CHAPTER I

THE S. S. "Hitachi Maru," 6,916 tons, of the Nippon Yushen Kaisha (Japan Mail Steamship Co.) left Colombo on September twenty-fourth, 1917, her entire ship's company being Japanese. Once outside the breakwater the rough weather made itself felt, the ship rolled a good deal and the storms of wind and heavy rain continued more or less all day. The next day the weather had moderated, and on the succeeding day, Wednesday the twenty-sixth, fine and bright weather prevailed, but the storm had left behind a long rolling swell.

My wife and I had joined the ship at Singapore on the fifteenth, having left Bangkok, the capital of Siam, a week earlier. Passengers who had embarked at Colombo were beginning to recover from their seasickness, and had begun to indulge in deck games, and
there seemed every prospect of a pleasant and undisturbed voyage to Delagoa Bay, where we were due on October seventh.

The chart at noon on the twenty-sixth marked five hundred and eight miles from Colombo, two thousand, nine hundred and twelve to Delagoa Bay, and one hundred and ninety to the Equator; only position, not the course, being marked after the ship left Colombo. Most of the passengers had, as usual, either dozed on the deck or in their cabins after tiffin, my wife and I being in deck chairs on the port side. When I woke up at one forty-five I saw far off on the horizon on the port bow, smoke from a steamer. I was the only person awake on the deck at the time, and I believe no other passenger had seen the smoke.

It was so far away that it was impossible to tell whether we were meeting or overtaking the ship. Immediately thoughts of a raider sprang to my mind, though I did not know one was out. It is generally understood that instructions to Captains in these times are to suspect every vessel seen at sea,
A CAPTIVE ON A GERMAN RAIDER

and to run away from all signs of smoke. The officer on the bridge with his glass must have seen the smoke long before I did, so my suspicions of a raider were gradually disarmed as we did not alter our course a single point, but proceeded to meet the stranger whose course towards us formed a diagonal one with ours. If nothing had happened she would have crossed our track slightly astern of us.

But something did happen. More passengers were now awake, discussing the nationality of the ship bearing down on us. Still no alteration was made in our course, and we and she had made no sign of recognition. Surely, everything was all right, and there was nothing to fear. Even the Japanese commander of the gun crew betrayed no anxiety in the matter, but stood with the passengers on the deck watching the oncoming stranger. Five bells had just gone when the vessel, then about seven hundred yards away from us, took a sudden turn to port and ran up signals and the German Imperial Navy flag. There was no longer any doubt—the
worst had happened. We had walked blindly into the open arms of the enemy. The signals were to tell us to stop. We did not stop. The raider fired two shots across our bows. They fell into the sea quite close to where most of the passengers were standing. Still we did not stop. It was wicked to ignore these orders and warnings. Most of the passengers went to their cabins for life-belts and life-saving waistcoats, and at once returned to the deck watching the raider. As we were still steaming and had not obeyed the order to stop, the raider opened fire on us, firing a broadside.

While the firing was going on, a seaplane appeared above the raider; some assert that she dropped bombs in front of us, but personally I did not see this.

The greatest alarm now prevailed on our ship. My wife and I returned to our cabin to fetch an extra pair of spectacles, our passports and my pocketbook, and at the same time picked up her jewel case. The alleyway between the companion-way and our cabin was by this time strewn with splinters of
wood, glass and wreckage; pieces of shell had been embedded in the panelling, and a large hole had been made in the funnel.

We returned once more to the port deck where most of the first class passengers had assembled waiting for orders—which never came. No instructions came from the Captain or officers or crew; in fact, we never saw any of the ship's officers until long after all the lifeboats were afloat on the sea.

The ship had now stopped and the firing had apparently ceased, but we did not know whether it would recommence, and of course imagined the Germans were firing to sink the ship. It was useless trying to escape the shots, as we did not know then at what part of the ship the Germans were firing, so there was only one thing for the passengers to do—to leave the ship, as we all thought she was sinking. Some of the passengers attempted to go on the bridge to get on the boat deck and help lower the boats, as it seemed nothing was being done, but were ordered back by the Second Steward, who, apparently
alone among the ship's officers, kept his head throughout.

The number one boat was now being lowered on the port side; it was full of Japanese and Asiatics. When it was flush with the deck the falls broke, the boat capsized, and with all its occupants was thrown into the sea. One or two, we afterwards heard, were drowned. The passengers now went over to the starboard side, as apparently no more boats were being lowered from the port side, and we did not know whether the raider would start firing again. The number one starboard boat was being lowered; still there was no one to give orders. The passengers themselves saw to it that the women got into this boat first, and helped them in, only the Second Steward standing by to help. The women had to climb the rail and gangway which was lashed thereto, and the boat was so full of gear and tackle that at first it was quite impossible for anyone to find a seat in the boat. It was a difficult task for any woman to get into this boat; my wife fell in, and in so doing dropped her jewel case out
of her handbag into the bottom of the boat, and it was seen no more that day. The husbands followed their wives into the boat and several other men among the first-class passengers also clambered in.

Directly after the order to lower away was given, and before anyone could settle in the boat the stern falls broke, and for a second the boat hung from the bow falls vertically, the occupants hanging on to anything they could. Then, immediately afterwards, the bow falls broke, or were cut, and the boat dropped into the water and righted itself. We were still alongside the ship when another boat was swung out and lowered immediately on to our heads. We managed to push off just in time before the other boat, the falls of which also broke, reached the water.

Thus, there had been no preparation made for accidents—we might have been living in the times of profoundest peace for all the trouble that had been taken to see that everything was ready in case of accident. Some passengers had asked for boat drill when the
ship left Singapore, but were told there was no need for it, or for any preparations till after Cape Town, which, alas! never was reached. Accordingly passengers had no places given to them in the boats, the boats were not ready, and confusion instead of order prevailed. It was nothing short of a miracle that more people were not drowned.

If the ship had only stopped when ordered by signals to do so, there would have been no firing at all. Even if she had stopped after the warning shots had been fired no more firing would have taken place, and nobody need have left the ship at all. It seemed too, at the time, that if only the "Hitachi" had turned tail and bolted directly the "Wolf's" smoke was seen on the horizon by the officer on watch on the bridge—at the latest, this must have been about one-thirty—she might have escaped altogether, as she was a much quicker boat than the "Wolf." At any rate, she might have tried. Her fate would have been no worse if she had failed to escape—for surely even the Germans could not deny any ship the right to escape if she could effect
it. Certainly the seaplane might have taken up the chase, and ordered the “Hitachi” to stop. We heard afterwards that one ship—the “Laruna,” from New Zealand to San Francisco—had been caught in this way. The seaplane had hovered over her and dropped messages on her deck: ordering her to follow the plane to a concealed harbor near by, failing which, bombs would be dropped to blow up the ship. Needless to say, the ship followed these instructions.

“There was no panic, and the women were splendid”—how often one has read that in these days of atrocity at sea! We were to realize it now, the women were indeed splendid. There was no crying or screaming or hysteria, or wild enquiries. They were perfectly calm and collected, none of them showed the least fear, even under fire.

As we thought the ship was slowly sinking, we pushed off from her side as quickly as possible. There were now four lifeboats in the water at some distance from each other. The one in which we were contained about twenty-four persons. There was no officer
or member of the crew with us, while another boat contained officers and sailors only. No one in our boat knew where we were to go, or what we were to do. One passenger wildly suggested that we should hoist a sail and set sail for Colombo, two days’ steaming away! Search was made for provisions and water in our boat, but she was so full of people and impedimenta that nothing could be found. It was found, however, that water was rapidly coming into the boat, and before long it reached to our knees. The hole which should have been plugged could not be found, so for more than an hour some of the men took turns at pulling and baling the water out with their sun-helmets. This was very hot work, as it must be remembered we were not far from the Equator. Ultimately, however, the hole was found and plugged. An Irish Tommy going home from Singapore was in our boat. He was most cheerful and in every way helpful, working hard and pulling all the time. It was he who plugged the hole, and as he was almost the only one among us who seemed to have any useful
knowledge about the management of lifeboats, we were very glad to reckon him among our company.

The four boats were now drifting aimlessly over the sea, when an order was shouted to us, apparently from a Japanese officer in one of the other boats, to tie up with the other three boats. After some time this was accomplished and the four boats in line drifted on the water. The two steamers had stopped, so we did not know what was happening on board either of them, but saw the raider's motor-launch going between her and her prize, and picking up some of the men who had fallen into the sea when the boat capsized. Luckily, the sharks with which these waters are infested had been scared off by the gunfire. We realized, when we were in the lifeboats, what a heavy swell there was on the sea, as both steamers were occasionally hidden from us when we were in the trough of the waves. There was no one in command of any of the boats, and we simply waited to see what was going to happen.