sea almost level with the edge of the upper deck. It was as though he lay spread-eagled on a steeply sloping roof.

Panting for breath, gritting his teeth with pain, he tried to rise. It hurt evilly. But he very soon realized that standing was impossible without falling. So crawling, dragging himself from handhold to handhold, he managed to reach the starboard berthing rails, where he held on.

The speed of the ship was diminishing. Tall plumes of high-pressure steam were escaping from the engine or boiler rooms with a whistling roar that made all else inaudible. A dense white cloud hung over the funnels. Right forward on the upper deck Tony could see the dark figures of men coming out from under the forecastle.

This whole stunning series of incidents had taken place in a few seconds. To Tony, it had seemed more like minutes.

It suddenly flashed through his mind that the ship was finished—sinking. Yes. Her bows had lifted. The port side of her stern, although he couldn't see it, must already be deep in the water. She might be about to capsize.

Then what of Reed, whom he had last seen in the wardroom pantry about to cut sandwiches?

What of the Doc, Stephen, Mr. Hebard, and Morgan, none of whom, so far as he knew, had been in the forepart of the ship when he left the bridge?

Walton, the Commissioned Engineer, had been sitting in his usual billet behind his shelter at the top of the engine-room hatch, for Tony had passed the time of day with him as he came aft. He felt quite sick at the thought of what might have happened to the Chief. The little man was sitting right over the spot where the explosion occurred, amidst all that escaping steam—God!

And the officers' stewards and cooks had their own small mess abaft the wardroom. They rarely used it except for sleeping and at this time of the afternoon were probably forward under the break of the forecastle smoking with the rest of the men off watch. Still, one never knew.

But Maclean and some of the others might be in the cabin flat before the wardroom. The Doc and Morgan, who had no

regular cabins and usually slept in the wardroom, were honorary members of any cabin that was vacant for the time being. Reed was certainly in the pantry.

Meanwhile, the after part of the ship must already be flooding. Judging from the effects of the explosion on him on deck—it could only have been a mine under the bottom of the ship—those chaps down below might well be stunned and knocked out. If the ship sank by the stern or capsized as she seemed likely to do, they must inevitably be drowned.

It all passed through his mind very clearly, much too clearly to be pleasant. Reed, being in the wardroom pantry, was in the most dangerous position of all, or so it seemed to Tony.

The roar of the escaping steam was gradually becoming less. Its volume was decreasing. In its stead, however, Tony saw flickers of orange flame and whorls of black smoke which meant that oil fuel was on fire. The blaze increased as he watched it.

The ship now lay nearly motionless, still heeling bodily over to port. The water was becoming strained with the filthy black scum of escaping oil fuel. And as Tony lay there, cursing the pain which reduced him to a state of helplessness, he felt the *Vexatious* shudder. Then came a distinct shock from somewhere below. It might mean the collapse of a bulkhead and the flooding of another compartment. Whatever the cause, the old ship suddenly flung herself over to starboard with an abrupt swing which brought the water lapping up the ship's side close to the edge of the deck where he clung to the berthing rails. She rolled sluggishly back to port again, more slowly this time—remained steady with a slight list to port.

Yes. The stern was several feet deeper than usual. Sitting up, Tony could see the water close to the extreme end of the quarter deck. The depth charges there were set to “safe.” He had heard the orders given just before he left the bridge. It was a matter of routine whenever the ship was in very shallow water. That was one thing off his mind, at any rate. The depth charges couldn’t explode.

How deep was the water, he wondered. Three fathoms, five, ten?

The ship was close up to the shoals off Dunkirk. There might be no more than a few feet under her bottom, which meant that if she sank a large part of her would still remain above the surface. There was slight consolation in that, somehow. It wasn’t like sinking in really deep water.

But six feet of water or six hundred made little difference when the ship sank if Reed and any others who happened to be below had been knocked out. They’d be drowned. They *must* be stunned. If not, why hadn’t they come on deck?

“God!” Tony muttered to himself. “I *must* do something!”

Praying for strength he dragged himself to his feet, staggered to the door of the superstructure, passed slowly through it and toward the wardroom hatch. The effort hurt him cruelly. His arms and legs were uninjured, but he felt bruised all over, with an agonizing pain in his side as though some of his ribs were broken.

All the electric lights had gone out. Peering down the hatch, he couldn’t see if there was water in the wardroom lobby. Sitting down on the hatch coaming he felt for the ladder with his feet, found it, and started gingerly to lower himself. After what seemed minutes he found himself on the deck below. So far, there was no water there. Since the

deadlights over the scuttles were always kept closed, the lobby was almost as black as night. Tony carried no torch, so groped his way toward the pantry door and entered. All was quiet below except for the gentle lapping of water outside the ship and the subdued rumble of escaping steam.

He stumbled over a body almost at once. Reed was lying on the deck.

"Reed!" Tony said, bending down to shake him by the shoulder. "Reed! Pull yourself together, man!"

The steward groaned, muttering something that Tony couldn't catch.

"Reed! For God's sake—"

At that same instant Tony heard the whistling screech of a diving airplane. It grew louder—louder.

"God!" he murmured, realizing what it meant.

The steel of the ship transmitted the sounds outside almost like a telephone.

The plane came closer, its noise shriller and more penetrating—then the frenzied chattering of machine guns followed by the familiar reports of the *Vexatious'* pom-poms. The ship vibrated to the discharges.

"Reed!" Tony shouted, dragging at the steward's body. "Reed!"

He could hear no reply, so took the man by the shoulders and started to tug him backward toward the door. He was no lightweight. The effort cost Tony severe pain, but he forgot that.

The noise of firing continued, mingled with the roar of planes. There were several aircraft now, and very close. The thump of a heavy explosion in the water near by caused the

Vexatious to shudder. A second bomb detonated in the sea, followed within a short breath by a resounding crash and the clang of disintegrating metal.

The ship had been hit, and badly from the feel of it. She vibrated convulsively, reeled as though struck by a heavy sea, listed farther over to port. The pom-poms suddenly became silent, though the sound of aircraft and the crackle of machine guns persisted. A high-toned, increasing screeching terminated in the noise of a heavy splash.

It all happened in a few seconds.

Tony, redoubling his efforts, had managed to drag the still unconscious Reed over the sill of the pantry door and toward the foot of the ladder leading up into the superstructure. Heaven only knew how he could get the man on deck. Negotiating that steep ascent and the small hatch above with so awkward and heavy a burden wouldn't have been easy at any time, but now that Tony himself was injured it seemed impossible. Meanwhile the ship was heeling more and more over to port. She seemed about to capsize.

"Reed!" Tony yelled, desperate with anxiety. "Reed! Wake up, man!"

He shook the steward with all his strength, hurting himself in the process. There was no reply, no movement that he could feel, though the man still seemed to be breathing. If only there had been light to see, it would have been better.

The planes seemed farther away now. The machine-gunning had ceased. He could hear the splash and gurgle of water alongside.

Tony, bending down, tried to hoist the limp body on to his shoulder. A spasm of agonizing pain warned him that it was more than he could do unaided.

“Hell!” he muttered.

Trusting to luck that the ship wouldn’t roll over, he must crawl on deck again and find someone else to help him. There was no alternative.

He had actually started up the ladder when he heard the heavy tread of sea-booted feet on the deck overhead.

“Anyone down below there?” a voice roared—a well-known voice, the voice of Able Seaman Flagg. He was shouting down the foremost hatch leading to the cabin flat.

“Flagg!” Tony hailed him. “Come aft here! Wardroom lobby!”

Flagg came, breathing heavily, muttering away to himself.

“Gawd Ormighty, Mister Cheenies, sir! I knew you was somewheres aft. I sees you leavin’ the bridge. Come on up, sir. It’s abandon ship. She’s finished, the poor ole—”

“Come down, Flagg,” Tony broke in. “Reed’s knocked out. I can’t shift him. I’ve had a bit of a crack myself.”

“My sufferin’ oath!” the A.B. exclaimed. “No sooner d’you get out o’ me sight than somethin’ happens. Blast them bleedin’ Jerries! —All right. I’m comin’, sir.” He put a heavy foot in Tony’s face as he started to come backward down the ladder.

“Mind my head!” Tony hissed, lowering himself hurriedly. “Go easy, you elephant! Reed’s at the foot of the ladder. Watch where you tread.”

“Sorry, sir. It’s all dark, an’ I’m no blinkin’ screech-owl. Are *you* all right, Mister Cheenies, sir?”

“I can manage,” Tony replied, as Flagg landed on the deck beside him. “Get hold of Reed and yank him on deck.”

“You first, sir.”

“Get hold of Reed and don’t argue!” Tony insisted, as the ship shuddered again and lurched a little more to port.

Flagg started to obey with much heavy breathing.

“Haven’t I told you a million times always to carry a torch day and night?” he grunted. “It’s that dark I can’t tell his bow from his stern. Ah, that’s got ’im. Up she goes. Stand clear, sir.”

The seaman worked his way slowly up the slanting ladder with Reed slung limply over one shoulder. How he managed it without letting his burden fall Tony never understood.

Carried out, the steward was laid on deck. He breathed stertorously, with a face that was ghastly in its pallor. There were no outward signs of any injury.

“Stunned, that’s what he is,” said Flagg, when Tony joined him. “He’s wearin’ his Mae West,” he continued, bending down to unbutton Reed’s coat and noting the rubber lifebelt round his body. “I’ll blow it up in case we goes swimmin’. Things don’t look too good to me.”

They didn’t. The *Vexatious*, now badly on fire forward, had rolled still farther over to port. Her bridge and forecastle were invisible in the clouds of black smoke mingled with white steam. The enemy aircraft seemed to have gone, Tony noticed with intense relief. A trawler about half a mile away to starboard was steaming hot-foot toward the *Vexatious*. A motorboat was coming from another direction.

“I’ll look out for Reed,” Tony said hurriedly. “Go below, Flagg, and search the cabin flat and the steward’s mess.”

The able seaman hesitated.

“Are you certain *you’re* all right, sir?” he asked. “I shouldn’t—”

“For God’s sake get a move on!” Tony interrupted him. “You’ve no time to waste. —Hurry, man. Hurry!”

Flagg obediently disappeared inside the superstructure. He was down below for what seemed minutes, while Tony, filled with anxiety, watched the oily water lapping the port edge of the upper deck. He had already blown up Reed’s lifebelt, and started to inflate his own.

There were sounds from inside the superstructure, followed by the emergence of Flagg with Midshipman Morgan in his arms. His head was bleeding.

“He’s alive all right, sir,” the seaman announced, laying the boy down. “I found him on the deck in the Chief Engineer’s cabin. Reckon he was lying in the bunk an’ bumped his head when that there mine went off.”

“Is there anyone else?”

“No, sir. I’ve been in all the cabins, and the stooard’s mess. That’s the lot, sir.”

“Thank God for that! Good work, Flagg.”

“Huh!” said the A.B. “What’ll we do next, sir? Go over the side, or what? Mister Morgan’s wearin’ one o’ them stuffed waistcoats. He’ll float right side up if one of us keeps his head up.”

Tony, sitting painfully on the deck beside Reed, looked down the sloping deck at the water. Thick with oil fuel, it was creeping higher and higher up the deck. The two rescuing craft were rapidly approaching. The motorboat was within two hundred yards.

Tony didn’t like the look of the oil fuel, and said so. It was safer, he thought, to stick to the ship until the end. Her rudder and screws must already be very near the bottom. She

mightn't capsize completely if she grounded. Besides, they had two injured people on their hands, and he wasn't feeling too full of beans. Some ribs were cracked, or something. How were things forward, he asked anxiously. Were there many casualties?

Flagg didn't know. All he could say was that the forepart was "a ruddy pot-mess, and no mistake." First the mine—then a bomb which had burst somewhere near the bridge—then the machine-gunning which had silenced the pom-poms, with bullets zipping all over the place.

Bake and blister the ruddy Huns, said he, full of venom. But one of the unmentionables had been brought down before the pom-poms were put out of action. Hit full in the nose she had nose-dived into the sea within fifty yards of the ship. And a damn good—

He paused, listening.

"What's up?" asked Tony.

"I believe the bustards are comin' again!" said Flagg, his voice full of anxiety. "I hear 'em."

Tony could hear them now, the unmistakable roar coming closer—the screeching, tearing sound as the machines dived to attack.

"Lie flat!" Flagg hissed, flinging himself on his stomach. Tony obeyed.

The smoke of the fire forward was drifting away to port in a thick curtain. The next thing he saw was a plane flying low within about a hundred feet of the ship, the sparkles of flame from her machine guns, the reddish-green trails of tracer bullets.

He heard an angry crackle, and the impact of metal upon metal as the bullets drove home. It sounded as though someone were rattling stones inside a tin can.

“The dirty—” Flagg started to say.

But Tony didn’t hear the end of the remark. Something hit him hard near the right shoulder.

The last thing he remembered was a twinge of searing pain, followed by a peculiar sort of numbness.

The bright sunlight faded into darkness. That was all.

CHAPTER X

THE moment Tony Chenies recovered consciousness and opened his eyes he realized he was on board a ship. He lay flat on his back on a hardly padded settee in a small white-painted compartment which swayed gently from side to side. A ray of bright sunlight, with motes of dust dancing through it, filtered through an open skylight overhead. The place smelt horribly—a mixture of oil fuel and iodoform, or something like it.

He could hear voices somewhere near, but his view was restricted by a line of blue tablecloth well above the level of his eyes. He was aching all over, and trying to sit up to see brought him a spasm of acute pain. He desisted.

Lord! Someone had stripped him to the waist. His right shoulder was heavily bandaged. Lifting his right elbow was agony. He groaned without meaning to.

The last thing he remembered was the deck of the *Vexatious*, with Reed and Flagg and young Morgan. Then that damned plane with the black crosses on her wings and fuselage had shot out of the smoke. Yes. He remembered the chattering of her machine guns, those little streaks of fire from her tracer bullets.

So he'd been shot, had he? He'd often wondered what it felt like to be shot. He knew now. He remembered that thump in the shoulder which knocked him out. It hurt him quite a lot now, though not nearly so much as he imagined it would. There was a dull ache lower down around his ribs. He remembered what had caused that—remembered how it had hurt him to crawl up and down that ladder.

What had become of Reed, he wondered. Where were Flagg and Morgan?

He must have been overboard since leaving the *Vexatious*. His trousers were ruined—clammy and horrible with oil fuel. They'd been quite a decent pair of trousers, too. How much did the Admiralty give one to buy a new kit?

Confound the oil fuel. His hair and beard and eyebrows were thick and sticky with it, he discovered on putting up his left hand. His eyes smarted. He could even taste the damn stuff in his mouth. He was confoundedly thirsty.

"Flagg!" he called.

There was no reply.

"Flagg!" again.

Someone in his shirtsleeves with his arms bare and a pair of red rubber gloves on his hands leaned over the end of the table to look at him.

"Who the hell are you?" Tony asked feebly. "Where's Flagg? I want some water."

"I'm Maclean," said the other. "Don't you recognize a messmate?"

"Ugh!" Tony muttered, gritting his teeth. His shoulder was very painful. It was far too much trouble to ask the Doc how the devil he thought a fellow could recognize him upside-down, particularly when Maclean's face was all streaked like an African witch doctor's.

"I'll give you something to make you sleep," the Doc said. "I won't be a second."

"I'm thirsty, Doc."

"Okay, old boy," Maclean replied, vanishing. "We'll see to that."

He came back in a moment and gave Tony his drink. A strange sub-lieutenant R.N.V.R. appeared with things on a tray. Tony heard something tinkle.

"A bit closer," said the Doc, sitting on the table close to his patient's head. "Now then, Chenies, your left arm, please."

Tony felt fingers on his elbow, and the skin of his upper arm being dabbed gently with wet cotton wool.

"Just a little prick," said Maclean, reaching behind him.

Tony hardly felt the needle when it came.

"I wish you'd tell me what's been happening," he asked, as the doctor stood up. "What about the skipper and the others?"

"The skipper's all right," Maclean told him. "You go to sleep and don't worry."

"What about Number One, and the Chief, and Guns and Flagg? Where *is* Flagg?"

"You'll hear everything in good time. —Is that shoulder hurting much?"

"Rather so-so at times," Tony confessed.

"You'll feel it less and less. —Well, cheer-oh! You'll be all right before long."

Maclean vanished. He was very busy.

The trawler steamed on, toward Dover.

For some minutes Tony watched that thin, flickering ray of sunshine swaying backward and forward, to and fro, like the beam of a searchlight. It was pleasant to watch, rather comforting.

He felt the regular throb of the engines, and the little ship curtsying rhythmically to a gentle swell. Some gruff orders were shouted on the deck overhead. The trample of heavy

footsteps responded. There came the familiar yelp of a destroyer's siren—one peremptory short blast. She was altering course to starboard.

His thoughts became muzzy and confused. Mingled with the sounds of the ship came recollections of the *Vexatious*: Reed and tongue sandwiches; Flagg and his funny old face; Bickerstaff shouting blasphemously at a trawler sliding past his bows; the Gunner and his store accounts; the Commissioned Engineer scrounging stores from the dockyard without signing any receipts.

His mind suddenly flicked to Minchinhampton, with its gray stone houses and walls, and that winter frost when the bath water refused to run away and the overhead tank of another sanitary contrivance had to be thawed out with a blow lamp. They'd been frozen up for days. —Hot rum at The Bear, excellent!

His mother, he presumed, was still full of local activity and good works. Father was probably at sea in his armed merchant cruiser and enjoying it, ancient though he might be. A tough old boy was Father, though sometimes rather antiquated in his notions.

Was Toppy still on the job in that huge white building of hers in Bloomsbury, or had she decided to join the Wrens? She was too independent and undisciplined for that, he fancied, too outspoken....

But he was drowsy. He found it difficult to think, impossible to concentrate with a sort of mental jigsaw of scenes and people's names and faces whirling round inside his head.

But why worry, as the doctor said. An apple a day, and all that. Who was the man who'd invented that slogan? Why an

apple instead of a carrot?

No. Things were by no means too bad. He felt no pain at all. He was positively comfortable, floating in air, or on air. The hard settee felt like one of those patent mattresses they advertised in the magazines.

Was this the effect of the dope that the Doc had pumped into him, he wondered drowsily. Whatever it was, it was strangely pleasant.

The ray of sunlight shining through the scuttle swayed gently from side to side with the slow movement of the ship. At times it flashed with the colors of the spectrum, red through orange, yellow, and green, to violet and purple.

Purple—“Deep Purple,” the confounded tune, a sort of slow thing, that young Morgan kept putting on the wardroom gramophone. He played it day in and day out until people were sick of hearing it. A noisy blighter was young Morgan. If he wasn’t playing the gramophone he had the wireless going all out.

Morgan, Flagg, Reed, the skipper, and all the others. What had become of them?

Tony Chenies shut his eyes. His thoughts were becoming increasingly muzzy and confused.

He slept.

2.

It was irksome being in the hospital when one had the appetite of a horse and felt perfectly well, apart from a little soreness. Tony had had three weeks of it.

Beneath the bandages and strappings his right shoulder and ribs had hurt a bit to start with. But the cracked ribs soon

knitted, while the bullet wound in his shoulder, the surgeons said, was a nice clean one with no complications. It ached a little at times, but only hurt actively when he forgot and tried to move it. They had kept him in bed to start with, and then allowed him to sit out in the garden, even to walk when he felt so disposed.

It was a pleasant place, that auxiliary hospital, a large country house set in the midst of its own wooded park and gardens with a view of the rolling Sussex downs in the far distance. The doctors were pleasantly unofficial and the nurses charming, particularly the Canadian V.A.D. girl with the blue eyes, corn-colored hair, and impertinent nose who looked after Tony and spent some of her scanty leisure in writing his letters. His right arm was out of action for the time being. Writing in capital letters with his left hand took ages.

It was a mixed hospital for convalescent and lightly wounded officers of all the three Services—military officers wounded in Norway and France, some dare-devil young R.A.F. pilots, a Canadian, two New Zealanders, and an Australian among them, itching to be back on the job, a sprinkling of naval officers and pilots who had been in action in Norway and Dunkirk, a Polish submarine officer and a Czech airman. They were good company, and between them had seen practically every phase of the war up-to-date. There was much to be discussed and talked about.

Air-raid alerts seldom troubled them. But they frequently heard the drumming of engines, and looking hard overhead might see tiny, insect-like shapes flying in formation high against the deep blue in the zenith. Sometimes their position was given away by a sudden glint of sunlight on a fleeting

wing, sometimes by their white vapor trails in the sky. They were usually British planes, the wounded pilots said, cursing the fate that temporarily held them earthbound and inactive, and envying their comrades up aloft. But how anyone could tell a Spitfire or Hurricane from a Heinkel or Messerschmitt at that great height passed Tony's comprehension.

So far as their private lives went, and apart from those buzzing airplanes, the war seemed very far away from the Old Hall and its occupants. They might almost have been living as guests in a large and comfortable country house. It stood perhaps three-quarters of a mile from the old-fashioned village, with its church, three inns, its few shops and little houses sprawling round the village green.

Major Colefax, the owner of the Old Hall, had rejoined the Army and was somewhere abroad. His American wife, with two young daughters who sometimes appeared for week ends, had transferred herself to a cottage on the estate. The whole of the rambling old house with most of its contents and all the new equipment necessary to transform it into a temporary hospital, had been handed over as a gift to the British Red Cross Society for the duration of the war. Mrs. Colefax's many friends in America were generous. Parcels of cigarettes, sweets, books, and games arrived almost weekly.

It was glorious summer, and life went on much as usual. Most of the younger gardeners, the grooms and men from the home farm had joined up. But the older men carried on as they had for years. The carefully weeded borders and rose garden were aglow with color. The yew hedges were trimmed and the lawns regularly mowed, as were the putting greens of the miniature golf course.

Tony had visitors, first his sister Toppy from London, then his mother from Minchinhampton.

Toppy, who rarely showed her feelings, was matter of fact and almost casual. She brought with her a parcel of little luxuries from Fortnum and Mason's, thinking that Tony might be starving. She was a little disappointed to find her brother living on the fat of the land, with milk, butter, and eggs in profusion. She didn't like Tony's beard, and said so. It was the patchiest beard she had ever seen, and all beards were disgusting.

Tony laughed.

"My beard's my own," he said. "How'd you like it if I said I hated the way you did your hair, or the color of your lipstick? Live and let live, Tops."

Mrs. Chenies, when she arrived, was inclined to fuss. Considerably to Tony's embarrassment she also chose to regard him as some sort of hero, the more so because he had been promoted to Lieutenant in the middle of May. It was useless for Tony to tell her that he had served his full time as a sub-lieutenant and was due for promotion anyhow. Dunkirk had nothing to do with it. What was more, he hadn't done any more than his job. It had been rather tough at times, admittedly, but nothing whatever to make a song and dance about.

He'd be in the hospital about five weeks, the doctors said. After that they'd probably send him on a month's sick leave. Then he'd be surveyed, and would be sent off to sea again. He prayed to heaven it would be another destroyer.

"But a destroyer, Tony!" Mrs. Chenies sighed. "Why not a big battleship?"

Oh, my God! Tony thought.

“Do be sensible, Mother,” he said aloud. “I’d loathe being in a battleship. I’d be the dog’s-body in the wardroom, the junior watchkeeper roped in for all the lousy jobs. No thank you, Mother. Destroying’s the life for me.”

Mrs. Chenies realized the futility of further discussion. Her husband had served in destroyers all through the four years of the last war, and wouldn’t have been elsewhere for worlds. Tony was only following in his father’s footsteps.

They talked of Captain Chenies. How was the Old Man, Tony wanted to know.

Mrs. Chenies hadn’t heard for more than three weeks, and then the letter was strictly noncommittal. It said nothing of any excitements, or of what the *Fonthill Abbey* was doing, or where she was. However, Tony’s father was still in the same ship, and apparently loving every minute of it.

“He’s a proper tough old guy,” Tony observed. “Much tougher than I ever thought. It’s a pity he wasn’t at Dunkirk. He’d have loved that.”

Mrs. Chenies shuddered. From what little information Tony had given her, coupled with what she had read and heard broadcast, one member of the family at Dunkirk was quite enough.

3.

Nobody else from the *Vexatious* was convalescent at the Old Hall. Tony, who had been temporarily patched up at Dover and rushed off to the hospital, had heard nothing but garbled accounts of what had been the end of his old ship—more important still, what had happened to his old shipmates.

Eight days after his arrival, however, there came a letter from Stephen, the sub.

"Dear Tony," it said. "I had the devil's own job to find out where you'd been sent to hospital, and only discovered by accident through one of the doctors here. I hope you're getting better and all that, and before I forget, congratulations on your second stripe.

"As for me, I got through without a scratch, and as they wanted extra officers to run boats and so on, I volunteered to stay. I had four of the most hectic days of my life, running one of those Dutch coasters, and then, when she got knocked out by a near miss, being sent to a motorboat with a very posh saloon and cabins. They weren't at all posh by the time we'd transported nearly 400 troops in seven trips. The bombing and gunfire were pretty lousy, but you can imagine all that. I really think we saw the worst of it before the old ship went. I was fed to the teeth because four lovely Bren guns I'd 'borrowed' from the beach at Dunkirk went with the Dutch 'skoot,' as I believe they call them.

"It was sad to see the last of the good old *Vexatious*, and to think of the casualties, though it's surprising there weren't more. I'm particularly sorry about poor little Walton. He was such a good fellow and messmate, and a darned good engineer of a destroyer. Nothing was ever too much trouble.

"The skipper escaped with a bullet through the thigh when that swine machine-gunned us after the mine explosion. You're the only other officer casualty. What's happened to Number One and Morgan I don't know; but the Gunner's still here doing a job, and so is the Doc. This place is full to bursting with the odds and ends of odd ships doing odder jobs. It will take them some time to sort us all out. I hear a

buzz we may be sent on a fortnight's leave, and must say most of us can do with it. All my clothes have gone bar those I had on when the ship went, and they're mostly oil fuel. I had to do a drop of swimming before being picked up. I'd been living in borrowed battle dress until some very senior Commander asked who the hell I was!

"Considering all things, I think the old ship did pretty well, and it was sad to see the last of her. I suppose we were lucky to get off with nine killed, including the poor little Chief. Some ships had a good many more than that. Most of our wounded seemed to be getting on well when I last heard of them.

"I saw the skipper before they took him off to the hospital at Chatham. He was cursing his fate at being knocked out and losing his ship. He says he may not get another, though he's such a darned good one I rather doubt that. He sent you his chin-chin if I was writing, and asked me to tell you he'd make, or was making, a report about that show of yours aft. Reed has been telling everyone that you saved his life.

"I expect Flagg has written to you. He managed to save some of the clothes from your cabin before the ship went, though I rather doubt what value they'll be with all that oil fuel and muck floating around. However, he may have managed to transfer them to the trawler which came alongside just before the old 'V' rolled right over and went under.

"I hope we'll be shipmates again one of these days, and that you're on a fair way to recovery and a drop of leave. If you've time you might write to my home address, Dunsford House, Abinger, Surrey.

"Cheer-oh and God stiffen the Huns!

Yours ever,

Steve."

It was an unsatisfactory letter in a way. Assuming that Tony knew much more than he did, it left so much unsaid, and evoked a whole flood of questions. Which men had been killed and which wounded, Tony burned to know. What had happened after he had been knocked out? How had Flagg managed to save some of his belongings, quite apart from saving Tony himself, young Morgan, and Reed, the wardroom steward?

Flagg must have done wonders, bless him!

Since he couldn't write himself, Tony persuaded his pretty Canadian V.A.D. friend to write to Stephen's home address almost by return of post. The envelope was marked, "Urgent. Please forward."

Three days later there came a letter from Flagg, written from No. 54 Mess, Royal Naval Barracks, Devonport, and forwarded on from Minchinhampton.

Flagg wrote much as he spoke, and with an almost complete absence of punctuation. He had quite a lot to say.

"Mister Chenies Sir," it began. "I lost sight of you after we lands at Dover and they puts you in the ambulance so takes the pleasure and liberty of writing to your home address trusting this will soon find you recovered and in the pink as it leaves me at present but a bit tired. Your uniform greatcoat number one monkey jacket what you bought six months ago 2 prs. trousers five shirts two panjamas 2 prs. shoes no sox but shaving gear binoculars one pullover I manages to save in a bedsheet transferring same to trawler what saved some of us trusting this meats with your approval. Gear was dooly handed over to an officer at Dover who says what's in my

bundle. I says cloths belonging to you. He says give me that stuff. I says okay buddy I'll have your receipt. He gives me receipt and says cloths will be sent to your home address but I can't read his signature though he looked onest. Trusting this is correct and suitable because he couldn't be no bilker wearing three stripes and brass hat though very magesterial.

"It was a fair shame to see the good old ship go the way she did and to see you knocked out the way you was. But you was lucky not to be corpsed like the other poor chaps and the engineer orficer Mister Walton who we liked. We buried two of ours at Dover along of others that tall Signalman Clarges with the red hair what played the mandoline and was in a laundry before the war likewise Stoker Masson. It was a fair treat the funeral. Everything done proper with band eight coffins on a lorry with flowers procession and firing party and all the rank and fashion and the mourners behind. I feels all squeamishlike inside, thinking it might be me or you. And what would my missus say Sir you being a batchelor and having no encumbrances. I reckons we all done our bit allright and deserves a pat on the back.

"Sir I takes liberty to ask you a favour. I sees the Assistant to the Drafting Commander here at barracks Sir Lieutenant-Commander Chalmers him knowing your father the Captain. I says I want to go to your ship when you goes again. He says he don't know how it can be managed him not knowing where you're going and maybe not a West Country ship. But Sir perhaps it can be managed if you writes Lieutenant Commander Chalmers whose an ameable gentleman and no frills and haw-haw. Having started this war with you I begs leave to finish it trusting it meats with your approval me having done your washing and cleaned up the cabin trusting I

gives satisfaction. Pleese write Mister Chenies Sir you can't get on without your faithful

George Henry Flagg
A.B.

3 G.C. badges."

Tony, amused and not a little touched, communicated with Lieutenant Commander Chalmers as suggested. Chalmers' reply was friendly, but entirely noncommittal. Flagg, it seemed, had been sent on a fortnight's leave. When he returned he would probably be put through a refresher gunnery course lasting a month or three weeks. After that, he must take his turn for draft to a seagoing ship with hundreds of others, though if Tony would write when he himself was appointed to a new ship he, Chalmers, would see if anything could be done. He couldn't hold out much hope, however.

So that was that.

CHAPTER XI

ON the second week of July, Tony was discharged from the hospital and sent on sick leave. He went home to Minchinhampton, to be pampered and cosseted and asked to relate his experiences, not merely once but a score of times. He became sick and tired at the telling of it. And after the request had been firmly refused by telephone, the local newspaper sent its Mr. Harry Tasker to the house for a personal interview. He was an obstinate and pertinacious young man.

"You don't understand," he said to Tony, having forced his way past a flustered and indignant Effie, who had been told to admit no press representatives at all. "We have our duty to do in enlightening the public."

"The hell you have!" Tony grunted, eyeing him with disfavor. "That doesn't give you the right to come barging in here, particularly after I said no when your paper rang up."

Mr. Tasker smiled. He was used to this sort of thing. If he always took no for an answer, he'd probably get the sack.

"You're well known in the neighborhood, Lieutenant Chenies," he said engagingly. "You were wounded at Dunkirk. People are clamoring for your story. You're a public hero."

"Hero be blistered!" Tony burst forth. "And let people clamor. Why should I satisfy their silly curiosity? What would you think if I came butting into your house demanding this and that?"

"I'm not a public character," Mr. Tasker explained. "You are, Lieutenant Chenies, and this is a country district. You're

news, and we're proud of our local worthies."

Tony replied that he loathed and detested this sort of vulgar personal publicity. After all, he was only one of the many thousands who had been at Dunkirk, and had played a very minor part. Moreover, naval officers weren't permitted to give interviews to the Press, which Mr. Tasker ought to know.

But Mr. Tasker, or Mr. Tasker's editor, had seen to that. He explained with an air of triumph that the editor had rung up the appropriate people at the Admiralty and the Ministry of Information. It seemed there was no objection to the interview provided the copy was submitted for approval and censorship before publication.

Tony's last remaining guns were spiked. He had no alternative but to surrender.

The result, which appeared the following week and occupied two-thirds of a column, was fairly harmless. It referred to Tony as "this modest stripling of little more than twenty summers, bearded like the pard, who had seen more fighting in the last few months than many warriors have seen in a lifetime, etc." That was a bit over the edge, Tony thought—rather nauseating. Thank heaven none of his naval friends was likely to see it. If they did, he'd never hear the end of it.

Minchinhampton bore little resemblance to the peaceful little place he remembered when on leave before the war. It was full of troops and strange new faces. Most of Tony's young men friends had joined the Army or R.A.F. in one capacity or another. All the girls he knew and liked were away from home in one or other of the Services, or doing war work. Most of the older people, his mother included, were cooking or serving in canteens, looking after evacuated mothers and children, or had joined some branch of civil

defense, the Women's Voluntary Service, or the Mechanized Transport Corps. All the older ladies were knitting feverishly, some in khaki wool, others in the naval dark blue or the bluish-gray of the R.A.F.

Volunteers, old Wilkes among them, were drilling in the evenings on the common, which was being trenched to prevent the landing of enemy aircraft. Concrete or wooden barriers were being erected on the roads to prevent the passage of tanks and mechanized troops. They were guarded at night by troops or volunteers who insisted upon inspecting identity cards by the light of a shaded torch. More volunteers, armed with binoculars, spent their nights on the church tower watching the starry sky for German planes and German parachutists.

Margaret and Webster Barton, Mrs. Chenies' American friends who had taken a house near Holmfield and refused to be called by anything but their Christian names by those they liked, were a real asset so far as Tony was concerned. He had first met them during his few days leave in the winter, and had been taken to their hearts, as he had taken them to his. Bartons, Chenies and the Dodsons at the rectory treated each other's houses rather as their own, turning up at unconventional hours, often staying to improvised meals, or organizing this and that by telephone on the spur of the moment.

Yes. Life at Minchinhampton would have been very dull for Tony without the Bartons. Solitary walks on the common with Tinker were alleviated by meeting Margaret and Sammy, her spaniel, on their way back from shopping in the village. Well-traveled, shrewd, and very observant, Margaret and Webster were the most interesting friends Tony had ever

had. They were friends, real friends, utterly natural, spontaneously generous, and open-hearted. They were Americans, technically aliens or foreigners, with viewpoints and opinions that sometimes differed widely from Tony's own. They argued fiercely. All the same, he found it impossible to consider them as anything but members of his own family.

Tony's only other dissipation was being taken out to lunch and tea by his doting parent, which soon began to pall. He could understand his mother's feelings, but disliked being treated as some sort of exhibit. If only Toppy had been at home things would have been livelier. But Toppy, worse luck, was full up with her work in London.

"Lady Essington-Blake has asked us to tea on Thursday," Mrs. Chenies said, looking up from her letters at breakfast one morning. "We'll have to go, Tony."

Tony immediately assumed what his family called his "sea-boot face."

"*That* old battleship!" he groaned. "Why must we go, Mother? You know how I loathe tea parties, and yapping to old ladies."

Tony spoke with all the fierce intolerance of youth. To him Lady Essington-Blake was formidable. The widow of one of the largest landowners in the district, he remembered her as a white-haired lady of almost incredible age, erect as a grenadier, austere and rigidly Victorian in her outlook, and with an incisive manner of speaking. She still kept up a sort of feudal state at Hatchetts, which he recollected as a gray, rambling old mansion with a long, long drive, and full of retainers, family portraits, gilt-framed mirrors, brocade-seated, spindle-legged chairs, miscellaneous bric-a-brac in

glass cases, and cabinets collected from the Holy Land and Egypt, and a profusion of china, and gilt and enamel clocks under glass domes.

He had seen Lady Essington-Blake perhaps half a dozen times in the last ten years, and had studiously kept in the background. He was frightened of her because of something that had happened during his first visit to Hatchetts as a small boy on the occasion of her annual garden party to most of the countryside and all of her tenants.

At that first garden party at Hatchetts as a small schoolboy Tony had disgraced himself. It was partly the excitement at being in a great crowd of people and winning a coconut, partly the heat coupled with the results of eating large portions of the coconut with too many ices and cream puffs in the refreshment tent. But the inevitable cataclysm was inopportune and badly timed. It took place in public, to wit, on the terrace where her ladyship, armed with her inevitable ear trumpet, was bidding a gracious farewell to her guests. The band, Tony remembered, had just played "God Save the King."

Like most deaf people, Lady Essington-Blake had a clear and penetrating voice.

"Who *is* that disgusting little boy?" she demanded, fixing her basilisk eye upon the wretched Tony and pointing with her instrument.

Mrs. Chenies made things worse by trying to apologize. It was the heat, she explained. The child was always inclined to be bilious. Captain Chenies tried to look as though Tony had nothing to do with him.

"Send for Thomas," Lady Essington-Blake commanded. "Have the poor little wretch taken care of."

Thomas was the second footman.

It was an ignominy which Tony never forgot. If only he had had the presence of mind to retire behind the shrubbery!

"We *must* be polite to Lady Essington-Blake," said Mrs. Chenies that morning at breakfast. "She's done such a lot since the war with these canteens and things. She's got three evacuated mothers and eleven children at Hatchetts."

"But what's all that got to do with me?" Tony wanted to know. "Surely she doesn't want me to make funny faces for her evacuees!"

"She particularly asks me to bring you to tea," Mrs. Chenies told him. "She'll even send a car for us."

"Huh! And where the blazes does she get the petrol?"

Mrs. Chenies didn't know.

"We'll have to go, Tony," she said firmly. "And you'll have to wear your uniform, dear. I don't like you to be in plain clothes if army officers are likely to be there. I believe she's got some billeted upon her."

It was with rather a bad grace that Tony finally assented. He could think of no valid excuse for refusing.

And Lady Essington-Blake was no longer the awe-inspiring dragon he remembered as a small boy, but a small, rather fragile-looking old lady in a wheelchair, with silver hair, a lace cap, and benevolent blue eyes which seemed to miss nothing. She was shrewdness itself, and knew everything that was going on. Her conversation was lively and interesting. For listening, she still used the disconcerting ear trumpet in preference to one of the newer electrical devices for the deaf.

It was a warm, sunny afternoon. There were no other guests, and the three of them had tea on the terrace outside the French windows of the drawing room overlooking the flower beds and lawns at the back of the house. Like Lady Essington-Blake herself, the garden seemed to have shrunk in size since Tony had seen it last.

The time went much faster than he realized. The tray of drinks arrived in due course—golden cider in a cut-glass jug, a glass carafe of fresh tomato juice in a large bowl of crushed ice, decanters of whisky and sherry, a siphon of soda water, another bowl of ice. The maid followed Styles, the aged butler, with a plate of small biscuits, and another of anchovies and olives on little rounds of toast. Tony marveled. This munificence was almost pre-war.

"You needn't wait, Styles."

"Very good, m' Lady."

Tony did the pouring, sherry for his hostess and himself, tomato juice for his mother. The sherry was pale and golden, and very dry.

"I'm forbidden this by my doctor," Lady Essington-Blake chuckled, sipping. "It's bad for my rheumatism. But I never could resist Tio Pepe, and this is an occasion. —You like it, young man?"

Tony, who was no connoisseur of wines, confessed that he did.

"So much the better," said his hostess. "Yes. It's a pleasant wine. I was first introduced to it by my dear husband long before you were born, in the days we used to hunt with the Cotswold. Well, well!" she sighed. "England will never see those good old times again. And all because of a vulgar little jackanapes of an Austrian paper-hanger wanting to rule the

world by murder and beastliness. I hope I live to see his downfall.”

Half-past six came. Styles reappeared to announce the car at the front door.

Mrs. Chenies and Tony got up to go.

“Styles!”

“M’ Lady?”

“Have those things been put in the car?”

“Yes, m’ Lady.”

“You’re sure you’ve made no mistake?”

“No, m’ Lady. They’re all in.”

“Very well, Styles. You may go.”

“Very good, m’ Lady.”

Styles bowed and retreated through the French window.

Mrs. Chenies and Tony shook hands with their hostess.

“I’m glad to have seen you, young man,” she said, holding Tony’s hand and looking up into his eyes. “Your mother’s so often talked about you. All the same, I’m not quite certain I like the beard, though no doubt you’re following the fashion set by our dear King Edward and his sailor son. —I expect you’ve young friends in the neighborhood you see now and then?” she went on to ask, without giving Tony a chance of defending his beloved beard.

“Oh, yes,” he replied, wondering what she was driving at.

“I know it isn’t easy to entertain nowadays,” the old lady continued with an air of mystery. “So you’ll find a little something in the car which may help you to give a small party. Be merry while you can, young man. You’ll only be young once.”

“It’s awfully good of you,” Tony stammered, rather overcome. “I....”

“And there’s a memento of my dear husband which may be useful at sea, and another little thing which may help to keep you warm in winter— No, no. I don’t want to be thanked,” as Tony strove to reply. “But if you ever have time to write to a rather lonely old woman, she’ll always be delighted to hear from you. We’re all thinking of the men at sea, and of the Navy. D’you know what I’d be doing if I were fifty years younger, instead of a useless, rheumatic old drudge with knobby fingers who can barely knit?”

Tony hadn’t any idea, and said so.

“I’d be in the Navy myself, like my uncle Ned who fought in the Crimea. —Yes, I’d be one of those Wren women.”

Tony smiled.

“I can’t quite imagine you obeying someone else’s orders and putting up with naval discipline,” he said.

“I’d put up with anything if I thought it would send this man Hitler to the place he belongs,” Lady Essington-Blake returned. “Well, God bless you, dear boy. Knock the conceit out of these impudent Germans whenever you get the chance, and write and tell me all about it. Good luck to you.”

Lady Essington-Blake’s “little something” resolved itself into nine bottles of the precious Tio Pepe, together with a large box of assorted cocktail savories from a well-known firm in Piccadilly. One parcel contained a sporting telescope which had been used for deerstalking by the late Sir Richard Essington-Blake in the eighties of last century, another a quart-size vacuum bottle in a leather case embellished with Tony’s initials, with Lady Essington-Blake’s card with her

own spidery handwriting, “With best wishes from an old woman.”

“Now I know why she asked me for your full name over a month ago,” Mrs. Chenies remarked. “But I never suspected this.”

“Talk of fairy godmothers,” said Tony, rather embarrassed and ashamed of himself. “And to think that I—”

His mother guessed what was in his mind.

“Now you know what I meant when I said how good and kind-hearted she was,” she put in.

2.

The enemy’s intensive air offensive, which afterward came to be known as the Battle of Britain, started in the second week in August with attacks on convoys in the English Channel, the Thames Estuary, and off the east coast of England. As the days went on Portland, Portsmouth, Dover, and other coastal towns, besides the fighter airdromes in the south and southeast of England, were all heavily and repeatedly attacked.

But the hordes of enemy dive bombers, accompanied by their clouds of protecting fighters, were well and truly dealt with by the gallant young men of the R.A.F. The Germans had planned a knockout blow designed to overwhelm by sheer weight of numbers. It failed utterly. By August 15 four hundred and seventy-two enemy aircraft had been shot down. Within three days their losses had risen to six hundred and ninety-seven.

No bombs fell anywhere near Minchinhampton, but nobody in England could ever forget the late summer and

autumn of 1940. Tony, now feeling perfectly fit, was itching to be back at sea again. It irked him to be tied idly by the leg as a pseudo-invalid while all this activity was going on. Had the Admiralty forgotten his very existence?

He had almost made up his mind to go to London to see someone at the Admiralty, when there came a letter from Richmond, who had been First Lieutenant of the *Vexatious*. After inquiring how he was getting on and apologizing for not having written before, Richmond came to the point.

"I was told this morning at the Admiralty that I am to be appointed in command of a destroyer," he wrote. "I can't go into details in a letter, but would you like to come as my Number One? I should naturally like someone with destroyer experience. You're the very chap, though I shan't take it amiss if you'd rather go somewhere else. However, it sounds fairly amusing.

"I mentioned your name to the powers-that-be, and they were willing provided you're passed fit when you're medically surveyed, or whatever it's called. Anyhow, send me a wire on receipt of this, and I'll fix it up."

Beside himself with excitement, Tony showed the letter to his mother. She read it without comment, though her expression showed what she felt.

"I suppose you'll say yes, darling?"

"Of course," said Tony, aware of what she was thinking. "You know, Mother, I should simply hate being in a big ship. I'd feel sort of lost in a multitude."

"I know, dear."

"And being offered a job as Number One of a destroyer's pretty good going for me. I've only been a lieutenant for

three months. Most of the Number One's are far more senior."

"Then I'm glad they think so well of you, dear. —You mustn't mind about me, Tony," she added, her voice rather strained and unnatural. "I'm only your stupid old mother. I naturally want—" She hesitated. "I want you always to do what you think best. —And now I must go and see Effie about the food."

Within five minutes Tony had telephoned a telegram to Richmond. "Delighted to come," he said. "Feeling perfectly fit. Please hasten medical survey. Sick doing nothing."

Three days passed with Tony in a fever of impatience—four days. Then an official letter from the Admiralty, in which he was instructed to present himself in London for medical survey on a certain date at a certain time.

They X-rayed him, examined him all over, prodded him, asked many questions, finally to pronounce him fit in all respects for sea service.

Lunching with Richmond at his club he heard more about the new appointment. Fifty of the older American destroyers were being handed over to Britain, and Richmond was to command one of them. The crews were to be sent to a Canadian port by liner, and the destroyers would be brought over in batches.

"When do we sail from England, sir?" Tony asked, adding the "sir" because Richmond was now his commanding officer, or presently would be.

"Early in September," he was told. "I'm told it'll be a bit of a hustle over the other side. You'll have to keep your wits about you, Chenies. Strange ships, strange gear, and a new ship's company. Think you can do it?"

“I’ll have a darned good try, sir, or die in the attempt. What’s our job when we get back?”

“Search me,” said Richmond. “Some sort of convoy work, I should imagine.”

“And which of the home ports does our ship’s company come from?”

“I believe it’s Devonport, Chenies.”

“Then we simply must try to get Able Seaman Flagg, sir.”

“That old devil!” Richmond laughed. “He’s the most plausible and artful old dodger I ever met.”

He might be, Tony admitted, going on to speak of Flagg’s letter and of Lieutenant Commander Chalmers, the assistant to the Drafting Commander at Devonport barracks. Did Richmond mind if Tony wrote asking for Flagg’s services?

“I’m perfectly agreeable. I don’t know the name of our new ship. But if Chalmers will play, ask for Flagg to be detailed for the crew of *Number Fourteen*, that’s what the ship’s known as at present. —If it’ll help, you can tell Chalmers you’ve consulted the C.O., and that the C.O. concurs.”

“I will,” said Tony, making a note of *Number Fourteen*.

3.

An official list of awards for Dunkirk appeared in the newspapers late in August. The *Vexatious* had done well.

Among others, Bickerstaff had been awarded a bar to his D.S.O. Richmond, Tony, and Maclean, the doctor, had been given the Distinguished Service Cross. In the list of those who had earned the Distinguished Service Medal appeared the name of Able Seaman George Henry Flagg.

Incidentally, Lieutenant Commander Chalmers had been helpful. Flagg had duly been drafted to *Number Fourteen*.

It was early in September, after the first of the night bombing attacks on London, that the *Duchess of Devonshire* sailed from England for Canada with a few passengers and about twelve hundred officers and men of the Royal Navy, forming the crews for eight of the new ex-American destroyers. Enemy submarines were active in the Atlantic, though from that point of view the voyage passed without incident.

Most of Tony's mornings and afternoons were busily occupied. Apart from frequent consultations with Richmond, he had to sort out the crew of *Number Fourteen*, and to interview each man separately to discover his past history and the ships in which he had served. Some of them were new entries who had just completed their training. A few of the older men were pensioners, one a grizzled petty officer with a long row of ribbons who had served with the naval guns in Serbia in the last war. Others had been at sea since the outbreak of war and had served in battleships, cruisers, aircraft carriers, and destroyers. They came from all over the world. Many, like Tony himself, had already been in action in Norway, in Holland, and at Dunkirk. One young A.B. had been present at the defeat of the *Admiral Graf Spee*.

It was during this interviewing that Tony met a smart likely-looking young leading seaman named Alfred Buttress, who had been in destroyers through the whole of the war. He asked him the stock questions. What job had he done in his last ship? Was he married or single? Where did he live? Had he any special accomplishments? What was his age?

The answers were duly noted.

“Right, Buttress,” said Tony, dismissing him. “That’s all for the present.”

But the man hesitated.

“You’ll pardon me asking you a question, sir,” he asked. “But your name’s Chenies?”

“It is,” said Tony.

“And is it a relative of yours who’s captain of an armed merchant cruiser called the *Fonthill Abbey*, sir?”

“My father,” Tony replied. “Why d’you ask?”

“Because the name’s familiar through my old dad,” said Buttress, smiling. “He’s a pensioner chief petty officer in the *Fonthill Abbey* along with your father, sir.”

“That’s a peculiar coincidence,” Tony said. “Two fathers and two sons in two different ships. I wonder if we’ll ever run across the *Fonthill Abbey* in harbor. That ’ud be stranger still. We’ll go ship visiting together, Buttress. Knock the old boys for their tot of rum, what?”

Buttress grinned.

“Sounds all right to me, sir,” he agreed.

“So you come of a naval family?” Tony asked.

“I’ve got one brother in the Service, sir. The old dad did his full twenty-two, sir, and his dad before him, my grandad, that is. He was in China in eighteen-sixty, sir, and in Egypt in eighty-two. I know, sir, because we’ve got his medals at home. He finished up in the sail loft in Pompey Dockyard, having lost an eye in China and turned over to sailmaker from A.B.”

“A pretty stout record,” Tony agreed. “I hope you’re proud of it, Buttress.”

“I am that, sir. My old dad got his D.S.M. at Gallipoli, sir. Then my great-grandad was along with Admiral Collingwood in the *Royal Sovereign* at Trafalgar.”

“Trafalgar!” said Tony. “I congratulate you, Buttress. — Well, I’ll be seeing plenty of you in the next few months, and one of your jobs as a leading seaman and an experienced hand is to teach the ropes to the men entered for ‘Hostilities Only,’ and to make proper seamen of them. Be gentle with them to start with. They’re good stuff.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“Then that’s all for now,” said Tony. “Send Ordinary Seaman Harvey in, please.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Leading Seaman Buttress turned on his heel, replaced his cap, and left the office. *Number Fourteen* was lucky to get him, Tony decided. He was a smart, alert fellow, slick with his answers and good at his job if appearances were any guide. Moreover, he was certainly young to be wearing the “killick,” or anchor, which denoted his rating as leading seaman. The Navy was getting good men in these days. What with the losses and the huge expansion it needed all the good men it could get.

Yes, Tony was busy enough during that voyage to Canada. There was a good deal of paper work, and apart from mustering his new crew and organizing them so far as possible for their duties and stations for the new ship, they carried out a mild form of naval routine, with divisions in the morning, physical drill twice a day, periodical inspections of the men’s quarters, and a certain amount of instruction in seamanship for the younger men.

There came the last day of the voyage, with everyone packing, changing money at the purser's office, and filling in the usual forms and obtaining their landing cards. The ship was expected to berth at about half-past nine next morning. Land would be in sight at daylight.

CHAPTER XII

COMPLETED over twenty years before, the fifty destroyers handed over to Britain by the United States in the autumn of 1940 had been part of the huge American building program of 1917-18. Admittedly, as destroyers go, they were old ships, but between forty and fifty British destroyers of equal age had done yeoman service since September 1939. The *Vexatious* was one of them. Her experiences were by no means exceptional.

Losses among the British flotillas had been heavy, particularly during the Norwegian campaign and at Dunkirk. Italy had entered the war and France had surrendered, which meant that the British Empire had to shoulder practically the whole of the responsibility for the struggle at sea. The area of operations at sea had greatly widened. Besides home waters and the convoy routes in the Atlantic, the whole of the Mediterranean, with the Red Sea and portions of the Indian Ocean, had now become theaters of naval hostilities. Moreover, Germany's occupation of 2,000 miles of European Atlantic coast, from the North Cape of Norway to the frontier between France and Spain, made it far easier for her surface raiders, her U-boats and aircraft to prey upon the vital trade in the Western Approaches to the British Isles.

More destroyers were urgently needed for convoy work in the Atlantic, everybody knew that. Still more were required for operating with the fleet. Double the number of destroyers and escort craft that Britain possessed could usefully have been employed and still be overworked. Their numbers did not even approximate the available total in 1917-18, when

Britain still lay as a geographical barrier athwart Germany's exits to the outer ocean and the naval situation was far less difficult and dangerous than in the latter half of 1940.

Coming as it did at a most critical and perilous time, the reinforcement from America of fifty fast, well-armed vessels was a most welcome accession to Britain's naval strength.

The fifty ships were steamed in batches to a Canadian port by their American crews. There, after being turned over—forty-four to the Royal Navy and six to the Royal Canadian Navy—they hauled down the Stars and Stripes, hoisted the White Ensign, and set forth to join the hard-pressed flotillas on the other side of the Atlantic.

2.

Number Fourteen, Tony's ship, was not to be known by her new British name, H.M.S. *Hamilton*, until she was halfway across the Atlantic on her way to England, when the new names of the flotilla were made known by radio. Like all her sisters, she had been given a place name common to the British Empire and the United States. There were numerous Hamilton counties or towns in America, another in Lanarkshire, Scotland, others, among other parts of the Empire, in Ontario, Canada, and in Australia and New Zealand. The ship's nominal connection extended in many different directions.

She was a four-funneled, flush-decker of 1,200 tons without a raised forecastle, running down to a low "fantail" right aft. She had a speed of over thirty knots, and carried four four-inch guns and twelve torpedo-tubes, besides the armament and equipment for dealing with submarines and aircraft.

Her whole design, lay-out, and internal arrangements were different from those of any British destroyer. The captain and officers had their wardroom and cabins in the forepart of the ship beneath the bridge. The seamen lived on a large messdeck under the officers, the chief petty officers farther forward again on the same level, and the stokers right aft. The mess decks were fitted with two-or three-tiered bunks instead of hammocks. In the wardroom and cabins the cupboards, chairs, table, and other furniture were all of some light metal alloy.

The American guns, ammunition, torpedoes, depth charges, anti-submarine equipment, engines, boilers, indeed, most fittings, varied from the British. They would take some getting used to, so a day was spent with the American officers and men explaining the details of this and that to their British opposite numbers. Nobody could have been more helpful or co-operative.

Richmond was introduced to the steering gear, engine-room, telegraphs, telephones, and other instruments on the bridge by the American Lieutenant Commander, and was given much good advice as to how the ship handled in varying circumstances of wind and sea and going alongside. Like British destroyers, it seemed she had an individuality all of her own, and at times was inclined to be what her American captain called "temperamental." Sometimes she was as docile as a lamb. Occasionally, for no apparent rhyme or reason, she took the bit into her mouth and became mulish and obstinate. When this happened she had to be humored and treated very gently. Forcing her was no good.

Tony was conducted round the ship on deck and below by *Number Fourteen's* First Lieutenant, a typical product of

Annapolis—keen, efficient, very up-to-date in his work, and secretly regretful that he was not coming "over the other side" in the ship. Staddon, the Engineer Lieutenant Commander, R.N.R., and Biddle, his Chief Engine-Room Artificer, went into a huddle with their American counterparts about turbines, boilers, dynamos, oil fuel, boiler water, flooding arrangements, and a multitude of pipes and valves for one purpose or another. Mr. Small, the Gunner, and his chief assistant, Chief Petty Officer Folland, had to adjust themselves to acquiring a rapid knowledge of American torpedoes, depth charges, and electrical appliances.

Able Seaman Flagg, initiated into the mysteries of the bosun's store by a sailor from Portland, Maine, was loud in his admiration for the American white cotton canvas, the cordage, and everything else that the store contained.

"You'd hardly believe all the stuff that's in there, Mister Cheenies, sir," he said with his eyes goggling. "It's like a shop, sir, more stuff than ever I saw outside Woolworth's! An' that gob who took me round, sir!"

"That what?" asked Tony, mystified.

"Gob, sir. That's what their sailors is called—same as we're called matlows."

"That's a new one on me, Flagg. What of him, though?"

"He's called Pendrick, sir. His grandfather came from Plymouth."

"Don't waste my time on family histories, Flagg," said Tony impatiently, trying to remember what he had been about to write in his notebook. It was just like Flagg, the enthusiastic old ass, to come worrying him with a complicated rigmarole about gobs and grandfathers when there was so much to be done and to think about.

“No, Mister Cheenies, sir,” the A.B. replied, with rather an injured expression in his doglike eyes. “But as I was goin’ to say, sir, that there Pendrick’s just turned twenty-four and’s bin four years in the navy. He’s drawin’ close on sixty dollars a month, sir. Three blinkin’ quid a week an’ all found! Did you ever hear the like o’ that, sir?”

Compared with Flagg’s pay, Pendrick’s was munificence indeed.

“It costs much more to live in America,” Tony informed him. Comparisons in pay were certainly not to be encouraged.

“Yes, sir. But it’s not only the pay I’m thinkin’ about.”

“Then what *is* on your mind?” Tony demanded, his exasperation beginning to get the better of him.

“Pendrick knows some dames around here, sir,” Flagg explained, sinking his voice to a throaty whisper. “He wants me to—”

“Dames! At your time of life, you old reprobate? I thought you were married, Flagg?”

“ ’Gawd ’elp me, Mister Cheenies! O’ course I’m married. But it’s not *them* sort o’ dames you sees in films. You’ve took me up the wrong way, sir. It’s a father an’ mother an’ a whole parcel o’ daughters wot Pendrick’s friends with, a Canadian family. Seein’ as how I’m fresh out from England an’ seen a bit, Pendrick says will I come along an’ have a bite o’ supper tonight an’ spin ’em a yarn about the war, Dunkirk, sir, an’ all that.”

Tony could imagine the sort of yarns that Flagg might spin when really on his mettle.

“Is it all right for me to go, sir?” the A.B. inquired.

“Of course,” said Tony. “Why ever not?”

“Me bein’ a belligerent and Pendrick a nootral, sir, I thought maybe—well, sir, you know what I mean.”

“I hope you’ll have a very pleasant evening with the—er ladies,” said Tony. “Be careful of what you say, that’s all. Act as though Hitler were under the table. In other words, be discreet.”

“I’ll see to that, sir,” said Flagg, beaming all over his face. “But a bit o’ female society don’t come amiss now an’ then. It’s civilizin’, in a manner o’ speakin’.”

Tony could agree with that also, though he was far too busy to remember to ask what happened that evening with Pendrick and the “dames.”

Flagg, being a staid hand and the most senior A.B. in the ship, could no longer be spared as Tony’s henchman and the guardian of his exiguous wardrobe. He was wanted for more important duties, which did not please Flagg, since being the First “Lootenant’s” personal attendant gave him the entree of the wardroom, the pantry, and the cabin flat at all times. This increased his importance on the mess deck. Flagg, if he had not actually heard what the skipper had said to Jimmy the One, or Jimmy the One to the engineer officer, was always capable of inventing something. Thus, he was regarded as always being in possession of the latest information of interest. If someone asked, “What’s the buzz, Georgie boy?” wanting to know what was in the wind, Flagg either used his vivid imagination or, if he could think of nothing sufficiently plausible, tapped the side of his nose and looked mysterious.

Flagg selected his own successor, a tall, pale-faced lad called Rust.

“I’ll keep an eye on ’im, sir, an’ tell ’im what to do,” Flagg volunteered. “He knows how to press trousers already.”

“The least important part of his duties,” said Tony. “What did you do before you joined the Navy, Rust?”

“I was a milk roundsman, sir, before becoming a saxophone player in a dance band, sir,” came the somewhat surprising answer.

3.

The ships had been refitted throughout. They were scrupulously clean and fully supplied. Complete outfits of ammunition and other warlike equipment were left on board, together with stores of all kinds. Everything was handed over to the new owners—paint and cordage, mess-traps, silver and china, all marked with the anchor and U.S.N., towels, sheets, blankets, mattresses, and pillows. Sextant, chronometer watch, high-powered binoculars for the use of the officers and lookouts, parallel rulers and instruments for navigation were not forgotten. A typewriter, paper, envelopes, patent pencil sharpeners, pencils, ink—everything and anything one could imagine, even to books and magazines, an electric coffee machine in the wardroom, were all provided. Storerooms were fully stocked with provisions, including spiced tinned ham and tinned sausages and canned fruit and corn, which do not normally find a place in the dietary of British bluejackets. Since the American Navy is “dry,” the British victualing officer on shore saw to it that the ships were duly provided with Navy rum.

When the time for the final turnover came, the American ensigns, jacks, and pendants were hauled down for the last time, and the American crews left their ships to travel home

by rail. An hour later, with a band of the Royal Canadian Navy playing at its head, a long column of British seamen, eight ships' companies, marched through the town from the barracks where they had been accommodated.

At the head of the jetty alongside which the destroyers lay stood a British Rear-Admiral and his staff. As each ship's company marched by, the officers saluted and the detachments were given the order "Eyes left!"

The crews went on board their new ships and were fallen in on deck. When all was ready, with men standing by the halliards, a bugler on the jetty sounded the "Attention" followed by the "Admiral's Salute." The brand-new White Ensigns appeared at the ensign staffs aft, the jacks forward, and the white, red-crossed naval pendants at the main masthead. The bugler sounded the "Carry On." The brief ceremony was over. Another eight destroyers had become British. Their crews started to settle down in their new and unfamiliar surroundings.

For the next few days *Number Fourteen* was at sea with the other ships—exercising the men, carrying out steaming trials, trying out the armaments. For Richmond and Tony it was a period of intense activity. The crew had to be drilled for every conceivable emergency, from repelling enemy aircraft and action stations to fire quarters, collision stations, and taking or being taken in tow. Not a few of the men were strange to destroyers. Others, the newcomers to the Navy, had not been to sea except for the voyage out from England.

And then, after fueling up at another port, they set out for the long stretch of nearly 2,500 miles across the Atlantic. The weather was inclined to be turbulent, particularly for ships of only 1,200 tons. It eventually came on to blow very hard

indeed, with fierce squalls and a steep, toppling sea and the wind whipping the spray off every surging wave crest.

"Heavy breaking southwesterly sea, very steep," ran one of the entries in the *Hamilton's* bridge notebook. "Wind 7 to 8. Squalls of heavy rain, with gusts force 9 to 10. Occasional thunder and lightning."

All destroyers are lively in such conditions, and the *Hamilton* and her consorts, though dry enough on deck, were no exception. The heaviest rolls were fifty-four degrees to port and forty-seven to starboard, though not of course at the same time. The roll toward the wind and sea never approximated to the roll to leeward. The motion was quick and jerky, disconcerting enough to those who had never been in destroyers before. Some of the younger men paid the usual penalty, and wished only that they might die, and that quickly.

Most of the men lashed themselves in their bunks at night, as did the officers off watch in the upper berths of the double cabins. Except for a hurried wash and shave in the morning, few removed their clothes during the entire voyage. Even partial cleanliness was something of an ordeal with the ship throwing herself about as she did. Richmond, Tony, a few of the petty officers, Flagg, young Buttress, and perhaps half a dozen others, were the destroyer veterans of the party.

One of the other officers, a Lieutenant R.N.V.R., had been a chemist in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, when the war began. The R.N.V.R. Sub-Lieutenant was about to become a solicitor and had joined the Navy as a seaman to serve some time in a trawler before being chosen to qualify as an officer. What with mines, U-boats, bombs, and engagements with

enemy aircraft, he had already had his full share of experiences.

The Surgeon Lieutenant, whose first trip it was to sea in the Navy, had forsaken a practice in the West End of London. He never once was seasick and even during the most blowing weather was invariably immaculately dressed with a clean white collar. Most of the others wore fishermen's high-necked jerseys, mufflers, sea boots, and their oldest of uniforms, much patched and tattered. Not so the "Doc."

Staddon, the engineer officer, and Mr. Small, the Gunner, have already been mentioned. They proved themselves to be towers of strength at sea, just as they had during the process of taking-over in Canada.

As has already been indicated, the previous histories of the men were as varied as those of the officers. A good many corners had to be rounded off and polished. There were a few square pegs, but the crew as a whole were a keen lot of men and stout-hearted. By the time the coast of Ireland was sighted as a gray-blue smudge on the horizon they were beginning to get over the first throes of life in a small ship in bad weather, and were working together with a will.

Already the *Hamilton* showed signs of being a happy ship. Whatever Richmond and Tony may have felt about the necessary minor readjustments, they would never have admitted to any outsider that she wasn't incomparably the best and smartest ship of the flotilla—a flotilla soon to be broken up and its units dispersed to the areas in which destroyers were most needed.

For one busy week the *Hamilton* lay in a British dockyard port undergoing a few alterations and having her anti-submarine and anti-aircraft armaments increased.

Speculation was soon rife among the crew as to where the ship would next be employed. Bales of additional warm clothing were drawn from the Naval Store Officer. Large gift bundles of hand-knitted jerseys, mufflers, sea-boot stockings, gloves, and other things arrived from various organizations in Britain and the United States which provided comforts for the Royal Navy. Their receipt at once started a rumor that the *Hamilton* was shortly to be sent to the Arctic, though precisely what for nobody could say.

"That's all baloney," said Able Seaman Flagg, arguing the point with the leading cook. "I'll bet you three tots o' rum we won't sight no icebergs nor polar bears this commission." He helped himself to a freshly baked rock cake from a metal tray in the galley.

Cookie did not draw his rum, and said so. Anyhow, if Flagg had inside knowledge as to where the ship was going, he might just as well share it.

Flagg sucked his teeth and looked mysterious.

"Well," he said, proceeding to masticate. "I did hear a buzz. Leastways, it isn't hardly a buzz, but me puttin' two and two together from wot I heard in high places."

"You're telling me!" Cookie laughed. He had been shipmates with Flagg quite long enough to realize that he was no ordinary romancer.

"Ho!" said Flagg, somewhat nettled. "So you thinks I'm a liar, do you?"

"Not hardly a deliberate liar, Georgie. More a comedian, I should say. You like a good yarn. Your two and two don't always make four."

“So that’s what you thinks, you old water spoiler! —Why d’you think they’ve painted us in all these here fancy colors?”

Indeed, the *Hamilton’s* service gray had been covered over with a futuristic design in white, blue, and green with a few broad streaks of black.

The cook didn’t know, and said so.

“But I knows,” said the wiseacre. “It’s so we’ll ’armonize with tropic seas. An’ didn’t I hear the skipper askin’ the navigator wot charts we had o’ Gibraltar and Sierra Leone? We’re goin’ somewheres ’ot, you mark my words.”

But somehow cookie couldn’t reconcile those bales and bundles of winter clothing with service in the tropics.

“When you’ve bin in the Navy as long as I have you’ll learn not to be surprised at anything they does,” said Flagg, choosing another rock cake and biting into it.

“There’s something in that,” the leading cook felt bound to admit. “I volunteered for a big ship in the Mediterranean, so they send me here to look after a lot o’ ungrateful perishers like you who don’t know what good cooking is, and growl if you don’t get three rashers to your breakfasts.”

“Wot about the corned beef hash?” Flagg queried, his mouth full.

“Good cooks are artists, which is more than I can say for some able seamen I know of. Artists can’t make pictures without materials in a gale o’ wind in the blinkin’ Atlantic!”

“If you’re an artist I’m an admiral,” said Flagg. “But never mind, cookie. You don’t do so bad, reely. Don’t let it get you down, any’ow.”

“It’ll take a better man than you to get me down,” said cookie, as Flagg’s hand went out again. “And now clear out o’ my galley, you old scrounger. Those rock cakes are for the petty officers’ tea.”

“They’d be all right if you hadn’t skimped the currants,” said Flagg, brushing crumbs off his jumper preparatory to moving off. “I was only samplin’ your artistry. Well, so long, Cookie Boy. Keep your pecker up. We’re goin’ somewheres ’ot, you mark my words.”

“Maybe you will one o’ these days,” said the cook to Flagg’s retreating figure.

The *Hamilton* was filled up with provisions and stores, then went to sea for a short run to test her new armament and to make certain that a slight defect in one of her turbines had been made good. All went well, and on returning to harbor Richmond went ashore to report. He was back in less than an hour.

“What’s the verdict, sir?” Tony asked, meeting him at the gangway.

“We sail at seven A.M. tomorrow, Chenies.”

“Where for, sir?” came Tony’s instinctive question.

Richmond smiled and shook his head. Various people were within earshot, and one never talked about destinations in wartime.

“Our address,” he said, “is care of G.P.O., London. Come forward to my cabin, Number One. —Quartermaster?”

“Sir?”

“Ask the engineer officer to speak to me.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

It was in the privacy of the captain's cabin that Tony heard of their new duty.

The *Hamilton* was to join a newly formed convoy group for work in the North Atlantic.

CHAPTER XIII

FOR more than four months during the winter the *Hamilton* was engaged in escorting Atlantic convoys—ten to twelve days out as a rule followed by a nominal four days in harbor. But there were all too few ships for the work, and some of them had a habit of developing defects or being damaged in bad weather, so that the *Hamilton's* four days' rest was often shortened to forty-eight hours or less.

It was a grueling, monotonous job at any time, but particularly during the furious gales and bitter cold of winter. Occasionally they had the chance of opening fire on an inquisitive Focke Wulf which hovered aggravatingly around reporting the position and composition of the convoy for the benefit of the U-boats, while rarely venturing within range. Once they picked up eight survivors from a U-boat which had been depth-charged and sunk by someone else. Twice they rescued the men from torpedoed merchant ships, one such party being on board for seven days, which severely taxed their resources and already crowded living spaces. But war at sea is not all excitement, action, and glory. The lucky incidents like sinking a U-boat, bringing down an aircraft, or assisting in the destruction of an enemy surface ship, come as brilliant flashes of light in long periods of gray monotony. For the most part war is simple drudgery, combined, so far as the smaller ships are concerned, with the very acme of discomfort. Destroyers, escort ships, corvettes, and trawlers all had an equally trying time.

Sometimes it blew like the wrath of God, with the fierce wind whipping the crests off the steep, leaden-colored

combers and hurtling them to leeward in clouds of flying spindrift which almost hid the surface. The old *Hamilton* plunged and wallowed, burying her bows in the advancing seas, flinging the heavy spray high over her bridge and funnel tops, and quivering and shaking as though at any moment she might wrench herself apart.

In really bad weather normal routine went by the board. Nobody ever took off their clothes at sea for fear of being caught undressed on some sudden alarm. Some hardly washed. They evolved a new and simplified technique of living, snatching an hour or two of sleep whenever the chance came, and eating scratch meals whenever they could be provided. As often as not, when the galley—which was on deck—was out of action through flooding or the motion was such that the cooks were unable to keep their pots and pans on the stove, the meals were very scratch indeed. Many was the time Tony sat wedged on the settee in the wardroom eating a tin of sardines with his fingers.

All hands grew heartily tired of corned beef and tinned salmon, with ship's biscuit. Fresh meat and bread usually became exhausted three or four days after leaving harbor. Hot soup, cocoa, and coffee appeared at all times, and were most welcome. The sailors preferred tea—strong, well-stewed tea the color of dark sherry liberally sweetened with brown sugar and diluted with condensed milk. Jermyn, the doctor, thinking of their digestions and mindful of his own reputation as a dietician, tried to eradicate the habit. He might as well have attempted to remove the pyramids singlehanded. Though grog, otherwise "Nelson's blood," has not lost its popularity, tea is really the staple drink of the Royal Navy.

The winter gales sometimes brought blizzards and heavy snow, with temperatures well down below freezing. The cold was frequently so intense that ice from condensation formed on the bulkheads and ship's side in the crowded living spaces. On deck the guns, boats, ropes, rails, indeed all deck fittings in exposed positions, became thickly encrusted with ice, partly from frozen spray, partly from driving snow. The thin stanchions of the berthing rails and the wire rails themselves became swollen to the size of saplings. Entrenching tools were supplied for de-icing, which was most important. Even in a ship of considerable size, let alone a destroyer, the additional top weight of ice is dangerous to stability.

There came the time when the afternoon before the *Hamilton* arrived in harbor after a particularly arduous convoy trip, Jermyn, the doctor, came into Tony's cabin to disturb his afternoon nap. He had been without regular sleep for eight days.

"Number One," he said, shaking him by the shoulder.

Tony was awake on the instant. He sat up blinking in his bunk.

"What's up?"

"I've had to put the skipper on the sick list."

"Hell!" Tony exclaimed. "He said he wasn't feeling too well this morning. What's the matter?"

"Appendicitis."

"Lord! Are you having to operate?"

"No," said the doctor, "not with the ship tumbling about in half-a-gale of wind and a heavy sea. The appendicitis wasn't acute. All the same it *was* appendicitis, and he'd told

Richmond to lie up in his bunk and had given him something to make him sleep. He wouldn't undertake the risk of his carrying on. The ship was expected to reach harbor at daylight on the morrow, wasn't she?"

"Yes," said Tony, scrambling out of his bunk and into his sea boots.

"Then we should arrange for an ambulance to meet us the moment we get alongside," the doctor said. "He ought to be operated on as soon as possible."

They reached harbor without incident, and Richmond, rather apologetic and very sorry for himself, was taken off to the hospital. Two hours later Tony was reporting to the Captain in charge of the flotilla at his office on shore.

"It's a bad business about Richmond," the Captain said. "He'll be away for some weeks, they tell me."

"So I understand, sir."

"And your ship's wanted for a special job the day after tomorrow. You've no defects that'll prevent you from going to sea, I suppose?"

"Nothing that really matters, sir."

"Good. How long have you been in destroyers, Chenies?"

"Just over sixteen months, sir. Ever since the outbreak of war."

"You know the ropes pretty well, what?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"Well, I propose leaving you in command, for the next trip, at any rate," the Captain told him. "See you don't let me down."

Tony felt very proud.

“I’ll do my best, sir,” he said, flushing with pleasure. “Thank you, sir.”

“Whether or not the high-ups will confirm your remaining in command till Richmond’s fit again I don’t know,” the Captain continued. “It all depends on your next trip, I imagine. But I believe in giving young chaps their chance, so look out you don’t put her ashore or do anything desperate, or my name’ll be mud. You’ll be sailing at daylight on Thursday. You’ll get your orders in due course.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“And I’m sending you a sub-lieutenant R.N.V.R. to help out with the watchkeeping. He’s a useful chap who’s spent most of his time in destroyers. All right, Chenies. Good luck. That’s all.”

Tony felt himself walking on air as he made his way back to the ship. He was sorry for Richmond, but to be trusted with even the temporary command of an old destroyer in wartime as a lieutenant of less than a year’s seniority was glory indeed. There were precious few who had been given the chance.

He saw Richmond in the hospital before he sailed. The operation had been successful. There were no complications.

“Good for you, Chenies,” the Lieutenant Commander said, when he heard of Tony’s good fortune. “Don’t smash up the old ship while I’m away.”

“I’ll do my best not to put a hole in her,” Tony told him.

“Good hunting,” Richmond smiled. “If you manage to bag a U-boat, I’ll whoop with joy and damn the rotten appendix that kept me out of it. Don’t forget she’s tricky on the helm, and take it easy going alongside. When are you sailing?”

“At cockcrow tomorrow.”

“Then so long, good luck again, and give the lads my blessing. They’re a damn good crowd.”

2.

Tony, full of his new responsibility, was poring over the sailing orders with a chart of the North Atlantic spread out before him. Snagg, the Canadian Lieutenant R.N.V.R., stood beside him with parallel rulers, dividers, and pencil. Snagg, originally a chemist in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, was the *Hamilton’s* navigator, and a most reliable one.

The orders were comparatively simple, “1. Being in all respects ready for sea,” they began, “H.M. Ship under your command will sail at 0700 on Thursday, January 29, in time to rendezvous with Convoy L.X. in Lat. —— N. Long. —— W. at 1030 the same day.

“2. The Convoy, which consists of the three ships named in the Appendix and should be capable of a speed of 15 knots, will be escorted by H.M.S.’s *Bechuana*, *Cutlass*, and *Claymore*. You will place yourself under the orders of *Bechuana*, Senior Officer of the escort.

“3. After passing through positions M, L, and R, it is intended that the Convoy shall be escorted to the meridian of —— West. Fuel permitting, escort force will then rendezvous with eastbound Convoy M.Q. in Lat. —— N. Long. —— W. at about daylight on Monday, February 2nd, and accompany it to its destination....”

There was a good deal more about the waves upon which wireless watches were to be kept, the latest-known positions of U-boats, the areas in which British minefields had recently

been laid, and the activities of enemy aircraft in the Western Approaches.

"It looks to me like a fairly ordinary eight or nine day trip," said Tony.

"Provided the weather's decent," Snagg put in. "The glass is well up now, but how long will it last?"

"What a doleful bloke you are," Tony laughed. "What we all want is a spot of excitement after these dreary months of flogging the ocean. —Gosh! I'd give something to cop a nice fat U-boat on the surface!"

"If you haven't had your bellyful of excitement already, you'll have had it by the time this war's ended," said Snagg. "I'm a civilian, not a roaring, ranting sailor. —All the same, I wouldn't mind a U-boat."

Tony glanced at the clock on the bulkhead of the charthouse. The time was eighteen minutes past seven *P.M.*

"Seeing that this is our last night in harbor and we're all T.T. at sea," he said, "what we both really need, Snagg, is a drop of pink gin before dinner. Lock up the charts and come down to the wardroom."

"You've had many worse ideas than that, Number One," the Canadian replied, bundling the charts into a drawer and locking it. "I must confess I like my drop o' gin in moderation. But I'm a chemist, and I've often wondered—"

"What?"

"Have you ever analyzed gin, Number One—beg pardon, I mean Captain?"

"Lord, no!" said Tony. "Why should I?"

"Who invented gin and Angostura bitters?"

"What a damnfool question. Are you going ga-ga, Snagg?"

“My queries are partly scientific. Who introduced pink gin into the Navy? My old English grandmother always said that only charwomen drank it.”

“Good luck to the charwomen,” said Tony.

“Quite. But who introduced it into the Navy?”

“How the blazes should I know? What’s it matter, anyhow?”

“I’m just wondering what we’ll do when there’s no more gin,” said Snagg mournfully. “It’ll be rationed one of these days, if not abolished for the duration.”

“There’s always beer,” Tony suggested.

“But I detest beer,” the Canadian observed. “That’s what’s worrying me.”

“Huh!” said Tony. “When the gin’s gone and you won’t drink honest beer you’ll have to go T.T., my lad.”

3.

The outward trip with the convoy was not entirely uneventful. The weather was fine with little wind, nothing but a long, smooth swell rolling down from the westward. The sky remained obstinately overcast with low cloud. At times a thin haze over the gray horizon shut down the visibility to three or four miles. It was in these circumstances, halfway through one forenoon, that a huge Focke Wulf Condor came sailing out of the clouds about fifteen hundred feet overhead and on the starboard bow of the convoy. Its arrival was quite unexpected. One couldn’t say which was the more surprised, the convoy or the aircraft.

But the weather being hazy, the escorts and merchant ships had their anti-aircraft guns manned and ready. Before even

the *Hamilton's* alarm bells had ceased ringing or Tony and the others on her bridge had put on their steel helmets, the intruder was being fired at.

The guns started to thud, and the gray sky became heavily pockmarked with the puffs of exploding shell—inky black, brown, and a curious golden yellow. Smaller weapons chimed in. One heard the rattle of heavy and light machine guns and saw the tracer bullets curving aloft like flights of red-hot tomatoes.

It all happened very quickly.

The Focke Wulf swerved and dived, probably with the idea of making it more difficult for the guns. Watching through glasses, Tony saw a parcel of bombs leave the machine and come slanting down toward the sea. They fell practically together, bursting with a roar and raising an elongated upheaval of grayish-white smoke and spray which completely obliterated the second ship in the convoy.

"Lord!" someone exclaimed on the *Hamilton's* bridge. "They've got her."

"Don't be a damn fool!" said Tony, turning on him.

Appearances were often deceptive, and he'd seen a good deal of bombing at sea in one way and another. There was always much more water than ship, and though near misses might sometimes do damage, hundreds of bombs were dropped for every actual one that did harm. It was so in this case. When the smoke and spray of the explosions had subsided, the merchant ship was seen to be steaming on as though nothing had happened.

The enemy airplane, meanwhile, had come down to less than a thousand feet and had started to climb toward the

friendly cover of the clouds, still pursued by shell bursts and the sparkling tracks of tracer bullets.

The *Hamilton's* own guns were firing hard. So were those in the other destroyers.

It seemed to Tony that the Focke Wulf would escape. Already she was becoming blurred and indistinct in the clouds. Then, when he had almost given up hope, he saw a thin smear of black smoke clear and distinct against the prevailing gray.

It thickened rapidly into an inky trail arching across the sky. At the spot where it started he noticed the reddish-golden glow of flame. Then the airplane itself came into full view again, diving steeply down toward the sea, and apparently out of control. Her forepart and wings were clear and distinct. Her fuselage and after part were ablaze.

It was all over in a few seconds. As cheering burst out from the men on the *Hamilton's* upper deck the Focke Wulf, flaring like a comet, hit the sea in an upheaval of black smoke and spray. When it cleared away nothing could be seen of the machine but a small part of the smoking tail standing up out of the water at an angle of forty-five degrees.

The nearest destroyer, the *Cutlass*, raced to the scene. All signs of the aircraft had disappeared before she got there. She found nothing but a patch of oil littered with charred debris—that, and two dead bodies in lifebelts.

4.

It was the next evening, some time before sunset, that the air suddenly became strident with radio messages.

The *Hamilton*, tied to one particular wave length, did not get them all, merely intercepts which showed that something unusual was happening far over the horizon to the southward. An unknown warship with a convoy was going into action. After that, silence. Tony fumed with impatience. It was exasperating not to know details.

What ship was in action, and who was she fighting? Was it an ordinary attack by U-boats or aircraft, or something more serious?

The leading telegraphist of the *Hamilton* didn't know. He had heard no more than bits and pieces of messages, and garbled fragments at that.

But the *Bechuana*, the Senior Officer of the escort, knew more. An hour later, just after dusk, she was signaling to the *Claymore* and *Hamilton*:

"Homeward bound convoy attacked by raider, probably pocket battleship, in Latitude —— Longitude ——. *Claymore* take *Hamilton* under your orders and proceed with all convenient dispatch to position indicated, searching area for possible boats and survivors and continuing after daylight tomorrow until satisfied. Then proceed to nearest base. Keep careful lookout in case raider breaks north."

Twenty minutes later the *Claymore* and *Hamilton* were steaming southward at twenty-three knots, the highest speed that was desirable in view of their already considerable expenditure of fuel. The position given was roughly two hundred and eighty miles distant. If the good weather held, they should reach it shortly before daylight.

Tony spent a sleepless night on the bridge as the *Hamilton* drove southward in the *Claymore's* wake. Four times he sent down to the wireless office to ask if there was any further

news of the action, or for whose boats or survivors they had been directed to search. As often the reply came back that there was no further news—no wireless signals at all except the usual routine messages. Full of his new responsibility, Tony would have given a lot for more definite information.

It was a fairly light night, with a three-quarter moon hidden behind a canopy of thick cloud. A large ship like a battleship might be sighted at two miles, certainly no more. Torpedo tubes and guns were kept manned and ready for action. Officers and lookouts swept the dark horizon with their glasses.

The *Claymore*, being the senior of the pair, had already made known her intentions. "If raider is met," she had said, "intend attacking with torpedoes, ships separating and acting independently. After attack enemy should be shadowed. If nothing sighted by daylight, ships will be stationed five miles apart by signal."

The hours passed, punctuated by jugs of hot cocoa and sandwiches from the galley.

Midnight ... 2 A.M. ... 4.30 A.M. ...

It would be a death or glory business if the raider were sighted. Tony had made up his mind to close in to decisive range before firing his torpedoes, while trying to keep the pocket battleship silhouetted against what light there was in the sky. The enemy mounted six eleven-inch and numerous 5.9's. The moment she opened fire, the *Hamilton* would reply with her four-inch. A mosquito fighting an elephant, but in the deathless story of the night attacks at Jutland he remembered reading that a lucky four-inch shell from a British destroyer bursting on the bridge of a German battleship had killed many and wounded more.

But no dark shape hove in sight to reward their vigilance—nothing.

At half-past six the first fingers of dawn came creeping over the sky to the eastward. Three-quarters of an hour later it was almost broad daylight, and the two destroyers started to diverge to cover a wider area.

The visibility had increased to seven or eight miles, and the clouds overhead were beginning to fray out and disperse. There was little or no wind, and the long, westerly swell broad on the *Hamilton's* starboard beam caused her to lurch heavily to port as she lifted to the smooth, rolling hillocks. A man with a pair of binoculars had long since climbed up the swaying ladder to the small crow's nest halfway up the *Hamilton's* foremast. He had orders to keep his eyes well skinned, and was doing his level best. In point of fact, standing in a steel cylinder not unlike an exaggerated oildrum which swayed giddily to and fro in a sickening arc as the ship rolled, he was beginning to feel the pangs of acute nausea, and wondered what was the correct and most tactful procedure if the pangs reached fruition. No one had ever instructed him on that point. Anyhow, he wished he had not drunk that tin mug of rather greasy ship's cocoa before climbing to his lofty eyrie. Being a destroyer sailor was all very well. He had volunteered for small ships, and liked them. Fifteen months before he had been a milk roundsman in Peckham, and his nautical experience had been limited to a boat on the Serpentine with his wife and two children.

Then, sweeping the horizon with his glasses, his qualms were suddenly forgotten as he caught sight of a black object on the horizon to starboard. He focused on the spot—

whatever it was had disappeared. Yet he could have sworn his eyes had not deceived him.

Ah! There it was again.

Putting his mouth to the lip of the voice pipe he hailed the bridge.

“Dark object bearing green three-oh, sir!” he reported. “Distance about five miles.”

As yet they could see nothing from the bridge.

“Ask him what it looks like,” said Tony, the glasses to his eyes.

“Might be the conning tower of a submarine, sir,” the lookout man replied. “I can’t see it all the time. It bobs up and down on the swell.”

It wasn’t the conning tower of a U-boat. It was a ship’s boat flying what looked like a flag. The *Hamilton*, signaling to the *Claymore*, altered course toward it.

“Investigate boat and report,” said the *Claymore*.

A quarter of an hour later the boat was close ahead—a merchant ship’s lifeboat painted gray, gashed and torn with parts of her gunwale missing. She was crowded with men, some bailing, some trying to get out the oars. Someone in the sternsheets was waving. The boathook, with a bit of dirty blanket flapping from it, had been up-ended in the bows. Looking through his glasses Tony could see no ship’s name on the boat’s stern. But he saw that many of its occupants were bandaged.

The *Hamilton’s* engines stopped—went slow astern. Tony conned the ship to bring the boat close under the port bow. Leading Seaman Buttress, with several other men, was on the destroyer’s forecastle.

“Here. Catch this, mate!” shouted a seaman. “We’ll pull you alongside. Don’t get out your oars.” He threw a heaving line, which was caught by a man in the boat.

Leaning over the port wing of the bridge, Tony looked down into the boat. It contained more than thirty men, all dirty and dressed in diverse clothing. One or two wore naval duffle coats. Most of them seemed to be bandaged. A man in rolled-up shirtsleeves was evidently a doctor. He was leaning over two obviously badly wounded men lying on the flooded bottom boards, their heads pillowed on lifebelts, their faces ashen-gray and ghastly.

A youngish man in the sternsheets wore a tattered uniform monkey jacket with the stripes of a lieutenant of the Royal Naval Reserve.

“What ship d’you come from?” Tony asked him.

The officer didn’t seem to hear, but realized he was being addressed.

“We were sunk in action with an enemy raider yesterday afternoon,” he said.

“I know,” said Tony. “But what ship d’you come from?” He already realized that their pathetic remnant of a ship’s company came from a warship.

The Lieutenant R.N.R. put his hand to his ear.

“I didn’t catch what you said, sir.”

“I asked what ship you came from,” Tony repeated, louder this time.

“The *Fonthill Abbey*, sir. Armed merchant cruiser.”

Tony’s heart nearly stopped.

“Are you the only survivors?” he managed to get out, hardly recognizing his own voice.

“I think so. We picked up all we found floating around on wreckage.”

“Where’s the Captain?” Tony asked, feeling sick and dazed.

“I don’t know, sir. He may have got away, but the last we saw of him was on board, wounded. She was badly on fire and sinking when he ordered us to leave her. That was after dark.”

“My God!” Tony groaned.

He felt stunned. His father gone. It was unbelievable, dreadful to contemplate. How in heaven could this terrible news be broken to his mother? Probably she’d get one of those stereotyped official communications starting with the words to the effect that the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty deeply regretted to inform her that ...

“Oh, God!” he murmured, clenching his fists.

He could imagine a telegram arriving at the house at Minchinhampton. They might even telephone it. The news would be all over the little place. Friends and neighbors would condole and try to be helpful and sympathetic.

But the bottom would be blasted out of his mother’s little universe. She rarely showed her feelings, but Tony very well knew how really devoted she was.

And what of Toppy and himself?

One somehow couldn’t visualize existence or home without the old man. He’d been part and parcel of their lives ever since they could remember, their friend and helper, always generous and understanding. In his mind’s eye Tony could see his father pottering round his garden and tying up the sweet peas, chaffing old Wilkes or the postman, polishing

the car, playing the fool with Tinker, the Sealyham, and Tiger, the cat.

No. Life could never be the same without the old man.

And now he'd gone—in action, fighting a pocket battleship armed with eleven-inch guns with a slow, unarmored tub of an armed merchant cruiser mounting no weapon larger than a six-inch. It was just like him to go bald-headed for an opponent who could blow him out of the water with a single salvo, but—

Tony was brought back to mundane affairs by a report from Snagg that the ship was gathering sternway. In his shocked agitation, he had forgotten that he had given orders for slow astern. He rectified the omission, gave the ship a touch ahead and brought her to a standstill.

On deck Leading Seaman Alfred Buttress made agonized inquiries from the survivors as they were helped and hoisted on board, no easy job with a rolling ship and so many badly wounded.

His father, Chief Petty Officer Reginald Ebenezer Buttress, was also among the missing. The last time he had been seen was making his way forward to the *Fonthill Abbey's* burning bridge. From what some of the survivors said he had gone there to report to the Captain that all the guns were out of action—that the ship could fight no more.

The *Fonthill Abbey* had floated on into the night, they said, blazing like a beacon. Then, after the sudden glare of a heavy explosion, she had been seen no more.

But her tattered, begrimed White Ensigns were still flying when she foundered. They had seen them in the light of the flames.

The survivors were pathetically proud of that.

CHAPTER XIV

THE fog that had persisted for the first few days of the *Fonthill Abbey's* voyage home from Canada had lifted. Captain Chenies was pleased at that.

Shepherding a large ocean convoy in close formation in the thick weather prevailing on the Banks off Newfoundland was ever an anxious job. The Captain had hardly slept—rarely left the bridge.

Now, three-quarters of the way across the Atlantic, with the convoy intact and steaming well, with fine weather and a promising forecast and the visibility a full twelve miles, Chenies was beginning to think of home. The *Fonthill Abbey* was overdue for refit, and needed it. Jamieson, the Chief Engineer, who made light of most difficulties, had begun to complain about the state of his boilers. Wenlock, the Commander, was equally emphatic about the condition of his department. Parts of the deck needed recaulking after the winter gales of the North Atlantic. There were boats' davits to be straightened, two lifeboats to be replaced, and various alterations and additions to be made to the armament as a result of war experience. The defect list was growing almost daily. Three times the *Fonthill Abbey's* refit had been put off because her services were urgently needed. In Wenlock's opinion, and Chenies and Jamieson cordially agreed, further to postpone it was asking for trouble.

The officers and men, too, needed their ten days' leave. They'd had a particularly grueling time during most of the winter, and were beginning to show signs of staleness. Day after day at sea with convoys provided no chance of real rest or relaxation. Goodchild, the Surgeon Lieutenant

Commander R.N.V.R., who had the unpleasant job of scrutinizing most of the men's outgoing correspondence with the help of two assistant censors, had reported privately to Chenies that the ship's company was beginning to think that it had been forgotten.

Chenies also would be glad of a rest, though winter with its cold weather, short days, and inconveniences brought about by the early black-out, wasn't the best time of the year for leave in the country. Minchinhampton wouldn't be at its best. There would be little chance of pottering about in the garden, seeing his friends, and doing all the things he liked. Petrol and food were rationed. There was little or no entertaining. All the same, Minchinhampton was home, and blessed. He'd see his wife and Toppy, perhaps Tony as well if the lad could manage a hurried week end. There would be Tinker and Tiger. No place was really home without a dog and a friendly cat. They'd possessed dogs ever since they'd been married. Life wouldn't have been the same without them.

He had already planned in his mind that he would get his wife to join him in London to give him a chance of seeing Toppy and of looking up various old friends at the Admiralty. A couple of nights in London would be enough. They'd take Toppy to a theater—if the theaters were still running and there was something worth seeing.

Toppy was doing pretty well in her job, it seemed, and so was young Tony. The lad rarely wrote direct to his father, but from his letters to his mother it appeared he was enjoying himself in his ex-American destroyer, strenuous though it might be. In his last letter the young fire-eater had even ventured to hope that the war would last long enough to give him the necessary seniority for a command of his own.

“I can think of nothing more dismal than the Navy in peacetime,” he had written. “No excitement to keep one on one’s toes, no submarines or aircraft, nothing but monotonous exercises at sea at reduced speed to save fuel, and everyone trying to pretend it’s something like the real thing. I remember what it was like before this war, and I can’t somehow see myself liking that sort of thing after all that’s happened to me since. If I’m not chucked out on the beach as a good many chaps were after the last war, I think I’ll have to volunteer to go exploring in the Antarctic or somewhere. I don’t particularly care for the dirt and discomfort of this sort of life, but it would irk my simple soul still more to go back to scrubbed decks and brass work, with me, in a frock coat and telescope, having to keep a watchful eye to see that the seagulls to windward aren’t too familiar with the paint work. They’re badly brought-up birds with no manners at all. We don’t worry about such things now.... I wish you could see this ship and the men,” he went on to say. “Apart from a few old stagers who were in the Service before the war, and one or two veritable ancients who served in the last spot of bother and are back as pensioners for this, practically all of our hands were in civil jobs all over the country and had no idea of being sailors at all. Now they’ve got over their seasickness and we’ve trained them to do their jobs, I must say I’m proud of them and a bit pleased with myself for being responsible, or partly responsible, for having licked them into shape, more or less. Their ideas of naval discipline are a bit weird and wonderful after so short a time in the Service, but they’re a grand crowd to work with and to be among. We’ve one man just rated A.B. who was some sort of supervisor in a corset factory. You wouldn’t think it if you saw him after two or three days at sea. We’ve another who was a commercial

traveler in ladies' underwear, and a signalman who used to be a tic-tac man to a bookie. It takes all sorts to make a wartime Navy...."

2.

The time was after half-past four in the afternoon. The weather being clear and the convoy in station, Chenies was in his sea cabin near the bridge going item by item through the engine-room defect list with Jamieson. It was a boring job which simply had to be done before the ship reached harbor. Chenies, for his part, would have far preferred to be enjoying the bright sun outside. Days with sun were none too frequent during winter in the North Atlantic.

The trusty Young, the senior Lieutenant R.N.R., was on watch on the upper bridge. With him was Mr. Rigby, midshipman. Goodchild, the Surgeon Lieutenant Commander, and Herbert, the Paymaster Lieutenant Commander, were also on the bridge, partly for an airing, partly to amuse themselves by taking some pictures of the convoy with Goodchild's cine camera. Having done their best with the convoy, they wanted a few feet of Young, insisting that he was photogenic.

"Now, Dundee, my bonny boy," said the doctor, "if you'll kindly drape your rugged features over the compass and pretend to be busy, your missus will have a permanent record of how you helped to win the war. Rigby, if you'll stand alongside Mr. Young pretending to take notes on a signal pad it'd make a better picture—or you might point at the horizon as though you'd suddenly sighted a submarine."

But Rigby paid no attention. The *Fonthill Abbey* was to starboard of the convoy and steaming faster than the other

ships to close the Commodore, who was leading one of the lines. There was a signal to be passed. It had something to do with an alteration of course some hours after dark. And the midshipman, with his binoculars to his eyes, was looking to port. He might idly be passing the time by gazing at the ships as they steamed past. On the other hand, his attitude was a little too tense for that, and he had had his glasses leveled on the same spot for some time.

Young, with his lips hovering over the voice pipe leading to the lower bridge preparatory to passing an order to the helmsman, noticed the midshipman's unusual concentration.

"Seen something, Rigby?" he asked.

"I can't be certain, sir. But I thought I saw what might be a ship away on the horizon beyond the convoy."

"What sort of ship?" the Lieutenant wanted to know.

"I couldn't make out, sir. She was very faint and far away, but I thought I saw the top of a mast and bit of a funnel."

"Where away?" Young asked, going to the midshipman's side and lifting his own glasses.

"You see that ship with the black funnel that's making smoke, sir—the fourth, no, the third from the right in the third column?"

Young nodded.

"What's all the excitement?" asked the Paymaster Lieutenant Commander, joining them. Goodchild, having now got three figures silhouetted against a background of sky and sea laden with ships, stood in the background pressing the button of his cine camera. He could hear it whirring contentedly. With the excellent light it should provide a good, sharp picture, but, oh, for the chance of something unique

and really thrilling. The doctor hadn't had much luck with his photos—no submarines being depth-charged or surrendering on the surface, no aircraft crashing into the sea—no real, exciting action such as he had sometimes seen.

"I can't see anything," Young said to Rigby. "Curse the confounded smoke that ship's making. It blankets everything and is visible for miles. Rigby?"

"Sir?"

"Go down and tell the Captain you sighted a ship."

"But I'm not certain, sir," the midshipman objected, anxious lest he should be "bitten" for causing a false alarm.

"Go down and tell him all the same," the Lieutenant ordered.

Rigby went.

"And you two chaps clear off this bridge before the skipper comes up," Young continued. "I'll get hell if he discovers you up here."

"But what *is* it Rigby's sighted?" the doctor wanted to know.

"I don't know. Maybe it's a ship, maybe, it's Rigby's imagination. Anyhow, make yourselves scarce and look sharp about it."

Goodchild and Herbert departed, grumbling.

A minute later Chenies arrived on the upper bridge. Commander Wenlock came with him. Rigby followed.

They all used their binoculars to peer out to port. Another minute passed ... two minutes ... a few seconds more ...

Rigby's eyesight was not at fault. A faint gray shape slid into view in a clear gap between two of the ships in the convoy.

Chenies' heart nearly missed a beat. Clearly through his powerful glasses he could see a long gray hull, two gun turrets, and, overtopping all, a squat funnel with a heavy control tower farther forward.

There was no mistaking that silhouette. Even at a distance of ten miles the stranger was plainly recognizable as a warship, a foreigner—a German pocket battleship! She was steaming at high speed, with a white bow wave halfway up her sharp forefoot.

An "enemy report" went down to the wireless room, to be coded and broadcast to the Admiralty—to all ships in the vicinity. Heaven only knew who would pick it up, or if any ship powerful and fast enough to bring the enemy to action was anywhere near. Meanwhile ...

"You see what she is, Wenlock?"

"I do, sir," the Commander nodded, almost casually. "It's come at last."

"We'll fight, Wenlock. Action stations, please."

"Of course, sir," the Commander said, stepping over to unclip and push a red-painted button which sounded the alarm gongs throughout the ship.

They could hear their strident clangor, followed by the sound of voices and rushing feet as the men ran to their stations.

"Full speed both," Chenies ordered, putting his lips to the voice pipe to the lower bridge. He followed it with a helm order.

There came the rattle of the telegraphs, followed by the jangle of the reply gongs from the engine room.

Officers arrived breathless on the bridge.

“Wenlock,” Chenies said.

“Sir?”

“I’m going on ahead of the convoy. Then I’ll turn and engage, after telling the convoy to scatter and make smoke. It’s their only chance. It’ll be dusk in another half-hour,” he added, glancing at the sun, “and dark by about six. You understand, Wenlock? In case—well, in case I’m knocked out, you carry on.”

“I fully understand, sir,” the Commander said, looking his senior full in the eyes. “I’d better be getting along to my station. Well, good luck, sir,” he added impassively. “I daresay we’ve a sporting chance.”

Chenies did not reply to that. What chance could the sixteen-knot, unarmored *Fonthill Abbey* have against a faster enemy battleship armed with six eleven-inch and a number of 5.9’s? The German could stand off out of range and pound the armed merchant cruiser into a sinking shambles. But that process might take time—time enough to save the convoy. Dusk was coming. Darkness would soon follow.

The Commander turned to leave the bridge. Chenies halted him.

“You’ve got that letter, Wenlock?”

“Yes,” the Commander said. “Have you got mine, sir?”

Chenies nodded.

They didn’t discuss what was in these letters. It might have savored of sentimentality. But it had long since been arranged that Wenlock should carry a letter to Mrs. Chenies, and Chenies a letter to Wenlock’s wife, just in case. The pair were very old friends. They had known each other long before the war.

And Wenlock knew very well what Chenies intended to do. At various conferences in the Captain's cabin attended by all the senior executive officers they had discussed the situation that had now arisen—an attack upon the convoy by a heavily armed raider.

Some, no doubt, hoped that the situation might never arise, but if it did it was Chenies' intention to fight his ship until not a gun remained fit for action. Everyone knew of the gallant fights against hopeless odds of the *Rawalpindi* and *Jervis Bay*. Like them, there must be no thought of surrender. All the *Fonthill Abbey's* officers understood that.

"Well, so long, Wenlock," said Chenies. "Do your best, and thanks for all you've done up to date for this ship. You've been a tower of strength. —Good luck, old man, and God bless you."

"God bless us all, sir," the Commander replied, leaving the bridge to go to his battle station. Wenlock was anything but emotional, but at that moment there was something in his heart that he had never felt there before, something glorious and inspiring that he could never have described in words.

The enemy was closing in fast. Before the *Fonthill Abbey* had drawn ahead of the convoy, before even the merchantmen had time really to scatter and partially to hide themselves behind a friendly smoke screen, the German had opened fire. Chenies saw the orange sparkle of the gun flashes and the billowing clouds of brown cordite smoke. There were some seconds of suspense before, almost simultaneously with the thudding of the guns, a cluster of tall, grayish-white spray fountains leaped into the air in the midst of the convoy. For the moment no ship was hit, but the fire seemed to be concentrated upon the largest and most

important-looking vessel in the convoy, a passenger liner with two funnels.

Another salvo came hurtling through the air ... another ...

Chenies had no chance of seeing the result. Leaning over the compass on the upper bridge he was watching the enemy, while bringing his ship gradually round to port to get between the German and the convoy. The convoy, meanwhile, acting independently, had started to scatter to the southward. Some of the ships were dropping smoke floats, their blue-gray vapor drifting across the sea in a low cloud.

The enemy, firing rapidly and at times all but hidden in smoke, was closing fast ... 15,000 yards ... 12,000 ... 11,000.

The *Fonthill Abbey*, flying her battle ensigns, was still edging round toward the enemy. She, also, started to drop smoke floats to add to the artificial fog.

“Shall we open fire, sir?” someone asked.

“All right,” Chenies agreed. “Carry on.”

He gave the order not because there was much chance of hitting at long range with the *Fonthill’s* old pattern six-inch guns, but mainly to draw the fire on his own ship while the convoy did its best to escape. It would also keep the guns’ crews busy, and would give them the idea that they were hitting back in the cataclysm that would presently burst upon them.

The ship shuddered as two of her guns were fired practically simultaneously. A hot, acrid cloud of cordite smoke enveloped the bridge and drifted away aft.

The enemy had ceased firing. The sky was gradually clouding over, with banks of heavy, purplish cumulus piling up over the western horizon. The hidden sun must nearly be

setting. Through the rifts in the cloud canopy broad swathes of pale golden and greenish light shone up like the rays of giant searchlights. Dusk and darkness would soon be coming —but not soon enough.

Chenies was automatically filling his pipe preparatory to lighting it. His eyes traveled aloft.

“Yeoman!” he said, turning to address a stout, grizzled chief petty officer wearing the crown and crossed signal flags on his collar.

“Sir?”

“Harkness, send one of your people to hoist a newer ensign at the starboard yardarm. That black-looking rag we’ve got up there is a disgrace to the ship. —Hoist all the biggest ensigns we’ve got, and damn the expense!”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Pensioner Chief Yeoman of Signals David Harkness, a veteran of the other war, was never really surprised at anything. He was phlegmatic by nature. Only his bushy eyebrows twitched a little. It struck him as faintly incongruous that the skipper should be worrying his head about new ensigns with a Hun battleship coming down fast and about to open fire. The old *Fonthill* would be copping hell in another minute or two.

The dirty black rag to which Chenies objected came fluttering down, and a large White Ensign which had never been used went up in its place. It streamed bravely in the wind, tugging at its halliards.

Harkness was no patriot of the flag waving variety, but it gave him satisfaction to see the red cross of St. George

brilliantly clear on its white background with the little Union Flag in the upper canton—St. George for England.

Man and boy he'd served under that ensign for nearly five and twenty years. It was a grand old flag, quite the finest in the world.

Yes. Harkness was satisfied.

Licking his lips, he glanced at the oncoming enemy, wishing she would open fire and get on with it. The suspense of waiting for the inevitable was almost more than he could bear.

The *Fonthill Abbey's* guns were still firing. They were outranged. Harkness could see occasional plumes of white spray leaping out of the water short of the enemy and to the right.

The German battleship was turning to starboard. At first they had had a foreshortened view of her, but now she was nearly broadside on, heading slightly across the *Fonthill Abbey's* bows. The ships of the convoy were well away to the southward, half hidden behind a bank of grayish-white smoke of varying intensity. One of the merchantmen must be on fire. A cloud of darker smoke, too dense to come from any funnels, showed over the edge of the artificial smoke screen.

Chenies was using his glasses.

"Port fifteen," he ordered, anxious to head off the enemy, to prevent him if possible from reopening fire on the convoy.

Hardly had the ship started to turn under her helm when he saw the brilliant red flashes and rolling clouds of dun-colored smoke which showed that the battleship had fired a salvo.

This time, he realized, the *Fonthill Abbey* was the target for those hostile guns.

Chief Petty Officer Buttress' station in action was at the foremost guns—to keep a watchful eye on the guns' crews, to supervise the ammunition supply, to assist in the repair of breakdowns, generally to act as right-hand man to Lieutenant Tanner, R.N.R., who was the officer of quarters with a midshipman, Hastings, as his number two.

Rushing from his mess at the first jangle of the alarm gongs, Buttress had gone straight to his beloved guns, trying to button his jacket with one hand and carrying his steel helmet and lifebelt in the other. In point of fact he had been washing himself when the alarm sounded. He had seen his guns' crews mustered, the weapons cleared away, and ammunition ready before reporting to Tanner, who reported to the bridge.

The enemy had opened fire on the convoy by the time Buttress had time to look about him. He had heard the rumble of heavy gunfire, and saw the shell splashes round the convoy.

"That's no chicken fodder, Mr. Tanner, sir," he observed, measuring the spray fountains with a practiced eye. "That's big stuff, well over six-inch. Can you see what's firing, sir?"

But Tanner couldn't. The enemy was still hidden by the convoy.

The *Fonthill Abbey*, meanwhile, was working up to full speed and making flag signals. The ships in the convoy were answering. A few minutes later, as the armed merchant cruiser started to draw ahead, the ships of the convoy began turning to starboard. The *Fonthill Abbey* swung to port.

Then, for the first time, Tanner and Buttress saw the enemy.

"God!" the Lieutenant muttered, peering through his glasses. "We're up against something this time, Buttress." His mouth was tightly set.

"What is it, sir?"

"A pocket battleship, from the look of her."

"Gawd!" Buttress murmured, his feelings very mixed. "What happens now, sir?"

"We're going in to engage," the officer replied. "It's the only chance of saving the convoy. We might land her with a lucky hit," he added, though the doubt sounded in his voice.

Buttress sniffed.

"We might, sir," he said. "On the other hand, we mightn't. Six-inch guns against eleven-inch isn't exactly what you'd call fair. If it was a cruiser now. Are there any of our ships anywhere near to do a *Graf Spee* on her, sir, or are we on our own?"

"I don't know," Tanner said. He might have added that unless some reinforcement was sighted within a matter of minutes, the *Fonthill Abbey* was doomed.

Buttress was equally aware of the situation. He wasn't worrying about himself. At the back of his mind he was thinking of his wife, his two naval sons, and the little shop in Knightsbridge. Laura came first in his thoughts. He hoped the shop was still paying its way. If he were knocked out, the widow's pension wouldn't amount to much.

Laura, bless her! She'd been a good wife to him, and a good mother to young Alf and Willie. She didn't always wear her heart for all the world to see, but she was a fine woman.

She was the contriver of the family, and the shop was her idea and creation. They'd been through bad times together but always managed to make ends meet and come up smiling.

Yes. Laura had a way with her. She was a good tough one, unemotional and completely unmoved by setbacks and calamities. Even those long weeks during which the bombs had crashed down nightly on London had not frightened Laura. She'd merely been venomously angry with the devils who encompassed all the ruin and destruction, worried not for herself but for Hannibal the cat who slept most of the day and invariably set forth on his nocturnal ramblings just before the mournful wail of the sirens heralded the first shattering explosions.

It was a bit hard, Buttress thought, if he never saw Laura again—especially hard when he'd made up his mind to a spot of leave. Oh, well! There'd been many good men in the Navy who'd fought against hopeless odds. And the Navy was in his blood, in a manner of speaking. What of his father, "Old One Eye," who'd been at Taku in 1860? What of old grandad, who'd been with Admiral Collingwood at Trafalgar? "S'trewth," he told himself, though he would never have said it aloud. "I've got something to live up to, and that's a fact."

"I'm glad, in a manner o' speaking, sir," he said to Tanner.

"Glad of what?" the Lieutenant wanted to know.

"Glad we're not running away, sir."

Tanner was almost amused.

"Can you see our captain running away?" he demanded.

"No, sir. I can't, not with that there convoy. An' thank Gawd for it, says I. 'Twouldn't be decent to let the convoy down."

“You’ve said it,” Tanner returned. “It’s a death or glory stunt for us. Chins up, Buttress.”

Buttress felt slightly nettled. He needed no encouragement to do his job in action, particularly from an officer young enough to be his son.

“I’ve never known my chin down yet, sir. I—”

Conversation was interrupted by orders to the guns. In less than another minute they had opened fire.

There was alleviation in that. Once his guns were in action Buttress had no time for introspection. There was work to be done.

4.

A towering pillar of white spray, its base tinged with gray, suddenly burst out of the sea some five hundred yards short of the *Fonthill Abbey* and to the right. It shot up to a height of over a hundred feet, curled over like an ostrich plume, and tumbled in ruin, to leave a sooty patch on the gray-green water.

A second great splash—followed almost instantaneously by a third. They were closer this time. The enemy’s eleven-inch guns were reaching out at their target, trying for the range.

Chenies, smoking his pipe, was conning his ship from the open upper bridge. The *Fonthill Abbey* had no armored fighting position, though parts of the lower bridge round the wheelhouse were protected against light splinters and machine-gun bullets. As a concession, and because it was the rule for all the men in exposed positions in action, he wore his steel helmet.

He could picture the German fire control officer over five miles away, with the glasses to his eyes, looking at those spray pillars from the other end. He would be giving orders to someone else, and electric transmitters would pass the range and deflection to the guns. Inevitably the German would lengthen his range and try for a straddle, with one shot over, and the others short—or hits. It was only putting off the evil moment, but to make it more difficult for the men controlling those hostile guns, Chenies swung his ship to starboard—toward the spot where the last salvo had fallen, toward the enemy. He was trembling a little with excitement, but was not the least bit nervous or alarmed. He had often wondered what it would be like to engage a more powerful and faster opponent, and imagined one would feel helplessly frightened. Now that the moment had come, he had never felt cooler in his life. It was force of habit, he presumed, but rather surprising, all the same.

Down below Jamieson was giving his turbines every ounce of steam they could absorb. The ship had worked up to full speed, and had occasional spasms of shuddering as she drove along. A fraction over sixteen knots seemed a veritable crawl. Chenies would have given a lot for another three or four.

The range was closing fast. The *Fonthill Abbey's* guns were firing as fast as their crews could load them, but their shell still seemed to be falling short of the target. All the same, it was worth firing. A lucky projectile might drive home.

Again the enemy burst into splashes of orange flame, brighter and more visible now against the gradually darkening sky on the horizon. She disappeared momentarily in clouds of thick brownish smoke.

Anxious seconds passed as the shell drove through the air. Then, with a sound like the crack of doom, a projectile roared over the *Fonthill Abbey* to burst in the water just beyond. Two others fell short—one so close that its hurtling splinters sprayed the after well deck and superstructure abaft the funnel.

Three men fell wounded. A call went through for stretcher parties.

It was one shell of the third salvo that struck just above the waterline abreast of the funnel, and brought the ship to a gradual standstill. She shook to the shock of the explosion. A gout of mingled flame, smoke, steam, and debris flew skyward.

How many men that single projectile killed instantaneously, drowned, scalded, or maimed, nobody was ever to know. There was none to count.

The cloud of steam grew denser, and was presently reinforced by wisps of evil black smoke. They thickened fast into billowing, rolling masses. Lurid tongues of red fire flickered amongst the wreckage. They lengthened, until they looked like the petals of a flame-colored, wind-blown flower mingling with the darkening pall overhead. Oil fuel was ablaze.

The *Fonthill Abbey* was listing heavily to starboard. Her engines had stopped, but she still carried her way, her speed diminishing every second. She rolled gently in the almost imperceptible swell.

Thereafter, as the range decreased and the enemy's 5.9's joined in with the heavier guns and poured shells into her, the ship was hit continuously. There was no respite, no breathing space between the thudding crash of bursting projectiles.

Like a living thing, she winced as they struck her. One couldn't think. All sense of time vanished.

More men fell to that hail of steel slivers, killed or wounded. A shell exploding beside one of the guns wiped out the entire gun's crew and blew the weapon off its mounting, whence, half hanging, it wrenched its way overboard with the ever-increasing heel to starboard. A fire started amongst some of the ready-use ammunition stacked near one of the other guns. The flaming cordite communicated the blaze to the torn-up, splintered planking of the deck, to cordage, to anything inflammable. Working with beserk energy and courage, seamen threw some of the blazing charges into the sea, fought and tore at the burning debris with their bare hands. It was all they could do. Never the feeblest trickle of water came from the slashed and punctured hoses. The pumps had stopped.

The fires gained strength and spread. Strive as they might, those fighting them were gradually beaten back. Some of the broken lifeboats on the boat deck added fuel to the flames. In the course of a few minutes men performed many deeds of desperate gallantry and self-sacrifice. Since no one saw them, they went unrecorded.

A seaman dragged a stricken messmate up the sloping deck away from the encroaching flames, and protected him with his own body against the flying shell splinters. The savior was killed by the next explosion.

The blackened figure of a fireman appeared from below with his unconscious mate across his shoulders. How, bearing his heavy burden, he had negotiated the steep steel ladders leading up from the stokehold amidst that blinding inferno of searing flame, smoke, and scalding steam, nobody could say.

He collapsed on reaching the deck. His unseen bravery went unrewarded. Neither rescuer nor rescued were among those that survived.

Goodchild, the Surgeon Lieutenant Commander, helped by his staff and some of the stewards, worked among the wounded in the dressing station until they were driven forth by the stifling smoke and fumes. Leaving the dead behind, they evacuated the wounded to the upper deck, and tied the lifebelts round them. The ship was still under heavy and accurate fire; but there, at any rate, the injured had some chance of their lives. Down below, as the fires spread and gathered hold, the ship was rapidly becoming a blazing furnace.

All electric power had failed when that first shell crashed home and burst. In the wireless room the operators continued to transmit on an auxiliary set. A shell bursting close outside drove a ragged sliver of steel through the thin outer bulkhead. It mortally wounded a leading telegraphist as he sat tapping out a message with his Morse key. He collapsed across the table, whence the others lifted and laid him on the deck. He lay there groaning and half-unconscious, breathing stertorously with his eyes shut and his face a ghastly ashen gray. A pool of blood was gradually encroaching on the thick green oilcloth covering the deck. A friend knelt beside him, doing all he could, but there was no hope.

Meanwhile another man had taken his place at the transmitting key, and the radio message went off into the ether. Heaven only knew if any other ship received it, but the telegraphists, like everyone else in the ship, were faithful to their duty, faithful unto death. They remained at their posts

until another shell smashed the wireless room and all it contained into ruin, and started another fire.

The *Fonthill Abbey* was a sinking ship—stopped and listing more heavily to starboard as her compartments became flooded. All her guns were out of action. She was blazing fore and aft, with a great pall of smoke rising to the heavens before drifting sluggishly to leeward on wings of some fitful air current.

But above the reek and din of battle, tattered and sadly blackened, invisible sometimes in the murk of her destruction, the *Fonthill Abbey's* White Ensigns still remained aloft. There was no thought of hauling them down, no idea of surrender.

The nearest ships of the convoy, those that could be seen, that is, were far away to the southward. The sky was darkening rapidly. A few stars twinkled palely through the sparse rifts in the gathering clouds overhead. Soon it would be night.

5.

When Chenies recovered consciousness night had come. Without knowing how he had got there, he found himself lying on the starboard side of the promenade deck halfway between one of the ladders leading to the boat deck and the large double doors leading into the entrance lobby through the superstructure. Someone had tied a lifebelt round him. His right leg and side hurt abominably. It was almost as bright as daylight. Looking down, he saw that his trouser leg had been torn away and that the limb itself was roughly bandaged above the knee. The bandage was bloodstained in parts, and there was more blood on the deck. He remembered

the wound, but not the bandaging. Who was responsible for that and the lifebelt?

The sea was stained wine-red with the dancing light of many fires. He could hear the crackling of flames. The air was full of eddying smoke, thick and pungent at times, at others thinning to a partial haze. Looking around he realized he was on one of the few parts of the deck that wasn't actually burning. The bridge and boat deck above were well ablaze, with tongues of flame occasionally licking along the underside of the boat deck, and charred and flaming fragments dropping on to the promenade deck, the torn planking of which was on fire within twenty feet of where he lay. The flames seemed to be creeping forward toward him, discoloring and blistering the paint on the superstructure. To his left another blaze was slowly moving aft. The ship was listing to starboard, listing so heavily that he could see the water quite close through the open rails. If she heeled much more he would slide across the deck and be thrown against the rails. After that, the sea was his only salvation. Either the ship would capsize and force him into the water, or he would be driven there by the fires. His lifebelt would keep him afloat for a time, but could he swim? He doubted it. He felt strangely weak and lethargic, very unwilling to move before he had to.

Incidents which seemed to have happened hours before flooded into his memory like scenes from a play. They were vivid enough. Only their sequence was blurred.

He remembered the first heavy shell hitting the ship and bringing her to a gradual standstill—then two crashing explosions in the bridge structure which reduced it to a mass of tangled wreckage, killed or wounded nearly all of the

people up there, and started fires which rapidly gained the upper hand. He recollected being hurled off his feet by a heavy impact, and a burning sensation in his thigh. It was not very painful to start with. He picked himself up.

Harkness, the Chief Yeoman of Signals, was already dead, killed instantaneously. A signalman lay close beside him. He too was beyond all help. Only Rigby, the midshipman, pale-faced and badly shaken was left alive.

"Rigby!" Chenies called.

The lad turned.

"Oh, sir," he said. "You're wounded. Can I do something?"

"No. I want you to go aft. Find the Commander. Tell him —ask—"

"What shall I ask, sir?" Rigby queried, as Chenies hesitated. Another shell whinnied close overhead.

The Captain's face was ghastly. The midshipman saw his torn clothing, and blood running down his right leg to stain the once clean deck. He was obviously in great pain.

"I *must* do something for you, sir," said Rigby, forgetting his own fear. "Shall I get someone to attend to you?"

"No. Go aft. Find out about the damage, and what they're doing about these fires. Tell the Commander we may have to abandon ship, but not till I give orders. I want the men kept under cover as long as possible. Are we still firing, Rigby?"

"Yes, sir. Number one gun's just gone off."

"Then go and find the Commander, or failing him, Lieutenant Commander Percival or one of the others, and give him my message. Cut along, boy. Don't wait."

But Rigby still seemed unwilling.

“But you’re wounded, sir,” he objected. “And the bridge is on fire. If I leave you—”

“Damn the fire!” Chenies broke in, as there came the crash of a shell exploding farther aft. “And don’t you dare to bother about me. Now obey orders. Get a move on, Mister Rigby.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“And thank you, Rigby. You’re a good lad. Tell your parents I’m glad to have had you as a shipmate if I don’t get the chance. Good luck to you. Away you go.”

The midshipman saluted. He couldn’t trust himself to speak. He was gulping as he disappeared down the broken ladder leading from the upper to the lower bridge. The flames were already licking round its foot.

How Chenies descended by the same way a few minutes later he never understood. It was a painful process, agonizing at times. On the wrecked and burning bridge below there was nothing that he could do. Peering into the shattered, smoke-filled wheelhouse he saw three men, two laid out on the deck and another kneeling beside him.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The kneeling figure looked up.

“It’s Able Seaman Sykes, sir. Bridge messenger.”

“Are you all right?”

“I think so, sir.”

“Who are those others?”

“Petty Officer Bayles, sir, the Chief Quartermaster, and Able Seaman McColl.”

“Dead?”

“McColl’s breathing, sir. Petty Officer Bayles—well, sir, it’s in his head,” said Sykes, pointing.

Chenies, looking, suddenly felt sick. Death must have come swiftly, before Bayles could have felt any pain.

“Can you lift McColl?” the Captain asked. “I’m no use to help. My right leg’s useless.”

“I can manage him, sir.”

“Then get him down out of here before the fire spreads, and under cover somewhere. Find someone to look after him. —Gently, man, gently!” as Sykes, a burly fellow, hoisted his limp and unconscious burden over his shoulder. “He’s not a sack of spuds.”

Chenies followed the able seaman out of the wheelhouse, and after nearly collapsing on the bridge, managed to lower himself down the ladder to the boat deck with the use of his arms and his one sound leg. It hurt abominably.

The sky, or what he could see of it through the flames and dense clouds of rolling smoke, had deepened almost to indigo. The *Fonthill Abbey’s* guns were silent. Heaving sluggishly to the slight swell, she had lurched still farther to starboard. Apart from the unconquerable fires, Chenies could tell from the movement that she was a doomed ship.

By the mercy of God the enemy gunfire had ceased. The roaring crackle of fires and the hiss of what sounded like escaping steam seemed almost like dead silence after the crashing thunder of battle.

Some minutes later Lieutenant Commander Hanley, blackened and disheveled, found Chenies sitting on the boat deck with his back against the rails. The fire in the bridge structure had crept scorchingly near.

“Thank God I’ve found you, sir,” came Hanley’s first breathless words. “But you’ve been hit, sir,” he added hurriedly. “Hadn’t—”

“Don’t bother about me,” Chenies put in. “Tell me what’s happened.”

The Commander had been killed early in the engagement, Hanley said, and what had become of Percival, the next senior executive officer, he didn’t know. As for himself, he had been trying to put out the fires in the after part of the ship, a hopeless task. The pumps had failed. Even if they hadn’t, the hoses were slashed to ribbons. The ship was burning practically from end to end. The fires were gaining every minute.

“I sent young Rigby aft with a message,” said Chenies wearily.

Hanley had seen nothing of Rigby.

“What are our casualties, Hanley?”

“Very heavy, sir. More killed than wounded from what I’ve seen.”

Chenies sighed.

“It was murder,” he said. “What could we do against her?”

“Precious little, sir, except by some almighty fluke.”

“I hope nobody thinks we ought to have surrendered to save life.”

“Surrendered, sir?” said Hanley with an air of surprise. “Lord! We couldn’t have done that.”

Chenies felt relieved.

“But suppose we’d run with the convoy?” he asked.

“You’ve nothing to blame yourself with,” said Hanley at once. “Speaking as man to man, what else could you—”

“Not me, Hanley. All of us.”

“Well, sir? What else could *we* have done? Most of the convoy will have got away in the dark, or at least, I hope so. And why? Simply because we stood and fought. We did our job, sir. Not a man in the ship would have had it otherwise.”

“Thank God for that, Hanley.”

“Yes. But you’re knocked out, sir.”

“I can look after myself,” Chenies told him. “It’s the others I’m thinking about.”

“Yes. I came up to say, sir, it’s a choice of two evils now. The fires are gaining every minute, and the list’s increasing. The bulkheads are going one by one, and she’s flooding fore and aft. It’s a question whether she rolls over and sinks before we’re driven overboard by the fires. I’d like your orders.”

“Abandon ship,” Chenies answered. “Get the men away now, Hanley. Straight away.”

“But you, sir?”

“Abandon ship, Hanley. I’m the last to leave, anyhow.”

“But I can’t leave you like this, sir,” Hanley protested. “It’s—it goes against the grain.”

“You heard what I said, Hanley. Abandon ship now, please!” Chenies ordered. “I don’t want to argue, anyhow. I’ve lost my pipe, blast it! Have you a cigarette on you?”

Hanley was able to oblige him, and bent down to light it.

“Is there anything else, sir?” he asked.

“No,” said Chenies, puffing out smoke. “But I can’t understand how people can smoke gaspers when they might

smoke a pipe. —Oh! I nearly forgot. The ensigns, Hanley.”

“What about them, sir?”

“See they’re left flying. I’m damned if I’ll have ’em hauled down!”

Hanley nodded.

“Go on, Hanley. Abandon ship, and good luck to you all. I’ll come along when I feel like it. Thanks and all that, old man. You’ve been a tower of strength. It’s a pity it all ended like this, just as we were expecting a bit of leave.”

Hanley saluted and went. He was far too overcome with emotion to speak.

It may have been three minutes later that Chenies fainted away, and perhaps ten minutes after that that Chief Petty Officer Buttress found his stricken Captain and carefully carried him below to the promenade deck.

He was only just in time. The deck was burning within a few feet of where the unconscious Chenies lay.

CHAPTER XV

To Buttress, and those six others who remained on the raft, the night was interminable and bitterly cold. Their refuge was a large rectangular contrivance with airtight metal compartments supporting a wooden grating, and lifelines looped around it to which men in the water could cling. Some of the compartments, however, had been punctured by shell splinters, so that one side of the crazy thing was flooded and constantly under water. To make matters worse, the rising breeze was causing the swells to break, and at times sent the spray flying over its occupants. Time and time again the steeper swells nearly brought about a capsize. It was only prevented by men, with their legs trailing in the icy water, balancing themselves precariously on its higher and undamaged side. Everyone had long since been soaked to the skin. They were numb with cold and weakening fast. It was touch and go if any of them lasted until morning.

Eleven men had originally left the blazing *Fonthill Abbey* in the raft, and they were the last to go. Four, grievously injured and unable to hold on, had slipped away and disappeared, in spite of the efforts of the others to save them. There remained seven—Hooper, one of the young Sub-Lieutenants, two A.B.'s called Streeter and James, Brewis, a young officers' steward, Ogden, a fireman, Buttress himself, and the badly wounded Chenies. Streeter and Brewis were also wounded, the first-named in the head and arm. Both were fully conscious but bore their hurts without a murmur.

Hooper was the only officer in the party apart from Chenies. But Hooper was an engineer by trade, and not very experienced in an affair like this. Buttress made a point of

consulting him about this and that, but as the senior man of the seaman branch had taken over the command, Hooper had no objection.

Chenies, still wearing his lifebelt and wrapped in an oilskin, had been lashed to the gratings on the high, sound side of the raft. Buttress watched over him, ready to cast him free if the thing overturned during one of its wilder plunges. The Captain spent most of the time in a state of insensibility, though occasionally he came to to mutter a few words. Sometimes they were incoherent. Once he observed in a husky whisper that it was “damn cold and wet,” and he had no feeling in his legs.

Buttress blessed the forethought that had led him to break open and ransack two of the cupboards in the burning wardroom—originally the ship’s writing room—at the last moment before embarkation. He had found a bottle of liqueur brandy two-thirds full, an open tin of sweet biscuits, and some little cartons containing malted milk tablets. These, with a few tins of cigarettes, he had tied up in a curtain and transferred to the raft.

They had no water, no other food. Originally, the raft had been provided with wicker-covered demijohns of water and an airtight metal box containing biscuit, condensed milk, and various concentrated foods. But the precious demijohns and food box had been smashed by shell fire. All that remained on the raft was a smaller tin box of flares.

The precious brandy had been scrupulously reserved for the wounded, Buttress realizing that they must be suffering from shock, and that people in such condition must be kept warm. Warm indeed! What a hope in a crazy, plunging, half-submerged raft with the spray breaking over it.

All the same, the brandy might help. Since he had no cup, he emptied one of the cigarette tins and doled out minute portions of the precious spirit every hour or so to Brewis and Streeter, and to Chenies whenever he became conscious. At what he thought was midnight, he served out one sweet biscuit and four milk tablets to each person. That, he informed them, must suffice until daylight. The cigarettes were useless. They had five boxes of matches between them; but all were sodden and refused to ignite. He wished he had not brought the cigarettes; but some of the stoppered bottles of soda water he had seen in the wardroom cupboard. One or two of the men were already complaining of thirst. God only knew what agonizing pangs they might suffer later.

But Buttress still hoped. If they managed to survive until dawn they would probably find themselves in an area strewn with the *Fonthill Abbey's* floating wreckage. With any luck they might even see one of the lifeboats with other survivors, or perhaps an empty boat with her food and water still intact.

Buttress prayed that it might be so—prayed with all the simple fervor that was in him that the Almighty would be merciful, and that he, as the virtual leader of the little party, might be granted the strength to help in saving the lives of the six men committed to his charge. He prayed especially for the life of his Captain.

2.

Buttress had done all that was humanly possible for Chenies on board the ship, bandaging him to the best of his ability after carrying him down to the promenade deck.

Orders had already been given for the ship to be abandoned, but Chenies, in a period of consciousness, had

utterly refused to be taken to a boat. He knew what Buttress knew—that some of the boats had been shattered by shell fire, while the boat deck, whence in any case they must be lowered, was well ablaze. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to get them into the water. Any boats that were available might not be sufficient to accommodate the survivors that remained.

Buttress had done the next best thing. Collecting some men, he had managed to launch the life raft from the after end of the promenade deck. It wasn't until it was in the water that they realized it was damaged and leaking.

But it was that or nothing. The ship, listing heavily to starboard, might roll over and founder at any moment. Chenies, with a rope's end under his arms, was lowered down over the rail of the promenade deck and lashed. He fainted away while it was being done. Others scrambled down after Chenies.

It was simple suicide to remain close to the ship. She might roll over on top of them. There might be explosions, or heavy suction, when she went under. The float was provided with paddles, three of which remained. So partly by paddling, partly by men swimming alongside, the crazy raft was propelled ahead of the blazing *Fonthill Abbey*. It was backbreaking work, but Buttress insisted. The sound members of his crew took turns in going over the side and swimming. He himself set the example.

Far away to the southward the undersides of the lowering clouds were stained with ruby and orange. When the raft lifted on the swells, its occupants could see the glare from three burning ships. Then, high above the horizon in the same direction, came some pale, bluish-white globes of light which

grew until they shone on the sea like the reflection of a full moon.

"What in hell's those?" someone asked.

"Star shell," Buttress replied, watching their gradual descent. "Ten to one it's that raider that did for us looking for the convoy."

"I hopes there's some of our ships knocking around that'll do for her, the ——!" growled the first speaker, adding some further unprintable remarks about Hitler and the Germans that seemed appropriate to the occasion.

"They'll be dealt with in due course," said Buttress. "Don't you worry. You save your breath and keep on paddling, my son."

"Paddlin'!" laughed James, the unwounded A.B. "What'll my old woman say when she hears I've bin bathin' in the blinkin' Atlantic at this time o' year? Blackpool isn't in it with this ruddy picnic. Did you ever visit Blackpool, Chief Petty Officer Buttress?"

"No," said Buttress severely. "I've got better things to do than visit those outlandish places."

James felt rebuked. Conversation lapsed. One by one the descending blue-white flares in the sky flickered out and expired. They were not followed by any flashes of gunfire, for which Buttress, for one, felt duly thankful. It probably meant that the enemy had failed to locate the convoy.

Hooper's wrist watch had long since stopped through immersion, and nobody else wore one. They had no means of telling the time; but it must have been about two hours after leaving the ship that the end of the *Fonthill Abbey* came. The raft was perhaps four hundred yards away at the time.

At one moment they were watching the dark hull of the ship with showers of sparks and tongues of vivid flame hundreds of feet long pouring to leeward out of it to join the dark curtain of smoke rising at an angle until it was carried away on the wings of the freshening breeze. Whirling debris seemed to be blazing in mid-air. Little puffs of inflammable vapor seemed to burst into green and violet flame in the midst of the smoke. In places the very hull of the ship seemed red-hot and glowing. It was magnificent as a pyrotechnic display, but ghastly to think of what it meant.

Then, quite suddenly, there came the thud of a heavy explosion. A column of flame and heavy wreckage shot skyward from the *Fonthill Abbey's* stern as though from the eruption of a volcano. A magazine had exploded, and in the silence that followed those on the raft heard objects splashing down into the sea. Some were far too close to be pleasant.

That detonation was the beginning of the end, for the next moment they saw the *Fonthill Abbey's* bows lifting as the stern started to disappear in a series of bursting upheavals of spray and smoke tinged blood-red in the glare of the fires farther forward.

The stem rose dripping out of the water until they could see the curved forefoot. It lifted to an angle of about forty-five degrees, and hung there with parts of the blazing bridge structure still visible above the surface. Clouds of vapor mingled with the gradually diminishing flames. Above the wash of the sea they could actually hear a loud sizzling as the water invaded the burning areas. In the midst of the smoky reek which hung over the sinking ship Buttress was vouchsafed a momentary glimpse of the leaning foremast. The remains of two scorched and tattered White Ensigns,

unrecognizable as such, were still fluttering. Overcome with emotion he felt proud that the old ship had flown her colors to the bitter end. The *Fonthill Abbey* had not disgraced herself. The Captain would also be glad to hear about the ensigns. Buttress would have told him if he had been capable of understanding. But Chenies hadn't spoken for some time. He had relapsed into a state of coma.

"The old ship's going!" someone muttered in an awed voice.

She was, for with a series of muffled thuds and more upheavals of spray, the whole stern portion of the ship plunged deeper until the bows pointed almost vertically skyward like the point of a broad-bladed spear. The fires died away, and the fore part of the ship became darkly silhouetted against a background of whitish gray. There came the prolonged hiss of escaping air, and the thudding collapse of more bulkheads.

The bows started to disappear, slowly at first, then faster, finally to be pulled swiftly under the surface as though by some titanic hand. There was another spurting uprush of mingled air and water, and the noise of gurgling and splashing which soon died away. The air was still full of the reek of burning and the pungent odor of oil fuel.

After the leaping glare of the fires the sudden darkness was Cimmerian. So long as the ship had remained afloat, the survivors on the raft had derived some comfort, a faint hope that some rescuing vessel might be attracted to the spot by the flames.

Now that the ship was gone they felt terribly alone.

The dismal night wore on.

The men, their limbs and bodies numb and their teeth chattering, were beginning to give up hope. There was a limit to human endurance. Some of them were beginning to think of deliberately dropping off the raft to end an agony which could only be prolonged. Even Buttress was beginning to feel dejected.

Chenies was in a very bad way. Buttress and the others took turns in rubbing his arms and legs, a task of difficulty on a heaving, waterlogged raft with a badly wounded man.

It seemed hours later that Brewis, the wounded officers' steward, and the youngest member of the party, suddenly announced he saw a ship.

"Go on, son, you're dreamin'," said James, the able seaman.

"I'm not dreaming!" Brewis insisted. "I saw her clear against the sky when we lifted."

"Where away?" Buttress demanded, as the raft slid down the watery slope into the deep hollow between two swells.

Brewis pointed in the rough direction.

"Well keep your eyes skinned when we're on top of the next sea."

Brewis needed no encouragement. They all kept their eyes skinned. The raft started to rise to the following wave crest.

"There!" Brewis pointed, rising insecurely to his knees for a better view, and pointing.

"Steady on, you bloody young fool!" growled Buttress, clutching him by the seat of his trousers. "You'll be overboard in a minute! Where is she?"

“You see a lightish patch on the horizon just to the left of that long dark cloud—” Brewis began. “She’s—”

“By God he’s right!” James broke in. “I see her. A large ship, with no lights. No more’n a couple o’ miles away.”

The raft topped the rolling crest and began to descend.

“Maybe it’s that bloody raider come back,” said Ogden, the fireman.

“Never mind who she is,” said Buttress excitedly. “James?”

“Yes, Chief.”

“If your fingers aren’t all thumbs like mine, open that box of flares. Just take hold of the ring and pull off the metal strip. Be careful,” he went on to warn him. “If they go overboard we’re finished.”

“The lid’s off,” James grunted. “What do I do next?”

“Take one of the flares by its wooden handle.”

“Okay, Chief. I’ve got it.”

“Now feel for a small thing sticking out at the side at the other end.”

“I can feel a bit of a pimple, Chief.”

“Good! When I give you the order, but not before, strike the pimple, as you call it, smartly against some hard substance, and hold the flare aloft at an angle of about forty-five degrees.”

“All set, Chief.”

The raft started to rise to the next rolling hummock.

“Stand by!” said Buttress, and then, a moment later. “All right. Let her go, James.”

The A.B. obeyed orders and struck. The flare spluttered and emitted a little shower of sparks before bursting into a glare which bathed the raft and surrounding sea in a flood of brilliant ruby light. It burned for about two minutes before dying away.

The next time the raft lifted they peered eagerly out into the darkness for signs of the approaching ship.

“I believe she’s seen us!” young Brewis suddenly exclaimed. “Yes. She’s steering toward us.”

“God!” the Chief Petty Officer muttered, his heart beating fast with hope. “I hope you’re right, Brewis.”

“I know I’m right,” the officers’ steward replied. “She’s not steering the same as when we first saw her. She’ll pass us quite close.”

The crest of the wave passed under them, and the raft started to descend into the next trough. Minutes seemed to pass before they again began to climb. The suspense became intolerable.

“Stand by with another flare,” Buttress ordered.

There was no need for another flare at the moment. The next time the ship came into view they saw the faint diamond, ruby, and emerald triangle formed by her dimmed steaming and low lights, which had just been switched on. Their flare had been seen. The ship was coming straight toward them. She was within half a mile.

“Captain, sir! Captain!” Buttress exclaimed, shaking Chenies in his excitement. “There’s a ship coming, sir—a ship!”

Chenies groaned. At least he was alive.

“Maybe we’ll get our spell o’ leave after all,” observed Ogden, the fireman. “Twice wrecked, once torpedoed, and now this. I always knew I was never born to be drownded.”

“Put a sock in it,” James retorted. “You were born to be hanged, chum.”

“Keep silence, you two!” Buttress growled. “I want to hear if she hails us. Keep that flare ready, James.”

POSTSCRIPT

Extracts from a letter written by Mrs. Robert P. Hanson, passenger in the United States steamship Philadelphian, *bound from Galway, Eire, to New York, to her mother in San Francisco.*

As I shall be seeing you within a week of our arrival at New York, it seems rather a waste of time to be writing now. But the urge is on me, and you know what I am when I start.

We left Galway a very crowded ship after a tiresome journey across Ireland, and a long wait before we could embark. Bob and I were lucky to get a two berth room to ourselves, but with no private bathroom. Many people are having to camp out on mattresses in the public rooms. The ship was nearly full on leaving Lisbon, and what with another crowd at Galway and the hordes of children, life is rather uncomfortable and difficult. However, as we are refugees of a sort, I suppose we can't really complain. Bob says we're lucky to have a passage at all, and wouldn't have unless he'd pulled strings.

On the second afternoon out things began to happen. I've only heard part of the story at secondhand, but it seems that a German raider attacked a convoy some distance ahead of us. We saw nothing of the battle, but had a certain amount of information that came through on the radio. Anyhow, that evening they were particularly careful about the black-out, stewards coming round every so often to see that those circular steel things—I can't remember their names—were in place over our portholes, which were tight shut. No lights were allowed on deck, and someone was even scolded for lighting a cigarette. There was a sort of suppressed

excitement all over the ship as though people were expecting things to happen. And sure enough they did.

Bob and I have the first dinner at seven o'clock, and usually take a walk on deck afterward before settling down to read or play bridge. We were on deck just before eight, a fine night with clouds all over the sky, very dark and cold. We hadn't been there more than a few minutes when we saw a reddish glow in the sky a long way ahead. We couldn't make out what it was until we were told it was a ship on fire. That gave us a funny feeling in our insides, particularly when it turned out to be several ships on fire, one well separated from the others and we heading toward the single one. It was a long way off, and presently disappeared altogether, though not before we had seen some bluish glares in the sky far away to the left. They looked exactly like the flares I've seen dropped over London by the German planes before they start bombing. All this gave us a lot to talk about. An officer told us that the burning ships belonged to the British convoy that had been attacked.

Bob and I went to bed at our usual time, just after eleven o'clock. It was after midnight, when I was still reading, that I noticed a different rhythm in the engines. You know how easy it is when your ear's on the pillow. Then the ship stopped altogether, and I felt a sort of vibration. Bob, who knows all about these things, said, "We're going astern. There's something happening. Get your clothes on, Allie, and come on deck."

Well, we scrambled into some things over our pajamas, snatched our lifebelts, and went on deck, thinking we might have been held up by a submarine. But it wasn't that at all. Our ship was stopped, and a boat was being lowered to

rescue some poor souls from a raft. There were seven of them, all wet through and nearly dead from cold and exhaustion. Three of them were wounded, one, a Captain in the British Navy, pretty seriously. I, being emotional and highly strung, nearly wept when I saw the poor things brought on board and taken to the ship's hospital. They were well looked after there. I gather they'd been six or seven hours clinging to a waterlogged raft. We only just reached them in time—

I am continuing this three days later. The rescued Captain's name is Chenies, and he had to be operated on for bad wounds in the leg and side. Our ship's doctor was helped by two others who happened to be among the passengers. One of them told me that Captain Chenies has his home at a place called Minchinhampton, where we once had American friends. So Bob and I managed to see this Chenies for a few minutes. He's a nice man, somewhere in the fifties, who had left the Navy before the war and came back to command an armed merchant cruiser. He's still very weak, but the doctors all say he'll recover. He must be pretty tough.

All the other survivors are going on well, and one, a funny old thing called Mr. Buttress, is an old pet and has been telling me about his wife and two sons in the Navy. He, too, came back for the war, and in peacetime was running a little shop in Knightsbridge near Harrods. They won't say much about the battle, being apparently under orders not to talk. We're benevolent neutrals, I suppose, though still technical "aliens" to them. Not that I ever feel the British are real foreigners to us.

I must say I like these British sailors. They're so simple and unassuming. They're all being lionized by the passengers, who are getting up a concert and subscription to do something for them when we arrive. Oh! I nearly forgot. Captain Chenies knows our American friends at Minchinhampton, or at least his wife does. I've promised to send Mrs. Chenies a cable when we arrive. He'll be in the hospital some time yet.

Later. We've been entertaining heroes unawares. We heard in the B.B.C. news that the ship our survivors came from fought a German battleship singlehanded and saved most of her convoy. You can imagine our excitement at hearing this. Still more ado is being made of them, and they simply hate it. There's talk of having a special dinner for all those well enough to attend the night before we arrive, with speeches and toasts. Mr. Buttress came to see me just now and said, "Miss" (he always calls me Miss), "Miss. I find all this fuss about us most embarrassing. It's likely to turn the men's heads. May I be so bold as to ask, Miss, that you will request the other passengers to forget we're on board?" Of course I said I'd do what I could, though I told him it was about as difficult as stopping an avalanche with one's bare hands. He looked at me reproachfully when I said that. "I can't stand it, Miss. Really I can't." He's got eyes rather like a sheepdog's, sort of half-sad and very faithful.

I've no doubt that the names of these men and the name of this ship must already be known in America. So I fear, though of course I didn't tell him, that Mr. Buttress and his friends will be more embarrassed still when we dock in New

York. The news hounds will soon smell them out, poor dears, if I know anything about them.

2.

A letter written by Toppy Chenies to her brother, Lieutenant Anthony Chenies, D.S.C., Royal Navy, H.M.S. Hamilton, *c/o G.P.O. London.*

My dear Tony,

We had your wire, days late and very discreet, since it tells us nothing of where you are or if there's any chance of your coming on leave. You're badly wanted.

It's glorious about Father, and Mother and I feel frightfully proud. But it's more wonderful still to know that the old darling's getting on so well. We had a cable from him in New York, and another from someone called Hanson who apparently knew Margaret and Webster here in England. It's as well Father's out of England. His life wouldn't have been worth living here.

We've had a hectic time, telegrams and letters from the Admiralty and shoals of people all over the country, some of whom we don't even know but may be Father's friends. There have been dozens of others from people wanting to interview us, and cables from America.

The story really begins with me sitting doing my usual job in the M.O.I. and being rung up by a male voice asking if I was Miss Chenies. I said yes, and was asked if I was any relation to Captain Chenies of the *Fonthill Abbey*. I said yes, he was my father. Then the man asked if I minded being interviewed. I said I'd simply detest it, but what on earth did he want to interview me about. He hemmed and hawed a bit,

and asked if I hadn't heard the news. I asked what news, and he replied that Father had done a very gallant action, and his name would be all over the world. Next it came out that Father was reported missing. God! But that was awful. I can't describe what I felt. I nearly passed out. I was thinking of how Mother would take it.

My nice boss came to the rescue, and said he'd deal with any would-be interviewers, and that I was to go straight home to Mother. So feeling like nothing on earth, I collected a few things from my flat, and caught the first train from Paddington, getting to Stroud in the early afternoon, and then on to Minchinhampton by car. Mother was wonderfully brave, but the next thirty-six hours were the most agonizing I've ever endured. All sorts of people tried to help, but apart from the Dodsons we naturally preferred to be alone. We took the telephone off its hook, and told Effie to tell people we weren't at home. Effie, incidentally, spent most of her time weeping bitterly about "the pore Capting." Yes. I can joke about it now, but it was all pretty ghastly at the time. Our whole world seemed upset, and Mother and I were wondering what to do, and if we'd be able to carry on with the house.

Then, like a bolt from the blue, came a wire from the Admiralty telling us that Father was safe, though wounded, and was going on well. We'd already seen in the papers, and heard through the B.B.C., of course, of what the *Fonthill Abbey* had done, and how she'd saved her convoy, or most of it. But you can imagine our feelings when we had this definite news that the old dear had been picked up. Then, later, we heard he would be landed in America.

The newspaper and photographer invasion started soon afterward, and the very next day we came on here to this

hotel at St. Ives, where we've been for five days, and haven't been bothered much up to the present. If we are, we'll pack up our traps and migrate elsewhere.

I can't tell you how glad and proud I am to think that Father's come into his own. It's the sort of thing he always longed for. Mother, who sends her love to you, hopes they won't send him to sea again because of his wounds, which were in the right side and leg. Also she says the socks she's knitting for you are rather a lighter blue than usual and does it matter?

Meanwhile, I wish you could get a few days' leave.

Your affectionate sister,

Toppy.

Cable from Chief Petty Officer Buttress, New York, to his wife in London.

DEAR LAURA AM SAFE IN GOOD HANDS AND HEALTH HOME SOON FOLKS HERE WONDERFUL DIFFICULT STAND KIND HOSPITALITY UNACCUSTOMED AMERICAN FOOD PREFER YOUR COOKING NONE THE WORSE EXPERIENCES BUT A BIT TIRED DEAR DONT BELIEVE NEWSPAPER YARNS MOSTLY SLUSH THUMBS UP DEAR WIFE HOPE YOU AND BOYS WELL WHAT PRICE FATHER NOW LOOKING FORWARD CELEBRATION LONDON TAKE CARE YOURSELF LOVING HUSBAND BEN BUTTRESS.

[The end of *title* by Henry Taprell Dorling (as "Taffrail")]