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Flag and Ball Days

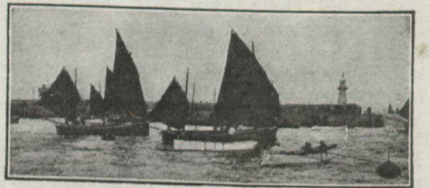
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It was low tide when the first crew, victims of a U-boat, were landed in our town. Men and women waded out waist deep in the water, laughing and crying and cheering to drag the boats ashore. The captain of the lost ship was a very old man. He turned his face from the crowd and stiffly climbing the jetty steps stared out to sea. But his ship was gone, and he burst out crying like a child. The old man's grief stopped the cheering, and later in the day all tendency to cheer the rescued was swept away for ever when three men, one dead, were landed.

The number of ships lost round this coast varied each week. Sometimes for a few days two or three crews would be landed each day, then for two or three weeks no ships at all would be lost near here.

Nearly all the ships were sunk beyond the bay, out of sight of the land, but one Sunday morning early a ship was torpedoed only three miles out, plainly to be seen from the town. They landed the crew of forty-two black men. They could speak no English, and although they had been rescued in good order and had all their possessions with them tied up in bundles, they looked most miserable, for they were shivering and liver-coloured with cold. Their ship was a fairly large steamer, and she lay all day in a water-logged condition, her stern deep in the sea and her bows and the top of one funnel in the air. Her dusky crew sat on the rocks and dismally watched for her to sink, but by what seemed a miracle she kept afloat till dusk. At night time, drifting helplessly, she would have been a danger to passing ships, so a patrol boat fired three shots into her and sank her.

The submarines themselves were fortunately not invulnerable, but it was only occasionally that we heard anything about their being destroyed. One day a Spanish crew from a torpedoed



Types of fishing craft off the Cornish Coast

ship was landed, and just before the doors of the Salvation Army hall closed on them the youngest of the crew turned and addressed the English crowd. He was very young; he had a curly mop of black hair; he was bare-footed, and clad only in a ragged shirt and pair of trousers. He used the language of signs; he held his hands over his head in an attitude of surrender, which meant "Germans," then he thrust his hands down in a gesture which seemed to mean the depths of the sea; his whole message was evidently that Germans had recently gone there. The young Spaniard then called to an embarrassed but joyful ship-mate who could speak English to explain further. He told the crowd that after the patrol boat had taken them from their sinking ship she sighted a periscope close by, and rammed and sunk the submarine.

The patrol boat as soon as she had landed the Spaniards had gone back to hunt for any wreckage of the submarine that she could find. Not exactly in a souvenir hunting spirit, but because the reward given for sinking submarines was only given to boats that could prove their claim. The best witness to the sinking of a U-boat was a part of the U-boat; the large patches of oil floating on the water when a submarine had been destroyed could not be taken away as evidence. In the springtime we used to know if many submarines had been destroyed close round the coast, because if they had young sea-birds used to come drifting helplessly with the tide, their feathers and pinions stuck together with sticky oil.

The sea washed up still grimmer flotsam and jetsam of the war. Sometimes an empty ship's boat would drift in. Once the bodies of two drowned seamen were left by the tide. Nothing had been heard of any ship sunk near here just then, and nothing was ever known of the sailors, except that as they were big, fair men they had not come from this coast, where a small, dark type predominates. After that a voluntary watch was kept on the shore. All day long men and boys walked up and down at the water's edge, hauling wreckage out of the reach of the waves when it came their way, but waiting and watching all the time for something else—waiting for the sea to give up its dead.

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