

Six Shells Left

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The last party had been lowered from the stricken boat, and none remained but that fighting, sweating bunch around the gun. On came that skulking gray monster of the deep with a perilous trick up her sleeve.

WHEN he shipped into the navy that bleak December morning, "Soapy" McDowell wasn't half as anxious to serve his country as he was to leave it. You know the old gag that ninety-nine out of a hundred recruits pull—about enlisting two jumps ahead of the sheriff? Well, it was largely true in the case of Soapy—known professionally as Professor J. Pendleton McDowell, medium.

It wasn't Soapy who made up his mind regarding a naval career. It was Chief Boatswain's Mate Hank Miller. On recruiting duty, strolling down the dimly-lighted street on the way to his boardinghouse, Hank was suddenly attracted by sounds of a near riot in the crumbling old house that sat back behind the chinaberry trees. The structure was dark, and Hank paused at the sagging gate and listened.

"Fake!" someone shouted. "Grab ten!"

"Just a moment, please—"

"Police! Police!"

Lights flashed on suddenly, and pandemonium broke loose with a crash of overturned chairs and sudden, profane cries. A woman screamed and a solemn-toned bell rang out, then fell to the floor with a flattened, discordant note.

Hank Miller had been on recruiting duty two months and he chafed for action. He bounded up the walk. There was so much noise within that no one heard him leap upon the porch and throw open the door.

Against the farther wall a tall, pasty-faced man shrank. A dozen men and several women moved toward him menacingly; they laid hands on him and dragged him across the overturned table.

"Hold on a minute!" shouted Hank in a voice such as only boatswain's mates can develop. It boomed out over the sounds of conflict, carrying an authoritative note. The embattled ones turned and the sight of a man in uniform calmed their anger. An ominous quiet fell for a few seconds, then everyone tried to speak at once.

"Pipe down!" ordered the sailor. He indicated the tall man. "What's going on here?"

The tall man bowed. "We were in the midst of a seance," he explained. "We were communicating with a

departed spirit—this lady's Uncle Abner, I believe it was. Suddenly someone broke the chain and accused me of faking. They threw over the table and turned on the light. They seized me."

"He was ringing the bell and operating the thingamajig that raps on the table," accused a shrill-voiced woman. "He was doin' it with his toes. Look!"

She indicated Professor McDowell's feet. Hank Miller looked down and saw there was no shoe on the right one. The sock ended about midway to the toes, and somehow, those toes appeared extremely capable and dexterous. They undoubtedly were longer than the average toe is wont to be.

"He's a fake, all right. We're going to turn him over to the police," a man asserted.

Hank saw the pleading in the tall man's eyes. "Wait a minute, folks," he answered. "Maybe he is a faker, but I don't guess any crime has been committed, and this is no time to be putting able-bodied men in jail for nothing. Let me take him in charge. Clear out of here and I'll make a sailor out of him tomorrow. He'll return your money cheerfully, won't you, doc?"

"Er—not doctor, my dear sir, not doctor," the tall man protested. "Professor, if you please, Professor J. Pendleton McDowell."

"You'll return the money—cheerfully?" insisted Hank.

"Well, not exactly cheerfully," admitted the professor. "But I shall return it. Kindly step forward, folks. Fifty cents each."

The crowd left. McDowell looked at Hank Miller.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well, it's up to you!" the sailor answered. "Somebody's going to report this to the police. There's the jail—and here's the navy. You're within draft age and the army'll get you in the long run. Why not get in a good outfit?"

"I'll choose the navy!" McDowell said. "Let's go."

He limped across the room to where his other low-cut shoe lay. Much to Hank's amazement, he thrust his foot within it without so much as stooping to hold it or untie its laces.

That was how Soapy McDowell became a sailor back in 1917. Hank Miller shook hands with him and thought he had seen the last of the erstwhile professor. But a relenting providence jerked Hank off recruiting duty a couple of months later and ordered him to sea in command of the armed guard aboard the merchantman *Crescenta*. And when Hank got together his six men at the receiving ship at Brooklyn, there was Soapy—a boot fresh from Newport, with the collar-button mark still on his neck.

Beside Soapy there were Reynolds, Jones, Cardini, Morgan and Riley. The last named was a little Irish gunner's mate who could point a five-inch like nobody's business, but the others were seamen and most of them had only had the experience of the spotting board and a few hours' drill at the guns in the armed guard school. They mustered on the dock, got their bags and hammocks together and took a motor sailer over to the Hoboken pier where the *Crescenta* lay, dirty and rusty, making ready to clear for Liverpool.

"She's a hard-looking packet," Hank swore when he saw their future billet. "Slow, and rough in heavy weather, you can bank on that!"

"Wonder she hasn't stopped a torpedo long ago!" Riley agreed. "The navy's still goin' to hell, when you have to do duty aboard a tub like that!"

They went aboard and met the skipper, a weather-beaten old seadog named Jonathan, who whittled himself a pipeful from a plug of chewing tobacco and wished them luck.

Their quarters, allotted from space that was already at a premium, were smelly and crowded, and the one five-inch gun had been mounted aft in a little place where the deck gear had been cleared away and a special platform constructed.

"One good crack out a this baby and the ship'll fall apart!" Riley complained.

"One good crack at a sub is all we'll need!" boasted Reynolds with all the cocksureness of the recruit. Whereupon Riley set him and a couple of the others busy on the gun's camouflage paint job, and they watched the shoreline fade in the mist as the *Crescenta* warped away and slipped out to sea.

IT WAS the following morning that Soapy limped up to where the chief stood on deck and voiced his complaint.

"Chief," he said, "this navy is ruining my feet!"

"What?" asked Hank.

"I said this navy is ruining my feet. I can't get a pair of regulation shoes that fit right. And I don't dare wear these socks—I've discovered the dye fades, and that might infect your feet, you know. The first shoes I had issued me cramped the ends of my toes. Then I got this pair, and they're about two sizes too large. They don't cramp my toes, but they blister my heels. I have to

hobble around with them untied and slip my feet out so they'll cool every chance I get. But I simply can't ruin my feet—what'd I do when the war is over?"

Hank suppressed a smile. He liked this big faker who was a little older than the average recruit and who went around always with the same grave expression he must have worn when in the midst of his seances, as he called them, back on the outside.

"You can't do that; that's right!" he agreed. "Why not go barefoot if it isn't too cold for you. Everybody goes barefoot down around Guantanamo when the fleet is south. I'll see if Jonathan has any shoes in his slop chest that might fit better, and when we get to Liverpool, or when we come back to the States, I suggest that you buy a pair of non-regulations. You know you don't have to wear strictly regulation stuff aboard a packet like this!"

"Thanks, chief!" Soapy said as he limped away. "But I really wouldn't dare go barefoot. I might step on a nail or something might fall on my feet!"

The *Crescenta* lumbered on her way, deep laden and despairingly slow, creaking and groaning in rough weather, shipping heavy seas and rolling scuppers under. The armed guard kept one of its own number on the bridge as a lookout to watch for periscopes and to act as spotter for the gun crew should one be sighted. After interminable days of sailing, they came to the danger zone—that area on the chart which was bounded in red and reported to be alive with those sharks of the deep—the U-boats.

Here the worst thing that could have befallen the *Crescenta* came, and the armed guard, despite the little catch of fear it must have felt in its collective breasts, gathered around the five-inch and snickered with the derision of the navy man for a merchant vessel. The ancient tramp's engines began to lie down on the job every hour or so!

"What a ship!" roared Hank Miller. "The old Tuscarora you hear about in the navy—the one with the sixteen decks and a glass bottom—well, she had nothin' on this packet!"

"Yeh, we're loggin' six knots and liable to stop that any minute," Riley grumbled. "We go six miles, then we wallow along while they patch the engines, then we go another six miles. If we sight a sub it'll be our luck to lose headway and drift around broadside for her to aim a fish at."

"Hell, she wouldn't waste a fish on this!" snorted Hank. "She'd stand off and shell us. And I guess you fellows have heard what the Germans threaten to do to armed guards? Treat 'em like pirates—shoot 'em. You might as well be up in a frontline trench as in the armed guard service!"

"There you go, chief, always bein' a Pollyanna!" Reynolds complained.

It happened eighteen days out of Hoboken, when, by all rights, the *Crescenta* should have docked at Liverpool. She was hobbling along like a crippled old lady crossing a muddy street. It was a bright day, with low swells, and the armed guard was at breakfast, with Morgan standing lookout.

Nobody saw a thing. The first warning was in the shape of three rapid shots from somewhere on the port quarter. They sang overhead, missing by many yards, and the crew, captain and armed guard tumbled out on deck with their mouths full of food, ready for battle.

"She's in the sun streak!" Morgan sang out, and it was another full minute before they sighted the conning tower. It was far away, and just as they saw the tiny gray oblong the deck gun popped again and another shell screamed overhead.

"Let her have it!" Hank Miller shouted. The gun crew sprang to their posts. Morgan telephoned his estimate of the range as eight thousand yards, which wasn't far off, and the five-inch tore loose with an explosion that shook the *Crescenta's* ancient deck plates and jarred Captain Jonathan's bridgework.

A fountain spouted short of the low whaleback. Morgan telephoned the information that the shell had fallen two hundred yards low. Different, this was, to gluing your eyes to the slot at the end of a spotting board and having a shipmate move a bit of white cotton about in representation of the "splash!"

Another shell from the submarine shrieked over them, and Riley, pointing the gun, elevated its muzzle a little and jerked the lanyard.

"Boom!"

It was still short, Morgan told them. More shots from the German, but they all went over. Apparently the sub, confident that she was out of range, closed in about five hundred yards, and here a shot from the *Crescenta's* gun was seen to strike dangerously near the enemy craft. The sub dropped back to its former position, keeping up a continuous fire, but missing. The *Crescenta's* gun answered steadily, fast as they could reload and fire her.

JONATHAN had put his wheel hard over, and for a time the *Crescenta* was almost stern on to the sub, offering as little target as was possible. But the German was far superior in speed; she cruised swiftly around on the port beam, keeping well out about the eight-thousand-yard mark, and began dropping her shells too close for comfort.

"Boom!"

The shell screamed its way over the water, and back came the sound of the impact of metal on metal. It had struck the German a glancing blow well aft of the conning tower. The sub veered off almost instantly, keeping up her fire.

"Atta boy!" yelled Hank. "A few more like that and she'll go down like an elevator!"

Crash!

A shell from the German tore into number one hold. She, too, had found the range at last. Another shell came over promptly on the heels of the first and ripped into the engineers' storeroom. Clouds of smoke began to pour past the gun crew.

"Hey, chief! We're afire!" Reynolds shouted.

"Never mind the fire, just keep loadin' this gun!" Hank ordered. "We got to work fast now!"

A seaman came running aft.

"Captain has set off the smoke pots to spoil their aim!" he announced.

"Hell!" snorted Hank. "He's spoilin' ours too! Tell him to lay off so we can see what we're shootin' at!"

The smoke pots evidently failed of their purpose, for another shell hit the *Crescenta* well aft and low down on the water line. She began to circle, and the cry came from the bridge that the steering gear had been disabled. Around in a wide sweep the merchantman steamed, turning her broad, clumsy side full toward the maneuvering submarine.

A shell screeched overhead, but not without effect. It ripped off the *Crescenta's* mainmast clean as though an ax had sliced through, and down came the wireless antennae in a tangled heap.

"Now we'll play hell gettin' any help, unless somebody's already picked it up!" Hank murmured. "And now—I thought so!"

A cough and a wheeze from the depths of the engine room. The throb of the machinery ceased; the *Crescenta* slowed and lurched helplessly in the swells, her rudder disabled, her engines still.

"Stand by to abandon ship!" Jonathan bawled.

"We'll take the last boat!" Hank shouted. "Keep firing!"

"You're a damn fool!" yelled the skipper. "She'll shell the boats if you keep on!"

"She would anyway!" Hank retorted. "Furthermore, you're another. Now shove off and let us fight—just leave us one boat!"

The submarine, sensing victory, was pouring a rapid and damaging fire at her helpless victim. One shell pierced number two hold, others fell short or went over as the ship wallowed along and lost headway. The gun crew stood by and placed its shots carefully. At least one more indirect hit was tallied against the U-boat as Jonathan and his crew lowered three of the lifeboats and rowed away from their vessel.

"We're making ourselves unpopular as hell, boys!" Hank said. "The Krauts have announced that they'll treat all armed guards as pirates and shoot 'em. What do you say—shall we stick until the old tub is actually sinkin'—or shall we take to the boat now?"

"Stick, you louse!" came from the headset of the spotter's phone. Morgan was still at his job on the bridge. And the gun crew chorused its assent.

"But say, chief!" broke in Soapy McDowell, who was passing shells. "There are but six shots left!"

"My God—have we been shootin' that much?" demanded Hank. "That's a lot of shells gone! Six left! Hold that fire a minute!"

The chief frowned, glanced over the almost deserted vessel. Out a couple of hundred yards away from the ship the three boats were pulling to safety. Jonathan's voice bellowed out over the intervening distance, advising the crazy fools aboard to save their necks.

"Strategy—we ought to use strategy!" the chief exclaimed. But how?

The next shell from the Germans answered him in part, at least. It shrieked over the water and smashed the remaining lifeboat to splinters where it hung on its davits. Their means of escape was cut off.

"Well, that's something!" Hank announced. "We can't go now. Leave the gun, gang. Let's go forward and wait a minute to see what the Krauts will do. Probably they'll come alongside and board us. When they do, don't make any move unless I give the word. This may be a decent Heinie, this skipper, and they may treat us like prisoners of war are supposed to be treated. And they may shoot us. War sure is hell!"

The submarine's skipper probably was watching them through his glass, but he took no chances on a new trick of the dreaded "Q-boats." His craft circled warily, keeping well off until he was certain no trick was intended. Then he closed in, still circling, while the seven men aboard the *Crescenta* sweated with uncertainty and waited, standing by the rail.

"He's picking up Jonathan!" Reynolds announced suddenly.

The sub had approached the three boats; it threw one of the small craft a line and took it in tow. The other two stood by a minute, several men transferred from the boat which held the skipper to the other two. Then the U-boat proceeded, towing the lifeboat and heading almost directly for the ship.

The minutes dragged like hours. Up came the submarine, so near now the men on the *Crescenta* could recognize their shipmates in the boat astern. Captain Jonathan was not among them. Apparently he had been placed in one of the other boats, and now this one only held enough seamen to man the oars.

THE submarine halted a quarter of a mile distant from the *Crescenta*, keeping its gun trained on the crippled ship. Its commander and several of his men stepped into the *Crescenta*'s number three lifeboat and had the American seamen row to the ship.

"Ahoy, on deck!" the officer yelled. "Stand by! We have our gun on you!"

"Tell us something new!" growled Hank Miller.

The sub's skipper and eight German sailors swarmed up the boatswain's ladder dangling from the starboard

side. *Herr Hauptmann* was a Prussian, tall and haughty, and he and several others carried automatics.

"We find we shall need some of your supplies," he remarked pleasantly, smiling at Hank. "You and your men will lead the way to the master's cabin, after which we will have no further use for your services."

He gave his men an order and they searched the Americans for weapons.

"I don't like the way he said that," confided Soapy McDowell to Riley as Hank led the way aft. They entered Jonathan's cabin.

The remains of the skipper's breakfast were still on his table, and there lay his pocketknife and a plug of tobacco where the sub's first shell had interrupted him as he whittled a pipeful. The cabin was spacious for a vessel of the *Crescenta*'s age. There were several chairs about the table and the German ordered Hank to be seated. Soapy McDowell sank into the chair opposite him with a sort of sigh, Riley took his place at the end of the table and Cardini occupied the remaining chair. The officer said something in German and one of his men departed.

"As you know, armed guards on merchant ships really constitute violation of international law and should be treated as piracy," the German informed Hank. "I should obey orders and have you shot. But I couldn't think of being so cold-blooded, my friends. I shall merely have you tied and left aboard. Then we will replenish our provisions and take what instruments we can use—incidentally unshipping the gun with which you did such accurate shooting and taking it with us if possible—and then we will stand off and enjoy a bit of target practice."

"You dirty so-and-so!" Hank replied. "If you think you can scare us you're off your nut!"

The captain laughed. He jerked a corner of the oilcloth table cover, and dishes and silverware clattered to the deck. The seaman returned with a coil of stout line and they began tying the Americans. They slipped a loop around Hank's hands after they were bound, and made them fast down between his knees by securing the line to a round of the chair. He was trussed up like a pig ready for market.

This work was over in a minute and the seven Americans were bound helplessly, Morgan and Jones lying on the deck, the rest sitting upright at the table where they could read the despair in each other's eyes. A couple of Germans were put on guard, Lugers in their hands, and the captain led the rest forth in search of provisions. The doomed men could hear them loading canned goods into the boat; heard them knocking off brass and copper fittings and rummaging for documents and instruments. They heard the captain urging haste, and they prayed for the coming of some vessel which might have picked up those first few flashes of the *Crescenta*'s wireless.

"It looks tough, gang!" was all Hank had a chance to say before one of their guards jammed the Luger almost in the chief boatswain's mate's mouth and ordered silence. Hank could see from the expressions in the eyes of the other men at the table just how tough it was. Only Soapy McDowell's face, still gravely pale and holding a quiet dignity, was inscrutable.

The officer was returning; they heard him just outside the cabin door, chuckling over the success of his raid on the *Crescenta's* stores. He carried his Luger in one hand, the other arm embraced a couple of cartons of toilet soap as though it were worth its weight in gold. Hank remembered how someone had told him how scarce this common necessity was in Germany, where fats were at a premium.

"Very nice, very!" the captain remarked gleefully. He placed his pistol on the table and ripped the cover off one of the cartons to smell its contents. "You never know what good soap means, my friends of Yankee pigs, until the day comes when you are forced to do without it."

Hank's eyes were on the Luger, within his reach on the table top. If he could only wrench a hand free! If there were only some way of getting that gun! They'd die like rats in a little while if something didn't happen. He strained and swore under his breath. The thongs held like steel, biting into his sweating wrists.

Across the table Soapy McDowell sat, face inscrutable and pale, looking straight into the chief's eyes. His own eyes were burning with an intensity that attracted Hank's gaze and held it spellbound; the former "professor" seemed trying to tell the chief something, something that meant a lot to the men in that little room—rescue, perhaps! Hank's eager mind grasped at the thought; instinctively he knew that Soapy dared not say a word, dared not even move his lips lest he be detected.

Then Hank's taut-stretched nerves nearly snapped and he bit his lips to keep from crying out in alarm. A cold and clammy hand was touching his under the table! Sweat started out on the chief's forehead, and his mouth was sticky and dry. Then he remembered and was reassured by that look in Soapy's eyes.

That was no hand—merely McDowell's dexterous foot, slipped out of those oversize regulation shoes! It drew back for a second, then came up again and Hank Miller felt the cold steel of Captain Jonathan's pocketknife, held between Soapy's toes!

THE loquacious captain was still praising the virtues of the soap he had found; Hank thought he was going to eat it. He even cast rank and station aside for a moment and allowed the two burly seamen to smell its fragrance, and their little pig eyes glittered.

"We regret that your pop-gun is too heavy to take away, since we really have no time to rig a boom and

tackle!" the captain declared. "However, the sights and breech plug, as well as a few brass fittings will come in very useful. This has been a very profitable ship—considering that it hardly appeared to be worth a shell. For my part, I—"

He never finished that sentence. Hank Miller felt the knife cut through the last thong. His hands wrenched free. He jerked them upward and snatched the Luger off the table and shot one of the German seamen where he stood. He grabbed *Herr Hauptmann* by the collar and used him as a shield while he turned the Luger on the other seaman.

The sailor let his gun fall, and Hank released the skipper, who staggered back against the bulkhead, his hands upraised, his mouth agape with dismay.

"Now, you lousy Krauts, stand by for a ram!" Hank ordered. "Here, Riley, get those guns!"

He stooped and retrieved the knife, slashing the thongs that held the gunner's mate.

Riley freed the others rapidly. There were six other Germans, still busy ransacking the stores. They must have heard the shot.

"Quick, Riley! You and Morgan and Jones! Take the other two Lugers and slip out on the port side here. Keep behind cover so they can't see you from the sub. Get below and get those other Heinies. And listen—I got a plan! When you've got 'em, slip on their uniforms and report back here. Bring an extra uniform!"

"You bet, chief!"

"Very nice, *Schweinhund!*" the captain snarled. "But if you remember, my crew has a gun trained on you! I have changed my mind about leaving you aboard. Put down your gun and I give you my word of honor you'll be treated like prisoners of war."

"What honor?" sneered Hank. "You're in a hell of a position to be telling me what you'll do and what you won't do. We've got you licked. Listen!"

There was a short, sharp scuffle below decks. Riley and his men had caught the Germans coming out of the storeroom with cases of canned goods burdening them. Five minutes later the little gunner's mate and the other two sailors reappeared, wearing the jackets and the unbecoming flat hats of the vanquished submarine sailors.

"All right!" Hank told them. "Now get me this bird's uniform. With that gold I guess I'll rate something!"

He motioned with the Luger. "Sit down, Krauts. We'll see how you like being tied."

From the deck of the German submarine the gun crew and the underofficer watched as their men came on the deck of the *Crescenta* and went aft to the gun, preparing to take its sights and other pieces. *Deutschland uber alles*, but it was a great day for the U-boats! There'd be the telling of this and other victories over many a stein when they got back in the Kiel Canal for a period of rest and overhaul!

It wasn't a suspicious move, that gun muzzle swinging around toward them. Someone was about to hammer off part of the breech mechanism—see, they had swung it open, and they crowded about it so you couldn't tell exactly what they were doing. Maybe Mueller was having his little joke, pointing the enemy's disabled gun at his own ship—Mueller was a droll fellow, anyway.

Nobody on the sub knew how it happened. No one of the sub's gun crew lived to tell, but that gun on the Crescenta's deck suddenly belched flame and smoke. A shell struck the sub's deck gun and demolished it, and the men around it were blown into the water, torn, lifeless things.

"That leaves five shells!" announced Hank Miller as he stood by the Crescenta's gun in *Herr Hauptmann's* uniform. "Now if she surrenders, hold your fire. If she tries to dive, give her hell!"

The panic-stricken underofficer made the conning tower and chose to dive. The hatch clanged shut, the whaleback went awash and slanted forward.

Boom!

A gaping, jagged hole at the base of the conning tower. Water began to pour in. At such close range the Crescenta's armed guard couldn't miss.

Boom!

She heeled over, torn and dying. Her stern shot into the air, propeller whirling helplessly, then she went down swiftly, leaving great patches of scummy oil blubbing up on a silent sea.

Hank Miller turned toward his gun crew, and they saw the pity that was in his eyes. He regarded them silently for a few seconds.

"Well, now we'll have to stay on this packet till we get help, or take to that other lifeboat with a crowd of Krauts!" he said. "But, for the benefit of you gobs that don't savvy just how this thing happened, let me recite a little verse I learned in the Third Reader."

He faced Soapy McDowell and jokingly began to recite:

"Blessings on thee, little man,
Barefoot boy with cheek of tan—"