CHAPTER IX

A last effort was made to persuade the Captain to ask the "Wolf's" Commander to release the Spanish ship here, take all the prize crew off, and send us back to Cape Town, for a suspicion began to grow in our minds that Germany and nowhere else was the destination intended for us. But our Captain would not listen to this suggestion, and said he was sure the Spanish Captain would not go back to Cape Town even if he promised to do so.

On the next day, January twenty-fourth, relief seemed nearer than it had done since our capture four months before. I was sitting on the starboard deck, when suddenly I saw coming up out of the mist, close to our starboard bow, what looked like a cruiser with four funnels. The Spanish officer on the bridge had apparently not seen it, or did not want to! Neither apparently
had the German sailor, if, indeed, he was even on the bridge at that moment. I rushed to inform the American sailing ship Captain of my discovery, and he confirmed my opinion that it was a four-funnelled warship. The Germans were by this time fully alarmed and the ship slowed down a little; the Captain, evidently also thinking that the vessel was a cruiser, went to his cabin to dispose of the ship's papers, the crew got into their best uniforms to surrender, and it looked as if help were at hand at last. We were all out on deck, delighted beyond words, and saw the ship—i.e. must be remembered that it was a very misty day—resolve itself into two two-funnelled ships, apparently transports, one seemingly in distress and very much camouflaged, and the other standing by. Soon, however, they proceeded on their course and crossed our bows fairly close. We were then all ordered to our cabins, and we saw the two ships steam off to the westward, without having spoken to us or given any evidence of having seen us at all.

It was a most bitter disappointment to us,
comparable to that of shipwrecked sailors on a desert island watching a ship expected to deliver them pass out of sight. But it was a great relief to the Germans. We never discovered what ships they were, but the American said he believed them to be American transports and that each mounted a gun. If only we had seen them the day before, when we were in the company of the “Wolf,” they might have been suspicious, and probably have been of some help to us.

In the midst of the excitement the Spanish chief mate had rushed onto the bridge and into the wireless-room, and while the wireless operator was out of the room, or his attention had been diverted, he took from their places all the six or eight bombs on board and threw them overboard. It was a plucky act, for had he been discovered by the armed sentry while doing it, he would have undoubtedly been shot on the spot. On the next day, on the morning of which he saw two sailing ships far distant, an inquiry was held as to the disappearance of the bombs, which would of course have been used to sink
the ship, and the chief mate owned up. He said that he did it for the sake of the women and children on board as the sea was rough their lives would have been in danger if they had been put in the lifeboats when the ship was bombed. He was confined to his cabin for the rest of the voyage, and later sentenced by the Commander of the “Wolf” to three years’ imprisonment in Germany and a fine of two thousand marks. From this time on all the Spanish officers were relieved of their duties.

The Germans had told us that, in the event of the prize being captured while the weather was rough, the ship would not be bombed or sunk, as they had no desire to endanger the lives of the women or children amongst us. In fact, so they said, the ship would not be bombed under any conditions when once the “Wolf” had got all the coal she wanted: It was indeed difficult to see what purpose would be served by the Germans in sinking the Spanish ship, if she were overhauled by an Allied cruiser. The Allies could not keep her, as she would have to be restored to Spain.
—the Germans said they would not keep her, but return her to her owners. To have deliberately sunk her would only have meant a gratuitous offense to Spain. Nevertheless the next time we met the “Wolf” a new supply of bombs and hand grenades was put on board our ship. At the same time an extra Lieutenant came on board, additional neutrals were sent over to help work the ship, and the prize crew was increased from nine to nineteen. All the prize crew now wore caps and the words “S. M. S. Otter” inscribed thereon.

The Kaiser’s birthday, which fell on a Sunday, was marked by a most terrific storm. The wind was raging for hours at a hurricane force between eleven and twelve, the seas were between thirty and forty feet high and it seemed impossible that the ship could live in such a sea. But notwithstanding terrible rolling, she shipped very little water, but all of the prisoners were alarmed at the rough weather and the rolling of the ship. From this day onwards we lived in a condition of great misery and
death stared us in the face many times. It got colder and colder every day for a considerable time; the food got worse and worse and we were on short rations; the ship became more and more dirty, smokes ran short,—only some ancient dusty shag brought from Germany by the “Wolf,” and some virulent native tobacco from New Guinea remained—and conditions generally became more and more beyond endurance. Darkness fell early in these far northern latitudes, and the long nights were very dreary and miserable. Sundays seemed to be the days on which the worst storms occurred, though on very few of the days from this time onwards did we have anything but extremely dirty weather. On February fifth we again met the “Wolf”—we had sighted her on the evening of the fourth, but it was too rough then to communicate. With the “Wolf’s” usual luck the weather moderated next day, and the ships stopped. Just as the Germans on land always seemed to get the weather they wanted, so they were equally
favored at sea. This was noticed over and over again.

Those who had written letters to be sent on the “Wolf” sent them over on this day, and the Spanish chief mate expected to be sent aboard the “Wolf,” as we might not meet her again. Luckily for him, however, he was not transferred, and neither he nor we ever saw the “Wolf” again, after the morning of February sixth.

We heard from the “Wolf” that she was getting very short of food, and that there was much sickness, including many cases of scurvy, on board. Some of the prisoners, we knew, had very little clothing, and positively none for cold weather, and our hearts were sore at the thought of so many of our fellow-countrymen, many of whom we had known in good and ill fortune, being taken into captivity in Germany.

The next day we entered the Arctic circle. The cold was intense and the cabins were icy, the temperature falling as low as 14° F. in some of them. There was no heating ap-
paratus on the ship, with the exception of a couple of small heating pipes in the saloon. The cabin curtains froze to the ports; all the cabin roofs leaked and it was impossible to keep the floors and bedding dry; and in our cabin, in addition, we had water constantly flowing and swishing backwards and forwards between the iron deck of the ship and the wooden floor of the cabin. This oozed up through the floor and accumulated under the settee, and on many nights we emptied five or six buckets full of icy water from under the settee which had also to be used as a bed. At last I persuaded the Captain to allow one of the sailors to drill a hole in the side of the cabin so that water could have an outlet on to the deck. Since the great storm on the Kaiser’s birthday our feet had never been dry or warm, and were in this condition till some hours after we got ashore. The ports of the cabins had all long ago been painted black in order that no light might show through at night. We had to sit in these cold and dark cabins during the day. The weather prevented us from being on the
deck, which was often covered with frost and snow, and often there was nowhere else to sit. The electric light was on for only a limited time each day, so, as the ports could not be opened on the account of the cold, we asked and obtained permission to scratch a little of the paint off the ports in our cabin. This made things a little more bearable, but it can easily be imagined how people who had been living in tropical climates for many years fared under such conditions. It was nothing short of cruel to expose women and children to this after they had been dragged in captivity over the seas for many months. The Captain had ordered a part of the bunkers to be cleared, so that the prisoners might sit there in the cold weather. But the place was so dirty and uncomfortable and difficult of access, in addition to its being in darkness, and quite unprovided with seats, that most of the prisoners preferred the crowded little saloon.

On the morning of February seventh we for the first time encountered ice floes, when attempting the northern passage between
Greenland and Iceland. About eleven a.m. we stopped and hooted for the "Wolf" as a fog had come on, the first time we had heard a steamer’s siren since the day of our capture. We waited for some hours in the ice, but no answering signal came back, so the Captain decided to turn back as he thought it impossible to force his way through the ice. We therefore went back again on our course, the Captain hoping that the wind would change and cease blowing the ice floes from off the shores of Greenland. After a day or two of slow steaming on this course we resumed our attempt to go to the north of Iceland, evidently to escape the attention of the British ships which the Germans expected to encounter between the south of Iceland and the Faroes. But before long it became evident that ice was still about, and in the darkness of the early morning of February eleventh we bumped heavily against ice several times. This time the Captain abandoned his attempt to go through the northern passage, and turned the ship round to try his luck in the pas-
sage he did not expect to be so free from British attentions.

We thought perhaps that as we were on short rations and water was running short and the case of us all really desperate, the Captain would land us and give up the ship at Reykjavik; leaving us there to be rescued. Even a stay in Iceland would be better than one in Germany, for which country we now all suspected we were bound.

To add to our miseries, the Captain told us on February eleventh for the first time that it was, and always had been the intention to take us on the "Igotz Mendi" to Germany, there to be interned in civilian prisoners' camps. He told us too, that the women and those of the men over military age would be released at once, but we all declined to believe anything else our captors told us, as they had deliberately and repeatedly deceived us by assuring us at various times that they were going to land us in Spain, or Norway, or some other neutral country.

At daybreak on the eleventh we were still
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among ice floes, but going away from instead of meeting them, and on that morning we saw in the distance the coast of Iceland, the first land that we had seen since the Maldiv Islands, a week after our capture, i.e. more than four months before. We also saw a few fishing boats off the coast.

We now shaped a course for the coast of Norway, keeping to the north of the Faroés. On Sunday, the seventeenth, we again ran into a very heavy storm. Ever since the storm on January twenty-seventh the propeller had been constantly racing and sending shudders through the ship from stem to stern. On this day this feature, which was always disconcerting and to a certain extent alarming, became more marked, and the thud with which the ship met the seas more and more loud, so loud indeed that on one occasion the Captain thought we had struck a mine and rushed from the saloon to the bridge to ascertain what damage had been done. The Captain and crew had by this time become very anxious as to the fate of the “Wolf,” as no news had been received
concerning her. Day after day on which the Captain told us he expected news went by without any being received. But on the evening of the nineteenth the Captain informed us that he had received a wireless message announcing the safe arrival of the "Wolf" at a German port. The Germans seemed singularly little elated at the news, and hardly ever mentioned the subject again after that evening. This was so different from what we had expected that most of the prisoners did not believe the "Wolf" had got home. We hoped that she had been intercepted and captured by a British cruiser, and that with any luck a similar fate might be in store for us.

The "Wolf" had certainly made a wonderful cruise and the Germans were naturally very proud of it. They had successfully evaded the enemy for fifteen months, and had kept their ship in good repair, for they had first-class mechanics and engineers on board. But she must have been very weather-worn and partly crippled before she arrived at a home port. She had touched at
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no port or no shore from the day she left Germany till the day she returned to the Fatherland. She had sunk seven steamers and seven sailing ships, and claimed many more ships sunk as a result of her minelaying. Beside the prizes already named she had captured the "Tarantelle," "Wordsworth," "Jumna," "Dee," "Winslow," and "Encore," the last three of which were sailing vessels. Her first prize, the "Tarantelle," taken in February, 1917, in the Indian Ocean, was originally a German ship captured by the British. On her recapture by the Germans, she was equipped as a raider and minelayer and sent off on an expedition by herself. But soon afterwards she came to grief near Aden "through enemy action."