

THE CURTAIN

Written for the 'Record'
by WILL GRAVE

"It was exactly right, that sound," he told me afterwards, except that it needed only the rattle of the chart-room windows to complete it."

FROM the chart-room, the captain telegraphs to the chief engineer.

"How is it below?"

The engineer is rightly Scots.

"The old lady's got her tail up. Her screws are racing."

Then the wireless alarm rings, the signal that runs through the ship when the radio picks up the message of SOS.

"Chertsey Abbey calling all ships," says the wireless. "Chertsey Abbey calling all ships. My latitude 46.58 north, longitude 12.24 west. Helpless. Steering gear disabled. After hatches stove in. Making water. Require assistance."

THE piping Morse brings the message from the Chertsey

Abbey to the Monmouth across the miles of troubled water. It's a message that stirs the listener who has heard those piping messages time out of number on his set, when ships talk at sea.

There's a job to be done now on the Monmouth, and the radio takes you into the centre of it. You are somehow there in the Monmouth, a silent, invisible watcher, bodiless, and so not getting in anybody's road, but seeing it all—with your ears.

IN the silent chart-room you watch the captain and the chief officer plot the position of the Chertsey Abbey. Forty-three miles to the north-west. You hear the captain, without any fuss, say he will alter course to north-west and bring the ship up to 14 knots.

"The damage?" says the first officer.

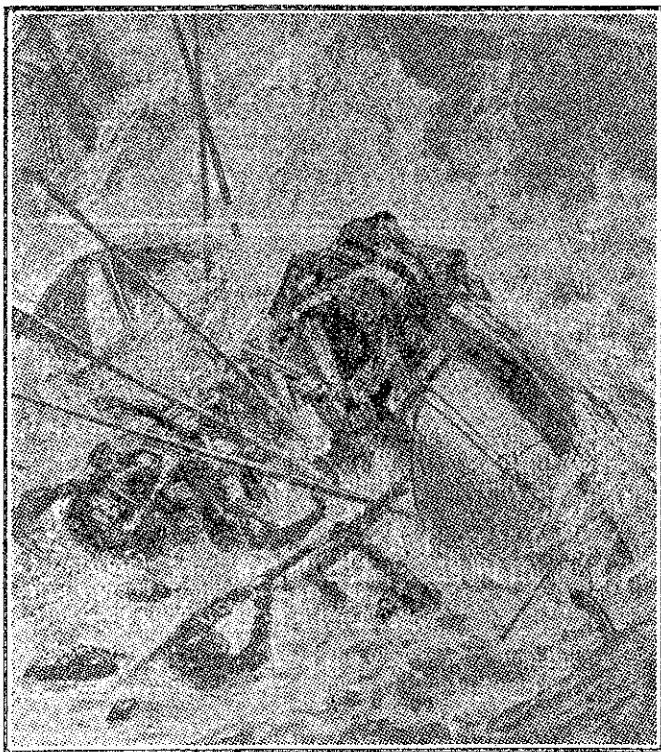
The damage can't be helped, nor the fuel bill. It costs a bit to plug the Monmouth at 14 knots through these seas.

"We'll be there by six o'clock," says the captain, and rings the wireless officer. "Tell the Chertsey Abbey we'll be up by 6.30. Tell her to fire rockets."

IN the howling storm of the bridge, the voices shout before they are carried away by the wind. They're altering course at the wheel, they're steering north 48 west.



... "She's practically vertical."



... When the lifeboats capsize.

And then again, in a church-like silence, come the piping voices of the ships at sea as they talk to the Chertsey Abbey.

Monmouth to Chertsey Abbey: Coming to your assistance.

Silverdale to Chertsey Abbey: Coming to your assistance.

H.M.S. Stafford to Chertsey Abbey: Steaming to your assistance.

Brandenburg to Chertsey Abbey: Coming to your assistance.

ALL the ships nearby are talking now, an American ship, a German passenger steamer, a French flier, a British cruiser, in a manner that one finds strangely moving, as they swing in along different radii to the centre of the circle in which lies the Chertsey Abbey—"helpless, steering gear disabled, requiring assistance."

And on the bridge of the Monmouth the invisible listener hears the storm rising—or seeming to rise—as the speed cranks on to 14 knots, and you feel you really want to pull your sou'-wester round you and your hat over your eyes.

SILENCE again, abrupt and immediate, as your ghost self goes into the chart-room once more and stands at the elbow of the captain, who talks with the chief about laying oil on the water when they get to the wreck, about the boats, about getting lines ready to veer, and "Tell the chief to drive her all he can. Not risk a breakdown, but drive her all he can. I'll sign for oil."

That's all for the moment. It seems the end of the act, which closes with the heaving sea and the wind and some notes of music, as if the sea were going to triumph now...

UNTIL the Morse pipes again.

Chertsey Abbey, 5.35, calling all ships... calling all ships: Situation desperate. Second mate and two men swept overboard. Situation desperate.

The wireless fades out, almost forlorn, fades in again with quiet reassurance.

Monmouth to Chertsey Abbey: With you after six. Show lights, rockets.

H.M.S. Stafford to Chertsey Abbey: With you after six.

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