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Hunting the German Sea-Serpent

The First of Remarkable Series of Articles on Britain's Successful Pursuit of the Under-Sea Demon.

By Alfred Noyes.

"Deutschland unter allies!" was the cry of all Germany when her submarine first popped up, not without a touch of comedy, in Norfolk, Va.; and undoubtedly one reason for the news transatlantic submarine is the fact that certain measures have made English waters unsafe for them. Even submarines that arrive in America may disappear on their return journey. What those measures are it is now possible, though the censorship is still strict, to indicate a little more clearly.

There is a tale in Devonshire that Sir Francis Drake has not merely listened for his drum, during the last three hundred years, but has also heard and answered it on more than one naval occasion. It was heard, as the men of the Brixham trawler can testify, about a hundred years ago, when a little man, under the pseudonym of Nelson (for all Devonshire knows that Nelson was a reincarnation of Sir Francis), went sailing by to Trafalgar.

Ask of the Devonshire men. For they heard, in the dead of night, The roll of the drum, and they saw him pass.

On a ship all shining white, He stretched out his dead, cold face, And he sailed in the grand old way, The fishes had taken an eye and an arm, But he swept Trafalgar Bay.

It was only a little before the great naval action in the North Sea—perhaps the greatest British victory since Trafalgar—that word came from the Brixham trawlers again. They had "heard Drake's drum beat," and were now assured that the ghost of Sir Francis Drake was inhabiting the body of Sir John Jellicoe.

There is good reason why the trawlers should be aware of this first; for it is among the three thousand-odd trawlers, drifters and other fishing craft of the British auxiliary fleet that the seamen who broke the Armada would find themselves most at home to-day. In the host of auxiliary England has, in fact, brought to life again and organized on a huge scale, with certain modern improvements, the men and the fleets and the men that have struck terror into the German submarines and driven them from the seas.

There has been some discussion in America as to whether Mr. Wilson's notes or some other more secret and certain power caused the Germans to abandon their deadliest sea weapon. Inasmuch as this weapon ceased to trouble the English a little earlier than it ceased to sink neutrals, the latter alternative might be accepted as probable, even without further knowledge, but further knowledge absolutely confirms this probability.

Nothing is more striking in the conduct of this war than the way in which the British method of "slow and sure" has justified itself. The superficial clamor for sudden and sensational proofs of "what England is doing" began in the first fortnight of the war. Neutral countries even wondered why the first month of the war had produced no great historian.

In the meantime, England was making the history of the next thousand years; and that can only be done on vast and deeply sunken foundations which must be laid in silence. Results, and solid results, of granite and oak were England's aim. These are now appearing; and while her great war armies are demonstrating what England has created on that side, it is now possible to give a glimpse of the far-reaching method that destroyed the menace of the German submarine.

It was done in silence, and silence was one of the weapons. Submarines went out and never returned. Other submarines went out, perplexed, against a mystery, and these, too, never returned, or returned in mysteriously diminishing numbers. Nothing was said about it till the destruction of the fiftieth was quietly celebrated at a small gathering in London; and then neutrals began to inquire, with a note of curiosity, "What is England doing?"

We heard tales of steel nets—as vague as the results would have been but for certain great preliminaries of which we never heard. A few days ago I had the opportunity of seeing the finished system; and this threw a flood of light on the immense work that must have gone before in even this one branch of our sea warfare.

To begin with, a body of men, larger than the United States army, was chosen from the longshore fishermen and trawler crews. They were grad-

ually drilled, disciplined and trained and put into naval uniform. The accompanying illustrations show one contingent of this force (now over a hundred thousand strong), marching through the little fishing port which is their headquarters. They were chosen, of course, on an entirely different principle from that of the army. They were tough sea dogs, of all ages, inured to all the ways of the sea, but not at all in any form of discipline. This in itself implies very great preliminaries; for the finished product, as seen in the picture, is fit to man a battleship.

In the meantime, their fishing boats, trawlers and drifters were gradually taken over by the Government and fitted out for the hunt, some three thousand of them. To these were added a fleet of fast motor boats, specially built for scouting purposes. They were stationed at various points all round the island.

Night and day, in all weathers, section replacing section, these trawlers and drifters string themselves out from coast to coast; while on shore thousands of workers are turning out their own special munitions and equipment—nets, mines and a dozen mysteries which may not be mentioned.

From one of their bases a patrol boat took me out, along one of the longest lines of the flotilla. This innocent line of trawlers, strung out for some fifty miles, had more night-mares in store for the German submarine than a fleet of battleships. It was an odd sensation to approach trawler after trawler and note the one obviously unusual feature of each—the menacing black gun at bow and stern. They were good guns, too—English, French and Japanese. The patrol boat carried a Hotchkiss and most of the trawlers had equally efficient weapons.

There were other unusual features in every trawler, drifter and whaler, features that made one catch one's breath when their significance was realized. About this I may say very little. But in the matter of the nets it was demonstrated to me that within twenty-five minutes any submarine reported in most of our home waters can be inclosed in a steel trap from which there is no escape. The vague rumours that we heard in the earliest stages of the war led one to suppose that these nets might be used, perhaps, in the English Channel and other narrow waters. But I have seen traps a hundred miles long, traps that could shift their position and change their shape at a signal.

A submarine may enter their zone, indeed, and even go to America. She may even do some damage within their lines. But if she does this, her position is known; and if there be any future damage done, it will probably have to be done by another submarine.

For she has called upon a thousand perils, from every point of the compass, to close upon her return journey. I have actually seen the course of a German submarine—which thought itself undiscovered—marked from day to day on the chart at an English base. The clues to all the ramifications of this work are held by a few men at the Admiralty in London. Telephone and telegraph keep them in constant touch with every seaport in the kingdom. But let the reader consider the amount of quiet organization that went before all this. Even the manufacture of the nets—which do not last forever, even when made—is an industry in itself, and that is one of the least of a thousand activities.

We boarded one of the trawlers just as her nets were running out, and at the end of twenty minutes, when the long, dwindling line of fishing craft had "dressed" itself, from the British coast to the coast opposite, all that was necessary was to wait for visitors. As for their welcome, one skipper remarked to me cheerfully: "I don't know about the others, but I've killed ten."

Through this work of the auxiliary fleet it is worth noting that in their records of rescue and salvage a good half of their care is devoted to the ships of neutrals. It is England that sweeps the sea for mines, marks them off on her charts, warns, delays and guides the traffic of the world through a thousand unknown perils. And England has paid the price for it; for while the neutral traffic is held up for an hour or two, as at the lifting of a policeman's hand, the mines are removed; but sometimes those who remove them are awaited in vain by their homes in the little seaports. That neutrals are not altogether forgetful of the fact is shown by the exceeding-

ly generous subscriptions raised on the Atlantic liners, among Americans and others, for the widows and orphans of the mine sweepers. On one Dutch liner recently over \$1,000 was contributed for this purpose in half an hour by the passengers at breakfast, who had come undisturbed through waters full of menace.

But neutrals have not always escaped; and in talking to the men on these trawlers I was struck by the fact that a large proportion of their tales referred, as I have said above, to the salvage or the actual saving of neutral ships, sometimes in the condition of the ship in the accompanying photograph.

Often, as in the case of the Falaba, the rescue work is attended with many perils to the auxiliary concerned. From the Falaba 116 persons were rescued; and the drifter was "billed," a phrase that in this case meant "almost foundered." On a few occasions the hunters have themselves been trapped. Three men taken off a trawler by a submarine endured an eighty-hour's nightmare under the sea that shattered the mind of one and left permanent traces on the other two. Periodically revolvers were put to the heads and they were ordered, on pain of death, to tell all they knew of their naval dispositions. They saw a good deal of the internal routine of the German submarine also, and noted characteristically that the German crew—on this boat, at any rate—were very "jumpy," too "jumpy," even to take a square meal. They munched biscuits at their stations at odd moments.

On the third morning they heard guns going overhead, and watched the Germans handing out shells to their own guns. Finally a torpedo was fired and they heard it take effect. Then they emerged into the red wash of dawn and saw only the floating wreckage of the big ship that had been sunk, and among the wreckage a small boat. They were bundled into this, told they were free to row to England or Nineveh, and the submarine left them—three longshore fishermen, who had passed through the latest invention of the modern scientific devil, two who could still pull at the oars, but the other too crazy to steer, as his little personal part of the price paid by England for sweeping and patrolling the seas of civilization.

Many were the tales of neutrals towed to port, battered but safe, by these indefatigable auxiliaries. One was towed in, upside down, by fixing an English anchor in one of her German-made shell holes; she was towed for a hundred miles, at a quarter of a knot an hour, and arrived as shown in the accompanying photograph for the admiral at the base to make his inspection.

But even with neutrals, the auxiliary fleet finds its necessary sometimes to add the wisdom of the serpent to its general philanthropy. On one occasion a neutral tank steamer was overhauled. She was believed to be carrying suspiciously large supplies to a suspiciously vague destination, but was allowed to proceed for political reasons and in the name of the freedom of the seas. Nevertheless, with innocent fishing boats dotting our waters at intervals of half a mile, and wireless telegraphy to help them, the sea has almost as many eyes and ears to-day as it has fishes; and at dusk a drifter rolled up to our neutral friend again.

"Begorra, it's twins!" said the gunner, training his twelve-pounder on her; and twins it was. For tucked close under either quarter lay a German submarine, quietly being fed. Before they could submerge or bunk away, the crew of the drifter had boarded the neutral and had persuaded the crews of the submarines, with the help of a dozen revolvers, that they were prisoners of war.

The skipper of another trawler that we boarded was a quiet-voiced man, with eyes that looked into the distance. There were suppressed tears in them, very sternly suppressed, as he told me that his brother had been killed, with all hands, on the mine sweeper next to his own only a few weeks ago. He also told me—and I wished that Americans could have heard him—of the German attack upon the American ship, the Gulfight, which he had seen from his own fishing boat. The German submarine was halfway between himself and the Gulfight, which was flying the American flag, and could be recognized at four times the distance. The evidence of this man and his crew had never

been asked or taken, but he gave me one significant piece of it—the fur cap of one of the lost American seamen, which he had picked up. Even this bedraggled relic of a tragedy threw a new and sharper light on the position of neutrals.

No men were ever more clearly entitled to go on their ways unmolested than the crew of this all-American merchant ship. There was no mistake possible, no excuse and no ground for pardon in that one anarchistic act of the German navy.

The attack on the American steamship Gulfight was narrated to me as follows by the skipper of His Majesty's drifter Contrace. I am sorry that it has not the violent literary qualities which literary men call realism. Sailors have not yet learned the trick; and those who desire reality will know that the conversational expressions of this very plain yarn are, at least true and the speaker the sort of man who would send his kind regards to a friend, from his deathbed:

At the time of the incident I was serving as a skipper of a vessel fishing out of Lowestoft. We were lying to our nets about nine miles off the Scillys. In fact, we could see the Scillys, as it was a very clear day, with blue sky and a fresh breeze. Many vessels had passed us during the day, and the scene was so peaceful that you could almost imagine we were still at peace with every one and that such things as submarines and mines and "such like" never existed. Of course I knew better, and I had good reason to remember the day the German fleet came to bombard my native home. They weren't allowed to remain over long, as they were chased back to port; but they stayed long enough to sow a large mine field in the way of shipping. My brother was then a naval skipper in command of His Majesty's drifter Will and Maggie—he met his death trying to sweep up those mines, and his ship and his crew went with him. I've seen their submarine before, although when I did see them they were too busy trying to evade our patrols to try to sink my little ship. You must remember that I was then engaged in fishing and could only rely on my stout stem to attack one. One night just about sunset, I saw one. She passed quite close to us—not more than a mile and a half, I should say.

She was a great big chap, with two guns, and a lot of the crew on deck—that was about sixty miles from the Seven Stones lightship. Well, to continue, my vessel, funny enough, was called Our Friend, and before the end of the day, it was our luck to prove our friendship for our friends across the waters. As I was saying we had shot our nets, and about noon we saw a large oil tank steamer coming up Channel at a good pace. She was coming in our direction, and I soon saw her colors, the Stars and Stripes, at the stern—a fine big ensign it was, and spread out like a board. When she was about two miles off, to my horror I saw a submarine emerge from the depths and come right to the surface. There was no sign of life on the submarine, but she lay stationary, rising and falling in the trough, and I knew instinctively that she was watching the steamer. She had undoubtedly come from the same direction as that in which the steamer was going; and it did not take me long to realize what had actually happened. I took in the situation at a glance. The submarine had passed the Gulfight (for that proved to be her name). She had deliberately increased speed to lie in wait for her and get a sure target, rather than attempt to fire a torpedo when overhauling her, with the possible chance of missing and wasting one of those expensive weapons, even on an American.

The submarine was painted light gray and had two guns; but I could not see any number. For five minutes she lay motionless, and then, having fixed the position of her prey and taken her speed into consideration, she slowly submerged in its direction. I knew what was coming, and it came—a dull, heavy explosion and a silence, and then, as if to see the result of her handiwork, the submarine again appeared. She did not stay long, as smoke was soon seen on the horizon, and I knew the patrols had been looking for her. She knew it, too—and submerged.

I hauled in my nets and proceeded at full speed to the sinking ship, to try and save the lives of the crew. Our boat was launched and I went aboard. By this time the Gulfight's

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boats were well down and her fore decks awash, and she looked as if she would sink at any minute. She was badly holed in her fore part—the Huns, I thought, had done their work well.

Ten minutes later I saw the patrol vessels racing up for all they were worth, and one of these vessels took the crew, two of whom were drowned. The captain of the Gulfight died of shock. Soon four patrol vessels were on the spot; and three of these vessels put men aboard with wires in double-quick time. The fourth, a big trawler with wireless (which I now know in naval language as a "trawler leader"), steamed round and round in the vicinity, keeping a careful watch.

In less than two hours the Gulfight, her Stars and Stripes still flying above-water, was being towed at a good speed to port with trawlers in attendance. That is all I have to tell; yet my story is perfectly true in every detail.

Later on I went to Penzance, and found that the crew of the Gulfight were receiving every comfort and hospitality from the senior naval officer and were very pleased with themselves. Of course, we met them, and you should have heard their opinions. I would not give much for a German if one happens to meet my American friends. They told me that if they had the chance they would join the British Navy "right away," and were full of praises for the treatment they had received both afloat and ashore.

I myself am now serving my country and have a ship with a gun and many other explosives. To-day, July 15, 1916, is the anniversary of my joining His Majesty's Naval Reserve. I have two other brothers in the R.N.R.; one is a skipper and one a mate.

My one ambition in life is to get a real live submarine and tow her in complete, but I don't think there is much chance of that in my present billet, because we have much quicker methods of putting them out of action. You simply press a button and the figure works.

Summer complaint—Is this hot enough for you?