

THE MAN THAT HAD SIX MINUTES TO LIVE

HOW Captain Herrmann Chuckled at the Goblin of the Wreck, and Lo! He Found Himself Trapped in His Diver's Armor Without Air

THIS story is one told concerning Captain Albert Herrmann, now, after an active career, one of the house captains at Baller's Snug Harbor, Staten Island. Captain Herrmann, after the manner of many men who have done things, could not be induced to tell it himself, but some of his old shipmates were not so reticent, and the facts, when obtained, drew a reluctant confirmation from the Captain.

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It was a strange adventure that befell Captain Albert Herrmann beneath the rolling surges of the Pacific. No deadly combat with a living adversary, no matching of strength and wit against those of a palpable opponent, no shock of battle or hot rage of conflict ever brought forth a stranger.

Captain Herrmann scoffs at any suggestion of the supernatural. Man and boy he was at sea for forty years, master of sailing vessels for the most part of it, and if there is any life that held more of stern reality and grim, tangible fact than that of a commander in the old merchant marine it has not been recorded. And yet Captain Herrmann might well find ground for certain doubts in regard to the tense hour he passed within the ribs of a sunken wreck on the floor of the ocean.

Some there be that have heard this story who lay it all to the kobold. It is not to be denied that the kobold was there, nor that he was a thing of sinister appearance, nor that being a kobold he might plausibly be associated with uncanny happenings. But the point immediately arises that the kobold is an earth sprite and has no manner of right to be mixed up with affairs in the sea which are plainly out of his province altogether. To make the yarn quite consistent there should have been no kobold, but a nix, a nix or some other of the familiars more clearly attendant upon the watery tribe of evil. Still—but this is the story.

Captain Herrmann quit the command of trading vessels some years back to take the post as northern agent for the San Francisco Board of Underwriters. In this capacity he had supervision of every wreck along the Pacific coast from San Francisco to the Arctic, and it was his duty, on receipt of word that an insured vessel had been cast away, to proceed to the spot and make an inspection. On his judgment of the condition and position of the craft she was either abandoned, raised or stripped of her cargo, work which the captain directed.

Came report to San Francisco one day that the Joseph F. Splinter, schooner, just completing a weary voyage around the Horn from New York with a miscellaneous cargo, had pushed through a fog and broken her back on a reef off Cape Ray. After striking the vessel had drifted off and sunk, scarcely allowing the crew time to take to the boats.

Captain Herrmann was shortly on hand with No. 6 wrecking barge, and after some sounding the sunken schooner was discovered lying some eight fathoms deep. Weather was propitious, and after the barge had been anchored the Captain prepared to descend for preliminary investigation.

Among other heavy material the wrecked vessel bore many tons of short bar iron, but the most valuable part of her cargo was a consignment of statuary, bronze and marble, which was to grace a semi-public park. This statuary represented years of conscientious collecting by one of the wealthiest citizens of California who had travelled extensively and had made most of his purchases in Europe, shipping them to New York for storage and examination by experts. The selections were to form the decorations of the grounds of his large estate. Captain Herrmann was particularly desirous of determining the condition of these statues, and whether or not they could be saved.

He was assisted into his diving suit with the rubber lined garments and the huge, automatic headpiece. As usual in deep sea diving, he took no guide rope, depending upon iron weights to bring him to the sea bottom and the buoyancy of the helmet and inflated suit to bring him up again when he should cast them off. He carried a signal line attached to a bell by the pump by which he could call for more air. The automatic escape valve in the helmet was arranged to release an excessive pressure. For exploration in the dark interior of the hold he carried strapped about his waist a set of small electric batteries attached to a hand torch. Outfitted in this wise, and with the diver's knife hanging by his side, he went down the ladder and so through the deepening gloom of the water to the schooner below.

Entering the Hatch.

He had no difficulty in bringing up on the deck of the schooner, and his first task was to try the main hatch. It was tight and considerable effort was necessary to open it and effect an entrance. Then, crawling over the edge, he dropped within.

Sweeping his light before him and holding the slack of his gutta percha air pipe in the other hand the Captain started forward. It was hard going. The bars, broken out of their orderly rows by the vessel's list, lay piled in heaps and mounds, thrusting at all angles like chevaux de frise, jammed in fantastic pyramids and forming jagged ridges over which he had to crawl. Keeping well toward the upper or port side, close to the schooner's skin, he made shift to wriggle his way cautiously nearer to the fore part of the hold, where he knew the statuary had been stowed.

In that enclosed space, shut off from even a glimmer of the light of day, the bright knob of his torch spread a strange, suffused glow. Objects were but faintly visible, dimmed in the water, unreal and baffling the distance instinct of the eye. But at length, having wedged himself partly over the temporary bulkhead that held the iron to its section of the hold, he found himself peering into the compartment where the statuary should be.

And then—Captain Herrmann saw him! He was no ordinary kobold—none of the tiresome little terra cotta gnomes painted in impossible colors that are inevitable features of the conventional German front lawn, clapping stels and grinning fatuously. He was a real kobold, a real Nibelung, a little bearded dwarf cast in bronze with a hammer in his hand, and he looked at the intruder through the green shimmer of the water with fixed, malevolent gaze.

Captain Herrmann, as has been said, is an extremely practical individual, but even Captain Herrmann was struck by the oddity of this encounter, far beneath the Pacific, with a queer little man who seemed a visitant from the nether world. So fanciful and yet so definite was the apparition that the Captain chuckled to himself inside his helmet as he slid back upon the iron.

It was the Captain's purpose now to return to the barge. He saw that the statuary could be saved by cutting through the deck or by approaching through the forward hatch, but haste was necessary. The weight of the iron might easily tear the wreck apart in heavy weather.

He started to retrace the uneven course he had taken. He had covered perhaps half the distance to the main hatch, when suddenly his footing shifted beneath him and he staggered. At the same instant he was aware that his air had stopped.

It is all situations that might sound reason tottering upon a base so terrifying as that of a diver, entangled in a shattered wreck, when he knows that his vital tube of air has been closed. For

that hollow thread as he is upon the main artery of his heart.

The thought of the slender cord and what it means to him is never far from the diver's mind. Men grow callous to danger with running the same risks, but there is something about the isolation, the silence, the strangeness of the under sea that keeps alive a sense of its sinister possibilities in those who venture there.

Like every other diver Captain Herrmann knew what the stopping of the air meant. It meant that unless he could restore his supply he had six more minutes, seven at the outside, to live. For so long

upright and save himself from falling amid the clamping and grinding of the iron. Then the motion ceased and his hand went to his signal line.

It was merely instinctive, that clutch, and as he pulled he knew that it was useless. The line, like where a bar pressed athwart it, and here. He knelt and gripped the first obstacle.

Moving swiftly, surely, as a man moves who can count his lease upon life in breaths, he stooped low, and with his torch sweeping the bristling iron shafts worried back along the pipe. Here he could see where a bar pressed athwart it, and here. He knelt and gripped the first obstacle.

There is a childish game known as Jack straws,

an ominous movement of the mass and he deflated. It occurred to him now that he might be able to work the tube free from beneath the obstructions. He lowered himself diver fashion, letting the weights sling about his body draw him down, and, crouching, wrought desperately at the tube. Hopeless! He could not slip the flattened gutta percha an inch. The pressure was too great.

He straightened now at another thought. He had free some ten feet of the tubing. Prying this out, he crawled aft to the limit of the tether in the direction of the main hatch. And as he played the light before and about him he understood at last the extent of the disaster. He had wasted nearly three valuable minutes in his attempt to solve the jack straw puzzle. Beyond the spot where the slide had balked him the bars had piled in barriers upon his pipe. And his exit was blocked.

Nearly half his time was gone, nearly half of the precious oxygen in his helmet had been expended—all in dallying over an impossible task. If he had been able to remove those first dozen bars it would have been only to discover at the end that he was still trapped and that he had been deceived into a fruitless and fatal struggle.

But he had not yet been betrayed into losing all. Composedly, with unburied movements, hushbusting his little store of air by determined control over the action of his lungs, he prepared for the last slim chance that remained to him. He gathered up the slack of the pipe, and with his left hand took it about three feet from where it joined the helmet. His diving suit, clamped about the wrists, left his hands free and he could bring to bear upon the flexible gutta percha the direct grip of his palms and fingers. He chose his hold carefully, deliberately, and when he had found it he throttled the tube, closing the band of bone and muscle with the full tension of his strength.

Then drawing his knife with his right hand he set the keen blade upon the tube close above the compression, and with one stroke severed it. At the same time he sliced the signal line.

The move was final. There was no retreating it. He was now definitely cut off from all connection with shore by his own act. His helmet and the remaining fragment of hose, guarded by the grip of his fisted left hand, held his little remaining share of life. When that air had been used, or if in the interval his hold upon the tube relaxed, it was the end.

Prisoned Amid Iron Bars.

Freed from the tether he now sought a way over the barrier of tumbled bars. They were still grinding and shifting with the new tilt of the vessel and the rocking of the swell, and he found himself in imminent peril of being crushed or maimed among them. He tried to climb them, but the first two steps taught him that he could not possibly run the gauntlet that way. The iron presented a bristling and treacherous slope which threatened to crumble upon him each instant.

The thing seemed impossible. But there was still another way to be tried. He cast off from him the weights sling about his body that overcame his buoyancy. When he dropped them he rose like a huge bubble through the water to find himself bumping without support against the under side of the deck.

And now began his real fight. He was safe for the moment from the grinding of the iron teeth. But he had at least fifteen feet in a straight line to cover before he could reach the hatch. And he could not travel in a straight line, since the barrier before him had heaped up close to the deck and the way over it was yet to find. Throughout this struggle he had to work with his right arm above his head, since his weighted shoes kept his feet downward. To propel himself he had only his right hand against the timbers of the deck.

He caught at them, found a brace and was able to give a vigorous shove that thrust him ahead some distance. But when he reached again his fingers slipped along smooth wood. The slightest pressure sent him bobbing down again and he strove in vain for a hold. Ardently he began to feel the effect of the vitiated air upon which his lungs were laboring. A heaviness oppressed him, a dull throbbing in his ears, a pulsing in his temples and back of his eyes. It was the warning, the beginning of the distress that would mount swiftly to unendurable torture.

Desperately he whipped out his knife again and drove its tooth into the planking above him. With this purchase he gave a strong thrust. Looking toward the hatch he caught a patch of light over the top of the barrier to the starboard. Using his knife he thrust in that direction. His feet touched the bars lightly as he worked nearer the summit, and he used them, forcing his head and shoulders toward the light. At last he had wedged himself into the space. He could see just beyond the square of the hatchway. And there he caught.

His was a curious position, fraught with the utmost danger. It was as if his trap had closed upon him when he was half way through the jaws. Above him was the deck. Beneath him were the grinding hedges of the iron bars. A slight shift, a piling up of the cargo, and he would be smashed against the deck like a fly on a ceiling. A bar across the back of his neck and his shoulders held him.

About five minutes of his time had gone. He had not ceased to keep approximate measure, aided by the painful and increasing exertions of his lungs. He sprawled there, and through the red, dancing mist that gathered behind his starting eyes he saw the dwindling of the grains in his glass of life.

Suddenly something heaved below him. He felt the shuddering of the barrier, felt the bar at his back press against him, and in the first panic shock of terror to which he had yielded he tashed out with every ounce of power in galvanic contraction of every muscle, whipped to a frenzy of action by the closing of the jaws. The next instant he was free and the shuddered angrily. The effort had carried him through.

And yet it was all but too late. He had almost reached the point in suffering where flesh and tissue can suffer no further. His lungs swelled and labored in utmost distress, breathing again and again the tainted air. His head was in a whirl of molten anguish, beaten with white hot hammers. With a last scramble he won somehow to the hatch and drifted through it.

Eight fathoms was the sounding to the deck of the wreck. But as he rose slowly, slowly through the brightening water, he passed through eight hundred. There seemed no end to it. There seemed never to have been any beginning. Up and up. He knew he must be moving, yet he doubted. And he was near, very near, the line when it could make no difference.

A rude shock stirred his fading consciousness. The water had sudden darkened again. A vast shadow hovered over him. He stared about in a daze. He had ceased to rise. Against the blurred windows of the helmet he saw a vast, vague shape.

It was some faraway corner of his tortured brain still feebly resisting the stupor enveloping him. He was able to understand that he had come up against the barge and that he hung there motionless. It was the same corner that painfully drew his right hand up to the strip of keel, closed it and worked the muscles of the arm in a last sluggish impulse.

Nursed Back to Life.

The crew of the wrecking barge picked up Captain Albert Herrmann as soon as his casque rose above the surface. Knowing that something was wrong with him, unable to force air through the pump, they had taken to the boats with some notion of dragging loose the pipe from another angle. It was by the side of one of the boats that he came floating to the top.

He was unconscious, but, they coaxed him back to life by careful nursing. For hours his mind wandered and they heard the story of his perils. They thought he was raving when he described the kobold. All through it he kept his left hand clamped about a length of the air tube in a grip that nothing could break. They had to cut away the tubing above and below his fist and leave it so. Later, when he had returned to consciousness, he himself was unable to loosen that hold by any effort of will. Patient nursing at the set fingers and cramped muscles was necessary before he could finally reverse the compressed section of the pipe.

Eight Pathoms Was the Sounding to the Deck of the Wreck. But as He Rose Slowly, Slowly Through the Brightening Water, He Passed Through Eight Hundred.

the air in his helmet would serve. At the end of that time he would perish in fearful agony of tortured lungs, swelling veins and feeble brain, all the horrors of slow suffocation.

In the spur of thought that revealed the situation, and all its significance to him he knew what had happened. The schooner, which he had thought so firmly wedged among the rocks, had settled again in the writhing of the ground swell and had crept to starboard. The bars were sliding and changing place under his feet, clanking with the bars the list, set of heavy blows beneath the water. In the shift he had almost suffocated.

For the first minute he had all he could do to keep the object of which is to lift thin slivers of ivory or wood from an intermixed pile without disturbing any unit of the pile except the one attempted. Down there in the bowels of a wrecked ship eight fathoms deep, Captain Albert Herrmann began to play a game of Jack straws with death. He lifted the bar, lifted one end of it with ease, and brought tumbling about him an avalanche which he barely escaped.

Again he tried it, cool and alert, measuring his remaining time with curious calm and detachment. There were a dozen bars, where the one had been. They he wrestled with, one where, nearly fallen, were stacked and formed inextricably. He sought the weaker bar, caught hold of it and heaved. There was

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