

Here at Dunkirk is another English epic. And to my mind what was most characteristically English about it — so typical of us, so absurd and yet so grand and gallant that you hardly know whether to laugh or to cry when you read about them—was the part played in the difficult and dangerous embarkation—not by the warships, magnificent though they were — but by the little pleasure-steamers. We've known them and laughed at them all our lives. Sometimes they only went as far as the next seaside resort. But the boldest of them might manage a Channel crossing, to let everybody have a glimpse of Boulogne. They liked to call themselves "Queens" and "Belles"; and even if they were new, there was always something old-fashioned, a Dickens touch, a mid-Victorian air, about them. They seemed to belong to the same ridiculous holiday world as pierrots and piers, sand castles, automatic machines, and crowded sweating promenades. But they were called out of that world — and, let it be noted — they were called out in good time and in good order. Yes, those "Brighton Belles" and "Brighton Queens" left that innocent foolish world of theirs ... to sail into the inferno, to defy bombs, shells, magnetic mines, torpedoes, machine-gun-fire ... to rescue our soldiers. Some of them — alas — will never return... And our great grandchildren, when they learn how we began this War by snatching glory out of defeat, may also learn how the little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back glorious.

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