

A FIGHT WITH A SUBMARINE

Tale of a Newfoundland Skipper

By WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON

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YOU don't believe in miracles, don't you? Well, I do, and I'll tell you why, if you care to listen. A miracle happened to me this last October, out in the North Sea. Oh, I'm not telling you whereabouts, nor where we were bound for; but I don't mind telling you we got the shock of our lives when a darned brute of a German submarine came alongside of us, shoved up a quick-firer out of a sort of hatch fore-side of the conning-tower, and batted a shell bang across our bows.

Not being either a hero or a man-of-war, but just an average aggregate of flesh and blood and bones born and bred in the ways of common sense in the port of St. John's, Newfoundland, I rang the telegraph to stop, pretty smart; and when our way was off us, she slid alongside near enough to talk, and the officer in command, a snorty sort of person, sung out to me to lower our dinghy, with a couple of men, and pull across to her, "Do you want me?" I asked.

"No!" he said in English good enough to go down anywhere. "Stay where you are, Cap'n, and keep order. If anyone starts any funny business, just understand I'll sink you before you can say your prayers. Be smart with that boat, I want it!"

Well, of course, I sent the boat, and she came back in about ten minutes with three thumping, greasy, great Germans, and a cute little dumpling of an officer, partly gold lace, and the rest bad manners and thirst.

First thing he did was to go for the manife-st, and the second was a bottle of "Black and White." The third thing was to start in

on my own special brand of cigars, and the fourth was *to tell me to keep out of my own cabin!* Suffering Jehoshaphat! But the little brute was nearer Kingdom Come that same moment than ever he'll guess, till he gets there! They say there's something in the blood of Newfoundlanders that makes it boil at the thought of the most tepid insult. And this wasn't an affront of the brand marked "extra mild."

However, I kept the stopper on, and shoved my gear into the first mate's room, and he went into the second's and pushed poor old Welby into the bottom bunk. I felt sorry for Welby, but I guess we all had our troubles!

They were busy all day—the German thieves, I mean—carting stuff across in the boat. They took charge entirely, and I was told if I showed on deck they'd shove daylight through me. The same with the two mates. And I understood from the steward, who was allowed to go along the decks to the galley, that the men had been told to keep in the fo'c'sle.

I couldn't quite twig what the whole game was. It was something more than stocking their larder and filling up with oil from the engineers' store-room. They kept us going at about quarter speed, I judge, and from the tell-tale in the saloon I could see they'd altered the course a couple of points more to the norward. There was something ugly in view, and I'd have given a whole lot to shove a spoke in their wheel and mess up their little plans.

Well, after thinking it over I began to get the beginnings of a plan in the back of my mind that would start something on the



By Chas. Peers

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enemy, and I went to call the mate to talk things over with me.

"Come into my room, Mister Belston," I said. "I've been thinking this confounded business over, and I've got an idea."

The mate climbed out of the top bunk, and the second mate, Mister Welby, shoved his head out of the bottom one.

"Not you, Mister Welby," I told him. "If we have a crowd in my room that fat German hog 'll get smelling seven kinds of rats, and that won't do. The mate will tell you what I've got to say when he comes back."

I went back to my room, and the mate followed me in his shirt and trousers.

And then, you know, I'd no more got the business opened up to Mister Belston when the steward knocked gently on the door and shoved his head in.

"Sir, they're talking German. The submarine's right alongside, an' him"—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder to mean the officer who had been put in charge of my ship—"he's gassing back. I been listening through the pantry port-hole, only I don't know no German. You do, don't you, sir? It's dark in there, an' maybe you'd hear something as would be useful—"

"Good man, steward," I said, interrupting him. "Get along and keep cave for me. Mister Belston, you stay here, quiet. I'll be back in a minute."

I went across to the pantry, which was dark, and told the steward to get out and keep watch in the hood companionway, and let me know the moment he saw anyone coming along to come below. Then I shut myself into the pantry so that the light from the saloon would not show me through the port. After that I got close up to the port-hole, and started to listen for all I was worth.

The submarine was lying within two fathoms of our side, and the conning-tower was almost level with my face. The night was absolutely still and calm, and I could hear every word. What was more to the point, I'd picked up enough German in my schooling days in St. John's to be able to understand all that was said; and what they were saying was just plain life and death to every man aboard, and to others as well.

Of all the cold-blooded brutes that ever sailed God's seas, they were the—well, judge for yourself, then you'll realise just how much chance any of us had got of being alive the following night, unless I could start in and work a small miracle.

The officer in the mouth of the conning-tower did the bulk of the talking. He was the boss. What he said I can put briefly. Here's the point. They were planning to use the old *Narcissus* as a stalking-horse. They'd got inside information from some darned traitor who traded into Hartlepool, so it seemed, and was the mate of a small coaling steamer in the Dutch trade. He gets hold of information from a German bum "agency" ashore, and peddles it round to those beggars on the trip to Holland. My oath! I swore if ever I came out alive there'd be a new mate to that steamer, and he'd make a hole in the sea just big enough to hold him through Eternity!

They'd got the news from this chap that a Battle Squadron was going North, and they were aiming to take my ship right across their track and lie hid under our lee until the squadron was quite close up to us. Then they were going to slip out and bust off all the torpedoes they'd got into the middle of the fleet; and they reckoned they were absolutely certain to get at least a couple of our Dreadnoughts. They simply gloated about it, until I was ready to let loose with my automatic and make one less, at any rate, of that little lot. And then came the final thing—the limit—The *it* of German milk of human kindness and decency!

Listen! As soon as the English Battle Fleet was sighted, we were to be shot, so as to ensure that there would be no danger of our giving any sort of warning signal at the crucial moment. Wasn't that just German! Efficiency gone mad! And, as all extremes are bound to do, defeating its own ends; for that last detail, when I told it to the mates, made them ready to go right slam down into hell and pluck the Kaiser himself by the moustache out of the biggest pot of brimstone there. I guess when men know they've got to die they ain't exactly particular what risks they run to get a chance of living and

getting even. That may be Irish; but, by the Lord, it's like a lot of Irishisms I've heard from Paddys toiling in the mists on the Great Newfoundland Banks; it's plain sense!

Of course, all this fresh news altered my half-cooked plans, and I just loaded the mate up with all I'd learnt, and sent him back into his room to prime the second mate, and make him as ready for murder and sudden death as the two of us were already!

Well, we held a War Council later and settled something that meant quick death or sudden delivery for the whole lot of us.

First of all I told the steward to keep on the watch, and to start coughing the moment he heard anyone coming. Then I went over the whole plan again, and told the mates exactly what to do.

They were to lash me up in my bunk and gag me. As soon as I heard the other officer come below with the man who seemed always to attend him wherever he went, I

would groan in such a way as to call their attention. They'd come to see what was the matter, and the two mates who would be waiting were to bash them on the head with a couple of bootjacks (excellent "bashers" are bootjacks too!) and tie them up. The bashing was not meant to break anything, but just to daze them a bit and make them easy to handle.

Then they would haul the dinghy alongside, shove some grub and water into her, and take the German officer and one or two of his men and "get."

"You see," I finished up, "the submarine will be bound to go searching for you as soon as she finds you're gone; otherwise, if you get ashore with your men, or reach a patrol, it'll be all U.P. with her little plan to use us to stalk our ships. And while she's gone, why I guess we'll coax our old engines to take us away out of this before she gets back. And she'll never sink us *before* going, because

she'll look to catch you and be back in three or four hours, and if we're sunk, well, we'd be no use as a stalking-horse—eh?"

The whole thing worked excellently next day. I heard the officer and his companion (a sort of senior seaman, I fancy, who was apparently dry-nursing him!) come down into the saloon. Then I groaned, and I heard them stand a moment to listen. I groaned again, and they came to my cabin door which was opened and looked in over each other's shoulder, as you might say.

"Mein Gott!" said the officer.

"Mein Gott!" said the man. Then I saw my two mates behind them, and the two boot-jacks got in a useful thump apiece on their thick German heads.

Exactly ten minutes later the two of them were lashed up solidly and gagged, and laid on the floor of my cabin to groan in unison with me. We all groaned.

My two mates and the steward went on deck in search for the two other men. One was at the wheel, and the other was sleeping in my chart-house. Both got bashed, and lashed up and gagged. Then the second mate took the wheel, while the mate went forward and routed out a man to steer, whilst he and the second mate got busy on other things.

The dinghy was towing astern. They hauled her up quietly and shoved Armour's tinned beef, water, whisky, hard biscuit, Dutch cheese and other et ceteras into her. Then they came below and carried the German officer on deck and lowered him quietly into the dinghy. They collared also the two German sailormen and lowered them on top of their officer.

Then they came down and told me that they were going, and just how many sorts of a fool I had been to refuse to come with them and to threaten to prevent them from leaving the ship. They said they would steer west-sou'-west, which should take them into the Firth, and there hand their prisoners over and start a warship off to us. After that they elevated thumbs of insolence to their separate noses and therewith departed, leaving the German leading seaman on the floor of the cabin to keep me company.

Seven hours and a half later the people in the submarine came aboard. They must have smelled a rat. Perhaps they hailed us and got no answer; and then, when they sang out for the dinghy, well, there was no dinghy. Result, I guess they came right in alongside of us, and shoved half a dozen men aboard with rifles.

When they found the German leading seaman and me they cut us both loose, and then started to rough-house me; but the German who had been lying on my cabin floor explained all *he* knew, and they had no excuse to keep on taking it out of me. All the same, they were pretty beastly! I guess it's just in the blood, and they can't help it.

Well, as soon as they'd got all the detail they put a hustle on. They shoved a handy-billy tackle down through the engine-room skylight, and what do you think the cunning devils did! They lifted off the lead of the high-pressure cylinder and lowered it aboard their own craft.

"Good Lord!" I thought to myself, "that snuffs out the cut-and-run plan!" But naturally I said nothing.

They weren't more than half an hour on this job, and after that they rummaged the flag locker and took every bit of our bunting. It was pretty plain that they meant that we should have no chance to fly signals during the few hours they expected to be away in chase of the boat. I got hoping that these signs meant they would leave no one aboard on guard; but I soon saw I was mistaken; for after holding a bit of a pow-wow on my poop the commanding officer cleared off and left two armed Germans aboard under the control of the man who had been lying on the floor of my cabin.

"Cap'n," sang out the Commander of the submarine, after he'd got aboard his own craft again, "I'm trusting you to keep order while I'm gone. If you don't, well, my men know what to do, and there'll not be one of you left alive by the time I get back. So, I'd be wise, if I were you, Cap'n."

"I'll be wise, right enough," I told him. "I guess wisdom's best policy just now!"

"At a premium, Cap'n," he said, and called down the speaking-tube to go ahead.

I could hear him laughing for a minute afterwards as the submarine glided like a fish into the darkness.

I leant over the poop rail and watched her for a bit. She was evidently not going more than half speed, and I guessed the German officer was anxious not to get too far before daylight lest he should overshoot the boat in the dark.

You see, he'd got the course the boat would steer from the German sailorman who had been on the floor of my cabin when my two mates made so many unnecessary explanations!

I grinned to myself; but all the same, I was deuced anxious; for unless I could bottle up those three armed Germans, and unless Mac could see some way to do the impossible, and unless I could carry out another notion or two of mine, why, I couldn't see anything but a mess, and a bad mess, inside the next twelve hours or so, with good-bye to all hopes of ever seeing the good port of St. John's again at the end of it. For whether the submarine found the boat or not we could expect her back before the day was half through. You see, she'd never miss a chance to get her topdoes off at the ships she was laying for.

Anyway, the first problem was how to get rid of those three big Germans.

Six hours later I went on deck, but the leading seaman person wanted to show he was Lord of Creation and ordered me below without bothering to be polite about it. And because I didn't exactly jump to do his bidding he gave me a poke in the ribs with the butt of his rifle just to make his meaning clear. It was! And I went!

In a way I was rather pleased. I felt more like killing a man or two than I did. I never was much good at the cold-blooded act. But now! Well, you try a German rifle-butt in your ribs if you want the edge taken off some of your finer scruples! It's effective!

I sat a bit in the saloon and smoked, then I thought I would risk going through the alleyway to Mac's room and have a word with him. When I got there, however, Mac was not in his bunk, and I knew he must be down in the engine-room. So I thought

I'd risk a bit more and follow him there. I did.

But on the fiddle I stopped; for things were happening, right there before me.

Mac was up at the open head of the high-pressure cylinder, with his rule and a pair of dividers in one hand and a piece of chalk in the other. At the moment, however, he was not taking measurements, but looking up at the engine-room skylight. As I looked up also I heard someone say from the engine-room below:

"Vat youous do mit dat cylyngder. Gome away dis von momengt, or tead I shood youous!"

"Two of 'em, begowb!" I heard Mac mutter as he stared down now into the engine-room below.

There were certainly two of them! One, the leading seaman, with his head shoved in under the leaf of the open skylight, and the other, a big brute, who must have gone down the engine-room stairway and entered through the stokehold doorway.

"Get away from that cylinder," said the German in the skylight, speaking such perfect enough English, or rather American, that it seemed to carry me straight back home. "Get away right now, or I'll sure lead you up solid so you'd sink a thousand miles. I will, by Josh!"

He began to pass his rifle in through the opening of the skylight; and right then Mac acted.

"Ye'll do phwat!" he said; for he's an Irish Mac, not a Scottie. "Ye'll do phwat!"

He said never another word, but let fly with one of the big holding-down nuts from the cylinder-head. The nut took the German in the chest with a thump like a drum, and the man went white and gasped a moment. Then, deliberately, and before I could conceive he would really do such a thing, he shot poor old Mac through the middle of his forehead, and Mac flopped a moment soft and quiet over the edge of the cylinder. Then rolled with a dull, sickening thump to the floor of the engine-room.

Then I was awake, as you might say. There's one thing in favour of an automatic, it's quicker in the change-speed gear, and I

drilled the German's forehead with two 38 holes, one above each eye—one for payment and the other for good measure.

He hung there, dead; half of him one side of the skylight-coaming, and the other half the other. But I'd no time to think about him; for something split away a great piece out of the peak of my cap, and the same moment the engine-room loomed again to a rifle-shot. The German down below had loosed off at me.

However, I'd no need to bother about him. The second engineer and two of the stokers got him on the run, and what they did to him was sufficient and a bit over. Only, of course, Mac was a good boss and well liked, and I can't say I blame them.

I heard someone running along the after well-deck then, and I stepped out with my automatic in my fist. It was the third German, and the moment he saw me with the

automatic in my hand he let drive. So did I. It was a draw, I should fancy, for we both missed!

Before he could work the bolt I let drive again, and got him through the right forearm. But he was plucky, right enough. He snapped the bolt back and forward and fired from his hip. The bullet took away the whole of my right coat-pocket without touching me. It's queer what tricks a bullet will play at times.

I fired again, and got him in the left hand, and at that he ran all the way aft to the poop, crying aloud with the pain of it. I was sorry for the beggar; but he was still dangerous, for he had taken his rifle with him; and the next thing I knew, he snapped off a shot at me from behind one of the after ventilators.

He missed me by a mile. I guessed he was shaking too much, and I felt he couldn't

hit me now, except by a fluke; so I just rushed him, for I was sick of the killing, though I knew the brutes would not have hesitated to shoot the whole crowd if we hadn't got them going right from the first.

He managed another shot as I ran at him, which was the best he made, for it nicked the left side of my neck, and I bled like a pig; but it was nothing more than a shallow gouge; and the following instant I'd taken the rifle from him and was sitting on his head.

Afterwards I whistled for the steward, and the two of us bandaged him up and carried him down and locked him in the spare cabin on the starboard side. Then I got busy.

I had poor old Mac put in his berth, and the two Germans were shoved on the fore-hatch under some canvas. Then I went for the second and third engineers and told them what I wanted doing.

It seems there is an old high-pressure cover in the store-room that has been there for many a voyage, and Mac had been planning to make a try at fitting it on in place of the other, so that we could get up steam and be away before the submarine returned.

We got the cover out of the store-room, and while the engineers tried it for the fit, I had all my deck hands running around on a special job of my own. The old packet fairly hummed with energy let loose.

"Well?" I asked a bit later when I went back to the engine-room. "How is it, you two? Can it be made to fit?"

"Yes, sir," said the second. "All the bolt holes don't come into the same places, and we'll have to drill four new ones, and we'll have to pack her up, but I reckon we can do it, only it'll take time."

I nodded, and left them to get at it; for they are good men, both of them, and I knew they'd do their darndest. But, as you can guess, I was as anxious as a maggot on a hot brick. However, I'd business of my own to do, and I did it, and between whiles I paid visits to the engine-room, and I'll own to a prayer or two; for there would be no sort of mercy shown us once the submarine came back, as I jolly well knew.

Two hours passed, and I'd paid three visits to the engine-room. The donkey-man and two stokers were taking one-minute spells at a geared hand-drill which the two engineers were tending in a pretty earnest sort of way.

The fourth time I went they'd got the four holes drilled out by hand, and a weary job it had been with the poor tools they'd got, and the cylinder cover, of course, proving to be extra hard stuff, just for sheer cussedness.

The sixth time I went along all hands were busy, working like madmen, with sheet copper and cold chisels cutting out packing to raise the cylinder head which was not enough domed to give sufficient clearance to the newer-pattern piston.

"Mister Melbray," I said to the second engineer, "it's four hours and twenty minutes since that darned submarine went away looking for the dinghy. I guess we can look for her back any time inside the next hour or so; an' if she finds us here like this it'll be bye-bye for all of us. How long do you reckon you'll be now before you can put steam through your gadgets?"

"Another half-hour, maybe, Cap'n," he told me; "an' even then, it's God help us, I'm thinking, if we can't make a good steam-tight job of this. She'll have to do all she knows to get anywhere before that darned submarine be on top of us, if we don't get shifting before she gets near us. What do you reckon those U submarines can do on the surface, sir?"

"The Lord knows," I told him. "No one knows, really; but I understand they're supposed to run up to fifteen knots in fine weather, that is."

He shrugged his shoulders in a sort of hopeless fashion, but he never stopped working for a moment.

"Give us another twenty or thirty minutes, Cap'n," he said at last. "I'll try her then; and I guess we'll blow something adrift before we let them come up on us."

I went away again. I had sent a man aloft to keep a look out all round, but there were no signs of the submarine; though, as a bit of a breeze had sprung up, she wouldn't

be so easy to see in the broken water if she were running with only her periscope out.

I walked the poop, pretty anxiously for the next ten minutes; then I got more philosophical, and decided the whole job wasn't worth indigestion. So I came below and had a smoke. At the end of the half-hour I walked forward to the engine-room and shoved my head in the skylight.

"Well?" I asked.

"Just going to put the steam through her, Cap'n," said the second engineer.

He was sweating, and he and the third engineer and the donkey-man were heaving away pretty fierce on a four-foot spanner, compressing the sheets of copper packing to a steam-tight "consistency."

And then, from my man aloft, came the yelp of:

"Submarine on the port beam, sir! Submarine on the port beam. She's dead on the beam, sir; about four miles off, I reckon. . . . *She ain't got the boat!*" He yelled that out with triumph. Then, in a different voice: "Less they've sunk her!"

"That's all right, my lad!" I said to myself. "Don't worry!"

You see, when the two mates explained their proposed course with such exact detail in my cabin, well—they were remembering that they were going to leave one German behind just for the one purpose of passing on that bit of information. I need hardly say that the boat steered a very different course indeed! That would have been one comfort whatever else happened.

I shoved my head in the engine-room again to see how they were managing. As I did so the engine began to turn over slowly. The third was at the main steam-valve giving her steam gently, and the second and the donkey-man were standing anxiously by the high-pressure to see how the packing held the steam. It held fine, and the second grinned up at me as pleased as Punch.

"Good man," I said, and pulled out my head and bellowed for a man to go to the wheel; for the old *Narcissus* had started to forge slowly ahead.

I went to the side and grinned down like

a delighted maniac at the water moving past our side as our speed increased. Then there was a yell from the man aloft.

"They'm shootin', sir! They'm shootin'!"

As he yelled I heard the scream of a high-velocity shell from the submarine's six-pounder, and *cr-rash*, a regular hole was bust in our steel bulwarks on the port side about thirty feet forward of me, for the shell struck there and, burst, the bits cracking and thudding viciously all over the place. I should never have imagined that six pounds of iron would have gone so far in the spreading line. It sounded like half a hundred-weight.

No one was hurt, and I made one jump for the bridge and rang the telephone for full speed ahead.

"Shove your helm over hard-a-port!" I shouted at the man at the wheel.

As the old *Narcissus* started to pay off I saw a flash aboard the submarine, now about two and a half miles away, or perhaps a bit less. And then, almost in the same instant, the queer, beastly "meeee" whine of the high-velocity shell crowding the wide miles into a couple of seconds. "Meee-owww," it went, changing its note in a queer fashion as it came for us. Then "*cr-rash*" again, and the whole top of the engine-room skylight seemed to fly up in a shower of glass splinters.

I grabbed the speaking-tube to the engine-room.

"Anyone hurt?" I called.

After a few moments the third engineer's voice answered:

"It got the second, sir. He's dead. The engine's all right, though," he said. He sounded calm enough, and I sent a man for the steward to go down the engine-room and see if the second was quite knocked out. Then I turned and looked for the submarine again. She was right astern now and seemed to be gaining only slowly. As I stared I saw the flash of the gun again, and then once more came the beastly whine of the shell.

"Bang!" it struck the middle steel bridge-stanchion which supports the centre of the

bridge. This is a stout three-inch stanchion of solid steel. The shell gouged away a piece as easily as if it had been putty and burst with a stunning crash directly under the bridge. Two of the middle planks were blown up on end, and in three places fragments of shell struck clean up through the deck of the bridge penetrating right through the heavy planks. One of these fragments killed the man at the wheel, and I jumped to steady the helm, while I sung out for another man to come aft.

I looked round with a feeling of despair. The whole sea was empty of shipping from horizon to horizon, and I didn't pretend to hide the fact that nothing short of a miracle could save us; for the German wasn't out to coddle us, I could bet on that!

The steward came up on the bridge and reported that the second engineer was headless and therefore unmistakably dead. I told him to give a hand to carry the dead helmsman down on to the main deck hatch, and then bring a flag and cover him. I guessed

we'd be gone inside twenty minutes; but we might as well be decent.

I was just beginning to get sentimental over the old folks at home and saying a last farewell, as it were, to all my pals in Newfoundland I should never see again, when I caught suddenly the "meeee" scream of another shell coming. "Meeeee-oww, cr-rash!" . . . It ripped a monstrous great chunk out of the funnel, about half of it; and it seemed to me I felt our speed drop right then in that same moment.

Then one, two, three, four . . . one after the other they loosed off at us as fast as they could work the quick-firer. The air seemed one whining scream as the four shells came "Cr-rash! Cr-rash! Cr-rash! Cr-rash!" The rest of the funnel vanished. The wheel, and the man at it, went in a flying cloud of spoked and torn flesh and clothing, and the after mast was punched clean through, and the chart-house was wrecked. My steward was wounded, and I saw one of the deck boys limping along the main deck.

"Jehoshaphat!" I said; "we're done!"
. . . I didn't even know I was bleeding all
down my face where a shell-splinter had
cut me.

Two more shells came Thud! Thud!—
dull ugly thumps away aft in the stern of her
that told me the Germans had started now to
sink us in real earnest. You never saw such
deliberate murder!

"Cr-rash!" came another shell, higher this
time, and killed the boy who was limping
along the deck.

I stared round and round the horizon in
despair. I sung out to the man aloft to know
whether he could see anything. He simply
shook his head in a hopeless, silent sort of
way.

I found myself praying aloud in a fierce
sort of fashion for a miracle to happen;
for nothing but a miracle could save us
now.

And suddenly, like the voice of God:

B-A-N-G!

It was coming from somewhere ahead of
us on the starboard bow, but precious
close.

I raced across to the starboard end of the
bridge:

B-A-N-G!

The miracle had happened. A long grey
shape was tearing through the sea, firing as
she went.

It was one of our latest submarines that had
just bobbed up:

B-A-N-G!

I whipped round with my binoculars and
stared at that murdering brute astern.

"Flash!"

I was just in time to see her go straight
down into hades with all her devils aboard of
her. The shell from the submarine ahead had
hit her slap at the base of the conning-tower,
and she just simply vanished—went!

No, there was no miracle about it; not if
you want to argue. But I don't!

The dinghy was overhauled and my two
mates and the greaser taken aboard by the
submarine, one of our latest type on patrol
duty. The poor old *Narcissus* foundered
inside of half an hour.

But, by the Lord, I'm a believer in miracles
from now onwards.