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Slaves of the Sea

Continued from Page 7

we might kick up wouldn't have much chance.

"Remotely, we might work loose. It's almost a hopeless possibility; but it's here, with life. Every five minutes those engines work shortens that life an hour. For one, I am loath to surrender a second. We've failed in our mission. What it was I don't know; but I'm going to open that packet, and if it's in there I'll find out. It might not be too late to serve so long as a chance of escape remains.

"But aside from duty, there are other things to make a man lust for life. There is Marsh's wife watching for him, needing him back in that little rose-bowered cottage in Suffolk he tells about. Corrigan has his daughter. You—" and the lieutenant looked again at the handsome profile of the ensign, cast, as it was, from brow to chin in ancient Saxon mold—"well, you have been the lure of maiden eyes in every port where we have disembarked. Maybe you love them all, or one of them. And I expected to be married after this trip. To Grace, Miss Brown, you remember, Rolf, the little playmate who used to cruise about Morecambe Bay with me when I was a kid. I can't assure you or myself that there is the millionth part of a single opportunity for us to win back our freedom; but for the sake of the ones we care for, I want to cling to that fraction. If any one feels differently, speak out!"

There was no audible response, although the boatswain's lips moved silently, as they had continued to do since the reference to his wife. Possibly he was praying again.

Barton stood waiting a moment; then, nodding appreciation of the wordless assent, he sat down at the table. From beneath it he drew forth the flat, metal box. There was no sound in the room while he turned thru the papers noiselessly, save at several-minute intervals the release of the air-valve which hissed sharply as if some fabled serpent in the black sea outside were voicing anger at its inability to reach the men within.

The lieutenant presently found the packet, and for a matter of seconds his eyes countered the forbidding stare of the lurid seal.

Then he split the wrapper lengthwise, and as he bent over the closely typed contents, Rolf instinctively edged nearer. Suddenly Barton's arms began to tremble upon their resting elbows; his hands gripped at the paper spasmodically, and it fell in a crumpled ball when the lieutenant pushed backward, staggering to his feet gaspingly, as if the air already had failed.

Rolf snatched up the sheet, smoothing it upon the table-top. Marsh crowded behind him while he read, and Corrigan stretched at arm-length away from his post. Shorn of salutation, impertinent detail, and subscription, the message ran as follows:

"Certain interests at Constantinople demand protection, and it is imperative that the Victory and Dauntless reach that port. They will be ordered thru Marmora on the 30th. The Gardanelles are known to be heavily mined. Secret advices from the Intelligence Bureau are that mines will be fired under pretense of accident if attempt is made to pass. Inadvisable at present to recognize this information officially. B-23 will act under your orders. Instruct Lieutenant Barton to explore immediate waters carefully, charting a course thru the strait which will avoid all difficulties."

He concluded the missive aloud, half hysterically, and looked at the others. For an appreciable interval no one moved.

"May the saints save him when they're goin' thru," murmured Corrigan at length, and awaking to his neglected duty, he roused the others from the spell by a prolonged twist of the valve lever.

It was nearing the close of the first benighted day of confinement when Rolf succeeded in relighting the electric beacon in the forepeak of the conning-tower by wiring up several storage batteries in series. The feeble current did not produce a light of very great penetration, but the ensign,

nevertheless, climbed aloft to the little circular room in the hope that it might help him to discover just why the submarine would not move.

As he peered thru the forward port, the water refraction against the bulging lens of the glass spread the rays in the form of a hemisphere, which silvered the black depths oddly for perhaps a dozen feet. Asterias, basket fish, sea urchins, crinoids, and other hosts of star-like creatures hung inanimate and motionless in the phosphorescent glow, as if dazzled beyond power of flight by this too sudden irradiation of their sunless nrmament. One long, tenuous shape came spinning out from the bordering shadow in mad pursuit of itself, and after whirling about like a lariat-noose suddenly darted off at a tangent to crash blindly against the glass of the light.

While following these eccentric maneuvers, the glance of the ensign fell unexpectedly upon a cylindrical object barely piercing the lighted area below on the starboard side.

Pausing only to confirm his impression, he descended the ladder in haste. Marsh and Corrigan, where they sat, had sunk to their first troubled slumber. Barton stood at the air valve.

Exchanging places with the lieutenant, Rolf motioned him above. And when the latter presently returned, his added solemnity of visage did not need his corroborating words:

"It's a mine, unquestionably; but not a contact affair, for I made out wires coiled round the top," he said. "They've dropped them pretty far out, or we made more westing than I thought. There's nothing can be done about it, tho, from our position; so you'd better turn to and try for a bit of sleep. Don't fret the others by mentioning it."

The four men were awake together as the second day came to an end.

Marsh huddled in a chair beside the table, feverishly scratching at a pad with the stub of a pencil. Already his skin stretched tightly over his protruding cheek-bones, held something of the dulling gloss of time-stained parchment. As he wrote, he kept speaking his own dictation in a half-audible whisper.

"Better save your strength," Barton cautioned, after observing him silently for some moments, "I wouldn't write. It wears your nerves down just that much, and you'll need all you've got. Short air rations aren't like the lack of food and drink. And the carbonic acid gas that we can't get rid of will mean slow system poisoning. We'll have to remain as quiet as possible, all of us, and breathe as few times as we can. When it comes to that"—Barton could not repress a slight shudder—"I'll write each man's final word into the log."

So, immobile, except the man at the valve, they sat thru the hours.

Monotonously, the iterated escape of the air hammered upon their ear-drums, with an insistence which at last commanded undivided attention. Febrile glances crept and clung to the little dial indicator which shivered at each minute release of air and tortured an answering tremor from the set muscles of every face.

Marsh slumped in his chair, his sparse arms tight at his sides, touching the floor with his finger tips which still outstretched rigidly as when they had dropped the pad and pencil at Barton's implied command. The lieutenant, at the table, tapped with a paper knife; then laid it aside with an annoyed look of self-reproof.

Rolf sat on the edge of a bunk—his normally full lips drawn to a gray-blue line, his starting eyes fixed in a stare that seemed plumbly infinity.

Corrigan was at the valve. He stood with back to the others, his head so far bowed forward upon his breast that the rolls of fat at the nape of his neck pressed flat, and the cords showed ivory-white beneath the ruddy skin. Now and again his body heaved and a ponderous sigh welled from within to blend sonorously with the seethe of the liberated air.

After a time the strain of concentration grew unbearable to the big engineer, and his thoughts, drifting up and away from the ghoully depths, sought relief beside the distant, brighter

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