

liberately fool a man into loving you when you were going straight to the arms of another? But perhaps it was the other who was being fooled? He shook his head, remembering Scott's youthful charms. For Brack no longer felt young; he felt old, a hundred years old. Old and old.

He looked about, vaguely surprised that the busy traffic of the smoke room went on as if nothing had happened.

In the next instant the busy traffic of that curious room stopped forever.

To a shattering roar of sound which went up like one hoarse crescendo, the ship reeled and staggered. People were flung from chairs, windows flew in splinters, glasses were sent smashing. For the fraction of a second after, there was utter silence and lack of movement, as if the pulse of life had jammed. The ship and all her people were stunned.

Then, in the smoke room, a man's voice pitched tautly high, said in a whisper which reached into every corner, "Mined! Great God!" Above the siren hooted, and at that derisive mad bedlam broke loose. A steward shouted, "It's all right! They'll beach her! Stay quiet!" But the words did not register on ears still reverberating under the stroke of that death-dealing explosion. Some few stood firm and they might have calmed the rest, but, before their efforts could avail, a worse thing happened. The roar was repeated, agonizingly, killingly, so that the nerves screamed out for mercy.

The pulse of life in the ship stopped, and darkness crashed down, complete and absolute. Screams and oaths and appeals crowded the darkness with terror.

Brack, still numbed by his own affairs, was braver than most. He said aloud amidst the confusion, "We've been hit again. In the engine room this time."

His table was in a corner of the room and he was lying where he had been flung across it. "Try!" At the thought of her he leapt up and, stumbling over chairs and slipping on spilt drinks and glass, joined the milling mob. This might be his chance. If he could save her! He must save her! Young men could be afraid or in a crisis for some other reason. He was still nothing of a swimmer, and he would not let his panic grip him.

For her sake he thrust and fought and kept his feet with grim determination. Had they waited out, the place could have been cleared in two minutes, but they had not done so and before he reached the deck Brack had been struggling for what seemed like an hour. The moon had gone and the deck, though better lit in the shut-in room, was a tossing river of white foam in all directions, full of whirlpools, in deep dark.

Clinging to a bar along the deckhouse he tried to discover what to do. Where did one go to look? How call her name in that pandemonium so that she would hear? Even if, by miracle, he found her, what could he do?

An officer, shouting through a megaphone, proclaimed what was by comparison a lull.

No need for panic. Ships on way. Plenty of boats for all, and if you don't behave like lunatics and just go quietly to the boats and wait, "I'll save your silly necks."

They greeted that with a ragged cheer, but it didn't find Mary.

And that alone mattered to Brack just then. Much more than his own silly neck. For this was the chance of a lifetime. The decks still

seethed and were littered with wreckage, but he fought his way along calling her name with desperate persistence.

The boats were swinging out now, and people were crowding towards them, held back by the crew. The sea lapped closer, unseen but sensed. It dragged at the murdered ship; it sucked her down. Brack suddenly had a picture of Mary lying hurt somewhere, deserted, doomed, alone. For calamity had banished the thought of Scott. Mary was as he had known her on the deck that night. He started to run wildly, knocking people down, thrusting them aside.

A large man, like a policeman in a sailor's uniform, seized him roughly.

"Here, that's enough of that. How can we keep 'em in hand with a damn fool like you rushing about. Get into this here boat."

"But Mary —"

"We'll look after her. You're only a nuisance."

The policeman-sailor did not waste further words. He took Mr. John Brack, M. P., by the scruff of the neck and the seat of the trousers, ran him to the rail, lifted him up bodily, and pushed him into the boat. The falls whined and the boat plopped into the water that was so near. An ignominious exit for a lover who sought to be a hero.

The dark sea was dotted with the ghosts of boats all pulling away from the doomed ship. Oars splashed wildly, for many were in inexpert hands and elbow room was scant. The shouts of those seeking lost ones echoed to and fro. Brack joined in them. No answer. The strange flotilla crept on over the calm waters which were suddenly disturbed by a succession of smoothly rounded waves. The seas slapped up against the hulls and set them swaying. Back where the shadow of the ship had made a blacker silhouette against the blackness there was a void.

Authoritative voices shouted orders. Nothing to be gained by pulling further, for the lights of vessels hurrying to the rescue were near at hand. The flotilla paused and waited.

Voices grew more cheerful — there was even some cheering and a few started to sing — but Brack, his throat sore from calling, sat in melancholy silence. Mary had not answered him; he had failed her; he had lost her. And still he did not remember that Mary was really Scott's affair. The scene in the smoke room had been blotted out by that which followed so swiftly.

Great living white swords struck through the night. They fell on the boats, lighting faces with a blinding brightness. The dark sea glittered into smoky silver. Cheers broke out anew.

"Destroyers, four of them," explained the third officer in Brack's boat. "Bit of luck, and a sight better for them to be looking after us taxpayers than fussing about the ruddy Spaniards. If they're going to mine places why can't they make the mines fast properly so they don't break away?"

The low, swift bearers of the white swords came up, white water at their bows. For a time they cruised slowly, looking for chance survivors, since those in the boats were safe. They then put out boats themselves, and at last the task of embarkation began. The flotilla split up, the boats heading for the nearest destroyer. People were laughing now and chattering excitedly.

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