CHAPTER VII

IT must not be supposed that the life of the prisoners on the "Igotz Mendi" in any way approximated to that of passengers on an ordinary passenger ship. To begin with, there were no ship's servants to wait on us with the exception of the Spanish steward, a youth who "waited" at table and excelled in breaking ship's crockery. If the cabins were to be kept clean, we had to do it ourselves. Every morning saw the occupants sweeping out and cleaning up their cabins, as no ship's servant ever entered them. The water supply was very limited, and had to be fetched by ourselves—no matter what the weather—sometimes from the fore peak, and sometimes from a pump near the ship's galley. Washing water and drinking water were served out twice a day, at 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., an ordinary water can being the allowance of the
former, and a water bottle that of the latter. The supply of washing water was very inadequate, and no hot water was ever available. After washing ourselves, we had to wash our clothes in the same water—for there was of course no laundry on board—and then the cabin floor after that. By this time the water was mud. It was impossible to have a proper bath all the time we were on board, for there was no water supply in the bathroom, and it was kept in an extremely dirty condition.

The saloon, about eighteen feet square, in which all the meals were served in two sittings, was very rarely clean, and the habits of the Captain’s pup did not improve matters. The pup, born on the “Wolf,” rejoiced in the name of “Luchs” and as his presence was so evident in the saloon, it was often appropriately named the “Salon de luxe.” The table “appointments” were often disgusting. The table cloth was filthy after the first meal or so, thanks to the rolling of the ship, but was only changed twice, sometimes only once a week. Cups were used without
saucers, and spoons gradually disappeared, so that towards the end one had to suffice between four or five persons.

We got thoroughly sick of the food provided, but the German officers and crew had just the same. The “Hitachi” had been carrying ten thousand cases of canned crab to England. A great part of this was saved, and divided between the “Wolf” and her prize. None of us ever want to see or hear of this commodity again; we were fed on it till most of us loathed it, but as there was nothing else to eat when it was served, we perforce had to eat that, or ‘dry bread, and several’ of us chose the latter. Bully beef, every variety of bean, dried vegetables, dried fish that audibly announced its advent to the table, bean soup, and pea soup we got just as sick of, till, long before the end, all the food served nauseated us. Tea, sometimes made in a coffee pot, sometimes even with salt water, was the usual hot drink provided, but coffee was for some time available once a day. We owe a great debt to one of our fellow-prisoners, a ship’s cook, captured
from one of the other ships, who in return for his offer to work as baker was promised his liberty, which fortunately he has now secured, though no thanks to the Germans. He baked, under the most difficult conditions, extraordinarily good bread, and over and over again we should have gone without food but for this. We were often very hungry, for there was nothing to eat between "supper" at 5.30, and breakfast next morning at 8.30. The Captain had given each lady a large box of biscuits from the "Hitachi," and my wife and I used to eat a quarter of a biscuit each before turning in for the night. We could not afford more—the box might have to last us for many months.

Mention has been made of the ship's rolling. Her capacity for this was incredible—in the smoothest sea, whether stopped or under steam, she rolled heavily from side to side, and caused great discomfort, inconvenience, and often alarm to all on board. The remark, "The 'Mendi' roll, fresh every day for every meal, for breakfast, dinner and tea," was made by someone at almost every
meal time, as we clutched at our food, gliding or jumping from end to end of the saloon table, accompanied by the smashing of crockery and upsetting of liquids and soup. Even the Captain was astonished at the rolling of the ship, as he well might have been, when one night he, in common with most of us, was flung out of his berth. No ship ever rolled like it—the bath in the bathroom even got loose and slid about in its socket, adding to the great din on board.

As may be imagined there was not much to do on board. The few books we had between us were passed round and read over and over again. Some were also sent over from the “Wolf” for us. Card games of various kinds also helped to pass the time, and the Captain and some of the prisoners held a “poker school” morning, afternoon and evening in the saloon. But time, nevertheless, dragged very heavily.

We were at liberty to go practically where we liked on board, but we were never able to get far away from the German sailors, who always appeared to be listening to our
conversation, no matter where we were. As on the "Wolf," they were sometimes caught spying on us, and listening at the portholes or ventilators of our cabins.

We next picked up the "Wolf" on the afternoon of December nineteenth and heard that since we had last seen her she had sunk a French sailing vessel loaded with grain for Europe. The two ships proceeded on parallel courses for Trinidad, but about eight p.m. both ships turned sharply round and doubled on their tracks, proceeding on a southeasterly course at full speed. We learnt the reason for this the next day. German raiders had previously coaled and hidden at Trinidad but Brazil was now in the war, so that hole was stopped, and the "Wolf" had intercepted a wireless from the Commander of a Brazilian cruiser to the garrison on Trinidad. Hence her rapid flight! But for that wireless message the "Wolf" would have walked right into the trap, and we should have been free within twelve hours from the time she picked up the message.
Once again wireless had been our undoing. The "Hitachi" had wirelessed the hour of her arrival at, and departure from Singapore and Colombo, the "Wolf" of course had picked up the messages and was ready waiting for her. One other ship, if not more, was caught in just the same way. The "Matunga" had wirelessed, not even in code, her departure, with the nature of her cargo, from Sydney to New Guinea, and she wirelessed again when within a few hours of her destination. The "Wolf" waited for her, informed her that she had on board just the cargo the "Wolf" needed, captured, and afterwards sunk her. The "Wolf's" success in capturing ships and evading hostile cruisers was certainly due to her intercepting apparently indiscriminate wirelessing between ships, and between ships and shore—at one time in the Indian Ocean the "Wolf" was picking up news in four languages—and to her seaplane which enabled her to scout thoroughly and to spot an enemy ship long before she could have been seen by the enemy.
Soon after leaving the Indian Ocean, the seaplane had been taken to pieces and placed in the 'tween decks, so that if the "Wolf" had been seen by another steamer, her possession of a seaplane would not be revealed.

The two ships proceeded on their new course at full speed for the next two days. On the twenty-first they slowed down, hoping to coal in the open sea. The next day both ships stopped, but the condition of the sea would not admit of coaling; we were then said to be about seven hundred miles east of Montevideo. It was a great disappointment to the Germans that they were prevented from coaling and spending their Christmas under the shelter of Trinidad, but it became quite clear that all the holes for German raiders in this part of the ocean had now been stopped, and that they would have to coal in the open sea or not at all. Some of us thought the Germans might go back to Tristan da Cunha or even to Gough Island—both British possessions in the South Atlantic—but the Germans would not risk this. Even St. Helena was mentioned as a possible
coaling place but the Germans said that was impracticable, as it would mean an attack on an unfortified place, as if this would have been a new procedure for German armed forces!

But the disappointment about Trinidad was mitigated by other wireless news received. The Commander of the "Wolf" called all his men together, and harangued them to the effect that the latest news was that Russia and Rumania were now out of the war, having given in to Germany, that the war would certainly be over in six months, and that the "Wolf" would then go home in safety to a victorious, grateful and appreciative Fatherland. Some such spur as this was very necessary to the men, who were getting very discontented with the length of the cruise and conditions prevailing, notably the monotony of the cruise and threatened shortage of food, drink and tobacco. The "Wolf" had brought out from Germany enormous stores of provisions for the cruise, which was expected to last about a year. In fact her cargo from Germany con-
sisted of coal, stores, ammunition and mines only. She replenished her stores solely from the prizes she took.

Christmas Eve was still too rough for the ships to tie up alongside, and our Christmas the next day was the reverse of merry. The Germans had held a Christmas service on the "Wolf" on Christmas Eve, and sounds of the band and singing were wafted to us over the waters. We could hold no service on the "Igotz Mendi" as we had no piano, but our friends on the "Wolf," so we heard afterwards, gathered together in the 'tween decks and joined in some Christmas music. On Christmas morning the Spanish Captain regaled the ladies with some choice brand of Spanish wine, and offered first-class cigars to the men prisoners, rather better than the "Stinkadoros" sometimes offered us by the crew. German officers on the ships exchanged visits and we all tried to feel the day was not quite ordinary. Our thoughts and wishes on this sad Christmas Day may perhaps be "better imagined than described." The German officers had a great feast and
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a jolly time on the “Wolf.” One cow and three pigs had been killed for the Christmas feast, but they did not go far between nearly eight hundred people and all the prisoners, at least, were glad when the dismal farce of Christmas under such conditions was over.

The weather on Boxing Day was only a little more favorable than that on Christmas Day, but the Germans decided to wait no longer to coal the “Wolf.” They had previously conveyed water to our ship from the “Wolf” in boats. The same method of transferring coal was discussed, but that idea was abandoned. At five p.m. she tied up alongside us. She bumped into us with considerable force when she came up, and not many of us on board the “Igotz Mendi” will ever forget that night. Both ships were rolling heavily, and repeatedly bumping into each other, each ship quivering from end to end, and the funnel of the “Igotz Mendi” was visibly shaking at every fresh collision. Sleep was impossible for anyone on our boat; in fact, many feared to turn in at all as they
thought some of the plates of the boats might be stove in. The next day was no better, but rather worse. About six p.m. there was a great crash which alarmed all; it was due to the "Wolf's" crashing into and completely smashing part of the bridge of our ship. This was enough for the Germans. They decided to suspend operations, and at seven p.m. the "Wolf" sheered off, having coaled six hundred tons in twenty-five hours. The coaling process had severely damaged the "Wolf," many of whose plates were badly dented. We had lost eighteen large fenders between the ships, and the "Wolf" was leaking to the extent of twelve tons an hour. The "Igotz Mendi" had come off better. None of her plates were dented, she was making no water, and the only visible signs of damage to her were many twisted and bent stanchions on the port side that met the "Wolf."

We had been allowed to send letters for Christmas—censored, of course, by the Germans—to our "Hitachi" friends on the "Wolf," and when the two ships were along-
side we were allowed to speak to them, though conversation under such conditions was very difficult, as one minute our friends would be several feet above us, and the next below us with the rolling of the ship; and the noise of the coaling, shouting of orders, and roaring of the water between the ships was deafening. There did not seem much point in censoring letters, as the prisoners on the "Igotz Mendi" and the "Wolf" were allowed to talk to each other a day or so after the letters were sent, and although a German sentry was on guard while those conversations were going on, it was possible for the prisoners to say what they liked to each other, as the sentry could only have caught an occasional word or two.

I have since been asked why the prisoners and Spaniards on the Spanish ship did not attack the prize crew and seize the ship when we were not in company with the "Wolf." It sounds quite simple, but it must be remembered that although the prize crew was certainly a small one, they were well supplied with arms, bombs, and hand gren-
ades, while the prisoners and Spaniards had no arms at all, as they had all been taken away by the Germans. Furthermore, an attack of this kind would have been far worse than useless unless its absolute success could have been definitely assured. There were very few young and able men among the prisoners, while the German prize crew were all picked men, young and powerful. The working crew of the ship was composed of Spaniards and other neutrals, including a Greek and a Chilian. It would have been absolutely necessary to have secured the allegiance and support of every one of these. The plan of seizing the ship, which sounds simple, was discussed among us many a time, but it was in reality quite impracticable. What would our fate have been if we had tried—and failed? And what of the women and children on board?