



Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea · Episode 39 / 46 · B1–B2 · 00

Running Out of Air

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OVERVIEW

Summary

Running Out of Air — chapter 39 of Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, told in clear English for language learners.

Transcript

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Chapter Thirty-Nine — Running Out of Air

Ice now surrounded the Nautilus, above and below. We were prisoners of the iceberg. Captain Nemo was calm.

"There are two ways to die here," he said. "We may be crushed, or we may run out of air. We have plenty of food, so let us count our chances."

"The air tanks are full," I said.

"Yes, but they hold only two days of air. We have been under the water for thirty-six hours already. In forty-eight hours the air will be gone. We must cut through the wall. I will rest the ship on the lower ice, and my men will attack the thinnest side."

The Nautilus sank and settled on the ice, 350 yards down. I told my friends our danger was great. "I am ready to help," said Ned Land. "I am as good with a pickaxe as with a harpoon." Nemo accepted. Ned put on his diving suit and went out with a dozen of the crew.

They found the ice was ten yards thick between us and the open water below. They had to cut out a huge block to make a hole. The men dug a trench near the ship. Big blocks broke off and floated up to the roof of the tunnel. After two hours Ned came back worn out, and Conseil and I took our turn. The water was icy, but I soon grew warm swinging the pickaxe.

After twelve hours of work, we had cut down only one yard. At that rate the job would take four days and five nights — but we had air for only two days. And even if we broke through, we would still be trapped under the iceberg, far from the open sky.

The next morning I saw a new danger. The walls were slowly closing in. The water was starting to freeze. I did not tell my friends, but I told Nemo.

"I know," he said calmly. "Our only chance is to work faster than the ice can freeze."

The air on board grew worse and worse. It was hard to breathe. Nemo let some fresh air out of the tanks so we would not choke. Each day the walls grew thicker. For a moment I lost hope. Why dig, if we were going to be crushed and frozen like stone?

"We must try something bold," said Nemo, "or we will be sealed in like cement. How long will the air last?"

"After tomorrow the tanks will be empty," he answered.

A cold sweat came over me. Then an idea struck him.

"Boiling water!" he said. "We are in a small space. If we pump in jets of boiling water, we can warm it and stop the ice."

We tried it. In the kitchen the machines heated the water until it boiled, and the pumps pushed it out into the sea around us. Outside the cold slowly eased. Little by little, the freezing stopped. We would not be crushed.

By March 27th only twelve feet of ice were left. But the air inside was terrible now. By three o'clock I could hardly breathe. My head ached. Brave Conseil stayed by me and whispered, "Oh, if only I did not need to breathe, so my master could have more air!" Tears came to my eyes.

To go out and dig was almost a joy, for the diving suits gave us pure air. Each man handed his air to the next when his turn ended. Nemo went first and set the example.

Only two yards of ice remained. On the sixth day Nemo decided to break the last thin sheet with the ship's own weight. The crew came aboard. The tanks were filled with water until the Nautilus was very heavy. The ice cracked like tearing paper, and the ship dropped through.

"We are free!" whispered Conseil.

The Nautilus fell like a stone. Then the pumps emptied the tanks and we began to rise. The screw drove us north under the ice. But the last of the air was gone. I lay in the library, my face purple, my lips blue, unable to move. I woke to feel a little air on my lips. Ned and Conseil had saved the last breaths for me, giving them to me drop by drop while they choked.

It was eleven in the morning, March 28th. We were only twenty feet from the surface. One sheet of ice still lay above us. The Nautilus backed up and rushed forward, again and again, striking the ice from below like a great hammer. At last it broke through and shot up onto the ice. The hatch was thrown open, and fresh air poured into every corner of the ship. We breathed again. We were saved.

Audio, timed transcript, and companions online:

<https://alexlearns.com/english/twenty-thousand-leagues/chapter-39/>

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