

THE FRINGES OF THE FLEET

neutral knows them when their searchlights pin him across the deep, or their syrens answer the last yelp of his as steam goes out of his torpedoed boilers. They stand by to catch and soothe him in his pyjamas at the gangway, collect his scattered lifeboats, and see a warm drink into him before they turn to hunt the slayer. The drifters, punching and reeling up and down their ten-mile line of traps; the outer trawlers, drawing the very teeth of Death with water-sodden fingers, are grateful for their low, guarded signals; and when the Zeppelin's revealing star-shell cracks darkness open above him, the answering crack of the invincible destroyers' guns comforts the busy mine-layers. Big cruisers talk to them, too; and, what is more, they talk back to the cruisers. Sometimes they draw fire—pinkish spurts of light—a long way off, where Fritz is trying to coax them over a mine-field he has just laid; or they steal on Fritz in the midst of his job, and the horizon rings with barking, which the inevitable neutral who saw it all reports as 'a heavy fleet action in the North Sea.' The sea after dark can be as alive as the woods of summer nights. Everything is exactly where you don't expect it, and the shyest creatures are the farthest away from their holes. Things boom overhead like bitterns, or scutter along like hares, or arise dripping and hissing from below like otters. It is the destroyers' business to find out what their