

THE AUXILIARIES

shoals and soundings. There is a movable list of the boats at work, with quaint and domestic names. Outside the window lies the packed harbour—outside that again the line of traffic up and down—a stately cinema-show of six ships to the hour. For the moment the film sticks. A boat—probably a ‘common sweeper’—reports an obstruction in the traffic lane a few miles away. She has found and exploded one mine. The Office heard the dull boom of it before the wireless report came in. In all likelihood there is a nest of them there. It is possible that a submarine may have got in last night between certain shoals and laid them out. The shoals are being shepherded in case she is hidden anywhere, but the boundaries of the newly-discovered mine-area must be fixed and the traffic deviated. There is a tramp outside with tugs in attendance. She has hit something and is leaking badly. Where shall she go? The Office gives her her destination—the harbour is too full for her to settle down here. She swings off between the faithful tugs. Down coast some one asks by wireless if they shall hold up their traffic. It is exactly like a signaller ‘offering’ a train to the next block. ‘Yes,’ the Office replies. ‘Wait a while. If it’s what we think there will be a little delay. If it isn’t what we think, there will be a little longer delay.’ Meantime, sweepers are nosing round the suspected area