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Chapter 33

There was a shrill whistle from the captain's bridge, and the steamer, which had scarcely yet gathered way, swung slowly around. Rushing up towards it through the mists came a little naval launch, in the stern of which a single man was seated. In an incredibly short space of time it was alongside, the passenger had climbed up the rope ladder, the pinnacle had sheered off and the steamer was once more heading towards the Channel.

The newly-arrived passenger was making his way towards the saloon when a voice which seemed to come from behind a pile of rugs heaped around a steamer-chair, arrested his progress.

"Hugh! Major Thomson!"

He stopped short. Geraldine shook herself free from her rugs and sat up. They looked at one another in astonishment.

"Why, Geraldine," he exclaimed, "where are you off to?"

"To Boulogne, of course," she answered. "Don't pretend that you are surprised. Why, you got me the appointment yourself."

"Of course," he agreed, "only I had no idea that you were going just yet, or that you were on this boat."

"They told me to come out this week," she said, as he drew a chair to her side, "and so many of the nurses and doctors were going by this boat that I thought I would come, too. I feel quite a professional already. Nearly all the women here are in nurse's uniform and three-quarters of the men on board are doctors. Where are you going, Hugh?"

"Just to the Base and back again to-morrow," he told her. "There's a court martial I want to attend."

"Still mysterious," she laughed. "What have you to do with courts martial, Hugh?"

"Too much, just for the moment," he answered lightly. "Would you like some coffee or anything?"

She shook her head.

"No, thank you. I had an excellent supper before we started. I looked at some of the cabins but I decided to spend the night on deck. What about you? You seem to have arrived in a hurry."

"I missed the train in London," he explained. "They kept me at the War Office. Then I had to come down in a Government car and we couldn't quite catch up. Any news from Ralph?"

"I had a letter days ago," she told him. "It was posted at Harwich but he couldn't say where he was, and of course he couldn't give me any news. Father came back from the Admiralty very excited yesterday, though. He says that we have sunk four or five more submarines, and that Ralph's new equipment is an immense success. By-the-by, is there any danger of submarines here?"

"I shouldn't think so," Thomson answered. "They are very busy round the Scilly Islands but we seem to have been able to keep them out of the Channel. I thought we should have been convoyed, though."

"In any case," she remarked, "we are a hospital ship. I expect they'd leave us alone. Major Thomson," she went on, "I wonder, do you really believe all these stories of the horrible doings of the Germans--the way they have treated drowning people attacked by their submarines, and these hateful stories of Belgium? Sometimes it seems to me as though there was a fog of hatred which had sprung up between the two countries, and we could neither of us quite see clearly what the other was doing."

"I think there is something in that," Major Thomson agreed. "On the other hand I think it is part of the German principle to make war ruthlessly. I have seen things in Belgium which I shall never forget. As to the submarine business, if half the things are true that we have read, they seem to have behaved like brutes. It's queer, too," he went on, "for as a rule seamen are never cruel."

They were silent for a time. For some reason or other, they both avoided mention of the one subject which was in the minds of both. It was not until after the steward had brought him some coffee and they were more than half-way across, that Thomson a little abruptly asked her a question.

"Have you seen anything of Captain Granet lately?"

"Nothing," she replied.

He turned his head slightly towards her.

"Would it trouble you very much if he never came to see you again?"

She was watching the misty dawn.

"I do not know," she answered, "but I think he will come."

"I am not so sure," he told her.

"Do you mean that he is in any fresh trouble?" she asked quickly.

"I don't think he needs any fresh trouble exactly," Thomson remarked, "but suppose we leave him alone for a little time? Our meeting was so unexpected, and, for me, such a pleasure. Don't let us spoil it."

"Let us talk of other things," she agreed readily. "Tell me, for instance, just what does a submarine look like when it pops up out of the sea?"

"I have never seen one close to, he admitted "except on the surface. Why do you ask?"

She pointed with her forefinger to a little spot almost between two banks of mist.

"Because I fancied just now that I saw something sticking up out of the water there, something which might have been the periscope of a submarine," she replied.

He looked in the direction which she indicated but shook his head.

"I can see nothing," he said, "but in any case I don't think they would attack a hospital ship. This is a dangerous area for them, too. We are bound to have a few destroyers close at hand. I wonder if Ralph--"

He never finished his sentence. The shock which they had both read about but never dreamed of experiencing, flung them without a moment's warning onto their hands and feet. The steamer seemed as though it had been lifted out of the water. There was a report as though some great cannon had been fired off in their very ears. Looking along the deck, it suddenly seemed to Thomson that her bows were pointing to the sky. The after portion, where they were seated, was vibrating and shaking as though they had struck a rock, and only a few yards away from them, towards the middle of the boat, the end of the cabin was riven bare to the heavens. Timbers were creaking and splintering in every direction. There was a great gap already in the side of the steamer, as though some one had taken a cut out of it. Then, high above the shrieking of the escaped steam and the cracking of woodwork, the siren of the boat screamed out its frantic summons for help. Geraldine for the moment lost her nerve. She began to shriek, and ran towards the nearest boat, into which the people were climbing like ants. Thomson drew her back.

"Don't hurry," he begged. "Here!"

He threw open the door of a cabin which leaned over them, snatched two of the lifebelts from the berth and rapidly fastened one on her. There was some semblance of order on deck now that the first confusion had passed. The men were all rushing to quarters. Three of the boats had been blown into splinters upon their davits. The fourth, terribly overloaded, was being lowered. Thomson, working like a madman, was tying some spare belts on to a table which had floated out from the cabin. More than once the boat gave a great plunge and they had to hold on to the cabin doors. A huge wave broke completely over them, drenching them from head to foot. The top of the rail now was on a level with the sea. Thomson stood up for a moment and looked around. Then he turned to Geraldine.

"Look here," he said, "there'll be plenty of craft around to pick us up. This thing can't sink. Keep the lifebelt on and get your arms through the belt I have tied on to the table, so. That's right. Now come over to the side."

"You're not going to jump overboard?" she cried.

"We are going to just step overboard," he explained. "It's the only chance. Throw off your fur cloak. You see, if we stay a moment later we shall be dragged down after the steamer. We must get clear while we can."

"I can swim," he answered quickly, throwing off his coat and waistcoat. "This thing will support me easily. Believe me, Geraldine, there's nothing to be frightened about. We can keep her afloat for half-a-dozen hours, if necessary, with this only don't let go of it. Keep your arms through, and--by God! Quick!"

A huge wave broke right over their heads. The boat, which had nearly reached the level of the water, was overturned, and the air seemed full of the screaming of women, the loud shouting of orders from the bridge, where the captain was standing with his hands upon the fast sinking rail. The water was up to their waists now. In a moment they ceased to feel anything beneath their feet. Geraldine found herself suddenly buoyant. Thomson, swimming with one arm, locked the other in their raft.

"Push yourself away from everything as well as you can," he whispered, "and, Geraldine--if anything should happen to us, I never changed--not for a moment."

"I don't believe I ever did, either," she sobbed, holding out her hand.

Another wave broke over them. They came up, however. He gripped her wet hand for a moment. All around them were articles of ship's furniture, broken planks, here and there a man swimming. From close at hand came the shriek of the vanishing siren.

"Look!" Geraldine cried.

Barely fifty feet away from them was the submarine. The captain and four or five of the men were on deck. Thomson shouted to him.

"Can't you save some of these women?"

The answer was a laugh--hoarse, brutal, derisive. The submarine glided away. Thomson's face as he looked after it, was black with anger. The next moment he recovered himself, however. He had need of all his strength.

"Don't listen to anything, Geraldine," he begged her. "They will nearly all be saved. Can't you hear the sirens already? There are plenty of ships coming up. Remember, we can't go down so long as we keep hold here."

"But you've no lifebelt on," she faltered.

"I don't need it," he assured her. "I can keep afloat perfectly well. You're not cold?"

"No," she gasped, "but I feel so low down. The sky seems suddenly further away. Oh, if some one would come!"

There were sirens now, and plenty of them, close at hand. Out of the mist they saw a great black hull looming.

"They're here all right!" he cried. "Courage, Geraldine! It's only another five minutes."

Thirty miles an hour into a fog of mist, with the spray falling like a fountain and the hiss of the seawater like devil's music in their ears. Then the haze lifted like the curtain before the stage of a theatre, and rolled away into the dim distance. An officer stood by Conyers' side.

"Hospital ship Princess Hilda just torpedoed by a submarine, sir. They're picking up the survivors already. We're right into 'em sir."

Even as he spoke, the moonlight shone down. There were two trawlers and a patrol boat in sight, and twenty or thirty boats rowing to the scene of the disaster. Suddenly there was a shout.

"Submarine on the port bow!"

They swung around. The sea seemed churned into a mass of soapy foam. Conyers gripped the rail in front of him. The orders had scarcely left his lips before the guns were thundering out. The covered-in structure on the lower deck blazed with an unexpected light. The gun below swung slowly downwards, moved by some unseen instrument. Columns of spray leapt into the air, the roar of the guns was deafening. Then there was another shout--a hoarse yell of excitement. Barely a hundred yards away, the submarine, wobbling strangely, appeared on the surface. An officer in the stern held up the white flag.

"We are sinking!" he shouted. "We surrender!"

For a single second Conyers hesitated. Then he looked downwards. The corpse of a woman went floating by; a child, tied on to a table, was bobbing against the side. The red fires flashed before his eyes; the thunder of his voice broke the momentary stillness. In obedience to his command, the guns belched out a level line of flame,--there was nothing more left of the submarine, or of the men clinging on to it like flies. Conyers watched them disappear without the slightest change of expression.

"Hell's the only place for them!" he muttered. "Send out the boats, Johnson, and cruise around. There may be something else left to be picked up."

The word of command was passed forward and immediately a boat was lowered.

"A man and a woman clinging to a table, sir," an officer reported to Conyers. "We're bringing them on board."

Conyers moved to the side of the bridge. He saw Geraldine lifted into the boat, and Thomson, as soon as she was safe, clamber in after her. He watched them hauled up on to the deck of the destroyer and suddenly he recognised them.

"My God!" he exclaimed, as he dashed down the ladder. "It's Geraldine!"

She was standing on the deck, the wet streaming from her, supported by a sailor on either side. She gasped a little when she saw him. She was quite conscious and her voice was steady.

"We are both here, Ralph," she cried, "Hugh and I. He saved my life. Thank heavens you are here!"

Already the steward was hastening forward with brandy. Geraldine sipped a little and passed the glass to Thomson. Then she turned swiftly to her brother. There was an unfamiliar look in her face.

"Ralph," she muttered, "don't bother about us. Don't stop for anything else. Can't you find that submarine? I saw them all--the men--laughing as they passed away!"

Conyers' eyes blazed for a moment with reminiscent fury. Then his lips parted and he broke into strange, discordant merriment.

"They'll laugh no more in this world, Geraldine," he cried, in fierce triumph. "They're down at the bottom of the sea, every man and dog of them!"

She gripped him by the shoulder--Geraldine, who had never willingly hurt and insect.

"Ralph," she sobbed, "thank God! Thank God you did it!"