



Down Among the Dead Men

by S. Ten Eyck Bourke

“**T**HEN you'll not go to Newport?” the chief said. “I tell you, man, they need a diver badly. There's no government man to be had and that

submarine won't last another ten hours on bottom, locked fast. They can't get a local man to risk it; and it means money to you, Mac, let alone the mercy of it.”

I could guess why the local divers would not take a chance at the sunken submarine and her imprisoned crew, but I did not mention it. I had had a bitter hard day in the harbor, clearing the ship channel, and that was excuse enough, let alone the other men hurrying homeward to help.

I am a violent but God-fearing man, or I would not be telling of the judgment that fell upon me, as a warning to others. I shook my head. The boat was down too deep, the divers said.

Then let me tell you, John MacGregor," the chief cried in a rage, "I know why you will have nothing to do with the navy or navy men! You cast your own son off because he ran away to sea, and that Puritan stone that you have for a heart hates men of his kind—men that fight for their country—"

"Aye, and shed innocent blood, and make widows and orphans—I know the argument! With your permission, sir, having reported, I'll go home to my girl. Your submarines and your war engines must take their chance!"

I am a violent man, as I said, but Godfearing, like my forefathers before me, who turned the sinner from the door in the wintry night and snow, to live or die as Providence might decree. Folks call me a hard man, but just; nor does my calling make for a gentle nature, groping among the blind fishes for coffers full of gold or human tenements empty of soul.

Neither the chief of the divers nor the men with whom I worked side by side that day knew of the heart of lead inside me, nor the bitter hatred I bore for all men who wore the uniform. I had spoken of my daughter Jeanie with a smile on the lips. There was no reason why any one should know of the letter which had struck me to stone that morning, or maybe the chief would have understood, and would have forbore to curse me for my hardness of heart.

Still dumbly unbelieving, I reread the letter that I had received only a few minutes before I was summoned by the chief.

Dear, Darling, Cruel Daddy:

I am going to him—Lieutenant Gerald—isn't that grand, daddy? I have never dared to tell you. When everything is all right, you will forgive us both; but, darling, cruel, stupid, dear dad, I had to see him before he took his first command—a submarine at Newport; so we'll be together a little while, at least—

I had forgotten that. A submarine at Newport!

I did not fully realize yet what Jeanie had done—that she had left me for a villain in a uniform. I had not heard the name—never a rumor, till the letter struck me like a blow in the face. Lieutenant Gerald—a submarine! It seemed like a terrible jest of fate; but it was a jest that took me back to the chief's office with a hope and a vengeance gnawing in me.

The chief sat where I had left him, reading a telegram.

"The roster of that submarine—her officers?" I said, as he glanced up with a scowl.

His face cleared wonderfully.

"I've just got word. Lieutenant Gerald and—"

"I'll go!" I said.

II

I HAD not been at home the night before, and Jeanie's letter had been left at the chief's office the previous day, while I was working at the bottom of New York harbor. So she was in Newport at the time of the accident to the submarine! Not that it mattered, for her letter went on to speak of many meetings with the man, and the "plans they had made for the future"—poor girl! I did not read the whole



BELOW ME, A MAN'S HEIGHT FROM THE
BOTTOM OF THE LADDER, I SAW THE
GRAY FLOOR OF THE SEA

letter at the time.

As the special bore me to Newport, with the right of way cleared for the "rescue train," I was not thinking of the judgment that had intervened so much as of the part I should play, I had a vision of that helpless submarine lying in the deep water, and of the last act that Providence had left to me—to avenge my poor Jeanie, if not to save her.

In the launch that took me out to the scene of the accident, I learned more facts.

"The submarine's the *Shark*; she's down in more than twenty fathoms, and her air compressor's leaking," the officer in charge told me. "Of course, we've got no news from her, but by the way the air bubbles up they're alive aboard and fighting the leak."

"No diver's been down?"

"One tried it." The officer hesitated, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. "He came up unconscious—suit torn, too," he said finally.

I nodded, I had known from the first that the depth of the water was enough to knock out a man in an ordinary diving-dress, but my suit was reenforced for deep diving. It would help to protect me, too, from the dangers of an encounter with sharks or dogfish, such as had apparently been the cause of the other diver's torn clothes.

The safety of the job, or its certain peril, was the last thing I thought about. I wanted to ask for news of Jeanie—whether she knew that the scoundrel who stole her from me was at the bottom of the sea, awaiting a terrible death; but my lips seemed sealed, and the navy man was sharp business. I don't know whether he suspected anything, but he had watched me closely from the moment we started out in the launch, making for the group of boats a mile from shore.

"You're not a government man, but I take it you know what to do," he said to me as we neared the big lighter that was anchored

over the sunken submarine. "The other man said the pressure crushed him before he could make her out at that depth; but if you can get the hoisting cable and the air-tube to her, that's all we'll ask of you. You're taking chances, I tell you straight."

I laughed again—the laugh he didn't seem to like—and we sprang on board the lighter. The diver who had been down was there, sprawled out, white and helpless, but I didn't stop to talk with him, though he seemed to want to tell me something.

Among the crowd of craft near by a torpedo-boat was snapping and crackling her wireless.

"Trying to call a battle-ship—if we ever get a chance to derrick up those poor chaps," the officer told me. "It all depends on you, MacGregor—and God be with you!"

That gave me a start. Till that moment, from the time I left the chief in New York, I had moved like a man in a dream. The only clear thought in my numbed brain was that Providence was in some way shaping events, and that I was the instrument called to a certain end.

It was in my mine! that here, in a steel coffin at the bottom of the sea, lay a man who had wronged me as much as one man can wrong another; and on me, the father of Jeanie MacGregor, depended Lieutenant Gerald's salvation.

The irony of it swept over me at the moment when one of the men on the lighter knelt to lock on my copper helmet, and I threw back my head and laughed like a man gone mad. I saw the terror and suspicion leap into his eyes, and I finished roughly:

"Bah, man! I'm but thinking how the dogfish will gnash their big teeth on my armored suit. 'Tis my trade, remember, diving down among the dead men!"

The fear was still on him that my nerve had broken, and suddenly his eyes flashed.

"Good Heaven!" he cried. "You're

name's MacGregor. Can it by any chance be you're a relative of—"

"I haven't a relative on earth. Finish, or let some one else finish," I snarled back at him.

He snapped on the helmet, and the last word I heard was a muttered threat, or command, or curse, I could not make out which—nor cared.

The terrible mockery of the situation possessed me. For all I knew, Jeanie had heard of the catastrophe and come out. The man must have connected our names that way, and Heaven knows what she may have said in her despair. The thought fired the rage within me. Half-way down the weighted rope ladder I stopped to have another grim laugh, and to wait for the pressure of the water to give the warning "snap" in my ears. The pressure of grief and shame had already snapped my brain.

III

To this day I do not know how deep the submarine lay; but below me, a man's height from the bottom of the ladder, I saw the gray floor of the sea, dotted here and there by moving black shadows that seemed to be prowling round a long, cigar-shaped vessel which rolled slightly in the ground swells. Only a strong man could live where my leaden shoes landed me, and I knew by the sluggish motion of the submarine that she was resting heavily, all her buoyancy gone from her. Beside her, on the bottom, another long, narrow shape showed that she had shed her keel—her commander's last desperate attempt to rise to the surface. The ship was helpless, dead already.

"Aye, Providence did a good game when at it, and left the finish to me!"

Snarling at the helpless craft through clenched teeth, like a savage beast, I drew nearer. I saw now why the men within had

been unable to save themselves when she sank. The blunt bow of the ship, like the stubby neck of a bottle, was jammed against a wall of rock, blocking her torpedo-tubes and preventing egress by that way.

“The hand of Providence!” I gloated.

In the implicit faith that all things were ordered. I had thought only for the man who had wronged me, none for the imprisoned crew, though I knew that five men besides the commander were within that steel shell. Over her glowed a pale nimbus of light.

I knew where I should be most likely to find Lieutenant Gerald. I made my way to the turret like structure amidships, and peered through the thick glass band that circled the conning-tower. Within, I caught a glimpse of a distorted white face that stared out at me—the face of a man already dead and buried.

“He knows I’m here. I’ll let the villain see me before I talk to him.” I thought.

I was so deep down that a spring landed me on the lateral fin that ran round the boat. As I stood upright, glaring into the turret, Lieutenant Gerald’s hand flickered up at salute and I shook my fist against the glass, anger mastering

“Wait—just wait!” I snarled.

Pressing my vizer against the thick glass, I could dimly see other forms in the submerged ship, some crawling on their hands and knees; and then I knew that the lights were still going in her. I could make out the swinging electrics, the brass staircase, and the sheen of machinery—even a box of cigars, drenched by the sea water that had rushed into the ship when she sank, so quickly and unexpectedly that the commander had hardly time to swing the lever that closed the trap cover when she dropped to the floor of the sea.

For hours the living death had mowed at them, had clutched at their throats. I knew well enough why some of them were crawling—it was from sheer weakness.

“They’re almost out of compressed air. It’s not hours they have to live now, but minutes!”

Moved by a will stronger than mine—the habit of saving life, I suppose—I grasped the long air-hose which the men on the lighter had lowered beside the ladder, and made it fast to the brass standard that I had already located in the bow of the submarine. Signaling up top, I waited till the leap of the air in the hose told me the pumpmen were at work, and made my way back to the turret.

I could tell by the commander’s face that the air was pouring into the ship. Suddenly my heart gave a great leap. Maybe it was the uniform cap, or the fair hair that curled on his head; but thought of my own lost boy leaped back to me, and now I knew why Jeanie had loved the villain. He looked like my lost Jerry!

They say that training makes most men alike; but it was more than that—it was the defiant courage that shone in the man’s eyes, the courage that never gives up to the end, whatever the odds—that made me want to spring on the fellow and tear him down, to proclaim who and what I was and utterly destroy him, at the very moment when hope surged up in him.

He seemed puzzled himself at something—though he could only have had the vaguest sight of me through the vizer of my helmet. He was trying to motion with his lips. Suddenly he snatched up the head-piece of the turret telephone—the emergency instrument, used only in talking “up top” and to divers, when the ship is submerged.

He had seen the receiver inside my helmet, or he was chancing it; but I had come prepared—prepared to denounce that handsome, smiling scoundrel, and to put the fear of death into him, as I had already given him the breath of life.

“You’re a dead man already, but I’ll let you know that there’s no escape from me I

was growling at him like a wild animal, while I was working with the copper pegs that I had taken from my belt and screwed into the plate on the turret-sill. My last words must have reached him, for he stopped just as he was about to speak. Then, evenly and clearly, his voice came to me—the voice of a doomed man in a steel coffin, yet the voice of an officer talking to a sailor.

“Who are you? You are not a government diver! I am the commander of the *Shark*, Lieutenant—”

“I know who you are! And I am John MacGregor!”

IV

WHAT else I said in the first rush of rage I do not know, only as I knew it by the change that seemed to pass over his face, as I glimpsed it staring at me through the wavering lights of the lenses and the sea. I left little to be said, when the cold cruelty of my forebears came upon me. I wanted to kill the man, but most I wanted to hear him beg for mercy; and he only smiled!

The great hawser was hanging behind me, a few feet away from the ship to which it was my duty to make it fast. He saw it in the refraction of light from the turret, and motioned over my head.

“There’s your duty—do it!” he said. “For the rest—I will answer to that on top, or Jeanie MacGregor will answer for me. Now make fast that cable!”

I laughed. I heard the sound of my own voice, and shuddered.

“I have only to disconnect the air-hose, and where are ye?” I retorted. “Aye, there’s a ship overhead—a big one. She can pull out a boat of this size—and will, when you get down on your marrow-bones and swear the oath I’ll put to ye. Decide, or—the hose is as handy as the hoisting-cable.”

It was not John MacGregor that was

talking; it was some demon of the deep. Who knows a man’s soul? And mine was in torment.

But the man in the turret was an officer and a gentleman. Yes! That’s what they call ’em, in spite of what he’d done. I knew while I swore it that no power of life or death could make that man show the white feather. Helpless he was—dead, did I give the word—and yet the cold feeling of defeat crawled over me, lying like an icy hand on my heart.

In that moment I could have crushed the world. Think of what I had gone through! Think of what I had lost, through the villainy of that smiling, scornful blackguard in the turret. That I should beat him down to shame, he would not permit—no, though his life and the lives of all aboard paid for it. I knew that.

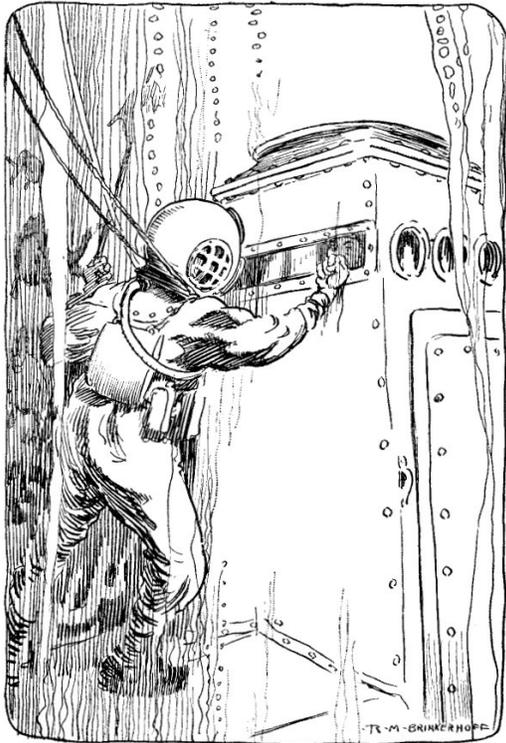
I turned away from the turret, and looked out into the surging water. Help had come. The great shadow over me, which I knew was the battle-ship, waited. The hoisting-cable swung from her huge steel derrick. Above, I knew that every man held his breath—impatient, too, as I could tell from the swaying of the cable and the quick, anxious twitches that came from my signal-cord.

They knew, up above there, that the submarine was getting air; they must know that I had already had speech with her commander. But it rested with me how much to tell them of the black drama being played out below.

A thought came to me, and I stifled it like a thief in the night.

“It’s the way I’d like a son of my own to act,” it came into my mind; and I hated myself for the thought.

Just then a shadow, grayer in tone and closer to me than the war-ship’s shadow, swung slowly athwart the sea, passing over the sunken submarine. It swayed aside the hanging cable and came back again, playing with the new toy. It was a shark.



I SHOOK MY FIST AGAINST THE GLASS, ANGER MASTERING ME

Blankly I kept my eyes raised to it as it passed between the air-hose attached to my helmet and the air-hose that rose from the sunken ship, swishing both lines with its fail. A voice filtered evenly and coldly into the receivers in my helmet, startling me.

“Better watch out for that shark, Mr. Murderer. He’ll beat you at your own game if he takes a bite out of that rubber hose!”

It was Lieutenant Gerald talking, but somehow the man’s voice affected me differently than before. The tone of command had gone out of it. It was not that the man was afraid; he was just waiting for what fate would bring forth. I heard him say something:

“It is on the knees of the gods,” it sounded like.

It came to me with a shock, and it maddened me, too, that this man—knowing him for what he was—should trust himself to the hands of Providence. Then, suddenly, the most terrible thought of all came to me, and I

hurled myself through the water, clutching at the swaying cable.

“If he will have it so, then he shall have it. Providence shall judge between us!”

Well I knew that the monster of the sea, wandering so far out of his range in the great deeps, had come to the sunken submarine by no chance of fate. Nor would he go without leaving a terrible mark behind—a mark that would spell life or death either to one John MacGregor, or to the smiling face that taunted him behind the plate glass of the turret.

The shark’s rush had torn the threadlike wires of the telephone from my helmet, but I did not mind that. As the gray form melted away I seized the cable and sprang with it to the bow of the submarine. In the great pressure of the water my own weight and that of the hawser were nothing.

Twice I passed the cable round the bottle neck of the sunken craft, doubling it back on itself, and finally making the great hook at the end fast to a huge ring-bolt in the bow. Once the powerful engines of the ship above strained on that cable, the submarine would go to the top, nose first, as easily as I myself could bound from the bed of the ocean back to the turret on top of her.

Once there, a bitter pang struck me. I could no longer taunt the officer inside, defy him and dare him to the duel in the depths that my mad brain had evolved. But he seemed to understand. I saw him glance down at his crew—God forgive me for forgetting them, but in my madness I had. When he looked up again, his face was pale, but I could make out that he was smiling, as before. He was watching the scourge of the sea—and me.

“Ah, you understand?” I exulted, as if he could hear me.

He was a sailor, as I was a diver, and he knew. Sooner or later that terrible curiosity that impels those monsters of the deep to return to that which they cannot understand,

would turn to rage. Twice the great shark had returned already, nosing and swishing aside the thin lines of the air-hose as if in contempt. The great hanging cable attracted him, and he nipped it. I must have been mad, but I turned to nod to the watching officer.

"There's judgment for ye!" I gibed. "He'll tear one o' them apart before he goes, I know, for I've seen them nip a ship's cable as a woman nips a thread!"

"Two against one!" he taunted.

Whether I heard it, or sensed it from the movement of the man's lips, I'll never know, but the words that came from the man in the turret were as plain to me as if I had heard them. Another word came, too:

"Coward!"

It struck me like a blow in the face; but it was true! To the shark I had left the choice of destruction. The parting of those trailing lines of hemp and hose meant the destruction of one or both of us.

I have said that I was mad, and the thrashing demon above us was even madder than I. He had seized the cable in his great jaws, champing on it, but foiled by its wire core. His madly swishing tail threw the air-hose into a tangle of white water.

Suddenly he turned, in his own length, snapped, and missed the dangling air-hose of the ship. In my ears I heard that taunting cry:

"Two against one!"

Such cowardly odds never should stand in favor of John MacGregor! Besides, the madness in my brain was clearing.

The lunge of the shark brought his great side within a foot of me. I staggered, and felt the sawing rasp of his sandpaper hide tearing across my diving-dress. A great black fin flapped against me, and I flung out my arm to save myself, stabbing, stabbing, stabbing with the long diver's knife that I snatched from my belt.

"Ye black fiend!" I roared. "Ye'll come spoiling the work o' John MacGregor,

when I've taught the likes of ye many times to keep off! Take that, and that, and that!"

A horrible red mist filled the waters, and a blow sent me rolling over on the bed of the sea. I braced myself for the rush of salt water in the air-tube, but it never came. I gave the signal to the top, and began to stagger up the rope ladder.

It must have been a fearful blow that next struck the armored back of my diving-suit. It threw me clean to the foot of the ladder, and as I recovered myself and caught at the bottom rung I saw the submarine slowly rising by the nose from the sea, hooked like a great fish on the derrick of the battle-ship above. We were both going up top!

V

I WOKE from unconsciousness with the hoarse chorus of sailors' voices in my ear.

"Down went McGioty to the bot-tom of the sea!" they were singing.

Then an officer spoke in a tone of authority.

"Keep those fellows from the submarine quiet, can't you?" he said. "They ought to be saying their prayers—praying for Diver MacGregor, at that!"

The officer was beside me, and his hand on my breast when I struggled up. I saw that I was still in diving dress, save for the smothering helmet. Some one behind me was holding my head; and that made me angry, to be treated like a child, though the hands were soft and cool. The officer laughed.

"Didn't know me, dad, did you? I could see that the pressure had floored you, down at the turret, when you talked all that queer stuff. Steady! Hold him fast, Jeanie. You'd think we were murdering the man!"

It was Lieutenant Gerald—my own lost lad, Jerry MacGregor, speaking. Did I know him now, outside that awful turret in the deep? God's mercy, yes; and Jeanie, his sister,

looked in my eyes, and laughed, and cried.

“Jeanie,” I mumbled, gasping for breath with the wonder of my discovery, “why-why didn’t ye tell me?”

“Tell you, when ye hated him, dear, cruel, stupid daddy! You would have cursed Jerry; and maybe the curse would have counted against him. I’m sorry I ran away, but he sent for me to see him take his first command. Lieutenant Gerald MacGregor— isn’t it grand, daddy dear, after all these years apart? We were coming home, when— when—”

“When you took me from the dead men, with your good MacGregor courage, in spite of an attack of diver’s madness,” said my son.

Our eyes met, and we gazed long into each other’s faces, with a look of understanding.

“’Twas you proved the blood of the MacGregors, and mastered your old mad dad, son o’ my heart!” I said. “Man, man, there’s no fool like an old fool. Aye, my lad, ’tis a grand place for madness—down among the dead men!”