

# THE WRECK OF THE MARY DEARE



*A Story of the Sea by*  
HAMMOND INNES



*Hammond Innes*  
*The Wreck of the*  
**MARY**

**DEARE**

*Alfred A. Knopf, New York*

# *The Wreck of the* Mary Deare

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*To the Mate and Crew of*

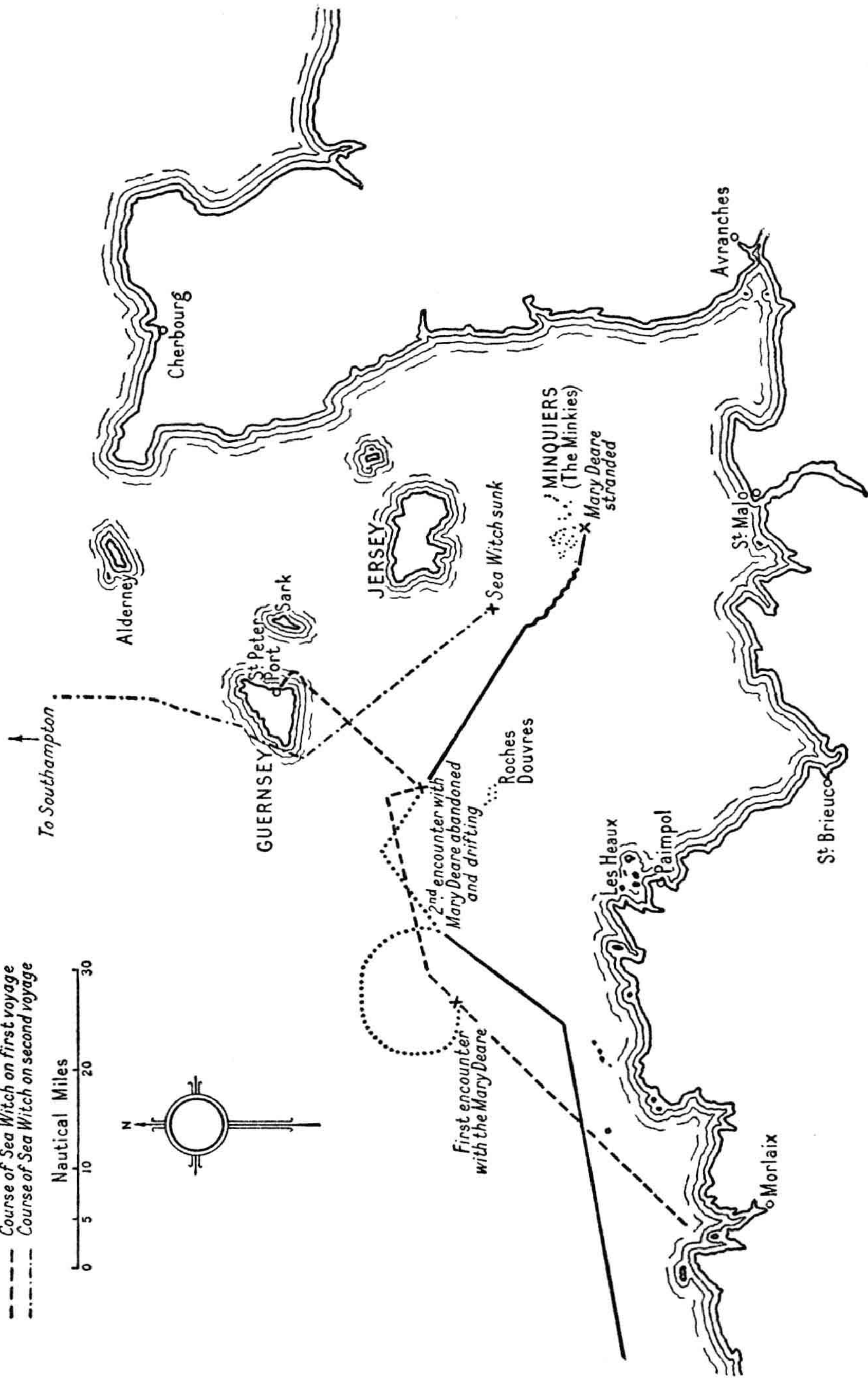
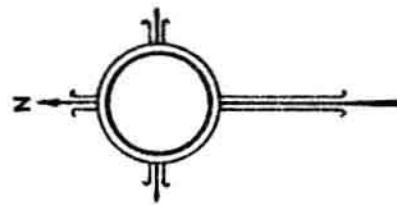
TRIUNE OF TROY

AND THE MEMORY OF A GALE

OFF THE MINKIES

# LEGEND

- Known course of *Mary Deare*
- ..... Probable course whilst not under control
- - - Course of *Sea Witch* on first voyage
- . - . - Course of *Sea Witch* on second voyage

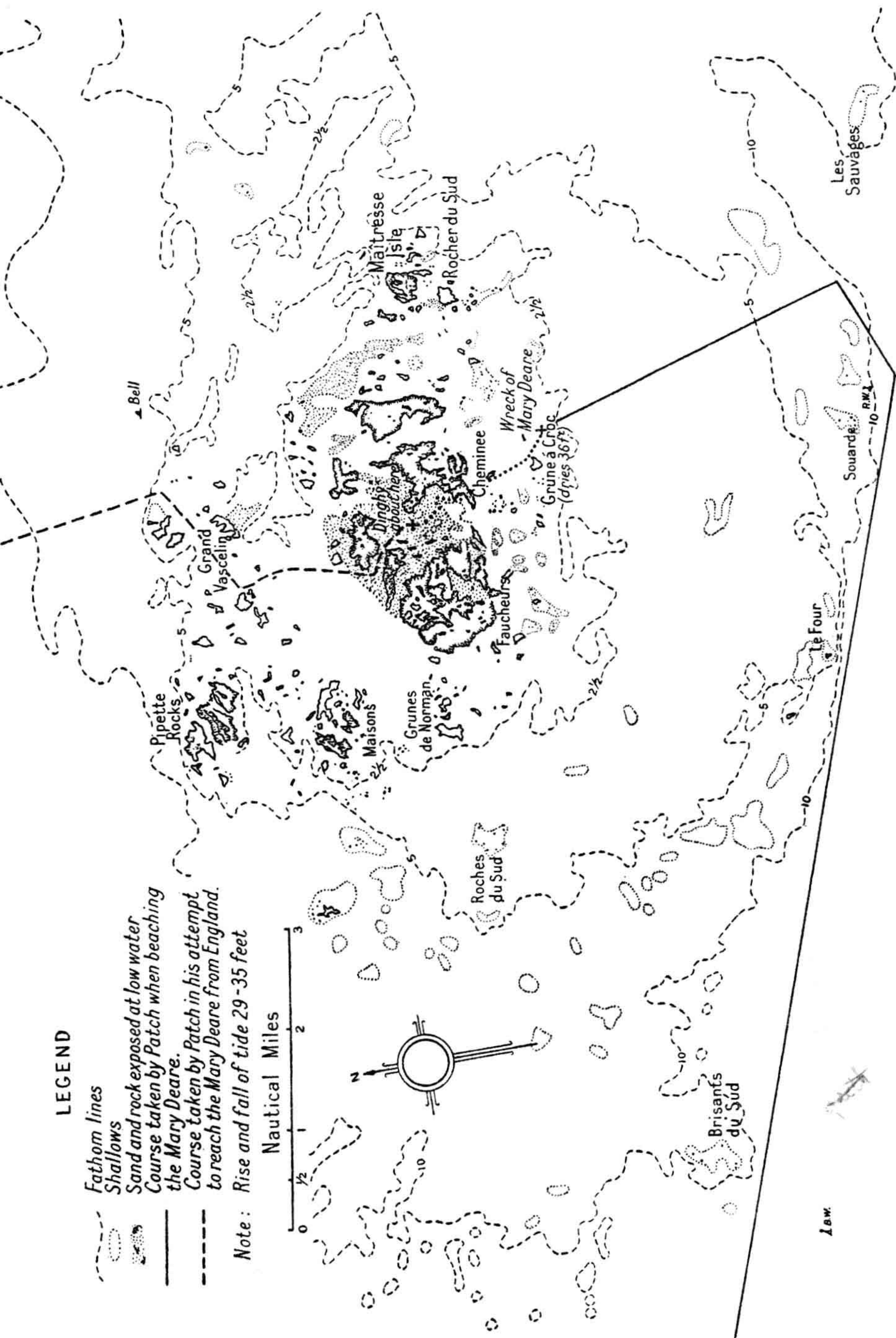
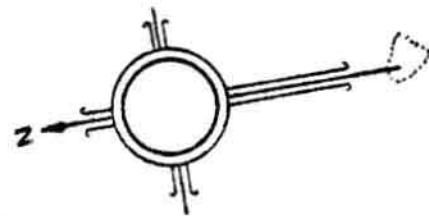


# LEGEND

- Fathom lines
- Shallows
- Sand and rock exposed at low water
- Course taken by Patch when beaching the Mary Deare.
- Course taken by Patch in his attempt to reach the Mary Deare from England.

Note: Rise and fall of tide 29-35 feet

Nautical Miles



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*Part One*

# The Wreck



# I

## *I was tired and very cold;*

a little scared, too. The red and green navigation lights cast a weird glow over the sails. Beyond was nothing, a void of utter darkness in which the sea made little rushing noises. I eased my cramped legs, sucking on a piece of barley sugar. Above me the sails swung in a ghostly arc, slatting back and forth as *Sea Witch* rolled and plunged. There was scarcely wind enough to move the boat through the water, yet the swell kicked up by the March gales ran as strong as ever and my numbed brain was conscious all the time that this was only a lull. The weather-forecast at six o'clock had been ominous. Winds of gale force were reported imminent in sea areas Rockall, Shannon, Sole, and Finisterre. Beyond the binnacle light the shadowy outline of the boat stretched ahead of me, merging into the clammy blackness of the night. I had dreamed of this moment so often. But it was March and now, after fifteen hours at sea in the Channel, the excitement of owning our own boat was gone, eaten up by the cold. The glimmer of a breaking wave appeared out of the darkness and slapped against the counter, flinging spray in my face and sidling off into the blackness astern with a hiss of white water. God! It was cold! Cold and clammy—and not a star anywhere.

The door of the charthouse slammed back to give me a glimpse of the lit saloon and against it loomed Mike Duncan's oilskin-padded bulk, holding a steaming mug in either hand. The door slammed to again, shutting out the lit world below, and the darkness and the sea crowded in again. "Soup?" Mike's cheerful, freckled face appeared abruptly out of the night, hanging disembodied in the light from the binnacle. He smiled at me from the folds of his balaclava as he handed me a mug. "Nice and fresh up here after the galley," he said. And then the smile was wiped from his face. "What the hell's that?" He was staring past my left shoulder, staring at something astern of us on the port quarter. "Can't be the moon, can it?"

I swung round. A cold, green translucence showed at the edge of visibility, a sort of spectral light that made me catch my breath in sudden panic with all the old seamen's tales of weird and frightful things seen at sea rushing through my mind.

The light grew steadily brighter, phosphorescent and unearthly—a ghastly brilliance like a bloated glow-worm. And then suddenly it condensed and hardened into a green pinpoint, and I yelled at Mike: "The Aldis—quick!" It was the starboard navigation light of a big steamer, and it was bearing straight down on us. Her deck lights were appearing now, misted and yellow; and gently, like the muffled beat of a tom-tom, the sound of her engines reached out to us in a low, pulsating throb.

The beam of the Aldis lamp stabbed the night, blinding us with the reflected glare from a thick blanket of mist that engulfed us. It was a sea mist that had crept up on me in the dark without my knowing it. The white of a bow wave showed dimly in the brilliance, and then the shadowy outline of the bows themselves took shape. In an instant I could see the whole for'ard half of the ship. It was like a ghost ship emerging out of the mist, and the blunt bows were already towering over us as I swung the wheel.

It seemed an age that I watched *Sea Witch* turn, waiting for the jib to fill on the other tack and bring her head round, and all the time I could hear the surge of that bow wave coming nearer. "She's going to hit us! Christ! She's going to hit us!" I can still hear Mike's cry, high and strident in the night. He was blinking the Aldis, directing the beam straight at her bridge. The whole superstructure was lit up, the light reflecting back in flashes from the glass windows. And the towering mass of the steamer kept on coming, thundering down on us at a good eight knots without a check, without any alteration of course.

The main and mizzen booms swung over with a crash. The jib was aback now. I left it like that for a moment, watching her head pay off. Every detail of *Sea Witch*, from the tip of her long bowsprit to the top of her mainmast, was lit by the green glow of the steamer's starboard light now high above us. I let go the port jib sheet, hauling in on the starboard sheet, saw the sail fill, and then Mike screamed: "Look out! Hold on!" There was a great roaring sound and a wall of white water hit us. It swept over the cockpit, lifting me out of my seat, tugging at my grip on the wheel. The sails swung in a crazy arc; they swung so far that the boom and part of the mainsail were buried for a moment in the back of a wave while tons of water spilled across our decks; and close alongside the steamer slid by like a cliff.

Slowly *Sea Witch* righted herself as the water poured off her in a white foam. I still had hold of the wheel and Mike was clutching the backstay runner, shouting obscenities at the top of his voice. His words came to me as a frail sound against the solid thumping of the ship's engines. And then another sound emerged out of the night—the steady thrashing of a propeller partly clear of the water.

I shouted to Mike, but he had already realized the danger and had switched the Aldis on again. Its brilliant light showed us plates pitted deep with rust and a weed-grown Plimsoll mark high above the water. Then the plates curved up to the stern and we could see the propeller blades slashing at the waves, thumping the water into a swirling froth. *Sea Witch* trembled, sails slack. Then she slid off the back of a wave into that mill race and the blades were whirling close along our port side, churning white water over the cabin top, flinging it up into the mainsail.

It was like that for a moment and then they flailed off into the darkness beyond the bowsprit and we were left pitching in the broken water of the ship's wake. The Aldis beam picked out her name: *MARY DEARE—Southampton*. We stared dazedly at her rust-streaked lettering while the stern became shadowy and then vanished abruptly. Only the beat of her engines remained then, throbbing gently and gradually dying away into the night. A faint smell of burning lingered on for a while in the damp air. "Bastards!" Mike shouted, suddenly finding his voice. "Bastards!" He kept on repeating the word.

The door of the charthouse slid back, and a figure emerged. It was Hal. "Are you boys all right?" His voice—a little too calm, a little too cheerful—shook slightly.

"Didn't you see what happened?" Mike cried.

"Yes, I saw," he replied.

"They must have seen us. I was shining the Aldis straight at the bridge. If they'd been keeping a lookout—"

"I don't think they were keeping a lookout. In fact, I don't think there was anybody on the bridge." It was said so quietly that for a moment I didn't realize the implication.

"How do you mean—nobody on the bridge?" I asked.

He came out onto the deck then. "It was just before the bow wave hit us. I knew something was wrong and I'd got as far as the charthouse. I found myself looking out through the window along the beam of the Aldis lamp. It was shining right onto the bridge. I don't think there was anybody there. I couldn't see anybody."

"But good God!" I said. "Do you realize what you're saying?"

"Yes, of course, I do." His tone was peremptory, a little military. "It's odd, isn't it?"

He wasn't the sort of man to make up a thing like that. H. A. Lowden—Hal to all his friends—was an ex-Gunner, a Colonel retired, who spent most of the summer months ocean racing. He had a lot of experience on the sea.

"Do you mean to say you think there was nobody in control of that ship?" Mike's tone was incredulous.

"I don't know," Hal answered. "It seems incredible. But all I can say is that I had a clear view of the interior of the bridge for an instant and, as far as I could see, there was nobody there."

We didn't say anything for a moment. I think we were all too astonished. The idea of a big ship ploughing her way through the rock-infested seas so close to the French coast without anybody at the helm . . . It was absurd.

Mike's voice, suddenly practical, broke the silence. "What happened to those mugs of soup?" The beam of the Aldis lamp clicked on, revealing the mugs lying in a foot of water at the bottom of the cockpit. "I'd better go and make another brew." And then to Hal, who was standing, half-dressed, his body braced against the charthouse: "What about you, Colonel? You'd like some soup, wouldn't you?"

Hal nodded. "I never refuse an offer of soup." He watched Mike until he had gone below and then he turned to me. "I don't mind admitting it now that we're alone," he said, "but that was a very unpleasant moment. How did we come to be right across her bows like that?"

I explained that the ship had been down-wind from us and we hadn't heard the beat of her engines. "The first we saw of her was the green of her starboard navigation light coming at us out of the mist."

"No fog signal?"

"We didn't hear it, anyway."

"Odd!" He stood for a moment, his long body outlined against the port light, and then he came aft and seated himself beside me on the cockpit coaming. "Had a look at the barometer during your watch?" he asked.

"No," I said. "What's it doing?"

"Going down." He had his long arms wrapped round his body, hugging his seaman's jersey. "Dropped quite a bit since I went below." He hesitated and then said: "You know, this gale could come up on us pretty quickly." I didn't say anything and he pulled his pipe out and began to suck on it. "I tell you frankly, John, I don't like it."

The quietness of his voice added strength to his opinion. "If the forecast turns out right and the wind backs north-westerly, then we'll be on a lee shore. I don't like gales and I don't like lee shores, particularly when the lee shore is the Channel Islands."

I thought he wanted me to put back to the French coast and I didn't say anything; just sat there staring at the compass card, feeling obstinate and a little scared.

"It's a pity about the kicker," he murmured. "If the kicker hadn't packed up—"

"Why bring that up?" It was the only thing that had gone wrong with the boat. "You've always said you despise engines."

His blue eyes, caught in the light of the binnacle, stared at me fixedly. "I was only going to say," he put in mildly, "that if the kicker hadn't packed up we'd be halfway across the Channel by now and the situation would be entirely different."

"Well, I'm not putting back."

He took his pipe out of his mouth as though to say something and then put it back and sat there, staring at me with those unwinking blue eyes of his.

"The real trouble is that you're not used to sailing in a boat that hasn't been kept up to ocean-racing pitch." I hadn't meant to say that, but I was angry and my nerves were still tense from the steamer incident.

An awkward silence fell between us. At length he stopped sucking on his pipe. "It's only that I like to arrive," he said quietly. "The rigging is rusty, the ropes rotten, and the sails—"

"We went over all that in Morlaix," I said tersely. "Plenty of yachts cross the Channel in worse shape than *Sea Witch*."

"Not in March with a gale warning. And not without an engine." He got up and went for'ard as far as the mast, bending down and hauling at something. There was the sound of splintering wood and then he came back and tossed a section of the bulwarks into the cockpit at my feet. "The bow wave did that." He sat down beside me again. "It isn't good enough, John. The boat hasn't been surveyed and, for all you know, the hull may be as rotten as the gear after lying for two years on a French mud bank."

"The hull's all right," I told him. I was calmer now. "There are a couple of planks to be replaced and she needs restopping. But that's all. I went over every inch of her with a knife before I bought her. The wood is absolutely sound."

"And what about the fastenings?" His right eyebrow lifted slightly. "Only a surveyor could tell you whether the fastenings—"

"I told you, I'm having her surveyed as soon as we reach Lymington."

"Yes, but that doesn't help us now. If this gale comes up on us suddenly . . . I'm a prudent mariner," he added. "I like the sea, but it's not a creature I want to take liberties with."

"Well, I can't afford to be prudent," I said. "Not right now."

Mike and I had just formed a small salvage company and every day we delayed getting the boat to England for conversion was a day lost out of our diving season. He knew that.

"I'm only suggesting you steer a point off your direct course," he said. "Close-hauled, we can just about lay Les Hanois on Guernsey Island. We'll then be in a position to take advantage of the wind when it backs and run for shelter to Peter Port."

Of course . . . I rubbed my hand over my eyes. I should have known what he was driving at. But I was tired and the steamer incident had left me badly shaken. It was queer the way the vessel had sailed right through us like that.

"It won't help your salvage venture if you smash the boat up." Hal's voice cut across my thoughts. He had taken my silence for refusal. "Apart from the gear, we're not very strongly crewed."

That was true enough. There were only the three of us. The fourth member of the crew, Ian Baird, had been seasick from the time we had left Morlaix. And she was a biggish boat for three to handle—a forty-tonner. "Very well," I said. "We'll head for Guernsey."

He nodded as though he'd known it all along. "You'll need to steer North 65° East then."

I turned the wheel, giving her starboard helm, and watched the compass card swing to the new course. He must have been working out the course in the charthouse just before the steamer came up on us. "I take it you worked out the distance, too?"

"Fifty-four miles. And at this rate," he added, "it'll be daylight long before we get there."

An uneasy silence settled between us. I could hear him sucking at his empty pipe, but I kept my eyes on the compass and didn't look at him. Damn it, I should have thought of Peter Port for myself! But there'd been so much to do at Morlaix getting the boat ready . . . I'd just about worked myself to a standstill before we put to sea.

"That ship." His voice came out of the darkness at my side, a little hesitant, bridging the gap of my silence.

"Damned queer," he murmured. "You know, if there really was nobody on board . . ." He checked and then added, half-jokingly: "That would have been a piece of salvage that would have set you

up for life." I thought I sensed a serious note underlying his words, but when I glanced at him he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Well, I think I'll turn in again now." He got up and his "Good night" floated back to me from the dark gap of the charthouse.

Shortly afterwards Mike brought me a mug of hot soup. He stayed and talked to me while I drank it, speculating wildly about the *Mary Deare*. Then he, too, turned in and the blackness of the night closed round me. Could there really have been nobody on the bridge? It was too fantastic—an empty ship driving pell mell up the Channel. And yet, cold and alone, with the pale glimmer of the sails swooping above me and the dismal dripping of mist condensed on the canvas, anything seemed possible.

At three Hal relieved me and for two hours I slept, dreaming of blunt, rusted bows hanging over us, toppling slowly, everlastingly. I woke in a panic, cold with sweat, and lay for a moment thinking about what Hal had said. It would be queer if we salvaged a ship, just like that, before we'd even . . . But I was asleep again before the idea had more than flickered through my mind. And in an instant I was being shaken and was stumbling out to the helm in the brain-numbing hour before the dawn, all recollection of the *Mary Deare* blurred and hazed by the bitter cold.

Daylight came slowly, a reluctant dawn that showed a drab, sullen sea heaving gently, the steepness flattened out of the swell. The wind was northerly now, but still light; and sometime during the night we had gone over onto the other tack.

At ten to seven Hal and I were in the charthouse for the weather report. It started with gale warnings for the western approaches of the Channel; the forecast for our own area of Portland was: *Wind light, northerly at first, backing north-westerly later and increasing strong to gale*. Hal glanced at me, but said nothing. There was no need. I checked our position and then gave Mike the course to steer for Peter Port.

It was a queer morning. There was a lot of scud about and by the time we had finished breakfast it was moving across the sky quite fast. Yet at sea level there was scarcely any wind so that, with full main and mizzen set and the big yankee jib, we were creeping through the water at a bare three knots, rolling sluggishly. There was still a mist of sorts and visibility wasn't much more than two miles.

We didn't talk much. I think we were all three of us too conscious of the sea's menace. Peter Port was still thirty miles away. The silence and the lack of wind was oppressive. "I'll go and check our position