

THE FRINGES OF THE FLEET

destroyers, and, of course, contingents of trawlers. We were waiting the return of some boats which were due to report. A couple surged up the still harbour in the afternoon light and tied up beside their sisters. There climbed out of them three or four high-booted, sunken-eyed pirates clad in sweaters, under jackets that a stoker of the last generation would have disowned. This was their first chance to compare notes at close hand. Together they lamented the loss of a Zeppelin—'a perfect mug of a Zepp,' who had come down very low and offered one of them a sitting shot. 'But what *can* you do with our guns? I gave him what I had, and then he started bombing.'

'I know he did,' another said. 'I heard him. That's what brought me down to you. I thought he had you that last time.'

'No, I was forty foot under when he hove out the big 'un. What happened to *you*?'

'My steering-gear jammed just after I went down, and I had to go round in circles till I got it straightened out. But *wasn't* he a mug!'

'Was he the brute with the patch on his port side?' a sister-boat demanded.

'No! This fellow had just been hatched. He was almost sitting on the water, heaving bombs over.'

'And my blasted steering-gear went and chose *then* to go wrong,' the other commander mourned.