The Rapier was an old destroyer, one of the 370-ton "thirty-knotters" completed in about 1901. She burnt coal and was driven by reciprocating engines, instead of using oil fuel and being propelled by new-fangled turbines, while 23 to 24 knots were all she could be relied upon to travel in the best of weather. She had a low, sharp bow and the old-fashioned turtle-back forward instead of the high, weatherly forecastle of the later destroyers, and in anything more than a moderate breeze or a little popple of a sea she was like a half-tide rock in a gale o' wind. In fact, except in the very calmest weather, she was a regular hog, for she rolled, pitched, and wallowed to her heart's content, varying the monotony at odd moments by burying herself in green seas or deluging herself in masses of spray.

Her small bridge, with its 12-pounder gun, steering wheel, compass, and engine-room telegraphs, was placed on the top of the turtle-back and about 25 feet from the bows. It acted as a most excellent breakwater and took the brunt of the heavier seas, and how often the Rapier came back into harbour with her bridge rails flattened down and her deck fittings washed overboard, I really do not know. It was a fairly frequent occurrence, for war is war, and they kept the little ship out at sea in practically all weathers.

Even in harbour, when her officers and men were endeavouring to obtain a little well-earned sleep, she sometimes had an exasperating habit of rolling her rails under and slopping the water over her deck, and then it was that Langdon, her lieutenant in command, wedged in the bunk in his little cabin in the stern, and driven nearly frantic by the irregular thump, thump, crash of the loosely hung rudder swinging from side to side as the ship rolled, rose in his wrath and cursed the day he was born.

But whatever he thought in his heart of hearts, he would not hear a bad word against his old Rapier in public. She might be ancient; but then she had done "a jolly sight more steaming" than any other craft of her age and class. She might burn coal in her furnaces instead of oil-fuel, and every ounce of coal had to be shovelled on board from a collier by manual labour, whereas, in an oil-driven destroyer, one simply went alongside a jetty or an "oiler," connected up a hose, and went to bed while a pump did all the work. But Langdon never could endure "the ghastly stink" of crude petroleum, while coal, though dirty, was clean dirt. The Rapier might have old-fashioned engines, but with them one ran no chance of developing that affliction of turbine craft: water in the casing, the consequent stripping of blades off the turbine rotors, and a month or so in a dockyard as a natural concomitant. Moreover, everybody knew that destroyers with reciprocating engines were far and away the easiest to handle.

So, from what Langdon said, though it is true that he may have been rather prejudiced by the fact that she was his first independent command, the fifteen-year-old Rapier was a jewel of fair price. The powers that be perhaps did not regard her with such rose-tinted optimism, but for all that, were evidently of the opinion that she was still capable of useful work, and kept her constantly at sea accordingly.

Exactly what her function was I had better not say, but she always seemed to be on the spot when things happened, and had assisted at the "strafing" of Hun submarines, and had been under fire a great many more times than some of her younger sisters, many of whom were craft at least three times her size, eight knots more speed, and infinitely better armed and more seaworthy.

So it was not to be imagined that the Rapier, ancient though she was, suffered from senile decay.

* * * * *

"Curse this weather," the Lieutenant muttered, wrinkling his eyes in a vain endeavour to see through the murk. "We've been forty-eight hours on patrol, and now we're due to go into harbour this beastly fog comes down and delays us. It IS the limit!"

Pettigrew, the Sub-Lieutenant, agreed. "We shall have to coal when we arrive," he observed mournfully. "That'll take us two hours, and by the time we've finished, made fast to the buoy, had our baths, and made ourselves fairly presentable, it'll be two o'clock. I take it we go to sea at the usual time this evening, sir?"

Langdon nodded. "Bet your life!" he said with a sigh. "We shall be off again at eight p.m. I was looking forward to having a decent lunch ashore for once," he added regretfully, "but now this beastly fog's gone and put the hat on it. Lord! I'm fed up to the neck with the grub on board!"

"Tinned salmon fish-cakes for breakfast," murmured the Sub. "Curried salmon for lunch, and tinned rabbit pie for dinner. My sainted aunt! The Ritz and Carlton aren't in it!"

The skipper laughed.

The fog had come down at dawn, and now, halfway through the forenoon, the weather was still as thick as ever; so thick, indeed, that it was barely possible to see more than a hundred yards through the white, cotton-wool-like pall. It was one of those breathless, steamy days in mid-July. The sea was glassily calm, while the sun, a mere molten blot in the haze overhead, whose heat was unmitigated by the least suspicion of a breeze, was still sufficiently powerful to make it most uncomfortably warm.

Altogether the torrid clamminess of the atmosphere, and its distinct earthy flavour, reminded one irresistibly of the interior of a greenhouse.

It was the sun who had been guilty of causing the fog at all. His rays had saturated the earth with warmth the day before, heat which had been given off during the cooler hours of darkness in a mass of invisible vapour. Impelled slowly seaward during the night, the heat wave, if one can so call it, had eventually come into contact with the colder atmosphere over the water, where, following the invariable law of nature, it had condensed into an infinite number of tiny particles of moisture. These, mingling and coalescing, had formed the dense masses of vapour which hung so impalpably over the dangerous, thickly populated sea-areas in the closer vicinity of the coast. Further afield, seven or eight miles away from the shore, there was nothing but a haze. More distant still the sun shone undimmed, and there were no signs of fog at all.

* * * * *

Thick weather at sea is always exasperating, and to avoid the chance of colliding with something they could not possibly avoid at any greater speed, Langdon had been forced to ease to the leisurely speed of eight knots, and eight knots to a T.B.D., even a relic of the Rapier's age, is just about as irritating as being wedged in a narrow lane in a 40-horse power Daimler behind a horse pantechnicon.

They had a man on the forecastle keeping a lookout. The automatic sounding machine was being used at regular intervals to give them some sort of an idea as to their position by a comparison of the depths obtained with those shown on the chart, but even then the eccentricity of the tidal currents and, let it be said, the erratic and most unladylike behaviour of the Rapier's standard compass, made navigation a matter of some conjecture and a good deal of guesswork.

Somewhere ahead, veiled in its pall of fog, lay the coast. Ahead, and to the right, was a large area of shoal water, portions of which uncovered at low tide. It had already proved the graveyard of many fine ships whose bones still showed when the water fell, and Langdon had no wish to leave his ship there as an everlasting monument to his memory, while he, probably court-martialled, and at any rate having "incurred their Lordships' severe displeasure," left the destroyer service under a cloud which would never disperse.

Added to which there was always the chance of a collision, for the sea seemed full of ships. Time and tide wait for no man, and, Hun submarines or not, mines or no mines, fog or no fog, merchant vessels must run. To-day they seemed to be running in battalions and brigades, judging from the howling, yelping, and snorting of their steam whistles here, there, and everywhere.

But the Rapier managed to avoid them somehow, and, shortly before noon, having

heard the explosive fog signal on the end of the breakwater, she slid slowly past the lighthouse at the entrance and groped her way into the harbour. It was still as thick as it possibly could be, but she found the collier, and, after completing with coal, secured to her buoy.

Ten minutes later Langdon and the Sub were talking together in the little wardroom when there came a knock at the door.

"Signal just come through, sir," the signalman announced with a smile on his face. "Rapier will proceed to Portsmouth at daylight to-morrow to refit. She will not be required for patrol to-night."

The ship was long overdue for the dockyard, but the skipper and

Pettigrew looked at each other, hardly able to believe their ears.

"Lord!" muttered the former. "That means a week's leave, Sub. D'you realise that?"

"Do I not, sir!" answered the Sub-Lieutenant, as the signalman retired with a grin.