

Ruddick's Yarn

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THEY teach you at school that the world has one center, but really it has a great many. It's all according to the way you look at it. Greenwich Observatory is one, and your home's another, and yet another center is a pilot-cutter, because lines of communication run out from it all over the world. Ships of every flag, ships of all tonnage, cargo ships, passenger ships, transports, and war-ships all go about their businesses starting from a pilot-cutter, and, given luck and good weather, come back to it again.

The pilot-cutter is the place where pilots wait till they are wanted. The outward-bound vessel takes a pilot on board, to lead her through that part of her course which that particular pilot has studied and understands. Each pilot is a highly trained expert guide to those waters that he's made a study of. All pilots have been skippers in their time, and must have got experience and practise in tidal waters through the handling of tugs. Their skilled work is paid at the rate such skill commands, and pilots can make eight hundred or a thousand pounds a year.

The pilot may be landed at Newcastle, or Liverpool or Milford, or any such port, or even in bad weather, at New York or Bilbao, but wherever he lands he has to report straight away to Trinity House, or the Lights Board, or whatever authority he is under. Then, like a

homing pigeon, he makes for the cutter where he belongs, and reports there to his mates, unofficially and very much more fully.

In the pilot-cutter men are gathered together who have sailed on many seas, and beheld great wonders, and the pilots' cabin hears more yarns in a week than most people could believe in a year.

As for Ruddick's yarn, which is what I want to tell you about, you can believe it or not, as you like. It has one peculiarity: it is the only one he was ever known to tell and he only told it twice. It seems plain that something happened, something strong enough to shake him out of his usual self, for before this happened—whatever it was—he was a silent man, and a good listener. He wasn't sullen or churlish, but he had a sort of smiling silence; he looked you full in the eye and you knew he was straight and meant well by you—and he always said what was needful and not a word more. Indeed he didn't seem to have many words or to need them.

He wasn't one of those that can talk round about a thing and dress it up in words till you see it as plain as the man that's telling about it, until this thing happened. And then he got words, somehow just to tell about that one thing. Afterward he went back to being the same sort of pleasant, silent chap he'd always been. That's one queer thing about his

yarn. Then you've got to remember that there certainly was something like what he told us about in the place where he said it was. Old Chesson vouches for that and, besides, it's recorded all right at—but I will get on with the story and you can see what you think.

It would be about the beginning of August or end of July. There was a dozen or so of us aboard. You know a pilot-cutter's not much more than a hundred feet in length and when you've allowed for crew's quarters and engines and boilers and bunker space there's not much to spare for the pilot's cabin, and you're lucky if you get it twenty foot square. Then the bunks and the locker-seats take off a good slice all round, and with the mess-table in the middle it's a pretty tight fit for twelve.

We'd got the skylight open, of course, and the smoke from our pipes went out through it all the time, rising slowly and swirling out quick as the wind caught it. Ruddick wasn't there, and we got talking about him. Some one asked was there any news of him.

"Not a sound," young Ingle said.

And fat George Selby said: "That's bad."

And I said: "How do you mean, bad?" for I hadn't long come from taking a light cruiser that I mustn't name to a place that I mustn't mention.

Then they told me how Ruddick had gone aboard a Danish tramp southward bound, and not a word of him since.

"How long since he went aboard the Dansker?" I asked. We call all Danish craft Danskers, the same as we call a Swede, a Swansker, or a Norwegian, a Noscar, or a Jap, Maru.

"Nigh on three weeks," said old Chesson, "and I don't like it." Chesson is one of the old veterans that have gone back to work since war began. He never looks on the bright side of anything.

Some one said Ruddick would be all right, all right. But Chesson said: "You never

know, these times, what with mines and torpedoes as well as so many beggars without lights."

And some one else said three weeks was a goodish time and he'd not be sorry to see old Ruddick walk in.

Old Chesson said: "It's a toss-up with anybody nowadays. I shouldn't be surprised if something hadn't happened to him. We oughter got news of him before now. You know he was my apprentice, and I don't dislike the chap. And I tell you I had a queer feeling about him, I did, when he was fetched off. Just as if he was marked out for something."

We laughed at that, because old Doleful was always thinking some one was marked out for something; but when Ruddick did come I remembered it and I didn't laugh then—for I never saw a chap so different to what he was when we saw him last.

He came pat on the word, too. We were alongside a certain pier, waiting for supplies, so he just walked aboard. We heard boots on the companion-stairs and there was Ruddick.

Of course, we all began asking him questions at once, but he seemed to have less to say than ever, and only told us he'd been in Norwegian waters. But while they went talking and joking him and all through tea I was watching him. I can't explain what the change was that made me think again and again of what old Chesson had been saying. The man's jaw looked squarer that I remembered it. But it wasn't that. I think it was his eyes. I don't know how to put it—but they looked like as if they'd seen something and was seeing it still. I didn't like the way he looked, and I didn't like the way he held on tight to anything he had hold of—cup or plate, or the edge of the table—so tight you could see his finger and thumb go white with holding on so hard.

Every one was very jolly, seeing his come aboard, and none the worse, seemingly,

for his three weeks, and after tea Fat George said: "Why not have a tot to celebrate his coming back?" So we did—and the best of liquor, too. For you get that, as well as the best cigars, on a pilot-cutter, because every respectable ship gives a pilot something besides his fees. Ruddick was generally a teetotaler or as near as don't matter, but now he took his tot with the rest of us and perhaps that oiled his tongue, for when the chaps got on to him again asking about where he'd been that three weeks he suddenly seemed to let himself go, and out it all came. Something like when you open the sluices in a lock.

Of course, we kept on interrupting with questions—but that was only at first; toward the end we just listened. So I sha'n't put everything we said, because a lot of it was neither here nor there, but mainly what Ruddick told us.

"Well," he said, "it was like this. The Dansker. was bound for Rio, and I ought by rights to have landed at the Wight, but the skipper was a bit jumpy for some reason or the other and he asked me to keep on with him as far as Falmouth. And I said I would. But we never made Falmouth.

"I don't see how he could have had any call to feel any less safe than the usual, but he seemed as if he felt something was going to happen to his ship, the Draga, her name was."

I looked at old Chesson, but he wouldn't look back at me.

"And sure enough," Ruddick went on, "something did happen. It was what every one expects, these days, but I somehow didn't think it would ever happen to me. I've always been reckoned a lucky chap," he added musingly, "and I didn't think I would ever be in for anything like this."

There was a sort of movement of impatience among us. We wanted to know. Ruddick understood.

"All right," he said hastily. "I'm telling you, aren't I? But I want to tell you what I felt

like and what happened, and I'll have to tell you a bit of each, turn and turn like. Well, I was feeling rather pleasant with myself, because there was another five pounds or so sticking to it, and I could hardly believe it was me it was happening to when up pops a German submarine on our port side. She came up whole, with the water pouring off of her like it does off a seal or a whale, and she runs side by side with us and the lid on her tower opens and out comes a squarehead officer and hails us, first in English and then in some lingo I didn't understand—Danish, I suppose.

"He said: 'Ease down, slow, and stop.' and I suppose the Danish was the same, for our captain gave the order and we did as he said—the submarine keeping alongside us all the time. Then she put out a small boat, and her officer boarded us, and began asking questions and wanting to see the ship's papers. I kept very quiet. I thought perhaps I'd be all right after all, and these Dansker chaps are very like us English to look at. So I thought I might pass in the crowd. And being a neutral ship I thought we'd be let go when the squarehead officer had seen our papers.

"He seemed quite satisfied with the papers, and then he asked who was in charge. Yes, he asked it in Danish, but *I* understood. You do understand foreign language, when it's about yourself. And besides, the Dansker captain pointed at me. So I knew. Then the German officer said to me: 'We want you,' just like that, and without more words I had to go down into that boat just as I stood. After that the squarehead captain shook hands with our captain and I suppose he told him to proceed on his course, for the minute the squareheads were clear the Dansker set his course off the land, thinking himself lucky, I dare say. But he hadn't long to think it in.

"I had to go down into that submarine among those cursed squareheads, they were all grinning like apes and chattering among themselves. They shoved me into a corner among the machinery, and suddenly there was

a feeling like a lift going down, and I knew she was submerged. The crew were busy crawling about like ants, and the officer giving orders—you know the aggravating way they talk, like a dog barking. And presently I heard a noise like a great sigh, and a sort of hissing, and then a noise like—well, more like ice crackling under you when you're sliding—only ever so much louder. I wondered what it was. The officer saw me wondering, and he came close to me and said in English:

“Your damned Danish friends have gone to heaven. Quick passage. Charming ending, eh?”

“Yes, within five minutes of his shaking that poor skipper's hand on his own deck that devil had tin-fished him. So that was the end of the Draga.

“I couldn't think they'd saved my life because they fancied the cut of my jib, and I kept wondering what they'd saved it for. I thought perhaps they didn't let me go down with the Draga, meaning to kill me later, some dirtier way, some way that hurt more—me being English. But they didn't seem in any hurry to begin. And presently they had some grub and gave me some, so I made out whatever they were going to do to me it wouldn't be just yet.

“Presently the officer sent out an order and they passed me along to his cabin. The submarine's chock-full of machinery and you wouldn't think there'd be room for the officers to have a cabin to themselves, but they have, and I was taken to it. Then he asked me all sorts of questions about what my qualifications were, and I said, yes and no whenever I could, not wasting words.

“I didn't dare to answer him wrong, because these chaps know so much more about our waters than we do about theirs. Come here yachting they used to, before the war. Had pilot's licenses granted them, too—God forgive all fools! I saw plain enough he'd got a use for me, and wasn't going to kill me yet a while. And I made out, too, it was

because I was a pilot he'd saved me, and that he'd want me to do some piloting for him later on.”

“Would you have done it?” old Chesson asked, saying what we all were thinking.

“I'd have piloted him to somewhere,” said Ruddick. And we were satisfied.

“So there I was,” he went on, “hooked aboard this underwater pigsty. I don't know whether any of you chaps have ever been aboard one of these craft. I never had. But I'd read about them and I suppose you have, too. You'll understand how I felt. Down below there, under water, not knowing where we were going nor how deep we were—sometimes sinking, sometimes rising a bit—and never knowing from one minute to another if that minute wasn't going to be your last. Because, of course, all our chaps are out after those vermin, and sometimes they get them.

“It's beastly stuffy inside, all jammed there among the machinery and the squareheads. And she kept moving this way and that—and presently she went to the bottom and lay there like a Dover sole. They'd taken my watch away and my pocket compass and everything, but I should say we lay on the bottom that time not much short of twelve hours. Lying low, most likely, because of our destroyers. And then she went on, and rose and sank and carried on, Sometimes she'd rise to the top—at night mostly—and every one got on deck for a breath of air—even me.

“When she sighted a ship that couldn't defend herself she'd sink it, same as she did the Draga. She sunk five in the time I was in her, and that was about a fortnight as well as I can make out. And every time she did for a ship that officer would put his face close to mine and grin and tell me what he'd done.

“One ship they sunk in daylight and stood on deck laughing at the crew and passengers drowning. And one was a hospital ship. They enjoyed that fine. Every one had

schnapps after that—even me. A chap that could speak English gave it to me, and the captain knocked him over and kicked him for it. And he got up and wiped the blood off his mouth and saluted. But he talked a bit to me when the officer wasn't there, Liked to show off his English. He'd been a deck-hand on a Cardiff collier. And besides he wanted to get things out of me about our fleet. He didn't get anything. And every day I wondered whether that would be the day they'd ask me to pilot them. And it never was.

“The Slonchers didn't seem to enjoy it more than me, except seeing people drowning and having a drink after it. Only the officer seemed to like it all. When he wasn't sinking ships he was knocking his crew about. *He* enjoyed himself all right.

“As far as I could size it up from what that chap said and what I noticed we must have got round the west coast of Ireland, for I know they sank a big New York liner. The more they sank the more they drank and the more that officer enjoyed himself. He was never drunk, but he was never sober. It didn't seem to go to his head or his legs in a natural way as it would into you chaps. I think it went to his soul so that he got more of a devil everyday. I dare say there's some in U-boats does it for duty—but I believe this chap would have sunk a ship-load of new-born babies and reveled in it.

“But I don't really know rightly where we did or didn't go, but what I'm going to tell you I know where *that* happened, because I know where it ended, and it ended where it began. I made out from the Sloncher that the submarine had nearly finished her tour and was scheming her way home to her own port and that was the Elbe, as far as I could get at it—this side the Kiel Canal. The German beggars had been getting more and more down in the mouth, except when the liquor was in them—but they seemed a bit more cheerful now they were homeward-bound.

“The thing I looked forward to most all

the time was the coming up for air. It reminded you that you were alive—so far. Inside the U-boat you felt as though you were dead and buried. I know what that Bible chap felt like in the whale's belly. And there being, so to speak, no difference in day or night made it worse. The Slonchers told me they often go off their heads and then there's an end of them. They don't keep straight waistcoats on board to take them home in.

“We were all as glad as kids at a school treat when the word came that night to go up for air. Just before dawn it was, with smooth water and a clear sky; the moon was full, and it all looked so peaceful you could hardly believe things were what they were. I felt the skin of my face getting looser and more comfortable. Even the German swine looked different in the face, more like what I expect they look like to their people at home.

“The Sloncher whispered to me there was only one torpedo left, and the officer wouldn't go home till that was used. Wanted to get all the fun he could, I suppose. He didn't look any more like a man that could have a mother or a sweetheart at home. He looked like a young boar-pig—showed his side teeth like tusks. I could see the love of killing in his eyes—growing, growing. I could see it was taking fair hold of him, and he longed for something to kill, just as you might long for a drop of water on a desert rock.

“It's my belief he'd have sunk anything that came in sight, friend or foe. Now the only thing in sight was a little fishing boat, a Nосcar we made out when we got close—a little silly bit of a boat that wasn't doing any one any harm—a neutral, in its own waters, too, going about its own business harmless as a child. He laughed and rubbed his hands and gave his orders.

“The skipper of the Nосcar came aboard and he made him stand on our deck and watch while they tin-fished his little craft—blew it all to smithereens with their last tin-fish. No, there was not a living thing left,

only dark bits settling in the water. Nothing alive. It was near full daylight now, and I should have seen it if there had been. And the captain stood there and laughed as if he was at a play.

“I supposed he’d saved the Nascar skipper to use him later on, same as me, and I was glad to think there’d be two of us that wasn’t Germans on board that bloody submarine, even if we couldn’t understand a word each other said. We should have known what each other was feeling. And I should have felt I’d got a messmate instead of being all alone with those Sauerkrauts.

“But he hadn’t been saved for that. The officer stopped short in the middle of his laughing. He’d seen something, one of our destroyers, I expect; but we were all bundled down before I could get sight of whatever it was. The lid was shut, and I looked round for the Nascar skipper. He wasn’t there. They’d shut the door of the conning tower in his face—and sunk the submarine under him. That was what the officer had saved him for.

“It was then I made up my mind that if I got half a chance I’d do that captain in. I’ve never taken life, and I’ve never held with fighting, but if I could have got hold of a knife or anything handy I’d have done for him and chanced it. But I couldn’t get hold of a knife.

“Down we went, and down we had to stay. The crew got grumbling in whispers, because if we hadn’t loosed that last torpedo and attracted the attention of whatever it was that they were afraid of they’d have been nearly home by that time. On the bottom they had to lie all through the long northern day. The Sloncher told me he wished they’d let that fishing boat alone; what had been done to her skipper was too much even for his stomach. He gave me a rubber life-belt on the quiet. I suppose he knew his officer. I hid it under my waistcoat.

“The grumbling got worse; the captain knocked over a man or two, not to disable them, they were too useful and too few of

them, but just to keep his hand in, and then they had drink served out, and a good deal of it, to keep them quiet, I expect.

“As soon as it was dark we went up to breathe again, and as soon as we got clear of the bottom, even I, though knowing nothing of a submarine’s work, could feel there was something wrong. There was a lot of chatter. The officer swearing, and I could tell as she went up that she wasn’t on an even keel. And when we went out by the conning tower and got on to her decks, any one could see that she was down by the head. There seemed to be something holding her down. It was night, you understand, and a bit cloudy over the moon, but you could see fairly well. And sure enough there was some thing hanging on to the fore end of her. Nobody could make out what it was, but it looked like some big lump of seaweed or driftwood.

“They tried to prod at the thing with rods or boat-hooks or something—they drove her ahead, and they drove her astern, and still the thing stuck fast. And every time she went ahead the dip got a little bit worse.

“Then everything was stopped and there was a consultation. The officer hadn’t done anything but give his orders up to then—give his orders and his blows. Now he seemed willing to let his kicked dogs speak—if they’d anything to suggest. He was barking, himself, with a different sound in his bark. All hands seemed to have got sober suddenly. They talked, saluting every time they spoke to their officer.

“In the end every one was ordered below again, the conning tower made fast, and we went down a bit and tried to level her, but she wasn’t having any. They moved the engines ahead and astern again under water, and every time she moved she got more down by the head—if you can use such a term about under water. The Sloncher wondered whether it could be a bit of the Nascar hanging on—a sort of judgment—but he must have known there wasn’t a bit of her left bigger than a

dinner-plate.

"After they'd worked her back and forth and sweated over her for a couple of hours they brought her to the surface again. But this time with great difficulty. It was quite plain there was something very wrong with her. I didn't like the idea of slipping my cable in such dirty company. The Sloncher was crying and talking about his girl, and as for the others, I know now what a squarehead looks like when he's got the fear of death on him.

"We went up through the conning tower into the dark, and so down on to the deck. The moon had gone in. You couldn't see anything; but you could feel this weight drag, drag, dragging at her head, and the pitch forward got more and more.

"The officer gave the order to go below again, but the crew were getting out of hand. Even those that had been like worms under his feet plucked up a sort of a spirit. They were more frightened by something else than they were by him. Some of them went below, but two or three wouldn't; they said no to their officer's face.

"He pulled out his revolver, shot two of them, and they slid over the slimy side of the boat, and that was the last I saw of them. If it hadn't been them it would have been him, it was plain man to man then, not crew and officer. The rest of us went below. The others crawled down in the dark into the submarine. I just went with the rest. Nobody was noticing me any more. Something else to think about. If I hadn't gone I'd have been shot, too. I took my chance.

"They were getting more and more jumpy, for whatever it was that was on to her head wouldn't be shaken off, though they did all they could to clear her, going slow and then full speed, ahead and astern, but still she dipped more and more by the bows. It was getting difficult to keep your footing; she'd got such a slope en her.

"Them Germans had got a new shipmate aboard with them, and his name was

Fear. I've heard about fear, and I've felt it right enough, but never a fear like this. It seemed to walk about among the crew like they say ghosts walk in old houses—so that the men looked over their shoulders as if they expected to see the very face of it that had come creeping up behind them. We all seemed to be holding our breaths, waiting, waiting, and the rattle of the engines and the cursing of that captain went on and on.

"Then quite suddenly one of the men let out a sort of howl that nearly stopped your heart with the suddenness of it, and he was all yellow and white in the face, and the slobber running down his chin. And he went for the officer with teeth and nails and feet like a mad animal. He got shot, too, so we had a dead man down there with us all that day.

"The captain wouldn't surface in daylight to signal for help for fear us English should get hold of him. Why he didn't settle me I don't know, but either he forget me or he thought I might come in useful to him yet. But I never did. Nor yet I wouldn't have.

"All the time the thing that was on her was dragging, dragging, and she got more and more down by the head.

"When it was night they left off working the engines, and the quiet was beautiful. We rose up slow and gentle to the surface again. But when they came to open the hatch of the conning tower they couldn't. It seemed to have stuck. And I thought in a flash what it would be to die slow in that box with the machinery and the squareheads, and the food giving out, and the water and the air.

"I didn't see what they did to get a move on that hatch, but it gave at last, all together, and down comes a rush of water, and I thought it was the sea coming in, and that that was to be the end—drowned like rats in a trap. But it wasn't the sea. It was only a barrel or two, and as soon as they could pull themselves together there was a rush for the hatch. Their precious discipline couldn't stand up against a bucket or two of salt water. The

officer got out second, though, knifing a man that was in his way. It was his last taste of the blood he was so fond of. I used my hands pretty strong and got out third.

“When we got out on the deck we could see that the conning tower had got foul of something, and there was a hole near its base at the forward side that the water had come in by and filled the conning tower.

“We couldn’t have stood on the deck if we hadn’t had the lines to hold on by, for the vessel was a tilt so that full half of her was submerged, and the rest sticking up clear of the water like a great buoy, and the propeller all bare. The moon was up, and the sea like a mill-pond.

“The officer wiped his knife on his trouser-leg.

“ ‘My turn next, perhaps,’ I says to myself. ‘I think the water will be best for me.’ So I jumped for it before he could begin on me.

“I’m pretty handy in the water, and I made shift to blow up my belt, and then I turned round to have a look and see what the thing was that was upending her like that.

“You may think I’d been glad to swim clear and not have bothered, but the water seemed to put new life in me, and I’d been so worked up all those hours and hours about what it was that was happening to the craft that I felt I must see what it was if I died for it.

“So I swam toward it and trod water and cleared my eyes with my hand and had a look, and I heard a sort of groaning howl from that captain and I knew he’d seen it too.

“The moon was shining clear enough to have read a letter by, and you couldn’t make any mistake about what you saw.

“There was something, sitting athwart the fore part of that U-boat—something that looked at first like a great heap of seaweed. But it wasn’t only weed. I could see the shape of a paddle wheel without its boxing. It was a craft of some sort, and when I got used to the light I could see what sort of a craft it was. It

looked like a boat that had been under the sea a very long time. I could trace its lines among the seaweed, and they were the lines of a Thames tugboat. I saw the bridge and the funnels. It all shone wet in the moonlight, and there it was, on the fore part of the submarine, pressing it down, down, down.

“And as I looked I saw that it wasn’t only a boat, and seaweed; there were things on it that moved, not like the seaweed moved with the play of the water, but things that moved with a purpose, same as living things move. They moved. They were as big as seals, but they weren’t seals. They had arms, for they lifted them. They had feet, for they moved along the seaweed-covered deck. They had hands, for they pointed. They had faces, for I saw them. Horrible. They were men, but though they moved, they were not living men. The seaweed had grown on them as it grows on old timbers sunk long ago. They didn’t make any noise when they moved—the officer had stopped swearing. It was as quiet as the grave.

“I suppose I spent that night partly off my head and partly swimming for my life. When I came to myself altogether the men were gone—the officer was gone, the sun was shining—as if nothing had happened. The submarine was upended—stern up about five feet of her clear of the water. I got to her, climbed up on the stem somehow, and hung on. There was no one else alive.

“That’s where they found me—a Norwegian fishing boat. I was half off my head still, but as we made away from that cursed submarine I could see that there was nothing where that had been, just clear water, and you could see the lines of the submarine curving down into deep sea. Whatever it was that had pulled her down had done its work and gone back to where it belonged.

“They put me ashore at a little place called Vefsen.”

Ruddick rubbed his hands together and wiped them with his handkerchief.

"That's all!" he said.

There was something about his face and the way he had spoken that made it quite difficult for me to smile and say "That's a good yarn." But I did say it. And I did smile.

"It's true," said Ruddick.

"Is that what you told to Trinity House?" young Ingle asked.

"Exactly that," Ruddick told him, "and the admiralty too."

"What did the squareheads want you for?" asked Fat George.

"I don't know. I never shall know,

now."

"But look here," said young Ingle, "what would a Thames tug be doing in those waters?"

"There *was* a tug sunk there sure enough," said old Chesson. "in 1872 it was. The Oracle, London. All hands."

"They told me that at Vefsen," said Ruddick mildly.

"Yes, I came from Bergen by the Vensyssel line to Newcastle. Roughish weather, too, for the time of year."