

# THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

By H. F. Gadsby

Somewhere in mid Ocean—"I suppose," said the Professor, edging up to me, "it is permissible for one gentleman to tell another that he is afraid of torpedoes." We shook hands upon it.

And yet the Professor, who is a son of the Old Land—though Canadianized these many years—was making his customary summer trip "Over home" in spite of all the German U-boats between hell and Montreal. To have done less would be to admit that Britannia did not rule the waves, which as our old friend Euclid says, is absurd.

The Professor was simply not letting the war interfere with his habits and ways of life—that was the English of it. He did his bit when he snapped his fingers at the German submarine menace, incidentally stating his life for sixteen long days against the perils of the deep. He was full of proud statistics of the glories of the British merchant marine which had ferried so many millions of soldiers safely and so many million tons of munitions, not quite so safely, across the seven seas and the narrow seas. But what would the navy be without the merchant marine to feed the great maw of the war with the necessities of life and death? What's more it is all in the day's work and there is no extra pay or war bonus for doing it.

The Professor recalled that the merchant marine had, in the course of duty, salted the sea floor with sixteen thousand of its bravest, and he wondered why there were not more medals for distinguished service flying about.

The first officer did not wonder at all. "The Admiralty," he said, "won't give us gold medals, which are reserved for the navy, and we think ourselves too good for silver ones. A British destroyer," he added with grim North-country humor, "rammed the Irish mail packet in the Channel the other day and her commander was decorated for it. But we haven't done anything wrong yet—so we haven't got any medals."

"The commander of this ship," the Professor remarked, "had four days ashore, and now he has to take her back through a devil-haunted ocean. He looks as if he had come through the torture chamber of the Spanish Inquisition. How he stands it beats me."

We shook hands on these sentiments and exchanged addresses in case his lifeboat should be luckier than mine or the other way about. We agreed that nobody should travel for pleasure these days. He was travelling as an Englishman to flout the Hun as I was travelling as a newspaper man to get a little copy and so we had a right to be there. But we were not so sure about some of the others.

One thing we were sure of—that everybody on that ship was as afraid of torpedoes as we were, not only the officers who had had active interviews with torpedoes in many waters, but the gallant gunners in khaki who had stood up to shells and bombs at the fighting front. They were of the same mind as the Irishman who preferred train-wreck to shipwreck. "Train wreck?" said Pat. "Why, there ye are." But shipwreck—where are ye?"

True! where are you? There is a weary waste of blue chill in the Atlantic and many a man has survived torpedoes to curl up and die of cold water.

Did I say everybody was afraid? Well, nearly everybody. Everybody, that is to say, except the cabin boy, rosy of cheek, blue of eye, and about as tall as a minute. "Have you ever been torpedoed?" I asked. "No," he chirped, "but I dearly hope I shall be." Can you beat it? On what literature has that young mind been feeding to wax so dauntless?

"Of course," said the Professor one sunny afternoon when we were inclined to look on the bright side of things, "this German submarine cam-

paign is impersonal. It's not you and me they're after. It's tonnage." "At the same time," I replied, "the last thing I want to see is a low, rakish periscope in the offing. The more offish it is, the better I like it. You offer me cold comfort, Professor, when you say that the one hundred and seventy pounds dead weight which I contribute to the general disaster will be regarded merely as excess tonnage."

"Last night," said the Professor, "a sheep-voiced tenor got up in the lounge and bleated a thing called 'Baby Mine.' I think the captain ought to put a stop to it. One may mention babies when women and children are present—that's all right—but not mines. They have no place in polite company. They are a painful reminder," added the Professor, who will have his joke. "We are beset by painful reminders," I chirped in. "The lifeboats swung outboard, the life belts worn everywhere except in bed, the two howitzers at our bow, the four point seven at our stern—all these are reminders that we live on the crumbling verge of a great tragedy. How I hate my life belt! I drag it about with me like a bad conscience."

"Don't slang the life belt," said the Professor. "It is made of the best material available—Kapok—ten times as buoyant as cork. It is cut in the latest fashion. The high ruff neck gives it a fifteenth century effect and the hump on the back makes me feel like Richard III on Bosworth Field. Moreover, it is as good as an overcoat on a cold night, and from what I notice on this ship it does not interfere with any obstacle between the V.A.D.'s and their flirtations with the young lieutenants."

"True," I murmured, "the life belt is the one best bet. Lifeboats may capsize or be smashed to pieces, but your life belt is always with you—or ought to be. When I go to bed at night I do three things. I sleep in my underclothes, and I put my trust in God, and my life belt under the pillow."

"Humph," said the Professor, who is a confirmed cynic, "are you sure that is the exact order?"

"This darkened ship," I complained, "making night darker with its closed ports and doused lights. It gets on my nerves. I have a gone feeling at the pit of the stomach. It must be torpid liver."

"No," said the Professor, "I have the same thing. The mesenterics shrivel, the duodenum whammles. It's not torpid liver. It's torpedoes. A good old Anglo-Saxon name for it is fear. It's a popular disease on this boat. We're carrying enough fear this voyage to sink the ship. Last night a man told me that he was in love with two women at home, and preserving a good average. I don't think a sin like that ought to be allowed aboard. It overloads us."

"Do you find," I asked, "that a door slamming wakes you up in the middle of the night, that a bigger wave than usual slapping at the keel causes you heart to beat faster, that heavy footsteps on the boat deck start you fumbling for the light, that—?"

"No need to go further," chimed in the Professor, "the symptoms are the same with all of us. A periscope in every ridgy wave against the skyline, a torpedo wake in every crest of foam. It certainly does get one's goat. Once upon a time the sailor believed in the Flying Dutchman. What he dreads which the sea serpent and the octopus are mild as gold fish."

"The other night," I volunteered, "I went up on deck. I saw what I took to be the white comb of a torpedo. It did not fade away as waves usually do. However, nothing came of it and I decided finally that it was the Hon. Newton Wesley Rowell swimming home in the midst of his favorite element."

"Forget politics," was the Professor's gruff comment. "There's a war on."

Sometimes we sought doubtful comfort from the first mate. "This ship," he said "has nine lives. We're up to the ninth right now. We've been torpedoed eight times—six of 'em in the Mediterranean. The Atlantic is pie compared to the Mediterranean—but it's no sweet job at that. This old hulk has been through a lot. Once we brought the wounded home from Gallipoli. They died all over the ship—went west a hundred a day. The place is full of ghosts. I hear them sometimes at night. The wind in the rigging, you know."

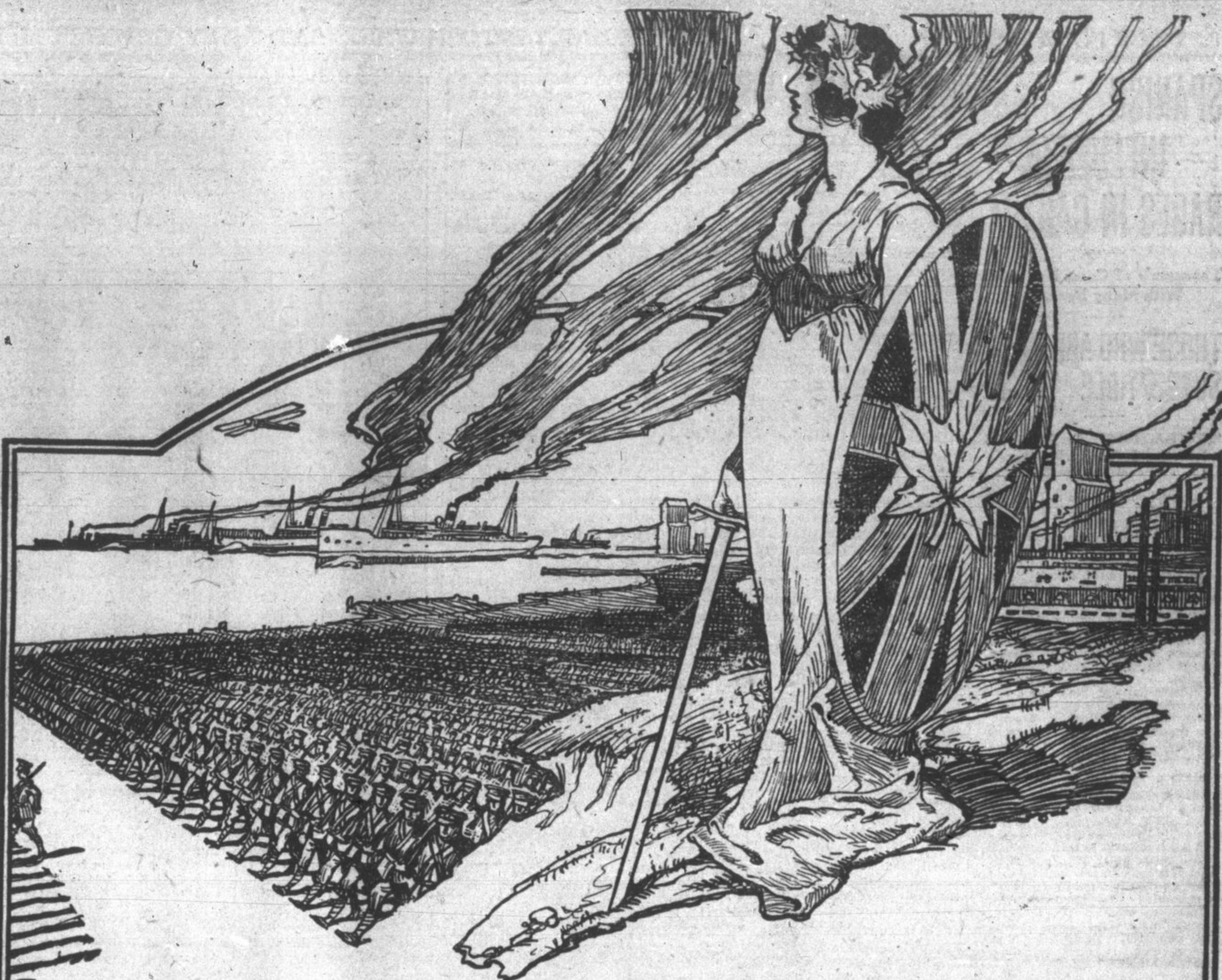
"Of course," I said, "your troubles will be all over when the destroyers meet us."

"Over!" he snorted. "Just beginning, you mean! Destroyers! Humph!" The first officer spat violently. "They get you both ways. When they come out to shepherd you in they practically say to the Hun, 'Follow me if you want to find 'em.' And when they go back after shepherding you out they say to Fritz, 'Here they are—sic 'em!'"

One fine evening in mid ocean—just at the spot where Admiralty wireless had warned us that we should find him—the Q boat on our port bow opened out on a distant shadow. The range was ten thousand yards, and the periscope was not visible save to the sharp eyes aboard the mystery ship, which cut loose at it with half a dozen six-inch guns. Some thirty shots were fired in the space of five minutes; those were smart gunners aboard that American ship, as our first officer was constrained to admit. Moreover, she was a ship of great importance, as was plain when four American destroyers took her in charge of the Irish coast and sped off with her on some other mysterious errand.

Fritz, as I said before, met us in mid ocean, and when the Professor came tumbling up from his interrupted sleep when all he said was, "When my grandchildren ask what I did in the Great War I shall reply, 'I ran the gauntlet in the middle and at both ends.'"

What surprised us all was the calmness of the great moment. Trembling at imaginary danger, everybody stood up heavily to the real one. The seafaring folk forgot that they were



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sick, and the well people hailed the excitement as a welcome relief to the monotony of a long voyage. It might have been gunnery practice—trying out the ballistic qualities of our ammunition—so coolly did everybody take it. The V. A. D.'s—bless their hearts—were not alarmed one little bit. They clapped their hands and said, "How jolly!"

When I came up from my cabin where I had been reading "Wild Beasts and Their Ways," I found the Q boat pounding away at a wilder, more devilish beast than any mentioned in Frederick Courtenay Selous' pages. I could not have seen it in the half-light anyway. However, there can be no doubt that the Q boat got Fritz, because he did not bother

us afterwards. What's more, there can be no doubt that he was there to get, because he despatched a piece of evidence in the shape of a torpedo, which our stern gun nailed at two thousand yards from the ship. The torpedo broke water just long enough for the mate's keen eyes to spot it. A fine shot that, when you consider what zig-zagging a twelve knot convoy must do to dodge a forty knot torpedo! Our zigzags made the Grand Chain look like a straight line. When I approached the mate with words of praise shortly afterwards he said: "It would have missed us anyway."

"Still," I said, "there was something in our fears after all."

"Well," smiled the mate, "sometimes something happens."

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