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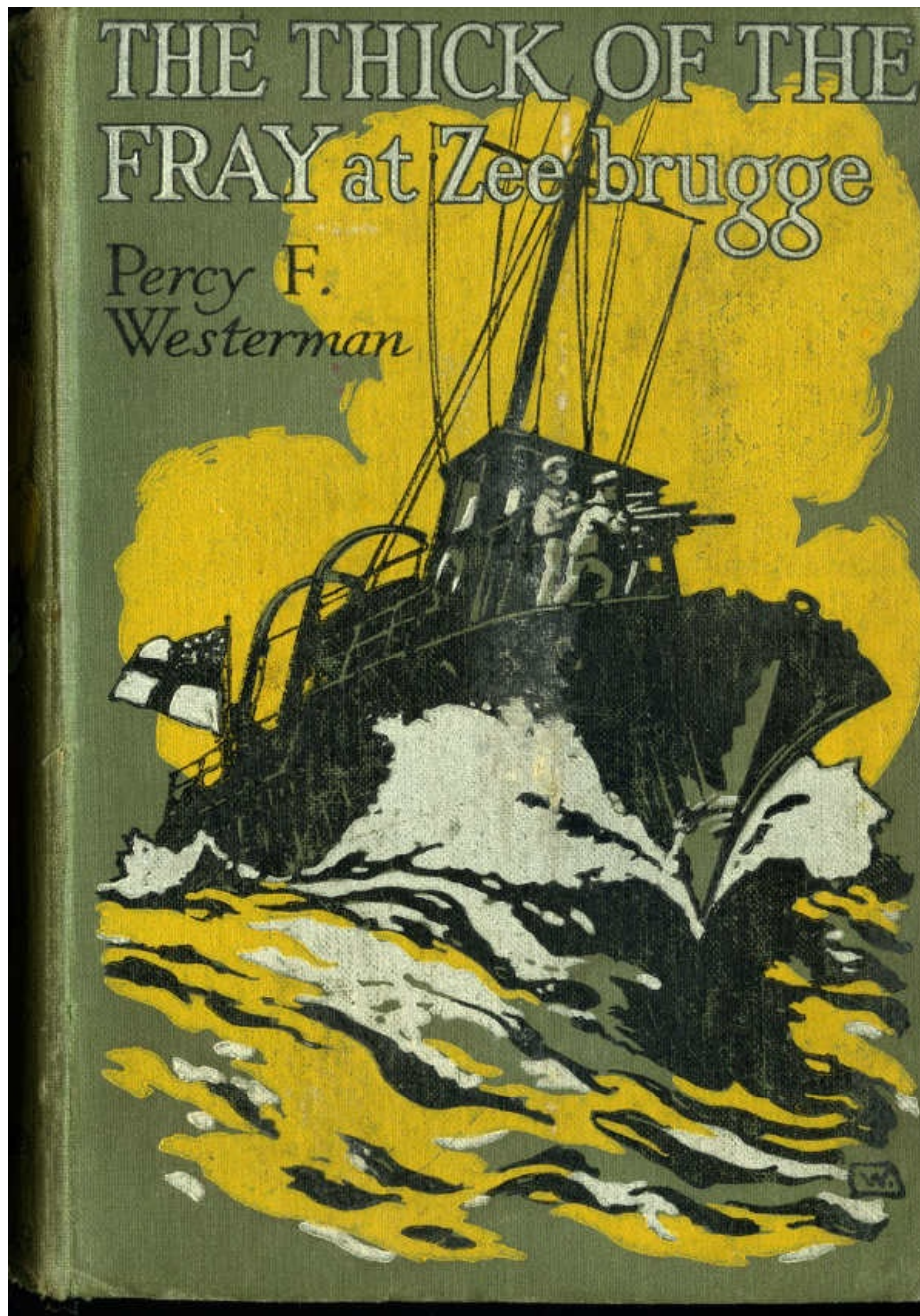
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THICK OF THE FRAY AT ZEEBRUGGE,
APRIL 1918 ***



[Illustration: cover art]

The Thick of the Fray

at Zeebrugge

BY
PERCY F. WESTERMAN
LIEUT. R.A.F.

No boy alive will be able to peruse Mr. Westerman's pages
without a quickening of his pulses."—**Outlook.**

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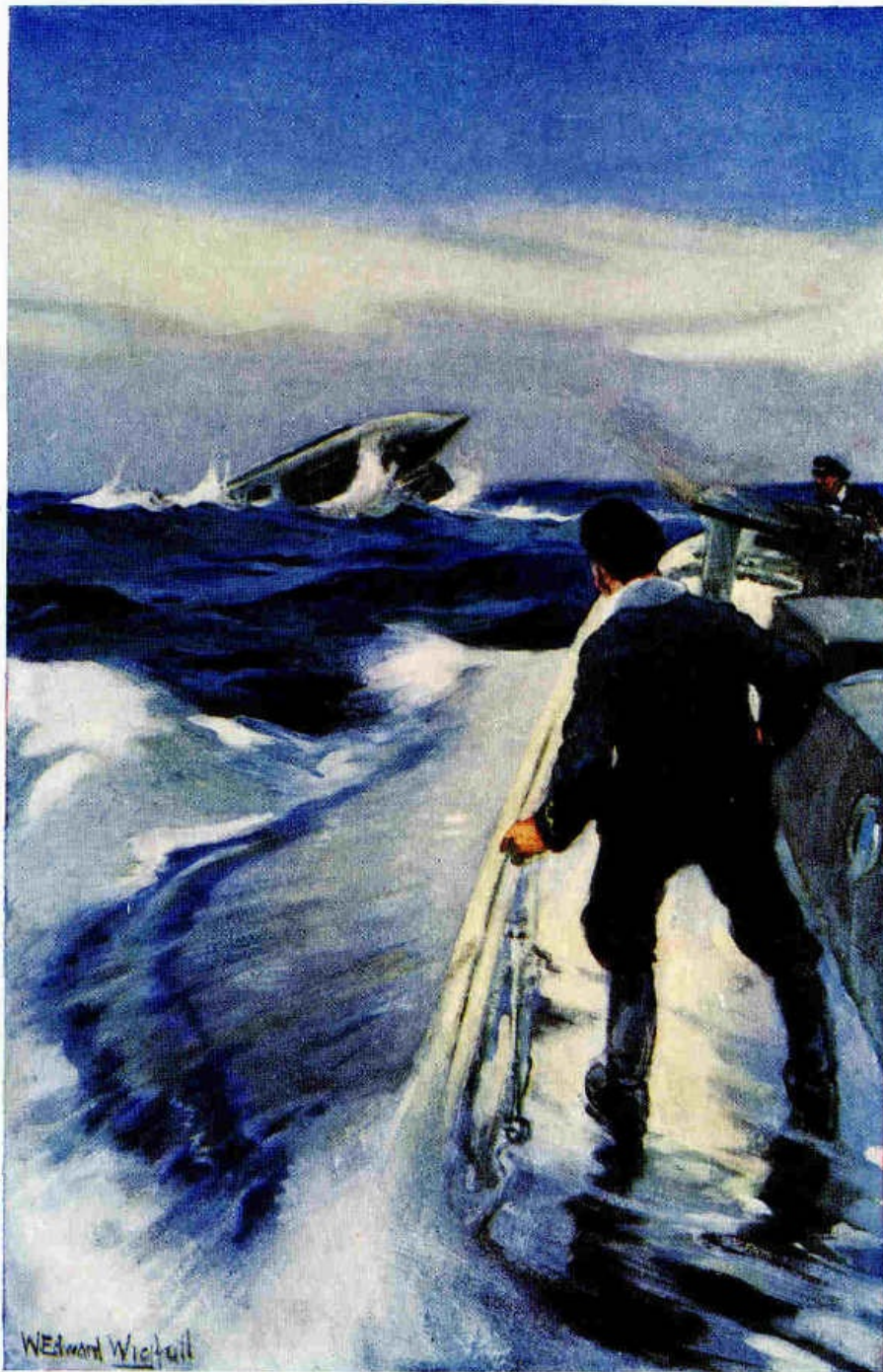
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THE U-BOAT DIVED SO ABRUPTLY THAT HER RUDDERS AND TWIN-SCREWS WERE CLEAR OF THE WATER

[Illustration: THE U-BOAT DIVED SO ABRUPTLY THAT HER RUDDERS AND TWIN-SCREWS WERE CLEAR OF THE WATER (Frontispiece)]

The Thick of the Fray

at Zeebrugge

April, 1918

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Author of "Winning His Wings"
"With Beatty off Jutland"
"The Submarine Hunters"
&c. &c.

Illustrated by W. Edward Wigfull

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED
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THE THICK OF THE FRAY AT ZEEBRUGGE

CHAPTER I

Bound North

"Wonder if she'll do it in time," thought Sub-lieutenant Alec Seton, R.N., as he stolidly paced the stone-paved platform. For the twentieth time in the last two hours he had consulted his wristlet watch and compared it with the smoke-begrimed station clock. "A proper lash-up if she doesn't."

It was 1.40 a.m. on a certain Monday in March of the year of grace 1918. Seton, warned by telegram to rejoin his ship, H.M. Torpedo-boat Destroyer *Bolero*, had been handicapped by reason of the Sunday train service. Due to report at Rosyth at 10 a.m. he found himself at midnight held up at Leeds with the unpleasant prospect of having to wait until 1.50 a.m. before the mail train took him on to Edinburgh.

Seton had been spending part of a well-earned spell of leave at his parents' house in the Peak District. An urgent message demanded his recall before half the period of leave had expired, which was no unusual occurrence in war-time. What was exasperating was the fact that the wire had been delivered at 6 p.m. on Sunday, and even by rushing off and catching the first available train Alec found, on perusing the time-table and consulting various railway officials, that it would be impossible to arrive at Edinburgh before twenty minutes to eight on Monday morning. That left, only a little more than two hours to continue his journey to Inverkeithing and then on to Rosyth. Even then he had no idea where the *Bolero* was lying, whether she was alongside the jetty or on moorings out on the Forth. To say the least it was "cutting things a bit fine", but it was a point of honour that, if humanly possible, Seton should report himself on board at the hour specified.

"An' we were going into dock for eighteen days for refit," mused the Sub. "Wonder what's butted in to upset things? Some stunt over the other side, or only another sea-trip out and home again, without catching sight of a measly Hun. By Jove, I'm hungry. I'm experiencing an unpleasant feeling in a certain sector of the front."

Vainly he regretted that on his hasty departure he had omitted to provide himself with refreshment. Counting on finding a restaurant-car he had been disappointed; while, on arriving at Leeds, he found it impossible at that hour to get a meal at an hotel. The sight of half a dozen Tommies in full field-kit emerging from a Y.M.C.A. refreshment-room, and dilating upon the excellence of the hot coffee and cakes, filled him with envious desires, which, however, did little to satisfy the cravings of the inner man.

"Ah, I've no belt to tighten," he soliloquized grimly. "Six or seven more hours to go, and not a chance of a snack. Hallo, what's this? Out of tobacco, too, by Jove." Very ruefully Alec surveyed his worn and trusted pouch. Only a pinch of dried dust remained.

"The last straw," he muttered. "Must grin and bear it, I suppose. I'd rather be keeping middle watch somewhere in the North Sea."

A truck, propelled by an undersized man, came into view. The truck was surmounted by a green box with glass panels and brass rails. From a small funnel steam was issuing. Already half a dozen belated passengers were crowding round the new arrival.

"A perambulating coffee-stall," declared Alec. "My luck's turned."

Two minutes later he was sampling the wares of the itinerant vendor. The result was not only disappointing but repugnant, for the beverage, termed coffee by the man presiding over the stall, bore a strong resemblance to greasy water, while the cake was more like sawdust than war-bread at its worst.

Disgustedly Alec left his purchase practically untouched, and resumed his tedious beat up and down the draughty platform, until the long-expected night mail train pulled up at the station.

Through the steam-laden atmosphere Alec made his way, trying to find an unoccupied compartment. Foiled in this direction he edged along the corridor until he almost cannoned into a uniformed attendant.

"All sleeping compartments engaged, sir," replied the man; "but I'll find you a smoker with only one other passenger. This way, sir."

He threw open the blind-drawn sliding door, and switched on one of the four electric lights. One of the seats was unoccupied. On the other was stretched a somnolent figure almost completely enveloped in a large fawn rug, bedizened with the Railway Company's monogram. The sleeper's face was turned towards the partition. On the rack overhead were two weather-beaten portmanteaux, and a naval cap with a tarnished R.N.V.R. badge.

Alec slipped half-a-crown into the attendant's hand.

"No thanks," he replied in answer to the man's inquiry; "I'll be quite comfortable in the circo. Sorry there isn't a tobacco-stall on the train."

He stowed his gear to his satisfaction, patted his empty tobacco-pouch to make sure for the fifth time that it was empty, and then contemplated his soundly-sleeping companion.

"Since it seems that I've a mouldy messmate," he soliloquized, "the best that I can do is to follow his example and turn in."

Switching off the solitary light Alec stretched himself upon the seat, using his great-coat as a pillow. He was asleep before the train left Leeds.

Beyond a slight return to wakefulness as the train pulled up at Carlisle, Alec slept soundly until the first gleam of dawn began to steal through the carriage windows.

He glanced at his wristlet watch. It was half-past five. Sitting up he stretched his cramped limbs.

"By Jove, I am hungry," he muttered. "Won't I make up for it when I get aboard."

Almost the next moment all sense of physical discomfort vanished, as he caught sight of the wonderful vista that met his view. The train was climbing the steep ascent of the hills of Roxburgh. Snow lay deep upon the ground, while the peaks were only partly visible in the grey morning mists. Alec had seen many varieties of scenery in widely different parts of the world, but, as an admirer of nature, he was never tired of "viewing the land".

"Magnificent!" he murmured enthusiastically. "It's worth a night in the train. I've seen the Peak of Teneriffe at sunrise, but our country takes a lot of beating."

A swirling cloud of steam beat against the window pane, momentarily obscuring the outlook. Before it cleared Alec was astonished to hear his name shouted in boisterous tones.

"Alec Seton, by all the powers! What, in the name of all that's wonderful, brings you here?"

Seton's "mouldy messmate" was sitting up and rubbing his eyes—a bronzed, shock-headed youth, who looked, despite his uniform, little more than a schoolboy. His features expanded into a broad grin of whole-hearted delight as he extended a large, horny hand.

For a brief instant Alec was at a loss to recognize his fellow-traveller, then—

"Branscombe, my festive buccaneer."

Guy Branscombe, Sub-lieutenant, R.N.V.R., was one of those war-time productions whose existence, as members of the "band of brothers" under the White Ensign, has been amply justified. He had been a candidate for Osborne, but had failed to satisfy the examiners. Now, taking advantage of his undoubted skill as an amateur yachtsman, he was doing good service both in deep-sea and coastal navigation. These two branches are widely distinct. Generally speaking, officers of the "pukka" navy are indifferent navigators in coastal waters. Inside the "five fathom line" they often lack the confidence that the skilled amateur possesses. Thus the Admiralty soon found the need to accept the offers of British yachtsmen to take command of the shoal of "M.-L.'s"—otherwise Coastal Motor-Launches—the war record of which showed that official confidence had not been misplaced.

In the early days of the war the newly-constituted Motor-Boat Reserve was frequently a subject for ridicule. "Harry Tate's Navy", as it was called, figured in cheap comic papers, and was spoken of jestingly by misinformed critics. True, there were incompetents, who managed to obtain temporary commissions on the strength of baneful influence; but these were soon weeded out, and the zealous, hard-working men remained to "carry on". For the first three years of war the M.-L.'s were rarely if ever in the limelight. Not that they wanted to be; they were content to work whole-heartedly as units of the Great Silent Navy, until even official reticence and the muzzle of

the Press Censor failed to hide from public notice the stirring deeds of the officers and men of the puny but doughy M.-L.'s.

"I'm taking over M.-L. 4452," explained Branscombe, when the two men had settled down to the contents of a Thermos and biscuits—for the R.N.V.R. man had taken the precaution to fortify himself amply against the discomforts of long railway journeys. "She's a brand-new hooker, just handed over at Dumbarton by the contractors. We're bound south for——" He hesitated. Alec looked at him inquiringly and raised his eyebrows.

"Dover?" asked the R.N. sub.

"Yes—Dover," replied Guy.

"Lucky blighter," rejoined Seton "Wish I had the chance. There's always something doing in the 'Wet Triangle'. Up here with the Grand Fleet it's the usual out-and-in stunt, with no chance of tumbling across anything more than a Fritz or a mine. Absolute boredom, and all because the Huns won't come out. Now at Dover—any stunt on?"

"Can't say, old man," replied Branscombe with perfect truth. As a matter of fact the R.N.V.R. officer was "in the know". Great operations, as to which all concerned were bound to secrecy, were impending; the risk was great, and the chance of honour correspondingly so; and since success depended upon a sphinx-like silence the secret was being well kept. Branscombe even knew of a case in which two life-long chums were shipmates for three weeks, and although each was detailed off for duty in the forthcoming operations neither hinted to the other that it was his luck to be chosen for the stunt.

The conversation turned into other channels, talking "shop" being tabooed as far as possible, and punctually to time the two chums found themselves on Waverley Station platform with ten minutes to wait for the train that was to take them to their destination—Inverkeithing and Rosyth.

CHAPTER II

Strafed

"Mornin', Seton," was Lieutenant-Commander Dick Trevannion's greeting as Alec reported himself on board H.M.T.B.D. *Bolero*. "Had a long journey, eh? Sorry, old bird; but there's one consolation: We're bound south. Evidently the Admiral thinks we are in need of recuperation in a warmer climate. No, don't look so infernally joyful. We're not off up the Straits, if that's what you think. It's a convoying job."

Seton looked glum. He couldn't help it. Of all the tasks that fall to the lot of the ubiquitous navy convoying is one of the worst. The speed of the escorting destroyer or destroyers must perforce be limited to that of the slowest old tramp in the convoy, and in the days of shortage of shipping there were plenty of old hookers that in other circumstances would be being broken up in a shipbreaker's yards. Mule-headed skippers, ignoring peremptory signals, would haul out of line; superannuated engines would break down at particularly inopportune moments—when night was falling and a heavy sea running. Then the faces of the officers commanding H.M. ships comprising the escort would turn an apoplectic purple, and white anger would surge under their great-coats; but to little purpose. Acting on the precepts embodied in the song, "Sailors Don't Care", the horny-handed mercantile marine would just carry on in its own sweet way, contemptuously indifferent to naval orders, mines, U-boats, and other disquieting incidents on the High Seas in the Year of Grace 1918.

"What sort of a circus have we, sir?" asked Seton.

"Usual lot," replied Trevannion as he offered his subordinate a cigarette. "Coastwise tramps an' a couple of hookers for the 'Beef Trip'. We're to escort the latter to the North Hinder, and then put into Harwich to await instructions."

The suggestion of the Beef Trip made the outlook a little more promising. The term is applied to boats running between Great Britain and Holland and carrying live cattle for the ultimate sustenance of a hungry population. Many and many a time the Huns tried to intercept the Anglo-Dutch traffic. Raids from Borkum and Zeebrugge by swift German torpedo-boats made the trip a fairly exciting one, and the chances of out-escorting destroyers bringing the Huns to close action were always both possible and probable. It was a change from spending months of comparative inactivity at Scapa Flow, where in the piercing cold of the Northern climes the mammoth fleet of Britain lay waiting in vain for another opportunity of Der Tag. Only once before had the chance offered, and then night and mist had robbed the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet of his opportunity of annihilating von Scheer's Command.

At eight bells the *Bolero* cast off from the buoy and proceeded down the Forth, her ensign floating proudly from her diminutive mizzen mast. Past the giant hush-ships lying off Rosyth she glided, threading her way through a multitudinous assortment of craft that the Royal Navy has

taken as its own: brand-new light cruisers, monitors with huge 17-inch guns, hogged-backed P-boats, mine-layers, coastal M.-B's, X-barges, and other weird types of naval architecture. Under the northern span of the Forth Bridge the *Bolero* passed, exchanging signals with the little station on the rock that supports the central pier; then, settling down to a modest twenty-five knots, she shaped a course towards the cluster of vessels awaiting her off Leith and Portobello Roads.

The convoy was, as the Lieutenant-Commander anticipated, a motley crowd. There were rusty-sided tramps, tramps fantastically decorated with dazzle; tramps large and small, wall-sided and with high and low freeboards. Nevertheless, with all their shortcomings, they formed part of the arteries of Empire, manned as they were by British seamen, whom the piratical Huns failed utterly to intimidate by threats of ruthless murder and sinking without a trace.

The short spring day was drawing to a close before the convoy weighed and shaped a course towards the frowning Bass Rock. Ahead steamed a destroyer, two more were on each flank of the long-drawn-out line, while astern, as a sort of whipper-in, came the *Bolero*, her turbine engines running at quarter speed.

As Officer of the Watch for the first watch Alec Seton had his work cut out. Almost every quarter of an hour the engine-room had to be telegraphed to, either to increase or decrease speed slightly, while the Morse flashing-lamp was practically in constant use, calling upon this vessel to close station or that to increase distance by so many cables.

And so the weary watch went on. The wind, hitherto off-shore, had suddenly veered to the south-east and blew with considerable violence right in the teeth of the convoy. Even at reduced speed the *Bolero* was "shipping it green" right over her raised fo'c'sle, while stinging showers of icy spray lashed viciously against the canvas dodgers and rattled like hail against the plate-glass windows of the chart-house.

There was a marked change in the Sub's appearance, as he crouched under the lee of the dodger. His hitherto slim figure looked pudgy, and for a good reason.

Underneath his great-coat he wore his monkey-jacket, three sweaters, and a muffler. Oilskin trousers tucked into and turned over the tops of his sea-boots, and a weather-beaten cap rammed well down over his eyes completed his watch-keeping kit. With him stood the signalman and quartermaster, both enveloped in duffel suits.

On deck everything was battened down, for the glass was falling rapidly and giving every indication of a sharp, if short, blow before very long. Already the wind was moaning dismally through the wireless aerials, and causing the bridge canvas to bag in a double series of almost inflexible bulges.

At six bells (10 p.m.) the signal was given to the convoy to alter course eight points to port. Then ensued an anxious time, some of the vessels obeying with alacrity, others dallying in the carrying out of their instructions. With the wind now abeam, the lumbering craft rolled horribly, while the long, lean destroyers, which largely rely upon steadiness by reason of their speed, were constantly rolling rail under. Torn clouds of reeking smoke from the vessels to windward, mingled with icy spray, swept over the *Bolero*, whose position on that account was the most undesirable of the escorting craft.

"It's Fritz's chance, absolutely," thought Alec. "A U-boat could be lying awash a cable's length away and we shouldn't spot her. And it's a dirty night to have to stand by a sinking tramp."

"There's something on our port bow, sir," reported the look-out, stretching a glistening oilskin-enshrouded arm in the direction indicated.

"Yes, by Jove," ejaculated Seton. "It's a dirty Fritz. Starboard two, quartermaster, and let her have it."

It was for one thing fortunate that the *Bolero* was running at greatly reduced speed, otherwise the lurking U-boat might have been passed unnoticed.

The submarine had evidently been compelled to rise to recharge batteries, the heavy sea notwithstanding. Her hydrophones had given indication of the presence of the convoy, and the latter's recent change of course had set the vessels slightly abeam and at gradually reducing distance. The kapitan-leutnant of the U-boat, quick to grasp the situation, had waited until the escorting destroyers on the convoy's port hand had passed, and was now manoeuvring to fire a torpedo at the rearmost tramp—which also happened to be the largest. Owing to the darkness it was almost impracticable to make use of the periscope, so the German submarine remained awash in order to take a direct bearing on her intended victim.

In the shortest possible time the gun's crew of the for'ard 3-inch quick-firer were ready. At a bare two hundred yards the target was one that could not be easily missed and the gun-layer knew his job thoroughly.

Too late the astounded and terrified Huns sought to submerge. Before the last Teuton gained the quick-action watertight hatchway the *Bolero*'s gun barked viciously. Fairly through the

conning-tower at a height of a couple of feet above the tapering armoured deck the high-velocity shell passed. Exploding, it blew the top of the conning-tower to pieces, killing the kapitan-leutnant, the quartermaster, and two of the crew.

The doomed U-boat began to sink, clouds of oil-laden vapour issuing from the jagged base of the conning-tower; but even that was not enough. It is the practice of the U-boat hunters to make doubly sure.

At increased speed, and with slight port helm, the *Bolero* scraped past the up-tilted stern of her victim. Resisting the temptation to ram her with the destroyer's knife-like bows, Seton held on his course, while right aft a couple of petty officers were busily engaged in allowing a wire to run out. Attached to the wire was a powerful depth-charge—one of two ready for instant use.

Fifty—sixty—seventy—eighty fathoms, the P.O. brought his hovering finger down smartly upon the firing-key of the battery.

He performed the act without emotion, although it meant sealing the death-warrant of a score or more of human beings. To him it was merely the performance of duty: frequency of opportunity had made it matter of routine.

With a stupendous roar a column of water, showing greyish-white through the darkness, was hurled a couple of hundred feet into the air. The *Bolero*, as the tremendous wash created by the explosion met and overrode the crested waves, shook violently from stern to stem, while fragments of metal, hurled upwards to an immense height, fell all around her.

For some minutes it seemed as if the fury of the wind was subdued by the blast of displaced air, while astern the waves subsided in a rapidly-increasing circle under the influence of tons of heavy oil liberated from the shattered wreck of the modern pirate.

"Hard a-starboard, quartermaster!"

Alec's voice quivered with excitement. It was the first Hun that he had bagged, although the *Bolero* had claimed more than one before Seton had been appointed to the destroyer.

Telegraphing first for "half-speed", then "stop", and "half-speed astern", Seton brought her to a standstill almost in the centre of the vast patch of oil. As he did so he became aware of the fact that Lieutenant-Commander Trevannion, picturesquely rigged out in gaily-striped pyjamas, service cap, great-coat, and sea-boots, was standing beside him on the bridge.

"Good bag that," remarked the Lieutenant-Commander in dispassionate tones, as if Fritz-strafting was a less exciting occupation than hunting rats. "You've ordered the buoy to be let go, I see. Right-o, carry on!"

The nun-buoy, to which was attached a line terminating in a sinker, was dropped over the side to mark the position of the ill-fated Hun submarine, in order that divers could make subsequent examination, of the shattered hull, and fix her identity.

Meanwhile the *Bolero* had switched on her search-lights, and was sweeping the surface of the oily sea on the off-chance of sighting survivors. It was practically a matter of form, since previous experience told that rarely does a single member of a depth-charge-shattered U-boat live to tell the tale.

"Something on the starboard bow, sir," reported one of the lookout-men. "Looks like a corpse, sir."

Leaning over the bridge guard-rails Alec followed the direction indicated by the man's outstretched arm. Something black was floating on the sullen, oil-covered water. It was the body of a man clad in black oilskins, and wearing an inflated life-belt. Even as the Sub. looked, the man feebly waved his arm.

"Away duty boat!" shouted Seton.

There was an orderly rush to man the boat. Although the man was an enemy and a despicable one at that, the British seamen gave little or no heed to that. There was a chance to save life, and the bluejackets meant to do it.

With a resounding splash the boat dropped into the water. The patent disengaging-gear was slipped, and the men gave way with a will. Within fifty seconds of the time the order was given to lower away, the sole survivor of the U-boat was hauled into the destroyer's boat.

With the greatest celerity the boat returned alongside. The falls were hooked in and the order given to "haul away roundly". Almost before the boat's keel was clear of the water the *Bolero's* triple propellers began to thresh, and the destroyer, gathering way, resumed her station astern of the convoy.

CHAPTER III

Count Otto

"By Jupiter, old man!" exclaimed little Browning, surgeon-probationer of the destroyer, as he met Seton on the termination of the latter's watch. "We've netted a fine bird. The skipper's as pleased as a dog with two tails."

"One of the most recent types of U-boats?" asked Alec, as he proceeded to divest himself of a portion of his heavy clothing, and to kick off his sea-boots.

"Better than that, my festive," replied the medico, as he deftly filled a tin mug with hot tea—a task not easily accomplished when a destroyer is rolling horribly in a sea-way. "The Hun we fished out is none other than Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert."

"Explain," said Alec, as he took the proffered cup and gratefully drained its contents. It mattered nothing that the cup was old and battered, and that the dregs left by the previous user were floating in the highly-brewed beverage. In such circumstances one cannot be too fastidious.

"What! Not heard of Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert?" asked Browning in mock dismay. "I thought everyone in the destroyer patrol knew of him. He's the fellow who torpedoed the *Bentali*."

"*Bentali*? Of course, I remember," replied Seton. "A hospital ship homeward-bound from the Dardanelles. Didn't cotton on to the fellow's tally, though. I'm jolly glad we've collared him. Wonder what they'll do with him?"

"Do with him?" echoed the doctor. "Why, put him ashore, send him in a comfy first-class railway carriage to a cushy home for fortunate Hun pirates. Feed him up; let him take a daily jaunt into the nearest town for the benefit of his health and to prevent boredom. Allow his friends to visit him, and all that sort of tosh. My word, we English are a rummy race! We carry our humane principles too far, and Fritz takes it as a sign of weakness."

"It's innate chivalry, I suppose," remarked Seton.

"Innate foolishness!" corrected Browning with asperity. "If you saw a poisonous snake lying across your path would you pick it up, wrap it in your pocket-handkerchief, and take it out of harm's way? I'd as soon do that as molly-coddle a Hun. I've seen them and their dirty work, my festive, long before you took to the noble pastime of Fritz-strafting."

Meanwhile the subject of the discussion was reclining more or less at ease upon a settee in the *Bohero's* ward-room. A fractured collar-bone, several minor contusions, and a shock to the nervous system summed up the extent of his injuries. The destroyer's surgeon-probationer, notwithstanding his vehement denunciations of von Brockdorff-Giespert and all his kind, had used all his skill in mitigating the pirate's injuries; and now, slightly under the influence of morphia, the Count was pondering over the situation and wondering whether it would have been preferable to have perished with his crew rather than be taken alive by enemies.

Von Brockdorff-Giespert believed, and with good reason, that he was on the Black List of the British Admiralty. In the Fatherland he used to boast of the fact, but different surroundings are apt to change a fellow's tune, and now he was beginning to feel truly sorry for himself.

The Count was a kapitan-leutnant of the unterseebooten service, and held a staff appointment at the newly-constructed German base at Zeebrugge. The post was given him as a reward for his zealous services to the All-Highest having claim to the destruction of 60,000 tons of Allied mercantile shipping. Most of his victims he sank without warning, and in several instances without leaving a trace, while his despicable act of torpedoing the hospital ship *Bentali* on a dark night and in a very heavy sea was the crowning act of a long list of piratical outrages.

While every other country regarded the act with every expression of horror, cultured Germany hailed the deed with acclamation. It showed the thoroughness of Teutonic frightfulness: that Germany meant business. Count Otto received the Iron Cross with swords, and the Ordre pour le Mérite. Nevertheless he deemed it advisable for his health's sake to give up active submarine work, and become permanently attached to the Zeebrugge station for shore duties.

Unfortunately for him, he had a slight difference with the naval governor of the modern pirate base, and the latter revenged himself by ordering von Brockdorff-Giespert to sea in U 292—not in actual command, but as adviser to the proper kapitan-leutnant, a swash-buckling Prussian, of the name of von Bohme.

U 292 was on her trials when the end came with dramatic suddenness. Von Bohme had no intention of attacking until he had thoroughly tested the sea-going and manoeuvring capabilities of his new command; but the temptation of sinking one of the convoy of merchantmen was too strong.

Von Brockdorff-Giespert's mental and physical activities were completely suspended for a period of twelve minutes following the sudden destruction of U 292. At the time of the

catastrophe he was standing in the compartment immediately under the base of the conning-tower. On the impact of the British shell he formed the hasty but correct impression that the strafed Englander had scored. He attempted to gain the open air by means of the conning-tower hatchway, but the water-tight lid in the floor was immovably shut and secured. Water was pouring in through the started rivet-holes and buckling plates. Below, the nerve-racked Germans were rushing to-and-fro in blind panic, colliding with each other in the dark, confined space, for the impact of the shell had put the electric-lighting dynamos out of action.

It was not too much to say that von Brockdorff-Giespert was seized by the contaminating panic. He was no longer a kapitan-leutnant of the submarine staff, but a mere Hun struggling fiercely for life in a wholehearted, selfish desire to avoid a death to which thousands of his fellow-Huns had been condemned under similar circumstances.

Then came the paralysing shock, and the tremendous roar of the exploding depth-charge. Rolling completely over, the doomed U-boat began to fill rapidly. Struggling for life, half-immersed in the oil-tinged swirling water, gasping in the black, petrol- and nitric-acid-laden fumes, von Brockdorff-Giespert gave himself up for lost. His senses deserted him.

In an insensible condition he was whirled, by a curious whim of fate, through a gaping hole in the U-boat's bilge. While the rest of his companions in piracy were caught like rats in a trap in their metal tomb, the Staff-kapitan-leutnant was impelled to the surface. Well it was for him that he wore a life-saving waistcoat. He had worn it day and night during the trip; surreptitiously lest any of the crew should make merry at the arrogant Junker's expense. It helped to save his life: the *Bolero's* boat completed the task.

Daybreak found the rescued Hun comfortably in bed in one of the officers' cabins—comfortable as far as could be expected while suffering from a broken collar-bone and various minor bruises and contusions. He was glad to find himself alive, but in his innate arrogance he could find neither means nor desire to express his gratitude to his rescuers. Nor was he exactly comfortable in his mind. That little incident of the hospital ship *Bentali* persisted in recurring. There might be awkward questions asked. But never mind: the English would be afraid to take reprisals upon him. They looked like losing the war, consequently they would treat their prisoners with consideration lest vengeance overtook them.

It was a truly Prussian view, and one almost implicitly believed in throughout Germany. It accounted for the humane treatment of German prisoners in England. Only those who are bound to win can, according to Prussian ideas, override all the articles of the Geneva Convention. With them war was a demonstration of brutality—relentless and pitiless. The vanquished was expected to receive no mercy. When the Huns were worsted they hardly expected clemency, and when, as prisoners of war, they received both clemency and a certain amount of consideration they could only put it down to the faint-heartedness of their captors, who, knowing that they were on the losing side, were anxious to ingratiate themselves with victorious Prussia.

"By Jove! What a pity we've hauled him out of the ditch!" exclaimed Seton, after he had visited the prisoner and had courteously inquired after his health. "The fellow looked at me as if I were a Boche conscript. I'd like to have him in the ship's company for a week—no, I wouldn't. I wouldn't like to think that my men would have to endure his precious society for five minutes."

So for the next forty-eight hours Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert was left severely alone by the officers of H.M.S. *Bolero*, the one exception being the doctor, whose efforts for his injured enemy were untiring.

At last the slowly-moving convoy passed Yarmouth and sighted the Cork Lightship off the entrance to Harwich Harbour. Here the unwieldy tramps were practically immune from hostile action, for the air was stiff with aircraft and airships, while for miles round the sea was dotted with swiftly-moving destroyers, M.-L.'s, and submarine-chasers. It was no place for Fritz to show his nose, and to his discretion, if not to his credit, he left the approaches to Harwich severely alone.

A wireless telegraphist, holding a folded slip of buff paper, ran up the bridge-ladder, and saluting Alec, who had just taken over as Officer of the Watch, handed him message.

"Wireless just gone through, sir," he reported. "General signal to the convoy."

Seton took the proffered signal-pad, read the message, and elevated his eyebrows. Long experience in naval matters had taught him never to show unwonted surprise at any order that might come through at any hour of the day or night. But this, on the face of it, seemed remarkable.

Briefly, the convoy was to be split up, the major portion going into Harwich to await further orders. Four of the slowest tramps, escorted by the destroyers, *Bolero* and *Triadur*, were to proceed to the Nord Hinder Lightship, there to stand by until instructions were sent to the destroyers by the S.N.O.

"Wonder if the tramps are Q-boats after all," soliloquized Alec. "One doesn't know t'other from which in these jolly old times. . . . Chance of luring Fritz and seeing a bit of life, eh, what?"

Five minutes later the convoy acted according to orders, the two destroyers and their sluggish charges shaping an easterly course through the mine-infested North Sea.

CHAPTER IV

Torpedoed

"Port five—steady."

"Port five it is, sir."

Alec Seton, sheltering under the lee of the bridge dodger, raised his binoculars and peered steadfastly through the gloom. It was night. Patches of fog were ganging around with irritating persistency, as if bent on following and hampering the *Bolero's* movements. There was just sufficient headwind to throw cascades of icy cold spray over the destroyer's flaring bows. The breeze whistled mournfully through the rigging, while aft a long trail of black smoke, beaten down by the heavy atmosphere, hung sullenly over the short, vicious seas. According to reckoning the Nord Hinder lay 5 miles east by north.

It was not idle curiosity that had prompted Seton to order the course to be altered. Less than a mile away was something showing black and ill-defined even to the powerful night-glasses. It might be anything from a derelict tramp to an abandoned boat. It might be a German submarine or a sea-going torpedo-boat flying, or rather supposed to be flying, the craven Black Cross Ensign of Germany.

Whatever it was, it was Seton's duty to investigate, taking proper precautions in the event of the object turning out to be a hostile warship.

There was also the possibility—almost the probability—that the strange craft, if a craft it were, might be a British or Allied vessel. In any case, before the *Bolero* could open fire she had to establish the national identity of the stranger. A Hun was under no such obligation. He could open fire indiscriminately, not caring whether his target were a hostile or a neutral vessel.

Again Alec raised his binoculars. By this time the *Triadur* and the convoy were two or three miles to the sou'east. The *Bolero's* crew were at action stations, ready at the word of command to let loose every quick-firer that could be brought to bear upon the enemy craft.

"What do you make of her?" inquired the Lieutenant-Commander, who, acquainted with the alteration of course, had joined his subordinate on the bridge.

Before Seton could express his opinion the question was answered. Two vivid flashes stabbed the darkness, while a few seconds later a couple of shells burst two hundred yards beyond the British destroyer.

Almost immediately the *Bolero* returned the compliment. Her salvo hit exactly on the spot that her gun-layers aimed at—but it pitched into and partly dispersed a cloud of smoke. The wily Fritz had been approaching stern foremost, and directly the German boat fired she went full speed ahead, at the same time releasing an enormous smokescreen.

From the British Senior Officer's ship a message flashed:

"Stand in pursuit; will remain by the convoy."

It was an order after Lieutenant-Commander Richard Trevannion's own heart, and of that of every member of the ship's company.

Telegraphing for full speed ahead, Trevannion stood in pursuit. Boat for boat the British destroyer had the advantage both in speed and armament, but already the Hun had gained in distance, and, taking advantage of the smoke screen, was now nothing but an indistinct blur in the night. It remained for the *Bolero* to keep her quarry within sight, and then the momentarily increasing speed would begin to tell.

Firing steadily with her pair of fo'c'sle quick-firers the *Bolero* held on. Her whole frame vibrated under the pulsations of her powerful engines. The wind no longer whistled through the scanty wire rigging: it absolutely shrieked. At times the for'ard guns' crews were knee-deep in water, as the destroyer literally punched her way through the waves.

"A near one, Sir," exclaimed Alec, as a shell burst within twenty yards of the *Bolero's* port quarter, some of the splinters cutting jagged holes in the two after funnels.

Trevannion smiled grimly.

"Yes, Fritz can shoot straight sometimes," he replied. "No casualties aft, I hope?"

A signalman ran aft to make inquiries.

"No, sir," he replied on his return; "the after quick-firer's crew——"

A terrific detonation, almost instantly followed by an enormous column of water, interrupted the signalman's remarks anent the after quick-firer's gun's crew. The *Bolero* seemed to be lifted clean out of the water; then she listed heavily to starboard. Clouds of flame-tinged smoke, mingled with hissing jets of steam, were issuing from the engine-room.

"Fritz has bagged us, my festive!" remarked Trevannion, when the two officers recovered their senses, of which the sudden explosion had temporarily deprived them. "A fair deal: we've nothing to complain about. See that our involuntary guest, Count Otto What's-his-name, is not overboard."

The Lieutenant-Commander spoke with the admiration of a true sportsman. For once a U-boat had fulfilled her legitimate purpose by torpedoing a warship. The destroyer had taken the risk, and she had fallen a victim to the powerful Schwartz-Kopff torpedo.

It was apparent to every man on board that the *Bolero* was doomed. The German torpedo-boat had acted the part of a decoy, and had lured the British destroyer athwart the track of a lurking unterseeboot. At a range of three hundred metres the kapitan-leutnant of the U-boat felt sure of his prey; so much so that he decided that one torpedo was enough.

Hit abaft the boiler-room, the *Bolero* was practically broken in twain. Her watertight bulkheads were holding, but had been badly strained. Even at the most sanguine estimate it was doubtful whether the bow and stern portions would be able to keep afloat for more than twenty minutes.

Meanwhile there was much to be done. While the signalmen were sending up rockets and firing Verey lights—for the concussion had put the wireless completely out of action—the task of getting away boats and rafts was proceeded with. The wounded were first lifted into the boats, for the explosion had taken heavy toll of the heroes of the engine-room and stokeholds. Already the Lieutenant-Commander had thrown overboard the confidential signal-books and log. Impassively he stood upon the bridge, awaiting the end. His duty was almost done. By virtue of the glorious and imperishable traditions of the British Navy he stood at his post until the last man was clear of the sinking ship.

Deftly, and without the faintest suspicion of panic, the crew took to the boats and rafts. The survivors of the engine-room staff, coming straight from the heated and confined space below, were ill-conditioned to withstand the bitter coldness of the night. Lightly-clad they stuck it, accepting with grimly-expressed thanks the offers of additional clothing from their better-clad messmates.

From the first it was apparent that the boats and Carley rafts were insufficient to accommodate all the ship's company, yet not a man moved out of his turn. Donning lifebelts, those who were unable to take to the boats, without risk of overcrowding and endangering the lives of their messmates, prepared for their long swim, confident that help would be assuredly forthcoming to "hike them out of the ditch".

"Pull clear, men!" shouted Trevannion. "Good luck!"

Standing at the head of the bridge-ladder, and holding on to the stanchion-rail, for the destroyer was listing excessively, Seton watched the scene with feelings akin to admiration. For himself he cared little, or rather, in the grim excitement of the destroyer's last throes, his mind was fully occupied with the episode of the final moments.

"Jump for it, Seton!" shouted the Lieutenant-Commander.

Alec shook his head.

"I'll stand by till you're ready, sir," he replied, proffering a life-belt to his superior.

Trevannion waved it aside with a grave, gesture of refusal. To him, as captain of the ship, it seemed unbecoming that he should don the life-saving device.

"Thanks," he replied. "I'm a good swimmer. I'll find something to hang on to. By Jove! Seton, the men are simply splendid."

The end came with startling suddenness. With two successive reports the sorely-trying bulkheads gave way under the terrific pressure of water. In a smother of foam the riven hull sagged until bow and stern reared themselves in the air to such an extent that to Alec it seemed as if the two extremities would meet. Then, with a sickening movement, the *Bolero* plunged to the bed of the North Sea.

Seton's first sensation of the plunge was that of intense cold. The moment he felt himself off his feet he struck out to clear the wreckage. In spite of his efforts he found himself being drawn back as surely as if he were held by a chain. Down, down, down! Would the horrible descent never end? He held his breath, struggling the while to force himself to the surface. Already his lungs felt on the point of bursting.

"Good heavens! I'm foul of something," was the thought that flashed through his mind.

It seemed like an eternity, that slow and remorseless suffocation in the icy-cold water. His eyes were wide open, but he could see nothing. Involuntarily he gasped; an inrush of water followed; a moment of intense irritation, and then a period of utter insouciance. His senses were deserting him. In a vague sort of way he realized that he was drowning.

Suddenly the downward movement was arrested. Caught by the upward rush of air from a burst compartment Seton was impelled to the surface with incredible speed. He was conscious of being shot almost clear of the water, of a rush of life-giving air into his partly water-logged lungs; then of striking out almost automatically.

The sea was horribly cold. Hampered by the weight of his clothes, for, with the exception of his great-coat and sea-boots, he had "taken to the ditch" fully-clad, it was a hard struggle for Seton to keep himself afloat.

With a noise like a small pistol-shot the water hitherto pressing against his ear-drums dispersed, and his sense of hearing was restored. Above the hissing of the waves he could hear shouts of encouragement and cries for aid from his struggling shipmates. There were swimmers all around him. Some men were clinging to oars and pieces of floating wreckage. Others were supporting their less robust comrades, while a few dauntless spirits were singing, or rather trying to sing, in order to convey the impression that they still had their "tails up".

Someone pushed an empty water-beaker almost in Alec's face, with a jerky invitation to "Hold on to that, chum."

"Thanks," gasped Seton breathlessly.

"Lumme, if it ain't our sub-lootenant," exclaimed his benefactor. "Goin' strong, sir? Shall I stand by and give you a hand?"

Seton was glad of the moral assistance, although he continued to hang on to the barrel with little effort. For some moments neither man spoke.

"Bout time the old *Triadur* showed up sir," remarked the bluejacket. "Sure I won't forget to-night, an' it's me birthday. You all right, sir?" he added anxiously.

"Quite," replied Alec untruthfully, but with a dogged determination to refuse to acknowledge that things were not going at all well with him. An ominous numbing sensation in his arms and legs told him plainly and unmistakably that the icy cold water was beginning to take effect.

Almost directly after he had given his assurance, Alec relaxed his grasp of the beaker and without an effort disappeared beneath the surface.

CHAPTER V

In the Whaler

Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert's feelings were far from comfortable when the crash of the *Bolero's* quick-firers told him unmistakably that the destroyer was in action.

With his broken collar-bone and other injuries he was practically helpless, while to make matters worse, as far as he was concerned, his captors had put him under lock and key. Evidently these English meant to take no risks, he soliloquized.

It was no exaggeration to state that he was in a blue funk. At one moment he cursed the German vessel for replying to the British destroyer's fire; at another he hoped and prayed that the former would draw out of range. Not once did he express a wish that the Black Cross Ensign might prove victorious.

With the perspiration oozing in large beads on his bullet forehead he lay and quaked, his mind torn with agitated thoughts. He remembered vividly—the reminiscence was frequently in his mind—how on one occasion, when he was in command of a U-boat, he had taken out of a badly-damaged boat an old, white-haired British merchant skipper. It was not by reason of the call of humanity that he had done this: it was part of a cool, calculated plan of action whereby the Huns vainly thought that, with British captains and engineers detained on board the submarines as hostages, the hunters would hesitate to sink the modern pirates. It was but one of the many instances in which the Hun miscalculated the spirit of Britain. Von Brockdorff-Giespert's submarine was being chased by a particularly aggressive P-boat. A depth charge was exploded so near that the hunted U-boat reeled and quivered under the shock. By sheer good luck Count Otto's command escaped, and the Hun commander lost no time in taunting his captive.

"Are you not glad you weren't blown up by your fellow-countrymen?" he asked.

The old skipper shook his head.

"I'm downright sorry," he replied boldly.

"Sorry our fellows didn't do you in. My sole regret would have been that I should have to go to Davy Jones' locker in such rotten company."

Filled with a violent passion von Brockdorff-Giespert swore at and threatened the imperturbable Englishman. He gave him no credit for his patriotism. To the Hun such a standpoint was incomprehensible. He could only attribute it to the crass stupidity of the schweinhund Englishman. Yet, somehow, Count Otto rather admired the old skipper in the present juncture. He envied his calm demeanour. The bronzed face and white hair of the old man haunted him.

Then came the terrific impact of the Boche torpedo. Flung completely out of his bunk von Brockdorff-Giespert lay inertly upon the floor for nearly a couple of minutes. At length, regardless of his injuries, he staggered to his feet and battered the locked door with his open palm, the while bellowing for assistance.

To be drowned like a rat in a trap: it was a fate inconceivable to a member of the Prussian nobility—a junker of the first water. He redoubled his cries as the doomed destroyer listed more and more. Had he but known it he might well have saved his breath. His shouts were drowned by the hiss of escaping steam and the inrush of water.

At length through sheer exhaustion he ceased his cries, yet he sobbed like a child in his rage and terror. It seemed an eternity, but in reality only three minutes elapsed between the time of the explosion and the unlocking of his prison door.

"Blow me, ain't the Boche got the wind up?" remarked one of the bluejackets to his raggie, as the pair lifted the now speechless Hun from the cabin floor, over which the water was rising swiftly, and carried him up the narrow companion-way to the deck.

Very carefully and tenderly the men lifted their enemy into the first boat to be cleared away. In the company of half a dozen badly wounded and scalded men the men pushed off, deeply laden for the high sea that was running.

Placed in the stern sheets and supported by a rolled canvas awning von Brockdorff-Giespert could watch with every roll of the boat the last throes of the British destroyer. Had he not been in peril of being thrown into the sea by the swamping of the boat he might have gloated over the scene. As it was he watched and waited, fervently hoping that before long he would be transferred to a larger and more seaworthy craft.

For several seconds following the final plunge of the torpedoed vessel silence reigned. The wind lulled, the waves were quelled under the influence of the widely-spreading oil. It seemed as if Nature were paying homage to the departed destroyer. Then the silence was broken by shouts of encouragement and exchange of rough, almost incomprehensible banter by men struggling for their lives.

In spite of their efforts—for there were only two oars available—the whaler drifted considerably to leeward of the rest of the boats. Even the Carley rafts were lost to sight in the darkness.

Presently a voice hailed.

"Boat ahoy! Can you take an officer on board?"

The stroke boated his oar and peered into the faces of the men lying in the stern-sheets before replying.

"Right-o," he replied.

"No, don't," expostulated von Brockdorff-Giespert. "Already the boat is overcrowded. It is madness."

"Shut up!" growled the man, a first-class petty officer. "Are you running this show, or am I? If it weren't for the likes o' you the likes of us wouldn't be in this bloomin' fix."

"But——" persisted the Count.

"Dry up," growled the petty officer, "or into the blinkin' ditch you go pretty sharp! Toss them two overboard, mate," he continued, addressing another seaman. "They won't want any more suppers."

It was no time for respect to the dead when the fate of the living was at stake. Without ceremony the corpses of two men who had died of injuries were given to the waves, while willing hands hauled the senseless form of Sub-lieutenant Alec Seton into the boat.

"Look alive!" shouted the bowman to Alec's rescuer, who, on noticing the Sub relax his grasp of the beaker, had promptly dived and brought the young officer to the surface. "Stroke ahead; I'll give you a hand."

"Too many in the boat already, mate," was the reply. "I've a mother living in Lowestoft, and I'll have a shot at swimming there. How far—eighty miles?"

Without further ado the chivalrous bluejacket turned and began swimming away from the boat.

"'Ere, no you don't!" shouted the Bowman, and with a quick movement he engaged his boat-hook in the neck of the bluejacket's jumper. "Plenty of room in the stalls, mate. Two blokes wot booked seats ain't taking 'em up."

"Is that jonnick?" asked the swimmer suspiciously.

"Proper jonnick," asserted the other.

"Good enough," rejoined Alec's rescuer, and suffered himself to be hauled over the gunwale into a place of at least temporary safety.

For nearly two hours the boat continued to drift in spite of the dogged efforts of the two oarsmen. The breaking of an oar made matters worse, and all that could be done was to keep the whaler stern-on to the waves. Where were the rest of the *Bolero's* crew, and how they fared, were merely matters for speculation.

Meanwhile the whaler's crew were unremitting in their attention to their disabled messmates, two of the men chafing Alec's numbed limbs in the hope of restoring him to consciousness. In this they succeeded, and presently the Sub opened his eyes.

"Quite all right, sir," said one of the men reassuringly in answer to Alec's unspoken question. "Just you lie quiet, sir. It'll be dawn very soon, and then we'll be picked up."

"How did I come to be picked up?" asked Alec.

"Just hiked on board like any old bundle done up ugly, sir," replied the man. "In a manner of speaking you didn't care whether it was Christmas or Easter."

"I remember," continued the Sub. "A bluejacket—Saunders is his name was—standing by when I was hanging on to the beaker. Where is he?"

"Having a caulk on the bottom-boards, sir. He's as right as ninepence; but we've had to heave four of the hands overboard. They were pretty far gone when we put them into the boat."

Tediously the night passed. Signs of other movements were absent, with one exception. That was about three in the morning when a sea-plane of unknown nationality passed high overhead. Even her presence would have passed unnoticed, for the whine of the wind completely muffled the noise of the motors, had not the pilot started to use his flashing lamp. Apparently he was calling up a sister sea-plane in code, for the message was unintelligible to the whaler's crew. Nor was there, as far as they could see, any response.

Gradually the dawn began to gain mastery in the south-eastern sky. A rosy hue crept upwards from the misty horizon, betokening a spell of wet and stormy weather. Already the whaler's crew had all their work cut out to prevent the boat being swamped. They were baling incessantly with the solitary baler and their caps. With the increase of wind, and consequently heavier sea, it was doubtful whether the boat could survive, since there was nothing of which to make anything in the nature of a sea-anchor.



D 5

"ENGLISCH OFFIZIER-PIG!" HE SHOUTED. "WE YOU TAKE PRISONER "

[Illustration: "ENGLISCH OFFIZIER-PIG!" HE SHOUTED. "WE YOU TAKE PRISONER"]

Yet not for one moment did a single British member of the party show signs of being dismayed. Even the badly wounded men cracked jokes with their comrades, while others, whose injuries were of a slighter nature, insisted on being allowed to take their turn at baling.

Von Brockdorff-Giespert, on the other hand, looked the picture of misery and despair. He grumbled incessantly, asserting, with true Hunnish arrogance, that he was being neglected by his captors. It was not until he was sternly threatened, if he did not hold his tongue, that the Count began to realize that there was a limit beyond which even he must not go when in the company of British tars.

"There's a craft of sorts," announced the bowman, who, maintaining a precarious perch on the thwart, was scanning the horizon.

"Away on the starboard bow. Think she is coming this way."

"Wave your scarf, Lofty," suggested another member of the crew.

The man began to unwrap his "comforter". Then very abruptly he sat down.

"We'll hang on a little longer, mates," he said in a low voice. "I don't quite like the look of her. Strikes me she's a Fritz."

"By smoke, you're right!" exclaimed another, taking a cautious view of the oncoming craft. "A dirty U-boat. Lie down all hands. 'Ere, you blinkin' Fritz, none of your capers. Stow it!"

Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert, on hearing of the approach of what was apparently a German submarine, was making an effort to stand up and attract his compatriots' attention.

"It is time for me to do as I like," he replied, sneeringly.

"Is it? Then you're jolly well mistaken," retorted the stroke of the whaler, as he ostentatiously spat upon his hands and gripped a boat-stretcher.

The German's beady eyes contracted, and, thinking that discretion is ever the better art of valour, he shrugged his shoulders, and then winced with pain.

There was soon no doubt as to the type and nationality of the approaching craft. She was a U-boat. She was running on the surface. On the platform in the wake of the elongated conning-tower stood two men in black oilskins. At times completely enveloped in clouds of spray, they were intently searching the horizon either on the watch for likely prey or else keeping a sharp look-out for the dreaded British submarine-hunters.

"Looks like giving us the go-by after all," whispered one of the whaler's men, as the U-boat bore broadside on at a distance of about three-quarters of a mile.

"Let her," added his mate fervently. "Us don't want to see the likes of she just now. I'd give a month's pay to have her at yon range for twenty seconds."

"O, Lud!" exclaimed another with a grunt "she's starboarding helm. She's spotted us, lads!"

Clearly the whaler's crew were "in the soup", for the U-boat had altered course and was bearing down upon the luckless British seamen. Four or five hands made their way for'ard of the German craft's conning-tower, and in a few seconds a 4.7-inch gun rose from its place of concealment. Quickly the sinister weapon was manned and trained full at the helpless boat's crew.

"Murderous swine!" exclaimed the bowman, shaking his fist in futile defiance of the pirates.

Moments of intense suspense followed, yet the Huns refrained from opening fire. It might have been a matter for precaution that the quick-firer was trained upon the whaler; but, on the other hand, there was abundant evidence in the past to prove that the modern pirates had no scruples about murdering in cold blood the survivors of torpedoed merchantmen.

The while the officers outside the conning-tower were still busy with their binoculars. One of them kept the whaler under observation, while the other, evidently fearing a trap, swept the waste of water in case the periscope of a British submarine were watching Fritz with a view to blowing him to atoms.

Raising himself with his uninjured arm, Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert shouted something in German. The distance was still too great to enable the U-boat's officers to understand. This time the Count was not called to order, for the whaler's crew knew only too well that the tables had been turned.

Slowing down, and then reversing her engines, the U-boat came to a standstill within twenty yards of the survivors of the *Bolero*.

"Vot boat is dat?" hailed the U-boat's unter-leutnant. "Vere you from? Vot is der name of der schip you vos come from?"

"Better tell him civil-like," suggested the bow-man. "So here goes."

But von Brockdorff-Giespert again took up his parable. Speaking volubly, he quickly explained matters to his satisfaction. Although none of the British seamen understood German, the purport of the Count's words were sufficiently plain to them.

Interpolated with numerous "Ja, Herr Kapitan" from the obsequious unter-leutnant of the U-boat, von Brockdorff-Giespert gave a string of orders. The whaler was then commanded to come alongside, and the Count was assisted on board the submarine.

"Now," thought Alec, "he's out of it. Wonder if the dirty dogs are going, to turn a machine-gun on us, or ram the boat."

His natural curiosity was quickly satisfied, for the unter-leutnant, stepping to the rail, leered down into the boat.

"Englisch offizier-pig!" he shouted. "You der hospitality of Zherman U-boat must make. We you

take prisoner."

CHAPTER VI

A Prisoner of War

The Sub-lieutenant made the best of a bad job. Although weak with exhaustion and exposure to the elements, he held his head high as he was taken on board the submarine.

The coxswain and stroke of the whaler, who had assisted their young officer, were curtly ordered back. The U-boat was not engaged upon an errand of mercy. It was the British officer who was wanted for a definite purpose. The men did not count. In the eyes of the Germans the hapless British seamen were almost beneath notice, although in other circumstances the Huns would have feared to have met them in fair fight.

As he gained the bulging deck of the pirate craft, Seton, steadying himself by the guard-rail, turned to bid good-bye and good luck to his men. Guessing his intention the unter-leutnant gave a curt order. Instantly two German sailors laid hold of the British officer; and without ceremony took him below.

In the act of descending the vertical ladder, Alec caught sight of Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert and the kapitan of the U-boat. Both were vastly enjoying the British officer's discomfiture. Count Otto, in spite of his injuries and dishevelled appearance, was smoking a cigar and holding a steaming cup of "coffee substitute".

"I owe this young Englishman a debt," he remarked grimly to the commander of the U-boat. "I will take good care that I repay it with interest."

It was the Prussian touch all over. Von Brockdorff-Giespert totally ignored the fact that his foes had saved his life. He attributed his misfortunes mainly to Sub-lieutenant Seton, as if the latter had been actuated by feelings of personal animosity rather than sheer devotion to duty. Already the Hun had made up his mind to inflict every possible indignity upon the prisoner.

Confined in a cramped, ill-ventilated and ill-lighted compartment in close proximity to the wireless-generator-room, Seton strained his ears in the hope of finding out what had happened to his whaler's crew. The purr of the electric motors and the noise of men's voices echoing and re-echoing in the interior of the huge metal cylinder deadened all sounds from without.

The U-boat was submerging. Apparently she had not used her guns upon the boat, for the recoil of the weapons would have been noticeable. There was, however, the horrible possibility that, before diving, the submarine had deliberately rammed the boat. Or, perhaps the Huns had shot down every man in the whaler by rifle and pistol. That was one of Fritz's little stunts—cold-blooded butchery.

After a while Alec thought it was time to look after himself, since his captors evidently had no intention of attending to his personal comfort. The warmth of the cell caused the moisture to steam from his saturated clothes. Divesting himself of his garments he wrung them out, and began to exercise his limbs to ward off the numbness that assailed them.

Presently the door of his cell was thrown open and a seaman appeared carrying a bowl of hot soup.

"Can I have my clothes dried?" asked Alec.

"It's not my work to dry the clothes of a schweinhund," replied the fellow in English. Then he pointed to the Sub's wristlet watch.

"For that I will dry your things," he added.

"Right," replied Alec. "It isn't going, though. The water's spoilt it."

"That is to be expected," rejoined the German, picking up the saturated garments. Then waiting until Alec had handed over his watch, he went out, to return presently with a canvas suit, rust-marked and greasy.

"In case Herr Kapitan sends for you," explained the man, and without another word he again backed out of the compartment and locked the door.

While waiting for the soup to cool, the Sub, with feelings of repugnance, put on the loaned suit. It felt damp and clammy and smelt vilely. As for the soup it was little better than dish-water, greasy and unpalatable, while with deliberate intent an excessive quantity of salt had been put into the liquid. Nevertheless Alec took a considerable quantity, for he was desperately famished, and the hot concoction warmed his chilled body, for even in the warm atmosphere cold chills were persistently passing over him.

For several hours—how long Alec had no accurate idea—the U-boat ran submerged. As far as he could estimate it was about noon when she came to the surface, only to dive again very quickly, to the accompaniment of a couple of bombs from a British sea-plane. Although wide of the mark the explosion of the missiles gave the submarine a nasty shaking up, so much so, that the startled Huns allowed their craft to rest on the bed of the North Sea until nightfall before resuming their course.

It was during this period of enforced detention that Alec was summoned to be examined by Kapitan-leutnant von Kloster.

Clad solely in his borrowed canvas suit, unshaven and unkempt, Alec felt his position keenly. He realized that it was a hard matter to preserve his dignity, when his appearance was like that of a greaser of a third-rate tramp.

Attended by two stolid German seamen the prisoner was taken to the kapitan's cabin. Seated on a settee by a narrow folding table were Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert and Kapitan-leutnant von Kloster. The former was rigged out in a uniform that evidently was von Kloster's, judging by the fact that the Count was lightly-built and his borrowed garments fitted him like a sack. His injured arm was in a sling, while, as the result of his immersion and subsequent prolonged stay in the whaler, he had contracted a very bad cold.

Von Kloster, on the other hand, was stout, florid-featured, and well-groomed. He had the typical Prussian "square head", the contour of the back of his head and neck forming practically a straight line. His moustache he wore with the points upturned after the fashion set by his Imperial master.

On a camp-stool at the other end of the table sat the unter-leutnant, Kaspar Diehardt, a very young and very bumptious Prussian. His bulging forehead contrasted vividly with his insignificant, receding chin, while his watery blue eyes belied the suggestion that he could ever become an efficient leader of men.

With paper and ink in front of him he sat gnawing the end of his quill pen, as if his thoughts were constantly of the ever-present danger that threatened those who go down into the sea in German submarines.

In his broken English von Kloster demanded Alec's name, rank, the vessel to which he belonged and her approximate position when torpedoed.

"You may yourself think fortunate that no lies you haf told," remarked his interrogator. "All this information I haf. Now, tell me: for what reason was der *Bohero* an' oder schips off der Nord Hinder?"

"That I cannot tell you," replied the Sub.

"Do you know?"

"I refuse to answer this question."

The Kapitan-leutnant addressed several words to his subordinate, the latter writing diligently for some moments.

It was an acute period of suspense for Seton. The silence was only broken by the scratching of the temporary secretary's pen, while the Count and von Kloster kept their eyes fixed on the prisoner. Alec was beginning to feel the effects of the salt soup. A burning thirst gripped his throat.

"Now, you have time had," continued his inquisitor. "Will you answer?"

Seton shook his head. Even if he wanted to speak his parched tongue seemed unequal to the task. But that was not the reason. At all costs, he determined to refuse to give any information likely to be of service to the enemy.

"Answer!" shouted Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert, bringing his fist down upon the table and wincing at the effort.

"Water!" gasped Alec.

The Kapitan-leutnant gave an order to one of the men. The fellow saluted and went out, presently to return with a carafe full of water, and a glass. Very deliberately von Kloster filled the glass almost to the brim and offered it to the prisoner. Then, as Seton stepped eagerly forward to take the liquid, the Kapitan-leutnant withdrew the glass.

"After you spoken haf, not before," he reminded with tantalizing cunning.

"I see you to blazes first!" Alec said hoarsely, with an effort.

"Ach, goot!" rejoined von Kloster sneeringly. "We shall see. I leave der matter in der hands of mine chief."

"Quite so," assented Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert. "I may tell you, prisoner, that the information you refuse to give is already at our disposal. How remains our affair? I can tell you this with absolute certainty: either you will remain a prisoner of war until the end of hostilities, or you will not leave this U-boat alive. Rescue is entirely out of the question. Hence it does not matter whether I tell you a British naval secret. Those tramp steamers you were escorting were decoys. It was the intention of the British Admiral to sacrifice those ships in the hope that our torpedo-boat flotilla at Zeebrugge would be lured out to bite a tempting bait. While our boats were engaged thus, your destroyers were to attempt a raid upon our new naval base, which, like Antwerp in the time of Napoleon, is a pistol aimed at the heart of England. Unfortunately for you, the plan miscarried. Instead of our torpedo flotilla appearing, some of our *unterseebooten* were lying at the rendezvous, and, as a result, you are here."

He paused to watch the effect of his words. Not a muscle of the Sub's face moved. Outwardly his face was an imperturbable mask, although he was suffering the torments of acute thirst.

"And, since you are, like many others of our enemies, very curious to know what is developing at Zeebrugge," continued the Count, "it will afford me great pleasure there to offer you hospitality—of a kind. I mean to provide you with quarters and rations in a comfortable post on the Mole of Zeebrugge. If your pestering compatriots come flying over and drop bombs, and you happen to fall a victim, the responsibility is theirs, not mine. If, again, you are anxious to exchange your quarters for others beyond the Rhine, you have but to answer a few questions and the transfer will take effect."

Then, finding that Seton was apparently quite indifferent to this proposal, von Brockdorff-Giespert lost all control of his temper.

For fully two minutes he raved and threatened both in English and German. Had it not been for his injuries he would doubtless have struck his prisoner in the face. At length, after giving various instructions to von Kloster and Unter-leutnant Diehardt, he ordered the prisoner to be removed.

"The rascals look like being right," thought Alec on finding himself again in the cell. "Either this U-boat returns to Zeebrugge, or she does not. If she doesn't, it means that she'll be strafed properly. The Huns seem keenly alive to the possibility."

The Sub had not been very many minutes alone, when the seaman returned with his clothes. Giving a sort of superior smile, the fellow placed the bundle on the floor, and, without a word, backed out and relocked the door.

A brief examination showed that the Hun had broken the compact. He had Alec's wristlet watch, but no attempt had been made to dry the things. The uniform and underclothes were almost as wet as when Alec had arrived on board the U-boat.

Two hours later the submarine blew her ballast tanks and rose to the surface. The electric-motors were cut off, and the surface petrol-engines started and coupled up. All immediate danger was past, and the U-boat once more shaped a course for Zeebrugge.

Presently Seton was given another bowl of so-called soup and a piece of black bread. One taste of the former was sufficient. It was excessively salt. The bread, too, had a saline taste, and was as dry as sawdust, but Alec derived some relief to his burning throat by slowly chewing the unpalatable substance.

"And I've to thank the British Navy for this," thought Alec, critically regarding the black war bread. "Evidently efficacious, if Fritz and all his kind are compelled to carry on with this. Hallo! What's the game now?"

For the U-boat had suddenly commenced to submerge once more, the steep diving angle indicating that the action was not entirely voluntary on the part of her nerve-racked pirate crew.

CHAPTER VII

M.-L. 4452

"And the run across to Ostend?" inquired Sub-lieutenant Guy Branscombe of M.-L. 4452.

"A wash-out," replied his superior officer, Lieutenant Frank Farnborough.

Branscombe expressed no surprise at the information. During the war there were innumerable instances of orders being given, of plans carefully laid, and preparations made sometimes for weeks in advance, then, at the last hour, they would be countermanded. In Service parlance the abandonment of any particular project is generally referred to as a "wash-out".

M.-L. 4452 was lying in the outer harbour of Ramsgate. It was dead low water, but sufficient for the M.-L. to lie afloat alongside the eastern arm of the stone pier that towered twenty-five to

thirty feet above the deck of the trim little craft.

She had had a quick, uneventful run round from the Firth of Forth, and upon reporting at Dover had been ordered to lie in Ramsgate Harbour, owing to certain activities in progress at the former base. It was on the cards that M.-L. 4452, in company with five sister ships, was to take part in important operations off the Belgian coast—operations requiring courage and discretion, and far from being devoid of great risk to life and limb.

For her size the M.-L. was a comfortable packet. True, she rolled heavily in a seaway and was unhandy on her helm when running at slow speed. Built of wood and equipped with two powerful eight-cylinder motors, she could attain a speed of twenty-six knots.

For'ard she carried a 3-inch quick-firer. In the wake of the gun-mounting rose the wheel-house, surmounted by a small but powerful searchlight. Her single mast supported a complex array of wireless gear and a cross-yard with necessary signalling halyards. On the slightly raised deck-house was a dinghy in chocks, the davits being swung inboard. The boat was made of thin sheet iron, with water-tight compartments fore and aft and was sufficiently light to enable two hands to haul her up and down a beach. Judging by the dents and bulges in the dinghy's sides she had already been called upon to do useful work.

Right aft fluttered the White Ensign, an emblem under which few if any, of the motor-boat officers ever dreamt of sailing prior to the eventful August, 1914.

On either side and slightly in advance of the ensign staff, M.-L. 4452, like a hornet, carried her sting in her tail; for here were two powerful depth charges, capable of shattering the plating of a U-boat within a radius of fifty or sixty yards from the source of the explosion.

Below, the M.-L. was provided with ample accommodation—far more than the casual outside observer would give her credit for.

The crew, consisting of seven hands, were berthed for'ard. Then came the store rooms and wireless and hydrophone rooms. Aft were the galleys, the ward-room one opening into the officers' living quarters.

The ward-room was a picture of cosiness. The M.-L.'s skipper had seen to that, for he had been sufficiently long in the Service to know the ropes. A few gallons of white enamel, drawn from the dockyard store, had worked wonders on the walls and ceiling of the ward-room, while the beams and timbers had been painted a dark brown to represent oak. The result was that the place resembled the interior of an old-fashioned half-timbered house, while, to carry out the scheme, the electric lamps were encased in cardboard, cut in the fashion of eighteenth-century lanterns.

Opening out of the ward-room were the two-bunked sleeping quarters for the officers, also enamelled tastefully and effectively. At the present time these were in a somewhat disordered state, oilskins, sea-boots, and pilotcoats dumped promiscuously, bearing a silent testimony to the fact that M.-L. 4452 had encountered heavy weather in the Straits of Dover.

Frank Farnborough, lieutenant and skipper of the M.-L., was a tall, slimly-built man of twenty-five. In civil life he was a consulting engineer, who was just beginning to make a name for himself when war broke out. His chief pastime was yachting, and in his little weatherly nine-ton yawl he had visited and was well acquainted with every port and haven between the Humber and the Lizard, and had a nodding acquaintance with the Dutch and Belgian coast and that of France from Dunkirk to Brest.

On the formation of the Motor Boat Reserve he had joined on as an ordinary deckhand, but it was not long before his experience and ability gained him a commission.

His sub, Guy Branscombe, has already been introduced.

Every man of the crew was an amateur yachtsman. In private life they were respectively barrister, mining engineer, Manchester merchant, two ex-public schoolboys, a stockbroker, and a bank clerk. The barrister, senior in point of age, was ship's cook, he having voluntarily taken on the job, and, considering it was doubtful whether he ever made even a cup of tea for himself prior to 1914, he did remarkably well.

The discipline on board would have turned the hair of a pukka R.N. officer grey; but still there was discipline of sorts. They had been shipmates since 1916, turning over from another M.-L., that had perished gloriously in an endeavour to assist a torpedoed liner, when 4452 was received from the contractors.

Altogether they were a jovial, hard-working band of comrades. The men had as much yachting as they wanted, summer and winter alike, with the excitement of hunting Fritz or the chance of bumping on a drifting mine thrown in. Yet, far from being fed-up, for they realized that life on an M.-L. was infinitely preferable to foot-slogging in the infantry, their zest was enhanced rather than dimmed.

Only a few minutes before the skipper's return, Branscombe had been talking with Able Seaman Brown, R.N.V.R., and stockbroker.

"As a matter of fact, sir," remarked Brown, "I'm seriously thinking that after the war—if the war is ever going to end—I'll buy an M.-L. There'll be hundreds on the market and I guess the Admiralty will be lucky if they get 300 pounds a piece for them."

"And what then?" asked the Sub. "You may be a budding millionaire, but no man in ordinary circumstances could afford to run one of these hookers."

"That's where you are mistaken, sir, I fancy," replied A. B. Brown. "These packets will be purchasable after the war for a matter of a few hundred pounds. I'd take out the engines and sell them. They'd come in handy for electric light plant for a country house or something of that sort. Then I'd get a single 40-60 H.P. Kelvin motor, which uses paraffin instead of petrol, and couple up the twin screws. That's my little castle in the air for after the war, sir."

"Tea ready?" enquired the skipper. "No? Well, there's time to give the dogs a run ashore."

He eyed the twenty-five foot vertical ladder somewhat dubiously. It was strong enough, but a considerable portion towards the lower end was slippery with seaweed and slime. Then he whistled to two large sheep-dogs who were coiled up in the stern sheets of the dinghy.

Peter and Paul were recognized members of M.-L. 4452's complement. They belonged to Frank Farnborough but had been adopted by every individual on board. Both animals had been violently seasick on the first occasion when they put to sea, but from that time onwards, blow high or blow low, they behaved like seasoned sons of the sea.

"Send 'em up in a bowline," suggested Branscombe.

"Hardly good enough," objected the Lieutenant. "I'll carry them up, one at a time."

Placing Peter on his back and holding on to one paw, Farnborough began his somewhat hazardous climb. All went well for the first half, and then a catastrophe occurred. It was owing to a large ginger cat that was prowling along the very edge of the quay. Peter spotted her, and began barking. The feline arched her back and spat defiance. This insult was more than the sheep-dog could stand. He began to struggle furiously. His master's admonition to "shut up" was ignored. The next instant Farnborough's feet slipped on the slimy rung, and, hampered by the heavy animal, he fell upon the deck.

It was a drop of about twelve feet, but sufficient to make the Lieutenant writhe. His right ankle was badly sprained, while, to make matters worse, he had struck his back against the edge of the raised cabin-top. Peter, unhurt, but genuinely concerned, began to lick his master's hand.

"Nothing much," declared Farnborough in answer to Branscombe's inquiry. "Bit of a twist to my ankle, that's all. Lucky thing old Peter wasn't hurt, the silly old ass!"

One of the men, taking each dog in turn under his arm, made the ascent in safety, and the now docile animals went off to visit a great friend—the cook at the Naval Base Canteen.

"I'll have to turn in for half an hour or so," declared Farnborough. "My ankle is giving me socks. It'll be all right soon. What? Go to the medico for a little thing like that? No, thanks; besides, we are under orders to sail at eight."

"Not the stunt?" asked Branscombe.

"No, laddie; I said it was a wash-out," replied the skipper. "It's coming off all in good time; can take your affidavit on that. . . . By Jove! that was a bit of a twister," he added with a wry smile as he carefully lowered himself down the steep companion ladder to the ward-room. "Quite all right, though. A little embrocation will soon set matters right."

Having laid himself on his bunk, Farnborough drew an envelope from the inside breast-coat pocket of his monkey-jacket.

"Here you are!" he remarked, giving his sub the contents of the envelope. "Usual thing. You might see that the dogs are on board before we start. I'll get you to take the old hooker out, old man."

Guy Branscombe scanned the typewritten orders. They were marked "Confidential", which is a word that in Service matters may mean a lot, or nothing. Often orders of the most trivial character are so marked, possibly by a minor official who wishes to magnify the importance of his particular work. Consequently, there is a tendency to under-estimate the significance of the word "Confidential". It is another instance of "Familiarity breeds contempt".

However, in this case the orders were important. M.-L.'s 4452, 4453, 4454, and 4455 were to proceed on patrol between certain positions. A reference to the chart showed that the limits were from a point six miles north-west of the mouth of the Scheldt to a point five miles due north (true) of the Sandettie Bank Lightship. Three large destroyers from the Dover patrol were to act as covering vessels, while a couple of monitors, each armed with a single 17-inch gun, were to keep Fritz on thorns by lobbing a few shells with uncanny accuracy upon the fortifications of Zeebrugge.

The special task of the M.-L.'s was to keep a look-out for a squadron of bombing aeroplanes, which were engaged in liberally plastering the Mole and canal locks of Zeebrugge with tons of high explosives. Should a seaplane become disabled and be compelled to alight on the sea, then the handy little craft would speed to the rescue, in spite of the fact that they were within range of the long-distance German guns on the Belgian coast.

"All plain sailing?" asked Farnborough. "Good! If you'll take her out, and call me at eight bells, I'll be eternally grateful to you. So the old hooker's going to have her baptism of fire."

CHAPTER VIII

On Patrol

Punctually to the appointed minute, M.-L. 4452 cast off and proceeded seaward. Her sister ships had preceded her, and were running in single column line ahead. It was a pitch-dark night. The sea was as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond. Shoreward the land was enshrouded in darkness, not a light being visible. Viewed from a short distance, the Kentish coast, normally defined by lines of twinkling lights, but now looming faintly against the sombre sky, looked more like a desolate land than a populous corner of England, literally linked by a chain of seaside towns.

The M.-L.'s were under way without navigation lights, only a small lamp astern of each enabling those following to keep station. The little craft were cleared for action, for it had been known that hostile torpedo-boats had approached within a few miles of the port of Dover.

Branscombe, standing by the quarter-master in the little wheel-house, fully realized the danger of the operation. He revelled in it, notwithstanding the fact that the M.-L.'s were passing over one of the most heavily-mined portions of the sea adjoining the British Isles. A few fathoms beneath the boat's keel were mines in hundreds, that, in conjunction with nets and other elaborate devices, formed an impregnable barrier to the passage of German U-boats. As long as the mines remained anchored and submerged they were dangerous only to the type of craft they were intended to destroy; but after the heavy blow of the last few days there was a possibility, nay, a probability, that some would break adrift and float on the surface, a menace to those who had lawful business upon the waters, a prospect sufficient to stimulate the imagination—if not to get on the nerves—of the hardest mariner.

It was almost on this very spot twelve months previously that Branscombe had ordered the gun's crew to open fire at what he took to be a periscope, but what, on closer examination, proved to be a derelict boat-hook; while on another occasion the Sub, inexperienced in those days, saw a large dark object slither under the water. To his excited imagination it could be nothing less than a U-boat, hurriedly diving to escape detection. Ordering full-speed ahead, Branscombe steered straight for the rippling swell, and detonated a depth charge on the spot where the submarine had vanished. A badly mutilated porpoise came up in the cascade of foam.

The Sub was badly chipped for some considerable time over the affair, but it was excusable. The M.-L.'s motto is to hit and hit hard at anything of a suspicious nature. Explanations, if necessary, can follow later, but one has to take no chances with Fritz and all his dirty tricks.

It speaks well for the courageous temperament of the British sailor that he has stuck it for more than four years, living in momentary danger of being blown sky-high by an unseen mine or by a torpedo from a lurking foe, and yet is able to laugh and joke unrestrainedly with his comrades, and to take the keenest interest in sport. During the whole period of the war, the British navy faced dangers and thrived; while the Huns, having no traditions to hold up, and running little risk, as they rarely put to sea beyond the shelter of their own minefields, were slowly but surely drifting to moral suicide that culminated in mutiny and the disgraceful surrender of Germany's fleet.

In spite of the unrestricted U-boat campaign, there was a constant stream of merchantmen passing round the Forelands to and from London River. Those outward bound were making for the Downs, there to await escort to the convoy. All these ships, fantastically camouflaged and steaming without lights, made navigation doubly difficult, and it was not until North Foreland was several miles astern and the M.-L. out of the recognized sailing routes that Branscombe began to feel more at ease.

"Eight bells, sir," reported Anderson, wireless man, and ex-bank clerk.

Being in the war zone, and at night, the actual striking on the ship's bell was dispensed with.

"Very good," replied the Sub, and turning to another man he asked him to inform the Captain.

In five minutes the man returned.

"I've been trying to get the skipper on deck, sir," he reported, "but I'm afraid it's no use. It's not only his ankle that's causing trouble but his back is rather badly bruised. Moving about after

lying down has made matters worse."

Guy picked up a signal pad and wrote a message, telling Farnborough not to worry but to take things quietly; meanwhile, he (Branscombe) would carry on, reporting anything unusual.

It was against regulations for both officers to leave the deck at the same time; hence Guy had to send down a chit. This done he prepared for at least a twenty-four hours' "trick".

Rapidly the booming of the heavy guns grew louder and louder. The air trembled under the terrific reverberations of the contesting ordnance, for Fritz was not backward in replying to the fire of the British monitors.

Peter and Paul, to whose sensitive nerves the continuous concussions did not appeal at all, had abandoned their post in the dinghy, and had retired to the comparative shelter of the after sleeping-cabin. The fact that the ladder was almost vertical and seven feet in height did not trouble them. They merely settled the matter by jumping, alighting on Branscombe's bed, where they made themselves as comfortable as possible in the distressing circumstances.

Presently dense masses of smoke on the horizon betokened the presence of the monitors. Each, her presence screened by artificial fog emitted from the attendant destroyers, was firing with her 17-inch gun at extreme elevation, dropping tons of H.E. shells upon an invisible target, while seaplanes, hovering overhead, recorded by means of wireless the result of each discharge.

Within a mile of the unwieldy floating batteries the M.-L. altered course, keeping parallel to the invisible shore. It was an inspiring scene. In the rifts of the smoke-screen could be discerned the tripod masts, enormous top-hammer and up-trained guns of the monitors. With every shot the vessels heeled, until, with the return list, their gigantic "blisters" or anti-torpedo devices were exposed above the oily surface of the calm sea.

It was by no means a one-sided game. Projectiles were "straddling" the monitors, some falling hundreds of yards beyond their objective, and hurling columns of foam high into the air, as they ricocheted three or four times before finally plunging to the bed of the North Sea.

The whine of a high-velocity shell, as it passed a few feet above the wheel-house of M.-L. 4452, gave Branscombe warning that he, too, was under shell fire. A direct hit with one of those monsters would mean utter annihilation to the wooden hull of the M.-L. and to her crew as well. Nevertheless the little flotilla had to "carry on". Orders to patrol on a certain course had to be implicitly obeyed. The "small fry" under the White Ensign had to take similar and often greater risk than their huge and powerfully armed and protected sisters.

Up and down the limits of their patrol the little M.-L.'s carried on. No. 4453, always the unlucky one, was struck by a ricocheting shell. Fortunately the missile did not explode, nor did it detonate the depth charges stowed astern; but the impact played havoc with the ward-room, completely demolishing the roof and knocking two gaping holes in the raised sides. Well it was that her crew were at action stations, for not a man received as much as a scratch.

At the pre-arranged hour the monitors "packed up". Lowering the muzzles of their guns and bringing the weapons in a fore-and-aft position, they steamed slowly out of range under cover of a really colossal smoke-screen. For nearly twenty minutes the Huns liberally "watered" the spot where the bombarding force had been, until their observation balloons—for they were afraid to send their aeroplanes out—reported that once more the British ships had withdrawn. That evening Berlin would be cheered by the report that a prolonged and determined attack upon Zeebrugge by strong enemy forces had failed, with heavy losses inflicted upon the attackers.

But the task of the M.-L.'s was by no means accomplished. With the destroyers still holding on, in case a swarm of German torpedo-boats should issue from their lairs and pounce down upon the lightly-armed patrol-boats, No. 4452 and her consorts remained to watch for the returning seaplanes.

With their customary inclination to make "a show", the "spotting" aircraft had gone inland upon the termination of the bombardment in the hope that a Hun airman or two would try conclusions in aerial combat. Failing an encounter, they proceeded with great deliberation to drop bombs upon certain railway junctions, aerodromes, ammunition dumps, and other objects of military importance.

Over the placid sea patches of genuine sea-fog were stealing, as if Nature was bent upon showing man that, after all, his efforts at maritime camouflage were puny compared with hers. At intervals there was a clear view of the horizon; at others it was difficult to see a cable's length ahead.

From the Belgian shore the thunder of the heavy guns had ceased, but the air rumbled with the distant ceaseless cannonade on the Ypres salient. There was no mistaking the noise. For nearly four years the dwellers on the south-east coast of England and the seafarers in the vicinity of the Straits of Dover had heard it. By this time its monotonous rumble hardly raised a comment, save when at times it rose to a crescendo of hate. And yet that incessant rumble was the death-knell of thousands of the flower of the British Empire and its gallant Allies, and, no less, that of the Hunnish invaders.

Out of a broad patch of clammy fog glided M.-L. 4452 into a blaze of perfect sunshine. The glass windows of her wheel-house were open, since the moisture rendered them almost like frosted glass.

"Look!" exclaimed Branscombe. In his excitement he brought his hand down heavily upon the quartermaster's shoulder. "A Fritz; and we've got him cold!"

There was no mistake this time. Porpoises and floating boat-hook staves might be taken for U-boats, but the long, low-lying hull of the German submarine and its twin periscopes could not possibly be mistaken for anything but what they were. She was running on the surface at a moderate speed of ten knots, as if loath to "crack on" into the bewildering fog-bank that lay athwart her course.

"Stand by, aft!" shouted the Sub.

As if running for a challenge cup, the ex-bank clerk and the former public schoolboy tore aft. They knew their job: to release the deadly depth charges and to stand by the firing key, by means of which the electric circuit was completed and the explosive detonated. All out, the M.-L. made straight for her intended victim, her quick-firer giving the U-boat a preliminary show by way of encouragement. The shell missed the conning-tower by inches. Before the breech-block could be opened, the still-smoking cylinder ejected and another charge inserted, the U-boat dived so abruptly that for a few seconds her rudders and twin-screws were clear of the water.

"Starboard . . . at that!"

Branscombe, his eyes fixed upon the surface-swell of the now submerged pirate, waited until the M.-L. was crossing the path of the frantically-diving Hun.

"Let go aft!"

With a smother of foam, the metal canister toppled from its cradle into the milk-white wake of the swiftly-moving M.-L. The drum, on which the insulated wire was wound, began to revolve rapidly as fathom after fathom was paid out.

The Sub stepped from the wheel-house and raised his hand. Then, with a quick decisive motion, he brought it down to his side. At the signal, the key of the firing-battery was pressed home.

"Bon voyage, Fritz!" murmured Branscombe, as with an ear-splitting report a column of mingled smoke and foam rose quite two hundred feet into the air.

With her helm hard a-port the M.-L. circled rapidly to starboard, and, steadying, passed at slow speed through the patch of agitated water. One of the crew made ready to let go the mark-buoy to indicate the position of the sunken U-boat. He waited for the order, but Branscombe gave no word of command. Gripping the stanchion-wires, the Sub leant over the side and watched. Then his look of elation gave place to an expression of acute disappointment—like that of a needy man who picks up from the gutter what he imagined to be a "Bradbury", only to find that it is a wrapper of a packet of tobacco.

There was nothing—absolutely nothing—to indicate that the depth charge had carried out its pre-ordained mission. Not a vestige of oil floated on the surface of the sea. There were dead fish in hundreds, killed by the terrific explosion, but not a scrap of debris that by any stretch of the imagination could be attributed to the strafed U-boat.

Up pelted M.-L. 4453, closely followed by No. 4454. The skipper of the former raised a megaphone to his lips.

"Any luck?" he asked cheerfully.

"'Fraid not," shouted Guy, trying to hide his chagrin.

"Hard lines," was the sympathetic rejoinder.

"Yes, my luck's out this time," soliloquized Branscombe, as he gave orders for the former course to be resumed. "I wish to goodness I'd blown the beastly thing to bits."

But, had Guy known that his chum, Alec Seton, was on board the submarine, he might not have expressed himself thus. He would still have done his level best to strafe the U-boat, Seton notwithstanding. It would have been a case of duty before everything; but it would have been an unpleasant task.

CHAPTER IX

At Zeebrugge

It would be no exaggeration to state that Alec Seton "had the wind up badly" when the U-boat

dived suddenly. He knew what it meant right enough; only on this occasion the positions were reversed. Instead of being the hunter he was the hunted, and, what was worse—worse from a strictly personal point—he was being strafed by some of his own friends, men who, from long practice, had been uncannily adept in sending German submarines on their last, long voyage.

Had he been on board a British submarine, and had been chased by a pack of Hun torpedo-craft, he would have borne the situation with comparative calm, knowing that it was part of the game, and that both sides could hit unpleasantly hard. But, a captive in an enemy craft, unable to lift a finger to help himself, Seton had good cause for being in a mild state of funk.

It seemed to him that the U-boat was diving almost horizontally, for he slid heavily against the for'ard bulkhead. Then, with a disconcerting roll, the boat regained an even keel. Men were shouting, hand-wheels and levers were being manipulated with undisciplined haste. There was no doubt about it: Fritz was having a sticky time, and taking his medicine badly.

Then came the muffled detonation of M.-L. 4452's depth charge. The U-boat, caught by the underwater undulations, rolled and pitched alarmingly. Gear was carried away, and clattered noisily across the steel platforms, the electric lights went out, water began to hiss in—fine but high-pressured jets through the buckled plates and started rivet-holes. In the darkness there was no telling whether the U-boat was plunging to the bed of the North Sea.

A sudden impulse prompted Seton to thrust his shoulder against the steel door. In calmer moments he might have reflected upon the needlessness of it. If he had to drown, he might just as well remain in solitude as spend his last moments in the company of a crew of panic-stricken Huns.

The door resisted the impact, but unaccountably the lock gave. Stumbling over the raised threshold, the Sub found himself brought up against a number of complicated valve wheels and tubes. There he hung on and waited.

Already some of the crew had produced electric torches. The pumps were set to work to keep the slight but none the less dangerous influx of water under control. Von Kloster, his eyes fixed upon the depth gauge, was bellowing out orders, while the unter-leutnant was feverishly attending to the wheel operating the horizontal rudders. Right aft, the sweating engineers were trying to coax the electrically-driven engines into action.

By degrees the Huns, realizing that they were not immediately going on a visit to Davy Jones, began to calm down. A petty officer, making his way aft, flashed his torch upon Alec. The latter, still clad in the dinghy canvas suit, was easily mistaken for one of the crew, for the petty officer, pointing for'ard, gave a curt order.

Seton had not the faintest notion of what the Hun said, but the gesture was unmistakable. Entering into the fun of the affair, the Sub, squeezing through a small oval-shaped aperture in one of the transverse bulkheads, found himself in the bow torpedo-room.

At that moment, the artificers having renewed the blown-out fuse-wires, the electric lamps were lighted. Alec was alone in the compartment. In front of him were the twin torpedo-tubes, which differed from the British ones in one important detail. Instead of the breech piece being secured by six butterfly nuts, the German method was to employ an intercepted thread cam-action, similar to the breech-block mechanism of a quick-firing gun. Above the tubes were six oiled steel torpedoes, each ready to be "launched home" into the tubes.

"By Jove! What an opportunity!" thought Alec, giving a cursory glance to reassure himself that he was alone. "A gorgeous chance to do the dirty on Fritz!"

Picking up a heavy adjustable spanner, Seton set to work quickly and deftly. To each of the rudders of the torpedoes he gave a slight and almost imperceptible twist. In the excitement of launching home and firing the deadly missiles, the Hun torpedo men would almost to a certainty overlook the slight but important bend in the delicately adjusted metal fins.

"Good enough!" declared Alec. He felt like a schoolboy engaged in ragging an unpopular fellow's study. It was time to make himself scarce before his presence was detected.

His luck was in. Without encountering anyone he regained his cell and closed the door.

"Now Fritz can use his tin-fish as often as he likes," he thought gleefully. "He's welcome to puzzle his brains to find out why the blessed things won't run true, for it's a dead cert. they won't."

It was a matter of three or four hours before the U-boat again rose to the surface. Her batteries were running low. If again obliged to submerge before regaining her base she would be compelled to rest helplessly on the bottom of the sea, since her underwater propulsion powers were almost nil.

When the sailor reappeared with Alec's unappetizing meal—black bread, acorn coffee, and sausage of doubtful origin—the German looked suspiciously at the door.

"You haf with the lock played tricks," he declared.

"Must have been the concussion," said Alec. "It was a nasty shock, wasn't it?"

The fellow scowled with sullen anger.

"Schweinhund Englander," he muttered. "I go tell der kapitan."

He put the food upon the floor and went to the door. Then, half turning, he inquired:

"Vot you give me, if I not tell der kapitan?"

Seton laughed outright. His sense of humour was tickled.

"Carry on, Fritz!" he replied. "It's your German temperament, I suppose. You can't help it. So put that in your pipe and smoke it."

The Hun looked puzzled.

"Put vot in mine pipe? Haf you any tobacco?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"'Fraid you can't understand, Fritz," rejoined Seton. "You'll get nothing more out of me, so hook it!"

The man went out still puzzling over the idiomatic expression that Alec had purposely employed. Yet he did not report the incident of the tampered lock to the kapitan. A little later an artificer came and secured the door, and once more Seton was a close prisoner.

With her pumps going continuously to keep under the steady inflow of water—for, in spite of "stoppers" and patches applied to the gaping plates, she leaked badly—the U-boat passed between the ends of the moles and entered Zeebrugge Harbour. Owing to injuries she had sustained, it was considered desirable to pass through the lock gates and take her up the Bruges Canal for repairs. Although the locality was not a healthy one, there was less risk of the U-boat being smashed by British guns or bombs than had she remained at Zeebrugge. Accordingly the returned pirate craft was temporarily berthed alongside the Mole in order to land certain members of her crew and also spare stores before proceeding.

Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert was the first to step ashore. There was a smile of satisfaction on his face: he made no attempt to conceal his joy at leaving the badly-strained U-boat, and he mentally vowed that, if the matter were left to him, it would be a long time before he went on a voyage again. He would be quite content to exercise his valuable submarine knowledge ashore, and let the U-boat commanders put his theories to the test.

Two-thirds of the crew, including Unter-leutnant Kaspar Diehardt, also landed. They showed little enthusiasm on their stolid faces, for they knew perfectly well that there was no respite for them. Owing to the shortage of skilled submariners, they would be promptly drafted to other U-boats, and be sent to sea again on their ruthless and inglorious task of attempting to wipe out of existence the British Mercantile Marine. Practically all the German submarine service suffered in the same way. Constantly employed, exposed to perils seen and unseen, ill-fed on very inferior food the men were already on the high-road to mutiny.

Guarded by a couple of armed men, Sub-lieutenant Alec Seton was taken ashore. Still clad in the loaned canvas suit and carrying his saturated uniform in a bundle under his arm, Seton set foot for the first time upon the now historic Zeebrugge Mole.

He made good use of his eyes during his progress. It was part of his training to do so. He had seen aerial photographs of the place, but these, useful though they were, conveyed but a slight idea of the formidable nature of the German defences.

The stone wall, rising full thirty feet above low water-mark, was of massive construction. It had been additionally protected by concrete works and thousands of sand-bags. There were emplacements for heavy guns by the dozen, and for quick-firers by the hundred, while machine-guns bristled everywhere. There were plenty of evidences of the activity of the British guns and aeroplanes, for the wall had been repaired in fifty different places. Some of the havoc played by bombs was of recent origin, men, both Belgian and German, being employed to make good the damage. Almost abreast of the berth where the returned U-boat was lying was a hole twenty feet in diameter, and perhaps a dozen feet deep, while the wall on the seaward side was bulging ominously under the strain.

At intervals, beneath the level of the outside parapet, several block-houses had been built on the Mole, machine-guns commanding the roadway on the breakwater. Evidently the Huns expected a landing, and with true Teutonic thoroughness were taking precautions accordingly.

Within the harbour were swarms of small craft of all types—ocean-going torpedo-boats, patrol-boats, submarines, lighters, suction-dredgers, captured merchantmen, and paddle-wheelers. All, more or less, showed signs of being badly mauled, for, almost daily, British sea-planes swarmed overhead and let the Huns know that they meant to make things hot for the pirates' nest.

At the present moment the guns were silent. Nevertheless, it was easy to see that Fritz was on thorns. Above the town floated four observation balloons; a Black Cross aeroplane flew discreetly along the sea-front, ready to hark back to its hangar on the first sign of the dreaded British sea-planes. From an elevated wooden tower on the extremity of the Mole, signalmen, brought specially from Kiel, swept the horizon with their telescopes. Anti-aircraft gunners were continually standing by, while in bomb-proof shelters artillerymen awaited telephonic orders to man their guns, should a 17-inch salvo from the monitors beyond the horizon announce that yet another strafe was beginning.

Against the base of the parapet were bundles of barbed wire, one end of which was securely fixed to stout ring-bolts in the granite wall. On the inner edge of the Mole were massive iron posts, each post being abreast a corresponding roll of wire. This was a part of the German defences, for at night the wire was stretched across the Mole roadway, forming twenty or more barriers, in which narrow gaps were left to enable men to move to and fro. These barbed-wire defences were augmented by live wires, the whole forming a truly formidable obstacle should any attempt be made to storm the Mole.

All this Seton was freely permitted to see. His captors intended that he should do so, otherwise they would have bandaged his eyes. It was part of von Brockdorff-Giespert's scheme. Confident in his belief that the prisoner would never leave Zeebrugge until the conclusion of a victorious German peace, the Count spared no pains to humiliate and intimidate his captive.

Presently the guards halted at a distance of less than eighty yards from the head of the Mole. Here was an abandoned big-gun emplacement. The seaward aperture had partly collapsed, leaving a gap of about four feet in width and two in height. This had been prevented from completely caving in by several thick steel bars fixed at four-inch intervals, the whole forming an impassable grille. The gun had been removed from the emplacement, leaving a space of twenty-five feet by twelve, and eight feet between the stone floor and the steel-girdered and concrete reinforced roof. The door was of steel, and furnished with three slits for rifle-fire. Within was a plank-bed with a straw mattress, a wooden stool, a shelf holding tin plates and cups, and a couple of blankets. This was Alec Seton's cell.

"Evidently the old brigand is keeping his word," thought the Sub as he was roughly bidden to enter and the door locked upon him. "He said he'd leave me to the attentions of our bombing 'planes and long-range guns. Ah, well! It's no use moaning about it. Make the best of a bad job, Alec, my boy, and keep a stiff upper lip. Many a man's been in a tighter hole than this before to-day and has lived to tell the tale. Never say die till you're dead."

And, with a series of similar trite maxims running through his head, Seton prepared to shake down in his new abode as a guest of the Imperial German Government.

CHAPTER X

Preparations

"Jolly rotten luck that *Bolero* business," remarked Lieutenant Farnborough, commanding M.-L. 4452.

The M.-L. lay alongside the oil-fuel jetty in Dover Harbour. A week had elapsed since the stunt off Zeebrugge. Farnborough was still far from fit. His sprained ankle was much better, but the injury to his back caused him considerable inconvenience and pain on movement. Yet, eager not to miss the opportunity of participating in the impending big operations at Zeebrugge and Ostend, he sturdily refused the more prudent course of reporting sick, and carried on as usual.

It was a calm, moonlit evening, following a hard blow. There was a fairly heavy sea running in the Channel, while in the Wick, or portion of Dover Harbour enclosed by the new Admiralty breakwater, a long swell was setting in, causing the destroyer and other vessels at the buoys to roll heavily. The "gush" was even communicated to the small basin at the north-eastern end of the harbour, where half a dozen M.-L.'s and two P.-boats lay in somewhat dangerous proximity to thousands of tons of highly-inflammable oil fuel.

No. 4452 was rolling slightly, her large coir fenders grunting and groaning as they ground against the massive timbers of the pier, the deck of which towered thirty feet above the little craft. Beyond and above, looming ghostly in the cold moonlight, were the rugged chalk cliffs crowning the venerable Dover Castle.

Sub-lieutenant Guy Branscombe, deep in a novel, merely shrugged his shoulders. His skipper's words had as yet failed to penetrate his understanding. Farnborough knew the Sub's peculiarity. In his spells of off-duty Branscombe was a regular book-worm. Farnborough, on the other hand, was prone to conversation, but he had an unsatisfactory victim in his sub, who was able to defend himself against inopportune interruption by entire absorption in the book of the moment.

Presently, after a lapse of a minute or more, Branscombe removed his pipe.

"What's that about the *Bolero*?" he asked.

"Torpedoed," replied the Lieutenant.

"Lost off the Nord Hinder last Friday week."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Branscombe. "I know a fellow on that destroyer. Any casualties?"

"Fraid so," answered Farnborough. "Night, rough sea, and all that sort of thing, you know. An officer and seventeen men missing—presumed drowned. Here you are, my boy!"

He handed Branscombe a copy of an Admiralty confidential circular giving details of the disaster. A month later the casualty list would be communicated to the Press together with a bald statement that "one of H.M. destroyers was torpedoed and sunk in the North Sea on the night of so and so". It would have to be left to one's imagination, and perhaps the simple narrative of a survivor, to picture the end of a gallant vessel, for "the Navy doesn't advertise", especially in war-time.

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Branscombe; "I knew Seton awfully well. Old school chum of mine. His people lived close to my home. An' I came up in the train with him to Rosyth just before we commissioned; he envied me my stunt because of the extra excitement and risks," he added reminiscently. "Poor old Seton!"

The news hit Branscombe badly. In the senior service men get to know each other more than in the army. The camaraderie of the sea is a real thing. Friendships made afloat are generally of a lasting order, especially during a two years' commission, by the end of which time there is hardly a secret between "chummy" officers.

And into the midst of the big band of brothers stalked Death—far too frequently during the Great War. Men went singly, in dozens, and in hundreds, nobly doing their duty to King and Country. Some died in the knowledge that their passing was witnessed by their comrades; others went unheard and unseen, with none able to tell with any degree of accuracy of the manner of their going.

"Rough luck," murmured Farnborough sympathetically. "Did I ever come across him?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied the Sub, "and to my belief you never will."

"Strange things happen at sea," rejoined the Lieutenant. "There's nothing to prove that Seton's been done in. However, to change the subject, you might cast your eye on this. You'll have to commit the thing to memory."

The "thing" was a close-lined, typewritten document endorsed "Strictly Confidential". Branscombe gave a low whistle as he read the title. It was "Orders for Coastal Motor-Launches for the impending operations off Ostend and Zeebrugge".

For some considerable time past a series of rehearsals for the contemplated bottling up of the two Belgian ports had been taking place. One of the first steps was to pick and choose the men; the second was to train them. Volunteers for a certain mysterious and hazardous business were called for. Hundreds were required, thousands offered themselves. Bluejackets and stokers from the Grand Fleet, men from that Corps d'Elite, the Royal Marines, were accepted to form landing parties; destroyers from the Dover Patrol were merged into the scheme, together with several M.-L.'s; co-operation by the Royal Air Force was secured, pilots and observers from the old Royal Naval Air Service offering themselves in shoals.

The next step was the training. The operations were to be of a vast and complex nature, every division, sub-division, and individual working in harmony and unison with the rest. Should one link in the chain of preparation be faulty and not detected, should one division fail to do its allotted part, the whole enterprise might be in jeopardy.

To facilitate matters, relief plans of Zeebrugge and Ostend were prepared, every known detail being inserted, while daily corrections and additions were made, based upon aerial photographs and observers' reports.

In a remote and secluded spot in Kent, a full-size model of the portion of Zeebrugge Mole, alongside which it was proposed to place the vessels bearing the storming-parties, was constructed, so that the attackers would know exactly what was required of them. To be able to surmount a thirty-feet wall and to know the obstructional difficulties which lay on the other side was an asset; it certainly made things easier and gave a feeling of confidence to the attacking-party. But there was one element that could not be estimated exactly, but only guessed at and allowed for—the presence of German troops on the actual Mole.

To land seamen and marines on the Mole the old cruiser *Vindictive* was prepared. A sister ship to the ill-fated *Gladiator*, the *Vindictive* had long ceased to count as an effective ship of the Royal Navy. To all outward appearances her days were over. She was fit only for the shipbreaker's yard. Any further expenditure upon her was a waste of public money. These were a few of the many criticisms passed upon this and similar vessels, when it was proposed drastically to cut

down the number of non-effective vessels on the navy list.

But in spite of her years—for she was old as far as steel vessels go—the *Vindictive* was fated not only to prove of important service but to cover herself with honour and glory, not once but twice, and to end her days in a glory of heroism that will for ever be written on the pages of the world's history.

Step by step the plans were worked out. Landing demolition-parties on the Mole was but a subsidiary operation. So was that of smashing the wooden bridge connecting the Mole with the mainland, and thus hampering the arrival of German reinforcements.

The climax of the operations was the bottling up of Zeebrugge and Ostend by means of old cruisers filled with concrete.

A few years ago the world was thrilled by the exploits of Lieutenant Hobson, of the U.S.A. Navy, when he attempted to bottle up Cervera's fleet in Santiago Harbour. Newspapers devoted columns of copy to chronicle and dilate upon the heroic deed; yet, without detracting from the merits of the achievement, the attempt was comparatively easy compared with the task before the British Navy at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

Hobson, with a small volunteer crew, took an old tramp steamer through the narrow entrance to Santiago Harbour. Within was a demoralized Spanish fleet. The forts were ill-armed and ill-served. Hobson carried out his instructions, but the actual result was a partial failure. The sinking of the block-ship did not prevent Cervera's fleet from issuing from the harbour and literally sacrificing itself to the guns of the powerful American fleet.

In the case of Ostend and Zeebrugge, the Huns were equipped with the most modern instruments of warfare. Everything that science could devise was at their command. The Belgian ports were formidable fortresses possessing natural and artificial defences of a stupendous character. No doubt the Boche, despite strenuous efforts on the part of the British to ensure secrecy, had a good inkling of what was being contemplated, and would take steps accordingly.

The vessels told off to attempt the bottling operations were obsolete third-class cruisers. They were to approach at night under their own steam, enshrouded in artificial fog, gain an entrance, if possible, and then sink themselves in the fairways of the two harbours. This act of maritime *felo-de-se* was to be accomplished by exploding charges in their holds. Officers and men had to be employed to navigate the vessels; engineer officers, E.R.A.'s, and stokers were necessary to keep up a head of steam; their task accomplished, they themselves had to be rescued, if possible.

It was here that the little M.-L.'s were again to prove their worth. On a given signal they were to dash into the harbour, range alongside the sinking block-ships, and dash out again with the rescued crews—provided the boats survived the maelstrom of fire that was sure to greet them.

"We're up against a tough proposition, my lad," remarked Farnborough, as he cut a chunk of navy plug and shredded it between his horny palms. Four years ago horny hands and plug tobacco were ill acquainted with Frank Farnborough, but a man's manners and customs undergo a considerable change in four years of war. Now he prided himself on the toughness of his palms and thoroughly enjoyed the tobacco.

"We are," assented Branscombe; then, after a pause, he added: "but I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Nor I," added the Lieutenant. "If there's to be another blessed medical examination, I'll thug, poison, or bluff the whole of the medical branch of the navy. I'll go somehow, this idiotic sprain notwithstanding."

Branscombe made no remark. Much as he admired the grit and tenacity of his chief, he knew that at a time when every ounce of strength, both mental and bodily, were required, a man, handicapped by a stiff back, would not only be a trouble to himself but to the crew. Under the most favourable conditions the Lieutenant would not be fit in less than a week—and that with constant rest. He was too energetic to rest, and the stunt was timed to take place on the forthcoming Thursday.

The eventful day came at last. The sea was calm, the wind light. Gleefully, almost boisterously, the major portion of the storming-party boarded the *Vindictive*. The rest were told off to two Mersey ferry-boats—the *Iris* and *Daffodil*. Monitors were making ready to proceed at slow speed; destroyers and M.-L.'s were fussing noisily around, awaiting the Admiral's order to carry on.

Farnborough, dissembling his hurt, was in the wheel-house, with Branscombe close at hand. Anxiously they watched the aneroid. For days it had been remarkably steady, but now, just after noon, it commenced to fall. Weather was a tremendous factor. With anything like a sea it would be practically impossible to lay the ships with the landing-parties alongside the Mole, while the chance of being able to set in position even a single gangway was out of the question.

There might be time before the weather broke, but the prospect was disquieting. Uneasily, men scanned sea and sky. Everyone hoped that the approaching storm would be deferred until the morrow.

Overhead, "Blimps" and sea-planes buzzed like wasps round a jam-jar. Ill betide the Hun who dared to make a cut-and-run raid upon Dover. Not a German airman must have an inkling of the assembly of the strange, ill-assorted armada in Dover Harbour.

With the dipping of the sun beneath the western horizon the flotilla put to sea. Meteorological reports from Zeebrugge and Ostend—obtained in some mysterious manner by the British Admiralty—reported slight fog and a faint ground-swell. That ground-swell presaged a storm—it was a race between armed might and Nature.

The M.-L.'s were at the tail of the flotilla. Their rôle would come last. It was imperative that they should be preserved intact until the critical moment. Their motors had to be kept absolutely in tune, for engine trouble meant disaster, not only to the crippled M.-L., but possibly to her consorts.

An hour and a half sped. Slowly, yet in perfect order, the strange assembly of warships lessened the distance between them and the invisible Belgian coast. Already the glare of the hostile search-lights could be discerned.

"Another three hours, my lad, and we'll be seeing life," declared Farnborough; "and death," he added in an undertone.

Almost as he spoke, a general wireless signal was sent from the Flagship. Decoded, the orders were brief and explicit:

"Operations abandoned owing to adverse weather conditions. Ships to return to Dover."

CHAPTER XI

The Lone Air-Raider

Apart from the actual fact that he was a prisoner, Alec Seton's captivity on the Mole at Zeebrugge was far from irksome. He had an almost uninterrupted view of the interior of the harbour, and seaward his range of vision in clear weather embraced a wide arc of the horizon. So confident were the Huns of the impossibility of Seton's escape that they allowed him to see almost everything that was going on, his gaolers actually pointing out various details, and gloating over the effects upon their prisoner.

It was only when a bombardment or a raid was expected that the seaward window, or rather aperture, was closed. This was effected by lowering a heavy slab of metal, after the fashion of an old-time gun-port. It was a precaution against signalling on the part of the captive. But without light or matches, or even a looking-glass as a heliograph, it was difficult to see how Seton could have accomplished the feat.

His food was poor and meagre. This was hardly the fault of the Huns, since the admirable blockade by the Allied fleets had already reduced Germany to the verge of starvation. Generally speaking, the demeanour of his guards was harsh and tyrannical. Misled by their officers, the rank and file of the Boche armies believed that Germany was already within measurable distance of emerging triumphant from the world-wide contest. This, to a great extent, explained the domineering manner of Seton's guards, although there were some who, guessing the truth, bore in mind possible consequences should the relative positions of captor and captive be reversed.

Life at Zeebrugge was not lacking in excitement. Every time a U-boat returned there were demonstrations; every time a U-boat set out she departed in almost sullen silence. The men loathed their task—not on account of the craven nature of their work, but by reason of the peril it entailed. Dozens of Hun submarines had left Zeebrugge never to return. Of the manner of their loss, none on that side of the North Sea knew. They could only conjecture. The secret lay with the British Navy, and the very mystery that enshrouded the vanished unterseebooten added to the terror of the crews of those boats that had hitherto escaped destruction.

Occasionally, and it was a rare occurrence, German sea-going torpedo-boats would leave the harbour at sunset. Before dawn they would be back with riddled funnels and shell-swept decks. Fritz had learned that it was decidedly unhealthy to try conclusions with the Dover Patrol.

And the raids: rarely a day and night passed but sea-planes and aeroplanes, sometimes singly but more often in flights, soared over the pirates' lair. Unruffled by the lurid and discordant greetings of the German "antis", the airmen would hover over their objective, and then, to make doubly sure of their target, dive down to within two hundred feet of the ground.

Cheering was the sight to the captive Sub-lieutenant, but the experience was none the less nerve-racking. More than once heavy bombs dropped within fifty feet of Seton's cell. The massive masonry of the Mole trembled like an aspen leaf; the air was laden with pungent vapours that caused Alec to gasp for breath. At the spot where the heavy missile dropped a hole twenty feet in diameter had been made.

Seton had hoped that during one of these aerial visitations a portion of the wall of his cell might have been demolished, and that, during the confusion that followed the explosion, he might have been able to escape. But second thoughts "knocked his theory into a cocked hat". The concussion that would break down the granite wall would certainly "do him in". Even if it did not, and his senses were not temporarily stunned, his chances of getting away unnoticed were of the remotest nature.

Regularly, and as often as the rules set down by the Huns permitted, Seton wrote home, but no reply came. Reluctantly he was forced to come to the conclusion that the Germans were fooling him—the letters were never sent. This was the case, for, as in similar instances, Alec's name was never sent in as a prisoner of war. He was one of those reported "missing" whose fate remained a mystery to their friends, until, on rare occasions, the missing man was able to effect his escape and to return home, to the consternation and surprise of his relatives, who had long thought of him as dead.

It was during one of the raids that Alec witnessed a daring stunt on the part of a young R.A.F. pilot. All that morning the Huns had been loading mines on board three new mine-laying submarines, the work being performed under a camouflaged canvas screen. Either a Belgian had managed to send the information over to the British Admiralty, or else aerial observers had noticed a difference in their photographic views of the harbour during the last few days. In any case, the solitary airman knew of the operations in progress.

In the grey dawn the British machine swooped down from a bank of clouds. With his engine cut out, he dived steeply. Too late the German anti-aircraft guns opened their hymn of hate. At two hundred and fifty feet the pilot released his cargo of bombs. A miss was almost an impossibility.

With an appalling, deafening roar, the three U-boats disappeared, together with nearly two hundred Germans engaged in loading their dangerous cargoes. For a radius of a hundred yards the havoc was terrific. Far beyond that area the damage wrought was severe.

With the roar of the explosion still dinning in his ears, Alec saw the gallant airman disappear in a cloud of smoke mingled with far-flung debris. Hurling like a dried leaf in an autumnal gale the British biplane was seen to be turning over and over, in spite of the engines running all out, and the efforts of the pilot to keep his 'bus under control. Momentarily, through rents in the blast-torn cloud, Seton watched the man whose work had been accomplished, and whose efforts were now directed to save himself—if he could.

"He's done himself in this time," exclaimed Alec.

The biplane was falling jerkily and giddily. She had got into a spinning nose-dive. Her tail-piece had been hit by a fragment of metal, and wisps of dark-brown canvas were streaming in the wind.

Although falling with great velocity, the biplane appeared to be dropping slowly. It seemed as if the pilot was bound to crash upon some houses, a short distance from the lock-gates of the Bruges Canal. To make matters worse, her petrol-tank caught fire, her downward course being marked by a trail of bright yellow fumes.

Then, falling headlong behind a tall building, the sea-plane was lost to sight.

"Hard luck!" murmured Seton sympathetically. "The fellow took no chances of missing; but, by Jove, it was certain death!"

Accustomed though he was to see men slain in the heat of battle, the catastrophe to the daring airman had a depressing effect upon the Sub. He rejoiced in the knowledge that the pilot's effort had not been in vain. He felt proud of the man who had given his life for his country; but, at the same time, the spectacle was a gruesome one.

Almost mechanically Seton stood at the open window. There was no doubt about the moral and material effect of the enormous damage. Swarms of German troops were being hurried up to clear away the debris and to repair the damage by the dock-side, for a large section of the wall was in danger of sliding bodily into the basin. Seamen were strenuously engaged in shifting damaged vessels from the locality, while Red Cross men, armed as usual in the German way with short swords and revolvers, were carrying away the maimed victims of the raid.

As Alec watched, he became aware of a babel of angry voices. A dispatch-boat had just tied up close to the head of the Mole, and the object of the hostile demonstration was in the act of landing.

Although not of an excitable nature, Seton could hardly refrain from giving a hearty British cheer. Actually he gave a whoop of encouragement, for, marching off in charge of a file of marines, was the airman who had played havoc with the submarine mine-layers.

Limping badly, and with a rent in his flying-helmet, the captured pilot marched with head erect and set lips, unmindful of the angry demeanour of the German spectators. Alec could imagine him muttering grimly:

"I've had a thundering good run for my money. Now try and get even with me, you blighters—if

you can!"



D 5

THE BIPLANE HAD GOT INTO A SPINNING NOSE-DIVE

[Illustration: THE BIPLANE HAD GOT INTO A SPINNING NOSE-DIVE]

It was a brief and passing pageant of British character: indomitable even in disaster. Then, surrounded by the fixed bayonets of his guards, the prisoner passed out of Seton's sight.

"The best thing I've seen since I've been in this rotten hole," soliloquized Alec. He spoke aloud. It was a habit he had deliberately acquired during his incarceration, in order that he could hear English spoken. "Jolly lad, the airman fellow; wasn't done in after all!"

Shortly afterwards the soldier told off to give Seton his meals came in with the Sub's meagre breakfast. As the Hun left, either by accident or design, a folded newspaper slipped from underneath his field-grey tunic.

Directly the door was closed and locked, Alec pounced upon the paper like a hungry dog at a

bone. Half-expecting to find a journal printed in German, which would be practically useless to him, Seton was delighted to discover a soiled and crumpled edition of a Belgian newspaper, partly in French and partly in Flemish.

Flemish he knew nothing of, but he was a tolerable French scholar. As he read, his face grew long. Every scrap of news was nothing more nor less than a record of German triumphs. Paris was on the brink of capitulation; the British were thrown back upon a narrow strip of Picardy, bordering on the English Channel; the Ypres salient was flattened out; while the small American army had suffered a heavy reverse, and its surrender was but a matter of a few hours. The naval news recorded a succession of U-boat triumphs, the bombardment of several British seaports, and lastly, the failure of a determined attempt to blockade Zeebrugge.

"We know with absolute certainty," he read, "that a few nights ago strong English forces left Dover with the object of making an attack upon Zeebrugge. Large bodies of troops were embarked for the purpose. The fleet was met a few miles off Dover by a flotilla of U-boats, with the result that the English were compelled to retreat in disorder, with the loss of several of their large cruisers."

"Tosh!" exclaimed Alec. "This wretched rag is a 'plant'. Printed by the Huns in order to put the wind up the Belgian population. Fritz is a cunning swab, but it won't work here."

He tore the offending rag into small pieces, and threw the fragments through the barred window. It was slight—almost paltry—satisfaction, but it afforded him some gratification to see the lying paper scattered to the winds.

A key grated in the lock. Alec started like a school-boy detected in some slight indiscretion.

"The bounders have been spying upon me!" he thought; "I said it was a plant. Hang it all! why worry? Believe my nerves are going to blazes."

The next moment the door was thrown open, and Unter-leutnant Kaspar Diehardt appeared. Behind him were about half a dozen German seamen.

"Anoder schwein to you company keep, Englander!" he yapped.

The Unter-leutnant made a side pace. Then, propelled by several strong arms, the British pilot was bundled unceremoniously into the cell.

CHAPTER XII

St. George's Eve

The "downed" airman was undoubtedly feeling the after effects of his crash. His forehead was swathed in a bloodstained linen-substitute bandage made of paper. He had been deprived of his leather flying-coat, triplex glasses, and fur-lined boots. Even his tunic had been taken from him. His shirt-sleeves were rolled up, disclosing a pair of badly-scorched arms, while in his fiery descent his eyebrows had been singed, notwithstanding the protection afforded by his goggles.

He eyed Alec curiously. Although the latter greeted him with a smile and an outstretched hand, the pilot evinced no enthusiasm. There was a distinctly stand-offish manner about him that put a damper on the Sub's advances.

"By Jove! That was a fine stunt of yours," remarked Seton, as a preliminary to a friendly conversation.

"Think so?" queried the other with a slight drawl.

"Rather!"

"Umph!"

The attempt fizzled out. Both men stood silent, contemplating each other like a couple of boxers about to engage in a bout.

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Seton.

"No, thanks."

Another interval of silence. Alec was wondering how to pass the time with such a mouldy messmate. He had rejoiced at the prospect of companionship, but his realizations in that respect were falling far short of his anticipations.

The day wore on. The new arrival spent most of his time in possession of the open window, while Alec resumed his vigil at the seaward aperture of the cell until the midday meal was brought in.

Suddenly the Sub felt a hand laid upon his shoulder, and the pilot's voice speaking peremptorily:

"Who and what are you?"

Seton told him his name and rank.

"You'll take your oath on it. Proper jonnick?"

"Proper jonnick," declared the somewhat mystified naval officer.

"Good enough!" continued the R.A.F. pilot with a laugh. "Had to be on my guard, don't you know? Thought you were a Boche agent."

"Thanks," said Alec. "And what gave you that impression, may I ask?"

"Natural caution, that's all," answered the pilot. "Fritz has a nasty habit of putting a Boche in with a fellow as a sort of room-mate, merely to try and pick his brains, don't you know? Don't say it isn't done, 'cause it is. Your opening remark about my little stunt rather strengthened my suspicion."

"And what made you alter your opinion?"

"A fairly long period of observation," replied the pilot. "What settled it was the way you were taking your soup or skilly. Beastly rotten stuff, but a Hun couldn't take it silently—you did."

"You're sure you're not mistaken?" asked Alec facetiously.

"Certain sure," rejoined the other. "My name? Oh, just Smith! When a fellow wants to be specially polite he addresses me as Allerton-Smith. But, by Jove, what a rotten crib to be shoved into! How long have you been here?"

Seton told him.

"Doesn't say much for my skill in egg-dropping," continued the pilot. "Our fellows have got hold of the idea that the Huns have a large petrol-store close to the head of the Mole. Consequently I've tried my level best to bomb the place, and apparently you into the bargain."

"Then I can assure you that you weren't far wide of the mark," said Alec. "Several times you rather put the wind up me, to say nothing of rudely disturbing my beauty sleep."

"Is that so—then I apologize," declared Smith. "All the same it is a bit gratifying to know that I do get near the mark sometimes."

"You did early this morning, at any rate." said Seton. "Those U-boats went up beautifully."

"And so did I," added the pilot. "Haven't quite got over the rotten sensation yet. Wonder my 'bus wasn't pulverized with solid stuff flying up. The air seemed stiff with bits of submarines. Funny thing happened—but perhaps I'm boring you?"

"Not at all," Alec hastened to assure him. "What happened?"

"Well, the old 'bus was whirling like a piece of straw. I was hanging over the side of the fuselage, when I saw a huge piece of metal rising, up to meet me—awfully weird sensation. Thought my number was up for a dead cert, when the chunk of stuff seemed to stop still, and then drop and disappear."

"How was that?" asked the Sub.

"Simply that my old 'bus was just a few feet above the highest point reached by the up-flung metal before gravity won the tug-of-war, don't you know. Then I came tumbling down, doing a sort of *splitasse* all over the place. Thought I was going to crash right on top of a house when the 'bus sort of pulled herself together, flattened out and then made a fairly decent sort of landing in the middle of the canal, which wasn't bad for a machine without a tail. Next thing I remember was being hauled on board a boat and taken off to the head of the Mole. Why the Boches wanted to do that puzzles me. It wasn't out of consideration for you, old bird."

"Evidently not," remarked Seton. "It's my belief, strengthened by a hint from von Brockdorff-Giespert, that we are here as a species of cock-shies for our own fellows. By the by, have you met von Brockdorff-Giespert?"

"The U-boat staff-bloke? Rather!" replied the pilot. "He tried to pump me, and, finding that was no go, tried to put the screw on. There was nothin' doin'."

The pilot paced up and down the limits of his prison-cell like a caged animal. Then suddenly wheeling, he asked:

"Ever thought of doing a bunk?"

"Many a time," replied the Sub. "That's as far as it went. Even supposing I got clear of this show, what's to be done? Not a chance of finding a boat, and putting to sea."

"Putting to sea!" repeated the airman. "That's all you sailors think about. The Huns know it too, and directly you were missed they'd send out torpedo-craft as far as they dared go to look for you. No, it's inland—that's the wheeze. It would put the Boches off the scent, and a fellow would stand a fighting chance of getting across into Holland."

"We're still behind iron bars—and massive ones at that," Seton reminded him.

"Quite so," admitted Smith. "There are other means; this was a gun-emplacement."

"So I believe."

"I know for a fact," declared the pilot. "The Huns constructed half a dozen for big guns to be directed seaward. The old R.N.A.S. knocked them about so badly that Fritz abandoned the idea. Now, does that suggest anything?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"The guns must have been served when they were in position."

"Admitted."

"And Fritz may make plenty of blunders, but he's no fool. Having placed the guns in position in well-concealed emplacements, he wouldn't send the ammunition along in the open. He'd connect the emplacements by passages to run the stuff up on tram-lines. You can take it from me, my festive, that if we dug down we'd break into a tunnel already provided for our edification."

"Sounds feasible," admitted Seton.

"Then when shall we start?" asked the pilot.

"Now," decided the Sub promptly.

Both men were warming to their work. Even if the desired result were not forthcoming, it was something to occupy their minds, and to ward off the deadly monotony.

"We'll have to go slow," cautioned Seton. "The floor looks pretty solid, and we've no tools."

"Haven't we, by Jove!" exclaimed Smith, producing a steel marline-spike of about nine inches in length. "I saw this beauty in the boat that brought me across the harbour, and, thinking it might come in useful, I annexed it. We'll start with this stone; it looks slightly wonky."

While one listened at the door for the sentry, the other tackled the cement. Working in turns, they succeeded at the end of three hours' work in prising the slab from its bed. Underneath was a quantity of rubble, bordered on one side by a stone slab.

"We're breaking into the old trap-hatch," declared the pilot. "We must clear this rubble and get rid of it. I vote we carry on till supper-time, and then stand by till midnight. It will be a slow business at first."

Handful by handful the rubble was removed, and thrown cautiously through the window on the seaward-side of the Mole. Before supper was brought in, the stone slab that formed the only barrier between the cell and the arch of the communication gallery was exposed.

In good time the upper slab was replaced and dust rubbed into the exposed joints, so that the gaoler would not notice anything was amiss.

"To-night's the night," remarked Smith, as the two prisoners partook of their frugal, unappetizing meal. "We'll have a jaunt ashore, if nothing else."

"What day is it?" asked Alec. "I've lost all count of time."

"Twenty-second of April," replied the pilot.

"Good enough!" exclaimed Seton joyfully. "St. George's Eve—a good omen."

As night fell the two officers prepared to renew their task. If Smith's surmise were correct, the actual business of breaking out of their cell seemed a fairly simple matter. Seton wondered why he had not thought of a similar plan before. Then he reflected that, had he done so, and had the work of getting clear of the Mole been successful, he would most certainly have attempted to make for the open sea. The idea of bluffing the Hun by going inland and thence across the Dutch frontier had never occurred to him.

Nevertheless the whole business was fraught with peril. The men were liable to be shot at sight by the sentries; if recaptured they might also be executed as spies, since they were not in uniform. Without doubt Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert would not be backward in taking any steps to make it decidedly unpleasant for them should they have the ill-luck to be recaptured.

Directly the rounds had made their usual inspection and had taken their departure, Alec and his R.A.F. comrade set to work. With only a marline-spike and two pairs of hands, the task of removing the cemented-in stone was a tedious and formidable one. They had to proceed cautiously and silently, lest the alert sentries detected the grating of cold steel against hard cement.

At intervals they desisted to listen. It was quite possible that the communication-tunnel might still be in use, in which case it was falling out of the frying-pan into the fire with a vengeance, and at the expense of a terrific amount of hard and purposeless toil.

"Wonder how goes the time," gasped Smith, pausing to straighten his aching back and to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. "Getting on for midnight, I should say."

"No fear; it's not much past eight o'clock," replied Alec. "I'll just see."

He went to the seaward aperture and gazed skywards. The night was dark and calm. The stars shone brilliantly, although obscured here and there by patches of mist. In the northern sky the Great Bear flamed in stellar splendour. By its position with relation to the Pole Star, Alec was able to confirm his surmise with a fair degree of accuracy.

"It's certainly not nine yet," he reported. "We've eight hours of darkness; ought to do something in that time. By Jove, this cement's hard! Wonder if it came from England?"

He took the marline-spike from his companion. It was wet and sticky. The pilot's hands, hitherto well kept and unused to hard manual labour, were almost raw. Alec's were not much better, while every muscle in his body and limbs was aching with the unwonted exertion.

Yet doggedly they continued their work, each man relieving the other at, roughly, a quarter of an hour's interval. The stone was beginning to show signs of working loose.

"Wonder if any of our fellows will be over to-night," remarked the airman. "We don't give Fritz much rest."

"It's been quieter to-day than ever since I've been here," said Alec. "You were the last fellow to come over."

"And stay here," added the other grimly. "Hope Fritz doesn't think that one man being brought down will put the others off. If so, he's vastly mistaken."

"I wish there would be a big raid or bombardment," declared the Sub. "We'd have to run the risk of being strafed; but, on the other hand, Fritz would be much too busy to worry about us. What's the weight of this stone: three-quarters of a hundredweight?"

"Quite," replied Smith promptly. He had been mentally calculating the cubic capacity and weight of that wedge-shaped piece of stone for hours past. "It's not the weight that matters so much. It's the awkward shape of the brute."

For the next ten minutes the two toilers were silent. Every jab with the now-blunted marline-spike was telling. The stone was almost ready for removal.

"Hist!" whispered Seton, holding up a warning hand. Although it was night, the stars enabled the men, accustomed to the sombre conditions, to see with comparative ease.

"What is it?" whispered Smith.

In reply Seton inserted the point of the spike into a crevice and pressed his ear lightly against the blunt end. His suspicions were not ill-founded. The metal, acting as a transmitter of sound, enabled him to detect footsteps in the corridor beneath.

"Rough luck," remarked the pilot in a low tone.

"We'll stand fast for a bit," decided Seton. "It may be that it's only a patrol or a party drawing stores. It's not far from midnight now."

As he spoke a gun barked a few yards off, quickly followed by another and another, until the masonry quivered and swayed with the terrific detonations.

Both men made their way to the window, which, unaccountably, their gaolers had not closed by means of the metal shutter.

Seaward avast bank of fog—whether natural or artificial the watchers had no means of telling—was punctured by rapid and vivid flashes of light. Star-shells and search-lights illumined the sky. Shells were screeching and bursting everywhere, until the sea and sky seemed blotted out with smoke and far-flung columns of spray.

Suddenly Seton gripped his companion's arm, causing him to wince with pain, and pointed to an indistinct grey mass looming through the fog. It was a vessel, blazing away with quick-firers

and heading straight for the Mole.

"Thank God for that sight!" ejaculated Alec fervently. "This is the beginning of St. George's Day with a vengeance."

CHAPTER XIII

The Attack on the Mole

"It all depends upon the weather," remarked Lieutenant-Commander Farnborough. "This is absolutely the best we've had, and our third attempt—three for luck."

It was a quarter to five on the afternoon of Monday, the 22nd of April. The main force of the vessels operating against Zeebrugge and Ostend were on the point of starting from the concentration base, upon their hazardous enterprise.

The composition of the operating craft was of a truly diverse nature. Off the Goodwins came the old *Vindictive*, disguised almost out of knowledge. Her mainmast was down, the massive spar being fashioned into a huge "bumpkin" to fend her stem off the masonry of the Mole. On her foremast and above her conning-tower were box-like structures containing flame-projecting apparatus, Lewis-guns, and other devices conjured up by the Great War. Along her sides were large "brows" or gangways, together with a formidable array of hawsers and chains terminating in specially constructed grappnels.

Astern and in tow of her were *Iris* and *Daffodil*, two ferry-steamers well known to the inhabitants of Liverpool and Birkenhead, and now carrying passengers of a very different sort from those to which they were accustomed. Following were the block-ships *Thetis*, *Intrepid*, *Iphigenia*, *Sirius*, and *Brilliant*, the paddle mine-sweeper *Lingfield*, and five M.-L.'s.

The starboard column was composed of *Warwick*, flying the flag of Vice-admiral Keyes, *Phoebe*, *North Star*, *Trident*, and *Mansfield*, the two latter towing two obsolete submarines of the "C" class. In the port column were destroyers, every vessel towing one or more coastal motor-boats, while between the columns were about fifty or sixty M.-L.'s.

M.-L. No. 4452 was told off to operate with the artificial fog-producing craft. It was to be by no means an uninteresting task, for, not only was it fraught with danger, but it required great skill and sound judgment on the part of the small craft concerned to liberate the thick pall of smoke at the opportune moment and exactly in the required spot.

Both Farnborough and Branscombe had urgently requested permission to be allowed to take their M.-L. into the harbour to rescue the crews of the block-ships; but since practically every M.-L. skipper had made a similar submission it was obvious that there were to be many disappointed aspirants to the honour—amongst them the officer commanding M.-L. 4452.

Cautiously the strange medley of naval vessels proceeded. Several hours of daylight yet remained—a period during which the flotilla was in more danger of submarine attack than during the night. There was also the risk of running over an enemy mine-field, for the Huns, anticipating naval operations against their Belgian fortresses, had been known to make lavish use of their mine-laying submarines. Another factor, which subsequently proved to be a very vital one, was the position of the buoys. These had been carefully observed by British air-craft, and, as far as could be judged, were all in their positions on the morning of the 22nd.

Orders had been given to dispense with wireless signals, while the use of flags as a means of communication was reduced to a minimum. But one signal and its reply were fated to be recorded in the pages of history.

From the Admiral's ship came the stirring message, a clarion call to which Englishmen had oft-times rallied before: "St. George for England".

Promptly came the forcible and appropriate rejoinder, "And may we give the Dragon's Tail a jolly good twist".

Guarded by destroyers and M.-L.'s the *Vindictive* and the block-ships proceeded, arriving at a certain rendezvous just as darkness was setting in. Here the principal actors separated, the *Sirius* and *Brilliant* making towards Ostend, while the others held on for Zeebrugge.

"How do you feel, old son?" inquired Lieutenant-Commander Farnborough of his Sub-lieutenant.

"Can hardly describe it," replied Branscombe. "Almost believe I've got cold feet, but I wouldn't be out of the show for anything."

Branscombe's description of his condition was a figure of speech. Actually his throat was hot, his tongue was dry, and he could hardly speak a word in reply to his commander. His heart was thumping heavily, while his pulse was throbbing at a rate that would have made a medical man,

unacquainted with the circumstances, look astonished. It was a series of sensations akin to those experienced during the last five minutes before "Going over the Top".

A few minutes after scheduled time the monitors began their preliminary "hate", and almost immediately the German guns replied. It was a preliminary operation only, with a view to distracting the attention of the Huns from the *Vindictive* and the block-ships.

Both Farnborough and his Sub were consulting their wristlet watches almost every fifteen seconds. They wore their watches outside their thick gloves, for officers and men had to be as fully protected as possible against the highly-injurious effects of mustard gas. Together with shrapnel helmets and gas-masks the "get-up" was as unlike that of the Royal Navy as could be readily imagined.

At 11.40 to the minute—for everything depended upon the operations being carried out "according to plan"—the coastal motor-boats dashed in towards the low, flat, sandy shore, and proceeded to lay floats on which the fog-producing plant was lashed. As the dense black pall of vapour rose, Fritz opened a heavy fire. Anxious foreboding was telling upon him. His nerves were very much on edge that night.

Several of the floats were observed to be sunk, while, as ill-luck would have it, the light wind, hitherto favourable to the enterprise, changed in direction. Nevertheless, the dauntless little craft went about their work, nothing but their small size and handiness saving them from annihilation by the terrifically hot fire maintained by the enemy.

Sixteen minutes later the *Vindictive*, emerging from the smoke-screen, sighted the head of the Mole, bearing one and a half cables on the port-bow. Gathering increased way until her engines were working at full speed, she steered straight for her appointed berthing-place, her guns literally belching fire as she forged through the shell-torn water. It was a gallant sight. Marvellous it was that the old cruiser was not sent to the bottom, so violent was the cannonade directed towards her.

St. George's Day, 1918, was but a minute old when, with the shock practically absorbed by her massive fenders, the *Vindictive* struck the Mole a glancing blow. Although her decks were shambles, she was now fairly protected from the German fire by the masonry of the lofty breakwater, but by this time her funnels, upper-works, and flame-projecting huts were riddled.

In the midst of a truly deafening din men dashed from cover to hurl the grapnels across the parapet of the Mole. At first the attempt was a failure, for the set of the tide and the scend of the sea caused the *Vindictive* first to grind heavily and then swing slightly away from the wall. To add to the difficulty of the storming-party most of the "brows" had been shattered by shell-fire. Two only could be run out, and along them literally lurched the seamen and marines. Swept by machine-gun fire the passage of the storming-party along those frail gangways was a heroic one. In cold blood a man would have been pardoned for hesitating to essay the task. Should any of the men slip and fall—and several of them did—a hideous death awaited them between the grinding hull of the ship and the seaweed-covered masonry of the Mole.

Encumbered though they were with Lewis-guns, bombs, ammunition, and explosive charges, and carrying rifles and bayonets, the storming-party continued, one after another, to gain the top of the parapet, whence a drop of fully fifteen feet had to be risked before they could reach the fairly broad but much obstructed roadway on the inner side of the breakwater.

Meanwhile, not only had the *Vindictive* put alongside the Mole farther from the mole-head than had been intended, but she obstinately refused to range alongside. It was the little *Daffodil* that saved the situation. Bows on, and with her engines continuously going ahead, the Liverpool ferry-boat forced her big consort up against the Mole, and thus enabled the rest of the storming- and demolition-party to land.

A few yards ahead of the now secured *Vindictive* came the *Iris*. In the heavy ground-swell she bumped heavily against the hard granite. Most of her scaling-ladders were smashed to matchwood, and those that remained were almost too insecure to attempt to use. Yet, in spite of hostile fire and the hazardous means of ascent, men were not wanting to risk and give their lives for King and Country.

One of the first to ascend was Lieutenant Claude Hawkings. For a brief instant he stood upon the parapet, silhouetted against the glare of the star-shells and the flashes of the guns, striving to engage one of the large grapnels flung from the deck of the *Iris*. The next instance he was shot and fell upon the stonework.

Almost simultaneously Lieutenant-Commander G. N. Bradford worked his way to the top of a derrick used for lifting out a large mole-anchor. From this precarious perch he leapt down, alighting on all fours on the parapet. Without an instant's delay he was on his feet again and tugging furiously at the anchor to secure it. This he did, and in the moment of success he, too, was shot, his body falling into the water betwixt the ship and the Mole.

Unfortunately the mole-anchors refused to obtain a grip. Grinding and bumping, the *Iris* was unable to land her men. Reluctantly it was realized that any further attempt at that spot would mean a needless loss of life, so the cable was slipped and the little ferry-boat ran alongside the

Vindictive, where she was able to land the survivors of her seamen and Royal Marines across the deck of the cruiser.

By this time the storming- and demolition-parties were hard at it, clearing the head of the Mole and making a mess of German personnel and material generally. With Lewis-guns and bombs they worked their way along, destroying wireless stations, clearing out machine-gun nests, and hurling deadly explosive missiles upon the decks of the German torpedo-craft lying alongside.

It was by no means a one-sided affair. Caught like rats in a trap the Huns on the seaward end of the Mole put up a plucky and stubborn fight, doubtless relying upon the chance of receiving reinforcements from the shore.

The expected reinforcements never arrived. To enable German troops to gain the stone portion of the Mole they must needs cross an iron pier connecting the stonework with the mainland. Bodies of troops were actually on the way, when it was noticed that a submarine was approaching at a distance of a mile and a half. Lit up by the glare of the star-shells the coming submarine presented a tempting target. Hun 4-inch guns promptly opened fire upon her, but unswervingly the submarine held on.

This puzzled Fritz completely. Then it occurred to him that the British submarine was out of her course and that, if she carried on, she would run aground and become an easy capture. So orders were given to cease fire and to train two search-lights upon the doomed craft in order to baffle still further her navigating officer.

But C 3 was not out of her course, nor was her lieutenant in command at all hazy as to his position. The submarine was laden with explosives in order to demolish the only means of communication between the Mole and the shore. It was deemed a task that entailed the sacrifice of C 3's officers and men; yet, in the hope that a slight chance of escape offered, the vessel was provided with a motor dinghy. From the conning-tower the officers could see the viaduct distinctly, as it stood out against the glare. On it were hundreds of German troops, many dancing and waving their arms with delight at the thought of making an easy capture of the bewildered Englishmen.

Now, at a distance of less than a hundred yards, success looked like becoming realization. Altering helm slightly C 3 charged the viaduct at full speed, hitting it fairly at right angles. The blunt nose of the submarine glinted over a horizontal girder, lifting the hull quite two feet out of the water. Still carrying way, C 3 lurched forward until the base of her conning-tower brought up against the massive iron braces of the pier. There she remained hard and fast, save for the quivering movement imparted by the ground-swell.

Overhead were hundreds of Huns still delirious with glee at their easy victory; underneath, a handful of cool and resolute Britons determined to do the job thoroughly and efficiently.

C 3 had been fitted with gyro steering-gear, a device similar to that of the Whitehead torpedo, to enable her to steer automatically for her goal after her crew had abandoned her. But, taking no risks on that score, Lieutenant Sandford, the officer in command, had resorted to the ordinary methods of steering until the submarine was securely wedged under the viaduct.

Before the actual impact C 3's crew mustered on deck. In that exposed position they remained within full view of the enemy; yet, confident that the submarine's crew would speedily be made prisoners, the Germans forbore to fire.

The order was then given to ignite the fuses. Having made sure that the desired explosion would take place, Lieutenant Sandford gave the word for all hands to embark on the skiff.

Then the disconcerting discovery was made that the skiff's propeller had received damage. The little motor was useless. All that could be done was to make use of oars in a race against time. It was a hard tussle, with the tide boring against the deeply-laden boat. Unless a certain distance was covered before the explosion took place the men would share the fate in store for the Huns.

To add to the difficulties the Germans, on finding that the dinghy was leaving the submarine, opened a furious fire with pom-poms, machine-guns, and rifles. It was indeed a mystery how the skiff survived the ordeal. Holed many times, her officer in command twice wounded, and several of her crew hit, she struggled manfully against the current, her pumps going all the time to keep the inrush of water under control.

Yard by yard the little boat drew away from the abandoned C 3. Fritz, wild with rage at being balked of the capture of the crew, redoubled his fire, more men and more machine-guns being brought up to harass the elusive skiff-dinghy.

By dint of strenuous exertions the boat gained a distance of about two hundred yards through the bullet-flecked water when, with a tremendous report, the explosive cargo of C 3 detonated.

In an instant the viaduct went up in a cloud of flame-torn smoke, taking with it men, guns, and search-lights. The air was full of falling debris, a great quantity dropping into the water all around the skiff.

There was not the slightest doubt that C 3's work was accomplished, while the chances of her crew surviving their hazardous task rose with a bound.

In the lull that followed, the men made good use of their oars, and presently, to their relief, the picquet-boat told off to attempt their rescue was sighted. Quickly the heroic men were taken off and transferred to comparative safety on board H.M.T.B.D. *Phoebe*. Meanwhile the demolition-parties on the Mole were hard at work with Fritz's little contraptions, while the block-ships were preparing for their *magnum opus* within the gates of the Huns' stronghold.

CHAPTER XIV

The Night of Nights

"Hurrah! They've laid the ship slap alongside the Mole," reported Seton from his post of observation at the seaward aperture.

"Sure," agreed Smith. "And it's about time we broke bounds and had a chip in."

Both men were shouting at the top of their voices, for the noise without was deafening. The roar of the heavy guns punctuated by the crash of the quick-firers, the rattle of machine-guns, the hiss of escaping steam, the grinding of the *Vindictive's* hull against the masonry, the cheers and shouts of the storming-parties, and the cries and groans of the wounded, all united in an indescribable babel of discord.

Owing to the relative position of the ship and the prisoners' observation aperture, only a few feet of the *Vindictive's* stern could be seen. There was nothing to indicate whether the assault had been successful. But on the Mole side there were soon evidences that the British seamen and marines had obtained a footing, and had more than made good their position.

Grotesquely garbed men were dashing forward in sections, hurling bombs and using Lewis-guns like fiends possessed. Here and there a cornered Hun would put up a fight until laid low by bullet or cutlass thrust. Slowly but surely the British invaders of the Mole were working their way along.

"No place for us here," yelled Seton. "Our fellows are bombing every hole they see. It's useless to attempt to tell them who we are, and I don't fancy being blown to atoms by our own side. We'll have to take to the tunnel."

"Right-o!" agreed the pilot.

Together they struggled desperately with the refractory stone, until by dint of great effort they succeeded in raising it on to the floor of the cell. It was then a matter of comparative ease to enlarge the hole sufficiently to allow them to effect their escape.

They were not a moment too soon. With the sounds of the conflict immediately outside their cell, the two men dropped through the gaping hole, alighting on the stone floor of the corridor eight or nine feet below.

The tunnel was thick with suffocating fumes. Until the smoke cleared any attempt at escape in the rear of the storming- and demolition-parties was out of the question. All that could be done was to work their way along to the seaward end of the corridor, and there await developments.

"Wish I had a gas-mask," exclaimed Alec chokingly.

"Same here," agreed the pilot. "Here," he added, pointing to a pile of what appeared to be short sticks, "take a few, they'll come in handy."

The acquired articles were bombs of German manufacture, and had evidently been placed there as a reserve stock.

"Know how they work?" inquired Smith.

Alec shook his head. He understood the mechanism of the Mills' grenade, but he had never before had an opportunity of handling a German bomb.

"Simply pass this thing round your wrist and chuck the thing as hard as you can. The cord is tied to the safety-pin, and the jerk releases the pin. Quite easy."

"And easy to blow yourself up," added Seton. "All right, carry on! We'll do our best with the things."

Proceeding cautiously, for they could hear Huns talking in the tunnel, the two men worked their way along the tunnel for nearly a hundred yards. Then they paused abruptly and flattened themselves against the wall.

A few feet farther along, the corridor terminated in a flight of steps, seven in number, leading upwards to a fairly spacious casemate. From where Alec and his comrade stood the legs of several Germans could be seen, the rest of their bodies being hidden by the curvature of the roof of the tunnel. The men were formed up round a quick-firing gun of 15 centimetres, or approximately 4.1 inches—a weapon of great hitting power and rapidity of action.

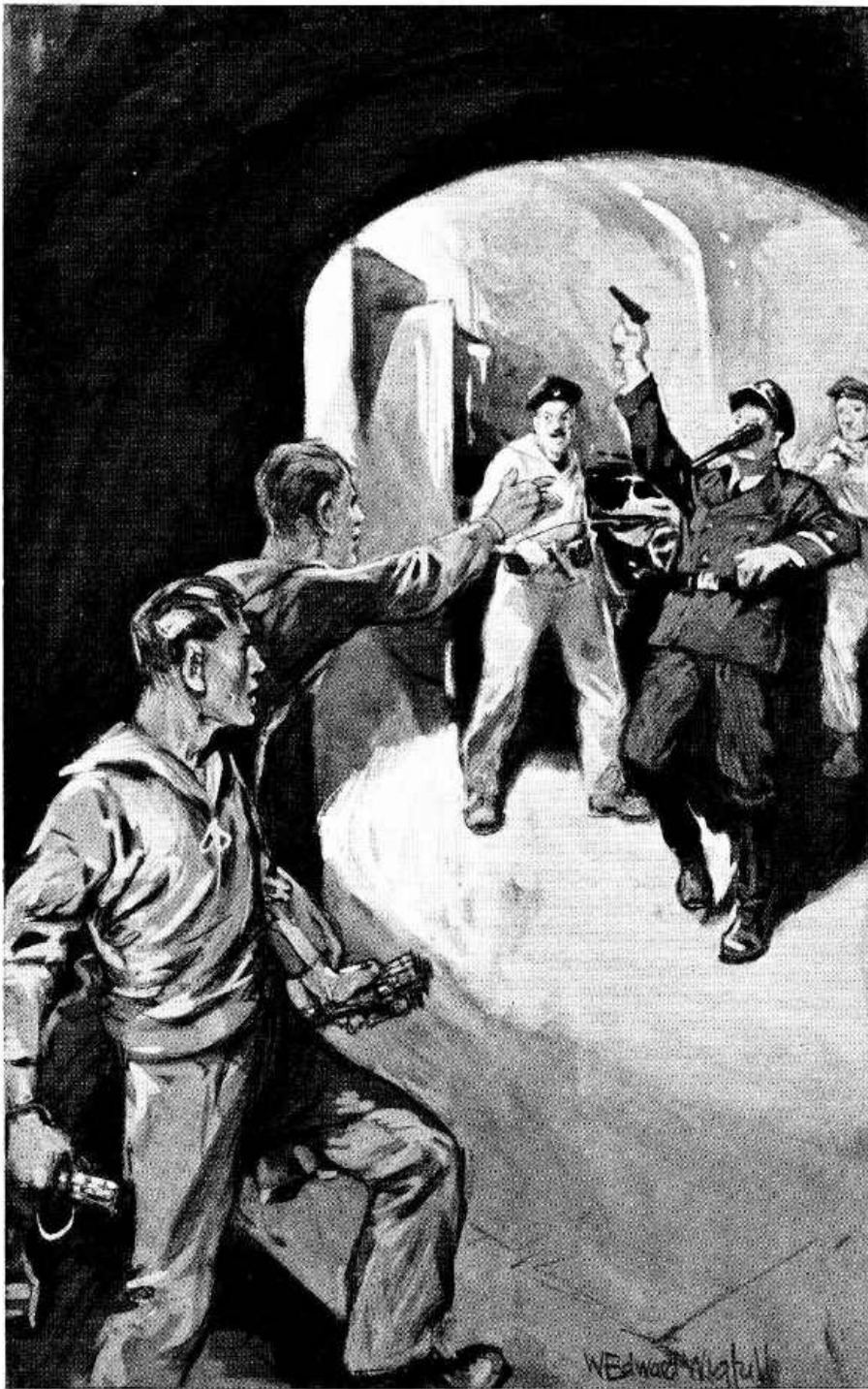
Evidently they were waiting to train the weapon upon some moving objective that had not yet entered the arc of fire.

The two officers glanced at each other. Their teeth gleamed in the dull light, as they exchanged grins of delight. They were no longer prisoners of the tyrannical Hun, but strong men armed. Providence had delivered the enemy into their hands, but it would not be a one-sided contest. The surprise of the attack would compensate for the inequality of numbers, and there were the survivors and possibly crews of guns in another casemate to be reckoned with.

Simultaneously both officers took a step forward, and launched their deadly missiles. The two reports sounded as one, outvoicing in the confined space the din of the conflict without. Amid the rattle of metallic splinters could be heard the thud of bodies falling and the startled squeals of wounded men who find themselves unexpectedly hit.

The rapid crack of an automatic pistol and the splaying of bullets against the stonework gave Seton and his companion warning that their work had not been thorough. Through the pall of smoke a Hun—perhaps more than one—was "letting rip".

Four bombs in quick succession gave the unseen foe his quietus. Silence reigned in the casemate. The roar of battle without was increasing in violence.



D 5

THE PILOT THREW A BOMB FULL IN THE FACE OF A PRUSSIAN
UNTER-LEUTNANT

[Illustration: THE PILOT THREW A BOMB FULL IN THE FACE OF A PRUSSIAN UNTER-LEUTNANT]

Keeping a sharp look-out for the approach of Hun reliefs along the corridor, the two officers waited until the pungent fumes had almost cleared. Then, into the suffocating atmosphere they penetrated. Ascending the short flight of steps they gained the gun emplacement. The weapon, trained to the extreme left, was pointing slightly to the right of the lighthouse, at the extreme end of the Mole extension. Around it lay the bodies of the crew.

A glance through the sighting-slit in the gun-shield gave Alec a clue. Seaward the water was swept by search-lights, the giant beams darting between the sullenly rolling clouds of artificial fog. Quick-firing guns were blazing away like fury. Apparently a torpedo-boat attack on the harbour was about to take place.

"Make a job of it while we are about it," shouted Smith, pointing to a passage on their right. "Another quick-firer in there!"

Through the passage dashed the impromptu bombers, encouraged by their previous victory. Less than ten yards away was another 15-centimetre gun. Apparently its crew were either in

ignorance of the knocking-out of the sister-gun, or else they attributed the noise of the bombs to the explosion of a shell fired from seaward.

In any case the surprise was complete. Two bombs were sufficient to silence the weapon.

Beyond was yet a third gun. In this instance the task was by no means so easy, for running along the communication passage came a stalwart naval gunner—one of a picked crew from the German High Seas Fleet.

It was the two officers' canvas suits—garments so grudgingly accepted and yet so opportune—that saved them from instant detection. The Hun, imagining them to be two members of a working-party, bellowed an incoherent order. In a trice he was collared in approved Rugby fashion, while a heavy blow behind the ear reduced him to a state of insensibility.

The scuffle was witnessed by two or three Germans engaged in bringing up ammunition. Their shouts of alarm roused the rest of the gun's crew.

Before Seton and his companion, having completed their task of strafing the Hun gunner, could hurl their bombs, a fusillade of pistol shots rang out. A bullet grazed Smith's cheek; another ploughed a furrow through Seton's hair.

The pilot threw a bomb full in the face of a Prussian unter-leutnant. The missile failed to explode, although it floored the German. Another Boche picked up the bomb and hurled it back. Ricochetting against the wall it hurtled past Seton's head and clattered on the floor of the tunnel ten feet in the rear of the British officers.

There was no time to devote to that. If the sinister missile exploded it meant an end to the contest, but fortunately it was what was known as a "dud".

Almost immediately Alec threw a grenade. It exploded within a couple of seconds of leaving the Sub's hand. When the smoke cleared away, the gun was deserted, save by the dead and dying. Three Huns who had escaped the death-dealing missile had promptly leapt through the embrasure into the sea.

"By Jove, we've put a battery out of action," declared Smith breathlessly. "What luck!"

"Luck, indeed," agreed Alec, pointing to the unexploded bomb. "If that beauty had gone up—but it didn't. What's doing now?"

The two men made their way to the embrasure. It was just possible to squeeze between the steel shield and the granite face of the gun emplacement.

Without, the scene beggared description. Although the 15-centimetre guns were silent, hundreds of smaller quick-firers and machine-guns were letting rip at what was certainly short range. Search-lights were swinging to and fro across the harbour, star-shells bursting high aloft turned night into day.

From seaward shells were coming in showers knocking splinters from the Mole extension on which a Hun battery of six 88-millimetre guns was rapidly being put out of action.

To the right of the embrasure at which the two British officers had taken up their post of observation could be discerned a string of canal barges, moored end to end with anti-torpedo nets between, while the line of obstruction terminated in a number of net defence buoys, their position hardly visible even in the strong artificial light.

The while, sounds of conflict on the Mole were distinctly audible, although from where Seton and his companion stood it was impossible to see what was taking place. The crash of bombs and the rattle of machine-guns mingled with British cheers and German guttural shouts. Whatever was happening it was apparent that the landing-parties were making things particularly hot for Fritz on Zeebrugge Mole.

Even as the two men looked the object of the Huns' shortened fire became visible, for, steaming at full speed towards the Mole-head, were the first of the British block-ships *Thetis*, *Intrepid*, and *Iphigenia*.

Once more it was a case of the onlookers seeing most of the game. At the risk of being knocked out by a British shell—for the position of the now silent 15-centimetre guns was known to the attacking forces, although the actual bore of the guns was supposed to be but 10.5 centimetres—Seton and his companion stood enthralled at the spectacle of supreme valour.

Literally into the jaws of Death came the *Thetis*, majestically, unswerving, and as steadily as if about to pick up moorings at Spithead. With her quick-firers replying to the storm of German shrapnel she held on, rounded the Mole-head, and passed within a cable's length of the battery in which Seton and Smith stood.

Then, with a slight alteration of helm she steered straight for the barge farthest from the Mole. Down went the barge; on swept the *Thetis*. Between the net defence she went, tearing buoys and nets from their anchors and sinkers. Hampered by these obstructions, for apparently the nets

fouled her propellers, the *Thetis* slowed down and grounded diagonally across the entrance to the canal and about a hundred yards from the pier-heads.

Even as she settled, for she had been purposely sunk in the fairway, the *Intrepid* came into view. In her case she was late in rounding the Mole-head, a circumstance that was subsequently explained by the fact that her surplus watch of stokers, determined not to miss the scrap, had refused to be taken off by the M.-L.'s. Consequently the *Intrepid* went into Zeebrugge Harbour with a complement of 87 officers and men instead of 54, and that meant that if possible 33 extra men had to be rescued by the little M.-L.'s.

Steering for the gap in the net defences made by the *Thetis* and judging her position by the latter vessel, hard aground, the second participator in the marine Balaclava entered the Harbour.

Although receiving a heavy gruelling the *Intrepid*, worthy of her name, held resolutely to her course, until she grounded heavily in the centre of the entrance to the canal. Her mission accomplished she was sunk by orders of her gallant skipper, and thus thousands of tons of hard cement were firmly embedded in the mud and sandy bottom of the canal. And now, to make doubly sure of the bottling-up process, the *Iphigenia* approached under a heavy fire. She, too, was carrying far more than her required complement of men, the supernumeraries, resolutely determined not to be out of the grim business, having dodged the motor-launches told off to remove them before the ship made for the harbour.

From their point of observation Seton and Smith watched the majestically-moving *Iphigenia*. Frequently hidden by driving clouds of artificial fog, pounded by guns of all calibres, with her upper-works shot through and through, the third block-ship held on.

Suddenly two shells hit the ship on the starboard side. Following the blast and smoke of the exploding missiles a dense cloud of steam poured from her vitals, enveloping the whole of the forepart in blinding vapour.

"Steam-pipe severed," decided Alec. "Now, what will she do? She's missing the entrance, by Jove!"

Fortunately, at that juncture the smoke cleared sufficiently to allow the temporarily blinded navigation-party to realize their mistake. With her partly-disabled engines going at full speed astern, the *Iphigenia* drove between a large dredger and a lighter, sinking the latter like a stone. Then, driving the rammed barge ahead with her only starboard engine working, she literally pushed the huge, unwieldy craft into the canal.

It was tricky navigation, difficult even in times of peace, to manoeuvre a craft like the *Iphigenia* in a narrow waterway. Hampered by smoke, pounded at by guns, and blinded by search-lights and star-shells, her commander's task appeared to be super-human. Yet marvels were accomplished that night, and *Iphigenia's* handling was one of them. Ably manoeuvred, she narrowly missed colliding with the sunken *Intrepid*, then coolly and deliberately she was grounded on the east side of the canal, thus making doubly sure that the hornets' nest was sealed.

And now, their work completed, the storming- and demolition-parties from the *Vindictive*, *Iris*, and *Daffodil* were being withdrawn.

"Time for us to be making tracks, old man," shouted Alec to his chum. "Our fellows are clearing off the Mole. It's our chance to slip off with them, without being plugged by an over-excitabile marine or blown sky high by a British bomb."

"Yes, the show's over," rejoined the R.A.F. officer, as the pair began to retrace their footsteps. "Jolly fine stunt—eh, what?"

Past the silent gun emplacements with the wiped-out crews, the two officers hastened, and descending the short flight of steps, gained the communication passage that ran practically the whole length of the Mole.

For quite two hundred yards they fought their way through pungent vapours, hoping to find an exit and thus mingle with the storming-party as the men withdrew to their ships.

Suddenly they found themselves confronted by a mass of blackened rubble, the stones still warm to the touch. A hasty examination showed that a heavy charge of gun-cotton had blown in the tunnel, completely cutting off the escape of Alec and his companion.

"Properly dished!" exclaimed Smith disgustedly. "We're trapped!"

"Tails up!" exhorted his companion. "I know of a way. Game for a swim?"

"Right-o!" replied the R.A.F. officer. "Lead on, old son! It's the night of nights, isn't it?"

The Passing of M.-L. 4452

"Lucky blighters!" ejaculated Lieutenant Farnborough, referring enviously to the M.-L.'s told off to rescue the crews of the block-ships. "They're on the move, by Jove!"

"Wish we were on the same game," added Branscombe covetously. "I suppose we can't log an imaginary signal ordering us in support?"

"Brilliant idea of yours, old man," replied Farnborough. "Half a mind to try the wheeze."

M.-L. 4452, having for the time being completed her smoke-screen task, was "lying off", an interested spectator of the dash of the block-ships into Zeebrugge Harbour.

Other M.-L.'s had been detailed to cover the retirement of the old *Vindictive* and the two ex-ferry boats—if they were fortunate enough to draw away from the inferno of fire and shot, shell and poison gas; but Farnborough's command, together with six other M.-L.'s, was to stand by as a reserve rescue vessel.

The *Thetis* and her consorts had vanished into the smoke-laden harbour. After them dashed the small motor craft detailed for the rescue of the crews of the block-ships.

"It's like sending half a dozen wasps to tickle the tongue of a bad-tempered lion," remarked Branscombe. "Lucky bounders!"

"Harry Tate's Navy is well up to-night," added Farnborough grimly. "I'd like to see some of those funny bounders who tried to pull our legs taking on this business. Guess they'd have the wind up. Hello, here's one of 'em!"

Zigzagging through the smoke, dodging shells that landed exactly on the spot where she had been two or three seconds previously, came a M.-L., her decks packed with human beings. The destroyers pushed forward to screen her from the wrathful Huns. Listing badly and well down by the stern, the brave little craft had dared, and had come back, scarred with honourable wounds, from the gates of hell.

Then came another, also bearing a heavy deck cargo of rescued men. As she passed within a hundred yards of M.-L. 4452, the latter gave her a rousing, cheer.

A comparatively long interval elapsed. No more M.-L.'s came into view. A rocket, soaring aloft above the smoke, announced that the *Vindictive* was recalling her storming- and demolition-parties. It was a way of announcing that all that could be done was done, and nothing else was left but to withdraw from the action.

"There's our number!" exclaimed Farnborough, as a light blinked through the murk.

It was a stretch of imagination on the part of the Lieutenant in command of M.-L. 4452. Whether he saw the signal, or only imagined that he did, made little difference. There was an opportunity of making a dash into the harbour, and Farnborough jumped at it.

The engine-room telegraph-bell clanged loudly as the Lieutenant ordered "Full speed ahead both engines". M.-L. 4452, hitherto waltzing to and fro in a seemingly erratic manner, quivered under the pulsations of the powerful motors. Zigzagging, she leapt, forward towards the partly demolished lighthouse at the Mole-head.

Standing just behind his superior officer, Branscombe began to taste the sensation of going into action. At first the experience was far from pleasant, especially when the beam of a powerful search-light swung round and steadied itself full upon the swiftly moving M.-L.

"Our number's up," thought Branscombe, for he felt absolutely certain that a salvo of hostile shells would follow within a few seconds. Fritz would be sure to let fly with a veritable tornado of "hate" upon the brilliantly-lighted target.

Unaccountably Branscombe's surmise was not realized. Beyond a few chance missiles that hurtled wide of the mark not a shot came from the Mole-head batteries. Out of the dazzling light into comparative darkness dashed the M.-L., rolling heavily in the confused swell at the harbour-mouth.

"Hard-a-port!"

Round swung No. 4452 just in time to escape collision with one of her sisters. Silhouetted against the ruddy glare an officer, megaphone in hand, leant over the rail of the returning M.-L.

"Cutter adrift. . . ." he shouted, and the rest of his words were lost in the din.

Farnborough raised his hand in acknowledgment. He understood; somewhere in that turmoil of strife a boat had had to be abandoned—a cutter with some of the survivors of the block-ships—otherwise the official in command would not have gone to the trouble of reporting it. Loss of material counted for nought that night. The sacrifice of His Majesty's stores mattered not at all, provided the main object of the operations was achieved; but with human life at stake all that

could be done to effect a rescue must be attempted.

Rounding the Mole-head so closely that the extremity of her signal yard-arm almost scraped the masonry as she rolled to starboard, M.-L. 4452 gained the wreck-strewn harbour. Narrowly averting collision with a water-logged barge, part of the net defence works that the block-ships had rammed, the speedy little craft held on.

A sliver of shell brought her mast down with a run, at the same time blowing her search-light over the side. Branscombe's cap vanished through the broken glass of the wheel-house; a hot stabbing pain in his forehead caused him to raise his hand to his head. His fingers were wet, sticky and red. A piece of flying metal had seared his forehead.

The Sub hardly realized that he had been hit. An inch nearer and the wound might have been fatal, yet his narrow escape hardly troubled him.

"Mind that gear doesn't foul our prop!" he shouted to one of the crew—the man who had intended to buy an M.-L. for pleasure-cruising in those dim, far-distant halcyon days "after the war".

"Aye, aye, sir."

The man made his way to the side, where a raffle of wire was trailing over the splintered deck. The next instant his feet gave way under him and he sank inertly upon the deck.

In a trice Branscombe gripped him under the arm-pits and hauled him into the frail shelter of the wheel-house. One glance was sufficient; Brown, A.B. and ex-stockbroker, would never see the Stock Exchange again, nor would he be able to put his carefully-laid after-the-war plans into execution.

Another of the crew sprang forward, axe in hand. A few vigorous blows sufficed to cut the tangle of broken gear clear. His immediate reward was a machine-gun bullet through the left arm just above the elbow.

It was a hot time for M.-L. 4452. Apparently the other boats had completed their particular tasks, for, as far as the drifting smoke permitted, the harbour was clear of them. Fritz was hurling plenty of "hate" at the solitary little craft, and only her speed and handiness saved her from annihilation.

"No sign of the abandoned cutter," yelled Farnborough. "We'll hook it—if we can."

Hard a-starboard went the helm. With the port propeller running full-speed ahead and the starboard one half-speed astern, M.-L. 4452 spun round almost in her own length, just missing an undesirable acquaintance in the shape of a 6-inch shell that ricocheted and threw up a terrific column of spray within six feet of her bows.

Compared with the dash into the harbour the return journey was a horrible nightmare. The haunting possibility of being knocked-out recurred tenfold. The crew of the M.-L. no longer had their faces to the foe, they were literally running for safety, and exposed to blows in the back without being able to raise a finger in self-defence.

"There's the boat, by Jove!" exclaimed Branscombe.

"Where? How's she bearing?" asked the Lieutenant, for he was partly blinded by blood flowing from a gash in his forehead. Like his Sub, Farnborough hardly realized that he had been hit.

Telegraphing for "easy" and then "stop" the skipper brought his craft to a standstill within boat-hook stave's length of a water-logged dingy. Clinging to the partly submerged gunwale were two men.

"She's not a cutter, you juggins!" exclaimed Farnborough. "I believe those fellows are rotten Huns."

He was about to telegraph for "Full-speed-ahead both engines", when Branscombe gripped his arm.

"It's old Seton, by smoke!" he shouted, in order to make himself heard above the din.

Quickly the well-nigh exhausted men were assisted over the side, Seton minus a little finger, and the R.A.F. officer with a bullet wound completely through his left shoulder.

It was no time for explanations. Like a thing endowed with life M.-L. 4452 leapt forward. She was now on the point of repassing the badly-damaged lighthouse on the Mole-head. Here Huns, no longer in danger of being strafed by the *Vindictive's* landing-parties, were frantically blazing away with their quick-firers and machine-guns. A 4.1 shell fired at point-blank range furrowed the fore-deck and, without exploding, passed completely through the side a few inches above the water-line. Another blew the M.-L.'s "tin" dinghy into the sea, davits and all; while a third, striking the stern, smashed the quadrant of the steering-gear and blew off the head of the rudder.

M.-L. 4452 began to describe a large circle, her head falling off until she pointed straight for the Mole. To attempt to keep her on her course by means of the helm was an impossibility, for not only had the spare tiller—for use when as sometimes happened the steering-wires and chains carried away—shared the fate of the davits, but the rudder-head itself was bent and twisted by the explosion of the shell.

Immediately the ship was hit Branscombe made his way aft to investigate and report. He was back in the wheel-house just in time to find Farnborough and the coxswain lying motionless on the floor, and the M.-L., left to her own devices, circling to port.

The helm useless, Branscombe realized that he had to steer by means of the twin screws. Under ordinary conditions it was a tricky job, but the difficulties were now increased tenfold. A partly-disabled boat, nearly half her complement out of action; a dark, fog-enshrouded night with occasional bursts of dazzling light from search-lights, star-shells, and the flashes of guns; a short, confused sea, and the constant danger of ramming, or being rammed by, other craft manoeuvring without lights.

There were dozens of similar vessels out that night engaged in the same work. Frail little M.-L.'s, manned by amateur yachtsmen of yesterday, were achieving wonders. Men from the Clyde, the Solent, and the East Coast, whose knowledge of the sea was confined to a few days or weeks of summer cruising under favourable conditions, were proving their worth as fighters of the Empire. Experience gained in those dainty little yachts, snow-white of deck and glittering with burnished brass, was put to good use in those squat, grey-hulled M.-L.'s. It was on St. George's Day that the practically unknown R.N.V.R., unostentatiously at work as a unit of the great Silent Navy, suddenly leapt upon the pinnacle of fame.

A dense pall of smoke drifted down and enveloped M.-L. 4452. Branscombe had to steer solely by his sense of direction. He was one of those men who instinctively could find his way through a dense fog. At the back of his mind there was ever an impression—rarely, if ever, at fault—of the direction in which lay the north. The compass was useless: the same blow that had struck down the skipper and the coxswain had wrecked the binnacle.

The while the din was simply terrific. The air trembled under the violent, irregular pulsations of sound as guns large and small, exchanged their mutual "hate".

With all his work cut out to keep the vessel on her course Branscombe gripped both handles of the engine-room telegraph, and peered through the smoke-laden night. Feelings almost akin to panic assailed him. He was no longer a fighting man dashing into the fray, but a fugitive—a human being endeavouring to escape from all the terrors of the jaws of hell, as exemplified by the hitherto considered impregnable harbour of Zeebrugge.

"If the motors konk out we're dished," he thought, as he listened to detect any ominous sound from the pulsating engines. The vibration was excessive, far more than is usual even with a heavily-powered M.-L., but apparently the staunch little craft was still maintaining her speed.

"She's making water badly, old man," exclaimed a voice.

Branscombe turned his head to find Seton standing behind him.

"Think she'll last out?" inquired Branscombe.

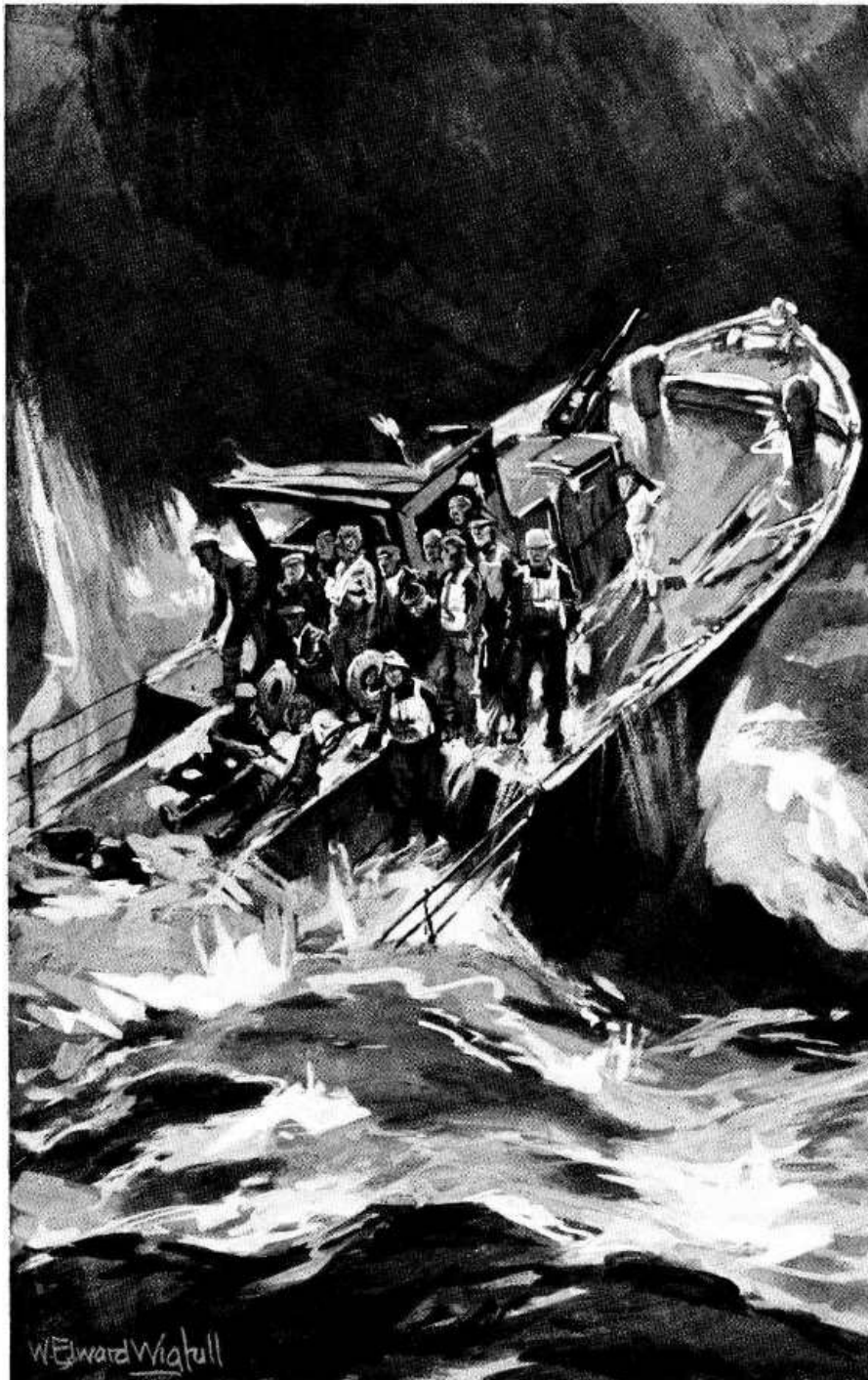
"Another hour—that's all I can give her," was the reply. "The stern-post was badly strained when the rudder-head carried away."

"Auxiliary engine running?" inquired the M.-L.'s Sub speaking through the voicetube to the engineer.

"No, sir," came the answer. "The mag's six inches under water,"

That meant that the power bilge-pumps were useless. The hand-pumps were hopelessly jammed long ago. The search-light in being shot away had done that damage. There were no means now of checking the steady flow of water through the gaping seams.

By this time M.-L. 4452 had drawn out of range of lighter quick-firers. Shells from heavy guns still hurtled overhead, unseen but unpleasantly audible. Occasionally a huge projectile would ricochet close to the little boat as a grim reminder that other perils beside foundering were still present.



D 5

"SHE'S GOING, LADS!" SHOUTED BRANSCOMBE

[Illustration: "SHE'S GOING, LADS!" SHOUTED BRANSCOMBE]

Presently Branscombe fancied that the M.-L. was turning to starboard. A glance astern at the foaming wake was sufficient to confirm his suspicions. Altering the starboard telegraph to easy astern, and then stop, the R.N.V.R. Sub awaited developments. His fears were realized. Only the port engine was running, the other had "konked".

"Ignition, sir," reported the engineer in reply to Branscombe's inquiry. "I'll try and get her going in a few moments."

The fact that the little engine-room staff had been working knee-deep in oily water, and that the electric light had failed, added to the difficulties of the strenuously-engaged men. While one held an electric torch in position, the other was busily engaged in fitting new sparking-plugs—even if only to keep the motors running another quarter of an hour.

Branscombe signalled for the port engine to be stopped. It was worse than useless to run on one engine, since the M.-L. would circle aimlessly and possibly drift nearer the Belgian coast.

The M.-L. was rolling sluggishly. She always did roll heavily, but the motion was totally different. It suggested a lack of liveliness, and the gurgling sound of tons of water surging to and

fro 'neath decks told its own tale.

M.-L. 4452 was foundering—slowly, but nevertheless surely. Her metal dinghy was a mere scrap of riddled galvanized iron. Her life-buoys had either been carried away, or had been shattered by machine-gun fire. Down below were half a dozen life-belts. These with a few wooden gratings were the sole means of supporting the survivors of the crew, all of whom, with the exception of the engine-room staff, were more or less wounded.

A rift in the persistent bank of smoke revealed nothing near at hand. Miles away could be seen search-lights and flashes of guns, as the monitors and destroyers were covering the retreat of the *Vindictive*, *Iris*, and *Daffodil*. Apparently M.-L. 4452 had been carried too far to the nor'ard by the tide. Even if she contrived to keep afloat till dawn, the rising of the sun would expose her to the full view of the exasperated Huns ashore.

"She's going, old son!" exclaimed Seton, who had been engaged in strapping life-belts round the unconscious forms of Farnborough, Smith, and the coxswain. "Think yourself lucky it's your first swim to-night. It's my second, and the water's beastly cold."

"And it's a long swim to Dover," rejoined Branscombe facetiously. His sense of panic had now entirely deserted him. Practically beyond range of the hostile batteries, save for the chance of an unlucky hit from a long-range gun, he was now just a sailor bent on doing his level best to save his ship from disaster and his crew from drowning.

A couple of hands were told off below to ram every available piece of canvas gear into the broad wedges formed by the transom and the vessel's quarter, since it was here that she leaked badly. The canvas, saturated with oil, certainly checked the inrush, but whether it was possible to keep the M.-L. afloat was a question open to doubt.

Had it been daylight M.-L. 4452 would have presented a forlorn spectacle. Night hid her honourable scars, and toned down the ragged appearance of her shell-swept deck. She had had a gruelling. Holed in a dozen places, her mast, search-light, and most of her deck-fittings blown away, deep down by the stern, she had played her part.

The most strenuous efforts on the part of her engine-room hands were doomed to failure. With a foot of water surging over the beds of the motors, it was impossible to "get a kick" out of either of them. It was a case of both or none if the boat were to be steered at all. Yet, loath to admit failure, the two men toiled, with their hands almost raw and the sweat pouring down their foreheads, in the vain hope that the engines could be made to run once more.

Clad in a sweater, flannel trousers, and an oilskin—gear that he had annexed from the M.-L.'s ward-room—Seton was indefatigable in his efforts to assist Branscombe to save the ship. At his suggestion oil was thrown overboard to quell the effect of the rapidly-rising waves, while a rough-and-ready sea-anchor was rigged up and thrown over the bows to keep her stem-on to the vicious, crested breakers.

The R.A.F. pilot, who had now almost recovered from the effect of his immersion, was working strenuously, passing buckets of water up the hatchway in order to keep down the rising water in the hold. All available hands were doing their utmost, realizing that every moment gained meant an additional chance of preserving their lives.

At intervals Verey-lights were fired to call the attention of any vessel within reasonable distance of the sinking ship; yet minute after minute sped and no succour was forthcoming. Evidently the flotilla, its work accomplished, was on its way to England, and M.-L. 4452 with others would be reported as destroyed by enemy action.

Aft the water was ankle-deep on deck. The rolling became slower and more sluggish. It was now a question of minutes before the gallant little M.-L. made her last plunge.

Wearing their life-belts, the survivors mustered abaft the wheel-house, for Branscombe had given orders for the engineers to abandon the motor-room and fall-in on deck. The wounded and unconscious officer, and two of the deck hands, who were rather badly hit, were laid on deck, and also provided with life-buoys, their comrades volunteering to "stand by" them in the water until the last.

Facing peril, the indomitable British spirit prevailed. Every man of the little crew, save those who were unconscious of their surroundings, kept a stiff upper lip. While making every endeavour to save themselves they were resolved, should things come to the worst, to die bravely, conscious that they had done their duty to the end.

The M.-L.'s bows rose until her forefoot was clear of the water; her stern dipped until a surge of icy water swept for'ard as far as the wheel-house. It seemed as if she no longer had sufficient buoyancy to shake herself clear. Cascades of water poured through the hatchways and the gaping rents in her decks.

"She's going, lads!" shouted Branscombe, stating what was an obvious fact. The incongruity of the remark struck him almost as soon as he had spoken. Then—"Every man for himself, and the best of luck."

Even as they waited for the ship to sink beneath them, a long, dark shape loomed through the darkness. Coming seemingly from nowhere, a destroyer ranged up alongside the sinking M.-L.

"Jump for it, men," shouted a voice through a megaphone.

Under the lee of the destroyer, the M.-L., half water-logged lay comparatively quietly, rubbing sullenly against the large coir fenders hanging over the side of the rescuing vessel.

The wounded were first transferred, then the rest of the crew, Seton and Branscombe being the last to leave. The latter was not empty-handed; under his arm he carried the M.-L.'s smoke-discoloured and tattered White Ensign. The signal code-book he had thrown overboard when it seemed that hope was dead.

Even as Branscombe clambered over the rail M.-L. 4452 gave an almost human shudder and slithered beneath the waves.

CHAPTER XVI

The Return from Zeebrugge

The destroyer's work that night was not yet accomplished. While the rescued crew of M.-L. 4452 were hospitably entertained and provided with hot food and drink and dry clothing, she resumed her patrol off the Belgian coast. With others the destroyer was on the look-out for possible survivors, amongst them the crew of the cutter for which Farnborough was searching when entering Zeebrugge Harbour. It appeared that the M.-L. that had rescued the crew of one of the block-ships had the cutter in tow. In the latter were five or six men who for some inexplicable reason were not transferred to the M.-L.'s deck. They might have thought that remaining on the boat was safer than crowding on the M.-L.'s already congested deck. At all events the men stopped where they were, the cutter was taken in tow and the dash out of the harbour begun.

Then difficulties arose. The M.-L. was steering badly; the cutter was sheering violently. It was a question whether the towing-craft could weather the Mole-head. The parting of the towing-hawser settled the problem. How it parted no one on the M.-L. knew. It might have been shot through, or slipped by one of the men in the cutter; but, before the skipper of the M.-L. realized that it had parted, the cutter was lost astern in the darkness.

Two hours after the rescue of the crew of M.-L. 4452 the cutter was sighted and picked up fifteen miles from land. Her undaunted crew had almost miraculously made their way out of the shell-swept harbour and were resolutely straining at their oars determined, if not picked up by a vessel, to make the shores of England.

Zeebrugge had been effectually "bottled up". No longer could skulking U-boats descend the Bruges Canal and put to sea on their errand of ruthless and unlawful destruction. A flotilla of Hun torpedo-boats, too, was rendered useless by the closing of the port.

It was the most brilliant naval episode of the war. Accomplished under adverse conditions the loss of life, though deplorably heavy, was less than that of a land battle. The results were greater; directly, they practically sealed the fate of the U-boat campaign; indirectly, they made their moral effect fall not only on the Western Front but all over the vast area affected by the stupendous Battle of Nations. People, who, owing no doubt to the over-secretive policy of the Admiralty, were asking: "What is the British Navy doing?" were silenced. Zeebrugge provided an indisputable answer.

It was hardly to be expected that the old *Vindictive* and the little *Iris* and *Daffodil* would return from the storming of the Mole, and arrangements had been made to take off their crews by means of the motor-launches, should the ships be sunk alongside the strongly fortified wall.

But they did. Battered, her upperworks riddled like sieves, her decks resembling shambles with their load of dead and wounded, the *Vindictive*, with her White Ensign streaming proudly in the breeze, returned to Dover. One night's work had placed her on the same pedestal as Nelson's Victory. Proposals were submitted that she should be preserved as a national relic, and when the question was raised in the House of Commons the enigmatical reply was made: "The future of the *Vindictive* is a matter now under consideration".

Successfully the sealing of Zeebrugge was accomplished; but the simultaneous operations against Ostend, though brilliant in their conception and heroic in their attempt, failed to achieve the desired result.

A sudden change in the direction of the wind, local mists, a dark night, and the alteration in the position of the important Stroom Bank buoy all contributed to the glorious failure of a gallant attempt. Under a heavy fire, the *Brilliant*, making for the supposed position of Ostend piers, grounded. The *Sirius*, following slowly in her wake, immediately reversed engines, but, as the ship was already badly damaged by gun-fire and in a sinking she refused to answer to her helm.

Before she could gather sternway she collided with the *Brilliant's* port quarter. In the end, both vessels being hard and fast ashore, they were blown up, nearly a mile and a half to the eastward of where they ought to have been had observations been possible.

Here again, in the work of rescuing the crews of the stranded block-ships, the M.-L.'s played a successful and daring part. M.-L. 532, in attempting to run alongside, was badly damaged in collision. M.-L. 276 repeatedly went alongside the *Brilliant*, and in exceptionally difficult circumstances rescued most of the crew.

M.-L. 283, ranging up alongside the *Sirius*, took off practically all her crew; then, notwithstanding the fact that her deck was crowded with men, she took off sixteen of the *Brilliant's* crew who had taken to a whaler, which had been sunk by gun-fire.

After the rescuing M.-L.'s had left, it was reported that an officer and some men belonging to the *Sirius* were missing. That vessel was hard and fast aground, and subjected to a furious fire from the German batteries. It seemed impossible that anyone could remain alive on board the shattered hulk. But, since there was a very slight possibility, there was no hesitation on the part of the skipper of Coastal Motor-Boat No. 10. Under a heavy and accurate fire from 4.1-inch and machine-guns the C.M.-B. made a thorough search for the missing officer and men, but found no sign of life. Subsequently they were picked up thirteen miles out at sea, whither they had pulled in an open boat after the sinking of their ship.

It was no fault on the part of Commander Godsall that had caused the failure of the operations. Most men would have been content to rest on their laurels, but not so Godsall. Directly he reported to the Vice-Admiral at Dover he volunteered to make another attempt upon Ostend. His offer was accepted, and, while the nation was clamouring for the *Vindictive* to be exhibited as a show-ship, her hold was already being filled with cement in order to use her as a block-ship to complete the task that the *Sirius* and *Brilliant* had failed to achieve.

It was about a week after the return of the *Vindictive* to Dover that Alec Seton and Guy Branscombe were making their way along the esplanade in the direction of the Lord Warden Hotel, when they were hailed by Flight-lieutenant Smith.

"Gorgeous news, you fellows!" exclaimed the R.A.F. pilot, who had made a rapid recovery from the effect of his immersion in the icy waters of Zeebrugge Harbour. "I'm told off for the coming Ostend stunt. Got my orders from the Squadron Commander this afternoon."

"Some fellows get all the luck," grunted Branscombe. "Spose we must congratulate you; but for Heaven's sake don't rub it in! We're properly hipped. Nobody up-topsides loves us. We're kind of social pariahs amongst the lucky dogs of the Dover Patrol. In short, we're fed up absolutely."

"I agree," added Seton disconsolately.

"What's upset your respective apple-carts?" asked Smith.

"Every mortal thing," replied Seton. "We both volunteered for work with the *Vindictive*, and all we got was thanks and fourteen days' leave. There's been a most unholy scramble to take part in the stunt—fellows tumbling over each other, like a west-end bargain sale. One fellow puts forward his claim on the grounds that he was on the *Sirius*, another the *Brilliant*, a third because he got into Zeebrugge and got out again. The 'Vindictives' naturally want to see the thing through, and they won't budge—so there you are. Branscombe's M.-L. is *non est*, and they haven't given him a new one. I'm pushed out of the destroyer flotilla 'cause I've been chipped about a bit. The medical board tell me that I want rest—and it's rest that's driving, me silly. No chance of getting a lift in your 'bus?"

The pilot shook his head.

"Sorry—nothin' doin'," he replied. "Much as I appreciate what you've done for me in the past, you have asked me the impossible. I couldn't smuggle you in a 'plane, you know. Well, I must away. I'm just off to the Air Station."

"By Jove, Seton!" exclaimed Branscombe, as the pair continued their way; "that fellow Smith has given us the straight tip."

"What do you mean?" asked Alec.

"Said he couldn't smuggle us."

"Well, what of it?"

"Where's your imagination, old son?" continued Branscombe. "What's to prevent us doing the stowaway stunt on board the *Vindictive*?"

Alec fairly gasped.

"Fine old hole we'd be in if we were found out," he objected.

"We mustn't be found out—at least until after the stunt is over," replied Branscombe; "then it

doesn't matter so much. Either we won't be alive to bear the wiggling, or else we'll be tails up. In that case I don't very much care what happens if we've had our whack of the fun."

"'Prejudicial to discipline and good conduct'," quoted Seton.

"So are a good many things," argued Branscombe. "In the Service there are two ways of getting a job done: the official and the non-official. It's only when you make a mess of things that you are hauled over the coals. Nothing happened to those fellows who refused to leave the *Intrepid* before she went into action. We'd both be able to do a bit with a quick-firer or a machine-gun."

"It's not a bad scheme," admitted Alec. "How do you propose to go about it?"

"You leave it to me," declared Branscombe "and I'm open to wager a month's pay that when the *Vindictive* sails for Ostend, you and I will be on board."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Alec.

CHAPTER XVII

"Good Old 'Vindictive'!"

"Clear lower deck, supernumeraries fall-in on the quarter deck."

To the accompaniment of the bo's'un's mates' pipes the order given in hoarse, strident tones, was repeated in various parts of the ship.

The *Vindictive*, with 200 tons of cement in her after-magazines and in the upper bunkers on both sides, was lying in Dunkirk Roads in company with the *Sappho*, which had been hurriedly fitted out at short notice to act as an additional block-ship in the operations against Ostend.

Two men clad in bluejackets' working rig heard the order not without emotion. The instinct to obey—the result of three years' service under the White Ensign—was strong; but resisting the impulse the two remained "as you were", sheltering from observation in a corner of a disused flat abaft the after-magazine.

Clearing out the supernumeraries—men embarked to assist in the navigation of the *Vindictive* across Channel—was a slow process. Again and again alert, lynx-eyed petty officers scoured the ship to make certain that the additional hands had fallen in. More than once the flat in which the disguised Seton and Branscombe were concealed was inspected, but no one thought to pay particular attention to a heap of empty cement sacks that camouflaged the determined stowaways. After half an hour of suspense, they felt secure.

"They're gone," whispered Seton, taking a pull at a water-bottle and passing it on to his companion. "Stuffy show, isn't it? Good thing we provided ourselves with biscuits and water."

"Hope to goodness the stunt won't be declared off," remarked Branscombe. "Let's see; we're due to arrive off the Stroom Bank at 2 a.m. That means that we've got to lie low for another four hours. It wouldn't be safe for us to show up before 1.30 at the earliest."

"No one will notice us if we hang about the main deck," objected Seton. "I don't want to miss any of the fun. Besides, as soon as the ship's under way, they wouldn't slow down to send us ashore."

The somewhat erratic pulsations of the *Vindictive's* engines—for since the Zeebrugge operations, when her propellers got foul of the Mole, the hard-worked machinery was far from perfect—announced that the venerable and historic cruiser was leaving the Roadstead, and the two chums left their place of concealment and made their way to the starboard battery on the main deck.

Not a light was shown on board. In the darkness they were unrecognized as strangers, and boldly mingling with others of the depleted crew they had the satisfaction of finding that their carefully laid plan was being carried out without a hitch.

"What's wrong with the old *Sappho*?" inquired a seaman, who was looking out of the gun port. "She's dropping astern."

"Something wrong with her," agreed his "raggie". "Hope that won't put a stopper on this little jaunt."

As a matter of fact it very nearly did. The *Sappho* had hardly cleared the anchorage when a man-hole joint in the side of her boilers blew out, instantly reducing her speed to six knots.

"It's all right, mates," announced a petty officer, who was making his way aft through the battery. "The Admiral has just signalled. We are to carry on without the *Sappho*."

"The ball's opened," exclaimed several voices, when at 1.43 a.m. the sound of a furious cannonade was borne to the ears of the *Vindictive's* company.

Unlike previous operations there was in this no preliminary bombardment. For several nights past Ostend had been left severely alone by our monitors and bombing planes. This had the result of lulling Fritz into a state of false security, and in consequence the took-outs were taking things easy.

But now, at a pre-arranged signal, hell was let loose over Ostend. From the air large bombing machines rained their deadly missiles upon the batteries and land-approaches to the town. From seaward the monitors, some with 17-inch guns, opened a furious and accurate bombardment, while from the battle line in Flanders heavy siege-guns pounded the hostile batteries on the left flank of the defences.

Almost immediately after the opening of the bombardment patches of local fog enveloped the approaching flotilla, while the artificial smoke-screen set up by the coastal motor-boats, although protecting the *Vindictive* from direct fire, helped to render her navigation a difficult matter.

Through the night mists dull flashes showed that the British destroyers were standing in to engage the batteries, while the Huns, in a frenzied sort of way, concentrated most of their guns on a continuous barrage fire across the entrance to the harbour.

It was through this deadly hail of projectiles, large and small, that the *Vindictive* was literally compelled to feel her way. As long as she remained in the smoke-screen she was fairly immune from hostile fire, but directly she drew near the shore she would be the target of hundreds of guns.

Peering through a gun-port, which had been additionally protected by walls of sandbags, Seton noticed a white light showing faintly through the drifting smoke. It was the calcium light placed at certain intervals by the British to enable the *Vindictive* to fix her position, thus countering the ruse on the part of the Huns that had succeeded too well in the abortive attack on St. George's Day—the removal of the recognized navigation buoys.

For a little more than ten minutes the *Vindictive* held on a course that ought to have brought her off the entrance to the harbour. Anxiously those responsible for navigating her kept a sharp look-out, in the hope of sighting the now familiar piers. Then, as the entrance was obviously missed, the ship altered course to west'ard, keeping parallel to the shore and maintaining a speed of only nine knots.

After a while orders were given to alter course sixteen points to starboard, which meant that the ship would retrace her course and steer eastwards. Again the elusive harbour was missed, and once more a course was shaped to the westward.

In the midst of this serious game of maritime blindman's buff—for it was possible to see only three hundred yards or so owing to the density of the fog and smoke—the entrance suddenly came into view at one cable's length distant on the port beam.

It was now neck or nothing. Orders were given to "prepare to abandon ship", the officers on the bridge retired into the conning-tower in order to con the ship with the least risk (as if such a condition were possible), and the *Vindictive* was steered straight for the harbour entrance.

Directly the *Vindictive* sighted the shore the hostile batteries sighted her. Instantly a terrific cannonade was opened upon the ship.

In the midst of the terrific hammering, which shook the staunch old vessel from stem to stern, a petty officer came tearing along the deck.

"You hands fall in abaft the conning-tower," he shouted, addressing Seton and Branscombe. "Communication's broken down. You're wanted to convey orders to the engine-room. Look alive!"

There was no delay on the part of Alec and his chum to execute the order. At last they were doing something useful instead of remaining inactive in the battery, waiting to take the place of any casualties.

It was a dangerous post, for there was little or no protection without the conning-tower, which was one of the principal objectives of the German gunners.

The ship was still forging ahead, slowly but steadily. The air was thick with fragments of flying metal, as shells burst in, over, and around her.

At last! Literally making her way through a tornado of shot and shell, the *Vindictive* passed between the pier-heads. Smoke, pouring from her engine- and boiler-rooms, mingled with the vapour from bursting projectiles. Happen what might, the block-ship was inside the harbour and success was within reach.

It was now necessary to alter course, and since communication between the conning-tower and the steering-flat had been interrupted, Commander Godsall, quitting the doubtful shelter of the

conning-tower, stepped outside and shouted for hard-a-starboard.

By this time the din was absolutely terrific. Seton, standing at the foot of the bridge-ladder, was unable to hear a word of the captain's order. He made a rush to ascend and get instructions.

"Pass the word for hard-a-starboard," shouted the captain again.

"Aye, aye, sir!" replied the disguised sub-lieutenant.

He was in the act of descending the ladder when a heavy shell hit the conning-tower. A hot blast literally blew Alec from the ladder and hurled him violently against one of the ventilating shafts. Deafened by the concussion, he strove to regain his feet, but his limbs seemed devoid of feeling. Wisps of burning woodwork were lying all around. His canvas jumper was smouldering, yet he lacked the strength to smother the smoking fabric.

The next impression was that of being lifted from the deck. Branscombe, seeing his chum's plight, had hurried to the rescue.

"Captain's orders: hard-a-starboard!" exclaimed Seton. "Leave me, old man, and pass the word."

Branscombe, waiting only to divest Alec of his smouldering jumper—it was a work of a few seconds only—tore off to the steering-flat. Promptly the hand-wheel party obeyed, and the cruiser swung round to port.

It was the last order that the gallant Godsall gave. The shell that had hurled Seton like a feather in a gale had literally blown the *Vindictive's* skipper to atoms. Lieutenant Sir John Alleyne, the navigating officer, was rendered unconscious by the concussion, which also gave the occupants of the conning-tower a bad shaking.

Immediately Lieutenant Victor Crutchley assumed command. Everything depended upon his orders during the next few seconds, for the ship was still swinging to port and, if her course was not altered, she would probably ground in a useless position.

Ordering the port engine to full-speed astern, Lieutenant Crutchley tried to get the ship to swing across the narrow channel between the piers. Unfortunately the port propeller, which had been badly damaged at Zeebrugge, refused its allotted task, and the ship's bows grounded against the eastern pier.

For a few moments it seemed as if the old ship would swing athwart the channel, but it soon became apparent that she was hard and fast aground. Nothing more could be done but to sink her as she lay.

The while the *Vindictive* was subjected to a terrifically hot fire. The after-control had been completely demolished, killing every man in it. The upper works were literally shattered, while the decks were littered with debris and the bodies of slain and wounded men.

"Don't move, old man!" exclaimed Branscombe, who had returned to his chum. "The order's given to abandon ship. I'll stand by you right enough."

"You've been hit," said Seton, as he caught sight of a dark, gradually-increasing stain on the right side of Branscombe's jumper.

"Machine-gun bullet copped me," replied Branscombe. "Nothing much. Heavens! We've had a hammering, but we're here this time."

"Any sign of the M.-L.'s?" asked Alec after a pause.

"They'll be here in a brace of shakes," replied Branscombe confidently.

The *Vindictive* had now settled on the bottom of the harbour with a slight list to starboard. The Huns were still maintaining a hot fire merely out of sheer rage. They knew perfectly well that the ship was sunk, and that no military advantage could be obtained by continuing to shell her. They were determined to prevent the rescue of her crew. Massacring survivors of sunken ships is one of the gentle pastimes of the "Kultured" Hun, and he now was doing his best to keep up his reputation.

Meanwhile, on board the water-logged cruiser the utmost order was maintained. In spite of the galling fire, men were coolly searching for their wounded messmates and removing them to the safest possible places until the expected rescue craft arrived.

"Here they are!" shouted a score of voices, as a dazzle-painted M.-L. emerged from the pall of smoke and headed straight for the stranded ship.

Through the shell-torn water M.-L. 254 raced. Her cool and calculating R.N.V.R. commander knew his job. He came alongside, selecting the *Vindictive's* port side—that nearest the eastern pier—in which he showed admirable judgment, for in the narrow space between the ship and the pier the little M.-L. was temporarily sheltered from direct fire.

"Now, then!" exclaimed Branscombe. "Up with you, old man!"

Assisted by his wounded chum, Seton regained his feet. Desperately weak, he was able, with Branscombe's assistance, to make his way along the inclined deck to where the M.-L. lay grinding in the tidal swell.

Wounded men were being assisted on board the little craft with the utmost celerity, yet with due care to their desperate condition, until, with close on forty undaunted survivors of the *Vindictive's* crew, M.-L. 254, heavily laden and deep in the water, cast off and backed astern. Great though her task had been to dash into the harbour, the difficulties that awaited her on her return run were far greater. Coolness, good judgment, and a special dispensation of Providence were needed to enable her to escape from the fiery jaws of the deadly trap.

CHAPTER XVIII

Out of the jaws of Death

Lying at full length upon the deck of the M.-L., Alec Seton underwent one of the most nerve-racking periods of his life. He could feel the wooden hull quivering under the pulsations of the powerful twin-engines, and the jarring thuds as missiles large and small struck the frail craft. By all the laws of naval warfare, M.-L. 254 ought to have been out of action long ago, for the Huns, finding their prey slipping through their fingers, redoubled their efforts to send the little boat to the bottom of the sea.

Machine-gun bullets sang through the air like the hum of a thousand angry bees. Men, crowded on the M.-L.'s deck, were hit over and over again. Of her own crew, the First Lieutenant and one of the deck hands were killed instantly, while the coxswain was badly wounded. Although three times hit, Lieutenant Drummond, M.-L. 254's skipper, stuck gamely to his post, cleared the entrance, ordered full speed ahead, and made for the open sea.

Into the merciful fog ran the little M.-L. Enveloped in mist, her human cargo was practically safe from fire, but another danger confronted the band of heroes.

The severe gruelling to which M.-L. 254 had been subjected had resulted, amongst other injuries, in the forepart being badly hulled 'twixt wind and water. In spite of every effort to stop the leaks, the M.-L. was settling by the bows.

Speed was promptly reduced in the hope that the inrush of water might be checked. At the same time sound-signals were made in order to get in touch with the off-shore destroyers. For nearly half an hour M.-L. 254 crawled along at slow speed without aid being forthcoming. It seemed as if her deck cargo of human beings—nearly all of them wounded—would soon be struggling for dear life in the numbing water, for the metal dinghy was hopelessly damaged and practically all the life-saving devices had been either swept overboard or destroyed by shell-fire.

Following the gallant and brilliant blocking operations, the threatened fate seemed doubly hard, yet with the heroic fortitude of their race the survivors made light of their difficulties, even laying odds on the chances of being picked up and cutting grim jokes upon the situation. They had faith that even in the fog and darkness the patrols would bear down in time to effect their rescue.

By this time the relative conditions of Seton and Branscombe were reversed. In spite of a slight wound from a shell splinter, Alec had practically recovered from his shaking. Although feeling stiff and bruised, he had regained the use of his limbs; while the wound, received as he lay upon the M.-L.'s deck, was little more than a skin-deep gash on his left cheek.

On the other hand, Branscombe, whose injury was more serious than he cared to admit, was feeling horribly weak from loss of blood. At last he had to give in and allow his chum to attend to his injuries.

With a knowledge of first aid—although hampered by the darkness—Alec cut away his chum's jumper. Just below the lowermost rib on the right side was a small puncture-wound, through which dark blood was welling sullenly. It was not enough to cause weakness unless the wound were bleeding internally. Very tenderly Seton turned his patient over on his side, and made the discovery that the machine-gun bullet had passed completely through, leaving a rather ugly wound where it had emerged.

By the help of a first-aid dressing, Alec succeeded in staunching the flow of blood; then, having done all that he could for the present, he sat down by his comrade's side and waited.

"We'll take to the ditch together, old son," he remarked. "I'll give you a hand. 'Sides, it'll soon be dawn, and then we'll be picked up."

Branscombe nodded in outward accord with his chum's plans. He knew perfectly well that Seton was deceiving him in an attempt to buoy up his spirits. It was some hours till dawn, and the

temperature of the sea was too low to enable a man to keep afloat for more than twenty minutes.

"There'll be a fine old jamboree ashore if we are done in," remarked Branscombe. "I never told a soul that we were going on this stunt; not even my people."

"Neither did I," added Seton. "Officially we are on leave. That means we'll be posted as deserters if we fail to report. We were chumps not to take necessary precautions."

"Agreed," declared Branscombe. "It's the penalty for sailing under false colours. At anyrate we've been in the thick of the scrap, so that's some consolation. I say! think you could get me some water? My throat's like a lime-kiln."

Stepping over the prostrate forms of half a dozen exhausted and wounded men, Seton made his way to the companion-ladder leading to the little ward-room. A foot of water was flowing noisily to and fro over the floor. Aft the bulk-head was the galley. For want of a cup Alec took down a small saucepan and held it under the tap of the water-tank.

The tank was empty. Even its large capacity was not sufficient for the needs of forty-odd thirsty men.

Foiled and disappointed Alec made for the deck. As he descended the ladder, a rousing cheer burst upon the night. Out of the fog a large vessel was bearing down upon the sinking M.-L.

Ten minutes later the survivors of M.-L. 254 and most of the *Vindictive's* officers and men were safely on board H.M.S. *Warwick*, the flagship of Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, while M.-L. 254, her work accomplished, disappeared beneath the waves.

Equally daring was the brilliant affair of M.-L. 276, commanded, like M.-L. 254, by a Royal Naval Volunteer Lieutenant. No. 276 followed the *Vindictive* into Ostend Harbour, her crew boldly engaging the Huns on both piers with machine-guns, as if to impress upon the enemy that they were there and intended to "make a splash". Running alongside the *Vindictive*, after M.-L. 254 had taken off the survivors, the crew of the frail little craft shouted and searched for any possible hands who, in the hurry of abandoning ship, might have been overlooked. Finding no one, the M.-L. backed away while under a terrific fire. In the midst of a hail of shell and machine-gun bullets the crew of the M.-L. saw a boat floating keel upwards to which were clinging three men.

These were rescued under most difficult circumstances, for the three were badly wounded and practically unable to help themselves. It was afterwards found that one of the rescued was Lieutenant Sir John Alleyne, on whom the command of the *Vindictive* had fallen on the death of the gallant Godsal.

Almost by a miracle M.-L. 276 got clear. Hit in fifty-five places and with three of her crew casualties, she managed to keep under way until picked up and taken in tow by the British monitor *Prince Eugene*.

The heroic ending of the old *Vindictive* was literally the clinching of the last nail in the coffin of the Huns' Belgian Coast defences. St. George's Day had all but completed the work; 10th May, 1918 settled it. From that day the Belgian ports were useless to the enemy both as torpedo-boat and submarine bases. The Dover Patrol had closed and secured the Gateway of the Channel against all hostile traffic both on and under the sea.

CHAPTER XIX

The Great Surrender

"Think the beggars will put up a fight after all?" asked Lieutenant Alec Seton, D.S.C., as he raised his binoculars to sweep the misty eastern horizon.

"Not they," replied Lieutenant-Commander Trevannion of H.M.T.B.D. *Bolero*. "What little stuffing they did have has sunk into their boots. But, by Jove! I never thought they'd chuck in their hands so completely. Try to imagine a British seaman showing the white feather like that—you simply couldn't, for the very good reason that it's not in his nature. Hullo! The flagship's signalling."

It was a brand new *Bolero* of which Lieutenant-Commander Trevannion was skipper; Seton, on promotion, being appointed his second-in-command. The *Scena* was in the North Sea some miles to the eastward of Harwich; the time, dawn of the 20th day of November, 1918.

"The Day"—der Tag—was at hand. As Beatty had prophesied, the Huns had to come out, although the manner of their coming was greatly different from that which had been expected. Everyone was firmly convinced—it was an erroneous tribute to an upstart navy without a single tradition—that the German Navy would emerge at the last to commit *felo-de-se* under the guns of the Grand Fleet. It seemed incredible that the array of battleships and cruisers, ostensibly built

to wrest the trident from Britannia's grasp, would tamely surrender without firing a single shot. But such was the case. The handing over of the German battleships, cruisers, and destroyers had already been arranged, and the White Flag Armada was due at Scapa Flow on the following day.

But the 20th of November was Tyrwhitt's Day—a fitting reward after four years of anxious watching, mingled with a few glorious scraps when Fritz did show his nose out of harbour. The first batch of 150 U-boats was due to arrive, officered by recreant Huns who, had they lived in a different age, would have been promptly hanged in chains at Execution Dock as common pirates.

So incredible to the British seamen did the tame surrender appear that many of them fully expected Fritz would put up a fight even for the sake of "saving his face" in the eyes of the world. After months of "Kolossal" boasting the Hun would surely not chuck up the sponge without resistance, even of the most treacherous kind.

But Admiral Tyrwhitt was a man who took no undue risks. Every vessel of the British squadron appointed to accept the surrender was cleared for action, while precautions had to be taken, before the U-boats left Germany, to draw their stings—in other words to remove the warheads from their torpedoes. In addition the German crews were ordered to fall-in on deck.

Covered by a hundred guns their fate would have been swift and sure had they foolishly given way to one act of treachery.

"U-boats in sight bearing E. by N.½N., distant three miles," came the welcome signal.

Very shortly afterwards Seton picked up with his glasses the first of the long line of German submarines—submarines no longer, since they were to keep on the surface until they passed into the hands of the ship-breakers. At the masthead of each flew a flag that throughout the Great War had never been flown from a vessel under the White Ensign, a rectangular white flag, bare in its simplicity and craven in its significance.

There was a fairly high sea running, the waves at times breaking completely over the approaching U-boats. Direct communication was impossible without risk of life and limb, so, except in a few instances, the act of taking over the prizes had to be deferred until they were within the limits of Harwich Harbour.

Overhead flew some of the gigantic British airships, while the air was "stiff" with seaplanes stunting daringly in sheer exuberance, for it was the airman's day almost as much as it was the navy's. Both the R.N. and the R.A.F., working in perfect co-operation, were responsible, for the successful climax to their strenuous labours.

As the first of the U-boats drew abreast of Tyrwhitt's flagship, the head of each of the double line of British light-cruisers and destroyers turned inwards through sixteen points of the compass; while each craft in succession, as she drew level with her corresponding prize, likewise circled, until the long line of German submarines was shepherded by two formations of British vessels each in line-ahead.

On board the German submarines there were many anxious faces. For the most part the officers looked sullen and felt uncomfortable. They were not altogether too sure of the nature of their reception. Some had consciences that had developed amazingly during the last few days. They remembered the hospital ships and unarmed merchantmen that they had sunk without pity, helpless boats' crews massacred in order to carry out the policy of *spurlos versenkt*, and now they were regretting those brutal acts, not because they were brutal, but because there is such a thing as reprisal. Others, hopeful that Englishmen would be ready to shake hands and forget the past, were more cheerful. In any case the war was over, and with it the great chance of being sent to the bottom by the explosion of one of those dreadful depth charges.

No fraternization was the British Admiral's order. The hand of the cowardly Hun was too dirty to be grasped by that of a British tar. For all time the record of Germany on the sea will remain, and its effect will be seen in the aloof demeanour of all honest seamen toward the descendants of the Hun pirates.

On the signal: "Board, and take over the prizes", the boarding officers rowed off to their "opposite numbers". Seton, in the *Bolero's* whaler, ran alongside a large U-boat, whose six-inch guns and lofty conning-tower proclaimed her to be one of the latest type of fully 300 feet in length.

Punctiliously the U-boat kapitan-leutnant saluted, then held out his hand. Returning the salute, but ignoring the proffered welcome, Alec himself received a surprise, for the German was an old acquaintance, von Kloster.

The recognition was mutual. The German's sallow features turned ashy-grey. His frame shook with the emotion of fear. Never had he expected to come face to face with his former prisoner. He had been confident in the belief that Seton had been blown to atoms on Zeebrugge Mole.

"Mercy, mercy!" exclaimed von Kloster. "I vill amends make."

"Stow it!" interrupted Seton brusquely. The exhibition of panic angered him. "You've nothing to

be frightened about. Now, sir, where are your papers?"

The formal deed of surrender was accomplished, but von Kloster seemed persistent to make a statement.

"Well, what is it?" asked Alec.

"You Count Otto von Brockdorff-Giespert remember?" asked von Kloster in broken English.

"I think I recall the name," admitted Seton grimly. "Where is the—er—fellow?"

"He is dead," declared the kapitan-leutnant.

He paused, hoping to catch a sign of satisfaction in Alec's face at the tidings. Seton's features betrayed nothing.

"He opposed to der surrender vos," continued von Kloster. "It vos at Wilhelmshaven. He would make der unterseebooten put to sea to make fight, but der seamen make mutiny and threw him into der sea. It vos Count von Brockdorff-Giespert who order me to you place on der Mole at Zeebrugge."

"Then he did me a very good turn," rejoined Seton.

The British lieutenant turned on his heel and rapped out an order. From the ensign staff the black cross of infamy was contemptuously hauled down by one of the *Bolero's* men. To the halliards was toggled another ensign, somewhat similar in design but infinitely cleaner in its records and traditions.

Seton glanced at his watch, and then at the forest of bare poles of the surrendered U-boats. In another half minute—

From the flag-ship a single gun boomed. As one, a galaxy of bunting rose in the grey, misty air, and on each of the surrendered U-boats fluttered the Black Cross Ensign once again, but with a vast difference. Floating proudly in the breeze above the flag of beaten Germany was the emblem of the true Freedom of the Seas—the glorious White Ensign.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE THICK OF THE FRAY AT ZEEBRUGGE,
APRIL 1918 ***

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