CHAPTER X

THE Germans were now getting very anxious as they approached the blockade zone. They affected, however, to believe that there was no blockade, and that there was no need of one now that America was in the war. "No one will trade with us," they said, "accordingly there is no need for a blockade." Nevertheless they were at great pains to keep as far as possible from any place in which British ships might appear. But unfortunately not one did appear, here or anywhere else, to rescue us, although we felt certain in our own minds that some of our ships would be present and save us in these parts of the seas which we believed were regularly patrolled. It was a bitter disappointment to us that we saw none. But as some of the passengers remarked to the Captain, "If there is no blockade, as the Germans say, why haven't you more raiders
out, instead of only one, and why have so few been able to come out?” There was of course no answer to this! The Captain further remarked that even if there were a blockade it would always be possible to get through it at the week-end, as all the British blockading fleet returned to port for that time! The “Wolf,” he said, “came out and got home through the blockade at the week-end. It was quite simple, we were to do the same, and we should be escorted by submarines as the “Wolf” had been on both occasions.

On the twentieth we were off Bergen and saw the coast in the distance. I suggested to the Captain that it would save much trouble if he would land us there. He smilingly replied that he would very much like to, but was afraid it was quite impossible! The next day we were nearer the coast and saw a couple of suspicious-looking steam trawlers which gave the Germans a few anxious moments, and on that night we encountered the greatest storm we experienced on the cruise. The wind was terrific, huge
seas broke over the ship, the alleyway outside the cabins was awash all the night, and the water even invaded the saloon to a small extent. Articles and receptacles for water that had not been made absolutely fast in the cabins were tossed about; many cabins were drenched and running with water. The noise of the wind howling and the seas breaking on the deck was so alarming to those in the outside cabins that they left them and assembled in the saloon, though sleep that night was utterly impossible, there or anywhere else on the ship. The ship, though steaming full speed, made no progress that night, but went back, and in three days, the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first, made only a hundred knots.

After such stormy nights, and in such bitter cold weather, a breakfast of cold canned crab, or dry bread with sugar, or rice and hot water plus a very little gravy, or bread and much-watered condensed milk, was not very nourishing or satisfying, but very often that was all we had. This weather of course pleased the German Cap-
tain, who said that no enemy ship would or could board him under such conditions. In fact, he said no enemy vessel would be out of port in such weather! The weather alone was sufficiently terrifying to the landsmen amongst us, and the prospect of having to take to the lifeboats at any moment if the Germans took it into their heads to sink the ship were she sighted by an enemy vessel, added to the fears of all of us. There had been no boat drill, and the lifeboat accommodation was hopelessly inadequate for the more than eighty people now on board. It is certain that with the mixed crew there would have been a savage fight for the boats. The prospect was alarming from any point of view, and one of the greatest anxiety for us all. Physical distress and discomfort were not the only things we had to contend with—the nervous strain was also very great.

On February twenty-second we rounded the Naze. Here we thought we should certainly come across some British vessel. But that day and the next passed—it seemed as if we, too, were to get in during the week-
end!—and hope of rescue disappeared. Many messages had been dropped overboard in bottles and attached to spars, etc., during the voyage, but all apparently in vain. The bearing of the Germans towards us became markedly changed. We were almost in their clutches now, the arrival at Kiel and transfer to Ruhlebèn were openly talked of, and our captors showed a decided inclination to jeer at us and our misfortunes. We were told that all diaries, if we kept them, must be destroyed, or we should be severely punished when we arrived in Germany. Accordingly, those of us who had kept diaries made ready to destroy them, but fortunately did not do so. I had written mine in Siamese characters during the whole time, so the Germans could not have gained much information from it.

Sunday, February twenty-fourth dawned, a cold, cheerless day. “I suppose this time next week we shall be going to church in Kiel,” said one of the prisoners to the chief mate at breakfast. “Or,” the latter replied, “I might be going to church with my brother,
who is already a prisoner on the Isle of Man!” We were now in comparatively narrow waters of the Skagerrak, and we saw only one vessel here, a Dutch fishing boat. Our last chance had nearly gone. Most of us were now resigned to our fate and saw no hope—in fact, I had written in my diary the day before “There is no hope left, no boat of ours to save us”—but some said we still might see a British war vessel when we rounded the Skaw. At mid-day the sailor on the lookout came into the saloon and reported to the Captain that a fog was coming on. “Just the weather I want,” he exclaimed. “With this lovely fog we shall round the Skaw and get into German waters unobserved.” It looked, indeed, as if our arrival in Germany were now a dead certainty.

But the fog that the Captain welcomed was just a little too much for him; it was to prove his undoing instead of his salvation. The good old German Gott about whom we had heard so much was not going to see them through this time. For once, we were to be favored. The white fog thickened after the
mid-day meal, and luckily for us, it was impossible to see far ahead. Soon after two we passed a floating mine, and we knew that before long we should be going through a mine field—not a very cheerful prospect with floating mines round us in a fog. But we were all too far gone to care now; nothing could be much worse than imprisonment in Germany, and some of us gathered together in our cold and gloomy cabin were discussing the prospects and condition of this when, at three-thirty on that Sunday afternoon, we felt a slight bump, as if the ship had touched bottom. Then another bump, and then still one more! We were fast! Were we really to be saved at the very last minute? It began to look like it, like the beginning of the end, but it would not do to build too much on this slender foundation. The engines continued working, but no progress was made; they were reversed—still no movement. The fog was fairly thick but we could just make out through it the line of the shore and the waves breaking on it some distance away. Two sirens were going at
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full blast, one from a lightship and one from a lighthouse.

The German officers became agitated; with great difficulty a boat was got out, soundings made, and various means adopted to work the ship off, but all were of no avail. The Captain admitted that his charts of this particular spot were not new and not good. It was impossible to tell the state of the tide at this moment; we all hoped it might be high tide, for then our rescue would be certain. The engines were set to work from time to time, but no movement could be made. Darkness fell, and found us still stuck fast. Our spirits had begun to rise, the prospect was distinctly brighter, and soon after six o'clock the Assistant Lieutenant went ashore in mufti to telephone to the nearest port, Frederikshavn, for help. What reply he received we never heard, but we did hear that he reported he was on a German ship bound from Bergen to Kiel and wanted help. Lourenco Marquez to Kiel, via Iceland, would have been nearer the truth!

About eight o'clock we heard from one of
the neutrals among the crew that the Captain of a salvage tug was shortly coming aboard to inquire into matters. The ladies among us decided to stay in the saloon while the Captain of the tug interviewed the German Captain in the chartroom above it. On the arrival of the tug the Captain on the bridge, the ladies in the saloon created a veritable pandemonium, singing, shrieking and laughing at the top of their voices. It sounded more like a Christmas party than one of desperate prisoners in distress. The Danish Captain departed; what had been the result of his visit we did not know, but at any rate he knew there were women on board. The German Captain came down into the saloon, asked pleasantly enough what all the noise was about, and said, “I have offered the salvage people £5,000 to tow the ship off; money is nothing to us ‘Germans. This will be done at four tomorrow morning, and we shall then proceed on our way to Kiel.”

Some of us had talked over a plan suggested by the second mate of a captured ship, by which one of the neutrals among the crew
should contrive to go ashore in one of the tug’s boats in the darkness and communicate with the nearest British Consul, informing him of the situation and the desperate case we were in. We promised him £500 to be raised among the “saloon passengers,” if by so doing our rescue should be accomplished.

We had remained in the saloon to talk over developments when we heard that a Danish gunboat had come nearly alongside, and that her Commander was coming on board. He had presumably received a report from the Captain of the tug. We heard afterwards that he had his suspicions about the ship and had brought with him on board one of his own men to make inquiries of the crew, among whom were Norwegians, Swedes and Danes, while he kept the German Commander busy in the saloon. The previous mistake of taking the Danish Captain on to the bridge was not to be repeated. The Commander of the gunboat was to come into the saloon, so the ladies could not remain there and make their presence known. But some of them contrived to leave some
of their garments on the table and settee in the saloon—a muff, hats, gloves, etc. These the Danish Commander must have seen; and not only that, for he saw some ladies who had stood in one door of the saloon before they were sent to their cabins, when he entered at the other one. He also saw a passenger in khaki uniform, the Australian Major of the A.M.C., and other passengers standing with the ladies in the alleyway. If he had entertained any suspicions as to the correct character of the ship, which the Germans were of course trying to conceal, they must have been strongly confirmed by now. It was now too late for us to be sent to our cabins, as a German sailor came and ordered. We had achieved our object.

It was a night of great unrest, but finally most of us lay down in our clothes. For very many nights we had been unable to rest properly owing to the violence of the weather, the possibility of having to leave the ship at any moment, and our general anxiety concerning our desperate condition.
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We had not had our clothes off for many days. At four a.m. we heard the engines working, as the Captain had told us they would, but still no movement could be heard. Soon the engines ceased; it was evident then that the attempt to get the ship off must for the present be given up. The wind was rising, and the sea getting rougher, and at six a.m. a German sailor came and knocked at the door of all the cabins, saying, "Get up, and pack your baggage and go ashore." It was too good to be true—never was an order more willingly and gladly obeyed! But first we had to see how the ship stood with regard to the shore; we went out on deck to look—there was the blessed green shore less than half a mile away, the first really solid earth we had been close to since we left Colombo exactly five months before. Only those who have seen nothing but the sea for many months can imagine with what a thrill of joy we saw the shore, and realized that we were saved at last. We had seen the sea under nearly every aspect possible from the Equator to the Arctic re-
gions, and we had appreciated more than ever before its vastness. Not many of us wished for sea travel again.

It did not take us long to dress and throw our things into our bags. When we had done so and were ready to go to the lifeboat, we were told that we might take no baggage whatever, as the lifeboat was from a shore station and could save lives only, not baggage.

The German Captain took his bad luck in good part, but he was of course as sick as we were rejoiced at the turn events had taken. He had known the night before that he could get no help from the Danish authorities, as they refused towing assistance till all the passengers had been taken off the ship. But he had hoped to get off unaided at four in the morning. He professed great anger with the Danes, saying that if they had only helped as he requested, the ship could have been towed off in the night, and we with all our baggage could have been landed at a Danish port alongside a pier the next morning, instead of having to leave all

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our baggage behind on the ship. I fancy not many of us believed this; if the ship had been got off we should have brought up at Kiel and not at any Danish port. And, as the tug Captain said afterwards, if he had towed the ship off the Germans probably would have cut the hawser directly afterwards, he would have received no pay for his work, and we certainly should not have landed in Denmark.