

THE DIVER'S SECRET

How a Dangerous Task Brought About Revelation

By FENTON ASH

As the grey dawn was stealing over the harbour of a south coast town one autumnal morning, a tug-boat might have been seen making its way out towards the English Channel which lay beyond.

It was a fussy, snorting, grimy, self-sufficient-looking craft, this tug. From the sooty top of its funnel it poured forth almost enough black smoke for a man-o'-war, and it was tooting with its shrill, chirpy siren as though it were a Cunarder at least, and expected everything afloat to clear out of its path.

It was towing a barge, and as it threaded its noisy way amongst the crowd of other vessels, large and small, many of those on board them turned to stare after it. It was not that the pair were unfamiliar objects, for it was known to most mariners thereabouts that the tug was the Otter, and that the barge carried a party of deep-sea divers and their outfit.

"Theer goes 'Mat the Diver,'" a sailor on board a schooner lying at anchor remarked to a mate. "He be a-goin' out after gold to the wreck o' the Dolphin, as was run down t'other night in the fog. They do say as it be a mighty risky job, fur the wreck lies twenty-four fathoms deep, an' what makes it worse the tide just theer do run uncommon strong. Nobody else would tackle it, not even for the big price as be offered. But I heered yest'day as Mat Herron's took it on. I s'pose if he's lucky he'll make a tidy bit out of it—but I'd rather him try fur it than me!"

This voiced the general opinion in the port; and it is no matter for wonder, therefore, that the start of the diving party was watched with more than ordinary interest and curiosity.

On board the barge, Mat himself was talking to one of his assistants in a fashion which showed that he was fully aware of the unusually dangerous nature of the undertaking he had in hand. He was a man advanced in years, with a weather-worn visage which habitually wore a stern and forbidding expression, and he was at all times rough and curt, and reticent of speech. The assistant he was addressing was a contrast to him in almost every way. Though working under Mat for the wages of a working diver, everyone who knew him was aware that he must originally have been one of the very different class from that to which such men usually belong. His name was Jack Gale; but amongst his fellow-workers he was more commonly known as Gentleman Jack—a fact which almost explains itself. It tells at once of some young fellow who has been well educated and brought up amid very different surroundings, and who has manfully thrown all pride to the winds, and taken to the first honest work which offered itself in order to avert starvation.

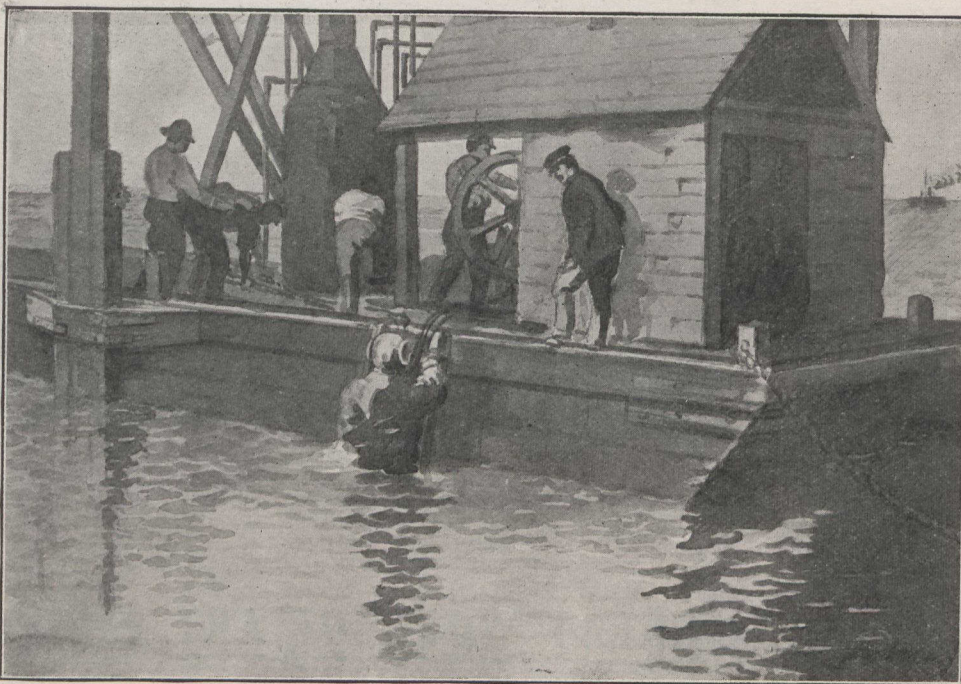
This had been Jack Gale's position three years before, only that in his case it was a question of starvation not merely for himself alone, but for an invalid mother and young sister in their home in the North. So when the crisis came which had cast him suddenly upon his own resources, he had paid the little money he had been able to scrape together as a premium to Herron the diver to take him on as his assistant and teach him the work. Jack's people knew not that the money he sent them every week was earned at so risky a trade. He had kept them in ignorance upon that point, fearing that they might otherwise refuse to accept it. It was enough for him to know that he could not have learnt to earn so much in the time in any other way.

Great was his surprise, this particular morning, at what Mat Herron was saying, and the singular change in the diver's manner. For though he and Herron had got on fairly well together on the whole, and Jack knew him to be plucky and skillful at his work, he had always appeared a sombre, reserved character, with little to say, surly and unsympa-

thetic in manner, and greedy and grasping in disposition. The latter quality it was, in Jack's estimation, which had caused him to attempt the recovery of the boxes of gold on the wrecked vessel—a task which every other diver in the district had declined, spite of the tempting reward offered.

"This is what I wants of ye," Mat was saying. "In case annything 'appens t' me. Under the bed in my room ye'll find a box, an' the key be in a drawer. I wants ye t' open it an' t' read the papers in it, an' a document as I've writ out after a good deal o' thought an' trouble. Ye'll find some money theer, too, an' I wants ye t' apply it t' the purposes I've set down in that document, d'ye see—all but what ye'll see ye're t' keep fur yerself fur yer trouble."

As may be supposed, Jack stared as he listened to these details of the strange task thus unexpectedly thrust upon him. More particularly did he wonder at the confidence it implied, and that he, of all the diver's acquaintances, should have been selected for the trust. He put this point to Mat, but the man turned it aside, and in response to Jack's objections only stuck doggedly to his request. Evi-



"A little later he went over the side and disappeared from view."

Drawn by S. S. Finlay.

dently the old man had recognized in his own mind the difference between "Gentleman Jack" and his fellows, and had decided that he would rather trust him than anyone else he knew.

As argument proved fruitless, Jack at last gave the required promise. But he made a mental reservation that it applied to that particular time only. If, as he hoped, they succeeded in the task before them, and returned in safety to the shore, he was resolved that he would make the diver draw up a proper will instead of the informal "document" which had been spoken of, and insist upon somebody else being appointed to carry out its provisions, whatever they might be.

In due time the two vessels reached the scene of the wreck, and there the barge was moored, the tug remaining near, to be at hand in case she was wanted. Jack and his fellows helped Mat into his diving-suit, and a little later he went over the side and disappeared from view.

As Jack watched him sink beneath the waves a feeling of depression stole over him such as he had never felt before in similar circumstances, and which he could in no wise account for. Certainly the scene was dreary and depressing enough. Overhead the sky was grey and lowering, around there was nothing to be seen save the grey-green waves rising and falling, nothing to be heard save the peculiar sucking sound as they pattered continuously against the sides of the barge, or the desolate cries of the sea-birds as they wheeled and circled in the air above.

Jack felt some consolation in the fact that he could talk to the diver and ascertain from him all the while how he was progressing. For the whole of the apparatus was of the best and most up-to-

date description, and Mat carried with him a telephone with which he could communicate with those on the barge.

For a time all went well. Mat reported through the telephone that he had found no difficulty in climbing on board the wreck by the bow, and later that he had fixed a ladder there to facilitate his return. A little later still he had made his way into the captain's cabin, and had reached the boxes of gold which he had been told he would find there. Then came the news that he had dragged one of the boxes up on to the deck ready for a rope to be attached to haul it up.

For a while after this there was silence; and then came the ominous information that while the diver had been in the cabin the tide, which at that time was increasing in strength, had forced his life-line and air-tube against the bow, and got them tangled up round the anchor and a mass of loose wreckage which lay there.

The minutes which followed were anxious ones, and then came the announcement from Mat that the current was too strong to allow of his getting his lines free, and that he wanted help.

The owner's agent, Mr. Mendford, called for a volunteer to go down; and Jack's heart bounded within him as he saw that the other men, who by reason of their seniority were asked first, hung back. While they hesitated he volunteered and was accepted; and, as quickly as was possible, he donned a diving-suit and went over the side.

He made his way to where Herron was standing, and found that he was afraid to stir, for the position was such that any movement on his part might have broken or ruptured his air tube, which would have meant certain death. Jack speedily found out where the trouble lay, and set to work to free him. But he also found that as fast as he freed one part another would get entangled, and all the time he had a growing conviction that the conditions at that depth were very different from any he had experienced before.

The great pressure of the water made itself felt more and more, there was a singing in his ears, and he began to suffer from headache. Presently, when he thought he had nearly freed Herron's lines, he suddenly discovered that his own had become entangled.

Then there began a terrible fight for life—for his own as well as for Mat's. When he disentangled the lines or tubes in one place the swirl of the current carried them against wreckage in another, and the work had to be commenced all over again. The worst of it was that Herron, who was up on the deck, while Jack was now working below him, was so situated that he

could not help at all. He dared not move, but had to remain in the one place hour after hour, watching and waiting, while his would-be rescuer toiled and strove, wrestled with the difficulties of the situation, and persevered with seemingly tireless persistence in his endeavours to save him.

Jack Gale understood now, for the first time, why all the other experienced divers had not volunteered. He perceived why it was that even the rich rewards held out by the owners had failed to tempt them, and he began to feel sore against Mat, considering that it was his greed which had led to their both being in this awful peril.

More than once he debated with himself whether he should make a hauling-line fast round the old man and himself, and signal to those above to haul him up, and then cut the air-tubes and lines, trusting to their both being hauled up before they were suffocated. But each time the idea occurred to him he decided that it would be too perilous.

His head began to feel as if it must burst, and once or twice it seemed to swim and he nearly lost consciousness. And then, at last, when he had almost given up all hope, he found that the tide was slackening. He had been working down there so long that the ebb was near, which meant that the current would practically shortly fall away altogether.

Revived by the hope that this put into him, he started with fresh energy, and at last had the satisfaction of getting all the tubes and lines clear and finding that they remained so. Then he gave the signal to haul up, and from that moment he remembered no more till he came to himself on board the barge, and found a doctor whom he knew bending

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