

waters that he loved. Presently he began to hum softly under his breath:

"There's a sunny spot in Ireland—"

Beads of moisture gleamed suddenly upon the wrinkled brow of the boatswain, tiny eyes which glistened tearfully at the melancholy cadence of the song. His dry lips began to move once more, and his words came groaningly, as if he were in physical pain.

"This is awful," he said, "awful! My God, isn't there anything we can do? Can't we send up a bottle—or something?"

"Nothing," Barton replied with apparent effort.

"The torpedoes," Marsh leaped to his feet, his face fairly contorting in his excitement. "They'll tear up the surface when they explode," he wailed. Barton glanced at Rolf. Neither had spoken of that other instrument of destruction outside almost brushing the hull. The ensign still looked away. He could not speak to dash the old man's hopes.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't do," the lieutenant shook his head reluctantly. "The hull is close aboard, and that's where they'd go off. We might chance them splitting her in pieces before they did us, if she were all. I'd thought of it. But we lay within five feet of a mine-plant. The concussion—no, we can't do that."

Corrigan took up his refrain again, tremulously, and lulled by the melody or to gain relief from it, the others presently sought their bunks. When Rolf woke to relieve him, later, the engineer was still crooning plaintively to himself.

"Buck up, Jack," the ensign encouraged, and bethinking himself, restrained an impulse to pat the other on the back. "We're entitled to live, all of us, and I'm sure in some way we're going to get the chance."

"'Tis dhraggin' the hull Medhi-therranean they'll have to be, to foind us," Corrigan dissented, as he stumbled to his bunk. "O'm only worrit about the little wan. Rough on her 'twill be whin she's ahl alone." He began abstractedly to sing once more, and was still voicing the words incoherently even after he fell asleep.

As those in the last death-watch, tolling off with quickened heart-beats the seconds before the black-capped march to eternity, the men passed the next afternoon.

There was a brief relief from tension, while they ate from the plentiful store in the food-locker, and occasionally one or another stepped to the big water tank to drink. Otherwise attention centered on the passage of time.

The hands of the ship's clock moved forward, and as remorselessly, the hand on the dial toiled in the other direction—pointing near and nearer, like the index finger of Fate, to the little zero that meant annihilation. From moment to moment, the hissing of the valve became almost sensibly fainter.

Their days of living in the small, unventilated compartment had so fouled the atmosphere that the men breathed pantingly, open-mouthed, in great, whistling gulps. In their purpled, swollen veins and their jaundiced eyes and yellow skin, the effect of the toxic carbons in the air was only too apparent.

Barton sat at the table—the log outspread before him—painfully, yet painstakingly, inscribing the record. His own message had been written—a farewell to life and to her for whom he most cherished it. When at length he raised his eyes from the page, they wavered ever so slightly as he addressed the old boatswain.

"What shall I say, Marsh?" The words came palpitantly as he struggled for breath. "I'd better have it now—in time."

The boatswain was at the valve controlling the lever with fingers agitated as the indicator itself. His throat muscles gripped spasmodically at the question, and he seemed about to fall. When he turned, his eyes held a look of longing so unutterable, yet withal so hopeless, that Rolf and Corrigan, with common impulse, glanced away, and Barton clenched his fist until the penholder snapped in two.

"Tell Mary," Marsh lingered falteringly over the name, "say I didn't think the old cottage at home was good enough for her; so I'm going to get a better one promised us yonder.

Tell her I'll keep it waiting, as she did for me, and that I'll try not to mind her not coming for a while."

The old man's voice failed, and he pressed his face against the wall to hide his feelings.

The broken holder shook in the writing and paused a long moment at the end, while Barton summoned the reserves of his stoic will to help him at his task. Ere the lieutenant looked toward him, Corrigan's full-fleshed face had sagged lumpily, till his eyes seemed drawn and misshapen. Rolf's eyes, as he swayed on the edge of a bunk, again held that uncanny impression of illimitability.

With his under-jaw driven forward so that the teeth clasped his upper lip and deep hollows showed before his ears, he seemed lost in the mazes of some intricate problem. As Corrigan started to speak the ensign suddenly rose to his feet.

"We sha'n't die!" he interrupted in a whisper which literally snarled thru the room. Then his voice climbed in a raucous crescendo to the volume of a shriek. "We sha'n't die! We sha'n't die!"

Electric youth, upreared in that magnificent body—demanding the life it required to transmit its power! The supple figure stiffened as if to resist the clammy death that lurked about it.

His shoulders squared; his sinewed chest swelled till his buttoned jacket strained; his arm lifted slowly to the line of his body; and with head tilted back and his features still fixed in that vast expression, he stood like some young Roman orator spellbound by the eloquence of his own thought.

"Great God, I have it!" He spoke with the awesome deliberation of a seer from the depths of his trance. "We can make air." And at the words he crumpled limply to the floor.

Barton was by his side instantly, shaking him roughly, savagely, while he fought back a hope that he dared not trust.

"What do you mean, Dick? Come—speak! Make air? Man, are you mad?" he cried as he tugged at the prostrate form with all of his failing strength.

"Yes! Air—oxygen—life!" the ensign murmured. He sat up unsteadily. "At the academy—remember? The acid and the batteries! We decomposed water. There's enough in the tank till we raise the pressure—then we've got oceans of it."

He swung his arms above his head—dramatically—a bit wildly, while Barton himself almost collapsed as his mind flew back to his training-school chemistry and the experiment of long before.

Electrolysis—thrusting the ends of two current-charged wires into water, salt or fresh, tintured weakly with sulphuric acid, beyond question, would separate the liquid into the oxygen and hydrogen of which it is composed. One part of the first to two of the latter would be the proportion; and a single cubic foot of the water would produce two thousand feet of the gas.

For an instant thought of the fatal effects of pure oxygen struck the lieutenant cold.

To make it respirable in the air it is diluted with three times its volume of nitrogen. Then he reflected that hydrogen is also inert and harmless to breathe and its ratio would be sufficiently large. Corrigan's act in substituting lead-oxide battery plates for the iron weights of the balance trough now appealed to him as nothing short of providential.

"Unbelievable!" he cried as he began to gather together all the glass Leyden-jars they had; "yet—thank God—so true—so true!"

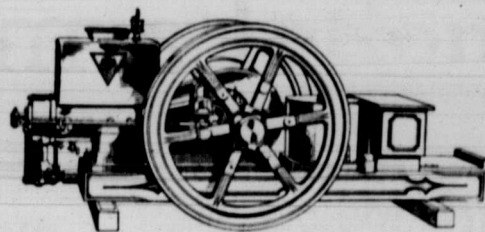
Their reprieve was barely in time; and the lieutenant and Rolf went at the preparations feverishly, while Marsh and Corrigan watched dumbly, scarcely comprehending the vital sweep of events.

And when, at last, the first tiny bubbles began to rise thru the water like the effervescence of some Jovian wine, no Ponce de Leon arrived at his quested Fountain of Youth could have matched the wild cry which sprang from the lips of Barton and Rolf. For to them it was life, spelled in sixty-five foot letters that reached to the top of the sea.

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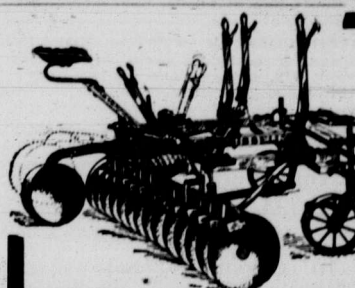
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