

Three Little Ships

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Extract

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Prologue

May 1940

England was under threat.

Adolf Hitler's army was on the march throughout Europe. Belgium was on the point of capitulation; France was crumbling. The British Army itself had been driven into retreat. Half a million men were crowding into one port; half a million men needed rescue.

From deep within the white cliffs of Dover, the call had gone out for ships – little ships, to take the men off the beaches of France and ferry them to the larger ships waiting offshore. All and any vessels were urgently needed, along with the men to go with them: holiday-steamers, motor yachts and cabin cruisers; stately Thames sailing barges and family dinghies; forty-year-old cutters and brand new cabin cruisers; paddle-steamers and rowing-boats.

Eventually, a fleet assembled, such as had never been seen before, and each ship shared a single mission. They were heading across the Channel towards France; towards a single port and its outlying beaches.

Not even Hitler himself could break the spirit of those who took these little ships and sailed them on this most desperate of missions. A spirit that would go down in history and be conjured up for ever by one word; the name of that one French port.

Dunkirk.

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Amongst the convoy there were three little ships in particular, each one skippered by a man who hoped to rescue one special soldier and bring him home.

Olly Mears, in the London fireboat *Surrey Queen* had promised his wife Effie that he would do his best to bring back their son Joe. Robby Endacott, in charge of the Devon holiday-steamer *Countess Wear*, had promised his mother Hetty that he would try to find his brother Jan. And Charles Stainbank, in the little motor yacht *Wagtail*, had promised his wife Sheila that he would bring her brother Alex home to safety.

Out of half a million men, the possibility of bringing back that one particular man was remote, but Olly, Charles and Robby would keep that promise in mind all through the terror and violence of what was to come; and each would realise the futility of promises made during times of war.

Yet their spirit would endure. And such a spirit – the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ – can, sometimes, perform miracles . . .

PART ONE

Chapter One

Wednesday, 29 May 1940

LONDON: *Surrey Queen*

'I dunno for sure what it's all about,' Olly Mears said to his wife Effie, in the living room of their terraced house not far from St Paul's Cathedral. 'The bloke what come on board told me a tale about taking kiddies round the coast on evacuation, like we did back last September.' He frowned and shook his grey head. 'I tell you what it seems like to me, though. It seems like they're getting ready for the invasion.'

'Invasion?' Effie was busy at the breadboard, cutting a loaf into thick slices and slapping a wodge of corned beef and a spoonful of pickle between them. She paused, the big breadknife held in one hand and the other clutching the loaf against her bosom, and stared at him. 'You really think so, Olly?'

'Well, summat's up, ain't it? I mean to say, Eff, the news ain't good, is it? Now the Belgians have surrendered, they reckon the Germans are pouring through France. Gawd knows what's happening to our boys over there, but I reckon the Government's at its wits' end with it all. They just dunno what to do next, so they're getting the youngsters out of it, fast as they can.'

Effie put the loaf down on the table. Her face was white.

‘But – our Joe. What’s going to happen to our Joe, if things over there are as bad as you say?’

She sat down as if her legs had given way under her and Olly came quickly round the table and put his hands on her shoulders. Their eyes went to the framed family photographs on the mantelpiece: the studio portrait they’d had done once, when all the children were little, and then the more recent ones: Dot and Carrie, their daughters, sitting on the railings at Ramsgate and laughing, during that last holiday they’d had just before the war, and Joe, their only son, smiling and looking smart in his Army uniform just before he went away.

Joe Mears had been somewhere in Belgium or France for five months now. He’d joined up almost as soon as the war had started and, apart from a brief leave at Christmas, had been away ever since. Effie, who had lost a brother and a cousin during the Great War of 1914–18, lived every day in terror that he might never come back, and lay awake at night praying that God would send him home safe.

‘Joe’ll be all right,’ Olly said comfortingly, praying in his own heart that it was true. ‘I mean, if the worst comes to the worst, they’ll bring ’em home, won’t they? Don’t you worry about our Joe, Eff.’

Effie wiped her eyes with the corner of her pinafore and nodded. Worrying didn’t help anyone, especially when there was work to be done. She put her hand up to her husband’s and squeezed it for a moment, then got to her feet again and resumed making sandwiches.

‘What d’you think’ll happen if there is an invasion?’ she asked. ‘Will they get this far? London’s not that near the coast, whichever way you looks at it. They’ve got to come all the way up from Dover or wherever they land, and they’d never get up the Thames. We’ve got plenty of soldiers here still, haven’t we, and there’s the RAF as well. The Jerries’d have a fight on their hands if they tried.’ She

looked at the breadknife in her hand, as if imagining herself tackling a German soldier with it, and Olly grinned.

'They'd have a fight if they came here, that's for sure! Londoners don't take kindly to being invaded. But you can see why they want to get the youngsters out of the way, all the same.'

'Yes, but that's another thing.' Effie wrapped the sandwiches in greaseproof paper and packed them into his lunch-tin. 'We haven't heard nothing round here about kiddies being evacuated again. There's any amount of them came home at Christmas and stopped here, what with there being no bombs after all. Nobody's said a word to me in the caff about them being sent off again. Drink that tea while it's hot, love.'

Olly lifted the big enamel mug to his lips and sucked the strong brew through his bristly moustache. He was a large man, his thick dark hair greying now that he was past forty-five, but he was still as powerful as he'd been in his twenties. Working on a London fireboat kept you tough, he always said, taking the big boat up and down the river, ready to answer all sorts of 'shouts'. Why, he'd lost count of the times he'd battled with fires raging in dockside warehouses stocked with inflammable materials like sugar, alcohol or paint, ready to explode any minute and send huge fountains of flame into the sky, to descend on everything within range and start a dozen more fires if you weren't careful. But the *Surrey Queen* was equal to jobs like that – they were what she had been built for. You could send sprays of water 100 feet or more from her deck to douse the flames. That meant handling a hose like a giant live snake, ready to turn on you if you didn't keep it under control, and all the time the fire threatened the boat itself as well as the docks. It was no job for namby-pambies, that was for certain.

'Well, we'll just have to follow orders and see. It'll make

a bit of a day out for me and the lads, taking a lot of boys and girls for a joyride,' he said with a grin. 'So long as they behaves theirselves. You know what boys are like; holy terrors they are – run riot once they get excited. I don't want no accidents on the boat.'

Effie raised her face for a kiss. 'I reckon it'll be the mess you'll be worrying about. I know what you're like about that boat – keep it more spick and span than I do this house. You'll be on tenterhooks the whole time in case they get the brightwork covered in fingerprints.'

'I'll keep 'em in order, don't fret.' He planted a smacker on her lips. 'I took our Joe out often enough with his mates when they were nippers. I just talks to 'em like a Dutch uncle to start with and they're as good as gold. If they're not, I tells 'em I'll turn the hoses on 'em!'

'You'll be careful, just the same,' she said to Olly as he went to the front door. 'You've made me think, with all this talk about an invasion. I wouldn't be at all surprised if there isn't more to it than meets the eye.'

'Why, what could there be?' Olly asked easily, and swung his canvas knapsack on to his shoulder. 'They're not going to ask us to take 'em to America, are they! Anyway, can't stand here nattering about it. I'll be late for duty at this rate.' He stepped out of the front door, then turned back and gave his wife another kiss. 'Cheerio, Effie, love,' he said in a voice that was suddenly gruff. 'You take care of yourself, too. And don't you worry about me. We don't even know as this trip's going to be happening. We've only been told to get ourselves ready for it – get in stores and that sort of thing.'

He strode off up the street, leaving Effie staring after him, her strong, square face creased in a puzzled frown. She pushed back her hair, still showing only a few silver hairs amongst the black, and pursed her lips. It hadn't been at all like Olly to go off like that. Usually all she got was one

kiss and a cheery 'see you later, love'. It was almost as if he wasn't expecting to be back soon – as if he knew more than he'd let on.

I wonder if it's the King and Queen, she thought suddenly. Olly had come home one day and told her that the two main fireboats, *Massey Shaw* and *Surrey Queen*, had been earmarked to take the Royal Family upriver to Windsor if ever it was necessary. 'What they think, see, is that the roads might be blocked if there's a lot of bombing,' he'd explained. 'They can't block the Thames though, and anyone can see they'd be better off at Windsor Castle than stuck right in the middle of London in Buckingham Palace.'

So far, there had been no bombing and London seemed as safe as anywhere else. It was the coastline, especially around East Anglia and all along the south of England, that seemed more vulnerable just now. Everyone was waiting for Hitler to invade, and although the news from France and Belgium was heavily censored, it sounded very much as if the Germans were getting closer all the time. Every morning now, when Effie woke up, she felt a twinge of dread as she parted the curtains and looked out, half-expecting to see German tanks parked in the street below.

This sudden order for the *Surrey Queen* to take on stores and prepare for passengers seemed ominous. Something big was going to happen, but whether it was a new evacuation of children to the countryside, the movement of the Royal Family to a safer place, or something quite different, she didn't know. Olly didn't know either, or he would have told her – but she could see in his grey eyes that he had the same suspicions as she did. You only got half the story these days.

As she stood there wondering, two figures appeared round the corner; her daughters Dot and Carrie, coming home from work. Carrie, tall and big-boned like her father,

worked in a fish shop and Effie sometimes thought that Bert Hollins, the widowed fishmonger, was sweet on her. She wouldn't have minded that – he was a good *catch*, Olly had said once with a grin at his own wit – but he was at least twenty years older than her. Effie would rather she got herself a boy nearer her own age, but Carrie didn't seem inclined to do that.

Effie felt happier about her other daughter. Small, with a rosy face and dark, curly hair like her mum's, Dot was going steady with Benny Foster from two streets away. There'd even been talk of their getting engaged on Dot's birthday in June, but Benny was over in France now and it didn't look as if he'd be home in time. Dot didn't even know exactly where he was, even though Olly had pinned a big map on the wall of the back room and the family studied it every day, trying to figure out from the news on the wireless where his unit might be. These days, the Authorities told you nothing, that was the trouble.

'What's going on?' Dot asked when she came near enough. 'I saw our Dad marching off up the street as if the wolves were after him. Been called out on a shout, has he?'

'He hasn't, that's the funny thing about it.' They went into the house together, down the dark, narrow passage past the front room to the back room and kitchen where the family spent most of its time. 'He says they've been detailed off to help with this new evacuation. You heard anything about it, either of you?'

'Not a thing. What evacuation?' Carrie shrugged off her cardigan as her mother explained. 'Well, I suppose it's not surprising they've decided it's time all those kids went back to the country. There's a lot of people getting really worried about an invasion.' Her face was solemn and she spoke in a lowered voice. 'You know that Mrs Jennings, from Somers Road? Well, she's talking about gassing

herself and the kids, if it happens! And I don't reckon she's the only one, neither.'

Effie stared at her. 'That's awful! It's murder.'

'She says it'd be better for them all to be dead before the Germans gets here, rather than wait for them to come and do it. At least they'd all be together. I don't suppose she'd actually do it, mind.' Carrie balled her hands into fists and screwed up her face. 'I certainly wouldn't. I'd sooner stand up to 'em. I wish old Hitler'd come here himself - I'd give him short shrift.'

Dot laughed. 'I bet you would, too! I reckon we ought to send you over to deal with him. One look at you in one of your paddies and he'd be gone like a shot.'

The kettle came to the boil and Effie put a couple of well-heaped spoons of tea into the brown teapot and poured on the water. 'But why use the fireboats to do the evacuation?' she asked aloud. 'Why not use the trains? Suppose there's a fire in the warehouses along the docks - who'll be there to put it out?' She went outside for the milk, which was kept in the meat-safe in the back yard, and came back holding the bottle. 'I tell you what it seems like to me. It seems like there's something else going on, something that only the Authorities know about and ordinary people like us aren't being told.'

'Perhaps they need the trains for troops,' Dot said doubtfully, sinking into her father's armchair.

Carrie shook her head. 'Nearly all the troops are in France and Belgium, like our Joe and your Benny. I didn't think there were all that many left in England now.'

Effie glanced at her and wondered if her daughters had heard any talk about the situation in France. Perhaps, like most people, they hadn't yet realised what was happening. Perhaps they didn't believe that anything that bad *could* happen to the British Army.

I won't say anything to them yet, she decided. There's

no point in upsetting them before we know it's true. But as she stood staring at the crumbs left on the breadboard from Olly's sandwiches, she felt the familiar terror chill her heart at the thought of the danger her son must be facing at this very moment.

Goodness knows, she chided herself, I ought to be used to living with danger, what with Olly being skipper of a Thames fireboat – but she'd never wanted Joe to follow in his footsteps and she'd never in all her days wanted him to be a soldier. He was a clever boy, good at his books, and the master at school had told her he could go far. Shipbuilding, that was what he'd been keen on – not just building them but actually designing them, thinking up new shapes and styles. She and Olly had been pleased as Punch when he'd got that apprenticeship at Tough's Boatyard, and he'd not long finished it when the war started. He could have had a good job there – a real career, old Mr Tough had told him – but the minute Mr Chamberlain made that announcement on Sunday morning, 3 September, telling the country they were at war with Germany, nothing would do but Joe had to enlist. He'd been gone before the week was out, and although he'd managed to get home at Christmas that was the only time they'd seen him since.

Now he was somewhere in France with the British Expeditionary Force, and boys like him were getting killed every day. And then Olly was off on this strange job in the fireboat, taking kiddies round the coast. It didn't make sense. None of it did.

As he marched through the streets to Blackfriars, where the *Surrey Queen* was moored, Olly was almost as bewildered as his wife. The evacuation story didn't ring true at all. The preparations that were being made added up to far more than transporting a few boys and girls down the Thames

and maybe up the East Anglian coast. For one thing, the crew had been told they would need a compass.

'A compass!' Olly had repeated, staring at the Naval Petty Officer who had come aboard to deliver their instructions. 'What do we need one o' them for? The only time this ship's ever been to sea was when she come from the boatyard where she was built, on the Isle of Wight. We don't need a compass for the river! And I reckon I can find me way round the coast to Norfolk all right.'

'You'll need one on this trip,' the PO said. He was a man nearing forty, with a weatherbeaten face and eyes narrowed by years at sea, and he spoke in a blunt, abrupt voice as if he wasn't used to people arguing with him. He handed over a sheet of paper. 'That's what you'll need, so anything you haven't got, you'd better stock up on right away. And look nippy about it. You'll need to be ready to go sharpish.'

Olly was still thinking about this as he jumped down to the deck. His mate Chalky White had gone off to the chandler's with a couple of the lads to get the compass and other items from the list. And all those stores – how long were they expected to be away, for God's sake? Did they have to feed the youngsters as well? How many were they expected to carry? He shook his head in mystification and then looked up as another voice hailed him.

'Skipper Mears?'

'That's me.' Olly eyed the man who was standing just above him, hands on hips. He'd seen him about the dock – a short, stocky fellow in his fifties, bald as a coot, but with broad shoulders and looking as strong as an ox. 'You're a stevie, aincher? Work on the loading and unloading.'

'That's right. And now I'm working with you.' He jumped down on to the deck. *With* you, Olly noted, not *for* you. 'Me and a few of the other blokes have been detailed to come with you. We've all done boatwork, so you don't

need to worry we're a lot of landlubbers. We can work the hoses too. We know what we're doing.'

'That's all very well,' Olly said, still bewildered, 'but we're supposed to be loading up with nippers. What do we need extra hands for? What you going to do, organise games on deck or summat?'

The man laughed. 'Don't tell me you're falling for that tale! Doncher know what's going on? Doncher know what all these boats are being requisitioned for?'

Olly looked at the busy river. For the past day and a half, boats had been coming downriver. Pleasure boats, the sort he and Effie might go on for a Sunday-afternoon jaunt up to Hampton Court. Passenger-steamers that might be used as ferries. He and the other men aboard the fireboat had watched them, wondering what was up, until they'd been told that they too might have to join the convoy, on their trip with the children.

Now, he realised that there were even more boats coming down the Thames, and they weren't just pleasure-steamers either. Headed by Thames tugs, they were a motley crowd of motor yachts, small lifeboats and even dinghies. They were being towed in clusters, and the men in them were looking straight ahead, their jaws set as if they were setting off on some desperate and dangerous mission.

'What in the name of Gawd is all that about?' Olly asked in a low voice. He turned back to the man who had just come aboard his ship. He remembered his name now – Stan Miller. An old Navy man, if Olly remembered right, the sort who knew all the gossip. 'Tell me.'

Stan Miller took him by his arm and ducked behind the canvas dodger that was all the protection the steersman had from the weather. He jerked his head for Olly to bend closer, as if he were afraid of being overheard.

'They're going to France,' he said in a half-whisper. 'You must've heard what's going on there. The Jerries have

got our boys trapped. The Navy's brought a load back from Boulogne and Calais but the Jerries have moved in there, so now they're working out of a port further north. Place called Dunkirk. And there just ain't enough Naval ships to do the job. They needs passenger boats as well to get 'em away. They've requisitioned all these boats, and they're asking for volunteers to take 'em over. And the *Surrey Queen's* going too.'

'But we're a fireboat,' Olly objected. 'Why should they want us to go?'

Stan crinkled his face. 'Doncher reckon there'll be fires there as well, then? Course there will! Sure as God made little chickens, those bloody Jerries ain't going to sit there and let us take off all our boys without a fight. There'll be ships on fire, docks, and Gawd knows what, apart from bombs dropping and machine-guns going off in all directions. It ain't going to be no picnic, believe me.'

'So *that's* why we need a compass.'

'And extra stores,' Stan nodded. 'And the grey paint and all the rest of it. We might be over there for a while, Skip.' He stuck out a big hand with fingers the size of sausages. 'So here I am. Ready, willing and able, as they say. And there'll be a few other blokes along soon. Reckon you'll be needing all the help you can get.'

Olly nodded and turned to look at the few instruments a London fireboat needed for fighting fires along the banks of the Thames. The steering wheel, the telegraph, to communicate with the engine-room. There was little else – not even a place for the compass they had been instructed to buy.

'Bloody hell!' he exclaimed. 'The compass! *Surrey Queen's* a steel ship – it'll play merry hell with the settings. It won't be much flaming use to us if it doesn't even show us the right direction!' He glanced anxiously along the quay. There was still no sign of Chalky and Jack Hodge and

the other blokes. And now that he knew where they might be heading, a sense of urgency was beginning to grip him.

'France!' he muttered. 'My Joe's over there. He could be waiting now – stuck on one of them beaches, with Jerries and machine-guns on every side.' He paced the deck to the bow of the *Surrey Queen* and stared down the Thames, wishing that he could set off at this very moment. And he thought of Effie, praying every night that her son might come home safe.