

Reverberations

(never sent)

## Reverberations.

From his bed he looked out of the porthole at the curiously pitted piling which seemed to rock slowly to and fro. About him in the ward of the hospital ship the strangely assorted occupants of the hanging beds had become quiet, lulled to sleep by exhaustion or merciful opiates. A nurse moved silently among them.

His mind turned restlessly to the events of the last twenty four hours since he had left Folkestone on the ill-fated Sussex. It had seemed strange that in a harbor so full of shipping no other vessel was bound across the channel for France. But the cross channel passenger line had been immune from torpedo attack so far. He remembered that a short distance out at sea they had passed floating bales and lumber. Why had they not heeded this mute warning of danger?

The warm March sun glinted on the unruffled surface of the sea. Smooth hills of water shouldered their way toward the crowded vessel and each in turn caused the forerail, on which he had leaned, to soar upward. Gulls swam at a little distance and the war seemed very far away.

Then, in an instant, it had all changed. He seemed to be falling down, down, down from a great height and timbers turned slowly with him in that mill of crashing sound. Sound so loud that it blotted out all other sensations. How curiously vivid his thoughts became! It had flashed upon him that this must have been a torpedo and that life was over. But that, because of his unfinished work, seemed impossible. The whole bow must have been blown up and water must lie below, but it <sup>SEEMED</sup> he would never reach it. That slow moving timber up there would follow down upon him.-----Then he remembered lying still on something solid while boards drifted down over the wreckage. His watch struck him on the chest and he put it in his pocket. After that he could not remember but he must have crawled back to the deck where it was intact.

Away aft he could see people thronging the rail. A life-boat was being lowered. It was filled with men and several were sliding down the ropes. One end of the boat descended faster than the other. As it neared the water a man leaped from the rail upon the heads of those already in the boat, and it turned over. Heads bobbed in the water. It seemed gratifying that the first life-boat, in which was neither woman nor child, should refuse to bear its over-load of frenzied men.

Not far down the deck a bewildered woman stood running fingers through her wet, disheveled hair. She saw him and held out her arms like a little child. Her lips moved but no sound came to him over the gigantic roar of steam from somewhere below.

Where the bow had been there remained only a heap of wreckage. Surmounting it was the forerail he had leaned upon with his companions. Farther forward, like a pendulum swinging slowly to and fro, was a man suspended, ~~caught~~ by one foot. A green billow came rolling in, almost touched his waving white hair and then foamed against the wreckage as though disappointed.

The last boat was unlimbered. It filled with women and men in equal numbers this time. It was lowered to the water. Several men jumped <sup>FOR IT</sup> and one was pulled in over the stern. A Belgian soldier got out the oars and some in the boat waved a goodbye. He watched them pull away and then looked down into the dark water at the ship's side. There he saw a man bouyed up by his preserver, the white face with its horn-rimmed glasses floating like a bubble for a moment on the black surface of the sea. Shivering he had sat down on the deck.

There followed the long waiting ~~ing~~ for the ship to sink. The hissing of the steam grew less. In the debris forward now could be heard the voice of a woman calling in French for help. The cry was repeated monotonously, and sometimes, as though she were exhausted, the voice quavered and stopped. He had risen and tried to go forward but the broken leg seemed to take the courage out of him. Then in the

ANSWERED

dining saloon below a man's voice, calling "Ma cherie." A French officer in blue uniform could be seen through a rent in the deck, apparently lifting something. A few minutes later a slim girl and the officer stood on top of the wreckage in a long embrace.

Time passed. Could it be that the ship would not sink? Could her bulkheads hold?

A woman came along the dismantled deck searching for something. There were tears in her eyes. She moved several chairs and looked behind them. Then she asked <sup>ALOUD</sup> if anyone had seen her bags, she must get on dry shoes. A change came over her face when she saw that there were those about her whom she might help, and she went to work. Others came forward to lend a hand. They all seemed to be Americans.

With the dark came wind and waves which rushed upon and pounded the vessel's side as though fearful lest a prey should escape. The ship rolled under vast cold millions of stars, toward either horizon in turn. The wrecked bow was borne away and waves surged against the bulkheads. An occasional rocket had shown him rows of anxious faces on the after deck. Women and men who were, perhaps, adjusting themselves to the possibility of death, what it would mean to those left behind, what hopes must be relinquished. This was something they had not dreamed of. They had not gone to war. How many different causes were being served by those passengers. Mercy claimed the largest number, perhaps, also business, government, curiosity.

At midnight a sudden volley of commands in French had announced the arrival of a trawler. Without lights, out of the darkness she came, changing from a black shadow of unreality into a sturdy little vessel that crashed against the side of the rolling wreck. Then followed the transfer of passengers and crew, hazardous now because of the storm that was driving them through the night. He had peered down over the side. A group of sure-footed seamen were gathered on the deck of the trawler near an opening in the side of the Sussex. The two vessels were alternately borne apart and crashed together. By a hidden light he had seen that each time the trawler approached the ship a woman or child was tossed through the air to be caught

by the French sailors.

Down in the water, between the vessels, the prows of two life-boats pointing up were ground to pieces.

After the departure of the trawler for France there appeared in its place, as though by magic, a British destroyer, The Afridi. Waves swished over her and the rushing foam made fleeting silhouettes of the crew. The destroyer was quickly made fast and they came aboard the wreck. Two sailors ~~had~~ rolled him in a bamboo mat and hoisted him by a rope to a davit. He ~~had~~ swung, slowly rotating, out over the destroyer, for the moment able to see both vessels as they rocked and buffeted below him. Then he had been lowered into the hands of men who bore him aft over the dark deck, cursing in good-natured cockney as they stumbled along.

A voice at the bedside broke in on his memories. It was the British Medical Officer again, <sup>SAYING:</sup> "It was a torpedo that got your ship. Good luck she didn't sink.----Yes, the destroyer brought most of the wounded back to England, -a good many nationalities, but we have orders to take care of you all."