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John Henry Goldfrap**

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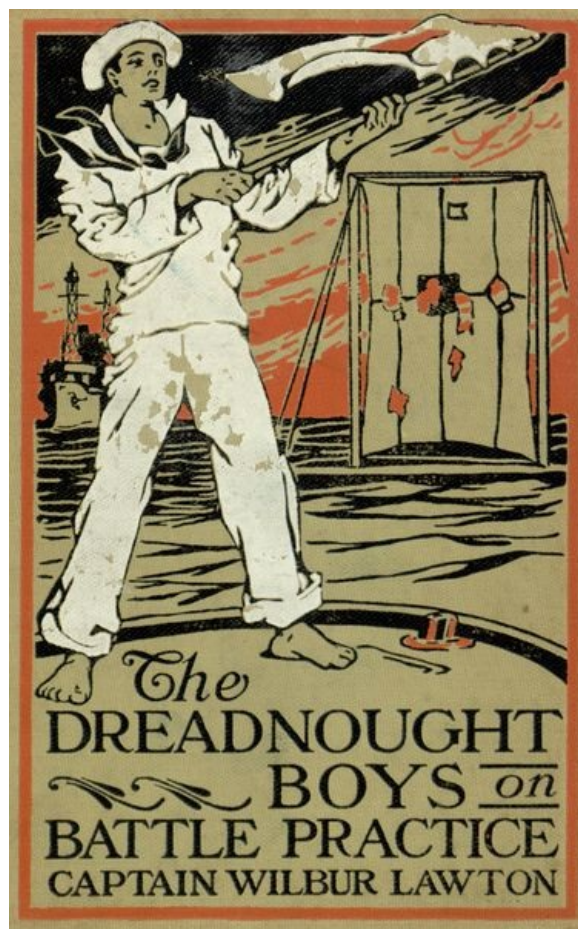
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**A FEW STROKES BROUGHT HIM
ALONGSIDE THE FLOAT, AND HE
SCRAMBLED UP ITS WET SIDES.**

THE DREADNOUGHT BOYS ON BATTLE PRACTICE

BY
CAPTAIN WILBUR LAWTON

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BY
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CHAPTER I.

A RED-HOT STOVE AND DESTINY.

"Isn't it a dandy picture—the real thing—just as I've always imagined it. Herc!"

Ned Strong wheeled from the gaudily colored lithograph he had been admiring, and turned to a red-headed youth of about his own age—almost eighteen—who stood beside him in the postoffice and general store at Lambs' Corners, a remote village in the Catskill mountains.

"It's purty as a yearling colt," responded the lad addressed, examining once more, with an important air of criticism, the poster in question. The lithograph had been tacked up only the day before, but by this time half the boys in the neighboring country had examined it.

The poster represented a stalwart, barefooted jackie, in Uncle Sam's natty uniform, standing on the flying-bridge of a battleship and "wig-wagging" the commanding officer's messages. The bright-red signal flag, with its white center, which he wielded, made a vivid splash of color. In the background a graphically depicted sea, flecked with "whitecaps," was pictured. As a whole, the design was one well calculated to catch the attention of all wholesome, adventurous lads, particularly two, who, like our new acquaintances, had never seen any water but the Hudson River. Indeed, as that majestic stream lay twenty miles from their home, they had only set eyes on that at long intervals.

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"Look how that ship seems to ride that sea—as if those racing waves didn't bother her a bit," went on Ned, dwelling on the details of the poster, which was issued to every postoffice in the land by the Bureau of Navigation.

"And look at the sailor," urged Herc Taylor, Ned's cousin. Herc had been christened Hercules by his parents, who, like Ned's, had died in his infancy, but Herc he had always been and was likely to remain.

"What's he waving at—sea-cows?"

"See here, Herc Taylor, this is serious. Wouldn't working for Uncle Sam in a uniform like that on a first-class fighting-ship suit you better than doing chores? How would a life on the ocean wave appeal to you, eh?" inquired Ned, with rather a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes.

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"First-rate," rejoined Herc. "It makes me think of those sea stories—those you are so fond of reading, Ned, 'Frank on a Gunboat,' and the rest."

"I guess a modern Dreadnought is a whole lot different to the vessels on board which Frank fought," smiled Ned; "but I must admit that that picture has put some queer notions into my head, too."

"For instance, what?" demanded Herc, in whose eyes there was a glimmer which would have said plain as a pike-staff to those who knew him that the red-headed lad had come to some sort of determination.

"For instance, that I'd like to be a sailor for Uncle Sam, and work my way up, like some of those admirals and naval heroes we've read about!" exclaimed Ned, with considerable animation.

"Shake!" cried Herc; "that's what I've been thinking of ever since I saw that picture——"

"Which was ten minutes ago," put in Ned.

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"Never mind; you haven't been looking at it any longer, and I can see that you are as hard hit by the idea of joining the navy as I am," briskly interrupted Herc.

"I don't know but what you are right, Herc," rejoined Ned thoughtfully. "I've been thinking that if we go on as we are, we will be doing the same old round of duties on grandpa's farm ten years from now, just as we are doing to-day. Things don't change much in the country, as you know, while in the navy——"

Ned stopped, but his glowing face and sparkling eyes finished the speech for him.

"While in the navy, bing! bang!—Promotion.—Fire the guns!—Target!—Good shot!—First mate!—Medal!—Introduction to the president.—Up in the fighting-top.—Down in a submarine.—Bottom of the sea.—Top of the mast—whoop!" exploded Herc, in a way that he had when he was excited. It was for all the world like listening to the detonations of an exploding package of firecrackers.

"Well, the poster here *does* say that there are a lot of good chances for promotion," soberly put in Ned, who had been examining the text below the lithograph with some attention, while Herc had been exploding. "I've a good mind to try it, Herc," he concluded suddenly.

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"Count me in on that, too," heartily rejoined his cousin, giving a few impromptu steps of what he declared was a sailor's hornpipe; "and when we're both admirals we'll come back here and astonish the natives—including Hank Harkins."

"Who said Hank Harkins?" growled a harsh voice from the rear of the store, for the postoffice was tucked away in one corner of the Lambs' Corners Emporium, in which, it was the boast of its proprietor, you could buy anything from a needle to a gang-plow.

As the words reached the boys' ears, a tall, hulking youth, of about their own age—shouldered his way through the knot of loungers gathered about the stove—for it was December, and cold.

"I'll thank you two to keep my name out of your conversation," growled the newcomer, as he lurched up to the cousins.

"Oh, we'd not use it unless we had to," rejoined Herc, facing round, his red hair seeming to bristle like the hackles on the back of an angry dog. "Since you were mean enough to persuade your father to post his land against us so that we could not take the short cut to the store, we are not likely to want to discuss your points,—good or otherwise—promiscuous." [Pg 10]

"See here, Herc Taylor," glowered Hank, who had considerable reputation in the village as a bully, and had sustained his renown as a hard fighter and wrestler in many a tough contest, "I don't know what you mean by promiscuous—"

"No, I didn't think you would," grinned Herc cheerfully.

"But I want to tell you here and now, that if I have any more of your impudence, I'm going to lick you, and lick you good," concluded the bully; his enmity to the two boys, who lived on an adjoining farm to his father's, not at all allayed by Herc's aggressive tone and evident contempt.

"And I want to tell you that we don't want anything to do with you," retorted Herc; "we're mighty particular about our company."

"You young whelp, I'll have to teach you some manners," grated Hank angrily, edging up threateningly toward the red-headed youth, who, for his part, did not budge the fraction of an inch.

"You'll be a teacher who never studied then," retorted Herc hotly, as he turned away to join Ned, who had been regarding the disputants with narrowed eyes, but had said nothing so far. He knew Hank Harkins for a bully, and believed him to be a coward at heart, but he had no wish to get into a fistic argument with him in a public place like Goggins' store and postoffice. [Pg 11]

But by this time a number of the loungers about the stove had become attracted by the raised tones of Hank and Herc and crowded around the two; and Hank, nothing loth to having an audience, proceeded to give Herc what he elegantly termed a "tongue-lashing."

"So far as posting our farm went," he sputtered vindictively, "you know why that was done, to keep you two from pot-hunting over it. Killing every rabbit you could and pulling down walls to get them out. Why," exclaimed Hank, turning to the auditors who stood with gaping mouths in various interested postures, "those two fellows made a hole in our south wall that let our whole herd of milch cows through, and—"

He stopped short at a sudden interruption.

"That's a lie." The words came from Ned Strong.

"Yes, you know it is. You pulled down that wall yourself and then to escape getting in trouble with your father you blamed us for it," snapped Herc. [Pg 12]

The bully's face twitched. He grew pale with anger and his rage was none the less because he knew Herc's charges to be true.

"Call me a liar, will you?" he gritted out, springing at Ned with considerable agility, considering his hulking frame and general appearance of clumsy strength.

"Take that!"

Smack!

The bully's big hand landed fair on Ned's cheek, bruising it and raising an angry crimson mark.

Unwilling as Ned was to fight in such a place, the insult was too maddening to be allowed to go unnoticed by any one but an arrant coward; and Ned was far from being that.

Before Hank had gathered himself together from the force of his unexpected blow, the quiet Ned was transformed from his usual docile self, into a formidable antagonist. His eyes blazed with anger as he crouched into a boxing posture for a breath, and then lunged full at Hank Harkins, who met the lighter lad's onslaught with a defiant sneer. [Pg 13]

So quickly had it all happened that no one had had time to say a word, much less to interfere. Paul Stevens, the owner of the store, was out in the granary at the back helping a farmer get a load of oats onto his wagon.

The loungers, nothing averse to having the monotony of their unceasing discussions of the crops and politics interrupted in such dramatic fashion, fell back to give the battlers room. Not one of them, however, dreamed of but one issue to the battle and that was that Ned Strong was in for a terrible thrashing; but, as the seconds slipped by, and several blows had been exchanged between the two, it began to appear that Ned was not going to prove such an easy prey as had at first seemed manifest.

Hank Harkins himself, who had been surprised at any resistance from Herc's cousin, began to look uneasy as Ned, instead of going down before the perfect hail of blows the bully delivered, skillfully avoided most of the lunges and contented himself with ducking and dodging; only changing his tactics now and then to deliver a blow when he saw a favorable opportunity.

"Good boy, Ned," breathed Herc, as he saw his companion wading into Hank Harkins in such surprising style. [Pg 14]

Even the loyal Herc had not hitherto dreamed that beneath Ned's quiet personality had been hidden such ability to take care of himself.

Hank, after the first few minutes, was breathing heavily, and the sweat began to pour off his face. A pampered, only son, he never did much hard work about the farm, whereas Ned's muscles were trained fine as nickel-steel by hay-pitching, wood-sawing and other strenuous tasks. His training stood him in good stead now.

Overmatched by Hank, he undoubtedly was, but his hard frame was the more enduring. Hank's punches, terrific enough at first, began gradually to grow weaker, more particularly as most of them had been wasted on empty space.

Finally Hank, perceiving that he was reaching the end of his rope, clenched his teeth and, with set face and narrowed eyes, made up his mind to end the fight in one supreme effort.

He hurled himself on his lighter antagonist like a thunderbolt, but Ned, with a skillful duck, avoided the full fury of the onslaught, and rising just as the bully launched his blows into thin air, caught his lumbering opponent full under the chin. [Pg 15]

Swinging his arms, like a scarecrow in a windstorm, the bully plunged backward under the effective blow.

"Hurray for Ned Strong!" shouted Herc ecstatically, as the bully's big frame reeled staggeringly backward.

The next minute, however, his delight changed to a groan of dismay as Hank, unable to control himself, crashed, full tilt, into the stove. With a deafening clatter, like that of a mad bull careening round a tinware shop, the heater and its long pipe, came toppling in a sooty confusion to the ground. Red-hot coals shot out in every direction.

In the midst of the wreckage sprawled the unlucky bully, his features bedaubed with black. Through this mask his look of puzzled rage at his defeat came so comically that Ned and Herc could not restrain themselves, but, even in the face of the disaster to the store stove, burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter. In the meantime some one hurled a bucket of water on the coals, and the bully was drenched.

The onlookers, their risibilities also tickled by the downfall of the bully, and the noisy demolition of the stove, joined in the merriment and the laden shelves of the store were echoing to a perfect tempest of laughter when suddenly the rear door opened and Paul Stevens entered. A look of dismay appeared on his lean features as his eyes lighted on the wreckage. [Pg 16]

With him was another figure whose unexpected appearance caused the boys' faces to assume almost as dismayed a look as the countenance of the storekeeper.

"Grandfather!" gasped Ned, as his eyes encountered the angry glare of the newcomer's pale orbs.

"Yes,—grandfather," snapped the other, whose weather-beaten face was adorned with a tuft of gray hair on the chin, in the style popularly known as "the goatee."

"What have you got to say in explanation of this?"

As he rasped out this query in a harsh, rusty voice like the creaking of a long disused hinge, old Zack Strong pointed to the wreckage. From the midst of it was rising the bully, plentifully besmeared with soot, but doing his best to maintain a look of injured innocence.

CHAPTER II.

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"WE'RE GOING TO JOIN THE NAVY."

Old Zack Strong was not one of those men who can distinguish between boyish high spirits and what he would have termed "downright pesky cussedness." In this latter quality, indeed, he believed both his grandsons—Ned, and his dead second son's offspring, Herc,—to be plentifully endowed. Not naturally bad-hearted, however, the old man had assumed the care of the cousins on the death of their parents, but even with his act of adoption there came the thought to his frugal mind: "They'll be a great help 'round the farm."

In his hopes in this direction the old man had not been disappointed. Both boys had entered into the work with painstaking thoroughness; but it must be admitted that to adventurous lads, the monotonous grind of a remote farm in the hills is somewhat dampening. Ever since Ned and Herc had left the district school and become, in a more thorough sense than ever, "helps" to their grandfather, the old man had chafed at their hunting expeditions and proclivities toward baseball and other games. He could not see that pitching hay, milking, and doing chores, was not the full-rounded end of existence for any lads. [Pg 18]

So, when, on this bitter December afternoon, he entered the store unexpectedly on his way back from delivering a wagon-load of grist at the water-driven mill at Westerlo, a nearby village, his chagrin may be imagined when he discovered his two young charges occupying the centre of the scene depicted in the last chapter.

In Zack Strong's hard creed there was only one sin worse than playing—or "fooling," as he called it—and that was fighting.

And it was only too evident that in the latter of these heinous offences one at least of the boys had been indulging.

Worse still, in the wrecked stove the old farmer foresaw a demand for damages on the storekeeper's part, and there was only one thing harder to wring from Zack than a smile, and that article was money. If the average farmer is what may be described as "close-fisted," old Zack was "cement-fisted."

With this side-light on their grandfather's character in view, the consternation of the boys may be understood when they met his amazed and indignant gaze resting accusingly on them. [Pg 19]

"Mean?" stammered Hank, wiping as best he could some of the soot off his mottled countenance and echoing the old man's last words. "It means that your two boys here have made a brutal and unprovoked attack on me and that——"

"And that my stove is busted to Kingdom Come!" disgustedly sputtered Paul Stevens, whose cadaverous features had been busily scanning the wreckage in the brief interval of time that had elapsed between the entrance of himself and Zack Strong and the seemingly righteously indignant outburst of the bully.

"Never mind your stove now," grated out the hard-featured old farmer, wishing devoutly that the stove could be "never-minded" altogether, "what I want to find out is what these boys here have been up to. What kind of deviltry they have been at."

"We haven't been at any deviltry, as you please to call it, grandpa," burst out Ned, striving to keep cool, though he was burning inwardly with indignation and humiliation.

"Eh-eh-eh?" grunted the old man incredulously, "that's fine talking, but what's all this I see? How did that young man come to be all mixed up in the stove?" [Pg 20]

"Through no wish of his own you may be sure," chuckled the irrepressible Herc. "Say, Hank, you look like a skunk—all black and white, you know——"

"Silence, sir," roared his grandfather, with as near an approach to a stern bass as his wheezy voice would allow. "Who started this?"

Ned remained silent. It was not his wish to tell tales, and he had no desire to act as an informer.

"Why, Hank Harkins here started it," spoke up Si Ingalls, a young farmer who had formed one of the group about the demolished stove, "he slapped Ned in the jaw and Ned—rightly, too—came back at him. Am I correct?" he asked, turning to the others.

"Hank's face looks it," grinned Luke Bates, the village wit, regarding Hank, who was quivering with fury, in an amused way, "never mix it up with a stove, Hank," he went on, "it'll get the best of you every time."

"Is this right?" demanded old Zack, turning to his grandson as soon as the laugh at Hank's expense subsided. [Pg 21]

"Oh, yes, that's about the way it happened, I guess," said Ned in a low voice.

"What I want to know is who's going to settle for my stove," wailed Paul Stevens. "Here's a cracked draught-piece, a busted door, two lengths of stove-pipe flattened out like pancakes and soot all over a fine piece of dress goods."

"Name your price," groaned old Zack, wincing as if a twinge of rheumatism had passed through him, "but don't make it too steep," he added, cautiously, "or I won't pay it. How much, now?"

The storekeeper made a rapid mental calculation, in which his fingers and various grimaces played an important part.

"There's the stove door, say seventy-five cents; and the pipe, two lengths, a dollar; and the draught-piece—I'll have to send to New York for another, sixty cents; and the spoiled dress goods ——"

"You'll only have to cut the outside edge off them," objected old Zack, his lips twitching nervously as the rising tide of expenses swamped his cautious senses.

"Wall, that'll be a yard, anyhow," announced the storekeeper, "that is twenty-five cents, we'll say. Two dollars thirty-five for the whole shebang." [Pg 22]

"Two dollars thirty-five. It's rank robbery," objected the old farmer, almost giving utterance to a groan.

"Of course I may be able to straighten out the stove pipe," admitted Paul Stevens, reluctantly, "and you are an old customer. I'll make it two dollars and ten cents to you."

Reluctantly old Zack drew out a battered wallet and drew from it two one-dollar bills, being careful not to display the rest of its contents. Then, after much fumbling in the recesses of his clothing, he produced a small leather purse from which he drew a ten cent piece. These he tendered with an agonized expression to the storekeeper.

"Canadian," sniffed the storekeeper, regarding the bit of silver.

"It's good," objected old Zack.

"Not to me. Come, I let you off light on the stove and the other damage them boys have done; give me a good dime."

Reluctantly old Zack took back the rejected coin and substituted for it a piece of United States [Pg 23]

silver.

"There you are," he grumbled, "those pesky boys will bankrupt me yet."

All this time the boys, standing aloof from the crowd of loungers, had regarded the scene with very different expressions. Herc's lips trembled with suppressed laughter as he witnessed the painful operation of separating old Zack from his beloved money, while Ned's face bore a thoughtful look, as if he were revolving some serious project in his mind. Hank Harkins had taken advantage of the temporary diversion from himself as a centre of interest to shuffle off, and was by this time well on his way home, considering, as he went, the best way in which he could explain his soot-smearred face and rapidly swelling eye.

A short time afterwards the boys accompanied their elder to his spring-wagon and, as they had walked down to the store, prepared to accompany him home.

"Look out for squalls," Herc whispered to Ned, as the two lads unhitched the team. His warning was not ill-judged. The vials of old Zack's wrath burst with the fury of a midsummer storm above the boys' heads as soon as the wagon had clattered out of the village and was climbing the steep ascent to Zack Strong's farm.

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"Of all the useless, idle scamps that I ever had on the farm, you are the worst," began the querulous old man, "and then, to cap it all, you go to fighting and brawling in public and cost me two dollars and an American dime to settle it. I don't see why Paul Stevens couldn't have taken that Canadian one. They're as good as any others, in some places," he went on, his mind reverting to his other grievance, "but that's the way in this world, nothing but ingratitude everywhere you turn. I've nourished a pair of sar-pints, that's what I've done. You're rattle-brains, both on yer."

He turned a sour enough countenance on the two lads as he spoke.

"Sort of rattlesnakes, eh?" cheerfully remarked the irrepressible Herc. "It's no use being angry, gran'pa," he went on, "we'd finished splitting the last of that tough hickory before we came down to the village and, as there was nothing else to do till chore-time——"

"You spent it in disgracing yourselves, eh?" grimly rejoined old Zack. "I'm tired of it, I tell you," he railed on, "and——"

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"And so are we," quietly broke in Ned, whose face still wore the same thoughtful look that had come over it just before they left the store.

"What?" quavered the old man, as if he thought he had not heard aright.

"I mean 'so are we tired of it,'" repeated Ned, slowly, but in a firm voice, "we work for you early and late, grandpa, and nothing ever comes of it but scolding and fault-finding."

"Didn't I pay two dollars ten cents for that busted stove, Ned?" complained old Zack, "and I'll swear the damage wasn't more'n one ninety-eight, and——"

"That's not the question, now," went on Ned, in the same quiet, determined voice, "as it was partly my fault that the stove was overturned I'll pay you back that out of my own pocket."

"What,—you ain't got no money!" exclaimed old Zack incredulously and in somewhat alarmed tones. There was a note in Ned's voice he had never heard there before and he saw his authority melting away like snow in the spring, "and besides, maybe I was a bit hasty, Ned. Come, we'll call it square and you do your work right in future and we'll say no more about it."

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"I shall do only a little more work for you, gran'pa," was Ned's amazing reply, which almost caused the old man to drop his lines and fall backward off his seat.

"What's that?" he cried, and his voice fairly squeaked under the stress of his great astonishment.

"I said," calmly repeated Ned, "that I shall not do much more work for you, grandpa, and neither will Herc here, I guess. We are going away."

It was Herc's turn to look astonished. Accustomed as he was to accept Ned's opinion in most things, this latest resolve seemed somewhat drastic even to the impetuous red-headed youth.

"Why, you ain't got no money?" stammered old Zack, not being able to think of anything else to say in his great amazement.

"Oh, yes, I have," quietly rejoined Ned. "I have fifty dollars saved up that I got for skins last winter and Herc has about the same sum. That will carry us a little way, I guess."

"Why, Ned, boy! Land o' Goshen, what have yer set yer mind on doin'?" gasped the farmer.

"We're going to enter the navy," announced Ned, in these same quiet, determined tones; which unmistakably meant to anyone who knew him that his mind was made up beyond the possibility of change.

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"What, out on the water?" gasped old Zack, his mind in a whirl at this sudden kicking over the traces of authority.

"I believe they usually sail the vessels of Uncle Sam's navy on the water," chirped the irrepressible Herc, who, his first astonishment over, had quite resolved to follow his cousin's footsteps wherever they might lead.

The sarcasm was lost on old Zack, however. He even forgot to emit his customary minute interval cry of "Geddap!" to his old team which, in consequence, came to a dead standstill in the middle of the road.

"Of course we shall stay and help you till you get a hired man to suit you," went on Ned, with quiet sarcasm.

"Yes—yes," quavered the old man, chirruping to his stationary team, and seemingly dazed by the sudden announcement of the boys' intentions.

"In the navy—out on the water," he muttered as they drove on, "Land o' Goshen!—two dollars!—fights!—busted stoves!—the navy!"

CHAPTER III.

[Pg 28]

UNCLE SAM GETS TWO RAW RECRUITS.

Old Zack's daze was not dispelled the next morning when, having done their work as usual, the boys set off to trudge the six miles into Lambs' Corners.

"Will you be back to dinner?" the old man croaked, in such a quavering voice that even Herc felt sorry for him.

"We'll be back before then, and make up the time we've lost before night," Ned assured him, as the two cousins swung off to take what they both felt was the final step of their resolve.

They had lain awake most of the night in the room they shared, discussing the future, and had decided to abide by the decision they had so hastily arrived at, whatever might happen.

"Things have come to the cross roads of opportunity," was the way Ned put it, "we've got to strike out now and sink or swim."

During the course of their conversation it had occurred to Ned that in reading over the printed matter beneath the picture which had attracted their attention in the post office the day before, he had come across instructions to ask the postmaster for a post card, which was free on application. This card, when mailed to the Navy Department, so the poster said, would bring the applicant additional information regarding the navy, in the form of booklets and pamphlets.

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As soon as the boys arrived in the postoffice they perceived that they were the objects of very general scrutiny by the usual group assembled 'round the re-erected stove. They paid no attention to the comments of the knot of spectators, however, but marched straight up to the little pigeon hole, behind which Paul Stevens attended to the weighty matters of the U. S. mail, and demanded two of the post cards the poster mentioned. With a lifting of his eyebrows the postmaster handed them out.

"Seems like everyone in the place is goin' ter enlist, or whatever you call it," he remarked. "Hank Harkins was in here early to-day and got one of them cards. I reckon he's thinking of getting a chore boy's job in the navy, too."

This was news to the boys and not particularly welcome news, either. They had no desire to come into further contact with the lumbering Hank, but inasmuch as they had no control over his movements, they accepted the situation with the best grace they could.

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A few days later the literature arrived from Washington and the boys put their heads together over it during their leisure time, examining the prospects held out from every aspect. The result was, as might have been expected, that their resolution became more firmly set than ever and a week after they received the booklets and other information they bade good-bye to old Zack, who had by this time acquired resignation and a hired man, and started for the village whence they were to take the stage to Granville, the railroad town.

As may be imagined, the boys felt little regret on leaving the farm and old Zack, and were not hypocrites enough to pretend to any great affection for their surroundings of so many monotonous years. Old Zack wrung his hands and lamented, to be sure, but as the boys knew that his grief was caused more by the loss of two husky helpers than by any personal regret, they did not pay much attention to his protestations.

As they strode through the old farm gates there did come over them a momentary twinge of feeling at the idea that the portals that they had so often opened and shut as they went about their work, were closing behind them for perhaps the last time. It was only a momentary emotion, however, and was speedily dispelled by a shout of "Hey!" from old Zack, who came running after them from the barn where he had spent the time since, he had said good-by, in scolding the new hired man.

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The two lads halted and set down their brand new suit-cases in the dusty track.

"Say!" panted old Zack, clumsily loping up to them, and holding out something in his withered fingers, "here's something you boys may need. Take it, anyhow; I'll give it yer."

In his digits he extended to them the Canadian dime, rejected by the postmaster on the afternoon of the disaster to the stove.

Hardly able to restrain their laughter, the boys accepted the gift with becoming gravity, and once more said farewell to the old man.

"It'll do as a luck-piece, anyhow," laughed Ned, as they trudged on and a turn in the road blotted out from their eyes the old farm-house, its weather-beaten out-buildings and fertile fields. It was

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to be many a day before they saw it again and many adventures, of which they little dreamed at the moment, were to be experienced by them before they once more encountered it.

In due time the stage reached the Granville ferry and five hours later the railroad brought the two lads down the east bank of the Hudson to New York. They stood dazed and confused outside the Grand Central station looking with amazed eyes on the roar and confusion of traffic that swirled by them. It was mid afternoon and they had yet to report at the recruiting station, of which they had the address in their pockets.

Ned stepped up to a policeman who stood at the crossing directing the flow of traffic by blasts on a whistle.

He extended the piece of paper which bore the address: "U. S. Navy Recruiting Station, No. 394 Bowery," on it.

"Can you please tell us how to get there?" he asked, somewhat tremblingly. It was the first real live policeman he had ever addressed, and the country boy felt somewhat awed.

"I'm a traffic cop. Ask the man on post," snapped the policeman. With a sharp blast on his whistle he started the cross-town traffic, which had halted, to moving again, paying no further attention to the tall sun-burned lad with the shining new suit-case.

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Somewhat taken aback at this reception, the lad looked at his companion with a puzzled expression.

"I guess he regulates the traffic," suggested Herc, in response to the silent query, "see that horse's head in a wheel embroidered on his arm? Let's look for a policeman without that and I guess he'll be the right man to inquire from."

Following Herc's suggestion Ned's eyes soon lighted on a stout bluecoat who stood talking to a number of taxi-cab drivers and seemed to have nothing to do with the regulation of traffic; or, in fact, anything else. This time he got a quick answer to his question.

"394 Bowery," repeated the patrolman, "shure any one knows where that is," and he looked at Ned and Herc pityingly as if they were some strange sort of creatures and much to be sympathized with.

"Yes, officer, but we are strangers in the city, and—"

"Sure, any one could tell you were Rubes from the cut of your jibs," grinned the patrolman, while the taxi-cabbies set up a laugh. "Goin' ter enlist in the navy, eh?" he went on, scrutinizing Ned's bit of paper, "well, Heaven help ye. They'll feed ye on skilly, and milk from a tin-cow, and put yer ter bed in a haythanish hammock of nights."

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"We are going to become sailors in Uncle Sam's navy," proudly rejoined Ned, "and we think it's a service which any man should be proud to be privileged to join."

His face flushed indignantly, and he felt a flash of anger at the contemptuous tone of the fat policeman.

"Oh well, be aisy," rejoined the bluecoat, "I meant no harm; but my wife's sister's cousin Mary had a son as went for sailor and they brought him home in a coffin, that's all. He was blowed to bits by an explosion of one of the big guns. The police force is good enough for me and by the same token I should think two likely looking lads like you would like to jine the force."

"Our time is limited," broke in the still indignant Ned, "will you please direct us to the address I showed you?"

"Shure I will, me bye," amiably replied the unruffled patrolman, "walk to your left two blocks and take a Third Avenue car down town. When she gets onto the Bowery watch the numbers and you can't miss it."

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With a brief word of thanks the boys hastened off in the direction indicated. As they walked away they heard the policeman remark to his friends, the chauffeurs:

"Waal, there goes more food for powder."

"I'm glad we're not staying in New York. I don't believe I should care much for it," said Herc, as the boys walked toward Third Avenue, their ears stunned by the din all about them.

"Nor I," responded Ned. "However, if we pass our tests and are accepted, we shall not have to stop here longer than overnight. That's one comfort."

"That's so," assented Herc. "I used to think there was an ear-splitting racket about the place on hog-killing day, but it was nothing to this."

Thus conversing they boarded a Third Avenue car and rode for half an hour or more.

"Here you are, boys—here's Number 394."

The conductor of the car poked his head in through the doors and gave his bell one jerk, which brought it to a stop.

The boys hastened from the car, and found themselves opposite a not particularly prepossessing looking building, the lower floor of which was occupied by an old book store. But above an open door leading to the upper stories, which had been newly painted and presented a neat appearance, floated a flag that made both their hearts beat quicker. If all went well, they would soon be enlisted under it. Old Glory hung bravely above the dingy portal, amid the hurry and squalidness of the surroundings.

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"Well, here's the place, Herc."

But to Ned's surprise, Herc stopped short and was standing irresolutely behind him.

"Um-ah! I guess we'd better walk around the block a couple of times first, Ned," stammered the red-headed youth.

"What's the trouble?" laughed Ned. "You look as awkward as a hired man going courting. You don't mean to say that you are nervous?"

"No," protested Herc, "not nervous, Ned; but—but— Well, the fact is, I'd have liked a little preparation first, as the fellow said when he fell into the well on Luke Bates' place up home."

"You're going to come in with me right now," said Ned grimly, seizing Herc's arm in a grip there was no resisting. [Pg 37]

Together the two lads passed through the door and up a flight of stairs. At the head of the flight they found a well-furnished office confronting them. A rather brusque-looking man, with a pair of formidable mustaches, sat at a table facing them.

"Well?" he demanded somewhat truculently.

"Well," the irrepressible Herc was beginning in the same aggressive tone, when Ned checked him.

"We wish to enlist in the navy. Have we come to the right place, sir?" he asked civilly.

"You have, my boys," was the response in heartier tone; "and if you mean business, I think I can promise, from looking you over casually, that you'll pass with flying colors. Fill out these blanks, and I'll see what you're made of. We have so many fakes we have to be careful."

He pushed toward the boys two large sheets of paper. On them were printed numerous questions about themselves, their parents, their previous condition of life, and so forth.

"Gee! this is like passing an examination at school," whispered Herc, as the boys sat down with pen and ink at a corner table and prepared to fill out the blank spaces left for answers. [Pg 38]

"Hush!" cautioned Ned.

"Or the papers you fill out when you enter a prize heifer at the county fair," continued the incorrigible red-headed youth.

Despite Herc's frequent remarks, breathed in a cautious undertone, the questions were all answered in due time and the papers handed over to the bristly mustached man, who eyed them approvingly.

"Good!" he snapped. "Neat and satisfactory. Now," he continued, "go into that room and undergo a physical examination."

He indicated a door, which the boys opened with somewhat of a feeling of awe, and found themselves in the presence of a surgeon, who ordered them to disrobe and conducted a thorough examination of them.

"Just as if we were a pair of fat porkers," commented Herc afterward.

"They are magnificent physical specimens," reported the surgeon to the bristly mustached man, who, though the boys did not then know it, was a quartermaster detailed to recruiting duty.

"Good!" snapped the quartermaster once more. "They have already given me the written consent of their guardian, so nothing remains to be done but to administer the oath." [Pg 39]

The solemn oath of allegiance to duty and country was then administered to the boys, who stood bolt upright, with round eyes, while the impressive little ceremony was gone through. Even the volatile Herc seemed impressed by the seriousness of what they were undertaking.

"And now we are blue jackets," said Ned, as they concluded and subscribed their names to the oath.

"Not yet," laughed the quartermaster. "You will now have to go to the Naval Training School at Newport as apprentice seamen."

"Only apprentices," sighed Herc. "I thought we were out of that class."

"As apprentice seamen," went on the officer, not noticing the interruption, "you will receive pay during your four months of instruction, and will be furnished uniforms and equipment free, as well as board."

He reached into a drawer.

"Here is your transportation to Newport. The boat leaves to-night at six o'clock," he went on, handing the boys some tickets. "I hope you boys, who look to be the stuff of which real seamen are made, will work hard and succeed." [Pg 40]

"Thank you, sir. We will if effort counts for anything," promised Ned.

With light hearts the two boys made their way to the street a few minutes later. As they passed under the flag once more, Ned drew himself up stiffly and saluted.

"Why do you do that?" asked Herc curiously, as he watched his companion's action.

"Because we are now sailors under that flag in the United States navy," replied Ned proudly. "You should do the same, Herc. We're Dreadnought Boys from now on."

"All right. I will salute next time," easily responded Herc. "And now, as we have some few hours before the boat goes, let's saunter round a bit and see the sights."

As the boys, having inquired the way, started toward Broadway, they almost collided with a tall figure that was hastening into the door of the recruiting office.

"Out of my way, can't you?" the newcomer exclaimed querulously, shoving roughly by. "What are you barricading the door of the naval recruiting office for? I'll report you."

"We're here because we are now apprentice seamen in the navy, Hank Harkins," rejoined Ned, who had recognized the bully before the other had realized with whom he had almost collided. [Pg 41]

Hank glanced angrily at the two lads, but refrained from speaking. Instead, he hurried up the stairs leading to the recruiting office, paying no attention to his country's flag.

"There goes a fine addition to the navy," sneered Herc, as the boys started off for Broadway.

"Don't say that, Herc. The navy may make a man of him," remarked Ned.

"Then it's got a fine big job on its hands, that's all I've got to say!" was the red-headed lad's rejoinder.

CHAPTER IV.

[Pg 42]

THE DREADNOUGHT BOYS HAVE AN ADVENTURE.

The *Rhode Island*, the largest and fleetest of the big passenger vessels plying Long Island Sound between New York and New England ports, was ploughing her way through a wild, bitter night in the latter part of March, down the narrow, tempestuous passage of water dividing the mainland from the low-lying expanse of Long Island.

Although the snow swirled and the wind screamed through the vessel's funnel stays and lofty wireless aerials as if it would root them out, every window and porthole on her three lofty decks glowed with a cheerful yellow light. The lively strains of an orchestra were occasionally swirled away on the fierce wind, when the door of the main saloon swung open to admit or give egress to a passenger.

The laboring vessel had run into the storm at sundown that evening, and now, as she forged her way through the choppy seas off Point Judith, she was, despite her great size, thrown and tossed about like an empty bottle at the mercy of the seas. [Pg 43]

As the vessel gave an unusually heavy plunge, the companion door once more opened, and in the sudden flood of light that illumined the dark decks for a brief interval, the stalwart figures of the two Dreadnought Boys were revealed. Both wore heavy "service" overcoats buttoned up to their chins, and these they secured more tightly about themselves as they faced the storm.

Both lads were heavier, even more bronzed, and keener of eye than when we saw them last. Their four months of vigorous training had, too, given them a manly air of self-reliance.

"Wow!" exclaimed Herc, as the wind hit them full and square and gave pause for a second even to their well-knit frames. "This is a hummer, and no mistake, Ned!"

"Nothing to what we'll get when we go cruising under Uncle Sam's flag," laughed the other. "I tell you, Herc, that this isn't a circumstance to the gales I've heard they get off Cape Hatteras."

"Why, what are you talking about?" rejoined Herc, pulling his cap closer over his head of bright red hair. "This wind is worse than the one that blew the roof off gran'pa's barn last New Year's eve, and that was a hummer, if you like it!" [Pg 44]

"Still thinking of the old farm and Lambs' Corners, eh?" laughed his companion, with a hearty chuckle that sounded as if it came from the depth of his full, deep chest and excellent lungs. "Well, now that you're a full-fledged jackie, Herc, it's time to forget the stock and the barnyard, and think of the big guns and the fighting tops."

"Well, anyhow," grunted Herc, as if to change the conversation, "blowing as it is, I'd rather be out here than in that stuffy saloon, for all the lights and the music and the dressed-up ladies."

"Same here," rejoined his companion. "Crickey! that was a lurch, if you like! Hold on, Herc!" he shouted, as the other went sliding off across the slippery deck, under the impetus of the plunge. "We don't want to lose you just yet, you know. And, moreover, this is no skating rink, but a passenger steamer carrying two new-fledged ordinary seamen——"

"Blamed ordinary!" grunted Herc, in parenthesis. [Pg 45]

"From the Naval Training School at Newport to New York, to join their ship, the U. S. S. *Manhattan*," went on Ned.

"Dreadnought, isn't she?" sputtered Herc, as a great, hurtling mass of spray was flung aboard by the angry wind.

"That's right. The newest vessel in the navy. We're mighty lucky boys to have got the berths."

"I agree with you," rejoined Herc, brushing his hand across his eyes, where the tang of the salt water still stung him. "I'd be altogether as satisfied as a woodchuck in a corn patch if only that fellow Hank Harkins hadn't been detailed to the same squadron. He means to give us trouble,

Ned. I'm sure of it."

"I'm not afraid of any trouble that a bullying cad like Harkins can make," was Ned's brisk reply. "Anyhow, he is detailed to duty on the *Illinois*; and now, Herc, we've been standing here long enough. We'll take a brisk walk around the decks, to get the cobwebs out of our brains, and then we'll turn in—how's that suit you?"

"Fine," rejoined Herc, as the two young seamen started to circle the swaying decks at a good brisk pace. "I'm as sleepy as Uncle Fred's prize Berkshire after a bran mash." [Pg 46]

Immediately on being passed at the New York recruiting office, the lads, as we know, had been ordered to report at the training station at Newport, where they had remained for the prescribed four months, being given in that period a thorough schooling in the detail work of the ordinary seaman in the United States navy. They had also gone through setting-up exercises that had, even in that short period of time, changed their physiques from the somewhat round-shouldered, slouching aspect peculiar to country boys to the smart appearance and trim get-up of Uncle Sam's sailors.

While in the school they had received a salary of seventeen dollars and sixty cents a month, and as uniforms, food and washing were all provided by the government, they had incurred no expenses, and had a good part of their money in their pockets when they left the training-school with their "papers" endorsed "Excellent" in red ink, with a special "good-conduct" mention.

That afternoon they had embarked on the *Rhode Island* for New York, where the vessels of the North Atlantic squadron lay in the North River, awaiting the command to leave for the naval base, at Guantanamo, Cuba, for battle practice. [Pg 47]

"Well, Herc," said Ned, after the two lads had circumnavigated the slippery decks a few times, "let's turn in, for, if I'm not mistaken, we have a trying day in front of us to-morrow."

As the boys were unlocking the door of their stateroom, which opened directly onto the deck, the *Rhode Island* gave a plunge that brought her almost on her beam-ends, and sent Herc, who was balancing himself as best he could, while Ned fiddled with the lock, careening full against a tall, gray-mustached man of upright bearing, who was just about to open the door of the stateroom adjoining the boys'.

Herc's heavy frame, with the added impetus given to it by the swerve of the vessel, banged into the other with the force of a projectile, and the two went struggling helplessly toward the scuppers.

Strive desperately as he would, Herc could not regain his balance, and after waving his long, sinewy arms round a couple of times in a vain effort to recover his equilibrium, he collapsed in a heap at the edge of the deck. In his fall he brought down the dignified gentleman, who in the meantime had been striving as hard as Herc to keep upright. [Pg 48]

"I—I—I beg your pardon, I'm sure!" sputtered Herc, as he scrambled to his feet and reached out a hand to assist the other to a standing position. "It was quite an accident—as gran'pa said when Betsey, our muley cow, kicked Lem Betts in the eye."

"Thank you, my lad," responded the other, accepting Herc's aid and standing erect once more. "I am sure that, as in the case of your grandfather's cow, the disaster was unintentional."

The boys, for Ned had by this time unlocked the door, and had been taking in the embarrassing incident, regarded the tall stranger with some interest. He was distinctly different from the ordinary citizen. His skin was bronzed and weather-beaten, and, beneath his close-cropped gray mustache, his mouth quivered humorously at poor Herc's obvious embarrassment.

"Why," went on the object of their attention, regarding them in the light which streamed from the open cabin door of the boys' stateroom, "I see that you lads are both recruits to the navy. What ship, may I ask?"

"The new Dreadnought *Manhattan*, sir," said Ned, proudly throwing out his chest, as he always did instinctively when he mentioned the name of the big fighting ship to which they had been assigned. [Pg 49]

The gray-mustached man's eyes twinkled more than ever.

"The *Manhattan*, eh?" he repeated reflectively. "Well, in that case we shall probably see more of each other. In any case, I thank you for your assistance"—turning to Herc—"rendered after you had 'boarded' me in such unceremonious fashion."

With a pleasant smile, he turned into his cabin, picking up as he did so a suitcase which had been deposited by him at the stateroom door, just before the unhappy Herc went careening across the deck.

"Say," whispered Herc, in an awed tone, as their new acquaintance vanished into his room, "did you see the letters on the end of the suitcase?"

"No," answered Ned sleepily, "I'm too tired to pay attention to anything but that snug-looking bunk there."

So saying, he closed the door on the storm, and, seating himself on the edge of a lounge at one end of the cabin, began to remove his shoes. [Pg 50]

But Herc would not let the subject drop.

"Well, I noticed them," he continued in the same awed voice, "and I believe that we've got

ourselves in bad right on the start."

"Why, what's the trouble, Herc?" inquired Ned, interested despite himself in his red-headed companion's eager tone.

"Well," said Herc impressively, "it said 'F. A. D., Commander U. S. N.,' on that suitcase, and it looks to me as if we had started our career in the navy by an act 'of gross insubordination,' as they'd have called it at Newport."

"How do you mean?" asked the sleepy Ned, stifling a yawn.

"Why, here am I, Herc Taylor, ordinary seaman, of Lambs' Corners, New York, butting commanders about as if they were ninepins and I was a bowling ball, that's all!" groaned Herc. "And that looks to me like a first-class way to get in bad."

"Herc, you are incorrigible," groaned Ned; "and I agree with you. If this adventure of yours doesn't turn out badly for both of us, I shall be much surprised."

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 51]

TWO LADS WITH THE "RIGHT RING."

It seemed to Herc that he had been asleep but a short time when he awakened with a start and an uneasy feeling that he could not account for.

Gradually, however, as the semi-stupor that followed the opening of his eyes wore off and he became sensible of his surroundings, he was aware that something unusual seemed to be occurring on the ship. Shouts and the trampling of running feet were borne in to him, and his first sleepy impression was that it was morning.

Suddenly, however, he became aware that the shouts formed a certain definite cry.

What was it?

Herc straightened up as well as he could in his bunk and listened.

A thrill of horror shot through him, as, like a flash, he sensed the nature of the shouts that had aroused him.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

The terrifying cry echoed from bow to stern of the ship and Herc now recognized a fact which he had not in first sleepy stupor realized, and that was that their cabin was hazy with smoke, which was becoming momentarily thicker. The heat, also, was growing rapidly insupportable.

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With one bound, the boy was on the floor, and shaking Ned by the shoulder.

"Ned, Ned, wake up!" he roared at the top of his voice.

"Aye, aye, sir!" came in a sleepy voice from Ned, who was dreaming that he was still back in the training school and that reveille had blown.

A minute later, however, Herc's shaking aroused him to his senses, and a few rapidly spoken words apprised him of the seriousness of the situation.

"Tumble into your clothes quick!" gasped Herc, as breathing in the smoke-filled room became every moment more difficult.

Ned needed no second telling. In a few seconds, thanks to their training, both boys were in their uniforms, and, grabbing up their suitcases, dashed out onto the decks.

The scene outside was one that might have turned cooler heads than theirs. The storm was still raging, and a white swirl enveloped the laboring ship, but the whiteness of the snow was tinged a fiery red with the reflections of towering flames that were by this time pouring from the engine-room hatch of the *Rhode Island*, and illuminating the night with their devouring splendor. Fire originating in a pile of oily waste against a wooden bulkhead had started the blaze.

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Men and women in all stages of dress and undress rushed confusedly about the decks, praying, screaming, blaspheming and fighting.

In the emergency that had so suddenly arisen, the crew and officers of the ship seemed powerless to do anything. Instead of attempting to quiet the panic, they rushed about, apparently as maddened as the rest of the persons on the ship, by the dire peril that confronted them.

"The boats! The boats!" someone suddenly shouted, and a mad rush for the upper decks, on which the boats were swung, followed. Women were flung aside by cowardly men frenzied with terror.

"Here, I can't stand this!" shouted Ned, as, followed by Herc, he plunged toward the foot of the narrow stairway up which the frenzied passengers were fighting their way.

"Women and children first! Women and children first!" the Dreadnought Boy kept shouting, as he elbowed his way to the foot of the steps, closely trailed by Herc.

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The roar of the flames was by this time deafening, drowning all other sounds. To add to the confusion, there now came pouring up from the lower regions of the ship a black and sooty crew

—the firemen of the vessel. Maddened by fear and brutal by nature, the grimy stokers had little difficulty in shoving the weaker passengers aside and making their way to the foot of the stairway up which Ned and Herc were helping the women and children and keeping back the cowardly male passengers as best they could. They were not over gentle in doing this latter. It was no time for halfway measures.

Above them, the captain of the ship and two of his officers who had partially collected their wits, were directing the crew to lower the boats. The women and children were being placed in them as rapidly as possible as Ned and Herc passed them up.

"Can you hold them back?" the captain had shouted down to the boys a few minutes before, as he peered down at the struggling mass on the lower deck. [Pg 55]

"We'll stick it out as long as we can," Ned had assured him, as he whirled a terrified male passenger about and sent him spinning backward whining pitifully that he "didn't want to die."

Suddenly Herc was confronted by a huge form, brandishing a steel spanner in a knotty fist.

It was one of the panic-stricken firemen.

"Let me by, kid!" bellowed this formidable antagonist.

"You can see for yourself that there are several women to go yet," responded Herc calmly, although he felt anything but easy in his mind as the muscular giant glared at him with terror and vindictiveness mingling in his gaze. "Women first, that's the rule."

"What in blazes do I care about the women?" roared the fireman, behind whom were now ranged several of his companions. "Let me by, or—"

He flourished the spanner with a suggestive motion anything but agreeable to Herc.

The red-headed boy gazed over in the direction in which he had last seen Ned.

There was no hope for help from that quarter, as a glance showed him. Ned was holding back an excited man with long whiskers and of prosperous appearance, who was shouting as if he were a phonograph: [Pg 56]

"A thousand dollars for a seat in the boats! A thousand—two thousand dollars for a seat in the boats!"

Suddenly, so suddenly that Herc had not time to guard against it, the stokers made a concerted rush for him.

"Ned! Ned!" shouted the boy, as he felt himself borne down by overwhelming numbers and trampled underfoot.

Ned heard the cry, and in two leaps was in the midst of the scuffle, dealing and receiving blows right and left.

"Do you call yourselves men?" he shouted indignantly, as the stokers fought their way forward in a grim phalanx which there was no resisting.

"It's deuce take the hindmost, and every man for himself now!" shouted a voice in the crowd, and the cowardly mob elbowed forward through the few women that still remained on the stairway and its approaches.

Ned and Herc, who had by this time struggled to his feet, fought desperately to stem the tide. So effective were their blows that for a time they actually succeeded in checking the advance. [Pg 57]

"Oh, for a gun!" breathed Ned.

"A cannon!" amended Herc.

Above them they heard a cheer, signifying that the first boat had struck the water.

"Stick it out, Herc!" panted Ned, as he struggled with a grimy giant, who, thanks to his ignorance of wrestling and tackles, was easily hurled backward by his lighter opponent. But the fight was too uneven to be of long duration.

Step by step, fighting every inch of the way, the two boys were borne backward by the opposing mob. Ned's foot caught in the lower step of the stairway and he was toppled over backward.

A mighty onrush of the fugitives immediately followed, and Herc shared Ned's fate.

The thought that they had failed flashed bitterly through each Dreadnought Boy's mind as they were trampled and crushed by hurrying feet of the terrified firemen, whose van was followed by the badly scared male passengers. The screams of the women who were being ruthlessly thrust aside tingled maddeningly in the boys' ears as they strove to regain their feet. [Pg 58]

Suddenly, above all the noise of the fugitives and the crackling of the flames as they ate through the bulkheads about the engine-room hatchway, the boys heard a sharp command.

It rang out as incisively as the report of a rifle, in a voice that seemed used to implicit obedience:

"I'll shoot the next man up that stairway!"

The rush came to halt for a brief second, and in that time the boys scrambled to their feet.

They soon perceived the cause of the interruption.

Not far from them, garbed in his shirt and trousers, just as he had rushed from his cabin on awaking, stood the man who had occupied the neighboring cabin to theirs.

The flames illumined the grim compression of his lips beneath his gray mustache. His eyes were narrowed to a determined angle.

In his hand he held a blue-steel navy revolver on which the glare of the conflagration played glisteningly.

"Come on, boys!" roared the stoker who had threatened Herc with the spanner. "It's just a bluff!" [Pg 59]



"That's to show you I mean business!"

At his words, the spell that had fallen on the frightened crowd for a second seemed to be broken, and the rush recommenced. The boys, with horrified eyes, saw the giant stoker snatch up a woman with a child in her arms and hurl her brutally back into the crowd, where she disappeared, lost in the vortex of struggling humanity.

"Crack!"

There was a spit of vicious blue flame from the revolver, followed by a yell of pain from the giant stoker.

The boys saw the spanner fall from his upraised hand and tumble with a clatter at his feet. His wrist, shot through by the gray-mustached man's unerring aim, hung limp at his side.

Like frightened sheep suddenly checked in a stampede, the white-faced crowd came to a halt and faced about at the new peril.

"That's to show you *I mean business!*" grated out the marksman, in a voice as cold as chilled steel. "Now let the women go first, and then the men may follow."

Under that menacing weapon, of whose efficiency they had just received so convincing a proof, the men sullenly stood aside and passed up the half-dozen women or so who had not had an opportunity to take advantage of the boys' plucky stand. [Pg 60]

From the bridge above, the captain of the *Rhode Island* hailed them.

"Six boats are away! Let the rest come!"

"Steady, steady!" came the sharp, commanding voice of the man with the pistol once more, as the score of men left began to scramble up the stairway. "One at a time! Take it easy!"

Under his authoritative voice the rush changed like magic to an orderly retreat, and in a few minutes a seventh boat was loaded with frightened passengers and lowered onto the heaving sea.

"Well, I guess we can go now, Herc," remarked Ned, turning to his companion.

"Yes, it's getting as warm here as it is in the smoke house at home in July," agreed Herc, as he carefully picked up his suitcase, which was somewhat battered by the recent knocking about it had gone through. After Ned had likewise recovered his piece of baggage, the two boys began the ascent of the stairway. For the moment they had quite forgotten the presence of the gray-mustached man, of whom, as we know, Herc stood in some awe on account of the inscription he had espied on the former's suitcase. [Pg 61]

Now, however, the stranger was at the boys' sides. They saluted instinctively.

"I was a witness of your plucky conduct," he exclaimed warmly, "and I am glad to see that I was not to be disappointed in the estimate I had formed of both your characters. I shall keep a sharp lookout over your future careers as seamen in the navy."

It was a moment when ordinary barriers seemed to be let down, and Herc, in a hesitating tone, asked, as they gained the boat deck:

"Are you in the navy, too, sir, may we ask?"

"You may, my boy," was the hearty response. "I am Captain Dunham of the *Manhattan*."

"You're all right, sir," sputtered Herc, in his enthusiasm entirely forgetting the respect due to an officer.

The next minute, with cheeks even more crimson than the flames and his exertions had painted them, the farmer boy plunged forward into the confusion of the boat deck, much embarrassed at his impulsive breach of discipline.

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 62]

A COWARD'S BLOW.

Thanks to the boys' defense of the stairway, and the cool-headed commander's prompt action in quelling the onrush of the stokers, the boys found that there was plenty of room in the two boats that still remained to be lowered. Haste, however, was a matter of necessity, as the flames by this time had devoured the bulkheads and were sweeping forward, driven by the high wind.

The captain of the *Rhode Island* had recovered his wits, and the loading of the boats went on rapidly. In its company were enrolled the cowardly stokers, at whom the boys could not gaze without a feeling of disgust.

"Are not you boys going in that boat?" said a voice at their elbow, as the davits were swung out and the remainder of the crew prepared to lower it.

"No, sir; as navy men," said Ned, proudly dwelling on the "men," "we prefer to wait till the last boat to leave the ship." [Pg 63]

"That's right," agreed the commander approvingly.

He hastened off and assumed the control of the few manoeuvres to be carried out before the *Rhode Island* was ready to be abandoned. The captain of the *Rhode Island* had recognized Captain Dunham, and was anxiously trying to aid him; but the naval commander treated the other with some contempt, doubtless inspired by the latter's abject failure to quell the panic in its inception or handle it when it broke.

The boys now had time to gaze about them.

The glare of the burning ship lit up the surrounding water with a weird radiance, in which they could see the loaded boats, already lowered, tossing helplessly, the crowds on each being so great that the sailors could not use their oars.

"Say, Ned, suppose the boiler busts!" suddenly exclaimed the cheerful Herc, as the last boat was swung out.

"No use thinking of such possibilities," rejoined Ned decisively.

"Well, I can't help it," protested Herc indignantly. "I remember when that thresher blew up to grandpa's. I guess this would be something like that, eh, Ned?" [Pg 64]

"Only more so," was the dry reply.

Suddenly the notification that all was ready for the lowering of the last boat rang out.

As this one was to be the final lifeboat to leave the ship, it was put overside before any one boarded it. The officers of the *Rhode Island*, the six members of the crew remaining, the boys and Commander Dunham getting into it by sliding down the falls.

At last they were all on board, and the order was given to shove off. No time was lost in doing this, as the *Rhode Island* was by this time a mass of flames in her forepart, and it seemed impossible that she could float much longer.

"Do you anticipate being picked up shortly, captain?" asked the boys' friend of the commander of the *Rhode Island*.

"Why, I don't expect that we'll have to drift about very long," was the reply. "You see, the Sound is well traveled, and some ship must have seen the flare of the fire."

It was bitterly cold in the storm-swept waters of the Sound, but the boys checked any tendency they might have felt to complain by thinking of the plight of the women and children in the other boats. [Pg 65]

It is doubtful as the newspapers at the time pointed out, that there would have been no fatalities attendant on the wreck of the *Rhode Island*, if but a little less than half an hour after they had cast adrift from the ill-fated steamer, the *Kentucky*, of the Joy Line, had not hove in sight. By this time the *Rhode Island* had burned to the water's edge, and sank with a noisy roar.

The *Kentucky* bore down with all speed on the drifting boatloads of half-frozen men and women, and within an hour every one of the passengers had been picked up and given warm food and drink and attention.

As the *Kentucky*, having performed her rescue work, pursued her way to New York, the boys mingled with the excited crowd of the saved that thronged her lighted saloon.

While they walked about, overhearing interesting scraps of conversation relating to the rescues of several of the passengers, they were startled by a sudden cry in a woman's voice:

"There he is! There he is, the coward!"

There was a rush to the part of the saloon from whence the cry had proceeded. Every one was naturally anxious to ascertain what could have caused it. The boys were among the curious persons who joined the throng. [Pg 66]

They saw a slight, pale-faced woman pointing indignantly to a tall youth who was slinking away through the crowd, trying evidently to conceal himself from the woman's scorn.

"What is the matter, madam?" somebody asked the excited woman.

"Why, I was in the first rush for the stairway," explained the woman, "before those brave young men there——" It was the boys' turn to try to slink away. "Before those brave young men there kept back the cowardly fellows who were trying to trample past us. That man yonder, who has just slunk away, dealt me this blow in the face," she pointed to a livid weal on her cheek, "and knocked me down."

A roar of indignation went up as she related the craven conduct of the youth the boys had observed slink off. Some of the more excitable passengers shouted that they wanted to organize a party to find him and deal him out summary punishment. Cooler counsel prevailed, however, and the rest of the night was passed in as comfortable a manner as was possible on the overcrowded ship. [Pg 67]

When the *Kentucky* arrived at her dock on the East River, below the Brooklyn Bridge, she was met by big crowds, among whom were many reporters, the wireless stations along the Sound having been notified by the *Kentucky* of the disaster that had overtaken the *Rhode Island*.

The boys, laughingly turning aside the assiduous young men of the press, were making their way ashore, when Herc suddenly caught hold of Ned's arm.

"Look there!" he exclaimed.

Ned looked, and saw Hank Harkins standing in the midst of a throng of reporters, to whom he was evidently giving a "big story."

"I took the woman in my arms," the boys heard him say, as they paused, "and made my way to the upper deck with her."

"You saved her?" asked a young reporter, holding a long pencil poised above a very large new notebook.

"Yes, I saved her, and then——" Hank was continuing, when his jaw suddenly dropped, and he shook as if he was about to have a fit. [Pg 68]

Then, without another word to the amazed reporters, he shouldered his way through their ranks and dashed off down the gangplank in the direction of the land.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Herc. "I'll remember Hank's look when he met our eyes as long as I live. He looked like a dying duck in a thunderstorm!"

"I guess we headed off his thrilling narrative, all right," commented Ned, echoing Herc's merriment.

"And for a good reason, too," went on Herc. "I recognized Hank as he slunk away from that woman last night. He was the coward who struck her and disgraced his uniform."

"I'm glad his overcoat covered it," rejoined Ned.

At this juncture one of the reporters, who had noticed that both the lads wore Uncle Sam's uniforms, hurried up to them.

"Can you tell us what was the matter with that fellow?" he demanded. "He was just in the middle of giving us a good story, when he suddenly hurried off as if he had been shot. Is he a reliable chap, do you know?" [Pg 69]

"Well, I wouldn't believe *all* he told you," grinned Herc, as the Dreadnought Boys hurried ashore, to cross New York and join their ship.

CHAPTER VII.

"WE ARE PART OF THE FLEET."

After some little difficulty the boys ascertained that the *Manhattan* lay up the North River, off the foot of Seventy-second Street and Riverside Drive. They could go to Seventy-second Street in a subway express, they were informed, and then walk across to the boat landing, where they would

be almost sure to find a launch from the big Dreadnought waiting to take off the shore-leave men.

"Say!" gasped Herc, as the two, having descended into the "tube" and seated themselves in the lighted car, were whirled northward through pitch darkness toward their destination, "how far does this hole in the ground go?"

"Almost as far as Yonkers, I guess," replied Ned; "or so I've heard. Don't you like it?"

"Not much," rejoined Herc; "it's like trying to talk in a boiler factory."

The two boys had their suitcases tightly clutched between their knees, but nevertheless, when they reached the Grand Central station, the inrush of passengers, tumbling and pushing like mad to get seats, swept the lads' possessions before them as if the two pieces of baggage had been chaff in a high wind.

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"Hey! come back with those gripsacks!" yelled Herc indignantly, seizing the arm of a puny-looking lad who was stumbling forward over the red-headed lad's particular possession. "Haven't you any manners?"

The town-bred lad turned a sharp, ferret-eyed face on the young sailor.

"Say, greenie, where do you come from, Painted Post or far Cohoes 'where the wind flower blows'? Just keep an eye on your own junk, or else hire an express wagon."

The indignant Herc stooped to rescue his suitcase, and by the time he raised a red and angry face, the sharp-faced lad had gone.

"Good thing he did get out of the way, or I'd have fetched him a clip on the ear!" grumbled Herc, as he resumed his seat by Ned, who had by this time retrieved his property also.

"No use losing your temper," counseled Ned; "just keep cool. Hullo, there is an old lady and a younger one standing up over there. The old one looks feeble. I'm going to give them these seats. Come on and get up."

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"All right," muttered Herc, "but I don't see any one else doing so. See, all the men are seated and the women all seem to be standing up. What's the use of being different to the others? We'll only get stared at."

"All the more reason that we should be polite. The first duty of a sailor is to be kind and courteous to those weaker than himself," rejoined Ned in an undertone, as the boys rose to their feet.

With a courteous bow, Ned approached the ladies and motioned behind him to where he supposed two seats were vacant.

"Will you avail yourself of our places, madam?" he said, addressing the older lady and removing his navy cap.

Herc, with an awkward grin, also uncovered his red thatch and made a sweeping motion behind him with his big hand.

"Thank you very much, sir," rejoined the elderly lady, "my daughter and myself would be very glad to accept your kindness, but others seem already to have availed themselves of it."

"What's that?" cried Ned, wheeling, with a red face, and clapping his eyes on the seats they had just vacated.

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Sure enough, as the elderly lady had said, they were occupied.

Two stout, red-faced men, with well-rounded stomachs and fingers covered with diamonds, lolled at their ease in the just vacated seats, reading their papers. They had slipped into the places while the boys were requesting the two ladies to take them.

"Well, what do you know about that?" sputtered Herc indignantly. "They just sneaked into those seats like skunks into a wood pile."

"They'll come out of them a lot more easily," breathed Ned grimly, as he took in the situation.

Bending forward, he addressed the interlopers courteously enough, while those around who had witnessed the scene looked on curiously. It is not often that a subway passenger has the courage to resent any slight, however marked. From the compression of Ned's lips and the determined flash in his eyes, however, it was evident that he had no intention of allowing the two beefy newspaper readers to enjoy their stolen seats undisturbed.

"I beg your pardon," said Ned. "Perhaps you are not aware that my friend and I vacated those seats to allow these ladies to be seated."

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One of the red-faced ones, slightly older, it seemed, than the other, looked up with a bovine stare in his heavily rimmed eyes.

He stared at the Dreadnought Boys much as if they had been some strange visitors from another planet.

"I guess you don't know much about Noo Yawk," he said in a sneering tone, "or you'd have known that in the Subway it's 'first come, first served.'"

"Is that so?" inquired Ned, keeping down his anger, while Herc was dancing about in the narrow space he could find in the aisle of the crowded car. The red-headed lad was biting his nails and scratching his head in a manner that boded a storm as surely as black clouds portend thunder.

"That being the case," Ned went on in a cool voice, "it's about time that the Subway learned a few

manners. We gave those seats up for those two ladies, and not for you. Are you going to vacate them?"

"Aw, run along and roll your hoop!" sneered the younger newspaper reader, with an affectation of great languor. "You drunken sailors make me tired." [Pg 75]

A brown hand shot out as the words left his lips, and the beefy one found himself propelled by the shoulder into the center of the car faster than he had had occasion to move for a long time.

At the same instant Herc, to his huge delight, perceived the signal for action and sailed in on his man. In another second the two beefy ones, dazed by the suddenness of it all, stood side by side in the center of the car, while Ned courteously aided the two ladies to the seats from which the interlopers had been so suddenly wrenched.

"This is an outrage!" bellowed the red-faced men in concert, as they found their voices. "Such a thing has never happened before."

"That's a pity," observed Ned contemptuously, while the delighted Herc whispered in a stage undertone:

"Mine came out like a soft, white worm out of a hickory nut."

"Conductor! conductor!" howled the man to whom Ned had given such a rough and ready lesson in manners, "come here and do your duty. We've been assaulted."

The conductor pushed his way through the crowded aisle, assuming an air of great importance. [Pg 76]

"What's all this? What's all this?" he shouted.

"These two rowdy sailors deprived us of our seats," sputtered one of the red-faced men.

"Did you fellows do what he says?" demanded the conductor importantly.

"Sure they did. They pulled the gentlemen right out of them," piped up a voice in the background of the crowd—that of the ferret-faced youth.

"Gentlemen!" snorted Herc. "We'd call 'em hogs up our way!"

"We got up to give our seats to those two ladies, and are very sorry to have caused them this embarrassment," volunteered Ned. "But to see these two overfed fellows slip into the seats before we had hardly risen from them got our dander riz, and we undertook to put them out."

"Conductor, you will call a special policeman at the next station," shouted the man that Ned had hauled to his feet. "I'll make a charge against these desperate ruffians. They need a lesson."

Ned and Herc exchanged alarmed glances.

It might ruin their naval careers if, on the eve of joining their ship, they were to undergo the disgrace of an arrest. [Pg 77]

"Better think it over," advised the conductor, who seemed disposed to make peace, and as he slipped by the boys, to regain his platform as the train slackened speed, he whispered:

"You'd best make a sneak, boys; that fellow is Dave Pulsifer, the big gun man, and the other's his brother. He's got lots of influence, and he means to make trouble for you."

Little as either of the Dreadnought Boys relished the idea of running away from trouble, yet the advice seemed good. They both knew enough of the law's delays to realize that, in the event of their being arrested on the red-faced man's charge, they would be liable to be held for some time before they could have chance of explaining the circumstances of the case to a magistrate.

As the train rolled into the Seventy-second Street station, therefore, they adroitly slipped by their friend, the conductor, and, as soon as he opened the door, shot out onto the platform.

The red-faced men, crying loudly for a special policeman, were in the act of following them, when—quite by accident, it seemed—the conductor's foot got in the way, and the first of the pair of worthies fell headlong over it, and his companion, who was pressing hard on his heels, piled on top of him. [Pg 78]

By the time they had extricated themselves, during which period the crowd of passengers behind them, who were also anxious to alight, went almost crazy at having to wait a few seconds, the two lads were far down the sidewalks of Seventy-second Street. After a few minutes' brisk walk they reached the snow-covered slopes of Riverside Drive.

"Pulsifer! I know that name," Ned mused, as they hurried along. "I have it!" he exclaimed suddenly. "He's Dave Pulsifer, of Pulsifer Bros., the fellows who make guns in America and sell them to foreign governments."

"I'll bet those two were the brothers, then," suggested Herc. "They looked like two ugly pups of the same homely litter."

The boys gave the matter little more thought, though had they realized how intimately the Pulsifers were to be associated with their further career, they might have considered their encounter more seriously.

"Look, Herc, look!" cried Ned, as they came in sight of the river.

From the slight eminence on which they stood, the boys commanded a magnificent spectacle. [Pg 79]

Up and down the majestic stream, as far as the eye could reach, the grim, slaty-hued forms of Uncle Sam's sea bulldogs swung at anchor.

From the funnels of some smoke was lazily floating, while others lay like sleeping monsters on the surface of the dark river.

Looking northward, the boys saw only a maze of cage masts—looking not unlike narrow waste-paper baskets turned upside down—and great dark hulls. Here and there a gaily-colored bit of bunting, which as yet meant little to the boys, fluttered from a masthead or from the signal halliards. Between the ships and the shore constantly darted light gasoline boats, or swift launches with big gray hoods over them.

"Just think, Herc, *we* are a part of all that!" breathed Ned reverently almost, indicating the formidable array of fighting craft with a wave of his hand.

"Gee! I feel about as big as an ant," whispered Herc, even his irrepressible nature overawed at the sight. "How in the world are we—little, insignificant specks—ever going to distinguish ourselves in all that big array of fighting ships and fighting men?"

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"We must do our best, Herc," rejoined Ned simply. "And now let's be getting down to that landing place. I think I see some man-o'-war launches landing there. Maybe we will be lucky enough to find one of the *Manhattan's* boats."

As they started down an inclined road which led through the park and across the railroad tracks at its foot, they were accosted by a hearty voice just astern of them.

"Hullo, there, shipmates!" it hailed. "Where away?"

The Dreadnought Boys wheeled, and found themselves facing an elderly man, somewhat inclined to stoutness, but whose grizzled and weather-beaten face bore the true trademarks of an old man-o'-war Jack upon it.

"Why, you're from the *Manhattan!*" cried Ned, as his eyes fell on the other's name band, on which the name of the new Dreadnought was embroidered in gilt thread.

"Aye, aye, my hearties," was the rejoinder in a voice cracked with much shouting in heavy weather in all climes, "and you are a pair of rookies—land-lubbers, eh?"

"Well, I guess you might call us that," responded Ned, not best pleased at this free and easy mode of address, but judging it best to be as amiable as possible. "Can you tell us how to get aboard the *Manhattan*? We've just left the Naval Training School and are appointed to her."

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"Get your rating?"

"Sure—ordinary seamen."

"That's good. Come on with me, boys, and I'll put you aboard ship shape and comfortable. It's a cold day when old Tom Marlin can't look out for a pair of greenies."

Piloted by their companion, the two boys soon arrived at the landing place, which was already crowded with sailors whose shore leave had expired.

"Which is the *Manhattan*?" asked Sam, gazing with eyes that were still awestruck at the immense vessels that lay out in the river and appeared several sizes too large for their mooring places.

"Right yonder, Bricktop," rejoined old Tom, pointing off to a vessel which, large as were the other battleships, seemed by her huge size almost to dwarf them. "That's the old hooker. The last output of your old Uncle Sam. Right in the next berth to her is the *Idaho*."

"What's that red flag, with a black ball in the center, floating from the *Idaho's* main?" inquired Ned, much interested.

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"That? Oh, that's the meat-ball!" laughed old Tom.

"The meat-ball?" echoed the boys, much astonished.

"A sort of dinner flag, I suppose?" asked Herc, who was beginning to feel hungry.

"Not much, my lad," laughed the old sailor. "That's the gunnery pennant for the vessel making the best score at the targets. The *Idaho* won that off the Virginia capes on our last battle practice cruise. All the fleet's after it now, but if we have our way, the old *Manhattan* will be flying it after we get through peppering the marks off Guantanamo."

Each of the Dreadnought Boys found himself making up his mind, as old Tom spoke, that if it depended on them, the *Manhattan* would be the battleship to fly the coveted "meat-ball" when next the fleet made port.

CHAPTER VIII.

[Pg 83]

HERC TAKES A COLD BATH.

A few minutes after the boys' arrival at the landing, a launch with a lead-covered hood was seen approaching, towing three large ship's boats behind it. The latter were crowded with jackies coming ashore.

A gilt "M." on the bow of the launch proclaimed it to be from the *Manhattan*, and Herc made a dive for the float as the "steamer" puffed up to the landing stage.

"Come on, Ned!" he cried. "Whoop! Here's where we join the ship! Bang! Big guns! Blow 'em up!

Hurray!"

But to Herc's surprise, as he made for the inclined runway leading to the float, he was met by the menacing muzzle of a rifle.

The weapon was held by a marine—"soldier and sailor too"—behind whom stood the natty middle in charge of the float.

"Stand back!" ordered the marine sternly.

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Herc regarded the leveled rifle with some apprehension and gave way a few steps to the rear.

"Don't you know enough not to try to embark till the order is given?" asked Ned, as the young midshipman scowled at the red-headed youth as if the latter had committed some heinous crime.

"Why, the boats are made to get into, aren't they?" protested Herc. "And who is that fellow in the funny uniform, anyhow?"

"That's a marine," laughed Ned. "He's on sentry duty."

"Oh, so he's a marine, eh?" rejoined Herc, regarding the sentry with much disapproval. "One of those sea soldiers—a sort of half-and-half fellow."

Further comment on Herc's part was cut short by the outpouring of the laughing, shouting jackies who were coming ashore on leave. They poured up the narrow gangway in a seemingly never-ending stream.

"There'll be no one left to man the ships," gasped Herc, as the ranks of light-hearted shore-leave men poured past. Some of them carried suitcases, and were evidently going ashore to bid a last good-by to their friends. Others, whose folks probably resided in distant cities, were going ashore for a last look at New York.

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"Those fellows will all have to be on board by midnight," explained old Tom to the boys. "They're going to crowd all they can into the few hours they'll have ashore."

"Then we are to sail soon?" inquired Ned, his heart beating high and his eyes sparkling.

"Before eight bells to-morrow morning we'll be in the Narrows," rejoined the old bluejacket.

"That's the stuff!" cried Ned, gazing at the ranks of bronzed, healthy faces which were still passing by.

"Want action, eh?" laughed old Tom. "Well, lads, you'll get it before you are many hours older; and remember, my lad, that it isn't all fun aboard a man-o'-war, and always bear in mind one thing—do what you're told without grumbling. Tee-total abstinence, when it comes to making remarks about what you are told to do in Uncle Sam's navy."

"Say, Ned," whispered Herc.

"What?" asked Ned, still engrossed in the animated scene before him, and in the formidable background formed by the motionless war machines.

"Well, did you hear what he said?"

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"Yes, why?"

"Oh, nothing; only it looks as if we had bitten off more than we could chew, that's all."

"What do you mean?"

"That I didn't like that part about 'not grumbling whatever we are told to do.' It looks as if we might have some pretty tough chores set us."

"I guess we shall have all sorts of chores," laughed Ned, as he regarded Herc's rueful face; "but we didn't enlist to look pretty and pose becomingly in our uniforms. We're in the United States navy for four years, and whatever happens, we've got to stick to it."

The lads' conversation had been carried on in an undertone, but Ned had unconsciously raised his voice as he spoke the last words.

"That's the talk, shipmate," said old Tom, regarding him approvingly. "I never heard a boy talking like that yet who didn't come out of the big end of the horn before he'd served out his enlistment. The navy's the finest place in the world for boys of your cut, but it's no place for shirkers."

The old man regarded Herc as he spoke, and the carrot-headed boy's eyes fell under the tar's keen, half-humorous gaze. To tell the truth, Herc was beginning to half regret that he had enlisted at all. The prospect of four years' service at the hard tasks at which the old sailor had hinted did not best please him; but Herc knew better than to make any complaint to Ned. The other lad, however, had noticed his companion's downcast looks and rallied him on them.

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"Come, Herc, cheer up!" he said heartily. "We're like young bears—all our troubles before us; but they'll lick us into shape, never fear."

"Oh, crickey! there you go again," groaned Herc.

"Go again—what?" demanded Ned, puzzled.

"Why, talking about 'licking us.' Do they still lick fellows in the navy, Mr. Tom?"

"No, my lad; the cat-o'-nine-tails was abolished in Uncle Sam's ships years ago," responded the old man, with a twinkle; "but we've still got the brig."

"The brig—that's a kind of a ship, isn't it?" inquired Ned.

"Not as I know of," grinned old Tom; "but teetotal abstinence is the word when it comes to the brig, my lads. I hope you'll never form its acquaintance." [Pg 88]

"Attention!"

The young midshipman shouted the order.

The Dreadnought Boys straightened up, as did all the other tars. The landing parties had by this time all dispersed and were straggling up the hill, playing all manner of tricks on each other, more like a lot of happy boys just out of school than anything else.

"Now, what's that young whipper-snapper going to do?" whispered Herc.

"Hush!" rejoined Ned. "I expect we are going to get an order."

He was right.

Orders were given for the men to board the boats in a quiet, orderly manner.

"Keep close by me," cautioned old Tom, "and never mind the joshing you are going to get."

Ned had noticed for the past few minutes that the sailors assembled on the wharf had been eyeing them curiously, and that some of them had been whispering together.

"Why, what's the trouble?" asked Herc.

"I expect the boys will give you a bit of a hazing," replied old Tom. "But take it all in good part, and you'll soon be shipmates with all of them." [Pg 89]

The old sailor's prophecy came true.

The midshipman who had been on duty at the float was relieved by another of his rank, and the first then took his place in the "steamer" which was to tow the boats full of jackies. As he sat in the stern sheets of the power craft, he could not see readily what was going on in the boats, and perhaps made it a point not to be too observant.

Ned and Herc found themselves in the second boat, and as they had become separated from old Tom in the rush to board the craft, they had now no mentor to advise them, and felt curiously alone among the laughing, joking bluejackets that crowded the boats to the gunwales.

"I see the old man's ordered his winter's supply of kindling!" came in a loud stage whisper from the boat in which the two lads were seated.

The "old man" always refers to the commander of a man-of-war, in the parlance of the jackies.

"Say, Bill, your thatch is on fire!" laughed another.

Poor Herc felt his cheeks turn as red as his unlucky hair under the running fire of banter which, there was no room to doubt, was intended for him. [Pg 90]

"Might be a good thing to call fire stations," grinned another. "I don't much like the idea of sailing on a battleship with so much combustible stuff aboard."

"Like being shipmates with a red-hot stove," put in another before-the-mast humorist.

"Keep cool, Herc," whispered Ned, who was beginning to dread an outburst on the part of his impulsive companion.

Unfortunately his whisper was overheard, and a shout went up from those nearest the two boys.

"That's right! 'Keep cool, Herc!'" they mimicked. "Don't get afire, mate, or we may have to duck you."

"I reckon he must have belonged to the village fire department," put in another.

"I'll bet they practiced putting out fires on his head," came another voice.

It was more than flesh and blood could bear.

Herc arose angrily to his feet, and was beginning a speech full of hot resentment, when the boat, which was by this time under way, gave a sudden lurch.

Herc had been unmindful of the fact that a fresh wind blowing up the North River kicks up quite a sea, and in a second he was sprawling on the bottom of the boat, with a perfect tempest of laughter ringing in his burning ears. [Pg 91]

But, as he fell, Herc's heavy form careened against a seaman who was standing upright, scanning the vessel they were approaching. Down crashed the two, with Herc on top. When they rose the nose of the seaman who had fallen under Herc's bulky person was bloody, and his eyes inflamed with rage.

"You hayseed-eating swab," he growled, "look here—blood all over my blouse. Now I've got to clean it or get a call down."

"I'm very sorry," said Herc penitently, "I didn't do it on purpose."

"You're a liar, and I'll trim you for it before long."

Herc recollected Ned's advice, and bottled his rage. In a cutting voice, however, he rejoined:

"At the Training School they told us that most sailors were gentlemen. I guess they were dead wrong."

"Fire's out!" yelled somebody; but as, by this time, they were almost alongside the towering, slate-colored sides of the *Manhattan*, a quick cry of "Hush!" ran through the boat, and the [Pg 92]

Dreadnought Boys, for the present, escaped further trials of their tempers.

"Aren't we going to board the ship?" asked Herc, as the launch approached the *Manhattan*, which was swung up-stream, with the tide.

"Of course," replied Ned.

Both lads spoke in an undertone, so as not to run the risk of incurring a rebuke or the bringing down of further teasing on their heads.

"But there is a gangway hanging over the side right there," objected Herc, pointing to a substantial stairway leading from the stern structure of the big war vessel to the water's edge.

"Why, you lubber," laughed Ned, "that's the officer's landing place. We are not allowed to land on the starboard side. We jackies have to go round to the port side of the ship."

"Humph!" remarked Herc, in whose mind a very distinct feeling that he should not like the navy was beginning to take shape.

In a few minutes the launch drew up at the officer's gangway, and the young midshipman leaped in an agile manner onto it. The launch then continued round the steep bow of the *Manhattan*, which towered like a mighty cliff of gray steel above the boys' heads. It steamed on till it arrived beneath a number of "Jacob's ladders" dangling from booms projecting several feet outward from the vessel's side.

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"How on earth do we get aboard?" said Herc.

"Climb up those ladders," rejoined Ned.

"What, those swinging things?"

"That's right."

"What then?"

"Then we run along those booms till we are on board the ship."

"No, thank you."

Herc looked apprehensively at the swinging ladders up which the jackies from the first boat were already beginning to swarm like monkeys, nimbly scampering along the booms when they reached the top. They steadied themselves on the lofty perches by light hand-lines rigged for the purpose.

"What do you mean? Surely you are not getting scared?"

"No, not scared," replied Herc. "But what's a fellow want to come into the navy for if he can make a living walking a tight rope?"

"Come on, you two rookies!" shouted a voice at this moment. "Let's see how you can manage a Jacob's ladder."

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There was a taunting note in the words that made Ned wheel angrily. He saw facing him, with an ugly leer on his countenance, the hulking-looking man, whose arm stripes denoted that he was serving his second enlistment, with whom Herc had already had the recorded passage-at-arms. Then and there Ned felt that this fellow and himself were not destined to make good shipmates. He also determined, however, not to let any of the jackies see that there was an instant's hesitation in his mind about taking the perilous-looking climb.

"Come on, Herc," he cried, as he made a spring for the ladder.

Its swaying end hung a good three feet above the boat, and as the river was fairly choppy, the craft, heavy as it was, bobbed about in a lively manner. The lad's experience at the training school, however, had taught him not to mind this, and without an instant's pause he made a jump for the contrivance, and a second later was climbing up it like a squirrel.

"I guess I'll wait and see after our baggage," called Herc after him.

"Your baggage will be sent up afterward by deep-sea express, bricktop!" yelled a derisive voice.

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"Come on, now, get up that ladder lively, and don't keep us waiting."

Poor Herc, with much inward perturbation, made a jump for the ladder, and, to his surprise, found that it was easier than he had expected to negotiate. He scrambled rapidly upward after Ned, who by this time was almost at the boom.

Close behind Herc came the sailor who had taunted the boys in the boat. His name was Ralph Kennell, otherwise known as "Kid" Kennell. He had quite a reputation in the fleet as a fighter and wrestler, and on the strength of his renown had allowed a naturally domineering disposition to develop into that of a full-fledged bully.

Kennell pressed close behind Herc as the red-headed boy clambered as fast as he could toward the boom.

"The sooner it's over, the better," thought poor Herc to himself, as he made his best pace upward.

But it was no part of Kennell's plans that the Dreadnought Boys should make their first appearance on board the *Manhattan* without some sort of an accident befalling them, and he did his best to "rattle" Herc as he climbed close on his heels.

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Already Ned had gained the boom, and scampered neatly along it and alighted on the white deck

of the first battleship he had ever boarded. He gazed anxiously over the rail at poor Herc as he toiled upward. Ned's quick eyes did not escape the fact that Kennell was "bullyragging" Herc to the extent of his capacity in this direction, which was considerable.

The cheeks of Herc's chum burned angrily as he gazed, but he was powerless to interfere. The officer of the deck, with his telescope tucked under his arm, was standing near by, and Ned knew it would be a gross infraction of navy discipline to shout the warning he longed to deliver to Herc. Ned had, as soon as he reached the deck, turned toward the stern and saluted the flag, and then paid the same compliment to the officer, who had touched the rim of his cap in return.

And now Herc had scrambled up onto the boom, which was slightly flattened on the top and not really so very difficult of passage. He started along it, gripping the frail hand-line tightly. It is likely that, if he had been left alone, he would have gained the ship without disaster, but Kennell was close behind him, and as Herc, with set face and white cheeks, reached the center of the narrow "bridge," the ship's bully closed up on him.

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What happened then occurred so quickly that the jackies who watched it said afterward that all they saw was Herc's body shooting downward with a despairing cry, and a second later another flash, as his chum's form dashed through the air and entered the water close by the place of Herc's disappearance with a loud splash.

Instantly the startling cry of "Man overboard!" echoed from mouth to mouth along the decks of the Dreadnought.

CHAPTER IX.

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A NAVAL INITIATION.

Both the Dreadnought Boys were good swimmers. Even if they had not been drilled in this art at the training school, their experiences in the old swimming pool at home would have made them at home in the water. Ned had dived after his chum as a matter of impulse, more than anything else, and, a second after the two splashes had resounded, both boys appeared on the surface of the water.

A few strokes brought them to the side of the ship, where they clung to the slight projection afforded by an out-board seacock, till a ladder came snaking down to them.

By this time the rail, which seemed to be as high above them as the summit of a skyscraper, was lined with faces, and at the stern the officers who were on board were peering over the side of the quarterdeck.

Captain Dunham himself, summoned by his orderly, came running from his cabin, as the two dripping youths arose from their immersion, and joined his officers on the stern. He had just come on board in his own launch.

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"Who are they, Scott?" he asked of his executive officer, as the boys once more ascended the side of the ship on the emergency ladder.

"Two recruits, sir, from the training station, I believe, sir," was the reply, with a salute.

"Well, they are certainly taking a naval baptism," laughed the captain, whose merriment was echoed by his officers, now that it was seen the boys were safe, "but how did it happen?"

"I don't know, sir. I was not forward at the time," was the rejoinder. "The shore men were coming on board, I believe, and the red-headed young fellow fell from the boom. His companion dived instantly after him. It was a plucky act, sir."

"Humph!" remarked the captain. "I suppose it was an accident, and we can take no official notice of it. By the way, Scott, those two young men, I perceive now, are the ones I spoke to you about as having behaved with such singular courage and cool-headedness when the *Rhode Island* burned. Keep an eye on them, for I think they have the makings of real sailors in them."

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"I shall, sir," replied the executive officer, saluting, as the captain turned away with a return of the courtesy.

If Ned and Herc were wet and cold without, they were warm enough within as they gained the deck. Ned's eye had detected Kennell's foot in the act of reaching out to trip his chum and cousin, and he felt within him an overpowering desire to seek the man out and demand an explanation.

Fortunately, however, for himself, other matters occupied his attention at that moment.

Dripping wet as they were, the boys did not forget their carefully instilled training, and each came to attention and saluted as they faced the officer of the deck.

"Who are you men?" demanded that dignitary, red tape not allowing him to comment on the accident.

"Recruits, s-s-sir, from Newport T-T-T-Training School," answered Ned respectfully, his teeth chattering.

"Get on dry clothes and report to the master-at-arms. Messenger!"

A messenger slid to the officer's side with a hand raised in salute.

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"Show these recruits to their quarters. Let them get on dry clothes and then conduct them to the master-at-arms."

As the boys' suitcases had by this time been hoisted on board, they soon changed into dry uniforms in the men's quarters forward, and their conductor then beckoned them to follow him. The two boys, their eyes round with astonishment at the sights and scenes about them, followed without a word, and were led through labyrinths of steel-walled passages, down steel ladders with glistening steel hand rails, up more ladders, and through bulkhead doors made to open and close with ponderous machinery. The lower decks of the ship were lighted with hundreds of incandescent bulbs, as, in a modern man-of-war, there are no portholes on the sides, owing to the thickness of the armorplate. The officers' cabins are lighted by lozenges of glass let into the deck.

"It's like living in a fire-proof safe," whispered Herc.

The boys noticed that, although they seemed to be in a steel-walled maze, that the air was fresh and cool, and they discovered afterward that large quantities of fresh ozone were distributed into every part of the ship by electric blowers. For the present, however, they followed their guide in a sort of semi-stupefaction at the novelty of their surroundings.

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"Say, we must have walked a mile," gasped Herc, as their guide finally emerged into a narrow passage seemingly in the stern of the vessel. He paused before a door hung with heavy curtains and knocked.

"What is it?" demanded a voice from inside. "A voice as pleasant as an explosion of dynamite," Herc described it afterward.

"Two recruits, sir," was the reply.

"Send them in."

The boys found themselves in the presence of the master-at-arms, a dignified and business-like officer.

"Your papers?" he demanded, without further parley.

"Here, sir," answered both boys, producing their precious certificates from the training school.

The master-at-arms glanced over them.

"You seem to have good records," he remarked, "but don't presume on them. You have a lot to learn. Messenger!"

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The messenger sprang to attention and saluted, and the boys, not to be outdone in politeness, did likewise.

"Sir!"

"Take these two recruits to the ship's writer, and have him enter them in the ship's records."

Once more the threading of the metal labyrinth began, and the boys felt almost ready to drop as they were ushered into another cabin, where sat a man not unlike the master-at-arms in appearance, but who wore spectacles perched on his nose.

He took the boys' papers without a word and filed them away in a pigeonhole. He then produced two varnished ditty boxes, with their keys, which he handed to the boys.

"These are your ditty boxes," he remarked, handing over the caskets, which were about a foot and a half square, neatly varnished and finished, and each of which bore a number.

"You are to keep your valuables, stationery and knickknacks of any kind in these," he said. "Be careful of them and look after them well."

"What about our money, sir?" asked Ned.

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"You can place that in the ship's savings bank if you wish. It gives four per cent. Or, if you prefer, you can deposit it with the ship's paymaster, and draw on it as you require. If you are transferred to another ship, it will be transferred for you."

"I think the savings bank would be best," said Ned, looking at Herc.

"Same here," replied the farmboy; "gran'pa used to say, 'put your money in hogs,' but I guess we couldn't do that aboard ship, so it's the savings banks for me, too."

"Very well; you may leave your money with me and I will give you a passbook. You see, we do these things much as they are done ashore."

"I see," nodded Ned as he took his passbook, and Herc did the same, "what do we do now, sir?"

"You will now be conducted to the boatswain's mate, who is a sort of foster-parent to young recruits, and from him you will get the numbers of your hammocks and be assigned to a place at mess. He will also outline your duties to you.

"Messenger!"

"Sir!"

Once more the messenger came to salute, and stiffened in the attitude of attention, and the boys did the same.

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"Conduct these recruits to the chief boatswain's mate."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER X.

NED HOLDS HIS COUNSEL.

The chief boatswain's mate was a far more awe-inspiring officer, in the boys' eyes, than any they had so far met. They both knew enough of the navy to realize that he and his subordinate were the class of petty officer with whom they would come most in contact during their early period of enlistment.

This dignitary on the *Manhattan* was a fierce-looking personage, but the boys were to learn that as the sailors say, his "bark was worse than his bite."

"Hum, recruits," he said as he looked the two boys over.

"He certainly is giving us a sizing-up," whispered Herc.

The ears of the boatswain's mate were sharper than the boys had imagined.

"Yes, I *am* sizing you up," he said with emphasis. "I'm thinking that you look like pretty good material." [Pg 107]

"We mean to do our best, sir," rejoined Ned.

"That's right. That sort of ambition will carry you far. But are you not the two boys who fell overboard a short time ago?"

"I fell, and he jumped after me," corrected Herc.

"How did it happen? An accident, wasn't it?"

"Not exactly an accident," rejoined Ned.

"What then? You mean it was done on purpose?"

"I'm afraid so," was the quiet reply.

"Who did it?"

"We would prefer not to say now, sir," replied Ned in the same repressed tone.

"You mean you intend to attend to the matter in your own way?"

"Something like that," admitted Ned.

The officer looked sharply at him.

"It is my duty to warn you, my lad, that all such matters should be confided to your superior officer, and you should abide by his advice. However, unless you commit some breach of discipline, I have no concern in the affair. I must tell you, however, that I heard from some of the men that Kennell had something to do with it. Is he the man you suspect of causing the trouble?" [Pg 108]

"I had rather not say," rejoined Ned quietly.

"Very well, as you wish it; only recollect what I have told you. Now, follow me, and we will look over your quarters. Of course, you are familiar with hammock-slinging, and all that appertains to it?"

Herc rubbed his head with a grin.

"I've got some bumps here yet that serve to remind me of my first efforts to climb into one."

"Answer me 'yes' or 'no,' please; do not try to say anything more."

"I was just explaining," muttered Herc, not heeding Ned's warning look.

They were soon assigned two places, side by side, in which they might sling their hammocks. The space devoted to the jackies' sleeping quarters was well forward under the superstructure and lighted by electric lights. It was well ventilated, and aisles of steel pillars ran in every direction. From these the hammocks were slung.

"I will now show you something of the ship, so that you may be familiar with your floating home," said the boatswain's mate; "follow me."

"I wish he'd show us some supper," whispered Herc. "I'm about as empty as a dry well." [Pg 109]

"Never mind," rejoined Ned; "we shall soon be summoned to eat, I expect."

The boatswain's mate took them through much the same maze of steel-walled passages and heavy doors as had the messenger. After descending three decks and traversing the stern of the ship, they were shown the mighty tiller and the mechanical apparatus connecting with the wheel-house, where the steam-steering gear was installed. Then they were hurried along forward. Not, however, before the officer had shown them the emergency steam-steering gear, far below the water-line, which could be used in case a shot disabled the guiding apparatus above decks.

Forward they were conducted up steel steps onto the gun deck, and thence to a passage under the bridge and chart room, from which they emerged onto the edge of a sort of steel "well," sunk immediately below the center of the bridge.

"There are the fire-controls," said the officer, pointing down into the "well" at a lot of shapeless apparatus swathed in heavy, waterproof cloth. "We keep the range-finders and other apparatus covered while we are in port or in a damp climate." [Pg 110]

"The fire-controls?" echoed Herc, with half a suspicion that his unfortunate head was coming in as the subject of more joking. But it was not, as the next remark of the boatswain's mate showed him.

"The gunnery officer is seated in that well, with two orderlies, at battle practice, or in actual warfare," he explained. "He is screened there from the enemy's fire; but, through narrow slits cut in the steel, he sees what is going on about him, and telegraphs the range and directs the fire. His commands are transmitted to the gun-control room electrically, and thence to the turrets."

The boys listened with deep interest.

"We will now go below again and look at the gun-control room," said the boatswain's mate, as he trotted off once more.

"He must be made of the same material as the ship," groaned Herc, as the two boys followed him. As before, they traversed innumerable passages, passing several officers on the way, whom they, of course, saluted. In each case the salutation was returned by a brief touch of the officer's fingers to his cap rim. [Pg 111]

"If you'd ever get lost here, you could wander round for a week without finding your way out," grumbled Herc.

"Not much chance," laughed their guide; "every part of the ship, huge as it is, is visited at least once a day by some officer. Not a corner is allowed to escape notice."

Suddenly the boatswain's mate plunged downward through a very narrow square opening, which seemed almost too small to admit his body.

The boys followed, though for a moment they had been quite startled at his sudden disappearance.

"This is a part of the ship no stout man can ever hope to penetrate," said their guide, as he clambered down a steel ladder, which the opening, through which he had crawled, led to.

"I should say not," muttered Herc, squeezing through. "It doesn't speak very much for navy food," he added to himself, "if all the sailors can squeeze through such a place as this."

At the bottom of the ladder they found themselves in a small chamber, looking not unlike the central office of a telephone exchange. It was quite hot, owing to its proximity to the boiler room. [Pg 112]

Everywhere wires ran, with head-pieces, like those worn by operators, dangling from them. Small bells were affixed to the steel bulkhead, and a system of tiny signal lights was arranged above them.

"This is the place from which the fire is directed after the commands have been sent from the fire-control well," explained their guide. "As you see, it works like a telephone exchange. In action, an officer and four men are stationed here to attend to the signals."

"Are we under the water-line now?" asked Ned breathlessly.

"We are now twenty feet below the surface of the river," replied the boatswain's mate.

"Then, if the ship was sunk in action, the men down here would not stand a chance to escape?" queried Ned.

"No; they probably would not know that the ship had been struck till they saw the water come pouring in on them."

"Say, Ned," whispered Herc.

"What?"

"There's one job in the navy that I don't want." [Pg 113]

"What is that?"

"To be stationed down here."

"No danger of that," laughed Ned. "Only the most expert of the crew—men to whom gunnery is a science, are assigned to these posts."

A visit to the wireless room, which was set snugly in the superstructure between the two forward and the two after funnels, completed the lads' tour of their new home.

"Now, I have done all I can for you," remarked the boatswain's mate, as he parted from the boys on the forward deck, "the rest lies in your own hands. The only part of the ship you have not seen is the magazines. As there are two and one-half million dollars' worth of explosives stored there, we naturally keep them private."

Lounging about with the other tars on the forward deck the boys found their friend, Tom Marlin. He had already heard about the accident which had resulted in Herc's involuntary immersion and Ned's voluntary ducking.

"I'm glad that you boys kept your heads," he said, after the boys had recounted their experiences and suspicions to him; "the 'old man' is very much averse to fighting; although on some of the ships of the fleet they allow the men to meet under proper conditions and fight out their [Pg 114]

grievances with boxing gloves."

"We have no intention of letting Kennell go unpunished, though," promised Ned indignantly. "Why, for all he knew, he might have drowned Herc here."

"You'd better steer clear of Kennell," warned another sailor, who had come up with three companions at this moment; "he's a dangerous man, and could eat both you kids for breakfast, without sauce or salt."

"I'm not so sure of that," breathed Ned truculently, smarting under the sense of the mean trick that had been played on his friend; "and, perhaps, before this cruise is over, he may have a chance to try."

This conversation took place on the forward deck, in the short lounging interval allowed the sailors between afternoon "setting-up" drill, and the supper bugle, which is sounded at 5:30.

As Ned voiced his intention of squaring things up at some future time, the brisk notes of the summons to the evening meal cut short further talk, and as the chiming of "three bells" mingled with the bugle's notes, the jackies descended on the mess-tables like a flight of locusts on a wheatfield. They were served with cold roast ham, potato salad, boiled potatoes, canned peaches, bread and butter, and steaming tea.

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"Ah," sighed Herc, as his nostrils dilated under the odors of appetizing food, and his eye fell on the long rows of tables, spread with plates, knives and forks, with a cup at each man's elbow, "this is a lot more interesting to me right now than all the underground subways in the navy."

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 116]

BREAKING TWO ROOKIES.

A fresh breeze, tossing up the foamy white caps; fleecy clouds, scurrying by overhead; and, on the sparkling sea, spread in a long formidable line, the North Atlantic squadron, steaming "in column," bound for the battle practice at Guantanamo. Between each of the huge battle bulldogs, glistening wetly with the tossed-up spray, a perfect distance was maintained—as accurately as if the space between each ship in the long line were fixed permanently; yet the squadron was reeling off twenty knots an hour on its way to tropic waters.

On the fore-deck of the *Manhattan*, which, leviathan as she was, pitched heavily in the huge Atlantic swells, stood the two Dreadnought Boys; but a big change was manifest in the ruddy-headed Herc's smiling features, since he sat down to supper the night before the squadron sailed.

Ned regarded his chum with a smile at the other's woe-begone look.

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"Cheer up, Herc," he said. "It will soon be over, you know. Sea-sickness does not last long."

"A good thing it doesn't," groaned the unfortunate Herc, "or I'd be finished with earthly woes by this time. O-oh-oh-oh!"

The exclamation was forced from Ned's cousin as the *Manhattan* gave an extra heavy pitch which sent the salt foam flying in a wet cloud over the port-bow.

It was the second morning following the fleet's departure from New York. The night before, after a day of agony, poor Herc had been hoisted into his hammock by three sailors, and now, in the early dawn, he was undergoing once more all the torments of the day previous. Ned, on the contrary, seemed unaffected by the motion of the ship in the heavy sea-way, and had escaped the toll old Neptune demands from most neophytes.

"Here, you boys," bluffly snapped a boatswain's mate, approaching the boys; "what are you doing here?" It was not the same petty officer who had shown them about the ship.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Ned, respectfully saluting, "but we haven't received any assignments yet."

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"Well, lay hold of a swab and get to work."

"A swab, sir?"

"It sounds what I feel like," groaned Herc.

"Yes, a deck-mop, if you like that term better. No idlers allowed here."

"My friend here, is pretty sea-sick, sir," ventured Ned respectfully.

"Never mind; a little work will do him good—work and a good breakfast——"

"Breakfast oh-o-o-oh!" from the luckless Herc.

"Come, hammocks have been piped down for five minutes. Have you stowed yours?" demanded the boatswain's mate sharply.

"Yes, sir," replied Ned, who had performed this office both for himself and for his friend.

"Well, you will turn to with the first deck division and scrub decks."

"Very well, sir," said Ned, starting forward to where he saw a number of jackies, armed with swabs, preparing to begin the first daily task on a man-o'-war. Scrubbing and painting and cleaning brasswork are a Jackie's chief tasks at sea.

"But hold on a minute—your boots."

The boatswain's mate glared downward disapprovingly.

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"Have I lost those, too?" moaned Herc.

"Take off your boots, at once. Footgear is not allowed while scrubbing decks."

"Very well, sir. Come, Herc, we must go forward."

Followed by Herc, Ned made his way to the fore superstructure, where swabs were being served out. After a little inquiry, he found his "station," and guided the half-dazed Herc into his place in the scrubbing line. Soon they were at work on one of those tasks which may seem menial, but which every boy who enters Uncle Sam's navy must learn to do without complaint.

"I didn't leave home to scrub floors," muttered Herc indignantly, his disgust getting even the better of his sea-sickness; "is this a sailor's chore?"

"Never mind, Herc; look at it from this angle—in scrubbing decks you are helping to keep your five-million-dollar home clean."

"I'd give five million dollars to be ashore," groaned Herc, a fresh paroxysm sweeping over him.

Suddenly the sharp cry of "Attention!" rang along the decks.

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The scrubbing squads straightened up stiffly, and came to the position of salute.

It was the captain, making an early tour of inspection with the executive officer of the ship, Lieutenant-Commander Scott. Behind him came his orderly and a messenger. Altogether, it was quite an impressive little parade.

Ned thought that the captain, whom he had last seen quelling the onrush of the crazed stokers, glanced at him with a flash of recognition. He knew enough, however, not to betray by the flicker of an eyelash that he had ever seen his commander before.

As for Herc, he was fortunately, perhaps, past paying attention to anything.

"Tell the men to carry on," Ned heard the captain say to the boatswain's mate in charge of his scrubbing squad, as the officers passed by.

"Carry on," thought Ned; "what on earth is that?"

"Come; carry on!" said boatswain's mate sharply to Ned as the boy still stood at attention, having received no order to resume work.

Ned looked at him inquiringly, and the man saw the lad was puzzled.

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"Carry on. Go on with your work," he said, and Ned at once understood the hitherto mysterious order.

Breakfast followed the swabbing-down work, and Herc, who felt somewhat revived, managed to swallow a few mouthfuls. Not enough, however, to completely restore him, and a shipmate, seeing his despondent condition, advised him to visit Pills.

"What is that?" asked the astonished boy.

"It isn't a 'what,' it's a 'he'," explained the man; "Pills is the doctor."

"Well, if there's a doctor on board, I certainly want to see him," agreed Herc; and, at seven-thirty, together with several other men, suffering from real or imaginary ills, he sought out the ship's doctor, who gave him some remedies, which soon made the boy feel all right. In fact, an hour later Herc and Ned found themselves consigned to a painting squad, working, side by side, on the big forward turret which housed the twelve-inch guns.

Beside them was another blue-jacket and old Tom, their acquaintance of their first day of naval life.

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Ned felt a thrill, as, in his bosn's chair, he dangled on the side of the turret close to the glistening barrels of the huge guns, which could hurl a ponderous weight of metal, an 870-pound projectile, almost ten miles. He wondered if he would ever attain his present ambition, which was to serve on the crew in the big forward turret, the one he was then engaged in painting a dull-slate color.

Conversation is allowed among blue-jackets at work if they are discreet enough not to make their tones too loud, and relapse into silence when a petty or a commissioned officer happens along. Thus Ned and the convalescent Herc found time to ask many questions concerning the ship. Naturally, the talk drifted, as they worked, to the turret on which they were toiling.

"If I tell you boys a secret can you keep it—teetotal abstinence?" asked old Tom suddenly.

"You had better not confide in us, if you don't think so," rejoined Ned somewhat sharply.

"Oh, no harm meant," hastily put in Tom; "and at that, it isn't so much of a secret. It's been hinted at in the papers, and maybe you may have heard of it. Have you?"

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"Why, how can we tell unless we know what it is?" questioned Ned, with a laugh.

"Well," confided old Tom seriously, and lowering his voice—though by this time the third man on their side of the turret was painting at some distance from them—"well, inside this here turret is one of the new Varian guns. They are the invention of Henry Varian, of Boston—"

"The inventor of that new explosive?" breathed Ned.

"Exactly; Chaosite, they call it. Well, this here gun is specially built to handle this explosive, but

it's never been tried yet; and—here's the secret—Varian himself is to join us in Cuba and direct the firing tests of it. While the papers have got hold of the fact that we have the gun on board, none of them know that it is to be tested on this battle practice, or that Varian himself is to meet us at Guantanamo."

"How do you come to know all this?" asked Ned.

"Why, I'm the stroke-oar of the captain's boat—when he uses it—which isn't often, nowadays," lamented old Tom, who hadn't much use for "steamers" and gasoline launches. "Well, when we was at Key West, I rowed him ashore—helped to, that is—and I overheard him talking to this fellow Varian himself about the gun. I wasn't eavesdropping, you understand; just overheard."

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"That's mighty interesting," mused Ned; "of course, I have read of the government's experiments with Chaosite. It is supposed to be, I believe, the most powerful of all explosives yet discovered. It's great to think that we are on board the first ship to try it under actual battle conditions."

"I wish we could get on the crew of that gun," put in Herc. "I'd like mighty well to see just how that Chewusite acts when it's touched off. Regular Fourth of July, I guess. Pop-boom-fizz! Up in the air!—stars!—bang—down comes the stick!"

As Herc spoke, in his newly recovered vitality, he swung his pot of slate-colored paint about, to illustrate his meaning. As ill-luck would have it, the wire handle was not oversecurely fastened, and off flew the receptacle of the pigment with which the turret was being covered.

"Oh, crickey! Now I've done it!" groaned Herc, as he felt the bucket slip from the handle and go hurtling down.

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The next moment Ned echoed his chum's exclamation of dismay, as he saw what had occurred.

To make matters worse, at that very moment the redoubtable Kennell was passing beneath the turret, on his way aft to clean some brasswork, and had turned his face upward, preparatory to flinging some jeering remark at the two Dreadnought Boys.

The contents of the unlucky pot of paint fell full on his sneering features, blotting them out in a sticky cloud of gray pigment!

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 126]

A BULLY GETS A LESSON.

For a moment the big form of the paint-covered bully swayed about blindly and helplessly. Then, dashing the paint from his eyes, he emitted a roar like that of a stricken bull.

Jackies at work near at hand, who had seen the accident, gazed at Herc, who had by this time slid to the deck—in a sort of pitying way. They knew Kennell too well to suppose that he would let such an occurrence—even if it were an accident—pass by unrevenged.

"I'm sorry, Kennell; it was an accident," exclaimed Herc, one hand extended, and the other gathering up the loose end of his work-blouse; "here, let me wipe some of it off with this."

He stepped forward, with the intention of doing all he could to repair the damage he had unwittingly caused, but Kennell, with an angry sweep of his arm, waved him furiously back. To increase the bully's rage, some of the men near at hand began to laugh.

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"My! what a lovely complexion the kid has when he's all rouged up!" laughed one.

"Kennell's got his battle-paint on," jeered another.

It was easy to see that none of the men particularly regretted the accident to the bully, whom none of them had any particular reason to love.

From their suspended bosn's chairs, Ned and old Tom watched the scene with some apprehensions. Ned was a shrewd enough reader of character to know that the affair could hardly end by Kennell's peaceably accepting Herc's apology; while old Tom knew Kennell's nature too well to entertain any doubt that the young seaman was in for a terrible trouncing.

"You—you—red-headed clod-hopper!" grated Kennell savagely through his mask of "war-paint," when he found his voice. Somehow, he looked so ludicrous, showing his teeth, like a snarling dog, through his panoply of pigment, that Herc, to save his life, could not have restrained himself from bursting into a hearty laugh.

"I—pardon me, Kennell; oh, ha! ha! ha! I—I'm awfully sorry. Please accept my apologies. It was, ha, ha, ha, ha! an accident—really it was. Won't you forgive me?"

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Herc held out his hand once more. As he did so, Ned shouted a sharp warning from above.

It came too late.

Kennell's mighty arm shot out with the speed of a piston-rod, and its impact, full on Herc's laughing face, carried the boy crashing against the side rails.

"Take that, you pup, as a starter!" hissed Kennell "and I'm not through with you yet, either. I'll keep after you two whelps till you slink out of the service."

Herc, half-stunned, clambered to his feet, and stood swaying for a moment, as if he were about to

keel over altogether. He rapidly pulled himself together, however, and fixed a furious gaze on Kennell, who stood glaring at him with an upcurled lip and narrowed eyes.

Echoing the bellow that Kennell had let forth when the paint obscured his vision temporarily, Herc threw himself into a boxing attitude, and sprang straight for his opponent. It was the onslaught of a wild-cat on a bull.

"Take that, for tripping me overboard, you big coward," he snapped, as he aimed a terrific uppercut at the ship's bully. [Pg 129]

The unexpected blow caught Kennell with the force of a young battering-ram. Full on the point of his blunt jaw it landed, and raised him a good foot off the deck. He came crashing down like a felled tree, in a heap at the foot of the turret's barbette.

He lay there, seemingly senseless, while the ship plunged onward, and a thin stream of red began to trickle from his head and spread over the newly whitened deck.

Herc gazed down at his handiwork in consternation.

What if he had killed the man? Kennell lay there so still that it seemed reasonable to suppose that his life might be extinct. The stream of blood, too, alarmed Herc, who had struck out more on impulse than with any well-defined idea of knocking out the ponderous "Kid Kennell."

"Kennell, Kennell!" he breathed, bending over the prostrate man. "Speak! Are you badly hurt?"

"Leave him alone, matey," counseled old Tom, who, with Ned, had slid down from the turret-side. "He's a long way from dead. He's just asleep for a few minutes, and only got what was coming to him." [Pg 130]

"Oh, is he all right?" questioned Herc, much relieved.

"Sure; it would take a harder punch than you've got to hurt 'Kid' Kennell seriously," put in a sailor at Herc's elbow; "but Heaven help you when the kid gets about again."

"Why?" asked Herc simply.

"Why? Oh, Lord!" groaned the sailors mirthfully, "why, red-head, he'll pound that ruby-colored head of yours into the middle of next Fourth of July or pink calves'-foot jelly."

"Carry on, men! Carry on!" exclaimed a boatswain's mate, coming round the barbette at this moment.

"Why, what's all this?" he exclaimed the next minute, as his eyes lighted on the recumbent and paint-smearred figure of Kennell, and the flushed faces and anxious eyes of Ned and Herc.

"It's Kennell, sir; he's knocked out," volunteered one of the jackies.

"So I see. Who has so grossly violated the rules of the service as to have been guilty of fighting?"

All eyes rested on poor Herc, who, coloring up to the roots of his colorful thatch, said, in a low voice: [Pg 131]

"I have, sir."

Though the lad's tone was low, his voice never quavered.

"What you—Recruit Taylor—fighting?" queried the amazed boatswain's mate, who was no stranger to the record of the redoubtable Kennell, and inwardly marveled at what sort of fighting machine Herc must be to have laid him low.

"Yes, sir; I'm sorry to say that I have," replied Herc, looking his superior straight in the eyes.

At this juncture the officer of the deck hastened up. From his station amidships he had noted the sudden cessation of all activity forward. He had at once hastened to see what had occurred to stop the monotonous clock-work of the routine duties aboard.

"What's all this, Stowe?" he shot out sharply at the boatswain's mate, as his eyes took in the scene.

All the jackies had come to attention as the officer hurried up, but at his sharp command of:

"Carry on, men!" the work had gone forward, apparently as before, although, as my readers will judge, the men had one eye on their work and another on the scene that now transpired. [Pg 132]

"Why, as well as I can make out, sir, this young recruit here, sir—Taylor, sir—has been fighting with Kennell, here, sir, and——"

"Seemingly knocked him out," snapped the officer, as Kennell began to stir. He sat up, blinking his eyes like a man who has been summoned back from another world.

As the bully rose, the officer—a young man with a good-natured face—suddenly coughed violently and turned to the rail. His shoulders heaved and his handkerchief was stuffed up to his face.

The boatswain's mate gazed at him apprehensively. He thought his superior had become suddenly ill. As a matter of fact the sight of Kennell's puzzled countenance, blinking through the paint and vital fluid, with which his features were bedaubed, had been too much for the officer's gravity, and he had been compelled to turn away or suffer a severe loss of his dignity by bursting into a roar of laughter.

Finally he recovered himself, and turned, with a still quivering lip, which he bit incessantly, toward the battered Kennell and the others. [Pg 133]

"What explanation have you to make of this?" he demanded of Herc, in as unshaken and stern a voice as if he had never suffered the loss of an ounce of his gravity.

Poor Herc saluted and shuffled uneasily from one foot to another.

"Oh, I know he'll make a mess of it," thought Ned to himself. "I wish the regulations would allow me to speak up for him."

"Come, sir; what have you to say?" reiterated the officer, as the sorry-looking Kennell got slowly to his feet. He glowered menacingly at Herc, as recollection of what had occurred began to come back to him.

"Why, sir, that young cur——" Kennell began.

"Silence, sir!" roared the officer; "I'll attend to you when your turn comes."

"I was painting the side of the turret," began Herc; "and, quite by accident, the handle of my painting pail came off. Unfortunately, this man happened to be passing below and the stuff doused him, just like a sheep at dipping time, and——"

"Attention, sir! Never mind your comparisons. Proceed. You have not yet accounted for the extraordinary condition of this man's countenance." [Pg 134]

"Why, sir, *that's* the paint," sputtered Herc, as if astonished at the officer's simplicity.

"Exactly. I understand. You say that such a thing was an accident. Possibly, it was. But how do you account for the fact that the man Kennell was lying insensible at the foot of the turret, with that cut over his eye?"

"I did that, too, sir," admitted Herc ruefully.

"What, you cut his eye like that?"

"No, sir; I guess that he must have done that when he fell. I just gave him a sleep wallop——"

"Attention, sir! Use more respectful intelligible language," said the lieutenant, suddenly becoming much more interested in some object on the far horizon; so much so that he had once more to turn his back on the Dreadnought Boys, the boatswain's mate and the open-mouthed jackies. In a minute he faced round again, as grave as before.

"I hope you are not sea-sick, sir?" began Herc solicitously, for he had observed the officer's handkerchief at his mouth. The lad could not imagine that a scene so serious to him could appear ludicrous to any one else. "If you are, Pills, the doctor, I mean——" [Pg 135]

"Silence, sir! You need disciplining. You admit, then, that you hit this man?"

"Yes, sir, but he——"

"Silence! Answer 'yes' or 'no,' please."

"Well, 'yes'," admitted Herc.

"Why in the great horn-spoon doesn't he ask him if Kennell hit him first?" groaned Ned, regarding the examination from a prudent distance.

"This case calls for a full investigation," snapped the officer; "fighting aboard a man-o'-war is one of the most serious offenses an enlisted man can commit. Messenger!"

"Sir!"

"Get the master-at-arms, and request him to come forward and report to me at once."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

The messenger sped aft on his errand, while a dreadful silence ensued, which even the irrepressible Herc had not the courage to break.

Evidently something dire was about to happen to him.

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 136]

HERC LEARNS WHAT "THE BRIG" IS.

In a few minutes the messenger returned with the master-at-arms, who saluted the officer of the deck, who in turn gravely saluted him. Herc, feeling that he should do something, saluted each of them in turn, concluding his respectful motions with a deep bow.

Neither officer, however, paid any more attention to the lad than if he had been carved out of wood.

"Master-at-arms!" began the officer.

"Yes, sir," responded the master-at-arms, bringing his heels together with a sharp click.

"There has been a flagrant breach of discipline here, which it is my duty to report to the captain at once. You will place this man, Ordinary Seaman Taylor, under restraint, and arraign him at the mast at one o'clock with the other prisoners."

"Yes, sir," nodded the master-at-arms, edging up to the dismayed Herc.

"Kennell, if you wish to prefer a complaint against this man Taylor, you may," went on the officer. [Pg 137]

"I do, sir, certainly," said Kennell earnestly, through the paint that smothered his face; "but first, sir, I should like to clean this mess off, sir."

"You will be relieved from duty while you do. Carry on, men."

The officer of the deck faced about and walked aft; no doubt to acquaint the captain with the details of the occurrences on the forward deck.

"Come, wake up," said the master-at-arms to Herc, who was in a semi-stupor at the horrifying idea that he was under arrest. "Come with me."

"What! I'm to be locked up?" gasped Herc.

"Yes, in the brig."

In an instant the recollection of the boys' conversation with old Tom on the day they joined the ship flashed into Herc's mind. So then "the brig" that the old tar had been so reluctant to talk about, was the place in which they locked up malefactors and disgracers of the service, of whom it seemed he was one. Poor Herc felt ready to drop with shame and humiliation as—under the eyes of the hundreds of jackies going about their various tasks—he was marched aft by the master-at-arms. There was only one drop of relief in his bitter cup. It came when Ned pressed forward, at the risk of being severely reprovved. [Pg 138]

"Never mind, Herc, old fellow," he breathed. "I know you were in the right, and I'll see that Kennell gets what's coming to him, if it's the last thing I do."

"Come, sir! carry on," snapped the master-at-arms, who had pretended not to notice the first part of this conversation, being a really kind-hearted man, although bound by discipline, just as is every one else in the navy; "you must know it is a breach of discipline to talk to prisoners."

Prisoners!

Poor Herc groaned aloud.

"Come, come," comforted the master-at-arms, "it isn't as bad as all that. I am confident that you can clear yourself. Besides, it is your first offense, and you are a recruit, so perhaps the old man will be easy on you."

"It isn't that, so much as it's the disgrace of being arrested like this," burst out Herc.

"Oh, well, you shouldn't go to fighting, then," remarked the master-at-arms, pulling open a steel-studded door and thrusting Herc before him into a narrow passage, lighted by electric bulbs, down one side of which was fitted a row of steel-barred cells. [Pg 139]

"We're a bit crowded," he remarked, "so I can't give you a cell to yourself. When a ship puts to sea out of a port there are generally a lot of men to be disciplined. Those who have overstayed their leave, and so forth. Therefore, I'll have to put you in here."

He opened a door as he spoke, and pushed Herc into a cell in which two other men were already seated on a narrow bench which ran along one side.

"You'll get a full ration at eight bells, for which you are lucky," remarked the master-at-arms; "the others get only bread and water."

Clang!

The steel door swung to, and Herc, for the first time in his life, was a prisoner.

It did not make the experience any the less bitter to know that he was a captive and disgraced through no fault of his own, unless it had been from his exuberant swinging of the paint-pot in the enthusiasm of his newly-acquired "sea-legs."

The Dreadnought Boy, despite his unpleasant situation, was naturally inquisitive enough to gaze about him on his surroundings. The cell itself was a steel-walled apartment about twelve feet square with no other furnishings than the narrow bench, which also was of steel. It was lighted by an electric bulb, set deep in the ceiling and barred off, so that it could not be tampered with by a meddlesome prisoner. The walls of this place were painted white. The floors red. It was insufferably hot and stuffy, and the songs of a group of roisterers confined in another cell, which broke forth as soon as the master-at-arms departed, did not tend to make the environment any pleasanter. [Pg 140]

"So this is the brig," mused Herc, "well, they can have it for all I want with it. It's not much better than the hog-pen at home."

One of Herc's fellow prisoners, who had been sitting sullenly on the bench, now arose and began to pace back and forth. His companion did likewise. They had not paid the slightest attention to Herc hitherto, but now one of them spoke.

"What you in for, kid?"

"I guess you'll have to ask the master-at-arms," rejoined Herc, who was not prepossessed by his questioner's appearance. He was a heavy-set, low-browed man, with a pair of black eyebrows that almost met in the center of his forehead, giving him a sinister aspect. His companion was slight, and long-legged, with a delicate—almost an effeminate—cast of features. [Pg 141]

"Oh, well, if you don't want to talk you don't have to," growled the heavy-browed man. "Say, Carl," he went on, turning to his companion, "this is a nice, sociable cellmate they've given us,

isn't it?"

"You attend to your own affairs, Silas," snarled the other, who did not seem to be any more amiable than his heavy-browed friend; "leave the kid alone. We've got trouble enough of our own, haven't we?"

"Hum, yes; but overstaying leave isn't such a very serious matter, and think of the reward that's ahead in store for us. Only this cruise, and——"

"Hush!" broke in the one addressed as Carl, with an angry intonation; "you must be a fool to talk like that in front of the kid," he went on in a low undertone.

"Pshaw!" snarled the other in the same low voice, however. "He's just a country Reuben, with the hayseed still in his hair and the smell of the hog-pen on him—like that one we gambled with in New York—Hank Harkins—wasn't that his name?—on the old 'Idy'."

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"Just the same, it's well to be prudent," counseled the other, and fell once more to his pacing of the cell.

As for Herc, to whom all this, including the reference to Hank, had been, as Carl had guessed, so much Greek, he laid down at full length on the bench. As he had not had more than a few winks of sleep during his seasick night, he soon dropped off into peaceful slumber, despite his uncomfortable couch and serious position.

How long he slept, he did not know, but he woke with a start, and was about to open his eyes, when he suddenly closed them again and feigned deep slumber.

He had heard something being discussed by the two men with whom he shared the cell that set his pulse to stirring and his heart to beating a wild tattoo.

The boy realized that the safety of one of the United States' greatest naval secrets lay, for the time being, in his hands.

CHAPTER XIV.

[Pg 143]

A PLOT OVERHEARD.

"Say, didn't that boy move?"—the prisoner that Herc knew as Carl put the question.

The lad heard rapid footsteps pace across the narrow cell, and felt the hot breath of one of the men in his ear as he lay still and feigned slumber as best he could, although his heart beat so wildly he was sure its agitation must have been audible to the two men.

Apparently, however, his ruse succeeded. The men were satisfied that he was wrapped in slumber, for, with a growl, the one that had bent over him said:

"He's off; sound as a top."

"A good thing," rejoined the other, "both for us and for him."

It was Carl who spoke, and the tone in which his soft, refined voice uttered the words left the Dreadnought Boy no room to doubt that if the two plotters had imagined he had overheard them they would have done something exceedingly unpleasant to prevent their secret being betrayed. As it was, however, they seemed to feel no uneasiness and resumed their conversation.

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"The yacht will be waiting at Boco del Toros, about ten miles above Guantanamo Bay," continued the black-browed man. Herc recognized his bearlike growl. "All we have to do when we get the plans is to steal aboard and sail. Her captain will be prepared for us, and will take us on board when we give the signal."

"Then all that we will have to do will be to waylay Varian," said Carl in his soft way, which, mild as it seemed, yet impressed Herc with the same sense of chill as if the cold muzzle of a revolver had been pressed to the nape of his neck.

"That's it. An easy way of earning ten thousand dollars, eh?"

"Yes, if—if we don't get caught."

"No fear of that," laughed the black-browed man; "at any rate, if we are it will be our own fault. But I see no chance of a slip-up. Varian sails from New York to Havana on a vessel of the Ward line. He will put up at a hotel at Guantanamo. We are to meet the others ashore, and if all goes well we'll finish our business in a few hours. If not——"

[Pg 145]

"Well, if not, we'll have to get what we're after from the captain himself, and that's going to be difficult and perhaps fatal for him."

"Well, I've taken longer chances than that for less money," laughed Carl's companion. "Lucky thing they didn't look back into our records, or they'd have found out a thing or two which would have made us very undesirable subjects for Uncle Sam's navy. Likewise Kennell, I guess. I'd 'a' hard time to get him to join, but a golden bait will catch the shyest fish."

Carl gave a high-pitched chuckle, almost a giggle, but the two worthies instantly lapsed into what seemed sullen silence as the key of their jailer grated in the lock of the bulkhead door.

As for Herc, he judged that his best and safest course was to emit a loud snore, which he did. So

well was his slumber simulated that the master-at-arms who had entered, accompanied by two orderlies carrying the prisoners' food, exclaimed in an astonished tone:

"That youngster must be an older hand than I thought him. He's actually sleeping like a baby."

Herc pretended to feel very sleepy when the master-at-arms shook his shoulder and indicated a smoking dinner of cornbeef and cabbage, flanked by bread and butter and a big mug of coffee. [Pg 146]

"Here, wake up and eat this," commanded the officer; "you ought to be alive to your luck. The other prisoners only get full rations once a day. They have to dine on bread and water."

The boy stretched his arms as if he was only partially awake, and, after what he judged to be a proper interval of feigning sleepiness, fell to on his hot dinner. Empty as he was, the food heartened him up wonderfully, despite the scowls that his two companions leveled at him as he ate. When the master-at-arms arrived, just before two bells—one o'clock—to take his prisoners to the tribunal at the mast, Sam felt better prepared to face his ordeal than he had a few hours previously.

The captain's "court" convened just forward of the stern awnings, and a little abaft the towering "cage" aftermast.

The "old man," in full uniform, with a sword at his side, Lieutenant-Commander Scott, and several of the officers stood in a little group chatting, as the prisoners were brought aft. All wore side arms and what the Jackie calls "quarter-deck faces"—meaning that they looked as stern and uncompromising as flint. [Pg 147]

"I guess I'll get life," muttered Herc to himself, as he heard the stern doom, of stoppage of five days' pay and ten days in the brig, without future shore leave, pronounced on three sailors who had been found guilty of coming on duty in an intoxicated condition, at New York.

"You men are to understand that the United States navy has no place for men who wilfully indulge in such practices," the captain had said, with blighting emphasis, as the men trembled before him. "Clean men, clean-living men is the material the government wants, and such as you are better out of the service. The navy is better off without you if you go on as you have been doing."

Herc felt his cheeks blanch as pale as had the countenances of the guilty ones as he heard this stern speech.

Next came the turns of the two men who had shared the same cell with him.

"Carl Schultz, ordinary seaman, and Silas Wagg, ordinary seaman," read the captain's yeoman who acted as a sort of "clerk of the court." [Pg 148]

"What's the offense?" asked the captain.

"Overstaying their shore leave four hours, sir," was the rejoinder.

"Any previous bad record?"

"No, sir. I have found none," volunteered the master-at-arms.

"Men," said the captain, in the same icy tones as he had used toward the three intemperate prisoners, "you are guilty of a serious offense. In the navy regularity should be a watchword with all of us. It may seem to you that to overstay your leave by four hours was but a small matter, and that you yourselves would not be missed among eight hundred or more men. Yet every one of the crew and each of your forty-two officers has a niche of his own to fill. We are all cogs in the same great machine, servants working for the good of the same government.

"If any one of us is derelict in his duty, he is not only derelict to himself and to his officers, but to his country and his flag. Always bear that in mind. As this is your first offense, and your officers tell me you are hard-working men and good seamen, I shall dismiss you with a reprimand. But mind," he added sternly, "if either of you is brought before me again I shall not prove so lenient. Carry on." [Pg 149]

With grateful faces, the two men hastened off forward.

How Herc longed to tell of what he had heard in the cell! But he dreaded to make himself appear ridiculous by reciting what might seem an improbable story, cooked up by one who already rested under a cloud, so he said nothing.

In fact, he was not allowed long to entertain these thoughts, for hardly had the two worthies who had shared his cell made the best of their way forward, before the yeoman, in a voice that affected Herc much as a sudden plunge into ice water would have done, shouted out:

"Ordinary Seaman Taylor!"

The story of Herc's knocking out the bully had already spread through the ship—a place where gossip travels as swiftly as through a small village—and the officers and the few men whose duties brought them near to the "court room"—eyed Herc curiously as he stepped forward, with head bared, holding himself as erect as possible. He saluted as he clicked his heels together with painstaking precision. His heart beat fast and thick, however, and there was an anxious look in his eyes as he faced his inquisitors. [Pg 150]

Herc was a brave boy, full of pluck and grit; but the ordeal before him might have caused a stouter heart than his to quail.

"Master-at-arms, what do you know about this case?" asked the captain, as Herc stood rigid,

twisting his cap in his big hands.

The master-at-arms rapidly rehearsed what he knew of the affair, and then the captain turned to his executive officer.

"Mr. Scott, there is a complainant in this case, is there not?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Mr. Andrews, who had the deck this morning, so reported to me."

"Able Seaman and Gunner Ralph Kennell is the man, sir," said Lieutenant Andrews, stepping forward.

"Very good. Where is this man Kennell?"

"Here, sir," said Kennell, stepping forward in his turn.

His face shone with soap, which yet had not been able wholly to eradicate the traces of slate-colored paint with which he had been shower-bathed. Over his left eye a big bit of plaster showed where "Pills" had patched him up. Beneath the same eye a dark bruise was beginning to spread. His jaw was also woefully swollen where Herc had landed his effective blow.

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"Now, Kennell," began the captain, who was perfectly aware of the bully's record, and marvelled as much as his officers how such a slim lad as Herc could have inflicted such injuries on him; "now, Kennell, tell us in as few words as you can what occurred this morning between you and Ordinary Seaman Taylor."

"Well, sir," began Kennell sullenly, "I was making my way aft to clean brasswork, sir, when this man here, sir, drops a pot of paint on my head, sir, out of pure malice, as I believe, sir."

"Never mind what you believe. What happened then?"

"Then, when I protested, sir," went on Kennell, "he climbs down from the turret he was a-painting, sir, and strikes me."

"Where?"

"Right by the forward twelve-inch turret, sir."

"You mean your eye, don't you?"

"Well, sir, he struck me all over, sir," complained Kennell.

"And you had done nothing to him?"

"Nothing, sir."

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"Very good. You may stand aside. Taylor, what have you to say to this story?"

"Not much, sir, except that it is a fabrication," said Herc indignantly, his fear at the officers swallowed in his wrath at Kennell's lying tale. "It is true I dropped the paint on his head. That was accidental, however. So far as his injuries go, I believe that he got the cut over his eye when he fell against the turret. He hit it an awful whack, sir." Herc grinned broadly at the recollection.

"No levity, please. You are to understand this is a serious matter. Who struck the first blow?"

Herc hesitated. It was no part of his ideas of what was right to tell tales on a fellow seaman, and yet Kennell had lied cruelly about him. Suddenly his mind was made up.

"I had rather not say, sir," he said at length in a low tone.

"What! Are you aware that this is a confession of guilt, or equivalent to it?"

"Perhaps so, sir, but I cannot say," repeated Herc stubbornly.

"Very well, then," said the captain in his most dignified tones, "I shall have to inflict a heavier punishment on you than I would otherwise. You are one of the two recruits whose gallant conduct on the *Rhode Island* caught my favorable attention. I am therefore doubly reluctant to punish you. But the discipline of the service must be upheld. Seemingly, you are screening some one. You must learn that your officers are to be obeyed, and also the regulations. No regulation is more mandatory than that forbidding fighting and unseemly conduct on the ships of the United States Navy. I shall therefore sentence you to two days in the brig with prison rations. Master-at-arms!"

[Pg 153]

"Sir!"

"Carry on!"

The officer saluted, and a few minutes later poor Herc was once more in his steel cell. This time he occupied it alone, however.

"Well, two days is not such a very long time," mused Herc philosophically; "and I expected at least two months, by the way that captain talked to me. I'm in here now, but let that old 'dog Kennel' look out for me when I'm foot loose again!"

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 154]

ORDERED AFT.

"Mr. Scott," said Captain Dunham, turning to his lieutenant-commander, "ask Mr. Andrews to

step here a minute, will you?"

"Yes, sir," responded Mr. Scott, and a minute later Lieutenant Andrews respectfully saluted Commander Dunham.

"Andrews, I'm not altogether comfortable about giving that lad two days in the brig. The fellow Kennell I have heard is a most unconscionable bully, and, moreover, I am favorably inclined to both those lads. I saw their mettle well tested on the *Rhode Island*, as I told you gentlemen the other day. Have you heard any details of the matter which you could not relate officially at the inquiry?"

"Yes sir, I have," said Mr. Andrews straightforwardly. "I learned a short time ago, from a boatswain's mate who arrived on the scene shortly after Kennell had been knocked out, that young Taylor, instead of being the aggressor, had, as a matter of fact, been attacked by Kennell a few minutes after he had extended his hand and offered an apology for an unavoidable, if annoying, accident."

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"Hum, hum!" mused the captain; "then it seems that there has been a miscarriage of justice here. But why, in the name of the old Harry, couldn't the young fellow have acquainted me with the full details of the case."

"I suppose, sir, that he was unwilling to inform on his shipmate. You know that 'snitchers,' as they call them forward, are not encouraged in the navy."

"No, Andrews, no. But I hate to think I have done the lad an injustice—even if unwittingly."

"I should not worry about it, sir," put in Andrews. "It will not hurt the youngster to get a sharp lesson in naval discipline which he won't forget in a hurry."

"Perhaps you are right," mused the captain; "but I should be unwilling to spoil what I am sure is a fine disposition by over-harshness. As for that man Kennell, I have been his commander on another ship of the fleet, the old *Massachusetts*. I am sure he is a trouble maker, and I am going to have a sharp eye kept on him. If I can detect him attempting to stir up trouble among the men, I shall visit my wrath on him pretty sharply."

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"And rightly, too, sir," agreed Andrews. "So you have decided to let young Taylor serve out his sentence?"

"I think so, yes—for one day, anyway," rejoined the commander. "As you say, it will be a good lesson, though a sharp one. I intend, however, to put both those lads on a good detail as soon as Taylor is released. It will be by way of compensation for what I feel is a partial injustice."

Thus it will be seen that, while naval officers outwardly have often to "ship a quarter-deck face" and deal out what may seem harsh measures, yet they are, with few exceptions, kindly, humane men, with an adoration for their flag and country that amounts to fanaticism, and, moreover, a kindly feeling toward the men serving under them. It is somewhat hard, though, to administer the exact measure of justice among eight or nine hundred high-spirited, healthy young animals like the average American tar.

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"Well, lad, the smoke lamp is lighted. Light up and forget your troubles."

Old Tom paused as he passed Ned during the rest hour, after the jackies' noonday dinner.

"Thanks. I never smoke," responded the boy, whose troubled face showed that he was still worrying over Herc's disgrace. In fact, Ned took his companion's position to heart much more keenly than did Herc himself, who, knowing in his own heart that he was not to blame, set to work to make the best of it.

It was the day following Herc's imprisonment, and already the squadron had passed into the Gulf Stream, and the warm air of the tropics was about the mighty fighting ships.

That morning the flagship had signalled to the squadron that white uniforms were in order, and very trim and neat the jackies looked in their snowy garments, as they lounged about the decks. Some were smoking and chatting, some writing letters, and others playing checkers, chess or cards, or absorbed in some book in a quiet nook.

As Ned, who was leaning over the rail, gazed downward at the foam flying past the vessel's side, he found never-failing amusement in watching the great flocks of flying fish that fled shimmering from the yellow patches of "gulf weed" as the *Manhattan's* mighty bow nosed into them.

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"For all the world like a covey of partridges scared up in the woods at home," thought Ned to himself.

"Ordinary Seaman Strong?" asked a sudden voice behind him.

Ned turned swiftly, and saw the captain's orderly facing him.

"Yes, I'm Strong," he said.

"Come with me," directed the orderly.

Ned had been long enough on a battleship now to obey without hesitation or question when an order was addressed to him.

The lounging jackies regarded him with some interest as he passed among them.

"The pal of the red-headed lad is going to get a wiggling now."

"Two of them upon the carpet in two days. They won't last long in the service."

These are samples of the comments that were bandied about as the boy passed along behind the orderly, somewhat troubled, in fact, in his own mind as to what could be the reason of the sudden summons to the captain's cabin.

Old Tom spoke up indignantly as he heard the remarks:

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"A whole lot of you young varmint will still be scrubbing decks, and cleaning brasswork, and doing your regular trick in the brig after shore leave, when them two young fellows is wearing chevrons!" he snapped.

The old salt was a privileged character, and did and said pretty much as he liked among the men; but his remark aroused some resentment among those about him.

"How about you, old Growler?" asked a gruff voice. "How is it you never rose from the scrub stations?"

"Cos I was a fool like you when I was young," snarled old Tom, as the sailors exploded in a shout of laughter at the discomfiture of the venturesome spirit that had essayed to "bait" old Tom.

"Better leave Tom alone, Ralph," shouted one of the card players; "he's too sharp for you."

"Yes, he presumes on his gray hairs to do as he likes," snarled the other, who was none other than Kennell. "It's a good thing for him he's got a bald head."

"Well, I don't need a pot of paint to cover it, anyhow!" laughed old Tom, at which there was another tornado of laughter; and Kennell, with a black look on his face, rose to his feet and made his way to another spot, one where he was less likely to encounter such a sharp tongue as old Tom's.

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"Confounded old fool!" he muttered to himself as he went, "I'd like to finish up him and those two kids at one stroke! I'll do it, too, if I get a chance."

In the meantime Ned, at the orderly's heels, had traversed several of the memorable narrow, steel-lined corridors, and at last found himself in front of heavy green plush portieres, beyond which lay, as he guessed, that hallowed spot, the captain's cabin.

The orderly knocked softly at the polished mahogany door frame.

"Ord'ly, sir," he announced.

And a minute later:

"Ordinary Seaman Strong, sir."

"Send him in," came the pleasant, mellow voice of the captain.

Ned subdued an inclination to take to his heels, and entered, looking as calm as he could.

"A moment, Strong," said the captain in a pleasant voice. "I'll be through here in a minute."

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Ned stood stiffly at attention and gazed about him out of the corners of his eyes while his commander wrote busily, dipping his pen from time to time in a massive silver ink-stand. The commander's quarters, although on a fighting ship, were as luxuriously appointed as the library in any mansion ashore. The fittings were all dark mahogany, relieved, here and there, with maple-wood, on which the soft lights glowed and shone. As in the officers' cabins, there was no porthole, the armor at this part of the ship precluding any such device. Thick glass, let into the quarter deck above, however, admitted light.

"Ord'ly!"

"Sir!"

The orderly sprang into view, like a familiar spirit, from behind the curtain where he had been standing at attention.

"Take these general orders to Mr. Scott!"

"Yes, sir!"

The galvanic orderly saluted and was off like a shot.

"I wonder if that fellow is equipped with springs?" mused Ned, "or if he is galvanized daily, or merely wound up by clockwork?"

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"Well, Strong."

The captain was gazing at the boy quizzically.

Ned saluted stiffly, and stood straighter than ever at attention, waiting for what was to come.

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 163]

A BIT OF PROMOTION.

"Strong," began the captain, "I sent for you to ask you a few questions. As you know, I have taken

some interest in you since I witnessed your courageous behavior aboard the *Rhode Island*."

Ned blushed hotly, but said nothing. The captain's remark did not seem to call for a reply.

"You have ambitions, and your friend Taylor has also, I presume."

"Yes, sir," replied Ned; "we wish to advance ourselves in our chosen profession, sir."

"I am going to give you a chance," was the rejoinder. "You are, of course, acquainted with the rudiments of gunnery?"

"Yes, sir. We were schooled in the elements of gun practice at Newport."

"So I perceived by a perusal of your papers."

This was news to Ned, who had not hitherto dreamed that the commander of a vessel like the *Manhattan* would have time to pay any attention to two mere ordinary seamen. In this, however, he was mistaken. The officers of the United States Navy are ever on the lookout for new material, and watch any promising youngsters with keen interest, giving them every opportunity to show what they can do.

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"I am going to put you and your friend Taylor on a gun crew."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" burst out Ned, his eyes almost popping out of his head, but preserving a cool exterior, nevertheless.

"Wait a minute. I have not finished yet," went on the captain, with a twinkle in his eye. "Your friend Taylor is er-er somewhat impulsive, I should imagine?"

"Well, yes, sir; but he had plenty of provocation for what he did the other day," spoke up Ned boldly. He was delighted that a chance had come to tell the facts in the case which poor Herc, in his embarrassment, had neglected doing.

"So I understood. The man Kennell, I understand, attacked him. For this reason Taylor will be released to-day. But even so, he had his recourse in reporting the matter."

"That was not all, sir," broke out Ned.

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"Not all? What do you mean?"

"That I saw the man Kennell deliberately trip Herc—Seaman Taylor, I mean, sir—as he was walking the boom the day he boarded the *Manhattan*."

"You mean the day you dived over after him? It was pluckily done."

"Yes, sir. Kennell had been badgering him in the boat, and then deliberately tripped him."

"That chimes in with the reports I have heard about Kennell," remarked the captain. "However, that matter is past, and official action cannot now be taken. I have spoken to the gunnery officer, Lieutenant Timmons, about you two boys, and to-morrow you will be a part of the crew of the fifteen-inch guns in the forward turret."

Ned's heart was too full for utterance. He stammered his thanks, and obeying the captain's curt nod of dismissal, hastened from the cabin, his head fairly buzzing over the good luck that had come to them.

"If I am not mistaken," thought the captain, as Ned left the cabin, "I have selected two good bits of material in those lads for Timmons. Yet the experiments with that Varian gun are going to be dangerous, and perhaps I was wrong to place those two boys in peril. However, the life of a sailor is made up of risk and danger, and there is no more danger with that gun than with any other piece of modern ordnance. It is only because it is untried that it seems more fraught with possible mishap."

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Had the captain possessed the gift of prophecy— But what man or woman does? If they did, perhaps many of the experiments which have proved of the biggest ultimate benefit to the world would never have been tried.

Ned, his head fairly buzzing with his good fortune, hastened forward. He wished he could communicate with Herc and cheer up that captive by news of their good fortune. Musing thus, he had the misfortune, as he reached the fore deck, to collide with a man hastening in an opposite direction.

He looked up with a quick word of apology, and found himself gazing full into the scowling features of the Dreadnought Boys' arch enemy—Kennell!

"Out of my way, you young mucker!" glowered the man, with a look of hatred, "or I'll maul you up as badly as I did that red-headed young cub."

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"You mean my friend, Herc Taylor."

"I said 'cub!'"

"And I said friend!"

Ned returned the man's glare firmly.

"I see I shall have to give you a good lesson, too, one of these days!" hissed Kennell evilly.

Ned, fresh from the presence of the captain, proud of his promotion—for so he considered it, the twelve-inch turret being the "prize detail" of the ship—had no desire to get into a fistic argument. He knew the captain was a stickler for discipline, for all his kind heart, and that with one of the Dreadnought Boys already undergoing punishment, although unjustly, it would be the worst thing

that could happen for him to become embroiled with Kennell.

He therefore regarded Kennell with a cold stare and said sharply:

"Let me pass, please. I am in a hurry and have no time to waste."

Kennell planted his bulky form squarely in the Dreadnought Boy's path.

"You'll pass when I get good and ready," he grated out. "It's time you boys learned a lesson or two, and I'm going to give it to you!" [Pg 168]

"I said let me pass," repeated Ned firmly, making a determined effort to quell his rising tide of hot anger at the fellow's evident determination to provoke him into a quarrel.

"Call me 'sir' when you address me," ordered Kennell pugnaciously. "I'm going to teach you how to address your seniors in the service."

"I only say 'sir' to men I respect," was the sharp retort, the very coolness of which stung Kennell to renewed fury. His rage was increased by the fact that a group of sailors, momentarily growing larger, began to titter at his discomfiture.

"Better leave him alone, Ralph," laughed old Tom mischievously. "He's as sharp a young file as I am an old one."

Ned took advantage of the temporary diversion to try to slip past without trouble. He had his own ideas of getting even with Kennell, and it was no part of his plan to break regulations by getting involved in a fight with him on shipboard. He stepped forward to pass on.

Kennell was too quick for him.

"Say 'sir'!" he demanded.

"I have already told you for whom I reserved that distinction," said Ned in a low voice, "and you are emphatically not in that class." [Pg 169]

"Maybe this will teach you respect for your superiors."

A huge, gnarled fist, knotted and twisted by many a battle, shook under Ned's nose.

The undismayed boy gave a low laugh of contempt.

"You'd better put that hand to work, instead of going round trying to scare people with it," he said stingingly.

"I will put it to work. SO!"

Wh-oo-oo-f!

The fist fairly whistled as it shot out with the force of a torpedo speeding on its destructive way.

But Ned was not in its path. Thrown off his balance by the boy's quick avoidance of the sledge-hammer blow, Kennell stumbled forward.

Quick as a whip snap, Ned stepped under his guard and planted a crushing blow in the fighter's ribs.

But delivered as it was, with the full force of the Dreadnought Boy's well-trained muscle, it seemed hardly to sway the bullock-like frame of the ship's blusterer. [Pg 170]

"I've got the fight of my life on my hands," was Ned's quick thought, as Kennell, recovering himself, prepared, with a confident grin, to annihilate his young opponent.

CHAPTER XVII.

[Pg 171]

JIU-JITSU VS. MUSCLE.

All else forgotten now, Ned fought warily.

Time and again Kennell rushed at him, apparently trying to end the battle in a hurry. But every time he rained his blows on thin air. Ned, perceiving that his only chance lay in tiring the man out, had early decided to adopt cautious tactics.

While avoiding the terrific rushes of his opponent, however, he still managed once in a while to land an effective blow.

On Kennell's seasoned body, however, they seemed to have but little effect.

The jackies groaned in sympathy for the lad as he put up his plucky and skillful defense. It was clear that they believed that the battle would be simply a question of a few minutes, unless it was cut short by the arrival of an officer.

As the petty officers were at dinner, however, and the commissioned dignitaries were enjoying a smoke aft, there seemed little likelihood of any interference before the contest was ended. The men were fighting in the shelter of the turret, so from the bridge nothing of what was transpiring was visible to the navigating officers or the quartermasters. [Pg 172]

"You young hound, I'm going to kill you!" hissed Kennell, white with rage, as, for the twentieth time one of his terrific swings met thin air.

"Catch me first!" mocked Ned, skipping backward with agile footwork.

Kennell, who was breathing heavily, seemed fairly to spring at the lad as he spoke, but Ned nimbly sidestepped, and Kennell went careening ahead like a man shot out of a suddenly checked auto.

"Keep your wind to fight with!" advised Ned jeeringly. But, alas for his confidence, as he spoke his foot caught on a deck ring he had not observed, and he fell backward, sprawling.

He was up in a breath, but Kennell, with a roar of triumph, was on him in a flash.

The bluejacket's great arms, hairy as a bear's, shot out and encircled Ned in a grip that threatened to crush his ribs in.

It was a lock grip.

Ned, as the breath was slowly crushed out of his body, felt as if the fight had ended.

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He saw defeat, utter and absolute, staring before him.

Perhaps this thought gave him almost superhuman strength, for the next minute, with an agile twist, he had writhed clear of the deathly grip and had in his turn laid hold of the bully in a wrestling clutch.

It was the ancient "grapevine," and Kennell smiled a cold, deadly smile as he felt and knew the old school-boy grip. Throwing it off as easily as if it had been the clutch of an infant, he crouched, and, rushing in, caught Ned craftily about the middle; but Ned, slipping aside, gripped the sailor with a peculiar twist, and seemingly with no great exertion, shot him over his head.

The tars set up a cautious shout.

It was an old trick of wrestling, in which Ned was perfectly at home; but, to his amazement, the agile Kennell fell on his feet as lightly as a cat, instead of crashing to the deck as Ned had expected.

The bluejacket, brute though he was, was just as evidently a master wrestler and up to all the tricks of the game.

Indeed, as Ned watched his confident leer as he recovered from what the boy had expected to be a crushing overthrow, there was an expression on the fellow's crafty face that struck a chill that was almost one of dread into Ned's heart.

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As for the jackies, they watched in silent fascination.

Not a sound was to be heard but the quick "patter-patter" of the wrestlers' feet on the decks as they "sparred" for a fresh opening.

Suddenly Kennell crouched low, and, before Ned could check him, was once more upon the boy.

But now his tactics were wholly changed.

His method of wrestling was unlike any that Ned had ever seen or heard of.

Yet how deadly it was the boy quickly began to experience.

Kennell's fingers, spread like the talons of a hawk, glided here and there about the lad's body rapidly as the undulating movements of a snake. Wherever they touched, the boy felt a sharp shock of intense pain shoot through his frame.

Beads of cold perspiration jetted out on his forehead.

A numbing sickness seized hold of him.

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And still Kennell's deadly fingers pressed here, there, and everywhere, bringing the sickening agony that Ned had already tasted in their wake.

The very fact that he could not understand what was happening added to the boy's alarm.

He had been in many wrestling matches. In fact, he was a better performer on the mat than with the padded gloves, but in all his experience he had never met an opponent like Kennell.

Clumsily built as the man was—he had not an iota of the agility possessed by the lithe and supple Ned—yet he seemed to wind and twist like a sapling under Ned's holds; recovering from each grip, he laid his hands on the boy with the same deadly precision.

Ned began to feel that his nervous system was a pincushion for his opponent to puncture at will.

The old hiplock, the Nelson, the half-Nelson, the grip at the back of the neck—all these tricks of the wrestler's craft Ned tried in turn, but none of them seemed to have any effect on Kennell.

And all the time the bluejacket kept up his deadly assaults on Ned's nerve centers, pressing them deftly and producing excruciating pain.

Once Ned wrenched free, and glad he was of the brief spell in which he could take stock of his remaining faculties.

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It was not that he was winded, or that Kennell was too strong for him. In fact, Ned felt that, well-muscled as the bluejacket was, he had his own system in better fighting shape.

The strange methods of Kennell were what worried him. He could not seem to escape the assaults of those hawklike hands.

Suddenly a partial explanation of the mystery came to him.

Old Tom stepped forward and whispered in his ear, during the brief period in which the two sprang about, eying each other narrowly.

"He's jiu-jitsu! Look out!"

The full meaning of these words shot into Ned's brain.

He recollected now having heard some talk about Kennell's having served in the Far East on his first enlistment.

Doubtless it was there that he had learned the subtle, deadly Japanese tricks that he was now exercising on his inexperienced opponent.

Gladly would Ned have come to open boxing. In a ring, under proper rules, he was well convinced he could whip the burly Kennell; but under the conditions he now faced, he was by no means certain of his ultimate chance of victory. [Pg 177]

And now Kennell, with his snakelike glide, closed in again, and Ned seized him without warning in a half-Nelson.

Back and back bent the bulky form of the bluejacket till it seemed that his vertebra must crack under the cruel pressure.

But to Ned's sickened amazement, the other wriggled from the hold as if he had been some reptile, and there was the work all to be done over again.

One fact, however, Ned noticed with satisfaction.

If he was becoming exhausted, Kennell was also tiring. His breath was coming sharply, with a hissing intake, like that of a laboring pump.

The strain was telling on him.

Ned felt, if he could only hold out a little longer, that he would lay his opponent low.

But could he last?

The contest now was simply a matter of brute endurance plus skill, and in the latter quality Ned felt that Kennell, in his Oriental way, possessed the advantage.

Suddenly Ned found himself with a grip on both of Kennell's arms at once. [Pg 178]

A flood of joy rushed through his veins. He felt certain that few men could resist the pressure he could now exert with his mighty forearms and biceps.

"Now where are your jiu-jitsu tricks?" he hissed, as he drew the struggling Kennell nearer and ever nearer with the same resistless force as is exerted by the return plunge of a piston.

Kennell, his face white, with an ashy tinge about the corners of his mouth, said nothing, but fought with every ounce of strength within him against the steady pressure that was drawing him closer and closer into Ned's crushing embrace.

As Ned had said, "Where were his jiu-jitsu tricks now?"

The breathing of the two men came in short, sharp barks that sounded hoarsely as coughs as they stood straining there in a deathlike lock.

For a second or two all motion ceased, and they stood, except for the working of their opposed muscles, like two stone figures.

The next instant, however, the slow, irresistible force of Ned's compressing arms overcame Kennell's stubborn resistance, and the bluejacket was dragged yet nearer into the toils he dreaded—dreaded with white, frightened face and beaded brow. [Pg 179]

But even as Ned prepared to throw him with a mighty crash to the deck, a strange thing happened.

Kennell's body grew limp as a half-filled flour sack and slid like an inert mass down Ned's body.

The next instant the boy felt his ankles gripped in a steel-like hold, and, utterly unable to resist, he was toppled over to the deck. As he fell, one of Kennell's big hands slid round to the back of the Dreadnought Boy's neck, and Ned simultaneously experienced a queer, fainting feeling, as if he were being borne far away from the *Manhattan* and his surroundings, up, far aloft, into the fleecy clouds.

Again the hand struck, so softly it seemed as if his neck had been merely stroked, but the sense of illusion increased.

Ned's eyes closed.

Suddenly—just as it seemed to the boy that he was entering a delightful land, where flowers bloomed luxuriantly and birds sang the sweetest song—a sharp voice shattered his illusion like a soap bubble. [Pg 180]

"Ned! Ned, old chap! Get him, for the love of Mike!"

It was the red-headed Herc released from his cell ahead of time by the captain's commutation of sentence.

Like a steel spring suddenly released, Ned's body curved upward, and the next instant the wily Kennell's body was in his close embrace.

This time Ned had caught him where all his Oriental tricks were of no avail.

Back and back he bent Kennell till, with a great gasp, the bluejacket crashed down to the deck, his head striking with a heavy thud.

"Downed him!" shouted old Tom, capering.

"The kid wins!" yelled the delighted jackies.

Kennell, dazed and astounded at his sudden loss of the match he had made sure was his, got clumsily to his feet.

"Shake hands," said Ned simply, extending his palm. "I don't like you, Kennell, but I think you are the cleverest wrestler I have ever met."

With a scowl of fury and a half-articulated cry of rage, Kennell dashed the outstretched hand from him and hastened away from the jeering cries of his shipmates, with whom, as has been said, he was by no means popular. [Pg 181]

"Well, if he doesn't care to be friends," remarked Ned, as the jackies, led by Herc, crowded around him and shook his hand warmly, "he doesn't have to. I suppose we shall have to take the consequences."

What those consequences were to be neither of the Dreadnought Boys dreamed at that instant. Perhaps it was as well they did not.

While the congratulations were still going on, a boatswain's mate came bustling up.

Perhaps he detected the symptoms of something unusual having occurred in the excited faces of the jackies and in Ned's still heaving chest and flushed face, but he was too wise a man to inquire into something he had not witnessed with his own eyes. As it was, therefore, he simply contented himself by inquiring for Kennell.

"With the gun crew," suggested one of the throng.

"He won't be long," replied the boatswain's mate shortly and with a meaning look.

"Why not?" asked old Tom, the privileged character.

"Because, my boy, he has been relieved from duty in the forward turret and the two recruits put there in his place." [Pg 182]

"Phew!" whistled the jackies, as the boatswain's mate hurried forward on his quest.

"Now look out for squalls!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 183]

THE BOYS GET ACQUAINTED WITH BIG GUNS.

Two days later the squadron sighted what at first seemed—to the boys, at least—to be a distant cloud of deeper blue than the surrounding sky. It floated on the southern horizon.

"Cuba!" announced old Tom, who, with the boys, was standing on the fore deck in the "smoke time" succeeding the jackies' dinner.

"How soon will we come to anchor?" inquired Herc.

"About sundown," was the reply. "You boys are in for some strange sights and experiences down here."

If Tom had been a prophet of old, he could not have spoken more truly. The boys were indeed "in for some strange experiences."

That afternoon the gun crews were set to work on their various pieces of ordnance, and "dummy drill" was gone through again and again till the officers were hoarse with shouting commands.

In the forward turret, Ned and Herc, the proudest bluejackets of all the *Manhattan's* ship's company, were drilled again and again in their part of the gun-pointing and sighting performance. [Pg 184]

Just as in actual practice—only these were dummies—the projectile, shining and menacing, and the bags of make-believe smokeless powder were sent up from the magazines on the electric ammunition hoists. From these they were rapidly transferred by the gun crew, who used a sort of wooden trough in the process.

"Like the hog troughs we put the mash in at home," mused Herc, as he laid hold of one of the six handles on the trough and did his best to fall into the rhythmic swing with which the men obeyed the sharp series of commands issued by the officer, who was Lieutenant Timmons himself.

"Take up LOAD!"

The projectile was laid in the trough almost as fast as it was shot up on the elevator. As the last echoes of the command rang sharply on the steel walls of the turret, the implement was reposing in its "bed."

"Swing LOAD!"

By this time the shining breech—as fine as the mechanism of a three-hundred-dollar stop watch— [Pg 185]

was swung open by the breech tender. It was then only the work of a second to flash the projectile into the glistening chamber.

"Ram HOME!"

With one quick movement, that seemed to occupy no longer period than the tick of a clock, the projectile was slid to its proper place by a long wooden rammer.

All this time the gun pointer—Jim Cooper by name—alert, watchful as a mousing cat, was crouched on a little platform at the side of the gun, sighting an imaginary mark through a telescope affixed to the gun's side.

The lens of this sight was marked with tiny, hairlike crosslines, affording the pointer the means of determining with almost unerring accuracy, the exact second at which the target and the gun were in line. In a heavy seaway, of course, or even in a moderate blow, the work of the gun pointer is much more complicated, as a dozen different elements and movements are at work to confuse and spoil his aim.

Then came the powder charge. Several canvas bags appeared on the ammunition hoist.

"More like flourbags than powder," thought Herc to himself, as he helped slap them into the carrying tray. [Pg 186]

"Ram HOME!"

The powder was shoved in with the same flash-like rapidity that had marked the placing of the huge projectile.

"Ready, sir!"

The chief of the loading crew saluted.

"Ready, Cooper?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Close breech! FIRE!"

The two commands seemed to be merged into one, so rapidly did they come. The boys and the rest of the crew sprang to the back of the turret and crouched low, as did the others as the command was given.

The gun pointer came last of all, springing backward like an acrobat. As he did so there was a sharp click. The lieutenant in command had thrown the switch that ignited the priming spark. The mighty charge had been touched off—in imagination.

The lieutenant looked at his watch, which he had held on his open palm while the crew worked.

"Twenty-five seconds! Good work," he announced. "Do as well as that at battle practice, men, and we shall beat the *Idaho* to rags—on speed, at all events." [Pg 187]

"And on targets, too," grimly remarked Cooper, wiping his nervous hands with a bundle of waste.

This was the final practice of the afternoon, and the rest of the time was devoted to familiarizing the two young recruits with their duties about the turret.

Both were quick pupils and had already studied something of gunnery at the Newport Training School, so that in a short time they thoroughly understood the theory of firing the big guns.

With quick eyes both lads had noticed that the other twelve-inch gun—the Varian projectile hurler—had not been unhooded, and its grim breech was swathed mysteriously in waterproof coverings. It was in the breech that lay the complicated mechanism which made it possible to handle the terrific explosive power of Chaosite—at least, so the inventor hoped.

As a final lesson, the boys were instructed in the elementary theory of gun pointing, a much too technical subject to enter into here.

Herc was amazed when he took his place on the gun-pointer's little steel platform, to find that by handling a lever close to his right hand he could point the ponderous gun, weighing fifty-four tons, up or down as easily as he used to sight his little "twenty-two" when he went shooting "chucks" at home. [Pg 188]

"That great gun is balanced as delicately as a microscope," explained the lieutenant.

"How do you get it in lateral range?" inquired Herc.

For reply, the lieutenant indicated another lever.

Herc touched it.

Instantly the great turret itself began to quake, and then, with a soft rattling of cogs, commenced slowly to revolve.

"Reverse it!" shouted the lieutenant.

Herc pulled the lever in the other direction.

As obediently as if it had understanding, the tons of triple-riveted steel which composed the shelter for the heaviest guns in the navy began to turn in the opposite direction.

"Electricity," laughed the officer. "Electricity is the life-blood of the modern battleship. A vessel like this has a more complicated system of circulation than the human body. We eat by electricity, fire the guns by it, read by it, cook by it, coal by it, and——" [Pg 189]

"Fight by it, sir," put in Ned quietly, carried away by enthusiasm.

The lieutenant gave him a quick look, as if to rebuke him for his forwardness; but the shining light in the boy's eyes showed the officer that, after all, it was real enthusiasm for the United States fighting ships that had incited Ned's remark.

"Yes," he said quietly also, "and fight by it, too, Strong."

This concluded the great-gun drill, and the boys and the crew of the forward turret joined the other tars assembled on the forward deck, awaiting the sounding of the supper call. All over the ship, down to the marine's little six-inch batteries, the same practice had been going forward.

Already they felt set apart somewhat from their comrades, and proud in the thought that they were part of the fighting force that commanded the actions of the biggest guns in the fleet. That it really did confer a sort of distinction upon them was evidenced, too, by the increased cordiality with which their shipmates greeted them.

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"Hurray! we're on our way to be admirals," whispered Herc to Ned, as they passed among the groups of resting jackies, returning the running fire of joking and congratulation to which they were subjected on every hand.

"Only a very little way," laughed Ned, "though I feel as proud as if that was my flagship yonder and I was entitled to fly the two-starred blue flag."

He pointed to the van of the squadron—the big *Connecticut*—on which flew the flag of Rear-Admiral Gibbons.

"If we do our duty as well as we can," he went on seriously, "we are just as important to the fleet as any of the officers or our superiors."

"I guess that's right," agreed Herc. "At any rate, that's just what I heard the captain saying the other day to two men who had the misfortune to be my cellmates, and, by the way, that reminds me——"

Herc drew Ned into a quiet niche—a hard place to find on the busy, crowded fore deck of the man-o'-war—and in whispers told him of the conversation he had overheard.

"Ought we to tell the captain?" he concluded.

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Ned hesitated.

"I don't think so. Not yet, at any rate," he decided after an interval of thought. "We shall have shore leave at Guantanamo, I understand, and we will employ it by keeping close on the track of those two fellows. Neither of them imagine we know their plans, so that we have that advantage, and we may be able to do something that will bring us really in the line for promotion. I wonder how Kennell got into it, though?"

"I suppose the fact that he was familiar with the Varian gun, from his detail in the fore turret, had something to do with their bribing him," suggested Herc. "However, we may be on the eve of finding out."

Destiny was holding big things in reserve for the Dreadnought Boys.

CHAPTER XIX.

[Pg 192]

IN THE MIDST OF PEACE.

As the sun was sinking that night in a blaze of red and gold behind the green-bowered coast of Cuba, the boys, leaning over the starboard rail with hundreds of other white-uniformed jackies, saw a sudden signal broken out on the after signal halliards of the flagship.

"Coming to an anchorage," exclaimed old Tom, as the string of gayly colored signal flags fluttered out. "There's Guantanamo yonder." He pointed to a huddle of red roofs set among tall palms.

"The signal's for flying moorings!" exclaimed Herc, who, as well as Ned, had received a thorough schooling in signaling at the training school.

"That's right," rejoined old Tom approvingly, "flying moorings it is."

And now all became activity throughout the fleet. Aboard the *Manhattan*, and, indeed, on every other ship of the squadron, the most active bustle prevailed.

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Coming to "flying moorings" is one of the greatest tests of a captain's ability to handle his ship, and right well did every commander in that squadron of ten mighty fighting ships show that he was entitled to wear his uniform.

Master's mates flew about among the crew of the *Manhattan*, and a shrill sound of piping arose as the men assigned to the various posts connected with dropping the vessel's "mud hooks" hastened to their stations.

"Look close now! You are going to see something worth watching," said old Tom, as the crucial moment drew near.

On the flagship ahead the lads saw motion suddenly cease, following a mighty splash as her huge anchor shot downward twenty fathoms or more, and her engines ceased revolving for the first

time in many days.

At the same instant the boys' hands instinctively flew to their caps in a prompt salute as Old Glory broke out on the rear-admiral's jackstaff and fluttered in the evening breeze, a sign that the ship was at anchor.

On the bridge of the *Manhattan*, Captain Dunham, his officers in full uniform at his side and an attentive midshipman at his elbow, was watching his flagship anxiously. As she swung to her anchor a sharp command was barked out: [Pg 194]

"Slow down!"

The midshipman's hand shoved the engine-room telegraph indicator over, and instantly the strong vibration of the engines began to diminish. It felt strange, this sudden cessation of a sound and motion that the boys had come to regard almost as second nature.

"Let go the star-board anchor!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" shouted a watchful boatswain's mate, springing forward.

Instantly a shrill screeching of whistles broke out, and with a mighty roar the great anchor of the *Manhattan* shot from the cat-heads and plunged into the water.

After it roared thirty fathoms of chain before the further screams of the pipes stopped the rapid "paying out" of the iron-linked cable. The *Manhattan*, her engines idle at last, came to an anchorage.

"Caught her to the eighth of an inch, sir!" remarked Lieutenant-Commander Scott to his chief.

Sailor-like pride wreathed the faces of every man on the bridge. [Pg 195]

The *Manhattan* swung at anchor behind her flagship at precisely the same distance as she had steamed in column behind her all the long voyage from New York. It was a feat to be proud of, and called for a high degree of seamanship.

Behind the *Manhattan* the other vessels came to similar moorings, the Stars and Stripes fluttering out from the stern staff of each as the anchor touched the bottom. It was a sight to make the heart of a patriot beat proudly. Ten of the finest ships in the United States Navy swung at exact intervals in a perfect line. The flag of their country whipped out from the stern staff of each, as if in defiance of their country's foes.

Hardly had the anchor of the *Iowa*, the last ship in line, dropped before from the flagship another signal was broken out.

"Well done!" read Ned, studying the bright bits of bunting. "Congratulations to officers and men."

A great cheer went up from the fore deck of the *Manhattan*, and its echoes went winging down the line of grim fighting craft and was caught up by ship after ship. [Pg 196]

At almost the same instant the sun dipped behind the coast hills, and the bugles began to sound the musical call of "Retreat."

It was the boys' first opportunity to see the impressive ceremony of "colors," as the lowering of the flag on a man-o'-war is termed. The ceremony is not gone through at sea, and the boys had been below when it had been carried out in New York on their first night on board.

Now they were to witness one of the most impressive ceremonies of the United States Navy.

Division after division of the crew was formed in line and marched aft, in rhythmic tread, to the stern deck, on which stood Captain Dunham and a group of his officers in full uniform, the last rays of the sun glinting on their gold braid.

The men stood facing the flag and grouped on each side of the deck. Their hands raised uniformly in salute to the flag as at the last notes of the bugle it slowly descended the staff.

As it reached the deck, the band, stationed with their shining instruments on the starboard side of the ship, burst forth into the "Star-Spangled Banner."

The eyes of every man on that deck shone as the emblem for which they were pledged to fight fluttered down and the band blared forth the inspiring strains of the national anthem. Their officers stood in a little group, bare-headed, the chaplain conspicuous among them in his plain braided garb. [Pg 197]

"First division, right about face!"

The sharp command of the ensign in charge of that division broke the impressive silence.

"March!"

Division after division, the men melted away from the after deck and left the little group of officers standing chatting alone. In all their after years in the navy, the two Dreadnought Boys never forgot that ceremony. Its recollection remained with them long after the annoying incidents and trials of their first year of service had faded.

There were three men in that crew, however, on whose hearts the solemn scene made no impression. These men were Carl Schultz, his friend Silas, and Ralph Kennell.

In the breast of the latter dark feelings of hatred burned, and a keen sense of humiliation over his deposition from the forward turret rendered him oblivious to any better feelings. As the second division, in which all three were stationed, wheeled to return forward, their eyes met, and in them there flashed something that seemed more than a mere gleam of recognition. [Pg 198]

Was there actually more in the glance they exchanged than seemed to be the case? Was it a mutual sense that they were at the scene which was to be the theatre of their daring attempt?

We shall see.

As the Dreadnought Boys sat discussing the ceremony they had witnessed and earnestly talking over their plans and ambitions, they became aware that a hush had fallen over the fore deck and that a group of men were carrying something aft.

With the other men, they pressed closer to see what the burden was, and were startled to hear a sudden groan.

On the stretcher the men carried lay a bronze-faced jackie, his skin a deadly white under the brown. Drops of sweat—the moisture of agony—jetted his forehead as he was borne past on his way to the sick bay, where the surgeon and his assistants were already prepared to begin a battle for his life.

"It's Bill Hudgins," ran the word among the jackies. "He was crushed badly when the cable caught him as we dropped anchor." [Pg 199]

Although the boys afterward had the pleasure of meeting Hudgins and congratulating him on his recovery, the incident taught them that even in times of peace there is peril to be faced on board a man-o'-war, and that it is the duty of Uncle Sam's fighters to meet it unflinchingly.

After supper that night, while the men were still discussing poor Hudgins' mishap, the boatswain's mate—the same one who had received them on board—hastened up to Ned and Herc as they lay on the fore deck, gazing at the soft tropic stars, and announced:

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good. Hudgins was signalman of the target officer's wherry. You boys go out in his place to-morrow."

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 200]

HERC—A LIVING TARGET.

To the keen disappointment of the boys, however, they found out the next day that they were not, as they had anticipated, to go together in the target officer's "wherry," as the small boat he used was called.

Ned was to accompany the officer—a young ensign named Rousseau—while Herc was to take his place as acting signalman in one of the two big whale boats that were detailed to attend to the targets. The man who ordinarily undertook this duty being assigned to the signal post in the "flying bridge" of the flagship.

Immediately after breakfast, the *Manhattan*, which was to have sole charge of the target-placing, lowered the three boats and one of her "steamers." The targets were set up on the floats already provided for them before the call for the first meal of the day sounded.

These targets were huge sheets of canvas twenty feet high and twenty-five feet broad, which were to be towed to a distance of a mile and a half from the battle-practice ground and anchored. Each was marked into squares by thin lines, with a big square of black in the center for a bull's-eye. [Pg 201]

There were ten of them, and they were to be ranged in a line. The first test to be applied was firing by the flagship from anchorage. This was more to get the range than anything else. The real practice would come later, when the ships in column steamed past the targets, firing one after the other at designated marks. This was to be the real test of the fleet's gunnery, and one in which the men of the *Idaho* felt confident they would again shine preëminent.

The *Manhattan's* gun crews, on the contrary, felt just as sure of capturing the scarlet "meat ball," the trophy of the fleet.

The *Manhattan's* steamer lay, with a full head of power, alongside the man-o'-war as Ned and Herc, with their signal flags, emerged from their quarters forward with the rest of the men assigned to placing the targets.

The targets, as has been said, had already been set in place on the big collapsible scows which had been towed out from the shore during the night. Nothing remained but to tow them out and place them. [Pg 202]

The range would then be picked up as soon as Ned wig-wagged the ensign's signal to the flagship that all was ready. For this purpose, the commanders of the different vessels had been summoned by signal to appear on the *Connecticut* that morning and take part in a "counsel of war" in the rear-admiral's cabin.

As Ned clambered down the sea ladder after the ensign and took his place in the little boat he was to occupy, he saw, with a start of surprise, that among Herc's companions in the whaleboat were Carl Schultz, the black-browed Silas, and Kennell. He felt further misgivings as he took notice of the black glances Kennell cast at the unconscious Herc, who was far too engrossed in the excitement of his first real duty to pay any attention to his shipmates.

Rapidly the boats were towed out to the spot selected for placing the first target, and Ned, with a

telescope to his eye, anxiously watched the flagship for the signal to stop.

At last he spied the expected flags fluttering up on the halliards and notified the ensign.

"Make it so," rejoined that officer, and Ned rapidly "wig-wagged" that the signal had been seen and would be carried out. Herc, at the same moment, was standing in the stern of the whaleboat, doing the same thing. [Pg 203]

The first target anchored, the "steamer" towed her convoy to the next position, which was indicated by a signal from the flagship as the first had been. One after another the targets were anchored in position, and at last, about an hour before eight bells—noon—everything was ready for the range testing, and the signal recalling the steamer fluttered from the flagship.

The whaleboat on which Herc was stationed was in command of a petty officer, as was the other small craft. The only commissioned officer assigned to the comparatively unimportant duty of target placing was, therefore, the ensign in the wherry in which Ned was posted as signalman. In this boat there was but one oarsman; however, he seemed to be plenty for the craft, which was a light one and rowed easily.

One after another a final inspection was made of the targets, and after a thorough overhauling, all was pronounced ready for the tests to begin.

To ascertain if all was in order, the ensign had his boat rowed up to each of the targets in turn. Ned, at his side, sent the signal that each was O. K. successively back to the flagship as they were examined. [Pg 204]

"Rather awkward, sir, if they were to fire at a target while we were standing on the scow," remarked Ned, as they stood on the undulating platform supporting the last screen of canvas.

"Well, rather, Strong," laughed the ensign. "I imagine our earthly troubles would be over very shortly."

"But if the shell passed above us, sir?" asked Ned respectfully, as he wanted to accumulate all the knowledge he could of gunnery.

"The air currents generated by the high velocity of the shell would sweep anything within even ten feet of it to destruction," rejoined the ensign learnedly. "Of course," he added laughingly, "nobody has ever tested it, but I should imagine that the gases generated by such a projectile would poison anything that happened to be in the vicinity as it passed."

Ned nodded thoughtfully.

As they regained the wherry he gazed about him.

The sea stretched sparkingly blue under the tropic skies as far as the eye could reach. [Pg 205]

Right ahead of them was extended the line of snowy targets, seeming huge enough at such close range, small as they appeared to the battleships a mile and a quarter off. In spite of the beauty of the scene and the glorious crispness of the sea air, Ned felt an oppression, the cause of which he himself would have found difficult to determine.

"If I was superstitious, I should say that I had a premon—a premon— Oh, I forget the word! But, anyhow, that I had a 'hunch' that something was going to happen," mused Ned to himself.

But it was no time for musing.

The whaleboats were beginning to back away to safe quarters before the firing commenced. At the ensign's command, the wherry followed them.

"Give them the signal to go ahead, Strong!" ordered the ensign sharply at length, as they lay bobbing at some distance from the targets. The bronzed arms of the oarsman were motionless and his eyes were fixed intently on the far-off line of battleships.

Ned stood erect in the stern of the plunging wherry. Awkward as the motion would have been to a landsman, to the Dreadnought Boy it was hardly noticeable. [Pg 206]

His brown arms dipped and rose, and with their motion the red signal flag cut arcs against the blue sky.

Far off, on the bridge of the flagship, the lookout, gazing through his telescope, reported to the anxious group of officers that all was ready.

Rapidly the word was passed to the port twelve-inch turret, it having been decided to use the big guns on test work.

Boom!

The report followed a flash of red flame. The battleship trembled to her keel plates as the sound reverberated.

The shell sped screeching through the air.

"Phsiw-is-s-s-s-s-s-s!"

Straight for the end target it sped, and a second later the lookout, reading off Ned's wig-wagging signals, announced in a curt voice:

"Bull's-eye, sir."

A little chorus of congratulation followed among the officers.

"That's the stuff!" murmured the ensigns and middies.

"Excellent work," was the comment of their more dignified senior officers.

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"Signal whaleboat Number One to replace canvas," ordered the ensign, and Ned promptly transmitted the signal to the boat in which Herc was signalman. The red-headed lad answered his chum's signal promptly, and in a minute the double-ender was scooting through the water on its errand.

The work of placing fresh canvas on the target did not consume long, and in a short time Herc, standing in the stern of the whaler, wig-wagged back to Ned that all was ready.

"Number One whaleboat signals 'all ready,' sir," announced Ned.

"Very well. Order them to pull away," said the ensign.

Ned transmitted the order, and the men who had been holding the boat to the scow by their boathooks cast off hastily.

Ned's attention was instantly turned to the ensign, awaiting fresh orders. Had it not been for that, he would have seen something transpiring on the whaleboat which would have filled him with rage.

Kennell it was who had charge of the stern boathook. His station was on the small grating astern of the petty officer's seat. On this grating Herc, too, was standing. As the boat was shoved off, Herc felt his feet suddenly twitched from under him, and the next minute he toppled headlong into the sea.

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The crew of the boat, bending to their oars at top speed—for they knew that the deadly projectile would soon be winging toward them—apparently did not see what had occurred, and bent over their oars without a thought of Herc's peril. Kennell, with an evil grin on his hard features, clambered back into the boat with the look on his face of a man who has done a good day's work.

At the speed at which the whaleboat was urged through the water, it was out of earshot by the time Herc rose to the surface. Indeed, the unexpected immersion had resulted in his swallowing so much water that he was unable to shout.

Blowing a stream of water from his lips, he struck out for the nearest target, the one which had just been replaced.

"I'll just camp there till they see me," he thought.

A few strokes brought him alongside the float once more, and he scrambled up its wet sides, not without some difficulty. In fact, when he gained the flat upper surface of the target's support he was breathing heavily.

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The sea, too, had risen since they had rowed out, and one of those sudden squalls that are so common in the tropics was whirling in from seaward. Herc did not see this, however—the mighty screen of canvas behind him veiled it from the boy's view.

The men in the boats had, however, spied the approaching bad weather, and orders were given to get up spray hoods in the bows of the craft.

"Well," thought Herc, "I'm being rocked in the cradle of the deep with a vengeance. However, I get a little rest from that eternal wig-wagging. That's one comfort."

Suddenly a thought struck him that sent a cold shiver down his spine.

In his new-found security he had given no thought to a peril that now loomed imminent.

He was seated on the float at which the flagship was firing.

At any moment they might send another shot toward it, and then what would happen?

"I'll signal them," thought Herc; but even as the thought entered his mind he recollected that as he had gone overboard the flags had gone with him.

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He was marooned on a floating target, with every prospect of having a twelve-inch shell come shrieking toward him at any moment.

Suddenly Herc saw a string of flags hoisted on the flagship. Instinctively he knew what they meant.

Ned, his cousin and chum, had signaled that all was ready, and the *Connecticut* was about to open fire!

Situated far to the rear of the target as they were, Herc knew that those in the boats had not sighted him, and unless he was missed from the Number One whaleboat, his doom was sealed. He could have screamed aloud with real terror at the peril of his situation.

At almost the same instant his burning eyes saw a burst of flame suddenly flash from the side of the battleship. Herc's brain reeled. Already he could hear the scream of the shell, and in fancy saw his dismembered body flung in torn fragments before it.

"Phsiwis-is-s-s-s-s-s-s-s!"

The projectile shrieked nearer and nearer and passed like a thunderbolt through the target, ripping it from top to bottom with a vicious hiss. It plunged into the sea far beyond, ricocheting from wave to wave for two miles or more.

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But the float was empty of life.

Herc had vanished.

AFLOAT AND ASHORE.

The petty officer in command of Number One whaleboat noted the effect of the shot and then looked about for Herc. As we know, the red-headed lad was not on board, nor did any inquiry among the crew bring a satisfactory explanation of his whereabouts.

The men had seen him standing on the stern, and then had lost track of him. They had supposed that he was "somewhere on board," they said.

Kennell alone volunteered an explanation.

"He may have tumbled overboard, sir," he suggested. "I saw him standing up in the stern-sheets as I cast off with my boathook."

"We must communicate with Ensign Rosseau at once," said the officer, greatly agitated.

He knew that a searching investigation would follow the loss of a man, and he foresaw that he would appear in no very creditable light without any explanation to offer as to the manner in which Herc had vanished.

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The triangular fin was now close upon the lad.

Rapidly the whaleboat was rowed to the wherry, which "lay to" some distance away, with the Number Two whaleboat alongside.

The tidings of Herc's loss were received with some anxiety by the ensign. He turned to Ned, whose face had gone white at the news, and asked curtly if Herc could swim.

"Like a fish, sir," was Ned's rejoinder, although he had hard work to keep his lips from quivering at the thought of his friend's possible fate.

"Then there is a chance that he can be saved yet," breathed the ensign; "give way for that float yonder. Strong, signal the news to the flagship and inform them that we are standing by."

Ned, badly unnerved as he was, made the necessary signals, and received an order to "carry on" from the flag-ship.

The two whaleboats and the wherry at once got under way for the target near which Herc had last been seen.

Suddenly Ned gave a shout and pointed ahead.

"Look, sir, look!" he cried.

Not more than a hundred feet from them a rubicund object, which a second glance showed to be Herc's head, was bobbing about on the waves.

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But the water had by this time grown dark and oily-looking. The approaching squall would burst in all its fury in a few minutes.

The work of saving the swimming lad must be accomplished within a brief few minutes, or not at all.

"Hold on, my lad, we'll get you," hailed the ensign encouragingly, as the wherry drew closer and closer to the plucky boy.

"Aye, aye, sir," hailed back Herc, expelling a thin stream of water from his lips and giving a cheerful grin; "but hurry up, for I've forgotten my lightning-rod, and it looks like thunder."

But, just as Herc's easy rescue seemed a matter of certainty, the intentions of his saviors were interfered with in a startling fashion.

It was Ned who saw the impending peril first.

"Look! Look there!" he shouted. "What's that, sir?"

"That" was a black, triangular object, moving through the water toward the unconscious Herc, who was treading water easily. The dark object came on at a rapid pace, the ripples parting on each side of it as it cut its way along. [Pg 215]

The ensign's reply to Ned's exclamation was a cry of alarm.

"Give way!" he shouted. "We've got to get that man quickly, if at all."

Ned looked his question.

"It's a shark!" shot out the ensign, his face ashy-white and his lips sternly compressed; "these waters swarm with them."

Ned was almost unnerved. The boat was still some feet from Herc, and the triangular fin was now close upon the lad.

Suddenly its steady motion ceased, and it shot forward with a rush.

At the same instant Herc perceived his peril, and gave one harrowing shriek, as he saw the terrible nature of the approaching peril.

He swam desperately toward the boats, his countenance strained and lined with the effort and the horror under which he labored.

"Crack!"

The sharp bark of a service revolver sounded.

"Crack! crack!"

Again and again the reports reverberated, and the water behind Herc grew troubled and crimson. [Pg 216]

The fin vanished and only a small whirlpool remained to show where the mortally wounded shark had sunk slowly downward.

In the stern of the wherry stood Ned, his face set and stern, and in his hand the navy revolver that had done the work.

It was the ensign's weapon, which he had laid on the stern seat for his greater ease in moving about.

Ned, casting about for some means of saving Herc, had suddenly spied it, and, on the impulse of the moment, had snatched it up and fired.

"Well done, my lad," said the ensign in a voice that still trembled from the keen tension of the past few minutes.

"Sir—I—" began Ned, somewhat alarmed, now that Herc was out of danger. He had committed what he knew must be a breach of discipline in seizing the officer's pistol.

"You mean that it wasn't quite the thing to do to use my revolver," laughed the ensign. "My lad, I'm proud that it was put to such good service; glad that you were quick enough of wit to use it in the nick of time."

A few moments later Herc was on board the wherry, and in reply to the eager questions of its occupants, gave them a brief account of his accident. He did not mention the fact that it was Kennell who had tripped him for the second time, however, saving that for Ned's private ear later on. Herc had his own ideas about getting even with the brutal blue-jacket. [Pg 217]

"When I saw that nothing could save me from being 'wiped out,' I stayed on the float," related Herc. "I recollected that I had felt an iron brace on its subsurface with my foot, as I clambered up on to it.

"The minute I saw the signal, therefore, I dived and hung on to the brace under water till I felt sure the shell had passed. Then I came up to the surface, and the rest you know."

"Thanks to your friend Strong, here," amended the ensign, "whose gallant conduct and presence of mind I mean to mention especially to Captain Dunham on our return to the ship. Had it not been for Strong's quick and sure aim, your adventure might have had a different termination, my man."

And now the long-expected squall burst in leaden-colored fury. To the boys, who had never witnessed a tropical squall, its rage was amazing. The flag-ship, which had seen its approach, had already signaled the recall, and the boats were on their way back to the *Manhattan* when the tempest broke. [Pg 218]

"Bale boat!" was the order transmitted through the little flotilla as the waves began to come climbing over the bows of the small craft and torrents of rain invaded them also.

By the time the battleship's side was reached, however, the squall was over and the sun shining out brightly once more.

"That's the suddenest thing I ever saw," gasped Ned to Herc, as they regained the deck of their five-million-dollar home, as Herc called the big Dreadnought.

"It's not half as sudden as what's going to happen to a young party named Kennell before very long," grinned Herc meaningly.

Two nights later there was a brilliant scene at the Hotel del Gran Plaza, the principal hostelry of Guantanamo. The mayor and civic dignitaries of the town, together with the merchants of the place, were giving a dinner and reception to the officers of the squadron.

During the time that had elapsed since Herc's rescue, the Dreadnought Boys had been participating in their capacity as two of the crew of the forward turret in battle practice. They had in that time become used to the big twelve-inch gun, and proved themselves capable of the responsibility and confidence vested in them by their officers. [Pg 219]

Well pleased with themselves, therefore, the two lads had come off the ship that evening for shore leave. They had employed much of their time in strolling about, buying souvenirs and post-cards—which have even invaded Cuba—and seeing the few sights the town had to offer. Being both temperate, clean-cut young fellows, the low drinking dens and other resorts of the place had no attraction for them, although they were well patronized by a number of the sailors. To the credit of Uncle Sam's navy, though, be it said that the keepers of such places are coming to look less and less to the wearers of naval uniforms for their profits. The man-o'-warsman of to-day is an ambitious young fellow. He is far too anxious to get ahead in his chosen profession to haunt places of foolish dissipation.

"Say, Ned—moving pictures!" Herc nudged his companion, as the two stood in front of a brilliantly lighted building on the main street of the Cuban town. [Pg 220]

"We've got some time yet before the shore boats leave; let's take them in," suggested Ned.

As this was just what Herc had been anxious to do, no time was lost in buying tickets and securing two seats well down in front, where the two boys had a clear view of every film as it was displayed.

After the exhibition of two or three of the pictures, stories familiar in such places, the screen suddenly announced that the next picture was to be a series of views taken in the Joliet penitentiary, showing the various phases of convict life. A note explained that the pictures had been taken a few years before, prior to the wave of prison reform that had swept over the country.

The first scene showed the interior of a basket-making shop, with the rows of stripe-clothed unfortunates at work on their monotonous tasks. One after another similar repulsive views were shown.

"Say, let's get out of this—the air seems bad," breathed Ned at last.

As he spoke a fresh view was thrown on the screen. It showed a group of life-prisoners at work in the prison-yard. Unlike the other pictures, this one exhibited the figures at more than life-size. In their exaggerated proportions every form showed up clear as print, and the features of each hard face could be as clearly defined as if the pictured subject was a living being. [Pg 221]

The boys had risen to leave, but a sudden exclamation from Herc brought them to a sudden halt.

Angry murmurs in Spanish rose about the boys.

"W-what's the matter?" asked Ned in an astonished voice, gazing about.

"Come on, you chump, and let's get out of here. We're blocking the views of the Cubanolas, or whatever they call themselves; but before you go, look at the two center convicts in that picture. Who do they remind you of?"

Herc's voice shook with excitement. Ned gazed a few seconds fixedly at the screen, while the angry hum of protest increased.

"Seat-a down," came voices.

"By the big horn-spoon, those two wearers of stripes are Carl Schultz and his pal, Silas, or I'm a Dutchman," sputtered Ned, as the two boys, having exhausted the patience of the audience seated behind them, beat a hasty retreat. [Pg 222]

CHAPTER XXII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

"You are sure of it, aren't you?"

Herc asked the question as they gained the street.

"Certain," replied Ned; "no mistaking that underhung jaw and heavy brow of friend Silas."

"Or that lady-like simper of the rascal Schultz. Ned, I feel that we are on the verge of big

discoveries."

"Why?"

"I don't know; it's in the air—like electricity."

"Well, they'll have to hurry along—those big discoveries of yours, I mean," laughed Ned; "for it's ten-thirty now, and the shore boats will be at the float at eleven-thirty."

"That's an hour," responded Herc, "and many a big battle has been fought and won in that time. By Hookey!" he broke off suddenly, "did you see those two fellows who just passed?"

"I saw two rather fleshy men in evening clothes hurry by in the direction of the hotel. Why?"

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"Did you recognize them?"

Ned laid a hand on Herc's shoulder and wheeled the red-headed Dreadnought Boy about.

"Say, Herc, what's the matter with you to-night? You've got rememberitis, or some similar disease. Who are you going to recognize next?"

"I don't know; likely to run into Gran'pa Zack, if this keeps up. Those two fellows were the same pair of worthies we yanked out of the seats that day in the subway."

Herc chuckled at the recollection.

"No?"

"Yes."

"The Pulsifer Gun people. The concern that sells American-made guns to foreign powers?"

"That's right."

"Are you sure?"

"As certain as I am that the two figures in that convict picture were Silas and Schultz."

"If that is the case, we might just trail after them a little way. There's little danger of their recognizing us. I don't imagine that they are here, while the fleet is on battle practice and trying out new guns, for any good or patriotic purpose."

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"That's just my idea. Anyhow, they are going toward the hotel where all that glare of light is. As we want to have a peep at the festivities anyway, we might as well kill two birds with one stone."

"I agree with you. Come on."

The two Dreadnought Boys wheeled about and began to follow the course taken by the red-faced, be-diamonded men they had last encountered so strangely in New York.

As they had guessed, the pair they were shadowing went directly to the hotel—the front of which bore a brilliantly illuminated set-piece, formed of hundreds of red, white and blue incandescents, the whole forming a representation of the Stars and Stripes. Instinctively the two lads saluted the colors, and then passed up the broad wooden steps on to a capacious veranda.

Through windows opening on to it they could see the long dinner-tables, at which, the meal concluded, officers and civilians now sat listening to the more or less complimentary speeches of the citizens and dignitaries of Guantanamo.

"Looking at the big wigs, eh?"

The boys turned.

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Behind them stood old Tom. The boys greeted him warmly.

"Coming down the street? I want to buy a few gim-cracks for the kids at home."

The lads shook their heads. For reasons of their own they were anxious to remain about the hotel till they caught a further glimpse of the two red-faced men.

"I'll meet you here in half an hour then," suggested old Tom.

And so it was agreed. The old man-o'-warsman hurried off and left the boys standing behind one of the big palms, with which the veranda was decorated, discussing in low tones their next move.

But, as things turned out, it was not left to the boys to determine their actions of the immediate future.

A door leading from the banquet-room suddenly opened, and through their leafy screen the boys spied the two red-faced men emerge. They were accompanied by a tall, distinguished-looking man, who wore a Van Dyke beard and was garbed in evening dress. He was smoking a cigar.

As the voices of the three fell on their ears, the boys gave a start.

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One of the red-faced men had addressed their ill-matched companion as "Varian." The boys at the same instant recognized the inventor of Chaosite and the untried gun for handling the powerful explosive, from the picture they had seen of him in the papers.

Eagerly Ned and Herc listened to catch the drift of their talk, but the three spoke in low tones. Suddenly in a heightened voice, however, one of the red-faced men suggested that they should seek the garden to smoke their cigars.

"You will really enjoy seeing the grounds here, Varian, if you have not done so," said Dave Pulsifer persuasively; "and under this moon they are one of the most beautiful sights the tropics have to offer."

"I should like it above all things, gentlemen," responded Varian cordially, "and in the coolness we can talk over the proposition you say you have to make."

The three, chatting easily, passed down the steps and strolled down a smooth path which led round the corner of the hotel and into the tropical gardens, which reached for a considerable area behind it.

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"*The proposition you have to make.*"

The words rang in Ned's ears.

Could it be possible that Henry Varian, whose invention was already pledged to the United States navy, was dealing with one of the foreign powers represented by the Pulsifers for its purchase?

There was only one way to learn if the navy was dealing with a traitor. Ned decided in a flash to adopt it.

"Come on, Herc," he whispered. "We've got to follow them and hear what they are talking about."

"But we shall be eavesdropping," objected Herc.

"Yes; *eavesdropping for the flag*," snapped Ned in a low, tense tone, as, with a swift glance about him, he dropped over the rail of the veranda and on to the soft ground beneath. He landed as noiselessly as a cat.

Herc followed him, but was not so successful. In fact, as he struck the ground with a crash, he ejaculated:

"Ouch!" in a loud, startled tone.

Luckily a burst of applause from within, at some sentiment expressed by one of the speech-makers, drowned his exclamation. Ned, in an angry whisper, demanded to know what was the matter with his red-headed companion.

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"Gee whitakers! I dropped into a porcupine, I think," moaned Herc. "I feel like a human pin-cushion."

Ned looked at his chum, and then, serious as was the situation, he could not help breaking into a low laugh.

"Herc, you poor fellow, I'm sorry for you," he exclaimed. "You've tumbled into a cactus-bush."

"Oh, is that it?" rejoined Herc. "Well, whatever it is, I can't walk till I get some of these stickers out of me. You go ahead, Ned, and I'll meet you here in half an hour when Tom gets back."

And so it was agreed that Herc was to await Ned's return and employ the time in extracting what he called "stickers."

"Good-bye, Herc," said Ned, under his breath, as he slipped off cautiously, avoiding moonlit spots and dodging along in the black shadows.

"So long," muttered Herc, as he painfully made toward the hotel steps. "If ever I get these things out of me," he added to himself, "I'll never put a tack in any one's chair again. I know just how it feels now. I'm full of that tack-tus, or whatever you call it."

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With the aid of a grinning colored bell-boy, Herc soon got rid of most of his "bristles." By the time old Tom arrived at the appointed meeting-place he was comparatively comfortable once more.

"Where's Ned?" demanded the old salt, gazing about him, as Herc greeted him.

"Oh, he'll be here in a minute. He just went off to talk to some old friends—or rather acquaintances," responded Herc lightly. "He'll be here immediately or sooner."

But Ned was not "here" in a few minutes or in many minutes.

Impatiently the two—the Dreadnought Boy and the old blue-jacket—awaited his coming, but the lad did not appear.

Eleven o'clock struck and no Ned.

The quarter past the hour chimed on the hotel clock and jackies on their way to the boat-landing began to hurry by.

But of Ned there had been no sign.

CHAPTER XXIII.

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A JACKIE AGAINST WOLVES.

Ned, gliding softly as a cat stalking a mouse, among the trees—choosing the shady spots to conceal his movements—soon came within earshot of the three men in whose conversation he was so deeply interested.

The moonlight, as intense as it usually is in the tropics, flooded the beautiful grounds of the hotel, making checker-work patterns of black and white beneath the tropical growth.

The Pulsifers and Mr. Varian were standing full in the center of a moonlight flooded opening as the Dreadnought Boy approached them.

"Now, see here, Varian," the elder of the two Pulsifers was saying, "it's sheer madness for a man in your position to refuse our offer."

"I confess that your knowledge of my 'position,' as you call it, puzzles me," rejoined the inventor of the most powerful explosive known, quizzically.

Ned, crouching low in the dark shadow of a poinsettia bush, saw the inventor's face in the flood of silver light, and noted that a smile of disdain had curled his lips. [Pg 232]

"Come, come, Varian," urged the other Pulsifer, "let's talk as men to a man. You are not wealthy. You have spent most of what little fortune you had in perfecting Chaosite, until it has become, as it is to-day, the most terrible destructive agent known. As if this were not enough, you have invented a gun-breech of sufficient strength and elasticity to withstand the terrific pressure exerted by the gases liberated when a charge of your explosive is fired."

The inventor nodded, still in the same mocking manner, at the flattering tone. He blew a big cloud of smoke from his cigar, but said nothing. Obviously he was waiting for the other to go on; while Pulsifer, for his part, appeared to be expecting speech of some sort from the inventor. Disappointed in this, he continued.

"You have, as I said, done all these things—crowned your life, I might say—if I wished to be florid—with a magnificent flower of achievement, and what are you going to do with it?"

Pulsifer paused impressively, and came closer to the unmoved inventor, who stood like a figure of stone. [Pg 233]

"I say, what are you going to do with your achievement? Fling it away on a notoriously ungrateful government. Waste it on a navy which will not repay you a thousandth part of the sum we are prepared to offer? The power we represent is apt to become involved in war at any moment. The situation in Europe is, as you know, an extremely ticklish one. A spark in the powder-barrel, and 'Woof!' there is an explosion!"

"What you say may be, and undoubtedly is, true," remarked Varian coolly, "but was that what you brought me out here to tell me? You told me you had important business matters to discuss—a proposition to make."

Ned's heart sank. Could it be possible that the inventor was contemplating the dastardly act of selling out his country? He listened with eager attention as the conversation went on.

"Ah, now we are getting down to business," smiled the elder Pulsifer amiably; "we did bring you out here to make a proposition to you, and one that we flatter ourselves will interest you deeply."

Varian bowed gravely, and seemed to wait for the other to continue. [Pg 234]

"If you sell out Uncle Sam, I'll knock you down if it's the last thing I do," muttered Ned to himself, clenching his capable fist menacingly.

"You are interested, above all things, in the success of the Varian type of gun—handling the Varian explosive, are you not?"

The elder Pulsifer was doing the talking now. From his earnest manner things were evidently coming to a climax.

"Why, of course, that is obvious. It has been, as you said, my life work. Naturally, I wish to see its full fruition."

"Exactly; and Pulsifer Brothers are going to help you. You have heard of Baron Von——"

To Ned's disappointment, the elder Pulsifer's oily voice sank to a mere whisper, and the lad could not catch the name the gun manufacturer breathed.

"Of course, he——"

"Is at the present time in Washington. Ah, Mr. Varian, there is a genius. He is actually engaged, or reported to be—it serves his purpose just as well—to one of our wealthiest women, and yet all the time his wonderful mind is plotting, planning, scheming for his country. Of course, I tell you this under the pledge of secrecy we exacted from you before leaving the banquet hall?" [Pg 235]

"That goes without saying; but you were going to remark?"

"That the baron," again the name was omitted, "came armed with letters to us, and we have consented to transact this business for him. I need scarcely tell you, after having promised this much—that the baron's mission to this country is to acquire the formula of Chaosite; and not only that, but to take back with him the blueprints and specifications of the Varian breech-block and explosion-absorbing machinery, without which the other would be useless."

"The baron is here for that purpose?"

The inventor seemed deeply interested. He thoughtfully inhaled long puffs of his cigar and expelled the smoke slowly.

The Pulsifers were watching him narrowly, without seeming to do so. His attitude, it appeared, puzzled them as much as it did Ned, watching from his leafy bower. In the case of the Dreadnought Boy, however, his mind was practically made up. Varian was prepared to sell his secret to a foreign power—possibly for use against his own country. He was, or so Ned judged the situation, only awaiting the naming of a price. [Pg 236]

"Yes, Mr. Varian, I will not conceal anything from you. We will be perfectly frank," went on Pulsifer. "The baron is here solely for that purpose, cleverly as he has masked the object of his

visit. He has declared through the papers that he is here to study our society and write a book about it. I need scarcely add that the humorous interviews with him printed in the New York dailies—which have made him appear in a clownish light—have aided his plans tremendously."

"How long has this—this—baron been here?"

"Oh, but a short time. But, as you will have gathered, he has not let the grass grow under his feet."

"So it would seem," agreed Varian, with a curious, dry intonation.

"As I was about to say, Mr. Varian, the government he represents is a power of the first class. It has unlimited money at its control. The financial resources at its command are unquestioned. The war into which it may shortly be plunged will undermine its credit, its home prestige and its colonial power if it is not brought to a successful conclusion. To win that war, which will be largely an affair of naval engagements, it will spare no expense to acquire the tools of victory. The baron, and we also, regard the Varian gun and Chaosite as an unbeatable combination. At the trials at the Sandy Hook proving grounds, the gun——"

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"But the trials were secret," protested the inventor.

"Money will open any door," suavely rejoined the elder Pulsifer; "it is to our interest to keep abreast of the times; therefore, we made it our business to acquire—I need not insult your intelligence by saying by what means—a complete record of the three-day tests."

"Your enterprise is only equalled by your resourcefulness," remarked the inventor. Again Ned noted in his voice that queer, dry intonation, as if he were trying to mask some other feeling.

"Oh, yes," smiled the elder Pulsifer greasily, "we are very enterprising, Mr. Varian."

He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a paper.

"Let me read you some of the gun's performances, and you can judge if I am speaking the truth or not. On Monday, April the 25th, target at two miles, wind thirty miles, weather clear: The first shot at nine forty-five scored a bulls-eye; but, the charge being light, three hundred pounds only, the projectile did not——"

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"Enough," snapped the inventor. "I see that you had some one there. It is getting late, gentlemen, and if you will come to the point, I shall feel vastly obliged."

"Ah," exclaimed the elder Pulsifer, rubbing his bediamonded hands till they flashed and sparkled in the moonlight, "you are as anxious as we to conclude the negotiations. Well, to put the matter in a nutshell, Mr. Varian, we are authorized by the baron to offer you——"

Ned's heart beat so loud and fast that he half-unconsciously placed his hand over it, as if he could in that way dull its sound.

"Five hundred thousand dollars for the plans, specifications and formula."

"Five hundred thousand, why, gentlemen, I——"

"And a royalty which can be arranged later to suit your own terms," the younger Pulsifer hastened to add.

"Look out, Hank Varian," Ned muttered to himself, as the inventor hesitated, or seemed to, "you are nearer getting a punch on your nose right now than you ever were before, you double-dyed traitor."

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"It is a very generous offer," rejoined the inventor, "but——"

Again the Pulsifers interrupted him.

"We are authorized, I may say," added the elder one, "to make the sum eight hundred thousand ——"

"Or more," put in his younger brother.

"Eight hundred thousand dollars," mused the inventor in a quiet tone; "why, the government you act for must be made of money."

"They are generous when they have determined to get a thing," smiled the elder Pulsifer, "and they have determined to get the Varian inventions. After all, you see, you can withdraw gracefully from negotiations with Washington. Nothing has been actually accomplished yet, and as matters have only reached an experimental stage nobody is compromised."

"See here, gentlemen," asked Varian suddenly, as if his mind had been fixed on this question all the time Pulsifer had been speaking, "how much money has this government got to spend in cold cash?"

"Why, my dear sir, what a question——"

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"Answer me!"

"Well, if you must know—though it is wholly foreign to our discussion—I suppose they could raise a war fund to-morrow of seventy million dollars, to be raised by loans to a billion dollars and a half."

"They could do all this in two days?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, you go back to your baron and tell him that if his government worked for ninety days and

raised ninety times ninety millions *they would still be a million miles away from buying Henry Varian to betray his government!*"

"You are insane!"

The elder Pulsifer's fat face quivered, while his brother's already red visage deepened in color to an angry crimson.

"No; not insane, gentlemen," quietly replied the inventor. "It is you who must be that for imagining for a moment that I would set a price for selling out Uncle Sam."

"Hurray!" breathed Ned from behind his bush; "it's the Pulsifers I'm aching, twitching, dying to get a slam at now."

"So, then, you have been trying to draw us out!" shouted the elder Pulsifer, beside himself with fury at the unexpected turn of affairs. "You have led us on, you cur, you sneak, you hound, you ___"

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Smack!

The inventor's palm shot out and struck Pulsifer's fat face a stinging blow. In the moonlight Ned could see a dark, angry patch appear where it had struck.

The younger Pulsifer made a leap for the inventor as the blow resounded. The Dreadnought Boy saw something glitter in his hand as he leaped forward.

It was a revolver that the would-be briber had drawn.

At the same instant, and just as Ned was about to spring forward, the elder man drew from his coat-tail pocket a silver whistle. He placed it to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

Simultaneously four dark forms leaped from behind a sort of summer-house shrouded in creepers, and flung themselves on the inventor.

They bore him to the ground, as the Dreadnought Boy, with a loud shout of:

"Stand clear!" dashed from his place of concealment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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IN THE PULSIFERS' HANDS.

Sinewy and well-musclcd as he was, Ned realized a moment later that he was in for such a battle against odds as he had never fought before. Hardly had he made his unexpected appearance and bowled the astonished younger Pulsifer over with a well-directed blow of his fist, before one of the quartet that had downed Mr. Varian sprang upon the lad and gripped him in a strong-armed embrace.

As they swayed back and forth, Ned saw the fellow's features as the two emerged into a patch of moonlight. His astonishment almost caused him to lose his advantageous grip.

"Hank Harkins!" he gasped.

"Yes, Hank Harkins; and this is the time I even up old scores," grated the other, through his close-set teeth.

"Not while I've got two arms," grunted Ned, striving to overset the other. But, as he felt Hank's body bend back and his sinews crack, two of the other men flung themselves on the Dreadnought Boy from behind. A few brief seconds later, Ned, borne down by overwhelming numbers, was a prisoner.

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Even as he fell he recognized the two who had come to Hank's aid as Carl Schultz and Ralph Kennell.

"This is the kind of work I should have expected to find you taking part in," sneered Ned, as he lay on his back, his arms and legs pinioned by Hank and Carl Schultz and Kennell's evil face glaring down into his.

"It's the kind of work you'll have no reason to like," grinned Hank meaningly. "I fancy that we'll be able to even up things now."

Ned disdained to answer the fellow, and returned his threats with a stare of cold contempt. The next instant he set up a shout, which was instantly choked back by a rough hand on his throat. Kennell it was who had compressed the Dreadnought Boy's windpipe till breathing became painful.

"Your handkerchief—quick!" Kennell ordered Schultz.

The graceful Schultz brought out a scented piece of linen.

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"Now, younker, open your mouth again," ordered Kennell, taking his hand from Ned's throat.

Ned set his teeth firmly, however. Kennell, beside himself with fury, struck him a cowardly blow across the face with his clenched fist. Still Ned's mouth was locked.

The blue-jacket, seeing that it would take too long to force Ned's lips open in that way, then seized hold of the lad's nose, compressing the nostrils. In a short time Ned was compelled to

open his mouth to breathe and the handkerchief was then thrust in between his teeth, making an effectual gag.

The Dreadnought Boy was then rudely yanked to his feet. As he stood upright, he noticed a faint, sickly smell in the air.

Chloroform!

The inventor's figure, white-faced and outstretched as though in a deep sleep, lay a few paces away. His stupor showed to what purpose the drug had been put.

"He'll give us no more bother," grinned Pulsifer, nodding in the direction of the recumbent inventor, over whom the scowling Silas stood guard. [Pg 245]

"Got any left for the kid, if he gets mussy?" inquired Kennell.

"No, confound it," muttered the younger Pulsifer; "the stuff upset and spilled on the grass."

"I should say it did. The place smells like a medical college," commented Kennell. "Now, gov'nor, where's the gasoline gig?"

"Two of you fellows pick up Varian," ordered Pulsifer, "and follow me. Kennell, you take care of the boy—wherever he came from. Tie his hands. The rig is right outside the rear gate of the grounds."

Ned, helpless as he was, had no recourse but to obey Kennell's rough order to "Look alive." In the meantime the traitorous Silas roped the lad's hands. In a few minutes they reached the back gate. Outside it stood a powerful touring car.

There was a lamp on the rear gate, and Pulsifer, as he went by, reached up to turn it out.

"The less light we have, the better. No knowing who is skulking around," he remarked. As he straightened up to reach the lamp, however, his eyes fell on Ned, whose face was illumined momentarily by the light. [Pg 246]

Pulsifer gave an exclamation of delight.

"Look who's here, Dave," he cried exultingly; "little Johnny Fixit. Don't you remember him?"

"Why," exclaimed the elder Pulsifer, "that's one of the rowdy kids who tried to get us out of our seats on the subway."

"Tried to," thought Ned; "I guess we came pretty near doing it."

"Oh, this is luck," grinned the younger Pulsifer; "talk about killing two birds with one stone. We'll attend to you, my young friend—you dirty young spy. We'll put you where what you overheard to-night will do you no more good than—this."

He stepped lightly forward and deliberately struck the Dreadnought Boy an open-handed slap on the cheek.

Ned's hands struggled with the rope that Kennell had twisted about his wrists. He palpitated, ached, and longed with a superhuman intensity, to get at the younger Pulsifer, and beat his sneering face into an unrecognizable mass. It was a lucky thing for that young man that Kennell had tied his knots with sailor-like thoroughness. In a few minutes—by the time they had been bundled into the tonneau of the machine, in fact—Ned was once more calm. He recognized the stern necessity for keeping absolutely cool. [Pg 247]

On the seat beside him in the tonneau lay the senseless form of the inventor. As a guard, Kennell, Schultz and Hank were seated also in that part of the car. Dave Pulsifer took the wheel and his brother sat at his side. Silas, the heavy-browed, occupied the small extension-seat at the elder Pulsifer's side.

With the engine muffled down, till it made scarcely any noise, the car glided off into the night, leaving behind it what Ned could not help feeling was the last hope of rescue.

As the wheels began to revolve, Dave Pulsifer leaned back, and, with one hand, extended to Kennell a revolver.

"If our guests should object to our little surprise party and moonlight ride, just give them a leaden pill," he suggested pleasantly.

"Say, gov'nor, it would be pretty dangerous firing off a gun at this time of night, wouldn't it? It might bring the alligator-zills, or whatever they call these Cuban cops, about our ears, mightn't it?" [Pg 248]

The younger Pulsifer laughed lightly.

"No danger of that," he said. "In ten minutes now we'll be out in a desolate part of the country, inhabited only by a few cattle-grazers, and they've got too much horse-sense to inquire into a casual shot. So don't hesitate to pepper away if our guests get obstreperous."

A few minutes later the car began to bound forward, the elder Pulsifer "opening her up," as they drew out of the few scattered huts on the outskirts of the town. They emerged into an arid, stony region, fringed with low, barren hills, clothed with scanty vegetation. Huge cacti stood up weirdly, like tombstones in the moonlight, and a few half-starved cattle plunged off to both sides of the track as the car sped along.

So far as *one* of the prisoners becoming obstreperous was concerned, there was no danger, or immediate danger, at any rate. Henry Varian lay like one dead, with his face of a marble

whiteness, in the cold moonlight.

"Say, the gov'nor must have given him a pretty heavy dose," muttered Kennell, bending over the inventor and feeling his heart. "I hope he hasn't overdone it." [Pg 249]

"What's the difference?" inquired the soft-voiced Carl, in a casual way. "We find plenty of places alretty vere ve get rid off him if he dond come back."

"I don't know. I don't care much about taking such chances," muttered Kennell; "killing a man is bad business. I should think you and Silas would realize that, after your escape——"

"Hush! der boy hear!" warned Schultz, holding up a thin, white hand.

Kennell subsided with a growl of "what's the difference," but said no more, to Ned's intense disappointment.

It was no trick of their eyesight, then, when the two Dreadnought Boys had recognized in the two pictured convicts, at the biograph exhibition, their two dastardly shipmates. Moreover, it seemed, from what Kennell had let drop, that both men were jail-breakers. Revolving this in his mind, Ned saw the cunningness of the two men's movements, if they had actually escaped from Joliet. What less likely place to find an escaped prisoner than in the United States navy? They must have forged papers of recommendation and character, and thus tricked the careful authorities. In fact, Ned learned later that this was the case. [Pg 250]

On and on droned the car, speeding through the same monotonous moonlit wastes of hills and scrub-grass—with here and there the gaunt form of a tall royal palm—as it had encountered on leaving the scattered outskirts of the town. All the time Ned had been working feverishly, but quietly, at his bonds, and now he began to feel what at first he scarcely dared believe—the ropes were becoming slightly loosened. In ten minutes more he had stretched the new rope, of which the thongs were made, till he could slip them off by dint of rubbing them against the cushion at his back.

His mind was made up as to what he would do the instant he found himself at liberty to make his escape. He would drop from the car and trust to luck to get away. The surface of the hills was rough and creased with numerous deep gullies. If he could get into one of these, it would be impossible for the auto to follow, and on foot—well, Ned had a few records for sprinting behind him, and he was confident he could outdistance any one of the occupants of the car.

He looked about him. The car was at this moment passing quite near to one of the arroyos—as they are called in our West—that Ned had noted. Kennell, his eyes half-closed, was hunched in a doze, the pistol in his lap. Carl Schultz and Hank Harkins were talking in low tones. Not a single one of them was watching the Dreadnought Boy. [Pg 251]

The moment to carry out his plan, if he was to put it into execution at all, had arrived.

With a quick move, Ned slipped off his thongs, and sprang to his feet.

Before any one of the occupants of the tonneau knew what was happening he was out of the auto and sprinting, as he had never sprinted before for the friendly darkness of the gully.

Angry shouts instantly broke out. The gully seemed farther than Ned had judged.

He had gained its edge, and, with a grateful prayer, was about to slide over into security, when he felt a sharp twinge in his right calf. At the same moment he heard the sharp crack of a revolver behind him.

Nobody had ever accused Kennell of being a bad shot, and he had aimed true this time.

Ned doubled up. [Pg 252]

He was halted by unbearable pain. In another instant his pursuers had seized him with exulting cries.

CHAPTER XXV.

 [Pg 253]

THREE MINUTES OF LIFE.

Before the first sharp sting of the wound that had halted the Dreadnought Boy had subsided, Ned found himself once more a prisoner. He had torn the gag from his mouth as he ran; but he made no effort to shout, knowing that it would do no good in that desolate region. He calmly submitted to being rebound, this time his legs also being tied tightly.

"We'll take no further chances with you, my young rooster," commented Kennell, as he made a double half-hitch on Ned's leg thongs; "but you were a greeny to think you could get away as long as Ralph Kennell could hold a gun."

Although the wound in his leg gave him acute pain, Ned was pretty sure it was only a flesh one, and had not shattered the bone; for which he felt thankful. Ned was made of that kind of stuff that never gives up hope, and, even in the desperate position in which he now was, he yet decided to make the best of it and watch for any chance that might present itself to extricate himself. [Pg 254]

"Come on, come on," growled the elder Pulsifer, as Ned was once more hustled roughly into the

tonneau of the machine. "We can't waste all night on that cub. Silas and Carl told us that you were a good fast worker. We're not paying you to take all night over it."

"All right, guv'nor; keep your shirt on," rejoined Kennell; "let her rip. We've got him hog-tied now, all right."

Not long after, the auto shot into a dark, shadowed cañon, which seemed to bisect the range of rugged hills, and came to a halt on the other side. The stop was made before a small house, built in the native style, in front of which stood a row of royal palms.

"Home, sweet home," grinned Kennell, with grim humor; "come on, younker, pile out, there."

Ned almost yelled with pain as he straightened up on his injured leg, and Kennell, noticing him wince, gave a loud, brutal laugh.

"Hamstrung, by the great bow-gun!" he exclaimed. "I guess you'll give us no more trouble."

To Ned's relief, for he had almost begun to share Kennell's belief that Varian had been overdrugged, the inventor had opened his eyes a few moments before they reached the hut, and murmured feebly. His words lacked sense, however, under the influence of the drug as he still was.

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"Bring them both into the front room," ordered the elder Pulsifer, as he climbed down from the driver's seat.

The "front room," it transpired, was a sparsely furnished apartment, containing a table and two or three chairs, and nothing else. The floors were bare and of polished wood after the manner of the country. Ned guessed that the place was occupied only temporarily by the Pulsifers as a quiet spot in which they could meet their agents, secure from outside observation. The fact that they had brought an auto to this part of Cuba, where horses are mostly used, lent color to this supposition.

Dave Pulsifer's first act was to light a lamp, which he placed on the table; his second, to ignite a cigar, and his next to offer a chair to the white and shaky inventor.

"Sit down, Varian," he said. "We don't wish to injure you, or hurt you unless we have to; but, as you wouldn't talk business over quietly, we have had to adopt these means of bringing you to terms."

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Glad enough of a chance to rest, Mr. Varian slipped wearily into the offered chair. Ned was shoved along by Kennell till he stood behind the inventor with Kennell close at his elbow. Since his frustrated escape, the wretches who held him captive were taking no chances of another runaway.

Schultz, Silas, and Hank Harkins stood behind the younger Pulsifer, who had now joined his brother at the opposite side of the table to that at which Mr. Varian's chair had been placed. Before the younger of the worthy pair of brothers lay a revolver convenient to his hand. As he regarded Mr. Varian intently, his jeweled fingers played with its butt suggestively.

The inventor made no reply to the elder Pulsifer's remarks, and the foreign agent—as he now stood revealed—continued in a sharp tone. This time he came right to the point.

"Varian, we need not beat about the bush now. We want those plans and the formula."

"I have not got them," replied the inventor, in a low, shaky voice.

"You lie!"

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It was a sure indication of Mr. Varian's pitiable condition that he made no move or spoke no word at the insult.

"You searched my pockets before you forced that stuff over my face," he breathed. "You know that I have not got them."

"Again I say you lie. You were consulting with Captain Dunham, of the Dreadnought *Manhattan*, earlier this evening. You were seen to show him the papers, and explain some of the points of the test which is to be made of your gun shortly. Come, we don't want to be unnecessarily rough with you. Are you going to give the papers up?"

"No!"

The answer snapped out like the crack of a whip.

Ned noted with satisfaction that the inventor's former fire and decision seemed to be returning.

"Then we must search you. Men——"

The elder Pulsifer pointed to the inventor, while the younger covered him with the revolver. One of the latter's bediamonded fingers was crooked on the trigger as if he longed to pull it.

Instantly Carl Schultz, Silas and Hank, who had all three started forward at the command, seized and held Mr. Varian tightly, while the younger Pulsifer, still with his revolver in hand, tapped the inventor's coat to find the hiding-place of the papers.

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"Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, with a cry of triumph. A crisp, crackling sound had rewarded his search.

An instant later, from a secret pocket in the inventor's coat, he had drawn forth a flat bundle of papers. The two Pulsifers, their eyes shining greedily, scanned them closely beneath the lamp, and then uttered what was a perfect howl of baffled rage.

The blueprints of the breech-block, without which the gun would be useless and the formula so much waste-paper, were not there.

"Look here, Varian," snarled the elder Pulsifer, "we've been pretty lenient with you, so far. We intend to be so no longer. Where are those blueprints?"

"Where you will never get them," bravely replied the inventor.

"You are overconfident, my friend," sneered the elder Pulsifer. "We not only will get them, but by your own lips you will tell us where to go to acquire them." [Pg 259]

If the faces of the Pulsifers had borne an evil look before, they became as avid as those of vultures now.

The inventor, who was fast overcoming the effects of the drug, folded his arms defiantly, his captors having released him when the search was given up by the younger Pulsifer.

"Bind him!"

The command was snapped out by the elder of the brothers.

Instantly the three hired rascals who had held him before pounced on the inventor, and roped him tightly in the chair.

Resistance was useless, and the inventor submitted to the ordeal with an unflinching countenance.

"Now, then, Varian, have you changed your mind?"

"Not yet; and I never shall if you wish to know, Dave Pulsifer."

"Very well. We have tried fair means, now we'll adopt other tactics."

The Pulsifers whispered together a few minutes, and then the younger brother left the room. [Pg 260]

He returned with a fair-sized keg, which seemed to be heavy. This he placed in a corner of the room.

"What on earth are they going to do?" Ned wondered to himself.

He was not to be left long in doubt.

The younger Pulsifer's next move was to open a cupboard in one corner of the room and produce a short length of candle.

He eyed this critically and then produced a silver match-box.

A tense silence hung over the room, as the flabby-faced Pulsifer moved about making these preparations. Both Mr. Varian and Ned eyed him with close attention. They felt that somehow or other, incomprehensible as these preparations were, that they boded no good to themselves.

The younger Pulsifer lit the candle and then turned to the two captives with a smile.

"This candle will burn, roughly speaking, for five minutes," he said. "I am going to place it in this barrel of powder. The stuff is not as powerful as Chaosite, but it will serve the purpose," he added, with a side glance at the inventor. [Pg 261]

As he spoke, the wretch ripped off the wooden heading of the barrel, which had already been loosened, and placed the candle upright on its contents.

This done, he once more turned to the inventor.

"Now, will you tell us where those blueprints are, and give us an order for them?" he snarled.

"Not in the longest day you ever lived," replied the inventor firmly.

"Good for you," shouted Ned; "if we are to go to the bottom we'll go down with colors flying, Mr. Varian."

"That's right, my boy; spoken like a true jackie of Uncle Sam," said the inventor approvingly.

"Very fine, heroic and melodramatic," sneered Dave Pulsifer, "but think a moment, Henry Varian. That candle is getting shorter. In a few seconds we shall withdraw, not wishing to be present at the final act of the tragedy. Think of your wife and children——"

This time the inventor groaned, but an instant later recovered himself.

"I would rather leave them the memory of a loyal citizen and American, than give them the companionship of a coward and a traitor," he replied. [Pg 262]

"More heroics; really, Varian, if you were going to live, you might tackle a melodrama with good success. Come on, boys. Two minutes of time are up. In three minutes more this place and those in it will be blown to pieces. Good-night and—good-by, Varian, and you too, you spying, sneaking, informing cub. If you relent, Varian, shout loud, and we shall hear you."

With this bitter fling at the Dreadnought Boy, the Pulsifers and their evil companions withdrew, Hank Harkins pausing at the door to remark:

"I guess I'm on top now, Ned Strong."

Ned disdained to reply, but, instead, as the door closed behind the men who had planned such a refinement of cruelty, he fixed his eyes on the candle in the barrel. Pulsifer had taken the lamp when he and the others withdrew. The light of the waxen illuminant, that was rapidly growing shorter and nearer to the powder, was the only radiance in the room.

"In three minutes," Pulsifer had said.

Ned's eyes regarded the flickering candle with a look of despair.

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It grew lower and flickered. One more such wavering of its steady flame and the end must come.

CHAPTER XXVI.

[Pg 264]

A BLUFF CALLED.

Ned cast his eyes despairingly this way and that, in the hope of spying something that might promise even a faint hope of salvation.

"Ned," it was the inventor's voice; but it sounded faint and far off, "shall I call out?"

"And betray your trust—no, sir!"

"Thank you; I thought you would say that. There is no chance of our getting away?"

"Not a loophole that I can see, sir."

"So be it. The explosion must come in a few seconds now, and all will be over."

The inventor bowed his head. Ned's brain worked as it had never worked before, but, think as he would, he could not contrive any avenue of escape. "If only I could work these ropes loose; if only they'd left the lamp—I'd have risked knocking it over and burning them off. If only——"

The boy came to a sudden stop.

On the floor by the table he had espied a small, gleaming point of fire—the burning stub of a cigar, carelessly thrown aside by one of the Pulsifers. They smoked only the best of cigars and the weed burned red and strong.

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To Ned its spark rekindled hope.

That tiny glow meant perhaps life and freedom.

Without an instant's delay, he threw himself on the floor, for, bound as he was, he could not bend or move. Otherwise he would have taken a chance on burning through his thongs at the candle in the powder keg.

The Dreadnought Boy rolled himself toward the burning cigar butt. Mr. Varian watched him wonderingly, but made no comment. He realized that the boy had found what he thought was a way of escape.

Ned placed his mouth alongside the cigar, and after some difficulty got it between his teeth. He took a few sharp puffs, as he had seen smokers do, although the rank taste of the tobacco sickened him. It was Ned's first and last smoke.

With the end of the cigar now blazing redly, he was ready for the next step. Dropping the "weed," he wriggled along the floor till he had brought his bound wrists up to the red end. Then he pressed the rope down on the glowing tobacco, with a silent prayer that he might be in time.

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A smell of burning rope filled the air.

A second later Ned Strong, his hands free, uttered a low cry of triumph.

He had won the first step of the desperate fight for liberty.

Rapidly, with his freed hands, he felt in his pockets. His captors had forgotten—or, as was more probable, had not deemed it worth while—to search him. His jackknife was in his pocket. To sever his leg bonds was the work of two quick slashes. In his excitement the pain of his leg was forgotten. All that the Dreadnought Boy knew was that he had a fighting chance.

Hastily he stepped up to the powder barrel and prepared to pluck out the candle. This was risky work. Not only might the Pulsifers or some of their gang be on the lookout, but he might, in his haste, spill a spark which would blow both himself and the inventor sky high.

As he reached the side of the keg, however, Ned's first utterance was a gasp of surprise and then a low laugh.

"Bluffed!"

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The exclamation came sharply as he plucked out the candle and threw it to the floor. Luckily it did not go out, for the next instant he realized that he would have to use its light.

Hastily he made his way to the inventor's side. A few quick slashes of the knife, and Mr. Varian stood free, words of gratitude on his lips and a light of admiration in his eyes.

Ned hastily checked the other's words.

"Time for action now, sir," he said briskly. "Can you run an auto?"

"Can you tie a running bowline?" smiled the inventor, who now seemed as cool as ice.

Ned grinned appreciatively.

If all went well, the next step of his hastily contrived plan of escape could be carried out.

"One moment, sir," begged Ned, as the inventor whispered: "What next?"

The boy was over at the side of the keg and rummaging there, it seemed.

"For Heaven's sake, don't waste time on that, my lad," urged the inventor. "Let us make a dash for it. Those men may be near at hand."

"All in good time, sir; but I want to cinch these rascals if we can and cinch them good and tight!" [Pg 268]

"But why waste time on that powder barrel?"

"Powder barrel nothing—— I mean, it's not a powder barrel, sir."

"What?"

"That's right. Look here!"

Ned held up a handful of papers which he had extracted from the keg.

"When I said 'bluffed' just now, that's what I meant. But, Mr. Varian, we've called their bluff with these!"

"These" were papers which seemed to be maps of different places carefully marked and figured, and other diagrams of different kinds.

"What are they?"

"As well as I can see, sir, material to forge steel chains on those rascals who brought us here. They appear to be plans of United States ports and details of our harbor defenses. But we've no time to look them over now. Come, sir!"

The lad stuffed the papers in his blouse.

He had noticed with his keen eyes that few things escaped, that the Pulsifers had not locked the front door when they entered their hut. He now flung it open, and, a second later, he and the inventor stood under the open starlight, their hearts leaping excitedly. [Pg 269]

In front of the door, a dark shadow in the gloom that had set in following the sinking of the moon, was the automobile.

A little gasoline, and more than a little good luck, was all that lay between them and safety.

"Crank her up, sir. I'll stand guard here," breathed Ned.

The inventor bent over the front of the machine and jerked the cranking handle over. There was no explosion.

Again he turned it, without result.

"We'll have to hurry, sir, or else run for it," warned Ned. "Hark!"

Inside the house they could hear trampling of feet.

Evidently Pulsifer and his brother had decided that their "bluff" would have burned itself out by this time, and were returning to the room in which they confidently supposed their helpless victims were lying in agony of mind.

"We'll have to try them another way, since they have withstood the ordeal of powder," Ned heard the elder Pulsifer's heavy voice boom out, half-amusedly, as the inner door of the room banged open. [Pg 270]

At the same instant there came a low "chug" from the motor.

"Speed up that spark," ordered the laboring inventor. "No, not that lever. There, that little attachment on the wheel. That's it."

Chug-chug-chug!

"Hurray! that did the trick!" shouted Mr. Varian, forgetting his dignity in the excitement of the moment.

As he spoke, from inside the house they heard, above the roar of the now awakened motor, the shouts of dismay with which Pulsifer and his mercenaries greeted their discovery that their "birds had flown."

"They can't be far off!" Ned heard the heavy voice boom out. "Scatter, boys! After them! One hundred dollars to the lad who bags the first one!"

The front door burst open and out rushed the men who a few minutes ago had been so confident of bluffing out one of Uncle Sam's sailors and one of his brainiest citizens.

"There they are!" yelled Pulsifer, as his eyes lit on the two figures as they lightly swung into the auto. "Don't let them get away! Five hundred dollars if you stop them!" [Pg 271]

"Shoot 'em down!" bawled the shrill tones of Schultz.

As the inventor opened up the motor and threw in the clutch several dark figures leaped in front of the machine, and one jumped on to the seat beside Ned.

This last figure—it was that of Kennell—raised a knife high and then brought it down with a vicious swoop. The blade seemed to strike full at Ned's heart.

The inventor gave a cry of dismay.

But at the same instant, like a thing instinct with life, the car leaped forward.

"Stand from under!" bawled the inventor, as he threw in the third-speed clutch.

Ned saw the figures of Schultz and Hank Harkins flung aside by the wheels and go rolling down the steep hillside. At the same time he drew back his fist and sent it crashing into Kennell's face. The knife fell clattering twenty feet away, as the treacherous bluejacket, with a howl of alarm, fell backward.

"Take that from Herc Taylor!" shouted Ned.

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Forward into the darkness plunged the car, leaping and rolling over the rough road.

"Hurt, Ned?"

It was the inventor speaking. His voice was anxious. Already the shouts and cries behind them were dying out.

"No, sir, why?"

"That blow with the knife. I thought it would have killed you."

"Well, it might have, sir, but for *this*. I carried it for a luck piece, and I guess it's earned its name!"

The Dreadnought Boy held up a tiny silver coin. It had a big dent in it, where Kennell's blade had been turned.

It was old Zack's parting present, the Canadian dime.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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A STRANGE RETURN.

"You say Seaman Strong made his way after the men you suspected, and that was the last you saw of him?"

Rear-Admiral Gibbons, Captain Dunham and several other officers were seated in a room on the lower floor of the hotel at which the banquet that had ended so disastrously for the inventor, Varian, had taken place.

Herc shifted uneasily on his feet. He felt alarmed before this glittering court of inquiry that had convened as soon as it became apparent that the absence of Henry Varian, discovered shortly before midnight, was no mere accident.

"Yes, sir," he replied to Captain Dunham, who had put the question.

"Can it be possible that the man Strong was in league with the miscreants? The circumstances seem very suspicious," put in the rear-admiral.

"I think, sir," said Captain Dunham, "that we shall find, when the mysterious affair is sifted, that young Strong acted the part of a United States sailor in the matter. I have kept a careful eye on him, and should be loath to believe him anything else than an upright, honest young fellow of uncommon capability."

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"Good for you," thought Herc to himself.

"And what were you doing all this time?" inquired one of the officers of the embarrassed witness.

"Picking stickers out of myself, sir."

"What! Be careful, young man; this is no time for levity."

"Well, sir, I guess if you had fallen into a tack-tus bush you'd have been picking those vegetable tenpenny nails out of your system for a while, too," replied Herc in an aggrieved tone, while suspicious twitches appeared about the corners of the mouths of several of the assembly. Rear-Admiral Gibbons got up and gazed out of the window for a moment to conceal his smiles at the naïve rejoinder of the red-headed youth.

Suddenly he turned, with a sharp exclamation.

"Gentlemen," he exclaimed, "here comes the automobile, or one just like it, that those two precious rascals, the Pulsifers, used. I've seen it before. As it was the only one in Guantanamo, I remarked it especially."

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The officers crowded to the window, and Herc would have joined them, but a marine barred his way.

"Get back, young feller," he warned, suggestively pointing his bayonet.

"Huh! I guess you never had a friend in trouble," grunted Herc, going back to his witness chair in high dudgeon.

But the auto, instead of coming up to the hotel, turned off two blocks below.

"Possibly I was mistaken," said the admiral. "Those two figures in it didn't look like the two scoundrels, but at the distance it is impossible to tell."

"In any event, sir, they cannot escape from Cuba," spoke up one of the officers. "Every port has been telegraphed. Their capture is almost certain."

This was indeed the case. An investigation of the garden had shown clear indications of the

struggle that had taken place there the night before, and servants had been discovered who had seen the inventor issuing into the garden with the unsavory Pulsifers. The odor of chloroform still clinging to the grass decided the matter, and completed the chain of circumstantial evidence. Herc, too, had been able to supplement the mute testimony by his story of the convict film and the names of the conspirators. Already a launch full of marines had been sent to Boco del Toros to intercept the yacht Carl and Silas had mentioned in the lad's hearing.

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This much having been done, a code message had been sent to the secretary of the navy, who had at once ordered every port in Cuba watched, and detailed secret service men in the United States to special duty to apprehend the Pulsifers if they attempted to land in America.

The examination of Herc, who was, of course, the principal witness, went on.

At its conclusion an officer of the *Illinois* begged permission to ask one more question.

"My man, did you or your friend talk over this step of his?"

"Not any more than I have told you, sir," rejoined Herc, somewhat puzzled.

"I submit, sir," remarked the officer, turning to the rear-admiral, "this looks somewhat as if the lad was in league with the Pulsifers. We know now, from what this lad has told us, that other members of the crew were disaffected; possibly Strong was bribed, too."

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"You don't know Ned Strong, sir," spoke up Herc, "or——"

"Silence, sir!" thundered the officer.

"Huh!" grunted Herc, in a low tone, however.

"As I was saying, sir, the whole thing looks, as you said, suspicious. We know that the lad was recently placed in the forward turret of the *Manhattan*, and would have had an opportunity to examine the breechblock of the Varian gun. He might even have made rough drawings of it."

"What you say is plausible, Captain Stirling," nodded the rear-admiral gravely.

"I don't believe a word of it!" snapped Captain Dunham hotly. "I'll stake a good deal on that youngster's honesty, and——"

"You'll win!" came a crisp voice from the rear of the room.

The officers turned, amazed, and set up a shout of astonishment as they beheld, framed in the door which they had entered noiselessly, the figures of the inventor, and, standing, cap in hand, by his side, the Dreadnought Boy, the lad to whose pluck and resourcefulness the inventor largely owed his liberty.

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"I repeat it, gentlemen," went on the inventor, for it was he who had voiced the interruption; "there isn't a finer, more capable or grittier lad in the service to-day than Ned Strong of the *Manhattan*."

"But, but—gentlemen, pray sit down——" began the rear-admiral. "Really this is most irregular."

He sat down resignedly as the officers pressed about the inventor and Ned. In a few moments order was restored, and the two newly escaped captives were telling their story.

"But how did you get back from the Sierra Madre Mountains so quickly?" asked Captain Dunham, who was familiar with Cuba and had recognized the location of the Pulsifers' hut from the inventor's description.

"Let Ned Strong tell that," smiled the inventor.

"Why, gentlemen, we—we borrowed Mr. Pulsifer's automobile," explained the Dreadnought Boy.

"Good for you!" burst out Herc, who had been dancing about in the background, hardly able to keep down his excitement. Of course, discipline did not permit his greeting Ned just then, and he had been on the point of exploding ever since his chum entered the room.

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In the general excitement no one reproved the impulsive youth, who turned as red as a winter sunset when he realized what a sad breach of naval etiquette he had committed.

"Strong, stand forward," ordered Rear-Admiral Gibbons, as the inventor took up and concluded the story of how they had missed their road, but finally found their way into town, going first to a house occupied by some friends of Mr. Varian's before proceeding to the hotel. At the home of the inventor's friends they had got a wash and brush-up which both stood sadly in need of. Ned's leg, besides, had required dressing. It turned out to be, as he had guessed, only a flesh wound, but was sufficiently painful, though not dangerous in any way.

In obedience to his superior's command, the young seaman took two paces to the front and saluted, bringing his heels together with a smart click, despite the pain his wound gave him as he did so.

"Strong," went on the admiral, "you have done Mr. Varian and the United States Navy a great service. Had it not been for your quick, intelligent work, it might have been that the Pulsifers and the others implicated in this dastardly affair would have escaped. Mr. Varian might not have been with us this morning. I congratulate and thank you on behalf of the government and on behalf of the naval department and officers of this squadron."

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Ned's lips moved. Somehow he couldn't speak. Herc's face, bisected by a broad grin, thrust itself forward among the officers till it appeared, like a whimsical moon, between the elbows of Captain Dunham and the rear-admiral.

"I shall see, Strong," went on the admiral, "that some signal notice is taken of your clever, plucky work. You are of the stuff of which real seamen are made and we want to encourage men like you in every way possible. And now, gentlemen, as we are not within hearing of Washington—or the papers—perhaps it might not be inconsistent with the occasion to give three cheers."

"Oh, those crazy Americanoes!" exclaimed the little yellow-faced Cubans, as three long, resounding naval cheers, with a zipping "tiger," rang through the stagnant tropic air and went booming over the water as far as the grim sea bulldogs of Uncle Sam, lying at anchor off the town.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

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A HIT WITH CHAOSITE.

"General battle practice to-day," cried a bosn's mate, as he hastened forward through the scrubbing stations the next morning.

Ned and Herc exchanged glances above their swabs.

At last they were to see what actual battle conditions were like. The practice hitherto had been merely target practice and mine-laying—the latter being dummies, of course. To-day, they had learned earlier, the ships were to be "cleared for action" just as in actual service, and steaming at eighteen knots, were to fire at the targets as they steamed by as if they were repulsing a hostile fleet. No wonder the jackies were on the tiptoe of expectation.

As for the two chums, they were in high spirits. Promotion loomed ahead of Ned, and Herc wished him success with all the warmth of his generous heart. Not a thought of envy entered his mind. He was as delighted as Ned himself over the big chance that had come to the Dreadnought Boy.

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Each of my readers can imagine for himself what the two boys had had to say the evening before, when they had been reunited; and Ned had to tell his adventures over and over again, till Herc advised him to invest in a phonograph and talk his narrative into it for indefinite reiteration. "Pills" had patched Ned's injured leg so deftly that it hurt him hardly at all, and the doctor's suggestion that he go on the "binnacle list," otherwise the sick roll, had met with Ned's unqualified disapproval.

"I'm fit for duty. I want to do it, sir, if possible," he had said quietly but firmly, when the doctor suggested that he rest up for a few days.

The doctor, a veteran of thirty years' service, had thrown up his hands in amazement.

"I've been in the navy for more years than you've seen, my boy, by a long shot," he exclaimed, "and I never heard a seaman talk like that before. Well, if you want to work, go ahead, and my blessing go with you."

"I hope that young man is quite right in his head," the man of medicine had muttered to himself, as he heard the door of his sanctum closed by the first bluejacket he had ever met who was not anxious to avail himself of the restful idleness afforded by being on the "binnacle list."

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Immediately after breakfast the *Manhattan* was a scene of the liveliest activity.

Rails came down and were stowed. Boats were lowered, ventilators shipped, war nets rigged, and every object on the deck that was not an absolute fixture vanished. The same thing occurred on other vessels of the fleet, in obedience to the flagship's signalled order:

"Clear for action."

It was like stripping human fighters for a ring contest.

Bugles shrilly sang the order from ship to ship of the squadron. While the smiling jackies bustled about on deck, stewards and orderlies below were stowing pictures and bric-a-brac between mattresses and placing all the ship's crockery and glassware in places where it was not in danger of being jarred to fragments by the earthquake-like detonations of the big guns.

In the meantime officers had invested themselves in their full-dress uniforms with side arms, and an hour after the order had been first transmitted the signal to "Up Anchor" fluttered out from the halliards of the flagship.

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Aboard the *Manhattan* especially excitement ran at high tension, for Mr. Varian himself had come aboard that morning in a shore boat, and it was an open secret that the big twelve-inch gun, fitted with his Chaosite breech—was to receive its first sea test.

The first sight that greeted the eyes of Herc and Ned, reporting for duty in their turret as the squadron got under way beneath a pall of black smoke, was the unveiling, so to speak, of the inventor's masterpiece. Mr. Varian and Lieutenant Timmons, the ship's gunnery officer in command of the turret, had their heads together over the intricate piece of machinery as the two Dreadnought Boys entered the steel-walled box, in which they were practically a part of the machinery.

The inventor greeted them with a kindly nod. Perhaps the thought shot into his mind that had it not been for the pluck and clear-headedness of one of the Dreadnought Boys, he might not have

been there.

"Is there any news, sir?" Ned asked respectfully, as soon as he got a chance to speak to the inventor. [Pg 286]

"No. The launch that was sent to intercept the Pulsifers' vessel has not yet reported, but we may hear from her at any time now."

"Let us hope that the rascals haven't got a start and boarded some passenger vessel at sea," put in Lieutenant Timmons.

As the officer joined in the conversation Ned saluted and went to another part of the turret. It is not naval usage for an enlisted man to converse with an officer, and Ned was far too well-trained a young man-o'-warsman to break any rule, even the unwritten ones, which in the navy are almost as numerous as the codified regulations.

The excitement under which all hands labored was, however, far too keen to allow even the thoughts of the Pulsifers' capture to interfere with present duty.

Especially was this the case on two of the vessels of the squadron—the *Idaho*, the holder of the coveted meat-ball, and, as has been mentioned, the *Manhattan*, every jackie on board of which vessel longed with his whole soul to see the gunnery flag flying from the Dreadnought's main.

The scores stood even between the big guns of the two battleships now, and the open secret that the morning practice was to be made, in large part, with the Varian gun and explosive made the *Manhattan's* jackies fearful that they might lose, after all. [Pg 287]

Jim Cooper, nervous and high-strung as ever, crouched in his seat beside the big weapon as the charge was rammed home and the breech slapped to on the heavy load of Chaosite, which the two Dreadnought Boys beheld for the first time. It was a pinkish, crystalline-looking substance, and its inventor claimed, as safe to handle as ordinary clay, which it resembled in its plasticity. Just to show its properties, before the charge was placed, the inventor picked up a chunk of the explosive and compressed it in his hands. He moulded it into several different shapes, and concluded the exhibition by throwing it on the flooring of the turret with force enough to have detonated a charge of dynamite.

"There is only one danger I apprehend from it," he had explained to Lieutenant Timmons, "and that is in the event of a 'flareback.' But under such conditions there is no powder made that is safe."

In reply to the officer's questions, the inventor explained that Chaosite was a slow-burning explosive, and if the much-dreaded flareback ever occurred in a gun in which it was being used, blazing particles of the freed explosive would be scattered about the turret. As Chaosite would only explode when confined, these particles would glow like hot coals till they burned out. The deadly peril consisted in the fact that the doors of the ammunition hoist opened directly into the turret. There were safety shutters to the hoist, but in action the reloading followed so fast on the firing of the guns that there was little chance of the safety devices being used. [Pg 288]

The shaft of the ammunition hoist led directly down to the ammunition table below the water-line on which the explosive was piled, ready to be shot upward on electric elevators. Alongside the ammunition tables were the open doors of the ship's magazine. It does not require vivid imagination to picture what would be the result of blazing particles of a substance like Chaosite dropping down the hoist onto the powder and explosives piled below. Quick and utter annihilation would follow. Not a soul of the eight hundred odd crew and forty officers would stand any but the smallest chance of salvation. [Pg 289]

The Dreadnought Boys, as well as the rest of the crew in the turret, were interested listeners to the conversation. All of them knew what a flareback was. One had occurred on the *Georgia* a year before, costing two lives. It is usually caused by fragments of burning powder being left in the chamber of the gun after a charge has been fired. An electric blower is attached to the big guns of Uncle Sam's navy, which is supposed to thoroughly clean the chamber after each discharge; but it is not careless sailor-proof, and occasionally the newspapers bear dreadful testimony to the result of a flareback, which occurs when the new load is ignited by the left-over fragments of the old one.

But the talk between Mr. Varian and the officer was suddenly checked.

"Boom!"

The flagship had fired, and, as the glass brought to bear by Lieutenant Timmons showed, had missed the first target.

At the distance of a mile and a half the targets, with their tiny boats bobbing at a safe distance, looked extremely small. Shooting at a potato on a fence post at twenty rods with a small rifle is easy compared to the task before Uncle Sam's gunners. [Pg 290]

"Now, Cooper, steady, my lad!"

Lieutenant Timmons' voice sounded strained and harsh as the gun pointer squinted through his telescope and depressed his pointing lever ever so little. Already the range had been signaled from the fire-control wells.

The *Manhattan* was quivering to the speed of her engines, rushing her stripped form past the targets at eighteen knots.

Every man of that gun crew was under as painful a tension as the officer. As for the inventor, his

face took on a deadly pallor as he leaned against the rear wall of the turret. In a few moments now he would know if his invention was a failure or a glorious success.

A tiny signal light—the message from the firing room glowed.

Cooper looked round. His wrinkled face was grotesquely knotted, like an ape's, in his excitement. His hand shook, but there was a glitter in his eyes that showed he meant to get that target.

"Brace yourselves, men!" warned the officer.

The boys stood as they had been taught, their knees slightly bent, so as to be springy. As they got the last order they stuffed cotton in their ears. Otherwise, the drums would have been shattered by the discharge. [Pg 291]

"All ready, sir," breathed Cooper.

"Fire!"

There was a sharp click from the electric firing switch and a tiny spurt of bluish flame.

A shock like that of an earthquake followed. The mighty explosion seemed to rend the turret.

It had not died out before the glasses of the gunnery officer, the inventor and the gun-pointer were bearing on the distant target and the boats scurrying toward it. From the bridge and the quarter deck similar scrutiny was brought to bear.

Chaosite was almost smokeless, so their vision was not obscured, as with the old-fashioned powder—even the so-called "smokeless" making quite a smother.

"Hit, sir!" shot out Cooper dryly, as the signal man in the target boat wig-wagged the news.

"Now let the *Idaho* folks get busy!" cried the delighted gun crew.

The new explosive and the new gun had proven themselves one of the biggest naval successes of many a day.

CHAPTER XXIX.

[Pg 292]

THE STUFF A JACKIE'S MADE OF.

Hastily the gunnery officer scribbled a note and handed it to Herc.

"Here, my man, take this to Captain Dunham," he said, thrusting the paper into Herc's hand.

The red-headed boy was off like a flash, and a second later the captain, who had already witnessed the signaling of the successful hit, was reading the details of the wonderful results achieved with the new gun.

He detained Herc several minutes while he asked him numerous questions about the handling of the gun, all of which the boy answered so intelligently as to bring nods of approbation from the group of officers surrounding the commander of the *Manhattan* on the vessel's flying bridge.

By the time Herc started back for the turret, the *Manhattan* was close upon the second target.

"I've got to hurry," thought the boy, quickening his pace.

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But before he had more than reached the midship section of the Dreadnought another mighty shock set her stout frame quiver, and Herc knew another shot had been fired.

"Another hit!" he heard a shout go up an instant later. "We've got the *Idaho* folks lashed to the mast. They missed the first target."

But even as the cry reverberated along the decks there came another sound that struck terror to the heart of the Dreadnought Boy.

It was a heavy, smothered explosion that seemed to come from within the turret itself. At the same instant great clouds of yellow-colored smoke began to roll from the top ventilators.

"It's a flareback!" Herc heard old Tom shout. "Heaven help the poor souls in there!"

A flareback!

What the words meant Herc knew only too well. In the poisonous fumes of the burning Chaosite, vomited backward from the big gun's breech, there was quick, sure death.

Suddenly the small door in the barrette of the turret opened, and four half-crazed, reeling men staggered out, bearing a limp form of a fifth. It was Jim Cooper, the gun-pointer, they carried. Blackened and almost unrecognizable as the men were, the look of blank horror on their faces burned itself into Herc's mind.

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"Where's the lieutenant and Mr. Varian? Where's Ned Strong?" the jackies shouted, as they crowded round the staggering men. The survivors could only wave their limp arms back toward the inferno from which they had emerged.

"B-b-blown to b-b-blazes!" gasped one in a choked voice.

All at once, and before Captain Dunham and the officers could reach the scene, a red-headed figure ripped off its blouse, and, wrapping it about its head, plunged on all fours into the small door from which the smoke-blackened five had emerged.

It was Herc Taylor.

"Stop that man!" shouted Captain Dunham, as he arrived, just in time to see Herc vanish in the smoke.

An ensign plunged forward. Half a dozen bluejackets followed him.

"No, stop! Come back!" shouted the captain. "Enough lives have been sacrificed."

Reluctantly the men came back. Tears rolled down the ensign's face as he begged to be allowed to enter the turret. But the commander was firm. No more lives would he have thrown away. For that Herc was doomed to the same death as it seemed sure had overtaken the officer, Mr. Varian and Ned Strong, seemed a definite certainty. [Pg 295]



Captain Dunham himself caught Ned Strong as he fell.

"Signal the flagship of the accident, Mr. Scott," ordered the captain, whose face was set and white, but whose voice was steady as if he were issuing a routine order.

"Aye, aye, sir."

The executive officer issued the necessary orders.

A second later the boom of the *Idaho's* gun sounded.

Another miss.

"The *Manhattan* wins the meat ball!" shouted some jackie far back in the throng of anxious-faced, pallid men.

"Stow that, you lummox!" growled old Tom, and his admonition was echoed angrily by a dozen tars. It would have fared hard with that jackie if they could have laid hands on him.

The minutes rolled by and still there came no sign from within the turret.

An ensign, despatched below by the captain, had reported that not a single spark had dropped down the hoist. [Pg 296]

"Gentlemen, that means that there was a hero in that turret!" exclaimed the captain. "Before death came he closed those doors and in all probability saved the ship."

The others nodded. It was not a situation in which words seemed appropriate.

From the turret ventilators little smoke was now issuing. If any of the four men inside that steel-walled trap remained alive, they stood a fighting chance now.

Suddenly the jackies set up a roar.

From the turret door there staggered a black, weird figure; its clothes hung in shreds and blood streamed from a dozen cuts and bruises. In its arms this reeling figure carried another scarecrow-like form, the latter half-naked, like its bearer.

The first figure turned toward the dumfounded group of officers with a ghastly attempt at a smile

on its blackened face, and then pitched forward with its burden.

Captain Dunham himself caught Ned Strong as he fell. Mr. Scott, the executive officer, as swift to act as his commander, had at the same instant seized hold of the limp form of Lieutenant Timmons, which the Dreadnought Boy had dragged from the jaws of death.

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The doctor, a strange, soft light on his face, was still bending over his so strangely restored patients, when another roar came from the jackies. They seized each other and capered about like lunatics, and not an officer checked them. Temporarily the *Manhattan* housed a mob of cheering, yelling maniacs.

For through the turret door there now emerged a second figure, but this one bore a head of fiery red above his sooty countenance.

It was Herc, and with him he dragged out the collapsed figure of the inventor.

The Dreadnought Boys had beaten the flareback at its own grisly game.

From the scorched lips of Lieutenant Timmons, who, besides a few burns and the effects of the severe shock, had, like the others, miraculously escaped injury, the captain that evening heard the whole story.

The flareback had come like a bolt from the blue while the gun crew, still cheering Jim Cooper's second hit, were reloading.

The officer had felt himself blown back across the turret and smashed against the steel wall. The place was filled with acrid smoke and yelling, terrified men. Through the smoke glowed the blazing fragments of Chaosite that had been spurted back out of the gun.

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Dimly the officer had seen Ned Strong stagger through the smoke toward the doors of the hoist, which were open preparatory to receiving another load. At the same time Lieutenant Timmons was trying with all his might to reach the same goal. He fell before he attained his object, however, and the last thing he knew was that he saw Ned seize the lever that swung the safety doors together and then collapse in a heap.

The inventor had fared much as had the officer, except that he succumbed to the fumes more quickly. He had managed, however, to open the ventilators to their full capacity by seizing, with his last conscious movement, the control that elevated them. This action undoubtedly contributed in large measure to saving the lives of those imprisoned in the death trap, for even Jim Cooper recovered, and a court martial later acquitted Lieutenant Timmons of all blame.

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The joy that ran through the fleet when it was learned that not a single serious injury had resulted from the accident on the *Manhattan* may be imagined. Battle practice, which had stopped for that day, was ordered resumed on the morrow. But before that occurred another event happened which marked the end of one of the boldest attempts on record to steal one of Uncle Sam's most jealously guarded secrets.

The squadron was at anchor that evening, and retreat had just blown, when the wireless operator of the Dreadnought sought Captain Dunham with a paper in his hand.

It was a wireless from the launch sent after the Pulsifers and their gang, and reported that the yacht had been intercepted and boarded, off Boco del Toros, and that all the miscreants were captured.

The captain himself it was who sought out Ned and Herc, in the sick bay, and communicated the news to them. Both boys had been placed on the "binnacle list" under their protests; but, gritty as they were, they had been ordered to the ship's hospital peremptorily.

The rest of the gun crew shared their retreat, though each and every one of the rescued men declared that he was fit and able for duty. As a matter of fact, however, all of them had had a severe shock, and it was some days before they finally recovered and were about again receiving the congratulations of their shipmates. In the meantime battle practice went on, and the *Manhattan* eventually won the "meat-ball."

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The boys received the news of the capture of the Pulsifers with a cheer, feeble but sincere. The summary court martial called to decide the cases of Carl Schultz, Silas, and Hank Harkins was convened the next day, when the crest-fallen prisoners were brought back on board. Schultz and Silas broke down under questioning and confessed that they were escaped prisoners, and were returned to the Illinois authorities to serve out life sentences for the murder of an old farmer near Springfield many years before.

Ralph Kennell was sentenced to serve ten years in a government penitentiary and to be dishonorably discharged from the service. Hank Harkins escaped with a dishonorable discharge, on the boys' intercession for him. As for the Pulsifers, they were given over to the Federal authorities, and are now serving long terms at the Federal prison in Atlanta, Georgia. Simultaneously with the discovery of the plot, the Baron vanished from Washington, leaving a disappointed and mystified fiancée. It was never learned for just what government the Pulsifers had been engaged in their work of spying and bribing.

[Pg 301]

How Hank Harkins got mixed up with the plotters he explained to the court martial. He had fallen into Schultz's and Silas' company in New York and gambled much of his money away to them. Afraid to write home for more, he had cast about for a way to recruit his finances, and

when Schultz and Silas suggested that he join them in the work they had undertaken for the Pulsifers, he willingly agreed.

A few days after Ned and Herc were once more up and about—for they had been "binnaced" while the above events transpired—they were summoned aft to the captain's cabin, and told that on the return of the fleet to American waters they were to report to the Secretary of the Navy at Washington without delay. This event occurred in the early part of June.

The two lads, brown-faced and alert, but somewhat alarmed at the prospect of encountering such a mighty personage as the Secretary of the Navy, called at the department, according to instructions, and sent in their names. [Pg 302]

"Send them right in," came a hearty voice, although there was a long row of visitors ahead of the Dreadnought Boys.

"And so you are the two lads that Captain Dunham thinks more about than any bluejackets in the service," began the secretary, a keen-faced, slender man, with a bristly black mustache and kindly, penetrating eyes. "These are the lads," he went on, turning to a portly man with a gray mustache and a pleasant smile, who stood behind him.

The stout man stepped forward, and as he did so the boys were struck with an air of dignity he bore about him, which was even more impressive than that which hedged the secretary about.

"My lads," he said, "I have heard with interest and deep admiration of your bravery, and, better than that, your cool-headedness when the accident that imperilled every soul on the *Manhattan* occurred. Had it not been for the pluck of one of you, a disaster which would have been historic in its horror might have occurred. I refer to your action in closing the safety doors, Strong.

"And you, Taylor"—Herc turned as red as his own thatch—"you are also deserving of the highest praise. Your action in entering what seemed a certain death trap was heroic in the extreme. The United States Government is proud of you both, and I am authorized to pin upon you, as unfading mementoes of your conduct, these." [Pg 303]

From two blue plush cases the portly man with the kind smile drew two gold badges which he pinned on the breast of each Dreadnought Boy.

They were the coveted medals of honor.

"I know that you will wear them with the highest appreciation of their significance. I congratulate you both."

The portly man turned to the secretary with a smile.

"I think that is all, Mr. Secretary," he said.

"I believe so, Mr. President," said the secretary, rising and opening the door.

The boys' eyes fairly popped in their heads. Herc's amazement actually overcame his sense of discipline.

"Oh, sir, was that the President himself?" he quavered, as the secretary returned to his desk.

"It was," smiled the secretary, "and he was here at his own special wish. He ordered a detailed report made of your actions to him and investigated your case carefully. You young men have been rarely and highly honored. And now one thing remains to be done. You have received the highest honor the navy can confer for heroism displayed in line of duty. The government has for actions like yours a more substantial reward. I present you with these two purses, each containing a hundred dollars in gold." [Pg 304]

The boys stammered their thanks somehow, while the room seemed to whirl round them. How they ever got out once more on to the sunlit Pennsylvania Avenue they often discussed afterward, but never arrived at any satisfactory conclusion.

"I guess we flew," Herc always says; "I know I felt as if I was walking on air."

The Dreadnought Boys had a two weeks' furlough before rejoining the fleet. They spent part of this in New York, seeing the sights, not forgetting a visit to the office where they had enlisted, and a portion of it in the old village, where, as may be imagined, they were the "heroes of the hour." Old Zack still exhibits a dented Canadian dime with which Ned presented him as a souvenir. The village band, not to be behindhand, learned to play a series of strange discords declared by them to be the navy's own, particular march, "Nancy Lee." [Pg 305]

And so, with their hearts overflowing with patriotism, and a fixed determination ever to serve the flag and their country with an unflinching devotion, we will for the present take our leave of the Dreadnought Boys.

But many adventures, stranger and more fraught with peril than any through which they had yet passed, were ahead of them. A career in the navy is, even in "the piping times of peace," one full of excitement and action, and in their immediate future the boys were to realize this.

Life on board a torpedo-boat destroyer is a strange one in many ways, and the boys, in their coming experience on such a craft were destined to have this borne in on them. Their adventures on one of Uncle Sam's sea-tigers in a strange country and among strange people will be related in full in the next volume of this series, *THE DREADNOUGHT BOYS ABOARD A DESTROYER*.

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Boys of Oakdale Academy By Morgan Scott

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This is a brisk, vigorous, snappy, story in which winter sports—snowshoeing, skating, rabbit hunting, and such—are features. In the tale Rodney Grant, a young Texas cowboy, appears at Oakdale and attends the academy, being adjudged an imposter by the New England lads, who entertain a mistaken notion that all Texans swagger and bluster and talk in the vernacular. As Grant is quiet and gentlemanly in his bearing and will not, for some mysterious reason, take part in certain violent sports, they erroneously imagine him to be a coward; but eventually, through the demands of necessity and force of circumstances, the fellow from Texas is led to prove himself, which he does in a most effective manner, becoming, for the time being, at least, the hero of the village. This is a story of vigorous, healthy boys and their likes and dislikes; it is brimming over with human nature and, while true to real life, is as fascinating as the most imaginative yarn of adventure.

Transcriber's Note:

Images may be clicked to view larger versions.

Retained some inconsistent spacing and hyphenation from the original (e.g. "postoffice" vs. "post office" and "flagship" vs. "flag-ship").

Retained some hyphens from the original that might better be dashes (e.g. "er-er," "Herc-by").

Page 30, changed "exam-ing" to "examining" ("examining the prospects").

Page 59, italics around "I mean business" are inconsistent with italics around "mean business" in accompanying plate; this inconsistency is retained from the original.

Page 79, changed "gasolene" to "gasoline" for consistency ("darted light gasoline boats").

Page 109, changed "steam-steering gear" to "steam-steering gear."

"Aboard a Destroyer" ad, added apostrophe to "citizens' interests" and changed "predecessor" to

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