

Reflections

Donald takes another slug of whisky, rolling the golden liquid around his tongue, savouring every last drop before gulping it back in one. It surges, then breaks on the back of his throat in a satisfying, fiery wave. Enjoying the hit, he closes his eyes, and thinks...

He's always had a fascination with boats. Anything to do with the sea, really. It must have been the model of 'The Titanic' his father bought him that started it all. A Christmas gift when he was six or seven it was a plaything to be pushed across the carpet, inspected with an eye glass, a receptacle of stories, tragic and heroic, both real and imagined.

And then there was the *Boy's Own* paper with its tales of derring-do, of distant, exotic places, of trips beyond the horizon and daring rescues at sea.

He smiles at the memories and settles further into his chair.

Strange to think that he'd not glimpsed the sea until he was - what? - eleven or twelve years old. A week it was, the South Coast, somewhere near Worthing, or was it Bognor? Whatever, it is of no consequence to him now as he tries to picture himself as a little boy. The cottage, the village, the people, appear as foggy, wraith-like figures; faded photos that refuse to come. But the sea! He adjusts his hat and shuts his eyes tight. The sea, in all its myriad colours, comes flooding back, salty air tickling his nostrils, the crash and rattle of the breaking waves as they advance up the pebble beach, to give in, and disappear, before surging again.

A bang, from where, he is unsure, startles him and he rises. He straightens his jacket and makes his way unsteadily across the cabin to where he manages to locate the decanter. He has left his glass behind so picks up the cut-glass vessel by the neck and puts it to his mouth. A couple of mouthfuls and he is coughing it up, more than a dram of best malt soaking his jacket and tie. He steadies himself and feels his way to the door and along the passageway, stopping occasionally to wipe the sweat from his face, cleaning his glasses with his handkerchief. The ship appears to be talking to him now – there's creaking and groaning, rattles and bangs - things you should not hear on a ship. It's dark until he reaches the bridge where he covers his eyes against what appears to be a premature dawn, the red of a burning sea illuminating the empty interior.

He is alone.

The ship makes a sudden lurch to starboard as more and more water pours into the hole ripped open by the U-boat, and he is forced to hang onto the wheel.

He stands to attention and salutes the photograph, his sovereign – then turns and salutes his crew, wherever they may be.

He has done his best – but it's just not been enough.

He's going down with his ship.